

OLIVIA ELLIOTT

*A Dangerous Man to
Trust?*

Book One in The Pemberton Series

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Prologue



No one would call Miss Serafina Edgemont pretty. ‘Pretty’ is a word people toss out without any care where it might fall because it has no weight. Flowers are pretty. A dress might be pretty or a little girl. But Serafina? No. Serafina was not pretty. But she was striking in an odd and inexplicable way. If you saw her in a crowd at a ball, you may find yourself unable to look away. A mass of dark brown hair worn up in twists and braids pinned neatly to her head. A round face and bright brown eyes that always seemed to be searching for something lost. It might have been her posture or maybe her bone structure that gave her the appearance of someone important, even regal. And it was this intangible aspect of her person that made men angry—angry and eager. They hid their anger behind masks of pure etiquette and good manners. Smiles and bows and polite requests to dance. Pretty girls were ten-a-penny, but Miss Serafina Edgemont was something else: Serafina was a challenge and to one lucky man a conquest, for she would by necessity have to defer to her new husband. And whether the gentlemen were consciously aware of it or not, submission was the prize that they sought.

Perhaps there were some men with noble intentions, but how to tell them apart? Serafina had seen what had happened to her mother within the contract of marriage, and she would not allow herself to suffer the same fate. Madeline Edgemont, née Robertson, had once attracted a whole host of suitors. She had been the jewel of the London season once upon a time. No less than seven proposals of marriage within the space of a few months! She was often prone to reminiscing about her life before she had been married, so Serafina had heard it all a thousand times. Madeline had eventually chosen Mr. Walter Edgemont, Serafina's father.

"He had such a charming way about him," she would say leaning in close as if to share a secret. "Eyes like emeralds—so handsome in his black jacket. And so considerate as well. He had the most beautiful (and expensive) bouquets of flowers delivered to my parents' home every three days like clockwork. There was always some small note attached which was intended for me, but my mother would read it out loud and pass it around to her friends when they came to call."

On one occasion, seated in the drawing room with their needlework, Serafina's mother had lifted her head with a faraway look and stated quite out of the blue, "He once wrote me a poem, your father. He was no Byron, that is for certain, but it was exceedingly heartfelt, and I decided to marry him."

Serafina could only nod. Her mother was not well. She suffered from a kind of melancholia that often forced her to retreat to her bed. By the age of sixteen, it had fallen to Serafina to organize the household and to see that their day-to-day lives ran smoothly. Mr. Edgemont, for his part, no longer troubled himself much with his family. He was often away in London where it was rumoured he kept a mistress. When he was at

home at their country house, they ate their meals in silence, and he made a conspicuous effort to avoid eye-contact with his wife.

It was excruciating for Serafina when her father was home. The unspoken resentment and her mother's broken heart made all the more tender by his presence—these things were like a blanket that smothered the spark of each new day. So Serafina threw herself into caring for her mother, cajoling her out for walks, reading to her in the evenings. She ordered her days as if they were tiny soldiers lined up for battle. She discussed cleaning schedules with the housekeeper, gave directions to the gardener, and kept a careful account of the household bills. She made a note of all the servants' birthdays so as to give them the day off along with a small token of appreciation. And when she was alone. Truly alone. In her bedchamber at night. She unpinned her hair and untied her stay. She peeled off her stockings and walked barefoot across the cold floor savouring each chilling step. She undid everything that kept her bound up during the day, including her mind. She cast it open, and throwing herself upon the bed with a book in hand, she would lose herself in some piece of philosophy or argument of science until she fell asleep in the flickering candlelight.

One

Pride and a Fall



John had been travelling for days, and he was tired and impatient to reach his destination. The plan had been to leave the little town early that morning by carriage. But the carriage had broken a wheel on uneven ground, and so the inn-keeper had lent him a horse in order to ride on ahead to Bosworth Manor. It was early, and the air was a damp bluish fog. As he made his way along the road that cut through the woods, his vision was obscured save for the dark silhouettes of trees that loomed into view, their ill-defined edges giving them the appearance of existing in some in-between place, as if they were not even trees at all but merely thoughts taking the form of trees, evaporating into the fog as he passed them by. The soft sound of hooves on the damp earth, a snuffle from the horse, and his own raspy breath—all sounds that were quickly absorbed by the heavy atmosphere.

