

How to Rescue Rapunzel

The Marriage Broker, Book Two

By

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Table of Contents:

Chapter One	5
Chapter Two.....	16
Chapter Three.....	29
Chapter Four	41
Chapter Five.....	52
Chapter Six.....	63
Chapter Seven	74
Chapter Eight	86
Chapter Nine	98
Chapter Ten.....	106
Chapter Eleven.....	114
Chapter Twelve	126
Epilogue	139
About Viola Morne	142
Ebook Offer.....	143
Blushing Books Newsletter.....	144
About Blushing Books	145

CHAPTER ONE

The Elysium Towers, Kent, 1812

She was not mad. Was she?

Angelica stared through the wavy glass at the courtyard below her tower room, deserted in the autumn sunshine. She tried to remember how long she'd been at the asylum, but memory was tricky here, as distorted as her reflection in the thick windowpane. Had it been months, or years?

Gerard would never have permitted his brother to treat her like this; to shut her up in this white-walled cell in a kind of living death. But Gerard himself was dead now, and Roger, as his executor, held all the power.

Roger had never liked her, or trusted her. He thought Gerard was somehow under her spell, that she had transformed her husband into a perverse creature with unnatural appetites. Roger was a fool. His brother's tastes had never altered. It was Gerard who led Angelica into a world of pleasure and pain that left her missing him with a desperate longing when he died, and abandoned her to his brother's not-so-tender mercies. And once Roger had realized that Gerard had left her his entire estate, he decided to take it for himself, regardless of his brother's will.

At first, Angelica had tried to be generous—assisting Roger and his wife with their bills, paying for their son's schooling. But it was never enough for Roger—he wanted it all. The only way that could happen was to have Angelica declared incompetent, and all her financial affairs placed in his greedy and undeserving hands. Gerard had never had any illusions about his brother, but even Gerard had not foreseen just how far Roger would go to achieve his ends.

A key scraped in the lock. Angelica tensed. The warders were off their schedule. Normally she was left alone in the afternoon, until supper and then bed. The door swung inward. Angelica blinked, dazzled by the sunshine flooding in from the hall that turned her visitor's hair into a fiery nimbus. Perhaps she really was mad, after all.

"Lady Saxon?"

He stood on the threshold like an avenging angel, sent from on high to assist her. Was

deliverance at hand? She had almost worn out her knees praying for help. No wings, though, and no flaming sword. He was merely a tall man with a shock of red hair.

"Is your name Angelica, Lady Saxon?" His voice held a touch of gravel, and a note of command that weakened her knees.

She nodded. He moved into the shadows and Angelica could finally make out his features—well-arched brows, an aquiline nose and wide, thin-lipped mouth. His eyes were dark blue, deep-set and full of intelligence.

Angelica finally found her voice. "You must be new."

"I'm Thor Ericson. Mrs. Pringle sent me. I'm here to help you."

"Help me to what?"

"Escape."

Angelica blinked. If this was some kind of bizarre dream, then she didn't want to wake up. "How?"

Mr. Ericson's grin transformed an attractive countenance into something beautiful. His eyes brightened and his white teeth flashed. Angelica was transfixed. He was so gloriously alive.

"You'll have to give me a moment to figure that out."

He strode over to the window and threw open the latch. Then he grabbed one of the iron bars and grimaced, before peering through them to look at the ground four stories below.

"They really have you tucked away, haven't they?" He scanned the room. "Is there another window?"

Angelica nodded, and pointed to a curtain on the far wall. Mr. Ericson pulled it away to reveal the small window which looked blankly onto a brick wall.

"No bars."

"Because there's a wall."

"And a space."

"I beg your pardon?"

"There is actually a space between this window and the opposite wall, approximately three feet wide. I think you could fit."

Angelica stared at him. "I'm beginning to think that you are the one who is mad!"

"Not mad, just extremely clever. I have to leave now, but I will be back before dawn. Look out that window and you'll see me." He lifted her chin with a finger. "Will you be ready?"

His touch, as slight as a butterfly, made her shiver.

"Yes."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

Mr. Ericson smiled again, and strode to the door. "Oh, and you'll need this." He unhooked a coil of thin rope from his waist and tossed it on the floor. "Do you know how to tie a knot?"

