

THE GOVERNESS GAME bonus scene

Chase and Alexandra's first meeting, from Chase's point of view

By Tessa Dare, ©2018

The Bookshop Where it All Began

Autumn, 1816

As English gentlemen of leisure went, Chase Reynaud didn't have many grand accomplishments. No Amazon jungles explored. No military campaigns strategized. No Romantic poetry penned.

But Chase could say this: He'd left hundreds of women pleased.

It was his singular talent. He knew, instinctively, what members of the female sex wanted. And he gave it to them.

His ability did have boundaries. There was that one Christmas when he'd missed the mark on choosing a gift for his housekeeper. He'd never managed to make his own mother happy.

And, most irritatingly today, he had no cursed idea what books girls liked to read.

Chase wandered the rows of Hatchard's, impatiently scanning through books for children and pulling volumes from the shelves almost at random. He didn't have time

to be particular. His newly-acquired wards were scheduled to arrive today: Rosamund and Daisy Fairfax, ages ten and seven, respectively.

Considering the tragedies in their own lives, Chase supposed the young Misses Fairfax might prefer stories where everything turned out for the best. Hence the armful of fairy stories he had amassed. And considering that Chase intended to send them to boarding school at the first possible opportunity, they would also need some instructive selections.

He wiggled a blue volume from its shelf and examined it.

*A Compendium of Stories for Obedient Girls.*

Perfect.

He added the book to the growing stack tucked under his left arm.

A moment later, the stack was no longer tucked under his arm—it was on the floor. Someone collided with him from behind, scattering both their books.

Chase discerned two things immediately. First, the “someone” was a woman. Second, she’d bumped into him by accident.

In a more innocent world, that second point would have been obvious—but where women were concerned, he’d been on the receiving end of many not-quite-accidental collisions. Otherwise self-possessed women became remarkably unsure of their footing in his presence. Falling into his arms seemed a popular, if unsubtle, way of communicating a desire to fall into his bed.

However, this particular stumble was no sensual overture. Unless the woman behind him had taken seduction lessons from drunken elephants, it was genuine awkwardness, not artifice.

“Drat. I’m so very sorry,” she said. “I didn’t—”

He turned to face her. “No, please. Don’t feel—”

“—was entirely my fault, and ... ”

When their gazes met, she stopped speaking. He would have said she fell silent, but “fell” made it sound too graceful. She tripped, stumbled, and sprawled silent.

For his part, Chase was quiet, too.

Quietly amused. Quietly admiring.

She was lovely. Delicate features in a heart-shaped face. Hair the same deep, glossy black as a summer midnight. A blush tinted her olive skin. But it was her eyes that had him transfixed. They were dark and wide, and they pulled on him like a chasm drew a man toward its edge—using his own curiosity against him, tugging him closer inch by inch.

For a moment, Chase lost track of other women. The ones in the bookshop, in London, in England. The ones in his past, in his future. He didn’t forget them, not really. They certainly didn’t cease to exist. They merely slipped his attention, darting off in directions that for once he had no impulse to follow.

All of him was here, and none of him wanted to be somewhere else.

Interesting.

He bowed. "My deepest apologies."

"N-not at all," she stammered.

"Allow me."

He crouched to retrieve the books scattered about their feet. As he did so, Chase glimpsed three women a few paces distant. A ginger-haired young woman knelt on the floor, stacking and re-stacking her own tower of books. The other two—one fair-haired, one dark—conferred in whispers as they studied him. Chase could only imagine them to be trading suspicions and warnings. If they moved in society at all, they would know him to be a terrible rake. And if they didn't move in society, the fact was probably obvious anyway.

When he stood, he returned the midnight-haired beauty's book and gave her a roguish half-smile. In response, her pink blush deepened to crimson.

That half-smile had served him well over the years. The expression took practice, and few men could truly master it. Not a smirk, not quite a grin. Perched on the fulcrum between dangerous and dashing. If Chase had more time on his hands, he might have offered lessons. Or applied for a patent.

"You seem to know something about books," he said. "Perhaps you could be so good as to lend me your expertise."

"Surely you don't need *my* help."

"I think I do."

Even more than receiving her help, he needed to explain why he was carrying an armful of fairy stories without so much as a sporting magazine in the lot. Of all the ways he tried impress women, displaying a lofty intellect wasn't among them—but Chase had too much pride to let her walk away believing he read *A Compendium of Stories for Obedient Girls* for his own amusement.

"You see, I need to purchase some books for a pair of young girls." *Not for myself*, he mentally underscored. *Definitely not for myself*. "I've absolutely no idea where to start. What do you think of these?"

