

SUMMERSET ABBEY
A BLOOM
IN WINTER

A NOVEL



T. J. BROWN

SECOND IN THE SWEEPING TRILOGY

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About T. J. Brown

*This book is dedicated with all my love and gratitude to Dr. Colin Cave and Dr. Katie Deming and their team
—amazing doctors and extraordinary people.*

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Love you all.

CHAPTER

ONE



Victoria paced the length of Summerset Abbey's Great Hall, impatience rippling through her body. In London the mail had come at the same time every day, like clockwork. But at the sprawling country estate that she now called home, the mail's arrival remained frustratingly unpredictable and entirely dependent on her uncle's will. When he was away from Summerset Abbey, it was even more haphazard, unless her ladyship needed something posted or was expecting an important invitation.

When she reached the end of the hall, Victoria doubled back, marching furiously forward, ignoring the light from the circular skylight, which danced and sparkled off the marble columns lining the room. Even the breathtaking frescoes depicting angels floating above battle scenes that covered the domed ceiling, which normally captured her gaze when she entered this hallway, remained hazy on the fringes of her tunnel vision. And all because of an inept mail delivery system that harkened back to the bloody Dark Ages. She'd been waiting outside on the drive if she weren't afraid of the suspicion that would raise, especially after learning that Aunt Charlotte, or Lady Summerset Ambrosia Huxley Buxton, noticed everything that happened at Summerset.

Well, almost everything. Victoria smiled. Her aunt didn't know how often she snuck away to her secret room in the unused portion of the manor to practice her typing and shorthand, study botany, or craft her own articles on plants and plant lore. She didn't know that her own daughter, Elaine, could mix up a mean gin sling, or that Victoria's older sister, Rowena, had gone flying in a plane and had kissed a pilot. So maybe her forbidding aunt Charlotte wasn't so infallible after all.

But Aunt Charlotte had known how to get rid of Prudence. Victoria frowned, a familiar ache twisting her stomach.

She heard a car in the front drive and she flew to the servants' door behind the stairwell, not caring whether the servants resented her intrusion on their domain. The mail would be taken to Mr. Cairns, who would sort it out in his office, and then presented to Aunt Charlotte, to Uncle Conrad, or to whomever it was addressed. Victoria, however, couldn't stand by and wait for her letter to eventually find its way into her hands. She'd counted the days carefully and knew in her bones she would receive an answer today.

The servants bobbed their heads as she rushed past them. No doubt Aunt Charlotte had already heard of her sudden obsession with the mail. If asked, Victoria would just tell her she was awaiting a letter from a friend and then whine about being bored out here in the country. Aunt Charlotte deplored whining.

She stuck her head around the doorjamb of Cairns's office. "Did I get anything, Cairns?"

The man jumped and Victoria hid a grin. Very little ever surprised this supremely self-contained man, but Victoria had long ago made it her mission to try. She'd spent almost every summer vacation since she was a small child trying to ruffle Cairns, who had no outstanding features except his unflappable composure. She knew he could barely stand her, and the girls used to find it funny.

Now, of course, it would be better if Cairns were on her side, but old habits were hard to break.

His mouth tightened. "I'm just going through it now, Miss Victoria."

She waited, almost screaming with impatience as he deliberately took his time going through the post and sorting it into different piles. She knew he had found her letter by the quivering of his nostrils. He held it out and she snatched it from his hands as if worried he was about to change his mind.

“Thank you, Cairns!” She whisked out of the servants’ quarters and up to her room, praying she wouldn’t run into her cousin, wanting to break up the boredom by sneaking down to play billiards and smoke cigarettes, or Rowena, wanting to go riding or walking or whatever she could to chase away the guilt she felt over Prudence. Victoria felt bad for both her sister and her cousin, but right now, she had more important things to do.

Once in her room, she put the letter on her white and gold empire dressing table and stared at it, half afraid to open it. She’d been waiting for it for so long—now that it was actually here, she was terrified it wouldn’t contain the news she wanted. Finally she picked it up, crossed the soft Axminster rug, and settled down upon one of the two blue-and-white-striped chaise lounges that sat before a small white fireplace.

Inspired by Nanny Iris, a remarkable herbalist and Victoria’s friend and mentor, she’d written an article on the health benefits of *Althea officinalis*, or mallow, and the history of its uses among the healing women who worked with the poor. She had sent it to one of her favorite botany magazines and to her surprise, the editor had written back, telling her he enjoyed the article, and gave her some advice on how to improve her writing. He had asked her to resubmit after she’d revised it. She’d rewritten it ten times, typing it carefully on the brand-new typewriter she had hidden in her secret room. Then she’d sent it back, praying it would be good enough to publish.

Her stomach churned. And here was her answer. Unable to take it any longer, she went to her desk and rifled through the drawers until she found her letter opener. Something fluttered to the ground when she opened it and she stared at the slip of paper, unbelieving. It was a check.

Her eyes widened and she pulled out the slip of paper that came with it. The top of the paper was embossed with the magazine’s name in script.

The Botanist’s Quarterly, 197 Lexington Place, London. Victoria ran her fingers over it in awe. She and her father used to pore over the magazine every time a new issue came in. A noted botanist, her father had transmitted his love of plants to his daughter and the shared passion brought them close during their late years together. It would always be the one connection she had with him that was solely hers.

He would have been so proud of her.

She wiped away the tears that gathered with an impatient hand.

Dear V. Buxton,

Thank you so much for revising your fine article, “The Many Medical Uses of Althea officinalis Among the Lower Classes.” I am delighted to tell you that we will be using your work in our summer edition of The Botanist’s Quarterly. I would love to see more articles from you in this vein. Have you considered doing a study on the medical uses of plants among the poor and itinerant? At any rate, thank you again for your submission. Please don’t hesitate to stop by should you be in London.

Sincerely

Harold L. Herbert

Managing Editor

The Botanist’s Quarterly

Victoria read it again before picking up the check. Ten pounds. Not only was she now a published author but she’d been handsomely compensated—and praised!—for her work.

Sighing with happiness, she leaned back against the chaise. Whom could she tell? Who would understand? Not Rowena, who had become so sad and listless that she barely bothered to get dressed anymore. Not her cousin Elaine, either. Even though she and Elaine had grown closer in the months since her father’s death, they still weren’t to the point of sharing confidences. Kit, certainly, but Kit wouldn’t be here until the

weekend, if he even came. He usually came with her cousin Colin, when Colin came up from the university. He would understand her excitement—be impressed, even—but then again, he was such a tease.

