



"[Dotta's] evocative prose draws readers in with uniquely layered characters and rich intrigues that leave you gasping and begging for more."

SERENA CHASE,
USA TODAY

PRICE
of
Privilege

PRICE
— of —
PRIVILEGE
TRILOGY

JESSICA
DOTTA

Praise for the Price of Privilege series



M A R K O F D I S T I N C T I O N



“Jessica Dotta is a phenomenal writing talent and her evocative prose draws readers in with uniquely layered characters and rich intrigues that leave you gasping and begging for more.”

SERENA CHASE, *USA Today*

“Ms. Dotta weaves a web of intricate secrets revealing one, only to expose thousands of other untold threads. Overall, this was a thrilling read, perfect for fans of Austen and Brontë, with all the intensity and tension of the Tudor court.”

RADIANT LIT

“Dotta has brought forth the complicated world of high society England and makes it understandable to readers. Her characters are charming, but she throws in a few scoundrels to even things out.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Dotta picks up the action right where the story left off in *Born of Persuasion*, delivering . . . richly gothic atmosphere, suspense, and tangled relationships.”

BOOKLIST

“A brooding and atmospheric tale that may appeal to readers who enjoy Charlotte Brontë.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“Jessica Dotta’s beautiful writing and narration brought this book to life. . . . Fans of the series will be pleased with this new installment, and just as eager as I am to get their hands on the final book.”

CHRISTIAN MANIFESTO

“Readers will find themselves engulfed in a story of danger and romance. . . . In a word, the series so far is remarkable, but it is so much more than that, as it challenges readers to examine closely the world around them, the faith within them, and [the] foundation below them.”

FAMILY FICTION



B O R N O F P E R S U A S I O N



“An intrepid heroine falling for two different men; a plot brimming with secrets, scandal, and suspense; and a richly atmospheric setting are the key ingredients in the first novel in Dotta’s *Price of Privilege* trilogy. Readers who miss Victoria Holt will swoon with delight upon discovering this retro-gothic winner.”

BOOKLIST

“With crossover appeal for mainstream historical romance fans of Victoria Holt, Dotta’s debut novel will have readers demanding book two immediately.”

LIBRARY JOURNAL

“I was delighted, enthralled, and utterly captivated by the way Jessica Dotta cleverly mixed a cast of Austen-like characters into a creative Charlotte-Brontë-meets-Victoria-Holt setting. . . . With twists, turns, and a hopeful ending that leaves so very much to be resolved, *Born of Persuasion* will no doubt make my list of top favorite debuts this year.”

SERENA CHASE, *USA Today*

“Dotta’s new series has something for all fans of this time period: romance, family secrets, overbearing guardians, and even a little laughter. The characters are well-rounded and the author’s research on the setting shines through.”

ROMANTIC TIMES

“Absolutely entertaining and brilliantly written, with lovable flawed characters. Full of witty dialogue that opened windows into a world of intriguing mystery as this author explores love, faith, and honor. Jane Austen fans will love this instant classic that dropped me into all the richness of the Victorian era. I highly recommend this book for a great read and a book club pick.”

THE BOOK CLUB NETWORK INC. (BOOKFUN.ORG)

“The best Christian fiction I’ve read in a very long time. . . . [It] perfectly blends mystery, drama, heartbreak, and romance with just a touch of sermonizing. I believe this book could be in the running for one of my favorite Christian books of the decade.”

RADIANT LIT

“*Born of Persuasion* is the sort of book in which readers of historical fiction long to lose themselves: rich with period detail and full of intrigue and deception. Fans of Philippa Gregory and Sarah Dunant will fall in love with this arresting story.”

TASHA ALEXANDER, *New York Times* bestselling author

“With a voice you’ll love, Jessica Dotta paints a vivid portrait in words, drawing her readers through an unexpected maze of plot twists. *Born of Persuasion* is a story of betrayal and perseverance, rich with unforgettable characters.”

CINDY WOODSMALL, *New York Times* bestselling author

“A fascinating cast of characters and breathless twists and turns make this story anything but predictable. Mystery and romance, sins of the past and fears of the future all combine for a page-turning experience.”

LIZ CURTIS HIGGS, *New York Times* bestselling author

“*Born of Persuasion* is among the best novels I’ve ever read. It is descriptive, suspenseful, and absolutely captivating. Not since *Jane Eyre* have I wanted to reread a story again and again.”

