



The Duplicate Duke (Once Upon a Widow #10)

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Category: Historical

Description: In a country far, far away...

Lady Gwendolyn Beaumaris and her brother have been known as the Bernard twins since their father's death. Fearful that their grandfather, the Duke of Shackerley, would take her son, Gwen's mother relocates them in Boston where she had family. At nineteen, Gwen and her mother have been waiting to hear from her brother, who is trying to make his fortune in the timber trade. Down to their last pennies, a wealthy middle-aged merchant comes to the rescue with a marriage proposal for Miss Bernard.

The brass ring is so close...

Lord Wickton has worked tirelessly the past five years to bring honor back to the family name. His father's debts have been paid, and he is now returning the entailed estate to working order. When the viscount learns he is the heir presumptive to his great uncle's dukedom, it seems fortune is knocking at his door. But his honor and desire for family compels him to make one more attempt to find the heir apparent.

A comedy of errors...

When English investigators arrive with a letter announcing that Gwen's brother is the new Duke of Shackerley, mother and daughter come up with a desperate plan: Gwendolyn will impersonate her twin and assume the dukedom until her brother can be located. But their confidence soon dwindles when the sinfully handsome Wickton meets them at the dock, and Gwen is hopelessly smitten.

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Northern England, near the border

Miles, Viscount Wickton bent low to hear the dying man's words. He clutched a signet ring in his bony hand, pushing it at Miles.

"Take it," the Duke of Shackerley rasped, his pale face ghostly in the darkened bedchamber. "You're my heir. You will be the next duke."

"I am hoping you recover, Uncle," Miles said, taking the heavy piece of jewelry. Great-uncle to be precise. His grandfather's brother.

"If you're ever..." The duke drew in a shallow breath. "In need of... anything—" The old man succumbed to a bout of coughing. "They will help."

Who will help? Miles didn't foresee any trouble except finding his cousin, the true heir to Shackerley Place. But the long-lost marquess had not been seen or heard of in over twenty years.

"I'll keep it safe." He tucked the heavy piece inside his coat and sat back down in his chair.

The room was lit by a large fire, the huge tester bed and its curtains casting eerie shadows across the room.

No windows were open, drapes were pulled, and the heat was suffocating.

Miles pulled at his cravat as he stared at the pile of blankets and the counterpane,

practically burying the man in fleece.

A bloodhound lay beside the man, one long ear flopped upon his master's belly. His uncle stroked the liver-colored dog. "I thought we'd grow old together, Harry. I apologize for leaving you so soon."

Harry? Was he talking to his dead heir? "I shall try to find your son." No! he thought. The demmed dog is Harry.

Shackerley shook his head. "Gone."

"We must be certain?—"

"Dead to me!" These words came out with surprising force, considering his uncle's condition.

The hound whined and licked the duke's gnarled hand.

"Yes, yes, I understand." But he didn't. How could anyone name their dog after someone and still hold a grudge for over two decades? "You must rest now." Miles patted his great-uncle's hand, the parchment-like skin cold to the touch. It won't be long, he thought with a sigh.

* * *

Mr. Garner woke Miles early the next morning. A maid followed behind to start a fire in the hearth.

"My lord, I believe he has passed," the butler said with a bow.

His silver hair was a bit mussed, his cravat not tied perfectly.

The deep purple beneath his eyes told of the long vigil he must have spent over his employer during the night.

It was the first time he had seen the man step out of his role of austere servant.

Miles met the physician an hour later, who confirmed the death. “I will notify the local magistrate. Is there anything I can do for you, my lord?”

“I don’t believe so, but I thank you. His papers should be in his study and in proper order, according to his solicitor.” Miles walked the doctor to the entry hall. “Please let the magistrate know I will be here for at least a few weeks.”

“Certainly. And my condolences.” The physician put on his hat and trotted down the portico steps.

Miles stood a long time in the doorway, gazing out on the expansive courtyard and front lawn.

It was a beautiful and extensive estate, close to the border, with a generous annual income.

He should be thrilled to be inheriting the title and property.

He’d worked hard enough restoring his own after his father was almost ruined by bad investments during the war.

That was behind him now, and Wickton House and the estate’s profits were increasing each year.

Not that he couldn’t use the wealth of the dukedom, but he was no longer knee-deep in debt and had paid off the last of the vowels two years ago.

He loved his country seat, the childhood memories there, the camaraderie of the tenants and villagers at the annual harvest gathering.

It was also closer to London, where he took his seat in the Lords seriously.

He meandered into the library, his hands clasped behind his back as he studied the shelves of books.

There had not been much time for reading over the past five years, though Miles enjoyed print of any kind.

He'd had to suffice with newspapers and a few agriculture and animal husbandry books.

Now he might have time to indulge himself.

After looking through his great-uncle's estate ledgers.

Two hours later, he shut the leather-bound book with a soft thud , and stood, straightening his waistcoat.

His uncle had spoken the truth. A copy of a report had been in a drawer, telling of the death of the Marquess of Greystone, the duke's estranged son.

A gravesite had been found in Quebec with his name.

He peered at the dark storm clouds gathering over the distant hills as fat drops of rain splattered against the window panes.

A fitting day for death. Miles wondered about the marquess's wife.

The stone had called him husband and father.

There was a second report detailing the search for the marchioness, but she had disappeared.

It seemed after several years, the duke had ended the investigation.

“Is there anything I can get you, my lord?” asked Garner from the door.

Miles looked over his shoulder and shook his head. “No, thank you. If there is no one else expected, I would suggest you take the afternoon off and get some sleep. I’m sure there’s a footman who can take over.”

The butler opened his mouth to disagree, but Miles stayed him with a hand. “You won’t be any good to me if you’re exhausted. And considering the extra duties I’ve just inherited, I will be depending on you and the steward.”

Relief washed over the older man’s haggard face. “Yes, my lord. I will send the housekeeper in with tea.”

Miles nodded, then remembered a note on his great-uncle’s desk. “Wait, Garner.” He called back the butler. “I am supposed to contact the Duke of Cranbrook with any questions. It has something to do with the ring my uncle gave me. Is Cranbrook’s estate close?”

“His Grace is our neighbor,” answered Garner. “He also is head of the duke’s association that is behind the signet. I am sure a courtesy call to relay the news of your uncle’s passing would be appreciated.”

* * *

The next day

“Lord Wickton,” announced the footman.

Miles entered the study and paused. It was a sumptuous room with thick Aubusson carpet, costly oak paneling, and an intricately carved desk large enough for Miles to sleep on.

The desk was littered with books and papers, indicating the Duke of Cranbrook was not in his dotage.

He had assumed the duke to be the same age as his great-uncle.

This man was much older than Miles, but there was nothing aged about him.

Besides the gray hair, his hazel eyes brightened with curiosity as Miles approached.

“Shackerley’s nephew, I presume?” he asked in a booming voice, standing to hold out his hand. “Take a seat. Brandy?”

The duke motioned to the footman, who immediately went to the sideboard to pour two brandies. When both men had been served, the footman silently backed away and closed the door.

“I’m sorry to meet under these circumstances,” began Miles.

“He’s gone, then, eh?” The duke obviously was used to getting straight to the point. “Good man, Shackerley. Stubborn, but he had integrity.”

“Yes, Your Grace. He passed last night.” Miles sipped from the crystal glass, appreciating the good French liquor. “I?—”

“Gave you the ring, I see.” The duke nodded at Miles’s right hand, the signet with the engraved WD resting on the fourth finger. “Good.”

“What does the ring mean, exactly?”

“WD is for Wayward Dukes. Many years ago, I thought it would be nice to have a small alliance... for dukes only. If one of our peers found himself in need of assistance, he could call on his fellow dukes, no questions asked. The ring will identify you to others.” Shackerley smiled.

“Welcome to the club, Wickton. Though I should be calling you Shackerley.”

Here was his opening. “Your Grace, I was wondering, to that end, if you might be able to help me.”

The bushy gray brows furrowed as the duke nodded. “Certainly. You need only ask.”

“Do you know any of the background between my great-uncle and my cousin? His son?” Miles didn’t like to gossip, but this was a different matter. He had to be sure there were no other legal heirs to the dukedom. It was a matter of honor.

“The only foolish act Shackerley ever committed. Casting out your heir because of a woman. Nonsense.” Cranbrook leaned forward, the creases around his eyes deepening.

“I told him to go after the boy. He could have found a way to get rid of the chit. Or ignored her. She may have been a good breeder and given him a dozen boys. Who knows?”

Miles nodded. “I would like to. I can’t, in good conscience, take this title seriously until I’m absolutely positive my cousin is dead, and he had no sons.”

“There was an investigation, not too long before Shackerley succumbed to his bed. I don’t know if he had second thoughts about his son, but I do believe he wondered about a grandson.

The report said the Marquess of Greywood had died.

A headstone had been discovered in Quebec, using the family name Beaumaris.

” The duke smiled. “While your integrity is appreciated, it’s not necessary.

Would you feel better if you traveled to Canada and saw it yourself? ”

“No, it’s not that... I saw the report. It’s the disappearance of his wife. She was never found. How do we know there were no offspring from the marriage?” It would haunt Miles until he knew for sure. He might have second cousins living unbeknownst to him.

“Shackerley truly believed that Frenchwoman was only after the family coffers. As I said, if the stubborn man hadn’t let his temper get away, the whole situation might have resolved itself.” Cranbrook held up his glass, silently asking if Miles wanted another drink.

With a nod, he handed over his glass. “You wouldn’t happen to know a good private investigator, maybe a Bow Street Runner, who would consider traveling to Quebec and poking around?

” Miles wouldn’t feel guilty spending Shackerley’s money on such a venture since it would be the old man’s grandson who would benefit.

If not, it would end up Miles’s blunt anyway.

The duke paused in his pour for a moment, harrumphed , then finished pouring.

As he handed Miles back his glass, he smiled.

“As a matter of fact, I do know someone. An old Runner from Ireland who did some work for me years ago. He runs the O’Brien Investigative Services, sort of a family-run business.

If anyone can find this possible heir, it would be one of his boys. ”

“Based in London?” asked Miles, already composing a letter in his mind.

“Same house in Cheapside since he moved there over thirty years ago. Quite a character.” The duke sipped his brandy. “I’ll write you a letter of introduction. You can send it along with your inquiry. No use making a trip to London if he won’t take the case.”

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Boston, Massachusetts

Miss Gwendolyn Bernard tapped her boot on the oak boards of the dry goods store.

Mama! Let's go! But her mother continued speaking to the shopkeeper's sister.

Gwen turned from the bolts of cloth, wishing they could afford a few lengths of muslin for a new summer dress.

Her present dress, once a lovely azure blue with a dark-blue ribbon accentuating the high waist, was now faded and accessorized with fraying cuffs and hem.

She couldn't take in the sleeves anymore without the length appearing too short.

With a sigh, she turned to face the barrels of flour and gazed longingly at the shelf of sugar loaves wrapped in blue paper.

Gwen preferred her tea and coffee strong and sweet, but they had gone through the monthly quota of sugar.

Drinking the weak (they diluted it to make it last) bitter liquid did not start the day well.

Gwen's foot began tapping again. Her mother was taking an inordinately long time to finish her conversation with Mrs. Tarron.

Patience. She looked across the counter at the owner, Mr. Barnaby, who was

watching her mother with a strange look on his face.

His craggy face wore a ridiculous smile as he smoothed a big, calloused hand through his thinning, dark hair.

He had a nice face, Gwen thought, for an old man.

“Are you enjoying the mild spring weather, Miss Downing?” The shop owner turned to face her, tugging his waistcoat over his slight paunch. “It’s certainly a fine day.”

“Yes, Mr. Barnaby. It is, indeed.” She pretended to browse the selection of ribbons, consciously attempting to keep her foot still and avoid another dagger glare from Mama.

“That violet ribbon would look real good on you. That color goes nice with your blonde hair and those big blue eyes,” said the shopkeeper. “I’ll cut you a length if you like.”

Gwen’s head jerked up, and she narrowed her eyes at Mr. Barnaby over her shoulder.

Her long locks were tied back with an old leftover strip of linen, and the weather was windy.

She knew she looked a bit of a mess. “I’m sorry to say I can’t buy anything today.

” Her stomach grumbled, and she frowned at her middle.

She’d rather he offered her something to eat.

“It would be my treat.” Mr. Barnaby walked from behind the counter, grabbing a large pair of scissors as he came around. He measured several hand lengths and cut

the satin material. “There you go.”

“Why, thank you, sir,” she said, wondering what he was up to. Why the compliments and a gift? “I can pay you when my br?—”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head about it, now,” he replied, his kind brown eyes twinkling. He folded the length of ribbon and went back behind the counter, finding a piece of paper to wrap it in. “I was wondering...”

And then it hit her—like an ax smacking a tree trunk.

He was courting her. Was the funny look he’d given Mama because he wondered if she would agree to his courtship?

A knot twisted in her stomach. Did he know how desperate they were?

Perhaps he was being kind. He and her mother had been friends for years.

“Miss Bernard,” he began again, “do you think Mrs. Bernard would mind if I came to visit this evening?” When she gave him a blank stare, he mustered, “Or another night if it’s more convenient.”

He did want to court her. For the love of Hercules, there had to be at least thirty years separating them. Her stomach growled again. Perhaps the good Lord was sending them a horn of plenty in disguise. She looked up to find Mr. Barnaby giving her an odd look.

“I’m afraid Tuesday is mending night after dinner,” she said evasively. His interest was unexpected, and she needed time to think about it. While she did need a husband, Gwen had hoped for someone closer to her age, a man who would win her heart.

“I have an idea.” The shopkeeper grinned as if the cleverest notion had just come to him. “Why don’t I take the two prettiest ladies in Boston to dinner? Then you can still return home in time to finish your mending.”

He must have heard her stomach growl. Regardless, she decided a good meal was a fast step toward capturing her heart at this point.

With her brother gone for over a year now, their funds were dangerously low.

They were rationing, and top priority had gone to necessities such as firewood and oil for the lamps, paper and ink for the countless letters they sent to Graham while receiving none in return.

Food was minimal, and their cupboards were practically bare.

“I would have to ask?—”

“Merci , we would be honored to accept your gracious invitation, Mr. Barnaby,” her mother said behind her, the faint French accent still heard in certain words. “Shall we meet you somewhere, or would you prefer to collect us?”

“I’d be honored to call upon you. Say, half past six?” The store owner’s face had slowly turned red as he faced Mrs. Bernard. “We could dine at the Boston Exchange if that would suit you.”

Gwen’s eyes went wide. The Boston Exchange Coffee House and Hotel was the finest building in Boston, boasting seven stories with more than two hundred rooms. They would have a feast tonight.

* * *

“Mr. Barnaby is such a sweet man to ask us to dine with him. He knows a bit about our circumstances,” Mama said as they dressed for dinner. “No fancy talk about women and independence tonight.”

Gwen rolled her eyes. “I think he’s interested.”

“Oh?” Gwen could see Mama’s half smile in the mirror as she finished brushing her mother’s black hair and deftly twisted it into a smooth bun. At forty, she had only a few strands of gray, and her figure remained trim. “Did he say something?”

“Yes, in so many words, he called me pretty, gave me ribbon without charging me, then asked about visiting tonight. I told him it was our darning night since we don’t have any refreshments to offer if he came.” She chuckled. “Then my stomach gurgled, and he asked us to dine with him instead.”

“Oh,” her mother murmured, jabbing another pin into her chignon.

The laughter died in Gwen’s throat as the smile faded from her mother’s lips. “Are you well?” she asked, concern flooding her chest. Mama had caught a fever in January and was still not back to full health yet. In fact, they still owed Dr. Robertson.

“I’m fine, my dear.” She turned from the mirror and put an arm around Gwen.

“Mama, have you heard from Mrs. Tetter? She mentioned needing a French tutor for her daughters. That would bring in some money.”

“Non , but it’s only been a few days. That would be a godsend, wouldn’t it?” She absently straightened her daughter’s collar, her green eyes distant. “I had hoped...”

The sound of horse hooves and carriage wheels crunched in the snow outside. “He’s

here. And we haven't had a chance to talk about what I should do if he wants to court me."

Her mother's lips pressed into a thin line, then she took a deep breath. "At almost twenty years, I believe that is your choice to make. If he is interested, you will give it thought and decide what path to take. I will not influence you on matters of the heart."

Gwen snorted. "My heart has nothing to do with it. My stomach may fall madly in love with him though." She smoothed her best linen dress, a bright green with white (a bit yellowed but almost white) lace along the square neckline, along the high waistline, and the hem.

