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Bestseller *Saving Grace*

JULIE
GARWOOD

PRINCE
CHARMING

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The Secret
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*To Marilyn Regina Murphy.
My sister, my champion, my friend.*

Know what it is to be a child . . .
To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.

—William Blake, *Auguries of Innocence*

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Virtue is bold, and goodness never fearful.

—William Shakespeare,
Measure for Measure

London, England, 1868

The vultures were gathering in the vestibule. The salon was already filled to capacity, as was the dining room and the library above. More of the black-clad predators lined the curved staircase. Every now and then two or three would bob their heads in unison as they gulped from their glasses of champagne. They were watchful, expectant, hopeful. They were also vile and disgusting.

They were the relatives.

Quite a few friends of the earl of Havensmound were in attendance as well. They were there to show their support and their compassion over the unfortunate tragedy about to take place.

The celebration would come later.

For a brief spell, everyone tried to behave in a dignified manner befitting the solemn occasion. Liquor soon loosened both their thoughts and their smiles, however, and it wasn't long before outright laughter could be heard above the clinking of their crystal glasses.

The matriarch was finally dying. There had been two false alarms in the past year, but many believed this third attack would turn out to be the charm. She was simply too damned ancient to keep on disappointing everyone. Why, she was already past sixty.

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Lady Esther Stapleton had spent her life accumulating her fortune, and it was high time the old girl died so her relatives could start spending it. She was, after all, reported to be one of the richest women in England. Her only surviving son was also reported to be one of the poorest. It wasn't right, or so his sympathetic creditors announced whenever the lecherous earl was within earshot. Malcolm was the earl of Havensmound, for God's sake, and should have been allowed to spend as much as he wanted, whenever he wanted. Granted, the man was a blatant squanderer, and a rake as well, whose sexual appetite ran to the very young, but those flaws weren't frowned upon by the moneylenders. Quite the opposite in fact. While the more respectable bankers had long ago refused to loan the licentious earl any more money, the street corner lenders were more than happy to accommodate the man. They were jubilant. They thoroughly enjoyed their client's debauchery. Each had charged an exorbitant amount of interest to shovel the earl out of his latest gambling fiasco to say nothing of the staggering amount they'd had to fork over to silence the parents of the young ladies their client had seduced and then discarded. The debts had piled up all right, but the patient creditors were soon going to be richly rewarded.

Or so they all believed.

Thomas, the ailing butler's young assistant, pushed yet another creditor out the entrance, then took great delight in slamming the door shut. He was appalled by their behavior. He was certain they knew better. They just didn't care.

Thomas had lived in the household since he was twelve, and in all that while, he didn't believe he'd ever seen anything as shameful as this. His dear mistress was above the stairs, struggling to hold on until all her affairs had been properly settled and her favored granddaughter, Taylor, arrived to say her farewell, while down below, the dying woman's son was holding court as pretty as you please, laughing and carrying on like the cad that he was. His daughter, Jane, clung to his side, a smug expression on her face. Thomas guessed the gloating look was due to the fact that she knew her father would share his wealth with her.

Two rotten peas in the same pod, Thomas thought to himself. Oh, yes, father and daughter were very alike in both character and appetite. The butler didn't feel he was being disloyal to his mistress because he harbored such dark opinions about her relatives. She felt the same way. Why, on several occasions, he'd heard Lady Esther

refer to Jane as a viper. She was that, all right. Thomas secretly called her much worse. She was a vicious young woman, full of clever plots, and it seemed to him that the only time he ever saw her smile was after she had deliberately crushed someone's feelings. It was said by those in the know that Jane ruled the upper crust with a malicious hand and that most of the younger men and women just stepping into their places in society were actually afraid of her, although they knew better than to admit it. Thomas didn't know if the gossip was true or not, but one thing was certain in his mind. Jane was a destroyer of dreams.

She'd gone too far this time, however, for she'd dared to attack that which Lady Esther most valued. She'd tried to destroy Lady Taylor.

Thomas let out a loud grunt of satisfaction. Very soon now, Jane and her disreputable father would be made to realize the ramifications of their treacherous deeds.

Dear Lady Esther had been too occupied with ill health and family losses to notice what was going on. Since the day Taylor's older sister, Marian, had taken her twin babies to live in Boston, Lady Esther had begun her decline. She'd been failing ever since. Thomas believed the only reason she hadn't completely given up was because she was determined to see the child she'd raised as her own daughter married and settled first.

