

THE LEGENDARY DUKE

PUT UP YOUR DUKES BOOK TWO



MARGARET LOCKE



PROLOGUE

CAMLON, HOME OF THE DUKE OF
ARTHINGTON - NEW YEAR'S EVE 1788



Bertram Laxton, Earl of Grennet, eyed the man he was about to kill: Loughton Knight, Duke of Cortleon.

His wife's seducer. Bertie couldn't bring himself to say "lover," though Albina had been quite the willing participant in the fervent coupling he'd just witnessed before Cortleon sent her off. How dare the bastard dally with *his* wife in this field minutes from Camlon? Any of Arthington's other house party guests could have stumbled upon them. Had she no shame?

He swallowed. Did everyone know she was cuckolding him with the loathsome duke? Had they laughed behind his back, even as he'd glowed with pride over his little Bee's current condition? But whose child did she carry, his or Cortleon's?

He clutched his pistol. The honorable thing would be to call Cortleon out, not shoot him without warning. But when had the duke ever been honorable? His lecherous

exploits were infamous. Why his wife stayed by his side was beyond comprehension.

Bertie flexed his fingers on the weapon. His source of retribution. Of revenge. Unbidden tears sprang to his eyes. He blinked them away. *Damn it all*. No sign of weakness. Not now, not with his honor at stake. Not with *everything* at stake.

He stepped from the trees. "Cortleon!"

His voice was sure and strong, though his hand shook as he raised his arm toward the figure some thirty feet away. The object of his malice whirled, a smile on his face. Until he saw Bertie. And the gun.

Cortleon held up his hands, palms out, his mouth whisking into that grin that led women to swoon and men to fawn over him. Blasted cur. Charming and debonair, he drew courtiers wherever he went, like an emperor of old. He had it all: rank, looks, wealth. And women. Women everywhere, from the time the blackguard had turned fourteen.

Though they'd been at Eton and Oxford together, Bertie had never had whatever it took to become one of the duke's inner court. Oh, Cortleon had always been hospitable, especially after he'd married Albina's friend Anna, but a deep friendship never developed between the men. Perhaps now he knew why.

"How long?" he called out.

"How long what?" The smug smile never left Cortleon's face, though he stilled at the wavering of Bertie's hand.

"How long have you been swiving my wife?"

The duke's amiable look faltered, wariness entering his eyes.

About damn time.

Cortleon smoothed his hands down the front of his velvet overcoat, a bold scarlet embroidered with birds and gold stars. Stars, of all things, as if forever proclaiming his

lofty status. He opened then closed his mouth, evidently at a loss for words. That was a first; the rogue was known for his glib tongue—a tongue that moments ago had been licking Bee’s breasts.

“I am sorry, Grennet,” he said at length. “Truly. I love her. I always have. I wanted to wed her. But Anna and I had been promised since we were but children.” He sidled his fingers to the edge of his coat.

Bertie’s brow furrowed. *What was he about?*

“She loves me, too. She wanted to marry *me*, never you. You were her duty, as Anna was mine.”

The words shot arrows through his heart even as his nostrils flared. Why was the duke provoking him when he had a pistol trained on the man?

“How long?” he bit out. *How long had his wife and this jackal been fucking?* He took a step closer, dry grass cracking under his foot. Dead. Like the duke soon would be.

“Eight years.”

Eight *years*? He took another step. “You seduced her when she wasn’t even out in society?”

Cortleon’s lip curled. “*She* pursued me at her parents’ house party, not the other way around.”

His Bee had been intimate with this lecherous rakehell at her own initiative? Sweat pearly on Bertie’s forehead. A goshawk called in the distance, the only sound besides the rustling of a light winter wind. His arm steadied as his eye narrowed down the length of the gun.

Cortleon’s eyes widened. “Gr—” he began, as a deafening crack rang out. Birds scattered from the nearby forest.

Bertie blinked. Had his aim been true? One look told the grisly story. The duke lay on the ground, face up. Or where his face had been. *Holy Mary, mother of God*. Bile rose. What had he done? Still gripping his weapon, he walked toward the felled man, fighting the urge to vomit.

