

“*The Elusive Miss Ellison* will delight the hearts of Regency romance lovers with its poetic narrative, witty verbal swordplay, strict social constructs, and intriguing touch of mystery. Carolyn Miller is a bright new voice in the Regency genre, and I look forward to reading more of her charming stories.”

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“In *The Elusive Miss Ellison*, Carolyn Miller has created a heroine who will steal your heart and a hero who is as frustrating as he is charming. With unexpected twists and turns, the story stays true to the times. The

scenes in the English countryside as well as in London will capture the imagination of those who love the Regency period and win over those who are experiencing the era for the first time.”

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“*The Elusive Miss Ellison* is a wonderful blend of romance, witty banter, and Regency-era charm sure to delight readers.”

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“From the moment I cracked the pages I was transported to another era with a heroine as compelling as Lizzie Bennet and a Darcy-esque hero.”

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“Carolyn Miller’s writing style is reminiscent of Jane Austen, with a modern sense of wit and spunk. Lavinia is a spirited heroine who will leave you smiling to the very last page, and despite the initial presumption of a disinterested, battle-scarred war hero, Nicholas quickly sneaks his way into your heart. This minister’s daughter and guilt-laden earl are supported by an ensemble cast who keep you turning the pages. You’ll be swept into a story of God’s amazing grace and the slow unfolding of a love that overcomes even the greatest opposition.”

—Amber Stockton, author of more than twenty novels, including the best-selling *Liberty’s Promise*



REGENCY BRIDES  
A LEGACY of GRACE

CAROLYN MILLER

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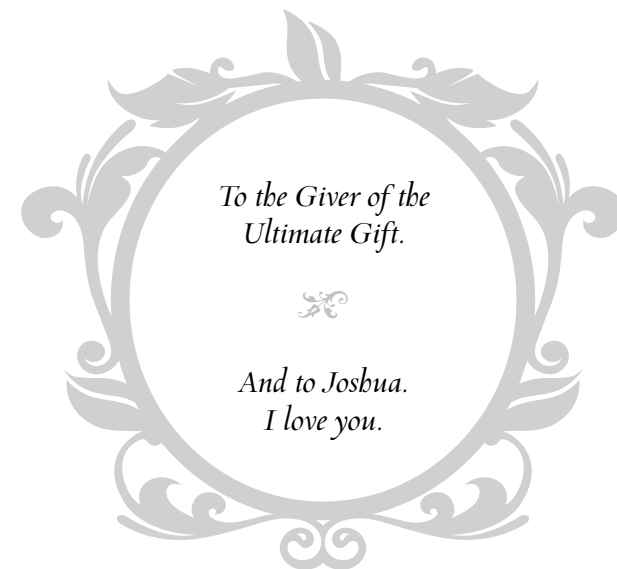
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 CHAPTER ONE

*St. Hampton Heath  
Gloucestershire, England  
June 1843*

“WHY, LIVVIE! WHATEVER are you doing?”

Lavinia Ellison placed down her gardening trowel, swiped perspiration from her brow, and smiled up at her friend. “Good morning, Sophy.”

“Oh, er, yes, good morning.” Sophia Milton’s nose wrinkled as she peered at Lavinia’s handiwork: a tall pile of weeds. “But where is Albert? Surely tending the garden is his responsibility. I know Mama would never permit me to do so, let alone without a hat—”

“Albert is tending our old Jersey. She has been rather ill lately.” She avoided the question of permission. After all, neither the preparations for Papa’s sermon nor Aunt Patience’s Sunday school lesson deserved interruption for such a minor matter.

“Oh. That’s unfortunate for you all.”

Lavinia nodded as she dusted off her skirts. Sally’s sad decline was unfortunate not just for their household, but for the poor families in the village blessed by her superior milk production. Still, God would provide. And if He didn’t, Lavinia would find a way. She pushed the twinge of worry to one side and led the way indoors, cleaning up quickly before directing her guest to a seat in the morning room. She picked up her embroidery. “So, what brings you here on this glorious sunny day?”

“Oh, Livvie! You’ll never guess who is coming tomorrow night!”

She swallowed a smile at her friend's wide cobalt eyes. Sophia Milton was notorious for her passions. "Alas, you are correct. Do tell."

