

# THE PUZZLE BOX

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## SUMMARY

### The Puzzle Box

The Marquess of Trembley uses his gift for solving codes and puzzles to serve his country. He's used to people asking for assistance, but when he asks Abigail Latham's father for permission to walk out with her and the man thrusts a puzzle into his hands, he is taken aback. What on earth does the man want?

Some puzzle boxes can be solved in a few moves. Some take dozens. This one takes many more than he expects, but he finds Abigail Latham herself an even bigger puzzle, one he's delighted to study—very carefully.



*Written to order for Patricia Taylor with gratitude for her interest  
in my work*



## Author's Note

In the July 2018 I offered the right to specify elements for a made-to-order story that would be the exclusive property of the winner for two months as the grand prize in a contest. Patricia Taylor won that contest, and this story is the result.





## Chapter 1

**E**dinburgh, June 1840

The size of a loaf of bread, and remarkably light, the puzzle box in front of the Marquess of Trembley held onto its secrets as tightly as an untried debutante clung to her virtue.

“Rather more tightly, come think about it,” he murmured, recalling a few memorable encounters. Devon Fitzmorris, Marquess of Trembley, had attempted to breach the thing for three days. Made of a resplendent pattern of inlaid wood, it appeared innocent enough. The first moves had been obvious: slide one end a bit, slide the other a bit, and listen for a click. He expected one end to slide off at that point, as it had on puzzle boxes he’d examined in the past. It did not. It took him half a day to find the part of the side panel that did move. Since then two other small pieces had yielded to his probing, but the top, bottom, and interior of the thing resisted his efforts.

“Asbury, Chelten, and two bright sprigs of the Mathematics College have already failed. Why don’t you just give up?”

Devon glared across the conservatory at his friend who hadn't even had the grace to look up from his work before delivering that set down. He began to regret tracking Archie Mallet to his lair in the botany laboratory. "Are you equating my skills with Asbury's flamboyant demonstrations or Chelton's plodding lectures? Neither one could solve a simple mathematical code much less a real puzzle."

When no answer met his complaint Devon shook the puzzle box again, and turned it over in his hands, first one way and then the other. He peered closely at one of the corners. "Well?" he demanded.

No answer. Archie rarely let himself be distracted from his blasted plants, particularly when propagating crosses.

Devon pressed down gently on bottom of one of the openings he had already found and felt a spring give. The sides remained firmly in place, and the panel on which he had put his finger refused to budge.

"Are you going to help me or not?"

"One moment. Delicate matter, Trembley. Delicate," Archie mumbled.

"It certainly—" The wretch didn't mean Devon's puzzle. He meant his potato plants. Devon pressed up rather than down, and one more piece slid forward. He put the box down, reached in his coat, and pulled out a flask. The recalcitrant box drove him to drink.

"Save some of that for me." Archie stood in front of him wiping his hands on a towel. He tossed it aside, reached for the flask, and gave it a quick look before imbibing. He handed it back and declared with a grin, "For that boon, I'm happy to help. What do you think I can contribute?"

"Have you ever solved a puzzle box?"

"Once. My brother and I spent one of our uncle's holiday house parties solving one; it took us three or four days."

“How many moves did it take?”

“Six is what I recall. The first two were easy.”

Devon snorted. He had already found eight moves. “What was inside?”

“Nothing. It was an empty box,” Archie said, “but this one is reputed to be a treasure box.”

Devon bit his lip. “Yes, Latham implied as much, yet somehow his sly smile implied ‘treasure’ might mean anything.”

“I assume he gave it to you because of your cryptology work. Does he expect you to find his family fortune?”

“That’s the odd part. He didn’t give it to me. Abigail—Miss Latham did.”

His friend raised an eyebrow. “The daughter?”

“We met at a lecture at The Academy for Scientific Advancement. Interesting girl. She seems to have a solid mind in addition to—well, some other assets.”

Archie chuckled. “I’ve noticed the other assets. Half the university has, but Latham guards her like the crown jewels.”

“If Asbury is a sample of her suitors, he has reason. Anyway, I paid a formal call. Tea in the parlor. Maid in the corner. All that. We seemed to get on well, so I asked her to walk out with me on Sunday. The next thing I knew I had been escorted into her father’s office and came away with this box.”

“A test.”

Devon nodded morosely, looking at the box. “Eight steps, and I’m not even close. I’ve heard of examples with seventy-five or more moves.”

“Odd way to screen suitors. I would have thought the title would be enough for any father.”

“Not Latham, apparently. And I just asked for a blasted

walk through the park. I shudder to think what they'd expect if I asked for her hand."

"Is she worth it?" His friend studied him, head tipped to one side.

"Maybe. I'd like to find out." He picked up the box again. "Are you going to help me or not?"



HE CALLED AGAIN, and did not bring back the box, a detail that cheered Abby enormously. She positively glowed at the marquess perched nervously on her mother's favorite overstuffed chair, looking adorable balancing a teacup in one hand and a butter biscuit in the other. At least she felt like she glowed. Perhaps he didn't see it, but he must have recognized her smile because he smiled back.

"Excellent biscuit," he said, clearing his throat. "My compliments to the cook."

*Should I tell him I made it? Best not. No doubt in his world one had a dedicated baker of biscuits.* Her spirits sank at the reminder that, lovely man though he might be, his family far outranked hers.

