

Chapter One

Lady Tempest Knox

Primrose Park

Lady Tempest Knox stood outside the doorway to her husband's library. Though she had been married to Lord Knox for nigh on to five years, being summoned to his private sanctuary always set her tummy aflutter.

She recalled with a rueful smile the very first meal they had shared together, when she had barged in upon him in this very room slamming down her tray of food and offending him with her frank manner and conversation.

In the years since that noteworthy meal, a deep and profound love had grown between the unlikely couple—though she continued to be frank in word and deed. In addition, they were now the proud parents of two rambunctious little girls. The eldest Lady Merry, born on Christmas day four years earlier, had been quickly followed by younger sister, Lady Anne, now aged two.

The household was quite busy indeed.

Despite being an experienced married lady, and the Countess of Knox, Lady Tempest still tingled with eager anticipation whenever she had the opportunity to be alone with her husband. She hoped his reason for summoning her to his private library was for pleasure, though she knew it was equally likely chastisement awaited her on the other side of the door.

For though they were very happily married, and very much in love, their life was not without the occasional marital conflict. Lady Tempest hesitated to even contemplate the number of times she had been taken across her husband's knee for a bit of domestic correction.

Running back through her mind, Lady Tempest tried to ascertain whether she had done anything of late which might necessitate the application of her husband's firm palm to her shapely backside. Try as she might, she couldn't recall any transgressions on her part. However, well she knew those things which she might not consider transgressions often fell into that category as far as her strict husband was concerned.

"I know you are waiting out there, Tempest," her husband called. "You may as well come in, because there are matters I wish to discuss with you. Stop hiding."

She could not get away with anything

"Good morning, James," she said, taking in the orderly state of his desk. Her efforts notwithstanding, he remained organized, dutiful, and quite determined to remain so. She moved around the large piece of furniture to place a kiss upon his cheek.

He grabbed her about the waist and pulled her down to his lap, holding her there while he kissed her properly. She wound her arms around his neck and reveled in the strength of his hold as he pressed her close.

When James lifted his mouth she used her hands, which still clasped his head, to hold him in place and prolong the kiss. He complied, but when the kiss was finished, he reached behind his head and disengaged her hands.

"Now, go take your seat, Tempest," he said giving her a stern look. "I do have some important matters to discuss with you."

With a pout she got up from his lap and did as he instructed. She was obedient, but did not believe she had to be cheerful about it. She slumped down into the chair across from him and gave him a side-eyed glance. "Why do you always have to spoil my fun?"

"As I recall," he said, giving her a smoldering stare, "you had plenty of fun already this morning. Or does my lovemaking leave so little impression on you these days that you do not even remember?"

Tempest returned his smoldering gaze with a saucy smile. "Oh, I do recall it very much, my lord. And I thank you for it."

Tempest was familiar enough after several years of marriage to be able to discern the different moods which her husband exhibited. Currently, she could see he was debating within himself about whether to continue on their path of flirtatious conversation, or to get on with the business of the morning. To her sadness, business won out.

"We must discuss Seraphina," he said, and a pit of dread formed in Tempest's stomach.

"Oh, James, please. No."

"Yes, Tempest, my dear. This has gone on long enough."

Tempest sighed in resignation. "But we promised Colonel St. Clair we would see to the girl's welfare until she was ready to be courted. He is your mother's husband, we can hardly abandon her."

James sighed. "I know. And I am sure you are a much better influence on a young lady than my mother ever could be."

"Now, James, that is unfair. Your mother is a wonderful woman, loving and warm. She is one of my favorite people."

"Fair enough," he replied, "besides, I can hardly imagine a household which contained both Seraphina and my mother. No wonder Colonel St. Clair was so receptive to leaving Seraphina in our care."

"He made a wise choice, and well you know it. We must consider the girl's well-being."

"But, not at the expense of our own hearth and home," James said, his jaw tightening in a way which sent a sliver of dread through Tempest.

"What has happened now?"

James leafed through a stack of papers on his desk. "This is a bill," he said, holding up one of the pieces of paper, "for a window she broke, while attempting to hang a picture in her bedchamber."

"I am sure it was an accident," Tempest said.

"No one is saying the girl does these things intentionally," James said, continuing to go through the documents on his desk. "Here is a bill from the doctor, for the treatment of one of the footmen who was injured when he had to go wading into the pond to rescue her after she fell in."

"I know our expenses have increased since her arrival," Tempest said, attempting to appease her husband, though the knit of his brow suggested she had an uphill battle.

