



*Gina
Rose*

*Keeping
Chelsea's Secret*

A Historical Novel

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A Historical Romance Novel

By

Gina Rose

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Prologue

1801

The Sheraton Estate
England

“Celia, we forgot our picnic basket and I’m starving,” Chelsea complained, placing her latest catch in the wicker basket, with all the other fish she’d caught since morning.

“You’re always starving Chelsea. I swear, one day you’ll be as big as old Hattie if you don’t learn to tame your appetite.”

Chelsea snorted at her sister, “Come now Celia, I’m a growing girl. I need to replenish myself regularly, especially after a day like today where I’ve been hard at work providing our supper,” she said with a puffed up chest, clearly proud of herself.

“A growing girl, indeed! Just look at you dressed in those raggedy breeches and boots, with your hair stuffed under that ugly old cap. No one would ever say you were a girl, dressed like that. You know Papa says it’s time for you to put such foolishness behind you and start dressing like a girl. Really, Chelsea, you are quite the little hoyden. How will you ever find a husband unless you start behaving like a lady?” Celia lectured her sister in her most authoritative tone. She was her older sister after all, even if only by three quarters of an hour.

The identical twins, age two and ten glared at each other for a moment until Celia broke, saying “Fine! I’ll go back and get the stupid old picnic basket, but this is the last time, Chelsea. You always have me fetch this and that. It is not fair. I’m a lady not a footman.”

“Pish tosh! What do you know about being a lady?”

“You are so incorrigible,” Celia groaned in exasperation.

“Oh, go on with you and hurry up!” Then, she felt her line tug. She quickly yanked it up out of the water, “Look! I’ve already caught another one while you’ve been standing there dallying around. Papa will so be proud,” Chelsea beamed as she held up the fish for inspection.

Celia growled. With a huff and a twirl of her skirts, she scurried off through the woods.

Chelsea put the fish in the basket and stood to stretch her legs. She always enjoyed being out of doors. She loves the sound of the running stream trickling by and the birds singing. Yes indeed, nature is a wonderful thing. ‘Why should I want to behave like a girl, only to be cooped up inside doing wretchedly boring things all day like practicing stitches and silly old pianoforte lessons’, she inwardly grumbled. ‘Dressed in those stifling clothes, where one has no freedom of movement.’

‘No! I will never give up the outdoors or my boyish ways. If I don’t find a husband, so be it. Let Celia do it. She is the heir to the title after all since Papa has no sons. The barony will be safe whether I marry or not.’

‘Besides, marriage would not suit me at all. What man would want a wife who can fish better than he fishes and shoot better than him, not to mention out ride him? No, I will never marry,’ she assured herself with a soft harrumph.

‘It’s not that I dislike men, not at all. Indeed, I love and admire and yes, somewhat envy them, if one must be honest with oneself. I love the way they have freedom to be who they are without restriction. If only I could have been born a man as Papa always laments. Alas, I was born with the affliction of being a member of the gentle sex.’

She was startled out of her reverie by the sound of snapping twigs. “Celia?” she cried out, somewhat alarmed. She was answered by silence so eerie that it made her skin crawl. Her eyes darted around looking for the source of the sound but the trees were so thick beyond the small clearing that she couldn’t see very far into the wood. She listened quietly; still she heard no other sounds. Even the birds were quiet now. She strained her ears more but still heard nothing.

A sense of self-preservation made her start. She gathered up her basket and tackle, preparing to take her leave of the stream when a deep voice said from behind her, “Are you alone then child?” Instantly, fear gripped her. She froze with her back to the voice.

“Such a lovely child you are,” the deep voice murmured. She flinched when she felt a light touch on the back of her neck. The stranger ran his fingers along her skin. Intense fear gripped her now, with icy tendrils, crawling all over her body, causing her to quake. She shivered, unable to speak.

“Turn around. Let me look at you,” the voice softly commanded.

When she didn't move, he put his hand on her shoulder forcefully turning her around. She found herself looking into the face of what could only be described, as some kind of demon. His eyes were a strange mixture of brown and yellow and were alight with an unholy shine. His gaze devoured her, making her feel exposed and vulnerable.

