

USA TODAY Bestselling Author

EMILY ROYAL



A  
Christmas  
Wager



A CHRISTMAS WAGER  
(SCHOLARS OF SEDUCTION)

THE WEDDING WAGER BOOK 15



EMILY ROYAL

TWINKLE PRESS

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Thank you for reading!

Scholars of Seduction

Seducing Sophia

About the Author

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## The Wedding Wager

After facilitating the match of the season, Lady Pandora “Pansy” Osbourne, boasts that she is the best matchmaker the *Ton* has ever seen. Her cousin, Lady Octavia Sewell insists that was no feat of matchmaking at all, as the couple involved were clearly destined for one another despite Pansy’s meddling. A bitter argument ensues and a challenge is issued. Pansy must do more than say it... she must *prove* it.

Throughout the year, Pansy must produce matches between the notoriously unmarriageable—spinsters, bluestockings, rakes and fortune hunters. If she loses, she’ll forfeit her most prized possession—her grandmother’s tiara—and deliver it into Octavia’s grasping hands.

Pansy resorts to the greatest weapon in any matchmaker’s arsenal—the house party. Not just one, but a series of them. At the end of each party, one couple will emerge either betrothed or wed, by fair means or foul.

As the year draws to a close, and with one houseparty left, will this be the moment of Pansy’s triumph—or her downfall?



## A Christmas Wager

**A Yuletide wager...an unlikely match...will the pickpocket steal the duke’s heart?**

After surviving destitution, the orphaned Eleanor Hawkins re-enters society with a new identity, courtesy of her guardian, the renowned silk merchant Sir Arthur Evans. With a penchant for pickpocketing, learned on London’s streets, Eleanor seeks vengeance on the society that abandoned her, and a Christmas houseparty is the ideal venue to hone her skills, and lighten a few gentlemen’s pockets for good measure.

Self-professed *matchmaker extraordinaire*, Lady Pandora Osbourne, is determined to show her prowess by securing a match between Society’s most eligible bachelor, the Duke of Sedgewick, and Sir Arthur Evans’s new ward—a young

woman whose origins are shrouded in mystery. Where better to achieve her aim than Lady Westfield's Christmas houseparty, where mulled wine, mistletoe, and the season of goodwill would tempt even the most committed rake into love?

But, unbeknown to Lady Pandora, Sedgewick is the man who broke Eleanor's heart and was instrumental in her downfall. What will Christmas bring? Redemption...or revenge?

*To Lawrence,  
Gentleman, companion, and boa constrictor.*

□

## PROLOGUE



**T** here he is...

Eleanor's heart skipped a beat as she caught sight of him.

Montague Lockhart, fifth duke of Sedgewick.

A man as impressive as his title.

And, the most exhilaratingly wonderful man in the world.

As a child she'd worshipped him—the older boy next door, who'd treated her with kindness and affection. To everyone else, he was master, landlord, titled gentleman—revered, even among his peers.

But to Eleanor...

He was her friend and savior, and he always had a smile for her, even at his most serious. It was Montague who'd taught her to ride the day he spotted her giving a pony an apple in the stables at Lockhart Hall—Montague who bandaged her knee after she'd scraped it.

And it was Montague who had come across her last Christmas Eve, when she'd slipped and fallen into a ditch. He'd jumped in, and helped her climb out, not caring that he ruined his riding outfit.

Then, he had kissed her, and called her '*my Elle*'. The delicious scent of him—warm, woody spices—had intensified as he'd held her in his arms, and his body warmth had seeped through the fabric of her gown.

From that moment, she had fallen in love.

And now, there he was, standing at the edge of Lady Amherst's ballroom, surrounded by a group of men—earls and viscounts, friends of Papa's.

Her heart swelled with hope. Papa had lectured her, in the carriage tonight, on the folly of impropriety, and the need to fill her dance card. But she only ever dreamed of dancing with one man.

And there he was—in all his magnificence.

Would he ask her to dance?

Two ladies approached him. Tall and graceful, they exuded the kind of elegance that Eleanor couldn't hope to possess, with her sixteen-year-old frame yet to shake off the roundness of youth. They turned their heads, flicking their fans, and she suppressed a giggle. They reminded her of cows in season, flicking their tails in an attempt to entice the bull.

But, try as they might to catch his attention, they failed. A slight sneer played on his lips, then he resumed his attention on his friends.

Eleanor's heart swelled with pleasure.

Montague always saved his smiles for her. She only had to approach him, and that sensual mouth of his would curve into a smile. The light would shine once again in his eyes, eliciting that delicious feeling of warmth deep inside.

Eleanor was well aware that a lady must wait to be asked to dance. But he couldn't ask if he hadn't noticed her. Montague was a duke—the talk of the ton, whereas she was merely the daughter of a baronet. To approach him would require courage.

And, Eleanor's courage would need a little assistance.

She approached the punchbowl, beside which a footman stood in attendance.

“Two glasses, please.”

The footman raised an eyebrow, then complied, filling two glasses and handing them to her. She swallowed half of one glass, and made her way toward the object of her affection.

He was talking animatedly to his friends, then he threw back his head and laughed, and her heart swelled to see the joy in his eyes.

Then she froze, as she heard Papa's name.

"As for Sir Robert Hawkins—*he's* nothing but a drunkard on the verge of bankruptcy."

"Why the devil did Lord Amherst invite him tonight?"

She saw Montague stiffen. "He's here?" he asked.

"Lord yes!" someone else replied. "He's dragging his daughter around like a prize cow at auction. As if anyone would want *her*—a plain, plump brat with no dowry. Sir Robert's hoping to foist her off onto a rich man who'll settle his debts."

"Why would anyone waste their cash on that sorry creature when there are whores to fuck for a tenth of the price?"

Eleanor's skin crawled with fear. Debts?

*Bankruptcy?*

"Isn't their estate close to yours, Sedgewick?" someone asked.

Eleanor trembled, her gaze fixed on her idol. But he didn't defend her. Instead, he shrugged his shoulders.

"I believe so," he said, "but she's of no consequence."

"So you're not going to ask her to dance?"

"Heavens, no!" Montague cried. "I wouldn't even *acknowledge* Miss Hawkins, let alone suffer the punishment of standing up with her on the dancefloor."

A ripple of laughter threaded through the group—men of consequence, who dictated the lives of so many—men who ruled the world.

Tears stung in Eleanor's eyes. She stepped back, then collided with a body.

"Mind where you're going, Miss Hawkins!" a voice cried.

Montague looked up, and caught sight of her. For a moment, Eleanor thought he might draw her into his arms, say he'd been playing the fool, and beg forgiveness.

Then the sneer returned, and he looked away.

"Montague!" she cried.

A sharp intake of breath rippled through the company, followed by a volley of tutting at her overly familiar address.

"Who might *you* be?" he asked, his voice cold and hard.

Distress turned to fury.

"You bastard!" she cried, throwing the contents of her glass at him. The brown liquid sailed through the air and splashed onto his face. He spluttered, as the liquid dripped off his hair. Droplets trickled down his face, staining his waistcoat.

"Eleanor!" a voice roared.

Papa strode toward her, his face purple with rage. She glanced around the room at the guests, and saw shock in the ladies' expressions, disgust in the men's. At the far end, their host, Lord Amherst, approached two footmen, and gestured in her direction, most likely to demand her eviction.

Then, Papa gripped her arm, his bony fingers digging into her flesh, and hauled her across the dance floor. The footmen followed, not stopping until they had left the building.

Papa didn't relax his grip until he'd bundled her into the carriage.

"What the devil were you thinking?" he cried. "Do you have any idea the ruination you've caused with your behavior tonight? Nobody will take you now. I'll lose everything!"

"Papa, I'm sorry," she said, "but did you hear..."

“I don’t care what you heard! Ungrateful child—you’ve been nothing but a disgrace from the day you were born. How dare you soil my good name—I ought to have you thrashed!” He drew in a sharp breath, then reached for his cane. “I’ll give you a bloody good hiding now. I...” He gasped again, then clutched his arm, his eyes widening. “Eleanor, I...aah!”

He slumped sideways.

“Papa!” Eleanor cried. He let out an airless gasp, and she pulled down the window and leaned out.

“Make haste!” she cried. “Papa’s unwell!”

With a crack, the driver urged the horses on. The carriage lurched sideways, and Papa crumpled to the floor.

“Papa—Papa!”

Eleanor shook her father’s shoulders, but he made no response. His face was ashen, his lips blue. She pressed her head to his chest, and her gut twisted in fear.

There was no heartbeat.



## CHAPTER 1



*Five years later—December 22<sup>nd</sup>*

LADY PANDORA OSBORNE stepped out of the carriage and wrinkled her nose as she stared at the enormous building in front of her.

Godstone Abbey was said to be the finest gem in England but, to Pansy, the building—like all ecclesiastical structures—had the air of a mausoleum, particularly in the fading light, with the surrounding landscape covered in a dusting of snow. It was a far cry from the elegant townhouses of Mayfair with their clean lines, and pale stone façades.

Why the devil Lady Westfield decided to hold a Christmas house party in this gloomy place, rather than London, Pansy couldn't fathom. Still, she had to concede that the architecture was somewhat striking—if one liked that sort of thing. Many members of the *ton* raved about the grounds—landscaped by Capability Brown himself—with the curving, undulating lake, exquisitely placed shrubberies, and exotic trees, rumored to be the only living specimens this side of the East Indies.

Lady Pandora's cousin, Lady Octavia Sewell, followed her out of the carriage.

“Oh I say, what a fine building!” she cried, her tone filled with false enthusiasm. “I've heard some dismiss it out of turn, but those who possess true elegance of taste, will always appreciate the architectural features.”

“I myself prefer the understated elegance of a country manor, Octavia,” Pansy said. “I simply cannot bear ostentation, which always carries an air of vulgarity.”

“Dearest cousin, how you amuse!” Octavia cried. “Lady Westfield will find much to laugh at in your company.”

Pansy gritted her teeth. Now was not the time to react to her cousin’s goading. Not on the eve of her triumph. Following a wager with her cousin at the beginning of the year, for which her beloved grandmother’s tiara was the ante, Pansy had been attending all manner of house parties in order to secure matches between the unmatched. Rakes, bluestockings, committed bachelors and ladies of doubtful reputation, had all fallen into the parson’s trap, courtesy of Pansy’s matchmaking skills. And now, as the year was drawing to a close, the final house party was nigh. One more match and the wager would be won. Octavia would have to eat crow and, more importantly, the tiara would be safe from her grasping fingers.

As if she read Pansy’s mind, Octavia gave her a nudge. “Have you brought Grandmama’s tiara?” she asked.

“My answer is the same as it was the last time you asked me, when we entered the driveway,” Pansy replied, “*and* the time before that, when we left London. I have it, about my person.”

“You should wear it tonight,” Octavia continued. “After all, it won’t be in your possession for much longer.”

“Pshah!” Pansy exclaimed. “You impugn my skills as a matchmaker. Have I not been successful to date? I only need effect one more match to triumph over you—and claim possession of the tiara, once and for all.”

She turned toward the carriage, where two footmen were struggling with her trunk.

“Be careful with that!” she cried. “I’ll not have my belongings tossed about as if they’re crossing a stormy sea.”

“Yes, ma’am—sorry ma’am.” The footmen carried the trunk across the gravel driveway, and disappeared around the

side of the building.

“Perhaps I’ve left the greatest challenge for last,” Octavia said. “Complacency will be your downfall, Pansy. Many thoroughbreds fall at the final fence.”

Pansy shivered at the gleam of satisfaction in her cousin’s eyes. Which unmarried young woman had she selected? Nobody could be more difficult to match than Miss Alexandra Isaacs—the gangly young miss with a penchant for wearing breeches, and so many freckles on her face that she looked quite the savage. Yet Pansy had secured a match between that particular young miss and none other than Giles Harewood, former captain in the militia.

“So—who have you singled out as being in need of my matchmaking skills?” Pansy asked.

A smile slid across Octavia’s lips. “The Duke of Sedgewick.”

“Ha!” Pansy laughed. “*He’s* no challenge at all. His Grace is one of the most eligible bachelors in the country.”

“And he’s been so for the past five years,” Octavia said. “He might be the most desirable catch in the eyes of every desperate debutante and their mamas, but he’s a notorious miser. As for the marriage state, His Grace has never shown interest in any woman except Lady Jarvis. And we all know *she’s* not the marrying sort.”

“You intend for me to change her mind?” Pansy asked. “Nothing could be easier.”

“Good heavens, no!” Octavia laughed. “Lady Jarvis prefers the trappings of a mistress over the duties of a wife. I have a far better quarry in mind.”

“Who?”

Octavia smiled. “Do you know Sir Arthur Evans—the silk merchant?”

“Of course,” Pansy said. “I flatter myself in saying that I was instrumental in his rise to the top, for I have personally recommended his silks to the finest modistes in town.” She

hesitated, then drew in a sharp breath. “Good grief—you’re not referring to his ward?”

“The very same.”

A mystery surrounded the origins of Sir Arthur Evans’s ward who seemed to have sprung up from nowhere. Nobody had heard of the girl until the wealthy, and recently-knighted Sir Arthur introduced her at Lady Danbury’s party earlier that year. Pansy hadn’t thought much of the girl. Pretty enough, but she had an unfortunate turn of phrase, and spoke a little too loudly for polite society.

Octavia slipped her arm through Pansy’s. “Don’t look so glum, cousin,” she said. “It’s not a completely impossible match. Sir Arthur is rumored to have given his ward a dowry of forty thousand. Given the Duke of Sedgewick’s miserly tendencies, Miss Evans’ fortune might be enough to tempt him, despite her—*unfortunate situation*.”

Her unfortunate situation, indeed! Why didn’t Octavia just say it outright? Many rich men introduced young ladies as their wards, who were nothing more than by-blows.

“It matters not that she’s Sir Arthur’s *natural child*,” Pansy said. “Honestly, Octavia, that’s not so objectionable as it once was. A sizeable fortune is enough to make even the most discerning suitor overlook a few doubts as to a young woman’s birth. I accept your challenge. By Christmas Day I’ll have matched Miss Evans with the Duke of Sedgewick.”

“Oh, my poor dear cousin!” Octavia cried. “She’s not Sir Arthur’s progeny at all. Aren’t you aware of the rumors surrounding our distinguished knight of the realm?”

“Rumors?”

“Sir Arthur is a *committed bachelor*,” Octavia said. “He has a lifelong friend—a gentleman friend.”

“So? All gentlemen prefer to circulate in packs and frequent their clubs in order to indulge in the company of their own sex. rather than suffer the company of ours.”

“Ah, but this particular friend—Mr. Finch...”

“The lawyer?” Pansy interrupted. Everyone who was anybody knew of Lawrence Finch. He was the founding partner of Finch & Sparrow, and the sharpest, brightest and—more importantly—the most discreet lawyer in London.

“Yes,” Octavia continued. “Mr. Finch is also a *committed bachelor*. I’ve heard whispers that Miss Evans occasionally goes by the name Evans-Finch. What do you say about that?”

Pansy felt herself blushing, but she wasn’t going to give Octavia the satisfaction of seeing her confidence wane. “Even better,” she said. “A young woman with two papas will have double the dowry.”

“Lady Pandora!” a voice cried, “and Lady Octavia—I’m so glad you could come!”

Lady Westfield stood in the entrance, resplendent in a bright orange silk gown with undertones of pink that shimmered as she approached them. That silk was recognizable anywhere—Sir Arthur always managed to procure the best silks in Society. His wares were so sought-after, that he was a frequent guest at the finest dinner tables, particularly since the knighthood elevated him from being a mere ‘mister’.

