

## CHAPTER 1



“*W*hat in heaven’s name could they want with us?”  
Becky’s mama murmured as she gazed at the approaching curricule drawn by a pair of ebony horses.

“Oh, blast,” said her brother, Albert. “This can’t be good. If the lord of the manor has come to turn us out on our ears, I cannot be responsible for my actions.”

The way that Albert’s dark eyes flashed with anger filled Becky with alarm. In the past, her hotheaded brother had gotten into a few scrapes with other young men over various disputes, but it wouldn’t do for him to turn his angry fists on the landed gentleman now approaching. No, this wouldn’t do at all.

“Cool your heels, Albert,” said Ginny, Becky’s sensible sister. “The gentleman may be calling upon us for any number of reasons.”

A tense silence fell over the Wilson family. Whilst Ginny made a good point, indeed, not one of those present could think of a single reason why Thomas Markland might have to call upon them, barring the worst.

Could Albert be right? Was the gentleman paying them a call to inform them they must vacate the land? If so, Becky hadn’t the foggiest idea what would become of herself and her family. Since

her papa died two years ago, it had been a struggle to keep their allotted fields prospering, but she and her brothers and sisters had banded together with their mama, and they had managed to do just that.

Becky heard the familiar squeaky hinge of the door. She turned to find Emma and Sam, her younger brother and sister, emerge from the cottage to join the rest of the family. The five Wilson children adjusted their positions so that they were flanking their mother. Shoulder to shoulder and chins held high, they stood in proud defiance against their unwanted visitors like their ancestors surely had done for centuries.

When the curricle was but a mere half dozen yards away, Mr. Markland pulled back on the reins and the horses came to a halt. The handsome young gentleman beamed his boyish smile upon the assembled group, and lifted his hand in a wave.

“Well, this is quite a treat,” he said. “I shouldn’t have thought the whole family would be present to welcome us.”

“Hallo,” called the young lady seated next to him.

Becky couldn’t recall having seen her before. One thing was certain; she wasn’t a relation of Mr. Markland—at least not a close one. The gentleman’s sisters were both fair-haired with round cheeks, whereas this young lady had jet-black hair and prominent cheekbones.

The only logical conclusion was that the pair must be betrothed. If this were not the case, it would be most improper for them to be out riding together, un-chaperoned.

In any case, Becky and her family had far more to worry about than whether or not the son of the squire was balking custom by being seen out and about with a young lady. Becky glanced at her mama, at Albert and at Ginny, but judging by the blank expressions on their faces, they were just as unsure as she herself was in regards to what to say to their visitors.

Mr. Markland, however, seemed to be unconcerned with the tepid welcome he and his companion had received. He hopped out

of the carriage and then darted across to the other side to help the young lady alight.

She was a curious sort of girl. Although clearly a lady of noble birth, considering the expertly crafted embellishments on her luxurious silk dress, not to mention the flawless chignon and the bejeweled combs holding it in place, the young lady had a deportment unbefitting her status, and indeed her gender. The pair of them had a distinctive bounce in their steps as they came around from the other side of the curricule to join the Wilson family in front of the modest cottage.

"Mrs. Wilson, please forgive me for calling unannounced," Mr. Markland said with a bow.

"Think nothing of it, sir," Becky's mama said. Although her smile was genuinely warm, she couldn't hide the puzzlement in her eyes.

Mr. Markland's companion stepped forward until she was face to face with Becky.

"Good heavens, Thomas, you were right," she exclaimed. "It's like gazing into the looking glass."

"Of course I was right," he said with a laugh. "Surely there was no doubt?"

Becky turned to her mama, to Albert and to Ginny. The three of them wore identical expressions that belied their confusion, and would clearly be no help in deciphering what was going on.

She turned back to face the young lady standing before her. It was true. They did share a number of facial characteristics. In addition to the fact that they both had dark black hair, their eyes were almost an identical shade of blue, and both slanted upwards in the corner like a cat's. The slope of their noses was similar, and both had soft, full lips. The young lady, like Becky, was a great deal taller than most girls, and appeared to have similarly long limbs.

