

JILTED BY A ROGUE by Cheryl Holt

Excerpt

CHAPTER ONE

Amelia marched down the cobbled street, and she was so happy she could barely keep from twirling in merry circles.

So far, Gibraltar seemed perfect. It was exotic and foreign and wonderfully thrilling. Of course she'd just debarked from their ship two hours earlier, so she might be wrong, but she didn't think so.

The sky was so blue, the sun so bright. Colors were more intense, the world glowing in vibrant shades of pink, green, and red. There were flowers everywhere, trailing over railings and growing in pots.

Miss Hastings and her sister, Laura, were at the hotel, content to spend the hottest part of the afternoon in the shade. Amelia had been too excited to rest and mope. They had *arrived!* How could she not venture out immediately?

She couldn't wait to investigate her surroundings.

The locals retired in the afternoon, so it was impossible to glean information as to Evan's whereabouts. Public offices would open again at five o'clock, after the heat of the day had waned, and she would inquire then.

She was a tad lost, but she didn't care. Once she decided to return to the hotel, she need only head for the harbor. She could see it from every vantage point, so there was no reason to panic. She would stroll and gape like the tourist she was—until she was too exhausted to continue.

After the weeks on the ship, it was refreshing to stand on solid ground. She should have worn a bonnet though. In her haste to flee their stifling inn and—if she was being honest—to escape Miss Hastings, she'd rushed out without it.

The sun was too daunting to *not* wear a bonnet, and it was quickly dawning on her that her London wardrobe, especially her black mourning attire, was completely inappropriate for the tropical climate.

All of her gowns had high necklines, dark colors, and long sleeves, and they were sewn from warm, heavy fabric. Her first order of business would be purchase new clothes in lighter shades and materials. How did a woman cool down in such heat?

She was meandering down a quiet lane, with streets winding up the hill where the houses were bigger and grander. She supposed they'd officially be called villas. She hoped during her sojourn, she

would be invited to visit one of them. She was already picturing herself loafing on a verandah and staring out at the ocean.

Suddenly, she heard voices, male voices—British voices—and the tone was cheery and enthused. There was clapping and jests, and she walked toward the sound, not worried about being alone. She was twenty-three years old and hardly needed a chaperone dogging her heels.

She rounded a corner and stumbled on a barn that had to be part of the army garrison. There was a corral, with several soldiers leaned on the wooden slats. They were watching a man work with a horse.

The soldiers were teasing the man, tossing out good-natured insults and offering wagers as to whether he could ride the horse without being thrown to the dirt.

She huddled in the shadows, observing them with a sense of relief and pleasure. These were the sort of men she knew well, the sort of men around whom she'd been raised. Her father had been a sailor. Her brother *was* a sailor. The chairs at their dining table had always been filled with the same type of active, robust young fellows.

Their presence increased her perception of having come to the right place. It would be very satisfying to host a supper party for them.

The man in the corral was quite something. About thirty, with his handsome face, black hair, and blue eyes, he was arresting and dynamic in a thoroughly splendid way. He was tall, with broad shoulders and a lanky physique, and he glided by with the grace of a dancer or an athlete.

He was a soldier, but behaving as if he were a native. He was clad in the white trousers of his uniform, but that was it. His chest was bare, his feet too, and clearly, he often tarried in the sun. His skin was bronzed a beautiful honey color.

At strutting about nearly naked, he was unabashed and unconcerned. It seemed a normal state for him, as if he frequently stripped off his clothes. Since they were from a country where people buttoned up from chin to toe, his dishabille was so un-British. She wanted to cluck her tongue with dismay, but she was actually jealous. She'd love to shed a few of her heavy garments too.

If there was a single defect on his smooth, flawless torso, it was a jagged scar on his back and arm, as if he'd been slashed by a saber. The wound was old and healed, but she hated to see that he'd once been maimed. She wished she could wave a magic wand and have the injury vanish.

There was a water trough by the fence, and he led the horse to it, letting the animal drink. Then he dunked his head into the water too. As he stood, it careened down his chest. His hair was long and tied with a strip of leather. He tugged the strip away, the dark locks swirling over his shoulders as if he were a feral savage.

He murmured a comment in the horse's ear. The animal nestled closer, as if mesmerized by the words, then the man stepped to its side and leapt onto its back. It tensed, and he spoke softly to it again.

