

# **DUKE MOST WANTED**

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BRADLEY**



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—*Romantic Times BOOKreviews*

#### THE SPY

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—*Romance Reader at Heart*

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“Bradley carefully layers deception upon deception, keeping the intrigue level high and the tone bright . . . Readers will race through this delightful comedy of errors and eagerly anticipate the next installment.”

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*Duke Most Wanted*



**Celeste Bradley**



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DUKE MOST WANTED

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*This book is dedicated to my sister, Cindy. Through life and loves and kids and gardens, you are always there. I love you.*

*I'd like to acknowledge the fortitude and beyond-the-call patience of my wonderful editor and friend, Monique Patterson. Sorry about the stress, sweetie! I'd also like to thank my assistant, Darbi Gill, for pushing while Monique pulled. Somehow Pooh made it out of Rabbit's door.*

## *Prologue*

Once upon a time, on a lovely spring day in the English countryside, three tiny girls played side by side by side—cousins and future competitors.

The eldest, Sophie, watched an insect crawling across the path, squatting awkwardly so that her hem dragged in the dirt. The middle, Phoebe, sweet and unrestrained, chased a butterfly. The youngest, Deirdre, even then a stunningly beautiful infant, grabbed Sophie's bug and ate it, ignoring Sophie's howl of protest.

Their mothers, Sophie's a frustrated and resentful widow, Phoebe's a kindly but overworked vicar's wife and Deirdre's, an ethereal and unwell beauty, sat watching them from the shady blanket left over from their picnic.

Sophie's mother, who was cousin to the other two, not sisters as they were, slapped irritably at something with too many legs that encroached upon her skirts. "Disgusting idea," she muttered. "I abhor eating outside."

Phoebe's mother, the only woman whose hands showed the wear of actual toil, gently removed the offending creature and set it free in the grass. She smiled to see her daughter playing so joyously. "Insects or no, I think it's delightful to sit at all."

Deirdre's mother fanned her pale cheeks and smiled as well. "I don't get out enough these days. And it's lovely to see the girls play together."

Sophie's mother eyed her own daughter for a long moment, then let her eyes rest on the very pretty daughters of her cousins. No one had said a word so far, but it was obvious that Sophie wasn't going to be the beauty of the three.

No one had mentioned the Pickering trust, either. Yet how could they not be thinking, even now, that their daughters had a chance where they themselves had failed so miserably?

Oh, one sister had found a wealthy enough man, though not a duke by any means. The other had settled for a vicar! She herself had not done much better, for though her late husband had left her settled fairly if she pinched her coppers, she was no higher in life than she'd started!

No, it was up to the next generation. Sophie's mother frowned, gazing at her child's knobby knees and awkward movements. She'd even inherited the Pickering nose!

Was that the sort of girl a duke most wanted?

I, SIR HAMISH Pickering, being of sound mind but ailing body, do make my last will and testament.

I've climbed as high as a man can, despite having twice the brains, wisdom and fortitude of the layabout aristocracy. Yet, a woman can wed as high as her looks will let her, up to a duchess if she may.

There, my own daughters failed me miserably. Morag and Finella, I spent money on you so that you could marry higher but you weren't up to snuff. You expected the world to be handed it to you. If any female of this family wants another farthing of my money she'd best set herself to earn it.

Therefore, I declare that the entirety of my fortune be kept back from my useless daughters and be held in trust for the granddaughter or great-granddaughter who weds a duke of England or weds a man who then becomes a duke through inheritance, at which time the trust will be released to her and only her.

If she has any sisters or female cousins who fail, they may each have a lifetime income of fifteen pounds a year. If she has any brothers or male cousins, though the family does tend to run to daughters, more's the pity, they will receive five pounds apiece, for that's all I had in my pocket when I came to London. Any Scotsman worth his haggis can turn five pounds into five hundred in a few years' time.

A set amount will be given each girl as she makes her debut in Society, for gowns and whatnot.

Should three generations of Pickering girls fail, I wash me hands of the lot of you. The entire fifteen thousand pounds will go to pay the fines and hardships of those who defy the excise man to export that fine Scots whisky which has been my only solace in this family of dolts. If your poor sainted mother could only see you now.

