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For Gretchen



1



OCTOBER 1882—NEW YORK CITY

Forgive me, Miss Plum, but there's a gentleman outside demanding to speak with you. He claims to be your father."

Miss Lucetta Plum paused in the act of removing her stage makeup and turned, finding Mr. Skukman, an intimidating gentleman she employed to manage her overzealous admirers, standing in the doorway of her dressing room. "How fascinating, Mr. Skukman, especially considering my father died years ago."

Mr. Skukman arched a single dark brow her way. "Fascinating indeed." With that, he withdrew, pulling the door firmly shut behind him. Seconds later, the sound of what was surely some type of a scuffle drifted into the dressing room.

"This is an outrage," a man bellowed. "I demand you unhand me at once, sir."

Recognition of the voice was immediate. Rising ever so slowly from a vanity stool upholstered in red velvet, Lucetta navigated

her way across the cluttered dressing room. Stepping over a pair of high-heeled shoes she'd slipped off her feet the moment after she'd taken her last curtsy, she drew in a steady breath and yanked open the door.

Exasperation mixed with a large dollop of annoyance coursed through her when her gaze settled on the gentleman Mr. Skukman was now muscling down the narrow hallway.

Knowing there would be little benefit in putting off what was certain to be a most disagreeable meeting, Lucetta lifted her chin. "You may release him, Mr. Skukman."

Mr. Skukman stopped in his tracks, glanced over his shoulder, and let out a grunt that sounded exactly how it had been intended to sound—menacing.

Lucetta barely batted an eye. While she'd hired Mr. Skukman because of his frightening demeanor and ability to make grown men shake in their boots, she was well aware there was a charming man behind the menace—a man who possessed an endearingly tender heart. That man enjoyed reading poems of a slightly romantic nature, and reciting those poems out loud in a soft yet dramatic tone of voice, when he thought no one was listening.

"Forgive me, Miss Plum, but I don't think it would benefit you in the least for me to release this particular man," Mr. Skukman argued. "He's obviously a most unpleasant sort, and I know you have little to no tolerance for unpleasant gentlemen."

"He is indeed unpleasant, Mr. Skukman, but—"

"I'm your father," the man yelled.

"You are *not* my father, Nigel," Lucetta said, holding up her hand when Nigel opened his mouth to obviously argue that point. "Officially, you're my stepfather, but ever since I was sixteen and you tried to force me to assist you with one of your nefarious schemes, I don't consider you part of my

family. You're merely an unpleasant man my mother foolishly chose to marry."

Mr. Nigel Wolfe shook himself out of Mr. Skukman's hold and pulled his jacket over a stomach that was less than trim. While he'd once possessed boyish good looks, late nights with too much liquor and rich foods were beginning to take their toll on him. Nigel's jowls were heavy, and his complexion was pasty. Given the dark bags under his eyes, it was clear he hadn't slept well in days. His brown hair, now liberally streaked with gray, was mussed, and his general air of neglect meant only one thing. . . .

He'd been gambling again.

"I need to speak with you privately regarding a matter of great urgency," Nigel said.

Lucetta refused a sigh. "Of course you do." Sending Mr. Skukman a nod even as she pretended not to notice the incredulous look her guard was sending back to her, she turned on a bare heel and headed through the dressing room again. Retaking her seat on the vanity stool, she watched Nigel from the reflection in the mirror as Mr. Skukman pulled her door almost closed before he took up his position directly outside it again.

Distaste settled on her tongue as Nigel strolled across the room and dropped into a deep-seated fainting couch, squishing the wig she'd recently taken off her head. He immediately took to scrutinizing his surroundings.

"The matter of great urgency . . . ?" she was finally forced to ask when Nigel seemed to have forgotten the business at hand as he continued perusing the room.

"Are those real diamonds?" He nodded to a necklace dangling from her mirror.

Picking up a jar of cream, she dipped a finger in it and then

dabbed the cream underneath a blue eye with far more force than necessary, wincing when she unintentionally poked herself. “I’m sure they are, but since Mr. Skukman will be returning the necklace to a Mr. Dover later on this evening, it doesn’t matter one way or the other.”

“You’re *giving* the necklace back?”

“Since I have no intention of paying the price Mr. Dover will surely expect if I keep his token of affection, of course I am.” Lucetta snatched up a handkerchief and began blotting an eye that had taken to watering.

“That’s incredibly foolish of you, my dear. You’re neglecting a prime opportunity to secure yourself a tidy fortune.”

Setting aside the handkerchief, Lucetta swiveled around and caught Nigel’s eye. “While I would love nothing more than to continue discussing my admirers and their completely inappropriate gifts and expectations, tell me, what exactly are you doing in New York. And where is Mother?”

“She’s back in Virginia at Plum Hill, preparing for a luncheon she’s hosting tomorrow.”

“Does she know you’re here?”

“Who do you think insisted I seek you out after discovering I’ve landed myself in a bit of a pickle?”

A hint of something that felt remarkably like hurt stole over Lucetta, taking her by surprise. She’d never shared a close relationship with her mother, having had more in common with her father, but . . .

“So if you’ll just kindly fetch the deed to Plum Hill for me, I’ll leave you in peace.”

All sense of hurt evaporated in a split second.

“Forgive me, Nigel, but surely you didn’t just ask me for the deed to Plum Hill.”

“While it pains me no small amount to have to ask for a deed

that should be in my name in the first place . . . yes, I did ask for the deed, and . . . I need it tonight.”