A tall man, who was no more than five and thirty, towered over her. The top of her head barely reached his chest. He had long dark brown hair gathered together at the base of his skull with a leather tie. He was dressed in tight fitting buckskin breeches with Hessian boots. His sweat dampened white linen shirt outlined his broad shoulders. The sleeves were rolled up revealing the taut muscles in his forearms.

He looked as though he had been traveling for some time. Dust coated on his boots. Sweat pooled under his armpits and down his chest. It was glistening from his forehead and his throat. His breathing seemed heavy and erratic as if he had just run a foot race. The way he was looking at her made her squirm with fear.

“Ah...eyes made of blue crystal...beautiful boy,” he breathed as he began to stroke her cheek.

She was suddenly relieved that he mistook her for a boy and not a girl, alone in the woods. She saw no reason to correct him in his misconception. Indeed, it would be far wiser to play along until she could get safely away.

“Why are you alone out here in the wood lad?” the stranger asked as he continued to stroke her cheek.

Chelsea took a step back, saying, "Please sir, I just finished fishing and am about to return home. My Papa is waiting for me. I'm already late so if you will excuse me, I'll just be on my way."

She tried to turn to move away but he grabbed her hard by the shoulder with his fingers digging into her flesh.

"Hold there, what's the hurry? I'm just getting to know you now, my bonny lad," he said through clenched teeth.

Chelsea dropped her basket and tackle then. She started to struggle to free herself but that only seemed to make him angry.

His grip tightened. He spun her around pressing himself to her back. Then, he started grinding his hips against her. She became aware of a hard ridge in the center of his hips as he undulated against her.

"See what you do to me lad," he breathed harsh, hot into her ear. He started groping her legs and buttocks.

"You're just the right age to appreciate what I can teach you," he said in a husky voice.

Chelsea didn't know what he meant by that but she knew that this was wrong...terribly wrong. She renewed her struggle, to no avail.

He pulled at the back of her shirt to remove it from her breeches. He ran his hand up and down her bare back in several rough pawing strokes.

She continued trying to wriggle free of him but he wrapped his big hand around the back of her neck and squeezed hard to subdue her. Then, suddenly he drove her face down into the ground. With his other hand, he ripped away the back of her breeches and started fondling her exposed buttocks.

"Aye, you like that, don't you?" he panted.

Chelsea couldn't speak. He pushed her face into the moss on the ground, holding her down by the back of her neck. Chelsea whimpered. He chuckled, as though he were amused by her soft cries.

In one swift, savage move, he ripped her trousers away and began to grope her. She understood then, that she was in imminent peril.

Chelsea started to pray now. What else could she do? This monster was clearly intent on harming her and there was nothing she could do to stop him. She grew still and quiet. She realized then, he was undoing his breeches.

"Come lad, spread your legs now, It will be easier on you," he snarled.

Instead, Chelsea clenched her legs closer together with all her might in a feeble attempt to thwart him but he did not notice the action as he commenced with his unholy assault.

Just when she thought she would swoon from the pain, she heard another male voice. She could tell by sound of the other man's voice that he was younger than the monster who was assaulting her.

"Nigel! What in the name of God are you doing to that boy?" the younger man raged.

Nigel stopped long enough to acknowledge the other man. "Go away Damien, this doesn't concern you!" he growled at the interruption.

He let go of her neck, gripping her shoulders with brutal strength, to keep her pressed down. She was able to turn her head to look at the man named Damien now.

He just stood there staring, his emerald green eyes locked on hers. His mouth was agape with a look of shock and utter disbelief on his face.

It seemed like an eternity before he pulled himself together. Finally, he ran toward them. He threw himself at Nigel, knocking him away from her. She lay there a moment too weak and frightened to move, listening to their struggle. She heard Damien shouting.

“It was you that harmed Jacob! I will kill you, you sick bloody bastard!”

