

APART FROM
THE CROWD

OUT OF
the
ORDINARY

JEN TURANO



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For Paulette Tangelder
Because sometimes a person just needs
to be reminded they're appreciated!

Love ya!

Jen

CHAPTER ONE



JUNE 4, 1883

Slipping through the crowd gathered on the upper deck of a most extravagant yacht, Miss Gertrude Cadwalader drew in a breath and adopted an air of what she hoped would be taken for nonchalance. Her greatest desire was that no one would realize she was anything but completely composed, even though something was horribly, horribly amiss.

Mrs. Davenport, the lady Gertrude was paid to be a companion to, had, regrettably, gone missing.

It wasn't that Gertrude was concerned her employer had fallen overboard, or that she'd suffered some manner of terrible accident. Circumstances such as those would have been much easier to handle than the reality Gertrude was facing—that reality being the unfortunate business of Mrs. Davenport having the propensity to go missing on a far too frequent basis.

On this evening, Mrs. Davenport had not been seen for over an hour. During that hour, Gertrude was all but convinced her employer had been pursuing activities that would be considered

suspicious in nature by everyone except members of the criminal set.

Unable to help but shudder over that idea, Gertrude quickened her pace and reached a flight of narrow steps that led below-deck. Glancing over her shoulder, relief trickled through her when she realized all the guests who'd been invited to celebrate the recent engagement of Miss Permilia Griswold to Mr. Asher Rutherford were sufficiently occupied and not paying her the least little mind.

Keeping a firm grip on the railing because the unusually large bustle attached to her behind made traveling down stairs tricky, Gertrude reached the lower deck and took a second to peruse her surroundings.

To her left, she discovered a great many closed doors, a rather daunting sight, and when she looked to the right, she was less than reassured when she discovered just as many closed doors in that direction.

Knowing there was nothing left to do except get on with the disturbing matter at hand, especially since the longer she lingered, the more mischief Mrs. Davenport could get into, Gertrude headed down the companionway to her right, stopping at the first door she encountered.

After she edged the door open, she found a delightful stateroom on the other side, paneled in gleaming wood. Set in the very middle of the room was a four-poster bed, complete with a canopy draped in blue silk. The bed was sitting high enough from the floor to where a person could very well slip underneath it if that person were trying to avoid detection.

Marching her way across the room, Gertrude stopped directly beside the bed and leaned over, stopping mid-lean when one of the wires used to create the monstrosity on her behind took that moment to jab through the delicate material of her

petticoats and drawers. Wincing, Gertrude straightened even as she longed to rub a bottom that was now sore but impossible to reach past a bustle that seemed to be coming undone.

Deciding it would not benefit her to bend over again since she really had no liking for wires jabbing her, she cleared her throat and lowered her voice to the merest whisper.

“Mrs. Davenport, are you under there?”

When only silence met her ears, Gertrude debated bending over again, but when the thought sprang to mind that there was a very good chance her bustle would only disintegrate further, jabbing her numerous times in the process, she abandoned that particular debate.

“Since I seem to be suffering some ill effects from a bustle you assured me had been crafted in a most expert manner, which, sadly, I’m learning was not exactly the case, I fear I’m beginning to lose all sense of a pleasant attitude,” she began in a voice slightly louder than a whisper this time. “Because of that, and because I’m certain you, Mrs. Davenport, won’t want my enjoyment in this lovely evening to be ruined because of an ill humor, I’m going to suggest if you are under the bed, you show yourself immediately. You must know that no good can possibly come from skulking around Mr. Harrison Sinclair’s yacht.”

When Mrs. Davenport did not come crawling out from underneath the bed, Gertrude made for the door, stopping a second later when she noticed a smaller door, one that might very well lead to a wardrobe. Knowing her employer had a great liking for wardrobes, and the space they provided a person when one wanted to go unobserved, Gertrude changed directions and strode across the room again, taking hold of the latch attached to the smaller door and giving it a pull.

She did not discover Mrs. Davenport lurking on the other side. Instead, she found a room she’d been told was called a

“head” instead of a retiring room, one that came complete with a marble sink with gilded taps.

Unable to stop herself since her curiosity was now getting the better of her, she turned one of the taps, which immediately sent a stream of clear water spouting out of it.

Not wanting the fresh water to go to waste, she splashed some on her face, which had become heated during her searching endeavors, washed her hands, then stilled when she thought she heard footsteps in the companionway.

Turning off the tap, she reached for the fluffy towel that was hanging from a gilded hook, patted her face and hands dry, returned the towel to the hook, uncertain that was proper but not knowing what else to do with it, and then moved as stealthily as she could out of the head and through the stateroom. Opening the door ever so carefully, she stuck her head out and peered down the companionway.

