

A TALENT
for
TROUBLE



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For Al . . . just because.

*All my love,
Jen*

1



NEW YORK CITY, 1881

*M*iss Felicia Murdock was wallowing. She did not normally have the propensity to wallow, but given the trying circumstances of the day, she felt she was entitled, at least for an hour or two.

Leaning her forehead against the cool pane of glass, she stared out her bedroom window, watching the traffic that paraded past the Fifth Avenue mansion she called home. Carriages sporting liveried servants jostled for space amongst delivery wagons, while well-dressed ladies and gentlemen strolled down the sidewalk arm in arm, all of them apparently enjoying the lovely spring day.

Her nose wrinkled at the sight of so many cheerful people, and when one of the couples stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and shared a quick embrace, Felicia jerked her head from the glass and trudged across the oriental carpet, coming to a halt in front of her bed.

Normally the sight of her whimsical bed, with its frothy bit

of blue silk scooping gracefully from the canopy and comfortable quilted ivory coverlet, brought a smile to her lips, but on this particular day, smiles were difficult to produce.

Feeling the need for a dramatic gesture in order to continue with her wallowing, Felicia turned, held out her arms, and fell backward, anticipating the moment her bed would cushion her in a soft cocoon of luxury and allow her to descend into a much-needed bout of self-pity.

As she landed, a sharp stabbing of her behind sent all thoughts of self-pity disappearing in a split second. She bolted upright, beat down the voluminous skirt of the putrid pink gown tangled around her legs, struggled to her feet, and permitted herself the indulgence of releasing a good grunt.

Acts of a dramatic nature were clearly not advisable when one still had the required fashion accessory of the day, the dastardly bustle, attached to one's backside. Disgruntlement now flowing freely through her veins, she reached around and twisted the dreaded contraption back into place.

Kicking off her shoes, she eyed the bed once again and, unwilling to abandon her dramatic gesture, took a few steps back, hitched up her skirt, and lunged forward. She flung herself into the air and landed on top of the coverlet with a resounding bounce.

Air was difficult to come by, as her tightly laced corset protested such strenuous activity, but determination to continue with her wallowing had her breathing in shorter breaths as she cushioned her head with folded arms. She was hardly comfortable, but at least she was in an appropriate position to sink into misery. She closed her eyes and forced herself to recall the horrors of the day.

Reverend Michael Fraser, the gentleman she'd held dear to her heart for over four years, was now married.

Unfortunately, *she* had not been his bride of choice.

That honor had gone to Miss Julia Hampton, a young lady Felicia might have actually liked if the lady hadn't absconded with the man Felicia adored—the man she'd for so long believed God had selected for *her* to marry.

It appeared she and God had experienced a slight misunderstanding of late. Quite frankly, she couldn't help but be distinctly put out with Him.

She'd been so certain He would intervene today—with a bolt of lightning or something equally impressive—right in the middle of the wedding, which would have proven once and for all that she was meant for Reverend Fraser, not Miss Hampton. But even though she'd kept a sharp eye on the ceiling throughout the ceremony, no such divine intervention had occurred.

A trickle of unease caused her eyes to flash open.

Good heavens, if God would have intervened, Miss Hampton, or rather Mrs. Fraser now, would have been devastated. All of Julia's hopes and dreams would not have come to pass, and . . . The sheer selfishness of what Felicia had hoped for hardly spoke well of her character.

It was little wonder God hadn't answered her many and varied prayers regarding Reverend Fraser. She was a sad excuse for a self-proclaimed woman of faith.

How in the world could she have convinced herself she was destined to become the wife of a minister?

It was ludicrous—that's what it was. And now, since she'd spent so many years pursuing Reverend Fraser, she'd reached the ripe old age of twenty-four and couldn't help but think she'd landed herself in a bit of a pickle.

None of society's eligible gentlemen would want to court a lady so long in the tooth, which meant she was destined to remain a spinster forever.

An image of herself ten years in the future sprang to mind, and it did absolutely nothing to calm her nerves—especially

since the image she'd conjured had her wearing a ratty old shawl with dozens of cats slinking around her feet.

She didn't care for cats. They made her sneeze. They also seemed to spring out at her when she least expected it.

Groping out with one hand, Felicia yanked a velvet pillow of periwinkle blue toward her and pressed it against her face, trying to force her thoughts away from anything to do with cats. To her dismay, trying to push cats out of her mind only caused more cats to prance through her thoughts. Pushing the pillow aside, she began to whistle a jaunty tune she'd picked up from one of the grooms, and thankfully, images of cats disappeared, replaced with sailors walking on bowed legs down at the dock.

It wasn't much of an improvement, given that she wasn't terribly familiar with sailors, but at least it was better than cats.

"What in the world are you whistling?"

Pressing her lips tightly together, Felicia glanced out of the corner of her eye and, much to her dismay, saw her mother striding determinedly across the room. She squeezed her eyes shut and summoned up what she hoped was a credible snore.

"I know you're awake."

"I'm not."

A chuckle was Ruth Murdock's only reply before Felicia felt the mattress shift and then shift again as her mother went about the business of getting comfortable, apparently intent on a bit of a chat.

"It was a beautiful wedding, wasn't it?"

The last thing she wanted to discuss was the wedding. The disappointment of it was still too fresh, but her mother had no way of knowing her daughter had suffered a blow today. Felicia had never admitted to anyone the troubling fact that she held Reverend Fraser in high regard.

"I thought Miss Hampton looked lovely."

Felicia forced open her eyes, pushed herself up and then off the bed, shook out the folds of her gown, and summoned up what she hoped would pass for a smile. “She did.”

