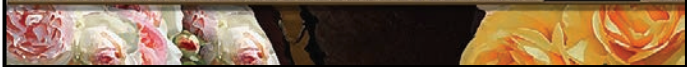


The Derbyshire Set - Book 0
Regency Historical Romance

A Gift of Love



Bestselling Author
Arietta Richmond



The Derbyshire Set – Book 0

(A prequel)

Regency Historical Romance

A Gift of Love

Arietta Richmond

ARIETTA RICHMOND



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Dedication

For all of my readers who want to know more about the characters found in my books, and to follow all the byways of their lives.

For the patience of my partner, in the face of me starting to write this, and not stopping for anything at all, until it was finished. My thanks for feeding me, because otherwise I would not have eaten or drunk anything at all that day.

For everyone who has ever loved unwisely, yet, in the end, found it rewarding beyond their expectations.

ARIETTA RICHMOND

Chapter One

Monique Clermont was dying. She bitterly resented it, but she could no longer hide the fact that it was happening. Yesterday, her voice had failed at practice, badly enough that the theatre manager had taken her aside, a sad look on his face. She had known, immediately, what was coming.

That did not make it any easier to hear.

“Monique, this has gone too far – you can no longer dance, you are so weak, and now you cannot sing either – and what use is an opera dancer who cannot either sing or dance?”

She had nodded, not trying to deny his words – for they were true.

“I cannot keep you on – we cannot afford it – the best I can do is give you a little extra as a parting gift. You have been good for the Palace, our patrons have loved you for years, but I have no other thing to give you in return.”

He had clasped her hand a moment, true sorrow in his eyes, then pressed a small purse of heavy coin into her grip. She did not look, that would be for later, she simply tucked it away in the pockets of her skirts, and nodded again, her throat tight.

Monique had refused to cry, all she had left was her dignity, for she knew that even her beauty was fading, as her body suffered from the growth in her neck, that had stolen her energy, now her voice, and was starting to be so visible that it stole any visual appeal that she had left. She had simply curtsied her farewell, and quietly moved to the dressing rooms, to gather up her possessions. The other performers, her fellows for so long, had said nothing, simply looked on. Only a few might actually care, others would be all too ready to step into her place as a feature performer.

Leaving the theatre, she had gone to her rooms and, pushing her exhaustion aside, had forced herself to pack everything, even as she cried for what might have been, and now never would be. Not that there was all that much to pack. Everything that she had ever received from admirers had been sold, beyond just a few good dresses, and pieces of jewellery. She had better things to do with her money than dress extravagantly. The thought brought the tears again, for what she would not live to see.

She shook them aside, and forced her belongings to fit into her one trunk, a hat box, and a small ladies valise. She trusted Margaret, Mrs Johnson, her landlady, to sell the furniture for her, and send the money on. Margaret's cook shop was just next door – she would see her in the morning, to give her the key, and the direction to send whatever the furniture brought.

She had packed her blankets, so she pulled her heavy travelling cloak about her, and tried to sleep. Tears came faster than sleep, but eventually exhaustion won, and she drifted off. There were dreams, deep terrifying dreams where she wandered, lost in a fog, and could not speak to cry out, could not reach anyone, or anything, until she just faded away. She woke in a cold sweat, aching, not rested at all, as the dawn thrust weak light through the single window.

It had taken all her energy to drag her trunk and box downstairs, and she had been glad that Margaret had seen her, and sent one of the boys out to help. Monique asked him to wait with her things whilst she spoke to Margaret and gave her the key. She was sad to leave, and almost cried again when Margaret pulled her into an all-enveloping hug, and, telling her to look after herself, pressed a packed lunch into her shaking hands. Ned carried her trunk and hatbox for her, walking the, fortunately short, distance to the post station, and she settled herself to wait for the coach.

She would be six hours on the road, and she doubted that she would manage to sleep in the crush on the mail coach, but she could endure. What waited for her at the end of the journey was worth it.

*

Late in the day, she staggered as she alighted from the coach, finally at her destination. The stable lads at the Bull and Bell knew her, and rushed to get her things down. She was glad of friendly faces, and even more so of the strong arms that went with them. Tommy had grown 6 inches taller in the last few months, and towered over her – she smiled at the sight, but not at his greeting.

“You look all in Miss Monique, you just sit here and catch your breath until we deal with the coach, and I’ll see you home with your things.”

If Tommy noticed, she must truly look terrible, and she was not used to looking terrible, not after years of being feted for her beauty. But he was right – she had no energy to do anything but sit. He had come back half an hour later, taken one look at her tired face, and gone and brought out the little pony trap that the inn used to bring things from the market. He tossed her trunk and box into the back, with the effortless strength of youth, and handed her up onto the seat, then climbed up beside her and took the reins.

