



## A TRYST WITH DANGER

Kent, England 1793

### Prologue

Intrigued, Lady Lucie Bedford followed the coach for some distance as it rolled boldly down the road. Sleek and black, it exuded an air that could only mean wealth or privilege. To her surprise, it turned into the gates of Bedford Manor. It clattered down the crushed stone driveway and pulled up in front of the waxed oaken double doors in a spray of rocks. She slowed her mare, Foxglove, to a walk to watch. Visitors, although not unknown, were rare to the manor. Particularly now with her parents in London.

A portly man exited the carriage and climbed the stairs. Raising one pudgy fist, he grabbed the doorknocker and slammed it with an authority that rattled the doors in their hinges. After a moment, the doors swung open to reveal Hawthorne, the butler, arms held stiff at his side, mouth set in a permanent moue of disapproval.

At first, Hawthorne wouldn't let the man in but when shown the thick velum envelope emblazoned in the top left corner with the Bedford coat of arms, he grudgingly stepped back.

Lucie pulled Foxglove to a halt and dismounted in the front drive with the aid of a footman. She nodded her thanks to the man then patted the neck of the horse, fishing about in her pocket for a lump of sugar which she held out. Velvet lips rippled her palm and the lump disappeared in a twinkling. She dropped a kiss on the white blaze where it ended between the mare's nostrils before the stable boy led the animal away.

Uncertain, she hung back for a moment before curiosity nudged her to follow the two men into the house.

"This is the daughter?" The portly man noticed her peeping around the library door.

"Yes, sir, this is Lady Lucie," replied Hawthorne, motioning to Lucie to come in. She did, taking a wary step past the threshold.

"Hello, Lady Lucie, I am Mr. Thomas, your father's solicitor." The stranger looked her up and down where she stood. If he noticed her disheveled clothing and wind-tousled hair, he chose to ignore it. Sympathy flashed through his eyes. "How old are you?"

"Thirteen," Lucie answered, bobbing a curtsy. She didn't know who the man

was but there was no reason not to be respectful.

"So young." A sad expression crossed Mr. Thomas' face and the first frisson of apprehension tickled Lucie's spine.

"Not so very young, sir," she said, hoping her defiant words would banish the foreboding that began to crowd her mind. "In another year or two I shall join my parents in London for the season." So intent was she on rejecting the words of Mr. Thomas, she didn't notice the silent departure of Hawthorne.

"No, my dear," the solicitor said, shaking his head. "I am sorry to inform you your parents are dead."

"Oh, you're wrong," she responded, sure in her denial. "They're in London. They're coming home next week."

The solicitor shook his head again. "I am afraid not. They were killed in a carriage accident two days ago."

"No," Lucie whimpered, backing away from him as if increased distance between the two could erase his words. "No, they are due home next week." Her bottom lip began to tremble.

"Sit." Mr. Thomas commanded.

Bewildered, Lucie sat down. This could not be happening to her, he had to be wrong. That was it, he had the wrong people.

"I know this is a shock, but your parents left you well provided for," he said gently. "I am here to tell you about their wishes for you." He pulled a small pouch out of his waistcoat. "Here, your parents would want you to have these."

She took the small leather pouch and unlaced it. She turned it upside down and two wedding bands tumbled out into her palm. They belonged to her parents – on the inside of one was etched "My darling Gregory", on the other "Anne, yours forever". She clenched the rings so tightly in her hand, her knuckles whitened.

It must be true then. She stilled her trembling lip but the tears began to well. Not wanting to cry in front of a stranger, she blinked her eyes dry and looked around the book-lined room. This had been her father's private domain and Lucie half expected to see him walk through the door, laughing over his shoulder to her mother over some humorous incident that had occurred in the stables.

That didn't happen. The only thing that entered the room was the sun, streaming in through the tall windows, reflecting off the polished surface of her father's desk, illuminating the spiraling dust motes that were disturbed as the solicitor set his leather case on the desk. He cracked open the gold latches, twin claps that cleaved the air.

