

RESISTING ROMEO

One

Once upon a time, Claudine Bellerose enjoyed creating a grand entrance. Her mentor had been one of the best actresses to grace the London stage, and under Nan's instruction, Claudine had become quite good at commanding a crowd.

A stunned silence would descend over the Grand Saloon. Theatre patrons would turn to gawk. And Nan's mouth would arch into a coy smile that was a testament to her pride in her student.

Yes, Claudine had learned to stand out wherever she went, but three years of living under the Duke of Stanhurst's iron fist taught her it was better to go unnoticed. Unfortunately, the giant of a man walking beside her along Bond Street tended to cause a stir wherever they went.

She eyed the towering stack of hatboxes and packages in Benny's arms. "Are you certain I cannot lend assistance? Can you see where you are going?"

"No, ma'am. I mean, yes, ma'am."

"I am not helpless. At least allow me to carry one of the hatboxes."

When she reached for the stack, her companion turned his shoulder to block her and kept walking. "I can do it."

She stopped on the walkway and sighed. "Benny."

His long-legged strides quickly created a gap between them, and she hurried after him before he left her behind. When she caught up, Benny glowered as if she'd attempted to steal sandwiches from the picnic hamper Cook had packed to feed Claudine's fellow actresses after their lessons.

Her good friend Sophia Darlington was meeting her at the theatre to teach the other actresses how to protect themselves. A woman had been attacked close to the Drayton Theatre last week, and everyone was understandably nervous. Learning a few basic Wing Chun maneuvers, however, would likely ease their worry. Knowing how to defend herself against an attack using the ancient warrior art had certainly

helped Claudine regain her confidence. She was grateful to the Darlington sisters for sharing what they had learned from their uncle.

“The question is not whether you are capable of carrying the load alone,” she said to Benny, “but if I should allow it. Don’t you grow tired of fulfilling my every whim?”

“No.” He pursed his lips, which were stained red from his usual breakfast of pickled beets. “Mr. Vistoire said I should take care of you. Friends take care of friend’s friends. You will tell him I did good when he returns, won’t you?”

She smiled and patted his massive forearm reassuringly. “Of course I will. You are doing a fine job, and Xavier will be pleased when he and Regina return from their honeymoon trip.”

Benny beamed, his round face aglow with pleasure. The man was uncommonly attached to the American gentleman, Xavier Vistoire, and she suspected Xavier was fond of Benny as well. Claudine found it rather sweet, albeit odd since Benny had been Xavier’s guard while he was held hostage on Benny’s family’s farm. Not long ago, Benny had proven his loyalty and earned Xavier’s forgiveness by saving his life. And Benny had been very good to Claudine since he’d come to stay at her town house.

Because Xavier and his new bride had provided her with safe haven when her former benefactor wanted to kill her, she had been happy to take on Benny when the couple craved a little privacy. It was meant to be a temporary arrangement, but Claudine and Benny had become fast friends, and she was in no hurry to be rid of her house guest.

Benny’s size had intimidated her at first. The Duke of Stanhurst hadn’t been much taller than she, but his fists had been large enough to nearly break her. She couldn’t imagine the damage a man of Benny’s stature could do. Her worries had been for naught, however. He was a kind, gentle, and protective soul. God help any many who wished her harm now.

Claudine directed her gaze ahead and squeaked. “Stop!” She shot out her arm in front of Benny.

As usual, he followed her order without question and stopped abruptly. The top

packages flew from the stack and rained down on an unsuspecting lady as she disembarked from her carriage.

“Oh!” The young woman’s hand fluttered to her chest. A package knocked her bonnet askew. “Lord, Almighty!”

She shoved the brim higher on her head, her eyes sparking with irritation. Her gaze traveled up all six foot four inches of muscular man at Claudine’s side, and her jaw went slack.

“Ah, erm. G-gads— Eh... Oh, m-my!”

Benny’s reddish brown eyebrows dropped low on his broad forehead. “Is that French?” he asked Claudine.

She smothered a chuckle with her hand and shook her head.

Crimson flashed in the lady’s porcelain cheeks, and she tried to cover her discomposure with an indignant sniff and a jab of her gloved finger at Benny. “You, sir, should watch where you are walking.”

