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LINDEN

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One Night in
London

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One Night in London

The Truth About the Duke

Caroline Linden



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Dedication

*For Rebecca
(for free)*

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Chapter 1

The Duke of Durham was dying.

It wasn't spoken of openly, but everyone knew. With quiet steps and whispered instructions the servants were already preparing for the mourning. The solicitor had been sent for. Letters had been urgently dispatched to the duke's sons, one in the army and one in London, summoning them home. Durham himself knew his death was nigh, and until a sudden attack of heart pains the previous evening, he had been approving the funeral arrangements personally.

Edward de Lacey watched his father doze, the gaunt, stooped figure propped up on pillows in the bed as he struggled to breathe. The doctor had assured him there was no hope, and that the end was swiftly approaching. Edward would be very sorry to lose his father, but there was no question that the duke's time on earth was spent.

Durham stirred. "Charles?" he said faintly. "Is that you?"

Edward moved forward. "No, sir," he said quietly. "Not yet."

"I must . . . speak . . . to Charles," his father gasped. "Need . . . to—" He raised one hand and clutched weakly at Edward's sleeve. "Get Charles . . . you must."

"He's on his way," promised Edward, although he wasn't sure of any such thing. He'd filled the letter to his brother with the direst language possible, but that could only have any effect after the letter found its way into Charlie's hands, and even then he might be too drunk to understand that he must come home immediately, let alone actually make the journey. Edward clasped his father's hand between his own and expressed his hope, rather than his expectation. "He will surely be here at any moment."

"I have to tell him . . ." Durham mumbled fretfully. "All of you . . ."

Edward waited, but his father just closed his eyes, looking anguished. Unwillingly, Edward felt a flicker of petty annoyance; always Charlie, the firstborn, even though he was the son who was always there when the duke wanted him. He shoved it aside. It was unworthy to think such a thought as he

father sank closer and closer to mortality. "Tell me, sir," he whispered. "I will tell Charlie in the evening . . ." *In the event he doesn't arrive in time.* "I will make sure he knows as soon as he arrives, if you should be asleep then."

"Yes . . ." came the duke's soft, slurred voice. "Sleep. Soon. But not . . . without . . . telling Charlie . . ." He sighed, and went so still Edward feared the worst for a moment, until the faint rise of his father's chest proved him still alive.

In the utter quiet of the room a distant drumming sounded. Hooves pounding hard up the gravel drive, Edward realized, at the same moment his father bolted upright in bed. "Charles," croaked the duke, his face ashen. "Charles—is it he, Edward?"

Edward rushed to the window in time to see the rider's scarlet coat before he flashed out of sight beneath the portico in front of the house. "It's Gerard, Father."

"Ah," said Durham, slumping once more into his pillows. "A good boy, Gerard."

Edward smiled wryly at his father's masked disappointment. He was glad his younger brother, at least, was home. "I'll go fetch him right up."

"Do that," murmured Durham. "I will be glad to see him. And Charles . . . Charles will be here soon?"

"At any moment," Edward said again as he slipped through the door, then held it for the doctor to take his place in the room. He reached the top of the stairs just as his brother came running up.

"Am I too late?" demanded Gerard.

Edward shook his head.

Gerard exhaled and ran one hand over his head. His dark hair was damp with sweat, and dust covered him from head to toe. "Thank God. I've been riding all day; probably damn near killed that poor horse." He glanced at Edward. "Charlie?"

"No sign of him, as usual," muttered Edward as they walked down the hall. "Father's been calling for him for two days now."

"Well, some things never change." Gerard sighed and pulled loose a few buttons of his coat. "I should wash."

Edward nodded. "I had all the rooms prepared. But Gerard—hurry."

His brother paused on the threshold of his bedchamber. "He's really dying, then?"

It did seem incredible, even to Edward. Durham had been a vital person, every bit as robust and daring as his sons. Since the death of the duchess over twenty years ago, the household had been a preserve of male pursuits, and no one pursued them harder than Durham himself. Edward was almost eighteen before any of the brothers could outshoot their father, and they outrode him only when the doctor flatly ordered His Grace out of the saddle at the age of seventy after a bad fall injured his back.

But now Durham was eighty. He was an old man, and had been dying for the better part of a year. Gerard just hadn't seen the decline. "Yes, he's really dying," he said in answer to his brother's question. "I would be surprised if he lasts the night."

When his younger brother slipped into the sickroom a few minutes later, Edward had already

returned to his post by the window. Durham had told him to wait there, to announce Charlie the moment he arrived. He wondered what his father wanted so desperately to tell Charlie; God knew Charlie hadn't cared much for anything the duke had to say for the last ten years or so, and apparently still didn't. But whatever final words Durham had for his heir, they were obviously of tremendous importance. When the duke heard the creak of the door at Gerard's entrance, he lurched up again and cried out, "Charles?"

"No, Father, 'tis Gerard." Not a trace of offense or upset marred Gerard's soft tone. He crossed to the bed and took his father's hand. "Edward wrote me some nonsense that you were ill," he said. "I came to thrash some sense into him."

"But why did you not bring *Charles*?" whispered the duke in anguish. "Ah, lads. I have to tell Charles . . . ask his forgiveness . . ."

That was new. Edward abandoned his window post as Gerard shot him a curious look. "Forgiveness, Father?"

A tear leaked from the duke's eye, tracing a glistening path down his sunken cheek. "I must beg pardon of you all. I didn't know . . . If only I had known, in time . . . You, Gerard, will come out well enough—you always do—and Edward will have Lady Louisa . . . But Charles—Charles will not know what to do . . ."

"What do you mean?" Edward had to admire his brother's calm, even tone. The duke's demeanor was raising the hair on the back of his neck.

