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## CHAPTER ONE



Papa, the post has arrived," Rosalind Treadwell called down the corridor of the two-story stone cottage. She set her tea tray on a niche table near the front door and picked up the three letters left earlier by a message boy. A smile crept across her lips as she read the name scrawled on a large yellowed envelope. "Lord Remington has written. Papa, you've had a letter from Sir Arthur!"

Her father, Lord Buxton, appeared in the corridor, his maroon, paisley-print dressing gown hanging to his ankles. "Has the post arrived, Rosalind?" he shouted. "Have I had a letter from Arthur?"

"Yes, Papa! I have it here." Setting the mail on the tea tray, Rosalind shook her head. Her father was growing more hard of hearing by the day. The doctor had recommended the purchase of an amplifying ear trumpet. But Lord Buxton refused to consider the extravagant expense. He informed his daughter that the horn would be a nuisance, and it would make him look foolish besides.

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Rosalind felt she would far rather sit beside the fire and have a nice chat with her father—no matter how foolish he looked with an ear trumpet—than shout back and forth to him all day long. She lifted the tray and hurried back down the long hallway toward the drawing room. The autumn chill had crept along the uncarpeted granite floors of the old house, and she found herself wishing she had worn wool stockings.

“Where is Moss?” Lord Buxton grumbled as his daughter carried their morning tea into the room. “Why have you brought the tea? Didn’t I ring for Moss? I’m certain I did.”

“This is Tuesday, Papa,” Rosalind said loudly. “Mrs. Moss always visits her son on Tuesdays.”

“And she leaves you to bring the tea? That is a dreadful situation. Appalling.” The elderly viscount seated himself in his chair beside the crackling fire and stretched out his legs. His long white nightgown barely covered his thin ankles, and the soles of his house slippers were worn through. “I wonder if the post has arrived. Did you think to look on the niche table in the corridor, my dear?”

Settling into the chair across from her father, Rosalind handed him the three envelopes. “You’ve had a letter from Sir Arthur.”

“Aha. And I shall tell you who wrote these letters directly. Now let me see, let me see.” He dug his spectacles from the pocket of his dressing gown and set them on his nose. “By George, I’ve had a letter from Arthur at last! And this one is from our barrister, Mr. Linley. Oh, dear, I hope it’s not bad news.”

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Rosalind sighed as she poured the steaming tea into their cups. When Mr. Linley wrote, it was *always* bad news. Through a series of disastrous events, the estate had fallen on very hard times. Lord Buxton had been forced to sell off much of the land that had been in his family for generations. After his wife's death, he had moved his only child out of the grand manor house and into a large gamekeeper's cottage nearby, which was easier to heat and didn't require as many servants. Not many months ago, he had been compelled to discharge the whole staff save Mrs. Moss, the housekeeper, who had been with the family since her own childhood. Rosalind feared it would not be long before Mr. Linley suggested they sell the paintings and statuary that were all that remained of the Buxton wealth and legacy.

"I can't make out this name," Lord Buxton said, passing his daughter a small white envelope. "The hand is quite ill formed, don't you think? Obviously not an Eton boy. We were taught good penmanship in my day. Well, what does it say?"

Rosalind studied the writing. "He's got your title right, anyway, Papa. The Right Honorable the Viscount Buxton."

"Good, good." Her father was opening the letter from his oldest and dearest friend. "I wonder what Artie has to say. I hope his gout hasn't got the better of him."

"Papa, do you know a Sir Michael Stafford? A baronet from London?"

"Oh, dear. He's been unable to go to his club since Thursday last. The doctor gives him little hope for a reprieve. Poor Artie."

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Rosalind opened the baronet's letter. "Shall I read this aloud, Papa?"

"Indeed, my dear. I shall take a cup of tea and say a prayer for poor Arthur. Gout. How very distressing."