Benny bobbed his head. “Yes, ma’am. I will. I promise I will.”

The lady’s footman eased up behind her, appearing slightly green as if he might be called upon to defend his mistress. She swung her accusing finger in Claudine’s direction. “See that he does or I--I...” Her gaze flickered toward Benny again, and she gulped. “Just see that he watches where he is going.”

“Yes, milady.” Claudine curtsied as the woman bolted for the milliner shop. Her footman took a wide berth of Benny and dashed after her.

“Do you know that lady?” Benny asked.

Claudine bent to pick up her packages. “No, but from the coat of arms on the carriage door, I would wager she is the new Viscountess Wishbourne. I read about the marriage in the *Morning Times*.”

The viscountess was too young to recognize Claudine. The Duke of Stanhurst had kept her out of the public eye these last two years, most likely so she could not appeal to anyone for help with leaving him. She had nearly been successful the first time, and the duke had never been one to take risks.

Claudine still recognized many of the ladies of the *ton* by sight from her time on stage. At the height of her fame, some had even invited her to perform for their

guests. Now they barely glanced in her direction.

Benny took the packages from her. "Was I supposed to kiss her finger?"

Claudine smiled. "Only hands when they are offered. We could practice more this evening if you like."

"All right."

She had been teaching Benny basic manners with the goal of helping him to blend in with the crowds a little better. For the most part, he was an apt student. They hadn't covered what to do when a lady angrily shakes a finger in one's direction because she hadn't considered that it might be necessary.

"Please try not to run down anyone else today," she teased. "I need hearty and hale patrons to attend my play."

With the packages secured in Benny's arms, they continued toward her carriage where it was waiting near the intersection.

A year ago, Claudine had tried her hand at playwriting and found she enjoyed it as much as she did being on stage. When the duke had demanded she abandon acting and threw tantrums when she visited her fellow thespians, she'd decided giving up her career was in her best interests. Wandering the town house and dreading her benefactor's visits had almost driven her to madness, but creating a happy life for herself on paper had become her sweet escape.

Now she had three complete plays to her name, and her latest was being performed at the Drayton Theatre in fourteen days.

Two ladies in pastel gowns approached with their chaperone in tow. Benny stepped aside to allow the women to pass. The elderly one glowered at them. He simply smiled and wished her a good day.

Benny never seemed to allow others' judgments to bother him. His only concerns were for his friends. Claudine liked that quality in him very much.

"You bought a lot of hats," he said to her.

"I suppose three seems extravagant to a man who didn't own a single one until recently." She was proud of his attempts at conversation these days. In the beginning, he had barely spoken, and his reticence had made for long evenings at home. "The hats are part of the costuming. Very necessary, I assure you."

Every item she'd purchased that morning would be used for the production. Funding her play would require her to live miserly for a while, but the sacrifice was worth seeing her dream come to fruition. Someday she hoped to be as successful as Hannah Cowley or Elizabeth Griffin and have one of her plays performed at Drury Lane.

Reaching the carriage, she passed the packages to her footman and climbed into the aging Berlin. Benny surrendered his bundle as well and climbed inside to sit across from her.

"Does your play have pirates or sword fights?" Benny asked as the carriage lurched onto the congested thoroughfare.

"I am afraid not."

"Oh." Benny's shoulders slumped. "I was hoping for pirates."

"Maybe next time."

He grinned, revealing a few gaps where he was missing teeth. "If you need ideas, I can help you."

"Thank you. I would love to hear your ideas, but first we must survive this production." She couldn't invest in another show unless this one was successful.

As the carriage headed toward Drayton Theatre in Marylebone, Claudine retrieved a sheath of papers from the large bag lying beside her on the seat and silently read through her work for the hundredth time. Every time she looked at her work, she found places where small improvements could be made. If she kept changing the dialogue, however, her fellow thespians would soon descend on her like the Senate on Caesar, but she wanted the script to be perfect.

Benny leaned toward the window to watch the world speeding past. He called out landmarks along the way, which had become his habit on their first trip to the theatre. When he pointed out the church, and the carriage turned onto their street, she tucked her papers away. The Berlin slowed to a stop outside the theatre. The footman hopped from his perch to open the door and set the stairs.

