

A woman with blonde hair styled in an updo, wearing a white Victorian-style dress with ruffles and lace, sits at a dark wood round table. She is holding a teacup and looking thoughtfully to the side. On the table is a silver tea set including a teapot, sugar bowl, and creamer. The background shows a room with white walls and a window with curtains. The entire scene is framed by ornate gold scrollwork.

Diamond ⁱⁿ the Rough

AMERICAN HEIRESESSES • 2

JEN TURANO

USA Today BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *A Change of Fortune*

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For Barb Petrozzi

You've always been one of my dearest friends, no matter how many miles separate us. Thank you for all the support you've given me, and for reading all of my books, no matter that historical romances really aren't your thing.

Love you!

Jen



CHAPTER 1



NEW YORK CITY
NOVEMBER 1885

Any smidgen of hope that her entrance into New York high society would be deemed a rousing success died the moment Miss Poppy Garrison's tiara became firmly attached to the sleeve of her dance partner.

Wincing when Mr. Murray Middleton began turning her around in a circle, a step that would have certainly been easier to execute if her head wasn't stuck to his sleeve, Poppy listed to the left but came to a rapid halt when Mr. Middleton abruptly stopped moving.

"Miss Garrison, what in the world are you about?" he asked in a voice no louder than a whisper. "If you're unaware, the Gypsy Quadrille does not require any manner of peculiar posturing. Your deviation from the tried and true steps is drawing notice." He bent closer to her, an easy feat since she was still attached to his sleeve. "I realize you're not overly familiar with the ways of the New York Four Hundred, but take it from someone in the know, it's not quite the thing to diverge from the expected steps. That could very well see you excluded from the smart set forever."

Mr. Middleton then attempted to take a step away from her, a move that left her convinced she'd just become parted from a

great deal of blond hair that had once been styled in a most elegant manner but now must be looking nothing less than frightful.

“I’m not posturing,” she managed to whisper back, even though she felt the distinct urge to release a howl of pain since her head was now stinging dreadfully. “I’m stuck.”

“Stuck?”

“Indeed. To your jacket. Or at least my tiara is.”

“A curious circumstance to be sure, but perhaps if I give you a twirl, you’ll become unstuck.”

Before Poppy could utter a single protest to what was certainly a horrible idea, Mr. Middleton surged into motion, giving her a very enthusiastic twirl. Fire raced over her scalp as the tiara was yanked from her head, taking numerous strands of her hair with it in the process, even as the tiara remained firmly attached to Mr. Middleton’s sleeve. Then, for some unfathomable reason, Mr. Middleton gave her another twirl, sending her careening away from him and into the crowd of guests assembled on the edge of the dance floor located on the top floor of Delmonico’s.

With her arms flailing about, she pitched forward, her plunge toward the ground interrupted when strong hands grabbed hold of her, pulling her directly against what felt like a rock-solid chest.

Lifting her head, Poppy felt a tingle creep up her neck as her gaze settled on the face of the gentleman who’d saved her from a nasty spill.

He wasn’t who one would consider the handsomest gentleman in the room, but he had a presence about him that drew and held her attention. His hair was dark, as were his eyes, and he had a sharp blade of a nose, which didn’t hold her attention long, not after she caught a glimpse of his lips—lips that weren’t curving in the least and . . .

“Are you all right, miss?”

The moment that question left the gentleman’s mouth, Poppy found herself going noticeably weak at the knees, a direct result of the distinct English accent that flowed over her like rich honey being drizzled over a hot biscuit.

Blinking out of those thoughts when she realized she'd curled her hands into the lapels of the gentleman's jacket, causing him to arch a dark brow at her, Poppy released her hold on him and stepped back, willing knees that were still a tad wobbly to cooperate.

She smiled. "You're English."

"British."

"Isn't that the same thing?"

"Not at all."

Poppy's smile dimmed. "I suppose I should now beg your pardon, sir, although I wasn't attempting to insult you, merely—"

"Miss Garrison, what, pray tell, are you doing?"

Dread was immediate as she recognized the voice behind her as belonging to the esteemed Mr. Ward McAllister, a gentleman her grandmother had told her had the power to see her accepted into society—or not.

Forcing herself to turn, Poppy winced when she discovered Mr. McAllister scowling at her, his moustache twitching in a most concerning manner.

"Well?" Mr. McAllister demanded. "Explain yourself."

Her mind, unfortunately, took that moment to go completely blank. "Forgive me, but what was the question?"

