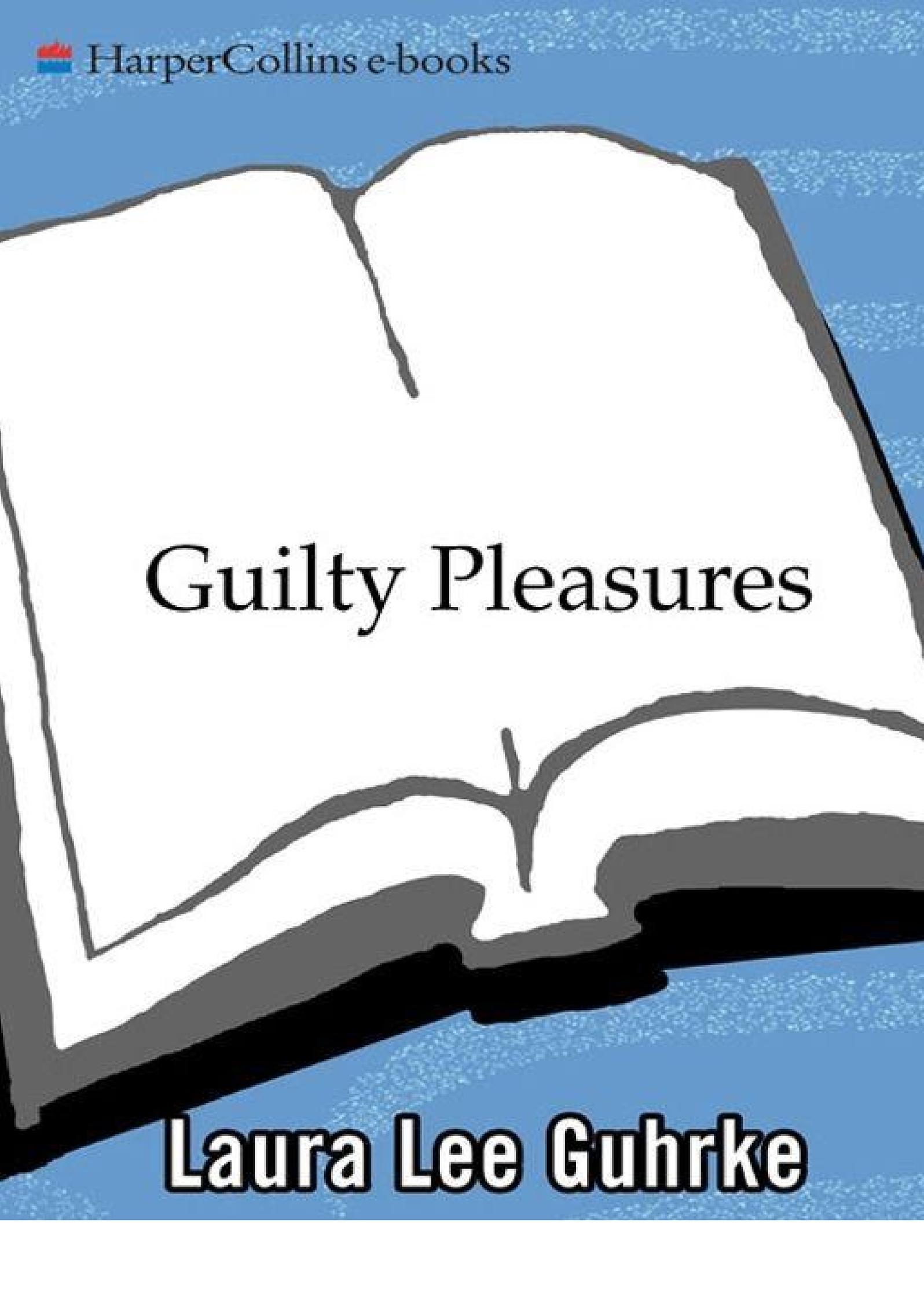


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Guilty Pleasures

Laura Lee Guhrke

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Guilty Pleasures

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*For my literary agent, Robin Rue.
Your support of my career
and your faith in my work
mean more than I can say.
Thank you, Robin.*

And ruin'd love, when it is built anew, grows fairer than at first, more strong, far greater.

