

APART FROM
THE CROWD

CAUGHT
by
SURPRISE

JEN TURANO



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For David Turner

Even though I was convinced you got far more than your fair share of attention as the baby of the family, which was probably why Gretchen and I tormented you so much, you still—and I’m not exactly sure how—turned out to be charming, well-adjusted, and . . . completely normal.

Love you!
Jen

CHAPTER ONE



SEPTEMBER 1883—NEW YORK CITY

The first inkling Miss Temperance Flowerdew had that her rather mundane day was about to turn anything *but* mundane happened when a closed carriage trundled up beside her, keeping pace with her every step as she walked down the sidewalk adjacent to Broadway.

With her thoughts consumed by the watercolor lesson she was soon to teach at Miss Snook's School for the Education of the Feminine Mind, she gave the carriage only the most cursory of glances and continued forward. However, when the door to the carriage suddenly burst open and a masked man bounded out of it, Temperance stopped dead in her tracks and turned her undivided attention to the scene unfolding directly in front of her. For the life of her, she couldn't comprehend why a member of what was obviously the criminal persuasion would behave in such a blatant fashion in the midst of a public sidewalk.

Before she could come up with a reasonable explanation, though, the masked man set his sights on her, and then, to her utmost horror, he lurched her way and grabbed hold of her arm.

The next thing she knew, she was hanging upside down over a very broad shoulder, the breath stolen from her lungs, right before

she was tossed unceremoniously into the carriage. Wincing when she landed on a seat bereft of much cushioning, she managed to get a less than impressive “help” through her constricted throat. Scrambling for the door opposite of the one she’d been tossed through, her scrambling came to an abrupt stop when the masked man grabbed hold of her foot. He then kept a firm grip on that foot even as he went about the tricky business of closing the carriage door while she twisted and turned in a desperate attempt to get free.

The door shut with an ominous click, and darkness settled over the interior of the carriage, the lack of light adding a substantial amount of melodrama to what was already a very dramatic situation.

As the carriage surged into motion, a burlap bag that smelled strongly of onions was pulled over her head and something that felt quite like a very sharp knife pressed into her side.

“If you know what’s good for you, you’ll not make another peep,” a voice rasped as the carriage picked up speed, the driver evidently not having a care where he was driving since Temperance could hear the yells of people trying to get out of the carriage’s way.

For the briefest of moments, Temperance was more than willing to abide to the demand of keeping silent. But when her scrambled thoughts began to settle, she realized that if she did remain quiet she’d be spirited down Broadway with relatively few people aware of her troubling plight. There was little likelihood anyone who realized she’d been abducted would be able to follow her since they’d all been on foot. With that in mind, she opened her mouth and managed to get what sounded exactly like a croak past her lips.

Her croaking came to a rapid end when the bag was pulled off her head and a cloth that smelled revoltingly sweet and was saturated with some type of liquid was pressed over her nose and mouth. Temperance’s stomach immediately began to roil. Unable to dislodge the cloth or the man as the carriage continued to careen wildly down the street, she soon found her thoughts growing fuzzy and her limbs turning alarmingly numb. Before she knew it, her eyes fluttered shut, and everything faded straightaway.



“I done told you, Eugene, that a person really can’t be trusting those remedies sold at those apparition shops. Why, that lady has been senseless for hours. We ain’t gonna get paid the rest of our money if we get to Chicago and discover she died along the way. Besides, I didn’t sign up for no murdering of a young lady. That would go against everything Pastor Roy used to preach to us when we was young’uns.”

Forcing her eyes open even though they seemed less than willing to cooperate, Temperance blinked a few times, confusion coursing over her as her gaze settled on thin slices of light drifting through what looked to be small holes. A distinctive rumbling sound met her ears, but because her thoughts were incredibly muddled, she couldn’t remember when she’d heard that rumbling before, or what it signified.

“She ain’t dead, Mercy. I checked her no more than ten minutes ago, and I told you I heard snores coming out of the coffin. And not that I want to squabble with you, but I’m fair to certain that Pastor Roy wouldn’t have been approv’in’ of us stealing that lady from the street either, or whiskin’ her off to Chicago. I might be wrong about this, but kidnapping a person is almost as bad as murderin’ them.”