Mr. McAllister's moustache twitched again. "I asked you to explain why you've disrupted the Gypsy Quadrille, one I personally chose to open up the first Family Circle Dancing Class of the Season." He puffed out his chest. "I hope you're aware that only two hundred and twenty-five guests are invited to this affair, and only a select few, yourself included, are presented with the supreme honor of participating in the quadrille. There were more than a few young ladies who were sorely disappointed to find themselves not included in the opening dance. I have to believe none of those disappointed young ladies would have ever contemplated causing the type of ruckus you have."

Poppy wrinkled her nose. "Perhaps one of those young ladies is currently lingering on the sidelines and would be more than happy

to take over for me, something I would appreciate since I'm woefully inept at the intricacies of this particular dance."

Mr. McAllister's eyes flashed in a less-than-encouraging way. "Do not toy with me, Miss Garrison. You will not enjoy the consequences." He crossed his arms over his chest. "I demand an explanation, and without further delay, if you please. If you've neglected to notice, the entire ballroom is waiting with bated breath to learn why the opening quadrille has come to a screeching halt."

Poppy glanced past Mr. McAllister and found that the dancers who'd been given the honor of participating in the Gypsy Quadrille, all of whom were garbed in brightly colored costumes similar to the one she was wearing, were standing still as statues. She then directed her attention to the guests who'd been observing the quadrille, finding them watching her closely, their gazes alive with speculation.

"I do seem to have drawn an unusual amount of interest," she said weakly before she summoned up another smile, one that Mr. McAllister didn't return. "I had no idea my mishap would cause such mayhem." She craned her neck. "How curious that the musicians appear to have frozen in place as well, quite as if they're figurines in a music box that needs a few good whirls to get them into motion again."

Mr. McAllister stepped closer to her. "Not that this is the moment to descend into such unusual observations, Miss Garrison, but the musicians froze on my command, and the dancers stopped dancing because they know they cannot successfully continue on with this quadrille until you resume your place with Mr. Middleton." Mr. McAllister released a sniff. "What *could* you have been thinking to cause such a disruption?"

"I wasn't thinking much of anything beyond trying to puzzle out how best to get my tiara unattached from Mr. Middleton's jacket."

Mr. McAllister swung his attention to Mr. Middleton, who was still trying to tug the tiara in question from his sleeve. Mr. McAllister snapped his attention back to Poppy. "How is it possible your tiara became attached to Mr. Middleton's sleeve in the first place?"

Poppy shot a look to Mr. Middleton, noticing that his cheeks were stained a telltale shade of red, which stood out vividly against a complexion that was unusually pale and in stark contrast to the lightness of his blond hair.

She did not know Mr. Middleton well, having only made his acquaintance the week prior, after her grandmother had received a last-minute invitation from Mr. McAllister inviting Poppy to participate in the Gypsy Quadrille.

Her grandmother, Mrs. George Van Rensselaer, known to her closest confidants as Viola, had been beside herself with glee over that coveted invitation. Poppy, on the other hand, had accepted the invitation with a great deal of wariness because she'd never danced a quadrille before in her life.

That wariness had only increased after she'd been shown the intricate steps of the dance at a Family Circle Dancing Class practice session. When she'd voiced her concerns to her grandmother after that session, claiming there was little hope she'd be able to master the steps on such short notice, her grandmother had dismissed the concerns out of hand, stating that Van Rensselaers were known for their ability to adapt to any situation.

Viola, from that point forward, could not be persuaded to change her mind. She'd insisted Poppy practice the steps with Mr. Parsons, the family butler, every evening for hours, but even with that practice, Poppy had known she was ill prepared to perform in front of New York high society.

She had a feeling her dance partner, Mr. Murray Middleton, had come to that very same conclusion and must now be bemoaning that his original dance partner, Miss Susan Welles, had turned an ankle a week and a half before.

After meeting Mr. Middleton, Poppy had been left questioning whether Miss Welles had truly suffered a great injury or if she'd used a turned ankle as an excuse to avoid taking to the floor with Mr. Middleton.

Mr. Middleton, being all of twenty-one years of age, a year younger than Poppy's twenty-two, was what one could only call

a nervous sort. He was constantly in motion, fiddling with his sleeve, his necktie, and even his hair, and because he did not possess much height to speak of, he seemed much younger than his years.

Poppy had tried her best to put the poor gentleman at ease while they'd been practicing their quadrille steps, but after Mr. Middleton had gotten a glimpse of them in the mirror and realized that Poppy was a good three inches taller than he was, he'd descended in what could almost be considered a fit of the vapors, convinced that society would mock them because of their discrepancy in height.

