

EXCERPT - Mad Maria's Daughter

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Clutching her reticule in her lap, Daphne watched the growing darkness beyond the carriage window. It had been kind of Lord and Lady Lansbury to loan the use of their carriage to take her to her aunt's. But then, everyone had been so kind and sympathetic—once she had announced she was leaving. And relieved. She shouldn't forget how relieved they were at the departure of someone as unpredictable as Mad Maria's daughter.

Daphne bit her lip and tried to retrieve her straying thoughts from the debacle that had capped her stay in London. She was almost at Aunt Agatha's. There seemed no purpose in stopping for the night despite the driver's protests. He could travel on to the Lansbury estate in the morning. The carriage had to come this way anyway. The Lansburys had merely been offering a minor kindness, after all.

Clutching her gloved fingers, Daphne wrestled with the twin devils of ingratitude and cynicism. She could have taken a post chaise like anyone else. She was lame, not helpless. She was not even incompetent and certainly not mad. She was actually quite intelligent. Not that anyone cared. Biting her lip, she watched the road to her voluntary exile go by.

In a society that demanded perfection, she lacked the essential requirement. She supposed she looked well enough. Friends and family had assured her that her brunette curls were just as they ought to be, that her features were quite well-formed, even to the point of prettiness and past.

They even claimed that her eyes were a most extraordinary green, and if they seemed a trifle hazy and mysterious at times, that was more to her account than not. The fact that they were her mother's eyes created the problem. Part of the problem, she had to admit. The rest of the problem she created herself.

Daphne fought back tears and forced her chin up. She had been green enough at first not to realize why the young gentlemen passed her by for silly, less presentable girls.

Oh, there was always someone's kind relative to bow and ask if they might fetch her some punch or to exchange meaningless gossip through a dance set or two. She was never left to feel alone and neglected, but she was seldom asked for more than one dance, either. Once was daring enough. Twice would have been foolish. After all, what if she took leave of her senses in the middle of the dance

floor?

Not that her mother had ever committed such a social solecism. She had been very polite about her madness. If her effervescence sometimes reached the heights of hysteria, or her dismals became black whorls of discontent, no one paid them any mind. That was just Maria. Charming, ever-maddening Maria.

Even her suicide had been committed with exquisite care to make it look an accident. It was only by pure, horrible chance that she had been discovered.

Daphne closed her eyes against that long-ago pain. She could remember her mother as sweet and smiling and ever gentle. Why could society not remember her that way, instead of as the lady who had driven her carriage off a cliff one dark night, in full view of her only daughter?

The period of mourning for her mother had long passed, but the *ton* continued to look at Daphne askance, waiting for her to show signs of her mother's instabilities. They found them all too frequently in the sharp lash of Daphne's temper, her cool withdrawal when anyone approached the subject dominating their minds, and in her inability to be one of the crowd.

The members of the *ton* would nod their heads sagely and give each other knowing glances, then treat her to saccharine smiles and insipid pleasantries until they could make their escape. After all, who wouldn't be unstable after such an experience?

At times, Daphne felt as if the *ton* resented being reminded by her presence that the world outside their hallowed halls was not a perfect one. Perhaps if they knew how imperfect she was, they would turn their backs on her completely.

As it was, Daphne had persisted, refusing to believe all of society could be so shallow and thoughtless as to disregard her because of her mother's tragedy. Besides, she had no where else to go, naught else to do unless she wished to play the part of sheltered invalid in her father's house. And then she truly would go mad.

For four long years she had determinedly beat her head against society's thick walls. Now, she had given up. She would not go back.

Gazing blankly out the uncovered carriage window, Daphne tried not to imagine what her future would bring. Like any other young girl, she had set out in society with the dream of finding a young man who would understand and care, someone she could share her thoughts and her life with.

She certainly hadn't set any higher goals than that. Considering her lameness, it mattered little to her if the man of her dreams was perfect. She had a secure competence from her mother's estate, not a wealthy one, but sufficient for a comfortable life. She didn't require great wealth. She didn't even need a title. Her father was only the younger son of a relatively obscure north country title. Titles meant

nothing. But she had expected to be found pleasing by someone, somewhere. It was not as if she were a complete antidote.