"Father said the new earl has accepted the invitation to our musicale!"

The new earl. Lavinia's chest tightened.

Sophia sighed. "I saw him from the window when he called on Papa yesterday. He's *ever* so handsome. So tall and dark . . ."

Yes, but a handsome appearance counted for naught unless matched by good character and actions. She quashed her uncharitable thought, offered a polite nod, and cast her attention back to her ever-frustrating needlepoint as her visitor continued listing his charms. Why Aunt Patience insisted that Lavinia embroider was beyond comprehension. The list of accomplishments for young ladies was ridiculously long, especially when young *men* did not have nearly so many requirements.

After Sophia finally stopped for breath Lavinia murmured, "Your mother must be very happy."

"Oh, yes! And Papa, too."

But of course the squire would be pleased. The second-largest landowner in the district had a wife whose social aspirations far surpassed their sizeable income. To receive such a distinction would prove most gratifying. She frowned at the miniscule mistake she'd just made in her stitching. Why couldn't sewing be simple and enjoyable, like music? She swallowed a sigh and glanced up.

Sophia's smile had dimmed. "But Mother has heard he is something of a flirt, so we should be on our guard."

"I hardly think *I* need be on my guard. I would think the prettiest girl in Gloucestershire should be more concerned about attracting attention." Lavinia gazed without envy at her visitor's artfully styled blond tresses, crimson cheeks, and fresh new muslin, overlaid with embroidered blue flowers. Lady Milton might have her shortcomings, but dressing her daughter to disadvantage was not one of them.

"Livvie, you do not seem terribly thrilled."

"You should know by now that I am quite unwilling to be excited about someone I have never met. But after I meet him, if indeed he *does* condescend to appear, I shall endeavor to seem excited for you. Will that suffice?"

Sophia laughed. "Must you always talk such nonsense?"

"I'm afraid I must, if only to balance some of the prosiness of ordinary conversation."

The younger girl's brows knit together. "Oh no!"

"What is it?"

"Now we know the earl shall attend, whatever shall I wear?"

SOPHIA SOON SWEEPED from the house in a flutter of muslin and ecstasy, leaving Lavinia to open the window, drink in the delightful scent of the late flowering lilacs, and then exchange her embroidery for her sketchbook. As she sketched the glorious rainbow of pansies cascading down the garden's rock wall, she thought on the Earl of Hawkesbury she had once known.

Lord Robert had been as kind as her father: generous, interested in his neighbors, seeking the well-being of his tenants and the local village of St. Hampton Heath. A truly good man. But his death two years ago had precipitated a series of family tragedies. George, his younger brother, had died of influenza within six months of inheriting the title. Less than a year later, while his younger son had been engaged in heavy fighting on the Peninsular, George's elder son, James, had been killed in a hunting accident. Her fingers clenched. *His* death she could not even pretend to mourn.

A blur of tan-and-white fur leapt through the open window. Mickey barked and jumped onto her lap, as if sensing her disquietude. She hugged him close as her art pencils spilled to the floor. Perhaps Sophia and her parents *were* right to be excited about the district's new addition. Lately, Hampton Hall had taken on a slightly neglected look, thanks to the bailiff's less than stellar efforts. And the family's prolonged absence meant the little things Lord Robert formerly noted, such as cottage roof repairs and sending baskets at Christmastime to the poor—services that made a great difference in the lives of the less fortunate—these things had been missed.

"If the new earl fulfills his obligations, he *might* prove a blessing, Mickey."

He barked his agreement, wriggled away, and dashed through the open window to the tangled underbrush of the rose garden beyond. Tangled underbrush she would resume clearing this afternoon, when Papa and Aunt Patience were sure to be absent and unable to object.

She returned her attention to her sketchbook, working to capture the purple heart of a pansy, until the swish of skirts announced her aunt's arrival. "So, little Sophia hopes to snag herself a Hawkesbury, does she?"

"I don't believe Sophy has any such idea, although Lady Milton may."

