

# HIS CURIOUS IMP

THE RAKES OF MAYFAIR BOOK 4



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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## CHAPTER 1



MARCH 1888, LONDON

Gabriella Saunders sighed loudly and pushed her empty baby pram back and forth as if trying to soothe its invisible occupant.

“Hush, Gabby,” John McNutt said as he stared at the crowd in St. James Park. “At least Phillips let you come along as a prop. You could be sitting back at your desk in front of your typewriting machine instead of enjoying this beautiful spring day.”

Gabby knew that he’d been staring at the women, instead of watching for their intended subjects.

“You hush, McNutt,” Gabby countered. “I’m a much better writer than you are and you well know it. The only reason I’m not a reporter is because I’m a woman. I could write circles around you.”

McNutt straightened his shoulders and stared at the beautiful woman sitting next to him. Her job at this point was to be his ‘wife’ to make his long stay in the park less noticeable. He was searching

for a pickpocket who had been plaguing the gentlemen enjoying the delights of the St. James Park for some time.

McNutt's editor, Mark Phillips, was sure that if McNutt could find the pickpocket it would lead him to a larger crime ring that *The London Sentinel* could take credit for breaking up.

"Write circles around me?" He took his eye off the crowd and stared at the black-haired woman who had a deep frown on her face. "You're a woman. If you aspire to be a writer, then you should be sitting at home trying to be the next Jane Austen. Leave reporting to the men who know what they're doing."

"If you knew what you were doing we would not have had to sit in this park for the past seven days looking for something that has been right under your nose. See that towheaded boy over there? He's lightened the pockets of three gentlemen in the past twenty minutes."

McNutt turned to stare at the boy in question. The youngster was now running toward the park entrance.

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"Well, remember, McNutt, I'm only a woman." Gabby batted her eyes and fanned her hand in front of her face. "I should be at home, trying to be the next Jane Austen, not doing your job for you."

McNutt took off at a run after the boy and Gabby broke out in gales of laughter, pushing the pram back and forth as she snickered. She shouldn't be laughing, really. She was never going to fulfill her dream of being a newspaper reporter. Her sex hampered her desires. She wasn't lying when she said she could write circles around McNutt. Many times he would ask her for advice on how to word a sentence. The laughter disappeared moments later when her name rang out.

"Gabby Saunders? I don't believe it."

Gabby swallowed nervously and then turned to stare as Charlotte Hughes, now Lady Essex, moved toward her park bench, determination and fascination in her eyes. Gabby couldn't believe that in all of London she would happen upon her old school friend.

Charlotte had always been nice to her, and she'd suffered a series of unfortunate events when her husband had been killed, and she'd been accused. But her new husband, Lord Dalton Essex, had cleared her name, and married her.

And here was Gabby, unmarried and toiling away at a newspaper office. And she sat in a park, with an empty baby pram sitting near her. Her already tarnished reputation was about to take a huge hit.

"Charlotte!" Gabby stood and stepped in front of the pram as if to block it from view. "My goodness it's been years. How are you?"

Charlotte pulled her in for a hug and Gabby stared at Charlotte's husband, who watched with amusement as he talked to a very handsome man whom Gabby didn't recognize.

"I can't believe it's been so long," Charlotte said with a grin. "Long enough for you to give birth to a little one. I have two now, both boys."

"Yes, I've heard," Gabby said. She searched her mind for a convincing reason to have a baby buggy with her. Nothing came to mind. If she tried to ignore it, would Charlotte take the hint? Probably not. One thing Gabby and Charlotte always shared was a healthy sense of curiosity.

And Gabby was right. Charlotte peered over Gabby's shoulder toward the carriage and raised her eyebrows.

"I hadn't heard about your child," she said, lowering her voice. "May I see?"

Charlotte stepped toward the pram at the same time McNutt rushed back, anger written all over his face.

"This is your fault, Saunders! I'm going to demand that you be sacked. If I hadn't been arguing with you I would never have lost that subject. A perfect example of why a woman will never make a good reporter."

"Don't blame your failures on me, McNutt," Gabby answered. She tried, and failed, to stop the smile that lit her face. "You're the

one who didn't notice what was happening. I'm sure Mr. Phillips will be happy to hear that."

Gabby glanced at Charlotte, who had stopped from lifting back the pram cover to watch the scene unfold before her.

"Just the same, this is your fault, do you hear me? I wouldn't have been distracted. Your immediate termination is required and I shall see that it happens right away."

McNutt's angry voice carried through the crowded park and several people stopped to stare.

"You're repeating yourself, McNutt," Gabby said. "Of course, you do have a very small vocabulary. It shows in your work."

He opened his mouth to speak again and the man standing with Lord Essex put his hand on McNutt's forearm.

