



Only a Kiss: A Survivors' Club Novel

By Mary Balogh

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Soon Imogen awakens in Percy a passion he has never thought himself capable of feeling. But can he save her from her misery and reawaken her soul? And what will it mean for him if he succeeds?

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Mary Balogh

“Once you start a Mary Balogh book, you won’t be able to stop reading.”—Susan Elizabeth Phillips, New York Times Bestselling Author of *Heroes are My Weakness*

“Mary Balogh sets the gold standard in historical romance.”—Jayne Ann Krentz, New York Times Bestselling Author of *River Road*

“One of the best!”—Julia Quinn, New York Times Bestselling Author of *The Secrets of Sir Richard Kenworthy*

“A romance writer of mesmerizing intensity.”—Mary Jo Putney, New York Times Bestselling Author of *Not Quite a Wife*

“Mary Balogh just keeps getting better and better...interesting characters and great stories to tell...well worth your time.”—*The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*

About the Author

Mary Balogh grew up in Wales and now lives with her husband, Robert, in Saskatchewan, Canada. She has written more than one hundred historical novels and novellas, more than thirty of which have been *New York Times* bestsellers. They include the Bedwyn saga, the Simply quartet, the Hustable quintet, the seven-part Survivors' Club series and the Westcott series.

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1

Percival William Henry Hayes, Earl of Hardford, Viscount Barclay, was hugely, massively, colossally bored. All of which descriptors were basically the same thing, of course, but really he was bored to the marrow of his bones. He was almost too bored to heave himself out of his chair in order to refill his glass at the sideboard across the room. No, he *was* too bored. Or perhaps just too drunk. Maybe he had even gone as far as drinking the ocean dry.

He was celebrating his thirtieth birthday, or at least he had been celebrating it. He suspected that by now it was well past midnight, which fact would mean that his birthday was over and done with, as were his careless, riotous, useless twenties.

He was lounging in his favorite soft leather chair to one side of the hearth in the library of his town house, he was pleased to observe, but he was not alone, as he really ought to be at this time of night, whatever the devil time that was. Through the fog of his inebriation he seemed to recall that there had been celebrations at White’s Club with a satisfyingly largish band of cronies, considering the fact that it was very early in February and not at all a fashionable time to be in London.

The noise level, he remembered, had escalated to the point at which several of the older members had frowned in stern disapproval—old fogies and fossils, the lot of them—and the inscrutable waiters had begun to show cracks of strain and indecision. How did one chuck out a band of drunken gentlemen, some of them of noble birth, without giving permanent offense to them and to all their family members to the third and fourth generation past and future? But how did one *not* do the chucking when inaction would incur the wrath of the equally nobly born fogies?

Some amicable solution must have been found, however, for here he was in his own home with a small and faithful band of comrades. The others must have taken themselves off to other revelries, or perhaps merely to their beds.

“Sid.” He turned his head on the back of the chair without taking the risk of raising it. “In your considered opinion, have I drunk the ocean dry tonight? It would be surprising if I had not. Did not someone dare me?”

The Honorable Sidney Welby was gazing into the fire—or what had been the fire before they had let it burn down without shoveling on more coal or summoning a servant to do it for them. His brow furrowed in thought before he delivered his answer. “Couldn’t be done, Perce,” he said. “Replenished consh—constantly by rivers and streams and all that. Brooks and rills. Fills up as fast as it empties out.”

“And it gets rained upon too, cuz,” Cyril Eldridge added helpfully, “just as the land does. It only *feels* as if you had drunk it dry. If it *is* dry, though, it having not rained lately, we all had a part in draining it. My head is going to feel at least three times its usual size tomorrow morning, and dash it all but I have a strong suspicion I agreed to escort m’sisters to the library or some such thing, and as you know, Percy, m’mother won’t allow them to go out with just a maid for company. They always insist upon leaving at the very crack of dawn too, lest someone else arrive before them and carry off all the books worth reading. Which is not a large number, in my considered opinion. And what are they all doing in town this early, anyway? Beth is not making her come-out until after Easter, and she cannot need *that* many clothes. Can she? But what does a brother know? Nothing whatsoever if you listen to m’sisters.”

Cyril was one of Percy’s many cousins. There were twelve of them on the paternal side of the family, the sons and daughters of his father’s four sisters, and twenty-three of them at last count on his mother’s side, though he seemed to remember her mentioning that Aunt Doris, her youngest sister, was in a delicate way again for about the twelfth time. Her offspring accounted for a large proportion of those twenty-three, soon to be twenty-four. All of the cousins were amiable. All of them loved him, and he loved them all, as well as all the uncles and aunts, of course. Never had there been a closer-knit, more loving family than his, on both sides. He was, Percy reflected with deep gloom, the most fortunate of mortals.

“The bet, Perce,” Arnold Biggs, Viscount Marwood, added, “was that you could drink Jonesey into a coma before midnight—no mean feat. He slid under the table at ten to twelve. It was his snoring that finally made us decide that it was time to leave White’s. It was downright distracting.”

“And so it was.” Percy yawned hugely. That was one mystery solved. He raised his glass, remembered that it was empty, and set it down with a clunk on the table beside him. “Devil take it but life has become a crashing bore.”

“You will feel better tomorrow after the shock of turning thirty today has waned,” Arnold said. “Or do I mean today and yesterday? Yes, I do. The small hand of the clock on your mantel points to three, and I believe it. The sun is not shining, however, so it must be the middle of the night. Though at this time of the year it is *always* the middle of the night.”

“What do you have to be bored about, Percy?” Cyril asked, sounding aggrieved. “You have everything a

man could ask for. *Everything.*”

Percy turned his mind to a contemplation of his many blessings. Cyril was quite right. There was no denying it. In addition to the aforementioned loving extended family, he had grown up with two parents who adored him as their only son—their only *child* as it had turned out, though they had apparently made a valiant effort to populate the nursery with brothers and sisters for him. They had lavished everything upon him that he could possibly want or need, and they had had the means with which to do it in style.

His paternal great-grandfather, as the younger son of an earl and only the spare of his generation instead of the heir, had launched out into genteel trade and amassed something of a fortune. His son, Percy’s grandfather, had made it into a *vast* fortune and had further enhanced it when he married a wealthy, frugal woman, who reputedly had counted every penny they spent. Percy’s father had inherited the whole lot except for the more-than-generous dowries bestowed upon his four sisters upon their marriages. And then he had doubled and tripled his wealth through shrewd investments, and he in his turn had married a woman who had brought a healthy dowry with her.

