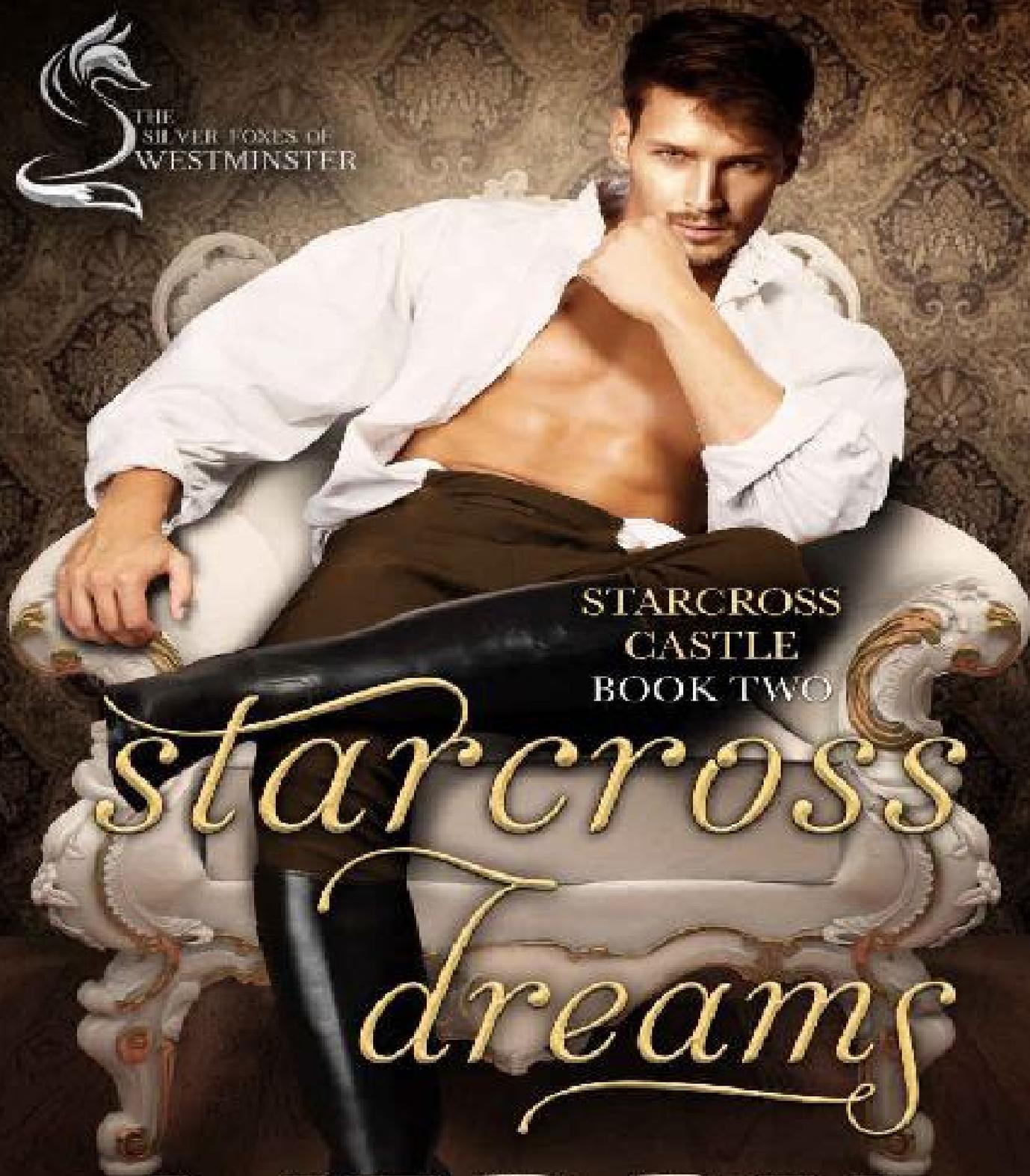




THE  
SILVER FOXES OF  
WESTMINSTER



STARCROSS  
CASTLE  
BOOK TWO

*starcross*  
*dreams*

MERRY

bestselling author

FARMER

# Table of Contents

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Epilogue

# STARCROSS DREAMS

STARCROSS CASTLE

# MERRY FARMER

# STARCROSS DREAMS

Copyright ©2018 by Merry Farmer

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to your digital retailer and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Cover design by Erin Dameron-Hill (the miracle-worker)

ASIN:

Paperback:

ISBN-13:

ISBN-10:

[Click here for a complete list of other works by Merry Farmer.](#)

If you'd like to be the first to learn about when the next books in the series come out and more, please sign up for my newsletter here: <http://eepurl.com/RQ-KX>

 Created with Vellum

# CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

## CHAPTER 1

STARCROSS CASTLE – OCTOBER, 1879

Change was coming to Starcross Castle, and Poppy Miller could hardly contain her excitement.

"Just imagine," she sighed, stars in her eyes as she brushed her hand over the collection of fabric samples spread out across the table in the morning parlor. "Ginny and Harry are married and couldn't be happier, Lady Mariah is months away from giving Lord Peter the child he's always wanted, so many new maids and footmen have been hired, everyone is switching up places between here and the London house, and we're all getting new uniforms on top of it." She added another fond sigh, and picked up a swatch of cornflower blue fabric, rubbing it on her cheek.

Miss Victoria Travers laughed and shook her head. "Oh, Poppy. I don't know what I'd do without you. You're such a delight."

All at once, Poppy remembered her place. Her cheeks went bright pink, and she set the fabric swatch back on the table. "I'm so sorry, miss," she said with a quick curtsy for Miss Victoria, and one for Lady Mariah, who was seated at the far end of the table. "I'm sorry, my lady. I've forgotten myself."

"It's all right, Poppy," Lady Mariah smiled. She leaned back in her chair, rubbing the cheery bump of her stomach and smiling. "I can't help but feel as though Starcross Castle needs more high spirits and light hearts after everything it's been through."

Lady Mariah sent a covert look to her sister, who was comparing two swatches of fabric in subtly different shades of lavender. It was true, the summer had been an odd one. Lord Peter's nephew and former heir, Lord William, had met a violent end at the hands of men he owed money to in the late spring. And it was whispered that he'd abused Miss Victoria horribly before his death.

If that were true, Lord William's gory end was justified, as far as Poppy was concerned, especially since Miss Victoria's spirits had been so depressed. But with the arrival of trunks and trunks worth of Miss Victoria's belongings the month before, it had been announced that the unfortunate young woman would be joining the household of

Starcross Castle permanently. Or at least until she felt well enough to strike out on her own and seek a husband, like all well-born young woman did.

"I like the blue," Miss Victoria said, "But isn't it a little bright for servant's uniforms?"

Poppy glanced from Miss Victoria to Lady Mariah, her brow inching up hopefully. She loved the blue, loved the idea of bright, happy dresses to wear as she went about her duties as a maid in Starcross Castle. The grey they wore now seemed so drab. But it wasn't her place to say anything.

"I was leaning toward the green myself," Lady Mariah said, standing and reaching for a swatch of dark bluish-green that reminded Poppy of the sea on a sunny day after a storm. "It seems very Cornish."

Lady Mariah leaned forward to reach across the table, and Poppy jumped into action. "Let me fetch that for you, my lady. We don't want you straining yourself."

Lady Mariah laughed. "Lifting swatches of fabric is hardly straining myself." She stepped back, a hand on her belly, and let Poppy rush in to hand her the swatch in question. "You're all turning out to be as bad as Peter when it comes to not letting me do anything. I'm hardly far enough along to warrant all the fuss."

"You can never be too careful, my lady," Poppy said.

She then proceeded to catch her foot on the edge of the carpet and stumble forward with a loud shriek. As she went down, she flailed for the edge of the table, but rather than grabbing the solid wood of the table's edge, she grasped a square of cardboard to which several swatches were attached. It did nothing to stop her fall, and as she yanked it, a dozen and more wisps of fabric flew into the air, scattering in every direction. Worse still, as Poppy hit the ground, she grabbed hold of Lady Mariah's skirt, jerking her off-balance.

Lady Mariah was far more graceful than Poppy was and kept herself upright, but a loud rip sounded all the same.

"Oh no! Oh no, my lady, I'm so sorry." Hardly aware of her own bruises, Poppy scrambled to her knees, checking her mistress's skirt to see where the damage had been done. "I'll fix it. I swear I'll fix it. I'm not as good with a needle as Ginny is, and if you'd rather wait until she and Harry get back from their honeymoon, I'll understand. But I can fix it if you'd like."

Fortunately for her, Lady Mariah burst into laughter. Miss Victoria giggled as well and came to help Poppy to her feet. Embarrassment had Poppy as hot as blazes.

"I can't see where the rip happened," Miss Victoria said, still holding Poppy's arm.

"It was probably just the hem." Lady Mariah chuckled. "I need to have all of my dresses let out a bit more soon anyhow."

"I can do it, my lady. If you need me to."

"That won't be necessary," Lady Mariah said, mirth sparkling in her eyes. She took her seat as Poppy began retrieving the spilled swatches from the floor. "Domenica recommended a seamstress in Truro who has been making new clothes for my confinement, as well as altering a few older dresses."

Poppy's eyes widened as she put the swatches back on the table. Mrs. Domenica Tennant was something of an enigma and a legend, as far as she was concerned. The

tall, dark woman was born in America and was of Spanish heritage. She had married Lord Peter's friend, Captain Albert Tennant, more than a year ago, and had come to Lady Mariah's rescue in the spring, when Lord William was causing his final problems. There were rumors that Mrs. Tennant had led a wicked past, but that only made her more fascinating in Poppy's eyes.

"I should have been a captain's wife," she said aloud before she could stop herself.

"A captain's wife?" Miss Victoria blinked at her, barely hiding her amusement. "What brings this on?"

"Oh! I...I'm sorry, miss." Poppy blushed as she attempted to set things back to right on the table. "It's just that I'm not sure I was meant to live the life of a housemaid."

"Do you think so?" Lady Mariah asked. "Would it help if we sent you to London when we shuffle the staff?"

Poppy's eyes went wide with alarm. "Oh no, my lady. I couldn't possibly. I mean, I know it would be a lovely opportunity and that London is an exciting, sophisticated place. But I couldn't possibly leave Nick—I mean, Starcross Castle—I mean, Cornwall and my family and all my sisters." She was babbling and knew it. Her face had gone red-hot.

"Nick?" Miss Victoria asked, a sly, falsely-innocent grin curving her mouth into a spritely bow.

"Nick Parson, the head gardener?" Lady Mariah asked, also smiling.

"Did I say a name?" Poppy attempted to cover her slip with a squeak. "I don't remember. All I know is that I would miss my mother and my sisters terribly. I have five younger sisters, you know. I'm the oldest, and Delly—which is short for Delphinium—is a few years younger than me. She thinks she's very important and won't marry Jack Fisher—who is a fisherman, believe it or not—because of it."

Poppy was sure her face shone like the sun, it was so hot. And she was equally sure that her words didn't make a lick of sense. Miss Victoria and Lady Mariah exchanged grins that told Poppy her words had all been for naught anyhow. The two of them had heard what she'd said and wouldn't soon forget.

Lady Mariah cleared her throat and picked up the swatch of green fabric. "So, green or blue for the new servant's uniforms?" Her lips twitched and her eyes sparkled, even though she didn't look directly at Poppy.

"I suppose it all depends on what colors you think are appropriate," Miss Victoria answered. Her grin almost certainly had nothing to do with the appropriateness of colors for livery. "Could you do one color for Starcross Castle and one for Dunsford House?"

"I think that's a splendid idea," Lady Mariah said. "Although from what I understand of Mrs. Driscoll, she would put her foot down and refuse any but the dullest, drabbest colors."

Poppy nodded sagely. Mrs. Driscoll, the housekeeper of Dunsford's House, Lord Peter's London residence, was well known to be a battle ax. She brooked no nonsense and ran a tight ship. Which was the other reason Poppy had no interest in transferring to the London house. But it wasn't the main reason.

She'd said too much by mentioning Nick's name, but truth be told, she adored Nick Parsons. He was older than her and so handsome it tied her insides in knots just thinking

about him. He'd been the head gardener at Starcross since his father passed away suddenly several years ago. Poppy had fallen in love with him from the moment she joined the staff of Starcross as a kitchen maid three years ago. And unlike most of the other male staff, Nick didn't treat her like a silly little joke. He talked to her when their paths crossed. He smiled at her when they spotted each other across the garden. He'd also come to her rescue more times than she could count.

"So if not a maid, what would you be, Poppy?" Miss Victoria asked.

Poppy blinked, shaking herself when she realized that she'd lapsed into staring out the window with a dreamy smile. "Oh, um...." She hid her embarrassment at being caught wool-gathering by attempting to straighten the fabric swatches. Which mostly meant pushing them around aimlessly. "I would be a wife and a mother," she said.

"Admirable professions," Lady Mariah answered with an approving nod, her grin still as wide as the horizon. "I think you would make a brilliant wife and mother."

"If I could avoid burning supper, breaking every dish in the house, and dropping the baby," Poppy laughed. Her mother was constantly reminding her how much presence of mind it took to run a smooth household, and telling Poppy she didn't have the grace for the job. But Poppy knew she was wrong about that. "Mama sent me here to be a maid so that I could hone my skills and learn a few things," she went on.

"But you would rather marry and have a family?" Lady Mariah asked.

Poppy jerked to stand straight. "I'm sorry, my lady. I don't mean it like that at all. I adore working for you. Starcross Castle is lovely. And I've grown so fond of Miss Victoria." She turned to Miss Victoria with a smile of adoration. "I didn't mean to imply that I was ungrateful or that I wanted something else."

"Who wouldn't want something else?" Miss Victoria asked with a coy grin, holding up the blue fabric swatch. "If that something else was as handsome as Mr. Parsons."

"I didn't mean it like that," Poppy stammered, blushing down to the roots of her hair. "Nick—I mean, Mr. Parsons—is lovely, yes, but he's ever so much more important than I am. And I do enjoy working here, my lady." She turned to Lady Mariah. "Honestly, I do."

Lady Mariah laughed and shook her head. "Love is nothing to apologize for."

"It's not love, my lady," Poppy was quick to reply, lowering her head, unable to wipe the smile off her face, and thus proving that her words were a big, fat lie. "Mr. Parsons and I are friends is all."

Lady Mariah and Miss Victoria shared a look, then burst into snorting laughter.

"Where have I heard that before?" Miss Victoria said.

"Why, would it be the exact same thing Ginny said about Mr. Pond not more than a month ago?" Lady Mariah asked, teasing.

"Hmm." Miss Victoria tapped a finger to her chin.

"All right." Poppy giggled. "I won't try to deny it. I love Nick Parsons." She sighed, clutching her hands to her chest. "He's simply wonderful. I would drop everything to marry him in a second, if he wanted me."

"How do you know he doesn't?" Miss Victoria asked.

Poppy tilted her head to the side, considering. "To tell you the truth, miss. I'm not sure what Nick wants. Mr. Parsons, I mean, begging your pardon."

Lady Mariah brushed her protest aside with a wave of her hand. "You should find out. For all you know, he could be pining for you the same way you're pining for him."

"And we wouldn't want another situation where two people in love waited too long to speak about it," Miss Victoria added in reference to the turmoil Ginny and Harry had experienced before they finally confessed their true feelings for each other.

Poppy frowned and bit her lip. It was true, a lot of heartache could have been spared if Ginny had been open and honest with Harry, and vice versa. Perhaps she should muster up her courage to come right out and tell Nick how she felt about him. Although if he didn't share those feelings, she would feel absolutely wretched.

"It's a bit of a gamble, isn't it?" she said, still half in her thoughts.

"Love?" Lady Mariah asked.

Poppy shook herself to attention, remembering her place. "Yes, my lady." She threw in a curtsy to remind herself and her mistress that she was, in fact, a servant, not a guest in the house. "It's always a gamble to confess love."

Lady Mariah grinned, but looked a bit wistful. "I suppose it was lucky that Papa arranged my marriage to Peter. I never had to worry about whether he would have me."

"And letting your heart guide you can be disastrous," Miss Victoria said with sudden solemnity. She lowered her head, looking as though she might cry.

The change happened so suddenly that Lady Mariah leapt from her seat and rushed to put her arms around her sister. Miss Victoria's moods were like that, though. The horror of what had happened to her came upon her suddenly and viciously. Poppy backed away from the table, blushing. She was out of place in the moment between the sisters.

"I'll just see if Mrs. Wilson needs me," she whispered, then bolted for the nearest door to give the two of them their time alone.

The nearest door happened to be one of the parlor's French doors, which was opened to the balmy, autumn afternoon. Poppy slipped outside, shutting the door behind her, then scurried along the gravel path to be out of sight of the morning parlor.

Of course, as she glanced back over her shoulder to make sure Lady Mariah and Miss Victoria could no longer see her, she veered to the left and stumbled over the border of one of the flower beds. The world pitched sideways, and before she knew it, she was sprawled on her backside in a cluster of chrysanthemums.

Nick knew from the moment he saw Poppy slipping out through the door to the morning parlor, a flighty look on her face, that within moments, she was going to need his help. He straightened from the garden bed where he was turning the soil and mixing in his secret blend of peat and sulfur so that the hydrangeas he planned to plant in the spring would produce bright blue flowers, and watched as Poppy snuck away from the door.

"What are you doing, you daft girl?" he murmured to himself, leaning on his rake as he watched her. There was nothing but fondness in his words and in the smile that spread across his face. There was something about Poppy that warmed his heart...and a few other parts of him. She was the sort of girl that most men wouldn't give a second look. Her hair was an unremarkable light brown and tended not to stay in whatever style

she set it in, or under her maid's mobcap. She was a tiny bit on the plump side, which rounded out her breasts and backside nicely, as far as he was concerned. The staff at Starcross Castle was always snickering behind their hands about how clumsy Poppy was—and she was—but she had the most beautiful, startlingly blue eyes Nick had ever seen. And she had far and away the kindest heart of any woman he'd ever met.

