

THE PIRATE'S CLEVER RUSE

GRAVESYDE VILLAGE MYSTERY

BOOK FIVE



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ONE



JUNE 1816

GREY

The danger of intellectual curiosity was that one forgot the essentials of survival—like keeping an eye on one’s surroundings. Cecil Greybourne never failed to teach that maxim, even to malingering assistants. Leonard *knew* better.

Having emerged from his office into the lecture hall, and not found the prints he’d chosen for today’s lesson, he stacked his notes on the podium and glared at the students haphazardly filing in. Leonard was seldom late but he was bordering on irresponsible this morning. Even an invaluable employee wasn’t beyond rebuke.

Needing the prints sorted, *now*, Grey impatiently abandoned his preparation and strode down the aisle toward the back of the lecture hall.

“The mad lion stalks his prey,” one student whispered as Grey brushed by. “Don’t he ever cut his mane?”

Grey had given up controlling his haystack hair long ago as a waste of valuable time. A good student recognized that art and education preceded appearance.

"Prof is on the rampage," one of his better students warned, hastily removing himself from Grey's path. In his haste, he bumped into the first student and sent his pencil rolling down the floor.

Towering over most of the adolescent lot, Grey stalked on. He wasn't of lofty height but, as any good scientist would tell them, energy required space for expansion. A friend had once told Grey that his big brain fooled him into thinking he was a behemoth. Utter fustian, of course. More likely, he was simply unconcerned with his surroundings and expected others to pay attention. Most of the time, they did and got out of his way.

He glared in disbelief at his assistant's empty desk in the wide outer hall. Leonard belonged there, in that damned rickety chair, guarding his class from intruders. Research books should be scattered across the battered wood surface, pens littering paper, notes everywhere. *And his art prints should be out of the file drawers.*

Where the devil was Leonard? His efficient, ever-composed, assistant had been there earlier. He would have reported any emergency to Grey.

The clean desktop did not bode well. Grey clamped down on his fear and hastily checked the desk drawers—still locked, thank all that was holy. He'd have to fetch his key to retrieve his papers.

His stalwart assistant would not have abandoned that desk and its valuable contents without reason. At this realization, fury replaced fear, demanding that he finally deal with the putridity no doubt responsible for his missing assistant.

The hallowed halls of Harrowby's Young Men's School stank of rot. It had been an excellent school once. The rot had set in last year, after the death of old Mr. Harrowby. Any historian worth his salt would recognize the source.

Grey took the stairs down to the administration wing. Ignoring the neatly-tailored secretary attempting to stop him from slamming open the double doors, he marched into the office of the newest Harrowby to occupy the Head's desk. The original battered oak had been replaced with polished mahogany twice the size of the old one. Not a single paper marred the shiny surface.

"Where is Leonard?" Grey roared.

"If you ever attended meetings, you'd know the board has had to make a few budget adjustments." The pudgy, balding Harrowby shrugged and opened a drawer to remove a folder most likely containing meeting minutes. "Costs keep rising."

Grey knew Harrowby needed spectacles but vainly wouldn't wear them. So the folder he opened was no more than a prop.

"The matching bay mares you fancy aren't getting any cheaper?" Grey asked in a voice heavy with irony. "And the rest of the board? Are they now in alts over your continued presence?" There had been rumblings of discontent all year.

"The board was due for a salary adjustment," Harrowby said stiffly. "Someone must attend to the education requirements of our students."

"So, Mr. Leonard's pathetic salary now goes to flush plums who have never set foot in our hallowed halls?" Students quivered in their shoes when Grey used that ominously quiet tone. His students were smarter than Harrowby.

The Head merely tapped his fingers on the shiny surface. "Leonard was little more than an ornament in your hall. Your point is?"

Ornament? Plain, poorly-dressed, skinny—efficient—Leonard was an *ornament*? What the hell did Harrowby think he was? Blind? And an idiot.

It was happening again. *Damn*. His life was littered with casualties.

Grey briefly closed his eyes, stifled the lecture boiling up from his bowels, and nodded cynically. "Fine. If you and the board are now attending to the education of the students, then you won't mind teaching my class. Without an assistant. Excellent experience. Good students."

Seething with frustration more than fury, Grey spun on his heel and slammed his boots on every hollow tread all the way up the uncarpeted wooden stairs.

He'd stayed too long, grown too comfortable, believed he'd been informing a generation of young men about history through the brilliance of art. He'd stifled his usual instinct to

move on, thinking he ought to finally settle down. Stupid of him.

Locating his keys in his office, he stuck them in the lock of Leonard's desk. . . Only this time, it was open. The drawers had been emptied since he'd last checked.

Not until that horrifying moment did he have reason to panic.

All his notes. . . the draft manuscript. If anyone read that. . .

Fate had found him again.

For a very brief moment, he considered his assistant seeking revenge through theft, but Leonard would never do that. He simply would not. Grey wasn't that poor a judge of character. He knew precisely how human nature operated. Leonard was one of the dedicated students of learning, honest, more than competent—

And Grey would bet his fortune that Leonard was *loyal* to a fault.

Which meant Leonard had his manuscript, if he'd had any warning whatsoever.

Grey had delivered books to Leonard's pathetic abode in the past. He had occasionally wondered how anyone living in such poverty could speak with the educated accents of the upper class, but the world was full of little mysteries. Finding Leonard wasn't one of them. He knew where to look.

