

SECRETS OF SEDUCTION

by Nicole Jordan

EXCERPT FROM CHAPTER ONE:

East Sussex, England; September 1816

She had never before pursued a man, but in matters of the heart, sometimes a lady needed to take fate into her own hands.

In the gathering dusk, Lady Skye Wilde peered through her carriage window at the hulking mansion shrouded in fog and drizzling rain. Built two centuries before, Hawkhurst Castle was an enormous edifice of gold-hued stone, complete with turrets. Once magnificent, it looked forsaken now, although faint lights shone in a lower-story window, giving Skye hope that her mission would not be in vain.

The Earl of Hawkhurst needed a bride, and she intended to interview for the position.

In truth, she'd been plotting this moment all summer long, ever since learning of Lord Hawkhurst's intention to marry again. Now that the moment was at hand, an army of butterflies was doing battle in her stomach.

Skye was keenly aware her entire future could depend on this first meeting.

Before she lost her nerve, she pulled her cloak hood over her fair hair and stepped down from her carriage into the rain. No doubt it was idiotic to purposely get caught in a storm, yet the brewing tempest played well into her scheme to plant herself on the earl's front doorstep. A downpour increased the odds that he would take pity on her and provide her shelter, perhaps even allow her to stay the night.

An ominous flash of lightning in the near distance warned Skye that she had little time before the worst hit. Even so, she hesitated to approach the sweeping stone steps that led up to the massive front door.

Actually, she had encountered the earl only once, yet Hawkhurst—known as Hawk to his intimates—was the kind of man no woman ever forgot . . . or any girl either. When she was nearly fourteen, she'd fallen head over heels for him and had been heartbroken to learn he was already wed. Then shortly afterward, he'd suffered the most terrible of tragedies, losing his beloved wife and very young son to a fire here at his family seat.

From her vantage point, Skye couldn't see the charred remains of the burnt rooms. The fire must have started in another wing—

A second bolt of lightning, this one much closer, was followed swiftly by a crash of thunder that startled the already fractious carriage horses. Glancing behind her, Skye called out an order to her coachman to drive the team around to the stables and seek shelter.

"My lady, I dislike leaving you here alone!" he shouted back over the growing bluster of wind and rain.

She appreciated the concern of her loyal servants—two grooms and a coachman—who were more like bodyguards than lackeys. Her brother, Quinn, insisted they accompany her for protection on her travels, even though she was almost four-and-twenty. Skye usually suffered her strapping attendants with good grace, since they allowed her a measure of independence that most unattached young ladies lacked. But now they were decidedly in the way.

"I won't come to harm!" Skye insisted. "Lord Hawkhurst is a close friend of my aunt. He will not turn me away in a storm."

At least I trust not, she added to herself. Hawkhurst was known as a great lover of horses and a master horseman. In all likelihood, he would not evict frightened animals from his estate, even if he might want to refuse their human owners.

"If you are certain, my lady—"

Another crack of thunder cut off his sentence. "Yes, go quickly please, Josiah!" Just then the heavens opened up and the drizzle became a torrent of driving rain.

The two grooms hastily climbed onto their rear perch and the carriage drove off, while Skye sprinted for the stone staircase and wondered if she had underestimated the storm's danger. Her cloak hood barely protected her face as big, stinging drops pelted her tender skin. Quelling a gasp at the chill impact, she ran almost blindly up the steps. By the time she reached the top landing, she was thoroughly drenched.

Between the gloom and the buffeting rain, she could barely make out that the knocker had been removed from the door. She rapped with her knuckles for several long minutes, then pounded with the heel of her hand.

No one answered.

Although half expecting the door to be locked, she tried admitting herself. The knob turned freely, so she pushed open the door an instant before it abruptly swung wide, pulling her forward. Skye stumbled over the threshold and would have pitched face-first onto the floor if not for a pair of strong arms saving her.

Skye did gasp then. Held against a broad chest and a very male body, she looked up, her heart pounding. In the enormous entrance hall, the flame of a single wall sconce cast flickering shadows over her savior's visage.