William Shakespea

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Chapter 1

Hampshire, 1830

No one who glanced at Daphne Wade would ever imagine that she had a guilty, secret pleasure. Her countenance was plain, made more so by the spectacles perched on her nose. Her hair was light brown and fashioned into a functional bun at the nape of her neck. All her dresses were varying shades of beige, brown, or gray. Her height was average, and her figure was usually concealed beneath a loosely fitting work apron of heavy canvas. Her voice was low and pleasant to the ear, with nothing strident in its tone to evoke anyone's attention.

No one judging her by her appearance would dream that Miss Daphne Wade had the rather salacious habit of staring at her employer's naked chest whenever she had the chance, although most women would have agreed that Anthony Courtland, Duke of Tremore, had a chest worth looking at.

Daphne rested her elbows on the sill of the open window and lifted the brass spyglass. Using the instrument was awkward when she was wearing her spectacles, so she pulled them off. After setting the gold-rimmed pair on the windowsill, she once again raised the spyglass to her eye. Through its lens, she scanned the archaeological site in the distance, searching for Anthony amid the workmen.

She always thought of him by his Christian name. In speech, she called him "your grace," just as everyone else did, but in her mind and her heart, he was always Anthony.

He was talking with Mr. Bennington, the excavation architect, and Sir Edward Fitzhugh, the duke's closest neighbor and quite the amateur antiquarian himself. The three men stood in a huge patch of excavated ground amid the crumbling stone walls, broken columns, and other remnants of what had once been a Roman villa. At the moment, they appeared to be discussing the mosaic pavement beneath their feet that had been uncovered by the workmen that morning.

The moment she froze the spyglass on Anthony's tall form, she felt that familiar twist of her heart, that addictive mix of pleasure and discomfort. It was a combination that in his presence always tied her tongue and compelled her to withdraw into herself until she seemed part of the furniture, but when she watched him like this, she always longed to be the subject of his full attention. Love, she thought, should be a pleasant thing, warm and tender, not something that hurt one's heart by its intensity.

Daphne felt that intensity now as she watched him. When in residence at Tremore Hall, he would

wont to spend two or three hours each day working alongside Mr. Bennington and the men on the excavation. Sometimes, if she was not on the dig and he found the August afternoon exceptional warm, Anthony was compelled to remove his shirt. Today was a very warm day.

To Daphne, he almost seemed a part of the Roman excavation around him, for Anthony was one of those rare men who looked like a living statue. With his uncommon height of over six feet, with his broad shoulders and sculpted muscles, he could have been a Roman god carved of marble, were it not for his dark brown hair and tanned skin.

She watched him as the three men continued their discussion of the floor, and she felt that odd melting sensation that came over her every time she saw him this way, a sensation that somehow made breathing difficult and made her heart race as if she had been running.

Sir Edward bent to move a heavy stone urn that was blocking a portion of the mosaic from the view, but Anthony stopped him and lifted the urn himself. Daphne was delighted by this gallantry, which only served to reinforce her high opinion of him. A duke he might be, but he wasn't so overproud that he would stand by and let a much older man like Sir Edward injure himself.

Anthony carried the urn to the cart nearby, placing it beside a crate filled with broken pieces of wine amphorae, bronze statues, fresco fragments, and other discoveries. At the end of the day, the pieces would be taken to the antika, a building nearby where artifacts were stored, until Daphne could repair, sketch and catalog them for Anthony's collection.

The sound of footsteps coming down the corridor toward the library brought Daphne out of her clandestine observations. She pushed the ends of the spyglass together, collapsing it. As she moved away from the window, she shoved the spyglass into the pocket of her skirt. By the time Ella, one of the dozen maids in the duke's employ at Tremore, entered the library, Daphne was seated at her desk with a text on Romano-British pottery open before her, pretending to be hard at work.