After his father’s death three years ago, Percy had become so wealthy that it would have taken half the remainder of his life just to count all the pennies his grandmother had so carefully guarded. Or even the pounds for that matter. *And* there was Castleford House, the large and prosperous home and estate in Derbyshire that his grandfather had bought, reputedly with a wad of banknotes, to demonstrate his consequence to the world.

Percy had looks too. There was no point in being overmodest about the matter. Even if his glass lied or his perception of what he saw in that glass was off, there was the fact that he turned admiring, sometimes envious, heads wherever he went—both male and female. He was, as a number of people had informed him, the quintessential tall, dark, handsome male. He enjoyed good health and always had, knock on wood—he raised his hand and did just that with the knuckles of his right hand, banging on the table beside him and setting the empty glass and Sid to jumping. And he had all his teeth, all of them decently white and in good order.

He had brains. After being educated at home by three tutors because his parents could not bear to send him away to school, he had gone up to Oxford to study the classics and had come down three years later having achieved a double first degree in Latin and Ancient Greek. He had friends and connections. Men of all ages seemed to like him, and women . . . Well, women did too, which was fortunate, as he liked them. He liked to charm them and compliment them and turn pages of music for them and dance with them and take them walking and driving. He liked to flirt with them. If they were widows and willing, he liked to sleep with them. And he had developed an expertise in avoiding all of the matrimonial traps that were laid for him at every turn.

He had had a number of mistresses—though he had none at the moment—all of them exquisitely lovely and marvelously skilled, all of them expensive actresses or courtesans much coveted by his peers.

He was strong and fit and athletic. He enjoyed riding and boxing and fencing and shooting, at all of which he excelled and all of which had left him somehow restless lately. He had taken on more than his fair share of challenges and dares over the years, the more reckless and dangerous the better. He had raced his curricule to Brighton on three separate occasions, once in both directions, and taken the ribbons of a heavily laden stagecoach on the Great North Road after bribing the coachman . . . and sprung the horses. He had crossed half of Mayfair entirely upon rooftops and occasionally the empty air between them, having been challenged to accomplish the feat without touching the ground or making use of any conveyance that touched the ground. He had crossed almost every bridge across the River Thames within the vicinity of London—from

underneath. He had strolled through some of the most notoriously cutthroat rookeries of London in full evening finery with no weapon more deadly than a cane—*not* a sword cane. He had got an exhilarating fistfight against three assailants out of that last exploit after his cane snapped in two, and one great black eye in addition to murder done to his finery, much to the barely contained grief of his valet.

He had dealt with irate brothers and brothers-in-law and fathers, always unjustly, because he was always careful not to compromise virtuous ladies or raise expectations he had no intention of fulfilling. Occasionally those confrontations had resulted in fisticuffs too, usually with the brothers. Brothers, in his experience, tended to be more hotheaded than fathers. He had fought one duel with a husband who had not liked the way Percy smiled at his wife. Percy had not even spoken with her or danced with her. He had smiled because she was pretty and was smiling at him. What was he to have done? *Scowled* at her? The husband had shot first on the appointed morning, missing the side of Percy's head by a quarter of a mile. Percy had shot back, missing the husband's left ear by two feet—he had intended it to be one foot, but at the last moment had erred on the side of caution.

And, if all that were not enough blessing for one man, he had the title. Titles. Plural. The old Earl of Hardford, also Viscount Barclay, had been a sort of relative of Percy's, courtesy of that great-great-grandfather of his. There had been a family quarrel and estrangement involving the sons of that ancestor, and the senior branch, which bore the title and was ensconced in a godforsaken place near the toe of Cornwall, had been ignored by the younger branch ever after. The most recent earl of that older branch had had a son and heir, apparently, but for some unfathomable reason, since there was no other son to act as a spare, that son had gone off to Portugal as a military officer to fight against old Boney's armies and had got himself killed for his pains.

All the drama of such a family catastrophe had been lost upon the junior branch, which had been blissfully unaware of it. But it had all come to light when the old earl turned up his toes a year almost to the day after Percy's father died, and it turned out that Percy was the sole heir to the titles and the crumbling heap in Cornwall. At least, he assumed it was probably crumbling, since the estate there certainly did not appear to be generating any vast income. Percy had taken the title—he had had no choice really, and actually it had rather tickled his fancy, at least at first, to be addressed as Hardford or, better still, as *my lord* instead of as plain Mr. Percival Hayes. He had accepted the title and ignored the rest—well, most of the rest.

He had been admitted to the House of Lords with due pomp and ceremony, and had delivered his maiden speech on one memorable afternoon after a great deal of writing and rewriting and rehearsing and rerehearsing and second and third and forty-third thoughts and nights of vivid dreams that had bordered upon nightmare. He had sat down at the end of it to polite applause and the relief of knowing that never again did he have to speak a word in the House unless he chose to do so. He had actually so chosen on a number of occasions without losing a wink of sleep.

He was on hailing terms with the king and all the royal dukes, and had been more sought after than ever socially. He had already patronized the best tailors and boot makers and haberdashers and barbers and such, but he was bowed and scraped to at a wholly elevated level after he became *m'lord*. He had always been popular with them all, since he was that rarity among gentlemen of the *ton*—a man who paid his bills regularly. He still did, to their evident astonishment. He spent the spring months in London for the parliamentary session and the Season, and the summer months on his own estate or at one of the spas, and the autumn and winter months at home or at one of the various house parties to which he was always being invited, shooting, fishing, hunting according to whichever was most in season, and socializing. The only reason he was in London at the start of February this year was that he had imagined the sort of thirtieth birthday party his mother would want to organize for him at Castleford. And how did one say no to the mother one loved? One did not, of course. One retreated to town instead like a naughty schoolboy hiding out

from the consequences of some prank.

Yes. To summarize. He was the most fortunate man on earth. There was not a cloud in his sky and never really had been. It was one vast, cloudless, blue expanse of bliss up there. A brooding, wounded, darkly compelling hero type he was *not*. He had never done anything to brood over or anything truly heroic, which was a bit sad, really. The heroic part, that was.

Every man ought to be a hero at least once in his life.

