

EXCERPT FROM TO SEDUCE AN ANGEL

Chapter One

England, 1824

Emma faced the two gentlemen in front of the massive stone fireplace. A painting on the wall above the gray stones depicted a hunting dog pinning a spotted fawn in agony between his forepaws. Emma's sympathies were with the fawn.

They had her pinned, the duke and his nephew. The Duke of Wenlocke, tall, gaunt, and imperious, his face as unyielding as granite, leaned heavily on a black cane. His gnarled hand curved over its golden head like an eagle's talon. His other hand clutched a document.

"This is the girl?" His haughty gaze sent an icy wave of alarm over her. "She doesn't look like a murderess to me."

Emma willed her knees to remain steady. It took steady knees to run.

"Oh she's the one, uncle. Emma Portland." The other man, the duke's nephew the Earl of Aubrey, turned from prodding a great log with an iron poker. A shower of sparks vanished up the flue. *If only escape were that easy.*

"What's your age, girl?" the duke demanded.

"Twenty, your grace." Her voice came out thin and reedy, unrecognizable to her own ears over the pounding of her heart.

The duke's gaze fixed her to the spot. "Stuck a knife in some fellow's ribs, did you?"

Don't deny it, Emma. She clenched her fists in the folds of her shawl. Let them think her a murderess. Let them stare as if she were a beast in a menagerie to be baited.

"She's accused of the deed, uncle, not convicted. I'm sure she'd rather do a favor for a pair of gentlemen than face the law." Aubrey had a smooth voice and a powerful body, his muscled thighs bulging in skintight riding breeches, his calves sheathed in gleaming black leather. Emma had seen him return his pretty mare to the stables with bloodied sides. She had not imagined that he noticed her.

The duke's stare pierced her. "She'd better. I'm done with the law and courts. Hang all lawyers. I want that whore's get out of Daventry Hall and back in the gutter where he belongs."

He shook the paper in his fist at Emma. "You know what this is, girl? A request for the king's pardon. The duchess wants me to sign it. If I don't, you'll be had up before the justices at the next assizes in Taunton."

Emma drew a sharp breath and blinked hard against a sudden sting in her eyes. Somehow in spite of all their care, the law had connected her with the spy's death. She knew what that meant. Once more she and Tatty had been betrayed. Her thoughts raced back through the long chain of coins and jewels pressed into willing palms and hasty bargains made with low characters. Their enemies might have bought off anyone on sea or land in the thousand miles between home and England.

"You'll hang, you know." The duke handed the paper to Aubrey. "Read it to her."

Aubrey circled her, making a slow deliberate perusal of her person, the privilege of a man with power. A mad desire to pick up her skirts and run passed in an instant. She would not make half the distance to the library door. She would never make the first set of stairs or the grand entrance or the drive, let alone the unfriendly woods below Wenlocke House. Escape took care and planning and above all luck. No one knew that better than Emma.

How many times had she and Tatty and Leo tried and failed in seven years until their jailers had hanged Leo.

Aubrey stopped so close to her she breathed his scent, a heavy male mix of musk and leather with a tang of sweat. "Not pleasant to contemplate, is it? Much better to hide here at Wenlocke, teaching servants' brats. That's what you do, isn't it, Miss Portland?"

Her downward gaze caught at the flimsy paper in Aubrey's hand. A pardon meant the duchess, her grandmother's friend, still believed in her. When she and Tatty had reached her grace, all their difficulties had melted away. Until now. Now the duchess had gone to London to visit her daughter. Tatty was on her way to a ship at Bristol. There was no one at Wenlocke to help Emma. Still the duchesses' wishes must count for something. "The duchess kindly gave me a position."

"Don't think to hide behind her grace, girl," the duke snapped.

"But she's done it for weeks, uncle. Look at her. With her pink cheeks, golden curls, and round blue eyes, a man thinks butter won't melt in that sweet mouth, but that's a lie, isn't it?" Aubrey lifted her chin, the cutting edge of his nail against her throat. Her stomach roiled at the touch. "You're a lie, Emma Portland. There's a dead man in Reading whose reeking corpse says you're someone else."

His broad back was to his uncle. He let go of her chin and reached down and dealt her breast a swift, stinging blow with a flick of his middle finger.