"Sir, I would ask that you lower your voice when speaking with a lady. I'm sure she doesn't deserve whatever abuse you are sending her way."

"I would thank you, sir, to mind your own business," McNutt replied, seconds before Lord Essex moved to put a protective arm around Charlotte's shoulder.

"Strange words from someone who makes a living sticking his nose into other people's business," the unknown man replied.

McNutt had the forethought to blush. Then with a loud humph he left the group without another word.

"Thank you, sir," Gabby said, staring at her striking rescuer. Tall, dark and handsome didn't begin to describe him. Well over six feet with hair as black as her own and beautiful green eyes, a strong chin, a full nose and a fantastic smile. Probably early 30s. Most definitely a man who attracted her. Too bad she was so far under his class.

"Gabby, allow me to introduce Lord Fergus McIntyre," Charlotte said with a giggle. "Fergus this is Gabriella Saunders. We attended classes together in our youth. And Gabby, you remember my husband, Lord Dalton Essex."

How could she forget? She'd only seen him once, but she

remembered being jealous of Charlotte's luck in finding such a perfect man.

Lord Essex inclined his head at the same time Lord McIntyre bent his own over Gabby's hand and brushed his lips lightly over her knuckles. It sent a chill down her spine and she shivered as he locked eyes with her.

"Lord Essex, Lord McIntyre," she whispered in greeting. She tried to pull her hand away and he held it a moment longer than necessary, increasing the chill to a full-fledged quiver. When he let go he gave her a wicked grin.

"Your, um, *friend*, seemed to be in a bit of a temper," Fergus said.

"McNutt is not my friend, thank God," Gabby replied. "He is merely a co-worker at the newspaper where I am employed. Or at least I was employed, until he gets back and tells our editor that I ruined his story, which I did not."

Charlotte took a tentative step toward the pram and peered over the bonnet.

"It's empty, Charlotte," Gabby said. "Merely a prop so that McNutt and I could pass ourselves off as a married couple out for a stroll in the park and not attract attention to ourselves."

"Oh my stars how exciting and adventurous," Charlotte said with a giggle. "Tell me who you were after. What is the story about? Does this mean you gather news for the paper?"

Gabby shook her head and shifted from foot to foot. "Charlotte..."

"My love, I think this is not the proper place for disclosure," Lord Essex said.

Gabby smiled at him gratefully. Then felt her heart quicken at his next words.

"Gabby must tell us at dinner tonight at our house. Fergus you come, too. I'm sure the tale will be most amusing. Shall we say around eight? I'll send a carriage for you if you'll just give me your address."

"No, I couldn't have you do that," Gabby said, working hard to

come up with an excuse for not going to dinner at the Essexes' home. This was getting out of hand. The first problem would be giving him her address in a less fashionable part of London. She couldn't possibly attend dinner at the home of a lord, even if she was a schoolgirl acquaintance of his wife. She had nothing fashionable enough to wear for such an event.

"I agree," Fergus said. "I'll just pick you up in my carriage on the way there."

Gabby felt her heart race even faster. If it continued at this pace it would surely burst from her chest and fall onto the ground to hop around. His Scottish accent was incredible. She wondered what he looked like in a kilt, and if he were a married man. Stupid, stupid Gabby she said to herself. He wouldn't offer to come by in his carriage if he had a wife.

"No, no, I can find my own way there," Gabby said. "Eight it is."

Without waiting for another word she hurriedly pushed the pram toward the park entrance, wondering which of her dresses was the least mended and could be worn to dinner at the Essex house.



"TELL ME EVERYTHING ABOUT HER, CHARLOTTE," Fergus said as he stretched his long legs in front of the carriage seat.

Fergus knew how Gabby looked. Beautiful. Just beautiful. Perhaps a stone or two overweight but she carried it in all the right places. Curvy hips and large breasts. Beautiful brown eyes with just a hint of green. Full lips and a pert little nose. He wondered what those lips would look like wrapped around his prick. It was an incredibly erotic thought and he shifted to hide the growing bulge in his trousers.

Charlotte laughed and leaned into her husband's chest.

"Gabby is a wonderful woman, although I haven't seen her in a

few years," Charlotte said. "I saw her right after we married, do you remember, darling, at the theater?"

Essex nodded and kissed his wife's forehead.

"She had a falling out with her parents years ago, a rather public one. But Gabby has always been the adventurous sort. She was always interested in writing but I had no idea she worked at a newspaper."

"No other family?" A frown marked Fergus' handsome features.

"None."

"And she never married?"

Charlotte's smile disappeared. "Gabby is, well, she was, how do I say this politely. Dalton?"