She looked again at the door, willing her father to appear. But he didn't. Instead, there was the dry rustling of Mr. Thomas' papers and

the soft “thwack” of a housefly that buzzed repeatedly into one of the windows. Lucie watched it for a few seconds before it flew off to a corner of the library. She turned her regard to Mr. Thomas, busy adjusting his spectacles.

“Och, may I come in?” Miss Graham, her governess, bustled in without waiting for a response and bee-lined to Lucie. “Hawthorne told me the awful news. Oh, my dear, how horrible for you.”

“Hrrrm.” Mr. Thomas cleared his throat. “We may begin.”

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” Miss Graham said, “how rude of me to interrupt.” She moved to stand behind Lucie’s chair, placing a hand on Lucie’s shoulder.

Lucie sat up. The faint scent of lavender drifted about her. Lavender. Miss Graham hung it in sachets in her wardrobe and her clothes always smelled of it. It was a pleasant, soothing odor, much like Miss Graham herself. Lucie grasped the comforting hand that lay on her shoulder and was encouraged by a little squeeze. She must be brave. She would be brave. Miss Graham would be disappointed in her otherwise.

“The Bedford title will revert to your father’s younger brother, Lord Randolph Heddington, but you are still a fortunate girl. You will inherit the estate including Bedford Manor upon your marriage or the age of 21, whichever comes first. Until then, you will live with your aunt and uncle who will be compensated for your care.” He ruffled through the pages. “There is more, the usual stipends for servants and such, a favored charity or two, but I will deal with those in due time. In the meantime, I will contact your uncle and inform him of your changed circumstances.”

And thus one short week later, Lucie, with trunks in tow, found herself on the doorstep of Heddington House, the home of her Aunt Alice, Uncle Randolph, and cousins, Ronald and George.

She shivered as the double doors before her swung inward, resembling the maw of some great hulking beast about to swallow her whole. Thirteen, orphaned and taken from her home to live with virtual strangers. It couldn’t be any worse.

## Chapter 1

Seven years later

Lucie ripped the gown off, taking great satisfaction in hearing the fabric rip and buttons pop and roll across the floor.

“How dare they,” she stormed, wadding the butter yellow silk into a ball. She threw it on the floor, trampling it with matching silk slippers.

“Lady Lucie?” A rap sounded on the door. “Is something amiss?”

Fudge, it was Elizabeth Anne, the maid she shared with her aunt. In all likelihood she had been listening at the door.

"Go away," Lucie commanded.

Silence.

"Go away," Lucie repeated. Finally she heard a testy "Very well," and the tap of receding footsteps.

"Good riddance," Lucie muttered. Elizabeth Anne would now doubtless scuttle straight to Lady Alice to report on Lucie's unbecoming behavior. Which would lead to another of Lady Alice's interminable lectures on The Proper Role of a Young Lady. Already she could hear her aunt's voice, ripe with rebuke, "A show of temper is unbecoming." Well, what was temper to one was mettle to another, in Lucie's opinion.

She waited for a few moments to make sure the maid had indeed gone before she continued her tirade.

"They're mad, absolutely mad." She kicked off her slippers and threw them at the door. They created a gratifying thud-thud before landing on the floor beside the rumpled remains of her dress. She looked around for something else to throw, spying the satin gloves she had donned earlier that evening with such pleasure, such anticipation.

"Aha." Lucie pounced on them, rolling them into a ball before launching them at the portrait of Queen Elizabeth I that hung above the fireplace.

"Another thing," she said, shaking her finger at the Queen, "what makes them so certain that I am going to go along with their scheme?"

"What, poor little Lucie, do be a grateful dear and marry Ronald." She mimicked Lady Alice's tones perfectly. Queen Elizabeth continued her lifeless stare, not even allowing Lucie the satisfaction of an argument.