A high-pitched scream sounded from the trees bordering the clearing. A small boy darted forward, legs and arms pumping, his face purple and cheeks wet. “You killed my papa! You killed him!”

Wynhawke. Cortleon’s son. Why was he here? Had he overheard everything? Did he know who Bertie was? *What to do?* He raised the pistol once more, aiming directly at the boy. The chamber was empty, as it held only a single bullet, but maybe Wynhawke wouldn’t know that. Bertie’s mind spun, his gaze darting from Cortleon’s son to the mess of a man a few feet away.

“Stop!” he yelled, his voice echoing around the silent clearing.

The boy did, though whether from the command or from seeing his father’s disfigured face, he didn’t know. He closed the distance between them, grabbing onto Wynhawke’s collar. Leaning down, he pressed his nose near the child, whose eyes leaked tears despite the rage they reflected—a murderous rage matching his own.

Wynhawke was but five. Bertie flexed his fingers. He could settle his hands around the lad’s neck and choke the life from him. If the boy revealed what he’d seen, it’d destroy not only Bertie but also his entire family. He might as well hold the pistol to his own skull should that happen. If caught now, he’d hang for sure—unless his peers shot him first. But was his soul so lost that he’d stoop to murdering a child?

He raised himself to his full height, releasing the child. Wynhawke sucked in a breath, his face whitening. Bertie stood a head above most other men and had a chest of such width that his friends teased he was a giant. “You must never say what happened here. Do you understand?”

Mutiny etched itself across Wynhawke’s features. Despite his visible fear, he pushed out his chin. “You killed my father! You’ll pay for this!”

“Do you know who I am?”

“I know you’re a murderer!”

Bertie exhaled. “I don’t want to hurt you. Your father deserved it. You, on the other hand ...” He *didn’t* want to kill the boy. *One ought not to visit the sins of the father upon his sons.* He scowled, contorting his face into the most monstrous expression he could muster as he bent down, piercing Cortleon’s son with his eyes. “Say *nothing*. Should you do so, I’ll find you and chop off your head. And that of your mother.”

Wynhawke gulped but didn’t move a muscle.

“Your father was a bad man. You and your mother needn’t pay for his crimes.”

The boy’s gaze darted toward Cortleon’s body. He steeled his shoulders, his little brown eyes tightening.

Bertie’s heart—what there was left of it—sank. Wynhawke wasn’t going to let it be. That he could kill the father but spare the son had been a far-fetched notion. He grimaced. He was already damned; what would one more heinous act matter? He must spare his wife and unborn child.

As he stepped forward, a roaring pop sounded. Pain exploded in his neck. His eyes widened at the gun in Wynhawke’s hands—*where had it come from*—and then he fell, his hands clutching at his cravat, warm blood oozing between his fingers.

Bee, he thought, as consciousness left him. *Forgive me.*



GAVIN SCREAMED. A duke’s son was permitted to scream if he’d killed a man, was he not? If he’d seen his papa murdered? He dropped the pistol he’d pulled from his father’s coat pocket and leapt to his feet.

“Papa,” he wailed, his eyes on the bright red coat he’d long admired for its pattern of stars and hawks.

“In honor of you, my son,” Papa had said the first time Gavin saw it. “For you are the Marquess of Wynhawke.”

“The birds look so real they seem like they will fly away at any moment.”

Papa had laughed, that rich, booming laugh Gavin loved, and allowed him to feel the soft fabric to his heart’s content. But now blood darkened the velvet. The birds looked as if they were crying. Gavin stared at them, for he couldn’t peek any higher. His papa’s face was gone. How could a face be *gone*? A strange, metallic, meaty smell stung his nose. What was it?

Was it Papa?

His stomach emptied itself until there was nothing left. He grabbed his father’s hand, fixing his eyes on the large ring, the one with the golden lion’s head on top of a red stone. The Cortleon crest. Papa had told him he’d wear the ring when he was Duke.

“I shall be a duke, too? Like you, Papa?”

“Yes. After I’m gone, you’ll be the next Duke of Cortleon.”

“Gone? But where would you go? I don’t wish you to leave me!”