"My lord,'" Rosalind read as loudly as she could without shouting. "'I trust this letter finds you in good health. I pray the enclosed introduction from your friend, Lord Remington—'"

"Remington? Does this chap know Artie?"

"Apparently so, Papa. Sir Arthur has written him an introduction." She handed her father the note. Before he could interrupt again, she skimmed the remainder of the letter. "He wishes to come and meet you."

"Artie? But he's laid up with gout. Can't even get to his club, poor chap."

"Not Sir Arthur. The baronet, Sir Michael Stafford. He has written that he will arrive on Tuesday morning—" She caught her breath. "But that is today! He comes from London today, Papa. And you are in your dressing gown."

"Arthur has gout, my dear," her father pronounced very clearly, as though it were his daughter who was hard of hearing. "He cannot travel. I'm quite sure of it. There must be some mistake."

Rosalind let out her breath and took the introduction from her father's lap. "Lord Remington has written that Sir Michael Stafford is a man of excellent repute, vast wealth, and prominent social connection. He owns a stocking factory in Manchester and a lace manufactory in

Nottingham. He is a fine gentleman and most worthy of our acquaintance."

"Hurry with our paintings, did you say?"

"No, *worthy* of our . . . oh, read it yourself, Papa!" Exasperated, Rosalind put the letter in her father's hands and stood up. "How can we be expected to entertain this man today? Moss is away, and you are in your dressing gown, and we've only enough coal to keep one fire lit. The parlor is far too cold, and Papa, you're still wearing your nightcap. It's ten o'clock in the morning!"

"Clearly a parvenu," the viscount announced, setting the letter on the tea tray. "Baronet, ha! This Sir Michael Stafford most assuredly got his title by loaning someone a good deal of money. A peer, no doubt. Perhaps a royal. Shame the way things are going these days. Factory owners buying titles. Great houses falling to ruin. Where is Moss? This tea is quite cold, Rosalind, and you know how I feel about cold tea."

"Papa, you must take off your nightcap!" Rosalind reached for the offending item just as the knocker sounded at the front door. "Oh no, that will be the baronet, and we shall make a spectacle of ourselves. What if he has brought his wife? She'll tell everyone in London, and . . . oh, me!"

"Hot tea? Yes, indeed, that would be lovely, my dear." The viscount held out his cup. "Do you suppose Moss has returned from visiting her son?"

Rosalind grabbed the white cotton cap from her father's head and tugged the edges of his dressing gown together. "Sir Michael Stafford is here!" she shouted. "Sir Michael!"

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Trying to suppress the edge of panic that rose inside her chest, she smoothed down her skirt as she hurried out of the drawing room. Although this man might be just a parvenu who had bought himself a title, he was a baronet all the same. He was a guest, too, and they hadn't had a visitor at Bridgeton Cottage in many months. Moss would not be back until this afternoon, and that meant Rosalind had only stale biscuits to offer, and even worse—the tea was cold!

Glancing at her reflection in a mirror as she raced for the door, Rosalind let out a groan. At best, her mass of curly brown hair was difficult to manage. Today, with the threat of rain, it positively had a life of its own. She pinched her cheeks, hoping to put some color into them, and turned the doorknob.

The gentleman standing in the morning mist might have stepped from an illustration in one of Rosalind's favorite novels. A dashing prince perhaps. Or a nobleman from some far-off land. Tall, elegantly dressed in a black frock coat, a white shirt, and a bright red ascot, he swept his top hat from his head. Thick, dark hair framed the bluest eyes Rosalind had ever seen. He had an aristocratic nose, finely formed lips, and a smile that seemed almost heavenly.

"Good morning," he addressed her, extending a gray-gloved hand to present his engraved card. "Sir Michael Stafford, at your service."

"Oh," was all she could manage.

"I have an appointment with Lord Buxton."

"I see, but . . ." She took the card. "But Lord Buxton is . . . he is occupied at the moment."

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"Then I shall be pleased to wait for him in the parlor. Will you be so good as to show me in?"

