

# JUDE KNIGHT

## *Paradise Lost*

A collection of vignettes prequelling The Children of the Mountain King  
**THE DUCHESS ALONE**

# PARADISE LOST

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THE DUCHESS ALONE

JUDE KNIGHT



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## **PARADISE LOST**

The Duchess of Haverford has built a fulfilling and happy life centred on her children and her charities. She never forgets the man she once loved; the man she was prevented from wedding, but she no longer grieves him.

His return from Central Asia after thirty-five years has her considering those memories and others. Looking back lets her see how far she has come.

*To my newsletter subscribers, whose support helps to keep me writing. Thank you for reading my stories. Thank you for emailing me with your thoughts. I hope you enjoy this little book about Eleanor.*



**H**averford House, London, March 1812

The Duke of Haverford slammed the door on his way out, but it wasn't his temper that left his duchess trembling in her chair, her limbs so weak she could do nothing but sit, her chest hurting as she tried to force shallow breaths in and out. She had grown so used to his tantrums that she barely noticed.

"Your Grace?" Her secretary held out a hand as if to touch her then drew it back. The poor girl — a distant cousin just arrived from Berkshire — was as white as parchment. "Your Grace? Can I get you something? Can I pour you a pot of tea?"

*Brandy would be welcome.* A slight touch of amusement at Millicent's reaction to such a request helped soothe Eleanor's perturbation. "I should like to be alone, Millicent," she managed to say. A lifetime of pretending to be calm and dignified through grief, anger, fear, and desperate sorrow came to her rescue. "Can you please send a note to Lady Carew to ask her to hold me excused today? Ask her if tomorrow afternoon would be acceptable."

Once the girl left the room, casting an anxious glance over her shoulder, Eleanor stood and crossed to her desk, stopping before the mantel when her reflection caught her eye. If Millicent had been pale, Eleanor was worse — so white that dark patches showed under her eyes, eyes in which the pupil had almost swamped the iris.

It was the shock. Perhaps she would have that cup of tea before she fetched the box.

She poured it, and then added a spoonful of sugar. Two spoonfuls. She normally took her tea unsweetened, with just a slice of lemon, but hot sweet tea was effective in cases of shock, was it not?

With the cup set on the table by the chair, she spent a few minutes moving panels of wood in her escritoire, until the secret compartment at the back opened. It was large enough to contain boxes of various sizes, several small stacks of paper tied with ribbon into a bundle, and a dozen cloth bags.

She had to move some of the contents out of the way to reach what she wanted. The first of the boxes to be hidden in what she called her memory cabinet. She hadn't taken this one out since the afternoon of the day Grace and Georgie had told her — oh, some 15 years ago — that James still lived.

*James had returned to England.*

Haverford could shout as much as he liked about Winshire's heir being an imposter, about all the world knowing that the youngest son of the family had died in Persia three decades ago and more. But Eleanor had known almost as soon as Winshire's daughter and daughter-in-law knew that James still lived. Of course, he would come home now, when Winshire's other heirs had died. She should have expected it. Why had she not expected it?

Words from Haverford's rant came back to her as she sipped her tea and looked through the few treasures she had kept all these years, sacred to the memory of their doomed courtship. *Winshire says the man is his son.* The ribbon she wore in her hair the first time they danced. *He lies, of course.* A dried rose from a bouquet he had sent her. *The man has a pack of half-breeds that he claims are his children.* Several notes and two precious letters, including the one in which he asked her to elope. *Barbarians as Dukes of Winshire? Over my dead body!* A handkerchief he'd given her to dry her eyes when she cried while telling him that they must wait; that her father would come around. *Better to see the title in the hands of that idiot Wesley Winderfield than handed over to some cloth head.*

She had kept several brief notes about nothing in particular. 'I saw these and thought of you', on a card with a bouquet of sweet spring flowers. 'Save me a dance at the Mitford's tonight?' 'I saw you in the Park. You rode like a goddess.' They did not have to be signed. They were all from James, and short because they had been passed to her in secret.

She cradled the rose, fragile and faded. *I remember.*



### *The garden of Creydon House, 1777*

Lady Eleanor Creydon traced the words in the water that puddled on the stone rim of the fountain. "Lady James Winderfield." Her lips curved in a tremulous smile. The man she loved was asking her father for her hand, and would soon come to ask her.

"I have made an appointment to meet your father tomorrow," he had whispered in her ear last night as they promenaded down the centre of the double line of dancers. Then, as they passed one another, a few moments later, "You know what I want to ask him, my darling."

She circled the girl at the head of the ladies' line, barely aware of the other people in the room, conscious only of James and the words that set her heart thumping. Only years of practice kept her moving gracefully back around to meet James again, her arm stretched high, her hand ready for his brief clasp and her ears for another burst of whispered words.

"It is what you want?"

Looking up, she nodded, and the anxiety cleared from his eyes as they met hers. How could he be unsure of her? She had no further opportunity to reassure him. They had to part and dance down the outside of their respective lines, and the music drew to a close before they could speak again.

Her mother had been waiting, and hurried her away. The Earl of Farnmouth, her father, had decided it was time to leave the ball.

Eleanor had lain awake in the night, thinking that tomorrow would never come, but at last the sun had come up, and the interminable morning had passed.

James was with her father now, shut in the earl's study. Soon, surely, the earl would send him out into the garden. The answer would be yes, of course. As the daughter of an earl, she knew her worth, but James was third son of a duke; a duke, furthermore who was a friend of her father.

Eleanor cast a glance at the house and frowned slightly. Her father would say yes. Of course, he would. Only last week, he had interrupted her dinner with her mother to announce that he expected a very eligible offer for Eleanor's hand. "I am pleased with your daughter, countess," he had told her mother. "Betrothed only two months after her debut. You are to be congratulated, madam."

He had not spoken to Eleanor, but he seldom did, nor had he given a name. Who could it be but James? James was her most ardent suitor. Indeed, since the rascal son of the Duke of Winshire had made her the object of his devotion, the rest of her court had fallen away. They had been callow boys, in any case, standing up with her because of childhood friendship or because she had become fashionable.

James was a man, not a boy — twenty-four years to her seventeen. He was unbelievably handsome, charming, clever, funny, and dearer to her than anyone she had ever known, even her older sister. And he had chosen her! She clapped her hands and spun in a circle, unable to contain her delight.

Soon he would come. She composed herself on the stone bench opposite the path by which he would enter the garden. How would he propose? On one knee? Sitting beside her? The thought had her up on her feet again, too excited to stay still, peering down the path.

"Eleanor!" It was a hiss just a hairsbreadth above a whisper.

She spun around. James had come from the other direction. Well, no matter. She hurried towards him; her hands outstretched. He scowled, his eyes blazing in a white face. "James? What is the matter?"

He clasped her hands and pulled her after him into the shadows of the yew walk, where he wrapped his arms around her and rested his chin on her hair. "Eleanor, I love you. I love you more than life itself. You believe me, do you not?"

Eleanor pulled away, but only enough to peer into his eyes. "James? What did my father say?"

James groaned.

"James, you are frightening me. Did he say we must wait?"

"Eleanor, he says that he has given your hand to the Duke of Haverford," James blurted.

Eleanor's breath stopped, and the blood surged in her ears as her heart pounded. Her sight grew dark at the edges, and the enormous yew hedges swayed towards her as if to batter her into the ground. By force of will, she fought off her faintness. "But... but he is old," she stammered, "and a wicked libertine, and cold as ice." She stamped her foot. "I don't want him, James. I love you. I love you, James."

"Shush, my love," James begged. "We must be quiet. Farnmouth told me I could not see you again, but I had to, Eleanor. I'll find a way. I promise. You love me, and I love you. I will ask my father to help. He is friends with yours. Surely Winshire can persuade the earl."

"Yes!" Eleanor's heart gave another enormous thump, this time with relief. "We will be together?" she asked.

"We will marry," James promised. He bent his head and his lips touched hers. It was a gentle, reverent salute, but Eleanor pressed closer and the kiss changed, James's lips still soft, but questing, moving, devouring. His tongue pressed the seam of her mouth and swept inside when she gasped. Again, the darkness hovered, but this time it was a welcoming warmth, a giving and taking of sensation, a merging of selves so that Eleanor no longer knew who sighed and who moaned, or how long they stayed intertwined.

The whistling of a gardener brought them back to themselves. "I must go," James told her. "Stay strong, my love. We are meant to be together, and I will find a way."

"We are meant to be together," she agreed.



*Haverford House, London, March 1812*

If she had said 'yes', what would have happened? He had a curricle in the mews. They could have left that night, straight from the garden where they'd slipped out for a private conversation. Haverford would not have assaulted her on her way back inside. James would not have challenged him to a duel, wounded him, and been exiled a step ahead of the constable.

Eleanor carefully replaced the rose and took out the letter her maid had brought her the afternoon after Haverford's horrifying assault had been followed by the announcement of her betrothal. The maid had hidden it under the tray cloth when delivering her breakfast so that the footmen who guarded her bedroom door didn't see it.

*My dearest, dearest love*

*My father is in it, too. He says that Haverford is to have you, as soon as he has recovered from his wounds.*

*I wish I had never challenged the duke, or that I had shot to kill. I meant only to defend your honour; to show he could not speak of you as if you were his possession. Even a husband should hesitate to show such disrespect to the woman he has promised to cherish above all others, and so I told him. 'You are not even her betrothed,' I told him, 'and the last man on earth to deserve her'. I am very sorry, Eleanor. I lost my temper, when I should have been thinking of the best way to press my case with your father.*

*Now, the devil is in it, my father insists that I must flee the country. He says Haverford will have me arrested for shooting him, and Father won't lift a finger to stop him.*

*Come with me, Eleanor. The ship my father has organised leaves in two days, but I have a friend who can get me away tomorrow night. I promise I can look after you. I've sold the little estate my mother left me, so I have funds. We will go to the Continent. I can find work, I know I can, and we will be together. I know it won't be*

*what you are used to or what you deserve, but I love you, and you love me. Is that not worth fleeing for?*

*Meet me by the oak near the back gate of your garden as soon as the house is quiet tomorrow evening. I will be there. We have to be on the ship in time to sail with the dawn, and by the time your household wakes, we shall be gone down the river, and out to sea.*

*Come with me, my love.*

*Yours forever*

*James*

Her father's voice, in her memory. *I'm not throwing you away on a third son, Eleanor Creydon. Winderfield is a fribble; a useless pup. Haverford wants you, and I've accepted him. Forget Winderfield.*

The letter was yellowed with time, and Eleanor, too, had faded with age. But she had not forgotten. She would never forget.

Had she been brave enough or clever enough to break out of her room and evade the guards outside her door and patrolling the garden, Eleanor would not have been left with her reputation in tatters, refusing to marry Haverford and unable to marry James.

If she had continued to refuse, had stayed true to her memories of him, and had not finally given way to her sisters' pleadings—for Lydia assured her that marriage would free her from the tyranny of her father and Helene had been set firmly on the shelf because of Eleanor's scandal—she would not have spent thirty-four years married to a monster. But her father and the Duke of Winshire told her James was dead, and after that it didn't matter what became of her?

They were mistaken, or they lied. Almost certainly, they lied. Now, James was back in England, and she would need to meet him and pretend that they hadn't broken one another's hearts so many years ago.

A few tears fell onto the letter, and then the Duchess of Haverford packed everything away, dried her eyes and returned the box to its place.

Weeping over the past and fretting over the future never helped. She had children who loved her, friends, important work in her charities, and a full and busy life.

She smiled at her reflection in the mirror. Her complexion had returned to normal, and her sense of herself, too. The girl who mourned James had become a woman she rather liked. How could she regret any part of the path that led here?