But the only person she truly wanted to tell had now been gone for over a month. Had it really been that long since she'd last seen Prudence? Her heartache over Pru's abrupt departure felt just as raw as it did the day she fled from Summerset, but as much as Victoria missed her, she understood why Pru could no longer stay. She'd have left, too, had she suddenly been implicated in a Buxton family scandal that Aunt Charlotte had managed to keep buried for years.

Impulsively, she rang the bell and waited for Susie to arrive. She couldn't bear to let her aunt simply replace Pru with a new lady's maid as if Pru were an interchangeable, anonymous servant, so she relied on the scullery maid when she needed help . . . or company. Susie was the only servant who had truly been kind to Prudence, and though she couldn't take Prudence's place, Victoria felt closer to Pru when Susie was around.

Susie rushed in, her cap askew. "Sorry, miss. My hands were deep in the sink when the bell rang and Cook couldn't find my cap fast enough . . ." Her voice trailed off as she eyed Victoria. "Oh, miss, you look as if you'd just received the most wonderful gift!"

Victoria smiled and waved her check in the air. "I have. Well, not a present exactly. But look what I received in the post today!"

Susie squinted as she came closer. "It looks like a check, miss. For ten pounds?"

Victoria nodded and, taking the check, did a little dance around the room. "Yes! Yes! They paid me for an article I wrote on mallow! Can you imagine?"

Susie's eyes widened and she shook her head. "I can't! You mean like for a newspaper?"

"For a magazine!"

"Well, that's just fine, miss! My mother once had a recipe printed in the *Summerset Weekly News*, and I thought that was wonderful. That probably isn't much the same, is it?"

Victoria shook her head and checked a laugh that threatened to burst out. "Not quite, but I bet she was very happy."

"We were all very proud. Did you need anything, miss?"

Victoria shook her head, disappointment sinking her stomach. Of course it wasn't the same as telling Prudence. It wasn't even the same as telling Katie, their kitchen maid back home, who had been her friend and a fellow student at Miss Fister's Secretarial School for Young Ladies. Because she didn't really know Susie. Susie had been Prudence's friend, not hers.

Susie stood to leave. "Wait, Susie." The girl turned and Victoria saw that her cap, which she was required to wear for her duties upstairs, still rested crookedly on her head. "Have you heard anything from Prudence lately?"

A wide smile lit up Susie's plain features. "Yes, miss. I got a letter just the other day. Oh, she sounds as if she's having a wonderful time! She wrote that she and Andrew had the pleasure of staying in a luxurious hotel and dining in fine restaurants while they secured a more permanent place to live. Now they've settled into an elegant apartment near the college where Andrew's studying to be an animal doctor. As soon as he's done, they're planning to move to a big country house. She even has her own small staff!"

Victoria smiled sadly, glad that Prudence seemed to be flourishing the more distance she put between herself and Summerset. But her happiness for Pru was still tainted by guilt and sorrow. "Have you written her back yet?"

Susie shook her head. "I was going to tonight."

"Can I give you a paper to slip into your post? I don't have enough news for a full letter . . ." Her voice trailed off. She didn't want to tell Susie that Prudence hadn't written to her since she'd left, or that she didn't

even have Prudence's address.

Susie nodded. "Yes, miss. I will get it tonight on my way to bed."

Victoria hurried to her desk. She pulled out a piece of paper and dipped her ebony fountain pen into her inkwell.

Dear Prudence, she wrote, and then stopped as a giant blot stained the paper. What was she supposed to say? *I'm sorry?* But for what? For discovering that her own despicable grandfather—the Buxton patriarch—was Prudence's real father? For the insufferable snobbery of her family? For her failure to step in and defend Prudence when she was relegated to the maid's quarters upon their arrival to Summerset in the first place? *But what about the way Prudence is treating me?* Victoria thought stoutly. Prudence hadn't been in touch with her since her wedding to that sweet footman. She wrote to Susie, but coldly ignored the girl who had once been like her sister.

Victoria slumped in her chair. She felt overwhelmed by the entire affair, crippled by the gravity of it all. Maybe if she pretended hard enough that it hadn't happened, she could find something to write . . . but no. Rowena had pretended not to see how horrible the situation was until it exploded all around her. Simply *willing* things to change had gotten her nowhere.

Taking a deep breath, she got out a clean piece of paper and started again.

Dearest Prudence,

I hope this letter finds you well and happy. Susie says you are settling into your new home and Andrew is studying for the exams. I wish him the best of luck. I'm sure everything will turn out all right.

Victoria stopped and chewed on her thumb. Did that sound too patronizing? Like she didn't believe he would do well on the examinations? She shook her head.

"Oh, bother."

Dipping her pen, she continued.

I have some good news to share. I wrote an article on mallow, you know, the kind of articles Father and I used to read to each other that bored you and Rowena to tears? Well, I wrote one and sent it to The Botanist's Quarterly and what do you know, but the editor liked it and bought it! He even sent a check for ten pounds and told me he wanted to see more! So you see, all those lectures Father and I used to attend finally came in handy! Perhaps someday I will become a botanist like Father, for I have decided that is what I would truly like to do. I haven't told anyone else but you, my dear, because no one else could possibly understand . . .

Here, Victoria stopped and took a deep, shuddering breath as grief over her father threatened to overwhelm her. When she had composed herself, she finished.

I miss you more than I can say.

She paused again, wondering whether she should mention Rowena, but then decided against it. Let Rowena and Prudence sort themselves out. All she knew was that, for her, life without Prudence was growing unbearable.

Please write back soon.

Love,

Vic

Victoria chewed on the end of the pen and then added a stanza from "My Heart and I" by Elizabeth Barrett Browning.

*You see we're tired, my heart and I.
We dealt with books, we trusted men,
And in our own blood drenched the pen,
As if such colours could not fly.
We walked too straight for fortune's end,
We loved too true to keep a friend;
At last we're tired, my heart and I.*

There. Now it felt complete. Victoria put her pen and ink away and left the letter out to finish drying. She stood and stretched. A part of her longed to rush off to her secret wing of the house and set to work on her next article, but she was too restless for that. Then she remembered that there was someone else who would be delighted over the news. The same person who had given her the idea for her piece in the first place—Nanny Iris!