"It is not always about the money, Tempest," he said, "though I shall admit I have been shocked by the damage a single young woman can do the budget of a household, even one as large as ours. However," he continued before his wife could jump in, "'tis not only the costs but the general disruption."

"Having a new person in the household is bound to result in some changes."

"Tempest," James leveled his gaze at her, "I caught her smoking one of my cigars."

"Oh my!" Even Tempest was shocked by that bit of information. "She does have some colorful habits," Tempest said as a means of placating her husband.

“Colorful habits is hardly the way I would describe her,” James said. “The girl is a walking disaster.”

“Oh, James,” Tempest said, wringing her hands. “How can you be so cruel? She is simply a girl who needs a bit of guidance.”

“Guidance? Would guidance have prevented her from spilling gravy all over a tablecloth which has been in the family for generations?”

“You know,” Tempest said, “I never did care for that tablecloth.”

James rested his elbows upon his desk, steepled his fingers and gave his wife a most severe glare. “Need I remind you, we have two small children in our home now. Sometimes I fear for their safety.”

“But James, she loves the children.”

“No one is questioning her devotion, her likableness, or her good intentions. I am simply stating the fact that the girl seems to bring destruction everywhere she goes.”

“But what are we to do? Colonel St. Clair vowed to care for her. ‘Twas only fitting we take her on as she is much closer to my age than your mother’s.”

“That is a mere technicality, not based on actual behavior.” James loved his mother, of that Tempest was certain, but the two were quite different and Lady Calliope St. Clair’s whimsical nature often caused strife for her one and only child.

“I have enjoyed having her here and I believe I have made great strides. She nearly never slurps her soup anymore and her posture is much improved. Do I not get some credit for those accomplishments?” She batted her eyelashes at her husband, hoping to jostle him out of his foul mood. She had high hopes for Seraphina, but the girl was not ready for her debut in society just yet.

Or ever, though Tempest was determined to make a silk purse out of the sow’s ear that was Miss Seraphina Moon. Of course, she only spoke optimistically about the young woman to her husband. James was far from unkind, but he was practical and even for Tempest some of Seraphina’s shortcomings were hard to overlook.

“You have accomplished a great deal, I shall admit. I was more skeptical than usual when Colonel St. Clair dropped her on our door.”

“James, that is unkind. I offered to take her in. Colonel St. Clair was more than willing to uphold his end of the agreement he made with the girl’s dying father. And he has been quite generous in providing for her clothing and other needs.”

“Would that he had gotten a bit more information before promising to see to her upbringing.”

“It is my understanding he assumed she was a child, who would be much more malleable than the nineteen-year-old harum-scarum he found.”

Despite his obvious intentions to be miffed about the situation, James laughed. “Oh, I can only imagine what their first meeting must have been like.”

“Yes, even the highly decorated Colonel William St. Clair was likely in over his head with Seraphina. But,” Tempest said, growing serious, “she is a dear girl and I would like to see her well-settled. Please, James, just a few more weeks?”

James sighed. “Between you and the children, it seems I am wrapped around the little fingers of all of the women of the household. Two weeks, but that is all. Have I made myself clear? I shudder to think of the havoc she will wreak upon a husband.”

“I believe, if you will recall, my dear, I brought a certain amount of havoc with me when I arrived at Primrose Park. But you seem none the worse for it.”

“I will grant you that, on both counts.” James smiled at his wife lovingly. “I am sorry this puts you in a bad position, but I do not know what else we can do. I fear the girl shall destroy our home by the time a proper spouse is found for her.”

“James, my darling, what do you suggest?”

“Why, Lady Ambrosia, of course.”

Fisk Residence

Briar Glen

“Oh, please, doctor, I am in dire need of assistance.” Miss Caroline Fisk reclined against a chaise lounge, the back of her hand resting against her forehead in a clear—and clearly practiced—indication of distress.

Dr. Lucas Spencer stood at a distance observing the tableau being played out before him. Next to Miss Fisk, her mother, the formidable Mrs. Fisk, stood holding the girl’s other hand.

“Oh, Dr. Spencer, thank goodness you are here,” Mrs. Fisk said. “As you can see, my darling daughter Caroline, is in extreme anguish, and is in dire need of your assistance, Doctor, for there is a significant pain in her side.”

It was the fourth time in a fortnight the doctor had been called to the Fisk residence. When he had first arrived in the village, two years prior, he had wondered if perhaps Mrs. Fisk was some sort of hypochondriac. However, upon consulting with his predecessor, the aging Dr. Thorpe, he learned Dr. Thorpe had been called to the Fisk residence hardly at all. It seemed the family enjoyed good health. At least, until Dr. Spencer had arrived in town.

