

Chapter One

As I sat in the Woodlawn family carriage traveling farther and farther from my home, I had a tingling feeling my life was about to change forever.

It probably wasn't such a stretch of the imagination. I had, for the entirety of my eighteen years, lived in Surrey. First, in the home of my widowed mother, and later, at the age of twelve, I entered service at the ancestral estate of the Woodlawn family. I had never traveled outside the county of my birth, and never expected to.

All of that changed when I, and all my worldly possessions, boarded the carriage that morning with my mistress, Lady Violet Woodlawn. We began the day filled with anticipation of our adventure, but after several hours, we had both escaped into our own thoughts.

I had never been on an actual holiday, such excursions being available only to the wealthy, which I most certainly was not. Prior to our departure, Lady Violet had insisted I wear one of her dresses instead of my usual maid's uniform. "Honestly, Phoebe, those uniforms are utterly hideous. If I am to be Lady Marlowe, then I think I ought to at least be able to have a maid who does not look like a prison matron." Thereupon she gifted me with an entire trunk of her hand-me-downs.

Like a prisoner suddenly freed, I traded the stiff black uniform and white apron for a pale yellow dress which I had coveted whenever Lady Violet wore it. And now, seated in the carriage wearing the most beautiful dress I had ever donned, I felt like a completely different person.

I glanced across at Lady Violet. My heart pinched up in worry as I observed her countenance. This trip upon which we had embarked was occasioned by the betrothal of Lady Violet to Lord Braxton Marlowe of Kent. More than just pre-wedding jitters, I sensed Lady Violet's anxiety was due to the fact that she had never met Lord Marlowe. In fact, she had never even heard of him until her brother, Lord Andrew Woodlawn, announced her engagement.

From all appearances, it was a brilliant match. Lord Marlowe was reputed to be handsome and rich, with a magnificent estate and proud family name. Lady Violet also came from a distinguished family and wealth, though she was unlikely to be described as handsome, or even pretty.

I know it is wicked of me to say such a thing, and I would not ever speak so were it not the absolute truth—and also, I believe, a major contributing factor in the sight unseen marriage which had been arranged for her.

A few weeks prior, Lord Andrew had invited several eligible gentlemen to Weatherby Hall in order to introduce his sister to potential marriage partners. Dinner had gone well and Lady Violet fairly burst with enthusiasm when she returned to her bed chamber to freshen up while the gentlemen had after dinner brandy and cigars. She convinced me to accompany her downstairs so I might sneak a glance at the suitors. As the two of us scuttled past the door to the library, we overheard a most unfortunate conversation.

"Honestly, Woodlawn," one gentleman's voice boomed from within, "your sister might be named for a flower, but she is more like a shrub."

Lady Violet and I froze in our tracks. In retrospect, I ought to have hurried her on her way before more of the conversation was revealed, but I was simply too shocked to move.

Laughter followed the cruel remark and I felt my mistress wilt next to me. The sharpest betrayal followed as soon as the laughter died down.

"I will agree that my sister is not the loveliest young lady," we both recognized her brother's voice, "but surely her dowry, and the prestige of the Woodlawn name, make her look more tolerable."

A small gasp escaped Lady Violet's lips before she made haste to the sanctuary of her bedchamber. No amount of consolation could persuade her to rejoin the party, and so I made her excuses for her to Lord Andrew. Nonplussed, he simply engaged the gentlemen in a card game instead of the previously planned evening of charades.

It was shortly after this fiasco that word of a betrothal to Lord Marlowe became known about the manor.

Lady Violet noticed my appraisal from across the carriage. "What if he changes his mind when he sees me?" she whispered, her eyes clouded with agony.

"If he does, then he does not deserve you," I assured her. "You have a beautiful heart and if he cannot see it, then it is his loss."

"Thank you, Phoebe," she said with a wry smile, "but I have noticed that such platitudes come easily to those, like you, who are quite pretty. I wonder if you would be so cavalier if you had a bulbous nose like mine."

Although Lady Violet was my superior, and my employment was at her will, she had never spoken to me with such vitriol. Taken aback by the vehemence of her statement, I did not know how to respond. I could not argue with the truth of her words.

"If I may speak boldly, Lady Violet. You are without a doubt the kindest and most thoughtful person I have ever met, and it saddens me that others may not see those qualities in you."

"I am sorry, Phoebe. I am just anxious. Tomorrow I shall be a married woman." She paused and looked out the window. "At times like this, I miss my mother more than ever." There was a small catch in her voice, and I felt tears pricking the corners of my eyes as well. Lady Violet's mother had been the epitome of motherly love and warmth. Her death was felt by all who had ever encountered her, and had been particularly difficult for Lady Violet, who had entered that stage in life when a young lady most needs her mother.

