

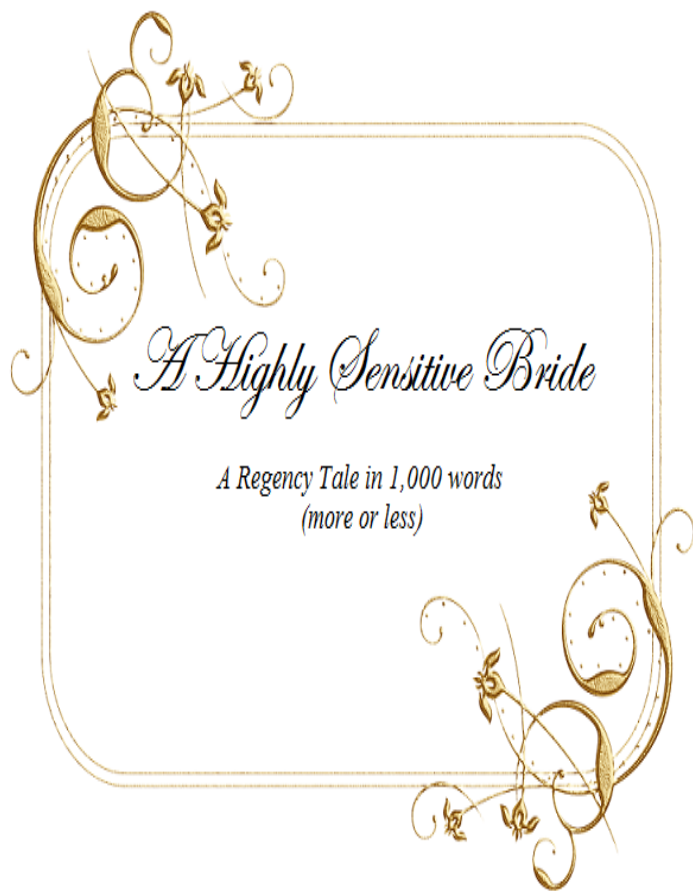
LINORE ROSE BURKARD

*A Highly Sensitive
Bride*



*A Regency Tale in 1,000 Words
(more or less)*

H BALDWIN



A Highly Sensitive Bride

*A Regency Tale in 1,000 words
(more or less)*

by Linore Rose Burkard

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Let other pens dwell on guilt and misery.

—JANE AUSTEN

Miss Caroline Stevens and Mr. George Grantham, betrothed by special arrangement since childhood, delighted in the reunion occasioned by the end of the war. Mr. Grantham was now returned from active duty after routing the Corsican, that ogre Napoleon, at Waterloo. He and Miss Stevens had been corresponding by letter for years, but now eagerly anticipated their coming nuptials. After seeing his bride-to-be a handful of times since his return, George was more in love with Caroline than ever.

Caroline had rich, russet hair, almond eyes, and a sunny smile and disposition. Indeed, she seemed to have no defect whatsoever except for highly delicate sensibilities. This led to a propensity to react strongly to most any external cause. A mildly windy day found her in a thick shawl and poke bonnet. A slight chill produced a heavy wrap or hooded cloak. Sunny weather made her declare such heat could hardly be borne. Her complaints, however, were gently voiced, and Mr.

Grantham quite looked forward to protecting the sensibilities of his bride for all his life.

Moreover, the same sensibility that made her shrink from the weather produced an exquisite appreciation for art, music, and drama. To find her in happy tears at Drury Lane during a play or ballet was no surprise. But still there came a jolting revelation one afternoon when he called upon Miss Stevens.

Her mama welcomed him in the drawing room, where the menu of the wedding breakfast was raised.

“My daughter, as you know, is delicate,” she reminded him. “More than in the common way.”

“Of course, I appreciate it in her.”

“Your new cook must be instructed in it.”

Mr. Grantham’s brows rose. “Eh? Cook?”

“Yes; has she never mentioned it? I suppose shyness prevented her. She has had so many hills to climb where her sensibilities are concerned. But her mouth, you see, her sense of taste, even her lips, are her most sensitive points. If something is served hot, to her it is boiling. If cold, to her it is ice. She must have food and beverages only middling hot or cold. Our chef is expert at making things just so for her. Indeed, now I think on it, she has likely not mentioned it because it was discovered early in childhood and addressed so successfully by cook that she seldom is troubled by it.”

He nodded thoughtfully. "Her lips and mouth, you say?"

Mrs. Stevenson nodded. "There are dishes she simply cannot tolerate that we never serve at table. Once tasted, if found distasteful—by her exacting standards—it is odious forever. But likewise, if Caroline finds a dish agreeable, she cannot give it up, whether it be advisable for health—or our green-grocer budget," she added with a chuckle.

Mrs. Stevens left him then to await Caroline's appearance, which he did, mulling over this new revelation about his betrothed. Her sensibilities were of course nothing new to him. That she had decided tastes, he had noticed. But no one had suggested she had *particularly* sensitive lips and tongue. Yet surely it could pose no difficulty. If anyone could be said to be incommoded by such a thing, it must be Cook.

But when Caroline shortly entered the room in a lovely daydress of sprigged muslin with a flowered purple print, and smiled with her pretty but extraordinarily sensitive lips, a terrible thought occurred to Mr. Grantham. Her tastes, once developed, were for life. Her lips and mouth were more sensitive than usual. What if she found *his* taste odious? His lips, for instance, upon hers, as surely they would be once they were wed?

After bowing his greeting, the couple locked hands, facing each other. Caroline said, “I think we must stay inside today. Mama says the sky is gray and lowering. We can read together and be cosy before the fire, if that suits you.”

“That sounds perfect,” he said, but his eyes dropped to her mouth and lingered there, for he was wondering. Wondering, what if, after all the years of their betrothal, years during which he had not taken the liberty to kiss more than her cheek, she found him distasteful? What if they were to discover this after the wedding and he was consigned to a bride who *would not kiss*?

“Caroline,” he said shortly, his eyes perplexed, even grave upon hers. “Forgive me. I must know—” And he pulled her into his arms and kissed her, first lightly, and then with passion, while she, in amazement, let him. When he drew apart, he searched her face. What did she think? Had she found him odious?

She licked her lips with a thoughtful look on her face.

Mr. Grantham’s heart hung as in a noose waiting to be tightened.

She rubbed her lips together.

He thought he might asphyxiate or at least burst with suspense.