Claudine smiled at Benny. "Sophia should be here any moment if she hasn't already arrived."

"Go on inside, Miss Claudine. I'll bring your costumes."

“Thank you.” She descended the steps with the footman’s assistance and swept toward the arched doorway of the theatre. Stone columns flanked the entry, lending it a regal air. As she reached for the copper door handle, now green with age, the door flew open, and a strapping lad nearly barreled into her.

She took in his livery and recognized it as belonging to the Clarendon. The hotel provided footmen for their guests, but she couldn’t imagine what business any guest might have with the theatre. “Pardon me, ma’am.” He held the door open to allow her to enter.

Dismissing the matter as unimportant, she thanked him and went in search of Oliver Jonas to deliver her scripts. The manager was in the front of the auditorium with the small cast and crew gathered around him as he read aloud from a sheet of paper.

Tilde, Claudine’s understudy and close friend, gasped and covered her mouth. Her lover wrapped his arm around her waist, and she buried her face into his shoulder.

Claudine’s heart bolted. “What happened? What is wrong?”

One of the stagehands spotted her moving along the aisle and shook his head. His forehead was wrinkled as if he couldn’t comprehend the situation well enough to explain it.

She hurried her step when no one responded. “Oliver?”

The manager turned and thrust the piece of paper toward her as if appealing for help. “The Drayton Theatre is being closed,” he said. “The company is being evicted.”

“Under whose orders?”

“The new owner’s.” His usual robust complexion had a sickly gray cast to it.

Her friendship with Oliver went back many years from the days when his mother had shared a stage with Claudine’s mentor, Nan. Claudine and Oliver used to keep each other company when they were supposed to stay out from under foot. He’d taught her to juggle, and she had tried to teach him to sing. In all the time she had known Oliver, Claudine had never seen him shaken.

She took the paper and skimmed the bold handwriting. The new owner wanted the theatre vacated in seven days. Hoping she had misread it the first time, she read

it again, but it was succinct and left no room for misinterpretation. “But we have a *performance*—in two weeks.”

“Not any longer.” Oliver cursed under his breath and raked his fingers through his dark brown hair. “Everyone is to begin packing their belongings. We have a week to vacate the building.”

Yes. She had read the letter, but it still made no sense. How could the man do this with no warning?

Jane’s light blue eyes filled with tears. “Where are we to go?”

At sixteen, she was the youngest member of the company, and she had only been at the Drayton for a month. Her natural talent and willingness to run herself ragged for the other players had saved her from the workhouse after her release from the children’s foundling hospital. Jane truly had no other options. Neither did a few of the others who’d found their way to Oliver’s door after a few unlucky turns.

Oliver grimaced. “I don’t imagine the gentleman cares where we go, Jane. He intends to sell the property.”

Lars hugged Tilde when tears slipped from the corners of her eyes. “We will find work elsewhere, *schatz*. Do not worry.”

He was correct, of course. Lars and Tilde were seasoned players who had performed in theatres all over the Continent, but they had come to the Drayton at her urging to perform her play. Claudine couldn’t help feeling responsible that they were in this situation.

“This is not right.” She squared her jaw, crumpled the letter, and stuffed it into her bag. “I will go speak with Mr. Hawke at the hotel. I am sure once he realizes he is displacing everyone, he will reconsider. At a minimum, he should postpone until after the play.”

Oliver scoffed. “The nob doesn’t care what happens to any of us.”

Perhaps that was true, but she wasn’t ready to surrender, and Oliver’s fatalistic acceptance of the situation disappointed her. He was the manager, for heaven’s sake. He should be a champion for the company--not lying down so Mr. Hawke could wipe his boots on him.

If Oliver would not rise to the occasion, she would. “I will handle Mr. Hawke.”

She plopped her bag on the front row. "When Miss Darlington arrives, please convey my regrets. If she does not want to proceed with the lesson without me, I will call at Wedmore House this week to reschedule."

Benny and her footman entered the auditorium with the purchases she had made earlier.

"Please leave the costumes backstage," she said. "I need to pay a call to the Clarendon. Will you be joining me, Benny?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She smiled. "I was hoping you would be agreeable."

Gentlemen tended to be better listeners when Benny stood behind her.

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