

*Composer and pianist Elisabeth Winters returns to the United States after the Civil War to find that her life is in jeopardy. By those who killed her father? Or by the suave and charming man whose presence taunts an unrecovered memory?*

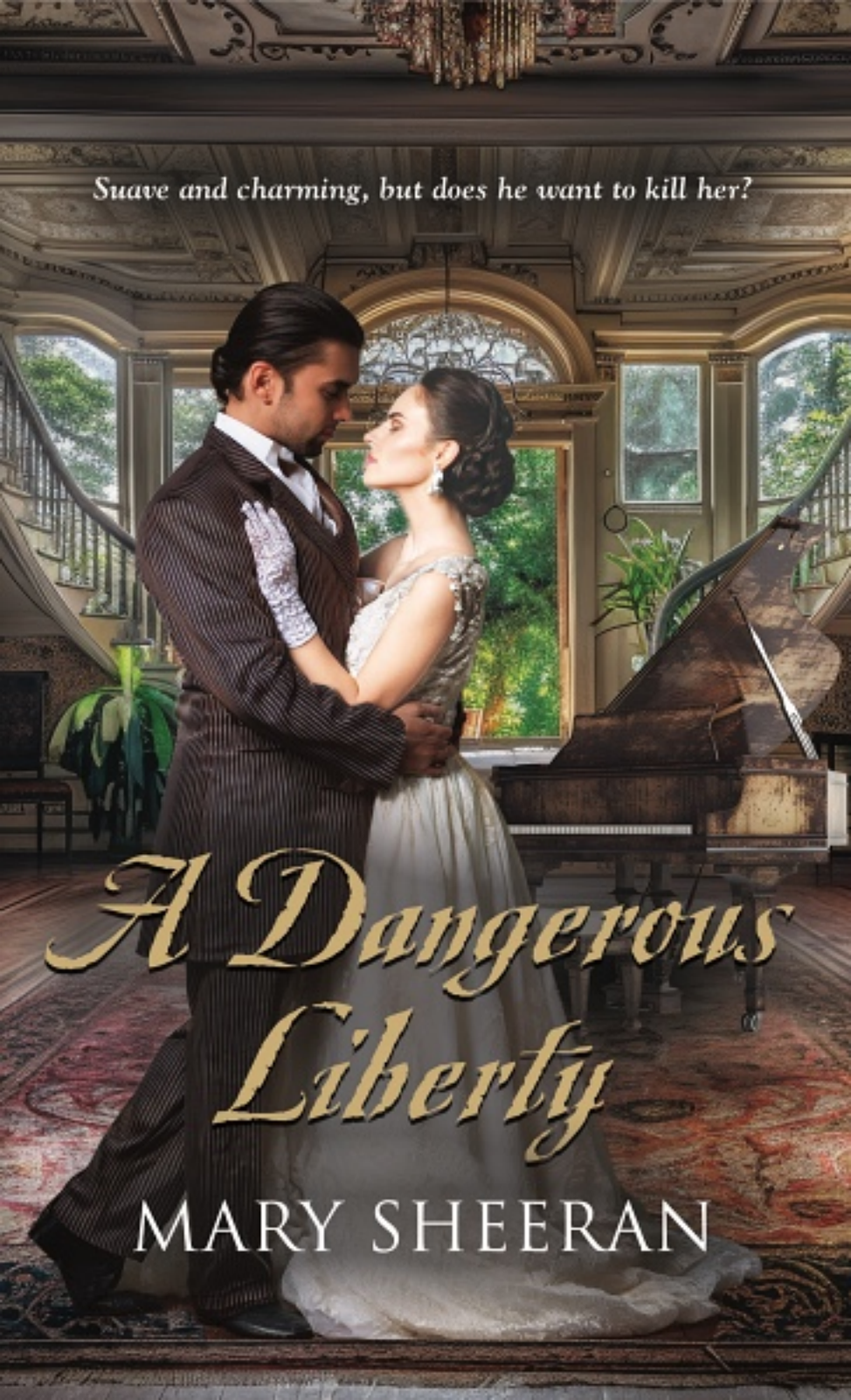
## **A Dangerous Liberty**

By Mary Sheeran

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*Suave and charming, but does he want to kill her?*

*A Dangerous  
Liberty*

MARY SHEERAN

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## Two

Despite experiencing the horror of that mine fire and seeing the burned bodies and the hysterical, grieving women, Elisabeth could almost believe in God again as she rode through that grand forest of ancient pines and breathed in the world's fresh air.