She giggled. "You are shocking today, sir," she said smiling, withdrawing herself from his arms. "Come, let us sit before the fire. Perhaps you will tell me what induced you to do that."

"I love you!" he cried, overcome with relief.

Caroline's large hazel eyes regarded him affectionately, a smile curving her lips, her beautiful, delectable, sensitive lips. "I love you too, silly man." She went and took a seat on the settee and patted the cushion beside her. "Now, what is this about?"

He sat beside her and made his confession with many earnest protestations. Caroline listened, smiling, her eyes growing bigger now and then, and afterwards silent a moment. "I daresay Mama had the right of it. My mouth is as sensitive as the rest of me, alas. Rarely does it incommode me. Most homes we visit, and even inns, offer food that is neither too hot nor cold."

She looked shyly at him. "Shall we test it again? To be certain?"

"With all my heart!" he said, lowering his face to hers.

*

The wedding planned for the coming month took place one fine morning with all due pomp and circumstance. A wedding breakfast followed, with every dish

neither too hot nor too cold. Mr. Grantham kissed his bride heartily as soon as they were alone together.

And, of course, they lived happily ever after.



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The BRIDES of MAYFAIR
Book One

BONUS EXCERPT

PROLOGUE

1801, Yorkshire

Numerous gentlemen stood about the vast parlour at Toadingham, the Duke of Trent's ancient seat in Blythewold of the Yorkshire dales, speaking in muted but jovial tones. Only two of those present seemed sensible of the recent tragedy which had occasioned the gathering. One was the duke, for his sister and her husband had died in a coaching accident. The other, Miss Feodora Margaret Tavistock, "Feenie," only nine years old and fresh from America, was sitting on a bench on the side of the room: frowning, lonely, clutching a frozen-eyed porcelain doll, and trying not to cry. The dead were her parents, though it was her father's loss only that she grieved, the father who had reconciled across an ocean with his estranged wife only to die right along with her a mere three days after arriving by ship with Feodora.

She had two living relations in England who might care for her, two uncles, the brothers of her mother. But only one, the duke, volunteered to do so. In his late forties, a quiet, perpetually uncomfortable looking man, he seemed as bewildered as the young orphan.

Chatting solicitors, looking important in their grey topcoats, nondescript pantaloons, and voluminous cravats, helped themselves to snuff from little porcelain or gilded cases whipped from

waistcoats and returned in practiced gestures that took mere seconds. Feodora noticed this not, as her entire attention was directed inwards, where tears were suppressed but fighting to come forth. She'd been scolded by her uncle's servants enough to know better than to let them out. Even now, a grim-faced housekeeper by name of Mrs. Pudding—a name which might have made Feenie laugh under other circumstances—kept a sharp eye upon her, standing silently against the far wall.

Feodora huddled with her arms tightly about her little doll. The world had come to an end. With Papa gone, how could life continue? The memory of the carriage overturning, and the sight of him, so still and lifeless, haunted her. The sight of her mother was disturbing too, but she'd only just been reacquainted with that lady. Her father had taken her off to America when she was a mere infant for reasons unknown to her. But now he was gone. She would never, ever recover. She would never laugh or be happy. She wanted to die and join Papa in heaven. He must be in heaven, of course. She wished to be there, too, not in England, not in her uncle's home. Much better if she could return to America and live with her old nurse, Persippany, who had cried buckets at her leaving. That world was lost to her now.

After the carriage had overturned the previous night, only miles from the duke's residence, the next thing Feenie remembered was being handled roughly. Grim countenances of unfamiliar faces staring hard at her...the housekeeper's stern, frightening expression. She'd grabbed hold of Feodora and carted her kicking and screaming, to a small room, where she was told to stop her hysterics or she'd sleep there alone in the dark. The memory shook a fresh small sob from deep within her.

Mrs. Pudding was there in a moment and whisked Feenie in one stout arm against her side as she scurried from the room with her.

“I might have known!” she huffed, setting the girl on her feet after progressing down a carpeted hall for some distance. She opened a door and roughly pushed the girl in before closing it behind them. Swiftly she crossed the room, grabbed a switch from near the fireplace and came menacingly toward Feodora, who sobbed louder. Papa had never given her the switch! Mrs. Pudding wore a sour expression, and came at her with an arm raised. “Shush your ‘owling this instant!” She bent over as if to strike, but at just that moment the door opened.

A young man’s face, filled with consternation, peered inside and was followed in an instant by the rest of him; a tall, well-dressed frame, with an elegant cravat and a bearing equal to the station of an earl’s second son. Glaring at Mrs. Pudding, who instantly straightened and hid the switch behind an ample posterior, he stepped in and came toward Feenie and stood between her and the servant. His expression of righteous indignation, coupled with blazing eyes, surely conveyed to that lady the distinct impression that her penal actions had best cease.

She frowned at him. The Hon. Mr. Rempeare was only a lad, not more than fourteen or fifteen; a boy of the quality and a nephew of her master’s but still a lad. She put her hands on her hips, inadvertently revealing the switch.

The young man grabbed it and shook it in the servant’s face. “Leave this room!” he ordered, “or I’ll teach you how it feels at the end of this.” He spoke as one who held no doubt that he would be obeyed. Mrs. Pudding opened her mouth—she would argue—but his presence, young as he was, impressed her, and she said only, “But sir, she must keep silent in company!”

“I heard nothing from her,” he said, imperiously. “And has she not suffered the loss of her parents? Only last night? Young as she is?”

The housekeeper nodded stiffly. “Aye.” Quickly she added this torrent: “But it don't make it right that she should scream like kingdom come and all Bedlam loose, like she done last night!”

“Perhaps, in her mind, it is,” he answered, and turning, opened the door while eying her in such a way that she exited with a great frown. Feodora was left with the tall lad who turned and surveyed her. He smiled and bowed. “We are cousins, my dear,” he said brightly. “Gabriel Rempeare, at your service.” She regarded him, blinking. Her tears ceased. He pulled a handkerchief from his waistcoat pocket and said, “There, now. The old battleax shan't harm you. I'll see to that.” She took the handkerchief and blew her nose and looked up at him with instant and ardent adoration.

Young Master Rempeare looked over his little American cousin. She had an abundance of curly orange locks, a liberal sprinkling of freckles, and was painfully skinny. Hysterics did nothing to improve matters, for her nose and cheeks were bright red. Looking rather miserable, she clung to a porcelain doll with a ferocity that made him examine it as if to determine whether it was bejewelled. While she sniffed and stared, he wondered vaguely how to proceed. He should give her time to settle herself, no doubt.