An appreciative twinkle lit her aunt's deep blue eyes. Over the past fourteen years, Lavinia had learned many things from this independent, intelligent woman, yet sometimes she still found it difficult to believe that Patience West was Mama's sister. Mama had lived up to her name. *Grace* had filled everything from her musical voice to her pretty mannerisms and her compassion for others. Patience's forthright, practical ways contrasted as strongly as her dark hair differed from Mama's—and Lavinia's own—fairness.

"That woman would be far better off teaching her daughters useful accomplishments and knowledge rather than filling their heads with frippery and empty dreams." Aunt Patience smoothed her severe gray dress, which matched Lavinia's.

Lavinia gestured to the discarded needlepoint. "Useful accomplishments?"

A thin smile escaped her aunt's lips. "One of these days, my dear girl, you will realize that not every worthwhile endeavor can be as enjoyable as writing letters to *The Times*."

Memories arose of the past week's efforts to bring solace to two poor tenant families, endeavors of far greater worth than needlepoint, and far from pleasant: The sour stench of sickness, only slightly alleviated by the aroma of the hearty beef stew she'd brought. Dark, dank cottages filled with a dense chill no fire could chase away. The sad-eyed desperation of wee children who seemed to suspect their mother might die soon. The old ache rippled across Lavinia's soul. Tears pricked. She blinked them away. The earl simply *must* help.

Her aunt patted her arm. "Worthy endeavors are most often rather less than enjoyable."

Lavinia nodded. Good deeds were not about personal pleasure but pleasing God: visiting the sick, biting one's tongue, rooting out envy, forgiving enemies.

And allowing the past to remain buried in the churchyard.



The seventh Earl of Hawkesbury leaned back in his saddle. Fields of sun-ripened barley waved golden in the June sunshine. The scent of fresh-dug earth filled his nostrils as a light breeze ruffled nearby hedgerows. In the distance, the village of St. Hampton Heath reposed peacefully, watched over by the gray-stoned church. Such an idyllic pastoral scene, yet its peace did little to ease the tension edging his heart.

Fourteen years since that disastrous day. Fourteen years filled with study, travel, and then war. Fourteen years spent avoiding this upcoming interview. Sweat beaded his brow as it had the first time he faced cannon fire. He swiped at the moisture, disciplined his limbs to remain still and not turn his horse for home.

Midnight snorted and stamped his hoof, impatience pulling at the bit.

He patted his horse's neck. "There, there, boy. This surely cannot be as bad as Burgos."

The great horse nickered, as if remembering the chaotic withdrawal of allied troops from that Spanish fortress amidst rain and cold.

Nicholas's jaw tightened. Too many good men had died or been captured in that campaign, back when he'd been plain Captain Stamford. Thank whatever gods may be for his horse whose faithfulness had brought him safely to Ciudad Rodrigo. He stroked the glossy mane with tender affection.

Midnight lowered his head, tugging at young grass.

"At least we have food now, don't we, boy?"

Midnight's ears flickered. No French cavalry had chased them harder than starvation, the pangs of hunger carving deeper than the bullet wound in his thigh.

No, the only thing chasing Nicholas now was his conscience.

He shook off the memories and squared his shoulders. "One can only hope this mission proves as unexceptionable as the first, eh?"

Small hope of that.

After wading through the paperwork his bailiff had prepared, his first port of call had been to visit the local squire and baronet. Sir Anthony's delight at his impromptu appearance had been cast in the shade by his effusive invitation to some local assembly, which made him wonder how many unmarried daughters the man had. All soldierly assurance had fled,

replaced by mealymouthed capitulation. This visit would be equally trying, but for very different reasons.

“Come. We best get on, before someone overhears me talking to you, questions my sanity, and insists I be sent to Bedlam.”

He tapped Midnight’s flanks and rode down the drive. They soon arrived at a modest, red-brick manor house, surrounded by oaks and fruiting trees. A servant girl was kneeling in the adjoining weed-strewn garden.

“Excuse me,” he called. “Is your master at home?”

The girl squinted up. Dirt smeared her face, her hair tucked under a monstrously ugly mobcap. He nudged Midnight closer. Her gray eyes widened and she backed away. Poor simpleton.

“There is nothing to be afraid of. He is a good horse.”

She raised a hand to shade her eyes but said nothing. Perhaps she was a mute.

