

ALL A WOMAN WANTS

LOVE AND LAUGHTER SERIES

Patricia Rice



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As the study door closed behind her maid, Beatrice Cavendish shut her eyes, and a single tear trickled down her cheek. She'd wept until she couldn't weep anymore these past months after her father's death, and again with Nanny's passing last week. She had few tears left in her, and at the moment, they were all for herself.

She'd never thought of herself as a selfish person.

Pulling the embroidered pillow from behind her back, she punched it into shape again. She'd made this for her father the Christmas before last, and he'd sworn she was the best daughter who'd ever lived. He'd died only a few weeks before this past Christmas. She'd never had a chance to give him the matching footstool she'd worked on all year. She'd thought her many gifts and accomplishments were important to him, and that was all that mattered in her world.

Stupid her. The cold, cruel facts of life faced her now. No one had ever pointed out to her that she was an ignorant, overindulged spinster, beyond a prayer of changing. Of course, who was there to point out such things? No one. Her father had liked her just the way she was, so it simply hadn't occurred to her that she was singularly useless.

Like every little girl, she had once entertained passing fancies of being beautiful and desirable, but the fact was, she was twenty-eight years old, tall and ungainly, without hopes of a suitor. She'd never been introduced to society, never been taught the social graces necessary for that introduction.

Her knowledge of the outside world came from London fashion magazines and her father's newssheets. Nanny Marrow had written letters from all the places she'd stayed.

Nanny Marrow! Grief washed over Bea at the loss of the one friend who had taught her far more of the world than the alphabet. It had been only a year since Nanny had retired in the village and only a week since the lung inflammation took her. The hole in Bea created by her loss kept growing wider.

Tapping her quill pen against the desk, Bea gazed out on the lawn. If only she could find a book that would teach her how to manage an estate, then she might learn more about her father's account books and figure out what was wrong. They'd never had debt collectors at the door when her father was alive. There must be something she wasn't doing right.

She pulled out the bank letter again, unfolded it for the forty-ninth time since its arrival. The sum mentioned was so enormous, she couldn't fathom it. Her household accounts for the year didn't equal a twentieth of this amount, and she couldn't pay *them*.

If she sold every piece of silver and bit of furniture in the house, she couldn't pay this bill. She had searched her father's desk, written to every bank and solicitor represented by crumbling documents dating back decades, with no success. Her father had obviously thought he'd live forever. The estate wasn't entailed, and aside from James's distant connection, her father had no living relatives outside herself, which was the sole reason she'd inherited without question.

Nervously smoothing the heavy fabric of her mourning gown, Beatrice desperately tried to think of another solution. She had tenants. She ought to have income. Surely she owned crops and sheep. Mr. Overton would know. She would have to eat crow and call on him.

No, she had to do this on her own. Life was too uncertain. Even if Mr. Overton got over his pique, he would never willingly teach her to run the estate. He was just like Papa, thinking women were incapable of more than tatting and sewing. And if she objected to his methods, he'd only quit and walk away again, and she'd be right back where she started. Every path she took brought her to the same conclusion.

A man would never believe she could manage an estate on her own.

Heaven only knew, *she* didn't know if she could manage an estate on her own.

Pacing the room, her full skirt rustling as it brushed against the heavy furniture, she prayed for a miracle. She stopped to search her father's shelves for the millionth time, hoping for some inspiration, but most of the books dated back to the turn of the century. Things had changed since then.

Her father hadn't.

Wearily, she pulled out a volume on agricultural production and attempted to make head or tails of the lengthy lists of which counties produced which crops and when, but it was meaningless to her. She felt as if she'd been stranded in a foreign country with no coins and no means of speaking the language.

What she needed was someone to teach her by doing, as men were taught. Of course, that meant she would require a knowledgeable man who was not only willing to teach her, but also believed she was teachable.

Better to ask for a miracle.

The pounding of the door knocker resounded so loudly in the hall, she jumped and almost dropped the book. No one in the village knocked so forcefully.

Fear clenched her insides as she waited for the servants to answer the door. A bill collector? She should have instructed the servants to say she wasn't at home.

James was in the privy. Mary was helping Jemmie chase the escaped hounds. Had the dogs caused some dire accident in the lane that had caused an emergency?

The knocker rapped again, with a slamming authority that would not be denied.

Shelving the book with a shaking hand, Beatrice smoothed her skirts again. Just the angry sound of the knocker immobilized her.