"Thought you'd like some tea, Miss Wade," Ella said, setting the teacup and its saucer on the edge of Daphne's large rosewood desk, beside the stacks of books on Roman antiquities and Latin.

"Thank you, Ella," she answered, trying to sound absorbed in her book as she turned a page.

The maid turned to leave, saying over her shoulder, "Didn't think you could see a thing, miss, without them spectacles. Seems t'me they don't do you much good sitting over on the windowsill."

The maid disappeared into the hall and Daphne lowered her flushed face into the open book before her. *Caught again.*

Still, could anyone blame a plain, quiet, self-contained young woman who spent most of her time buried in ancient artifacts and Latin lexicons for being in love with her employer when he was so utterly splendid?

Daphne straightened in her chair with a sigh and rested one elbow on the desk. Chin in her hand, she stared into space, dreaming of things her rational mind knew could never happen.

He was a duke, Daphne reminded herself, and she worked for him. She had been employed by him for nearly five months now, and he paid her the quite generous salary of forty-eight pounds per annum to repair frescoes and mosaics, to restore antiquities, and create a catalog of the collection for the museum he was building in London. It was a demanding position with a demanding employer, but she was happy. She did every task he required of her not only because that was her job, but also because she was in love with him, and loving him was Daphne's guilty, secret pleasure.

Anthony leaned back in the copper bathtub with a contented sigh. God, he was tired, but the work had been worth it. That bedchamber floor he and the men had unearthed earlier in the day had some extraordinary pavements.

They had also found an entire wall of fresco pieces, damaged and crumbling, but also quite

erotic. He must remember to tell Marguerite about them, especially the one depicting the master of the house as if he were the god Priapus, with his penis on one side of a scale and bars of gold on the other. No need to tell Marguerite which side was shown to be heavier. Mistresses always understood that sort of joke.

“Your grace?”

He opened his eyes to find Richardson standing beside the bathtub holding the jar of soap and a fresh pitcher of steaming water. Anthony leaned forward in the tub and allowed his valet to wash his hair, savoring the tangy scent of lemon soap and the pleasure of being rid of a day’s worth of dirt and limestone dust.

Once Richardson had finished, Anthony rose and stepped out of the bathtub. He accepted a warm towel from his valet and began to dry his body as Richardson left the dressing room.

Thinking of Marguerite made Anthony realize it had been months since he had last seen the dark-eyed, dark-haired beauty. She had been his mistress for over a year now, but he had scarcely had half a dozen opportunities to visit her. The excavation here at Tremore had been dominating his attention lately and had kept him away from the cottage he provided for her just outside London.

Anthony tossed aside the towel and combed his hands through his still-damp hair as he walked into the bedchamber, where Richardson was waiting for him with fresh linen and a dressing gown of black and gold jacquard silk. He raised his arms and his valet slipped a cambric shirt over his head as the door opened and a footman entered the bedchamber.

“Lady Hammond is here, your grace,” the servant said with a bow.

“Viola?” Anthony was not expecting his sister, and he glanced over his shoulder at the footman in surprise as his valet began to button his shirt. “When did she arrive?”

“A quarter of an hour ago, sir.”

Anthony muttered an oath, thinking that if Hammond had shamed Viola with another scandal this time he’d have the fellow’s head. “Tell the viscountess I shall be with her in a moment, and have Madeira and port sent up.”

“Very good, sir. Lady Hammond said she would await you in her sitting room.” The servant departed, and Anthony thrust his arms into the sleeves of his dressing gown. A few minutes later, he left his own room and headed down the long corridor to his sister’s suite at the opposite end, where a footman waited there to open the door to him. He entered his sister’s sitting room, stepping into a baroque fantasy of pink velvet, white brocade, and gold leaf that suited Viola’s golden blond beauty and lavishly feminine temperament down to the ground.