They met Mr. Barnaby in the entrance hall. "Miss Gwendolyn, Mrs. Bernard," he said, removing his beaver hat and giving them a sweeping bow, sending his great coat swirling about his knees. "You both look divine."

He helped them both with their pelisses, talking about his day at the store.

As they approached the carriage, Mr. Barnaby held his arm to her mother and helped her into the carriage first. Then he assisted Gwen, who sat opposite her mother.

To her surprise, when the gentleman climbed in, he sat next to Mama.

Gwen had thought he would sit next to her, but perhaps he was keeping with propriety.

She pulled the curtain back and sat quietly looking out the window while Mama made pleasant conversation with the shopkeeper.

The streets were muddy with chunks of snow that had not quite melted yet.

Gwendolyn wasn't sure which was worse. The mud and muck that never quite came out of her hems, or the dry summers when dust filled the air and seeped through the windows and into their clothes.

That's city life , her mother would always say to either situation.

Carriages, wagons, and carts still filled State Street as they passed Cornhill Square.

Mr. Barnaby deftly moved their conveyance between the others and soon turned off State onto Congress.

On their right, the Exchange towered over the other buildings.

Six marble pilasters guarded the front entrance, and Venetian windows lined the facade facing Congress.

It was reported to be the tallest building in the country.

They made their way inside, and Gwen marveled at the extravagance. Graham had taken her and Mama to the top floor once. The glass atrium had a spectacular view of the surrounding city. The thought of her brother pinched her heart a bit, wondering for the hundredth time if he would return soon.

The meal and the conversation were superb.

Gwen was certain she'd never had roasted chicken seasoned so well or cooked so perfectly.

The bread and butter pudding afterwards almost made her moan with happiness.

She found Mr. Barnaby to be quite entertaining when not behind the counter of the

dry goods store.

He teased Mama, making her blush and giggle, and continued to compliment Gwen.

Though she wasn't attracted to him at all, she did truly like the man.

He was kind, had a fine sense of humor, and wasn't stingy with his coin.

"I am thankful for the company tonight, ladies," said Mr. Barnaby as he walked them to the door of their home.

He bowed over Gwen's hand, then turned to her mother.

He cleared his throat, bowing over Mama's hand.

Did his lips touch her glove? Goodness. Had he drank too much wine at dinner? "I hope we may do this again?"

"Oui ."

"Of course," Gwen said at the same time her mother spoke.

"A new tea arrived today that I haven't tried yet. Might I bring some tomorrow and share it?" He glanced at Gwen and back at her mother. "Unless I'm being too forward, Mrs. Bernard?"

The next two weeks included at least a half dozen visits from Mr. Barnaby, who always seemed to have some new edible import to share with his "favorite ladies." At first, Gwen had wondered if the store owner was vying for both of them when he gave them equal attention.

But men wanted sons, and Mr. Barnaby was a bachelor with no children.

So of course, he wanted a family to carry on his business.

However, it boded well for the future that he got along so well with Mama.

For Gwen had decided when the gentleman asked her, she would agree to marry him.

He had a profitable business, was well-respected in Boston, and would provide stability and financial security.

She had to think of her and Mama's future.

Today was Sunday, and after the service, Mr. Barnaby had returned with them.

Mama cooked dinner for them, a celebration for Gwen tutoring the three Miss Tetters.

It was a dreary job, teaching three young girls with no interest or aptitude in the language, but the kitchen was stocked again with basic staples.

She had just finished the lessons for the following week and joined Mama and Mr. Barnaby in the parlor for an evening of cards.

The two were sitting beside one other on the settee.

The shopkeeper was grinning broadly, and her mother appeared flushed.

As she entered the room, Mr. Barnaby stood while her mother smoothed back her thick midnight waves.

“I was just speaking to your mother about...” He glanced at Mrs. Bernard, then back at Gwen. “I wanted to ask you if you would be opposed to?”

A knock on the door interrupted the conversation. Thankful for the reprieve, Gwen rushed to the entry hall. He was about to propose. For the love of Hercules, couldn't the man be a tiny bit more romantic?

She answered on the second knock to find two strange men filling the doorway. Both had dark-brown hair and eyes, but one was of medium height while the other towered over his companion. Without thought, she took two steps back, hoping they were not bearers of bad news. Her stomach clenched.

“Is this about Graham? Is he hurt? Is he alive?” Panic clawed at her throat, and she squeezed her hands into tight fists, ready for the worst.

“We are presently searching for Graham Beaumaris, so I'm afraid we wouldn't know his present condition,” said the shorter man. He sounded English. “May we speak with... your mother?”

“Who are you?” demanded Mama in a stern voice. “What do you want?”

“We have come on behalf of our client, Lord Wickton. He is searching for a possible heir to his great-uncle's estate. The Duke of Shackerley passed recently.”

Gwen turned to her mother, noting her white face. She looked back at the men. Why were they here talking about some lord and duke, and why did their presence upset Mama so?

“Ezek—Mr. Barnaby, would you mind terribly if we ended the night early? I need to speak with these gentlemen.” Mama smiled up at him. “I believe this has to do with my departed husband.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to stay?” he asked, hovering over both ladies in a protective stance. “If you don’t know these men, I would be happy to remain.”

Mama placed a hand on Mr. Barnaby’s arm. “Non , we will be fine. Please call on us again this Tuesday. We thank you for such a lovely day.”

This seemed to mollify him, and Mr. Barnaby collected his coat and hat, gave the men a stern look, and left.

“Please, come in,” she said to the gentlemen. They followed the ladies into the parlor. Once they were seated, she turned to the man who seemed to be in charge. “I’m afraid you’ve caught us unawares. I-I have not told my daughter of her father’s previous life.”

Gwen’s stomach plunged with dread. Previous life? “What does that mean?”

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“Let us introduce ourselves, my lady. I am Mr. Harry Walters, and this is Mr. Gus Rutland. We work for the O’Brien Investigative Services in London.

Our client, the Viscount Wickton, is the great-nephew of the Duke of Shackerley.

” He nodded at Gwen. “I’m sorry to have created an unpleasant situation. ”

Gwen noticed the slight gray at the man’s temples and, in the back of her mind, registered him as handsome. “ Who is the Duke of Shackerley?”

“He was your grandfather.” Her mother took Gwen’s hand, tears brightening her green eyes. “He and your father had a falling out over... me. We left for Quebec, and they never spoke again.”

“My name isn’t Bernard?” Her throat swelled; she couldn’t breathe. “Who am I?”

“The granddaughter of a duke. And a very wealthy one,” said the mammoth across from her.

She hadn’t noticed his longer hair before, pulled back by a leather tie at his nape.

He looked more fur trapper than investigator and good-looking in a brawny sort of way.

“Our client does not want to assume the title if there is a possibility of a grandson.”

“We traced you from Quebec to Boston. The name change put us off for a bit until we

realized it was your maiden name, but we've found you. Do you know where your son is?"

Mama shook her head. "Non, he left over a year ago to purchase land in Canada. He wants to start a timber business like his father hoped to do. But we haven't heard from him in months."

Mr. Rutland gave Gwen an empathetic look, which seemed odd for a man so big and burly. "That's why you thought we came with bad news."

She nodded, her mind a whirlwind with this news. She wasn't Gwendolyn Bernard. Her mother wasn't Mrs. Bernard. Her father had been heir to a dukedom? She blew out a loud breath and fell back against the settee.

"Why don't we give you time to discuss this with your daughter, my lady," said Mr. Walters.

"I will leave the packets from the viscount and the solicitor for you to read at your leisure. We'll return tomorrow and discuss your situation further.

I need to ascertain what you know about your son's direction when he left. "

Gwen looked at her mother, slack-jawed. My lady?

When the Englishmen left, Gwen turned on her mother. "Is there anything else you haven't told me?"

Her mother studied her clasped hands resting in her lap. "There is."

Dread skittered down Gwen's spine. Could it get any worse? Silly question.

“I heard from my brother-in-law, your uncle,” she said quietly. “You know we’ve been living here rent-free since my sister died, and he left for... who knows where. He’s decided to continue traveling and will need funds, so he is selling the house. We will need to find another place to live.”

Yes, it could always get worse. “So we must not only find a way to survive, but also pay rent?” Gwen’s stomach churned. “The tutoring will not cover that. We are barely getting by as it is. How long do we have?”

“The solicitor’s instructions gave us at least a month. He will let us know when there is a prospective buyer.” Mama took a deep breath and pasted on a smile. “So really, this revelation about the inheritance is good news.”

The next morning

Gwen paced the worn parlor rug, still trying to come to grips with the news her mother was a marchioness and her brother a duke. According to Mama, she was Lady Gwendolyn Beaumaris. She was at once thrilled, relieved, and angry.

“Does Graham know?” she asked, turning to her mother who was calmly reading a book and enjoying undiluted sweet tea, courtesy of Mr. Barnaby.

Her mother nodded. “Oui, he does. He had to know for his own safety. I didn’t trust the duke not to kidnap him. Shackerley was a spiteful old man.”

A knock at the door sent Gwen’s heart racing. The investigators were back. She answered the door, watching them with suspicion as her mother seated them in the parlor. She listened as her mother explained the last known destination of her son.

“So when Harry—Lord Greywood—died, I was certain that nasty Englishman would come after my son. What was I to do? Just let him?” huffed her mother. “So I took

back my family name of Bernard and found my sister in Boston. We've been here ever since."

"Lady Greywood," said Mr. Walters, "our client is most anxious to see his relatives in their rightful place. He has no other motive."

"If your son is alive," added Mr. Rutland, then giving the ladies a sheepish look of apology.

"Wouldn't I be the heir if my brother is..." Gwen swallowed. "I should be next in line."

"It doesn't work that way, dear," intervened her mother. "Only males can inherit."

Gwen huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. "That's ridiculous. What about Queen Elizabeth?"

"Different scenario, my lady," said Mr. Walters. "When we find your son—because we will—the viscount will want you on the first ship to Liverpool."

"We assume both of you will want to accompany the duke." Mr. Rutland gave his companion a side-glance. "This must be a shock. We apologize for the abruptness of our visit."

Mr. Walters added, "You may take the time while we are away to make arrangements for the house and gather what belongings you would like to bring to England."

"I'm afraid we have few matters to take care of," said her mother. "We have no funds, and this house does not belong to us. It belongs to my brother-in-law."

"And he is... where?" asked Mr. Walters quietly.

“I have no idea. My sister died three years ago. He was distraught, of course. The home he’d made with his wife held too many memories.

After a year of mourning, he decided he would travel and left, allowing us to stay in the house.

” Mama pressed her lips together into a thin line.

“We hadn’t heard from him until a letter telling us he is selling this property. ”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” said Mr. Walters, sincere sympathy in his dark-brown eyes. “Perhaps our timing is not so bad?”

“And I’m sure Lord Wickton will provide the funds needed for your passage,” said Mr. Rutland.

Gwen’s foot was tapping, and an idea was stirring around in her brain. She smiled at the gargantuan. “But what if my brother arrives while you are looking for him? Would it be wise to leave a bit with us, so we can be on our way? We could leave word here if that happened.”

Mr. Walters and Mr. Rutland shared a look. The bigger man shrugged.

“You wouldn’t snatch a pouch of coin and run with it, now would you?” asked Mr. Walters, his grin transforming his face. He was indeed a handsome man in a mature way. Oh, if only Mr. Barnaby had his looks.

Gwen shook her head in earnest. How dare he suggest she was a thief! “Oh no, it would only be used for passage to England. Or rent if we must move sooner than expected.”

“Or whatever your mother decides is a necessity,” added Mr. Walters gently, letting them know he was not averse to the ladies using some of the funds.

Before the gentlemen left, they left a leather pouch of coin for emergency or if Graham returned before they did.

Her mother explained if they were not at the house when the investigators’ return, to inquire at Barnaby’s Dry Goods Store.

Mr. Barnaby would know their address. Gwen had also purposely steered any conversation away from the fact that she and her brother were twins.

As soon as the door closed, Gwen twirled to face her mother.

“Start packing, Mama. We aren’t waiting for Graham.

This is fate telling us we have a new home, and I don’t have to marry a man my father’s age.

I will be the Duke of Shackerley until Graham returns. ”

* * *

Early June

Onboard the Amity, docking at Liverpool

Gwen wiped the salty spray from her face with a grin, squinting at the vague shoreline.

She was thankful she didn’t have to try to tame her wild curls, now kept in a tight tail

and tucked down her back.

The cravat—how did men tolerate the suffocating neck cloth?

—hiding the rest of her mane. But the trousers were heaven, and the long strides she was able to take in the boots.

However, her first thrill at foregoing her corset had been dampened with the cloth that now bound her breasts.

“Oh, Mama, I never thought I would enjoy the sea this much. It’s so... freeing!”

“I’m happy for you,” her mother mumbled, who’d had a bout of seasickness for the entire journey. “My feet are anxious for dry land after a month of this swaying.”

Poor Mama. She had tried to maintain propriety, keeping her toilette every day and her clothing and hair neat.

Gwen was now a man, so she didn’t bother.

She loved the possibilities of being male, not being told what to do, not being put down or ignored only because of her sex.

This was the adventure of a lifetime, and she would enjoy every moment of it while it lasted.

“So what is your plan if... if the worst happens,” asked Mama. “If you are convincing, do you plan to remain a duke for the rest of your days?”

Gwen hadn’t thought that far. It didn’t matter.

In her heart, she knew Graham was alive.

She always knew when he was in danger; it was like they were two people yet one.

“He’s fine, though I cannot foretell the future and know when he will return.

But Mr. Walters and Mr. Rutland seemed very confident of their skills to find him. ”

“I don’t like this ruse,” said her mother stubbornly.

“You didn’t have to come,” Gwen reminded her.

“And let you cross the ocean by yourself? We don’t even have a servant to send with you,” huffed Mama. “What kind of mother would I be if I allowed you to go off to another country alone?”

“Is it better that you lied to me most of my life?” She was still hurt that her mother had kept the truth from her and told her brother. And how had Graham kept it a secret from her when they had no secrets? But the pain in Mama’s eyes gave her pause.

“I’m sorry. It’s just such a shock,” she said finally, giving her mother a tight hug.

“I was alone and terrified the duke would steal your brother. I did what I had to in order to keep my children safe. I have no regrets.” She kissed the top of Gwen’s head. “I would give up anything for you and Graham.”

Land came into view, and Gwen squealed, caught herself, and cleared her throat.

“You’re fortunate you have a husky voice for a woman. Take care with your mannerisms,” warned her mother. “It was bad enough being destitute in Boston with friends close by. I don’t relish being alone in this godforsaken country without a soul

to help us.”

It was true. Gwen hadn’t considered that risk until the sails had set, and they couldn’t change their minds.

She straightened her waistcoat, thinking of the notes they’d left behind.

If Mr. Walters and Mr. Rutland found Graham, her brother would also find the letter explaining where they were once the men returned to Boston.

Her mother had sent off a hurried note to Mr. Barnaby, so the kind man wouldn’t worry, also including copies of the letters to Graham and the investigators.

Then to ensure their safety once in England, Gwen used the viscount’s address from one of the packets to inform him of their arrival.

“I’m like Graham’s second skin. Unless someone sees me bathing, there is no way for us to be found out.

” Gwen gazed out over the water, breathing in the spicy air, enjoying the cool breeze against her skin.

In her heart, she knew she was on the right path.

Her brain, however, liked to poke holes in her plan.

After counting the coin in the pouch left by the investigators, they had decided to play their parts as beau monde and booked a well-appointed cabin. It had a skylight and enough room to dress with a small table for meals if they chose to eat in their room.

Her mother had cried the first day, remembering her last voyage with Gwen’s father.

“So much hope. Harry and I were so young and foolish. We didn’t understand what the world was truly like,” she’d sobbed on Gwen’s shoulder. “How I loved that man.”

By that evening, Mama was so nauseated she couldn’t leave the cabin. Though she improved by the end of the voyage, she never ventured far from a dish or a rail she could lean over. Even with her seasickness, anticipation grew as they neared England.

Now as the ship neared the dock, they both looked to the future and Gwen’s first glimpse of the English shore.

The harbor was hectic with smaller boats, wagons, and crews loading and unloading shipments; Gwen’s heart raced with excitement as she watched the activity.

She belonged here, felt it deep in her soul.

Satisfaction filled her at the possibilities that lay before them.

Until Lord Wickton met them at the dock.

As they disembarked, Gwen spotted the same crest on a carriage that she’d seen on the envelope.

