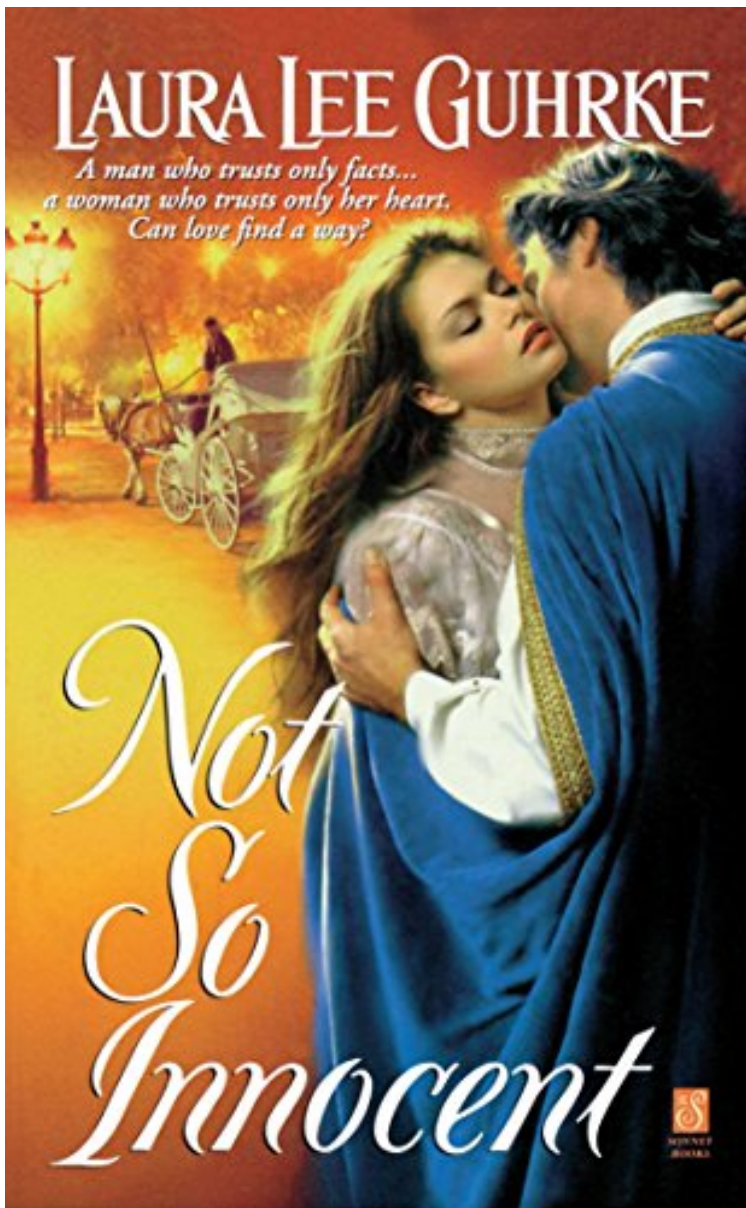


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Not So Innocent (English Edition)



Par Laura Lee Guhrke
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Today was his birthday, his thirty-sixth birthday, and he had to face the bitter fact that he wasn't so young anymore.On this particular morning, he even felt old. His shoulder ached from that bullet wound ten years back, he seemed to have more gray in his dark hair than he'd had the night before, and shaving off his mustache didn't make him look any younger. Mick knew it was going to be a long day.The moment he arrived at Scotland Yard, he saw that the birthday jokes had already begun. His office was empty. His desk, his chairs, his case files were gone. Even the commendations he'd received in his career were no longer hanging on the wall."Thacker!" he shouted, watching as his sergeant came running from the large room that served as the main office of the Criminal Investigation Department. "What happened here?"The suspicious twitch of the sergeant's huge red mustache told Mick that Thacker was in on the joke. "Chief Inspector DeWitt decided today was the perfect day to repaint your office." "I'll bet he did," Mick muttered. Even his own boss was not above a bit of chicanery. "So where'd he put me? The morgue?" "No, sir. You're on the ground floor. I'll show you." Mick followed his sergeant downstairs to the large main office of the constables. It was the worst place -- other than the morgue -- that the lads could have chosen. Anyone coming to report a crime was sent here first. It was noisy, crowded, and chaotic.Thacker led him to the center of the room. Case files and reports were heaped on top of his desk and on the floor surrounding it. Mick, considered to be the most obsessively neat officer in the Metropolitan Police, looked at the mess and swore loud enough to be heard above the noise.Laughter broke out all over the room, and he looked around to see the constables on duty grinning at him. But when he walked around the desk to sit down, he found the joke was not yet over. There was a cane hooked over the back of his chair.Mick looked at the symbol of old age and scowled. Birthday pranks were common, and he was usually ready to laugh along with the others, even when he was the victim. Not this year.He grabbed the cane from the back of his chair and handed it to Thacker. "Toss that in a dustbin." "Happy birthday, sir." Thacker gave him a hearty slap on the back that sent a shot of pain through his aching shoulder. "You knew something like this would be on today." "Aye, I knew." "Cheer up, sir. I've had worse things done to me in Her Majesty's Navy." He grinned. "By the way, I could have told you it doesn't work." "What?" "Shaving off your mustache." Undeterred by Mick's deepening scowl, he continued, "How does it feel to be an old man?" "Thirty-six is not old." Mick sat down, staring at the mountains of paperwork that completely hid the top of his desk from view. "Any new cases in this mess?" Thacker pulled a pair of files from beneath one of the stacks. "Two new ones for you today, sir." Mick removed one pile of paperwork from his desk and set it on the floor, clearing himself some space to work, then he took the files from the sergeant. "A drowned body, female, found yesterday on the bank of the Thames just beyond Tower Bridge," Thacker explained, "and a viscountess claims her emeralds have been stolen." The body sounded more intriguing than jewels. Mick opened that file first and read through the report of the drowning. "The divisional surgeon believes it's a suicide," Thacker went on, "but he said you'll have to wait for the autopsy this afternoon before he'll swear to it." "Of course it's suicide," Mick answered and shut the file. "The report says three witnesses watched the woman jump. Why did the River Police give this to the Yard?" "Richard Munro said to tell you happy birthday." "What a thoughtful fellow. Telephone his office and tell him he'd better meet me at the morgue about half past three. Cal will have finished the autopsy by then. Tell Richard if he doesn't meet me there, I'll tell his wife where I took him the night before his wedding." Thacker laughed, and Mick set the first file aside. He picked up the second one. Glancing through it, he shook his head. "Some pampered viscountess losing her emeralds? No, thank you." "She had worn the necklace to a ball, and she's certain she put it in her jewel case when she came home. She claims someone must have taken it between the night before last and this morning. She suspects the maid. It's probably an easy case." Mick was not tempted by that. "Give it to one of the junior detectives. They need the experience." Thacker took the file. "I'll have it assigned to --" The sergeant was interrupted by a loud, indignant voice that boomed through the office of the constables like a

