

Laura Lee Guhrke

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When The
MARQUESS
Met His Match

🌸 An American Heiress in London 🌸

Laura Lee Guhrke

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MARQUESS
Met His Match

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AVON

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Dedication

*For my friend and wonderful fellow writer
Elizabeth Boyle, who always finds a way
to inspire me, especially when she
oh-so-carelessly says things like,
“Why don’t you write a matchmaker?”
This one’s for you, my friend.*

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An Excerpt from How to Lose a Duke in Ten Days

About the Author

By Laura Lee Guhrke

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Chapter 1



The primary difficulty with being a matchmaker wasn't the unpredictability of human nature, or the contrariness of love, or even the interfering parents. No, for Lady Belinda Featherstone, known to wealthy American families as the finest marriage broker in England, the true difficulty of her occupation was the romantic heart of a typical eighteen-year-old girl. Rosalie Harlow was proving a perfect example.

"Sir William would make any woman a fine husband," Rosalie was saying, her voice conveying the enthusiasm one might reserve for a visit to the dentist. "But . . ." She paused and sighed.

"But you don't like him?" Belinda finished for her, and felt the inclination to sigh, too. Sir William Bevelstoke was one of many well-connected English gentlemen who had expressed a romantic interest in the pretty American heiress since her arrival in London six weeks earlier, and was not the only one to elicit a lukewarm response. To make matters worse, Belinda suspected Sir William's feelings were deeper than attraction.

"It isn't that I don't like him," Rosalie said. "It's just that . . ." She paused again, her brown eyes giving Belinda an unhappy look across the tea table. "He isn't very exciting, Auntie Belinda."

Belinda wasn't the girl's aunt, but she was as close to the Harlow family as any blood relation could be. Like her own father had been, Elijah Harlow was one of the many American millionaires who, upon striking it rich in railroads or gold mines, found the lure of Wall Street irresistible and moved their families to New York only to find the doors of social acceptance slammed in the faces of the wives and daughters.

Like the Harlows, Belinda had faced that situation when her own father had brought her to New York from Ohio the year she was fourteen. Mrs. Harlow, a kind and loving woman, had felt great compassion for her young, motherless fellow outcast and had taken the painfully shy girl under her wing, an act of kindness Belinda had never forgotten.

The summer she was seventeen, Belinda had married the dashing, handsome Earl of Featherstone after a six-week whirlwind courtship. It had proved a disastrous union, but Belinda had managed to carve out a successful place for herself in British society. Five years later, when Mrs. Harlow had desired to spare her eldest daughter Margaret the stinging snubs of a New York debut, she had asked Belinda's help to launch the girl in London. Belinda, though happy to assist, was well aware that a rushed marriage to an impoverished scoundrel could well be the consequence. She had placed the girl in the path of the amiable, warm-hearted Lord Fontaine, and as a result, Margaret had become both a social success and a happily married baroness, and Belinda's reputation as a matchmaker had been

launched.

Since then, many New Money American girls, cold-shouldered by the rigid social hierarchy of Knickerbocker New York, had found their way to London and Belinda's modest house on Berkeley Street, hoping to follow in Margaret Harlow's footsteps. Rosalie, now done with French finishing school, was here to do the same, but Belinda feared she would prove more difficult to match with a good man than her sensible sister.

Belinda placed her teacup back in its saucer as she considered what her reply to Rosalie should be. Though she was a widow now and very grateful for the fact, she was also well aware that the only way for girls like Rosalie to achieve social acceptance was through matrimony. She wanted to prepare these girls for the practicalities of husband hunting without destroying any of their romantic ideals in the process, and Rosalie was a girl stuffed to the brim with romantic ideals.

"Sir William may not be the most exciting of men," she said after a moment, "but my dear Rosalie, there is so much more to a happy marriage than excitement."

"Yes, but shouldn't marriage be based on love? And," Rosalie rushed on as if afraid Belinda would disagree, "how can there be love if there is no excitement? To love is to burn, to feel as if one is on fire. Sir William," she added with another sigh, "does not set me on fire."

Before Belinda could point out the dangers inherent in such thinking, Jervis entered the room. "The Marquess of Trubridge has come to call, my lady," the butler informed her. "Shall I show him in?"

"Trubridge?" she echoed in astonishment. She did not know the marquess except by reputation, and that reputation hardly impelled her to make his acquaintance. Trubridge, the son of the Duke of Landsdowne, was well-known as a rakehell, a man who spent most of his time gallivanting about Paris, spending his income on drink, gaming tables, and women of low moral character. He was also a friend of her late husband's brother, Jack, and that fact gave her even less desire to make his acquaintance. Jack Featherstone was as wild as his brother had been, and both men had done plenty of carousing with Trubridge on the other side of the Channel.

Belinda wasn't surprised Trubridge would break rules of etiquette and call upon a woman with whom he was not acquainted, but she couldn't imagine his reason. Trubridge was a confirmed bachelor, and such men avoided Belinda as if she had the plague.

Still, whatever his reason for coming to see her, she had no interest in finding out what it was. "Jervis, please tell the marquess I am not at home."

"Very good, my lady." Jervis withdrew, and Belinda prepared to return to the subject at hand.

"Do not dismiss Sir William so quickly, Rosalie. He is quite well placed in Her Majesty's government. His knighthood was granted due to his excellent diplomatic skills over some tricky business in Ceylon."

"Ceylon?" Rosalie looked a bit alarmed. "If I were to marry Sir William, would I have to live in foreign places?"

The fact that she lived in a foreign place now, and a hotel at that, didn't seem to bother her, but Belinda fully understood the reasons for her concern. "Possibly," she was forced to concede, "but such posts are seldom for long, and they are an excellent opportunity for someone of your position to make an impression. A good diplomatic hostess is welcomed everywhere."

"I don't want to live in Ceylon. I want to live in England. Does Sir William have an estate?"

"Not at present, but if he were to marry, I'm sure he could be persuaded to purchase such a property. Still, it's far too early to think of that now. The point is that he is a very nice young man, well-mannered and well-bred. And—"

A discreet cough interrupted her, and she found her butler once again in the doorway. "Yes, Jervis

What is it?"

The butler looked apologetic. "The Marquess of Trubridge, my lady. He has asked me to inform your ladyship that despite your words to the contrary, he knows for a fact that you are at home."

"Oh, does he?" Belinda was indignant. "What makes him presume to know anything of the sort?"

Her question was rhetorical, but Jervis supplied an answer anyway. "He pointed out that it is a dark afternoon, and your lamps are lit, but your curtains are not drawn, making him able to see you quite easily through the window from the street below. He once again requests a few moments of your time."