“You looked lovely as well.” Ruth’s eyes began to gleam. “I noticed the marked attention Mr. Zayne Beckett was sending your way.”

Felicia looked past her mother and caught sight of her reflection in the full-length mirror that stood next to the entrance of her dressing room.

Lovely was hardly the term she would have chosen to describe her appearance.

White-blond hair was pulled ruthlessly away from her face, the tightness of the chignon causing her deep blue and heavily lashed eyes to tilt up at the corners. Her cheekbones were high and her nose slim, but her face looked strained and pale, and she resembled a lady of forty instead of twenty-four. Her eyes skimmed over plump lips that were entirely too full and settled on her gown, the sheer volume of it hiding curves she knew perfectly well were considered voluptuous. She winced when the sun took that moment to stream through the window, the beams of light causing the pink tulle she was wearing to glow.

“Are you planning on seeing Zayne again soon?” Ruth asked, causing Felicia to pull her gaze from her appalling reflection and settle it on her mother.

“Mother, honestly, the only reason Zayne was paying me ‘marked attention’ was because I knocked him over that pew after you shoved me a little too enthusiastically in his direction. Zayne, being a most considerate gentleman, was concerned for any embarrassment his rapid plunge to the ground might have caused *me*.”

She blew out a breath. “Besides, you’re forgetting the pesky little fact that he’s firmly off the marriage market, given that he’s practically engaged to Miss Helena Collins.”

Ruth's eyes turned shrewd. "Reverend Fraser was firmly off the market as well, but that didn't seem to stop you from continuing to hold the man in affection. Really, Felicia, the manner in which you were staring at the ceiling throughout the ceremony today was somewhat disturbing. Why, I was convinced you expected a bolt of lightning to disrupt the service."

Sometimes her mother knew her just a touch too well, but . . . Her eyes widened. "You knew?"

Ruth scooted back on the bed and took a moment to plump up some pillows behind her. "Of course I knew, darling." She folded her hands over her stomach. "It is my fondest hope that, now that he's well and truly married, you'll finally be able to put the gentleman behind you once and for all. I also wouldn't mind if you'd set aside the rather demure attitude you've assumed over the past four years."

"You've taken issue with my 'demure attitude'?"

Ruth bit her lip. "Oh dear, that might not have come out exactly right." She tilted her head. "I certainly expect you to be ladylike at all times, my dear, but ever since you made the acquaintance of Reverend Fraser, you've ruthlessly pushed aside your exuberance for life. That is what I long for you to embrace again. I also wouldn't be opposed to seeing a dramatic change in the fashions you choose to wear. Your rather outlandish sense of style, while always a topic of conversation at every society event, has bothered me for years."

"You're the one who bought me my first 'outlandish' gown."

"I truly do love you, darling, but I'm not going to take responsibility for the manner in which you've been dressing. Did I, years ago, purchase you a somewhat hideous gown bedecked in ribbons? Yes, I did, but I only did so because the designer assured me it would make you appear years younger. If you will recall, at that time you'd almost reached the ripe old age of twenty and did not have a suitor to call your own."

“Only because my coming out was delayed due to Grandmother’s death and Grandfather’s ill health.”

Ruth’s lips curled into a smile. “It was truly commendable, your diligence to your grandfather, but . . . that has nothing to do with the horrible dress I bought you.” She gave a delicate shudder. “The moment you stepped out of your room garbed in that ridiculous creation, I knew I’d made a horrible mistake. Unfortunately, we were running late. There was nothing to do but tell you how charming you looked and pray you’d someday forgive me.”

“You never told me you thought I looked ridiculous.”

“I had every intention of doing so, dear—after the ball, of course—but you made the acquaintance of Reverend Fraser that very night. He rather foolishly, yet out of kindness, I’m sure, proclaimed you looked delightful . . . and charming.”

“He sounded sincere.”

“I’m certain he was, since he’s a lovely man. But he is woefully deficient in the matter of fashions. I cannot tell you how appalled I was when the very next day you asked me to go shopping, ordered an entirely new wardrobe comprised of questionable styles, and discarded your old wardrobe. You haven’t worn anything remotely fashionable since.”

Something that felt remarkably like regret swept through her. “I was trying to impress Reverend Fraser, and I thought I was on the right track because he did compliment my appearance quite often.”

“Again, he’s a kind man and probably came to the conclusion you needed extra compliments because you always looked so peculiar.” Ruth released a sigh. “I’ve never understood why you decided he was the right gentleman for you.”

“I thought God had sent him to me.”

“Because . . . ?”

Felicia walked over to a settee, sinking down on it as her

skirts billowed up around her. “I knew perfectly well after I returned from Grandfather’s house that I was rapidly approaching spinsterhood, so right before the Patriarch Ball, I had a talk with God. I told Him that I wanted to find a suitable gentleman that very evening, and then, much to my delight, Reverend Fraser turned up.”

“Did it never cross your mind that you might have been mistaken? Surely you must have considered, given your slightly mischievous nature, that you were hardly suited to a life as a minister’s wife.”

Felicia leaned forward, earning herself a faceful of pink tulle in the process. She brushed it aside. “I would make a fine minister’s wife.”

“You’ve done an exceptional job helping the needy and attending church, but tell me, have you done those things because you desire to do them, or was it simply a means to spend time in Reverend Fraser’s company?”