"Bah, what am I talking to you for, you're just a stupid old picture of a woman dead for years."

Turning around, Lucie marched over to the bed and grabbed her robe. She flung it over her shoulders, jamming her arms into the sleeves before tying the sash with a ferocious wrench. In an effort to fight her anger, she breathed deeply for several moments, eyes closed, fingers at her temples and chest rising and falling in great shuddering gasps. Her breathing gradually slowed to a regular cadence but she could not slow her thoughts.

What a farce this evening had been.

Oh, it had started innocently enough, a family dinner to celebrate

the win by Uncle Randolph's prize stallion at the races one county over. The local magistrate and several of the neighbors had been invited and it promised to be a grand affair. Lucie had been excited for it gave her the opportunity to wear the new dress Lady Alice had ordered for her from London. An unexpected gift, it had arrived a month ago.

What a silly girl she had been, anticipating the evening, naively thinking the elaborate dinner was only for a horse race. She should have known her aunt and uncle had an ulterior motive for the evening.

And what a motive – her announced betrothal to Ronald. "No," she had shrieked when the idea had been broached to her while the second course of poached salmon was being cleared. All around the table, startled eyes turned to her at her outburst.

Uncle Randolph, eyes narrowed in displeasure, repeated in a voice that brooked no argument, "You will marry your cousin Ronald." He took a slurp of wine before adding, "It is arranged, Lucie, you have nothing to say in the matter."

Horried, Lucie looked at him for a moment, then looked at the faces around the table – Ronald's, supercilious, George's, sympathetic, and Lady Alice's, smug. She ignored the guests, although she could feel their embarrassment at her obvious dismay. Without waiting for assistance, Lucie pushed her chair back and stood up. "You could have done me the courtesy of discussing this with me in private. Now you have succeeded only in embarrassing our guests and making me out to be a shrew. I bid you all a good night."

She stalked out. No one stopped her and she reached the sanctuary of her room unimpeded, slamming the door shut with a vengeance that shook the very foundations of Heddington House. Or so she hoped. Tongues would wag and the story would be bandied about at every gathering for the next month but she didn't care.

As she didn't care about the dress, the shoes, the gloves. The new clothing had been a lure, fripperies meant to buy her compliance. Lucie paced the distance to the window. She unlatched it and swung it open so she could lean her elbows on the sill and look out. The gardens were clothed in comforting darkness. The scent of roses drifted on the evening breeze and she took a deep breath before lifting her face to the stars.

Of course they could not force her into a marriage she did not want. Could they? Why would they want her to marry Ronald? She had no liking for him or he for her. Fudge, why didn't she face the truth, she knew why they wanted the marriage.

They needed her wealth.

Yes, they had the title but they had no funds. The clues had been there, nonetheless she had been too blind to see – the dismissal of

Miss Graham, the gradual disappearance of the servants, the sale of the new carriage.

And their solution was to betroth her to her cousin Ronald. Ronald, ugh. A fop and a wastrel if there ever was one, idling his life away, haughty in the knowledge that as first born, he was heir. At least George shared her love of plants and flowers. But Ronald? In her opinion, the estate would be doomed under him.

Yet marriages of convenience happened all the time to members of the peerage.

Not to her. No, not to her.

"I won't stay here," Lucie whispered to the moon that now peeped out from behind the trees. The breeze lifted, carrying on it the chorus of distant crickets. One thought swirled on her mind, echoed by the cricket's rhythmic chatter – what could she do, what could she do, what could she do?

The thought of marriage to Ronald was intolerable yet did she have a choice? She had no other relatives and few options for employment. Even if she could find employment, she was sure Lady Alice would not give her a reference. The truth was, she had not the means to sustain herself.

No, she corrected herself. She had funds available. On her next birthday she would turn twenty-one and then she would be set. The thought pleased her. Once she reached her age of majority she could be as eccentric and scandalous as she wished, openly defying the conventions of society with nary a care. And she could choose to marry a man she loved, not one foisted on her.