"Of all the high-handed arrogance!" She didn't know him, had no desire to meet him, and saw no reason to accommodate him. "When a lady says she is not at home, she may be in residence and yet not at home to *visitors*, a social custom any marquess ought to be well mannered enough to know. It is so good as to point this out to him, if you please. And also remind him that a lack of prior introduction prevents me from seeing him in any case."

"Yes, my lady."

The butler once again withdrew, and Belinda returned her attention to Rosalie. "Now, about Sir William—"

"Who is this Marquess of Trubridge?" Rosalie interrupted. "He appears most insistent upon seeing you."

"I cannot imagine why. I don't even know the man."

"Is he unmarried? If so, surely his reason for coming to you is obvious."

"Trubridge is a bachelor, yes, an adamant one. It's common knowledge he has no intention of ever marrying. He is also a man no respectable young lady ought to become acquainted with. Now about Sir William . . ."

She'd barely begun a glowing description of that worthy young man's potential future as a diplomat before a movement from the doorway caught her attention, and when she looked up, Jervis was once again standing there. "Oh, for heaven's sake!" she exclaimed. "Isn't the man gone yet?"

"I am afraid not, my lady. He said to tell you he cannot imagine what he has done to give such offense that you would cut him in this manner by pretending you have never met him before, but whatever he has done to wound you, he offers his most sincere apologies. He again requests a moment of your time."

"This is nonsense. I've never met the man in my life, and I fail to see what is of such urgency—" She broke off, struck by a thought that trumped other considerations.

Perhaps something had happened to Jack. Her brother-in-law and Trubridge did share the lease on the town house in Paris, and the marquess would be the first to know if Jack had met with an accident. Jack was known for committing the wildest, stupidest, most reckless acts imaginable, and it would not surprise her if he'd come to an untimely demise. It would also explain what had brought Trubridge here without a proper introduction.

She bit her lip, considering for a moment, then she said, "Ask Lord Trubridge if he's here because something has happened to Jack. That is, to Lord Featherstone."

"I will inquire, my lady." Jervis, who was proving himself today as the most forbearing butler in London, bowed and withdrew. During his absence, she did not return her attention to her companion. Instead, she stared at the door, waiting for the butler's return, a knot of apprehension in her stomach.

It wasn't that she was fond of Jack. She wasn't. He was too much like his brother—too inclined toward carousing with bad company, too fond of high living, and completely careless about his responsibilities at home. But though she did not approve of her late husband's brother, she sincerely

hoped nothing untoward had happened to him.

“Well?” she prompted when Jervis reappeared. “What did he say? Is Jack . . . is he dead?”

“Lord Trubridge wishes to know—” Jervis hesitated, as if the message were so important as warrant being conveyed as accurately as possible. “He has asked me to ask you if Jack’s meeting with an accident would enable you to grant him an interview. If so, then yes, Jack has definitely come cropper.”

Beside her, Rosalie choked back a giggle at this absurd reply, but Belinda could not share her amusement. Like Rosalie, she suspected Trubridge’s tongue was firmly in his cheek, but it was best to be sure.

“Oh, very well,” she said, giving in to the inevitable. “Put him in the library, wait ten minutes, then show him up.”

“Yes, my lady.” The butler departed to carry out these latest instructions, and Belinda turned to her companion.

“I’m sorry to cut our visit short, dearest, but it seems I am forced to see Lord Trubridge after all, only to confirm that my brother-in-law has not come to harm.”

“But why make the marquess wait in the library? Why not simply have him come upstairs?”

The idea of that man anywhere near a sweet innocent like Rosalie didn’t bear contemplating. “I cannot allow you to meet him. Lord Trubridge is not a gentleman.”

“Not a gentleman? But he is a marquess.” Rosalie gave a little laugh, understandably confused. “I thought a titled British peer was always a gentleman.”

“Trubridge may be a gentleman in name, but he is not one in deed. There was a scandal years ago, a girl he compromised but wouldn’t marry, a young lady of good family. And . . .” She paused, striving to remember what else she’d heard about the marquess. “I believe there was another girl—Irish—who went running off to America because of him though I don’t know the details, for his father managed to have it all hushed up.”

“Ooh,” Rosalie breathed, her eyes widening with even greater curiosity. “He sounds terribly notorious.”

Belinda studied Rosalie’s rapt expression and wondered, not for the first time, what it was about the rakes that young girls found so captivating. By all rights, Rosalie ought to be repulsed, but no. She was all the more keen to meet him because of his wicked reputation, and Belinda wanted to bite her tongue off for having discussed the wretched fellow at all. Still, the damage was done. All she could do now was try to mitigate it and get Rosalie out of the house as quickly as possible.

“He isn’t notorious enough to be interesting,” she answered with a deprecating smile. “He’s just a despicable, odious man with a sordid history who has no business calling on me when we’ve never met.”

“But he says you have met.”

“I’m sure he is mistaken, or he’s teasing for some obscure reason of his own. Either way, I must see him, it seems.” She stood up, pulling Rosalie to her feet as well. “And you, my dear, must return to your hotel.”

“Oh, must I go?” She groaned. “Why can’t I meet this Lord Trubridge? I am supposed to be mingling in British society. This man is a marquess, so I think I should meet him, don’t you?”

Absolutely not. Still smiling, pretending a casual indifference she was far from feeling, she picked up Rosalie’s gloves from the settee and handed them to her. “Another time, perhaps,” she said, and began steering the girl toward the door. “But not today.”

Ignoring the girl’s protests, Belinda propelled her through the drawing-room doorway and down the corridor to the stairs. “Besides, I can’t introduce you to a man I haven’t yet met myself. That would

not be proper.”

She paused near the top of the stairs, casting a quick glance down to the foyer below to reassure herself that Jervis had done his job, and Lord Trubridge was safely ensconced in the library. Satisfied, she started down the stairs, pulling a reluctant Rosalie with her. “And I can assure you, Rosalie, that he’s a man unworthy of your interest.”

“Oh, but how could he not be interesting, with such a history? Oh, please, please, let me meet him. I’ve never met anyone notorious.”

Belinda discerned that further excuses would be needed to make the girl lose her curiosity. “My dear girl, you expressed the wish to live in England,” she reminded her, as they started down the stairs. “Trubridge lives in Paris.”

“But does he have property here?”

“I believe he has a place in Kent,” she answered with reluctance. “Honey-Something. But I don’t believe he ever visits it. He certainly doesn’t live there.”

“But if he married, he might wish to.”

“I doubt it. He and his father are estranged and have been for years.”

