

# OUTBID BY THE BOSS

*Stephanie Browning*

*A Stephanie Browning Romance*

# ONE

*Two thousand pounds!*

A trickle of cold sweat worked its way down Samantha Redfern's ribcage and lodged itself in the waistband of her well-worn jeans. Two minutes ago, she'd been the only one bidding on a rare, 18th-century candlestick and now some yahoo she couldn't even see at the back of the auction hall had managed to double the stakes in less than half the time.

No matter. Tucking a stubborn strand of auburn hair behind her ear, Sam scanned the other bidders. Antique silver was her area of expertise. It had won her a coveted position with Burton-Porter & Sons, and now here she was, moments away from owning a piece of the past. Her past. And nothing, not even an amateur collector with more money than brains, was going to stop her now. All she had to do was stay calm.

"I have two thousand pounds..." called the auctioneer. His practised gaze rested on Sam for the briefest of seconds before moving on in search of wealthier prey "...do I hear two thousand, one hundred..."

What was she waiting for? She'd been searching for a candlestick exactly like this since she'd first arrived in England and this one had it all...London hallmarks, date marked 1749, manufactured by a well-known silversmith, and rumoured to be part of a larger collection once belonging to the king himself.

It was a wonder half of London hadn't shown up to bid on it. She'd known about the candlestick since she was a child growing up in Toronto. A family secret, her grandmother had told her. Sam frowned. Maybe not so secret after all...

"....going once....going twice..."

"Come on, lovey!" The middle-aged woman in the seat beside Sam gave her a jab and up shot Sam's hand startling both her and the auctioneer.

“I have two-thousand, one hundred pounds!” he crowed. “Do I hear two-thousand, two?”

The auctioneer, Sam thought, was having way too much fun. While she decidedly was not.

A flood of guilt washed over her. She should so not be here. She should be in New York City. Attending an important sale on behalf of her London employer. Not perched on the edge of a folding wooden chair in a cramped auction hall in a teeny, tiny village in the West Midlands that, while very picturesque, belonged on top of a biscuit tin. Her colleagues at Burton-Porter wouldn't believe it. They saw her as the consummate professional. Cool as a cucumber, that's me, thought Sam, as she wiped her damp palms along her thighs.

An excited buzz rippled through the room. The phantom bidder had just upped the ante by another hundred pounds. Sam twisted in her seat, trying to catch a glimpse of her competitor, but there were too many bodies in the way.

She swung back to find everyone watching her, waiting to see what she would do. “I have two thousand, two hundred pounds,” the auctioneer repeated. “Do I hear three....?” he asked looking directly at Sam.

This was absolutely crazy. Her budget was stretched to the max. She was living in a central London flat so small, she could barely bend over the sink to brush her teeth without butting up against the shower door. And the bidding had already soared past her credit limit.

Maybe if she sat on her hands...

“Going once....”

“....going twice....”

It was no good, thought Sam raising her hand one more time.

She just had to have it.

The auctioneer acknowledged her bid with a twitch of his moustache. “I have two thousand, three hundred pounds. Do I hear four?” he peered down the length of the room.

Sam held her breath.

*Please, please, please, don't bid.*

He didn't, and the next thing she heard was the smack of the auctioneer's gavel. “Sold to the young lady in the second row for two thousand, three hundred pounds.”

Sam leapt to her feet, green eyes sparkling in triumph. She tossed her bag over her shoulder, gave her neighbour a hug and set off, hur-

riedly picking her way through the tangle of legs and carry-alls to the end of the row.

With her long hair caught up in a clip and her favourite blazer topping jeans and boots, Sam strode towards the rear of the building to pay her bill and pick up her prize. It was the happiest she'd felt since wrangling her way to England.

If everything went according to plan, she would have just enough time to swing by the flat with the candlestick. Her suitcases were in the car, she'd downloaded her boarding pass that morning, all she had to do was drop off the rental and catch the shuttle to the airport.

It was going to be tight, but totally worth the risk.

The candlestick was hers!

From where he stood, leaning against an immense mahogany armoire, thirty-six-year-old Chas Porter had a clear view of Samantha Redfern as she bounded down the length of the hall.