The sound of Albert's disgruntled murmurs captured Becky's attention.

"Now listen here—" he began.

"If you'll pardon me, sir," said Mrs. Wilson, effectively interrupting her son. "To what do we owe the honor of your visit?"

"Actually, I have a rather unusual proposition for you. Or to be more accurate, for your lovely daughter here," he said, gesturing to Becky.

"I'm afraid I don't understand," Mrs. Wilson said.

"Indeed. I think perhaps Clara had better explain it to you. Please allow me to present Lady Clara Prescott, one of my oldest and dearest friends."

"How lovely to make your acquaintance," Lady Clara said to Becky's mama.

One by one, Lady Clara greeted each and every member of the Wilson family with a degree of enthusiasm and warmth that was most unusual, considering the disparity of their social stations. Despite her overall confusion in regards to what was happening, Becky couldn't help but take a liking to the unconventional young lady.

Mrs. Wilson invited their distinguished guests into the cottage and asked them to take a seat. Because it was late on a Sunday afternoon, there was a nice pot of tea warming on the hearth. If their visitors had come to call on any day other than Sunday, they would have found the Wilson family hard at work in the fields or the barn, rather than enjoying their day of rest.

Once Mr. Markland and Lady Clara were seated round the heavy oak table, Mrs. Wilson set two steaming cups of black tea before the visitors and joined them, along with her three oldest children. With all the chairs in the cottage thus occupied, Sam and Emma hovered around the periphery of the room, bursting with curiosity in regards to the purpose of the visit.

Becky was struck by the incongruity of it all. Her home, which she had always regarded as plain but comfortable, suddenly seemed frightfully shabby. With their luxurious clothing and genteel airs, Mr. Markland and Lady Clara made their surroundings seem all the more rundown.

Glancing down at the tabletop, dingy and pockmarked from decades of wear and tear, Becky felt a wave of shame wash over her. And then she felt another wave of shame, but this one resulted from the guilt she felt for being ashamed of her status. Her family might have been poor, but they were good, honest, God-fearing people, which was the only thing that counted, really.

“Now,” said Mr. Markland, clasping his hands together before him. “I’m sure you’re all wondering why Lady Clara and I have come to pay you a visit this morning, and what sort of proposition we have in mind.”

“Oh, let me tell them, Thomas,” Lady Clara interjected. “It’s nothing to do with you, anyway.”

“By all means,” Mr. Markland said, throwing his hands up as if in surrender.

“Wonderful.” Lady Clara leaned forward on her elbows and directed her words at Mrs. Wilson. “Perhaps you’ve heard of the London season?”

Mrs. Wilson frowned slightly, and after a moment she said, “I can’t say that I have.”

“Well, it’s a terribly outdated tradition that the upper classes insist upon perpetuating,” she explained. “Shortly after Easter, all the unmarried young aristocratic ladies in England descend upon London to attend an endless number of parties, balls, theater performances, operas, dinners, sporting events and other excursions. The purpose of the season is to secure husbands. Most young ladies find the season to be great fun and terribly romantic, but personally, I find the concept of it to be mercenary and tiresome—surely the opposite of romantic.”

As it were, Becky thought it sounded positively magical. As agreeable as young Lady Clara appeared to be, Becky couldn’t help but feel a tinge of resentment towards her. She didn’t seem to have the slightest bit of gratitude for the privileged life she led.

“For years, I’ve been dreading the thought of attending the season myself,” Lady Clara continued, “and now that I’m eighteen,

I'm expected to attend. Sadly, there doesn't seem to be any possible way to get out of it. I've spent the last few months appealing to my mother and father, begging them not to force me to participate—or at least to allow me to put it off for another year. But neither of them would budge on the matter.”

