

“Does nothing ever ruffle your calm, Verity? Or do you insist on producing *sensible* advice under all circumstances?” Will demanded, irritation suddenly overcoming the tattered remnants of good manners.

“Would you rather something did ruffle me?” She paused, one hand on the door frame, arrested in the act of tossing her wrecked hat inside, and smiled at him. It was not reassuring. “I have no intention of not being sensible, or of pretending to be less intelligent than I am, even if you would prefer me to produce some tears and flutter my handkerchief. I have no idea how to have a fit of the vapors, if that is what you are expecting, Will.”

It might be easier if she did succumb to nerves, he admitted to himself. Then he could rely on his own judgment without having to give due consideration to her, undoubtedly reasonable, objections. That smile—genuine, amused, warm. He had no idea she could smile like that.

Author Note

Where the inspiration for a novel comes from always varies for me—sometimes a character arrives in my imagination, sometimes a pair of lovers or sometimes a scene or a place.

With Will and Verity's story, I saw Verity in her excavation, clutching a skull, and a handsome gentleman crashing down in front of her—but who they were and how they had arrived in this situation, I had no idea. So I let them talk and gradually they began to reveal themselves to me. Will is a duke bearing a crushing load of responsibility and with an upbringing that had almost—but not quite—suppressed his wicked sense of humor. Verity is a bishop's daughter with an independent streak and a secret that make her a most unsuitable match for a very proper duke.

But...an attraction that they won't admit to, a shared sense of the ridiculous and the wicked schemes of a brood of unruly children keep throwing the two together.

Will and Verity took over and told me their story—and I hope you enjoy discovering it as much as I did writing it.

LOUISE ALLEN



*Least Likely to
Marry a Duke*

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Least Likely to Marry a Duke

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Louise Allen loves immersing herself in history. She finds landscapes and places evoke the past powerfully. Venice, Burgundy and the Greek islands are favorite destinations. Louise lives on the Norfolk coast and spends her spare time gardening, researching family history or traveling in search of inspiration. Visit her at louiseallenregency.co.uk, @louiseregency and janeaustenslondon.com.

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To Chris, Dickie, Robbie and Darren,
who built me my wonderful library and study.

Chapter One



Great Staning, Dorset—May 1st, 1814

William Xavier Cosmo de Whitham Calthorpe, Fourth Duke of Aylsham—William to his recently deceased grandfather, Will in his own head and Your Grace to the rest of the world—strode up the gentle slope of the far boundary of his new home and relaxed into the calming certainty that all was as it should be.

There was the slight matter of the turmoil he had left behind in the house, but he would do battle with that later, when he returned for breakfast. Patience and the application of benevolent discipline was all that was required. A lot of patience.

Now he was doing what any responsible landowner did first thing in the morning—he was walking his estate, learning its strengths and weaknesses and needs so that he could be a good landlord. He was the Duke now and he knew his duty, whether it was to the undisciplined brood of half-siblings who were currently making domestic life hideous or the hundreds of tenants and the numerous estates that were now his responsibility.

Oulton Castle, twenty miles away, was the true seat of the Dukes of Aylsham, but although, naturally, it was in a state of perfect repair and management, it was completely unsuitable for the large and lively family he had just acquired. This manor, Stane Hall, had been in the hands of excellent tenants for years, but with its improved drainage, its unoccupied Dower House and its complete absence of lethal moat, towering medieval walls and displays of ancient weaponry it was a far safer home for now. He could only be thankful that the tenant had been ready to retire to Worthing and had needed no persuasion to leave.

Will pushed thoughts of problems away to focus on what he was doing. This was the seventh day he had been in residence and the first morning he had been able to spare to inspect the land. Ahead must be the northernmost point of the boundary.

He checked the map he had folded into his pocket. Sure enough, the six low irregular bumps that lay before him like a string of half-buried beads were shown with stylised hatching and labelled '*Ancient Tumuli (Druidic).*' The low morning sun cast long shadows from their bases and the boundary line was shown on the map as running along the crest of the chain. There was no sign of a fence.

That was not good. Fences were of the utmost importance to a perfectly managed estate and he intended Stane Hall to be perfect. Dukes did not accept second-best, either in their staff, their surroundings or themselves. That had been one of the first lessons his grandfather had taught him when the third Duke had plucked Will out of the miserable chaos that life had become with his father, the now deceased and always erratic George, Marquess of Bromhill.

