

Chapter 1

Cassandra's heart raced. She had to think quickly. There was no way she was staying at such a ludicrous place! Didn't they realise who she was? Why were they calling her Miss instead of Lady?

She took a hurried glance about the room. A man and a woman stood in the doorway, blocking it, but the window—thank goodness!—was open. She ran past Miss Robin's desk, and pushed the sash upwards. It only went halfway. Oh well—that would have to do.

Cassie saw the man lunge towards her and yelped. She closed her eyes and leapt from the window. On the way down, she thwacked the window pane with the heel of her boot, and heard a crack, followed by the tinkle of glass. She fell in a hydrangea bush, stood, and with no time to check herself for injuries, ran headlong to the front gate.

They closed Miss Robin's front gate behind them.

"Are you sure you want to do this, Fletcher? You might have sent a letter."

"I owe her an explanation, Price."

Captain Alexander Fletcher sighed. He had been dreading this visit to Miss Robin's School, known among military men as Redbreast Academy.

The house was in St John's Wood, half-hidden by lush green gardens. It was white, four stories, completely anonymous, with groomed rose bushes lining the white gravel path. Only the knob which opened the gate provided a clue as to what sort of establishment it was. Fletcher had found himself reaching for a ring which was held in the mouth of a young girl, rendered in brass; her eyes were closed, and her lips struggled to hold the ring's thickness.

Before they could proceed up the path to the front door, there was a commotion. The sound of glass breaking, followed by a crash and hurried footsteps. And then she appeared from around the side of the house. A girl—wild-eyed and red-cheeked, her deep mahogany coloured curls falling loose from their pins—didn't hesitate before attempting to run right past Fletcher and Price and out the front gate.

Fletcher's training and military instincts kicked in. He seized the girl, trapping her in his arms. It was Price who spoke.

"Gracious me," he said. "No girl running that fast can be up to much good, can she?"

Fletcher said nothing. He was trying to still the girl who was breathing hard and trying to writhe away from him. In a single, swift movement he had seized her by the arms, and pulled them behind her back, clasping her above the elbows. She was small and not particularly sturdy, but she fought him with all her might, and he found himself surprised at her strength as she struggled uselessly to break free of his grip, more of her hair tumbling out of its arrangement.

"Unhand me at once!" she finally cried, when she realised she could not break free.

"I most certainly will not," he said, pulling her in closer, until he felt the silks of her gown brushing his breeches, the heat of her body radiating through her gown. "Not until you tell me what on earth you're doing fleeing from Miss Robin's establishment in this manner."

At that moment, she twisted her neck and looked up at him, and he was so startled by what he saw that he almost loosened his grip. He found he was looking into the finest green eyes he had

ever seen. They were a pale, silvery-sage colour, utterly wild, and, at that moment, full of an intent and urgency that sent chills through his entire person. Her skin was a flawless white, and roses bloomed in her cheeks from her recent exertions.

“Freedom,” she hissed.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked.

“What I’m trying to do,” she said, “is attain my freedom—nothing more!”

A note of pleading entered her voice. “Please,” she said. “Sir. You don’t understand. Won’t you let me go?”

Please. Sir. She twisted in his arms, and something stirred in Fletcher. He held her even tighter against the buttons of his red coat.

At that moment, two other figures appeared in the front doorway, a tall woman and an even taller man. They moved, unhurried, down the gravel path towards Price and Fletcher.

“Lieutenant Price, Captain Fletcher, allow me to apologise for our newest arrival. She does not fully understand the gravity of her new situation.”

“I see,” said a bemused Price.

“I trust you gentlemen will forgive this highly improper display. Dr. Hendricks, would you please remove Miss Kent back to her room?”

“Of course, Miss Robin.”

The doctor, a tall, blond man with round glasses and a neat moustache, approached Captain Fletcher, and gripped Cassandra Kent by her upper arm. He nodded at Fletcher, who released her, and watched the retreat of her mussed chignon, tiny waist and pretty, scowling features, not without a twinge of regret.

“Won’t you come in? Lieutenant, I assume that you’re here to visit Miss Brookes. And Captain Fletcher, I’m glad to see you. I was concerned that I wouldn’t be seeing you again.”

They were led into the house where they heard the sound of shrieking cut off by a heavy door slamming shut.

Miss Robin led the men into her private office, a large room papered in white with a pattern of golden leaves. Tea was brought and poured by a black-haired young lady in a navy dress.

“Thank you, Mrs. Pendleton,” Miss Robin said, and the girl curtseyed and left the room.

“General visitation will begin shortly,” Miss Robin said, “if you are interested in meeting some of our unattached girls, Captain?”

