

Keepsake

Distinguished Rogues – Book 5

Copyright © 2014 Heather Boyd



PROLOGUE

On the Eve of a Wedding, 1803

“Are you comfortable?” the Marquess of Taverham whispered into the silence of the blue guest bedchamber at Twilit Hill, the Taverham family’s country estate. The room had been assigned to Miranda since the night of her arrival. The scandalous fact that the young marquess, her betrothed, had frequented her bed each night since she’d crossed his threshold ahead of their wedding was a secret he insisted she keep to herself.

“Yes. Very,” she assured him. She drew in a deep breath, temporarily at peace with the night and her own desires.

If all they had were these nighttime hours, Miranda would be blissfully overjoyed to be Taverham’s wife and a future marchioness, but the demands of the days threatened to smother her happiness.

She had never imagined she’d be accepted easily into his life—her family’s fortune came from trade and she didn’t possess the same distinguished pedigree other well-born debutants could claim. Her friends were concerned she was rushing into the marriage without proper consideration. Her father was beside himself at the valuable connections the marriage would bring to him.

She couldn’t blame her friends for worrying. She was headed for a very different life than most of them. Miranda had just passed her seventeenth birthday. Taverham would be nineteen years in a few months time. She was aware that Taverham’s guardians didn’t exactly approve of his plans to marry her. They were both so very young.

She had tried very hard to make friends among Taverham’s acquaintances and family, and she’d thought some had accepted her. And some definitely had not. Those closest to Taverham made little effort to hide their dismay over tomorrow’s wedding. His stern and unsmiling mother was the worst at hiding her disapproval.

Taverham tugged her into his arms and settled her there with a steady hand to her lower back, pressing her close against his long limbs, which always burned with fiery warmth.

She hugged close to her betrothed—eager for the reassurance that always came with being near him.

Today’s lecture from his mother had been on the uncomfortable topic of delivering an heir as soon as possible and the great obligation she had in ensuring the child thrived. Miranda was not to run about. She was not to exert herself. She was not to impose herself on her husband unless it was for the purposes of getting his heir.

Miranda hadn’t had a mother to tell her what to do for a very long time, and the frank and blunt discussion had shocked her to her core. She had nodded, unable at the time to give voice to

her astonishment. Miranda might have only seen seventeen years of life, but delivering a healthy child was of course imperative, and not just for her husband's sake. She longed for a child of her own to love, a family to take care of, and nothing would influence her wish to be a devoted and involved mother.

Miranda let out a shaky breath as the full scope of her earlier mistake struck her. She had to stand up to the marchioness if she wished to be seen as her husband's equal in this marriage.

She was a silly fool to let a demanding older woman shake her confidence. She would be the marchioness, the mother of Taverham's heir. Miranda had known she would face a difficult road ahead. Taverham might have ruined her, but she couldn't claim she'd disliked the experience. He had taken her innocence so completely that she couldn't even remember ever not knowing the feel of his hands on her skin. Given enough time and the right words, she would bring Taverham around to her way of thinking about the manner in which they would raise their children.

She would persevere through the difficulties because she loved him. One day she'd tell him.

"Mama and Emily have worked wonders with the staff to have the house ready for the wedding," he whispered. "It will be perfect, despite the rush. I promise you there is nothing you need do."

Emily, Lady Brighthurst, seemed to hold great sway over her husband's decisions too.

Miranda saw no point to having ice sculptures adorn her wedding breakfast tables and had said as much, but been overruled. Lady Brighthurst had claimed them essential for such an occasion and Miranda's future mother-in-law had supported Emily's frivolous wishes, not Miranda's simpler suggestions.

She bit back her resentment. Miranda hated roses, but they were everywhere in the house. They made her sneeze, and that sent more irritated looks darting in her direction. Emily had convinced the marchioness that they were best suited for a June wedding and had stripped the gardens and hothouses, regardless of Miranda's preference for milder wildflowers.