The old Duke's first attempts at training the perfect heir had all gone for nothing the moment his son, the newly widowed George, set eyes on the lovely Miss Claudia Edwards, writer and passionate educational theorist. A life made notorious by the couple's eccentricity had ended with the Marquess's plunge to his death from a rooftop, where he had been putting into practice the theory that a gentleman should be able to perform any task he might ask of others, including manual labour.

Three months later Will was still struggling to feel anything but deep irritation that his father, whom he had hardly known, had failed to grasp the simple fact that he had an obligation to provide employment for as many local people as possible, not replace his own roof tiles at the expense of a skilled craftsman. Will rather suspected that the realisation that he could now hand the title safely to his grandson had enabled the old Duke to finally give up the fight against a debilitating heart condition.

The loss of his grandfather was one for which he was not yet ready to forgive his father. Will had been Marquess of Bromhill for only five weeks when he found himself Duke of Aylsham. That was only eleven—no, twelve weeks ago, he corrected himself. Three months and the pain inside for the grandfather he had lived with for fourteen years had not subsided. But while dukes might observe all the outward shows of mourning, they did not speak of loss and loneliness and certainly not of their fear of finding themselves inadequate to the role they had to fill, Will told himself. He wondered if the old man had felt like this when he had inherited the title. Grandfather would never have admitted it, he thought ruefully.

Will had absorbed all his predecessor's lessons and

he intended to be every inch as perfect a nobleman as the third Duke. That would be easier with the right wife at his side, he knew. The old man had been firm on the importance of not marrying an unsuitable woman and that rule was underlined in Will's mental list of priorities, as if his father's example was not warning enough.

Suitable meant well bred, handsome, fertile and brought up to the highest standards of deportment. A pleasant disposition, an adequate level of education and reasonable intelligence were, of course, desirable. Unconventional ideas and eccentricity were impossible, as demonstrated by his stepmother, who, despite perfectly understandable displays of grief for her recent loss, absolutely refused to observe any of the mourning customs suitable to her sex and station in life.

Will brought his mind back from the problem of his stepmother and the prospect of the Marriage Mart—which could not be contemplated for the next forty weeks of mourning, unfortunately—and reapplied it to the matter of boundary fences. He could have brought his estate manager with him on this walk, but he preferred to make his own judgements first, not allow his staff to gloss over shortcomings or try to distract him from problems.

Brooding unproductively on the past had brought him to the foot of the largest tumulus. Naturally, he had come out dressed appropriately for the rigours of the countryside, and well broken-in boots and his second-oldest pair of breeches were entirely suitable for scrambling up hillocks.

His boots slid on the rabbit-cropped grass as he reached the top, turning as he climbed to face back the way he had come. From here the view over his park was a fine one with the distant glint of water from the lake, a

group of grazing fallow deer and mature trees in picturesque coppices. The warming air brought green scents, a hint of hedgerow blossoms, the rumour of the dung hill awaiting spreading in a nearby field.

Was the house visible from here? He shifted back a step to change the angle and the ground vanished from beneath him, pitching him down into the mound in a shower of earth and stones.

Will landed with a painful thud on his tail bone. Dirt and pebbles rained down on his bare head and his low-crowned beaver hat rolled away over beaten earth to the knees of the young woman crouched in front of him. The young woman with a loose plait of rich toffee-coloured hair over one shoulder, wide brown eyes—and a human skull clutched to her midriff. At which point something bit him sharply on the left buttock.

There was very little warning, only a long shadow falling across her as a body crashed down into her excavation slicing into the mound. Verity lunged forward, grabbed at the skull and rocked back on her heels as the man landed in front of her with a grunt, one short, sharp Anglo-Saxon expletive and a loud rattle of stones.

Silence. It was neither a thunderbolt nor a fallen angel facing her, either of which might have been easier to deal with. The dust settled, leaving her staring at a fair-haired man, blue eyes narrowed against the light, mouth set with either discomfort or fury. Very likely both. He was dressed in expensive, simple and utterly appropriate country clothing, now filthy.

Utterly appropriate. I know who you are. Oh, no...

His handsome face contorted in a wince of pain

and she realised why. As social disasters went, this ranked high.

‘Sir, I fear you may be sitting on a tooth.’

Not the correct form of address, but as we have not been introduced...

Those blue eyes narrowed a little further as he shifted on to his right hip, reached underneath his coat-tails and produced a human jawbone. ‘A tooth? Singular?’ he enquired. Then his gaze shifted to what she was cradling against her bosom. ‘Madam, you appear to be holding a skull. A human skull.’

