

THE
BLEECKER STREET INQUIRY AGENCY

To Steal a Heart



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USA Today BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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For Rachael Wing,
who stole a piece of my heart
with her infectious laugh and enthusiasm for life,
becoming a delightful friend in the process!

Love you!

Jen



CHAPTER
One

NOVEMBER 1886
NEW YORK CITY

It was quickly becoming evident that she, Miss Gabriella Goodhue, might very well be arrested in the not-too-distant future, and all because she'd convinced herself that sneaking into a high-society costume ball would be a relatively easy feat, given her past life as a street thief.

Unfortunately, over the thirteen years she'd been off the streets, her skills with planning a covert campaign had obviously suffered. Not once had she considered that dressing as a gentleman dandy from the French aristocracy would garner attention from young ladies interested in making her acquaintance, but that's exactly what it had done.

It was only a matter of time until one of those ladies realized Gabriella was not a gentleman, which would then most assuredly lead to some unpleasant questions.

"I'm completely baffled about your identity, sir," a young lady dressed in an elaborate peacock costume said, sauntering closer to Gabriella. "It was very naughty of you to paint your face so effectively, but could you possibly be Mr. Hammond Gregor?" Her gaze traveled over Gabriella's form, one Gabriella had cleverly

stuffed. “You seem quite fit, and Mr. Gregor is known to spend an inordinate amount of time in the boxing ring.”

“It would ruin the mystery of the evening if I divulged my identity too soon,” Gabriella returned in a raspy voice that she could only pray sounded suitably masculine.

Another lady, this one dressed as a princess, tittered. “Oh, I do love a good mystery and adore puzzling out clues.” She sent Gabriella a waggle of glove-covered fingers. “Speaking of mysteries, have you read the latest by Montague Moreland? I found it to be a most riveting read.”

“Did someone just mention Montague Moreland?”

Glancing to the right, Gabriella blinked, and blinked again, hoping that the sight of Miss Daphne Beekman wandering up to join them would turn out to be a mirage, because of the two jobs Daphne was responsible for that evening, drawing attention to herself wasn’t one of them.

Remaining inconspicuous until Gabriella could steal away to the second floor had been Daphne’s first order of business, at which time Daphne’s second job would take effect, that of acting as a lookout to make sure no one happened in on Gabriella as she tried to break into a safe that certainly didn’t belong to her.

In the past, Gabriella would have had her choice of competent assistants, but since she’d abandoned her life of crime at the ripe old age of twelve, she no longer had experienced criminals at her beck and call, which was why she’d had to settle for Daphne, an unlikely partner if there ever was one.

Daphne Beekman was a recluse by choice, who barely left the attic room she rented from Eunice Holbrooke and preferred to spend her time with the imaginary characters who stomped around her mind at all hours of the day and night.

The only reason Daphne was out this evening was because she was the lone resident at the Holbrooke boardinghouse who fit into the Cleopatra costume that Eunice, the instigator of tonight’s adventure, had pulled out of a ratty trunk she’d drug in from the carriage house. Because there’d not been time to procure

another costume, Daphne had reluctantly allowed herself to be pressed into service, but only because she felt the mission that needed to be accomplished was worth leaving the safe confines of her attic.

Since Daphne was not a lady accustomed to participating in social conversations, why she'd decided to join in on a conversation now, with the daunting circumstances they were already facing, was beyond Gabriella's comprehension.

"Are you a reader of Montague Moreland?" the lady dressed as a princess asked Daphne.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," Daphne said.

Gabriella had no idea how Daphne would expand on that curious statement, but she prayed Daphne wouldn't divulge too much—such as the fact that Daphne *was* Montague Moreland.

"I don't believe we've been introduced," said the peacock lady, which had Daphne's green eyes widening, as if she'd just realized that inserting herself into a conversation was going to require a certain amount of proper discourse, something Daphne struggled with in the best of situations.

"Ah . . . right," Daphne said before she simply stopped talking and smiled weakly back at the peacock lady.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Wright," the peacock lady returned. "I'm Miss Emma McArthur, and this is my friend Miss Rosaline Blossom."

Daphne's smile faltered as confusion flickered through her eyes before her mouth made an O of surprise. "But that's brilliant," she muttered right before she began fumbling with her reticule, pulling out a small notepad and a short stub of pencil. "Miss Wright," she said, scribbling away on the notepad, completely oblivious that Miss McArthur and Miss Blossom were now looking at her as if a madwoman had stumbled into their midst.

