

READY TO OBEY



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BLUSHING BOOKS

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CHAPTER 1



BATH, ENGLAND

MAY 1872

Something told Maisie Glover there was something wrong with this school. She'd never been to a finishing school, but she didn't think the students would be this old. Not a one of the females who had walked past her was under eighteen. As she glanced at the two women coming down the stairs she changed her mind and decided none of them were under twenty. It seemed a strange age for women of social standing to be in school. Most of them should be married by now, shouldn't they?

"Mrs. Glover?"

Maisie looked up at the smiling, middle-aged woman standing in the doorway,

“Yes,” Maisie said as she stood. She grasped her reticule tightly in an effort to still her shaking hands.

“I’m Naomi Beale, the assistant headmistress,” she said. “If you’ll come with me I’ll introduce you to Mr. Cummings, the headmaster.”

Not for the first time Maisie questioned her sanity in applying for this job. She had problems in the outside world, true, but this place seemed dark, and it wasn’t from the lack of light coming in through the open curtains. It was just gloomy outside, she said to herself. It had nothing to do with the atmosphere here.

“We’ve been in need of a seamstress for some time,” Mrs. Beale said. She indicated Maisie should follow her as she headed out of the room. “The work might seem a bit daunting at first, but when you’re caught up things will seem better.”

Mrs. Beale led Maisie through several twists and turns, through what was obviously a dining hall and then a kitchen. Off the kitchen there was a short hallway, which led to a staircase.

Once they were downstairs the darkness intensified, despite the gas lighting. She wondered once again if she should turn and run, tell Mrs. Beale she had made a mistake. Then she remembered Jack, and Mr. Parker, and she fought back the urge to flee.

At the first doorway to the right of the stairwell, Mrs. Beale knocked on the door.

“Mr. Cummings?”

“Come in,” a deep voice responded,

Mrs. Beale opened the door and Maisie stepped into an even darker room. Behind a desk mounded with books and papers sat a man who took Maisie’s breath away. She forgot about her misgivings as she focused her attention on him. All she could see of his clothing was his shirt, vest, coat and tie, but it wasn’t that that made

him so striking. It was the light blue eyes and dark hair that set him off.

“This is Mrs. Glover, sir,” Mrs. Beale said. “She’s here about the seamstress job.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Beale,” the man said. “That will be all.”

The woman left, closing the door behind her.

“Please, have a seat,” Mr. Cummings said. “I need to finish this and I’ll be right with you.”

Maisie sat down in one of two chairs across from his desk. She took the time to look around. There was a sofa near the hearth, but there was no other decoration, no paintings on the walls or windows.

“You’re a widow, correct?”

Maisie’s head jerked toward Mr. Cummings.

“Yes, sir.” Maisie flexed her fingers to keep from balling her hands into fists. She’d relaxed a little, but now that he spoke the anxiety was back.

“No children?”

“No, sir.”

He finally looked up from the papers on the desk and narrowed his eyes. “At your age?”

“My husband and I tried, but it was not to be.”

“And where are you employed now?” he asked.

“The Poke and Bear,” she said.

“I don’t suppose you make much money there.”

“No, I don’t,” she said. “That’s why I’m looking to make a change.” That and the fact that her boss was demanding she take on another job, one of servicing his customers in a totally different way.

“I see,” he said. “You understand what this position entails?”

“I do, sir.” She continued flexing her fingers. “You are looking for a seamstress to repair dresses for the young ladies here.”

“And to sew new creations if necessary,” he said. He nodded toward a table. “Mend that dress and if I am happy with your work we will discuss other things.”

Other things like pay? Maisie wanted to ask. She was terrified that she would walk out of here without the job. Jack had been clear the night before. One of his customers offered him ten pounds if Jack would give him Maisie for the night.

“You’ll suck his cock, and let him fuck you,” Jack had said. “I’ll give you three of the ten pounds. If it works out, we can make the arrangement with several men and make a little money on the side.”

Maisie had run from the pub, and she’d been terrified to go home. But that’s when she’d seen the notice on the board offering a job at the school. Maisie knew how to sew. It was one of the greatest skills she had.

She went to the table and picked up the dress, studying the rip. It was uneven, but could be mended to where it wouldn’t show. She could gather the material in the right way and use the right color thread to blend in with the fabric.

It didn’t take long to plan a course of action. She went to work and had it done in half an hour. When she was done, Maisie studied the dress and saw a spot near the one she’d already mended that also needed attention and fixed it; then she saw another and did the same thing. When she was done, she stood.

