“Damn it, Belinda,” he said in aggravation, “what is it about you that always makes me feel like a bug on a pin?”
She smiled a little at that. “Why don’t you like talking about yourself?”
“That’s the pot calling the kettle black, isn’t it?” he countered, glad for the opportunity to divert the conversation. “I’d wager many people wonder what’s underneath your exterior. I know I do.”
She looked away, staring down at her lap. “I don’t know what you mean.”
“No? Allow me to explain.” He slid onto his knees in front of her, ignoring the way she stirred in her seat. “You are so cool, anyone would think butter couldn’t melt in your mouth. But...”
He paused, placing his hands on either side of her hips, resting them on the roll and tuck leather.
“But that’s a front, isn’t it?”
He leaned forward, his abdomen brushing her knees, and the contact started the slow burn of desire inside him. He was heading into dangerous territory, he knew, but just now, he didn’t much care.
“I don’t know much about you, Belinda Featherstone,” he murmured, “but I do know one thing. I know that underneath that prim, cool exterior of yours, you are hotter than hellfire.”
By Laura Lee Guhrke

When The Marquess Met His Match
Trouble at the Wedding
Scandal of the Year
Wedding of the Season
With Seduction in Mind
Secret Desires of a Gentleman
The Wicked Ways of a Duke
And Then He Kissed Her
She’s No Princess
The Marriage Bed
His Every Kiss
Guilty Pleasures

Coming Soon
How to Lose a Duke in Ten Days
Laura Lee Guhrke

When the Marquess Met His Match
An American Heiress in London

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For my friend and wonderful fellow writer Elizabeth Boyle, who always finds a way to inspire me, especially when she oh-so-carelessly says things like, “Why don’t you write a matchmaker?”
This one’s for you, my friend.
Chapter 1

The primary difficulty with being a matchmaker wasn’t the unpredictability of human nature, or the contrariness of love, or even the interfering parents. No, for Lady Belinda Featherstone, known by wealthy American families as the finest marriage broker in England, the true difficulty of her occupation was the romantic heart of a typical eighteen-year-old girl. Rosalie Harlow was proving a perfect example.

“Sir William would make any woman a fine husband,” Rosalie was saying, her voice conveying the enthusiasm one might reserve for a visit to the dentist. “But . . .” She paused and sighed.

“But you don’t like him?” Belinda finished for her, and felt the inclination to sigh, too. Sir William Bevelstoke was one of many well-connected English gentlemen who had expressed a romantic interest in the
pretty American heiress since her arrival in London six weeks earlier, and was not the only one to elicit a lukewarm response. To make matters worse, Belinda suspected Sir William’s feelings went deeper than attraction.

“It isn’t that I don’t like him,” Rosalie said. “It’s just that . . .” She paused again, her brown eyes giving Belinda an unhappy look across the tea table. “He isn’t very exciting, Auntie Belinda.”

Belinda wasn’t the girl’s aunt, but she was as close to the Harlow family as any blood relation could be. Like her own father had been, Elijah Harlow was one of the many American millionaires who, upon striking it rich in railroads or gold mines, found the lure of Wall Street irresistible and moved their families to New York only to find the doors of social acceptance slammed in the faces of their wives and daughters.

Like the Harlows, Belinda had faced that situation when her own father had brought her to New York from Ohio the year she was fourteen. Mrs. Harlow, a kind and loving woman, had felt great compassion for her young, motherless fellow outcast and had taken the painfully shy girl under her wing, an act of kindness Belinda had never forgotten.

The summer she was seventeen, Belinda had married the dashing, handsome Earl of Featherstone after a six-week whirlwind courtship. It had proved a disastrous union, but Belinda had managed to carve out a successful place for herself in British society. Five years later, when Mrs. Harlow had desired to spare her eldest
daughter Margaret the stinging snubs of a New York
debut, she had asked Belinda’s help to launch the girl
in London. Belinda, though happy to assist, was well
aware that a rushed marriage to an impoverished scoun-
drel could well be the consequence. She had placed
the girl in the path of the amiable, warm-hearted Lord
Fontaine, and as a result, Margaret had become both a
social success and a happily married baroness, and Be-
linda’s reputation as a matchmaker had been launched.