While a few students watched with puzzlement from the doorway, Grey shoved files of art prints into his satchel. Glancing around to be certain he left nothing behind, he picked up his beaver hat and walking stick and departed, without looking back.

It was the last of the term. His students had only the final exam to finish. Let Harrowby handle it. Those new bays ought to cost him some effort.

The meager June sun didn't make it through the fog of Edinburgh's alleys. Moss and vines clung to high brick walls, fertilized by the muck in the streets. Children shouted in yards hidden by tall walls. Church bells rang noon.

Finally, he arrived at the cheerful blue door he remembered from his last visit. A small pot of colorful flowers adorned the worn step. Leonard must have a female looking after him. Without a salary,

they'd be out in the street by next month. July wasn't a bad time to be homeless, but females didn't look kindly upon it, Grey wagered.

He disliked arriving anywhere without a prior appointment but needs must. He rapped the gold knob of his walking stick on the door. It popped open instantly, revealing a harassed young man, his light brown curls disheveled, his cravat askew, and a cane apparently propping him up. "We can't pay—"

He halted abruptly, staring.

The young man almost looked like Leonard, but there was a lack of refined features and. . . Grey focused on the man's odd boot. Leonard did not have a clubfoot.

"Andy?" a voice called from the cottage's tiny interior. "Who is it?" A tall, slender figure of the same approximate size and coloring as this young man emerged from the darkness. "If I'm to apply for that position, I need help with this. . ."

Cravat unfastened, wearing only a waistcoat over an open linen shirt and trousers, Leonard halted at the sight of Grey. She had the same light brown curls as the man with the club foot.

She.

Loyal, efficient, knowledgeable Leonard was female.

TWO



ELEANOR

ELEANOR ANNE LEONARD STARED AT THE PROFESSOR AND WISHED THE rathole beneath her too-large boots would swallow her.

Except for his electrified golden mane, Greybourne appeared as elegant as always in an impeccably tailored dove gray coat and silver waistcoat. His immaculate linen was only slightly disheveled, as it became when his tempestuous humors erupted.

She had to say something if she couldn't arrange to disappear. Recovering, she grasped with relief that he was here for his manuscript.

"I have your notes." Hastily tugging at her untied shirt, El stepped deeper into the shadows, leaving Andrew between her and the professor.

"Hide them," Greybourne ordered before she could escape. "You locked the desk before you left, did you not?"

"Of course, sir," she said indignantly. "The students would steal your paper and ink and hunt for your lecture notes otherwise. But I thought I might finish copying the pages you left this morning." She needed the salary he paid her. He wouldn't continue paying a female, but he might give her what he owed.

"The desk was ransacked." He made no attempt to enter when Andrew stepped aside.

"Ransacked, sir?" That temporarily shocked her from her monetary fears. "I assure you, I did not—"

He interrupted her protest with a curt wave. "I know you did not. But I fear the papers are no longer safe."

His book was a scholarly treatise of contemporary art. Eleanor didn't dare argue. They needed his wages.

"I have been planning to spend time with my cousin," he continued abruptly. "I'll simply leave sooner than anticipated. I take it you have not found new employment yet?"

She sent her twin a wild look of panic. Without her position at the school and salary from Greybourne, they were near enough to penniless. But now he knew she wasn't Andrew—he could ruin them.

Greybourne finally remembered his manners, entered, and bowed curtly to Andrew, introducing himself. "I need your. . . sister's. . . invaluable assistance. I don't suppose you have a fair hand or research talents too?"

Andrew snorted. "I have education but no talent for books. I'll happily mend your coat, your horse's harness, or build your shelves, but El is the one who got me through university."

"Fine. I don't have a valet. Are you available to accompany your sister?" Haystack mane flowing, the professor stalked irritably up and down the uncarpeted floor, glaring at the books overflowing what little furniture they possessed.

"Accompany?" they both said at once.

El was accustomed to thinking quickly, but this was a little much, with too little information.

But the rent was past due and if they could somehow save her quarterly salary. . .

"We will need a little more information than that." Andrew recovered first. "I have several jobs arranged, and we cannot just leave this place empty for an unknown time."

El knew the professor didn't like being contradicted once he set on a course. He gestured rudely at the remains of their former life. "You could burn the place with no loss. I'll double your sister's

wage, provide a similar sum for you to be my man-of-all-work, and provide food and board for the next six months. You may pack your belongings and take them with you. I'll hire a cart."

She ought to take offense at that insult to their home, but he wasn't far wrong. His arrogant, high-handedness only emerged when he was frustrated, which admittedly, was often. El had worked with him for a year and knew he was also brilliant and fair-minded. . . witness his not objecting to her duplicitous appearance. He was quick-witted enough to have already grasped her reasoning. That he'd accepted that a female could perform the tasks of a male wasn't necessarily broad-minded, however, so much as expedient. He didn't wish to train a new research assistant mid-book.

While the men negotiated, Eleanor ran over the pluses and minuses of such an abrupt upheaval. She saw almost no reason why they shouldn't abandon poverty to seek better circumstances elsewhere.

It wasn't as if Greybourne saw her as anything but a tool to be used.

She was the one suffering from delusions if she feared a wealthy, sophisticated aristocrat like the baron might look at an inconsequential *female* assistant differently. Even if Greybourne saw through her natural invisibility, he'd pay her no attention, as long as she continued his work.

If it meant securing their financial future, she'd happily leave Edinburgh.

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