The answers to those questions weren’t something Felicia cared to delve into at the moment. She’d already come to the conclusion she was a horrible person for wanting a bolt of lightning to end Miss Hampton’s dreams. The last thing she wanted to contemplate was whether or not actions she’d told herself were selfless had actually been done in an attempt to further her appeal to Reverend Fraser.

A knock on the door provided a welcome reason to avoid answering her mother. She rose from the settee, walked across the room, pulled open the door, and found one of the housemaids, Gladys, on the other side.

Gladys bobbed a curtsy. “There’s a gentleman here to see you, Miss Murdock.”

“A gentleman?”

“Yes. Mr. Sumner has come to call.”

Apprehension was immediate. “Are you certain about that?”

Gladys nodded and pressed a calling card into Felicia's hand. She glanced at it, and sure enough, it did appear as if Mr. Grayson Sumner had come to call. She jumped when her mother suddenly peered over her shoulder.

"Ah, how lovely. The card does read *Mr. Sumner*. My, I wonder what he's doing here."

Felicia turned and quickly recognized that her mother was batting innocent-looking eyes back at her—something she did quite often when she was in the midst of a plot. "I can't help but wonder the same, Mother."

Ruth ignored her and beamed at Gladys. "Please tell Mr. Sumner that Felicia will be right down."

"I don't think so. Gladys, please tell him I'm indisposed."

"She'll be right down," Ruth repeated.

"I'm indisposed."

Ruth seemed to grow a little larger even as her face turned red. "You're not indisposed; you're sulking—which is quite unattractive, by the way." She nodded to Gladys. "Again, you may inform Mr. Sumner that Felicia will be down momentarily."

Not giving Felicia an opportunity to argue further, Gladys barely bobbed a curtsy before she spun around and beat a hasty retreat.

"Why is Grayson Sumner here, Mother?"

"Because he enjoys your company?"

"Mr. Sumner and I have rarely spent time in each other's company."

Ruth smiled. "Why, that's it. He saw you today at the wedding, realized he wishes to become better acquainted with you, and here he is, in our house, waiting for you to go greet him."

"I'm afraid I don't think that's the reason a member of British aristocracy is currently waiting for me to go greet him."

"I disagree."

"Out with it, Mother. What have you done now?"

“You’re always so suspicious.”

Felicia arched a brow.

Ruth arched one right back at her before she seemed to deflate on the spot. “Oh, very well. If you must know, Mr. Sumner is here to escort you to his sister’s house. Eliza’s decided to host a late-afternoon tea, and she specifically sought me out in order to extend an invitation to you.” Ruth let out a breath. “She was quite concerned when no one could locate you after the wedding. You’ll be relieved to learn that I explained your mad dash from the ceremony with as few words as possible, stating something to the effect that the fabric of your gown had brought on an unfortunate rash.”

“You told everyone I have a rash?”

“Well, not everyone—just Eliza, Grayson, and oh, that delightful Agatha Watson.” Ruth frowned. “The thought did spring to mind, right after the word *rash* escaped my lips, that it probably wasn’t the best explanation I could have come up with, considering rashes are hardly desirable. However, ladies have been known to suffer from wearing an excess of tulle, which you *were* wearing today, so it certainly was a believable comment.”

Ruth’s frown turned into a smile. “At least now your friends will be considerate of your tender condition instead of recognizing the real reason you fled the wedding was due to your unfortunate infatuation with Reverend Fraser.”

There were no words at Felicia’s disposal to respond to that bit of nonsense, and oddly enough, since her mother had mentioned a rash, her skin had begun to itch somewhat dreadfully underneath the swaths of fabric she wore. Scratching her arm, she took a moment to consider her mother. “Tell me, why can’t I simply ride over to Eliza’s house with you?”

“Ah, well . . . I wasn’t invited.”

Her mother was getting more incorrigible with each passing

day. “Eliza would never neglect to extend you an invitation, Mother.”

“I think it’s a tea for young people.”

They were getting nowhere fast.

“How did it happen that Mr. Sumner was coerced to come fetch me?”

“I wouldn’t say he was *coerced*. It seemed to me he was quite eager to make the offer.” Ruth’s eyes began to sparkle. “You should feel extremely honored that a gentleman of Grayson’s caliber has come to call. Why, with that delicious accent of his and his all too handsome face, he’s a gentleman any lady can appreciate.”

Here it was—clear proof that her mother was indeed plotting.

“Are you sure your name isn’t Ruthless instead of Ruth?”

“Pardon me?”

“You’re scheming, Mother, and not very subtly. You’ve set your sights on Grayson Sumner as a prospect for me.”

“My goodness, Felicia, I never realized you have such an overactive imagination. All I did was point out that he’s a fine candidate, er, suitable escort for you today.”

“Grayson Sumner is out of my reach. He’s an aristocrat, as in a real-life earl.”

Ruth began inspecting the sleeve of her gown. “You’d make a lovely countess, and just think how adorable any children you might have would be. When you’re not downplaying your looks, you’re beautiful, and Grayson . . . Well, need I say more?” Ruth looked up. “Would they be little lords and ladies, your children, or do children of earls not get honorary titles?”

“Mr. Sumner abandoned his title.”

“He can always resume the use of it with a bit of prodding.”

The conversation was quickly going downhill. “I’ve never aspired to become a member of the aristocracy.”

“That’s not entirely true. When you were ten, you declared to me you wished to become a princess.”

“All little girls wish to become princesses.”

“Now you can contemplate becoming a countess. They’re almost the same thing.”

Felicia sucked in a deep breath of air, the action causing her corset to brush against skin that, strangely enough, was still itching. “You’re going to have to tell him I’m not feeling well. In fact, I do feel as if I might be coming down with a rash.”

