



Aunt Dimity  
and the Duke



Nancy Atherton

PENGUIN BOOKS







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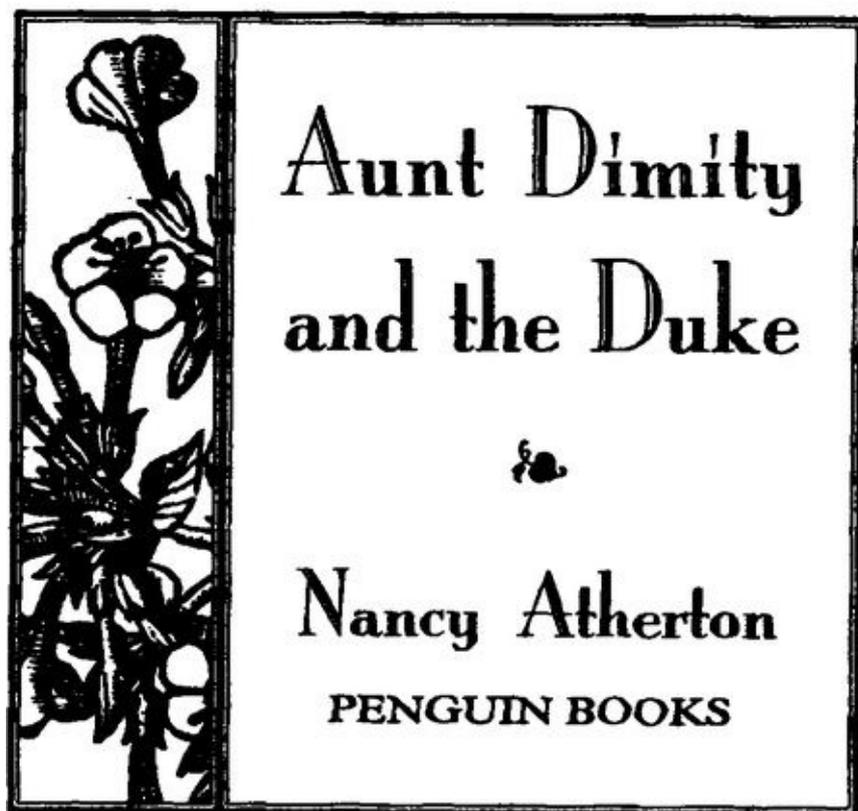
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# A PENGUIN MYSTERY

## AUNT DIMITY AND THE DUKE

Nancy Atherton is also the author of *Aunt Dimity's Death* (the winner of the Mystery Guild Neumann Discovery Award), *Aunt Dimity's Good Deed*, *Aunt Dimity Digs In*, *Aunt Dimity's Christmas*, *Aunt Dimity Beats the Devil*, and most recently *Aunt Dimity: Detective*. She lives next door to a cornfield in central Illinois.



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For  
Leslie J. Turek,  
Consulting Gardener

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## Prologue



“Come back, Master Grayson!”

“Master Grayson! Stop!”

“Grayson Alexander! When I get my hands on you—”

His father’s roar was swallowed by the rising wind as the boy ran down the terrace steps and sprinted for the castle ruins. Shirttails flying, he ran, heedless of the servants’ cries and headlong from his father’s wrath, intent only on escape. Black clouds boiled overhead and a cold wind whipped from the sea, surging mournfully up the cliffs and snatching at his hair as he dodged through gaping doorways, past tumbledown walls, feet pounding, lungs pumping, heart breaking. Tear-blinded and tripped by a half-buried granite block, he sprawled, lay panting, then pushed himself up and ran on.

He reached the green door and flung it wide, stumbled down the stone steps into Grandmother’s walled garden. A building stood there, high on the jagged cliffs above the cove, rock-steady in the wind. They called it the lady chapel, though it was sacred to no one, except perhaps to the boy. It straddled the rear wall, pointing out over the storm-lashed sea like a ship riding the crest of a wave; a small, rectangular building—rough-hewn gray granite, peaked roof, rounded door with time-blackened hinges. Moss-covered and ancient, it rose from the ground as though it had grown there, its roots buried deep in Comwall’s dark past. Reaching up to release the latch, the boy put his shoulder to the door and let himself in. Panting, he pushed the door shut behind him.

Stillness. Silence.

*Light?*

Uncertainty gripped him. A candle burned where no candle should be, there on the ledge beneath the stained-glass window—the jewel-hued lady window that overlooked the sea.

“Hello, Grayson.” The voice was calm and soothing. “Let’s see what we can do about that knee, shall we?”

A woman sat in the front row of wooden benches. As she turned her head, the candle’s light illuminated white hair, gray eyes, a softly wrinkled face, and when she smiled, he remembered Grandmother’s friend, the woman for whom Crowley reserved his deepest bows, around whom even Nanny Cole spoke gently. She was the teller of tales who brought all the servants clustering round the nursery door. Miss Westwood, at first, but later.