“Lord and Lady Prescott still believe Clara here will one day become a proper lady,” Mr. Markland said with a barely concealed smile. “Hope springs eternal.”

“Oh, hush, windy-wallets,” said Lady Clara, reaching over to give Mr. Markland a playful slap on the arm. She turned back to Mrs. Wilson. “And so my fate was sealed. As gruesome as it seemed to me, I came to accept the fact that I would be forced to attend the season, and that there was no way out of it. But then something happened to change that. My mother was out for a ride on her favorite horse, Athena, one morning. I'm still a bit unclear on how it happened, but for whatever reason, Athena got spooked and took off like a bolt of lightning. Mother was thrown to the ground.”

“Good heavens,” Mrs. Wilson said. “Was she terribly hurt?”

Lady Clara nodded. “I'm afraid so. In addition to fracturing her wrist and her leg as well as a couple of ribs, she was concussed. As a result, Mother is laid up at Greenwood Hall and won't be mobile until the end of the season.”

“How awful,” Mrs. Wilson said under her breath. “We shall remember her in our prayers tonight.”

“You're very kind. Thank you,” Lady Clara said with a smile. “Now, although I would never in a million years wish such a terrible ordeal upon my dear mother, I can't help but be grateful for the opportunity that has arisen in the aftermath of the accident. Mother was, of course, planning on accompanying me to London to participate in the season, and now she is unable.”

“I see,” said Mrs. Wilson.

In truth, Mrs. Wilson did not see. Not one member of the Wilson family had the faintest idea what the curious noblewoman was on about, and why she was sharing the story of her mother's

accident with a family she had only just met. Becky stole a glance at her sister. Ginny's eyes were wide, mirroring the confusion that Becky felt.

"As soon as Mother had all her wits about her, she promptly wrote to my Aunt Georgina in London and made arrangements for her to sponsor me for the season," Lady Clara went on to say. "As luck would have it, I have never met my Aunt Georgina."

She paused then, to release a quiet giggle.

Mr. Markland shook his head as if to scoff at the silly girl. "Get on with it, would you, Clara? I'm sure Mrs. Wilson is keen to hear what you have in mind."

"Right," Lady Clara said, straightening her shoulders and composing herself. "A few days ago, I was bemoaning my fate to my friend Thomas here, and I mentioned how lovely it would be if I could send another young lady to London in my place. He immediately became thoughtful and pensive, and when I asked what was on his mind, he said perhaps such a scenario could be arranged. He mentioned that there was a family on his father's estate that had a daughter who bore a striking resemblance to me, and that it was worth asking if she might consider attending the season in my stead."

When she finished speaking, Lady Clara turned to Becky with a wide, warm smile. At last her intentions were clear.

Mrs. Wilson tilted her head to the side and opened her mouth to respond, but no words came out. Ginny and Becky exchanged a bewildered look. Sam and Emma tittered quietly in the background, although it was unclear whether they were laughing at the thought of their sister masquerading as a member of the aristocracy or simply to break the awkward tension that had suddenly descended upon the cottage. One member of the Wilson family, however, was not at a loss for words.

"Don't be preposterous," Albert said with an angry scoff.

"Pray tell, what's preposterous about my idea?" Lady Clara asked.

“Becky would be found out within moments,” he said. “And what would London society do to a simple country girl trying to pass herself off as a lady? I can’t even fathom the repercussions. I apologize for my harsh words, my lady, but your suggestion is patently absurd.”

Becky glared at her brother. She hadn’t known he regarded her as such a hopeless case. Simple country girl, indeed!

“I understand your concerns, my good man, but you’re forgetting that Clara isn’t expected to depart for London for over a fortnight,” said Mr. Markland. “This leaves us plenty of time to educate your sister in the rules of society and to shape her into a proper English lady.”

“A fortnight? I reckon you couldn’t make a lady out of Becky even if you had a year to do so,” Albert said.