"Edward . . ." Durham reached feebly for him, and Edward stepped forward. He knelt beside the bed, leaning closer to hear the duke's quavering voice. "I know you would forgive me, and even know what to do . . . Forgive me, I should have told you earlier . . . before it was too late . . ."

"Told me what, Father? What is too late?" Edward fought down a surge of apprehension. Behind his back, Gerard hissed quietly at the doctor to leave.

"Tell Charles . . ." rasped the duke. An ominous rattle echoed in his breath. "Tell Charles . . . I am sorry."

"You will tell him yourself when he arrives," Edward said. Gerard crossed the room in two strides but shook his head as he gazed out the window facing the road from London. Edward turned back to his father. "Rest yourself, sir."

"Rest!" Durham coughed, his entire body convulsing. "Not until you grant me forgiveness . . ." His blue eyes were almost wild as he stared at Edward.

"I—" Edward stared. "Yes. Whatever it is, Father, I forgive you."

"Gerard!" cried the duke.

"You know I will forgive you, sir." Gerard had come back to the bed. "But for what sin?" Even he couldn't joke now. "I tried . . ." The duke's voice faded. "The solicitor . . . will tell . . . Sorry . . ." Durham never spoke with any clarity again. He slipped in and out of consciousness the rest of the day and into the evening, and finally breathed his last in the darkest hour of the night. Edward slumped in the chair next to the bed and listened to the silence when the tortured breathing finally stopped. Gerard

had been sitting with him until a few hours ago, when he finally went to bed, exhausted from his hard ride. The doctor had long since dozed off, and Edward saw no reason to wake him, either. Durham had lived a long and full life, and suffered the last several months of it in pain. It was a kindness that he was at peace now.

Slowly, he levered himself upright in the chair and leaned forward to take his father's hand. It was still warm; it felt just as it had for the last year or so, when the wasting illness had taken hold of the duke and shriveled his flesh. But there was no strength in it, and never would be again. "Fare thee well, Father," he said quietly, and laid the limp hand back on his father's chest.

The duke's solicitor, Mr. Pierce, arrived the following day. He had handled the Durham affairs for twenty years, as his father and grandfather had done before him. Edward was waiting in the front hall when his carriage pulled up to the steps.

"I see I should begin with condolences," Pierce said, glancing at the black crepe already on the door. "I am very sorry for your loss, my lord."

"Thank you." Edward bowed his head.

"His Grace sent full instructions, as always. I was delayed a day, gathering everything he wished me to provide you." Pierce paused. "I will be available as soon as you are ready."

"My brother, Lord Gresham, is not yet here. Captain de Lacey and I are in no hurry to proceed without him."

Pierce nodded. "As you wish, sir."

"There is just one thing." Edward raised one hand. "My father was quite agitated near the end, begging us to forgive him, but he wouldn't say for what sin. He said you would explain."

Pierce looked startled. "He didn't—he didn't tell you?"

"Tell us what?" Gerard was coming down the stairs, buttoning his scarlet jacket.

"Welcome home, Captain. My deepest sympathies," said the solicitor with a quick bow.

"Thank you, Mr. Pierce." Gerard turned to Edward. "The mysterious sin?" Edward nodded once, and Gerard fixed his penetrating gaze on Mr. Pierce again. "Do you know what Durham meant by that?" he asked in his usual direct way.

Mr. Pierce's eyes darted between the two of them. "Yes," he said. "I believe I do. I have a letter, as well as many other documents from His Grace, which will explain everything—as much as can be explained. But I think we should await Lord Gresham so that you might hear it, and the contents of His Grace's will, together."

"God only knows when Gresham will find his way out to Sussex," said Gerard. "My brother and I would like to know now."

"Yes," Edward said when the solicitor shot him a questioning look. He and Gerard had been unable to guess what Durham meant, and it was bothering Gerard as much as it was him. Over breakfast they agreed that since Durham had pushed the task onto the solicitor, it was undoubtedly some matter of inheritance. Perhaps their father had imposed some onerous conditions in his will or made some

unexpected bequests—but that, of all things, was something completely in Durham’s power to change and had no need of forgiveness. They were both at a complete loss, and very impatient to know the answer.

Mr. Pierce drew in a deep breath. “His Grace wished you to hear it at once—all three of you, since it affects you all.”

“Now, Mr. Pierce,” snapped Gerard.

“If you please,” Edward added more politely. “On this we do not wish to wait.”

“Your father—”

“Is dead,” said Edward. “I believe you are in my brother’s employ now—at the moment.”

Everyone knew Edward ran Durham, right down to which flowers were planted in the garden. Everyone knew Charles, the new duke, wouldn’t give a damn which solicitor handled his affairs. Edward wanted to sack Pierce, Charles wouldn’t lift a finger in protest. And Mr. Pierce knew just how profitable it was to handle Durham’s legal affairs. He hesitated only a moment, glancing from Edward to Gerard and back.

“The trouble is,” the solicitor began in a lowered voice, “it is not a well-defined problem; it stems from events many, many years ago, and unwinding the knot after so long has proven very difficult.”

“What knot?” growled Gerard.

“There is a chance,” said Mr. Pierce, as though choosing each word with care, “a very small, remote possibility, although it is impossible to ignore, that . . .”

“What?” prompted Edward sharply when the man hesitated again. This was doing nothing to ease his bad feeling about anything.

“That you—all of you, I mean—may . . . not be . . . able to receive your . . . full inheritances.”

“What?”

“Explain.” Edward held up one hand to quell Gerard’s outburst. “Why not?”

Mr. Pierce winced at his cold tone. “His Grace was married before he wed your late mother, the duchess,” he said, almost whispering. “Long ago.” He paused. “He and the young lady both decided the marriage had been a rash, youthful mistake and they parted ways.” Another pause. “But . . . there was no divorce.”