The black mask he wore over half his face to conceal his

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deformity had become increasingly uncomfortable in the damp, close air, and he had thought nothing of removing it. There was, after all, no one around. The better part of his forehead and one side of his face was unnaturally puckered and scarred. It looked as if a bear had shredded half his face with its claws, and the wounds had frozen in time, crimson ripples of flesh. An eyebrow was missing, and one eye looked alarmingly large and wide, a consequence of his partially missing eyelid. Part of his upper lip had been damaged on one side giving it the look of a permanent snarl.

John let out a breath he had been holding for some time. It felt good to feel the outside air on his face. He turned off the main road and down a small path he knew as a shortcut to the house, but no sooner had he done so, then a dark spectre appeared suddenly from the fog alarming his horse who reared up onto its hind legs flinging him to the ground.

“Sir!” came a lady’s voice. He could hear her quick approach.

“Stay back!” he growled reaching his palm forward to halt her. He attempted to stand, but he was surprised to find he could bear no weight on his right ankle, and he collapsed once more to the ground.

“Let me help,” came the voice, closer now. Too close. He did not look up. He did not want her to see his face, and he certainly did not want to see her face as it took in the horror of his mutilated form.

“I SAID STAY BACK!” he growled once more, arm raised in warning and head bowed.

But she had approached nonetheless.

“A gentleman must not allow pride to get in the way of accepting help when it is needed.” She said it as if she might be scolding a child. “Allow me to help you to your horse.”

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She took his outstretched arm (the one intended to keep her back) and bent down so that he might place it upon her shoulder. As she did so, he looked up, and their eyes met. She saw his face. Uncharacteristically for a lady, she wore no hat or bonnet, and her dark brown hair although carefully twisted and pinned was starting to frizz in the damp. A long lock of hair had broken free of its pin and had tumbled down over one shoulder. John took all this in as he waited with resignation for a scream. But it did not come. The lady did look somewhat surprised, but she caught herself and forced a smile, not once averting her gaze.

Oh God. Pity. John could not tolerate being the object of pity. Fear? Sure. Disgust? Fine. But pity? It was too undignified. He gritted his teeth.

“Come now,” she said. “Your horse will not wait all day.” Again, he felt he were being spoken to as if he were a child, and his irritation grew.

Reluctantly, he supported himself to standing with the help of her shoulder, and the two of them stumbled their way towards the horse. John’s teeth were pressed firmly together. He could not wait to be rid of this lady and her pity. *This lady? It was strange that she was out at all at this hour, but without an escort? Who was she?*

“Where is your lady’s maid?” he asked in a tone of accusation, arm still across her shoulder. He winced inwardly. It was a weak attempt to gain the upper hand, but the question had already been asked.

She did not answer, but she turned her pale round face up to his once more. Her pink lips parted, and she laughed. He smiled quizzically—he couldn’t help it. The situation was so odd and unlikely. He had not been this close to a woman, let alone unmasked in six years. His irritation melted away under

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her breath which smelled of raspberry jam and fresh baked bread.

Still fixing her eyes to his, still smiling (a genuine smile this time), she said, "I am no longer in need of a lady's maid, for I am no longer a lady. How is that for an answer? I will bid you good day."

She shrugged her shoulder to encourage him off, and he took hold of the horse's mane with one hand, releasing her with his other. He mounted his horse and called out after her as she continued along the path towards town, "What's your name?" He was for some reason desperate to know, but his voice was gruff, and he barked the question as if it were a command to an inferior. He still needed to put her in her place. He would have none of her pity.

She called out through the fog, her voice fading as she walked away, "It's of no use to you." And she was gone. As if she had been, like the trees, only a thought, just a fleeting impression disappearing back into the ether. John gripped his horse with his thighs and pressed it forward.