She summoned the strength to get up then and started scrambling around trying to find her breeches but realized there was nothing left of them except for torn rags.

She decided to run just as she was but before she did she saw that Nigel had Damien down. He was beating him savagely. She wanted to help but after quickly scanning her surroundings, couldn't see anything to use as a weapon.

The young man, her savior, must have been knocked unconscious because he was no longer moving. Horror surged through Chelsea. She feared he could be dead. That devil, who he'd called Nigel, kicked Damien in the ribs for good measure. Then he made a move toward her. He came to an abrupt halt as his gaze took her in. He just stood there glaring at her with a look of disgust on his face.

She was facing him, naked from the waist down with her plaited hair mostly visible now. Her cap had gone askew during her search for her breeches. Now, he could plainly see that she was not the boy he thought she had been. He made a sound of revulsion then quickly dashed off into the wood.

She stood there for a moment, violently shaking and trembling. She looked over at Damien. He was bleeding from his eyes, nose and mouth.

Afraid that the gallant young man who had saved her was dead and that the monster would return, she turned. The motion caused her to lose her cap altogether. She ran... ran as fast as she could on her sore weakened legs until she arrived at a clearing where she stumbled and fell, hitting her forehead on a rock. She knew no more as darkness grabbed her in its cold embrace.

“Chelsea! Oh sweet Jesu! Chelsea...wake up child! Chelsea can you hear me?”

Celia watched as her father cradled Chelsea in his arms, wailing at the heavens. “Sweet God in heaven who did this to my little girl?” He rose with her limp bleeding body clutched tightly in his arms and started walking toward the manor.

Celia followed behind, tears streaming down her face. Her poor sister! Who could have done such an evil thing? What if Chelsea dies? What has been done to her? Why was she naked and bleeding? She trembled as she tried to imagine what horrors Chelsea must have suffered.

She continued behind her father as they made their way back to their home. How was her sister ever going to be the same? After this...

Chapter One

1810

Mayfair, London

“Aunt Matilda, must we have this conversation again? Damnation! I know what is expected of me but I am only seven and twenty. Can you not allow me to live in peace another year or two before I’m forced to take a wife?”

Damien Alexander Vane, the ninth Marquess of Devonshire stood against the marble fireplace mantle of the Dowager Duchess of Fairhaven’s Mayfair mansion, glaring at her in frustration. “I mean really Aunt, every time I turn around you start harping at me about my duty to the title. I know what my duty is, believe me, I know and I loathe it. You know I never wanted this fate so just let me move at my own pace. I’m plenty young enough to marry and produce an heir before I cock up my toes.”

“Now now Damien, don’t fuss on so. I know that you have not accepted your lot in life but dear, it is past time that you did. Your brother has been dead seven and ten years. If your father, God love him, was capable of telling you himself, he would say how proud he is of you and that you will make a fine duke when he passes on. It is just a matter of time now, you know, that my brother dies. The surgeons say he cannot possibly last more than another month or two in his condition. I dare say, you should straighten up and take charge right this minute, young man because your duty is calling.” The middle aged Aunt Matilda said glowering at him.

She was a handsome figure of a woman at the age of nine and forty with lustrous red hair and sharp green eyes.

“Aye... Aye, I suppose I owe it to father,” Damien allowed on a deep sigh before walking over to the sofa across from his aunt. He plopped down onto it without ceremony.

He rubbed a hand through the front of his hair. “It’s just that I can’t abide all the balls, parties and the scheming mama’s with their simpering daughters. The whole tradition of the marriage mart makes me ill. It stinks of greed and hypocrisy,” he complained. “I just wish Jacob were still here to assume the title so I could live my own life.”

“Hear me well Damien, just so you know. I’m serious and will put up with no more of your dallying around. I will cut you out of my will and leave you without so much as a farthing,” Matilda bristled. “You know I love you, Damien but heed me, I will cut you off and leave everything to that weasel cousin of yours...oh what’s his name...oh yes, Reginald. That’s right dear; I will leave all my estates and my entire fortune to Reginald if you don’t find a wife this season.”