“Yes, everything,” he agreed with a sigh, referring to what his cousin had said a few moments ago. “I do have it all, Cyril. And that, dash it all, is the trouble. A man who has everything has nothing left to live for.”

One of his worthy tutors would have rapped him sharply over the knuckles with his ever-present cane for ending a sentence with a preposition.

“Philosh—philosophy at three o’clock in the morning?” Sidney said, lurching to his feet in order to cross to the sideboard. “I should go home before you tie our brains in a knot, Perce. We celebrated your birthday in style at White’s. We should then have trotted home to bed. How did we get here?”

“In a hackney carriage,” Arnold reminded him. “Or did you mean *why*, Sid? Because we were about to get kicked out and Jonesey was snoring and you suggested we come here and Percy voiced no protest and we all thought it was the brightest idea you had had in a year or longer.”

“I remember now,” Sidney said as he filled his glass.

“How can you be bored, Percy, when you admit to having everything?” Cyril asked, sounding downright rattled now. “It seems dashed ungrateful to me.”

“It *is* ungrateful,” Percy agreed. “But I am mightily bored anyway. I may be reduced to running down to Hardford Hall. The wilds of Cornwall, no less. It would at least be something I have never done before.”

Now what had put *that* idea into his head?

“*In February?*” Arnold grimaced. “Don’t make any rash decisions until April, Perce. There will be more people in town by then, and the urge to run off somewhere else will vanish without a trace.”

“April is two months away,” Percy said.

“*Hardford Hall!*” Cyril said in some revulsion. “The place is in the back of beyond, is it not? There will be no action for you there, Percy. Nothing but sheep and empty moors, I can promise you. And wind and rain and sea. It would take you a week just to get there.”

Percy raised his eyebrows. “Only if I were to ride a lame horse,” he said. “I do not possess any lame horses, Cyril. I’ll have all the cobwebs swept out of the rafters in the house when I get there, shall I, and invite you all down for a big party?”

“You are not *sherious*, are you, Perce?” Sidney asked without even correcting himself.

Was he? Percy gave the matter some thought, admittedly fuzzily. The Session and the Season would swing into action as soon as Easter was done with, and apart from a few new faces and a few inevitable changes in fashion to ensure that everyone kept trotting off to tailors and modistes, there would be absolutely nothing new to revive his spirits. He was getting a bit old for all the dares and capers that had kept him amused

through most of his twenties. If he went home to Derbyshire instead of staying here, his mother would as like as not decide to organize a *belated* birthday party in his honor, heaven help him. He might attempt to involve himself in estate business if he went there, he supposed, but he would soon find himself, as usual, being regarded with pained tolerance by his very competent steward. The man quite intimidated him. He seemed a bit like an extension of those three worthy tutors of Percy's boyhood.

Why *not* go to Cornwall? Perhaps the best answer to boredom was not to try running *from* it, but rather to dash *toward* it, to do all in one's power to make it even worse. Now there was a thought. Perhaps he ought not to try thinking when he was inebriated, though. Certainly it was not wise to try planning while the rational mind was in such an impaired condition. Or to talk about his plans with men who would expect him to turn them into action just because that was what he always did. He might very well want to change his mind when morning and sobriety came. No, better make that *afternoon*.

"Why would I not be serious?" he asked of no one in particular. "I have owned the place for two years but have never seen it. I ought to put in an appearance sooner rather than later—or in this case, later rather than sooner. Lord of the manor and all that. Going there will pass some time, at least until things liven up a bit in London. Perhaps after a week or two I will be happy to dash back here, counting my blessings with every passing mile. Or—who knows? Perhaps I will fall in love with the place and remain there forever and ever, amen. Perhaps I will be happy to be Hardford of Hardford Hall. It does not have much of a ring to it, though, does it? You would think the original earl would have had the imagination to think up a better name for the heap, would you not? Heap Hall, perhaps? Hardford of Heap Hall?"

Lord, he was drunk.

Three pairs of eyes were regarding him with varying degrees of incredulity. The owners of those eyes were all also looking slightly disheveled and generally the worse for wear.

"If you will all excuse me," Percy said, pushing himself abruptly to his feet and discovering that at least he was not falling-over drunk. "I had better write to someone at Hardford and warn them to start sweeping cobwebs. The housekeeper, if there is one. The butler, if there is one. The steward, if . . . Yes, by Jove, there *is* one of those. He sends me a five-line report in microscopic handwriting regularly every month. I will write to him. Warn him to purchase a large broom and find someone who knows how to use it."

He yawned until his jaws cracked and stayed on his feet until he had seen his friends on their way through the front door and down the steps into the square beyond. He watched to make sure they all remained on their pins and found their way *out* of the square.

He sat down to write his letter before his purpose cooled, and then another to his mother to explain where he was going. She would worry about him if he simply disappeared off the face of the earth. He left both missives on the tray in the hall to be sent off in the morning and dragged himself upstairs to bed. His valet was waiting for him in his dressing room, despite having been told that he need not do so. The man enjoyed being a martyr.

"I am drunk, Watkins," Percy announced, "and I am thirty years old. I have everything, as my cousin has just reminded me, and I am so bored that getting out of bed in the mornings is starting to seem a pointless effort, for I just have to get back into it the next night. Tomorrow—or, rather, today—you may pack for the country. We are off to Cornwall. To Hardford Hall. The earl's seat. I am the earl."

"Yes, m'lord," Watkins said, the aloof dignity of his expression unchanging. He probably would have said the same and *looked* the same if Percy had announced that they were off to South America to undertake an excursion up the River Amazon in search of headhunters. *Were* there headhunters on the Amazon?

No matter. He was off to the toe of Cornwall. He must be mad. At the very least. Perhaps sobriety would bring a return of sanity.

Tomorrow.

Or did he mean later today? Yes, he did. He had just said as much to Watkins.

2

Imogen Hayes, Lady Barclay, was on her way home to Hardford Hall from the village of Porthdare two miles away. Usually she rode the distance or drove herself in the gig, but today she had decided she needed exercise. She had walked down to the village along the side of the road, but she had chosen to take the cliff path on the return. It would add an extra half mile or so to the distance, and the climb up from the river valley in which the village was situated was considerably steeper than the more gradual slope of the road. But she actually enjoyed the pull on her leg muscles and the unobstructed views out over the sea to her right and back behind her to the lower village with its fishermen's cottages clustered about the estuary and the boats bobbing on its waters.