An hour later, Victoria was sitting at Nanny Iris's table, enjoying a delicious cream scone that even Coolidge, with all her expertise, could not rival.

Nanny Iris's kitchen was warm and inviting, with printed gingham curtains draped on the tiny window and a rack of pots hanging over the sink. The scrupulously clean stone floor might have been worn and cracked in spots, but the whole cottage was so charming that Victoria never felt anything but peace here.

"That's wonderful, my dear girl. You know your father would be quite proud," the old woman said from where she stood, smiling, at the stove. She was stirring up a concoction that smelled terrible, but she assured Victoria it would help when she had a breathing episode.

Victoria nodded, unable to speak. Nanny Iris had been her father's nanny and taught him everything she had known about plants and herbs, just as she was teaching Victoria now.

Nanny Iris came over to the table and patted Victoria on her head. Even though Nanny Iris always made Victoria feel like a child rather than the confident young woman she worked so hard to embody, at least the old woman always made her feel warm and genuinely beloved. When Ro and Pru treated her like a child, she always felt patronized, insulted.

The old woman wiped her hands on her starched white apron and picked up the letter again, even though she had read it three times already. Victoria glowed. She'd been right to come here.

But instead of reading it again, Nanny Iris frowned. "Why does it say V. Buxton instead of Victoria?"

Victoria washed her scone down with a sip of tea. "Hmm? Oh, yes. I thought if I used Victoria, someone at the magazine might recognize the name and know me as my father's daughter. I'm very proud of my work, but I wish to be known for my own merits and make my own opportunities."

"Very commendable," Nanny Iris murmured. "Was there any other reason?"

"Well, I thought it sounded more established, more impressive. V. Buxton. Don't you think?"

Victoria grinned, but when she caught sight of Nanny Iris's face, her smile faded. "What? What's wrong?"

"So this editor, Harold L. Herbert, doesn't realize you're a woman?"

"Well, no," Victoria admitted. "But that shouldn't make any difference, should it?"

"No, it shouldn't!" Nanny Iris said firmly, and patted her hand.

But doubt began to creep into Victoria's mind. Just because it *shouldn't* make a difference doesn't mean it *didn't*.

The leaden winter skies hung over Summerset, as heavy and despondent as Rowena felt. In the weeks since Prudence had left, Rowena had developed a pattern of habits designed to keep her mind as empty as possible. In the last four months, her father had died, she'd let her childhood home slip away, and Prudence had left her. Emptiness of the mind was preferable to endless choruses of *if only*.

She looked up into the sky again. Her fingers fluttered subconsciously over her lips as she remembered the kiss she shared with the pilot on the frozen lake. She hadn't seen him since, and it had been weeks. Even the sky felt empty—and too quiet—without the roar of Jon's plane flying over Summerset Abbey, a once-weekly ritual that he'd abandoned without explanation. Rowena wondered whether his brother had put a halt to their budding friendship the moment he had found out at the skating party that she was a Buxton.

She closed her eyes for a moment and breathed his name.

Jon.

She tried to remember how incredibly blue his eyes were and the way his thin, well-formed lips would widen in a smile just for her, but the image was already growing blurry. Instead the memory of her flight in his aeroplane came into her mind. She remembered the thrill of leaving the earth far behind and the soaring freedom of floating above the clouds. She'd felt completely untethered, as if she'd left her problems on the ground. The memory was so sharp and clear, she could almost feel the chill of the wind in her face. Restlessly, she snapped the book she held shut.

Rowena's life had never been as fascinating or exciting as Victoria seemed to find it, but at least it used to be interesting and enjoyable. Now Victoria often buzzed about her like a worried bee, sometimes coaxing and other times accusatory, but nothing Victoria said seemed to reach Rowena at all. It was rather as though Victoria were speaking to her through a wall of jellied aspic. Everything in her life—changing dresses for every meal, entertaining Lady Charlotte's guests, even her occasional trips into the small town of Summerset—suddenly seemed so pointless and exhausting.

So Rowena read voraciously from the ornate library that held thousands of volumes of books. She didn't care what books she read and rarely remembered anything about them when she finished, but while reading them, she had no room in her head to dwell upon anything else. When she wasn't reading, she rode her horse like a fury, taking long runs up through the hills to see into the valley below. Though she rarely admitted it to herself, she was always holding out hope that she'd see an aeroplane soaring through the skies.

"Yes, I think that's about enough."

Rowena jumped upon hearing her aunt's clear voice. She looked up from the window seat in the sitting room to find Aunt Charlotte bearing down upon her with the determination of an angry goose. Aunt Charlotte had been Lady Summerset for twenty-five years and the title had long settled itself in the regal set of her finely shaped head atop a long, definitive neck. Her blue-eyed, dark-haired beauty, which had once awed even the Prince of Wales Marlborough set, was still very much in evidence, even though the tautness of the skin had softened, blurring the exquisite lines of her heart-shaped face.

If her loveliness had once been appealing, Rowena thought as her aunt loomed over her, now it was simply terrifying. Though Aunt Charlotte rarely raised her voice, her temper was known by the frost of her tone and the unrelenting sting of her words.

In spite of her lethargy, Rowena snapped to attention. "Good morning, Aunt Charlotte. What is about enough?"

Aunt Charlotte snatched the book out of her hands. "Enough reading. Enough sulking." Her voice softened just a hair. "Enough grieving."

A lump rose in Rowena's throat, but she only said, "But I like to read."

“Nonsense. Or rather, it doesn't matter if you do like to read, it ruins your eyes and the squinting will give you wrinkles. You'll also get a stooped posture and rounded back. You've met Jane Worth, haven't you?”

Rowena frowned. “You mean the short, little woman with the—” Rowena made a curved movement with her hand, showing a humped back.

Her aunt nodded solemnly. “She always was a bookworm.”

Rowena tried to shake her head. Surely that couldn't be true.

Her aunt continued. “And honestly, child, you look a fright. Your forehead is oily, your hair is lank, and I don't know how long it's been since you bathed. You're one of the most beautiful girls I've ever seen, and right now, you wouldn't merit more than even a passing glance. *Enough.*”

Rowena blinked, stunned. Her aunt thought she was beautiful? She'd never told her that before. Had she always thought so?