**H**averford House, London, April 1812

Eleanor had seen James—the Earl of Sutton, she supposed she must call him. Not that she would have a chance to call him anything. The Duke of Haverford had ordered his household and his dependents and allies to cut the entire Winshire family, and to refuse to attend entertainments where they were present.

Eleanor would have to make do with the glimpse last night at the Farningham ball. She had looked up when the room fell silent, and there he stood on the stairs, surrounded by members of his family, whom she barely noticed. James looked wonderful. More than thirty years had passed, and no person on earth would call him a fribble or useless now. He had been a king somewhere in Central Asia, and wore his authority like an invisible garment. And he was still as handsome as he had been in his twenties.

Eleanor caught herself sighing over James like a silly gosling. Silly, because women did not age as well as men, as the whole world knew. She no longer had the slender waist of a maiden, her hair was beginning to grey, and her face showed the lines her mother swore she would avoid if she never smiled, laughed, frowned, or showed any other emotion. Of course, she had not followed her mother's instruction, but those who had were no less lined than Eleanor, as far as she could see.

Besides, she was a married woman, and he was a virtuous man who had, by all accounts, deeply loved his wife. Even if he was willing and she was a widow, she would never take a lover. Somewhere within her might lurk the monster that was consuming her husband. Perhaps not. According to the physician, she had a better than even chance. But she would not know until she was sick, or until she was on her deathbed and still clean of the dreadful thing.



### *Haverford Castle, East Kent, 1784*

The Duke of Haverford did not bother with greetings or enquiries about Eleanor's health. He flung open the door without knocking and marched into Eleanor's sitting room, saying, "What is it, duchess? I have a great deal to do today."

Inwardly, Eleanor quailed as he stood over her, threat in every line of his posture. Unlike her father, he had never beaten her in cold blood, but she had every reason to fear his temper.

But fear would not serve her here. She was fighting for her life and for the wellbeing of her son. She maintained an outward semblance of calm and gestured to a chair. "Will you not be seated, Your Grace? As I said in my note, I have an important matter to discuss with you."

Haverford grumbled, but sat; even accepted a cup of tea. The delicate porcelain cup might not survive the next few minutes, but its sacrifice was a small price to pay for giving the discussion a façade of normality.

As she'd hoped, the good manners drilled into every English gentleman in the presence of a lady, even his wife, kept the duke sitting during the ritual of preparing the cup, but he burst out as soon as he accepted it from his wife's hand. "Well, duchess?"

Eleanor prepared her own cup, glad to have a reason not to look at him as she spoke. "Your Grace, you will be aware that I have been very ill this past six weeks. It is, indeed, why I removed myself to Haverford Castle."

“Yes, yes. And I’m glad to see you much improved, madam. I have need of you in London.” He condescended to provide an explanation. “The bill I am sponsoring—those idiots who will not listen are much easier to convince after you’ve given them one of your excellent meals, and invited their wives and daughters to your soirees. How soon can you be ready to travel?”

What an excellent opening. “I can pack tomorrow and leave for London the day after, Your Grace.”

Haverford smiled. “Excellent, excellent.” He put the cup down, shifting as if to stand.

“If I do not have a relapse,” Eleanor added.

Haverford sank back into his chair, frowning.

Now to get to the meat of the matter. Eleanor grasped hold of her dwindling supply of courage with both hands. *This is about saving Aldridge*. The situation in the nursery was fit to ruin him. His attendants had always indulged his every whim, egged on by the duke, who considered himself to be the only person the infant marquis needed to obey. Eleanor’s frequent visits and threats of dismissal allowed him to be raised with some sense of structure and decorum. He knew she would not tolerate rudeness or temper, to her or to his nurses and the maids.

After spending four weeks too sick to leave her bed, she found the nursery in disarray, the young heir ruling the roost. He was in a wild tantrum when she arrived, and the next hour left her drooping with fatigue, and she still had to hunt down the boy’s missing head nurse and find out why she had allowed such chaos to reign.”

The memory prompted her to deal with the minor issue first. “Your affair with Aldridge’s nurse, Your Grace.”

He straightened, and opened his mouth, but Eleanor spoke over the rebuke that was certain to come. “I have no objection, sir, but I assume you have not given her license to neglect your heir or to be impertinent to me.”

The duke frowned. “Certainly not. I shall have a word with the bitch.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. You have always required others to treat me with the respect due to your wife, and that is why I was certain I

could depend on you for what I am about to ask.” Honey worked better than vinegar, one of the Haverford great aunts was fond of saying.

The duke smirked at the compliment and inclined his head, graciously indicating that she should continue.

Now for it. Best to say it straight out, as she had rehearsed a dozen times since she and Haverford’s base-born half-brother, who was also his steward, had concocted the strategy. “You may be aware, Your Grace, that I have been taking the mercury treatment for the pox. As I am a faithful wife, and have only ever had intimate knowledge of one man—yourself, Your Grace—I must assume it originated with you.”

As expected, Haverford erupted. “I will not—”

Eleanor held up a hand. “Your Grace has needs, and I would not normally comment on how you meet them, as long as any lovers you take within the household you have given me to manage are willing partners.”

She kept talking over his attempt to interrupt, hoping his temper would not override his manners. “I owe you a second son, Your Grace, and I fully intend to attempt to carry out that side of our bargain, but I have a request to make to keep me safe from falling ill again.”

He frowned, silenced for the moment. Eleanor thought it best to wait for him to speak. At least he was listening.

“Go on,” he said at last.

“My doctor has assured me that fewer than half of all people who contracted second stage syphilis moved into the deadlier third stage, and most of those had the disease multiple times. Repeated infections may also kill or deform any further children we have. I would like to take steps to limit the risk, Your Grace.”

“What steps?”

In the end, Haverford lost his temper twice more before he signed the document she put before him. In it, he promised to not to require intimacy from Eleanor unless he had refrained from any potential source of the disease for six weeks, and had been inspected by a doctor.

She had delicately hinted at the retribution that would follow if he didn't keep his word. A gentleman's word was his bond, of course, but only when given to other gentlemen. Haverford would not hesitate to break an agreement with his wife, if it suited him.

Thanks to the duke's training in politics, she knew all about the pressure to apply—in this case, the social contacts who would be informed of the whole disgusting situation if he broke his word. She had been a lady of the chamber to the Queen, was friends with several of the princesses, was sister to the current Earl of Farnmouth and sister-in-law to another earl and an earl's second son.

Added to that there were all of her social contacts. Those she had been presented with were only the start. Being Haverford's hostess had given her huge reach into the upper echelons of Society, especially those families headed by his political cronies and rivals.

One son, she contracted for, and a maximum of two more pregnancies. Eleanor prayed she would conceive quickly, that she would suffer no more miscarriages, and that she would deliver a healthy son without any further ado.



### *Haverford House, London, April 1812*

To give Haverford credit, Eleanor conceded, he had stuck to the agreement for several years. Her copy of the agreement was still in her secret compartment, somewhere. Her co-conspirator, Tolly Fitz-Grenford, had a second copy, and the third had been given to her brother in a sealed envelope, to be opened only if she died unexpectedly or sent a message asking him to read it.

Presumably, that copy was somewhere in the papers inherited by her nephew. Perhaps she should ask for it back, for Haverford had not approached her with marital duties in mind since she announced that she was *enceinte* with the child who proved to be the wanted spare son.

She very much doubted that he ever would. After all, his mistresses and lovers were all twenty or thirty years younger than Eleanor.

On the other hand, he was behaving like a bad-tempered guard dog over James Winderfield's return, and she wouldn't put it past him to—mark his territory, as it were. The copies of the agreement had better stay where they were.

In truth, as long as the disease never recurred, Haverford had done her a favour. Without the incentive, she might have taken much longer to grasp what freedom she could.

Eleanor felt dizzy again, just thinking about James as he appeared last night. Haverford's command was not to be borne. Grace and Georgie were her dearest friends, and she was not going to be separated from them.

She would need to be careful, though. Perhaps one of her goddaughters could pass a note to one of Grace's daughters. The Society for the Betterment of Indigent Mothers and Orphans was meeting tomorrow. That would do nicely.

She moved to her escritoire, took out a sheet of her monogrammed paper, and sharpened a quill. Now. Where could they meet? Perhaps Grace or Georgie might have a notion.

**A** *Haverford townhouse in Brighton, May 1812*

The package was stamped with the welcome postmark—ST PETERSBORGH, all in capitals. Eleanor guessed its origins when the butler brought it into the room, properly presented on a salver. The package itself was anonymous from across the room, but her butler's face, usually professionally impassive, told the tale. Only dear Jonathan brought that lift to the corners of Parswarden's lips, as if he was fighting a doting smile.

Sure enough, she recognised the slanting hand, just far enough away from a scrawl to escape his tutor's heavy hand. She reached out for it, grinning at Parswarden. "News from Jonathan," she affirmed. "Wait while I open it, Parswarden, and I will give you news to take below stairs."

Parswarden's smile almost escaped his control. "If Your Grace would be so good, I am sure Cook would be pleased to hear how our young lord is managing in those foreign parts. I will send for a tea tray for Your Grace, while you open your package, shall I?"

Fifteen minutes later, the butler sailed out of the room, as close to hurrying as his dignity would allow, eager to regale the upper servants with stories of their young lord and his adventures: racing a troika—a sleigh pulled by three horses; dancing with a Russian imperial highness; hunting wolves with a wild band of Cossacks.

Eleanor shivered at the risks he took, but she had to admit that Jonathan led a charmed life, and waltzed through danger that made her hair curl. Indeed, he had been both charmed and charming since his birth.

She smiled as she sipped her tea. He had arrived after a further miscarriage, when she had almost lost hope that the birth of a son would deliver her from the consequences of her husband's lifestyle. Haverford had kept his word. As soon as it was certain that she was with child, he stopped visiting her, and before long she and her husband had established a pattern of separate lives, intersecting only when Eleanor would be a social or political asset to the duke.

Later that summer Haverford demanded she serve in such a role when he insisted on her joining him for a house party in Wales, where he wanted her assistance to impress a former ally who had changed sides. Later, she looked back on that chance meeting with the daughter of a local mine owner as a watershed moment in her life. The woman's son had the Haverford hazel eyes.

He arrived at her house a few months later, escaping his cruel grandfather after his mother's birth. In helping him, Eleanor discovered what became her life's passion: helping the helpless, particularly those with a call on His Grace or the Haverford family.

Perhaps it was not the life she had dreamed of, but she had made a difference in many lives. She mattered. Her pregnancy ended in a difficult birth, and it took her time to recover, but by the time Lord George Jonathan Creydon Walter Grenford received his unwieldy list of names at his baptism, the boy from Wales was established in her house. In her hidden cupboard, tied into a neat package, lay the notes that confirmed her in her path.

*Haverford House, London, August 1787*

Thomas Oliver, or Uncle Tolly as her son called him, balanced the delicate porcelain cup carefully on his knee, not taking his eyes off his hostess. A slow blink was his only reaction to her announcement that she intended to defy both Society and her husband. The Duke of Haverford was not a gentle man, and did not tolerate rebellion in his household. As his base-born brother, Tolly Fitz-Grenford had reason to know this fact at first-hand.



"The duke will not be pleased," he warned.

"His Grace will not wish to upset me." The duchess smiled serenely, and placed a hand on her middle. Tolly nodded his understanding. Eleanor had lost several babies since the son who secured the succession. Even His Grace would hesitate to counter his duchess's express commands when she might carry the backup hope of the Haverfords.

"Does His Grace know the boy is here?" Tolly asked.

"His Grace left London immediately after Jonathan's christening, Tolly, which gives me time. I would like to be armed with some information before he discovers David's presence.

"So, what, precisely, do you wish me to do?" Tolly asked.