"I am sure she, and your father, would be very happy for you."

"I think my brother is the happiest. It seems he could hardly wait to get me out of the house."

I had not been blessed with the genteel ability to smoothly say things which were not true, even if my sole purpose was to comfort my companion.

"Perhaps you and Lord Andrew will each be happier with some distance."

I knew I would be.

Never would I reveal the truth of the matter to Lady Violet, but our trip to Oxley Court had saved me in more ways than one. Lord Andrew's attentions had frequently made me uncomfortable. When no one could see, he often brushed his body against mine, sometimes whispering crude comments as he did so. I became adept at knowing where he was and making sure to keep my distance. After his mother died, his actions became bolder.

With a shudder, I recalled the night I had let my guard down and Lord Andrew cornered me in the back hallway near my tiny bedroom in the garret. He pinned me against the wall, enjoying the fear he no doubt saw in my eyes. The alcohol on his breath assaulted my senses while his hands groped my body. Assuming that fighting back would only make matters worse, I gritted my teeth and prayed for reprieve from his heinous intentions.

"No one can save you now." He covered my mouth with one hand and pawed at my breast and kneaded it roughly with the other. Bile rose in my throat and dread churned my stomach.

I had heard tales of servant girls being subjected to such abuses and knew that if Lord Andrew chose to make good on his lascivious plans, I would have no recourse. I was a mere working class maid. He was Lord Andrew Woodlawn who, upon the death of his father, had inherited land, wealth, a title and enough prestige and power that he could behave in any way he wished without censure.

I had hoped to preserve my virtue for my husband. Though marriage for one of my station in life was not often feasible, I retained a girlish hope for love and romance.

Lord Andrew Woodlawn was determined to deprive me of those once in a lifetime pleasures, for he cared only for his own selfish desires.

His groping moved down my body and he yanked at the hem of my skirt, attempting to reach below my uniform and to expose my womanly charms to his assault.

Although I had never known Lady Violet to enter the servants' area of the estate, on that particular night she came in search of me. When she called my name from down the hall, her lecherous brother slunk away.

Unbeknownst to her, Lady Violet saved me. Little was I to know the extent to which my mistress would alter my life completely.

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Lady Violet passed the time reading, while knitting occupied me. Eventually she dozed off and I set my task aside to lean against the wall of the carriage, hoping for a nap. I anticipated very little solitude over the next few days and closed my eyes for a bit of rest.

I daydreamed about what our new destination might hold for me. Might I find love at Oxley Court as well? Of course, my first concern was for Lady Violet and I prayed Lord Marlowe would be a kind man who saw past her unfortunate appearance to appreciate the lovely person who was Lady Violet Woodlawn.

Yet, I could not help but hope that I, too, might meet a hardworking, honorable man of my own class with whom I could share a loving relationship.

How tall might he be? What color were his eyes? I smiled at my pleasant imaginings and drifted off to sleep.

Sudden sharp movements of the carriage wrenched me from sleep. Objects inside the passenger compartment flew about while Lady Violet and I clutched at anything to keep ourselves from being tossed from our seats.

"Oh Phoebe, what shall become of us?" my mistress wailed and I was helpless to protect her or even to reply.

"Heaven have mercy on us," I said, my shoulder slamming into the ceiling. Or was it the floor?

After a terrifying few moments, which felt like hours, the carriage came to rest on its side. Lady Violet's scream was the last thing I heard before all went dark.

My next recollection was the warmth of strong arms carrying me up a hill. My eyes opened just long enough to take in a worried look on a very handsome face. I rested my head on my rescuer's shoulder and lost consciousness again.

I vaguely remember being placed in a bed while dark figures moved about the room speaking in hushed tones. The man who had carried me from the wreckage made a number of appearances. Somehow, I sensed him next to me, stroking my arm or wiping my brow. Several times I woke and found him sitting nearby, watching me. I had only enough strength to meet his gaze briefly, before drifting back to sleep. Yet, I found myself seeking him out each time I awakened, even if for a moment.

Although he was a stranger to me, his presence filled me with peace and comfort.

Eventually I woke more fully. My eyes strained to adjust to the darkness and the unknown location. Where was I? Where was Lady Violet? Where was the mysterious man who had cared for me? Had I dreamed him?

I attempted to sit up, but the pounding in my head forced me to lie back down.

"Shhh," a warm voice said from next to the bed. A gentle hand rested on my shoulder. "You took quite a spill. Lay back and rest."

I glanced in the direction of the voice and smiled. It was my rescuer, my hero. He was real and right next to me. Happiness filled my body and I found I had become quite attached to this handsome stranger.