If Sir Arthur’s ward was decked in a similarly exquisite silk, she might prove to be a desirable match, for all her unladylike attributes. But, Pansy needed to take a less direct approach to render the girl desirable to a man such as Sedgewick. The duke wouldn’t respond well to admiration, flattery, or an overt attempt to match him with a woman. No—Pansy needed to ensure that Miss Evans danced with every gentleman in the room *except* Sedgewick.

For, there was nothing more desirable to a man, than a woman who was engaged to every other suitor but him.

## CHAPTER 2



Eleanor held up the dress to the light. “What do you think, Nancy?”

“It’s a little creased, Miss. Let me hang it by the fire.”

Nancy plucked the dress from Eleanor’s hands.

“It’ll only get creased again when I pack it,” Eleanor said.

“Then *I’ll* pack it,” Nancy replied. “You should have let me fold it properly yesterday instead of cramming it into the drawer as usual.”

Nancy was right. Eleanor had struggled to shake off the habits she’d acquired while living on the streets, despite her noble origins. Whereas Nancy, who’d lived in the gutter all her life, had taken to the task of lady’s maid as if she were born into a life of routine and order.

The chamber door opened to reveal Eleanor’s guardian.

“I see the packing is going well,” he said.

“Papa Arthur!” Eleanor leaped to her feet and embraced him. “I thought you were still working,” she said. “Does that mean you can come to Godstone Abbey with me today?”

He shook his head. “Sorry to disappoint you, Eleanor, I still have much to do. But I promise that both Lawrence and I will arrive by Christmas Day. Shall I ask Lady Westfield to chaperone you during the house party?”

“Ugh—I’d rather eat horse dung.”

“Eleanor!” he cried. “How many times have I told you not to curse?”

“That’s not cursing,” Eleanor said. “If I were cursing, I’d say fu...”

He held up his hand. “That’s enough, young lady.” His tone was stern, but a twinkle shone in his eyes. “You must learn to behave in a more ladylike manner, if you’re to be accepted in Society.”

Papa Arthur was right. Eleanor had acquired a new vocabulary on the streets—in addition to other skills. And, indulgent as her guardian was, he expected her to behave—at least in public.

“I promise I won’t let you down at Godstone Abbey,” she said, “though I am concerned that I’ll encounter someone from my past.”

“You have nothing to fear. Nobody will recognize you.” His expression softened. “Lawrence is here,” he said, “and there’s tea in the parlor. Why don’t you take a break from...” he gestured toward the pile of clothes on the floor, “... whatever it is you’re doing, and join us?”

Eleanor glanced at the half-empty trunk. “There’s still so much to do.”

“Go on, Miss,” Nancy said. “I’ll be quicker without you getting under my feet.”

Eleanor followed her guardian out of the chamber and downstairs to the parlor.

Their guest was standing by the fireplace admiring the ormolu clock on the mantelshelf, his hands folded behind his back.

He turned as Eleanor entered.

“Uncle Lawrence!” she cried.

“Eleanor, my dear,” he said. “You look well. Are you looking forward to the house party?”

“I’m a little nervous.”

He drew her into an embrace. “You’ll be fine, as long as you refrain from cursing.”

“Papa Arthur’s already warned me,” she said. “I’m better than I was, but sometimes I can’t help myself.”

“Lawrence and I aren’t asking you to change yourself,” Papa Arthur said. “You should be proud of who you are. We only ask that you show due regard for other people’s feelings. The other guests would be uncomfortable if you cursed. And, whether or not you agree with them, the views of others must always be taken into consideration. Your Uncle Lawrence and I know that better than most.”

Eleanor nodded. If the two men she loved best in the world could conceal their true selves to avoid censure—or worse—then, at the very least, she could act the part of the lady for a few days.

She approached the table where the tea things had been set out. Then, she poured a cup, and dropped two sugars into it, just how Uncle Lawrence liked it.

“Tea?” She held out the cup.

Uncle Lawrence gave her a wink, then took the cup and sat, while she poured another for Papa Arthur. Then the three of them settled into a comfortable silence—the kind of silence between friends and family who had no need to fill it with idle chatter.

An unusual family set-up it might be, but she wouldn’t have it any other way.



AFTER TEA, Eleanor returned to her chamber, in time to see Nancy closing the trunk.

“You’ve finished packing already?”

“I said I’d be quicker without you getting in the way, Miss,” Nancy said, with a twinkle of mischief in her eye. “I



suppose Mr. Finch and Sir Arthur gave you a lecture over tea on how to behave?”

“I’ve promised to be the epitome of elegance,” Eleanor said. “But I still intend to carry out my plan, especially if I see anyone I recognize. Imagine what stash I’ll accumulate from all those deep pockets!”

Nancy’s eyes widened. “You can’t go pickpocketing at a house party, Miss! It’s one thing to pick a stranger’s pocket on the street, but at a house party, there’s nowhere to run.”

Eleanor grinned. “That makes it more of a challenge. Don’t you remember that night when I picked more than twenty pockets in Vauxhall Gardens—when The Hawk reigned triumphant?”

“You’re not The Hawk any more,” Nancy said. “You’re Miss Evans—ward of a knight, and respectable member of society.”

Eleanor wrinkled her nose. “What has society ever done for me? After my father died, I was tossed out on the street with nothing. His former friends swooped on his belongings like scavengers, taking what they could. It might be small revenge to pick a few of their pockets, but I’ll be doing it for every child left destitute by an uncaring world.”

“Don’t get caught,” Nancy said. “You’ll not only get yourself into trouble, but you’ll disgrace Sir Arthur.”

“I won’t get caught.”

Nancy smiled. “You always were better at it than me.”

Eleanor smiled to herself at the prospect of emptying the pockets of the very same men who bore the responsibility for destroying her life.

And none more so than *him*.

Montague Lockhart—the man who had taken her heart and ripped it to shreds.

The man she held responsible for her downfall.

## CHAPTER 3



The carriage drew to a halt outside Godstone Abbey, and Montague climbed out, followed by his friend, Dominic de Morigeaux, Duke of Peterton.

“A fine building,” Dominic said. “Very fine, indeed.”

“You place too much value on material possessions, Dom,” Montague said.

“If *you* lost your ancestral home, you’d feel the same.”

Montague sighed. Dom came from a long line of wastrels who’d lacked the sense to place the family possessions in trust. As a consequence, the elegant London townhouse that had once belonged to the de Morigeaux family, was now in the possession of a woman—one with a head for business, and a tongue sharper than a rapier.

“You’ve nobody but your own ancestors to blame for your lack of funds,” Montague said.

“You’re not exactly flush yourself,” came the reply. “I’ve never known anyone so miserly. You won’t even lend me five guineas for this week.”

“That’s because you’d lose it at the card tables on the first night, then come to me cap in hand for another five.”

Dom opened his mouth to reply, then clearly thought better of it as he closed it again. He was somewhat beholden to Montague, having long ago had to give up his carriage—not to mention other comforts.

“Will the delightful Lady Jarvis be joining us this week?” Dom’s eyes glittered with desire as he spoke of one of the *other comforts* he’d given up.

“No,” Montague replied. “She and I have parted company.”

“Costing you a fortune, was she?”

In that, Dom was right. Mistresses were more expensive than carriages—especially when they shared Juliette Jarvis’s expensive tastes. But Juliette had lost her luster. Yes, she knew how to pleasure a man in bed, but every woman lost her appeal after a few months. The first flush of lust always faded when they fell into a routine.

With Juliette, monotony had crept into their relationship. A stroll in the park, followed by dinner, and a bout of lovemaking, after which Montague would drop a trinket into the dish beside her bed before creeping out of her townhouse as dawn was breaking, to return to his bed at home.

A cold, empty bed, to match his cold, empty heart.

And, Juliette had begun to share her favors. Montague had demanded exclusivity, as he did with every woman he patronized, but of late, Juliette’s eyes had been filled with an expression he recognized—the first flush of lust and excitement at the anticipation of a new partner’s skills at bedsport. And, no matter how tenacious she might be with her ablutions, a woman could never quite rid herself of the scent of the other men she rutted.

Not that he cared—he’d long since encased his heart in a shell of steel.

Since *her*.

Eleanor.

Each time he closed his eyes, the image of her tear-stained face flashed before him, taunting his conscience. The last time he’d seen her, she was being dragged out of Lady Amherst’s ballroom by her father. A week later, he’d learned that Sir Robert Hawkins was dead, his estate bankrupt, and his daughter missing.

And it was *his* fault. He'd been swept along with his friends' laughter, indulging in their superiority over the impoverished baronet who'd drunk and gambled away not only his fortune, but his daughter's dowry.

To the rest of the world, Eleanor Hawkins had been a figure of ridicule—a plain, plump creature in a hand-me-down dress. But, to him, she was the artless child from the estate next door—who'd grown into a kind and intelligent young woman.

Despite his attempts to resist, Eleanor—his Elle—had captured his heart. Though he was required to act the part of the duke in company, it was only with *her* that he could discard the façade and truly be himself.

But, Eleanor Hawkins had been missing for over five years and, despite Montague's efforts, and inquiries, she had never been found.

He wanted to apologize for the cruel words he'd said, to explain why...

And most of all, he wanted to hold her in his arms, and kiss her, like he had that Christmas Eve in the snowstorm when she'd fallen into that ditch. He could still remember her sweet scent as he'd taken her in his arms. Not the expensive colognes which ladies found so alluring, but the fresh scent of the country—newly cut grass with an undertone of lavender.

When he'd given up on finding her, he did the next best thing—set up a charitable foundation for destitute women and children, in the hope that she might find her way there one day and survive.

And, if she didn't...

Then, he took some consolation—albeit not much—in the knowledge that other young women in her situation would be given the comfort, and sanctuary, that had been denied her.

Nobody knew of his venture, not even Dom, who'd consider it a waste of resources. Not even his lawyer knew. Montague had approached a different lawyer—a Mr. Finch, who had an excellent reputation for discretion.

Which was just as well, given the rumors that circulated about Mr. Finch, and a certain Sir Arthur Evans.

“Oh, lord—Madam cockroach is here.” Dom nudged Montague’s elbow, returning him to the present. “She must have lined up one of Lady Westfield’s guests as the next victim in her matchmaking endeavor. I’ll wager my fortune that it’s you.”

Montague glanced up to see two familiar figures—Lady Pandora Osborne and Lady Octavia Sewell, the worst gossips in all of society. They—particularly Lady Pandora—fancied themselves the premier matchmakers of the ton.

And, in some sense, they were right. Over the past year, Montague had seen several of his friends—including the Duke of Witherin, and Lord Blackstone—felled by the parson’s axe. And most of the men had met the young ladies responsible for their downfall at a house party—one at which Lady Pandora was also a guest. A coincidence, perhaps? No—a belief in coincidences often led to a man’s downfall. If events displayed a pattern, there was usually a reason. Subterfuge, perhaps.

Or, the machinations of a woman such as Lady Pandora.

“Seeing as you’ve squandered your fortune, Dom, any wager you make would be worthless,” Montague said, wincing at the sour note in his voice.

Dominic let out a good-natured chuckle, and the two men approached the doorway.

“Your Grace!” Lady Westfield cried, eyeing Montague up. “And, Your Grace,” she added, nodding toward Dominic. “It’s not often I have the pleasure of *two* dukes arriving at my door at the same time.”

The black-clad Lady Pandora cast an appraising eye over Montague, and dipped into a curtsy. “Your Grace, what a pleasure. I wouldn’t have thought anything would tempt you away from Lockhart Hall at this time of year—but I am *particularly* delighted to see you here.”

*Oh, bloody hell.*

The predatory gleam in Lady Pandora's eye was unmistakable.

Montague himself was her next target.

Which unpalatable young woman did she intend to thrust upon him?

## CHAPTER 4



**B**y the time Eleanor arrived at Godstone Abbey, the light had already faded. Moonlight reflected off the snow, illuminating the front façade with a blue light, which highlighted the ornate masonry, and cast sharp shadows across the surface of the stone.

Every window was ablaze with light, as if Lord and Lady Westfield wanted the entire world to know that they were hosting the house party of the year.

A footman opened the carriage door and offered his hand. Recalling Papa Arthur's instructions, Eleanor refrained from pushing him aside and declaring that her sex didn't render her incapable of descending steps unaided. Instead, she took his hand, issued a polite thank-you and let him lead her to the main doors of the building.

Nancy followed. The footman arched an eyebrow as he caught sight of the maid climbing out of the carriage, but Eleanor refused to observe etiquette that dictated her maid sit on the outside of the coach on a freezing night such as this. Nancy was more than a personal maid. She was Eleanor's friend and companion. They had taken care of each other on the streets—a world where human lives had no value, and young women were exposed to predators. It was Nancy who'd taught her pickpocketing, a skill Eleanor discovered she had a knack for—and which saved the two of them from having to find other, less savory, means to earn enough coin to prevent starvation.

As they were ushered through the doors and into the main hall, Lady Westfield approached. A small group of men stood together, further inside the building. Eleanor's heart rate increased, as it always did when among the men and women of society with whom she'd once circulated. But they never recognized her. The shy Miss Hawkins, yet to shed her teenage plumpness, was a distant memory, both for them, and for her. The bold, brash Miss Evans was a different creature altogether.

Nancy clutched Eleanor's arm. "Look!" she hissed. "It's the *Porcine Peer*."

Eleanor's stomach churned with nausea.

The Porcine Peer—Viscount Dunbar—was a most unsavory man. He was well known among London's rookeries as a predator with villainous intentions toward the disadvantaged women of London. Eleanor herself had once blackened his eye with her fist when he'd tried to foist his attentions onto her. With his portly frame and wheezing breath, he presented little threat, given that everyone could outrun him—but Eleanor had no wish to be recognized.

He wobbled over, his cheeks reddened, most likely as a result of an overindulgence of Lord Westfield's liquor.

"Lady Westfield," he said, "you must introduce me to your delectable guest."

*Ugh.*

"Lord Dunbar, this is Miss Evans," Lady Westfield said.

He wrinkled his nose. "Good Lord—the *silk merchant's* ward?"

"Sir Arthur's a respectable man, and a dear friend," Lady Westfield said, disapproval in her tone.

"O-of course," Dunbar spluttered. He took Eleanor's hand and lifted it to his lips, and she suppressed a shudder. Then he glanced at the back of her hand and his eyes widened. She snatched her hand away. Though she was not ashamed of the callouses on her knuckles—the marks of her survival—she had promised Papa Arthur to play the part of the lady.



But gloves hindered the picking of pockets. Each of the five senses were needed for a successful lift, and none more so than touch—a sense which was dulled by the wearing of gloves, as effectively as a blindfold extinguished sight.

Lady Westfield linked her arm through Eleanor's.

“Let me introduce you to the rest of the ladies,” she said. “I promised Sir Arthur I'd take care of you until he arrives.” She glanced toward Nancy. “Perhaps your companion would like to see to your belongings?” She waved over a footman. “Charles, would you show this young lady to Miss Evans's chamber?”

“Very good, your ladyship.”

Nancy bobbed a curtsey, then followed the footman, while Lady Westfield escorted Eleanor into a reception room, where the majority of the guests were milling about.

The room was enormous. Solid stone walls were lined with tapestries depicting medieval battle scenes. Huge stone pillars rose up from the perimeter toward a high, arched ceiling, decorated with ornately carved wood, embossed in gold. A huge chandelier hung from the ceiling, filled with candles, which sent a myriad of light dancing about the room.

Eleanor craned her neck upward. How the devil did anyone light those candles? They must be twenty feet up at least. Did the footmen teeter about on a ladder, or perhaps they suspended themselves from the ceiling, somehow.