Drawing in a breath of stale air, Temperance froze in the act of releasing that breath when she realized the word *coffin* had been used, which almost seemed to suggest she was currently residing in one, although . . . that couldn’t be right, unless . . .

“And because talk of Pastor Roy, God rest his soul, is making me uncomfortable,” the man continued, “allow me to change the subject to something a little less troubling. *Apparition*, a word you just spoke, Mercy, ain’t the right word. Apocalypse shop is where I got that sleeping potion, but I’m beginning to think I may have been a little heavy-handed with it. The owner of that shop didn’t mention a thing about it makin’ a person senseless for so many hours, but that’s what it’s done.”

“If she ain’t dead, that senseless state she’s embracing might very well be a blessing in disguise—unless she never comes to, that is,” said the voice belonging to a person Temperance thought might be Mercy. “I doubt she would have climbed into that coffin on her own accord, let alone allowed us to nail the lid of it closed over top of her, or waited quietly while we drilled more air holes through the wood. That might have made it all kinds of tricky to get her on this here train. She weren’t nearly as accommodatin’ as we was led to believe she’d be. And she sure didn’t come along with us peaceful-like, which made the use of that coffin a brilliant idea on your part.”

At the mention of the word *coffin* again, all the breath seemed to get sucked right out of Temperance’s lungs as the truth of her situation settled over her.

She’d been abducted, stuffed into a coffin, and someone had apparently nailed the lid shut after they’d gotten through with stuffing her inside a place a living person wasn’t supposed to be. They’d then, if she was following the conversation correctly, hauled her onto a train and were taking her off to Chicago for some unknown reason.

Panic, and a large dose of it, had perspiration beading her forehead.

Trying to push aside the panic, Temperance forced air back into her lungs, breathing in and out as she tried to puzzle out why someone would want to nail her into a coffin or abscond with her in the first place.

She was not a lady who possessed a fortune, having become a poor relation to her distant Flowerdew relatives when her parents died unexpectedly a few years before. She’d been left destitute, a circumstance that had been next to impossible to comprehend given the vast family fortune she’d always believed to be in fine form, but a fortune that had turned out to be anything other than fine.

Unaccustomed to having limited funds at her disposal, she’d found herself forced to accept the hospitality—and grudging hospi-

tality at that—of Mr. Wayne Flowerdew, her cousin twice removed. He'd been the gentleman who'd tracked her down in Paris, given the direction by her father's business associate who'd known she was spending a few years enjoying a grand tour while perfecting her craft as an artist.

To say she was taken aback to discover a gentleman she barely knew waiting for her in the house she was renting in Paris was an understatement. But then, after Wayne Flowerdew made himself quite at home in the charming parlor her rented house offered, he'd changed her world forever with the unfortunate news he'd come to deliver.

Her parents were missing in the wilds of South America, presumed dead. They'd been murdered, witnesses claimed, by a tribe of vicious savages.

Shaken to the core by the idea she would never see her beloved parents again, having never once considered that the adventurous life her mother and father enjoyed would end with their deaths, she'd been less than prepared to deal with the next disaster flung her way—one centered around the fact that the family fortune was no longer intact.

That information had been delivered to her by Mr. John Howland, a gentleman she'd learned was her father's most trusted man of affairs. He'd met Temperance and her cousin at the New York Harbor and ushered her directly to his office off Fourth Avenue. Explanations Temperance barely understood immediately commenced, but when Mr. Howland was finished, Temperance was aware of some life-changing truths: her parents were dead, the family fortune had been lost to an ill-advised investment opportunity, and the family house in Connecticut had been sold to settle the most pressing of her father's debts.

Mr. Howland, evidently not being a gentleman who knew how to deal with a young lady who'd been brought up in the lap of luxury but was now nothing more than a pauper, launched into what he seemingly thought would be a small measure of consolation. A few personal belongings had been saved for her, those

belongings having already been delivered to Wayne Flowerdew's residence.

When she'd finally had the presence of mind to inquire why Wayne Flowerdew, a gentleman she barely knew and only a distant relative to her, had become such an integral part of her personal misfortunes, she'd learned that her father had written a special clause in his will, entrusting his cousin with the guardianship of his only daughter if anything of an unfortunate nature happened to him or Temperance's mother. That guardianship was to stand until she reached the age of twenty-five, unless she got married before reaching that age, in which case it was apparently assumed her husband would look after her interests.

