

The Siege of Lady Aloria, de Wolfe Pack Novella Excerpt

Chapter One

“Do stop flailing about, Mother.” Lady Aloria’s sturdy stature was no match for her mother’s constant dramatics as they made their way above stairs and to her chambers. “One would not think a fainting spell would cause such convolutions. Are you certain I need not send for the doctor?”

She should have accepted the footman’s offered assistance before her mother had motioned the man away.

It’d taken all of her strength to haul her mother, Lady Garland, up the back servant’s staircase to avoid the prying eyes of the *ton*. And it was overly convenient that her father had mysteriously disappeared moments before her mother’s episode commenced.

“No, my dear,” Lady Garland—Beatrice—moaned. “I shall be quite the thing after a few moment’s rest.”

Aloria doubted if her mother had ever been considered ‘quite the thing,’ but she knew better than to speculate this out loud. If she did, it was likely her mother would embark on another long-winded fable about the glory of her youth; how she’d been courted by no less than three men before settling on Aloria’s father, a mere viscount.

Not that Aloria saw this as an unattainable feat...she’d been courted by three men as well.

And unceremoniously jilted by each.

But that reminder would send Lady Garland into another dizzy spell.

Therefore, Aloria kept her sense of failure to herself, squared her shoulders, and continued to yank the woman down the last hall, and safely into her dimly lit room, the crackle and pop of the fire breaking the quiet.

As soon as the door closed, her mother pulled away from Aloria’s grasp and smoothed her evening gown. “I do say that was a fine show.”

“What?”

“Oh, dear heavens, my girl.” The exasperation in her mother’s words likely mirrored the look on Aloria’s face. “The nerve of Lord Haston, thinking he could garner a place on your dance card. Does he not know all of society is aware of his quirks?”

Aloria was taken aback by her mother’s proclamation. “You mean to say you fainted dead away—in front of a crowded ballroom, no less—to extricate me from my next dance partner?” Her mother’s cunning behavior never ceased to amaze and confound her.

Her mother’s sly smirk confirmed everything.

Even in the dimness of the room, Aloria saw the familiar spark light her mother’s eyes.

“Bloody hell!”

“Do not curse,” Beatrice scolded. “It is very unladylike, and...dare I say, befitting a mere baroness? Do aim higher, lass.” Her mother tended to fall back on her Scottish roots when excitement and mischief got the best of her. Although, as far as Aloria knew, her mother had never even seen the Scottish border and rarely traveled outside their London townhouse.

“You cannot keep doing these things merely because you are dismayed about something as trivial as my next dance partner.”

“I most certainly can and will.” Lady Garland sat in her favorite chair, an overstuffed monstrosity complete with hanging tassels and gilded, engraved legs. The puce fabric matched the viscountess’ dress perfectly. “Do be a dear and fetch my fan.” She waved her hand in front of her face. “It is dreadfully stuffy in here.”

Aloria looked around at the chaos that was her mother's private chamber. Not a thing was in its rightful place; her brushes sat upon a small stool before the hearth, her privacy screen perched so close to the exit that it would likely fall over if one pushed the door too wide, and a large stack of feather-stuffed pillows were mounted by her dressing closet, forming a fort of sorts. She hadn't any notion of where to begin her search. If she were made to climb into her mother's makeshift fort, it would likely collapse about her, smothering her in pillows the size of small horse carts.

Luckily, Beatrice took pity on her only daughter, lifting her hand and pointing to the screen positioned close to the door.

Aloria eyed her mother's privacy screen, realizing she'd rather risk collapsing the pillow fort than see what lay beyond the partition.

The sooner she retrieved the blasted fan, the sooner she could escape the room and return to the ball below.

How hard could it be to find a measly fan?

Slipping behind the screen, Aloria realized her mistake and regretted catching her mother when she fainted. She should have let her fall to the floor...maybe it would have knocked some sense into her addled brain.

"It looks marvelous, does it not?" her mother's singsong voice called from her place beyond the partition. "I debated all morning on the perfect spot for her. I do think she'll enjoy the view."

Aloria was convinced; Lady Beatrice Garland had officially gone mad.

"Thankfully, she is long expired and must care less about her current scenic view." And Aloria did not doubt her mother had given the woman a rather extensive view.

The painting of Lady Aloria de Gare, her namesake and supposed great-aunt several times removed, was much like everything else in her mother's chamber; overly gilded and out of place. Yet strangely befitting Beatrice.

"You are much like her, Aloria," Beatrice confided. "Though I sense you fight it."

Aloria tilted her head and squinted her eyes at the painting...next, she hummed a bit.

Still, she did not see the resemblance between herself and the woman portrayed before her.