She had to grow a backbone.

When it became obvious that no one would answer, she clenched her teeth and swept out of the study as if she were master of all she surveyed.

She *was* master of all she surveyed. That was the problem. She was an incompetent master.

After fumbling with the massive door bolt, she cautiously swung the huge door open on the gloomy, threatening day. Amazingly, a dark green waistcoat and rumped white neckcloth blocked her usual view of the lawn.

Being as large as she was, she didn't think she'd ever looked a man in the waistcoat before. Gaping, she tilted her head back. Green eyes narrowing in grim resignation studied her as if she were the last thing on this earth that the visitor wanted to see. A lock of golden brown hair fell appealingly over a wide, furrowed brow, and, without thinking, Beatrice took a step backward.

A whimper extracted her from a survey of clenched lips and square jaw, and her gaze dropped to the bundle the man held. A growing wet spot on the green waistcoat and a glimpse of wispy golden curls wrapped in a man's short box coat so startled her, she almost closed the door in their faces. Rain began to pour.

With a whoop and a burst of energy, a small muddy form bolted past her skirts, skidded on the Oriental rug, and raced for the stairs. Tousled curls above a blue velvet coat disappeared around the landing.

"Excuse me, madam." The stunning giant dumped his burden into Bea's arms, shoved the door open, and, taking the steps two at a time, raced up the stairs after his small charge, leaving damp footsteps in his path.

Utterly distracted, Beatrice gazed down at the bundle she held, into beatific blue eyes in a cherub's face, and almost forgot the savages invading her upper story.

She'd never held a baby before.

They stared at each other raptly. The infant popped a thumb into her rosebud mouth, but her gaze never left Bea's. Caught in the study of tiny fingers and chubby cheeks above a lace-bedecked

smock, Bea didn't register the dampness spreading across her bodice until shouts overhead intruded upon her reverie.

A man's roar followed by a childish scream of outrage abruptly brought her head up, and she grimaced as moisture sank through the fabric of her bodice and her chemise and chilled her skin. Heavy boots pounded down the stairs, coming into view first, followed by dirt-streaked trousers over massive... thighs. Bea gulped, flushed, and tried to look away.

It had never occurred to her to look at a man's... limbs... before.

Narrow hips, a wide chest beneath an unfastened waistcoat and twisted neckcloth, and a squirming, shrieking toddler clasped under one masculine arm appeared next. The look of mixed resignation and rage on broad, chiseled features should have sent her fleeing. Instead, curiosity compelled her to remain, clinging to the smelly, sopping child in her arms.

If she did not mistake, a stranger and two children had just arrived on her doorstep on the brink of a rainstorm. In novels, did it not tend to be an abandoned mistress arriving with babes in arms during a howling snowstorm?

"I'm here to speak with Miss Cavendish," the man said peremptorily, heaving the toddler over his shoulder. The boy loosed his bandaged arm from its sling and tried to climb down the man's back, but his captor's big hands firmly wrapped around small ankles, preventing escape.

Dressed as she was, he probably thought she was the housekeeper. She could say Miss Cavendish wasn't at home and send this terrifying apparition away.

She could tell from his stance that he was entirely too certain of himself. His restless energy permeated the room and would stampede right over her if she admitted to her existence. His massive size reduced her elegant foyer to the size of the closet. But he had the most fascinating green eyes, and a bronzed, windswept look that no gentleman crossing these portals had ever possessed...

She could almost feel the hurricane winds of change sweeping through her cloistered walls.

She didn't have a clue as to who he could be.

"My lady!" an effeminate male voice squeaked from the depths of the interior. "Shall I show this motley lot to the door?"

Bea closed her eyes and sighed as James finally appeared.

The stranger's eyes narrowed again as her bewigged cousin, in a scarlet coat and gold buttons, hovered behind her. A growling terrier would offer more protection.

Donning her haughtiest demeanor, Beatrice raised her eyebrows in the stranger's direction. "I am Miss Cavendish, sir. I believe you have mistaken me for someone else."

Expressively, she held out the child for him to retrieve.

He glowered at her, glowered at her cousin, and holding the squirming boy firmly beneath one muscular arm, refused to take the babe. "I've been told you can tell me of Nanny Marrow."

The bottom dropped out of Beatrice's heart at this mention of her lifelong friend.