At first, she thought she must have been imagining the footsteps, until she glimpsed the merest hint of a shadow disappearing around a corner. Hoping the shadow belonged to none other than the errant Mrs. Davenport, Gertrude hurried after it, coming to an abrupt halt when she rounded the corner and found herself facing two doors, one of which had been left slightly ajar.

“I’ve found you now.” Pushing open that door, she discovered herself in a room that was devoid of Mrs. Davenport, but filled to the brim with leather-bound books, the scent of the leather reminding Gertrude of the library her father used to own, back in the days before he’d lost the family fortune and . . .

Shaking herself from thoughts she certainly hadn’t expected to spring to mind, especially since she couldn’t afford to become distracted, Gertrude headed farther into what turned out to be the yacht’s library. She made short shrift of looking behind two

chairs with tufted cushions upholstered in a navy and white fabric, disappointment stealing through her when she didn't uncover Mrs. Davenport crouched behind either chair.

Tapping a finger against her chin, she considered a small fainting couch that was positioned directly underneath a painting that, if she wasn't mistaken, might have been painted by Bouguereau. What such a painting was doing onboard a yacht, she couldn't say, but since Mrs. Davenport was often drawn to objects of an expensive nature, the small space located between the wall and the back of the couch certainly deserved further investigation. Moving to stand before the couch, Gertrude placed a knee on top of the cushion, peered over the back of the couch, and found absolutely nothing there.

Since there was little sense lingering in a room where her employer was obviously not, Gertrude began to straighten, but to her dismay, her bustle took that moment to shift, making her side-heavy. Before she could do more than let out a squeak, she wobbled to the left, the bustle shifted again, and before she knew it, the weight of it pulled her straight against the fainting couch. She was left reclining in an awkward and less than graceful pose between the high back of the couch and the cushioned seat.

When what felt like every wire that had been used to fashion the bustle—a bustle that was actually a sawed-in-half birdcage—began jabbing her in far too many places, Gertrude tried to push herself into an upright position. That decision turned out to be a grave error in judgment when she heard the fabric of her gown rip right before she became completely immobile.

Realizing that the wires of her bustle were keeping her firmly attached to the fainting couch, Gertrude knew she had no choice but to call for help. Before she could do so, though, footsteps sounded directly outside the library door.

Turning her head, the only part of her body she seemed capable of turning, she blinked and then blinked again when a lovely young lady dressed in a delightful gown of yellow tulle stepped into the room, paused, and then sent a frown Gertrude's way.

"I say, Miss Cadwalader, are you quite all right? I could have sworn I just heard a bit of a ruckus, but . . ." She waved a hand Gertrude's way. "There you are, completely at your leisure, although now that I think about it, you being at your leisure is somewhat odd. When I took note of you leaving the upper deck, I thought for certain you must be searching out a retiring room to fix your hair, since it is, as I'm certain you're aware, looking downright frightful at the moment."

For the briefest of seconds, Gertrude could only stare at the young lady known as Miss Clementine Flowerdew—a member of the fashionable set and a lady Gertrude rarely conversed with, and certainly wasn't looking forward to conversing with at this inopportune time.

That Miss Flowerdew was looking very well indeed, there could be no question. Strands of jewels were woven into the young lady's perfectly styled flaxen hair, the style of that hair drawing attention to the graceful curve of her white neck. Encircled around that neck were additional jewels, set in numerous strands that ended in a glitter of diamonds nestled directly in the very center of Miss Flowerdew's charms.

A flicker of what felt exactly like envy took Gertrude by surprise, brought on, no doubt, by the thought that any charms *she* might possess were tucked away beneath a gown that was made of yards and yards of hideous green fabric.

Even though she wasn't a lady who held an overt interest in fashion, which made her the ideal companion for a woman who considered herself a designer but had no true talent for design,

she did occasionally wish Mrs. Davenport would refrain from using her as a subject to try out her more outlandish creations. Refraining from that behavior would have allowed Gertrude to attend the engagement event that very evening without wearing a curiously designed bustle, one that was now responsible for keeping her a prisoner on the fainting couch.

The idea for that bustle had come about when Mrs. Davenport had overheard a conversation between Gertrude and her very good friend Miss Permilia Griswold. Permilia was the guest of honor this evening and a woman with a keen eye for fashion. As such, she was always up to date on the trends fashions were expected to take. Those trends were now suggesting that bustles were to expand in size by numerous inches. Evidently wanting to embrace the idea that bustles were to become larger than ever, Mrs. Davenport had set about creating the largest bustle anyone had probably ever seen, resorting to using a real birdcage to obtain the size she'd decided she needed.