Sure enough, within seconds of skipping away from the house, she yelped and dropped like a sack of flour into one of his flower beds. Nick shook his head and tossed his rake aside, musing to himself that he wouldn't mind if she dropped into his actual bed. He had a feeling she'd be everything he'd ever dreamed about and more between his sheets.

The thought had him hotter than he should have been as he strode up to the edge of the chrysanthemum bed, where she was just pushing herself to stand. His heart beat faster at the sight of her raised eyebrows and half-opened mouth, as though she couldn't decide whether or not to laugh at herself.

"All right, Poppy?" he asked, unable to keep the smile off his face or out of his voice.

She squeaked and looked up at him, likely embarrassed to be caught. But instantly her expression changed to a wide, dreamy smile, and those blue eyes of hers shone. A look like that could keep a man's pride going for weeks.

"Oh. Nick. I didn't see you." She blinked and glanced around. "I'm so sorry I squashed your garden."

Nick chuckled and bent to scoop her up in his arms. She might not have been a lithe and dainty thing, but he could still pick her up as though she weighed nothing. And frankly, he liked the feel of her in his arms. So much so that he delayed putting her down for as long as he could.

"The flowers can take it," he said, walking to the side of the gravel path. On second thought, he didn't think he'd put her down at all.

Poppy looped her arms around his neck and glanced down at her skirt, then around at the ground.

"Looking for something?" he asked.

"My shoe. I don't know where it went, but it's most certainly not on my foot."

Nick craned his neck to look at her feet, poking out from under her skirt. One was clad in a ratty old shoe with fraying laces, the sole separating from the upper. The other was in nothing but a stocking.

He heaved a pretend dramatic sigh. "Now Poppy, what have I told you about those shoes of yours?" he asked, walking her to the wooden bench resting against the wall of the house.

"That they're too big for me and in disrepair, and that I would do well to spend some of my wages to buy a new pair," she answered, making big, guilty doe-eyes at him.

The look was so sweet that he felt blood rush straight to his groin. If he didn't put her down soon, she'd feel it too. So he nestled her on the bench, then started back to the bed to look for her shoe.

"So why haven't you been to the cobbler yet?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Well," she began with a sigh. "First Delly needed two new pairs of stockings so that

she could take that job in the shop in Falmouth. Then Beatrice needed a couple yards of fabric for new school dresses. She's growing like a weed these days. Then Angela broke her tooth, and Mama insisted on taking her to that fancy new doctor who only doctors teeth all the way up in St. Austell."

Nick listened, a strange, uncomfortable feeling growing in his chest. He found her missing shoe easily, noting that the lace had snapped clean through, and straightened to bring it back to her. "You can't hand over all of your wages to your mum, you know," he said, taking a seat next to her.

"But Mama knows best," she said with an authoritative nod. "And I couldn't possibly sleep at night with new shoes and the knowledge that Angela's tooth would be forever broken."

She was so good that it turned him inside out. And as she struggled to get her worn and mangled shoe back on, she glanced up at him with an obvious sort of adoration that made him want to take her in his arms and shelter her from the world. Girls looked at him fetchingly all the time. He was attractive and well aware of it. But none of the women who had thrown themselves at him over the years did so with as little artifice as Poppy. None of them but Poppy had him looking back with just as much admiration. And it was always the good girls that turned into wildcats when you finally got them on their backs.

Of course, with Poppy, a quick tumble wouldn't be enough. Her kind of sweetness demanded promises of forever. Promises he would gladly have given her right that very moment. If he could.

"Why don't you let me buy you a new pair of shoes," he said. "It's the least I could do."

In fact, it was likely the most he would ever be able to do, and it tore him apart.

Poppy blushed, finished tying her shoe, and straightened her skirts. The fact that she'd had her skirts hiked to her knees without a single hint of flirtation or the slightest idea that it could be construed as seductive only squeezed Nick's chest tighter. "I couldn't do that, Nick," she said in a voice so low it was almost a whisper. "You need to save your money for something you want."

I want you, Nick thought to himself. I'd give the world for you, shoes and all.

"What if I found a serviceable pair of shoes second-hand?" he asked.

Poppy hummed uncertainly and stood. "I could probably find something worthwhile in the church donation box."

Her words felt like an arrow in his heart. She shouldn't have to rely on charity. She should have the finest things money could buy, and he should be the one giving them to her.

He stood, his smile kind and fond, but showing no hint of how deep his feelings truly ran. "What if I speak to Lord Peter or Lady Mariah for you? I'm sure they would give you something much better than those old clod-hoppers."

Poppy laughed. She pressed a hand to her mouth and glanced down at her feet, tapping her mangy toes together. "Clod-hoppers. I like that. It makes it sound as though I go bounding through the fields like a rabbit."

He laughed with her. She was so artless it hurt. Being so close without being able to

touch her hurt ten times more, though.

"Well, as long as you promise to be careful and not to hop right into any more flower beds any time soon, I guess I'll let it go this time," he said. He couldn't resist raising a hand to brush a bit of dirt off her cheek, not that his hands were particularly clean.

"I promise, Nick," she said, glancing up at him with that look that pierced his soul. "I should probably get back to work now. There's so much to do with the shake-up in staff between here and London."

"I bet there is," he said. "We wouldn't want Mrs. Wilson wondering where you are when she needs you, would we?"

For a moment, she looked downright terrified. "We most certainly would not."

"Run along then, little rabbit," he said with a wink.

She blushed, and for a moment, a look that was far away from the innocent girl that most people thought she was filled her eyes. She didn't let it linger, though. She turned and headed off for the house at a fast clip, turning to wave at him as she rounded the corner.

Nick waved back, but his smile dropped when his hand did. If he could go back five years and shake some sense into the young and foolish man he'd been, he would do it in a heartbeat. He'd warn himself not to let a pretty face turn his head and cause him to make promises he wouldn't want to keep. He'd shout at himself not to get down on one knee and propose to Mavis.

## CHAPTER 2

Happiness came easily to Poppy, and for the next few days, she floated through her duties and chores with a bubbling sense of contentment in her heart. Nick had been so strong when he'd lifted her out of the flower bed. His smile had been so warm and jovial. The fact that he cared enough to offer to buy her new shoes had her sighing and staring off into space with visions of him tying the new shoes himself. Down on one knee. Perhaps with a ring. She didn't even need a ring, all she needed was Nick.

A sudden clatter and smash yanked her out of her daydreams, and she jumped when she realized the bowl she'd been mixing potpourri for Miss Victoria's room in was lying smashed at her feet.

"Look at that, you daft girl," Mrs. Harmon said, shaking her head and marching over, broom and dustpan already in hand. "You need to keep your head out of the clouds and on your work or more than a bowl will be broken."

"Sorry, Mrs. Harmon. I'm so sorry." Heat flooded her face as she bent to pick up the larger pieces of broken crockery, along with handfuls of dry flowers.

"Don't worry," Mrs. Harmon sighed. "I've known you long enough not to give you any of the good bowls to work with. That one probably had it coming anyhow."

"It was probably crafted in the era of Napoleon and Wellington."

Poppy gasped at the voice that had made the comment, leaping to her feet—and kicking a large shard of the bowl halfway across the room, where one of the kitchen maids tripped over it. "You're back," she squealed, leaping over the mess she'd made to throw her arms around Ginny.

"We're back." Ginny hugged her in return, laughing along with her.

"Did you have a good time?" Poppy asked, breathless with joy. "What was Brighton like? Was it as exciting as I've always been told it is? Did you and Harry bathe in the sea? Did you eat ice cream? Did you see the Pavilion?"

Ginny laughed, resting her hands on Poppy's shoulders to keep her from bouncing. "We did eat ice cream and see the Pavilion. It's too cold to swim right now. And although we got out some, we spent most of our time indoors." Her eyes sparkled.

Poppy giggled, pressing a hand to her mouth. She might have been a flighty rabbit, but coming from such a large family, she knew exactly what Ginny and Harry had been up

to. Her thoughts flew instantly back to Nick, to the way his arms had felt around her, the heat of his body so close to hers, and the softness of his lips when he talked to her. Her fantasy of him tying her shoes switched to one of him stroking his hands slowly up her legs, over her knees, along her thighs....

"We'd better clean up this mess," Ginny laughed. "The smell of lavender is overwhelming."

"Oh." Poppy twisted to look at the pile of dried flowers and broken crockery on the floor. "Yes, we'd better."

She and Ginny moved back to the mess. Mrs. Harmon had left the broom and dustpan for them, so together they were able to make quick work of the disaster.

"We can save most of these flowers, if we pick the pottery out," Ginny said as they moved the mess to the table. "I'll help, and you can tell me all about what I missed while we were gone."

"You missed so much," Poppy gasped, grabbing Ginny's arm. "Mr. Snyder and Mrs. Wilson have been talking about who from Dunsford House is coming here and who from here is going to London, Lady Mariah is having all new uniforms sewn for us all, and Nick has been absolutely lovely."

Ginny's eyes were already bright and interested, but her smile grew when Poppy mentioned Nick. "Lovely, is he?"

"Very lovely." Poppy leaned in closer to her and whispered, "I think he really likes me. Although I don't know how or why."

"Because you're sweet and charming," Ginny answered. "Everybody loves you."

"Not everybody." Poppy smirked and peeked over her shoulder to where Mrs. Harmon was muttering to herself as she kneaded bread dough.

"Mrs. Harmon adores you," Ginny went on. "But she'll never let on."

"Well, regardless," Poppy sighed. "Nick has been lovely."

"So I hear."

"And, well, the other day, I was talking to Lady Mariah and Miss Victoria about how I don't think I'm truly cut out to be a maid—"

"You said that to them?" Ginny's brow flew up.

"Yes?" Poppy suddenly questioned whether she should have said anything to her betters at all. "I told them that what I really wanted to be was a wife and mother."

"I can see that." Ginny's shock melted into a smile, and she continued picking through the flowers and pottery. "Did you mention Nick?"

"I might have." Poppy blushed and glanced down. "But it isn't my place to go asking a man to marry me. It should be the other way around, shouldn't it?"

"Well," Ginny began slowly. "Yes. Technically. Although I'm beginning to think there's no harm in being honest about your feelings." She gave Poppy a pointed look that said more than words could.

"True. I wouldn't want to be like you and Harry. Not that there's anything wrong with the way things turned out between the two of you," she rushed to finish.

Ginny laughed, joy lighting her expression. "Everything turned out perfectly."

"That's what I want too."

"Then perhaps you should look for ways to make your dreams a reality."

"You know, I think I will," Poppy said with a nod.

The flowers and shards were sorted as much as they were going to be, and when Poppy got up to fetch another bowl, Ginny stood as well. "I need to get a few things from my old room and move them over to the stables. But I'll be around later to talk, if you'd like."

"I'd love that," Poppy said.

The smile remained on her face as Ginny left the kitchen. She continued with her work, wondering if she would ever have the nerve to ask a man to marry her, to ask Nick to marry her.

"Mrs. Harmon," she asked after several minutes of contemplation, mixing the potpourri absentmindedly with her hands. "Do you think that it's ever right for a woman to pursue a man?"

Mrs. Harmon snorted and shook her head. "No," she said. "It's not in the natural order of things. Men are the ones who must make the advances, and it's up to women to wait and accept when they come along."

Poppy blinked and turned fully to her. "You've never been married, have you? I mean, the 'Mrs.' is just part of your title, right?"

Of all things, Mrs. Harmon's cheeks pinked as Poppy asked the question. "No, I was never married."

"But did you ever have a beau?"

"That's none of your business."

Poppy grinned. If the answer were truly no, Mrs. Harmon wouldn't have snapped. "The thing is," she went on, "I think I would be much better suited to life as a wife and mother instead of life as a maid."

Mrs. Harmon laughed out loud at that. "Yes, my dear, you would," she said, still chuckling. She stopped, blinked, then turned to Poppy. "Oh, so you're wondering if you should go out and find yourself a man to marry instead of waiting for one to stumble along and sweep you up, are you?"

"Well, yes," Poppy answered with a modest blush, focusing on her work. Not that she could remember what she was doing with a bowl full of dried flowers. Did she even have anything to put the potpourri in?

"Then I take back what I said." Mrs. Harmon marched over to where Poppy stood, opening the cupboard above her and taking out a pair of glass potpourri jars with ornate lids. "You should go find yourself a man as soon as possible. And when you've found him, snatch him up and get him to give you a house and a bunch of babies to look after. But tell him to make sure there's nothing breakable within arm's reach."

"Mrs. Harmon," Poppy laughed. "I'm not that clumsy...am I?"

Mrs. Harmon huffed and sent her a wary look before returning to her bread.

Poppy was still in a sunny mood, though, in spite of Mrs. Harmon's teasing. If someone who knew her as well as Mrs. Harmon thought she should pursue Nick, then it was almost a given that she should. She thought about how she would go about approaching Nick on the subject of marriage as she divided the potpourri between the

jars and screwed the lids on. She imagined ways she could propose as she carried the jars up to Miss Victoria's and Lady Mariah's rooms. She practiced sweet words and supplications as she returned downstairs and washed up for lunch. By the time she found a seat at the servant's table, along with most of the rest of the staff, she was determined to plead her case with Nick as soon as possible.

Until he walked into the servant's hall and sat a few seats down from her at the long table. He smiled broadly at her and even winked as he reached for a bowl and the ladle for the large pot of stew in the center of the table. Poppy grinned and blushed back, but her tongue was suddenly stuck to the roof of her mouth.

"I'll be going until Christmas," Christopher, the new head footman, was in the middle of saying as plates and bowls clinked, silverware tinged, and half a dozen arms reached across the table for bread or cheese or water. "Mr. Snyder isn't too pleased," he went on in a lower voice, glancing around to see if the butler was nearby. But only the understaff was present for the meal. "But Mr. Egbert reckons he has a lot he could teach me."

"You've been in contact with Mr. Egbert?" Kitty, one of the newer Starcross maids asked.

"Lord Peter has been in touch with him," Christopher went on. "And he called me up to his office the other day to say I'd be going to London for a few months."

A ripple went around the table. "Did he say who else is going or who is coming here?" Clive, one of the footmen who had been at Starcross for years but who had turned down a promotion, asked.

"Not in so many words," Christopher reported, gesturing with his spoon. "Since there has been more of a turn-over in footmen, I got the idea that more of us will be shuffling around, but he did mention something about one of the maids coming back."

"Not Jane," Clive said, his eyes wide and his expression serious. "Please, anyone but Jane."

Poppy fervently wished that she wouldn't come back either. Two years ago, she had schemed, along with Lord William, to make Millie Llewellyn's life miserable when she'd first arrived. And wretched as it made Poppy feel, she'd gone along with Jane's plans, been her friend, even. She was ashamed to her very core about her behavior now, but she'd been young and foolish and trusted the wrong people. She was grateful that Ginny had taken her under her wing after Jane left, setting her straight and helping her to see who was worthy of being a friend and who was not.

"I heard Mrs. Wilson saying something the other day about Mavis," Dot, the tiny scullery maid piped up from the end of the table.

"Mavis?" Clive tilted his head to the side. He blinked, then nodded. "Yeah, she's all right. She can come back."

"I bet you'll love that, eh, Nick?" Mrs. Harmon said as she swept into the room with a steaming pot of turnips and set it on the table.

Nick seemed suddenly anxious. He glanced to Poppy, something woeful in his eyes, then twisted to smile at Mrs. Harmon. "Sure. It'll be grand."

Mrs. Harmon nodded and marched back out of the room again.

"I suppose that would be grand," Poppy said, her smile growing wider. Mavis was

Nick's sister, after all. Poppy didn't know much about her, only that she'd been mentioned once or twice as the person who was closest to Nick. Only a few people who still worked at Starcross remembered her. She'd moved to the London house before Poppy was hired. Rumor had it she was pretty and lively. Poppy wondered if she had Nick's dark, mysterious coloring or if she favored someone else in the family.

It wasn't until a longer sort of silence reigned at the table that Poppy realized Nick was watching her. He wore a peculiar look as well.

"You will be happy about it, won't you?" she asked.

Nick couldn't have been more surprised by Poppy's question if someone had kicked the bench out from under him and he'd crashed to the floor. He hadn't realized Poppy had known about Mavis in the first place, and here she was, telling him it would be grand for him to have her back?

His mind couldn't wrap itself around the concept. He was certain to the very core of his being that Poppy loved him, or at least carried a torch for him. How could she possibly be happy about his fiancée returning?

"Well...I...yes, I suppose I will be happy?" he said, completely unsure on every level.

Mavis was a youthful mistake. She was the irritating itch on his back that he couldn't reach. In a way, she was his mother's idea. His mum and Mavis's had been friends since they were girls, and they'd plotted for the two of them to end up together from the time they were in their cradles. Mavis was beautiful, and after the heartbreak and misery his mum went through when his father died, Nick had had no problem cozying up to her. He'd enjoyed it on some levels, but his heart had never been involved. He'd made promises to Mavis for his mum's sake, promises that he'd been ambivalent about until Poppy came along. The fact that Mavis had left to work in London instead of marrying him immediately hadn't bothered him four years ago. He'd been in no hurry to stand up in the church with her.

And when Poppy came along, he'd started wishing and hoping she'd stay in London forever. But she was coming back. And Poppy was...glad?

The meal went on, with Clive telling the others about the footmen he knew in London and how he imagined they would fit into the way things worked at Starcross. He was in the middle of talking about the differences in managing style between Mr. Snyder and Mr. Egbert when Poppy asked Nick, "Do you think you'd like to be married?"

Nick nearly choked on his stew. The rest of the table was split between the conversation about London and a fast-paced, high-pitched discussion between Kitty and another new maid, Henrietta, about the upcoming harvest festival, so no one but Nick heard the question.