“That could also change if he married, too.” Rosalie stopped at the bottom of the stairs, forcing Belinda to stop as well, and as she noted the girl’s mouth taking on an obstinate curve, she began to fear her own intransigence was making the marquess all the more appealing. Clearly, she needed to find something that would lessen his allure.

“I’ve heard . . .” Belinda paused, inventing quickly. “I’ve heard he’s become quite fat.” After all, she consoled herself, it *could* be true.

“Fat?”

“Absolutely corpulent.” Belinda once again began propelling the girl toward the front door. “And I know he drinks,” she added, as they crossed the foyer, “which has probably given him the gout by now. I daresay he smokes cigars as well, so his breath must be . . .” She broke off with a shudder. “Ugh.”

“You make him sound dreadful.”

“Well, he is getting on. Why, he must be over thirty, at least.”

If she’d hoped young Rosalie would think a man of thirty too old to be attractive, she was mistaken. “Oh, Auntie Belinda, thirty’s not so old. Why, you’re twenty-eight, and you could easily pass for a debutante.”

“What a lovely thing to say, darling. Thank you. But my point is that Trubridge is a man of dissolute habits, and when men like that reach a certain age, they become most unattractive.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” She looked less interested now, much to Belinda’s relief. “Oh, how very disappointing.”

“Well, dinner at Lord and Lady Melville’s tonight ought to brighten your spirits. Their second son, Roger, is quite good-looking, and delightful company.” She turned to the footman who had opened the door for them. “Samuel, please escort Miss Harlow to Thomas’s Hotel and see that she arrives safely.”

“Heavens,” Rosalie put in, “I don’t need an escort. Berkeley Square is just across the street. I don’t understand all this fuss about walking everywhere with a chaperone.”

“That’s because you’re American, darling. Things are very different here.” She kissed the girl on the cheek, pushed her gently out to the sidewalk, and turned to her footman. “Not just to the entrance of Berkeley Square, mind. Go with her all the way into Thomas’s Hotel.”

“Yes, my lady. She’ll not go amiss with me.”

“Thank you, Samuel.”

Her footman was most reliable, but despite that, Belinda watched from the doorway as Rosalie crossed Hay Hill and entered Berkeley Square. She was fiercely protective of the young American girls who sought her help, and when it came to safeguarding their reputations, she felt it was always best to err on the side of caution. This was particularly true of the Harlow girls, who were so much like family to her.

Jervis's footsteps on the tiled floor of the foyer reminded her of her other visitor, and since Rosalie had now vanished from view, she came back inside. Meeting her butler's inquiring gaze, she nodded then as he went down the corridor to fetch the marquess, she ran up the stairs to the drawing room. She was able to settle herself on the settee with her tea and catch her breath before Jervis came through the doorway. "The Marquess of Trubridge," he announced, and stood aside.

Another male figure appeared, moving past the butler and into the drawing room with the ease of a man who never had cause to doubt his welcome in a room where there were women. Belinda rose to her feet, studying him as he approached.

For Rosalie's benefit, she had conjured the picture of an aging roué, but that picture was shattered by the man before her. He might have all the dissolute habits she'd enumerated, but one wouldn't have known it to look at him. He was a big man, but there wasn't an ounce of superfluous flesh on him, and every line of his tall, broad-shouldered frame exuded athleticism and strength, the perfect combination to make any woman feel protected and safe in his company. But Belinda knew such an impression was nothing but illusion. Trubridge's reputation made him as safe as an untamed lion.

He had a lion's beauty as well, the tawny, windblown beauty of that splendid animal. His eyes were hazel, with lights of gold and green in their brown depths. His hair, though cut short, was thick and slightly curly, and the gold-burnished locks shimmered in the lamplight of Belinda's drawing room like the sun might shimmer on the Serengeti Plain. Suddenly, the dark, rainy English afternoon became one of exotic warmth and brilliant sunshine. Even Belinda, who knew full well how deceiving appearances could be, blinked a little in the face of such splendid masculinity.

He was clean-shaven, a rarity these days, but she could not fault the marquess for choosing to do so in fashion. His lack of a beard allowed the lean planes of his face and the strong lines of his jaw to be displayed to perfect advantage. Why, she wondered in frustration, were the rakehells always so damnably handsome?

"Lady Featherstone." He bowed to her. "What a pleasure to see you again."

"Again?" Looking at him, she was more positive than ever they had never met, for as galling as it was to admit, Trubridge wasn't the sort of man a woman was likely to forget. "I don't believe we have ever been introduced, Lord Trubridge," she said, hoping her words and her withering tone might remind him that he had already broken several social rules.

"Of course you don't remember me." He smiled, a disarming smile that was boyish enough to belie his reputation and seductive enough to reinforce it. "We were introduced at the wedding breakfast following your marriage to Lord Featherstone."

Heavens, her wedding had been a decade ago. That might explain why she didn't remember him, for she'd been barely eighteen on her wedding day, navigating her first foray through the maze of British society like a moth blundering in lamplight. Horribly self-conscious, head over heels in love with her new husband, and terrified she'd make some awful faux pas that would embarrass him, she'd been too nervous to remember much of anything that day, even a man like Trubridge. How extraordinary that he should remember her, but she supposed his talent for remembering women was another reason he was so successful at seducing them. "Of course," she murmured at a loss for what else to say. "Forgive me."

“There is nothing to forgive. It was a long time ago, and we’ve not seen each other since, a fact which is clearly my loss. You look more radiant now than you did as a bride.”

“You flatter me.” *One of your greatest talents, I imagine*, she was tempted to add, but she bit back that rather acidic rejoinder. “Thank you.”

His smile faded to an earnest expression that seemed thoroughly genuine. “I was sorry to hear of your husband’s death. He seemed a very good chap.”

All men, she supposed, would share that opinion of Charles Featherstone. He’d been a terrible husband, but from the male point of view, he’d been a very good chap indeed, able to gamble, carouse, and drink with the best of them, until the night five years ago when he’d collapsed on top of his favorite mistress and died of heart failure at the age of thirty-six.

Belinda strove to maintain a neutral expression and keep hidden her distaste of her late husband and her lack of grief over his death. In England, showing too much emotion was considered bad form. “I appreciate your condolences,” she murmured. “But I take it you are not here to offer me similar sympathies about my brother-in-law?”

His mouth twitched a bit. “Fortunately not. Jack was hale and hearty the last time I saw him, which was only a few days ago at our apartments in Paris.”

“Quite so. I am not surprised, sir, that a man of your reputation would use such a ruse to obtain an interview, but I am baffled as to the reason for it. What is the purpose of this visit?”

“For the same reason many bachelors visit you, of course.”

“I hope you don’t mean that the way it sounds.”