Despite her hopes of managing her own home, it had become very clear that Kit's mother ruled this house and wasn't about to relinquish her control to any new wife, though what Emily wanted always seemed to come to pass. Emily appeared to be the only woman the marchioness seemed to approve of.

Miranda would learn that secret and soon.

"I'm sure everything will work itself out," she murmured.

Taverham kissed her brow, slid from beneath her gently, and left the bed entirely. Miranda lay in a puddle of untidy sheets an uncertain moment and then rolled over to watch him dress. He paused beside the bed, facing the fire. The light thrown by the pitiful flame made him appear much older than his eighteen years. They were both so young to marry, but Taverham had promised her father she'd make a fine marchioness.

He'd sounded so certain.

He nodded to himself and collected his clothes.

"Are you going?"

"Tomorrow is an important day and you shouldn't lose any more sleep because of me."

"I don't mind." Miranda smiled wickedly. She raised one knee, slowly rocking it to and fro. She had learned a little of teasing these past weeks and had a fair idea of what her future husband liked to see.

Taverham's gaze shifted to her activity. He licked his lips. "Are you not weary?"

"No. I never feel tired when I'm with you." Making love to Taverham was not a chore in any sense of the word. He was adventurous but liked to have his own way. In fact, these secret meetings had made her feel irresistible.

He shook his head, a rueful smile passing over his lips. "You make me forget my purpose. What will I do with you once we are wed?"

Miranda would turn herself inside out to make him want her at his side always. She raised herself to a provocative sitting position, brazenly revealing her breasts to him. She slowly stroked the nipple of one. His gaze narrowed to what she was doing.

"I have an idea of what we could do together," she whispered.

As hoped, his gaze flickered over her skin and she warmed from head to toe at his heated expression. His clothing dropped to the floor. “So do I, but...”

She smiled at the desire in his eyes. Keeping him close would only strengthen the bonds between them. “You do still want an heir while you are a young man, don’t you?”

His gaze drifted low to rest on her stomach. His brow creased into a frown. “I had hoped we’d done enough toward that already.”

A pang of fear filled her at the lack of affection in his words. If he thought her with child would he discontinue his visits to her bed? She didn’t want to lose his attention, so Miranda forced her fear down and feigned nonchalance. “Perhaps we have. But it is far too soon to be certain.”

His gaze flew to hers and he stared.

Miranda grew uncomfortable at the anticipation lighting his eyes. She shrugged. “I am a little late, but that may be merely the stress surrounding the wedding.” And dealing with his mother and friends. They both knew he was marrying her for her dowry and an heir; he had an estate to save from ruin. He’d been completely open about his priorities. Marriage, estate, heir, in that order. In comparison, Miranda’s hopes were very small—a home and someone to love her.

“You’re with child,” he said, nodding decisively, but not a smile crossed his lips. “Once our guests have departed, I’ll inform Mama about your condition. She knows what must be done. You need not worry about anything, I swear.”

Despair filled her as he turned away. She had to stop him telling his mother until she’d time to take up the reins as mistress of this house. Their unborn children, their sons particularly, had already had their lives planned out to the smallest detail. Miranda could only dread the future in store for them. Wet nurses, nannies, private and expensive tutors, and finally Eton or Cambridge would be their future.

Not with Miranda. Not with their mama. Her place was never mentioned, her suggestions brushed aside in favor of years of family tradition.

That had to change.

Miranda flew from the bed and grasped his arm before he could slip from her room. “Please. I’m uncertain. It’s early days yet. Don’t tell her so soon. Can it not be our secret a little longer as meeting each night has been?”

He raked his hands through his hair and then he glanced down the length of her naked body. He groaned. “Thank God we wed tomorrow; I’ll be glad to be done with all this sneaking about.”

She set her hands to his shoulders. She’d lost her heart to him the night they’d met and she’d hoped his feeling would one day mirror hers. “I am too. After all we have done together, and I suspect there is more pleasure to be had still, I am very eager to share your bed as often as you want.”

His eyes widened and he pulled her against him. “Temptress.”