"Where am I?"

"Oxley Court. I am Lord Marlowe."

Lord Marlowe? "What happened?"

"Something must have spooked the horses and the driver lost control. The carriage crashed."

"What about—"

My attempt to ask after Lady Violet was interrupted by his soft finger against my lips. "Hush now," he said. "There will be plenty of time to talk after you get more rest."

Perhaps he was correct. Even that small amount of effort exhausted me and I drifted into a fitful sleep. My last conscious thought being *why is Lord Marlowe waiting on me?*

Several hours later, sunshine streaming in the windows woke me. I glanced about the room, taking in the high ceilings, lace curtains and opulent furniture. Although I had spent years in service at Weatherby Hall and was accustomed to spending my waking hours surrounded by luxurious furnishings, I had never slept in such a room and I felt decidedly out of place. I pushed back the covers and made to exit the bed. At that time, I noticed I had been dressed in an exquisitely soft nightgown, more like something in a wedding trousseau than the usual night time garb of a lady's maid. No doubt the trunk containing my clothing had been destroyed when the carriage wrecked. I made a mental note to find out who had been kind enough to loan me such a lovely garment and to thank her properly.

There was a soft tap at the door and a young maid entered with a pitcher of water and fresh towels. She bobbed a curtsy and wished me good morning. "I am Annie," she said, "and I am here to assist you in dressing, if you are feeling well enough."

She was a mere sprig of a girl with a smattering of freckles across her nose and a mischievous twinkle in her eye. I liked her immediately and was glad to know there would be other members of the staff who might become my friends.

"I believe I am feeling well enough to get dressed. A bit of freshening up will do me a world of good." I picked up the pitcher from the stand where she'd set it and began to pour.

"*Miss,*" Annie said, panic in her voice, "if you please, it is my job to pour the water."

Having neither the strength nor inclination to argue, I allowed the girl to do her job, and I assumed the role of pampered lady of the house. Once that task was completed, Annie assisted me in changing from night gown to daytime wear.

Just as I finished dressing and examined myself in the mirror, there was another tap on the door and upon ascertaining I was properly attired, Lord Marlowe entered the room with a breakfast tray. What sort of topsy-turvy world had I tumbled into where the lord of the manor brought breakfast to me?

Annie excused herself and I was left alone with Lord Marlowe. Surely it was improper to be alone with a man, particularly in my bedchamber, but it seemed the rules I had known my whole life had disappeared.

Besides, I liked having all of his attention to myself. Wicked, I know, for he was intended for my dear Lady Violet, not me.

I watched silently as he set the tray on a table near the window and arranged the dishes for two place settings. I hoped it meant Lady Violet would be joining me. Though the two of us dining together would be awkward, a maid and her mistress did not share meals, the thought of seeing her again and knowing she was well, filled me with pleasure.

His task completed, Lord Marlowe took my hand and led me to the table, held my chair for me and then took up the seat opposite mine.

"Please," he indicated the plate before me, "eat something. You shall need your strength."

"Thank you." I speared a piece of fruit with my fork. "I had not expected you to wait on me."

Lord Marlowe's handsome face broke into a smile and my appetite left me briefly. His sincerity and kindness boded well for Lady Violet's happiness as his wife, and for that, I was grateful indeed.

"I was quite concerned for your well-being. Did you know you have been in and out of consciousness for the last forty-eight hours?"

As long as that? "What about the wedding?" I was crushed by the idea I might have missed it, though to ask such a forward question of an earl was highly improper, and I braced myself for an appropriate chastisement.

Again, he favored me with his dashing smile. My stomach knotted up, and I feared I had eaten a bad piece of fruit, for what else could cause such a tightening?

"The wedding has been postponed until you are feeling better, though now it appears you are on the mend, so I shall make haste to arrange the ceremony."

"I look forward to it," I said, relieved that I had not missed my mistress's nuptials.

"As do I," Lord Marlowe said, his gaze holding mine in a way that made me blush.

He excused himself and left the room and it was not until I was no longer under the spell of his charm that I realized I had not asked about Lady Violet. But, if the wedding was going forward as planned, she must have come out of the carriage crash in better stead than I.

Later, I felt well enough to venture outside where I sat upon a bench in the garden enjoying the warmth of the sun and the fragrant blossoms around me. I had never been so ill as to miss work, and strained to recall if I had ever spent so much time at leisure. The life of a servant was one of constant activity, whether directly attending to the needs of our employers or anticipating their wants when not at their sides. I had begun my duties at Weatherby Hall as a scullery maid, spending long hours scrubbing pots in the kitchen, cleaning vegetables and mopping floors.