He smiled again, a grin that was wide, rueful, and utterly devastating to the feminine heart. “Lady Featherstone, I want you to find me a wife.”

Chapter 2



Nicholas's first thought upon seeing Belinda Featherstone was to curse both her husband and her father for their penchant for heavy gambling. If Charles Featherstone hadn't loved cards and racehorses to an obsessive degree, and if Jeremiah Hamilton hadn't staked and lost his entire fortune on America's Wall Street, the solution to Nicholas's problems might have been standing right in front of him, for Belinda Featherstone was one of the loveliest women he'd ever seen.

He hadn't expected that.

He'd been twenty years old when he'd attended her wedding breakfast, a decade had passed since then, and he remembered little of the event. Despite his words to the contrary this afternoon, they had never been introduced, but he hadn't wanted to waste time arranging a formal introduction. That decade ten years ago, he'd only glimpsed her from across the room, and his recollection of her appearance that day was vague—a painfully thin girl swathed in too many yards of silk illusion and too many strands of diamonds. He hadn't seen her since, for he spent little time in England, and when he was here, he had never happened to run across her. Lady Featherstone's social circle was far too respectable for the likes of him.

In deciding to bring his matrimonial situation to her, Nicholas hadn't given any thought to what her appearance would be like now, but had he done so, he'd probably have envisioned nothing more than an older version of the unremarkable bride he'd glimpsed ten years earlier. Such an assumption, he saw now, would have been utterly wrong, for time had transformed the gawky girl of his memory into a beautiful woman, a fact Jack had somehow failed to mention during the past decade.

Large eyes in a heart-shaped face stared back at him, eyes of clear, sky blue surrounded by a thick fringe of sooty lashes. Irish eyes. Another thing about her he hadn't expected.

Once again, Nicholas's mind flashed backward, nine years instead of ten, to a different dark-haired, blue-eyed girl with Irish eyes, and his heart twisted, just a bit, in his chest. For a moment, he felt as if he were twenty-one again, filled with dreams and ideals and all the claptrap that only young love could inspire.

He shoved the feeling aside. This was no Irish hillside, he was no longer a callow youth, and his dreams and ideals, like his love, had turned to dust a long time ago.

Despite a superficial resemblance in coloring, this woman was nothing like Kathleen. Her black hair was not a riot of corkscrew curls blowing loose in the wind off the Irish Sea. Instead, it was sleek and straight and caught back in an elegant, complicated chignon that had clearly been fashioned by a lady's maid. Her dress was a tea gown of soft, slate blue cashmere, not a coarse and serviceable

linsey-woolsey covered by an apron. And though her house was small and modestly furnished, it was nothing like the thatched-roof cottages of County Kildare. Besides, he knew Lady Featherstone to be filled to her fingertips with scruples and rectitude, two qualities Kathleen Shaughnessy had never possessed.

In fact, Lady Featherstone had one of the most pristine reputations in London, and though that would definitely benefit him in his quest, at this moment it seemed a pity, for her mouth was full, dark pink and eminently kissable, with an unmistakable sensuality that her philandering husband had clearly not appreciated.

He took a glance down her figure, noting that the stick-thin frame of the girl swathed in tulle had given way to a figure of much more luscious proportions. Even her loosely fitted tea gown could not hide the round fullness of her breasts and the undulating curve of her hips. No, he decided, as his gaze traveled slowly back up her body, there was nothing gawky about Lady Featherstone anymore.

He paused at her throat, appreciating the bare skin exposed by the open, lace-edged vee of her gown for a moment before he returned his gaze to her face, and when he looked again into her eyes, he was flooded through his body, the unmistakable heat of desire. For him to be aroused by a woman certainly wasn't an uncommon thing, and black hair and blue eyes were a combination to which he was particularly susceptible, but given the reason he was here, any desire he might feel for Belinda Featherstone was damned inconvenient.

Not that his feelings seemed to matter much anyway, he thought in amusement, watching as those stunning blue eyes narrowed. It was clear the stirrings in his body had been perceived and were definitely not reciprocated, nor even welcomed.

Ah, well, he supposed that was for the best. There were widows happy to set aside the propriety that had been required of them during marriage, but to his knowledge, Lady Featherstone had never been one of those. Besides, he knew that these days she was a woman of modest means, and thanks to his father's latest attempts to bring him to heel, Nicholas could no longer afford to become entangled with women who didn't have money.

"This is a most unexpected surprise, Lord Trubridge."

Her voice brought him out of his reverie, and with regret, he put aside any lustful thoughts about her and reminded himself of the purpose that had brought him here. "A surprise perhaps, but a pleasant one, I hope?"

She made no reply beyond an insincere little smile that made him regret he'd asked the question. Despite her admission of surprise at his presence here, her face displayed no curiosity, and as silence once again fell between them, Nicholas began to feel deuced awkward.

Perhaps it was conceited of him to expect more favorable reactions than this from the fair sex, but so, he was being duly punished for his conceit. The disdain that emanated from her was palpable.

But then, he didn't often encounter women like Lady Featherstone nowadays. No doubt, she felt honor-bound to disapprove of a man like him as a matter of course. The women with whom he usually associated were much more forgiving. And he supposed his rather cavalier way of gaining entrance to her drawing room hadn't helped matters, but he'd seen no other way to manage an interview after her initial refusal to see him. After all, it wasn't as if they were invited to the same parties.

Still, he was here now, she knew the purpose of his visit, and the only civil thing to do was to invite him to sit down. He waited, but she issued no such invitation, and as the silence lengthened with the only sound the tick of the clock on the wall, it became clear he would have to take the lead. He gave a slight cough. "Might we sit?"

"If we must."

Not at all an encouraging reply, but the best he was going to get, it seemed. He gestured to the celadon green settee behind her with an inquiring glance. She hesitated, as if trying to find a way to avoid settling in for a conversation, but at last, she resumed her seat, perched on the edge as if waiting for the first possible excuse to stand again and show him the door.

In light of that, Nicholas felt that a delicate, more tactful approach to his situation might do less to offend her. "Lady Featherstone," he began as he took the chintz chair opposite her, "my thirtieth birthday was four days ago."

"Congratulations."

The dryness of that perfunctory reply was not lost on him, but he persevered. "When a man turns thirty, he is often forced to consider his future in ways he would not have done earlier in life. I am at that crossroads."

"I see." She cast a pointed glance at the clock and began drumming her fingers against her knee.

"Hence my decision," he continued valiantly, "that it is time for me to marry."

She leaned back, folded her arms, and eyed him with skepticism. "From what I hear, you are not the marrying sort."

"Jack told you that, I suppose."

