



The Duke of Dunloch Castle

(A Wish Upon a Castle #3)

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Category: Historical

Description: Can a hidden identity lead to true love?

Lady Penelope Strachan isn't willing to settle when it comes to marriage. She loves her home, loves living in rural Northumberland, and is rather sick of her dowry being of more interest than her personality.

Alone and despairing after a sudden storm washes away her sailing boat with her at the helm, she finds herself on the shores of Scotland, and in the way of the short-tempered Duke of Dunloch.

It seems like the perfect opportunity to get to know a man without society's stupid rules or obsession with her wealth. But will the grumpy Duke pass all the tests she sets him?

And will he forgive her once he discovers her deception?

This is a SWEET Regency romance with a prickly hero and a heroine keen to conceal her identity.

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"I just don't understand, Mother, how on earth I'm supposed to marry a man that I've danced with perhaps three times at a ball and taken a couple of promenades with. It's a lifelong commitment – surely I need to know him better than that?"

Her mother, the Countess Strachan, sighed wearily. It certainly wasn't the first time Penelope had raised this topic, nor was it the first time she had given the same response.

"That's the way it's done, Penelope. It's the way I met your father, it's how your grandmother met your grandfather, and you cannot turn down every proposal you receive. You're a beautiful young lady, there's no denying that – but every year, more and more beautiful young ladies come onto the marriage market, and those who have been there longer look less appealing."

Penelope had to bite her tongue to avoid arguing with her mother. She never won arguments with her mother, so there really was no use in starting one. They would soon be relocating to London for her fifth Season – and she wondered if she would receive more offers of marriage which she would inevitably turn down, or whether her mother was right and she was growing less appealing to society as the years progressed.

"I just want to know that the man I marry cares for me, and not just for my dowry or title."

"And so he will," her mother said without much conviction. "Now, don't forget that we're attending the ball at Blackthorne Castle tomorrow night. Your dress is ready. Make sure that if you go out wandering, you're back in plenty of time to change."

Her mother said ‘wandering’ with as much disdain as if Penelope had been out gutting fish or mucking out stables – both of which she probably thought were just as unsuitable as her daughter’s proclivity for exploring nature.

But why shouldn’t she spend time outside? They lived – in Penelope’s opinion, and based on her limited experience – in the most beautiful part of the world: Northumberland. She loved walking far enough to see the sea or taking a horse for long canters through woodland. Sometimes she stayed in the grounds of their beautiful home, Ambleswood Castle, and found new pathways to explore. But she was always happiest outdoors.

Alone.

"I won’t forget, Mother," Penelope said with a resigned sigh. The Duke of Blackthorne was one of many men her parents had hoped she would marry. In fact, she had been rather worried when the reclusive duke decided to re-enter society that her parents might arrange a marriage and announce it without her consent.

He was good-looking, certainly, and although she found him rather terrifying, the rumours swirling around him had all been discredited. But she hadn’t known him, not really... And then he had fallen in love with his mother’s companion, shocking the ton and severely disappointing the Countess Strachan.

Penelope had seen them together, though – the grumpy, limping duke and the fair-headed ray of sunshine who was now the duchess. No one could doubt the love they shared. They glowed with happiness, always aware of one another, always close. It was clearly a true love match – and Penelope was very pleased for them.

Was it too much to want a man to look at her the way the Duke of Blackthorne looked at his wife? She didn’t think so. But as a woman, she did not really have the luxury of hiding away for a decade and still being considered eligible when she re-

entered society.

She would quite happily hide away at Ambleswood Castle for a decade, she thought. She hated London; it was too loud, too busy, too stressful. But if – or when – her mother succeeded in finding her a husband she was willing to accept, it seemed unlikely she could avoid spending at least part of the year in London. All the fashionable set did, and she had endured the Season there every year since she'd come of age.

It seemed unlikely she would find a husband in Northumberland, given that in five years of searching, no one local had made himself an obvious choice.

If only she were a man, she often thought. Just for the freedom it would offer: the ability to inherit Ambleswood, for one. It didn't seem fair that her beloved home should go to some cousin of her father's simply because her parents had not had a son.

There had been talk of her marrying the cousin when it became apparent she was not going to accept any of the eligible young men who courted her during her first and second Seasons.

But he was an old man, at least the same age as Papa, and she had struggled with the thought of being married to such a gentleman.

Sometimes she wondered whether she had made a mistake in turning him down. Not that he had ever made a formal offer, but there had been an understanding...

If she'd married him, she thought as she wandered through the rose garden, at least one day she would be mistress of Ambleswood.

Well, assuming her husband didn't pass away before her father. And if he did inherit,

and she failed to produce a son – well, once again, everything would go to some unknown male.

It all seemed to hinge on luck – or the lack of it – and having the right man by your side.

The warm summer sun shone down upon her, and she closed her eyes to enjoy its warmth, seeing no solution to her present difficulty. Marrying to secure Amblewood didn't make much sense, and anyway, she didn't want a marriage based on such mercenary reasons. She wanted, no matter how foolish her mother thought it, love.

But how on earth did one fall in love during a brief and busy ballroom encounter?

In the end, she lost track of time while wandering the estate and had to sneak in and hurry to her room to dress for the ball before her mother noticed her tardiness.

She pulled the cord to summon her lady's maid, Sarah. Thankfully, Sarah could be trusted to be quick and discreet. Over the years, Sarah had mended many tears in Penelope's dresses from her adventures and scrubbed grass stains from her frocks too. They didn't always manage to hide her activities from her mother, but they did a pretty good job.

Penelope was sitting at her dressing table when Sarah arrived, carrying a pile of clean clothes.

"I'm running late, Sarah," Penelope said. "I think we'll have to keep my hair simple. And is that the dress Mother picked out?" she asked, gesturing to the pale pink gown hanging on the armoire door.

Penelope hated pink. The reddish tinge to her brunette hair clashed terribly with it, making her look completely washed out. But there was no arguing with her mother,

who thought it an eminently suitable colour for a young lady seeking a husband.

"Yes, milady," Sarah said, immediately setting to work brushing out the knots in Penelope's hair and arranging it in a delicate chignon that looked far more intricate than it actually was.

With only seconds to spare before her mother's inspection, Sarah finished lacing the dress and handed Penelope a cloak. "It's cold this evening, milady," Sarah explained.

"Thank you, Sarah," Penelope said with a true smile. "You always rescue me. If only you could save me from having to go to this ball..."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll have fun, milady," Sarah said, already tidying away the pins she hadn't used. "Blackthorne Castle is truly beautiful. And I hear the Duke's cousin will be in attendance with his wife – so that will be interesting." She raised her eyebrows and met Penelope's gaze in the mirror. Sarah could always be relied on for local gossip.

"Oh?"

"He's the one who married the Duchess's lady's maid – remember?"

"Oh yes. Have they been back here since they wed?"

"Not at any public functions, from what I understand. I was quite amazed that it happened, considering who the housekeeper is."

Penelope frowned. "Do I know her?"

"Henrietta, my lady. She was housekeeper at Wardringham Castle, many years ago...when you were just a child. It's said that a romance developed, between her and

the young lord who would one day inherit the title..."

"Goodness, really?" Such romances were rarely spoken of, but Penelope rather thought that they were more real than many of the matches of the ton. While there was a disparity in stations, they surely knew each other better than a lady and a gentleman who had simply danced together a handful of times in a ballroom, never without a chaperone.

"I was only young," Sarah said, placing the brush away in the drawer. "But I heard his parents hurriedly sent him away, and married him off to an heiress."

"How sad."

"It is hard for relationships like that to succeed, my lady," Sarah said, gentle admonishment in her voice. Penelope didn't have plans to run off with a stable lad, so she wasn't sure why her lady's maid felt the need to be disapproving.

"Of course. I only meant... Never mind. Do relationships like that happen very often?"

The disapproving look did not disappear from her maid's face. "Not successfully, no – in fact, the Duke's cousin is marrying the girl is rather unusual. I did hear of a housemaid over the border in Scotland, who... Well, it's not for me to say, but–"

At that moment, her mother knocked and entered without waiting to be called in, and Penelope never would know what her maid had been about to tell her.

She stood to greet her mother, who was dressed in an ice-blue gown that far better complemented her complexion.

Sarah bobbed a curtsy before disappearing from the room, and Penelope stood tall,

hoping her mother had not noticed how late she had entered the castle and how hurried her preparations for the ball had been. For, of course, her mother did not think there was anything more important than the effort required to secure a suitable husband.

Penelope knew, with each passing season, that her mother was growing more frustrated with her refusal of the several marriage proposals she had received. Each time, they argued, and her mother would take to her bed for several days, unable to handle her wilful daughter's defiance of what was expected.

But, as Penelope explained to her father every time, she was willing to do her duty. She knew she would one day marry – most probably a man with a great title – and take her place in society. It wasn't that she didn't want that; she just wanted to be sure he was the right man. A man she knew, a man who knew her. Not just one with the right title, or a handsome face, or reasonable dancing skills.

"Very nice," her mother said, checking her hair from the back and seemingly finding nothing to fault.

Thank goodness Sarah could work such magic in such a short time.

Penelope did not know how long her parents' patience with her would last. She was of age, and they could not refuse her choice of husband, nor particularly force her into a marriage. But there were certainly ways to make it difficult for her to refuse. Cutting her off from the family home and money, for one—although she did not think they would be that cruel. Reducing her allowance was another option, as was simply announcing a betrothal and assuming that Penelope would not deny it and risk social embarrassment.

If they became desperate enough, there were certainly options they could resort to – and she didn't want that to happen. She wanted to find a husband, have her own

home, and children. But she did not want to be tied for the rest of her life to a man she did not know and might later discover was entirely unsuitable.

"We must have some more gowns made in that shade of pink when we go to London, Penelope," her mother remarked as she finished checking her daughter's appearance. "It is very becoming and suggests that you are a little younger than you are, which, with this being your fifth season, is no bad thing."

Penelope pressed her thumbnail into her arm to stop herself from saying something rude in response and managed to maintain the smile on her face. She wasn't sure her mother saw what she did when she looked in the mirror. To Penelope, the pink washed her complexion out, making her look even paler than usual. And she wasn't so old – twenty-two was hardly an old maid. It was perhaps a little older than one would wish to be when still searching for a husband, but as the daughter of an earl and countess with a rather large dowry, she was confident she could secure a husband, even if not precisely the one she wished for.

No, she did not think that all hope was lost – she just wanted to have her own choice. To find a man whom she could love and who would love her in return.

"But who knows," her mother said, rubbing her hands together in glee, "perhaps you'll meet someone at the Duke of Coldingham's ball, and there will be no need for a season at all!"

"Perhaps, Mama," Penelope said, although she did not truly believe her own words. She had yet to meet a man at a ball whom she was willing to marry, and she could not imagine tonight being any different.

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As their carriage pulled up outside Blackthorne Castle, Penelope craned her neck to see it. It was a grand, imposing castle – although in the fading light, it was hard to discern much of its detail. She had always admired it, ever since she was a little girl. The beautiful views it boasted, and its proximity to the ocean, made it an enviable home.

She had even imagined living there when she first came out in society, and her mother had been heavily pushing for a match between her and the Duke of Coldingham – even with the rumours that had been swirling around his name at the time.

Everyone was convinced now that he hadn't killed his father in that fire, and it seemed that the Duchess was keener to entertain than he ever had been – for although balls at Blackthorne Castle still weren't frequent, they now occurred at fairly regular intervals.

Being some of their nearest neighbours, the Strachans were always invited, even if such events caused her mother to lament the fine match she had lost. Not that he had ever proposed. From what Penelope occasionally heard through gossip, he had never proposed marriage to anyone in his life until he did so to his current Duchess.

The Duke and Duchess were waiting to greet everyone in the entrance hall, and Penelope and her mother swept curtsies while her father bowed.

"Lord and Lady Strachan, and Lady Penelope. Such a pleasure to have you with us," the blond Duchess said with a beaming smile. She was glowing with happiness and – although Penelope would never have commented upon it – was rather clearly with

child again. The thought of filling this castle with laughter and love, rather than leaving it empty and cold as it had been for many years, was a cheering one.

Perhaps one day, Penelope would have her own castle filled with children, and a husband who looked at her in the adoring way the Duke looked at the Duchess.

"Thank you for having us," Lady Strachan said. "The castle looks beautiful, as always."

They moved into the great hall, where tables had been set along one side for food, and a band was setting up in the far corner. The room was filled with beautiful flowers – the summer's last, Penelope reckoned, for soon the foliage would be turning to oranges and browns, and everything would be falling from the trees.

As they often were, the Strachans were some of the first guests to arrive. Her mother liked promptness, and their proximity to the castle meant they avoided any issues on the roads. It also meant there was no need for them to stay the night, something Penelope was quite pleased about. As beautiful as the castle was, she did prefer to sleep in her own bed.

"Is that not His Grace's cousin?" her mother asked behind her fan.

Penelope looked in the direction her mother was gazing, trying not to make it obvious. A tall, dark-haired man had entered with a redhead on his arm. Unlike Penelope's slightly reddish-tinged hair, this woman had a head full of flaming locks, intricately pinned around the crown of her head. She wore an emerald green dress that complemented her pale complexion, and Penelope was struck by how beautiful she was.

"I think so," Penelope agreed. "The Viscount and Viscountess Aylesbury, I think?"

"The one who married the lady's maid," her mother said with a tut.

"They look very happy, though," Penelope commented, watching them as they glided through the room towards the refreshment table. The Viscountess held her hand delicately to her stomach, and Penelope wondered if she too was with child.

"I'm not sure they have any business being happy," her mother said with a sniff, though she kept her voice down – whatever her views, she would not want to offend their host or his cousin. "They went against the natural order of things. It's a dangerous thing to upend society like that."

Penelope sighed, feeling irritated by her mother's remarks. "For goodness' sake, Mother. I don't see that it's any of our business. Besides, you didn't seem to have such an issue when the Duke married his mother's companion."

Her mother shushed her, clearly concerned that someone important might hear, and took her elbow, leading her to a quieter corner. "She was at least a gentleman's daughter, and well you know it. Not a servant girl, descended from a servant girl...Don't get any silly ideas in your head, young lady. It's not right when a man marries beneath his station, but it's much more forgivable than for a woman."

"Yes, Mother," Penelope said, eager to end the conversation. Just because she could see someone was happy, why did everyone suddenly think she was about to run off with someone in their employ? She wasn't a fool – she knew that would not be tolerated by her family. She also knew she enjoyed the comfortable life she lived far too much to give it up and become a poor man's wife.

Her mother was right that it was easier to forgive in men; after all, they had the money and the power. If they wanted a wife of little consequence, they would provide for her – but they wouldn't have to give up their lifestyle. Unless society shunned them, of course, but considering how many people were at this ball, that didn't seem

to have happened for either the Duke of Coldingham or Viscount Aylesbury.

"There's Lord Danson," her mother commented, looking towards the door as a young, fair-haired man entered. "He has newly inherited, and he's looking for a wife. You must make sure you dance with him."

"Yes, Mother." Penelope knew it was easiest to agree, though she still couldn't quite see how a good husband could be found in such circumstances.

The band began to play, and the Duke and Duchess led the first dance. Since no one had yet asked for her hand, Penelope watched them as they glided across the dance floor, never putting a foot out of step.

The Duke walked with a limp, but when he danced, it seemed to disappear entirely. He had eyes only for his wife, and she for him. When other couples joined them on the dance floor, Penelope watched them too, trying to decipher which ones were truly in love, which were merely acquaintances, and which were married couples who felt nothing for each other.

The Duke and Duchess, and the Viscount and Viscountess, were very clearly in love. Her parents were clearly married, but she wasn't sure she would call what was between them love. Companionship, perhaps. They rubbed along together well enough and worked together to be well-liked and respected peers of the region.

Lord Danson was dancing with a girl Penelope didn't recognise, but one she thought had probably only just come out in society. They trod on each other's toes several times, both wincing painfully, and Penelope wondered whether a match could be made from such a brief pairing.

Stranger things had happened.

And yet... she wanted more. She wanted love. She wanted a marriage with a stronger foundation than simply property that ought to be combined for efficiency's sake, or a young man's need for a dowry.

She wanted a love match she was sure of – and she just had to figure out how on earth she was going to get it.

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James pushed his horse, Gideon, into a canter as they passed the lake and headed for the edges of the Dunloch Castle estate.

He'd been preoccupied over the summer, he knew that. With all three of his sisters home, demanding his attention and help with any number of trivial issues, he felt like he hadn't had a second to think straight.

But the estate was his most important responsibility. He had been raised to understand that from a young age, long before he became the duke. Indeed, his parents had thought it more important for him to develop the sensibility, focus, and decorum to be a good duke than anything else. More important than spending time together as a family or playing with local lads in the fields. Those boys were far beneath his station, as his parents regularly reminded him – although their games had always looked rather fun.

His three younger sisters, he felt, had been largely forgotten as his parents focused all their efforts on raising the next Duke of Dunloch. Had they been blessed with another boy, perhaps his education would have matched James's own, for that boy would have been next in line. But no boy came, and when his parents were swept off to their graves in a terrible sea accident eleven years earlier, James was left with the solemn duty to care for the estate, to uphold the family name, and to be guardian to his three younger sisters at the tender age of nineteen.

He reached the beginning of the farmland he owned and noted with dismay that several fences were broken. They would need to be repaired before the animals could be moved there to graze – something he wished he had organised earlier. If the weather turned early this year, it would be far harder to complete, and harder still to

find labour.

But soon, his sisters would be out of his hair once more, back in London, and he could focus on the tasks at hand. The estate was large, and many people relied on him for their homes and livelihoods. It needed constant attention – and he hadn't even begun to think about the fact that one day, he would need to find a wife and produce heirs to ensure Dunloch Castle stayed within the family.

Whenever he had played a game too roughly or ridden too far or too fast, his parents had reminded him that he was the sole heir to the dukedom. If something happened to him, the title would fall to some far-off male relative of his father's, someone who had not been raised for the task and was not suitable.

And so James had always been careful. Even now, as he pushed Gideon into a gallop, enjoying the wind in his hair, he was acutely aware of any possible dangers that might befall him. He supposed he should think about an heir – and a spare – sooner rather than later, in case he met an early end as his parents had done.

"I can't believe he hid this from us," a voice said in the parlour as he re-entered the castle.

"It's so very dull here. And the one thing that could have livened it up..."

They had clearly heard his return, for the next voice was his youngest sister, Francesca, calling out his name. "James?"

With a heartfelt sigh, he followed the sound of their voices, knowing that if he tried to escape and hide, they would only come and find him.

"You screeched, dear sister," he said sardonically, raising his dark eyebrows in irritation.

Antonia, his middle sister who had just turned eighteen, thrust a piece of card at him. "We found this invitation – the Duke of Coldingham's ball last night. Why didn't we attend?"

James plucked the card from her fingers. "Because Coldingham's castle is in England, and it's a decent ride from here. We would have had to stay overnight. And, Antonia, you are not out in society yet and so would have had to stay here. Hardly a loss."

In truth, he simply hadn't wished to attend. He did not enjoy balls, and although he occasionally attended those nearby, the thought of staying away, however hospitable Blackthorne Castle surely was, made him send his regrets immediately. When he wanted a bride, he would go to London and find one – not waste time in provincial ballrooms. He needed someone properly bred, who would know how to be a duchess, who would know her place and not expect more from him than he was willing to give.

"But we could have gone," Cecily said, while Francesca pouted at the thought of being left out.

"Well, we didn't," James said, scrunching the invitation in his hand and throwing it into the fireplace. "So that's the end of the discussion. You are all to return to London in two days – surely you have things to arrange before you leave? Cecily, you know our aunt will expect you to be ready for the Season, so do not disappoint her. And Antonia, there must be things you need to do to ready yourself for your presentation at court."

"Yes, brother," Cecily said, and the three of them traipsed out of the room, looking rather downcast.

James took a seat by the fire and sighed. His sisters were considerably younger than

him, with eight years between him and Cecily, and fourteen between him and Francesca. He loved them, of course he did – they were family. But he couldn't help being irritated by their general silliness. They didn't seem to take anything seriously and had little understanding of the way the world worked. He only hoped that their time in finishing school – and Cecily's Season with their aunt in London – would teach them to be more sensible. Or at least find them husbands who were sensible and would remove them from James's care.

He had plenty to occupy him once they finally left him in peace and quiet.

He called for his whiskey and enjoyed a glass by the fire. He loved Dunloch Castle, but it was always draughty, even in the height of summer.

His mind wandered to Blackthorne Castle, the site of the ball his sisters were so disappointed to have missed. It overlooked the beach and stood right on the ocean. He had visited once or twice when his parents were alive. He imagined it was rather cold there all year round. For a long time after James inherited the title, the Duke of Coldingham had not entertained. James was vaguely aware of rumours surrounding him and the death of his father, although he didn't tend to pay attention to gossip. However, the Duke had started entertaining again in recent years, and James wasn't sure why.

Perhaps the Duke was on the lookout for a wife. Or perhaps he had already found one. Undoubtedly his sisters would know, if he asked them – but his interest in the topic faded quickly.

He settled in front of the fire and made a mental list of the tasks that needed to be completed that week. The work of a duke was never done – especially for one who made it his business to be involved in every aspect of running the estate, no matter how small.

He had been raised to know how important his role was, and he never forgot that, even for a moment.

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There were dark clouds in the distance, but they didn't deter Penelope. She knew it wouldn't be long before her parents began packing the house for their move to London for the season. Her time to enjoy the Northumberland wilderness was limited.

In London, there would be no disappearing without a chaperone, and although the parks were pretty, they had nothing on the rugged coastline of Northumberland.

She ate her breakfast early and alone before slipping out through a side door, her cloak wrapped tightly around her against the autumn morning chill.

Her parents were accustomed to her vanishing for the day. As long as she didn't get herself into trouble, they seemed to accept her need for a little freedom.

Although, her mother had remarked more than once that such freedom would be curtailed once she was married. Because – in her words – who wanted a wife disappearing all over the countryside?

And so, Penelope was determined to savour every moment she could in her beloved home county.

She kept a little boat in a cave just off Amblemouth Beach, which was only a short ride away. Occasionally, fishermen were on the beach, but they were used to seeing her and paid her no mind. Today, the beach was mercifully empty. She hauled her little vessel out and let the tide lift it from the sand. Her boots got wet as she climbed in, but she didn't mind. Taking up the oars, she began to row out to sea.

She never had a destination on these excursions; she simply liked to feel free,

bobbing on the ocean waves with no one around her.

When her arms grew tired, she let the boat drift, unwrapping the small package of biscuits she had brought along for such an occasion.

As she ate the cook's sweet treats and breathed in the salty air, she thought life could not get much better than this. She felt free, with the world at her feet, nature unfurling in all its glory around her.

Perhaps she didn't have to marry. Perhaps she could remain a spinster daughter, living at home with her parents and cherishing moments like this... But as she began to row again, glancing at the ominous clouds gathering above, she knew that wasn't a realistic option. Either her parents would find her a match and push her into it, or she would eventually be left in the vulnerable position of her father passing away, leaving her and her mother without a home. There was a dower house, but staying there would rely on the goodwill of the heir – and she had no way of knowing if that could be counted upon.

No, marriage really was the only way to secure her future. She just needed to ensure she chose the right man; someone who wouldn't make her feel trapped.

The wind began to pick up, making it harder to row, but Penelope didn't panic. She had been out on her little boat in all kinds of weather and had never yet encountered serious trouble.

When the rain started, it was disheartening – the cold droplets soaked through her cloak quickly, leaving her shivering in the small vessel. Still, she rowed. The shoreline came into view, and though her arms ached, she reassured herself there would be plenty of time to rest in front of the fire that evening. After all, all that was expected of her was to complete some needlework, which was hardly taxing.

A sudden boom of thunder startled her, and her teeth chattered involuntarily. The storm seemed to have come from nowhere, leaving her wholly unprepared. The dark clouds in the distance had not seemed so threatening when she had left the shore...but now they were right above her. The winds intensified, tossing her backwards and forwards on the waves, and several times she feared the boat might capsize. She wanted to scream for help, but even in her panic, she knew it was pointless. There was no one around for miles, and even if there had been, her voice would have been lost to the wind.

Fighting against the waves, her hands grew colder and more numb. Then, a particularly vicious wave struck, knocking her over. She hit the floor of the boat hard, and everything went black.

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The storm which had raged overnight had blown itself out, leaving the air cooler but the sky clear and sunny. With all three of his sisters on their way back to London, James was pleased to have some time to himself, free to attend to his affairs without commentary or question.

He often swam in the sea during the summer months, and though autumn was well underway, it seemed as good a day as any for a swim. The weather could turn at any moment, and he liked to seize every opportunity.