“Nor I, you, my child. But it is the way of the world. That’s why you must live with all you have, my boy.”

A groan sounded, and he jerked around. The giant green man stirred. How could that be? He’d shot him! A low moan came again, and the man’s eyes opened, now rimmed in red. He must be a monster. How else could he come back from the dead? Those red eyes moved to him. *The monster is going to kill me!*

Gavin shrieked, jumping up. Then he ran.



BERTIE LAY ON THE GROUND, agony burning his throat like a hot iron. But he was alive. By some miracle, he was still alive. At least for now. He had to leave this field before anyone found him.

With agonizing movements, he removed his coat then held it to his neck. Rising painfully, he stumbled away. Somehow, he'd have to make it back to Camlon. Howsden would help him. Howsden would never betray him. That was the advantage of employing a valet besotted with him. Bertie never acknowledged the man's desire, of course, but he didn't mind taking advantage of it when needed. Such as now.

Yes, Howsden would help disguise this wound—provided Bertie made it to his chamber undiscovered. What if Wynhawke had already revealed what he'd seen? *Whom* he'd seen? If the boy didn't know him by name, he certainly would know him by appearance. Bertie did not blend easily into a crowd.

But the lad had shaken with terror. Bertie's threat just might keep him safe. If Wynhawke held his tongue, he'd have to act as if nothing were wrong, as if his own body didn't presently bear witness to the morning's violence.

The neck wound may prove superficial, but if Cortleon's son told of what he'd seen, the consequences wouldn't be.



"MERCIFUL HEAVENS, Wynhawke! Whatever is the matter?"

The Duchess of Arthington's startled voice flowed over him as he raced across Camlon's front grounds. He ignored the question, launching himself into his mother's embrace and flinging his arms around her neck, her familiar vanilla scent enveloping him as he clung to her for all he was worth. Nurse would cluck at him. Such behavior was unseemly for a boy his age, but he didn't care.

“He’s dead, Mama!”

“Who’s dead, my child?” Her tone was sharp, though the hand smoothing his hair remained soft and steady.

“Papa! Papa’s dead!”

Without warning, she gave way beneath him, and they both fell.

“Anna!” Mama’s friend cried out. She crouched beside his mother, who lay unmoving on the ground.

Just like Papa.

A servant ran off, calling for the duke.

“What do you mean, Wynhawke?” the duchess asked again, a calm in her voice—the kind adults used when they wanted to convince him nothing was wrong.

But everything was wrong and always would be.

“He’s in the field. He’s dead! He’s in the big field.”

The Duke of Arthington ran across the lawn. The duke never ran. He was always everything “proper and fitting to his highest of stations, as you ought to be, Pendrake, you raps^callion,” Gavin’s friend James had repeated just that morning, imitating his father’s rigid posture and using such a funny voice that Gavin had fallen onto the nursery floor in laughter.

No one was laughing now.

“What is this, Wynhawke?” the duke demanded.

Gavin swallowed but stood up tall, as Papa would want him to. “My father is dead, Your Grace.”

“You saw this?”

“Y-yes.” He hiccupped, dashing a hand against his wet cheeks.

“There’s blood on the boy.” The duke frowned, immediately calling for horses. “Take him into the house, madam.”

Mama’s friend reached for his hand. “We shall go in,” she whispered, gently squeezing his fingers. “But with your mother.”

A maid knelt by his mother’s side and waved a bottle

beneath her nose. The smell was funny. It tickled Gavin's nostrils, making him want to sneeze. His mother's eyelids fluttered open. She sat up abruptly, looking to the duchess. "Irene? It isn't true, is it? Is he—my husband—dead?"

"Shh ... do not speak so now. Arthington has ridden out with several men. We will have answers soon."

A footman helped Mama to her feet. Gavin pulled free from the duchess's hand and ran to her. Though her skin was pale, she gave him a smile. "Come, my son. Let us go inside."

A short time later, noises from the rear of the house indicated the men had returned. The duke strode into the front drawing room where Gavin sat with his mother, four lords following after him. One of the men looked like he was about to be ill. The duke shook his head, his mouth a tight line.

Mama wept, clutching Gavin to her.

