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Lakeshire Park



PROPER ROMANCE

MEGAN WALKER

“This gentle love story is a treat.”

—PUBLISHERS WEEKLY



I entered Lakeshire Park, comfort enfolding me like a warm, heavy blanket. I tried to place the feeling, to name the unfamiliar warmth that relaxed my heart. All I knew was that here, nestled in the middle of nowhere, I could breathe. How I hoped these next two weeks were only the beginning, that we could finally find refuge within these walls once Clara made a match with Sir Ronald.

Two weeks to secure my sister's happiness.

Amelia Moore wants only one thing—to secure the future happiness of her younger sister, Clara. With their stepfather's looming death, the two sisters will soon be on their own—without family, a home, or a penny to their names. When an invitation arrives to join a house party at Lakeshire Park, Amelia grasps at the chance. If she can encourage a match between Clara and their host, Sir Ronald, then at least her sister will be taken care of.

Little does she know that another guest, the arrogant and overconfident Mr. Peter Wood, is after the same goal for his own sister. Amelia and Peter begin a rivalry that Amelia has no choice but to win. But competing against Peter—and eventually playing by his rules—makes Amelia vulnerable to losing the only thing she has left to claim: her heart.

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MEGAN WALKER



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*To my Simon,
King of the NICU,
for teaching me everything I know about
hope, courage, and genuine love.*

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Chapter One

Brighton, England, 1820

My fingers held the last chord on the pianoforte a beat longer than necessary. Another morning filled with Father's song. When he was alive, I'd play the music over and over while he read his correspondence in the morning, and he'd hum along to the rise and fall of the melody. If I played just right, I could almost hear him still, almost feel that same exhilaration that comes from childhood, where worries are few and the future full of hope.

But the end of the song and the strike of the clock meant it was time to prepare for my stepfather, Lord Gray, who would be returning soon from his daily bath in the sea, and I was loath to give up my freedom.

Tucking in the bench, I picked up my stitching basket from the window seat where I'd been working earlier. I carefully collected each wayward thread, making sure to leave the cushion as clean and as plush as I'd found it.

Golden light streamed through the glass, beckoning me to tarry. Lifting my face to feel the sun's warmth, my eyes

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instinctively sought out the Royal Pavilion framed inside the uppermost right corner of the window. The building sat upon the hill a quarter mile from Gray House, its exotic domes and minarets piercing the clear England sky. What I wouldn't give to walk inside those walls, to feel the security and ease that must come from a life of such grandeur.

"Brighton is a bit different from London, is it not?" Clara's reflection met mine in the window.

"A bit more eccentric, to be sure." I turned to face my younger sister. "But far less crowded, I'll give it that."

Clara sighed. "Would you believe I miss the Season already? The society, the dinners, dancing until morning . . ." A smile touched her eyes, a first since we'd arrived back in Brighton three weeks before.

I let out a happy sigh of my own. "And falling asleep in the coach to the clip-clopping of the horses' hooves on cobblestone." When had I ever fallen asleep so easily? Years ago, perhaps. Before life struck us with spades and dug up our roots.

Clara bit her lip. "I thought for sure we'd hear from . . . *someone*."

"We shall." I squeezed her arm, offering her my most genuine smile. But the words rang false to my ears. Three weeks with no calls. We'd met plenty of eligible gentlemen who lived within easy distance to Gray House, but still, our door was silent.

"Amelia," Clara's voice was small. "What will we do if . . . What will happen if neither of us marries before—"

"Do not worry over such things." I tucked a loose curl behind her ear. Worrying was my responsibility.

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“Lord Gray has worsened since our return. His coughing never ceases.” Clara’s eyes were pained, her voice dejected.

“He promised Mama he would see to our security. For all his faults, and for all his resentment toward us, he loved her. We must trust he will see his promise through.”

Clara looked down, unconvinced.

“Did he not give us a Season? And your dress—we haven’t had new dresses like these in years.”

Heaven knew I’d endured headaches for a week from all his shouting when I’d pled our case. But if I could convince the man to fund both our Season and new gowns certainly I could convince him to use his connections to our benefit. Couldn’t I?

Clara tugged on a loose curl by her ear. “Aunt Evelyn nearly ripped my silk gown to pieces when she saw it.”

“Do not call her that. She is hardly our aunt.” I frowned. Lord Gray’s family did not claim us so why should we claim them?

Evelyn had been our chaperone, meeting us in London only because Lord Gray paid her royally for the task. Yet she’d kept us behind her heavy elbow at every introduction, her prized daughter directly in front of us. I had to crane my neck around Catherine’s curls every night to carry any semblance of a conversation, forcing smiles while Evelyn told nearly every gentleman who’d inquired after my dance card that I was either too sickly or too overtired to exert myself. Catherine, however, willingly obliged every one of my suitors.

My cheeks colored at the memory. Why had I been so quiet? So timid and so easily tossed aside? Never again.

Straightening from the window, I refocused my thoughts.

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“Where have you been this morning? I did not hear you come in.”

“Mary accompanied me on a walk along the shore. I thought perhaps the ocean could lift my spirits. The sunrise over the Channel was breathtaking.” Clara’s smile faded, and I caught her gaze lingering on the Pavilion for a moment. Her eyes looked sad and hopeless.