To Rowena's surprise, her aunt sat close to her on the silk window seat and clasped one of Rowena's hands in her own. Rowena tried to remember another moment when Lady Summerset had touched her affectionately but couldn't recall a single time, even from the many summers that she spent at the abbey during her childhood.

“I understand your loss. I, too, lost my father at a young age. But you're a young woman, and your father's heart would break if he could see you now.”

Something twisted painfully inside Rowena. No matter what her aunt's motives were, there was no doubt in her mind that she was speaking the truth. Her father would hate her moping, her listlessness. Though she had imagined over and over his disappointment at her treatment of Prudence, she had never thought about how saddened he would be at how she was treating herself.

She nodded, defeated. “You're right, I'll go bathe.”

Aunt Charlotte squeezed her hand ever so slightly and let her go. “Please do. I've told Elaine she doesn't have to make calls with me this afternoon, as you are coming instead.”

Rowena's mouth fell open and her aunt gave her a satisfied smile. “So please wear something appropriate.”

Her aunt left her then, her skirts rustling triumphantly.

An hour later, after Rowena had been bathed, Susie was still trying to dry her hair. “If you didn't have so much hair, this would be much easier,” she said, toweling a segment, brushing it, and then toweling it again.

Rowena agreed. “If I didn't have long hair or corsets, I would be able to dress myself and in half the time, too.”

“Those days are coming,” Susie said. “Mark my words.”

Rowena smiled slightly, wishing she felt that kind of optimism. She wished she could feel anything besides sadness.

“Her ladyship came in while you were in the tub and chose the outfit you are to wear. It's right lovely, too, miss. You'll look like such a toff in it. Well, not that you aren't . . .” Susie shut her eyes for a moment. “I'm sorry, miss. I think I am just too chatty to be a lady's maid!”

Rowena was too shocked by this information to reassure Susie. “She did? What did she choose?” she asked, rising from the dressing table.

“The navy blue walking suit, miss.”

Susie helped her into her chemise, camisole, and corset and waist petticoat, and then brought out the wool walking suit.

Rowena had never seen it before.

She almost said something and then thought better of it. Obviously her aunt had given her a gift and

wasn't going to make a fuss about it. The expertly cut wool suit was decorated with black soutache on the lapels and cuffs of the jacket and along the hem of the skirt. The back of the long jacket was gathered together, giving her fullness in the back that softened the silhouette. She marveled at the intricately carved ebony buttons on the front of the jacket and down the side of the skirt. The skirt was a daringly modern four inches above the ground. Either it had been made for someone shorter than Rowena or her aunt was secretly developing modern tastes.

Because Susie had little experience in doing hair, Hortense, Lady Summerset's own lady's maid, busied herself with Rowena's hair, teaching Susie as she did so. Hortense's disdain at having been forced into the task of training a mere kitchen servant was evident in the purse of her mouth. "*Pourquoi dois-je enseigner cette idiote?!*" she muttered under her breath.

"*Soyez prudente, je parle bien le français,*" Rowena snapped.

Susie glared. She wasn't sure what had been said, but she didn't like the tone. Hortense lapsed into sullen silence, but she was a bit more helpful in teaching Susie how to make the simple chignon Rowena liked best. After she was finished, Hortense handed her the combs and brushes she had used. "Don't forget to wash out your mistress's tools when you're finished." Hortense gave Rowena as small a curtsy as she could manage and left the room.

Susie's face screwed up with dislike after the woman left, but she said nothing. Rowena remembered V telling her that Hortense had been especially rude to Prudence, and Rowena fought the urge to make a face too.

Rowena chose a blue and black pancake hat trimmed with lace, black roses, and an ostrich feather that curled over one ear.

Her aunt nodded approvingly when Rowena joined her in the Great Hall but said nothing. Elaine, dressed in a simple tea gown, gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Thanks for taking my place today, cousin," she whispered. "Good luck."

Rowena smiled at her. She still had a hard time reconciling this pretty, stylish, and vivacious woman with the shy, downtrodden, chubby girl she had known growing up. That Swiss finishing school had done wonders for her. Or more likely it was the simple fact of having a year away from her mother that had given her room to flourish and come into her own.

"I heard that," her mother said as she whisked out the door.

Elaine winked and waved her hand as Rowena followed behind her.

"The motorcar was the best thing to happen to formal calls," her aunt said once they were ensconced in the back of the touring car. "Before I could only make a few calls by carriage; now I get to see so many more people and have to spend less time at each call."

Rowena watched her aunt, roused for the first time in quite a while by curiosity. Who was this formidably stylish and regal woman? "But I thought you liked making calls, Aunt Charlotte?"

The woman snorted. "Goodness no. At least not anymore. I suppose I did enjoy it at one time. But after you hear the week's gossip at the first call, it's just a matter of hearing it repeated at each subsequent call. And you can imagine how dull that becomes."

Rowena gave a surprised laugh. "Is it the same in London?"

"Oh, no. It's much more interesting in London because there's so much more gossip."

Rowena settled back into the fine leather of the motor. "Where to first?"

"We are stopping at the Endicotts' first, because they won't be home. Then we will go to the Kinkaid's because they will be home and I quite like Donald Kinkaid's new wife and it will make her feel honored that I visited. After that we will be going to the Billingslys', which is quite a long drive, but Edith is my friend and we have a few things to discuss."

“I was unaware that Lord Billingsly lived so close.”

“They don’t, actually. A visit by carriage would have been impossible. It takes us almost two hours by car but the other calls are on the way there, so it breaks up the drive quite nicely.”

Aunt Charlotte didn’t miscalculate a single detail. The Endicotts were not home, so they left their car and made their way to the Kinkaid’s. The new Mrs. Kinkaid was droll and pretty and properly awed by Lady Summerset. And she was almost twenty years younger than the former Mrs. Kinkaid, who, Aunt Charlotte confided later, had been a bit militant.

Rowena giggled at this last bit and Aunt Charlotte gave her a rare smile. “It’s true. This new Mrs. Kinkaid will make Donald a good wife and will be able to give him children.” She reached under the seat and brought out a red velvet pillow with gold silken tassels. “I suggest you rest, dear. We have almost an hour before we get to Eddelson Hall.”