He didn’t need to say more. The implications came at Edward in a blinding rush. He looked at his brother, whose expression reflected his own dawning horror. Holy God. If Durham had been married . . . If his first wife had still survived when he married again . . . when he married *their mother* . . .

The solicitor was still speaking. “Unfortunately, recent letters received by the duke made clear the marriage was not as forgotten as His Grace had believed, and implied the woman might still be alive. His Grace expended a great deal of effort and expense trying to locate her—”

“Are you saying,” said Gerard in an ominous voice, “our father was a *bigamist*?”

A fine flush of perspiration broke out on Mr. Pierce’s forehead. “That has not been proved.”

“But it is a distinct possibility.” Gerard stabbed one finger at the man. “And you didn’t tell us!”

“I was expressly ordered not to, sir!”

“What do the letters say?” demanded Edward. He felt struck numb. It was one thing for Gerard not to have known; Gerard had been on the Iberian Peninsula until two months ago, and then with his regiment at Dover. It was even understandable that Durham would have kept it from Charlie, even though he was the heir apparent. Charlie wouldn’t have taken it well, or been much help in getting to the root of the problem. But his father had kept this dreadful secret from *him*, from the son who stayed at his side and managed his estates and dined with him every evening and cared for him in his final illness. Of all the people Durham might have trusted enough to confide in, Edward thought he would have been the one.

Apparently, he was wrong.

“I have brought them, as His Grace instructed.” Mr. Pierce indicated his bulging satchel apologetically. “I believe he wished to take care of the problem himself and spare all three of you any uneasiness, my lord.”

Great lot of good that did, thought Edward bitterly. “We’ll look at them later,” he said, masking his emotions with effort. The butler stepped forward at his wave.

“Thank you, my lord,” said Pierce with a bow. He followed the butler up the stairs, his relief evident in his quick step. Edward strode after his brother, who had turned and left the hall. Gerard was already pouring a drink when Edward stepped into the drawing room.

“The bloody scoundrel,” muttered Gerard.

“Father, or the solicitor?” He closed the doors behind him. No need to titillate the servants further.

“Both.” Gerard swallowed his brandy in one gulp and poured another. He raised one eyebrow at Edward, who shook his head. “But mostly Father, I suppose. What the bloody hell was he thinking?”

“I have no idea, and I was right here all the time.”

His brother glanced at him, apology flickering in his eyes. “I didn’t mean that. Just . . . What kind of fool keeps that secret?”

“A fool who doesn’t want to look like one,” said Edward. “Or an old fool who still thinks he can control everything.”

“Bastards,” Gerard said, and Edward flinched at the word spoken aloud. “We’ll be bastards if the woman turns up alive. All this”—he swept one hand around to indicate the room, the house, the estates—“will go to someone else.” He paused. “To whom would it go? I can’t even recall.”

Edward sighed, not wanting to think about that. Durham was supposed to go to Charlie. “Some distant cousin. Augustus, I suppose.”

“Perhaps he’s the one who sent those letters,” said Gerard.

“Perhaps. Perhaps it’s the woman herself. Perhaps her children. Good God,” he said as the thought struck him. “You don’t suppose Father had other children?”

“Wouldn’t that cause a stir?” His brother gave a harsh crack of laughter. “Rather odd they haven’t come forward in all this time.”

“Rather odd our own father never mentioned the possibility of their existence.” Edward walked to the tall windows that overlooked the lush gardens his mother had designed and planted, and he himself

had maintained. He felt at home in those gardens, at peace—usually. A hot fury burned in his chest that all this might be yanked out from beneath him and given to another. He had spent his life here doing everything that was required. He was needed here. Without Durham, what would he be, where would he go? How could he face his fiancée, Lady Louisa Halston, and tell her he was no longer Lord Edward de Lacey, brother of the Duke of Durham, but just some bastard son with no property? The scandal over his father's bigamy would be enormous. How could he ask Louisa to endure that gossip? It simply staggered the mind that Durham had kept a prior marriage secret, knowing it could have come to light at any time and upended everything in their lives. In that moment he was almost glad the duke was dead, because he would have surely doomed himself to hell for what he would say to his father now.

Gerard came up beside him. He tossed back the remainder of his drink with a flick of his wrist. "We've got to find Charlie."

"So that he might offer his sage counsel and guidance, and exert himself to deal with the problem?" Edward muttered.

Gerard gave a snort. "Hardly. But it's his problem, too—he's got even more to lose than you and I do."

"When has that mattered?" But he knew his brother was right. Of course they had to tell Charlie, and since Charlie couldn't be bothered to come to Sussex, even for his father's death, it appeared they would have to go to him. And perhaps this would actually spur their brother into some action that didn't involve personal pleasure. Perhaps that was why Durham had been so desperate to beg Charlie's pardon; he knew very well how terribly his eldest son's life would change if he were to lose his name, his title, and his fortune.

Unfortunately, for all that their father seemed to think them better equipped to cope, he and Gerard would suffer much the same fate.

Because if they couldn't disprove this shadow on their claim to Durham, they would all lose everything.

Chapter 2

They found Charlie, not in a gaming hell or a brothel, but quietly asleep in his own bed. Of course from the number of empty wine bottles in the room and the items of female clothing that had obviously been left behind, Edward guessed it was mere chance that they'd found him alone. But still it was convenient to have him where he ought to be.

"Get up, Charlie." Gerard strode around the bedroom, throwing open the drapes and making a great racket. Edward had stopped to soothe the worried butler and was a few steps behind. Having assured the poor man that he wouldn't be sacked for letting them disturb Lord Gresham, Edward sent the butler for some hot tea and followed, every bit as set on rousing his elder brother as Gerard was.

Charlie grunted and rolled over. "Go away," he moaned. "I'm ill."