Still gazing at the chandelier, she walked forward, then collided with a solid wall of muscle.

“Pardon me,” a deep voice said, in a tone which made the apology sound like an insult.

Eleanor froze.

The arrogance in his tone was matched by the contempt in his eyes—clear blue eyes in a savagely handsome face, surrounded by a mane of thick black hair.

*No...*

He must be a figment of her imagination, made manifest by years of despair.

She closed her eyes, but though it brought about blessed darkness, the familiar scent invaded her nostrils—the scent which she'd once found so comforting, but now associated with betrayal.

When she opened her eyes, he was still there—tall, broad-shouldered, domineering.

And, most certainly—*him*.

“Oh!” Lady Westfield cried, breaking the spell. “Miss Evans, may I introduce Montague Lockhart—Duke of Sedgewick.” She turned to him. “Your Grace—this is Miss Evans.”

His attention, which had been focused on Lady Westfield, now turned to Eleanor, and she caught her breath, as her heart stuttered in her chest.

But he showed no sign of recognition. Instead, he clicked his heels together and gave the slightest of inclinations with his head.

“A pleasure, I'm sure.”

Then he turned his back, and walked away.

“His Grace is not one for conversation,” Lady Westfield whispered, “and he's refused to join in the Christmas festivities—he'll be leaving on Christmas Day before dinner. But he's an old schoolfellow of Lord Westfield's. They were at Eton together, you know. But never fear, you'll not have to talk to him at dinner tonight. I've sat you next to Mr. Appleby—he'll be a much more entertaining dinner companion, and his wife's a charming creature.

Lady Westfield rattled on, and Eleanor let her hostess lead her around the hall, introducing her to guest after guest.

But she had eyes only for one—the silent, brooding man who stood apart from the others, leaning against a column and staring out into the room as if the rest of the company bored

him. He glanced in her direction, then his gaze swept past, without a flicker of recognition.

It was what Eleanor wanted—to be unrecognizable. She was a different person since she'd seen him last. Her hair, which had always been a mass of unruly curls, was now fashioned into a sleek, short style. Her frame, thin and wiry from years of living on the streets, was a far cry from its former feminine softness. And her air—Papa Arthur had taught her self-assurance. Unlike Father, who'd treated her as a means to an end—a commodity to be sold in marriage, Papa Arthur saw Eleanor as an individual in her own right.

And she was, most certainly, *not* going to be cowed by the contempt of the man she'd once loved.

Part of her was amused by the fact that he'd not recognized her, that she was subject to the same arrogant disdain he bestowed on the rest of the world. But a small part of her—the very core of her heart—yearned to see him smile at her, like he once did.

But, it had been an illusion. To him, she was nothing more than the dirt on his shoe—and though she spent the rest of the evening smiling and nodding to the other guests, inside, her heart wept.

## CHAPTER 5



*D*ecember 23<sup>rd</sup>

LADY PANDORA EYED Miss Evans from across the breakfast table. Gauche the young woman might be, but she had a certain appeal. She was unafraid to speak her mind, and though that was an undesirable quality, Pansy couldn't help but notice the attention Miss Evans was getting from the male guests.

Viscount Dunbar seemed quite taken with her—at least when he could drag his attention away from the platter of food in front of him. Pansy had never seen such a disgusting excuse for a man—shoveling mouthfuls of kidneys and bacon, and eating with his mouth open, such that the tablecloth around him was already dotted with globules of half-chewed egg.

Shortly after he'd begun eating, Miss Evans had turned to her companions—Mr. and Mrs. Appleby—and proceeded to discuss the habits of livestock, in particular the eating habits of the swine at the farm near Sir Arthur's country estate, and the rather peculiar noises the fattest hogs made when indulging in swill. While the young lady had kept her composure admirably, poor Mr. Appleby had almost choked on his tea trying to hide his laughter.

In fact, the only guest who seemed uninterested in Miss Evans, was the Duke of Sedgewick.

Pansy's cousin leaned across, making a show of passing the milk, and whispered in a low voice. "You have my

sympathies, dear cousin. It seems as if the prospective suitor has no time for your young lady's vulgarities."

"It's early days yet, Octavia, darling," Pansy said. "My plan's coming to fruition."

Octavia let out an unladylike snort, and resumed eating. She didn't know that Pansy had already persuaded several of the gentleman to partner Miss Evans at the ball tomorrow night. Being the most sought-after young woman in the building would pique the duke's interest.

The meal concluded, and the company rose and left the breakfast room. Most of the men disappeared to explore the grounds, while a few of the older men preferred to stay indoors with the ladies. Miss Evans stood out by being the only lady choosing to explore the grounds in the abominable weather outside.

Pansy eyed the landscape with distaste. Another layer of snow had fallen, shrouding the landscape in a cold, white blanket. But fortune favored the intrepid. If she were to succeed in securing a match, she needed to keep a close eye on the prospective lovers.

But, as soon as the excursion began, Miss Evans skipped ahead, and Sedgewick remained at the rear of the party.

Pansy fell into step with the Duke of Peterton. "Does your friend always take such little pleasure in company, Your Grace?" she asked.

"Monty?" Peterton laughed. "Almost always."

"I wonder why he joined the walking party today."

"To avoid the ladies, I imagine," he said. "There's too many single young women among the party. Doubtless he feels unsafe indoors."

"Miss Evans is among the walking party today," Pansy said. "She's single—and rumor has it her guardian intends to sponsor her next season."

"Ha!" Peterton cried. "I knew it! You're hunting for a husband for her, aren't you? Do you think I'll slip my neck

through the parson's noose?"

"Not at all," Pansy said. "I suspect Miss Evans is more discerning than most, when it comes to selecting a partner."

"She has no right to be. Everyone knows about her guardian."

"Knows what?" Pansy asked.

"That he's a *committed bachelor*," came the reply. "Most people in society don't hold with such a lifestyle. A man must marry."

"How short-sighted of them!" Pansy forced a laugh. "Miss Evans is Sir Arthur's sole heir and, I suspect, she is also Mr. Finch's heir. Given that there's little risk of further issue from either man, she stands to inherit a veritable fortune, in addition to her substantial dowry." She cast a sly glance toward him, and smiled at the expression in his eyes, which was a mix of surprise and greed.

"Of course," Pansy continued, "a man such as yourself wouldn't be in the least bit interested in a woman of her class, no matter how wealthy she may be. Dukes must consider things other than fortune when choosing a partner. There's no space in their lives for modern sensibilities—or the need for cash."

Pansy had cast the bait—and now, she waited for the fish to bite.

She resumed her attention on their surroundings. "I must say, the gardens hereabouts are quite beautiful," she said. "The view of the lake reminds me of..."

"What size dowry would you consider to be *substantial*?" Peterton interrupted.

"I couldn't say, Your Grace," she replied. "That would be improper."

"Yes, yes, of course." He waved his hand dismissively. "Twenty thousand?"

Pansy let out a snort.

“Thirty?”

She ignored the question, and continued walking.

“Good God!” he exclaimed. “More than thirty thousand?”

“Your Grace!” she snapped. “I cannot tolerate such an outburst. Moderate your language, please.”

“My apologies.” His voice was meek, but hunger glittered in his eyes, and he focused his gaze ahead, where Miss Evans was laughing with Mr. Appleby. “I wonder if she’d be disposed to dance with me tomorrow night?”

“I suspect her dance card’s already filled,” Pansy said, “and recall what I said about her discerning tastes.”

“A duke’s more than a match for the ward of a commoner,” he said, petulance in his voice, “even if that commoner has been elevated to the knighthood.”

Pansy smiled to herself. Good—she’d pricked his pride.

A man’s pride was his downfall. And Dominic de Morigeaux was no exception. A vain creature with no fortune, and even less sense, he’d most likely prostrate himself at Miss Evans’s feet if he believed her to be the object of attention of the other men.

And, if the elusive Sedgewick, believed that Pansy intended Miss Evans for his friend, then *his* interest might be piqued. As every astute woman knew, the key to ensuring a man did what she wanted, was to make him believe that it was his idea.

As if he was the marionette, and she the puppeteer, Peterton walked ahead and joined Miss Evans, as expected.

Pansy glanced back toward Sedgewick. Though still apart from the rest of the party, his attention was now focused on Miss Evans.

But Pansy didn’t merely want his attention on the young woman. She wanted him to be *obsessed* with her—the forbidden fruit, the exotic flower which bloomed for others but not for him. And a man’s obsession only lasted while the object of his interest was unattainable.

Sedgewick increased his pace, closing the gap between him and the main party, his attention fixed on Miss Evans. But, before he reached her, Pansy darted forward, and slipped her arm through Miss Evans's, casting a stern glance at Peterton.

"You mustn't monopolize this young lady," she said, "not when I've been eager to speak with her. My dear Miss Evans, I'm quite devastated that we've not had the opportunity to speak to one another so far. Permit me to remedy that situation now. I'm a great friend of your dear guardian."

Miss Evans turned wide, brown eyes on Pansy, and raised her eyebrows in question.

"I'm Lady Pandora Osborne," Pansy said. "I was one of the first ladies in society to recognize the superiority of Sir Arthur's silks, and I made a point of recommending him to my modiste and, indeed, to my entire circle of acquaintance."

"You're too kind," Miss Evans said.

"Will Sir Arthur be joining us this week?" Pansy asked.

"He intends to arrive by Christmas."

"I've not heard from Sir Arthur for ages," Pansy said, "and I *ache* to hear news of him. You must tell me everything you know. Perhaps you'd care to accompany me back inside, and we could take tea? It's a little too cold outside, don't you think?"

Though she had a reputation for plain speech and incivility, Miss Evans was clearly too polite to refuse Pansy's invitation, even if the expression in her eyes told Pansy that it was the last thing she wanted to do.

"I'd be delighted," she replied.

"Let us go, then," Pansy said, "and leave the gentlemen to the elements."

Arm-in-arm they broke free from the party. Pansy glanced over her shoulder to see both Peterton and Sedgewick staring after them. And, if she were not mistaken, she detected a shift in Sedgewick's expression—a flicker of desire in his eyes.



He was, undoubtedly, interested in Miss Evans. And the more Pansy did to prevent their paths crossing, the more his interest would heighten.

## CHAPTER 6



Eleanor sat at her dressing table, while her maid unpinned her hair.

“I never imagined a house party would be so boring, Nancy.”

“Oh, I don’t now, Miss. The grounds hereabouts are beautiful, and you must admit the air’s much cleaner than in London.”

Eleanor reached up and took Nancy’s hand. “Forgive me,” she said. “I forget, this is your first time at an event such as this. I only wish you could attend it as a proper guest, not as a maid.”

“I prefer my place,” Nancy said. “The company in the kitchen is far more congenial than the people *you’re* having to associate with.”

“I can well believe it!” Eleanor laughed. “I mean—who the devil is Lady Pandora Osborne? She says she’s an old friend of Papa Arthur’s, and seems awfully keen on ensuring I have a partner for every dance tomorrow night. Of course, she doesn’t realize that she’s playing into my hands, for what better opportunity is there to pick a man’s pocket, when he’s parading me around the dance floor?” She grinned at her reflection. “I wonder what the Duke of Peterton has in his pockets?”

That particular gentleman had seemed particularly desperate to add his name to Eleanor’s dance card, and tonight, he’d maneuvered himself into the place next to hers at the

dinner table, no doubt making her the envy of the other unattached ladies. But he was a vain insipid creature, who placed too much value on material wealth. He'd even complained about his friend being a miser, and she'd laughed until he said his name.

*Sedgewick.*

She'd looked up, then, to see the subject of their discussion staring directly at her across the dining table, his forehead furrowed into a frown. But she'd seen no recognition in his eyes—only disdain.

“Are you well, Miss?” Nancy asked.

Eleanor nodded. Nobody—apart from the guests at that long-ago party at Lady Amherst's—knew of what had happened between her and Montague. She'd not even told Nancy.

Speaking about it, made it real. While Eleanor remained silent on the subject, the Montague she'd known of old—the kind man who had shown her such consideration, who she'd given her heart to—existed in her dreams. And when she'd lain in the slums of London, lost and alone, she had clung to her dreams. They kept her alive, even though she knew they weren't real.

She patted Nancy's hand. “I'm just a little tired, that's all,” she said. “I had to sit near Lord Dunbar at dinner, and listen to him chewing his beef, and dribbling sauce down his chin—or should I say, *chins*.” She let out a sigh. “I dislike the company of these people even more than I did when I was one of them.”

“You're still one of them,” Nancy said. “You're the daughter of a baronet, you...”

“Hush!” Eleanor hissed. “We don't speak of my past.”

Nancy blushed, then continued brushing Eleanor's hair.

“What did you think of the Duke of Peterton's friend?” Nancy asked.

Eleanor sighed. “Do we really need *two* dukes lording it over the rest of us this week?”

Nancy giggled. “I heard one of the footmen in the kitchen call him *Montague Miser*! He said he’s one of the wealthiest men in the land, yet he never puts his hand in his pockets—not even to help his friend out.”

“I daresay that’s a wise decision, seeing as Peterton’s likely to lose whatever he has at the card tables,” Eleanor said. “But, it won’t stop me from putting *my* hand into his pocket.”

She smiled at her reflection, satisfaction gleaming in her eyes. It might be a petty victory, but the notion of relieving Montague Lockhart of some of his possessions at tomorrow’s ball might ease the ache in her heart whenever she thought of him.

## CHAPTER 7



**D** ecember 24<sup>th</sup>

“AREN’T YOU DANCING, MONTY?”

Montague leaned against the column, champagne glass in hand, while he watched the other guests indulge in a country dance, clapping and cheering to the lively tune.

“Good Lord, no, Dominic,” he sneered.

“It’s the waltz next,” Dominic said.

A *waltz*—good heavens! What the devil was their host thinking?

“I could never indulge in such a shockingly familiar dance,” Montague replied, “where a man and a woman remain so close for the duration.” He lifted his glass and took a sip. “That level of intimacy is best left to the bedchamber.”

“I suppose a waltz is the next best thing, when in the company of a respectable young woman, compared to spreading her legs.”

“Must you be so crass?” Montague asked.

“Must you be so bloody boring?” Dominic huffed. “Still—it’s your loss. I’ve secured the delectable Miss Evans for the next dance. She’s hardly a lady—she has such an ugly turn of phrase—but I’ll wager a woman with that level of spirit would be an exciting prospect for the bedchamber.”

“One day you’ll find yourself at the wrong end of an angry father’s pistol,” Montague growled.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake! I don’t know why you bothered coming here if all you’re going to do is complain.”

Dominic flounced off, making his way toward a footman carrying a tray of glasses. Doubtless, he’d be inebriated before the dancing had concluded. Montague found himself almost pitying Miss Evans, for all that she was an unattached young woman—and therefore more predator than prey.

In truth, Montague had no idea why he’d chosen to attend the Westfield’s house party—other than the fact that each Christmas for the past five years he’d indulged in melancholy and self-pity, to take his mind off...

*Her.*

Eleanor Hawkins.

The woman he’d let go.

No, his crime was altogether worse than merely *letting her go*. He’d insulted her, then watched as she’d been dragged out of his life. All because he’d been too much of a coward to stand up to his peers and declare his love for her.

If only he could be more like Dominic—a man without a conscience. All Dom need do to reach fulfilment, was marry a woman with fat thighs and a fatter dowry, then get her with child to perpetuate his line. Whereas Montague’s lifelong companion wouldn’t be a woman. It would be his conscience—which made for a bitter bedfellow.

