

GIDEON'S LAW



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only. Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

PROLOGUE



August 1926...

I woke with a smile and a shiver, too. The sun wasn't up yet, and the moon hung stiff and chalky in the pre-dawn sky. Gideon moved beside me in the grass, where we lay half-sheltered by that crumbling white building missing one full wall and a roof. I could see by the light of morning, that it was, in fact, a ruined, old church.

For now, he slept, his breaths soft and bearing little resemblance to the animal of a man who had claimed me last night in these long grasses under the stars. Pushing me down to my belly, his mouth on the backs of my thighs and moving higher, gripping my wrists in his hands, he had known I would struggle as his kisses became obscene. But I had not struggled long; as always, the pleasure he gave consumed me, and I submitted to his lewd doings with my face pushed into the earth, moaning into the loose dirt. When he'd had his fill with his mouth, he took me by the shoulders and laid his

body over mine, the hard lengths of his muscles against my back, crushing me delightfully into the cool grass.

And then he had taken me, his lips hot at the back of my neck, at my ear, growling my name. He had given me all of himself, made love with everything he had, and it had not been gentle. Always, he had curbed himself before, had been careful with me, but that leash had been broken. It had been bliss, it had been frightening, and it had even hurt a little, too, and when he finished, he had bitten passionately at my shoulder. But even then, he had not been through with me.

Yes, I woke with a smile and a shiver, too, but something wasn't right, was it? Gideon stirred in the grass beside me, for he hadn't been asleep at all. He had moved over onto his side, propped up on one elbow, his eyes bright and alert. I saw now, he held his leather belt in his hands, and I caught my breath. He was going to fight me, and he knew just how to make me surrender.

"I'm going with you," I said, clenching my teeth, ignoring my fear.

He did not answer, but only took hold of one of my wrists. He did not look me in the face, and his mouth was turned down, grim. He pulled me toward him, shifting my weight in the grass.

"You said I could go with you, Gideon."

At last, he looked into my eyes. I wanted to see pain there, but I did not. I only saw conviction, an arrogant certainty that he was right.

"Well, honey," he said quietly, "I lied."

CHAPTER 1



April 1926...

A man speaking to his companion woke me; the moon was bright on my face through the train window, and the train felt to be decelerating. My body tugged forward in my seat, a strange sensation, and the brakes groaned loud as the whistle screeched.

"This is O' Shale land," the man was saying, "and I'd not step foot out there for all the gold in the world."

"O' Shale? Ain't that one of those names you hear about from that famous feud? But what was the name of the other family?"

"It was Vane. Only thing worse than an O' Shale, is a Vane, so they say. This whole damn land is cursed, for those two. God only knows what started the mess."

"What I hear is it was one of 'em who had his own wife get murdered by the other..."

I had been trying to listen but was interrupted by the conductor when he informed me that the uncovered, wooden deck outside

was indeed the train stop, and that this was my morning drop off, though the moon still shone high, and it could not have been long after midnight. He escorted me to the aisle, moving me along and ignoring my arguments utterly.

"You *cannot* just leave me out here!" I cried at last, standing at the door foolishly, unwilling to step into the night. The two men who'd been conversing now stared at me with new curiosity, that here was a passenger, stopping and departing into the cursed land they'd been speaking of.

"It's either that, or you go on with us to Kingston," the conductor said with a shrug.

So now, I sat shivering and abandoned, seated on my huge wooden trunk, much more frightened than I was cold. My fur trimmed woolen coat had always been sufficient.

She will have got the telegram, I told myself more than once. My aunt knew when I would arrive, and surely, she would be here any minute. I stiffened myself against the fear that crawled up through me, lest it should overtake me completely. If it did, I would start screaming and run madly into the dark walls of forest spanning the long dirt road leading up to the train platform.

I could have started walking, I suppose, but I didn't know where to find my aunt's house, having never been there. Besides, in no way, could I have moved my own trunk. It had taken the conductor and two busboys to offload it, grunting and scowling at me the whole time, while I scowled right back at them. Who in their right mind would leave a lone young woman stranded in the middle of the Kentucky wood in the absolute dead of night? It was madness.

Even with the moon's light, it was dark, and so I spotted the headlights from a good way off, coming directly towards me up the road. Who else could it be but my Aunt Agnes? The question hung over me like a chill, and I had an instinct to hide. I drew my head low into my coat collar, taking deep breaths to keep myself from crying. My world had shattered, and here I was, at the mercy of an aunt I'd never even met who was the last living relative I had. When

the vehicle pulled to a stop on the gravel next to the rail platform, I stood and raised my head, but I felt my own helplessness like a weight, heavier even than my trunk.