GINA HOLMES, bestselling author of *Crossing Oceans*

“Filled with romantic twists, social intrigue, and beautiful writing, Dotta’s *Born of Persuasion* is an alluring debut that will leave fans of Victorian fiction clamoring for more.”

TOSCA LEE, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Jessica Dotta is this generation’s Jane Austen but with a twenty-first-century voice, and *Born of Persuasion* is a riveting saga that will keep you turning page after page.”

ANE MULLIGAN, president, *Novel Rocket*



❖ PRICE OF PRIVILEGE ❖







P R I C E
of
Privilege

 Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, Illinois

J E S S I C A
D O T T A

Visit Tyndale online at www.tyndale.com.

Visit Jessica Dotta's website at www.jessicadotta.com.

TYNDALE and Tyndale's quill logo are registered trademarks of Tyndale House Publishers, Inc.

Price of Privilege

Copyright © 2014 by Jessica Dotta. All rights reserved.

Drawing of castle copyright © Claudio Divizia/Shutterstock.com.

Cover designed by Faceout Studio, Jeff Miller

Author photo taken by Joshua MacLeod, copyright © 2013. All rights reserved.

Interior designed by Dean H. Renninger

Edited by Caleb Sjogren

The author is represented by Chip MacGregor of MacGregor Literary Inc., 2373 NW 185th Avenue, Suite 165, Hillsboro, OR 97124.

Scripture quotations are taken from the *Holy Bible*, King James Version.

Price of Privilege is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Dotta, Jessica.

Price of Privilege / Jessica Dotta.

pages cm. — (Price of Privilege Trilogy ; #3)

ISBN 978-1-4143-7557-1 (sc)

1. Heiresses—Fiction. 2. Upper class—England—London—Fiction. 3. London (England)—History—19th century—Fiction. 4. Christian fiction. I. Title.

PS3604.O87P75 2014

813'.6—dc23

Printed in the United States of America

20 19 18 17 16 15 14
7 6 5 4 3 2 1



One



HOW CURIOUS IT IS, at long last, to write about the trials. Long have they been guarded, the truth kept veiled.

At first, it wasn't proper to speak of them. When so much is lost, who can bear to trample over the little that remains? One afternoon, years afterwards, sadness overtook me, and as I stood in the cool shade beneath leafy bowers, I realized my opportunity to disclose the full truth had passed. Lives were tentatively healing, and to speak would have been disruptive. By that point, my name was so besmirched by lies, accusations, and assumptions, my only defense was to allow the remainder of my life to testify to my true character.

During that period, I faced the fullness of myself and glimpsed the substance of my soul. What a strange alloy it comprised—fear intertwined with hope, cowardice lumped with bravery, innocence amassed with sin.

It is no wonder in my case God demanded a crucible. We often fail to recognize our greatest godsend simply because it comes bundled in suffering.

Thus only now, as I prepare to chronicle those fateful

months, have I reopened memories long stuffed into boxes, stored in dusty closets of forgotten chambers. Each box opened contains something precious yet equally cruel. As I bring forth the last of these remembrances, the picture finally clears, and I am able to comprehend how stunning the events actually were.

What strange nonsense I must seem to write, the babblings of an old woman, a monied dowager at that. Yet have I ever used pity as my cloak? Was I not born despised and unwanted? Only a strange twist took me from being unheeded to being one of the most influential voices of the century.

Who could have predicted such an end?

Who could have foreseen the vast power and wealth that my name would one day accrue?

But I am off point.

I begin at the end of the story that most think they understand, though in truth, they know nothing about.

The first morning I awoke in Edward's arms, I stirred in my slumber, feeling a deep sensation of lament as if something had slipped through my fingers, though I could not place what. Shivering, I shifted position and pulled the blanket higher. The nap of homespun cloth scraped my skin.

My eyes opened. No London House sheets were these.

The very first sight that greeted me was a window framing the beginnings of dawn. Only the trunk of the nearest tree could be seen in the morning fog, its branches seemingly disappearing into the mist. A grey light, thin as gruel, seeped into the cramped chambers, recalling me to my surroundings.

My breath frosted the air as I thrilled with gratitude. Of course! This was Edward's church and today was Henry and Elizabeth's wedding! I shifted onto my back and viewed the century-old slatted wood ceiling that had been resurrected as an addition to the sanctuary. The stark architecture was so unlike my father's lavish houses that I couldn't help but give a silent offering of thanks. It was as if I'd been drawn out from stormy

waters and placed on the solid planking of a ship. Here, I would become myself again.