While considering this, he paced about the room with one hand on his chin. He took a few lunges with the switch to fight off an imaginary Frenchie, but then returned his attention to the forlorn little girl. His compassionate eyes must have made an impression, because when he went toward her with an outstretched hand, she took it easily. He gently led her to a sofa. To his shock, when he sat down beside her, she climbed onto his lap, put her little bony arms around his neck and lay her head on his shoulder. In moments, she was asleep.

Gabriel held his new charge with a dazed expression. He had hoped to come to her aid somehow, but never had he dreamed of it

being like this. He decided right then and there that he would champion this new little cousin. Indeed, his dear departed mama had told him about his American cousin, and that when she was of age, he must marry her. Her looks were hardly inspiring, but he was little concerned about that. He was soon to enter His Majesty's Navy and his mind was filled with images of ships and ocean swells and sword fighting and honour.

His father, the fifth Earl Stafford, had remonstrated all the way to Toadingham that his brother the duke was a fool to take the child. Looking down at the homely drawn little face, Gabriel was glad he had. He would let her sleep for as long as she liked. For as long as they were left alone in peace.

CHAPTER ONE

Ten years later
1811, Yorkshire

“Mrs. Filbert! Only guess what I have learned from my uncle!” Miss Tavistock, the nineteen-year-old orphaned ward of the Duke of Trent, rushed across the great library at Toadingham to where her companion, Mrs. Filbert, lay settled upon a settee amongst layers of pillows and blankets near the fire, sniffing and sneezing. Mrs. Filbert was laid up in the library where her ague bothered no one else in the household but where she could take comfort in books during her affliction.

Margaret—for Miss Tavistock detested the name Feodora and went by her second name now—held a letter in her slim hands as she arrived before the companion, her strawberry-blonde curls bouncing and her gown still swishing against legs that had moved far more quickly than was usual for a genteel young lady. Her cheeks, bright with excitement, were outshone only by the shimmering sea green of her eyes. She hovered, breathless, before the settee with its profusion of blankets, uncertain where the boundaries of the middle-aged Mrs. Filbert ended.

“Here, dear,” the comfortably plump personage said, patting a spot on the blankets. “Only do not stay close, lest this dreadful ague passes to you! *Achoo!*”

“Bless you,” said Miss Tavistock absently, depositing herself upon the designated seat. Mrs. Filbert noted the rosy glow upon her face with pleasure. She disapproved of the girl’s daily horseback riding but had to concede that the country air surrounding Toadingham christened her cherubic countenance with an almost absurd vitality and youthful beauty.

“I must tell you!” the cherub exclaimed, settling herself more comfortably while peering at Mrs. Filbert. “Or shall you guess it?”

“Indeed, I am sure I may not, my dear!”

“Very well.” Margaret tried in vain to hold back an irrepressible smile. “’Tis regarding my cousin, Captain Rempeare!”

“Indeed!” said the lady appreciatively. Word of the captain, who was betrothed to Margaret by the particular wish of both their now deceased parents, was exceedingly scarce at Toadingham. It was so scarce that Margaret had vowed, on more than one occasion, to break off the nuptials, though it would disappoint the duke and go against the wish of the dearly departed.

“The captain’s injury is not as bad as we feared,” she said now. “But his ship is beyond repair and has been decommissioned! He is ashore and says he will call upon me!” Margaret’s red lips, full and scandalously voluptuous, smiled, her green eyes sparkling.

“Decommissioned?” asked the older lady. “We must thank Providence his injury wasn’t worse, if the ship fared so badly.” They had learned of the battle and the captain’s injury from *The Times* and *The Morning Chronicle*, where Margaret got most all her news of the war against Napoleon and of London’s upper class. She clipped and saved every mention of her elusive cousin and his skirmishes at sea. During the Battle at Lissa, the captain valiantly held off and routed a much greater French and Spanish force than what he commanded. Despite the victory, there were casualties and

wounded. The captain's sword arm had taken a nasty hit. He was blessed, his letter to the duke said, that he hadn't lost the limb.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Margaret held the letter against her bosom and stared out at the room smiling, appreciating the wonder. She hadn't seen the captain in near a decade, almost since before he entered His Majesty's Navy. But she prayed for him faithfully each night and was mindful of the marriage arrangement, her private journal even littered with the words, "Captain and Mrs. Gabriel Rempare." She adored the sound of it and thought it wise to grow accustomed to her future name.

"I dare say he must dislike it," said Mrs. Filbert.

The smile on the rapturous face vanished. "Dislike it?" she asked. "After ten years at sea? I should think he'd be pleased!"

Mrs. Filbert hated to crush excitement in her charge, there was so little in her life, but she said, "It all depends, my love—oh, *achoo!*—excuse me, dearest. This wretched chill!"

"Bless you," responded the girl despondently. "Why do you say it depends—on what?"

"On why he ran off to sea in the first place. Men have a penchant for getting it in their blood, and some never wish for a regular life on land again. The sea takes hold of a man in strange ways, you know."

"Pooh!" said the young miss unromantically. "He went to sea to escape his overbearing father, or so says the duke. A father who is no longer with us. And if my cousin wished to remain at sea, then he would not have got himself injured and his ship decommissioned."

"Why, my love! How can you say so! When he was fighting a war!"

“Well, perhaps he had enough of war. *I* certainly have!” Miss Tavistock looked at the ceiling in an injured fashion as if she herself had suffered hardships from the French blockade.

“But, my dear, how fortunate we are here in Yorkshire, situated near the coast where smugglers’ ships get through aplenty. We never lack sugar, tea, French silks, or lace. In London, such contraband costs a pretty penny!”

Margaret nodded, looking unconvinced. Smoothing the fold of her gown, trimmed at the bust along the front centre skirt with prohibited French lace, she said, “I own I want for nothing. My uncle is too generous by halves!”

Mrs. Filbert nodded. “The cross you bear is a want of happy society. What should be part and parcel of the life of a duke’s ward is sadly absent in this wild country! If His Grace were not *such* a recluse—”

“He doesn’t snivel at surrounding me with servants, the best dancing master, or pianoforte instructors!” interrupted Margaret, hoping to cut off the remonstrances against her uncle that she knew from long acquaintance with her companion, were about to erupt.

“I dare say you’ve seen little in the way of company *except* for governesses and servants.”

“Do not forget Sir Thomas—”

“Who is now departed, God rest him, and whose two sons were ever seldom in residence! I never met a man more determined to avoid his own offspring! What you wanted all along was female acquaintance.”