Rowena laid her head back, puzzling over her aunt’s behavior. She had never seen the stately Lady Summerset this engaging or forthright before, especially not with her, and Rowena wondered why her aunt had asked her to come today instead of Elaine. Had she genuinely been worried about her, or—as was often the case with her aunt Charlotte—did her aunt have some hidden motive?

She must have dozed off, because the next time she opened her eyes they were parked in front of a grand mansion that had to be Eddelson Hall. Eddelson wasn’t nearly as large as Summerset, but what it lacked in size it made up for in charm. The two circular towers that flanked the front of the home were almost completely covered in ivy and there were so many mullioned windows at the front of the house that it looked as if the walls were made of glass rather than brick.

The butler met them at the front door and took their card. Bidding them to wait, he took the card to where his mistress was apparently waiting in the sitting room. Rowena wanted to ask her aunt whether she found this kind of formality unbearably stupid, but she didn’t want to overstep and shatter the sudden warmth that had sprung up between them.

The butler reappeared almost immediately and they followed him through exquisitely charming rooms decorated and furnished in a French country style, which always appeared far more comfortable than it actually was.

The butler announced them and Rowena found herself involved in a flurry of introductions. Besides Lady Billingsly, four other women were present—society matrons who apparently lived for tea at the Billingslys on Tuesdays. Rowena had always disliked this kind of superficial social chat and suddenly began to regret taking her aunt up on her invitation. Though in reality, it had been more of command than an invitation.

“Miss Buxton!”

Rowena turned in relief when she heard Sebastian call her name. “Lord Billingsly, how wonderful to see you again.”

He took her outstretched hand and bent over it briefly. “How are your sister and Elaine?” he asked.

“They are doing well, thank you for asking.”

Lady Billingsly nodded at them approvingly. “Why don’t you young people go for a walk in the winter garden while we catch up on our gossip? It’s not raining, is it?” She looked around as if daring anyone to say it was raining. No one did.

Sebastian held his arm out and with relief, Rowena took it. She had endured just about as much small talk as she could handle and felt that if one more pinched-mouthed matron asked how she and her sister were holding up, she would scream.

Eddelson had a mellow quality that Summerset, in all its grandeur, would never achieve. They walked past a pair of open pocket doors that showed a rich, warm library inside with a crackling fire, shelves full of haphazardly placed books, and oversized pieces of leather furniture.

Sebastian caught her gaze as they walked past it. He smiled. "My father spent his summers at his grandfather's lodge in Scotland. I think he copied the library down to the volumes of books and the fireplace poker. It's my favorite room in the house."

She smiled as they walked out the door and into one of the extensive gardens that surrounded the house. Rowena remembered the stolen glances he and Prudence had shared and had often wondered about Sebastian's feelings for Prudence, and hers for him. Of course, when Prudence fled with the footman, all of her conjecture had come to nothing.

While Sebastian still made the occasional call to Summerset, he was not the same lighthearted young man Rowena had met last autumn.

"I miss her, you know," Sebastian said.

Startled, she glanced sideways at him. He nodded his head toward a gravel path that wound its way through a stand of fir trees. She followed his lead, wondering whether he had brought her to this quiet corner of the garden to confide in her. Maybe he needed to talk to someone.

They rounded a corner of slender silver pines that were interspersed with granite obelisks. If he wanted to talk, he seemed in no hurry to begin and waited until they had reached a small frozen fountain before speaking again.

"Do you hear from Prudence quite often, then?"

Rowena's heart gave a little pang. His voice held a note of loneliness that Rowena recognized. "Not very often." Then she gave a harsh little laugh. "Not at all, actually, though Vic has finally heard news of her."

They came to a bench and both sat as if by accord. "She is still angry with you, I take it?"

"I ruined everything when I brought her to Summerset as our lady's maid. I never thought it would last for long, and I never could have imagined that she'd truly be treated as a servant . . . I don't know what I believed, but I know it was all too real for Prudence and she was dreadfully unhappy." Rowena didn't tell him that she hadn't been completely honest with Prudence and Victoria about her uncle letting the London home go, but then, she didn't have to. Sebastian had been present when Prudence had discovered they had no home to return to and that she was trapped at Summerset.

Rowena stared at the ice covering the small fish pond. She knew how those fish felt, trapped underneath the ice and waiting for the thaw.

"She never said anything to me. I spoke to her after you and she argued that night. Did you know that Sebastian looked over at her, his dark eyes questioning."

She shook her head. "No."

"Outside. Under the trees. She'd lost her hat." He fell silent for so long that Rowena wondered whether he was done with the conversation, but then he continued. "She was going to take a job as a companion for an acquaintance of mine. I thought—" He stopped then and looked up at the dead gray sky for a moment. "I thought I'd found a way to make her happy . . . I thought we had an understanding. Apparently, we didn't."

Rowena sighed, wondering if he knew whether Pru was also the daughter of the former Earl of Summerset. Not that this would make a bit of difference. No one of their class would accept a marriage between an earl and the illegitimate daughter of a maid, regardless of who fathered the child. She glanced sideways at Sebastian, wondering whether she should tell him. No. She wouldn't betray Prudence further.

"We should be getting back," she said gently.

He nodded absently, and as they started back slowly toward the house, she offered that Victoria had told her that Prudence was living in London and seemed to be well and happy.

"Well, that's something," he said.

"I'm hoping she will forgive me someday," Rowena said, with a catch in her voice.

He squeezed her arm. "You three were like sisters. I'm sure she won't stay angry for long."

~~They walked back into the house, where Aunt Charlotte was gathering her things. "Oh, good. You're~~
back. We were just about to send a maid for you."

"Will you be going back to the university?" Lady Summerset asked Sebastian as she wrapped her wool cape around her shoulders.

"Actually, I'm all finished. I started a term before Colin, so I finished before he did."

"Oh, really?" Lady Summerset placed her hand on his shoulder and smiled up at him in appeal. "You mustn't be a stranger. I'm sure both Elaine and Rowena would love to have you come to dinner sometime, even if Colin can't make it. Wouldn't *you*, Rowena?"

Startled, Rowena nodded. "Of course." She caught an arch look between her aunt and Sebastian's mother and wondered what it meant.

On the long journey home, Rowena puzzled over the conversation she and Sebastian had in the garden. Had he harbored feelings for Pru? Maybe. But now that Prudence had married, it didn't really matter, did it?