“I believe the affliction,” Dr. Thorpe had said with a chuckle when Lucas had consulted him on the topic, “of which the members of the Fisk family seem to suffer, or at least the female members, is the advancing approach of spinsterhood.”

Lucas had looked at his mentor with furrowed brow and an air of confusion. “I beg your pardon, sir? Whatever are you speaking of?”

“What I am saying,” the experienced doctor said, “is that you are the first eligible young gentleman to arrive in the village in quite some time. It has, no doubt, caused a stir amongst the eligible young, and not so young, ladies of the area.”

“You must be joking,” Lucas said. “Why on earth would anyone act in such a silly manner as to pretend to be ill in order to secure the attentions of a physician?”

Dr. Thorpe had only chuckled and said, “I believe their interest in you is more matrimonial than medical, though your steady income is also an attractive attribute, I am sure.”

Lucas had scoffed at Dr. Thorpe’s explanation—though not to his face—as such a thing would be highly rude and Lucas did have great affection and respect for the good doctor who had turned his practice over to him.

However, as time went on and not only the Fisk household but several others—all with eligible daughters of marriageable age—became his most frequent patients, he had to acknowledge the correctness of Dr. Thorpe’s assessment.

All of this put Dr. Spencer in an awkward position, to say the least. While he lived comfortably, he was not a wealthy man and the patronage of the families in the district provided for not only his support but that of the small staff who ran his household. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, he believed in his calling as a healer of the sick and ailing, regardless of their

ability to pay. Because many in the area were unable to compensate him for his services, the fees collected from the more affluent households were crucial to offset those expenses.

Hence, he found himself at the beck and call of malingerers and manipulators.

Under other circumstances, he might have favored one of the local young ladies. But, as he had a complete abhorrence for artifice of any kind, he could never consider the young ladies who feigned illness in order to gain his attention as marriageable. Not to mention his profound desire to avoid the sort of overbearing potential mother-in-law which Mrs. Fisk and her ilk represented.

He had no objection to the institution of marriage, and in fact had been giving due consideration to taking a wife. However, the hounding by the local single ladies and their mothers—and sometimes aunts and grandmothers—had made him determined to have a wife who knew nothing about him in advance. He was tired of being pestered at all hours, not to mention that the truly ill were often neglected due to the constant demands of those seeking to ensnare him.

All he wished for was an honest woman of character. Surely making a marriage work could not be so difficult when sincerity and integrity were the main components.

As soon as he finished with this pointless examination, he would write to a matchmaker in London. He had heard many good things about a certain Lady Ambrosia.

“Doctor! Doctor! Are you unable to hear me? Shall I speak more loudly?” Mrs. Fisk moved to stand directly in front of him, blocking his exit and his view.

“My apologies, Mrs. Fisk, I was simply giving serious thought to your daughter’s medical condition.”

“Why yes, doctor, how very clever of you.” Mrs. Fisk had returned to her obsequious self, stepping aside so Lucas could examine her daughter. “You see,” Mrs. Fisk said, drawing the doctor’s hand to her daughter’s midsection, “she has a most severe pain right here.”

I should like to give you both a severe pain. Much like the one you are giving me. But the good doctor kept those thoughts to himself. Removing his hand from the clutches of Mrs. Fisk, he rested the back of his hand against Caroline’s forehead. “I do not detect a fever.”

“Of course she does not have a fever, she has an ache in her side, which is no doubt getting worse as time passes.”

Lucas straightened to his full six feet two inches in height and directed a withering look at Mrs. Fisk. “Were this an attack of appendicitis, she would have a fever. Since she does not, I can rule that severe malady out, which is good news, do you not agree?” He held the meddlesome woman’s gaze until she looked away.

“Thank you, Doctor Spencer, that is good news indeed. But, what about the extreme distress she suffers?”

“I shall take a look now, if you will please step aside.”

“I shall do even better than that,” Mrs. Fisk said. “I shall go and fetch refreshments for us all. I am sure you must be hungry after a hard day of caring for the people in our village and I am sure your housekeeper is no match for our cook.” Mrs. Fisk scurried toward the door as she spoke.

“Absolutely not. Mrs. Fisk, I insist you remain in the room. You know it is not proper for me to be alone with your daughter, much less to do so while I am examining her.”