Signed,  
Sir Hamish Pickering  
Witnesses,  
B. R. Stickley, A. M. Wolfe  
Solicitors' firm of Stickley & Wolfe

\* \* \*

NEARLY TWENTY YEARS passed before three young ladies, chaperoned by Deirdre's stepmother, took up residence in London for their debut season.

At first, it seemed that pretty, openhearted Phoebe would be the one to land an almost-duke. When she ran away with his rakish half-brother instead, beautiful, willful Deirdre snatched him up, wedding him within weeks.

Deirdre may have loved her new husband desperately, but he wasn't nearly so pleased with her. Luckily, when she refused to mother his wildly out-of-control child, Meggie, sparks flew—and grew to white-hot flames.

With Deirdre's handsome lord about to inherit the title of Duke of Brookmoor, everyone assumed it was only a matter of time until Deirdre was handed an enormous

amount of money she didn't especially need.

Sophie, tall, plain and socially awkward, had never nurtured any hope of winning the inheritance herself. After all, scholarly, reserved Sophie had never even met a duke!

# Chapter One

*England, 1815*

If someone had told Sophie Blake one year ago that tonight she would find herself sprawled on the rug before the fire with one of the handsomest, most desirable men in London, she would have laughed outright in disbelief.

Yet here she was, stretching lazily in the warmth, gazing fondly at Lord Graham Cavendish, tall of form and dashing of countenance, as he stroked long capable fingers over her bare, sensitive palm—

“Ouch!” Sophie snatched her hand back.

“Got it!” Graham held his pinched fingers up high in triumph. Then he brought his hand down close to his face and peered at his quarry with his striking green eyes. “Blue glass? How in the world did you manage to get a sliver of blue glass in your hand?”

For Sophie, the question wasn’t so much how it happened as why she didn’t glow like a stained glass window after twenty-seven years of shattering delicate valuables with her clumsiness. She simply shrugged innocently at Graham. “Haven’t the foggiest. But thank you. That has bothered me greatly.”

He bowed his head facetiously. “All in a day’s good works.” Then he moved away from the fire, where he had towed her to get the benefit of better light.

They were in the front parlor of a rented house on Primrose Street, near the fashionable district of Mayfair but not quite in it. Sophie had no choice in the house, but she would have liked it well enough had her chaperone, Lady Tessa, not been in residence.

Not that the snide and insulting Tessa spent much time properly chaperoning Sophie—thank Heaven!—for she became easily bored and turned to her lovers for attention for weeks at a time.

Tessa believed that Sophie had come to London to find a husband—more precisely, to compete with her prettier cousins for the few unwed dukes in Society and win the Pickering fortune—so it might have a subtle form of strategy to abandon Sophie to a solitary life without benefit of a chaperone to accompany her to the many events and balls she had every right to attend.

What Tessa didn’t know—nor did anyone else—was that Sophie had never intended to make a play for the fortune, nor even, in truth, to look for a man to make her own. This opportunity to escape the drudgery of her life in Acton had been seized and perpetrated almost before Sophie herself had been aware of what she was doing.

When the letter from Tessa had arrived, announcing the plan to take all three

cousins to London to try their hand at winning the Pickering pounds, Sophie had packed within the hour and left within the day—without a word to anyone.

Here in London without permission or purpose, free for the first time in her life to please herself and not merely be the unappreciated handmaiden of a fretful and demanding woman who held her in no particular regard, Sophie told no one her true mission.

Sophie wanted to have fun. Unsurprisingly, Sophie's fun was not everyone's cup of tea, but she relished being free at last to pursue her own interests and her own pleasures—to read for hours, uninterrupted! Heaven!—and to speak to new and interesting people.

To be truthful, she wasn't very accomplished at that yet, but she had every intention of improving, someday, when there was nothing breakable in sight—and to see something of the world before she must return to a life of dreary servitude. Tessa's petty vengeance suited Sophie perfectly well.

When Sophie's cousins, Phoebe and Deirdre, had yet been unmarried, the three of them had spent many enjoyable hours avoiding Tessa's poisonous company, but now with her cousins away from London with their new husbands, Sophie had no one.

Except Graham.

Of course, Graham had his own house in London, or at least, his father, the Duke of Edencourt, did. It was surely much larger and grander than this simple house. Yet Graham avoided his home as much as possible. The stories Graham told of his three elder brothers made Sophie much happier about her own lack of siblings.