She studied her hands where they twisted in her lap and searched for a way to change the subject. "I didn't see you at the Academy lecture Tuesday," she said at last, wishing he had come so they might have discussed it.

"I didn't know you would be there! The topic..." He leaned over to set the teacup on the table to his right and let his words trail off.

"It wasn't one of the best," she admitted ruefully. "I had hoped to learn something, but I fear I found phrenology..." She bit her lower lip and groped for a word. *Nonsense* came to mind. It was hard to think with the man watching her so

intently; as if she were a butter cake and he planned to devour her.

“MacAske’s theories on the measurement of the skull are getting much attention in the popular press,” he said, his steady gaze still on her face. “Was it a great crush?”

She nodded. “Half of Edinburgh turned out to hear it, as if he peddled the key to the meaning of life.”

“But I sense you don’t share popular opinion.”

“It sounded like a great deal of nonsense, actually.” She felt her face heat, embarrassed at her own outburst.

His grin reassured her. “I knew you’d see it for what it was. You’ve too fine a mind to be taken in by that sort of folderol. I wish I had gone, then. We might have shared a laugh afterwards. The next one will be better—Faraday is coming up to lecture about his work in magnetism.”

*Faraday!* Abby longed to hear what he had to say. She longed to hear it next to the marquess even more. “I would like that very much,” she said. “If Papa can get away from faculty council. They meet that day.” She cast him a sideways glance and prayed he took her hint.

The marquess sipped his tea, and didn’t respond. His pained expression gave her pause. Perhaps he found her hints too forward. She felt heat creep up her neck, and she dropped her eyes to her shoes.

“Miss Latham, I need to tell you something. About the puzzle box.”

*That wretched box! I would like to toss it in the firth, but Mama sets such store by magic, and Papa sets such store by Mama and her notions.*

Her caller frowned at her abstraction. “I haven’t forgotten that you asked me to solve it, you know. It’s just that I haven’t finished the quest.”

“How many moves did you manage?” She held her breath.

“Fourteen as of this morning,” he said. “It is wickedly stubborn, but I will conquer the thing eventually.”

Abby’s heart soared. “But that’s marvelous! No one else has gotten that far—except my father.” *When he married Mama. Asbury, the arrogant fop, gave up after five, and Cheltenham failed after two.*

He beamed back at her. “I rather gathered he likes to put your callers to the test.”

Now her cheeks positively burned, but she hastened to reassure him. “It is more that he likes to identify ones he thinks are unworthy. Like many fathers, he chooses not to simply listen to his daughter.”

“How will I know when I’ve solved it completely?”

“You will know when you see the—token.” Her hand moved involuntarily to the necklace she wore, a silver pendant with the outline of an owl surrounded by a Latin inscription, something also dear to her mother’s heart.

The marquess peered over at the maid perched in the far corner attending to her needlework and rose to his feet, his expression serious. When Abby rose as well, he took both her hands in his. “The last time I called, I asked you to walk out with me, Miss Latham.”

“Abby.” The name burst out of her, and she didn’t regret it. She longed to hear him say her name.

Her reward was a smile that shone from his hazel eyes. “Abby,” he repeated with a grin. “Not Abigail?”

“Only my father calls me that,” she replied.

“Well then, Abby, explain something. I asked you to ride out, but I reached home before I realized neither you nor Professor Latham answered me. You didn’t say no.”

*No, Papa just distracted you.* She thought rapidly. *Fourteen*

*moves! Surely that shows both intelligence and diligence. Papa has to allow me to walk out with him.*

“So will you?” he prodded.

“Walk out after church? Yes.”

“Or, better, will your father permit me to escort you to the Faraday lecture?”

She grinned. “He finds my interest in science peculiar in woman, but he’d rather I listen to Faraday than MacAskell.”

“I find your interest in science a wonder,” the marquess assured her, with a crooked grin. He had not let go of her hands. “Will you go with me?”

“Yes. I would like that above all things,” she breathed.

He scanned her face until his eyes reached her mouth and fixed his attention there. Abby held her breath, fearing he might kiss her. Hoping he would. When he flicked a glance at the maid, stepped back, and freed her hands, she let go of a deflated breath.

“Until Tuesday then,” the marquess said. “I am determined to solve the puzzle. I’ve asked my friend Mallet to help me figure it out.”

“No!” Abby sputtered. “Please don’t.”

He blinked at her emotional plea. “It matters so much?”

“I— Yes. That is, I don’t know your friend, and the box is important to my family.”

“I assure you, Archimedes Mallet can be trusted with it.”

“Archimedes?” she laughed, momentarily distracted.

“His parents are classics scholars I gather.” He shook his head as if to dismiss the subject. “The box matters so much?”

“It matters to my parents. I don’t care about it, my lord, and I’m sure your friend is a fine person. It’s just that I would greatly prefer if you would solve it, not some gentleman I don’t know.”

He peered at her then, as if to plumb the depths of her soul, and she froze under the force of his gaze. “Very well Abigail Latham. If it matters so much to you, I will solve this puzzle, but I demand one thing.”

“What,” she whispered, her voice rough, unable to take her eyes from his.

“If I’m to call you Abby, you must call me Devon, at least when we are private.”

She felt her lips turn up and knew she met his smile with her own. “I’ll see you to the door—Devon,” she said, and set action to her words.

He took his hat from the table by the door and put one hand on the door handle. “I meant to ask you something else,” he said. “That pendant you wear is interesting; it appears to be quite old.”