"What happened?"

He didn't know to whom the voice belonged, but it didn't matter. He kept his eyes on the red carpet. Red like his papa's bloody coat.

"He was shot in the face. A cowardly act."

"Shot?" Mama whipped up her head. "*By whom?*"

"We don't know, though his own pistol lay near his side. It'd been discharged. We found blood a short distance away."

"A duel?" said his mother's friend, the duke's wife, who sat to their other side, her arm laced through Mama's at the elbow.

"Perhaps. Though if so, not one conducted in an honorable fashion. No seconds, no doctor? Absurd."

A short man with a sizable stomach approached Gavin. "Wynhawke," he barked. "Did you witness the event? Did you see another man?"

Gavin gulped but said nothing.

“There was blood on your clothing.” The duke’s thick brows wrinkled together. Did he think Gavin had shot his own papa?

He swallowed. “I ... I hugged him.”

His mama’s body trembled, and she made sad sounds at his words.

They weren’t true. He hadn’t hugged Papa. He’d only held his hand. But if he told from whom the blood had come, the monster would kill him and Mama. He didn’t know the giant’s name, anyway, so what could he tell? Of a green man? The man—the *monster*—had worn green from head to toe: green coat, green waistcoat, green breeches. Even his hose and shoes were green, though his periwig was white, like Papa’s. Did it cover green hair? A green man with red eyes, like those of a demon. Maybe he *was* a demon!

He’d spoken to Papa as if they knew each other, though. Surely Papa hadn’t known any demons?

“Gather the guests,” the duke snapped. “Servants, too. Have them assemble in the ballroom. We must make them aware of what’s happened, though everyone’s likely heard by now. We must see if someone knows anything.”

“At once, Your Grace,” said a footman, who then sent servants scurrying.

“Wynhawke needn’t come, need he?” his mama said. “He’s been through so much. Too much. No boy should see his ... should see ...” She broke off with a sob.

The duke’s voice gentled. “I’m sorry, Madam. Truly. But we must determine if your son recognizes or reacts to anyone.”

Gavin’s heart seized. He did not want to go into the ballroom. He wanted to go to the stables and hide among the horses with James. He did not want to risk seeing the green monster again. But he obeyed when his mother, her own throat bobbing, beckoned him.

A great number of people had already crowded into the room and more trickled in from the doors on either end. If only he were a real hawk and could fly away! He didn't see the green man. Perhaps he'd died. Though if he had, wouldn't the duke have found him?

Maybe the bad man had run off and would never return. Oh, how he hoped so!

But at that moment, a round-bellied lady waddled in, followed by the monster he'd prayed never to see again. There was no mistaking him. He wasn't in green now, however, but a dark brown coat with a checked waistcoat.

He looked to the man's neck. There was no blood. Maybe the giant's high-collared coat and neckcloth hid it. Or had he been healed by magic?

The air would not move from Gavin's lungs. The monster that had shot his father stood at the back of the room and nobody knew. Nobody but him. His stomach turned, and he feared he might be sick right here, though nothing remained to come up.

The duke entered the ballroom, his mouth turned downward. "The Duke of Cortleon has been fatally shot."

People gasped and cried. One lady swooned.

"There is a murderer among us!" squealed a plump older woman wearing a silly bonnet. Several other ladies shrieked.

"Let us not make assumptions." The duke's tone was at once both chiding yet calming. "Perchance a ruffian attacked the duke at random."

"A ruffian?" called someone else. "Was Cortleon robbed?"

The duke held up a hand. "I'll say no more at present. You shall each present yourself to me, however, so that I may ascertain privately if anyone has useful information."

The green monster, now in brown, acted as surprised by this news as everyone else, until he saw Gavin. He lifted his

hand and pointed up. Gavin gulped at what hung directly above the giant. An axe. A huge, double-headed axe. Lots of old swords surrounded it, but the axe was the only thing he could see.

The green giant might use that axe to chop off his head if he said anything. Gavin pressed his lips together. No words would cross them. He turned away so nobody might see him looking at the monster. He wouldn't let anyone or anything hurt Mama. He would protect her, just as Papa would want him to. Always.