Damien laughed, rolling his eyes. “Is that fool even still alive? Last I heard he was tiptoeing through the jungles of the West Indies trying to make his own fortune. Surely, he’s contracted malaria or been eaten by a very large snake by now.”

“Behave you devil! He is my youngest brother’s only child. I’ll not have you say such things about him...even if he is a dandy,” she said with an air of indignity though she had a crooked smile and a mischievous glint in her eye.

She knew she had Damien right where she wanted him. He would do whatever he had to do to secure her fortune.

Damien sighed, running his hand through his hair. He shook his head, as if by doing so, he could clear his mind. “Alright you win, but I can tell you now that I refuse to go to Almack’s. If you want me to find a wife, you will not interfere. You will allow me to select the balls and parties that I wish to attend. And don’t try to choose a bride for me either, I will choose for myself,” he said broodingly.

“With your golden looks, title and fortune, you will have your pick of this season’s crop. I dare say, all the ladies will swoon at your feet,” she said with a smile trying to lighten the mood.

She lost her smile however when she looked at him. She couldn’t help but see the aura of darkness in Damien’s eyes...that same darkness that had been there for so very long. It worried her.

“Damien what troubles you, dear?” she asked in a more somber tone.

Damien growled. He huffed out a harsh breath and said, “Nigel! He is returned from India.”

Nigel took his family to India soon after that fateful day in the woods, the day his whole world changed. That was the day he realized that Nigel was Jacobs tormentor. Nigel was the reason for his brother’s shame and suicide. Nigel was responsible for ruining so many lives.

He must make him pay for his crimes, but how? ‘Should I publicly denounce him for a pederast? Should I hire some thugs to rough him up and send him off on a transport ship to Australia? Should I challenge him to a duel?’ he silently wondered. There had to be a way to make Nigel pay.

Damien would never forget that day nine years ago. He could still see the crystal blue eyes of that beautiful youth filled with tears and terror. His eyes pleading with Damien for help as he lay there on the ground while Nigel violated his poor little body.

The sight of the boy being assaulted had propelled Damien back to another time thirteen years before that day. After the initial shock of what he was seeing registered in his brain, he was dumbstruck with the paralyzing memories for several moments.

He remembered hearing a voice on many a night in the nursery when he was five years old and his poor brother Jacob was nine.

He couldn’t see clearly in the darkened nursery but he heard the voice, the voice that he now knew to be Nigel, telling Jacob, ‘You like that don’t you lad,’ as he kept him pressed face down on the mattress while he...Damien shook his head to rid himself of the vision. Nigel deserves to die. By God, he would see to it. The only question is how and when.

His Aunt’s voice brought him back to the present, “I never liked Nigel. He always made my skin crawl. But tell me, why do you hate him so, Damien? All these years, you have hated him and have never told me the reason why.”

“Some things should never be discussed. It suffices to say that Nigel is an animal, unfit to live in decent society,” Damien said with a stern voice that brooked no further discussion.

“I’m sure I don’t want to know the specifics. I trust your judgment, but what will you do? What can you do? Nigel is a duke for heaven’s sake. You can’t just kill him!” Matilda said, not realizing how close to the mark she really was.

“Besides, from what I hear, he is only going to be in London long enough to marry off his daughter then he will return to India and his tea plantation. Perhaps you won’t even have to see him, dear,” she said in an attempt to look on the bright side.

“I dare say he won’t want to leave his plantation unattended for more than a few months. He will marry that mouse of a daughter off to the first bidder or rather the first one he can lure with her fat dowry,” she snickered.

They sat in silence for a few moments before Matilda found a new subject.

“Oh Damien dear, I hear that Baron Sheraton... you remember the baron dear, he has brought his daughter Celia to London for a few weeks for a small season. He is eager to see her married since she is one and twenty and will soon be on the shelf. She is an heiress, you know, to not only a fortune but a title as well...though your title is much more impressive darling. I hear she is quite beautiful. You should make yourself known to her as soon as possible before someone else moves in and sweeps her away,” she said casually.