Culross Cove was only a short ride from Dunloch Castle, and it was thankfully secluded. He disliked unnecessary conversation or the risk of a virtuous young miss stumbling upon him half-dressed, either entering or leaving the water.

But when he arrived at the beach, it wasn't as empty as usual. A small wooden boat had washed ashore, and he hurried down to secure it, wondering if it had broken loose in the storm.

To his surprise, it wasn't vacant. A sodden figure, her hair escaping its pins and her dress dripping wet, was curled up in the bottom of the boat. Swearing under his breath, he jumped aboard, lifting her into his arms. She was cold and deathly pale, and he couldn't tell if she was alive or dead until he laid her out on the sand.

Once they were clear of the sea, he gently placed her on the dry sand and watched carefully for any signs of life. Suddenly, she coughed violently, half the ocean pouring from her mouth.

"That's it," he said, hoping his tone was reassuring, though he had no idea what a girl like her was doing alone in a boat or what had led to this strange situation. "All is well."

She opened her eyes, and they widened in horror. He wasn't sure whether it was the sight of him or her predicament that alarmed her. She certainly didn't look like a fisherman's wife. Even soaked, her clothes were far too fine for that.

"What on earth were you doing in a boat? Did you get caught in the storm?" he asked, tempering his words as he reminded himself she was, after all, a lady.

"I-I- took my boat out," she stammered, and he wondered if she'd hit her head, as she sounded rather like a simpleton.

"Who are you?" he asked, glancing towards where his horse was tethered. His swim would have to wait; he needed to get her back to the castle and warmed up if she was to have any chance of avoiding a dangerous chill. If she'd been out in that storm, she was lucky to be alive.

"I-I-" Her mouth opened and closed like a fish before she swallowed hard. "I'm not sure," she said, shivering even more violently.

"Well, you were a fool to go out in weather like that." James eyed the pitiful figure before sweeping her into his arms, her protests too feeble to resist. He would get her warm and dry – and then find out who she was and who on earth had allowed her to behave so recklessly.

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Penelope knew when he swept her up into his arms that this wasn't right – but it was hard to argue when he was so strong and sure of himself, and when the warmth of him was a blessed relief against the iciness of her own clothes.

When he first found her, when she opened her eyes and saw him above her, she hadn't been sure where she was or even who she was.

But now... She didn't know where she was. And she had no idea who he was. But she was sure that she was Lady Penelope Strachan. And yet, she did not tell him that.

She wasn't entirely sure why. At first, it had certainly been because she was unsure. But now... Part of her thought it would be better to keep her identity hidden so that her reputation would not be ruined by this incident.

He helped her onto his horse and then vaulted on behind her, wrapping his arms around her in order to hold the reins, and setting off at a brisk pace in the direction of a castle on the horizon.

Did he live there, she wondered? Or was he merely going to the nearest place for help? She struggled to control her teeth chattering or her body shivering. She could think of nothing but getting warm, of removing her sodden clothes and sitting far too close to a very hot fire.

He was right; she had been a fool to go out in weather like that. And if she kept her identity secret, perhaps no one else would ever need to know.

She could warm up, find out where she was, and make her way home – perhaps even

before her parents realised she was missing.

Not that she knew how long she'd been out in the boat, for she had been unaware of time passing for a while, she was sure of it. And from the way her stomach rumbled, she was sure it had been a long while since she had eaten.

"Where are we?" she turned her head to ask, and she felt his deep, rumbling reply reverberating through her body. "Dunloch," he said, urging the horse up a steep path. "That's Dunloch Castle, up ahead."

Penelope frowned, trying to think whether she knew of a Dunloch Castle. She knew most of the castles of Northumberland, she was pretty sure of that – so this was surely a little further afield. By the sounds of it, perhaps over the border into Scotland. And yet, her rescuer did not seem to have a Scottish accent.

He dismounted in the courtyard of the castle and put his hands on her waist to help her down. She did not think she had ever been this close to a man before, and it was rather thrilling – being alone, and unchaperoned, with no one knowing who she was or expecting anything of her.

"You need to get warmed up, and quickly," he said, taking her by the wrist and leading her up the stone stairs and in through the arched doorway. So he obviously lived there, for he was confident enough to approach and walk in without knocking. He was dressed in fine clothes, and she wondered exactly who he was.

"In here," he said, leading her into a library with a fire roaring in the grate. He was clearly a man of few words, but in that moment she didn't care. She hurried towards the fire, sinking to her knees before it, and holding out her hands before the flames. They stung a little in shock as the heat reached them, but it was better than the biting cold. And it wasn't even winter yet... What would have happened to her had she been knocked unconscious in a storm and the weather had been icy? Perhaps she never

would have woken up.

"I'll get you something to wear and something to eat," the man said, disappearing without giving her his name.

As she waited and thawed her icy limbs before the fire, her eyes wandered the room. He clearly liked to read, if this library was his. There were many volumes, far more than were held within Ambleswood Castle. The arched window looked out onto a beautiful lake, and she thought that, were she feeling more herself, she would have quite liked to explore the grounds. If she was right, and she was indeed in Scotland, then it was an opportunity she had not had before. For she had been to Edinburgh before and attended balls, but she had never seen rural Scotland.

He returned with a green gown in his hands, and she wondered where he had found it. Was he married, and taking it from his wife's wardrobe? Or perhaps it belonged to his mother.

He shoved it in her direction, and she scrambled to her feet, taking it from him with a grateful smile.

"You can change in here. I've ordered some food and some wine to be sent up, but they won't come in without knocking." And then he was gone again, with Penelope still none the wiser as to how she should address him or whether she should be curtsying.

With some difficulty, since she was used to the help of a lady's maid, she removed her soaking dress. She considered keeping her slip on because it seemed rather scandalous to be without it in someone else's home, but it too was sopping wet, and she really did not wish to catch a chill.

Thankfully, the dress fit well, even if she did struggle to lace it herself. By the time

the knock came at the door, she was trying to remove the remaining pins from her hair, and then combing her fingers through it to make herself look more presentable, and to allow it to dry.

"Come in," she called at the sound of the knock on the door.

A young man came in carrying a tray of steaming soup, with a large glass of wine and some bread to accompany it.

He bowed his head. "His Grace asked for something warming, milady," he said, placing the tray on a small oval table.

His Grace? So her mystery rescuer was a duke, was he? That was interesting information.

"Thank you," she said with a smile. "Might I trouble you for a hairbrush, too?"

He bowed his head sharply. "Of course, milady."

As she ate the soup, which was delicious, she pondered this situation she had got herself into. She was alone in a strange man's – no, strange duke's – house, unsure of exactly how far she was from home, and with no one any the wiser to her identity.

While her first thought had been to leave as soon as she was physically able, and to hope that her disappearance hadn't been noticed, she now thought again. She needed to find out how long she had been at sea, certainly. But perhaps it was too late for her parents not to worry. And perhaps she had here an opportunity that she had never had before and would never get again.

She could get to know this man, curmudgeonly as he seemed, without all the rules of society. She had wanted for a long time to see whether she would be more open to the

idea of a husband if she got to know him outside of a ballroom. And this duke, with no knowledge of who she was, her dowry or her title, might be the perfect chance to test that idea. Presuming he was not married, of course...but would a wife not have made herself apparent by this point, if she existed?

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James stood in his study, feeling irritated. Once again, his plans had been thrown off-kilter by a woman. One who didn't seem to remember her own name – and one who had been foolish enough to go sailing in a storm.

Who was she? She was dressed like a lady of quality. But he certainly did not recognise her, although he supposed there was no reason necessarily for him to. He wasn't one to attend balls regularly, and he had not frequented the London Season in quite some time. There was far more chance of his sisters recognising the lady, but of course, they were gone.

Just when he'd thought that he finally had Dunloch Castle to himself, that he could enjoy the peace and quiet, and get on with all the tasks that needed attending to.

Now he had this woman to take care of. It wasn't as though he could have just left her in the boat, could he? And although it wasn't really appropriate to have her in his home, with no one else present, there wasn't much he could do about it. What was he to do, throw her out to figure out where she came from and who she was? Ride around every town he could feasibly reach on horseback in order to see if anyone recognised the chit?

No, the best course of action – indeed, the only course of action – seemed to be to make sure she was warm and fed, and hope her memory returned very swiftly.

No one visited Dunloch Castle, especially when his sisters were not present. So there

would be no real gossip around her appearance. He trusted his staff not to spread rumours about their employer; they'd all been with him since he was a young boy, and he could not imagine any of them wishing to bring shame on Dunloch Castle.

He just had to hope that it was not long before she regained her memory. And that she did not expect him to spend his time trying to help her recover it.

He was an important man, and he had important things to do.

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James was poring over the plans to tear down a crumbling farmhouse and build three cottages in its place when there was a knock on his study door.

"Enter," he called, not looking up from the parchment on his desk.

"I'm sorry for interrupting, Your Grace," the soft voice of young Albert, a footman, said. The lad had been terrified of his own shadow when he started working, but as the son of their former cook, James had given him a chance – and he was certainly growing into the role.

"Yes, Albert?" James said, finally tearing his eyes away from the document.

"I just wished to tell you that the lady has finished her food and is in dry clothes in the library."

James nodded. "I don't suppose she has remembered who she is, has she?"

"She has not shared that information with me, Your Grace," Albert said with a bow of his head before departing from the room.

James tutted to himself. He supposed Albert was trying to remind him of the girl's existence. Indeed, he probably had been in danger of forgetting her. But he could have done with finishing signing off on the plans first. For now he felt obligated to go and see if she was well and whether she was any closer to knowing who she was and where she belonged.

Because she certainly did not belong at Dunloch Castle.

With a weary sigh, he pushed the documents aside and stood, walking the short distance from his study to the library. He knocked before entering, because even though it was his house, he did not wish to risk interrupting her in a state of undress.

"Come in," her feminine voice called, and he entered to find a far more put-together woman than the one he had left. Cecily's green frock seemed to fit her just fine, and she had obviously availed herself of a hairbrush, for the curls that had been escaping pins were now loose but looking rather more tamed.

She stood as he entered and curtsied. "Your Grace. Thank you so much for rescuing me, and for the clothes and the food."

So one of the staff had obviously informed her of who he was. If only he knew who she was.

"It was no trouble," he said, although her presence was rather troubling. He didn't like anything to interrupt his most important duties – those of being the Duke of Dunloch.

"On the beach, I felt I might never be warm again. But I'm pleased to say I was wrong," she said with a small smile.

"I'm glad to hear it. Although, whoever you are, it was mighty foolish to go out on the ocean with a storm like that brewing."

She nodded and bowed her head in contrition. "Indeed. I am sorry for the trouble I have caused you."

He wasn't used to a woman agreeing with him and not arguing back. But then he supposed that was the challenge of having three younger sisters. They never did as they were told.

"Have you remembered your name? Or where you hail from, at least?" he asked. Once he knew that, he could put her in a carriage and send her on her way, his duty done.

She gave a sad shake of her head. "I'm afraid not, Your Grace. I remember going out on the boat, noticing the clouds...the waves hitting and then...nothing." She gave a shrug.

James could not help sighing slightly. "Well, I shall have a guest chamber prepared for you tonight. Hopefully, after a good night's sleep, your memory will be restored, and you can be on your way back to your family. You must have parents, or perhaps a husband? Someone who will be wondering where you are."

"I'm not married," she said quickly, and he wondered how on earth she could be so sure if she did not even know her own name. "I mean, I don't feel like I'm married. But you're right, I'm sure. A good night's sleep, and everything will become clear."

"Although perhaps," James said, the thought suddenly occurring to him, "I should send for the doctor. If you really cannot remember who you are, perhaps you have sustained serious injuries that are not immediately apparent..."

But to that, she shook her head. "Oh no, I certainly don't need to put you to that bother. Now that I'm warm, I feel fine in myself..."

James nodded slowly. She seemed insistent – and he really did not want to have to call for the doctor. The expense was no issue, of course, but he'd rather nobody else knew that this girl was staying in his home. And if she said she felt fine...well, who was he to argue?

If her memory had not resurfaced in a day or two, then he would, of course, call for a professional opinion. He wasn't going to have the girl here for any great length of

time. But he surely could give her a night or two, see if her memory returned by itself. And he would barely have to interact with her, really. A meal together, perhaps. That was all.

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Penelope was shown to a beautiful bedchamber overlooking the lake – or ‘the loch’ as the staff seemed to call it. Since this trip was, of course, unplanned, she had no belongings with her, so the footman simply showed her up and then left her there.

She stood for a long while, looking out of the window and marvelling at how far removed the weather now seemed from the storm that had brought her here. Indeed, it was hard to believe such winds had raged and such rain had fallen when looking upon the clear blue skies.

With every moment that passed, she began doubting her plan. What did she hope to achieve by remaining in this Duke’s home without him knowing who she was?

And yet, excitement fizzed away in the pit of her stomach. She could be anyone. No one needed to know, for the next day or so, that she was the daughter of an earl and countess, that she had a rather sizable dowry, or that she had four failed Seasons behind her.

The Duke clearly was not putting on any airs and graces around her; in fact, she found him rather rude. But even that was exciting because everyone was always so polite, even if one had no idea what they were like beneath the surface.

The grounds stretched on endlessly, and she could see to the left a manicured garden, clearly kept to a high standard by a gardener. To the right of the lake was open grass, leading to woodland.

It wasn't quite her beloved Ambleswood, but she did think it was a beautiful castle.

She perched on the window seat, fairly sure that she would have time alone before it was time for supper. She supposed she didn't have to stay in the room, but it felt polite, for now, to stay put.

She needed a plan. A plan for what she wanted to achieve from this brief break from society's expectations.

She wanted to see, first of all, what kind of man the Duke was outside of a ballroom. In fact, after meeting him briefly, she struggled to imagine him in a ballroom, though she was sure he had frequented them over the years.

She also wanted to see if there was any chance of him being a suitable candidate for marriage. It would be very lucky if the man she ended up stranded with was someone she could finally fall in love with – and a man who might finally fall in love with her.

She wouldn't get this chance again. It was a pure twist of fate that she had ended up in the cove by his castle and that he had found her, and surely it made sense to make the most of such a situation.

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Feeling irritated, James pulled on his riding boots without bothering to call for his valet and stomped down the stairs. The land for the proposed new cottages needed inspecting, and he was not going to let the arrival of this unnamed chit get in the way of his business. He had a castle full of servants, after all; if she needed anything, she was hardly alone.

As he rode hard and fast across the estate, he tried to imagine what it would be like not to know who he was, or not to want to know who he was. Being the future Duke of Dunloch, and then taking on the title, had been an essential part of his character for as long as he could remember. Indeed, his parents had very deliberately raised him for this monumental task.

So he could not think of himself as separate from the title. That was what everyone saw, including himself: the title. The Duke.

He thought perhaps his sisters saw beyond it, for they certainly did not treat him with the respect the rest of society did. But they were silly girls, and their constant idle chitchat distracted him from more important matters.

Although, he had to admit, the castle was rather quiet now that they had left.

"Good morning, Your Grace," a local farmer called, tipping his hat.

James nodded in greeting from atop his horse. "Good morning, Mr Jarvis. How are those sheep of yours doing?" He took pride in knowing all of his tenants by name, as well as what they farmed. For how could one yield good results from the land if one was ignorant?

"They're doing well, thank you Your Grace. Although there is a fence down in the left field they keep escaping from, no matter how often I fix it."

"I can take a look, if you like, once I've inspected old Acorn farm. See if there's anything I can suggest."

"Much appreciated, Your Grace," Mr Jarvis said with a bow, and James trotted on his way.

He knew what he was doing when it came to looking after his estate. He was confident in his decision-making, and his tenants trusted him. He had no issues with riots or protests like some of his neighbours had, and he thought that was because he always tried to make sure he was fair. Whether the men he dealt with were farmers, labourers, men in service, or other local gentry, he believed they all deserved a fair chance at making a living for themselves and their families.

Was there a family out looking for the lost woman he was currently harbouring? He wondered again if he ought to ask around in the local village or send notes to the grand houses in the area. But while it might reveal who she was, it would also mean that people knew of her existence. And things would be an awful lot simpler if she simply regained her memory and disappeared back to wherever she came from without needing to mention his name to anyone. Then there would be no talk of impropriety, and he could go on with his life as usual. Undisturbed.

When his valet, Timothy, came to remind him that it was time to change for supper, James was pleased that he at least felt he had got some work done.

As the valet helped him pull off his muddy riding boots and change into something more appropriate for supper – something he liked to do even when dining alone, for he did not want the appearance of his station to be let down – he remembered that he was not alone.

The lady, whatever her name was, must surely have been up in her bedchamber for the entirety of the afternoon. Or perhaps she had come out to explore a little, not that he'd seen hide nor hair of her.

"Would you make sure that somebody knocks to tell the lady that supper will soon be served?" James asked as Timothy tied a fresh cravat for him.

"Of course, Your Grace."

She was already waiting for him in the great hall when he arrived, and he wondered if the staff had thought to tell her before he had reminded them. They were very diligent, and it wouldn't have surprised him. He bowed stiffly, still entirely unaware of the rank of this young lady.

"Good evening. I trust you are well?"

At the opposite end of the table, the young lady nodded her head. "Yes, I am feeling much recovered, thank you."

"Any sign of your memory returning?" he asked her. He presumed she would have mentioned such a thing immediately, but one never knew with women. Their minds worked in very different ways.

"I'm afraid not, Your Grace," she said, as the footman came in and filled their glasses with wine. "Have you had a pleasant day?" she asked.

He didn't know why, but the question rather surprised him. Perhaps because his sisters never really took an interest in what he did with his days. "Oh, a productive one, thank you." He took a sip of his wine and then realised he probably ought to return the question. "I hope yours was as pleasant as it could be?"

"Oh yes. You have a beautiful home, Your Grace. I do love castles and beautiful countryside like this."

"That sounds rather like a memory," James said, and for some reason, the girl blushed. "Hopefully it's a good sign that the rest will soon return."

"Where exactly are we?" she asked. "I know this is Dunloch Castle, but not precisely where in the country I have ended up..."

"You're in Scotland," he said. She did not have a Scottish accent, but that didn't mean that she didn't reside somewhere in the border between Scotland and England; after all, he had lived here all his life and still retained the English accent of his parents, and of his schooling. "About thirty miles outside of Edinburgh."

She did not ask any more questions as the first course – a hearty soup – was placed before them, and they ate without speaking. But when the plates were cleared away, she asked, "Is the owner of this dress not in residence? I wouldn't wish to be rude and not thank them in person."

"No. I am the only one in residence at present. If that bothers you, I suppose I could see if any of the other local houses have womenfolk in residence and would be willing to take you in."

She shook her head. "Oh, no. I do appreciate your hospitality. I just wished to thank the lady in question, that's all."

She really was a strange one. She didn't seem particularly bothered at all that she was alone in a house with a man she knew nothing about. Of course, he knew that he only ever had good intentions, especially when young women who seemed like they were probably of good families were concerned. But she didn't know that. "It belongs to my sister. My eldest, I think – although I must admit I do not pay much attention to

their clothing, other than to the amount they charge to our account at the modiste."

"How many sisters do you have?" she asked.

"Three. They are presently all on their way to London, either for the Season or to attend finishing school. You remember the Season, I presume?" he asked, unsure what the boundaries of her memory loss were.

She nodded. "I do believe so. And so there is no...duchess in residence?"

A seed of suspicion began to sow in his mind. She wasn't trying to fill the position herself, was she? Turning up here out of the blue, with no idea as to her identity... Was she simply seeking a rich, titled husband?

But then he did not think anyone, no matter how conniving, could have feigned the state she was in when he found her in the boat. He had thought her close to death, and had he not found her, who knew how long it would have been before she succumbed to the cold and the water filling her lungs.

And so he answered her and tried to put his mistrust aside, if only to make their interactions easier.

"No. My mother was the last duchess, and she has been gone a long time."

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So he was not married. She had thought as much, but she had just wanted to be sure. For what was the point in getting to know him, testing his character, if he ended up having some wife away in the country?

And they were in Scotland, as she had suspected. Her little boat had travelled quite

some distance in the storm, and she thought once again that she was lucky to have survived such an experience.

As they ate roast chicken, she found herself glancing up at him several times. He really was quite handsome, with his short dark hair – a little shorter than society would normally choose – and his sharp jawline, even if he never smiled. That would be a good test, she decided: was there a way to make him smile? Something that would make him cheerful? It did not seem that speaking of his sisters did so.

She needed to be careful, though. She was not an accomplished liar, she knew that, and she had already nearly ruined the ruse by telling of her love of castles and the countryside.

"Will you join your sisters for any of the Season?" Penelope asked. It was rather difficult, she was finding, to make conversation whilst concealing so very much. So many opportunities to accidentally spill her secret. And then, she rather thought that he would be mad. He wouldn't understand that she had never got to know a gentleman outside of a ballroom. That she just wanted to know whether a connection could be made, before her parents married her off to some lord old enough to be her grandfather.

"I shouldn't think so," he said, pursing his lips. "I do not find London particularly appealing, I must say."

Penelope was about to agree with him when she remembered that she had lost her memory. "But your sisters enjoy it?"

He waved a hand dismissively through the air. "My sisters are, as many women are, rather silly. Yes, they enjoy the frivolity of London – and hopefully there they will make their matches and be secure and happy in whatever way they wish."

Penelope frowned. He certainly had a rather low opinion of the fairer sex. She rather wished she could meet these sisters, and see if they really were as silly as he made out.

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Penelope awoke knowing exactly who she was, but for a moment with little memory of where she was. She could tell, before she even opened her eyes, that she was not in her own bed at Ambleswood, with its green drapes and view out into the grounds.

No, this bed felt different. And when she opened her eyes, the whole room looked different. Then she remembered – the boat, the storm, the Duke.

The lie.

She had slept in only her shift, since she obviously did not have nightclothes. Although the Duke had furnished her with a dress, he did not seem to have thought any further than that.

With her own gown still somewhere below stairs being washed and dried, she had to rely on the borrowed gown, and then set to making her hair look as presentable as possible without any pins other than those she had managed to retain in her hair throughout her adventures.

When she looked at herself in the looking glass, she wasn't exactly pleased, but it was the best she could do. She certainly wouldn't have passed her mother's inspections – and certainly not if her mother knew she was to dine with the Duke.

But her mother wasn't here. She knew nothing of the Duke, and he did not know that she was Lady Penelope Strachan or that she knew what was expected in the company of a Duke – and was simply unable to meet that standard with such limited tools and no lady's maid.

She had no idea of the time, but when she opened the bedroom door and listened, she could hear the noise of people downstairs and thought it acceptable to venture out.

The great hall was set for breakfast in a rather formal fashion, and Penelope presumed the seat at the far end of the table, where she had sat the night before, was intended for her. She didn't wish to appear rude, though, by sitting before the Duke had arrived, and so instead she wandered over to the large bay window and looked out across the estate.

The early morning sunshine glittered on the lake, and in the distance, she could just about see the sea, looking calm and inviting after it had so nearly brought her to her death in the days that had preceded this.

It was a beautiful castle, and she rather thought she would like to spend the day exploring the grounds, as well as getting to know its sole, rather grumpy inhabitant.

For now that she had decided to test his mettle and see what sort of man he was – and what it was like to converse with a gentleman without society's expectations hanging over them – she was rather excited by the prospect.

In fact, she couldn't wait to get started.

At the sound of a throat being cleared, Penelope turned and realised that the Duke was standing there, watching her. She quickly bobbed a curtsy, feeling her face flush at being so unaware of his presence, as well as being caught daydreaming.

"Good morning, Your Grace," she said, tearing her eyes from the quizzical look upon his face and walking over to the table.

He had not forgotten about her presence, but even so, he found himself rather surprised by her when he walked into the great hall. Had he expected her just to stay

hidden in her room? He was not sure. There was hardly any protocol for a situation such as this: alone in a Duke's house with no memory of who you were.

Really, she should not have been alone in a Duke's house at all. He planned to remedy that as soon as she remembered who she was and where she needed to go.

"Good morning," he replied, taking his seat at the head of the table. She looked fairly well put-together in his sister's dress, but not quite as impeccable as most ladies out in society. When he thought on that, though, he realised that she was quite probably used to a lady's maid and had been forced to ready herself that morning without any help.

She was pretty, though. He knew he probably shouldn't be thinking this as they sat across the table from one another, but her auburn locks set off her pale skin so that she rather looked like a porcelain doll; a perfect English rose.

He wondered again whether she was married. It didn't really make sense for her not to be, since she was pretty, knew how to make conversation, and comported herself well in society.