Since then, many New Money American girls, cold-
shouldered by the rigid social hierarchy of Knicker-
bocker New York, had found their way to London and
Belinda’s modest house on Berkeley Street, hoping to
follow in Margaret Harlow’s footsteps. Rosalie, now
done with French finishing school, was here to do the
same, but Belinda feared she would prove more diffi-
cult to match with a good man than her sensible sister.

Belinda placed her teacup back in its saucer as she
considered what her reply to Rosalie should be. Though
she was a widow now and very grateful for the fact,
she was also well aware that the only way for girls like
Rosalie to achieve social acceptance was through mat-
rimony. She wanted to prepare these girls for the prac-
ticalities of husband hunting without destroying any of
their romantic ideals in the process, and Rosalie was a
girl stuffed to the brim with romantic ideals.

“Sir William may not be the most exciting of men,”
she said after a moment, “but my dear Rosalie, there is
so much more to a happy marriage than excitement.”

“Yes, but shouldn’t marriage be based on love? And,”
Rosalie rushed on as if afraid Belinda would disagree, “how can there be love if there is no excitement? To love is to burn, to feel as if one is on fire. Sir William,” she added with another sigh, “does not set me on fire.”

Before Belinda could point out the dangers inherent in such thinking, Jervis entered the room. “The Marquess of Trubridge has come to call, my lady,” the butler informed her. “Shall I show him in?”

“Trubridge?” she echoed in astonishment. She did not know the marquess except by reputation, and that reputation hardly impelled her to make his acquaintance. Trubridge, the son of the Duke of Landsdowne, was well-known as a rakehell, a man who spent most of his time gallivanting about Paris, spending his income on drink, gaming tables, and women of low moral character. He was also a friend of her late husband’s brother, Jack, and that fact gave her even less desire to make his acquaintance. Jack Featherstone was as wild as his brother had been, and both men had done plenty of carousing with Trubridge on the other side of the Channel.

Belinda wasn’t surprised Trubridge would break rules of etiquette and call upon a woman with whom he was not acquainted, but she couldn’t imagine his reason. Trubridge was a confirmed bachelor, and such men avoided Belinda as if she had the plague.

Still, whatever his reason for coming to see her, she had no interest in finding out what it was. “Jervis, please tell the marquess I am not at home.”

“Very good, my lady.” Jervis withdrew, and Belinda prepared to return to the subject at hand.
“Do not dismiss Sir William so quickly, Rosalie. He is quite well placed in Her Majesty’s government. His knighthood was granted due to his excellent diplomatic skills over some tricky business in Ceylon.”

“Ceylon?” Rosalie looked a bit alarmed. “If I were to marry Sir William, would I have to live in foreign places?”

The fact that she lived in a foreign place now, and a hotel at that, didn’t seem to bother her, but Belinda fully understood the reasons for her concern. “Possibly,” she was forced to concede, “but such posts are seldom for long, and they are an excellent opportunity for someone of your position to make an impression. A good diplomatic hostess is welcomed everywhere.”

“I don’t want to live in Ceylon. I want to live in England. Does Sir William have an estate?”

“Not at present, but if he were to marry, I’m sure he could be persuaded to purchase such a property. Still, it’s far too early to think of that now. The point is that he is a very nice young man, well mannered and well-bred. And—”

A discreet cough interrupted her, and she found her butler once again in the doorway. “Yes, Jervis? What is it?”

The butler looked apologetic. “The Marquess of Trubridge, my lady. He has asked me to inform your ladyship that despite your words to the contrary, he knows for a fact that you are at home.”

“Oh, does he?” Belinda was indignant. “What makes him presume to know anything of the sort?”
Her question was rhetorical, but Jervis supplied an answer anyway. “He pointed out that it is a dark afternoon, and your lamps are lit, but your curtains are not drawn, making him able to see you quite easily through the window from the street below. He once again requests a few moments of your time.”

“Of all the high-handed arrogance!” She didn’t know him, had no desire to meet him, and saw no reason to accommodate him. “When a lady says she is not at home, she may be in residence and yet not at home to 

*visitors*, a social custom any marquess ought to be well mannered enough to know. Be so good as to point this out to him, if you please. And also remind him that a lack of prior introduction prevents me from seeing him in any case.”

“Yes, my lady.”

The butler once again withdrew, and Belinda returned her attention to Rosalie. “Now, about Sir William—”

“Who is this Marquess of Trubridge?” Rosalie interrupted. “He appears most insistent upon seeing you.”

