

AMANDA SCOTT

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR



Lord Abberley's Nemesis



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Amanda Scott



For Kevin

Best of Sisters

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IN 1818 AND FOR many years thereafter, northbound travelers along the Great North Road met with an irritating check at the bottom of the wide marketplace in Baldock High Street, where they were forced to turn right into White Horse Street and then, after a few hundred yards, left again in order to resume their northward course. So popular was the Great North Road that nearly every traveling coach to pass through the marketplace executed that right-left jog. Thus it was that when two dusty, heavily laden coaches entered the town one chilly evening in late March and failed to take the left-hand turn, more than one person with late business in White Horse Street turned to give them a second, more searching look. When the lead coachman likewise failed to check his team where the Roman road from Bishop Stortford crosses White Horse Street, one old gentleman squinted his eyes and peered first at the liveried footman perched up behind and then at the small crest, barely discernible through the dust of the door panel, and gave it as his opinion that 'twas her ladyship and young Miss Caldecourt returning at last from Foreign Parts.

Lady Celeste Fortescue, being merely the daughter of the third earl, had little right to display the Abberley crest, but she had never in the fifty odd years since her girlhood allowed that fact to deter her from displaying it. Therefore, since the present earl rarely bothered with the trappings of his position and since White Horse Street is no more than a diversion of the ancient Icknield Way, the most efficient route to both Abberley Hall and Caldecourt Manor, the only two great houses in the immediate vicinity of Baldock or Royston, the old gentleman made his observation in tones of certainty and he was—as, indeed, he was accustomed to be—quite correct in his surmise.

Inside the coach, twenty-two-year-old Margaret Caldecourt gently prodded the elderly, well-dressed lady snoring erratically beside her. “Aunt Celeste, we are passing through Baldock. Shall I tell Milsom to draw up at the Crown for some refreshment?”

Lady Celeste straightened first her spine and then the frothy confection perched precariously atop her complex arrangement of silver curls, after which she peered suspiciously out the coach window, if doubting that they could actually have traveled so far as Baldock. Then she turned back to her grandniece.

“No need to stop,” she said briskly. “Only ten more miles to Royston, after all, and with the earl in sight after a long journey, delay is nothing more than time wasted. If you tell Milsom anything, dear child, tell him to stir his stumps.”

Margaret chuckled, and her smile lit up her oval face. She was a slim, elegant young woman with dark hair twisted into an intricate knot at the nape of her neck under a dashing slate-blue silk bonnet trimmed with ruchings of rather dismal charcoal ribbon. Her eyes were large and gray with black rings to their pupils and black lashes so thick they seemed to weight her eyelids. Set wide apart on either

side of her straight little nose, under dark arched brows, those eyes had drawn more than their share of compliments over the years, but once Margaret's smile faded, the sparkle dimmed, leaving dark-grained pools of sadness.

The coach rattled off cobbles and onto the rutted roadbed between tall, straggly hedges, and as she stared out at the familiar bare downs sweeping away to the Midland plain, she saw a wood pigeon slope out of the twilight sky, dropping lower, with fewer and fewer wing strokes and longer and longer glidings upon half-closed wings as it drew near its home tree. It disappeared. Another, no doubt its mate, flew into sight and slanted downward with the same folding-in motion. Then there was only the rattle of their coach, echoed by the slightly lower-pitched rattle her keen ears detected from the baggage coach behind, and the empty road ahead. Involuntarily, Margaret's slender black-gloved hands gripped each other in her lap.

"Margaret?" Lady Celeste spoke gently, without her usual briskness.

"Ma'am?" Margaret turned to face her, noting in the distance beyond her ladyship's sharp profile a sprinkling of lights from the village of Ashwell. Dusk was rapidly turning to darkness.

"'Tis no use trying to hide what cannot be hidden, my dear, but you must endeavor to appear cheerful once we reach the manor—for the boy's sake, you know."

"I know, Aunt Celeste, but I cannot help thinking we ought both to be wearing blacks when we arrive. Whatever will they think?"

"Fustian," replied her ladyship. "The servants have no right to be thinking anything whatever about our mode of dress, for mourning is in the heart, not in the garment. Our grief over your brother's death is clear enough without draping ourselves in black bombazine." She sniffed. "Hideous stuff. Thank God we had no time to arrange for more than black ribbons and gloves before we left Vienna."

"Well, if you had not long ago chucked everything I had with me from London, I'd have had plenty of proper mourning dresses."

Lady Celeste winced. "Three years out of date? Surely not, dear heart. What a figure you should have cut. No, no," she added when Margaret drew breath to protest, "'twould be far worse to look dowdy. And when I think what a chore it was to get you out of your blacks after young Culross was killed ... well, I can only be thankful you haven't had time to acquire a new set."

"Nonetheless, I shall do so at once, now we are home again," Margaret said quietly. "We must set an example for little Timothy, after all, and I'll not have anyone saying I didn't show proper respect for Michael's memory."

"To my mind, 'tis better for young Timothy to get on with life and not be surrounded by constant reminders of his father's death," said Lady Celeste more tartly. "The boy's only seven and already he's lost both mother and father. Moreover, by the time you reach my age, m'dear, you'll come to realize that life is too short to waste huge bits of it in repining."

"I've already had more than my share of those bits," Margaret said, her tone laced with

bitterness.

“That you have, but we must all learn to be content with our lot. None of those deaths was of your contriving, after all.”

Margaret turned away again, her eyes looking sadder than ever. Maybe she had not contrived, but surely it was no good thing for another person to be cursed by her love. More and more as years passed by it seemed that she had only to care deeply for another person to see that person cut down by Fate’s cruel hand. Had she not thus far in her short life lost three out of four grandparents, both her own parents, her only uncle, her favorite aunt, and Frederick Culross, the only man to whom she had ever considered giving her heart? And now Michael, dear, dear Michael, cut down just before his thirtieth birthday in the very prime of his life by a fierce pain in his side that had grown worse and worse and then had ceased altogether, giving those around him cause to rejoice for his recovery. But their rejoicing had proved premature, for the end had come swiftly, two days later.

