

# HEATHER BOYD

 A Rebel Hearts novel 

# THE WEDDING AFFAIR



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# THE REBEL HEARTS SERIES

Book 1: The Wedding Affair

Book 2: An Affair of Honor (July, 2016)

Book 3: The Christmas Affair (October, 2016)

# CHAPTER ONE



*April, 1815*

*Newberry Park, Essex*

*I will be betrothed today.*

The familiar refrain brought Lady Sally Ford intense satisfaction as she hurried toward Newberry Park's white drawing room where her future waited to be taken up.

The two footmen flanking the drawing room doors opened them smartly, allowing Sally to make a grand entrance to meet with the earl whom she intended to give her hand in marriage. She noted the occupants arrayed in the afternoon's final sunrays—her mother and her future mother-in-law.

But no potential groom.

Regardless of the lack of future husband, Sally dropped into a perfect curtsy because she could not afford to make a bad impression. She had spent many additional minutes before her looking glass, making sure her dark hair was perfectly arranged and her lips slightly pinked thanks to a brush of tinted beeswax. She wanted to have kissable lips when she agreed to become a bride.

Sally's mother, the Countess of Templeton, rested with her feet upon a padded stool and a scrap of fine cloth over her brow.

“Good afternoon, Mama. Lady Ellicott.”

Mama started upright at the sound of Sally’s voice. “Sally, what are you doing here? I thought you would be gone for hours yet.”

Sally smiled but did not want to be drawn into a conversation about the estate immediately. “Where else would I want to be but with our important guests?”

Lady Ellicott, her beau’s formidable mother, had also been drowsing in a comfortable high-backed chair but smiled somewhat warmly in return. A round woman with a pale face, Lady Ellicott met her gaze and held it a touch longer than Sally found comfortable, no doubt assessing her yet again.

Sally had grown used to the feeling and the scrutiny over the past weeks. She straightened her spine a touch more, determined not to fail to meet the lady’s high standards. She felt she had almost won her over to approving the match.

Almost, but Lord Ellicott had not yet asked for her hand.

“My dear girl, how lovely you look today,” Lady Ellicott murmured as her son stepped into the room from the terrace. *There he was. Adam Belmont, Lord Ellicott.* The man she would give her hand and fortune to if he would but ask. “Is she not the most arresting woman of all, Ellicott?”

“She is a beauty.” Ellicott strode across the room, lean and handsome, smiling widely as he approached. He raised her outstretched hands to kiss them, his warm brown eyes dancing with feeling. “Good afternoon, Sally.”

She had given him leave to use her given name a week ago, but the familiarity was still something of a shock.

The sound of her first name tumbling from his lips should have excited her happier emotions. It was an intimacy she did not give lightly to anyone outside her family. Sally waited for anything resembling a heated awareness of him to affect her senses. After all the time they had spent together, shouldn’t she feel something, at least anticipation for the pleasure of his kiss? When her heart and body failed yet again to stir, she smiled demurely. The marriage was more important than fleeting pleasures anyway. He was her future.

“Thank you for the compliment. Have you had a pleasant morning shooting with Uncle George?”

“Yes, quite pleasant.”

Her uncle George had lost a foot years ago, but that did not stop him from hunting on the estate several times a week. He was a high stickler though, and she felt confident he would only paint her character in the best light. “I am sure he enjoyed having the company of another man with him.”

Ellicott laughed, and his eyes lit up with mirth. “I imagine so. The chatter of a dozen women can be so overwhelming.”

Sally smiled, but the jibe hit a little too close to the bone. Newberry Park consisted of wives or spinsters for the most part. “There are only ten Ford women on the estate to amuse three often exacting men. It is an exhausting job indeed keeping that trio and guests in line, I might tell you.”

“I do not wonder why you are hardly ever in London. They do not dare let you out of their sight for long because they are afraid of letting you go.” Ellicott kissed her hand again and looked deep into her eyes. He doted on her as much as almost-courting couples were allowed within the bounds of propriety in public, and in the brief private moments they had been granted she had found much to admire in him. He was very free with his compliments, and she felt them all sincere.

