



A Lady's Lesson in Scandal

By Meredith Duran

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Editorial Review

Review

Here's a sophisticated, witty, smart novel that, like a Mary Balogh romance, compels the reader to look deeper into the story and uncover great depth as well as grand passion . . . and a better understanding of humanity and the power of love', Romantic Times'Will enchant romance readers who yearn for a clever tale', Booklist'*Fool Me Twice* is a smart, well written, fun and highly entertaining read, one I recommend to all historical romance fans', The Bookaholic Cat'The more I read Meredith Duran books, the more I become fascinated and enthralled with her voice', Smexy Book'This author is one of the best writers in the romance genre', Heroes and Heartbreakers

About the Author

Meredith Duran is the *USA TODAY* bestselling author of ten previous novels. She blames Anne Boleyn for sparking her lifelong obsession with British history (and for convincing her that princely love is no prize if it doesn't come with a happily-ever-after). She enjoys collecting old etiquette manuals, guidebooks to nineteenth-century London, and travelogues by intrepid Victorian women.

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By the time the whistle finished shrilling, Nell was already out the door. She knew she shouldn't push; once or twice there'd been a stampede and somebody had gotten hurt, broken a leg or arm. But she couldn't slow down. Ever since Mum had taken to wheezing, Nell was finding it harder to breathe, too. No longer could she ignore the thick stink of the workrooms or how often she had to cough as she rolled the cigars. By the end of the day there barely seemed air enough to fill her lungs.

Outside, in the dimming twilight, the damp breeze smelled sour from the coal smoke, but there was enough of it, and that was what mattered. She wove through the milling crowd, girls pausing to tuck their shawls down over their hair, to toss saucy remarks to the lads, chattering like they hadn't got better places to be than this infernal, stinking factory, and maybe they didn't, at that.

Finally she reached a stretch of open pavement. Relief hit her, and with it, a lifting of spirits. Nice thing about working at the factory: every day had a happy ending. She found a wall to lean on and settled against it just as a hand grabbed her elbow.

She ripped free and came face to face with Hannah. "You scared the life out of me!" she gasped.

Hannah's pale, freckled face was alight with excitement. "That's because you're a goose, Nellie. What's your take for the week?"

Nell looked around for eavesdroppers. "Nineteen shillings." Her neck was cramped from hunching over the worktable and the ache in her knuckles would keep her awake tonight, but nineteen shillings was the best she'd ever done.

Of course, it would sink to ten after her stepbrother, Michael, took his share. That wasn't enough to tempt a good doctor to the flat and eat next week besides.

Hannah pulled a face. "Only fifteen for me." Usually she beat Nell by a crown; her fingers were cleverer. "Was yesterday that did me in. I was going gorgeously but then the labor-mistress took a temper and made

me unroll half the pile. Ah, well.” She wiped a strand of honey blond hair from her eyes, then waggled the fingers of her uplifted hand. “D’ye like my gloves? Found ’em at Brennan’s dollyshop. Cost me two days’ wages, but they’re genuine kidskin, he said.”

“Oh, they’re lovely.” In fact, the knuckles were cracked, and the white leather had long since grown dingy with use. In her friend’s place, Nell could have found better uses for a crown. Good tough wool, for instance. A new kettle. Some fresh fruit—Lord alive, her mouth watered for a crisp country apple.

Then again, she had chilblains, and Hannah didn’t. So who was the wiser?

She took Hannah’s arm and pulled her into step along the pavement. “You won’t let your father see them.” If Garod Crowley found out that his daughter was keeping a bit of coin to herself, there’d be an awful row.

Hannah laughed. “I’m no fool!”

A passing lad made eyes in their direction. Nell didn’t recognize him, so she frowned to send him on his way. He winked at her before turning onward, but despite her blush, she wasn’t fooled: he’d been admiring Hannah. With her heart-shaped face and big, velvet brown eyes, Han had grown dangerously pretty in the last two years.

“Oh, say, Nellie—are you coming to the GFS?”

Nell had forgotten there was a meeting tonight. The ladies who ran the Girls’ Friendship Society had a tendency to lecture and a provoking way of trying to pry into a girl’s private affairs, but they also kept a brilliant collection of books that they’d lend to any girl who joined. “I wish I could go,” she said. But Mum was too sick now to leave alone. That last quack’s potions had only made her worse.

“You’ve got to come! They’re having a tea for us!”