She rode up the forest road shivering in the cold and reveling in the strong scent of pine.

*How to explain God.*

God who could let people die so horribly and let trees grow so beautifully.

The road grew steep and narrow. She led her horse through the granite rocks on either side, hoping that the clearing she had been told about would soon appear. The road grew so steep that old Juniper ultimately balked. Elisabeth slid down and took the reins to lead him. She could hear roaring waters through the wind in the trees.

“Doesn't that sound glorious?” she cried to the horse. “Just a little further.” She added, “I hope.”

A little further took a quarter of an hour. When the path leveled off, she looked about her with delight. A frosted meadow lay before her, still covered in snow and surrounded by snow-kissed pines, with a stream roaring through it.

The snow on the mountains was melting, and this snow poured into great waterfalls, one that cast its spray at her as she led Juniper up into the meadow. The waterfall poured into the stream, which was wide and wicked and pushed

violently through the meadow, leaving only a narrow place between the forest and the stream, which was growing more powerful and noisy.

“Let us find a view of the lake,” she said to her horse.

Hitching the animal to a branch, she nimbly negotiated the bank. She thought she could see what looked like a clearing up ahead.

A sharp noise, a shot? startled her. She slipped, skinned her hands, and looked about.

Had she imagined the shot? Her body grew alert, taut in caution. She felt the sting in her palm and whipped off her gloves. Those cuts would not help matters in her next concert.

Another explosion.

It was a rifle! Someone *was* after her! *They* had tracked her when they heard she had returned to this country. That letter – unsigned – sent to her Paris home – had warned her about returning. She had dismissed it, even forgotten it. Now she remembered. Would she never be free of the awful fear even in virgin wilderness? She twisted, intent on seeing who was behind her.

Unfortunately, her foot slid off the rock on which it had paused. Grabbing for a hold, she missed, and losing her balance, she fell backward into the wild, ice cold current, its frigid temperature shocking her into numbness.

The current swept her down. She was able to catch a fleeting, breathtaking sight of pine trees, blue sky, and snowcapped mountains. It was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen in her life, she who had seen Chartres,

Versailles, and the Alps, and she felt thankful that she had been allowed to die here instead of in the mines.

*Explain God* was her last thought. She even caught the joke. At least, it seemed funny at that moment.

She lifted her head, remembered the water, and flailed with her hands, gasping for air.

Wood burned and crackled. But she felt cold. Her head fell back. She was lying on a big, very comfortable bed with down pillows piled beneath her head and heavy blankets about her. She reached up to touch the pillows and feel her damp hair. Where was she? In a sea cave? She moved, felt her bare legs beneath what felt like flannel, and were those thick socks on her feet? Other than a night shirt and the socks, she had nothing else on.

Where in blazes was she?

She reached up and felt a solid wall of some sort beneath what she took to be animal furs. Now she heard the fury of the wind in trees and in waters that seemed all around her.

Where *was* she?

“Hullo!” she called, her voice croaking.

Nothing. Only the wind.

She sat up, feeling shaky.

“Hullo!” she called.

She heard someone walking around behind the wall. A door opened. She blinked at the lamp.

“No esté asustado, Señorita.” A man’s voice.

A soft voice, like velvet being pulled over her skin.

Was that Spanish? Do not be frightened, Miss, it had said. Had she been swept to the Pyrenees?

Someone set a lamp on a table beside her. She shrank back into the pillows, drawing the bedclothes around her. She looked up at a very tall man moving about and lighting another lamp.

She peered desperately about her through flickering shadows and light. She was in a small room, the walls covered with furs. The fire was what flickered across from her. Shelves on one wall were crowded with leather covered books. She could smell them. A dark wood cabinet dresser, bureau, and a wardrobe took up another wall. The room was rude in one sense, but on the other hand, its furnishings showed wealth and a sense of beauty.

“Cómo usted se siente?” the tall man asked, again in Spanish or was it Italian? How do you feel, she quickly translated.

The gunshot. Someone had fired at her. Remember.

She looked up and, warring with her defensive walls going up inside her, her feminine senses were bursting into life. She must be dreaming.

She had never seen a man as handsome as this one. Ever. Or as tall, well over six feet.

