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ASHES ON THE MOOR

SARAH M. EDEN



The life of an impoverished schoolteacher is not one Evangeline Blake would have chosen for herself. Torn from her home and her beloved sister and sent to work in the gritty factory town of Smeatley, Evangeline must prove herself to her grandfather, a man who values self-reliance above all else, before he will grant her access to her inheritance. Raised to be a lady of refinement, she hasn't any of the skills necessary to manage on her own nor does she have the first idea how to be a teacher. But failure means never being with her sister again.

Alone and overwhelmed, she turns to the one person in town who seems to know how she feels—Dermot McCormick, an Irish brick mason who is as far from home and as out of place as she is. Despite the difference in their classes and backgrounds, Evangeline and Dermot's tentative friendship deepens and grows. Her determination and compassion slowly earn her the faith and confidence of the skeptical residents of Smeatley, who become like the family she has lost.

But when a secret from her past comes to light, Evangeline faces an impossible choice: seize the opportunity to reclaim her former life and rejoin her sister or fight for the new life she has struggled to build for herself—a life that includes Dermot.

Ashes on the Moor is the inspiring love story of one Victorian woman's courage to fight against all odds, and the man whose quiet strength gives her the confidence to keep trying.

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DO NOT DUPLICATE

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SARAH M. EDEN



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*For William and Ann,
my 4th-great grandparents, who labored in the
19th-century textile mills of West Yorkshire*

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CHAPTER ONE

Petersmarch, Cambridgeshire, September 1871

Through a thick fog of grief, Evangeline Blake suffered the blow of each clang of the distant funeral bells. Petersmarch custom dictated that the bell in the church tower toll once for every year of the deceased's life.

Four people were being interred that day. Four lives reckoned one peal at a time. Four irreplaceable bits of herself. Her father and mother and both of her brothers were gone. The bell tolled for them, shattering her heart with its ringing.

Each clang reverberated through her with new pain, new heartache, new loss. The echoes filled the now-empty house where she stood with a comforting arm around the thin shoulders of her twelve-year-old sister, the sole member of her once inseparable family. Lucy's head rested heavily against her.

Unfinished needlework sat on the arm of Mother's chair. Unopened correspondence lay piled upon the side table nearest Father's preferred place by the fire. The miniature George had commissioned of his intended on the occasion of their engagement mere weeks earlier stood on the mantelpiece. James's

well-worn schoolbooks occupied their usual shelf near the window.

If not for the bells, she might have believed her beloved family were merely in the corridor, waiting to step inside the parlor, their smiling faces greeting her with amusement and tenderness and love.

“Gone,” the bells tolled. “Gone.”

Grief washed over her in relentless waves, yet she could not allow it to drown her. She was Lucy’s only support and stability.

Evangeline closed her eyes. She needed to hear every last toll marking her family’s memory, despite the pain. This was their final tribute, the last impression they would make on a world that would forget them all too quickly. She would hear their memorial in this room where they had once been happy. She would do so with her beloved sister kept close.

“Gone. Gone.”

Evangeline waited for the next toll. A long moment stretched out into silence. The bells had stopped. No years remained to be marked. The all-too-short reckoning had been made.

“I do not want to leave here,” Lucy whispered. “Could we not convince Aunt Barton to allow us to remain?”

Their mother’s sister had descended upon their grief only one day before the fever claimed its first victim. She had allowed no emotion, no tears from Evangeline or Lucy. Her dictates had been unfeeling and unbending, including the one demanding their immediate departure from the only home they had ever known.

“The world does not allow ladies to choose our own futures,” Evangeline said. It was a difficult but unarguable truth. “We must go where we are sent; that is the way of things.”

“Could we not at least ask her?” Lucy’s voice cracked with emotion.