It visibly relaxed, then trotted around the corral as if it was the tamest creature on Earth. The man moved with it, as if they were melded together. He hadn't been pitched into the dirt, so the onlookers were either disappointed or delighted, depending on their wager.

One of them muttered, "I shouldn't ever bet against him. Not when there's a horse involved."

"Isn't that the truth?" another said, sounding disgruntled.

The man on the horse grinned pompously, as if he were a king or a black prince who'd proved them to be lesser mortals. His imperious gaze swept over them, and it also landed on Amelia where she was still loitering in the shadows

On odd spark of recognition flared between them, as if the universe was making note of the encounter, then it passed as swiftly as it had flickered.

He dismounted, and the spectators surrounded him, which she took that as her cue to sneak away. She'd likely meet all of them eventually, but she wasn't so brash that she would bluster up and introduce herself.

Miss Hastings would. But not Amelia.

Amelia had learned quite a bit about her companion, having slyly pried out information about her past. Miss Hastings was wild and unrestrained, and she pushed herself into situations without thinking.

She'd mostly been raised by Lord Denby's brother who'd been a London gambler and dandy. She'd had an unusual upbringing, intermittent schooling, irregular chaperones, and scant supervision.

She knew the rules of Polite Society, but chose not to follow them, so she was an exhausting person, and Amelia would be glad to separate from her.

Miss Hastings's sister, Laura, was another matter though. Initially, Miss Hastings had claimed Laura was a handful who required constant minding, but it was a bizarre assessment.

The girl was a tiny sprite who never talked and who floated through the world as if she were invisible. Miss Hastings insisted she could speak if she felt like it, that there was no impediment to prevent it, but she remained silent simply to draw attention to herself.

Amelia suspected the poor child was merely a keen observer of life who huddled in the corner and fretted over what her sister might do next. She rarely let her sister out of her sight, as if she'd been abandoned before and was afraid she might be again.

It would be a blessing to deliver the pair to Lord Denby—and good riddance.

She'd ogled the horse trainer much too avidly, and she tiptoed away and sauntered down the pretty lane again, figuring it was time to return to the hotel, then proceed to the naval office to garner what details she could about Evan.

She intended to surprise him, and she was positive he'd be happy that she'd come. He wouldn't have wanted her to mourn alone in England.

Very quickly, she decided she was walking in circles. Or perhaps all the lush balconies looked the same. She'd tried to head toward the harbor, but none of the streets took her there. After awhile, she wound up by the barn where the handsome equestrian had performed his tricks.

The soldiers were gone, the place empty, which was frustrating. She could have asked a British gentleman to escort her through the labyrinth. She spun to continue on, and she ran right into the man in question. The oaf was so light on his feet that he'd snuck up without her noticing.

He'd put on his clothes, although the top buttons of his shirt were undone, revealing a swath of chest she found much too intriguing. His hair was pulled back with that strip of leather again, and he'd donned black boots that covered him to his knees. They were scuffed and muddy and needed polishing.

He was grinning a devil's grin, his blue eyes twinkling with merriment and conceit. He exuded the confidence of a lothario who could easily overwhelm a gullible female.

Bedchamber eyes...

It was a phrase she'd once heard an elderly auntie whisper to her mother when Amelia was little. A renowned actor had passed by in a carriage, and the two women had tittered with shock and amusement.

At the time, Amelia hadn't understood what the words indicated, but she understood now. He was very impertinent, as if he was visually undressing her, and she wished she'd been carrying a parasol. She'd have whacked him on the arm and told him to behave.

When she'd seen him earlier, she'd thought he was tall, but with him standing beside her, she assumed he was six feet at least, and with her being only five-foot-four in her slippers, he towered over her.

He hadn't moved away, so he was close enough that her skirt twined around his legs. She could have stepped back to create some space between them, but she was certain it would simply fan his ego. She stayed where she was.

"Were you looking for me?" he asked.

"Not you precisely, but if you could show me the correct route to my hotel, I'd be eternally grateful."

"You're a Londoner," he said, stating the obvious.

“How can you tell?”

“You have the accent.”

“I didn’t realize Londoners had an accent.”

“They do.” His lazy gaze wandered down her torso. “And you’re wearing the wrong clothes.”