“I know. How lovely.” She would have enjoyed a proper cup. What with how hard she was saving, she couldn’t afford aught but bohea tea these days.

The thought dimmed her mood. She could save all she liked, but it was a slow effort. Meanwhile, Mum grew worse almost by the hour.

“—to give us gifts as well,” Hannah was chattering. “You can’t miss the meeting!”

“I’ve no choice. Suzie’s got a shift at Mott’s tonight, and Mum can’t be alone.”

Hannah cast her a sharp glance. “Let Michael look after your mum for once!”

Nell almost laughed. *That* would be the day. Ever since Mum had taken too ill to work, Michael wanted nothing to do with her. Suddenly he remembered he was only a stepson. “I expect he’ll want to keep company with Suzie.” He enjoyed the fast atmosphere of the supper club where his wife kept bar—and the fine liquor Suzie slipped him when she was working there.

He enjoyed Suzie’s wages, too. Didn’t let a penny slip past for his wife to keep. Nell couldn’t count on her to help.

What she needed was a moneylender. They scrupled at loaning to a woman, but somebody probably would agree to lend to Michael in her stead.

Would Michael hand over the money once he had it, though? He'd never been one to share. Last year, he'd come into a handsome windfall somehow but he'd put every penny of it toward his political club. Now he'd washed his hands of politics, but gambling and gin kept his pockets empty. If he took a loan and refused to share it ... Nell couldn't think what she would do.

Or rather, she could. She knew exactly how to solve her difficulties. Michael would be more than willing to help on *that* point. But she couldn't do it. The very idea made her bones go cold and the gorge rise in her throat. *Milk once spoiled is naught but rubbish*, Mum always said.

Then again, Mum told her all they needed was prayer. It didn't make a girl a heathen to know that wasn't true.

Miserable, she glanced toward Hannah. They'd lived in the same building as children, walked to school together, spent Sunday evenings making mischief in the road. They'd kept nothing from each other while growing up. But lately that had changed. Things were happening that Nell couldn't manage to speak about for shame. *My stepbrother wants to whore me*: how did a girl bring herself to say that? And what use in doing so? Hannah had naught but sympathy to give.

Still, a bit of sympathy sounded so lovely right now. Nell gathered her courage. "Han, I've got to tell you—"

"Oh, would you look at that!" Hannah dropped her arm to fly toward a shopfront. The gas lamps burning in the window illuminated a row of photographic prints.

Nell exhaled. She was relieved, really. She could manage it on her own.

Still, to her surprise, she had to blink hard a couple of times against the urge to cry. "I'm in a hurry."

"Oh, come on—just for a moment!"

With a sigh, Nell walked over to the window. This was the new craze, to buy pictures of society beauties. Michael had a couple pinned to the wall at home, flash ladies in evening gowns and tiaras. Sometimes when Nell was frying haddock at the fire, she caught herself staring at them. They looked like dolls, their waists so tiny, their hair so smoothly rolled. Impossible to believe that as she stood there choking on the smell of fish, they were living in the very same world, the same moment in time, not a handful of miles distant. As unreal as they seemed to her, they might have been living on the moon.

"I know about this one!" Hannah pressed a finger to the glass to indicate a handsome girl wearing a dark brocade gown trimmed with silk roses. "Lady Jennie Churchill, does that say?"

Beneath the photograph sat a fancy placard covered in cursive. Nell gave it a quick look. "Aye, right enough."

"She's the American one what married the Duke of Marlborough's son. He's got a case of the glim, they say!"

Nell shrugged. "Lie down with dogs, rise up with fleas."

“No, these toffs don’t visit any threepenny uprights, Nell. They keep their molls high class! Set up a girl with a flash place in St. John’s Wood and her own coach and driver, even.”

“And how would *you* be knowing it?”

“People talk, don’t they?”

The conversation was making Nell’s stomach tighten. They did talk. They accused her mum of putting airs into her, educating her above her station. If she took the path Michael was pushing on her, they would gloat till the cows came home. “They talk a whole lot of rubbish, all right.”

“Oh, don’t be sour! A proper gentleman isn’t the same as a man off the street. No, I expect it’s just talk about his lordship.” Hannah frowned, her finger tapping the glass. “Still, poor girl. Hope he don’t make her sick.”

“Nothing poor about her,” Nell muttered. “Those diamonds at her throat could feed and house us both for five years.”

“Well.” Hannah fell silent, studying the rest of the pictures. She pointed to a photograph farther down the row. “Look there. She’s a lovely one, ain’t she?”