Before Rosalind could move, the man stepped around her and walked straight into the front room. She covered her cheeks with her hands for a moment, imagining what he must think of the frigid parlor with its tattered curtains and empty fireplace. Had the room even been dusted in years?

"Sir Michael," she said, coming up behind him, "I'm afraid this is not a good day for a visit."

"Why not?" he swung around, eyeing her in mild displeasure. "I sent word of my arrival some time ago. Please inform your master that I have come."

"Yes, sir. Of course." Mortified, Rosalind hurried out of the room and raced down the hall to the drawing room, where her father waited. Sir Michael believed she was a housekeeper! Oh, it might as well be true.

In the past years of hardship, she had lost all hope of marriage and a family of her own. Nearly thirty now, she had learned to take joy in serving her aging father's needs, playing the small pianoforte in the parlor, and reading the countless books that had been carted over from the manor house library. Rosalind knew she would end an old maid, sitting by the fire with Moss or some other helper at her elbow. If only she could be allowed that peaceful existence. Instead, she must bear the humiliation of displaying her father's poverty before this handsome man who had so much money that he had bought himself a title.

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"Papa," she cried as she burst into the drawing room. "He is here! Sir Michael Stafford has come. He wishes to speak to you. You must send a message telling him to go away. You must tell him you cannot see him today."

"Did you bring the hot tea, my dear?" Her father smiled peaceably. "If you will pop the cozy over the pot, I shall read you the letter from Arthur. He describes his gout in great detail. Such a dreadful situation. Do you know he cannot even go to his club?"

"Sir Michael Stafford!" Rosalind shouted at her father. "Stafford! He has come!"

"Thank you very kindly for the introduction, madam." The man himself strolled into the room and gave her a polite nod. Then he pointed to the mail on the tea table. "Lord Buxton, I see you received my letter. I trust it finds you in good health."

The viscount stood from his chair and gave his visitor a bow. "Stafford, is it? You know Lord Remington, I take it. Sir Arthur is a very good friend of mine. School chum, actually. Eton."

"Yes, sir. His son, William, is my closest companion."

"Aha." The viscount glanced at Rosalind for assistance.

"He knows Lord Remington's son!" she said, leaning toward him.

"Very good, very good. Do sit down, will you, Sir Michael?" Her father settled back into his chair, seemingly unaware that his white nightgown was showing again. "As you can see, we're a bit at sixes and sevens this morning. The housekeeper has gone out to visit her son, and the

tea is quite cold. Rosalind, will you fetch another pot, please? There's a good girl."

Sliding the tea tray from the table between the two men, Rosalind stole another glance at Sir Michael. Well, he might be handsome, but he was also very proud. He stared past her as if she didn't exist, his attention focused wholly on her father. What the man thought he could get out of Lord Buxton only he and God knew.

As she carried the tea tray down to the kitchen, Rosalind realized that, in fact, God was the one she must turn to in this situation. In all her rush, had she thought to address him? In the midst of the humiliation born of her own selfish pride, had she considered her heavenly Father's will?

Repentant, Rosalind stood beside the kitchen stove and closed her eyes. God had given her a job to do. In the years since her mother's death, her father's health had withered. Rosalind's only desire was to take care of the man who had given her life and home and security. Tattered curtains and dusty mantelpieces did not matter. A dearth of servants and parties and carriages did not matter. And handsome young baronets certainly did not matter.

"Father, forgive me," she prayed softly as the kettle began to sing. "It doesn't matter that Sir Michael believes I'm a servant, because in truth, I am. I am your servant, Lord, and I want to do whatever you ask of me."

As Rosalind carried the tray down the corridor, she felt a sense of peace settle over her heart. She remembered that she had long since made her peace with the path God had set before her. Her introduction into high society had been

brief and of little consequence, and she had learned that the privileges of wealth mattered not at all. What counted was family.