"Um...I suppose," he said, bristling with discomfort. How could she ask something so sensitive, something that he was sure would ultimately make her miserable, with such a cheerful expression? Perhaps some of the unkind things he'd heard about Poppy over the years were true and she really was touched in the head.

But no, he knew she wasn't. He knew she was the gentlest, sweetest soul imaginable.

"I think I'd like to be married," she said in a rush, cheeks pink, unable to meet his eyes. "I think I'd make a wonderful wife and mother. After working with Mrs. Harmon for years, I'm a very good cook. And I'm sure I wouldn't break things if they belonged to me."

"I'm sure you wouldn't," he said, because it seemed like the right thing to say. His mind roiled, though. Poppy would make the perfect wife and mother, but to do so would mean she was someone else's wife and the mother of someone else's children. He wasn't sure he could stomach the thought.

"What do you think the best part of marriage will be?" she asked, glancing to him again with stars in her eyes.

He stared at her, the piece of bread he'd picked up frozen in mid-air. The look she gave him said she was thinking of him and only him when thinking of married life. But she'd just said he would be happy to have Mavis back. When he thought about the things he'd like about being married to Mavis, nothing came to mind. Not a single thing. Not even her face, really. He only saw her a few times a year, when she'd come home for holidays and their families got together.

When he thought about the best parts of marriage to Poppy, however, the entire world came to mind. Quiet evenings in winter, sitting by the fire with her, delicious meals served for him and for their friends in the garden house where he lived, and especially the way she would feel under him in bed, the passionate sounds he knew she would make and the salty-sweet taste of her skin.

"I don't know," he answered when he realized he was taking too long to say something. It was true. He didn't have the slightest clue, both in terms of what marriage would be like or what was going on in Poppy's head.

"I should like to keep house," Poppy went on, her gaze taking on a distant, joyful look. "And raise children. Although I'm not sure if I could keep a house tidy and look after half a dozen babies."

"Half a dozen?" Nick's voice cracked. He could so easily fit himself into that glorious picture, see himself dandling little girls with Poppy's smile on his knees or teaching his sons the secrets of the earth as they grew older, the way his father had taught him. But the thought that those children would belong to some other man killed the last of his appetite. He put the piece of bread down.

Poppy seemed to draw herself back from her thoughts and focus on him again, a sweet flush painting her cheeks. "If that's not too many," she said.

"It's not too many," he said. For her sake, he smiled. Whatever would make her happiest was the right thing to happen. It would be a crime for Poppy to remain unmarried forever, even if he couldn't be her husband.

If only he could. If only his former self hadn't been so rash, or his mum hadn't needed the ray of happiness that him marrying Mavis according to her wishes would give her.

A new possibility tickled him. If Mavis returned and decided to break things off with him, everything would be different. He wouldn't be the one breaking his mother's already broken heart then. And his mum would love Poppy, once she met her.

"You never know what the future will hold," he said, his smile genuine again.

"You never know," Poppy repeated.

They shared a smile across the table. It was precious to him, meaningful. It filled his heart with hope, even though a whisper of doubt continued to plague him. He knew what he wanted, and if he played his cards right, there was a chance he could get it.

## CHAPTER 3

The problem of Mavis stayed at the forefront of Nick's thoughts for days. There had to be something he could do. He'd never been the sort to sit by and let life roll over him. He jammed his shovel into the heap of manure, compost, and dirt, feeling the heat and comfort of his muscles working, and frowned over the conundrum. The situation he was in reminded him of the stinking pile of muck in front of him. It was made up of the very worst things, but if he used it right, it would provide nourishment and make beautiful things grow. If he could work out how to turn his mistakes and his loyalty to his mother into a way to win Poppy for good, it would all be worthwhile.

"Cheer up," Harry's upbeat call shook Nick out of his thoughts. "It might never happen."

"What?" Nick heaved a shovel of fertilizer into the wheelbarrow beside him, then planted his shovel and leaned on it, panting.

"It's something Ginny likes to say." Harry wheeled another barrow of fresh manure toward him. He dumped it into the pile, parked the wheelbarrow to the side, and strode over to Nick. As far as Nick was concerned, no man had the right to look as blissfully self-satisfied as Harry did.

"You two enjoyed your honeymoon, I see." Nick sent his friend a teasing smirk—one he didn't really feel—and went back to shoveling shit.

"We most certainly did," Harry answered.

"Brighton was nice?" Nick asked.

"I haven't the foggiest idea."

Nick sent him a flat look, only to find Harry grinning like a man who had spent a week being well and truly satisfied. It caused a strange pang of jealousy to burn in his gut. He and Harry had been equals in just about all things, up until recently. It was hard for him to see how he would get the happy ending Harry had at the rate things were going.

"Come on, man," Harry went on with a chuckle. "I would have expected a lot more ribbing from you after a remark like mine."

Nick shrugged and tossed another shovel of fertilizer into his wheelbarrow. "Guess I'm not in the mood for idle chit-chat."

"Guess not," Harry said, but his teasing grin was still in place. He crossed his arms,

studying Nick intently as he tried to continue his work. "So rumor has it Mavis is coming back."

Nick straightened, unsure whether to roll his eyes at Harry or sigh and admit defeat. "That's what I hear."

"Did she write to you to say she's coming?"

Nick paused with his shovel in mid-air. "No, she didn't. I heard it through downstairs gossip, and then from Mum when I was home on Sunday." A sliver of hope hit him, and he emptied his shovel into his wheelbarrow, then leaned on it. "You'd think she'd write if she was coming back and wanted to pick up where she left off."

Harry's teasing smirk shifted to a more serious look of camaraderie. "Has she been writing much at all these last few years?"

Nick shrugged, staring at the corner of the castle without really seeing it. "Not much. Well, not to me. She writes to her mum, who talks to my mum all the time. But me?" He searched through his memory for the last time he got a letter from Mavis and what it had said. The only face that came to mind when he thought about the woman he loved was Poppy's. "It's been months, really."

"Which, I'm sure, is fine by you."

Nick shifted to stare at Harry. "And by that you mean...."

Harry chuckled, letting his arms drop and thumping Nick's arm. "Leave playing coy to the women. I know how you feel about Poppy Miller."

Nick started to frown, but there didn't seem much point in hiding his feelings from his closest friend. He stabbed his shovel into the pile of fertilizer. "There's no point in falling in love if I'm not free to do anything about it."

Harry shook his head. "You're not some high-born nob whose social reputation rests on honorably marrying a woman you haven't seen for four years."

"I saw her when she was home for Easter," Nick contradicted him in a sullen voice, knowing that wasn't Harry's point. "Our families spent the holiday together. They spend every holiday together, now that Mum and the girls have moved out to Porthleven."

"How did the two of you end up engaged anyhow?" Harry asked.

Nick sighed and stepped away from his work to the jug of water he'd set on a nearby bench earlier. He sank into the bench with a grunt and took a long drink of water. Harry ambled over and put his foot up on the edge of the bench.

"It happened how anything happens when you're young, randy, and impatient." Nick shrugged. "And, of course, our families are close. Mum and Mavis's mum grew up together and stayed in touch, even after Mama married Papa. They used to joke about Mavis and I getting married someday when Mavis was a baby and I was in short pants. I still think Papa helped Mavis get a job here so we could be around each other all the time. After he died, with Mum in the state she was, how could I not ask Mavis to marry me?"

"Never underestimate the power of mothers who want their children to get married," Harry chuckled.

Nick shrugged. "Mavis was pretty and biddable, so I didn't fight it so much. I was used to having girls give me whatever I asked for." He arched a brow when Harry snorted. "So

were you," he said, pointing at him. "But you know as well as I do that the girls who we kept company with back then were notoriously free with their favors. Mavis wasn't, and since I was used to getting what I wanted, I figured proposing marriage was the way under her skirts."

"And how far under her skirts did it get you?" Harry asked, his lips twitching with mirth as Nick writhed in discomfort.

"All the way," Nick muttered. "Of course, she was moved to the London house about a month after that."

"Did you know she was being sent there when you proposed?"

"No."

"Did she?"

Nick narrowed his eyes. "What are you getting at?"

Harry shrugged and rocked back to stand on two feet. "Men aren't the only ones who like a little poke now and then. Maybe Mavis wanted a tumble, but didn't want to seem too eager. Maybe she wanted to please her mother by getting engaged to you as much as you wanted to make your mum happy."

Nick let out a breath. "Could be. She certainly wasn't a shy violet about things." In fact, he'd been surprised by how bold she was. She could have taught the girls down by the docks in Penzance a thing or two.

"Did Mavis request to be sent to London back then or was she sent without knowing about it?" Harry asked on.

"I have no idea." Nick took one last swig of water, then pushed himself to stand.

Harry followed him back to the pile of fertilizer. "For all we know, this whole mess about being engaged with honor and pleasing your family when you want to be free to marry someone else could just be a tempest in a teapot."

"You think?" Nick glanced over his shoulder at Harry as he grabbed the shovel and took it back to the corner of the greenhouse nearby.

"I don't see why not," Harry said. "For all you know, Mavis might drop you like a hot potato the second she sets foot on Cornish soil. What could your families do then? You could be closer than you think to dropping down on one knee to propose to sweet Poppy. You, uh, haven't already plucked that flower, have you?"

Harry was back to teasing, but his words cheered Nick all the same. "Of course not. Poppy isn't that kind of girl." He paused, sending Harry a guilty grin. "Not that I haven't thought about it, mind you. Far more than I should," he added in a mutter, walking to his wheelbarrow.

"There you go." Harry nodded, moving to fetch his own wheelbarrow. "You could be closer to happiness than you think. All you have to do is wait for Mavis to get here and set you free."

Nick nodded, calling, "Cheers," to Harry as they both headed off to get more work done. Harry had given him new hope, but he wasn't fool enough to think he was out of the woods yet.

Poppy's plan was set. Not that she considered herself particularly good at planning. But she knew what she wanted, now more than ever. Lady Mariah and Miss Victoria had been encouraging. Ginny was excited for her. Mrs. Harmon approved. And with Nick's sister returning to Starcross Castle, there would never be a better time for her to reach for her dream of finding where she truly belonged in life.

"I belong at Nick's side, as his wife," she reminded herself, checking her reflection in the small mirror beside the bureau in her room in the servant's quarters. She'd washed her hair the night before and set it in rag curls. They'd been caught up under her mobcap all day as they finished drying, and now they rested around her shoulders in springy, brown loops. Granted, she would never win the blue ribbon for hairstyles at the town faire. One strand of curls in particular wouldn't stay behind her ear. But she was convinced Nick would like what he saw.

She pinched her cheeks to make them pinker than they already were, then took a step back to smooth her skirts. It was the middle of the day, so she still wore her faded maid's uniform, but her apron was starched and white. She was ready to do this. She was ready to pursue Nick Parsons and to convince him she was the woman who should be his wife.

"All right," she told her reflection, then blew out a breath. "Let's go find a husband."

She turned, making it three steps toward the door before snagging her foot on the worn carpet and stumbling forward. She yelped, but managed to catch hold of the door instead of spilling to the floor. Her heart raced, and she took a few more steadying breaths before turning the handle.

"Slow and steady, Poppy," she told herself. "And don't trip over your own feet."

At last, she pulled the door open and walked out into the hall. With careful, even steps, as if stalking prey in the woods, she walked to the end of the hall, down the stairs, and through the servant's quarters.

She made it almost all the way past the kitchen before Mrs. Harmon called out, "What's wrong with you, girl? You're walking as though you're trying not to break wind as you go."

Poppy's face turned beet red, and she whipped to face Mrs. Harmon, her floppy curls bouncing. "I am not. I'm being slow and careful."

Mrs. Harmon's brow shot up to her hairline. "Where are you going looking like you have a head full of snakes?"

"They're curls, not snakes. And I'm...." She darted a glance to the two kitchen maids, who were tittering behind their hands and pretending not to see her. Poppy sighed. "Do I look that bad? I was trying to look pretty."

Mrs. Harmon let out a breath and shook her head. "Dear girl." She marched across the room and started running her fingers through Poppy's hair like a mother hen. "You're pretty enough without fuss and nonsense. I'm sure any one of the footmen or lads down in town would fall all over themselves to have you."

She grabbed Poppy's shoulders and turned her to the side, then set to work gathering half her hair at the back of her head. She pulled a piece of twine out of her apron and tied the hair back. The style was simple, but it kept the hair out of Poppy's face while letting the curls she'd worked so hard for settle around her shoulders.

"I don't want one of the footmen or any old lad from town," Poppy confessed. She couldn't bring herself to continue to say that it was Nick she wanted.

Mrs. Harmon took hold of her shoulders and jerked Poppy to face her again. "My sweet girl. I know there's someone out there for you. Lord help him," she added with a chuckle.

Poppy smiled, then threw her arms around Mrs. Harmon's meaty shoulders. "Thank you, Mrs. Harmon," she said. She kissed her on the cheek, then skipped off through the kitchen door and out into the autumn sunshine.

She wasn't entirely sure where Nick would be, but chances were, he'd be near the greenhouse. Her heart was light and her steps, well, reasonably light as she hurried through the gardens to the far corner, where the pretty flowerbeds and manicured yards gave way to more serviceable beds where Nick grew and tested plants for the formal gardens. Poppy spotted Nick's outline beyond the foggy greenhouse windows and let out an excited squeal. She could do this. She could charm Nick into wanting to marry her.

The second she threw open the door to the greenhouse, a potted fern to her right tumbled off its shelf and smashed on the floor at her feet. Poppy stood there staring at it, feeling as though her insides were melting like candle wax.

"Sorry," she said with a wince.

"Poppy?" Nick was at the other end of the greenhouse. He glanced up from whatever he was doing with a tray lined with pots no bigger than Poppy's fist. The second his eyes met hers, he smiled. And when he glanced down to the smashed pot and its floundering fern...his smile widened even more. "Oh dear."

The way he said those two syllables, his voice low and as rich as the soil at her feet, made shivers break out along Poppy's spine. They coalesced in that secret spot that ached whenever she thought about Nick. It was lovely and exciting. However, the fact that she was too embarrassed to move a muscle wasn't helping her mission at all.

"I didn't mean to," she sighed, holding her hands up, as if keeping them at her sides would dirty them, even though the destroyed plant was around her feet. "It just jumped off the shelf when I came in."

"Ah, yes," Nick said, striding up the long aisle from the other end of the greenhouse. "It's a rare Peruvian Jumping Fern, after all." His eyes sparkled, which raised a giggle in Poppy's throat.

"There's no such thing," she laughed. "You're teasing me."

"Of course I'm teasing you."

Nick reached her, scooping his arms around her waist and lifting her clear off the ground. She gasped, not so much in surprise, but because his arms felt so perfect around her, and the heat of his body made her ache even harder. He took her a few steps to the side, between the rows of waist-high tables lined with sprouts and potted plants. When he put her down, his hands stayed on her waist.

"Did you do something to your hair?" he asked, his smile glowing.

Poppy could have died and gone to heaven. He'd noticed. "Do you like it?" she asked tentatively, glancing up at him through her lashes.

He didn't answer at first. He swayed subtly into her, his mouth going soft as if...as if

he were about to kiss her. Poppy's heart sped up, and she tilted her face to him, more ready to be kissed than she'd ever been.

But he held off, saying instead, "I do like it." He raised a hand to cup one of her bouncy curls. And even though those hands were just a bit dirty, even though he smelled like compost and hard work instead of exotic spices, Poppy drew in a deep breath of him, closing her eyes.

"I love you, Nick," she sighed.

Her eyes popped open, going wide. Had she really said that? Said it out loud?

Nick stared at her, watching her. The fire in his eyes flared, and his smile grew. It was devilish and enticing and genuine all at the same time. He moved his hand from her hair to cradle her face. His lips parted.

"I think we should get married," she blurted before he could tell her she was a silly dreamer. "I think I would make a very good wife, especially if I was your wife. And I think that we could be happy together. I know I could make you happy."

His smile widened, causing his eyes to dance with light. "I think you could too," he whispered. His thumb stroked her cheek. He leaned closer.

"We would have a beautiful family. Lots of children. And I would love them and take care of them and raise them all to make you proud."

"I'm sure you would." The laughter was in his voice now as well as his eyes. He moved his hand from her waist to her back, pulling her closer, while his other hand continued to cradle her blazing-hot cheek.

"And I know there are a lot of things I'm not very good at," she went on, her voice rising higher and higher, even as her knees went weak and her heart thumped against her chest, "But I would be so good at others. I just know I would. And—"

"Poppy." He stopped her.

She was tense in his arms, her chest rising and falling rapidly, as though her heart wanted to leap right out of her and cling to Nick forever. "Yes?" she squeaked, her brow inching up.

He answered by closing the distance between them and slanting his mouth over hers. It was as if the sun had shattered above them, reigning drops of pure happiness around them.

## CHAPTER 4

*H*er bones melted. Her skin tingled. It was as if her whole world had turned inside-out, but in the very best of ways. Nick's mouth claimed hers. His tongue teased the seam of her lips, coaxing her to open up to him. She wanted nothing more than to be his in every way, forever. She parted her lips, and the fiery intensity of his kiss soared to heights she'd never imagined. His tongue slid along hers, tasting her in a way she never could have dreamed of.

She sighed, deep in her throat, and slid her arms up over his shoulders, threading her fingers through his hair. Everything about him was solid and masculine and wonderful. A shiver of longing passed through her as one of his hands dropped to caress her backside, pulling her closer to a part of him that was firm and warm. She might have been inexperienced, but she wasn't ignorant. She knew what that meant, knew that he wanted her. She smiled into his kiss, wanting him just as badly in return. The foolish girl she tried not to be melted away into the woman she knew she could become in his arms.

"This is perfect," she whispered as Nick trailed his kiss away from her lips to her cheek, and then down the line of her neck as she leaned back. "This is completely perfect."

He hummed, sliding his hand up from her backside to cup her breast through the fabric of her uniform.

She sucked in a breath, her senses sizzling like fireworks. "I'll be the best wife to you," she said through panting breaths. "I'll make you so happy, Nick. Happier than any man has ever been."