Last night, I scarcely dared to sleep, fearing that I'd wake and discover this all a dream. But now, the acceptance that this was actually true prevented all chance of returning to slumber. I turned on my stomach and propped myself on my elbows to hungrily take in every detail of our home.

To call that space a chamber was a decided compliment, yet I adored every inch of it. How much better I understood the nap of wool over the gloss of satin.

A single table served also as a desk, evidenced by the books, Bible, inkwell, and parchment laid out in orderly stacks. There were only two chairs—one shoved beneath the desk, the other in the corner where it doubled as a valet, holding Edward's extra folded clothing. Next to it, a single fireplace with a rough-hewn wood mantel provided both the kitchen and heating source. I gave the cast-iron pot hanging from the crossbar a dubious look. Surely Edward wouldn't expect me to cook. I frowned, pulling the blanket over my chilled shoulder. In the past, I'd kept Sarah company while she dressed poultry, but I'd never heeded her work. And nearly six months with Pierrick, my father's world-renowned chef, hadn't extended my skills beyond choosing the proper sauce and embellishment. That knowledge hardly constituted what Edward needed in a wife.

Edward stirred, emptying the pocket of warmth trapped between us. His cold nose nuzzled through my thick hair. Sleep rusted his voice. "Awake already, Juls?"

Instead of answering, I snuggled tighter against him, savoring his warmth.

He planted a sleepy kiss on the back of my head, then slung an arm across me to pull me close. "The girls will be here soon to decorate, and I doubt our news has circulated. Besides, it's getting late. We should rise."

I squeezed my eyes shut. Clearly we needed to discuss what

constituted “late.” I hitched the blanket higher. “You forget, we told Mrs. Windham we were married last night. I warrant the entire village knows by now.”

“What? And risk that our news might upstage Henry and Elizabeth’s wedding? Surely not!”

Smiling, I opened my eyes. “Don’t you think hiding it is more of a hazard? Someone else might catch wind and spread the news first. Trust me, everyone knows.”

“All right.” Edward jostled the bed as he repositioned himself. “What do I get when I win?”

“*When* you win?” I turned and settled on my back, then viewed the tousled silhouette of Edward. He studied me as he propped on one elbow. Even in the semidarkness, the love in his eyes created quiescence within me. They say the ancients believed peace was a rare gift bestowed on mortals they favored. In that moment, I understood the belief. My cup couldn’t have been fuller. I stretched, giving him a mischievous look.

Teasing filled his eyes. “Hmmm. How about a fair share of the blanket?”

I gave a mock pout. “That’s your best demand?”

“Aye.” He traced the outline of my face as he leaned forward to kiss me, but then merriment crinkled his eyes, and from my peripheral vision, I noted that his right hand inched toward the edge of the blanket.

I tilted up toward his kiss, but just before our lips met, I shrieked with laughter and yanked the blanket hard, then rolled over and cocooned myself in wool.

Edward roared with laughter. “Why, you little—” The straw in the mattress shifted as he pinioned me between his knees and searched for a seam. “That’s it. As your husband, I’m taking full charge of the blanket and its distribution.”

Icy air stabbed my skin as his hand found an inlet. I gave a squeal, prepared to defend my sole right to the bedclothes. “Edward! Stop! Don’t you dare! It’s positively freezing!”

“Trust me, I know.” He continued to unwrap me, as I in turn struggled to make it more difficult. “I’m beginning to suspect,” he cried, “that you, Mrs. Edward Auburn, are a cover thief! And there’s only one proper punishment for thieves!”

I could scarcely breathe from laughing but still managed to keep myself enveloped by twisting every time he got the advantage. “And what . . . is that?”

He stopped wresting, triumph filling his eyes. “A thorough dunking in the horse trough.”

I gave a gasp of horror as he hefted me up in the blanket and tossed me over his shoulder.

For a startled second, all I could see was my hair cascading toward the floor, where I feared it might be long enough to mingle with the crushed leaves and clods of dirt. When he started toward the chapel, however, I tried to kick free. “You wouldn’t!”

“Oh, wouldn’t I?”

“I’ll scream,” I threatened as he headed straight down the center aisle of the sanctuary.