"We can tell." Gerard picked up something from the chaise and held it up: a lady's silk stocking. "On death's doorstep, obviously."

Charlie squinted at the stocking, then closed his eyes again. "Agatha's. Only she wears violet."

"And I suppose Agatha gave you the pox or the consumption or whatever ails you."

"I have a headache, you damned idiot."

Gerard snorted. Edward gave him a quelling look. He had located a chair by now, and pulled it up beside the bed. "You'd better get well soon, Charlie. We've got a much bigger problem."

"What? Oh yes, I got your note about Father." Charlie blinked open his eyes again. "I suppose I'm too late to pay my final respects."

"Indeed," Edward said dryly. "By several days."

"I assumed as much. Well, the old man will rest in greater peace for not having had to deal with me one last time."

"On the contrary," Edward replied. "He called for you desperately in his last hours."

For a second Charlie's face went still, and not for the first time Edward wondered just what had gone on between his father and brother. But Charlie just shrugged, his expression relaxing again. F

stuffed another pillow behind his back and pushed himself up a little. “Then I’ll be on watch for h
ghost, come to haunt me throughout eternity for denying him the pleasure of one last lecture.”

“You would deserve it,” said Gerard. “We had to tell him you were on your way.”

“No one asked you to lie for me.” Charlie shot him an insolent look. “It’s just one more sin for m
collection: disappointing Durham on his deathbed.”

Gerard shot him a disbelieving look. “Have you lost every shred of care for our father?”

“Obviously,” said Charlie with a twist to his mouth. “But if he’s dead and buried already, and lon
past any groveling for forgiveness on my part, why must you rouse me from my sickbed?”

“You don’t look terribly ill to me,” muttered Gerard.

“Stop it,” Edward snapped. There was a feverish brightness to Charlie’s eyes, and when a footma
slipped in with the tea tray, Charlie sat up to pour a cup, and sipped with alacrity. Unless the tea in th
pot was really brandy, it wasn’t his usual behavior. Edward got up and closed the door securely behin
the servant. “Charlie, I would be glad to leave you to your suffering, but you haven’t got time to be
now. We—all three of us—have a serious problem, and time and secrecy are vital.”

Charlie leaned back against his pillows, looking tired again. “What is it? I’m sure I’ll be no help
all in solving it.”

“It turns out Father had a bit of a secret,” Edward said grimly, ignoring his brother’s attempt
dodge all responsibility. “A clandestine marriage some sixty years ago. He and the woman decided
had been a mistake and went their separate ways.”

“Really?” Charlie smiled in a vaguely bitter way. “Who knew the old dog had it in him?”

“He never divorced her.”

Charlie just looked at him, eyebrows raised.

“And he had no proof she died.”

It took a moment, then Charlie’s eyes closed. “Ever?”

“Ever,” Edward confirmed. “Let alone before April of 1774.” When Durham had wed his duchess
their mother.

For a long moment everyone was silent. “Well,” said Charlie quietly. “That is a bit of a problem
isn’t it?”

“Not for you, clearly,” exclaimed Gerard. “You’ve lost a dukedom, and all you can say is, ‘that’s
bit of a problem’? Are you mad? Don’t you understand what’s at stake here?”

“Gerard,” said Edward in warning. Charlie was still sprawled across his pillows as before, one ar
draped over his forehead, but his hand had curled into a fist. Whether it was anger at Durham, or
their new circumstances, or at Gerard for baiting him, Edward didn’t know, but they didn’t have tim
for an argument. “No one knows just how deep the trouble is. Some months ago, Father beg
receiving letters from someone who hinted that the secret marriage wasn’t so secret after all, and th
more trouble was waiting if Father didn’t pay.”

“Someone blackmailed Durham? How very ironic,” murmured Charlie.

“There was no proof of anything,” Edward went on sharply, glaring at Gerard to keep quiet. H

younger brother snorted and stalked away to the window. They had agreed Charlie must be told, but Gerard was straining at the bit to *do* something, not keep talking. Perhaps he should have told Gerard to go ahead and charge off while he took care of telling Charlie . . . Well, it was too late now. He plowed on with his explanation. “The letters arrived sporadically, beginning almost a year ago, and Father took extensive measures to discover the author, but could not. He also tried to discover if his first wife lived or died, but couldn’t find a trace of her, either. But still the letters came, four in all. Pierce handed them over, along with a letter from Father detailing his efforts. And now that Father is dead, this person—or the woman, if she’s still alive—may announce this publicly. I’m sure you can guess what would follow.”

Charlie was silent for a moment. “Not everything was entailed.”

“No, the estate in Lincolnshire is clear, left outright to you. We each have a modest sum of money. But everything else . . .”

“Yes,” repeated Charlie. “Everything else.”

“That’s quite a lot,” said Gerard from across the room. Arms folded over his chest, he leaned against the window frame and fixed a hard look on both of them. “The name, for one thing. Legitimacy, for another. I don’t fancy being a bastard, let alone a bastard with only a thousand pounds a year. We’ve got to do something, and the sooner the better.”

“You could go shoot this woman and solve all our problems.”

“Charlie!” Edward scowled at him as Gerard bristled. “Do take this seriously. We could lose everything—*everything*, do you hear me?”

“Of course I heard you,” muttered Charlie. “But what do you suggest we do?”

“Engage the best solicitors in London at once. We don’t wish to challenge the will—right now it leaves everything to us, as expected, and a challenge will only tie up the estate. But if another claim is filed, we need to have our case prepared to counter immediately.”

Charlie lay back and stared at the ceiling. “That sounds reasonable.”

“It sounds slow.” Gerard came back across the room and sat on the edge of the bed, ignoring Charlie’s hissed curse as the mattress shifted under his weight. “What shall we do? Engaging a pack of solicitors is all very good, but then what—shall we three go on as if nothing is wrong? What if word of this leaks out?”