“Do not tell me you tried to gamble away the plantation again.”

“I didn’t merely try, my dear, unfortunately, this time I succeeded.”

“If I need remind you, Plum Hill isn’t yours to gamble away.”

“I’m well aware of that, but when I threw the promise of the deed into the game of cards, I wasn’t planning on losing. I was certain I held a winning hand, but . . .”

Nigel shuddered ever so slightly before pulling out a pocket watch, took note of the time, and then shuddered again. “I’m under a bit of a time constraint, so if you’d just fetch that deed for me, I’ll be ever so grateful—as will your mother who, again, *encouraged* me to seek you out.”

Lucetta narrowed her eyes. “If Mother was so keen to encourage you to leave her without a roof over her head, why didn’t she make the trip to New York with you?”

Nigel began inspecting his pocket watch. “I told you, she’s hosting a luncheon tomorrow. Besides, you know full well that Susannah doesn’t like to face the reality of having a daughter who treads the boards for a living.”

“Mother’s also not the sort of lady who’d want to face the reality of not being able to host luncheons in her very own home, which makes me question whether or not she really did encourage you to seek me out.”

Nigel’s head shot up. “Are you going to give me the deed or not?”

“Not—which I think you probably realized all along, but . . . even if I completely lost my sanity and wanted to hand you the deed, I couldn’t because I no longer have the deed in my possession.”

“You *sold* Plum Hill without seeking my counsel first?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Do you really believe you’d still be permitted to live at Plum Hill if I’d sold it to someone else? If you recall, I promised my father on his deathbed that I would always look after Mother. Selling Plum Hill out from under her would hardly be honoring my promise.

“For your information, Mr. Everett Mulberry has possession of the deed, but he’s merely holding it for me to keep it safe, strictly as a precaution against situations like the one I currently find myself in. Furthermore, I’ve given him explicit instructions regarding the release of that deed—those instructions being that someone will need to present him with my very cold, very dead body.”

Nigel smiled a smile that was less than pleasant. “That could be arranged.”

It took a great deal of restraint to keep her temper in check. “I’m sure you do find the notion of my death vastly appealing at times, Nigel. Nevertheless, even though you’re a remarkably disagreeable man, I don’t believe you have the stomach for murder.”

Nigel settled back against the fainting couch. “Probably not, but . . .” He suddenly brightened. “This Mr. Mulberry—he wouldn’t happen to be one of the New York Mulberrys, would he?”

“He would, but before you continue on with what I know you’re about to say—insulting me in the process, no doubt—he’s simply a friend of mine, married to one of my best friends, the former Miss Millie Longfellow. He’s holding the deed for me because he owes me a favor.”

“Would that favor be big enough that he’d consider making your stepfather a rather large loan?”

“No.”

Folding his hands over his stomach, Nigel eyed her for a long moment. “That’s too bad, but fortunately for us, we have another option available, and one that will keep me out of jail for not honoring a debt, or beaten to a bloody pulp, which might, indeed, be worse than a stint in jail.” He drew in a deep breath, released it, and then drew in another as perspiration began to bead his pasty forehead.

Trepidation settled in the pit of Lucetta’s stomach. “I’m not certain I like the sound of *we* having another option available. I had nothing to do with you losing something in a game of cards that wasn’t yours to lose in the first place.”

“We’re family, and as such, our problems are shared.” Nigel wiped his forehead with the back of his hand. “While I truly wish I *didn’t* have to broach this particular option—because you’re hardly going to like what I have to say—as you recently mentioned, you *did* promise your father you’d look after your mother. Because of that, and because you must know Susannah would be horribly distressed if I got hauled off to jail or harmed in any way, broach it I shall.” He cleared his throat. “Do know that if I’d had the slightest inkling how events were going to play out, I would have never sat down to that particular game of cards.”

“You’ve never turned down a game of cards with your friends,” Lucetta pointed out.

Nigel’s face, oddly enough, took on a tinge of green. “Oh, these weren’t friends of mine,” he began. “In fact, I’d never met any of the gentlemen before, but since they made a point of telling me how they’d heard about my reputation at the table, I certainly wouldn’t have been comfortable refusing their kind offer of a friendly game.”

Wrinkling her nose, Lucetta leaned forward. “Why in the world would you sit down to play cards with gentlemen who

freely admitted they'd heard about your reputation for losing at the table?"

Nigel wrinkled his nose right back at her. "They heard I was remarkably skilled at cards."

"When you're not drowning yourself in a bottle of brandy, which, I hate to say, is something I'm afraid everyone knows you make a habit of doing most nights."

"I was *delighted* to accept the invitation after their flattering words," Nigel continued as if Lucetta had not spoken. "And was doing quite well, but then . . . I'm afraid I got overly ambitious and lost everything on a single turn of the cards. To my relief, Mr. Silas Ruff was incredibly gracious. When he discovered I might not actually have the deed to Plum Hill readily available, he offered me another way to honor my debt to him."

Lucetta suddenly found it rather difficult to breathe. "You sat down to cards with Mr. *Silas Ruff*?"

"Ah, wonderful, so you *do* know him." Nigel smiled. "He spoke most highly of you, my dear, and learning you're acquainted with him makes this so much easier to say."

"Makes what easier to say?"

"That Mr. Ruff is perfectly willing to take something in lieu of the deed to Plum Hill—something he seems very anxious to acquire. . . . That something being . . . well . . . you."