

Chapter One

Wellingshire, England, 1772

In a small corner of England in a coastal town called Wellingshire, there lived a young man named Baldwin Albert Hugh Wellington. The second son of Lord Alden and Lady Alice Wellington, he was mischievous, adventurous, and curious to a fault. He was a handsome man with dark curls and deep brown eyes that always charmed the ladies. The one before him now was no exception.

Lavinia was a blonde barmaid who worked at The Horse and Groom, a public house on a cobblestone lane of the small town, a mere four miles from Baldwin's family home of Highwoods Castle. Lavinia was busy cleaning a table when Baldwin snuck up behind her.

"Hello, Lavinia," he whispered in her ear, pinching her on the arse.

"Oh!" She whirled around ready to fight until she saw who it was. "Baldwin!" she hissed, smacking his arm with the wet rag she was cleaning with. "Stop pestering me while I'm working or Mister Ainsworth is going to give me the boot!"

Baldwin ducked to avoid any further bombardments with the rag and grinned, revealing a dimple on his right cheek. He grabbed the rag from her and whipped it quickly around her neck. Glancing around to see only two customers in the late afternoon hour, two men at the bar quietly nursing their whisky, he pulled her close to him.

"Can you meet me when you get off?" he whispered.

"Ten o'clock sharp," she said, "if you behave."

"I'll behave and I'll be here."

"You'd better."

Baldwin knew that some of the men made advances towards her, especially as the evening wore on and the whisky flowed freely. More than once, she had been fondled and nearly attacked, but as her mother was deceased and her father one of the drunks in the public house each night, and being the only child left to care for him, she didn't have much choice in the matter. She had to work to pay for her father's whisky so that he came home in a good mood. He was kinder drunk than he was sober. When he was sober, he remembered that he didn't have a wife anymore.

The nearby church bells rang, drawing Baldwin's attention to the time.

"I have to go. Do you have anything for me?"

She nodded.

She walked over to the bar and he watched her refill the men's drinks. She then picked up something and walked back towards Baldwin.

"Come again soon," she said while discreetly putting a piece of stale bread into Baldwin's hand.

“Aye, I will.”

He put the bread in his pocket and turned to leave but then turned back towards her. Glancing at the men and taking care that Mister Ainsworth wasn't watching, he pulled her in for a quick kiss on her ruby red lips and cupped her bosom. She pulled away quickly, smacked him across the face, and he ran out the door laughing.

He plopped his tricorne hat over his head and walked out into the cold March air. He whistled as he walked down the cobblestone lane, confident he was going to get lucky that night.

Baldwin had been mischievous ever since the day he was born. He came out of his mother's womb and immediately proceeded to urinate on the midwife who helped birth him. The midwife laughed it off and swore it was simply the exposure to the cold air. But it happened again hours later upon his first introduction to his father, a long stream of it that went into his father's twitching eye. He was at first shocked but then bellowed a deep laugh, which Baldwin had been told made him smile.

That was when his father loved him. Before the accident.

Lord Alden's patience with his second child became thin in the years that followed. At merely seven years of age, Baldwin was responsible for the death of the fourth child in the family. It was purely accidental but left a hole in his mother's breaking heart and a stench in his father's.

After that, Baldwin's father spent little time with him and therefore Baldwin acted out to gain attention. Anything to get his father to notice him, even if it meant a lashing later. One example was when Baldwin would parade around in his Scottish friend Lachlan's tartan, which was against the law. After losing the bloody battle of Culloden against the English years before, the Scots were banned from wearing their traditional tartan clothing. That didn't prevent the Scots from hiding their family tartans in their trunks and other hidden places, nor did it prevent little boys from bringing them out to fight pretend battles in the courtyards. Baldwin suffered extra lashings when his father found him wearing the “filthy clothing of the rebellious Scots.”