She enjoyed the mournful cry of the seagulls, which weaved and dipped both above and below her. She loved the wildness of the gorse bushes that grew in profusion all around her. The wind was cold and cut into her even though it was at her back, but she loved the wild sound and the salt smell of it and the deepened sense of solitude it brought. She held on to the edges of her winter cloak with gloved hands. Her nose and her cheeks were probably scarlet and shining like beacons.

She had been visiting her friend Tilly Wenzel, whom she had not seen since before Christmas, which she had spent along with January at her brother's house, her childhood home, twenty miles to the northeast. There had been a new niece to admire, as well as three nephews to fuss over. She had enjoyed those weeks, but she was unaccustomed to noise and bustle and the incessant obligation to be sociable. She was used to living alone, though she had never allowed herself to be a hermit.

Mr. Wenzel, Tilly's brother, had offered to convey her home, pointing out that the return journey was all uphill, and rather steeply uphill in parts. She had declined, using as an excuse that she really ought to call in upon elderly Mrs. Park, who was confined to her house since she had recently fallen and badly bruised her hip. Making that call, of course, had meant sitting for all of forty minutes, listening to every grisly detail of the mishap. But elderly people were sometimes lonely, Imogen understood, and forty minutes of her time was not any really great sacrifice. And if she had allowed Mr. Wenzel to drive her home, he would have reminisced as he always did about his boyhood days with Dicky, Imogen's late husband, and then he would have edged his way into the usual awkward gallantries to *her*.

Imogen stopped to catch her breath when she was above the valley and the cliff path leveled off a bit along the plateau above it. It still sloped gradually upward in the direction of the stone wall that surrounded the park about Hardford Hall on three sides—the cliffs and the sea formed the fourth side. She turned to look downward while the wind whipped at the brim of her bonnet and fairly snatched her breath away. Her fingers tingled inside her gloves. Gray sky stretched overhead, and the gray, foam-flecked sea stretched below. Gray rocky cliffs fell steeply from just beyond the edge of the path. Grayness was everywhere. Even her cloak was gray.

For a moment her mood threatened to follow suit. But she shook her head firmly and continued on her way. She would *not* give in to depression. It was a battle she often fought, and she had not lost yet.

Besides, there was the annual visit to Penderris Hall, thirty-five miles away on the eastern side of Cornwall, to look forward to next month, really quite soon now. It was owned by George Crabbe, Duke of Stanbrook, a second cousin of her mother's and one of her dearest friends in this world—one of six such friends. Together, the seven of them formed the self-styled Survivors' Club. They had once spent three years together at Penderris, all of them suffering the effects of various wounds sustained during the Napoleonic Wars, though not all those wounds had been physical. Her own had not been. Her husband had been killed while in captivity and under torture in Portugal, and she had been there and witnessed his suffering. She had been released from captivity after his death, actually returned to the regiment with full pomp and courtesy by a French colonel under a flag of truce. But she had not been spared.

After the three years at Penderris, they had gone their separate ways, the seven of them, except George, of course, who had already been at home. But they had agreed to gather again each year for three weeks in the early spring. Last year they had gone to Middlebury Park in Gloucestershire, which was Vincent, Viscount Darleigh's home, because his wife had just delivered their first child and he was unwilling to leave either of them. This year, for the fifth such reunion, they were going back to Penderris. But those weeks, wherever they were spent, were by far Imogen's favorite of the whole year. She always hated to leave, though she never showed the others quite how much. She loved them totally and unconditionally, those six men. There was no sexual component to her love, attractive as they all were, without exception. She had met them at a time when the idea of such attraction was out of the question. So instead she had grown to adore them. They were her friends, her comrades. Her brothers, her very heart and soul.

She brushed a tear from one cheek with an impatient hand as she walked on. Just a few more weeks to wait . . .

She climbed over the stile that separated the public path from its private continuation within the park. There it forked into two branches, and by sheer habit she took the one to the right, the one that led to her house rather than to the main hall. It was the dower house in the southwest corner of the park, close to the cliffs but in a dip of land and sheltered from the worst of the winds by high, jutting rocks that more than half surrounded it, like a horseshoe. She had asked if she might live there after she came back from those three years at Penderris. She had been fond of Dicky's father, the Earl of Hardford, indolent though he was, and very fond of Aunt Lavinia, his spinster sister, who had lived at Hardford all her life. But Imogen had been unable to face the prospect of living in the hall with them.

Her father-in-law had not been at all happy with her request. The dower house had been neglected for a long time, he had protested, and was barely habitable. But there was nothing wrong with it as far as Imogen could see that a good scrub and airing would not put right, though even then the roof had not been at its best. It was only after the earl was all out of excuses and gave in to her pleadings that Imogen learned the true reason for his reluctance. The cellar at the dower house had been in regular use as a storage place for smuggled goods. The earl was partial to his French brandy and presumably was kept well supplied at a very low cost, or perhaps no cost at all, by a gang of smugglers grateful to him for allowing their operations in the area.

It had been upsetting to discover that her father-in-law was still involved in that clandestine, sometimes vicious business, just as he had been when Dicky was still at home. His involvement had been a bone of serious contention between father and son and a large factor in her husband's decision to join the military rather than stay and wage war against his own father.

The earl had agreed to empty out the cellar of any remaining contraband and to have the door leading into it from the outside sealed up. He had had the lock on the front door changed and all the keys to the new one given to Imogen. He had even voluntarily assured her that he would put an end to the smuggling trade on the particular stretch of the coast that bordered the Hardford estate, though Imogen had never put much faith in

his word. She had never made any mention of smuggling to anyone afterward, on the theory that what she did not know would not hurt her. It was a bit of a morally weak attitude to have, but . . . Well, she did not think much about it.

She had moved into the dower house and had been happy there ever since, or as happy as she ever could be, anyway.

She stopped now at the garden gate and looked upward. But no, no miracle had happened since yesterday. The house was still roofless.

The roof had been leaking as long as Imogen had lived in the house, but last year so many pails had had to be set out to catch the drips when it rained that moving about upstairs had begun to resemble an obstacle course. Clearly, sporadic patching would no longer suffice. The whole roof needed to be replaced, and she had fully intended to have the job done in the spring. During one particularly dreadful storm in December, however, a large portion of the roof had been ripped off despite the sheltered position of the house, and she had had no choice but to make arrangements to have the job done at the very worst time of the year. Fortunately there was a roofer in the village of Meirion, six miles upriver. He had promised to have the new roof in place before she returned from her brother's, and the weather had cooperated. January had been unusually dry.