"India!" Sir Michael was shouting as Rosalind pushed open the parlor door. "I was brought up in India! By my uncle!"

Smiling, she set the tray on the table again. At least the man was a quick learner. It hadn't taken him long to realize he'd get nowhere using his practiced and gentlemanly tone of speaking. Setting out two fresh cups, she poured the tea and then stepped aside to let the poor man bellow his mission.

"India, did you say?" The viscount stirred a lump of sugar into his tea. "Silk and spices, eh? Tea and curry. The Raj and all that."

"Yes, sir!"

"And how did you meet Lord Remington, my boy? I don't recall Arthur was ever in India. No, I'm quite sure of it."

"Actually, I met his son at a party."

"Artie?" The viscount nodded. "Yes, indeed, Artie was my old schoolmate at Eton. A fine chap, hails from Devonshire, but I'm sure you knew that. By George, we had some jolly good times together, Artie and I. And how did you happen to meet Lord Remington?"

Rosalind feigned disinterest as she watched Sir Michael shift uncomfortably in his chair. The baronet clearly had a mission in coming to Bridgeton Cottage, but would he ever manage to accomplish it?

“Artie and I used to slide down the steps on a silver tray,” Lord Buxton said. “Good fun, eh? No, you could never have a warmer pair of chums than Artie and I. Well, with connections like that, my boy, you are in a fine position. Anyone who is a friend of Lord Remington is a friend of mine.”

Beaming, he took a sip of tea and smiled at his guest. The baronet attempted a returning grin. By now his face was slightly flushed, and the tips of his ears had gone bright red.

“Lord Buxton,” he said loudly, and then he cleared his throat. “Lord Buxton, I have come to speak with you about a personal matter.”

“Personal, eh? Well, then, go on, go on.”

The young man set down his teacup and adjusted his cravat. Then he leaned forward and shouted at the top of his lungs, “I have come to ask for your daughter’s hand in marriage!”

Rosalind let out a gasp and sank onto the nearest settee. For a moment, she couldn’t breathe. Certain she would faint, she grabbed the table next to her and clung to it for dear life.

“Marriage!” the man repeated, his blue eyes fixed on the viscount. “My lord, I will speak plainly. I have arrived at a time in my life when I feel it is prudent to select a wife. Lord Remington informed me that according to the original grant from the king, your estate and your title may fall to any of your heirs, whether male or female. Although I am landed and have a large fortune to my name, I have no

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family home nor any title that can be passed down. I propose, therefore, to marry your daughter, providing your estate with ample financial support and ensuring the continuation of your family's legacy."

Rosalind brushed a hand across her forehead. She had to breathe. She really must breathe!

"Do you understand me, Lord Buxton?" the young man shouted.

The viscount held up his hands, waving them slightly before his face. "I understand; I understand. You want my estate and my title for your heirs. In exchange, you will provide the comfort and social standing my daughter has never known."

"That is correct, sir."

"Well, it's quite a scheme, isn't it?"

"I prefer to think of it as an arrangement, sir. An arrangement for the benefit of both parties."

"Artie, eh? Good old Artie approves of it, does he? I suppose so, or he wouldn't have written the introduction." The viscount shook his head. "You'll have to give me a bit of time to think it over, of course. Could you come back next year, sir? Perhaps in the spring?"

"Next year? I have taken a room at the village inn, Lord Buxton. I planned to return for your answer tomorrow morning."

"No!" Rosalind cried, coming to her feet. "No, Sir Michael, you cannot come back tomorrow, and no, I shall not marry you. You must go away at once, sir, and never come here again!"

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"I beg your pardon?" The man stood. "Who are you? But I thought you were—"

"I am Miss Rosalind Treadwell, daughter of Lord Buxton, and we are quite happy without your offer of wealth and social standing. Our lives here are most content, sir, and I assure you an arranged marriage to a perfect stranger would suit neither my father nor myself."