She was getting a good look at him now as he looked down at her, a broad grin filled with big, white teeth, and a smoothly handsome face topped by very thick, black hair that shook over his forehead. He had placed two broad fists on his waist, emphasizing his very broad shoulders and toned muscular arms.

“What language?” she asked, weakly, wondering if she had floated to the Castle of the Sleeping Beauty. And had he kissed her?

He laughed and shook his head. His laugh was big and hearty, a baritone’s laugh. He drew a chair up to her, and when he sat, she could see he had dark green eyes, the color of olives, exuding kindness, intelligence, and something like wonder. An elegant slim mustache framed his upper lip.

“I apologize, *Senorita*,” he said in clear, articulate English. “My men and I all speak Spanish here, and I forgot.” He paused, then said, pointing to his odd clothes combination of ruffled shirt, covered by a buckskin jacket, “*William de la Cuesta, Senorita*,” he said.

“*De la Cuesta*,” she said slowly. “*Senor*, where am I?”

“You swept up onto the beach at my camp,” he said.

“Near Lake Tahoe?” she asked, hoping to be at least in the same kingdom of the world.

“*Si*,” he said, then corrected himself. “Yes. We have a nice view of it from our camp. Are you warm enough?”

“Who else is here?” she asked.

He seemed taken aback by her question, but he answered. “A few men in a shack next door—and some horses.”

She sank back against the pillows, wondering what an articulate, charming Spanish man was doing in the high Sierra.

“Is this your night shirt, *Senor*?” she asked.



His smile narrowed, he cocked his head, and he reached up one long arm so that his hand could grab the back of his own neck. He looked sheepish.

“My good clean one,” he said, looking back at her and grinning.

She saw her clothes then, hanging over wooden chair backs near the fire. Her blue velvet riding habit was probably ruined, but her petticoats, stockings, and drawers would survive. How good of him to take care of her things.

He had gone from sheepish to embarrassed, but when he looked up through tousled locks like a bad boy caught with a firecracker, his eyes gleamed with some amusement.

“Senor,” she said, gravely, “did you undress me?”

He shrugged. “Someone had to. You were soaked.”

She regarded him for a moment, trying to guess what he was thinking. She wondered what *she* was thinking! Did she mind that this very handsome man had undressed her and rubbed her down without her even being conscious? She looked at his huge hands, placed palms down on his muscular legs.

She mustered a nervous smile and stuck her hand out of the covers.

“Senor, thank you for saving my life,” she said sweetly. “I am Elisabeth Winters.”

“I know,” he said quickly.

“How on earth do you know?” she asked, astonished.

He shifted in his chair, looking more nervous and ill at ease.

“You are the pianist,” he said. “I once saw you play in Paris with Berlioz. I could never forget how you played the Chopin. It was so delicate—like angels’ wings.”

Well, it had been two extraordinary days. She had nearly suffocated to death and then nearly drowned, and now here was a Spanish gentleman in the American wilderness discussing her interpretation of Chopin’s second piano concerto under Berlioz’s direction.

He caught her smile, guessed why, and grinned. With his huge white teeth, grinning gave him a roguish look, helped by the mischievous gleam in his eyes. Even so, she felt a comforting warmth in his presence, and she wondered why. She, who so usually put everyone at a safe and gracious arm’s length.

“I am grateful,” she said, softly. “And very tired. What time is it?”

“Close to three in the morning. Would you like something to eat?”

He stopped talking. She had closed her eyes and had gone to sleep immediately. He envied her that, not knowing it was the first time in years she had done this.

For a moment, he sat and watched her breathe, her long black curls caressing her fair face as he would like to do.

He could not believe that Elisabeth Winters at this very moment was sleeping in his bed and in his nightshirt. What joke of the gods was this?

He had gone down to the stream to analyze the dirt on the banks, and she had swept past him, unconscious and smiling. Smiling! Perhaps she knew the trees would rescue

her. Pine branches that had blown down into the water and caught on the rocks had saved her. It was as if nature had arranged the moment. Like a mermaid sent by the mountains, he had thought. My own goddess.

She had been dripping and freezing as he carried her into his cabin. Throwing his men out, he had undressed her and rubbed her down. As he nervously undid buttons of her blue velvet habit that had weighed her down, he tried to concentrate on preventing her illness rather than satiating his own masculine curiosity. She was a beautiful creature, slim, a fair face exuding rosy health, long black lashes and artfully trimmed eyebrows, a slim, straight nose with a small tip. Her hair had lost whatever pins had held it up and wrapped itself about her in long black swaths down past her shoulders extending nearly to her waist.