Firstly, Aloria was baffled at how the portly lady had attained such a reclined position, her bosom exposed to the artist, without falling head-first off the settee she was draped across. It defied all she'd read about the forces of nature. Legend told that Lady Aloria de Gare, or Lady Jordan as Queen Eleanor named her, had had this painting commissioned to send to her secret lover, de Wolfe, a great clan warrior.

If she were truthful, Aloria doubted the woman was in any way a relation to herself or her mother's family. The portrait was likely found in a dusty attic decades before, brushed off, and hung upon the wall to elevate her family's sense of import, resulting in a suitably compelling story developed over the years.

Even more unfortunate was the fact that Aloria had been born a plump baby, rounded to excess—and had stayed much the same throughout her childhood. However, her mother long held there were worse things than to be named after a lady-in-waiting to Queen Eleanor.

Aloria was not so convinced.

"Do you not see it, Aloria?" her mother called.

She closed her eyes briefly to dispel the image of her namesake's ample breasts nearly spilling from the top of her gown as she bent over the lounge.

Another unfortunate certainty; the depiction was apparently seared into her mind—for eternity.

If only she could convince her mother to leave the dreadful painting in one place. It would make it all the easier for Aloria to avoid stumbling upon the sight, but her luck never held. Last week it hung above their supper table, resulting in her and her father passing on several meals. Just this morning it was suspended in the grand foyer where every new visitor would garner a glance.

Thankfully, her father had put his boot down solidly—which did not happen often—and demanded the portrait be moved until after the evening’s party. Her mother had agreed, not wishing the spotlight to be removed from her daughter.

Scanning the small area again, Aloria didn’t see the gem-encrusted fan anywhere. “No, Mother, it is not here. Are you positive you did not misplace it below?”

Quiet greeted her from beyond the screen. Aloria peeked around to see why her mother, for possibly the first time in her existence, was remaining silent.

“Mother!” she called. “Do listen. I have no intention of spending my entire evening here with you.”

“I was only listening to the music below.” Beatrice stood quickly, her fan slipping from the folds of her dress, landing on the rug-covered floor without a sound.

Both eyed the discarded fan.

“You are incorrigible!” Aloria proclaimed. “I must be going. Time may yet allow a short dance for Lord Haston and me.” And she hoped she could return to the ballroom before the song ended. Haston was a kind, if not overly captivating man. He listened when she spoke and offered her refreshments when appropriate. He never sought to lead her into any scandalous incidents.

Which was much more than she could say for her earlier beaux.

Reprobates and scoundrels, the lot of them. Their only redeeming quality—if one could call it that—was that their titles and fortunes were beyond reproach.

But one does not learn manners, loyalty, or gain integrity from a title alone.

Aloria had learned that the hard way—on multiple occasions.

Sometimes it was hard for her to pinpoint one awful trait worse than the rest.

Beatrice huffed. “Do tell me you are not standing there daydreaming of Haston.”

Her mother’s words pushed the thoughts of her ill-fated past back where they belonged—buried deep, right where she wished she could put the bodies of Lords Danderfur, Plumberly, and Canterbourne. Alas, all three men thrived...and mingled amongst the highest in society, nonetheless. It was only Aloria who lived with the aftermath of the scandals. Lord Canterbourne had recovered so completely from the ordeal that he was now betrothed to another lucky lady. Aloria truly hoped her dearest friend Delilah experienced an altogether different marquis than Aloria had faced the previous season.

“Now that you have located your misplaced fan, I think I will be on my way.” There was no need to confess to her mother that she hadn’t been daydreaming about Haston, but instead reliving a nightmare of far greater proportion. “I will tell Father you are resting for a spell and will return shortly.”

The perturbed look left her mother’s face and she smiled. “My dear, wonderful daughter. Not a day passes that I do not thank whatever divine being gave you to me.” Flipping her fan open, she quickly moved it back and forth in front of her face. The slight breeze from the hurried movement pushed her long curls back and over her shoulder.

“If you would consider pinning your long hair atop your head, you would stay much cooler and not succumb to overheating so much.” It was the argument mother and daughter embarked on at least a dozen times each season.

“You know I cannot pull my hair up for it would make me appear the old woman.” Beatrice’s free hand moved her bouncing curls back forward. “And what would happen to me then if I admit my age? You know as well as I, dear, that not a soul in London would believe I am any older than you.”

Aloria instantly patted her own upswept hair, nestled securely at her crown in the severe style she preferred over her mother’s flowing flair. If her mother fought the passage of time, then it was Aloria who embraced it, wallowed in it, and prayed that society would leave her be.

“Good eve, Mother.” She wouldn’t be seeing her again this evening. Her mother’s aversion to society was not altogether new. “I hope you are feeling better on the morrow.”