"She's not a virgin," Essex answered. "As Charlotte told me the lady and a young lad had a lover's tryst in their early twenties. He'd promised to marry her and Gabby, being the adventurous sort as Charlotte said, agreed to give him her maidenhead before marriage. Not only did he leave her at the altar he made sure that everyone knew that she was ruined."

"I hope he was horsewhipped," Fergus said harshly.

"No," Charlotte said. "But Gabby was destroyed in our town. No decent man would look at her. He still lives there. I hear he's unhappily married though. Of course, all the men wanted to lie with her after, thinking she would spread her thighs for them, which she refused I might add. She moved to London after her father died and I lost touch with her until today. It's strange how the world works, isn't it?"

"You will pick her up tonight of course," Essex said with a grin. "I'm sure it won't be hard to find out where she lives."

"Of course," McIntyre replied. "How can I resist a woman who runs around St. James Park with a fake baby?"



GABBY WORKED to fasten the buttons on her red dress. It was her

best dress, with only one mended hole at the bottom of the skirt. Some days she wished she was a society lady who had a maid to help her reach her buttons. And who had a bevy of dresses from which to choose.

She managed to fasten two more buttons, leaving six to be done. She shook out her aching fingers and thought about her afternoon.

Phillips had not fired her, thank the stars, but he had insisted that she stay in the office from now on. Her only work would be transcribing notes for reporters and correspondence with readers and other business people associated with the paper. The smug look on McNutt's face had driven Gabby crazy and she'd wanted to slap it off. But she knew that if she did Phillips would have surely given her the sack.

And what of meeting Charlotte and her noble husband? And Lord McIntyre. Gabby felt herself quake at the memory. After her dressing down from Phillips all she could think of was the handsome lord, and what it would feel like to be wrapped in his arms. She'd only been wrapped in the arms of one man and that had turned out disastrous. But Gabby was sure this time would be different.

Would he kiss her until she couldn't catch her breath? Would he caress her breasts gently? Would he touch her between her legs and make her moan? Oh yes, he would do all that and more.

She took a few deep breaths and reached around to do another button. Stop it Gabby. A man like him would never allow himself to dally with a soiled woman like you. Except as a convenient tryst. But would that be so bad? It had been so long since she'd felt a man's touch and she did so enjoy it. Let others think she was a slut. She didn't care. She was older now and more experienced. And she had a job and was making her own money. She may not live in a palace but the boarding house was respectable.

She gave up after another button and decided to go across the hall and see if Margaret was there and could help her with the task.

She pulled open the door at the same time McIntyre's hand

went up to knock. His hand met with thin air and landed on Gabby's shoulder. Caught off guard he lost his balance and fell into Gabby, who grabbed him, stumbled on her skirt and then fell to the floor. He landed right on top of her, his hands on her shoulders and his lips inches away from hers.

When she recovered her breath enough she gasped.

"Lord McIntyre! Whatever are you doing here?"

"Knocking on your door I believe," Fergus said with a laugh. "Although I didn't expect it to have the effect that it had. Forgive me, Gabby. I didn't mean to bowl you over."

Gabby felt herself blush deeply. She pushed gently on his shoulders but the man stayed right where he was, his eyes boring into hers. His body felt hard and wonderful on top of her.

"Milord, if you please."

"If I please what, Gabby?"

She turned her head from his before she could ask him to please kiss her. He propped himself up on one elbow to examine her dress.

"I hope it's not damaged. I'll replace it of course." His hands ran the length of the skirt and Gabby cried out when his fingers touched the mended spot.

"No, no, it's fine. Please get up."

He stood and helped her to her feet after he closed the door.

"Well, shall we make our way to the Essex house?"

Charlotte shook her head as she patted her hair back into place. "I was just going across the hall, to um, well, have Margaret help me with..."

Her words drifted off and she pointed to her back. Fergus circled around her and left out a soft, "Ah, I see. Allow me."

His fingers danced across her skin as he began to button the dress and Gabby pulled away from him.

"No, you shouldn't. I won't be but a moment." She started for the door and Fergus laughed.

"A woman who would face criminals with nothing more than a

fake baby in a pram is afraid of having her dress buttoned by a man? I find that quite extraordinary.”

“I assure you, Lord McIntyre, that I am afraid of nothing. It’s simply not proper.” There was a large part of her that said she wanted to throw proper into the fire and have his fingers on her buttons again, but undoing them instead of it being the other way around.

Fergus threw back his head and laughed. “Well, my dear, I hate to tell you that I’m not always a proper gentleman. Now come here and turn around or we’ll be later than we already are. Or are you frightened of my touch?”

Gabby glared at him, and the look of triumph in his eyes let her know she was reacting just as he wanted. She turned her back to him, hands on hips as he began to button the ones that were left, and the ones that had come undone when she’d fallen.

“I think one or two are damaged,” he said softly, his voice husky with desire. “I think the dress will definitely have to be replaced.”

