

A REGENCY TIME TRAVEL ROMANCE

Forever, Lately

Can true love
triumph
over time?



LINORE ROSE BURKARD

CHAPTER 1

March 1816

England

Julian St. John dug in his heels and spurred on Brutus, his thoroughbred of sixteen hands, as he approached the drive to his estate. A light rain obscured the moonlight, and he wanted nothing more than to get home and return to his books and fireside. He'd been dragged off by a messenger who'd claimed that a "proper lady" was on the road and in need of assistance.

He'd ridden all the way into the village and found no lady in need of help. Neither did he see the boy who'd appeared at his door claiming there was one. He didn't mind an urgent gallop; he was born for speed, and thrived on racing, but it was a fool's errand and he was tired. He secured his hat and nudged on Brutus with his heels. As he neared the turnoff to his own drive, suddenly the lights of a coach against the side of

the road about fifty feet ahead lit up, looking dully at him like two sleepy eyes.

St. John squinted and slowed Brutus. The coach hadn't moved, so he spurred the animal gently towards it, wondering if his assistance was needed after all. But the sound of a whip and a coachman's yell brought the idle vehicle to life, and it barreled down the road—straight towards him. He moved Brutus to the side but was astonished when the coach veered again in his direction. Was the coachman baffle-headed?

He spurred the animal's sides and maneuvered off the road and up a steep incline, and then turned to watch the vehicle. Unbelievably, it was still coming crazily at him, its lamplights brighter now, blazing like evil eyes. And closing in. This wasn't poor driving—the coach was *trying* to hit him! As it bowled towards him, the coachman's face materialised out of the haze, his eyes opened wide in terror.

A fence prevented St. John from vanishing into the trees that fronted his property, but just as the coach would have bowled into him,

he shouted at Brutus, snapped his spurs, and cracked the reins—they missed a collision by inches as the sturdy animal lunged out of harm's way. The coach's horses hit the fence whinnying.

Turning Brutus around quickly, St. John patted his neck while surveying the vehicle as it came to a rollicking stop, balanced precariously on the incline. The messenger boy, he saw now, had fallen from the coach to his backside in the wet brush.

Taking a deep breath at the close call, St. John quietly reached into a coat pocket and pulled out a pistol. Good thing he rarely rode in the evenings without one. Good thing too, that he was an excellent horseman or that insane coachman might have caused his demise.

Brutus nickered nervously. "Steady, old fellow," he said, never moving his eyes from the sleek black coach, silent and mysterious. Its horses stamped impatiently. There was no other sound as he approached and made his way past the closed door, but he found the

coachman huddled on his perch.

"How the devil do you explain your driving? Are you hocused?" he asked, thinking the man was in his cups.

"Nay, gov'nor. Followin' me orders, that's what."

"Orders from whom?" St. John demanded. "Who do you have in there?"

"T'mistress an' 'er sister," he answered sullenly.

St. John's heart sank—two women—if the driver could be trusted. "And you drove like a madman with women aboard!"

The man shifted uneasily on his perch but muttered, "I follows me orders, gov'nor."

"And what were your orders, precisely?" he asked in a scathing tone.

Again the man shifted uneasily. "Ask t'mistress."

"Who is your mistress?"

The coachman gave him a guarded look. "Ask t'mistress," he repeated.

St. John turned away in disgust and urged

his horse nearer the window of the equipage. He peered cautiously inside but saw only darkness. Dismounting, he kept the reins in one hand.

“Hello?” No answer. He readied his pistol. “If you do not answer, I warn you—I am armed.” When still no sound came forth, he reached for the latch and turned it, eliciting a gentle click. Holding the pistol out, he swung the door open and peered inside. “Hello,” he said again, wishing the clouds weren’t obstructing the moon so well.

He heard movement and tensed. A muffled sob came from the far side of the coach. He shoved his pistol in a pocket—heavens, it was a woman—and was about to jump in when a female laugh, very close to his head, rang out, clear and distinct.

“Oh, Margaret,” the voice scolded. “You’ve spoilt it! You needn’t blubber; we are unharmed, are we not? And you can see St. John is equally unscathed.”

Julian forced himself to take a deep breath

before he spoke. "What the devil have you done?" he hissed at the speaker, who now pushed her face forward from the shadows, where the coach lamp illumined the lovely features of Clarissa Andrews in all her wicked, seductive beauty.

She smiled at him, turning her head demurely, only it wasn't an honest movement, for there was nothing demure about Miss Andrews. She was a vixen, a minx, a she-devil, and she'd been trying to get St. John beneath her power since the start of the season. She knew, as did all of London that St. John, after thirty-four years of bachelorhood, was in need of a wife. He'd made an oath to the Marquess of Worleydon, his deceased guardian, and he meant to keep it.

