Stealing Roses

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Chapter One

Eveline is Late for Luncheon

Eveline was making her third attempt to sketch the scene before her: the great cedar tree, the four grey walls that surrounded the garden, the huddle of roofs sloping down toward the shore, and the sea beyond. The two drawings she had made already – neither of which captured the magnificence of the tree, or the light glancing from the water – had floated away from her lap, and eventually the third was discarded also. Somehow she could not bring the sketch to life. She turned to the book, and, reminding herself of her resolution to learn some lines of poetry every day, began to murmur those she had chosen as today's task.

On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley, and of rye . . .

Eventually, as the warmth of the spring day, and the distant rhythm of the waves, and the lullaby of the words, all combined, her eyes began to droop and the book fell from her hands to join the crumpled sketches lying on the grass below, waking her as it landed. Since she was in fact sitting on the broad branch of a beech tree, and was some twelve feet above the ground, there was nothing for it but to climb down the usual way (this involved the edge of the inner wall, which enclosed the rose garden, the roof of the old potting shed – carefully, here, since there was a glass panel to avoid – and an upturned wheelbarrow) to rescue the book and the unsatisfactory sketches, and once on the ground it occurred to her that she might be wanted indoors. As though to confirm that prickle of conscience, she heard the faint familiar chime of the luncheon bell, and with a small sigh of exasperation, which originated more from her own unproductive morning than from its interruption, she slipped back through the low door in the wall, climbed the steps to the lawns, and crossed the terrace to the house.

Within, all was bustle and energy. Eveline could hear her mother's and sisters' voices even as she entered the dining room, raised in animated discussion of whether a cold soup should be served for the dinner tomorrow evening, and if pineapples could be got at this late stage, and if they could how they should be prepared. Her two brothers-in-law were engaged in a good-tempered argument over the merits and demerits of a pair of carriage-horses, which Arthur had recently bought, as his wife had taken a fancy to them, and Bevis suspected of having been less of a bargain than Arthur believed; Daisy and Kitty were whispering together; and her aunt and Miss Angell were engaged in trying to persuade six-year-old Henry that

he must eat some bread and butter, and some cold chicken, before he could have any hope of the trifle, which was already on the sideboard in all its alluring splendour of cream and cherries and angelica.

'Eveline, at last!' Her mother caught sight of her youngest daughter as she tried to seat herself unobtrusively next to Aunt George. 'Wherever have you been?'

Eveline knew that this question was largely rhetorical, and she remained silent.

'Well, it is a cold luncheon today, so there is no harm done, but really, Eveline, your hair!'

Eveline's hair was, she knew, a source of constant sorrow to her mother. Mrs Stanhope had been famous in her youth for the fair ringlets, which framed her heart-shaped face so becomingly. Her hair was a little faded now and there were streaks of silver among the gold beneath her cap, but even in middle age she was a remarkably pretty woman. Her two elder daughters had inherited her looks to a large extent – Louisa, in particular, as lovely as her mother had once been, and Beatrice, although a little less classically beautiful, possessing the same white sloping shoulders and rosebud mouth – but Eveline had taken after her father. She was taller than her mother and sisters by a head, with dark unruly curls that sprang from any attempt to confine them, and unfashionably strong features: a wide mouth, a straight nose, and heavy brows. She had been miserably conscious of the disappointment this caused to her mother since she was twelve years old, and still occasionally felt awkward and clumsy beside her sisters; but she had talked herself out of minding this very much some years before, and now felt there was something of a relief in not being a beauty. She did not expect compliments; she did not spend hours with her hair twisted

into painful rags; she did not feel alarm in walking out without a sunshade; and in all this there was a freedom that she would not now have traded for her sisters' anxiety about their porcelain skin and smooth shining hair.

'Your mother is a little anxious about tomorrow's dinner, my dear,' said her aunt quietly.

'Of course. It's no matter, Aunt George. Although I don't know why Mama is in such a state; she loves to give dinners, as a general rule.'

'I think,' said her aunt carefully, 'that she is concerned about her mix of guests. She has invited Mr Watson, and the young man who works for him, and she worries that the Sandhams may feel they should not be asked to meet them.'

'We are a small town here, Aunt, of course we must all meet each other! And the Sandhams are not so very grand.'