It wasn’t far to her Gran’s but it might as well have been 100 miles – she would not have made it on foot. The tough little pony pulled them through the village, and out along the lane, through countryside full of spring flowers and green growing crops. The thought that this would be the last spring that she saw tore at her, and she bit back a sob. Tommy eyed her sidelong, but said nothing. Just helped her down in the yard, where the riot of roses had gone even further with their plans to take over the world, than ever before. It scared her to think that this might be a sign that Gran was failing too.

Tommy had hauled Monique’s things inside, tugged his forelock in respect at her Gran, and left them to it.

So here she was. Sitting quietly beside the one thing that still mattered in her life. Quietly, because her daughter was asleep, and she did not want to wake her – this moment was utterly precious – a time to simply watch, to soak in the sight while she still could.

Pale skin, dark rich brown hair, all full of highlights of red and gold that caught the light, tousled in sleep, long rich black eyelashes that drifted across lightly flushed cheeks, hiding eyes of a startling intense green, washed through with flecks of blue. She was long limbed, showing promise to grow taller than her mother. She took so much after her father, the resemblance brought Monique a rush of memories, bittersweet like everything else now.

Chapter Two

She had been twenty, just starting her career in the theatre, her years of practice having finally started to deliver her some good roles. He had been 17, just out of university, and the despair of his aristocratic parents, as he launched himself into the life of a rake, the way that only a son of the *ton* can do. He was sure of himself, charming, well made and good to look on, and absolutely certain that, if he wanted something, it would be his. And he wanted her. He had seen her perform, in the small theatre that was the height of her career so far, and had decided, instantly, that he wanted her.

At first, Monique had pushed him away, as too young to be a good patron – she was focussed on her career. But he had persisted, until, eventually, she became charmed, and permitted him to call on her.

He had swept her up into a round of dinners, picnics, nights at Vauxhall Gardens and more, all the while presenting her with a steady stream of remarkably tasteful gifts.

She came to think that she loved him, and, late one night, basking in the afterglow of her best performance ever, she finally let him talk her into his bed.

She knew that most actresses became the mistresses of wealthy men, but had been loath to do so – all of those who were interested were old and unappealing, and she found she just could not give herself to them, no matter what they offered.

Charles had been different, and she had been fool enough to think that it could last, could be something more. He had installed her in a tasteful little terrace house, in a fairly respectable part of London, bought just for her, and lavished her with attention. Their conversation had been complex, had crossed many topics, and drifted effortlessly in and out of French and English, leaving them both exhilarated from the witty byplay.

But soon, all too soon, he became frustrated with her dedication to her craft – he wanted more of her time than she was willing to give. They loved passionately, and the good times were amazingly good, memories that she had treasured all her life since, but, more and more often, they had argued.

Until Monique began to wonder how much longer it could last – she knew that he had started taking other women to his bed, and that he drank, gambled and went about with his friends to some very disreputable clubs.

Even then, she had been careful with her money – she had saved, from what he gave her, making sure that she had something squirrelled away for when the time came that she would no longer be living in his house. It saddened her greatly, but she was a realist, even then. She treasured what she had, while she had it, but knew when to let go.

*

She paused, watching the sleeping child, holding the memories of the best moments close. A gentle hand touched her shoulder, and her Gran beckoned her from the room.

“You must eat child, you’re fading away. And then you must sleep – you need to be rested to deal with the young one tomorrow.” Gran’s eyes were knowing, the eyes of one for whom daily life was becoming just as much a struggle as Monique’s was. Monique had feared this, for years, had prayed, with every ounce of belief that she could muster, that Gran would outlive her, that she would live long enough to protect the child until she was old enough to marry, or to care for herself.

It seemed unlikely now, that she would live that long. Fear settled, cold and sharp, into Monique’s bones. She had thought this through time and again, but only ever found one possible answer to the question of how to protect her daughter, once she herself was gone. It was not an answer that she liked. She pushed the thoughts aside, to smile, to eat, to talk of harmless gentle things, and pretend, for a while, that none of the bad things were real. It was, she thought wryly, quite the best performance of her life.

Every second of the evening, the world seemed more intense than normal – every smell or taste, every sight around her, dragged memories from the depths of her mind, made her acutely aware of everything that she would lose, when she lost her battle with the thing that was growing in her body – the doctors had told her that it was a type of cancer, that it would grow, no matter what anyone did, and eventually take her life. They washed their hands of her, and turned away.

She wondered if it was just her, or if this riot of memory and sensation came to everyone who knew that their death was coming soon.

With a full stomach, and a heart a little lighter for feeling loved, she took herself to bed early, the exhaustion of the last two days of tumultuous events suddenly a crushing weight on her limbs. Sleep came fast, and full of dreams, as it so often was of late. But tonight's dreams were of the past, of those few months with Charles, the only time in her life when she had been truly, deeply, happy with a man.