"No, but it would hardly be necessary for him to do so. Your reputation precedes you, sir."

Having spent a great deal of time and effort bolstering that reputation for reasons of his own, he couldn't find cause to regret it now. Still, though a few days ago Nicholas would have been happy for a matchmaker to deem him as an unsuitable candidate for matrimony, everything was different now.

"I have not been inclined to marriage, that is true," he said, "but I have come to a change of heart on the subject."

"Indeed?" One delicate black brow arched upward. "A mere birthday and a bit of circumspection have been sufficient to motivate this . . . change of heart?"

Nicholas threw tact to the winds. "Lady Featherstone, I realize custom dictates delicacy in discussions such as this, but I've never been much good at beating about the bush. Might we speak frankly?"

Without waiting for an answer, he spread his arms and admitted the truth. "Four days ago, my father, the Duke of Landsdowne, cut off my trust fund. I am forced to the marriage state by circumstance."

"How dreadful for you," she murmured. "And on your birthday, too."

"It's more than dreadful, Lady Featherstone. It's damnable. To my mind, no one should be forced to marry for material reasons. But I have no choice. My income comes from a trust bequeathed to me by the terms of my mother's will. She died when I was a boy, but unbeknownst to me, my father had somehow managed to persuade her to add a codicil just before her death that made him sole trustee of that income. I was unaware of that codicil until four days ago, when Landsdowne's attorney wrote to inform me of it and to tell me that the duke has chosen to cut me off."

"Ah, so it is a change in your pocketbook, not a change in your heart, that has brought about the reflections regarding your future?"

He stirred in his chair, feeling suddenly defensive. "The former has induced the latter," he said. "Bachelorhood is no longer an option for me, which is why I have come to you."

She frowned. "I'm not certain I comprehend your meaning. What have I to do with whom you wish to marry?"

"Lady Featherstone, everyone in society knows you arrange these things."

She unfolded her arms and leaned forward, her gaze skewering him like an icicle. "By 'arranging' . . ."

things,' what you mean is that you want me to find you a wife rich enough to provide you with the income your father has cut off?"

Nicholas studied her hostile countenance, and he wondered how this woman could possibly make a living as a marriage broker when she seemed so resentful of the concept. "Well, that is what you do, isn't it?" he asked. "You bring wealthy girls of no background over here from America and pair them with eligible peers in need of money."

She stiffened, seeming to take offense at this assessment of her profession.

"You needn't pucker up so, Lady Featherstone. You have carved out for yourself an ingenious role in society, and a very necessary one in light of our beastly agricultural depression. I would imagine many a peerage has been rescued from disaster due to your efforts."

She lifted her chin a notch. "I facilitate the introduction of various American acquaintances into British society, hoping that in my small way, I can help to smooth their path. Whether or not such introductions have the happy result of matrimony is not within my control."

"Is matrimony ever a happy result?" he quipped without thinking, but the moment the light, careless words were out of his mouth, her cool gaze became absolutely frosty, and Nicholas reminded himself that making light of marriage to a marriage broker was probably not a good idea. "I must marry. I have no other choice if I am to have an income."

"You have an estate."

"Lady Featherstone, you must know that land rents are not always enough to cover the costs of running an estate these days. Between the sale of the barley, wheat, and hops grown at Honeywood, the land rents, and the lease of the house, I am able to pay the operating expenses, but there is nothing left over for me to live on."

She shrugged, seeming wholly unsympathetic. "I don't suppose you could try earning your living?"

"Obtain employment, you mean? Careful, Lady Featherstone. You're showing your American blood when you suggest things like that. You know the son of a duke isn't supposed to peg away at a job. It's not done."

"And you care so much what people think of you?"

He smiled in the face of her sarcasm. "Actually, I don't give a tinker's damn," he confessed with a cheer. "And as to finding employment, I'm open to suggestions." He forced a laugh. "But what on earth would anyone hire a man like me to do?"

She tilted her head, studying him. "I can't think of a thing."

Strangely, that hurt. He didn't even know her, and yet, her words bruised him deep down inside, in that place where dreams and ideals had once existed, a place that was empty now. Still, he didn't show that her words had cut, for Landsdowne had given him a lifetime of training in how not to show pain. His smile did not falter. "Quite so," he said. "And even if I were able to obtain some sort of job, it would hardly be one sufficient to support me."

"Given your hedonistic way of life, I should imagine not."

She made him sound quite depraved. "Lady Featherstone, I realize that my past is somewhat checkered, but surely that alone does not make me an undesirable *parti*. I am a marquess, after all, and the only son of a duke."

"And do you not think persuading your father to reinstate your income would be a more honorable course?"

He gave a laugh. "Are you acquainted with my father, Lady Featherstone?"

"I have met him. But we are not well acquainted, no. Still, I cannot see how discussing the matter with him would be a less desirable course than marrying for money."

"I'm not the first person to seek marriage for material considerations, madam," he shot back, frustrated by her resentment toward him when surely many of her clients had sought out her help for the exact same reasons as he. "As for my father, he and I have not spoken a word to each other for a person for over eight years and, let me assure you, we both prefer it that way. As for persuading him . . ." Nicholas paused and leaned forward, meeting her gaze with a hard one of his own. "I would crawl to the devil before I would ask that man for a brass farthing. I realize that a marriage based on material considerations is not ideal, but if both parties are honest about their reasons for marrying from the very start and freely choose to marry for those reasons, there is nothing dishonorable about it. Besides, as I said, I have no choice. I can live off of my credit for a while, but after that, I shall be destitute. In the normal course of events, coming to a marriage broker is not how I would go about finding a wife, but I have few options. There—"

"How would you go about it?" she interrupted. "Finding a wife, I mean? In the normal course of events?"

"Not society's way." Before she could probe further, he went on, "And I fail to see how that matter at this stage. As I said, I must marry, and as quickly as possible. I haven't the time, nor—I must confess—the inclination to engage in society's tedious rituals of proper courtship."

"And you believe that coming to me enables you to avoid those rituals?" She stared at him as if she couldn't believe what she was hearing. "You think it's as simple as that?"

"Isn't it?" Nicholas frowned in bafflement. "You are a marriage broker. I am the son of a duke. I wish to engage you in the task of finding me a suitable wife—that is, one who is rich, preferably pretty, and willing to part with some of her wealth in order to obtain a higher place in society, and later, a duchess's coronet. I will, of course, pay you a handsome commission out of the marriage portion. This seems to me a straightforward business arrangement and something you have facilitated many times before. Call me thick, but I fail to see what is complicated about it."

She made a sound of derision. "You, sir, are nothing but a fortune hunter."