It had taken nearly two months for word to reach Margaret in the form of a typically formal notice from Mr. Maitland, the vicar of their church, informing her that her brother, Sir Michael Caldecott, had passed from this life to the next a week before Christmas. The details had come from the rector’s daughter, Pamela, in a more emotional and much-crossed second sheet enclosed within her father’s missive. Immediately upon receipt of the news Margaret and her ladyship had made preparations for the long journey back to England. Thus it was that Death, having sent Margaret to Vienna, now called her home again.

Her thoughts were interrupted just then as Milsom drew in to the side of the road long enough to allow Quinlan, the liveried footman riding up behind, to light the carriage lamps, before giving his team the office to continue their journey. Details of the landscape thus faded into darkness, and Margaret could see little now beyond the lantern’s glow. She knew England’s oldest road—for the Ickniel Way dated from the Bronze Age or before—well enough to imagine what the passing countryside looked like, and she soon found herself playing a mental game she had played since childhood when she had first learned bits of the ancient road’s history.

In her mind’s eye she saw Neolithic warriors carrying spears as they trod a vaguely defined track above the thick, wild-animal-haunted forests that once covered Hertfordshire’s undrained lowlands, having followed the crest of the Chilterns from Buckinghamshire, through Dunstable in Bedfordshire, before passing through what was now Baldock and traveling on to Royston. Many of the settlements in the area dated from the Iron Age, and Margaret’s father had once taken her and Michael to Ashwell to view an Iron Age fort that was said to be two thousand years old. Closer to home, on Royston Heath, a long barrow and several round barrows—evidence of the county’s ancient inhabitants—had been unearthed several years earlier.

The thick, impenetrable forests were mostly gone now, though some portions of the countryside were still heavily wooded with beech, lime, sycamore, and hornbeam trees, and Margaret knew she

could look forward to some pleasant rides as winter turned to spring. Already there seemed to be little snow left on the ground, although their coachmen had slowed the teams as soon as the sun had disappeared behind the low ridge to the west, knowing they could expect to encounter icy patches along the road.

Nearly two hours passed before the coaches rolled into the village of Royston, and by then Margaret was only too glad to wrap herself in the fur rugs that were part of the coach's furnishings. She peered from the coach windows as they passed through the town, becoming more excited by the moment, despite her sadness, the nearer they came to home.

Whether Royston or its twelfth-century Augustinian priory had come first was a moot point, but there were documents showing the grant of a market and fair in 1189. Two more fairs came into existence during the next fifty years, and all of these were originally held in a cigar-shaped open space at the road crossing now largely taken up by High Street, King Street, and Lower King Street. As the two coaches passed from King Street into Lower King Street, Margaret could scarcely make out in the dim glow cast by erratically spaced streetlamps the block of millstone grit popularly known as Rohesia's Cross, which was said to be the socket of an old market cross. Only a tiny open space north of the cross still survived to remind people of the old marketplace, however, for the present marketplace, east of Ermine Street, had come into use during the previous century.

Margaret had once found a book, dated 1745, in the library at Abberley Hall, which commented enthusiastically upon the multitude of corn merchants, maltsters, and other dealers in grain who constantly resorted to the Royston Market, and what a vast number of horses laden with grain did find on all the roads on market day. Indeed, her own memory provided her with knowledge of the bustling, noisy crowds that filled the town on such days.

The coach turned south now onto Ermine Street, once the main route from London north into Hertfordshire and beyond until it was made nearly unusable by the constant traffic of heavily laden barley wagons and packhorses carrying their freight from all over the eastern counties to the great malting town of Ware. The two coaches lumbered along the badly rutted road for some fifteen minutes before turning west onto a gravel drive. They soon passed between two fat stone pillars, then wound their way through a wooded area to a tall, torchlit house. They were home, and they were clearly expected, for the tall, narrow windows of the first two floors glowed a welcome.

Margaret was grateful to Lady Celeste for having had the forethought to send a courier ahead from London to warn Mrs. Moffatt, her brother's motherly housekeeper, of their intended arrival. Quinlan had leapt to the ground as the coaches drew to a halt and approached the door, rubbing his gloved hands to restore circulation after having held on so long in the chilled air. A moment later he pulled open the door and let down the steps. Lady Celeste accepted his hand, allowing him to help her from the coach, but once her feet were solidly upon the ground, she stepped away from him, tacitly rejecting further assistance. In her mid-sixties, her ladyship was as spry and agile as a woman half her

age, and she disdained to accept help she did not need, saying that she would need it soon enough and that there was no sense in anticipating one's decrepitude.

When the footman had helped Margaret to alight, her ladyship, who had been speaking to the two tirewomen who had descended from the baggage coach, turned back to him again, a slight frown of disapproval creasing her brow. "Quinlan," she said, "do you run up to the door and give that knocker a good clanging. I cannot think what is keeping Moffatt. We've made enough din out here to wake the dead. Mayhap he grows deaf in his old age."

Since Moffatt was, as clearly as Margaret could recall, easily ten or fifteen years younger than her ladyship, it was obvious that Lady Celeste was annoyed. That she had expected the door to be flung wide immediately upon her arrival and to find herself enveloped in a warm welcome by all around sundry was clear to the meanest intellect.

Margaret hid a smile. "Perhaps the servants are all in the kitchen having their supper, ma'am. 'Tis nearly nine o'clock, after all, and Timothy must be tucked up in the nursery by now."

"Poor child," said Lady Celeste, ascending the stone steps at her side. "Two months an orphan with only servants to look after him. How lonely he must be."

"For all we know, ma'am," Margaret replied, "Timothy is not even here but has been carried off to Abberley Hall instead. You know that his lordship had a great fondness for Michael. I should not be at all surprised to learn that he has taken Michael's only child under his wing."

"Well," replied her ladyship tartly, straightening her hat, "for my part, I should be astonished to learn anything of the kind. Abberley taking notice of a six-year-old? I wish I may see it. From all I have heard from my friends who deign to include news of him in their letters, he has become little more than an irresponsible rake these past years, and is much more likely to be off gracing some duchess's house party or shooting in Leicestershire. Timothy would be much better off in the care of Moffatt's care than ... Ah, Moffatt," she said without skipping a beat when the door opened at last to reveal a tall, plump man in a black suit and snow-white linen, "we had begun to fear the place had been deserted."

