

*Dear
Impostor*

Nicole Byrd

Chapter 1

He should have guessed that redemption, unlike a well-dealt hand of cards, would not be so easily grasped; perhaps heaven always lay two steps beyond hell's gaping door.

"There— 'e's over there!"

Gabriel Sinclair glanced quickly over his shoulder. He had mingled with the last of the emerging theater-goers, hoping to lose his pursuers, but the gang of ruffians who had followed him half way across London was not so easily shaken.

Gabriel stepped sideways behind a pudgy gentleman in an opera cloak, although his tall stature could not be completely hidden by the shorter man. The skinny woman who clung to the other man's arm looked up at him, flushed, and fluttered her lashes as she stretched her too-thin lips into a wide simper. Gabriel returned the smile without really seeing her. He had always had this affect on women; he hardly noticed anymore.

He was more concerned with escaping the attention of the roughly-dressed men who hesitated at the edge of the thinning crowd—too many even for him to fight his way through. His own immaculate evening dress should have made him appear part of the tonnish men and women leaving the theater, but the sharp-eyed man with the scar on his cheek who seemed to be the leader of the gang was not so easily distracted.

"Nab 'im, ye brainless curs!"

Gabriel took one step farther into the deeper shadows at the corner of the building, then turned and ran for his life.

But the alley was littered with rubbish and one drunken street-sweeper who had evidently earned enough pennies to buy himself the solace of a cheap bottle of gin. Slumped against the theater's outer wall, he snored in drunken bliss, a strong odor of gin rising from his open mouth like mist on the moor, almost strong enough to obscure the otherwise prevalent stench of rotting garbage. His balding head reflected the dim light from the avenue's street lamp beyond, the empty bottle was still cradled in his lap, and his coarse-fibered broom blocked the narrow alley.

Gabriel saw the dirty broom in time to leap over it, but he had to slow slightly; behind him, he heard a muffled curse and then a crash as his closest pursuer was not so nimble.

Gabriel grinned, but saved his breath for running. He was still not free of his stalkers. He covered several more yards, then leaped across a puddle of stagnant water. As his feet again hit the pavement, he blinked. In the corner of his vision, he caught a reflection in the dank pool, a dark shape moving behind him. He heard the splash of feet pounding through the water, followed by an almost indiscernible whisper of sound. He whirled in time to see the cudgel descending.

Most men would have died then and there in the refuse-strewn alley, but Gabriel Sinclair was not most men.

He dodged the blow easily, then caught the weapon at the bottom part of its arc and jammed it upward hard against the villain's chin. With a grunt, the man fell. Gabriel pulled the club free of his attacker's suddenly slack fingers and struck the next ruffian hard in his stomach. The man bent double, cursing and gagging on his own sour-smelling vomit.

"Eat something that didn't agree with you?" Gabriel asked, his tone pleasant. "A spot of bad wine, perhaps?"

Warily, he eyed the remaining three men, who drew back in alarm now that their victim held a weapon. Two of the men held only rough truncheons, but the leader, his eyes narrowed, pulled a long, evil-looking blade from his sleeve and stepped forward. The scar-faced man smiled, revealing rotting teeth, and shifted the knife with an ease which came of long practice.

Gabriel winced at a whiff of the man's foul breath. He watched the villain's eyes instead of the narrow, lethal weapon.

Gabriel had not spent fifteen years living by his wits to no purpose; he knew when it was prudent to fight and when to flee.

Of course, Gabriel thought with his usual cynicism, Prudence has never been one of my virtues. He made one quick feint with the club; the would-be assassin jumped back. Once more, Gabriel took to his heels.

He turned the corner and had traveled only a few yards when his path was blocked by a skinny man of almost his own height, who paced up and down in front of the theater's back entrance.

The other man, who also wore evening dress, tugged at his too-high neckcloth and muttered to himself as he perused a sheet of paper. "Aunt Sophie has white hair and a long nose; Cousin Mervyn has a fat paunch and thinning hair. No, that's Cousin Percival. Oh, hell's bells—I'll never pull this off."

Gabriel tried to sidestep him, but the man moved in the wrong direction, toward him instead of away. Gabriel skidded into the thinner man, sending the paper flying into the air. Knocked off his feet by the impact, arms flailing, the other man sprawled across the wooden steps that led to the rear entrance.

