

The Marquis' Runaway Miss

By

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CHAPTER ONE

London, 1824

The door knocker on the house in the once-fashionable street near the Strand was wrapped in black crepe. Nicholas raised his hand and took a deep breath. Once the news of Lord Groveham's death reached him, he had traveled to town as quickly as possible, as his duty required. He hadn't asked for this responsibility, but it was his regardless. He would honor the memory of his father's old friend.

Nicholas let the knocker fall and the door opened. Groveham's butler greeted him by name.

"Good afternoon, Fulton, I am here to see Miss Jemima James. Is she in?"

"I believe Miss Jemima is in the morning room."

"Very good. I shall announce myself."

"Your pardon, my lord, but you mean to speak to her *alone*?"

Nicholas' brows rose. "You need not fear for her virtue. I shall be respectability's very self."

"Sir! No, it's not that, of course. Miss Jemima has been very upset by her grandfather's passing. Her spirits can be...that is to say..." Fulton stopped and shook his head. "You know your way of

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course, my lord."

Extraordinary. Was Fulton warning him about Miss James? The young woman was barely twenty. How much trouble could she possibly be? Nicholas continued down the hall to the morning room, where he found Miss Jemima James huddled in a wing chair by the fire, clutching a sodden handkerchief tightly in one small hand. The blue eyes she raised to him brimmed with tears. Nicholas had been prepared for her sorrow. He had not expected her to be so beautiful. A plain black gown enhanced her porcelain complexion and the chestnut hair she wore braided back from her finely-boned, elegant features.

"Thank you for receiving me, Miss James."

"I am afraid we have never met, sir."

"I am Colmere. Lord Groveham was a great friend of my father's. I came as soon as I heard of his passing."

She nodded, completely uninterested. It was not the response he usually received from pretty young women.

"I am very sorry for your loss, Miss James."

"Thank you, Lord Colmere. It was kind of you to call."

He hesitated, unwilling to cause her more pain. But there was no help for it. She hadn't asked him to sit down, but he did so anyway.

"I am afraid there is another reason for my visit. Did your grandfather ever speak of the provision he made for you in his will?"

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Miss James stared at him, as if she couldn't quite understand what he was saying.

"You are underage, Miss James, so he appointed a guardian to take care of you until you reach your majority."

She stiffened. "I do not require a guardian, sir. May I ask you to take your leave? I should like to be alone, to grieve for my grandfather."

He was trying to be kind, but it didn't come naturally. He was Nicholas Cole, the Marquis of Colmere. He didn't ask, he commanded. He tried again.

"This house is no longer your home."

She turned white.

"I am sorry, but by the terms of the entail, the house, the estate and everything else is now settled on your cousin, Mr. Francis James."

"Francis gets everything?"

"Everything except your own inheritance, which your grandfather wisely invested in the Funds. It will be held in trust and the income administered by your guardian."

Miss James jumped to her feet and paced in agitation across the room. "So I am to be turned out of the only home I have ever known and dumped on a stranger? Why can't I have my money now?"

"Your grandfather was at great pains to care for you. Your inheritance will be waiting when you are of legal age to claim it."

"And until then? I must live with some

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stranger? Who is this guardian anyway?"

Nicholas hesitated for a moment. "He knew your grandfather."

Jemima threw up her hands in exasperation. "Of course! Some doddering old friend of my grandfather's. I will be stuck in another household of fossils and relics, until I dry up myself. No, I won't have it!"

She picked up a vase from the table and threw it straight at the mantel, where it shattered into pieces.

Silence followed, broken only by the breath sobbing in her chest.

"That is quite enough of that behavior, Miss James. You will sit down, and you will listen. And that is all you will do."

Her stormy blue gaze met his. Her lips opened. Nicholas crossed the room to stand in front of her. He pressed a finger against those full pink lips. An electric thrill coursed through him. What was it about this girl?

"Be silent and sit down. Now."

Miss James dropped into a chair.

"That's better."

She wiped her eyes, and Nicholas eyed her with compassion. He would have to grant her some leeway, as young as she was, her family all dead. He knelt beside her chair and took her hand, which sat limply in his.

"Miss James, you will recover from this sorrow, I promise you. Your grandfather was

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elderly and ill; it was his time. But you have all your life ahead of you."

She nodded listlessly, her display of temper ended for the moment. "When must I leave?"

"We can leave right now, if you like. The servants can pack your clothes and your other belongings and send them on."

Jemima looked around the room, as if to memorize it. "I suppose there is no point in staying on. Are you to bring me to my new guardian?"

Nicholas opened his mouth to enlighten her, but changed his mind in order to avoid another display of temper. "Yes, if you would like me to."

