

An Eyre of Mystery

G. Leeson

(Sneak Peek)

Chapter Six

I heard feet hurrying toward me from every direction. Grace was the first person I saw—her face was red and pinched as she patted my cheek.

Had I lost consciousness? I didn't think so, but—

“You young women need to stop scurrying up and down those stairs like so many rats.” Mrs. Fairfax glared down at me. “I knew one of you would trip over the hem of your dress and fall one day. It's a wonder you didn't break your neck.”

I got the feeling she wished I had.

Mr. Briggs stepped around Grace to take my hand. “Do you think you can stand? Is anything broken?”

“I don't think so.” I tried to evaluate the pain radiating throughout my body. Most of it was in my head—literally, not figuratively.

“I'll carry you upstairs then.”

As Mr. Briggs started to gather me into his arms, I said, “I'm sorry—I mean, I don't think anything is broken. I do believe I can stand.”

He helped me to my feet and allowed me a moment to get my bearings. I looked around to see who else had come to see about me.

“Shall I fetch the doctor?” Grace asked.

“No, thank you.” I managed a slight smile. “I'm sure I'll be fine.”

“Laudanum, then?” Mr. Briggs asked.

“N-not...not even that.” I noticed Adele was smirking, and I widened my smile. “You didn’t cause me to fall to get out of schoolwork, did you?”

“You know I didn’t. In fact, you’re the one who has put our lessons on hold.” She looked up the stairs and then back at me. “I suppose I’d better be more watchful myself since the women of Thornfield Hall seem determined to fall prey to one misfortune after another.”

“The women only?” I asked, dropping the pretense of a smile. “It seems to me Mr. Rochester is dealing with a great deal of misfortune of his own.”

“Perhaps of his own making,” Adele said.

“Besides,” Mrs. Fairfax added, challenging me with her stare, “he isn’t dead. Yet.”

Mr. Briggs insisted on helping me up to my room, and Grace fussed over me once I was there. She fluffed my pillow and removed my shoes.

“Just lie here and rest for a while,” she said. “You’ll feel better by dinner.”

“Please let me know when Father Francis gets here.”

“I will.”

I was relieved when Grace pulled the door shut and left me alone. My head throbbed, and I’d have loved to take a short nap, but I was afraid to let down my guard. I used an acupressure technique I’d picked up somewhere to try to ease the pain as I assessed my predicament.

There was no way I’d tripped on my hem, as Mrs. Fairfax had suggested. Had that been the case, I’d have fallen forward. No, someone had definitely pulled me backward, and it was more than likely one of the people who’d come to help me. Tonight, before going to sleep, I’d push that dresser in front of the door.

But how had someone slipped up behind me without my being aware? The stairs weren’t terribly wide, but I still should have seen or heard someone approach. I’d have to investigate that mystery when I was feeling better.

On edge, I started when there was a knock at my door. “Grace?”

“No, it’s St. John. May I come in?”

“Okay.” I was still struggling to sit up when St. John—pronounced *Sinjin*—rushed into the room.

“Easy.” He sat on the edge of the bed and took my face in his hands. “My darling Jane, are you all right? We’ve just arrived, and Miss Poole told us you’d taken a tumble.”

“I’m fine.”

He let go of my face and pulled me into a hug. This wasn’t the cold St. John I was familiar with from the original novel, the man who’d asked Jane to marry him because she’d be a good wife for a missionary in India. He leaned back out of the hug and started to kiss me.

Nope, this is for sure not cold St. John! What is the nature of his relationship with Jane in this new iteration of the book?

Turning my face away, I said, “We don’t want to set the entire household to gossiping. We should go downstairs.”

He smiled, and I was immeasurably relieved that there were no silverfish in his teeth. “I adore that you are the epitome of propriety. I’m eager to make you my wife—the sooner, the better.”

After giving me a chaste kiss on the cheek, he helped me out of bed where I put my shoes back on before we went downstairs. I wondered briefly if he’d looked as I’d slipped on the delicate boots. If so, he got quite a shot of ankle. Maybe now he’d believe me brazen and decide not to marry me.

I really need to get out of this place. It’s starting to drive me insane.

St. John’s sisters, Diana and Mary got up from the sofa and met us in the middle of the room.

Diana brushed a stray hair back off my forehead. “Are you well? We were told of your fall. I can help you get your hair back in order.”

“Would you please?” I hadn’t realized my hair wasn’t in order. In fact, I hadn’t given it a thought.