“It’s all I brought.”

“You just arrived?”

“A few hours ago.”

“You’ll need to find a competent seamstress, or you’ll be constantly fainting from the heat.”

“I’m not the *fainting* type.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” He gestured to the street. “May I be your guide? Will I suffice?”

She snorted with annoyance. “You’re a cheeky devil, aren’t you?”

“I can be.”

“Well, you can rein in your marvelous allure. It won’t work on me.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Quite sure. I grew up with men like you, so I’m immune.”

He pretended to be insulted. “Men like *me*? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly. I shouldn’t have to spell it out.”

“I can’t help myself. Charm oozes out of me.”

She rolled her eyes. “You’re too vain by half.”

“Why did you really come back?” His expression became sly. “Were you hoping to catch me alone?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m lost, and I wasn’t aware I was near this barn again until I staggered up to it.”

“I saw you watching me.”

“Believe me, it wasn’t intentional. I stumbled on you by accident.”

“But you were so fascinated you had to dawdle. I’m amazing. You can admit it.”

“Honestly! You might be the most conceited person I’ve ever met.”

“Yes, I am.”

“You seemed to be very proficient with that horse you were riding. Are you a cavalry officer?”

“Yes. I was raised around horses. They’re my stock and trade.”

“It looked as if you were talking to him.”

“I always chat with the animals I train. How else would they realize what I’m requesting?”

“It also looked as if he understood you.”

“Yes, I speak their language.”

She stared at him, thinking he was joking, but he wasn't. He truly presumed he'd spoken to it. Perhaps he had. She didn't know much about the animals, so who was she to have an opinion?

"Do you like horses?" he asked. "Shall we ride together someday?"

"I'm not an equestrian."

"Isn't every British girl an equestrian? Didn't you have lessons when you were young?"

"I fell off and broke my arm."

"Your father didn't make you climb back on?"

"No, but he was a sailor, so he was rarely home. It was just my mother, and I almost gave her an apoplexy. My lessons were abruptly cancelled."

He sighed dramatically. "If you don't like horses, I'm sorry to report that we have nothing in common. Why am I bothering with you?"

"Are they your life?"

"Yes. I like them better than people. They never disappoint me."

It was her turn to gesture to the street. "May we go? I have to get to my hotel."

"Is your husband waiting for you? If so, I'm stunned that he let you traipse off by yourself. You shouldn't."

"I'm not married."

"You shouldn't wander."

"I'm used to taking care of myself. I haven't had a nanny in many years."

"But if you went missing, who would worry about you?"

"Probably no one."

"That's the saddest comment I've ever heard."

She tsked with irritation. "I shouldn't have said *no one*. My brother would miss me terribly."

"Good to know." He nodded. "What brings you to Gibraltar? Is it your brother? Is he stationed here?"

"Yes, but he's a sailor, so he's likely not in port at the moment."

"What's his name?"

"Evan Boyle? Are you acquainted with him?"

"We wouldn't have crossed paths. He's a sailor, and I'm a soldier. I wouldn't lower myself to mingle."

"Not only are you horribly vain, you're also a snob."

"Definitely."

He offered her his arm, and she grabbed hold, and they started off, strolling in a comfortable silence. Occasionally, he pointed out landmarks, important buildings, or the homes of prominent citizens.

She was enjoying herself immensely, and much too soon, they reached the harbor, their encounter at an end. When she found herself trying to devise reasons to delay their parting, she was disgusted with herself.

She wasn't a debutante who played flirtatious games, but he was attractive and interesting, and she hoped she'd see him again before too much time had passed.

Her hotel was just ahead, and he asked, "Shall I walk you to your door?"

"I'd like that." They kept on, and she said, "Gibraltar is much smaller than I thought it would be. Will I be able to find a cottage to rent?"

"I'm sure you will, but your brother will have to rent it. No landlord would rent to a female."

She bristled with exasperation. "I hate how you men run the world."

She was beginning to sound like Miss Hastings!

The remark amused him, and he chuckled. "If we permitted women to have a hand in managing things, it would upset the entire order of the universe."

"What if my brother is away for weeks or months and can't sign a lease for me?"

"His commanding officer will help you, but you'll figure it out. As you mentioned, it's a small place. You'll meet people quickly, and they'll be glad to assist you. Especially the men. There are far more of us than there are of you ladies."