He proceeded on his way through the trees, grimly anticipating the tasks that awaited him at his ancestral home. Ledgers and accounts to be settled, tenants to be seen, and a household full of servants to manage. Not to mention the little girl. His half-sister whom he had never met. While his mind muttered to itself of this and that, he found himself returning to that place where he had left the road, to the woman who had turned her face up to his, who didn't even flinch, who had laughed at her own misfortune and helped him on his way as if he had been a small child fallen in the path.

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Serafina had not thought to wear a bonnet when she left the house that morning. It was early, and there was such a fog. There would be no one about. She absolutely hated wearing a bonnet. It was hot on her head, and she could not stand tying it beneath her chin. If she did not tie it, there was always a gust of wind waiting to lift her bonnet away, forcing her to give chase . . . as if she even liked the thing, as if she even wanted to keep it. So she had set out on her walk with a scandalously bare head, and if she was being honest with herself, a bare heart as well, quite open to the elements.

The death of her employer, Mr. Thornton, two weeks prior had been an emotional blow. When her parents had passed on two years earlier, she had been left with nothing. Serafina had watched as her mother slowly faded away, succumbing to the melancholia of a broken heart. Her father had died suddenly some months later. The physician had called it apoplexy, and Serafina suspected this meant he did not actually know the cause of her father's death. She had to pay his bill nonetheless.

In retrospect, the physician was lucky to have been paid at all. Her father had made some extraordinarily poor investment decisions, and his creditors soon descended upon the property like a murder of crows. There was no inheritance to speak of, no siblings, and no relations save one distant dowager aunt—Aunt Edwina—who simply could not be bothered.

My dear Serafina, she had written, Such is the world and a woman's place in it. You should not have been so callous with those many gentlemen who might have secured your future and position. I'm sure you have regrets.

For the first time in her life, Serafina had actually been afraid. The parents of her good friend Patience Pemberton had invited her to stay with their family for an indefinite period of time.

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Patience's mother, Lady Agnes Pemberton, thought to host her for a season in order to secure her some sort of emergency marriage, but Serafina had been down that road before, and while she appreciated the thought, the effort, and certainly the expense, she simply would not allow herself to be married off to a polite stranger in a tailcoat. This frightened her even more than her current circumstance. Men, she knew, were not to be trusted. They had their courting face—all politeness, and bows, and compliments, and “May I have this dance?” And then they had the face they wore to stare down at their peas as they avoided the gaze of their wife across the dinner table. Worse still, she knew, *she knew*, that there were some very respectable, dignified, and exceedingly polite gentlemen who wore quite another face entirely behind closed doors. This was a cruel face of power wielded over another—a horse, a servant, even a wife.

No. She would not marry. It was quite unthinkable. So when she heard that Mr. Thornton was seeking a governess for his six-year-old daughter, she wrote to him and was hired sight unseen based on a recommendation from Lady Pemberton. (This recommendation had been written most reluctantly, as Lady Pemberton was of the opinion that marriage would be a much more suitable solution to ‘employment’ – a word she pronounced distastefully, lowering her voice as she would when she did not want the servants to hear.)

Mr. Thornton had hired Serafina, had given her a new life in his home, had entrusted her with his most exceptional daughter Molly, and now he was gone. He had been a friendly, jolly man, but always suffering from some mysterious illness or other.

“Phlegmatic,” he used to say by way of explanation if he was feeling under the weather. “But never mind this old man. Tell me about Molly. What did she do today? What did you teach

her?”

And Serafina would say, “She can tell you herself, Mr. Thornton.”

To which he would respond with a twinkle in his eye, “Yes, yes I know, but I want to hear your version first!”

Mr. Thornton absolutely doted on his daughter, and he was kind to Serafina, welcoming her into his household and treating her with respect and good humour. Now he was gone. Like her parents. She stepped out into the early morning fog and inhaled the wet air, letting out a deep sigh. A tear ran down her cheek and dripped from her chin. A brisk walk would do her good. Burn up these feelings with movement so that she could clear her head and be able to support Molly as they went about their day. She would need to hold her close. Molly appeared to be taking the circumstance in her stride, but Serafina knew better. The death of a parent (both parents) especially for one so young was simply unthinkable. It marked you forever.