Angelica met his steady gaze, her own puzzled. What on earth was he talking about?

"A knot, Lady Saxon." He sounded impatient. "Do you know how to tie a knot, or a hitch in this case, sufficiently strong enough to bear your weight?"

Angelica shook her head.

"I'll show you. It's not difficult." But when Mr. Ericson played out a length of rope from the coil and tied it quickly into a complex knot, she couldn't grasp his instructions. Her mind felt woolly.

"I can't do it. I don't understand how you are tying it."

He inhaled briefly. "All right. Look, I'll tie it again."

She watched him, concentrating as hard as she could. And then she tried it, several times, until she could tie the rope to his satisfaction.

"Good. Now, you'll have to anchor the rope to something in the room that can support your weight. The only thing I can see is the iron bars on the other window. Luckily, this rope is long enough to pass across the room and down to the ground."

"How did you know how long the rope should be?"

"I took a rough measurement of the house and added extra for unforeseen circumstances. I have to leave now. Can you manage this for tomorrow? Be sure."

She nodded.

"Very well. Get a good night's sleep. I'll be back before at dawn." He opened the door and listened for a moment, then slipped through it quietly.

Angelica covered her mouth with trembling fingers. Had she really had a visitor? Or had she finally lost her wits? Her room was once again still and silent and lonely. Only the rope remained, coiled on the floor like a cobra, and just as dangerous. She wondered, for one terrible moment, if the rest of the world still existed.

She considered Mr. Ericson with his cool air of decision. No, he was real. Her physical

awareness of him was too visceral to be the result of her imagination. An angel of fire, who promised her release from her prison, the physical one, at least. The invisible bars which enclosed her remained unassailable and inflexible. Gerard had seen to that.

* * * * *

Thor slunk along the corridor, the soles of his boots sliding on the highly polished floor. The main stairs loomed ahead. If he could just reach them without being seen, he had a chance of making it out the asylum undetected. He pulled off the warder's jacket as he hurried down the corridor and tucked it inside the pack slung over his back. He should hold on to it, in case things went badly tomorrow, and he needed to visit again. Thor smoothed his hair and assumed an expression of hauteur. If he looked like he belonged here, perhaps he could escape the asylum unchallenged.

The stairs, like the corridor, were deserted. Oliver's contact had provided him with the uniform and also the staff schedule. Thor checked his timepiece. He had only a few minutes until they finished their tea and were back on duty once more.

Thor gained the ground floor. The main doors lay just a few feet away. He heard the whisper of approaching feet and sped ahead. He was almost there when a burly man dressed as a warder hailed him.

"May I help you, sir?"

Thor froze. He would have to brazen it out. "I don't require any assistance. I was here to see my client, Lady Saxon."

The warder's eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Her ladyship don't see nobody but her brother-in-law. And you ain't him. I don't know you."

Thor raised a brow and affected the voice of a London swell. "My dear fellow, how should you? Mr. Saxon just engaged me last week." He nodded and turned back to the door, willing himself not to run and raise even more suspicion. Thor lifted the latch. He heard a step behind him.

"Jones! Mrs. Scrope needs you. On the double, man."

The steps receded, and Thor eased through the door. He pulled out his handkerchief to wipe his brow as he ran down the stone steps and cut across the graveled drive to the line of trees

growing along the edge. He kept in the shade as he ran along the drive. With luck, no one would see his hurried exit, at least no one who would be believed, anyway. He gained the gates standing open at the end of the drive. His horse was tied to a tree several feet away.

Thor threw himself into the saddle and urged his horse onto the road. He would return to the inn and stay out of sight. He cursed Warder Jones. He didn't want anyone connecting him with Lady Saxon's disappearance. Too late to worry about that now.

The thought of that lady made him frown. Thor didn't know what he'd been expecting. Some gaunt wraith of a woman, perhaps, with crazed eyes and hair like a bird's nest. Instead, Angelica Saxon was a Fragonard portrait brought to life. Delicate and appealing, with a sweet, soft face and luminous violet eyes. She was exquisite. Too thin, of course. Her gown of coarse gray wool was ill-fitting, dwarfing her figure.