He kissed her hard, demanding entry to her mouth with his tongue. His hands gripped her hips with definite eagerness, and Miranda liked that about him. His arousal soon pressed against her belly, hot and full. Miranda smiled against his lips. She’d claim this small victory. The first of many, she hoped. Still kissing her, he herded her across the room toward the bed and Miranda didn’t mind his bossiness. When he released her, Miranda eased onto the mattress slowly, relishing Taverham’s slow prowl toward her as he crawled on hands and knees. She lay back as his head dipped and his lips skimmed her still-flat stomach. His kiss was reverent, almost shy, when he’d never been that way before.

His kisses grew firmer as he moved lower. When he nudged her legs apart roughly and kissed her at the apex of her thighs, she covered her mouth to stifle her moan. Taverham’s kisses were sweet and addictive.

Delightful tremors began and ended on the tip of Taverham’s tongue, and Miranda struggled to push her worries aside. If he wanted her like this, surely they had a chance to build a satisfying life together. Beginning tomorrow, she would convince him to expect her company everywhere he went. Their wedding night would be special, the most erotic she could imagine and arrange.

Taverham quickly brought her body to the threshold of release. She squirmed to delay the moment, but as usual, he would not allow her to hold back. She sobbed as her body shook and

she pressed her mound against his face shamelessly. Before the tremors had subsided, Taverham was above her, entering her with one slow, sure thrust.

Once her body grew accustomed to his return, Taverham began to move. He was quick with his thrusts, urgent in his passions. He held himself above her, both hands firmly pressed to the mattress beside her head, his eyes closed.

Miranda stroked his chest firmly as his skin grew slick with his exertions and even hotter than before. She wrapped her legs about his waist tightly and dug her fingers into his sides the way he liked best.

His thrusts grew frenzied, and when he growled out a muffled shout of release, his eyes scrunched even more tightly shut. After a moment, he collapsed upon her, exhaustion claiming his strength. "I..."

As always after their joining, Miranda held him tight and waited for him to continue his words. Yet all that greeted her was more silence. Words of love and tenderness burned on her tongue, and she longed to unburden herself of them.

He started to lift his weight from her until Miranda's fingers slipped from his skin. "I want you to be with child now," he said in a tone that brooked no argument as he sat up. As if such a matter could be ordered as he would a carriage.

"I want that too. We will have a family. As large as we want it."

"An heir first, then the rest will come later, once the estate is running smoothly again." Then he rolled from the bed and threw on a shirt, turning his back to her. His movements were brisk as he made himself respectable once more. "Rest. Tomorrow we wed and the future can begin."

He strode to the door without looking back.

Miranda stared after him in surprise at his haste to go. "Good night, Taverham."

He paused with one hand on the door latch. "I won't see you until the ceremony. Mama will visit you first thing in the morning to see all is well, the vicar will arrive at ten, the wedding breakfast will be served promptly at twelve, and the supper for our guests will commence at eight. I expect their amusements to last long into the night."

Since there was nothing that required her attention, she agreed with him. "I'll be ready on time."

"Good." He nodded, his expression distracted. "Immediately after we wed, I must attend to a private matter. Nothing to concern you."

Miranda sat up in surprise. "But it's our wedding day?"

"It's just one evening." He frowned. "Since Emily's marriage it's not been easy to be private with her. I'll have to set a schedule so her needs and expenses are not forgotten in the rush to repair Twilit Hill. I've no idea how long our private discourse will take tomorrow. Her husband may prove adverse to any permanent arrangement, but I'll have my way in the end."

He rubbed his eyes. "You may retire whenever you choose tomorrow night if I have not returned in time to escort you to your new bedchamber. The day after, I will be engaged with my guardians over estate issues that require the most urgent attention from an early hour. In the unlikely event you need me, Branxton can arrange to have a message delivered."

He slipped out the door without further explanation.

Miranda's throat tightened, and she swallowed her hurt and shock at being so thoroughly dismissed from his life. That was *her* dowry he was planning to spend. The fortune she'd thought she'd be giving to a man she *hoped* might love her in return.

He expected to spend their wedding night with Emily.

