



# PENELOPE NERI

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# SCANDALS

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**—Phoebe Conn, on *Enchanted Bride***

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NAKED FLESH

His lean, powerful body was quite bare now, except for the line of curling dark hair that bisected his broad chest. And, to her surprise, he wasn't horrid or beastly at all. He was beautiful. Like a statue of a Greek athlete, powerfully muscled and deeply tanned everywhere, his skin burnished by a sun far hotter than that which shone on England's damp, chilly shores.

“So. Do you like this better, my dear? The two of us, naked as Nature intended? Unfortunately, we would be at a decided disadvantage should this flea-bitten hostel catch fire!” Laughter rumbling in his voice, he gathered her into his arms and drew her close.

He smelled of sandalwood soap, tobacco and brandy, and felt so deliciously warm. *Hot*, really. His naked flesh burned like a furnace against her own, warming her. Oh, God, yes, warming her in ways she'd never dreamed of. . . .

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**STOLEN**

# SCANDALS

PENELOPE VERI

LEISURE BOOKS



NEW YORK CITY

*For Barbara Snyder, with love.*

**A LEISURE BOOK®**

**January 1999**

**Published by**

**Dorchester Publishing Co., Inc.**

**276 Fifth Avenue**

**New York, NY 10001**

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**ISBN 0-8439-4470-6**

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**Printed in the United States of America.**

**“Love and Scandals are the best sweeteners for tea.”**  
**—Henry Fielding, *Love in Several Masques***



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# *Chapter One*

*Hawthorne Hall, Whitby, Yorkshire, 1855*

"I'm off for a gallop before luncheon, Joseph. Go on home to your Sunday dinner. I'll rub him down."

"That's very good of you, m'lord," Victoria heard Lovett, the head groom, murmur as he stepped away from her father's hunter. "I'll just take another look at that mare before I leave."

"Good man. Give my regards to Mrs. Lovett."

With her father erect in the saddle, the snorting gray lunged forward, eager for a gallop. A moment later, she heard the clatter of Samson's hooves on the cobbled stableyard as Father rode away.

"Old Thorny's, gone, he has," Ned declared in a low, pleased voice as he ducked back inside the

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stables. "Good riddance, I say! Now, come along wi' me, my lass. I've got summat for you."

"You have?" Victoria asked, giggly with a mixture of excitement and nerves as Ned took her by the hand. *Old Thorny!* So that was what the servants and workers called her father behind his back? Given his irascible temper, it was an appropriate nickname.

"Aye, lass," Ned murmured, leading her to a horse stall at the rear of the stables. The shadows were deepest there, the gloom filled with the pungent scents of horse, liniment and fresh straw.

"You're quite mad, you know, coming here in broad daylight. What if Father had seen you? What then?" The risk of their being discovered alone together made her breathless.

"But he didn't see me, did he?" Ned retorted cockily, catching her about the waist. He grinned and winked down at her as he clasped his hands behind her back. "I were careful, weren't I? I came over the fields, instead of up the lane to the Hall. Besides, you're worth the risk, my lass." He flashed her another smile. "Now, forget about him. Think about me, and what I've got for ye, instead."

"What is it? Must I guess?"

"Nay. Just close thy bonny eyes, and don't look till I tell thee to."

"Oh, Ned. It's lovely!" Victoria exclaimed, opening her hyacinth-blue eyes moments later. "Thank you!"

Her smile was dazzling as she looked down at the pretty little jet rose Ned was clumsily pinning

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to her bodice. Jet jewelry was all the rage in society, and this piece was exceptionally beautiful. Each dainty petal had been faithfully rendered by a talented carver's hand, then polished to a high black gloss.

"Truly, I've never seen such a pretty piece of jet."

"The real name for it is lignite. Any road, that's what the Professor said," Ned explained in his broad-voweled Yorkshire dialect. "It forms when a bit o' driftwood gets packed down in the mud of the ocean floor. It takes thousands of years to make a great dull lump in the shale. But after it's carved and polished, it shines like thy hair."

Darling Ned. He was exactly like the jet, Victoria thought fondly, her heart swelling with love as she threw herself into his arms. A true diamond in the rough. But instead of being embedded in ocean mud, Ned was buried here, in the northeast of England. Forced—by virtue of his poor birth—to labor on her father's home farm, and as a miner in the rabbit warren of the Hawthorne jet mines, his dear, fine qualities hidden beneath layers of shale.

Surely her love, like the carver's tools, could cut away the dross. Free the precious, hidden gem that was Ned? After all, it was the honest sweat of him and others like him in the Hawthorne jet mines, cotton mills and coal mines that had made her father the very wealthy man he was.

Ned, bless him, provided the vital elements that were missing in her luxurious yet empty life.



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The ones that no amount of money could ever buy. Warmth. Affection. *Love* . . .

Ah, yes. She loved him so much. And he loved her, too . . .

With a low sound, Ned tugged the pins and combs from her upswept hair. Freed from confinement, the long, glossy black curls unraveled to her waist. Her inky lashes trembled on flushed cheeks as he ducked his unruly golden head to hers. His gray eyes burned as he grasped a fistful of that shining mass and hungrily bent to kiss her.