Damien growled, “Enough Aunt! I will find my own wife!”

“Yes, yes dear, I’m just making small talk...pay no mind to me, love,” she said with a coy smile.

“Well, I’m off to my club, I have a meeting with Jarrett,” he said as he got up and went over to kiss her on the cheek. “Don’t worry, I know my duty. I am resigned to it.” He then quickly took his leave before she could make more mischief.

Behind him, Matilda smiled a knowing smile. She was glad to see Damien cooperate even if she had to trick him with the threat of that ghastly sniveling cousin Reginald inheriting her fortune...as if.

“Ho Damien!” Jarrett Wellstone greeted Damien as he entered Whites on St James Street.

Damien returned the greeting, joined him at his table, and ordered a brandy. Turning to his friend, he asked, “So that bastard has returned, has he?”

Jarrett, the son of his father’s late steward has been a lifelong friend of Damien. He is also a highly successful Bow Street runner, commissioned by Damien to monitor his Cousin Nigel’s whereabouts and activities.

Until recently, the job was mundane but now that Nigel had returned to London, Jarrett would no doubt, be set the task of following his movements more closely to make sure he did not commit any more atrocities against children.

“Aye. So far all is quiet on the home front as they say. He’s spending his days and his fortune escorting his wife and daughter around to the modistes and shoemakers to outfit them both for the season. He is actually going to try to marry his daughter off this season, can you imagine? Good luck I say, have you seen her? God’s bones! A more homely lass, I’ve never seen,” he said with a mouth twisted as though he tasted something bad.

Damien can’t really remember what his cousin Tess looked like. She was a young girl the last time he had seen her, “around the age of nine,” he supposed. “She must be about eight and ten now”, he mused. “That’s about the right age to find a husband.”

What he remembered of her was that she was a shy little chit who preferred to stay out of sight whenever her father was around, hiding behind her mother’s skirt as if hoping to become invisible.

“Perhaps the modiste can help her along with some pretty frocks to enhance her female attributes. Show enough cleavage and one’s face becomes inconsequential,” he said with an air of disdain.

Jarrett chuckled at that, saying, “Hate the whole family, do you?”

“Am I that obvious?” Damien asked with a rueful smile.

“Just a smidge,” Jarrett teased.

The two men sat in silent contemplation for a few moments before Jarrett broke the quiet.

“Seriously Damien, what are you planning to do about Nigel? You cannot just kill him outright. He is a duke for Christ’s sake! Though, he does deserve to be killed, you have to be practical.”

Damien's right eye twitched. His jaw clenched as he suppressed a flash of memory of why he wanted to kill Nigel. With a dark look at his friend he said, "I could challenge him to a duel."

Jarrett sucked in a breath, saying, "Damien, you know what will happen if you kill him in a duel. You will be forced to leave England. You cannot do that now, not with your father on his deathbed. No my friend, you will have to come up with something else. Perhaps we could set a trap of some kind. Snare him in the act so to speak. Of course we would have to fix it so he can't actually harm a child but maybe we could set it up so we can catch him just before he commits the deed," Jarrett said smiling, clearly liking his plan.

"No! That's not good enough punishment for him, Jarrett. You know he is a monster. He is responsible for my brother's death. Nothing will satisfy me but his own death. I want to personally send the bastard straight to hell," Damien snarled.

Jarrett darted a quick glance around the room to make sure no one heard what he had said then looked at his friend with his most frank and earnest expression, "Look, I'm not going to try to stop you, but I cannot help you kill him. I can look the other way, maybe point the investigation in another direction but that's as far as I can go with it."

Damien loved his friend and would never bring harm or dishonor to him by involving him when it was time to kill Nigel. He just needed to have someone to confide in, someone to listen to his plans. He knew his friend would never reveal to the magistrates that he had killed Nigel. They had a lifelong bond and the only other person besides himself that knew of Nigel's crimes was Jarrett.