My heart fell at the thought of her longing for something out of her reach. Knowing my sister—the peacekeeper, the kindest, gentlest woman I’d ever met—felt trapped in a life forced upon her was nearly more than I could bear. Mama had married Lord Gray after Father’s death to relieve us of such burdens. Only it hadn’t worked that way; our worries only escalated after she too was taken from us. And now it was my job alone to ensure Clara’s happiness. Clara’s success in society. Clara’s future.

“Lord Gray is not far behind me, I’m afraid,” Clara said flatly, breaking the trance that held us at the window.

I drew a heavy breath, and the familiar scent of stale smoke in the air brought me back to the present. “Then we must be quick.” I squeezed her arm and tugged her alongside me.

Preparing for our stepfather was like preparing to walk onto a battlefield. His newspaper needed adjusting, his pillows fluffed, and his cigar box at the ready. The slightest misstep—from dropping a book to walking too heavily across the floor—could anger him.

Sewing basket in hand, I scanned my surroundings for anything out of place. No one could find fault in this room. But Lord Gray would. That much was certain.

As though on cue, the drawing room doors flew open

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with a bang that echoed through the house. Lord Gray stomped in with shoulders hunched, eyes set on his dark chair in the back corner.

“Where is my cigar?” He bellowed hoarsely.

“Just here.” I set my basket on the window seat and fetched Lord Gray’s cigar box from under the newspaper beside his chair. His habits were the same every afternoon, but he’d only started smoking in the drawing room since our return from London. Though I hated the smell of the smoke, and even more how it lingered on my clothes and in my hair, neither Clara nor I dared mention a word to him.

“How was sea bathing today, Stepfather?” I asked, my shoulders tensed.

“Cold,” he muttered. Barely bothering to clip the head, he lit a match and took a long pull from his cigar. He finally seemed to relax as he fell into his gray velvet chair.

“Shall I fetch some tea?” Clara’s voice sounded small, pinched.

“No,” Lord Gray growled. Without warning, he curled into himself, an alarming wheeze lifting his back up and down, up and down, followed by a deep, retching cough that rattled his breath. All was silent for a beat, and then, like the rush of an ocean wave, his voice crashed upon us. “What on earth are you doing standing around? Is there not work to be done? Look at this room, the absolute shame of it! If anyone of matter came into Gray House, they would think we live like rats.”

I kept my voice calm, despite his rage. “Of course, Stepfather. The floor needs attending, to be sure.” I took a few careful steps backward, angling myself in front of Clara,

and bent down to pick imaginary threads from the rug beneath the settee. All for guests who would never come.

A knock sounded on the door, and our butler, Mr. Jones, walked in, bowing. "A letter for you, my lord."

Clara glanced at me with questioning eyes, and I could feel her wondering, hoping.

"I shall have it." Lord Gray steadied his voice and raised his empty hand in expectation.

I forced my heart to settle as he broke the seal.

It wouldn't do to hope. Evelyn had made sure of that. I hadn't wanted to worry Clara, but I was sure Evelyn had spoken ill of us, spreading rumors amongst the *ton*. Why else would we have no correspondence after spending two months in London?

Lord Gray folded the paper into crisp lines while taking another long draw from his cigar. He endured another wheeze and another shaking cough that I could practically feel in my own lungs.

"Tea." His voice was hoarse and rough.

Clara sucked in an audible breath and turned on her heels, nearly running from the room in pursuit of it.

Lord Gray's dreadful cough had brought us to Brighton, or rather to the healing waters of the English Channel, following in the footsteps of the Prince Regent himself. The doctor had initially diagnosed pneumonia, but after every remedy was administered and every option exhausted, Lord Gray ignored his doctor and uprooted us to Brighton. Clearly, the ocean held no magic elixir for the lungs, either.

"Sit," Lord Gray snapped at me. His fingers twirled the cigar, his eyes watching its embers blaze at the tip, lips pursed.

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I sat in the chair beside him and nervously straightened the pink linen skirt of my dress.

“This letter is from Sir Ronald Demsworth of Hampshire. A well-spoken man clearly besotted by one of you.”

My jaw threatened to fall open. Sir Ronald? The smiling, curly-headed young man Clara had chattered about incessantly? The one who’d inherited both a title and a Royal Pavilion-sized estate? Yes, he’d paid particular attention to Clara in London, but not once had he called on us through Evelyn. Why was he writing to us now?

Lord Gray cleared his throat. “I have your interest, then? I will not waste my breath on you, Amelia, as I have already wasted enough money trying to secure a future for you—to no avail, I might add, despite affording you every luxury of a London Season. Catherine has been home for three weeks, same as you, yet she is nearly engaged. I admit I was surprised when our doors remained silent, no letters inquiring after either of you. But here we are.” He gestured briefly to the paper he held. “A baronet, no less, and an invitation to his home for a fortnight.”

My heart jumped into my throat, and I felt a surge of relief at the idea of escape. London had seemed too good to be true, and I’d all but armored myself against the hope of leaving Gray House again so soon.

His sunken eyes bored into mine, willing me to ask, to beg. He knew as well as I did that this invitation bore a deeper meaning, a blooming interest, and was a greater opportunity for us—for Clara—than we could possibly hope for. I also knew that neither I nor Clara had any money or means to reply affirmatively without help from our stepfather. We’d need

a coach for travel, a maid to share between us, and an allowance. Asking, and certainly begging, did not come naturally to me. Clara's reflection flashed in my memory—her sad eyes, softened from weariness and disappointed dreams.