"No, my lady," he replied in a quiet, well-modulated voice, affecting a slight bow. "Welcome home, my lady. And, miss, I'm sure 'tis good to have you back with us again. Young master ... that is, Sir Timothy will be very pleased to see you both, I'm sure." Moffatt stepped aside as he spoke, ushering them into a spacious, well-lit hall, the highly polished floor of which was dotted with colorful Oriental carpets, acquired by an early-eighteenth-century Caldecourt who had extended his grand tour to the Far East.

A small but cheerful fire crackled in the large marble fireplace opposite the front door and candles glowed from an overhead chandelier and numerous wall sconces. Margaret, remembering her brother's habits of thrift, hoped the show was merely in honor of their arrival and not a habitual display. Lady Celeste, accepting the brilliance as her due, saw nothing amiss and paid no heed at all

the brightly lit room. She had matters of greater importance on her mind.

“Our people can dispose of our baggage, Moffatt,” she said, “but we are famished, so I trust Mr. Moffatt can manage to prepare something nourishing for us. We are accustomed, you know, to large midnight suppers.”

“Yes, my lady,” replied the butler, his expression nearly concealing his opinion of habits in Foreign Parts. “In point of fact,” he added with a slight twist of his lips, “I was on the point of serving tea in the drawing room when you arrived, and as it has been thought unnecessary to engage more than one footman at present, and him not being one of us and off to the village besides, supposedly to attend to important business, though how he can have business of any sort in a village far from home—own—”

“Serving tea to whom?” demanded her ladyship. “Surely, young Timothy has been in his bed these two hours past.”

“Indeed, yes, my lady, although not because he was wishful to go. Growing right stubborn is the lad,” he added in an undertone as they moved to the graceful stairway at the rear of the hall and began making their way to the first-floor gallery.

Margaret, hearing, grinned at him, but her curiosity was quite as avid as Lady Celeste’s. “Who was in the drawing room, Moffatt?”

The butler’s features arranged themselves into nonexpression, and he avoided the eyes of both women. “Her ladyship and Mr. Caldecourt, miss,” he said as he moved purposefully toward the drawing-room door.

“Her ladysh—Not Annis!” Lady Celeste quickly lowered her voice on the last word, for Moffatt—in self-defense, Margaret decided, hiding her own annoyance—had flung the doors to the elegant blue-and-white drawing room wide and was announcing their arrival to those within.

The scene upon which they intruded was a cozy one. The two persons now facing the door had obviously been indulging themselves in a generous tea. A silver tray reposed upon a low table near the plump, black-clad Lady Annis Caldecourt, and the platter beside the teapot, though a large one, bore but one lone sandwich and a dusting of crumbs. Jordan Caldecourt, a sleek, sandy-haired young gentleman sitting opposite his mother in a straight-backed blue-velvet chair near a fire larger than the one below in the hall, had been caught taking a generous bite of a heavily buttered muffin. He choked a little but rose to his feet with studied grace to greet Miss Caldecourt and Lady Celeste. His mother unperturbed, set down the blue-and-white Sevres china cup and saucer she had been holding and nodded regally without making any effort to rise from her comfortable brocaded wing chair.

“So you are here at last, Celeste,” she said. “Now Moffatt can put out all the lights downstairs except for the porter’s lamp in the hall. Such a waste to have so many candles burning all at once. Her tone was placid but marked by an incipient whine that grated on Margaret’s ears. She saw Lady Celeste’s slim shoulders tense, though whether at the younger woman’s words, tone, or use of her

Christian name she was at a loss to say.

“We made excellent time,” Margaret said. “At least, from London we made excellent time. Six weeks’ journey from Vienna, even in winter, is scarcely noteworthy.”

“No, indeed,” put in Mr. Caldecourt, approaching her with both hands held out. “Why, one of my chums—Brevely, I believe it was—actually made the trip in half that time. Of course, it was summer then, and he hadn’t to worry about a coachload of baggage and servants.”

Margaret, fearing that he meant to embrace her, quickly held out one hand to fend him off, withdrawing it immediately when he showed a desire to retain it in his own. “How do you do, Jordan? I trust we see you well.”

“Indeed, coz, and anxiously awaiting your arrival, unexpected though it was.” He smiled at her.

“Unexpected? How could we be unexpected? Surely you must have known we would return soon as we received word of Michael’s death.”

Jordan shrugged with a slanted, somewhat accusing glance at his mother, and Margaret found herself thinking he had not improved much in the three years she had been away. Two years he was senior, he had been an irritating young fop who, whenever they met in London, had seemed to enjoy attaching himself to her in order to bask in the reflection of her popularity. Although Michael and Abberley had merely teased her about her conquest of the young man, she was certain that Frederick Culross would have soon sent him to the rightabout, once Michael had allowed an announcement of their betrothal to be posted in the *Gazette*. But it would not do to think of Frederick now. Resolutely she pushed the memory into the nether reaches of her mind and regarded Mr. Caldecourt straightly, waiting for his response.

But it was not he who spoke. “You do not ask how I fare,” said Lady Annis plaintively. “Of course, you do not realize that Doctor Fennaday has positively insisted that I be in my bed at nine o’clock. My health is tenuous, you know. But I must not complain of my sufferings. There could be no question, once your courier had brought us news of your intended arrival, of my going to bed without knowing you were safely at home. It is my nature to worry,” she added with a sigh.

“But why on earth are you here?” demanded Lady Celeste, unbuttoning her gloves. She glanced pointedly at the interested Moffatt, who quickly effaced himself, before she looked back at Lady Annis. “I am sorry you worried, for there was no need. But surely you ought to be tucked up in your own bed in Little Hampstead.”

Lady Annis drew herself up, her impressive bosom swelling with righteous indignation. “Am I to leave my poor dead husband’s little grandnephew to the mercies of mere common servants? Surely you cannot think I should be so remiss in my duty as that. Why, as soon as I heard—”

“Just how did you hear?” Lady Celeste interjected impatiently.

“The vicar,” replied Jordan, “and once we was here and had got our blacks on, we couldn’t very well put them off again, so there seemed little point in going elsewhere.”