"Sorry!" Gabriel kept his balance, but barely, and he dropped the club. He glanced at the theater's back door, but it looked firmly locked. Then, even as the footsteps from the alley came closer, he heard the sound of horses' hooves.

A vehicle was approaching, not a hackney, which he might have hired, but someone's private carriage. To his surprise, it drew up before them.

"One of you the Marquis of Tarrington?" the driver called down to them both.

The man draped across the steps gaped up at the coachman, then waved his hand feebly. "Uh, that—that's him, right there."

Gabriel turned sharply to look down at the unknown man. "What?"

But the door of the carriage swung open in invitation just as he saw three of the ruffians turning the corner, their weapons held ready. And a fourth, one of the men he'd knocked down in the alley, stumbled after them, his expression murderous.

"Get in, if you please, my lord," the driver called.

Gabriel was not one to turn down a gift from providence. He jumped into the carriage, slammed the door shut, and the vehicle

pulled away. Through the window, he saw the gang members stare blankly at the departing rig.

"Another time, gentlemen," Gabriel called. Then, laughing, he leaned back against the thick soft nap of the velvet squabs. What a way to return to his native land!

Taking a deep breath, Gabriel relaxed for the first time since he had set out for the evening toward the high-class gaming club that he had never reached. He had seen poor losers in his time, but never one to rival Barrett's murderous ire.

Of course, few gamesters had lost a stake the size of Barrett's last wager. An estate in the south of England—a landed property suitable for reestablishing the fortune of an impoverished younger son, a black sheep who had left England in disgrace years before.

It was the opportunity Gabriel had been waiting for—a way to return with dignity, with style, and to prove at last to his father, to his whole censorious family, that Gabriel was not the ne'er-do-well they all believed him to be. He had always vowed he would never return with his tail between his legs, in poverty and dishonor, begging for handouts.

He had been stroking the smooth mahogany panel of the door, and his long fingers clinched involuntarily into a fist. No, he would come back successful or not at all. He would show them he had survived, more than survived, triumphed! An estate of his own, with rents to collect and a handsome house to make into his home—it would change his life forever.

If he could just live long enough to collect his winnings.

Barrett, the disgruntled card player who had lost his own birthright over a hand of cards, had conceived of an ingenious if not terribly original way to wipe out his debt of honor.

Dead men could not collect their spoils.

But Gabriel did not intend to die for someone else's convenience. If that were the case, he would have given up long ago, in all those years of wandering, of card-playing, of existing on the fringes of civilized society, living by his wits, his charm, his handsome face, and his sharp mathematician's mind.

He looked out through the glass panes once more, absently noting changes in the London cityscape. Here was a newly refurbished mansion, there a new shop boasting elegant ladies' hats trimmed with tall ostrich plumes or delicate silk roses. The street lights were more prevalent than he remembered on his first

boyhood trip, glowing with the steady flame of gas instead of oil.

And he had changed, too, perhaps more so than the country, the city, he had left behind. He glanced down at his own sun-bronzed fingers—harder and leaner, surely, than the pampered white hands of the boy who, heart-sick, had turned and walked away from his father's sharp-tongued disinheritance. The man who returned would establish his own place without seeking his father's blessing. Yes, by the heavens, he would, and his father and older brother could choke on their own bile!

The carriage slowed to allow an old-fashioned coach to move out of its path, and Gabriel heard the driver cursing from his front perch, and the other vehicle creaking as it rolled ponderously across the intersection. Shutting his eyes, Gabriel smiled. The curses sounded as lyrical as a Mozart overture—they were in English, after all, not French, not German, not Spanish, not even one of the polyglot dialects of the West Indies. And the smells of the street—manure and rain-washed brick and sweating horses—these were also the smells of London, not the spicy odors of a Tobago market or the sewage-laced stench of a Venetian canal. He was home again at last, and this time—this time, no one would drive him away!

The carriage moved forward again, and Gabriel wondered where the carriage was taking him. He didn't really care as long as it gave him a momentary respite from his attackers. Judging by their zeal, they had been promised a small fortune for his death—and considering what Barrett would save by it, Gabriel didn't wonder at his enemy's generosity.

And where was the real Marquis of Tarrington? Still inside the theater, wooing some second-rank actress in her tiny dressing room? He would be annoyed that his carriage had picked up the wrong occupant. Why on earth had the driver not recognized his own employer? As to that, why did the man Gabriel had flattened confuse him for this Tarrington fellow? There were puzzles here, but Gabriel always enjoyed a good intrigue; he had spun enough of them on his own.