"Lord Gray, you have been so generous to us." The words tasted like lemon on my tongue. "After Mama died, you've still protected and provided for us these past two years."

He rolled his eyes. "Do you honestly think I do any of this for you?" He spat. "Neither of you deserve this life, not with the blood of the Moores running through your veins. There is not enough of her in you to make me care beyond the promise I made regarding your protection. A promise that dies with me."

He'd said such things a thousand times, but the sting of such open disdain burned fresh upon my cheeks. His invocation of death lingered between us, the word billowing along with the smoke from Lord Gray's cigar until both filled the room.

My own life was before me, more fragile and more uncertain than I had ever imagined before, a future cracking like glass. My gaze found the bluish-gray carpet beneath his feet. "I see."

"Look at me," Lord Gray demanded coldly, and I forced myself to meet his sunken eyes. I noted the darkened hollowing to his cheekbones, the dryness of his cracked lips, and thinness of his graying hair. I wanted to look away from him, to pretend I didn't see the truth in the labored rise and fall of his chest. But after six months with no improvements, it was glaring so obviously at me, I could not turn away.

"Have you called for the doctor, Stepfather?"

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His countenance changed from anger to liberation. “I’ve already spoken with Dr. Wyles. He says I have no hope of recovery.” He spoke as if he were more inconvenienced than troubled by the news. “Unlike your father, you are smart. Certainly you can deduce that very shortly, everything I have will be given to Catherine’s brother, Trenton, and you will be left with nothing.”

His words buzzed in my head like flies, blurring my vision. A tightness squeezed my chest, and my lungs fought for air.

“*Look at me, Amelia!*” Urgency thundered in his voice. He waved the letter in my face, his cold eyes full of disdain. “My family will take my money and turn their backs on you when I am gone, and I would not have it any other way. Fool that I am, I bound myself for your mother’s sake before she died, or I would have rid my house of you long ago. This invitation compels me to offer one last alternative. You will go to Hampshire and secure this match. Then I shall meet Arabella again with a clear conscience.”

“Y-yes,” I whispered, my mind swimming in thought. I’d known he resented us, known that our father had ruined his life, but I’d never imagined that his hatred ran so deep. I could no longer sit. Rising from my chair in stunned silence, my legs instinctively carried me to the door.

“And you haven’t much time to prepare.”

Turning, my hand loosely gripping the door handle, I watched him take another slow pull of his cigar. “How long?”

“It appears the letter was delayed in transit. You must leave tomorrow.”

Chapter Two

The morning sun burst through my curtains, which were open enough to allow in an unwelcome stream of light. My forehead ached from the stress of last night's rushed gathering of a fortnight's worth of necessities. Had I slept at all?

I rubbed my temples as Mary tiptoed in and set a tea tray on my side table before opening the curtains the rest of the way.

"What time is it, Mary?" I yawned.

"Just after seven, Miss Amelia," she replied, adding a spoonful of sugar to my cup of tea.

So I'd slept for three hours. Not enough. Perhaps I'd be able to nap in the coach. I sipped my warm tea, easing out of my covers with cup in hand. A floor below us, Lord Gray's coughing shook the air. The start of a new day, and perhaps for him, one of his last. My stomach knotted at the thought, and I lost my appetite.

"Amelia?" Clara rushed in, fully dressed, her hair perfectly curled and pinned. Her eyes were as bright as the morning sun, nearly bursting with excitement. "I've told Mr. Jones to

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ready the coach. We must be off if we are to make it in time for dinner at *Sir Ronald's* house. Can you believe it?"

"I cannot." I smiled, despite knowing the truth of Lord Gray's confession. Any knowledge of our true circumstances would ruin the party for Clara, and she deserved a chance to create a genuine connection with Sir Ronald. Not something forced out of fear for her future. "His home must be magnificent."

"Oh, I am sure it is. Five floors and two wings, and a library he admires. He even has a room entirely dedicated to yellow, which is his favorite color. And his holding encompasses hundreds of acres of land." Clara's eyes brightened as she recalled the details.

My mouth fell open, and it took me a minute to find my voice. "How do you know all of this, Clara?"

"Well, dances and dinners, of course. We escaped to the terrace a few times. And once we hid away under a grand staircase when a certain woman would not leave him alone. He is not overly fond of large parties."

Half-laughing at my sister whose secrets were more than I possibly could have assumed, I shook my head in amazement. "This is why you've been so glum. Did he tell you he would write to us?"

"I am not glum. We are friends, that is all. Miss Wood, I hear, has held his affection for some time. So, no, he did not inform me of his party. But I am happy for the invitation regardless."

"I see. Well, we shall see if Miss Wood was also extended an invitation when we arrive. It sounds to me like Sir Ronald's

interests may lie in another direction.” I shot her a pointed glance, and she scrunched her nose.

“Please don’t say such things, Amelia. I only want his happiness. Promise me you will not try to persuade him otherwise? Or meddle between us? If Miss Wood is as amiable as I have heard, then I doubt it will do any good. I am thrilled to have been invited at all.”

“Miss Wood,” I huffed. “She sounds plain.”

