

A woman with her hair in an updo, wearing a long, flowing purple gown with lace detailing on the back, stands with her back to the camera. She is positioned in front of a large, ornate stone building with classical architectural features like columns and arches. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day.

Lord
Love a
Duke

The Lords of Oxford

Book One

Renée
Reynolds

Lord Love a Duke

Book One in The Lords of Oxford series

Renée Reynolds

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For Carie,

a dear friend who taught me novels are like potato chips . . . you
cannot just read one.

And for my Mother, Ma Mère,

for being my staunchest supporter, my fairest critic, and my greatest
example.

Chapter One

Now is the winter of our discontent . . .

William Shakespeare, Richard The Third, Act 1, Scene 1

London – May, 1814

"I have decided the moment is at hand to repay Jonas for his constant interference in my life," declared Lady Miranda Leighton, "and who better to help me than my best friend?" She batted her eyelashes in an exaggerated flutter and pasted her best look of innocence on her face.

Lady Juliet Quinn, said best friend, turned from her place of contemplation on the window seat with a mixture of curiosity and dread. "I had thought your brother left you alone and as such you had no need for schemes against him. Why ever do you want to engage him now? I have been in such charity with your family and have successfully avoided attracting their ire for nearly five years. They quite think me the best of ladies," she quipped with a wink at her friend. Juliet took a breath and renewed her argument. "And do not forget our past dodges were quite the failures and usually resulted in damage to our wardrobes and freedom." She did not add that she also found it useful to avoid Miranda's brother, Jonas Leighton, Duke of Dorset and head of their family these past two years; she remembered her unfortunate habit of trailing and spying on him when she was younger. She gave an involuntary cringe of embarrassment over the memories of her past infatuation.

"Juliet! Do you attend me still?" Miranda's voice interrupted her daydream. Juliet shook herself slightly and left her memories to the past. "You know my mother adores you as a second daughter, as did my dear Papa. And I had been very content being beneath my brother's notice until the start of the Season. In fact, he had quite left

me alone since he went to university, until Papa died and Jonas became great high lord of the family. No . . . this is all about his suffocating behavior of late. Since assuming the title and heading our family he has grown even more alarmingly stale and morose, but only recently has he begun to constantly monitor what I do, where I go, and whom I see. His boring stuffiness I can tolerate; his daily interferences I cannot." Miranda stamped her dainty slippered foot to add emphasis to her frustrated comment, her mouth turning down in a frown.

"These past two years have undoubtedly changed your brother's life in myriad ways. You were previously his sister; now he sees all the responsibilities he has toward you. I am sure he only--"

"You mean I am his liability, not responsibility. I understand Jonas had his life changed dramatically, as we all did when Papa died so unexpectedly, but as you said it has been two years. What I cannot fathom, and will not suffer, is why he has decided that he can ignore my feelings and wishes and bend me to his will. Even Papa did not do that. It is too much and he goes too far!" Her frown had now transformed into a full-blown pout as she plopped down indelicately onto her bed.

"Don't frown, Randa, you'll wrinkle." Juliet studied her friend's downcast expression for a few moments. "So tell me then, what has your brother done?"

"The better question would be 'what has he not done?'" Miranda threw up her hands in exasperation, rising from the bed to stalk back and forth across the plush, dusty pink Aubusson carpet in her bed chamber. Juliet kicked off her slippers and tucked her legs under her skirt upon the window seat, settling in to hear her friend's rant.

"Jules, he has required me to keep an account book of how I spend my pin money, with a threat to lessen the amount if I do not cease buying ribbons and bonnets. He has forbidden me to receive any calls from gentlemen unless he is available to chaperone. I am allowed no more picnics in the park, and you know of his decree that I cannot leave a ball room for a breath of fresh air without him or my mother in

attendance. His announcement at breakfast this morning, however, is the final straw, and I know you will agree." She paused for dramatic effect and straightened her skirts. "He has decided to remove from Town *this week!* He will not even wait until later in the summer when the rest of Society departs. He thinks I am spending too much time shopping and dancing and not focusing on finding a suitable husband. Suddenly, at the ripe old age of twenty, he has decided I need to be betrothed by summer's end. Insufferable!"