*

At first the dreams drifted her through the intimate moments of ordinary life, of eating together, of walking in the park, of a quiet evening, reading in her library, followed by a languorous and delicious time in her bed, until the exquisite sated exhaustion that comes from physical pleasure would take them into sleep. But then the dreams, as dreams are wont to do, twisted, and took her somewhere that she really did not want to go. It was the kind of dream that is so intense, so real, that you can believe you are really there, even whilst a part of your mind knows that you are dreaming.

Monique tossed in her sleep, reliving the feverish intensity of their last pleasure together, and the argument that followed – which had ended their relationship – many months' worth of conviviality and love, of a sort, gone, in the space of a few harsh words. They had been out, to a dinner at the home of one of his wild friends, and come back to her house, full of wine and desire, just enough in their cups for inhibitions to be released, and for speech to happen before thought could intervene.

They had been hot with the need for each other, barely holding back in the carriage, and had rushed up the stairs to the bedroom, with barely a nod to the footman who opened the door. With knowledge borne of practice, they had stripped the clothes from each other, tantalising and teasing, in all of the ways that would most inflame their passions.

For hours they had indulged in a sensual exploration of just how many times they could bring each other to climax, until, at the end, they lay in curled around each other, finally satisfied. It had been wonderful, and it had made her want to tell him the other wonderful thing about her day.

She had, just that morning, received the news that she would be contracted to perform at Covent Garden, starting in a few weeks, until the end of the season, and then, again, all through the following season, after the summer break. This was what she had worked for, for three years now, and she was ecstatic.

Turning in his arms, Monique had told Charles, in a rush of words, her joy spilling out of her.

And he had not shared her joy.

She could still remember, as clear as if it had been yesterday, how his face had looked, as it had gone cold and angry. He might as well have slapped her across the face, the impact was so great. Her voice had shaken as she spoke, hesitantly – “Charles?”

He had pushed back from her, leaving her cold and bereft without his arms around her. He had pushed a hand through that beautifully unruly hair, and spoken.

“In a month’s time, I am leaving for the continent, and beyond. I had hoped that you would accompany me. That you might care more for me, than for the theatre. It would seem that was a forlorn and childish hope on my part. I can see that you care nothing for me, and everything for your career. So be it. I will not see you again. You may stay in this house until three weeks from now, then I expect you to be gone. I thank you for our time, but, obviously, it is over!”

He had turned from her, pulled on his clothes, and left on the moment. He was true to his word. She had not seen him again. Now, in the dream, she lived it all again, the cold, jagged shards of ice that had filled her heart, the blackness that descended on her. The moment when she realised that she had been foolish enough to love him more than she should, but that he, it seemed, did not love her at all. She was just a convenience, company, physical relief, but not a person whose own hopes and dreams should be considered.

She thrashed in her bed, and cried, cried the hot tears of youth betrayed, as if it had been yesterday, not 10 long years ago.

Finally, the dream released her, and she dropped into the deep dark sleep that only utter exhaustion can bring.

Chapter Three

Bright light assaulted her eyelids, and a bright voice rang in her ears, just before a solid weight flung itself onto her, crushing her to the bed.

“Monny, Monny, Monny! I am so happy that you are here!”

At just turned ten, Tia was already well grown, and the signs of future beauty could be seen in her bone structure and shape, although she still moved with the gangly inelegance of a foal finding its balance as it grew. The unconditional joy and love in her words and actions almost brought Monique back to tears, but she forced herself to hold them back, to smile, and wiggle until she could breathe and move enough to hug the girl to her.

“And I am just as glad to see you! You have grown so much! I brought some things for you, and I am going to be staying quite some time. Do you want me to ?”

Monique ruffled Tia's already tangled hair, which had definitely not seen a brush since she had left her bed, and smiled at the excitement that her words had created. Her heart swelled with love for this amazing child, this one truly good thing that she had done in her life, even if it had happened in the worst possible way.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes....." Tia appeared ready to continue this litany forever, when she was interrupted by Gran, who stood smiling in the doorway.

"Young lady, I think that it's time for you to come and get dressed and tidied up properly, ready for the day. Whatever must your mother think! Anyone would think I hadn't taught you anything!" The scold came with a smile, and no harshness at all. Monique's heart contracted with joy all over again, seeing this evidence of love between the two people who were the only family that she had.

Tia let herself be herded out of the room, and Monique made to rise. All of the happiness dissolved in a rush, as the movement brought the pain back to the surface. Her whole body ached, especially her neck and, more and more often, she felt short of breath, as if the growth were cutting of her airflow, slowly but surely. With the pain came the memory – the memory of the decision that she needed to make, and soon.