Jacob never told anyone else what happened to him or who did it. He was too ashamed and swore Damien to secrecy. Damien was too young at the time, to fully understand, what had happened in the nursery. He was too young to know exactly what it was that he was swearing secrecy to.

From what his brother told him before he killed himself, it was one of many times that he was accosted thusly, but he would never tell Damien who the villain was.

No, instead at the age of four and ten, he got into his father's gun cabinet, took out one of the dueling pistols, went to the pond, and blew his brains out. The note that he left behind did not detail any of the troubled thoughts that would lead him to commit such an act. It simply said that he could not go on living with his shame.

His father never understood the meaning of the note and succumbed to deep depression with the loss of his first-born son. He never really came out of it. He became an introvert rarely leaving the ducal apartments of Evansdale, their ancestral home.

Damien rarely visits his ancestral home because he cannot bear the ghosts of Jacobs suffering. Shaking himself free of his dark contemplations he said, "Of course I would never ask you to do such a thing. I appreciate all you've done so far. No, my friend, this is my problem. I will solve it and take full responsibility when the time comes."

Jarrett wanting to cheer his friend up a bit moved to change the subject. "Are you going to the Simpson's ball tonight?"

“As a matter of fact, it so happens, that I am. Aunt Matilda has been up to her antics again, trying to push me to get leg shackled. Today she actually got me to agree to do it by the end of the season. So it seems, that I have become an eligible bachelor for the taking,” he said rolling his eyes. “I guess it’s time to settle down and do right by my family and title since my father could die any day now. I just wish I didn’t have to go through the dog and pony show.”

“Lord, never say that I get to have all the opera singers and actresses to myself now. And what will you do with your mistress the lovely and incomparable luscious Lila?” Jarrett asked in mock horror.

“Lila and I parted ways a few weeks ago. It was time after all, I became bored with her. The relationship ran its course, so I cut it off clean. I left her with the lease on the house paid through the end of the year and five thousand pounds. If she’s smart, she’ll invest it somewhere and never have to work on her back again,” Damien said without emotion.

Jarrett looked at his friend incredulously, “How could you just let her go like that? My God man, are you daft? She has the nicest bosom I have ever seen. Enough to make a man think he’s died and gone to heaven.”

“Aye, that she does, but the last few months she became lazy and predictable. She just wanted to lay there and let me do all the work. I was paying good coin for that. When a man is paying out thousands of pounds to set a woman up with all her fripperies and jewels and a house to keep her in and all she wants to do is lay on her back and....well it just wasn’t worth it anymore,” Damien said with the same emotionless tone.

“I see your point. I wonder if she has a new protector yet,” Jarrett wondered aloud.

“You can’t afford her, Jarrett. You’d better stick with the opera singers and the actresses,” Damien said with a rueful smile.

Jarrett laughed and made no further comment but continued to sit there with a thoughtful expression on his face.

Damien smiled inwardly, knowing that he was taking a mental accounting of his finances to see if he could take on the lovely luscious Lila. “Oh well, perhaps Jarrett could work a deal with her through the end of the year. The lease is paid up until then, after all. She has plenty of new baubles and her wardrobe is up to date.

Maybe I should even put in a good word for him, he thought. Aye, I can send a note around to her this afternoon, making the suggestion.”

With that decided he smiled, clapping his friend on the back, “Well my friend, if I’m to suffer through the Simpson ball tonight I should go home to rest up. What time will you be there?”

“Oh, I thought I would show up fashionably late, around ten or so. What time will you be there?”

“The same. I can come round to collect you, if you’d like. Perhaps we can make a short time of it and go over to Maude’s for some cards, drink and wenches after. I hear she has a new crop of girls to choose from,” Damien told him.

“That would be grand old boy!” Jarrett replied smiling.

Damien and Jarrett entered the Simpson's ball at half past ten dressed in their formal black and white attire. Both men were stunning in their appearance. The sea of people parted when Damien lead the way through the ballroom.

He was already bored. He could hear the whispers of women behind their fans, the giggles of the debutantes and the admonishments of their scheming mama's.

"Sit up straight dear!"