Juliet could not hold back her laughter at the end of her friend's petulant tirade and quickly clapped a hand over her mouth to quiet her outburst. Her gray eyes sparkled with mirth even as she gave voice to an apology. "I am sorry for the burdens you must now bear under the new Duke, but I do have to agree with your brother. You have an overabundance of ribbon." She flicked her glance to the three small drawers of Miranda's wardrobe currently spilling fripperies of varying styles, colors, and accents onto the floor.

Miranda retrieved a pillow from her bed and threw it at Juliet, who caught it with ease and proceeded to lie back on it in comfort. "Ha, ha. Laugh while you can, my dearest, but you have an equal share in my troubles. You are leaving London as well."

This information brought Juliet upright and to her feet as well. "What?"

It was now Miranda's turn to laugh, which she made no attempt to hide. She smiled with smug delight. "Oh yes, *His Grace*, the Duke of Dorset, has decided to host a house party at our summer estate, and he has done your family the honor of presenting them with a most gracious invitation to join us. He has invited gentlemen he considers good prospects for marriage. My mother, in turn, has persuaded your mother that this opportunity could be advantageous to you as well, since you are as long in the tooth as I. Mother and he evidently sat down a week ago to make out the guest list and I am told the invitations went out three days past. It is *fait accouchement*."

"*Fait accouchement* means . . . well, it actually means nothing to a Frenchman, but literally translated it means 'confinement for childbirth.' Am I correct in assuming you did not mean the invitations were for

observation of a birthing?" questioned Juliet with a barely contained smirk.

"Botheration, Jules, you know what I meant. *A fait accomplie* or something like that. I mean the deed is done. The invitations are sent. And my mother is currently ensconced with yours in full party planning mode. You probably passed her carriage on your way over here. Now who laughs?" She took Juliet's former seat at the window and played with the tassels on the pillow she had thrown earlier.

"Blast! Your mother knew my parents would fall right in league with any plans of creating a personal marriage mart. That was too tempting a morsel for them, to be sure." Juliet crossed her arm over her waist and propped a hand under her chin as she stood digesting these developments. She tapped a finger to her lip in contemplation. "Should we take offense over this extreme and urgent desire our families possess to rid themselves of our presence?" She now shared in the anger and frustration vented earlier by her friend. "You meant to say *fait accompli*, by the by. That means 'accomplished fact,'" Juliet offered with an absent-minded air as she continued to process the startling change in her plans for the next fortnight.

"Now you see my call for mischief! We cannot stop our departure from Town and were quite left out of the guest selection, but we can resolve to make this party miserable for the puppet master rather than just us, his puppets. What say you?"

Juliet scrunched her brow and came to a decision. "My parents know of my desire to forgo marriage, so no doubt they are delighted with this plan. Thus far they have been content merely to pine for my future with hopeful expression each time I dance." A fierce look of determination crossed her face. "My dearest Miranda, you have my full cooperation to thwart the success of this party."

Miranda ran to Juliet and they clasped hands. She winked at her best friend, her closest confidante since meeting when they were five years of age. "In for a penny . . ."

Juliet sighed deeply and slowly. "In for a pound." They hooked the little

fingers of their opposite hands together in the secret handshake they developed as little girls.

Chapter Two

Though this be madness, there is method in't.

William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 2

Lady Miranda took a seat at her desk, removing a sheet of foolscap from the drawer. She checked the nib of her quill for sharpness then pulled back the lid from the crystal inkwell.

"My plan is to execute a series of brilliant attacks against Jonas, attacks of an embarrassing nature. My brother, above all, hates to appear foolish. He has prided himself for too long on his 'superior' intellect and ability to avoid trouble. I vow to disabuse him of that notion." She paused for dramatic effect, straightening in her seat and cocking her head at a slight angle, as if bestowing the most spectacular of revelations. "First, let us sabotage his spirits and dye his mouth, teeth, and lips a shocking blue!"

Juliet gave an involuntary and unladylike snort. Of all the ideas she envisioned Miranda spouting she could honestly admit she never thought of this. "You want to dye his teeth blue? Permanently? And however does one accomplish this?"