Edward laughed, ready to answer, but then he stiffened, turned, and rushed back.

Twisting, I did my best to rise up far enough to see what had alarmed him.

Outdoors, Henry sat upon his steed. Frowning, he squinted at the row of arched windows. Though it was too dark for Henry to see inside, I had little doubt he’d heard our commotion and was debating his best course of action.

“Henry,” I shouted with all my might, knowing Edward’s predicament was far worse than mine, for he hadn’t a stitch on, whereas I wore the blanket. “Help! Come and stop your brother from committing an evil crime!”

“Oh, you’re in trouble now,” Edward promised, doubling his pace as he slunk back to our chamber.

I was still laughing as he dumped me on the straw mattress and then crouched to find his trousers. The floorboards creaked

as he shoved one foot through them and then the other. “Don’t think I’m going to forget that!” He grinned as he pulled the shirt over his head and shoved fistfuls of it into his trousers.

My stomach ached as it hadn’t in years. “That’s what you get for threatening your wife.”

He chuckled as he hastened back out into the sanctuary. Henry must have dismounted while Edward dressed, for in less than a minute, the brothers’ voices filled the chapel.

I lay catching my breath, unable to believe that the day our foursome had dreamed about for so long was finally here. A few hours hence, Elizabeth would become my sister. After their wedding, nothing could ever separate the four of us again.

The thought gave wings to my feet. I wanted to be dressed to begin the day.

Though it was May, cold streamed up through the wooden floorboards as I planted my feet and stood. I viewed the clothing we’d carelessly discarded last night. It was impossible not to smile as I recalled our ardor, the frantic kisses, the manner in which we’d clung to each other after months of separation, and how we’d finally gone to sleep entwined together.

Henry’s voice crested, recalling me to task.

I scooped up the quilted muslin underdress, slid it over my head, added drawers, then turned to my stay. With dismay I gathered the broken pieces. The previous evening as Edward undressed me layer by layer, he’d fought so much with the cording that he eventually just pulled it completely out. One aglet had snapped off the end.

I fingered the frayed cording, wondering if I could dip it in wax and fashion it to fit through the tiny ivory eyelets. I frowned, knowing that even if I managed, I’d still have to estimate how much cording to pull through the first two eyeholes. Tightening a stay by oneself was frustrating, but to start it with uneven lacing was nigh impossible.

"I'm leaving, Juls," Henry's voice carried from the sanctuary behind me. "Will you be all right?"

"Yes, I'm fine!" I called over my shoulder. "I'll see you at the wedding!"

"Don't let Ed give you any trouble."

My laughter rang through our cramped space, sounding louder than I intended. "Oh, I promise. If anything, I plan to be the handful!"

Henry rewarded me with a hearty laugh before the slap of his boots faded out of hearing.

Edward's bare feet scarcely made a sound as he approached. "We're lucky it was only Henry. Some of the girls are en route and haven't heard the felicitous news yet. He rode out to warn us, just in case."

I grinned at the imagery of Edward's female parishioners finding him frolicking au naturel with the scandalous daughter of William Elliston slung over his shoulder.

"That's humorous?"

"I'm sorry, but yes. Can't you picture their expressions had they walked into the church and seen that?"

Edward must have envisioned it too, for his eyes creased with silent mirth. Then, seeing me struggle with my stay, he wagged his fingers in a request for it.

A flush of embarrassment heightened the color of his cheeks as he realized his mistake, but presently he dimpled. "I'm sorry, Juls. I had no idea what I was doing last night."

I gave him a saucy look, rubbing the chill from my arms. "Well, thank goodness for that. I rather preferred it to finding you experienced."

He chuckled, then glanced at the empty grate. "I should have risen earlier and started the fire for you first, too." He looked at the mangled stay in his hands. "I fear I'm not much good at playing lady's maid."

I looked over the pile of my clothing, imagining how Nancy

would have made a point to grumble about our mess, and then I gasped, stunned I hadn't thought of it beforehand.

"Nancy!" I cried. The idea caught like kindling as I clutched Edward's sleeves. I could have danced a jig or spun in circles. "Oh, my word! We've got to hire her! We've got to! With any luck, she can cook too!"

"Nancy!" He shot me a look of surprise before he frowned.

Somehow that wasn't the response I expected. "I need a maid-of-all-work, and she's skilled as an abigail. Besides, if it wasn't for her, I never would have escaped Macy that night. Oh, please! We must!"

