

Sweet Deception



Heather Snow

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HEATHER SNOW

A VEILED SEDUCTION NOVEL

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An Excerpt From:

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Chapter One



Derbyshire, June 1817

The medieval tower rose high and proud above the bilberry heath covering the castle's grounds, its vibrant red bricks proclaiming it a foreigner amongst a plateau of white limestone. Derick Aveline, Viscount Scarsdale, exhaled with a snort—he certainly knew what *that* felt like.

If there was one place on earth he'd hoped never to set eyes upon again, his northernmost family estate was certainly it. He supposed that would surprise most people, given the dangerous and often unpleasant spots he'd been in over the years. But these lush rolling hills and deep, narrow valleys of his childhood loomed ominous and more treacherous to his well-being than even the filthiest of French prisons that had once held him.

With a sharp tap of his heel, Derick directed his steed down the knoll and onto the lane, as a wealth of memories he'd thought long locked away assailed him. The restless boy he'd been, roaming the hills and dales of White Peak with endless summer days stretching out before him. His mother's red-rimmed eyes, looking at him with alternating sadness and indifference. The last day he'd seen this patch of England, the day his identity had crumbled away like the ancient limestone the area was named for.

Gravel crunched beneath his stallion's hooves as they entered the stable yard, shaking Derick from his thoughts. He'd been a fool to come back. If not for this last mission for the Crown, he would never have returned. But he always did what must be done for love of country.



Even when it wasn't his country to love.

"Boy!" Derick called out, throwing his leg over his saddle and dismounting. He rolled his shoulders, stretching knotted muscles. He'd had to race to stay ahead of the weather and felt every rough mile bone deep. If God were merciful, a hot meal, a warm fire and a clean bed waited within. He scanned the yard for a stable hand.

The lane leading up to Aveline Castle was in clear view of both the stables and the main hall. It was inexcusable that no one waited to greet him, particularly as he'd sent word well ahead to expect him.

Several moments passed, yet no one appeared.

"Damnation," Derick grumbled, turning his collar up against the chilly wind. The clime this far north had yet to recover from last summer's unimaginable cold, and with dusk fast on Derick's heels there was little sun left for warmth. He'd managed to beat the coming storm by only minutes, he'd guess. He led his horse to the deserted stable, secured the mount and promised the animal that he would send a groom straightaway to brush him down.

Derick strode along the north side of the fifteenth-century castle, his gait far from the languid, leisurely manner of walking that he usually affected. He would slip into his ne'er-do-well persona once there was someone about who might observe him.

He climbed the front steps two at a time. When he reached the stoop, he found the massive door half open. Had the staff lost all discipline since his mother had died? The place was drafty enough without carelessly leaving the door unlatched. He pushed it wide, the ancient carved English oak giving way with a groan.

No candlelight greeted him. Indeed, it was as if the place were deserted. Derick frowned, his steps echoing as he walked into the stone foyer. The hairs on the back of his neck rose. His

trunks, which had been sent ahead and should have long since been unpacked, sat stacked at the base of the grand staircase. No fire burned in the grate. No lamps had been lit.

Where the devil was everyone?

“—take this area, from the bend in the creek to the waterfall—”

A feminine voice, full of authority, drifted to him from the back of the house.

Curious, Derick started in that direction.

“—and Thomas, you and John Coachman take from here to Felman’s Hill.”

Derick furrowed his brow. There was something eerily familiar about that voice, which was ridiculous given that the only woman he’d known in Derbyshire was his mother, and she had been dead two months now. As he turned into the long hallway leading toward the kitchens, light spilled from the dining hall and a low murmuring of voices reached his ears.

He slipped unnoticed into the room, melting into the shadows along the far wall. It wasn’t even a challenge, as no one paid him a bit of mind. His eyes took in the whole room at once, a skill honed through years in the espionage game.

A dozen and a half people of mixed age and company hovered around the table—all servants, from their dress. Aveline Castle employed only a skeleton staff now that his mother was gone. So who were all these people whispering quietly, their faces grim?