A gold W engraved on a silver shield, flanked by two peregrine falcons.

It made her wonder what the Shackerley coat of arms looked like.

A broad-shouldered man wearing a great coat of derby brown and a beaver hat stood near the gangway, peering at the departing occupants.

Somehow, she knew it was the viscount. His dark-brown hair had hints of gold, as if sun-kissed, combed back and cut just at the collar, above which was a square chin.

She waved at him, certain it was Lord Wickton, and their eyes met.

His were light-brown, almost the color of a good brandy.

Then he smiled and her world turned upside down.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:10 am

Miles had been surprised he'd heard news so quickly.

A letter from the Peelers Investigative Service had stated there were two offspring.

A boy and a girl. Walters and Rutland had followed a trail from Quebec to Boston, where the late heir's wife had family.

The marchioness had adopted her maiden name, Bernard, making it more difficult to locate her.

The next missive came from Graham Beaumaris, the new Duke of Shackerley. He pulled the letter from his pocket, reading the fine sprawling handwriting.

Dear Lord Wickton,

I would like to thank you for your diligent and successful search to find me.

I understand my grandfather is gone, and as you know, my father has passed, leaving me the heir to the Shackerley dukedom.

I will sail on the next packet, the Amity, arriving in Liverpool in early June.

If it is not too inconvenient, we would appreciate someone meeting us at the dock. I will be accompanied by my mother.

We are looking forward to meeting family, for we've so few relatives to call upon.

Your hopeful cousin,

Graham Beaumaris

Miles had studied the portraits at Shackerley Place. Would this man resemble his father? It would make it easier to identify him. He hoped the crest on the carriage would confirm his presence to meet them.

Approaching the gangway, he watched the hectic activity on deck.

He'd arranged earlier to have his cousins' luggage brought to his coach.

The crews were moving trunks, supplies, and a variety of shipments, including livestock.

The docks were always chaotic, but there was a system for debarking.

The wealthier passengers would be first, followed by those in steerage.

When the poorer passengers appeared, he quickly scanned the deck to see who was left.

A slight young man with dark-blond hair, dressed in slightly outdated clothes, waved as he scanned the crowd.

He had a similar countenance to the late heir, strongly resembling the portrait Miles had seen in the gallery at Shackerley Place.

He assumed the dark-haired woman next to the duke was his mother, the marchioness.

With a sigh of relief, he waved back and caught his cousin's gaze.

The young man smiled, lighting up his face, and Miles liked him immediately.

The mother and son made their way to the shore, Lady Greywood behind the duke.

As they stepped onto solid ground, her lids fluttered, her face turning white.

Miles stepped up and caught her as she fainted.

Scooping the woman up in his arms, he said over his shoulder, "Your Grace, it is good to meet you in person." He nodded at the woman in his arms. "The sea does not agree with her?"

His cousin smiled, showing straight white teeth and a tiny dimple in his right cheek. "I'm afraid she's been ill the entire voyage. I don't think she'll venture across the water again until some new mode of transportation is invented."

"We have some brilliant scientists, but that may be quite a wait." Miles nodded toward the coach. "Let's get out of this throng. I have arranged for rooms at a nearby hotel with good brandy and a hot meal waiting."

He gently laid the marchioness on the carriage bench. When she stirred, Lord Wickton patted her hand. "All will be well, my lady. We will get you something to eat and a bed to sleep in that doesn't rock back and forth. You'll be back to yourself in no time."

The woman blinked, gasped, then searched for her son. "Where is... What happened?"

"Your son is behind me, and you fainted. I was able to catch you, so I'm happy to say

no injuries occurred.” He took a flask from his pocket. “Would you like a drink? It’s strong but very smooth.”

“My s-son?” Lady Greywood looked over Miles’s shoulder. “Oh, my son,” she said, taking a healthy swallow before closing her eyes again.

Miles sat on the opposite bench, joined by his cousin.

He gave the ceiling several loud knocks, and the carriage lurched forward.

The new duke leaned toward his mother to steady her as she rolled perilously near the edge of the blue velvet-covered seat, then leaned his head back against the soft squabs.

“Thank you for meeting us, Miles,” he said, fatigue evident in his face. “It’s been quite an adventure so far.”

Miles was surprised at the use of his given name. However, being raised away from England, he assumed the ton’s protocol didn’t reign supreme in America. “It’s my pleasure, Your Grace.”

As the carriage rumbled through the streets of Liverpool, mixing with fine conveyances, hackneys, wagons, and carts, Miles studied his cousin.

Smooth unblemished skin spoke of his youth.

How old was he? Nineteen or twenty? He was slender and of medium height for a man, just a half head or so shorter than Miles.

His dark-blond hair had lighter streaks running through it, tied back and tucked into his cravat, longer than the London fashion.

The duke would have much to learn before being presented to society.

“Please, call me Graham,” said his cousin with a smile.

“I would be happy to, in private,” agreed Miles. Graham was a handsome man, in an odd way. He wasn’t quite masculine, probably due to his age, yet not effeminate. “Our societal constrictions may be a bit more confining than what you are used to.”

Lady Greywood sat up, covered a yawn, then nodded.

“Oui , I’m afraid I haven’t educated him on the rules .

I shall begin immediately.” She leaned forward and patted her son’s knee.

“You really should call him Wickton, my dear. Dropping ‘Lord’ still provides an intimacy without using his given name. And he would most likely be more comfortable calling you Shackerley once the matter is settled.”

“Settled?”

Miles noted the marchioness’s slight French accent, then explained, “Yes, you still need to be recognized as the true heir. We will submit the needed documents to the Attorney General. Once he has confirmed their authenticity, you will legally be the Duke of Shackerley. There is nothing wrong with using the title now since we shouldn’t have any impediments, according to my research and the investigation by O’Brien’s men. ”

His cousin went pale as he addressed his mother. “We have documents?”

“The marriage contract, of course, and a family bible given to your father by his mother. Your birth is recorded in it, along with your sister.” The marchioness cast her

emerald-green eyes on Miles. “Will that be sufficient?”

“I believe so, added to the timeline I’ve created and the engraving on the marquess’s gravestone of husband and father .

” Miles grinned at his cousin. “Once you have the social protocol down, I think you’ll be quite popular.

The half-English duke raised in America and born from a forbidden love match. ”

“It does sound romantic,” murmured Shackerley. “How odd. My life has been quite the opposite until now.”

“Well, I hope it’s a change for the better.” Miles peered out of the carriage. “Here’s the hotel. I arranged for your rooms to be together, and a cold repast and hot water for a bath will be sent up as soon as we arrive. We will meet tonight for dinner in a private dining room.”

“That sounds wonderful. You are too kind,” said Shackerley, adding with an impish grin, “Wickton.”

The duke’s smile was infectious, and Miles grinned back, slapping his cousin on the shoulder. “You’re a quick learner.”

* * *

It took all of Gwen’s strength not to fall forward when the viscount slapped her from behind. Her mind was crowded with thoughts of this handsome man, documents, her mother, and rules . Why hadn’t her mother prepared her for this on the ship?

She inspected the sumptuous hotel, with thick red wool carpet that led across the

lobby, gleaming planks where the carpet did not reach, plaster pillars, and large windows looking out onto the street.

The late afternoon sun spilled through the panes, dust motes dancing in the light.

Gwen blinked, saw her mother approaching the large staircase in front of them, adjusted her hat, and followed.

They were taken to rooms on the second floor.

Their chambers were lavish as well. Her room had a large four-poster bed, forest-green bed curtains, and a matching counterpane.

There was a wardrobe for her clothes, which had not arrived yet, a side table holding a pitcher and basin with a framed mirror above it, and a small table with two chairs.

The fireplace took up the wall opposite the bed, a metal tub sitting before it lined with bleached linen.

A tattoo on the door signaled her trunks had arrived. She let the young man in, and when he walked back to the hallway, she followed him to her mother's room.

"Mama?" she called. "Your trunk is here."

"Come in, dear," came a muffled voice.

"Will we ever get used to such surroundings?" Gwen asked when they were alone, peering about the bedroom similar to hers but in a deep rose color. "Were you ever used to such luxury?"

"When I was young. It seems like another lifetime," she answered.

“In France, my father was a comte and wealthy. But when we escaped the Terror, our family fled with practically nothing. We relied on the charity of others once in England. I was a naïve young girl with fanciful thoughts of dances and finding love.”

“Is that why the duke was against the marriage? Because you were French?” she asked, seeing her mother in a new light.

“ Oui , he detested the French, and the Revolution only increased his hatred. I met your father at Hyde Park on a Sunday in June. He was the most handsome man I’d ever met, a prime buck, indeed.

” Her mother’s eyes sparkled at the memory, a smirk pulling at the corners of her mouth. “And a peacock if I ever saw one.”

Gwen laughed. “You changed that?”

Her mother shook her head. “Non, I’m afraid life did. Your father had some funds when we left England, but he wanted to invest in a timber business, so we learned to be frugal.”

“He’s quite handsome,” Gwen said nonchalantly, walking to the window and pulling back the curtain. “And kind.”

“The viscount? It’s a shame you’re a male, for you might have charmed him.” Her mother raised one dark brow. “I wonder what he’ll think when he finds out?”

“He won’t until Graham is found. And then it won’t matter, for he is the actual duke.” Gwen spun around, remembering she was upset with Mama. “Why didn’t you warn me about all these details? At least living in America gives me an excuse to be ignorant of the English customs. But still!”

“I am sorry, sweet daught—I will have to watch that, won’t I?” Mama chuckled. “You’re a quick study. It’s not so difficult, and any mistakes will be attributed to your upbringing. I was going to educate you on the ship, but I was so busy dealing with a revolting stomach...”

Gwen rushed across the room and threw her arms around her mother. “I know. I’ve thrown us into this debacle and have no right to reprimand you.” She kissed the older woman’s cheek. “Thank you for going along with this. I realize now I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“We haven’t accomplished anything yet except escaping that horrid ship.”

“We’ve convinced Wickton,” she said and saw a suspicious twinkle in Mama’s eyes. “What are you plotting?”

“Moi ? Nothing at all. Fate will decide what happens to us.”

Someone knocked at the door. “Hot water?” asked a maid on the other side.

Gwen let the maid in, who carried a bucket and several thick towels, followed by two lanky boys, carrying a bucket of hot water in each hand. “Will you need assistance, ma’am?” the girl asked Mama.

“Non , I can manage.”

The maid seemed flustered at that. Obviously, titled persons usually required someone to bathe them. Ridiculous! thought Gwen as she intervened. “We have been on a crowded ship for weeks. Privacy and quiet will be a delight for a few hours.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the girl mumbled, leaving the towels on the edge of the tub and giving a curtsy. “We will return with more water and then leave you alone. The other tub has

already been filled, Your Grace.”

Gwen blinked at the title. For the love of Hercules, this would take some getting used to.

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Miles raised a glass of champagne. “To family.” The duke and marchioness raised their glasses and echoed the sentiment. “I hope your rooms are to your liking?”

“And more,” said Shackerley. “We appreciate your help.”

“Of course.” Miles refilled their glasses as the clear broth was served. “Tomorrow, if you’re rested enough, we will proceed to London. There we will see my solicitor and find you one as well. We will also petition the Crown to recognize your claim.”

“What will that entail?” asked Shackerley, dipping his spoon into the soup and closing his eyes as the broth hit his tongue.

“We present how the patent was originally created, what the conditions of inheritance are, and trace you as a descendant of the late duke.” Miles tasted his soup and frowned.

It was good but not worthy of Shackerley’s reaction.

“I presume the food on the ship was not of the best quality. You will put the weight back on here in England.”

“Pardon?” asked the duke.

“I—your clothes are a bit loose. I assumed you lost a bit on the journey?”

“Oh, yes! Of course, I’ve found I like the extra room.

My limbs have more freedom.” Shackerley took another sip of champagne.

“The sea voyage was enthralling. We even encountered a storm. I watched the sailors in awe as they moved around the deck, securing lines and sails, moving as one. It was almost like a dance.”

“You have an adventurous nature. Do you hunt?” His cousin’s exuberance would do Miles himself some good. He remembered being so young and full of life.

“No, I’m afraid I don’t ride. We didn’t travel and had a small carriage at our disposal.” The duke looked up and saw Miles’s surprised expression. “I would love to learn, however.”

“A carriage at your disposal? You did not own one of your own?” Miles hadn’t even considered their financial state, assuming the marquess had left his family well off. Then again, if he was cast out by his father, he may not have had an independent source of income.

“I’m afraid my Harry did not leave us financially secure.

He leased some land before he died, but I had no money to continue his vision.

Loans are not often given to women, especially those without some kind of collateral.

” Lady Graywood took a deep breath. “I threw myself on the mercy of my sister and her husband. They took us in, were generous with all they had, but...”

“I apologize, my lady,” Miles said, wanting to kick himself.

“Of course, you did what you had to in order to survive and keep your children safe. And a fine job too.” He glanced at Shackerley, who nodded in agreement.

“There will be no more worries about money in your lifetime. You may put your mind at ease on that matter. The coffers of the dukedom should provide for generations to come if handled properly.”

Another matter he would like to help guide the young duke with. He’d seen his share of wastrels, spending money as if it came from an eternal fountain. He also understood how quickly a bad investment could ruin the family name.

Lady Graywood blinked back tears. “ Merci .”

He reached out to cover her hand. “We are cousins, ma’am. I hope you will learn to trust me and know I will always be just a post away if you should need me.”

“So tell me of this fascinating voyage.” Miles turned his attention to Shackerley and changed the subject.

The duke began a recant of all he’d seen on the ship, from the crew working the deck and their camaraderie to how the livestock had been managed and how the passengers in steerage lived.

“And the freedom... It was exhilarating. Walking the deck, the salt spray on your face, the sun on your back. The feel of the ship beneath my feet as I learned to balance the waves and remain standing.” Shackerley laughed.

“The first few days I moved as if I was drunk, but by the end of the voyage, I was moving as sure as the crew.”

Miles enjoyed listening to the account, so full of excitement, so positive about everything he’d experienced. Shackerley was a breath of fresh air. There was an instant kinship between them, and Miles enjoyed being the one to introduce this new life to his cousin.

He watched Lady Graywood's eyes as her son spoke. The love shone brightly, and Miles had a pang of regret for never knowing his own mother.

The dinner was over too soon, and Miles looked forward to the next few weeks with his newfound family. He would offer to accompany them to Shackerley Place and get them settled in. Shackerley would need help learning how to run the estate.

* * *

Two days later

London

Gwen bit her lip watching Lord Wickton dismount. His thigh muscles flexed as he threw a leg over his mount, and his backside... She gave a little squeak. The viscount was making her role much harder to maintain. If only he wasn't so handsome, so understanding, so humorous...

"Stop staring," hissed her mother. "He will see you."

Gwen's eyes snapped back to the inside of the carriage as Wickton approached the carriage. "I'm trying. Sometimes my eyes have a mind of their own, but I will be more diligent."

"If he finds out our scheme, he may send us back to Boston. I would be happy to never step foot on a ship again. And I find I've missed England." Her mother sniffed. "I believe we'll be happy here as soon as Graham finds us."

The plan was to impersonate her brother, then remain quietly at their new home until Graham was found. Then he would announce the arrival of his sister, with no one ever knowing she had stood in his place for a time. All's well that ends well, as

Shakespeare said.

“We have arrived at my humble abode,” announced Wickton, opening the door as the tiger jumped from the back of the carriage to put down the steps. He held his hand up for her mother, and Gwen followed.

Oh, the simple pleasure of not having to wait on a man to descend.

She stood with hands on her hips, staring up at the three-storied townhouse.

It was located near the end of a crescent, each home similar but with different friezes, porticos, gates to distinguish the different residences.

The Wickton facade included flowering plants flanking each step, graceful pillars, and a detailed plaster pineapple above the entry.

To the right, a bay window reflected the afternoon light.

The door opened as they ascended the few steps, and a butler greeted them. “My lord, it is good to see you again.” The stoic gentleman bowed when Miles introduced them. “Your rooms have been prepared. I will have the water sent up for a bath and a tray in case you are hungry.”

Wickton took off his hat and handed it to the butler. “Thank you, Wilburs. Efficient as always. What would we do without you?”

The butler simply nodded as he collected Gwen’s beaver hat and her mother’s bonnet.

“Oh, and Wilburs, have one of the footmen act as manservant for His Grace until we can find him someone permanent.”

Gwen's breath caught. "Oh, please, don't go to the trouble. I'm quite used to taking care of myself."