Anthony’s worry that her visit brought bad news was dispelled the moment he caught sight of her, for she immediately began to laugh. The sound made him pause, and a half smile curved his mouth. He was glad to hear her laughing. It was better than listening to her cry over her disgrace of her husband. “What is so amusing?”

“You,” she said, rising from her settee to come toward him. “You look like some decadent Turkish potentate in that dressing gown, with such a frown on your face that I imagined you about to order someone’s tongue cut out.”

“No one’s tongue,” he answered, taking his sister’s outstretched hands into his own. “Hammond’s head did come to mind.”

Viola gave him an affectionate kiss on each cheek and turned away. It did not escape Anthony’s notice that she would not meet his eyes. “You do not need to do anything so drastic, dear brother,” she told him, returning to her seat on the settee.

“You mean he is finally behaving himself?” Anthony moved to sit on the striped pink and white brocade chair opposite her.

Before she could answer, a maid entered the room, carrying a tray that held port, Madeira, and

two glasses. She placed the tray on the table beside Viola and departed.

~~“You want port, of course,” Viola said, and began to pour the wine.~~

“He is behaving himself, is he not?” Anthony leaned forward, accepting the glass of port from his sister’s hand. “Look at me, Viola, and tell me the truth.”

Viola met his gaze. “The truth is that I wouldn’t know. Hammond does not keep me informed of his activities, but I did learn yesterday that his most recent interest seems to be sea bathing.”

Anthony could tell from her voice that nothing had changed. “Hammond is at Brighton?”

“His arrival, of course, compelled me to depart from there at once.”

Anthony frowned. “You cannot be forever avoiding him, Viola. For good or ill, he is your husband, and you have scarce spent two weeks in his company this past year. The gossip is rampant. Even here in Hampshire, I have heard rumors—”

“Speaking of rumors,” she cut in, “I have been hearing quite a bit of gossip about you of late. She raised her glass and gave him an inquiring glance. “Can it be that I am soon to have a sister?”

Her words irked Anthony, not because she was asking such a question, but because he did not enjoy being the subject of gossip and speculation.

“Ah,” he said, and took a sip of port. “Word of my recent trip to London reached the seaside pavilions at Brighton, I take it?”

“Did you expect it would not?” she countered, smiling. “The oh-so-eligible Duke of Tremore, a man who never dances at balls, who would not be caught dead at Almack’s, who avoids young ladies of impeccable background as if they all have the plague, suddenly takes the ducal emeralds to London to be cleaned. Most of our friends are in agreement that this bodes well for a duchess. Are you finally going to marry? Please tell me yes. Nothing would delight me more than knowing you have found someone to make you happy.”

He studied his sister over the rim of his glass for a moment without speaking. How could any woman with a husband like Hammond retain any optimism about happiness in marriage? “I am going to wed, yes,” he confirmed.

Viola gave a cry of delight. “How wonderful! I have been going over names in my mind all the way up from Brighton, but I cannot imagine who could have captured your heart when you have been buried here since March. Who is she?”

“Can you not guess? One choice stands high above the rest. Monforth’s eldest daughter, Sarah.”

“Ugh!” Viola fell back against the velvet pillows of the settee with a groan. “You cannot be serious.”

“Monforth is a marquess with impeccable connections. Lady Sarah would make an excellent duchess. She is well bred and has a substantial fortune. She is also healthy, gracious, and quite beautiful.”

“And she is as intelligent as a fence post.”

He conceded that with a shrug and reached for his glass. “I don’t intend to have intellectual discussions with her,” he said as he took a sip of port, “so what does that matter?”

“Oh, Anthony!” Viola rose and circled the table to sit on the arm of his chair. “Lady Sarah cares nothing for you.”

“And your point?”

“She seems as sweet as honey, but it is a facade,” Viola went on, contempt in her voice. “The only things she really cares about are money and position. You have both, and she would sell her soul to have you.”

“Yes,” he agreed dispassionately, “she would.”

“Then why?” Viola cried. “Why, when you are in a position to choose from among hundreds of young ladies, would you pick someone as shallow and calculating as Lady Sarah Monforth? She could

never make you happy.”