But then there was the horse and that man! Serafina had never seen anyone’s face so disfigured. And such a grump! She supposed that she might be grumpy too if she had to live with a face like that. But the look in his eyes—pale blue like chips of ice under a clear sky. What was that look? Asking her about her lady’s maid! It made her smile just thinking about it. She looked down at her brown coat. Certainly not the stylish coat of a lady. *I was not even wearing a bonnet! How could he think me a lady? Nevermind.* She shook her head as if shaking off the memory.

Arriving back at the house, she thought to herself, *Molly might enjoy some puzzles today. Math puzzles. And perhaps I will indulge her in one of her experiments. To lift her spirits. No cursive or needlework—both activities Molly despised. I will ask cook to*

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make those buns she likes for tea, and we can sneak into the kitchen and steal them hot from the oven. Cook will yell and scold us, and Molly will flee laughing up the stairs with a bun in each hand and the dog at her heels. That is how I hope the day will go. At least, I will try.

She sighed and entered the house through the back door to be greeted by Rupert, Mr. Thornton's enormous English mastiff, and Miss Browning the elderly housekeeper.

"Miss Edgemont, where have you been?! I have been looking everywhere for you!" said Miss Browning as she gained hold of Rupert's collar and made him sit.

"Out for a walk—it's early," replied Serafina bending down to pet the dog. She knew he would be upset with her for going out without him, but she had needed some time on her own.

"Well, Mr. Thornton is asking for you, and just look at you! What has happened to your hair?" Miss Browning cast her glance down to the hem of Serafina's dress peeking out from under her coat. "And you are spattered in mud."

"What do you mean, Mr. Thornton?"

"Mr. Thornton! The son! He has returned this morning."

"Oh!" Serafina had it in the back of her mind that he might come, but he had never visited before, and for some reason, the servants were of the opinion that he would continue to keep his distance from the manor despite his inheritance. "I shall go and change first, fix my hair."

"No, no," said Miss Browning firmly. "He has already been waiting." Serafina looked at her curiously. She seemed quite agitated. "Go now! He's in the small drawing room."

The 'small' drawing room was no such thing. It was merely smaller than the other very large drawing rooms. It was decorated in red and cream with gold accents and cherry wood

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furniture. Serafina knocked. When she heard no response, she opened the door and walked briskly into the room. She recognized his voice first.

“You!” He spoke as if there were gravel in his throat. A deep rumbling sound. “You are the governess? Miss Edgemont?”

She barely recognized him by sight. He wore a black mask over his brow and one side of his face, stopping just short of the mouth. And he had an unruly shock of dark brown hair. Most noticeable now that he was wearing a mask was how incredibly handsome he was with his blue eyes, high cheekbone and strong jawline. He was sitting in a chair, leaning his strong frame back with his feet planted wide. He had removed his coat and jacket, and his white linen shirt fell open at the throat where he had loosened his cravat. This was not the way a gentleman sat. It was too casual, too unaffected.

Serafina approached him, stopping a few feet away.

“I would stand,” he said, “but there is the matter of my ankle.” He looked at her carefully, “And as you have said, you are not a lady, so in any event, there is no need for me to stand.”

The sheer rudeness of his statement caught her off-guard. Instinctively, she knew he was looking for some sort of reaction from her.

“Quite.”

“Quite? Is that all you have to say for yourself after this morning? ‘Sorry’ might be a better start.”

This man was not like his father.

“What might I be sorry for?” she asked, immediately regretting her decision to talk back but feeling committed to the action nonetheless.

“Causing my injury for one thing,” he responded, his pale blue eyes never leaving hers.

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"You caused your own injury by choosing to go riding in the fog." Serafina kept her eyes on his. She would not look away first, but she was starting to feel a little weak in the legs.