“But his amiable wife, Lady Frances—”

“Another recluse!” broke in the elder lady.

Margaret looked bereft. “They say Sir Thomas kept her almost under lock and key. But on the occasion we met, she never uttered a complaint against him.”

“A baronet’s wife—under lock and key? I cannot credit it.” Mrs. Filbert further pressed her point by nodding severely at Margaret. “I hate to speak against my betters, you know ’tis true, but she is no doubt that simpering sort of woman, a church mouse, not at all the thing for good conversation or company.” She pointed a finger. “And she supplied no daughters for your acquaintance.”

“A grave failing, indeed,” said Margaret, suppressing a smile, and with a sideways glance at Mrs. Filbert. Playfully, she added, “But my uncle has been only magnanimous: why, the moment I thought to ask for a companion, he gave me *you!*”

Mrs. Filbert smiled, but her company was not at all the same as being in polite society. Little wonder Margaret had accepted Mrs. Filbert for a companion when a more worldly-wise young miss might have insisted on one closer to her own age. Mrs. Filbert was five years widowed and just approaching her fiftieth year when she arrived from London in answer to the advertisement. To her concern, she’d been taken straight to the duke himself, when usually a housekeeper conducted interviews. But His Grace, a bespectacled, mild-spoken grey-haired man not much older than herself, had approved her for the situation faster than she thought possible, almost faster than she thought respectable.

There were questions that hadn’t been asked. She knew next to nothing about the girl she was to provide chaperonage for, and usually, the much-pampered young woman would come and inspect her and finally give her reluctant agreement—if Mrs. Filbert was lucky—or whimper that she was too old (in her very presence) and send her off. Miss Tavistock had shown neither hide nor hair, yet Mrs. Filbert had been escorted by a footman to a bedchamber, which had apparently been designated for her by that young woman previous to her arrival.

Mrs. Filbert was positively suspicious. Did the young miss have a terrible deficiency? Was she mentally impaired? Ugly and awkward? There had to be some reason why the young lady had not required an interview, and her mind could furnish only those which seemed macabre.

All her fears were laid to rest when Miss Tavistock, unbidden, came to bestow a curious welcome to the new addition to the household. A firm rap on the door. “May I come in?” said a clear voice. “It is Miss Tavistock.” The door opened to reveal a slim young woman who crossed the portal and swept into the room with easy elegance. Mrs. Filbert’s heart sank, for such a poised beauty would never desire an old widow for a companion, she was sure. At a loss for words, and finding herself under the scrutiny of a pair of wide-open, sea-green eyes, she uttered hastily, “Your uncle sent you, no doubt?”

“The duke?” she asked, smiling prettily. “No, indeed! I heard from the servants you’d arrived.” Only later would Mrs. Filbert discover that His Grace rarely spoke a word that wasn’t strictly necessary, which explained the hasty interview.

Miss Tavistock sat upon the bed, still looking curiously at Mrs. Filbert. Her lovely reddish blonde hair, more blonde than red, fell in tight little ringlets about her head, and her dress was of the latest fashion. Mrs. Filbert was to learn that all of Miss Tavistock’s stylishness came from a steady subscription to fashion magazines and journals. And that the poor child had never in her life attended a ball or concert outside of the small village beyond the Hall, except once, at the estate of the captain’s father, her other uncle.

“I was hoping,” the young woman said quietly, not lowering her eyes, “that you would be younger.” Quickly she added, “I beg you’ll pardon my saying so. I can be frightfully rude, I’m afraid, for I speak my mind.”

“Not at all, my dear,” Mrs. Filbert said warmly. Unlike the spoiled young chits who criticised her as if she weren't present, this lovely girl had apologised for an honest appraisal. “I should think you *would* want a younger companion,” she added sympathetically. She was careful not to show her disappointment; for only two minutes in this young lady's presence had made her feel certain she would have liked to stay. But she couldn't blame Miss Tavistock for wanting younger blood for company.

“But that's that!” her new charge exclaimed, surprising her not a little. “I'm sure we'll get on famously.”

The older woman blinked in surprise. “Do you mean you don't wish for me to leave?”

“Leave?” she asked innocently. “*Fire and brimstone*, pray do not!” The cry was heartfelt. The young miss looked thoughtfully at Mrs. Filbert's much-worn apparel, adding, “I dare say you need this appointment.” Her frank eyes rose to meet Mrs. Filbert's. “And I am in need of company. All the gentry in these parts have gone off to London: the Season, you know.” She swallowed and looked suddenly sad.

“Have you had a debut—” Mrs. Filbert started to ask. Margaret said, “I couldn't bear to ask the duke; he wouldn't abide setting up an establishment in London. He loathes society, you must know.”

Mrs. Filbert nodded, for the duke was a famous recluse. “But surely there are other ways. He needn't go himself.”

Miss Tavistock eyed her hopefully. “Do you indeed think so? We must discuss this further!” But she had the good breeding to check her curiosity, saying, “After you've settled in and rested. You've obviously travelled from some distance.” The young eyes had appraised the signs of a weary traveller correctly. “From where?” she enquired. “You look to have been on the road for days.”

Mrs. Filbert could not feel reproachful at this description for it was true. “From London,” she said, and was instantly glad to have come from that place, for the young lady’s eyes lit up.

“London? Famous! You will tell me about it?”

“Of course, my dear, whatever I can.” The eagerness in her new charge’s eyes eloquently bespoke the years of loneliness the girl had suffered. The young woman rose.

“Dinner is served at six—early by London standards, is it not?”

“Yes, eight or nine is customary there.”

Margaret’s eyes glittered for having known this much of London styles, and Mrs. Filbert’s heart warmed again.

All that was nearly two years ago, now. Since then, a great affection had sprung up between the two. Mrs. Filbert was grateful for being treated nearly as an equal (though she made sure never to forget she was a hired companion) and the motherless Margaret was blessed by the company and care of an older woman who had witnessed much of life and London.

The duke kept largely to himself. If he felt badly for not providing the girl with society, he made up for it by giving her all the niceties and fripperies any female could want. The only thing he denied his niece was the thing he could not countenance for himself—society. Margaret had bloomed beneath his lackadaisical care; but was lonely.

She felt sure the captain would have called upon them during shore leaves if only His Grace wasn’t averse to company. When she enquired about her cousin’s absence, the duke said that seamen often preferred to take their leave on foreign soils where adventure and excitement lay. Margaret tried hard not to believe that exotic women went along with that excitement. She might have succeeded, too, if not for Roderick.