The dancing stopped, and the musicians tuned their instruments. Montague saw Dominic approach Miss Evans—the tall young woman who’d accompanied the gentlemen during their walk yesterday and braved the elements. Tonight, she wore a pale green dress, with a necklace of pearls at her throat. The dress clung to her figure, which exuded health and athleticism. Together with the clear, confident tones of her voice, she had a masculine air. But as Dominic led her across the dancefloor, Montague caught a glimpse of the swell of her breasts beneath her neckline—a promise of feminine curves.

As they waltzed past, her eyes met his, briefly, before she resumed her attention on her partner. He caught his breath, as his heart fluttered in his chest—almost as if he recognized her.

Then he felt it—the awakening of desire, a delicious flame igniting his blood, which rushed toward his groin. The air left his lungs, and he gritted his teeth to stem the powerful surge of lust, and he crossed his legs to hide the cockstand in his breeches.

*Sweet heaven!* He'd not felt such desire since...

"I wouldn't bother," a feminine voice said. "She's not the sort of girl who'd show interest in you."

The voice had an air of harshness, as if a crow had spoken.

He turned to see Lady Pandora Osborne standing beside him, a sly smile on her lips.

"Miss Evans is too far beneath your notice," she said. "But, she *is* rather pretty, isn't she? In a brash sort of way, of course."

"I can't say I'd noticed," Montague replied, painfully aware of the strain in his voice, and in his breeches. Lady Pansy had only to glance down to see the evidence of his lust.

The waltz ended, and Miss Evans freed herself from Dominic's grip. She glanced about, her expression furtive, then disappeared onto the terrace. Moments later, she returned, and another young man sidled up to her and bowed.

"She's engaged for every dance tonight," Lady Pandora said, pride in her voice.

Dominic, face flushed, and eyes bright with excitement, approached Montague, and nodded to Lady Pandora.

"How was your partner, Your Grace?" Lady Pandora asked.

"Delightful—simply delightful."

"I daresay she'd be a little less *delightful* without her fortune," Montague said, aware of the petulance in his voice.

“You’re merely jealous because she’s disinclined to dance with *you*,” Dominic replied.

“I haven’t asked her.”

“Do you fear rejection?”

Montague’s stomach churned at the sour odor of wine on Dominic’s breath. “I’m impressed,” he said. “In your cups before eight o’clock. I’m sure Miss Evans was equally impressed. You do realize that some women—even the crass ones wishing to purchase a titled husband—prefer their partners to be sober.”

Dominic let out an ungentlemanly snort, and stumbled toward the terrace, presumably on his way to the garden in search of a convenient bush to vomit behind. Dominic was not averse to emptying the contents of his stomach into the nearest vase—including, if the rumors were true, the urn containing his late father’s ashes. But, then, that old bastard deserved no respect, given that he’d whored, drunk and gambled away his fortune, leaving his son almost destitute.

No wonder Dominic drank. Not only was it in his blood, but he needed oblivion to forget the direness of his situation.

Montague found his gaze drifting toward Miss Evans. Hardly a lady, but something about her intrigued him. Her hair, though an unremarkable shade of brown, was fashioned into a short style which few ladies could carry off successfully. It gave prominence to her femininity, the sleek lines drawing the eye to her face, rather than distracting it with an abundance of curls.

And her eyes—wide, and expressive, they were an extraordinary shade of brown. At first, he’d thought they were dark, but as she passed him, chatting animatedly to her partner, he spotted the flecks of gold in the center, which seemed to be illuminated from within with pieces of the sun. Once again, he felt a ripple of familiarity. Then he dismissed it—there was a difference between recognition and wishful thinking.

When the dance concluded, she glanced once more toward the terrace. Viscount Dunbar approached her, and Montague



caught his breath. Surely, she wasn't going to dance with that lecher?

They engaged in a brief conversation, then she raised her hand and stepped back. Dunbar bowed, then retreated, and Montague exhaled. No doubt a woman of her brashness would be capable of defending herself, but the thought of that hideous man forcing his attentions on any woman made Montague's flesh crawl.

She stood at the edge of the dancefloor, watching Dunbar retreat, before she turned aside and headed for the terrace.

Montague caught sight of the expression in her eyes, and his heart almost stopped. Then she smiled, as a young man wearing regimentals—the second son of the Earl of Dewberry—approached her and bowed, and the troubled expression in her eyes was gone.

But he'd already seen it—an expression which had haunted his dreams for five years.

The air left his lungs, and he leaned against the wall as his legs almost gave way beneath him.

*Sweet Lord!* No wonder she'd looked familiar.

It was *her*.

Miss Evans was none other than Eleanor Hawkins, returned from the dead.

## CHAPTER 8



Lord Dunbar might be an object of ridicule, but Eleanor struggled to swallow her revulsion every time he drew near.

Why the devil had she agreed to dance with him? Was the satisfaction of picking his pocket enough to make up for the feel of his hands on hers? Or was it the prospect of stamping on his foot during the dance?

“Miss Evans?”

Major Dewberry stood before her, and she smiled. Of all the men here tonight, he was one of the least objectionable. A sensible, level-headed sort of man, he might do for a husband, if she must marry. As the younger son of an earl, he needed to earn his living, rather than wallow in aristocratic idleness.

She looped her reticule—now heavy from tonight’s bounty—over her wrist, and took his proffered hand, letting him lead her onto the dancefloor.

Her quest was going well. She’d already procured a sovereign from the Duke of Peterton’s pocket—which the poor man would only have lost at the card tables tonight—plus a gold watch from Lord Mayhew. And, she had been disappointed, and intrigued in equal measure at the identical handkerchiefs bearing the initials *JJ*, and reeking of the same expensive French cologne—each procured from the pockets of Lord Westfield and Mr. Baldwin.

“You dance very well, Major Dewberry,” she said. “Is it perhaps because a dance can be compared to battle

maneuvers?”

“I prefer to think of a dance as hand-to-hand combat,” he said.

“In which case, your chances of securing a victory are slight.”

“How so?” he asked.

“In order to maintain his superiority, a man depends on physical strength, and the weapons given to him by the militia. A woman, on the other hand, has no such resources.”

“You’ve just argued the case for my victory, Miss Evans.”

“On the contrary,” she replied. “Men suffer complacency, whereas women learn how to overcome their disadvantages. Therefore, when a *man’s* advantage is removed, the woman will reign supreme. On the dancefloor, sir, without your sword, *you* have the disadvantage.”

Confusion clouded his expression.

“You need not fear,” she said. “I shall show mercy if I triumph, and deliver you intact to your next partner.”

As they moved toward the edge of the dancefloor, she tripped over her foot, and fell against him.

She released her hold of his shoulder, in a feigned attempt to regain her balance, then slipped her hand into his pocket.

Success! Her fingers curled around a flat, round object—a sovereign, perhaps. She palmed the coin, as Nancy had once taught her, then withdrew her hand.

Her partner stopped, and her heart skittered in her chest. Had he noticed?

“May I cut in?” a deep voice asked.

A shiver coursed through her body, at the familiar aroma of wood and spice. She looked up into a pair of clear, cold, blue eyes.

“I don’t think...” Major Dewberry began, then he stopped as the newcomer met his gaze. His eyes widened, a flicker of

fear in their expression, then he released Eleanor and stepped back, lowering his gaze in submission.

Before she could react, Eleanor's hands were taken in a strong grip, and she found herself swept into the center of the dancefloor. She drew in a sharp breath, her senses overpowered by his nearness. Though she had dreamed of having him take her in his arms at a ball, the reality—the raw, male potency of him—threatened to overpower her.

*No—I must be strong!*

She was no longer a giddy debutante. She was an independent woman, capable of protecting her body—and her heart.

She closed her eyes, while she fought to maintain her composure. When she opened them again, he was staring directly at her, his eyes the color of dark sapphires. Her body shook with a jolt of recognition, but she maintained her gaze, determined not to let him intimidate her.

The best defense against a man such as he, was to effect a direct attack.

“Do you always behave in such an inappropriate manner, sir?” she asked. “Lady Westfield would disapprove at such a lack of decorum displayed by one of her guests.”

A flare of amusement shone in his eyes, then it was gone, replaced by cold arrogance.

“If Lady Westfield was a rigid observer of decorum,” he said, “she shouldn't include a waltz at her ball—a dance that is altogether far too—*intimate*.”

A secret thrill coursed through her body as he curled his tongue around the final word.

“Nevertheless,” she said, “you had no reason to insult Major Dewberry.”

“I had every reason.”

She waited for him to elaborate, but he steered her across the floor in silence, his powerful body moving in time to the music.

“How so?” she asked, at length.

“Major Dewberry is a puppy—a mere boy.”

Then, he pulled her close, until their bodies touched, and his voice reverberated against her chest. “For a dance as shocking as a waltz, you should be partnered by a *man*—not a boy.”

She suppressed a whimper. “Y-you consider yourself a man, Your Grace?”

“Your Grace!” he mocked, softly. “So *formal* an address.”

“You’re a duke, are you not?” she replied. “How else ought I to address you—a man to whom I was introduced only two days ago?”

“We need no introduction,” he said, lowering his voice to a whisper, his breath hot against her neck. “Do we—Miss Hawkins?”

Eleanor’s stomach somersaulted. She drew in a sharp breath, and tripped over her feet.

He tightened his grip. “Steady, I’ve got you, Elle...”

“I...”

“Say nothing,” he said his voice a low rumble. “Let me savor this dance.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but her body betrayed her. The music swirled in her mind, and she closed her eyes, surrendering to the delicious sensation of being in his arms.

She hated him—hated the part he’d played in her downfall. But—just for this dance—she could imagine that she loved him, and that he loved her in return. After years of stark, cold reality, she could be forgiven for wanting to indulge in the dream—just for a moment.

The music finished, but he continued to hold her. When she opened her eyes, she saw that he’d steered her toward the terrace doors. Without a word, he led her out into the night, his touch gentle, but firm.

The cold air caressed her skin like a soothing balm, and she breathed in a lungful of fresh, country air, a sharp contrast to the heady cocktail of perfumes and colognes which had thickened the atmosphere in the ballroom.

He released his grip, and she crossed the terrace to the balustrade, and looked out over the garden which sloped downward toward a ha-ha, beyond which, a line of trees stood like silent sentinels watching over the world.

A thick blanket of snow covered the landscape, and weighed down the branches of the fir trees. The snow glistened in the moonlight, tiny diamonds twinkling in the night. Her eyes adjusting to the dark, Eleanor spotted a line of footprints in the snow, weaving across the garden. A solitary bird, perhaps, in search of food.

“Are you cold?”

Her heart jumped at his voice—deep and strong—which penetrated the tranquility. The arrogance in his tone had gone, replaced by...

By what? Concern for her?

Impossible. Montague Lockhart only cared for himself, and his standing in society.

Soft footsteps crunched across the terrace, and a ripple of warmth spread across her body, as she sensed him approach from behind.

“Elle?” His voice was no more than a whisper—so quiet, she might have imagined it.

“No, I’m not cold,” she said. “Over the years since...” she hesitated, “...In recent years, I’ve grown accustomed to the cold. A person can weather a great deal when the need arises.”

He stood beside her, and placed his hands on the balustrade. She glanced up at him, but he remained motionless, staring out across the lawn, his profile silhouetted against the diffused light from the ballroom.

He might have been a statue, save for the faint rise and fall of his chest, and his breath misting in the air each time he

exhaled.

“What bird do you suppose made those tracks?” he asked.

“A blackbird, most likely,” she said. “It’s too small for Lady Westfield’s peacocks, and too large for a robin.”

He nodded, and they continued to stand, side by side. A screech echoed across the night, and a dark shape flew out from one of the trees and glided through the air. Then it turned course and swooped toward the ground.

Eleanor’s heart skittered as she recalled the last time she’d seen an owl hunting.

He let out a sigh. “Do you remember...”

“Yes,” she breathed, blinking back the moisture in her eyes.

It had been the day he’d helped her out of the ditch. On the way home, as night fell, an owl had crossed their path. She’d let out a cry of joy, and the two of them had stood, holding hands, watching the bird glide as gracefully as an angel through the air. Then, he’d pulled her to him and placed his lips on hers.

“Aye,” he whispered. “I remember, as if it were yesterday.”

He reached for her hand, and she jumped as he grasped her fingers. She snatched her hand free, and the lace strap of her reticule snapped, and it fell to the ground. It burst open, spilling some of its contents onto the terrace.

“Damn!” she cursed, and his eyes widened.

Before she could retrieve her reticule, he swooped down, as swiftly as the owl, and picked it up.

“What the devil...?” he muttered, inspecting the contents. “This is hardly what I’d expect to find in a lady’s bag.”

“How would you know what a lady carries about her person?” she retorted. “Unless you’re in the habit of riffling through her private possessions.”

She snatched the reticule from him, and crammed the contents back inside, but not before he plucked a handkerchief

from her fingers, and held it up to the moonlight.

“*J.J.*” he muttered.

“If I indulged in gambling, like your friend Peterton,” she said, “I’d wager that those initials stood for Juliette Jarvis.”

“Do you know her?” he asked.

“I know *of* her,” came the reply. “We mix in very different circles.”

“Then you admit that this handkerchief doesn’t belong to you.”

“I’m not obliged to answer that.”

“It wasn’t a question, Miss Hawkins.”

“It’s Miss *Evans*, now, Your Grace.”

“Of course it is,” he replied, his voice laced with scorn. “Is your new identity a ruse to enable you to indulge in robbery at the expense of respectable men and women? Lord Westfield should hear of this.”

She let out a snort. “Respectable, indeed!” She pulled out the other handkerchief from her reticule. “I have two, you see—tokens of affection from a lover, no doubt. One came from the pocket of Mr. Baldwin, third son of the Earl of Midcombe—and the other from Lord Westfield himself. By all means, tell our host that I stole them, but I’m sure Lady Westfield wouldn’t thank you when she learns that Lady Jarvis is fucking her husband.”

Eleanor winced as she uttered the profanity, and he recoiled and drew in a sharp breath. Seizing the advantage, she snatched the handkerchief from him.

He shook his head, then ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “How did you get to be so coarse?”

She’d expected anger—a sharp admonishment—but not the resigned disappointment, which did more to cut through her heart than any words of fury might have done.

“Shall I tell you, *Your Grace*?” she sneered. “It would make fascinating conversation for when you’re gossiping



about your inferiors with your friends—particularly inferiors whom you wouldn't even deign to acknowledge, let alone suffer the punishment of standing up with on the dancefloor.”

Her arrow hit home as she uttered the very same words he'd used, five years ago to crush her spirit. He turned to face her, his eyes glistening in the moonlight.

“I lived on the streets in London after my father died,” she said. “Believe me when I say that the refined turn of phrase of a baronet's daughter, is not conducive to an easy life in the gutter.”

His eyes widened, but he said nothing.

“I stole to survive,” she continued, “from the idle rich—the very people who'd turned their back on Father and me. A coin is nothing to you—or them—yet it can feed a destitute family for a week.”

Years of rage which had swelled within her, threatened to break, and she dug her fingernails into her palms, to stem the tide.

“Men propositioned us,” she said, “men not unlike those here tonight—who consider themselves superior due to their sex, their fortune, and their birth. To some men, a woman—whatever her age or status—is merely a body to rut—flesh to be used then discarded.”

“*Sweet Christ!*” He lifted his hand to his mouth.

“*Now* who's being coarse?” she taunted. Then she gestured toward the ballroom. “Did you know that one of the aggressors is parading about in there? When I refused to accede to his sordid demands on the streets, he tried to take what he wanted by force. I planted a shiner on his face, yet, he'll never recognize me, because a man cares not for the face of the woman he's rutting.”

He drew in a sharp breath, then bent over, as if he were going to retch.

“Is it too much for you?” she cried.

He gestured toward her. “Did you...did they...”