She had said she didn't feel married, but he wasn't sure that one could feel married. She wore no wedding ring, that he had ascertained – but he supposed she could have lost it when her boat was nearly shipwrecked.

Perhaps she had some scandal attached to her name, he mused, as the footman brought in a selection of fruit and rounds of toast. Perhaps when she remembered who she was and where she came from, she would find it was somewhere she did not particularly wish to return to.

But that wasn't his problem.

"Have your memories returned yet?" he asked, realising that neither of them had spoken in some time.

She shook her head. "I'm afraid not, Your Grace," she said, her eyes cast downwards. "I had hoped they would after such a good night's sleep."

James nodded. He hadn't really expected a different answer, for he presumed she would have told him if she had remembered who she was. But it still seemed prudent to check.

"Do you have a busy day ahead?" she asked, and he paused for a moment, unused to being spoken to at breakfast time. He was so often alone, and when his sisters were in residence, they tended to chatter amongst themselves without concerning themselves with what James might be doing unless it directly impacted them or their social calendar.

"I need to speak with some of my tenant farmers this afternoon," he said, thinking through his day's tasks. "And I have some correspondence to deal with, too."

"You seem very busy, Your Grace," she said, before taking a sip of the tea that had been poured for her.

"There is a lot to do when you are a Duke," he said. "And with three younger sisters, I must look out for their interests, too – ensure they have dowries, good prospects... There always seems to be something more that I could be doing." He took a bite of toast and then realised he probably ought to ask her about her plans.

"And do you have any plans for how you will spend your day? I'm afraid, as I said, I will be absent for much of it." He did not wish for her to think he had the time to entertain her; she would have to pass the time herself.

"I thought I might explore the grounds. The weather seems fine, and I love to be outdoors..."

So she clearly remembered something of her tastes, even if she did not remember her name or home.

"Take a horse from the stables, if you like."

"Thank you, Your Grace," she said with a smile that lit up her whole face. "I think I shall remain on foot...but if I wish to explore further afield, I will certainly do so."

"Just don't go getting yourself into any trouble," he said after a brief pause. He didn't know why it mattered to him; she wasn't his responsibility. And yet she seemed the type to wander into trouble without even realising it.

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"I must go and attend to important paperwork in my study," the Duke said after they had broken their fast, and he had once again asked whether her memories had returned – and she had lied to him again. She felt guilty for doing so, but she comforted herself with the fact that it would not be for long. She just wanted to get to know him.

"When Albert or Simon comes to clear the table, could you please ask them to ensure luncheon is at one, and that they remind me when it's ready?"

"Of course, Your Grace," Penelope agreed. "I will stroll in the gardens this morning, since the weather is fine. If that is acceptable."

The Duke frowned slightly. "It is of no consequence to me. I am not your guardian."

She was rather taken aback by his rude response; after all, she had planned to go anyway, but thought it courteous to at least inform him.

"Well, good day," he said, pushing back his chair and rising from the table.

It was then that Penelope had the idea for the first of her tests: to see whether this man was good and kind underneath his admittedly prickly exterior.

Albert came in to clear away the plates, bowing to her as he did so.

"Good morning, milady. Can I get you anything else?"

Penelope shook her head and smiled sweetly at the young lad. "No, thank you. But His Grace asked me to request that luncheon be at noon, and that you remind him when it's ready."

The footman gave a brief nod. "Certainly, milady."

Penelope practically skipped from the room. She would wander the gardens and think on her plan. She just needed to be back inside before noon so she could see how the Duke reacted to the mistake. Of course, she told herself, if the boy got into real trouble, she would step in and admit it had been her mistake, not his. But she was very intrigued to see how he treated his staff in such a situation. After all, was it not better to judge a man by how he treated his inferiors, rather than how he treated his equals or betters

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It was confounding. No matter how many times he checked the figures, the numbers simply didn't add up. Something was missing. The castle's outgoings were outstripping its income, when that had never been an issue before.

Dealing with numbers was his least favourite part of his title. Arithmetic had been the bane of his boyhood, often earning him reprimands from both his tutor and his father. He just didn't have a natural head for figures, try as he might.

He did have men he could ask to handle the work for him, but he was a firm believer in not delegating tasks he didn't understand himself. If there were errors or if someone was swindling him, how would he ever know?

Now, however, something was definitely amiss in the household accounts – and yet he could not figure out what. He did not think his addition was at fault, having checked it so many times, but it was always a possibility.

Just as he thought he might have pinpointed the issue, there was a knock at the door. He swore under his breath before calling out for whoever it was to enter, his tone sharper than perhaps was necessary.

He was surprised to see Albert, considering he had only recently heard the clock chime midday. Perhaps there was an issue with the confounding girl.

"I just wished to inform you that luncheon is ready, Your Grace."

"Now? But I requested it for one. I have a lot of paperwork to finish."

Albert looked a little flustered. "I'm—I'm sorry, Your Grace. I thought I was told noon. Perhaps... I'm very sorry. I can have Cook take it back."

Either the lad had misunderstood, or the mysterious girl had. James supposed it didn't matter much either way. He would not ask for the meal to be taken back to the kitchen; surely, in an hour's time, it would be dry and far less appetising.

Besides, he had been working for hours on the accounts without making much

progress.

He sighed. "Very well. There's no need to send it away, or to look quite so terrified, Albert. I shall eat now. Perhaps in future, I'll relay the timings directly to Cook."

"I am very sorry," the footman said with a bow before disappearing through the open door.

James watched him go and was sure he saw the girl disappearing out of view in the opposite direction. He frowned. What on earth was she doing there? He'd thought she was exploring the grounds, and yet there she was, lingering near his study.

Perhaps there had been some progress with her memory. He certainly hoped so. She was an extra burden he didn't need.

Then again, perhaps it wouldn't be terrible to dine with a companion for a few days. Maybe she would offer more stimulating conversation than his sisters if he tried to engage her in a topic of interest – assuming, of course, she could remember what interested her.

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The study door was ajar, so she didn't feel as though she was snooping. After all, she didn't want to see all his financial records – just get an idea of the sort of man he was, economically.

If she had learnt anything from the gossip of the wives and widows in London, it was that it was not uncommon for a man to seem like everything was in order but secretly gamble away large sums of money, leaving a title penniless or a widow destitute.

When men knew of her dowry, she was always concerned they were merely interested in her to increase their fortunes or pay off outstanding debts. But she realised that if she were looking to marry a man, she would like to find one who was sensible with his money. He didn't have to have a great fortune, although she was used to a certain level of luxury. But she hated the thought of a man wasting his money – and hers, once they were married – in gambling hells.

And so, as she wandered the castle that afternoon, wondering how long she ought to keep up the ruse of having no memory, the open study door was far too tempting.

She slipped through the small gap, her slim frame not disturbing the door at all, and quickly checked to make sure the Duke was not somehow within. She was confident she had seen him riding away, his impressive horse taking him speedily across the estate, but it still wouldn't do to stumble across him unexpectedly.

As expected, the study was empty, and there were several documents on the desk.

She might only have had an education in sewing, dancing, and art, but she had seen plenty of ledgers at Ambleswood Castle. Her father employed a man of business to

deal with such things, and when Penelope grew tired of her own company, she would sometimes ask him to explain what all the neat rows of numbers were and what they meant.

Because anything that related to her beloved Amblewood was interesting to her – even mathematics.

She was very happy to be a woman; she liked fine dresses, dancing, and painting beautiful scenes. But there were many things about being a man that also appealed to her – the freedom to make choices, to go where one pleased without being questioned, and the ability to inherit.

For she thought that if she could inherit Amblewood after her father was gone and live there for the rest of her days, she would be quite happy to remain a spinster. She did not wish to marry the wrong man, but she wasn't sure she was bothered about marrying at all – except for the fact that it was rather a necessity for a woman in her situation.

Presuming he would not be back for some time, she took a seat at his desk, the smell of cigar smoke and whiskey permeating the air. Her eyes scanned rows of figures, which seemed to be household expenses. Another page showed the rents from the tenant farmers, and another the Duke's personal expenses. There seemed to be no sign of gambling debts, at least in his official records, which Penelope was pleased to see. He seemed like an eminently sensible man, if rather gruff, and she was glad to find she had not been entirely wrong in judging his character.

His largest personal expense appeared to be at the modiste, and for a moment, that did surprise her – until she remembered his comments about his sisters. She supposed that exorbitant figure was for his sisters' dresses and other accoutrements for their time in London.

Well, it seemed he had the money to spend, and she was pleased he was a good brother, even if he seemed to think his sisters were silly. She flipped back to the household expenses, a nagging feeling in the back of her mind that there was something she had missed.

She glanced down at the itemised descriptions and found nothing amiss. All the usual necessities were there: candles, sheets, fabric, salt. And yet the figures attributed to each seemed far larger than she would have expected. She double-checked the dates, wondering if it was for a larger period than she expected – but no, these were the accounts for the previous month.

How odd. She had seen the accounts at Amblewood many times and so knew roughly the costs of running such a castle. Dunloch wasn't particularly bigger than Amblewood and was, in fact, less inhabited. Could goods really be so much more expensive just over the border in Scotland?

It all seemed rather mysterious, but at least it didn't reflect badly on the Duke. Another test passed, although this time, he hadn't even needed to be present.

"You do have a habit of ending up in places you shouldn't be, don't you?" the icy voice of the Duke said, making Penelope jump out of her skin. How long had she been staring at the ledger to not have heard him return?

She jumped up, knocking the book onto the floor in her haste. "I am so, so sorry, Your Grace," she stuttered, hastily picking the ledger back up and replacing it on the table. "I was merely exploring the castle and wandered in here, and..."

"Thought you would look through my personal finances," the Duke said, striding towards the desk. "With your propensity to find yourself where you do not belong, I wonder sometimes whether you are a spy – perhaps sent by some British official who does not trust me – and not a lost English girl with no memory of her name or her

family."

"I'm not a spy," Penelope insisted quickly, realising she had once again messed up – but this time by making him suspicious of her intentions. She had to admit, it did look rather strange.

"It's just..." She grasped desperately for an idea to explain the chain of events without him thinking she had some nefarious purpose. "I saw the ledger, and some sort of memory came to mind. I don't really know why, but I feel like I've dealt with ledgers such as these before..."

The Duke scoffed. "I find it unlikely, my lady, that you have been poring over ledgers wherever your life normally is. Women have little knowledge of such matters, you see."

Penelope's blood began to boil. She knew women generally didn't manage the finances, but it certainly wasn't because they were incapable. In fact, she didn't understand why women were so often overlooked in household management – especially when they were the ones dealing with the items on a day-to-day basis.

"I think you'll find, Your Grace, that there's something amiss with your records."

His eyes narrowed. "Is there, indeed?"

Penelope stuck out her chin defiantly. "Yes. The cost of the items bought for the household is massively inflated. Somewhere, someone is making a tidy profit out of you."

He frowned, then strode over to the desk, flipping the ledger open to the correct page and jabbing his finger at it. "Show me."

His brusque attitude made her a little nervous, and she was wary of how much she could say without giving away that she knew exactly who she was and where she'd come from.

"I just... I feel I know the costs of these items for a castle like this," she said with a feeble shrug. "And these are double, if not triple, what I would expect to be spent in a month on things like candles and salt. Who does the ordering, Your Grace?"

He frowned before answering. "The housekeeper, Mrs Simmons." For a moment his eyes were focused on the figures before him, and then he looked back at Penelope. "But I do not understand why she would be inflating figures, or why this change would have happened when she has ordered for the castle for years..."

"Perhaps her circumstances have changed," Penelope said softly. "Or maybe costs here are much higher than...wherever I come from." She bit the inside of her lip, very aware that she had nearly messed everything up again by admitting that she lived in England, and knew the prices there.

"The figures have seemed...out of alignment, for the last two months. I did not know where the inconsistencies were coming from..."

He met her eyes, and a shiver ran through her at the heated look he was giving her. She wasn't sure if it was anger, or frustration, or something else, but it made her quite forget why she was here and what she had been saying.

"It seems I need to speak to Mrs Simmons. Thank you. Even if you should not have been in here...I appreciate your insight."

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James generally felt confident about fulfilling his duties as the Duke of Dunloch – but he did not particularly enjoy dealing with issues involving the staff. Especially female staff, as they had a tendency to cry and make him feel rather uncomfortable.

Thankfully, over the years, there had not been many occasions where he needed to speak to the staff about a problem, and so it was with a rather heavy heart that he went downstairs to speak with Mrs Simmons that evening.

The housekeeper was surely approaching retirement, for she had been housekeeper for as long as James could remember – he was pretty sure his entire life. And yet, she still ran the house with confidence, never seeming to tire, even with the endless stairs and boundless duties.

He just could not understand why, after so many years of loyal service, she would inflate figures. He very much hoped that she had a reasonable explanation for her actions.

He knocked on the door to the little sitting room in the servants' quarters which belonged to her, and when she saw who it was, she bobbed her head and went pale.

"Your Grace! What a surprise. Is there something you require?"

"I must speak with you on a rather serious matter," James said, not relishing the task. "Perhaps we could close the door and sit down."

She nodded and hurried to close the door as he took a seat on a large armchair.

"I'll be direct, Mrs Simmons. You have worked here for a long time, and I have never had any cause to fault your service."

"Thank you, Your Grace," she said, not quite meeting his eye.

"But when studying the books, I'm afraid I found some discrepancies." He did not feel the need to disclose that it had actually been the mysterious female visitor who had noticed the issue; he was sure, with a little more time, he would have noticed it himself. "And it is in reference to the household ordering – a task which I believe you are in charge of."

Her face went paler still, and she nodded. "Yes, Your Grace."

"There is nothing incorrect in my summary, is there? There is no one else who has taken on the ordering in your stead?" He assumed that such a change would have been reported to him, but he wanted to be sure, before accusing her of anything, that he was correct in his assumptions.

"I still do the ordering, Your Grace," she said quietly.

"Then I assume you are aware of the issue to which I am referring." When she did not answer, he continued, "For the last two months, the amounts quoted as being spent on household goods far exceed their true cost, or the amount spent in other months. I cannot find any explanation for this sudden increase. Do you have one, Mrs Simmons?"

Tears filled her eyes, and James found himself looking away, unsure how to proceed. Tears made him uncomfortable. He rarely had to deal with women's emotions, and none of his training to be the Duke of Dunloch had taught him what to do when a woman suddenly cried.

"I'm ever so sorry, Your Grace," she choked out.

"So you admit to inflating the costs?"

She simply nodded.

James frowned. "But I do not understand why. What on earth could have possessed you to do such a thing when you have worked here for so long without ever being involved in such theft?"

"I—I—"

"Mrs Simmons," James said, his voice stern. "Let me be clear. Unless I can understand what has happened here and be reassured it will never happen again, I have no choice but to dismiss you."

"I cannot say," Mrs Simmons whispered through tears. "But I must tell you, I did not take the money for myself. I would never do such a thing. Your Grace has been so generous to me, to all of us. I would not dream of—"

James clenched his fist, frustration coursing through him. "But you have, Mrs Simmons. And I must know why. I cannot accept that there is no reason for such behaviour."

Tears rolled down her cheeks, and James felt extremely uncomfortable in the presence of the crying woman who had known him since he was a baby.

"He threatened to tell everyone my secret if I did not pay him," she choked out between sobs.

"Who threatened you, and what secret?"

"Please, don't make me share it. But Mr Cavin, who runs the Fox and Hound in the village... He must've discovered it, somehow. And he began to send notes and demand money. And I didn't know what else to do. It is not money I have, and so I thought if I could just take a little from the estate's purse, I could pay it back in time. Once he left me alone..."

James's eyes narrowed. "So this Mr Cavin has been blackmailing you. But you will not tell me what about?"

She shook her head. "I cannot. But please rest assured, it is from the past. A very long time in the past. But I could not have him spreading rumours about me, ruining my good name, my standing... And I just thought if I could pay him off quickly, and repay the money..."

James closed his eyes for a moment. "And when you paid him, did he leave you alone?"

The tears flowed even faster as she shook her head.

"When blackmailers get what they want, they just want more of it," James said. "I wish you had come to me, Mrs Simmons, instead of stealing from me."

"I'm so incredibly sorry, Your Grace. I did not know what to do, and I know what I did was wrong, but please believe me that I was going to repay it. It's just that every time I paid him, he demanded more... And I became so desperate..." She took a deep, juddering breath. "Please, I know you should dismiss me instantly. But I would hate to leave Dunloch Castle. Is there anything I can do to persuade you?"

"Do you promise me that nothing like this will ever happen again?" he asked, and she was nodding before he even finished the question.

"I swear on my life."

"And if something like this happens again, I want you to come to me. I will deal with it – but I do not like being lied to or deceived."

"I understand," Mrs Simmons said, looking pitiful.

James stood, rather keen to remove himself from this room and let her recover. "Then we will consider this matter put to rest. I will send somebody over to Mr Cavin to ensure he knows that I will not accept blackmail or bullying towards any of my staff, nor from any of my tenants. And you may repay the money stolen from your wages – and we will say no more about it."

She was still thanking him as he strode from the little room and headed for the stairs.

As unpleasant as the encounter had been, he felt a sense of relief. He knew where the money had gone and why – and although he did not like the thought of blackmail going on beneath his nose, or of a long-term member of staff being deceitful, he thought the matter could be put to rest. He would send his man of business to see this Mr Cavin, and if that did not work, he would pay the man a visit himself.

And Dunloch's accounts would all be in order the following month, he was sure of it. He trusted Mrs Simmons and knew she must have been desperate to have done such a thing.

Had the mistake in the accounts not been noticed, he wondered how long the villain would have continued blackmailing her.

It was a good job that the mysterious lady was quite so nosy... Although he would certainly never tell her that.

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The following morning, with the lady still not having recovered her memory, they breakfasted together and then James went about his usual business. As he passed the parlour, he heard a gentle melody coming from the piano. He stood in the doorway for a moment, listening, for the piano got very little use. His mother had been the pianist, and despite hours of lessons, his sisters were still no more than basically proficient. He himself had never had the time nor inclination to learn the instrument.

The door was ajar, and he managed to peek in without disturbing it. It was, of course, the mystery woman sitting at the piano, her fingers seeming to effortlessly glide across the keys.

Then she began to sing to herself, and he found he was mesmerised. Her voice was beautiful, soft, and haunting, and he was surprised to find he could have stood there listening for hours.

Not that he had hours to spare, of course. But, in that moment, he forgot about everything else.

The song was a simple one about a lark greeting the morning sun. She had no music or lyrics in front of her, so she clearly had some memory of her life before – otherwise, she surely would not know how to play.

She was such a mystery. He'd gone through so many ideas of who she might be: a lady, a commoner, a spy of some sort, sent to infiltrate his home – although to what end, he did not know. He had never given the government any reason to doubt his abilities as Duke, he was sure. Or his loyalties. He was loyal to King and country, even if his family's seat happened to be just over the border in Scotland.

But he was English through and through. There was no hint of a Scottish accent, no plaid in his wardrobe, and not even any Scottish ancestors. Just a Scottish castle and a title that had been given to his ancestor and passed down through the family.

She paused in her playing, and he wondered if he'd been spotted. He felt guilty for watching her, then told himself he was being ridiculous. It was his home, after all. And he had regularly found her where she shouldn't be.

But she did not come over to the door. Instead, she made her way to the window, looking out over the loch and choosing a new song about the Lady of the Lake. He could not remember the last time he had sung or when this house had been filled with the sound of music.

It should have made him angry, for she was certainly distracting him from his work, whether she intended to or not. And what was more important than his ducal duties?

And yet...he could stay a moment longer, surely. After all, she had solved the mystery of his figures, even without knowing who she was. He had confronted his housekeeper, discovered the truth, and now everything was put to rights. He was rather ashamed, really, that he had not noticed the discrepancy himself and had needed it pointed out to him by a woman. But then, he supposed that household ordering was more of a woman's task. He just liked to think he was kept abreast of everything in his household.

He had settled on the idea that she must be a great lady. Due to her knowledge of castles, for one, and the way she sang and played so beautifully. She was certainly not some lady's maid who had run amok with her mistress's boat.

But then why had he not heard of anyone looking for such a daughter? How far had she come? And when would she remember who she was?

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Penelope had offered to collect some supplies from the local village to have a reason to leave the castle. She was used to doing what she wanted, when she wanted, but she stayed close so as not to raise suspicion. Now, she wanted to stretch her legs and blow away the cobwebs, as well as do a little more investigating into the Duke.

So far, she had deduced that he was responsible with his finances, fair to his staff, and, though a little brusque, a good brother and guardian to his three younger sisters. How she would have liked to meet them and get their opinion, but alas, that was not to be.

What she could do, she thought as she watched the groom saddle a horse for her, was see what his tenants thought of him. Whether they feared him, whether they felt he was reasonable, whether he dealt with their issues in a timely manner.

And then, she thought as she rode into the village, loving the feeling of the wind whipping through her hair – which had been clumsily plaited by her own hand – she wanted to spend the evening testing whether he had a sense of humour. He was a very serious man, and that wasn't necessarily a bad thing. But surely it did not pay to be so serious and brooding all the time? Surely one had to have fun on occasion, else life would be very dull.

The village was only small, far smaller than Amblewood, and it did not take long to locate the apothecary and collect the requested items. With plenty of time before she was expected back at the castle for luncheon, she strolled through the village, leaving her borrowed mare tied up to wait for her.

"Good morning," she said to anyone who met her eye, offering a friendly smile. Since no one knew who she was, there was no reason for them to offer respect automatically or to be scared of her and her family's influence. She was certainly

dressed in finer clothes than most, but other than that, she felt she could blend into the crowd fairly easily.

It was market day, and so she perused the stalls, rather wishing she had some money with her. She saw some beautiful ribbons and oranges which looked irresistible.

But of course, when she had left Ambleswood two days earlier – and she could hardly believe it had only been two days, but the Duke had assured her that she could not have been unconscious for very long, considering when the storm had been – to go out on her boat for the morning, she had not brought any coins. She wasn't going to ask the Duke for money, either. It was not his place to purchase things for her.

"Do you know much about the castle up there?" she asked a fishwife, although she instinctively wrinkled her nose at the smell of the gutted fish before her. She had never particularly liked fish, although, if she had to be around them, she certainly preferred them alive.

"Dunloch?" the woman asked in a broad Scottish accent. "Aye, everyone around here knows Dunloch. Home o' the Duke of Dunloch, y'see, for the past three generations."

Penelope nodded. It wasn't that she was uninterested in the castle, for she generally found them quite fascinating. But now she had a more specific topic in mind: the inhabitant of the castle.

"Does the Duke live there most of the time?" she asked.

The fishwife nodded. "Rarely leaves. Not a fan o' that London, I understand. Not that I blame him – who'd want to be somewhere that busy for any length o' time? I've heard y'can barely walk for horse dung on the roads."

Penelope chuckled. It was certainly true in some areas, but she doubted anyone had

ever said it to her before. It was rather nice, being anonymous.

"Is he a decent man, the Duke?" she asked directly, for she didn't know how much longer she could stand in front of so much fish without retching.

"Fairest landlord you'll ever meet," the woman replied sincerely. "I heard from my grandmother that people were a bit unsure when they were given the seat, three generations ago. What with them being English – thought they'd be tyrants. No offence meant, o' course, milady."

Penelope smiled. "Of course not."

"But since they've been in the castle, held the title, this place has prospered. And the most recent one – the young Duke, we call him, though perhaps that's not so accurate these days – well, he seems the best o' the lot. Perhaps some men are just born to be in positions like that, for he always seems to make the right decisions."

Penelope thanked her for her time and moved on, relieved to get the smell of fish out of her nostrils. What she'd been told wasn't wholly unexpected, but she had not anticipated such enthusiasm in the woman's words. Even though she thought her father was a fair landlord, she doubted his tenants would respond so fervently if asked about him. They wouldn't say anything negative, but they also wouldn't go out of their way to list so many positives.

The Duke of Dunloch must be a very special man indeed, and she was beginning to wonder why on earth he was not yet married. What was it that meant he had not attracted a wife... or that he did not want one? Perhaps he simply had no desire to tie himself to another human being. And she could understand that...except he needed an heir. A man so diligent about his duty surely would not wish to see everything he had worked for passed on to someone who was not a direct descendant.

And therefore, he surely needed a wife.

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She urged the horse on, faster than was sensible, because she had a plan. She wanted to know: was the Duke brave? Would he save her if he thought she was in danger? He had already saved her once, of course – but then, there had been no immediate danger to either of them. Now, she wanted to know what kind of man he truly was.

She found herself growing rather excited every time she planned one of these little tests.

It was the most interesting thing she had done in years, and she felt like she was truly getting to know the Duke to boot.

