

***A Touch of Grace* – Book 4 of the Realm Series**

By Regina Jeffers

He had trailed his attacker for nearly two hours. Gabriel Crowden had decided that the man was not a professional killer. His assailant had made no attempt to hide the blood trail; yet, he did not think the man he pursued would die from the wound Gabriel had inflicted upon him. His attacker could die from infection, but Gabriel would see to the task before that time. He would not fail his friends. He could have personal enemies—knew for certain that he did have many who objected to the descendant of a French diplomat as a ranking member of the British aristocracy—but not the type of enemy who would assault him on a deserted Scottish road. Those who hated him would fight their battles in London’s ballrooms and on the Parliamentary floor. No, he was certain that the man he sought was the Realm’s enemy. If his assailant succeeded in eliminating Gabriel, the man would turn his attention to Gabriel’s only true friends. Before he took his last breath, he would see his attacker dead. Viscount Worthing and the others would observe his death as a warning for their own safety.

The blood trail had led to a small coaching inn. From his vantage point, Gabriel had watched the comings and goings of the inn yard. Nothing unusual. This place was not a trap. At least, not an obvious one. Patting his stallion’s neck, Gabriel pulled the reins to the left. “Let us see what the stables holds.”

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Grace stepped from the wooden walkway, which ran along the inn’s front and turned her steps toward the stable. She had no desire to be out of view of the busy inn yard. Hostlers rushed to and fro to aid those seeking shelter before nightfall. Yet, as she reached the stable’s main door, it swung wide, and a man in a finely fitted coat staggered toward her. At first, she had thought to turn on her heels to make a speedy escape, but then a face of an Adonis stilled her. She had seen him before—only once. In London. At the party at Carlton House. “Lord Godown,” she gasped, and then observed the painful grimace as he pitched forward. Grace instinctively caught him, shoving him backward to brace him against the building. “My Lord, you are unwell!” she said anxiously. He used his free hand to steady himself against the door. “Permit me to find assistance.” Her hand rested on his arm, and Grace heard the hiss as he looked out over the inn yard.

“No,” he insisted. With a deep inhale, he said, “Can you lead me to the inn?”

Without considering her actions, Grace laced her arm about her shoulder to brace his weight against her frame. She had never felt such panic. When she had first laid eyes on this man—some six months prior—she had considered his Christian name and how perfectly it fit his handsome countenance. Gabriel. The angel. The avenging angel, but an angel, nonetheless. “Lord Godown, please,” she whispered hoarsely. “Allow me to find someone more fit to assist you.” A barely perceptible shake of his head declared his refusal. Grace’s bonnet shifted forward as his arm pressed heavy on her shoulders. He continued his jerky steps toward his goal—another ten feet to the walkway.

Finally, she shoved up on his arm to bracket his weight against the building’s side. Sliding free of his grasp, she turned to examine him more closely. In the darkening shadows, she realized his hair was sweaty and windblown, and dirt streaked his clothes’

fine cut. Then she saw the trickle of blood darkening his shirt. "Oh, my God!" she rasped as she reached for her linen to press to the opening. "Tell me what has happened."

Head back and eyes closed, he appeared unable to answer, but he finally spit out the words. "Trailed my attacker to this inn." Grace looked on in wonderment as he took a deep steadying breath. "You did not faint from the blood."

"No, my Lord." Grace pulled a second cloth from her reticule. She pressed it firmly over the first.

"Do you have a room?" he asked through gritted teeth.

Grace doubly regretted her status. If she had proper quarters, she could tend his wounds in private. She shook her head in the negative. "The innkeeper will not let a room to a woman without companionship. I will spend the night in the common room."

Lord Crowden nodded weakly. "Would you share my room?" He caught her gaze, and the clarity surprised her. "If you have a husband whom you were to meet on the road..." He did not finish his thoughts as the pain snatched his breath away. Frantically, he caught at her hand. He said softly, "I do not wish to die alone."

Grace recognized his proposition to be a scandalous one, but she had accepted the inevitable conclusion the moment she had draped Gabriel Crowden's arm about her. She had willingly participated in her reputation's ruination. The fear she recognized in his gaze stayed her. This man carried death about his strong, muscular shoulders. "Yes, I will remain with you, Lord Godown," she said without hesitation.

"You have called me by name three times. Do we have a prior acquaintance?" She noted how he stood taller.

Grace blushed as disappointment filled her. Why would an "Adonis" remember someone as nondescript as she? "Grace...Miss Grace Nelson. Lord Averette once served as my employer."

Lord Godown cupped her face as if seeing it for the first time. "Miss Nelson. Of course." He stroked her mouth with the thumb of his left hand. "Just what I require. A touch of grace."

Grace could not breathe. She had never known such an exquisite moment. He had seen her. Truly seen her. Not the governess, but the woman of three and twenty with dreams buried but not deceased. And she knew him also. Not the face of perfection. But a man who had known great loss. She licked her lips for moisture, and her tongue grazed his thumb. She noticed how something flared in his gaze. "How should we precede, my Lord?" she said uncertainly.

Her words had broken the spell, but his fingers still traced her skin. Grace's breathing shallowed, and pure warmth spread through her. "You are my wife," he said confidently. "Your maid abandoned you, taking your purse." He easily wove an elaborate tale. He was, obviously, a man accustomed to improvising in intense situations. "We were to meet in Carlisle, but when you did not appear, I came searching for you." She nodded her agreement. "Reach into my inside pocket and remove my purse. I will not be able to do so when we enter. Have it ready to place in my hand," he ordered. She did as he instructed. "I will also need a card from my case."

"You should probably open it in the innkeeper's presence," she said. "It will bring legitimacy to our claim. I have previously spoken to Mr. Bradshaw regarding a room." She fished the items from his various pockets. "The innkeeper will recognize me."

Godown smiled at her admiringly. "You are quick to assess what must be done."

“I have been my own mistress since leaving the schoolroom,” she explained.

A frown crossed his brow, but he made no comment. Instead, he lifted her chin with his fingertips. “Miss Nelson. Grace. The man who attempted to kill me is in within. I managed to wound him.” She nodded her understanding. He inhaled deeply and looked off as if seeing something she did not. “If he discovers that I have taken refuge within these walls, he will come for me. What I am asking of you could be dangerous.”

Despite wishing to appear brave before this magnificent man, Grace’s lower lip trembled. “How shall you stop him?” she asked tentatively.

Lord Godown smiled wryly. “If I am awake, I will deal with him. If not...”

“I must see to his demise,” she whispered. The thought of taking another’s life frightened her.

He must have recognized her fear. “It will not come to that,” he assured. “But I must stop him. Others of your acquaintance are in danger: Viscount Worthing, Thornhill, Viscount Lexford and Sir Carter.”

“Those with whom you served?”

“Yes. They are my earnest companions. I cannot explain now, but know my words are true.” He swayed, and Grace instinctively reached for him. “You cannot send for the physician, Miss Nelson. You will tend my wound,” he insisted. “No one must know how close to death I am.”

“Please do not speak as such, my Lord.” She clutched at his lapel.

“My life is in your hands, my Dear,” he said matter-of-factly. He caught her fingers and brought them to his lips. “If I should die before I wake...”

Grace bristled. “I shall not have it! Do you hear me, Lord Godown? You shall not die on my watch!” Despite her best efforts, a tear crept down her cheek.

Godown flicked it away. “I will do my best to comply. Now, come, my Dear. We have a farce to play.”