“Does His Grace wish to know whether I whored myself out?”

He flinched. “Elle...” he choked. “I-I had no idea. Dear *God*—why didn’t you come to me?”

“You know damned well why!” she cried. “Do you think anything in the world would induce me to come cap in hand to the man who’d declared that I was nothing more than a speck of dirt under his shoe?”

“You were never that,” he said, taking her shoulders. “Sweet Lord, Elle—if only you knew how I felt—how deeply I regretted what I’d said. If only...”

“I care not how you felt!” she cried. “I trusted you—and you broke my heart!”

“I’d give anything to undo what I did,” he said. “It was foolish and arrogant. It wasn’t only *your* heart that was broken that night. I searched for you for days after I heard Sir Robert had died.”

His eyes glistened in the moonlight, the blue so pale that it was almost silver.

Then he lowered his mouth to hers.

Unable to fight the raw need coursing through her, she surrendered, parting her lips to welcome him. His tongue probed gently against the seam of her lips, then slipped inside, caressing every inch of her mouth, slowly, seductively...

A small whimper escaped her throat, and she clung to him, relishing the feel of his powerful body—hard and ready—against hers.

A deep growl of approval reverberated in his chest, and liquid heat curled through her. She shifted her legs to ease the ache which pulsed deep within—an ache only he could ease...

A shriek of laughter from inside cut through the fog of desire, and she jerked free.

What the devil was she doing, almost giving herself to a man she hated?

*No, you don't...* a wicked voice whispered in her mind.

*Yes—I do!*

“You do, what?” he asked. His eyes had darkened to deep pools of midnight, into which she yearned to dive, knowing that in doing so, she’d likely never return.

“I...” she tried to speak—to tell him that she hated him.

But she couldn’t.

“Eleanor, I’m sorry...” the plea in his voice threatened to break her resolve.

She raised her hands to fend him off.

“No...” she said, her voice cracking. “I can’t. I-I just can’t...”

She stumbled across the terrace, and returned inside, leaving him standing in the moonlight.

## CHAPTER 9



The taste of her lips lingered as he watched her leave.

Tonight had been an evening of revelations.

She was alive! His heart had soared when he'd recognized her.

But it had shattered into a thousand pieces when she'd alluded to her past.

What she'd spoken of! Not the thieving, but the propositions—the notion of that sweet girl being subjected to the pawing hands and lustful urges of predatory men.

But the sweet girl no longer existed. Another had taken her place—a woman, hardened by experience. Doubtless she'd endured more in five years, than most of his acquaintances would ever endure in a lifetime.

But two questions remained. How had she climbed out of the gutter? And which of the men inside was the filthy bastard who'd tried to force himself on her?

Montague shook with the urge to pummel the man—whichever he was—into a pulp.

He deserved to be punished.

But was *he* any better? He'd played his part in her downfall. Had he defended her, and followed his heart, rather than fall in line with his friends for the sake of appearance, she might not have retaliated. And though Sir Robert Hawkins had mired himself in debt, his daughter might have had a chance at securing a match.

But, had she secured a match, she'd now belong to another.

Perhaps Fate had given him a chance to atone—and claim her as his.

He straightened his cravat, smoothed his hair, then strolled back inside, where the guests were lining up for the next dance. A number of unattached ladies glanced at him, hope in their eyes, but he had no intention of dancing again tonight.

He wanted to discover who the bastard was who'd tried to force himself on Eleanor. She was mistaken in one thing. A man—even when drunk—was more than capable of recognizing a woman he lusted after. Eleanor was in just as much danger here, in a ballroom, as she was on the streets of London.

He circled the perimeter of the room until he caught sight of her. Though her expression had softened when she'd melted in his arms on the terrace, the hardness had now returned. But this time he recognized the haunted look in her eyes.

Eleanor was dancing with Lord Dunbar. She displayed a convincing façade, but an air of fear surrounded her. Her steps seemed forced, her body stiff, as if poised to flee at the first sign of danger.

Dunbar was oblivious to her distress—his attention was on her neckline as he steered her toward the corner of the ballroom. His tongue flicked out and he licked his lips, his eyes glistening with lust.

Surely *Dunbar* wasn't the one who'd...

Then he saw it.

Eleanor stumbled against Dunbar, and he loosened his grip. She lowered her left arm, and slipped her hand into his pocket. But, before she could remove it, another couple bumped into them—an insipid-looking young woman and her partner, who'd clearly overindulged in Lady Westfield's champagne.

Dunbar fell sideways, taking Eleanor with him. He glanced at her left arm and his eyes widened. He gripped her wrist, and her eyes flashed with terror.

“Unhand me, sir!” she cried.

“I shall not,” Dunbar snarled. “What the bloody hell are you doing, you little thief!”

“I’m no thief—how dare you!”

Some of the dancers had stopped, craning their necks to watch the altercation. With a flick of her wrist, Lady Westfield signaled to the musicians, and the music ceased.

“I say!” Lord Westfield cried. “What the devil’s going on here?”

“This woman is a thief!” Dunbar said.

Eleanor curled her left hand into a fist, but Dunbar grasped her hand, yanked her fingers back, then held up a small, shiny object.

“This is my watch!” he declared, “and she stole it from me.”

“I say, Dunbar,” Lord Westfield said, “you can’t go accusing a lady of...”

“She’s no lady.”

Eleanor glared at her accuser, but her body shook with terror.

“I demand you call the magistrate and have her dealt with,” Dunbar said.

“I’m sure there’s a perfectly reasonable explanation for this,” Westfield replied. “Miss Evans?”

Eleanor glanced at Westfield, her cheeks reddening.

“Look at her!” Dunbar cried. “She’s got guilt written all over her face.”

She looked around, and Montague recognized the despair in her eyes from the night she’d been dragged out of the Amhersts’ ball.

He had failed her then—but he’d be damned if he’d fail her now.

He strode toward Dunbar. “Miss Evans is blushing as a result of your outrageous behavior, Dunbar,” he said. “You’ve no right to make such an accusation without proof—we live in a civilized world.”

“How do you account for my pocket watch being in her possession?” Dunbar spluttered. “Is that not proof enough?”

“It’s quite simple,” Montague replied. “It was a wager.”

“A wager?” Dunbar snorted. “Don’t be a bloody fool, Sedgewick.”

A ripple of gasps threaded through the onlookers, and Montague spotted the black-clad figure of Lady Pandora Osborne watching him, her eyes dark with interest.

He straightened his stance. “I *beg* your pardon, Dunbar?”

Dunbar had the sense to flinch.

“I’ll have you know that Miss Evans and I engaged in a wager tonight.” Montague said. “We discussed it shortly before the dance began.”

Eleanor glanced up at him, confusion in her expression, and he placed a reassuring hand at the small of her back.

“I wagered with Miss Evans that she’d be able to procure a watch before ten o’clock.” He gestured toward the longcase clock in the corner of the room. “After the conclusion of the last dance, I reminded her that she had less than fifteen minutes left.”

He plucked the watch out of Dunbar’s hand.

“Nothing special,” he said. “In fact...” he held it to his ear, “...it’s not even working, so even if you’d procured it successfully, Miss Evans, you’d still have lost our wager, for we’d agreed upon a fully functioning watch. So, Miss Evans, I believe you owe me a shilling.”

Spots of red appeared on Dunbar’s cheeks, and his body shook with rage. Montague smiled, and handed back the watch. “Miss Evans was right about you, Dunbar,” he said.

Eleanor's body stiffened, and Montague caressed her back with his thumb, as if to reassure a frightened filly.

"What do you mean?" Dunbar asked.

"She said you were too astute to fall for our ruse."

Dunbar narrowed his eyes, and stared at Eleanor. Then he lowered his gaze once more to her neckline, and licked his lips.

"Well!" a female voice cried. "What a diverting interlude."

Lady Osborne had moved closer, her sharp gaze flitting between Eleanor and Montague. "How clever of you, Your Grace, to think of such an amusing way to pass the time," she said. "I'm excessively fond of games. I dare say the whole of society will be indulging in such diversions next season. It will be quite the thing to liven up a dull party—what do you think, Octavia?"

The woman standing next to her—the sour-faced Lady Sewell—shrugged her shoulders.

The crowd dispersed, and the dancing resumed. Montague steered Eleanor away, his hand pressed possessively against her back.

"You had no right to interfere," she hissed.

"Should I have left you to the mercy of that lecher?" he replied. "You were playing a dangerous game with Dunbar."

"No more so than with anyone else."

"Don't be so naïve!" he retorted. "You're lucky Dunbar didn't recognize you."

Her eyes widened as she caught his meaning.

"Have a care, Eleanor," he said. "Lord Dunbar's a vindictive creature. You made a fool of him tonight, and he'll be out for vengeance. Put one more foot wrong, and I'll not be able to protect you."

"I didn't need your protection."



“Yes—you did,” he said. “Both tonight—and five years ago.”

She blinked, and his heart ached to see the moisture in her eyes.

“The last thing I want is to see you distressed,” he said, “and I’ve no wish to see you handed to the magistrate, either.” He gestured toward her reticule. “I’d advise you to replace your bounty—tonight.”

She glanced around the ballroom. “I can hardly put it back into their pockets.”

“Then you must put it back into their chambers.”

She let out a mirthless laugh. “You cannot be serious! You expect me to wander around the building in the dead of night?”

“No,” he said. “*I’ll* do it.”

She raised her eyebrows. “For what purpose?”

“For you.”

“Why?”

He took her hand. “Don’t you know?”

Her expression softened and he caught a glimpse of the girl he’d known. Her chest rose and fell in a sigh, and his breeches tightened at the delicious sight before him—the swell of her breasts, the smooth skin he’d dreamed of caressing...

“Very well,” she said. “But I have a condition.”

“Which is?”

“We do this together. If you’re to be my partner in crime, then you’ll need a look-out. What say we meet at midnight by the longcase clock at the top of the stairs?” She glanced at his feet. “Don’t wear your boots—they’ll make too much noise on the floorboards.”

His heart ached at her matter-of-fact tone. What kind of life must she have led to have felt the need to learn about stealth and look-outs?

The dancing finished, and the gong rang for supper. The young man Eleanor had been dancing with earlier—Dewberry—sidled up to them, and offered his hand.

“Miss Evans, I believe you’re next to me at supper,” he said. “Shall we?”

She glanced at Montague, and he nodded. “Midnight it is,” he whispered.

Her mouth curled into a smile, and a twinkle of mischief shone in her eyes, then Dewberry led her toward the dining room.

Montague exhaled, not realizing that he’d been holding his breath to control the cockstand in his breeches.

*Sweet Lord!* The innocent Miss Hawkins may have captured his heart years ago, but the mischievous, independent woman who’d replaced her, possessed the power to enslave his soul.

## CHAPTER 10



Eleanor approached the top of the stairs. The steady, rhythmic ticking—the heartbeat of the building—was interrupted by a heavy click, and a whirring sound, deep inside the belly of the clock. Then, a single note rang out twelve times.

Midnight.

It was Christmas Day.

A sliver of moonlight stretched across the hallway, illuminating the clock face.

Where was he?

Perhaps he'd betrayed her. Might Lord Westfield—or worse, Lord Dunbar—emerge from the shadows?

A flickering light appeared, followed by footsteps, and Eleanor darted across the hallway and slipped behind a curtain.

“Miss Evans?” a voice whispered.

She remained where she was, trembling. What the devil was she doing undertaking such a foolish enterprise?

“Elle?” The voice spoke more loudly, and Eleanor breathed a sigh of relief as she recognized it.

She emerged from her hiding place. Montague stood beside the clock, his face illuminated by the candle in his hand.

“Didn’t you think I’d come?” he asked. “Or, perhaps you thought I might have betrayed you?”

When she didn’t reply, he moved closer. “You can trust me.”

“*Can I?*”

He sighed. “I know you have no reason to trust me, but I’ve learned my lesson. I’m no longer influenced by my friends, or by societal expectation. I only wish to atone for what I did. Might you agree to a truce?”

He offered his hand and, led by instinct, she took it, and laced her fingers through his.

“After you disappeared five years ago, I never gave up hope,” he said. “I decided to help others, so that I might at least do something, in order to find peace.”

*Arrogant fool!* Did he think to portray himself in a better light, to assuage his guilt?

“I suppose you tossed a coin to a charitable cause to absolve yourself,” she said. “But, you’ll never convince me that you care for others. I hear you’re such a miserable soul that you’re not even going to remain with the party on Christmas Day—you’re going back to Lockhart Hall, to wallow in self-indulgence.”

Her conscience pricked at her at the flash of hurt in his eyes.

“How did you come to return to society?” he asked.

“Papa Arthur knew my father.”

“Papa Arthur?”

“My guardian—Sir Arthur Evans.”

“*You’re* Sir Arthur’s ward?” he shook his head. “Miss Evans—I should have realized.”

“He was one of my father’s creditors. He...” She turned away to hide her shame. “He found me on the streets. Quite by chance—Nancy marked him out, and I picked his pocket. I thought I’d got away with it, but he’d seen. He recognized me,

and followed us home. I-I feared he was going to hand me to the runners—or worse...” She shivered, recalling Lord Dunbar’s proposition, “...but he offered to take us in—me, and Nancy.”

“Who’s Nancy?”

“She’s my friend,” she said. “I owe my life to her. After I’d run out of things to sell, I was so hungry that I resorted to begging. Nancy gave me a scrap of bread. I offered to pay her back, but instead, she taught me how to pick pockets, so that we could earn a living together. When she realized I had a talent for it, she became my lookout. She’s now my maid and companion.”

“Sweet Lord!” he cried. “To have resorted to begging—it’s worse than I’d imagined.”

“I’m sure *you* never imagined it at all,” she retorted.

“Believe me, I did,” he said. “I can only thank the Almighty that you’re here now.” He drew her to him. “Eleanor...”

She withdrew her hand. “Shouldn’t we conclude our business first?”

“Yes, of course,” he said. “You have the spoils?”

She held up her reticule.

“Good,” he said. “My valet gave me a list of who’s in which chamber. I take it you remember which item belongs to whom?”

“There’s the two handkerchiefs belonging to Mr. Baldwin and our host, reeking of Lady Jarvis’s perfume,” Eleanor said. “I wouldn’t be surprised if every man here tonight had one.”

He let out a low chuckle. “That sounds like Juliette.”

“If I’d picked *your* pocket, would I have found a handkerchief?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I never take keepsakes from ladies who are overly free with their favors.”

“But it was offered?” She winced at the jealousy in her tone.

He gestured toward her reticule. “What else do you have? Will we be occupied all night?”

She glanced at him, and his eyes glittered with a flash of desire.

She pulled out a phial and held it up.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Lord Eldridge’s digestive aid,” she said. “According to the label, he must take two spoonfuls after every meal.”

“That explains the assault on my sense of smell at supper,” he said. “I had the misfortune of sitting next to him, and the odor lingering about his person was only surpassed by the extraordinary gurgling noises. Lady Westfield’s chambermaids have my sympathies.”

“Then it’s just as well we’re giving him back his medicine,” she said.

“I’m not so sure,” he replied. “If the medicine *aids* the digestive process, then imagine what might happen if he takes it after a long abstinence—like a great wave swelling behind a barrier, which bursts forth into the chamber pot when the barrier is removed.”

She let out a giggle, which echoed across the hallway.

“Hush!” he hissed. He placed a hand over her mouth, and she stiffened. Then he cupped her chin, and traced the outline of her lips with his forefinger.

“Eleanor...”

Desire rippled through her. Then, recalling what he’d said about Lady Jarvis, she withdrew. She had no wish to become the next in a long line of lovers—to be used, then discarded.

“We should put these things back before we’re discovered,” she said.