De la Cuesta peeled two fine linen petticoats off her and then wrestled with her corset. She did not move. He grew anxious that she would open her eyes and see that he was undressing her.

Her clothes indicated wealth and position, and with all the fights he was fighting, he did not care to fight her family or, certainly, her. Her corset was not too tightly laced, for her body was slim and firm, her breasts having a just bloomed sense about them, her hips only beginning to take on alluring curves. He imagined that, until recently, she'd had a girl's figure, more boyish than womanly, but now she was a newly burst blossom. He guessed her to be about eighteen or perhaps twenty years old.

She shivered. So did he. He bound into the next room and dug up two clean towels, thankful that his boy servant Pepito had kept up some of his usual fastidiousness.

William de la Cuesta had removed a woman's clothes before, in fact, many times. But he'd always bought and paid for such services, where the undressing had been part of a show. This girl was meant to be undressed on her wedding night.

"Where did you come from, beautiful lady?" he asked softly, perhaps postponing the moment when he had to bare her. He felt a little remorse and regret. He would like to be the one to show her love, and he envied the man who would.

He was also afraid of himself. How could he think lascivious thoughts when she was shivering and in shock? He undid the buttons of her drawers and peeled them off. He felt himself surrendering to her innocent limbs, fuller than he would have thought, and to her slim waist, then to her hips and what in other circles men referred to as the sacred grove. His first instinct was to kiss her there, but he kept his senses and threw a blanket around her legs, then undid her chemise and peeled it off her shoulders and her young, high breasts.

Taking the towels, he wrapped her hair in one of them and began rubbing her down. She showed no inclination to come to. Had she struck her head? He lifted her wet head carefully and looked keenly at her skull, feeling his way through the thick black wet locks. Her body was trembling. He continued rubbing her down with the towel, looking at

her face, and worrying. Finally, he was done, and he took his clean, flannel nightshirt and wrapped her in it. He was about to wrap her in the furs, when the locket around her neck gleamed in the lamplight for only a second, enough for him to take note of it.

He removed it from around her elegantly curved neck and opened it, thinking it might have her name.

The locket contained two miniature portraits of a man and a woman.

Sweet Mother of God.

He remembered again that brilliant summer day in a pungent apple orchard, standing in the ample shade of an ancient tree, his big feet crushing the fallen apples. Senator John Winters, the nation's most eloquent speaker, abolitionist, unionist, and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, walked beside him, talking about dirt.

In Concord, Massachusetts, the prominent Senator was just a farmer, but a passionate one. Nineteen-year-old William de la Cuesta, from a Spanish winemaking family, knew the dirt as *terroir*, a concept he was developing based on his travels and his experience. The branches above them stirred, and a little girl cried out and fell.

Will had only just managed to grab her. She sat up in his arms, her wide blue eyes happy, her long black hair swinging. She flung her arms around his neck and hugged him tightly.

"You saved my life!" cried the precocious ten-year-old. She looked directly into his eyes.

“Will you marry me?”

Even then, her beauty could make a man speechless. William de la Cuesta, educated at Salamanca in Spain and at the Sorbonne in Paris had paused, realizing what a beauty she would grow into.

Then, sitting in his arms, she had grown shy.

Her father was stern. “Your mother does not want you climbing trees, Elisabeth.”

The child had blushed and slid down from his arms. Young Will watched her flight from the orchards, and he felt a sadness he had not understood at the time.

From that day to this, he would never see her again.

That scene in the orchard had stayed with him as some last day of calm. The election storm was brewing, and Eduardo had still been alive at the University of Virginia. During the dark days of the war, and the subsequent battles, and the months of climbing to life again, he would remember the sun’s rays pouring through the orchard as the child raced toward the rambling white farmhouse. For many dark years, in the fierce awfulness of waking every day to kill men, he had remembered that sunshine, that orchard, that happy child.

Now here was the little girl herself, grown a woman, pitched at him by the mystical gods of this blessed land. It had to be an omen, finding her like this.

Looking at her as she slept in his nightshirt in his Sierra cabin, he realized sadly that Elisabeth Winters did not remember him. Of course, he thought, how could she bear to look back? She lost more than I. Two brothers at

Antietam, her mother in grief and childbirth, and her father. Her whole family.