After testing him – something he always seemed to pass, she noted – she would feel a little guilty. And perhaps if she had thought through that afternoon's ruse, she would have realised how foolish it was. How unfair to make the Duke think her life was in danger just to test him.

But at that moment, as excitement coursed through her veins, all she thought about was how he would react. She hoped, as the horse almost skidded on a sharp corner taken far too fast, that he was nearby – otherwise, this would all be for naught.

And then a dog barked somewhere in the distance, and the horse reared. Penelope did not have time to think. Her heart raced, and she clung desperately to the reins, very nearly being thrown off. She was an experienced horsewoman, but it seemed that her mount was not used to the normal noises of the countryside. Was it a new purchase? she thought to herself, even in her panic. Surely the animal had heard a dog's bark before.

When the horse returned to all four legs, Penelope tightened her grip even more on the reins and tried to force herself to breathe normally. All was well. A near calamity – but nothing she couldn't handle. Now she would just gently trot the animal back to the stable and forget all about the test she had intended for the Duke.

But the horse had other ideas. Clearly used to the pace Penelope had set on the way back from the village, once its feet were firmly on the ground, it took off at a canter, far faster than Penelope was able to control. It did not, as she had planned, race into the courtyard, but instead bolted straight past the castle and towards the loch.

"Stop!" she screamed, tugging on the reins to no avail. "Stop!" At the rate they were going, they would soon both tumble into the loch – and she had no idea how cold or how deep it was. Yes, in theory, she could swim, but in a deep loch full of weeds, and in a heavy dress... She wasn't sure she would make it to the bank, let alone manage to save the horse, which seemed intent on propelling them both to their deaths.

And then, seemingly out of nowhere, the sound of thundering hooves filled her ears, and rough hands grabbed at her, unseating her from the horse she had been clinging to so desperately.

Yet she did not fall to the ground, as her mind expected her to, but instead was thrust onto a warm, solid horse that seemed to remain calm in spite of everything.

"Easy," the Duke called in an unwavering, strong voice. "Easy."

Penelope did not know whether it was the Duke's voice, the realisation of what lay ahead, or the fact that the horse no longer bore her weight, but the animal reared once more and halted just before plunging into the loch.

It took Penelope's mind a few moments to catch up with everything that had just happened. She blinked rapidly and realised she was shaking.

The Duke had one arm around her to keep her steady and hold the reins, and she leaned against it for support.

That had been close. Her silly plan had almost led to real tragedy. What would have happened if the Duke had not been nearby, already saddled on his horse? What if he had not reacted so quickly?

In silence, he turned the horse in the direction of the castle and clicked his tongue for her wayward mare to follow – which she did without protest.

"You really do have a propensity to find yourself in trouble, don't you," he said, his tone sardonic.

"I didn't mean to," Penelope said, her voice shaking, more affected by the incident than she would have liked to admit.

"Are you hurt?" the Duke asked.

"No...thanks to you."

"You're lucky I was nearby," the Duke said, and Penelope could not have agreed more. "What on earth spooked Delilah like that?"

"A dog barking," Penelope said truthfully, although she did not add that she had been riding the horse far faster than was sensible before the incident occurred.

She rather thought that, like her decision to sail with a storm brewing, he would scold her. And as right as he was, she did not want to be told how foolish she had been. She already knew that.

And she also knew that the Duke was indeed brave. He'd rescued her without a

thought for himself, and didn't that just endear him to her even more?

When they calmly approached the stables, the Duke vaulted off and then offered his hand to help Penelope down. He had done this before – but she had not known him then. Now, she knew so much about him. More than about any other eligible young man of her acquaintance. She knew he was rough and that he had little patience for women. But she also knew he was kind, sensible, brave, and fair. And when he helped her down, and she could feel the warmth of his body against hers, it sent a shiver down her spine.

She looked up at him, wanting to thank him again, but instead found herself speechless, staring into his dark eyes and feeling frozen to the spot.

And he was speechless too. He did not scold her, nor remove his hands from around her waist, until a stable boy appeared and led the errant Delilah away, breaking the moment.

"You should have some brandy," he said, stepping away quickly. "For the shock."

And then he strode away without a backward glance, leaving Penelope feeling rather intoxicated by his presence – and without having had the opportunity to thank him again for saving her.

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"Have you recovered from your adventure?" James asked at dinner that evening, thinking that if one of his sisters had nearly plummeted into the loch, she'd surely have spent the rest of the day in bed, claiming her nerves needed to recover.

This mystery lady, it seemed, was made of stronger stuff.

"Yes, thank you Your Grace," she said with a warm smile. "Thanks to your quick thinking, I'm quite unharmed. Although I do not think I'll be riding Delilah any time soon..."

"No, probably for the best," he agreed. Surely she would recover her memory soon, anyway. And if she did not, he would have to start making enquiries. She could not remain indefinitely. "You really do seem to get yourself into an awful lot of scrapes. It's a miracle you have not ended up lost somewhere before." He took a sip of his wine and then shrugged. "Although, I suppose perhaps you have and you don't remember."

She laughed. "I don't think I have...but you're right, perhaps I wouldn't know. I don't think I get into that much trouble though..."

"I would have to respectfully disagree," James said, spearing a carrot with his fork. "Especially considering how you arrived here, and what has happened since then."

She blushed, and he found himself struggling to look away from her. She really was very pretty. Earlier, when he'd helped her down from his horse, there was a moment where he'd been tempted to kiss her. A moment of madness, for sure – but the feeling had not entirely gone away.

She had the manners of a lady, and she was certainly attractive. He had wondered many times whether she was possibly married, and had a husband out looking for her. She was not wearing a wedding band – he had checked early on in their acquaintance – but he supposed she could have lost it on her travels.

And yet he found he did not want her to be married. Not because he wanted to marry her himself...but because he didn't like the thought of her with anyone else.

It was a silly notion, and one he would shake off as soon as she left, but nonetheless, he was quite happy to think she was unwed.

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There was a twinkle in his eye as he joked about her getting into trouble, and she found herself smiling in spite of the scare she'd had earlier in the day. She'd wanted to test if he had a sense of fun – and here was her chance.

"Perhaps you're right, and I get into trouble without even meaning to," she conceded. Other than her 'wanderings', she thought she was fairly well-behaved at home. This was the most daring she had ever been – and she was loving every minute of it.

Not that she could tell him that, of course.

"Have you never found yourself in trouble without meaning to, Your Grace?"

He instantly shook his head.

"Never?" she queried, tilting her head to one side. "Not even when you were a little boy?"

"I do not believe so. I have always known that I would be the next Duke of Dunloch,

and that I had to comport myself accordingly."

Penelope could not imagine a young boy thinking about his actions in relation to a title he would one day have. She had always known she was the daughter of an earl, but it had not stopped her enjoying life where she could. Even when her parents disapproved.

"Surely a boy of four thinks more of fun and games than of duty?"

"That's not the way I was raised," he said, and although his tone was a little sharper, she found herself feeling sorry for him. "My parents were chiefly concerned with making sure I was ready to be duke. That was the focus of every lesson, every meal, every conversation..."

Penelope could not hide her frown. Had his whole life really been boiled down to his title? It seemed it had, and she thought that was incredibly sad – but he didn't seem to see any issue with it.

"And what about your sisters?" she asked softly, her food forgotten on her plate, growing cold as they spoke. "Did they ever get into mischief?"

"They can be rather silly," he said dismissively, cutting into his chicken pie as he spoke. "And of course, no one expected much of them, so they were allowed to be frivolous. And then our parents passed on, and they continued viewing everything as an opportunity for fun, rather than seeing that they have a place in it. A role they must fulfil."

"Whether it makes them happy or not?"

He looked up and his dark eyes met hers. "Not everything in life can be about happiness. Sometimes one has duties to discharge."

Penelope nodded slowly.. "Yes...but surely life cannot be about duty alone either? There must be some balance?"

She did not know if he agreed with her or not, for he then seemed to find his appetite, and all conversation was lost.

She still did not know, she thought later that evening, whether or not he had a sense of humour – but she thought she understood him better, and why he was so serious about his role as a duke. Of course it was important, but there were other things in life that were important too, and he seemed to have been raised as though nothing else truly mattered.

Rain pattered against the windowpane as Penelope lay in the grand four-poster bed, contemplating her next move.

She had realised, rather to her shock, that her testing of the Duke had been successful. She knew him now, and he had proven himself to be a decent man.

But what was more, she thought she actually felt something for him – something more than she had felt for any man of her acquaintance in the seasons she had spent in London. The two and half days she had spent with him in some ways seemed so brief, but how long would it take her to spend such an amount of time with a gentleman in society? Months? She might not spend that amount of time with a man before the banns were being read.

It was then that she began to question what she had been doing. Yes, it had been successful – but she couldn't help but wonder what the cost would be of her deception. If the Duke found out that she had been at his home for days and lied to him all that time, would he forgive her?

She rolled over and sighed into her pillow. She didn't even know whether he had any

feelings towards her at all, other than perhaps irritation at her descending upon his life and often being found where she shouldn't be.

But was there anything more? Did he feel what she wanted him to feel? If she had to get married, she wanted someone who liked her, cared for her, loved her even, for herself – not for her title or her money.

And she knew he could not like her for any of those things, for he didn't know about them. But she had tried, in spite of her deception, to show him her real self...and yet she had no idea whether or not he was attracted to her.

She still wasn't entirely sure why he wasn't already married. She rather wished his sisters were in residence, for she thought she would find out much more useful information from them than she possibly could from him. And none of the staff seemed keen to gossip about their master either, so there was nothing to be learned there.

In the distance, a dog howled, and she shivered a little.

He had saved her life when the horse had bolted, she had no doubt about that. But would he want anything to do with her once she revealed her identity and admitted the lie? Sooner or later, she had to remember who she was and go home.

But what if she never saw him again? She could not now imagine marrying another man, one whom she barely knew past a few pleasantries, when she had got to know James and was becoming more convinced that they could be a good match. He was a good man, and she thought she could be good for him. She could make him see the fun in life, if he let her.

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It was strange how quickly it felt normal to have the mysterious woman opposite him at breakfast. She would then go about her business, and they would reconvene at luncheon, and she would be waiting for him with a smile and questions about his day.

Was this what it was like to be married? He had never thought much about marriage, except for knowing that it was something he must do, in time. He had thought of how he would select an appropriate match, and the qualities she would need to have – good breeding, an understanding of what the title brought with it, an impeccable reputation – he had not given any thought to life living with a wife. A partner.

Someone who would always be there, and would ask him about his day, and sit and converse before the fire on the long Scottish winter evenings...

He hadn't thought it would ever be something he would desire.

And yet, with her here, as temporary as it was, it made him think about it...and to wonder if, perhaps, it was time to start contemplating marriage more seriously.

"It seems, Your Grace, that it was an outright lie."

James frowned. His butler, Richards, had asked to see him about Mrs Simmons, and the outcome of sending his man of business to deal with the villainous Mr Cavin.

"Then why on earth did Mrs Simmons give in to it?" he asked with a shake of his head. It just didn't make sense. "If he did not know anything damaging about her, why did she pay him off without questioning it? And could this man really not get money by any other means? Lies and deception, blackmail and deceit – you know

how strongly I feel about such weaknesses of character."

The butler nodded. "Indeed, Your Grace. I'm not sure it's a case of the man being unable to earn a living any other way, rather him not wishing to. And as for Mrs Simmons..." He paused for a moment, and James wondered what on earth he'd uncovered. He really did not want to have to give Mrs Simmons her notice. She'd been working there for so long. But if there was more to her theft than she was saying...

"It is rather delicate," the butler began.

"Well, spit it out, man. There are no fainting ladies in here; you do not need to worry."

"It seems – although the blackmailer was unaware of this – that there was an illegitimate child, born many years ago."

Somehow, this was not the information James expected to learn. "Oh?"

"Over thirty years ago, Your Grace. Mrs Simmons, as you know, is unwed. She had the child on the continent, and left the babe to be raised by family, before returning with no one the wiser. Or so she thought, until the blackmailer began to extort her for money based on a terrible secret from her past."

"I see," the Duke said, steeping his fingers in thought.

"So he never stated explicitly what he knew, and she just assumed her long-held secret had been rumbled." Well, at least that made a little more sense. While he was rather shocked to find out that Mrs Simmons had an illegitimate child, he was pleased that there was no current deception he needed to be worried about.

"Very well. Excellent work, Richards. If you can please convey to Mr Cavin that, should he ever try such a thing again, I will make sure he never leaves Calton Jail, then I think the matter can be considered resolved."

"And Mrs Simmons? What would you like me to do about her?"

James considered his ageing butler for a moment. Clearly, his sense of morality had been offended by learning this about the housekeeper, who had been in the family's employ for as long as the butler himself.

"I don't think there's anything we need to do, Richards. This relates to an incident from before I was born, I believe, when my father was duke, not me. As long as she is not foolish enough to give in to a blackmailer's demands again and comes to me if any such issue arises in the future, I think we can rest easy in our beds."

James thought the butler wished to say more, but the finality in James's tone could not be ignored.

"Very well, Your Grace," he said, bowing before leaving the room.

As he left, James once again noticed Penelope in the corridor outside his study. He almost smiled, a reaction she seemed to rather regularly elicit in him, but then he turned his face to a scowl. She really was always in places where she shouldn't be, and he hoped she hadn't overheard Mrs Simmons' sorry tale. Not that it seemed likely that she would recover her memories and then spread gossip about the staff of a castle she would probably never see again.

But still, he reminded himself as she scurried away and he returned to his correspondence, he had to remember that he didn't really know her or what her reasons were for being there.

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Penelope had overheard the whole conversation – but it was not the part about the illegitimate child that was making her chew her bottom lip in worry.

No, it was the Duke's statements about how he found deception and lying such apparent flaws in humans. That was what solidified within her the knowledge that, when he found out she'd been lying all this time, he was not going to be very pleased with her.

She returned to the bedchamber she had been given for her brief stay, and sat in the window seat, nervously tapping her fingers against the painted wood.

Had this all been a huge mistake?

She felt like she had done at sea, when the tide had turned and she'd realised her error in judgment. Out of her depth, and with no idea what the right course of action was.

It had seemed like a reasonable idea to pretend she could not remember who she was, and to test what sort of a man he was.

But she'd discovered how reasonable and generous he was, beneath a prickly exterior...and more than that, she'd realised that she felt something for him. Something that was possibly stronger than attraction alone.

And now...how could she admit the truth to him, having heard what she had?

He hated lies and deception. And what had she done, other than lie to him and deceive him?

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When he called for more brandy that evening, sitting in his study long after his guest had gone to bed, he did not expect Mrs Simmons to bring it.

"Surely this is not one of your duties, Mrs Simmons," he commented as she filled his glass from the fresh decanter.

"Not since I was a maid, Your Grace," she said with a smile. "But I just wanted to thank you again, for everything. And to tell you..." She swallowed and avoided his eyeline. "Mr Richards has informed me of what he has found out, and passed on to you. And I am very grateful to you for not dismissing me."

"It was a long time ago, Mrs Simmons," he said, leaning back in his chair, pleased that there seemed to be no tears this time. "As far as I am concerned, the matter is over."

She paused, as though there was something else she wanted to say, and then reached for the empty decanter. "Thank you, Your Grace. You're a good man."

Never comfortable with compliments, James took a sip of his brandy and waited for the moment to pass. It was late, and he would soon head to bed, but he just wanted to finish the last few pages of the book he was reading. With the arrival of his mystery guest, his free time of an evening had diminished, and it had taken him longer to read the last few chapters than it normally would. It was a riveting account of the battle tactics of the Roman Empire, and he had been hooked by it before her arrival.

"Is there any progress with the young lady's memory?" Mrs Simmons asked, her hand already on the door handle.

"Not as of yet," James said with a sigh. "But I am sure she will remember something shortly."

Mrs Simmons nodded and then glanced back at him. "Yes, I'm sure she will. But her presence has been pleasant, has it not? Brings some warmth back to the castle. Whoever she is, she seems like a nice young lady, who knows how to behave and how to treat people."

"Indeed. Good night, Mrs Simmons."

Had she known that her words would stick with him, and distract him from finishing the rest of his book? He doubted it; she was probably just making conversation. But nonetheless, he did not shake them off for the rest of the evening, nor when he lay in bed, struggling to sleep.

Because her presence had been nice. He had to agree. But it wasn't meant to be. She didn't belong here – and the longer she stayed, the more comfortable he would feel with her being there, and the stranger it would feel when she left.

She needed to go. There was no doubting it. Mrs Simmons's comment that her presence was nice, and even worse, James's instinct to agree with her, had made that abundantly clear. Besides, it had been five days – if her memory had not returned yet, perhaps it never would.

And he was not going to take care of her for the rest of her days, with no idea of who she was. There were some inconsistencies too, which did not always make sense – things that she remembered and then seemingly backtracked on. Was there something she wasn't telling him? Or was that his inherently suspicious nature playing tricks on him?

It was a grey and cloudy morning when they sat down to breakfast, and he made his

announcement.

"I believe we must call for the doctor tomorrow."

His mystery woman's eyes widened, and her mouth formed an O.

"Why, Your Grace?"

The Duke sighed. Surely it was obvious?

"You have been here for five days, and you seem no closer to remembering who you are or from whence you came. I am happy to do my Christian duty and provide a port in the storm, so to speak. But we have no idea now whether your memory will ever return, and you cannot remain indefinitely."

He didn't know if he was mistaken in thinking she looked disappointed.

"I understand, Your Grace. And I have trespassed on your hospitality for far too long. I really thought that by now..."

"I realise you are not doing it on purpose. But there may well be people looking for you, and the last thing we would want would be rumours swirling about your time here, about the nature of this situation."

"No, of course not," she insisted quickly.

While James believed that she did not want negative repercussions from this sojourn, he realised that, as unusual as it was for him, he really had not thought things through. His staff, he was fairly sure, he could trust. But she'd been to the village...had she told people where she was staying? If anyone found out he'd had an unchaperoned miss – especially if she turned out to be a lady of any consequence,

which he rather thought she might be – in his home for almost a week, well then, he'd have no choice but to marry her.

He knew one day he would marry; it was inevitable, rather like taxes and death. But he certainly never planned to be caught in the parson's mousetrap unwittingly. No, when he did marry, it would be well thought out – an advantageous match that would suit his lifestyle and his ambitions.

Not some unknown lady, no matter how beautiful she was, or how much she smiled, or how warm she made his home seem.

"We are agreed, then," James said, reaching for a segment of orange. "Tomorrow, I shall call for the doctor. And if he cannot help you regain your memory or advise when it might return, then we shall have to enquire around the local towns and villages to see if anyone of your description has been reported missing."

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Panic was making it impossible for Penelope to continue the conversation. Of course, she should have known this was coming. She'd only intended to stay a couple of days herself – and now they were approaching a week, and she had not brought the ruse to an end.

Her parents were surely worried sick. And now the Duke had decided he had put up with her for long enough, and he wanted to call in a doctor.

But she could not allow that to happen. She was sure, somehow, that a doctor would know she had not lost any memories whatsoever. And then she would be exposed, and the Duke would hate her. She had just been having so much fun getting to know him, playing the role of someone else for a short period of time.

Perhaps, if she miraculously regained her memories, she could simply go home as if nothing had happened. He wouldn't need to know that he'd been tricked. And maybe...maybe she could contrive to invite him to Amblewood. If he felt anything for her after this week together, perhaps he would propose marriage without her needing to reveal anything...

"Are you quite well?" the Duke was asking, and she realised she had been staring into space, unable to focus as she thought through her possible next steps.

She nodded and broke into a bread roll in order to have something to do. "Quite well, thank you."

She had discovered from the staff, after some discreet questioning, just how far they were from Amblewood. They weren't so far over the border, but since she had travelled by sea and not by land, the distance on a map looked much greater. If the Duke were to ask around, how far would he go? And would he travel by horse or think about where it was feasible for her to have hailed from, considering she had been washed up on his shores in a boat?

She tried to imagine her parents' reactions to her arrival at home as the footman cleared away the plates. She was sure they'd be pleased at her safe return, although if they found out she had been alone with the Duke of Dunloch for several nights, she rather thought they might also be pushing for marriage.

And they might be rather surprised to find that she was not against such a marriage – but she did not want the Duke to be forced into it. No, just as she had wanted a man to be interested in her for her personality and not her title or dowry, she also did not want to be wed without the groom having any choice at all.

And so her initial plan still seemed a sound one: when she 'regained' her memories, she would return home and be vague about the details of where she had been. She

could surely pretend not to remember, or at least simply state that the Duke had helped her on her way, rather than housing her and feeding her and making her feel things she had never felt before...

She had certainly woven a tangled web of lies when she had decided not to be honest with the Duke of Dunloch about her identity.

Since it was to be her last day at the castle, with the Duke, she intended to make the most of it. She knocked on his study door and interrupted his work – something she had tried to avoid doing for the rest of the week.

"Since I am to be leaving you soon," she began. "I mean, here," she corrected, hoping he had not noticed her slip of the tongue, "I thought I might take a ride through the woods."

"Are you sure that is wise?" the Duke said, a frown on his face.

"I will ride very carefully," she promised. "And I intend to ask the groom for a more stable mount."

"A sensible plan," the Duke agreed.

"But I thought, since you spend so much time working, perhaps you might like a break. To join me."

"I have rather a lot of work to complete, you see, and—"

"I know you are very busy," she interrupted him. "But I think sometimes it's good to remember that there are other things in life than work and duty." She smiled at him, hoping it took some of the sting out of her words, which she realised sounded rather like a rebuke. Well, she supposed they were – she did not believe he was living life to

the fullest. It wasn't entirely his fault; it was how he had been raised.

But she thought, before she left, that she should show him it was not the only way to live.

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James couldn't remember the last time he had gone for a ride without having a purpose, just simply to enjoy the outing.

He liked to make sure that everything he did had a purpose, and simple enjoyment was never really enough to spend an afternoon on.

But she had asked him. And somehow, he found her peculiarly hard to say no to.

They trotted gently through the woods, with the lady on an older, more stable mare. Perhaps she had not had much experience riding before, he thought – but she did not sit like someone who didn't know how to ride a horse.

Sunlight had broken through the clouds, and the air was warm and full of birdsong. The woods really were beautiful, with shafts of light filtering through, and he found himself noticing things he didn't normally when he came this way, like a tree with a bough perfect for climbing, and a birds' nest high up in another.

"Is this something you do often?" he asked, before realising that she wouldn't know. "I mean, do you think it is?"

She turned to him and frowned. "What, riding?"

"Riding aimlessly..."

"I walk—" she began, then corrected herself. "I seem to remember that I like walking more. But yes, without purpose. Can the purpose not be simply to enjoy nature?"

"I suppose," James said. "But when there is so much to be done in a day... It seems rather wasteful to spend time without purpose."

"One cannot work all day, every day," she said in her sing-song voice. "You have a beautiful estate, Your Grace. You should enjoy it, not just work to preserve it endlessly."

They reached a clearing, and she turned to him with a smile. "Can we sit, for a moment? Cook was just getting some shortbread from the oven before we left, so I brought some with me."

"I suppose," he said, wishing he knew how much time had passed. He really ought to be getting back. He needed to approve the plans for the new homes before the end of the day, for the building was due to begin by the end of the week.

But he dismounted and helped her off her horse, trying not to notice how pleasant it was to hold her close to him, just for a moment. She would be leaving very shortly, and that was a good thing indeed. He didn't want to be distracted, or tempted into doing something he would later regret.

She sat upon a moss-covered log, not seeming concerned over her dress – which was the one she had arrived in, washed and looking none the worse for wear for its adventure. From her pocket, she pulled out a bundle tied up with string, and unwrapped it. She held it to him first, offering him the biscuits, and he took one with a word of thanks.

"You can sit down, you know," she said with a smile on her lips.

He sat beside her, feeling it would be rude not to, but the log was small enough that he had to sit closer than he would have liked. Not because it was unpleasant to sit next to the lady with no name, but because it was rather too pleasant. He shouldn't be

noticing the warmth of her body beside his, or the smell of lavender he could detect, which he presumed came from the soap she had been using.

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She could feel the tension rolling off him, sat so close, but she presumed it was because he was worried about wasting time out here with her, eating delicious fresh shortbread in the woods. She wanted to tell him that she spent as much time as she could wandering aimlessly, exploring and enjoying nature – but that would be admitting too much of a memory.

She also wasn't sure it was the sort of trait men really liked in a woman. Would he just think she was frivolous, as he clearly did his sisters?

She knew, when she was one day wed, she would have a home to run and children to tend to. But up until that day arrived, she only had her needlework, her piano practice, and whatever social events her parents dragged her to.