“You’re not, and I’ll do no such thing.”

“Then tell him I have nothing suitable to wear.”

“Your wardrobe is stuffed to the gills with clothing.”

“That’s exactly what my gowns resemble, gills.”

“You’re determined to be difficult, aren’t you.”

“Yes.”

Ruth reached out and patted Felicia’s cheek. “Darling, I understand that you suffered a great disappointment today, but the last thing you should do is hide away in your room. You need to reclaim your life and pursue a future that will allow you to embrace who you truly are, not who you’ve been pretending to be of late.”

“May I assume you believe I should do all of those things while in the company of Grayson Sumner?”

“He’s a charming gentleman, Felicia, and the times I’ve seen the two of you together, both of you have always been smiling.”

“I’m quite certain the only reason I smile while in his company is to mask the fact he makes me incredibly nervous.”

“Hmm . . .” Ruth’s eyes began to sparkle once again.

Chaos normally followed that particular sparkle, which meant Felicia was going to have to nip this subject in the bud before her mother got any truly crazy ideas.

“Grayson Sumner clearly has a mysterious past, and I think that past has caused him to be a rather dangerous man.”

“I’ve always found dangerous gentlemen to be very intriguing.”

There was going to be no reasoning with her mother. Felicia’s

hope of extended wallowing was rapidly slipping away. “Fine, I’ll find something to wear.”

“That’s the spirit, dear.” Ruth patted Felicia’s cheek once again as her eagle eyes skimmed over Felicia’s hair. “You might want to do something different with your hair, darling. I’m afraid it looks quite disastrous.” With that, Ruth hurried through the door and disappeared from view.

Felicia’s shoulders sagged ever so slightly, knowing there was no option but to change and then travel to Eliza’s tea. She stiffened her spine and headed for her dressing room, striding through it before she yanked the door to her wardrobe open. She refused to allow herself the luxury of a good sigh when the sight of pinks, yellows, pale greens, and far too many bows, ribbons, and, more alarmingly yet, feathers met her gaze.

Temper took her by surprise. She moved into the wardrobe and began rummaging through the garments, anxiety quickly replacing the temper as realization finally began to sink in over what she’d actually done over the past four years.

She’d changed who she was in the hope of attracting the attention of a gentleman.

She’d spent hour upon hour at the church, volunteering for everything from feeding the needy to distributing used clothing, and, occasionally, even scrubbing down the pews.

She’d prided herself on never missing a church service, when in actuality she’d gone to every single one only to gaze at Reverend Fraser.

She was a fraud, and it was past time she did something to rectify that.

Her hands stilled when a flash of dark met her gaze. She reached into the farthest recesses of her wardrobe and snatched at it, pulling out the black gown she’d worn to her grandfather’s funeral.

She tore the pink tulle from her body, not bothering to ring

for a maid, and slipped into the black dress, buttoning up the front before she strode back to the mirror. She eyed her reflection and then began to pull pins as rapidly as she could from her hair. Her fingers flew faster and faster as something that felt very much like panic settled over her.

She'd wasted years of her life.

She'd become someone she didn't know and really didn't care for in the least.

Her mother was right. It was time for her to reclaim her life, but she had no idea how to go about that.

An image of Grayson Sumner sprang to mind.

Her mother was not mistaken—he was a handsome gentleman, wealthy too, and he did possess a title, as well as a compelling British accent—but . . . he really was dangerous. She'd realized that the first time she'd made his acquaintance.

She pulled out another pin, tilted her head, and then nodded. Perhaps a tiny slice of danger was exactly what was needed to get her life back on track.

2



Grayson Sumner picked up the china teacup the housemaid had so thoughtfully provided for him, taking a sip of the pleasant brew before he glanced around the tastefully decorated drawing room. He'd never been in this part of the Murdock residence before, and quite frankly, he was surprised to find his surroundings so understated, without a single bold color in sight.

He'd been expecting fussy, given the eccentric manner Miss Felicia Murdock chose to dress, and was slightly disappointed to discover everything so normal.

Amusement replaced disappointment when the thought came to him that Felicia could never be mistaken for normal, no matter the conventional state of her home. She garbed herself in highly unusual fashions, her gowns always dripping with bows and ribbons, but he'd realized shortly after making her acquaintance that underneath the yards and yards of fabric draping her form, there resided a lady who possessed the spirit of a hoyden.

How he'd come to that realization, he really couldn't say. It

wasn't as if he'd ever seen her behave in an untoward manner. Felicia presented herself to the world as a demure young lady, but there was just something about the way her eyes twinkled with mischief every so often that lent credence to his impression regarding her true nature.

For the life of him, he hadn't been able to understand why she'd assumed such a retiring manner—well, retiring except for her peculiar taste in clothing—until just a few hours ago. He'd watched her as she'd perched on the very edge of the pew throughout the wedding ceremony, looking for all intents and purposes as if she were about to take flight. When he'd remarked on Felicia's odd behavior to his sister, Eliza, she'd leaned closer to him and whispered that she'd come to believe Felicia held Reverend Fraser in affection, affection of the romantic kind.

That had explained much, at least in regard to her demure attitude. He wasn't certain anything could explain her taste in fashion. What had taken him aback though, once he'd had a moment to think about it, was that a clear feeling of disgruntlement had settled over him right after Eliza whispered her thoughts into his ear.

What had caused the disgruntlement, he really couldn't say, but he'd been downright grumpy for the rest of the ceremony, which had been rather odd, since weddings normally left him in a pleasant frame of mind.