“I cannot imagine why. I don’t even know the man.”

“Is he unmarried? If so, surely his reason for coming to you is obvious.”

“Trubridge is a bachelor, yes, an adamant one. It’s common knowledge he has no intention of ever marrying. He is also a man no respectable young lady ought to become acquainted with. Now about Sir William . . .”

She’d barely begun a glowing description of that worthy young man’s potential future as a diplomat before a movement from the doorway caught her at-
tention, and when she looked up, Jervis was once again standing there. “Oh, for heaven’s sake!” she exclaimed. “Isn’t the man gone yet?”

“I am afraid not, my lady. He said to tell you he cannot imagine what he has done to give such offense that you would cut him in this manner by pretending you have never met him before, but whatever he has done to wound you, he offers his most sincere apologies. He again requests a moment of your time.”

“This is nonsense. I’ve never met the man in my life, and I fail to see what is of such urgency—” She broke off, struck by a thought that trumped other considerations.

Perhaps something had happened to Jack. Her brother-in-law and Trubridge did share the lease on a town house in Paris, and the marquess would be the first to know if Jack had met with an accident. Jack was known for committing the wildest, stupidest, most reckless acts imaginable, and it would not surprise her if he’d come to an untimely demise. It would also explain what had brought Trubridge here without a proper introduction.

She bit her lip, considering for a moment, then she said, “Ask Lord Trubridge if he’s here because something has happened to Jack. That is, to Lord Featherstone.”

“I will inquire, my lady.” Jervis, who was proving himself today as the most forbearing butler in London, bowed and withdrew. During his absence, she did not return her attention to her companion. Instead, she stared at the door, waiting for the butler’s return, a knot of apprehension in her stomach.
It wasn’t that she was fond of Jack. She wasn’t. He was too much like his brother—too inclined toward carousing with bad company, too fond of high living, and completely careless about his responsibilities at home. But though she did not approve of her late husband’s brother, she sincerely hoped nothing untoward had happened to him.

“Well?” she prompted when Jervis reappeared. “What did he say? Is Jack . . . is he dead?”

“Lord Trubridge wishes to know—” Jervis hesitated, as if the message were so important as to warrant being conveyed as accurately as possible. “He has asked me to ask you if Jack’s meeting with an accident would enable you to grant him an interview. If so, then yes, Jack has definitely come a cropper.”

Beside her, Rosalie choked back a giggle at this absurd reply, but Belinda could not share her amusement. Like Rosalie, she suspected Trubridge’s tongue was firmly in his cheek, but it was best to be sure.

“Oh, very well,” she said, giving in to the inevitable. “Put him in the library, wait ten minutes, then show him up.”

“Yes, my lady.” The butler departed to carry out these latest instructions, and Belinda turned to her companion.

“I’m sorry to cut our visit short, dearest, but it seems I am forced to see Lord Trubridge after all, if only to confirm that my brother-in-law has not come to harm.”

“But why make the marquess wait in the library? Why not simply have him come upstairs?”

The idea of that man anywhere near a sweet innocent
like Rosalie didn’t bear contemplating. “I cannot allow you to meet him. Lord Trubridge is not a gentleman.”

“Not a gentleman? But he is a marquess.” Rosalie gave a little laugh, understandably confused. “I thought a titled British peer was always a gentleman.”

“Trubridge may be a gentleman in name, but he is not one in deed. There was a scandal years ago, a girl he compromised but wouldn’t marry, a young lady of good family. And . . .” She paused, striving to remember what else she’d heard about the marquess. “I believe there was another girl—Irish—who went running off to America because of him though I don’t know the details, for his father managed to have it all hushed up.”

“Ooh,” Rosalie breathed, her eyes widening with even greater curiosity. “He sounds terribly notorious.”

Belinda studied Rosalie’s rapt expression and wondered, not for the first time, what it was about rakes that young girls found so captivating. By all rights, Rosalie ought to be repulsed, but no. She was all the more keen to meet him because of his wicked reputation, and Belinda wanted to bite her tongue off for having discussed the wretched fellow at all. Still, the damage was done. All she could do now was try to mitigate it and get Rosalie out of the house as quickly as possible.

“He isn’t notorious enough to be interesting,” she answered with a deprecating smile. “He’s just an odious man with a sordid history who has no business calling on me when we’ve never met.”

