

***Lord Cushing proposes and Nicolette accepts...
only because her grandfather's money sweetens the deal.
Where does love fit into this financial transaction?***

Chapter One 1814

Nicolette Turner had no love for the English. How could she, when her country had been at war with that starched-up monarchy for two years? But that being the case, what on earth was she doing here in London--enemy territory?

Gripping the railing that encircled her passenger ship, the *Aurora*, she stared out at the endless stream of cargo vessels moored along the banks of the muddy River Thames. Shouts from seamen filled the air as they snapped sailing canvas shut and dropped the ship's weighty iron anchor. These nautical sounds weren't the only things filling the air; the foul stench from the river saturated it as well.

Which mirrored her own situation. Her lungs had previously held the clean, salty scent of the ocean, or in other words, freedom. Now all she smelled were the revolting fumes of stagnant English waters, signifying imprisonment.

Though she had patriotic stars and stripes running through her veins, she had to be truthful. Her loathing of the English was more personal than reasons of war or politics. She hated her earl of a grandfather for disowning her beloved father and snubbing her dear mother. She hated that man for never acknowledging her birth. And she hated him for ordering her to journey to England now that his other son and heir, Lord Grenton, had died.

Nicolette turned away from the docks. "Hating--it is not good for the soul, *ma petite*," her mother often admonished her. But dearest Mama was on the other side of the Atlantic, while Nicolette was here, by herself in a strange land, with no friendly faces to cheer her, let alone admonish her.

"Ah, there you are, Lady Nicolette!" a large, matronly woman trilled as she scurried past fellow voyagers, crewmen, and coils of heavy rope impeding her progress. "I declare, you are the most difficult young lady to keep track of, even on a small ship such as the *Aurora*." The woman--Mrs. Wingfield, surely the most talkative person that ever graced the earth--pulled a handkerchief out of her reticule and mopped at her perspiring brow. She was Lord Eldredge's neighbor, if her missive from the earl was to be believed, and she'd been tasked to fetch his up-until-now unwanted granddaughter.

Nicolette wrinkled her nose, not from the odor of the Thames but from the appellation of

"Lady" attached to her name. She had only just learned of her grandfather's exalted status in his recent letter. Dear Mama had thought it best not to mention the Earl of Eldridge by his title, and beloved Papa never spoke of his background unless pressed to do so.

Poor Papa. Gone these past six years, she missed him so.

Her companion threatened to let loose a volume of words, so Nicolette beat her to it. "Mrs. Wingfield, we seem to be in everyone's way. Shall we take a turn about the ship before we prepare to depart?" She extended her arm for the older woman to take.

"Yes, yes, of course. Indeed, what a capital idea!" Mrs. Wingfield fussed with the cotton shawl about her broad shoulders, then adjusted her straw bonnet that hid a multitude of frizzy grey curls. "But we cannot depart as yet. Not for four days. 'Tis the king's command, you know. Dashed inconvenient, with Lord Eldredge so agog to see you."

Nicolette slowed her pace to keep Mrs. Wingfield from huffing and puffing. "Four more days on board? No, I didn't know. Why is that?" This was unwelcome news. Being in close quarters aboard the ship for over five weeks would give anyone cabin fever. Not that she was anxious to see her grandfather. And to set the record straight, he, most assuredly, *was not* agog to see her.

The woman dabbed at her forehead again. "The King--old George, you know." She lowered her voice. "Quite dicked in the nob, such a tragedy." Her tone resumed its booming level. "Some time ago he decreed that no one, not even His Highness himself, may leave a ship newly arrived at any English port until four days have passed."

"But why would your king be bothered by when we leave the ship?" Nicolette stood on her tiptoes to peer around the docks. From what she saw from her vantage point, maybe she didn't want to disembark. Squalid ghettos, rife with poverty and misery, lined the river on both sides. The fabled marvels, riches, and places of beauty that London held were nowhere in sight.