“It has been handed down through my mother’s family,” she replied, covering it instinctively with one hand.

He pursed his lips and tipped his head to one side as if considering something, but he left without saying any more.



## Chapter 2

Devon left for the Latham house the following Tuesday determined to quiz the professor about the box and its seeming importance. He had begun to think the Lathams put as much importance on his solution to the box as the Foreign Service put on some of his code-breaking efforts. Devon didn't think that an absent-minded professor of mythology had anything to do with espionage, but he couldn't imagine what else the man found so pressing.

When he arrived to escort Miss Latham to the lecture, her father met him at the door, but before they could exchange more than greetings, the lady herself descended the stairs. All thought fled.

Chestnut curls framing warm brown eyes and luscious curves in a copper gown with a deeply plunging neckline seized his entire attention. Lace covered her décolletage for modesty, but it served only to draw his inappropriate imagination to focus there until he caught sight of the antique necklace. Before he could sort out his disordered mind and various other parts, they were out the door.

Escorting her into the Faraday lecture, he wondered which Abby Latham he had on his arm that night. The girl puzzled Devon even more than the datted box. One minute she stood her ground and ably defended her opinions and ideas. The next she stared at her dainty slippers, pink cheeked and shy. She acted as if the puzzle box had profound meaning, yet appeared embarrassed by her family's obsession with it when the subject arose.

Devon determined not to mention the puzzle box the entire evening; he intended to merely enjoy the beautiful woman at his side. Just before the house lights lowered, however, she leaned toward him. "How many moves?" she asked.

"Seventeen." Her radiant smile at his response left him baffled even as it wrapped his heart in warmth. He had no time to consider it when the great chemist began to speak.

An hour later the master of ceremonies announced the interlude, and Abby readily agreed to seek refreshments while still enthusing over what they had heard. Her sharp observations about Faraday's work impressed Devon. When he expressed confusion over one of the more obscure aspects of the scientist's work, she agreed, but suggested aspects he hadn't considered. Her remarkable mind continued to fascinate him.

Devon pulled Abby close to the lobby wall, behind one of the massive planters and put his body between her and the crush around the refreshment area. She smiled gratefully and sipped the lemonade he had obtained for them. They stood in companionable silence for a moment before a voice on the other side of the planter jarred their peace, sounding clearly over the general buzz of conversation.

"Did you see the Latham chit with Trembley?" the voice sneered.

His companion's reply sounded garbled.

"That explains why her father makes everyone try that beastly box," the voice went on. "The ambitious mushroom uses it to scare off all comers because he thinks he can snare a marquess—a duke's heir by all that is holy—for his precious daughter. He probably whispered the solution in Trembley's ear."

The companion replied again, but Devon still couldn't make it out. Abby's stricken face hit like a punch to his mid-section. He took her hand with his free one to reassure her; she gripped it for dear life. He wanted to confront the speaker, but hesitated to leave her side, especially in this crowd.

"Yes, well, for all the bluestocking's pretense of an interest in science, I hear the mother thinks the damned thing is magic. What do you expect? Peasant stock."

The voices moved off. Devon turned to see Viscount Asbury climbing the steps to the gallery. He turned back to see tears staining Abby's cheeks. Grabbing her glass, he added it with his own to the tray of a passing attendant and groped for his handkerchief.

"I'm so sorry," she gasped wetly.

"Why on earth are you sorry. Asbury is no gentleman."

"What must you think of my family—of me?"

"I think you are delightful and undeserving of insult." He itched to follow Asbury and shut his mouth in the time-honored method among men, but he couldn't leave Abby.

He dabbed her cheeks, which grew pinker by the moment. "My father only wants my happiness. He doesn't care about your title, truly. Please believe me."

"Only if you will believe status doesn't matter to me either," he replied.

“Doesn’t your father want you to marry into your own class?”

*Does he? We’ve never discussed it.* “I’ll marry to please myself, Abby. When I’m ready to marry it won’t be for status.”

Her face became a mask of horror as if she just realized the direction their conversation had taken. “I didn’t mean to imply—”

“Hush. Asbury did the implying. One thing, though. Tell me about that puzzle box. Why is it important? Does your mother really think it is magic?”

Abby sighed deeply, causing the expanse of lace across her chest to rise and fall interestingly. “I’m not sure what she believes. Sometimes I think it’s a game, and then she will sigh and stare off into space. Papa humors her. It amuses him.”

“But he uses it to screen your suitors.” It wasn’t a question.

“I believe so. If I insisted he not, it might not matter.” She looked at him earnestly. “But he loves my mother very much. Her happiness matters to him. I hate to interfere.”

*So Abby’s mother insists on the puzzle box. Not espionage then.* His heart soared. Before he could pursue this interesting conversation the signal came to return to the lecture. Faraday’s science absorbed the rest of their evening.



ABBY TURNED OFF SOUTH BRIDGE, past massive Doric columns, and under Robert Adams’ arched gateway to the university, a basket over her arm with her father’s mid-day meal, Jared, the Latham lad-of-all-work, skipping behind her. *More likely late day meal*, she thought wryly. *He would*

*forget entirely if we didn't interrupt him.* He often forgot to come home or send word. Usually her mama sent Jared; today Abby convinced Mama she could bring it on her way to pay a call on Aunt Susan. In her heart of hearts she hoped to encounter Devon on the square.