“La-di-da. Give me a fortune and I’d look lovely, too.” Nell cast an anxious glance down the street. The crowd was already starting to thin. Once everybody cleared out, it wouldn’t be safe.

“Well—and hey! I’d say she does look a good bit like you! Really, Nell, have a look at that!”

Did that group of lads coming toward them have specific intentions, or were they just making their way on down the road? “God save me from looking like a wax doll!”

Hannah giggled. “Oh, you’re just jealous because Dick Jackson was walking around with a print of this one t’other day.”

She recognized one of the boys, a good, churchgoing fellow. Relaxing, she turned back to Hannah. “I’ve got no business with Dickie Jackson, and I’ll not say it again. He spends more time in the lushery than he does at his work, and that’s enough to finish him for me.”

“Well, what is it then? D’you truly not fancy her beautiful? You’ve got to admit the resemblance!”

Nell sighed. It was cold out, and not everybody here had gloves. But there was a look on Hannah’s face, a sort of wistful awe, that made her feel small hearted. If looking at these silly pictures tickled Hannah’s fancy, then she could stand here a bit longer.

She cupped her hands to her mouth and blew, the heat of her breath stinging her chilblains. “Right you are, then. She’s a jemmy lass.”

“Oh, leastways *look* at her before you say it! Tell me who she is.”

With a roll of her eyes, Nell turned her attention to the placard beneath the photograph. “Lady Katherine Aubyn, daughter of Earl Rushden.” She glanced up and felt a shock. “Why ...”

“Lady Katherine,” Hannah repeated softly. “Queer how much she looks like you.”

Nell’s hand shook a little as she touched her own chin. Katherine Aubyn had a cleft there, too. Her jaw made the same stark square. Her nose was as long and thin, her eyes as widely spaced.

A prickle moved down Nell’s spine. The girl looked just like her. How was that possible? She knew she wasn’t handsome, but this girl with her face looked perfect, not a single wrinkle or blemish to prove that she was real. The photograph was like a magic mirror—a view into a different life where she was born to riches, where maids wove silk ribbons through her brown hair and fastened a fortune in pearls around her neck before she sat down to pose for a portrait.

Lady Katherine wore a faint smile. It seemed to deepen as Nell stared. *My pearls could buy a thousand visits from a thousand doctors*, that smile said.

Gooseflesh rose on her arms. Hannah asked, “How do you reckon you look so much alike?”

She drew her shawl tighter. Witchery! This girl had stolen Nell’s face and was getting far better use from it. “Boring,” she said sharply. “She’s boring, that’s what. Not a line on her face—you think she ever farts, or does she have the maids do that for her, too?”

Hannah laughed. “Well, with *that* much chink, who needs to be interesting?”

Nell forced out her own laugh. “True. Her daddy’ll buy her a husband if she can’t find one on her own.”

The picture made her feel sick somehow. She linked her arm through Hannah’s and pulled her away.

Her friend cast a forlorn glance back at the shop window. “Can you imagine, Nell? What it’d be like to have your face up there? To have the blokes paying for your picture?”

“Lord, no, and I’m glad of it!” Her voice sounded firm enough. “Don’t think I’d want *my* face in Dickie Jackson’s pocket.”

Hannah’s laughter started out surprised but trailed off into sad. “Oh, Nell. Truly, though, *don’t* you wonder? Piles on piles of chink. Not a care in the world.”

She couldn’t imagine it. But she’d seen what trouble lay in trying. “They don’t go hand in hand, love. Rich women have got cares of their own.” She had to believe that. Wasn’t anybody in the world without a heart and a worry to burden it.

“Ha! I could use some cares like that!” Hannah slid her arm out from Nell’s to do a little twirl over the pavement. “Shall I wear the diamond or the emerald tiara tonight, milord? The silk dress or the satin?” She batted her big brown eyes and sketched a mock curtsy. “Oh, you wish to give me even *more* money? However will I make do?”

Nell still felt dizzy, like that bleeding photograph had leapt out and slapped her. “Oh, you’ve brought back the rotting disease from one of your whores?” she retorted. “Too kind of ye, milord!”

Hannah planted her fists on her hips. “That was just patter! Anyway, I’m serious. You *must* wonder. Say you do.”

Nell felt herself frowning. “You shouldn’t waste your time hankering after what you can’t have. That’s no road to happiness.”