“Unless this woman comes forward, there is no problem.”

“This woman, or her heirs, or the blackmailer,” Gerard retorted. “You’re thinking too tamely. We could still end up decimated by gossip.”

“Gossip about what, Gerard?” Edward said testily. “Something that might never happen and hasn’t been uncovered in sixty years?”

“Gossip that we’re about to lose everything. You know as well as I do that the appearance of ruin is almost the same as ruin itself.”

“Then what do *you* propose we do?”

Gerard leaned back against the bedpost and propped one fist on his knee. “Find the blackmailer

That will put an end to it.”

“How do you plan to do it? Father searched for months and hadn’t a clue who it was.”

“It’s better than sitting around waiting for a sniveling lawyer to tell me what my fate is!”

Edward pinched the bridge of his nose and reined in his temper. It did no good to argue with his brother. He wished he could be a bit more like Charlie, who simply poured another cup of tea and leaned back into his pillows, watching with detached interest. “If you think you can find the blackmailer, Gerard, I will be the last to stand in your way,” he said. “In fact, I wish you the best of luck. But I cannot, in good conscience, leave us legally unprepared. If this woman—or her heirs, you say—should come forward, I want to be ready. We’ll have to contest the validity of her marriage and that will take time to prepare, no matter that she hasn’t lived as Durham’s wife in over half a century. Even if her heirs have no credible claim on Durham, we could still lose it to Father’s cousin Augustus if he files a rival petition to be granted the dukedom. In fact, even if you find the blackmailer and throttle him with your bare hands, if the man has solid proof his charges are true—and provides it to Augustus—we’re still in trouble.”

“Not if he never gets the chance to present it,” muttered Gerard grimly.

Edward clenched his jaw and turned to Charlie. “What do you think?”

His brother lifted one shoulder. “Both plans sound excellent to me. Gerard will go kill the blackmailer and you’ll raise an army of lawyers. Fine ideas both. I agree wholeheartedly.”

“And what do you plan to do?”

Charlie gave Gerard a smirk, and raised his teacup as if in salute. “Stay out of the way, of course.”

Gerard stared at him in astonishment. Even Edward was surprised. Charlie was acting as if he didn’t care at all whether he was the next Duke of Durham or an illegitimate son with only a single Lincolnshire estate. Deep inside his head, a little voice whispered that Charlie didn’t really deserve Durham, and it would serve him right if he lost it all. He certainly hadn’t valued it much to date. Part of Edward took some malicious glee in the thought of Charlie left with nothing but a small country estate whose income wouldn’t cover his tailoring bills. He could just picture his brother moldering away in Lincolnshire—lovely country, really, hundreds of miles away from the glittering splendor of London.

But of course, surrendering Charlie’s birthright would also have the unfortunate effect of surrendering his own. No matter how ungrateful or disinterested his brother was, Edward knew he still had to do everything in his power to keep Durham. It was the only life he had ever known, and he wasn’t giving it up just because his brother was a lazy sot. It would merely be one more time Charlie coasted along on the fruits of his efforts.

“Very well then,” he said in truce. “Gerard shall pursue the blackmailer. I’ll see to the solicitor. Charlie . . . carry on as you were.”

“Always planned to,” murmured Charlie, pouring more tea.

Gerard held up one hand as Edward started to rise. “And we must all pledge absolute secrecy. This would unleash a storm of gossip unparalleled in London’s history. Not a word of this unpleasant

business to anyone—excepting of course whatever you must tell the solicitor. Agreed?”

Charlie shrugged. “Of course.”

Edward nodded. “Agreed, except . . . I must tell Louisa.”

“Louisa!” Gerard frowned. “Must you?”

“How can I not?” Edward frowned back. “She deserves to know.”

His brother looked unconvinced. “I know you care for her, but I suggest you reconsider. You’ll have to put the wedding off because of Father’s death, but there’s no need to tell her of . . . this.”

“Gerard, she is my fiancée,” Edward replied, each word coated in ice. “I cannot keep something like this from her.”

Gerard hesitated. “Perhaps you should, if you want to keep her as your fiancée.”

Edward stilled. “I will pretend I didn’t hear that,” he said quietly. “Louisa is a woman of understanding and discretion. Moreover, she is the woman I love, and the woman who loves me. I wouldn’t dream of keeping such a terrible secret from her.”

A dull flush burned his brother’s face. “Right,” he muttered. “I apologize. Do what you think is best.”

He nodded stiffly. “Accepted.” An awkward silence filled the room. Edward didn’t feel like breaking it. How dare Gerard imply Louisa wouldn’t stand by him? Theirs wasn’t an arranged marriage, but a love match. He hated to tell her, but it was inconceivable that he could keep such a secret from her. He would be distracted and busy, and she would notice that at the very least—and that was if the scandal didn’t burst over London like the fireworks at Vauxhall. Somehow it seemed incredible Charlie wouldn’t let it slip to someone. It would probably be a comfort, in fact, if Louisa knew; Edward wasn’t about to tell another soul, and he knew it would be a relief to confide in someone. And if the news did get out, she deserved to hear it from him.

Gerard cleared his throat and got to his feet. “Well, good. Glad we’re agreed. I’ll look over the blackmail letters again and get started.”

“Godspeed, and good luck,” said Charlie gravely.

Gerard growled something rude under his breath. Edward glared at his older brother. “Thank you for sparing us a few moments of your time.” If Charlie heard the sarcasm in his voice, he didn’t respond to it. Edward followed Gerard from the room, closing the door behind him.

“I know he didn’t get on well with Father, but this is too much,” said Gerard, quietly seething, as they went down the stairs. “Is he too stupid to realize what this could mean, or is he just unspeakably indolent?”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter.” Edward repressed any hint of the sympathy he felt with Gerard’s frustration. “We would press on no matter what Charlie’s attitude. And I cannot believe he doesn’t care at all.”