He stopped kissing her and straightened. The sound he made was far more frustrated than sensual. Poppy had a moment of panic before she opened her eyes—she hadn't realized she'd closed them—and stared into Nick's pinched face.

"We can't do this," he sighed.

"What?" Her grip on his shoulders grew tense, then desperate as his eyes filled with regret. "Of course we can do this," she said with a nervous laugh. "We're going to be married, after all. I know you haven't asked me yet, but you do want to marry me, don't you?"

"Yes," he answered with too much hesitation, pain in his eyes.

"Then it's all right if we kiss," she went on, her voice higher. "Married couples can do

whatever they want, and people who are engaged do all sorts of things. No one will think less of us if we—”

“I can’t marry you, Poppy.”

Her world came to a screeching stop. He continued to hold her, but his arms were stiff and his brow furrowed. Poppy studied him with her mouth open, her mind not accepting what he’d just said.

“But...but you want to marry me,” she said, blinking fast as her eyes started to sting.

“I do,” he sighed. His body relaxed, but in the process, he let go of her and stepped away. He paced to the side, rubbing a hand over his face.

Poppy felt cold and bereft without him. “I don’t understand. If you want to marry me, what’s stopping you?”

She dreaded the answer, especially when she saw that there was one. His face pinched, and his eyes held a grim combination of sorrow and guilt that caused prickles to break out on her skin. He paced a few more steps, then blew out a breath and walked deliberately back to her. He took her hands in his.

“I want to marry you, Poppy, but I’m already engaged to someone else.”

She frowned and shook her head. “No, you aren’t.”

His shoulder sagged. “Yes, I am.”

“Who?”

“I’m engaged to Mavis.” His expression grew slightly confused. “I thought you knew.”

Poppy let out an anxious laugh. “But Mavis is your sister.”

He raised an eyebrow as though something suddenly made sense. “No, she isn’t. She’s, well, technically she’s my fiancée.”

“But I thought she was your sister,” Poppy said as though all the wind had gone out of her sail. She let go of Nick’s hands and took a half-step back. “I’ve heard people talk about her in connection with you before, and....”

Nick clenched his jaw and let out a breath, running his hand through his hair. “Mavis is a maid who worked here years ago but works in London now. Years ago, we were, well, we were involved. It was a match that both of our families wanted. They still do.”

“Do you love her?” Poppy’s question came out as a squeak.

Nick winced. “I fancied myself in love with her four years ago. Enough to propose. She said yes, but then she was transferred to London.”

“You loved someone else.” She didn’t know why it hurt so much. Nick wasn’t a green boy. He was handsome and amiable, with a good job and strong prospects. Of course he’d been in love before. He could have any girl he wanted, and chances were that they fell at his feet when she wasn’t looking. Why would he choose her when he had the whole female population of the world to choose from?

She turned away, stepping over to a tray of seedlings that had only just sprouted. She felt as fragile as those tender stalks and twice as likely to wither.

“We all do foolish things when we’re young,” Nick said. “And we keep doing them when our families get involved. If I had known you would come along, I never would have gotten cozy with Mavis.”

“Oh, so you were cozy?” Poppy didn’t turn back to him. She didn’t want to see the

truth in his eyes, and she didn't want him to see how deeply it hurt her to know that there had been others. That there were others. It shouldn't bother her. Men were men, and heaven only knew the lives they led. But Nick was special, or so she'd thought. Nick was hers.

But he wasn't.

"I don't know how to make this better," he said, stepping slowly toward her. "I don't know if it would help to say I don't love her, that I haven't loved her for years. I don't know if telling you I'd marry you in a heartbeat, if I was free, if putting Mavis aside wouldn't break my mother's heart, will make things better or worse."

Poppy did her best to smile, and turned toward him. "It makes things better," she lied. She couldn't hold onto her smile. "Thank you for telling me, at least. And before—" She gasped, flushing red with embarrassment and alarm. "Before she gets here. Oh heavens, Mavis is coming here. She's coming back to Starcross Castle."

"Yes," Nick said lowering his head. "I've just had confirmation of that from my mum this morning. She came up to give me some seeds, and told me. She's...she's happy about it. I haven't seen her smile like that in years."

"Oh." Poppy didn't know what else to say. There didn't seem to be anything to say. From the moment she'd met Nick all those years ago, when she was still a kitchen maid and he would bring vegetables from the estate's gardens to Mrs. Harmon, he'd been engaged elsewhere. If she'd known, she never would have looked twice at him, never would have fallen in love with him, never would have had her heart broken. And she would have been poorer for it.

"I have to go," she mumbled, pushing away from the table of seedlings and past him.

"Poppy, wait," he called after her.

She didn't want to listen to anything else he had to say. It would be too painful, she knew, but in spite of everything, she still loved him. She made it all the way to the greenhouse door, her hand on the handle, when she turned back to him.

"I do love you," he said. The look in his eyes reflected all the pain in her heart. "I just want you to know that. I love you."

Her throat closed up before she could tell him once more that she loved him. Her feet were stuck to the ground while the rest of her wanted to run to him.

"And who knows?" He shrugged. "Maybe there's a way out of this."

"Maybe," she said, though her heart wilted all the same. She should have known better than to think that a silly, clumsy girl like her would end up married to a man as wonderful and handsome as Nick.

She threw open the greenhouse door and ran out into the garden, not knowing where she would go or what she would do. Miss Victoria didn't need her again until it was time to dress for supper, and Felicity, the woman who had taken Ginny's place as head maid, had given her a full hour off to take care of her business with Nick. Not that Poppy had told Felicity the urgent matter she needed to attend to was Nick. She felt listless, hopeless, lost.

Her steps slowed as she rounded the corner of the house, walking into the manicured French garden. Nick put so much care into everything he did for Starcross Castle that he

seemed to follow her wherever she went. Which meant that once Mavis returned and Nick married her, she would never be able to get away from everything she'd lost.

She let out a mournful moan as she reached the far end of the house and the strange, walled garden where Lady Anne, Lord Peter's first, unfortunate wife, was buried. There didn't seem to be a more perfect place to mourn the loss of everything that could have been, so she dragged herself over to the raised stone slab of the tomb and plopped to sit on the edge, burying her face in her hands.

"Poppy? Was that you I heard?" Moments later, Ginny appeared around the corner of the garden's wall.

Feeling wretched, Poppy looked up. "Oh, Ginny. All is lost," she wailed.

Ginny rushed to her, a look that was both sympathetic and amused in her eyes. Poppy didn't blame her for the amused part. She was a laughingstock now, and she knew it.

"Is this about Nick?" Ginny asked softly as she sat by Poppy's side and looped an arm around her shoulder.

"He's engaged to someone else," Poppy sobbed, resting her head on her friend's shoulder. "Mavis isn't his sister, she's his fiancée, and she's coming back."

"I know," Ginny sighed. When Poppy straightened to look at her in shock, Ginny went on with, "Mrs. Wilson was just telling me about all of the London staff that is coming back to Starcross. She wants me to help train a few of the maids, if Lady Mariah can spare me. In the process, she mentioned Mavis. I thought he was Nick's sister too, since I came to work here after she left, but Mrs. Wilson set me straight."

A horrible thought occurred to Poppy, and she glanced up, her throat squeezing. "You don't think Mrs. Wilson and...and the rest of the staff knows that I've been such a fool over Nick, do you?"

Ginny bit her lip. That was all the answer Poppy needed. She slumped forward, burying her face in her hands again.

"Oh, this is humiliating. Everyone knows how big of a ninny I've been. I'll never live this down. And Nick will marry someone else on top of it all."

"There, there." Ginny rubbed Poppy's back. "Things might not be as bad as all that."

"You always say that, but it always is," Poppy sniffled. She wanted to have hope, but part of her needed to be miserable.

Ginny hugged her more closely. "Let's look at this logically. From what I understand, Nick asked that Mavis woman to marry him at least four years ago. Long before you or I came here."

"True," Poppy said, straightening and wiping her eyes with the hem of her apron. "But Nick is a good and honorable man. And his mother wants him to marry Mavis. He seems to think it would break her heart if he didn't. He wouldn't end an engagement just because he doesn't fancy the woman anymore under those circumstances."

"Maybe not," Ginny said, smoothing Poppy's hair—which she now felt ridiculous for curling. "But what if Mavis doesn't want to marry him? Even amongst the aristocratic class, a woman can call off an engagement up until the last minute."

Poppy frowned. "But it still causes a scandal. And we're definitely not aristocrats."

"All the better, then," Ginny laughed. "We could all be getting upset about nothing."

"I suppose so," Poppy sighed. Her throat continued to squeeze and her heart to feel as though it were full of holes, though. "But this whole fiasco just serves to show that I shouldn't have given myself airs by thinking Nick Parsons would fancy me."

"Is that what this is all about?" Ginny asked gently. "You don't think you're good enough for Nick?"

Poppy's shoulders sagged. "I'm not, am I? I'm not pretty or clever. I can't do anything fancy. I've made some terrible mistakes in my past and trusted all the wrong people."

"But you have a good heart," Ginny insisted, taking her hands. "That's what Nick sees. That's all that matters. We don't know what this Mavis person is like."

"True," Poppy admitted reluctantly.

"And what kind of woman would run off to work in London as soon as she became engaged to a man like Nick?"

"I hadn't thought of that." A glimmer of hope formed in Poppy's gut.

"And stay away for four whole years," Ginny went on. "If you ask me, I don't think this Mavis woman really wants to marry Nick at all."

"You don't?"

"No. Mark my words. The second she steps foot on Starcross soil, she'll break off her engagement to Nick and the two of you will be free to have a beautiful life, full of good food and chubby babies."

Poppy laughed at the thought, actually laughed. Her heart felt as though it were shaking off some of the gloom that had settled over it. "Maybe," she said.

"I'm sure things will work out." Ginny squeezed her hand and stood. "Women as lovely and sweet as you deserve to be happy. And I'm sure that Nick loves you."

Poppy stood with her, keeping her eyes downcast. "He said so, you know."

"Did he?"

She nodded. "When he told me he couldn't marry me because he was engaged to Mavis, he told me he loved me."

"Well, there you go then." Ginny hooked her arm through Poppy's and walked her out of the memorial garden and back toward the house. "I'm certain that everything will work out the way it should. All we have to do is wait for the London staff to get here, and you'll see."

"When do they arrive?" Poppy asked, the tremor in her heart still there.

"Within a week, or so Mrs. Wilson says," Ginny reported.

Poppy nodded. She could do this. She could wait things out. Within a week, Mavis would return and set Nick aside, and she could swoop in. Everything would be just as it should.

## CHAPTER 5

He'd handled it badly. For days after his intimate encounter with Poppy, Nick was convinced that he'd handled the whole thing badly. As soon as she'd rushed from the greenhouse, he'd cursed himself for pushing her away. He loved her. That should be all that mattered. He would find a way to get out of his engagement to Mavis, and everything would be as it should be.

One day later, he was berating himself for kissing Poppy. He'd made a promise to Mavis and to his mother, and even though it wasn't one he wanted to live up to, it wasn't right to disregard it so cavalierly. Kissing should have waited until he was able to talk things through with Mavis. But Poppy had looked so incredibly sweet with her hair done up in curls, and the joy in her eyes had been irresistible. Her body had fit so perfectly against his. She smelled so sweet, like cinnamon. He'd needed to kiss her, needed to taste her.

He needed her still, days later, as he pulled weeds in the French garden. The exertion kept his muscles busy and stopped the drive to find Poppy, throw her over his shoulder, and take her to his bed so that he could show her that she was the only woman for him. Every day that passed made it harder for him to resist throwing caution to the wind to do what he wanted rather than what his conscience told him was right.

"You can't go on this way forever," Harry said with a grin that went beyond teasing as the two of them enjoyed an afternoon cup of tea behind the stable. "Sooner or later, either your conscience is going to win or your cock will."

Nick glared at him. "My heart, you mean."

Harry shrugged, doing a piss-poor job of hiding his amusement at the situation. "All right. If that's what you insist. Funny, but I always thought the heart was located higher up in the body." He nodded to Nick's trousers.

"It is," Nick growled, even though he had existed in a half-aroused state of impatience for days.

"Whatever you say," Harry chuckled. "But you can't convince me that's a trowel in your pocket."

Nick muttered a string of expletives that had Harry laughing even harder. He wanted to throw his tea in his friend's face, but it wouldn't have made him feel better. At the rate he was going, the only thing that was going to put him out of his misery was a solution to

the situation, one way or another.

"Maybe I should just be a bastard and throw Mavis over," he sighed at last. "Maybe it doesn't matter if I break Mum's heart and crush the plans she's had with her best friend since she was in the schoolroom."

Harry shook his head, a shade more serious. He finished his tea, stood, and clapped Nick on the shoulder. "You're not the type, mate. You're a good man, too much so sometimes. You'll do what's right."

"And what's right is...." He let the question hang.

Harry laughed. "How the hell should I know? Either way, something will have to give."

Almost as if Harry had cued the next scene in a stage farce, the rattle of a carriage coming up the drive and into the kitchen courtyard snagged their attention. The London staff was due to arrive that afternoon, and unless Nick was mistaken, the moment had come.

He wasn't ready.

"I need to find Poppy," he said, standing and pouring the dregs of his tea in the grass. He handed the cup to Harry. "I need to explain one last time before this whole thing comes to a head."

"Do you really?" Harry questioned.

He was too late. Nick was already striding around the corner of the stable and marching into the courtyard. Poppy had been avoiding him for days, and he couldn't say he blamed her, really. He hadn't meant to hurt her, but he was sure he had. He needed to find her to make one last attempt to reassure her that if things didn't go the way they wanted them to, it wasn't her fault. It was all his own stupidity.

His heart thudded against his ribs at the sight of Poppy standing at the far end of the courtyard as the largest carriage Lord Peter owned rolled to a stop. Poppy saw him, and her expression flooded with anxiety. Nick smiled, hoping he could reassure her. Harry's nephew, Jimmy, jumped down from the back of the baggage-laden carriage and scrambled to open one of the doors. A flurry of chatter and movement followed as the London servants disembarked, but Nick barely registered any of it. He saw only Poppy, thought only of reaching her to explain.

He was halfway across the courtyard when a loud cry of "Nick!" snapped his focus on Poppy. He froze mid-step, and turned to see Mavis alighting from the carriage.

She was every bit as pretty as the last time he had seen her. Her blonde hair was caught up in a loose bun at the back of her head instead of covered by a mobcap, but then, all of the London servants were wearing plain clothes instead of uniforms or livery. The cut of Mavis's dress flattered her slender figure, accentuating her curves. Her sensual lips curled into a smile as she spotted him, and her green eyes sparkled. But as lovely as she was, Nick felt nothing.

He turned back to Poppy, only to find that her face had fallen. She was staring straight at Mavis with a look of sad resignation. It was like an arrow in Nick's heart. Mavis was a beauty, but Poppy was so much more than a pretty face.

He pushed himself into motion again, focusing on Poppy alone.

"Nick," Mavis called again. "Oh, Nick, I'm so happy to see you again at last."

She rushed toward him, cutting him off before he could close the distance between him and Poppy. Without warning, she threw herself into his arms, and Nick was forced to catch her to keep them both from spilling to the cobblestones.

"Mavis," he said.

He didn't have a chance to say more. Bold as brass, she kissed him. Her arms snaked around his neck and she leaned so heavily into him that he had to brace himself to keep from being knocked over. He was too surprised by her enthusiasm to kiss her back, but she didn't seem to mind. Her mouth moved over his as she made a loud, sighing sound.

As soon as he could, Nick pulled away from her, but she wouldn't let him go, and he couldn't tug his arms free from her waist without her falling. He glanced toward the house in time to see Poppy burst into tears, hide her face in her hands, and run inside.

"I've missed you so much, Nick. It's been torture to be apart from you for so long," Mavis said in a rush of emotion. She glanced toward the house, and Nick could have sworn that her eyes narrowed at the sight of Poppy, but she went on. "I dream of you every night, what it would be like to hold you in my arms again. I haven't been able to sleep these last few days, knowing we are so close to being together at last. I've been waiting for you, Nick. I've been burning for you." She lowered her voice for her last sentence. The purr in it was unmistakable.

Nick dragged his eyes away from the door Poppy had disappeared into at last to stare at Mavis. Her eyes flashed with lust, and one of her hands moved from his shoulder to his chest, threatening to go lower.

"It's nice to see you too, Mavis," he said, polite but distant.

If she noticed he wasn't returning her heat, she didn't let on. "I bet you haven't been able to sleep these last few nights either," she went on. "I know how restless you get in bed." She bit her lip, glancing up at him with a suggestive flutter of her eyelashes.

"Um, sure." He glanced to the kitchen door again, praying Poppy couldn't see Mavis's display. Every hope he had that Mavis would have grown cold in the four years she'd been away, that she'd set him free so that he could be with Poppy, faded.

Mavis followed his gaze. "Who is she?" she asked. She was trying so hard not to seem interested in Poppy that it was obvious her mind was racing to know who Poppy was. Even to Nick, and he didn't consider himself an expert on the secret language of women.

"That's Poppy," he said. "She came on as a kitchen maid after you left."

"A kitchen maid?" Mavis wrinkled her nose. "Really, Nick. You should know better than to let trash like that look longingly at you."

Anger flared through Nick as though Mavis had fired a gun. He pushed away from her at last, just as her hand trailed down to the waist of his trousers. "Poppy is a good, sweet girl. She worked her way up from the kitchen to be an upstairs maid, and now she serves as Miss Victoria's lady's maid when she's needed."

Mavis lowered her eyes, and her cheeks went pink, but whether she was ashamed of herself or plotting something, Nick couldn't tell. When she glanced up at him, there was a certain amount of regret in her eyes. "I'm sorry, Nick. I shouldn't have made assumptions. If this Poppy is a friend of yours, then she's a friend of mine. Can you forgive me?" She rested a hand on his chest once more, and her eyes seemed to grow larger, rounder.