Fear cramped her insides, but Emma knew better than to show it. She'd made a mistake to brush the walnut dye out of her hair and scrub her skin and accept an old figured gown from the duchess, sweet and clean, scented with lavender and verbena from the clothes press.

"Listen to Aubrey, girl." The duke's voice brought her gaze back to him. "If you don't want them to break your pretty neck and feed you to the crows, you'll do as he says."

Crows. She steadied her treacherous knees. *Don't think about crows, Emma.* Tatty and the babe must reach the coast and the waiting messenger.

The fire crackled, and outside a March gale howled against the windows. The Englishness of the place, which had seemed so warm and comforting when she first arrived at Wenlocke, now seemed chillingly cold. The baroque grandeur of the room dwarfed her. Its dark oak cases held thousands of morocco bound tomes with gold-tooled spines, crushing slabs of history and law. The English liked their law to do the killing. They did not send assassins to kill babes in their cradles like her countrymen, but they would hang the merest child for stealing.

Aubrey called it a favor, but Emma knew better. The prickle of the small hairs of her neck warned her. He and the duke wanted her for some ruthless business because they believed her to be a murderess. She could tell them what a joke that was. Tatty was the fearless one. Leo had always admired her for it, married her for it. Her older brother and her cousin had been well-matched in courage. It had been Emma's duty to kill the flies and spiders in the cell she'd shared with Tatty. Once Emma had even been so bold as to kill a rat. But if these gentlemen knew the truth about her, if they saw that she would be of no use to them, they would simply give her over to the law. And the crows would get her.

Aubrey handed the duke the paper. His voice turned coaxing. "We want you to teach a different group of brats. That's all. Here, read this notice." Emma swung her gaze back to him. This time he offered her a newspaper, and she was pleased with the steadiness of her hand as she took it. Inside her everything quaked as if she would shake apart in spite of the name she had taken for herself. *Portland*, for the stone and *Emma* for the lover of the great English hero Nelson. She had vowed to be as unshakeable as her new name.

The paper was folded open to a small notice inquiring after a schoolmaster. *Private instruction wanted in letters, mathematics, and geography. References required. Inquire at Daventry Hall for interview.*

Emma handed the notice back. Asking a suspected murderess to tutor children in a private gentleman's house was not the favor Aubrey meant. "What makes you think this person will hire me?"

She did not know where her boldness came from. Tatty would say a cat pent up becomes a lion. Aubrey watched her with a twisted smile. A ridge of vein marred his smooth broad forehead. "We will send impeccable credentials with you."

She waited for the trap to close. Aubrey's smile was the slow, complacent smile of power.

"In return, you must do something for us. It's simple really. I'll keep a man in the village. He'll tell you what to do, and you'll report to him everything you discover about your new employer's habits and plans."

"I must spy?" She tried not to betray any relief. They had not asked her to kill anyone. *Still she would have to report to a man, Aubrey's man. Aubrey would know where she was. Escape would be very very hard.*

"Or hang if that's your preference."

"On whom must I spy?" Her mind raced. Let them think her agreeable. Let them think she could be bought with a piece of paper. There would be time while she spied for them for Tatty to reach the coast and Emma to plan another escape. She was the planner, not Tatty.

"On the Marquess of Daventry."

"A lord?"

"Whore's get." The duke's cold voice insisted.

She turned to him. The lines cut deep in his harsh face. The hooded eyes were unreadable. "May I know why I am to spy on this lord?"

"He's an enemy of this house, Miss Portland."

"Is he dangerous, then?"

"He's damned hard to kill."

She stared at the duke, but his closed expression revealed nothing. Emma's brain could make no sense of it--to send a schoolmistress to spy on a dangerous lord. "For how long must I spy?"

"As long as it takes. And we may ask you to obtain certain items for us, certain papers and objects."

They wanted her to spy and steal. "You will sign the pardon request if I spy?"

In answer the duke tossed the paper aside. The weary gesture told Emma all she needed to know about her predicament. The duke's unsteady leg buckled, and Aubrey took his arm to help him to a leather chair. Emma understood the gesture. The duke relied on Aubrey now, and Aubrey only waited to take power as it slipped from the duke's grip.

"When do I leave?"

"Today."