The door of the truck swung open with a metallic squeal. The headlights remained on, blinding me, so that nothing was visible of whoever now stood next to it.

"Miss Molly Brennan?" A man's voice rang out into the night, brash and deep. I stayed frozen, speechless.

"Miss Molly?" he repeated. "I'm come from your Aunt Agnes, to drive you on up back home."

My mouth opened dumbly. What could I say? I could not see him at all, while he saw me illuminated, saw my foolish stare as brightly lit as an actress who had forgotten her lines gawping on a stage. Hot tears sprang to my eyes.

"Your aunt don't go out this late, miss," he said, his voice gentler. "But she sent me for you, sent me for her niece, Molly Rose Brennan. Guess it must be you?"

"Who else would be out here right now?" I cried. It tore out of me, but it calmed me to hear myself speak; it put me back into the bonds of reality.

He laughed, a soft, dry sound, and then his form appeared, silhouetted by the headlamps. He was a tall man, broad-shouldered but rangy at the arms and slim through the waist, with long denim-clad legs. I clenched my fists in the pockets of my coat with a sudden prickle of fear.

"Name's Gideon," he said. "I'll load your trunk now."

I nearly wept. I don't know why. I could not tell if it was the time to be relieved or freshly terrified, and the confusion paralyzed me. If he had ill intents, there was naught that could protect me from him. And he knew my name, even knew *Rose*, so he must have known my aunt. To do anything other than go with him, would have been pointless.

I nodded, as though he'd asked, and it occurred to me he had not. He'd already stepped up to the platform, appraising me under

the light, and I grew warm with irritation. He neared, towering over me, and said, "Damn, that's the biggest trunk I've ever seen. Could fit a person in there. Two, maybe."

"I haven't got anyone in there," I said peevishly.

"Your clothes then? You really are city folk, aren't you?"

I sniffed. Possibly, it was more of a snort, but he had goaded me. "It is *not* clothes." Those were in my much more modestly sized suitcase. He must have known it in the next moment, for he heaved the trunk up under one arm with a surprised grunt. The lift did not look too difficult for him; clearly, he was strong. I do believe the grunt had been exaggerated.

"You sure there ain't no bodies in here?" he asked, a smile in his question.

"Great God, you're being ridiculous. It's only my books."

He laughed, a crackling sound that made me warm again, made me feel silly and vain. Then he said, "This whole trunk of yours is filled with books?"

"Not *only* books," I began and then switched tactics. "Whatever in the world is the matter with books?"

"Nothing at all, miss." He'd disappeared behind the lights, and I heard him heave the trunk into the truck bed. I made my way carefully down the platform stairs and through the gravel, all at once glad that he had left his headlights on. My oxford heels had not been made to hike through loose rock.

"Only, you seem awful young to have read so many books already." He swung his way into the cab and leaned across the seat swiftly, opening the other door for me. I climbed in, bouncing on the firm leather of the seat, making it squeak. The cab of the truck smelled of the leather and of something else, something oily and mechanical and masculine.

"I'm not young," I argued. "I'm twenty-four, and anyway, I haven't read them *all*."

He laughed again when I told him my age. I began to feel a trifle angry, offended even at all his poking at me. It did occur to me

dimly that I'd ceased to be afraid, though I was still uncertain of him. I tried to see him in the refractions of moonlight; his hair showed up dark against his skin, he had a black beard, and two startling dark triangles of eyebrows. I could ascertain no more. But who was he? How did he know my aunt?

"You don't look a speck like her, you know," he said, as if he knew it was she I'd been thinking on. Maybe it was his way of making friendly conversation; if so, I would have much to get used to in the country.

"I wouldn't know," I replied frostily. "I've never met her."

"She's twiggy an' red-haired. Tough lady, your aunt."

I made no response, not wanting to encourage any remarks upon my own person. I was certainly *not* twiggy and red-haired. My hair was ashy brown, and it made up for this plainness by being vexingly thick and curly, especially after I had lobbed it to my chin when it came in style, to my grandmother's horror. And I was, well, *plump* would be the polite term, I guess. *Fat*, the less civil one, though I had certainly heard it before. I waited for him to remark on it. I'd known plenty of finer folk with better manners who had never had any trouble doing so.

