

After the death of their Marques Uncle, three sisters deal with their situation in various ways as three men enter their lives. They must deal with misunderstandings, danger, and more, as they learn God's plans are different from theirs.

**Three Sisters of Stanhavon Castle:
Inspirational Regency Romance**

By Carolyn R Scheidies

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INSPIRATIONAL REGENCY ROMANCE

Three
Sisters
of
Stanhavon
Castle

Carolyn R Scheidies

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Table of Contents

The Solicitor and the Marquis' Niece.....	7
The Earl's Brother and the Healer	147
Sara and the New Marquis	287

The Solicitor and the Marquis' Niece

Chapter One

Jerusalem glanced at Sara as her youngest sister slipped her small hand into hers. Sara's ashen face concerned her. The funeral was difficult enough for her and Beth, but Sara always took things to heart and her constitution was not strong. Reaching over, she pulled Sara's black wool cape more closely about her narrow shoulders as she did when Sara was a little girl. Sara didn't resist her efforts and that worried Jeri even more.

Though her sister was seventeen, two years younger than herself, Jeri felt years and years older. The death of their uncle sat heavily on her shoulders.

The rising wind eddied the edges of her own long, black cape that covered her gown of unremitting black. Jeri hated the color. It washed out her features and made her feel like a crow. But society dictated black for mourning. The girls spent an afternoon removing all trim and bright buttons from the gowns to be worn at the funeral, adding black sashes and neck trim. They attacked the task with distaste and spoke little during the process. More than once, she caught her sisters surreptitiously wiping tears from their cheeks.

It was hard during the previous days not to realize Uncle Rupert, the Marquess of Stanhavon, lay in repose in another room. Candles surrounded him and someone remained with the body day and night until after the funeral. Jeri had been relieved when the housekeeper Mary and her husband Daniel Adams, son of the cook and the stable and grounds manager, insisted on preparing the body after his death. "Taint fittin' for young unmarried innocents to do so," Mary declared.

Jeri could only thank her profusely. Mary was pleased, though she tried to downplay the situation.

Daniel made the coffin. His tribute to the beloved master he'd served for so many years. Jeri had seen the carvings and workmanship and realized the effort was a work of love. She would

have given payment for the extra work, but Daniel refused. Jeri could not deny having the coffin provided was a relief. Despite what their uncle deserved, the funeral had been rather stark with no fancy carriages carrying the departed, no crowd of mourners at the church. A simple horse and wagon sufficed with the girls in one carriage and the rest of the Adams' family along with the one other retainer, a stable hand to help care for the horses.

Jeri didn't much like the arrogant young man and did her best to stay away from him. Her sisters followed her example. Still and all, everyone from Stanhavon Castle was expected to attend the funeral.

The church was filled mostly with townspeople and farmers, though a few chosen peers, friends of the Marquis, sat in the premier pews. They'd spoken about the Marquis in glowing terms at the service and then headed back to London. They did not ask about a lunch for those attending the funeral. Silently, Jeri applauded their sensitivity in realizing the girls had little to offer in the way of amenities. The vicar had taken the decision from their hands. He quietly passed the word and the villagers themselves would be supplying food after the internment. Jeri was thankful and humiliated at the same time. They should have been able to provide food at the castle.

At the cemetery, Jeri watched as the coffin was carefully lowered into the grave. The bumping and scraping of the coffin on the sides of the deep hole, gave Jeri pause. Beth caught her eye and conveyed her own dismay. *What if the coffin tipped and the body fell out?*

Jeri felt her shoulders ease as the coffin thumped to the bottom. Sara's hand clenched hers more tightly as the girls walked to the grave to, once more, say goodbye before the grave was filled. As they turned away, a young man Jeri noticed earlier, approached.

At the church after the service when the girls turned, she'd noticed him seated toward the back. He stood out among those attending, his hat low on his forehead. He had not sat with her uncle's peers near the front of the church, yet his clothing clearly showed him of a different status from the villagers and farmers surrounding him. His black frock coat was well tailored and fit his well-shaped form. Jeri blushed slightly that she would have such

thoughts at such a solemn occasion. Was she really so shallow? As she watched him, a flush started up her neck to her cheeks.

She recognized that face. *Oh dear! Why was he here?* She was sure, almost sure, the gentleman was the very one who rescued her the night of that country dance she'd tried so hard to forget. She recalled that night with shame.

Tall and willowy, Jeri moved with grace as the manservant handed her down from a gig that had seen better days. At least the mare was first rate, since raising and selling prime cattle helped keep the books balanced. She should know. She kept them, had kept them ever since they could no longer pay their bookkeeper.