The Honourable Roderick Rempeare, eternal student at Cambridge, was the captain's younger brother. He did not come often to Toadingham—usually only for Michaelmas term break and Christmas—but when there, he had nothing good to say of the captain. With his perpetually disdainful eye, he would say things like, “My brother ever did lack common sentiment such as would encourage him to write you, Feodora. You should scarcely be surprised at it. I wonder you haven't called off the arrangement: don't want to enter the parson's mousetrap to regret it, eh?”

“Fire and brimstone, Roddy! Have I not asked you for this age to please call me Margaret?” As usual he ignored this plea, merely looking down his Cambridge nose at her. Roderick claimed to be a poet. Or so he said this year, though last year he had been intent upon mastering the study of anatomy, and the year before, it was antiquities and archaeology that fascinated him. Margaret had long admired his scholarship, except her whole conception of Roderick had changed at Christmas when he recited his most recent creation, a poem entitled “Poetical.”

*I've no sense o' the highly poetical
But if I may be theoretical
For only a minute—
I'll put a rhyme in it—
And end with a good parenthetical.*

She'd been doubtful of his talent ever since.

“Does his letter say when he will call upon you?” asked Mrs. Filbert, dragging her mind back to the present.

Margaret had no need to scan the note. “In exactly a fortnight.” She shook her head to assure herself it was all quite real. Her future husband—coming at last! Her eyes grew far away. “I remember him

quite well, you know. He had striking eyes, dark curly hair, and was very tall. He seemed quite elegant,” she said with a giggle. But her look turned more serious. “He rescued me once.”

“Rescued you?” Mrs. Filbert was faintly amazed, never having heard of this rescue. She pictured a damsel in distress, the captain valiantly drawing a sword to defend her....

“From Mrs. Pudding,” Margaret added. “Who was housekeeper. She’s long gone now, of course.”

Mrs. Filbert wiped her brow.

Margaret continued, “I was a child then, but he seemed a proper hero to me, I assure you.” She smiled. “He was only a boy, I suppose, but so tall and...and I thought, manly, at the time. And those eyes.”

“You said they were striking?” asked Mrs. Filbert.

“Upon my word, yes. I even bestowed on them a space in my diary, describing them thus”—and here she stood and struck a pose like that of an actor reciting lines—“a pair of iridescent opals, only darker.” She curtsied to an imaginary audience and resumed her seat.

“We shall see if his eyes are still iridescent opals,” said Mrs. Filbert with a fond smile.

“Say nothing of that description, if you please,” Margaret said quickly, blushing. “I dare say a decade in His Majesty’s Navy must change a man.”

Mrs. Filbert was about to opine that seafaring men might change in many aspects, indeed, but that eye colour was not likely to be one of them. But Margaret let out a heartfelt sigh. “I am sure when he comes he will explain why he wrote so seldom,” she said in a tone that conveyed she was anything but sure.

Mrs. Filbert made a clucking sound with her tongue. “I should say! Hardly a letter per annum! For a near decade!”

Margaret coloured but said, "Not all men take well to the pen, you know."

"Only those with half a brain," murmured the lady.

"You are determined to dislike him."

"You are determined to protect him."

Margaret paused and gave an impish smile. "I am determined only to *marry* him," she said with a happy sigh. "It was my parents' wish; it was his mother's wish, and I have no other prospect, as you well know."

"You could have enormous prospects if you allow me to chaperon you in London." All of Mrs. Filbert's encouragement had so far failed to move Margaret to approach the duke for permission for a Season.

"But the marriage is arranged, recollect. And in any case, the captain will end my days of solitude. You'll see."

Margaret bustled about, glowing with the added responsibility of getting the ancient house sparkingly in order. For herself, visits to the mantua maker, urgent orders to London merchants, and a thorough examination of the latest styles as put forth in *La Belle Assemblée* and other fashion magazines, were all necessary before she felt herself ready to receive her guest.

The morning of the arrival dawned. The house shone at its best.

A disconcerting notice in the morning *Times* gave the ladies pause, for it said in the society column that Captain Rempeare, though new to Town and already sought after as a war hero, was busy setting up an establishment in a townhouse in Mayfair. Margaret maintained it wouldn't postpone his visit. And then the letter arrived, not even a letter, but so brief as to have been a dictated message

"Visit postponed indefinitely. Deepest regrets. Captain Rempeare."

CHAPTER TWO

“Insufferable!” said Margaret of her cousin’s abrupt change of plan. Holding out the message in one slim hand, injury in her eyes, she cried, “He fails even to furnish a reason for such rudeness! Nor is the letter sealed with his signet; he no doubt employed a footman to write and post it!”

Even Mrs. Filbert could not think why a gentleman could not take the time to send a polite apology, especially when it was he who had extended the invitation to himself, in effect, to begin with. Over the next few days, the morning papers enlightened them. That the captain had remained in London was clear. That he was an admired and popular dinner guest was equally clear. That he had sent nothing further in the way of excuse or apology, was unforgivable. After reading the most prominent news and reports in the *Times*, Margaret turned blithely to the morning *Herald*, scanned its contents—and froze. With an agonised look at Mrs. Filbert, she returned her gaze to the paper, horrified.

“My dear!” cried the companion. “Is it the captain?”

Margaret wordlessly passed the newspaper to Mrs. Filbert. “In the left column,” she said, woodenly. Mrs. Filbert scanned the place on the page to where it said:

From a reliable source: the reclusive Duke of T. is said to have a liaison, a beautiful and mysterious “Lady X.” The pair are said to meet secretly at Todingham. This coincides with another report which may interest our readers, of the duke’s nephew, our own newly famous war hero, one Captain R., who has been seen with an avowed lightskirt; reportedly he also may have suffered a fatal loss at the gaming table. The captain is just returned from the Adriatic where he faced fierce warfare and must be forgiven. But his uncle? We think the duke must be in his dotage to dally with a demi-monde dame.

She placed a hand upon her heart. “My word,” and then passed the paper back to Margaret, who stared at the guilty lines, rolled the periodical and then stood and cast it into the fire. A footman cleared his throat. “The duke ‘asn’t seen it, mum. Shall I run t’town and get ‘nother one?”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Margaret said severely. “The duke has the *Times*, which is enough. Please go, now.” To Mrs. Filbert she gave a face that meant she wished to speak to her privately. When the servant closed the door behind him and they were quite alone she cried, “My uncle must never get a whisper of this horrid rumour!”