“What, then?” said Gerard in a sharp, low voice. They had reached the hall, and Edward motioned to the footman waiting nearby to bring their coats and hats. “Why can’t he even express the slightest dismay or outrage?”

“Because that’s not how Charlie is.” Edward raised his eyebrows. “Charles de Lacey, scoundrel and rake extraordinaire, show any concern? Don’t you remember when he lost his favorite horse in a wager to old Garston? Came home whistling as if he hadn’t a care in the world, but late that night caught him staring at the portrait of himself astride that horse.”

Gerard sighed, some of his flush of anger fading. “Lord, I’d forgotten. And Garston made sure to ride the damned horse every time he called, didn’t he, just to rub it in Charlie’s face. He did love that beast.”

Edward nodded in agreement. He’d almost forgotten that story, too, but the look on Charlie’s face when they broke the news had summoned up the memory. His brother cared about things—some things—but for some reason laughed off everything.

Still, this was far more important than a lost horse. This was Durham itself. Whether Charlie cared or not, whether he exerted himself in any way or not, this wasn’t something either Edward or Gerard was willing to just let him suffer through and laugh off. “I don’t expect Charlie to do anything,” Edward said to Gerard. “In fact, it may be easier if he stays out of the way, as he said.”

“You’re probably right.” Gerard took his coat from the footman. “Not that it wouldn’t give me a fair bit of pleasure to see him suffer the pains of his own shortcomings once. Can you imagine him consigned to the wilds of Lincolnshire, without a curricule race or an opera dancer in sight?”

Edward smiled and shook his head, and stayed the footman with his coat. “I’ll be along shortly.”

“You aren’t going to apologize, are you?” exclaimed his brother as Edward turned back toward the stairs. “For what?”

“For cutting up so rough at him. He’s ill.”

Gerard stared after him in disbelief for a moment, but put on his hat and left without another word. Edward went back upstairs, shaking his own head at himself. He hadn’t done anything wrong, really. One day he would get out of the habit of caring so much for his brothers’ peace. He tapped twice at the door and opened it. Then he stopped short in surprise.

Charlie was sitting on the side of his bed as if in the process of rising, arms braced on the mattress and feet on the floor. But one of his legs was out straight in front of him, bound in bandages and splints that didn’t quite conceal the reddened, swollen flesh. Charlie’s valet Barnes, kneeling beside him to support the leg, glanced up at Edward’s entrance and froze in apprehension.

“Bugger all, don’t you knock?” Charlie shot an annoyed glance at Edward through the rumpled waves of hair that had fallen over his eyes.

Now Edward realized the sheen of perspiration on his brother’s forehead wasn’t just from a headache. That was a badly broken leg. He stepped into the room and closed the door. “I beg your pardon.”

“No, you don’t, not really, but never mind.” Charlie settled his injured foot on the floor, flexing his arms. His valet hurried to his side, and with a heave Charlie was on his feet. The valet snatched up a green silk dressing gown and held it up as Charlie shoved his arms into it, balancing precariously on one foot.

“It doesn’t look as though you should be walking about,” Edward observed.

His brother took the cane his valet offered him and hobbled to the table, where a tray with breakfast dishes and a fresh pot of tea sat. Leaning heavily on the cane, Charlie poured a cup and sipped deeply. “Not even I can spend my entire life in bed—not alone, at any rate.”

“I came to apologize,” Edward said to his brother’s back. Charlie didn’t turn, but his shoulders tensed, visible even through his dressing gown. “Gerard was out of bounds, and I was impatient as well. This problem has consumed us for several days now, and you seemed oddly unmoved by it.”

Charlie said nothing. Listing on his cane, teacup clutched close to his chest, he stared out the window, a strangely pensive figure. Edward crossed the room to stand beside him. “I didn’t realize you were in no state to travel,” he said.

“Damn it, Edward, I wouldn’t have come to Sussex anyway,” Charlie muttered. He seemed fascinated by something outside the window, although Edward couldn’t see anything worthy of note. “We all know that. Durham certainly knew it.”

“He called for you,” Edward reminded him. “I was there. He wanted to see you again. Perhaps he knew you didn’t want to see him, but he was dying, and he wanted to see you.”

“And what did he want to say to me?” A heavy, brooding expression had settled over Charlie’s face.

Edward hesitated. “He wanted to beg your pardon,” he said reluctantly, knowing how it would sound to his brother. “For this terrible mess, I believe. He worried for you.”

A dark smile curled Charlie’s mouth. “Ah. No wonder. I suppose he knew you and Gerard would get on just fine, but poor Charles wouldn’t know what to do.”

Edward said nothing.

“And you think he was right,” Charlie went on. “You came to tell me what you planned to do, but only out of obligation.”

“You must admit,” said Edward dryly, “your response did not overturn our expectations.”

“The bloody bounder,” Charlie said, bitterness seeping into his voice. “How dare he do such a thing?”

“I expect it was shame, and age, and outraged pride.” Somehow Charlie’s belated anger at Durham made Edward want to defend their father, even though he agreed with every word his brother said.

“That damned Durham pride,” Charlie muttered.

Edward sighed. “He tried to apologize.”

“And now he’s left us all to be humiliated and dispossessed.”

“It certainly wasn’t what he intended; it left him heartsick at the end. And he left us everything he had so we can solve what he could not.”

Charlie just gulped some more tea. This time Edward caught a whiff of brandy, and almost shook his head. He should have known . . . But perhaps this once Charlie deserved a little nip. “Dare I ask what happened?” he asked, looking at his brother’s leg.