However, that was still five months away. The problem was how to defy her uncle, or, failing that, how to push off the nuptials until it was too late. What could she do? Feign illness? No, she couldn't be ill for that long. Not only would they not believe her, they might declare her incompetent and incarcerate her.

She really had only one option – she would have to disappear. And a neat solution to that was her old governess, Miss Graham. The dear lady had departed with an open invitation to Lucie to visit her in Bristol any time. At the time, Lucie had brushed it off but now it seemed a most appealing destination.

"And run away I shall," she declared to the crickets.

Lucie squatted behind a barrel and leaned back against the stable. The warmth from the bricks seeped through her clothes and into her shoulders, almost like the comforting embrace of an old friend. She savored it, relaxing her shoulders and letting her bottom slide to the ground. Although near midnight, the rear stable doors stood open to the dank evening breezes.

A storm threatened, distant pewter flashes of lightning that illuminated the ash clouds draping the ebony sky. Lucie could hear the horses in their stalls, stamping their hooves and swishing their tails in nervous reaction.

To her dismay, the rattle of dice and the dim murmur of voices wafted from the groom's quarters. One sounded like her cousin George but the other voice was not known to her. Perhaps a new groom had been hired. The sound irritated her. She had chosen her hour of escape carefully and had assumed by now everyone would be abed. The fates could not be so cruel that her flight was over before it even started? Would she be discovered before she even left the estate?

"No," Lucie whispered. "I will not fail. I've planned well and leave I will. Patience is all. George will finish his visit and I will be on my way."

She looked down and ran her hands over the breeches that covered her legs. The fabric was coarse beneath her fingers, coarse against her legs. Finding them and a shirt had been a challenge but one of the gardeners had believed her story about collecting used clothing for the almshouse. Both items had needed mending which she had done in the privacy of her room. The generous gardener had also donated a jersey. It was tied about her waist in case the night air grew too cool. On her head was an old cap she had found in the bottom of her wardrobe. For good luck she had wrapped a miniature of her parents and their wedding rings in a square of linen and tucked it into her pocket.

How horrified Lady Alice would be to see her garbed like a lad but it had made the most sense to Lucie. Hopefully, no one would notice a ragtag lad traveling alone.

The worst part about the delay was that it gave her more time to think. Had she brought enough clothing, had she brought enough food, was her disguise good enough, would Miss Graham be happy to see her, could she get Foxglove out by herself? Question after question tumbled willy-nilly through her mind, feeding the panic that was beginning to rise in her belly.

A burst of laughter ripped through the air, interrupting her thoughts.

"I win!"

George, apparently, had won the last round. Coins clinked. "And you'll win so much more, my friend," George's companion replied.

The man had an odd accent, one that Lucie was not familiar with. "Yes!" George guffawed. "Soon we'll be rich." He giggled, a high pitched, effeminate warble.

Lucie shivered. George sounded odd, unbalanced even.

"And there will be more. I have a meeting with our captain later tonight. Our quarry sails in a few weeks carrying a fine prize. "

"Don't let me keep you." George giggled again. "I wouldn't want to stand in the way of imminent wealth."

The other man chuckled. "Then we'll both be happy, won't we?"

"Yes, we'll both be happy." A chair scraped along the floor as presumably George stood. "Good night."

An answering scrape sounded. "It was good of you to hide me while we waited for confirmation. I will be in contact. Good night."

Lucie waited for the sound of footsteps to fade away before she moved. Creeping forward, she peered around the edge of the door in time to see George walk across the courtyard towards Heddington House. There was no sign of the other man other than the clip clop of shod hooves fading down the drive. George's associate had not been a groom after all. What was George involved with? Disreputable nighttime activities did not suit him. Ronald, perhaps, but not mild-mannered George.