Her dear uncle, the Marquess of Stanhavon, was loath to fire a man who stood by him for thirty years and was as much a friend as hired employee. Yet, Jerusalem, Jeri to her family and friends, knew he was relieved when the man retired to live with his son and family. The bookkeeper stayed long enough to show Jeri how to go on. Jeri smiled in the darkness. It had not taken long. She always grasped mathematical principles quickly and rather enjoyed keeping the books. Her smile faded.

Well, she would relish the task, but for the fact there was little money in their coffers. She finally understood why her uncle who spoiled his three orphan nieces as much as possible was unable to offer them a London season. Neither Beth nor Sara seemed to mind. But then, both were younger.

Jeri patted her gown one last time. It was as fashionable as her own efforts could make it. Her mother left a trunk full of gowns, nothing ostentatious, but lovely gowns of fine material. If she did think so herself, she'd updated this one right nicely. No one would know.

Lips tight, she moved behind another party, hoping to blend with the rather large group and so be assumed to have come with them. After all, it wasn't the thing to attend even a country dance without an escort. Not at her tender years. Still and all, she had no one to escort her, and she was determined to attend. This was as close to a

London season as she was likely to get. Her sisters would be horrified at what she was doing. Her uncle would be upset and angry, especially if he discovered she'd taken his invitation. Not that he would have used it. Uncle worried about them far too much. After all, she was all of nineteen and could take care of herself.

A gentleman brushed her sleeve as those waiting to enter clustered. She glanced over at him, and found dark intense eyes taking her in. His hair swept back in the latest style and his superfine jacket fit without a wrinkle on his fine form. A smile lifted his well-formed lips as he recognized her own perusal. She flushed and raised a gloved hand to her cheek at his soft whisper. "We'll shall get better acquainted."

Something about his tone sent up warning bells and yet, yet, from his appearance he was the very sort she'd come to the ball to find. His attire shouted refinement and old money. Jeri liked the idea of spending her days in luxury. Always had. She brought herself in hand, reminding herself sharply finding a husband with a title and deep pockets was not just about her. No. It was about providing for her family. She dipped a nod. It wouldn't hurt to flirt a bit and see what happened.

The gathered crowd thinned as a line formed up the wide outside staircase and those invited entered the hall. Others separated her from the dark eyed man. She'd look for him once inside. Mayhap, he would ask her to dance. She hoped so. She needed to make the best of her opportunities.

She didn't even see the stranger until someone pushed her against him. She recoiled in horror and embarrassment as the young man turned about. He had a pleasant enough face, and the twinkle in his green eyes told her he was not the least upset with her inadvertent actions. "I'm so sorry. It was an accident. The crowd you see."

"Quite all right, Miss." He paused. "Are you all right? These events tend to be quite the crush."

"They can indeed." Jeri tried to straighten her gown to keep it from being stepped on. Surreptitiously, she surveyed the gentleman. He was young enough, confident enough and he had been invited to this ball so he must be of some note. However, these events weren't

always all that discriminating. She noted the slight fraying at his cuffs and a Spanish blue jacket in style of two years previous. Not in the first stare of fashion or all that deep in the pockets.

Still and all, when he asked to take her arm to get her safely inside, she acquiesced. Though she planned to leave his side soon enough, his assistance gave her the appearance of an escort. With a smile and nod, she took his arm. "Why thank you kind sir."

She straightened and lifted her head. Now she did not need to slink inside. Her mind dismissing the gentleman at her side, her thoughts focused on the man with the dark eyes. Yes, he was her opportunity at a prosperous future. This night would be a big step in that direction. Laughing and smiling at those around her, she gained entrance on the arm of a stranger.

High time she took care of Uncle and her sisters as well. Most knew her uncle and her bloodlines were good. She had nothing of which to be ashamed. Holding up her head, she stepped into the ballroom. A quick glance showed few took notice of her entrance. That both pleased her as she wished to mingle without undue attention and made her wonder if her gown was as up to snuff, so to speak, as she supposed. Still, she bowed a farewell to the stranger and did the pretty for those she knew. Mingling as she made her way about the room, Jeri surreptitiously searched for the dark-eyed man.

She just managed to avoid Doctor Matthews who'd known her since she was in leading strings and was like another beloved uncle in her life. He'd ask uncomfortable questions if he knew she was unescorted. A flush started in her cheek at the thought that he might actually insist on escorting her home if her answers weren't satisfactory. She also kept an eye out for the good vicar and his wife who would also pose questions she did not wish to answer.

"Miss." After a turn on the floor with an older country gentleman, Jeri was delighted when the dark-eyed man approached her.

"Miss Saunders," she told him.

