
A MATTER OF WIFE & WEALTH

The Siblings - Book One

RAFFAELLA ROWELL



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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.

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Chapter 1

Mollie Sorensen and Kathryn Ellis had called in to see the old man.

"My husband wouldn't leave the room until I pushed the 'delete' button on my laptop, my lord. We had no choice. Your son was not in agreement with this. Without his approval, we had to wipe out all his information from our dating app. I am sorry, sir, Fergus made quite a fuss. He got us into trouble," Mollie said with a serious expression.

Gustave Waltham, the tenth Earl of Buckley, was ill. Everyone knew this. His days were numbered. He had been ill for some time. The doctors thought he was declining rapidly and would not recover. So, in his illness, the earl wished to see his son, and heir, settled with a good woman.

They were in his sitting room, in his grand home in the outskirts of Oxford. The man was propped up in a comfy armchair with cushions, wrapped up in blankets, with a hot-water bottle on his lap.

The earl's face was wrinkled by age but still fascinating, while wispy white hair covered his round, elegant head. Though his body was frail, his eyes, under bushy grey

eyebrows, were as alert as they had ever been, as if in those of a curious, spirited child. His mind, as sharp as a knife, had not lost its acuteness or its brilliance, as if he were still in his prime. His intellect was sublime.

Time had not completely misshapen his frame, but he looked frailer and weaker than ever. Mollie could not remember seeing him this feeble before. He had lost a lot of weight and seemed fatigued. It was a blow for the girls to look at him so poorly. It shocked them, but they put on a brave face for him. He was in good spirits that day, entertaining them with his wit and stories. A gifted raconteur, the old fog was amusing. The girls liked him. They had always got on well with him and had struck up a friendship.

"We had no option, my lord. Fergus hadn't given us his permission, not to mention he was livid about it," Kathryn emphasized.

"Yes, I understand, ladies. Not to worry, I know Fergus was not happy. He told me in no uncertain terms, I can assure you," he said with a little naughty laugh. "But out of curiosity, did my son match up to anybody on your dating app?"

"Yes, he did," Kathryn replied with a satisfied grin.

"Really?"

"Oh, yes. A 'top pick' too, a ninety-five percent score! A top match!" Mollie pointed out. "You can't get much higher than that."

"My fiancé and I, you know Finley Harman, don't you, sir?" Kathryn went on with a smile.

"Sure."

"Well, Finley and I scored ninety percent match on our dating app, and look, we are engaged to be married now. See my ring!" She proudly showed her engagement ring, a modern and refined round twist solitaire diamond with a clean edge platinum band.

"Oh, it's beautiful, Kat, congratulations. You deserve it,"

he said, while the girl lifted her hand to the light to make her engagement ring sparkle, smiling with satisfaction, showing it off.

"What a rock on her finger, hey? Finley spent a packet on it." Mollie snorted. "And they adore each other. Fergus and his match scored even more, imagine that. Unbelievable! Ninety-five percent score, my lord. It would have been an incredible match for your son. What a pity we had to delete everything," Mollie said, rubbing her ear with a soft shake of the head.

"I can't believe that ill-tempered son of mine matched to somebody. Ninety-five percent, you say, eh? Who the hell will want him?" he said, but a sudden twinkle flashed through his eyes.

"Yes, sir, he did. I can assure you, and our dating app hasn't been wrong so far," Mollie stated primly.

"He is a good-looking chap all right," the earl said. "Women find him handsome, irresistible; it's a family trait. All of my children are attractive if I may say so myself. Their mother, God rest her soul, was a beautiful lady, but Fergus has a waspish, short-tempered attitude. After a while, women run. They fear him. He is not like his brothers. My younger sons can charm the pants out of a stone, but Fergus and my daughter, Belinda, she is my youngest, you know her, don't you?"

"Yes, of course." The girls nodded vigorously.

"God, I despair of those two; they are my burden to bear. Still, Fergus is my heir and some woman will have to put up with him," the old man sighed with a resigned expression.