The room smelled crisp, filled with the tang of the outdoors carried in on clothing. And indeed, most of those gathered around were dressed for the elements, garbed in coats and hats or scarves. Several noses were red, as if they had been long out in the wind, and many boots were dirty, covered with mud.

The group seemed to be waiting for something, or someone. Derick shifted more into the corner until he found a break in the wall of people large enough to see through.



Ah, the source of the mysterious voice, he'd wager. The woman stood at the head of the table, but he could not see her face, as she was leaning over a large square of paper that was rolled out across the polished mahogany. Her position made it difficult to gauge her height as well, but there was no mistaking the ample curves her simple muslin dress couldn't hide.

Her well-tailored frock was a vibrant green, the dye not faded as a castoff would be. A lady of quality, then. One slender hand braced her as she marked furiously upon the paper. The tilt of her head and the way she held herself in determined focus niggled at his memory. Derick tried to place her, but locks of chestnut hair had slipped her coiffure, obscuring even her profile from him.

He turned his attention to the paper and squinted his eyes in the low light. That looked suspiciously like . . . A discarded frame caught his attention then, propped up against the wall. His eyes snapped back to the table, to the blotchy inked areas the mystery woman was currently drawing lines through.

She was scribbling all over an irreplaceable Burnett map of the countryside, commissioned by his grandfather over half a century ago.

He should be appalled. But Derick had long ago shed any care for the trappings of the viscounty. Instead, he eyed the scene with detached curiosity, angling for the best way to use it to his purposes. Hmmm. Outrage would be precisely what people would expect of the "pampered aristocrat" persona he typically used for these missions. And Little Miss Map Despoiler had given him the perfect opening. All he had to do was take the stage she'd inadvertently set for him.

"What the devil are you doing?" he barked as he pushed off from the wall. His exclamation had the desired effect. A chorus of gasps registered, but Derick ignored them as he reached the

head of the table in three long strides and snatched the priceless map from atop it.

He rolled the map with deceptive casualness, the dry paper making a hissing sound against his palms in the now otherwise silent room. He raised a brow and injected a supercilious tone into his voice as he turned to the woman standing frozen before him.

“Do you mind telling me just who you are”—his gaze traveled up her slim body in an intentionally arrogant perusal—“and why you are vandalizing *my* property?”

The last word caught in his throat as his eyes finally reached hers.

A flash of memory came, of a scrawny blond pest who’d trailed behind him every summer like an unwanted hound, a little hoyden with unforgettably wide amber eyes.

No longer a blonde, he noted.

And no longer a girl, his baser side chimed in. Derick pressed his lips together, hard. Damnation. The neighbor girl, Miss Wallingford.

Anna? Ella? *No, Emma*. Derick was surprised he recalled her Christian name. He’d always just called her Pygmy. She’d hated the nickname, thinking he was poking fun at her tiny stature. There *was* that, but he’d really given her the moniker because her golden eyes and tenacious nature had reminded him of the pygmy owlets that hunted these hills at twilight.

She was apparently still a pest—and one already interfering with his plans, even if she couldn’t possibly know it.

Miss Wallingford’s wide gaze narrowed, and her mouth flattened in what was certainly pique.

Derick waited for her answer, tapping the rolled-up map against the highly polished walnut tabletop in feigned irritation.

Well, mostly feigned. This wasn’t quite the foot he’d hoped to get off on with Miss



Wallingford. As sister of the local magistrate, she could prove integral to his mission. He'd intended to call on her at her home, play on their childhood friendship—if one could call it that—to gain better access to her brother. Not snap her head off in front of a room full of witnesses.

But what was done was done. Derick had learned long ago that the key to a good deception was to always go on as one had begun. He would brazen through, play his part and find a way to sweeten Miss Wallingford later.