“Of course, dear. And we can do it right here. No need to climb those nasty stairs again.”

That was a relief. Soreness had settled into my limbs, and I wasn’t looking forward to traipsing upstairs to get my hair done.

“Mary, do you have a comb in your reticule?” Diana asked.

“No.”

“You do,” her sister insisted. “I saw you use it in the carriage.”

“Very well,” Mary said. “But you’ll clean it afterward.”

Gee whizz, this new Mary is a little ray of sunshine. She and Adele should get along great.

Mary begrudgingly turned over her comb to Diana, and Diana instructed me to sit on a chair by the window. Within about fifteen minutes and without making my head hurt much worse than it was already, Diana had me presentable again—at least, by her standards.

Not long after I’d had my hair done, Vidocq arrived in his Father Francis disguise. When he was shown into the living room, I got up out of my chair and all but sprinted over to kiss him on both cheeks.

Eyes dancing, he said, “Good evening, *ma petite*. I’m delighted to be here with you.”

“And I’m so glad you’re here,” I said.

St. John came to stand beside me. “Who have we here?”

“This is Father Francis.”

“How did the two of you become acquainted?” St. John asked.

Before I could answer, Vidocq walked further into the room, sat on the chair I’d so recently abandoned, and began his elaborate tale.

“I was a friend of Jane’s parents,” he said. “I used to bounce the *bébé* Jane on my knee. Oh, she was so happy and so adored her Father Francis.”

He could’ve stopped there, but *mais non!* He had a trowel and was laying it on thick.

“After little Jane lost her parents to typhus, we lost touch for such a long time. I didn’t find her again until I officiated the wedding of Maria Temple of Lockwood School.” He closed his eyes as if he were fighting back tears. “For some reason—a nudge from my beloved Creator, I daresay—I was prompted to tell Miss Temple about my dear friends, the Eyres, and their precious daughter. She reunited me with Jane the very next day.”

He opened his eyes, damp with tears, and crossed the room to where I stood. Putting his hands on my shoulders, he said, “How it pained me to leave Jane in that dreadful school.” He turned so that he could gauge the expressions of his captivated audience. “But, alas, I had no choice. Only today did I find my sweet Jane again. The sight of her brought such joy to this old man’s heart.” He lowered his head. “Yet I’m much troubled by the hardships that have befallen Thornfield Hall.”

“Thank you, Father Francis,” I said. “May I get you a drink?”

“I wouldn’t turn down a brandy.”

I poured him a glass and then suggested we take a stroll through the garden before dinner.

“I’ll go with you,” St. John said.

“Stay with us,” Diana told him. “Let Jane and her friend reminisce.”

“Oh.” He gave a slight chuckle. “Forgive me for not wanting to allow my future bride out of my sight.”

“Go on, you two,” Diana said.

I handed Vidocq his brandy, and we made our escape.

“Quite the leech, isn’t he?” he asked, once we were outside.

“Yes. I wasn’t anticipating him to be this way.”

“You were thinking he might be in India already?”

“I did. At the least, I didn’t think I’d see him here at Thornfield Hall.” I frowned up at him. “How do you know so much about me—I mean, Jane?”

“It was a fine story, I wove, *non?*”

“You didn’t answer my question.”

Grinning, he said, “It wasn’t difficult. I’m a brilliant detective—is that not why you asked me to come? Now, we haven’t long, so we must concentrate on the murder of Bertha Rochester. Have you made any discoveries?”

“I found a man’s button in Mrs. Rochester’s chambers. It isn’t Edward’s, so it’s possible she was having an affair.”

“That’s a strong possibility. I heard she was quite beautiful—also mad, but such a combination can be exciting!” He waggled his bushy eyebrows.

I shook my head. Vidocq, alias Father Francis, might prove to be more of a handful than I’d expected. But he was right—he was a terrific detective.

“I saw Adele studying a book on botany,” I said, “and there are some potentially dangerous plants here in the garden.”

He nodded. “I see that. But Mrs. Rochester was stabbed, *non?*”

“She was, but maybe her killer gave her some sort of sedative so she’d be in a deep sleep when she was attacked.”

“Astute. Anything else?”

“Only this—I fell down the stairs earlier, and I’m positive someone here caused my accident.”

“That means you must be extremely careful, *ma petite*, but also that you are making the progress.”