He had pushed his son to marry for a long time, but to no avail. He wouldn't budge. He found something wrong with every girl his father tried to push on him. The young lord was against marriage.

His father was convinced his son was incapable of love. Only brief affairs were his style, nothing serious.

The earl was a sick man and he realised he didn't have

long in this world. Thus, he wished to go to his grave knowing that the irascible, crotchety son of his had a woman to look after him and ready to produce the next heir, too.

So, Lord Buckley had taken it upon himself to solve the issue. Failing everything else, he grabbed his chance with Mollie and Kathryn's dating app without his son's knowledge, though it had backfired on them when the young man had discovered what they were doing. He'd complained to Zac and Finley to put a stop to it, immediately!

Fergus was furious about the girls meddling in his life and using his data without permission. Hence, the girls were forced to delete every scrap of information on him from the dating app.

"He matched! We had paired him, but it's all academic now. We have deleted everything," Mollie said with a long sigh.

"I wonder! Who is she? She must be an interesting creature if she paired up to my son with that high percentage rate," he claimed, lifting his eyebrows. He shook his head with a brittle laugh, as if not believing any woman could.

"She is the gentlest girl ever, but she has a determined personality. She can be tough when she needs to be."

"Do you know her?" the earl asked, surprised, his eyes lighting up with that clever sparkle of his, tipping his head to one side while a slow grin curled up on his face. *Well, she must be strong if she is to cope with my son.*

"Yes, we do."

"What's her name?" he urged, as curiosity flashed across his eyes. He leaned forward in his armchair, ready to discover all about her.

It wasn't to be.

"My lord, you do realise we cannot tell you that. You'll get us in trouble," Kathryn said with a serious tone, and the mild rebuke was not amiss, "Fergus wants nothing to do with our

dating app. He warned us already, please... He said our app was nonsense!" She went on with a wounded look and thin lips.

"Typical! He would, wouldn't he? Only the first name then."

"What? Oh, no, my lord, it isn't a good idea," Kathryn replied with a concerned expression.

"What am I going to do with a name?"

"Well, I suppose so..." The girls glanced at each other.

"Come on, just the first name. You'll give an old fool who is a step away from his grave a thrill. I can still dream, can't I?" he uttered with a crack in his voice and the most sullen and grave of faces.

He slumped back into his armchair, heaved a long sigh and hunched his shoulders. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and stroked his forehead with the most pitiful expression on his face. In his current state of health, it was not too difficult to achieve the overdramatic impression he intended to portray.

Tenderness flooded the girls' hearts for him. They had a pang of remorse at not wanting to tell him.

"Oh, my lord, you mustn't say things like that, please, you'll soon be well again," Kathryn replied with a tear in her eye, slowly releasing a deep breath.

"Ladies, I am afraid I'm worthless now. Good for nothing but the grave. Look at me! The doctor said so, my time has come."

"What do doctors know, hey? You have a wonderful spirit, my lord," Mollie spoke. She wrapped an arm around her midriff, and the other went to her heart with a heavy sigh. She was fond of the man and it hurt her to hear him talk like that, defeated, ready to die.

"Sweet girls, just the first name, and you'll make an elderly fool dream a little in his last hours."

"Marguerite!" Mollie blasted out.

"Ah, Marguerite. What a sweet name."

"You would have liked her. She is lovely, pretty, determined, firm. The most efficient administrator in the Senior Post-graduate office," Mollie blabbered in a rush, wanting to brighten the day for him, hoping her news would make his imagination flow. Aware he was ill, if this gave him a little joy, then why not? It was only the first name, anyway. *What was he going to do with that?*

Kathryn elbowed her in the ribs and scowled.

"What? I didn't say a thing!" Mollie massaged her ribcage, despondent.

"Perhaps it's all for the best that we deleted everything." Her companion glared at her.

"French, hey?" His question was rhetorical, but Mollie nodded eagerly, earning another scowl from Kathryn.

He laughed.