Nick clenched his jaw, feeling as though parts of him were being torn from the inside out. He didn't want to trust Mavis's sudden good nature about the whole thing, but then, he had no reason to doubt her. It wouldn't be fair to anyone if he automatically assumed the worst about Mavis simply because he wanted out of their engagement. She had always been headstrong and forward, and she had always spoke without thinking.

Just like he had proposed without thinking. Once, they had been a good match.

"I'm glad you're back," he said, letting out the breath he'd been holding. He went so far as to bend forward and kiss her lightly and quickly on the lips. He would have kissed his sister the same way. Well, perhaps not on the lips.

Mavis laughed. "That's not the kind of welcome I would have expected from my fiancé." She rested her arms on his shoulders once more and leaned into him. "I would have thought you'd be much more ardent."

She tilted her face up to his, relaxing her lips in an invitation to kiss her more passionately. She even closed her eyes as if expecting it. Nick frowned. The last time they'd met, at her family's house at Easter, she hadn't been this overt with him. She hadn't kissed him at all or even tried to. It could have been because her parents and siblings had been present, but all the same, it felt odd.

Because it was what she expected, he kissed her. But he didn't linger or make it anything more than it should be. In fact, he deliberately tried to be cold. "I'm sure you've got a lot to do to settle in at Starcross Castle again," he said, taking a half step back.

"Yes, there's so much to do." Whether she was disappointed or not, her smile remained bright. Her hands lingered on his chest, playing with his buttons. "I'll take my trunk up to my room, but I don't know if I should unpack or not, seeing as I'll be moving into the garden house soon, there doesn't seem to be much point."

"Soon?" An uncomfortable prickle formed in Nick's gut.

"Yes, of course." She smiled up at him. "We're to be married, after all."

"About that," Nick began, unable to shake the feeling that the conversation wasn't going to go the way he wanted it to.

"I've got everything all set," Mavis went on, smiling brightly again. "I've already had the vicar back at our home parish start reading the bans."

"You've done what?" The prickle burst into an acidic pinch. Nick took a large step back, gaping at Mavis.

"We've been engaged for years," Mavis said, blinking as though she didn't understand his reticence. "Mama told Rev. Chambers to start reading the bans last week. They've already been read once, so in a fortnight we can be married."

"A fortnight?" His voice was hoarse, and he ran a hand through his hair.

"I would have arranged everything sooner if I could." Mavis swayed into him, closing her arms around him in a hug. "I can't wait to be your wife, Nick. I'd marry you tomorrow if I could."

"Yes, but...."

There was no way to end the sentence. Everything Nick had hoped would happen with Mavis's return lay shattered at his feet. There was no way he could back out of things now, not with Mavis as eager as she was. To do so would make him the biggest cad

Cornwall had ever seen. It would ruin his mum. He couldn't do it. He couldn't bring shame to Mavis that way, he couldn't disappoint his family that way, and he wouldn't expose everyone at Starcross Castle to the gossip his backing out would bring. It was starting to look as though he were well and truly trapped.

"All right," he sighed, letting her go. "Take your trunk up to your room, and we'll talk about everything else later."

She let out a sound halfway between a laugh and a sigh, kissed Nick once more, then turned and ran back to the carriage, where everyone's trunks were being unloaded. Nick ran a hand through his hair as he watched her, feeling as though he'd just been told someone had died. One of the footmen from London glanced over at him and shook his head with a smirk.

Nick blinked, then he frowned. What was a look like that for?

He didn't have time to dwell on it. Harry strode up to him and slapped him on the back. "That was quite the homecoming," he said.

Nick turned his frown on Harry. "I'm not in a mood to have you joking about the tangle of my love life."

There was nothing more to say, so he turned and strode off, heading back to the gardens.

"I didn't mean it like that," Harry said, catching up to him. "Only that it looked like Mavis was happy to see you."

Harry was still smiling when Nick turned to him, but that smile faded. "You saw how she is," Nick said. "She definitely still wants to marry me. And what am I supposed to do about that?"

"Sit her down and have a long talk about how it won't work?" Harry suggested.

Nick clenched his jaw and shook his head. "Did she look like she would be receptive to that? And how do you think our families would react? Her mum and mine have pretty much named all of our babies already."

"So explain to them too."

Nick sighed. "It isn't going to work. Everyone wants this marriage but me."

"And Poppy," Harry reminded him.

"And Poppy," Nick repeated, his heart breaking as he said the words. His shoulders dropped, and he rubbed a hand over his face. Disappointing Poppy, breaking her heart, would be the hardest part of the whole catastrophe.

"I still think you should talk to Mavis," Harry went on. "Tell her how you feel about Poppy."

"And what good would that do?" Nick stopped, snapping to face Harry. "Other than infuriating Mavis."

"No woman wants to marry a man who's in love with someone else," Harry reasoned. "If you tell her the truth, she might just understand and let you go."

"And our mothers?"

"Wouldn't want their children married to people they don't love," Harry finished for him.

Nick crossed his arms and scowled. It seemed so reasonable when Harry put it that

way, but the heart was fickle, especially a woman's heart. The last thing he wanted was for every woman in his life to hate him, but it looked like he wouldn't be able to avoid it.

"I'll think about it," he said at last, thumping Harry on the shoulder, then walking on.

"You do that," Harry called after him.

Nick was grateful that his friend was giving him the space to mull over the problem on his own. As things stood, he didn't see any light at the end of the tunnel.

## CHAPTER 6

In future years, Poppy was certain she'd look back at the moment she saw Mavis kissing Nick as the moment the young, cheerful version of herself died and the wiser, sadder woman she felt destined to be was born. Mavis was beautiful, far beyond compare. She was thin and blonde and everything men liked, whereas Poppy was getting plumper by the day and couldn't even fix her own hair in an attractive style. There was simply no way Nick would choose her when he was already engaged to perfection.

"Cheer up, my darling," her mother told her as Poppy sat in her family's front parlor that Sunday afternoon. She'd fled home after church with the Starcross staff, wanting the comfort of her mother and sisters, and to avoid the sight of Mavis and Nick arm in arm. "There are plenty of other fish in the sea."

"I heard from Gemma Staples that the bans were read for Nick and that Mavis last week," Delly said in a voice Poppy found more gloating than comforting. "They were probably read again this week, which means that after next Sunday, they could marry any time."

Poppy squeaked in misery, burying her face in her hands.

"There, there, love." Her mother got up from the table where she'd been darning socks and came to sit beside Poppy on the worn old couch under the window. "Delly, that wasn't very helpful."

"The truth is hard." Delly shrugged.

Poppy was so miserable she didn't have the energy to tell her sister off. Her mother made a scolding noise and shook her head, then took Poppy into her arms.

"You'll come out of this stronger, my darling," she insisted. "I know you fancied yourself deeply in love, but you will find someone else. You know that Jack Fisher has always been fond of you. I'm certain that if I had a word with his mother, he'd offer for your hand."

"Jack is my beau," Delly protested, sitting straighter.

"You turned him down years ago," their mother said. "He was always fonder of Poppy anyhow. Who wouldn't be fond of such a sweet, big-hearted girl?"

"Fine. Poppy can have Jack," Delly sighed. "But if she's going to marry, I think I should get a chance to go to Starcross Castle as a maid."

"If they'd have you," their mother said.

"I'm sure they would," Delly said. "Especially if Poppy leaves to marry Jack. Don't you think, Poppy?"

Poppy dragged her eyes up from the spot she'd been studying on the carpet. Her heart felt like a cold, lead weight in her chest. "I suppose," she said, too disappointed in everything to summon much of a care for the conversation. "Either way, I don't think I could stay on there. Not now. Not with...." She let her words trail off, lowering her head and giving in to weeping.

Her mother hugged her and rubbed her back, and after a while, rose to fix a cup of tea for Poppy, just the way she liked it. Delly went on talking about how well she'd fit in at Starcross Castle while her younger brothers and sisters tore about the room, oblivious to their oldest sister's misery. In a strange way, it was just the sort of balm Poppy needed.

By the time she returned to Starcross Castle that night, she'd resigned herself to things as they were. She was certain she'd feel better in the morning, or at least resigned to the world the way it was, but her misery didn't abate at all. It was hard just to put one foot in front of the other.

"You wouldn't actually leave Starcross Castle, would you?" Miss Victoria asked her when Poppy shared the reason behind her glum mood while helping her dress. "I mean, you wouldn't let something like a little romantic disappointment keep you from a place that has become your home."

In spite of everything, Poppy's heart lightened a little at Miss Victoria's show of support. She gathered the hem of the petticoat she'd just shaken out and lifted it over Miss Victoria's head so that she could shimmy into it. "I'm not sure it would feel much like home with Nick married to Mavis, miss," she admitted. "I don't know if I could stand to see that all the time. And I'd have to work side-by-side with Mavis every day."

"But you can't let a woman who just walked in here last week steal everything you've ever dreamed of," Miss Victoria insisted.

Poppy tied her petticoat at the small of her back, smiling sadly. "Mavis was here long before I was, miss. And as I understand it, her mother and Nick's have known each other and planned for the two of them to be together since they were young."

"I never did approve of this ridiculous notion that parents should decide who their children's life partners should be," Miss Victoria said with a huff as Poppy moved to fetch her skirt. "It seems so medieval. Barbaric, even."

"It seemed to work out well for Lady Mariah, miss," Poppy said, gathering the skirt to slip over Miss Victoria's head. "Begging your pardon."

"Yes, well, that was a once in a lifetime bit of luck." Miss Victoria's cheeks went pink, and a sheepish smile pulled at her lips. She climbed into her skirt, then smiled at herself and Poppy in the mirror as Poppy settled, adjusted, and fastened the garment. "I'm so relieved that my sister is happy."

"Lord Peter is a wonderful man, miss."

"I will admit that he is, and that I was a fool to see only his age and appearance when he first came to call on Mariah." Her shoulders sank as Poppy went to fetch her blouse. "I

was foolish about too many things.”

A darkness settled over Miss Victoria. It had been there almost as long as Poppy had known the woman, ever since the turmoil that had ended in Lord William’s death. Everyone downstairs knew that Miss Victoria had been grievously dishonored and hurt by Lord William, but Poppy was certain she knew more than anyone else just how deep the damage had gone.

Bolder than she thought she was, she put an arm around Miss Victoria’s waist and hugged her. In an instant, Miss Victoria stopped being her better and was nothing more than a young woman Poppy’s same age, one who carried a burden in her heart and had no one to share it with. If they’d been born into different stations, Poppy was sure they’d have been friends.

Miss Victoria drew in a breath and steadied herself, wiping away the tears she’d shed in the moment. “I was a fool because I trusted the wrong man,” she said, cleared her throat, and went on. “You gave your heart to the very best of men, Poppy. I hate to see you suffer because of something that was never meant to be.”

“We don’t know that it was never meant to be, miss,” Poppy said softly, helping Miss Victoria into her blouse and doing the buttons up the back.

“It can’t have been meant to be,” Miss Victoria insisted. “You and Nick were meant to be.” Poppy didn’t want to argue, but Miss Victoria must have caught her doubtful expression. “You were,” she insisted.

“Don’t worry about me, miss.” Poppy tried to smile. “It’s not so bad as all that. My mama thinks there’s a man down in Mousehole, where we’re from, who would marry me. Jack Fisher. I’ll have a home, children. I’ll be happy.”

“But do you love Jack?”

Poppy didn’t answer. They both knew she didn’t.

“Well, I don’t want to lose you,” Miss Victoria went on. “There. I’ve said it. And maybe it’s selfish, but I don’t want to let you go when I depend on you so much.”

Poppy smiled. “Thank you, miss. But you know that even if I did marry Nick, I couldn’t be your maid anymore.”

“But you would still live at Starcross Castle, would you not? Doesn’t Nick live in that little cottage at the far end of the garden?”

“He does, miss.”

“There you have it.” She was finished dressing and moved to study herself in the mirror. She smiled at her reflection and at Poppy behind her. “We simply won’t take no for an answer. Nick loves you, I’m sure of it. I don’t know who this Mavis thinks she is, but I refuse to let her thwart true love or chase away my dear friend.”

Her speech was so determined and optimistic that Poppy laughed. “You are a treasure, miss.”

“I hope I can be more than that.” She turned, taking Poppy’s hand and leading her to the small settee near the fireplace. “What you need is a plan to win Nick once and for all.”

“A plan, miss?”

“Yes.” She took Poppy’s hands. “How far are you willing to go to win Nick?”

Poppy's mouth dropped open, but no sound came out. She'd never thought about how far she'd go before. Visions of all the things she could do to Mavis popped to her mind, but she recoiled from anything that would be considered cruel. Those were the sorts of things Jane would have done, and she'd learned her lesson about keeping company with cruel people.

"I would never do anything to hurt anybody, miss," she said at last.

"Of course not." Miss Victoria smiled. "That's not the sort of thing I meant." She scooted closer to Poppy. "What I'm thinking is whether you'd be willing to do something that would convince Nick he should be with you and only you."

"What sort of thing?"

Miss Victoria's eyes flashed with mischief, giving Poppy a glimpse of the spritely young woman she must have been before Lord William did his damage. "The only thing I can think of that would make a man break an engagement to marry someone else, especially if he loves said someone else, would be if he had compromised the woman."

"Compromised, miss?" Prickles that were both dread and excitement broke out on Poppy's skin.

"You know." Miss Victoria leaned in closer and whispered. "If he took the woman he loved to bed."

"Oh." Poppy snapped straighter pressing a hand to her mouth. The memory of the way Nick had kissed her in the greenhouse, the way he made her feel every time he touched her, flooded back to her.

"Would you be willing to go that far?" Miss Victoria asked in a whisper.

Poppy blinked, her gaze losing focus. It was so easy to imagine herself giving in completely to Nick, so easy to picture herself naked in his embrace. She should probably have blushed at the thought, but the ache that formed inside of her at the very suggestion of joining with Nick, giving herself completely to him, felt so powerfully right.

"I would," she whispered, feeling naughtier than she'd ever felt. "I absolutely would, miss."

"Then the way forward is clear." Miss Victoria squeezed her hands. "You need to find a moment alone with Nick. My guess is that he loves you so much that it won't take much of a push to get him to cross the line. Men are forever crossing that line." She glanced down, the darkness seeming to overtake her for a moment. But she shook her head and glanced up again quickly. "You must go to Nick's cottage and wait for him there tonight. I'm sure as soon as he sees you in his home, he'll know what he truly wants and he'll be able to grab hold of it, and you."

"Do you really think so, miss?"

"I know it." Miss Victoria smiled. "I'll even lend you some of my French perfume and something to wear to help make you irresistible."

"Thank you, miss."

They stood, and Miss Victoria led Poppy over to the wardrobe. "This will be fun."

Poppy giggled, inclined to agree. She just hoped she didn't get herself into more trouble than either of them were bargaining for.

"Mama says we can have her linens," Mavis prattled on, clutching Nick's arm as the two of them walked through the meadow just beyond the manicured gardens of Starcross Castle. "They're the ones her mother brought with her from Ireland when she came here to work for Lord Haslett. Personally, I think they're a little shabby, but they are family heirlooms."

"Uh huh." Nick smiled, but he'd been having a hard time keeping track of their conversation since they set out. He'd had a hard time focusing on anything Mavis had said from the moment she returned. It was as if she'd been talking for months, and he'd walked in on the middle of things.

"I'm sure you have plenty of nice things in the garden cottage, but I'll spruce it up and make it look grand. Particularly in the bedroom. I have a lovely quilt that Mama made for the two of us years ago, right when we first started stepping out together."

"Is that so?" It felt like a lifetime had passed since they'd taken that first step, so long ago that he couldn't convince himself it had really happened. He didn't have a lick of emotion for Mavis, other than a sense of duty and politeness. She didn't feel a part of him the way Poppy did. She wasn't as essential to him as the air he breathed, like Poppy was.

"I can't wait for other things in the bedroom," Mavis said, her voice low and suggestive.

Nick hummed, his thoughts a thousand miles away. Or maybe just a few hundred yards away, depending on where Poppy was. He'd missed her smile in the past week. The gnawing impatience that lingered every time he thought about how close he'd come to letting their kiss go further than it should have was a constant irritant. Every time he tried to seek Poppy out to explain things, to explain how sorry he was, she'd rushed off or ducked around a corner. He'd spotted her less and less frequently, and it hurt more than he could have anticipated.

"...and I've never agreed with that. Have you?" Mavis stopped, shifting to stand directly in front of him, her hands on his chest. Her green eyes glittered as she looked up at him, and the flush on her face said she'd moved on from talking about home furnishings to something much more intimate.

Nick blinked at the sudden change in Mavis's attitude. It was as jarring as someone dropping a vase in the middle of church. "I'm sorry, what were you saying?"

Her lip turned out in a pout, and the coquettish light in her eyes increased. "Don't you agree?" She fiddled with the buttons of his vest, popping one open.

Discomfort wriggled down his spine. He took hold of her hands to stop her from undoing any more buttons, which she suddenly seemed intent on doing. "I'm not sure what I'm agreeing or disagreeing with."

She shrugged one shoulder and bit her lip, glancing up at him through lowered lashes. "That this whole business of waiting until we're married is just silly. Especially since we didn't wait before."

Nick's discomfort flared to pure alarm. He laughed nervously. "That was a long time ago."

"Which is exactly why I think we could use a refresher." Her voice was low and husky, and she leaned into him faster than he was anticipating. One hand went straight to his

backside, while the other tugged his shirt out of his trousers.

"Mavis, wait." He backed away so fast she stumbled. He had to reach out to hold her up, but that only encouraged her.

"It's been so long, Nick." She reached for his vest and undid another button before he could protest. "I'm burning for you. Don't you remember how good it was between us?"

Memories of the two of them together flooded his mind, but with them came guilt. Poppy would be so disappointed in him if she knew just how careless he'd been four years ago.