What was she doing here?

And why would she be bidding against him?

Unless... Chas shook his head. No, that was crazy. She couldn't possibly have known his interest in the candlestick. Or that the auction house had tipped him off before the sale.

At first, he hadn't even recognized the young woman bidding against him. He'd arrived late and been unable to get a seat, but his commanding height had ensured his bid was noticed. And allowed him to see his opponent.

In the office, Miss Redfern's hair was always neatly pulled back. Not threatening to spring from its pins into a shoulder-length wave of shining auburn. In London, her clothes were boringly routine, charcoal grey and conservative, if he remembered correctly, which suited her position as a buyer for one of the country's most exclusive dealers, but did little to enhance her physical appeal. Soft voice, an unexpected uptilt of her chin when a valuation she had made was questioned -- he had barely noticed her.

Until now.

Chas pulled out his mobile. If she'd wanted his attention, attending an out-of-the-way sale when she should be in New York, was a sure-fire way to get it. Sending a quick text to his office confirmed it. Samantha

Redfern had been booked to fly out last night, but had rescheduled.

Simmering with rage, Chas sliced his way through the thick crowd, nodding to a few familiar faces and avoiding those who knew him well. That his employee was at a country auction bidding on his candlestick when she should be on the other side of the Atlantic preparing for one of the season's most important sales was beyond belief.

He could hear the auctioneer in the background clamouring for the crowd's attention – a Royal Crown Derby tea set was on offer, but Chas' focus was all on the Sam. In the time she'd been with Burton-Porter, he'd found her totally professional and decidedly aloof. Which was more than okay with him.

Never ever dip your pen in company ink, his grandmother had drummed into his teenaged ears.

As the great-great grandson of the firm's founder, she scolded, having heard he was chatting up a female employee in the accounting department, he should know better than to play off his connections. Young, romantic, and hot-headed, Chas had ignored his grandmother's advice, until the day he heard the young woman bragging to her co-workers. It was his wealth and position they saw, his grandmother told him sharply, not the man he was. From that day on, Chas had guarded himself against all but the most casual relationships, ruthlessly channelling his excess passion into his work. Over the years, he had been able to rebuild what his father and grandfather had squandered.

His eyes narrowed. And no one, not even a trusted employee like Samantha Redfern, was going to jeopardize that success.

The spring in her step was unmistakable as she wove her way towards the cash. What was it about this particular candlestick, Chas wondered, and this particular employee?

Despite her knowledge of antique silver, it would be impossible for Samantha Redfern to make the connection to his family. Or would it? She was smart, she was ambitious and, Chas scowled, for all he knew, quite prepared to exploit any advantage that might come her way.

Barrelling through a knot of onlookers, Chas came to a halt. She had reached the cash desk. He was a few feet behind her now, but instead of seething with fury, he found himself admiring the view.

The fitted jacket and tight jeans she wore revealed the lush curves that had remained hidden at the office. His usual taste ran to the elegant, slim, society women who understood how to play the game, not to

employees who promised a cosy armful. Irritated by his own thoughts, Chas shook off this sudden flash of warmth and refocused his attention on why she was here and, for that matter, why he had let her outbid him!

She stood with her back to him, wallet open, tapping the wooden floor with the toe of her high-heeled boot until the auctioneer's assistant set her prize on the battered oak table.

The candlestick was in superb condition.

Just under nine inches in height with a circular base, swirling shell motifs rising up its stem and a petal-shaped lip surrounding the socket. In a London sale, he would expect it to sell for another five hundred pounds. At least. A pair wouldn't just double the price, it would triple it.

His gaze slid back to Sam.

He should be pleased that he'd hired one of the best eyes in the business, but knowing she wasn't there on behalf of the firm any more than he was, rather tarnished his high opinion. But why would she risk her position with Burton-Porter on this particular candlestick?

Chas felt a slow smile tug at the corners of his mouth. This scene unfolding in front of him was about to get interesting.

Not knowing the sale's payment policy, Samantha Redfern was waving a credit card about. The equivalent of a red flag as far as country auctioneers were concerned.