That left her with plenty of spare time to enjoy the beautiful county she lived in. She knew the Duke had many more responsibilities than she did. But even so, she did not think it was healthy to spend every moment of one's day focused on duty. Even when you were a duke. Especially when you were a duke, and could easily pay enough staff to help you. Surely, as well as responsibility, such privilege bought freedom?

"Why do you prefer to stay here at Dunloch Castle, instead of venturing south for the Season?" she asked as they ate.

"There is always much to be done here," he replied instantly.

"Yes...but most estates require regular upkeep," she began. "Or so I understand," she hurriedly added. "And yet don't most titled gentlemen manage to go to London for

the Season, or at least to another of their estates for the hunting?"

"Not every titled gentleman is as dedicated to their estate as I am," he said irritably. "Besides, London is busy and noisy and generally unpleasant. I have no wish to gamble, or to attend balls, so what would be the point in going?"

"Well, if one does not enjoy the entertainments, the aim I believe is usually to find a spouse," Penelope countered. She herself did not enjoy London, but she went every year – partly because her parents insisted, and partly because it seemed everyone thought it was the only place where she would find a suitable husband.

But perhaps they were wrong...

"As you must not remember what London is like, you cannot understand," he said, brushing errant biscuit crumbs from his jacket. "But it is not a place I would choose to frequent. Perhaps, when it is time for me to take a wife, I will have to go to meet an appropriate woman – but I do nothing without good reason, as I believe you understand."

He stood abruptly, and it was clear that he was signalling the end of their little outing.

She didn't like London herself, but she could not tell him that. And neither did now seem the right time to tell him that she thought sometimes, it was good to do things without having any reason at all.

"We must return," he said, offering his hand to help her onto the horse. "I have much to attend to, and tomorrow I shall call for the doctor, and that will be another day lost."

Feeling like a burden, Penelope took his hand and allowed him to help her onto the horse. She would have to remember who she was before he had time to call for the

doctor, and it was not a conversation she was looking forward to.

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Having wasted much of the afternoon in the woods, James was irritated when there was a knock on his study door, not long after they had returned. He needed to scrutinise the plans carefully, before he approved them – and to do that he needed some peace and quiet.

But apparently, some peace and quiet was not something he was going to get.

"I have some information to share, Your Grace," his man of business, Thomas, said upon entering his study.

James looked up from the plans before him. "Oh?"

Thomas closed the door and gingerly walked towards him. "It is of a rather delicate nature," he said, not meeting James's eye.

"Just tell me, man. I haven't got all day," James said, wishing his staff were not so cautious around him. Whatever it was, he was a man of the world – he doubted it would shock him greatly.

"It is regarding Mrs Simmons," Thomas said.

James frowned. "If it is regarding the blackmail and the topic of the blackmail, then no further discussion is needed. What happened is in the past, and I believe it is better for all concerned if we forget about it."

"Of course, Your Grace. Understood. However..."

James pressed his eyes closed for a moment, trying to remain patient. Clearly, he was going to hear this information whether he wanted to or not. Was his man of business as prudish as his butler? Did they truly believe such sins could not be forgotten or forgiven, even after thirty years?

"I believe you know that Mrs Simmons had a child out of wedlock and was permitted to remain in service here when she returned, having left the child with her brother in France."

James had not known the details of where the child had gone, but the rest was information the butler had already shared with him.

"Yes, I am aware."

"Well, the information I have uncovered, while ensuring this matter did not come to light and impact the reputation of Dunloch Castle, concerns the father of the child."

James was not sure this was information he wanted. It felt uncomfortably close to gossip, which he detested. Mrs Simmons had made a mistake many years earlier, and she had surely paid for it. What good could come of dredging up the past now?

"Is it essential I know this, Thomas?" he asked, giving his man of business one last chance to walk away and keep this private.

Thomas, clearly sensing irritation, gripped the sheaf of parchment tightly, his hands shaking slightly. "I'm sorry, Your Grace, but I think you do."

"Very well," James said with a sigh.

"There is rather a lot of evidence to suggest that the man who fathered the child was the former Duke of Dunloch."

James struggled to process the words being spoken to him.

"Excuse me?"

"It seems the father of Mrs Simmons's son was your father, Your Grace – the sixth Duke of Dunloch."

The words seemed to knock the breath clean out of his lungs, and all of a sudden, the room felt airless.

His father... His father had an illegitimate child? He had fathered a son with their housekeeper – or, James supposed, back then she was probably just a housemaid.

He had no words he could express to Thomas, who stood there awkwardly, clutching the parchment, which James presumed held evidence of this new information which had come to light.

"Thank you, Thomas. That will be all." It took a great deal of effort to force the words from his lips.

"Shall I—" Thomas began, holding out the parchment.

"I said that will be all," James repeated, raising his voice a little, needing to be alone.

Thankfully, he got the message. He darted from the room, leaving the parchment on the desk, and when the door closed, James gripped the desk tightly and tried to take deep breaths.

He had no idea what to say to Thomas about such a development, just as he had no idea why it was effecting him so deeply.

Although it was growing dark outside, he needed to get out. He threw open the study door and stormed from the room, thankfully not meeting anyone as he made his way down the corridor, out of the main door, and into the grounds. The air was fresh, and yet still, he did not feel he was fully breathing.

Thomas and Richards had both said the scandal was over thirty years ago, presumably before James was even born. Was it after his father had married his mother? Of course, having affairs was not uncommon amongst the ton, and James would not have judged his father particularly for doing so. He had not felt that the marriage between his parents had been some great love match, but rather a sensible combining of names, fortunes, and estates.

But having a discreet affair with another married lady of the same rank, or a widow, was one thing; an affair with a maid that resulted in a child – a boy! That was something else altogether.

James walked until he was confident he was out of sight of the house, not wanting to be disturbed. Then he sat down on a stone bench and held his head in his hands. For his entire life, James had been raised to know that he was the next Duke of Dunloch, and all the responsibility that entailed. He had taken his father's words seriously – and yet now he found out that his father had not held himself to any higher standard at all. No, he had apparently fulfilled his basest desires without concern.

And the worst thing was that he'd had a son. A son who was older than James. A son who, had he been born to the Duchess of Dunloch, would have been the next Duke and entitled to everything that was James's. Everything that defined him.

His whole world felt as though it was being turned on its head. How had he been raised to think something was so important when a quirk of fate could have meant it belonged to someone else entirely? Yes, he believed he was a good Duke of Dunloch – but what was to say this half-brother of his would not have been equally good, had

he had the opportunity?

Instead, he had apparently been raised in France, away from his mother, away from his biological father, away from his country.

And now this information was known – at least by Thomas. Who else knew? And who else would find out? He trusted his staff, even after Mrs Simmons's latest transgression, which he supposed was rather more understandable if the secret she had been hiding was the illegitimate child of the former Duke of Dunloch.

But if his men could uncover this information, then surely others could too. And the good name he had been raised to hold higher than anything else could be sullied by rumours of unfaithfulness and illegitimacy. What if, off the back of this information, people questioned James's own legitimacy? People did love to gossip.

An owl hooted in the distance, and James stood up. He could not go to pieces over this information. It was in the past – and the child, the man, was far away in France. He could pretend he knew nothing about him, and his life would continue just as it was.

Could he look at his title in the same way again? That he was not sure of, but it was a struggle for him to deal with internally; no one else needed to know about it.

He needed to rid himself of his mysterious guest, first and foremost. That had been his foolish mistake, just as it seemed Mrs Simmons was his father's. The girl's presence here could certainly cause rumour and scandal, and even an unwanted marriage. The doctor needed to be called, and she needed to leave. And then, in the solitude that would follow, he would decide what he was going to do about Mrs Simmons's son. Whether any action needed to be taken to keep the information secret. And whether, just perhaps, he might wish to meet the man who was his own flesh and blood.

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Penelope noticed that James was rather quiet at supper, but she did not comment. It did not feel her place to say anything – and besides, she was rather preoccupied with her own concerns. She needed to make sure the recovery of her memory was believable if she wished for any goodwill from the Duke to remain once she left Dunloch Castle. After all, her notion of having him invited to dine at Amblewood, and perhaps having a traditional courtship, would not work if he hated her and wished to have nothing more to do with her.

So the two ate in silence, each consumed by their own thoughts, and when the meal was over, Penelope chose to retire early, claiming a headache.

In truth, her anxiety over the conversation she would have to have with him in the morning was getting to her, and she worried that the more time she spent with him – although she did wish to spend that time with him – the more likely it was she would say something to ruin everything. If her nerves became apparent, or if she slipped up and admitted something before the morning and the recovery of her memory, then all of this would have been for naught. She did not wish to leave with a broken heart, but she rather thought she was in danger of doing so.

How strange it was, she thought to herself as she mounted the stairs to bed, that one could not know a person even existed, and less than a week later, feel as though never seeing them again would be the worst thing of all.

She barely slept that night, knowing that she must go to him the following morning and reveal who she was. She had decided she wouldn't tell him everything, just that she had regained her memory. She considered doing so after supper, but decided it was more realistic – not that she'd ever known anyone to lose their memory and then

regain it – to be refurnished with her memories after a night's sleep.

He was generally in his study most of the morning, and so she went there before going to the dining room, hoping to catch him before the day had begun. As she had expected, he was poring over paperwork before breaking his fast, and he looked up in surprise as she entered, obviously having expected one of his staff.

"Good morning, Your Grace."

"Good morning. I have not sent for the doctor yet, I'm afraid, I thought to do it after breakfast..."

Penelope shook her head. "That's not why I have come. Well, it is, I suppose."

He frowned, tapping his quill against his desk, and she tried to get to the point.

"I don't believe sending for the doctor will be necessary."

"I must disagree, miss. You cannot indefinitely–"

"I have regained my memory," she said hurriedly, and his eyes widened.

"I see. Well that is a different matter. Who do you believe yourself to be?"

Penelope took a deep breath. "I am Lady Penelope Strachan."

He leant back in his chair. "And where do you live?"

"Amblewood Castle, in Northumberland."

He blinked and she wondered if she needed to expand, or if he knew of it.

"So...you are the daughter of the Earl and Countess Strachan?"

She nodded, although guilt flooded through her at the thought of her parents. She might not have always agreed with them, but she did love them dearly – and they had surely been worried sick while she'd been enjoying herself living life as someone else at Dunloch Castle.

"I must think," he said, abruptly pushing his wooden chair backwards and stalking from the room.

Penelope stood and watched him leave, hardly breathing. That had not been the reaction she had been expecting...

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The daughter of an earl and countess.

Why had he not considered such a possibility?

He strode from the house, out towards the loch, without even thinking where he was going. He just needed to be away from her, from the house – to have some space to breathe. For the second time in twelve hours, he felt like the breath had been ripped from his lungs.

There was still dew on the grass and he sent droplets flying as he stomped past the loch and away from the house.

Was she planning to trap him in marriage? He had known she was no commoner, but he had not thought she would be so highborn. He could not escape the fact that he had been living under the same roof as the daughter of an earl for nearly a week.

He'd known if anyone found out, it could be an issue. But now, he could not see how they would not find out. For he could send her home today – and he certainly would do so – but her parents were not going to accept her not telling them where she had been.

And once they knew, they would expect a proposal of marriage. Of course they would. He imagined himself in their situation. If one of his sisters had been unchaperoned with a gentleman for a significant period of time, no matter whether or not anything untoward had occurred, he would be insisting on marriage.

Or calling the man out if he refused.

James muttered an expletive under his breath and kicked a tree stump, which did nothing but make his foot ache.

He always thought everything through. Always. How had he not foreseen that keeping her – Penelope – in the house would inevitably cause trouble?

He did not want to be trapped into marriage. He was furious with himself, for not thinking of this, and with her, for putting him in this position.

And if there was a niggling voice in the back of his head that asked whether it would be so bad to marry her – especially since she was an eligible young woman, from what she said – he ignored it.

When he did marry, it would be well-planned, to a young lady who had been properly vetted and was the ideal candidate.

Not to some woman who washed up on the shore and turned his world upside down.

As he began to make his way back to the castle, he struggled to control his anger at

himself. Why had he been so foolish? He had been judging his father for an ill-advised dalliance, but his own behaviour was equally questionable. Why had he not sent her to another nearby estate, with females in residence, and washed his hands of her immediately?

And why had he allowed this to go on for so long?

For surely he was left with two options now: marry the girl, or have her parents (and the rest of society) believe he was bringing shame to the dukedom.

And that was something he had been trained never to do.

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Penelope sat alone at the breakfast table, wondering how long she should wait for the Duke. She'd expected him to be shocked, certainly, that she'd recovered her memory all of a sudden – but she had not expected him to simply run from the room.

Did he know her parents, and that was the reason for his surprising reaction?

Or did he not believe that she had really regained her memory...or that she had ever lost it in the first place?

That had been her chief concern, but surely in that case, he would have been angry with her – not taken himself off for an impromptu walk through the grounds, something which she knew was very out of character for him?

Her stomach was churning too much to eat, so she simply sipped her tea and hoped he would soon return.

Unfortunately, the large window in the dining hall faced the back of the estate, and not the loch, which was where she had seen him heading when he had left the study, so she had not laid eyes on him in quite some time. Every now and then the footman would appear to see if anything was needed, and, Penelope thought, to check whether the Duke had yet appeared, but apart from that, she was left entirely alone.

It was only when she gave up on waiting for him and her appetite to return, and left the dining hall, that she saw him.

He was standing in the doorway of the castle, looking frozen with indecision. When he saw her, he turned red, and she wondered if she should say something – although

she had no idea what.

"Join me in the library," he said eventually, before turning and heading towards the open door without a backward glance.

She did not like being ordered around, but she followed him anyway, needing to know what was behind his response.

She closed the door behind her, even though of course she should not be alone with him in a confined space, but he did not seem to notice. He was pacing, and she rather thought he was nervous – something she had not seen in him before.

"I'm sorry if I shocked you this morning," she said, when he did not seem to be ready to speak. "I was surprised myself to suddenly know who I was, and thought I should tell you without haste."

The Duke nodded. "Indeed. You were right to. My shock came..." He stopped pacing, and indicated a chair by the fire. "Please, sit." He sat down himself on a wingback chair opposite, and crossed his legs. "Lady Penelope," he said, and it was rather a shock for her to hear his name on his lips, after so many days of it not being spoken. "You must realise, now you have regained your memory, what a precarious position we are in."

"Oh?"

"You are – to the best of my knowledge – an unwed daughter of an earl, who is presumably expected to make a wonderful match."

She nodded. "Yes, I believe that is the expectation. Although so far, I have not been successful."

"And now you have been here, alone, with me, for five whole days. It does not matter that nothing has happened to besmirch your reputation, the mere fact of you being here has done that. You will be ruined, Lady Penelope, thanks to your time here."

Penelope had considered that already, of course. But she did not know why he was in such a panic; it would hardly impact him if she were ruined. And she was already hoping to meet him socially in an approved setting, in order to set the wheels in motion for a real match between them...

And then none of this would be a problem.

"I will just be vague about where I was, Your Grace," she said. "I can say I washed up on the shore, that you rescued me even, but that I stayed at an inn. There is no reason for anyone to come and search for the truth..."

He shook his head and sighed. "I am afraid, Lady Penelope, that you hold a far more charitable view of the world than I do. Even if you were to be believed, and I am not sure any parents would accept such a story, the fact that you were alone at an inn for all this time would be enough to raise doubts over your virtue. Do you not see?"

Penelope bit her bottom lip. "I had not thought of that," she said softly, both in answer to the Duke but also to herself.

Could he be right? Society could be cruel, she knew that – but would she be ruined, no matter what happened? She didn't want to wed some nameless faceless man whom she had only danced three dances with, but neither did she wish to live at home until her father passed, and then find herself homeless and unwed, the burden of some male cousin – if he chose to take care of her.

"I believe there is only one course of action, to save your reputation and ensure there is no damage to mine," he said, leaning back in his chair. "I think we must marry."

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Her face, which had gone pale at the thought of her impending ruin, flushed red at his words. He had been unsure whether or not it was the only answer, until the words came out of his mouth – but of course it was. She ought not to be ruined because she'd ended up washed up on his shores, and he should not have his good reputation dragged through the mud.

And marrying her didn't seem like a terrible outcome. Perhaps not what he had planned, but she was certainly attractive, and came from a good family, and would know how to comport herself as a duchess – once she'd stopped wandering off and getting into trouble, of course.

"You do?" she asked, her voice a little hoarse.

"It is the only option that makes sense. I presume you are not already betrothed to anyone?"

"No," she said, her voice still quiet. "No, I am not betrothed."

"Well. Then there's nothing stopping us. I don't want your reputation to be worried, because of this time we have spent together. And I... I think we could suit."

"You do, Your Grace?"

He nodded curtly. "We have got along well enough. We could make a marriage work...and no one's reputation would be damaged." He paused, and then continued to add, "And you should probably call me James, if we are to wed."

When he'd said that she needed to go, making an offer of marriage had not been on his mind.

Things had changed. He had changed. For one, there was the fact that she was a woman of some consequence, and if he did not marry her, he would be in dereliction of his duty as a duke and a gentleman.

For another, the news that Thomas had brought him had made him reconsider things. He wasn't ready to confront Mrs Simmons yet, but he had looked at the evidence, and it did indeed seem plausible that the child was his father's.

And so, the thought of having a legitimate heir – and soon – appealed more than it had a few days earlier. Not that he thought anyone would question his legitimacy, but if this information became public knowledge... Far better to have a reputable wife and an heir on the way before it did.

At least, that was what he told himself was the reason. In truth, there was more to it than that. He had enjoyed her being at the castle, even if he had tried to deny it. And the thought of her being there permanently was certainly not unpleasant.

"I knew all along that you were a good person, in spite of your rather gruff manner, James."

James was about to agree with her, to comment that his bark was certainly worse than his bite, when her words made him pause.

"What do you mean, you always knew?" he asked with a frown. She flushed bright red and looked at the floor, and he knew he had caught her in some sort of lie.

But what was it that she was hiding?

"I didn't mean..." she began, but without much confidence.

He narrowed his eyes. "Did you know who I was when you arrived here? Was

gaining a proposal of marriage your aim all along?"

She shook her head rapidly. "No, no, not at all. I didn't mean it like that, I—"

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"Something doesn't add up, Lady Penelope," the Duke said, his voice turning icy cold.

Penelope shivered and bit the inside of her lip. She was frantically trying to figure out how to rectify this. After all, she had slipped up before and made it through without alerting him to the fact that she knew who she was.

"I just meant...that when I met you, you seemed rather harsh, but once I got to know you, and you reacted so... I mean, you passed... I mean—" She was tripping over her words, and she knew it, getting herself into more and more trouble with every attempt.

"The truth, please. Now," the Duke demanded.

She swallowed. This was it. She needed to either carry on with the lie and fully convince him or admit to what she had done and hope that he forgave her. He had, after all, offered marriage. He was a good man. Surely he would forgive her this harmless bit of fun?

"I did not know who you were when I arrived – not until your staff told me. And I certainly did not come here looking for a husband. But when I realised I'd have the opportunity to get to know a titled gentleman without the pressure of society, I could not resist utilising it. I just wanted to see what it was like to befriend someone, to know more about them than whether they liked to ride or how well they could dance. That was all," she said pitifully, not meeting his eyes, which she knew from a brief

glance were full of anger. Anger towards her. Anger that she probably deserved.

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"A re you saying," he said slowly, anger filling his body, "that you have known who you are the entire time you've been here?"

If it were possible, Lady Penelope grew even redder, and her eyes began to dart around as if looking for an escape.

"Not exactly..."

"Not exactly!" James roared. "And what does that mean? You knew for half the time? A day? Were you pretending to be unconscious in that boat, and the whole situation has been nonsense?"

She shook her head. "No, no, I was unconscious. I went out in my boat, thought nothing of the storm clouds, and lost control. I was fighting to get back to the shore, and then... And then everything went black. The next thing I remember was waking up on that beach, with you hovering above me."

How was he to know what to believe? Had every word that had come out of her mouth been a lie? Was she really who she said she was? He had no way of knowing.

"So you woke up on the beach, knowing exactly who you were and where you came from?"

Her silence was all the answer he needed.

"Why?" he asked, running a hand through his hair in frustration. Even in his fury, he was mindful of the fact that she was a lady, and it would not be appropriate for him to

shout expletives, as much as he wished to. "Were you trying to trick me into marriage? Did you think – quite rightly, too – that if we were alone together for long enough, I would have to propose matrimony?" he asked in disgust. "And you so innocently pretended that you had no idea your reputation was at risk. What nonsense."

There were tears in Lady Penelope's eyes, and yet he could not bring himself to feel sorry for her, nor to moderate his tirade. She had lied to him, and he had trusted her. Been taken in by...what? A sweet smile and a fake story? He would not have thought himself such a fool, but apparently, he was.

"I had no intention of trapping you into marriage," she said tearfully. "If you'll recall, I didn't even know who you were or whether you were already wed when you rescued me on the beach."

In a more reasonable frame of mind, he might have acknowledged that was indeed true – but he was in no mood to be reasonable.

"That doesn't mean you didn't decide to lie once you knew I was a duke. Once you knew there was a title and money up for grabs," James said coldly.

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Penelope did not think anyone had ever spoken to her so coldly, harshly, and without letup.

She did not want to cry in front of him, but she could not control her emotions. She hadn't meant to let on that there had been any sort of plan at all, and her worst fears were coming true: he did hate her for deceiving him. And he believed her capable of much more devious deception than she had planned. It was all meant to be harmless fun... and yet it had turned into such a mess.

Moments ago, she had been thrilled that he had suggested they marry. It was not, perhaps, the most romantic of proposals, but it was the first proposal she felt she could accept. She knew the man behind the words, and she was willing to marry him, to be tied to him for the rest of her life.

And yet now, that very same man hated her, and she was in the position of having her reputation ruined with no happily ever after. And really, she only had herself to blame.

"I wasn't trying to trick you into marriage," she insisted again. "I simply thought..." Why was it so hard to put into words? "This will be hard to understand for a man, I am sure. But I'm expected to marry someone I have never spent time alone with, someone I do not truly know. There is never an opportunity to deepen the connection before a betrothal is announced. And so I just thought..."

The Duke tapped his foot impatiently on the floorboards, and Penelope had to look away from his icy glare, for each dagger he was shooting her way was painful.

"I just thought that I could get to know a gentleman outside the rules of society," she continued feebly. "Not necessarily that I would marry him, just that I might see if he...if you...were the right sort of man to be considering."

She glanced up to see the Duke shaking his head incredulously.

"So it has all been some game to you? Playing pretend in a life that is not your own in order to – what? See what a man is like outside a ballroom?" He continued to shake his head. "And you expect me to believe that once you found out I was a duke, there was no thought in your mind that I would have to marry you, that both our reputations would be destroyed if anyone knew you had been here unchaperoned for so long?"

She continued to protest, but she could tell it was falling on deaf ears. "It was silly, I admit. But I wasn't thinking like that, I promise. I truly thought I could just tell my family that I'd stayed at an inn, and it would be accepted. And then, perhaps..."

"Perhaps what?" he barked.

She shook her head. She could not tell him that she had thought to arrange a meeting between them where they might dance together, where he might propose marriage in the proper way. A situation where she could legitimately be confident that she knew the man and was happy to risk tying herself to him for the rest of her life.

It all sounded far too much like child's play, and he was already angry enough with her. Besides, his fury was making her doubt herself a little. She had tested him and believed him to be a good man – and yet no one had ever spoken so cruelly to her. No one had ever been so unwilling to listen to her explanations. Granted, she'd never done anything quite this silly. But even so, surely he could have given her the benefit of the doubt.

"I am appalled that anyone could be so deceptive," he said, standing and reaching for the bell pull to call the footman. "You have done me a great disservice, Lady Penelope. You have taken advantage of my hospitality and my good nature, and still, you are deceiving me as to the real purpose of this ruse."

"I'm sorry," was all she could say, tears streaming down her cheeks.

There was a brief knock at the door, and then a footman entered, concealing his surprise at Lady Penelope's distress well.

"Please call for the carriage to be readied, Trent," the Duke ordered. "Lady Penelope will be leaving immediately."

And without even a word of goodbye, he stormed from the room, leaving the distraught Penelope to face up to what she had done.

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The staff were polite to her, but word must have spread about the altercation in the library. None of them asked if she was well or the cause of her distress.

She was handed into the carriage, and it seemed the driver was already apprised of where she lived, for he started on the journey without so much as a word from her.

Inside the carriage, with no reading or sewing to distract her, Penelope sat and sobbed.

What had she done? And what was she going to tell her parents?