Before Temperance could contemplate the sheer horror of that idea, Mr. Howland professed his deepest sympathies regarding her plight, rose from his chair, took hold of her arm, and escorted her directly out of his office, leaving her standing on the sidewalk with her unwanted guardian.

As the door to Mr. Howland's office shut behind her, Temperance vowed then and there that she was going to, from that point forward, put her past ways aside, deciding that embracing an adventurous attitude was entirely overrated and led to despair and heartache in the end.

No longer would she flutter through life from one journey to another, experiencing all the many amusements the world had to offer. Instead, she vowed to adopt a retiring nature, one that would see her safely removed from the dangers adventurous sorts faced far more often than she'd realized.

That vow, oddly enough, turned out to be remarkably easy to maintain.

Wayne, while willing to offer her a roof over her head, if only to stave off judgment from the society he longed to impress, informed her in no uncertain terms that he was appalled he'd been given the task of watching over her until she reached the age of twenty-five. He didn't even bother to hide the fact that he only agreed to fetch her from Paris because he thought her fortune was

still firmly intact, a fortune she would certainly want to share with him because he'd been named her guardian.

Because she was imposing on his hospitality, and with no money to ease the bother of that, Wayne determined she'd have to earn her keep. True to his word, she'd barely unpacked her steamer trunk before Fanny Flowerdew, Wayne's simpering wife, called her to the drawing room for a bit of a chat—one that detailed what would be expected of Temperance until she reached the age of twenty-five, or found a gentleman to marry, an idea Fanny thought was next to impossible.

From that point forward, and over the years Temperance had lived with the Flowerdews, she'd spent her days and nights at the beck and call of Wayne and Fanny's daughter, Clementine. Clementine was a young lady with grand social aspirations, which is exactly why the Flowerdew family had abandoned their house in upstate New York only a month after Temperance began residing with them, taking up residence on the far end of Park Avenue, one that was not quite the toniest of addresses, but acceptable all the same.

They'd immediately set about getting Clementine introduced to high society, her acceptance into that society aided by the assistance of Mrs. Boggart Hobbes, or Aunt Minnie, as the family fondly addressed her. Aunt Minnie was a leading society matron who was also Fanny's aunt, but any affection Temperance might have believed would come her way was put firmly to bed when Mrs. Boggart Hobbes stated most emphatically that Temperance was not to address her as Aunt Minnie, but was expected to maintain a formal attitude between them since they were not related by blood.

With Clementine being soundly embraced by the *crème de la crème*, Temperance found herself in the unenviable role of Clementine's chaperone and lady's maid when it became known she had a flare for styling hair.

Given Clementine's questionable nature, Temperance had clung fast to her vow of abandoning an adventurous nature and embraced

an air of meekness and reserve, qualities that served her well as she negotiated the unpleasant realities of her new life.

It had only been recently that Temperance's life had begun taking a happier turn, a direct result of being invited to attend Miss Permia Griswold's June engagement celebration. It was at that very celebration she'd enjoyed an unexpected encounter with one of her dearest friends from childhood—Mr. Gilbert Cavendish. She'd not seen Gilbert for far too many years, having been separated from him when he went off to college and she went off on her grand tour. Add in the fact she'd then been thrust into the retiring role of poor relation, which did not encourage her to seek out former friends, and it was little wonder so much time had elapsed since she'd last seen her friend.

Unsettling as it had been to realize how long she'd been parted from Gilbert, it had been more unsettling to accept the ugly truth his reappearance in her life brought to her attention. While she'd embraced the idea of living a less-than-adventurous life, she'd sacrificed her true sense of self, becoming a woman she didn't even recognize and a woman Gilbert had certainly never known.

A new vow had arisen as that evening spent in Gilbert's company wore on, a vow to reclaim at least a little morsel of the woman she'd been before her life turned upside down. She'd recognized that a meek existence did not suit her in the least, which was fortunate indeed because the very day after the engagement celebration, Wayne sent her packing. He stated it was past time she earned her own way in the world, even though she was not quite twenty-five yet.

The reasoning behind her abrupt departure centered squarely around the idea that Clementine, her less-than-pleasant cousin, wanted Gilbert Cavendish for herself. Oddly enough, Clementine was worried Temperance would stand in the way of her acquiring the attention of Gilbert because she believed Temperance's friendship with Gilbert was a direct threat to Clementine's plans of becoming Mrs. Cavendish.