He moved to stand at her side and leaned in close, offering his stack of books for her perusal. A bit shameless of him, but he couldn't resist. She smelled as delicate and lovely as she looked. Like blossoms.

"They're all fairy stories," she remarked.

"That seemed the logical place to begin for girls. Which ones do you recommend?"

"Er ... I don't know."

"Well, which were *your* favorites?"

"I ... I couldn't say I ..." She swallowed audibly, then finished in a whisper. "... had any."

He hoped she wasn't familiar with the tale of Cinderella and her pumpkin. Judging by the scarlet color of her cheeks, he suspected this girl might turn into a beet when the clock struck the hour.

"Well, then," he said genially, "I suppose that means I'll just have to buy them all, doesn't it? Don't know why I didn't think of it. Thank you, Miss ...?"

"Mount." Even that short syllable cost her some effort. "Batten." She closed her eyes and tried again. "Mountbatten."

Good God. Chase knew his looks and flirtatious nature had a tendency to make women flustered, but there was flustered and then there was ... this. Even her friends looked embarrassed for her.

Etiquette would suggest that he tell her his name, but since she could scarcely recall her own at the moment, Chase decided against it. Instead, he gave her one last smile and a gallant bow. "Miss Mountbatten, I am indebted to you for your kind assistance."

The words were sincere. Her discomposure gave his pride a lift, and Chase wasn't above accepting it. He needed the confidence. Before the day was out, he had two other girls to win over.

After signing the bill for his purchases, he left Hatchard's and returned to Reynaud House in Mayfair, where he bounded up the four flights of stairs to the nursery. The smell of drying paint had almost dissipated, thanks to the open windows

and a vigorous airing out by the maids. They'd hung the drapes in the windows, the beds had been done up. The room was as ready as it could have been, on the short notice he'd received.

Chase went to the window seat and added his most recent armload of books to the shelf tucked beneath it. He ran his fingers along the seat's wooden edge. He should have given it one more sanding before he painted it, but there hadn't been time.

He dusted his hands and prepared to stand, but something on the bookshelf caught his eye. A book that he didn't recall selecting at Hatchard's.

Blast, it must have belonged to the woman at the bookshop, and he'd inadvertently exchanged it for one of his own.

He plucked it from the shelf and regarded it. The author appeared to be a Charles Messier, and the title was—he squinted at the thin spine and mumbled his way through the embossed words—*Catalogue des Nébuleuses & des Amas d'Étoiles*.

He flipped through the pages and found them to be thoroughly incomprehensible. It was all tables and numbers in no form he recognized. His French had never been more than passable, but even if this book were in English, he couldn't have made head or tail of it.

Perhaps Miss Mountbatten hadn't been so stymied by his flirtation and fine looks after all. Maybe she merely thought him an uneducated dolt, going on about fairy

stories while her mind was occupied with—he turned the book to one side and tipped his head to the other—whatever this was.

Well, at least she hadn't learned Chase's name. In her memory, he'd merely be an anonymous uneducated dolt.

If she remembered him at all, that was. She likely wouldn't.

The sound of footfalls on the stairs brought him to his feet.

Damn. He wasn't ready. But then, he would never be ready for this. He was the worst possible guardian for two orphaned girls.

"Here we are, then." Mrs. Greeley led two girls into the nursery. "This is your room." She noticed Chase standing to the side of the nursery. "And this is your guardian, Mr. Reynaud."

The Fairfax sisters had flaxen hair that had been brushed to gleaming, and blue eyes that took in every furnishing, plaything, and tasseled drape in the nursery. The younger of the two clutched a doll in her arms.

They looked like a pair of angels.

Perhaps this guardian business wouldn't be so difficult after all.

"You must be Rosamund and Daisy," Chase said warmly, dismissing the housekeeper with a nod.

"And Millicent," the younger girl said, clutching her doll.

“And Millicent. How could I forget Millicent?” Chase clapped his hands together. “I’ve heard a great deal about you.”

“It was all lies,” Rosamund said.

He frowned. “What makes you say that?”

“Because you wouldn’t have taken us in otherwise.”

Right. Not a pair of angels, then.

*It’s not forever, he reminded himself. It’s only a temporary arrangement until they go to school.*

Rosamund looked him up and down. “I hope you’re not thinking you’ll send us away to school. We’ve been sent down from three of them already.”

*Oh, God.*

“Millicent has quinsy,” Daisy announced. “She’ll be dead by morning.”

*Good Lord.*

Fortunately, Chase had a full slate of highly-qualified governess candidates queued up for interviews tomorrow. Surely one of them would be perfect for the post.

Millicent—and her quinsy—would not be his problem.

Daisy looked up at him. “Is there jam for tea?”