Edward's eyes were his most expressive feature. His brow furrowed, raising alarm. I pressed my nails into my palms to keep from arguing until he'd at least answered me.

After a long while, he gave a thoughtful nod. "We can certainly offer for her to join us, but she may not wish to leave the comforts of Am Meer. A vicarage is poor placement for a servant." He gave me a look I couldn't quite interpret. "In all honesty, Juls, were it anyone but you, I wouldn't dare to wed, knowing that I'd only be pauperizing my wife. I doubt Nancy will want part in this adventure."

I frowned, disagreeing with his assessment. My outlook was certainly happier. I envisioned Nancy teaching me to cook and launder clothing. Together we could tend the garden and collect eggs. I imagined us chatting while we cleaned house. How could she not want that?

Looking back across years of experience, I am amazed at the fine line Edward walked that morning—joining me in my exuberance while maintaining a deeper knowledge of reality. For in my pipe dream, my hands weren't cracked and bleeding from hard work, nor was I frazzled with one child on hip, another buried in skirt, hindering me as I tried to round up the extra hours necessary to meet the demanding needs of a poor household.

I studied Edward a moment, sensing that our views on the future were dissimilar, though I couldn't pinpoint where. To be frank, it unleashed an emotion I couldn't name. The feeling of loss from my dreams returned and crouched on the edge of my cognizance. I shook my head, desperately needing to distance myself from the sensation. "You're wrong. Of course she'll want to be with us." I picked up my petticoat. "She will. You'll see."

Ed gave a friendly nod, though it was apparent he retained his doubts. "Well, you know her best. But since we're on the topic of servants, I've something too. Henry tells me Father is about to demote Jameson. I want to offer him a place with us."

"Jameson!" Shock rippled through me. Though I'd never met Lord Auburn's valet, we were practically on visiting terms. He was part of our foursome's legacy. The energies that poor man must have expended trying to keep Henry and Edward in line—a task in which no one could have excelled—were unfathomable.

"Your father is demoting him?" I hooked my petticoat as Edward approached with my mended stay. "To what?"

"Second gardener."

I gasped at the insult. "Why?"

Displeasure tinged Edward's features as he stepped behind me. "He's well past age, and Father has no need of a second butler."

"But to make him a groundskeeper, when he's served indoors his whole life!"

"Yes, well, it'd be even less swank to make him a footman. He'd further embarrass Father by having his advanced age seen by company."

I wasn't sure how to take the news, for I still retained my childlike fear of the valet. I glanced over my shoulder. "Can we afford him and Nancy?"

With a look, Edward communicated our dire financial situation as he finished lacing me.

“What about Henry and Elizabeth? Can they take him?”

“Not likely. Father is furious over Henry’s refusal to give up Elizabeth. He accepted the marriage on the condition that Henry finally buckle down and help with the estate. They’re going to live at the manor, and Father has final say on estate matters, including servants.”

Sympathy for Elizabeth swelled as I stooped and retrieved my massive dress from Quill’s. My fingers rummaged through the billows, looking for the bodice opening. Though it was one of the simpler gowns my father purchased, still it was voluminous. Eventually, however, I located the slit. “So you wanted to hire Jameson as . . . ?”

“My own personal valet. He’s . . . well, he’s slipping; his hand quakes occasionally, so some of the duties I’ll still do myself.” Edward ran his palm over his cheek as if envisioning a sharpened razor in Jameson’s hands.

I wrinkled my nose as I looked at the chair piled with his threadbare attire.

Edward understood my point. “I know, but it would gut him to take any other position, and I want him with us.”

I stepped into my petticoats. “All right, one elderly valet for you. One cheeky redheaded girl for me.”

“Yes.” Edward’s voice was muffled by the layers of my dress as he lowered it over my head. “And no extra income with which to pay them. They’re going to adore working for us.”

“Is my father not giving us an allowance, then?”

Edward’s fingers froze as he buttoned the back of my dress. “He tried.”

I lifted my hair, allowing him a better view of his work, trying to ignore the hollow sensation growing in my stomach. I had no need to inquire further. Clearly my father had set conditions, and Edward wasn’t going to place any member of his family under Lord Pierson’s authoritarian rule again.