And the time that Graham spent with her made her much happier about her chosen solitude. He never made her feel odd about her extreme height—for his own quite surpassed hers—nor did he twit her about her lack of fashion or her penchant for scholarly pursuits. At least, he did so only in a fond and lazy way that made her feel as though he actually approved.

He was very intelligent himself, though he rarely exerted himself to show it, and his breezy insouciance was a welcome antidote to her own more thoughtful bent.

He was also extremely enjoyable to look at. He was tall and lean, but solid with muscle and more than enough shoulder to fill out his dandy's coat most appealingly. His fair hair curled back from a high brow, and sea green eyes gleamed over sculpted cheekbones and jaw. Most decorative indeed.

Sophie only wished she could return the favor. She was too aware of her not-quite-blond ginger hair and her spectacles and the nose that Tessa had pronounced "the Pickering Curse," with a decided bump where no bump should be.

She watched Graham as he stood brushing industriously at his trouser knees. As well he should, for Lady Tessa was not inclined to treat her servants well, either in manner or in pay, and therefore was picked up after accordingly. Sophie had given up on trying to keep tidy any but her own chamber and this parlor—where she spent these precious rare hours with Graham.

In any case, those he could spare from his busy calendar of gaming, carousing, wenching and generally living up to his reputation as the layabout youngest son of the Duke of Edencourt. As Graham himself said, with three elder brothers to stand between him and the title, such activities were practically his required duty to perform!

“After all, someone has to wear the wool of the black sheep.” He’d sighed melodramatically, then grinned. “And I look very fine in black.”

Now Sophie, still seated on the carpet with her outrageously and unfairly long legs tucked beneath her, rubbed absently at the sore spot on her palm and gazed up at the most intelligent, difficult, contradictory man she had ever had the pleasure to know.

Not that she’d known many men at all. Until she’d come to London, she’d managed to go years without speaking to anyone but the mistress and all-female servants at Acton Manor.

She’d come to be fairly comfortable with the two men the other cousins had married. At least she didn’t break things when they were in the room. Yet it wasn’t until she’d met Graham that she’d ever really come to know a man at all.

It was Graham himself who’d set her at ease. “I am not in the market for a wife—ever!” he’d told her. “Furthermore, I, handsome bloke that I am, am entirely out of your reach. So you see, we might as well be friends, for there isn’t a chance in hell that we will ever be anything else.”

Comforted by that, and won over by a mind that finally equaled her own, Sophie was quite satisfied with the friendship.

Mostly.

Graham was great company—when he remembered to call at all. He was too handsome for his own good with that chiseled jaw and, most detrimental to his character, a rakish smile that made any woman he met forgive him for everything. In advance.

It seemed she was no different. At the moment, he’d not made a move to return to his previous seat on the sofa. Sophie knew the signs.

He was becoming restless. It was always so. He’d tire of the games and petty machinations of Society and he’d seek her out. She’d watch the tension ease from his shoulders and his smile go from smooth to sincere.

Then would follow golden glowing evenings of conversation and cards—he cheated, but then, so did she, only better—and scandalous gossip—his, not hers, for she didn’t know any, except about Lady Tessa, who was Graham’s cousin so it wouldn’t do to repeat it.

Then, usually just when she’d begun to hope it wouldn’t happen again, he’d become twitchy with the need for action and diversion. Of course, she made no sign that she was sorry to see him go. The slightest hint that she was becoming too attached would send him fleeing, possibly forever.

And she wasn’t attached. Not seriously, anyway. How could she be, when he was so very far out of her reach? Who was she but a woman here on false pretenses? When she’d left Acton in the middle of the night, without a word, taking the money Lady Tessa had sent according to the Pickering will, the only thing she was sure of was that she would die if she stayed any longer.

She was no one, a woman too unattractive to marry, too unskilled to work. Only an idiot would allow herself to become too fond of a man she could never have.

Sophie was no idiot. Plain, poor “Sophie the Stick” knew that this time in London was stolen magic, that dreams ended on waking and that some girls had better learn never to dream at all.

So she sent Graham a glare of friendly contempt. “You’re off to that slaving mistress of yours again, aren’t you?” *Very good. It sounded as if you couldn’t care less.*

He slanted her a reproving look as he tugged his weskit smooth. “You ought not to speak of such things. Furthermore, Lady Lilah Christie hardly drools at all—and then only in private.”