She set her hands to her hips as anger filled her. Emily could have waited. Emily had a life of her own and a husband of her own too. She should not be forcing herself on Taverham on *their* big day.

What had Taverham said? *Emily's needs and expenses must not be overlooked.*

What needs could Emily have that her husband couldn't satisfy? What expenses could a gentleman pay to another man's wife that were not improper?

Miranda balked at considering the most immediate answer that came to mind. An affair? No, surely not. It wasn't possible for her husband and Emily to be involved intimately. Someone would have gossiped about them.

She slipped her hand over her belly where her child grew, and recollections of recent events filled her with suspicion. There *was* a disturbing closeness between her future husband and the married woman. They'd grown up as neighbors. They had secrets and a past she might never understand.

Miranda sank back against her pillows. Was she simply tired and not thinking straight? Miranda sighed deeply. She was being ridiculous. It had been a trying few weeks and her nerves about her new life ahead made her worry over everything and nothing. Taverham had many plans afoot to repair his estate with the funds her dowry would bring and likely Emily knew more of them than Miranda. But not for long. That would change. It would be her counsel and company Taverham sought after tomorrow's wedding.

Besides, she'd learned long ago not to believe what she didn't see with her own eyes. Perhaps Taverham was planning a surprise for her.

Cheered by that idea, she resolved to forget her nasty suspicions and look forward to tomorrow. Miranda rolled onto her side and stared at the darkened windows of her bedchamber. It was her last night as Miranda Birkenstock. Tomorrow she would become Lady Taverham, a marchioness no less, a pillar of society, and she would be the happiest bride that ever lived.

~ * ~

After the Wedding

Miranda stepped into the quiet garden and whispered, "Lady Taverham."

She was a marchioness now and married. She could barely contain her happiness and danced a few steps across the terrace to express the thrill gripping her.

A male voice chuckled to her right, startling her.

She spun in that direction. "Who is there? Taverham?"

"An old fool." Lord Applebee, one of her husband's guardians, emerged from the shadows. "Your husband should not leave you to dance alone."

She smiled despite her disappointment that she'd been unable to convince Taverham that his conversation with Emily should wait until tomorrow. "Lord Applebee, forgive me. I didn't see you there, and you certainly are not a fool. You see more clearly than anyone."

He smiled kindly. "You shouldn't be out here."

Miranda glanced over her shoulder to the crowded room she'd just escaped. "I just wanted a moment to myself. I feel like I've been smiling for hours."

To prove her point, she brushed her fingers across her jaw because the strain of smiling at everyone *had* made her face ache. Her smiles now were for herself alone. She was a married woman and excited about her new life.

"Then take in the air and return inside quickly." He shifted to stand between her and the gardens she'd hoped to escape to. "A new bride should lap up every bit of attention she can on her special day. And you deserve it all and more."

"You're too kind."

Applebee smiled and bowed. As he did, she saw the shape of two figures stumbling toward the relative privacy of the rose garden.

Miranda chuckled softly. "Well, it seems I'm not the only one to have had the same idea of escaping the ballroom."

She wished her husband was done with Emily and would want to sneak away with her.

Applebee glanced over his shoulder, then caught her arm. "Time to dance. Will you do this crusty old bachelor the honor of the next set, my lady?"

Although her husband's guardian wasn't the partner she wanted, she nodded quickly, eager to stay on his good side. "I'd love to dance with you."

Applebee propelled her toward the open French doors rather quickly, and Miranda almost stumbled. As they reached the threshold, Lords Sorenson and Watts appeared, her father and Lord Louth trailing after in deep conversation.

Of all of Taverham's friends, Lord Louth had been the first to offer her friendship. He was a nice man, one of quiet wit and boundless faith that she would be an exceptional marchioness. She smiled at him in relief. She had no need to guard her words with Louth.

"Now, my dear, do not be distressed," Sorenson said soothingly, catching up her hands and squeezing them gently.

"She's not," Applebee replied, his head tilting at an odd angle.

