A Loving Scoundrel

Johanna Lindsey

Chapter 1

Jeremy Malory had been in some unsavory taverns before, but this one was likely the worst of the lot. Not surprising, since it was located on the edge of what was quite possibly the worst of London's slums, a neighborhood given over to thieves and cut-throats, prostitutes and wild packs of urchin orphans who were no doubt being groomed into London's next generation of criminals.

He didn't actually dare to enter the heart of that area. To do so would probably be the last his family would ever see of him. But this tavern, on the very edge of that den of thieves, was there for the unsuspecting to stumble upon, have a few drinks, and get their pockets picked, or if they were stupid enough to let a room there for the night, to get completely robbed, clothes and all.

Jeremy had paid for a room. Not only that, he'd spread his coins around freely, buying a round of drinks for the few customers in the tavern and giving a good performance of being quite foxed. He had deliberately set the stage for a robbery - his own. But then that's why he and his friend Percy were there - to catch a thief.

Amazingly, Percy Alden was keeping his mouth shut for once. He was a chatterbox by nature, and quite scatterbrained on top of that. Percy's keeping mostly quiet on this unusual outing attested to his nervousness. Understandable. Whereas Jeremy might feel right at home in this element, having been born and raised in a tavern before his father stumbled across him when he was sixteen, Percy was a member of the ton.

Jeremy had more or less inherited Percy when Percy's two best friends, Nicholas Eden and Jeremy's own cousin Derek Malory, had gone the domesticated route and got leg-shackled. And since Derek had taken Jeremy under his wing when Jeremy and his father, James, had returned to London after James's long estrangement from his family ended, it was quite natural that Percy would now consider Jeremy his closest cohort for entertainments of the nondomesticated sort.

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Jeremy didn't mind. He was rather fond of Percy after chumming about with him for the last eight years. If he weren't, he certainly wouldn't have volunteered to extricate Percy from his latest folly - getting royally fleeced by one of Lord Crandle's gambler friends at a house party last weekend. He'd lost three thousand pounds, his coach, and not one but two family heirlooms. He'd been so bloody foxed, he didn't even remember it, until one of the guests commiserated with him the next day and told him all about it.

Percy had been quite done in, and rightly so. Losing the money and coach were no more than he deserved for being so gullible, but the two rings were a different matter entirely. One was so old it was the family signet ring, and the other, quite valuable because of its gemstones, had been passed down in Percy's family for five generations now. Percy would never have thought to use them as betting tender. He had to have been coerced, goaded, or otherwise duped into putting them in the pot.

All of it now belonged to Lord John Heddings, and Percy had been beside himself when Heddings refused to sell the rings back to him. Money the lord didn't need. The coach he didn't need. The rings he must have considered trophies, a testament to his gambling skill. More likely a testament to his cheating skill, but Jeremy could hardly prove it when he hadn't been there to witness it.

Had Heddings been a decent sort, he would have sent Percy off to bed, instead of plying him further with drink and accepting the rings into the pot. Had he been a decent sort, he would have let Percy redeem them for their value. Percy had even been willing to pay more than they were worth. He wasn't poor, after all, as he had already come into his inheritance when his father died.

But Heddings wasn't interested in doing what was decent. Instead he'd gotten annoyed at Percy's insistence and downright nasty in the end, threatening Percy with bodily harm if he didn't stop bothering him. Which is what had annoyed Jeremy enough to suggest this alternative. Percy was quite convinced, after all, that his mother was going to disown him over this. He'd been avoiding her ever since, so she wouldn't notice the rings were missing from his fingers.

Since they'd retired to the tavern's upstairs room several hours ago, there had been three attempts to rob them. Bungled attempts each, and after the last, Percy was beginning to despair of finding a thief to carry out their mission. Jeremy was more confident. Three attempts in two hours meant there would be many more before the night was over.

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The door opened again. There was no light in the room. There was no light out in the corridor either. If this new thief was any good, he wouldn't need light, he would have waited long enough for his eyes to adjust to the dark. Footsteps, a bit too loud. A match flicked.

Jeremy sighed and, in one fluid movement, left the chair near the door where he was keeping vigil. He was quieter about it than the thief had been upon entering the room and was suddenly there blocking his path, a mountain of a man, well, in comparison to the short thief, but big enough to scare the daylights out of the urchin, who immediately bolted back the way he'd come.

Jeremy slamnmed the door shut behind the fellow. He still wasn't disheartened. The night was young. The thieves hadn't gotten desperate yet. And if it came down to it, he'd just keep one of them until they agreed to bring him their best.

Percy, however, was fast giving up hope. He was sitting up on the bed now, his back resting against the wall - he'd been appalled at the thought of getting under those sheets. But Jeremy had insisted he lie on the bed, to at least give the impression of being asleep. He'd done so on top of the covers, thank you very much.

'There must be an easier way to go about hiring a thief,' Percy complained. 'Don't they have an agency for this sort of thing?'

Jeremy managed not to laugh. 'Patience, old boy. I warned you this would likely take all night.'

'Should have brought this to your father's attention,' Percy mumbled.