“Happiness?” The other girl’s lips crooked in a sneer. “Aye, and I’m happy right now, ain’t I? With my ding gloves that some fine lady probably gave to her maid. Who probably gave ‘em to the scullery girl before they ended up at Brennan’s!”

Nell felt a moment’s shock: the outburst was so unlike Hannah. But why not? Hannah mightn’t have *her* worries, but neither of them had a future full of pearls and comforts. Meanwhile, the fog was coming on thick, lowering in dirty, sullen clouds to the uneven cobblestones. All around, light and sound were dimming, and the wet chill in the air warned of rain. Somewhere in this city, Lady Katherine was warm and snug, but out here, it promised a nasty night, the sort in which an unhappy spirit could find more than enough trouble to suit it.

God save us both.

She pulled her shawl over her head and then held out one hand, exposing cracked red knuckles. “If you’re going to toss those gloves, I’ve got a use for ‘em.”

Hannah stared. Her lips tightened around some emotion that Nell didn’t want to guess at. “I’m sorry, Nellie. I don’t know what’s got into me.”

“Oh, but I do,” Nell said softly. “Aye, Hannah, of course I think about it.” God above, she thought about it far too often lately. She barely could sleep at night for the thoughts in her head. “But it’s stupid to dwell on it. It only hurts.”

That photograph seemed such a bad omen. There was only so much good fortune to go around, and another girl with her face had already claimed her share.

Superstitious rubbish, she told herself. Aloud, she said, “Try to focus on the bright things, love.”

Hannah took a deep breath, then gave her a determined smile. “Aye, you’re right, of course.” She looped her arm back through Nell’s. “Well, come on, then, ducky. We’d best make tracks; it looks to be heading for a pea souper.”

Hannah’s fingers were saying something different from her smile. They dug into Nell’s arm hard enough to hurt. Hard enough to give her a new worry when she already had too many to bear.

She opened her mouth, then thought better of it. *I think about it constantly*, she might have said. *It’s a stone in my chest, a hot, fiery stone, the injustice of it.*

But what good would it do for Hannah to know that? She needed a different sort of example—one that showed her how to accept what she couldn’t change. You *had* to accept it; otherwise the fire in your chest would spread and burn you, inside out. Nell felt it happening to herself. She’d seen it happen to her stepbrother. Last autumn Michael had been ranting, raging, ready to change the world. He’d joined the Socialists, helped them gather over a thousand men. They’d gone marching through Hyde Park screaming slogans, demanding justice.

And what had they won? The wrath of the police. Broken ribs and shattered noses. A couple of days’ notice

in the newspapers ... and then it had been over, and the toffs had gone back to their tea parties, and Michael had turned to gin.

No. Best to forget such things.

“I will,” Hannah said, giving Nell a start. She hadn’t realized she’d spoken aloud. But it had been the right thing to say, for Hannah’s grip gentled, and she gave Nell a real smile this time, then launched into a popular ballad making the rounds on the street. Nell joined in, and together they set a brisk pace for home.

Nell woke that night to the sound of footsteps stopping next to her head. Her eyes opened on a silhouette looming over her. Not an arm’s reach away, Mum loosed a wet, choked breath.

“She’s done for,” said Michael from above. “Death rattle.”

That made the hundredth time he’d said the same. She could smell the gin on him. The floorboards creaked under his feet; his balance was failing.

She pushed herself up on an elbow. “Where’s Suzie?” she whispered.

“Where’s Suzie,” he mocked. “Where in bloody hell do you think?”

To her right, she heard her mother murmur something. *Don’t speak*, Nell willed silently. *Keep sleeping*. She’d seen Suzie’s state earlier this evening—eye blackened, face red and puffy from weeping. Michael could go days without the drink, but none of them rejoiced when he did. His abstinence invariably ended in a glut that lasted for days.

If he wanted a fight, he could have it in the back room. Mum needed her sleep.

Nell pushed aside the blanket and got up. The back of her neck prickled as he fell in step behind her.

A thin sheet separated the two rooms. On the other side, a kerosene lamp sat on the small table beside the hearth. Thinking to light it, she felt for the matches.

His sudden grip on her wrist pulled her around. Hot, moist, his hand was twice the size of hers. “Don’t,” he said. “Leave it dark. I don’t want to have to look on your ugly face.”

“All right,” she said on a breath. Mum said he had a demon in him that fed on the drink. Nell rarely paid her much mind when she took to raving of devils, but nights like these, it was easy to believe such things.