CHAPTER

TWO



Prudence looked around their flat, wondering yet again how she was supposed to live in two and a half rooms and a single water closet. Then she berated herself. They were lucky to have the WC and even luckier to be out of the flea-ridden boardinghouse where they had been living since they had arrived in London over a month ago.

She wasn't sure what she'd thought they would do when they'd first stepped off the train from Summerset. She was so used to having someone else in charge that it took her a few moments to realize that her new husband, so confident around motors and animals, was completely out of his element in the teeming mass of people that made up Camden Town, London. It was up to her to collect their luggage and find a boardinghouse, up to her to find a flat near the Royal Veterinary College, and to find out what the requirements of attendance were.

Andrew had almost quit right then. "We don't have that much money!" he'd cried out. "That's a bloody fortune."

Quietly, she let him know that *she* had enough money, and if they lived frugally and brought in some extra money here and there, they would be able to make it work.

"I'd be living off my wife," he scoffed, and Prudence couldn't help but agree.

"But then for the rest of our lives, you'll be a veterinarian and I'll be living off *you*," she told him briskly and he'd relented, seeing her logic. He didn't much like it and Prudence knew it would rankle, but she would be careful not to make an issue of it. Besides, she thought with the new, hard practicality she was developing, they really had very little choice.

Now Mrs. Tannin stood with her hands on her hips and sniffed. "Sir Philip wouldn't like this at all," she said.

Prudence had known bringing the housekeeper here from her old home would be a mistake. This entire flat would fit in Sir Philip's study in the Mayfair mansion, but Prudence was no longer Sir Philip's daughter and mansions were no longer a part of her present. Or her future, for that matter.

"Sir Philip is gone and my husband and I have to live within our means."

"But surely Miss Rowena and Miss Victoria wouldn't want you living in squalor . . ."

"Mrs. Tannin!" Hurt, Prudence drew herself up to her full height. It wasn't much, but she towered over Mrs. Tannin, who was as small as Victoria. "Pray remember that this is my home now, and it isn't squalid or dirty. It's clean and bright and very close to the Royal Veterinary College, where my husband will be attending. It's just small is all." She didn't mention that it was one of four flats situated above a greengrocer. The ever-present earthy scent of potatoes told that tale.

Mrs. Tannin subsided. Had Prudence been able to retrieve all of her things from her old home without help, she would have done so. Carl, the footman, was there to carry some of the heavier items, but she wanted Mrs. Tannin to supervise just to make it plain that Prudence hadn't taken anything that wasn't hers. She didn't want the Earl of Summerset to accuse her of stealing. She had been lucky to get inside and retrieve some of her belongings before the new family took over the house and perhaps denied her access to them.

"My apologies," the older woman finally said. "It's just that I don't understand any of this. Sir Philip died

the family moves away to the estate, and you return a scant three months later, married to a man who ~~excuse me, isn't a good match for you, and living in a flat in Camden Town. It's hard for a body to get her arms around, that's all.~~

Prudence took a deep breath, fighting to keep down her rising temper. She reminded herself how kind this woman had been to her mother.

"Mrs. Tannin. I believe it's your high regard for me that makes you say such things, but remember that my mother was a governess. I have no inheritance, no title, and no blood ties to aristocracy." Prudence's lips tightened for a moment as she remembered that she did indeed have illegitimate ties to the family that had brought her up, but she firmly put that out of her mind. "I was taken to Summerset as a lady's maid and was made to feel as though my presence was a contamination. I have done the very best I can considering the circumstances."

"Not by the girls, surely?" Mrs. Tannin cried, her hand at her heart. Mrs. Tannin looked upon the motherless Buxton girls as beyond reproach, and Prudence decided not to tell her that Rowena was responsible for a good many of her troubles.

"Of course not," she said tersely. "Now can you help me move this table over by the stove? It may fit if we put it cross-ways."

After Mrs. Tannin had gone, Prudence looked at the trunks and pieces of furniture with dismay. She thought she had only brought a few personal items that were given to her especially, but in her small living area, they looked incongruous, not only for their size but for their quality. She had brought a small card table to use as a dining table, but even though it looked tiny at the Mayfair home, it barely fit in the small room that served as the kitchen, dining room, and main living area of the family. The bedroom, oddly enough, was the same size as the kitchen and living area. It was located at the back of the flat, behind the kitchen, and in the front, a small half-room made up the sitting room. Because they lived in a corner flat, the kitchen/living area had two large windows along one wall, and the small sitting room had three windows with a window seat that occupied half the room. There was barely space for her small wing-backed rose-prince chair. After spreading a pink and white shawl over a trunk for a table and placing the gaudy standing lamp left by the previous tenant in the corner, almost every available square inch of the sitting room was taken.

She picked up a tablecloth and flicked it over the card table. A piece of paper fluttered from out of the folds. Prudence's heart caught. Victoria's letter. She picked it up and scanned the lines again. At first, she had been undecided as to whether to answer it or not. Clearly, she couldn't tell anyone at Summerset about her present living conditions. In spite of her bravado with Mrs. Tannin, her new home was cramped, confining, and common, and she didn't want either Vic or Ro to know of her exact circumstances. She set the letter on the mantel behind the coal stove. Later. She would figure that out later. She had enough on her mind.

She pushed the other trunks into the back bedroom, trying not to look at her bed as she did so. She and Mrs. Tannin had hired two men off the street to unload it and haul it up the narrow stairs for them. It was large enough for two, but the fine virginal white and blue feather quilts looked strangely out of place in the plain bedroom. Maybe because the quilts had belonged to another life, one that would be ending tonight.

Her husband had been curiously reluctant to start their married life on the narrow bed provided at the boardinghouse. Not that Prudence disagreed with him—indeed, she was grateful for his scruples. To accommodate the crush of people coming in from the country to work in the city, tiny rooms had been further split up by sheets acting as makeshift walls, strung between beds. They were put into a room with two other married couples, one of whom had no qualms about committing the physical act of marriage with other people within spitting distance.

Her face flamed upon remembrance of the unfamiliar noises issuing from the other side of the sheet. She understood from Andrew's stillness next to her that he, too, had heard and interpreted the sounds. She laid

beside him for several weeks, disconcertingly conscious of the way his strong form pressed next to hers and how the hair on his arm felt against her cheek as he held her. Her face flushed. She'd only felt that butte melting in the center of her middle once before and as it wasn't with her husband, it shamed her to think of it. It also shamed her that the man in question didn't have to touch her to make her feel that way.