“Tell the servants to keep the *Herald* from him,” agreed Mrs. Filbert. “But the captain, too!” she cried. “Both smeared at once!”

Margaret stared at her. “I have no doubt that ‘tis no fustian concerning the captain!” She gave her companion an earnest look. “He is no longer to be considered, Mrs. Filbert. I will free my heart of every thought of him. He is a *wastrel*. As for my uncle—” She cast troubled eyes at the lady. “How could such a thing occur? Who would invent such a flam? And why? The duke is the dearest man in the world and quite harmless. I can think of no enemies... Oh, *why?*” She clasped her hands together and paced the room.



The next day, Roderick surprised them with a visit. Though he did not share the striking eyes or dark good looks of his brother, Margaret thought he meant to look sharp in *Costume Parisien* of striped trousers and delicately-laced pointed shoes. One hand dangled carelessly from a pocket as he entered the room, but his shoes looked faintly baptised in soil, and a scarlet-striped waistcoat peeked out from the lapels of a buff-green jacket showing signs of wear. A voluminous bow on a high cravat, and a tall beaver with a wide rim which he carried in his other hand, completed the outfit. A quizzing glass hung from a fob, somehow looking untidy. There was often something or other hanging about Roderick, Margaret realised, as if

defying one to think he took care at the toilette—as though *that* were a danger.

Roderick had last called upon them for Twelfth Night, when he'd stayed a full week. She and Mrs. Filbert sat at cards with him every evening though he protested he played only as a concession to his poor cousin, for he did not expect she could share his more literary pursuits. But if Margaret tried to converse with him upon poetry, her favourite literary pursuit, he would only yawn and smile at her condescendingly. When she reminded him of the duke's prodigious library, filled with all manner of bookish treasures—for His Grace's nod to the outside world was to read voraciously—he feigned a yawn, saying, "I *live* in libraries, coz; you must allow my holiday."

Nevertheless, bereft for months at a time with precious few visitors, Roderick's were always welcome. As she greeted him in the drawing room, hoping to hear he might intend on a long stay, she was assailed by a sudden dread: What if Roddy had seen that dratted newspaper? She waited in mortification lest he mention it, yet she yearned for word of the captain, though he no longer deserved the least notice.

After initial pleasantries, her fear was realised.

"So what of this Lady X?" he asked, as if it were proper conversation for a drawing room.

"Please, sir!" moaned Margaret. "Must I hear that name spoken? You cannot mean to give credence to that monstrous falsehood. It's all fustian, a Banbury tale, I assure you."

“Has the duke made that claim?” he asked, peering with curious eyes over a pair of spectacles which he had recently begun wearing for effect. He felt sure he looked more studious in them.

Margaret gaped at him. “The duke? I would hardly bring that...that nonsensical story to his attention! He would find it utterly mortifying!”

Roderick shrugged, took a snuffbox from a pocket with a studied air and took a pinch. He went into an immediate paroxysm of coughing during which Margaret sat transfixed with consternation, wondering whether she was about to witness the demise of her cousin—due to snuff. She wondered if anyone had ever died taking it and scolded herself for having such a frivolous thought while Roderick choked. When he recovered his colour (for he had turned bright red) she felt vastly relieved.

The young man busily straightened his clothing, his eyes anywhere but on his cousin.

To change the subject and ease his embarrassment, she asked tightly, though she had vowed not to speak of him, “And how is the captain?”

“My brother,” said the young man, pulling himself together and then carelessly lounging back on the settee, “since coming ashore finds dissolution to his liking, I’m afraid. The navy did nothing to refine his character,” he added, stretching his neck. With closed eyes, leaning back tiredly, he said, “I think, cousin, you must concede that my siblings are utter wastrels.” The current Earl Stafford was the eldest Rempeare male and the duke’s heir. He was

indeed known so well for dissolute living that his presence at Toadingham was long ago prohibited. His Grace, though indulgent in some ways, was not disposed to allow the earl a chance to debauch his “dear gel.” The earl therefore was as much a stranger to Margaret as the captain.

Roderick sat up abruptly and stared hard at Margaret. “Consider yourself warned, coz. You saw it in the paper. He’s started in the petticoat line.”

Mrs. Filbert cleared her throat warningly, for she felt such talk was not fit for properly bred young ladies. Margaret was only too aware of it. “First Lady X and now this. More talk of *demireps*! Can this family be done with mistresses?” she cried, pursing her lips in annoyance.

Roderick merely smiled.

He stayed the night and was off the next day after achieving a private audience with His Grace, a necessary meeting since Roderick was low in the pocket, and everyone knew the duke was swimming in lard. He’d never been snivelling toward his nephews. Mounting the board to a small gig, Roddy turned and delivered these last words to Margaret before rumbling away.

“Remember what I told you about the captain, fair coz! You must find a nice watering hole—Bath, perhaps, or better yet, Brighton—and make a conquest; stop pining in the country for him to come and rescue you.”

Margaret stared long at the retreating equipage, her face slowly flushing pink. It hadn’t occurred to her, but Roddy was right. She’d been pining and waiting to be rescued. By

a man who was finding dissolution to his liking and who had “started in the petticoat line!” It was not to be borne.



“I was *mad* to anticipate the captain’s visit with such expectations,” she declared to Mrs. Filbert that night as they sat in the evening at their respective needles. They were sewing childbed linen for the parish box, who gave such things to the poor.

“I dare say the captain must be as cold and unfeeling as...as his uncle,” said the woman in rallying tones.

“Mrs. Filbert!” Margaret looked across at her companion, deeply shocked.

The green eyes were large, the cheeks perfectly rosy, and Mrs. Filbert thought for the thousandth time that the masterful Mr. Reynolds could capture her just right, if only the duke would think of it. Less attractive girls had their portraits plastered on some great wall; why shouldn’t Margaret, a real beauty, not have a grand portrait?

The real beauty was puzzled. “My uncle is not unfeeling; not at heart. Surely, you know that by now.”

Mrs. Filbert returned her gaze doubtfully. “If you say so, then I must be mistaken,” she murmured, not having the heart to say what she really thought about the duke. That he was shamefully remiss not to have given Margaret a social life, a debut, even a ball in her honour. The youthful

face watching hers was so genuine, so emphatic, however, that she held her tongue.

“My dear Mrs. Filbert,” Margaret said, as she returned to her sewing. “You cannot bamboozle me. Come, come speak your mind. I shan’t be cross, I promise.”