“*Aunt Dimity?*” Blinking back his tears, he made his way up the center aisle to her side.

“A rough night, I fear,” she commented, removing her pearl-gray gloves. “A full-blown Cornish gale brewing. Still, we’ll stay dry as tinder in here.”

A capacious tapestry handbag lay at her feet. From its depths she produced a hand towel, a small bottle, a length of white gauze. “Sit down, my boy,” she ordered. “This will sting a bit.” With deft hands she cleansed and bandaged the knee he’d scraped stumbling in the ruins, tied the gauze neatly, returned towel and bottle to the handbag, then sat back, hands folded, waiting.

“Why didn’t you come?” he asked.

“I didn’t know” was the prompt reply.

Of course. Grandmother’s funeral had been a shabby affair. Father would not have announced it.

“I’m so sorry, Grayson,” she added. “I know how badly you must miss her.”

Grayson scrubbed at his eyes with the back of a muddy fist, then stared, unseeing, at his clenched hand. Crowley, gone. Newland, Bantry, Gash. Nanny Cole would be next. She and little Kate would be sent away from Penford Hall just like the rest of the staff, and he would lose them forever.

Slowly at first, then with an urgency born of anger and despair, he told Aunt Dimity all about it. There was no one else to tell. With Grandmother dead, the village deserted, and the servants dismissed, ten-year-old Grayson was the sole witness to his father’s treachery.

“No one’s left at Penford Hall,” he finished sadly. “And now he’s ... selling things.” The low-voiced confession was spoken to the flagstone floor. “Grandmother’s jewels, her paintings ... her harp.”

“Oh dear.” Aunt Dimity sighed. “Charlotte’s beautiful harp ...”

“He’s sold the *lantern*.” Grayson’s finger stabbed accusingly at the granite shelf below the stained-glass window, where the candle now stood. “How will we hold the Fete without the lantern?” He bowed his head, ashamed of a father who knew no shame.

Frowning slightly, Aunt Dimity asked, “Are you quite certain of that?”

The boy’s head swung up.

“Are you absolutely certain that the lantern has been sold?” Aunt Dimity asked again. “I rather doubt that Charlotte would have allowed that particular item to leave the family, don’t you?”

“Then where is it?” Grayson asked bluntly.

“I don’t know.” Aunt Dimity’s gaze swept the stained-glass window and the dimly lit walls of the chapel, then she drew herself up and looked down at the boy. “But the Fête’s a long way off, and we have more pressing problems to attend to. Your face, for example.” Clucking her tongue, Aunt Dimity retrieved a fresh hand towel from the bag and began wiping the tear-streaked smudges from Grayson’s cheeks. “I know how distressing these changes must be for you,” she murmured, “and I won’t tell you to be a man about it. Grown men too often forget their dreams, and some dreams are worth holding on to.”

Tilting the boy’s chin up, Aunt Dimity examined his face critically, then brushed his honey-blond hair back from his forehead. “You do have dreams for Penford Hall, don’t you?” she coaxed. When the boy maintained a sullen silence, Aunt Dimity persisted. “You mean, there’s nothing you love about Penford Hall? No one?”

All that I love is here, Grayson thought. I would do anything to save it, anything to keep Kate here and bring the others back. Aloud, he muttered, “What’s the use? It’ll all be gone soon and it’ll never

be the same again.”

“Tush. Stuff and nonsense. Twaddle.” Aunt Dimity sniffed disapprovingly. “My dear boy, if you expect me to pat you on the head and say, ‘There, there, what a hopeless muddle,’ then you’ve mistaken me for quite another person—someone with whom I would not care to be personally acquainted. I’ve no patience with such foolishness and neither would your grandmother. Your father won’t always be the duke, you know. One day Penford Hall will be yours.”

“It’ll be empty by then.”

“Then you must fill it up again.”

“It’ll be years before—”

“If it’s worth having, it’s worth waiting for.”

“But—”

“And worth working for,” Aunt Dimity stated firmly. “If you were not overwrought at the moment you would see it as plainly as I do. Then again,” she added, half to herself, “perhaps I’m not making myself clear.” Staring thoughtfully at the lady window, Aunt Dimity put her arm around the boy, her fingers smoothing his windblown hair. “*She* would not have lost hope,” Aunt Dimity said, her gray eyes fixed on the lady’s brown ones. “And she faced far worse things than you’re facing. Do you know the legend of the lantern?”

With a nod, Grayson dutifully recited the words he’d heard so many times before: “Once, long ago a lady fair did love a captain bold—”

“Great heavens!” Aunt Dimity exclaimed. “Is that what Nanny Cole taught you? A lady and a captain? Dear me. Why do they fill children’s heads with such piffle? She was no lady, my boy, but a hardworking village lass who served as a parlor maid at Penford Hall. And her love wasn’t a captain but the duke’s son, shipped off as a common seaman. The only thing Nanny Cole got remotely right was that they loved each other.” The halo of white hair nodded slowly. “Listen closely, Grayson, while I tell you the true story of the lantern. Perhaps then you’ll understand why you must go on loving Penford Hall, come what may.”