She'd had a plan when she'd entered into all of this. She would test him, and then she would know what sort of man he was. And if she thought he was a suitable candidate for marriage, she would ensure such a thing could be arranged. She had not planned for her name to be ruined, nor for the Duke to be so furious with her that he banished her from his home.

What a fool she had been. She should have just told him her name as soon as she opened her eyes on that beach, and then he would have sent her home, and none of this would be happening. True, she would not have got to know him or discovered his character, but neither would she be facing life as a ruined woman on the edge of society, and quite possibly with a broken heart to boot.

Because she was sure that in the handful of days she had spent with the Duke, she had begun to hold real feelings for him. Feelings that she had never had for anyone else because she had never known anyone like she knew him. One could have an

acquaintance over several months and never spend as much time with a gentleman as she had done with the Duke on this escape from her life.

It had been exactly as she had thought – getting to know someone took more than a dance or two, and should surely be done before the marriage vows were said.

But nothing had worked out the way she had planned. And now she had a long carriage ride alone, with tears streaming down her face and far too much silence to contemplate the reality of what she had done and where it had led her.

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He wanted to read through some documents his lawyer had sent over, but he could not force his mind to focus. Blast that girl – how had she made it so impossible for him to think straight? This morning, he had been proposing matrimony. Now, she was in a carriage on the way back to Northumberland, and he would quite probably never see her again.

While that notion bothered him more than it ought to, it was not the primary emotion he felt. No, it was anger that simmered in his veins. Anger that made him unable to sit still, unable to read the words on the page.

She had tricked him. She had tricked him, and he'd fallen for it. Like some inexperienced fool, taken in by a pretty face and a kind smile.

Didn't he know better than that?

With a frustrated growl, he shoved the parchment away from him and poured himself a stiff drink. It was earlier than he would normally have had one, but he felt it was necessary.

Not that the potent whiskey tempered his anger; if anything, it made it burn more brightly.

Because he had thought, at the beginning, that perhaps she was lying to him. That she was trying to gain something, to fool him for some purpose of her own.

And he'd been right. She had wanted to trick him. Although apparently, it was in order to get to know him without the constraints of society. He wasn't sure he

believed that. Would a sensible, titled lady really risk everything – her good name, her reputation, her virtue, even, if she had stumbled across the wrong house – just because she wanted to know more about a gentleman than whether he could dance?

He downed the last of the amber liquid and slammed the glass on the table before abruptly standing and exiting the room. There was no point in staring at documents that his eyes and mind refused to comprehend. Perhaps he could attend to some task out on the estate.

At least then, he could ride off some of his angry energy. And maybe forget that it wasn't only anger he felt. He was disappointed in himself, and in her... And that, just maybe, his mind had become accustomed to the idea of her being here for longer. Of the marriage – which was purely to save her reputation, of course – going ahead.

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The skies were gloomy as the carriage made its way towards Penelope's beloved Northumberland. Guilt and despair warred within her, and she felt desolate as she stared out of the window, trying to stop crying.

It had been wrong to trick him. And she had known that when he found out, he would be furious. She just seemed to have rather underestimated how furious...and how much it would hurt to have his ire directed at her. To be banished from the castle where she had spent five glorious days. To have to accept that she would never see him again and that, with her silly, childish plan, she had ruined everything.

She knew she ought to be worrying about her reputation, about how she was going to fix the damage she had done, about what she was going to say to her mother and father when they asked where she had been and what had occurred in those days.

But all she could think about was him. And how she had finally had a marriage

proposal she could say yes to within her grasp, only to ruin it all. About how she wondered if he was the man she was meant to marry, and now he would never look at her without despising her.

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It was as he was riding hard and fast along the perimeter of his estate, checking for damaged fences – something which, of course, someone else could do, but which he had decided to take on himself – that a realisation came to James. She had tricked him, made a fool of him, proven ten times over why women were silly and thoughtless and should not be trusted.

But dismissing those details, the fact remained that he had allowed her to remain in his home unchaperoned, and her actions did not change that. Yes, the revelation of her status had made his proposal of marriage more essential, but had she been an untitled lady of means, the same gesture would surely have been necessary.

No matter what she had done, his behaviour had not aligned with the way he was raised – and so there was only one thing for it.

He would have to marry her.

Whether she had lied or not. Whether he trusted her or not. Whether he could bear to look at her or not.

For the sake of her reputation and his honour, there was no other choice. He did not want any child of his looking back, as he was now doing with his own father, and finding his moral fibre lacking. He had made the mistake, and he needed to do what was right.

After all, he thought as he rode back to Dunloch, needing a fresh horse if he was

going to catch her coach before she reached home. There were plenty of marriages within the ton that were not built on love or trust or mutual respect or even attraction. And there were plenty of marriages where the couple in question did not reside together. Barely saw each other, in fact.

He could marry her and still live his life the same. She had a good name, other than this silly behaviour. She knew what it took to be a duchess – and she could do so from one of his many other properties. Perhaps, in a few years, when his anger had settled and there was an urgent need for an heir, they might see one another occasionally. But other than that, it could simply be a marriage in name.

And it would fix everything that had gone wrong.

"Tell them I have left the estate, and I will be gone for the rest of the day, possibly overnight," he directed the stable lad who saddled up a fresh mount for him. As he waited, he eyed the recalcitrant Delilah, happily eating hay in her stall as if she had not, mere days ago, nearly thrown an earl's daughter into the loch.

"I can't say I totally blame you," he said to the horse as he stroked her soft nose. She whinnied in return, and he found himself smiling. What ridiculous, indulgent behaviour, he thought to himself, talking to a horse. And then his new ride was thankfully ready to go, and he set off at full speed, knowing that it was imperative to catch her before she reached Amblewood – and she had a couple of hours' advantage on him. But the carriage would go slower than just him on a horse, and he was fairly confident he could catch her. If she reached home and told them she had been at the castle unchaperoned, and that he had refused to marry her, then he rather thought her father would call him out. And although he fully intended to marry her, it did not seem like an auspicious start to familial relationships if a duel was called.

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Penelope did not notice the sound of hooves approaching the carriage until they were right alongside. The carriage began to slow to a halt, and her heart raced. Were they being held up by highwaymen? That would be just her luck, on what already felt like the worst day of her life. She had nothing of any value on her – just the clothes on her back, which she had worn far more over the last five days than they were used to.

She didn't know whether it made more sense to look out and see what they were dealing with, or to stay hidden in the carriage, hoping that whoever had stopped them would simply ride on.

But as she was weighing up these options, the carriage door was pulled roughly open, and standing there, a little out of breath, his hair tousled by the wind, was the Duke.

Penelope's first reaction was relief that he was no highwayman ready to stick a pistol at her head in demand for jewels she did not have. And her second was confusion. He had sent her away with so much anger – why on earth would he be here now?

He climbed into the coach without saying a word and sat on the seat opposite, running a hand through his hair. "We must still marry," he said, without any greeting or preamble.

"Oh?" Penelope could not believe the words she was hearing. Had he forgiven her? Had he realised that he felt something deeper, like she did?

"No matter your sins, the fact remains that we still were together, unchaperoned, for days – and that is as much my fault as yours. Perhaps more, since I know the ways of the world better than you do."

She nodded mutely, deciding now was not the time to start disagreeing. He certainly hadn't forgiven her, then.

"And so marriage is the only answer – to save your reputation and my honour."

"I can see that," Penelope squeaked, feeling it was time she said something.

"But you must understand, I do not intend for this to be a close union. I clearly cannot trust you. And so once we wed, you will move to one of my properties and live your life as the duchess there."

Penelope could not stop her face from falling. She had hoped that, somehow, everything hadn't been ruined by her silly behaviour. But here he was, proving that, in spite of his anger, he was a thoroughly decent duke – but he couldn't trust her. He didn't want a proper marriage with her. Just one in name...

"I—" She opened and closed her mouth, but no other words would come out. What could she say to that? Part of her wanted to decline the offer; to tell him that she had said no to other proposals because she did not know the gentlemen in question, and she would also say no to a marriage where she never saw her husband.

And yet...

She was struggling now to imagine marriage to anyone else. And if he was right, she had no option: if she was ruined, no one would want to marry her. Her future would be bleak – but would it be more bleak than marriage to a man she cared for, who wanted nothing to do with her?

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In the stationary carriage, surrounded by a vast expanse of Scottish countryside,

James waited for her to answer.

He hadn't expected she would have any hesitation. He was acting to save his honour – but he was no fool. He knew that it was her reputation that was really on the line. If her father did call him out, he was confident he could beat a man twice his age in a duel. And it might not even come to that. If it was simply gossip about him not marrying her that he had to deal with, then he knew he could weather it. After all, he barely ever went to London. And he was a duke, with a grand fortune, a headful of hair and age on his side. He would be able to find a bride when he wished to. It wasn't arrogance; it was simply the way things were.

This marriage was not what he'd envisaged, and he imagined not what she had planned for, either. But it was the only way he could see of rectifying the situation without having to live with a woman he clearly couldn't trust.

When she said no more, he thought perhaps some clarification was needed. "In due course, we can discuss heirs, for I shall need a son to pass the title down to. So you needn't worry on that score."

She swallowed and nodded, and still she did not speak.

"We both need to be returning to our homes," he said, slightly irritated by the delay – and by the way he could not take his eyes from the delicate features of her face. Sitting alone in a carriage with her had an effect on him that he did not welcome. He did not like to lose control of his mind, and she seemed to make him do so with alarming regularity.

"Very well," she said eventually. "We will wed."

He didn't know if he'd been expecting more gratitude, or emotion, but he certainly had not anticipated the cool, calm way she accepted him.

He should have appreciated it. He did not like displays of emotion – didn't know how to handle them. And this needed to be settled now.

"Right. Excellent. I will return home, then, and organise for the banns to be read. If you return to Dunloch in, say, two months, we can marry then, and everything will be organised. And if your parents wish to attend, that would be acceptable."

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"Very well," Penelope said again, feeling like every choice she had ever had was being taken away from her. When she had lied about knowing her identity on that beach, she had not thought it would lead to marriage...and a marriage that would leave her as a duchess in a castle all alone.

He left her without a kiss or even a kind word, and she continued her miserable journey south alone. So, all was settled. She was to marry him. Her parents would undoubtedly be thrilled – both at her return and her extraordinary betrothal.

But she was struggling to be happy herself. She supposed she should be grateful; he was marrying her, after all. And perhaps the home he placed her in would be one she loved, and she could be mistress of it until the end of the days.

No, she would not have her husband by her side. But it sounded as though, one day, he would wish to have children with her. And then she would have them for company...

Maybe it wasn't such a disaster. Although if that was the case, why did it feel like her heart was breaking?

As the coach approached Amblewood, her misery turned to anxiety. What would her parents say, having not seen her for several days? She craned her neck to get a view

of the castle that she had missed so much. No matter how long she was away from Amblewood, she found herself yearning to see it again, to feel safe within its walls, to wander the grounds she knew so well and lose herself in them.

On this day, however, she did not get the usual sense of overwhelming relief at seeing her home. All it seemed to remind her of was Dunloch – the castle that the Duke, her betrothed, would surely live in for the rest of his days...and the castle that she would not be calling home.

Because he didn't trust her.

The carriage stopped in the courtyard, and a liveried footman hurried to open it, his mouth dropping open at the sight of Penelope within.

He quickly regained his composure, and bowed. "My lady."

"Are my parents home, Gates?" she asked, taking his hand and alighting from the carriage.

"Yes, my lady. In the parlour – they're very concerned about you."

She gave him a strained smile, picked up her skirts and walked determinedly to the front door, leaving Gates to arrange food for the coach driver and the horses who had brought her there.

Outside the parlour, she took a deep breath, and then pushed the door open.

Her mother and father instantly turned to see who had entered, and the colour drained from her mother's face.

"Penelope?" she whispered, as though not truly trusting her daughter's appearance

before her.

In spite of the misery which filled her heart, Penelope's smile was genuine. She often disagreed with her parents, but she loved them dearly, and seeing them after several days apart was a joy.

Her mother crossed the room in three paces and enveloped her in a hug, while her father stood and looked on.

"We have most of the staff out searching for you," Mama said, not letting go of her arm. "Where have you been? We have been so worried..."

"Was it highwaymen?" her father asked. "I've heard tales..."

Penelope shook her head. "Perhaps we could call for some tea? And I will tell you everything..."

"Of course," Mama said, reaching for the bell pull. "Are you hurt? Sick? Injured?"

"I am quite well," Penelope said, and it was true – other than the broken heart she was sporting.

"Well where the blazes have you been for five days, without sending word?" her father asked, his face reddening. "Really, Penelope. I know we've allowed you some freedom, but this is—"

"Gregory," her mother said in a warning tone. "Let us hear Penelope out, please."

Penelope took a seat and began from the beginning. "I took my boat out, and then the storm hit..."

Mama frowned. "That storm was terrible. You were at sea? I knew we should never have allowed you that little boat, so unsafe..."

"I was foolish to go out with the clouds drawing in," she admitted. "But I never expected... I lost control, and I believe I was knocked over by a wave, because the next thing I knew, I woke up on a beach with no idea where I was."

Her mother gasped, but did not interrupt.

"I was found...I later discovered...in Scotland. By the Duke of Dunloch."

Her mother and father looked at each other. "Do we know a Duke of Dunloch?" Mama asked Papa.

"Not personally...but I seem to remember an old duke of that name, went to Eton at a similar time to me, inherited fairly young..."

"That might have been his father," Penelope offered, for her Duke of Dunloch – the current Duke of Dunloch – was certainly not a man as old as her father.

"I...could not remember much when he found me, and so he made sure I was well and...found me a bed in a local inn." She did not wish for her parents to think ill of the Duke, even if nothing had occurred during the days she had spent with him, and so she altered the truth slightly.

"Well, that was kind of him," Mama said.

"Indeed. We spent a little time together, and...he has asked me to marry him."

This time, her mother's gasp was one of delight.

"A duke!"

"Is there a reason he had to ask you?" her father asked, a frown on his face.

Her reputation was the main reason, but she did not disclose this, simply shaking her head. "I'm sure he will apologise, Papa, for not asking you for my hand. It was all rather unexpected..."

"Indeed!" her mother said, a beam upon her face. "After four Seasons, you get an offer from a duke! What a development. And you have accepted him, yes?"

"I have." Penelope could not bear to tell them that it would be a marriage in name only, that he was only doing it to save her reputation and to ensure his own honour was not maligned.

She was betrothed to a duke. But he hated her. And she couldn't even blame him. She had been foolish and childish...but all she'd wanted was to find out what sort of man he was.

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There was much to be done before Lady Penelope returned for the wedding. Not that he was planning a grand celebration – he believed marrying her was the right thing to do, but there did not need to be some extravagant party for everyone to attend. The ceremony itself would be small, just himself, Lady Penelope, and her parents. He would write to his sisters once it was done and inform them of the events.

No, he needed to decide before then where she would reside, as well as determine, when emotions were not involved, when they ought to have an heir. When he had proposed marriage, he had initially thought it prudent to have a child as soon as possible – and surely that would have been quite likely had they lived together as husband and wife.

But now, that was not to be the case. And so these things must be planned, because he knew he could not live with a woman who had lied to him and made him question his own judgement. He felt far too angry, and he could not see that feeling subsiding anytime soon.

While he was checking the ledgers for his estates in Southampton and Somerset, as well as his London home, to ensure that everything was in order before deciding where to place Lady Penelope, he found himself rather distracted – and not by his anger, which he had managed to lock away in a box in his mind for now. It was Mrs Simmons's illegitimate son who occupied his thoughts, and he felt he had to speak to her about it, even if the conversation would surely be an uncomfortable one.

He called her to his study after supper, feeling more confident about having the conversation in his own space.

She looked a little nonplussed when she entered, so he presumed that no one had mentioned his knowledge of the past. He was pleased about that; it was good to know that Thomas was discreet and that such information was not being spread around Dunloch and beyond.

"Can I get you something, Your Grace?" Mrs Simmons asked.

"Please, close the door and take a seat," James said, gesturing to the chair before his desk.

She smoothed down the brown skirt of her day dress before sitting, her hands clasped in her lap.

"I know, when we last spoke, I said we should let the matter rest," he began, seeing no point in shying away from the reason he had called her. "But I have since learnt new information, and I need to know a little more."

"Oh. I see," Mrs Simmons said, her face turning pale.

"Before we continue, I want you to know that my previous statement still stands – this is all in the past, has been dealt with, and will have no impact on your employment here. But regardless... I need to know more."

She nodded but did not say anything, presumably waiting for a direct question from him. At least she had learnt, he thought, not to confirm anything until she was sure the person before her had accurate information.

"It has come to my attention that the child you bore thirty years ago" – he noticed her wince at the reference to her secret but did not allow it to stop him – "was, in fact, fathered by the previous Duke of Dunloch."

She gripped her hands tightly together in her lap but did not look away from him as she said simply, "Yes."

The word felt like lead filling his heart. He'd seen the evidence, but he had not truly believed it until she confirmed it in that moment.

He nodded and made sure he had control of his voice before continuing. "And this son...he was born before I was, correct?"

Again, she nodded. "He is two years older than you, Your Grace."

"And he resides in France?"

Her eyes looked a little glassy, but he was relieved that this time she shed no tears. "Just outside Paris, Your Grace. With my brother and his wife."

It was hard to picture: another son of his father, living in France, presumably leading a much more modest life than James himself. "Does he know his true parentage?"

Mrs Simmons seemed willing to answer all of his blunt questions, and once he started asking, he could not stop. He had such a thirst for information about this strange topic that he had not even known existed until recently.

"He does not," Mrs Simmons said. "All he knows of the Duke of Dunloch is that his aunt works in his castle. And that is all I ever intend him to know, Your Grace."

"But my father...he knew?"

Mrs Simmons nodded. "Yes. He arranged passage to France, my extended leave from service, and then, when I returned, we never spoke of it again."

Part of him was rather curious as to whether that had been the end of their association, but he would not ask such an indelicate question, nor expect Mrs Simmons to answer it.

"Did my mother know?" he asked, and Mrs Simmons blushed, looking at the floor. It wasn't a question he particularly relished asking a member of staff, but there was no one else alive he could ask. No one who would know – or who he would wish to share this information with to see if they had heard rumours at the time.

"I am not proud of my behaviour, Your Grace. I knew your father...was a married man. I cannot defend–"

"I'm not trying to place blame, Mrs Simmons. My father was a man in a position of great power. He made his decisions, and I hold him alone responsible for them. I'm just trying to understand this situation, to comprehend this child who was born before me, to such a different life..."

"I do not know whether your mother knew or not. If she did, she never said anything to me. But then, that didn't surprise me. She was a woman born to be a duchess, your mother – she handled everything with grace."

James nodded, but he was surprised to find that his thoughts were not of his mother, but of the woman who was now to be his duchess: Lady Penelope.

Had she been born to be a duchess? Her silly behaviour in tricking him and testing him might suggest not, but then she was young...and he had never known his mother when she was only two-and-twenty.

"May I ask, what do you plan to do with this information?"

"I do not know," he said honestly.

"I shouldn't like...my son...to find out about this from anyone other than me. If he ever must learn of it at all."

James nodded. "Understood." It would certainly be even more shocking for this man than it had been for James to discover his existence. He would find he had been lied to for his entire life – and that he wasn't truly who he thought he was.

"If you do feel that you need to meet him," Mrs Simmons said, continuing without further response from him, "I would appreciate it if you could inform me, so that I might make a plan with my brother..."

"I have no intention of turning your life upside down, Mrs Simmons," he said, reaching for a half-drunk glass of port on his desk. "I just...needed to know."

Mrs Simmons gave him a friendly smile, and he wondered if it had been hard on her to be separated from her son – a son who did not even know she was his mother – for all these years. It surely had, and yet she had never complained, never sullied the name of the Duke of Dunloch, even though she had the ability – and quite possibly the right – to.

"Thank you, Mrs Simmons," he said, feeling ready to end the conversation and retire, although he was not sure he would manage to sleep.

"Good night, Your Grace," she said, standing and straightening her skirt. "I did want to ask, if I may – did you discover the identity of our mystery guest? I heard she had left..."

James rather thought that she had probably heard a lot more than the fact that Lady Penelope had left – probably how she had been distraught, how James had sent her away. No one else in the household had dared to ask him about her, but he did not feel he could refuse to answer Mrs Simmons's question, not when she had answered

his without hesitation.

"Lady Penelope Strachan," he said, resisting the urge to grip the desk at the strength of his emotions at saying her name, at the anger he felt towards her for deceiving him, for making him feel...and then making him regret doing so.

And then it seemed like the appropriate time to inform the housekeeper, who would surely disseminate the information to the rest of the staff, that he was to be wed. It would not change their lives particularly, especially with Lady Penelope residing on another of his estates, but he supposed they ought to know. "She is to return in two months, when we will be married."

Mrs Simmons's eyes widened, and then a smile grew on her face. "Congratulations, Your Grace. I am very pleased, for both of you. She is a sweet girl, and I'm sure she will make an excellent duchess."

James did not tell Mrs Simmons that she would be residing elsewhere, for he had no wish to explain his decisions to anyone else.

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He heard the banns read for the first time in church that Sunday, and he presumed Penelope had done the same in her own church. He felt the eyes of all gathered settling upon him, at the news that he was to wed, and he heard the gossip as he left:

"I wonder what's provoked that sudden change of heart."

"Seemed like he'd be a bachelor forever!"

"That castle needs a woman's touch."

"Who is this Lady Penelope? Where is she now?"

As always, he did not engage. He listened to the sermon, and the banns, and was the first to leave, top hat in hand, at the end of the service.

He could have sped things up, of course – money could easily circumvent the rules. But he wasn't ready to jump into an immediate marriage, even if it would only be in name. And besides, to do so would surely court scandal, which was exactly what they were trying to avoid by marrying.

He wondered if he ought to write to his sisters and inform them of his betrothal, or whether he could just wait until the marriage had taken place to inform them of the news. It wouldn't particularly impact them, other than that he supposed Lady Penelope, as the duchess, could present Francesca at court, rather than needing to find a lady of the ton willing to sponsor them, as he had done with Cecily and Antonia.

It wasn't going to change his life, either, he told himself as he rode back up the hill to

Dunloch Castle. Yes, while she had stayed with him, she had disrupted his daily routine – but she wouldn't be staying with him. She would be far away in England, perhaps in his home in Southampton or even his London townhouse, his wife in name but without any impact on his life.

Heirs would certainly be a consideration, but that did not need to be for a few years. After all, he hadn't even planned to marry yet, so he was ahead of schedule. And then perhaps he would visit his children, or send for them to come to Scotland.

Nothing would change, other than that there would once again be a Duchess of Dunloch.

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Penelope sat in the front row of Ambleswood Church, listening as her name and the Duke's were read out in the banns.

Hearing his Christian name, James, sent a shiver down her spine. He had asked her to call him that, in the brief moment between proposing marriage and hating her. And yet she had never got a proper chance to use it. She'd not given him leave to drop the 'lady' from her name, even though she would happily have done so. There hadn't been time – and of course, for most of their time together, she had pretended not to know her own name.

She winced even thinking of the ruse.

On either side of her, her parents sat, beaming proudly. They were thrilled that their only daughter, whose marriage prospects had been dwindling, was to become a duchess.

But all Penelope could think of was how wrong it all felt. How she would be

marrying a man she cared for, perhaps even loved – if one could fall in love in just five days – yet he despised her.

She didn't want to live apart from him. If she was going to marry him, and she truly did want to marry him, she wanted to do it properly.

She needed to find a way to earn his forgiveness.

Although she knew it was sinful, she spent the entire sermon devising a plan to win him back. Later, when one of her mother's friends invited them to tea to celebrate the joyous news, she sat quietly and refined her ideas further. Ironically, it was her knack for coming up with plans that had landed her in this predicament.

"You're very quiet, dear," Lady Malrose remarked in her overly blue parlour. "Are you thinking of your betrothed?" she asked with a sickly-sweet smile. "Young love – what a thing to remember." She sighed wistfully.

Penelope forced a smile. She was indeed thinking of the Duke – or James, as she supposed she ought to start thinking of him. But not in the way Lady Malrose imagined. Theirs was not the tale of young love she so clearly envisioned.

By the time they arrived home, Penelope had a plan. She didn't know if it was a good one, but it was the best she could manage – and, at the very least, it shouldn't make things worse. After all, things between her and the Duke could hardly get any worse.

"Are you still planning to go to London for the Season?" she asked her mother as they sat embroidering in the parlour that evening.

Her mother looked rather taken aback. "Well, there's not really any need, with you having secured a betrothed, and with your wedding so soon..."

"Could we go, just for a week?" Penelope asked.