Keeping well in the shadows, she crawled into the stable. The rough stone floor, strewn with bits of straw and grit, scraped and pricked her palms and bruised her knees. Placing her hands carefully as she crawled, she hoped she would not encounter any unpleasant lumps in the darkness.

"Did you see those two men?" She whispered to Foxglove when she reached the proper stall. Standing up, she wiped off her hands and massaged her aching knees before she reached over the gate to stroke the animal's neck. As if to answer, Foxglove stretched towards her and gave her mane a shake then rubbed her nose in greeting against Lucie's shoulder.

Taking the bridle from the peg, Lucie slipped it over the horse's head before unfastening the gate. She tugged the animal through and then secured the gate to the empty stall. The grooms were up early in the morning, far earlier than the occupants of the main house and she wanted to avoid any notice of the missing horse for as long as possible. That should give her a good head start for they would search for her, of that she had no doubt.

Lucie led Foxglove through the stable, cringing with every step. The horse's hoofs clacked against the stones and the hair on the back of Lucie's neck prickled with apprehension. Outside the stable, she relaxed a bit. Here the hoof beats were muffled against the pastured ground and it was just a few yards to the orchard wall.

She would have to ride without a saddle. Even if she could find hers in the tack room, she was not sure she could put it on and girth it securely. No, it would be easier to ride bareback and use the stone

wall as a mounting block.

Once seated and with one hand clenching the reins and mane, she leaned over and grabbed her belongings from the wall where she had hidden them earlier. Wedging the bundle in front of her, she urged Foxglove away from the stables and towards the deeper shadows of the trees behind the estate.

It was dark in the woods, but once Lucie's eyes became accustomed to the obscure light, she was able to pick out the path that led to the boundaries of the Heddington lands. She leaned low over Foxglove's neck to avoid being scraped by branches made invisible by the darkness, branches that clawed at her face and pulled at her hair. She whispered words of encouragement to her horse, words that were swallowed by the rising breeze high in the treetops and the low-pitched rumble of thunder.

Breaking clear of the trees, Lucie pulled up for a moment to listen for sounds of pursuit. Nothing, only the muffled hoot of an owl followed by a small animal's final, terrified shriek. The sound sent shivers up her spine but she resolutely put aside any fears of real or imagined terrors of the night.

"Do you see, Foxglove?" Her voice wavered as she looked up to the sky. "The clouds are holding for us. I think you and I shall be able to travel a great distance before dawn breaks." The sound of her voice reassured her. She tried not to think about the owl and its prey – the parallels were too close to comfort. She could be that hapless animal, caught in the vicious claws of her family's greed.

They headed off cross-country towards the west, which, according to her battered schoolroom atlas, should be the proper direction. Lucie enjoyed the sensation of riding bareback. Below her thighs she could feel the ripple of powerful muscles as Foxglove cantered. The contact gave her a sense of unity with the horse, much more than when perched sidesaddle with one leg looped around the pommel.

While she rode, she pondered George's presence in the stables so late at night with another man. She hesitated to use the word gentleman, for the secret behavior was not gentleman-like in the slightest. It was disturbing to realize George had a dark, unknown edge for she had always considered him an amicable companion.

"Don't think of George," she scolded herself. "Think instead of yourself." She flicked Foxglove with the reins as if to punctuate the shift in her thoughts.

With every mile that passed, her fear of discovery abated to be replaced instead with a steely determination. She would not let her uncle choose her destiny. No, she would choose her own life. A few nights of discomfort were a small price to pay for her eventual freedom. It was not that she abhorred the idea of marriage, rather, it was the idea that her family considered her nothing more than chattel to be used for their own convenience with no consideration

for her own wishes.

Above, the drifting clouds formed an ever-shifting pattern. Occasional flashes of lightning lit the horizon but as yet the storm was far away. The only hint of the tempest to come was the breeze that caressed Lucie's cheeks and ruffled the grasses.

She rode on through the dusky dancing shadows of night.