He nodded. “Mr. Baldwin’s chamber is the closest. Shall we go there first? I suggest you keep lookout and I replace the

items.”

“No,” she said. “I heard you coming just now. With your heavy tread, they’ll all wake up if *you* go into their chambers. I have the best chance of replacing the items without discovery.”

“But the risk to you is greater if we’re discovered,” he replied. “I can’t let you take that risk, Elle—you’re worth too much.”

She averted her gaze, determined never to succumb to his spell again.

“Nevertheless, I insist,” she said.

At length, he sighed. “Very well—if you wish it. But if you’re seen, *I’ll* shoulder the blame.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but he held up his hand to silence her.

“Now it’s *my* turn to insist,” he said. “Please.”

“Very well.” She offered her hand. “Partners in crime.”

He took her hand and shook it. “Partners in crime.”

He proved a surprisingly adept partner, watching the corridors while Eleanor crept into each bedchamber. Using the diffused light from his candle, she navigated her way around each chamber, and placed the stolen items in various locations—the washstand in Lord Alderley’s chamber, Mr. Baldwin’s trunk—and, she even managed to slip Lord Westfield’s handkerchief beneath his pillow while he slept.

As they approached the final chamber, where Sir Edward Short’s snores could be heard halfway along the passageway, the clock struck one. Eleanor startled, took a step back, and lost her balance.

Strong arms embraced her from behind, stopping her fall.

“Shhh—I’ve got you.”

For a moment, she remained still, relishing the feel of his body against hers, his warm breath caressing her neck. Then, he dipped his head, and placed his chin on her shoulder.

“Sweetheart, you’re cold.”

“I’m fine,” she said. “I’m used...”

“I know—you’re used to the cold,” he whispered. “It breaks my heart to know that you endured a life that necessitated such hardiness.”

A noise echoed in the distance, and she froze. “Did you hear that?”

She felt him shake his head. Then he grew still. But the only sounds were the ticking of the clock, and the rhythmic snoring from the chamber ahead.

She fished out the final item from her reticule.

“What did you take from Sir Edward?” he whispered.

“A letter,” she replied. “A very—*intimate* letter, signed Bessie Bust.”

He stifled a laugh.

“Shhh!” she hissed. “The poor lady cannot help having such a surname.”

“I dare say she can.”

“Are you suggesting that it’s her...*professional* name?”

“Perhaps. What does the letter say?”

“You impugn my honor, Your Grace,” she said. “I may be a thief, but I’m not in the habit of reading private correspondence.”

“I suspect that even though you’ve picked many pockets tonight, you’re the most honest person here,” he said. “Sweet Lord! It sounds like there’s a rutting boar in Sir Edward’s chamber!”

“Do you suppose Bessie’s paying him a visit?”

He laughed, softly, and fixed his gaze on her. Her heart tightened in her chest at the expression in his eyes—those beautiful eyes...

She held up the letter. “Come on—the sooner I place this in the boar’s den, the sooner we can retire.”



He glanced up and down the corridor. “Go on, then—it’s all clear.”

Eleanor turned the door handle and pushed it open, catching sight of Sir Edward’s silhouette as he lay in bed, his chest rising, then falling, accompanied by a long rattle in his throat. A jacket hung over the back of the chair beside the fireplace, where the embers still glowed. She dropped the letter inside the pocket, then slipped out of the chamber.

“Success?” Montague asked.

She nodded, then he took her hand, and led her back along the corridor.

“We need to get you back into bed before you catch a chill,” he said.

Before she could respond, she heard another noise—this time closer.

“Someone’s coming.”

“Quick!” He steered her along the corridor until they reached a door near the opposite end. He opened it, then pulled her inside, shutting the door behind them. Then, lifting a finger to his lips, he pressed his ear against the door.

This time there was no mistaking it—heavy footsteps.

He extinguished the candle, which let out a hiss as he pressed the wick between his thumb and forefinger, plunging them into darkness.

The footsteps grew closer, accompanied by deep, heavy breathing, and stopped outside the door. A warm hand took hers, and squeezed it, as if to reassure her.

Then the footsteps receded, and silence fell.

He pulled her close, until she could hear his heart thudding in his chest—a slow, steady beat.

“Are you all right, Elle?”

She nodded against his chest. “Where are we?”

“My bedchamber.”

“Oh.” She leaned back against him, taking comfort from his solidity.

“Eleanor,” he said. “I-I have no wish to compromise you, but...” he broke off, his voice wavering, and he buried his face in her hair and inhaled. “*Sweet heaven*—you’ve no idea how good it feels to hold you in my arms!”

Heat coursed through her body, as she became aware of a growing hardness, pressing insistently against her back.

No—she didn’t want him. She couldn’t want him.

*Yes, you do...*

She turned to face him, and reached out into the darkness.

A low growl of need rumbled in his chest, as she caressed his face with her fingers, tracing the line of the stubble on his jaw.

Then, surrendering to her need, she leaned up and pressed her lips to his.

He let out a low moan, and took hold of her arms.

“Eleanor,” he whispered, his voice hoarse. “Do you know what you are about?”

“Yes.”

“Please...” he hesitated, “...if you continue, I’ll not be able to control myself.”

“I don’t want control,” she replied. “I want to relinquish control—I’ve spent so long looking out for myself, looking over my shoulder, that just once—tonight—I want to *live*.”

“Do you know what you’re saying?”

In the darkness, she couldn’t see the expression in his eyes. But the loss of sight fed her imagination—and her hope. She could believe that he loved her—believe in the dream.

He led her deeper into the room, where she could make out the faint outline of a bed.

“Are you certain?” he asked.

She summoned courage, and sank onto the bed. “Yes.”

He caressed her neck, and she shivered as little ripples of pleasure coursed through her.

Then, he slipped his hand beneath her neckline and cupped a breast. She drew in a sharp breath at the jolt of desire.

“Mine,” he whispered.

He dipped his head and placed a light kiss on her shoulder. Then his tongue flicked out against her skin, and she shivered, as heat pooled between her thighs. He followed a trail of tiny nibbling kisses, nipping her skin between his lips, until he reached her neckline.

Then he tugged at her gown, and a rush of cold air caressed her skin.

“Your scent is beautiful...” he breathed.

He placed a light kiss on the skin of her breasts, and a deep ache pulsed in her center—an unfathomable, primal need. Then he placed his mouth over her breast. She cried out as he grazed her nipple with his teeth, sending shockwaves of pleasure through her, and she squeezed her thighs together to ease the hot ache pulsing between them.

He slipped a hand beneath her skirt, and caressed her thigh, moving his hand slowly—so slowly—toward the center of her need. Her body ached for his touch, and moisture formed between her thighs. She arched her back, offering herself to him, consumed by a need which only he could satisfy.

He nudged her thighs apart with his knee, then slipped his hand higher.

A low growl erupted in his chest, and he inhaled, deeply.

“Sweet Lord,” he whispered. “There’s nothing so pleasurable as the scent of a woman’s need.” He continued to move his hands higher, until they reached their destination, and she let out a hoarse cry, as his fingers slipped through her warm flesh.

He began to caress her, and tiny waves of pleasure rippled through her, swelling with each slick motion of his fingertips

as he moved closer toward the secret, sensitive bud at her center.

Then, he rubbed his fingers over the little nub, and her body jerked at the sudden fizz of pleasure.

He removed his fingers, and she mewled in frustration, parting her thighs wider and thrusting her hips upward to chase the pleasure.

“My hungry little Elle...” he whispered, his voice low and hoarse. “Shall I satisfy your craving?”

He shifted his body against hers, and she drew in a sharp breath, as she felt him, hard and hot, against her thigh.

“You must ask,” he said, “for I’ll never take what you cannot offer of your own free will.”

“Montague...” she breathed. “I-I want...something...” She shook her head. “I-I don’t know what...*please!*”

He moved again, until the tip of him nudged against her sensitized flesh. Then, he shifted his hips, moving slickly against her folds, until the tide of pleasure swelled again. She drew in a deep breath, and a low growl escaped her lips.

As if he understood the signal, he eased himself into her.

Her body began to ripple and shudder, as the wave swelled to a crest, and she let out a soft moan, as pleasure consumed her.

Then, he thrust forward, and she cried out at the sharp sting. She reached up, grasping his arms, and clung to him, drawing comfort from his strength, while he thrust in and out. The pain morphed into exquisite pleasure, until she could bear it no more. She cried out his name as her body shattered, ripped apart by wave after wave of pure ecstasy.

With one final thrust, he collapsed on top of her, drawing her into his arms. Then he rolled to his side, still thrusting weakly, as the aftershocks of pleasure rippled through them both, as if they had become a single creature.

When the ripples subsided, they lay together, bodies sticky with sweat, their hearts beating in unison, slowing gradually to

a languorous rhythm.

A delicious lassitude descended over her and, despite the slight soreness between her thighs, her body felt at peace.

She had realized her dream. And, though tomorrow she would have to return to reality—tonight, in the darkness, she could believe, even if only for a moment, that he loved her.

At length, the bed moved as he climbed off it. She heard the sound of a flint being struck, and he returned holding a candle, desire glittering in his expression.

Then his eyes widened, and he let out a low curse.

“*Shit*—you were a maiden!”

She glanced down and saw a smear of red between her thighs.

“You’ve not known a man.” He shook his head. “Dear God—what have I done?”

His tone was filled with regret.

The dream was over.

“Did you think I’d...” she gestured toward her legs, blushing.

“I-I thought...” he hesitated, “...what you’d said about living on the streets. I assumed...”

“That I’d made my living as a whore?”

He shook his head. “Forgive me. If I’d known, I’d never have...”

Her eyes stung with tears. Had he known she was a maiden, he’d have rejected her, But, thinking her a harlot, he’d seen her as merely another woman to warm his bed.

She lowered her gown then climbed off the bed, and approached the door.

He caught her hand. “Eleanor, you can’t leave. I need to make this right.”

“What do you mean?”

“We must marry.”

“Why?”

“To preserve your reputation, of course!” he cried. “I took your maidenhead. Granted, I didn’t know you were untouched, and it would be wrong of me to blame you. But—for the sake of honor, and of propriety, I have to marry you. Your guardian would expect it.”

Honor...propriety...

Expectation?

Her gut twisted with sorrow. But what had she expected—a declaration of love? It was plain that he didn’t love her.

She snatched her hand free. “Let me go.”

“Eleanor—don’t be foolish. There’s no other choice.”

“There’s *always* a choice,” she said.

“Don’t you want to marry me?”

*Yes—oh yes, I do!*

“No.”

“I don’t believe you,” he said. “I know you too well.”

“You don’t know me at all!”

“Eleanor...”

“Leave me be!”

Before he could respond, she opened the door and ran out, not stopping until she reached her own chamber. She closed the door behind her and leaned against it, her body shaking with sobs.

In a moment of madness, she’d surrendered to her desires, and given herself to him. But he didn’t love her. And the last thing she wanted was to be married to a man who viewed her as a duty—a burden.

Even compared to the hardships she’d endured on the streets, there was no greater pain than that of unrequited love.

## CHAPTER 11



**B**y the time Eleanor's sobs subsided, her eyes had grown accustomed to the dark. The moonlight cast a soft blue glow across the bedchamber, highlighting different shapes—the washstand in the corner, her trunk, and...

She caught her breath. Against the far wall, she could make out the figure of a man.

Then it moved.

“What a pleasant evening to be wandering about.”

The voice was Lord Dunbar's.

“W-what do you want?” she whispered.

“*You*, my dear.” He let out a low chuckle, and moved closer, his eyes glittering in the moonlight, and her stomach churned at the odor of cigars, and stale sweat.

“How dare you enter a lady's chamber!” she cried, forcing the fear from her voice. “Leave immediately, or I'll cry for help!”

“I wouldn't advise that...” he said, “...Miss Hawkins.”

Cold fingers clawed at her insides. “M-my name is Miss Evans,” she said. “Sir Arthur Evans is my...”

“You may have fooled everyone else here with your little act, but I'm not so easily duped,” he said. “Sir Arthur's a foppish dandy. And I doubt very much that he knows his way around a woman, given his sordid preferences.”

“How dare you!” she cried. “Sir Arthur’s worth a thousand of you!”

“But he’s not your real papa, is he?” Dunbar sneered. “What would the world think if they knew that the late Sir Robert Hawkins—bankrupt wastrel—has a street whore for a daughter.”

“I’m not...”

“Silence!” He grasped her wrist, and though she tried to break free, he tightened his grip until she could feel the bones scraping together. “I had my suspicions when I saw your hands—the hands of a guttersnipe. Then, when you tried to steal my watch, I knew who you were—the thieving little harlot who offered her services to everyone on the street, but had the effrontery to spurn me.” He thrust his face close, and a wave of nausea overcame her.

“I’ll scream,” she hissed.

“Be my guest,” he said. “I’ll tell the whole company who you are.”

“Tell them and be damned! Nobody will believe you.”

“And what about your dear *Papa Arthur*?” he sneered. “What *will* everyone think when they know the truth about him and Mr. Finch?”

Fear rippled through her. “Y-you wouldn’t dare!”

“I’d dare anything to get what I want,” he said. “And I *always* get what I want. Your beloved Papa Arthur might weather a rumor about his preferences—but do you think he’d weather a scandal about his ward as well? I saw you going in and out of every bedchamber in the place tonight. Can you deny it?”

She opened her mouth to argue, then averted her gaze.

“I didn’t think so—and, in any case, you reek of sex. If I roused the household, they’d only need look at you to see what a whore you are. You think your beloved *Papa Arthur* would welcome the scandal?”

She tried to break free, but he tightened his grip. “Well?”



“You want me to be your whore—is that it?” she sneered. “I’ll say you took my by force.”

“Oh no—sweet,” he said. “I’m only prepared to shackle myself with sullied goods if the price is high enough, and if I have exclusivity. And, as my wife, you can please me every night. I’m sure Messrs. Evans and Finch would approve—after all, isn’t that why they dragged you from the gutter—so they could find a man willing to take you on, in order to heighten their own respectability?”

Her gut twisted with horror.

*Sweet lord!* He spoke the truth—she was trapped. What had she done? In giving herself to the man she loved—the man who saw her as nothing more than another pair of thighs—she’d run straight into the arms of the man she despised.

“Come,” he whispered, his voice hoarse with lust. “Let us seal our bargain with a kiss—and celebrate Christmas as we mean to spend the rest of our lives.”

He gripped her arms, his fat fingers digging into her flesh. Instinct took over, and she thrust her knee upward, and rammed it into his groin.

He gave an airless gasp, and released her. But when she reached for the door handle, pain shot through her scalp as he fisted his hand in her hair, and yanked her backward.

She lost her balance, fell to the floor, and he landed on top of her. The survival instinct that she’d learned on the streets, came to the fore, and she tore at him, like a wild animal.

“Help me!” she cried.

“Scream all you wish, my dear—but think on what I’ve said. The more you resist me now, the more I shall punish you when we are wed. If anyone comes in, I shall tell them that we are merely enjoying a little pre-marital rut.”

She lashed out and heard a satisfying crack, as her fist met his jaw.

“Why, you little...” He raised his hand to strike her.

Then the door opened with a crash, and a tall, dark shape burst into the bedchamber.

“What the bloody hell’s going on?”

## CHAPTER 12



Montague let out a curse.

*Damn it*—there was no way he was going to leave it at that.

Eleanor loved him—he knew she did. He'd seen it in her eyes at the moment of dissolution when her body had surrendered to ecstasy.

And what had he done? Muttered his usual hogwash about propriety and expectations, then watched as she'd stumbled out of the bedchamber—alone, and ruined.