“But he says you have met.”

“I’m sure he is mistaken, or he’s teasing for some obscure reason of his own. Either way, I must see him,
it seems.” She stood up, pulling Rosalie to her feet as well. “And you, my dear, must return to your hotel.”

“Oh, must I go?” She groaned. “Why can’t I meet this Lord Trubridge? I am supposed to be mingling in British society. This man is a marquess, so I think I should meet him, don’t you?”

Absolutely not. Still smiling, pretending a casual indifference she was far from feeling, she picked up Rosalie’s gloves from the settee and handed them to her. “Another time, perhaps,” she said, and began steering the girl toward the door. “But not today.”

Ignoring the girl’s protests, Belinda propelled her through the drawing-room doorway and down the corridor to the stairs. “Besides, I can’t introduce you to a man I haven’t yet met myself. That would not be proper.”

She paused near the top of the stairs, casting a quick glance down to the foyer below to reassure herself that Jervis had done his job, and Lord Trubridge was safely ensconced in the library. Satisfied, she started down the stairs, pulling a reluctant Rosalie with her. “And I can assure you, Rosalie, that he’s a man unworthy of your interest.”

“Oh, but how could he not be interesting, with such a history? Oh, please, please, let me meet him. I’ve never met anyone notorious.”

Belinda discerned that further excuses would be needed to make the girl lose her curiosity. “My dear girl, you expressed the wish to live in England,” she reminded her, as they started down the stairs. “Trubridge lives in Paris.”

“But does he have property here?”
“I believe he has a place in Kent,” she answered with reluctance. “Honey-Something. But I don’t believe he ever visits it. He certainly doesn’t live there.”
“But if he married, he might wish to.”
“I doubt it. He and his father are estranged and have been for years.”
“That could also change if he married, too.” Rosalie stopped at the bottom of the stairs, forcing Belinda to stop as well, and as she noted the girl’s mouth taking on an obstinate curve, she began to fear her own intransigence was making the marquess all the more appealing. Clearly, she needed to find something that would lessen his allure.
“I’ve heard . . .” Belinda paused, inventing quickly. “I’ve heard he’s become quite fat.” After all, she consoled herself, it could be true.
“Fat?”
“Absolutely corpulent.” Belinda once again began propelling the girl toward the front door. “And I know he drinks,” she added, as they crossed the foyer, “which has probably given him the gout by now. I daresay he smokes cigars as well, so his breath must be . . .” She broke off with a shudder. “Ugh.”
“You make him sound dreadful.”
“Well, he is getting on. Why, he must be over thirty, at least.”
If she’d hoped young Rosalie would think a man of thirty too old to be attractive, she was mistaken. “Oh, Auntie Belinda, thirty’s not so old. Why, you’re twenty-eight, and you could easily pass for a debutante.”
“What a lovely thing to say, darling. Thank you.
But my point is that Trubridge is a man of dissolute habits, and when men like that reach a certain age, they become most unattractive.”

“Perhaps you’re right.” She looked less interested now, much to Belinda’s relief. “Oh, how very disappointing.”

“Well, dinner at Lord and Lady Melville’s tonight ought to brighten your spirits. Their second son, Roger, is quite good-looking, and delightful company.” She turned to the footman who had opened the door for them. “Samuel, please escort Miss Harlow to Thomas’s Hotel and see that she arrives safely.”

“Heavens,” Rosalie put in, “I don’t need an escort. Berkeley Square is just across the street. I don’t understand all this fuss about walking everywhere with a chaperone.”

“That’s because you’re American, darling. Things are very different here.” She kissed the girl’s cheek, pushed her gently out to the sidewalk, and turned to her footman. “Not just to the entrance to Berkeley Square, mind. Go with her all the way into Thomas’s Hotel.”

“Yes, my lady. She’ll not go amiss with me.”

“Thank you, Samuel.”

Her footman was most reliable, but despite that, Belinda watched from the doorway as Rosalie crossed Hay Hill and entered Berkeley Square. She was fiercely protective of the young American girls who sought her help, and when it came to safeguarding their reputations, she felt it was always best to err on the side of caution. This was particularly true of the Harlow girls, who were so much like family to her.
Jervis’s footsteps on the tiled floor of the foyer reminded her of her other visitor, and since Rosalie had now vanished from view, she came back inside. Meeting her butler’s inquiring gaze, she nodded, then as he went down the corridor to fetch the marquess, she ran up the stairs to the drawing room. She was able to settle herself on the settee with her tea and catch her breath before Jervis came through the doorway. “The Marquess of Trubridge,” he announced, and stood aside.