Eleanor had her answer ready. "Talk to the boy, then trace back his steps and talk to the people he met on the way. I have made my own judgement based on my meeting with him and his mother. Your report will confirm or disprove that he is fit company for the Marquis of Aldridge and the baby. I believe him, Tolly, but I do not trust myself in such an important matter." She waved an impatient hand. "You understand. You are His Grace's half-brother, as David is half-brother to my sons."

Fitz-Grenford smiled, despite the caution he felt impelled to offer. "Unacknowledged half-brother, and the duke will bar the door to me if I presume on the relationship in the least. Very well, Your Grace. I shall see what I can find out."



*"Your Grace, enclosed please find reports of the interviews I conducted on your behalf into the journey of the boy David. He seems a nice lad. I will look forward to hearing how he goes on. Sincerely yours, Tolly.*



*Gerald Ficklestone-Smythe*

*Manager of Cowbridge Mine, Llanfair*

The boy was gone when I got back from the funeral. Little bastard. I told him I'd kick him to next Tuesday if dinner wasn't on the table, but nothing was prepared, and he was nowhere to be found. And he'd let the fire go out. He'll come back when he's hungry, and I'll have the skin off his back, see if I don't.

Where else is he going to go? London? To the duchess? My slut of a daughter, told the boy to go to the duchess when she was dead, but he is stupid if he thinks she's going to want her husband's by-blow, and so I told him when I took the money she'd left with his mother. I had a right to it, didn't I? I took his mother back after the duke had finished with her. I gave her a home. I even let her keep the boy.

The duke owed me that money. Yes, and more. Made a harlot out of my daughter, and turned her off with a measly few hundred pounds. Wouldn't pay more when that ran out. Then, when my daughter lay dying and couldn't keep house for me anymore, that pernicious swine sent his wife to steal the boy I raised, promising him I don't know what.

Now the bitch is dead, and the boy can't be found, but where could he have gone? He has no money for the coach fare, and it's a long walk to London, especially with winter coming on, and the Black Mountains between here and England.

He's no fool, the boy. He'll be back.



*Jeremiah Penchsnith*

*Captain of the Merry Molly, Bristol*

We didn't find the lad till we was near Avonmouth. 'E was hid in the coal, but we saw 'im when 'e tried to escape over the side. 'E fair wriggled when we caught 'im, begged us to let 'im go. But 'e owed us 'is passage, and so I told him.

If we let away every lad who wanted a free trip over the Bristol Channel, we might as well set up as a ferry, and that's what I said.

Give the lad credit, 'e worked 'ard. Four trips 'e did wiv us, not counting the first. And then he left us in Bristol. I'd've kept 'im on, I would. Good worker, that lad. I 'ope 'e gets where 'e's going."



*Maggie Wakefield*

*Farmer's wife, Ditchford Frary, East Cotswolds*

He was a mystery, young David. Turned up in a snow storm, he did. Bessie the dog found him when Matthew went out after the sheep, huddled up in the midst of the flock where they'd taken shelter in the lee of the old stone wall.

Matthew brought them all home: boy and sheep, the boy limping along on a stick because his ankle was swollen to twice its size. "I've a lamb for you to warm by the fire, mother," Matthew said, and then stood aside. Just a sprain, it turned out to be, but a bad one. I would not turn man or beast out in weather like that, let alone a boy, and no more would Matthew, so of course we let David stay.

Where did he come from in that awful weather? Wales, he said, but that couldn't be, could it? Wales is a long way away, across the wolds and then the water. And mountains, too, they say.

David was a good boy, so perhaps he was telling the truth. He made himself useful until he could walk again. He was a good hand in the kitchen, and he read to me and Matthew at night, which was a great blessing, for our eyes are not what they were. Not that I've ever read more than enough to piece together a few verses from the Bible. Not like David. It was a treat to listen to him, and I was sorry when he left.

But he had people waiting for him, he said, so off he went, off to London. We got him a lift as far as Oxford with Jem Carter. I hope he made it to his people. A fine boy like that? They would have been missing him, I'm sure.



*Sir Philip Westmacott*  
*Gentleman, London*

My tiger? He's taken off. Ungrateful brat. Good boy with the horses, too. But there you go. That's what I get for taking a boy off the streets. I found him in Oxford, you know. Oh yes, I told you before, didn't I. He made sure I got back to my inn after a rather exciting evening. Didn't rob me, either, though he could have. I was somewhat—er—elevated.

I told him to come back in the morning for his reward, and he was waiting outside in the stable yard when I woke. And all he wanted was to come to London with me. I bought him a suit of clothing, of course. Couldn't be seen with him in the rags he had. Not livery. Not in Oxford. But I thought silver blue, to set off his dark hair. It would have looked stunning against my matched blacks.

We arrived late at night, and in the morning he was gone. Ungrateful brat.



*Henry Bartlett*  
*Gatekeeper, Haverford House, London*

Of course I didn't let him in. A boy like that? Tidily dressed enough, and nicely spoken, but what child of substance is allowed to walk around the streets? But he wasn't a street urchin, neither. He asked if he could send a note, and he wrote it right there on a piece of paper I found him. Never was a street urchin that could read and write.

Anyway, I sent it in to the duchess. Told him he'd have to wait, but it wasn't but an hour before Her Grace's own maid came down to fetch him, and the next thing I knew, he was part of the household.

He seems a pleasant enough lad; always polite. But it just doesn't seem right, raising the duke's bastard under the same roof as his legal sons. The duke agrees, or so goes the talk in the servant's hall. But the duchess got her way, this time. And we're all to treat the boy as if he were gentleman. Her Grace has hired him a

tutor, and word is he's off to Eton in the autumn. And the little Marquis follows him around like a puppy dog.

What will be the end of it, do you suppose?



### *A Haverford townhouse in Brighton, May 1812*

Eleanor opened the secret compartment of the escritoire that travelled everywhere with her. She didn't bother with Tolly's notes, but she did bring out the box of wooden toys that David had carved for his half-brothers. Aldridge's soldiers were particularly fine, the paint barely flaking. David had made them for Aldridge's twelfth birthday, and Aldridge never touched them again after Haverford threw David out.

Four-year-old Jonathan had been grief-stricken, though not as broken-hearted as Aldridge. Not that Aldridge spoke of it, then or later, but she'd seen the change in him; seen, too, the devastation he'd suffered when he and David met again, just a few years ago, only to be split even more decisively. That time, he'd admitted to Eleanor that he blamed himself: for Haverford's actions when he was twelve and David seventeen, and for the mistake that nearly cost David the life of the women he and Aldridge both loved.

Eleanor ran her hands over the scarred and dented head of the push-along toy David had made Jonathan so he wouldn't feel left out when Aldridge got his present. The stick to push it had long since gone. It had been Jonathan's favourite toy for years, till the pegs that made the legs move broke so they dangled, and the paint was completely worn away. A few specks of the bright colours it had been painted remained in the cracks. Eleanor kept it as a memento of the happy times with all three boys, when they stayed at Haverford Castle, and the duke did not.

Perhaps it could be repaired? If Jonathan ever married and had a son, she would like him to have it.

She chuckled at her own hopeful dreams. Certainly, nothing in his letter indicated the approach of that day! And, to be fair, he had no

need to wed. He was a second son, independently wealthy, and could please himself. She just wished he would do it in England.

**H**averford House, London, June 1812

Eleanor had withdrawn to her private sitting room, driven there by His Grace's shouting. Her son, the Marquis of Aldridge, was as angry as she had ever seen him, his face white and rigid and his eyes blazing, but he kept his voice low; had even warned the duke about shouting.

"Let us not entertain the servants, Your Grace, with evidence of your villainy."

Unsurprisingly, the duke had taken exception to the cutting words and had shouted even louder.

Could it be true? Had Haverford paid an assassin to kill the sons of the man he insisted as seeing as his rival? An assassin with a pistol in the woods who had been caught before he could carry out his wicked commission.

His Grace's jealousy made no sense. Yes, James was back in England, but what did that matter to Haverford?

He had been furious when James and his family attended their first ball, and beside himself with rage when Society refused to accept that the prodigal returned was an imposter. She expected him to continue to attack the new Earl of Sutton with words. Even his petition to the House of Lords to have James's marriage declared invalid and his children base-born was typical of Haverford. But to pay for an assassin?

He had failed. She would hold onto that. And Aldridge was more than capable of holding his own.

As she sat there with her tea tray, sheltering from the anger of her menfolk, she gave thanks that her son had not been ruined by his father's dictates over how he should be raised. She had been able to mitigate some of the damage, but more than that, his younger brother Jonathan and his older half-brother David had been his salvation, giving him the confidence that he was loved and the awareness that he was not the centre of the entire world.

Aldridge's fundamentally loving nature helped, too. He was a rake, but not in his father's mould. Rather, he loved and respected women, even if he did treat them according to the stupid conventions applied to aristocratic males. And he was a good son.

Putting down her tea, she fetched a little box of keepsakes from her hidden cupboard. The fan her long dead brother had given her before her first ball. A small bundle of musical scores, that recalled pleasant evenings in her all too brief Season. Aldridge's cloth rabbit. She had retrieved it when Haverford had ordered it destroyed, saying his son was a future duke and should not be coddled.

Aldridge had been eight months' old. Anthony George Bartholomew Philip Grenford, his full name was, but he had been born heir to his father, and therefore Marquis of Aldridge, and by Haverford's decree no one, not even Eleanor, called him by anything but his title.

Even so, the cloth rabbit had not been the first time she secretly defied her husband. She had been sneaking up to the nursery since Aldridge was born, despite the duke's proclamation that ladies of her rank had their babies presented to them once a day, washed, sweetly smelling and well behaved, and handing the infants back to their attendants if any of those conditions failed or after thirty minutes, whichever came first.

It was not enough for Eleanor, if she had grown bolder and bolder and slowly taken control of her life, it was for their sweet sake.





*Hollystone Hall, December 1791*

Eleanor poured tea for Tolly Fitz-Grenford, wondering if he would agree to her plan. After Haverford had exiled David and sent Aldridge off to school, she had pleaded with him to bring them both home, but he had laughed at her; pointed out that she had no power over him. In fact, he declared, her open defiance was enough to cancel the agreement they had made before Jonathan's birth.

So, she had then packed her bags and retreated to this lesser estate, the one place in the vast Haverford holdings that belonged to Her Grace and not His Grace.

"There, Tolly. Milk and no sugar. Is that not correct?"

Tolly took the cup. "Yes, Your Grace. Thank you."

She smiled. "We are brother and sister, Tolly. Will you call me 'Eleanor'?"

Tolly's face heated. As Eleanor knew, his relationship to the duke was not precisely a secret, but he had never been acknowledged. The father they shared had brought the son of a favourite mistress to be raised on the estate, and had even kept on his half-brother's tutor to train Tolly in the skills he would need to serve the duchy. Still, he had not been encouraged to show any familiarity, and the duke liked Tolly no more than Tolly liked the duke. "His Grace..."

Eleanor scowled. "I do not mean to concern myself ever again with the opinions of His Grace, except as I must for my safety and that of my children and the servants. Will you not call me by my name, Tolly, when we are not in company? Will you be my friend? For I stand in great need of one."

Tolly leaned forward to pat her hand. "I will always stand your friend, Eleanor," he told her.

"Good, for I need your help. Can you find me information with which to blackmail Haverford?"

Tolly blinked. Clearly, that was not what he expected.

"Blackmail?" he stuttered in response. "Is he... Has he..."

Eleanor pursed her lips, considering how much to tell him, then nodded decisively. "I shall be frank, Tolly. You shall not be shocked, for you know the duke even better than I do, in some ways. Some time ago, when he gave me a loathsome disease he picked up from

one of his intimate companions, you helped me broker an agreement with him. He intends to repudiate the agreement. I intend to prevent him from doing so.”