He should have known she'd be a maiden. But, even if she wasn't, he still loved her.

*Shit.*

The revelation hit him like a blow.

He loved her.

He'd *always* loved her.

Yet, tonight, he'd taken her maidenhead for nothing more than his own gratification—with no thought for the pain it must have caused her.

He was the very worst of libertines. No wonder she'd run from him.

Propriety dictated that he leave her alone. But propriety be damned. He rose from the bed, and exited the chamber, making his way toward the east wing where the female guests slept.

As he entered the hallway, he heard a muffled cry. Perhaps Lady Alderley was indulging in a tryst with Major Dewberry—she'd been ogling the young man all evening.

Then another cry rang out from a door halfway along—a voice he knew and loved.

“Help me!”

He broke into a run, and rammed his body against the door. He burst through, to see Eleanor struggling against the portly figure of Viscount Dunbar.

“What the bloody hell's going on?” he roared.

He grasped Dunbar by the collar, and threw him aside. Eleanor lay on the floor, panting, her gown torn at the neckline.

Dunbar struggled to his feet, and straightened his collar with feigned nonchalance.

“My betrothed and I are merely engaging in a little pre-marital sport.”

Montague glanced toward Eleanor, then resumed his attention on her assailant.

“Is that so?”

“Come on, old chap, you can't fault a man for taking what's on offer.”

“You filthy pig!” Montague swung his fist at Dunbar, which connected with his jaw with a crack. “You think me enough of a fool to believe your lies?”

Dunbar staggered back, cursing. Then he gestured toward Eleanor. “Tell him,” he said.

Her eyes widened, and she opened her mouth to respond. But Montague wasn't about to be fooled. The fear in her eyes, and the triumph in Dunbar's voice told him exactly what was going on.

Dunbar—a lecherous brute who'd drunk, gambled and whored away his fortune—was steeped in debt. Most likely he'd either seen Eleanor wandering about the bedchambers

tonight, or he knew of the rumors about Sir Arthur Evans and Lawrence Finch. Either way, he'd seen an opportunity to restore his fortune by blackmailing Eleanor into marriage.

Eleanor met Montague's gaze, and his heart shattered at the defeat in her eyes—the crushing despair which had haunted him for over five years.

“Miss Evans cannot possibly be betrothed to *you*, Dunbar,” he said.

“Why not?”

“Because,” he replied, striding across toward Eleanor and drawing her into an embrace, “Miss Evans is betrothed to *me*. She accepted my hand earlier this evening.”

“I didn't...” she began, but he silenced her with a kiss.

“Hush, my love,” he said. “I know we pledged to tell nobody before I've had an opportunity to speak to your guardian, but I'll not have my fiancée's respectability impugned by anyone.”

“You lie,” Dunbar said. “A man such as you wouldn't sully your hands with *her*. Do you know who she is—her background? She's the daughter of that wastrel Hawkins—and she's indulged in Lord knows what living in the gutter. Would you want to be associated with a woman such as that?”

“As opposed to what?” Montague asked. “Someone like you? A man up to his neck in debt—who attempted to rape the future duchess of Sedgewick?”

The woman in his arms flinched, and he placed a kiss on the top of her head.

“Did you think to seize her dowry by compromising her, Dunbar?” he demanded.

Dunbar shook his head, but the triumph in his expression had given way to fear.

“Leave,” Montague said. “Go—tonight.”

“Don't be preposterous!” Dunbar spluttered. “I can't possibly...”

“Yes you can,” Montague said. “Summon your valet and be gone within the hour. If not, then I’ll tell the world what you did tonight.”

“You think they’d believe you?”

Montague let out a mirthless laugh. “A duke of the realm—and personal friend to The Regent—over a bankrupt lecher?”

“I’m not...”

“But you will be,” Montague said. “You see, I count the chief cashier at Coutts’s among my personal friends. I’m sure you’d rather not have your loans foreclosed. Newgate is somewhat cold this time of year.”

Defeat shone in Dunbar’s eyes, and he slumped his shoulders.

“What must I do?”

“Leave the country,” Montague said. “If you set foot on English soil again, I shall hear of it. And if I hear the slightest whiff of scandal surrounding my betrothed, or her family—or any scandal involving yourself and any young woman, willing or not, then you’ll find yourself hauled back to England and taking up permanent residence in debtor’s prison. But, if you leave now, then you may enjoy your freedom, provided you live out the rest of your days like a monk.”

He gestured toward the door. “You have until I’ve counted to five.”

Dunbar stood, a flash of defiance in his eyes.

“One,” Montague said.

“What say you challenge me to a duel instead?” Dunbar asked.

Montague let out a cold laugh. “A duel is between gentlemen—and I’d hardly consider you fit that description. Besides, I wouldn’t waste a bullet on you.” He nodded toward the door.

“Two.”

Dunbar hesitated, then he fled, and his heavy tread faded into the distance.

Montague cradled the woman in his arms, relishing the sweet scent of lavender which had always lingered around her.

“Forgive me,” he said. “I should not have treated you like that.”

“No, she said. “You shouldn’t.”

“I won’t abandon you again,” he said. “It’s more common than you think for a betrothed couple to indulge in intimacies before the wedding.”

She stiffened, then pulled free. “I meant that you shouldn’t have told Dunbar we were engaged!” she cried.

“It was the best I could think of, to throw him off the scent.”

“You had no right to dictate my fate without consulting me—especially when I’d already refused you!”

“You must see that there’s no other course of action possible, now,” he said. “I can secure a special license, so we need not wait—which will avoid scandal, just in case Dunbar cannot keep his mouth shut.” He grinned. “I rather hope he does prattle on—I’d enjoy seeing him incarcerated at Newgate—it’d do him the world of good.”

“You want to see my name dragged through the mud—*again?*”

“No, of course not,” he said. “I only meant...”

“I don’t care what you meant!” she cried. “I’ll not be coerced into marrying a man merely for *his* convenience!”

“Sweet Lord, Eleanor!” he cried. “I don’t want you for convenience. I love you!”

She drew in a sharp breath, a flicker of hope in her eyes.

Then the hope died, and she shook her head.

“No.”

“I love you,” he said. “I always have, even though I was too foolish to admit it. And you love me—I *know* you do.”

“How do you know?” she sneered. “Is it because you’re the munificent Montague Lockhart, fifth duke of Sedgewick—the man who ladies swoon over and would fight each other to the death in order to secure his hand?”

“You love me, Elle,” he said, softly.

A tear splashed onto her cheek. “Go,” she whispered.

“Not before you say you love me.”

She shook her head. “I will only ever say such a thing to the man I wish to marry.”

“Eleanor, I...”

“*Please—go!*”

His heart ached at the pain in her eyes. He reached toward her, and she held up her hands to fend him off. Unwilling to press the matter, he nodded, lowering his gaze to show he posed no threat, then retreated.

In his arrogance he’d assumed that if he offered, she would accept. But love on its own would not be enough with a woman such as her. He needed to prove he was worthy of her.

Even though, deep inside his heart, he knew that he never could be.



## CHAPTER 13



**D** ecember 25<sup>th</sup>

AS ELEANOR DESCENDED THE STAIRCASE, the other guests had already gathered in the breakfast room. Her heart hammered in her chest. Would they stare at her—or turn her out, calling her harlot?

Would *he* be there? And could she look at him without blushing—or revealing her feelings?

She glanced about the room. Lord Dunbar was not there, but her heart skipped a beat as she caught sight of Montague sitting at the table, his sapphire eyes fixed on her.

Lady Westfield rose to her feet. “Miss Evans—Merry Christmas!” she cried. “I trust you slept well? Do join us—we have mulled wine for breakfast. Rather unusual, but it is Christmas, and it’s excellent with kedgeree. Jenkins, please show Miss Evans to her place.”

“Very good, your ladyship.” The footman steered Eleanor to an unoccupied seat next to Major Dewberry—and opposite Montague.

“Good morning, Miss Evans,” Dewberry said. Then he lowered his voice. “Have you heard the scandal?”

Her gut twisted in apprehension. “S-scandal?”

“Lord Dunbar,” Dewberry whispered. “He received a message in the middle of the night, and had to leave somewhat

—*abruptly.*”

“Abruptly?”

He picked up his wineglass, and she caught the aroma of orange and spices.

“My valet told me this morning that Dunbar has fled the country—something to do with a young woman he compromised, whose father is threatening to kill him. I can’t say I’m not surprised—he has something of a reputation. Not even the most desperate mamas are willing to let him court their daughters.”

A footman placed a plate of kedgeriee in front of Eleanor, and she picked up her fork, aware of the pair of eyes staring at her from across the table.

Amid the murmur of conversation, she heard the crunch of wheels on gravel outside.

A carriage had arrived.

Eleanor’s hand shook, and she dropped her fork, which clattered to the floor. Had Dunbar returned?

She looked up to see Montague staring at her. He raised his eyebrows, then mouthed his reassurance.

*You’re safe, Elle...*

The footman opened the door.

“Sir Arthur Evans, and Mr. Finch,” he announced.

Eleanor glanced up to see Papa Arthur and Uncle Lawrence standing in the doorway.

A ripple of whispers threaded through the guests, and Eleanor swallowed her anger. How dare they judge the two kindest, most wonderful men in the world!

Then Montague rose, and approached the two men, extending his hand.

“Sir Arthur!” he cried. “How wonderful to finally meet you. I’ve heard so much about you from Mr. Finch.” He shook Uncle Lawrence’s hand. “Mr. Finch—a pleasure, as always.”

The other guests watched the exchange and, one by one, they followed Montague's lead, nodding their greetings, and wishing the two men a merry Christmas.

Papa Arthur caught sight of her. "I trust you've been enjoying yourself, Eleanor, dear, and giving Lady Westfield no trouble."

"Papa..." Heat bloomed in her cheeks.

"Your ward is a delight, Sir Arthur," Lady Westfield said.

"Aye she is," a deep voice said. Montague smiled, his gaze fixed on her. "She's charming, Sir Arthur—a credit to you, and to Mr. Finch."

Papa Arthur smiled, and nodded. "I'm glad to hear that."

"Jenkins," Lady Westfield said, "please set a place for our guests."

"There's no need," Papa Arthur said. "We breakfasted in London."

"Then perhaps it's time for a walk, before the festivities begin," Lady Westfield said. "Shall we reconvene in the main hall in, perhaps, ten minutes?"

With murmurs of assent, the guests rose and exited the breakfast room. Montague hesitated at the doorway, his eyes on Eleanor. Then, he followed the other guests out.

Eleanor approached her guardian, and he drew her into an embrace.

"Is something the matter, Eleanor?" he asked.

She leaned against him, drawing comfort from the familiar odor of cigar smoke and woody cologne. The urge to blurt out her troubles almost overcame her, but she had no wish to burden him—not when he had troubles of his own to contend with, in a judgmental world.

Yet Montague, fifth Duke of Sedgewick—had, in full view of the other guests, greeted both Papa Arthur and Uncle Lawrence as if they were old friends.

Why did he have to be so considerate? It would be so much easier to hate him if he wasn't.

"I see we've much to discuss," Papa Arthur said. "Perhaps, during the excursion, we can find an opportunity to speak in private."

"Of course," she replied. "I'll get my shawl."

He placed a fatherly kiss on her forehead, and held her at arm's length. "You look well, but somehow different," he said. "I can't place it, but I'll find out what's the matter."

He released her, and they joined the rest of the party in the main hall. As she ascended the stairs to her chamber to fetch her shawl, she caught sight of Montague approaching Papa Arthur. The two of them exchanged a few words, then glanced up at her.

## CHAPTER 14



Papa Arthur and Montague were deep in conversation when Eleanor re-joined the party. Uncle Lawrence approached, and offered his arm.

“Shall we?”

She took the proffered arm and let him lead her outside.

Fresh snow had fallen in the night, covering the landscape with a glistening blanket. The party followed the main path around the abbey grounds, and headed for the lake, which was partially frozen—the ice forming a crystalline pattern over the surface.

“The grounds here are very beautiful,” he said.

“Uncle Lawrence, have you come here today to discuss architecture?”

“No, Eleanor, sweetheart,” he said. “Your Papa Arthur and I came here to spend Christmas with you. I hope you’ll forgive us—we intended to arrive yesterday afternoon, but I had some business to contend with. That is, I’m afraid, the lot of the tradesman.”

“Can you take a proper holiday this year?” she asked. “I recall last year you resumed working almost as soon as the goose had been carved.”

“That was only because Lord Seabrook had succumbed to the grim reaper during his Christmas luncheon, and his heir was overly anxious to read the will.”

“Oh—the spirit of Christmas—watching your father keel over at the dinner table then picking over his fortune!” she cried. “I take it the heir received the Christmas gift he was expecting?”

“On the contrary,” Uncle Lawrence said, with a grin. “Lord Seabrook had pledged the entirety of his un-entailed estate to a charitable foundation. His heir was left with the title, together with an empty—and, I might add, mortgaged—mansion.”

“Good for Lord Seabrook.”

“Exactly,” he said, with a laugh. “And though it goes against my profession to breach a confidence, I think I can trust you to keep a secret. Lord Seabrook was fully aware that his son was eyeing up his fortune. He used to tell me that he half-expected the young reprobate to roll marbles at the top of the stairs in the hope he’d slip and break his neck.”

“That’s awful!”

“And likely untrue,” he said. “The son’s an insipid sort of man. Of course, he contested the will, but he underestimated his chief adversary.”

“And who was that—the accomplished solicitor, Mr. Finch, who drew up the will?”

He shook his head. “You flatter me, Eleanor. No—it was the sponsor of the charity. A most determined man—willing to fight for something he believes in.”

“You sound as if you admire him.”

“I don’t see how anybody could *not* admire him.”

They continued in silence, bringing up the rear of the party. Ahead, Papa Arthur walked side by side with Montague. The two men were still deep in conversation, and occasionally glanced over their shoulders toward her.

“I wonder...” Uncle Lawrence hesitated. “Might I breach another confidence?”

“If you have good reason, then any rule can be broken.”

“My thoughts exactly.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Young Lord Seabrook’s adversary is among the party today.”

She glanced ahead, toward the others. Lord Westfield had a reputation for compassion, so it might be him—but her gaze lingered on Papa Arthur, and she smiled.

*Of course!*

Papa Arthur had the kindest heart in the world—though why he’d not told her about his charitable venture was something of a mystery.

“I see you’re not altogether surprised by my revelation,” Uncle Lawrence said. “No wonder—given that much of it is down to *you*.”

“To me?”

He nodded. “He came to me a little over five years ago, determined to do something to ease the plight of abandoned women and children—those left destitute by society. He said it was the only way he could ease his conscience, and honor someone he’d loved and lost.”

She continued to watch as Papa Arthur stopped, while Lady Westfield pointed out some feature of the landscape.

Poor man—he already lived in an unfeeling society where he had to keep his affection for Uncle Lawrence a secret. Who had he lost in the past that he’d been unable to grieve?

“I-I didn’t know,” she said.

“Nobody does,” he replied. “He told me he wanted no recognition—that he didn’t deserve it, because he’d been to blame. He said he knew that he wasn’t going to change the world—but if he could improve the lot of even one lost soul, then it would ease his pain, in the hope that perhaps someone, somewhere, would improve the lot of the girl he’d lost.”

“The *girl*?” Eleanor asked. “Did Papa Arthur have a daughter?”

He turned toward her, frowning. “*Arthur*? No—Arthur has nothing to do with it.”

“Then, who?”

He placed his hand over hers and nodded ahead. “Don’t you know, Eleanor? I had my suspicions for some time, and they were confirmed this morning. Of course, he’d never forgive me if he knew I’d told you, but I trust you’ll understand why I did.”