“Amelia.” Clara shook my shoulders with her hands. “Promise me.”

If only she knew what she asked of me. I could not lie, but I could not make such a promise either. A middle ground would have to do. “I promise to do nothing that would make you unhappy, Clara.”

Downstairs, Mr. Jones informed us that Lord Gray was feeling especially unwell this morning and was unable to see us off. I was unsurprised by his absence, but I also felt a tinge of relief. What would I say to him if these words were my last? I had little to thank him for beyond the sustenance he provided and the roof over my head. Even then, I was not entirely sure I felt grateful for that.

Mr. Jones helped us into the carriage, and just before closing our door, said, “Lord Gray asked me to wish you luck in your journey. Safe travels, Miss Moore, Miss Clara.”

“Luck?” Clara questioned as we rode out of Brighton. “I wonder why he thinks we need luck. Such a strange, peculiar man. I am glad to be away again so soon.”

“As am I.” I sighed, listening to the sounds of the squeaky coach. “I am sure he meant for our travels.” Nothing to do with our uncertain future.

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“Yes, but that would imply he meant to be kind, and Lord Gray is the most unfeeling man I have ever met.” Clara tasked. “I will never understand why Mama chose *him*. After a man like Father. Elevating our status is not a worthy enough excuse to be tied to such a person.”

I could not disagree with her, but I had a sinking feeling that if Clara did not win Sir Ronald’s heart, I could more easily understand marrying for protection, without much say as to whom.

“Be grateful you know so little of the subject to be able to wonder on it.” I gave in to another yawn and closed my eyes. There was something about a ride in a coach, heading far away from Lord Gray with Clara as my companion and the soft sound of Mary’s knitting needles, that was so comforting and so familiar, I fell asleep every time.

We stopped at a small inn for a meal before continuing on our way, but then a few miles outside of Hampshire, Clara sat bolt upright. “My gloves! Amelia, my gloves! I took them off for lunch. I’ve left them.”

I sat up straight. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She moaned, covering her face with bare hands. “They were my last short pair.”

I took a deep breath. Our allowance was small, but gloves were a necessity. Clara couldn’t wear evening gloves during the day. “We will have to stop at a shop in town.”

“I am sorry, Amelia. How could I be so careless? Wasting money on new gloves.”

“It is an inexpensive mistake. And easily remedied,” I assured her, though inwardly I groaned too. What would happen when our reticules emptied?

A few hours later, we pulled up to a row of shops lined side by side down a broad street in the middle of a small farm town. Clara had fallen asleep in the coach, and I did not want to worry her. Our hands were nearly the same size, though it would be a miracle if the glove maker could accommodate us on such short notice. I could only hope to persuade him to sell me another person's order at an inflated cost. Or with a hefty tip in the least.

The store was much larger on the inside than it appeared and looked as though the owner was in the middle of a remodeling. At the front, a clerk sat at a long, rectangular wooden desk, writing in a thick book. He looked up through his spectacles as I approached.

"Welcome, ma'am, I am just finishing this order. I shall be with you in a moment."

"If you could point me in the direction of the gloves you offer, then I shall wait for you there."

"Oh." The man removed his spectacles, uncovering a furrowed brow. "I am sorry to disappoint you, but our glove maker has recently moved his business elsewhere. Unfortunately, I can take no further orders until our new man arrives next month."

Would luck ever find us? I could handle disappointment, but I could not bear to see it in my sister. "I'm afraid our need is great. I must ask you to sell me anything you have on hand, sir. Anything at all. I can pay you well."

"Well, we've sold quite a lot of his old things already—patterns, samples, and the like—but I think there's one pair of sample gloves left on the table. Smaller in size, which appears to suit you, and I believe they are a fashionable beige.

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Just there, on the back corner table. I will assist you in a moment.” He motioned me forward, and I nodded my thanks, hurrying to the back corner of the shop.

Squeezing around a large sign, I spotted the table, my eyes searching desperately for beige fabric. Just as I approached the edge of the table, a rustling sounded directly underneath it. I drew an anxious breath, taking a step back.

A man appeared near my shoes, climbing out from below the table. My eyes widened in shock as he recovered himself. Where on earth had he come from? He bore no resemblance to a shopkeeper.

In fact, he looked quite the gentleman. A fashionable coat clung tightly to broad shoulders and a wide chest. He had a breezy air about him, with full, smiling lips and a clean-shaven jaw, his dark, wavy hair loosely drifting over his forehead. But it was his eyes that captivated me. They were the clearest green, boring into mine without reservation. The man chuckled through my scrutiny, and I burned to my ears with embarrassment. My gaze had lingered too long.

“Pardon me,” he said, a smile wrinkling the corners of his eyes as he dusted off his knees. “My search led me to a pile of stray fabrics under the table. This shop is rather disorganized, is it not?”

What a strange man. The corners of my lips twitched as he ruffled his hair. “Terribly,” I responded. “Excuse me.”

Reminding myself of my goal and my limited time, I twisted around him and began sorting through the dreadfully unorganized accessories on the table.

But the man did not leave. He moved closer to me, lifting a cherry-colored ribbon from the table. An odd bubbling

sensation filled my chest, and I did not like how flustered it made me.

“Perhaps I can help you find what you are looking for,” he offered, clearing his throat.