“I am the seventh Earl of Hawkesbury.” How strange it felt to say so, like he was defrauding the world, just as his brother had defrauded his creditors. He swallowed bile. “Now, can you tell me if your master is within?”

The pink staining her face as he announced himself gave way to something rather less maidenly as she lifted her chin. “I cannot.”

“I beg your pardon?” Who was this chit to refuse a major’s command? To refuse an earl’s command? He put iron in his voice. “Tell me, is your master home?”

“No.”

He jerked a nod, wheeled Midnight around, and then paused. “Wait. Do you mean to say he is not home, or do you merely defy me?”

A trace of a smile flashed across her face before her features settled into coolness. “If you are enquiring about Mr. Ellison, he is at home. As for my master, I cannot be expected to own what I do not have.”

He blinked. Perhaps he was the simpleton, after all. The most unusual servant girl picked up her basket of weeds and disappeared around the side of the house. He stared after her, until Midnight’s restless nickering recalled him to his mission. He secured his horse, rapped on the heavy wooden door, and waited. Apparently the rude maid had neglected to inform anyone of the visitor. What kind of servant was she? And what did she mean by saying she had no master?

A rattle of locks dragged him from his musings. Another servant greeted him, wide-eyed with the customary awe his rank and fashion usually merited, and ushered him inside. Nicholas was announced and led into a cluttered drawing room, lined with bookcases.

An older gentleman looked up. “Lord Hawkesbury! Welcome back.”

“Thank you.” He sat at his host’s request and studied the reverend. Deep lines creased a face topped with graying brown hair. He would have been somewhat plain save for a pair of shrewd gray eyes that gave cause to wonder just how much the older man saw.

“The village trusts you will enjoy your stay here.”

“I hope, Mr. Ellison, those are your sentiments as well.”

“Of course, sir.”

Nicholas glanced away. A pianoforte stood near the window, stacked with an untidy pile of papers. “I never had the opportunity to say how very sorry I am for the incident of years ago.”

Which was a lie. He’d had the opportunity. Uncle Robert had begged, cajoled, even threatened both of his nephews with banishment, but the pride running so deep in his mother had forbidden either of her sons to apologize.

Until now.

He steeled himself to meet his host’s justifiable recrimination—but saw compassion instead.

The shame doubled and redoubled, twisting his heart into knots. He forced himself to remain still and not squirm like a child. Many years had passed since anyone had made him feel quite so uncomfortable.

The reverend steepled his fingers and leaned back in his leather armchair. “It was my understanding that it was your brother and his friend who were responsible.”

He gave a small shrug, dropping his attention to his highly polished Hessians. “For the actual incident perhaps, but I fear my words goaded them. For that I am truly sorry.” His gaze lifted.

“And I am truly sorry that you have carried this weight for so many years.” Something like peace and acceptance suffused the reverend’s face. “You and your brother were forgiven a long time ago.”

Nicholas swallowed. “By yourself?”

“Aye. And my daughter.”

Memories flashed of the slight, golden-haired girl keening over a broken, bloodied body. He dragged guilty thoughts away and nodded stiffly. "Thank you, sir."

He glanced up at a lovely watercolor of St. Hampton Heath's old Norman church. The square stone tower and small curved windows had spoken of assurance for countless generations. Peace teased the restlessness within him.

"You will attend services?"

He suppressed a groan. Yet another duty he had no wish to perform. "Perhaps." The wise eyes seemed to search his soul, prompting a more enthusiastic, "I will try."

The reverend nodded. "I believe it will be a great blessing for our little village to have one such as yourself take an interest." He smiled gently. "I trust your time here will also prove a great blessing for you, my lord."

His throat cinched. The undeserved warmth and kindness filling the drawing room seemed to almost choke him. He couldn't take another jot. He rose. "Thank you, Mr. Ellison. Good day, sir."

After exchanging a slight bow with his surprised host, he exited the room and strode down the dim hall to the front entrance, fresh air, and freedom.

He dragged in great cleansing breaths as he untied Midnight, his heart hammering its insistence that he get away. His fingers seemed clumsier than when he was a boy in short pants.

From somewhere inside, a door slammed.