'They are large fish in this small pond, my dear, and they think themselves so. But I have always found Mr Watson's company more to my taste than that of the Sandhams; he is thoughtful, and has seen a great deal of the world, besides, which is more than one can say of Augusta Sandham, whose horizons are bounded entirely by the stout walls of her house and her estate.'

Eveline sighed. 'As are mine, Aunt George, are they not?'

Her aunt regarded her gravely. 'Anyone who reads widely is a citizen of the world, my love, and you are a reader.'

'I love to read, indeed I do, but that will not do for me. It cannot be enough. I have seen so little. I have been to so few places; hardly beyond this town, and when I do it is to visit other people whom I already know, who have houses very like ours, and eat dinners like ours, and listen to the same music after dinner, and – oh! It is so . . . confining!'

'Then you will have to make your own adventures, my dear,' said her aunt calmly, and turned her attention back to Miss Angell and Henry and the trifle.

Eveline's plan to spend the rest of the day reading was thwarted by her mother's saying that she would need her for the afternoon; there was so much to be done for the next day, and Eveline could help her check through the lists of food to be ordered and prepared and decide on the flowers.

'The roses are not in bloom yet, but jonquils will be perfect. And primulas, perhaps, for the table?'

'Shall I go and gather them now?' asked Eveline, seeing a chance to escape from the house presenting itself.

'No, the morning will be better – and I need you to help me with the seating plan now. Can we put Mr Watson next to Lady Sandham? Will that offend her?'

'I hardly see how she could be offended by being seated next to a sensible, interesting man.'

Her mother regarded her crossly. 'You know perfectly well, Evie. Mr Watson is a director of the Railway Company now; and he made his money in shipbuilding. Augusta Sandham thinks herself a great deal too grand to mix with people in trade as a general rule, and only his wealth reconciles her to meeting him at all; and then, he asked me so particularly to invite his young friend who is something clever in the railways, too, that I could not say no.'

'Are the railways trade, exactly?'

'Worse than trade,' said her mother briskly. 'And the railway is to run alongside the Sandhams' park, and ruin their peace and spoil their view.'

'As it will for many people. And Arthur's fortune came

from trade, and they have never minded Arthur; who could?'

'That is two generations ago, and Arthur is a gentleman; anyone may see that. And then, Evie, although I have invited Mr Watson's young friend, I do not know him at all, and I understand him to have come from the north – Yorkshire, or some other very cold, bleak place. Heaven knows what Augusta will make of him. She will put on her grandest airs, you may be sure.'

'Well, put Lady Sandham next to Bevis; he will charm her. And I think if you seat Mr Watson next to Aunt George, he will have a much pleasanter evening.'

'Are you trying to match-make, Evie? Mr Watson and your aunt?'

'Of course not, Mama! Aunt George would not marry.'

'She is not so old – a few years older than me, and Mr Watson is a pleasant man, and rich. Would it be so very shocking?'

'No, not shocking, exactly; but' – she stopped to consider why the idea was so unwelcome – 'Aunt George belongs here.'

'If it is only our wishes that keep her here, then that is a selfish reason. I do not see why she should not have a home of her own, and a husband, if she wishes it.'

'I think it is you who are matchmaking, Mama.'

'Nonsense, Evie. It is only that Mr Watson is such a dear friend, and it is so many years since his poor wife died, that I do not like to think of him alone.'

Georgiana was Mr Stanhope's only sister, his elder by two years, and had come to live with her brother's family a few years after his marriage. Louisa and Beatrice were very small, and a maiden aunt was certainly a great help to the family in caring for and entertaining two little girls so close in age. Georgiana was too much of a mouthful for the children, and she soon became Aunt George to everyone. When the girls were old enough to

need a governess, Miss Angell had arrived; but Aunt George had stayed, and was able to enhance their education by adding Latin and mathematics to Miss Angell's repertoire of history, French, and watercolours. There seemed to be no rivalry between the two ladies as to their teaching territories, and when Eveline arrived (perhaps a little unexpectedly, for she was born some ten years after Louisa, and nine years after Beatrice) she was duly educated by both as her sisters had been. Miss Angell was much beloved by all the girls, and Aunt George, though she could be acerbic, was a teacher and a companion full of wisdom and merriment in equal measure. When Louisa married at nineteen, and Beatrice the following year, the household seemed quiet and a little melancholy; yet Beatrice was now living only a few streets away, and Louisa, though further off, was a still frequent visitor to her parental home; and the relief from the talk of wedding dresses and lace, which seemed to have obsessed her mother and sisters for so long, was felt by Eveline to be an advantage, at least. She continued to read, to study, to walk with her father along the river learning the names of the flowers and birds, and occasionally she contrived to escape to climb trees, undetected by her mother.