"Oh, it's possible and ingenious, if I do say so myself." Miranda poised her quill above the sheet of paper and began to write. "*Number One, obtain bottle of brandy.*" I think we should get a new one from your father's cellar here in Town before we go to Sussex. We are less likely to be caught in the cellar here than there, where all the staff will be constantly restocking supplies for our guests."

"That's easy enough. Hampton keeps a watchful eye on the spirits in our house, no doubt due to my profligate brothers, but I feel confident I can persuade him to aid our cause in this. He has always been my greatest supporter and I feel sure he will part with a bottle for a comical cause."

Miranda tapped the top of her quill on her chin, dusting the feather back and forth in thought. Her brow furrowed as she tried to remember any specifics about brandy. "I have never tasted the concoction myself so we shall rely on your butler to direct our selection." She paused to scratch out her next line. "*Number Two, obtain dye.*" I have heard my modiste talk of dyeing fabric with various leaves and herbs. Our garden is full of plants that would surely do the trick."

A look of alarm passed across Juliet's face at this pronouncement. "No, Miranda! I know not what we need but we cannot use the same media that would dye clothing only. We need something edible," she laughed nervously at the absurdity and possible danger of this deed. "We need to stain his mouth, not kill him!" She looked off in thought then brightened. "I once watched our cook make syrup for a trifle, and when she crushed the berries, they stained the cloth she used. She then boiled the berry juices with sugar to make a thick syrup. The spoon and cloths were stained for days and required much soaking and laundering." Juliet began to laugh in earnest as she remembered Mrs. Selby's shocking hands. Her own tongue had even turned blue after eating some of the berry pulp.

"Heavens, I never thought about possibly poisoning Jonas!" She stewed for a moment. "We have whortleberries that taste ever so good in pie, and I noticed they leave their color behind on the plates. They shan't alter the taste of the brandy too much, do you suppose? But how are we to make the syrup without being caught? Oh! This may be harder than I anticipated." She dropped her quill onto the desk and looked out the window. It was a beautiful day in London, with bright sunshine and shockingly blue sky nearly free of its usual smoky haze. Miranda stared at the street below without focus. The family carriage pulled up to the house, her brother and mother returning home, but this likewise escaped her distracted notice.

Juliet jumped up from her seat on the chaise and ran over to the desk. "We can use the small stove in Father's fishing cabin! It is near the stream by the fence between our houses. No one would see us there."

"Perfect, Jules! Now *'Number Three, add dye to brandy and put it in Jonas' study.'*" She watched as Juliet began to walk a path from the desk to the door, pacing back and forth in thought. "The easiest time would be during the day, when Jonas leads the hunt or fishing or whatever man-games he has planned for the sample husbands. I do not wish him to drink it until late, so his mouth is dyed in the evening or next morning."

Juliet stopped in front of the door. "We replace it after dinner, while the men drink, smoke, and commiserate in the dining room and we ladies get exiled to the drawing room. One of us can sneak off to switch the bottles then."

"Another perfect idea. My-my, Lady Juliet, but aren't you the crafty one today? Is there no end to your devious machinations?" Miranda dipped her quill and began to write out the next phase of their plan, her blonde curls bobbing against her head as she scribed.

"I think, my lady, you shall find me always to be an incredible asset, a veritable fount of good ideas, sound judgment, and prudent actions. Would that I were a man, for I would be the perfect catch as a husband," she finished on a laugh. She twirled around and ran with a grunt into a solid object previously missing from Miranda's room. Miranda looked up from her desk to see her brother standing in the room, his hands on her friend's shoulders to stop her fall. She hastily capped her ink, blew briefly on the sheet, and moved to hide the list in the drawer of her *escritoire*.

"I do not even want to know what that last comment was about, do I? Lady Juliet, pardon me for startling you." The Duke removed his hands and dropped a brief bow, sparing her a glance as he addressed his sister. "I trust you will have your maid begin to organize you for packing at some point today? We leave in two days, Random, with or without all your pretties. If you are not ready at the departure time, I will scoop up the first five gowns and unmentionables I find and that will be the whole of your wardrobe for the next two weeks." He gave her an imperious look to lend credence to his words.