The viscount grinned at her, and her insides melted a bit. His smile was devastating, and combined with his amber flecked eyes and chiseled jaw, her body reacted despite her vow not to let him affect her. "We can't have you starting a scandal as soon as you arrive."

"I just need time to adjust. Everything has happened so quickly." She tried a jaunty smile, hoping it wasn't more of a grimace. "Once we are settled, we can find someone. I'm sure one of my grandfather's servants will suit."

"As you wish. Shall we go to our rooms?" Wickton held out his arm, indicating the upper level.

To their right was a staircase. To the left appeared to be a parlor. She followed her mother and the maid up the stairs to the second floor. The room at the top of the stairs held a pianoforte. "Mama," she whispered and pointed at the open door.

She smiled at her mother's pleased gasp. "I hope he won't mind if I play."

"I would be delighted," came his deep tenor behind them. "Consider this your home while we are in London. The library is also well stocked, though not as extensive as the one at my estate or Shackerley Place."

Gwen halted at the sound of his voice, and he almost ran into her.

His scent tickled her nostrils, leather and bergamot, and heat rushed through her.

She drew in a breath. Get hold of yourself!

But it was difficult. She'd had flirtations, but no man had ever affected her like this.

Wings in her belly, heart pounding, cheeks flushed, heat pouring through her like flames rising in the hearth.

It was wondrous and frightening... and dangerous. For she was Graham, not Gwendolyn.

Just enjoy his company and stick to the plan.

But turning to look up at him, she was lost in the gold flecks of his light-brown eyes. It took all her willpower to hold back the sigh that bubbled in her throat.

Their rooms were as well-appointed as the first hotel in Liverpool.

These were larger, with wider wardrobes and chairs before the fireplace.

A window seat looked out upon the park across from the townhouse.

It would be a nice place to stroll on a pleasant afternoon or evening.

She opened the window, letting in a slight breeze, and listened to a bird calling its mate from a nearby tree.

Below, their carriage pulled away from the house, probably heading to a nearby stable.

Gwen wrapped her arms around herself and twirled in a circle.

She'd done the right thing. This plan would save them from starvation.

But a little voice reminded her that Mr. Barnaby might have saved them too.

Yet, how cruel would it have been to both of them, marrying without love?

Or worse, if he'd cared for her and she had not reciprocated.

The shopkeeper had been so kind and generous, and she had true affection for him.

He deserved someone who would dote on him in return.

Would she have felt the same if she'd never met the viscount?

Miles. She said the name in silence, enjoyed rolling it around in her mouth, him on her lips.

Perhaps Lord Wickton had ruined any chances at a happy union with any other man.

Coming to know her as Graham, would he ever consider caring for her as Gwen?

Or would their relationship be permanently altered?

She pushed the thoughts away since it made no difference at this point. One does what one must in order to survive. As long as Graham was found, this story would end well. Then why were there knots in her stomach at the thought?

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The next day

Miles was relieved to receive the note from Sir Samuel Shepherd. The Attorney General was in Town and available for an appointment. They would be free to head for Shackerley Place once the meeting had been dispensed with.

He had risen early, taken care of some correspondence, and visited Jackson's for a quick bout with a friend. He enjoyed boxing and went to the pugilist's whenever he was in London. It was a constructive way to work out his frustrations.

Miles had taken up the sport after his sister and her husband died in a carriage accident.

It had happened while he and his father were trying to restore the family estate after a devastating investment loss.

The combined debacles had broken his father, and his health failed within a year of losing his daughter.

Raging at the hand fate had dealt him, Miles had gone on a binge in London.

Two weeks of liquor, women, and gambling.

Fortunately, he'd sobered up before he'd lost everything his father had hoped to regain.

A friend of the family had taken Miles under his wing, seeing the destructive pattern.

He'd dragged a hungover Miles to Jackson's and put him in the ring.

The first punch had sent Miles reeling, surprised a man so much older had the strength to plant a facer like that.

He'd cast his accounts, then turned on his father's friend, angry and embarrassed.

But as he fought back, the tension had eased in his shoulders, the heaviness in his chest lifting.

The sport had been cathartic for him, saved him in a way.

That had been five years ago, the two had continued their correspondence, and Miles had taken up boxing.

Above, he heard the sound of music. Taking the stairs two at a time, he found Shackerley and Lady Graywood at the pianoforte, his first cousin playing with gusto and his second cousin humming along.

He had a nice voice, a little high for Miles's taste, but clear and steady. When he entered, they both stopped.

"Good news! We have an appointment with the Attorney General later this afternoon. He's only in Town for two more days, so our timing is excellent.

Once he approves the claim, he will refer it to the Crown.

Unless there are multiple claimants, which I can't imagine since I'm the next in line, then you officially receive the dukedom.

" He paused, realizing he'd been speaking so fast he'd barely taken a breath.

Shackerley was rubbing off on him.

But the young duke went pale. “I don’t know what to say to him. What if he doesn’t believe us? What if we don’t have enough documentation?”

“Easy, there. Sir Samuel is a good man, besides knowing your grandfather and your father. He’ll only need to look at you and see the resemblance. There will be no other inquiry.” Miles squeezed Shackerley’s shoulder. “I’ll be there with you.”

The duke nodded, but worry still darkened his blue eyes. “What about my mother?”

“Oh, there’s no need for her to go. In fact, I’m not sure Sir Samuel would appreciate a woman accompanying us.

But”—he turned to Lady Graywood with an apologetic look—“if you would entrust me with your marriage documents and bible, we will see this matter done and forge ahead. We might leave for your new home within a few days.”

* * *

Gwen gripped her knees, her fingernails scraping her trousers.

Beside her, Wickton gave her an encouraging smile.

Sir Samuel Shepherd was an intimidating figure.

His hair—was it a wig?—was grayish white, and his pale-blue eyes peered down an aquiline nose as he considered Gwen. Would she pass muster?

“It’s as if I’m sitting before old Shackerley in our youth.

Those family lines haven't diluted much in the last two generations, have they?

" said the Attorney General with a warm smile.

"I don't see anything to hinder your claim, Your Grace .

I will say you have quite a reputation to live up to.

Your grandfather was a highly respected man. "

"And my father?" Gwen asked, hoping she didn't sound impertinent.

"Eh?" he asked, cupping his hand around his ear. "Cotter?"

"My father?" she repeated, thankful Wickton had warned her about the lawyer's deafness.

"I'm sorry to say I didn't know him well. It was a shame they had a falling out." Sir Samuel shook his head. "I'm sure Shackerley regretted it at the end."

Wickton cleared his throat, an odd expression on his handsome face. "I wanted to accompany them to Shackerley Place, get His Grace acquainted with the estate and tenants. He hasn't had the upbringing of a typical duke, so his knowledge is limited."

"Radical duke?" asked Sir Samuel, confusion drawing his brows together.

"Typical. Typical duke," repeated Wickton.

"Of course, of course. I can't think of a better mentor than Wickton, here," the Attorney General said to Gwen. "He was quite the wizard bringing back his family's estate."

Gwen had wondered about Miles's life and his past. It sounded as if he had also gone through some troubled times.

Maybe he would eventually share his story with her.

She studied his handsome profile, noted the slight hook in his nose, the strong jaw, and her heart thumped.

She had only managed this interview because of him. She seemed to draw on his strength.

Both men rose, and Gwen followed suit, holding out her hand to shake Sir Samuel's. "Thank you for your assistance," she said. "I'm not sure what I'd do without my cousin's help."

"I hope we meet again under happier circumstances. I might stop at your estate on my way to Scotland this summer."

"A long visit?" asked Wickton.

"No, no. Just visiting some friends. A beautiful place, Scotland. You should visit Edinburgh sometime," he said to Gwen, walking them to his office door. "It's been a pleasure, gentlemen."

* * *

A week later

The coach hit a rut, bouncing its occupants off the cushions. Gwen hit her head on the window shutter, her hand flailing for the leather hand grab near her head. "For the love of Hercules, I swear my brain is scrambled."

Wickton laughed and gave her an elbow in the side. “Your son needs a tougher skin,” he said to her mother, sitting across from them.

“Or a thicker skull,” answered Mama with a smirk.

Gwen stuck her tongue out in response.

“What shall we do to pass the time?” asked Wickton. “We’ve played I Spy enough for a lifetime.”

“Can you sing?” Gwen asked the viscount.

“I’m told I can hold a tune.”

“We’ll sing ‘Oranges and Lemons’,” she said. “I haven’t heard that one since I was a child. Let’s see if we remember the words.”

“Oh, I’ll begin,” said Mama, “for I’m certain I remember the opening lines.” She began in a clear voice:

Gay go up and gay go down,

To ring the bells of London town.

Oranges and lemons,

Say the bells of St. Clements.

Bull’s eyes and targets,

Say the bells of St. Margret’s.

“That’s all I can remember off the top of my head,” her mother concluded.

Gwen looked at her cousin, who shook his head, so she took up the next verses:

Brickbats and tiles,

Say the bells of St. Giles’.

Halfpence and farthings,

Say the bells of St. Martin’s.

Pancakes and fritters,

Say the bells of St. Peter’s.

She paused. “I know pancakes and fritters are for the baker. Halfpence and farthings are for the banker. What about brickbats and tiles?”

“Builders,” supplied the viscount.

“Ah,” said Gwen before she continued:

Two sticks and an apple,

Say the bells of...

She tapped her bottom lip with her forefinger, and Miles supplied, “Whitechapel.”

“Very good,” she commended and sang on:

Pokers and tongs,

Say the bells of St. John's.

Kettles and pans,

Say the bells of St. Ann's.

Old Father Baldpate,

Say the slow bells of Aldgate.

“On a return trip to London, I must give you both a tour of these churches and steeples,” said Wickton. “We have some beautiful chapels.”

“We'll look forward to that,” Gwen said. Handsome and thoughtful.

“I remember more,” exclaimed Mama.

You owe me ten shillings,

Say the bells of St. Helen's.

When will you pay me?

Say the bells of Old Bailey.

When I grow rich,

Say the bells of Shoreditch.

Gwen sang along:

Pray when will that be?

Say the bells of Stepney.

I do not know,

Says the great bell of Bow.

Her cousin added his deep timbre:

Here comes a candle to light you to bed,

Here comes a chopper to chop off your head.

Chop chop chop chop

The last man's dead!

“Mama, do you remember the time Gr... Gwendolyn threw a tantrum when she was caught in the trap at the end of the song?”

Her mother's eyes went wide, then she caught herself, and nodded. “Oh, my. She tried to throw herself against the arms of the poor girls holding her hostage. She was successful. She broke through the gate and fell right into a mud puddle. Oh, the outrage!”

Gwen laughed at the memory, forgetting Wickton had lost a sister and her family. She put a hand on his arm. “Do you miss her?”

He instinctively understood who she meant, his face slack as his smile disappeared. “Every day. But I’m no longer alone. I have family once again.” Wickton put his arm around Gwen’s shoulder and squeezed, the smile returning. “You have no idea how much it means to me to have both of you here.”

“We are happy to have found another relative too.” Gwen resisted the urge to lay her cheek against the hand resting on her shoulder. When he removed it, her skin felt chilled, and she longed to have his warmth again.

“Speaking of Lady Gwendolyn, why didn’t she come with you?” asked Wickton.

“She hates the sea,” said her mother in a rush.

“Is she younger or older?”

“Younger,” Gwen said, “by only a few minutes, she would be sure to include.”

“Twins?” Wickton looked shocked. “I’ve never known a set of twins. Identical?”

Gwen nodded. “There is some difference, being the opposite sex, but yes. If you know me, you will recognize her.”

“Fascinating!”

“Gwendolyn will come later once we’re settled. She didn’t want to make the trip twice if we returned to Boston. Women,” she added, rolling her eyes.

“Who will accompany her? She cannot travel alone.” Concern shone in his golden-brown eyes. “I could make the trip if need be.”

“Oh non !” Mama said a little too quickly. “I mean, she’s tutoring the children of a

prominent Boston family. Teaching them French. They were planning a trip abroad and said they would stop in England first.”

“Then on to France to practice their French?” he asked.

“Precisely!” Gwen mentally smacked herself for not thinking of that earlier.

Graham had been gone so long, she thought of him in a more distant sense. Someone who would return to them someday. Mr. Barnaby knew a man who had taken four years to make his fortune. Graham’s year-long absence wasn’t so unusual.

Now, thinking of Miles losing his sister, her heart ached for her brother.

Was he safe? She was still certain he was alive.

They were kindred souls, and she would feel it if...

Oh, to see him now, to hear his laughter, to pretend ire at his teasing.

Gwen blinked back the hot tears, turning to look out the carriage.

Once Graham arrived, their life would be perfect.

They would be a family again, settle down in the English countryside, and never worry about money or their next meal.

“I’m not usually a sentimental man,” the viscount was saying when her emotions were under control, “but I must say finding my cousins has been the best thing to happen to me in years.” His cheeks flushed as he made his declaration.

“We feel the same,” said Gwen, joy rebounding until guilt niggled at her ear. How

would he feel when he learned he'd been duped? Their growing friendship was threatening to ruin her plan. He would never believe Graham was Graham after so much time together. Eventually, she would have to confess.

"I can't believe how fond I've grown of you both in such a short time. It must be the familial bond." He gave a sheepish grin and shrugged.

Mama smiled and reached over to pat Wickton's cheek. "We can never have enough family, Miles. We're so happy to have found you. I didn't think Shackerley had a decent relative except for my husband."

"He had good points," said the viscount, "but he was so stubborn. Once he'd made up his mind or issued an ultimatum, he couldn't retreat.

As you'll see, he was liked by his tenants and did well by them.

He wasn't what I would call a generous man, but he was fair and never shirked his responsibilities. "

They were the first kind words she'd ever heard about her grandfather. There had been another side to him. Perhaps if her father had offered the olive branch, the old duke would have taken it. Now they would never know.

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Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 11:10 am

The next day

Shackerley Place

Miles could see the turrets peeking over the tree line.

He was on horseback today but staying close to the carriage to see his cousins' reaction to their new home.

In less than a month, he was already wondering how he would fare without Lady Graywood and Graham.

The marchioness was a maternal soul, and he enjoyed being mothered.

Graham had become a friend. One he could laugh with, throw back a brandy with, and talk to.

He felt... content when he was with his cousin.

As if they had always meant to be friends, to be together.

I sound like a ridiculous poet. But it was true. He hadn't felt such a bond with anyone, though he had a variety of friends. A few close companions from university who still corresponded, his steward, several men at the clubs in London.

Miles would have a family to spend the holidays with.

Christmastide would be something to look forward to again.

These last weeks had made him consider taking a wife, adding his own children to the family events he was planning in his mind.

He hadn't realized how lonely he'd been until these cousins burst into his life.

"Mama," cried Shackerley from the carriage window, "it's magnificent."

He grinned because Graham was correct. A fifteenth-century castle on a hill with stone battlements connecting four turrets on each corner.

The drawbridge had been replaced with a permanent bridge, but the heavy oak and steel gate remained.

The inner courtyard was a massive front lawn where he'd played lawn bowls as a child.

Behind the castle was a garden with a huge maze.

He remembered hiding from Alice and making her cry when she thought he was lost. His sweet sister, trying to take their mother's place, had always looked after him.

Miles blinked, his eyes wet. I'm turning into a sentimental old sap, he thought.

Yet he didn't feel sorrow, rather eagerness to see what the future would hold.

Where last month, his hopes had been limited, now the horizon seemed to spread out before him.

He could almost feel his father's presence, his eyes on Miles's back, smiling with

pride and happiness for his son.

“It’s been a long time coming, Father,” he said to the clouds above. “But I think a full and content life may lie ahead.”

He relaxed in the saddle and listened to his cousins ramble on about their castle, enjoying Graham’s youthful excitement.

Miles wondered if he’d ever been that young, that naïve.

Yet there was intelligence in the duke’s conversations.

He would brook no fools, and Miles would be by his side to be sure of it.

The carriage rattled over the stone bridge, and as it passed beneath the portcullis, Graham cried from the window, “My horse, my horse, my kingdom for a horse!” Laughter followed, and Miles’s heart was light when they entered the courtyard.

Mr. Garner was already standing on the portico to greet them.

He had resumed his usual exterior of the sedate and proper butler, his gray hair neatly combed back, his black coat, waistcoat, and trousers a sharp contrast to his pristine white cravat.

“Welcome, your ladyship, Your Grace, my lord,” he said with a bow. “Welcome to Shackerley Place.”