"Sir Tollen at your service, Miss Saunders." While she kept her smile in place, Jeri's heart sank. Merely a baron or a knight? How could she tell? *Oh, dear*, she thought. Then gave herself a mental

shake. He still had a title and if his pockets were deep it was enough. After all, she had her sisters to keep.

A moment later, she was in his arms on the ballroom floor. Her perusal showed most of those attending were older, already well-married couples or engaged. Not many fit her requirements. She smiled up at Sir Tollen. One prospect would have to do.

As they met and parted in the country dance, she blushed at his whispered flattery. He thought she was beautiful in a way that rivaled Venus de Milo. She tapped him with her fan. "Such flummery," she chided, though she drank up his flattery like a thirsty rose.

"Not at all, my dear," he told her. "Have you not been painted?"

His marked attentions brought a sparkle to her eyes. Her efforts might pay off. She was even more sure when he asked to escort her in to supper. They sat with others down from London, and Jeri found the repartee exhilarating. True, some was less-than-kind tittle-tattle, but she basked in Tollen's attentions and the acceptance of the others at the table. She blushed at the, sometimes, less-than-subtle comments about her and the baron

Her mind flew to a future as a wife accepted into society and as the rescuer of her family's fortunes. Once she made a suitable match, she'd sponsor each of her sisters. She relished the role.

When the Baron asked her for a third turn on the floor later in the evening, she hesitated only a moment. It was only a country affair after all and who cared she danced more than the socially acceptable two dances with the same gentleman? That third dance never happened. To her dismay, the man with the frayed cuffs cut in.

His voice low, he sounded a warning, "Not quite the thing three dances." He took her hand and smoothly swung her onto the floor. He moved with unexpected grace, but left Tollen without a partner, something the baron soon remedied.

Tollen's partner was a buxom blond. Jeri felt jealousy stirring and anger at her partner.

"How dare you interfere," she murmured.

He lifted an eyebrow. "Get the tabbies talking. Don't want that now, do we?"

Jeri glanced away. The last thing she needed was word to get back to her family. Anger warred with common sense. She gave in with ill grace. "I should be out of countenance with you, but..."

"I was again your rescuer."

She bit her lip as she followed him in the pattern of the dance. Too high-handed for her taste.

Once the stranger released her to the sidelines, Tollen again found her. "Miss, how about a turn in the solarium?"

If only to get away from the watchful eye of the stranger, Jeri agreed. Besides, this time provided privacy to further her plans. The air in the large room held a snap that Tollen used as an excuse to put his arm about her as he led the way down meandering walkways between carefully cultivated plants, small trees, and flowers. Jeri felt discomfort but was loath to pull away or put him down, not if she hoped to further this relationship. When his hold grew more firm, and he began to lead her into an unlighted area, she halted. "I do not think I wish to go further."

Tollen smiled. In the lantern light, his smirk made a shiver start somewhere deep inside Jeri. "What are you going to do, my dear? Scream?"

"Is there a reason I should?" She froze when Tollen lowered his head, and his lips took possession of hers. She'd never been kissed and wasn't sure what to think. He released her, surveying her as though checking her response.

In wonder, she touched her lips, her mind as frozen as her body. Her thoughts fled. She almost welcomed the second kiss, until he persisted, his arms imprisoning her to him as his mouth ravaged hers. His intensity frightened her, the kiss painful. This was not what she wanted. She felt out of control. When his hands began to wonder, she began to struggle. She arched away from him. "You are no gentleman."

"Never said I was." He still held her struggling body. "You are a comely enough piece. After hanging out after me all evening, tis a bit late in the game for high flown airs now."

"What?" Guilt and humiliation conflicted with confusion. She'd been so wrong.

“No one will know.” His eyes gleamed.

It took but a moment for her to understand his intent. “No. Absolutely no.” When his hold tightened, panic spread. As he forced her back, a scream ripped from her throat along with a prayer. “Help me, Jesus. Help me!”

“I believe the lady wishes to be released, Tollen.” The tone was quiet, but firm. Jeri recognized the stranger.

Tollen snarled. “Get your own ladybird.”

Jeri gasped. “How dare you!” How could she have thought, been so forward, oh...?

The stranger who now seemed a friend took her arm to steady her as Tollen all but flung her away.

“Have her then. She was but a momentary distraction in this backwater place anyway.”

Jeri watched him go. A moment later, her fantasy crumbling, she did as well. The stranger caught her and held her while she wept. “I am such a fool, I only wanted to care for my family.”

“I know.” He allowed her to weep. Once she controlled herself, he handed over a linen square to wipe her face. With a minimum of effort, he managed to order her gig and his horse. Not long thereafter, he escorted her home. At the gate when she stuttered out her gratitude, the stranger stopped her. “Forget tonight,” he told her. “but learn from it. Not all men are gentlemen.”