It was the lord of the manor himself, Morgan Blake, the sixth Earl of Hawkhurst.

Skye caught her breath anew at his stunning masculine beauty: High forehead, chiseled cheekbones, aristocratic nose, sensual lips. And his most striking features, winged black brows with dark-fringed, storm-gray eyes.

He looked more rugged than she remembered, perhaps because of his tousled, overlong raven hair and the stubble roughening his strong jaw. His face held more character also, and lines of pain that hadn't been present before. But of course, he was ten years older

now, and at four-and-thirty, he had seen far more of the dark side of life.

Those penetrating eyes still had the same spellbinding effect on her, however. When her gaze locked with his, heat streaked through Skye, stark and raw, like a bolt of lightning.

He might have felt the same electric flash of fire, for he reached up with one hand and pushed back the hood of her cloak to reveal her pale gold hair. Frowning, he touched her face, as if wondering if she were real.

It was a moment of enchantment she could never have anticipated.

Her heart still in her throat, Skye parted her lips but remained mute as she returned his searching stare. Then Lord Hawkhurst seemed to realize he was holding her. Appearing reluctant to let her go, he slowly helped her to stand upright.

Disappointment swamped Skye. Being held in his arms was as breathtaking as she'd dreamed it would be, and she had not wanted his embrace to end. This intimate manner of meeting was unplanned but much better than she could have hoped for . . . until she suddenly spied the weapon in his other hand.

He wielded a deadly looking dagger and seemed prepared to use it on her.

Skye swallowed hard before realizing his weapon was the sort of knife used for paring quill pens.

"My I-lord," she managed to say with relative calm. "You needn't defend yourself from me. I am not a thief or assassin. Had I been, I would not have knocked on your front door."

"If not a thief, then who are you?" he asked in a voice that was commanding and pleasantly deep.

"I am Skye Wilde, the niece of your friend, Lady Isabella Wilde."

His brows drew together sharply. "Did Bella send you here?"

"Yes . . . I mean, no."

"Which is it?" He sounded impatient.

"Actually, she did not send me. I came on my own, all the way from London—" Skye stopped herself. When she was nervous, she became breathless and spoke too rapidly. "Forgive me, my lord. I chatter on when dangerous gentlemen glare at me and threaten me with knives."

His expression softened a measure as he lowered the blade to his side. "Are you daft, setting out in a storm?"

She hid a smile at his accusation, since she'd just been wondering the same thing. "When I left home this afternoon, it was not storming. And I don't believe I am daft, merely desperate. May I please come in before you ring a peal over my head? Afterward you may scold me as much as you like."

Hawkhurst made a soft sound of disapproval in his throat, something like a growl, but stepped back to allow her entrance. As she moved past him, he glanced out at the darkening courtyard below, which was nearly obscured by rain. "Where is your carriage?"

"I took the liberty of sending it around to your stables. My horses and grooms needed shelter. I felt certain you would want me to keep my horses safe. Perhaps you should shut the door," Skye added sweetly. "Rain is gusting in and flooding your marble floor."

He stared at her again for a moment, as if not crediting her boldness. Then curtly acting on her suggestion, he closed the door and blocked out the storm before turning to face her.

The hall was quieter now, although still echoing dully from sheets of rain lashing the manor.

Skye smiled up at Lord Hawkhurst. "I do beg your pardon, my lord. We got off on the wrong foot. May we start afresh? I am Lady Skye Wilde, and I am happy to meet you at last. Have you not heard of me?"

"Yes, I have heard of you." He did not look pleased by the fact.

"I thought Aunt Bella might have mentioned me. You and I are practically family."

He gave her another frowning glance, this one rife with skepticism. "How did you arrive at that conclusion?"

