

The Viscount Needs a Wife (Rogue Series)

By Jo Beverley

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for the Novels of Jo Beverley
Jo Beverley weaves a spell of sensual delight with her usual grace and flair. "New York Times" Bestselling Author Teresa Medeiros
[Beverley] can be counted on to...create a beguiling love story. "Booklist"
""
Wickedly, wonderfully sensual and gloriously romantic. "New York Times" Bestselling Author Mary Balogh
A fascinating, glittering, and sometimes dangerous world. "New York Times "Bestselling Author Mary Jo Putney
A delightful blend of wit, intrigue, and emotional victories. "The State" (Columbia, SC)"

About the Author
Jo Beverley is the "New York Times" bestselling author of the Rogue series, including "Too Dangerous for a Lady," "A Shocking Delight," and "Lady Beware," as well as numerous other romance novels. Widely regarded as one of the most talented romance writers today, she is a five-time winner of Romance Writers of America s cherished RITA Award and one of only a handful of members of the RWA Hall of Fame. She has also twice received the "Romantic Times "Career Achievement Award. She has two grown sons and lives with her husband in England."

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Chapter 1

November 7, 1817
Cateril Manor, Gloucestershire

“Kathryn, your dog is looking at me again.”

Kitty Cateril looked up from her needlework to see that indeed her King Charles spaniel was sitting in front of her mother-in-law, eyes fixed on her face. She bit the inside of her cheek to hold back a smile as she patted her leg. “Sillikin, come.”

The small black and tan dog cocked its head, then trotted over, as if expecting a reward for a job well done. Kitty wasn’t sure why Sillikin sometimes stared at people, but it seemed to be in disapproval, and her mother-in-law sensed that.

What secret sins could lurk in the soul of straight-backed, gray-haired Lady Cateril? She was the sort of woman often described as beyond reproach. These days, dressed permanently in mourning black, she had been canonized by the heroism and death of her younger son—Kitty’s husband, Marcus.

Had Sillikin caught Lady Cateril wishing that the heroism and death had come together? That Marcus hadn’t lived, wounded and broken, for seven more years and married someone like Kitty? That devotion to

Marcus's memory hadn't required her to offer Kitty a home? Kitty and her irritating dog.

"I will say again, Kathryn, that you should rename that creature."

And I will say again, Kitty supplied silently, "She's too used to the name by now."

"She's a dumb creature. She cannot care."

"Then why do dogs respond to their names as people do, Mama?"

Names. So powerful and so often poorly considered. Six years ago, she'd named a wriggling ball of fluff Sillikin. Three years before that, when Kitty had married Marcus, she'd called his mother Mama, in the hope of pleasing the disapproving woman. It had never seemed possible to change to something more formal.

Her bid for approval had been a hopeless cause. Lady Cateril's favorite son, the wounded hero of Roleia, bound to a seventeen-year-old chit? Had she hoped that by using the name Kathryn, the chit would become a sober matron? "Kitty," she'd said at first meeting, "is a romping sort of name." There'd been a clear implication that Kitty was a romping sort of person.

Better that than being starchy as a frosted petticoat on a winter washing line!

The weather today wouldn't freeze cotton as stiff as a board, but it was raining. That trapped Kitty in the house, and effectively in this small parlor that smelled of wood smoke and the mustiness that came from long-closed windows. The larger, airier drawing room was rarely used in the colder months, so the fire there was unlit.

She would have liked to retreat to her bedroom even though that, too, lacked a fire, but in Lady Cateril's domain, bedrooms were not sitting rooms. They weren't dining rooms, either. The only time anyone was served food in her bedroom was if she was ill.

Kitty knew she should be grateful to be housed there. Her only other option was to live in cheap lodgings somewhere. At least there she had everything she needed and the estate to walk about on.

She had everything except freedom.

In the beginning, she'd rubbed along well enough with her mother-in-law, united in grief. However, when six months had passed, Kitty had followed custom and prepared to put off her widow's weeds. When Lady Cateril realized Kitty had ordered new gowns in gray, fawn, and violet, she'd reacted as if she'd spat on Marcus's grave. When reproaches and then tears hadn't changed Kitty's intent, Lady Cateril had taken to her bed and sent for the doctor. Kitty had been badly shaken, but the rest of the family hadn't seemed alarmed, so she'd stuck to her guns. The first gown had arrived, a very plain gray wool round gown, and she'd worn it, quaking. The next day Lady Cateril had emerged. Nothing more had been said, but a frost had settled.