'What was that?'

'Nothing, dear boy, nothing a'tall.'

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Jeremy shook his head, but said nothing more. Percy couldn't really be faulted for wondering if Jeremy was capable of handling this mess on his own. Jeremy was nine years his junior, after all, and Percy, scatterbrain that he was and quite incapable of keeping a secret, had never been apprised of Jeremy's real upbringing.

Living and working in a tavern for the first sixteen years of his life had left Jeremy with a few unexpected talents. A tolerance for hard spirits that had reached the point that he could drink his friends so far under the table that they'd be passed out cold while he'd still be mostly sober. A way of fighting that could be quite underhanded if called for. And a keen ability to recognize a real threat as opposed to a mere nuisance.

His unorthodox education hadn't ended there, though, when his father discovered his existence and took him in. No, at that particular time, James Malory was still estranged from his large family and living the carefree life of a pirate in the Caribbean, or, gentleman pirate, as he preferred to be called. And James's motley crew had taken Jeremy in hand and taught him still more things a boy his age should never have learned.

But Percy knew none of this. All he'd ever been allowed to see was what was on the surface, the charming scamp, not so scampish anymore at twenty-five, but still charming, and so handsome that Jeremy couldn't walk into a room without every woman in it falling a little bit in love with him. Aside from the women in his family, of course. They merely adored him.

Jeremy had taken after his uncle Anthony in his looks; in fact, anyone who met him for the first time would swear he was Tony's son, rather than James's. Like his uncle he was tall with wide shoulders, a narrow waist, lean hips, and long legs. They both had a wide mouth and a strong, arrogant jaw, as well as an aquiline, proud nose, darkly tanned skin, and thick ebony hair.

But the eyes were the most telling, a mark of only a few Malorys, purest blue, heavy-lidded, with the barest suggestion of an exotic slant, framed by black lashes and slashing brows. Gypsy eyes, it used to be rumored, inherited from Jeremy's great-grandmother Anastasia Stephanoff, whom the family had just last year discovered had really been half Gypsy. She'd so captivated Christopher Malory, the 1st Marquis

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of Haverston, that he'd married her the second day of their acquaintance. But that was a tale only the family would ever know about.

It was quite understandable why Percy had wanted to get Jeremy's father involved instead. Hadn't his best friend, Derek, gone straight to James when he'd had problems of the unsavory sort? Percy might not know of James's pirating days, but who didn't know that James Malory had been one of London's most notorious rakes prior to his taking to the seas, that it was the rare fellow indeed who dared stand up to James, then or now, whether in the ring or on the dueling field?

Percy had settled back down on the bed for his 'impression' of sleeping. After a few more mumbles, some tossing and turning, he was then mostly quiet in anticipation of their next intrusion.

Jeremy wondered if he should mention that taking this particular matter to his father wouldn't get it settled anytime soon, that James had hied off to Haverston to visit his brother Jason the very day after Jeremy had been presented with his new town house. He was quite certain his father had gone to the country for a week or two out of fear that Jeremy would drag him about furniture shopping.

Jeremy almost missed the shadow moving stealthily across the room toward the bed. He hadn't heard the door open this time, hadn't heard it close either, hadn't heard a bloody thing for that matter. If the occupants of the room really had been asleep, as was to be expected, they certainly wouldn't have been awakened by this intruder.

Jeremy smiled to himself just before he lit a match of his own and moved it over the candle on the table he'd placed next to his chair. The thief's eyes had been drawn to him instantly. Jeremy hadn't moved otherwise, was sitting there quite relaxed. The thief wouldn't know how quickly he could move to prevent his escape if he had to. But the thief wasn't moving either yet, as he was apparently frozen in his surprise at being caught.

'Oh, I say.' Percy raised his head. 'Did we finally get lucky?'

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'I'd say so,' Jeremy replied. 'Didn't hear him a'tall. He's our man, or boy as the case may be.'

The thief was starting to shake off his surprise and probably didn't like what he was hearing, to go by the narrowed, suspicious look Jeremy was now getting. Jeremy ignored it. He looked for a weapon first, but didn't see the thief carrying one. Of course, Jeremy had his own hidden in his coat pockets, a pistol in each, so just because he didn't see one didn't mean the lad didn't have one.

Much taller than the previous miscreants who'd tried their hand at robbing them, and lanky besides, this thief was probably no more than fifteen or sixteen, to go by those smooth cheeks. Ash blond hair so light it was more white than blond, naturally curly, worn short. A misshapen black hat several centuries out of fashion. He wore a gentleman's coat of dark green velvet, stolen no doubt, and quite grubby-looking now, as if it got slept in a lot. A discolored white shirt was under it with a few ruffles at the neck, black trousers of the long variety, and no shoes. Smart fellow, no wonder he hadn't made a single sound yet.

Very flamboyant looking for a thief, but probably because he was such a handsome young lad. And he was definitely recovered from his surprise. Jeremy knew to the second when he would bolt and was there at the door before him, leaning back against it, crossing his arms across his chest.