With her free hand, she felt behind her for the long iron fork she used to grill sausages over the fire. It fit nicely into her palm, a solid weight, reassuring. She’d sharpened the tines a week ago. “Where’s Suzie?” she asked again. *Not dead, pray God*. Once a man took to using his fists, he rarely stopped. One day, she feared, Michael would hit one of them too hard.

“Mott’s.” His laugh was low and nasty. “Knee-deep in the lads, wouldn’t you know. Made me sick to watch her.”

She wished that she could see his face. He took after her stepfather, brown in his coloring as dirt, but he was well built, a boxer, handsome and proud of it: he didn’t let himself sneer or twitch unless he’d given over to

his temper. If she could see the line of his mouth, she'd have clearer intentions about this fork in her hand. "It's part of her job, Michael. She makes good money there."

"Don't she? I wonder how she manages so much. Maybe I know."

"I know she loves you." Pathetic but true. Suzie had been a properly pretty girl with a dozen suitors. Most of them would have treated her better than Michael did. Like countless women before her, she'd thrown her fortune into the slops by following her foolish heart. When Nell married, she'd choose a man for better reasons: kindness, decency, a solid roof to shelter her. A lad who loved her more than she did him: that was the safest way to happiness.

"Sure and she loves me." Michael's voice was starting to slur, but his grip on her wrist didn't slacken. "Awfully worried for Suzie, ain't you? I'd worry for myself instead."

"I will, when there's reason for it." As far as she could tell, she was the only one in this flat that kept her wits about her.

"I'd say there is. I heard about that little talk you had with the labor-mistress. You've got a powerful wealth of ideas, don't you?"

She caught her breath. Were people speaking of that? All she'd asked was for Mrs. Plimpton to speak with the master about a few windows for the workrooms. Much good it had done—the woman had fallen apart with laughter. *You're not paid to breathe*, she'd said. *Back to work with you*.

"Didn't do any harm," she whispered. "Just a brief chat."

"You're a fool. You think they give a damn about your comfort? They look at you, they see one of us. Just another rat for the slaughter."

The bitterness in his voice struck at her. She heard his whole history in it, and it made her soften a little. Before jail, he'd had ideas of his own about what workers deserved. He'd put his money toward the cause of reform and all he'd gotten for it was misery and abuse. She could understand if he thought her a fool for following in those footsteps.

"I won't say anything more," she said. "But I'm right, Michael. It was the air in the factory that made Mum sick. And they could change it so easily—"

His nails dug into her. "Am I meant to care?"

She tightened her grip on the fork. If he made her stick him, it'd be a long and ugly night. "No."

"You get sacked and I'll care. I'll be fixing you up with Dickie, no matter your thoughts."

"All right," she said evenly.

"He was asking after you in the street tonight. Two crowns, he had in his hand. Said he'd be as glad to spend them on you as on another girl."

The darkness felt like a hand pressing over her mouth, stopping her breath. Damn Dickie Jackson. He knew

very well what he was doing with such remarks. Like waving a flag in front of a bull: he thought himself so clever in baiting Michael. Thought it was only a matter of time before her stepbrother forced her to it.

From the other room came the sound of a strangled cough. *Oh, God, don't let her get up. Let her be too weak to get up.* "I brought in twice that amount this week." Her voice sounded hoarse. Her wrist was starting to throb.

"Or you could make two crowns in a quarter hour. You think you're too good for it? Fancy yourself better than the rest of us, maybe? Somebody *special*?"

She swallowed. Sometimes lately she asked herself the same. So many girls she'd known had earned a quick coin up against the wall. Why should it be different for her? Aye, she could read and write and she'd worked hard to educate herself, but that didn't make her special. Everybody starved the same way. In the end, everybody died.

Two crowns for a quarter hour. It would be a handsome profit.

But not for her. Wasn't logic or reason that drove her, but something gut deep, hard as diamond: she could consider such a turn, but she'd never agree to it. There was another way. She'd find it, somehow. If not the moneylender, she'd go thieving before she laid down for Dickie bloody Jackson. "I earn my keep here—"

"Ha! Mason down the street says I could have twelve a week for the space you take up—"

The anger leapt up from nowhere. "Your father promised we could stay here!"

His grip fell away. "Your bloody *mum*, not you. And she's *dying*, do you hear that?"

"You're drinking away the coin that could save her!"

The blow came out of the darkness. Agony like lightning knifed through her jaw. The floorboards slammed into her. She opened her eyes, hearing her own strangled gasp, the rough wood burning beneath her cheek.