"Are all my father's servants so insolent?" Serafina knew very well that a governess was no servant, but she did not correct him.

"We're *your* servants now, Sir. I should think you would like to ask me about your sister."

"She's on her way."

Oh no. He will upset Molly. He is a complete stranger and certainly no gentleman.

"And you," said Mr. Thornton rising gingerly to his feet, supported by the arm of the chair, "must be Molly."

Serafina turned to see Molly being ushered in by Miss Browning who took in the scene with one concerned glance before disappearing down the hall. Molly entered hesitantly at first, then ran to Serafina's side and took her hand.

"Are you my brother John?"

"Half-brother," he said.

"Does it matter?" Molly asked.

"You're quick, aren't you?" he said with the soft beginnings of a smile. "Do you mind if I sit. I've injured my ankle."

"I don't mind."

As he took his seat, there was silence. A breath in the room that took some of the weight out of the situation.

"Why do you wear a mask?" asked Molly.

"Molly!" scolded Serafina. "It's not polite to ask such things."

Molly turned to Serafina. "But he's my brother. If I have to be polite with my brother, the world is a horrible place."

"You are quite right!" said Mr. Thornton with surprise in his voice. "No need to be polite with me." Serafina had felt she'd

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taken the measure of him, but this turn in the conversation caused her brow to furrow.

“I wear a mask because my face is quite hideous,” he said matter-of-factly. “It is all scarred and mangled and certainly no sight for a lady.” At this, he directed a pointed look towards Serafina.

“Can I see?” asked Molly.

“No.”

“Oh.” Molly’s disappointment was audible.

“But I will let you see my arm. It’s almost as gruesome.”

“Really?” said Molly as she dashed excitedly forward.

Mr. Thornton sat down in his chair and undoing the cuff of his left arm, he rolled his sleeve up to the elbow.

“Ugh,” was the sound Molly made, but her voice was full of admiration. “Can I touch it?”

“Yes, but I cannot feel anything between here and here,” he said pointing with his finger to his elbow and then his wrist.

“What if I pinched you?”

“Go ahead!”

Molly looked at Serafina who shrugged. She really could not anticipate how this was going to play out. Mr. Thornton’s arm appeared just as his face, raised red rivulets of flesh. Serafina wondered how far the scarring stretched. She glanced at his neck and followed the scarring down to a small patch of exposed chest where his collar fell open. *As far as his chest*, she thought. *And further. Shoulder? Down the arm. His belly?* She was starting to feel a bit hot. That she was still wearing her coat certainly wasn’t helping.

“He can’t feel it!” exclaimed Molly. “I really, really pinched him, and he can’t even feel it!”

“Do you have a pin?” asked Mr. Thornton with amusement.

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Molly rushed to open a drawer at the back of the room, returning with a large pin held high and the widest smile imaginable. Mr. Thornton took the pin from her and proceeded to pierce his arm with it, letting go so that the pin stood upright in his flesh.

“Ooooh! Look Serafina! He can’t feel it!” She turned to her brother. “Or are you faking?”

“Not at all. You could stick twenty pins in my arm, and I might sit here all day with not a thought for it.”

“Molly, I’m sure Mr. Thornton would like to remove the pin now,” said Serafina feeling a little queasy.

As he lifted the pin from his arm a bead of blood appeared. Grimacing, Serafina stepped quickly forward to hand him her handkerchief. He accepted it with a slightly bemused look and held it to his arm.

“Can you stick pins in your face?” Molly was lifting herself excitedly up onto her toes and then lowering herself back down. “What about your neck?” she asked peering under Mr. Thornton’s chin.

“Molly!” warned Serafina.

“No, no. She may ask. She is my sister after all,” he said. “To answer your question, no, I cannot put pins in my face. It’s just this portion of my arm that has no feeling.”

“Father never said you were so interesting,” said Molly quietly. “He made you sound quite dull.”

“Oh really?”

“He said you only liked the company of trees and flowers.”

“Is that so?”