“God, Viola, I am not getting married expecting to be made happy by it. It is the sensible course. I would prefer not to marry at all, but I must secure an heir, and I cannot afford to postpone that inevitable any longer. I am choosing the young lady who is most suited to the role of duchess, a young lady who will make no demands upon me beyond my support.”

“I see what you really mean,” Viola said slowly. “You have chosen a woman who will not care that you have no respect or affection for her, and who will not be hurt that you do not love her, as long as you supply her with a generous allowance and she supplies you with a son.”

“Exactly so.”

“Oh, Anthony, really!” Viola cried in dismay and jumped to her feet. He watched as she began to pace back and forth, and neither of them spoke. She seemed lost in thought, and he hoped she was accustoming herself to his decision.

Finally, she stopped pacing and looked at him. “Have you proposed to Lady Sarah yet?”

“No,” he answered. “She is in Paris with her mother. They are to spend the autumn there.”

“Good, then I have time to change your mind.”

She gave him that beguiling smile that ever since their childhood could get nearly anything out of him she wanted, but this time Anthony was unmoved. “I have no intention of changing my mind. Your expression is anything to go by,” he added, noting how quickly her smile faded, “the end of the world is at hand. You seem quite upset about this.”

“Of course I am upset,” she answered, and resumed pacing. “You are about to make an irrevocable choice that will ensure nothing but misery for you. I should die if you were unhappy.”

“Viola, you are being far too dramatic, as usual. I am quite content as I am, with the life I lead, and I see nothing about marrying Lady Sarah that would mar my current contentment.”

“Giving up Marguerite for Lady Sarah would mar any man’s contentment,” she answered with such wry humor that he couldn’t help a smile.

Marguerite was no secret, but discussing one’s mistresses with one’s sister was not quite the thing. On this occasion, however, Anthony felt he must make Viola understand his intentions. “I am not giving up Marguerite.”

Viola stopped pacing once again and stared at him, shocked. “You cannot possibly be thinking to keep her after you marry?”

He met the rebuke in her eyes with a direct stare. “Why not?”

“Oh, Anthony, I loathe Lady Sarah, I confess it, but such a course is so unbelievably cruel, and I cannot believe you would do such a thing.”

He stiffened at the rebuke. “You forget yourself, Viola. My choice of bride is not your concern, and neither are my mistresses.”

“Oh, do not attempt all that ducal hauteur with me, Anthony,” she shot back. “I am your sister, and every single day of my life, I endure the pain of marriage to a man who has nothing but contempt for me. How can you justify this when you know how I have suffered?”

Viola always did tend to express her emotions with a great deal of drama. “I know that,” he answered calmly, “and it wounds me deeply. For the pain he has caused you, I would throttle Hammond with my bare hands if I could, but your situation and mine are very different.”

“How?”

“Sarah will not give a tinker’s damn if I keep a dozen mistresses as long as I keep her in funds. She has no affection for me, nor I for her. You, on the other hand, still have some tender regard for Hammond, and that is why his behavior causes you pain. Although why you still harbor any affection for him is one of life’s inexplicable mysteries, since he is a blackguard whose treatment of you is deplorable.”

“And it is my own bitter experience that impels me to abhor your selection of Monforth daughter. I want you to be happy with your wife, happy enough that you do not need the companionship of women such as Marguerite Lyon, happy enough that you need not schedule your life to be wherever your spouse is not. I cannot help but believe that it is possible to be happy in marriage despite my own poor choice.”

Something in the soft romanticism of her words irritated him, for they brought memories to the surface, memories he thought both he and Viola had buried for good. He ruthlessly shoved those memories back down deep and concealed his irritation with an air of indifference. “How you can remain such a romantic, Viola, never ceases to astonish me.”

“Perhaps because I believe our parents were blessed to have loved each other so passionately while you believe they were cursed.”

Anthony felt his fingers curl around the delicate crystal glass in his hand so tightly, he was surprised it did not shatter. He set the glass down with care. “Love is all very well,” he said lightly leaning back in his chair, “but it has little to do with marriage. Look among our acquaintance. All of them are in love. Just not with their spouses.”