"Well . . . we are not related by blood, but you and my aunt are such good friends, I feel as if I know you. And you are acquainted with my elder brother, Quinn Wilde, the Earl of Traherne. You and I were never officially introduced, but I saw you once a long time ago, when you and your wife attended a ball at our home, Tallis Court. I was the girl hanging over the banister, watching the dancers below."

Even in the dim light, she could see recognition dawn in Hawkhurst's striking eyes.

"I am flattered that you remember me," Skye said honestly. "Except for a brief moment, you paid no attention to me that evening."

"I feared you might be in need of rescue."

Skye felt her cheeks warm at the reminder. She'd been watching the glittering company with her cousin Kate from the gallery above the ballroom. When the devastatingly handsome Lord Hawkhurst had looked up at her and smiled, her heart had instantly melted. Stricken with awe, she'd nearly tumbled over the railing. The earl had leapt closer, prepared to catch her and break her fall if necessary. Fortunately—or unfortunately, Skye had thought at the time—her cousin's quick action in grasping her skirts had saved her from disaster.

Uncomfortable awareness flooded her now. How embarrassing to appear so awkward with a nobleman she wanted earnestly to impress. This was twice now that she had almost fallen at his feet.

"I am not usually so clumsy, I promise you."

He did not seem interested in prolonging their discussion. "What brings you here in the midst of a storm, Lady Skye?"

His abruptness was rather unmannerly, but given her unexpected arrival, she could forgive him.

"My aunt wrote me a letter of introduction and explained my purpose to you. . . ." Fishing in her reticule, Skye pulled out a folded letter that was a bit worse for wear and presented it to him. "Please will you read this?"

Hawkhurst broke the wax seal but barely glanced at the contents, perhaps because it was difficult to read in the scant light. When he made to move closer to the wall sconce, Skye spoke up. "Is there a fire where I may warm myself?"

He hesitated before finally replying. "There is one in my study. Follow me."

When he strode off across the entrance hall, she hurried to keep up with him and found herself eyeing his tall, athletic form with admiration. He was dressed informally—white linen shirt, buff breeches, and riding boots—and the way his clothing clung to his broad shoulders, lean hips, well-formed buttocks, and muscular thighs emphasized his stark masculinity. It was brazen to admit, Skye knew, but the intense physical attraction she felt for Hawkhurst now was much less pure than when she was a mere girl.

She was also brazen to call at his nearly deserted country estate when no one suitable was present to act as chaperone. Yet to attain her heart's desire, she needed to be bold and daring. She would not let the risk of scandal deter her. Courting scandal in their amorous affairs was a Wilde family legacy, and she was a Wilde, through and through.

When they entered a dark corridor, Skye glanced inside the rooms they passed. The fact that the elegant manor was damp and musty from disuse was no wonder, considering that it had been shut up for more than ten years. But the furniture was still shrouded in holland covers.

"I expected you to have servants to answer your front door," she commented to the earl's back.

"The elderly man who acts as caretaker is hard of hearing and didn't heed your pounding."

"But I understood you arrived here a full week ago. I thought by now you would have tried to set the castle to rights."

Only after another pause did he answer her probing remark. "I haven't yet arranged for a full-time staff. Some women from the village came today to begin cleaning, but with the storm approaching, I sent them home before it grew too dark."

"That was kind of you."

Hawkhurst made another low sound of dismissal in his throat and kept walking.

"I am grateful that you opened your door to me," Skye pressed, "although you frightened me out of my wits, brandishing that knife."

"You did not look particularly frightened."

She had not been—but then she knew the extraordinary sort of man she was dealing with. "I suppose you have an excuse for your extreme reaction. You can't help yourself. You were trained to be suspicious. You were a spy for the Foreign Office for the past dozen years and more, were you not?"

Hawkhurst halted in his tracks and glanced back at her. "Who told you that?"

"My aunt, of course. She also warned me that you were a determined recluse. But you could be a trifle more welcoming, for her sake if nothing else."

His eyebrow shot up at her impertinence. Hawkhurst regarded her for several more heartbeats, obviously reassessing her.

