

MR. GREER AND THE GOVERNESS

by Sophie Barnes

EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

Somerset, 1820

Numbed by the cold, by the final loss that now gave her freedom, and the guilt this awareness stirred in her breast, Olivia Poole stared at the headstone before her. A frosty March drizzle dampened her black cloak. The smell of wet leaves and dirt teased her nose. Extending one hand, she traced the names adorning the uneven granite, the last one freshly carved.

Jonathan Mathis Poole.

A tear or two would be expected – a welcome relief even – but she had no more to shed. She'd spilled them all when death had reached out for her beloved sister, Agnes, thirteen years earlier. Her mother had died two years later, and now Olivia stood in the churchyard again, bidding her final farewell to her father, the vicar.

Most men rushed to marry off their daughters to reduce the financial burden on the rest of the family.

But Papa had been different. Instead of considering daughters a disadvantage, he'd used them to plan for the future. A vicar was after all installed for life. Retirement wasn't an option unless he had the means to hire a curate who could assist him with his duties. And since Papa's parish was poor and his salary meager, he'd worried about the cost, which would be paid out of his own pocket.

Hands balled at her sides, Olivia swallowed that thought and stared at the ground. Flowers, already drooping, adorned the newly dug grave. Did she miss him? No. A twinge of renewed guilt pierced her heart as she read his name. Distant, devout, and unforgiving, Jonathan Poole had been a hard man to love. But there was one thing for which Olivia would always thank him, and that was his insistence that she receive a broad education.

As much as she'd loathed the strictness with which each lesson had been delivered, she was grateful now for the knowledge he had imparted to her. His reason for teaching her Latin, German,

and French, for ensuring she was mathematically skilled, no longer mattered. For although she was now five and thirty, unmarried and without prospects, he had, in his effort to save the cost of hiring a curate, given her the tools with which to make something of herself.

Intent on making the fresh start she not only needed but knew she deserved, Olivia picked up her travelling bag and turned away from the past. With steady footfalls she followed the wet gravel path out onto the street. It was time for her to live, not only for her own sake, but for Agnes's too.

She gripped her bag as she approached the inn, hastening her steps when she spotted the coach. Water dripped from the brim of her bonnet, and in her hurry she stepped into a puddle. The icy water seeped inside one of her half-boots and soaked her wool stocking.

"Drat."

Setting her jaw she ignored the discomfort. Just a few more strides and she'd reach the coach. Her hand dove into her pocket, retrieving the ticket she'd purchased the previous day.

"Will you be passing through Varney?" she asked a man who was in the process of loading bags. She wanted to verify that she had the right coach. Having never left Treadmire before and with only a few funds at her disposal, she'd no desire to end up in the wrong part of the country.

He shoved a trunk into the boot, then peered at her from beneath the wide brim of his hat while raindrops slid over his shoulders, glossing the capes on his greatcoat. "Aye."

"And you're one of the coachmen?" Just to be sure she'd approached the right person.

"That I am."

Olivia took a step forward and held out her ticket, the paper sagging between her wet fingers. "Will you be able to drop me off at Sutton Hall?"

He nodded and glanced at her bag. "I can pack that in with the rest if ye like. Or ye can keep it in yer lap."

Olivia paused to consider. Her stomach twisted at the idea of letting her only belongings out of her sight.

"I'll keep it in my lap."

"Suit yerself." The man pulled the brim of his hat a bit lower and strode to the front of the coach where he placed one foot on the step. "Ye'd best get in if ye want to come with us."

Propelled by a mixture of dread and excitement, Olivia pulled the door open. Four passengers, crammed inside the confined space, greeted her with varying degrees of curiosity. Recognizing the

Brennants and Mr. Marsh, all parishioners, Olivia offered a smile in the hope they'd be willing to make some room.

"You can squeeze in next to me," Mrs. Brennan offered after a moment. She was a robust woman, roughly twenty years Olivia's senior. Her husband, a broad-shouldered fellow, flattened his mouth but said nothing. Olivia was grateful, for although Mr. Marsh and the younger man who occupied the bench across from the Brennants were slimmer, Olivia would much prefer sitting next to another woman.

"Thank you." Olivia climbed inside, squeezed herself into the tiny slot of a space she'd been allocated, bag in lap, and barely managed to shut the door before the conveyance rocked into motion.

"Where are you off to, Miss Poole?" Mrs. Brennan inquired while Olivia clasped her chilled hands to her mouth, attempting to breathe warm air onto them.

"To Varney," Olivia told her.

"Varney?" Mr. Marsh frowned. "What's in Varney?"

"Opportunity," Olivia said, realizing belatedly that she'd rather not share her dire circumstances with the Treadmire townsfolk. She sighed in response to the unspoken expectation that she elaborate further. "I plan to seek a position advertised in the paper."

"But..." Mrs. Brennan's voice faltered. She shifted her shoulder, pressing Olivia into the side of the coach as it rounded a corner and picked up speed.

Water droplets on the glass hampered Olivia's vision when she glanced toward the river where she and Agnes had learned to swim. Her heart gave a squeeze as the coach clattered across the bridge.

"Your father was a vicar," Mrs. Brennan added. "A gentleman, by all accounts."

Torn away from the view at those words, Olivia clutched her bag more fiercely. These people, save the stranger of course, had been at the service. They'd offered their condolences and had welcomed Papa's replacement who'd arrived last week. But even though the Pooles had been a part of Treadmire for well over thirty years, they'd mostly kept to themselves. Neither the Brennants nor Mr. Marsh could know what life had been like behind the vicarage doors.

Olivia swallowed. "Social rank doesn't always constitute wealth, Mrs. Brennan."

"No, I don't suppose it does."

Thankfully, nothing more was said on the matter.