"I would consider it a kindness."

That was better. She sounded more like the girl her grandfather had told him about—spirited, yes, but sweet and willing. A good girl, he had called her.

"I need a cloak and my reticule. Would you allow me a few moments?"

"Of course. Take as long as you need. I shall await you."

He helped her to stand. Jemima looked frail and small, standing there in her grandfather's parlor, with her world in ruins. He would help her, Nicholas vowed silently to himself. Whatever it took, he would help her. Perhaps her gratitude for his assistance would take the form of some pleasurable congress between the two of them. He quite looked forward to it.

#

Jemima rubbed her swollen eyes. Crying wasn't going to do her any good. Grandfather was dead and she was alone once more and about to be cast onto the charity of strangers. Her papa had died when she was just a babe, her mother a mere five years later. For so long, it had been just Jemima and Grandfather, alone in this great house. There had been a governess, but she had left years before to marry. She had loved her grandfather, in spite of his uncertain temper as his illness progressed. Their cozy chats and chess matches had dwindled to a wearying regime of pouring out medicine and feeding her grandfather the weak tea and gruel, which were all he would eat. The vast library had been her only solace in those last months. All those books belonged to Francis now. Her cousin was more interested in breeding horses than reading books, so it would all go to waste.

Jemima looked around the room that had been hers for over ten years. The paper was as faded as the carpet, but it was all familiar. Her books were stacked on the table beside her narrow bed, and tucked into shelves, and even piled on the floor. Her mother's music box sat on the windowsill. All remnants of a life that had disappeared overnight, to be replaced with a new and unknown existence.

If only her guardianship had passed to some fashionable couple, bent on making a stir in society and willing to drag Jemima along in their wake. Instead, Lord Colmere would convey her to

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some other elderly recluse and she would be immured forever, inhaling the scents of peppermint tea and lineament. It simply wasn't fair. Suppressing another sigh, Jemima pulled a valise from her wardrobe to pack a change of clothes. She removed the stack of magazines she had hidden inside the bag. She had first discovered the serialized romances in one of Grandfather's periodicals last year and had been reading them voraciously ever since. Should she pack them as well? They might prove a comfort in her new circumstances.

The copy on the top of the pile was dog-eared from her frequent re-readings. Ah, that one was her favorite: *The Sensational Adventures of Lady Kalinda*. She picked it up and leafed through to the story. Lady Kalinda had finally found love with her wicked sheik in the last issue and lived happily ever after in his desert tent. Jemima sighed. If only a swarthy sheik, wealthy beyond imagination, would swoop into Grandfather's house and carry her away. If wishes were horses. Her gaze strayed to an item on the society page opposite. A short article described the amorous exploits of the infamous Lord C - - m - re. After breaking any number of hearts, he had fled the fashionable world for a stay at his castle in Sussex. His behavior was condemned by the writer as both scandalous and heartless.

Jemima traced out the letters of the man's names. Lord C - - m - re. *Colmere!* Jemima

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dropped the newspaper in shock. The man was a rake and a scoundrel. How dare he criticize Jemima's behavior, when his own was so appalling? Men! They always had the best of both worlds. And, yet, she had no choice but to go with him. There was nothing left for her here.

Finally, Jemima pulled her cloak from the wardrobe and picked up her valise and reticule. Time to say goodbye. As for Lord Colmere and her unknown guardian, she would bide her time and pick her battles. She would not surrender just yet.

Lord Colmere was as good as his word, awaiting her return at the bottom of the staircase. He held out his arm with grave courtesy as he ushered her out the door and into her new life. His lordship drove a high-perch phaeton, painted dark blue with silver accents, and drawn by a beautiful pair of matched gray horses. Jemima didn't know much about the fashionable world, but Colmere's beautiful clothes and air of confidence marked him as a member of that rarefied social circle. A circle which she had never been given a chance to participate in. He helped her up and his tiger, a young lad of no more than ten, left the horses' heads to leap up behind them. Yes, his lordship seemed to be quite the beau. She wanted to be scornful, unhappy as she was, but the only thing she felt was envy and the smallest slice of awe. So this is what a rake looked like.

Colmere hadn't told her the name of her new

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guardian, or even his address. Was she a fool for trusting him, now that she knew exactly what kind of a man he was? But he was known to Grandfather's butler, who had a stodgy sense of decorum. Lord Colmere must be whom he seemed. Jemima glanced at him as he handled the ribbons of the phaeton with ease while he negotiated the crowded streets beyond her grandfather's house. He drove well, his long fingers in their gloves of York tan holding the reins lightly. His hands must be strong, but they were also gentle with his high-bred horses' delicate mouths. The thought made her shiver. What would those hands feel like on her? Would he be as gentle with her, as he ordered her into his bed and spread her wide for his pleasure?