I turned, eyebrows raised in interest. “Have you seen a pair of beige gloves? I’ve been sent back for the very last pair, and I’m in a bit of hurry.”

The smile on his lips fell instantly, and I dropped my gaze to his rising hand—and the gloves he held.

“Oh, you’ve found them. You won’t mind, will you? My sister left her last short pair at an inn, and I—”

“I am sorry.” He shook his head. “But I cannot give these up. *My* younger sister, who is, I am sure, far more commanding and much whinier than yours, will have my head if I return without these. She’s found a spot on hers that will not do, and these happen to be just the right size.”

“A spot? That can be remedied. My sister is without gloves entirely, sir. I am afraid this little shop is our only hope of acquiring a pair before arriving at a rather important house party. Surely your sister will understand.” I held out my palm, hoping I’d pled my case sufficiently. The man had done his duty to his sister by arguing her case, but clearly Clara’s need was greater.

“I assure you she would not, unfortunately.” He flashed me a look of meaningful regret with a deep sigh, and I retracted my hand. “Allow me to offer you their value in currency as recompense for her disappointment. You seem like a reasonable woman.”

“I do not want your money, sir. And I assure you, I am not at all a reasonable woman.” I folded my arms across my

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chest, the ridiculousness of my last statement bringing heat to my cheeks.

The stranger tilted his head, eyes studying me, before allowing himself a light laugh. “Well, then, in that case, allow me to seek out another pair and deliver them to you. Where will you be staying?”

“If it is so easy for you to secure another pair of gloves, can you not give me the one in your hand and seek out another for yourself?” I bit my lip. I had little experience swaying men, charming them even, and if London was any judge, I failed more than I succeeded.

“I’m afraid I am pressed for time. If these gloves were not so desperately desired, I believe you would be well worth the scolding.” A teasing glint sparkled in his eyes.

The nerve of this man! Did he wish to humiliate me? I’d all but begged for his mercy and was refused, and now, mortified. What a terrible advocate I was turning out to be.

“Name your price.” I lifted my reticule, praying silently this was not a man of too great a fortune or I would make myself into an even greater fool to deny him. But how could Clara face Sir Ronald without gloves? We would be finished before we even began. “I must have those gloves.”

“You reject my money and offer me yours?” He narrowed his gaze almost pityingly. “Money is not something I have in short supply. I am sorry, but I must insist on maintaining my hold.”

I frowned dejectedly, heat flaming up my neck. I could not argue with him without risk of further embarrassment. “Good day to you,” I said, managing a brief curtsy.

Snatching a peach-colored ribbon from the table, I

hurried to the front of the store. I would not return to Clara empty-handed.

“Wait,” he called after me. But I did not spare a second glance.

Just as I rounded the corner to the counter, the arrogant man quickened his pace and stole ahead of me. I imagined pushing him aside and demanding service, but he was already in conversation with the clerk. For all his charm, he was decidedly not a gentleman in the honorable sense of the word. I gritted my teeth.

After paying his fees, he took the brown paper package from the clerk and turned to me again, a gentleness touching his voice. “You must tell me where you are staying. I want to make this right for you, and for your sister.”

“You are being impertinent. I do not know you at all, sir. And honestly, after this interaction, I do not wish to.” Humiliation welled in my chest like a fire that refused to be extinguished, and I choked on the fumes.

“Allow me to change your mind. At least tell me your name.” He stepped sideways, blocking me from moving forward to the clerk with my ribbon.

“I rarely change my mind. Do not waste your time. Excuse me.” I lifted the ribbon in my hand to the clerk, but the presumptuous man grabbed my arm.

“Your name?”

“Amelia,” I said curtly. Impertinence matched with impertinence. Knowing only my Christian name would not help him find me. “My name is Amelia.”

I elbowed him aside and opened my reticule as the clerk packaged up Clara’s new ribbon.

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“I hope I see you again, Amelia,” the man said.

Staring straight at the clerk, I waited for the clang of the closing door. Satisfied that the man had departed, I finally let out the breath I’d been holding.

The clerk handed me a brown package. “Good day to you, miss.”

“I have not yet paid, sir.” I rolled the package over in my hands. It was much too big to contain one small ribbon.

“The gentleman added your ribbon with his others and paid for you. Good day.”

I stood, mouth agape, as the clerk returned to his paperwork as though nothing amiss had happened, and an anger rose in my chest that rivaled even Lord Gray’s foulest of moods. Who was this man? Had I not plainly told him I was uninterested in his money or his help? I bolted toward the door, furiously bent on finding him, on telling that irritable man exactly what I thought of him and his unwanted recompense.

But he was gone.

Chapter Three

“Perhaps they are poor, Amelia. His sister could well have needed the gloves more than I,” Clara said after I told her of my encounter with the stranger.

“They are not poor.” I handed her the bag of ribbons, full to the brim. Apparently, the man had been quite generous.

Clara pulled them out one by one, exclaiming over the colors and fabric and praising the generosity of the man who’d denied her what she currently needed most. It was just like a man of wealth to think he could buy a good opinion with money, as though I would easily forget his selfishness. I shook my head to rid my thoughts of him. He’d made his choice, and he was gone. And there was only one thing I could do now.

“Here.” I pinched off my buff-colored gloves, handing them to Clara.

