

The Land Steward's Daughter

Becky Michaels

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The Land Steward's Daughter is an endearing historical romance whose lovers flourish despite opposition.

Becky Michaels's Regency romance, *The Land Steward's Daughter*, explores the fruits of long-delayed love between childhood friends.

This first series title introduces Elaina, the daughter of a lady who married a land steward. After her mother died, her mother's friend, the Duchess of Blackmore, took Elaina into the Winter family fold, where she grew up alongside Montgomery, the future heir, and Will, whom she adored, but who went to war to distinguish himself.

When she turns twenty-five, Elaina is caught between the Hampshire countryside that she loves and the elite crowd to which she never aspired. When the duchess orchestrates a house party to celebrate Montgomery's engagement, and Will returns home to take charge of Larkspur, an estate in disrepair, his parents' hopes increase. They want Will to marry an heiress. They push Elaina toward a banker, Giles, though Will believes that Elaina is the only choice for him. Elaina's father, having once defied societal norms himself, is an empathetic background character who lets Elaina decide for herself.

The novel is familiar as it explores themes of duty versus emotions, but its narration is flowing and rich, filled with unvoiced thoughts and complex motivations. Elaina's self-denial, and Will's attempts to convince her to marry him, unfold over the course of a party. In the span of a few days, Elaina and Will's relationship, which is shaped by fond memories and letters, grows—and with increasing urgency, given Will's eventual departure for Larkspur.

In the novel's second part, Elaina and Will have eloped and try to revive Larkspur. Away from their families, their personalities solidify. The novel's scenes of passion are graphic and contrast with the elegant, restrained language that is used elsewhere. Elaina's origins as a land steward's daughter equip her for harsh labor, while Will's pride and jealousy about Elaina's continuing friendship with Giles is unvarnished and petulant. Giles is the unexpected, scene-stealing highlight: a fair-minded man whose outlook encourages others.

Throughout, feelings of indebtedness fuel Elaina's private struggles. Her connection to Montgomery, who is protective and brotherly, yet who is unwilling to allow Will the same freedoms that he feels were denied to him, result in fascinating exchanges. A subplot regarding Montgomery's indiscretion and its fallout, which Elaina helps to resolve, is rushed in an effort to make the Winters seem grateful for her intervention; the resolution of their grudges is too predictable, as are the resolutions of some subplots and tangents.

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KAREN RIGBY (September 30, 2020)

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