The grey-haired woman took her needle, and jabbing it forcefully into the linen, said, “’Tis the way he abandons you to solitude that I cannot countenance. For myself, I could stay happily beside you at Toadingham forever, dearest; believe me.” She stopped her work and cast a soulful look at the young miss. “But a coming out is what you need. A Season! After all these years cloistered away in the middle of nowhere!”

Margaret resumed her work with a serious expression. She couldn’t help but agree with Mrs. Filbert. She let out a deep sigh. “I suppose my uncle is aware that most females my age do have a Season.” Mrs. Filbert did not agree, and Margaret looked up, worriedly. “But he is not like most...men.”

“No, indeed!”

“Well, I only mean, he—he is not in touch with—”

“Anything!”

“Anything?” There was a plaintive note in the question.

“I should say not. Holed up in his study like a hare in its den, or disappearing on the estate for hours hunting to hounds, or overseeing his breed horses, or—nobody *knows* to where! He is not thinking of your needs, my love.”

“Why, anything I need, anything at all, he has never once denied me.”

“Except company. Society. Music. Conversation.” Each word landed with the weight of a thousand years’ agony to Margaret, who dropped her needle abruptly, jumped up from her little workstation and moved in agitation toward the window. She stood, looking out at the dark night. The moon was just beginning to rise over the fields in the distance, peeking between two small downs.

In a soft tone, she said, “He doesn't deny me these things out of coldness, or lack of feeling.” She turned and faced her companion. “’Tis that...he does not wish for society himself and forgets that others may feel differently.”

“To be sure!” Mrs. Filbert should not have pressed her point so hard, only she had long thought the duke to be lacking in this respect. The weight of time had hardened her antipathies.

“I maintain you are too strong against him, Mrs. Filbert. I have not approached him about having a coming out.”

“Do you deny that you should, above all else, enjoy the Season in London?”

Margaret swirled around to face the window again. Staring out but seeing nothing except her own unhappy face in the dark glass, she said, “I should so enjoy a Season!” She strode back and stood in front of the older woman. “Roddy said just this morning that I should go to Bath, or some such popular place, and stop pining for the captain to rescue me.”

Mrs. Filbert smiled. “Did he? I never took that young man to be the brightest thing on two legs—I thought him

chuckleheaded—but I think he’s hit upon it! A splendid idea!”

Slowly, a light rose in Margaret’s eyes. “Do you think, really, ’tis splendid?”

“Above time! You will adore it,” said her companion. “But I think London is far superior to Bath for a coming out. Only think—the opera, concerts, Drury Lane, Vauxhall Gardens! *All* the sights!”

Margaret’s eyes had come alight with an inner fire. “Yes, all the sights!” she repeated, enraptured at the thought. She sighed. “But surely the Season is half over by now.”

Mrs. Filbert surveyed her fondly. “Which means you will be just the thing to raise excitement, for now everyone has grown used to everyone else. A new, unmarried young woman when the Season is half over, I dare say, is better than one at the start, when there are dozens of you.”

Margaret bit her lip, smiling. “Do you mean, people will be eager to make my acquaintance?”

“No doubt!”

Margaret’s eyes glittered with hope and joy. “Think of it, Mrs. Filbert! Me, in a ballroom amongst acquaintances!” She did a spin on the floor right then and there, and began practising the steps of a popular country reel.

Mrs. Filbert cooed, “You are positively aching to be out, and unless you insist upon breaking my heart, you must promise to inform the duke that you mean to have your debut.”

Margaret's face puckered in thought. She stopped dancing and was suddenly blinking back tears. In a near whisper she cried, "I always hoped...for ever so long...that when *he* came back..." She couldn't finish her sentence.

Mrs. Filbert was in the dark for only a moment. "The captain!" she gasped. Her arms were outstretched instantly, and Margaret moved into them, receiving a very maternal hug.

"There, there," the companion said to the slim figure in her arms. "Only why did you think you must wait for your cousin to introduce you to society?"

"He gave his word that he would when I last saw him! It was so long ago, he's probably quite forgotten. But during his last visit, he was a junior lieutenant then, he said that someday, when I was quite grown up, he should take me to London on his arm, and show me the sights and dance with me at every ball and assembly. I've lived upon those words," she said now, blinking back tears. Here the distressed figure blew her nose. Sniffing, she said, "He called me Feenie after hearing my uncle use the term." Shooting a dark glance at Mrs. Filbert she added, "Another reason I detest that name, 'Feodora!'"

Mrs. Filbert nodded understandingly.

"Imagine, if you will, Mrs. Filbert, what it's like to be burdened with such a name!"

"But your second name is very sensible," the companion said heartily.

Margaret stared at her. “Just so! To my endless remorse! To have an outlandish burdensome name, followed by an utterly sensible one—how droll and unromantic it is!”

“Nonsense!” Mrs. Filbert returned to her sewing needle. “Margaret sounds perfectly pretty, and perhaps, even romantic.”

Margaret resumed her seat and took up her needle. “I hardly dare to believe that, but Mrs. Filbert, you are a comfort to me.”

“I pray that I am, dear.”

“Do you think, truly, that we could make a go of it in London? That we could get on? Without a sponsor?”

Strong nods of affirmation were given here so that Mrs. Filbert’s head bobbed. “All you need is a proper chaperon, and that, my dear—is me. A companion is the very thing for a chaperon.”

“Mightn’t people think it ill-advised of me if I were to set up my own establishment?” Margaret continued, with a concerned look on her face.

“A duke’s ward? I should say not!”

This comment earned Mrs. Filbert a gratified smile, although she never saw it, being focused on an untidy knot in her work. She never was very good with needlework.

“I grant, however, that you may need to pose that question to your uncle. After all,” the companion added gently, “he is the one with the purse strings.”

“Yes,” Margaret agreed. “But he never denies me. I’m afraid he spoils me, do you not think so?” Mrs. Filbert silently agreed, recalling her own ample wardrobe acquired

since coming to Toadingham. The gown she was sporting at the moment, in fact, a fashionable fresh muslin crepe, had been purchased only weeks ago by Margaret. From almost the moment of her arrival, Margaret had insisted upon refurbishing her wardrobe, much to Mrs. Filbert's astonishment. But it was useless to protest. The young woman delighted in outfitting her companion as much as she enjoyed bespeaking her own wardrobe. More than once, Mrs. Filbert had felt like a doll being dressed by a child, but so be it. If she must be the doll, she would be the doll happily. And the duke never gave so much as a murmur of disapproval.