The afternoon being far along, the campus appeared relatively empty of people. When she stepped out from under the vaulted tunnel and into the sunlight, a scattering of students hurrying to their tutors' premises or the library, bustled along the walkways. She directed her steps toward her father's office among the literature faculty and reveled in the great university, wishing she might be absorbed into its walls by simply passing through.

*As if they'd have you Abby.* She shook her head at the foolishness. There had been rumors that a college in Ohio had admitted women a few years ago, but this place remained a male bastion. As if to remind Abby, two black robed students glared at her as they hurried by. *The porter won't even let me fetch Papa's dinner up. Jared will have to go.*

She set out diagonally across the square. Another man approached, his robe open in front and flying backward in his haste. She looked away to fend off the expected glare, but this man sailed by only to stop just past her and spin on his heels.

"Miss Latham? It is Miss Latham isn't it?" he said in greeting.

She turned and found a lanky young man beaming at her. His wiry black hair stood out in all directions, and his blue eyes sparkled with life. A wrinkled cravat hung around his neck untied, and his shirt under an unbuttoned waistcoat was so rumpled she thought he might have slept in it.

"Sorry," the man said. "We met at the start of term faculty reception very briefly. Massive crush—you probably

don't remember me. James Mallet. I'm a visiting researcher this term."

She searched her memories for such an encounter, and then his name struck her. "Mr. Mallet. A biologist?"

"Botanist, actually."

"Are you the one they call Archimedes?"

He raised his eyes to the sky and shook his head. "I've been trying to escape that one since I was at school." He grinned back at her. "But yes, for my sins. My middle name. My father's conceit. Folks call me Archie."

"You're a friend of the Marquess of Trembley, I believe," Abby said, suddenly *very* interested in this young man.

"Trembley and I were at school together. We bonded over being misfits."

"Misfits?"

"Unlike most of our fellows, we actually cared about learning."

"That sounds like the marquess," she murmured.

He tipped his head and said in a conspiratorial tone, "I have the impression you are also a friend of his. He speaks of you often."

*What does he say?* She caught the question before she could blurt it out. "We're acquainted yes. He was gracious enough to escort me to the Faraday lecture."

"So I heard. 'Miss Latham's profound insights and clear-headed comments' delighted him apparently. He rated your conversation a vast improvement over mine." He had mimicked Devon's voice and his eyes danced.

"You are a tease, Mr. Mallet," she said, her lip twitching with the effort not to laugh.

"I know one thing, Trembley well likes puzzles, but his usual interest runs to codes and mathematical conundrums, not boxes. His obsession with your puzzle box tells me

much about his interest in you, Miss Latham.” His perfectly serious expression stunned her.

Mallet misinterpreted her reaction. The teasing conspirator returned. “Not to worry, Miss Latham. He will solve it. I’m helping him hurry it along.”

She felt as her blood drained to her toes, and she swayed, light headed in horror. “No! You mustn’t.” She sucked in a deep breath. His startled expression didn’t help her panic. She reached out and grabbed his forearm. “What if you were to solve it first? It won’t do. You must let Dev—the marquess do it.”

He studied her gravely, kindness and sympathy pushing aside other emotions. “So it *is* at test,” he said, “And from your reaction, an important one. One vital to your happiness, perhaps?”

She bit her lower lip when she nodded silently.

“Not to worry. We’ve... *He’s* made it to twenty-six moves. It can’t be much longer now.” He peered at her as if asking a question.

She shook her head. “I don’t know how many there are. That is great progress, though. I beg you Mr. Mallet—”

“I know. Let him do it. What am I to tell him?”

“Tell him”— She thought rapidly as her eyes stung and she blinked back moisture. “Tell him it matters. It matters very much.”

“We both want what makes our good friend happy, I think, Miss Latham. I’ll tell him.” He inclined his head gravely, and turned on his heels.

## Chapter 3

**A**n hour later Abby gave full rein to her tears, all over her Aunt Susan's shoulder. Her mother's younger sister had never married. She lived in gentile simplicity in a small apartment in the heart of the city surrounded by books and ferns and doted on her only niece.

"But Aunt Susan, what if Archie Mallet solves it? He is by all accounts brilliant and—"

"Do you love this Archie?"

Abby reared up in horror. "Goodness no!"

Susan shook her head. "That box has caused every bit as much sorrow as joy. Your father has given it to several young men with no harm done, hasn't he?"

"None mattered. Not until he gave it to Devon."

A smile stretched across Aunt Susan's face making her look rather like the baker's cat when it got into the cream—smug and delighted. "I suspected there was someone. Tell me about this Devon."

Abby described their meeting, the lectures and ices after, their walk the previous Sunday, and his calls. "We talk



and talk, Aunt Sue. He listens to my ideas—actually listens. No man, not even Papa, ever did that.”

“A sign of a hero, certainly. And he puts up with the nonsense about the box.”

“Papa thrust it on him the first time he asked me to walk out, but he’s let me see him as long as he hasn’t returned it and keeps on working.”

“How many moves has he figured out?”

“Twenty-six.”

Eyebrows shot up. “Determined. That’s a good sign. What worries you, aside from his friend’s interference.”

“But that isn’t a small matter. If Mama is right—”

“If your mother is right, and *if* this Mallet fellow were to solve the puzzle, he might turn out to be more to you than you now know.”