“I don’t think so, Miss Robin. I was hoping only for a brief interview—”

“He would love to meet your girls, Miss Robin,” interjected Price. “One of your students is just what he needs after his recent disappointment.”

“Please, Price, spare me—”

“I will not spare you, Fletcher. It’s high time you got back on the horse,” he winked, “so to speak.”

“That will have to be the captain’s decision, Lieutenant Price,” Miss Robin said. “Though, Captain Fletcher, if I may say so, in my experience, these disappointments usually turn out to be a blessing in disguise.”

“Thank you, Miss Robin. And in declining to meet with your pupils, I don’t mean to disparage the work you do here. I commend the teaching of discipline, in whatever form—I demand discipline from the men in my charge and don’t see why we should be more lenient with young ladies.”

“In that we quite agree.”

“I assume the young lady we encountered outside will be in for a lesson of just such a nature?”

Miss Robin smiled.

“Miss Kent—we do away with the nonsense of titles for our charges—has suffered a series of shocks, Captain Fletcher. She was enrolled by her uncle, after her father died and his debts, which proved only to be surmountable through the liquidation of his estate, were revealed. She thought herself destined for, shall we say, higher things. I do not expect her adjustment period to be short, or easy, either for herself or her chaperone.

“But I vet the girls personally before I accept their enrolment. They have to have a certain tractability, whatever their outward appearance may suggest, and whatever they may say. I thought I saw such a yielding nature in Miss Kent. I certainly hope I was not mistaken.”

“You never are, Miss Robin,” said Price.

There was a knock at the door, and the girl in the navy gown re-appeared.

“Excuse me, Miss Robin, I’ve had word that Miss Lucinda is ready for her fiancé’s visit.”

Miss Robin smiled at Lieutenant Price.

“Enjoy your visit,” she said.

Price stood, bowed, and left the room in a hurry.

“Now, Captain, you said you were hoping for an interview?”

Fletcher gave a brief nod.

“I only wished to thank you, Miss Robin. The disappointment of my broken engagement is mine alone, but it would be selfish not to acknowledge that it has also inconvenienced others. I have come to thank you for the preparatory work that you did in facilitating my suit, even though Miss Stowe and I did not become formally engaged.”

“Captain, that is hardly necessary. In fact, you may be inclined to retract your thanks, given the news I have for you.”

Fletcher knitted his brows. “News? Of Miss Stowe?”

“I am now at liberty to tell you that you were not her only suitor.”

The captain’s mouth became a hard line.

“Who?”

“One Major Stanley.”

“Stanley?”

“You understand that it is not against my rules for two suits to be pressed simultaneously.”

“I quite understand.”

Fletcher sat back in his seat and sat for a long moment in silent contemplation.

“You know, Miss Robin, perhaps I was too hasty earlier. I would be delighted to meet your single pupils.”

Other gentlemen had gathered in the front parlour of the house by the time Miss Robin walked Captain Fletcher to that room for visiting hours. He stood in the doorway. The room was long, tiled in black and white and panelled in dark wood. The furniture was upholstered with navy, cream and red velvets. Portraits of military commanders adorned the walls, and vases of flowers and potted ferns were arranged around the room.

Fletcher could tell immediately that the other visitors were either current or ex-military; some were in their uniforms, red or navy jackets with polished buttons, cream breeches and tall boots; others were in civilian dress, but still had the posture and bearing of men who had completed active service. Fletcher even remarked the presence of a few men he had served with.

“To refresh your memory,” said Miss Robin. “Those in white gowns are the pupils; if their sash is also white, they are available; if it is blue, they are attached, but not receiving a private visit today. The chaperones are in navy. I’m sure I don’t have to remind you they are already married.”

His eyes were already roaming the room.

“Of course, they will all be thrilled to lay eyes on you, Captain,” said Miss Robin.

Miss Robin ushered Captain Fletcher into the room, and he felt the eyes of many of the ladies turn his way. He was used to it; often he was the tallest man in a gathered group, and the recipient of admiring glances. He returned none of them, and tried not to look towards Marnie and Major Stanley, seated together on a sofa in the centre of the room.

At once, one of the chaperones—a comely raven-haired woman—smiled and gestured at the vacant seat beside her charge, a wiry-haired girl in a white dress who beamed at him instantly. A few other girls, pretty and plain, plump and slender, all corseted tightly beneath their flimsy white gowns, were all similarly giving tentative smiles, all only too ready to receive his attentions. Even many of the women in blue sashes or navy gowns were looking his way.

Too bad for all of them, Captain Fletcher thought. There was only one girl who had captured his attention. And he had every intention of finding her.