Kitty had realized then that in Lady Cateril's mind she had only one reason to exist: as Marcus's inconsolable widow. She was as much a monument to his magnificence as the marble plaque in the village church.

Captain Marcus Edward Cateril

of the 29th

Hero of Roleia

1782–1815

The words were inscribed on a large alabaster bas-relief that included a shrouded, mourning woman drooping over a plinth. The plaque was white, but the figure was black. Kitty had assumed at first that it was a symbolic representation of grief, but she'd since realized it was supposed to be her. Fixed in drooping black for all eternity.

She'd worn half mourning since then, but when her mourning year had ended, she'd lacked the fortitude to progress to bright colors. Her pretty clothes were stored away, becoming more out of style every day. She'd tried to think of ways to escape, but here she still was, eighteen months after Marcus's death. She had hardly any money and no possibility of desirable employment. She'd gone straight from school to marriage.

She picked up Sillikin. Through the most difficult times, the spaniel had been her confidant and consolation and had heard all that Kitty's pride had kept silent from people. We'll find a way, she said silently to the dog. There has to be a way—

The door burst open and Lord Cateril entered, eyes wild. "The most dreadful news!"

Lady Cateril started upright, a hand to her chest. "John?" she gasped, meaning her surviving son. "The children!"

"The princess. Princess Charlotte is dead!"

There was a moment of stillness as Kitty and Lady Cateril took in his words. Princess Charlotte, second in line to the throne, who'd been due to deliver her first child, the hope of the future, was dead?

"No!"

For once, Kitty and her mother-in-law were completely in harmony.

"The child?" Lady Cateril asked desperately.

"A son. Also dead." Lord Cateril sank into a chair by his wife's side and took her hand. "All hope is gone."

It was overly portentous, but Kitty knew what he meant. The king and queen had presented the nation with seventeen children, but now, nearly sixty years after George III had come to the throne, there had been only one legitimate grandchild, the Regent's daughter, Charlotte. With her dead, what would become of the nation? The king was old and mad and expected to die at any moment. The Regent was nearing sixty, grossly fat, and led a dissipated life. No one would be surprised if he died soon as well.

His sisters were all middle-aged, and those who had married hadn't produced offspring. Few of his brothers had married, and none of those unions had produced a living child. With the perversity of fate, some had bastards, which were of no use at all.

Kitty's heart ached for the people involved. "Poor woman," she said. "And her poor family. Royal, but not beyond the hand of fate."

"Amen," Lord Cateril said. "The shops and theaters have closed in respect. The court has gone into mourning, of course. But I'm told people of all degrees are putting on black, or at least dark bands."

“We must do the same,” Lady Cateril said. “The family must wear full black.” In spite of her genuine shock and sorrow, she shot Kitty a triumphant look.

Kitty almost protested, but Lord Cateril agreed. “You’re right, my dear. And black bands, aprons, and gloves for the servants. Please gather the household together in the hall. I must read out the news.”

Kitty helped to pass the word, and soon the family and servants stood together in the oak-paneled hall as Lord Cateril read out the letter he’d received. All were affected and many wept. Afterward Kitty went to her room to put on one of her black gowns. If only she’d given them away . . . but it was provident to keep mourning by. No one knew when death would strike, as had just been proved.

As a red-eyed housemaid fastened the back, Kitty resolved two things. She’d return to half mourning after the funeral, along with everyone else except the court. And she would not live this half life any longer.

Somehow she’d find a way to escape. Here was evidence that life was fleeting. She wouldn’t waste what time she had left in the everlasting shadows of Lady Cateril’s grief.

The princess’s coffin, along with that of her stillborn child, was lowered into the royal vault at Windsor on November 15. Lord Cateril read a letter giving an account of the funeral to the assembled household, and they all prayed again for the princess and the bereaved family.

Kitty went upstairs to take off her black, tempted to move into brightly colored gowns now, but she truly was sorrowful over Princess Charlotte’s fate, so half mourning felt correct. She chose gray and wore silver ornaments instead of jet. When she entered the parlor, Lady Cateril’s look was flat, which seemed even worse than anger. Strenuous thinking over the past week had brought Kitty no closer to escape. The only prospect was to find employment. She’d discussed the situation with her sister-in-law and raised the possibility that Sarah give her a reference.

“Employment?” Sarah had asked, eyes wide. “Mama would never permit that.”

“She can’t stop me.”

“But she can make my life miserable if I assist you.” Sarah was plump, practical, and kind, but not courageous. She never tried to cross Lady Cateril over anything.