Prudence had always wondered what would come next. She and Rowena had held a few whispered conversations after a trip to a farm to buy a new horse for Sir Philip, but these had always ended in embarrassed giggles. For all Sir Philip's liberal ideas, sex education for his daughters was not one of them.

She pressed her hands against her heated cheeks. Tonight, she would be sharing this bed with Andrew and there would be no one to stop the inevitable. The thought left her both thrilled and anxious. How would she know what to do?

She jumped guiltily when she heard the key in the lock. Was it that time already?

She hurried into the main room just as Andrew stepped through the open door. He filled up the doorway and the room with his height, one of the reasons he had been selected to be a footman at Summerset Abbey. His hazel eyes crinkled into a tired smile when he saw her. They might not have consummated the marriage yet, but she had no doubts about his love for her. She only hoped that in time she would grow to feel the same way.

He caught her with one arm around her waist and pulled her close and she gave him a shy kiss. At first she'd been taken aback by his easy physical affection with her. She knew the Buxtons loved one another deeply, but it wasn't in them to be that demonstrative. Somehow in that mean little farmhouse where he'd grown up, he'd learned to give and receive love more easily than the aristocrats in their Mayfair mansion. After her initial shock, she grew to rather like it. He never failed to make her feel special.

"Where did you work today?" she asked him. Andrew had found a place that hired workers on a daily basis. He was picking up some extra work a few days a week when he wasn't studying.

"Down at the docks."

She looked in dismay at his dirty clothing. She had learned this morning that the laundry had to be done downstairs and then hung to dry either out the back window or on a line in the cellar. She didn't want to admit to him that she'd never done washing before and didn't have the first idea of how to go about it. At the boardinghouse, they had just paid to have it done, as there were no facilities. He had been aghast at her insistence upon changing clothes every day, and she soon realized that she would spend all their money on washing if she continued that habit. Reluctantly, she had begun wearing her blouses and skirts for several days at a time and found that it really didn't make much of a difference. She wondered how many other trappings of her former life she'd discover to be completely frivolous.

His eyes swept their small apartment. "You've done a nice job. It looks very different." The neutral sound of his voice stung.

"I know it's a bit crowded, but I just wanted to get as many of my things as I could before the new tenants moved in." Her voice sounded apologetic to her own ears, which was silly. Why wouldn't she want to save her own possessions?

"I thought everything had been taken to Summerset?" He took off his jacket and handed it to her.

She hung it up on a peg next to the door and answered him quietly. "Nothing of mine. I suppose Lord Summerset never intended for me to stay for any length of time." She paused a moment to absorb the hurt and then continued. "I left several trunks of clothing in the attic that I supposed I wouldn't need right away. I can send for them later."

"Righto. It's not like we'll be invited to any balls anytime soon."

His voice was light, but Prudence detected a bitterness underneath. "It's just as well," she answered, trying to keep the hurt out of her voice. "I can't imagine trying to puzzle out how to press an evening jacket."

anyway. Would you like some tea?"

"Aye." He squeezed her arm lightly as she moved past him, and she knew he was sorry for his remark. She couldn't help wondering, though, whether this was to be a part of their marriage from here on out, the envious contempt of her old life. Well, she wasn't going to apologize for it.

"I'm famished, too. Did you have a chance to bring in any groceries?"

She put the teakettle on and flushed. "I haven't had a moment. I was busy getting everything packed up and then moved over here and then unpacked again. I thought I could run down to the pub and pick up some cottage pie. Just for tonight," she added quickly at the look on his face. She knew he thought she was spendthrift, and she really was trying to be thrifty. It was just a whole different way of managing things. Plus, this would buy her one more day before she had to confess to him that she didn't even begin to know how to cook. She cringed as she imagined the disappointment on his face when she eventually revealed her complete lack of skills as a homemaker. A few weeks into their marriage and she was already scrambling to cover up her shortcomings as a wife.

He sat in a small, dainty satin tufted chair that had once sat in front of the fireplace in her bedroom. She had thought it perfect near the stove, but it looked ridiculous now with her husband's long body draped over it.

"Oh, Lord. I forgot how tall you are. I'm sorry. Let's move the old chair out of the bedroom and put it next to the stove."

He glanced down at himself with a wry grin. "It is rather small," he agreed as he carried it through the kitchen to the bedroom to exchange it for the old club chair that had been in the flat when they arrived. "This isn't really good for much of anything but looking pretty."

"Kind of like your wife," Prudence said under her breath.

"What was that?"

"Nothing." Prudence took him his tea as he made himself comfortable in the club chair.

He handed her the money he had made that day and she stared at it blankly. "My ma always kept the money in a cracked cup in the cupboard. Maybe we should do something like that with the money that doesn't go in the bank."

She nodded and stuck the coins into a white glass vase that sat on their dining room table. A fire engine went clanging past them and Andrew jumped. "Not sure if I'll ever get used to that."

"You will." She sat down at the dining room table, tea in hand, and tried hard to think of something to say to him. She'd married him because he was one of the kindest people she'd met during a time when nearly everyone treated her cruelly. She firmed her chin. This would work. Perhaps her marriage had been impetuous, but she hadn't gone into it blindly. She'd chosen him for his thoughtfulness and because he had once fought for her publicly, damning the consequences to himself. "Tomorrow I'm going to go and get some provisions. I set up my dressing table in the corner of the bedroom by the windows. Maybe you could study there? That is, if you don't mind studying at a white and gold desk with pink flowers on it."

She grinned at him and he laughed, dispelling some of the tension in the room. "I think I'll manage. As far as I know, Euclid and Virgil don't care a whit about where they are studied, as long as they are studied."

One of Prudence's biggest surprises was how educated the farm boy turned footman actually was. He'd grown up working the land but had snuck away often to help the local animal doctor, who had mentored him and lent him books. Prudence had a wider knowledge in some things, such as politics, current events, and English literature, but in science, mathematics, and geography, he left her far behind. On Sundays, they had taken to going to a tea shop, reading the newspaper together and dissecting every article, one by one.