“But—”

“I said *if*. Don’t set too much store in the box. Listen to your own heart. You could reject him in any case.” Susan wrung her hands. “What has your mother told you about Walter McMurton?”

Abby’s brow furrowed, and she studied her aunt’s face. A sorrow lay there that Abby had never noticed before. “Who is he?”

“Walter asked to court me. We had been meeting in the meadow between the village and his father’s manor.”

Abby knew her mother’s father had been a village schoolmaster with ambitions for his daughters, but who believed in myths and fairies.

“He dragged that wretched box out. He told me after Walter left with it that the boy wasn’t good enough for me. As a second son he’d never inherit and never amount to much.”

“Did he solve it?” Abby asked.

Susan shook her head sadly. "He sent me a note and met me in the meadow two days later. He told me that the puzzle box was impossible and that our father had it in for him. He told me he meant to leave for America to make his fortune and asked me to come with him." Susan rose to her feet and walked to the window.

Abby waited. There had to be more. She didn't have to wait long.

"He called my father a superstitious old fool. We loved each other, what did a box matter? He kissed me then, not gently, but hard, and I lost my temper. I told him my father was not a fool; the box brought your mother and father together. He laughed at me and said no box would determine his future."

"What did you do?" Abby whispered, even though she thought she knew the answer.

"I left him there and sulked in my room for three days, more miserable with each day that passed. I knew I loved him, box or no box, and I decided to follow my heart. I sent a message to meet him and packed a valise. When I got to the meadow, the McMurton stable boy stood there instead. Walter had gone without me. I never saw him again."

Susan swept back toward Abby and sat on the settee. "The thing is, Abby, we later heard he was arrested in Boston for cheating his employer out of money. I don't know about the box and its supposed power of discernment, but I do know fathers. They love their daughters and are sometimes a far better judge of character. Does your father like this Devon?"

Abby bit her lip and considered her answer carefully. "He appears to respect him. I'd be more sure about Papa if the title didn't muddy the situation."

"Title?" Aunt Susan's brows shot up.

“Devon is the Marquess of Trembley. Worse, he’s a duke’s heir. He says he knows his own mind; that his parents don’t determine who he courts. But he’s never given me to think I’m more than a friend who enjoys what he enjoys. And worse, I can’t be sure that Papa’s view of him isn’t blinded by ambition.”

“Muddy mess indeed,” Aunt Susan murmured. “Perhaps you *should* let the box determine what happens.

Abby’s stomach turned over at the thought.

Her aunt gently cupped her cheek. She leaned close and whispered. “Twenty-six moves!”

The two women bumped foreheads, smiling in one accord.



SUN FLOODED the Prince’s Street Gardens, reflected off church steeples, and illumined the castle high above them when Devon led Abby from Saint Cuthbert’s church and into the gardens Sunday morning. Highlights glowed in the chestnut curls peeking out from her bonnet, but the light that flashed in her coffee colored eyes owed their brilliance to something else. At least Devon hoped that at least some of it came from their time together.

“What did you think of the service, Devon?” she asked dipping her head shyly after the question. She wore a lovely gown of sprigged muslin dotted with rosettes and cinched at her narrow waist with a deep rose sash. She also wore the intriguing antique pendant over the lace fichu across her chest. He forced his eyes forward. She wore no outer garment due to the warm weather.

The Church of Scotland service had been woefully dour

compared to Devon's high church taste. "It seemed a bit—" He couldn't lie. "Stern."

Her throaty laugh bubbled out from under the bonnet, heating his blood. He pulled her a bit closer without considering his actions. "It was that," she agreed. "Brimstone and shadows."

"Is it always so?" He glanced at her sideways as they walked along a broad path lined with flowerbeds.

"There are three elders. The others are not so grim, but Saint Cuthbert's doesn't hold with frivolity."

"There was music..."

She turned to peer at him. "But not, I think, the sort you are used to. Subdued?"

He smiled ruefully. "Rather."

He caught her mischievous grin before she turned forward to continue their walk. "Perhaps next week we can try Saint John's. It isn't Papa's taste, but I think I might like it."

*Next week.* His heart warmed. Spending time with Abby had become vital to him—as air is vital, he realized with a start. They walked for several moments in silence. Devon hesitated to break it, content to have this lovely woman at his side.

Eventually he broke the silence that had become uncomfortable. "Tell me, Abby, what interests you aside from Faraday's work in magnetism, steam locomotion, and Mr. Morse's telegraph notion?" He led her to bench in the shade of Castle Rock.

The joy in her eyes echoed in his heart when he sat beside her. "We have rather exhausted those subjects, haven't we? I do like to read," she said.

"Have you seen the latest installment in *Master*

*Humphrey's Clock*?" He took her hand in his where it lay on the bench, their clasped hands hidden in her skirts.

"Mr. Dickens?" She frowned. "His world is grim—and often tragic. It weighs on me. I may as well read Edgar Allen Poe." She shuddered.

A bark of laughter escaped him before he could call it back. "Poe?"

"Truthfully, I prefer Sir Walter Scott and an escape into the romantic past. Life has enough harsh realities." She turned bright pink. "You won't tell my father, I hope. He prefers that I read Shakespeare or Milton."

"I won't breathe a word." He leaned around conspiratorially. "I prefer Dumas myself."

"Me too," she breathed. Their faces were so close together he could feel her breath on his cheek. A few more inches and he might capture the lips that called to him with the force of a tempest.