That size was directly responsible for the yards and yards of fabric Gertrude was wearing, since Mrs. Davenport had longed to create what she called a waterfall effect that would cascade gracefully from Gertrude's backside. While Mrs. Davenport claimed the green color was her inspiration for creating that waterfall, something to do with rushing water, Gertrude had the sneaking suspicion her employer had used the green because it was the only color available that came with so many yards of fabric to the bolt, the availability of that bolt a direct result of no one with any sense of style wanting to be garbed in such an awful color.

Sadly, there was no disputing the idea that the gown Gertrude was wearing did not show to advantage next to Miss Flowerdew's frothy creation of yellow tulle, which left . . .

“Oh dear, I do hope I haven't hurt your feelings with the

frightful hair remark, Miss Cadwalader. I did so want to get off on the right foot with you. Clearly, though, since you've yet to respond to my statement, you weren't aware that there's something gravely amiss with whatever that is you currently have fashioned on your head."

Raising a hand, Gertrude patted the right side of her head and then patted the left. "Everything seems to be in order" was all she could think to say.

Miss Flowerdew walked closer, shaking her perfectly coiffed head in a rather sad sort of way. "You look as if you've attached two golden baker buns to either side of your head—a look that is neither fashionable nor appealing."

"Mrs. Davenport told me *she* was told by a society matron who just returned from Europe that *this* particular style was all the rage this season."

Miss Flowerdew bit her lip. "Perhaps that style may be well-regarded in some obscure European country, one that's far, far away, but I didn't witness a single lady wearing that look when I was over in Paris a few weeks back."

Taking a second to rub at a kink in her neck that was becoming more knotted by the minute, Gertrude released a sigh. "And that right there, Miss Flowerdew, is why one should never trust a lady of a certain age who is looking far too innocently back at you, while she's styling your hair in what you believe is a questionable manner, but she insists is not."

"I beg your pardon?"

Gertrude stopped rubbing her neck and waved Miss Flowerdew's comment aside. "It's of little consequence, simply a touch of pondering about finding myself in somewhat peculiar circumstances at times. However, now is hardly the time for me to descend into a state of self-reflection. May I assume you're searching for a retiring room and that is why you were follow-

ing me? As you can see, there's not a retiring room here in the library. I do know that you can find a well-appointed one on the aft deck, right behind the sitting salon, where people are currently taking their leisure to get out of the stiff ocean breeze."

To Gertrude's surprise, Miss Flowerdew gave a delicate shrug of her shoulders before she smiled, walked across the room, then made quite the production of lowering herself into a chair, smoothing out the folds of her skirt before she lifted her head. "I didn't follow you because I was searching out a retiring room, Miss Cadwalader. I followed you because I'd like to speak with you privately." She nodded to the chair adjacent to her. "It would be easier to enjoy our conversation, though, if you'd join me over here."

Gertrude took the briefest of seconds to contemplate her current dilemma.

Miss Flowerdew, being of the fashionable set, was a woman who would probably not understand how it had come to be that Gertrude was currently wearing a birdcage on her bottom. But if she didn't explain her unusual situation to Miss Flowerdew, she'd continue being stuck. That could lead to someone stumbling upon Mrs. Davenport and whatever it was Mrs. Davenport was up to, which could very well turn disastrous for her employer.

The sense of loyalty she held for Mrs. Davenport, a woman who was undoubtedly odd, yet provided Gertrude with a more than generous wage, had her lifting her chin.

"As curious as this is going to sound, Miss Flowerdew," she began, "I'm afraid that it's impossible for me to join you since I've gotten myself into a tricky situation, one that I can't seem to correct by myself."

Miss Flowerdew leaned forward, pursed her lips, then, curiously enough, smiled. "You need a favor from me?"

“I don’t know if I’d go so far as to call it a favor, more on the lines of a smidgen of assistance.”

If anything, Miss Flowerdew’s smile brightened. “Assistance that would leave you in my debt?”

A trace of unease began tickling the back of Gertrude’s neck, mixing with the knot that was still there. Summoning up a smile of her own, she nodded toward the door. “Upon further reflection, I truly don’t want to put you out, nor do I want you to miss any of the festivities currently taking place topside. If you’d simply be so kind as to tell Miss Permia Griswold that I could use *her* assistance when you return to the top deck, I’d greatly appreciate it.”

“Appreciate it enough to where you’d be willing to agree to do *me* a little favor?”