Tolly was reduced to stammering again. “I am sorry, Eleanor.”

Eleanor waved off his commiserations. “I need to a truce with him, Tolly, for he has the power to keep my children from me. I wish to live apart, but in the same house. Will you find me the ammunition to bend him to my will?”

Tolly sat back. She knew he admired her. Would he be willing to fight the duke for her? It would not be easy. The Duke of Haverford was one of the most powerful men in the country. He feared little and was embarrassed by nothing.

She was relieved when he said, “I think I may be able to help, Eleanor. I have a couple of ideas.”

Eleanor’s smile broadened. “I have in mind to be a proper mother to my children; one who spends time with them as real mothers do, and also to do good for others with my position and my wealth. I can build a good life, Tolly, if I can just keep Haverford at arms’ length.”

Tolly narrowed his eyes as he thought. “I shall investigate, Eleanor. He will have secrets that will embarrass even him. I will find them for you.”

“Thank you, Tolly.”

He gave her a distracted smile as he continued to list strategies. “Entertainments,” he said. “Eleanor, build alliances with the other great ladies of the ton and become a formidable hostess. You have it in you. If you have the support of the ladies, Haverford will have to think twice about acting against you.”

Perfect! She knew he would be the right person to talk to. “And if I continue to host his political cronies and support his public life, he will have far less objection to my removing myself from his private one.”

“You will have to fight him for influence over Aldridge,” Tolly warned.

“I know,” Eleanor agreed. “But I have an advantage there, my friend. I have never bullied or beaten my son.” She lifted her cup as if

it was filled with port or brandy rather than tea. “To my freedom, Tolly.”

He grinned and returned the salute. “To your freedom.”



*Haverford House, London, July 1812*

She *had* been free, too; as much as a woman could be when married to the Duke of Haverford. She had been cautious about using the information that Tolly brought her. Haverford in a rage would ignore his own best interests, and any scandal would hurt her children and her other proteges as well as him. But usually, she had been able to live as she pleased.

She had considerable freedom, the opportunity to help others, and her children—what more could any woman expect?

At the firm rap on her door, she tucked the cloth rabbit away, slid the hidden compartment back into place and moved the panels to return the escritoire to its normal appearance. She knew that knock. “Enter,” she called.

As expected, the visitor was Aldridge. Also as expected. He had been coming to her to be calmed after he’d worked himself into a fury since he was a little boy.

“Brandy, rather than tea, I think, my dear,” she said to him. She was so proud of her son. In the silent battle for Aldridge’s spirit, Haverford had done some damage, but the young marquis still retained his kindness and his innate decency. Eleanor was grateful for that.

**H**averford House, London, July 1812

The Duchess of Haverford took tea in her rooms this quiet Monday afternoon. She was alone for once; even the maid who brought the tray sent off back to the servants' hall. Her life was such a bustle, and for the most part, that was how she liked it, but just for once, it was nice to have an afternoon to herself. No meetings. No entertainments to attend or offer. Not even any family members—her current companion had gone to visit her mother for her afternoon off, Aldridge was about his own business, her youngest ward was at lessons, and the two older girls had been invited on an outing with a friend.

As to Haverford, who knew where he was? But he would not disturb her here.

The thought had barely crossed her mind when a knock sounded; not the discreet tap of a servant, but a firm rap. *Not the duke. He wouldn't knock.* "Enter," she called.

Aldridge let himself into the room. He greeted her with his usual aplomb, asked after her day, but she could tell immediately that he was agitated. "What is wrong, my son?"

"I have no easy way to say this, Mama." He knelt before her and took her hands. "Sutton has been assaulted in the street, and his schoolroom party was also attacked. A runaway brewer's dray that was not a runaway at all." He squeezed her hands, pulling her back

from her sudden dizziness. "Sutton gave his assailants a drubbing, and the children and their attendants are unhurt, thanks to swift action on the part of their escort."

Eleanor let out the air she was holding. "Thank goodness! And thank you, my dear, for letting me know before gossip made it so much worse."

Aldridge frowned slightly. "There is more. I heard of the assault on Sutton before it happened, and arrived with help just after. Mama, my secretary was asked to be the paymaster for the assailants. And guess who gave him the command."

She knew before her son said it. Breathed the words with him. "His Grace? Surely not. After the assassin at the duel, why would he do something like this again?"

"His Grace." Aldridge confirmed. He leapt to his feet and paced the room, not able to keep still for a moment, his body expressing the agitation his face refused to display. "He is getting worse, Mama. Whether it would have happened anyway, or whether the arrival of Sutton lit the flame, he lives on the point of explosion."

"I know, my dear." She knew better than Aldridge, in fact. Despite the long estrangement between her and her husband, they nonetheless lived in the same house, attended some of the same social gatherings, worked side-by-side for the same political causes. Aldridge kept largely to his own wing when he was under the same roof as his parents, which was increasingly rare. He managed all the vast business of the duchy, but Haverford had long since let go those reins to the extent that his only association with Aldridge tended to be through the bills and notes of hand that arrived regularly to be paid.

Aldridge thumped the mantelpiece. "This latest start... if word gets out that Haverford was behind the attack on Sutton and his family, it will be a disaster. Sutton would be well within his rights to demand Haverford's trial for attempted murder. This family is no stranger to scandal, Mama, and there's no doubt in my mind His Grace deserves to be hanged, silken noose or not, but..."

Eleanor's distress was such she found herself chewing her lip. "Thank God no one was seriously hurt."

“Thank Sutton and his sons for their warrior-craft, and my secretary for telling me in time to lead a rescue.” Aldridge heaved a deep sigh and took another fast turn around the carpet. “He intended murder, Mama, and when I confronted him with it, he laughed and said he did it for England. He has gone too far, Mama. If he is found out, he puts us all at risk. What if the Regent decides to regard a murder attempt on another peer as treason?”

Eleanor had not considered that possibility. The title could be attained, the lineage considered corrupt. Aldridge had worked for years to rebuild the wealth of the duchy after his father’s mismanagement. He could lose it all, including the title, and the Prince would be delighted to benefit.

Haverford had become more and more erratic as the year progressed. He insulted and alarmed other people at every event he attended, completely ignoring social conventions and saying whatever he thought, often using the foulest of language. Thankfully, he was showing less and less inclination to go into Polite Society. Even so, the duchess frequently needed to use all her considerable tact and diplomacy to soothe ruffled feathers and quiet the gossip that claimed the duke was going mad.

“He is going mad,” she acknowledged to her son, the one person in the world who could be trusted with the knowledge. “It is the French Disease, I am sure. It is rotting his brain.”

“We cannot bring in doctors to examine him, Mama. Who knows what would come of that; what he would say and who they would tell? He cannot be allowed to continue, however.”

Eleanor frowned. It was a conundrum. Who could prevent a duke from doing whatever he pleased?

Aldridge, apparently. “I have made arrangements. He has been persuaded to travel to Haverford Castle. When he arrives, trusted servants know to keep him there. He will be comfortable, Mama. I have arranged for him to be entertained, and have nurses on hand in case he needs them. The disease will kill him in the next year or two, probably, and he is likely to be bedridden long before the end.”

He was brave, her son. He was breaking the laws of God and man in showing such disobedience to his father and a peer of the

realm. She was sure God would understand, but the Courts might not. She would not ask about the entertainment Aldridge had provided. Knowing Haverford as she did, she did not want to know details. "He must never be set free," she concluded. Should anyone find out he was insane, the scandal would be enormous. Worse still for Aldridge.

"I understand that such spells may come and go, so we need to be prepared for him to return to sanity, at least for a time," Aldridge cautioned. "But if that does not happen, my instructions are to keep him from understanding he is imprisoned for as long as possible. With luck, the confusion in his mind will prevent him from ever working it out. I needed you to know, Mama, for two reasons. First, we need a story for the *ton*. Second, if he does not recover and if anything happens to me, it will be for you to keep him confined until Jon returns to be heir in my place."

"I hope dear Jonathan comes home soon, Aldridge. I miss my son. But do not speak of your demise, my dear. I could not bear it."

Aldridge stopped beside her and bent to kiss her forehead. "You are the strongest woman I know, dearest. Fret not. I am careful, and I intend to live to grow old."

Eleanor hoped so. She certainly hoped so.

After he left, she sat and stared at her *escritoire*, the concealer of her secrets. If Haverford's madness came out, what would it do her darling wards, the daughters of her heart? Her two eldest had only just made their debut this year, and the rumours about their origins made their lives hard enough!

*Haverford House, London, May 1792*

Tolly advised against the meeting. He said he would deal with Miss Kelly's problem. "I quite agree Haverford ought to do something to assist the opera dancer, given he is the immediate cause of the young female losing her job and needing to spend all her savings." Haverford would not, so it was for Tolly and Eleanor to intervene, as they had before. "You should not speak to such persons yourself," Tolly insisted. Tolly was quite firm on the subject, which Eleanor found sad, since his mother had been another such person.

Eleanor had insisted, so here was Miss Kelly, sitting in one of the smaller parlours at Haverford House, a delicate tea cup cradled in both hands.

She was exceptionally pretty; slender, with a heart-shaped face framed by dark curly hair, and blue eyes that were currently wide with wonder as she looked around the parlour.

The duchess allowed her a few minutes, until she overcame her curiosity and remembered her manners. "I beg yer pardon, Your Grace. It's rude, it is, to be staring at yer things like this. I can't be telling ye how grateful I am that ye agreed to see me."

"I must also admit to curiosity, Miss Kelly," Eleanor replied. "The gentleman who brought you here advised against my seeing you, but I ignored him."

The question, 'and why was that?' sparked in Miss Kelly's expressive eyes, but she simply repeated, "I am grateful."

Eleanor leaned forward to examine the unfortunate consequence of Miss Kelly's association with the Duke of Haverford, currently asleep in a basket at Miss Kelly's feet. The little girl was well wrapped against the cold, but the tiny face was adorable. Dark wisps of curl had escaped from the knitted bonnet, and a tiny hand clutched the blanket, pink dimples at the base of each chubby finger.

"My friend tells me that you seek a home for the baby," Eleanor commented.

Miss Kelly heard the question. "I cannot be taking her home, you see. I have a chance... There's a man. He wanted to wed me when my Ma and Pa died, but I had my head full o' dreams. He went home without me, but he'll take me yet. He knows how it is for girls like me. He'll not blame me for not being a maid, but — Patrick is a proud man, Your Grace. He'll not raise another man's babe. Or if he does, he'll make it no life for her, and we'd finish up hating one another and the poor wee girleen."

Eleanor could see the point. "So, you will leave her behind."

Miss Kelly must have assumed a criticism in that. "I'd keep her if I could, Your Grace, but here in London? How can a girl like me earn enough to support her and keep her with me? I want a good home for her; somewhere safe where she can grow up to better than her



Ma. Then what happens to me don't matter, so I might as well take Patrick as not. Better than another protector. Leastwise, if I get another baby in my belly, I'll have a man to stand by me."

As Haverford had not. He had turned his pregnant mistress out of the house in which he'd installed her, with a few pounds to 'get rid of the brat'. Miss Kelly did not have to tell Eleanor that part of the story. She knew it well enough from past liaisons. Tolly proposed to find a childless couple who wanted a daughter to love.

At that moment, the baby opened her eyes, looked around with apparent interest, then fixed her gaze on Eleanor, or — more probably — on the diamonds sparkling in Eleanor's ear bobs. The little treasure smiled, and reached up her arms, babbling an incomprehensible phrase.

Eleanor was on her knees beside the basket, reaching for the dear child before she thought to look up and ask permission. "May I?"