Another male figure appeared, moving past the butler and into the drawing room with the ease of a man who never had cause to doubt his welcome in a room where there were women. Belinda rose to her feet, studying him as he approached.

For Rosalie’s benefit, she had conjured the picture of an aging roué, but that picture was shattered by the man before her. He might have all the dissolute habits she’d enumerated, but one wouldn’t have known it to look at him. He was a big man, but there wasn’t an ounce of superfluous flesh on him, and every line of his tall, broad-shouldered frame exuded athleticism and strength, the perfect combination to make any woman feel protected and safe in his company. But Belinda knew such an impression was nothing but illusion. Trubridge’s reputation made him as safe as an untamed lion.

He had a lion’s beauty as well, the tawny, windblown beauty of that splendid animal. His eyes were hazel, with lights of gold and green in their brown depths. His hair, though cut short, was thick and slightly curly, and the gold-burnished locks shimmered in the lamplight of Belinda’s drawing room like the sun might shim-
mer on the Serengeti Plain. Suddenly, the dark, rainy English afternoon became one of exotic warmth and brilliant sunshine. Even Belinda, who knew full well how deceiving appearances could be, blinked a little in the face of such splendid masculinity.

He was clean-shaven, a rarity these days, but she could not fault the marquess for choosing to defy fashion. His lack of a beard allowed the lean planes of his face and the strong lines of his jaw to be displayed to perfect advantage. Why, she wondered in frustration, were the rakehells always so damnably handsome?

“Lady Featherstone.” He bowed to her. “What a pleasure to see you again.”

“Again?” Looking at him, she was more positive than ever they had never met, for as galling as it was to admit, Trubridge wasn’t the sort of man a woman was likely to forget. “I don’t believe we have ever been introduced, Lord Trubridge,” she said, hoping her words and her withering tone might remind him that he had already broken several social rules.

“Of course you don’t remember me.” He smiled, a disarming smile that was boyish enough to belie his reputation and seductive enough to reinforce it. “We were introduced at the wedding breakfast following your marriage to Lord Featherstone.”

Heavens, her wedding had been a decade ago. That might explain why she didn’t remember him, for she’d been barely eighteen on her wedding day, navigating her first foray through the maze of British society like a moth blundering in lamplight. Horribly self-conscious,
head over heels in love with her new husband, and terrified she’d make some awful faux pas that would embarrass him, she’d been too nervous to remember much of anything that day, even a man like Trubridge. How extraordinary that he should remember her, but she supposed his talent for remembering women was another reason he was so successful at seducing them. “Of course,” she murmured at a loss for what else to say. “Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive. It was a long time ago, and we’ve not seen each other since, a fact which is clearly my loss. You look more radiant now than you did as a bride.”

“You flatter me.” One of your greatest talents, I imagine, she was tempted to add, but she bit back that rather acidic rejoinder. “Thank you.”

His smile faded to an earnest expression that seemed thoroughly genuine. “I was sorry to hear of your husband’s death. He seemed a very good chap.”

All men, she supposed, would share that opinion of Charles Featherstone. He’d been a terrible husband, but from the male point of view, he’d been a very good chap indeed, able to gamble, carouse, and drink with the best of them, until the night five years ago when he’d collapsed on top of his favorite mistress and died of heart failure at the age of thirty-six.

Belinda strove to maintain a neutral expression and keep hidden her distaste of her late husband and her lack of grief over his death. In England, showing too much emotion was considered bad form. “I appreciate
your condolences,” she murmured. “But I take it you are not here to offer me similar sympathies about my brother-in-law?”

His mouth twitched a bit. “Fortunately not. Jack was hale and hearty the last time I saw him, which was only a few days ago at our apartments in Paris.”

“Quite so. I am not surprised, sir, that a man of your reputation would use such a ruse to obtain an interview, but I am baffled as to the reason for it. What is the purpose of this visit?”

“For the same reason many bachelors visit you, of course.”

“I hope you don’t mean that the way it sounds.”

He smiled again, a grin that was wide, rueful, and utterly devastating to the feminine heart. “Lady Featherstone, I want you to find me a wife.”