He offered a lazy smile. 'You don't want to leave yet, dear boy. You haven't heard our proposal.'

The thief was gaping again. It could have been Jeremy's smile, but was more likely his speed in getting to the door first. But Percy noticed it this time and complained, 'Damn me, he's staring at you the way the wenches do. It's a man we're in need of, not a child.'

'Age is irrelevent, old man,' Jeremy replied. 'It's skill we're in need of, so the package it comes in doesn't matter all that much.'

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The lad, blushing now, was insulted, apparently, and with a glower toward Percy spoke for the first time. 'Ain't never seen a nabob so pretty is all.'

The word pretty started Percy laughing. Jeremy was no longer amused. The last man who'd called him pretty had lost a few teeth because of it.

'Look who's talking, when you've got the face of a girl,' Jeremy said.

'He does, don't he?' Percy agreed. 'You should grow some hair on those cheeks, at least until your voice drops an octave or two.'

Yet another blush from the boy and a distinct grumble: 'It won't grow - yet. I'm only fifteen - I think. Just tall for m'age, I am.'

Jeremy might have felt sorry for the lad because of that 'I think,' which implied he wasn't sure what year he'd been born, which was usually the case with orphans. But he'd noted two things simultaneously. The boy's voice had started out high-pitched, then lowered before he'd finished his speech, as if he were going through that awkward time in a boy's life when his voice started changing to the deeper tones of manhood. And yet, Jeremy didn't think it was a natural slip, it had sounded much too contrived.

But the second thing he noticed upon closer examination was the lad wasn't just handsome, he was downright beautiful. Now, the same thing might have been said about Jeremy at that age, except Jeremy's handsomeness was decidedly male, while this lad's handsomeness was decidedly female. The soft cheeks, the lush lips, the pert little nose - yet there was much more. The chin was too weak, the neck too narrow, even the stance was a dead giveaway, at least to a man who knew women as well as Jeremy did.

Still, Jeremy might not have drawn the conclusion he did, at least not quite so soon, if his own stepmother hadn't used the same sort of disguise when she'd first met his father. She'd been desperate to get back to America, and signing on as James's cabin boy had seemed to be her only option. Of course, James had known from the start

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that she wasn't a lad, and to hear him tell it, he'd had a great deal of fun pretending to believe she was a boy.

Jeremy could be wrong in this case. There was that slim possibility. And yet he was rarely wrong where women were concerned.

But there was no need to expose her. Whatever reason she had for hiding her gender was her business. He might be curious, but he'd learned long ago that patience reaped the best rewards. And besides, they only needed one thing from her - her talent.

'What do they call you, youngun?' Jeremy asked.

'None o' yer bleedin' business.'

'I don't think he's figured out yet that we're going to do him a good turn,' Percy remarked.

'Ye set a trap-'

'No, no, think of it as an opportunity for employment,' Percy corrected.

'A trap,' their thief insisted. 'And I don't need wotever it is yer offering.'

Jeremy raised a black brow. 'You aren't even a little curious?'

'No,' said the thief most stubbornly.

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'Too bad. The nice thing about traps is - you don't get out of them unless you get let out. Do we look like we're letting you out of this one?'

'Ye look like ye've bleedin' well lost yer minds. Ye don't think I'm alone, d'ye? They'll be coming for me if I don't return when I'm expected to.'

'They?'

The question just got Jeremy another glower. He shrugged, unperturbed. He wouldn't doubt she ran with a pack of thieves, the very bunch that had systematically been sending their numbers in, one at a time, to rob the unsuspecting gentry who had blundered into their territory. But he doubted they'd come looking for her. They'd be more interested in obtaining the expected fat purse first, before they thought of any rescuing. If anything, they'd assume this attempt had failed, that she'd been apprehended, knocked out, or killed, and would be sending in the next thief soon.

Which meant they should wrap this up and be on their way, now that they had their quarry in hand, so Jeremy said congenially, 'Sit down, youngun, and I'll explain what you've volunteered for.'

'I didn't vol-'

'But you did. When you came through that door, you most surely did volunteer.'

'Wrong room,' their thief tried to assert. 'Ye've never walked into the wrong room by mistake?'

'Assuredly, though usually with my shoes on,' Jeremy said dryly.

She blushed again and swore a blue streak.

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Jeremy yawned. Much as he'd enjoyed the cat-and-mouse bantering, he didn't want this taking all night. And they still had a good distance to travel to reach Heddings's house in the country.

He injected a note of sternness in his tone when he ordered, 'Sit down, or I will physically put you in that chair-'

Jeremy didn't have to finish. She ran to the chair, practically dove into it. She definitely didn't want to risk his touching her. He forced back another smile as he moved away from the door to stand in front of her.

Percy, amazingly, injected a bit of logic into the proceedings: 'I say, we could explain this on the way, couldn't we? We've got our man. Is there any reason to remain in these god-awful accommodations a moment longer?'

'Quite right. Find me something for binding.'

'Eh?'

'To tie him up with. Or haven't you noticed that our thief isn't being the least bit cooperative - yet?'

At which point their thief desperately bolted for the door.

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