When she called for her secretary, thirty minutes later, little Matilda was still in Eleanor's arms. "Ah. Clara. This is Miss Kelly. She will be staying in the nursery for the next few days. I need you to hire me a wet nurse and a nanny to look after Matilda after Miss Kelly leaves. I also want to purchase a smallholding in — Kinvara, was it not? It shall be your dowry, Miss Kelly."

It was nearly five months before the Duke of Haverford discovered that the nursery, recently vacated by his younger son Jonathan, was once again occupied. He was moved to challenge his wife on her presumption, but her only response was to tell him the child's full name — Matilda Angelica Kelly Grenford — and to add that the scandal of her presence was long past, but the scandal of her removal would be ongoing. As his duchess and a leading figure in Society, the woman had the power to make the outrageous threat stick. He dealt with the impertinence in his usual fashion. He left, and never mentioned the little girl's existence again.



*Haverford House, London, July 1812*

She had intended only the one—a daughter to satisfy the longing for a little girl to raise and love. But fate had other ideas, and the second child arrived within a matter of months.



*Haverford House, London, September 1792*

When Mrs Watterson had asked for this meeting, she had seemed so nervous that the Eleanor had offered to meet her in the housekeeper's sitting room, thinking the woman might be more at ease on her own ground. It had made no appreciable difference. The housekeeper sat bolt upright, not sipping from her cup, her knuckles white with tension, her voice strained as she tried to make conversation.

Mrs Watterson praised the baby, little Miss Matilda, reminding Eleanor that she would far rather be upstairs in the nursery than down here in the cluttered little room, where the furniture was overstuffed and the fire too hot.

Eleanor was discovering the joys of mothering a baby, and would have spent the whole day in the nursery with her little ward, had her duties allowed. The duchess was a mother twice over, but both the ducal heir and the spare had been taken from her at birth, handed over to a retinue of servants, and thereafter presented for a ceremonious inspection for a few minutes a day whenever she and they happened to be in the same residence.

When Aldridge was born, she had been so oppressed by her marriage and the expectations that crushed her, she had accepted the duke's dictate: that aristocratic women had little to do with the children they produced for the well-being of the title. By the time Jonathan arrived, she had recovered some of her confidence, but the pregnancy and birth, coming after years of miscarriages, left her frail both emotionally and physically, and her little boy had been six months old when she wrested control of the nursery from the despot

who had ruled there since Haverford appointed her in the early days of their marriage.

The woman had been gone for more than five years, and sweet little Matilda was in the care of her replacement: a woman chosen by Eleanor, with testimonials from people Eleanor trusted, and completely devoid of the physical attributes that were the only qualifications of interest to the duke when he interviewed a female for any position.

An apology dragged Eleanor's attention back to the conversation. Mrs Watterson had finally begun to approach the matter that had her so anxious. "Forgive my impertinence, Your Grace," she said, "but is it true that Miss Matilda... that her mother...?"

Seeing Eleanor's raised brows, she rushed on. "I don't ask out of idle curiosity, ma'am. It is just that..."

All suddenly became clear. Eleanor sighed. "One of the maids? Or a villager's child?"

Much of the tension rushed out of Mrs Watterson, expelled in a huff of air. "My niece, Your Grace. I would not have said anything, but..." Tears began to roll down the pale cheeks.

Eleanor patted her hand. "I shall help, of course. A pension. A place to live in a village where she isn't known."

Mrs Watterson shook her head, the tears increasing in volume. Eleanor suppressed a sigh for her lost afternoon with Matilda, and devoted her energies to soothing the housekeeper and eliciting the rest of the story.

It was a sad one, but one she had heard before during nearly fifteen years of marriage to the Duke of Haverford. Jessie, the orphaned daughter of Mrs Waterson's only sister, worked for a neighbouring household. "I would not have her in this house, Your Grace, saving your pardon," the housekeeper said. It did not save the girl. She was returning from an errand to the village when a gentleman (Mrs Watterson began 'His Gr...' then changed the word) overtook her on the road. He saw that she was young and pretty, and led her off into the woods on the side of the road. Having exercised what he regarded as his rights, he rode on his way.

Jessie told no one until six months later, when one of the maids with whom she shared a room noticed the swelling she had managed, until then, to conceal. Of course, she was dismissed, but her aunt found her lodgings in the village, and paid for her keep and the services of the midwife. "It was a hard birth, Your Grace," Mrs Watterson explained. "Little Jessica survived, but my niece did not. I'm the only kin she has, poor little baby, and what is to become of her?"

Haverford had only just noticed Matilda, and had not been pleased. Eleanor had managed to threaten him in a way that did not cause his unstable temper to explode. Another of his by-blows in his nursery might be a straw too far, and when Haverford was angry, he cared nothing for consequences.

On the other hand, Matilda would benefit from growing up with another little girl of much the same age. The seven-year age gap between Aldridge and Jonathan meant they both lacked companionship, except for that of their servants.

Eleanor temporised. "Where is the baby now, Mrs Watterson?"

"The midwife knew a woman who could feed her, Your Grace, having recently lost her own youngest. Mrs Fuller. It was the best I could do, ma'am, but I don't want to leave her there."

Eleanor didn't blame her. Cold, neglect, and disease carried off Mrs Fuller's children with alarming frequency. She was one of those women that every village seems to produce almost certainly not entitled to the honorific, making a living for herself and her surviving offspring by serving drinks and food in the local tavern, and other more intimate services wherever a man with a coin might care to take her. Eleanor had tried to help the female into an honourable job, but whether she was too beaten down by life or just preferred earning her living on her back, the experiment had not worked out.

Eleanor stood. "Very well, Mrs Watterson. We shall visit Mrs Fuller and meet little Jessica. Then we shall see."

She had, of course, already made up her mind. No need to tell His Grace this was another of his unwanted children. This time, she would not even wait until he noticed. She would simply announce that she had taken in another orphan to keep Matilda company. She

would not discuss the child's origins. As long as he did not feel she was censuring his behaviour, he probably wouldn't care.



*Haverford House, London, August 1812*

Her strategy had worked very well, and she had gloried in her two little girls. Haverford's disinterest had the benefit that she did not need to counter his influence in choosing servants or selecting tutors. She had no need to fear he would suddenly command the children's attendance and carry them off to activities that no child should witness.

Indeed, the presence of their little sisters had much to do with the sweetness of character both of her sons managed to retain, and the truth that their treatment of women was so much better than their father had taught them.

Aldridge would get Haverford to the castle, and Eleanor must go and prepare for an evening in Society. The future of her girls might depend on the social alliances she strengthened tonight.

It was some time later that Eleanor realised Aldridge hadn't asked, and she hadn't explained, why she needed to hear that Sutton was unhurt before the rest of Society got hold of the story. Had anyone been listening, they would think that Sutton was more to her than a fond memory.

**H**averford House, London, July 1812

As soon as she arrived home, Eleanor ordered a tea tray to her room and then sent the servants away. Her visit to Miss Clemens' Oxford Street Book Palace and Tea Rooms had left her trembling, but gloriously happy.

Grace and Georgie had been unable to attend their arranged meeting, but James had come in their stead. No, Sutton. No, James. She would call him James in her own thoughts. She had seen him, of course, in the street or at various entertainments. But to see him up close—to touch him, even with her gloved hands! To talk with him for upwards of half an hour, just the two of them, alone!

Ah, she was every kind of fool. The Earl of Sutton was famous for having defied his father to remain with the Persian princess he married; the mother of his children. They had spoken of her today, the Princess Mahzad. James loved her still; it was in every word he spoke of her. Poor James, a widower for more than a decade.

But they had talked! It was a gift beyond price. Perhaps, when all this nonsense with Haverford was over, she and James could be friends?

*Haverford House, London, 1794*

The two ladies having tea with Eleanor clearly had something on their minds. They kept exchanging glances, and frowning at the servants who bustled in and out. Eleanor was entertaining two dear

friends on this lovely day in 1794; Lady Sutton, daughter-in-law to the Duke of Winshire, and Lady Georgiana Winderfield, his daughter.

As the servants wheeled in the refreshments Eleanor had ordered, and made sure that the ladies had everything they required, the three friends spoke of the fashions of the current season, the worrying events in France, the reopening of the Drury Theatre, and their children.

As the last of the servants left, Eleanor spoke to her companion-secretary, a poor relation of her husband whom she was enjoying more than she expected. Largely because she had decided to find the girl a match, and was gaining great entertainment from the exercise. Eleanor could hit two birds with a single stone if she sent dear Margaret to her husband's office, where his secretaries currently beavered away over the endless paperwork of the duchy. "Margaret, Lady Sutton and Lady Georgiana have a wish to be private with me. I trust you do not mind, my dear, if I send you on an errand? Would you please ask that nice Mr Hammond to find the accounts for Holystone Hall? I wish to go over the coal bills." Margaret blushed at the mention of Theseus Hammond, and left eagerly. Very good.

Grace was diverted. "Matchmaking, Eleanor?"

"A little. He is as poor as a church mouse, of course. We shall have to see if we can find a position in which he could support a wife. But what is it you wanted to tell me?"

Grace and Georgie exchanged glances, then Georgie leaned forward and took Eleanor's hand between two of hers. "We thought you should hear it from us, first. Word will undoubtedly be all over Town in no time."

Georgie's unexpected touch alarmed Eleanor. Embracing — even touching — was Not Done. A kiss in the air beside a perfumed cheek, but nothing more. Except for her son Jonathan, who was fond of cuddles, no one had held Eleanor's hand since Aldridge crept from the schoolroom to sit all night with her after her last miscarriage. "What can possibly be wrong? Not something Haverford has done?" But what could such a powerful duke do to give rise to the concern she saw in the eyes of her friends.

“Not Haverford.” Georgie again exchanged glances with her sister-in-law. “His Grace our father received a letter of condolence on the death of my brother Edward.” Another of those glances.

“Out with it, Georgie,” Eleanor commanded. “I am not a frail ninny who faints at nothing. Tell me what you think I need to know.”

Georgie sighed, and firmed her grip on Eleanor’s hand. “Eleanor, the letter was from James.”

*Who was James? Not Georgie’s brother, the one love of Eleanor’s life. James was dead, killed by bandits nearly fifteen years ago. They got the letter. The Duke of Winshire himself told her. She was shaking her head, shifting herself backwards on the sofa away from Georgie, whose warm compassionate eyes were so much like those of her missing brother. Missing?*

“*Not dead?*” Her voice came out in an embarrassing squeak, as emotions flooded her. Joy. Anger. A desperate sadness for so many years lost to grieving.

“Alive,” Georgie said. “James is alive, Eleanor.”

The room spun and turned grey, and Eleanor knew no more.



*Haverford House, London, July 1812*

After that, from time to time, her friends had shared smuggled letters with her. Not often. A year or more might pass before another message made its way across the vast distance between James’s mountain kingdom north of Persia and his sister in England. Often enough, though, that Eleanor shared in the delight of two more children, the grief of his wife’s death, weddings for four of his children and the birth of grandchildren.

She hadn’t told him that she knew much of what he told her today. Hearing the stories in his own dear voice was such a pleasure. She smiled again. Yes. Surely, one day they could be friends?



**H**averford House, London, October 1812

Despite hundreds of servants, the house seemed quiet. Haverford was in Kent with his own attendants, though his condition appeared to be improving. Aldridge was touring the ducal estates, keeping a tight hand on the reins of the vast lands that underpinned the Haverford wealth.

She was used to their absence. But for once, she had no one else. Her current companion was off with friends, finishing the initial planning for this year's Christmas house party and New Year's Eve Ball, and the girls were visiting friends in the country.