Grayson doubted that a story would save Penford Hall, or bring the servants back, but Aunt Dimity’s arm was warm around his shoulders, and he had nowhere else to go. The boy nodded, then leaned against Aunt Dimity, his bandaged leg swinging listlessly.

“It is seldom wise,” Aunt Dimity began, “for a poor girl to fall in love with a duke’s son. Love may be blind, but fathers most certainly are not, and the duke was not amused at the prospect of having a parlor maid as a daughter-in-law. He loved his son too well to forbid the match—I’ll grant him that—but he decided to test the boy’s devotion, for both his son’s sake and the family’s.” She glanced down at the boy, saw that his leg had stopped swinging, then went on.

“The maid was sent back to the village and forbidden to set foot within sight of Penford Hall. The duke’s son was sent away for a year and a day, to sail the wide oceans as a common deckhand. The duke hoped that a taste of hard labor would cure the boy of his infatuation.

“But this was no mere infatuation. The duke’s son had found his heart’s desire and he vowed that his first journey would be his last. ‘If you are here when I return,’ he promised the girl, ‘I will nev-

leave you again.' And with that, he rowed out from Penford Harbor to meet the great four-master that awaited him in the safe waters beyond the Nether Shoals."

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Grayson had turned his face to the one that hovered above them. The lady's eyes blazed suddenly and a streak of lightning split the sky, and the boy flinched at the crack of thunder that followed. Aunt Dimity's arm tightened about him protectively as she went on.

"One year passed," she told him, "and one day, and on the night of the son's return a storm blew up at sea. It was a fearful, rollicking gale, with waves as tall as Penford Hall and winds strong enough to shred the stoutest sails. Huddled safely around their hearths, the villagers knew that no ship would risk approaching the Nether Shoals that night."

"But she wouldn't listen?" guessed Grayson, his eyes upon the window.

"She would not," confirmed Aunt Dimity. "Though her mother begged her to stay at home, the lady would not be swayed. 'I must be there when he returns,' she said. And with that, she took up her lantern—a plain, shuttered lantern, no more than ten inches tall, the kind used in every village house—and set out for the cliffs, where she could watch for her love's return."

The boy tensed and drew closer to Aunt Dimity, envisioning the treacherous cliffs just beyond the chapel's rear wall, and the long fall to the churning sea below.

"It was a terrible journey," Aunt Dimity continued, her voice pitched menacingly low. "She could not take the easy path, for it wound within view of the hall, and the hard path was very hard indeed. Rain pounded like hammers, wind snatched at her cloak, waves crashed before her, and dark shapes swirled on every side. A dozen times she fell, and a dozen times she pulled herself back up ... and up ... and up ... until she stood upon the wind-lashed cliffs."

"And then?" Grayson breathed.

"Then it happened. The thing no one can explain. As she held the tiny lantern high, it began to glow with an unearthly light, softly at first, then more brightly, then blindingly, until it blazed forth like a beacon, piercing the curtain of darkness like a white-hot bolt of lightning." Aunt Dimity let the words linger, let the image of the blazing lantern fill Grayson's mind, before continuing, more quietly.

"In the first gray light of dawn she saw the ship, the great four-master bearing spices and gold and the treasure of her heart, floating in the safe waters beyond the Nether Shoals. From it came a tiny boat, gliding like an arrow across the rolling waves, straight for Penford Harbor."

"He met her on the quay," whispered Grayson, back on familiar ground.

"And he told her of the light that had guided his ship to safety. And she told him of the lantern..."

"And together they told the duke..."

"And the duke was filled with wonder," said Aunt Dimity. "From that moment on, he loved the lady as dearly as he loved his son. To honor her, he built this chapel, on the very spot where she'd stood, and he brought craftsmen to make the stained-glass window bearing her likeness. And in the chapel he placed the lantern, to remind his descendants of the miraculous light that had saved his son, a light that blazed forth bright as lightning, fueled by the power of a young girl's love." Aunt Dimity looked down on the tousled head at her shoulder. "And once every hundred years..." she prompted softly.

"And once every hundred years," the boy murmured, "the lantern shines of its own accord, and the"

duke of Penford must fête the villagers, in memory of the village lass, or Penford Hall will crumble and the Penford line will fade forever from the face of the earth.”

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“You must find the lantern, Grayson,” urged Aunt Dimity. “You must save Penford Hall. Look, Grayson. Look at the lady.”