Sir Michael stared at her, his blue eyes blazing. He said nothing for so long that Rosalind began to worry that her manners had been perceived as utterly deplorable. She cleared her throat.

"We do thank you, of course, Sir Michael," she said. "Certainly your intentions were honorable. And we do trust that your journey back to London will be—"

"Pardon my bluntness, but you live in a gamekeeper's cottage, Miss Treadwell." The man took a step toward her. "You have one fire burning, no household staff, and cold tea. How dare you refuse to consider my proposal?"

She felt as though she had been slapped. Anger flickered to life inside her. "I turn you away very easily, sir. Our circumstances are not so desperate as to compel us to throw our fortunes into the arms of a man we do not even know."

"Your circumstances are more than desperate, Miss Treadwell. Your family estate has been sold away piecemeal. Your family home lies crumbling to dust. You have no reason to hope for a future that includes anything but empty hearths and empty stomachs and cold tea."

"The tea is hot, sir!" Rosalind clenched her jaw. She

didn't like this man, didn't like his determination to rub her face in her poverty. If he were any sort of a gentleman, he would do all in his power to make her feel at ease.

"Yes, it is hot," he said, "because *you* went to the kitchen, and *you* heated the water, and *you* made the tea."

"Mrs. Moss is out."

"Miss Treadwell, I have come here to offer you the service of a hundred Mrs. Mosses and the pleasure of hot tea at the barest nod of your head. I offer you fine silk dresses, blazing fires, a feast at every meal, and shawls that do not have holes in them."

"Oh!" Rosalind covered the offending patch on the shawl she was wearing. "You, sir, are very rude."

"I am very reasonable, Miss Treadwell, and I cannot fathom why you refuse to be the same."

"Because I do not wish for wealth."

"And what do you wish for?"

"For a quiet life with my father. And I have that already."

He glanced at the chair where the elderly viscount sat studying the situation through his spectacles. "Miss Treadwell, your father is the rightful heir to a grand estate, and he is entitled to the company of fine society. Do you love him so little that you would keep him in a gamekeeper's cottage in his dressing gown?"

"He is happy here."

"Would he not be happier in the company of his friend, Lord Remington? Would he not be happier with a roaring fire, warm clothing, and a good meal in his stomach? I

have the means to provide your father with everything to which he is entitled—and more. I can restore the family home, fill the stables with the best horses, buy back much of the land that was sold away, and ensure that his line continues. You can have no possible objection to such a plan, Miss Treadwell.”

Rosalind studied her father. He would indeed enjoy the company of old friends. He deserved good medical care and comfort in his waning years. But to trust their future to a complete stranger? What if this man had some wicked aim behind his proposal? He spoke temptingly, but what did they know of him? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

“I do have an objection to your plan, Sir Michael,” she said. “Were my aim in life the attainment of money and position, I would find your offer impossible to refuse. But I long ago gave up all hope of those things. My only wish is to serve my father. I cannot be certain that your proposal would benefit him.”

“Why not?” he exploded. “I have told you what I will do for your father, and I have every intention of—”

“We do not know you, sir.”

“You have a letter of introduction from Lord Remington. I can provide fifty more letters that would say the same of me. I am reputable, honorable, held in high regard in polite society.”

“But we do not *know* you.” She glanced down at her hands for a moment before lifting her head and meeting his eyes. “I do not know you, sir.”

“But familiarity is the inevitable result of marriage, is it

not? You will learn that I like roast goose, and that I prefer to go calling on Thursdays, and that I do not enjoy playing at cards. You will come to know me in time, and I shall know you."

"That is not the sort of thing I long to know about a husband. Before I could commit my father's legacy and my own future into any man's hands, I would hope to know him far more intimately."

"I do not wish to be known intimately."

"And why is that?"

"Because . . . it is not my desire."

He looked uncomfortable for the first time, and Rosalind wondered if she had discovered his single area of vulnerability. Sir Michael Stafford had built himself wealth and power and esteem. He had purchased a title. By marriage to her, he planned to gain a legacy and heirs. Around himself he had constructed an impressive edifice of prestige.