Frankly, his lack of height might have been directly responsible for the tiara mishap. When she'd been about to glide underneath his arm in a difficult move, he'd not raised his arm high enough—or perhaps it had gone as high as he was capable of raising it—which had resulted in her getting a bit of a wallop from him as she'd begun to turn, and that walloping evidently left her tiara attached to his sleeve.

“We don't have all night, Miss Garrison,” Mr. McAllister growled.

Blinking from her thoughts, Poppy looked back to Mr. Middleton, saw the panic in his eyes, and knew there was only one thing to do, even if it might see her banished from fashionable New York forever.

Squaring her shoulders, she turned back to Mr. McAllister. “The only explanation I have is this: I fear I must have turned at the wrong time, which was how I became attached to Mr. Middleton's sleeve.”

“How do you explain almost knocking over Mr. Reginald Blackburn?”

“Who?”

“Mr. Blackburn, the gentleman who saved you from sprawling to the ground.”

Turning, she glanced at the gentleman who'd caught her and saw him watching her closely, as if he found her to be a most curious creature. Not caring to be watched in such a manner, she turned back to Mr. McAllister and inclined her head. “It certainly was not my intention to mow over Mr. Blackburn, sir, although

given the size of the man, I doubt I would have been successful even if that *had* been my intention.”

Mr. McAllister looked as if he'd gotten a whiff of something unpleasant. “One would hope a young lady would never contemplate the unlikely scenario of mowing a gentleman over.”

Poppy nodded. “I'm sure you're right, although I have, unintentionally of course, knocked down more than my fair share of gentlemen—but not on a dance floor,” she hurried to add. “Not that this paints me in a favorable light, but the oddest things happen to me when I least expect them to, and—”

“I don't believe this is exactly the time for us to delve into what sounds like unusual happenstances,” Mr. McAllister interrupted. “You've a quadrille to finish, and if you don't want to see yourself banned from future society events, I suggest you return to Mr. Middleton and allow us to get on with matters.”

“I would think you've already decided to ban me from future events.”

Mr. McAllister closed his eyes and seemed to be counting under his breath. Opening his eyes after ten seconds had passed, he took hold of her arm and began marching her toward Mr. Middleton. “I'm not casting you out of society *yet*, but do know that I'll be keeping a sharp eye on you from this point forward. One more incident and you might very well find yourself back on the family horse farm, no matter the high esteem I hold for your grandmother.” He drew her to a stop next to Mr. Middleton. Plucking the tiara from Mr. Middleton's jacket and ignoring the tearing sound of Mr. Middleton's sleeve, Mr. McAllister plopped the tiara onto Poppy's head, then gave it a good shove onto her head, pulling her hair in the process. After sending her a significant look, he turned smartly on his heel and strode away. Clapping his hands a second later, music filled the room, and a second after that, everyone swept back into motion.

Mr. Middleton grabbed hold of her arm and steered her forcefully across the dance floor, weaving in and out of their fellow dancers, tightening his grip when she stumbled.

“If this is a sign of how the rest of the season is going to unfold, I should consider taking a tour of the Continent,” Mr. Middleton muttered, pulling her to the right even as he dashed a gloved hand over a forehead that glistened with perspiration. “I thought both of us were doomed, but . . .” His steps slowed. “What were you thinking, taking the blame? You should have said it was my fault. That’s what any other lady would have said.”

Poppy winced when she realized she’d just stepped on Mr. Middleton’s foot. “I hardly believe it would have been fair to cast blame your way. If anything, you should be given a medal for agreeing to take the floor with me.”

Mr. Middleton, gentleman that he apparently was, didn’t respond to that as he settled into the daunting feat of leading her through the remainder of the quadrille. He whispered to her that she needed to exchange places with the young lady directly beside her, and after she wobbled past that lady and moved around that lady’s dance partner, Mr. Middleton took her arm, looking resigned when she stumbled over his foot again.

Poppy tucked a strand of loose hair behind her ear, not allowing herself to dwell on the disaster she was certainly sporting on her head. “I must say that you make a most impressive figure on the dance floor, Mr. Middleton. I must also add that it shows a great deal of character on your part that you haven’t abandoned me yet, even though I’m certain you’ve been tempted to do exactly that.”

Mr. Middleton turned her smartly around, then took hold of her arm as they moved in a circular motion with the rest of the dancers. “You’re very kind, Miss Garrison, and I must say that your perseverance is to be commended. There aren’t many young ladies who’d have continued with this quadrille after suffering such an unforeseen incident. I expected you to flee from the ball the moment you got free from my sleeve.”