"We're in the middle of the meadow, Mavis," he told her, glancing around. "Someone could come by at any moment."

"Then we'll lie in the grass." She tugged him to the side, where the grass grew tall, and pulled him down with her.

Nick was caught off-guard and flopped awkwardly to his knees. Mavis reached for him, pulling him down on top of her. She locked her hands around his neck and pulled his head down so that she could kiss him.

"Stop," he growled against her eager mouth. "Mavis, this isn't right."

"Of course it is," she panted, trying once again to unbutton his vest and shirt. "We used to do this all the time." Her hips wriggled under him, and she spread her legs apart.

He batted her hands away from his shirt, only to have her reach for his crotch. The sudden contact of her hand on his cock sent a jolt through him. It didn't matter how much he loved Poppy, a man's body was designed to react when a woman touched him. But instead of being pleasurable, the sensation set his teeth on edge.

"Mavis." He tried to be firm, grasping one of her wrists and holding it to the ground by the side of her head.

"See? You want this as much as I do." She rubbed him, causing blood to flow exactly where he didn't want it.

He managed to catch her other wrist and pull her hand away from his crotch to hold it to the side. But holding both of her hands to the side meant he was off-balance, and could only keep above her by pressing his hips into hers.

"I've wanted this for so long," Mavis panted. "I've dreamed about it. Take me now, Nick. I don't want to wait any longer."

"No," he said, loud enough to wince. "I'm sorry, Mavis, but this isn't what I want."

He managed to rock back to his haunches, unsettled and breathing heavy. But just when he thought he'd avoided Mavis's attentions, she pushed herself up, then launched herself at him. The surprise of her impact knocked him backwards, and before he knew it, she was straddling him.

"Say you want me, Nick. Say this is what you've wanted all along." She tugged at her skirt, pulling it up so that it wouldn't impede her. Then she reached underneath it for the fastening of his trousers.

A twist of fear joined Nick's frustration and alarm. If he didn't do something, she would have him exposed and sheathed within minutes, seconds even. Every fiber of his being rebelled at the idea. There was nothing he could do but push her aside, rougher than he wanted to.

Mavis yelped as she collapsed to the grass. Before she could recover, Nick leapt to his feet and refastened everything she'd undone.

"I don't want you, Mavis. Not here, not like this. Not ever."

For half a second, she glanced up at him with something feral and desperate in her eyes. It vanished quickly, replaced by the teasing look she'd worn before. "What kind of a man are you, Nick Parsons?"

"I'm a man who loves another woman," he burst. There was no way he could keep it inside any longer.

Mavis raised to her knees and stared at him. Where Nick expected fury, there was only calculation. Her eyes narrowed. "Does she do this to you?" She asked, moving forward and reaching for the fastening of his trousers.

Nick knew exactly what she intended and backed away before she could reach him. "No. Poppy is a good, sweet girl, and I would never make her do that." If she ever wanted to, however, he wouldn't say no.

The intrusive thought was completely unhelpful and did nothing to ease the rigid tension in his groin.

"We are going to marry, Nick," Mavis said, rising. She stood with her feet apart, brushing a strand of grass from her hair. "We were always meant to marry. It's what our families want. It's what I want."

"But why?" Nick asked through a clenched jaw. "We haven't been close for years. Why would you care so much now, especially when I tell you I love someone else? Why do you want to marry a man who loves someone else?"

"Because you're mine," she said, almost too cool, too calculating. "You always have been. And I don't give up what's mine easily."

"You can't force me to the altar."

"You would really break your mother's heart that way? And mine?" She crossed her arms. "When everyone else but you wants this, you would really disappoint everyone and bring shame to me by chasing after some dowdy, stupid maid?"

"Poppy isn't stupid," Nick said, hearing a shout. "And she's a far kinder woman than you will ever be."

"You're mine, Nick. You always have been."

Mavis wasn't going to see sense. It was plain as day. Nick's gut churned. He was going to have to do something drastic, something he didn't want to do. But whether that was throwing Mavis over or disappointing his family, he didn't know. He couldn't bear to see his mother lose something she'd set her heart on, not after losing his father the way she had. The poor woman had had enough sorrow for a lifetime.

But if he married Mavis just to make her happy, he'd be the one with a lifetime of sorrow.

"I can't deal with this right now," he said, turning and starting across the meadow toward home. "We'll discuss it later."

"Nick," Mavis called after him, but blessedly, she didn't try to pursue him.

Nick marched on, rubbing his face. There had to be a way to untangle the knot before it got worse.

## CHAPTER 7

Nick headed straight to his cottage instead of returning to work. Too many emotions clawed at him, from guilt to despair to the determination to find a way to solve everything. His heart ached with unfulfilled need for Poppy, her sweet smile and her calming presence. Worst of all, his body rippled with unspent arousal. He hated that Mavis had been able to trigger his basest instincts, and every awkward, uncomfortable step he took as he marched up the path to his home was a kind of penance for going hard at someone other than Poppy's touch. He should be better than that, truer than the lure of nature. He loved Poppy, and Poppy alone.

As soon as he crossed the threshold into his house, he slammed the door behind him and leaned his back against it. He rubbed his hands across his face and let his shoulders drop. How had he let things get so out of hand? He should have more strength than that. He didn't want Mavis. A braver man would put his foot down and do what was right, no matter who it hurt.

Except that he couldn't bear to disappoint his mother. Not when she'd done so much for him, before and after his father died. Perhaps if she met Poppy, she'd see what he saw and change her mind about him marrying Mavis.

Thoughts of his mother had the added effect of shrinking the relentless arousal that Mavis had sparked. He huffed an ironic laugh, then pushed away from the door. What he truly needed to regain his inner balance was a splash of cool water and an afternoon of hard work.

Two steps later, he froze. Poppy had slipped out from his bedroom and leaned against the doorframe.

"I heard you come in, but I didn't want to disturb you," she said quietly, her eyes round with worry.

That wasn't all that was round. Nick blinked. She was dressed in a slippery shift made out of some kind of thin, silky material that left nothing to his imagination. Her breasts were outlined to perfection, their fullness almost bursting from the fabric. Her nipples were taut, and stood out sharply. The shift also hugged the softness of her belly and the curve of her hips and thighs, as though it were just a bit too small for her. She wore a sort of robe over the flimsy garment that covered one shoulder, but had slipped down to expose the other. Her hair was loose and natural, unlike the forced curls of the other day,

and her eyes shone with nervous expectation.

The fact that she was clearly nervous instead of ruthlessly focused on seduction, like Mavis had been, broke the last of Nick's resolve. Blood pounded to his groin, making his trousers painfully tight again. His heart had resisted Mavis, even if his body hadn't, but all of him was helpless under the spell that was Poppy.

He crossed the room in a few, long strides, taking Poppy into his arms and kissing her as though his life depended on it. She squeaked in surprise, then sighed, deep and soft, as his lips parted hers and his tongue slipped in to taste her. He closed a hand over her backside, his cock aching when he discovered she was wearing nothing but the silky shift. The implication was so powerful that he trembled with need for her, grinding his hips against hers.

She was inexperienced and unstudied, but she kissed him back with enthusiasm. Her mouth accepted him, letting him vent every bit of frustration and lust that had built up inside of him. But it wasn't lust with her, at least not solely. He shifted to slide his hand up her side, cupping her breast and brushing his thumb across her nipple, and she moaned into his kiss. Her hands gripped the muscles of his back, and when he broke away from her lips to kiss her jaw, her neck, her shoulder, a cry of pure need ripped out of her.

"Oh, Nick," she sighed, urgent and panting. She moved restlessly against him, her leg lifting against his.

Only then did Nick realize he had her wedged against the doorframe. She'd tipped her head back to expose more of her throat to him. He kissed his way down her chest to the top of her breast and was moments away from yanking her shift down to expose her breasts to his hungry mouth. The ache in his groin had grown so intense that the drive to shuck his trousers and take her right there, standing up, was overpowering.

Until sense snapped through him like a lightning strike.

He forced himself to straighten and inch away from her. His hands shook as he moved them from her breasts to her waist, and he gulped for air as he tried to catch his breath.

"I'm sorry," he said, unable to pull away from her completely. His hips remained firmly pressed against hers, his erection trapped between them. "I should have controlled myself."

"No," she insisted, shaking her head and smiling. The nervous light was still in her eyes, and her chest heaved as she took short, shallow breaths. "This is what I came here for." She slid her arms over his shoulders and threaded her fingers through his hair. "I want you to make love to me."

"You do?" A grin tweaked the corner of his kiss-heated mouth, even as a surge of desire washed over him.

She nodded, biting her lip. "Miss Victoria loaned me one of her old nightgowns. It's perfect, isn't it?"

Nick glanced down at the wisp of silk masquerading as clothing. At his angle, it did nothing to conceal her breasts. Her milky skin tempted him. The shift had slipped down during their activity and now it seemed as though her nipples were the only thing holding on, keeping the fabric from slithering to the floor. The mental image didn't help Nick

gather the resolve to let Poppy go so that he could figure out why she was there.

He blinked and glance up, meeting her eyes. "Why are you here?" he asked.

"I told you." She blushed and glanced down, her lashes flirting with her cheeks. His cock jumped at the sight. "I want you to make love to me."

He wanted nothing more than to give her everything she wanted and more, but the tiniest kernel of doubt nagged at him. "But why?"

She raised her eyes, meeting his with a heat he never would have expected from her. "Because I love you."

Deep swirls of rightness radiated from his heart. They swooped through his gut and landed hard in his groin. He would never hear anyone else say those words with as much artlessness or as much determination as Poppy was saying them now. Not from Mavis, not from any other woman. His soul had only one mate, and that was Poppy. He should have let her go, explained the way the world worked and the obligations that men like him had.

Instead, he said, "I love you too. I'll never love anyone else."

Poppy sucked in a breath, her heart bursting like a flower blooming in the sun. Nick loved her. He hadn't laughed at her for dressing in Miss Victoria's scandalous nightgown, and he hadn't thrown her out for being a ninny and trying to seduce him. His body pressed into hers, hard and masculine. His staff throbbed against her belly. It took every bit of restraint she had not to rub against it. Her lips still tingled with his kiss, and her breasts felt heavy and hungry for his touch.

"Make love to me," she whispered, wishing she knew what she was doing. Every other woman in the world probably knew how to make a man take off his clothes and carry her to bed, but she didn't know what to do other than want him.

"Are you sure?" he asked, his hands sliding slowly from her sides up to her breasts.

She breathed in, arching into his hands. "I like that," she whispered. It was such a silly thing to say. Surely there were better words, words that would excite him and make her irresistible.

"So do I," he answered. He reached for the nightgown's straps and the edges of the robe and tugged them down over her shoulders. The whole garment slipped free, exposing her breasts and gathering around her hips. Nick closed his hands tenderly around her bare breasts. "I like this a lot."

"Oh, that's nice," she gasped, as he lifted and squeezed her breasts, teasing her nipples between his thumbs and forefingers. "Oh!"

The sensations he invoked in her shot straight to the ache between her legs. She wanted to move her lips, part her legs and rub against the part of him that was hard and hot between them. It was uncanny and a bit unsettling. She'd always considered herself a good girl, but as Nick bent to kiss one of her breasts while fondling the other, closing his mouth over her nipple and licking, she was desperate to be naked under him, her legs spread while he did anything and everything to her. She suddenly understood how women could become whores.

But no, she wouldn't have felt the same need to submit to whatever Nick wanted from her with any other man. She was his and his alone. But being his meant he could have her any way he wanted.

"I can't resist you," Nick rumbled, kissing his way back to her lips. He slanted his mouth over hers and kissed her with such intensity that she went dizzy. "I should," he went on as his hands slipped to her sides again, pushing the nightgown and robe down over her hips. It pooled around her feet, leaving her naked in his arms. "But I can't. I want you too much."

"I want you too," she said, barely able to get the words out as the breath left her lungs. The whisper of cool air against her heated skin and the brush of Nick's hands against her were too delicious. "Oh!"

His hands continued sliding down, but to Poppy's surprise, Nick sank to his knees as well. He kissed her belly as his hands brushed her thighs. When he reached her knees, he changed directions and ran his fingers up the insides of her thighs. It felt as though he turned her bones to butter as he did. She gripped the doorframe clumsily to keep from tumbling over as he nudged her legs apart. They couldn't go far and still hold her up, but he teased his way up until his fingers slipped through her curls and teased the softness between her legs.

"Oh, my." Her body was ready to burst into flame as he traced his fingers across her opening. The rush of sensation left her trembling and breathless.

"I knew you'd be wet for me," he said with a low, possessive rumble. "I've wanted to taste you for so long."

"T-tas—ah!"

He nudged her hips wider and closed his mouth over the most sensitive part of her. She didn't know how she remained standing, except that her nails dug into the doorframe behind her. The sight of his face buried against her coupled with the sensation of his tongue flicking against her left her weak and whimpering and wanting more. What he was doing was nothing but a prelude to everything she imagined he'd be able to do if she were on her back in his bed with her legs spread, but the hint of that pleasure, the glimpse into everything they could do together was enough to unhinge the spring within her.

She gasped as her body blossomed into pure, throbbing pleasure. Nick groaned, inching back to slide his hand where his mouth had been and two of his fingers into the part of her that was quaking.

"Yes," he hummed. "Come for me. So easy."

She was speechless as the wave of sudden bliss subsided, panting and hot. Her breasts were impossibly heavy as she arched her back, bearing down on his hand and hoping he would keep his fingers right where they were. The whole thing left her wanting more and more and more.

"You liked that, didn't you?" Nick asked, standing at last and pulling her into him. He was still fully clothed, while she had never felt more naked in her life.

She nodded, then found her voice. "Yes. Oh, yes."

"You want me to do it again."

It wasn't a question, but she nodded, glancing up to him with wide, hungry eyes. He watched her for a moment, cradling the side of her face. Something fierce and possessive flashed in his eyes.

"Something tells me that you could find yourself in a great deal of trouble, Poppy Miller."

She didn't know how to answer. He caressed her backside with one hand, his fingers tracing her cleft, while he brushed her lips with the thumb of his other hand. He slipped his thumb into her parted lips, and she sucked on it.

The heat and possessiveness in Nick's eyes deepened. "I won't let any other man corrupt you," he whispered as she stroked the pad of his thumb with her tongue. "And I have a feeling it would be far too easy to do."

"I don't want any other man," she said when he withdrew his thumb. "I only want you. But I'll do whatever you want me to do."

The emotions that flashed across his face turned Poppy's core into a quivering ball of white-hot liquid. He was capable of a great many things that she found both frightening and irresistible. If he were a bad man, she was certain he would hurt her in ways she couldn't dream of. But he was a good man, and he would never harm her. However, knowing that he could sparked something in her that was strange and exciting that she didn't understand.

The tension rippling off him resolved into a long sigh. He lifted her and carried her a few steps into the bedroom, laying her across the bed. From there, he bent to untie and kick off his boots, then fumbled with his trousers and suspenders.

"God help me, Poppy, I want to do things to you," he said, his voice darker and more excited than she'd ever heard it. Poppy wriggled against his quilt, rubbing her legs together even as she wanted to throw them wide. "I want to do things that are diabolical." He shrugged out of his suspenders and yanked his shirt up over his head.

"Like what?" Poppy asked, but her mouth went dry as he shoved his trousers down over his hips.

His staff sprung free, thick and hard and standing straight up against the dark curls between his legs. His thighs were powerful, and the sight of his full, naked body sent swirls of desire and panic through her, but her attention was riveted on that male part of him. It was so large, larger than any stolen glimpses of boys swimming at the docks back home or teasing peeks she had traded with beaux in her younger years for a look at what she had under her skirts. Nick was no child's game. He was all man, virile and proud. She had no idea how something as engorged and aggressive as his staff would fit inside of her, but she wanted to find out.

"I want you on your knees in front of me with my cock in your mouth," he said, climbing onto the bed with her and encompassing her with his body. "I want your hands and feet tied to my bed so that you can't move as I fuck you."

She let out a shivering half-moan at the almost inconceivable ideas he shared with her, the ache in her center growing almost painful with need. His body was a breath away from hers, and yet no part of him touched her.

"I want you bent over, my handprint red on your arse as I take you from behind." He

placed one hand on her belly and slowly slid it up to her breast. Poppy nearly arched off the bed, it felt so good. "And I want you straddling me, pleasuring yourself as you ride me, your tits bouncing as I watch."

She licked her lips, feeling as though her whole body were turning to liquid. "Yes," she whispered. "Yes to all of it."

"But right now," he said, lowering his head to hers and breathing in, "I want you to come for me again." She started to nod, but he stopped her. "And then I want to sheathe myself in your wetness and feel your tight, hot cunny milk the seed out of me."

Poppy let out a fluttery sound, somewhere between a sigh and a laugh. No one had ever said such dirty words to her before, but coming from Nick, she loved it. She adored it. And though it seemed backwards in every way, she wanted him to say more dirty things to her, vulgar things.

She didn't have a chance to ask. He moved quickly, as though a lamp had burst into flames while they were talking and something needed to be done about it immediately. He scooted back, then hooked his arms under her knees. With a single, powerful movement, he wrenched her legs apart, holding her knees to the side and exposing her core to him. She started to wriggle with pleasure, only to realize that he held her too firmly, at his mercy. And then his mouth closed over her once more.

She let out a cry as his tongue traced along her wet entrance, then delved deeper. The sensations of him tasting that part of her so boldly were heady and sent flames through her. She didn't know what to do with her arms, her head, the whole rest of her body. It was as if no other part of her existed aside from the gaping, hungry center of her sex. He nuzzled her, making sounds that betrayed how much he enjoyed pleasuring her with his mouth. At last, he found the throbbing button of her pleasure with his tongue and began to circle and stroke her.

This time, when the wave of pleasure crashed into her, it was as fierce and wild as any storm. She shouted his name as her body slammed into hard, cataclysmic convulsions that left her dizzy with pleasure. Nothing she'd ever been able to spark in herself had been so all-consuming. It was bliss incarnate.