Sophie narrowed her eyes. Lady Lilah Christie, social she-wolf, reportedly avid student of all things erotic and sensual, stunning beauty and recent widow, had been married to the only man in London rich enough to support her and enslaved enough to turn a blind eye to her extramarital adventures.

He could not have been actually ignorant of them, for Lilah’s every move—and now Graham’s as well, as her current paramour—was observed and ruthlessly masticated in print by the daily scriblings of that omnipresent tale-bearer, the Voice of Society.

Every night Sophie swore to herself that she would ignore the gossip sheet and every day she rushed to get her hands on it before it disappeared on Tessa’s afternoon breakfast tray.

It was tawdry and inconsequential and beneath her . . . but it was the only way for her to take part in the life Graham led outside the walls of this house.

Oh, she could attend all the same balls and events herself—for as the cousin of the new Marchioness of Brookhaven she would certainly be tolerated—and she sometimes did when forced to by Tessa’s belated and half-hearted sense of duty to her charge.

Yet as the properly virginal lady appearing in her first (and last! God, how was she to ever go back to Acton now?) Season in London Society, Sophie was not privy to the other side of city life. It seemed there was another world, the world of gaming hells and sultry mistresses and whatever else it was that Graham did all the hours he was not with her.

So she waited for him to tire of the fast-paced underbelly and kept the parlor as inviting as possible. When allowed, she treasured these evenings when Graham would sprawl in the chair before the fire and tease her and make her laugh with outrageous stories of his hairy-chested brothers and their obsession with hunting, or play the pianoforte with absent-minded skill, ignorant of the way her heart soared on the music.

He smoked the tobacco she purchased with money she’d intended for more books and drank the brandy that she’d stolen from her cousin Deirdre’s house while Deirdre and the Marquis of Brookhaven were on their honeymoon.

If someone had remarked upon the impropriety of a young lady spending such long hours unchaperoned with the likes of the notorious Lord Graham Cavendish, Sophie would have tartly retorted—if the speaker were female, of course; if it were a man, she would probably freeze in terror, then spasmodically break something!—that Graham, being Lady Tessa’s own cousin, was practically family. Therefore such a thought was ridiculous and the thinker ought to be ashamed, etc.

It was a well-rehearsed speech and went on at length, but since no one in the world gave a fig about the virtue of one tall, plain girl with no expectations other than scholarly spinsterhood, Sophie had never had the opportunity to use it.

After all, she had no real future to lose and Graham, who took nothing and no one seriously, including Lilah, thank the gods, risked nothing by it either. Their clandestine

friendship harmed no one and benefited them both greatly.

For one brief Season Sophie was determined to do precisely as she pleased—and she pleased to explore museums and libraries and play with Graham.

Matters might be different if she were serious in her search for a husband or if Graham would ever wish to marry and have an heir.

Fortunately, there was no reason why he should when his brothers intended to procreate often and well, as soon as they had slain one last elephant, bagged one final rhinoceros, taken down one more tiger—well, anyway, there was simply no reason why things could not go on forever precisely as they were.

AFTER LEAVING SOPHIE to her early bedtime in the house on Primrose Street, Lord Graham Cavendish strode whistling into Eden House, the London home of the Duke of Edencourt.

The Edencourt name was old and venerable and its estate vast and once beautiful, but the past few generations had failed to hold up their end of good taste and self-restraint. Now the name of Edencourt was equated with loud, boorish behavior and a predisposition for dying at the hands of liquor or firearms—sometimes both.

The house itself never changed, unless it was to gain a few more unfortunate trophies on its already cluttered walls, so Graham had long since stopped noticing the shabby conditions and the furnishings that had been elegant generations ago but now suffered mightily from the rough usage of its current residents.

The marble floors were scuffed beyond polishing and the dark wood panels and trim were gouged by things thrown or dragged against their damaged finish. The carpets were worn thin by heavy boots and the sofas were sprung by years of supporting great lounging louts who rarely bothered to sit up straight.

Graham, blinded by years of familiarity, merely came and went from the house and tried not to run into his brothers. Tonight, if he changed quickly enough, he could be at the tables within an hour. Still, as was his habit, he stopped in the entrance hall and listened for a long moment.

He heard no roaring laughter. He smelled no foul clouds of tobacco. He felt no thudding of wrestling bodies breaking the remaining furnishings into kindling.