Anthony’s careless tone brought his sister back to his side. She sat down again and took his hand in hers. “Do be serious. Will you not at least try to find someone you could love?”

Anthony studied her face for a moment, and he did not know what to say. Viola had married Hammond for love. Despite Anthony’s misgivings about the match, he had not been able to deny Viola her heart’s desire, and the resulting union had been a disaster. He had no intention of making his sister’s mistake and marrying for love only to be made miserable by the union.

“I beg you to at least consider my opinion,” she went on. “You deserve better than Lady Sarah. You deserve a wife with a kind and generous nature, a woman filled to her fingertips with passion for you, a woman who cares for you more than your rank or your fortune.”

All this high-blown sentimentality was bordering on the ridiculous. He jerked his hands free from hers. “God, Viola,” he said with some impatience, “I do not require passion of a wife.”

“Well, you should. Besides, Lady Sarah doesn’t love you. I doubt she is capable of the emotion.”

“So what?” He met his sister’s dismayed gaze with a hard and determined one of his own. “Since when has love ever been necessary to matrimony?”

Viola stared at him for a long moment, then she sighed. “Perhaps it is not necessary,” she said and rose to her feet. “But it would be nice.”

Chapter 2

“So these are his grace’s latest treasures?” Sir Edward smiled at Daphne over the pieces of jewelry she had laid out on the library table. There were armbands of gold, several pairs of pearl earrings, a few cameos, and an exquisite necklace of emeralds set between hammered gold leaves. The jewels glittered in the morning sunlight that poured through the windows of the library. They made a dazzling display against the white cloth that protected the table.

“Very fine emeralds,” he pronounced, studying the necklace through his monocle.

“They are not so fine as the ducal emeralds, I daresay,” Mrs. Bennington pronounced as she leaned her short, stout frame over the table a bit to have a closer look. Her rubicund face scrunched with disappointment. “When Bennington told me about these Roman jewels, I was so excited to see them, but now that I have, I find them rather a letdown. So crudely made. Why, no young lady would wear these!”

Daphne laughed. “But Mrs. Bennington, these are not to be worn. They are for the duke’s museum. His grace intends that museum to be open not only to the wealthy and privileged, but to everyone. Is that not a noble goal? All British people, rich or poor, shall be allowed to see the history.”

“She sounds just like Tremore, does she not?” A feminine voice floated to them from the doorway.

All three of them turned to see the woman who entered the library. Daphne pushed her spectacles up the bridge of her nose to have a clearer view and recognized her at once from the portraits in the gallery. This was Anthony’s sister. The portrait did not do her justice, for on canvas she seemed only a pretty blond woman with hazel eyes like her brother. But in reality, one could imagine that her face had launched the thousand ships at Troy.

Lady Hammond smiled at her and Mrs. Bennington in a friendly way, then nodded to the man at the end of the table. “Sir Edward,” she said, her hands outstretched in greeting as she walked toward him. “What a pleasure to see you again so soon.”

“Lady Hammond,” he answered, taking the woman’s hands into his own. “I so enjoyed dining here at Tremore Hall last evening, and your presence made it especially delightful.”

“I enjoyed it as well, Sir Edward. I was fascinated by your discussion with his grace about the excavation of his.”

Daphne would have loved to participate in such a discussion, but that was unlikely to happen. Being an employee of the duke, she never dined with Anthony or his guests. She took her meals with

the Benningtons in a separate dining room, but it would not have mattered in any case. She had spent her evening fulfilling a request Anthony had made of her just before dinner.

Would you be able to have those pieces of jewelry finished for me by tomorrow morning, Miss Wade?

It was a time-consuming and tedious process to clean and repair jewelry, but she had willingly spent her evening and half her night in the antika accomplishing it.

The viscountess noticed the pieces laid out on the table. “These must be the emeralds my brother was talking about last night. It is hard to imagine that they were buried right on our land all this time. Are they really over fifteen hundred years old?”