“I must say,” put in Lady Annis quickly, “that I am utterly shocked to see you both in color.” Though I have little right to speak on that head to you, Celeste, I should think that out of respect for your very own brother, Margaret, you might have seen fit to dress more conventionally.”

“Foolishness,” said Lady Celeste, moving now to warm her hands at the fire. “We’d no time for shopping before we left, let alone time to have anything proper made up, as anyone but a ninnyhammer might have realized without my having to explain the matter. Margaret can attend to such stuff now that she’s home. Not that she don’t look fine as she is.”

Mr. Caldecourt, lifting his quizzing glass to his eye, surveyed Margaret from head to toe and agreed. “Slap up to the echo,” he said, nodding. “Dashed if she ain’t, Mama. That sort of rig will be a crack in London when the Season begins next month. I’m persuaded we shall see any number of fashionable ladies in just such a getup as that.”

Irritated to realize that he was making her self-conscious, Margaret smoothed the slim, slate-blue wool skirt of her traveling dress, then turned away from him to remove her bonnet and gloves. She was saved the necessity of making any reply to his observation by Lady Annis’s assurance that she, for one, would see nothing of the kind.

“We shall stay quietly in the country this year, my pet. I am certain that my poor nerves would never survive the excitement of a London Season so soon after the shock of poor Michael’s death. And we *are* in mourning, you know.”

“But dash it all, *we* ain’t dead,” objected her son. “Perhaps I shall have to live a bit more quietly without the usual romp and rattle, but I needn’t avoid London altogether. A man must live, after all.”

“You will do well, my dear, to be guided by me,” Lady Annis said implacably, her dark brows beetling over her small dark eyes. “Do not forget that you have a duty to your little cousin.”

Jordan colored up to his side-whiskers, but Lady Celeste had become bored by their conversation. She cut in now firmly and in customarily brusque tones. “We should not wish to keep you longer from your bed, Annis. You are indeed looking peaked and must be longing to put off your stays. I’m persuaded they are much too tight. Pray run along if you have finished your tea. Margaret and I shall do very well on our own. Where,” she added, glaring at the double doors leading to the gallery, “do you suppose Moffatt has got to with our supper?”

Lady Annis protested mildly that she knew her duty, but she was easily routed by the stronger-minded Lady Celeste. Jordan likewise showed a tendency to linger, but he was no match for the old lady, who told him straight out to take himself off because she’d had quite enough of his airs and affectations for one evening.

Once they were alone Lady Celeste took the chair vacated by Lady Annis, removed her frothy bonnet, and tossed it inelegantly onto a nearby claw-footed settee, leaning back with a long sigh of relief.

Margaret, sitting upon a Kent chair with identical clawed feet, regarded her grandaunt fondly.

waiting for her to recover her equanimity. Instead, to her surprise, Lady Celeste frowned.

“What is it, ma’am?”

“Why are they here?” The old lady lifted her pointed little chin and straightened, gazing directly at Margaret. “What keeps them about?”

“To be sure, ma’am, their being here is a nuisance, but perhaps if they came for the funeral and her ladyship’s health is truly precarious—”

“Fustian. They complain most who suffer least. There is nothing wrong with Annis Caldecott that a little less idleness wouldn’t cure. I wish I may see her doing her duty by young Timothy. If he does so much as laid eyes upon her, I’ll wager it was none of her doing. And who asked her to interfere anyway?”

“Mr. Maitland, according to Jordan,” Margaret reminded her.

“That seems odd, very odd, indeed.”

But Moffatt confirmed the information when he finally appeared, accompanied by Quinlan carrying a tea service lavish enough to satisfy even Lady Celeste’s wishes. “Aye, Mr. Maitland saw fit to apprise her ladyship of the master’s death,” he said when asked. His features were once again expressionless, but there was that in his tone which told Margaret, at least, that Moffatt thought the vicar had been guilty of a great piece of impertinence.

“But why are they still here?” demanded Lady Celeste as she helped herself from a platter of cold roast beef.

“Her ladyship insisted that it was for young Master Timmy’s benefit,” Moffatt said, taking a basket of hot bran muffins from Quinlan’s tray and holding them out for Margaret’s examination. “She would have it that you and young Miss Margaret was fixed in Vienna and wouldn’t be able to come home.”

“Nonsense,” Lady Celeste said, waving Quinlan’s services on to Margaret. “That woman wants something. Mark my words. She’s a schemer, always has been, and though she may disguise herself she will not deceive the wise.”

Margaret had been listening to her ladyship but watching Moffatt. Now she was certain he wanted to speak, but she knew he would not forget himself so far as to put forth his own ideas on any subject without having been requested to do so. “What is it, Moffatt?” she asked gently.

Lady Celeste’s head came up sharply and she directed her piercing gaze at the butler, who seemed for once to have lost some of his aplomb. “What is it, man? Out with it. That woman *is* up to something.”

“I don’t know that for certain, my lady, but I have heard it said the master failed to leave a will.”

“Young men often do,” her ladyship pointed out. “What has that to do with anything?”

“I don’t know, my lady, but Mr. Jordan went down to London for the opening of Parliament the first of the month and returned only two days ago. He was closeted with her ladyship for long bi

before and after. Young Melanie—the chambermaid, you know, Miss Margaret, though she came to u
after your ladyship departed for foreign parts with Sir Harold—she said she once heard them speaki
about a petition, whether it would be granted or not. Her ladyship said there was no reason not, so lon
as they were quick about it. I can tell you,” he added quietly, “I’ve been that worried. Couldn’t thin
what it was all about, myself.”

Margaret frowned. No will and a petition to Parliament—what could that all mean? “Has h
lordship been to call, Moffatt? Perhaps he will know what is going on.”

The butler grimaced. “Hasn’t set foot in the house, Miss Margaret. Not even after the funeral.”

“He did attend the funeral, though?”

“Aye. Stood at the back of the church a-scowlin’ like he does. Saw him myself. But he neve
showed up for the buryin’ or the baked meats after. And he ain’t been next or nigh the manor since
Moffatt’s strong feelings were clearly evident in his lapse of grammar. “Like as not he’s dispense
with civility altogether,” he muttered as he followed Quinlan out the door.