"Smile gel, how can you catch his lordships attention, frowning so?"

"He's the heir to the Evansdale dukedom you know!"

"I hear he's a rakehell!"

These were just a few of the comments Damien heard as they braved the gauntlet.

"How can you stand the scrutiny, Damien," Jarrett asked.

"I can't stand it but I'm going to have to suffer it until I find a worthy candidate to be my marchioness," Damien said, rolling his eyes with utter disgust.

Jarrett snickered, asking, "And just what qualifications do you have for this nameless, faceless paragon?"

“Now that’s a question I would like an answer to myself. Frankly, I don’t care if she’s a scullery maid as long as there is a spark between us. Of course, don’t let Aunt Matilda hear me say that. She would die if I actually did marry a scullery maid. No my friend, I just want a wife I can be happy with for the rest of my life. A woman I will not mind being faithful to. Because believe it or not, once I take a wife my roguish ways are over. I will be a faithful husband as my father was, as was his father before him. It’s how it is with us Vane’s. We mate for life so they tell me, so she has to be special. Not one of these silly chits spilling over the rim of the ballroom. Look around! Not a one of them is unique. They all look like they were cut from the same dull cloth!”

Damien complained.

Jarrett laughed, saying, “That’s a fairly tall order Damien. I wish you the best of...Good God man, would you look at that!”

Damien followed Jarrett’s line of sight across the ballroom. He found himself looking into the eyes of a Goddess.

Aye, a living Goddess with hair so black that is cast a blue sheen when the light touched it just so. Her skin was a creamy alabaster that looked as smooth as a babe’s bottom.

She was dressed in a pastel blue gown with a bodice low enough to tease a man’s senses but high enough to remain modest. Her figure was so lush and voluptuous that it begged a man to grab hold. It left his hands aching to touch and squeeze.

He couldn't quite tell but from where he stood, it looked like she had crystal blue eyes. Huge blue eyes that were staring back at him. "Who is she?" he asked, in awed wonder.

"I don't know but she's looking at you, you lucky bastard," Jarrett grumbled.

"Whoever she is, she will be my marchioness as soon as I can manage it. Where is Aunt Matilda? I need an introduction," he said scanning the room for his wayward aunt.

"Ah look, there she is. How fortuitous for she's conveniently placed not too far from my wife!" Damien said with satisfaction, moving in that direction.

"It's a little early to call her your wife, old boy. What if she already has a husband?" Jarrett asked as he followed closely behind.

That comment brought Damien to an abrupt halt causing Jarrett to bump into him from behind.

"She better not have," he said suddenly struck with a powerful stab of jealousy over this phantom husband. He collected his wits and started moving again in the direction of his aunt never taking his eyes off his Goddess.

He finally reached Matilda. "Aunt, how are you this evening?" he said as he took her gloved hand in his own bringing her knuckles up to his lips for a kiss. "You look lovely as ever," he said smoothly.

"Oh, how you do go on, you devil. What are you buttering me up for?" she asked suspiciously.

"You wound me, Aunt. Why would I need to butter you up? I know you love and adore me and will give me whatever I want. All I need do, is ask," he said with a playful grin and a twinkle in his eyes.

She swatted him with her fan on his shoulder, saying, “You forget that I practically raised you.”

“Actually aunt, I was wondering...Do you know who that lovely black haired Goddess is? She’s over to your left standing beside that gruff looking old man.”

“Damien, you know I’m under strict instruction not to interfere, dear.” She said with a sniff and a lifting of her chin.

Damien’s smile faltered, “Be serious aunt. Do you or do you not, know who she is?”

“Well dear, of course, if you would lift your restriction and allow me, I would love to introduce you to the lovely Lady Celia Sheraton,” she said with pointed effect.

Damien’s jaw dropped open but he recovered and shut it quickly. His eyes alight with green fire, he said, “Now Aunt! Introduce me... now.”

“Of course dear, if you’re sure,” she winked at Jarrett. “Follow me, gentlemen.”