He must finally have realized that she was attempting to lighten the mood, for her complaint won her the barest hint of a smile. "You break into my home and then take me to task?"

"I did not break in," she pointed out genially. "You admitted me."

"Much to my regret."

Just then the darkness in the corridor was broken by another lightning flash. When he continued on his way, Skye followed in his footsteps.

Upon arriving at his study, he allowed her to precede him. To her relief, this room at least looked habitable. A fire was crackling in the hearth and a low-burning lamp rested on a massive desk.

"You may sit there by the fire," he said, pointing to a leather wing chair that was angled before the hearth.

His invitation seemed slightly grudging, but Skye did not take offense. "Do you mind if I remove my cloak first? I am chilled to the bone." Her discomfort was not a lie. Her cloak was soaked through and her gown was damp at the bodice and sodden at the hem.

Hawkhurst murmured something under his breath that sounded much like, "It serves you right," but he stepped closer to aid her.

When he reached out to lift the cloak from her shoulders, Skye's own breath suddenly turned ragged at his close proximity. Then, when she handed over the garment, revealing an elegantly tailored traveling dress of forest green kerseymere beneath, his gaze dropped to her breasts.

Instinctively she went still as his marvelous eyes traveled over her body in dispassionate appraisal. She was well aware of her physical attributes and that her feminine countenance and figure appealed to most men. Usually she had suitors falling at *her* feet, declaring themselves in love with her. Yet she had no clue what Hawkhurst was thinking or feeling.

There was no question about her body's reaction to *him*, however. She was not sexually

experienced, but the intense fascination she felt for him was most certainly sexual, her desire that of a grown woman, not merely the love-struck awe of a young girl. But what he did to her insides was more remarkable. His mere nearness filled her with fluttery excitement and sweet yearning—a response she had never felt with any man but him.

She had no difficulty picturing Hawkhurst as her husband now, just as she'd done numerous times in her romantic dreams these past few months. If he were her husband, though, she could have removed her gown instead of standing here shivering in this clammy one. If he were her husband, she could have undressed down to her shift and moved into his arms. Indeed, she could have bared her entire chilled body to him and shared his warmth. . . .

The alluring image dissolved when he took her dripping cloak and spread it near the hearth to dry, then went to his desk without another word.

Hawkhurst was clearly displeased to have her in his home, Skye could tell as she removed her wet gloves. She ought to be intimidated by his surly manner; any normal young lady would be. But few gentlemen had the power to shake her, perhaps because she was accustomed to handling the strong-willed men in her family.

She usually was able to bend them to her own will with sweet reason. She suspected in this case, though, it would take a good deal more than reason to sway the earl. Indeed, the sheer size of her task daunted her. But if Lord Hawkhurst was looking for a wife, it might as well be her, Skye judged. At the very least, she wanted to see if they were a compatible match. And regardless of her romantic hopes, she needed a hero just now, and he was a genuine hero.

Skye drew a steadying breath to bolster her courage. She had contrived to land on his doorstep, and now she had to capitalize on the opportunity she had created for herself.

"Will you please read my aunt's letter, my lord?" she asked.

Obligingly, he turned up the flame on the desk lamp, then held the letter nearer the light. It was then that Skye really saw the burn scars marring the back of his hands.

A sudden lump formed in her throat. Hawkhurst was still the most beautiful man she had ever seen, but also the most deeply scarred. Not just on the outside but on the inside, if her information was correct. After all, he had crawled through fire to save his wife and young son, futilely as it happened. With his life shattered, he'd exiled himself to a distant Mediterranean island and spent the past decade engaged in dangerous deeds, not caring whether he lived or died.

Skye's heart went out to him. Perhaps that organ was too tender, but as the youngest Wilde cousin of the current generation, she was known for being the sensitive one, in addition to being the most mischievous.

Mentally chiding herself for staring at the earl's scarred hands, she busied herself spreading her gloves on the hearth. Then she settled into the wing chair and began to remove the pins from her chignon, since her damp hair would dry more quickly if down.