As he mounted his horse, a dark gleam of gold flashed through the apple trees on the manor's southern side. A small beagle appeared, yapping at Midnight's heels, drawing a dismissive snort from the great beast. Nicholas wheeled his horse around, down the dusty drive, back toward the lonely three-storied stone pile that was the countryseat of the Earl of Hawkesbury.

His inheritance. Not a blessing, like the reverend seemed to believe, but both a burden and a curse.

## CHAPTER TWO

LAVINIA CLASPED THE leather hand strap as the carriage wheels rumbled over the uneven drive. She glanced at her aunt, seated opposite, whose jerky movements mimicked Lavinia's own.

"I declare, for a man of Sir Anthony's means, he keeps this road in shocking disrepair."

"We're almost there, Aunt Patience."

"I'm sure the only reason Cornelia Milton insisted we attend tonight was to show off her overdressed house and overdressed daughters."

"And to welcome back the earl," Papa offered mildly.

"The earl." Her aunt sniffed. "No doubt he'll be as high-handed as the rest."

"I did not gain that impression when he visited yesterday." Papa's brow creased. "He seemed surprisingly self-effacing."

No, he had appeared everything rude and presumptuous. Lavinia exchanged a look with Aunt Patience but held her peace. Her aunt's protests were nothing new, her vehemence against the nobility and the different rules for which society held them accountable had resulted in many a spirited rectory debate. The former earl had never seemed to mind her aunt's lack of marked deference, but then Aunt Patience had always held he was the exception to the arrogant aristocratic rule. After yesterday's encounter, Lavinia understood why.

"I do wish I had more time to revise those notes for my sermon."

Lavinia patted his arm. "Your notes can be revised tomorrow, Papa."

"I suppose you're right." He grimaced as another rattle swayed the



carriage's occupants. "It was kind of the Miltons to send their coach for us, but I confess I will be glad to get there."

"As will I."

Another bump threatened to unseat her. She braced her kid boots on the carriage floor. While she would be pleased to reach the squire's newly extended manor, she held mixed feelings about the guest of honor. Despite his overbearing manner yesterday, a new face—handsome or not—would be interesting. The newspaper accounts of the Peninsular War in Spain, so avidly followed in the rectory, suggested Major Stamford had been one of Wellington's most courageous men, attaining numerous war honors. He must have interesting tales, indeed.

Lavinia swallowed a sigh. She would try to give him another chance. After all, he *did* hold the keys to helping the poor of St. Hampton Heath.

She glanced out the carriage window as the hedges slipped past. Bright sunlight meant she had little chance to study him yesterday, yet everything she had seen tallied with Sophia's description. The earl was tall, his hair dark, his shoulders broad, but his face was in shadow, so she had been unable to see if his features were handsome. What had intrigued her most was the furious manner in which he rode away after his interview with Papa, as if he feared ghosts or some such Gothic nonsense might be after him. Strange behavior indeed for a man decorated for bravery.

Papa had merely said afterward that the earl had expressed his regret at the events of the past, and asked for his and Lavinia's forgiveness. "Which I offered, of course."

"Of course?" Aunt Patience had snorted. "Because he is an earl?"

"Because he is a man."

"So once again nobility slips from responsibility faster than scones from a buttered pan! Do you really think Grace can be so easily absolved?"

"Unforgiveness holds us slaves, dear Patience."

Yes, but how could Papa offer *Lavinia's* forgiveness? He hadn't been there, hadn't seen—

She bit her lip, breathing past the embers of resentment as the old hurts swelled past her good intentions. The frozen terror in that moment before the horse struck. Her mother's cry that haunted Lavinia's nights for years. The village whispers that the younger Stamford had asked for a doctor—only

for his brother! Lord Robert's oft-stated sorrow regarding the refusal of his nephews to own their culpability. The injustice flared anew, heating her chest. How *could* Papa offer her forgiveness? She glanced at Papa, offered him a taut smile, and forced her hands to unclench. Enough!

Tonight, she need not follow the rest of the village in paying homage to the guest of honor. Tonight, she would focus on someone far less self-important.



"My lord! Welcome to our humble abode."

Nicholas inclined his head to the evening's host. "Thank you, Sir Anthony."