Miss McArthur frowned. "What's brilliant?"

"Hmm?" was Daphne's only response, continuing to write for a good few seconds before she tucked her notepad back into the enormous reticule and smiled all around. Her smile dimmed when

her gaze settled on Gabriella. She peered closely at her before her eyes widened again. “Goodness, it’s you, isn’t it?”

“Who? Who is he?” Miss McArthur pressed.

“Ah . . .” was all Daphne said to that as her pale cheeks darkened and she fumbled with her reticule again, pulling out a hideous pair of black spectacles. Shoving them on, she turned her gaze on Gabriella, her green eyes now appearing much larger than they were, lending testimony to the strength of the lenses Daphne was wearing.

“My mistake,” Daphne said briskly. “I thought he was Mr. . . . erm . . . Vladimir Reimir, but I see he’s not Mr. Reimir at all. In fact, I’ve never seen this gentleman before in my life.”

“Isn’t Vladimir Reimir the name of the villain in Montague Moreland’s novel *Murder Under a Broken Moon*?” Miss Blossom asked.

Daphne raised a hand to her chest. “On my word, you *are* a true lover of Montague Moreland, aren’t you?”

“I daresay I am,” Miss Blossom began, “but now you have me wondering if Mr. Montague Moreland created Vladimir Reimir from a real person you’re apparently acquainted with. If that is the case, you might want to distance yourself from that gentleman, because the Vladimir in the book was a vile creature. He certainly deserved the horrible end he came to in the second-to-last chapter.”

“You *remember* Vladimir came to a bad end in the second-to-last chapter?” Daphne breathed.

An image suddenly flashed through Gabriella’s mind, one where she and Daphne were locked firmly behind bars. Knowing she needed to get Daphne away from Miss Blossom and Miss McArthur before disaster occurred, she stepped forward right as Miss McArthur opened her mouth.

“I don’t see the appeal of Montague Moreland,” Miss McArthur said, waving a fan made of peacock feathers in front of her face. “I find his work to be pedestrian, and his mysteries can be downright absurd in their complexity.”

Daphne’s mouth opened, closed, opened again, then closed as

she turned to Gabriella. “This is why I don’t enjoy coming out of my attic. I doubt I’ll ever be convinced to leave it again.” With that, she turned on her heel and headed across the ballroom, her pace causing the elaborate headdress she was wearing to jingle.

“Is it just me or does Miss Wright seem to be a peculiar lady, and rather overly enthusiastic about Montague Moreland as well?” Miss Blossom asked.

Having nothing of worth to say in response to that, Gabriella shrugged. “She’s clearly an avid mystery reader, but speaking of mysteries, I heard something curious tonight about Miss Jennette Moore. Have either of you heard about that mystery?”

“I wouldn’t call the Moore situation a mystery,” Miss Blossom countered. “It’s more along the lines of the scandal of the decade.” She leaned closer to Gabriella. “Everyone, myself included, was delighted when Miss Jennette Moore became engaged to the oh-so-dashing Mr. Duncan Linwood—until we learned that Jennette wormed her way into Mr. Linwood’s heart because she wanted to relieve his family of their famed sapphire and diamond collection.” She shook her head. “Poor Miss Celeste Wilkins has been beside herself ever since the news broke. She and Jennette attended the same finishing school and were good friends back in those days, until Jennette was forced to leave the school due to lack of funds. Celeste was the first lady in society to welcome Jennette back into the fold after her engagement to Mr. Linwood was announced. However, Celeste is now completely overwrought, what with how Jennette successfully hoodwinked her.”

“I ran across Celeste earlier in the retiring room,” Miss McArthur added. “The poor dear had retreated there to collect herself, having to resort to smelling salts because she’d turned faint after someone brought the Jennette debacle into conversation.” She gave a languid wave of her fan. “I have to say that *I* was not overly delighted about Mr. Linwood’s engagement to Jennette. Jennette and her mother had been all but tossed out of society after Mr. Moore died and it was learned that he’d decimated the family fortune, leaving them destitute. That they obviously had

no relatives to take them in, which would have spared them the embarrassment of renting rooms in a boardinghouse of all places, was very telling, and it speaks to the Moore family's questionable character."