Goodness, what was she thinking? Obviously, she had read too many of her cherished serials, where decadent rakes forced their attentions on wilting maidens. She ought not to be thinking of his lordship in this improper fashion. She ought not to have these thoughts at all. Furthermore, she had never wilted in her life, nor did she intend to. She was made of stronger stuff. Lord Colmere was handsome and elegant, but he was a bad man and not for her.

Jemima stifled a sigh. The bad man turned onto a quiet street in Mayfair lined with large, beautiful houses and pulled up in front of an imposing mansion. This must be her guardian's home. She swallowed and tried to order her

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nervous thoughts. What would her guardian be like?

#

The tiger leaped down to take the reins from his lordship and Jemima waited until Lord Colmere walked around the phaeton to assist her down from the high seat. The front door was painted black, its surface as glossy as a mirror. It swung open silently as they walked up the steps.

"Welcome home, my lord."

Jemima gasped and turned her head to see Colmere watching her, a faint smile etching his features, as sculptured as a Greek statue.

How was this possible? He couldn't...

"Your house?"

He sketched a small, graceful bow.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are my new guardian?" she demanded.

"I am indeed. And you will keep your pretty little mouth shut until we are alone together. Understood?"

This last word was uttered in a clipped, authoritative voice. Jemima instinctively stepped back, but Colmere caught her arm in a grip of steel and pushed her into the house. The doors closed behind her with a faint click.

"We'll have tea in my study, Farnsworth," Lord Colmere ordered over his shoulder as he hustled Jemima down a wide, paneled hall hung with portraits.

"Very good, sir."

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He thrust her inside the room and closed the door, leaning against it and regarding her thoughtfully.

"Did your grandfather ever spank you, Miss James?"

"No, of course not."

"He should have. I believe that I will remedy his mistake right now."

"What are you talking about?"

He pointed to the chaise near the fireplace. "Go and bend over the arm of the chaise."

Jemima stared at him, uncomprehending. "Why?"

"My dear ward, because I said so. That is reason enough for you."

Jemima firmed her lips in a mutinous line. "I won't do it."

"Won't you?"

She shook her head.

Lord Colmere smiled. It wasn't a pleasant sight. His smile was cool, mocking her. "My dear Miss James, I'm afraid I must insist."

He took her trembling hand in his large one and dragged her across the carpet to the chaise. He pushed her over the arm, pressing down on her back until her face and upper arms rested on the seat. She tried to struggle, but his strength held her immobile. Then he pushed up her skirts with brisk efficiency and smacked her hard, right on her bare bottom.

She shrieked in outrage and tried to buck him

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off.

"You are a headstrong miss, aren't you? I fear that attitude will not do you any good here."

And then her new guardian proceeded to spank her until her cheeks bloomed with raw heat. *Smack!* She could feel each individual finger as his large hand slapped her bottom.

"I won't make you count, this time. Feeling more obedient yet?" His comments were delivered almost casually, as he continued to blister her bottom.

"Stop it," she pleaded, her voice very small and scared.

Smack!

"Why should I? I am quite enjoying seeing you bared for your punishment."

"Because I'm sorry."

He stopped. "Are you?"

"Yes."

His hand now soothed where it had spanked, stroking her bare skin, down the curve of her buttock and stopping just outside the crease between her cheeks.

"What are you sorry for?"

"I was pert and rude and...and...ungrateful. I'm sorry, sir."

Lord Colmere's hand stilled. Then, incredibly, he pressed a soft kiss on her flaming bottom and pulled down her skirt. He helped her up and sat down on the chaise, pulling her down on his knees. Jemima winced at the pressure on her

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bottom, and he smiled knowingly.

"That was a lovely apology. You've given me hope that your behavior can be amended." He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket and dried her eyes. "You look very pretty, all tear-stained from your spanking. I must admit I enjoyed it very much." He pushed her gently from his lap and stood up. Farnsworth will show you to your room. I will see you at dinner."

She was dismissed. Jemima left the study, her bottom throbbing. He had spanked her!

#

Nicholas poured himself a brandy and slumped in his chair. He had been a hair's breadth away from spreading his little ward's thighs and claiming her, right there on the chaise. The satin sensation of her skin, her throaty little cries, and her sweet apology had all aroused him to a fever pitch. He closed his eyes. He wasn't used to waiting for what he wanted. Nicholas had been raised in wealth and privilege and the world was his for the taking. The world of lust and sensation, anyway. He'd never met a woman who refused him, whether because of his rank, his money or his looks. He hadn't even cared which one landed a willing woman in his bed. And there had been so many.