He looked around the drawing room, filled with the notables of the district. He nodded to Lord and Lady Winthrop, whose estate bounded his on the south; Mr. Jones, the attorney; and Mr. Ellison before glancing across the sea of interested faces. He dipped his head in acknowledgment and then turned to study the pictures on the wall. How many more of these nights must he endure? How many could he politely decline? His gaze shifted from a rather ugly painting of sunflowers to alight on a group of young ladies seated near the Palladian window.

The group were much as any other: brunettes, blonds, dressed in the pale colors society dictated as acceptable, their simpering glances mere rustic versions of London coquettes.

One young lady, however, drew his attention. Unlike the others, she did not glance his way. She was not the youngest, nor the most stylishly attired, dressed as she was in simple gray. Her copper-blond hair was not this year's fashion, and she wore no adornments apart from a smile that flashed occasionally as she listened to a plain older woman. But her poise, her calm assurance, as if she knew exactly what she was about, would not be out of place in a London ballroom. He frowned. She reminded him of someone—

"The young ladies have been quite anxious to make your acquaintance, my lord."

He dragged his attention back to his host, masking his dismay with a polite smile. For months now he had suffered a great deal of attention

from young ladies—and more particularly, from their mothers. He restrained a shudder at the memory of the recent London season Mother had insisted he attend. Conversations with insipid young ladies and vacuous young men, people who seemed to have no purpose but to see and be seen, held little interest for a man of action. It had been a blessed relief to finally be rid of the town and his social obligations, but now he was here in this dreary corner of Gloucestershire, and his status and supposed wealth once again drew attention. His smile grew taut. If only they knew . . .

The squire motioned forward a fussily dressed woman of dark hair and two chins. “May I present my wife, Lady Milton.”

Nicholas murmured the usual commonplace nothings, noticing with pain her look of awe. His eager hostess beckoned to a young girl as her husband continued. “And my daughter, Miss Sophia Milton.”

The blond simpered, eyes downcast, as she blushed becomingly. “My lord.”

Sir Anthony continued the introductions. “May I present Miss West?”  
“Good evening, ma’am.”

The dark-haired woman gave him a cool-eyed look and sharp nod worthy of a duchess and then moved away.

Nicholas frowned.

“And this is our dear reverend’s daughter, Miss Ellison.”

The poised girl from before slowly drew near, as if reluctant. “Lord Hawkesbury and I have already met.”

He stared at her. That voice, those eyes . . .

No. Surely not.

He swallowed. “Miss Ellison.”

“As you can see.” She mockingly sketched a curtsy.

“I apologize. I did not realize. I did not expect to find you so, so . . .”

She raised an eyebrow. “Clean?”

His hostess gasped.

“So grown,” he muttered. Which was stupid. He was no longer a stripling of fifteen. He should have expected something other than the little girl whose cries had cursed his dreams.

His chest tightened with a thousand regrets as the cool, oddly discon-

certing perusal continued. Her clear gray eyes held intelligence just as her father’s, but *his* had not been set in such a fair face.

The squire turned. “Lavinia, I trust you will charm us all again with your musical prowess tonight.”

Aloofness faded as affection filled her features. “Sir Anthony, your willingness to be charmed speaks more to your good nature than it does to my skill. I’m afraid you attach too much to my ability.”

“Nonsense, my dear.” Sir Anthony turned to Nicholas. “Miss Ellison is a most accomplished young lady and has delighted the neighborhood for many years.”

The usual response to such flattery would have been a blushing denial, but there were no reddened cheeks. Her earlier poise suddenly seemed irritating and smug.

Nicholas flicked away an imaginary piece of fluff from his sleeve and drawled, “Such high praise! I am sure all London would be most eager to hear such prodigious talent.”

Her chin rose. The sparkly gray eyes narrowed. “You are correct, sir, in attributing vast generosity and kindness of spirit to Sir Anthony’s comments. We simple rustics would no doubt bring the oh-so-elegant *ton* to their knees in appreciative amusement.”

Ha. So the chit was upset. His lips curved as she made her excuses and left, and he wondered at the contrast between this overly confident young creature and her faded, gracious father.



