

THE RECKLESS RUNAWAY



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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.

CHAPTER 1



Adele sat motionless at the dining table, gaping at Lady Montgomery. She could scarcely believe the words her horrid stepmother had only just uttered. Surely, it couldn't be true...

"We shall leave on the morrow, my dear," Lady Montgomery said to her equally horrid daughter, Gwendolyn. "I expect we'll be stopping for close to a fortnight, but you mustn't fret. I've already written to the innkeeper of the most charming establishment in Nottingham, reserving the finest suite in the inn. I assure you, we'll be well looked after whilst your dresses are being made. I daresay it'll be a lovely little holiday for the pair of us."

"Oh, Mother, I'm positively ecstatic," said Gwendolyn, clasping her hands together. "Have you really booked Mrs. Jameson to design my dresses?"

"Of course, my dear."

Gwendolyn squealed in delight and flashed a smug smile at Adele, to which Adele responded with a scowl.

Gwendolyn turned back to her mother and said, "But she's the most sought after dress designer in all of the East Midlands! How ever did you manage it, Mother?"

"Indeed, Mrs. Jameson is known far and wide for her exquisite creations. She's the best, and you must have the best, my dearest daughter. You deserve nothing less."

Adele felt sick.

In the years following her beloved father's death, Adele had struggled to endure the company of her insufferable stepmother and stepsister. When she found herself seething in the anger that resulted from their endless stream of snide remarks and nasty comments, only one thing lifted her spirits, and that was the knowledge that her lot was temporary. Once she reached her eighteenth year, Adele would be presented at Court.

Following the presentation, she would be swept into the whirlwind of the London Season and by the end of the Season, she would have accepted a proposal of marriage from the most delightful of all the delightful bachelors she was sure to have charmed. She would leave Cosgrove Manor with no regrets. Grateful for the chance to sever all ties with Lady Montgomery and the gruesome Gwendolyn, Adele could hardly wait to embark upon her new life as the wife of a dynamic young nobleman.

For years, she had entertained fantasies of this anonymous young nobleman. In her mind, he was kind and just. He was fearsome and fearless. He was devastatingly handsome and as sharp as a needle and a master of wits. And above all, he would treat Adele like a queen.

And now...

And now, the young nobleman she had constructed so carefully in her mind began to disintegrate, to disappear into nothing at all. Adele closed her eyes and allowed herself to indulge in a moment of despair. But only a moment, mind. She would not let her ideal husband slip away without a fight.

Opening her eyes, she turned to Lady Montgomery and, without waiting for a pause in conversation, she said, "Why?"

Lady Montgomery frowned. "I beg your pardon, Adele. Granted, you're not the most decorous of young ladies, but even

you must be aware that it's exceedingly rude to interrupt your dining companion mid-sentence."

Ignoring the reprimand, Adele pressed on. "Why must you exclude me from attending the Season? I am eighteen years of age, same as Gwendolyn. It's only logical that we should travel to London together."

"If you must know, I've made the decision to postpone your presentation until the following year. In the meantime, you will dedicate yourself to refining your mannerisms and tempering your behavior. At the moment, you simply are not ready to be presented to Her Majesty."

Adele found herself unable to respond. What her horrid step-mother was saying was most assuredly untrue. Granted, Adele's temper got a bit heated, at times, but those instances only occurred within the walls of Cosgrove Manor, and only when she was provoked. She always conducted herself as a refined young lady whilst out in public. Lady Montgomery's explanation was weak, and, above all, it was insufficient.

"Hogwash," she said.

Lady Montgomery responded with a pinched face, "Thank you for proving my point, Adele. Proper young ladies refrain from using vulgar slang."

"You know perfectly well that I conduct myself as a proper young lady in the company of others."

"I have no wish to continue this conversation," said Lady Montgomery, turning back to her daughter. "Now, Gwendolyn, I've some delightful news to share with you. We've been invited to attend a ball in Nottingham, hosted by the Duchess of Newbury."

"Oh, Mother, how lovely!"

"Indeed. I do hope you'll take advantage of the opportunity to hone your waltzing skills, my dear."