Margaret frowned. Such behavior didn’t sound like Abberley, who had been, after all, h
brother’s closest friend. They had been housemates at Eton and had shared a study at Oxford. As
child, she had looked forward to their school holidays almost more avidly than they had themselve
No doubt she, being eight years younger, had been something of a pest, but neither of them had ev
seemed to mind. They had taken her riding and had even allowed her to trip along behind them wh
they went shooting rabbits or wood pigeons in the large beech wood between the manor and the ha
She had been, at such times, the despair of her assorted governesses, but she had loved every momen
feeling as though she had two wonderful big brothers instead of only one. That his lordship had n
done his best to keep an eye on the manor and on Timothy seemed very strange.

“I have it!” Lady Celeste had fallen into a brown study as she ate, but now she interrupte
Margaret’s thoughts, her expression worried. “They have petitioned the House of Lords f
guardianship, I’ll wager, and perhaps even for control of the property. Annis and that dreadfu
offspring of hers mean to live here!”

“SURELY, YOU MUST REALIZE that it was the only possible course for us to follow under the circumstances,” Lady Annis said virtuously the following morning in the breakfast parlor when Lady Celeste demanded to know if she and her son had petitioned for guardianship. Then, before the old woman could respond, she spoke quickly to the stiff footman who served her. “A few more slices of that excellent Yorkshire ham, Archer, and perhaps one or two of those delicious apple turnovers. Really,” she added, patting her round, black-bombazine-covered stomach, “Mrs. Moffatt’s cooking has quite ruined my figure.”

“Can’t see that you’ve changed a jot since the last time I saw you,” said Lady Celeste brutally. “That was after the typhus epidemic eight years ago that carried Sir William Caldecourt and your son Stephen off within a week of each other, and you told us then that you were wasting away to a shadow out of grief.”

“What circumstances, ma’am?” Margaret asked hastily. Lady Annis, her cheeks unbecomingly reddened, turned to her, bewildered. Margaret kept her patience with difficulty. “Why did you find it necessary to petition for guardianship?”

“Why, the Fates clearly intended that we do so, my dear.” Her ladyship recovered herself quickly. “There was no will, you know—very remiss of Michael, I’m sure, but a common enough failing among younger gentlemen, who think they will never die. In any case, you must see that dear Jordan, who is practically your only remaining male relative and the heir apparent as well, is the natural person to take charge, both of dear Timothy and of the estate.”

“The *dear* estate,” murmured Lady Celeste incorrigibly.

Margaret’s lips twitched, but because she knew her grandaunt was perfectly capable of repeating her words in tones more audible to Lady Annis if requested to do so, she quickly suggested that perhaps they had not searched carefully enough for her brother’s will.

“Oh, but we did,” replied Lady Annis, wide-eyed with sincerity. “Archer here can tell you that I did not begrudge the least exertion, in spite of my poor health. He, Jordan, and I quite turned out poor Michael’s bedchamber, the library, and the estate office, looking for anything even resembling a will. There was nothing at all, I promise you. Where is your footman, by the by? I confess, we have felt the lack of a third manservant, though I did not think we would.”

“I have given Quinlan leave to visit his family in Dorset for a month,” Lady Celeste told her without apology. “I cannot think why you turned the others off.”

But Margaret, uninterested in domestic problems for the moment, was still thinking about the missing will. “Perhaps Lord Abberley would know where Michael kept it,” she said musingly.

“Lord Abberley,” said Lady Annis with injured scorn, “has not seen fit to pay us so much as

civil visit of condolence. Not," she added with tightening lips, "that I should have been flattered have received such a call from the likes of him."

"Why, whatever can you mean, ma'am? Lord Abberley has ever stood our friend."

"Then I shall say nothing against him," said Lady Annis primly.

"Nothing to say," said Lady Celeste, a warning note in her voice.

"That is as may be," retorted Lady Annis in tones which indicated that she, for one, could say great deal if pressed to do so. "I do not forget that he is your grandnephew, although it is with difficulty that one realizes he stands as close to you as dearest Margaret does. But you clearly don't wish me to speak ill of him, so I shall say no more."

"Dreadful woman," said Lady Celeste an hour later when Lady Annis had departed at last to take her morning drive—a necessity for the good of her lungs, she had explained at length, and sternly ordered by her doctor. "Quacks herself," added her ladyship. "How your Uncle Stephen, a sensible enough man by most standards, managed to bear with her long enough to produce that languid lack she calls her dearest pet, I shall never understand."

"Papa said Uncle Stephen fell in love with one of Lady Annis's elder sisters who was already spoken for and that he decided Lady Annis would do as well. Papa said he learned his error, but not quickly enough, for they were already betrothed by then, and Uncle Stephen couldn't, in good conscience, cry off."

"And, of course, there were no more unmarried sisters by then, either," said Lady Celeste with a touch of sarcasm. "The Earl of Brundage had seven daughters, poor man, but I daresay he'd have had more if he hadn't cried 'Enough' after one look at Annis's sour face."

Margaret laughed, but intruding thoughts quickly sobered her again. "Aunt Celeste, I simply cannot believe that Michael failed to make a will. In fact, I'm quite sure he drew one up soon after he married poor Marjory. He had to because of the marriage settlements, I think, and surely he would have added to it or written another when Timothy was born or when Marjory died. He wasn't an irresponsible man, even if he *was* young."

"True enough," Lady Celeste agreed. "He never was the sort of loose screw so many young men seem to be these days. He was very like your father, Michael was, a kind and sober man. I was so pleased when your mama married Sir William, for she was quite my favorite niece. Always the toast of the Season in London, Julia was, before she cast her handkerchief—a diamond of the first water. There were so many men after her—even a duke—that I was afraid she'd be swayed by a title or some ne'er-do-well's charming words or handsome face. But Julia no sooner clapped eyes on your father than she decided he was the man for her. You are very like her, you know, just as Michael was like Sir William."

Margaret had heard these words many times before, but although she still felt sad whenever she thought of her parents, her eyes didn't so much as mist now. Indeed, she had long since decided she

had no tears left. She had not even cried after learning of Michael's sudden death. The last tears she had shed had been for Frederick Culross. "I wonder," she said now, "what would have become of Mama if Papa had been killed in battle before they were able to wed," she said quietly.