"At least I am prepared to be an honest one," he countered. "I am willing to lay bare my situation for my future bride. If you can manage to find me one who is also prepared to be honest about her motives, there should be no cause for concern. And it's not as if you've shown any compunction about arranging material marriages in the past. The Duke and Duchess of Margrave, for example, or—"

"The duke and duchess made no material arrangement! And neither have any of the other couples I have brought together."

"Surely you don't believe that," he said, but she was glaring daggers at him, and he gave a incredulous laugh. "By God, perhaps you do believe it. Lady Featherstone, how can you have lived in England this long, arranged matches for countless peers, and still believe that marriage on this side of the pond is anything but a material arrangement? It's certainly not an affair of the heart. Believe me," he added, unable to stop the bitter edge that entered his voice, "I know."

"I, too, know all about marriage on this side of the pond, sir. I do not need you to explain it to me. And let me assure you that I am not in the least romantic. I am practical. I fully recognize that money plays a certain part in British matrimony, but my friends and the men they married formed unions based on far more than material considerations. Those couples had affection—"

"Affection?" he interrupted, diverted and amused by her choice of words. "Well, I daresay affection would impel any man to the altar."

She set her jaw. "Laugh if you like."

Nicholas hid his amusement at once. "No, no, your approach sounds very logical," he said, trying to sound appropriately grave. "But you do make me wonder . . ." He paused, and his gaze slid to her

gorgeous mouth. "What of passion?"

A rosy tint washed into her cheeks, showing that he'd rattled her cool complacency at last. "Passion is not really relevant to matrimony."

He laughed again. Her comment was so absurd, he couldn't help it. "Since most British peers marry in the hope of producing an heir, I think passion is highly relevant."

Her expression hardened. "Passion does not last. Therefore, it makes an inadequate basis for matrimony. To those who honor me by seeking my advice, I recommend they base marriage on a solid foundation of sincere affection, shared interests, and like minds."

It was clear that teasing her was not helping his cause. "Can we at least agree that marriage should be approached sensibly?" he asked. "From that standpoint, surely you would be able to arrange several suitable introductions."

"I think not." She rose to her feet. "I do not assist fortune hunters, even supposedly honest ones. I cannot help you, Lord Trubridge. I wonder why you think I would be willing to do so."

Nicholas tilted his head back to look up at her. "And I wonder why I am summarily dismissed for desiring the same sort of arrangement aspired to by many others who have sat in this drawing room."

She did not reply, and it was clear from her stony expression that there was no chance further discussion would change her mind. A pity, for she could have smoothed his way back into society and made this whole business so much easier, but it wasn't meant to be. He'd simply have to go about finding his wife another way.

"Very well," he said, and stood up. "I shall have to conduct my search without your assistance."

"Terrible of me to expect you to find your own wife, I know," she said, her voice taking on the dulcet sweetness of sarcasm. "I fear you shall now be forced to endure those tedious, proper courtship rituals, despite your contempt for them. I must confess I shall quite enjoy observing your attempt, Lord Trubridge."

"I shall endeavor to be as entertaining as possible for you."

"Do." Now she chose to smile, and it was a smile of satisfaction, as if she'd won some sort of victory. "But I feel compelled to warn you that I shan't make your quest an easy one."

"So, if I take your meaning, you are not only refusing to help me; you intend to block my efforts?"

Her smile widened. "In every way possible."

If she hoped her words would intimidate him into giving up his quest, she was mistaken. "Are you threatening me, Lady Featherstone?" he asked, smiling back at her.

"Take it any way you like."

"Very well then, I shall take it as a challenge. And I have never been able to resist a challenge. But I'm not sure what you can do to stop me," he added, baiting her, hoping she would reveal her strategy so he would know just what he would be up against. "I appreciate that you are disinclined to help me, but I fail to see what you could do to prevent me from finding a wife by my own efforts?"

Her smile vanished, and her eyes flashed like cool, polished steel. "I shall make sure that any young lady you are considering knows just what sort of man you are, of your scandalous past, the dishonorable reasons for your courtship, the mercenary quality of your intentions, and just what a horrible husband you would make."

He was stung by this scathing and wholly unjustified summation of his character, but he didn't show it. "You must do as your honor dictates, of course," he said in his most amiable fashion, "but now that the gauntlet has been thrown, let me say that I don't think your mission will prove quite as successful as you imagine."

"No?"

“No. You are assuming I will follow society’s customary courtship rituals, but I have no intention doing so.”

“What do you mean?”

“I will not be conducting a *proper* courtship at all. In fact,” he added, his smile widening as he relished her shocked face, “I believe I shall conduct one that is as deliciously improper as possible. He winked. “It’s more fun that way.”

“Oh, you are a devil,” she breathed, her hands clenching into fists at her sides, her expression one of barely controlled outrage. “A wicked, black-hearted rake.”

“No point in denying it,” he said with a shrug. “Many people came to that conclusion about my character long ago, including you, it seems.”

“With good reason, sir!”

She knew nothing about the circumstances that had led to the tarnishing of his reputation nor his reasons for allowing the rumors to stand, and he damned well wasn’t going to launch into explanations now. “Either way, it won’t make a particle of difference. Women love a rake who is willing to reform. Especially if he can evoke her passion.” His gaze slid to her mouth. “Mutual affection, like minds, and shared interests be damned.”

With that, he turned and walked out, leaving the prim and proper Lady Featherstone spluttering behind him.

UPON BELINDA’S ARRIVAL in England a decade earlier, the Viscountess of Montcrieffe (formerly Miss Nancy Breckenridge of New York), had been kind enough to guide her through her first few precarious years in British society. She had taught Belinda the three most important precepts of a true lady, with wit: a lady never displayed shock or surprise, never gave way to fits of temper, and never, even if contradicted a gentleman before dinner.

Belinda, in those days a young, withdrawn, terribly insecure girl, hadn’t had any trouble taking those precepts to heart. But now, as she stared at the empty doorway through which the Marquess of Trubridge had just departed, it occurred to her that she’d just broken all three of those rules as easily as one might break an egg.

Not that she could find cause to regret it, for his words about conducting an improper courtship could only mean one thing: he intended to seduce and compromise a girl into marriage, and that would give any woman, lady or not, cause to lose her temper. Still, Belinda knew anger wouldn’t serve her well in these circumstances. She had to think clearly, plan strategically, and find a way to stop him.

Women love a rake.

His words came back as if to mock her, and Belinda sank down onto the settee with a sigh. Trubridge was right about that, and she knew it better than anyone. Experience was a bitter teacher.