And then Nick let her legs go and shifted above her. Her body was still throbbing with orgasm as he pushed into her. Something within her tore, the moment of pain causing her to gasp, but the pleasure that followed was so much greater. He stretched her to the point where she couldn't breathe, it felt so wonderful. She clasped her arms around him, digging her fingernails into his back as he thrust again and again and again. It was so perfect that she let out a cry with each thrust as pleasure built quickly inside of her once more.

"Poppy," he cried, utterly out of control and desperate. "Poppy."

In an instant, the balance shifted, and she was holding him, steadying him as his journey of passion neared its end. He was suddenly dependent on her to cradle and accept him, and to keep him from flying off into oblivion. She could feel it in her soul, even though he was well beyond being able to use words to tell her. He needed her to protect the wildness within him, to give it a home.

At last, his body stiffened as he thrust deep, and he let out a cry that was far more

vulnerable than anything she'd ever heard. It felt as though their souls had connected in mutual need, as though they would never be whole without each other again. And slowly, his tension ebbed, his thrusts faded, and he collapsed above her.

His weight above her was crushing and beautiful. She could have laid there with him like that forever, but within moments, he rolled to the side, panting and sweaty. She rolled with him, not realizing she needed to catch her breath until she gasped, her chest heaving. She blinked rapidly, a smile spreading across her face. Her life had just changed. Changed in an instant. Changed for the better.

Her body ached in a different way now, spent and used. It was the most wonderful sensations she could have imagined. She was hot and felt as wrung out as a rag, but at last, everything was right.

"I...." she began, struggling to catch her breath. "I love you, N—"

"Nick!"

His name didn't come from her lips, but from Mavis's, in a high, furious shout.

Poppy yelped as though cold water had been splashed over her and tried to sit, but her body was too tangled with Nick's.

He did manage to sit, though, bringing her with him, and together the two of them faced the furious, red face of Mavis...and the pale, shocked older woman who stood beside her in the doorway.

Nick scrambled to pull the coverlet around them, his cheeks burning red. "Mum," he croaked. "What are you doing here?"

## CHAPTER 8

Panic flooded Poppy. She pushed away from Nick, tumbling off the side of the bed in her haste to retrieve her clothes from the bureau where she'd folded them before donning Miss Victoria's nightgown. Her heart throbbed so hard in her throat that she thought she might be sick. But not because of Mavis.

"How dare you?" Mavis shrieked, advancing on Nick, who still sat on the bed, frantically tucking the coverlet around his waist. "And with your mother here."

Poppy swallowed hard as she clutched her uniform dress to her shivering body. Nick's mother took a step back, pale and shaking. She averted her eyes from her son, but in the process looked straight at Poppy. In all her years at Starcross Castle, Poppy had never met Mrs. Parsons. Nick's father had died before she came to work for Lord Peter, and Mrs. Parsons had moved back to her childhood home. The older woman bore a strong resemblance to Nick, but with softer, faded features. It struck Poppy that if they'd met under any other circumstances, she would have liked the woman.

Her observations happened within a second as Mavis continued to rail at Nick. "How dare you?" she repeated, reaching the side of the bed and attempting to smack him. He raised an arm to fend her off, but her hand slapped against his bicep with a resounding clap. "You're mine, Nick Parsons, mine! How dare you bed another woman. We were walking together an hour ago."

The revelation snagged Poppy's attention. She glanced away from Mrs. Parsons—who was now turning beet-red after what Poppy could only assume was her initial shock wearing off—and stared at Nick.

"What I do with my time is none of your business, Mavis," Nick defended himself, standing. The coverlet formed a long skirt around him that would have made Poppy laugh, if the situation hadn't been so embarrassingly dire.

"No it isn't," Mavis protested. "Not when you're about to become my husband."

"I tried to talk to you about that." Nick took a step toward her, his brow knitting into a frown.

"There's nothing to talk about," Mavis rushed on. For half a second, Poppy thought Mavis would call her engagement to Nick off. But that hope was instantly dashed as Mavis charged on with, "You made a promise to me. Our mothers made a promise to each other. You're not backing out of a marriage that everyone on both sides of our families

wants.”

“Mavis, I—”

“Tell him,” Mavis ordered Mrs. Parsons.

Poppy flinched at the way Mavis spoke to the older woman.

Mrs. Parsons stood straighter, blinking incredulously at Mavis. “My dear, perhaps now is not the time to discuss this matter,” she said.

“Now is the time,” Mavis contradicted her. “I brought you here so that you and I could plan this wedding with Nick’s full participation. The bans only need to be read one more time. We will be married within a week if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

Mrs. Parsons stepped closer to Mavis, resting a motherly hand on her arm while trying to avoid looking at her son. “Let’s give Nick and his...” she cleared her throat, “friend a moment to compose themselves.”

“No.” Mavis yanked away from her.

At the same time, Poppy said, “I’m so, so sorry, Mrs. Parsons.” She had put on her drawers, chemise, and petticoat as Mavis raged and took a step toward Nick’s mother, her hands clasped in front of her. “This is all just a terrible misunderstanding.”

Mrs. Parsons looked her up and down, tilting her nose up and pursing her lips. “Nicholas, who is this woman?”

Nick let out a breath and stepped over to Poppy’s side. “Mum, this is Poppy Miller. She works as a maid at Starcross Castle, and she is currently serving as Miss Victoria Travers’ lady’s maid. And I love her.”

Everything in the room went still. Mavis held her breath, her fists clenched at her sides, her face turning red. Mrs. Parsons’ brow flew up as she gave Poppy another once-over. Poppy’s insides wriggled, and prickles broke out along her skin. She desperately wanted to make a good impression on Nick’s mother, but under the current circumstances, there wasn’t even a slim chance that she would. The older woman would have no choice at all but to see her as a strumpet and a woman of low character.

And perhaps she was. She’d let herself into the house of a man she wasn’t married to. She’d dressed to entice him. And when he’d come home and found her waiting for him, she hadn’t protested or sought to secure any sort of promise, like a good girl would. She’d flopped to her back and spread her legs for a man who was engaged to marry someone else, and had enjoyed being with him the way a whore would. Her heart tried to tell her that it wasn’t any man, it was Nick, but every other part of her shouted with condemnation.

Poppy lowered her head. “I’m sorry,” she murmured. It felt too cowardly not to face what she’d done, so she looked up, meeting Mrs. Parsons’ eyes. “I love your son, I do,” she confessed. “But I was wrong to succumb to that love while he’s engaged to another woman.”

“No, you weren’t,” Nick contradicted her. He reached for her, but Poppy stepped away, sending him an apologetic look. “Poppy,” he appealed to her.

“It was wrong,” she said softly. Beautiful, amazing, beyond any dream she’d ever had, but she couldn’t say that aloud. Not now. She turned back to Mrs. Parsons, working to ignore Mavis’s furious and supercilious stare. “I’m so sorry you had to see...what you saw,

ma'am. I...that is, Miss Victoria...." She shook her head. It wouldn't be right to blame Miss Victoria for suggesting she seduce Nick. The blame fell squarely on her shoulders. "I just wanted one beautiful memory," she said at last, tears stinging her eyes.

"What right does an ugly tart like—"

"Enough." Mrs. Parsons' raised her voice enough to cut Mavis off. She raised a hand to her temple as though warding off a headache. She squeezed her eyes shut and pressed her lips together. "You say you love my son, but you have disrespected the promise that he made to Mavis."

"I don't love Mavis, Mum," Nick cut in. "I...I never really have."

Mrs. Parsons opened her eyes, glancing to her son with shock and hurt. "You never told me that."

"It's true." Nick sighed and rubbed a hand over his face.

"It isn't true," Mavis shouted, her eyes wide and wild. "Nick loves me. He always has. We've been engaged for four years. We wouldn't have had any trouble at all if not for this little trollop." She flung a hand at Poppy.

"I'm sorry," Poppy said once more. It didn't seem to be doing any good, but she couldn't think of anything that would make the situation any less awful than it was. She slipped her grey dress over her head and did up the buttons. "I didn't mean for any of this to happen."

"Oh, no?" Mavis glared at her. "Nick didn't mention anything about meeting you here when we were together just an hour ago, which leads me to believe that this was all your doing."

Poppy lowered her head, unable to contradict her. It was her doing. She glanced to the corner of the room, where Miss Victoria's nightgown and robe sat in a silky pile. It didn't seem wise to draw attention to them by retrieving them now.

"I'll go." She grabbed her shoes and stockings, tucking them under her arm. She'd put them on once she was outside. As she passed Mrs. Parsons and reached the door, she paused and turned to them. "I won't stand in the way of what you and your friend have been planning since Nick and Mavis were children."

Mrs. Parsons blinked in surprise. "We were barely more than children then ourselves."

"This is your dream," Poppy said with a shrug. "And...." She licked her lips and lowered her head, unable to look at Nick as she continued. "There's a fisherman down in Mousehole, where I'm from, who says he'll marry me. So don't worry for my sake." She spoke to Nick, but kept her gaze downcast. "I'll be all right in the end." Even if it would break her heart forever to walk away from Nick. At least she'd tried. At least she had one beautiful memory to carry with her.

"I'm sorry," she said one last time. It took every ounce of effort she had to drag her eyes up to meet Nick's. Her chest squeezed painfully at the look of devastation in his eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered once more before turning to run out of his house.

"Poppy," Nick called, taking a step to follow Poppy as she fled.

He didn't make it far. Mavis stepped into his path, planting a hand on his chest to stop

him. "Don't you dare go after her," she growled. "You're staying right here and explaining yourself."

Nick ached to rush after Poppy, to demand she tell him who the fisherman she thought she was going to marry was, and to clasp her in his arms and tell her everything would be all right. The coverlet was coming loose around his waist, though, and his mother still couldn't quite look him in the eye.

He took a step back and scowled at Mavis. "There's nothing to explain. What you interrupted is between me and Poppy and no one else."

"You're days away from being my husband," Mavis protested, planting her fists on her hips. "I think I have a say in it."

There was no gentle way out of the situation. Hearts would be broken one way or another. "I don't love you, Mavis. I haven't for a while. And I'm sorry, Mum, but I want to marry Poppy, not Mavis."

"I can't believe I'm hearing this," Mavis gasped. "I refuse to hear this. I refuse to accept that the two of us won't be together." The alarm in her eyes went far beyond being jilted. It filled Nick with suspicion.

"You still want me?" he asked. The instinct to play his cards close to his chest was overwhelming. He couldn't shake the feeling he was missing something obvious.

"Of course, I still want you," Mavis said, halfway between a laugh and a cry of frustration. "We're meant to be together. It's what our mothers have wanted for decades." She gestured toward Nick's mother.

"Well, now," his mum began, smoothing a hand over her skirt, clearly embarrassed beyond measure. "Perhaps this is something we should sit down and talk about."

"There's nothing to talk about," Mavis huffed. "Nick and I are engaged. It's what you want and what my mother wants. Everyone wants this except for you and some shameless strumpet."

"You will not speak of Poppy that way." Nick raised his voice, ashamed that he couldn't control his temper when his mum was looking on. "Poppy is a kind, gentle, sweet girl who would never do anything to hurt anyone. She—" He blew out a breath. "She probably felt as though coming here and doing what she did was her last resort."

"What do you mean?" Mavis scowled, crossing her arms.

"Isn't it obvious?" Nick said, speaking to himself as much as to his mum and Mavis. "Poppy loves me. I love her. But I'm engaged to you. She knows that, and she knows that this match is something you have wanted for ages, Mum. Poppy probably thought the last chance she had to win the man she loves was to gamble everything."

His voice faded into a painful silence, and he winced. He should have known. He should have seen what she was doing. He was a bastard of the worst sort to have taken advantage of her when she was at her weakest. His stomach turned at the thought of everything Poppy had lost in her attempt to champion love. She'd been far braver than he could imagine, coming to him the way she did, and he'd callously taken what he wanted without thinking about the consequences. And now another man would have her for the rest of her life.

"I can't do this," he said, shaking his head. "I can't marry a woman I don't love to

make other people happy.”

“You can,” Mavis said, going rigid. “You will.”

“How can you even want that?” Nick asked. “After all this, how do you still want me?”

Mavis gaped, and the sound that came out of her mouth wasn't words at first. “It's what everyone wants,” she argued. “Your mother and mine.”

“I'm not so sure—”

“It's what everybody wants,” Mavis cut Nick's mum off. “My reputation will be in tatters if you back out. You'll be making a fool of your mother. Do you really want to do that?”

“No, but—”

“Perhaps, my boy, you should get dressed before we discuss this in greater detail,” Nick's mum said, managing to command attention without raising her voice. She turned to Mavis. “Go into the kitchen, dear, and fix us all some tea.” She glanced to Nick. “And you, put some trousers on.”

The derision in his mum's voice was almost comical, but Nick was in no mood to laugh. By some miracle, Mavis did as she was told and marched out of the room. Nick's mum followed, and he shut the door behind them. He took a moment to hang his head, feeling horrible on every level for the mess that had been made. There had to be a way to make things up to Poppy. Marrying her, for one. The more Mavis protested that the two of them had to be together, the more Nick felt like digging in his heels and refusing. It all hinged on what his mum thought.

With a bitter laugh, he pushed away from the door, tossed the coverlet back on his bed, and gathered up his clothes. He was a grown man of thirty, and the decision of his lifetime hinged on what his mother thought. Harry would laugh at him. Every man he knew would poke fun of him forever. But his mum was the light of his life—besides Poppy—and he would do a great many things to avoid causing her pain. But was marrying Mavis one of them?

He spotted Poppy's tempting silk shift and robe on his way to the door after dressing and bent to pick them up, holding them to his face. They belonged to Miss Victoria, but Poppy's scent was all over them. He breathed it in before taking them to his bureau and stashing them in the top drawer.

Surprisingly, Mavis was gone when he stepped out into the main room of his tiny cottage.

“Where did she go?” he asked his mum, who was bustling around the kitchen, fixing tea.

“Back to work, I suppose,” his mum said, still not looking at him.

Nick winced. “Mum, I'm sorry you had to see what she saw.”

She brushed his apology away, focusing on the tea things in front of her. “I know my son is a grown man with grown man's parts and desires.” She cleared her throat, and Nick could see her face go pink, even though she tried to hide it from him. “Still, I didn't need to be reminded of it quite like that.”

“Poppy really is the most wonderful woman.” He stepped up to the counter, trying to help, but his mother batted him away. “I'm sure if the two of you had met in other

circumstances, you would love her as much as I do."

His mum glanced sideways at him. "Maybe." Her lips were tight as she spoke. "She did comport herself the way a girl in her situation should when she was caught."

Nick frowned. He wasn't sure if that was a compliment or scolding. "I love her."

"So you say," his mum said. She fetched a cloth to wrap around the handle of the steaming kettle on his stove so that she could pour it into his simple, crockery teapot. "Are you sure you're thinking with the proper head where that girl is concerned?"

Thirty or not, he felt her reprimand as though he'd been caught stealing pies from the windowsill. "Yes, mum. I love her. And if it helps, we've never done that before."

She looked sideways at him as she set the kettle down and put the lid on the teapot. "You're willing to throw away an engagement to a nice, pretty girl whom our family has known since the two of you were in nappies for a maid who would toss you over to marry a fisherman at the first sign of trouble?"

Nick grimaced. He hadn't heard a thing about this fisherman bastard until Poppy mentioned him, which told him that it was a new development. "I don't love Mavis," he said. "We've lived apart for four years. I'm not sure I loved her to begin with. I just wanted to make you happy."

His mother hummed and carried the tray with the tea things to the tiny table and sat, inviting him to join her. "Never you mind my happiness," she said, pouring his tea. "A mother's greatest happiness comes from her children being happy."

"So you'd be happy if I set Mavis free and married Poppy, because I love her?" He studied her closely, practically holding his breath as he awaited her answer.

She took a long time answering. Painfully long. "Alice would be disappointed," she said, referring to Mavis's mother.

She didn't say anything else for a long time. Nick took his tea and sipped it while she fixed hers. He knew his mum well enough to see she was thinking things over seriously. He knew the lines of her face so well, had seen them form over the years, especially after his father had died. Every son wanted his mother to have all the happiness in the world, and it had always hurt him that his mum had been so unhappy in the last few years. But he knew she'd love Poppy, if she would just give her a chance.

At long last, she glanced up at him and let out a breath. "I just don't want you doing anything you would regret later based on a passing fancy and a flirtation."

"It's not a passing fancy, Mum, or a flirtation. I've known Poppy for years now, and I've loved her all this time."

His mother hummed and sipped her tea. "Perhaps you and Mavis could postpone your wedding for a few weeks. You could even wait until Christmas. Maybe if you spent some time together, you'd discover that you love her after all."

Nick let out a sigh of relief, though not for the reason his mum might think. If she was willing to put things off, she could be willing to see that he was right in time. She would also have a chance to get to know Poppy in a better light...and perhaps to see how peevish and sharp Mavis had become.

"All right, Mum. I'll talk to Mavis as soon as I'm able and tell her we're postponing the wedding."

His mother smiled. That was all the reward he needed. He smiled back. There was a way through the muddle, a way to have Poppy after all, and he wouldn't stop until he found it.

## CHAPTER 9

Somehow Poppy managed to drag herself through the next few days, although her heart was so weighed down with misery that she could barely focus on work from one moment to the next. Miss Victoria seemed to sense something was wrong and went easy on her, but Mavis wasn't so kind. Every time they met in the downstairs halls, she would corner Poppy with a glare and clenched fists.

"He's mine," she hissed. "Stay away from him."

Poppy didn't respond. She kept her eyes down and wriggled free, rushing to do her work with tears stinging in her eyes.

But the hardest moment came on Sunday afternoon, when she returned to her family's home in Mousehole. Jack Fisher was there to have dinner with the family.