"I must say, I'm surprised to hear you ask. You've made no secret of your opinions of London in the past," her mother replied with a delicate frown.

"I have no love for the city," Penelope agreed. "But I should like to purchase new garments for my trousseau...and I don't think Madam Caine in Amblewood is quite up to the task."

She hated telling more lies, but they were for the greater good. She was perfectly satisfied with Madam Caine's work and hadn't even thought about her trousseau until her mother had mentioned it earlier. But now, it provided the perfect excuse to go to London. She was to be a duchess, after all – she could not have second-rate garments.

And, thankfully, her mother agreed.

"An excellent thought, my dear. If we leave at once, stay for two weeks at the most, and have the items sent back to us if they are not ready... Yes, I think it's doable. You should write to your betrothed, though, to let him know where you are – just in case he wishes to visit before the wedding."

Penelope had already told her parents that she, and they, would return to Dunloch for the wedding in two months' time, as the Duke decreed. But she knew they found it odd that he didn't wish to meet her family before the day itself, nor had he contacted them to discuss the terms of her dowry. Her mother was most disappointed by the small wedding with no great celebration, but all of it had been left to the Duke to arrange.

Had Penelope been entering into a love match, confident her feelings were returned, she wouldn't have minded what sort of ceremony they had. But knowing how he felt about her, and that the whole arrangement was, in essence, another lie, made her

bitter. She was losing the wedding day she'd imagined, the one her parents had dreamed of since she was a little girl.

And yet, once again, she knew she had no one to blame but herself. She had taken away her own choices with her reckless decision to deceive him, playing fast and loose with her reputation – a reputation she'd been warned to guard for as long as she could remember.

Still, she was determined to make it right. And to do that, she needed to be in London. For in London lived the Duke's sisters – and she could think of no one better to help her find a way back into his good graces.

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The Duke, meanwhile, had no plans for their wedding beyond inviting Penelope's parents. He couldn't stop the residents of Dunloch from gathering at the church, if they wished – and, given his title and the unexpected marriage, he wouldn't be surprised if they did. But there would be no celebration afterwards, no wedding breakfast, no dancing.

He was doing what was right. Her parents, of course, would want to be there as witnesses. But once they left, so would she – to whichever estate he chose for her.

He hadn't yet decided. For some reason, it was hard to picture her in any of them.

Her free spirit seemed ill-suited to the confines of his London townhouse, and the manor in Southampton, though beautiful, felt desolate compared to her bright, sunny nature.

When his thoughts turned to making her happy, he scolded himself. That was not the aim. She had put them in this situation, and she would reap the rewards of her

actions. She would be a Duchess, with a title and wealth beyond imagination. She could hold balls, attend events, and socialise to her heart's content.

She would have her freedom, and he would have his.

So why, he wondered, was he agonising so much over where to place her?

Having read once again the parchment entitled 'Timothy Simmons,' James leant back in his chair and sighed. He was distracted – there was no doubting it. Distracted by learning of the existence of this Timothy, distracted by questions of whether his own title meant as much to him with the knowledge that it could have so easily been someone else's, and distracted by thoughts of Lady Penelope.

He did not want to think of her. But somehow, she kept worming her way into his thoughts. What was she doing at Ambleswood? Was she getting herself into trouble? How would her parents take the news of her engagement? Was she regretting the decision to agree to his proposal of marriage – especially with the caveats he had imposed?

And then the ever-present, niggling question that he refused to think about, but which would not leave him alone: did he truly wish to live separately from her?

He was still angry at her for lying to him, and he thought her foolish, and yet still when he envisioned them wed, he pictured her at Dunloch Castle, her laughter tinkling through the halls, her auburn hair loose down her back as she roamed the corridors, exploring, trying to get him to join her on one of her excursions.

With an irritated sigh at the direction his thoughts had once again travelled, James turned his attention back to the parchment before him.

He knew Timothy's name and where he lived...but for now, he did not think there

was anything he wished to do with that information. So many lives would be affected, and for what? For him to meet with a man who shared his blood, yes, but who had been a stranger to him for his entire life.

Perhaps one day, he thought, locking the parchment away in his desk, he would want to know more, want to meet him. But for now, it seemed fairer to leave things be.

Because, as he told himself regularly, it didn't really change anything. He was the Duke of Dunloch, and he would be for the rest of his life.

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London was as busy, noisy, and crowded as Penelope remembered, and as usual, she shuddered at the thought of living there. Only the brevity of her stay made it tolerable – and her mission.

First, she needed to find the Duke's sisters. Secondly, she needed to persuade them to help her win back their brother.

She only hoped they knew him better than he seemed to know them, for he had dismissed them many times as silly girls. But they were her only hope in discovering a way to make her future husband forgive her.

She waited until her parents were out of earshot to make discreet enquiries with their London butler, Soames.

"I wish to find the aunt of the Duke of Dunloch," she told him, thinking that was the best place to start to find the sisters. She was sure he had said at least one of them was staying with her. "Could you find out where she lives?"

Soames was as efficient as ever, and after a day spent shopping for clothing for her trousseau, Penelope returned to the London townhouse to find him ready with the information she required.

Thankfully, the house was not far, and she could easily pay a call and only need to take her maid to chaperone her on the busy streets of London.

She only hoped that the Duke's sisters would have an idea of how she could win him back.

She woke early the next morning, excited and nervous about her mission. At home, she would have used such time to wander the grounds, enjoying the fresh morning air and the dew-dropped grass.

But in London, she could not wander so freely. She found it hard to wait for an acceptable hour for house calls, and when it came, her mother looked surprised to see her putting on her cloak.

"It's not like you to go visiting, Penelope," she commented. "Would you like me to accompany you?"

Penelope shook her head. She certainly did not want her mother with her, for she would be far too interested in what Penelope had to say to the Duke's sisters, and so much of it was information she did not want to share.

As far as her parents knew, there was nothing amiss between her and the Duke's betrothal, and she would like to keep it that way – for she hoped, very soon, that would truly be the case.

"No, thank you, Mother," she answered, pulling on her gloves. "I am calling on the Duke's aunt and his sister, since I am in town. I think it better I make their acquaintance alone, this first time..."

Her mother nodded. "Very well. I must say, Penelope, you are rising to the challenge of being the wife of a duke very admirably. I am very impressed with your dedication to making the right impression."

Penelope's smile was a strained one. Her mother certainly would not be proud of her if she knew what a poor impression she had in fact left on the Duke. Nor would she be pleased at Penelope's deception – both towards the Duke and towards her own mother. She only hoped that, unlike the Duke, her mother never learned that she had

been lied to.

Once this was all resolved, Penelope vowed she would endeavour to tell the truth in all situations and think more carefully before concocting any schemes.

"Thank you, Mother. I shan't be long, and I'm taking Mary with me."

They walked the short distance to Lady Fitzgerald's home. Penelope only hoped that she would be received by the lady and the Duke's sisters. Did they know of their brother's betrothal? She didn't even know their names and was sure this would be a rather embarrassing visit. But she didn't care. She was desperate. She would do anything she could to avoid entering into a marriage with the Duke while he still despised her.

The door was answered by an elderly butler, and Penelope held herself tall, hoping that pretended confidence would lead to her truly feeling so.

"Lady Penelope Strachan, here to see Lady Fitzgerald."

The butler bowed and motioned for them to come in. The maid Penelope had brought along, Mary, stood quietly to one side, seemingly in awe of the large house. The girl had only recently come to London and entered service, and Penelope often noticed her amazement at her surroundings. She wondered what the girl would make of a place like Ambleswood, which was not only much larger but had so much more space to enjoy.

"One moment, please, my lady," the butler said, leaving them in the hallway and disappearing down the corridor. When he returned, he gestured in the direction he had come from.

"Lady Fitzgerald is just this way, my lady. And perhaps your maid would care for

some refreshment downstairs?"

"That's very kind, thank you," Penelope said, trying to remember exactly what she had planned to say as the butler showed her to a small parlour at the end of the house.

There were two ladies within, one older and one younger, and Penelope dearly hoped that the younger was one of the Duke's sisters. For really, they were who she wished to see – and the ones in whom she was willing to confide the troubles she was having.

"Lady Penelope," Lady Fitzgerald said, smiling kindly at her. She had tightly pinned curls, all grey, and she was a rather small woman, dwarfed by the great chair in which she sat. "Forgive me, but I cannot recall our acquaintance..."

Penelope gave an apologetic smile. "No, I'm afraid it is you who must forgive me. We have no prior acquaintance – but I'm in town and wanted very dearly to meet my betrothed's family."

The old lady's eyebrows knitted together. "Indeed. And whom, may I ask, is your betrothed?"

"The Duke of Dunloch," she said, the words sounding strange on her lips even now.

"James is to wed?" an excitable voice in the corner said, and Penelope turned and smiled at the tall, slender girl who had abandoned her sewing and seemed deeply interested in what Penelope had to say.

Lady Fitzgerald tutted. "Please excuse my niece. She is still learning the polite ways of society, so many years stuck up in Scotland..."

"My apologies, Aunt, Lady Penelope. But this news is so shocking..."

"I did not know if he would have written," Penelope said, wondering yet again if she had made a terrible mistake. His family was clearly completely unaware of who she was, and now that she had told them, she worried that she was not supposed to. Perhaps, for some reason, the news was meant to be kept quiet. Not that it could be for long... They were to be wed before the year was out.

"It is rather a recent development," she said, feeling awkward standing while the others were sitting. But she had not yet been invited to sit...

"Indeed. We are both rather shocked, as we did not envisage the Duke marrying without much persuasion. Not to say that there is a reason why he should not marry, and of course we are both thrilled to hear the news."

"Yes, congratulations. It is wonderful news, of course."

"I'm glad you think so," she said, her confidence returning a little. "The first banns have already been read, but I did not wish to miss out on the opportunity of visiting you while I was in London."

"James isn't here, is he?" the younger woman asked, looking rather shocked.

"No, I came with my parents to purchase some items before the wedding. He—" she couldn't quite bring herself to refer to him as James, even though his sister did so freely "—is still in Scotland."

"Of course he is. That man loathes leaving Scotland, for any reason."

"Lady Penelope, allow me to present my niece, Lady Cecily. And Cecily, dear, perhaps think about what is appropriate to say to someone you have only just met."

"Yes, Aunt," Cecily said, her voice full of contrition – but when Penelope caught her

eye, there was a gleam in it.

"I am afraid her sister, Lady Antonia, is currently in her art lesson, and Lady Francesca is attending Miss Molineux's finishing school on the other side of the city, so she is not in residence here."

"Well, it is a pleasure to make both your acquaintances," Penelope said, hoping this solitary sister would have an idea of what she could do to fix this mess.

"Perhaps we could promenade while the weather is fine, Lady Penelope," Lady Cecily suggested, putting her embroidery to one side. "If you do not mind, Aunt. It would just be nice to become acquainted with the woman who will be my sister."

Penelope couldn't believe the opportunity that had been dropped into her lap. She had been racking her brains trying to think of a way to get Cecily alone, and here she was suggesting it all by herself.

"You go ahead, but make sure you come back in time for tea. I would like to speak to Lady Penelope, too."

And that was how she found herself walking through St James's Park with the pretty younger sister of the Duke of Dunloch, confessing to her that it had not been only a desire to meet her future family that had prompted her to call on Lady Fitzgerald that morning.

When she got to the end of her tale, feeling relief at being honest, Cecily stopped and frowned.

"Goodness. James is a stickler for the rules, and he hates being kept in the dark about anything," she said. "I'm not surprised that he was angry – but I am surprised that he broke the rules in the first place, and let you stay." She looked her up and down.

"There must be something special about you..."

She said it as though it was not something she herself could see, and Penelope blushed at being so appraised. She had wondered, to herself, whether there was a reason the Duke had allowed her to stay for five days, and not insisted she go elsewhere. Did he feel something towards her? Something which she had then destroyed with her silly plan?

"We are betrothed. The banns have already been read once. But I do not wish to enter into a marriage with a man who hates me. Please, Cecily – is there anything you can think of that I can do to regain his trust?"

They continued to walk, and Cecily said, "I will have to think on it. My brother is a good man, but he's stubborn too. Once his good opinion is lost... Well, it is hard to regain." She flashed Penelope a smile. "He has written my sisters and me off as silly, vain creatures, simply because we enjoy the entertainment London has to offer."

"I'm sure he doesn't–"

Cecily shook her head. "You do not need to deny it. I have come to accept it. It is who he is. I do not know what he has told you of his upbringing, but he was raised very strictly, with one goal in mind – to be the next Duke of Dunloch. He lives and breathes that title; anything which does not further his interests as duke is of no interest to him. He never expected to have three sisters to take care of."

"He does seem very singularly focused on his duties and estate," Penelope agreed, as they looped around the park and began to walk back.

"But I want my brother to be happy. And I believe you have good intentions, even if your plan was a little foolish."

Even though she was sure she was older than Cecily, Penelope bowed her head in contrition. It had been more than a little foolish, and she knew it.

"I am attending the Hampton Ball tomorrow night, with my sister Antonia," she said as they approached the gate. "Will you be there?"

"I can be," Penelope said quickly, knowing she had seen an invitation to the ball in the silver tray in the hallway of their London home.

"I will think of any way I can help you," Cecily promised. "As long as you wish to make my brother happy."

Penelope nodded earnestly. "I really do. He will wed me either way, because he is an honourable man – but I want to fix what is broken between us, before we say vows that tie us together for the rest of our lives. I believe we can be happy, as man and wife, if he can only forgive me."

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

"Well, if you wish to attend the ball, then of course we can," her mother said, surprise colouring her tone. "I hadn't thought you would wish to, now that you have no need to find a husband..."

Penelope had not realised her dislike of society had been quite so apparent – but clearly she had not hidden it well from her mother, if she was so surprised by her wish to go to the Hampton Ball.

"I think it is important I am seen in society before I am duchess, as well as after," she said, hoping the hastily thought-up excuse made some sense to her mother, for it didn't make any to her. She did not want to go to the ball, and she had no desire to dance or be the topic of conversation.

But she would put up with it all if it meant finding a way to persuade the Duke he could trust her.

She wore a gown of ice blue, and had her maid Mary braid her hair and then pin it up. She was pleased with her reflection in the mirror. It wasn't that she wished to impress anyone in particular – for the man she wanted to impress was far away in Scotland – but she was determined that, from now on, she would not bring anything but positivity to the Duke's title and reputation.

The ballroom was already busy, and Penelope immediately began to look for Cecily. The Duke's sister had certainly not seemed averse to helping her, so she could only hope that she had come up with a plan to do so.

"Goodness me, it is busy tonight," her mother commented, pulling out her fan and

wafting it in her face. "Oh, look, I do believe that is Lord and Lady Gerald. They won't have heard the excellent news that Penelope is to be a Duchess. I think perhaps I will just go and share it with them."

"I just need to..." Penelope began, but coming up with an excuse seemed unnecessary; her mother was already moving across the dance floor to see the lady in question, and her father was close behind.

Penelope sighed. She wasn't altogether sure that it was the best idea to go around London bragging about the title she would soon have. After all, it wasn't as though it was any great achievement. In fact, she had come by it rather dishonourably, even if that had not been her intention. And she was not sure whether the Duke would want everyone learning of their marriage in such a way.

But for now, it served her purpose well to have her mother and father out of the way, and so she watched them go and then began to search for Cecily in earnest.

She found her by the refreshment table, wearing a pretty pink gown and accompanied by her aunt.

"Lady Penelope," Lady Fitzgerald said, balancing her weight on a cane held in her left hand. "What a pleasure to see you again."

Cecily had advised her that it was not prudent to tell her aunt the details of her match with the Duke, in case she disapproved and tried to meddle, and so when she had returned to Lady Fitzgerald's home for tea after walking in the park with Cecily, they had said nothing of their plan to meet at the ball.

"And you, Lady Fitzgerald," Penelope said with a polite curtsy.

"I had thought you would be on your way to Scotland by now," the old lady said,

narrowing her eyes somewhat suspiciously.

Penelope supposed it was somewhat odd that she was so far from Dunloch Castle when she was to be wed so soon, but she had good reason to be in London – not that she could share that with Lady Fitzgerald.

"I shall be leaving soon," she reassured Lady Fitzgerald. "I am just waiting for some clothing I have ordered from the modiste before I leave. My parents are here with me tonight – the Earl and Countess Strachan. They would be honoured to make your acquaintance."

Cecily's aunt smiled at that. "Well, that is a good plan. I am far too old to be making the journey to Scotland, so I doubt I shall see the wedding – or indeed Dunloch Castle again. I should be pleased to meet your parents now, here in London."

Penelope did not point out that the wedding was to be a small affair, with no guests she knew of being invited, save her parents. She did not even think that the Duke planned to have his sisters in attendance, since he had not even told them of his betrothal, let alone arranged for them to return to Scotland – but explaining any of that would invite questions. For why would a duke marrying an earl's daughter want to keep the ceremony so small? It surely hinted at problems, or at the very least the whiff of scandal.

Penelope had no choice but to accompany Lady Fitzgerald to where her parents were and introduce them before she was finally able to make her escape and speak with Cecily. Uninterrupted, they stepped out together onto the balcony, in the guise of needing some air, and Cecily immediately turned to her, her eyes sparkling.

"I have a plan," she announced, and although those words had got Penelope into enough trouble already, her heart began to quicken. This was what she needed – a plan to win back the Duke's trust.

"My sister is here with us," Cecily continued. "I have just lost sight of her for the moment. Antonia – she is eighteen and has not been out in society long. And I am rather afraid that she is about to make a terrible match."

"Oh?" Penelope asked, rather surprised by this information. She was not sure how it could help her in her quest to win back the trust of the Duke.

"My brother wishes for us to wed," Cecily continued, "but I am quite sure he would not be keen on this match."

"Why not?" Penelope asked, beginning to see where she might come in useful.

"He is a notorious rake, and a gambler, and at least ten years her senior. But she believes herself to be in love with him, and nothing I have said so far has made any difference."

"You wish me to speak with her?" Penelope asked. "I will happily do so, but I can't see that she will listen to me, a woman she has not met before, if she ignores the advice of her sister."

Cecily shook her head. "No, I believe you are right there. I should like you to speak to him ."

Penelope's eyes widened. "I think I have misrepresented myself if you believe I am capable of talking a rake out of paying court to your sister, or indeed of making him listen to me at all."

She was keen to help Cecily and to win back the Duke's good favour. But this did not seem like a task she was well-suited for. She might have been silly, and foolish, and reckless when she had been at Dunloch – but that had all been rather out of character. She couldn't speak to a notorious rake and warn him off an eligible young lady.

"You know how much my brother values honour and our good reputation. I cannot tell him of this, for by the time he gets here, it may be too late to stop Antonia from doing something silly. She is young and flighty and believes only in romance and happy endings. But if you could make the man who has set his sights on her see that she is not alone and unprotected, that there will be consequences if he chooses to continue down this path, then I know my brother would be grateful. And so would I."

Penelope rather thought that Antonia would be less grateful, but she did not say so. She had to trust that Cecily knew what was best. And if this could save the Dunloch reputation, and prove to the Duke that she wanted only what was best for him... Well, then she supposed it was worth trying.

She nodded. "Very well. I will try – although I am not promising that I can be successful."

Cecily beamed.

"Excellent. I shall point them out to you."

"They are here tonight?" Penelope asked with a gulp. She had not expected to have to deal with the man so soon.

"Yes. Antonia does not attend many balls – my aunt does not want society to grow weary of her, as she believes it has done of me."

Penelope was beginning to feel rather sorry for the pretty sister of the Duke of Dunloch. For while her brother had been raised with all the expectations upon him, it seemed she had shouldered the brunt of the disappointment. Penelope reckoned she was two years or so younger than herself and so had been out in society long enough to attract a husband, if that was what she so wished – and it did seem that that was her aim. She wondered why she was yet unwed and spending the season with her elderly

aunt rather than as a wife in her own home, hosting her own balls.

That was not a question for now. It would be presumptuous for her to ask – but Penelope promised herself that night that when she was Duchess of Dunloch, she would ensure Cecily found a worthy husband.

They turned to face the ballroom, and Cecily scanned the crowd. "There, that's Antonia, in the green," Cecily said, pointing out a petite young woman with a mass of dark blond curls pinned up around her crown. She was surrounded by many gentlemen, all clamouring for a dance, and it seemed she would not have any trouble finding a husband.

Although, if Penelope could not help her, she might end up with the wrong one.

"And the gentleman in question?"

Cecily tutted. "I am not sure I would call him a gentleman, with the reputation he has..." She glanced around the room. "Aha, there he is. Just entering the ballroom and removing his top hat."

"In the velvet waistcoat?"

"That's the one."

"And his name?" Penelope asked, steeling herself for this encounter which felt like it should be the domain of the dowagers in the room, not an unwed lady from Northumberland like herself.

"Mr Benjamin Pryce."

Mr Benjamin Pryce seemed to be watching the festivities from a distance, giving

Penelope an easy opportunity to approach him without being overheard by anyone. She had never before approached a gentleman in a ballroom whom she had not already been introduced to, but this was not a normal situation. She needed to persuade this man that Antonia was not alone and unprotected, an easy target for whatever scheme he had in mind.

"Mr Pryce?" she said when she was before him, for it would not do to accuse the wrong man.

He frowned slightly, clearly well aware that they had not been introduced, but nodded all the same. "I am, yes. And you are...?"

"Lady Penelope Strachan," she said, forcing her voice to sound confident even though she did not feel so herself. "And soon to be the Duchess of Dunloch."

His eyes widened then, and she knew that using the title had been the right decision. Unlike her parents, she was not particularly keen on telling everyone they had ever met that she was soon to be a duchess. But at a time like this, the title – and the connection to the woman he was pursuing – would surely be useful.

He bowed and recovered himself to say, "A pleasure to make your acquaintance, Lady Penelope."

Penelope did not say the same, for nothing about this conversation was a pleasure.

"I believe you are acquainted with my sister-in-law."

Mr Pryce narrowed his eyes. "I have been acquainted with all three of your sisters-in-law, Lady Penelope. Which lady is it of whom you speak?"

She was sure he was being deliberately obtuse, perhaps hoping that she would not

wish to press him in a public setting and appear impolite.

But she was a desperate woman, and politeness did not currently concern her.

"Lady Antonia Cresham," she said icily.

"Ah." There was no denial.

"My betrothed does not believe it to be a good and equal match," she said. She knew she was presuming a little to use James's name in a matter of which he had no knowledge, but she trusted Cecily, and she had to trust that she was right about her brother's wishes.

For if she was wrong, not only would Penelope be meddling in Antonia's affairs, but she would also be seen as meddling in James's – something of which he already thought poorly. In fact, the longer she stood there challenging this man with very little evidence, the more she questioned whether this idea had been a good one or just another hare-brained scheme that would only get her into trouble.

"I do not know what Antonia has told you..." Mr Pryce began. "But there is nothing inappropriate about our acquaintance, I can assure you."

"Do you intend to ask for her hand in marriage?" Penelope asked boldly.

He hesitated. "It would not...at this time...be prudent..." He stumbled through his words, but she understood the gist. If he had planned to marry her, he was not going to ask her brother for her hand. Perhaps he had some elopement in mind; perhaps ruination so she no longer had a choice.

"I see. May I suggest, Mr Pryce, for your own sake as well as Antonia's, that if you do not have honourable intentions towards the lady, you stop pursuing her."

"If you are accusing me of dishonourable conduct, my lady, then I must—" he began, his face turning red.

"I am accusing you of nothing," Penelope said, amazed at her own ability to remain calm and cut through his nonsense. "I am merely suggesting that if you have no intention of asking the Duke for his sister's hand – and I cannot tell you what the answer to that question may be – that you do not entwine your names together any longer. The Duke is not a man who forgives easily. If crossed, he will not hesitate to use his power and influence to exact revenge, especially if the honour of one of his sisters is involved."

In truth, she did not know whether that was entirely true. She knew he did not forgive easily – she had fallen foul of that herself. And although he seemed to find his sisters a little frustrating, she thought he would act to protect them, especially if the good family name was in danger.

And she did not think he would want his sister to be married to a man such as this; a man who clearly did not plan on doing things the proper way but who seemed to hope to lure the eighteen-year-old into his trap without any comeuppance from her family.

Well, she would be her family now. James was not here, but she was.

"Do we understand each other, Mr Pryce?" Penelope asked.

"Yes, Your Grace," he said, clearly forgetting in his panic that she was not yet the duchess. "We understand each other. And I apologise for any... misunderstanding there may have been regarding my intentions towards Antonia. I am not looking for marriage, and if I danced with the girl, it was only to be polite."