"Nanny Marrow passed away last week." To hide a fresh spurt of tears, she swung on her heels and marched into the formal parlor.

Two

Mac stared after the supercilious Englishwoman and tried to comprehend her devastating announcement. Nanny Marrow could not possibly be dead. Fate couldn't be so cruel.

How in the *devil* would he return to London without someone reliable to hide Marilee's children?

He stalked after Miss Cavendish, disregarding the bewigged footman who was holding out his hands in a useless effort to stay him.

"What do you mean, Nanny Marrow has *passed away*?" he roared.

He shouldn't roar. He should conquer his temper, his impatience, his frustration. He should grovel politely, and question carefully.

But dealing with two holy terrors beyond his experience had compounded the shock of Marilee's death and his fury at her husband. He desperately needed answers, right now.

In his haste to follow Miss Cavendish, he nearly tripped over an embroidered ottoman.

The parlor was stuffed with man-sized sofas covered in delicately tatted doilies, massive tables overflowing with fragile figurines, feathery ferns in heavy brass containers, and other rickety contradictions that would have spun his head off had he not fixed his gaze on the tall, curvaceous female maneuvering the maze with ease, apparently retreating to the support of an enormous piano.

The woman was a target he could sight without complaint. As she swung around, his gaze dropped appreciatively to the splendid bosom against which his niece rested. A man could fill his hands gladly with a woman like that.

He should have had a damned wench before absconding from London. In another minute, he'd be salivating over a haughty aristocrat like a green lad.

"Nanny Marrow is dead?" he clarified. He didn't dare let loose the squirming tot beneath his arm, despite a string of epithets spilling from the brat's dirty mouth. Fortunately, the boy's pronunciation was poor and the words muffled.

"She was. . . quite old," the lady said stiffly, looking longingly at the piano.

Was he so far beneath her damned dignity that she couldn't *look* at him? Mac drove his free hand through his rumpled hair. "Why the hell didn't that pompous excuse for an innkeeper tell me

that?"

She shot him an accusing look for his language, smothered a quiet exclamation, and, balancing the babe in one arm, caught a kitten in midleap before it tumbled an army of porcelain shepherdesses. With expertise, she flipped the kitten onto an afghan draped over a sofa, where the animal began contentedly shredding the wool.

Beneath Mac's arm, Percy quit cursing and watched the maneuver in apparent awe. Taking advantage of his new interest, Mac flung the boy onto the sofa with the cat.

"Mr. Digby?" the woman asked in dismay. "Mr. Digby sent you?"

He had to concentrate on priorities. Figuring the suspicious footman was still within earshot, he turned and caught him in the doorway. "The babe needs dry cloths. See if the maids can find some."

The fop's look of interest froze. "Miss Cavendish?"

"I'm sure Mary can help," she answered absently, looking down at the growing stain on her black bodice.

"My lady," the man insisted, "it would not be proper—"

The woman shot the red-coated dandy a look that was nearly as impatient and frustrated as Mac's own, and Mac hid a grin of appreciation.

"If Mr. Digby sent him, he can't be too dangerous, and the child is *wet*. Send Mary in here with the cloths. And has Dolly polished the silverware yet?"

The insolent footman drew himself up with hauteur. "Polishing silver is a senseless task. Who could possibly notice?" With that pointed dig, he sashayed out.

"If he wasn't always right, I'd hide him in a closet."

Diverted by the lady's sigh of exasperation, Mac swung back in time to stop Percy from climbing over the sofa back in search of the cat.

"*My kitty!*" the boy screamed, fighting for release as Mac lifted him by his coat and removed him from the upholstery.

"Miss Cavendish's kitty," Mac informed him firmly. "You may have one once we're on our way home."

"Don' wanna go home," the boy whined.

Miss Cavendish raised her lovely cinnamon eyebrows, forcing Mac to look past the hideous onyx brooch on her delectable bosom and acknowledge the intelligence in her clear, almond-shaped eyes. She'd braided her reddish brown hair in polished rope circles over her ears, but stray wisps escaped to shiver about her slender throat.

He wondered if her skin tasted as creamy as it looked, and coughed to clear his throat. He

couldn't remember ever having such a thought about a proper lady. Normally, their stiff manners were as off-putting as their overabundance of petticoats.

How the devil would he explain his predicament without revealing who the children were? Once his drunken brother-in-law recovered from his stupor, he would have men roaring across the countryside in pursuit of his stolen children.