When she had returned just a week ago, however, it was to the discovery that the work had not even begun. The roofer, when confronted, had explained that he had been waiting for her to come back so that he would know exactly what she wanted—apparently *a new roof* had not been clear enough. His workers were supposed to be here this week, but so far they had been conspicuous in their absence. She was going to have to send one of the grooms with another letter of complaint.

It was very frustrating, for she had been forced to move into Hardford Hall until the job was done. It was no particular hardship, she kept telling herself. At least she had somewhere to go. And she had always loved Aunt Lavinia. During the first year following her brother's death, however, it had occurred to Aunt Lavinia that for sheer gentility's sake she ought to have a female companion. The lady she had chosen was Mrs. Ferby, Cousin Adelaide, an elderly widow, who was fond of explaining in her deep, penetrating voice to anyone who had no choice but to listen that she had been married for seven months when she was seventeen, had been widowed before she turned eighteen, and thus made a fortunate escape from the slavery of matrimony.

For years after her bereavement, Cousin Adelaide had paid supposedly short visits to her hapless relatives, since she had been left poorly provided for, and she had stayed until someone else in the family could be prevailed upon to invite her to pay a short visit elsewhere. Aunt Lavinia had voluntarily invited her to come and live indefinitely at Hardford, and Cousin Adelaide had arrived promptly and settled in. Aunt Lavinia had collected one more stray. She collected them as other people might collect seashells or snuffboxes.

No, it was no great hardship to be forced to stay at the main house, Imogen told herself with a sigh as she turned away from the depressing sight of her roofless house. Except that now, *soon*, being there was going to become a lot worse, for the Earl of Hardford was coming to Hardford Hall.

That roofer deserved to be horsewhipped.

The new earl was coming for an indeterminate length of time. His title was really not so very new, though. He had been in possession of it since the death of Imogen's father-in-law two years ago, but he had neither written at the time nor put in an appearance since nor shown any other interest in his inheritance. There had been no letter of condolence to Aunt Lavinia, no anything. It had been easy to forget all about him, in fact, to pretend he did not exist, to hope that *he* had forgotten all about *them*.

They knew nothing about him, strange as it seemed. He might be any age from ten to ninety, though ninety seemed unlikely and so did ten, since the letter that had been delivered to Hardford's steward this morning had apparently been written by the earl himself. Imogen had seen it. It had been scrawled in a rather untidy, though unmistakably adult, hand, and it had been brief. It had informed Mr. Ratchett that his lordship intended to wander down to the tip of Cornwall since he had nothing much else to do for the moment and that he would be obliged if he could find Hardford Hall in reasonably habitable condition. And in possession of a broom.

It was an extraordinary letter. Imogen suspected that the man who had penned it, presumably the earl himself since it bore his signature in the same hand as the letter itself, was drunk when he wrote it.

It was not a reassuring prospect.

In possession of a broom?

They did not know if he was married or single, if he was coming alone or with a wife and ten children, if he would be willing to share the hall with three female relatives or would expect them to take themselves off to the dower house, roof or no roof. They did not know if he was amiable or crotchety, fat or thin, handsome or ugly. Or a drunkard. But he was coming. *Wandering* suggested a slow progress. They almost certainly had a week to prepare for his arrival, probably longer.

Wandering down to the tip of Cornwall, indeed. In February.

Nothing much else to do for the moment, indeed.

Whatever sort of man *was* he?

And what did a broom have to do with anything?

Imogen made her way toward the main house with lagging steps despite the cold. Poor Aunt Lavinia had been in a flutter when Imogen left earlier. So had Mrs. Attlee, the housekeeper, and Mrs. Evans, the cook. Cousin Adelaide, quite unruffled and firmly ensconced in her usual chair by the drawing room fire, had been firmly declaring that hell would freeze over before she would get excited about the impending arrival of a mere *man*. Though that man was unwittingly providing her with a home at that very moment. Imogen had decided it was a good time to walk to the village to pay a call upon Tilly.

But she could delay her return no longer. Oh, how she longed for the solitude of the dower house.

One of the grooms was leading a horse in the direction of the stables, she could see as she approached across the lawn. It was an unfamiliar horse, a magnificent chestnut that she would certainly have recognized if it had belonged to any of their neighbors.

Who . . . ?

Perhaps . . .

But no, it was far too soon. Perhaps it was another messenger he had sent on ahead. But . . . on *that* splendid mount? She approached the front doors with a sense of foreboding. She opened one of them and stepped inside.

The butler was there, looking his usual impassive self. And a strange gentleman was there too.

Imogen's first impression of him was of an almost overwhelming masculine energy. He was tall and well formed. He was dressed for riding in a long drab coat with at least a dozen shoulder capes and in black leather boots that looked supple and expensive despite the layer of dust with which they were coated. He wore a tall hat and tan leather gloves. In one hand he held a riding crop. His hair, she could see, was very dark, his eyes very blue. And he was absolutely, knee-weakeningly handsome.

Her second impression, following hard upon the heels of the first, was that he thought a great deal of himself and a small deal of everyone else. He looked both impatient and insufferably arrogant. He turned, looked at her, looked pointedly at the door behind her, which she had shut, and looked back at her with raised, perfectly arched eyebrows.

"And who the devil might *you* be?" he asked.

* * *

It had been a long and tedious—not to mention cold—journey, most of which Percy had undertaken on horseback. His groom was driving his racing curricle, and somewhere behind them both, in the traveling carriage, came a stoically sulking Watkins, surrounded by so many trunks and bags and cases, both inside and outside the vehicle, that its gleaming splendor must be all but lost upon the potentially admiring lesser mortals it passed on its journey. Watkins would not like that. But he was already sulking—stoically—because he had wanted to add a baggage coach, *not* in order to spread the load between the coach and the carriage, but in order to double it. Percy had refused.

They were going to be here for a week or two at the longest, for the love of God. It had felt, riding through Devon and then Cornwall, that he was leaving civilization behind and forging a path into the wilderness. The scenery was rugged and bleak, the ever-present sea a uniform gray to match the sky. Did the sun never shine in this part of the world? But was not Cornwall reputed to be *warmer* than the rest of England? He did not believe it for a moment.