“What are you doing? I will not accept your gloves; it is my own fault mine are gone.” Clara shook her head, scooting away from me.

“Take them, Clara. I care little for what Sir Ronald’s company thinks of me. I can hide my hands in my skirts.”

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“Surely someone belowstairs will have a pair I can sew up for you, Miss Amelia,” Mary said from her corner of the coach.

“There. You see? Mary and I will sort out another pair.” I tossed the gloves to Clara, who tugged them on reluctantly.

Moments later, the coachman rapped on the roof, and we looked out the east window just as the coach drove out of the lined woods and into an expansive clearing. There in the middle of the freshly cut lawn sat a grand estate, sandy-colored with four stories of parallel windows lining the front, reflecting the light from the setting sun. The double doors to the house were open. Our coach pulled into the drive, and a footman hurried out.

He opened my door and helped me down, followed by Clara. Just as my nerves started to get the best of me, a beautifully dressed, ginger-headed woman walked out to greet us. She was elegant and fair, bearing an air of authority as she approached us.

“Welcome, ladies. You must be the Misses Moore. I am Lady Demsworth, Ronald’s mother. Ronald has told me so much about you both, and it is such a joy to have you here at Lakeshire Park.” Sincerity flowed through every word, and she reached out for us, inviting us near.

“Thank you so much, Lady Demsworth.” I urged Clara ahead, following behind her. “We are very happy to be here.”

“Yes,” agreed Clara. “What a lovely estate. Amelia and I have missed the countryside dearly.”

Lady Demsworth took Clara’s arm affectionately. “That’s right. Ronald told me you were raised in Kent. I am sure

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Brighton is a vastly different environment. I hope this visit is a comfortable reminder of fond memories.”

Clara smiled graciously. “Thank you, Lady Demsworth. It already is.”

“I am sure you’re both ready to dress, but everyone is so excited to make your acquaintance. Might I introduce you to the party first? We’ve kept it rather small in hopes of a casual gathering and creating an opportunity to become better acquainted with Ronald’s closest friends.”

“Of course we do not mind,” Clara said. “Mary will have just enough time to ready our things.”

I followed closely behind the two as they entered the house, comfort enfolding me like a warm, heavy blanket. I tried to place the feeling, to name the unfamiliar warmth that relaxed my heart. All I knew was that here, nestled in the middle of nowhere, I could breathe. How I hoped these next two weeks were only the beginning, that we could finally find refuge within these walls once Clara made a match with Sir Ronald.

We’d just reached the foot of the grand marble staircase when Lady Demsworth veered left. Another set of double doors, white and trimmed with gold, stood as the entrance to the bustling drawing room.

Lady Demsworth fiddled with a string of pearls around her neck as though she, too, held high hopes for these next two weeks. As we entered the room, a click of the door signaled to me that the clock had finally begun.

Two weeks to secure my sister’s happiness.

My pulse quickened as Clara and I were introduced to the company. First was Mrs. Turnball, a refined woman of

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few words, though her gaze spoke volumes of her character. Her eyes were soft but focused, her head held high and resolute as she greeted us.

Meanwhile, her daughter, Miss Beatrice Turnball, fawned over Clara's golden hair, claiming her own brown and my auburn to be far inferior. "You must call me Beatrice," she said. "We shall be fast friends."

Next were two gentlemen sitting on the settee across from the window engaged in boisterous conversation. Both men stood at our approach, bowing deeply.

"Mr. Bratten of London," Lady Demsworth introduced. The tall, skinny man with a youthful countenance smiled proudly. "And Lieutenant Rawles, who dutifully serves our country."

"At present, my services are not required," the lieutenant corrected. "I am on half-pay until the king has better need of me." His rough, unkempt exterior, including an unshaven jaw and scarred right eyebrow, was intimidating, despite his smile.

I could've sworn the two men cast each other a knowing glance as we walked away.

"Where is Sir Ronald?" Clara shyly asked Lady Demsworth as we rounded the room.

"Getting another arrival settled. The Woods arrived just before you, and Ronald is very good friends with Mr. Wood. The two haven't seen each other in nearly a year."

"Miss Wood is here?" Clara's voice fell flat, but she recovered with a generous smile.

Blast our bad luck.

"Yes." Lady Demsworth nodded. "Ronald said you'd be

eager to meet her. In fact, your rooms are beside each other upstairs.”

Just then, the doors burst open, and Sir Ronald’s laughter filled the quiet room. Everyone stood to greet their host. Clara rose on her tiptoes, aiding his view of her.

“Miss Clara! You’ve arrived.” Sir Ronald made his way to her, guiding a bustling, curly-headed blonde by his side. “I trust your journey was uneventful.”

“Indeed.” Clara grinned. “We were so pleased for the invitation.”

“It is I who am pleased . . . to see you again so soon.” Sir Ronald’s smile grew serious and sweet, and my heart swooned for Clara.

The blonde girl, who Sir Ronald introduced as Miss Georgiana Wood, wedged herself perfectly between him and Clara. Her smile was fixed as she said, “Surely you are tired from such a long journey.”

“Not at all,” I said, raising my chin. Her presence alone put me on guard. Georgiana was a certain kink in our plans.

Sir Ronald pulled both ladies into conversation, and a comfortable murmur filled the room as the company fell into pairs and trios. I stepped back, suddenly out of place, like a stranger among a group of old friends. Now was the perfect time to dress for dinner. I could be back down before Clara noticed I’d gone.

