

CATCH A FALLING DUKE



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Content Notes

These content notes are made available so readers can inform themselves if they want to. They're based on movie classification notes. Some readers might consider these as 'spoilers'.

- Bad language: mild, infrequent
- Sex: several fully described sex scenes
- Violence: single on-page fight, main character
- Other: infertility, slavery

See the full (much more detailed) trigger warnings for further information if you need it: <https://evependle.com/index.php/2021/01/12/cw-for-catch-a-falling-duke/>

Prologue



28 September 1885

How could he resist a locked drawer? Hugo Ravensthorpe, the fourth Duke of Cumbria, knew dozens of matters required his attention, but none as enticing as this mystery. He'd been avoiding duty for years, and now the bright spark in his serious life was a writing slope he couldn't open.

When shaken the writing slope thumped and rustled intriguingly. There was probably nothing of interest in there, but he had to know. Hours earlier, before a meeting with his steward about the performance of the railway shares and meetings with two of the tenant farmers, he'd been brought the key to releasing the drawer.

Well. Not so much a key as a crowbar.

It would make sense to lock away jewelry, with bills of purchase. A diary, perhaps. Or scandalous love letters and a trinket from one of his forebearers' mistresses? He hoped it wouldn't be his parents' letters; he didn't need to see that. Every day during childhood had been enough, and since his father's death every item associated with him left Hugo's mouth dusty. Being reminded of his father was like a bet on a

promising horse that fell at the first fence. Maybe the drawer contained just a bottle of dried black ink and pristine white paper.

When he'd arrived at Keisley Park, just over a month ago, he'd stared at his father's study and realization had punched him. He was an imposter. He knew more about French wine than he did his own heritage. His mother had moved into the dower house by the time he'd arrived, leaving this house empty and lifeless, but he'd resisted the urge to return to London. The exploration had been gradual. He'd sat in his father's chair, at his desk, and found papers, duties, and keys. The role of keeper of the Dukedom was chained to him, and he would honor it. He'd be a duke as strong and worthy as his father and grandfather before him, even if his life up to this point had been dissolute.

He'd found the writing slope as he'd rummaged around in a cupboard of ledgers and files, looking for records of farm acreage. It must date from at least the Georgian period, and unlike everything else, none of the keys fit. The housekeeper and butler had never seen the writing slope, never-mind its key.

He tried to pick the lock, and perhaps he ought to have hired a locksmith, but he lost patience. He'd waited through long meetings with the steward where he'd parried questions about cottages that hadn't been renovated for sixty years and whether to plant a new variety of winter wheat. The locked drawer had sat on his desk with all the latent promise of a rugby ball, waiting to be snatched up and run to the goal. The need to know the contents obsessed him as he discharged the unfamiliar motions of running an estate.

Alone in the study, having finished his duties for the day, Hugo wedged the crowbar into the join, and levered. The crack rent the quiet and it popped open, released by a jagged splinter of wood.

He held his breath and pulled the drawer out... Revealing thin paper receipts of check payments into a bank account written in ink so old the black had faded to auburn. Oh. Not love letters, after all. Why would someone hide something so inconsequential? He rifled through the formal notices from names he didn't recognize. There was a large sum for the sale of a property he'd never heard of. Not a surprise, given how little he'd engaged with estate business. He'd always preferred the boxing ring to ticking boxes. A small leather-bound notebook nestled underneath the payment receipts. Flipping it open, he winced at scrawl barely more legible than his own.

One last receipt fluttered from the pages. A payment issued in December 1835 for £35,960 14s 8d. A lot of money, even by his family's standards. The payee was his grandfather. And the issuer of the cheque...

The jolt of understanding was like being thrown from a horse. One moment he was enjoying the thrill of the race, the next cold mud cloyed his back as he stared at the sky, struggling for air, knowing pain would catch up any second.

His own grandfather had made his wealth in the most sordid, revolting way imaginable. He'd used dirty money to renovate Hugo's childhood home, to buy influence and power, and surround himself with luxury. All while people far away from this elegance suffered.

Grabbing up the notebook, he ran his gaze across the words. It dated from the Regency period, and seemed to detail bets, or livestock. Or... The book thudded to the floor.

Hugo's stomach roiled and saliva filled his mouth. Words on a page couldn't cause physiological reactions, he told himself. But his body didn't understand. Bile burned up his throat and his abdomen jerked. Throwing himself out of the chair, he made it across the room and shoved up the window just in time. Spasms wracked him as his stomach emptied

onto the windowsill. He squeezed his eyes tight and hung his head.

He'd never expected to find this. His grandfather had wrecked lives as easily as the turn of a playing card. He couldn't reconcile the man who'd taken him fishing, and given him boiled sweets when his father wasn't watching, with this immoral avarice. His memory of childhood was tainted. His family was contaminated.

Gingerly, he opened his eyes. The scarlet roses below the window swayed, and for a trice he thought his hands were covered with blood. His chest heaved this time, sucking in air even as none got to his lungs, horror overwhelming him. Faces flickered through his mind. Women he'd bedded, women he'd laughed with, Agnes the soft-hearted cook at his lodgings during his undergraduate at Oxford, his friend Maurice from *The Dandy Club*. People who'd touched his life, whom he considered friends.

Hard on the heels of revulsion came anger. His family had white-washed their story and heritage, leaving no indication of the darkness that supported their existence. Lies. Secreting this truth away from polite society, his grandfather had also hidden it from his own grandson. So ashamed or unfeeling, his family hadn't told Hugo what Keisley Park was built on.

He had to leave, and he wouldn't return to this house. Ever.