The war had cost everyone so much. It had taken him years to heal, to come back to the living ground of earth. She, in the meantime, had become a legendary artist, a pianist men fought duels over in Paris. Not to sleep with, but over her innocence. On his trips to Paris, he had been acutely aware he'd been in the same city as her, and once he saw her at a distance. After that one performance, he had never been able to bring himself to watch her perform again.

In Paris, she was beloved, praised, the most famous and by far the most talented of the few young lady pianists who toured the continent. It had not been difficult to praise her Chopin concerto. It was her most famous piece. Men often repeated to each other that Miss Winters could arouse every man present simply by playing the largo of the second Chopin piano concerto.

Will stood and went about the room, turning down lamps. He paused to look at her before dimming the last one.

“I am glad I was here to save you again, little one,” he whispered, only in Spanish, with its soft vowels, that is, “Estoy alegre yo estaba aqui ahorrarle otra vez, el pequeño.”

The room went dark, and he returned to the adjoining one, where he knew he would not get any sleep.

For some reason, he did not think he should tell her that they had met before.

## Three

She slowly made it out of bed, wrapped herself in a brown wool blanket, and opened the door to the cabin's outer room.

The dim light of early morning revealed her rescuer's outlined silhouette stretched out on a divan, his strong legs propped up with a chair, an open book in his lap. The title was in Latin, but she understood it as Plato's *Republic*. She could smell cigar smoke and saw three butts on a glass tray next to a wine glass and an empty bottle.

She tapped on the doorframe.

He leaped to his feet, Plato falling to the floor.

"Bonjour," she said, in French. "Je voudrais un bain," (or, I would like a bath).

His mouth dropped open, but no words emerged.

All he could think of was how glorious she looked, wrapped in his blanket, her dark hair falling all over her shoulders and down to her waist, and her big eyes with their fine lashes eating him alive.

Could you just stay here with me, beautiful child, he thought, even before the next moment, when he remembered who she was.

He did not know quite how to answer, when her words registered with him. He looked around, wondering if a French maid had shown up.

Well, he could accommodate her, at least in language. "I am sorry, Mademoiselle," he said in French, "but the



only bathtub in these parts is the one you already experienced.”

She started to laugh but clutched her side, where her ribs had been bruised. “I am so sorry. My mind is a muddle.”

He stood and bowed. “Senorita, these are rude accommodations, and we did not expect a lady.”

“Rude? With a library that has Latin translations of Greek writers?”

Her wonderful eyes looked at him, darted away in confusion, and then fixed themselves on him with some authority. That made him move.

“Excuse me,” he muttered. He went back into the bedroom and pulled out a warm dressing gown of black and gold.

He moved to help her into it, but he realized she had to drop the blanket. “Senorita,” he muttered, bowing, and handing her the dressing gown. He lifted the blanket from her shoulders and held it high up so he could not see her standing in his night shirt, which he had dressed her in just hours before. It almost seemed silly, but he did not want her feeling embarrassed in his cabin.

“Thank you,” she said, softly.

He tossed the blanket on the divan. Once more, she was drowning in his things, but the quality of the dressing gown brought a regal air to her bearing. He bowed again.

Why wasn’t she amazed? A courtly, fastidious, handsome, and educated man in the high Sierra mountains,

in wild uncivilized territory? This was a wild, magical country!

“I can bring a couple pitchers in, or you can go out on the side, and I’ll see you are not disturbed,” he said. “My workers are not nearby.”

“I shall go out,” she said. She touched the dressing gown. “This is beautiful. You have fine things, but one would not guess you were a gentleman at the sight of you.”

He rubbed his unshaven face and grinned. His blue flannel shirt was rumpled, his denim trousers were stained, and his boots were caked with mud. He was a picture.

“We are both full of surprises,” he said. “I warn you, outside, it is too cold.”

She shrugged. “I grew up in Massachusetts.”

Did she imagine it, or did he give her a piercing look for a swift moment? She stood there defiantly, her own needs growing urgent, and said, pointedly, “Would you excuse me?”

His roguish smile irritated her. He had undressed her once, but that did not entitle him to any further privileges.