No one spoke for several moments, and Becky felt her body grow rigid with anger and tension. How dare her brother speak so poorly of her in the presence of the squire’s son and his aristocratic companion!

“And what if she did get found out?” Mrs. Wilson spoke at last. “What would happen to her?”

“The most she would get is a proverbial slap on the wrist and a railway ticket back to County Durham,” said Mr. Markland. “There is no crime in impersonating a lady.”

“Particularly when the lady is on hand to testify that the girl was simply doing her a favor by attending events in her stead,” Lady Clara said. “If Rebecca should agree to participate, I intend to travel to London along with her as her maid.”

This assertion effectively rendered each and every member of the Wilson family positively speechless. The very idea of this elegant lady posing as a lowly servant was just as bewildering as the idea of Becky posing as a lady.

Lady Clara turned to Becky and graced her with a smile so warm that Becky couldn’t help but smile back.

“I know it’s a strange proposition, but I daresay it’s one that you



would find amusing,” she said. “Granted, certain members of society are sour and unpleasant, but so many others are kind and agreeable. Perhaps you don’t care about such things, but if you were to attend in my stead, you would spend the season bedecked in the finest of dresses and the most dazzling jewels, dining upon rich, sumptuous meals and imported delicacies, attending an endless stream of gay events and being courted by the most distinguished gentlemen in all the land. Many girls would cherish such an opportunity.”

Becky was among those girls. She felt herself slipping into the world of fantasy as she imagined herself wearing Lady Clara’s blue silk dress with the impeccable ribbon detailing and being whirled around the dance floor by some dashing young gentleman.

“In addition to a taste of luxury, we’ve come prepared to offer something a bit more substantial if Rebecca agrees to attend the season as Lady Clara,” Mr. Markland said. “I’m prepared to deed you the land you’re currently leasing: twelve acres of farmland along with the cottage, free and clear.”

Mrs. Wilson gasped, but she quickly recovered herself and asked, “Have you the authority to do so?”

Mr. Markland flashed her a boyish smile. “Not as such, but as you know, the estate will be mine upon my father’s passing. You have my word as a gentleman that the very moment I gain control, I will deed you the land.”

Mrs. Wilson said nothing, but her silence spoke volumes. It would be years—decades even—before ownership of the land was passed onto them. As far as any of them were aware, the elder Mr. Markland was in fine form and would most likely be around for years to come. Furthermore, they really weren’t well enough acquainted with young Mr. Markland to take his word as a gentleman.

“Preposterous,” Albert muttered under his breath.

“I do realize that it might be some time before I’m able to deed the land to you,” he said, as if reading their minds, “which is why

Clara and I are also prepared to offer a monetary sum. Should Rebecca agree to impersonate Lady Clara for the season, we will provide you with five hundred pounds sterling, half of which will be payable upon her departure for London, and the other half upon her return.”

Becky nearly fell out of her chair. Five hundred pounds was an absolute fortune, and it would make a tremendous difference in the lives of her family. With that sort of money, they could purchase more livestock and pay to have the crumbling roof of the cottage rebuilt. They could finally retire their rusty old tools and purchase a new set. They could send the boys away to school, and even hire a farmhand or two to help with the day-to-day tasks. The thought of a prosperous future for her family had Becky’s mind soaring in the clouds.

She could almost feel the smooth, shiny new leather boots she would be able to purchase. One of the disadvantages of being poor was that she was expected to wear the same pair of boots until they were all but falling apart. Case in point: the boots she was currently wearing were scuffed and scraped, and there was a hole forming in the right sole. She was ever so grateful that her feet were securely positioned under the table and well out of the eyesight of both Mr. Markland and Lady Clara.

“Five hundred pounds,” Ginny whispered.

“Five hundred pounds, indeed.” Mr. Markland grinned. “Pray tell, what do you say Mrs. Wilson? Rebecca? Will you travel to London and attend the season as Lady Clara?”

Becky turned to her mother whose eyes were wide and unreadable. She hadn’t the least idea how her mother felt about the proposition. In the end, it was Ginny who spoke.