Perhaps while she was out tomorrow she might find a cookbook that would rescue her, she thought while waiting for their cottage pie. The pub was just down the street from their flat, and Prudence sat in the back

room next to a door discreetly marked *Ladies' Entrance*. The large mirror behind the bar was cracked in several places and the red velvet stools showed tufts of white cotton through the worn spots. She had given her order to the tired-looking woman who worked the ladies' area. Prudence looked around with interest. The male half of the bar bustled with men getting off work, while in the small back room only a few "working" women were in attendance.

A group of young women about Prudence's age pushed through the ladies' door, giggling and chatting. All were dressed in plain dark skirts that came to the ankle, and white blouses under their winter coats, which they soon removed in the heated pub. All wore their hair pinned back neatly, with no-nonsense hats sitting straight on their heads. Prudence tried not to stare at them as they called for ale. The tired servingwoman picked up a bit when they came in. "You'll be the death of me, you gaggle of geese," she teased. "You should all be home taking care of your mas instead of wearing out my feet."

"Ah, you love us, Mary, admit it," a lilting voice teased.

Prudence sat up. She knew that voice . . . She turned and stared at the table they had taken, trying to see who it was.

"Miss Prudence!"

Suddenly a skinny redheaded girl detached herself from the group and ran toward Prudence. The girl wrapped her arms around her in a quick hug before jumping back. "Oh, I'm sorry, miss!" she said, her face turning red beneath her freckles. "I was just so surprised to see you."

"Katie! What are you doing here? Mrs. Tannin said you had left and gotten a job in an office."

The girl smiled proudly. "Yes. Thanks to Sir Philip, I was able to get through secretarial school and got a fine office job."

The girls behind her hooted. "Katie still thinks it's a fine job," one of them said, laughing.

"That's because she's still new," another one said.

"Well, it's better than wiping posh arses all day, if you ask me," one of them said, giving Prudence a bold stare.

Prudence flushed, feeling as if she were back in the servants' hall at Summerset, being ridiculed for her high-class upbringing. Bigger that. She'd probably had a happier childhood than most of these women had even dreamed of having. She'd not regret it just because her privileged childhood meant she now fit in nowhere. She straightened her shoulders and looked down her nose at the woman with the black eyes until the busybody looked away. She turned back to Katie. "So you like your job? Do you live near here?" She hugged Katie back, tears stinging her eyes. She had always been friendly with Katie. Unlike at Summerset, servants were treated as beloved and respected employees in Sir Philip's home. Prudence wasn't close with them the way Victoria was, but suddenly she was gladder to see Katie than she could possibly say.

Katie nodded. "I moved here with my mother after I got the new job so I could be closer to work. Mum was finally able to give up working, so now she keeps house for me and my girlfriends who rent rooms from us. It's a good deal all the way around. But what about you? What are you doing in Camden Town, or here, for that matter?" Katie suddenly seemed aware of her surroundings and was shocked to find Miss Prudence here, even if she and her friends frequented such a place.

"My husband is going to be attending the Royal Veterinary College as soon as he passes the examination. We are in Camden because it's close to his school." She didn't add that here her husband could pick up odd jobs when they needed them. It was deeply instilled in her that as a lady she should never talk about money except with her husband.

The server handed Katie a mug of beer on her way to the table behind her and Katie took a drink. "Fantastic! How quickly things change, eh, miss? I'd have never figured you for a Camden Town housewife . . . no offense, miss."

Prudence laughed and wondered why there were tears under the laughter. "None taken, Katie. I actually don't know the first thing about being a housewife in Camden Town or anywhere else for that matter. I can't cook, or sew, or even do laundry."

Katie's eyes widened. "I never thought of that. You're like a babe, aren't you? Tell you what, I'll send you to my mum and she'll take care of you. Teach you all that stuff."

Relief of the load pressing down on her lightened her so much that she felt as if she were going to float away. "Would she, really?"

"Yes, I think she gets bored by herself all day."

The servingwoman handed Prudence the cottage pie in the big bowl Prudence had brought for it.

"Mary, can I get a pencil and paper?" Katie wrote the address down and gave it to her. "You drop it tomorrow and see how happy my mum is to help. I believe she thinks I'm a lost cause."

"Thank you so much, Katie."

As Prudence hurried back to the flat, she wondered how to confess to Andrew about her need for housewifery lessons. Her stomach began to tie in knots as once again she imagined how the conversation would unfold as Andrew realized that his new bride had never even made a simple meat pie, that she was just as uppity as the other servants at Summerset purported her to be. Perhaps she could delay revealing those shortcomings to him for now . . . After all, he was already fulfilling his promise to her to support them while pursuing his studies, and she couldn't bear the thought of letting him down so early in their marriage.

Andrew had bathed while she was out and wore a soft, loose-fitting white cotton shirt and trousers. His feet were bare and his hair, which he always wore a bit longer than most men, but not as long as an aesthete might, curled damply around his neck. He stood in front of her, his hazel eyes warm and caressing. Wordlessly, she handed him the bowl of cottage pie and moved to take down the dishes. He ate with gusto, seemingly absorbed in his food.

"This is good," she finally remarked, desperate to break the silence.

"Yes." His eyes met hers and then shifted away.

He's as nervous about tonight as I am, she thought in surprise. The realization eased some of her anxiety. "Would you like another helping?"

He shook his head and she put the leftover pie in the icebox. Silently, she cleared the table and washed their plates while he added more coal to the stove. They did their nightly chores even though it was too early to go to bed. When there was nothing left to do, Prudence grabbed her nightdress and darted into the wardrobe closet. Her face flamed in embarrassment, but she would not, could not, change in the bedroom. What if he came in?

She took her hair down and brushed it until it hung like dark silk down her back. When she could think of no other reason to linger, she opened the door and stepped into her bedroom. Andrew had diffused the gaslight until it cast a soft glow over the room. She blinked and her pulse raced as she saw him standing next to the bed. He had removed his shirt and even in the low lighting she could see the muscles in his chest and arms, deeply etched from a lifetime of labor.

Her mouth went dry.

Then, still silent, Andrew held out his arms. She only hesitated for a moment. More than anything else, Andrew made her feel safe, as if he were a harbor at which she could moor to escape the unexpected stormy seas of her life. *I can do this*. He scooped her up into his arms and held her close for a moment before gently laying her on the bed. As he bent over her, Sebastian's face floated to her mind for a fraction of a second before she banished it. She'd made her choice. She ignored the sound of her own heart hammering in her ears and reached up to touch his face. "Andrew," she said softly. "Andrew."

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