And the memory of the dream, all wrapped in the sadness that always came when she thought of Charles. There had been men after him, but it had never been the same. Against that one bright episode of her life, every other time with a man was dull and lifeless by comparison.

She shook herself, and moved through the pain, to dress and tidy herself. She would not let it beat her – while she lived, she would live as fully as she could, and treasure each moment that she had with Tia.

The day went by in a rush, as Monique unpacked her meagre belongings, and settled into the cottage. It was, for a country cottage, quite large – her grandfather, while he still lived, had worked hard to extend it, and to create the best place to live that he could, for his beloved family. It would, she now felt certain, be the last place that she lived – for she could feel the cold hand of death reaching for her, closer and closer every day. Without the theatre to distract her, she could not hide from that reality.

Tia was thrilled with the dresses and jewellery that Monique had brought for her, although some dresses were still a little large, but, at the rate she was growing, it would not be long before they were a perfect fit. The simple joys of childhood, so amply demonstrated in front of her, lifted her spirits a little, but every moment was fraught with memory, and sadness hovered, ever ready to sweep her away. The light on Tia's face at certain angles made her think of Charles, the old, old toys in Tia's room, treasured hard worn companions of her young life, all brought back that first year, when her world had changed completely.

It was, however, all in all, a marvellous day. In the evening, as the light slowly faded from the sky, once Tia had finally collapsed into sleep, like an over exuberant puppy or kitten, that just drops to sleep wherever it is, Monique sat in the quiet shaded arbour amongst the roses.

Grandfather had built this seat for Gran, who could not bear to sit here since his death, but Monique had always loved it. It had been her place of solace when her father had left, and they had all realised that he was not coming back. He had been French, hence her name, and the whispers had started, but they had ignored them, and the gossip had faded away. The arbour had been where she cried when her mother died, one year when a terrible sickness had killed one in five of the local population. It was where she cried now, for herself, for Gran, and for Tia – because there was no choice – for any of them.

She was not at all sure how she would explain it all to Gran, for she had never revealed the truth of Tia's father. It had not seemed important to her, not compared to having a safe and happy child, who could grow here in the sun and be loved. Her earnings from the theatre, and from the lavish and silly gifts of men who admired her, had been more than enough to ensure that Tia and Gran were well provided for. But she had never envisaged this day, never thought that she would be gone before Gran, that a creeping canker would eat her away from within, by the time she was thirty one. She had even less idea of how she would explain it to Tia – for how could a child of ten grasp all that had been, and what was important now?

Chapter Four

Before seeking her own bed, Monique sat and watched Tia sleeping, again. She wanted to spend every moment that she could bear, simply watching, feeling and knowing her daughter. She would not see her grow, would not see her bloom into the kind of beauty that her looks foreshadowed, so now would have to do.

Tia's slow and steady breathing filled the room with a whisper of sound, and gently brought Monique a measure of peace too. Her thoughts drifted, again, to Charles, and the days following that terrible moment when he had walked away.

She had despaired, but had forced herself to go on, to find another, smaller house to rent, to remove herself from anything and everything that reminded her of him. Her new theatre roles were a blessing, for they demanded so much of her attention, that she could forget, for whole hours at a time, what had happened.

Her days felt empty, and all the brightness was gone, but, inside, a small part of her kept hoping that he would find her, come back to her, and that they could repair the breach between them.

True to his word, one month after that fateful day, he left for the continent. She heard the news second hand, from one of his wild friends, who had attended a performance, and sought her out afterwards to compliment her. She was rather shocked, however, when she was told that his plan now seemed to be to stay away for two or three years.

That brought a whole new level of pain – and made it abundantly clear that there was no hope, ever, of a reconciliation. She had been a fool, and read more into the behaviour of a young man with his first full time mistress, than she ever sensibly should have. She resolved to never be a fool again, and immersed herself in theatre. Two short months after he had left, the season ended, and Monique was already the toast of the *ton*, the most celebrated actress of the year, with her roles for the next season assured.

With six or seven months of time away from the theatre until the next season launched, she had saved her money and let the house go, packed herself up, and retired to the country and Gran, almost happy, for the first time since Charles had left.

But the week after her arrival had brought the greatest shock of her life. She had thought the nausea a result of nerves, in the face of the pressure on her to perform, night after night, to packed audiences. But when it continued, here, in the peaceful countryside, another possibility occurred to her.

A possibility which some careful calculations, and Gran's assessment of her, had confirmed. She had discovered that she was with child. Gran had asked her who the father was – not berating her for her lack of morality, or doing any of the things that an upright woman might be expected to do, in the face of such behaviour from her granddaughter, but simply asking. Monique had refused to tell.

She had simply sat among the roses and thought. She had decided that this was a gift, a compensation for the loss of Charles, and one that she would treasure, as something wholly hers to love. That decision had settled her, and the pregnancy was smooth and easy, as was the birth, which caused the local midwife to go on at length about how lucky she was. Monique had smiled and agreed.