"We like many things the same," he whispered hoarsely. When he pulled his eyes from her lush lips he realized she was staring at his, as if she felt what he felt, wanted what he wanted. He couldn't resist taking a taste, moving as slowly as he could to give her time to resist. She met him half way, touching her lips tenderly to his in an innocent salute. He let his mouth move over hers for a moment before he pulled back to peer into her eyes.

Abby broke the contact, dropping her gaze to her lap, but clinging to his hand. He gave her fingers a reassuring squeeze and sat back against the bench, feeling like a man who had crossed a bridge to a new country, one he felt eager to explore.

"Shall we continue our walk?" *It will be safer than sitting together!*

They started down a different path. "Do you like true life adventure stories, Abby?"

"Sometimes, yes," she replied eagerly darting a glance at him. They smiled at each other. *Like a pair of fools*, he thought. *Besotted fools*, his heart echoed.

He cleared the lump in his throat. "You might like *Two Years Before The Mast*, in that case," he said. A summary of that book took them across the park and back toward the church where her maid waited patiently.

Just before they parted she asked him a question he suspected she had harbored all morning. "How many moves have you discovered?"

"Thirty-one." He took the light in her eyes as encouragement. He must be coming to the end. *Pray God that I am.*

## Chapter 4

“Who is next please?” Professor Latham’s voice behind the door made Devon’s heart race. He had decided to approach the man at his premises at the university, ascertained his office hours, and bribed two students to give up their appointments for him.

“Trembley!” The professor appeared startled. “Not here for assistance with mythology research I’ll warrant.” He gestured the marquess to a seat, and took his place behind his desk.

Devon sat on the offered chair gratefully when he found his knees less steady than they normally were. He groped for a way to begin.

The professor frowned at the box in Devon’s hands. “Are you giving up? Come to beg the solution?”

Devon glanced down; he had forgotten the damned thing. He knew he’d solve it eventually, but he had something more important on his mind. Some *one* rather—Abigail Latham.

“No sir,” he replied. “I came to talk about your daughter.”

Latham jerked his head toward the puzzle box. “Your conversation is premature, my lord.”

*My lord.* Devon hoped his title didn’t factor in either way. Latham seemed such an independent sort he feared the man would count it against him almost as much as he feared Latham might fawn over it. He didn’t need a sycophant for a father-in-law.

Latham ignored him. “The puzzle,” he said. “How far have you gotten.”

“Thirty-three moves, sir.”

The professor’s flash of pleasure at his answer struck Devon as a good sign even if the old man quickly covered it with a stern expression. Devon hoped it meant Latham cared more about his daughter than a blasted puzzle.

“You’re a determined one. May I hope interest in my daughter has motivated your persistence? You’ve had opportunity to get to know her better.”

Devon swallowed the lump in his throat. “Yes sir, and every time I have seen her—and what is more to the point have had an opportunity to converse with her—my respect has increased.”

“You don’t find her interest in science peculiarly unfeminine?”

“On the contrary! If Abby could be a student, she would rate near the top. It’s a pity—”

Latham’s deep frown stopped him, although he couldn’t be sure if the older man disapproved of the implication that a woman might attend university or of Devon’s familiarity with her name.

Devon pulled himself together. “The thing is, she understands the material. What is more to the point, she understands *me* when I talk. I can’t say the same for my family. We actually connect.”



“Connect?” Abby’s father growled.

“Our minds. Over science. And ideas...” Latham’s glower almost stopped him, but Devon sat straighter and got to the point. “I respect your daughter, Professor Latham. I like her very much. She is lovely and, she would be a treasure in any man’s household. I came here today to ask your permission to court her.”

*There, God help me. I got it out.* Devon held her breath.

Latham sank back in his chair, chewing his lower lip, a gesture his daughter shared when she was deep in thought. Long moments passed.

“At least you see more than her looks. Most of these young men who hang around can’t gaze past her...” He waved a hand. “Her feminine attributes. I’ll give you that.”

Latham gestured toward the box. “Thirty-two did you say? Keep at it. Finish the puzzle and we’ll talk again.” He glanced away, picked up some papers, and straightened them. “Send in my next student on your way out, if you haven’t frightened them all away, will you please?”



ICES AND LEMONADE for students in midsummer seemed like an excellent notion when the ladies of Saint Cuthbert who gathered on Tuesdays for tea—Abby’s mother among them—proposed the idea, and university officials made no objections.

That is how Abby found herself pouring lemonade for gawky first-year students and fending off their older colleagues who attempted to flirt, all the while scanning the green for the confident figure of the Marquess of Trembley who would, she knew, tower over his fellows.

He had sent a note postponing their assignation to

attend Saint John's that assured her he continued to work diligently on the puzzle box, but provided no reason for his absence on Sunday. Now six more days had past, and Abby watched for him in vain.

"I say Miss Latham, that is a particularly fine frock," a bold first year stuttered.

"Thank you Mr. Miller." She smiled at the boy and turned away dismissively lest he take her smile as encouragement.

"I believe your participation provides as much a treat as the lemonade, Miss Latham." Her father's colleague, C.D. Weatherly beamed at her. She smiled back, this time with confidence.

"You are very kind Professor Weatherly. Mrs. Weatherly's idea to include ices is what draws them in this heat, I believe."

"Oh but a pretty face is a joy on any day," the man said with a chuckle before engaging her mother in conversation about mutual friends.