Mr. Thornton’s voice remained level, but Serafina noticed a shift in his countenance. A kind of closing up, like curtains drawn across a window.

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“Molly, I have enjoyed meeting you, but I wish a word with Miss Edgemont. Alone,” he added when Molly made no move towards the door.

“Oh.” She looked a bit crestfallen, then quickly brightened, dashing towards him and making an awkward but enthusiastic attempt at a hug. “I’m glad you’re here,” she said. The man, Serafina noticed, looked absolutely terrified. When Molly didn’t let go, he hesitantly drew one arm around her and placed his hand on her back. Molly lifted her head to look into his face. “Later, it will be my turn to show *you* something interesting.”

Molly slowly extricated herself from his lacklustre embrace and reluctantly left the room. Mr. Thornton appeared lost somewhere inside himself. He remained quite still, gazing at the door for a considerable time. Serafina waited patiently. And then it was as if Mr. Thornton having been lost, found his path once more and reemerged with her in the small drawing room. He met her eyes.

“What kind of a house has my father been keeping here?” he asked.

What on odd question. Serafina struggled to come up with a response. Given the events of the morning, she thought that perhaps the most direct answer would be best.

“A happy one, Sir,” she said.

“He loved Molly.” Not a question this time.

“Of course.”

“Not of course!” he said fixing her in place with an icy glare. “There is no requirement for a father to love his child.”

It dawned on Serafina then that Mr. Thornton’s childhood had been quite different.

“I’m sorry.” The words came unbidden to her lips.

“For what?”

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She couldn't answer truthfully. It wasn't her place.

"For your ankle," she offered changing tack. His face softened ever so slightly.

"As you said, it was my own fault." In that one sentence, he conceded everything to her. He paused. "You look warm. You should go and remove your coat, return to the rest of your day."

"Yes. Thank you. It's been a pleasure to make your acquaintance." *Ugh.* Serafina immediately hated herself for saying that. It was the kind of thing you said to someone when it had not at all been a pleasure to make their acquaintance.

"When?" His tone was sharp now. The softness gone. He sounded almost angry for some reason.

"Excuse me?"

"When was it a pleasure to make my acquaintance? In the woods or here in the drawing room?"

He knew! He knew it was a disingenuous statement and suspected she meant nothing of the sort. How could a man be so sensitive?

"Both," she answered with some defiance.

"Why was it a pleasure in the woods then?" *He pressed on!*

Serafina was so startled by his line of questioning, she could only think to answer truthfully.

"If you must know, it was a pleasure in the woods because you made me laugh." She willed her legs to keep steady. This was a bit too much. "Sir," she added quickly, "I'm feeling unwell. I must take my leave."

Without waiting for a response, she turned and strode out of the room, stopping in the hallway to lean with her back pressed up against a wall. *What had just happened?* She felt somewhat ill, as if she had lost all sense of balance. He was quite the most insulting man she had ever met—it felt as if every word he spoke was a blunt instrument with which to beat someone over the

head.

As she recovered her balance and headed carefully down the hall, Serafina reviewed the events of the morning. They had been a lot to take in. What disturbed her most was that she did not know where to place Mr. Thornton in the schematics of her mind. *Long lost brother? Rude stranger? Dashing gentleman? No, certainly not 'dashing gentleman'—why had that come to mind?* Regardless of how Serafina felt about her new employer, Molly had loved him! He had truly seen his sister for who she was—right away. And he'd known exactly how to win her over. No one did that. Not with Molly. She was not the kind of little girl anyone expected to encounter, and people were woefully unprepared for her questions and her intelligence.

Serafina decided that Mr. Thornton, despite his . . . irregularities of manner, would be good for Molly. She'd lost a father but somehow, magically, gained a brother. This thought gave Serafina some semblance of relief. Molly's welfare was first and foremost in her mind. She loved that little girl more than she'd ever loved anyone and would do anything for her. A brother! How one's world can shift in a morning. *Math puzzles*, she thought, recovering her composure. *Then morning tea, and I'll ask her about her latest experiment.*