She stepped out of the door and walked down to the stream, which seemed more powerful today. The white tipped mountains, the tall fir trees sloping over the mountains and sweeping down toward the two cabins in the camp, and the lake down below, were beyond the glories of heaven. And the air was freezing. Like Massachusetts or in the Alps in January.

What a beautiful bathroom she had here! She dipped her bare legs into the stream and combed her fingers

through her damp hair, savoring the pine scent that made the air sweet and pungent. She looked up at the sky that had transformed from pink to purple and now to blue.

She bathed quickly, half suspecting that Senor de la Cuesta was watching. She wondered what he had thought about her body. He was Spanish, so probably a rogue when it came to women. She would have to watch out for him.

Scurrying back to the house, she did not see any evidence of him except for loud voices from the other cabin nearby—men speaking loudly in Spanish. She smelled eggs, bacon, and coffee through the crisp air. Yes, she was hungry! She ran inside the now empty cabin to dress. Her clothes were barely dry, and her blue riding habit was certainly ruined, its velvet streaked and matted.

A loud bang at the door made her jump.

“I have breakfast for you, Senorita,” called de la Cuesta.

She opened the door, clutching the long coil of her hair.

“Do you have some string? I need to tie my braid.”

He had shaved and changed to a red flannel shirt and new denims.

“I am glad you did not fall in again,” he said.

The bacon—she nearly fainted from hunger at its aroma. Well, she certainly wasn’t dead, and the world had tried to kill her twice now. Perhaps that was why her senses seemed so sharp.

He opened a cabinet from which he took a thin rope, which he cut with a knife. She tied the noose firmly and flung the braid behind her.

He wanted to untie it and enjoy slipping his hands through that glorious mane, trying to remember the pretty, happy child of nine years before.

As a young woman, she was a different creature. Cosmopolitan, confident, brilliant.

*And she did not remember him.*

“Would you share breakfast with me, *Senorita*?” he asked, shoveling out eggs and bacon onto a plain white plate.

“I must go,” she said. “My people will be worried.” But she sat down.

“Where are they?” he asked, sitting across from her and pouring coffee.

She grew uneasy at his smile and at his long arms reaching for her cup and at his eyes that tried to reach behind the defensive walls she put up for everyone.

“I rode a horse from the Tahoe Inn,” she said. “A brown roan.”

“One of my men found it,” he said. “Since it carried a sidesaddle, we thought it was yours. Did your people let you ride through this country alone?”

“I pay the bills for those people, so I do pretty much what I want to do! There was a road. The horse knew where he was. I heard that many guests at the inn ride this way, so I did not think it was dangerous.”

“On the contrary. This is wild country. I would not ride it unarmed, and I would certainly not let a lady ride here alone—even if she did pay the bills.”

“I have been in scrapes before,” she said airily. “I grew up in—”

“Massachusetts,” he said. “I have heard that you cannot tell a New England lady what to do and that they are strong minded sorts who can do without men.”

She bit into the bacon. It tasted wonderful.

“I am sure that men have helped you out of your scrapes,” he said. “A burning mine, for instance.”

She put her fork down.

“How do you know about that?”

“Pablo brings me the newspapers. Also, being nearly drowned.”

“What is this?” she asked.

“Or even insisting that slavery be ended,” he said. “Men had to fight their way out of that one for your New England ladies.”

“What do you know about it? Being from Spain!”

“Word of lovely New England ladies travels far. I would guess that you know all about me, too.” He sipped his coffee and sat back, not sure why he was resorting to baiting her. *You don't remember me.* “Please tell me about myself.”

“You are an adventurer,” she said. “I would lay wager that you are a second son.”

“Very good,” he said, swinging a long arm around his chair back and crossing one well-muscled leg over another.

Why couldn't she undress him? They could call it even, and she wouldn't feel so threatened when he looked at her.

"You wandered through Paris and London, spent a lot of money, gambled, womanized, and now you are here to take advantage of the silver craze in Nevada."

His eyes gleamed. His hand ruffled through his hair.

"What am I doing here, in the mountains, then?"

"You are not making good coffee."

"My apologies."

She tossed down her napkin. Why was she insulting the man who had rescued her? She couldn't stop. He had seen her naked, after all, and touched her. Perhaps he thought he owned a piece of her. No one ever would. Certainly not him.