Tia was born 4 weeks before Monique was due back on stage, and Gran simply smiled, and assumed that Tia would stay with her, and that Monique would return whenever she could. And so it was.

For ten years now, Monique had spent the part of each year between seasons, here, and visited sometimes during the season, had sent to Gran every pound of extra money that she could put aside or earn, because Tia and Gran's comfort mattered more than her own.

She reached out a hand, and ever so gently, brushed an errant strand of hair off Tia's face as she slept. Smiling, Monique turned and sought her own bed.

Chapter Five

Each day, the aches were worse, and it became harder to breathe. After a while, even Tia realised that something was wrong. It was time for Monique to have those conversations that she was dreading.

Late one evening, once Tia was sleeping, she sat down beside Gran, and turned to her.

“I know my dear, we have to talk, there are things you need to tell me, and decisions to make, aren’t there?” Gran’s smile was gentle, and her hand took Monique’s. The touch was made of pure love, and Monique could not speak for some time, as tears tried to choke her.

She nodded, and, eventually began to speak. It was such a relief to finally talk about it – she had not realised just how much pain it had caused, never to talk of that time, until now.

The words flew out of her, as she told the whole tale, sparing herself nothing, letting Gran see, in full, what a fool she had been, yet what a beautiful thing had come of it. At the end, she came to the most important part of all.

“So, you see, her father is Charles Rockingham, who is now the Earl of Stanningfield, since his father died unexpectedly last year. He has no idea that she exists, as he had left for the continent before we even realised that I was expecting, and I have not ever spoken to him since, as it was four years before he returned, and by then, everything was established – it was too late, in so many ways.”

Gran nodded, patted Monique’s hand, and waited.

Monique took a very deep breath and said the words that she had never yet said.

“I am going to die. Very soon – I feel the cold touch of death in my body more each day. The doctors have told me that there is nothing they can do – there is no hope for me. But there must be hope for Tia.”

Gran’s smile was sad, and, for the first time, she bit back a sob as she spoke.

“And I too, will likely die soon. Not so soon as you, but I can feel the tiredness creeping into me, I can feel your grandfather calling me, and I will soon not have the strength to resist any more. But you are right. There must be hope for Tia. What do you want me to do?”

A sob escaped Monique, but she forced herself to answer.

"I will write two letters. One for Charles, and one for Tia. Once I am gone, give Tia her letter. She will argue, and cry, and hate everything for a while, but she is young and strong. Once she can accept the idea, you will travel to Charles country home – assuming that he is there, as it is likely to be not during the Season – with Tia, and present him with the letter. If he is the man that I think he is, regardless of how we parted, I hope that he will take her in. Stay with her if you can, but I will understand if you need to come back here, at the end. I am sure that Tia will understand too."

"How do you expect him to explain her to his family, and the *ton*?"

"I will suggest that he pass her off as a distant niece, unexpectedly left to him as a ward, after the unfortunate deaths from illness of her parents. The families of the *ton* are so huge, so tangled, that no-one is likely to doubt his word."

"It's as good a plan as any I could contrive, and I am very glad that there is someone who may be a strong guardian for her, when we are both gone. Write the letters soon – I would not want death to come upon you before they are done, for Tia's sake, as well as yours."

"I will write them now. And thank you – for being you, for believing in me, all these years and for everything that you have done, and will do yet, for Tia."

Tears pouring down her face, Monique turned and almost ran to her room, to sit, and write the hardest letters of her life.

Chapter Six

The day of the funeral was fresh and bright, the church filled with roses from Gran's rose arbour, and more people than Gran had ever expected. Monique was one of theirs, but she had achieved fame, and they respected that.

The lads from the Bull and Bell had volunteered to carry her coffin, and Grainger, the publican, had offered to host the wake. It made Gran proud to see it, and Tia managed well, although seeming overawed by the number of people who had come to farewell her mother.

Monique had passed peacefully, in her sleep. The doctor had said that he thought that she had simply stopped breathing. Tia was glad that her mother no longer suffered the terrible pain of these last few weeks, but wished, more than anything else, that she could have her back, that it not be true. But it was. And that was that.

At home that evening, in the cottage that now seemed so empty, without Monique there, Gran handed Tia the letter, and simply sat quietly to let her read it. There were tears, and cuddles, and then a long time of thoughtful silence. At ten Tia was a very astute child, if strong willed at times. The words, when they came, were hesitant, but clear.

“So, I am the daughter of an Earl? How strange that seems, like a fairy tale, but not a happy one. And it is likely that I will need to pretend to be his niece instead – because he did not marry my mother? I could do that, but why do we have to go to him at all? Why can’t we stay here, just like always.... Except.... Mother will no longer visit?”