"Oh, I thought..." Watts glanced into the garden beyond them and Miranda followed the direction of his gaze. She spied the pair in the rose garden again and noticed that they didn't seem the least bit concerned about propriety. She frowned at that, trying to picture which of the wedding guests would behave in such a bold manner.

She took a pace in that direction, but Applebee tugged her back. "Come dance with me."

"Why shouldn't I know who they are?" A discomfiting sensation filled her as no one answered. She shook off Lord Applebee's grip. "This is my home and I want to know everything that happens here."

She cut across the lawn, aware of their whispered pleas to wait. To stop. To not approach the rose garden. Their steps were soft behind her and when she paused, they did too.

At this distance she could not see the pair clearly, but she could hear their words... and their gasps and moans of ecstasy.

She would recognize her husband's deep, rumbling voice anywhere.

A few more steps and she could see him better, clutching the breast of a woman, the pair of them deep in the throes of a passionate tryst.

She forced air into her lungs as he chuckled softly and urged the woman to go with him.

"I don't believe it," Lord Louth whispered from where he'd paused at her side. "That bastard."

As Louth made to move toward the pair, Lord Watts restrained him. "It's none of your business, lad."

She reached for Louth too, but only to keep him from blocking her view.

The woman stood, and *it was Emily*. Miranda stifled a gasp as Emily curled her arms around Taverham's broad shoulders. They kissed urgently and then Taverham swept her up into his arms and carried her away into the darkness.

"Well," Miranda's father said as he studied Miranda in disappointment. "He's taken a mistress a bit faster than I was led to believe he would, but there you have it. Can't help where a man's passion leads him if he doesn't find it with his wife."

He turned away and left Miranda standing in shock among near strangers. *Her father had expected this betrayal?*

Miranda certainly had not. She brushed away the tears that slipped over her cheeks, hoping for one last glimpse that proved her husband had not just run off with Emily on their wedding night.

The hope that had filled her since Taverham had proposed began to burn, the trust and love she'd felt for him curling into ash within her heart.

They were only just husband and wife!

How dare he make such a fool of her.

Lord Applebee moved to stand before her. "Surely you suspected?"

Miranda shook her head, darting a glance at those standing around her. She had only been married for her money, and the heir she would carry, and everyone knew it. She covered her face, too humiliated to let anyone see how deep his betrayal went, hiding the depth of her hurt.

What of the babe she carried? Taverham would never listen to her opinions on how children would be raised when he clearly cared so little for her.

"Ah," Watts said as he patted her shoulder awkwardly. "We should have prepared you better. He's never going to give her up, I'm afraid. Couldn't marry her in the first place because she'd not the funds to repair Twilit Hill, and now he has won you..."

Miranda glanced swiftly at Lord Louth and saw her own astonishment reflected in his face. He hadn't known either. At least here was one man who had never deceived her.

When their eyes met, his expression was one of fury on her behalf. "I'll call him out."

"You'll do no such thing." Miranda caught his clenched fist. She couldn't allow him to risk his life or ruin his standing in society just for her. She wasn't worth it. "You do not have the right to stand up for me, and I won't risk seeing you hurt."

The young man glanced away, and she winced as his jaw firmed into a belligerent line. Maybe Louth had developed feelings for her, but Miranda did not care for him that way. She'd loved Taverham and only him until this moment, and she'd been utterly wrong that she'd had a hope of winning his love in return.

She grew aware of a sharp pain in her chest and she backed away from Taverham's guardians and Lord Louth.

She had to get away. Miranda might have been beguiled into ruin, into a marriage she couldn't escape, but she would not expose her innocent child to such a father. She wouldn't stay at Twilit Hill.

Applebee watched her with a keen eye. "Now, Miranda. Don't do anything rash that you'll regret tomorrow."

"What is there to regret?" Fighting back tears, she managed to choke out, "Do excuse me. There is somewhere else I need to be."

Miranda fled before her heart smashed to pieces as her world had surely already done tonight.

To find out what happens next please return to
www.heather-boyd.com/books/distinguished-rogues/
and view the online seller locations. I hope you enjoy the story.