‘Yes,’ Verity agreed.

Presumably he was being sarcastic with the *appear*. It could hardly be mistaken for anything else.

‘I am and it is. Is the jawbone undamaged? I mean, are you unhurt?’ There was no really ladylike way of asking a duke if his left buttock had been wounded by an Ancient Briton. It was absolutely out of the question to snatch the jaw from him to check that it was intact. *The bone, that is.*

‘I am sure it is nothing serious, madam. I apologise for my language earlier.’ It would be much easier to deal with this if he had shown the anger he must be feeling. Or even moaned in acknowledgement of the pain. As it was, the conversation might as well be happening at Almack’s. The Duke shifted his long legs as though to stand.

‘No!’ She took a breath and moderated the volume. ‘Please stay exactly where you are or you will damage the sides. Just allow me to move everything.’ Verity placed the skull carefully in the box of hay she had prepared for it and held out her hand for the jaw. When that

was safe she moved back, gathered her skirts around her ankles and stood up.

The Duke, being a gentleman, had averted his gaze. He was probably too cross to consider ogling her in any case. Verity ignored the urge to see exactly what would provoke him into behaving improperly and waited while he rose to his feet in an enviably effortless and controlled manner.

He is the youngest Duke, not yet thirty, and he has no vices to mar that fine figure.

Her cousin Roderick had told her about the man who was now Duke of Aylsham. His reputation had been built up over many years of being merely the impeccable Lord Calthorpe and apparently the man was a byword for acting with absolute propriety under all circumstances.

They call him Lord Appropriate.

Roddy had written that about eighteen months ago, in the course of one of his chatty, gossip-filled letters.

Of course his father the Marquess, is eccentric, to put it very kindly, and his stepmother is a notorious bluestocking, so it was probably a relief to be rescued by his grandfather, who took him to live with him when Calthorpe was a boy.

The old Duke is the stiffest stickler for what is due to his position that you may imagine, but, even so, Calthorpe appears to have gone to extremes to conform. One day he will be the starchiest duke in the kingdom. He has even managed a duel with perfect correctness—a lady was insulted, he issued a challenge, deloped, shook hands with the

other man even though he did not delope, merely missed, and refused to gossip afterwards. Inhuman, I call it.

It seemed she was responsible for shaking an entirely improper oath out of the man, in addition to ruining his lovely but tastefully well-worn clothes, scraping his expensive boots and biting, by proxy, his perfect ducal backside.

And it probably is perfect, judging by how fit he seems. Those thighs...

At least he was capable of standing and nothing appeared to be broken. Verity told herself to wait until after the Duke had gone before she fussed over her careful excavation through the tumulus. ‘You are probably wondering what I am doing?’ she said. The very way he was *not* looking at her outfit of a plain skirt, laced boots and tweed jacket conveyed perfectly his shock at seeing a gentlewoman so attired. Goodness knew where her straw hat had gone.

‘I was surprised to find my Druidical monument bisected, I must confess,’ he said, perfectly courteous, but without a hint of a smile. ‘I was even more surprised to discover that it was being filleted by a lady.’

Verity opened her mouth, shut it again, taken aback by just how much she wanted to shake the man. He was polite. He was, not to put too fine a point on it, a supremely decorative example of his sex. But all she wanted was to shock another swear word out of him, or a smile, or an admission by so much as a flicker of an eyelid that he had glanced at her ankles as she stood up. His manner was perfectly correct, but she could tell, as clearly as if he had said so, that he thoroughly disap-

proved of her and thought her occupation bizarre and unseemly.

Oh, the horror of it! A female engaged in an intellectual pursuit involving engaging her brain and getting her hands dirty! Civilisation as he knows it will probably come to an end at any moment.

‘I am sorry to contradict you, sir, but it is not your monument, it is *our* monument. I have been most careful to excavate a section through this side of it only. *My* side. I am not convinced it has any connection at all with the Druids and I am most certainly not *filleting* it. This is a precise excavation conducted according to the most modern antiquarian principles. I can lend you the relevant papers on the subject if you are interested.’ She smiled, the kind of winsome, ladylike smile she had once reserved for tea parties at the Bishop’s Palace before Papa retired. The Duke was an intelligent man, she was sure. He would recognise a lightly disguised snarl when he saw one.

The contrast between her words and the smile made him narrow his eyes, presumably in displeasure. ‘Your side? This land belongs to you?’

Verity pointed to the one remaining post sticking out of the crown of the mound, twelve carefully measured inches back from the edge of her cut. ‘That is the remains of your fence.’