Gabby’s own breath came in short, shallow gasps as she felt his fingers brush her skin. She could feel his breath on her neck and she moaned when he reached the top of the dress, then caressed her shoulders.

“Oh,” she whispered softly.

“I agree,” he said, leaning down to nibble on her ear. “Let’s hold that thought until after dinner, shall we?”

He turned her head and leaned in to kiss her, stopping only when Gabby muttered, “No, don’t. I hardly know you, and despite what you’ve probably heard about me being a fallen woman, I don’t allow men to take liberties with me.”

“It’s just a small kiss, a perfect way to become acquainted.” He leaned in again and Gabby pushed her fingers against his chest.

“I have no doubt that you know I’ve had some experience in these matters,” Gabby said, fighting the desire that was building in her stomach. “That doesn’t mean I’m going to jump into your bed, Lord McIntyre, title or no title.”

The sinfully seductive smile he gave her made her knees go weak.

“You can’t blame a man for trying when such a beautiful woman comes to his attention,” he said, putting his hands on either side of her stomach and squeezing gently. “But I’ll respect your wishes. I will try again. And soon, I promise you.”

He leaned in again, his lips inches away from hers when a frantic knocking made them both jump.

Gabby pulled open the door to find her stern landlady with her hands on her ample hips.

“I told you no gentlemen! I run a respectable place.” The wind went out of the woman’s sails somewhat when she noticed that both the occupants of the room were fully dressed.

“Forgive me, sweet lady,” Fergus said. “We were just leaving for dinner.”

Fergus grabbed Gabby’s wrap from where it hung near the door and then propelled her out the door before Gabby could open her mouth to defend herself.

When they were outside in the hallway she made for the stairs, but then turned around and put her hand on his chest.

“How did you know where I live? Did you follow me?” She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “And here I thought you were a gentleman. But to show up at a woman’s doorstep, unannounced and barge in, well, I never. I want to know how you found me, because I never gave you my address, and I know Charlotte doesn’t have it.”

His chuckle was deep, and Gabby wasn’t sure if she should laugh with him, or push her finger in his face and tell him to be quiet.

“McNutt really doesn’t like you,” he said.

“Are you trying to misdirect me?” She took a step backward. “I’ve a good mind to forgo the invitation and go back into my rooms. It’s not as if I don’t know McNutt doesn’t like me. Why are you bringing it up now?”

“How do you think I found your place of residence?”

Gabby stayed at the top of the stairs. She looked behind Fergus to where her landlady stood near the door to Gabby’s apartments. Her face was bright with interest and Gabby didn’t want her learning anything about Gabby’s private life.

“Let’s discuss it on the way to Lady Essex’s house,” she said, her voice rising with each word. Let the old sod chew on the fact that Gabby was having dinner with a lord and lady. She had half a mind to use Fergus’ title, too, but decided she would save it for later.

She turned and started down the stairs. She could hear—no, really feel—Fergus’ presence behind her. If she slowed down even one millisecond, he would run into her with that absolutely gorgeous form of his. She hadn’t felt a man this close to her in years, and her reaction to him frightened her no end.

Nothing good came from being with a man. She’d learned that the hard way, and she’d be damned if she would allow herself to become involved with a man like Fergus McIntyre. He was too sexy by far, and she had the willpower of a snail. The only way she’d stayed away from men after her disastrous first attempt at love-making was staying as far away from men as possible.

At the bottom of the stairs she reached for the door handle but Fergus reached around her for the latch and pulled the door open. She went out without acknowledging him. The carriage driver opened the door and helped her inside.

Once Fergus was settled in across from her and the carriage was on its way, Gabby said, “I’m waiting.”

Fergus chuckled before he said, “Finding you was easier than you might think. McNutt told me where to find you. His rather vulgar terms let me know how much he hates you. He said he hoped I was collecting on a debt you couldn’t pay, and that I would take you away, never to return.”

“The twit,” she said. “He blames me for missing the story, but truthfully he just doesn’t notice things around him. He thinks of himself, and only himself.”

“Yes, I could see that,” Fergus said. “If you don’t like the other staff members, why do you stay?”

“I’m sorry, Lord McIntyre, but not all of us have parents funneling money into our pockets.” She looked out the window. “Living in London is expensive, you know, even in that depressing rooming house.” It came out harsh, but at least it would, hopefully, keep him off her.

She waited for him to apologize, to stammer and try to find his footing again. Instead, he cleared his throat and said, “I hope the cook’s making a good pudding. I do adore sweet things after a heavy meal, don’t you?”

Gabby turned her gaze toward him. He smiled at her and she felt as if they’d been sparring, and she’d just lost that round.

She would make sure she didn’t lose another.