She hung her head. The stranger was more a gentleman than the baron could ever hope to be. It was lowering. “Thank you...”

His soft palm caressed her cheek. “Take care of yourself, Miss Saunders.” With that, he leaped to the ground, untied his horse, swung into the saddle and, with a wave, headed off into the night.

Urging the animal toward the stables, Jeri vowed to forget the events of the night, prayed her uncle would never find out and hoped she’d never again meet either Sir Tollen or the stranger to remind her of her folly—at least Tollen. “Thank you, Lord, for protecting me.”

The incident flooded through her mind, and she was hard put not to blush crimson. *Lord, please don't let him say anything. Please make him go away. How does he know our uncle?* Her thought prayers tumbled over one another. Finally, she turned back, faced the

minister. Yet her thought questions refused to be silenced. Just who was the stranger?

Obviously, a gentleman, mayhap one without deep pockets. Surely he was not a tradesman to which her uncle owed money. They had not been extravagant, and had few resources, but, unlike many of his peers, the Marquis was firm about paying bills and not spending more than they could afford.

Jeri chafed at this, thinking of all the things they might have had—like a season in London—but for her uncle’s old fashion ideas. Once she started keeping the books, she gave thanks their uncle had not indulged her whims.

As the villagers made their way back to the church to set out the food, the vicar patted her shoulder. He nodded toward the stranger. After you speak with him, join us. Jeri nodded, absently, wondering if the vicar had any idea as to the identity of the stranger.

Beth flanked her on the side opposite of Sara. Sara tugged her hand from Jeri’s grip. Belatedly, Jeri realized she’d held too tightly. Worried? As the young man, in his late twenties she guessed, took off his hat, she noted that gray threaded through the dark hair.

He bowed. “Rowland Stanforton at your service ladies.”

When none of them said anything, he cleared his throat. “I wanted to catch you today. Sorry for the timing.” Their presence seemed to almost intimidate him, and he hurried on. His knuckles where he held his hat showed white. As he glanced from one to the other, he stopped at Jeri, gulped, and appeared to lose his train of thought. She prayed he would not reveal their previous meeting.

Sara showed pity. “You know us?”

“Yes. No, not really. Just your business.”

“Our business?” Jeri straightened. Was the man deranged? “Please speak plainly.”

Beth frowned. “We have just buried our uncle and guardian.”

“I know. That’s why I am here. I was gone and now I’ve returned.”

Jeri heard the growl in her voice. This seemed to frustrate the man further.

Sara asked, “Are you a tradesman come to collect.”

“No. No indeed?”

Beth tried. “A friend of our uncle.”

“Not exactly.”

Jeri had enough. “Mr. Rowland Stanforton. State your business quickly and immediately. We have obligations to attend. Now who are you.”

He straightened. “I am your solicitor.”

The girls exchanged a dismayed glance. Beth spoke first, “What happened to the Marquis’ solicitor?”

Jeri could only think, *Oh no!* She hadn't gotten rid of the stranger after all.

The Earl's Brother and the Healer

Chapter One

With the castle housekeeper, Mary, ill, Bethlehem, Beth to her family, did not have the heart to ask Mary's husband, Daniel, to accompany her on the short drive to the widow Annie Mason's little whitewashed house with its blue and white shutters. Beth did not care to go alone, not after the comments and leers her looks elicited. Still and all, she had to go. Doctor Matthews didn't seem to be around, and her skills as a healer were needed.

A neighbor sent her word the elderly woman had not worked in her precious rose garden for three days. Though the year was still early and the weather only beginning to warm, Annie was usually out preparing the earth and giving her plants a good start. She grew roses she gave to Beth. They graced the castle and brought a fragrance that overrode the mustiness found in so much of the structure.

Tucked behind the Rooster Inn, Annie's house was the last evidence that she and her husband once owned and ran the bustling inn. But that was years ago, before Annie lost her husband in a duel he tried to stop, a duel between two peers who'd hoisted a few-too-many that ended up with only him so badly injured he died the next day. As she approached, Beth watched a variety of carriages and other conveyances enter the courtyard.

She frowned until she remembered. This was a race weekend, with horses vying for honors. All inns were filled from the Welton estate where the Earl held the race on his track to down beyond their small village. Beth turned off the rutted roadway, not wishing to draw attention to her unescorted status, and maneuvered around the three-story inn.

In front of the small cottage, she got down from her light-weight vehicle and secured the three-year-old that was well on the way to being ready to sell. She patted the chestnut filly who nudged her hand with her nose. Laughing, Beth offered a piece of carrot. She'd hated to part with the young animal, but she'd already held onto her

far longer than they kept many of their other foals. She sighed, wishing they had the financial resources to keep some of the foals born to their prize broodmares and stud. She did not want to think that their blooded foundational animals were getting up in years.