Miles enjoyed the reaction on his cousins’ faces at their first glimpses of the estate, taking their rightful places after so long. “For the love of Hercules,” whispered Shackerley, then whistled. “Were you here before, Mama?”

She nodded, blinking rapidly. “Once, when Harry told his father of our marriage. I was shown to the parlor—there to your right. I have not seen the rest of the house.”

Miles hadn’t realized Lady Greywood had visited the castle. It must be a bittersweet memory, remembering the beginning of her loving marriage, then the rude reception of her father-in-law.

“Once you are settled, I will give you a tour at your convenience,” said Mr. Garner. “Your bedchambers have been prepared.”

Before them, the wide entry hall held several portraits of past generations, some medieval weapons, and at the far end, guarding the double staircase, were two suits of armor.

Several footmen passed them, hauling trunks to their rooms. They followed the butler in the wake of their luggage.

Stopping on the second step, Shackerley knocked on the helmet of a suit of armor.

“Hello in there,” he said with a guffaw.

Mr. Garner frowned over his shoulder, then continued his climb. The duke wagged his brows at Miles and his mother, his dimple showing with a wide grin. “This will be an adventure. I feel like I’m in a gothic novel.”

“Wait till I take you up to the battlements,” said Miles. “My sister and I used to shoot arrows from the top, pretending to be knights defending the castle from attack.”

“Could you teach me archery?” asked Shackerley. “I’ve always wanted to play Robin Hood.”

Miles snorted. “As long as I’m not supposed to be Maid Marian.”

* * *

Gwen hugged herself once she was alone in her chambers. The duke’s chamber was large and decidedly masculine with the counterpane, carpet, and curtains in dark blues and golds. The tester bed was huge, and the tall windows were all open, letting in a cool breeze off the fields behind the castle.

There was a rug outside the bedroom door, and she’d asked Mr. Garner what it was for.

“For His Grace’s bloodhound. He was quite devoted to his pack and especially the bloodhound,” he’d answered.

“The dog was trained to sleep there and guard his master. I tried to keep him in the stable at night, but he only howled for hours. So I let him in before I retire and let him out when I get up.”

A dog! Gwen had always wanted a dog. “What is its name?”

“Harry,” the butler had answered.

Harry was her father’s name. Had her grandfather given the dog his son’s name out of affection or as a cruel joke?

Yet Mr. Garner had said the old duke was devoted to the bloodhound, so perhaps...

Perhaps her grandfather had loved his son after all.

Men and their emotions were such a conundrum.

Women didn't need such pretenses. They laughed when amused, frowned when angry, and cried when sad.

No silly mask to hide their feelings. She was suddenly thankful she only had to be a man temporarily.

Her mother knocked on the door. "May I come in?"

"Of course, Mama," she said, running to open it. "Can you believe we will be living here?"

Her mother gave Gwen a weak smile. "It is a lovely place."

"But your memories here are not happy."

"Non, I'm afraid not. But I believe you will be. You have taken to this country like you are completely English and not half French." She kissed Gwen on the cheek. "You've done an admirable job so far."

"With your help. Giving me the look when I forget my voice, binding my chest every morning, tying my cravat. I'll never become adept at those pesky neckcloths." She hugged Mama. "I do hope you get used to living here. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"My options are staying or going back on one of those dreaded ships. At this moment, I'm not sure which would be worse."

Gwen walked to the window and leaned over the sill, breathing in the warm air and gazing out over the landscape.

Below was a side yard leading to the stable, and beyond that a patchwork of green

pastures and fields of hay, ending with a tree line.

All this space where Boston had been so crowded.

She would begin her riding lessons tomorrow.

“Dear, we need to discuss dinner. We’ve been rather informal, what with all the hotels and coaching inns, but there is etiquette to be followed at the table.”

Gwen walked across the room and flopped on the mattress, letting out a groan before bolting upright. “Do you think he died here, on this mattress?”

Her mother shook her head and laughed. “We do think alike. Non , Mr. Garner said the top mattress was thrown away and replaced with a new one. You should be quite comfortable.”

Falling back again on the soft bed, she closed her eyes. “So tell me how horrible my American manners are. What do I need to remember tonight?”

“First, I’ve already taught you not to reach across anyone at the table.

As a man, if we have guests, you must offer to plate any dishes nearby for the female next to you.

Only take one of anything when we are entertaining.

Tonight, when the soup and fish are served, I will serve the soup, and you will slice the fish.

For the second course, you will slice the beef, but we will help ourselves to those side dishes already set out.

” Her mother tapped her chin in thought.

“Oh, and you will ask Wickton if he would like to have a brandy afterwards, then join us in the drawing room.”

“Us?”

“Well, any female guests. When it is only our family, we do not have to leave over the brandy. Wickton might not drink it after every meal. For men, it’s more of a social activity.

” She sat on the bed next to Gwen. “I’ll give you more tidbits as they come to me.

It’s been awhile since I’ve had to follow such etiquette.

Boston society has its proprieties, but the circles in which we traveled were not so rigid. ”

The strict conventions kept by the English would be an annoyance, but she would adjust. “A bath, a tour, and a decadent meal should be the end of a perfect week.”

“I will admit I haven’t had one pang of hunger since we left Boston,” her mother agreed. “I am having qualms about our plan. Though you and Graham are twins, you are still obviously male and female. Miles will see the difference between you and your brother.”

“I’ve been thinking about that too,” she admitted, fiddling with her cravat. “We need to find a way to tell him before Graham is knocking at our door. I’m feeling terribly guilty, and it’s not fair to blindside the poor man.”

“He rescued us, and in turn, we’ve deceived him.” Her mother rose from the bed and

walked to the door. “We will have to find a way to tell him.”

Without him hating me. That would break her heart.

At the end of the evening, she met Harry.

He was mostly a chestnut brown—liver and tan, Mr. Garner had called his coloring—with the longest ears Gwen had ever seen.

His eyes sagged a bit, as if he were sad or tired, and he had jowls that occasionally dripped drool.

His tail was long and his skin loose, aiding his ability to track a scent she was told. Gwen was smitten.

After dressing in her night rail, Gwen studied the signet ring with intertwining W’s that Miles had given her at dinner.

He had received it from her grandfather when he had thought to become the duke, some token that represented an elite group of peers.

Her neighbor, the Duke of Cranbrook, would explain more, Miles had said.

She would pass the signet ring on to Graham.

For now, she left it in the porcelain box that held Graham’s cufflinks since it was much too heavy and large for her finger.

When melancholy hit her, lying alone in a strange bed, she wondered if she was falling in love with a viscount who might hate her in the near future.

All the talk of deception with Mama made her heart heavy with guilt.

Her brother's image danced before her closed eyelids, sending a knot to her gut.

What if he didn't want to be a duke, and she had sealed his fate?

Panic ripped through her at the thought, tears pricking her eyes, and she let out a soft sob.

She missed him so. Gwen was still certain he was alive, but lately, some imperceptible worry had been niggling in her chest. Something was wrong, though she had no idea what it could be or how she could find out.

A scratch at the door stopped her in mid sob.

Then a whine. She rose and walked to the door, to find Harry scratching at it.

Had he heard her? She dropped to her knees and stroked his ears.

He looked up at her with those droopy eyes and licked the tears off her cheek.

The unspoken sympathy and comfort stirred another round of tears, and Gwen threw her arms around the hound's neck.

When the tears subsided, Harry licked them away again, leaving a slimy mess on her cheeks and sending her into a round of giggles. "You're a silly dog, Harry. And tonight, you are sleeping with me. Come."

The bloodhound padded behind her, jumping upon the mattress when she invited him with a pat. "I think you've done this before, sir," she said with a laugh. "Thank you, I feel somewhat cleansed."

A rumbling woof echoed through the room as the hound's long tail thumped the counterpane. Drifting off to sleep, her fingers sinking in the smooth, loose skin of the dog, her last thought was, I must tell him soon.

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A week later

Late June

Miles grinned up at Graham and slapped the duke's riding boot, nestled in the stirrup. "You're doing a fine job. Balance is key, but it's also not something easily learned. You have a natural aptitude in the saddle."

"I thought I would die the first few rides. My legs and back ached so. I still don't think I'd enjoy being in the saddle for hours, as you do when accompanying us beside the carriage.

"The duke wiggled in the saddle, getting comfortable.

He sat on a docile bay gelding, its deep-brown hide gleaming in the afternoon sun.

"Let's leave the paddock and take a ride into the village. The steward needs to speak with us, and we can stop by his place on the way," suggested Miles, handing the crop to his cousin. "I think if we keep a sedate pace you will be fine."

Shackerley had asked Miles to take charge and allow him to "be like a shadow," learning as he went and following Miles's lead. It was a sound plan, and it would overwhelm the young man as he saw the massive amount of details there were to running an estate. Even with a good steward.

They left the stable yard, Shackerley whistling for his new best friend, who padded along behind them. Mounted on his own black steed, Miles and the duke ambled

across several fields as Miles pointed out boundaries, different crops, and a little history of the estate.

“In the early 1400s, the first Duke of Shackerley was given this land near the border to protect the Crown from Scottish rebellions and raids. Later, he supplied an army for the Lancastrians during the wars of the Roses,” Miles explained.

“There is a long history of loyalty and duty to the Crown in this family.”

“We’ve inherited quite a legacy,” said Shackerley. “I only hope we continue to bring honor to the name.”

“You come from determined stock, Cousin. I believe you shall make an excellent duke.” Miles wondered at the doubt in Shackerley’s tone.

Then again, he was in a new land, with new expectations and responsibilities.

The steward had recognized Graham as a Beaumaris immediately, as did some of the older tenants.

The duke had a relaxed way about him, putting the villagers and tenants at ease as they discussed their needs and talking in a personable manner rather than in a condescending way. Miles doubted his cousin had a patronizing bone in his body, and he hoped the dukedom didn’t change that.

“I had no idea a duke had to care for so many people, affected so many lives. My grandfather appears to have wielded his power carefully, not using a heavy hand,” said Shackerley. “I was under the impression the late duke had been somewhat of a curmudgeon.”

“I wouldn’t go so far as to say he was jovial, but he was not harsh.

I believe the rift between him and your father had more to do with how the marriage took place.

” Miles wasn’t a gossip, but he did have his own opinion of what had happened.

“Your father had gone to London on business for the duke. He ended up staying for several months, and when he returned, it was with your mother. They were already married.”

“So he was taken by surprise,” said Shackerley. “I can see it being quite a jolt to suddenly learn his heir has married, and others knew before he did. But to never relent in his position...”

“The duke’s pride was always an issue, according to my father. He refused to be the first to back down, and your father started a new life in Quebec.”

“Yet Grandfather named his favorite hound Harry.”

Miles shook his head. “Who knows what might have happened had your father survived.”

“You’re right, of course. Mama always blamed herself.

A penniless daughter of an immigrant Frenchman, who was chased from his own country during the Reign of Terror.

It was not an advantageous match, but Mama said they were so in love.

She believed my father could do anything.

” The young duke paused. “Except conquer a fever the winter after we were born.”

“So you never knew your father?” he asked.

Shackerley shook his head. “We know about him, his life, his portrait, through my mother.”

“My mother died giving birth to me, so she’s not even a memory. We learn we have more in common every day.” Miles felt the bond between them strengthen.

“Was your sister older?”

He nodded. “By ten years. I was a miracle babe. The physician had told my father that she would never carry another child.” Miles shrugged. “Yet here I am.”

“And I’m so glad you are!” said the duke, giving Miles a wistful glance.

“What happened to your estate? Why did Sir Samuel call you a wizard?” Shackerley grimaced. “I apologize. I shouldn’t pry.”

“We’re family. You’re allowed.” Miles gave him a reassuring smile.

“The estate had some trouble a few years in a row. Bad weather, then disease hit the sheep. So he decided to put his available cash into a ship. So many people were making a fortune during the War, and he thought to try his luck as well.”

“He wasn’t lucky I take it.”

“He invested in a ship with two other men, then purchased manufactured goods—cloth, guns, and luxuries such as tea and wine—to trade in America. They planned on bringing back raw cotton on the return journey.” Miles sighed.

“He would have been out of Dunn territory if the voyage had been successful.”

“But?”

“Once docked, the goods were unloaded. That night, before payment was exacted, the entire shipment was stolen. Then some drunken radicals sought revenge for the impressment of English-born, naturalized Americans into the Royal Navy. They set the ship afire.” He gave a mirthless laugh.

“If anyone tells me they have a foolproof investment, I run the other way.”

“What about the insurance?” asked the duke.

“The certificate covered the cargo as long as it was on the water—whether the ship was attacked or sunk—but once it was unloaded, Lloyd’s of London was no longer responsible.”

“Why didn’t he ask my grandfather for help?”

Miles snorted.

“Pride,” they both said at once and laughed.

* * *

“I’ll bring over the lavender for your bath,” Mama said as they both stopped at their chamber doors. “It will help you sleep tonight after your long ride.”

“Thank you,” Gwen said, looking forward to soaking in the hot water.

She had done well on the ride, but a total of three hours had taken a toll on her muscles.

The estate manager had informed them that he was retiring.

Gwen had hoped he had a son or nephew who could take over, but no such luck.

Wickford had assured her they would find another.

The manager would stay on long enough to help transition his replacement. .

Closing the door, she went through Graham's clothes in the wardrobe and chose a pair of trousers, waistcoat, linen shirt, and stockings to wear to dinner. She had just tossed her cravat and shirt on the floor when her mother knocked on the door.

"For the love of Hercules, come in," she said, clad in only the trousers and the binding around her chest.

She looked up to see the shocked face of Mr. Garner. "I beg my-your pardon, Y-Your Grace," he stuttered.

Gwen screamed, wrapping her arms around her the strips of cloth covering her breasts. Behind her, Mama gasped. "I-I can explain," Gwen began, wondering how she would.

The stricken butler closed his eyes and turned to leave.

"Wait," she cried, scrambling for her shirt and tossing it over her head. "Don't leave, Mr. Garner."

Mama held out her arms, blocking his way. Then she pushed the poor man backwards, his eyes still closed, and slammed the door shut. "You can open your eyes now," her mother told him.

He did but refused to turn around. Gwen had to walk around him and stand in front of him.

She saw a sheen of sweat on his brow and realized how shaken this proper man was.

Gwen took his arm and marched him to a chair, walked to the wardrobe, and withdrew a bottle of whisky the old duke had kept hidden there.

Pulling the stopper out of the bottle, she handed it to Mr. Garner. “Drink, you’ll feel better. Or so I’ve been told.”

“You will,” echoed Mama from experience. “Now, it isn’t what you think. My children are twins. Gwendolyn is only taking Graham’s place until he arrives. Then they will switch and tell everyone his sister has arrived.”

The butler took a long pull off the bottle, then held it with both hands, his eyes darting back and forth between mother and daughter.

“Although Graham doesn’t know we’re here yet.

The investigators are tracking him in Canada, someplace with lots of timber.

We think. They assured us they could find him, and they were so confident that we believed them.

And we’re sure Graham will want to be a duke, so everything will be well in the end.

” Gwen took a ragged breath. “Do you understand?”

He nodded and took several more swallows of whisky.

“Will you keep our secret?” asked Mama.

His gray eyes widened. “I cannot lie to Lord Wickton.” Another pull off the bottle.

Gwen knew how rattled the man must be to drink in front of them. “We’re not asking you to lie for us. Just don’t bring it up.”

“Or change the subject if the viscount comes too close to the truth,” added her mother, nervously smoothing her raven hair back into her chignon.

“I plan on telling him soon,” Gwen explained. “I just haven’t found the right time yet.”

“Wh-why?” croaked the butler.

“We were destitute, barely able to feed ourselves, and the house we lived in was being sold,” said Mama with a sniff. “It was agonizing not being able to provide for my daughter.”

“When we learned about the inheritance, I thought we would just begin the proceedings for my brother. A... proxy of sorts.” Gwen smiled, considering proxy a better word than substitute.

“An imposter, you mean.” The butler had found his voice.

Mama wailed, tears pouring down her cheeks in earnest as she shook her head. “I-I tried t-to talk her out of it.”

“It really is all my fault,” agreed Gwen, blinking rapidly to stall her own onslaught of hot tears and failing.

The horror on Mr. Garner's face as he realized he was trapped in a room with a bottle of whisky and two sobbing females was almost comical. Almost. He tipped back the bottle again.

Gwen went on her knees and threw her arms around the butler. "Please, don't tell Miles. I must find the right time, or he will hate me."

"And she loves him," squeaked Mama.