He needed a bride with a fortune to bolster his estate’s finances but was not so overwhelmed with debt to be considered an out-and-out scoundrel about it. Her dowry and connections were important to him. He was smart enough to keep up his end of a lively conversation, and he was active enough not to allow his figure to run to fat anytime soon.

Overall, a worthy catch for any husband-hunting woman from a good family.

Unfortunately for Sally, her head might say yes to marrying him, but her body and heart remained watching from the shadows. That lack of feeling was probably for the best. If there was any chance of love between them, Sally was convinced it would surface once they

were husband and wife and without anyone, such as her nine female relations, watching everything they did and said together.

Finding quiet moments with Lord Ellicott had been a challenge during the week of the Ellicotts' stay. Not one to let a little obstacle such as propriety upset her plans at this late stage of their courtship, she allowed him to take her hand in his and place it upon his arm. "You are too kind."

"Not at all, for it is the honest truth." He led her across the room and stopped, poised equally between their mothers. He cast his eye over them all and smiled. "Beauty runs in the family. In both families."

"True, but a woman's good looks must be cared for as if they were her greatest achievement," Lady Ellicott remarked, casting a stern look in Sally's direction. "I trust you rested in a dark room this morning. It works wonders for the complexion."

"I did hope to, but unfortunately there was a matter that required my urgent attention, so I had no choice but to go out for a little while." A fat fib if ever she had told one. She had wanted to escape the house and find a useful outlet for her nervous energy. Pretending to be demure was difficult.

Lady Ellicott exchanged a glance with her son that hinted at disapproval. In her brother's absence, Sally had involved herself in the running of the estate more than most unmarried women her age usually did. She enjoyed the challenge but made certain to hide her activities from important guests who would disapprove.

She glanced at her mother, seeking a diversion from conversation of Newberry, and saw annoyance in her expression, which she usually did not reveal so openly. Countess Templeton possessed a stubborn disposition and yet disliked disagreements. In her early fifties and mother of six children, five of whom still lived, there were ample signs of what had been considerable beauty in her mother's dear face. Determined that her mother and Lady Ellicott not fall out today of all days, Sally crossed the room and perched at her mother's side.

"Good afternoon, Mama," Sally said warmly, then pitched her voice low as she continued. "There were poachers in the northern

field last night, but no sign of them now or the last dozen sheep of that flock. I have had them moved closer to the rest.”

“If you think that best,” her mother said approvingly.

What Sally did for her family likely amounted to work by an outsider’s standards, but she did it with love and pride. Lady Ellicott could not seem to abide the concept of a woman employed and had already expressed her disapproval in many subtle ways. Today Sally was not so lucky.

“Surely Lord George should be making these decisions, or your father or grandfather.”

Sally met the woman’s gaze steadily, resigned to yet another lengthy discussion on what women should do or not do. It was the worst possible time for it. “Uncle George has his own duties, father is barely ever away from the admiralty, and my grandfather cannot ride the estate anymore. What should we do, allow the flock to be fleeced and the estate fall to wrack and ruin while we spin lace in the drawing room?”

Ellicott coughed into his fist. “Never that.”

His mother sniffed haughtily. “A lady should never be without a knowledge of lacemaking. It is certainly more proper than traipsing around the estate at all hours. I always advise my acquaintances to spend as little time out of doors in the elements as possible to preserve the complexion.”

Sally happened to love the outdoors, and she liked the way her skin looked—vivid and glowing with warmth during the summertime months. She also loved to be useful, to be as involved as possible with what happened on the Newberry Park estate. Hiding her involvement in the running of the estate was not easy. Many of the servants came to her with their problems and looked to her to make decisions. When she married Ellicott, she would never be an idle wife, but she had to tread carefully for now.

“And she makes the most delicate pieces,” her mother insisted loyally. To Sally she said, “You always make the right choices for the estate, and I could not be prouder of the woman you have become. Never doubt that, regardless of what anyone says to the contrary.”