Rubbing my face with my hands, I turned to exit through the double doors. With a whoosh of my skirts, I ran straight into something tall and hard. Stunned, I grasped wildly for balance, my discomfort magnified as I was caught in an embrace.

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“Amelia?” A low voice said, sounding much too pleased—and much too familiar.

My senses realigned, and I drew my head back, meeting the green eyes of the man from the shop. I stepped out of his hold, my mind spinning.

No. It could not be. Had he followed me?

“How did you find me here?” He leaned against the doorway with a wicked grin, echoing my own question.

“Excuse me?” Did he honestly think I would look for *him*? “I am a guest here.”

He stood up straighter, eyes flooded with interest. “You know Demsworth? How?”

“Never mind. What are *you* doing here? And when are you leaving?” I could not hide the sudden worry that filled my voice. This fortnight was about Clara. I could not have any distractions.

“As it happens, I know Demsworth rather well.” He shook his head in disbelief, laughing. “Amelia, I cannot believe you are here.”

I crossed my arms, glancing over my shoulder, fearful someone might overhear our conversation. “You should address me as Miss Moore, sir. I have not given you permission to use my Christian name so openly.”

“I beg to differ.” He lowered his chin, eyes glinting. “And so would the shopkeeper four miles down the road.”

Embarrassment wafted through me, igniting my pride. Perhaps I had not behaved as ladylike as I should have, but he’d not acted his part either. I huffed at the thought. “What kind of honorable gentleman steals a pair of gloves from a

lady? And then throws his money at her to solve the problem?”

He glanced to my bare hands, and I quickly tucked them behind me.

“In the first place, I never professed myself honorable,” he said, rubbing the back of his neck. “But I have regretted leaving that shop from the moment I stepped out its door.”

His eyes met mine curiously, like he wanted me to react to his regret. But the only emotion I felt was anger. His regret did not change his choices. And choices defined a person.

“Forgive me if I do not offer adequate sympathy.” At this point, it would be safer for me to retreat into the room to get away from him. A conversation with Lieutenant Rawles was more enticing than being forced to address the guilty conscience of this man.

“Wait,” he called as I stepped into the light of the drawing room.

“Peter!” Georgiana waved, and I turned, locking eyes with the strange man who’d followed me.

Sir Ronald also turned. “Wood, just in time. The Misses Moore have arrived.”

The man kept his eyes on me as Sir Ronald, Clara, and Georgiana moved toward us.

“Ladies, this is Peter Wood, a great friend of mine, and as I am sure you know, Georgiana’s brother,” Sir Ronald explained.

Mr. Wood—*Peter*, though I would never dare such informality aloud—offered a low bow. “How very fortunate I am to be in your company.”

If this was luck, then Lord Gray had cursed me.

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“It has been too long.” Sir Ronald looked pleased. “Inheritance is such a tricky trade, is it not? I mourn the loss of your father as I have mourned my own, but I am glad to have you near. Have you finished things in London at last?”

“Finally, yes. A year’s worth of settling affairs. And thank you, Demsworth. Georgiana is thrilled to be closer as well.”

And then it hit me, like the weight of a thousand bricks pressing into my chest. Miss Georgiana Wood. The woman Clara claimed to be in competition with for Sir Ronald’s heart was this man’s sister. Frustration boiled hot within me as I clenched my skirts with my bare hands. To have lost Clara’s gloves to Georgiana Wood, whose nose could touch the ceiling for how high she held it, was unacceptable. Judging by her expensive blue silk dress and shiny pearl necklace that rivaled Lady Demsworth’s, Georgiana did not often fail to acquire her heart’s wishes.

“Dinner will be ready in a half hour,” Lady Demsworth declared from the doorway.

“Perhaps we should dress,” Clara said into my ear.

I caught Georgiana motioning to her brother, and Peter turned to Sir Ronald. “I fear we have missed quite a lot of each other’s lives. You have much to tell me.”

“Shall we sit? Your travels surely rival mine.” Sir Ronald grasped Peter’s shoulder.

“Georgiana, join us, won’t you?” Peter edged the three of them toward a settee near the window, pointedly away from the rest of the company.

Clara looked back at them, frowning, and I realized my mistake. We should have dressed for dinner first instead of making introductions. Clearly, Peter had not hesitated to

navigate his sister into the center of Sir Ronald's attention. Meekness or timorousness would not be afforded here if I was to keep up with the competition.

"Yes," I whispered back to Clara. "Let us dress quickly. The sooner we dress, the faster we will be back down."

Our room, large and square, held two beds with brown wooden headboards occupying the rightmost wall and a fire crackling in the hearth on the opposite side. The fireplace was framed in white marble with light blue velvet chairs placed in front of it. A bouquet of lilacs in front of the open window filled the room with a sweet scent.

Mary had placed our gowns and long evening gloves over our beds, and she quickly pulled Clara over to the dressing table.

Despite the urgency I felt to return to the drawing room, I couldn't help but lean my elbows on the windowsill and take in a deep breath as the chill of the early evening breeze brushed across my face. Daylight waned, casting shadows in the crevices of the rolling hills outside. It was a beautiful scene.