The way she'd stared at him, like he was some visitation from another world. Though, perhaps to Lady Saxon, Thor was just that. Hard to say how living in such a place could affect one, and she had been there for two years. It would be remarkable if she wasn't mad in truth. That wasn't his problem, however, as long as she could convince a judge of her sanity, if the legality of their marriage was questioned.

Their marriage. Thor hadn't actually considered the lady in terms of a flesh and blood presence. His marriage was a necessary convenience, to allow him to pursue his work. The shadowy figure of his new wife had suddenly gained an undeniably attractive presence. Perhaps the marriage bed wouldn't be that much of a hardship, after all.

The inn Thor selected was just outside a small village, some five miles from the asylum. The Elysium Towers was a private institution, used by the wealthy and well-connected in society to hide away those degenerate and insane family members who would otherwise prove an embarrassment, or in Lady Saxon's case, a hindrance. According to Mrs. Pringle, it was her brother-in-law, Roger Saxon, who was responsible for her incarceration. He wanted the lady's fortune, so away to the Towers went the lady. Saxon must have a doctor in his pocket to sign away the lady's freedom and certify her insanity.

Thor was no expert, but Lady Saxon didn't seem like a madwoman. Wary, yes, and a little confused, but not a lunatic. The sooner she was away from that wretched place, the better. He'd find her a nice house in the country, if her own house wasn't available due to Mr. Saxon's encroaching presence. He'd hire a nurse and a companion, and a cook to feed her up and put

some meat on those fragile bones.

Lady Saxon would be safe and cared for, and Thor could leave for Egypt as soon as possible. She wouldn't want him to hang around. It was a marriage of convenience, after all, and staying in England when he longed to get back to work in Egypt would be terribly inconvenient, no matter how beautiful his new wife might be. He hoped Angelica would never feel she'd made a bad bargain. If she wanted a real husband, one to share her life with, she was doomed to disappointment. He had given his heart to Egypt years ago, and there was no room in it for another mistress.

He supposed he should consummate the marriage, just to make sure everything was neat and tidy from a legal standpoint. Thor imagined those violet eyes as he drove into her. Would she moan and twine her legs around his waist while he pleased her, or lie flat on her back and think of England? One never knew with aristocratic women. Some were cold as ice and others were hot as Hades. He would be gentle, of course, as he unlaced her stays and pulled off her chemise.

"Beg pardon, sir, do you want me to take your horse?"

"What? Oh, yes, of course." Thor jerked back to reality, from the fantasy wedding night he'd been envisioning. He climbed from the saddle, and adjusted his stiffening cock. What if she really was mad? Did that make him sick, that he wanted to lie with her, regardless?

He shook off his thoughts and walked into the coffee room, where he ordered a pint, and drank it straight down. Rescuing damsels in distress was thirsty work.

* * * * *

After Mr. Ericson left, Angelica spent the rest of the day in a state of agitation. He wanted her to tie the rope to the bars and then lower it out the window, before climbing down the rope herself. It was just possible that Mr. Ericson was the crazy one. Her room was four stories off the ground. What if she slipped? Or fell? She'd kill herself.

Angelica sighed and rubbed the back of her neck, stiff with tension and indecision. Were the risks worse than the living death she was subjected to in the Towers? If there was a chance of escape, an opportunity to seize the future and regain her freedom, it was surely worth the gamble. Angelica was watched too closely to allow her to escape in more conventional manner

from what was essentially a prison.

The Elysium Towers was a misnomer of tragic proportion. It had been a home at one time, though it was hard to imagine the family that might have lived there. From the high narrow windows to the crenelated roof line, it reeked of Gothic. The facade was grim, built of dark stone. The towers set at each corner and surmounted with a tiled cupola were gruesome, not whimsical. The grounds were bare of ornamentation, surrounded by an iron fence with tall palings and forbidding gates.

Inside, the floors on the ground floor were stone and marble, echoing with footsteps and cold beneath the feet. The ceilings were high, the rooms large and full of shadows, even in the daylight. It was not a place conducive to a feeling of well-being, let alone to the fragile mind of a mental patient.