But, as it turned out, apparently she was. After four years on the Marriage Mart, despite the kindness of all her relations, she had received only that one proposal, and it had been an insult.

Albert wasn't the sort her very protective relations would normally allow near—another reason he'd asked for her hand while in public view. Bankrupt and twice her age, his offer had been made out of desperation. If that was the best she could do, she was better off unmarried. Society could pity her little more for her spinster state than it already did for her mother's death.

Her maid snored, jolting Daphne back to the present. Aunt Agatha's house couldn't be far. They had just come through the village a little while ago. She had forgotten how steep this road was as it wound down to the riverbank. Or perhaps she had never known. She had probably been just as soundly asleep as her maid the summer she traveled here with her father.

The world outside seemed darker. Daphne looked up, trying to tell if clouds were covering the moon that had just risen. From the varying shades of darkness, she surmised the bank down to the river was overgrown with trees. The road appeared to travel along the river a little way before the bridge. She would have to ride here one day and investigate. It ought to be lovely on a sunny day.

If Aunt Agatha would allow her to ride. Dropping back against the seat in disappointment, Daphne had to consider that possibility.

With her brother's reluctant assistance, she had escaped her father's home because he had insisted on watching her every minute, forbidding her the stables, insisting that she be accompanied each time she ventured out of the house, all but ordering her to remain inside for fear she would be lost to him as her mother had been. She had been unable to tolerate the restrictions. If he had written Aunt Agatha with those same orders, would she obey?

Her mother's relations in London had been more understanding, but that had been London. She had been accompanied everywhere by cousins and footmen and maids.

The size and sounds and smells of the city had intimidated her, and she had accepted the fact that a lady could not travel alone, so she had not protested the restrictions there.

But the country was different. She used to love solitary walks with nature, and she had learned to ride as soon as she could walk. She did not wish to abandon those pleasures to please her grief-stricken, anxious father.

For all that mattered, she didn't see why she couldn't learn to navigate the streets of London just as well as a garden path, if only people would leave her alone to walk at her own pace.

There had been so many exciting things around her, places she would have liked to linger, people

she would like to know, but she was limited to those her family chose to visit. Now that she was older and more sure of herself, she had come to resent their constant vigilance. She was not likely to go berserk or collapse in the middle of a busy street if she stumbled.

But she would never have the opportunity to explore London now. If she and Aunt Agatha rubbed along well, she would in all likelihood spend the rest of her life in splendid isolation in the rugged wilds of Devon.

Relatively speaking, of course. She had heard of the mountains in Scotland and Wales, and learned of the magnificent scenery of Europe and America from her tutors, but unaccompanied, she wasn't destined to see them. So she really ought to make the most of this rough bit of coast and moor. She and Aunt Agatha would have to come to an understanding.

A shout outside the carriage shocked Daphne from her reverie. She grabbed the strap as the carriage swayed and pitched forward. What on earth was the driver doing?

Fear spiked through her at the horses' neighing protests as the carriage rocked and the wooden brakes screeched. Had the bridge gone out? Had a wheel broken?

The instant the carriage reached a full halt, Daphne shoved open the door. Behind her, her awakened maid wailed a protest, but she wasn't sitting here and waiting for someone to inform her that they were about to fall off a precipice.

Memory sent a *frisson of fear* through her, but she refused to retreat in the face of her cowardice. The shouts outside sounded like several men. Had there been an accident?

The dark shadow of a horseman veered close to the Lansburys' elegant landau. Cast in darkness outside the carriage lamps, he presented an otherworldly appearance. The specter made a gentlemanly bow and doffed his hat.

"What is happening? Has there been a mishap?" she asked before climbing down.

"I have only come to relieve you of a few baubles, my lady, and any coins you might have in your reticule. Consider it a contribution to charity, if you will, and you will soon be on your way."

Thieves! That was impossible in this day and age. Highwaymen had been long banished to. . . *The wilds away from London where there was little or no law*—Daphne finished the thought belatedly. Still, she could not just give up her entire quarter's income at his request. She reached to shut the door again.