powder blast. "I told you I want to see Inspector Michael Dunbar, young man, and he's not in his office. Where is he?" Mick glanced up. When he saw the stout, red-faced woman standing by the front counter with a constable, he knew his day was headed straight down to hell. It was Mrs. Tribble, his landlady, a woman with a raucous voice and an overbearing manner. When she glanced his way, Mick shielded his face from her view with the case file he was holding, but it didn't work. Her boot heels thudded against the floorboards with her considerable weight as she marched toward his desk. "Mr. Dunbar, I have come to report a crime."

She thumped his desk with her fist. "An infamous crime." Mrs. Tribble was always coming to him with infamous crimes. A fortnight ago she'd misplaced a ring, insisting it had been stolen. The month before that, she'd claimed a man had made improper advances to her in the queue at the stop for the omnibus. Wishful thinking on her part, Mick suspected. "What is this crime?" "My Nanki Poo has disappeared. He has been kidnapped." Nanki Poo was a flat-faced, bad-tempered Pekingese. Some people thought Pekes were dogs, but it was Mick's opinion that as pets they left a lot to be desired and could be of far greater use to the world as dust mops. "When you receive the ransom note, bring it to me." She stared at him. "That's all you're going to do?" He heard Thacker smother a laugh, and he decided it was time to repay the sergeant for calling him an old man. "Not at all. Sergeant Thacker will begin the investigation." Mick stood up, smiling at the sergeant's look of dismay. "I have to be going, but you'll help Mrs. Tribble all you can, won't you, Thacker?" Gesturing to the door with the hook of the cane in his hand, the sergeant said in a resigned voice, "Come this way, ma'am." Mick left his landlady to Thacker and departed from the Yard, but he had barely stepped into

Parliament Street when his day took another turn for the worse. He heard the sound of shattering glass, splintering timber, and frightened screams, and he glanced across the street to find that someone had driven a Benz motorcar up over the sidewalk and through the glass front doors of the Boar's Head Pub. "Bloody hell."

Mick made his way across the traffic of Parliament Street, hoping nobody was dead, because he'd end up being the one to visit the relatives and break the bad news. He hated that. As it turned out, nobody was hurt by the incident except the driver of the Benz, who had a bleeding gash on his forehead and was too drunk to feel the pain. In his inebriated state, the idiot had decided it would be jolly good fun to smash in the front doors of the Boar's Head Pub. Mick didn't agree. He arrested the fellow, not caring that he claimed to be Sir Roger Ellerton, and the son of an earl. Mick hauled Sir Roger into Cannon Row Police Station right beside the Yard, charging him with public drunkenness and property damage. "You can't arresht me, you bashtard!"

Sir Roger bellowed out a curse worthy of any longshoreman and slammed his fist into Mick's left cheek. Mick was a big man, and though the impact of the other man's fist made him see stars for a second, it didn't knock him off his feet. He promptly returned the favor, and the dazed Sir Roger fell back into the arms

of Anthony Frye, the day-watch sergeant. "Toss him in a cell," Mick ordered, "where he can sleep it off." Anthony grinned at him over the top of Sir Roger's lolling head. "You're going to have a fine shiner there, old man." "Thirty-six is not old," Mick said through clenched teeth. "Happy birthday." His reply to that

was an obscene gesture that only made Anthony laugh. Mick filled out a report on Sir Roger, adding the assault of a police officer to the charges, and left the station. He caught an omnibus for Piccadilly Circus and spent the next six hours investigating one of his open cases. It was after three o'clock when he started back

for Scotland Yard. He stopped at a costermonger's cart on Cannon Row for a Cornish pasty, but the only ones left were mutton. Mick hated mutton, hated it with a depth of feeling akin to his hatred of Manchester

United and newspaper journalists. Anyone with sense knew that Celtic, not United, was the only football team worth a damn, and newspaper journalists were the bane of every policeman's existence. Mutton wasn't fit for dogs. He decided to wait for dinner. Back at the Yard, Mick went straight to the morgue, intending to confirm the suicide of the woman who'd jumped off Tower Bridge and close that case. As far as dead bodies went, drowning victims had to be among the ugliest, Mick decided, staring down at the bruised and bloated

remains of one Jane Anne Clapham, which lay on a table in the morgue. Slime and mud had dried to greenish-brown patches on the woman's skin, and algae from the Thames still clung to her blue-tinged lips. He glanced at the two other men who stood around the table, Richard Munro and Calvin Becker. Cal,

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