Lady Celeste had been lost in her own memories, but these sad words brought her head up with a snap, and she said flatly, "Julia would have cried her eyes out and then got on with her life. And you're thinking of young Culross again, let me tell you you should put all that behind you now. It has been three years since Waterloo, and you weren't even properly betrothed to the man, so that's time and more in which to bury the past. He wouldn't have done for you, anyway."

"We weren't betrothed because Michael refused to allow it with Frederick leaving as he was to join Wellington, but he *had* agreed to allow Frederick to pay his addresses to me and I had agreed to receive them. Why, you never knew Frederick!"

"Well, of course not. It would have been a trifle difficult to effect an introduction when he was with Wellington, trying to catch Bonaparte, and your grandfather and I were in Vienna. Such a welcome change, too, after the Russian court. So gay and everyone having such a lovely time. Of course, no one knew until Bonaparte had been on French soil for over a week that he had even managed to escape from Elba. Then there was a deal of bickering, I can tell you."

Margaret glared at her. "Never mind that. Why wouldn't Frederick have done for me?"

Lady Celeste sighed. "Shouldn't have said that, I expect. It slipped. After so many years in diplomatic circles one might expect I'd have learned to put a guard on my tongue, but I never did. And the fact is that when you talk about young Culross, you always tell me how kind he was, and thoughtful, how he was always exerting himself to please you."

"He liked pleasing me. What's wrong with a man being thoughtful and kind?"

"Nothing, but you need a man who will cross you now and again, not one who trips over himself to please you."

Margaret opened her mouth to insist hotly that her beloved Frederick had been made of sterner stuff than that, but honesty intruded. Perhaps Lieutenant Culross had been rather easily led. In order to keep her sharp-eyed companion from pouncing upon whatever truth she might see in her face, Margaret quickly turned the conversation back to her brother's will.

"Surely you must agree, ma'am, that Michael would have done his duty where Timothy was concerned. And he would never have named Jordan the boy's guardian or trustee."

"No, certainly not. More likely to have named your grandfather jointly with his man of affairs. Who handled Michael's business?"

"Mr. Jeremy Swift in Royston, but I believe he had a man in London as well. Abberley would know. Aunt Celeste, even if Michael failed to make a will, we cannot stand by and see Jordan take control of Caldecourt Manor."

"No, indeed. We must contrive a little, I think."

“We must act,” Margaret said decisively, “and we need help. I am going to ride over to the hall once.”

“You mustn’t go alone, dear,” her ladyship said firmly. “I shall go with you.”

“Nonsense. You know you like at least a full day to recuperate after a long journey. I shall do fine alone. Moreover,” she added when Lady Celeste stiffened slightly, “one of us must remain here to become acquainted with Timothy. He had scarcely turned four when I left to join you and Grandpa in Vienna, so I daresay he won’t remember me at all. And it won’t help our cause if he treats us like strangers and appears to be well-acquainted with Jordan and Lady Annis.”

Although giving it as her opinion that if Timothy were indeed well-acquainted with his cousin and Lady Annis, he would express a preference for anyone else to stand guardian in their stead, Lady Celeste was much struck by Margaret’s view of the matter and finally agreed that no great impropriety lay in visiting a second cousin whom one had been accustomed since birth to think of as a second brother. Thus it was that half an hour later, attired in a forest-green woolen habit with gold frogs and military epaulets, Miss Caldecourt set out for Abberley Hall, riding a neat black mare named Dancer from her brother’s stables and accompanied only by an elderly groom.

The ride took the best part of another half-hour. As they rode through the thick beech wood, she was conscious of a damp chill in the air and found herself longing for the moment when they would emerge into open country again and pass through the gate into one of Abberley Hall’s well-tended fields. She wondered idly if it had been possible to begin planting the barley yet or if the fields were still too hard-frozen to plow, but to her amazement the first field, when she reached it, was cluttered with dried stalks and early weeds. Not so much as the normal clearing off had been done the previous fall.

Her groom did not have to climb down from his saddle to open the gate, for it was already open—or half-open—lurching precariously from one rusty hinge. The fence surrounding the field to keep off deer from the forest was in a similarly dilapidated condition, with whole sections broken down.

The second field was in no better condition, and when they passed through the main gate to the hall, Margaret was distressed to note more weeds cropping up here and there along the broad gravel drive and throughout the once plush herbaceous borders. The borders themselves had run amok, and the lawn more nearly resembled a hayfield. Indeed, she found herself dredging her memory for a view of the hall as it should be, set amidst neatly trimmed borders and well-scythed lawns. Even the house seemed to have gone to seed, though it loomed before her now in much of its ancient splendor—a pile of imported stone and local flint, three stories high in the massive central block, with two-story wings flying off at odd angles everywhere. A regular honeycomb, Abberley had been wont to call it. A longstanding joke in the family, according to Lady Celeste, was that there had been no need for priest holes at Abberley, since Cromwell’s men might have searched the place to their heart’s content and in all the confusion of rooms have overlooked an army of priests. But the building, once so well-care

for, needed a full-scale cleaning and refurbishing. Two of the windows facing the drive from the central block were cracked, and the woodwork was in desperate need of paint.

Margaret slipped from her saddle unaided at the stone steps sweeping up to the entrance, which was set under a broad, stone portico. She tossed her reins to the stoic groom.

“Go round to the stables, Trimby. I don’t know how long I shall be, but I expect someone will be there to direct you and give you a mug of something hot.”

The groom nodded, doubtful but obedient, and Margaret hurried up the steps to bang the heavy brass knocker. The house had a deserted air, and she had the feeling that if anyone were going to answer her summons, he would have to come up from the nether regions to do so. Thus, she nearly jumped out of her skin when the door was pulled open while she still had her hand on the knocker.

“Miss Margaret!” The neat, wiry man who stood there regarded her in amazement. “We thought ... that is, Mr. Maitland was given to understand ... that is, well, we’re right glad to see you’ve come home, miss.”

“Good morning, Pudd. I am very glad to be back, but news must travel a good deal more slowly than it did before I left Hertfordshire. I arrived at the manor last night and was certain you would have received word of it by now.”