Taylor's wedding had been canceled, thanks to Jane's interference. A bit of good came out of the godawful humiliation, however. Lady Esther finally had her eyes opened. She used to be a forgiving woman until this latest outrage. Now she was just plain vindictive.

Where in heaven's name was Taylor? Thomas prayed she would arrive in time to sign the papers and say her farewell to her grandmother.

The servant paced and fretted for several more minutes. He then turned his attention to ushering the guests lounging so insolently on the steps into the already crowded solarium at the back of the house. He used food and additional liquor as an incentive to gain their cooperation. After he crammed the last of the vile creatures inside, he pulled the door closed, then hurried back to the foyer.

A commotion coming from outside drew his attention. He rushed over to look out the side window. He recognized the crest on the black carriage still rocking to a stop in the center of the circle drive, let out a sigh of relief, and then said a quick prayer in thanksgiving. Taylor had finally arrived.

Thomas looked into the salon to make certain both the earl and his daughter were still occupied with their friends. Since their backs were turned to the entrance, he hurried over to shut the salon doors. If luck stayed on his side, he would be able to get Taylor across the foyer and up the stairs before her uncle or cousin noticed.

Taylor was threading her way through the crowd of opportunists camped out on the drive when Thomas opened the door. He was pleased to notice she completely ignored the scoundrels trying to gain her attention. Several actually shoved their cards into her hands with loud boasts that they were the best investment counselors in all of England and could get her a triple return on the money she would soon inherit. All she needed to do was hand the inheritance over to them. Thomas was disgusted by their theatrics. If he had had a broom handy, he would have gone after the rabble.

"Here! Here! Get away from her." Thomas shouted the order and rushed forward. He latched onto Taylor's elbow in a protective gesture and glared over his shoulder at the offenders while he escorted her through the doorway.

"Criminals, if you ask me, every one of them," he muttered.

Taylor was in full agreement with his pronouncement. "You were ready to pounce on them, weren't you, Thomas?"

The servant smiled. "Cecil would box my ears if I were to lower myself to their station," Thomas remarked. "If I am to follow in his footsteps, I must refrain from boorish behavior. A butler must always maintain his dignity, milady."

"Yes, of course," Taylor agreed. "How is our Cecil doing? I sent him a note just last week, but I haven't heard a reply yet. Should I be worrying?"

"No, you shouldn't be worrying about Cecil. As old as he is, he's still as tough as leather. He rallied from his sickbed to say his farewell to Lady Esther. Your grandmother already pensioned him. Did you know that? She set him up as grand as can be, Lady Taylor. Cecil won't be wanting for anything the rest of his days."

"He was Madam's loyal butler for almost thirty years," Taylor reminded the servant. "He should have received a handsome pension. What about you, Tom? What will you do? I doubt Uncle Malcolm will let you stay on here."

"I've already been given an assignment by your grandmother. She wants me to look after her brother, Andrew. It means moving to the Highlands, but that doesn't matter. I would go around the world to please Lady Esther. She set aside a parcel of land and a

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monthly allowance for me, but I'd wager you already knew about that. It was your idea, wasn't it? You have always looked out for Tom, you have. Even though I'm your elder."

Taylor smiled. It had been her idea, but she was certain Madam would have come up with the notion if she hadn't been so busy with other matters.

"My elder, Tom?" she teased. "You're barely two years older than I am."

"I'm still older," he countered. "Here, let me take your wrap. I'm pleased to see you're wearing white just as your grandmother requested. It's a lovely dress, and if I may be so bold as to add, you're looking ever so much better today."

Thomas was immediately sorry he'd added the compliment, for he didn't want to remind her of their last encounter. Not that Taylor would ever forget, of course. Still, it wasn't gentlemanly to bring up *the humiliation*.

She did look better though. No one had seen her since that afternoon six weeks ago when her grandmother had taken her into the salon to give her the news about her fiancé. Thomas had stood sentry inside the room with his back pressed against the doorknob so no one would dare intrude. He saw how devastated Taylor was by the announcement. To her credit, she neither wept nor carried on. Such behavior wouldn't have been appropriate for a lady. She'd kept her expression contained, but the proof of the injury done to her was evident all the same. Her hand shook as though with tremor as she nervously brushed her hair back over her shoulder, and her complexion turned as white as fresh snow. Her blue eyes, such fair, enchanting blue eyes, completely lost their sparkle, as did her voice when her grandmother at last finished reading the foul letter she had received and Taylor responded, "Thank you for telling me, Madam. I know it was difficult for you."