Emma Wallingford had never felt so riveted to one spot in her entire life. It was as if she were carved out of marble, much like the statues of the Greek scholars she'd so admired on her only trip to London. *Move, Emma, you ninny!*

What was this abominable awareness? Her logical mind told her it was only Derick. Yet her stomach fluttered, forcing her to amend that thought. Yes, it was Derick, but he was also . . . *more*. His hair was still black as night, thick and unruly, yet the lines of his face were more angular now, more chiseled. His shoulders seemed wider, his hips more narrow. His eyes hadn't changed, though. They still glittered like fiery emeralds and still gazed at her as if she were the bane of his existence, sent by Hades himself with the express purpose of bedeviling him.

"My—my lord." Billingsly, Aveline Castle's aged butler, brushed past her, his stooped form cutting through her line of sight, rescuing her from Derick's hard green gaze. Emma dropped her eyes to the floor, grateful for the moment to collect herself as the chaos of stammered excuses erupted around her.

His arrival shouldn't be such a shock to her—the entire village knew he was due today. Only she hadn't intended to come anywhere near Aveline Castle while he was in residence, but then Billingsly's note had arrived and—

Emma gasped. How could she have forgotten? She, of all people, didn't forget things like that.

Taking advantage of the continued distraction, she stepped forward and plucked the map from Derick's loosened grasp, berating herself for loss of focus. She spread it out on the table and resumed drawing the border she'd started. With dusk coming, time had become critical.

The voices around her stilled abruptly, and Emma could have sworn she felt Derick's gaze boring into her more surely than Archimedes' famed screw. Which was impossible, of course, as a mere gaze had no actual physical properties.

She didn't look up from her task as she said, "I'm certain Lord Scarsdale will agree that explanations can wait until *after* we find his missing upstairs maid."

Crack!

The sharp, sizzling pop of lightning served as harsh punctuation to her pronouncement. A low rumble of thunder followed quickly behind. Emma glanced over her shoulder at the window in time to see the first fat drops of a summer storm splash against the panes. Fig! If Molly were outside and injured . . . Emma mentally kicked herself for the bit of time she'd squandered mooning like a schoolgirl over a man who obviously didn't even remember her. She returned her eyes to the table and scanned the map again.

"My missing upstairs maid?" Derick repeated, sounding dubious.

"Yes." Without raising her gaze to him, Emma held up a hand to forestall any more questions. She ran her finger over the map. If her calculations were correct, the only feasible place Molly could be that they hadn't already searched was this area to the east of—

"*Miss Wallingford*," Derick growled, in a voice that demanded her attention.

So he did remember her.



“As these are *my* resources you seem to be marshaling,” he said, “I expect an explanation.”

She looked up at him then, annoyed. Had he just referred to his staff, and some of hers for that matter, as *his resources*? Emma narrowed her eyes, considering the possible ramifications of ignoring him completely. She had more important things to do than appease his “lord of the manor” sensibilities, particularly when this lord hadn’t bothered to grace this manor with his presence in more than a dozen years.

But Derick had risen to his full formidable height, taller even than she remembered. His glittering eyes had taken on a look of arrogant command. Emma gritted her teeth.

“Molly Simms,” she explained. “The gardener’s daughter. No one has seen her since she retired last evening.”

His shoulder rose in a half shrug. “That’s not even twenty-four hours,” he said. “I would hardly consider that ‘missing.’”

Emma pursed her lips. What did he know of anything? “Well, the rest of us disagree,” she said. “We feel Molly did not leave of her own volition and fear her situation may be dire.”

She’d given him as much of an explanation as he was going to get. Emma dismissed him and returned her gaze to the map.

“Yes, but *why* do you disagree?” he asked, plopping his hand down in the center of the map to block her view. “Do people in this village routinely find themselves in dire circumstances? Have you had a rash of dastardly events?”

Emma pinched the bridge of her nose. The Derick she remembered hadn’t been so tiresome. But then, she’d known only the boy. He had been seventeen when she’d seen him last, a whole lifetime of changes ago.