“No, miss.” Puddephatt did not explain. Nor did he stand aside to let her pass.

“Pudd, it is chilly out here,” she said pointedly.

“Yes, miss. Was you meaning to leave a message?”

“No, I was not,” Margaret replied, speaking more sharply. “I wish to speak to his lordship. Arriving not before time, either,” she added with a sweeping gesture that included the overgrown lawn, the weeds, and the leggy, sprawling borders. “Whatever is he about to have let his servants neglect the place so?”

“There’s pretty near only me and the rib left, Miss Margaret. So long as he gets fed and done, he don’t have to answer the door, he don’t much care about nothing else.”

“Then, he is here,” Margaret said, certain the little man must be exaggerating.

Puddephatt hesitated. “Aye, miss, like as not.”

“Well, for heaven’s sake, take me to him, or tell him I am here.”

Nervously the wiry man glanced over his shoulder toward a pair of tall oak doors in the near side of the ancient stone hall. “I’m thinking that it wouldn’t be wise, Miss Margaret. I’ll tell him you’re here and that you be wishful to see him. More than that I shouldn’t like to undertake.”

Margaret looked hard at the manservant. She had known him since her childhood when he was a mere footman who could be counted upon to produce lumps of sugar for her to give her pony or warn young mischiefmakers when to play least in sight. Now he looked careworn and rather anxious. She hadn’t missed the quick glance over his shoulder either.

“His lordship is in his bookroom, is he not?”

“Aye, miss,” he said unhappily, “but I daren’t announce you. ’Twouldn’t be fittin’ for you to see him just now.”

“Fustian,” said Lady Celeste’s grandniece. “Stand aside. You needn’t announce me at all. I’ve no the slightest notion of what’s what with his precious lordship that he isn’t even of a mind to be civil, but I assure you I mean to see him now, at this very moment, and not at his convenience.”

“Miss Margaret, no!” But Puddephatt might as well have spared his breath, for she pushed past him, crossed the stone floor of the hall with quick, angry steps and pulled open the doors to the bookroom.

Adam Fortescue, sixth Earl of Abberley—all six feet, three inches of him—lay sprawled in a tattered leather chair before a cold fireplace, snoring harshly, his light-brown hair more tousled than Margaret could remember ever having seen it before. But even before she had had time to register the sight fully, her nostrils were assaulted by the aroma of stale brandy fumes wafting through the air.

“Merciful heavens, Puddephatt,” she exclaimed, wrinkling her nose, “how long has his lordship enjoyed this disgusting condition?”

“Nigh onto three months or so, miss,” was the quiet reply.

Margaret stared at the manservant. “You’re jesting!” He shook his head. “You are saying he has been like this since Sir Michael’s death?”

“Aye, miss. Took it right hard, he did.”

“But the land, this place ...” She waved her hand in an all-encompassing gesture. “All this decay didn’t set in over a period of a mere two months.”

Puddephatt shook his head. “His lordship lost interest in estate management some time ago. Preferred London, the social scene, gaming, women—that is, parties and the like. When Sir Michael and Lady Caldecourt took you to London, you’ll remember that he went down, too. But then you were off to Foreign Parts, and when her ladyship died in childbed soon after, Sir Michael withdrew in himself a bit. Not that he and the master weren’t still close. They were. But Sir Michael busied himself with estate business, and the master began to care less about matters here and to go about even more than he had before, to house parties and such. He was hunting in Leicestershire when Sir Michael took ill and died. We sent word to him as soon as Sir Michael went sick, and he only just made it home in time for the funeral, on account of the warm spell we’d had went cold again, and the vicar wasn’t wishful to risk the ground freezing solid. A full bottle of brandy his lordship had that night, and it’s been much the same ever since.”

Margaret nodded, then looked back at the figure sprawled in the chair near the fireplace, his booted feet splayed far apart on the faded green-and-purple Aubusson carpet. Drawing in a long breath, she braced her shoulders resolutely, then spoke without turning her head.

“Fetch me a bottle of porter, a basin of cold water, and a cloth, Pudd. At once, if you please.”

He nodded and went to do her bidding, soon returning with the bottle of that beverage best known

for its excellent restorative powers under his arm, and the cloth over it. He held the basin in his two hands with an earthenware mug hooked over one finger beneath it. As he entered, Margaret was attempting to restore life to the fire.

“I’ll attend to that, miss,” he said, handing her the basin and cloth, and setting bottle and mug on a nearby table next to an empty brandy bottle.

Margaret watched Puddephatt move swiftly to the hearth, then turned her attention to Abberley. On closer inspection she saw distinct ravages of dissipation. His once-handsome face was pale, and a crow’s feet twitched at his eyes and mouth as he snored. There was likewise an unhealthy puffiness under the eyes, while a red-gold stubble around his lower cheeks and chin testified to the fact that he had not allowed himself to be shaved that day, nor possibly the day before. His neckcloth had become disarranged, and she noted that his linen—once a matter of great pride with him—was dingy. A sudden flash of anger overcame her at this last observation, and with scarcely a thought toward reason or consequence, she upended the basin of cold water over his lordship’s tousled head.

Puddephatt’s gasp of dismay was lost entirely as his lordship came sputtering to an upright position in the shabby chair and struggled unsuccessfully to get to his feet.

“What the bloody—” He dashed water from his brow with the back of his sleeve and saw Margaret standing over him, her eyes flashing, her arms akimbo. “Margaret, what the devil are you doing here?”

“Attempting to bring you to your senses, my lord,” she said tartly. “Please do not attempt to rise on my account. You appear to be in no condition to attend to the civilities.”

“Civilities be damned,” he muttered wrathfully. “If I could get to my feet, it would be for the sheer pleasure of throttling you. I don’t suppose you stopped to consider that the Aubusson will scarcely be improved by a wetting. Or this chair—one of Chippendale’s masterpieces, my father always said.”

“Well, Mr. Chippendale would scarcely be pleased to see how little you’ve cared for his masterpiece,” she retorted, “and your precious Aubusson has seen many a better day as well.”