Grayson took another sip of tea, set the cup aside on a table next to the chair, and pulled out his pocket watch, wondering when, or even if, Felicia would appear.

Perhaps her rash had gotten worse.

If she did appear, was he expected to inquire about the rash, or should he simply pretend Mrs. Murdock hadn't divulged that rather personal information?

Deciding pretending ignorance would be for the best in this situation, he leaned back and stretched out his legs, rising to

his feet a mere moment later when Mrs. Murdock charged into the room, her face wreathed in its customary smile. He stepped forward and took the hand she offered him, bringing it to his lips, which caused her smile to widen and her cheeks to turn pink.

“I do beg your pardon for keeping you waiting so long,” Ruth Murdock exclaimed when he let go of her hand. “Felicia will be down in a moment.”

“I hope she’s been able to address to satisfaction that, er, little problem you mentioned.”

Ruth winced but then smiled. “Indeed she has, but it might be for the best if you don’t bring that up around her. Ladies are extremely sensitive about such matters.” She waltzed over to a settee done up in watered silk and motioned him forward. “We might as well get comfortable while we wait.” She sat down and gestured to the space beside her.

Grayson smiled and took a seat, his smile widening when she reached over and patted his knee in a motherly gesture.

“I must thank you again for coming to fetch Felicia this afternoon. I know she would have been quite bereft if she’d missed having tea with her friends.”

“I was more than happy to offer my services.”

Leaning closer to him, Ruth lowered her voice. “Come now, Mr. Sumner. I know full well that you only offered so quickly because Eliza was treading on your foot.”

“You saw that?”

“I’m a mother. I see everything.” She patted his knee again. “Don’t fret about it though. You are a gentleman, and gentlemen don’t always see the opportunities that present themselves as well as we ladies do.”

“Opportunities?”

“Exactly. Which is why it’s so fortunate your sister is such an observant sort. It’s clear she only has your best interests at

heart, so do be certain to thank her when you see her next for stepping on your foot.”

He no longer possessed any idea regarding what the conversation was about, or where it was leading.

Ruth charged ahead. “You’re very indulgent with Eliza, aren’t you?”

He opened his mouth to respond, but she continued on as if she hadn’t just asked a question. “Tell me, dear, do you think that indulgence was brought on because you abandoned her for far too many years?”

There was no denying that.

He had abandoned his sister for years, and the guilt he suffered over that abandonment was the motivation behind his granting Eliza her every whim.

He’d left her and his father without a single word, without thought for that matter, turning his back on his responsibilities as he’d set out on an adventure of a lifetime after he graduated from Oxford. He’d never considered the possibility that his father might die, their man of affairs would steal all of the family money, and Eliza would be left to fend for herself.

She’d believed him dead.

His sister had mourned him while he’d been off in China securing a fortune for himself through reprehensible means. For that reason alone, Grayson would forever be plagued with remorse.

Regret was his constant companion, because what had eventually happened in China had been entirely his fault. His actions had caused his wife and the rest of her family to suffer the most brutal of deaths.

Only he and Ming, the child he was raising as his daughter, had managed to escape that horrifying end.

Ruth suddenly let out a cough, causing him to remember he was supposed to be in the midst of a conversation with the lady. “I do beg your pardon, Mrs. Murdock. What were you saying?”

“I was inquiring about that adorable daughter of yours. I missed seeing her at the wedding.”

Mrs. Murdock’s ability to change the subject at the drop of a hat was truly amazing.

“Ming’s fine—thank you for asking—but since she has just turned three, I felt it unwise for her to attend today. She’s at that age where you can never tell what she may do.”

“I well remember those years. Felicia was a terror.”

Silence settled over the room, most likely because Mrs. Murdock had snapped her lips together and was perusing the carpet as if something had captured her interest.

Resisting the urge to laugh, Grayson placed his hand on her arm. “I’m certain Miss Murdock was completely precious in her youth.”

Ruth’s head snapped up, and she began nodding, vigorously. “But of course she was. Why, whenever she found herself in the midst of a bit of trouble—not that she got into trouble often, mind you—she’d turn those big eyes on me and I was helpless to resist her.” She smiled. “I’m sure Eliza must have used the same tactics with you in her younger years.”

Eliza *had* been precious in her youth, with her flyaway red hair and large blue eyes. She’d adored him, had followed him everywhere, which made it all the more disturbing that he’d so carelessly turned from her.

“You need a mother for little Ming.”

This was what happened when one let down one’s guard while in the presence of a matchmaking mother. They were relentless in their determination to see their daughters well married and pounced when a man least expected it.

He considered Mrs. Murdock for a moment, unable to attribute the gleam in her eyes to anything other than speculation.

He’d come to truly enjoy Mrs. Murdock and her manipulating ways, even though that manipulation was currently directed

toward him. She was obviously a lady who loved her family, especially her daughter. He appreciated that about her, even though he had no intention of going along with whatever diabolical plan she currently had prowling around her mind.

He was going to have to be honest with her, firm as well, and make her understand that he was not the gentleman for Felicia, or for any other lady for that matter. He'd vowed to never marry again, and he intended to keep that vow. He was too damaged, too filthy, if the truth were known. He would never be good enough to become someone's husband, let alone a husband to a lady like Felicia, who was entirely too captivating for her own good.

He felt a bead of sweat pop out on his forehead and begin to dribble down his face as trepidation rolled through him. It was a bit concerning even thinking the word *captivating* and Felicia in the same breath. Granted, it lent a bit of an explanation as to why he'd been grumpy at the wedding, but . . . he needed to make a hasty retreat before other words such as *alluring*, *enchanting*, and *compelling* started swirling around his mind, but . . . apparently, they already were.