His lips tightened. Did he think that was an implied rebuke about the state of his boundaries? ‘I fear I should have introduced myself earlier.’ He removed his gloves, produced a vast and spotless white linen handkerchief, wiped his hands free of the dirt that had penetrated despite them and held out the right one to her. ‘I am Aylsham.’

‘I had guessed as much, Your Grace.’ Verity swiped her hand over her skirt and took his. ‘I am Miss Wingate.’ She retrieved her fingers rather abruptly. ‘My father is the Bishop of Elmham—the retired Bishop, that is. The current incumbent’s country seat is nearer the county boundary, but the Old Palace actually belongs to Papa. He bought it from the Church Commissioners when he was recovering from his stroke. They thought it too antiquated for present times, but we are very fond of it.’

She was talking too much and recognising why was no help. This was an attractive man—even if he was a judgemental aristocrat—and he had her at a disadvantage. She was partly responsible for his accident, she was looking a fright and under these circumstances she had no idea how to behave with him.

‘Miss Wingate. I was intending to give myself the pleasure of calling on your father tomorrow. If his health permits, of course?’

Why am I cross? Verity asked herself as she explained that the afternoon was the best time for her father and that, naturally, he would be delighted to meet the Duke. *Because I care what he thinks,* she answered. *And that is infuriating.* Just because he had broad shoulders and a firm chin and blue eyes and looked as though his smile—if he ever produced one—would be delicious, there was no reason to fawn over the man. She spent her life ensuring that, as far as it was within her power, men did not get fawned upon to the disadvantage of women. Once had been quite enough in her experience.

Now the Duke was looking around him. A small furrow appeared between straight brows two shades darker

than his hair. 'You are alone, Miss Wingate? I cannot see your maid or your labourers.'

'My groom will be collecting me at eight.' She glanced up to the east, noting the position of the sun. 'It must almost be that now. If you will excuse me, I will secure my excavation.' The skull was the most important thing, of course, but she had to make sure that the descent of one long-limbed male had not disturbed or damaged anything else.

'May I assist?'

'No,' she said sharply. 'I mean, no, thank you, Your Grace. If you could just stand over here, clear of the cut surfaces and the floor? Yes, there, perfect.'

Stop it, she scolded herself as she picked up the brush and tidied up the fallen pebbles and earth. He is not perfect, merely a well-formed gentleman. And do not pretend you were not examining the rear view just now. You knew perfectly well the tails of his coat would disguise any sign of damage done by that jawbone.

The Duke had broad shoulders and a trim waist to go with those long legs. It was maddening—surely *something* had to be imperfect? Other than his manner, of course. Who would need an ice house when they had the Duke of Aylsham to hand, ready to cast a chill over any situation?

The sound of wheels on gravel heralded the arrival of Tom with the pony and trap. He pulled up well clear of the excavation as he had been taught and came over, hat in hand. 'Good morning, sir. Miss Wingate, are you ready?'

'This is the Duke of Aylsham, Tom, and, yes, I am ready. Please put the tools in the back and then this box, very carefully.'

* * *

Will watched the retreating vehicle, picked up his hat and flicked the worst of the soil off it with his handkerchief. Both hat and handkerchief appeared ruined to him, but Notley, his valet, would no doubt work his magic on them, along with the scuffed boots, scarred gloves and soiled coat.

He made his way around the mound to the gap between it and the next, smaller, tumulus. For some reason he wanted to have his feet on his own land before he thought about that little episode.

What a hoyden Miss Wingate was, not at all what a prelate's daughter should be. Will lengthened his stride along the headland, making for the point where a hedge and track cut back towards the house. Dressed like a working woman, no hat, no gloves, hair coming undone on her shoulders, grubbing about on hands and knees in the earth—and handling a human skull as though it was a pudding basin. Outrageous. *And* she had been laughing at him because of where that confounded jawbone had attacked him, he could tell, even though she had kept her face perfectly straight. There had been a devilish twinkle of amusement in her eyes. They were a rather attractive brown...

The unfortunate Bishop must be sick indeed if he was allowing his daughter to carry on in such a manner, Will concluded as he reached the track. In no way was such an occupation fit for a gentlewoman. Even his stepmother drew the line at grubbing about in earth for old bones. It was most unfortunate, because there was no way in which he could prevent his half-sisters from making her thoroughly unsuitable acquaintance, given that they were now neighbours. He could hardly snub a bishop.