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Only with effort did Evangeline keep her own words quiet and serene. “Even if we were to ask her, she could not give us permission to remain. This house now belongs to Father’s cousin. We cannot stay.” Evangeline hoped being forthright would allow Lucy to reconcile herself to their situation more quickly. “But even in Smeatley, even far from home, we will be together, dearest. We will have each other, just as we always have.”

Lucy raised her gaze. Her once clear and naive eyes were clouded with an understanding of how unkind fate could truly be. “Do you promise?” The pleading in her voice was nearly Evangeline’s undoing. “We will be together? No matter what happens?”

Evangeline pulled her sister into a tighter embrace. “I swear to you, Lucy. I will not ever leave you. Not ever.”

Her sister took a deep breath, a gesture she had employed her whole life when calming herself. This time, however, the movement shuddered through her.

For Lucy’s sake, Evangeline clamped down her pain and resolved to be the sure foundation they both needed. “What do you say to pilfering something from this room?”

“Pilfering?”

Evangeline forced a smile. “We each search about for something to take with us when we go, something of our family and our life here.”

“But Aunt Barton said we weren’t permitted to take anything, that it all belongs to the estate.”

Evangeline assumed her most mischievous expression, one she’d often employed when Lucy was younger and they’d undertaken some silly game or another. “We won’t tell Aunt Barton, and no one will notice. Nothing in this room is of particular value

in the eyes of anyone but us. We will slip whatever we choose into our trunks and never breathe a word of it.”

Lucy pulled away enough to look up into Evangeline’s eyes. “What if we’re caught?”

“We won’t be. No one will come in here for a few minutes yet.”

For the first time since the true nature of their family’s illness had become apparent, Lucy’s expression turned hopeful. “And I can keep whatever I choose?”

“You can keep it forever and ever.”

Lucy nodded anxiously and stepped away, her wide-eyed gaze scouring the walls. Evangeline turned away, giving her sister a modicum of privacy to make her very personal selection. She hoped her scheme would help in some small way. She knew no other means of easing even the smallest bit of Lucy’s suffering. Or her own, for that matter.

Evangeline fixed her gaze upon a framed photograph on the bookshelf. Her father had been fascinated with photography and had, only a few short months earlier, arranged for a family portrait. How they had teased him about what had seemed like a ridiculous novelty.

Yet, there was her family—Father and Mother, George and James, frozen in time alongside Evangeline and Lucy. Captured forever. The sight pained and comforted her all at once, and she knew she had found her item to pilfer.

Evangeline glanced at the empty parlor doorway. She took the photograph from the shelf then moved swiftly to her trunk, opening it with shaky hands. She lifted two folded chemises, slipped the photograph beneath them, then carefully closed the lid.

She remained there, kneeling before her trunk. “Have you found something to claim for your own, dearest?”

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“May I take more than one thing?” Desperation touched Lucy’s simple question.

Evangeline wished she could allow Lucy to claim everything her heart desired, but Aunt Barton had been quite clear about them taking only their personal effects. She had caught Evangeline attempting to pack away one of Mother’s porcelain figurines and had confiscated it.

“So long as whatever you choose can be easily hidden,” Evangeline reminded Lucy.

“They are very small,” Lucy said. “I can put them all in my wrist bag.”

“Will the added weight be obvious? We wouldn’t want Aunt Barton to grow suspicious.”

“Help me hide them, Evangeline.” Lucy begged. “I can’t bear to leave anything behind.”

Perhaps this had been a bad suggestion. Lucy’s fragile heart would be set upon the treasures she’d selected. What if there was no way of secreting them away?

Footsteps sounded.

Evangeline turned quickly to her sister, whose look of panic told her she’d heard their aunt’s approach as well. They would have to be swift.

She quickly perused Lucy’s stolen goods. Father’s pipe would fit in her wrist bag, but would be easily spotted. The book she’d selected from James’s stack would also be harder to tuck away.

“Place the book and pipe in my trunk,” she said quickly. “Tuck them under the clothes so they won’t be easily seen.”

What else had her sister selected?