Searching for an excuse that would allow him to take an immediate leave, he casually pulled up the sleeve of his jacket, wondering if he could hope Felicia's rash had been a contagious thing and was even now rapidly spreading through the wedding guests. He leaned closer and peered at his skin, unable to detect a single blemish. He scratched it just to be sure.

"Good gracious, Mr. Sumner, are you itching?"

Itching to get out of there, but he couldn't very well make that proclamation without giving Mrs. Murdock a perfect reason to speculate, and that wasn't something he was willing to do, not given her devious mind.

The sound of an uneven stomping gait right outside the drawing room broke through his panicked thoughts. He turned

toward the door and felt the breath leave him in one single whoosh when Felicia stormed into the room, the sight of her causing his mouth to drop open even as he belatedly remembered to get to his feet.

“Oh . . . dear,” Ruth whispered as she got up from the settee as well.

Mrs. Murdock’s exclamation summed it up nicely. The lady standing in front of him in no way resembled the Felicia he’d come to know. Instead, he was faced with a lady gowned all in black, the cut of the garment emphasizing curves he’d never noticed and certainly never imagined. Her hair was unbound and tumbled to a waist that was incredibly small and accented her . . . charms.

His mouth ran dry as another bead of sweat formed on his forehead and trickled down his face.

Who would have ever thought such an enticing figure was lurking under the vast amount of fabric Felicia normally wore?

Realizing he was gawking, and with a mother bent on match-making standing only feet away from him, he pulled his gaze from Felicia’s surprising attributes and decided a safe part of her to concentrate on would be her hair. Unfortunately, random pins sticking haphazardly out of her tresses captured his attention, causing his mouth to curve up in a grin, something he quickly strove to control when Felicia’s eyes began to shoot sparks in his direction.

Ruth took that moment to clear her throat, loudly. “Felicia, what could you be thinking wearing that particular gown, and where are your manners? You’ve neglected to greet Mr. Sumner.”

“Mr. Sumner,” Felicia all but purred in a husky voice, the huskiness causing his mouth to feel as if it were suddenly full of sand.

“Miss Murdock,” he managed to say, wincing when he realized his voice sounded unnaturally high. He swallowed, drew in

a deep breath, and tried again, pitching his tone a few octaves lower. “Don’t you look . . . delightful.”

Felicia frowned, narrowed her eyes, and folded her arms over her chest.

Oddly enough, it seemed as if she took offense at the term *delightful*. He tried again. “Charming?”

Her eyes narrowed to mere slits.

“Different?”

Felicia’s frown disappeared as her lips curved into an enchanting smile, causing all rational thought to flee from his mind.

She was stunning when she smiled.

“Thank you, Mr. Sumner.”

“Really, Felicia, I’m not certain he was extending you a compliment,” Ruth muttered before she waved a hand at Felicia’s dress. “Would you care to explain why you’ve garbed yourself all in black? It’s not as if anyone has died recently.”

Felicia lifted her chin. “I had nothing else to wear. And there has been a death recently, very recently—the death of the old me. I’ve decided to assume a new identity, at least for today. Today . . . I’m going to be Clara.”

Grayson exchanged a glance with Ruth, who was looking decidedly worried, before he returned his attention to Felicia. Curiosity stole over him. “Why Clara?”

Felicia swept a strand of hair out of her face, the action causing some of the hairpins to tumble to the floor, which she ignored. “If you must know, Clara was a character I ran across in a moldy old book years ago. Given that she possessed a remarkable zest for life, I’ve long admired her.” She smiled. “She was a complete nuisance and came to an exceedingly bad end, but she was an incredibly compelling character—so compelling, in fact, that I’ve decided to emulate her.”

“You long to come to a bad end?” was all Grayson could think to ask.

“If it’s an interesting end, certainly.”

What could he possibly say to that bit of nonsense?

He opened his mouth but was spared a response when Ruth suddenly made a *tsking* noise under her breath, grabbed him rather roughly by the arm, and began tugging him toward the door.

“Thank you so much for coming by today, Mr. Sumner, but I fear my *dear* daughter’s rash must be far worse than I first imagined and is causing her to be out of sorts. You’d best get on your way quickly before you contract whatever vile disorder Felicia’s evidently picked up.”

“Forgive me, Mrs. Murdock, but I don’t believe a rash is causing her behavior—more like insanity, and I don’t think insanity is contagious.”

Ruth tightened her grip on his arm. “We mustn’t take any chances.”

They made it to the hall and were moving at a brisk pace down it before the sound of footsteps echoed behind him. Even though Ruth kept trying to prod him along, he slowed to a stop, turned, and found Felicia limping after them. He looked to her feet and couldn’t help but grin. She was wearing two completely different shoes, one with a high heel and one with a low heel, which went far in explaining her lopsided gait.

“You should have kept moving,” Ruth mumbled, right before Felicia teetered to a stop in front of them and plopped her hands on her hips. Ruth released a dramatic sigh. “Are you aware, dear, that you’re wearing two different shoes?”

Felicia lifted her black skirt, looked down for a moment, dropped the skirt back into place, and shrugged. “So I am. How odd.”

“Yes, it is odd, much like your demeanor, which is why you’re going to bid Mr. Sumner a good day and return to your room. I suggest you spend the rest of the afternoon taking a good, long nap.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Be that as it may,” Ruth returned between now clenched teeth, “it’s past time Grayson took his leave.”

