



Winds of Graystone Manor- The St. Clare **Trilogy- Book 1**

by B.J. Hoff

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Staten Island, 1867

The entrance hall was spacious but dimly lighted. Halfway up a broad stairway rising to the right, a young girl was perched on her knees, her skirts gathered about her ankles as she pounded one of the steps with a hammer.

Roman found it peculiar that a servant girl would be hammering on the stairway, more peculiar still that such a task would be employed at this time of evening. He glanced around. An open door to his left revealed a darkened parlor. All the other doors were closed or only slightly ajar.

He turned and stood watching the young woman for another moment. He cleared his throat, but apparently the din of the hammer kept her from hearing. Finally, he moved closer to the stairway. "Begging your pardon, miss, but could you please direct me to Mr. Fairchild?"

The girl snapped a look over her shoulder. Although she appeared startled, she made no effort to get to her feet, instead merely stayed on her knees, staring at Roman.

Her face was heart-shaped, delicate with a childlike full mouth and a saucy nose. The nose and one cheek were smudged with dirt. A kerchief protected her hair. Between her teeth were two or three nails. She appeared to be very young, and her blank expression made Roman wonder if she might not be slow-witted as well.

"I don't mean to be a bother," he tried again. "I can see you're busy. But perhaps you could show me to Mr. Fairchild? I've taken rooms, you see, and I've only just arrived."

Finally, she put the hammer down and stood to face him. After giving her skirts a vigorous shake, she ran her hands down both sides of the material as if to smooth it, then removed the hardware from her mouth....

“You...are Mr. St.Clare?”

“I’m expected, I believe.”

“Actually,” she said, arching an eyebrow, “you were expected this morning.”

Annoyed at this reminder of his late arrival, Roman was also surprised that a girl in service would be so bold. “I would like to see Mr. Fairchild,” he said, knowing he sounded testy but too tired to really care.

He caught a glint of something in those unsettling green eyes.

Mischief?

She was odd, no mistake.

“As a matter of fact, it’s Miss Fairchild,” the girl replied.

Still clutching the nails in one hand, she lifted the other to make a brisk swipe down the side of her dress before extending it to Roman. “I’m Amanda Fairchild, Mr. St.Clare. And I’m relieved to see that you’ve arrived safe and sound at last.”

Andy couldn’t help but be amused at her new boarder’s surprise. Obviously, Roman St.Clare had expected a man.

But when she met his eyes, her amusement quickly fled. The depth of sorrow reflected in that dark gray gaze struck her like a blow as she remembered the newspaper accounts of the terrible tragedy this man had endured.

Finally, he accepted her outstretched hand. His clasp was strong and warm, and Andy felt an unfamiliar jolt of surprise.

Dipping his dark head, he searched her face with an openly curious expression. She might have found such scrutiny offensive in another man, but something in those finely hewn, ascetic features belied any hint of boldness.

“Miss Fairchild,” he said now, his dark eyes still studying her. “Ah, yes...of course. I had thought...” He let his words drift off, unfinished, as he released her hand, though not her gaze.

Andy had almost forgotten that he was Irish. Though his voice was quiet, his words somewhat clipped, there was an intriguing kind of cadence, a lilt to his speech that brought a fleeting thought of a strange, ancient music and muffled drums.

It occurred to Andy that Roman St.Clare might be more of a surprise to her than she had been to him. He was nothing like she'd expected. In addition to being younger than she would have anticipated—he looked to be in his early to mid-thirties at most, despite the faint silvering of hair at his temples—he was also uncommonly attractive.

Startlingly tall, he wore a dark Union greatcoat that flapped open and black leather boots. His hair—a little longer than fashion prescribed—was an unusual charcoal color, his mustache and beard raven-black, his skin deeply tanned. His coat was smudged here and there, as were his boots. Overall, he appeared slightly rumped, yet his mien was anything but ordinary. He might just as easily have been decked in a cape with white lace at his throat, so courtly, so noble was his bearing.

Taken together, his features weren't classically handsome or aristocratic. His dark hair and skin, along with the high-bridged, rather prominent nose, combined to give him a somewhat hawkish appearance, even a dangerous one.

Andy reminded herself that St.Clare was not dangerous, in spite of his rather intimidating appearance. A quiet dignity seemed to emanate from the man. Nor was he nobility, for all that he seemed to exude a certain eminence. He was, after all, an Irish immigrant, a photographer—though admittedly one of considerable renown.

She looked at him, again struck by a sense of ambiguity in St.Clare. Moreover, there were clear signs of pain: physical pain, no doubt occasioned by the injury he had sustained in the War. Despite the contradictions that seemed to mark him, what she saw more clearly than anything else was the face of a man who had suffered...was still suffering...not only physical pain, but an overwhelming, relentless personal grief.

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