"Your king, also, Lady Nicolette." Mrs. Wingfield wagged her finger.

Nicolette bit back a smile. Not even standing on England's wretched shores yet, and she already had found someone to admonish her hoydenish ways.

"To answer--fear of contamination, my young friend. Among crew and passengers, conventional wisdom states that at least one person must be suffering from a fever. No one's permitted to disembark until the ship is sickness-free."

Nicolette had to admit that made sense. Perhaps old Farmer George wasn't as addled as her father had made him out to be.

"So we must wait." Resigned to the inevitable, Nicolette pleaded a megrim then rushed

off to the cabin compartment she shared with Mrs. Wingfield. Although she had four days in which to write letters, she hurried to put quill pen and ink to paper for now she could finally post a letter back home. Since postal charges were extremely expensive and had to be paid by the recipient, she used only one sheet of hot pressed paper. After writing in one direction, she “crossed the lines” to write in the other, cramming in the news. Not that she had so much news to share. The voyage here was not remarkable in any way, other than a few passengers suffering seasickness, and the capturing of a gigantic shark which must’ve been double her in size.

She could picture her little brother’s eyes widen when he learned about the shark. The youngest, Michael, was only two, so who knew if he would even miss her? But Josh just turned four; he loved his big sister with adoring devotion.

As Nicolette sighed, a fat puddle of a tear trickled down her cheek. How she yearned for her family--dearest Mama, mischievous Josh, sweet baby Michael, and her easygoing stepfather, Mr. Babcock. And all her friends, and neighbors, and...

Slumping until her long dark hair decorated the wooden table, Nicolette indulged in a good cry.

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At last, at last, at last! Nicolette poked her head out of the well-appointed town coach to stare at the opulence of Runsdale Hall. The size of the enormous palace actually took her breath away!

Mrs. Wingfield must’ve read her mind, for the woman patted Nicolette’s gloved hand. “Lord Eldredge’s main seat is magnificent, is it not? Simply magnificent. The Hall was built in the sixteenth century, you know, and stands on acres upon acres of some of the finest land in England. Home to the sturdiest herd of Jersey cows not only in the village of Long Melford, but in all of Suffolk, everyone says.

From Nicolette’s vantage point, no cattle--herds or otherwise--grazed the rolling moss green hills surrounding the great manor house, but the earl’s estate went on for miles. The view from the carriage only displayed a fraction of the acreage. For some reason, her spirits lowered.

“Yes indeed, ma’am. It certainly is magnificent. I am certain my home in Twin Ponds along the upper reaches of Manhattan Island would comfortably fit inside any of the main rooms at Runsdale Hall.”

Mrs. Wingfield fluttered her fingers at that as if to say: How could a mere cottage in the Americas compare with the splendor of one of the riches families in England? Gracious me, what a mésalliance your father made!

Perhaps Nicolette was being unkind by putting words into the matron’s mouth. But that

was one thing she didn't need to do, for Mrs. Wingfield had enough words for three people. As they approached Runsdale Hall, the woman proceeded to release her entire vocabulary. Or so it seemed to Nicolette.

Then again, she'd never been particularly talkative with strangers.

The town coach slowed to a halt in front of the grandest entrance she had ever seen. Mammoth statues, marble steps, and precisely shaped shrubbery all combined to present a very intimidating picture. Even though standing in front of the huge Hall made her feel as insignificant as a speck of dust, it felt good to stretch her legs. The journey from London to Long Melford took less than a half day, and they had stopped but once to refresh the horses.

Several grim-faced liveried servants suddenly appeared, and stood on the steps right outside the massive arched door. Nary a smile marred their severe countenances. If they were supposed to make her feel welcome, they failed abysmally.

For a moment, just a moment, Nicolette's courage fled.