Kitty tried another approach. “Don’t you think we should try to ease her out of her mourning? She has two fine children still, and six grandchildren—yours and Anabel’s.”

Anabel was Lady Cateril’s youngest child, who’d married a man who lived three counties away, probably by design. Anabel had as much spine as her mother, so they easily clashed.

“She won’t,” Sarah said. “In some ways she likes the effect of it, but it reflects true grief. She always loved Marcus best.”

“Doesn’t John mind?”

“He’s his father’s favorite and he is the heir. Surely you’re comfortable here overall, Kathryn. Why would you want to become someone’s servant?”

On the surface it was idiotic. She was treated as one of the family, with everything provided for her. She hardly ever had to touch the small sum left her by Marcus, for any bills were paid by Lord Cateril without complaint.

Kitty had told Sarah the truth. “I want to wear rainbow colors and be joyful.”

“I don’t think governesses or companions are encouraged to dress gaudily, or romp around laughing.”

Kitty had had to admit the truth of that, but it didn’t change her mind. She was only twenty-seven years old and felt entombed.

Chapter 2

The next day, Kitty entered the parlor and found it empty. John and Sarah had driven out to visit friends who were celebrating the healthy birth of a child. Kitty could imagine how fearful the parents must have been with such a prominent example of the dangers. Lady Cateril must have been going over the household accounts with the housekeeper, for mourning had not led her to loose the reins of management. Lord Cateril would be in his office, where he spent most of his time when at home.

Kitty settled by the fire, Sillikin at her feet, to seek escape of another sort—in the delightful adventures of Love in a Harem. She’d enjoyed novels when young, but they’d become a precious escape during her marriage. The unlikely adventures had transported her far from the Moor Street rooms in London that she and Marcus had called home. Marcus hadn’t liked her to leave him alone, but as long as she was in the room with him, he hadn’t minded her reading. In good times she’d read to him, and they’d chuckled together over the most implausible parts.

He would have enjoyed Love in a Harem. The heroine had been plain Jane Brown when she’d set sail from Plymouth, but her ship had been captured by Barbary pirates and she’d been sold into the harem of the Sultan of Turkey and renamed Pearl of the North. She’d narrowly escaped being ravished by a number of men, including the captain of the ship, but now, trembling and dressed in the skimpiest silks, she awaited her lord and master. The harem door opened. . . .

“Silent reading, Kathryn?” Lady Cateril asked, coming in. “You know I don’t approve.”

Suppressing some salty words she’d learned from Marcus, Kitty did her best to be pleasant. “Would you like me to read to you, Mama? You might enjoy Love in a Harem.”

She heard her own words only as she spoke them and had to fight the giggles. “Fulminating” was exactly the word for the look she received. Kitty was saved from another unwise remark by Becky, the housemaid, coming in with a letter.

“His lordship’s sent this for Mrs. Marcus, milady.”

She looked as if she might give it to Lady Cateril, so Kitty held out her hand. “Thank you, Becky. It will be from my friend Ruth Lulworth,” she told her mother-in-law, for Ruth was her only correspondent.

“Ah.” Lady Cateril’s expression lightened a little. Ruth was a clergyman’s wife and thus approved of. She sat. “You may read that to me.”

It was revenge for that mischievous offer to read from the novel, and probably for Kitty’s putting off mourning, but not worth fighting over. Kitty and Ruth were long past their school days, when they’d shared all the anxieties, dreams, and longings of their silly hearts. The letter would contain news about Ruth’s home and family, and of her work in the parish around the Gloucestershire village of Beecham Dabittot. Kitty broke the seal and unfolded the letter, but was startled to see that Ruth had written a great deal. To save the

cost for the recipient, she'd kept to one sheet of paper, turning it sideways and continuing the letter crossways. There were even a few lines on the diagonal. A sense of dramatic doings rose from the jumble, especially as one crosswise phrase stood out, because Ruth had underlined the "Yes!"

Yes! I'm sure your astonishment equals mine.

At least that didn't sound like tragedy.

Kitty needed to read the astonishing news in private, but Lady Cateril was waiting. The beginning of the letter seemed to be normal news and she didn't think Lady Cateril could see the crossways writing, so she'd make do.

My dear Kitty,

It's been a long time since I wrote, but we've been very busy here in Beecham Dab. Such terrible news about Princess Charlotte. All around put on some mark of mourning, and we tolled the bells at the time of her interment. The tragedy is a reminder to us all to be mindful of our brief lives and the judgment to come.