Chapter Seven

Vidocq and I went back into the house to find that Richard “Uncle Dickie” Mason and Blanche Ingram had arrived. Blanche was every bit as pretty and ostentatious as Jane had described her in the novel, but Adele didn’t seem to be taken with her. No surprise, since Adele wasn’t the animated, vivacious kid I’d expected to meet. But she did seem to adore Richard, who’d been a minor character in the original novel. When Vidocq and I walked into the parlor, Adele was clutching Richard’s right arm and leaning her head against it.

“Good evening,” I said. “I’d like you both to meet my friend, Father Francis.”

Richard was either not inclined or not able to free his arm to shake hands with Vidocq, so he gave him a brief nod of acknowledgment. Vidocq responded in kind, his attention much more occupied with the lovely Blanche. I did hope he’d remember he was pretending to be a man of the cloth. Then again, even a man of the cloth might be tempted to check out that cleavage.

“I’m so glad you’re here.” Blanche sashayed over to take the clergyman’s hand. “It’s a relief to know that poor Edward won’t go to his grave with unconfessed sins in his heart.”

“He can go to hell for all I care,” Richard said.

Blanche released Father Francis’s hand as if it had burned her and rushed over to Richard’s left side. “Oh, my poor Richard, I didn’t mean to be insensitive. I know how you grieve for your sister.”

“B-but you were a character witness at Edward’s trial,” I said to Richard, looking from him to Mr. Briggs.

“I shouldn’t like to discuss that at dinner,” Richard said. “Suffice it to say that I spoke the truth about the Edward I knew and was confident a just verdict would be handed down.”

“I, for one, wouldn’t want any man to die with a burdened soul,” St. John said. “My sisters and I are here to comfort Jane and Adele while they await Mr. Rochester’s end because Adele is of the utmost importance to Jane. She wants to make certain Adele will be well cared for when we depart for India.”

I shot Vidocq an expression of helplessness which he read expertly.

“Mr. Rivers, tell me how you and Jane met,” he said, diverting St. John from his talk of whisking me away to India.

With a slight smile, St. John got up and came to take my hand. He spoke to the room at large, but he gazed at me. “I found Jane near my home one evening. She was cold and half-starved. The desolate girl had been walking for days, having fled this place after some sort of argument.” His eyes flicked toward Adele.

In the novel, Jane had fled Thornfield Hall after learning Rochester had a wife he kept in the attic but was intending to go through with a wedding to Jane anyway. But apparently that wasn’t the reason Jane had fled in *this* story. Jane had come back to work here rather than becoming a teacher in the village girls’ school. This new development brought up all sorts of questions.

Had Jane known about Bertha all along? Had she still fallen in love with Edward? What had driven her away then? More importantly, what had brought her back? I realized I didn’t know this Jane Eyre—the character, as well as the story. Was it possible *Jane* had killed Bertha Mason? No. If she had, she’d never let Edward take the blame.

“Darling, are you all right?” St. John asked. “You’ve gone quite pale.”

“Well, she did take that tumble,” Diana said.

I tried to shake off my distress. “I’m fine.”

At that moment, Mrs. Fairfax called us into the dining room for dinner.

Reading the name cards, I was relieved to find that I was seated between Father Francis and Richard Mason. I hoped I’d get the opportunity to get to know “Uncle Dickie” a little bit and try to determine if he might’ve murdered Bertha. After all, he

was awfully vocal about wanting Edward dead—could it be he wanted his scapegoat gone before anyone discovered the truth about his sister’s death?

Our first course was some sort of broth—beef, I think. It was bland, but I was hungry, and it wasn’t bad.

“Miss Ingram, tell me about yourself.”

I stiffened as soon as Vidocq said the words *Miss Ingram*, but I realized that rather than being the flirtatious Vidocq, he was being the detective.

“I would answer you in your native tongue, Father, but I know not everyone here speaks French,” she said.

“I do,” Adele said. “Far better than you, I imagine. Would you like me to recite the poem, *Le Corbeau et Le Renard* by Jean de La Fontaine?”

Lowering my head to hide my smile, I was glad to see that not all traces of the old Adele were gone.

“That won’t be necessary,” Blanche said. “And it would be rude for you to recite a poem when I’ve yet to answer Father Francis.”

Adele shrugged. “Suit yourself. Do you know the poem? It’s about a crow who is tricked by a flattering fox.”

Blanche pinned her eyes on Richard Mason until he noticed her.

“Eat your soup before it gets cold, my pet,” he said to Adele.

She beamed at him, smirked at Blanche, and then dug her spoon into the soup.