Sally struggled to hide her surprise. Normally her mother would say nothing so openly approving about her or about the additional duties they undertook for the estate, certainly not around the Ellicotts. She had agreed that for Sally to make a good impression with the Ellicotts, especially at her age, she had to change, to hide the more unorthodox aspects of their family life.

Hoping to turn the conversation into smoother waters, she smiled warmly at her mother. "Shall we take tea on the terrace today?"

Her mother's face lit up. "Yes, tea out of doors is just the thing to amuse us all."

"I think we should rather not. It is so warm outside and blustery," Lady Ellicott said in a firm voice. Outside, the wind was only gently stirring the bushes of the garden.

Lady Ellicott had a preference for eating all meals indoors. Not even picnics on the cliff tops pleased her. Sally had little choice but to agree with her assessment of the weather since she was trying so hard to win a place in the woman's good graces. "Well then, shall I twist Ellicott's arm and have him read to us from the new *London Gazette* while we enjoy the tea together here?"

Ellicott shifted toward her. "I was actually hoping you and I might stroll the grounds. Stretch our legs a bit." He turned to Sally's mother. "All within proper sight of the mansion of course."

Lady Ellicott stared hard at her son a moment but nodded. "I am sure Lady Templeton will happily agree to your suggestion."

Her mother's expression grew flinty. "A leisurely stroll about the gardens is acceptable within sight of this room, but propriety must always be observed. You will take a maid."

Sally wanted the opportunity to be alone with Ellicott so he could propose, and her mother was not making it easy. A maid would gossip afterward. She would rather not receive a proposal with an audience. "Mama, please. What harm could come from a short walk through the gardens without a chaperone? We are at home. The wisteria walk is very beautiful at this time of year."

"Indeed that is true." Mama glanced around and then smiled. "I will have a shawl fetched and join you outside."

Sally groaned. Why was Mama not helping her advance her claim on Lord Ellicott's affections or time? She knew the right setting for a proposal was essential for many men to unburden themselves and reveal their desire for matrimony.

Ellicott merely smiled at the news that her mother intended to join them. "The more, the merrier. The breeze appears to have died down too. Shall we wait outside in the fresh air?"

"Yes, that would be lovely." Sally rushed to link arms with him.

Arm in arm, they left her mother behind in the drawing room while her shawl was called for. Undoubtedly Mama would catch up before too many yards had passed beneath their feet. Hopefully Lady Ellicott would sit alone very happily for a little while.

When Ellicott led her at a brisk pace directly toward the wisteria-covered walk, she almost laughed aloud at his haste. She hoped he would propose to her there because it was a lovely, secluded spot.

When they stopped, he caught her hands in his and drew them to his chest. "My dearest Sally, Mother is right. You are the most beautiful woman. I must again convey my thanks for inviting us both for the summer. It has been a pleasant interlude indeed."

"I feel so too," Sally agreed, staring up into his handsome face. Waiting.

"I was thinking of you this morning. Of how well you and I get along. And I do not know any other woman Mother has taken under her wing without hesitation." He laughed softly. "That is quite the coup, I must tell you."

"I do like her." Sally's pulse raced and she bit her lip as she waited for what she hoped might come next. "Her good opinion means the world to me."

Not that she was sure she had it yet, but...

"I must say I never once thought we would both reach this age and not be married." Ellicott sighed. "So it seems plain we must marry each other. What do you think of that idea?"

*Thanks for reading!*

## ABOUT HEATHER BOYD

Bestselling historical author Heather Boyd believes every character she creates deserves their own happily-ever-after, no matter how much trouble she puts them through. With that goal in mind, she weaves steamy English set love stories that push the boundaries of regency era propriety to keep readers enthralled until the wee hours of the morning. Brimming with new ideas, she frequently wishes she could type as fast as she conjures new storylines. While writing full time north of Sydney, Australia, Heather collects dust bunnies in all corners of the house and does her best to wrangle her testosterone-fuelled family into submission.

For more information visit  
[www.heather-boyd.com](http://www.heather-boyd.com)