All at once, joy that I had tied my fate to this man flared

within me—for in some ways, my time in London was far crueler than my childhood. The inability to bridge the gap to my father’s affections was like dying from starvation and smelling the waft of food, but being unable to locate the meal. I placed my hands over my bodice, trying not to care that our relationship was even further strained. It angered me that my father believed I had purposefully used Forrester’s newspaper to betray him.

Without warning, my mind flashed with Isaac Dalry’s pulverized expression as he discovered the article. The same sickening emotion I felt every time I remembered Lord Dalry egressed through me.

Edward noted my silence but misunderstood it. “Believe me, we’re better off managing expenses on our own.”

I nodded once, knowing how deep Edward’s animosity toward Isaac ran. Wanting to move back toward lighter topics, I made my voice smile. “Shall I order Nancy to marry Jameson, then? We could offer their salary as a couple.”

Edward’s laugh filled me with genuine warmth. “What? And hazard her tongue when she discovers she’s to wed someone her grandfather’s age?”

I spun. “Surely he’s not that old!”

Edward shrugged. “He’s nearer seventy than sixty.”

“Oh no, that will never do.” I sat on the bed and pulled on my stockings, happy that our banter had been restored. “Let’s arrange for her to fall in love with one of your father’s footmen. That might be handy.”

“Shocking, Mrs. Auburn!” Pride filled Edward’s voice as he used my new title for the second time. “Do you mean to tell me you’re going to allow your staff to wed?”

“Oh yes!” I gave him my most mischievous look. “I want everyone to be as deliriously happy as we are.”

Edward grinned as he donned his black waistcoat and started on its pewter buttons. “What sort of chap do you have in mind for her?”

“Tall and strong. A good-looking one, mind you. At least as handsome as yourself.”

Edward took up his clerical collar and moved toward a small mirror. “Men such as myself are rather in shortage. Would she mind a much plainer one?”

I laughed and threw the nearest pillow at him. “In that case, let’s focus instead on finding Jameson a wife. That should prove easier, at least. We’ll just order him to marry—” I froze midsentence.

“Well, do tell,” Edward continued as he buttoned his collar in place, unaware of the transformation happening in me. “I’m certain Jameson will be delighted to learn he’s headed for wedded bliss. Who is the lucky bride?”

“Sarah,” I whispered. “Oh, Edward. We must find Sarah, too!”

Forgetting that I could see his mirror image, Edward drew his brow together as if a hundredweight stone had been placed upon him. It was plain he wondered how on earth we’d manage such a large household, but he nodded.

I raced on tiptoes to him, threw my arms about his neck, and kissed his cheek. Sarah, like Jameson, was family. “We’ll eat nothing but gruel if necessary, and they can sleep on pews.”

He acknowledged my thanks, then took up a pocketknife, which he slid into his frock coat. “So that makes three servants, plus your father’s groom, horse, and carriage, which are still under our care. There’s no gruel, but as far as sleeping arrangements go, there at least I can offer our motley party better than church benches.”

I arched a brow.

He retrieved a small ring with two rusty keys, which he dangled in the air. “There’s Henry’s wedding present to us.”

For a second, I wasn’t certain I’d heard him correctly.

Edward glanced out the window. “If we hurry, I could show it to you before the wedding.”

“A house? But that’s not—” I wanted to state that it was an impossibility, especially as Henry and Elizabeth were being forced to live at Auburn Manor. Yet all at once I remembered our garden walk at Eastbourne, where Edward had told me about Henry’s early inheritance of land and the empty house he had given us.

“We have a house?” I whispered slowly.

“We have a home,” Edward gently corrected. “Our home.”

Only Edward could understand how that word represented the purest and most concentrated essence of belonging. I drew in a measured breath, willing myself not to cry. Like a passenger trapped inside a runaway carriage, I had spent the past year of my life in constant upheaval. I’d discovered that Mama’s suicide was murder and I’d betrothed myself to the murderer. I’d learned the man who raised me wasn’t my father. Overnight, still reeling from the pain of those discoveries, I’d gone from being the rejected daughter of William Elliston to the celebrated heiress of Lord Pierson. The finality of having a house—a home to grow a family and put it all behind me—nearly undid me.

Edward, thankfully, pretended not to notice that I struggled to remain self-possessed. I’ve since heard stories of his early pastoring days, and I can say that a truer shepherd never existed.

“Ready?” he asked.

I nodded, knowing that if I spoke, I’d cry. For the first time in my life, I was about to go home.