

Ponder This...



RACHEL A. JAMES



Whatever is
Honourable

A
*Field of
Forget-me-nots*

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Rachel A. James

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A Field of Forget-me-nots
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*1 May 1859
Longworth Hall, Luxbury*

"Her condition worsens." Ana placed the back of her hand on Lady Dunston's forehead and grimaced. "Has Mr. Renshaw been sent for?"

"Yes, though I wonder if word has yet reached him." Mrs. Pridmore tutted. "What business has the boy with traveling so far from home when his aunt be in the state she is?" She shook her head. "It's not right."

Ana wrung a cloth in tepid water and replaced it on her guardian's face. "I fear there is little that can be done, although I am no physician. The doctor..."

"Yes miss, he will call in this eve."

She waited for the housekeeper to leave before exhaling her frustrations. The staff expected her to be strong, but with her future so uncertain, it was difficult to remain positive. She kneaded the tension from her neck brought on by her arduous night of sleeping in the chair.

As ward of the grand Lady Dunston, she held an unusual rank within society. She was neither servant, nor family. Upon her guardian's death, what would happen to her? It was unlikely that Luke would want her to stay, even though they were once childhood friends, they'd not been acquainted in years.

She walked over to the long window, relishing in the sunlight's warmth. The most plausible solution was to seek a position as a governess. She sighed. Did she wish to teach? Not particularly, but if it kept her from becoming homeless... She could be a lady's companion but was unaware of anyone seeking such a person.

Defeated, she slumped onto the window seat. A suitable marriage was the only solution, but with her questionable breeding and lack of fortune, utterly impossible.

~*~

The hail pelted harder, and Luke ducked his head down, leaving a meager slit of visibility between his cloak and hat. With one arm on the reins, his horse veered to the right, sliding on rocky ground.

He patted her mane. "Easy, girl." He'd ridden for too long, but he was nearly home. Was Aunt May even alive? She'd always been of a sickly nature and inevitably suffered from one ailment or another. However, Aunt insisted he go on his travels, and, in all honesty, Luke needed little persuasion on the matter. Since his parents' tragic death, he found no solace in the village of Luxbury, which held so many memories.

His stomach growled, reminding him he'd passed teatime, and he'd not eaten since morning. With relief, the sight of Longworth Hall came into view, with its

gleaming white limestone and grand Italianate architecture standing proudly amongst unkempt lawns.

Luke wrinkled his nose at the estate's poor upkeep. He dismounted and frowned, no one came to tend to his horse. He rapped sharply on the oak door and waited. For goodness sake. Where was Carter? He charged through to the entrance hall and sprinted up the grand staircase, skipping three steps at a time, his footsteps echoing through the country house. Storming through the bedroom corridor, he headed for Aunt May's room.

In the corner of the chamber, a woman in liveries bent over the fireplace. She glanced up at him and dropped the gathering of kindling she'd held in her arms, the wood thudding to the floor. A small yelp, followed by a gasp escaped her, and a sooty hand flung to her mouth.

His gaze swung over to the grand four-poster bed, its morbid curtains drawn back to reveal his aunt, ill indeed. Beads of sweat lingered upon her forehead.

"Why do you make a fire?" he asked the maid. "She is full of fever."

The young woman hesitated. "She complained of the cold. I opened a window to let in the fresh air."

Indeed, the room was chilly. He buttoned his coat and positioned himself next to the bed. "Where are the servants? My horse needs attention."

The maid deposited the wood neatly beside the fireplace. "Manfred will tend to your horse, though he is on an errand in the village, at present."

"Manfred?"

"The manservant, sir."

Luke edged closer to the fire's flames. It had been

a while since his last visit, but truly, he didn't recognize any of the servants. "And where is Carter?"

The maid pulled a face. "The old butler? He's been gone for some time... there are but six remaining household staff."

Luke swallowed hard at the thought of abandoning his duty. He was heir after all.

Next to him, his aunt moaned, and he turned his attention to her, taking her small bony hand within his own.

"Has my prodigal nephew really returned to me?" Her voice was raspy with ill-use. "I can scarce believe it."

Luke stared at the maid in the corner. She was clearly enraptured by their conversation. As he met her eye, she glanced away, heat rushing to her face. She gathered her things and left.

He drew his attention back to Aunt. "Prodigal is a little harsh."

Aunt May chuckled, which led to a bout of coughing, and she drew her hand from his and pressed a handkerchief to her mouth.

Luke grabbed the glass of water from the side table and offered it to her.

Guilt wrestled within his gut. "Who has been taking care of you?"

She patted his arm. "I've Georgiana for company."

"What, little Ana? That small foundling you took in for a season?"

"Yes, Miss Georgiana Weston. It was more than a trifle season; I assure you. Why, you were always at school, if I recall. Ana has turned into a marvelous young woman and so accomplished. She has been my only true companion these last few years."

He'd not given the girl much thought. After his parents' death, he'd remained at Oxford during the holiday periods and later traveled Europe.

"She was here when you came in."

"She was?"

"Yes, by the fire. You spoke to her."

"That, was Ana? Why I thought her to be the maid!" Things were indeed dire. Bidding his leave, he went in search of his room. The candles were unlit, despite the fading daylight, another example of the estate suffering financially. The once elaborate house was sparse in comparison to his memory of a decade ago. Dust sheets covered the unused furniture and spaces appeared on the walls from paintings that had been sold.

And this was his inheritance.