The auctioneer's wife took one look at Sam's credit card and said, "Cash or cheque."

"I'm sorry?" said Sam.

The woman jabbed her pen backwards to where a dog-eared sign hung limply on the back wall. "Cash or cheque," she repeated.

"Debit," countered Sam. She selected a bank card from her wallet and held it up for inspection. "As good as cash..."

The pen pumped the air one more time. "Read the sign."

"But this is an auction," Sam stammered. "I go to them all the time..."

"Look," the woman said quietly, "there are half-a-dozen people behind you waiting to pay. Either you come up with the cash or the item will be offered to the next bidder." Her grey eyes slid over Sam's shoulder and landed on Chas, flickered in recognition and then moved on when Chas shook his head.

He could almost hear Sam's heart beat faster. In the salerooms, her only giveaway when she was tense or dealing with him, was a gentle

pulse near the soft skin of her left temple.

Maybe it was time to tap her on the shoulder and identify himself as the other bidder. The candlestick would be his. As it should have been in the first place. Although she was pushing her luck on the New York trip, she was one of the best silver appraisers he'd ever hired. Maybe he'd overlook this one.

At least, he might have, had Samantha Redfern not pulled a white envelope embossed with the Burton-Porter logo from the depths of her shoulder bag.

"Do you take American?" Sam asked.

"No."

It was all Chas could do not to reach out and grab his errant employee by the scruff of her slender neck. Instead he found himself sidetracked by the silky curls that had escaped her hair clip.

"Please...I have more than enough cash and..." Sam rifled through her wallet. "...I can do at least a third of it in pounds." She had dumped her entire bag onto the table and was pawing through its contents as if her life depended on it. "I'll pay the bank premium."

Dark brows furrowed, Chas watched her toss aside a pair of designer sunglasses, her mobile, a half-eaten chocolate bar, a neon-pink cosmetic bag and what looked to be a balled up pair of black tights. He saw no sign of a cheque book, but he did see a set of car keys with a familiar tag.

When Sam finally found what she'd been hunting for, a small change purse with an even smaller cache of banknotes, everything else went back in her bag. Everything except the envelope with the American cash.

"All right then..." the auctioneer's wife was muttering as she made her calculations. Sam glanced at the total, removed a wad of hundred-dollar bills, and handed it over.

The deal was done.

"Thank you, thank you, *thank you*," Chas heard Sam say as she lovingly scooped up the candlestick. "You have no idea how much this means to me."

"It's not me you should be thanking," drawled the woman. Her eyes slid past Sam's.

But Chas Porter was already beating a retreat through the crowded hall – this was not the place to confront Miss Redfern no matter how

much she deserved it.

Clutching the candlestick to her chest, Sam hurried for the exit. She had a plane to catch. And now, she realized with a frisson of panic, she not only had to nip back to her flat, she also had to stop at the bank. It would take all her savings and half her rent money to replace the firm's cash, but her purchase was worth every penny.

As she dashed through the open doorway, Sam remembered thinking how nice it was that the morning rain had given way to a sun-filled afternoon and then...

*Woof!*

She ran smack into a wall of solid masculinity, gasping as the base of the candlestick dug into her ribcage.

She staggered backwards. A pair of strong hands grabbed her upper arms to steady her, holding her fast as she regained her balance.

And then he spoke.

The "thank-you" Sam was about to utter caught in her throat.

"In a hurry, are we?" The voice was well-bred, well-schooled and awfully familiar.

She squeezed her eyes shut.

And began to mentally chant.

*Please, please, please...anybody but Chas bloody Porter. Please, please, please...*

"Anytime..." the voice said, rudely interrupting her pleas to the goddess of single women caught in compromising positions.

Stupid woman must be on a lunch break, thought Sam.

Her lids fluttered open and she followed the buttons of the beautifully-stitched, pale-blue oxford-cloth shirt he wore beneath his soft leather jacket to the button at the base of his neck. It was open. Revealing enough of the man to make one feel that every inch of him would be just as enticing as the dark stubble on his chin, the slightly battered but still patrician nose and...the steel-blue eyes washing over her like an icy Arctic wind.