Gran looked at her, biting back her own tears, and proud of her great granddaughter in that moment.

“We don’t have to go straight away. But we will soon. I am old, and getting older. And now there is no-one but me and you. We will need to go and see him, before I get too old to be able to travel, or too sick. I will stay with you there, as a sort of nanny, for all that the world will know, as long as I can. But we all die in the end, and I am no exception.”

“Oh please, please, please, stay strong. I want you to live for many years yet Gran. Please don’t talk about leaving me.”

They cried together, until the tears ran dry for that day, then fell into exhausted sleep and dreamed of better days.

Chapter Seven

One year later, on a hot summer day, just after the end of the London season, when the aristocracy were all settling into their country estates to escape the stink of London in the heat, a small carriage rolled up the imposing drive of Havisham Hall.

It was the best that could be managed from the village, and had been hired, along with Tommy to drive it, from the inn, using some of the money that Monique had spent so much effort providing for them.

Gran and Tia descended from the carriage with care, and stood a moment to consider the magnificent house in front of them. Tia clung to Gran's hand, almost wanting to hide behind her skirts like a baby. Gran was afraid – not that she was letting anyone see that, especially Tia, but this was a much more impressive estate than she had expected, and a coiling of fear inside her made her wonder if they would be turned away.

Taking a deep breath, she led Tia to the door. A Butler opened the door as they approached, and regarded them with a dubious expression.

“Good day, I am Mrs Walsh, and this is Miss Theodora Clermont. We are here to see the Earl on a very important, and private, family matter. My apologies for arriving unheralded, but this matter has become urgent, and we thought it best to come in person. Is the Earl at home?”

The Butler looked at them with great suspicion, but not unkindly, as if he was considering all of the ways in which they might be unpleasant, and coming to the conclusion that they appeared harmless.

“Wait here. I will enquire.”

With that, he shut the door in their faces, and the sound of boots tapping across marble flooring followed. Tia made a little whimpery noise, and Gran shook her hand gently.

“None of that now. Let’s just wait and see what happens.”

*

Wilton tracked down the Earl in his Study, looking at the accounts that his man of business had brought, and scowling at the world. He tapped on the door, and entered when commanded, to stand waiting until the Earl looked up enquiringly.

“My Lord, there is an old woman and a young girl at the door - a Mrs Walsh and a Miss Clermont. They claim to be here to see you on urgent, and private, family business. I don’t quite know what to make of them, but they are well dressed, if not of the best, and seem well spoken and sensible. Will you see them?”

The Earl's expression had changed, minutely, at the name Clermont. Wilton might almost have thought it a momentary expression of pain, had it not so rapidly passed from his face. Silence ensued, as the Earl considered the matter - a strangely deep amount of consideration for what seemed a simple question. Then he smiled, and spoke, as if nothing were out of the ordinary.

"Certainly Wilton, do show them in. Put them in the green parlour, and I will be there shortly. Perhaps Mrs Cartwright can arrange some tea and biscuits?"

"As you wish, My Lord."

*

After what seemed like an eternity, but may have actually only been a few minutes, the sound of boots on marble was repeated, and the door opened again.

"The Earl will see you. Please follow me."

They were escorted into a sunny parlour, with windows that opened onto the extensive gardens at the rear of the house. They sat, Gran in peaceful stillness, willing to accept and deal with whatever happened now, and Tia, in a state of the nervous fidgets that could not be contained.

Tia was, after all, about to meet her father for the first time ever. The concept that she even had a father had been hard enough to accept, and that he was an Earl still seemed completely lacking in reality to her.

Moments later, a maid came in and deposited a tray of tea and biscuits in front of them, took an assessing look at Tia and asked kindly,

“Would you prefer a glass of lemonade Miss?”

Overawed, Tia nodded. The maid smiled at her.

“I’ll just get that then.”

The room was quiet again, except for the faint crinkling sound as Gran withdrew the letter from her reticule. When the door opened again, Tia’s heart nearly stopped. The man who had just walked in had to be the Earl. He was tall, an imposing figure, well-made and handsome, with thick dark hair that appeared to resent being tidied (like mine, thought Tia....) and penetrating eyes. She found him frightening, yet reassuring at the same time. Her hand tightened on Gran’s arm.

It appeared that the Earl was as taken aback by her, as she was by him, for he froze, a few steps into the room, and studied her face intently. After a minute, he seemed to come to himself, and stepped forward to greet them. Gran stood, and curtsied carefully, her knees complaining as she did. Tia remembered her manners, and managed a passable curtsy too.

“Forgive me keeping you waiting. Welcome to my home – I am Charles Rockingham, Earl of Stanningfield. You have come on a family matter, you say? How may I assist you?”

“Thank you my Lord, I am Mrs Walsh, and this is my great granddaughter, Miss Theodora Clermont.”