Mr. Garner's mouth fell open, then a slow smile curved his lips, transforming his face. "I knew something wasn't quite right. And the way Harry acted when he first met you. Smelling your trunks and the clothes you wore, then smelling your hand, only to howl."

Gwen bit her lip and held her breath, hoping the butler was softening. "I wonder if twins have a similar scent, and it puzzled him."

"And some of your mannerisms when you thought you weren't being watched..." Mr. Garner set the whisky on the floor. "You're in love with Lord Wickton?"

Gwen swallowed, her world tilting. She hadn't been sure until this moment, hearing Mama say it. "Yes, I do. For the love of Hercules, I really do."

Mr. Garner stood, took in a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "I have known the viscount since he was a child. I know the losses he has endured, the sweat he has poured into his estate—and how lonely he is."

"Well?" asked Mama, dabbing at her eyes with a sodden handkerchief.

"I will keep your secret if you promise to tell him within the week." He walked to the door and opened it. "Even if he is angry at the news, he is a reasonable man. Give

him time and he will accept—if not condone—your scheme. It’s obvious he is very fond of you.”

With that, he left them. Gwen and her mother stared at the empty doorway and then at each other. Mama collapsed in the vacated chair, picked up the bottle of whisky, and took a healthy swallow.

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Early July

Miles sifted through the correspondence his butler had sent on. He recognized the scrawl of Mr. Walters. It must be the invoice for the investigation and expenses incurred. Cracking open the envelope, he pulled out several sheets of paper as a tattoo sounded on the study door.

“Wickton, I forgot what time we were meeting for archery practice. I’ve been playing with the bow. It takes more strength than I imagined.” Shackerley dropped down in the chair opposite the desk. “I’m sorry. I’ll stay quiet until you’ve finished reading.”

Miles nodded, smiled, and unfolded the letter. Walters was not billing him. He frowned, confused.

Lord Wickton,

We have located Graham Beaumaris and returned to Boston where his sister and mother reside.

He is in good health and curious about his inheritance.

It appears Lady Gwendolyn and Lady Greywood have already departed for Liverpool.

I have purchased tickets on the packet Courier, leaving on 1 July.

We will escort the gentleman to Shackerley Place as agreed.

Enclosed is a letter for the ladies from Beaumaris.

Kind regards,

Mr. Harry Walters

O'Brien Investigative Services

Miles blinked and reread the letter. He gazed at Shackerley. Was it Shackerley? Who had the investigators found?

“Are you well?” asked his cousin. “Is it bad news?” He rose from his chair and put his hands on the desk, leaning toward Miles and the letter in his hand. “Is there anything I can do?”

Miles peered at the second sheet of paper, the handwriting scrawled but masculine. His eyes narrowed as he glared at... Lady Gwendolyn? “Yes. Perhaps you could explain this?” he asked, handing her the letter.

As soon as she recognized the handwriting, her face went pale, and she sank back into the chair.

She scanned the words, blinking rapidly, smiling at first, then her lips trembling as tears streaked her cheek.

Her hand tugged at the cravat while the hand holding the letter from her brother fell to her lap.

“Please, don’t hate me. I can explain.”

“I’m holding my breath in anticipation.” If she really were a man, he’d have dragged

her to a boxing ring and pummeled her. But she wasn't.

"We were so hungry. I was going to marry a man old enough to be my father, so we didn't starve.

Our house was being sold, leaving us homeless.

We had no idea when Graham would return or when those investigators would find him.

"She leaned forward, those sapphire-blue eyes pleading with him.

"We didn't anticipate you staying with us, becoming close to you.

We thought we would stay here quietly until Graham came, then make the switch, and none would be the wiser. "

"I was easy to dupe, wasn't I? A gullible fool, hungry for family." His voice rose as he spoke. "I vouched for you with Sir Samuel. You dallied with my reputation!"

"Sacré bleu!" said Lady Greywood from the doorway. "I see she's told you."

He glowered at the older woman. "No, she didn't. I've received a letter informing me the real duke has been found. They left Boston two days ago."

"Graham's alive?" cried the marchioness. "Oh, thank the lord."

Miles rubbed his eyes and fell back into his chair.

"I know you're angry," said Lady Greywood, approaching the desk. "We were two desperate ladies, and we took a gamble on our future. Gwen meant no harm."

Miles snorted, giving Gwen a side-glance. He saw the gentle curve of her jaw now, the slender throat, the husky but not quite masculine voice. What a nodcock he'd been.

"Sir Samuel will never know. He only met me once, and the servants might be confused, but Mr. Garner will be sure they don't say anything." Lady Gwendolyn sat up, regret darkening her doe eyes. Her full lips trembled again. "We've come to care for you so much, Miles. Please don't shut us out."

"The butler knows?" he bellowed.

"By accident," said Lady Greywood.

"He walked into my chambers and saw me without a shirt," added Lady Gwendolyn.

His mouth fell open. "Mr. Garner has seen you..."

"No!" gasped Lady Gwendolyn. "My chest was bound to hide my?—"

"Enough!" Miles took a deep breath. What would his sister have done in their place? Alice had been a strong, independent woman. She might have tried a similar ruse in a desperate situation. Yet the betrayal was like a dagger to his heart.

He stared at the female who had fast become one of his closest male friends. "You are nothing I thought you were. Our entire friendship is based on fraud. I need time to come to terms with this."

Lady Gwendolyn nodded, then wiped her cheeks with the palms of her hands. "We'll leave you alone. Shall we see you at dinner?"

"No." Miles wanted to scream, clear the muddle in his brain. "If you would both

excuse me, I need some time alone. I may return to my estate. I've neglected it of late."

* * *

Gwen collapsed on the tester bed, unwrapping the cravat, throwing it to the floor, and sinking into the feather mattress. "Mama, did you see the disgust in his eyes?" She still clutched Graham's letter, tears brimming in her eyes again.

"It was betrayal, not disgust. What did you expect?" asked her mother. "I told you this would happen."

"Thank you for your support, Mama." Gwen slammed her fist on the mattress. "Crying will not help. We need a plan."

"To win him back?"

"To win him. Obviously, I never had him." She handed her mother the letter from Graham and reread it over her shoulder.

Dear Gwen and Mama,

You devious little devils. I'm proud of your sense of adventure, but I would have appreciated it if you left more of my clothes behind.

Then again, I can afford a new wardrobe.

While I am thrilled about this inheritance, I'm not sure if acting the duke and being stranded in some dusty old mansion is quite my style.

I've been bitten by a wanderlust bug and would like to travel.

I'm sure we can find a competent man to take care of the estate while I am seeing the world.

But first, I will visit my new property and give kisses and hugs to my favorite ladies. I've missed you more than bees on honey. I have so much to tell you when we meet again.

Until then,

Your loving son and brother,

Graham

Soon to be a plump in the pocket duke!

Mama blinked and dabbed at her eyes again. "I will soon have both my children with me. My prayers are answered."

"Could you say one for me? No one seems to be listening to mine." Gwen laid her head on her mother's shoulder. "Mama, what should I do? I love him to distraction."

"The viscount needs time. Then we need to show him you're a woman." Her mother stroked her hair and kissed the top of head. "He liked Graham. He will fall in love with Gwendolyn."

"He won't even talk to me," she mumbled.

"Not in those clothes. It's time to bring out your other trunk." She stood and pulled Gwen off the bed. "We have work to do."

"Simply putting on a dress won't change his mind." She'd wear a horse head if she

thought it would help. Her heart squeezed in her chest. “He must feel absolutely terrible. I must make this right. He’s been through so much, and then his own family lies to him.”

“Nonsense. He’s a grown man who will see reason just as Mr. Garner said.” Mama entered her own chamber and went to the foot of the bed and opened the second trunk they’d brought for Gwen. “We need to bring out your best dresses.”

“And find a modiste.” The weight in Gwen’s chest was easing a little as her mother took charge. “You really think I can woo him?”

“You are still the same person he grew to care for, plus more. We need to show Miles that the ‘more’ is the best part.”

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Two days later

“Do not include me in your machinations, my ladies,” said Mr. Garner. “I’ve dealt with the staff, but I cannot engage in shenanigans.”

“But if Miles leaves, I will never be able to convince him we belong together.” Gwen was ready to pull her hair out.

The viscount had not been to supper in two nights and rose at dawn to avoid the women at breakfast. “He told me in passing that he would leave for his estate at the end of the week. Just a minor excuse is all we need to keep him here.”

“I cannot lie to Lord Wickton,” the butler repeated. “However, I might mention that his lordship will be eating an early supper today at five.”

“And our usual time is seven,” said Mama. “Thank you, Mr. Garner. You have come to our rescue.”

* * *

Miles entered the dining room and sat at the head of the table. He frowned at the two extra place settings. “Why are there two extra plates when I’m eating alone?” he asked the footman.

“Because we are joining you,” said Lady Greywood from the doorway, wearing a light-rose gown with a cream lace overlay and looking every inch the marchioness. “And please don’t do anything childish, like leaving the room.”

He stood politely but glared at her. Him, childish? “I’m not the one wearing another’s clothes pretending to be someone I’m not.” Miles nodded to the footman, who poured a glass of wine and moved to the marchioness’s chair.

“Oui, thank you. My daughter will have a glass too.” She smiled warmly at Miles. “We’ve missed you the past two nights. How have you been?”

“How do you think I’ve been?”

“Grumpy,” she said with a grin. “But we are family and will find a way past this.”

He snorted, then looked toward the door.

“Where is she?” As if summoning her with his question, Lady Gwendolyn appeared at the door, glorious long ringlets of burnished gold framing her beautiful face and trailing down her slender neck.

With flushed cheeks, her ocean-blue eyes sparkling, the smile she wore dazzled him.

She was stunning.

It was irritating.

Lady Gwendolyn wore a peach muslin dress, a bit outdated but revealing every curve, with a low neckline showing her ample bosom. He briefly wondered how uncomfortable it must have been those generous mounds, then mentally kicked himself. He didn’t care.

Did he?

His brain may not care, but his body was having a definite reaction to this prime

article.

He stood again and found his feet moving to pull out a chair for her.

What the devil was wrong with him? He was irate with this chit.

As she sat, the smell of lavender and vanilla wafted in the air, and he breathed it in.

The scent was enticing and calming at the same time.

Miles cleared his throat and returned to his seat. He would ignore them, ignore their tricks.

“I suppose I shall have to learn to ride sidesaddle now,” Lady Gwendolyn said in an attempt to make conversation. “Is it much more difficult?”

Her sultry voice washed over him, heat spreading low in his belly. Had she asked him a question? “Beg your pardon?” he croaked.

“Is sidesaddle more difficult to learn?” she asked again, her smile revealing the slight dimple in her right cheek.

Why did everything about her seem so sensuous now that she was female?

He shouldn't be attracted to her. Yet, he found he missed their conversations, their easy camaraderie.

Those treasured moments when he felt as if he belonged to someone, as if he were not alone.

Miles tossed back the wine and signaled the footman for more.

“I wouldn’t know,” he said stiffly. “I’ve never attempted it.”

Lady Gwendolyn giggled, her flaxen curls bouncing. When he sent her a dagged glare, she covered her mouth, blue eyes wide.

“What is so humorous?”

“My imagination saw you in skirts, sitting on a horse with one leg wrapped around the pummel.” She bit her lip in an attempt to hide her grin. “I apologize, the image of you in a riding habit...”

A smile pulled at his lips.

“Whatever you do, Lord Wickton, do not smile. It will chip away at your resolve to remain angry with us,” said Lady Greywood. “We would hate to cause you any more upset.”

His eyes narrowed at his cousin’s sarcastic comment, but the smile continued to grow.

“I’m having a riding habit made next week. If you’d like to try it on—just to see how it feels—I’m happy to oblige.” Lady Gwendolyn shrugged, an impish glint in her eyes. “What’s good for the goose...”

The laughter erupted like a volcano, spewing out as if it had been held back and bubbling for some time. It evolved into guffaws, both ladies joining him until all three were wiping at their eyes.

“Fine,” croaked Miles, catching his breath. “I cannot stay angry with either of you.”

“We’ve missed you,” said Lady Greywood.

“Terribly,” added Lady Gwendolyn.

He nodded. “I need both of you to promise there will be no more secrets. If we are to move forward from this, I want that guarantee.”

“Of course.”

“Without a doubt,” they said at once.

The rest of the supper was a delight. They talked, laughed, and slowly reestablished the rip in their bond. Miles was still miffed, but he knew he would get over it. He wasn’t alone again, and being part of a family wasn’t always easy. One must take the good with the bad.

* * *

“Shall I play for us?” asked Lady Greywood after dinner. “Mr. Garner found some sheet music.”

“He seems to have taken to both of you,” said Wickton, his tone sounding suspicious.

“Mama can charm anyone,” answered Gwen. “Let’s have a lively tune.”

Her mother found a reel, and Gwen’s foot began tapping. “I wish I knew how to dance to this.” She gave Wickton a side-glance.

“I suppose I could teach you,” he replied with a smirk.

They stood opposite one another as he explained the complicated dance, coming together, backing away, moving around one another, palms touching?—

A jolt ripped through her as his warm skin pressed against hers. Their eyes met, held, and time seemed to stand still. His whisky eyes darkened; she couldn't breathe. A thrum began low in her stomach as her heart pounded.

He swallowed.

She blinked.

“At-at this point, we would switch partners,” he said, his gaze still locked with hers.

She shook her head, lips parted, thinking of something to say. “I don't want another partner.” It was a whisper. He couldn't have heard.

Of course he heard.

He licked his lips, then swallowed again. His head bent slightly toward her, his eyes moving to her lips. Then he jerked back. “I believe I'm more tired than I thought. Perhaps I'll call it an evening.”

Her hand went to his forearm. “Please, don't go. We don't have to dance anymore.”

Mama called from the pianoforte. “We could sing.”

He shook his head. “No, my apologies. Thank you for a lovely evening. I must retire.” He fled the room as if the devil himself were on his heels.

“What did I do wrong?”

Her mother smiled. “Absolutely nothing, my sweet daughter. Absolutely nothing.”

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Miles looked over his shoulder after taking the hedge to see Graham close behind. The duke leaned over the horse's neck as its powerful body rose and stretched over the hedge. As the gelding landed, his front hoof plunged into a gopher hole, sending both horse and rider tumbling forward.

Rushing to the prone form of his cousin, Miles skidded to his knees and gently raised Graham's head. But as his eyes opened, the face subtly changed.

"You saved me again." Gwendolyn blinked at him, her azure gaze steady. "Kiss me."

He leaned forward, brushing his lips across hers, and desire roared through his body. Her hands slipped around his neck, fingers curling at his nape as they explored his scalp. His kiss went from tentative to hungry, his lips demanding she open to him.

When his tongue slipped inside her mouth, she whimpered, and he pulled her onto his lap. "I cannot resist anymore," he whispered against her lips. She tasted of tea and honey, her curves melding against his body as if she'd always belonged there.

When he tried to end the kiss, her lips made a trail of fire along his jaw and neck. He growled, a low animal-like sound, and he could feel her grin against his cheek. "What spell have you cast over me?" he rasped.

"You are my destiny," she whispered in his ear, her breath warm and inviting.

Miles sat up, panting. He was exhausted from the constant dreams that had invaded his sleep.

The sun was just peeking over the horizon, and he sat up with a sigh.

The vixen taunted him whether his eyes were open or closed.

He moaned, remembering how he'd rushed from the drawing room like a green boy, running from the unfamiliar emotion hammering at him.

Desire.

Not the typical physical desire he understood as a virile man. He had wanted to pull her close, no care to who was watching, and kiss her senseless. This was a dangerous desire, a need to keep her close, make her his, claim her.

Was he a deuced animal? Or was this... love? All-consuming, sweet, sensual. If it was, he understood why men committed insane acts when they were afflicted. He ran his fingers through his cropped hair and planted his bare feet firmly on the rug beside his bed.

He needed a gallop since there was no boxing ring here. A hard, sweaty ride to make his muscles sore and his mind blank. He would deal with the women later.

It was midafternoon by the time Miles sat at the desk to attend to his correspondence. He had checked the drawing room, library, and parlor with no sign of Lady Gwendolyn or Lady Greywood. Maybe they were napping or out for a walk.

By late afternoon, he left the study and found Mr. Garner. "Have you seen the ladies?"

"No, my lord," said the butler. "They have not returned yet from a visit with the neighbors."

“They are at Cranbrook’s?” Miles frowned. “They weren’t properly introduced.”

“The duchess was here a few days ago. You were... occupied.”