For a short while as he read, the silence in the study was broken only by rain spitting against the windowpanes and the occasional snap of a log in the hearth fire.

When Hawkhurst absently reached for a snifter that was almost empty, Skye noticed the crystal decanter half-filled with what appeared to be brandy. Evidently he had been drinking, which partially explained his morose mood.

It was not surprising that he would be sitting alone here and brooding. She would have brooded also if she'd had to face the ghosts of her dead family, as he doubtless had upon his arrival at the castle after a decade of being absent.

In fact, it was his castle that had made Skye wonder if the earl might be her ideal match. According to her cousin Kate's matchmaking theory, the five Wilde cousins—Ashton, Quinn, Jack, Katharine, and Skye—could possibly find true love by mirroring legendary lovers in history and literature.

Skye hoped that her romance would follow a French fairy tale written nearly a century ago, where a beautiful young lady had been delivered to a beast whose lair was a palace.

Of course, Lord Hawkhurst was not a beast in the literal sense, but a brooding, scarred recluse somewhat fit the role. And this gloomy mansion could be a beast's lair, Skye thought with a shiver.

Just then Hawkhurst looked up from the letter. His gaze narrowed on her as she combed her fingers through her tangled tresses. Then he said rather brusquely, "Lady Isabella's missive falls far short of the explanation you promised. She says only that you have a request to make of me. So what do you want, Lady Skye?"

Skye hesitated, knowing she had to choose her words carefully. Naturally she could not tell him her true reason for being here for fear he would think she was stalking him. Her purpose had to remain her secret for now. Therefore, she would employ an entirely different excuse to ensure her chance to pursue the earl.

"I need you to you to find someone for me."

"Who?"

"My uncle's long lost love."

Hawkhurst appeared dubious. "Why the devil do you think I could help?"

"Because you are an expert at solving puzzles and finding missing people. Some years ago when Lady Isabella was abducted by a Berber sheik and carried off to the mountains near Algiers, you found her and rescued her, to her immense gratitude."

When the earl was silent, Skye offered absently, "I will pay very generously."

That was obviously the wrong approach, for he shook his head. "My services are not for hire."

"Then do it as a favor for my aunt."

That argument did not appear to sway him either.

At his reticence, Skye gave a soft huff of exasperation. "You are a hero, Lord Hawkhurst. You should want to help me."

Her claim brought a flash of genuine amusement to his features. "I am no hero."

"You are indeed. And you belong to a secret league of heroes called the Guardians of the Sword. In fact, you are the league's most renowned member."

His expression suddenly became enigmatic, but his tone revealed his displeasure that so much had been revealed about him. "I expected more discretion from Bella."

"You ought not blame her. I was quite persistent."

That was certainly true. She had quizzed her aunt at great length about every facet of the earl's past.

"But don't fear," Skye added quickly. "She told me little more than the name of your alliance of spies. I know, however, that you have a long list of commendable qualities. You are honorable, supremely clever, and a leader of men. Before the tragedy struck, you were a devoted husband and father. And since then, you have risked your life countless times over and saved numerous lives."

His answer was gruff, almost harsh. "That still does not make me suitable for your task."

Skye eyed Hawkhurst in frustration. She was not about to admit failure, not when she felt such great urgency to act. His spy career might still be shrouded in secrecy, but her aunt had been completely frank about his romantic affairs. Hawkhurst soon intended to wed the great-niece of his superior and mentor—a marriage of convenience strictly for political purposes.

He had not begun his courtship yet; he was merely readying his house to receive a new bride. But given his plans, Skye had little time to discover if they were a match, and if so, to somehow prevent his betrothal and marriage to another woman.

She was never one to turn away from a challenge, though.

Tamping down her frustration, she offered Hawkhurst her most winning smile. "Just hear me out, my lord. *Please*. It is the least you can do, given your friendship with my aunt."

Leaning back in his chair, he folded his arms over his chest. "Very well, you have five minutes."