Grayson stared up at the window. The lady’s raven hair swirled wildly around the hood of her pale gray cloak, but her chin was up and her shoulders were back. She thrust the lantern defiantly into the face of the storm, and her liquid brown eyes were fixed on something that remained forever out of reach. Grayson rose to his feet, pulled upward by the strength and courage in the lady’s eyes.

Aunt Dimity’s voice seemed to come from a long way off: “Neither mother’s cry nor duke’s command could stay her, neither wind nor wave could sway her, for her heart was true, her hope undying. Tell me, young Master Grayson, shall you be any less steadfast?”

Lightning flashed and thunder cracked and rain pounded down like hammers, but Grayson Alexander, who would one day be the fourteenth duke of Penford, stood unflinching.



*Twenty years later*

“All of the good men are either married or gay,” Rita declared. “And now Richard’s married.” She closed the file drawer with a bang.

Emma Porter touched a finger to her wire-rim glasses and cast a furtive glance at the freesias atop the file cabinet, gathered fresh from her garden that morning. The vase wobbled, but remained upright, and Emma quickly lowered her gaze to the keyboard of her computer. Bending forward, she let her long hair fall like a shield on either side of her face, determined to avoid the same, tedious conversation she’d had every day for the past six weeks.

“Not that Richard was a good man,” her assistant continued, scooping up another armload of files. “I’d’ve scratched his eyes out if he’d run out on me like that. No eyes, no cameras, no sweet young things to drool over.” Clang! Another drawer took the brunt of Rita’s disapproval.

“Please, Rita—the freesias.”

“I’m sorry, Emma.” Rita’s voice trembled with outrage. “But when I think of Richard dumping you like that, after fifteen years—”

“We weren’t married,” Emma pointed out.

“But—”

“We lived in separate houses.”

“Still—”

“We were two independent adults.”

“You were a *couple!*” Rita marched back to stand before Emma’s desk. “For fifteen years you did everything together. You even planned your big trip together. Then he ... he ...” Tears welled in Rita’s eyes.

Without looking away from the computer screen, Emma reached for the half-empty box of Kleenex on the windowsill behind her and handed it to Rita, silently reminding herself to buy a fresh box on her way home. It seemed as though half the women in Boston had stopped by to commiserate since the wedding and each one had ended up in tears.

“Oh, Emma,” Rita managed, trying to stem the flow before it ruined her mascara, “how can you be so *brave?*”

Burying her face in a handful of tissues, Rita retreated to her own desk, just outside Emma's office. When the other women in the department began to cluster around, Emma got up and closed the door firmly. The past six weeks had taught her that a firmly closed door was the only way to keep her sympathetic underlings at bay.

Sighing, Emma reached out to the vase on the file cabinet, plucked a fragrant blossom, and held it to her nose, wishing that her co-workers would mind their own business. It wasn't as though she and Richard were facing a messy divorce. She'd had no more desire than he to be tied down by marriage vows. Theirs had been a practical relationship, separate but equal, and it had outlasted most conventional marriages. Richard had his town house in Newton; she, her Cape Cod cottage in Cambridge. He'd pursued his career in photography and she'd pursued hers in computer science. They'd been a couple for fifteen years and now they weren't. That was all there was to it.

The light on her telephone began to blink, and Emma glanced at her watch. Time for Mother's morning pep talk, she thought wryly. Returning to her desk, she tossed the freesia blossom into the wastebasket and reached for the phone.

"Hello, Mother." Emma swiveled her chair to face the windows, where the bleak Boston skyline was etched against a lowering April sky.

"Hi, Emma. Heard from that rat yet?"

Emma's gaze traveled up along the tangled strands of ivy framing the window. She reached for her pair of scissors. "No, Mother, I haven't heard from Richard, and I don't expect to." Pinching the phone between her neck and shoulder, Emma stood and began pruning the tendrils of ivy. "I'm sure Richard is much too busy with his new life—"

Her mother snorted. "His new *wife*, you mean. I told you a thousand times to marry that rat."

"And I've told you that I don't see how marrying Richard would have changed the situation," said Emma.

"It would have given you some leverage in court! As it is—"

"As it is, I own my own home, I have a very lucrative position as an executive at CompuTech, and I enjoy my freedom. I don't think I have too much to complain about, Mother, do you?"

Her mother sighed. "Honestly, Emma, I never expected a daughter of mine to just sit back and talk about it."

"What would you like me to do, Mother?"

"Get angry! Throw his picture against the wall! *React!* That's what normal women do. But not my daughter. I mean, Emma, honey, I know you're trying to put on a brave face, but did you really have to go to the rat's wedding?"

"That had nothing to do with bravery," Emma explained, for what seemed like the hundredth time. "It was simply a matter of facing reality."

"I'll tell you about *facing reality*," her mother echoed scornfully. "When a thirty-nine-year-old woman gets dumped for a twenty-two-year-old ditz, she doesn't just shrug it off. You're going to have to deal with your anger, dear heart, or you're going to come apart at the seams!"