Abby poured a few more cups and set them on the tray in front of her. Looking down she missed the approach of a familiar figure.

"Well met Miss Latham!" Archie Mallet reached for a cup and drank it down, setting the empty cup back down. "That, I think, may be the best use of citrus I know."

"And a botanist would know that," she teased.

"A very thirsty gentleman would know it," he replied ruefully.

She couldn't resist darting a look behind him, hoping Devon had accompanied his friend.

"Looking for someone, Miss Latham?" Mallet's eyes danced. "I am as you see quite alone."

Abby couldn't resist asking what pressed on her heart.

“Have you seen the Marquess of Trembley these past few days, Mr. Mallet?”

“Don’t you know?”

His words made her eyes widen. “Know what?”

“His father called him home. I don’t know the particulars, but it sounded like a bit of summons.”

Her heart sank. The duke must have heard rumors he paid particular attention to a woman of unsuitable rank. Her face must have shown her distress because Mallet felt compelled to reassure her.

“Not to worry, Miss Latham. He hasn’t forgotten his quest. I believe the solution to that puzzle box is—”

She never heard what he meant to say because a colleague interrupted to alert him that his department head wished to speak with him. Before she could urge him to complete the sentence he darted off.

Abby’s mind raced. Devon’s father summoned him—the duke must mean to forbid their relationship. She felt certain of it. What else could it be? Worse, Mallet seemed to know the solution to the puzzle box. Was it possible? She felt sick to her stomach.

*I can’t bear it. I won’t bear it. I’ll live like Aunt Susan before I accept it.*

“What is it Sweeting. You look as if you don’t feel well.” Abby’s mother laid a hand on her arm and looked up at her with concern. “What did that shabby looking gentleman say to you?”

*Shabby? She means Archie Mallet.*

“Nothing, Mother. Nothing of import. The heat bothers me. I think I will go home if you don’t mind.”

“Of course. Jared is here. He can follow you home and see you safely there before coming back for me.”

It took moments to find the servant, and little enough

time to reach their home. She rushed up the stairs and reached her bed before she gave vent to the storm of tears that had threatened since Mallet spoke.

## Chapter 5

**T**he candles in Archie Mallet's room burnt low, but Devon persisted in his efforts to find one more sliding door on the complex puzzle while his friend sat on the floor in front of a fire against the nighttime dark toasting cheese and bread.

"If I'd known you would be back this afternoon I never would have said anything to her." Archie spoke over his shoulder.

"I told you I wouldn't be long." Devon didn't take his eyes from his task.

"Didn't know how long so I couldn't tell her."

"You said she looked distressed," Devon said frowning at the box in his hands.

"Yes—very much so. I guessed it was about the box, but I tried to reassure her, but she still seemed unhappy."

Devon bobbed his head up and stared at his friend. "You didn't imply you were helping again did you?"

"No! At least I don't think so." Archie slid around to face Devon, a thick slice of bread dripping with cheese in one hand.

“You don’t *think* so. What exactly did you say?” Devon rose to his feet, leaning his hands on the table and glared at Archie.

His friend screwed up his brow as if it hurt to think. “Don’t know exactly. I told her it was close.”

“*It was close or I was close. Did you imply you were still working on it?*”

“No! At least I didn’t mean that.” Archie thought about it some more. “She didn’t look happy at whatever I said. Maybe she misunderstood.

Devon sank into the chair and dropped his head backwards staring at the ceiling. “She must be a wreck. I should go to her.”

“In the middle of the night? Don’t be daft.”

“Past ten may be dark but it isn’t the middle of the night.” Devon grit his teeth and turned his attention back to the box. “Still mighty late; I’ll go tomorrow first thing and explain everything. I’ll tell her you’re a moron. I’ll—” Another panel on the puzzle box moved and a tiny drawer slid out of the box on silent springs. Devon shot upright, staring at the drawer. He reached in with two trembling fingers and pulled out a small object, laying it on his shaking palm.

Archie bolted across the room to stare at the object. “It’s a—”

“It’s the solution. I’ve done it.” Devon met Archie’s eyes and the two men grinned for a moment before Devon sprung into action. He took out his handkerchief and wrapped the object in it, buttoned his waistcoat, and began to put on his coat.

“You can’t mean to go over there this late!” his friend sputtered.

Devon’s only answer was a grin as he tucked the hand-

kerchief in his pocket and tapped his hat on his head. He left before Archie could say another word.



STANDING on the Latham's doorstep, Devon's confidence wavered. He studied the knocker for several indecisive moments before he heard the sound of movement within.

*Surely her father hasn't yet retired. I can speak with him.*

The elderly housekeeper answered his knock. "Who be you to disturb the family at this hour young man?" she growled. When Devon could not formulate a sensible answer to her question, she began to shut the door. He stood, mouth agape, unable to explain his impulse to come.

"Who's there Martha?"

At the sound of Latham's voice Devon's thoughts came into focus. He thrust his hand onto the closing door and said, "I'm the Marquess of Trembley. I have an urgent need to speak with the professor."

The old woman peered at him as if he had sprouted horns then turned to Abby's father—who had come out of his study—as if to ask his permission. She didn't have to.

"That will do Martha. This rather rude young man and I need to talk," the professor said approaching the door.

The servant nodded and headed to the rear of the house, passing Mrs. Latham coming to see about the commotion. "Who is it Alfred?"