"Miss Redfern, isn't it?" Chas Porter said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "I could have sworn you were representing us in New York this week. You do remember the two-day sale at Sotheby's? Previews in...what?" He removed his left hand and checked his watch. "Twenty-



four hours?”

“Which, allowing for the time change,” replied Sam choking back an urge to flee “gives me twenty-nine hours...”

“Now, if you don’t mind...” She pointedly eyed the hand grasping her left bicep, an amazing feat given the fact that her knees had turned to water and her brain was sending high-pitched alarm signals to every nerve in her body.

Chas dropped his hand and stepped back, his eyes resting on the candlestick nestled protectively between her breasts. “Very nice workmanship. Get it for a good price, did you?”

Sam flushed and like a child caught with her hand in the cookie jar, whipped the candlestick behind her back. Which of course thrust her chest forward.

She raised her chin defiantly.

Chas Porter gazed down at her, his eyes slightly hooded, impossible to read.

She stared back at him. The candlestick was hers. Or was it? She felt an unexpected stab of fear. Had he seen her use her expense money to pay for it?

A young couple coming up the steps dropped hands and gave them a wide berth. “We are blocking the entrance,” hissed Sam. “And, as you so rightly pointed out, I have a plane to catch.”

“Not today, you don’t,” Chas shot back. He crooked his finger and abruptly turned away leaving her little choice but to follow him down the steps and around the side of the building.

For an instant, Sam rebelled. Who did Chas Porter think he was, calling her to task as though she were a lowly serf. He was her boss, she reassured herself as she hurried to catch up, not some feudal lord who expected her to do his bidding. Perhaps she should just tug her forelock and be done with it.

A cobblestoned alleyway separated the auction hall from its nearest neighbour, a tumbled-down ironmonger’s Sam surmised from a brief glimpse at the shop window; still eking out an existence selling buckets and nails and who-knew-what.

Taking a deep breath, she plunged into the alleyway behind Chas.

It was creepy. A rickety fire escape hung from the yellowed bricks

of the ironmonger's, water dripping from its bottom rung; the bolts holding it to the wall were loose and rusty with age. Sam shivered in the dank air; she could almost hear the rats scuttling in the shadows. Gripping the candlestick even tighter, she hurried to catch up to where her boss, the head of Burton-Porter & Sons, one of the country's most exclusive dealers in Fine Art & Collectibles, was waiting for her.

Her best, and perhaps only defence, Sam thought, was that she had good taste.

But then so did he. As had all the other Burtons and Porters before him. They were the ones who had taken the firm from its 18th-century beginnings as a small shop on Regent Street to the discreet upper echelons of Mayfair and Belgravia.

It probably hadn't hurt that the men in the family were all devastatingly good-looking, thought Sam, assuming the portraits lining the panelled walls in the Burton-Porter boardroom were true-to-life. Raven-haired, broad-shouldered, tall, arrogant and cold.

Just like the one waiting beneath a long-faded advertisement, its white-painted letters barely visible on the wall of the ironmonger's. Chas Porter's expression was as hard as the nails they sold. "Anything you want to say in your defence?"

Sam shook her head. "Not at the moment." She wanted to ask him if he had been the one bidding against her and, if so, why he had stopped.

Probably not a good idea.

"In my experience," he began scrubbing his chin as he spoke, "my employees generally take their extra days to fly to New York to make contacts and educate themselves by visiting galleries and showrooms..."

"Which they do at your expense..." muttered Sam.

"You're hardly in a position to say anything right now."

"I'll replace the money!"

"You're darn right you will! As for New York..."

"Oh, for heaven's sakes," Sam interrupted, "you wouldn't have hired me if I hadn't been fully qualified. And...just for the record...slinking about New York takes a lot less time than some of your staff members would have you know..."

Her voice trailed away....challenging authority was a bad habit. Once acquired, hard to lose.

"Did you know your sentences get longer when you're angry?"

Sam felt her jaw drop. “That’s all you have to say!”

Chas shook his head. “Hardly.” He reached into his jacket and pulled out his mobile. “Wait here. I have a couple of calls to make.”