"I'm sure you're right, Mother."

There was a pause, followed by: “Okay. Have it your way. But just tell me one thing, Emma. Do you love that rat?”

---

Emma winced as a long strand of ivy came away in her hand. “Mother, I’m afraid I have to go now. The Danbury project is due before I leave for England, and—”

“Uh-huh. I thought so.”

“Good-bye, Mother.” Emma hung up the phone and put the scissors away, afraid there’d be nothing left of the ivy if she continued to prune it in her present state of mind. Trust her mother to ask the most *impossible* questions. Emma was no starry-eyed idealist. She’d known from the start that her career would leave little room for a demanding emotional life. Marriage and motherhood were out of the question, and she’d given her heart to Richard, in part, because he’d understood that. Richard hadn’t been perfect—his twin passions for bad sci-fi movies and heavy-metal rock music were two reasons to be glad they’d lived apart—but he’d respected her self-sufficiency. Her mother could say what she liked; Emma had *nothing—nothing—to* complain about.

Taking a calming breath, Emma sat down, swiveled her chair to face the desk, and leaned her head on her hands. In two weeks she’d be in England. She couldn’t wait to leave.

Granted, she hadn’t counted on leaving alone. Emma pulled her long hair back into a pony tail, then bent down to retrieve the file of travel brochures that filled the bottom drawer of her desk. She leafed through them until she came to the map, which she spread over the installation specs for the Danbury project. Cupping her chin in her hand, she gazed at it eagerly.

There was Cornwall, protruding like a broken branch from the southwestern tip of England, a jagged, irregular peninsula with the Atlantic Ocean to the north and the English Channel to the south. Emma had been to England many times and toured many gardens, but she’d never seen the gardens of Cornwall. She ran a finger along her intended route, pausing at the circled names: Cotehele, Glendurgan, Killerton Park, and the rest, private estates given over to the National Trust and open now to the pound-paying public.

Richard had planned to close up the studio for the summer, to lay aside his fashion photography in favor of a more serious—some might say pretentious—pursuit: a black-and-white photo essay on the neolithic standing stones that dotted the Cornish landscape. Emma had been so absorbed in planning his trip as well as her own that she’d felt nothing but relief when he’d disappeared from her life for a few weeks.

She’d had no reason to worry. Theirs had been an open relationship, of course, and Richard had a long track record of short-lived flings. There’d been no reason on earth to suspect that this one would be any different.

Then the travel agent had called, informing her that Richard had canceled his airline tickets. Next day Richard had telephoned, telling her that he’d met someone special. Finally, the wedding invitation had arrived, proof positive that Richard had disappeared from her life for good. Emma had shocked her friends and appalled her mother by attending the wedding, but she’d wanted to go. She’d needed to see the fairy princess with her own eyes.

Emma refolded the map, smiling faintly. The fairy princess—that’s what Rita had dubbed Richard’s bride, and Emma had to admit that it was an apt description. Graceful, slim, and twenty years younger than Richard’s junior, with hair like silken sunlight and eyes like summer skies, the fairy princess hadn’t

walked down the aisle, she'd floated. And Richard had been waiting for her, rotund in his cummerbund, a sheen of perspiration on his balding pate, beaming at his wife-to-be with a smile that was disturbingly paternal. Emma blushed at the memory. It had been pathetic to see her free-spirited Richard succumb to something as trite as a mid-life crisis.

Yet there it was. A fifteen-year relationship had ended with neither bang nor whimper, but with the whispery sound of an envelope slipped through a mail slot.

She'd spent a long time in her garden after the wedding, raking over the compost and wondering why she felt so ... numb. Emma wasn't given to expressing strong emotions, but even she had been surprised by the stillness that had settled over her. Was she in shock, as her mother insisted? Or was she merely going through a natural transition that would lead, ultimately, to a mature acceptance of her new situation? Emma preferred the latter explanation. She knew that there were some things in life she couldn't change.

But there were some she could. She'd gone back into the house and spent the rest of the evening gathering up the odds and ends Richard had left behind—a worn bath-robe, a broken tripod, a stack of CDs and rock videos. As she dropped the garish video boxes in the Goodwill bin, she thought wryly that Richard's taste in music had been as juvenile as his taste in brides, and the small joke had heartened her. It seemed to prove that she was ready to face the world without Richard.

Her friends—and her mother—remained unconvinced. They thought of her as a victim and expected her to behave like one.

It was ludicrous. Why couldn't her friends be honest with her? Why couldn't they just come out and say what they were really thinking? “You're no kid anymore, Emma. You're forty, fat, and frumpy, and your chances of landing another man at this stage of the game are nil. We understand, and our hearts go out to you.”

The faint smile returned as Emma put the map back in the bottom drawer. What a surprise it would be if she came home from England with a new man in tow—a six-foot-tall stunner with sapphire-blue eyes, broad shoulders, and ...