Juliet stumbled back at the removal of the Duke's hands as Miranda's brother swept masterfully into the room. As was typical, he failed to give Juliet much notice. As was also typical, she silently seethed that he still thought her to be of so little consequence. It was not that she wanted him to notice her romantically, so she reasoned to herself, as she once did when she was a child. Her mind drifted briefly to the moment they first met.

For her eighth birthday, Juliet had received a most unusual yet treasured gift from her beloved Papa – her very own pistol. It was an unconventional gift for a most unconventional girl, but their family was rather known for following Society's rules in public and their own unorthodox constructs in private. Thus, a daughter, who desired and was permitted to learn to shoot and hunt, was nothing out of the ordinary for the Quinns.

Juliet took the care and use of her firearm quite seriously and was devoted to becoming as fine a shot as her father, and better than her brothers. She practiced daily, and it was during one such session that she met the Duke, then the Earl of Middlesex, for the first time. He arrived across the fields, from she knew not where, and she had never seen a more handsome boy, with his wind-reddened cheeks, wavy black hair, and startling blue eyes. She knew herself to be in love immediately, with the surety that only an eight-year-old can claim, and she had yet to discover his name.

He was here to meet with her brothers; they were to discuss the details of a hunt they had planned later in the week. Juliet was ecstatic. She would go on her first hunt with this charming boy so unlike her vexing brothers, and she would test her newly acquired skills. Her day had improved ten-fold . . . until she revealed her plan to join in this hunt. Her brothers arrived in time to hear her declaration and deny her dream. They jeered and taunted her with good measure, and she was mortified to be called a 'little girl,' 'shameless hoyden,' and precocious child.' Her brothers grabbed their friend, dragging him off to the house and their hunt arrangements, and Juliet's heart plummeted to her feet.

What happened next remained one of those moments that became a

lasting memory for her: her new acquaintance turned back to her and dropped a formal bow, declaring, "this is not destined to be your hunt, but I've no doubt you shall be ready soon. You are a remarkable shot." He smiled, dimples appearing in his cheeks, before turning to join her siblings in their trek to the house. She still did not know his name, but that trifling detail did not prevent her from vowing in her heart, *I shall love you forever, whoever you are.*

Juliet's mind rejoined the present and she could not prevent the grimace on her face as she remembered her old infatuation. She silently made a new vow, that the Duke would notice her now for her maturity and lack of fawning behavior that marked her schoolroom crush. She now wished him to see her as an independent and intelligent lady. Which would be hard, she had to allow as she chuckled to herself, since his sister was constantly exasperating him with what he perceived to be immature behavior that likely made her guilty by association. The six year difference in their ages had separated them effectively as well, as the Duke left for university then began traveling extensively to learn the management of the ducal properties.

"Oh, what a bag of moonshine, Jonas! I will be packed and ready to go by your scheduled time. As if it matters whether we leave at exactly ten of the clock or not. And stay out of my room! You must ask permission before entering, you know."

"You sound like a hoyden! No wonder you are still unattached, with a mouth like that. And I will enter any room in this house any time I wish, you silly girl. Shall I ring for your maid?" Jonas moved toward the bell pull but waited for her answer, his booted foot making quiet taps on the uncovered floor by her bed. "And we leave at daybreak, which is much nearer seven than ten of the clock. I will advise your maid of this as well."

"Ring it or not, it makes no difference to me. I will not start packing until I am good and ready," she added with a pout. At the return of her brother's ducal glare she stuck her tongue out in response. "You may now leave." Miranda waved in dismissal and fluttered her hands about her desk in an affectation of busyness.

Jonas stalked to the door. "Pack, Random," he tossed over his shoulder on his exit. The way these two talked to each other gave Juliet hope that all siblings talked as spiritedly as she and her brothers. She also gave thanks silently that her brothers were content to harass her verbally without physically meddling in her life. So far, they seemed content to engage in wars of words rather than deeds, which suited her very well.

"Good riddance!" Miranda yelled again before seeing the look of bemusement on Juliet's face and dissolving into a fit of giggles.