Damien growled in frustration at his facetious aunt. She wasn’t alarmed. In fact, she was grinning from ear to ear. “Yes Damien, you should not be so quick to rule out your aunt’s advice in the hunt for a wife,” she mused as she led the way over to Lady Celia.

Celia was feeling nervous at her first society ball. Never in her life, had she been in a room with so many people. She felt a little plump compared to all the skinny blonde haired china dolls in attendance. She felt like she stuck out like a sore thumb, with all the stares she received, by both men and women.

“Why did Papa insist on coming to London? Three weeks is not enough time to find a husband anyway. Why can I not be allowed to pick a husband from the local gentry near Papa’s estate? I’m sure there are plenty of fine eligible bachelors to choose from.” Not that she would really know; beyond church and the occasional invitation to tea, she rarely left Sheraton Manor long enough to analyze the field.

At one and twenty she wasn’t really eager to take a husband but her father insisted that he was getting old. He needed to be assured his title and his lands will be in good hands once he’s gone from this world. So, after much arguing and convincing, here they were in London, staying at her Aunt Gertrude’s town house in Grosvenor Square. ‘Now, I’m attending balls with stuffy old snobs,’ she inwardly grumbled. ‘With Papa standing guard beside me looking so fierce, who would want to approach me? Why, I have not even been asked by a single gentleman to dance,’ she pouted. ‘Oh, they look at me, sure and I can tell they want to approach but you can see the fear in their eyes when they see Papa. I’m going to have to speak with him about this,’ she determined.

‘He cannot expect me to find a husband when he is standing there ready to tear off the head of anyone who dares to look at me. Of course, he cannot really help himself after what happened to poor Chelsea so many years ago.’

‘Such a tragedy. Poor Papa just cannot forgive himself for not being able to protect her. He would move heaven and earth for his family. It is so unfair that he lives in constant fear that he will lose another daughter if he doesn’t remain vigilant.’

‘Oh, now there’s a fine specimen of a man,’ she observed as a handsome man came into view. He was tall and broad shouldered with golden brown hair with streaks of blonde running through soft waves. It was unfashionably long, but not too long that he should need to tie it back.

‘Oh my, that chiseled jaw, and are those green eyes? Oh, I do so love green eyes. Oh my, he’s staring at me, goodness he’s so handsome. Should I be staring back like this? What if he gets the wrong idea and thinks me some kind of a wanton?’

Celia’s face heated up. She became nervous. She tried not to stare anymore but she could feel his eyes on her. ‘He’s talking to that nice dowager duchess...oh I cannot remember her name. They seem very friendly, perhaps I can slide over there later and ask her who he is and get Papa to approach him later for an introduction.’

‘Oh, lord the dowager duchess is leading him over here. Oh my heavens! Calm down Celia, it’s all right, he is just a man, not really the Godlike creature he appears to be.’

About the Author

My father was a great story teller and always said that one day; he would like to write a novel. My sister is a writer as well, so naturally I'm a dabbler. I thought I'd try my hand at writing romance novels because I love to read them. Romance novels have everything you want; mysteries, villains; wonderful characters and I easily find myself living in the moment with the story. I hope that readers will find my stories as entertaining as I have found so many. I like to mix tragedy and comedy together with a cast of colorful characters that I create from people that I have met in my life. I will visualize a person that I know as this or that character and the rest is history.

I hope you enjoy my warped sense of humor and the stories that I tell. In addition to Keeping Chelsea's Secret, I am also the author the Brother's In All series which includes My Sweet Alyssa, Resurrecting Dylan; and Luther's Own.

Gina Rose is the pseudonym for a very prolific author who spins tales in the Regency Romance genre.

Look for many more of her books to be available soon on Amazon and most other online bookstores.

Check her website, ginarose-author.com, often for more information and reviews.

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PS: If you would like to finish reading Keeping Chelsea's Secret by Gina Rose but are low on funds, ask your local librarian to purchase it in Soft Cover format - ISBN # 9780996094047 (English Language – 5 x 8) so that you can check it out and finish reading it for free.