No, the house was entirely empty except for the skeletal staff of servants still employed. Ah yes, his family was still far, far away.

Thank God.

His father's butler came to take Graham's hat and gloves. Graham grinned at him. "The chest beaters are still absent, eh, Nichols?"

After forty years of service, Nichols was the duke's man, always and forever. His usual haughty expression soured further at Graham's impious words.

"Good evening, Lord Graham. His Grace and your elder brothers have not sent word as to their return from their hunt in Africa. However, there is a Mr. Abbott awaiting you in His Grace's study."

Graham blinked. "For me? Whatever for?"

"Indeed, my lord." Nichols looked as though he could not begin to imagine why

anyone would want to speak to Graham. Ever. Graham didn't blame him for it, for the servant was only aping the attitude of the master. His own father hadn't said more than a dozen words to him this year.

Graham reluctantly made his way to his father's magnificently masculine study. It was a dismal place at any time, for every wall housed a menagerie of glassy-eyed, stuffed and mounted death.

During the day the room was depressing. At night Graham harkened back to his boyhood, when nothing but the threat of his father's heavy hand could make him step foot into the darkened, fire-lit hall of gleaming, vengeful gazes reflecting the flames of the hatred he'd imagined in their eyes.

Even now, a man grown, he hesitated outside the door, then took a deep breath and pushed it open, smiling at the young, rather exhausted-looking man waiting within. After all, the duke was not there. There was no need to brace himself.

He couldn't have been more wrong.

## Chapter Two

The tale went thusly—

On the edge of the veldt, on the dark continent of Africa, man was a soft, fragile creature out of place in a harsh, wild environment. Intelligent men moved carefully and usually lived. Stupid men, on the other hand, tended to die. Badly.

In a hunting camp in the African country of Kenya, a sun-darkened physician pushed open the canvas flap of the largest tent and stepped wearily into the circle of light created by a large central fire and several standing torches.

Three burly Englishmen awaited him outside. “How is the duke?” “Will he live?” “Bloody hell, man, speak up!”

The doctor sighed as he straightened. “I fear that the injuries His Grace suffered during the trampling by the bull elephant were too serious. He is no more.”

After a moment of stunned silence—and it was a long moment, for the three eldest sons of the Duke of Edencourt were not the quickest of men—one of the younger ones looked to the eldest, awe in his face. “You’re the duke now.”

The eldest, but alas, least intelligent of the brothers drew slowly to his greatest height. “I am the duke now. I’ll take on the estate and the title—but not until I’ve avenged my father and destroyed that killer elephant!” He raised his fist into the air. “That bull elephant must die!”

The second eldest brother, only slightly less thick-headed and nearly as drunk, nodded emphatically. “A battle to the death!”

The Kenyan guide, an experienced man of the savannah, moved to divert catastrophe. “Your Grace, my lords, this elephant is very dangerous. We should flee his territory and take your father’s body back—”

“*Flee?*” The third brother, who had until now been fostering the glimmerings of a similar thought, raised his hackles at such cowardly phrasing. “By God, man, the sons of Edencourt flee nothing!” He joined his brothers, raising his rifle high. “To the death it is!”

Alas, and so it was.

BACK IN THE grim death-decorated study of the late Duke of Edencourt, his youngest son fancied that the eyes that surrounded him and the young, round-faced solicitor took on a feral gleam of satisfaction.

“All of them?” Graham leaned back in his chair—his father’s chair, had he but noticed—and ran one hand weakly over his face. “But of course. They were indivisible to the end. Good God. Death by self-inflicted stupidity.”

The man, Mr. Abbott, nodded. “Just so. The guide tried to save them but only he and two of his men escaped with their lives.”

“There was nothing he could have done.” Graham waved his hand. “He couldn’t have stopped them. No one ever has.” He shook his head, still too shocked to feel anything like grief. At least, he hoped that was the case.

He’d never felt close to his father or brothers, for they were another breed of men entirely from him. Alternately ganged up on or ignored when he was young, he’d learned over time that the best way to deal with his family was to avoid them as much as possible.

When he’d gained something of reputation as a lady-killer in adulthood, he’d been offered a grudging sort of respect, for the chest beaters ever relished a hunt, any hunt. Still, the truce was always wary and short-lived on either side.