"Allow me to congratulate you, Julian, on the excellent handling of your horse," she purred. "I am infinitely relieved you have kept yourself in one piece, you must know. I should have been utterly cast down had you been harmed."

Steely blue eyes glinted at her.

He wished he could tell her to go to the devil, to plague *him* with her incessant fooleries, but he was too much a gentleman—by God, he would be a gentleman. So he said only, “You could have got someone killed.”

“Yes, you,” she agreed calmly. “But here you are, as handsome and alive as ever.” She gave him a sweet smile, reminding him of what he found so vexatious in her. She had an innocent smile, delectable lips, but behind it all a black heart.

“Oh, come, Julian, you give me too much credit. No one was anything near being killed. You know it was naught but a lark, only a lark!”

“Only a lark?” His voice dripped ice. “Your coach came directly at me, and if I had been any less a rider, I’d have broken my neck. My horse might have died as well.”

She was thoughtful a moment. “We were not supposed to drive quite so close to you, I own. And why do you insist upon riding such an immense animal? We should have fared the

worst, not you; only it did not work out the way I planned." She spoke with barely a moment's stopping. "And I warrant you would have come to rescue me in a moment if Margaret had not spoilt everything." She pouted at him from within the reaches of a richly beribboned bonnet. "I was perfectly prepared to swoon for your benefit. You would have come to my aid, would you not?" She looked at him hopefully, but he made no answer. He directed his next words to the opposite wall of the coach.

"Are you all right, Miss Margaret?" He couldn't see Miss Andrews's younger sister, but a snuffle came from the darkness.

"I—I think so. Thank you, sir."

"Margaret's perfectly well!" Miss Andrews cried, moving forward so her ample bosom, half revealed in the formal dress of evening wear, was not only plainly in sight, but blocked any possible view behind her. St. John looked away, refusing to admire her.

Other men did admire her, for any wall in

the kingdom would proudly boast her portrait. She had dark, lustrous hair, an ovaline face with a well-delineated nose, and dark, long-lashed eyes. She also had slim ankles and small feet, which he knew from attending many a ball or rout in town. But St. John could not admire Miss Andrews's face or slim ankles, for her brazen impudence gave him a disgust of her.

In the past he would have taken advantage of her, welcomed her when she teased him with her alluring countenance and everything beneath it. At times he wanted nothing more than to take hold of her and...He forced his mind to concentrate only on her irksome behaviour. Tonight's escapade, what she called a 'mere lark,' was the latest in a string of vexatious attempts by her to gain his attention. And it was merely a hoax, another of her tricks, to put him in her path.

As he considered how best to give her a set-down, the jarring sound of a ring tone, quite close, made St. John turn in amazement and

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look around, not understanding the sound or its source. It was unrecognizable. But Claire Channing, the author writing St. John's story, did. She shut her eyes with a low groan, while St. John and the coach, the dark road, all of it, vanished, and she was back, sitting before her laptop, waiting for the call to go to voice mail.

CHAPTER 2

Dove Cottage, Maine Present Day

Note to self: Mute the cell phone before writing!

Claire didn't get many calls. She'd become downright reclusive as her career as an author took off. Her agent could be calling but that was doubtful. Her last two books were flops, and the one he was shopping around now had only garnered "mild interest" from publishers. He'd called it "promising," but Claire suspected he was only being nice.

She didn't recognize the number, so waited long enough for the caller to leave a message and then picked up. To her surprise, the caller was still on.

"Oh good, Claire, you're there! Adam Winthrop here."

Claire sighed and shut her eyes. "I'm not really here. Can you leave a message?"

Adam's family owned Bavarian Mountain Ski Lodge, a lucrative resort that surrounded Dove Cottage. He'd been pestering her since her arrival two weeks prior to sell them the little dwelling.

"I'll keep it short. It's important. But if you don't want to stay on, I can show up at your door in approximately...five minutes."

"No, no," said Claire. *Definitely not.* "I'm listening. Go." Twice before he'd offered to come to her door—or threatened to, depending on how she looked at it—and she'd put him off. Was he curious to meet the struggling author? Size up the opposition? Well, she wasn't about to indulge him. He just wanted an opportunity to pressure her about selling.

"Okay, look, I thought you should know," Adam said. "The old man's ready to up his offer."

Claire sighed. "How many times do I have to say this? I'm not selling. And I would never sell without Mrs. Grandison's signature even if I wanted to, which I don't." Charlotte Grandison was Claire's grandmother.

"But she's still MIA," he countered. "The town says the land's not deeded—it's up for grabs, Claire, and my father's already in the process of buying it. Once he owns it, he'll tear down your cottage. I'm doing you a favor by offering to take it off your hands now, while you can still make money on it."

Claire gripped the phone. This was the first she'd heard about tearing it down. "Your father will have to tear it down around me because I'll be here. Goodbye, Adam."

"Don't go; don't go!" His voice softened. "Look, I'm sorry about your grandmother. But you don't really have ties to the place. You just moved in."

"It was my grandmother's home, and I live here now. I'll find that deed."

"Face it, Claire. If there was a deed, the town would have a copy. Mrs. Grandison lived there as a squatter, I'm sorry to say. And that makes you one too."

"You're wrong," she said. She *hoped* he was wrong. "My family bought this land, fair and square."

"There's no record of a purchase."

"Goodbye, Adam!" Claire hung up, breathing hard. The Winthrops were going to play dirty, were they? What did they want Grandmother's measly two acres for, anyway? They owned scads of land all around the cottage and as Adam had pointedly told her, "in plenty of other places." She'd heard their ritzy lodge was booked year-round, even when skiing wasn't an option—the cottage wasn't infringing on their profits.

Her sheepdog Charlie got up and lazily sniffed around her feet, then settled in a hump at the floor. He seemed as weary of Adam's calls as Claire.

She'd block the man in a heartbeat except she needed to know if the Winthrops were really going to snatch the cottage right out from under her.

When she first arrived, Adam called to invite her to a small mixer, a get-together of locals. Surely she wanted to know her new neighbors? Then it was to offer his assistance—did she need help with the woodstove? Or maybe she needed some wood chopped? When temperatures dipped into freezing single digits, he called to remind her not to let her pipes freeze. But something told her he wasn't just trying to be helpful. Sure enough, he soon revealed that his family wanted her cottage. To be exact, they wanted to tear it down for its land.

She *needed* the cottage. They only wanted it because it wasn't already theirs.



Claire had come from Connecticut to Dove Cottage in Maine out of desperation, and with one purpose: to churn out a masterpiece to save her writing career. She'd learned of Grandmother's disappearance months ago, but since she barely remembered the woman, she hadn't given it much thought. Not until Mother announced she planned on having Grandmother declared dead so she could sell the cottage, did Claire feel a sense of loss about the woman, accompanied by a sudden need to check out her home. She'd been there only once when Mother had reluctantly visited, bringing Claire, aged twelve, along. Apparently, Mrs. Grandison had nearly died after routine gallbladder surgery. But she didn't die, and Claire's mother had never seen the need to visit the matriarch again.

Mother and Grandmother had a long-standing feud. Claire was never able to get details about what started it. All Mother would say was that Grandmother had gone off the deep end; that living alone in the woods had

made her crazy. She didn't want Claire picking up any of her craziness, and had severed ties completely with the old lady after that last visit.

She wasn't in favor of Claire's sudden wish to visit the place.

"You don't want to go up there," Mother said, during a rare phone call. Claire and Mother had seldom been in sync, and now spoke infrequently. Women in Claire's line, it seemed, were destined for frosty relationships.

"Why not?" Claire asked. "Grandmother can't influence me; I'm not a child, and besides, she isn't even there."

"Living there is what made her crazy. She's been missing for a year. I'm having it torn down."

Claire protested, "I remember it as a cozy little house. Just give me a few months—enough to finish my book. Besides, maybe I'll find something that will tell us where Grandmother disappeared to."

"I went up once and looked around and couldn't find anything," Mother said. "I don't know what's happened to her, but I don't think she's still alive."

Claire was sorry to think she'd never have a chance to know the old woman, but she was determined to get up to that quiet place in the pines. She'd started a new book that could be a game-changer for her, and Dove Cottage was just the place to get it finished. It lay off a quiet secondary road, an ideal writer's retreat.

She ought to have visited Grandmother before her mysterious disappearance, of course. Why had she let her mother deprive her of the relationship they might have had? Since it was too late, and with the Winthrops threatening the cottage, Claire felt the least she could do was hang on to the place. What if Grandmother Grandison returned? She deserved a home to come back to.



After the call with Mother, Claire hurried to get her ducks in a row in order to get to the cottage before Mother had it razed. What started as a vague longing to see it, to find a connection to the woman who was family, became a conviction. That cottage was not only a link to her lineage, but her best chance of producing a game-saving book.

And her career definitely needed saving. The bad reviews that followed her last two books, both Regency romances, were overpowering, each one an anchor, strapping her to a loser's plateau that now she must escape from. One reviewer wrote, "Ms. Channing's fans may keep her alive, but it certainly isn't this latest book doing so." And even her agent warned that if she didn't turn things around, she'd have to write with a pseudonym. Or self-publish. Claire wanted a contract and a big advance, not the responsibility and headaches of self-publishing. She wanted a blockbuster.

She'd terminated the lease on her apartment, grabbed Charlie and a few suitcases, and drove up in her silver Capri. She phoned ahead first since the cottage had been empty for so long, arranged for snow to be cleared, and hired a cleaning service, an electrician, and a repairman. Working appliances and an internet connection weren't optional. On the third day after her arrival with Charlie, Adam called.

His family was surprised to see someone living in the lonely cottage atop the hill; wouldn't she like to sell it, seeing as it was surrounded by property—their property? They'd give her more than a fair market price, and who else would ever buy it?

Claire had been adamant from the start about not selling. Grandmother could be abroad on some pilgrimage, for instance—the old lady did pilgrimages, according to Mother. But also the cottage had instantly felt welcoming and she was already getting in a lot of writing. It wasn't paradise, but had rustic charm. Inside a log-cabin exterior with a quaint

red-metal roof was an old-fashioned kitchen that included an ironstone stove and a wide hearth. The cozy living room had a fireplace, as did the main bedroom, and the Winthrops' lodge was far enough away so she heard nothing of tourists and ski lifts. It was peaceful. It was perfect.

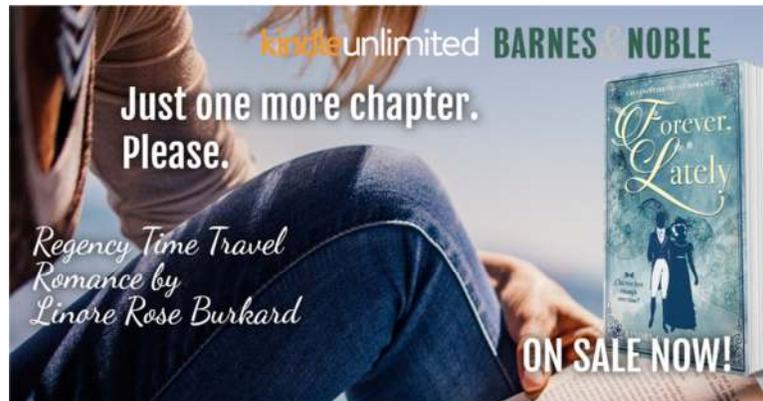
During her first walk-through, she'd found a cloth table runner in the bottom of a cedar chest. As she admired its lovely gold-and-mint embroidery, Claire had a sudden memory. It wasn't a runner; it was a shawl, a prayer shawl. Grandmother had found it in Israel on one of her pilgrimages. She called it by a special name which Claire couldn't remember. It was woven in sturdy white cotton, with a wide embroidered hem on all sides. The shorter ends were tasseled, and included two small doves—or were they lovebirds—meeting in a kiss.

The shawl had hung in a glass case on the wall like a museum tapestry on Claire's last visit. The glass must have broken, for the case was gone. She draped the fabric over the brow of the sofa where she'd see it as she worked at the kitchen table, and the memory bubbled up: a tallit, that's what Grandmother called it.

She added a log to the blaze in the fireplace. She'd need more logs eventually but Grandmother's front porch was stacked with two cribs of seasoned wood. If the old lady hadn't planned on being back for winter, she certainly had left enough firewood. She peeked out a window as she moved her laptop to the kitchen nook. Maine days were short in winter. She appreciated the falling snow, light as dust today, but sparkling upon the ground and trees in shafts of fading sunlight.

Well. St. John and Clarissa Andrews were waiting. It was time for Clarissa to apologize to St. John for the dangerous coach caper. Clarissa really was sorry and would begin to mend her ways. And St. John would have a change of heart towards her. By the end of the book he'd propose to Clarissa and they'd live happily ever after.

That was the plan, the outline she'd labored over for this new book which she called *Forever, Lately*. Later, when it all fell apart, Claire would wonder how she'd stumbled upon real people to inhabit her story. If she'd known they were real, she might have known, too, that they wouldn't ever do as she planned.



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Linore Rose Burkard is a serious watcher of period films, a Janeite, and hopeless romantic. An award winning author best known for Inspirational Regency Romance, her first book opened the genre for the CBA. Besides historical romance, Linore writes contemporary suspense (*The Pulse Effex Series*, as L.R. Burkard), contemporary romance (*Falling In*), and romantic short stories. Linore has a *magna cum laude* English Lit. degree from CUNY which she earned while taking herself far too seriously. She now

resides in Ohio with her husband and family, where she turns her youthful angst into character or humor-driven plots. **For a free novella, join her mailing list at:** <https://www.LinoreBurkard.com>

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