Emma's pleasant daydream faded as common sense reasserted itself. She didn't need her mother to remind her that men—of all ages—preferred mates who were younger than themselves, girls who were graceful and slim, with hair like silken sunshine and eyes like summer skies. She knew that the doors of romance were more often than not slammed in the faces of plump, plain-looking women approaching middle age.

Emma was proud of her ability to accept the truth, and she prepared for the trip accordingly. Come May, she would be in Cornwall, where she would feast on cream teas, explore pretty fishing villages, and, best of all, enjoy the springtime spectacle of massed azaleas in full bloom. She would do everything her heart desired. Except fall in love.

“Never again,” she murmured, stifling a wistful sigh. “When I come back from Cornwall, I'll buy a hammock for the garden and settle down to a life of industrious spinsterhood. But as for love—never again.”

On that same day, in an Oxford suburb an ocean away, Derek Harris wiped the last trace of rain

spattered mud from the headstone on his wife's grave. He could have left the task to the sexton, but Derek had worked with his hands long enough to know that, if you wanted a job done right, you did yourself.

He tucked the dirty rag into the back pocket of his faded jeans and rose to tower over the grave. He was a tall man, just over six feet, and his deep-blue eyes were shadowed with grief as he read the date he'd carved into the roseate marble. It had been just over five years since pneumonia had taken him from him. The thought made his heart swell until he could scarcely breathe.

"Ah, Mary," he whispered, "I miss you."

The spiderweb tracery of budding trees stood black against a darkening sky, and a chill April wind moaned low among the gravestones. Derek shivered, and thought of going back to the house. Peter would be home from school by now, and Nell would be back from her play group, and their Aunt Beatrice would be stopping by to check up on them.

Still he lingered by the grave, unwilling to face Beatrice's barrage of questions. She'd already begun to nag him about his plans for the coming year. He wondered, not for the first time, how his sweet Mary could have had such a harridan for a sister.

Wasn't it a shame that Derek had wasted his first in history—taken at Oxford, too, more's the pity—and gone into this mucky business of restoration? You'd hardly know he was an earl's son, such an embarrassment to his family and such a keen disappointment for poor Mary. His university friends were respectable gentlemen by now—financiers and politicians, most of them—and here was Derek at forty-five, still messing about with leaky thatched roofs, crumbling stone walls, and nasty old brasses. It had turned her hair gray to think of her only sister living in such a higgledy-piggledy household.

And now it was turning her hair white ("as the driven snow, the cold and driven snow") to think of poor Peter and Nell. Couldn't Derek see that men weren't meant to raise children? It was unnatural, unhealthy, and—"mark my words, nothing good will come of it." Surely he must see that Peter and Nell would be better off in a stable home, with an aunt and uncle who adored them and had only their best interests at heart. Surely ...

Angrily, Derek ground a clump of mud beneath the heel of his workboot. He'd promised Mary he'd keep the family together and nothing would make him break that promise. Mrs. Higgins was a splendid housekeeper, more than capable of looking after things when Derek was away. Thanks to her the house was immaculate, the children were well kept, and Beatrice, search as she might, could find no solid ground for complaint. He made a mental note to put a little something extra in Mrs. Higgins's pay packet before he and the children left for Cornwall.

"Thank God for Grayson," Derek murmured, blowing on his wind-reddened hands. The duke's proposal had arrived last month—a stained-glass window to restore at Penford Hall—and, with it, a letter of invitation. Bring Peter and Nell, his old friend had written, *Spend the summer*. It'd mean taking Peter out of school before the end of term, but Grayson had promised a governess to see to the boy's lessons, and Beatrice, dazzled by Grayson's tide, had been unable to object.

Luckily, among Beatrice's many shortcomings Derek could not, in all honesty, include a fondness for the tabloid press. Beatrice thought the scandal sheets "common" and thus remained blissfully ignorant of the dark rumors and innuendo that had surrounded the scion of Penford Hall five years

ago. Fortunately for Derek, Mrs. Higgins, whose passion for the rags was second only to her devotion to the Sunday radio broadcasts of *The Archers*, was not on speaking terms with the beastly Bea.

Derek had to admit to a certain amount of curiosity about the affair, and about Grayson, as well. Theirs had been an odd friendship, blossoming briefly during the summer Derek had spent touching up the ceiling in Oxford's Christ Church Cathedral, where Grayson, still a student, had been the organist for the local Bach chorale. Grayson had expressed a keen interest in Derek's work, and they'd had a number of lively discussions over pints of ale at the Blue Boar. But at the end of the summer, when the old duke had died, the younger man had been off like a shot, never bothering to finish his degree. Derek hadn't been the least bit surprised. He remembered how Grayson's eyes had softened whenever he'd spoken of his boyhood home, how they'd blazed when he'd described his plans for its restoration.