~*~

Ana stared into the mirror in utter disbelief. "This is how you present yourself to Luke Renshaw." Ten years since he'd last laid eyes on her, and nothing had changed since that time except, she'd like to think, an improved appearance. Apart from now, of course, when she depicted a glorified scullery maid.

Discarding the filthy working clothes, she'd borrowed from Betty, she reached into the washbasin with vigor, scrubbing at her hands and under her fingernails until it hurt. The lavender scented soap was a little bit of luxury she allowed herself.

It was Mrs. Pridmore's turn to nurse Lady Dunston, giving Ana a few moments peace to ready herself for dinner. Since Lady Dunston took to having her meals in her room, Ana usually ate with the

housekeeper, but, upon Mr. Renshaw's request, she'd been asked to dine with him that evening.

A knock sounded, and Betty entered the chamber.
"Do you require a hand with dressing, miss?"

"Thank you, I am struggling with these fastenings at the back." Ana glanced at the young girl in the mirror. "We'll need you to serve in the dining room this evening, with no footmen to call upon."

"Yes, of course, miss."

Ana gave an appreciative smile, "Thank you. I understand your duties must be overbearing. It is an awful lot for us to ask more of you."

"It's all right, miss. Can't complain. And you made the fire again for the mistress. You should've summoned me."

"Well, I was there, and it seemed silly to pull you away from your work when I could do it. At least, it did, until Mr. Renshaw made an unexpected appearance."

Betty giggled, helped Ana with her dress, and took to tidying up her hair. "I bet Mr. Renshaw got the shock of his life."

Ana gazed out the window. "I think he did, and I believe I am to blame. Let's do our best to make a lady of me, Betty." If indeed, her very future depended upon this gentleman, she would do all she could to appease him.

~*~

The chime of the grandfather clock resonated in his skull, although the dimness of the candlelight softened the surroundings and feeble furnishings.

"Good evening, Mr. Renshaw."

Luke glanced up at the one who addressed him and froze for the second time that day. She faltered at his intense stare, toying with a loose tendril of hair. "You did request my company?"

The lady from his aunt's chamber stood transformed into sheer elegance. One could no longer mistake her for a servant.

He blinked again at the girl he vaguely remembered. "Ana?"

Her face flushed, and she glanced away, feigning interest in the fine bone china tableware.

"My apologies." Taking a step toward her, he held out his hand to escort her to her seat. "Miss Weston, the years have been kind."

"Thank you."

Returning to his place at the head of the table, he made a start on the leek and potato soup. "So, my aunt tells me you are an amiable companion to her."

She nodded.

He perused her countenance. Her features were handsome enough. "Alas, I am curious. You never sought marriage?"

Ana dabbed the cloth napkin across her mouth and hesitated.

Indeed, she was handsome, not a great beauty to be sure, but many an uglier woman found success in marriage. It was his aunt's responsibility, as her guardian, to ensure her future comfort, but he doubted there would be much set aside for her financially, and the estate was to go to him.

Ana cleared her throat. "I fear I must explain my alarming appearance of before."

He shook his head. "I believe you are a great help to my aunt."

"She has done so much for me; I will forever be indebted to her." She stirred her soup and paused. "And you? Do you visit your family's estate often?"

The thought of his parent's house caused his pulse to quicken. "No. I let it out, for I've no desire to live there, and as it is entailed, I cannot sell it."

She nodded.

"We are of a similar situation. You and I, both orphans, both reliant upon Aunt May." Except that he would soon possess two houses he knew not what to do with, and she would have nothing.

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Ana pushed back the caramelized pear dessert on her plate. The usually delicious food was today, unappetizing. In fact, she felt quite ill, and sitting through this dinner with Mr. Renshaw was bordering on torturous. He'd turned into a most handsome gentleman, and yet it seemed the only thing he thought about was the estate he'd inherit. Why poor Lady Dunston was not yet in the grave, and he was likely planning the new wallpapers for the drawing room. She exhaled through pursed lips. To think, he owned a perfectly good estate of his own and yet chose not to live there—almost as if he were waiting for his aunt to pass on. This wasn't the Luke she remembered; he'd changed indeed.

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Luke could not believe it. "You'll disinherit me if I do not wed her? A natural child with not a penny to her name. Wed Miss Weston for the sake of convenience!"

Aunt May coughed again, her breathing turning wheezy. She motioned for the servant to leave the room. "Thank you, Betty. You may go now."

After Betty left the room, his aunt tugged on his hand. "Hush now, nephew. I mean nothing of the sort. You jump to conclusions."

Ashamed at his overreaction, he took a deep breath. He was vexing his dear aunt on her death bed. She did not need such a conflicted departure.

"Of course, you'll still inherit Longworth, although, with the debts on this place, you may not wish it. But it will be yours, all the same. I mention the notion of marriage with dear Ana only as I think the two of you are suited. Think on it, Luke. She has served me unconditionally all these years, and what thanks will she get for it? There is nothing I can give her, yet when I go, she'll be homeless with no fortune nor future."

"But a marriage of convenience?"

"You make it sound like a prison sentence."

"I'll not turf her out. She can remain here."

"Unwed? With no other females? It is not proper."

"We can employ her as a..."

Aunt May raised her eyebrows.

He exhaled a frustrated breath. He could argue the point until the end of time, but his aunt was right. Ana gave of herself when he could not. He owed her. His duty was to Longworth, and to her.

"But I know nothing about her."

"Let me tell you."