"I believe you should leave London for a spell, Taylor, until this little scandal blows over. Uncle Andrew will be happy for your company."

"As you wish, Madam."

Taylor excused herself a moment later. She went up to her bedroom, helped pack her own bags, and left for her grandmother's estate in Scotland less than an hour later.

Lady Esther hadn't been idle during her granddaughter's absence. She'd spent her time with her solicitors.

"Your grandmother is going to be happy to see you, Lady

Taylor," Thomas announced. "Since she received the mysterious letter the other day, she's been in such a fretful state of mind. I believe she's counting on you to know what's to be done."

The worry in his voice was quite pronounced. He noticed the name cards she was clutching in her hand, deposited them in the waste receptacle, and then followed her across the foyer to the staircase leading upstairs.

"How is she, Thomas? Has there been any improvement?"

The servant took hold of her hand and patted it with affection. He could hear the fear in her voice. He wanted to lie to her but didn't dare. She deserved the truth.

"She's failing, milady. There won't be a reprieve this time. You must say your good-bye to her now. She's most anxious to get everything settled. We can't continue to let her fret, now can we?"

Taylor shook her head. "No, of course not."

Tears filled her eyes. She tried to will them away. It would upset her grandmother if she saw her weep, and crying wouldn't change what was happening anyway.

"You aren't having second thoughts about your grandmother's grand plans for you, are you, Lady Taylor? If she believed she had truly coerced you into . . ." Thomas didn't finish voicing his concern.

Taylor forced a smile and said, "I'm not having second thoughts. You should know by now that I would go to any length to please my grandmother. She wants all the loose ends tied up before she dies, and since I happen to be the last of her loose ends, it has become my responsibility to help her. There will be no getting around that duty, Thomas."

A burst of laughter came from the salon. The sound jarred Taylor. She turned toward the noise, then spotted two strangers garbed in black attire lounging in the back of the hallway adjacent to the stairs. Both men, she noticed, held champagne flutes in their hands. She suddenly realized the house was packed with guests.

"What are all these people doing here?"

"They're getting ready to celebrate with your uncle Malcolm and your cousin, Jane," Thomas told her. He added a nod when Taylor looked so infuriated, then hastily added, "Your uncle invited a few friends . . ."

Taylor wouldn't let him finish his explanation. "The vile man doesn't have a single redeeming quality, does he?"

The anger in her voice inflamed his own. "It appears not, milady.

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Your father, God rest his soul, seems to have inherited all the good qualities, while your uncle Malcolm and his offspring . . ." Thomas paused to let out a weary sigh. He noticed that Taylor was about to pull open the salon doors and hastily shook his head. "Both Malcolm and Jane are inside, milady. If they spot you, there's bound to be a scene. I know you want to chase everyone out, but you really don't have the time. Your grandmother is waiting."

Taylor knew he was right. Her grandmother came first. She hurried back across the foyer, took hold of Thomas's arm, and started up the steps.

When they reached the landing, Taylor turned to the servant again. "What does the physician say about Madam's condition? Isn't it possible she could surprise all of us once again? She could get better, couldn't she?"

Thomas shook his head. "Sir Elliott believes it's only a matter of time now," he told her. "Lady Esther's heart has simply worn out. Elliott's the one who notified your uncle Malcolm, and that is why everyone has gathered here today. Your grandmother was fit to be tied when she found out, and I do believe Elliott's ears are still ringing from the tongue-lashing she gave him. It's a wonder his own heart didn't quit beating then and there."

The picture of her grandmother berating such a giant of a man like Elliott made Taylor smile. "Madam is an amazing woman, isn't she?"

"My, yes," Thomas replied. "She has the ability to make grown men shiver with fear. I had to remind myself I wasn't afraid of her."

"You were never afraid of her," Taylor scoffed at the notion.

Thomas grinned. "You wouldn't let me be afraid. Do you remember? You told me all about Madam's bluster while you were dragging me home with you."

Taylor nodded. "I remember. Madam didn't raise her voice when she berated Elliott, did she?"

"Good heavens, no," Thomas replied. "She's a lady, first and always," he boasted. "Elliott flinched as though she were shouting. You should have seen his expression when she threatened not to leave him any money for his new laboratory."