Fortunately, I had been deemed "too pretty" for kitchen work, and advanced to the position of Lady Violet's personal maid. Although my tasks changed from scrubbing pots to maintaining the wardrobe and other needs of Lady Violet, my days were long and leisure time almost unheard of. What limited off-duty time I had was spent in mending my own clothes or tending to my personal needs. On rare occasions the help was permitted to share a bottle of wine from the estate's collection.

Please do not misunderstand. I was grateful for the job. It was an honor to serve the Woodlawn family, with the notable exception of Lord Andrew's previously mentioned harassment. Lady Violet always treated me kindly. In fact, I believe she considered me a friend. Lady Violet's unfortunate appearance made her self-conscious and after her parents died, she had no one to buoy her self-confidence. She became nearly reclusive. Her brother, the aforementioned Lord Andrew, had teased her unmercifully when they were children. Lady Violet never complained, but I do recall with pleasure an incident when their father overheard one of Lord Andrew's cutting remarks and promptly escorted him to the stable for a thorough punishment.

But, once her parents were gone, Lady Violet turned further away from society.

However, it seemed that all was on the upswing for the very deserving Lady Violet. Her new home was magnificent, as were the gardens surrounding it. More importantly, Lord Marlowe was clearly a kind man of good character who no doubt had already realized what a treasure Lady Violet was.

Of course, I was happy for her.

And, I will admit, a tiny bit jealous.

Oh, I know it was horribly improper and probably the result of a blow to my head during the carriage crash, but whenever Lord Marlowe was near, my heart pounded and my tummy fluttered. Although we had not exchanged more than a few sentences, I felt a compulsion to learn all I could about Lord Marlowe and wanted to share all my most intimate secrets with him.

Surely it was simply a passing fancy due to the trauma of my injuries. I needed to find Lady Violet and get back to work. Too much leisure time had muddled my brain.

"May I join you?" The familiar voice filled me with excited anticipation and when I glanced up into the face of Lord Marlowe, my heart did a little flip flop. It was foolish for me to harbor any feelings for the man. I was merely a maid of no consequence, with only an attractive face and hard work to recommend me to the world.

In a fit of irrationality, I determined that for the balance of the day I would indulge my whim to enjoy the attentions of Lord Marlowe, but first thing the next morning, I would be back to my duties as a faithful maid.

"Please do," I replied to Lord Marlowe's request and shifted to the left to allow him to sit next to me on the bench. His thigh brushed mine and a heated jolt shot from the point of contact to my womanly place. One of us ought to have moved a proper distance from the other, but neither of us did. Rather than discomfort at being so physically close to a man I barely knew, pleasure and contentment filled my being and a smile tugged at my lips.

"The gardens here are lovely," I said, trying to distract myself from the hum reverberating through my body. If I had even a modicum of sense, I would have fled from the garden as quickly as my weary legs would take me.

Apparently, even a modicum of sense was too much to expect, since I sat gazing at him with what I am sure was a foolish expression on my face.

"I am glad you like your new home," he said. He scanned the horizon as though deciding what to say next. He picked up my hand and clasped it between both of his. I gasped at the forwardness of his behavior, but did not withdraw from his touch. No, I shall confess that I relished the warmth of his fingers enveloping mine.

If I was any sort of friend to Lady Violet, I would have rebuffed the cad for his disloyalty to his betrothed, but he was not the only one who was disloyal that afternoon.

"I have some unpleasant news for you," he said and I snapped my head up to stare into his face. He clasped my hand firmly. "The driver and your maid were killed when your carriage crashed. I am so very sorry. The bodies were buried in our graveyard and I have sent word to your brother about the loss."

My brother? My maid? I shook my head back and forth, as though to clear a dense fog.

Lord Marlowe released my hand from his grasp and wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me close to him. "I know you have suffered a great trauma, and I would understand if you wish to postpone our wedding, though I must confess something," he paused and tipped my chin up with his index finger forcing me to look directly into his golden gaze, "over the course of caring for you, I have fallen deeply in love. Your bravery in the face of tragedy, your resilience through pain and suffering. Please, Violet, say you will marry me right away."

Violet? Did he call me Violet?

The fog in my brain cracked apart and in the great chasm thus created I saw everything. I had been mistaken for Lady Violet, who perished when the carriage plunged down the ravine. A rush of sadness squeezed my heart for the loss of Lady Violet. How had everything gone so wrong? The whole world was turned upside down and inside out.

And Lord Marlowe wanted to marry me.

I licked my parched lips and opened my mouth to explain his mistake, but instead of an explanation, the words that came out of my mouth were, "Yes, let us be married right away."