“An antimacassar?” Similar bits of lace could be found over the backs and arms of chairs throughout the kingdom. Why would Lucy choose such a thing?

Lucy clutched it to her heart. “Mother made it for her chair,” she whispered. “It still smells like her.”

That simple explanation pierced Evangeline’s heart. These treasures that Aunt Barton would no doubt begrudge them both were so tender, so personally dear.

“That will fit in your wrist bag. Tuck it in.” Evangeline rearranged the items in her trunk, being careful to completely hide the photograph, the pipe, and the book. “Is there anything else?”

“The little shepherd boy Mother said resembled George.”

Evangeline held her hand out for the figurine. “That will have to go in here as well.”

She hid the final item, snapped the lid shut, and stood. She faced the doorway just as Aunt Barton stepped into view, framed in the light of the corridor. Lucy took tight hold of Evangeline’s hand, clutching it for dear life.

“I trust you are ready to depart.” Aunt Barton spoke sternly no matter that she must have known their hearts were breaking.

“We are.”

Truth be told, they were not the least bit ready. But as she’d told Lucy: ladies, be they young or old, had little control over their comings and goings. They were to be grateful and cooperative. Life was far easier when such realities were accepted upfront.

“The servants will place your trunks in the carriage,” Aunt Barton said. “Come along. We mustn’t be late; the train waits for no one.”

Lucy looked on the verge of falling to pieces.

Evangeline spoke on her behalf. “Might we have a moment to bid farewell to our home and—”

Aunt Barton’s mouth pressed tight. “The train waits for no one,” she repeated in clipped tones.

“I—”

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“Evangeline.” Aunt Barton motioned her into silence. “You would do well to set a good example for your sister. Both of your lives have changed, and it would be best if you helped Lucy make her peace with that.”

Make her peace? How was the girl expected to ever do that? And how was Evangeline supposed to help her when she hadn’t the slightest idea how to reclaim that peace for herself?

She alone remained of Lucy’s loved ones. No matter how deeply she loved her sister, no matter how desperately she tried to be strong for the dear girl’s sake, she knew she would never be enough to fill that void.



A light rain fell as the train sped north. Rivulets of water covered the windows, obscuring their view of the countryside. To distract Lucy from the gloominess of the ride, Evangeline pulled the ribbon from her hair and tied it in a large loop. It was not the perfect substitute for the string ideally used in a game of cat’s cradle, but it proved sufficient.

Lucy didn’t grin as broadly as she usually did when attempting the intricate patterns, but her countenance did lighten. Perhaps this was the key to seeing her sister through the difficult weeks and months to come: finding small sources of joy amidst the sorrow. Evangeline could do that.

“Perhaps when we reach Smeatley, we can find a field with daisies.” Evangeline carefully moved a length of ribbon from one of Lucy’s fingers to another. “We haven’t made a daisy chain in ages.”

Lucy watched the pattern forming around her fingers. “We could search for honeysuckle, as well.”

“Oh, yes. Honeysuckle would be a beautiful addition, and it would smell divine.”

Lucy’s small smile grew, and some of the pain in her eyes lessened. “Could we sing while we collect flowers?”

Evangeline abandoned her cat’s cradle creation to give her sister a hug. “Of course we can, my dear. Flowers. Songs. Games. We will continue to do them all—together.”

“You’re ruining the pattern.” Lucy’s complaint contained just enough amusement to make Evangeline smile.

Neither of them were truly happy nor lighthearted, but there was hope. They would be together, and Evangeline would make sure her sister had moments of encouragement each day.

Aunt Barton cleared her throat loudly, drawing their attention to her. She sat with her hands folded primly on her lap. Her lips pursed, and her brows pulled in a straight line. Evangeline had come to recognize that expression over the past week: her aunt was about to lecture. “It is time and past we discussed your future.”

Time and past? *Past*? How long was the generally accepted mourning period for the sudden passing of nearly all of one’s family? According to her aunt—four hours.