"He likes French women. We spent many summers in the South of France. Fergus enjoyed it there over the years. I remember one particular summer, it was the happiest I had ever seen him. We suspected then, it was to do with a girl. Never known him that cheerful in all my life. Mind you, it didn't last long. Soon, he returned to his usual, grumpy self, if not worse. He must have scared the poor wench off. Marguerite, you say... Ah, such a pretty name."

"My lord, I said enough. I'll be in trouble. Your son will kill me! And if he doesn't, my husband will, if he knew I have told you her name!" But there was a little mischievous glint in her eyes, too, Mollie wasn't a fool. On one side, she wanted to please the old man, and on the other, she realised full well what she was doing.

"Yes, sir, please. After today, you must forget it," Kathryn echoed, concerned at Mollie's lack of restraint after the trouble they'd had.

"Sure!" The old man nodded. "Don't worry. It's all hush-hush!" He zipped his mouth shut with his fingers and winked. "What am I going to do, bound as I am to this armchair, anyway?" He flapped his hand over his frail body, dismissing the notion he could do anything at all these days, confined as he was to a chair.

"Well, w-we—" the young women stuttered in discomfort.

"Your secret is safe with me, ladies." He tapped his nose with his index finger. "But you've made an old fool happy today. Bless you!"

They stayed a while longer, laughed and joked at his stories, then they said their goodbyes and left him.

The old fellow was not a clever man for nothing. He'd gotten what he wanted.

When they were gone, the earl called his secretary. "Perkins, find me a French girl named Marguerite who works in the Senior Post Graduate office. Bring her to me."

"Which office, my lord? Which studies?"

"Studies?" the earl pitched, wide-eyed, then he scowled.

"Yes, what discipline? There must be dozens of such offices. This is Oxford. What's her last name if I may ask?" the super-resourceful Perkins replied, unabashed, and used to combat with the old man and his extravagant requests.

"Hell, what do I know! No idea, on either. Get me the girl; hurry! I want to talk to her on Saturday."

"But today is Thursday, sir. With no full name and not knowing which office—"

"The lady is French! How many French 'Marguerites' are you going to spot in a Post-Graduate Office in Oxford? I tell you, you'd better hurry! I might kick the bucket by the end of the week, so off with you," he urged. His wrinkled hand

clutched his hot-water bottle and brought it to his heart. "Are you still standing there? Go find her!"

"Yes, my lord!" the man replied, knowing full well he wasn't going to win that particular battle. He was about to dash out.

"Oh, and, Perkins, call my lawyer. I want to see him right away. We have work to do. Make haste, as there is not a second to lose. Time is of the essence. I have a new will to write, my last testament."

A week later, Marguerite Morel was behind her desk in her office in the Senior Post-graduate department of Physics at Oxford University. She had finished an interview with a graduate for admission. The chap left behind his newspaper on her desk.

She didn't like a messy desk, *an uncluttered desk means an uncluttered mind*, her usual thought on the subject. She took the paper and was about to put it in a drawer, out of sight to read it later, when one news headline on the front page of the Oxford Mail caught her eyes. It was the name that attracted her attention.

Though she was not expecting it so soon, she felt it in her bones. Old Lord Buckley had died, the news headline read. Marguerite went perfectly still, while a pang of sadness surged through her frame, and she shivered. When she recovered, she scanned the half-page article on the Oxford tycoon and member of the House of Lords. As she read it, she bit her bottom lip, torturing the poor flesh, while she rubbed her forehead with her hand.

His son, Fergus Waltham, had become the new eleventh Earl of Buckley.

Suddenly, her head twirled, she felt her body swaying and she gripped her desk with both hands to steady herself.

Breathe, Marguerite, breathe, she told herself. She couldn't believe what she read, but it was true!

It sounded a good idea at the time, but now she was not so sure. In her mind, this was not supposed to happen for a long time. Had the old man lied to her? Marguerite should have gotten used to the idea, but she hadn't yet. Barely two days had passed since she had accepted and signed the old earl's proposal. She closed the paper and sat motionless in her chair when it dawned on her what would happen next.

Oh, dear God, what have I done? She blanched, still dizzy. Her limbs went numb as a violent shock ran through her body.