"Umm, the children's mother died, and they were a trifle. . . unhappy. . . until I arrived," Mac contrived uneasily. "I'd hoped to hire Nanny Marrow to look after them. When I found her house boarded up, I inquired at the inn, but they said the rooms were under renovation, and I should inquire here."

A maid appeared carrying a stack of dry cloths, followed by the bewigged footman. The tight-lipped lady surrendered Pamela to the maid. Judging by the lady's smile lines, and a glimpse of dimple when she handed over the chirruping baby, Mac decided her rosy lips didn't normally frown. It was just *him* that she disapproved of.

"Do you and the children have a name?" she wondered aloud as she delicately covered her damp bodice with a shawl the footman handed her.

"Mac," he improvised instantly. "Mac Warwick. These two are Bitsy and Bud." He'd have to hide their identities until he developed a clearer plan of action.

"Bitsy?" She wrinkled her patrician nose in distaste. "Bud? Well, then, perhaps Bud would like a biscuit and some milk in the kitchen. Excuse my manners." She gestured toward the glowering footman. "This is James, my cousin. Perhaps you could take the children to the kitchen, James?"

A cousin as footman? Mac had heard of ladies acquiring cicerones, but disguising them as servants was a new twist. This bewigged young fop didn't appear masculine enough to interest a woman. "Bud won't go without Bitsy. If your maid would be so kind as to go with them. . ."

Miss Cavendish nodded uncertainly. "Of course. Mary?"

The maid bobbed a curtsy, the footman scowled, and Mac released his grip on Percy. The boy took off like a cannon shot, and, cursing like a seaman under his breath, the bewigged footman loped in pursuit.

As Mary departed in their wake, Beatrice wished she could follow. She'd much rather watch the antics of the children than confront this massive man who vibrated with more energy than she thought the walls could hold.

Now that the children had departed, her tongue twisted in knots. She had a dozen questions she didn't dare ask.

"You wouldn't know of any available nursemaids in the area, would you?" he demanded.

“Those with any sense have left for more populous areas.” Nervousness made her angry, and the words were blurted out. “The only babies around here are those of servants. I suppose you might ask at Landingham or the Carstairs estate, but the earl is elderly and never in residence, and the Carstairses visit only during hunting season.”

He looked frustrated as he ran his hand through his hair and tumbled it more thoroughly than his son’s. She could see the resemblance in the golden brown locks, though the children had blue eyes and not their father’s green. His accent was odd and vaguely uncouth, despite his excellent grammar. And his wrinkled attire was a disgrace.

“I need to take the children to my parents in Virginia. I’ve a ship leaving in a few weeks.” He ground out the words from between clenched teeth.

Virginia. An American. That explained the accent, if nothing else. She had no idea what she was supposed to say, so she stood there like a great lump, nervously twitching her fingers against the piano. Was she supposed to make some hospitable offer?

He glared at her and began pacing, until he smacked his shin on a low table and nearly stumbled over her writing desk. Her father had sought to please her by buying her things. She’d about run out of places to put them. In any case this man would be too large for any room he entered.

With an exceedingly masculine growl, he retreated to the fireplace, where he leaned against the mantel and all but barked at her.

“I need a place to keep the children while I’m waiting for my ship.”

Well, he could tarry all he liked—somewhere else. She had enough problems of her own. Beatrice dared to stare at him while she waited for him to realize she had nothing to offer. He had a piercing way of looking at her that made her feel bubbly inside, but she refused to let that daunt her. She was safe here, in the protection of her own lovely home. And he was a rude, crude, uncouth stranger who shouldn’t expect anything.

“I need a nursemaid,” he clarified, with some urgency.

Perhaps. . . if he needed a nursemaid as desperately as she needed..

He did, if his look of agitation meant anything. Despite his rumpled appearance, her visitor wore a gentleman’s clothes. She recognized the richness of the embroidery on his satin waistcoat and the fashionable cut of London tailoring. Gentlemen should know of estate management.

Bea took a deep breath and let the notion spill out before she could reconsider. “I need a teacher of estate management.”

“You’re in need of an estate manager?” he asked with polite curiosity, apparently startled by her sudden change of topic.

“A teacher,” she said as firmly as she was able.

“A teacher?” he asked, incredulous.

“A teacher of estate management,” she confirmed.

“A teacher.” He didn’t look pleased.