“M’lord,” said Puddephatt hesitantly, picking up the brandy bottle and bending to find the glass which had somehow managed to roll under his lordship’s chair, “I’ve taken the liberty of pouring out a mug of porter—”

“Well, pour it back again or drink it yourself, man, and fetch me another bottle of the brandy. Lord knows, I need something stronger than porter to sustain the shock of Miss Caldecourt’s assault on my person. Yes,” he added, looking morosely down upon his sodden state, “and to ward off pneumonia, I’m thinking.”

“Fustian,” said Miss Caldecourt. “You’ll drink that porter and like it, my lord. Go away, Puddephatt. His lordship has no further need of your services at present.”

“The devil he hasn’t,” growled Abberley, stopping the manservant midstride. “His lordship, ma-

heaven help him, has the most urgent need of a dry shirt and coat at the very least, so hop to it, ma and don't forget the brandy!" Absentmindedly, he swigged from the mug of porter, frowned at the unfamiliar taste, then swigged again, eyeing Margaret malevolently over the mug's rim. "Thought you were fixed in Vienna," he muttered after a brief silence.

Having taken advantage of that silence to glare at Puddephatt in such a way as to make clear that it would be at peril of his own life if he were to bring his master that bottle of brandy, she turned her direct gaze once more upon his lordship. "Surely you knew I would return as soon as I had word of Michael's death?"

"Had it from Maitland that you wouldn't."

"The vicar?"

Abberley nodded, then winced. "Aye, daresay he had it from that sour-faced aunt of yours."

"She is *not* my aunt. Merely Uncle Stephen's wife—more's the pity. Adam, you must collect yourself. I need your help."

"Not my help, you don't," he said more to the mug of porter than to her. "My help's not worth sixpence. Not worth tuppence, come to that. Not worth ..." But words failed him. He could suggest nothing further that his help was not worth.

Margaret, staring at him as though at a stranger, felt the need of a chair. A trifle dazed, she reached behind her until she located the mate to the one Abberley sat in, and sank down upon it. He had made no further attempt to rise despite the fact that she was certain he must be sitting in a puddle. Nor did he speak, and since he had never before refused to help her out of a scrape, she could think of nothing further to say to him. Thus it was with a feeling of unmixed relief that she greeted Puddephatt's return a few moments later.

He entered the room quietly, carrying a pile of clothing over his arm and a bottle in his hand. Margaret noted with dismay that it was a brandy bottle exactly like the one he had carried away a few moments earlier. She opened her mouth in angry protest, but before she could voice the words leaping to her tongue, Puddephatt put a finger to his lips. Since it was the hand holding the bottle, the gesture was nearly lost, but Margaret understood his intent and kept silent. He set the bottle down beside Abberley.

"There ye be, m'lord."

"Ah, bless you, man." Ignoring the fact that his man had neglected to provide him with a fresh glass, Abberley fell upon the bottle and drank thirstily, swallowing almost convulsively several times before a black look crossed his face and he snapped the bottle to arm's length, glaring at it accusingly. "What the devil is this?" he demanded. Puddephatt was silent, watching him in a wary but measuring way. Scarcely a half minute passed before what little color was left in his lordship's face drained away. "Oh, my God, Pudd, what've you done?" he muttered, setting the bottle down hard upon the table and attempting once more, this time with a look of desperation, to get to his feet.

Puddephatt snatched up the basin from the floor where Margaret had put it after dousing the earthenware and said quickly over his shoulder, "If ye'r not wishful t'see 'im cast up 'is accounts, Miss Margaret, ye'd best wait a bit in the front hall."

Margaret fled.

In the hall she found herself remembering Abberley as he had been in better times, a young man given to the airs, graces, and general fastidiousness of a dandy. He had not gone so far as to employ one glovemaker to cut the thumbs and another to make the rest of his gloves as had the most famous dandy of them all, Mr. George Bryan Brummell, who was now—for his sins—a permanent resident of the Continent, but she had rarely seen Abberley before with an unstarched neckcloth or linen that was not immaculate. Indeed, she had hitherto scarcely ever seen him with a hair out of place or without that air of confidence he had been wont to wear so casually. What had brought him to this pass?

Her thoughts had produced no acceptable answer to the question before Puddephatt finally emerged from the bookroom, the basin in his hands discreetly covered by a pile of discarded clothing.

"He'll see you now, Miss Margaret," he said, for all the world, she thought, as though nothing remarkable had occurred.

"Whatever was in that bottle, Puddephatt?"

"Oh, just a bit of this and that," replied the manservant cryptically. "He's a mite weakish and nervous in the best of tempers," he added, "but he'll do now—for the moment, anyway."

Hoping that his pessimism with regard to Abberley's temper was misplaced, Margaret entered the bookroom once more to find the window open wide to a chilly breeze, the fire burning determinedly upon the hearth, and his lordship looking paler than ever but more presentable. He glowered at her when she stepped past him to close the windows, the brisk breeze having already cleared the air sufficiently for her comfort.

"Haven't changed, have you?" he growled. "Still tossing the cat among the pigeons whenever the mood strikes you."

She turned from the window, glaring right back at him, and retorted, "At least I don't fail where all that is needed is a spot of resolution."

"Meaning that I did, I suppose." He looked away as if he could no longer meet her eyes. "I expect you're right about that. I certainly failed Michael when he needed me most."

"Failed him! How did you fail him?"

"By not being here when he needed me, of course," he replied as if she ought to have known the answer.

Resentment welled within her. How dared he? By what right did he take that particular blame unto himself? "Is that a fact?" she demanded, moving angrily toward him. "You think you were responsible for his death, so you drown your stupid sorrows in a hundred brandy bottles and let the world around you go to rack and ruin!" Suddenly the tears she had long since decided she could not

shed for Michael's death spilled down her cheeks in rivers, but attempting to ignore them, she continued to rip up at Abberley, calling him every insulting name she could think of and accusing him among other things, of encouraging Lady Annis and her despicable son to usurp control of Caldecott Manor from its rightful heir.

"And Michael trusted you!" she cried. "I trusted you! I thought matters here were in safe hands because you were here. But I was wrong, so wrong." Folding suddenly into a chair, Margaret finally gave way completely to her tears, hiccuping and gasping, her face buried in her hands, her side heaving with terrible, racking sobs, while Abberley, his ill-usage completely forgotten, stared at her in dismay.

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