At that moment, the maid returned with the lemonade, which she deposited on the table near Tia, then she bobbed a curtsy and was gone.

“Might we close the door my Lord? This is, as I mentioned, a very private matter.”

The Earl raised an eyebrow at her, but complied, before turning to them again.

“Please sit.” He waved them back to the settee and took the chair opposite them. Gran drew in a deep breath and spoke.

“My Lord, I have here a letter for you, from my granddaughter, Monique, who is a year in her grave.” At her words the Earl stilled completely, and his face paled. When he took the letter that Gran held out to him, his hand shook, just a little.

“Please read it, before we speak any further.” Gran’s voice was calm, but her heart was racing – this was the critical moment – would he accept them?

Chapter Eight

Charles opened the letter carefully. The paper was yellowed, and the seal brittle, exactly as he would expect of a missive more than a year old. And why, he wondered, was it that old? If Monique was truly gone, and a year gone at that, why had it not been brought to him before now? What might she have to say to him, from beyond the grave?

He had regretted his last words to her, his behaviour that evening, for many years, but saw no way to ever make amends. By the time he had returned from his travels, she was famous, feted and surrounded by admirers wherever she went. He had been sure that she would have no time for him. He had been so callow, so crass in ending their relationship as he had – why would she care – she had moved on. So he had moved on too – to the life of a rake, a life which was becoming rather dreary, if he were to admit it – not that he would.

And now, it seemed, she was gone. Now he could never make amends. It saddened him more than he had expected. He turned his attention to the letter. The writing was a little shaky, and the ink a little faded with the passing of time, but it was, without a doubt, her writing. He knew it so well. All thought of doubt fell away, and he began to read.

My Dear Charles

(perhaps I should not call you that, but at this point, I don't care – for if you are reading this, then I am dead and gone, my body destroyed by a canker that has eaten me from within, that no doctor can help, and no amount of propriety will ever matter to me again).

This letter has two purposes – one is a confession, of something that, really, I should have told you many years ago. The other is a request. A very big request, which I can only hope you are the kind of man to fulfil. I cannot write for long, and I must finish this, before I cannot write at all, so I will be blunt. Please forgive my brevity.

So – the confession. When we were together, I was foolish enough to believe that I loved you, that you loved me, and that there was something for us beyond a short term arrangement with me as your mistress. So, when you left me, I was devastated.

It was my own fault, for you never promised me anything, and I should have known that you were no different than the other men of the ton, except perhaps in the intensity you brought to everything you did. Including anger.

When you left, I threw myself into my work, ignoring everything except the theatre, to block out the pain of your loss. There were no other men – none compared to you, and I could not face trying. Therefore, it took me until I returned to my country home at the end of the season to realise that something more had changed, other than my heart having shattered when you left.

What had changed, you are wondering at this point – or perhaps you already suspect? What had changed is that I was with child. Your child. There had been no others, only you. It was an easy time for me, I chose to see this as a gift of god, not a burden, I had my Grandmother to care for her when I needed to work, and she gave me purpose in life. She was born in winter, just before the start of the Season, and I named her for the gift she is – Theodora, gift of God. We call her Tia, because when she was little, she could not say her full name.

If this has happened as I asked, she sits before you now. Can you see me, in her? For I could always see you in her, which brought me joy and pain in equal measure.

I am so sorry that I did not tell you, when you returned from your travels, but I was afraid that you would turn away from us. I thought then, that it was better that she never knew you – that she grew up sunny and happy, in a country cottage surrounded by a riot of roses, than that she risk censure and rejection as a consequence of her birth out of wedlock.

I regret that I have caused you to miss all the little things, the seeing her grow and learn, from her birth until now. But we each made our choices, and must live (or in my case, die) with them.

So now to the request.

It is quite simple, but quite enormous.

I am gone. My parents are gone. Only my grandmother remains to care for her, and Gran is tired, oh so tired, of being the one left behind, when all that she loved, apart from Tia, are gone. It is likely that she too will die soon, leaving Tia alone. And even before that, although I saved every penny that I ever received to support her, there will no longer be enough money left to keep them fed.

So I ask you, humbly, with every fibre of my being, to remember the bright and beautiful days that we had, and take in your daughter, and love her as I can no longer be there to do.

I know that you most likely cannot acknowledge her as yours, as that would bring disrepute on you and on her. So I ask you to name her as your niece, the child of some much removed distant cousins, who have recently died from illness, and who named you as her guardian. Though it was a terrible burden to place on a ten year old, she knows this. For I wrote a letter for her too, which Gran gave her after my passing. She is brave, and very astute for her age (although rather alarmingly stubborn at times!) she will cope, and do well.

If you will do this for me, in memory of what we had, I ask that you also take in my Gran, and let her stay with Tia, as a sort of nanny (in the eyes of the world) for what life remains to her. She does not deserve to die alone.