She had seen James again, today. This time, it had been planned. She had sent him a note to tell him she would be at the bookshop, and giving the time her meeting ended. Afterwards, she had been sure he wouldn't come, and if he did, he would think she was chasing after him.

She pushed away the tea tray; she didn't want it. What she wanted was in the secret compartment; a memory she could not quite believe and could never forget. She found the little box, and extracted a crumbling faded rose. She had plucked it from her garden at Haverford Castle after a memorable dream, as a reminder that James had given his heart elsewhere.

*Haverford Castle, near Margate, July 1795*

Cecily was older. Of course, she was. More than fifteen years had passed since the season they shared; the season that ended with Eleanor's broken heart and Cecily's marriage. She and her husband Alec had taken a long wedding trip, to see the Orient, they said. And then... nothing. Until she appeared again in England, just a few weeks ago.

Through the ritual of greeting, of inviting her guest to be seated, of preparing a cup of tea for each of them, Eleanor kept shooting glances, comparing the composed and still lovely woman before her with the gangling clumsy teen Eleanor had taken under her wing at first meeting. She glowed with happiness, but the lines barely visible on her brow and around her eyes spoke of suffering and pain. What had happened in all those years away?

They spoke of nothings: the weather, the fashions, who was and who wasn't in Town, until all of the maids had left the room and they were alone. Then they both spoke at once.

"Did you wish to hear of...?" Cecily began.

"Lady Sutton and Lady Grace Winderfield tell me..." said Eleanor, stopping herself and waving her hand for Cecily to carry on.

Cecily nodded, as if Eleanor had confirmed what Cecily had been about to ask. "I met with Lord James Winderfield late last year. That is what you wished to know, is it not, Your Grace? Where I saw him, and how?"

"It is," Eleanor agreed, grateful that decades of training and practice allowed her to keep her face and posture from reflecting her inner turmoil. "His sisters told me he was alive, but little more." Married. To an Eastern princess. With children. Happy, or so Cecily had told them. It was silly to feel hurt. Did she expect him to wear the willow for her for a lifetime? She did for him, but look at the alternative! She had never been given the least incentive to fall in love with the tyrant she had been forced to marry. She was glad James was happy. Of course, she was. Or would be, given time.

Cecily had kept on talking while she scolded herself, asking her something. Ah. Yes. Was she certain she wished to know the details?

"You loved him, once," Cecily said, her voice kind.

She could answer that. "He was a dear friend, Mrs McInnes, and I have grieved him as dead these many years. I would dearly love to know how he survived, and how he now lives. And he has children, his sisters say. Many children. Please. Start at the beginning and tell me all about him."

That night, Eleanor had a very vivid dream.

She found herself in a beautiful garden. It was a long rectangle, walled on three sides and on the fourth bounded by steps up to a house. Or perhaps a castle, though unlike any castle Eleanor had ever seen. A fort of some kind, its arches and domes giving it an exotic air entirely in keeping with the garden.

A pool divided the garden in half; no, in quarters, for it had two straight branches stretching almost to the walls from the centre point of the walled enclosure. Eleanor had woken to find herself in one quadrant of the garden, surrounded by flowers in a myriad of colours, some familiar and some unknown. Not woken. She could not possibly be awake. Nowhere in England had the mountains she could see over the walls, and nor was this an English garden.

She must have spoken the last thought, because a voice behind her said, "Not English, no. Persian, originally, though I am told they are found from Morocco to Benghal. It is a *chahar bāgh*; a Paradise garden."

Eleanor turned. Behind her, a lady as exotic as her garden stood on the steps of a pavilion, raised to give a sheltered place from which to enjoy a view over the garden. "I am asleep and dreaming, I think," the lady said, "for it is afternoon by the sun, and at such a time my garden is full of my children and my ladies." She waved to indicate the deserted space, her lips gently curved and her face alight. "We should enjoy the peace while it lasts. Will you join me for coffee, or perhaps tea?"

Eleanor nodded and mounted the stairs to join her, following her into a space as alien as the garden, the stone-paved floor almost invisible under brightly coloured rugs and cushions. "Is it your dream or mine? For when I went to sleep, I was in Haverford House, in London. And this is not England."

The lady raised both brows, and then let them drop, her face suddenly bland. "You are, perhaps, the Duchess of Haverford?"

"Forgive me, I should have introduced myself. Yes, I am Eleanor Haverford."

If Eleanor had any doubts that this was a dream they were dispelled in the next instant, when a small table appeared from thin air, laden with a tea pot, a long full-bellied coffee pot, two cups, and plates of small delicacies.

The lady gave a brief huff of amusement. "The dream reminds me of my manners. Please be seated, duchess. Your Grace, is it not? I am Mahzad."

Now it was Eleanor's turn to wipe all expression from her face as she inclined her head. "Your majesty. Is that the correct form of address? Cecily McInnes spoke of you when she returned to England."

"Please call me Mahzad. After all, we have a lot in common, you and I. Tea? Or coffee?"

"Coffee, and please call me Eleanor. Cecily said he was well, and very much in love with his wife." And Eleanor was happy for the man she had once loved with a maiden's ardent passion. Of course, she was.

Mahzad smiled and placed a protective hand over her belly, where a slight rounding indicated yet another child on the way to join the already large family. "You have a generous heart, Eleanor. You have not been as fortunate as James and I; I think."

Eleanor waved away the sympathy. "I have my children and my work. I am content. But tell me about your family. Who knows how long the dream might last, and I wish to know all about them."

*Haverford House, London, July 1812*

It was her imagination, of course, building on the stories that Cecily had told, and Grace and Georgie before her. But the following morning, Eleanor had found a newly unfurled rose in the castle gardens that was the precise shade of the roses in one part of Mahzad's garden.

Now, it was fragile, dried and faded, adorned with yet another tear to join all the others she had wept on it in the past eighteen

years. James had loved his wife, but he had loved her first. He had assured her that he had fully intended to come home and claim her, but that his father denied to pay his ransom, despite his captor's threat to execute him without it.

To add insult to injury, Winshire had told James that Eleanor was already married to Haverford. It was true, but only because Winshire and Eleanor's father had assured her that James was dead.

Eleanor gently laid the flower back into the box. Once, she had loved and been loved. That, at least, would never change.

**H**averford Castle, East Kent, November 1812

Eleanor was pleased to spend a few hours on her own. Haverford, having recovered his senses, was making up for lost time at some scandalous house party. Aldridge was in London, though he had not shared his reasons. Eleanor's wards had accompanied her to Kent, but they had gone to stay with friends for a few days, even Frances, who at nearly fifteen was old enough to begin venturing into polite company in the more relaxed environment of the country.

She smiled at the escritoire that travelled from home to home with her. Hidden in its depths were the first booties she had ever knitted. And reknitted, multiple times, until she got it right. Matilda had worn them, and then Jessica.

Frances, though, was already out of infancy when she joined the Haverford household. There was never any doubt Eleanor would keep her, of course. She could not deny Jonathan and Aldridge; and besides, she fell in love with the little girl at first sight.

*Haverford Castle, East Kent July 1806*

The Duchess of Haverford examined her two sons as they waited for her to pour them a cup of tea each. To an outsider, they would seem totally at ease — Aldridge relaxed on the sofa, an amused twist to his lips and his cynical eyes fond as he teased his brother

about the horse the boy had bought on a jaunt into Somerset; Jon laughing as he defended his purchase, suggesting warmly that the marquis's eye for a filly blinded him to the virtues of a colt.

To their fond Mama, they appeared worried. Eleanor saw strain around the younger man's eyes, and quick darting glances at her and then at his brother when Jon thought she wasn't watching. Aldridge had that almost imperceptible air of being ready to leap to Jon's defence in an instant; a watchfulness, a vague tension.

Aldridge's cup was prepared as he liked it, and he came to fetch it from her hands, thanking her with a smile.

She would let them raise the subject, if that was their plan, but she did not intend to let them leave this room without knowing about the new addition to her nursery: a nervous withdrawn little girl of three or four years old. "If she was a bumptious little lordling and not a poor trembling mouse," Nanny said, "she could be one of my lads come again. Same shaped face and eyes. Same colour hair with the curls that won't brush out. Their lordships have your eyes, Your Grace, and this wee sprite doesn't, but I'll tell you who has eyes just that colour: so close to green as never so." Not that Nanny did tell the duchess. She did not need to. Those eyes were more familiar to Eleanor than her own.

She handed a cup to the younger son of the man with those eyes.

The child came from Somerset. Jon had brought her home in his curricule, leaving his groom to ride Jon's horse and manage the colt. On finding out about the little girl, and learning that Jon had deposited her in the nursery and then gone straight out to search town for his older brother, Eleanor had been tempted to question the groom.

However, she wanted Jon to tell her the story. Or Aldridge, perhaps. It was more likely to be his story than Jon's, given the age of the child. Jon was only 19. Furthermore, it was in Somerset that a certain outrageous scandal blew up five years ago, resulting in the exile of the sons of two dukes: Aldridge to a remote Haverford estate in northern Scotland, and his accomplice overseas.

Nanny didn't think the little girl was old enough to be a souvenir of Aldridge's visit to the Somerset town, but her size might be a result of neglect. She had been half-starved, poor little mite. The bruises might be from falls or other childhood accidents. Nanny suspected beatings, which made Eleanor feel ill to think about.

She sat back with her own cup, and took a sip. As if it were a signal, Jon gave Aldridge another of those darting glances and spoke.

"Mama, I expect you've heard about Frances."

Ah. Good. She was to be told the story. "Is that her name, Jon? Nanny didn't know it, and little Frances isn't talking."

Jon nodded, and smiled. There was a sweetness to the boy that the elder never had, perhaps because he was a ducal heir from the moment of his birth. "She is a little shy, Mama." His smile vanished and he frowned. "She has been badly used, and for no fault of her own. I could not leave her there, Mama. You must see that."

Eleanor arched one brow, amusement colouring her voice as she answered. "If you tell me her story, my son, we will find out."

It was much as Eleanor already suspected, though the villain in the piece was neither of her sons. Lord Jonathan Grenford, arriving in Fickleton Wells to inspect and pay for the offspring of a horse pairing that he coveted, found that the whole town, except for the owner of the horse, gave him a cold shoulder, and no one would tell him or his groom why.

Only on the last night of his stay did he hear the story. He came back to his hotel room to find a woman waiting for him. "A gentlewoman, Mama, but with a ring on her finger, and quite old — maybe 30. I thought... well, never mind that."

Aldridge gave a snort of laughter, either at Jon's perspective on the woman's age or at his assumption about her purpose.

Jon ignored him. "Anyway, I soon realised I was wrong, for there on the bed was a little girl, fast asleep. The woman said she belonged to Haverford, and I could take her. I argued, Mama, but I could see for myself she was one of us, and that was the problem. The woman's husband had accepted Frances when she was born, but as she grew, she looked more and more like her father."



“He resented being cuckolded, I suppose,” Eleanor said, “Men do, my sons, and I trust you will remember it.”

Both boys flushed, the younger one nodding, the older inclining his head in acknowledgement, the glitter in his eyes hinting he did not at all appreciate the gentle rebuke.

“He took his frustrations out on Mrs Meecham, which she surely didn’t deserve after all this time when I daresay he has sins of his own, and on little Frances too, which was entirely unfair. Mrs Meecham said that if Frances remained as a reminder, the Meechams could never repair their marriage, and that she feared one day he would go too far and seriously hurt or even kill the baby. So, I brought her home. Can we keep her, Mama?”

Eleanor looked at Aldridge, considering.

“She is not mine, if that is what you are thinking, Mama,” her eldest son told her. “She might have been, I must admit, but she was born fifteen months after I was last in Fickleton Wells. I’d been in Scotland for six months when Mrs Meecham strayed outside of her pastures again.”