Baldwin's father nearly always compared him to his older, perfect son, Willoughby. Why can't you be more like Willoughby, he'd say. Baldwin never felt adequate or good enough. So he began stealing and got caught. His father couldn't give him the lashings anymore since he had grown into a young man, so he kicked him out of the castle instead. “You'll stop doing this at once,” his father had said. “I don't think so,” Baldwin had said, grinning audaciously. “You'll do as I say or you will leave this castle,” his father had said. “Fine,” Baldwin said, and he did. That was nearly a year ago.

He now lived with a band of thieves, including Lachlan, in a tiny house in a hidden alley overlooking a forgotten graveyard. They stole for food to survive and for the thrill of it. Baldwin felt a huge burst of excitement when he got away with stealing something. It made him feel important, too, to be able to help provide for his friends. He had originally started stealing just for his father's attention, but now it was a necessity. He couldn't work because he had no skills. He'd been raised in gentry and taught the law, in preparation for him to one day be a responsible lord like his father and Willoughby.

It was the last thing he wanted.

In addition, his father's friends had been told to ban Baldwin from their establishments and warned them not to help him. He'd tried to join the British army, but his father had forbidden that, as well, and prevented it from happening. Baldwin stubbornly resolved to make it on his own, any way he could.

He wanted to go to the American Colonies. That was the furthest place he could think of to go, to get out of his father's hair and out of his father's town. To be somebody on his own merit.

He walked to the marketplace to add something to his bread from Lavinia. A nice fat slab of meat would be good enough for him and his band of gypsy friends to eat on for a week.

While ducking in and around the stalls so no one would notice him, he stood behind one stall when he spotted a genteel young woman talking with her servant. Baldwin slipped between two stalls to better hear their conversation.

“We shall acquire a nice bit of cabbage, leeks, and beetroot to cook with this mutton. Perhaps a fine meal will put Father in a proper mood to listen to my point of view.”

“Yes ma'am,” the servant said.

Baldwin watched the two of them walk around the various stalls, picking out food to add to their baskets. The genteel woman was quite striking. She wore her brunette hair piled high on her head, plumes sticking

out of a hat. Her low-cut dress revealed an ample bosom wrapped in green silk, edged in delicate white lace. Baldwin's mouth watered, not only from the mutton in her basket but also from the woman herself.

He wondered how he might get her attention. He looked down at his clothing, once starched and clean, now in tatters. No amount of charm would get her to pay him any mind. He would have to take more drastic measures, and maybe he might get a fine meal out of it, as well.

He walked behind the stalls nonchalantly, parallel to the woman and her servant. He waited until she had reached one end before he slipped between the stalls and grabbed the mutton from her basket. She saw him, her eyes widened, and he winked at her before turning to run off with the meat.

"Stop! Thief!" he heard her yell. "Catch that man!"

Baldwin ran around the stalls, out into the lane, jumped across the creek, and nearly made it to the woods when someone ran into his back, pushing him down to the ground.

"How dare you, brother!"

Baldwin turned his head around to see the blonde hair and blue eyes of his brother, Willoughby, who was lying across his back.

"Well, well, if it isn't my perfect brother. Get off me!"

"You didn't pay for that mutton, and I'm taking it back." Willoughby reached under Baldwin's body for the slab of meat.

"I need it, brother. I'm half-starved."

"You'll pay for food as you should and I'll not turn you in to the constable."

"Fine." Baldwin pulled the meat out, which was under his belly. He regretted it would not go inside his belly.

Willoughby took the meat and stood up. He dusted himself off, then reached into his pocket and pulled out several coins, which he tossed on the ground next to Baldwin. "Here, go buy yourself something to eat. And a bath at the public house wouldn't hurt."

Baldwin watched his brother walk back to the market as he picked up the coins, thinking he was lucky, indeed, that it was his brother who caught up with him and that he wouldn't be going to gaol.

That evening, Baldwin returned to The Horse and Groom around eight o'clock for drinks, sitting at a small table in a dark corner by the front window. Various men and women took turns singing and playing music, and many people danced. Lavinia kept everyone's drinks flowing. When she wasn't looking, he winked at a red-headed female who was singing, causing her to forget some of her words. He laughed discreetly at her bumbles.