“I’m not the type of lady who flees from unpleasantness, Mr. Middleton,” Poppy said. “Besides, my grandmother went on and on about the importance of this particular event, and I know she’d be more than displeased if I made what would surely be seen by

society as a dramatic exit.” She stumbled over Mr. Middleton’s foot and sent him a smile when he helped her regain her balance. “I am curious, though, about what sets this Family Circle Dancing Class apart from all the other frivolities offered this week.”

A hefty dose of horror flickered through Mr. Middleton’s eyes. “Have a care, Miss Garrison. Society takes their frivolities very seriously and expects its members to understand the importance of every event.” He leaned closer to her. “I trust you’ve heard of the Patriarch Balls?”

“My grandmother has assured me I’ll be attending every one of those this Season, beginning with the first Patriarch Ball held in January, sponsored by none other than *the* Mrs. Astor.”

“I would expect nothing less, given that your grandfather is well acquainted with the original patriarchs who have the honor of choosing the guests for each of those balls.” He nodded to the crowd surrounding them. “Invitations to the Patriarch Balls are most sought after, but what society leaders began to realize was this: Those balls draw attention, not to the many eligible young ladies within society, but to the established society matrons, whom everyone fawns over to shore up their own society positions. Because of that, it was decided that a venue to draw notice to the *young* ladies was needed, hence the creation of the Family Circle Dancing Class, and hence the reason behind it being one of the first important events of the social season.”

Moving with Mr. Middleton to join the line of dancers in what would be their final promenade of the Gypsy Quadrille, Poppy ignored the many whispers of the guests lining the ballroom floor as she and Mr. Middleton swept past them. “So there *is* a waiting list to be invited to this ball?”

“There is, as well as waiting lists to join many other societal functions this season.”

“I imagine I’ll now find my name on the very bottom of all those lists.”

Mr. Middleton shook his head. “Your grandmother wields considerable power within the New York Four Hundred, as does

your grandfather, even though he's rarely in town. Mr. McAllister may bluster and threaten banishment, but I doubt he'll dare follow through with those threats. He might, however, make it next to impossible for you to become a diamond of the first water, so you will need to tread carefully with your behavior from this point forward."

As they reached the edge of the dance floor, Mr. Middleton whispered a reminder that she would be expected to curtsy before the grand society dame who was their sponsor that evening, a formidable woman by the name of Mrs. Eugene Kruger.

Hoping she wouldn't fall over while curtsying, since she was unaccustomed to wearing the large bustles that were all the fashion this season, Poppy sank into a curtsy after Mr. Middleton brought her to a stop in front of Mrs. Kruger, relief slipping over her when she managed to rise with ease, even though she thought her bustle might have shifted to the right.

Stepping out of the way to allow the couple behind them to be acknowledged, Poppy exchanged a smile with Mr. Middleton.

"I imagine you're glad that's over," she said.

"I must admit you're right about that, although I'll be even more relieved after I've delivered you back to your grandmother." He gave a bit of a shudder. "She is certain to be put out over our performance."

"She won't be put out with us," Poppy countered. "We did, after all, manage to make it through to the end, and what grandmother wouldn't be pleased about that?"

"While completing the quadrille was an impressive feat if there ever was one, I don't believe your grandmother is going to see that in the same light we do."

Poppy swallowed the argument that was on the tip of her tongue because Mr. Middleton had just made an excellent point.

Her grandmother, who insisted Poppy address her as Viola, was a difficult woman to say the least, and over the two months Poppy had been living under her roof, she'd come to realize that Viola was nothing like the other grandmothers Poppy had encountered over the years.

Being in her early sixties, although she could easily pass for fifty, Viola was a lady who only dressed in the first state of fashion. She never stepped foot out of her dressing room without every blond hair in place, her nails buffed, and her face looking radiant, which was a direct result of the numerous creams she bought from Paris. Her posture was always perfect, her bearing regal, and she wrapped the extreme wealth she'd been born into around her like a cloak, one that brought to mind images of snobbery at its finest.

"Shall we get this over with?" Mr. Middleton asked as he gave her a tug in Viola's direction.

She fought a grin when Mr. Middleton began dragging his feet the closer they got to her grandmother. Her urge to grin disappeared when they stopped in front of Viola, who, even though she was smiling, had temper flashing out of her blue eyes.

"I do hope, Poppy," Viola began in a voice that was downright frigid, "that the debacle I just watched you participate in was not some curious ruse on your part to get released from the agreement you and I have. If it was, I assure you, it was all for naught because I have no intention of releasing you from your promise that easily."