Six months after the scandal, His Grace the duke had travelled back to Somerset, to pay damages to the gentlemen of Fickleton Wells who claimed that their females had been debauched. He had greatly resented being made a message-boy, and had been angry with his son and the females he had shamed for their indiscretions and beyond furious at the cuckolded gentlemen of the town for imposing on his ducal magnificence with their indignation. The mystery of Frances’s patrimony was solved.

“She is so sweet, Mama, and has been through so much. She needs tenderness and love. Don’t tell me I must give her to foster parents or an orphan asylum. I know His Grace will not be pleased, but...”

Eleanor smiled. “The problem with Fickleton Wells, Jon, as I’m sure Aldridge is aware, is that it is a Royal estate. Wales was mightily annoyed at what he saw as an offence against his dignity. He insisted on Haverford making all right.”

Jon’s shoulders slumped. He clearly thought this presaged a refusal.

Aldridge was seven years more sophisticated and had been more devious from his cradle. His eyes lit again with that wicked glint of amusement. Eleanor nodded to him. “Yes, Aldridge, precisely.”

Aldridge put down his cup. “Wales is not best pleased with His Grace at the moment. A matter of a loss at cards.”

Eleanor and her elder son grinned at one another, and her younger son perked up, looking from one to the other.

“Should one be grieved by the loss of a fostering,” Eleanor mused, “and take one’s sorrows to, let us say, a Royal princess who might be depended on to scold her brother for the behaviour of one of his favourites...” Eleanor stopped at that. Jonathan did not need the entire picture painted for him. He gazed at her, his eyes wide with awe.

“His Grace will not dare make a fuss. If His Royal Highness finds out that the very man he sent to save him from the offended citizens left a cuckoo in the nest of an esteemed leader of the community...”

“Precisely,” Aldridge agreed. “Mama, you are brilliant, as always.”

The duchess stood, leaving her cup on the table, and both boys. “Let us, then, go up to the nursery, and make sure all is well with your new baby sister.”



### *Haverford Castle, Kent, November 1812*

Haverford had not even hinted at coming to her rooms since Jonathan had brought Frances to join her nursery—the little girl a greater gift than her son could ever know. The scandal of the child’s existence was a secret Haverford needed to keep from his royal cousins, and she had been able to use her knowledge of that secret to secure her wards’ future under Haverford’s reluctant and anonymous protection, and to ensure her continued freedom from his intimate attentions.

It had been an unpleasant negotiation, determined on her part and rancorous on his—not that he much wanted his aging wife, but he resented having his will forced. In return for his agreement, she

had promised to continue as his political hostess, and to maintain the myth of a perfect Society marriage.

Why was she spoiling a perfectly good afternoon thinking about His Grace? She came up here to explore quite different memories.

**H**ollystone Hall, December 1812

The Duchess of Haverford waved her dresser away and stood so she could better see Matilda, Jessica, and Frances. Yes, even Frances was to go to tonight's fancy-dress ball, for a short while and under the strict supervision and care of her sisters.

How lovely they were! Matilda and Jessica had faced a difficult first Season with grace and courage. Even Eleanor's influence could not overcome their murky origins. Society could be remarkable stupid.

Eleanor had had high hopes of the Earl of Hamner, although he also showed an interest in Lady Felicity Belvoir. If he did not stay the course, somewhere out there was a man who would look past Matilda's parentage to her beautiful nature: her kindness, her intelligence, all the wonderful qualities that made Eleanor so proud of her.

Jessica was more of a worry in a way, covering her hurt at any snubs by layering on more charm, until she skirted the edge of flirting. Perhaps there was someone here at this house party who could give Jessica the love she needed?

At least Frances was safe for a couple more years, and perhaps, by the time she made her debut, her sisters would be married and able to help her.

In some ways, Eleanor wished they were all still in the schoolroom.

*Haverford Castle, July 1810*

Eleanor paused in the doorway of the schoolroom, where her three foster daughters were drawing under the supervision of their governess. The subject was a collection of objects: a flower in a rounded glazed bowl, a trinket box open to display a set of coral beads that trailed over the edge onto the polished surface of the table, a delicate statuette of a gun dog, with proudly pointing muzzle.

A difficult composition for such young girls, though little Frances was talented, and the older two girls competent enough. At thirteen, Frances had inhabited the Haverford nursery floor for eleven years, and by the time of her debut, in three or four years, the scandal of her existence was likely to be minimal. Especially since she, least of the three, resembled their shared father.

Matilda would face the ton first. At sixteen, she was as much a beauty as her mother had been, with the dark hair and stunning figure that had made her mother a reigning beauty of the *demimonde*, though she was only an opera dancer. A brave one, too, who—given the chance to start a new life back in her homeland of Ireland—braved Haverford House to beg for a safe home for her daughter, perhaps a tenant farm on an out-of-the-way Haverford estate.

It was just chance that Haverford was away on that occasion, and that Eleanor had just been arriving home. Or an intercession of the divine. Haverford would have turned his full ducal rage on a scion of the local gentry, and denied everything. But Eleanor took the baby in her arms and fell in love.

She smiled as she watched the three heads bent in concentration. It had taken His Grace nine months to realise that his nurseries were once again occupied, and by then Jessica, some six months younger and the daughter of a pretty maid who once attracted Haverford's attention. The combination was lethal, for the girl had died in childbirth, and the grieving grandmother brought the baby to Haverford House, to Eleanor. No-one could doubt Jessica's

parentage. She and Lord Jonathan, Eleanor's second son, were as alike as male and female could be.

Haverford, of course, denied that he'd sired the two girls, and ignored them completely. His solution to the unfortunate results of his careless whoring was to blame the female, a bag of coins (carefully measured to their social position) the only assistance they could expect.

Thank goodness she had been strong enough to hold out for the right to keep the children. As long as he never saw them, was not expected to acknowledge them in any way, and provided nothing extra for their support, he chose to treat her fostering as an eccentric hobby.

Frances had been the third, her birth a scandalous secret even Haverford did not want disclosed. Eleanor loved the three girls with all her heart, loved them as fiercely as she loved her two sons. And she could not regret bringing them into her home, selfish of her though it was.

She had learned better, especially after the disastrous end to David Wakefield's time under the Haverford roofs. For years now, she had been quietly settling her husband's by-blows in less scrutinised households, carefully supervised to ensure they had the love and care she wanted for those who shared blood with her sons.

As for the three sisters, their origins and the prominence of the family meant they would face many barriers in a quest for a fulfilling life. If only they did not so strongly bear the Grenford stamp! Still, with her support and that of her sons, all would be well. She hoped. She prayed.

Time to announce her presence. "Miss Markson, is this a good time for an interruption? I have come to take tea with the young ladies."



*Hollystone Hall, December 1812*

Eleanor smiled at the family gathered in her private sitting room. Matilda was pouring the tea, and Frances was carefully carrying each cup to the person for whom it had been prepared. Jessica was sitting on the arm of Aldridge's chair, regaling him with stories about the kitten she had adopted from the kitchen. Cedrica sat quietly, as usual, but the distracted smile and the glow of happiness were new, and her thoughts were clearly on her French chef, whom she had, unless Eleanor missed her guess, kissed in the garden last night.

Jonathan—dear Jonathan, back in England and arriving by surprise on Christmas Eve—was making Jessica laugh with faces he was pulling out of Aldridge's view, though from the quirk in the corner of Aldridge's mouth, he was well aware of his brother's antics.

Eleanor smiled around the room at her children, her heart at ease to have all five of her children with her. Two sons of her body, and three daughters of her heart. Deciding to bring the girls into her nursery had been one of the best decisions she had ever made.

Eleanor accepted another cup of tea from Frances, exchanged a smile with Matilda, and saluted the other three with her cup. How fortunate she was.

If she had been a cowed and obedient wife, her life would have lacked much richness. She had regrets—who didn't? If she'd been braver, she would have permitted the girls to call her 'Mama', rather than 'Aunt Eleanor'. But that would have been a red rag to the duke's bull. The safer path was, probably, the right one.

Eleanor caught Frances's eye and patted the seat beside her. "You did that very well, my dear," she told the girl. Frances was much younger than the other two, and Eleanor was pleased she'd be at home for a while longer. Perhaps, by the time Frances married, one of the others would have given her grandchildren. She smiled again at the thought. Yes, Eleanor had been very fortunate.





## EPILOGUE

**E**leanor had not visited her friends in Winshire House in nearly a year; had not seen them since they quit London in July, after the series of attacks on the family.

Today, she was going to ignore the prohibitions of the despot who ruled her family. He was convalescing in Kent, and would be away for at least another month. By the time he found out that she had made a condolence call on Grace and Georgie, it would be far too late for him to stop her. She hoped to see her goddaughter, too, who had married James's eldest son just before the turn of the year, a day before the Duke of Winshire died.

At first, she had thought to go on her own, but Matilda and Jessica wanted to express their sympathies to Georgie's daughters, who had been their friends since the cradle. Rather, they seized on the excuse to visit with the girls, whom they had sorely missed during the feud between Haverford and Winshire. No one could possibly imagine that anyone in the Winshire family actually mourned the sour old man who had just died.

Since she was going for precisely the same reason, she agreed, and then Aldridge announced that he planned to escort them. "When I am duke, Mama, I hope that the new Winshire and I will be able to work together, and I like what I've seen of his sons."

In the end, they all went, late in the afternoon. Only Jon was missing. A month ago, he had sailed from Margate in Aldridge's private yacht, and just this morning, a package had been delivered by a weary sailor, with a report from Aldridge's captain for the marquis, and a brief note from Jon for his mother. "Married. Safe. More news later." Aldridge grinned at the scrawled words. "Jon has landed on his feet again, Mama," he told her. He shook his head, his eyes twinkling. "I don't know how he always manages to do that!"

The Winshire drawing room was crowded, of course, but the Haverfords were invited to remove themselves to a private parlour, where their hostesses joined them after the other visitors had completed the polite fifteen minutes and been shown out.

“Do stay for refreshments,” Grace begged, and before long Lord Andrew Winderfield had carried Aldridge off for a game of billiards, the girls from both families had gone up to the twins’ little sitting room, and the older ladies settled in to catch up on all that had happened in their lives while they had been separated.

James joined them part way through the conversation, staying when his sister assured him he was not intruding. *I did not come to see him.* Of course, she had not. And yet, here he was and she felt herself turn towards him, a sunflower to his sun. She hoped her reaction was hidden from her friends. *Thank goodness, my all-too-perceptive son is out of the room.*

The new Duke of Winshire. *Had my father accepted his offer for my hand, I would still have become a duchess, in the end.* And there would be no Aldridge. No Jonathan. Perhaps none of the charities she had brought into existence out of her own urge to make the world an easier place for women.

David would still exist, if his grandfather had not beaten him to death in childhood. He’d been conceived before the Duke of Haverford even set eyes on Eleanor.

None of James’s wonderful children, though.

Perhaps Matilda, Jessica, and Frances might have been born, too, though who knew whether they would have survived and what they might have become without her intervention.

As if her thought had conjured them up, the girls came back into the room, and immediately, the Winderfield girls began telling their elders about “Aunt Eleanor’s house party to support women’s education.”

“Matilda and Jessica have been telling us all about it, Papa,” the elder of James’s daughters told him, perching on the arm of his chair and leaning trustingly against his shoulder. “I want to help girls who want to acquire medical knowledge. What do you think, Papa?”

James looked past his daughter to smile warmly at Eleanor. “Your wards are powerful advocates of your cause, Your Grace.” He turned his attention back to his daughter. “Ruth, it is your money to invest. Perhaps you could fund a scholarship?”