Avoiding Lady Gwendolyn and her mother, he meant.

“Will you be eating at the earlier time tonight or with the ladies?” asked Garner.

“I had a cold repast a bit ago, so I will dine later tonight.”

It was a lie. He hadn’t eaten anything since breakfast. Grumbling, he decided to spend some time reading. A few hours later, he glanced out a window. It was nearly dusk. Why hadn’t they returned yet?

He left the library and searched out Garner again. “I’m worried about Ladies Gwendolyn and Greywood. Do you think I should go after them? The carriage might have broken a wheel.”

The butler shook his head. “No, my lord. They are dining with the duke and duchess.”

He watched Garner walk away. Had that been a smug look in the man’s eye? Miles shook his head. He was at sixes and sevens with these women.

* * *

Miles heard Garner in the entryway, answering the door. “Good evening, ladies. I trust you had a nice visit?”

“We did,” answered Lady Greywood. “The duke and duchess are wonderful hosts. Now I am done to a thumb and shall retire.”

As the ladies walked by the open parlor door, Miles looked up with a smile, but neither woman looked in his direction. “Good evening,” he called after them.

“Oh,” said Lady Gwendolyn, “we didn’t see you in here. How are you, Lord Wickton?”

“I’ve enjoyed a quiet day,” he answered, wondering why she appeared flushed and her eyes were glazed. “Are you well?”

She nodded, a grin lighting up her blue eyes. “Wonderful. I’ve been introduced to madeira.”

That explained it. “Shall we practice archery tomorrow?”

Lady Gwendolyn arched a brow. “You are still willing to teach me?”

“Females are allowed to participate, so I see no reason not to teach you.” He gave her his most charming smile. “Unless you’ve changed your mind.”

She studied him for a moment, eyes narrowed, then nodded. “Yes, I should like that. Good night.”

Miles blinked. Fickle females. First, they nag him to remain friends, family , trick him into being cordial again, and then they desert him for the neighbors. A growl rumbled in his throat. He didn’t care. He did not care.

* * *

“Do you think the duchess is correct about Miles?” asked Gwen, placing the signet ring back in the box with Graham’s cufflinks. She sat on her bed, and called Harry, who leaped up to snuggle next to her, one ear flopped on his master’s lap.

“I do,” answered her mother. “She’s a clever woman. It was an excellent idea to use that ring as an excuse to visit the duke. His Grace was quite amused by our story.”

“I would wager on the duchess’s skills as a matchmaker. She’s quite wise about men.” Gwen stroked Harry’s silken ear, and he snuffled his nose against her hand when she paused. “I wish men were more like you,” she told the dog.

“Will you follow her advice?”

“To the letter,” Gwen said with a grin.

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The next day

Miles frowned at his plate. The eggs were tasteless, and the coffee was weak. Another sleepless night with Lady Gwendolyn waltzing with him, more kisses, more heated touches. More frustration upon waking. He was becoming obsessed. With her or his dreams?

Both.

He pushed back the plate and crossed his arms over his chest. Where were they?

He'd purposely taken his breakfast later so he could dine with them.

The footman hovered with the silver coffee pot, but seeing Miles's cup was still full, he melted back against the wall. "Have the ladies eaten?" he asked.

"Yes, my lord," replied the footman. "They asked for trays sent to the morning room, where they're meeting the modiste."

Fittings. That's what they were up to. What did she need clothes for? he wondered impatiently, tracing the rim of his teacup. He took a drink and grimaced. Cold.

Of course, she needs clothes you imbecile.

Miles pushed back from the table and marched to the morning room. Empty. He checked the parlor. Empty. The drawing room. Empty. Both bedchambers. No answer. He was successful in the library. Both women occupied the wingback chairs

in front of the cold hearth.

“Lord Wickton, good day,” said Lady Greywood.

Lady Gwendolyn glanced up from her book. “Hello, my lord. You look tired.”

He frowned.

“Now you look perturbed.” She cocked her head, one pale brow arched. “Are you perturbed?”

“Yes! I mean, no, of course not. Why would I be?” he demanded.

She shrugged. “I was only asking.” Her blonde head bent over her book again.

He noticed the bottle-green dress complemented her golden skin. Her teeth chewed at her bottom lip as she scanned the pages of her novel. The same bottom lip he had ravished last night in his dreams.

“When do you want to attempt the archery lesson?” he barked.

Lady Gwendolyn peeked over her book, blue eyes wide. “Whenever it is convenient for you, my lord.”

Good. He was back in control. Miles raised his chin and straightened his shoulders. “Now suits me.”

“What has your temper up, Cousin?” asked Lady Greywood in a mild tone. “You seem out of sorts.”

He realized he had both their attention. Miles let out a long breath. “I apologize. I

have not been sleeping well. I didn't mean to sound like a blustery old man."

"You are most definitely not an old man," said Lady Greywood.

"Blustery, however..." added Lady Gwendolyn. She stood up and tossed her book on a side table. "I have been looking forward to this."

Her smile transformed him. She had been looking forward to seeing him. The knot in his stomach unwound. "I will meet you at the grove near the stable in a half hour." Miles attempted a half smile. "You are welcome to join us, Lady Greywood."

The older woman looked up. "Oh, merci , but no. I'm quite comfortable."

Miles set up the target, then inspected his bow and the smaller one he'd brought for Lady Gwendolyn. He nocked an arrow, pulled back the string as he eyed the bullseye, and let go.

"Impressive," said Lady Gwendolyn behind him.

He turned, soaking in the praise. "Thank you, my lady."

"I wonder how long it will take me to become accustomed to that." She leaned against the table holding the arrows and bow. "I've been Miss Bernard most of my life."

Miles settled next to her. "It must be disconcerting."

She nodded. "In the last few months, I've gone from Miss Bernard to His Grace, the Duke of Shackerley, and now Lady Gwendolyn and my lady. I woke up the other morning and had to remember who I was before I got dressed."

He laughed. "It's been quite an upheaval for you."

"And you," she said quietly, placing her hand on his arm. "I am sorry for the deception, the confusion... You are so dear to me, and I don't want anything to change that."

His heart twisted a little. "You've become important to me as well. I apologize for my sour attitude. It's not like me."

"No," she agreed, "you are a kind and good man. I'm honored to be your second cousin."

Had she emphasized "second" for a reason? Miles glanced at her, wondering if she was as affected by their proximity as he was. It hadn't occurred to him before, but now he thought of it... Was she attracted to him? In that way?

The thrumming in his belly was back, heat spreading to his core. Lady Gwendolyn still gazed at him with questioning eyes, her lips slightly parted. What if he?—

"Is this the bow I should use?" she asked, picking up the smaller one and holding it between them. "What should I do first?"

He gave her a demonstration, explaining the basic form. When she tried, the arrow hit the ground before it came close to the tree. "Let me help you," he said.

Framing his arms around her, he guided her hands and helped her to pull the arrow and string back to her shoulder.

Her skin was smooth and warm, sending his pulse into a frenzy.

Her silken curls tickled his nose, lavender and vanilla filling his senses.

He closed his eyes, praying for fortitude.

“Now, take a breath, hold it, and let go.”

Zing! Her arrow landed in the outer circle. “Well done, you hit the target.”

“I did! Thank you, Lord Wickton,” she said, her face turned up to his.

“Miles,” he said, wanting to hear his name on her lips. “Call me Miles.”

“Gwen,” she whispered. “My family calls me Gwen.”

His arm reached out to pull her close just as she reached for another arrow. She nocked it as he’d instructed, pulled back with her eye on the target, took a breath and let it loose. She made the target again, still in the outside circle. “I rather enjoy this.”

I rather enjoy you.

They had a mock competition. Miles helped “guide” her several more times, coming close to the kiss he now obsessed to steal from her. He would be patient. She was an innocent, and he still wasn’t certain it was more than lust.

“What will happen when Graham arrives?” she asked as they walked back to the castle. “Will you stay on to mentor him?”

“I will have to return to my own estate, but I have an excellent steward. Returning shouldn’t be a problem. We still have to find an estate manager for Shackerley Place.”

“Do you miss your home, Miles?” Lady Gwendolyn placed her hand in the crook of his arm as they approached the hill.

His hand covered hers without thought, his heart swelling at the sound of his given name. How well their fingers fit together. They seemed to fit together. “At times. I have wonderful memories there.”

“Is it lonely?”

“You are intuitive. Yes, it can be lonely.” Why hadn’t he noticed before? Had he been too busy saving the estate? The return home had lost some of its appeal.

“I would love to visit one day,” she said, peeking up at him from under her pale lashes.

“You would like it,” he agreed. “We shall arrange it once your brother has arrived.”

Later as he dressed for supper, the conversation echoed in head. He could see her at Wickton House, greeting him at breakfast, charming the servants, arranging dinners with the neighbors.

Deuced nodcock, he thought. Things a wife would do.

Is that where this was leading? He had decided it was time for a wife.

“You seem pensive all of a sudden.” Lady Gwendolyn squeezed his arm. “I’d be happy to lend an ear if you need one.”

“I was thinking how nice it would be to dine with my cousins tonight,” he said, reaching over and tweaking her nose. “Or do you prefer the Duke and Duchess of Cranbrook over my humble table?”

“Never, my lord!” She withdrew her hand as he opened a door, and she slipped inside. “Until tonight, then.”

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“The meal was superb,” exclaimed Mama.

Gwen agreed. The sole had been poached to perfection, the lamb seasoned and delicious, the peas and asparagus just the right texture. She stared at the strawberry tart topped with cream, wondering where she would put it.

“Cook outdid herself tonight,” said Miles. “These tarts are tasty enough for the King himself.”

With that, Gwen poked her fork into the dessert, her eyes closing as the sweet crust and tangy berries exploded on her tongue. She thought of the empty cupboards in Boston, the dismal meals, and took another bite of the tart and decided she loved England.

“Shall we challenge ourselves with a few riddles tonight instead of music?” asked her mother.

“That’s an excellent idea. I love a puzzle,” said Gwen.

“I feel as if I’ve been living a puzzle the past months,” quipped Miles.

They chuckled together, and Gwen was pleased to note how the viscount was softening, even teasing about the debacle now.

Miles pulled another chair near the hearth and formed a semicircle. He sat in the middle chair with a cousin on each side. “Who wants to begin?” he asked.

“Mama, I would wager since it was her idea.”

“As a matter of fact, I do have a riddle ready,” said her mother.

“Riddle ready,” laughed Gwen. “Mama is riddle ready.”

“And you are madeira muddled,” joked Miles.

“I do enjoy that wine,” Gwen agreed. She would have to be careful in the future not to overindulge.

Mama began:

My first descends from yon eternal skies;

A winged weapon from my second flies;

And in my whole these colors may be seen.

“An angel,” boomed Miles.

“An angel isn’t full of color. It’s white.”

“How do you know?” asked Miles with a grin. “Have you seen one?”

He had her there. “Well, no.” She tapped her finger against her bottom lip, her foot joining in. “A rainbow!”

“Oui,” said Mama. “Very good. Who is next?”

“I will,” said Miles, leaning forward, hands on his knees.

My first is an animal's coat;

Many trees in my next you may place.

My whole, to your grief, will denote

That time has made work with your face.

"The animal coat is fur," said Gwen, eyes narrowed in concentration. "Say it again, please."

He repeated it, grinning as they concentrated.

"Trees, tree line," mumbled Mama. "fur sad, furfrown, furline, furrow!"

"Well done," admitted Miles.

An hour later, Mama yawned. "I'm done to a thumb, my dears. I'm off to dreamland."

Gwen glanced at her mother, who winked when she saw Miles wasn't looking. It was time. When they were alone, she rose and ambled to the piano. "Shall we play another game?" she asked.

Miles joined her at the piano. "Anything you desire."

She turned to him. "Anything?"

He nodded.

"Let's play Questions and Commands," she said with a triumphant grin.

“All right, shall you begin?”

“Yes. Question—do you want to kiss me?”

His mouth fell open. “I beg your pardon?”

“Do you want to kiss me? It’s a straightforward question.” She watched as his amber eyes locked on to her lips.

“I-I cannot answer that.” He swallowed.

I have him on the run , she thought. “Then my command is to do just that.”

“Do what?” he asked warily, taking a step back.

“Kiss me.”

She thought he would argue, try to find a way around the command, ramble on about how inappropriate her demand was.

Instead, he closed the space between them in a blink, his arm around her waist, pressing her body to his.

Her hands went to his chest as his lips descended on hers.

Soft, like velvet rubbing back and forth, the hint of strawberry still lingering on his breath.

Gwen closed her eyes, clutching his waistcoat, praying her knees held her up.

He broke the kiss, feathering her neck with kisses.

One hand pressed against her lower back, the other cupped her cheek as his mouth claimed hers again.

Her body hummed, soaking in his warmth, feeling his hardness against her soft curves. She moaned softly.

Then his mouth was gone. Her eyes flew open, and she saw him smiling down at her. “My turn,” he whispered in her ear.

Gwen tried to catch her breath, holding her palm against her heaving chest. What had just happened? Never had she experienced anything so... glorious. She tried to gather her wits, and when he released her, she clutched at the pianoforte to keep from melting to the floor in a puddle.

“Question—have you been trying to seduce me?”

She looked up at him and stepped close, finding her balance again. “I have no experience in seduction.” Gwen reached up and laid her fingers against his jaw, traced it to his neck, then dipped the tip of her finger inside his cravat.

He growled.

She laughed.

“That’s not an answer.”

“No,” she agreed, “it’s not.”

“A command, then?” he asked, his arm snaking around her waist again.

“Please.”

Gwen lifted her face to him, and this time when their lips met, her hands wrapped around his neck, her fingers entwined in his thick hair.

His tongue traced the seam of her lips, asking for something...

She parted them, and when his velvet tongue swept inside, she heard a strange mewling sound.

After another swipe of his tongue, Gwen realized she was making the sound.

The kiss ended, and he pressed his forehead against hers. "I like you better as Gwendolyn."

She sighed, laying her palm to his cheek. "Me too."

He laughed and held her close, rocking them back and forth, stroking her hair. "You are a vixen, my love." His breath caught as he stared at her, realizing what he'd just said.

"You cannot take it back," she told him, "for I love you too."

"Will you answer my question? Were you attempting to seduce me? And was it your mother's idea?"

She shook her head and grinned. "The duchess. She said to leave you be for a day, then taunt you with my nearness. And then, when you are at your wits' end, kiss you."

He laughed and kissed her again. "And the game?"

"Questions and Commands was my own idea."

“I would like one more turn,” he said, his brow furrowing. “Will you allow it?”

Gwen nodded, wondering if it was a ploy for another kiss. She would gladly give him another.

“Question—will you marry me?”

With a gasp and cry of “Yes!” she threw her arms around this handsome, kind, thoughtful, viscount and kissed him with all the passion that had been building for months.

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“He’s here! Mama, come quick. Graham has come,” shouted Gwen up the stairs. She ran to the door, sliding to a stop behind Mr. Garner.

“Calm, my lady. Practice being calm,” he murmured as she smoothed her silk skirts. “You are the sister of a duke.”

The butler had become a tutor of sorts, gently reminding her when her behavior wasn’t quite up to par. She had made excellent progress, according to him and her mother. Miles didn’t seem to care one way or the other.

Although she hadn’t wanted to wed immediately, Miles had explained about the reading of the banns. It was ridiculous, of course. An archaic rule. But he had also included the fact that her brother should attend the nuptials. He needed to ask for the duke’s blessing.

Said duke now emerged from the carriage, and her propriety dissolved as she ran down the portico steps and flung herself at Graham. He stumbled back, righted himself, then twirled her in a circle, kissing her soundly on the cheek.

“Sister, I’ve missed you,” he said, wiping the tears from her face. “It’s a happy time.”

“Tears of joy, Brother dear,” she said. “I knew you would return to us.”

“For now, anyway.”

“My boy,” cried Mama from the doorway. Graham dashed up the steps and embraced his mother, who was also crying. “Let me see you. Have you changed?”

“Thinner?”

“We can fix that,” Mama said, hugging him again.

Someone cleared their throat. Gwen turned to find Mr. Walters and Mr. Barnaby behind her. “I’m so sorry,” she said to both men. “Mr. Barnaby, whatever are you doing here?”

“He insisted on coming. Wanted to see for himself that you were both fine,” said Graham.

Miles called from the entry hall. “Come in, come in.”

They were soon settled in the parlor, hot tea and biscuits brought in for the travelers, and the Beaumaris family all talking at once. Gwen watched Mr. Barnaby and wondered with horror if he had come to propose. She needed to explain she was already betrothed.