“Perhaps we could have a moment or two to discuss this as a family?” she said, rising to her feet and holding an arm out. “Come, Mama.”

“Now that is a splendid idea,” said Mr. Markland. “But you must

stay where you are, Mrs. Wilson. Lady Clara and I will take leave so that you can discuss the matter amongst yourselves.”

“Yes, of course we will,” Lady Clara said, jumping up from her chair and reaching down to drag Mr. Markland to his feet. “We’ll get out of your way for now, but we’ll be right outside should you wish to ask us any questions. Come, Thomas.”

With a flurry of good cheer and dazzling smiles, the pair exited the cottage, leaving a rather stunned Wilson family in their wake.

Albert was the first to speak.

“Of all the hare-brained schemes I’ve heard in all my life, this one is the most ludicrous by far,” he said.

Becky felt the anger rising up inside her upon hearing her brother’s dismissive words, and it all but bubbled over when Emma and Sam started laughing at his remark.

“And just what is so ludicrous about their proposition?” she demanded. “You can’t overlook the fact that I bear a striking resemblance to Lady Clara.”

“Granted, but you, my dear sister, are no lady.”

Becky kept her mouth shut out of fear that she may launch into a tirade that Mr. Markland and Lady Clara might hear from outside. But this didn’t stop her from casting a nasty look upon her brother.

“I would imagine Lady Clara would get into heaps of trouble if it became known that she had groomed an imposter to step in for her,” Ginny mused. “If not with London society, then with her parents. With that in mind, I don’t think she and Mr. Markland would even go so far as to put Becky on the train unless they were certain she could pass for a lady.”

Mrs. Wilson turned to Ginny.

“Am I to understand that you’re in favor of Becky traveling to London?” she asked.

Ginny shrugged. “Five hundred pounds would make a world of difference in our lives.”

“Indeed.” Mrs. Wilson nodded and turned to Becky. “And what

are your thoughts, my love? Would you be willing to travel such a distance and pretend to be another person entirely?"

A few moments passed before Becky spoke. To be sure, the promise of living amongst the privileged classes was incredibly tempting. She reckoned she would never again get the chance to wear such fine fashions and attend such exclusive events. But her mother was right; London was a great distance away from County Durham, and she knew she would be terribly lonely without her family. Then again, it would only be for a short period of time, and five hundred pounds would help the family immensely.

Becky took a deep breath and said, "I think we ought to accept their offer. Ginny is right. They won't send me unless they're certain I would be believable as a lady, and five hundred pounds is too great a sum to turn down."

"You won't last a day," said Albert, shaking his head.

"That's enough out of you, young man," Mrs. Wilson scolded. "Have a bit of faith in your sister."

Becky squared her shoulders, lifted her chin and smiled at Albert, in the way she imagined a young lady of noble birth would smile. Serene. Cultured. Classy. And then she spoiled the effect by sticking her tongue out at her brother on impulse.

"How very ladylike," he said.

"Emma, love, will you run outside and ask Mr. Markland and Lady Clara to come back in?" Mrs. Wilson asked.

"Yes, Mama."

Sprightly young Emma was back within moments with the elegant pair in tow.

"Well, what say you?" Mr. Markland asked.

"Becky is willing to travel to London and to attend this... this season business as Lady Clara," Mrs. Wilson said.

"Oh, how lovely!" Lady Clara squealed.

Clapping her hands together, she bounced up and down on the balls of her feet and Becky couldn't help but notice how shiny and pristine her boots were. Lady Clara looped a long, slim arm

through Mr. Markland's and gave it a few pats with her gloved hand before darting round to the other side of the table and grabbing both of Becky's hands.

"Darling, I'm ever so grateful that you've agreed to step in for me," she said, giving Becky's hands a squeeze. "You're going to have the most marvelous time. Get ready for the biggest adventure of your life!"

Indeed, it was.