The thought of Gilbert had Temperance's lips curving, until a loud argument between her abductors pulled her directly back to her troubling situation—that being she'd been abducted and was shut inside a coffin.

“You've clearly not been listening well enough at that fancy church Mrs. Baldwin made us attend, back before she released us from service, Eugene. *Apocalypse* is the word preachers use when they're talkin' about the end of the world, so it's not what that shop was called where you bought the sleeping potion.”

“That might very well be, Mercy, but it ain't like a person can hear the sermons well, not back where members of the serving sort are required to sit in that fancy church. But that's not gonna help us know what word I was really fixin' to use. I sure do hate when a word is on the tip of your tongue, but you just can't spit it out. It's maddening, it is.”

“It's *apothecary*,” Temperance called before she could stop herself, the words echoing eerily around the interior of the coffin.

Dead silence was all that greeted her until someone cleared their throat.

“You reckon' that's God talking to us, Mercy?”

“Don't be an idiot, Eugene. The voice came from the coffin.”

“Ah, right. That makes more sense, but if that there lady has woken up from her stupor, you'd best stop calling me Eugene. I'll be . . . ah . . . Thurman and you can be . . . Dolly.”

“I ain't being no Dolly. I knew a Dolly years ago, and she was a nasty piece of work. I'll be Vivian because that's a right fine name and I always wanted me a right fine name.”

Wanting to laugh even though she was in a most precarious situation, Temperance resisted that urge right as heavy footsteps began trudging her way. The next thing she knew, an eye was peering at her through one of the holes that had evidently been drilled through her prison to allow her to breathe.

“How ya feelin' in there?”

“How would you feel if you were entombed in a coffin while you're still living?” she shot back.

The eye disappeared, replaced with a different eye, one obviously belonging to the other kidnapper. “You being in that coffin is all on account of my, er, partner being heavy-handed with a sleeping potion. Just so you know, if you hadn’t put up such a fight, he wouldn’t have been forced to use it.”

“Surely you’re not about to blame me for my current predicament, are you?”

“Course I am. You’ve given us all sorts of trouble, and it was only because me and Eu . . . er . . . What did you say your name was going to be again?”

“It’s Thurman and you’re Dolly.”

The eye disappeared. “I’m Vivian.”

“That’s a high-society name.”

“Since we’re about to stay at that high-society Palmer House hotel, Vivian’s as good as any name.”

A second later, the eye returned to peer down at her. “Where was I?”

Swallowing yet another unexpected laugh, Temperance cleared her throat, realizing as she did so that her throat was remarkably dry, probably since she’d apparently been rendered unconscious for hours upon end.

“I believe you were about to impart the inspiration behind spiriting me out of New York in a coffin.”

“So I was, and that inspiration was all due to Thurman remembering what happened to the unfortunate A. T. Stewart.”

“Are we talking about the A. T. Stewart who was the founder of A. T. Stewart & Company?”

“That’s the man.”

“I don’t believe Mr. Stewart sold coffins at his store,” Temperance said slowly.

“Of course he didn’t. Eugene, I mean Thurman, thought of him because we once heard tell that Mr. Stewart done got his body stolen and held for ransom.”

“I’m familiar with what happened to poor Mr. Stewart, although I do want to point out that his body wasn’t stolen *in* a coffin, but

stolen *from* a coffin, which was then left behind,” Temperance said. “I also feel compelled to point out that Mr. Stewart, God rest his soul, was dead when his body was stolen and held for ransom. Obviously, I’m not dead, and I do hope you’re not intending to kill me to remain true to the ransom scenario that followed Mr. Stewart’s abduction.”

“We’re not intending to kill you,” Mercy returned. “But getting back to Mr. Stewart—you don’t mean to tell me that some fool broke into his vault and took only his body, do you? I’ve been close to a deceased person before and the smell is most unpleasant.”

Feeling slightly reassured by the notion her abductors didn’t seem keen to kill her *and* seemed squeamish about horrible smells, Temperance lifted a hand, pushing on a coffin lid that refused to move. “I’m afraid that’s exactly what happened to Mr. Stewart,” she finally said, annoyance flowing over her that she had in fact been nailed securely into her prison. “Although I believe the criminals who stole his body have yet to be found.”