In the ten years that had passed since then, Derek had often wondered if his young friend's grandiose plans had come to fruition. Well, soon he would find out. Come May, he'd be in Cornwall restoring the window in the duke of Penford's lady chapel.

And after that? He balked at thinking beyond the summer. Somewhere, tucked into a far corner of his mind, was the thought that Peter and Nell should have a mother to look after them, but it was a thought he was not yet ready to contemplate.

He doubted he would ever be ready. He knew he couldn't bring himself to marry someone "for the sake of the children." The idea made his blood run cold. No, if he married again, it would be because he'd found someone to love, truly and with all his heart. And how could he do that, when his heart lay buried at his feet?

"Never again," he murmured, turning, stone-faced, for home. "Never again."

Peter Harris threw the scraps out for the cats and said aloud, to no one in particular: "The first of May. On the first of May, Dad'll take us to Cornwall and everything will be all right."

Thus reassured, Peter closed the back door, put the breakfast dishes in the sink, wiped the crumbs from the table, and swept the kitchen floor, Mrs. Higgins should've put the place to rights before retiring to her room—that's what Dad paid her for, wasn't it?—but Mrs. Higgins had spent most of the afternoon snoring on the settee in the parlor. He trembled to think what might have happened had Auntie Beatrice caught her at it.

"It'll be over soon," he murmured happily, and he believed it. Dad had shown him on the map—Penford Hall was a long way away from Auntie Beatrice.

Peter capped the milk and put it in the fridge, checked to make sure the shepherd's pie was in the cooker—Mrs. Higgins forgot sometimes—and took the box of soap flakes from the cupboard beneath the sink.

Since his mother's death, Peter had learned to clean the dishes and fold the linen and wash Nell's hair without getting soap in her eyes. He'd learned to do the shopping and sort the bills and remind Dad to pay them. He'd learned that it was best to get Nell off to sleep before beginning his schoolwork, and he'd learned—the hard way—that Auntie Beatrice *always* checked under the beds for dust. Over the course of the past few years, Peter had learned what it was to be bone-tired and burdened and constantly alert.

He'd never really learned what it was to be a little boy.

Ten-year-old Peter pushed the step stool over to the front of the sink, climbed up, and turned on the tap. He was short for his age and slight of build, with his father's deep-blue eyes and his mother's straight dark hair. He'd inherited his mother's sober manner as well, and perhaps that was why no one had noticed the changes wrought in him.

Peter himself was unaware of the change. He'd accepted his lot from the first, hoping that a reason for it would one day be made clear to him. And with the arrival of the duke's letter, the reason had appeared at last.

It was the window. The window would be the most important job Dad had ever done, the most important job imaginable, and Peter had to make sure that nothing interfered with it. Because one day when it was completed would Mum be truly at rest. Then Peter could rest, too.

Peter turned off the water, then paused, distracted by a strange thumping noise in the hall. The sound was familiar, but he couldn't quite remember where he'd heard it before. Puzzled, he stepped down from the stool and crept to the hall door to peek out. The sight that met his eyes made his stomach knot with dismay.

It wasn't his usual reaction. Unlike most big brothers, Peter was fond of his five-year-old sister. Dad called Nell his changeling, because of her odd ways and fair hair, but she reminded Peter of a painting he'd seen in one of Dad's picture books, a rosy-cheeked cherub with sparkling blue eyes and a mop of curls like Dad's, only Nell's were golden instead of gray. Admittedly, none of the cherubs in the picture books had carried a small, chocolate-brown teddy bear, but Peter could no more imagine his sister without Bertie than he could picture an angel without wings. And now the sight was making his stomach hurt.

"Where did you and Bertie find those clothes, Nell?" Peter asked.

"I am Queen Eleanor," Nell announced, clutching Bertie with one hand and pinching the hem of her skirt with the other, "and this is Sir Bertram of Harris, and we do not speak with pheasants."

"That's *peasants*, Nell." Peter had known it would be a mistake for Dad to read the King Arthur stories to her, but that was not the immediate problem. The immediate problem was that Nell had dressed Bertie in Mum's favorite silk scarf and herself in Mum's pink flowery dress and white high-heeled shoes, and Dad was due home at any minute.

"You must call me Your Majesty," Nell corrected him. "And you must call Bertie Sir Ber—"

"Nell, stop playing."

"I am Queen—"

"Nell."

"Auntie Bea?" Nell spoke in her own voice, her eyes darting to the parlor door.

Peter shook his head, relieved. Nell was cooperative enough once he got her attention, but Queen Eleanor could be stubborn as a mule.

"No," Peter explained, "those clothes. It'll make Dad sad to see them."

"Will it?" Nell conferred briefly with Bertie before asking the inevitable: "Why?"

“Because they’re Mum’s. They’ll remind Dad of her.”

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“And that will make him sad?”