Though none quite like Jemima. Her beautiful body housed a passionate spirit, a combination that fired his blood. He wanted to take her, so hard and so deep that he forgot everything else, until

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their coupling was the only thing that mattered in a tired, wicked world.

Christ, he was getting maudlin. Nicholas blamed the brandy and poured himself another glass. There was something about Jemima that reminded him of earlier days, happier days, when he had been surrounded by family, by love. The memory of that pain sliced through him like a jagged shard of glass. He was just thirteen when a sudden fever claimed his sister and the new baby his mother had just given birth to. A little boy. There hadn't even been time to give him a name. His mother was next, so worn out from the difficult birth that she slipped away in the night while Nicholas held her hand, huddled by the side of the bed. He had awoken to find her gone, her thin hand cold in his.

His father never recovered. He took to drinking and gaming, anything to extinguish the pain. He had died a year later from a fall while riding home drunk from a brothel. Nicholas had truly been alone then. He completed his education and returned to London, where he followed the same path as his father, trying to drown his pain in sensation. It only worked for a little while. Then Nicholas would wake, alone in the night, even if he had a willing woman in his bed. His heart was never touched, because he wouldn't let it. He would never risk the pain of loss again.

A soft knock preceded the appearance of his butler. "Lord Lucian Beaufort, my lord."

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"Lucifer! I thought you were in Paris!"

The tall man with dark gold hair and sleepy green eyes who stood on the threshold shook his head. "I was summoned home by my father. Apparently he needs to speak to me at the earliest opportunity."

"Again?"

Lucian settled himself in an armchair and rubbed the back of his neck. "I know. We have these little conferences every six months. He dresses me down over my latest indiscretion and threatens to stop my allowance. Then he tells me I should settle down with a wife and a pack of children so he can see them before he dies. I agree to everything and it's smooth sailing until the next time."

Nicholas grinned. "I don't suppose you ever mention to your father that you intend to ignore everything he says?"

"You wound me, old friend. I never ignore anything that relates to money."

Nicholas rose to pour himself another brandy and offer one to his friend.

"So what did your father say this time?"

Lucian accepted the glass. "I don't know, Nicky. I haven't seen him yet."

Nicholas laughed.

"You know I can't see him until I've had too much to drink, lost some money at the tables, and spent the rest of the night whoring."

"I'm sorry I'd forgotten."

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"Never mind, old man. You can make it up to me. I've heard of the most delightful establishment in St. James. It's run by an associate of Mrs. Abbot."

"I'm not in the mood to spank whores this evening."

Lucian waved a graceful hand. "No, this is something new. I think you'll love it."

"Sorry, Lucifer, I already have plans."

"Plans? What kind of plans could be more vital than mine?"

Nicholas set down his glass. "I'm having dinner with my new ward."

Lucian regarded him in stunned silence for a moment. "What kind of idiot would give someone like you the custody of an impressionable child?"

"Not a child, a beautiful young woman."

"Nicky, you'll have to invite me for dinner."

"When pigs fly, my dear Lucifer. You come by that nickname honestly. No woman in London is safe around you."

"Thank you, Nicky. You relieve me. I feared I might be losing my touch."

"Not in this lifetime."

#

Jemima regarded the beautiful chamber she'd been given with resentment. That odious man, her new guardian? *Ha!* Jemima's heart burned with bitterness. Her grandfather must have been losing his mind when he made his will. Lord Colmere had forced his way into her life, but it stopped

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there. He had laid his hand on her, bared her bottom, and spanked her! How had he dared lay a finger on her? She would not put up with this a moment longer. She picked up her reticule, her valise, and cloak. She was leaving.

Jemima opened the door and peered cautiously into the hall. Everything was quiet. The thick walls of Colmere House shut out even the ever-present noise of a London afternoon. She eased through the door, closed it behind her, and cautiously approached the head of the stairs. Still no one in sight. She descended the stairs, peeking past their curve to see a bored-looking footman standing by the front door. Curse it. What could she do now?

She heard a voice and dared a glance over the banister. A young maid crossed the hall to speak to the footman. He nodded and followed her until he was out of sight. This might be her only chance. She crept down the stairs. The hall below was empty. She stole across the polished marble floor. The imposing front door loomed ahead. Was it locked? She lifted the latch and turned the handle. The door opened and Jemima breathed a quick prayer of thanks. She opened it only wide enough to slip through and then she was down the stairs and onto the street beyond.

The September sun kissed her face with warmth as she hurried away from the house. Now to disappear, so her wretched guardian could never find her. Jemima turned the corner and the streets

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of London swallowed her.