The others broke in with objections about finding teachers, and strategies for overcoming that obstacle. Eleanor sat quietly in the warmth of James's smile. Yes, they could be friends. It would be enough. And the charities she had sponsored as Duchess of Haverford would be in safe hands for the next generation. What wonderful daughters her three were.



## ABOUT JUDE KNIGHT

I've been trying to be a novelist since I was fourteen. I was a good enough reader to see that the first two attempts (one when I was fourteen and one in my early twenties) weren't good enough to publish. Then along came life. A seriously ill child who required years of therapy; a rising mortgage that led to a full-time job; my own chronic illness... the writing took a back seat.

As the years passed, the fear grew. I'd waited so long. If I never finished any of the dozens of novels I started, no one would ever judge them.

My mother believed in me, and on the way home from that great lady's funeral, I realised I'd left it too late for Mum to ever hold a print copy of one of my fiction books. So I replaced the fear of finishing with the fear of not finishing, by telling everyone I knew that I was writing a novel.

In the years since I published my first fiction book just before Christmas in 2014, I published seven novels, thirteen novellas, a heap of shorter stories, and more novellas in group anthologies. I plan to keep going till I run out of years.

I write historical fiction with a large helping of romance, a splash of Regency, and a twist of suspense.

I then try to figure out how to slot it into a genre category.

I'm mad keen on history, enjoy what happens to people in the crucible of a passionate relationship, and love to use a good mystery and some real danger as mechanisms to torture my characters.

In my other identity as Judy Knighton, I've been a plain language consultant specialising in contracts, insurance policies, and financial disclosure statements. Fiction is more fun.

Website and blog: <http://judeknightauthor.com/>

Book blurbs and links: <http://judeknightauthor.com/books/>



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## Regency books

### *The Children of the Mountain King* series

**James Winderfield, exiled third son of the Duke of Winshire, is back to inherit the ducal title.**

In 1812, high Society is rocked by the return of the Earl of Sutton, heir to the dying Duke of Winshire. James Winderfield, Earl of Sutton, Winshire's third and only surviving son, has long been thought dead, but his reappearance is not nearly such a shock as those he brings with him, the children of his deceased Persian-born wife and fierce armed retainers, both men and women.

The Duke of Haverford, his one-time rival in love, sets out to destroy him, and his children with him, but Sutton is no longer the friendless, open-hearted youth that was exiled for his temerity. Even inheriting his father's title won't stop his enemies from trying to kill him. But no one, his people whisper, ever wins against the King of the Mountains.

As the new Duke of Winshire's four older children and his twin nieces navigate society to find acceptance and a love of their own, Winshire rekindles his acquaintance with the influential and beloved matriarch, Eleanor, Duchess of Haverford. Their time is long past; their friendship, though, is golden.

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### *Paradise Regained* (prequel novella)

James yearns to end a long journey in the arms of his loving family. But his father's agents offer the exiled prodigal forgiveness and a place in Society — if he abandons his foreign-born wife and children to return to England.

With her husband away, Mahzad faces revolt, invasion and betrayal in the mountain kingdom they built together. A queen without her king, she will not allow their dream and their family to be destroyed.

\* \* \*

### *To Wed a Proper Lady* — The Barbarian and the Bluestocking (this novel)

Everyone knows James needs a bride with impeccable blood lines. He needs Sophia's love more.

James, eldest son of the Earl of Sutton, must marry to please his grandfather, the Duke of Winshire, and to win social acceptance for himself and his father's other foreign-born children. But only Lady Sophia Belvoir makes his heart sing, and to win her, he must invite himself to spend Christmas at the home of his father's greatest enemy: the man who is fighting in Parliament to have his father's marriage declared invalid and the Winderfield children made bastards.

Sophia keeps secret her *tendre* for James, Lord Elfingham. After all, the whole of Society knows he is pursuing the younger Belvoir sister, not the older one left on the shelf after two failed betrothals. Even when he asks for her hand in marriage, she still can't quite believe that he loves her.

(This book was first published as a novella, and has been extensively rewritten to make it a novel. The novella was in the Bluestocking Belles' collection *Holly and Hopeful Hearts*.)

Publication date 15 April

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### *A Suitable Husband*

A chef from the slums, however talented, is no fit mate for the cousin of a duke, however distant. But Cedrica Grenford can dream. (novella)



*To Mend the Broken-Hearted — The Healer and the Hermit* (Novel 2) —  
coming June or July

Trained as a healer, Ruth Winderfield is happiest in a sickroom. When she's caught up in a smallpox epidemic and finds herself quarantined at the remote manor of a reclusive lord, the last thing she expects is to find her heart's desire. A pity he does not feel the same. She must return to London's ballrooms, where the wealth of her family and the question over her birth make her a target for the unscrupulous and a pariah to the high-sticklers.

Valentine, Earl of Ashbury, is horrified when an impertinent bossy female turns up with several sick children, including the two girls he is responsible for. He hasn't seen his niece and his daughter—if she is his daughter—since his faithless wife and treacherous brother died three years ago. He reluctantly gives them shelter. Even more reluctantly, he helps with the nursing.

When Ruth goes, she takes his heart with him. When jealous relatives lie about their time together, Val must face his past and win her back, not just for

himself, but for the children he has come to love.

\* \* \*

Melting Matilda (A novella in the Bluestocking Belle's collection, Fire & Frost)

Sparks flew a year ago when the Granite Earl kissed the Ice Princess under the mistletoe. Matilda Grenford is a lady and the ward of a duchess, but the daughter of a famous courtesan. Charles, Earl of Hamner, seeks a countess of impeccable bloodlines, not one whose scandalous birth would offend every noble ancestor back to the Norman Conquest. But neither of them can forget that kiss.

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*Coming at two-monthly intervals from July or August*

*To Tame the Wild Rake — The Sinner and the Saint*

The Marquis of Aldridge doesn't want to yearn for the sister of a friend from his raking days. Especially since she has rejected him in no uncertain terms. Charlotte Winderfield, niece of the Mountain King, keeps a secret that bars her from marriage, but even if she found the courage to trust, she would never trust a rake.

\* \* \*

*To Reclaim the Long-Lost Lover — The Diamond and the Doctor*

Her girlhood lover is back, as compelling as ever, but Sarah Winderfield, Charlotte's twin, cannot forget he abandoned her, leaving her to face the anger of her family and worse. Sarah is even lovelier than when she was a girl, but Miles Pointon has not forgiven her for betraying him to her father's revenge: indenture to the Caribbean and years of servitude.

\* \* \*

*To Save the Desperate Maiden — The Lion and the Lamb*

Andrew Winderfield is sorry for the girl next door, who is brutally treated by her step-family. His support for Anne Markham has unintended consequences when her step-brother forces a compromising situation. A marriage begun in such unpromising circumstances faces further challenges when a totally unprepared Anne faces the critical eye of the *ton*.

\* \* \*

*To Escape the Fortune Hunter — The Princess and the Pauper*

Rosemary Winderfield wants children of her own, but she is resigned to the reality that most of her suitors are fortune-hunters. An Anglo-Indian friend from her childhood has been told to find a rich wife. Surely this is the perfect match?

So why does Rosemary's eye keep straying to Simon's equally penurious friend Daniel Beckett, who has become engaged to a friend of Rosemary's. Could love be a possibility after all? Or will the demands of friendship and loyalty prevail?

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### *The Golden Redepennings series*

**True love is rare and elusive, but they won't settle for less.**

*Candle's Christmas Chair* (A novella in *The Golden Redepennings* series)

They are separated by social standing and malicious lies. He has until Christmas to convince her to give their love another chance.



*Gingerbread Bride* (A novella in *The Golden Redepennings* series)

Mary runs from an unwanted marriage and finds adventure, danger and her girlhood hero, coming once more to her rescue.



*Farewell to Kindness* (Book 1 in *The Golden Redepennings* series)

Love is not always convenient. Anne and Rede have different goals, but when their enemies join forces, so must they.



*A Raging Madness* (Book 2 in *The Golden Redepennings* series)

Their marriage is a fiction. Their enemies are all too real. Uncovering the truth will need all the trust Ella and Alex can find.



*The Realm of Silence* (Book 3 in *The Golden Redepennings* series)

Rescue her daughter, destroy her dragons, defeat his demons, return to his lonely life. How hard can it be?



*Unkept Promises* (Book 4 in *The Golden Redepennings* series)

Mia hopes to negotiate a comfortable marriage. Jules wants his wife to return to England, where she belongs. Love confounds them both.



Other Regency books

*A Baron for Becky*

She was a fallen woman. How could the men who loved her help set her back on her feet?



*House of Thorns*

His rose thief bride comes with a scandal that threatens to tear them apart.



*Lord Calne's Christmas Ruby*

One wealthy merchant's heiress with an aversion to fortune hunters. One an impoverished earl with a twisted hand. Combine and stir with one villainous rector. (novella)



*Revealed in Mist*

As spy and enquiry agent, Prue and David worked to uncover secrets, while hiding a few of their own.



*The Beast Next Door* (A novella in the Bluestocking Belles collection  
*Valentines from Bath*)

In all the assemblies and parties, no-one Charis met could ever match the beast next door.





## Lunch-length reads: story collections

### *Hand-Turned Tales* and *Lost in the Tale*

A double handful of short stories and novellas. *Hand-Turned Tales* is free from most ereaders. Try the range of Jude's imagination one bite at a time, in a lunch-length read.



### *If Mistletoe Could Tell Tales*

A repackaging of six published Christmas stories: four novellas and two novelettes. Because nothing enhances the magic of Christmas like the magic of love.



### *Hearts in the Land of Ferns*

Five stories all set in New Zealand: two historical and three contemporary suspense. All That Glisters has been published in *Hand-Turned Tales*. The other four have all been published in multi-author collections, but never before in a collection of Jude Knight stories.



## Victorian books

### *Never Kiss a Toad* (with Mariana Gabrielle)

Caught together in her father's bed, Sally and Toad are wrenched apart, to endure years of separation. But neither distance nor malice can destroy true love.



### *God Help Ye, Merry Gentleman* (with Mariana Gabrielle)

A Christmas collection: two purpose-written short pieces in the world of *Never Kiss a Toad*, showing Sally's and Toad's childhood and youth. Plus some other published vignettes from blogs, newsletters, and books set in the same world.



### *Forged in Fire* (A novella in the Bluestocking Belles collection *Never Too Late*)

Burned in their youth, neither Tad nor Lottie expected to feel the fires of love. Until the inferno of a volcanic eruption sears away the lies of the past and frees them to forge a new future.



## Post-apocalyptic fiction

*A Midwinter's Tale* (A novella in the Speakeasy Scribes collection *Resist and Rejoice*)

Verity Marchand is an orphan of time, her family tavern under the ice that grips Boston. When Verity's dreams lead her into a nightmare, she'll need a miracle—or the family cat—to save her.



## Contemporary

*A Family Christmas* (A novella in the Authors of Main Street collection  
*Christmas Babies on Main Street*)

Kirilee is on the run, in disguise, out of touch, and eating for two. Trevor is heading home for Christmas, after three years undercover, investigating a global criminal organisation. In the heart of a storm, two people from different worlds question what divides and what unites them.



*Abbie's Wish* (A novella in the Authors of Main Street collection *Christmas Wishes on Main Street*)

Abbie's Christmas wish draws three men to her mother. One of them is a monster.



*Beached* (novella in the Authors of Main Street collection *Summer Romance on Main Street*)

The truth will wash away her coastal paradise.



*The Gingerbread Caper* (A novella in the Authors of Main Street collection  
*Christmas Cookies on Main Street*)

A mischievous cat, a spy mystery, a gingerbread-munching burglar, a Christmas challenge gone wrong, and a tender new love. All in a New Zealand seaside resort.