That is the sum of it.

Charles – I am begging you to do this. And, in my heart of hearts, I love you still. I must believe that you will love our daughter as I do, or I will go mad in these last few days.

Forever,

My love

Monique.

He sat quite still. Caught in the past, as well as the present, and stared at the paper in his hands. He now understood what he saw. The ink was not just faded, but blurred here and there with drops that could only have been tears, more, the further through the letter he read. By the end, unashamed, he let his own tears join hers on the paper.

He looked up and saw the old woman watching, the shimmer of unshed tears brightening her eyes too. The child (***his child!***) watched him, not exactly afraid, but certainly unsure. He held out his hand, a look of wonder on his face.

The child looked to the old woman for guidance, and, at her nod, came to him, and took his hand. He folded her into his arms and wept.

Chapter Nine

The next week passed in a blur, with legal documents created and signed, to assure Tia's future, and to make her legally his ward. The discretion of his solicitor was absolute, and he was the only one to know the truth of the matter. To the world she became Theodora Rockingham, from a distant branch of the family.

Charles had begun to wonder if he would ever have children (much to his mother's dismay, as she wanted to see him married soon). There had been talk between his family and the Cavendish family, of the Earl of Derbyshire, of a match between him and their eldest daughter, but he had managed to put things off for some years, as the girl was still quite young. He was coming to realise that perhaps, soon, he would need to reconsider.

He had a lot to learn, and much to do to make a suitable set of rooms in his house for a young girl. Whilst Mrs Walsh still lived, she could care for the child, with the assistance of the maids, but once she was gone, he would need to find a governess – a task which he viewed with distaste, considering that he had heartily disliked every governess that he had ever met.

And, every day, when he saw Theodora, he saw the reflection of Monique – in her face, in her eyes, in the way that her hair fell to one side, in her mannerisms, and most especially, in her courage and determination. And oh, Monique had been right when she spoke, in her letter, of stubbornness!

But he could forgive her that, simply because it was so like her mother, and, he had to admit, so like him. That stubbornness in both of them, which had made sure that they never saw each other again. He wished the past different, but he could not change it, he could only treasure the now.

And he did – every day.

Epilogue

Mrs Walsh, with good food and care, and maids and footmen to help her with anything she needed, lived another 2 years and a bit more. She passed peacefully, knowing that her charge was safe and happy, and well loved and cared for, by her father, and by his staff. Six months after she departed, Charles was faced with a day that he had dreaded and could no longer put off.

Theodora had grown to a headstrong young woman, with the signs of becoming a striking beauty, in another few years' time. She was about to turn 14, and was, definitely, a very challenging girl to deal with.

Charles had regretfully agreed to the betrothal with Lady Blanchette Cavendish, although he was not at all sure that he really wanted to spend his life with her. She was passionate, and rather forward, but a little shallow for his liking. Still, he had agreed, and duty bound him to his word.

He sighed, rising from his desk, where he had been contemplating a series of applications for the position of governess, from women who all made him shudder, just from the way that they wrote. He would leave it until tomorrow – perhaps they would look better at a second reading.

Instead, he would go for a ride around his estates – getting out in the air on the back of a horse always improved his mood, and his new stallion, Thaddeus, was quite the best horse that he had ever owned.

Tomorrow, he would deal with the governess problem.



About the Author

Arietta Richmond has been a compulsive reader and writer all her life. Whilst her reading has covered an enormous range of topics, history has always fascinated her, and historical novels been amongst her favourite reading.

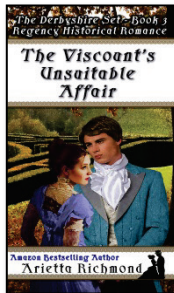
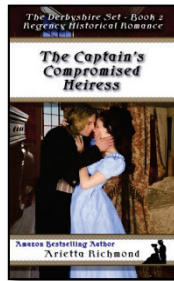
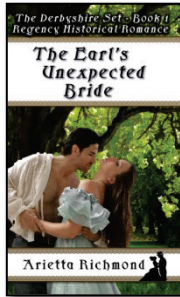
She has written a wide range of work, from business articles and other non-fiction works (published under a pen name) but fiction has always been a major part of her life.

Now, her Regency Historical Romance series is finally being released. The Derbyshire set is comprised of 9 shorter novels. She also has a standalone longer novel shortly to be released, and two longer series of novels in development.

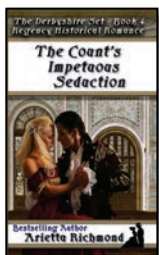
She lives in Australia, and when not reading or writing, likes to travel, and to see in person the places where history happened.

To find out first when Arietta's next book is released, sign up for her newsletter at <http://www.ariettarichmond.com>

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