“Over sixteen hundred, actually,” Daphne answered, causing the woman to turn in her direction.

“Lady Hammond,” Sir Edward put in, “you must meet Miss Wade and Mrs. Bennington. Mrs. Bennington is the wife of the project architect, while Miss Wade—”

“Does everything!” the viscountess put in. “Or so I have been told. Sir Edward was singing your praises last night at dinner, Miss Wade. Even Anthony admitted that you were quite the best antiquarian he knew.”

“He said that?” Daphne felt a warm little glow at the idea that Anthony had been singing her praises, but she did not show it, far too afraid of having her secret feelings for him revealed. “I am gratified to hear it.”

“I should hope so, dear, for that is high praise indeed,” Mrs. Bennington put in. “Mr. Bennington tells me the duke’s good opinion is very hard to earn, for it is always given with the strictest honesty.”

“Quite true,” Lady Hammond agreed. “He is always frank in his opinions, sometimes brutally so, but he said Miss Wade is a most excellent mosaicist and restorer. How did you ever come to learn such things, Miss Wade?”

“I suppose you could say I was born to it,” she answered. “I have lived and worked on excavation sites all my life.”

“Speaking of excavations,” Sir Edward went on, “I must go down to meet his grace at the site. His grace wishes to show me the hypocaust.”

“A hypocaust sounds most impressive,” the viscountess commented, “but what on earth is it?”

They all laughed, but it was Daphne who answered. “A hypocaust is a sort of cellar beneath the house that slaves kept filled with hot water. It made the tile floors warm in winter and heated the house. Quite a practical design.”

“I must see it then. Anything that would keep one’s feet warm in the wretched English climate would be a sound idea.”

“We could do with more of them, Lady Hammond, I am sure,” Sir Edward answered. “But forgive me, I must go.” He bowed to her.

“I shall go with you,” Mrs. Bennington declared, “for I must speak to my husband.”

“Of course, dear lady, of course.” Sir Edward offered her his arm, and they departed.

After they had gone, Daphne turned to the viscountess, who was studying her with frank interest.

The moment their eyes met, the viscountess smiled. “My brother has always wanted to excavate the ruins here at Tremore. How did he come to hire you for this project, Miss Wade?”

“My father was Sir Henry Wade, one of the most knowledgeable Roman antiquarians in the world. I was his assistant. The duke had been corresponding with Papa for several years. He would often purchase antiquities we uncovered, and Papa always offered any rare finds to his grace first. Your brother eventually hired us to come to England to work on this villa for him, but Papa died very suddenly. We—” She broke off, and swallowed hard. Nearly a year had gone by, but it still hurt to talk about Papa.

She took a moment to collect herself, then went on, “We were just finishing our work on

Volubilis in Morocco and preparing to come here when he died. The duke had already paid for passage to England, and I decided to come anyway. His grace was so good as to hire me to assist Mr. Bennington. My knowledge does not compare to that of my father, of course, but I do the best I can.”

The viscountess returned her attention to the jewelry. “These are beautiful pieces. I would not have thought ancient jewelry could remain in such pristine condition as this.”

“It doesn’t, I assure you,” Daphne said, laughing. “The necklace was in pieces when the duke himself uncovered it yesterday, and several of the jewels had fallen out of their settings. I cleaned the lot, then put the pieces back together and sketched them for his grace’s catalog.”

A slight frown marred the other woman’s face. “No young lady should have to work so hard.”

“Oh, but his grace wants the museum open by mid-March. I don’t mind the work. I enjoy it, and these pieces are extraordinary historical finds. Valuable jewelry is rare, for it is usually stolen long before an antiquarian has the chance to uncover it.”

“You must be a remarkable woman, Miss Wade. I cannot fathom what would be enjoyable about what you do. Repairing jewelry, restoring mosaic floors, and piecing together clay pots would not be my idea of enjoyment, especially under my brother’s supervision. He is impossible to work for, I have no doubt.”