“But, doctor, what about—”

Lucas felt his face heating with anger. As though being manipulated by the women of Briar Glen was not enough, Mrs. Fisk, no doubt, wished to create a scandal and force a marriage. He would not have it. After pausing for a moment, he composed himself and addressed her, knowing it was imperative he be diplomatic since Mrs. Fisk’s patronage provided a significant portion of

his wages, not to mention the utter destruction of his medical practice which she could create if he displeased her. When Mrs. Fisk spoke, the women of Briar Glen sat up and listened.

“I appreciate the kind offer of refreshments, but I would hate to do anything which might bring disfavor upon your lovely daughter’s reputation. I also do not have time to socialize today. As you know, there is an outbreak of the fever in the wetlands.” He favored her with his most charming smile and a pink flush bloomed on her cheeks.

Yes, he abhorred artifice, but he also knew you sometimes had to fight fire with fire.

“Well, perhaps another time then, Dr. Spencer.”

Through all of this, his patient, Miss Caroline Fisk, had remained silent, not even a moan of discomfort. Apparently, her mother had noticed as well. “Caroline, are you not in pain?” she said pointedly which drew an immediate and agonizing groan from her daughter.

“Oh, yes, the pain is nearly unbearable.”

Knowing that the sooner he examined the girl the sooner he could be on his way, Lucas set about the task. “Does this hurt?” He gave a miniscule tap on her rib cage.

“I said it was nearly unbearable, did I not?” Miss Fisk replied tartly.

“The pain must be horrible, for as you know, Dr. Spencer, my dear Caroline has the sweetest disposition. That is, when she is not in excruciating pain.”

“Yes, of course, Mrs. Fisk,” Lucas said, then clamped his lips closed lest he say something he might regret.

“And does it hurt here as well?” he asked, but did not actually make contact with any part of Miss Fisk’s body.

The girl reared up from the lounge with a wail of agony. “Oh, it hurts there the worst of all.”

“Just as I thought,” the doctor said, rising.

“Well?” Mrs. Fisk followed as he walked to where he had left his doctor’s bag. “How serious is it, Doctor? You will come back tomorrow to check on her, will you not? Perhaps then you will be able to stay for refreshments.”

Lucas searched around in his bag, pulled out a few unguents and tinctures, mixed a couple of things together and handed the jar to Mrs. Fisk. “I believe if you apply this to the ache in her side you will see significant improvement in a matter of hours.”

“But, you will return tomorrow? What if she does not improve? I know we would both feel much better if you could call upon us, would morning be best? Or afternoon?” Mrs. Fisk gazed upon him hopefully.

“I cannot make any promises, Mrs. Fisk, I have a very busy schedule. I expect the salve I gave you will do the trick and an additional visit from me would just be a waste of your valuable time and attention.”

“Then, perhaps dinner? You must eat dinner after a long day of seeing patients. Will you not be so kind as to dine with us tomorrow evening?” Desperation caused Mrs. Fisk’s voice to go up a couple of registers.

“Thank you, Mrs. Fisk, but I must decline. Thank you just the same.”

“We have recently taken delivery of a new barouche, Dr. Spencer. What a wonderfully swift conveyance it is. We would be pleased to have you ride out with us, are you free day after tomorrow?”

Lucas fought against an exasperated sigh. “Oh, Mrs. Fisk, your daughter is in such severe pain I am sure she would not enjoy a ride, even in something as elegant as a new barouche, for quite some time.”

“Dr. Spencer, you work much too hard. I do hope we will at least see you at the assembly scheduled for Friday fortnight. A man such as yourself ought to get out and enjoy himself. And my Caroline is an excellent dancer. You may recall the dance master I hired to teach everyone the waltz at our last assembly. The same gentleman gave Caroline private lessons and declared her to be the best dancer he had seen in quite some time. I am sure she would be happy to save the first dance for you.”

It had been a long day and an even longer visit to the Fisk home. Though Lucas rarely lost his composure, Mrs. Fisk’s insistent nature had finally gotten on his last nerve and an impish desire to shock overcame him.

“I believe I will be at the assembly, Mrs. Fisk, but I will have to reserve all my dances for my new bride as I plan to be married by then. It will be a nice opportunity to introduce my wife to her new neighbors, do you not agree? I am sure she will be pleased to make the acquaintance of both you and Miss Fisk.”

“What?” both women shrieked.

“Married? To whom?” Miss Fisk said, rising from the sofa with ease and speed. “Why have we not heard of this news before now?”

“I wanted the two of you to be the first to know.” He handed Mrs. Fisk his bill, bowed to them both and exited the room as quickly as he could.

He had certainly gotten himself into a pickle now.

But the look on both the elder and the younger Fisks’ faces was well worth it.

Two weeks to get a bride. He had best get home and write to Lady Ambrosia.