The little glimmer of fear grew and began to gnaw its way into Sam’s thoughts as she watched him retreat further into the gloom. Technically speaking, she had used company funds to pay for the candlestick but surely he wouldn’t...

...call the police. Or the firm’s solicitors. Sam shuddered. If only she could lip read. She heard Chas say “send me a text,” and then he was on to another call.

Worst case scenario, she decided, he’d fire her.

The candlestick was beginning to feel like a dead weight. The only reason she’d even known about this sale was because of a tip from a friend at a rival firm. Small sale in the Midlands, he’d said, squaring the books with Sam for a favour done in the past.

Sam had visited the auction website, which was feeble at best, read the brief description and realized that not many people would have recognized the candlestick or its history based on the information given.

So how did Chas Porter end up here?

Her head ached. With her free hand, Sam reached up and pulled the clip from her hair. As she shook it loose she felt some of the tension ease.

If Chas been able to get rearrange his busy schedule to attend the sale, he must have been on the lookout for the same silver candlestick. Which meant....what?

A number of theories flitted through her brain. She needed to talk to Mia. Mia was logical. She was Sam’s best friend at Burton-Porter, and she knew every piece of scuttlebutt worth knowing.

In the meantime, as far as Sam was concerned, the candlestick was hers.

She’d bought it fair and square.

And she was keeping it.

Part of him, Chas had to admit, felt a tad guilty as he covertly kept his eye on Sam. He had half-expected her to bolt but she was no coward, not by a long shot. With the sun behind her, her hair shone with copper and gold framing her face like a modern-day Madonna.

Which, he reminded himself sharply, she definitely was not.

He heard a voice in his ear and the image disappeared.

“Hello?” he said into the phone. “It’s Chas....slight change in plans.”

Without revealing anything untoward about the day’s events, he explained to his secretary why the assistant appraiser in the firm’s art department would be going to New York instead of Samantha Redfern.

“It’ll be fine. Tell her to concentrate on her own area of expertise... maybe check out the abstract expressionists while she’s there. And book her into the Park Plaza. Nothing like a five-star hotel to smooth the waters.”

Chas ended the call.

His focus shifted back to Sam. One problem down, another to go.

You had to admire her, thought Chas as he sauntered towards her. He knew how hard it was to stand one’s ground. When he had taken control of the business, family issues had weighed heavily on his young shoulders. The company’s good name was everything. He couldn’t risk it then, and he wasn’t going to now.

No matter how awkward the next few days might be.

Or pleasurable, he thought, as he took in the light dusting of freckles across Sam’s nose and the flecks of gold in the green eyes warily tracking his approach.

“Well?” she asked. “What’s the verdict?”

“The jury is still out....however, as I’m on my way to Derbyshire to catalogue an estate sale,” he continued blithely. “And since you evidently know more about Georgian silver than even I realized, you will be my assistant.”

“But I’m expected in New York!” Sam blustered.

He waggled his mobile in her direction. “Not anymore. Helen Chalmers will go in your stead. In fact, as I understand it, she only bowed to your persistent campaign to be the one to represent the firm because you offered to give up a day at Christmas. And yet here you are...”

“But...”

“A last minute decision, was it?”

“That is so not...” Sam sputtered.

“Fair?” Chas prompted. “As in taking it upon yourself to delay your departure to attend a sale and using your expense money to pay

for a personal purchase....that kind of fair? We call it fraud here by the way...”

Sam shook her head. “I can’t go...you’ll have to get someone else.”

“And why is that?”

A myriad of emotions crossed her face. “I have a rental car to return and, as you well know, a little banking to attend to...”

“Both of which are easily solved,” countered Chas. “We can drop your car off at their office in Coventry, and grab a bite of lunch...I’m assuming you used the company account,” he waited for her nod, shook his head and said, “then it’s a good thing you’re coming with me. You’ll be able to work off your debt in no time.”

“But...”

“What?” He hardened his gaze, silently daring her to take him on.

A brief flash of mutiny and then the realization dawned. She was trapped and they both knew it.

There were times, Chas reasoned as he steered her towards the high street, when one needed to spill a little ink.

In the best interest of the company, of course.