But who lived inside that edifice? What sort of man was he? And most important: why was he so determined to keep himself hidden?

"In consideration of the fact that you have proposed a business connection between our two families, I am certain you cannot object to an interview," Rosalind said, moving toward him across the thin carpet. "Are your parents living, Sir Michael? Have you brothers and sisters?"

"I have no family. My parents died when I was quite young, and I was sent to India to live with my uncle. When he passed away, I was left a small inheritance upon which I built my fortune. All of this is common knowledge."

## BEHOLD THE LAMB

“And whom do you love the most in this world, sir?”

“Love? Well, I have many friends and acquaintances.”

He ran a finger around the inside of his collar. “I enjoy an active social life.”

“What is your greatest dream?”

“I’ve told you, have I not? An estate, a title that can be passed down to a son.”

“Do you like children, Sir Michael?”

“Well, certainly. Of course I do. Not to mention that I own seven dogs—three Irish wolfhounds, two spaniels, and two setters.”

Rosalind moved closer. “Are you a Christian?”

“Of course I’m a Christian. Everyone in England is a Christian. What sort of a question is that?” He took a deep breath. “Miss Treadwell, I can assure you, you have nothing to fear. Marry me, and you and your father will live in luxury and contentment for the rest of your days.”

“Do you believe contentment arises from luxury, sir?”

“Of course it does. Poverty cannot bring happiness.”

“Neither can wealth.”

“My money has brought me a great deal of happiness.”

“Has it?” Standing in front of him, she looked into his eyes—his disconcerting blue eyes. His noble stature and dashing elegance made her long to trust him. But she saw that his eyes belied his words. “True joy arises out of love, Sir Michael. Love for God. Love for family. Love for friends. I am happy already. You cannot give me that.”

He stared at her. “I see I was mistaken in coming here.”

I believed you would welcome my offer. Forgive me, Miss Treadwell. I wish you well."

"Good day, Sir Michael."

Rosalind steadied herself with a hand on the table as he turned away and started across the room. She had done the right thing, she knew. A life with a proud, unfeeling man who loved no one and wanted nothing of intimacy could bring only misery. She and her father would be warm and comfortable enough without his wealth. They could sell a statue and live for at least a year on the proceeds.

"Worked things out, have you?" Lord Buxton said as Sir Michael passed the fireplace. "Settled the details?"

"I beg your pardon, sir?" The man paused.

"The marriage to Rosalind. Have you set a date?"

"Your daughter will not have me, Lord Buxton. She prefers to continue her life with you in this cottage. My offer holds no interest for her."

"What? What are you saying, my good man? Speak up."

"She will not marry me!" he shouted.

"Oh yes she will." The viscount rounded on his daughter. "Won't marry him? What sort of nonsense is this, Rosalind? You most certainly will marry him."

"But, Papa, we know nothing about this man!"

"Artie recommends him highly. Brought up in India, what? A perfectly fine gentleman and the only offer of marriage you're likely to get." He grasped the lapels of his dressing gown. "My dear girl, do you think I would allow you to pass up the opportunity to better your circum-

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stances? I love you far too much to deprive you of what you deserve. No, indeed, you shall marry this man, and the sooner the better."

He turned to Sir Michael and took him by the hand. "Grand idea, young man. Good scheme—provides the best for all of us. Well done, well done. Congratulations."

The baronet eyed Rosalind. She stared back at him, praying that he would walk away.

"I shall leave for London tomorrow," he said. "My carriage will arrive here at ten sharp to collect you both. I shall arrange for a coach to collect your luggage and transport your lady's maid."

"We have a housekeeper," Rosalind said. "I do not employ a lady's maid."

"You do now." Sir Michael gave her a smile. "Good day, Lord Buxton. Good day, Miss Treadwell."