A moment passed, but he said no more. I got to thinking of my aunt, this "tough lady". My grandparents had barely spoken of her, and so I had always attached to her some vague sort of scandal. All at once, it dawned on me that she may be a woman of ill morals, that this might be her man, whom she lived with without the sanction of marriage. I sighed. Could it really matter to me so long as she was not cruel? I waited, hoping he would speak of her more.

"She's been looking forward to having you stay," he said, and I realized that he may have sensed my anxiety in the matter. "My condolences as to your loss," he added gently.

"Thank you," I said. I sat up stiffly and folded my hands in my lap.

"Agnes doesn't talk much about her parents. I guess they had a fallin' out of sorts."

A falling out? I'd never heard that. It was odd, wasn't it, for him to speak on it so openly? He must have felt he had some claim to Agnes, just as I had suspected.

"My grandmother was a fine woman," I said loftily.

"I'm sure she was."

Did something in my tone belie my words, perhaps? A *fine woman*... Fine, meaning what, exactly? Upstanding? Elegant? Yes, she had been those. But in the years following my grandfather's death, I had grown to find her exacting, insular nature to be nearly intolerable, so much so that I'd barely stood being in the dining room with her to take our meals.

"Your aunt says you were raised by your grandparents," he said, cutting into the unpleasantness of having ill memories about the dead.

"Yes."

"And no siblings?" he asked. I nodded, and he remarked, "Must have been lonely."

"No," I said shortly. Stuffy, perhaps. And boring. So boring that even now, the prospect of leaving a city I had liked, a home I was comfortable in, to come live in some godforsaken corner of the world with an eccentric aunt, had a spark of intrigue to it. But I had not been lonely. Anyone who has had a conversation with a good book can understand. I don't guess my current company would have, though.

"And here you are, come to the backwoods to start a whole new life," he said, almost cheerfully, as though it must have been an adventure for me. I watched him from the corner of my eye, this overtalkative stranger, careful to keep my head facing away. He was still shrouded in darkness, but I could see his hands on the wheel; they were quite large, his knuckles as knobby as his dark-downed wrists.

"Not much to help it," I said. The knot in the pit of my belly had reappeared. *A whole new life*. And what on earth was that going to

be? I could not imagine it. It stretched before me as dark and obscured as the dusty road ahead of us.

"Well now, I expect your aunt's got some plans for what's to be done with you. You oughtn't worry yourself over it much."

Despite the ominous phrasing, *what's to be done with you*, I suspect he was trying to comfort me. I sighed.

"You cold?"

"No." But I was shivering. The strangeness of it all was taking its toll. The black wall of forest on either side of us cast otherworldly shadows across a path lit up eerily by moonlight. I'd not been out like this before, out at night beyond all lights other than the moon. It was not the same friendly lantern here as it was in the city, where lampposts rendered it pale and unnecessary. Out here, it made the sky a terrible, brackish blue, and its light bounced cold and hollow off the distant bald rocks of the mountains.

We drove for a while in silence, the truck rocking along the unkempt dirt path, jostling me against the door. My mind began to drift, to move even into a half-sleep, and in this state, I returned to our little house on the Carolina coast, to cozy nights by the fireside when both my grandparents had been alive. My grandmother, scolding my grandpa over his "middle class" habit of going about in his shirtsleeves—hardly a shock, for we were middle class, much as she tried to pretend otherwise. Yes, he went around in his shirt-sleeves and suspenders, his ample belly stretching to the limit the waist of his silly jodhpur pants. "Pardon me, Madame," he would tease, in return to her complaints, winking at me as he put on his coat. And she would laugh drily and shake her head. She never did get too mad at him, as much as his ways irked her. When he'd died, the lightness, the earthy manliness, had gone out of our lives entirely, and we had both been the worse for it.

I sniffled. I had come out of the dreamy stupor, and a sad mood had crept over me. Had it not been for the awareness of the stranger next to me, I would have cried. Self-pity engulfed me; I'd thought

things had been bad living with my miserable widow of a grandmother, but now I was utterly dependent on a strange aunt, who could not even be troubled to get me herself from the train station.

Suddenly, the truck swung to one side, jarring me from my miseries. I squinted out onto the road; he had pulled us over and turned out the lights, so that I could see something coming up the other side of it. Yes, in the moonlight, it looked to be another vehicle... no, a whole line of them, maybe five or six. None of them had their headlamps on.