“It took you a long time,” he said. “At that rate you wouldn’t be able to get dresses finished in a timely fashion. I’m sorry, but you won’t work out.”

Her heart leapt into her throat. “But sir, I mended two other places where the dress was threadbare.”

“Show me.”

Maisie crossed the room and pointed out the other two places. He took the dress and looked at it carefully. He frowned, and Maisie was afraid her extra work would not secure her the position.

“Excellent,” he said. “You can hardly tell it’s been mended.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cummings.”

“Can you start tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow?”

He studied her. “You need to start earlier?”

“I do, please,” she said.

He sat back in his chair and studied her. “Are you running from something?”

She wasn’t sure what to tell him, but soon decided that telling him the truth was the best thing to do. She related the incident of the night before, praying it wouldn’t make him change his mind.

“I see,” he said. “Where are your belongings?”

“I have rooms near the river,” she said.

“I’ll send one of the gardeners with you to collect them,” he said.

Relief washed over her. “Thank you, Mr. Cummings.”

“I’ll show you your room and you can settle in when you return and start work tomorrow.

“Yes, sir,” Maisie said.

“In the morning I will show you the sewing room,” he said. “Now, wait here and I’ll find an escort for you.”

Moments later she was in a wagon, heading to the center of town. Maisie sighed in relief as the man, who called himself MacGruder, flicked the reins. He accompanied her inside and once they were at her rooms, he waited outside the door while she packed her things.

Her landlord appeared as she was carrying out a suitcase.

“Jack was here last night, and this morning,” he said. “I’m to let him know when you’re back.”

Before Maisie could respond MacGruder pulled a few pounds from his pocket and offered them to her landlord. But before he could snatch them up, MacGruder pulled them back. “If you see this man tell him nothing.”

The landlord greedily eyed the money. He nodded and then took the cash. Maisie couldn’t see how much it was, but by the look on the landlord’s face it was quite a bit.

MacGruder took her arm and guided her to the wagon. When they were back on their way she said, “Why did you do that?”

“To keep him silent for a bit,” MacGruder, said.

She wasn’t sure it would work, but it gave her time to get away. That made things perfect, as far as she could tell. Maisie had moved to the rooms after her husband, Elvin had died a year and a half ago. She’d barely made her rent each week, and Jack knew that. Not for the first time, Maisie wished Elvin had not died. The thought made her feel guilty. Elvin had not been a good-looking man, but he had been good to her, and he’d made her laugh. No matter how poor they were he always provided food. He worked hard, and his job as a chimneysweep was not easy. That was what had led to his death.

“I found something new, Elvin,” she said to herself. Despite the darkness she’d felt today she prayed her new life would lead her into a bright future. Hopefully it was one that would be full of sunshine, and money.



THE NEXT MORNING, Maisie traveled to Mr. Cummings office after eating the porridge and tea that had been left outside her door. Once again, she found him behind his desk, working.

“Your work room will be near the kitchen,” he said. “There are lots of windows there so you should have plenty of light.”

“Thank you, sir,” Maisie said.

“I ask that you not go wandering around the school,” he said as they headed up the stairs. “The gardens are quite beautiful, and if you want to take the air that would be a good place. The other rooms are off limits, as that is where we train the girls.”

Train? Maisie found that an off word, but she didn’t say anything.

“Am I the only one residing downstairs?” she asked.

“I have a room down here,” he said. “Mrs. Beale and the other staff members and servants are on the third floor.

“Is there a lot of staff?” she asked.

“Not so much,” he said. “We have a butler, and several footmen, maids and cooks. You will not be asked to do anything other than sewing.”

Maisie couldn’t imagine that thirty or so upper class females would produce enough rips that they needed to employ a full-time mender, but she wasn’t going to argue. She was employed. She had a roof over her head. She was away from Jack.

“Your room is a little isolated, I’m afraid, and since it is in the basement there is not a lot of sunlight.

“I believe I will be spending most of my time in the workroom,” she said. “I will get my sunlight there.”

He stopped on the stairs and turned to her. “I see you found your uniform.”

Maisie nodded. The uniform was a simple black dress with a rope belt. Two pouches hung on either side of the belt for her to store her working utensils. Maisie felt as if she'd died and gone to heaven.

They made their way through the kitchen. Maisie nodded at the cooks, who nodded back. The sewing room was indeed large. Inside she saw mounds of material. "Dresses, stockings, shifts, there are various things there," Mr. Cummings said. "Each girl has her own basket in which to place things that need attention. It is important to keep them in their separate piles, which means working on them one at a time."

"Yes, sir." Maisie stared at what now looked like mountains.