“I’m going with him.”

Ruth shook her head. “That wouldn’t be wise.”

“I can’t ignore Eliza’s invitation, and it would be beyond rude to Mr. Sumner if he came all this way to fetch me but then was forced to leave me behind.” She turned to him. “I’ll be right back. I just need to change my shoes.” With that, she began to limp down the hall.

“If you’re determined to continue on with this madness,” Ruth called after her, “you might want to fetch a hat as well.”

Felicia looked over her shoulder. “Clara never wore a hat.”

Ruth closed her eyes for just a moment, opened them, and shook her head. “It is beyond me at times like this why people feel inclined to have children.”

“To bring you joy and comfort in your old age, of course,” Felicia said briskly before she turned her head and hurried off down the hallway.

“She’s in an unusual mood,” Grayson said to fill the silence Felicia’s departure had caused.

“I’m afraid I can’t argue with you about that.” Ruth sighed. “I should not have agreed to the plan of having you come after her, especially knowing the disappointment she suffered today. I think the only prudent thing to do now is to summon my carriage and accompany Felicia over to your sister’s house myself. Eliza did, in fact, issue me an invitation, but . . .” Ruth suddenly looked a little shifty. “It might be for the best if you didn’t mention that to Felicia.”

“Should I even bother to ask why you’ve allowed your daughter to believe you weren’t invited?”

Ruth began to fan her face with her hand. “Probably not, and it hardly matters now. What does matter is rescuing you from my

somewhat deranged daughter.” Ruth stopped fanning her face. “Do forgive me, for you have no idea what I’m speaking about, but I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to disclose the particulars.”

“Eliza told me about Reverend Fraser and Felicia’s affection for him.”

“I was under the impression Felicia had kept that affection a well-guarded secret.”

“I’m sure she did, but Eliza’s always been intuitive, and she’s great friends with Agatha, one of New York City’s rising journalists. It probably didn’t take much pondering for them to figure out Felicia’s secret. I must admit, learning about Felicia’s interest in Reverend Fraser explained quite a few things about her, especially why she’s never shown an interest in any of the gentlemen I’ve watched you parade before her.”

Ruth’s eyes turned cunning. “I think she’s shown a little interest in you.”

Once again he’d forgotten he was in the presence of a determined mother. “She hasn’t, as you very well know, and I must be up-front with you, Mrs. Murdock. I’m not looking for a wife.”

“You need a mother for your daughter.”

“I employ several nannies who are more than capable of seeing to her needs.”

“I’m certain they do an admirable job, but there’s nothing quite like a mother’s touch, is there?”

Grayson laughed. “You are tenacious, aren’t you?”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“It was intended as such, but I don’t want to give you false hope. Your daughter obviously hopes to settle down with a respectable and faith-filled man, given her affection for Reverend Fraser. I readily admit I’m far from respectable and even further from faith-filled.”

“I’m sure that’s not true.”

“Do you think it will ever be possible, Mother, for you to *not*

try and pawn me off on some poor, unsuspecting gentleman every time I leave a room?”

Grayson looked up and found Felicia marching toward them, her hair, surprisingly enough, stuffed underneath a revolting hat of lime green, pieces of it sticking out here and there, and one of her hands was clutched around a parasol of brightest orange. Determined to avoid the subject of wardrobe choices, he stepped forward and smiled. “Your mother wasn’t really trying to pawn you off on me.”

Felicia’s eyes turned stormy. “Oh fine, take her side.” She lifted her chin. “Perhaps I should simply drive myself over to Eliza’s.”

“I’m afraid that’s not an option, because I promised Eliza and Agatha I’d do my very best to entertain you out of your doldrums while . . .”

Pain had a way of making a gentleman forget what he’d been saying.

“Did you just poke me with your parasol?”

“Why would Eliza and Agatha have you make any promises?”

“Ah, well . . .” He looked to Ruth for assistance, but she didn’t appear to be giving him the slightest bit of attention and was instead staring at the ceiling as if she’d never before noticed the cheerful cherubs frolicking above their heads.

“What else did you promise Eliza and Agatha?” Felicia demanded.

He summoned what he hoped was a pleasant smile. “I promised them I’d be charming.”

Felicia drew in a sharp breath and rounded on her mother. “I thought you only told everyone I had a rash.”

Ruth stopped looking at the ceiling and fixed her gaze on him. “Isn’t that exactly what I told you?”

“Is it permissible for me to admit I have been privy to that type of personal information?”

Felicia began to tap the parasol in a slightly menacing manner

against the floor. “I don’t have a rash. Well, I have a small one, but I think it was brought on by the mere suggestion of . . . Oh, never mind.” She narrowed her eyes on Ruth. “Why would Eliza and Agatha send Grayson to charm me if they didn’t know, and if you didn’t tell them, how did they find out?”

Grayson resisted the urge to bolt when Felicia stopped tapping the parasol against the floor and shook it in his direction. When it appeared Ruth was at a loss for words, he cleared his throat. “I expect Eliza and Agatha, being the nosy ladies I’m sure you realize them to be, simply figured it out.”

Felicia’s eyes widened. “I thought I hid my feelings quite well.” Her shoulders slumped for a moment, but then she straightened her spine and nodded. “Well, there’s nothing I can do about it now. What’s done is done, and I’m just going to have to face everyone’s pity head on.”

“I’m more than certain everyone is going to pity Grayson far more than you, my dear, especially if you let it be known you’ve decided to be Clara for the day,” Ruth muttered.