"I was so afraid my arrival would be difficult."

"No, it will be very easy," he said. "Are you Miss Boyle?"

"Yes. Miss Amelia Boyle."

"Please tell me you didn't travel from London alone."

"I didn't. I came with another girl who's joining her brother too."

"So it was *two* females traveling alone."

"Three actually. She has a little sister."

"I can't decide whether to be impressed or alarmed."

"You shouldn't be either. We're grown adults who are fully capable of buying a ticket on a ship and sailing off on an adventure."

"Is that what you're having? An adventure?"

"Yes. I'm someone who'd never previously gone anywhere, so I'm absolutely having an adventure."

They continued on to the hotel's front door. Amelia glanced up at the window to her room that faced the harbor, and Laura was there, watching for her to return. Amelia waved, and she waved back, then slid out of sight.

"How long have you been stationed in Gibraltar?" she asked him.

"I suppose it's been eight months now."

"You're practically a local."

He snorted. "How about if I stop by some afternoon and give you a tour of the area? My *personal* tours are free of charge."

"Arrogant beast," she muttered, "but yes, I would love it if you could show me around." She could hardly keep from batting her lashes, but then, he had that effect on a woman.

He emitted a charisma that was tangible. It made her want to linger in his presence, to have him gaze at her with his magnificent blue eyes. The hot looks he flashed sent shivers down her spine. She'd never felt a sensation like it before.

He hadn't introduced himself, so she asked, "What is your name, gallant sir? You haven't said, and if I bump into you in the future, I should know how to address you."

"Pardon me for being so remiss." He clicked his heels and bowed, acting silly and officious. "Captain James Hastings, at your service."

"James...Hastings?"

"Yes."

"My goodness."

She gaped at him, astonished. Other than a porter and a maid, she hadn't talked to anyone since she'd debarked. What were the chances she'd run into him?

He noticed her odd stare. "What is it? Did I say something wrong?"

"*You* are James Hastings?"

"Yes," he repeated more slowly, as if she didn't understand English.

"Lord Denby? That James Hastings?"

"Well, I'm not *Lord* Anybody, but that's a long story. You may call me Captain Hastings, and you're still gawking. Why?"

"I'm not sure if I should spoil the surprise or not."

"What surprise?"

Miss Hastings had prattled on for weeks about her brother, how he'd encouraged her to come, how he'd sent money, but that he didn't realize she would make the trip so soon. He thought she was still in school and didn't realize she was finished.

Miss Hastings should announce her arrival in her own way, but Amelia couldn't imagine *not* telling him. Not when he was glaring at her as if she were a tad deranged.

"I traveled with your sister," she said. "I accompanied her from London."

He frowned. "What sister? I don't have a sister."

Amelia was taken aback by the comment, but she forged ahead. "Your sister, Brinley? Brinley Hastings?"

A thunderous expression darkened his handsome features. "Brinley is here? In Gibraltar?"

"Ah...yes?"

He froze, appearing bewildered. "She wouldn't dare."

"Your sister, Laura, is here too."

"I have no sister named Laura."

Amelia was completely flummoxed. "Are you certain?"

"I'm quite certain, Miss Boyle. I think I'd know if I had a sister named Laura."

The entire voyage, Miss Hastings had waxed on about her brother and their close bond. Whenever Amelia had mentioned her own brother, Miss Hastings would become particularly effusive, as if she always had to have a better anecdote than Amelia.

How could Miss Hastings be filled with tales about her brother, while Captain Hastings claimed a scarce acquaintance? What morass had Amelia entered?

"Where is she?" he demanded, his tone lethal.

"In Room Six—on the second floor?"

With how he was glowering, Amelia couldn't decide if she should have told him or not. It wouldn't have been that difficult to find Miss Hastings though. He could have simply inquired at the desk.

"You'll have to excuse me, Miss Boyle," he said.

He opened the door into the hotel, and she staggered after him.

"Ah...ah...may I ask where you're going?"

"I am *going* to Room Six to strangle Brinley with my bare hands."

"I wish you wouldn't!" Amelia insisted, but he was already flying up the stairs.

There were people in the lobby, and they turned to scowl. Amelia smiled wanly, pretending all was fine, then she marched after him.