She shook her head. “I *don’t* understand.”

“Sweet girl—can you think of no-one who might have harbored such a deep love for another, that he’d do everything he could to help others in her situation? A man who suffered guilt over a few careless words that cost him the girl he loved?”

At that moment, Papa Arthur turned around and waved at her. The man standing next to him turned, and smiled, the sunlight reflected in his beautiful blue eyes.

“Montague...” she breathed.

“Aye,” came the reply. “As fine a man as any I’ve had the privilege to do business with. He’s weathered a reputation for being a miser, merely because he refuses to indulge in the trappings of the wealthy. In reality, he’s donated almost all of his disposable income to the *London shelter for abandoned young women*.”

“The London shelter for abandoned young women?”

“He’s leaving, later today to spend Christmas there—to take gifts for the children, and assist with serving supper. But, of course, nobody knows, and I’m relying on your discretion. I shouldn’t even be telling *you*.”

“Then why did you?” she asked. “Did he instruct you to?”

“Of course not. But...” He shook his head, “...I don’t know...I suppose I felt that after the life you’d led before Arthur adopted you, you deserve to know that even when you felt you were abandoned and alone, there was—and still is—someone in the world who loves you a great deal.”

As they approached the main building, Lady Westfield’s voice rang out.



“Come *mes amis!*” she cried. “It’s time to celebrate Christmas in the great hall with a glass of champagne.”

The guests filed in through the main doors, handing their coats and shawls to the waiting footmen, then their hostess ushered them into the high-ceilinged hall, which had been decked out with sprigs of holly, and bunches of mistletoe which hung from the chandeliers.

Uncle Lawrence steered Eleanor toward the fireplace, where a footman stood waiting with a tray of champagne glasses.

He raised his glass. “Happy Christmas, Eleanor,” he said. “I believe I have given you a gift that money can’t buy. But I have another gift for you.”

“Which is?”

“Some advice,” he said. “Take it from one who knows. Love is not something to be taken for granted. Neither is it perfect, for it requires hard work. But anything worthwhile always does. Love is often hidden in plain sight. But when we see it—*really* see it—then we must seize it with both hands.”

He leaned over and placed a fatherly kiss on her forehead.

“There!” he said. “I believe I’ve given you two of the best Christmas gifts anyone could ask for.” He glanced across the room, where Montague stood beside the doorway, a glass of champagne in his hand. “Do with them what you will, Eleanor.”

He inclined his head in a bow, then excused himself and joined Papa Arthur.

## CHAPTER 15



Eleanor sipped her champagne, savoring the atmosphere of Christmas—the merry chatter, the crackling of the fire, and the aroma of spices in the air.

The party settled into the easy conversation of good friends, husbands, and wives.

One man stood a little apart from the rest of the party, and Eleanor felt a twinge of guilt as she recalled her own words and those of Lady Westfield—that he was considered a miser for not wishing to spend Christmas Day with them all.

Instead, he preferred to devote his time to helping others.

Any moment now, he'd be departing for London, and she found herself dreading the moment he left—straining her ears for the sound of his carriage come to take him away.

She might never see him again.

He glanced up, and their eyes met. Her heart ached to see the expression in his eyes—regret, and sorrow. He had suffered as much as she during the past five years—maybe not in terms of physical hardship, but guilt had gnawed at his soul. She had friends who'd returned her from the darkness into the light—Nancy, Papa Arthur, and Uncle Lawrence.

Montague had no-one.

Until now.

The rest of the party faded into the background, the bright, vivid colors of the great hall blurring to grey, until only one thing existed.

Him. Montague Lockhart. The man she'd given her heart to years ago—and who still owned it.

She raised her glass.

“I love you,” she mouthed.

His eyes glistened, then he smiled—a smile that illuminated his face with joy.

Her heart leaped as the stern duke was replaced by the man she'd once known.

Then he stepped into the center of the room, and cleared his throat.

“I wonder,” he said, “might I make a declaration?”

The chatter ceased, and the party dispersed toward the perimeter of the room, until he stood alone.

“Be my guest, Your Grace.” Lady Westfield nodded, and gestured toward him. Two women stood either side of her—Lady Pandora Osborne, an expression of triumph in her eyes, and Lady Octavia Sewell, who looked as if she'd just swallowed a glass of hogswill.

“Christmas is a time for giving,” Montague began. “It's a time for appreciating what we have, and for giving to those less fortunate than ourselves. But it's also a time for family—for love. Love can give rise to great sorrow—but, if we are prepared to risk all, it can also yield great joy.”

A murmur rippled through the party. Eleanor caught sight of Papa Arthur and Uncle Lawrence exchanging a smile.

Then, the man in the center of the room approached her. He lowered himself onto one knee, and held out his hand.

“Eleanor,” he said. “I've loved you for as long as I can remember. Foolish I may have been in not declaring that love at first, thereby proving myself wholly unworthy of you. But, before these good people, I hereby declare myself. Teach me to be a better man, dearest Eleanor. I shall love you until I breathe my last, and I humbly ask that you do me the great honor of becoming my wife.”

The room fell silent, as everyone held their breath.

His eyes betrayed his vulnerability and uncertainty. But when she took his hand, a flicker of hope shone in their blue depths.

“With all my heart, yes,” she said.

A cheer rose up, followed by applause, and cries of congratulations.

He rose to his feet, and took her other hand. Then she glanced up and smiled. An enormous bunch of mistletoe hung in the air above their heads. Needing no encouragement, he drew her to him, and kissed her—a long, lingering kiss, to seal their love.

Out of the corner of her eye, Eleanor saw a black-clad figure cheering louder than anyone and—*heaven forbid!*—dancing a jig on the spot.

“Do you suppose Lady Pandora Osborne is inebriated?” she whispered.

He linked her arm through his, then glanced across the room.

“Lady Pansy considers herself the premier matchmaker of the ton,” he said, laughter in his voice. “I’d heard a rumor that she intended me for her next victim, and I was determined to thwart her. Yet, there was one vital element I did not bargain for.”

“And what was that?”

“That I would be reunited with the only woman I have ever loved.”

Before she could respond, he silenced her with another kiss. Lady Pandora might be dancing a jig—but, to Eleanor, at that moment, there was not a single soul in the whole world as happy as she.

THE END

THANK YOU FOR READING!

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Montague's friend, Dominic, begins his quest to regain his ancestral home, by fair means or foul, in the *Scholars of Seduction* series. Let the battle of the sexes begin!

Read on for an excerpt from Book One, *Seducing Sophia*...

# SEDUCING SOPHIA



EXCERPT

“**Y**our next pupil is here, ma’am.”

The maid dipped into a curtsy. A little unsteady on her feet, but the girl had been at Summerton Hall less than a week, and though the poor child had no knowledge of her exact date of birth, she was, Sophia believed, no older than twelve years.

“Thank you, Tilly,” Sophia said. “Would you show her in, please?”

“Oh...” the maid hesitated then colored and curtseyed again. “Very good, ma’am.” She disappeared through the door, almost tripping over her hem. The uniform was too large for her thin frame, but in time she’d grow into it.

Sophia picked up the sheet music and arranged it into a neat pile on the stool beside the small square pianoforte on which she conducted her lessons. She picked up a booklet, opened it, and ran her finger along the marks, tracing the pattern made by the notes printed on the page.

Bach’s minuets—dedicated to his second wife—were ideal for new pupils. The pieces carried enough of a melody to maintain the pupil’s interest, yet were sufficiently straightforward such that most pupils could master the right hand, at least, and thus be encouraged to return—and, more importantly, *pay*—for repeat lessons.

For a fleeting moment, she was assaulted by the memory of the first day she’d played Bach’s minuet in D in Lady



Claybone's drawing room. That was the first time she'd met *him*.

William—the man she had fallen in love with.

The man who'd broken her heart, leaving her ruined and despoiled.

She closed her eyes and her nostrils quivered at the memory of his scent. Sandalwood and spices. The scent of man.

The memory was so strong, she could have sworn the scent was real.

With a sigh, she closed the booklet.

A deep cough made her jump, and she turned round.

A man stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame.

Not just leaning. He dominated it with his body. Broad shoulders filled out a smart, dark blue jacket, tailored to perfection. One hand was inside his pocket, the other hanging casually by his side. Long, lean fingers flexed, curled and uncurled. Her gaze wandered over his body—the jacket, the highly polished black boots—then it settled on a pair of cream-colored breeches which fit his muscular thighs like a second skin, leaving little to the imagination.

His body was so large...

So muscular...

So *male*.

He shifted his weight onto one leg and crossed his ankles, almost as if his position were intended to draw her gaze toward his very maleness. Her cheeks warmed with shame, but she couldn't tear her gaze away.

A deep voice spoke. "I think you'll find my face is up here."

Sophia looked up and her breath caught in her throat.

Clear blue eyes regarded her with appreciation. They radiated a sharp intelligence and something else—desire, and

wickedness. Something she had not seen since...

She tried to swallow but her throat was dry. She curled her hands into fists only to find her palms slick.

His eyes darkened and a slight smile played on his lips while he held her gaze, as if he challenged her to look away.

But she couldn't.

His looks conveyed a savage virility. A thick head of hair as dark as a raven's wing surrounded a strong, angular face with dark brows, a strong, straight nose and a full, sensual mouth.

He was, without doubt, the most handsome man she had ever seen.

A small sigh escaped her lips, and his eyes darkened. His mouth curled into a smile of triumph, then he parted his lips, and the tip of his tongue flicked out, and the sunlight glistened on his moistened lips.

It was as if he understood her—as if he could read her innermost thoughts and her body's desires before she knew them herself.

He lowered his gaze to the swell of her breasts and an expression of hunger glittered in his eyes.

In short, he was a rake.

What on earth had possessed Tilly to usher him in? Mrs. Huntington couldn't be aware, for she would have turned him away at the door—or, at the very least, insisted on accompanying him, so that Sophia wasn't in danger of being compromised.

Again.

His smile widened, exposing large, even teeth and she stepped back, lifting her hand to her neckline, as if to preserve an innocence she no longer possessed.

“Who are you, sir?” she asked. “What are you doing?”

“Standing in your doorway.”

The arrogance in his tone broke the spell he'd cast on her, and she frowned.

"That's not what I meant," she said. "How did you get in here?"

He let out a laugh. "With considerable more ease than I'd anticipated."

"I would beg you to leave."

"What, before we have even begun our lesson?"

"Lesson?" her voice came out in a squeak and he straightened his body and took a step closer, like a panther which sensed its prey's vulnerability.

He held out his hand. "Permit me to introduce myself."

"I most certainly will not," she said. "And you have no right to be here."

"But I was invited."

"Do you have any idea how improper it is for you to be here?" Sophia asked.

Of course he did. The wicked glint in his eyes told her that.

"You're expecting a pupil by the name of FitzRoy, are you not?"

"Miss FitzRoy?"

He shook his head. "I ought to be affronted you've mistaken me for a young woman." He gave her a smart bow, the heels of his boots clicking together.

"Colonel FitzRoy, at your service," he said. "Though, I very much hope to enjoy *your* services for the next hour, Mrs. Black." His tongue curled round her name, as if he were relishing a sweetmeat.

Ignoring the little primal pulse of heat at his words, she shook her head.

"You're mistaken, sir," she said. "I cannot teach you. My time is precious and I choose to spend it only with those I

deem worthy—those in possession of sufficient means, talent—and desire, to further the cause of music.”

“And how do you know I cannot be classified as such—particularly with regards to desire?”

Why did he have to be so maddeningly handsome when he smiled at her like that?

“At least shake hands with me,” he said. “After all, as a businesswoman, you must understand the traditions which must be followed. This is, after all, a business, and not a social, situation we find ourselves in.”

What harm would it do? His hand was before her. Strong, smooth, and ready for the taking. What might it feel to have those fingers curl around her own?

“Only if you promise to leave,” she said.

“Very well,” came the response. Perhaps, at last, he recognized defeat.

She moved toward him and took his hand. Almost immediately he curled his fingers around hers, as if they formed ropes binding her to him.

Though his skin was soft, strength vibrated from within, as if the smooth skin concealed a core of steel. Warmth seeped into her hand and her skin tightened, a sensation of a flame igniting through her body.

“Mrs. Black.” His voice came out in a low growl which seemed to vibrate through his body and he pulled her closer. “It’s a pleasure to meet you. I trust you find equal pleasure in our meeting.”

The arrogance of his tone doused the flame of need which had ignited within her, and she pulled her hand free. Her pulse raced with the unwelcome sensations which she knew were the first step to ruination.

She stepped back and waved a dismissive hand at him.

“You should leave,” she said. “Now.”

“I’m disappointed, Mrs. Black,” he said. “Would you be so dishonorable as to eject me before giving me the chance to prove myself a worthy pupil?”

“There is nothing I can teach you, sir, I assure you,” she said.

“I doubt that.” The hunger returned to his expression and his nostrils flared. “You only need surrender to your desire to give me a chance. And, if I may be so bold, I would add that I might teach you a thing or two.”

Arrogant man! Did he know her thoughts? Could he read inside her soul, and understand the need which pulsed deep within her?

Or was he merely a rakehell, who assumed every woman he encountered was ready to fall at his feet and surrender her body to his pleasure?

The wicked heat, which had been growing between her thighs, intensified and she drew in a sharp breath to dispel the fog of need.

“There’s nothing you could teach me which I don’t already know,” she retorted.

He cocked his head to one side. “I beg to differ, Sweet,” he said. “The pleasure of a lesson is not derived solely from the information exchanged, but from the method of execution. I’ll wager you’ve not been in the hands of a skilled enough teacher.”

He licked his lips and lowered his gaze once more to her neckline. To her chagrin, her nipples tightened against her gown. Were he to look closely, he might even see them pressing insistently against the fabric.

Once again, his tongue flicked across his lower lip, and a jolt of need tightened her skin, as if she could feel the tip of his tongue on her skin.

She reached behind her and grasped the bell-pull.

Disappointment darkened his expression. Shortly afterward, Tilly opened the door.

“Ah, Tilly,” Sophia said, hoping that neither the maid nor the unwelcome man in her room could detect the hoarseness in her throat. “Would you show this—gentleman out?”

“Very good, ma’am,” Tilly said. She gestured toward the door. “This way, sir.”

He turned and looked at the young maid, and for a moment, Sophia expected him to sweep her aside with the arrogant disregard for servants displayed by the aristocracy. But instead, his expression softened, and he smiled.

“Of course,” he said. “Be so good as to lead the way, miss.”

A shred of disappointment pricked at Sophia as he exited the room. Then, on reaching the threshold, he turned and gave her a lop-sided smile.

“It was a pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Black,” he said. “You have already taught me much.”

“But there was no lesson!”

He let out a laugh, his voice, warm and rich. “On the contrary, Sweet. You’ve taught me that in order to perfect my performance, I must acquire the tenacity and the will to practice. And rest assured, I shall devote the time until our next lesson to perfecting my skill.”

“What makes you think there’s going to be a next lesson?” she asked.

He let out a chuckle, gave a deep bow, then disappeared. She could swear she still heard his laughter after the front door had slammed shut.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*USA Today* bestselling author Emily Royal grew up in Sussex, England, and has devoured romantic novels for as long as she can remember. A mathematician at heart, Emily has worked in financial services for thirty years. She indulged in her love of writing after she moved to Scotland, where she lives with her husband, teenage daughters, and a menagerie of pets including Twinkle, an attention-seeking boa constrictor. She has a passion for both reading and writing romance, with a weakness for Regency rakes, Highland heroes, and medieval knights. *Persuasion* is one of her all-time favorite novels, and she is fortunate enough to live within sight of a medieval palace.