“Yes,” Peter replied patiently, “that will make him very sad.” He considered telling Nell about the window, but decided against it. Queen Eleanor might turn it into a royal proclamation. “Come along, Nell. Help me pack those things up again and I’ll find you and Bertie something else to play with.”

“Something beautiful?”

He nodded. “Something beautiful.” Peter unwound Bertie’s scarf, then helped Nell step out of the high heels and slipped the dress up and over her head. He was pleased to see a kelly-green jumper and blue dungarees underneath. With Nell, he was never sure what to expect.

He followed her back to the storeroom, where she’d pried open one of the boxes in which Dad had packed Mum’s things. After folding the dress and scarf, he laid them reverently on top of the other clothes, dusted the bottoms of the shoes on his pantleg, and placed them, soles up, atop the scarf. He closed the box, then turned to scan the storeroom.

“Nell,” he said, as a plan began to take shape, “do you and Bertie remember the story Dad read about the Romans?”

“And the lions?” Nell asked, brightening. “And the chariots and the swords and—”

“And the noble Romans in their beautiful white gowns?”

“Yes, we remember.” Nell nodded eagerly.

“Well,” said Peter, plucking a clean sheet from the stack on top of the tumble-dryer, “those gowns were called *togas*. Only the richest and most beautiful Romans were allowed to wear them.” Peter thought he might be stretching the truth a bit here, but never mind. He draped the sheet over Nell’s left shoulder, then swept it around to her right one.

“And they wore them to see the lions,” Nell said dreamily, reaching for a pillowcase with which to adorn Bertie, “and the chariots and the swords and ...”

Peter backed out of the storeroom as Nell’s eyes took on that familiar, faraway look. That should hold her until supper. He could refold the linen after she and Bertie had gone to bed.

Peter paused on his way back to the kitchen. Turning slowly, he approached the door to his father’s workroom. Sometimes he needed to look in, to remind himself of the reason Dad had left so much of the work to him. Carefully, quietly, he turned the knob, opening the door just far enough to peek inside.

There were the racks of colored glass Dad planned to use in the duke’s window, and the packet of photographs the duke had sent. His father had shown him the photographs of the window, explaining how he would clean it up and make it good as new. His father hadn’t explained all of it, but he hadn’t needed to, because Peter understood.

Peter had heard the rector explain it to some visitors, not long after Mum had died, how the soffit was like a window with God’s light shining through. Auntie Beatrice had got it wrong, saying that Mum’s soul would spend eternity in heaven. Peter knew that it was only waiting there, waiting for Dad to make this place for it on earth, this perfect place of rainbow colors, where God’s light would shine forever.





Bransley Manor was the first stop on Emma's meticulously planned itinerary. She'd learned of Bransley at a gardening seminar and toured its grounds once before, with Richard. She'd been enchanted by the avenue of monkey-puzzle trees, Richard by the hedge maze beyond the pond. Bransley Manor wasn't known for its massed azaleas, but Emma had included it on her tour nonetheless. A one-hour visit would break up the drive from London to Plymouth.

Emma parked her rental car beside an ancient black Morris Minor, the sole occupant of the manor's small parking area. Bransley was an inconspicuous British gem, well off the tour buses' beaten tracks, and after a whirlwind week of theater in London Emma relished the prospect of having the grounds to herself. Removing her neatly printed itinerary from her shoulder bag, she made a careful X beside the first entry, then took a moment to savor the scene.

The monkey puzzles were just as she remembered them, thorny and twisted and eccentrically grand. The fritillaria borders were new, though, and she wasn't sure she approved. The spiky topknots seemed too dramatic for the setting, and that particular shade of orange clashed resoundingly with the buttery tones of the stone gateposts. If she were head gardener here—

"Everything all right, ma'am?"

Emma started. A young man was standing a few yards away from her car, hunched over and peering at her, a mud-encrusted trowel dangling from one hand.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" He was wearing a tan shirt and tight jeans, and his auburn hair glinted penny-bright in the sun. He was no more than twenty, brown-eyed, freckle-faced, and well muscled, and his voice held the detached politeness that a well-brought-up young man might show to the elderly or infirm. It was the constantly reiterated "ma'am" that did it. He might as well call me "Granny," Emma thought.

"Are you lost, ma'am?" he inquired.

"No, thank you," said Emma. "I know exactly where I am."

"Good enough," the young man said. "Hope you enjoy your visit, ma'am." With a courteous smile he walked past Emma's car and disappeared between the gateposts. Watching the sway of his narrow hips, Emma felt a wave of self-pity wash over her. Would it have been such a terrible moral compromise, she wondered dismally, to have touched up her mousy-brown hair with something livelier, blonder?

Catching sight of herself in the rearview mirror, Emma paused to take stock. Was her nose a bit too long, her jaw a touch too strong to be called beautiful? Had long hours in the garden traced fine lines

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