“Mr. Walters, will you be staying?” she asked the investigator.

He nodded. “For the night, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Of course not,” said Miles. “We need to settle our business. I also need to speak with Shackerley.”

Graham blinked, then grinned. “That’s me, eh? About dukedoms and titles?”

“About sisters and marriage,” supplied Mama.

Graham’s eyes widened, and he looked at his sister. “You’ve fallen in love?”

Gwen nodded, a shy smile curving her lips as she stole a glance at Miles, who was beaming. Then she glanced at Mr. Barnaby, worried he would be shocked. To her surprise, he was staring at her mother.

“Well, marriage must be the new fashion this summer. It’s the second time a fellow has talked to me about wedded bliss.” Graham nodded at his mother. “I hope you don’t mind me bringing Mr. Barnaby, but he told me you had agreed to marry him before you disappeared.”

“You proposed to my mother?” Gwen asked, shocked. “When?”

“The day the investigators interrupted us,” said Mama, her face glowing as she held out a hand to Mr. Barnaby. “We were just about to tell you. And then when we left for England, I didn’t know if I would see him again.” Mama cast a loving glance at her fiancé.

“For the love of Hercules.” Gwen covered her mouth in shock. What an ego she had not to have seen the devotion in the shopkeeper’s eyes as he looked at her mother.

“I apologize if I assumed—” began Mr. Barnaby, searching Mama’s eyes for affirmation.

Her mother leaned over and kissed the shopkeeper on the cheek. “Assume away, my dear.” His face turned the color of a turnip, then they were all talking at once again.

Graham held up a hand. “What in the devil is that?”

A long, mournful howl came from outside. “It’s Harry. He must have heard all the commotion and thinks something is wrong.”

Gwen ran to the door, flung it open, and whistled. The hound came padding up to the

door, following her into the parlor and sitting at her feet. “He is my personal guardian.”

“You named him after our father?” asked Graham, seeming confused.

“Our grandfather did,” Gwen explained. “A story for another time.”

“Mama,” asked Gwen, “will you return to Boston?”

Her mother opened her mouth to answer, but Graham cut in. “I thought with his experience in business, and being raised a farmer, he would be a tremendous help here at the estate.”

“How opportune. The steward here is retiring. His Grace will need someone to help him run the estate,” offered Miles. “Would you be interested?”

“Perhaps. My sister is minding the store for now,” said Mr. Barnaby with a smile at Mama. “May we discuss it later?”

Her mother nodded and squeezed his hand.

The men were escorted to their rooms, and Miles stopped Gwen when she tried to follow. “I need to talk to you.”

“Yes?” She closed her eyes at the scent of leather and bergamot. His mouth claimed hers, and she smiled against his lips. “That’s not talking.”

“No, it wasn’t. But I wouldn’t make any sense until that was out of the way,” he said as he kissed her again. “Will you be upset when we marry, and you must come with me to Wickton House and be my viscountess?”

“May I bring Harry?”

“I already anticipated that.”

Gwen gazed up at his amber eyes. “I’m afraid I don’t know much about being a viscountess.”

“You didn’t know anything about being a duke, either. Yet, I’ve never met a finer duplicate duke.” He cupped her cheek and whispered in her ear, “Being Lady Wickton will be much, much easier.”

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ALSO BY AUbrEYWYNNE

Once Upon a Widow series

****Maggie award, International Digital Awards finalist****

Christopher Roker inherited the title of rake. She hides behind her independence. Fate accepts the challenge...

Escaping his late brother's memory, Lady Grace is a welcome distraction. But as the attraction grows, Kit finds himself wavering between his old military life and the lure of an exceptional but unwilling woman.

A Wicked Earl's Widow #2

****Recommended by InD'tale Magazine****

Eliza, Lady Sunderland, is widowed after one year. Her abusive father, near financial ruin, is already planning another wedding.

When Viscount Pendleton discovers a beauty defending an elderly woman against ruffians, he is smitten. But Nate soon realizes he must discover Eliza's dark past to save the woman he loves.

Rhapsody and Rebellion #3

****Maggie finalist, nominated for Rone Award, InD'tale Magazine****

A Scottish legacy... A political rebellion... Two hearts destined to meet...

Alisabeth was betrothed from the cradle. At seventeen, she marries her best friend and finds happiness if not passion. In less than a year, a political rebellion makes her a widow. The handsome English earl arrives a month later and rouses her desire and a terrible guilt.

Crossing the border into Scotland, Gideon finds his predictable world turned upside down.

Folklore, legend, and political unrest intertwine with an unexpected attraction to a feisty Highland beauty.

When the earl learns of an English plot to stir the Scots into rebellion, he must choose his country or save the clan and the woman who stirs his soul.

Earl of Darby #4

Holt Medallion Winner, NTRWA Reader's Choice Award, Nominated for Rone Award, InD'tale magazine

Miss Hannah Pendleton, nursing her pride after her childhood crush falls in love with another, hurls herself into the excitement of a first season.

Since his wife's suicide on their wedding night, the Earl of Darby has carefully cultivated his rakish reputation. But when Nicholas sees a lovely newcomer being courted by the devil himself, her innocence and candor revive the chivalry buried deep in his soul.

Earl of Brecken #5

He's on the brink of ruin. She's in search of a hero.

Notorious for his seductive charm, the Earl of Brecken searches for a wealthy heiress. His choices are dismal until he meets Miss Franklin. Guileless, gorgeous and with an enormous dowry, she seems the answer to his prayers. Until his conscience makes an unexpected appearance.

Earl of Griffith #6

Sorrow and Regrets...

After eloping, a widowed Lady Helen is disillusioned with love and raising a three-year-old alone. Now she must face the music and her family.

An unexpected ray of sunshine...

Conway, Earl of Griffith is smitten at first sight with his friend's sister and adorable daughter. But can he convince the grieving and lovely widow that love is worth a second chance?

Beware A Wallflower's Wrath #7

Annis Craigg gave her heart—and innocence—away at seventeen. When Lord Robert Harding returns to Scotland fifteen years later, he's desperate to find the only woman he's ever loved. But she has secrets and an attitude.

Lies, secrets, and betrayal will challenge the fierce love of a steadfast Highlander and remorseful but determined Englishman. Will destiny find a way to bring two star-crossed souls together?

A Wallflower's Wassail Punch #8

Lady Annette's first Season was a disaster after a duke's son pinched her by the punchbowl, and she walloped him in the nose. Five years of malicious rumors later, her father offers an outrageous dowry so he too can marry.

Lord Wilkinson, a widower, meets a striking, intelligent woman, with a dry wit only he seems to appreciate. His heart stirs for the first time in decades. But will their age difference and wagging tongues interfere with their budding romance?

The Scoundrel's Christmas Challenge #9

A contest to win her fortune...

Lady Winfield, a long-time wealthy widow, is infamous for her outrageous house parties.

While hosting her annual Christmastide gathering, Christiana proposes a new game: a daily challenge of her choice.

She will accept the proposal of the man who can best her at three or more competitions by Twelfth Night.

Though all agree to the diversion, no one expects the games to include marksmanship, archery, and fencing.

A contest to win her heart...

When Lucius, Viscount Bolingbroke presents Lady Winfield with a secret challenge, she can't resist. Will their midnight rendezvous and private contests end in certain victory for one or a dual attraction for both?

The Duplicate Duke #10

In a country far, far away...

Lady Gwendolyn Beaumaris and her brother have been known as the Bernard twins since their father's death.

Fearful that their grandfather, the Duke of Shackerley, would take her son, Gwen's mother relocates them in Boston where she had family.

At nineteen, Gwen and her mother have been waiting to hear from her brother, who is trying to make his fortune in the timber trade.

Down to their last pennies, a wealthy middle-aged merchant comes to the rescue with a marriage proposal for Miss Bernard.

The brass ring is so close...

Lord Wickton has worked tirelessly the past five years to bring honor back to the family name.

His father's debts have been paid, and he is now returning the entailed estate to working order.

When the viscount learns he is the heir presumptive to his great uncle's dukedom, it seems fortune is knocking at his door.

But his honor and desire for family compels him to make one more attempt to find the heir apparent.

A comedy of errors...

When English investigators arrive with a letter announcing that Gwen's brother is the

new Duke of Shackerley, mother and daughter come up with a desperate plan: Gwendolyn will impersonate her twin and assume the dukedom until her brother can be located.

But their confidence soon dwindles when the sinfully handsome Wickton meets them at the dock, and Gwen is hopelessly smitten.

A tale of love, deception, and the power of fate will entangle a desperate viscount with a daring female. Can he forgive her charade, or will he snuff out the burning passion that rages in her heart?

Kiss the Scoundrel Farewell #11

Lady Margaret marries out of duty only to find herself in the center of a scandal.

Her husband, Baron Drake, dies in a duel over another woman.

With no children and no desire to be shackled again, Meg decides to enjoy life as men do.

She will be the other woman instead of the wife held captive by the whims of a man.

Lady Drake enjoys the freedom of her widow's status.

Simon, Lord Hayward, a dutiful son with no fantasies of love, agrees to marry a wealthy heiress to plump the family's coffers.

His father, in love with his mistress for decades, sets out to find his son one of his own.

Simon scoffs at the idea, but when he meets an alluring courtesan at a masquerade, he

finds himself smitten.

In a twist of fate, the masks come off, and Simon and Meg realize they met years ago, sharing a kiss in a duke's garden. Their secrets come out: She is no courtesan, and he is betrothed. After the viscount confesses his love, the baroness flees for the safety of the countryside.

As Lady Drake begins to doubt her scheme of being a paramour, Lord Hayward wonders if he can be happy with a wife who is not Meg and searches her out.

He seeks her out only to find danger lurking in the idyllic English hills, and they soon learn the past has consequences no matter who you pretend to be.

Paddy's Peelers Mystery series

Set in the hectic district of Cheapside during the Regency, Paddy's Peelers search the dregs of London with skill and cunning to bring criminals to justice and, perhaps, unexpectedly find love along the way. A sweet but action-packed romance.

Crime, Conspiracies, and Courtship #1

Lady Matilda has always been an introvert, preferring her books to awkward conversations with strangers.

As her first Season arrives, her mother insists she put away her bluestocking and concentrate on finding a husband.

But Mattie is terrified of finding herself betrothed or even worse— not betrothed.

The arrogant men of the ton terrify her.

Mr. Harry Walters is an orphaned, ex-Bow Street runner turned investigator, who makes a living by his wits.

Working for Paddy O'Brien and his Peelers, often taking assignments for the Home Office, Walters is used to working closely with the beau monde.

When a peer approaches him about a new assignment, Harry realizes they are both after the same man.

He accepts the job but soon finds himself also protecting the earl's sister.

While working in costume at a masquerade, Walters makes a fatal mistake when he asks Lady Matilda to dance.

It takes only a few stolen glances and one waltz for two unlikely souls to become hopelessly entwined.

Mattie is determined to win the heart of this handsome, rugged man.

Harry is just as determined to keep her safe.

Will fate find a way to bring a common man and an earl's sister a happy ever after? Or will his lack of title and dangerous life keep her at arm's length?

Pads, Purses, and Plum Pudding #2

Dr. Sampson Brooks is on a case that has nothing to do with medicine.

He vows to help bring down the man who ruined his father and sent his mother to an early grave.

When the villain's top henchmen are apprehended, Sam attends the hanging.

While closing one chapter of his story, he unexpectedly opens another.

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Dottie Brown, young and naïve, is duped by a charming swindler.

A year after the wedding, she learns he's not what he pretends to be.

Watching him on the gallows, she vows never to be taken in by romantic notions again.

Yet fate tosses two obstacles in her path that day—a handsome physician and an abandoned child.

A chance encounter reveals one woman's secret, another man's revenge, and a love that will change their lives forever.

Poisons, Potions, and Parasols #3

She's content with her life...

Miss Eugenia Chapelle was born on the wrong side of the blanket.

After her mother was disowned and fled to London, she pretended to be the widow of a French aristocrat to draw customers as a modiste.

After her mother's death, Genie continues the lie, playing the half-French designer of Madame Chapelle's and running the business with her aunt.

She never expects an earl to search out his illegitimate daughter twenty-six years later.

He will rip it apart...

Mr. Clayton Pierce works for one of London's most respected investigators.

He has two cases on his docket—tracking a gang of counterfeiters passing banknotes and finding a long-lost child of an earl.

When he meets the beautiful and talented Miss Chapelle, his attraction for her is as strong as his obsession with solving mysteries and catching criminals.

After Genie witnesses a possible murder at Hyde Park, she becomes a key witness in his first case.

Then, by a twist of fate, she also becomes linked to his second assignment.

With danger lurking around every dark corner, and the past the murkiest shadow of all, Clayton learns that solving a case does not always guarantee satisfaction of a job well done.

As passions flare and the stakes are raised, will his success as an investigator be his ruin in love?

A MacNaughton Castle Romance series

Highland Regencies

“Witty and sensual!” Verified Purchase Review

“Lovely characters and complicated family conflicts. You will easily get caught up in their lives.” Goodreads Review

A Merry MacNaughton Mishap (Prequel)

****Rone finalist, InD'tale Magazine, N.N. Light Book Heaven finalist****

Two feuding clans, one accidental encounter, a wee bit of holiday enchantment...

When Calum MacNaughton rescues a rival clan member from an icy drowning, he is unexpectedly rewarded with the clansman's most precious possession. Now Calum has until Twelfth Night to convince her to stay.

Deception and Desire #1

****Nominated for Rone award, InD'tale Magazine, N.N. Light Book Heaven award winner****

Two rebellious souls... An innocent deception... One scorching catastrophe...

Fenella Franklin's talents lie in numbers and a keen business mind, not in the art of flirtation.

Lachlan MacNaughton has neither the temperament nor the patience to be the next MacNaughton chief, preferring to knock heads together rather than placate bickering clansmen.

Their attraction sparks a passion they cannot deny.

But will an innocent deception test their newfound love?

Allusive Love #2

A woman in love... An infuriating Scot... A tantalizing chase.

Kirstine has loved Brodie MacNaughton forever, but he considers Kirsty his best friend.

When he turns to her for advice, she surprises him with an unexpected kiss that sends fire through his veins.

When pride, Highland politics, and tragedy collide, he realizes how precious and allusive true love can be.

A Bonny Pretender #3

She's pretending to be someone she's not... His entire life is based on a lie...

Brigid MacNaughton becomes the perfect lady to placate her family, then falls in love with a quiet, self-possessed Englishman.

Lord Raines is smitten with the beguiling and demure Scot.

If he divulges his scandalous parentage, will she still fall willingly into his arms?

Bonny pretender vs handsome imposter... Can love overcome a double deception?

A Medieval Encounter Series

Rolf's Quest

****Great Expectations winner, Fire & Ice, Maggie finalist****

“Romance, destiny, family values & betrayal all played parts in this intriguing novel that had me turning each page in anticipation.”

The BookTweeter

A wizard, a curse, a fated love...

When Rolf finally discovers the woman who can end the curse that has plagued his family for centuries, she is already betrothed. Time is running out for the royal wizard of King Henry II. If he cannot find true love without the use of sorcery, the magic will die for future generations.

Melissa is intrigued by the mystical, handsome man who haunts her by night and tempts her by day. His bizarre tale of Merlin, enchantments, and finding genuine love has her questioning his sanity and her heart.

From the moment Melissa stepped from his dreams and into his arms, Rolf knew she was his destiny. Now, he will battle against time, a powerful duke, and call on the gods to save her.

Saving Grace (A Small Town Romance)

Contemporary and Colonial America

****Holt and Maggie finalist****

This unique piece has the reader traveling between the early 1700s and the early 2000s with ease and amazement.

The audience truly feels sorrow for Grace and Chloe and is able to connect with each woman for the hardships they are overcoming...

The attention to historical facts and details leave one breathless, especially upon learning the people from the past did exist and the memorial erected still stands.
InD'tale Magazine

A tortured soul meets a shattered heart...

Chloe Hicks' life consisted of an egocentric ex-husband, a pile of bills, and an equine

business in foreclosure until a fire destroys the stable and her beloved ranch horse. After the marshal suspects arson, she escapes the accusing eyes of her hometown.

Jackson Hahn, the local historian, distracts Chloe with a 17th-century legend of a woman wrongly accused of witchcraft.

It might explain the ghostly happenings on the property.

She is drawn to the similarities that plagued both their lives.

Perhaps the past can help heal the present. But danger lurks in the shadows...