She scratched the filly along her neckline under the abundant mane. Mayhap, Sunfire could be part of a new generation. She'd have to talk to grounds and stable manager, Adams, once she returned. With another quick pat, Beth sucked in a breath, grabbed her bag from her conveyance and headed toward the door of the cottage.

She was a little afraid of what she might find inside or of Annie's condition, considering the woman had to be all of eighty. She'd grown frail over the last few months.

She knocked and knocked again. When no one answered, she opened the door and called out. "Who's there." The sound of Annie's voice, though weak, was a relief.

With more confidence, Beth entered the living area and left her cape on the settee by a fireplace that looked cold and dark. The tiny bedroom was equally dark and cold. She found Annie huddled under quilts that she probably created herself.

"I'm here, Annie." Beth felt the woman's forehead and found it hot. "What happened? What's wrong?"

Beth heard the spunk in Annie's voice and smiled. "Tripped over the threshold. After what, fifty plus years, I trip and fall on the threshold. Managed to crawl into the house." Her tone weakened as she spoke.

"May I take a look?"

At the woman's nod, Beth uncovered Annie's legs and checked. When Annie winced, Beth told her. "The ankle, isn't it? May be broken."

Annie groaned. "Suppose you'll make me wait for Doc Matthews."

Beth patted the woman's shoulders. "I would, but he's away."

"Odd, that," was Annie's comment. Beth agreed, but said nothing. Instead, she went about warming up the cottage and preparing some soup for the elderly woman for whom she'd always

had a soft spot. Knowing Beth loved her roses, the dear woman was generous in presenting them at any excuse. For some time, she and the doctor accepted rose arrangements as payment for any services rendered. Annie had been remarkably healthy, but, at times, her grandchildren visited with the resulting minor mishaps.

Once the house was warm and Annie nourished and feeling stronger, Beth set the ankle and wrapped it up. “You need help, Annie.”

The usually feisty woman showed remarkable restraint. “I know. It is time. Charles and his wife have begged me to come live with them. They want me....”

“But you preferred independence.” Beth put the rest of her supplies back into her large cloth black bag embroidered with roses. “I know. Now, will you give me your son’s address so I may contact him?”

Not long thereafter, after contacting a near neighbor who agreed to watch out after Annie, Beth threw her bag into her rig, climbed aboard, and lifted the reins. For a moment, she stretched her back. The afternoon wore her out, and the visit took much more time than she expected.

As she turned Sunfire toward the road, she realized the length of the shadows. She’d need to give Sunfire her head if they were to return to the castle before dark. As she moved onto the roadway by the Inn, two peers stepped into the roadway. One caught hold of Sunfire’s bridle, causing the mare to dance and pull up. The horse’s unease caused the man to stumble and grab his top hat. He bumped his partner, who swore and shoved him away, causing Sunfire to back away and fight the hand on his bridle.

Beth gathered her wits about her and put as much authority into her tone as she could manage. “Enough. Stand aside and let me pass.” As she fought to calm Sunfire, her cape dropped from her shoulders. For a moment, the two men stared. A leer framed the lips of the first man, who none-to-gently pulled the horse down.

Beth understood that look. She witnessed it often enough. Here in the growing darkness without an escort, a chill marched up her spine and sent a shiver through her. With Sunfire struggling, she could not

release her hold on the reins to gather her cape. She feared the men, but they seemed not to realize their actions put them all in danger.

Sunfire was young. Should she panic, she could harm herself and them. “Stand down. Let her go.”

The second buck swaggered to her side. His fashionable jacket and high neckpoints proclaimed him a dandy. His breath proclaimed he’d spent time nursing a bottle or two of spirits. Probably lost his blunt at the races most like. His companion only grinned when his companion reached out to touch her.

Beth leaned away. “Let me pass.”

The man laughed a laugh that frightened Beth. “Look Dents, the mort wants us to go on.”

“Come here. Give Max a kiss...or two.” He pursed his lips.

Beth whipped the ends of the reins toward him, catching his cheek. The anger that leaped in his eyes, made her draw her breath.

For a moment, he backed away. His companion released the bridle to see to his friend. Beth took her moment. She let the reins slip through her shaking fingers. All but standing, she called, “Go, Sunfire, go.” The horse leaped forward, but not quickly enough. The first man grabbed Beth and yanked her from the conveyance. A moment later, she watched Sunfire heading down the road without her.

“Lord, help!” She never knew whether or not she spoke out loud. The next moment a tall, broad-shouldered man reached her side. His icy gaze made the two peers release her. When he held out his hand, Beth took it and allowed him to draw her to his side.