Mrs. Wingfield also alighted, and for the first time since Nicolette had made her acquaintance, she seemed to be at a loss for what to say. She gazed at one particularly stern-looking character dressed in what was perhaps a uniform of grey striped trousers, a black tailcoat, and waistcoat. His hair was an odd mixture of thinning brown on top and long grey-streaked wings ending past his ears. This man, probably the butler, refused to acknowledge Mrs. Wingfield's presence, so she pawed through her reticule to remove a much abused handkerchief. She used it to dab her forehead. "Ah, gracious me. Here we are. It seems I cannot come in--"

The man cleared his throat.

"Ah, what I mean to say, Lady Nicolette, is that I must rush off and see how my son has fared without me these past three months." She mangled the handkerchief beyond all hope of future use. "Yes, my darling Harold. You remember, he is my youngest. Some days, the poor dear forgets to eat."

There was no way Nicolette could've forgotten Harold; his mother obviously doted on him, and thought nothing of relating the most intimate details of his childhood. As the man numbered three and thirty years to his age, meeting this paragon of virtue was bound to be a trifle uncomfortable with all her hidden knowledge of him.

Nicolette glanced at the disapproving butler--which person did he object to: Lord Eldredge's neighbor or the unwanted granddaughter?--then turned to give Mrs. Wingfield a hug. "Yes, of course you must go to your son... and your daughters. Maybe you and all your children can visit Runsdale Hall on the morrow?"

Just as the woman smiled with pleasure, another irritating cough came from the butler.

Mrs. Wingfield dropped her smile and hurried back inside the carriage. "Thank you kindly, Lady Nicolette, but you will be so busy these first few days. Perhaps, when Lord Eldredge is inclined to have company--"

A young footman stepped out and shut the carriage door. Then the butler nodded at the coachman, and all Nicolette had time to do was thank Mrs. Wingfield for escorting her to Runsdale Hall. The town coach rumbled away, leaving Nicolette in the presence of the enemy.

"Lady Nicolette." The man walked down from his position on the stone steps to stand in front of her. His rotund stomach arrived first. "Welcome to Runsdale Hall." He bowed, giving her an excellent view of his sparsely covered head. "I am Dawson, Lord Eldredge's butler. The earl desires to see you now in the gold salon. If you will follow me."

She sighed. Obviously she was to have no time to freshen up. But maybe it was best to face Lord Eldredge right away and get the unpleasantness over with, for if he disliked what he saw, then maybe she could return home sooner rather than later.

Leading the way through the Hall to the gold salon, Mr. Dawson then opened a set of white with gold inlay double doors and gestured for her to enter. She did, slowly, for the room was dark and had the chilling feel and even the sterile smell of a tomb about it.

"The Lady Nicolette Turner, your lordship," the butler called out into the black mist surrounding her. Then he left, shutting the doors and whatever light had been available from the hallway.

Allowing her eyes to grow accustomed to the darkness, she gradually inched her way inside. An image of Papa suddenly flashed within her mind as if to give comfort. She straightened her shoulders and then advanced with a surer step. Dearest Papa would've thought her a poor soldier if she shrank from facing the earl.

But where was her father's father? She could discern shadowy paintings on the walls, and a few long couches in front of her but no human form was readily visible. The drapes that covered the gold salon's windows must have been made of the heaviest cloth conceivable.

"Gel!" a querulous voice called out. "Come closer, gel. Let me have a look at Ian's brat."

Nicolette's nostrils flared. Her father had always called her his little love--a far cry from being his brat. Locating the source of her irritation, she marched over to a wing-backed chair situated next to a huge fireplace. An indistinct figure sat within the confines of the chair.

The humor of her situation suddenly struck her for how could he have a look at her when the gold salon was as black as midnight?

"You wanted to see me, sir?"

A burst of bright yellow light arched through the gloom. The earl turned the lever on a side table oil lamp to produce a ghostly illumination. The first thing she saw was his bony hand. Her gaze rising, she spotted his caved-in chest, sunken cheekbones, bushy mustache curved up at the corners, and then his pure white hair, smoothed back to enhance a skull-like appearance.