Sadly, we have been visited by death more frequently than usual here this year. In August a sickness carried off ten souls and weakened many others, even at harvesttime, so Andrew went out when he could to help in the fields.

"Andrew is Reverend Lulworth, Mama."

"So I remember. A charitable act, but not, perhaps, suitable for a man of the cloth."

Kitty was tempted to debate how any charity could be unsuitable for a clergyman, but she returned to the letter.

By God's grace, we are all well. Little Arthur is babbling very cleverly for three. Maria is still quiet, but that makes her an easy babe.

Kitty remembered that Ruth's second birth had been difficult, but she and the child had survived, unlike poor Princess Charlotte.

She continued to read more descriptions of the children, the work of the parish, and about a pair of clever cats they'd acquired who were keeping the vicarage completely clear of mice.

At that point she invented a farewell and folded the letter. She longed to leave the room immediately to read the rest, but that could stir suspicion, so she used Ruth's comment about the cats to introduce a subject she needed to discuss with her mother-in-law. The housekeeper had asked her to try to persuade Lady Cateril to allow some cats in the house.

"Mice are causing problems in the kitchen area, Mama. A cat or two would control them."

"I could tolerate cats there, Kathryn, but cats do not stay in their allotted space." Kitty had no answer to that. "I'm pleased you see for once that I am right. It's a pity that your dog doesn't kill mice. Dogs do generally obey orders."

Sillikin half opened her eyes, as if commenting on that.

“I’ve never known her to kill, Mama.”

“If she weren’t fed, perhaps she would.”

Preferably kill you!

Seething, Kitty called Sillikin and left the room without explanation. She retreated so she wouldn’t say something unforgivable, but she needed to read Ruth’s astonishing news.

Perhaps Andrew Lulworth had been offered a grander parish, or even a place in a bishop’s establishment. Kitty had no idea how advancement in the church was achieved, but she was sure Ruth’s husband deserved it, if only because Ruth had chosen him. Perhaps they’d received an unexpected inheritance, or found buried treasure in the garden. Perhaps the Regent had dropped by for tea!

Her flights of fancy were interrupted by the sight of the portrait of her husband hanging over the stairs in such a way that it always confronted her as she went up. It had been painted after Marcus’s death, but based on a miniature done in 1807, before his heroic maiming. It showed a young, dark-haired officer in his gold-braided regimentals, bright with vigor and life. It showed the Marcus Cateril she’d never known, for she’d met him after he’d lost a leg and an eye, been scarred in the face, and broken in other ways that caused him pain till his dying day.

She fought tears, as she still often did, not of grief over his death, but of sadness for all he’d lived with. He’d often said he wished he’d died alongside others during that magnificent assault at Roleia, and she knew he’d meant it. The overdose of laudanum that had killed him had not been accidental, no matter what the inquest had said.

She hurried on into the refuge of her room and wrapped herself in two extra shawls. Fires in bedrooms were left to die down in the morning and not lit again until close to bedtime. Then she unfolded the letter, hoping for truly diverting news.

Now for the main impetus for writing, Kitty. The sickness carried off our local lion, Viscount Dauntry, and his only son, a lad of eleven. That was sad, to be sure, but it also produced an interregnum. There’s a daughter, but of course she can’t inherit, so no one knew who the heir was or, indeed, if there was one at all.

Now the new Lord Dauntry has arrived. He’s a very distant relation of the fifth viscount, who had no notion of being in line and has never been here before. By blessed good fortune, he and Andrew both attended Westminster School only a few years apart, though he was plain Braydon then.

Ah. A friendship with the new viscount might advance Reverend Lulworth’s career.

Dauntry has joined us to dine quite frequently in the weeks he’s been here, and thus we have become familiar with his situation.

At this point Ruth had run out of paper and begun the crosswise writing, so Kitty turned the page.

He did not rejoice to find himself a lord. He didn’t need the wealth or want the running of estates. To make matters worse, the late Lord Dauntry’s will makes his successor guardian of his daughter and imposes a duty to care for his mother, who lives on in the house. In short, Dauntry has decided he needs a sensible woman to assist him with these responsibilities. I immediately thought of you.

A laugh escaped. What was Ruth thinking of?

Then she read the next line.

It would mean you living close, Kitty. Only think of that!

Oh. Yes. Only think of that.