"Of course, I will. How clever of you to remind me."

Adele was trying to understand the reasoning behind her step-mother's choice to exclude her from the Season, but to no avail. She

was just as agreeable as Gwendolyn was; in fact, she was more so. Adele had a gift for charming everyone from the mustiest dowager to the aloofest of rakes. She had also been blessed with great beauty. Her emerald eyes were wide and luminescent, her golden locks thick and bouncy. She had a soft, smooth, peaches and cream complexion that was the envy of girls all throughout their corner of Derbyshire.

Gwendolyn, on the other hand, was blessed with no such gifts. Though pleasant enough to converse with—as long as you were not her long-suffering stepsister, mind—she lacked the magnetic charm that Adele possessed. What's more, Gwendolyn was plain. Everything about her appearance was remarkably unremarkable.

The sound of Lady Montgomery and Gwendolyn's lively chatter faded into the background as the true reason for Adele's exclusion from the upcoming Season became all too clear.

Before she could stop herself, she blurted out, "I know exactly why you are forbidding me from attending the Season. You know perfectly well that all the gentlemen will be drawn to me and that, with me there, none of them will pay Gwendolyn any mind."

A wounded little cry escaped from Gwendolyn's thin lips, and Adele immediately regretted expressing her thoughts in such an indelicate and insensitive sort of way. She bowed her head in preparation for the rant that was sure to come from Lady Montgomery.

Indeed, her stepmother wasted no time in jumping to Gwendolyn's defence. "You insolent, ungrateful little sornier!" she shouted. "How dare you suggest that your tawdry mannerisms and flashy appearance are in any way superior to my daughter's natural charms and subtle beauty!"

Still gazing down at the untouched game hen on her dinner plate, Adele said, "Please forgive me the coarseness of my words, Lady Montgomery. I did not mean to be unkind. Please accept the sincerity of my apology, Gwendolyn."

"Silence!" Lady Montgomery roared. "This is precisely why I

am forbidding you from attending the season, Adele. I cannot have you bringing shame upon myself and upon the memory of your dear father when you speak out of turn. I cannot, and I will not."

"Oh, please, Lady Montgomery. I beg you to reconsider," Adele said, daring to glance up to meet her stepmother's gaze. "If you look into your heart, surely, you'll realize that I've never spoken out of turn in polite society. Not once."

Lady Montgomery's cold grey eyes were narrowed in disgust. "If you continue to persist in your weak attempts to change my mind, I shall not only forbid you from attending the upcoming Season but, also, the Season in the year following."

Adele gasped. The concept of having to endure another year under her stepmother's watchful eye was horrid enough, but the thought of having to suffer through another *two* years was positively unthinkable. She vowed not to say another word on the subject.

And so, Adele sat in silence whilst Gwendolyn and Lady Montgomery chattered on excitedly of all the arrangements and purchases to be made in preparation of the Season. She felt utterly wretched. How would she ever find the courage necessary to endure another year at Cosgrove Manor?

She turned her attention to the dinner before her, but as delicious as the savoury game hen surely was, she got no pleasure from the modest bites she took. As a matter of fact, she was starting to feel rather sick as the tears welled in her eyes.

"May I please be excused?" she asked in a meek voice, which was very unlike her usual confident one.

"Yes, yes," said Lady Montgomery, waving her off without turning her head.

She and her daughter were immersed in a discussion about whether or not the emerald and diamond necklace was a bit too mature for Gwendolyn to wear during the Season. Gwendolyn thought not, but her mother felt they ought to err on the side of

caution and bedeck her in more modest gems. Heaven forbid, her daughter be thought of as too showy.

Thank heavens she'd been excused, because if Adele was forced to listen to such insignificant chatter whilst her heart was breaking, she thought she might scream. She sprang up from the table and left the dining room in a hurry. Quickly making her way through the drafty old manor house, tears were nevertheless streaming down her cheeks by the time she reached her chambers. Adele slammed the door behind her and threw herself down on the bed where she sobbed her heart out.

How would she ever find the strength to withstand a whole extra year with Lady Montgomery, the miserable old hag? Oh, it was all too tragic for words.