She shivered. If there was one thing she knew for certain, in no way did this apparition of death before her resemble her handsome father.

"Finished with your appraisal, gel?" Her disagreeable host sniffed through an aquiline nose.

"Yes, I have." As he looked her up and down as well, she asked, "Have you?"

"Impertinence!" Lord Eldredge roared the word, the strength of which was quite amazing considering his emaciated body. "However, what else would I expect from Ian's whelp?"

Nicolette shrugged. Obviously there was no way the earl was destined to win a place in her affections.

With the gold salon now partially lit, she glanced around only to have her attention captured by a painting hanging over the fireplace. It was a family portrait, of the earl, his wife, dear Papa, and his younger brother. From the graceful style and elegant execution, she easily recognized the painter: Thomas Gainsborough. She had her father to thank for giving her this artistic acumen.

Clapping her hands over her heart, Nicolette stepped closer to the painting to take in the sight of her beloved father. Tall and commanding, he had a hint of a smile, something she remembered so well about him. He was young, too. Probably the same age as she was now, just barely before his twentieth year. She looked like her father; she knew she did. His cool grey eyes, the rich mahogany of his hair, his oval face, were all echoed in her.

Reluctantly she tore her gaze away to study the other figures. Papa's brother Lord Grenton, or to be correct, Dabney Turner, since Papa hadn't been disinherited at that time, was still plump with extreme youth. Gainsborough managed to convey the boy's character by the pout of his full lips and the lazy expression about the clear blue eyes. Papa had rarely mentioned his brother; now she understood why. She disliked Dabney Turner on sight.

And now he was dead.

The Countess of Eldredge had the look of beauty about her, but also appeared wan and

faded. Dressed in the fashion of tight waisted bodices of the day, she had petulant lips like her younger son's. For some reason, Nicolette could not care for the woman.

Which left the earl. He, too, was a striking figure--a mature man in his early forties. His hair was still white, but it was the white of a wig, or queue, as she believed it was called, and he was clothed in black breeches, buckled shoes, and a long tailcoat. Perhaps symbolically, Gainsborough had painted Lord Eldredge and her father on opposite sides of the painting, as if they would spend eternity always being at odds with each other. Which was, of course, the case. What was shocking, however, was how much they physically resembled each other. But for the earl's blue eyes and hooked nose, he looked exactly as she remembered Papa before he died.

Shaken with this knowledge, Nicolette turned back to face the earl. She had to admit she was surprised that he had allowed her this perusal of the painting without interruption.

His silence was at an end, however. "You are almost twenty years, are you not, gel?"

She nodded.

"Pretty, too, though not a diamond as your mother was."

How odd it was to hear a compliment about her mother coming from Lord Eldredge's lips. "She still is, sir."

"You will call me Grandfather." He waved that skeleton hand of his as if he expected her to immediately agree.

Well, she would be contrary. "I fear I must disappoint you, sir. I cannot."

"And why not?"

She took a deep breath. "You made my father and my mother unhappy. I cannot forgive this monumental unkindness."

The earl's emaciated face burned crimson--so deeply red that she grew concerned about his health. "Sir." Now was a perfect time to plead her case. "It is obvious that I do not please you. If you like, I shall make arrangements to return to my home as soon as possible. I believe we will both be grateful for my departure."

Immediately, his skin-tone reverted to its normal ashen color. He chewed on his dry lower lip and shook his head. "So like your father." He waved his hand again, this time in dismissal. "We will talk again at dinner tonight. I have arranged an intimate party with some important people for you to meet. You may go to your room."

While she hadn't gotten what she wanted--not yet, anyway--at least this interview was

over. The meeting was, unfortunately, less than a decided success. And as for dining with *important* people... She wrinkled her nose at this *treat* the earl had arranged for her. Faith, it took away any appetite she might've had.