My bones ached from being caged in the carriage all day, but worse, my mind spun with the faces of all the people I'd just met. Each seemed kind enough, save the Woods. Georgiana would be trouble. And her brother was intimidating to say the least.

"Amelia," Clara chided. "If you start dressing now, Mary can attend to you when I am finished."

"Of course," I said, tearing myself away from the window. There was no time to waste.

Dinner was a boisterous event and more casual in seating

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arrangements and conversation than Lady Demsworth could possibly have anticipated. Between the men, no one else could get a word in, and their stories from past hunting adventures turned poor Lady Demsworth green as she picked at the lamb on her plate.

I took a small bite of roasted potatoes and risked a glance at Peter. He was grinning at something Lieutenant Rawles was saying, his arms crossed as he leaned back in his chair. Before reason called me to my senses, I caught his eyes with my own for a brief second. Nerves seizing, I stared down at my plate. What was it about his gaze that intimidated me so? I moved the remaining vegetables around with my fork while Georgiana encouraged the men with perfectly framed questions, batting her eyelashes as she sipped from her cup.

After dinner, Mr. Bratten entered the drawing room ahead of the other men, choosing a card table with Mrs. Turnball and Beatrice and motioning for Lieutenant Rawles, who was piling a stack of books next to a chair, to join them. Sir Ronald began a game of whist with Clara, Georgiana, and Peter, which left me alone with Lady Demsworth.

"I am feeling rather tired. I think I will do some stitching by the fire," Lady Demsworth said. "Would you care to join me? You should know that I appreciate honesty over obligation."

"In that case, I would love to join you and enjoy the fire *without* the stitching." I stifled a yawn, and she nodded.

"You look exhausted, Miss Moore. Should I call for a cup of chocolate with our tea?"

"That would be lovely."

Lady Demsworth led me to the coziest chair I'd ever sat

in, the velvety fabric as soft as the plump pillow at my back. A cup of chocolate arrived shortly after with the tea tray, and I leaned into my chair, listening to the muffled voices in the room.

Clara was laughing, a gloved hand covering her lips, clearly taken with something Sir Ronald had said. The striking transformation of my sister over the course of a single day was astounding. Yesterday her sadness had been overwhelming, but today her countenance was filled to the brim with elation. To keep her like this, happy and free, I would do anything.

Lady Demsworth was drifting off, stitching only once every few minutes. Her casual nature permeated the Demsworths' home. I felt so at ease already, and we'd only just arrived. Half of me still expected Lord Gray to march in and demand his cigar, his relentless cough shaking the walls. I was glad Clara did not fully understand the gravity of this visit, of how quickly we needed security. But a small part of me wished there was someone who felt the weight of my burden too.

Peter's loud laugh echoed off the ceiling, and I straightened. That man. How could I keep him—and more importantly his sister—from getting between Clara and Sir Ronald? Certainly not by sitting in a corner sipping hot chocolate.

Careful not to disturb Lady Demsworth, I rose and made my way across the room. Sir Ronald and Peter stood at my approach.

"Miss Moore. If only whist could be played with five instead of four." Sir Ronald smiled regrettably. "But, please,

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join us if you'd like to watch Georgiana and I rob your sister and Wood of their dignity."

Clara scowled playfully at him, eliciting a grin from Sir Ronald that creased his cheeks. Peter cleared his throat, and I met his gaze. His eyes held curiosity, and I shot back as much indifference as I could muster. I would no longer be timid. If a battle raged between his sister and mine, Clara would win.

"Now I am invested wholeheartedly," I said. "I cannot see Clara losing at whist, unless Mr. Wood is a terribly unskilled player."

"That I am not." He winked at me, and my nerves tightened. "But if we have an audience we should raise the stakes. What do you say, Demsworth? What should the winning pair get?"

"Tea on the veranda," Georgiana said, leaning closer to Sir Ronald. "Under the stars."

Clara exhaled, eyes dropping to her cards. I could not blame her. Who would want to spend an evening with Peter Wood on the veranda?

"Agreed." Peter smiled as if he'd already won. Clara's slumping shoulders conceded. "Miss Moore, allow me to offer you my chair."

I wanted to say no. I would have stood all night before taking anything from him. But Sir Ronald looked expectantly at me, and I nodded my acceptance. For Clara's sake.

I thanked my stars for Peter's formality in front of the company. Perhaps he meant to keep our secret after all. He slid his chair nearer to Clara so I could sit by her, and then retrieved another from a nearby table.

The game continued another half hour until, as predicted,

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Clara and Peter lost three points to one. I clenched my jaw, knowing Clara had played her best. Peter had obviously thrown the game so his sister would win.

“I thought you said you were skilled, Mr. Wood?” I cast him a disparaging frown.

“Every man has his day. Apparently, this was not mine.” His easy grin added fuel to my fire.

“No, it was not,” I grumbled. And neither would tomorrow be, nor the rest of the days we might spend in each other’s company. My patience for Peter Wood and his scheming had just run dry.

About the Author



Photo by Trisha Shelley Photography

MEGAN WALKER was raised on a berry farm in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, where her imagination took her to times past and worlds away. While earning her degree in Early Childhood Education at Brigham Young University, she married her one true love and started a family. But her imaginings wouldn't leave her alone, so she

picked up a pen, and the rest is history. She lives in St. Louis with her husband and three children.

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