“Gentlemen do not a treat a lady in such a fashion.” Even in her state of disorder, Beth took in his well-cut clothing, the black coat, the dark, almost black eyes that matched the hair. For all that, his hold on her was gentle.

“Out here?” commented the second man. “Lightskirt more like. Share and share...”

“I will see the lady home.” He emphasized the term ‘lady.’ “Mayhap, when you two sober up, you’ll realize your mistake. Be off with you.” There was something in the stranger’s arrogance and

confidence to which they responded, and they moved away, muttering as they departed.

Beth turned wide eyes toward her rescuer. Was she in more or less danger than before?

Sealey Langdon stared down into wide, frightened eyes. He tried not to react to her stunning beauty of face and form. She was frightened enough. He sensed she wondered how much she could trust him. From her manner and dress--even though not in the first stare of fashion, he knew she was a lady. Anger burned that she would be out all alone unescorted. He wanted to take her parents or guardians to task for allowing her out.

“What are you doing here?”

“I... I had something take care of.” Her voice wavered, and Sealey realized she transferred her fright to him. He released her.

“I will take you home.”

“Oh, but we must find Sunfire. She’ll be scared.”

“We’ll probably catch up with her.” She seemed more concerned for her horse than her own precarious position. Her caring heart sat well with him.

Still and all, he must needs get her safely home. “I have my carriage yonder. If you will allow me, I shall take you home.”

“Thank...you...but...” Her eyes mirrored her hesitation.

Of course, she had no notion who he was.

Taking a step away, he took off his hat and bowed. “Sealey Langdon at your service, Miss. Lately, protector of innocent misses from foxed gentlemen who should know better.”

Her shoulder relaxed slightly. “I am Beth Saunders of Stanhavon Castle.”

He had been correct, she was a gentlewoman. This was not a maidservant.

He stilled a smile when she straightened and with a dignity he knew was inborn, inquired. “Would I be safe with you, Sealey Langdon?”

As though she had options, he thought. He certainly understand how men with too much alcohol in their system, or even with two

good eyes might lose their heads over someone who looked like Beth Saunders.

“Let me be clear. I am Sealey Langdon, Doctor Langdon, the new doctor.”

Beth gasped. “But what about Doctor Matthews?”

“I'm afraid he has retired.” He held the reins with practiced ease.

“Why would he leave so suddenly? Why would he not say goodbye?” Hurt shown on the girl's lovely face. It made no sense.

“You knew him well, I take it?”

“He was like our uncle. I went out with him on his rounds these last few years.”

Langdon stared at the stunning young woman at his side. “With him? What are you?”

“A healer.”

Langdon tensed. Was this innocent telling a Banbury tale? She seemed sincere. “What doctor in his right mind would allow an innocent miss to doctor with him?”

Beth's eyes widened. “Doctor Matthews was a fine doctor and a good man. How dare you? My mother was a healer and so am I. Doc taught me medicine. I shared natural remedies.” The young woman paused, then asked, “Will you permit...?”

“No. No, I will not drag an innocent miss into situations you should have no knowledge of.” What was the doctor thinking? Not for him.

“Then I'll wait until he returns.”

Langdon sucked in a deep breath. “He's not coming back.”

“How do you know this?”

“He's a distant relation. He was visiting family when his heart...”

“He's not dead?”

“No, nothing like that. But he needs rest now. His things will be sent to him. Family will care for him.”

“And you?”

“He asked me to take his place.”

“He, he didn't say anything about us...me?”

“Sorry, no.”

Three Sisters of Stanhavon Castle

The young woman still seemed in shock when they retrieved her frisky animal, and he saw her safely home.

Sara and the New Marquis

Chapter One

Sara sighed in despair. Dust. Dirt. Grime. She hated it. Trying to keep it from taking over the crumbling castle that was her home was an unending occupation. She wore an older gown that had seen better days. She did not have a large wardrobe and certainly not a wardrobe filled with the required black or darker grey clothes that bespoke of her state of mourning for her beloved Uncle Rupert, the Marquis of Stanhavon.

In fact, she had few enough gowns of any sort. Her oldest sister, Jeri, with her tall, willowy figure and next oldest sister, Beth, with her curves had far different requirements for clothing than did she with her petite form. Had they not been so different, they might have shared their gowns, but there was no way she would fit any of the gowns left behind by her sisters, both recently married and gone.

She wished she would hear something from Jeri and her husband Rowland. Were they still safely in America? Sara suspected they chose the former British colony for more than their honeymoon, though they did not make mention of any other reason. Nonetheless, Sara caught a glance here and there that had nothing to do with romance and her letters hinted at--something. She sighed. "Please keep them safe, Jesus. I miss my sisters."