Nicolette walked to the doors, opened one, then for some reason, turned around to look at the earl. What she saw raised the hairs on her neck. His gaze rested squarely upon her, and an emotion akin to sadness seemed to soften his cool blue eyes.

Shivering again, she closed the door and leaned against it. Phew. That had been quite an ordeal. Now alone in the hallway, she puzzled on her next step, for she had no idea which room her things had been placed in. And from the absolute quiet surrounding her, no one was available to ask.

Time to go exploring. She whistled a little tune and headed back toward the entryway. After being cooped up on the *Aurora*, it would feel good to walk down Runsdale Hall's endless corridors.

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Victor Kincaid, also known as the current Lord Cushing, swept his unruly mop of hair off his forehead, then in one fell swoop, proceeded to clear off the cluttered jumble of papers marring the rich mahogany surface of his desk. Which meant this assortment of dunning notices now resided haphazardly on the Aubusson rug covering the floor in his library.

"Damn." Not usually inclined to indulge in profanities, Victor stared at his brother's pile of bills, and swore again. Gaming debts, haberdashery invoices, pleas for payment from various merchants--Foster Kincaid had extended his credit from one end of London to the other. And he had not the means nor the wherewithal to repay them.

So if Victor wished to keep the family name unsullied by the scandal of outstanding debts, which he did, he would have to find a way to settle these enormous amounts... and somehow rein in his brother. Perhaps he could force Foster to rusticate in the country?

While imprisoning Foster at Cushing Manor might cut back on future expenses, it did not solve their present dilemma. There were only two ways out that Victor could see: ask assistance from a moneylender or legshackle Foster to an unsuspecting heiress.

Victor stared into the flames crackling in the nearby fireplace. Each smoke-tipped plume offered a third method of escape: burn the evidence and pretend that all was well.

He leaned back against his chair in defeat. All three solutions were equally impossible. Pretending never solved anything; moneylenders always mushroomed trifling debts into monumental disasters, and unsuspecting heiresses? Where in God's green England could he find a rich woman willing to wed Foster? With his well-known profligate

reputation, no respectable female would dare be in the same room as him, let alone consider marriage.

Victor's customary "can do" optimism deserted him. How would he ever find a way out of this devilish coil?

As a ray of sunshine might brighten the darkest hour, his sister Leticia Stanley made her way into the library, smiling and dressed in the first stare of fashion. Her gaze then fell on his state of undress with his shirtsleeves and open waistcoat, and her prim mouth formed an "O" of surprise. "Good heavens, Victor! You cannot have forgotten." Her carefully styled curls risked their mistress' displeasure by moving in the wind caused by her now frantic pacing in front of his desk. "You must dress. Quickly, quickly. Oh, what are we to do if you are late?"

"Peace, good Leticia. Whatever are you anxious about?" His sister, a widow these eight months, often fell into a dither about some small thing or another. While she calmed down, he redid the buttons on his waistcoat and smoothed back his hair, for even though she was his sister and a married lady for the past five years, the sight of his déshabillé was far too shocking for feminine eyes.

"Victor. You did forget." Leticia stopped pacing and shook her head until her many golden curls peeping out of her feathered turban surely begged for mercy. Whatever social obligation she had in mind, it was one she looked forward to. The lavender evening gown trimmed with dark grey silk was one of her newest acquisitions now that she was in half-mourning for Stan Stanley, her deceased husband.

He sighed, not relishing the thought of being sociable. But then again, an evening in polite society might get him out of the doldrums. "I apologize, Leticia. I suppose I did forget. I have been preoccupied with Foster's... fiascos."

"My dearest brother." She leaned over the desk to plant a chaste kiss upon his forehead. "It is monstrous unfair that you must cover for Foster. How we both have been put out by that--"

Victor held up his hand. "Enough, Leticia. Refresh my memory. Who are we suppose to visit? Or are we entertaining guests tonight?" As the late Mr. Stanley was as poor as the proverbial churchmouse, his widow had returned to her childhood home to act as hostess for Victor. Not that Cushing Manor did much entertaining; Foster's unpaid bills nearly buried them.