Felicia looked at her mother, lifted her chin even higher, stepped closer to him, and grabbed his arm. “We should probably be on our way. I would hate to be late for tea.” With that, she prodded him toward the front door, barely waiting for the butler to open it before she pulled him through it.

Their progress came to an abrupt halt when three gentlemen, all of them bearing a marked resemblance to Felicia, ambled up the steps and blocked their way. He heard what sounded like a sigh escape her lips.

“On my word, Felicia, you’re looking a bit frightful,” Jeffrey Murdock, the oldest of the clan, exclaimed. “Are you aware that you’re dressed in black?”

Felicia’s grip on Grayson’s arm tightened. “Don’t be ridiculous. Of course I’m aware of what I’m wearing, Jeffrey. And I’ll thank you to not call me Felicia.”

Confusion immediately clouded Jeffrey's eyes. "What, pray tell, would you have me call you, then?"

"Clara."

Jeffrey simply stared at her for a moment with his mouth somewhat slack before he turned to Grayson. "Am I allowed to call you Grayson, or have you assumed a new identity as well?"

"He's Frank," Felicia supplied before Grayson could get a word out of his mouth.

"Forgive me, Felicia, but I don't recall agreeing to change my name to Frank, even for just today," Grayson said.

"Did you or did you not promise your sister you were going to charm me?"

"Well, yes, but that agreement had nothing to do with assuming a new identity."

Her eyes began to sparkle in a slightly mischievous way, causing him to completely lose his train of thought.

"Don't you want to do everything in your power to charm me?"

He suddenly found he wanted to do much more than charm her, which caused him to immediately turn from her, and move toward her brother Robert, his action causing her hand to fall away from his arm.

"It's nice to see you again, Robert."

"And you as well, Grayson, but tell me, have you really agreed to charm my little sister?" Robert was regarding him somewhat warily.

"It was Eliza's and Agatha's idea."

Felicia's third brother, Daniel, stepped forward, a huge grin on his face. "Well, that certainly fits, considering the antics of those two." He held out his hand and Grayson shook it. "They must have figured out Felicia's affection for Reverend Fraser and wanted to do whatever they could to cheer her up." Daniel shuddered as he glanced at his sister and then back to Grayson.

“I can’t say I envy you at the moment. Charming Felicia might be a bit of a daunting task today.”

Grayson couldn’t say he’d argue that point, especially when all the mischief disappeared from Felicia’s eyes to be replaced with distinct irritation.

“You knew about Reverend Fraser?” she asked, moving close enough to Daniel to give him a sharp poke with her parasol.

Daniel looked at her for a moment, reached out, and much to Grayson’s relief, snatched the parasol from her hand before he smiled. “Don’t ever do that again, and yes, we’ve known about Reverend Fraser forever.” He looked over her shoulder, and his smile widened. “Oh look, here comes Mother, and is that roast I smell coming out the door? I’m starving.”

“Me too,” Robert exclaimed, and without another word, the two brothers turned, greeted Ruth with a somewhat hurried hello, and fled into the house.

“Cowards,” Felicia called after them.

“Felicia, really, it’s not well done of you to throw insults at your own brothers,” Ruth said as she marched up to join them. “Ah, Jeffrey, this is a fortunate surprise. You can accompany Felicia and Grayson over to Eliza’s house. They’re going there for tea.”

Grayson thought that was a wonderful suggestion. He nodded in full agreement but stopped mid-nod when Felicia shook her head.

“Jeffrey wasn’t invited, nor were you, if you’ll recall.”

Ruth waved the comment away. “Eliza adores Jeffrey, and he can assume the role of chaperone, or rather, guardian.”

“I’m twenty-four, Mother. I haven’t needed a chaperone for years.”

“Not for you—for Grayson. The poor man is going to need all the guarding he can get, considering your state of mind.”

Grayson grinned, extended his arm once again to Felicia,

who'd begun to sputter, and sent Ruth a nod. "We'll be fine, Mrs. Murdock, but I do appreciate your concern." He looked down at Felicia. "Ready?"

"Of course I'm ready, Frank. Lead the way."

With Ruth's voice echoing in his ear, saying something that sounded remarkably like "Your sister has lost her mind and there's nothing any of us can do to help her get it back," Grayson helped Felicia down the short flight of steps and then heard the front door shut behind them.

"I like your mother," he said, patting the gloved hand Felicia had placed over his arm. "She's very managing."

"You should try living with her."

"I said I liked her, but I don't think I'd be up for living with her."

Felicia laughed, sounding much more like the Felicia he knew, and then she took over the task of steering them toward his phaeton, reminding him of one of the few times he'd danced with her and she'd taken to leading him around the dance floor.

Felicia brought them to a stop right beside his horses and surprised him when she let out what sounded remarkably like a whistle. "Nice phaeton. Is it fast?"

Trepidation was immediate. "It has been known to move rather quickly."

She moved up to it and trailed a gloved hand along the polished surface. "Will you allow me to drive it?"

"Hmm . . ."

She turned her head and smiled a smile that was just a bit too cunning. "Did you, or did you not, make certain promises today?"

"Well, yes, but those had nothing to do with allowing you to drive my phaeton."

"Driving such a remarkable conveyance would go far in lifting my flagging spirits."

Not only was she captivating at times, it appeared she was also rather diabolical.

“Do you know how to drive?” he heard himself ask before he could stop the words from escaping his mouth.

“My mother tells everyone how proficient I am with the reins.”

Five minutes later, as Grayson hung to the seat for dear life, he came to the realization that Mrs. Murdock was not above exaggeration when it came to her daughter’s abilities.