The Towers was administered by Dr. Garrison, a thin elderly man with gray whiskers and the mournful mien of an undertaker. Angelica met with the doctor once a month. He would take her pulse, listen to her heart and check her tonsils. Why the latter, she was never sure. He would ask if she was eating and sleeping well. She used to ask when she could go home, but stopped once it became clear that Roger and Dr. Garrison never meant for that happen. She was trapped, an insect caught in amber, stopped in time, while the world continued on without her.

There was a library, and Angelica was permitted to read, but only approved texts and only at approved hours. After the time was up, the book was removed and she would be alone in silence once again.

Some of the patients found their own way out by killing themselves. Word of that always got around. In her weakest moments, Angelica had let the thought cross her mind. But she was young yet, and life still held some sweetness, even curtailed and harried as she was here.

Dr. Garrison was assisted by his daughter, a grim-faced woman named Mrs. Scrope with pinched features and a soul of iron. At the beginning, before Angelica learned she was at the Towers to stay, she had not been compliant, as they termed it. Mrs. Scrope had administered the ice baths that left her choking and freezing, and thinking she was going to die. After that, she learned to pretend to accept her imprisonment, though they never called it that.

Now, against all odds, hope had come to her door, in the unlikely shape of her ginger-haired savior. The question was, did Angelica have the courage to take that leap, that very literal leap, out of a fourth story window? She must find the strength to climb down that rope and grab

her future by the throat before she died a small and quiet death, locked up here forever.

* * * * *

The tap room at the inn was crowded, as men trickled in to buy a pint once their working day ended. Thor found himself a quiet corner where he hoped his presence wouldn't garner too much comment. He took a sip of the local ale and went over the plan for tomorrow in his mind. It just might work. Then again, it might not. If he had known what was in store for him, would he have even replied to Mrs. Pringle's letter?

She wrote that she was an acquaintance of his cousin, Freya, and that she could be of assistance with his planned excavations in Egypt. She hadn't said how. Intrigued, he had gone to the tall, narrow house on Russell Square. A pert young woman answered the door and showed him directly upstairs to a room on the first floor overlooking the street. The dark man who turned from the window favored him with a silent, appraising stare. Who the devil was he?

A woman stood behind a large desk in the middle of the room. She smiled at him and offered her hand.

"Thank you for coming, Mr. Ericson. I am Minerva Pringle and this is Oliver."

Mrs. Pringle indicated a chair in front of the desk. She was a tall, striking woman, built on generous lines. Her red hair was several shades darker than his.

"Not at all, I received your note with some puzzlement. I am not sure how a marriage broker can help me find a sponsor."

"Can you not? Your cousin Freya replied to an advertisement I placed in the paper, and is now happily married."

"Yes, she wrote me. But how can you help me?"

Mrs. Pringle rearranged the papers on her desk. "I have a client, a woman of good birth, a widow, in fact, who has need of a husband. She is very wealthy. You need assistance to fund your work in Egypt. It might be an ideal match."

Thor sat back in his chair. He frowned. He didn't consider himself a marrying man. He was too immersed in his work to pay any attention to a wife.

"What I am proposing, Mr. Ericson, is a marriage of convenience. In return for her financial support, you will assist the lady out of a difficult situation."

"What kind of situation?"

"The lady in question was placed in an asylum by her brother-in-law, in order to gain control of his late brother's very wealthy estate. But she is not mad. She is a victim of a greedy and unscrupulous man, who thinks he is owed more than he received in his brother's will."

Thor rubbed his jaw. "It seems a very messy situation." He felt the typical male horror at the thought of any situation containing drama and women. Best not to get involved. "I don't think I am the man for this job."

Mrs. Pringle's eyes crinkled in amusement. "I am very sure that you are."

"Because I am desperate for funds?" His mouth twisted. "I am not a leech, madam."

Mrs. Pringle waved her hand. "I was not suggesting any such thing. A marriage of convenience is not uncommon. Her correspondence reveals a brave, intelligent woman in need of assistance. My research indicates that she married an older man when she was just seventeen. When her husband died, he left her his considerable fortune, which she is willing to share with you, on the condition that you help her to escape her present situation. She is not looking for romance, if that is what's worrying you. She is still a young woman, only twenty-four years of age. She has birth and a fortune. I don't see the difficulty."