Devon doffed his hat and stepped into the foyer. "Thank you Professor Latham. Sorry to be so late."

Latham spoke to his wife. "Mary, let me make The Marquess of Trembley known to you. Trembley, may I introduce my wife Mary?"

Devon inclined his head to the lady of the house struggling to keep from blurting out his mission.

“A marquess?” she breathed. Her eyes narrowed. “Are you the reason my Abigail sobbed her heart out all afternoon?”

Devon’s eyes widened and he peered up the stairs as if he could see through walls to his distressed love. He had no idea how to respond.

“Or do I place the blame on that scruffy friend of yours we saw this afternoon? She rushed away and hasn’t left her room since,” the woman scolded. “She refused a dinner tray. I have half a mind—”

Devon didn’t hear what she had half a mind to do. He took the stairs two at a time calling Abby’s name.

“Let him go, Mary,” Latham said. “I believe the boy solved the puzzle.”

Devon opened and closed the door to her parent’s bedchamber, frightened a cat, and woke up Abby’s two little sisters before he found the right room. He opened the door to see her standing in the middle of the room, dabbing at red-rimmed eyes, fully dressed but thoroughly rumped. It almost broke his heart.

He crossed the room in two steps and pulled her into his arms. “Archie is a ham handed idiot. Whatever he said to upset you was not true.”

She pushed him away and wrapped her arms around her waist protectively. “Your father refuses to let you see me.”

“What? No. Why? Whatever gave you that idea?” His entire body sagged in confusion. This was not what he expected.

“He summoned you home. Is he horribly angry about us seeing each other?” she asked, her voice thick with tears.



“Did Archie tell you that?”

“No, but he said, ‘Summoned.’ I assumed—”

His mouth quirked up at the corners. “A scientist would not ‘assume,’ Abby. May we sit and speak sensibly?”

She flicked a glance at the door behind him. He reached a hand back and shut it without breaking eye contact, causing Abby to blush fiercely, but she didn’t ask him to open it. Hope soared.

Abby sat in the little chair by her desk and directed him to a rocker in the corner. He pulled it as close to her as he dared.

“What is it you wish to say, *my lord?*”

Use of his title told him he had better go slowly. *Don’t muddle this any further Trembley.* He ordered his racing heart and burgeoning lust to calm down.

“First of all, Abby, my name is Devon.” When she opened her mouth to object he raised a hand to fend it off. “Secondly, my father did indeed send me an unexpected summons but not for the reason you think.”

He could see he had her attention, and relaxed, at least a bit. “My mother’s birthday was last Sunday, and I forgot. He sent a carriage and footman to summon me home to surprise her.”

“He sounds very thoughtful,” she murmured.

“He is; he adores my mother. There’s more.”

She watched him cautiously, waiting. The wariness in her eyes cut through him.

“I told them about you, and about the everlasting puzzle box.”

“What did they say?” she whispered.

“They said ‘Get you back to Edinburgh and solve the blasted thing so you can bring this paragon to meet us.’”

The rocker tipped perilously when she threw herself

into his arms. He managed to right it by resorting to a boot placed firmly on the rug in front of him, but his arms were too occupied to help, holding as they did the answer to all his dreams. One hand wrapped around her waist to hold her steady and the other cupped the back of her head to pull her mouth to his. He let her lead for a moment before he grew impatient and nibbled at the corner of her mouth. When she opened for him he took full advantage.

Her moan gave him pause, but when she frowned and urged him on, he realized it was a moan of pleasure. His passion—and an eager part of his anatomy—soared. He went back to kissing her face and allowed his hands to roam as far as they could while still holding her securely. He pulled away to lay her over his arm for better access to kiss down her neck, but her quick glance at the door cooled his ardor.

“Your father knows I’m here. He let me come up,” he told his rosy-cheeked beloved. At her puzzlement he added. “He knows why I’m here.”

“That wasn’t it?” she asked with a grin, still clinging to his neck. She darted in for another quick kiss.

“Well, yes,” he said when he came up for air, “Although I didn’t actually plan that part.” He rose with her in his arms, turned, and deposited her in the chair before dropping to his knees in front of her. “I solved the puzzle, Abby.”

“You, not Archie?”

“Most definitely *not* Archie bedamned Mallet.” He reached into his chest pocket and removed his handkerchief unfolding it with care. He held it up for her to see: a perfect little token of an owl.

Her smile spread slowly, widening her lush lips and lighting her eyes. “You found it.”

“I did indeed, and I know where it belongs.” He reached

up and lifted the pendant she always wore from her breast with a shaking hand. The owl fit perfectly in the outline and snapped firmly into place. He peered at the inscription closely.

“Sapientia vero amore videt,” he read. “Wisdom sees true love. I may not always be wise, Abby, but I see what I love. Will you marry me?”

“Yes,” she breathed pulling him to his feet and rising to meet him. “Oh yes.” When he wrapped his arms around her, she didn’t need words to tell him how much she loved him.

The End



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Award winning author Caroline Warfield has been many things: traveler, librarian, poet, raiser of children, bird watcher, Internet and Web services manager, conference speaker, indexer, tech writer, genealogist—even a nun. She reckons she is on at least her third act, happily working in an office surrounded by windows where she lets her characters lead her to adventures in England and the far-flung corners of the British Empire. She nudges them to explore the riskiest territory of all, the human heart.

You can find more about her work here:



