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The Rogue's Reform: House of Secrets (The Everard Legacy Book 1)

By Regina Scott, Marta Perry



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Adele's fortune is gone, along with her marriage prospects. Now she is devoted to securing her charge's happiness. When she meets Jerome, she dares to dream of love again. But after learning his true motives, that love comes to a test. Can she forgive his past and reform his heart...to make it hers forever?



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Editorial Review

Review

"Regina Scott is a first-rate storyteller who knows what her readers want in their romances." --The Huntress Reviews

"A fine start to the Everard Legacy miniseries." --*RT Book Reviews*

About the Author

Regina Scott started writing novels in the third grade. Thankfully for literature as we know it, she didn't actually sell her first novel until she had learned a bit more about writing. Since her first book was published in 1998, her stories have traveled the globe, with translations in many languages including Dutch, German, Italian, and Portuguese. She and her husband of over 20 years reside in southeast Washington State.

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Evendale Valley, Cumberland, England

Spring 1805

So that was the enemy's lair.

Jerome Everard reined in at the foot of the graveled drive. Just ahead, Dallsten Manor sat proudly on a rise, the afternoon sun warming the red sandstone towers at either end and glinting off the multipaned windows of the central block. Fields rolled away all around to meet woods still bare from winter. Beside him, the iron gates of the estate lay open, with a stone cottage standing silent guard.

"It looks innocent enough," his brother Richard said on his left, patting the weary horse on the neck.

"Looks can be deceiving," their cousin Vaughn replied on Jerome's right. His hand strayed to the hilt of the sword sheathed along his saddle.

Jerome almost hoped his so-called cousin's governess was peering out a window at that moment. The three of them could look intimidating on the best of days, and their grueling ride from London hadn't helped. Their greatcoats were dusty, their boots splashed with mud. Though Richard was the captain of their prize merchant vessel, his short russet hair, beard and mustache made him resemble nothing so much as a dashing pirate. Under that broad-brimmed hat, Vaughn's white-gold hair, held back in a queue, contrasted with the fathomless dark brown eyes that had made their Everard forebears feared and respected for generations.

And then there was Jerome, with his dark brown hair and icy blue eyes. The thinker, the planner. The schemer, his late uncle would have said. Had said, a few too many times for Jerome's taste.

"We'll find out soon enough," he said. "Remember our purpose—we discover the girl's origins and unmask her. I will not have a fraud taking over the Everard legacy."

"Or give her power over our inheritances," Richard agreed.

A smile played around the corners of Vaughn's mobile mouth. "This could be interesting."

In answer, Jerome urged his horse forward.

No groom came running as they approached the house, but then they hadn't been expected. In fact, Jerome was fairly sure everyone in that fine stone manor had assumed he'd stay in London, take his case to the courts. Certainly his uncle's solicitor had thought as much. Benjamin Caruthers had positively gloated when he'd delivered the news four days ago.

"Though I cannot as yet provide a formal reading of the will, I can relay the last wishes of your uncle, Arthur, Lord Everard," the solicitor had said as Jerome, Richard and Vaughn had gathered in his private office in London. Like everything else about the solicitor, the room was meant to impress. Tall, black bookcases lined the walls, boasting heavy, leather volumes lettered in gold. The squat, claw-footed desk in the center of the room was backed by a massive oil painting of a ship in full sail.

Caruthers was just as overblown, once muscular body grown round with indulgence, mouth wreathed in jowls a bulldog would envy. His old-fashioned powdered wig and lavishly embroidered coat proclaimed him a man of tradition, a man used to dealing with money. Grandfather Everard had insisted that the fellow be retained to handle their affairs, going so far as to include Caruthers and Associates in his will as managers of the Everard legacy. Uncle had found him insufferable. On that one thing, at least, he and Jerome had agreed.

"My dear sirs," Caruthers said with that arrogant smirk, "I shall not attempt to wrap this in clean linen. I am aware of the promises your uncle made to you. You each stand to inherit a considerable sum, and you—" He paused to contemplate Jerome for a moment. "You, my dear Mr. Everard, were expecting to receive the title, lands and considerable fortune associated with the Everard barony."

Heat pulsed through Jerome's body. For seventeen years, since being orphaned and given into his uncle's dubious care at thirteen, he'd been forced to do his uncle's bidding. Today, he became his own man at last.

"I don't much like your use of the word *expecting*"" Vaughn interrupted, crossing his arms over the chest of his black coat. "I am expecting that you will be forthcoming, or perhaps you should not expect to leave this room intact."

"Vaughn," Jerome warned.

Caruthers was nonplussed. "I had heard that you share your uncle's impulsiveness, Mr. Everard. I would have thought you'd learn a lesson from his untimely death. Hasty words have been the downfall of many a gentleman."

Jerome fought down the angry retort, just as he'd fought being saddled with his uncle's care-for-nothing reputation. "Your opinion of our uncle is immaterial. He is dead, killed in a duel, despite what the authorities think. We are his family, with responsibilities to the name Everard. That is the matter under discussion."

"Indeed it is," Caruthers said, leaning back in his chair and squeezing a creak from the leather. "And your expectations will be met, as soon as you fulfill one requirement of the will."

Jerome braced both hands on the hard, wooden arms of the chair where he'd seated himself. "Requirement? My uncle never spoke of requirements."

"Particularly with my brother, here," Richard put in, his own hands clenched at his sides. "There should be no impediments to his taking the title."

Caruthers's smile only grew. "I fear that is not exactly true. According to Lord Everard's will, the three of

you have a task to perform before you inherit anything."

Jerome took a deep breath. Trust Uncle to make it difficult. He had never wanted to accept responsibility for his role as baron, and he'd chafed at being reminded of his duties. This, it would seem, was his revenge for all the times Jerome had struggled to keep him in line.

"It is possible my uncle devised some scheme to put Richard and Vaughn to the test for the unentailed property," Jerome told Caruthers, "but he had no control over a sizeable portion of the Everard fortune and the title itself. Those items cannot be put under stipulation."

Caruthers eyed him. "You are quite right, Mr. Everard. Those items have already passed to Lord Everard's heir."

Vaughn leaped to his feet, and Richard stiffened. Jerome raised his head. "I, sir, am Lord Everard's heir."

"And to that we can attest," Vaughn declared.

Caruthers kept his gaze on Jerome, and Jerome felt it like a blade to the heart. "You may attest all you like. The Everard barony can pass along the female line. The title and entailed lands belong to the former Lord Everard's daughter."

The heat Jerome had felt earlier vanished, to be replaced by a coldness that went to his soul.

Richard rose, towering over the solicitor. "What nonsense is this? Uncle never married—he has no daughter."

"I am afraid you are mistaken, Captain Everard," Caruthers replied. "Lord Everard has a daughter, the issuance of a completely legal marriage. I have seen the proof."

Jerome stared at him. "What proof? Why weren't we told?"

Caruthers shuffled the papers in front of him. "Your uncle insisted on my silence, and I felt it necessary to comply. But all is not lost. The three of you can still inherit something. As the girl's guardians, you are charged with bringing the new Lady Everard out in style."

"Bringing her out in style?" Richard's scowl deepened. "Just how old is she?"

Caruthers glanced down at the parchment. "Sixteen, if memory serves."

"Sixteen?" Vaughn protested. "That cannot be right—Uncle could never have hidden a daughter so long. And now you expect us to play chaperone like some doddering dowagers?"

The solicitor seemed only too happy to elaborate. "Your uncle expected it, sir. His will stipulates that the girl must be presented at court, accepted in all the households who refused to receive your uncle and garner no less than three offers of marriage before the Season is out."

Richard shrugged. "Easy enough. We'll all offer for her."

Caruthers eyed him, mouth twitching as he unsuccessfully tried to cover his sneer. "I do not believe you are considered suitable, Captain Everard, but that will be up to the girl's governess, Miss Adele Walcott, to determine. She is charged with monitoring the success of Lady Everard's Season."

Jerome shook his head. "This is ridiculous. Uncle loved his games. Take this proof to Doctor's Commons for probate, and you'll find he's played you for a fool."

The solicitor's grin blossomed once more. "No, Mr. Everard, I fear in this case you are the fool. Your uncle offers you a small bequest and the estate on which you and your brother were born, if you help your new cousin take her place in Society. Otherwise, sir, even your horse is forfeit."

Jerome rose then, even as Vaughn and Richard moved closer to him in front of the solicitor. "My uncle may have preferred secrecy," Jerome said, "but the College of Heralds will insist on the truth, and so will I. Show me this proof."

"All in good time," the solicitor had replied with maddening calm. "I intend to journey to Dallsten Manor in Cumberland in a few days to meet with her ladyship, retrieve the necessary papers and hold a formal reading of the will. I expect you three will want to join me."

Jerome's fist tightened on the reins now, remembering. Join Caruthers? Never. If anything, they must discover the truth first. The solicitor's story had to be a lie, a fiction designed to keep Jerome from taking control of his inheritance.

Uncle had never understood the importance of the Everard legacy, its various estates across England, the fleet of ships that plied the waters of the world. Hundreds of people—tenants, servants, staff, sailors, merchants and villagers—relied on the Everards. Uncle had delayed important decisions, shrugged off ...

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