For years, she had lived a public life, performing beautiful music. The public's imagination of her defined her. American and European audiences considered her a saint if not a goddess, and saints were not disrobed by men, even if rescued by them. Saints were impenetrable. Goddesses killed men who violated their privacy

"I know all about what is happening. There are men swarming all over these forests because they want to lay claim to them. The mines in Nevada need timbering. The miners need to dig lower and lower to find the silver, and those searches need timber. Who owns these trees can own the world."

"I see you have studied the matter thoroughly."

“I came here to see about investing in the mines. Mr. Peter Rawlings, the president of the Silver Dollar Bank in San Francisco, is my adviser.”

“Rawlings?” De la Cuesta threw his head back and laughed.

Elisabeth was irritated.

“What is so funny, Señor?” she asked.

He waved his hands to excuse himself. “Again, my apologies, Senorita. I was amused by the workings of Fate is all. So, Mr. Rawlings is your adviser?”

She pushed her chair back and stood up. “I am very grateful to you, Señor de la Cuesta, but I must return to the inn. My aunt and uncle will be worried.”

“Not to mention Mr. Rawlings?” Will asked.

*So, Rawlings had set his sights on her. Why did he feel relieved?*

“I understand. You want to probe for weakness on the part of your business rival, so you insult me.”

“I beg your pardon,” he said. “My cynical nature at times bests me.”

His sincere tone puzzled her.

“I only have a buckboard wagon,” he said. “Excuse me. I will return soon.”

He grabbed a leather jacket and hurried out of the cabin. A few moments later, a young boy, whom she assumed was Pablo, hurried in to take the dishes.

She stepped out into the bracing mountain air. Just ahead was the mighty Sierra stream, which could have killed her, pushing forth with its snowmelt.

Two hulking men came out of the other cabin, both dragging large burlap bags with one hand and shovels in another. They passed her and muttered greetings in Spanish.

She heard the wheels of a wagon coming round and a few calls in Spanish, and de la Cuesta appeared driving a buckboard. She stepped up, and he took a firm hold of her arm and perhaps too roughly yanked her up.

“Senor, I can climb up a wagon,” she said, rubbing her arm.

“I am sure you can,” he said, flicking the reins. The buckboard jolted toward the road by the stream.

“Hold onto my arm,” he said, speaking over the water’s noise. “It’s a bumpy ride down.”

She almost said no, but her arms circled his muscled arm and held on.

“This country is both beautiful and cruel,” she said.

“This is why,” he said, “we refer to it as she.”

“Is that a joke?”

“Not today.”

“Senor, please excuse me. I do not mean to seem ungrateful.”

He laughed loudly, both annoying and tantalizing her.

“Do not be too nice to me, Senorita. Your Mr. Rawlings and I are opponents in court.”

“Perhaps you do not appreciate him,” she said, carefully. “He is not my Mr. Rawlings, either. He is my financial advisor and a leading financial figure in the American west. He is also a very nice married man.”



Why had she said that?

“Should that stop him? I would watch out for this financial adviser.”

She stiffened. “Mr. Rawlings is responsible for my being here, and he is financing my Asian tour. He built the new opera house in San Francisco and invited Maestro Jules Maille to bring his orchestra here for a lengthy tour. He also facilitated my being engaged for concerts with Maestro Maille.”

“I read that you avoided returning to this country,” said de la Cuesta.

She was startled. “Yes, it is true. I have little desire to go to New York or Boston or Washington. Or anywhere else.”

“You would have quite a reception at any of those places.”

“I prefer not to go there for the time being,” she said, breathing in the pine. “All this is a new world.”

“With plenty from the old.”

“These trees are so beautiful,” she said, wanting to change the subject. “Why do you want to chop them down?”

“I do not,” said Will. “You told me I want to do that.”

“What are you doing here then?”

“Planting a vineyard.”

She laughed, assuming he was joking.

For several minutes as the wagon jostled them down the hill, she took deep breaths of the pine air, closing her eyes to remember the wild beauty, and then opening them

to realize she could never do it justice. She could never write music as glorious as this.

She said, "I would like to invite you to my concert and reception. I am opening the new theater in San Francisco with Maestro Maille. It will be very exciting, and there will be a reception and ball after the concert."

"I am honored," said de la Cuesta. "In fact, I need to go into the city next week. Send the invitation to me care of the International Hotel. I would enjoy hearing you play—and Maille, of course."

He seemed sincere about that. She felt easier.

They were approaching the Tahoe Inn, a white clapboard with a wide porch underneath the pines.