By the time Hardford hove into sight, Percy was more than just bored. He was irritated. With himself. What in thunder had possessed him? The answer was obvious, of course. Liquor had possessed him. Next year he would find a different way to celebrate his birthday. He would pull up a chair to the fire at home, wrap a woolen shawl about his shoulders, prop his slippered feet upon the hearth, set his cup of tea laced with milk beside him, and read Homer—in Greek. Ah, and add in a tasseled nightcap for his head.

Hardford Hall had been built within sight of the sea, a fact that was hardly surprising. Where else could one build in Cornwall? The front-facing rooms, especially those on the uppermost story, would have a panoramic and much-prized view over the vast deep—if those rooms were habitable, that was, and what he was seeing was not just an empty facade hiding rubble. All the evidence of his eyes suggested that it was *not* a heap, though. The hall was a solid, gray stone, Palladian sort of structure, more mansion than manor, and though there was ivy on the walls, it looked as though it had been kept under control by some human hand or hands. The house had been built on a slight upward slope, presumably so that it would look impressive. But it was also sheltered from behind and partially on each side within the arms of a rock face and trees and what were probably colorful rock gardens during the summer. Its positioning thus probably saved it from being blown away by the prevailing winds and set down somewhere in Devon or Somerset. The wind did seem to be an ever-present feature of this particular corner of Merry England.

There were rugged sea cliffs well within sight, but at least the house was not teetering off the edge of them. It was some considerable distance back, in fact. And as far as he could see, the house was surrounded by a walled park, which, like the ivy, appeared to have been kept in decent order. Someone had scythed the grass before the onset of winter and trimmed the trees. There were flower beds empty of flowers, of course, but

also empty of weeds. It looked as if a line of gorse bushes, instead of a wall, separated the park from the cliffs.

By the time he rode onto the terrace of the house and waited for the groom who had poked his head out of the stable block to come and lead his horse away, Percy was hopeful that at least he would not have to spend the rest of the day sweeping cobwebs. Perhaps he really did have a staff here—a housekeeper, anyway. There was, after all, at least one groom outside, and there must be a gardener or two. Perhaps—dare he hope?—there was even a cook. Perhaps there was even a *fire* in one of the rooms. And indeed, a glance upward toward the roof revealed the welcome sight of a line of smoke emerging from one of the chimneys.

He strode up the steps to the front doors. The steps had been swept recently, he could see, and the brass knocker had been polished. He disdained to make use of it, however, but turned both doorknobs, discovered that the doors were unlocked, and stepped inside—to a pleasingly proportioned hall with black-and-white tiles underfoot, heavy old furniture of dark wood that had been polished to a shine standing about, and old portraits hanging on the walls in their heavy frames, the most prominent of which depicted a gentleman in a large white wig, heavily embroidered skirted coat, knee breeches with white stockings, and shoes with rosettes and high red heels. Four sleek hunting dogs were arranged in a pleasing tableau about him.

A former earl, he assumed. Perhaps one of his own ancestors?

For a few moments the hall remained empty, and Percy found himself feeling relief that the place was obviously clean and well cared for, but also mystification as to why. For whom exactly were house and grounds being kept? Who the devil was living here?

An elderly gray-haired man creaked into the hall from the nether regions. He might as well have had the word *butler* tattooed across his forehead. He could not possibly be anything else. But—a butler for an empty house?

“I am Hardford,” Percy said curtly, tapping his riding crop against the side of his boot.

“My lord,” the butler said, inclining his body forward two inches or so and creaking alarmingly as he did. Corsets? Or just creaky old bones?

“And you are?” Percy made an impatient circling motion with his free hand.

“Crutchley, my lord.”

Ah, a man of few words. And then a mangy-looking tabby cat darted into the hall, stopped in its tracks, arched its back, growled at Percy as though it had mistaken itself for a dog, and darted out again.

If there was one thing Percy abhorred, or rather one class of things, it was cats.

And then one of the front doors opened and closed behind his back, and he turned to see who had had the effrontery to enter the house by the main entrance without so much as a token rap upon the knocker.

It was a woman. She was youngish, though she was not a girl. She was clad in a gray cloak and bonnet, perhaps so that she would blend into invisibility in the outdoors. She was tall and slim, though it was impossible with the cloak to know if there were some curves to make her figure interesting. Her hair was almost blond but not quite. There was not much of it visible beneath the bonnet, and not a single curl. Her face was a long oval with high cheekbones, largish eyes of a slate gray, a straight nose, and a wide mouth that looked as though it might be covering slightly protruding teeth. She looked a bit as though she had

stepped out of a Norse saga. It might have been a beautiful face if there had been any expression to animate it. But she merely stared at him, as though *she* were assessing *him*. In his own home.

That was his first impression of her. The second, following swiftly upon the first, was that she looked about as sexually appealing as a marble pillar. And, strangely enough, that she was trouble. He was not used to dealing with females who resembled marble pillars—and who walked unannounced and uninvited into his own home and looked at him without admiration or blushes or any recognizable feminine wiles. Though blushes would have been hard to detect. Both cheeks plus the end of her nose were a shiny red from the cold. At least the color proved that she was not literally marble.

“And who the devil might *you* be?” he asked her.

She had provoked the rudeness by walking in without even the courtesy of a knock on the door. Nevertheless, he was unaccustomed to being rude to women.

“Imogen Hayes, Lady Barclay,” she told him.

Well, that was a neat facer. If it had come at the end of a fist, it would surely have put him down on the floor.

“Am I suffering from amnesia?” he asked her. “Did I marry you and forget all about it? I seem to recall that *I* am *Lord* Barclay. The Viscount of, to be exact.”

“If you had married me,” she said, “which, heaven be praised, you have not, then I would have introduced myself as the Countess of Hardford, would I not? You *are* the earl, I presume?”

He turned to face her more fully. She had a low, velvety voice—which overlay venom. And her teeth did *not* protrude. It was just that her upper lip had a very slight upward curl. It was a potentially interesting feature. It might even be a beguiling feature if *she* were beguiling. She was not, however.

He was not accustomed to feeling animosity toward any woman, especially a young one. It seemed he was making an exception in this woman’s case.

Understanding dawned.

“You are the widow of my predecessor’s son,” he said.

She raised her eyebrows.

“I did not know he had one,” he explained. “A wife, I mean. A widow now. And you live here?”