“You’re very tenacious with this idea about me owing you a favor, aren’t you?”

Instead of replying, Miss Flowerdew rose to her feet and moved closer, her gaze traveling over Gertrude with eyes that were far too sharp for Gertrude’s liking.

“You’ve landed yourself in a pickle, haven’t you?”

“I don’t know if I’d go so far as to claim I’m in a pickle.”

“You’re obviously stuck to the couch, which certainly constitutes being in a pickle.”

“I suppose it does,” Gertrude admitted.

“How fortuitous,” Miss Flowerdew chirped before she began pacing back and forth in front of Gertrude, seemingly sizing up the situation. Stopping, she arched a delicate brow Gertrude’s way. “How did it happen?”

“I lost my balance trying to get a . . . ah . . . closer look at the painting hanging above this very couch. Then, to add insult to injury, my bustle broke, evidently from the force of my fall, and pieces of it pierced the couch. I don’t want to move because I’m afraid I’ll ruin the upholstery if I do.”

Tapping a toe against the floor, Miss Flowerdew looked from Gertrude to the painting hanging behind the couch, then back to Gertrude again right as her eyes widened. “Forgive me, Miss Cadwalader, but I must tell you that your current situation seems to be more ominous than curious. Why, the only reasonable explanation that springs to my mind to explain why you would have needed to peruse that painting so closely is that you’re a thief but got foiled in your attempt to steal that painting by gravity.”

“Good heavens, Miss Flowerdew, get ahold of yourself. That’s a completely ridiculous conclusion, especially since it would be next to impossible for anyone to make off undetected with a painting of that size.”

“So you *were* considering the matter.”

Gertrude’s brows drew together. “No, I wasn’t, I was . . . oh, never mind. Allow me to simply say that I’m not a thief, nor was I attempting a heist on Mr. Sinclair’s yacht.”

Ignoring everything she’d just said, Miss Flowerdew began pacing again, stopping a few seconds later to look Gertrude’s prone form up and down. “Do you have so much fabric making up your skirt because that’s where you stash your ill-gotten gains?”

“Of course not, especially since, again, I don’t spend my time as a thief but only as a companion to Mrs. Davenport. If you must know, she’s responsible for the gown I’m wearing, and she used extra yards of fabric because of the questionable bustle she designed for me.”

Miss Flowerdew released a sniff. “A ridiculous explanation if I ever heard one.”

“It may be ridiculous, but it’s true. And, it’s also an explanation I’ll be able to prove once I get unstuck from this couch. I’ll then be able to show you the bustle in question, and then you’ll

be extending me an apology, one I richly deserve since you've now taken to questioning my integrity."

Turning her back on Gertrude, Miss Flowerdew walked across the room and retook her seat. Considering Gertrude with narrowed eyes, she finally gave a short jerk of her head. "Very well, let me see this so-called questionable bustle."

"I can't very well show it to you since, if you've forgotten, I'm stuck. You'll have to assist me with getting unstuck first, and then I can prove my innocence."

Miss Flowerdew suddenly smiled. "Which brings us directly back to the beginning of our conversation, one that, if *you've* forgotten, dealt with you being in my debt. I'm perfectly willing to assist you, however, it *will* come with a cost—that cost being your agreement to assist *me* in the foreseeable future with a little matter that's very dear to me." Her smile turned smug. "Since the question has arisen regarding your reason for being on the couch in the first place, a question that I'm sure you're going to want to keep hush-hush, I suggest you agree to my terms."

"That sounds a little like blackmail."

Miss Flowerdew tapped a gloved finger against her chin. "It does at that, doesn't it?"

"I'm not one to give in to demands, Miss Flowerdew, especially since I've done absolutely nothing to warrant a blackmail demand in the first place."

Wrinkling her nose, Miss Flowerdew settled back into the chair. "Has anyone ever told you that you're far too cheeky to fit the expectations of a wallflower?"

"Has anyone ever told you that there's not actually a society known as the wallflowers—it's simply a derogatory name for a group of lovely young ladies who aren't considered as fashionable as society wants them to be?"

Miss Flowerdew completely neglected to respond to that,

choosing to beam another bright smile Gertrude's way instead. "My goodness but we do seem to have gotten distracted from the business at hand. And since we are missing out on the festivities that are occurring above board, allow me to redirect our conversation to the important matter I need to broach with you."

Sitting forward in the chair, Miss Flowerdew suddenly looked far too earnest. "I'd like you to personally introduce me to the oh-so-delicious Mr. Harrison Sinclair, and then I want your promise that you'll do whatever is in your power to convince him to offer me a proposal of the matrimonial type."