On the eve of Eveline's thirteenth birthday, however, her life changed. Mr Stanhope had taken his youngest daughter walking along the river path, which led away from the little town, as he so often did, and on their return to the house he had felt tired, and had gone upstairs to rest before the evening meal. At six o'clock Mrs Stanhope had gone to wake him and remind him to dress for dinner – he was inclined to be absent-minded, and to neglect the formalities on which his wife placed a good deal of importance – but he could not be woken, and when Dr Pearson arrived he could do nothing but shake his head sadly and give his

opinion that Mr Stanhope's heart had failed, very suddenly, and in all probability with little pain.

The memories of the year following her father's death were as blurred as imperfectly remembered dreams: the rustle of the black silk dress her mother wore; the twilight gloom of the house with the blinds all drawn; the falling apart of the household routines, so that meals were forgotten and lessons neglected. Yet, as time passed, her mother began to wear lilac ribbons, there were new curtains in the morning room, and order returned. Eveline still spent her mornings learning whatever her governess and Aunt George had decided to teach her, but the dancing and music teachers who had been engaged when Louisa and Beatrice were growing up were somehow forgotten. Eveline missed most bitterly the walks she had been used to taking with her father – the river path, the sandy flats by the estuary, and the seashore; instead she spent long afternoons curled in the chair in her father's study where he had used to sit. No one took a great deal of notice of her in there, which suited her very well, and she read her way indiscriminately through her father's books: Shakespeare and Milton and Shelley and Byron; atlases and herbals; medical textbooks; maps and charts; great tomes with engravings of scenery from Italy, and Egypt, and the Lake Country; treatises on the rotation of crops and diseases of cattle; books with coloured pictures of birds and animals; and tucked away on the higher reaches of the shelves, reachable only by the use of the library steps, a beautiful book with pictures of men and women from the East, naked or in exquisite dress, in gardens full of flowers and on silken cushions, with golden bells on their ankles and jewels about their necks, entwined gracefully together in all sorts of interesting and astonishing ways.

This afternoon, however, there would be no chance to retreat to the sanctuary of the study. After the seating plan was done to Mrs Stanhope's exacting standards, Eveline was required to mind Daisy and Kitty and Henry while her sisters walked into town in search of shoe roses and scent – Louisa a little condescending now about the shops, which she once found enchanting but compared unfavourably with those in Newport, the town nearest her new home – and Beatrice anxious to learn from her sister what the latest fashion dictated in the wider world. Eveline was fond of her nieces and nephew, but two hours in their company were enough to make her very glad to see her sisters returning. They were delighted with their purchases.

'New lace gloves, Eveline, look, how pretty! Although a little delicate for you, perhaps, but there were some red silk roses, which might become you, perhaps,' said Beatrice.

'And what will you wear for the dinner tomorrow, Evie?' asked Louisa, admiring the lace against her wrist.

'I had not thought,' said Eveline.

Louisa shrieked at this. 'Come upstairs – the Angell will take the children now, and we will see what might be suitable. I must say that green thing you have on now does nothing for your looks. And you really must dress well for tomorrow: Charles Sandham will be there, and he is a man of taste, I know.'

Eveline regarded her sister with suspicion.

'You know him, then?'

'We met him in town, with his uncle, and were introduced – just back from a grand tour, you know, Italy, Greece, Vienna; oh, wonderful places! He is full of the most interesting stories.'

'And handsome, too,' added Beatrice.

Eveline recollected the seating plan for tomorrow's dinner, and her mother's insistence that Charles Sandham be seated next to her.

'Are you and Mama conspiring to marry me to Charles Sandham?'

'You would be extremely lucky if Charles offered for you, Evie,' said Louisa briskly. 'But if you would make an effort – here, sit down, let me try to do something with your hair – one never knows.'

Eveline sighed and submitted to her sister's ministrations.