Insufferable man! How *dare* he condescend to attend one of these country parties and then turn his nose up at everyone and everything? Aunt Patience was right. The aristocracy was all the same, thinking themselves better than everyone else.

Lavinia glanced across the row of silk-swathed ladies to where the earl watched the performances. He barely masked his boredom as Sophia valiantly attempted a Bach sonata—sadly beyond her ability. Lavinia sighed inwardly. Such offerings were only too likely to reinforce the earl’s dismissal of local talent.

She straightened her shoulders. Aunt Patience's insistence that Lavinia hone her creative abilities had not been for naught. And Lord Robert's generosity in acquiring an excellent vocal instructor had proved him the exception to Aunt Patience's objections to those of the aristocracy. Her smile at his memory faded. How sad that his nephew held himself so proud and aloof.

Sophy finished with an air of relief, blushing at the applause.

"Thank you, my dear. That was splendid, simply splendid." Sir Anthony's subsequent invitation to her aunt produced a technically challenging performance, and more genuine-sounding approbation. Then he turned to Lavinia. "Miss Ellison? Would you be so kind?"

Lavinia moved to the pianoforte, smiling at the crowd to cover unaccustomed nerves. Her aunt and father watched with very different faces. Aunt Patience's expression was one of pride, that the musical talent that ran deep in her side of the family would once again be expressed and praised—by all except the earl, no doubt. Papa wore a more wistful expression, something she'd seen many times over the past few years as she matured to look more like her mother. She could not disappoint either of them now.

She centered the music sheets and then struck the first note, completing a run before she began to sing. The music was at once comforting and familiar, a Handel aria she recalled Mama playing many years ago. As she sang, her face relaxed, the very action providing greater range as her voice soared clear and true. A quick glimpse at Lord Hawkesbury revealed he now sat straighter, almost leaning forward, astonishment replacing his perpetual sneer.

She played the final bar with a flourish, and the room swelled with generous applause. She caught the look on Papa's face, a look of such deep tenderness she wondered if he really saw her or dreamed of her mother.

At Sir Anthony's insistence, she played a cheerier melody and then bowed, a smile all the acknowledgment she could offer for their generous encouragement. Lavinia couldn't help but notice the earl's eyes follow as she resumed her seat. She glanced at him. He looked away, his features settling into bland indifference.

Later, during refreshments, her friends shared their impressions of the newcomer.

Catherine Winthrop's dark curls bobbed as she fanned herself. "I thought I might faint when he looked in our direction! He's the most handsome man I have ever seen!"

Handsome, perhaps, but scarcely a flirt. On the contrary, the earl seemed to find attention from young ladies trying, probably because he felt the locals so far beneath his notice.

"Perry would be quite jealous." Sophy said. "My brother has always counted himself the veriest tulip of fashion."

"The earl looks *so* distinguished, Livvie," Catherine murmured.

"Because he has a title?" At their puckered brows, Lavinia hurried on. "Don't you think he looks rather a proud man? He has scarcely spoken to a soul all night."

"Proud? No, not at all." Sophia looked over Lavinia's shoulder, her expression growing lamblike.

"You play quite well, Miss Ellison."

The deep-voiced drawl compelled her to turn. "Thank you."

She studied the earl. It couldn't be denied. Despite possessing one crooked eyebrow, his hazel eyes, coupled with high cheekbones and dark, wavy brown hair, made an appealing picture.

If you liked pictures that sneered. Although from the whispers around the room, it seemed many young ladies present would not mind the sneers.

She, however, was not one of those ladies. "I trust the evening was not completely devoid of amusement for one used to London society?"

His gaze wandered the room before settling back on her. "Tonight has been . . . tolerable."

She almost laughed. What a rude individual. "Lord Robert used to enjoy these evenings very much."

"Yes, but my uncle was not a man known for discriminating tastes."

Heat pounded her chest. How *dare* he disparage his uncle's generous good nature? "I fear you did not know Lord Robert as we did."

"That is most apparent."

He pulled out his quizzing glass and studied her as though she were a moth pinned to exhibit paper. She tilted her chin and glared at him until he finally placed the small glass away.

"I am sorry, sir, to learn your eyesight is not as it could be."