Margaret said, "I'm afraid it will be a shock. To learn I'm interested in a London coming out."

"Nothing he cannot overcome, my dear," said Mrs. Filbert, in what she hoped was a rallying tone.

"I suppose," she said, "we need not contact my cousin on the matter."

Mrs. Filbert's head rose, and she studied her charge. "'Tis the proper thing to do. Certainly any *gentleman* could do no less than help you get settled, and introduce you in society." There was no need to state that whether or not the captain was a gentleman was, in fact, in question. His precipitate failure to appear was still fresh in their thoughts, as were the dual black charges of dissoluteness and consorting with *impures*.

"Speaking of Town, we must have a means of getting about," said the city-wise Mrs. Filbert. "Do you intend to bring your own horses? And what equipage?"

“I warrant London has horses enough to hire,” exclaimed the younger. “I shouldn’t like to subject mine to the city.” There was an amiable silence for a moment, both women’s thoughts wandering where they would. Margaret’s had not strayed far. “Did you hear about Midnight?”

“Your uncle’s newest stallion?”

“He’s been a terrible disappointment, I’m afraid.”

“Indeed? Why is that?”

“Mr. McCluskey states emphatically that he’ll *never* sire.”

“Why is that?”

Margaret glanced at her companion. “Impotence,” she said sagely.

Mrs. Filbert nearly dropped her sewing. “Do you mean to say your uncle discusses such matters with you?”

Miss Tavistock’s laugh was fluid and clear. “I should say not! Mr. McCluskey did.”

“Of all the bad taste! I shall speak a word to that man.”

Another giggle escaped Margaret as she added, “Not at all. It was only natural that I should be curious. The duke always puts his best males to stud, and we’ve had him for a year now to no effect.”

“Has it been a full year? Well! I pray you not to speak of such a thing in London, my dear.” Mrs. Filbert decided a change of subject was in order. “When shall you speak to your uncle about the Season?”

This quieted Margaret considerably. “Tomorrow,” was her sober answer. “In fact, I’m quite done up with the

thought of it," she added, piling her thread and needle neatly atop the linen. She rose.

"Won't you have tea, my love?" The tea board was due any moment. It was a ritual neither lady missed often.

"I shan't, if you don't mind, Mrs. Filbert," she said. She looked so tired that her companion instantly insisted she get off to bed.



The next day was cold but gloriously sunny. A leisurely morning ride before breakfast struck Margaret as just the thing to start such a day. It would give her time, she reasoned, as she slipped from a simple shift into a clean cotton one and then a pale olive riding habit, to decide precisely what she would say to the duke later. With a beehive hat of cottage straw, and kid half-boots to complete her ensemble, she reached the stables, grabbed a fine whip, and waited while a stable boy prepared Fairweather for her.

She'd ridden him only once before, but he'd been pronounced safe by Mr. McCluskey, and Margaret meant to make him her own. The stable boy rode a mount behind her as usual. She started slowly in a walk, heading for the long drive that led to the road. She often followed the drive before moving into fields and then woods, for she could veer off to visit a tenant if she wished, as the road wound directly past a number of small cottages on the property.

She slapped Fairweather's reins lightly to move into a trot. Before long, cold frosted her face and seeped through her habit, though it was sturdy Georgian cloth. She slowed to a stop and lowered the veil of white lace that twisted around the rim of her hat and then took off again, with a light kick of her heels. Fairweather fairly flew into a canter. She reined the animal in. She hadn't meant to gallop, but he whinnied and picked up more speed.

Margaret cried out, pulling sharply on the reins. Fairweather slowed, but then whinnied, bucked in protest, and reared. The stable boy hastened to come astride and leaning over, grabbed the head lead while uttering a sharp rebuke. With a pounding heart, and at the boy's insistence, Margaret dismounted. The servant offered her his horse, but she refused. "Take them back; I shan't ride."

"It's a long walk, mum." And it was, probably half a mile.

"I love a bracing walk," she said. But she stroked Fairweather's head and murmured to him, "What made you behave so badly, hmmm? What did I do?"

"It warn't you, mum; 'e's an ornery bugger." After many reassurances that she did indeed wish to walk back, the stable boy started off on his mount holding fast to Fairweather's reins in one hand.

With the cold settling upon her, she set off on the return walk. The sound of the horses' hooves faded, and she was left in silence. The sunny sky was giving way to grey as heavy clouds approached from the south, and she quickened her pace. But pleasure in the walk never failed

to brighten her spirits as she surveyed the wide avenue with its snow-tipped firs. Dark green limbs peeked out beneath white blankets, and spotted starlings with yellow beaks flitted amongst them, landing here and there like shimmering jewels glinting in the light. It struck her as sad that so few guests came to Toadingham, or ever enjoyed the pretty sight that even the most jaded aristocrat, Margaret felt, would surely have to acknowledge as pleasant.

It was with a feeling close to amazement then, when she heard the sound of a coach behind her and realised a vehicle was approaching. Visitors? At Toadingham? No one was expected. More likely someone had made a wrong turn, or got lost from the nearest turnpike.

Just as Margaret wondered if perhaps she should abandon the road for the safety of the woods, a closed travelling carriage came rumbling past, slowed, and then came to a stop. She had been spotted. Seconds later a postilion jumped off the back, let down the steps, and a naval cocked hat, followed by the figure of a tall man, stepped out and down. Margaret watched curiously, fingering her whip in one hand.

The man surveyed her a moment and bowed. He was ruddy, not unhandsome, surely under thirty, and his blue frock coat with gold buttons, white facings, and epaulettes at the shoulder should have told her instantly who it was, but it wasn't until she got closer that she knew. He had a long lean face, dark hair, and a sea-tanned complexion. His lively eyes, regarding her with interest, held an inner glow,

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like two opals. She recognised those opals. It was her cousin, her intended, Captain Gabriel Rempeare.

END OF EXCERPT

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Linore Rose Burkard is a serious watcher of period films, a Janeite, and hopeless romantic. An award winning author best known for Inspirational Regency Romance, her first book (*Before the Season Ends*) opened the genre for the CBA. Besides historical romance, Linore writes contemporary suspense (The Pulse Effex Series, as L.R. Burkard), contemporary romance, and romantic short stories. Linore has a *magna cum laude* English Lit. degree from CUNY which she earned while taking herself far too seriously. She now resides in Ohio with her husband and family, where she turns her youthful angst into character or humor-driven plots.

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