She and Ruth had met when they were both parlor boarders at school in Leamington. They'd become inseparable, but when they'd left school their paths had gone in different directions. Ruth had found employment as a governess. Kitty had returned home and soon been wooed into marriage by Marcus. They'd rarely met since, and not at all since Ruth's marriage four years ago.

To be close again.

Wondrous, but surely impossible.

I know it would mean exchanging life as part of a noble family for one as a servant, but I have the feeling that you're not entirely comfortably situated.

It was so like Ruth to read between the lines. Kitty had tried to put a bright face on her situation here, just as she had during her marriage, for she didn't believe that a trouble shared is a trouble halved. It seemed to her that complaining of trials that couldn't be changed was merely sharing the misery.

Was this a possible escape? What would this position be? Surely the girl had a governess. Was she to be companion to the elderly lady? That might be no better than being trapped with Lady Cateril—except that she'd be free of mourning and have Ruth nearby. There could even be weekly visits.

Kitty focused eagerly on the page again.

I put forward your name and explained why you might be suitable, which I confess involved a little exaggeration of your sober nature, but then Lord Dauntry shocked me by saying he'd resolved that the lady he needs must be his wife. My hopes were exploded.

Kitty's were, too.

How could Ruth lead her on like that?

She crumpled the letter and threw it across the room. But Sillikin ran to retrieve it and bring it back to her, stub tail wagging.

"This isn't a game, you foolish creature."

But she took it, picking up the dog to hug. "I don't suppose I'd have liked the position anyway. I'd have been a servant, no matter how it was dressed up, and with no other company than my lady, who could be even worse than Lady Cateril." The dog licked her chin. "Yes, I know I have you. But would I be allowed to keep you?"

Sillikin turned to settle on Kitty's lap, but pushed the letter sideways with her paws so it slid toward the floor. Kitty caught it and realized she'd not yet reached Ruth's astonishing news. Perhaps that would raise her spirits. She smoothed the paper and found her place.

I was bold enough to ask why, and Dauntry pointed out that his ward is hard to handle and the dowager Lady Dauntry difficult in her grief. Then he asked if you would fulfill his requirements as wife.

Yes! I'm sure your astonishment equals mine.

It did indeed. Marriage? To a viscount? Was it a full moon?

I was cast into a tizzy. He, however, continued as if discussing whether to plant turnips or cabbages to say that he needs his household under sensible management without delay, and asked again if my friend might be suitable and willing.

I didn't know the truth about either, but the thought of you within miles, not to mention the opportunity for you to become my lady, was too much to resist, dear Kitty. I said you might be. Of course, that commits you to nothing, and I know you've said you will not marry again, but do please give it thought, for Lord Dauntry means what he said.

"He must be mad," Kitty muttered. "Would I marry a madman to escape?" She answered herself. "Perhaps. If he was safely mad."

Ruth was correct in saying that she didn't want a second husband, but that was largely because she couldn't imagine finding a comfortable one. After the storms with Marcus, she needed calm waters, but she was not in a position to pick and choose. She had no great beauty or elegance, and a pittance of money.

This offer tempted, but it was too good to be true. There must be something markedly wrong with a man who sought a wife in such a way. A difficult marriage would be far worse than life at Cateril Manor, and there would be no escape.

I respect your devotion to Marcus, but can you continue as you are for the rest of your life? Upon hearing of the death of Princess Charlotte, I found myself contemplating the uncertainties of life and our duty to use our time on earth well. I fear your current situation leaves you idle. However, my desires might cause me to overpersuade you, so let me tell you of the problems.

The writing was becoming even smaller. There must be a great many problems, and that was a relief. Kitty could feel the pull of this ridiculous plan, and she needed reasons to resist.

Lord Dauntry stated plainly that he sought a wife who would not seek to change his ways. Kitty, I fear those ways include carousing and wicked women. He behaves with complete propriety here, but he is a very fashionable gentleman. I understand he is commonly called Beau Braydon, in the style of Beau Nash and Beau Brummell! His life since leaving the army has been mostly in London. You are more familiar than I as to what that might involve.

Kitty was, but she was fixed on the words "since leaving the army."

Kitty had lived in London all her married life, often surrounded by Marcus's army friends. He'd not been able to get out much, so his military friends and acquaintances had come to him when in Town on furlough or official business, sometimes in numbers that threatened to burst the walls. Some were good company, but she'd learned that soldiering often left scars, visible and invisible. Major Quincy had been silent, with such a dark look in his eyes. Captain Farrow had mostly been quiet, but occasionally he'd fall into a kind of fit in which he thought he was fighting the French; it had taken two or three others to restrain him. Lieutenant Wynne had a strong voice and had often led jolly songs, but she'd sensed something wrong. According to Marcus, his wounds had affected his manhood. Marcus had thanked heaven that his had not, but they'd

affected so much else.