When she clapped her ungloved hands together and did a sprightly spin about the library, Victor could not help but smile at her exuberance. It was good to see her happy. Lately, she had been in high dudgeon. Her fertile mind had imagined a future alliance between her and Lord Grenton once her period of mourning was over, but then the Earl of Eldredge's son received his notice to quit, leaving Leticia... and her active imagination in the lurch. And, an active imagination it was for Dabney Turner had reached thirty

seven years of age before expiring, and all without showing any inclination to wed. Dear Leticia would have to set her marital sights on some other eligible bachelor.

By the decided sparkle to her fine hazel eyes, it appeared as if she already had.

She pulled out a fan from her reticule and fluttered a breeze across her face. "You must be roasting me, of course. How could you have forgotten that the Duke of Devonshire is staying at Runsdale Hall? Good heavens, all of Long Melford have been abuzz with the news for days! He has been comforting the old earl on the loss of Lord Grenton."

Leaning closer, she lowered her voice as if confiding a confidence. "The latest on-dit from London says they were cronies, you know. The very best of friends."

Victor shrugged. Gossip rarely interested him. "So how does this concern us?"

Leticia trilled a laugh and rapped him on his knuckles with the fan. "Silly brother! The Earl of Eldredge has invited us to dinner, to meet the duke, and also..." She paused to cover her mouth as she yawned. "To introduce us to that savage granddaughter of his. You remember, the one from the primitive Americas."

Her words released a floodgate of childhood memories. Memories of Ian Turner--the earl's older son and heir--of hero-worshiping this young man and trailing behind him like a deuced puppy dog. Sixteen years separated the two, but Ian had never seemed to mind the constant barrage of juvenile questions, the wide-eyed adoration, and the tagging along of a very-wet-behind-the-ears Victor. In fact, Ian had been more of a father than Victor's own parent. The previous Lord Cushing had no interest in his three children, and had gambled away most of the estate inheritance. Now Foster was following the same path.

Victor walked over to the sideboard, then poured himself a drink. He nodded to his sister, but she declined the offer of a beverage. Taking a sip, he savored the choice vintage of French brandy, until more memories resurfaced. How everything had changed when Ian returned from his grand tour of Europe with a French actress as bride.

"Yes," he finally answered his sister. "I had heard the granddaughter was planning to visit." Most likely this chit hoped to gull the old man out of his fortune, for why else would she decide to see the earl now, after all these years? According to the late Lord Grenton, the child's mother had been a common moneygrubber, so why not the daughter?

"Oh, bother the granddaughter! I am certain having her acquaintance will be excessively unpleasant for us, but think, Victor. The Duke of Devonshire! This is heaven sent, is it not?" She fluttered her pale eyelashes. "I am aware that he is twenty four to my twenty five, but I am told I do not look a day over twenty. Do you not agree?"

Victor smiled into his crystal brandy snifter. His sister had twenty six years to her name.

“Just so, Leticia.”

She pulled on his arm, causing some brandy to spill over the sides. “Come along, brother. Call your valet, for you must dress to the nines for this occasion.”

“Not overeager, are you, sister?” He smiled to take the sting out of his words. “Come then. Let us repair to our bedchambers. You, to freshen up, and me for my valet to work his magic. Never fear, we shall have plenty of time to make our entrance at Runsdale Hall and have a cozy chat with its inhabitants before the dinner hour of eight.”

As soon as he exited the library, he lost his smile. It was not meeting the Duke of Devonshire--William George Spencer Cavendish--that peaked his interest, but the prodigal granddaughter. Lord Eldredge was Victor's friend, and with the older man's ill-health and recent bereavement, he was in no condition to deal with an impudent piece of baggage. The earl had suffered enough. It was up to Victor to expose her for the opportunist that she was, and send her packing.



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