“That’s good to know,” Mercy muttered.

“I’m sure you are comforted by the idea criminals occasionally do roam free. But, getting back to my specific situation, while I’m not exactly in a position to argue with the manner in which you chose to spirit me out of the city, allow me to point out what I see as a flaw with your plan. I’m, thankfully, not dead, and as such, I’m afraid I have certain needs that a corpse would not have, such as the need to use a retiring room. I’m also going to need to be fed at some point. In addition to those concerns, I must tell you that the walls of my prison will soon begin to close in on me, and when that happens, I know I’ll be unable to stifle the screams that my fear of being in closed confines is certain to bring about.”

“It wouldn’t be a wise choice for you to start screamin’.”

Exasperation had Temperance rolling her eyes, not that anyone could see that, but it did seem to suit the moment. “Since I’m enclosed in a coffin, I’m not certain there’s much you’re going to

be able to do to stop my screams, not if you truly don't mean to kill me."

"Seems to me like we got ourselves a smart one, Vivie."

The eye disappeared once again. "It's *Vivian*, and it don't matter if she's a smart one. What does matter is we've got to figure us out a new plan of what to do next."

For the next few minutes, all Temperance could hear was the sound of muffled voices that occasionally rose above a whisper as what was undoubtedly an argument turned increasingly heated. Finally, and after one of her abductors let out a snort of disgust, heavy footsteps trudged back to the coffin and an eye appeared back at the hole.

"We're going to let you out, but no funny business. We might not be keen to murder you, but giving you a few knocks over the head won't bother us a'tall."

With those less-than-comforting words, someone began applying what had to be a crowbar to the coffin, but before the lid could be lifted away, the man now going by the name of Thurman began to speak.

"We best be putting on our disguises, Mercy. It won't do us no good if she gets a look at our faces."

"It also won't do us no good if you keep forgetting to call me Vivian."

"It's not going to do either one of you any good if I end up losing my last meal due to the queasiness I'm beginning to feel over still being stuck in this box," Temperance yelled.

"Give us a moment."

A moment was all it took for her abductors to evidently don their disguises, and with a sense of relief slipping over her, Temperance watched as the lid was pried away, squinting when light immediately blinded her. Raising a hand to shield her eyes, she pushed herself to a sitting position, then felt her mouth drop open when she got her first look at her surroundings.

She was in a Pullman car, and a nicely appointed Pullman car at that.

An honest-to-goodness chandelier hung directly above her head, while a divan upholstered in green velvet, paired with matching chairs on either side of it, was placed directly underneath the side window of the train. The bright sunlight streaming through that window suggested it was either late morning or early afternoon. Switching her attention to the other side of the room, she found her abductors watching her warily.

One of the abductors was a large man, the one who'd abducted her off the street, his face hidden beneath the same mask he'd had on when he'd jumped out of the carriage back on Broadway. The other abductor was clearly a woman, small in stature and thin, with a face covered in fake whiskers, those whiskers having been slapped on her face rather haphazardly since the mustache she was wearing was lopsided and her beard was hanging from the edge of her chin.

"Goodness but you look a fright," the woman said as she looked Temperance up and down, scratching her nose as she did so. "There's a retiring room just behind that small door over there, and there's a washstand right outside the door. You might ought to make use of it."

Temperance inclined her head. "Sound advice to be sure, but first I'm going to need help getting out of here."

The large man, evidently named Eugene even though he was trying to go by Thurman, nodded and shuffled across the room on heavy-soled boots. He came to a stop right in front of her and surprised Temperance by presenting her with his hand. Taking that hand, she struggled to push herself past the high walls of the coffin. Her struggle was interrupted when Eugene plucked her straight up into his arms and set her down. He steadied her when her legs wobbled, then took hold of her arm and practically pushed her across the Pullman car, stopping in front of a narrow door she assumed led to the retiring room.

"Just give a holler if you need anything else." With that, he turned around and strode to the other side of the car, presenting

her with his back—a chivalrous response even though the retiring room was equipped with a door.

Thankful she was being allowed a moment of privacy, Temperance slipped into the small retiring room, closed the door firmly behind her, and immediately began trying to plot out an avenue of escape.