It took a great deal of effort for Gabriella to refrain from stepping forward and shaking some sense into Miss McArthur, because Miss Jennette Moore did not possess a questionable character, nor had she stolen the famed Linwood jewels.

Jennette had been framed. It was as simple as that.

A single piece from the Linwood collection had been found in the room Jennette shared with her mother at the Holbrooke boardinghouse. That had been enough proof, at least according to the authorities, to charge Jennette with theft.

Interestingly enough, the single brooch that had been recovered from a drawer in Jennette's bedchamber had been the smallest piece of jewelry stolen. The rest of the Linwood collection was still unaccounted for.

Gabriella, Daphne, Eunice Holbrooke, and the rest of the ladies who lived in the boardinghouse had known immediately that a grave miscarriage of justice had taken place, because Miss Jennette Moore, being a lady possessed of an innocent nature, wasn't capable of stealing from the family of Mr. Duncan Linwood, the man she loved with all her heart.

After realizing that the police were not going to investigate further, Eunice Holbrooke had decided there was nothing left to do but take it upon herself, with the aid of the other boardinghouse residents, to clear Jennette's name. She'd then come up with a list of talents she believed each of the residents possessed that could aid in their investigation.

Daphne had been chosen to create a list of suspects because of her vivid imagination and skill with developing plots. Given the talents for skullduggery she'd once possessed when she'd lived on the Lower East Side, Gabriella had been chosen to implement the plan Eunice developed after studying the list of suspects Daphne came up with. The other residents were tasked with scouting out

locations, chatting it up with servants, and even driving the carriage that was currently waiting outside for Gabriella and Daphne, ready to whisk them home once they completed their mission.

It was a mission Gabriella wanted desperately to succeed because Jennette's romance with Mr. Duncan Linwood had been a fairy tale come to life, something one didn't witness often.

Mr. Linwood, a bachelor gentleman possessed of an impressive fortune and high standing within society, had been away on a grand tour for years. By the time he'd returned, society had already turned its collective back on Jennette and her mother, so he'd never had an opportunity to make her acquaintance while her family was still considered part of the social set. He happened to be in Central Park when Jennette was feeding the pigeons, and after catching his first glimpse of her, he'd fallen desperately in love and asked her to marry him a mere month later.

It had been a whirlwind romance, but one that had aroused jealousy in many a society lady, all of whom had set their caps for Mr. Linwood.

"Jennette certainly concealed her true nature well," Miss Blossom said, pulling Gabriella from her thoughts. "Rumor has it that the police now believe Jennette may be the Knickerbocker Bandit."

"What?" Gabriella demanded, causing Miss Blossom to gape at her in surprise.

"My goodness, but that's a remarkably high-pitched voice you're capable of, sir," Miss Blossom said.

Gabriella gave her chest a pat and lowered her voice a good octave. "Just getting over a cold. But returning to the Knickerbocker Bandit—surely you're mistaken, because that bandit has been responsible for at least ten thefts in the past year alone, and rumor has it he's been responsible for even more thefts over the past five years."

"Which is why one would think Jennette would have been more adept at stealing the Linwood jewels, but perhaps her arrogance got in the way."

Knowing there was little use debating that with ladies who were

obviously convinced of Jennette's guilt, Gabriella pulled out a pocket watch, took note of the time, then forced a smile. "I'm afraid you'll have to excuse me, ladies. I've just realized that it's almost eleven and the dancing is about to begin."

Miss McArthur's lips formed a perfect pout. "Does that mean you're off to claim your dance partner? I was hoping you'd agree to dance the first one with me."

"I'm afraid I'm already promised to something—or rather, someone else," Gabriella hurried to amend right as Miss McArthur thrust her dance card under Gabriella's nose.

"I have the second-to-last dance free. It's a waltz."

"How lovely." Gabriella scribbled a name on Miss McArthur's card before she did the same to the dance card Miss Blossom thrust at her next. She lifted her head. "Until later, then."

"I can't read what you wrote," Miss McArthur complained.

Gabriella's lips twitched. "I did that on purpose, wanting to keep my identity secret. It lends a certain intrigue to the evening, wouldn't you agree?"

Not waiting to hear Miss McArthur's answer, because Gabriella knew that lady would hardly be in agreement, she executed a bow and strode away, increasing her pace when she noticed additional young ladies sizing her up with far too much interest in their eyes.