How old was she? Twenty-three or four? Those dark eyes, that hair, like golden toffee streaked through with rich brown, those long legs and the elegant curves as she had risen to her feet... Her feet had been encased in boots more fitted for an under-gardener, but the flash of ankle he had glimpsed had been slender and rounded.

Stop it, Will, his conscience admonished as he climbed over a stile. She is clearly going to be an embarrassment as a neighbour and you have no business thinking about women at the moment in any case. Not for another forty weeks.

This mourning was a confounded nuisance. It was all very right and proper, of course. And he sincerely and deeply grieved for the loss of his grandfather, but he desperately needed help with his brood of half-siblings and a wife would be perfect for that. A wife with nerves of steel and a rigorous sense of duty, he added to his mental list of requirements. But no lady who was suitable to be the wife of a duke would consider flouting convention and being wooed and wed before the mourning period of a year was over.

And now he had gone half the distance he had intended to cover that morning and the encounter with Miss Wingate had made him forget to record points about the land as he went. Will climbed the next stile, sat down on the far step and got out his notebook.

Blockage in the west ditch, the fence across the tumuli...

A warm, mocking brown gaze... *Mocking*. She thought that entire episode was amusing, the confounded chit.

* * *

‘Good morning, Papa. Good morning Mr Hoskins, Larling.’ Verity caught sight of herself in the long mirror as she entered her father’s bedchamber on the stroke of half past nine and gave her reflection a nod of approval. She had bathed, changed, breakfasted and organised the events of the early morning into a suitably edited version in her head and now, looking the perfect model of a senior clergyman’s daughter, was ready to keep her father company while he breakfasted.

Her father smiled his lopsided smile, the Reverend Mr Hoskins jumped to his feet and mumbled a greeting in return and Larling, the valet, placed the breakfast tray on the bedside table.

A savage brain seizure almost two years before had left her father unsteady on his feet, liable to tire rapidly and with virtually no comprehensible speech. It had, mercifully, not affected his very considerable intellect. James Wingate was still a formidable scholar of the early church in Britain and was continuing his work with the assistance of his Chaplain and secretary, Christopher Hoskins.

Trial and error had helped the household establish a strict routine. Verity rose at dawn, had a cup of coffee, put an apple in her pocket and went off to her excavations for two hours, returning to bathe and take breakfast. At nine thirty her father broke his fast, in bed, while she entertained him with the results of her morning’s excavating and plans for the day.

When he rose the Bishop would retire to his study with Hoskins and they would work, communicating in their own manner, until luncheon at twelve thirty. Then

her father would rest for two hours and either resume his researches until four or receive callers.

Which left Verity the afternoon free, provided there were no visitors and the cares of housekeeping did not entangle her for more than the morning. And today there was nothing to detain her. The threat of a descent by the Duke tomorrow she would worry about when it happened.

Her father finished his porridge and lifted an eyebrow, her cue to recount events so far.

‘I have succeeded in removing the skull intact, Papa. I can see no sign of anything buried with the body, but then, the rest of the skeleton is not visible, being under the far side of the mound. I will clean it and take measurements and then I can rebury it and fill in the cut. You recall that I have already made sketches of the exposed interior of the mound.’

He nodded, smiling his approval, encouraging her to continue. The only problem was, nothing else had happened at the excavation other than her unexpected visitor.

‘The Duke was out walking and...er...dropped in to see what I was doing.’

‘The Duke of Aylsham?’ Mr Hoskins asked, quite as though the neighbourhood was replete with a selection of dukes to choose from.

‘Yes. He was perfectly civil and expressed a desire to call tomorrow, Papa. I said we would be happy to receive him.’

Her father’s hands moved in the rapid signs that only his Chaplain was able to decipher at speed. ‘Does he appear to be intellectually inclined?’ Mr Hoskins asked.

‘I have no idea, I’m afraid. He seemed intelligent,

although whether he has intellectual leanings I could not judge. He does not seem to know anything of antiquarian matters.'

And he certainly does not appear to believe in women using their brains.

The Chaplain was translating again. 'I look forward to meeting him. His grandfather was a man of great powers—I have high hopes of our new neighbour.'

Verity told herself to be glad. The stimulus would be good for Papa, the presence of the ducal household would be excellent for the local economy and she should not be selfish. What did it matter if the man thought her an eccentric hoyden or blamed her for the teeth marks on his posterior? His opinion, good or bad, was a matter of supreme indifference to her. She had better things to think about, surely, than a pair of chilly blue eyes.