“Your grandfather has made arrangements for you and Lucy,” Aunt Barton said.

“Arrangements?” The word boded ill. “I understood we were to live in Smeatley with you and Uncle Barton.”

“*You* are to live in Smeatley.” Aunt Barton straightened the chains of her chatelaine, separating the various baubles. Did she not intend to offer any further explanation?

“What are Grandfather’s arrangements?” Lucy asked.

“He has procured a position for you.”

Lucy traded her confused expression for one of concern.

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Evangeline leaned closer to her aunt and spoke in quiet tones. “Could we not discuss this at a later time? Lucy has suffered a great deal and certainly does not need—”

“Nothing I am saying should upset her.” Aunt Barton’s nose scrunched as she spoke. Culling her words on the girl’s behalf was apparently distasteful to her. “Besides, the job is for you, not Lucy. She need not be concerned on that score.”

“What is this job?” Certainly her grandfather did not mean for her to be employed in his textile mill? Although, considering Uncle Barton managed the factory and Aunt Barton was delivering the news of Evangeline’s unexpected employment, the possibility was not so far-fetched as it at first seemed. “In the factory?”

Aunt Barton’s look of dry disbelief held ridicule. “You? In a factory? Do you think we are mad? Why, you would not last a single day there.”

Evangeline didn’t know whether to feel relieved or insulted. Lucy, for her part, still looked worried.

“Do not fret,” Evangeline whispered to her. “All will be well.”

“And we will be together,” Lucy whispered back.

“We have never yet been apart.” Indeed, not a day of Lucy’s life had passed without Evangeline being there for her. They were as close as two sisters could be despite an eight-year age difference. “That will not change.”

“If the two of you are quite finished with your chattering, I would like to return to the topic at hand.”

Living in the same home as Aunt Barton grew less appealing with every conversation. Shielding Lucy from her barbs would require all Evangeline’s efforts.

“Smeatley is in need of a schoolteacher,” Aunt Barton said. “Your grandfather is the most important man in Smeatley, owing to his ownership of the factory—”

"I thought Grandfather lived in Leeds."

"Do not interrupt." Aunt Barton's stern expression did not change. "Your grandfather does not make his home in Smeatley, that is true, but he still wields a great deal of power there. As such, he has been granted the right to choose the town's new teacher."

"And he is asking me?" She was utterly unqualified, not to mention completely disinterested in being a teacher.

"We are not *asking*," Aunt Barton replied.

"We?"

Aunt Barton folded her hands once more. She tilted her chin at a disapproving angle. "Your uncle is the acting head of the school board. He, of course, was included in this decision. I was consulted as well. We are all in agreement. It is essential that you learn not only to work but to work hard. You will not learn that sitting about being idle."

Evangeline shook her head, confused that everyone seemed to have overlooked one simple fact. "I do not know how to teach."

"We are hopeful you will rise to the occasion." She did not sound the least bit hopeful. "You will learn what you must about teaching. Otherwise, you will fail."

Lucy's pallor had grown. Evangeline took her hand and held it comfortingly, though she continued to speak to Aunt Barton.

"I will do my best," she promised. "You will discover that I do, indeed, work quite hard, and I will work hard every day." She set her gaze on Lucy. "And we will gather our flowers and play our songs when I return home each evening."

Aunt Barton cleared her throat again. "You will not be living with us."

"We won't?"

With a sigh of annoyance, Aunt Barton clarified. "The schoolhouse has rooms for the teacher." She thumbed through

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the small chains hanging from her chatelaine and produced a key. She held it out, its rusty, dingy coloring in stark contrast to her white gloves. "You will need this."

"We are to go directly there? Today?"

Aunt Barton leaned back, settling herself comfortably. "You will begin teaching in only a few days. You'd do well to take the time to prepare for your students and to set your quarters to rights. The building has been empty for some time and will, no doubt, require a great deal of attention." She patted at her perfectly coiffed hair. "You will go directly to the schoolhouse and begin your work. Lucy will remain at Hillside House with your uncle and me."