Taylor started down the long corridor with Thomas at her side. "Is Sir Elliott with Madam now?"

"No. He stayed the night through and only just left to get a change of clothing. He should be back in an hour or so. That gives us sufficient time. Your grandmother's guests are in the parlor

adjacent to her chambers. She suggested I usher them up the back stairs so no one would see them. Your uncle Malcolm won't have an inkling what's going on until it's too late."

"Then Madam is still insistent we carry through with that plan too?"

"Yes, of course," Thomas answered. "My dear, a word of caution if I may. It will upset your grandmother if she sees tears in your eyes."

"She won't see me cry," Taylor promised.

Lady Esther's suite of rooms was located at the end of the hallway. Taylor didn't hesitate at the threshold to her bedroom. As soon as Thomas opened the door for her, she hurried through the entrance.

It was as dark as midnight inside. Taylor squinted against the darkness while she tried to get her bearings.

The bedroom was gigantic. Taylor used to believe it was at least half the size of Hyde Park. The square platform with the four-poster bed was on one side of the long chamber. On the opposite side were three wing-backed chairs and two small end tables, placed at an angle in front of the heavily draped windows. Taylor had always loved this room. When she was a little girl, she would jump on the bed, do endless somersaults across the thick Oriental carpets, and make enough noise to wake the dead, or so her grandmother often remarked.

There weren't any restrictions inside the chamber. When her grandmother was in an accommodating mood, Taylor was allowed to play dress-up in Lady Esther's wonderful silk gowns and satin covered shoes. She would put on a wide brimmed hat with clumps of flowers and feathers perched on top, drape mounds and mounds of precious jewels around her neck, and don white gloves that came all the way up to her shoulders. Once she was all dressed up in her finery, she would serve tea to her grandmother and make up outrageous stories about the pretend parties she had attended. Grandmother never laughed at her. She went right along with the game. She would diligently wave her painted fan in front of her face, whisper, "I declare" at the appropriate moments, and even gasp with mock dismay over the scandals Taylor would conjure up. Most involved a Gypsy or two and Ladies in Waiting. Occasionally Madam would even make up a few outrageous stories of her own.

Taylor cherished this room and all the wonderful memories, almost as much as she cherished the old woman who lived here.

"You took entirely too long to get here, young lady. You will now give me your apology because you made me wait for you."

Her grandmother's raspy voice echoed throughout the chamber. Taylor turned and started forward. She almost tripped over a footstool. She caught herself before she was pitched to her knees, then cautiously edged her way around the obstacle.

"I apologize, Madam," she called out.

"Quit dawdling, Taylor. Sit down. We have much to discuss."

"I cannot seem to find the chairs, Madam."

"Strike light to a single candle, Janet. That is all I will allow," Lady Esther instructed her maid. "Then leave the chamber. I wish to be alone with my granddaughter."

Taylor finally located the chairs. She sat down in the center seat, straightened the folds in her dress, and then folded her hands together in her lap. She couldn't see her grandmother. The distance and the darkness made it impossible to see much of anything. She still kept her posture ramrod straight. Her spine was as stiff as a starched petticoat. Grandmother hated to see anyone slump, and since she happened to have the vision of a cat, or so Taylor believed, she didn't dare relax.

The light from the candle on her grandmother's bedside table became a beacon in the darkness. Taylor felt rather than saw the lady's maid cross in front of her. She waited until she heard the click of the door as it was closed, then called out, "Why is it so dark in here, Madam? Don't you wish to see the sun today?"

"I do not wish to," her grandmother replied. "I'm dying, Taylor. I know it, God knows it, and so does the devil. I won't make a fuss. It wouldn't be ladylike. I won't be accommodating, however. Death is going to have to stalk me in the dark. If fortune stays on my side, he won't find me until all of my business here has been concluded to my satisfaction. Light might give him an advantage. I fear you're ill prepared for the tasks ahead of you."

The switch in topics took Taylor by surprise, but she was quick to recover. "I beg to differ with you, Madam. You have trained me well. I am prepared for any eventuality."

Lady Esther snorted. "I left a good deal out of your training, didn't I? You know nothing about marriage or what it takes to be a good wife. I blame my inability to discuss such intimate topics on the times, Taylor. We live in such a restrictive society. We must all be so very prim and proper. I don't know how you came by it, but you have great compassion and love inside you, and I will tell you now,