“Thank heavens I’ve been spared the necessity of becoming a governess,” Blanche said. “I don’t know that I’d have the patience to accommodate some beastly imp under my tutelage.”

Adele swallowed and then opened her mouth to speak, but she resumed eating her soup after getting a nudge from Richard.

“I’m confident some man will sweep you off your feet soon, Miss Ingram.” Father Francis grinned. “I am available to perform matrimonial services, in case anyone is interested.”

Blanche peeked at Richard from under her lashes.

That was subtle.

“Thank you for the offer,” St. John said.

I felt my eyes grow wide, looked down, and shoved a spoonful of broth into my mouth.

“I’m sure Jane would adore it if our marriage were to be officiated by her dear friend,” he continued.

“As lovely as that would be, we should wait until the sadness of this week has passed, *non?* I should have been more considerate in my speech and will endeavor to be more sensitive.”

Once again, I was grateful for Vidocq’s quick thinking. Of course, it was his offer to perform marriages that had caused the alarm in the first place. But then, I knew he was only trying to see if Richard Mason would rise to the bait. He hadn’t. Did he not return Blanche’s feelings? After all, the couple *had* arrived together.

“Mr. Mason, will you be staying on for a little while after the—the end of the week?” I asked.

“More than likely. Mr. Briggs is helping me sort my sister’s estate and, although I’d wanted to make this a surprise, I’m attempting to secure Adele’s guardianship.”

Squealing, Adele leapt up from the table and threw her arms around her Uncle Dickie.

Blanche’s mouth thinned and both her hands clenched into fists. It was apparent she hadn’t known about Richard’s plan to adopt Adele, and she was certainly not happy about it.

* * *

After dinner, everyone went into the drawing room to chat. I took Vidocq aside and asked him if he would accompany me into town tomorrow morning.

“*Mais, oui,*” he said quietly. “I’ll secure a carriage, and we will go before the rest of the household begins to stir.”

“Thank you.”

He cast a discerning eye around the room. “Be careful tonight, *ma petite.*”

“You, too.”

St. John strode over to the corner to join us. “What are you two whispering about?” The question was asked good-naturedly, but I felt an undercurrent of possessiveness in his tone.

“I don’t want to be rude, but I’d like to go on up to bed,” I said. “Father Francis believes everyone will understand, given my accident earlier today.”

“Of course! I’ll walk you upstairs.” St. John took my arm and ushered me to the center of the room. “Jane needs to retire. Her fall has taken a toll on her, and she needs her rest. She’ll see us all at breakfast tomorrow morning.”

No, I probably wouldn’t, Reader, but he didn’t need to know that—and neither did anyone else in that room apart from Vidocq.

Taking a candlestick from the sideboard before we mounted the steps, I lit the candle in it and carried it in the hand not tucked into St. John’s arm. I wasn’t sure if he was being solicitous or domineering. Feeling it was in my best interest to encourage the man, I squeezed his arm and smiled at him.

At my bedroom door, I let him give me a kiss on the cheek. I wondered how scandalous that was. Since we were engaged, I supposed it was okay.

“Goodnight,” I told him.

“I’ll be right down the hall should you need me,” he said. “Call out, and I’ll hurry to your aid.”

Good to know. “Thank you.”

I opened the door and stepped inside. As St. John turned away, I closed the door, stepped over to my dresser, and lit the other candles in my room.

A silverfish scurried out from under the bed and beneath the door.

Reader, do you have any idea how much that freaked me out?

Were there others? Was the small silverfish a sign that someone—one of *the silverfish*—was hiding somewhere in my room? I got down on my knees and looked under the bed, careful not to set the bedspread on fire—although had someone been hiding there, a fire would have been the least of my worries. Fortunately, there was no person. Also, no silverfish. At least, not under the bed.

I checked the wardrobe. No one there either, but my clothes had been disturbed. Only slightly, but I could tell. The items on my dressing table had been moved too. Someone had searched my room. But for what?

Placing the candlestick on the dressing table, I felt around for panels that might open up and lead to a secret room or hallway. I hadn’t had the opportunity to check the area near the staircase yet, but I would.

Unable to find a panel leading to another possible hiding place, I pushed the dresser in front of my door before undressing down to my chemise. I hadn’t seen any other silverfish in my room, but the terrifying thought that the silverfish could morph into the persons they were pretending to be gave me serious misgivings about going to sleep as I slid between the sheets.

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