Charles had been a rake, too, handsome as sin and charming as the devil, with blood more blue than any of the New York Knickerbockers who’d looked down their noses at Miss Belinda Hamilton of Cleveland, Ohio.

Race week at Saratoga was one of the few places where a girl with no background and plenty of money might mingle with those of higher social status. For a girl like Belinda, however, such opportunities had meant little, for she’d been far too shy to take advantage of them.

When the Seventh Earl of Featherstone, on a tour of the States at the time, had singled her out for his attentions on the verandah of Saratoga’s Grand Union Hotel, it had taken only one fifteen-minute conversation where he did most of the talking for her to fall head over heels in love with him.

When he’d pulled her into a darkened corner of the garden at a cotillion a scant six weeks after

meeting her, his bold manner and sensuous kisses had been the headiest experience of her life. And when, after that brief but passionate courtship, he'd asked her to become the Countess of Featherstone and come live with him in an English castle, he'd presented it as such a romantic, dreamy fairy tale that she'd accepted on the spot without even noticing that his proposal had included no actual declaration of love.

But he had assured her father that his desire to marry her had nothing to do with her fortune, and her father, never good at facing unpalatable possibilities, had taken him at his word. As for herself, Belinda had been so young, so infatuated with Charles and so enamored with the British aristocracy he represented, that she'd convinced herself of all sorts of romantic tripe about what being his wife and countess would be like.

Neither she nor her father had known the precarious nature of Featherstone's finances and how dissolute his character until it was too late. Only after the wedding had she learned of her new husband's four mortgaged estates, two mistresses, and three hundred thousand pounds of debt. Left with no choice but to honor the marriage agreement, her father had paid off Featherstone's debts and handed over the rest of her dowry, which his son-in-law had thoroughly enjoyed spending.

By the time Jeremiah Hamilton lost his fortune, the money from her marriage settlement was gone. Even before then, Charles had abandoned any pretenses of gentleman-like behavior or husbandly regard toward his young American wife. He had also made clear that he had no inclination to provide her with an income of her own.

Left to her own devices, she'd managed to direct her anger and disillusionment into a very lucrative source of income for herself, but that wasn't why she'd become a marriage broker.

Fortune hunters were the bane of any heiress's existence, and it had become the mission of her life to assist as many young ladies as possible in making wiser choices than she had. She informed American mothers as to the character of young British gentlemen, she advised fathers on how to properly tie up the money, and she did her best to guide marriage-minded American heiresses toward those British gentlemen of good and moral character, the men most likely to bring them not only social acceptance, but also lasting happiness, and she was proud of the fact that nowadays an American girl determined to marry a British lord knew her first call once arriving in London was upon Lady Featherstone of Berkeley Street.

Her recollections about Featherstone led to an inevitable comparison with Trubridge, and she found their similarities a sobering reminder of her duty. She had to make good on her threat and stop the man, but when she thought of his tawny eyes and devastating smile, she knew it was not going to be easy. There were quite a few heiresses who would happily hand over their hearts and their dowries in exchange for a handsome man with a title in the euphemistic hope their love would be returned.

Jervis entered the drawing room with a stack of newspapers, but lost in thought, she barely noticed as he crossed the room to place them by her chair. It was her custom to scan the morning and evening papers, just in case any tidbits of gossip had managed to make news before she'd become aware of them, and it was a pastime in which she usually took great amusement, for the papers were so often wrong.

Today, however, she couldn't stir up much interest as the butler crossed to her side and placed a stack of scandal sheets on the table by her chair. "The evening papers, my lady."

"Thank you, Jervis." She dismissed him with a preoccupied wave of her hand and frowned at the pile of newspapers, fearing some of them had already noted Trubridge's arrival from Paris and were mad with speculation as to why he was in town.

Despite her bold words to him, Belinda knew it was unlikely she'd be able to prevent him from

finding a bride, particularly if he were as desperate, as much in haste, and as willing to use dishonorable tactics as he had implied. Nonetheless, she was determined that every heiress in London and her parents, too, would at least be aware of his character and his intentions beforehand. It was up to her to warn them; but such warnings would have to be issued with subtlety, or she would appear to have a personal axe to grind, and her words would be discounted. Also, she wouldn't put it past him to sue her for slander if she went too far too fast.

Calling on the mothers, whispered consultations . . . yes, that long-established method would work, but it would take time, and if he were truly prepared to ruin a girl to gain his objective, time was something she did not have. But other than her tongue, what other weapons could she employ?

Belinda sat up straight in her chair, inspiration striking with sudden force. There might be a way, she realized, and glanced at the clock. Yes, she had just enough time to pay a call, and that one little visit might be all she needed to do to prevent the Marquess of Trubridge from taking some innocent girl's virtue and fortune.

Chapter 3



It was a common misconception that one had to have money to stay at a luxurious London hotel, but Nicholas knew otherwise. One of the few benefits of being a titled peer was that one need not have ready money to engage a suite of rooms, and for any member of the Landsdowne family, Claridge was the London hotel of choice. The staff, bless their trusting hearts, wouldn't dream of asking Landsdowne's son to pay in advance, and given the fact that he had a mere seventeen pounds, four shillings, and sixpence in his bank account at present, Nicholas was happy to make use of his family name to obtain accommodations, especially since it was his father's latest attempt to bring him to heel that had brought him to London in the first place.

Landsdowne's letter informing him he'd been cut off and would remain so until he had a suitable wife had been quite a shock, but only because he hadn't known his father had that sort of power over his inheritance. But in hindsight, he supposed he should have anticipated something like this. After all, control of his money was control over him, and that had always been the old man's greatest obsession. What Landsdowne couldn't ever seem to accept was the fact that he no longer ceded the old man that sort of power. Though his father's move did force him to marry to secure his financial future, he intended to find a wife of his own choosing, not one chosen for him.

Of course, Lady Featherstone's refusal to assist him in his search did make his goal a bit trickier to achieve than he'd originally envisioned, but it didn't change it. He had to marry, and the only question now was how to set about it without her help.

The morning after his visit to Berkeley Street, he had little chance to speculate on the topic, however, for he'd barely sat down to breakfast before there was a knock on the door of his suite.

Chalmers, his valet, paused in the act of dishing up kidneys and bacon from the warming dishes that had been sent up by the hotel kitchens and gave his master an inquiring look.

He nodded in reply, and Chalmers left the sitting room for the vestibule. Moments later, the valet was ushering in a small, elderly man who carried a black leather dispatch case and whose shriveled, pippin face was quite familiar to Nicholas. "That didn't take long," he murmured under his breath. He laid aside his napkin and stood up. "Mr. Freebody," he greeted in a louder voice. "How good of you to look me up."