“Temporarily,” she said. “Usually I live in the dower house over there.” She pointed in what he thought was roughly a westerly direction. “But the roof is being replaced.”

His brows snapped together. “I was not informed of the expense,” he told her.

Her own brows stayed up. “It is not your expense,” she informed him. “I am not a pauper.”

“*You* are spending money on a property that presumably belongs to *me*?” he asked her.

“I am the daughter-in-law of the late earl,” she said, “the widow of his son. I consider the dower house mine for all practical purposes.”

“And what will happen when you remarry?” he asked her. “Will I then be asked to reimburse you for the cost of the roof?”

And why the *devil* was he getting into this when he had scarcely set foot over the doorstep? And why was he being so abominably ungracious? Because he found marble women offensive? No, not plural. He had never met one before now. Her eyes, potentially lovely, were absolutely without warmth.

“It will not happen,” she told him. “I will not remarry and I will not ask for a return of my money.”

“Will no one have you?” Now he had gone plummeting over the edge of civility. He ought to apologize abjectly and right now. He scowled at her instead. “How old are you?”

“I am not convinced,” she said, “that my age is any of your concern. Neither is the list of my prospective suitors or lack thereof. Mr. Crutchley, I daresay the Earl of Hardford would like to be shown to his apartments to wash the dust of travel off his person and change his clothes. Have the tea tray brought up to the drawing room in half an hour, if you please. Lady Lavinia will be eager to meet her cousin.”

“Lady Lavinia?” He drilled her with a look.

“Lady Lavinia Hayes,” she explained, “is the late earl’s sister. She lives here. So, at present, does Mrs. Ferby, her companion and maternal cousin.”

His eyes drilled deeper into her. But there was not the smallest possibility that she was teasing him. “Not at the dower house when it sports a roof?”

“No, here,” she said. “Mr. Crutchley, if you please?”

“Follow me, my lord,” the butler said just as Percy heard the rumble of wheels approaching outside. His curricule, he guessed. For a brief moment he considered bolting through the door and down the steps and vaulting aboard with the command on his lips that his groom spring the horses, preferably in the direction of London. But it would be a shame to leave his favorite horse behind.

He turned instead to follow the butler’s retreating back. Watkins and the baggage would be awhile, yet. Lady Barclay and Lady Lavinia Hayes and Mrs. Ferby would have to take him in all his dusty glory for tea.

Three women. Marvelous! A sure cure for boredom and all else that ailed him.

This would teach him to make impulsive decisions while he was three sheets to the wind.

3

“I felt the sheets with my own hands,” Aunt Lavinia said. “I am quite sure they were well aired. I do hope he will not get the ague from sleeping between them.”

“Of course he will not,” Imogen assured her. All the linens at Hardford were well aired, since they were stored in the airing cupboard when not in use.

“Unless he is an elderly man and already has it,” Aunt Lavinia added. “Or the rheumatics. *Is* he elderly, Imogen?”

“He is not,” Imogen told her.

“And is he married? Are there children? And will they and his wife be following him here? Oh, it is very sad indeed that we know so little about him. I do not hold with family quarrels. I never have. If there cannot be peace and harmony and love within families, then what are families for?”

“Show me a family that claims to live in peace, harmony, and love, Lavinia,” Cousin Adelaide said, “and I will lead the hunt for all the skeletons in the cupboards. Such a fuss over a man.”

“I cannot believe,” Aunt Lavinia said, “that I was so busy seeing that everything was ready for him that I did not hear him arrive. But we could not have known he would come so soon, could we? Whatever will he think of me?”

“You need to be more like me, Lavinia,” Cousin Adelaide said, “and not care what *anyone* thinks of you. Least of all a man.”

Aunt Lavinia had indeed been horrified to learn that she had missed the arrival of the earl and her duty to make her curtsy to him in the hall. She was seated now in the drawing room, looking a bit like a coiled spring, awaiting the appearance of his lordship for tea.

“I did not think to ask if he is married,” Imogen said. If he was, she pitied the countess from the bottom of her heart. She did not often take people in dislike, at least not on first acquaintance. But the Earl of Hardford was everything she most abhorred in a man. He was rude and arrogant and overbearing. And no doubt there had never been anyone to call him to account. He was the type who would be admired and followed slavishly by men and fawned upon and swooned over by women. She *knew* the type. The officers’ messes with which she had been acquainted had abounded with such. Fortunately—*very* fortunately—her husband had not been one of them. But then she would not have married him if he had been.

“You have not seen Prudence, by any chance, Imogen?” Aunt Lavinia asked. “All the others are accounted for and shut safely inside the second housekeeper’s room, even though Bruce did not like it one little bit. But Prudence was nowhere to be found. I do hope she is not hiding somewhere, waiting to put in an appearance at an awkward moment.”

“I have not,” Imogen said. “The Earl of Hardford was unaware of my existence, you know. And of yours. And of Cousin Adelaide’s.”

“Oh, dear,” Aunt Lavinia said. “That *is* awkward. But he really ought to have made inquiries. Or perhaps we ought to have sent a letter of congratulation when he succeeded to the title and then he would have known. But at the time I was just too upset over poor Brandon’s passing. Dicky’s papa,” she added, lest Imogen or her cousin not understand who Brandon was.

The drawing room door opened abruptly and without even a tap upon the outer panel or Mr. Crutchley to step ahead to announce the new arrival.

The Earl of Hardford had not changed his clothes. Imogen doubted his baggage had arrived yet, since he had come on horseback. There was no doubt a coach on its way. Or two. Or three, she thought nastily. His drab riding coat and hat had been discarded, but the riding clothes he still wore were very obviously expensive and well tailored. His coat and breeches molded his tall, powerful frame, in which there was no discernible imperfection. His linen was admirably white and crisp, considering the fact that he had traveled in it. He had found something with which to restore the shine to his boots. Either he was a very wealthy man, Imogen concluded—but the estate of Hardford was not particularly prosperous, was it?—or his unpaid bills with his

tailor and boot maker were staggeringly high. Probably the latter, she thought purely because she wanted to think the worst of him. His hair had been combed. It was dark and thick and glossy and expertly styled.

He was *smiling*—and even his teeth were perfect and perfectly white.

He bowed with practiced elegance while Aunt Lavinia scrambled to her feet and dipped into her most formal curtsy. Cousin Adelaide stayed where she was. Imogen stood because she did not want his earlier rudeness to provoke her to retaliate with rudeness of her own.