My driver made a sound, a grunted, "Mm," deep in his throat. Then he said, "May seem a bit odd, but I'm gonna need you to lay yourself down next to your seat, under the dash."

"Excuse me?" I was terrifically awake now, my heart galloping and my senses bright. The appearance of the strange procession of cars in the opposite lane had given me a chill to say the least, but this instruction, spoken so seriously from the man who'd been teasing me only a while before, set my guts as cold as the grave.

He peered over at me, the shadows of his eyes holding me still. Somehow, I caught the glitter of them as he said, "You do just as I say, Molly Rose. Right now."

It was the way he said my name that did it. That, and maybe the dark calm of his voice, which changed my impression of him entirely so that I nearly forgot the cars heading towards us. I scooted down just like he'd told me, not taking my eyes off him as I huddled in the crowded space between the seat and the dash. He'd slowed the truck to a crawl, and his tall form stooping over the wheel took up most of my view, black against the sky and sort of terrible. The weirdness of it all rose, and I was desperate to dispel it. Finding my voice, I squeaked out, "*What is happening?*"

"It's all just fine," he said calmly, but without taking his eyes from the road ahead. "Only a few souls who don't need to be knowin' our business. Quiet now."

"Quiet? They can hardly hear me!"

"*Quiet.*" He hadn't raised his voice, but he'd said the word in a

tone that did render me such. Then, to my horror, he started to roll down the window; the sound of it shrilled in the night air and my nerves shuddered at the awful squealing. I knew now that the cars were pulling through right beside us, that they must have slowed to a stop.

"Hey there, Gideon," a man said from the other car. I could not see him, but his voice was smooth and bright, and it sounded as though the man it belonged to was handsome. Of course, I had no way of knowing it. I couldn't see a blasted thing from where I was curled up at the floor of the car.

"Evenin'," said Gideon, sounding like he'd just run into an old buddy at the corner grocery. It was all so silly, I might have laughed if I hadn't been so scared.

"Awful late to be out, isn't it?" remarked the other man, ridiculous, considering he and four other cars were also out, doing God knows what.

"Not for catfish," Gideon replied simply.

"Catfish, eh? Catch any?"

"Nope," Gideon said, with a good-humored grin and a deceit so smooth that for a second, I thought maybe he really had been out fishing.

"Well, then, guess we'll be seein' you."

"Be seein' you," Gideon replied, dashing his finger off his forehead in emulation of a hat tip. And that was that. Both men rolled up their respective windows while I stayed crouched on the floor, not daring to move a muscle until I got the go ahead. My driver did not speak, however, or so much as look my way, until he'd started up the truck and driven a small distance more. Then he said, "You get on back up in your seat, Miss Molly Rose."

He ought to have called me, *Miss Brennan*, but I didn't feel like telling him that. Besides, there was a certain charm in the way he used both my names like he did, though it was quite country sounding and would have made my grandmother's skin crawl. She'd never liked my mother's choice of name and tried even for a

time to call me Mary, even though I'd been Molly Rose Brennan since I was born and subsequently orphaned.

I scooted back up onto the bench with as much dignity as I could muster, straightening out my wool skirt under my hips with a jerk. His head inclined my way, and I saw the curve of a smile casting a crescent of shadow on one cheek. My temper perked.

"Of all the absurdities!" I exclaimed, sounding very Irish as my grandfather had, always picking up the accent in his anger, at least before my grandmother straightened him out with one of her looks. "What on earth are you about, then, making me lie on the floor?"

He grinned; I saw the white of his teeth against the black of his beard and got a weird chill. A man oughtn't to have the grin of a wolf, gleaming and sharp, but this one did. He stifled it under my glare, though not completely. "It's like I said, they ain't got no need to know my business. Don't you worry about it."

"It's *me* you didn't want them to know about. Why?"

"Everyone will know 'bout you soon enough," he said under his breath. "Can't keep no secrets in a county like this one. But they don't need to see you just yet."

"And who were they, out so late in all those cars? And don't tell me they were out fishing."

He laughed, soft and pleasant. Really, he had a nice laugh when he kept it gentle like that. "They were just some neighbor folk. We're almost home now, and we'll get you to bed. It's real late for you, I expect."

I huffed. I guess it was his way of putting me off. I knew he wouldn't tell me anymore, no matter how I asked. A suspicion of him pricked up in me over all that had just happened, though I had no clue what the events could mean. I leaned my head back on the seat and stared up at the bright, ominous circle of the moon over my head.