At that moment, a shot rang out down the road, and a scream of warning vibrated the night air. From a distance, someone shouted, "Soldiers!" and closer to hand, the mounted highwayman muttered, "Damnation, a trap!"

Before Daphne could pull the heavy door closed, he leaned over, hooked his arm around her

waist, and hauled her over his knees.

She shrieked a terrified protest. Her maid wailed in a piercing soprano. The highwayman merely kicked his horse and sprinted off into the darkness, one hand holding Daphne in place.

“Cease the caterwauling and you’ll be safe,” he ordered as the horse leapt a hedge and dashed through a clearing between the trees. “Continue, and you’ll live to regret it. I mean only to keep you hostage until the soldiers are gone.”

Daphne fell silent, more from lack of breath than obedience. The horse’s rough gait jarred knees against ribs, and to her utter humiliation, she clung to a very masculine leg from a very intimate position. Still, she felt as if she would slide off at any moment.

She strained to detect any sound of pursuit, but her blood was throbbing in her ears and panic clouded her senses. Never in all her years had she been subjected to this kind of ill treatment, and to think, she had thought he sounded a gentleman!

They splashed across a river, soaking her woolen traveling gown at the hem and spraying water up the back of her heavy pelisse. She shivered as the icy water soaked through, and the horseman adjusted her more comfortably.

“Not far now. You’ll be fine.”

Daphne scarcely considered his promise reassuring. What did the highwayman consider to be fine? She was already soaked, cold, and humiliated to the marrow of her bones. She couldn’t wait until she had breath to release the outrage choking in her throat.

The smell of his boot leather filled her nostrils, and she became aware of other scents besides that of damp vegetation. The faint scent of bay rum mingling with masculine perspiration confused her. Did highwaymen wear bay rum? It was an odor that choked the ballrooms of London, but out here in the desolate countryside it had an almost pleasant scent. Perhaps it just reminded her of civilization.

The horse reared abruptly, and the thief chuckled as Daphne’s fingers dug into his leg and creased his trousers. A hard arm lifted her with ease and slid her to the ground just as a shrill whistle in the distance cut the air in a vague resemblance to a bugle’s all-clear.

He released her in obvious response to the signal. “My men should be safely away by now. You’ll find a short walk down this path will lead you to a cottage where a very kindly widow and her servants live. If you’ll hand over your trinkets, I shall leave you alone.”

Now that her feet were back on solid ground and the breath was returning to her lungs, Daphne stared up at the immensity of man and beast and the old, familiar anger struck again. She had promised to control her temper, and she had honestly tried, but this was more than any one person should have to bear.

“You can’t do this! This is an outrage! How dare you desert me like this! You must take me back to my maid and carriage at once. You cannot leave me out here miles from civilization. What kind of gentleman do you purport to be to thus treat a lady?”

The highwayman leaned over in the saddle to study her. He had been quite prepared for her to faint and weep and plead for mercy. This mixture of rage and haughtiness from one so delicate caught him by surprise, but the fury underlying her words held something else. If she were afraid of him, wouldn’t she use her anger to run? What kind of woman would demand that a thief linger to return her to her maid?

“The carriage is further than the cottage, miss. Did you enjoy our ride so that you wish to repeat it?”

The taunting mockery of his words drew blood into her cheeks, and Daphne had to clench her fingers to restore proper decorum. “I am not familiar with these woods, sir. I could be lost for days. If you will not return me to the carriage, you must take me to the cottage.”

She said it as firmly as she could manage through chattering teeth. The icy river water was responsible for only a small part of her chill, she feared.

Beginning to lose his patience, the highwayman leaned over to wrap his fingers around the gold locket at her throat. “Are you so rich you have forgotten how to walk? Then you won’t mind if I relieve you of this feeble trinket. I daresay Lansbury was too smart to bait a trap with real jewels.”

Daphne smacked at his gloved hand and stepped backward. Her foot slipped on the damp moss and her weak knee betrayed her. The aching cold of the river water had done its damage, as she’d feared.