“Your Grace, I must inform you—”

Graham’s world stopped abruptly, then began to spin again with a nauseating new tilt to its axis.

*Your Grace.*

He swallowed, but his throat was too dry. Reeling, he staggered to his feet and stumbled across the room where his father’s—no, now his!—whiskey decanter glimmered like amber salvation.

Graham tossed back one for the dry throat and another one to take away the taste of the first one. He poured yet another, just to look at. Then he turned back to Abbott.

“I’m the Duke of Edencourt.”

Abbott nodded. “Yes, Your Grace, you are.”

Graham moved to reseal himself in his father’s chair, then recoiled and found himself one with less weighty history. “I’m the Duke of Edencourt,” he informed his glass of whiskey. Oh, hell, it was already empty.

Abbott took it away. “Your Grace—”

“Oy! I was drinking that!”

Abbott threw it across the room, where it shattered in the fireplace. Graham blinked, realizing for the first time that Abbott wasn’t just weary. The man was tight-lipped with fury and disgust!

“Your Grace, my family has served yours as solicitors and men of business for five generations. Your grandfather never managed to pay us on time or completely, and your father never paid us at all. The advice I am about to offer you is the first and last you’ll ever get from an Abbott, so listen closely.”

Graham drew back, eyes focusing at last. “I’m listening.”

Abbott straightened, his eyes snapping in his mild face. “Waste no time in assuming your responsibilities. Your estate is in ruins and your lands lie fallow. Your people are suffering and your debt is overwhelming. For God’s sake, man, if there is not a great influx of cash to Edencourt as soon as possible, there won’t be anything left to save! The only recourse left to you is to find a rich wife and find her quickly, before it is too late. There is less than a month left of the Season. I suggest you charm her quickly and well.”

With that, Abbott turned on his heel and strode from the study and from Eden

House. Graham watched him, dimly aware through his reverberating shock that with Abbott went any hope he had of getting help with the vast and ailing estate of Edencourt.

Which he had never bothered to learn a single thing about.

He closed his eyes and rested his forehead against the cool glass of the window. "I'm so thoroughly buggered."

HOW COULD EDEN House, already empty, now seem emptier? Graham strolled the halls restlessly in the dark. Room after room, grandly shabby, had an eerie echo of desertion never noticed before. Had the mere expectation of its owner's return populated the rooms with life? Or had Graham's own distaste for his family kept him from feeling alone? Better alone than with them?

He was certainly alone now. The emptiness of the house, his house now, was merely a manifestation of the emptiness of his entire life. A man didn't become a duke every day. Yet here he was, promoted beyond the bounds of his wildest dreams, had he ever bothered to dream at all, and there was no one to tell.

Except Sophie, of course. The thought comforted him. Sophie would listen to the awful story of his father's and brothers' end and she would see the ludicrous waste of it. Sophie would say something tart and sensible and it would be just the thing he'd been thinking at that moment. As always, he would instantly feel less alone. However, she was the only one. An entire life spent in play and only one good playfellow to show for it.

He paused in his mother's room, a gracious chamber that had been spared the hard usage of a house full of men. The silk bed hangings were a deep rose beneath the dust, and the furniture was dainty and elegant, though Graham remembered that it had also belonged to his grandmother in her day.

Upon the dressing table was a box, an inlaid case that held a lady's small, daily jewelry. Graham doubted his mother had owned any other kind, for the coffer had been depleted years before she'd married into the Cavendish clan. He flipped open the lid with one finger, but the case was empty. Someone had emptied it of valuables long ago, he imagined. Just what his mother would have wanted, her little treasures pawned for more adventures in fatality.

It was a very nice room, but it was just a room. Once this room had meant something to him, as it had even to his father, he imagined, for though his father had never spoken of her, the duke had never married again either. That might have been because he already had his heir along with several spares, or it might have been something deeper. Graham would have liked to believe that his father had been capable of something deeper, once upon a time.

He snorted. Probably not. His father had been precisely what he'd seemed, aggressive and coarse.

Turning to go, he grazed the edge of the little dressing table with his hip. Being rather more elderly than stable, it teetered. Graham caught it with a quick motion, but the jewel case slipped off and fell to the floor. God, he was as bad as Sophie!

He bent to sweep up the case. It had cracked along one corner, the joined wood