In the background, Mama called out. "Cornelia! Are you ... quite fine?"

"Are you quite fine?" Michael mimicked. "The bloody queen in there!"

Nell held still. Her brain seemed to be rattling in its casing, but her jaw still worked when she wiggled it. He'd used the back of his hand, not his fist, thank God.

"One good kick," Michael said softly. "That's all it would take, you uppity bitch."

Anger swamped the pain. This stupid, useless fork she still clenched in her hand—she should have stuck him when she'd had the chance.

"But you've got money to earn," he continued. "So get used to lying on your back."

I'll kill you first, she thought.

She saw the broad shape of his shoulders silhouetted against the curtain before he pushed it aside. The cloth

ripped and fell. His footsteps clomped across the floorboards, setting them to shuddering. Hinges squeaked. The front door slammed.

A quavering voice called from the next room. “Cornelia? Cor—”

The cough that punctuated that call roused Nell to sit up. The room was spinning around her. She wiped blood from her nose. Rage tasted bitter as bile. She hated him. She hated Dickie Jackson. Hate, hate, dizzy, hot; she hurled the useless fork aside.

Cloth rustled in the next room: Mum was trying to sit up.

Nell took a large breath. “I’m all right,” she said, forcing herself to her feet, hurrying past the torn curtain, crossing the distance to the pallet. “Shh, Mum, lie back. I’m all right.”

“No,” Mum said. Her graying hair was a pale nimbus around her shadowed face. “God save you. God spare you. God keep us all ...” She turned her head aside to cough.

Nell laid a hand to her back, supporting her into easing back down to the floor. “It’s all right, Mum. Go back to sleep.”

“You must ask ... for help. He is wicked but he will help.”

“All right,” Nell murmured. She brushed her hand over her mother’s hot, dry cheek. The fevers always got higher in the evenings.

Mum turned her head away, fretful. “Listen,” she said. “Write to him. I hoped ... I did it for you, Cornelia. His lust, he was a devil. Lewder, more prideful even than Michael. Lust and lewdness ...”

Brilliant. The last thing Mum needed right now was the exertion of one of her fits. “Calm down. Just lie quietly.”

“No.” Bony fingers caught Nell’s arm and dug for attention. “Gird yourself. Ask God to protect you. But tell him who you are. Tell him ... I thought to save you. Part of him for my own. To *save* a part of him.” A hack took Mum, wet and violent. The effort to breathe wracked her thin frame.

“All right. I’ll tell him.” *Damn* Michael. Damn the Malloys upstairs, too, who’d taken it into their heads that Mum was a minor saint. They encouraged her talk of demons and angels; they asked her to intercede for them. “Mum, you need to sleep.”

“I’m lucid.” For a startling second, Mum sounded as firm and sharp as she once had, back in the days when she’d boxed Michael’s ears for taking the Lord’s name in vain and forced him onto his knees beside the rest of them for three hours every Sunday. “You can go back now, Cornelia. I forgive you.”

“I’ll go back. Just calm.”

“You must go to your father. Lord Rushden is waiting.”

Nell froze. Lord Rushden? The father of that girl in the photograph?

The coincidence lifted the hairs on her nape. "Mum, what do you mean?"

"Oh, the devil," her mother said, sighing. "But I forgive you."

"Forgive me for what?" Nell whispered.

"You must speak to your father." Mum's voice sounded peculiar, suddenly—queer and girlish. "You must speak to his lordship."

Her *father*? "Mum." She barely dared to breathe. "What are you saying? You can't mean that Lord Rushden ..."

"Never let him tempt you," Mum murmured. "Resist sin."

"You're raving." Nell's throat closed on a hard swallow. "Donald Miller is my father." Mum had talked of him. A nice, respectable gentleman farmer from Leicestershire, who'd died of the cholera when Nell had been a babe in arms.

"Never," Mum said, still in that wispy, dreamy voice. "A lie. Only Lord Rushden, Cornelia. Long ago, before. He *will* help you. I took you for your sake. But I can help no longer. Only write to him."

Her heart was pounding in her throat. Impossible to think it, but she could find no other interpretation: her saintly mum was admitting she was a bastard. The bastard of a lord.

No wonder she looked like that girl in the photograph.

She leaned forward, gripping her mother's hand hard. "Would he pay for a doctor for you?"

"Oh, Cornelia ..." Her mother's high laugh sent a chill down her spine. "The devil will do far more than that."

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