She wondered, too, about Beth and how long it might be before she and husband Sealey Langdon returned. At least, Beth was able to keep her apprised with a note or two. Her doctor husband's brother, the Earl of Aiyden, was still holding his own and for that she gave thanks. Beth told her Sealey did not want the title of Earl. All he wanted to do was to practice medicine. Sara prayed for the situation and for the Earl's well-being.

Sara patted her worn lavender gown and retied the scarf about her head. No matter how much effort she put in, the library remained dusty. The room near the books had a decidedly musty smell. It hurt

to think insects were destroying books that should be preserved. She did her best, but, all too often, her best efforts felt like a lost cause.

She glanced around at the once elegant room. The carvings and scroll work on and around the ceiling were a confection of lace and delicacy, a far cry from the heavy Gothic overtones of many of the older, unused rooms of the castle. Sky blue and silver dominated. Even the snuff boxes, paintings and statuettes were chosen for their elegance and beauty.

The shelves, of dark wood, were a solid counterpoint to the airy feeling of the room. Craftsmen of another era built shelves to last. Sara rubbed a hand against the side, noting the thickness of the side support and hoped the study shelf unit would hold up a bit longer. How much longer? That hurt to even consider. Most of the cabinets and shelves held up well over these many years. Still others crumbled away, much like the walls of the castle. Sara sighed and applied the duster to another shelf of books. Pulling out each book in turn, she dusted it and flipped through it. She was more absent minded in her search today. Discouraged even.

Surely, if some clue to the treasure was to be found in the books of the library, it would have been discovered long since. Theirs was a family who considered reading and collecting books a privilege. While her sisters were not the all-consuming reader she was, they, too, enjoyed relaxing with a good book. Not so long past, the girls would pick out a book and take turns reading it aloud so they could all listen, enjoy and comment on it.

When Uncle Rupert first got sick, they shared that time with him. A soft smile touched Sara's lips. They had built positive memories during their uncle's last days. She was thankful and sent up a prayer of gratitude.

Sara pushed in another book and reached higher on the shelf. The shelf itself was thick with dust, and Sara wondered how she could have missed this shelf for the time it would have taken for that amount of dust to build up. She grimaced as her hand came away filthy with grime and dust. For a few moments, she applied the duster, promising herself to return with more substantial cleaning supplies. The shelf wobbled as she dusted. She'd ask the valet/butler,

Daniel, who turned out to be quite the handyman, to repair the shelf before it gave way and dumped the books onto the floor.

Taking off each book for cleaning raised a wave of dust that started her sneezing and sneezing and sneezing. Sara simply could not get a breath. She had to get away from the books and the dust. But with the dust swirling and with her eyes running with tears, she got all turned around.

Taking a step, she hit the edge of the bookshelf. Backing away, she turned, reached out to steady herself and took another step. It was the wrong way, and once more she butted up against the heavy bookcase. “Fustian!”

Leaning over, she tried to catch her breath only to trip on the rug that scrunched up underfoot as she turned about. Though she tried to stay on her feet, she felt herself falling. A moment later, her head connected with the solid wooden bookcase. Only suddenly it didn’t feel so solid. She felt the bookcase wobble. She must be imagining the sense that the high case, filled from top to bottom with heavy, leather-bound volumes, moved and tilted toward her. She pushed away from it, grabbing a shelf to steady herself.

This time she heard the groan of the wood, sensed the books shift and begin to slide from the shelves, felt the shelf she held give way. Before she could process that the whole unit was about to topple, it did. She felt one, two and more books hit her head and shoulders.

She heard a scream, her own, as her eyes cleared in time to see the whole bookcase fall toward her. “Jesus, save me,” she cried as she began to fall beneath the weight.

Suddenly, long, strong arms yanked her from the falling bookcase. She felt herself pulled against a strong chest. Heard the quick heartbeat beneath her ear. She jumped as the bookcase crashed to the floor, practically at her feet.

Incredibly she was safe. How could that possibly be? Who was the better question? Glancing up, Sara stared into the intense blue eyes of a tall, handsome stranger.

As he righted her, Sara dusted off her skirt. “Who are you?” Then, belatedly, she added, “Thank you for your timely rescue.”

The handsome stranger with intense blue eyes grimaced as he wiped dust from his hands and stared about at the crumbling mess. "I am Brand Saunders, the heir, it seems, of all this, this..." He motioned around him.

Sara's head snapped up. "What? Who?"

"Brand Saunders, heir to a crumbling English estate. Not much, is it?" It was not a question. She frowned, trying to place the accent.