“Ah.” Something of the usual gleam returned to Charlie’s eyes. “It was quite a fight. Three o

them, all monstrous brutes. I battled back two, but in the end had to flee on horseback. The horse cleared the first fence, but not the second. And as I was lying there in a daze, the last villain caught up to me and finished what he had started.” He extended his injured leg, regarding it almost proudly. “I’m quite an invalid now. I shall have a terrible scar.”

Edward didn’t believe a word of that story. He could tell when Charlie was telling a tale. “I hope she was worth it,” he said with a straight face.

His brother flashed a lazy grin. “Absolutely.”

This time when Edward left, he beckoned to the valet, who slipped out of the room behind him. “How long has his leg been like this?”

“Just over a week, my lord,” replied Barnes. “The doctor thinks it will heal well.”

Edward nodded. “How?” Barnes hesitated, and Edward added, “I know it wasn’t a fight, nor a runaway horse. I want to know if there is any danger of a similar fate awaiting his other leg.”

“A slip on the stairs,” murmured Barnes, glancing guiltily over his shoulder. “After a late evening out.”

So there wasn’t a jealous husband or an angry cardsharp contemplating breaking Charlie’s other leg. Edward let out his breath in relief. “Thank you, Barnes. Do your best to keep him under a doctor’s care.”

“Yes, my lord.” Barnes bowed and then hurried off at Edward’s wave of dismissal.

So Charlie was truly out of the way, though not due to disinterest. Gerard had effectively removed himself from the scene, taking off on some quixotic pursuit of the blackmailer. If Durham, with all his money and steely determination, hadn’t found the villain, Edward didn’t see how Gerard could be charging off alone with only the same information that had led Durham’s investigator into a blind end. But this plan suited him rather well; Charlie was inclined to do too little, Gerard too much. Now Edward could deal with the solicitor unimpeded. He would be free to act as he saw fit, without having to persuade his brothers to his prudent way of thinking.

After all, he was used to being responsible for everything, and he was quite content with that.

Chapter 3

Francesca, Lady Gordon, arrived early, which was very much against habit for her.

She did take her usual care in dressing. First impressions were terribly important, and Francesca was keenly aware of the need to strike just the right tone this morning. She wore her gray silk with black velvet trim, a smart, sharp ensemble that played up her coloring but also signified status and position. It might have suggested a bit more wealth and dignity than she actually possessed, but that could only help. The man she needed to impress today wasn't a politician or a lord, nor one of the society darlings she found so amusing. James Wittiers was something far more important to Francesca today: he was widely considered the best solicitor in London, fearless, tenacious, crafty, and cleverer than half the King's Bench put together. According to his very satisfied clients, Wittiers danced right to the edge of legality in pressing their interests, and sometimes succeeded in moving the boundaries of that legality. All this suited her perfectly. She needed a lawyer, and she needed a damned good one.

Wittiers's success had made him selective. It had taken almost a fortnight for Francesca to secure an appointment to see the man. She hated to waste that time, but every other solicitor and investigator she interviewed had been lacking in some way. She didn't want to hear the reasons why her case might fail; she was already well aware of them. She wanted to hear someone assure her she had a chance, and that he would pursue that chance to the very end of the earth. That was all she asked—that, and success.

A clerk showed her into a small office to wait, and offered to bring tea. Francesca declined. She didn't need anything to distract her from her interview. She had prepared for it intensely, knowing how much depended on winning his interest, and asked a variety of acquaintances for advice. Sir Phillip Blake, her neighbor, told her to engage the solicitor's love of a challenge. Mr. Ludlow, the husband of her dear friend Sally, suggested she stress the urgency of her situation, to pique Wittiers's urge to champion someone in need. Lord Alconbury, a longtime friend, told her to avoid dramatics, especially tears. And Mr. Heatherington, incorrigible rogue and flirt, advised her to look beautiful.

because Wittiers was just as much a man as he was a solicitor. Francesca wanted to leave nothing to chance. She was determined to meet every point, no matter how minor.

She perched now on the edge of the small settee and mentally ran over her rehearsed speech. Other solicitors had told her the case was a wretched tangle, as if she couldn't have guessed that herself, but she was counting on Wittiers to find the thread that would unravel it. A stickier point might be the fee from his reputation alone, Wittiers must charge a small fortune. Francesca lived a comfortable life and had some money, but she wasn't enthusiastic about the prospect of beggaring herself. She had fretted a bit over it, but then thought again of her niece, and hardened herself against worries about money. To save darling Georgina from her vapid and venal stepmother, Francesca was willing to risk everything. Somehow she would come to an agreement with Wittiers about his fee.

After a while the door opened. She rose, feeling composed and measured, and turned to greet Mr. Wittiers, who was younger than she had expected. Fair and barrel-chested, he was just the same height as she was, and he met her gaze levelly, with no trace of condescension or scorn. There was a vital snapping intelligence in his eyes that reassured her even more. After a brief polite greeting, he got right down to business.

"My clerk, Mr. Napier, tells me you have a highly complex situation," he said, seating himself in the chair near her. He propped one elbow on the armrest and focused his intense gaze upon her. "Would you be so kind as to explain, from the beginning?"

"Of course." Francesca folded her hands in her lap. She didn't want to lose herself and become excited. "The story is more complex than the situation. To be concise, I wish to have the care of my late sister's daughter bestowed upon me. My niece, Georgina, is currently living with her stepmother and I fear the woman is taking advantage of Georgina's inheritance and using it to support her own family."

His dry smile was gone almost before she registered it. "I presume you have proof of that charge, Lady Gordon."

"Hard proof, in the form of confessional letters or receipts, no," she said carefully. "Proof that the woman, Mrs. Haywood, inherited a very small portion from her late husband, yes. Proof that she lost her home soon after his death, yes. Proof that her brother, Mr. Watts, has influenced her to keep me from seeing my niece since I offered to raise her, yes."