“Of course not,” she said. Being situated at the south end of the Peak District, they’d had a



bit more crime than perhaps was normal due to the number of strangers that passed through. Even a few suspicious deaths, but nothing like that for at least two years.

“Were there signs of a struggle?” he persisted.

“No,” Emma admitted.

“And yet you suspect foul play . . .” Derick lifted his hand and crossed his arms with a slow negligence that set her teeth on edge. “The girl is young. She’s probably visiting with a . . . *friend*, and lost track of the time.”

The tips of Emma’s ears burned with indignation. She glanced around, grateful that neither of Molly’s parents was in the room.

“Or perhaps she eloped with the lucky chap,” he offered.

Emma nearly gasped at his cheek. Could Derick truly have become such an insensitive boor? A lifetime of changes or not, people didn’t usually transform into someone completely unrecognizable.

Regardless, she’d heard enough. She raised herself to her full height, which unfortunately barely put her at his chest level. Her cheeks warmed as she remembered that horrid nickname he used to call her as a child. Still, she gave him her fiercest glare. He was *going* to take her seriously and get out of her way, so help her.

“I suppose that in the realm of possibilities, these are all reasonable questions. However, if I may point out”—she emphasized the point with a poke of her finger right to his breastbone—“that you don’t know Molly from Eve. You can credit those of us who do that we have considered all other likely scenarios and have exhausted them.”

Another rolling boom of thunder sounded, ever closer. A quick glance confirmed that the sunlight was fading fast.

She turned her gaze back to Derick and narrowed it on him. “Molly is out there, somewhere, and the more time we waste chatting about it, the less chance we have of finding her before dark.”

Derick regarded her. He still looked as though he doubted her conclusions, but gone were the arrogant tilt to his nose, the pinched lines around his mouth, the bored ease of his stance. “I su—”

“She tweren’t anywhere, Miss Emma.” Two footmen came through the door then, cutting off whatever Derick had been about to say. The taller one spoke for them. “We searched the whole spot ye told us.”

Emma grimaced. The men stood in the doorway, taking great gulps of air and wiping moisture from their faces. Her frown deepened at their rain-sodden coats. She waved them toward the kitchen, not caring if Derick took issue with her directing *his resources*. “Thank you. Go on and get a hot drink, then hurry right back. We’ll need you both as soon as you’re able.”

She turned back to the map, bracing herself on the table with her left hand and using her right to draw lines through the section the men had been assigned—another search area combed through without success. Emma scanned the darkening sky through the window, mentally calculating how much daylight remained. She’d always been able to tabulate numbers in her head faster than even her father, an esteemed mathematician, had been able to do on paper. She factored in how much area a man could cover on foot in that time, and divided the result by the number of servants available.

Rain pelted the glass in an ever-increasing tattoo.

She’d better account for that variable in her time estimations. She was doing just that when a large bronzed hand planted itself to the outside of her smaller pale one. Emma sucked in a breath,



startled by the long, blunt-tipped fingers, the knuckles and skin dusted with a hint of black hair. Her entire body warmed curiously as Derick leaned over her back to see what she was doing.

“You’re mapping search areas,” he murmured, his voice sliding past her right ear in a hot breath.

“Y-yes,” Emma answered, damning herself for the catch in her throat. What in the heavens was wrong with h—

She jerked as the inside of his jacketed arm brushed the outside of her pelisséd one. His right hand reached out to run a finger down the eastern border she’d recently traced herself. Emma shivered, as if it were she he stroked rather than the vellum.

“And this unshaded portion is what you have left to search?”

Emma gave a jerky nod. “Those two footmen just finished searching here.” She pointed to a marked area to the northeast, abashed to see her finger tremble just a bit. “Since their greatcoats were soaked, I can only assume it’s been pouring east of here for some time, which you may remember—”

“Is prone to sudden flooding,” Derick said. He straightened, pulling away from her so quickly that gooseflesh prickled her skin at the sudden absence of his heat. “Don’t let me interrupt further, then.”