Shock rendered Evangeline unable to respond.

Lucy's tear-clogged voice broke the silence. "You won't be with me?"

Evangeline focused her thoughts and summoned her determination. "Lucy will come with me. We can make do with whatever we find at the schoolhouse."

Aunt Barton was unmoved. "That is not for you to decide."

"Aunt—"

"Set your new house to rights, Evangeline. That must be your first priority."

"I—"

That pursed-lipped, narrow-eyed gaze of her aunt's returned with full force. "This is why you girls have a guardian. Lucy is too young to be on her own, and you, it would seem, are too selfish."

"How am I selfish for wishing to keep Lucy with me?"

"You desire to have her with you more than her comfort and well-being."

With effort Evangeline kept herself from glaring at her aunt.

Why, in heaven's name, had she required this discussion now, with Lucy present? "You are decided?"

"Your uncle and grandfather are decided. It is not your place to argue against them."

A lady simply did not contradict decisions made by her male relations. Her governess had explained that time and again. A lady did as she was instructed; to do otherwise only invited difficulty, uncertainty, and unnecessary misery. Quiet obedience made life far less complicated. She would do well to calm Lucy's worries and set her own sights on creating a home where Lucy would be permitted to join her eventually.

She clasped Lucy's hand in both of hers and met her distraught gaze. "We will be apart only this one night, dearest. I will work tirelessly to get the schoolhouse ready, then you can come live there with me."

"We'll be together?"

"As always," Evangeline said.

"Just as you promised." The statement was nearly a question, a plea.

"Just as I promised." She took the ribbon, hanging limply in Lucy's hand, and untied the knot. "We will not be living in a place so fine as Blakely Manor, but it will be home to us, just as that beloved house was." She tied the ribbon in a bow at the end of Lucy's long braid. "And you will have family in Smeatley: myself, of course, but also your aunt and uncle. And when Grandfather visits, you will have him as well."

Aunt Barton interrupted her attempt at reassurance. "We have judged it best if you don't bandy about the fact that you're related to your grandfather or your uncle and me. In fact, we insist that you do not."

"But we are family."

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“The people of Smeatley did not take kindly to your uncle being placed in charge of the mill; some accused him of being given the position only because he was a relation of the owner.” Aunt Barton tugged at her gloves, straightening the wrinkled fabric. “They will never give you a moment’s opportunity to prove yourself if they know your connection to your grandfather.”

“He feels this way as well?” Evangeline asked.

Aunt Barton’s expression turned icy. “He and I have spoken at length about you, and we see eye-to-eye. You would do well to accept that your uncle and I speak for him in these matters.”

Evangeline’s heart dropped to her toes. As dismal as she had felt about coming to Smeatley, the prospect had only grown more bleak. She was being forced to take a job she’d not looked for nor knew how to properly perform. She and Lucy would be required not to acknowledge the only family they had left and would be disregarded, essentially disowned, in return. She could not imagine how Lucy’s presence in the Bartons’ home would be explained if she was not to be acknowledged as family.

“How will—” She stopped herself from asking about the requirement to hide their connection. She did not wish to emphasize that within Lucy’s hearing. “How long will I be working as a teacher?”

“Until your grandfather is convinced you can be trusted with access to your inheritance.”

Evangeline had been told only the smallest bit about the legacy left to her by her parents. Her grandfather controlled it entirely. It seemed, however, that he might be convinced to allow her enough of it to live a life more aligned with the one she and Lucy had known.

She pulled her sister to her side, keeping her arm tucked around her. This one night they would be apart, but Evangeline

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would spend that night making some semblance of a home for Lucy. She would throw herself into her unexpected responsibilities and prove to her grandfather that she was hardworking and capable. She would gain access to her inheritance, and they could live wherever they chose, perhaps Petersmarch.

They could return home. Together.