“Ma’am,” he said, turning the full force of a devastating charm upon Aunt Lavinia. “Lady Lavinia Hayes, I presume? I am delighted to make your acquaintance at last and must apologize for descending upon you with so little notice. I must apologize too for riding so far ahead of my baggage and my valet that I am compelled to appear in the drawing room so inappropriately dressed. Hardford, ma’am, at your service.”

Well!

“You must never apologize for coming to your own home, cousin,” Aunt Lavinia assured him, her hands clasped to her bosom, two spots of color blossoming in her cheeks, “or for dressing informally when you are in it. And you must call me *cousin*, not *Lady Lavinia* as though we were strangers.”

“I shall be honored, Cousin Lavinia,” he said. He turned his smile upon Imogen, and his very blue eyes became instantly mocking. “And, if I may make so free . . . Cousin Imogen? I must be Cousin Percy, then. We will be one happy family.”

He turned his charm upon Cousin Adelaide.

“And may I present Mrs. Ferby to you, Cousin Percy?” Aunt Lavinia said, sounding anxious. “She is a cousin on my mother’s side and therefore no relation to you. However—”

“Mrs. Ferby,” he said with a bow. “Perhaps we may consider ourselves honorary cousins.”

“*You* may consider whatever you wish, young man,” she told him.

But instead of throwing him off balance, her implication that *she* would consider no such thing merely turned his smile to one of genuine amusement, and he looked even more handsome.

“I thank you, ma’am,” he said.

Aunt Lavinia proceeded to fuss him into the large chair to the left of the fire that had always been her brother’s and in which no one else had ever been allowed to sit, even after his death. The tea tray arrived almost immediately with a large plate of scones and bowls of clotted cream and strawberry preserves.

Unfortunately, the maids left the drawing room door open behind them when they came in. Equally unfortunately, someone must have opened the door of the second housekeeper’s room—so called for no reason Imogen had ever been able to fathom, since there had never been any such person on the household staff. Almost before the tea tray had been set down and Imogen had seated herself behind it to pour the tea, the room was invaded. Dogs barked and yipped and panted and chased their tails and regarded the scones with covetous eyes. Cats mewed and scratched and growled—that was Prudence, who was apparently no longer lost—and leaped onto laps and furniture and eyed the milk jug.

There was not a truly pretty or handsome animal among the lot of them. Some were downright ugly.

Imogen closed her eyes briefly and then opened them in order to observe the earl's reaction. *This* would wipe the smile from his face and put an end to the charm that oozed from his every pore. Blossom, the furriest of the cats and also the one that shed the most, had jumped onto his lap, glared balefully at him, and then curled up into a shaggy ball.

"Oh, dear," Aunt Lavinia said, on her feet again and wringing her hands. "Someone must have opened the second housekeeper's door. Out of here, all of you. Shoo! I am so sorry, Cousin Percy. There will be hair all over your . . . breeches." Her cheeks flamed scarlet again. "Blossom, do get down. That is her favorite chair, you see, because it is close to the fire. Perhaps she did not notice . . . Oh, dear."

Imogen picked up the teapot.

Bruce, the bulldog, had taken possession of the mat before the hearth with a great deal of noisy snuffling before addressing himself to sleep. Fluff, who was not fluffy, and Tiger, who was not fierce, settled on either side of him. They were cats. Benny and Biddy, both dogs, one of them tall and gangly with hangdog eyes and ears and jowls, the other short and long, almost like a sausage, with legs so short that they were invisible from above, circled about each other, sniffing rear ends—it was a considerable stretch for Biddy—until they were satisfied that they had met before, and then plopped down together over by the window. Prudence, the tabby, stood close to the tea tray, her back arched, growling at Hector. Hector, the newest addition to their household—if one discounted the earl—was a smallish dog of *very* mixed breed, his thin legs alarmingly spindly, his ribs clearly visible through his dull, patchy coat, his one and a half ears erect, his three-quarters of a tail slightly waving. He stood beside the earl's chair and gazed up at him with eyes that bulged from a peaked, ugly face, begging silently for something. Mercy, perhaps? Love, maybe?

Aunt Lavinia was flapping her arms in a shooing gesture. None of the animals took the least notice.

"Pray be seated, Cousin Lavinia," the earl said, a quizzing glass materializing in his right hand from somewhere about his person. "I suppose I was bound to encounter the menagerie sooner or later, and it might as well be sooner. Indeed, I believe I already have a passing acquaintance with the growling tabby. She—he?—ran through the hall while I was in it earlier and expressed displeasure at my arrival."

"She does not know," Imogen said, setting down his cup and saucer beside him, "that cats hiss and dogs growl."

She looked into his face, a foot or so from her own. He was no longer smiling. But he had not, to give him credit, lost any of his poise. Neither had he raised his glass all the way to his eye. She reached down and scooped Blossom off his lap, inadvertently brushing his thigh with the backs of her fingers as she did so. He lofted one eyebrow and looked back at her. She stooped and deposited the cat on the floor.

"Perhaps," the earl said with ominous civility while Imogen prepared to take him a scone, "someone would care to explain to me why my home appears to be overrun with what I would guess is a pack of strays."

"No one, certainly," Cousin Adelaide said, "would have chosen any one of them for a pet. They are a singularly unappealing lot."

"There are always animals roaming the countryside without a home," Aunt Lavinia said. "Most people shoo them away or go after them with sticks and brooms and even guns. They always seem to end up here."

"Perhaps, ma'am," he said, his voice silky, "that is because you take pity on them."

He seemed to have forgotten that she was *Cousin Lavinia* and that they were one happy family.

"I *always* wanted a pet when I was a child," she explained with a sigh. "My papa would never allow it. I still wanted one after I grew up and Papa died, but Brandon would not hear of it either. Brandon was my brother, the late earl, your predecessor."

"Indeed," he said as he bit into his scone without loading it down with cream and preserves.

"He scolded me when he caught me feeding a stray cat one day," she said. "Poor little thing. The leftover food would just have gone into the bin. After Brandon died, another cat came. Blossom. She was terribly thin and weak and had almost no coat. I fed her and took her in and gave her a bit of love, and look at her now. And then there was another one—Tiger. And then Benny came—the tall dog—looking as if he was one day away from dying of starvation. What was I to do?"

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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