

The Devious Debutante

Chapter 1

New Orleans

December 1885

Ben Merritt scanned the large Collins property. His eyes darted from left to right and back again.

Was that?

It was. A figure appeared in the garden to the left of the enormous stone house. Someone walking fast—actually running. In a skirt.

Watching her race through a line of bushes and across the broad lawn toward the open front gate, he anticipated her path and turned just in time to catch the full brunt of her head and shoulders against his chest. He wrapped his arms around her as she fell backwards from the impact.

Stunned, she wriggled free of his arms, sniffed and brushed her hair off her face, wiping her wet cheeks with the same motion. “I beg your pardon.”

Ben bowed and tipped his cap to the most beautiful young lady he’d ever seen. A governess perhaps to the young daughter of Patrick Collins? No, she couldn’t be. A man with three sisters, he took in her blue wool coat, fashionably falling to the hips, unbuttoned to reveal the expensive fabric of her dress. The decorative braid, the jet beads were far beyond the means of most employees. Perhaps an older cousin? He’d been told Patrick Collins had but one child—a daughter, thirteen years of age.

The young lady's head barely reached his shoulders but she was lusciously proportioned. *Not thirteen.* He'd felt her full breasts against his chest. In the flickering flames from two gaslights mounted on the stone pillars, he admired the face of a Madonna: white skin as smooth as alabaster, huge sparkling blue eyes, and a perfectly rosy, pert little mouth. A mouth swollen, cheeks flushed with desire.

"To what do I owe this unexpected honor, Miss?"

"I ... couldn't sleep," she stammered, showing remarkable dignity as she uttered such a bald-faced lie. "I came out for a stroll."

"You seemed to be strolling very rapidly. And at midnight."

"Actually, I prefer a run to a stroll. It's the newest exercise for ladies." She raised her chin. "I'm surprised you don't know that."

"Ah, of course." He met her serious look with equal gravity, pretending as she did that her appearance alone on the street at this hour didn't violate every rule of propriety. "And it's done without a hat or gloves? This new exercise—a run, you call it. Perhaps you'd enjoy a run with me to the corner and back?" He offered his arm. "Or a stroll?"

She studied him under her long, black lashes. Her eyes swept from his laced-up workman's boots and denim pants to his plaid shirt and rough black wool jacket. He cursed silently that he'd not dressed more formally for his watch in this fine neighborhood. She focused a moment on his hair, unfortunately no longer neatly combed after two hours at the docks.

He waited as she hesitated, knowing she calculated her options. She glanced back to the gate through which she'd come. Running away from someone, was she? Not someone all that threatening. Her breathing had calmed. Her clenched fists had relaxed. He saw defiance, not fear, in the straightness of her back.

“It’s tempting,” she said finally. Raising her blue eyes to his face, she sighed heavily. “But how do I know you’re not a scoundrel? There seems to be no shortage of them out and about tonight.”

A lover’s quarrel, then? He put on his friendliest face and denied her charge. “A scoundrel would not have as warm and friendly a smile as I have.”

“I suspect that’s what all scoundrels say.” With remarkable pluck, she leaned in a little closer to examine him more closely. “And who told you your smile was so friendly?”

He laughed. “Are you disputing my mirror?”

“Perhaps it needs a good dusting.” A smile lit her face and her eyes sparkled as she said it. Quick-witted, she was, and flirtatious. She tilted her head just so and a black curl tumbled down her bodice and settled on her right breast.

Seized by a desire stronger than he’d ever felt for a lady he’d known for five minutes—or for a lifetime—his breath quickened. With tingling fingers, he grasped her face and brought his lips to hers. The softness of her cheeks, the warmth of her lips and the rose scent of her hair overcame all logical thought. She didn’t move. Neither did he for some moments.

Oh, my. The mirror didn’t need dusting whatsoever. The gaslights illuminated his handsome features. Clean shaven with longish straight dark brown hair, a high forehead and strong jaw, he stepped back and grinned at her predicament. She liked his kiss and he knew it. In fact, she liked it so much she was breathless, her knees trembling beneath her skirt.

In any case, she couldn’t return by way of the garden. Vespasian, with whom she’d just had a disagreement, might be waiting for her at the kitchen door or he might be lying drunk in

the bushes. And, if this man followed her to be sure she were safe and encountered Vespasian, she'd be at a loss to explain him.

He stood a respectful distance away. Was there harm in lingering here to talk with him? But a stranger on the street? Well-spoken but with an accent that revealed Northern roots. And incongruously dressed in workman's clothes? They'd not been introduced. And he'd kissed her. "I believe it would be best to forego my midnight, er ... run ... tonight ... I should go back in the house."

"So you would deny yourself a stroll? And deny me the opportunity to spend more time with the most beautiful woman who's ever run into me?" The left side of his mouth rose in a quirky grin.

She pulled her coat together and buttoned it. She'd had enough foolish gallantry for one evening. "Good night, sir."

He pointed to the front porch. "I'll watch until you're safely inside."

That was the last thing she needed. "I'm sure that isn't necessary. You should be on your way."

He tilted his head toward the gate and walk beyond. "I insist."

To get in the house, Maureen needed to find the key kept on the lentil above the front door. Problem was, she'd have to stand on something to reach it, which would confirm for the gentleman what he probably already knew: She'd sneaked out to meet a lover.

There was no help for it. She forced her feet to turn and step through the gate. Had he heard her and Vespasian shouting at each other? Had he heard him say he would have her yet? Sound traveled at night. She could feel the man's eyes boring into her back as she made her way

slowly up the front walk. She added a little swing to her hips that swayed her skirt from side to side.

Under the porch light, her face flaming with mortification, Maureen dragged a heavy rocking chair across the stone porch, lifted her skirt to mid-calf to climb on it, and balanced rather precariously as she felt along the ledge with one hand while holding on to the door facing with the other. No doubt the gentleman on the sidewalk found this show quite amusing. The key in her grasp, she jumped to the floor, repositioned the chair in its original place and unlocked the door.

Was he still there, really waiting until she was safely inside? Her hand on the doorknob, she hesitated. She wanted to look back, just a quick glance, but she kept her eyes forward and entered the house.

Pausing in front of the hall mirror, her body went hot with embarrassment. She stared at a mass of flyaway curls, sprinkled with bits of broken leaves and grass, which also dotted her overcoat, and skirt of her dress. Without question, the handsome man had noticed. Thank heavens she wasn't likely to see him ever again.