"Good, then get to work."

He was gone before Maisie could respond. She went to the basket that was nearest the door. It contained torn stockings and a dress that looked as if she had taken a knife to it. There were also several shifts that contained slashes. She wondered what this girl did to damage her clothing this way.

Then she noticed the dark brown stain. Was that blood? Of course it was on a shift, so it could be from the girl's monthly flux, but there didn't seem to be enough of it for that. It was just a small amount, no bigger than two peas, really. She wondered if the dress had already been laundered. Either way, that wasn't her job. She needed to concentrate on getting the frock mended. It was best to ignore it.

"Did you find everything you need?" Maisie turned to find Mrs. Beale in the doorway.

"I'm still becoming acquainted with things," Maisie said,

"Here are needles, thread and two thimbles," Mrs. Beale said.

"I know Mr. Cummings well enough to know he didn't show you

much or tell you much. He is preoccupied right now. We break in a few hours for tea and toast, and then luncheon is at one. We take another break in the afternoon for tea, and then supper is at six.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Beale,” Maisie said.

“If you need anything please let the cooks know and they will search for me,” Mrs. Beale said. “Please don’t go around the students.”

That was her second time to be warned away from the rest of the school, and it made Maisie wonder why. Don’t, she said to herself. Just be glad you’re working here and away from Jack.

“Do you know if anything needs to be done first?” she asked.

“Just pick one and start,” Mrs. Beale said with a laugh. “I will see you at the morning break.”

Maisie started to work the minute the woman was gone. She worked until break, and then went for tea and toast in the kitchen. She told her new coworkers the story of her life, telling them of Elvin. She left off the part about Jack and his idea of making her into a whore.

After that she sewed, took luncheon and sewed some more. When the day was done, Maisie was almost finished with two baskets. “I’d like to stay and work, if it’s all right with you,” she asked Mrs. Beale when she came to tell her the workday was done. Her fingers ached from the day’s labors, but she was eager to not fall behind.

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Beale said. “You’ve worked hard enough today. You need to relax. Eat supper, go for a walk, read a book. We don’t want to wear you out on the first day.”

Before she left the room, Maisie asked about the gardens.

“They are beautiful,” Mrs. Beale said. “If there are any students

present there please be careful and not make contact. Some of them can be haughty.”

Maisie promised to heed her advice. She went to her room and changed into one of her dresses. It was plain, but after wearing black all day the purple color lifted her spirits and made her smile. After putting on her shoes she started down the hallway.

“Mrs. Glover.” Mr. Cummings’s voice caught her by surprise. She turned to see him standing in the doorway of a room. “I trust your first day was productive and enjoyable.”

“Yes, sir, it was,” she said. She was once again struck by his handsome looks. His deep voice made her shiver slightly.

“Are you going out?”

“Yes, for a walk in the gardens,” she said.

“They will be mostly deserted at this time,” he said. “May I walk with you?”

“Of course,” she said. She put her hand on her dress to hide a stain. She hadn’t expected to see anyone until dinner, and before then she’d wanted to change into her best dress, the one she’d worn yesterday for the interview.

She saw him glance at her hand, but he didn’t mention it. He followed her up the stairs and out into the garden.

“They are beautiful blooms,” she said as they strolled. “I’ve always wondered what it would be like to have a garden around my house.”

“What did your father do for a living?” he asked.

“He was a sweep, which is how I met Elvin, my husband. They worked together.”

“And both your parents are gone?” he asked.

“No, my mother still lives, in America. She moved there with her two sisters after my father passed away. She wanted me to go,

but I was married to Elvin at the time. I didn't want to leave him, and he didn't want to go."

"I see." They walked a little in silence before he said, "You don't want to join her now?"

"Not really," she said. "It's true I have no one here anymore. Elvin didn't have contact with his parents. But the crossing is expensive. I had hoped that, since I have a better paying position now, I might be able to save some funds in case I decide to go at a later time."

"It is a hard journey," he said. "But you should be able to save a bit while working here, since your expenses are covered."

"Are you married, Mr. Cummings?" Maisie was shocked the words came out of her mouth. She usually wasn't that bold.

"No, I am not," he said. "Since you have been so open with me, I will do the same for you. My wife left me, after four years of marriage. She said I was a cold, heartless bastard."

Maisie stopped in her tracks. "Are you? I mean, you don't seem that way."

"I can be," he said.

"Does that mean you're divorced?"

"I am," he said. He leaned toward her, his face lit with a wicked grin. "Scandalous, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said, but she couldn't help but smile.