"My lord." The older man glanced at the table. "Forgive me for disturbing your breakfast."

"Not at all. As a matter of fact, I've been expecting you."

"Have you?" The dry, precise little man who'd been in charge of legal affairs for the present Duke of Landsdowne for nearly half a century actually seemed surprised.

“Yes, indeed. I didn’t know when you’d seek me out, of course, but it was bound to be soon after my arrival. Father’s letter was intended to bring me scurrying home, wasn’t it? So, here I am. You may tell him I arrived as anticipated.” He gestured to the chair across the table. “Please sit down. Would you care for coffee? Or I can have Chalmers fetch you some tea?”

“No, no, thank you, my lord.” He took the offered chair, placing his leather dispatch case beside it. “At His Grace’s request, I am here to further discuss that letter.”

“Of course you are.” He resumed eating his breakfast. “You know, sometimes I wish Father would be less predictable. My dealings with him might be more interesting that way.”

There was a rather awkward pause. Nicholas waited another ten seconds before he stopped eating and looked up. “Well?” he prompted. “You did come here to inform me of the terms under which my inheritance would be reinstated, did you not?”

Mr. Freebody smiled his dry little smile. “We don’t need to launch straight into legal matters, my lord. Do finish your breakfast. Do you plan to be in town long?”

He had no intention of giving anything away, and he kept his voice deliberately noncommittal. “I don’t really know. Beyond enjoying the delights of the season, I don’t have any fixed plans.”

“But surely you shall at least visit Honeywood while you are here?”

“I hadn’t thought that far ahead. Why do you ask?” He flashed the other man a grin. “Is Father afraid I might burn the place down for the insurance money?”

Freebody looked at him in some alarm, as if he were serious, and he reminded himself that lawyers had no sense of humor. They were rather like matchmakers in that respect.

With that thought, an image of Lady Featherstone’s eyes came into his mind—beautiful blue eyes tinged with the icy frost of disdain. Glaciers were warmer than that woman; no, he revised at once, even glaciers could melt if the proper heat were applied. As to Lady Featherstone, he doubted thawing was possible. On the other hand, she did have those full pink lips and that luscious figure. A determined man could perhaps—

A slight cough drew his attention. Nicholas set aside contemplation of the various ways one might apply heat to Lady Featherstone and returned his attention to his visitor. He set down his knife and fork. “Let’s cut to the heart of things, Freebody. You’ve known me all of my life, and there’s no need to dance around, making polite conversation. Landsdowne is holding my inheritance over my head in order to force me to marry whatever woman he deems most appropriate for alliance with the great and oh-so-noble Landsdowne family. Do I have it right?”

The lawyer gave him an apologetic look. “Force is a rather harsh assessment.”

“Landsdowne’s a harsh man, or hadn’t you noticed?”

“I’m sure His Grace’s sincerest wish is for your marriage to bring you happiness.”

Nicholas gave a laugh. “My dear man, spare us both the pretense that Landsdowne has ever cared about my happiness. He wants an heir, another pawn, another asset to put to use in the accumulation of his empire. That’s all.”

The lawyer ignored this summation of his employer’s motives. “As you have already surmised, His Grace is prepared to reinstate your income from your mother’s trust when you marry, if certain conditions are met. I am here to inform you of precisely what those conditions are and what else he is prepared to offer should you accept.”

Nicholas raised a brow at that. “Sweetening the pot, is he?”

“He will give you a quarterly allowance—”

“No,” Nicholas said, cutting off that dangling carrot at once.

“My lord, I realize you have not accepted an allowance from your father since you came into yo

own money, but you are entitled to his support, not only for yourself, but for your wife and children. He is willing to reinstate your allowance at double the previous amount, and by another ten per cent with the birth of each of your children.”

The duke was as miserly as he was ruthless, the main reason he still had so much money when people all over England were going broke. For him to offer such a staggering sum, and without any haggling, was quite uncharacteristic of him, and Nicholas could only wonder what other shoe was about to drop. He didn't have to wonder for long.

“Your bride will one day be the Duchess of Landsdowne,” Freebody went on, “and that is a position of great responsibility. To fulfill it, the woman you marry must be of the appropriate class.”

Nicholas ignored the old bitterness that stirred inside him and leaned back, forcing a laugh. “There is a pretty little French dairymaid in Paris who brings the milk each morning. Perhaps I should send for her and take her up to Gretna Green. The old man might die of apoplexy, and all my problems would be solved.”

These callous words made no dent in Freebody's unflappable, lawyerly reserve. “No elopements to Gretna Green, no dairymaids—French or otherwise—no shopgirls, no housemaids.” There was a pause as the lawyer met his gaze across the desk. “No actresses.”

So that was it. His grin widened. “Tempting as it might be to marry my most recent mistress and put the duke's knickers in a twist, Mignonette is a hardheaded Parisienne who's got far too much sense to take on marriage to me. And I do believe the little French maid's heart is already spoken for. So you may reassure my father that neither of them shall be the future Duchess of Landsdowne.”

“She must be an Englishwoman of noble family, Church of England, with her father's rank no lower than that of earl. She must also have a sizable dowry.”

He did not point out he was already in search of a woman who met none of those criteria except the last one. But he couldn't help being curious. “Landsdowne's rich as Croesus already. Why should he care if my wife brings a dowry into the family or not?”

The little lawyer drew himself up. “My dear Lord Trubridge, you cannot marry a girl with no dowry,” he said, as if appalled by the very idea. “She could be a gold digger.”

“Ah.” Enlightened, he grinned. “Yes, I suppose that would make her too much like the last girl. Wouldn't it?”

Freebody ignored the reference to Kathleen. “Your future bride must also have impeccable connections and an unsullied reputation.”

Given this list of requirements, his father might just as well expect him to marry a mermaid. “I see. And does the duke have any idea where I might find such a woman as you describe? The aristocratic English heiress with a large dowry is a creature of a bygone era, I fear. Most men of our ranks are poor as church mice these days and in no position to provide their daughters with generous dowries.”

“His Grace does have someone in mind.”

“And who is this paragon of womanly virtue?”

“Lady Harriet Dalrymple.”

“My God,” Nicholas muttered, staring at the lawyer in horror. “Landsdowne really does hate me. I've ever doubted it, this gives me irrefutable proof.”

“Lady Harriet is a wealthy heiress of excellent family and noble bloodlines,” Mr. Freebody went on doggedly determined to carry on with this joke of a negotiation. “She meets all your father's requirements.”

“She doesn't meet mine. Lady Harriet weighs more than I do. Fifteen stone, at least, the last time I saw her. God, man, she has hair on her lip. And her voice . . .” He shuddered.

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