She wasn't attracted to the idea of any second marriage, and certainly not to a another ex-soldier. She'd done her share in that regard.

He asked if I would put the proposal to you. I made no promise, but later Andrew and I discussed the matter. He is uncomfortable with the situation for many reasons, but he sees how advantageous it could be to you, and he confirmed my assessment that Lord Dauntry would be a tolerable husband, as long as you kept to his conditions.

And if not? Rages and bruises, then weeping contrition and threats to kill himself?

If she'd been a meeker woman, perhaps Marcus's life would have been more tolerable, but his unpredictable anger had developed an echo in herself. To begin with, she'd agreed and soothed, and even apologized for imagined faults, but her patience had worn down until she'd answered sharp words with sharper, and rage with rage. She'd rebutted accusations with ones of her own. That had worked better, but she'd hated his dismal repentance for days afterward.

Men wanted meek wives, and she didn't think she could ever be one again. Ruth's plan was a fairy tale. But the next line leapt out at her.

Remember, Andrew and I would be close by to offer loving support.

To be close to Ruth and have her loving support . . .

What was more, if she became Lady Dauntry—astonishing thought!—she'd be able to visit the parsonage whenever she wished. She could invite Ruth and her family to her own grand home. What was the name? Beauchamp Abbey. Was it pronounced in the French way—BOW-shamp—or did it match the village name, Beecham? That was irrelevant, but relevant thoughts, weakening thoughts, were trickling in.

Here, at last, was escape from Cateril Manor.

Might it be bearable?

The married life of Lady Dauntry would be vastly different to hers with Marcus, no matter how odd her husband was. She wouldn't be trapped in four rooms, and it seemed unlikely Lord Dauntry would demand her presence most of the time or insist on her sharing his restless bed.

She and he could have separate bedrooms, separate suites of rooms. Separate wings, perhaps! Given what Ruth had said, he might rarely be at the Abbey at all. In a normal marriage, she might object to his amusements elsewhere, but not in this one.

"Am I seriously considering this?"

Sillikin's cocked head seemed to send the question back at her.

"I am."

To escape Cateril Manor. To live close to Ruth. To have a home of her own again, with a frequently absent husband . . .

She read on, now fearful of something to make it impossible.

If you are willing to consider the matter, it must be soon. Dauntry is a man of brisk action. If you don't give him hope, he will proceed to other ways of obtaining the wife he wants. I can't imagine it will be difficult. He's a handsome man, though in a cool way.

Ruth had run out of space and turned the page to write diagonally.

If you agree to consider the match, he will arrange your journey here at his expense, and your journey home if you decide he will not suit. You need only reply to me for all to be put in hand, but remember, it must be soon.

I don't know this man well, Kitty, and I fear my ardent desire to have you nearby influences me, but Andrew believes you should at least consider this, and his judgment is sound.

That was it.

Ardent desire.

Yes.

Kitty rose and paced her room, Sillikin in her arms.

Escape!

But through marriage.

She hadn't rushed into her first marriage, but she'd been swept along on a torrent of ecstatic romance, with no one attempting to slow her down. Her parents had been dazzled by her being wooed by a member of the nobility. If they'd suffered any doubts, Marcus's wounds and true adoration had silenced them. Marcus had wooed her so desperately, with gifts, flowers, and passionate entreaties, that she would have had to be made of stone to refuse him.

Here was a very different situation. The offer was cool, the promises minimal, and there were no tempting gifts. The man was a stranger, but she must decide in a moment, and this time she had no one no advise her.

"I must go to Ruth."

With that, everything became clear. She must go to Ruth, for advice and for the joy of it. Once in Beecham Dab, once she met Lord Dauntry, she'd know whether to make this marriage or not. Mere travel there wouldn't commit her.

"How to escape?" she muttered. One thing was sure: Lady Cateril would never tolerate Marcus's widow marrying again.

She thought she had enough money to cover the cost of a coach ticket to Gloucestershire, but how to escape the house? She was devising complicated ways, some inspired by novels, when she came to her senses. No one here knew about the offer of marriage. She could simply ask to visit her old friend.

She hugged Sillikin. "I don't know why I haven't done that before. I've allowed us to be glued here by Lady Cateril's grief, but even she can't object to a short visit to an old friend, can she?"

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