Sara found it hard to assimilate this information. Hope sprang to her eyes. Mayhap there was hope for her beloved castle after all. "We were not expecting you. How...?"

Again, he grimaced. "An English lady on her honeymoon, I understand, and her husband solicitor managed to track the American side of the Saunders family. My duty, they said and here I am."

So that's why Jeri chose America. It made sense now. Still, the whole was almost too much to take in. "We'll have to see to the master suite for you." It did not occur to Sara to explain her own ties to the castle.

"You shouldn't even be in this room." He pushed another shelf until, when it wobbled, he shook his head. "This is dangerous. Surely, whoever is in charge isn't so cold-hearted as to recognize the danger you are placed in just being in this library." He said it with such disdain, Sara's stomach clenched.

"I chose to be here. All these books. They are a treasure."

"One of the few in this mausoleum. Surprised anyone would agree to work here. Wages can't be much."

"It is so much more than that." Sara swallowed. A glance at her gown explained why he thought her a maidservant. She was about to tell him who she was, when his next words froze her very heart.

"Not that it matters. The sooner this relic is demolished the better."

"No! You can't!" The cry tore from the depths of Sara's heart. Who was this man? Who was this, this monster?

"I can and I will. About time my starved up English relatives get what they deserve."

Tears welled up in Sara's eyes. "You are a horrible man. I wish Jeri never found you. Go home you monster. I wish, I wish you'd

Three Sisters of Stanhavon Castle

never come to England!” With that, she rushed out of the library and up to her room where she threw herself on her bed and wept.

Author Carolyn R Scheidies

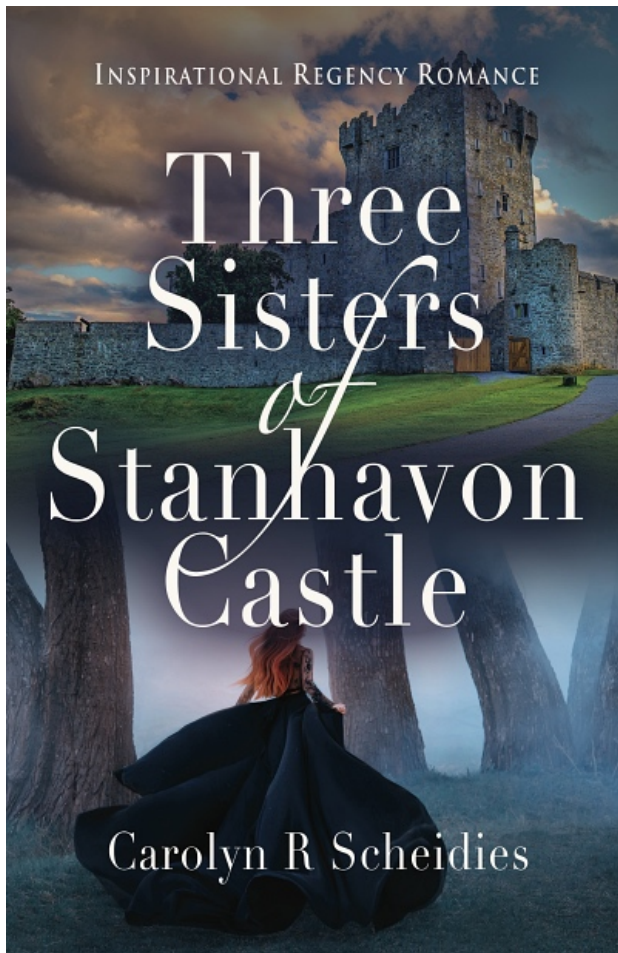
Carolyn R Scheidies is a wife, proud mother of two, and grandmother of wonderful grandchildren she loves to spoil. Though her writing career is important, it is not more important than her family or her faith.

A graduate from the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) with a degree in journalism, Carolyn's published credits include over two-dozen plus books (with various publishers including Harlequin and Barbour), several of which have garnered awards. She has written features, program material and more for a variety of publications, has a regular newspaper column, worked as an editor, speaker/teacher and book reviewer. One of her Kearney Hub columns also won her an Amy Writing Award.

Through the years, Scheidies has spoken to different groups, led workshops, substitute taught in the media dept at UNK for several years and has taught adult enrichment writing classes at Central Community College. She has been interviewed on NTV, KHAS and AFR radio as well as in numerous print and online publications and had a monthly book review segment on NTV when she was a regular book reviewer.

Whatever she does, Carolyn's goal is to share hope found in Jesus Christ.

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After the death of their Marques Uncle, three sisters deal with their situation in various ways as three men enter their lives. They must deal with misunderstandings, danger, and more, as they learn God's plans are different from theirs.

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