Penelope's heart felt as though it might break for the girl she had not yet met, who had clearly believed herself in love with this cad – a man who had proven, at the first

sign of questioning, that he was not devoted to her. His behaviour only confirmed what Cecily had said, and Penelope was relieved that she had trusted her doubts about the man.

"Well, I bid you good evening, Mr Pryce. I don't expect we shall see each other again."

She managed to keep a straight face even though she was cheering inside. She couldn't believe she had just intimidated a man she did not know and had been successful.

She returned to her parents, who were still conversing with Lady Fitzgerald, and signalled to Cecily with a nod that all was well.

And yet, in her heart, she was not sure it was.

Oh, she was fairly sure she had saved Antonia from, at best, heartbreak and embarrassment, and, at worst, scandal that would have ruined her forever. But she wasn't convinced she would win the Duke back with her good deed. Because she had certainly embellished the truth to persuade Mr Pryce that Antonia was not the woman for him. And would James not see it as further proof of her meddling?

Her high hopes of presenting him with evidence that she could be trusted fizzled before her. Perhaps there was no quick fix to the trust she had broken.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

The banns had been read for the third and final time when he received a letter from his sister, Cecily.

He and Lady Penelope could now legally be wed, and the date was set for just over a month hence.

She had sent it with an urgent messenger, and he ripped the envelope open, feeling rather anxious about the news it must contain. Had something happened to one of his sisters, or his aunt? Although he had not seen her himself in a few years, he knew from his sisters' reports that she was growing more elderly.

But he was rather surprised to find that the letter did not contain news of some injury or death – but news of his betrothed.

And he hadn't even thought they would have heard that he was to wed.

Dearest brother, the letter read. I will not pretend to understand why you have not informed us of your impending nuptials, or why you have not called us home to attend your wedding. But what I must tell you is that I have met Lady Penelope, and she has apprised me of everything that has happened between you.

Whilst I was indeed surprised by her tale, I am convinced that she is a good, kind lady who made a mistake and wishes to rectify it.

The Duke clicked his teeth in disgust. He had agreed to marry Penelope – so why was she going to his sister and telling her all about his foolish decision to allow her to stay at Dunloch Castle? And now it seemed his sister was trying to intervene on her

behalf, to improve the relationship between them before they were wed.

Well, it would not work.

But the letter did not end there, and although James was irritated, he could not help but read to the end.

To this end, I must tell you of a good deed that Lady Penelope has performed. She did so, I believe, with the intention of proving to you that she can be trusted and that she wants the best for our family. However, upon her success, she seemed to think you would view her involvement as meddling, and so she will not write to tell you of it herself.

But you must be made aware of the fact that, rather than meddling, your betrothed has done you, and indeed all of us, a great service.

Rather intrigued, James sat at his desk to finish the letter, which he thought might have been the longest Cecily had written him in many years.

I shall not commit all to paper in case it falls into the wrong hands. But suffice it to say, Antonia was close to making a grave decision which would have impacted the rest of our lives. Only your bride-to-be's timely and brave intervention saved her from herself.

I will explain more in person. But I would encourage you, if you think you could forgive Lady Penelope her errors, to come to London and to make things right.

You are an excellent Duke of Dunloch, and she will be a wonderful Duchess. But sometimes, brother, I do think you should remember that there is more to life than the duty you were born with.

All my love, your devoted sister, Cecily.

He reread the letter twice, surprised every time by the wisdom and maturity of the words written in his sister's hand.

When had she stopped being such a silly and vapid girl?

Could it be true that Penelope had acted to save his sister's reputation in some way? Although he was glad his sister had not written down any details, he did wish he knew what the situation was – and why they had not come to him over it. And what on earth was Lady Penelope doing in London, anyway? They were due to be wed the following month. Was she never where she was supposed to be?

He really wanted to dismiss the letter, to tell himself it was his sister being silly, plagued by female emotions that distorted her judgement.

But it stayed with him as he went about his business on the estate that day, and long into the night, when he found he could not sleep.

Had he been too quick to dismiss Lady Penelope as untrustworthy?

She had done something foolish, and she had apologised. Could she really have gone all the way to London in order to make things right? And Cecily spoke of bravery – just what exactly had she done to save Antonia's reputation? He hoped she had not put herself in any danger, for the thought of her being hurt made him feel far more uncomfortable than he would have imagined.

Could his younger sister have a point? Should he try to forgive Lady Penelope and live with her in a real marriage?

It had, after all, been his plan before he had learnt of her deception. When he simply

thought that she had rediscovered that she was the daughter of an earl, he had proposed marriage, with no thought of sending her to live away somewhere else.

And he allowed himself now to imagine a world in which that was the case. Where they said their vows surrounded by close family and returned home to Dunloch Castle. To live together in a similar way to how they had in those five days – except married. With no restrictions upon them. She distracted him from his work, it was true... But surely that effect would fade in time. And he had to admit to himself as he tossed and turned in bed that night, that he'd had far more fun in those five days than he had in a long time before.

Maybe... Just maybe he needed to move past her deception. Accept her apology... And see what they could have together.

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Penelope did not wish to attend the Dowager Duchess's ball, but her parents had accepted the invitation, based on her earlier enthusiasm, and so she had no choice.

In truth, she was feeling rather miserable. Her success in warning off Mr Benjamin Pryce had been short-lived when she had realised that telling the Duke would surely just cause him to accuse her of meddling and plotting and scheming again. She had been trying to get back in his good graces, and yet now she feared she never would. Oh, she was popular with his sister Cecily – although perhaps not so much with Antonia. And she would be the Duchess of Dunloch soon enough. But perhaps she had to accept that her punishment for her childish behaviour was to live a life separate from the Duke, at least for the beginning of their marriage. Maybe the only thing to heal this wound was time... And she ought to avoid any more silly schemes.

"This ball has come at just the right time," said her mother with a smile as she appraised Penelope's ensemble. "A perfect bon voyage to society before we make the

journey to Scotland for your nuptials."

Penelope hoped her smile looked like that of a nervous and excited bride, and not of a woman who knew that her fate was sealed.

"You will be the talk of the Season, you know. Especially with a brief appearance before making your debut next year as the Duchess of Dunloch." She clapped her hands together in glee. "Oh, what a marvellous year it has been. Lady Fitzgerald was very complimentary of you, you know. And who knows, by this time next year, perhaps there will be a future duke in the cradle of Dunloch Castle!"

It was so hard to keep a smile on her face when she felt like her heart was breaking. In a year's time, she would surely be sequestered somewhere in the country, having not seen her husband in goodness knew how long. Those days at Dunloch, before she had admitted everything, stuck in her mind like a beautiful dream. A dream that she would have to hold on to after she was married, in the hopes that they could one day fix what she had broken.

Source Creation Date: August 11, 2025, 11:10 am

James's arrival at his Aunt Fitzgerald's home was a surprise to his aunt but not to Cecily.

She simply beamed, embraced him, and informed him that there was the perfect event for him to attend that evening.

"It's not like you to come to London, James," his aunt said, peering at him through her half-moon spectacles. "Although I also hear you are to marry, and that was rather unexpected too."

"Well, I would hate to be predictable," he said with a wry smile, for he had spent many years very much enjoying everything in his life being predictable.

"You are not staying long enough to open up your townhouse, then?" his aunt asked.

"No. This is only to be a short visit, and so, if I might trespass on your hospitality, I will not open up Dunloch Place."

His aunt waved a hand through the air. "Of course. I have plenty of rooms here, and they sit empty most of the year." His aunt was a wealthy widow, having chosen never to remarry after the death of her husband some fifteen years earlier. She seemed to rather enjoy her life as a matron of society, with enough money to do as she pleased and no one to answer to.

"You have come to speak to Lady Penelope, yes?" Cecily asked him softly while their aunt ordered tea to be brought to the parlour.

James nodded curtly. He was not used to answering to his sisters for anything, but he supposed that, since Cecily was the one who had told him to come, it was fair enough for her to ask his intentions.

"Yes. Although I would appreciate it, before I see her, if you could apprise me of what happened with Antonia so that I have all the facts."

He was still rather irritated that his sister had not come to him, as the head of the family, to deal with the situation. And he thought Cecily was aware of this, for she nodded meekly in response to his request.

"When we go to change for the ball," she said quietly, with a glance at their aunt to make sure they weren't being overheard, "I will tell you everything then."

"Thank you," James said, finding that the words felt a little unusual coming from his lips. "And Lady Penelope will definitely be at the ball tonight?"

"She assured me she would be," Cecily said, before taking a seat again opposite their aunt and taking a cup of tea from the table. "It is to be her last ball before she leaves to return to you in Scotland – so your timing is impeccable."

Part of James wondered if he should go now to her family home and seek her out. He found himself keen to speak with her, to tell her that he hoped they could have a proper marriage, that he wanted to forgive her, to trust her again. And that he was grateful for everything she had done for his family.

But that conversation would make far more sense once he knew exactly what had occurred. And seeing her at a ball would avoid the risk of high emotions if he saw her in private. Besides, he rather wanted to dance with her.

It was an odd whim, and not one he had felt before. He did not like London, or balls,

or dancing. But it was the way of the world that people met in places such as these. And although he knew Penelope far better than any girl he had danced with, he rather wanted to do things properly. To see her dressed in her finest gown, to watch her twirl beneath the candlelight of the glittering chandeliers.

The banns had been read. As soon as they returned home, they could be wed – and their life could begin.

It was a life full of uncertainty and excitement and unpredictability. And, rather surprisingly, James found himself looking forward to it.

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She had no real wish to dance, and so she hovered at the edge of the room, avoiding any groups of young men who seemed keen to partake in the evening's festivities. Her mother and father were in their element, both clearly enjoying socialising without the pressure of finding their daughter a husband – and indeed, with a proposal they could excitedly share with the world.

It seemed to have escaped their notice that their daughter was not swept up in the enjoyment as they were.

She kept watch for Cecily, who she believed was attending with her aunt, although not Antonia, whom Cecily thought needed a break from society for a little while.

The two had become friendly, and they would soon be sisters-in-law, even if Penelope's marriage to the Duke was not to be all she had wished for it to be. It would be nice to have sisters. Having grown up as the only child of the Earl and Countess Strachan, she had been rather lonely. She had become very good at entertaining herself, finding places on the estate to play pretend, swim, climb, or fish. But she had often wondered what it would be like to have a brother or sister to do those activities

with.

Well, very soon, she would have three sisters-in-law – and rather a lot of time at her disposal, from what the Duke had led her to believe, to spend time with them and find ways to make the days more enjoyable.

The main door to the great hall opened, and a strange awareness rippled through Penelope's body before she spotted him. Indeed, it was enough to make her turn to see whether a window was open and a draught had been let in. And then she saw him.

He was somehow even more handsome in this grand setting, with everyone wearing their best clothes. Not that he wore anything different than she had seen him in most days, except for the addition of a top hat, which he removed as soon as he entered. He was accompanied by his aunt and eldest sister, but Penelope barely noticed them.

She only had eyes for him.

It took him a moment to find her in the crowd, but when he did, he strode towards her, having handed his top hat to the footman at the door.

She felt frozen in place, and yet unbelievably warm. Why was he here?

He stopped right in front of her and gave a short bow. "May I have the next dance, Lady Penelope?"

He offered his hand, and she took it without hesitation. "Yes, of course," she replied, rather embarrassed at the way she stuttered. It was just such a surprise to see him there...

It felt like all eyes were upon them as they stepped onto the dance floor and the band began to play. "I thought you didn't like London," she managed to say when she

regained control of her mouth.

"I don't." It was a typically short response, but Penelope needed more. She needed to know why he had come – and if it signified that anything had changed. She could not bear to have her heart broken yet again.

"I did not expect to see you here," she said eventually, when he had nothing else to say.

"And I did not expect you to run to London when our marriage is imminent." He gave her a look that made her forget why she had come to London in the first place. "Or to save my sister from ruin."

Penelope opened her mouth and then closed it again before making another attempt at speaking. "How did you–"

"Cecily," he answered before she finished her question. "I am wondering now if she is not quite as silly as I always thought," he said with a half-shrug.

They continued to move in time with the music, neither of them seeming to need to expend much energy on following the steps.

"I had hoped... I know how important the family name is to you," she managed to say, struggling to find the right words. "When your sister told me of Antonia's unwise attachment, I only wanted to help..."

"You did help. And I appreciate it. You are right – I set a lot of store by my family name. Our family name."

Penelope swallowed. Although she had been saying it to her parents, and they had been saying it to the rest of the world, it was only at that moment that it began to truly

sink in that she would soon become the Duchess of Dunloch. A whole new name and identity for her to live up to.

"I am sorry," she blurted out, and then almost stepped on his foot as the words in her mind began to distract her from the dance. "I never intended to trick you. Well, I did... But not for any nefarious purpose, I swear."

He nodded slowly. "I think...that I can believe that."

Hope began to flicker in her heart. "But I can see now how foolish I was. How I ruined everything... And if you can only be married to me in name, then I will accept it and do everything in my power to get you to trust me again," she said in a rush, as the music came to an end. "But I would really like to start our married life properly, living in the same home – living at Dunloch."

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They stood on the edge of the dance floor, as couples milled around switching partners for the next set, and James knew this was the moment. He'd decided, back at Dunloch, that he wanted to forgive her. To try to start their married life properly – and put her lies behind them.

He hated deception more than anything, and yet now he found he could not imagine his life without her in it. However much he wished she had not lied to him, perhaps her ruse had served its purpose – allowed them to get to know one another properly.

And he knew she was the woman he wanted to marry.

"If you can promise not to lie to me again, no matter the reason," he said, his eyes locked on hers. "Then I would like to see if we can be happy together..." Her eyes lit up, and he pushed on with his thought, even though it felt rather unnatural to share so much of what he was feeling. "Because I realised that, due to your plan, we had already been living together happily."

He wanted to kiss her there and then, not caring about the onlookers, but instead he simply held out his hand for hers. "Shall we dance, Lady Penelope?"

"Two dances in a row...people will talk," she said with a grin.

"Let them talk. We will be married very soon – I do not care what they say."

It was then that a tall, dandified gentleman approached and gave an over-exaggerated bow to Penelope.

"Lady Penelope," he drawled. "I was hoping to have the honour of the next dance."

"No," James answered immediately, surprising himself at the force in his voice. "Her next dance is taken."

Not seeming to be perturbed, the gentleman continued to address Penelope. "Another you have free then, later in the evening."

"She has no dances free," James responded, leading Penelope onto the dance floor without looking back.

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Penelope could not help but giggle, as Lord Lindon, a gentleman she had danced with occasionally when in London, stood and gawped as they walked away.

"Well, that will certainly have people talking," she said in an undertone to the Duke – James – as they began to dance.

"Did you want to dance with that fool?" he asked.

She shook her head. She was more than happy to save every dance for him – whether or not society frowned upon such possessive behaviour.

"My parents are watching," Penelope said, catching sight of them out of the corner of her eye. "You will have to be properly introduced to them, after this next dance..."

He nodded curtly. "Indeed. And perhaps I should have a word with them about not letting their daughter go wandering quite so freely..."

Penelope felt her cheeks flushing, but he smiled then, and her heart soared. He was

poking fun. He wanted to be her husband, wanted her to live with him at Dunloch, to put the mistakes of the past behind them and begin their future together.

And she could not wait.

"I am sure, once I am a duchess, I will be far less flighty," she promised with a grin.

"Indeed you will be. I'll see to that."

"When can we be wed?" she asked, impatient now to start the life she knew belonged to her.

"The banns have been read. We can leave for Scotland tomorrow, and be married as soon as we return," he said. It was the answer she had expected, and yet there was some disappointment in her heart. The journey to Scotland was not quick, and would have to be made separately, for proprieties' sake.

"Or," the Duke continued, making her look up into his dark eyes. "We could apply for a special license. Marry here in London, with your parents, and my sisters and aunt in attendance. And then go home...together. If that is what you wish."

She reached for his hands, even though the dance did not call for such a move, and squeezed them tightly. "It is very much what I wish."

When one was marrying a duke, things could be arranged with great haste – and that was how Lady Penelope found herself in a new gown, at a small chapel near St James's Park. Her father stood beside her, ready to walk her down the aisle, where the Duke of Dunloch was waiting for her. The man she knew better than any other – and yet a man she had not even kissed.

She had spent her adult life knowing that she would one day marry, and had not

wanted to marry a man she did not know. And then she had thought she would marry a man she cared deeply for, and have to be separated from him.

But somehow, she was about to marry a man she had lost her heart to – and then they would live their life in the beautiful Dunloch Castle, surrounded by nature and beauty and away from society.

And she couldn't be happier.

Oh, she knew she would miss her beloved Amblewood, but they could visit, and being mistress of her own castle, and a castle she loved as dearly as Dunloch, was another dream come true.

She had never been more sure of anything in her life than when she entered the quiet little chapel, with only a handful of guests in the pews, and walked towards the Duke of Dunloch.

He was the man she was supposed to marry, she was sure of it, and it had just taken a twist of fate to find him. Well, fate, a poorly-timed excursion in a boat, and a few half-truths...

But there would be no more lies between them, she had promised that. And as she promised to love, honour and obey him, in front of his sisters and aunt and her own parents, her heart fell full of joy.

And that was something she had not thought she would experience in the grey streets of London.

"I now pronounce you husband and wife," the vicar said, and Penelope's heart began to race.

She was his.

They were wed.

Everything had worked out.

He leant forwards and pressed a brief, chaste kiss to her lips, and she felt like she might explode into flames right there at the front of the chapel.

To applause from their small number of guests, Penelope and James processed back down the aisle, her arm threaded through his, and to the carriage that was waiting to take them to her mother and father's townhouse, where they would celebrate their marriage before returning home.

Home.

"We do not have to stay at this celebration too long, do we?" James asked as the carriage rattled on his way.

Penelope laughed. She found his blunt nature surprisingly endearing. "You do not wish to celebrate?" she asked.

"You know I do. But I long to be back in Dunloch, away from all these people."

"All of them?" she asked lightly.

"Well, all apart from my duchess," he said, tipping her head back and kissing her thoroughly, until she forgot who she was altogether, all the way to Mayfair.

One Year Later

Penelope had loved Dunloch in the autumn, spring and summer, but as winter rolled around, she thought it might be her favourite season there of all. The loch froze solid, and James found wooden skates in the attic for them to attach to their shoes, so they could skate across the frozen lake while snow fell around them.

The woods seemed utterly transformed by the white carpet which fell, capping the trees in snow and making the sunlight that still shone down seem white and magical. When she could not drag James away from his work, she wandered there alone, although she did so on foot – she did not think riding a horse through ice and snow would be sensible, after her previous experience.

As long as she kept herself safe, James did not object to her wanderings, and she often walked into the village with a basket of pies or other baked goods from the kitchens, to share with the villagers. While it had taken a while to get used to being called ‘Your Grace’, Penelope loved every moment of her life as the Duchess of Dunloch.

With all three of James's sisters at home for the festive season, the house was full of joy and laughter, and even James seemed to find time for a little fun in his busy schedule.

They planned to host a Twelfth Night Ball, which her parents, as well as ladies and gentlemen local to both Amblewood and Dunloch, would attend. But Christmas Eve and Christmas Day were just for them alone. On Christmas Eve, Penelope, James, and his three sisters all spent a happy hour out in the woods collecting greenery to

decorate the house. Then, when James insisted he must leave to get at least some work done, the ladies decorated the castle with holly, ivy, and kissing boughs of mistletoe, full of the joy of the season.

It wasn't until they went to bed that evening that she realised something was amiss. When her maid had laced her into a new green dress for the occasion that morning, she had struggled to get it done up, but Penelope had assumed that was due to an overindulgence in Cook's marvellous shortbread since she had moved to Dunloch.

That evening, as her maid was brushing out her hair ready for bed, she returned to the topic. "Forgive me, Your Grace, but I noticed you haven't been eating in the mornings..."

Penelope frowned. "I suppose I haven't, as much. I just don't seem to have much appetite when I wake any more. In fact, sometimes the thought of it turns my stomach."

Her maid nodded. "Well, that, combined with your increasing size... Your Grace, I hope you don't think it impudent of me to ask, but I wondered – could you be with child?"

"I—" She did not have an answer. The thought had not occurred to her. When, in the first few months of their marriage, no child was conceived, she found herself a little disappointed, but not terribly so. She enjoyed her time with James, and it was already limited by his work. Their union was a happy one, and they were young – there was plenty of time for children.

And so she had put the thought from her mind and had not noticed the signs that clearly her maid had done.

"Thank you, Mary. I will think on what you have said."

And think she did. All night, while James lay asleep next to her, she thought about the possibility, and by the morning, Christmas morning, she was convinced that it was true.

Her first instinct was to tell James. They had promised when they wed that there would be no secrets and no lies between them, and although she had only just realised herself that she was most probably at least two months gone with child, she felt guilty that he did not already know.

She waited until he awoke naturally, not wanting to disturb his peaceful slumber. And when he did, she beamed at him and wished him a merry Christmas.

"And to you, my love," he said, and the tender endearment – which he had started using more regularly of late – sent a warm glow through her body. "It's rare for you to be awake before me," he commented, sitting up and leaning back against the pillows. "Is everything well? Or are you just so excited for Christmas you could not sleep?"

Penelope beamed. The more she thought of a child of their own, the happier she became. Somehow, she seemed to have everything she could have wanted – a husband whom she loved, even if they had not yet shared those words, a child on the way, and a beautiful castle to call her own.

"I am excited. And I did struggle to sleep...but it's not just about Christmas."

James raised an eyebrow. "No?"

She shook her head. "No. I have...I have a present for you."

James smiled. "I have a present for you too, of course – downstairs."

"I have a present downstairs as well, but this is... You'll have to wait a little while for it. But I wanted to tell you as soon as I knew. James – I'm carrying your child."

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It was not the news that he had expected to wake up to on Christmas morning. It wasn't wholly unexpected, of course – but when she had not fallen pregnant in the first few months of their marriage, he supposed the possibility had rather faded from his mind.

When he did not say anything, the smile on her face faltered, and he felt terrible, as he always did if he hurt or disappointed her. It was never done intentionally, but he seemed rather good at putting his foot in it.

"I thought you'd be pleased..." she said with a sorry half-smile. "And if it's a boy, he'll be the heir to your title, to the castle..."

James nodded slowly. "I am pleased," he reassured her, reaching out to take her hand. "But I guess I'm wondering... Do I know how to raise a child? To be a good role model?" He thought of the way he had been raised, to only think of the title. And of the boy named Timothy who he had not met, but who had been raised with no idea of the title his own father held. He had always thought his parents excellent role models – but now he wasn't so sure that the way they had done things had always been right.

"Of course you do! You've been a father figure to your sisters for a long time."

James winced a little at the reminder. While he was trying to make up for it, he did not feel he had been the most supportive of guardians to his sisters since their parents had passed on. This had become even more apparent when he had known nothing of Antonia's attachments to an inappropriate gentleman – not until the incident had been resolved by the woman before him.

"I was raised...to think that this title was the only important thing about me. That if I was not the Duke of Dunloch, then I was nobody. I don't want a son of mine to feel that way or to spend all his life working with no time to play."

Penelope squeezed his hands, and he looked into her kind, brown eyes. "Then we shan't let him. This is our child, our choice. If we have a boy, then we will raise him to know his duty and to know that there is so much more outside of the title: family, happiness, love."

James nodded, and a smile slowly spread across his face.

"Yes, you're right. Of course you are. You're always right."

Penelope laughed, a tinkling sound that echoed through the grand bedchamber. He did not remember Dunloch ever being as full of laughter as it had been in the year since he had married Penelope.

"And I am very pleased. Thank you for such a wonderful Christmas present," he said, leaning in to press a kiss to her lips. And then, when he pulled back, he said the words that had been true in his heart for some time, but which he had not, for some reason, been able to say. "I love you, Penelope. And I will love this child greatly, too."

Her eyes lit up, and that exuberant smile took over her face. "I love you too, James. I think I may have from the moment I woke up on the beach with you above me."

"Ah yes, the day you foolishly risked your safety to go out on the water for an hour or two."

"I like to remember it as the day I woke up to find the man I had been looking for all along rescuing me."

"Always the romantic," James teased.

"Only when I'm with you," she replied, pressing one final kiss to his lips before leaving the warmth of the bed and reaching for the bell pull to call her maid. "Come

on, it's Christmas morning – your sisters will be wondering where we are."

He would never admit it to her, as he would hate for her to repeat such an action, but he knew as he followed her that the day she had dangerously and foolishly gone to sea with a storm looming over her had actually ended up being the most fortunate day of his life.

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Thank you so much for reading 'The Duke of Dunloch Castle'.