A woman of some forty years or more hurried out of the door without even having tossed a shawl around her.

"Aunt Jeanne!" Elisabeth called, starting to get down even before de la Cuesta had stopped the buckboard.

"Wait there —" he shouted, grabbing her arm.

But she pulled away and jumped down.

"They are out looking for you! We were frantic!" cried the woman. Jeanne Peyrac was quite handsome, her salt and pepper hair neatly arranged on her head, and not too plump either. Her eyes widened when she saw Will, who removed his hat and bowed.

"I fell into a mountain stream, Aunt," said Elisabeth, casually. "This is Senor William de la Cuesta. He fished me out."

Jeanne Peyrac looked at him carefully. She did not seem thrilled.

“Senor de la Cuesta.”

“Come, Aunt,” said Elisabeth, tugging at the confused lady. In a moment, they were going inside the house. Will, abandoned, flicked the reins to turn the buggy around.

Elisabeth did not know how disheartened she had left him.

*She did not remember me.*

Besides that, except for her music, he was astounded that she lacked depth. Aside from the resemblance, he would never associate her with her parents.

This reality was a crushing disappointment, for he had many times sought the memory of that happy, beautiful child. Through the darkness of the years that had separated them, he had often thought of the happy little girl running away from him, the sunlight surrounding her with a golden aura in the old apple orchard.

He would never see that child again.

But could he blame her for dying? He’d had to kill his own soul many times to survive.

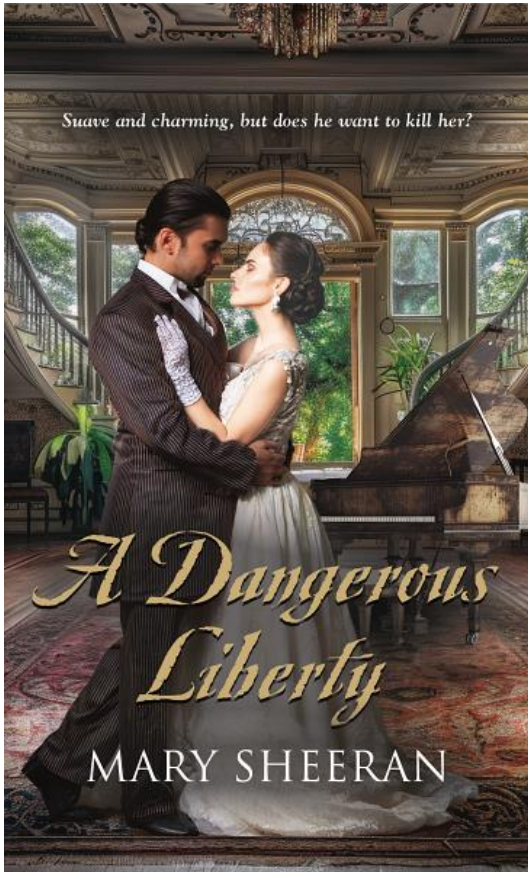
They had both lost so much.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mary Sheeran's novel, *Banished From Memory*, set in 1960 Hollywood and concerning the blacklist, was cited as a Distinguished Favorite in Historical Fiction by the Independent Press Awards. *Kirkus Reviews* called her novel, *Quest of the Sleeping Princess*, "impressive in its research of Balanchine, the image of woman, and the sleeping princess as a motif" and praised her novel, *Who Have the Power* as "an engaging tale of personal growth and cultural conflict, feminism, and race relations on the American frontier." Of her latest novel, *Idylls of the Collar*, *Kirkus Reviews* wrote, "Sheeran's portrayal of the politics of an Episcopal parish populated mostly by liberal refugees from Catholicism is fascinating. The novel...reads more like a memoir...the interpersonal dynamics are rich."

Sheeran has acted in plays, sung in operas and musicals, and created and performed recitals and cabaret shows, all in New York City, where she lives. She also wrote theater criticism for New York's show business trade papers.

She grew up in northern New Jersey's farm country, graduated from Saint Mary's College in South Bend, Indiana, studied acting at the Stella Adler Studio in New York, and earned a Master of Divinity degree at New York Theological Seminary. She lives in New York City.



*Composer and pianist Elisabeth Winters returns to the United States after the Civil War to find that her life is in jeopardy. By those who killed her father? Or by the suave and charming man whose presence taunts an unrecovered memory?*

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