“Oh, no,” Daphne cried. “He is a very good employer. If it had not been for Anthony, I—” She stopped, realizing she had said his Christian name aloud.

The viscountess did not appear to notice her slip of the tongue. She looked down and caught sight of the drawings Daphne had made of the jewelry. She picked up two of the sketches to study them. “You make a drawing of each item you find? For a catalog, I believe you said?”

“Yes,” she said, relieved. “I do a sketch of each artifact. They will form the permanent record of his grace’s collection.”

The viscountess studied the drawings for a moment, then set them aside. As she did so, she caught sight of Daphne’s sketch book, which was also lying on the table, and she opened it.

Remembering what was inside, Daphne made a move to stop her from going further, but it was too late. The viscountess was already looking through her drawings.

“I do not believe you would be interested in those, Lady Hammond,” she said, feeling a hint of panic. “They are not for the catalog. They are just my scribbles, and quite unremarkable.”

“Miss Wade, you are too modest. These are lovely.”

Without snatching the sketch book away, there was nothing Daphne could do but watch as the viscountess studied her drawings of the excavations and the workmen. One by one, she examined each page and set it aside, coming closer and closer to the ones tucked away at the bottom of the pile.

Just when Daphne wished she could crawl under the nearest floor carpet, Lady Hammond finally reached the drawings of Anthony, and she paused an inordinate amount of time over the last one, a drawing of him standing amid the excavations without his shirt. Daphne felt her cheeks heating with mortification, and she tried to look at anything in the library but the other woman’s face.

After what seemed an eternity, the viscountess put the last sketch down. She replaced the drawings back inside Daphne’s worn, leather-bound portfolio precisely in the order she had found them. “You have great talent,” she said, and closed the book. “The last one is especially fine. A very accurate likeness.” She paused, then added, “My brother *is* quite a handsome man, is he not?”

“I suppose so,” she said, trying to sound indifferent. “I have always made it a habit,” she said, struggling for some semblance of dignity, “to do drawings of each person involved in an excavation. It helps record the event for posterity’s sake.”

“Of course.” The very gravity of the other woman’s voice told Daphne she didn’t believe it for a moment, but she did not point out that posterity hardly required a drawing of Anthony without his shirt.

The tap of decisive, familiar footsteps in the corridor outside the library told Daphne who was coming, and she circled around to the other side of the table, never more thankful of a distraction in her life. She grabbed a soft, damp chamois, and by the time Anthony came through the door, she was polishing a gold armband, rubbing away any last tarnish from its surface.

“Anthony!” Lady Hammond greeted him over one shoulder. “I did not expect to see you until dinner.”

“I came in search of you, Viola,” he answered, crossing the room to stand beside his sister. “I thought you might wish to see some of the antiquities.”

“With pleasure.”

Anthony proffered his arm to her, but instead of slipping her own arm through his, the viscountess pointed to the jewelry. “Look at what your Miss Wade had done. I understand these pieces were in very poor shape yesterday, yet you would never know it to see them now. Miss Wade is extraordinary.”

He looked over at Daphne, and his smile took her breath away. “Yes,” he agreed, “quite extraordinary.”

Her heart skipped a beat as he circled the table to her side. She watched him anxiously as he made a careful perusal of her efforts, and she hoped he would find no flaw with them.

He looked up, his beautiful hazel eyes meeting hers. “Excellent work, Miss Wade.”

Pleasure washed over her like the sun. She swallowed hard and nodded, unable to think of a thing to say until he had walked away.

“Thank you,” she finally managed to call out as he moved toward the door, arm in arm with his sister, but he must not have heard her words, for he did not turn to look at her again.

The viscountess did, though, glancing over her shoulder at Daphne for a moment. There was something in the other woman’s face, a speculative and thoughtful expression Daphne did not attempt to interpret. Instead, she returned her gaze to the wide shoulders of the man walking out the door.

Excellent work, Miss Wade.

Those four simple words were enough to keep her walking on clouds for the remainder of the day.

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