She nodded, relieved, but whether more from the fact that he’d capitulated than that he’d moved away from her she wasn’t certain. It didn’t signify—at least he would no longer interfere. Emma quickly divvied up the eastern boundary into manageable sections.

“Right.” She addressed the tired servants, her middle tightening with unease. “We haven’t daylight left to search the remaining area in pairs,” she said, suppressing her discomfort the best way she knew how—with action. “We’ll all have to take our own section.”



As each man or woman came forward, Emma assigned them a small, defined boundary until only she, Billingsly, and Derick remained in the room.

“Billingsly.” Emma motioned the butler to follow as she exited the dining hall and made her way toward the front entrance. The old servant was too frail to be out searching in the rain, but she knew he’d want to be useful. “As the searchers return, you and Cook do what you can to get them warmed, dry and fed. God forbid we need to continue the search tomorrow,” she muttered, shoving her arms into a coat and struggling to pull it on.

The coat lifted from her shoulders, as if by unseen hands, before the heavy wool settled around her. She whirled in surprise, her elbow coming into solid contact with a hard wall—

“Ooof,” Derick grunted, his black brows dipping as he winced.

—of abdomen, as it were.

“Oh! Oh pardon me . . .” Emma mumbled, though truthfully she didn’t regret the accidental jab. But how had he appeared behind her? She looked down at his sturdy black boots. Certainly she should have heard a man of his size clomping down the hall after her.

Derick rubbed at the spot where Emma’s elbow had speared him. The place she’d poked on his chest still smarted, too. She was quite strong for such a compact little thing. Bright, too, given what little he’d seen of her tactical mind at work, even if she was overreacting. If he remembered correctly, Emma always had been one to take things too seriously, and to infect those around her with her imaginings. He’d guess she was making a mountain out of the proverbial molehill.

She was also adept at giving orders, and accustomed to being obeyed. Oh yes, little Pygmy had grown into just the kind of woman he’d thought she would.

Emma turned her back on him—again. Derick shook his head as he watched her struggle with the heavy oak door.



She still had more intelligence than common sense, however, since she was apparently planning to run out into a dangerous storm alone.

He reached around her and grasped the handle, stopping the door from opening. “You neglected to give *me* an assignment.”

Emma turned, effectively caged by his arm and the door at her back. Those large amber eyes widened as he loomed over her. Which heightened his own awareness of how close his body was to hers, nearly touching. How fragile she seemed . . . how diminutive, and yet so uncommonly tough. He’d already been the recipient of her tart tongue and sharp appendages. Now, thinking back, he remembered that when they were children, Emma had always kept up with him, no matter how he’d tried to lose her.

As if to demonstrate that her stubbornness still remained, Emma lifted her chin in challenge. “I hadn’t thought you would—”

“Wish to help?” Derick returned her challenge, raising a brow. Damn. Her assumption irked. And the fact that he’d been stung by it irked more. He’d long ago grown accustomed to not caring what anyone thought. “Feel responsible for a member of my household?”

Emma blinked. “Your household?” She sputtered. “You haven’t been to Derbyshire in fourteen—”

“No, but I *am* human, Miss Wallingford.” Derick stepped closer, bringing his other arm around and planting it on the door behind her, trapping her. Only so that she would listen to him, of course. Not at all because of her tantalizing scent, a heady mix of lavender and . . . something he couldn’t quite place. “I may not agree with your assumptions, but it is clear you strongly believe the maid is in danger. If there is a chance you are correct, I would like to do what I can.”

A huff of exasperation escaped her lips, a gesture Derick took to mean she didn’t think too



highly of him or his offer. He allowed a half-cynical smile to curve his lips. What did he care if Miss Emma Wallingford disapproved of one of his many alter egos? It wasn't *him*, after all.

Besides, he doubted she'd like him any better if she knew his *true* purpose in Derbyshire.

To investigate her brother for treason.

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