Tossing propriety to the winds, Victoria tilted her glowing face to his and let him.

"By gum, I want thee, lass," Ned rasped, drawing her down onto the straw beside him. Taking her slender hand in his large, rough one, he drew it to his lips. "I want thee summat fierce." *Am*

With crystal clarity she saw his brown flat cap lying on the brick floor of the box. Felt the coarse cloth of the threadbare brown jacket he'd worn to chapel, spread over the fresh straw beneath her. Then the press of his hot lips burned against her palm, ~~her~~ <sup>his</sup> throat, like the fiery wings of a moth, and thought was impossible.

"Victoria. I can't hardly bear it," he whispered thickly.

A thrill ran through her as she knelt there, her heart hammering in her breast like a steam engine. All fear of discovery paled beside her love for Ned. Oh, Lord. She would die if she ever lost him! Just die!

Ned made her feel beautiful. *Special. Wanted.*

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And he was so handsome, too, in a rugged, working-man's sort of way, with that wiry build, that shaggy golden hair, those pewter gray eyes.

He was very different from the smooth, cultured young men Father had begun to dangle before her two years ago, when she became sixteen and he realized she was a woman. Men with titles, who belonged to her own class. Men who were all flattery and flowery phrases and insincere, painted-on smiles. They were nothing but fortune hunters, drawn to her by her father's wealth, like moths to a flame.

Ned was nothing like them. All he wanted was her.

"I love you, too, Ned. And I shall miss you terribly while I'm in London."

*London!* Just thinking about the weeks—no, months—without him made her miserable. As if she needed launching into Society like a—a sailing ship on its maiden voyage! And as for finding a husband during her first season, as Father and Aunt Catherine hoped—*never!*

The only man she wanted to marry was lying right here, beside her. *Edward John Thomas. Farm laborer. Jet miner.* The man she loved, and who loved her in return.

It should all have been so simple, but it wasn't. Lord, no. She sighed. She and Ned were worlds apart, in every way but the one that counted. Their love for each other.

*Somehow, she vowed silently, we shall be husband and wife, Father will have to give his per-*

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*mission, once he realizes that I love Ned, and will marry no one else.*

"I'll miss thee, too," Ned said in response to her comment. When he smiled, as he was doing now, she felt the warmth of it right down to her toes. "Don't thee up and wed some rich toff while you're in the City, my lass," he reminded her, trailing a coarse knuckle down her cheek.

"Silly. Of course I will not."

"Promise? Cross thy heart and hope t' die?"

"I promise."

"Good lass. Now come thee here, my beauty." He pulled her down to the straw beside him and kissed her.

She moaned softly as his lips moved against hers, stiffening as his large hand curled, ever so lightly, over the curve of her breast—and remained there.

The bold caress made her gasp in shock and disbelief. But his second kiss—harder than the first, and given with open mouth and thrusting tongue—devoured the protest she would have uttered. Swallowed it whole.

Pinned beneath Ned's chest, his knee pushing against the place where her thighs were pressed together, she felt smothered, trapped.

What on earth was Ned doing? What had come over him? She could not speak—could hardly breathe!—as his hand slipped beneath her hooped petticoat. Seconds later, she felt his callused fingers squeezing her knee. "Don't!" she whispered as his hand inched its way up her leg,

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scraping the scalloped hems of her drawers, snagging on her silk hose.

Stop it," she repeated sternly. Her hand covered his, halting his explorations.

Looking up into his blazing gray eyes, she was frightened by what she saw in their depths.

"Stop? But why, lovie? If you really loved me, ye wouldna ask me to stop, my lass," Ned said thickly. His gray eyes narrowed. "Or were ye but making sport of me when ye said ye cared?"

"No, no, of course not. I'd never make fun of you, Ned," she assured him earnestly. "Believe me, dearest, I love you."

"Aye? Then prove it, lass. Prove I'm good enough for the likes of her ladyship." He sounded taunting rather than gently teasing now. "Prove I'm suited for better than licking your father's boots, aye?"

"I love you, truly I do, Ned. But . . . but I can't do what you ask of me . . . not until—not unless—we are marr—"

She froze as a great black shadow fell across them.

"*Father! Nooo!*" she screamed as Ned was lifted off her by the scruff of his neck.

Her father towered over them, his broad frame black against the April sunshine that streamed through the high windows. He looked very tall and terrible, etched against that brightness. A dark god of retribution, sent from the Underworld to punish her.

Ned, red-faced and choking, dangled like a dead rat from Lord Hawthorne's clenched fist,



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while beyond the box the great hunter Samson snorted and stamped his hooves, his reins dangling.

"You bloody *bastard!*" her father roared, slamming Ned up against the wooden box with such force that his teeth rattled. His normally ruddy face was livid with outrage.

The horses in the other stalls whinnied nervously and kicked at the wooden partitions.

"Lay your filthy hands on my daughter, would you, you son-of-a-bitch? I'll give you a thrashing you'll never forget!"