Now the carriage slowed again. It was stopping, this time, in front of an impressive mansion where a footman sprang to attention, ready to swing open the carriage door.

Now for the discovery, Gabriel thought. He had no real plan, but something would come to mind. It always did. With only mild anticipation, his heartbeat quickening just a little, he straightened

his well-tied cravat and bent to exit the carriage.

To his surprise, when he stepped down to the uneven stones of the street, the footman showed no sign of recognition—or, to be more accurate—of non-recognition.

"Your lordship." The servant bowed slightly and stepped back so that Gabriel could move toward the spacious house that rose before him, its tall windows glowing, showering shafts of light outward to brighten the darkness of the street. Already he could hear the sound of a pianoforte and the faint murmur of well-bred voices.

Gabriel ascended the broad steps with measured slowness. This was not the Marquis' own residence, then, and there seemed to be a good-sized party going on inside. Was he here as a guest? Did this mean that he—Gabriel—could keep up the pretense a few minutes longer? Why not, he thought with typical insouciance. He had always loved a good party.

He nodded to the liveried footman inside the doorway and paused to glance into the tall looking glass on the wall. He had lost his hat during the chase, but his dark hair was in place, his evening attire still immaculate despite his last mad dash through the littered alleyway. He flicked one almost invisible speck from his dark coat front, smoothed his lapel, then relaxed his shoulders and prepared to climb the staircase toward the next floor, where the sounds of chatter and the clinking of glasses could be plainly heard.

God, but he could use a glass of wine! Gabriel hoped that the master of the house, whoever he was, had a discerning palate and a good wine cellar; that earlier run for his life had left Gabriel with a dry throat and a giant thirst.

The other guests seemed to be already assembled; he climbed the wide staircase alone. At the worst, that meant all eyes would be on him when he entered the double doors, flung open to welcome the party-goers. At its best, perhaps he could hide amid the crowd long enough to enjoy a glass of burgundy, a brief respite before he was off again on the run. It had been his way of life for so long that it no longer seemed strange. Only this time, his purpose was not just another easy conquest or high stakes card game; this time, he had a real goal—the estate that he meant to live long enough to claim. He had something to prove, to his father, to his brother, to his hawk-nosed great-aunts, and perhaps even to himself.

With these thoughts still simmering in the back of his mind, Gabriel composed his expression to one of well-bred indifference, with only the faintest hint of polite greeting. He stepped up to the doorway.

Without apparent prompting, the footman declaimed in echoing accents: "The Marquis of Tarrington."

A silence in the big room, which was crowded with men in dark evening suits and brightly-clad ladies of all ages and shapes. The chatter of conversation died, and at the very end of the room, an elderly lady raised her lorgnette to stare at him through slightly protruding eyes.

Gabriel waited for someone to cry out, "Impostor! That is not the marquis!"

Silence, still. He glanced quickly around the edge of the crowd until one woman, standing a little apart, caught his gaze; his breath caught for an instant in his throat before exiting through slightly unsteady lips.

She was tall for a woman, slim but exquisitely formed, her curves evident beneath the soft folds of her blue evening gown. A pity it was cut a bit too high at the neckline; he was sure that her bosom was worth closer inspection. Her flaxen hair had been pulled into a simple but severe twist on the back of her head, and her perfectly-shaped oval face was still as she gazed back at him through icy blue eyes. Her features were regular and classically beautiful, but it was the spirit inside those cool eyes that held him, that spoke of passions that even the woman herself might not guess at. Gabriel, who had not been called a rogue in seven languages without good reason, sensed heat beneath the frigid demeanor as surely as a beast scented danger.

But he had forgotten, for an instant, his perilous impersonation. He would not be here long enough to woo this vision, and he felt a flicker of disappointment. The instinctive flare of longing that had leaped inside him would have to be suppressed. A damnable shame, but there it was.

"So," the older woman said, her voice loud amid the silence. "This is the mysterious fiancé you have at last allowed your family to meet."

It took all of Gabriel's prized *savoir fair* not to show his surprise; he blinked, but otherwise maintained his expression of polite indifference. Fiancé? His goose was cooked, then, and well sauced to boot. He was already rehearsing his escape route when

the blond goddess spoke.
"Welcome, my lord," she said.

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