An older gentleman dressed tastefully in a deep blue coat trimmed in gold braid with matching breeches walked into the public house. He was accompanied by a young brunette woman dressed in a low-cut green silk gown edged with delicate lace. It was *her*. The same woman he had seen at the market earlier that day. She was also wearing a pearl necklace. The woman sat down a few tables away from Baldwin while the man walked up to the bar, ordered drinks, and then took them to the table.

Baldwin tried to hide himself from them and spent the next hour trying to listen to their conversations without being seen. He could hear better between songs when it was a bit quieter. The two had heated discussions, from what Baldwin could observe. The male was much older and was perhaps her father. The woman tried to leave once, anger written on her face, but the man grabbed her arm and she sat back down. A moment later, another gentleman, slightly younger than the older man, entered the public house, greeted them and sat at the same table. He picked up the woman's gloved hand and kissed it, gazing down at her ample bosom. They stayed until nearly ten o'clock, when they all three left together.

At ten o'clock sharp, Lavinia threw her towel on the bar and announced to Mister Ainsworth that she was leaving. He fussed about her being lazy, but she was out the door, pulling Baldwin along with her, before Ainsworth could do anything about it.

"I hate that job," she complained as they walked down the cobblestone lane. "I don't get paid half the time, work more than I should, and Jonathan the cook is always trying to get me to lie with him. I'm sick and tired of it."

"Why don't you quit?" Baldwin asked.

"And do what? I'll not be a harlot like me' sister was. That's what got her killed."

"I wouldn't want you to do that anyway. Can you not sew? You could be a seamstress."

Lavinia huffed. "No. Me' ma died when I was young and me' pa certainly never taught me how to do it."

"Let's go to the colonies." Baldwin wanted a new life. He was tired of living as a vagabond.

"What?" She stopped in her tracks and then continued on again. "You've lost your wits. Completely." She was walking faster now. "I don't want to go to the colonies. Nothing but scoundrels and thieves live there."

"Aye. That's why it's perfect for me."

He struggled to keep up with her pace. She stopped abruptly again and turned towards him, her face softened. "You're none of those things." Her facial expression turned to a grin. "Well, most of the time you're not."

Baldwin smiled, thinking he wanted to ravish her right where they were, but he needed to concentrate on other things first.

"It can't be any worse than this place, can it?" he asked. "In the colonies we would be free to come and go as we please. No one telling us what to do."

"I don't know."

They continued walking but not towards the alley where Baldwin presently resided. In the public house, he had overheard the name of a wealthy estate owner who lived down one of the country lanes not far from town. He turned down to another road and led a confused Lavinia out of town.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"I'm going to procure us a ship to the colonies."

"What, tonight? You're going the wrong way. The harbor is the other direction."

"I have to get a little funding first."

"Baldwin, what do you mean to do?" Lavinia slowed down her walking pace and looked at him sternly. "Don't do something you'll regret."

"It'll be fine. I'll slip in, grab something, and slip out. Nice and easy."

"Can't you just steal money from yer folks?"

"That would be too obvious...and too easy."

He already had in mind to steal the pearl necklace from the rich young woman, an inhabitant of the mansion he was approaching. That necklace alone would pay for his voyage across the ocean.

They came upon a three-story grey-stoned mansion, which sat a couple hundred yards away from the road. Baldwin led her down the dry dusty drive towards the house. He stopped near a copse of trees and directed Lavinia to hide there.

"Wait here. I'll be right back. Don't move."

He snuck up to the house and looked up to see which bedroom window would be the easiest to reach. He figured that out and hoisted himself up the stone wall by stepping from one stone to the next while holding onto an English ivy vine that grew on the house. He stopped at his targeted window and saw that it was ajar. Perfect. He pulled the windows open and looked inside. It was a bedchamber, opulently furnished and he would venture to guess by a female. There was a tall canopy bed with a lace coverlet hanging down, and a nearby table and mirror with lit candles. Ah, he spied the woman. He had been correct. She was sitting at said table, brushing her hair, wearing a thin white shift.

She turned as he slipped inside the room. Recognition dawned on her.

"You!"