"Suggestive," he said, "but not proof."

She raised her eyebrow, still calm and cool. "I understood you were willing to act as investigator as well as solicitor for your clients."

"It has been done," he agreed.

Francesca smiled. "Then I am sure we will be able to deal very well together."

Wittiers stared at her for a moment, a thoughtful set to his lips. Then he sat forward in his chair. "Explain to me the family situation in detail. How did your niece come to be in the care of that woman?"

She had his interest. Francesca breathed deeply to control her leaping pulse. "Several years ago my

half sister, Giuliana, came to visit me from Italy. She had grown up there with our mother, while I was reared in England by my father's sister. My mother," she added quickly as a thin line creased her brow, "was Marcella Rescati, the Italian soprano. She married my father while in England, but after his death returned to Italy, where she married again, to Giuliana's father."

"Ah," he said, his expression turning keen. "I heard her sing in Florence, some years ago. *Armida*, believe."

Francesca smiled in real pleasure. "One of her particular favorites!"

"So," he said briskly, returning to the main point, "you and your sister have different fathers."

She nodded. "Yes. Her life was quite different from mine, but I was very content here in England. I married and settled in London, and soon after, my sister came to visit. She was just seventeen, beautiful and vivacious. Within a month she had received several marriage proposals, and to my surprise she accepted one from Mr. John Haywood."

"Surprise?"

"Because she was so new to England; her grasp of English was not complete, and although Mr. Haywood was an eligible match, he was several years older than she," Francesca explained. "But she was determined, and Giuliana asked for and received her parents' blessing. She married Mr. Haywood and had a child, her daughter Georgina, a year later."

"Haywood had money?" Wittiers queried.

Francesca shook her head. "No, quite the contrary. He had connections, but little fortune of his own. Giuliana's father was a very wealthy man, though, and had no other children; on her marriage he granted her a large allowance. At Georgina's birth, he changed his will so that all the funds were settled on Georgina, with the income to Giuliana during her lifetime."

"No marriage settlement?"

"There was one, of course, but I do not know the size. I suspect Giuseppe—Giuliana's father—was wary of Mr. Haywood's management. Mr. Haywood did not have a head for money." That was putting it mildly, and Francesca had proof of her brother-in-law's inability to account for his spending. Her sister had mentioned it often in letters. "Fortunately, Giuliana did," she went on. "They lived a happy, comfortable life for some years. Georgina grew into a beautiful, unspoiled child. I was named godmother to her and visited often."

"Excellent," he murmured.

"Unfortunately their happiness was short-lived." She had to steady her voice for this part of the story, a litany of deaths. "Giuliana died two years ago in childbed. I did my best to provide a maternal influence on Georgina, but my own husband died unexpectedly at the same time. Within a few months of my sister's death, Mr. Haywood had married again, to a woman named Ellen Watts, so Georgina would have a mother. I was welcome in their home, and still visited as often as I could."

"Was this woman unkind to the girl?" Wittiers queried. "Was she cold?"

Francesca hesitated. "Not that I could see," she admitted. "Georgina did not seem neglected or unhappy. But then her father was killed in a riding accident last summer, and suddenly things

changed.”

“Not surprising, given the death of the father,” Wittiers pointed out. “How did his will leave the girl’s custody?”

“He had not changed his will since my sister’s death. Giuliana was still named as the caretaker of their daughter, and Mr. Haywood’s brother as guardian—but he had also passed away. The Haywoods, it seems, have a tendency toward mortality. The court has not appointed anyone else yet. I believe, if there had been more money left to her, Mrs. Haywood would have gladly allowed me to take Georgina and raise her, as she was expecting a child at the time of Mr. Haywood’s tragic death. But Mr. Haywood had no money of his own, only what he received when he married my sister. I know that amount had dwindled to a very small sum after Giuliana’s death. There was little left for his widow.”

“And the child’s inheritance?”

“Giuliana’s father died a year before she did. He named as executor Mr. William Kendall, a barrister in Dover whom he knew through business dealings, to oversee the fortune he left Georgina. Mr. Kendall takes no interest in Georgina except to pay out her quarterly maintenance. I’ve already approached him for assistance, only to be told he has gone abroad and isn’t expected back before the winter.”

“I begin to see your difficulty.” Wittiers leaned back, a faraway look on his face. “He pays the maintenance to whomever has custody of the girl. The stepmother has little money of her own, I presume? From her family, perhaps?” At Francesca’s shake of her head, he smiled, a vaguely dangerous look that sent her hopes soaring. “Venality,” he said softly. “She has lived with the girl for a year?”

“Yes. Almost a year and a half now.”

“Ah. And you have seen the girl in that time?”

Francesca nodded.

“Was she mistreated? Unhappy? Ill or otherwise uncared for?” He fired each question without waiting for a response.

“Initially, she was brokenhearted over her father’s death.” Francesca struggled with her answer. She didn’t want to mislead the solicitor and damage her credibility, but neither did she want him to dismiss her concerns. “She did ask me to take her away from home, which reminded her so strongly of her parents. I offered then to take her and raise her, since I’m related by blood and her stepmother isn’t. I have a good home and could easily afford to raise Georgina, as well as love her like my own child. But Mrs. Haywood said no, saying she had grown attached to Georgina. I agreed, reluctantly, but my sense that things weren’t right grew over the next months. Mrs. Haywood bore twin boys three months after her husband died, and that threw the household into greater turmoil. And now . . . I don’t know, sir. I haven’t been allowed to see Georgina in several months.”

Wittiers glanced sharply at her. “She has denied you access?”

“We had a disagreement.” Francesca held her head high, even though she knew this was her greatest weakness. “A heated one. I implied she wasn’t able to take care of Georgina properly, as the mother of

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