"Does she live around here?"

"No, she married a merchant who lives in Liverpool." He started to walk again. "They have several children together, which is something she wanted from me."

"You don't want children?" Maisie gasped. "I'm sorry, I'm being far too forward. Forgive me."

"At the time, I was house manager for an estate," he said. "We

had our own little cottage and children were part of our plan. But —” He paused, and Maisie wondered what he was thinking. “It is almost time for dinner. Perhaps we should go inside and get ready.”

They turned before getting to a statue that Maisie had wanted to see. It set in what seemed to be the center of the path they were on, and she wanted to explore it, to examine the marble and its carvings. She would have to come out here later to do it on her own.

Maisie kept her gaze on the flowers as they walked, and when she tripped and fell to the ground she gasped.

“Mrs. Glover,” Mr. Cummings said, bending down to help her up. “Are you all right?”

“I tripped,” she said. She looked behind her. There was a small mound of dirt near the edge of the path, and a rock, not very big, but large enough for her to stumble over, was near it.

“I shall have to speak to the gardener about this,” he said. “He is not doing his job properly if things like this are left about. Were you injured?”

Maisie felt her knee. There was a new rip in her skirt from her fall. “Nothing I can’t fix,” she said.

“You know, I believe there is extra material in your work area. Perhaps you could use some of that to make yourself a new frock. Consider it a bonus for having to put up with another worker’s carelessness.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cummings,” she said.

He nodded, and she took that to mean you’re welcome.

The idea of a new dress occupied her mind as they walked in silence back to the house.

“I’ll see you in the staff dining hall,” he said. “We still have about half an hour.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cummings,” she said.

She changed as quickly as she could, and then headed back to the garden, thinking she could see the statue before the meal. The night was closing in on her, and she carefully kept to the right side of the path so she did not trip over the rock and dirt clods.

As the statue drew near she thought about her new life. She thanked the powers that be for seeing her safely to the school. Her panic had been so real, and it seemed so far away now.

Last night there was every chance she would be a whore. Now she was an employee of the best finishing school in Bath. She was just a mender, true, but if she worked hard there was the possibility that when Mrs. Beale retired she could take her job.

What would it be like to be more than a worker? What would it feel like to be one of those young ladies, she wondered. She was sure they were all happy and didn't have a care in the world. They didn't have to worry about how they were going to pay the rent, or where their next meal was coming from.

"Quit feeling sorry for yourself," she whispered as she reached the statue. She wasn't sure who the sculptor was, but the object was Roman in nature. It was of a woman, wearing a floral crown and the long, flowing robes they wore. She had an orb of some sort in her hand, but it didn't look like a globe.

Maisie wondered what it was. She took a step closer to get a better look. There was a golden ring around the middle of the orb, but there were no other markings.

She wondered what life would have been like in the times the Romans inhabited the city. The baths were a wonderful place to visit.

She was so happy now that she wasn't sure anything could bring her down, unless she managed to make Mr. Cummings angry and lose her job. That might happen if she were late to dinner the first

night. She made her way back down the path, stopping when she heard a few voices Maisie was surprised to hear one of those ladies voice the same concern she had thought just moments ago.

“We’ll be in trouble,” the first voice said. “Besides, this is a ridiculous search. Nothing has been found in the last eighteen hundred years. What makes you think we’ll find it?”

Find what? In the growing darkness, Maisie looked down to make sure she didn’t trip again. As she did the second voice, much louder and stronger than the first one, spoke.

“You’re such a milksop. This is an adventure. Think about how famous we’ll be after we find it.”

Find what? Maisie asked herself silently. Had something been buried in the gardens? Something that had been missing for quite some time? In her years in Bath, Maisie had never heard any sort of legend associated with this manor house. The school had only been here for the last twenty years.

Before that it had belonged to a rich family, although Maisie couldn’t remember their name.

“You stay then. I’m going back,” the first voice said.

Maisie moved back and crouched down, the pebbles from the path biting into her knees as she tried to make herself as tiny as possible.

A girl, no not a girl, a woman, hurried out from the bushes and turned toward the house. Maisie couldn’t make out her features, and she doubted she would be able to pick her out if she saw her again.

Seconds later a second female entered the path and rushed after her friend. “Wait for me!”

When they were gone, Maisie stood up. If she didn’t hurry she would be late for supper, and that would not make her look good in

Mr. Cummings's eyes. She took off toward the house, praying she would make it before they said the meal prayer.

Tomorrow she would ask Mrs. Beale about any legends that might be associated with the house. It would make for interesting conversation at mealtime.