Of course she didn't. Women always saw marriage as the solution to everything.

"I hadn't planned on marrying."

She looked amused. "Most men do not, though it often befalls them. If you do marry, and Lady Saxon re-enters society, think of the doors which will open for you. You will be introduced to men of wealth and learning, men who might also be interested in your work. I know for a fact that one of the directors of the late Sir Gerard Saxon's companies is also an influential member of the British Museum. All that you have worked for, all that you have dreamed lies just within your grasp. You have only to reach out your hand."

"A hand waving a marriage license."

Mrs. Pringle nodded. "Consider it a bargain, one of mutual assistance." She paused a moment while she rearranged the papers on her desk. Thor had the feeling she was weighing her words.

A knock sounded on the office door and the maid poked her head in. "Beg your pardon, madam, but Mr. Oliver is needed downstairs."

The dark man left his post by the window and slipped through the door without a sound.

It was rather unnerving. Finally, Mrs. Pringle looked up.

"Oliver has advised me to speak frankly, Mr. Ericson, so I will do just that. Although I am employed as a marriage broker, my real employer is the Crown. I work with a number of agents here and on the continent, with the object of providing the authorities with important information, gleaned from many sources."

Thor frowned, turning over this information in his mind. "You are an enquiry agent?"

"Of a sort. We are a group of loyal Englishmen, pledged to help drive Napoleon from power, and, most importantly, away from Britain's shores."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because we have reason to believe that our enemy is working in Alexandria to provide the French with information, ammunition and weapons. We mean to find out who he is, and put an end to his activities, by whatever means necessary."

"What is my role in this?"

"Under the cover of your scholarly researches, you can send me information about Mohammed Ali Pasha and his court. You will be issued an introduction to the pasha, and to a resident Englishman who has a place at court. We will also provide you with a contact in Alexandria, who will pass on certain information to you, which you will transmit to me here in London."

"It sounds dangerous."

"I won't lie to you, Mr. Ericson. If the pasha suspects you are providing us with tactical information, that you are a spy, things will go badly with you."

"I see."

"The particular operative we seek is a very dangerous man. We don't know how many lives have been lost because of his activities. We have to stop him. And we need you to help us do it."

"And Lady Saxon? What is her role in all this?"

"She has none, beyond the need for a husband. I haven't told her about the situation in Alexandria. There was no need. I really am a marriage broker. That's how I am able to function without being detected as an agent of the crown."

"And Oliver?"

"He assists me with the marriage brokerage, but he also runs the household and works for

the crown with me. He is invaluable."

"Are you married?"

"To Oliver? Gracious, no. He is my foster brother. We grew up together in Canada."

"He is a native?"

"His mother was Algonquian and his father was French. We were both adopted as children by a Mohawk tribe."

"How did you end up in London?"

"That is a long story. For today, we will confine ourselves to speaking of your trip to Egypt. Have I piqued your interest?"

"I am intrigued, yes, but mostly because I would do practically anything to return to Egypt and continue my research. But I am no spy, Mrs. Pringle. I don't know how much help I can be."

"Because you have a reason to be in Alexandria, you won't be under suspicion. This information gathering I need will not take much time. You will have plenty of opportunity to dig in the sand to your heart's content."

Thor took a deep breath. "Very well, I'll do it."

"Excellent. Of course, all this depends on you getting Lady Saxon out of the Elysium Towers, and convincing her to marry you. Once you are wed, we can make our plans and get you ready for Egypt."

He must be mad. Agreeing to act as a spy. Subtlety was not something he was known for. Quite the reverse in fact. What had Freya gotten him into? First a wedding and then a new career as a god-damned spy. Christ, he needed a drink. Or two.

"Well, Mr. Ericson, what do you say?"

Thor left fifteen minutes later, having agreed to the whole wild proposition. That damned woman was little better than a snake-oil salesman, though perhaps prettier. Still, helping a lunatic escape from an asylum was bound to be exciting. He cheered up a little. At the very least, he'd get an adventure out of this devil's bargain.