"Jack was just telling me that he's saved up the money to buy his own boat," Poppy's mother told her, eyes bright with promise.

"Is that so?" Poppy did her best to smile as the story of her life unraveled in front of her, like a spool of ribbon that had been dropped and rolled away.

Jack was reasonably handsome, with kind eyes in his weathered face. He was young, but the sea and hard work had left their marks. "Aye," he answered. "A man with his own boat is a man who can make something of himself."

"I'm sure he is," Poppy answered, knowing where the conversation was headed.

"He's a man who can provide for a family of his own."

And there it was. Poppy smiled, trying not to break into tears. Nick was lost to her forever. The sensible thing to do was to make everyone happy by marrying Jack. Painful as it was, she knew she would do it. Just as Nick would marry Mavis to please his mother and everyone else who wanted the two of them together. At least Jack would be kind to her.

She left her family's house early, taking the train back to Starcross Castle. It was a grey day, and the servants' hall was bustling as everyone enjoyed their day off indoors. Poppy marched right past the large common room and fled up the stairs. She hadn't made any promises to Jack, and he hadn't asked for any before she left, but the understanding had been there. Which meant that there was no point in delaying.

As soon as she reached her room, she let out a tight sob and headed straight for her bed, pulling her worn suitcase out from under it. She didn't own much, and the uniforms

she wore belonged to Starcross, not to her, so it wouldn't take long to pack. She could be back in Mousehole that night.

"What's going on in here?" Ginny startled Poppy in the middle of her packing. She stepped into the room, her eyes wide and scolding, and crossed her arms.

Poppy sent her a mournful, guilty look and continued folding petticoats. "I'm going home," she admitted, barely more than a whisper.

"Because some little harpy thinks she can convince Nick not to love you?"

Poppy didn't meet Ginny's eyes. The scolding in her voice was bad enough. "Nick would never go against his mother's wishes," she mumbled. "And Jack Fisher wants to marry me."

Ginny shook her head. "I don't know who this Jack Fisher is, but he doesn't love you the way Nick does."

"It doesn't matter." Poppy swallowed to keep herself from sobbing. "He's a good man, and he's about to buy his own boat. He'll be a good provider. I'll have a roof over my head and children to keep me busy."

"But you don't love him." It wasn't a question. "You won't be happy."

"I lost my chance for happiness," Poppy said. Her arms felt like lead weights, and as she dropped a petticoat into her suitcase, she sank to sit on the bed.

Ginny rushed to sit next to her, looping her arm around Poppy's back. "This can't be the way things end," she said. "I refuse to sit by and watch true love be thwarted by greed and stupidity."

Poppy shook her head. "There's nothing I can do about it. I tried everything, and I mean everything, to win him." The look she sent Ginny was both miserable and guilty.

Ginny raised an eyebrow, but didn't say more. She rubbed Poppy's back. "Well, don't make any rash decisions. Why don't we go downstairs and have a cup of tea and think our way out of this?"

"I couldn't." The very thought of going anywhere near Mavis and the rest of the servants turned her stomach. "Mavis is probably down there and—"

"She's not," Ginny said.

It was a tiny consolation. "She's not?"

"No." Ginny shook her head. "I've no idea where she's gone, but she's not downstairs right now. So wash your face and come downstairs to have a bit of tea with me. Mrs. Harmon made lemon biscuits."

The promise of lemon biscuits lifted Poppy's spirits enough to propel her to stand. She dragged herself to the washbasin under her window and splashed water on her hot face, drying it on the threadbare towel hanging from the washstand. Then she let Ginny take her hand and lead her back downstairs.

Mavis wasn't in the servant's hall, but plenty of other people were. The footmen had a game of cards going at one end of the long table, and two of the new Starcross maids were sewing at the other end and watching the men with stars in their eyes. Poppy remembered how charmed she'd been by Nick when she first came to Starcross. She probably wore a bright-eyed, pink-cheeked look as she watched Nick those first few months. It hurt that she would never feel so young or innocent again.

"Here you go, love." Ginny fixed her a cup of tea from the service in the middle of the table, gesturing for her to sit in the middle of the bench on one side. There was no way their conversation could be entirely private, but at least they were far enough away from the groups at either end of the table to be readily overheard. "Now, tell me all about it."

"There's not much to tell that you don't already know," Poppy sighed, sipping her tea. Ginny had put two lumps of sugar in it, just the way she liked it. The sweetness and Ginny's friendship were a balm to her sore heart. "Jack needs a wife, and...and I need a husband."

Ginny shook her head, sipped her tea, then said, "The only husband you need is Nick."

One of the London footmen peeked sideways at them for a moment before focusing on his game and playing a card. Poppy lowered her voice and leaned in closer to Ginny so that he didn't overhear.

"I might need a husband. Sooner rather than later," she whispered.

Ginny frowned. "I don't understand."

Heat flooded Poppy's face. "When I said I did everything I could to win Nick, I mean everything." She couldn't look Ginny in the eyes as she confessed, "If things were timed badly, I might need a husband as soon as possible to preserve my honor."

"Oh." Ginny sat straighter. She blinked rapidly, and a smile spread across her face. "You didn't."

Poppy nodded, her eyes going watery. "And it was wonderful."

She couldn't have said more. Her throat closed up, and the misery of the whole thing threatened to pull her under again.

Ginny rested her hand over Poppy's. "You don't have to make any decisions right away," she said. "You might not have anything to worry about."

Poppy sighed. "Even if I don't, I couldn't bear to stay here once Nick and Mavis marry." The London footman peeked in their direction again. Poppy scolded herself for being too loud. "I might as well get on with my life, such as it is."

Ginny made a sympathetic sound and squeezed Poppy's hands. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know this must be awful for you. I still think there has to be a way to stop Nick from making such a horrible mistake."

Poppy shook her head. "It's what his mother wants, and Mavis's mother too. They've planned it for ages."

"Does Mavis know Nick is in love with you?" Ginny asked.

"Yes." Poppy hid the sudden burst of shame at the memory of her and Nick's mother walking in on them by sipping her tea.

"Oh dear. What's that look for?" Ginny asked.

There didn't seem to be any point in keeping secrets. "She walked in on us." Poppy took another sip of tea, then put the cup down and slumped her shoulders. "We'd just... finished, and Mavis walked in. With Nick's mother."

"Good gracious." Ginny pressed a hand to her face, blushing. Poppy could only hope she was blushing in sympathy and not because she thought Poppy was a tart.

Poppy nodded. "It's not like there was any other explanation for why we were—" She glanced around quickly, unable to shake the feeling that everyone in the room was

listening to her, even though she was quiet and they were chattering away. "—on the bed," she finished. "We'd just finished."

"I see." Ginny put her hands on the table and cleared her throat. "Well. And she didn't throw him over? Even after seeing the two of you like that?"

"No." Poppy frowned. "She was furious. She said that Nick belonged to her, and how dare he be with me."

"That doesn't seem right." Ginny chewed her bottom lip and fingered the handle of her teacup. "If it were me, I would have smacked him and washed my hands of the bastard for good. Not that Nick is a bastard, mind you."

"Mavis is possessive, I guess." Poppy shrugged.

The London footman snorted. Both Poppy and Ginny turned to him. As if he'd realized he couldn't pretend he wasn't listening anymore, he set down his cards and turned to them.

"Do you have something to add?" Ginny asked with all the ferocity of a mother bear protecting her cub.

"Only that it's rich, isn't it?" the footman said.

"What is?" Ginny asked.

"Mavis getting jealous of her bloke fooling around with another woman. Beggin' your pardon, Miss Poppy," he added with a deferential nod.

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked on, her voice rising.

The rest of the footmen paused their card game to watch the exchange, which meant the maids at the other end of the table were paying close attention now too. The room had gone eerily quiet.

"Well," the London footman went on, his cheeks flushing. "It's just that we all know what a tease Mavis is."

Alarm curled so tightly around Poppy's heart that for a moment she couldn't breathe.

"You're going to have to do a better job of explaining than that, young man," Ginny said for her, anger building in her eyes.

The London footman swiveled on the bench to face them fully. He looked a bit embarrassed as he said, "Any of us from Town could tell you what Mavis is like."

"What's she like?" Poppy asked, breathless with panic.

The London footman gave her a sheepish smile. "She likes her men, does Mavis."

"Tommy Mercer, you'd better be a whole lot more explicit than that or I'll bash you over the head with this teapot," Ginny said, clutching its handle.

Tommy laughed nervously and held up his hands. "All right, all right. Mavis likes her gentleman callers, if you know what I mean. Barely a Saturday night would pass when she wasn't stepping out with some bloke she met on the Strand or at the market. Sometimes she'd keep the bloke around for a while, and sometimes it'd be a different gent every night. She managed to bag toffs too, not just working-class blokes."

"You don't say." Ginny clenched her jaw, her eyes wide with fury.

"It's true," one of the other London footmen added.

"It is," Mary, one of the maids from London said from the far side of the table. "She was walking out with one man in particular last month."

"Is that the married bloke?" the other London footman asked.

"That's him," Mary said with a sense of foreboding. "The doctor with an office on Harley Street and a kid at Eton. You should have heard the way she went on about him. In detail." Mary's face went bright pink, and she looked down at her sewing as if too embarrassed to go on.

"I thought so," Tommy said. He nodded, staring into the distance for a moment, before taking in a breath and turning back to Ginny and Poppy. "Anyhow, we all figured she jumped on the chance to come back to Cornwall the way she did 'cuz she was in trouble, if you know what I mean."

Poppy gasped, clutching the edge of the table.

"We all knew she'd been engaged to Nick for a while," Mary said. "It made sense that if she'd had a little too much fun with the gents, if you know what I mean, that she'd try to cover it up by marrying him right quick. If I'd've known there was another side to that story out here, that you loved him and all, I'd've said something sooner." She sent Poppy an apologetic look.

Ginny let out a curse that made Poppy jump out of her seat and set the footmen to giggling. "We're not going to let that trollop get away with this," she said, taking Poppy's hand and standing. "I don't care what Nick's mother wants, there's no way he will marry Mavis when he knows the truth. Come on."

Ginny and Poppy stepped over the bench and started toward the door, but Tommy stopped them. "Oy, if you're planning on bringing things to a head, you'd better be quick."

"What do you mean?" Ginny asked.

"Mavis and Nick headed out to Porthleven after church. Mavis said something about the bans having been read for the third time in her home parish and getting on with things."

"No," Poppy gasped. She turned to Ginny. "She wouldn't. Nick wouldn't."

Ginny looked back at her with a look of grave concern. "Poppy, can you ride?"

Poppy blinked, not sure what riding had to do with anything. "Yes."

Ginny nodded, then flew out of the servant's hall with her, down the kitchen hall and out into the courtyard. "I'd be willing to bet that they took the train to get to Porthleven. If we ride and head straight there, we might be able to reach them before it's too late."

## CHAPTER 10

Nick spent the entire journey to Porthleven in a foul mood. He barely spoke to Mavis on the train, even though they shared a seat. He kept his arms crossed and his mouth pressed firmly shut, staring out the window. He didn't like the smug smile that wouldn't leave Mavis's face, or the way she was acting as though everything were fine between them.

He'd taken his mother's suggestion and asked Mavis to postpone thoughts of the two of them marrying the day after the catastrophic scene in his bedroom. Mavis had brushed the topic away, telling him she forgave him for his indiscretions. Then she'd tried to corner him in the greenhouse and unfasten his trousers. It'd taken firm words and a lucky escape from her clutches to stop her from molesting him, but at least his body hadn't reacted the way it had out in the meadow.

He didn't think he'd be able to be more than reluctantly aroused by any woman again after Poppy. Being with her was the most remarkable experience of his life. No woman had ever fired his blood, or engaged his heart in the act of love-making, the way Poppy had. The emotions that had coursed through him as he thrust into her were beyond any he'd experienced before. He'd come harder than he ever had, and was left more satisfied than he could have imagined. If not for Mavis—and his mother—he would have cradled Poppy against him, enjoying the drowsy glow, then taken her again to prolong the feeling.

But things hadn't worked out the way they should have. The mess he'd created years ago was still in his lap, as knotty as ever. Mavis had barely heard his request to put things off, and now they were on a train together, going to visit their families. With any luck, as soon as they reached the station in Porthleven, he could say his goodbyes to Mavis and head off to his mother's house.

"We're here," Mavis said the second the train's whistle sounded to signal the approaching station. "I'm so excited."

"Why?" Nick frowned as he stood, heading to the end of the aisle.

"Because this is a big day," Mavis said. Her color was high, and her eyes shone with excitement.

"It's Sunday," Nick said. "We're going home to have dinner with our families. It could happen any given Sunday."

"Yes, but this one is special." She reached for Nick's hand. He tried to move so that she couldn't grasp it, but the train jerked to a stop at that moment, and she fell into him. Her arms went around him, and she giggled. "Whoops."

She stayed where she was, gazing up at him, her fingertips digging into his sides, as the other passengers disembarked. He finally had to clear his throat and pry her free before turning away and heading to the train's door, then down onto the platform. He took a moment to orient himself, then marched toward the stationhouse and the boundary that exited to the road.

"Where are you going?" Mavis called after him, scurrying to catch up. She tried to catch his hand when she reached him, but he avoided her.

"I'm going to my mum's house," he said, stepping out onto the carriage-lined street. Porthleven wasn't a city, but it was a sizeable enough town that he had to watch for traffic.

"She's at the church." Mavis tugged his arm to keep him from walking off.

Nick stopped and frowned, turning to her. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, your mother and my mother are waiting for us at the church."

Suspicion crawled down his back, leaving him restless, as if under attack. "Why are they at the church?"

"Because it's Sunday?" Mavis suggested. Her eyes darted to the side, as if looking for something or waiting for someone.

"Services were over hours ago," Nick pressed her. "Why would they still be at the church?"

"I don't know," she said, not meeting his eyes. "I only know that Mama told me to meet her there, and to bring you, since your mother would be there too."

His mum had told him no such thing. He hadn't spoken to her much since they'd had their talk over tea, but he went home every third Sunday. It was possible he'd missed a message from her that Mavis had received, but still, something seemed wrong.

"I think I'll head home first," he said, starting off down the street.

Mavis grabbed him and yanked him to a stop. She laughed, but there was an anxious light in her eyes. "Why do you need to do that? I told you everyone is at the church. And the church is just over that way." She pointed in the opposite direction he wanted to go.

Nick let out a breath and swept the cap from his head, rubbed his forehead with his arm, and set his cap back in place. The church both of their families attended wasn't far from the station. It wouldn't take too much out of his day to stop by and see if what Mavis said was true. If she was leading him on some wild goose chase, he could explain that to his mum later, possibly use it as further proof that he and Mavis weren't suited for each other.

"All right," he said at last.

"I knew you'd see things my way," Mavis said with a relieved smile.

She hooked her arm through his, holding on as though he would bolt at any moment as they started down the street. He might have run if given half a chance. Nothing about the errand felt right.

"Have you given more thought to what I said a few days ago?" he asked as they

walked.

"What did you say a few days ago?" She glanced quickly at him, but for the most part kept her eyes on the sidewalk in front of them. Her steps were rushed.

"About postponing the wedding," Nick said through clenched teeth. "Mum thinks, and I agree, that, all things considered, we should give it a little more time, really think about whether we're suited for each other or not." The way he said it, even the hint that there was a chance for the two of them to marry after all, felt like a terrible lie and left Nick's stomach sour.

"Of course we're suitable," Mavis said quickly. "Why would you think we're not?"

"Because I love Poppy," he said, almost laughing at the absurdity of her question.

"No you don't," she said, pulling him along faster. "You love me. You just had to get something out of your system by being with her."

"No." He pulled her to a stop, staring hard at her. "I love Poppy. I want to marry her, not you. The only reason I haven't called things off altogether is because Mum asked me to take some time, to think about it. But I don't need to think about it. I want Poppy. Not you."

Rather than the fury Nick expected to see in Mavis's eyes, he saw panic. "No, you want to marry me. You've always wanted to marry me. You have to marry me."

"How can you still want me after everything I just said?" Nick asked, skating too close to losing his temper for his comfort.

"Because...because I love you," Mavis burst out. Her expression shifted slightly, and she burst into a smile that felt as false and brittle as fool's gold. "That's right, Nick. I love you. I always have. You're the man I dream about at night. I was a fool to leave for London when I did, when I could have had you by my side forever." She threw her arms around him, resting her head against his chest. "Can you ever forgive me?"

Nick stumbled back as her body hit his. He held his arms to the side, keenly aware of the passersby staring at them. "Get ahold of yourself," he whispered, tugging Mavis away from him and setting her on her feet. "You're making a spectacle of yourself."

"No I'm not," she snapped, back to anger again. "You're making a spectacle of me. If you hadn't dallied with that little trollop, I wouldn't be in this mess."

"Don't speak about Poppy like that," he warned her, his voice low.

She winced. "All right, all right. I won't. I won't ever say another word about her, if you just marry me."

"Mavis," he began, pinching his eyes shut in a grimace.

"There isn't time for this." She grabbed his hand, startling his eyes open, and dragging him on down the street. "We have to get to the church."

Nick wanted to protest. He wanted to yank Mavis to a stop and demand she tell him what was really going on. But the prospect of a public confrontation left him cold. At least if they were at the church, they would be away from the prying eyes of strangers.

But when they finally reached the small, parish church where both of their families had been members since well before either of them were born, the only people there were the priest, his wife, and her sister.

"There you are," Mrs. Corning, the priest's wife, greeted them with a wide smile. "We

were wondering when you'd get here."

"Is my mother here?" Nick asked with a frown. His back itched with suspicion.

Mrs. Corning sent him a confused, slightly sympathetic look. "Why would she be here when she's at home with a cold?"

Nick's suspicion flared to alarm. "She didn't send me word that she's sick."

Mavis laughed anxiously. "Did I not mention that?"

"You said she'd be here." Nick narrowed his eyes at her.

"Well, it doesn't matter." She brushed the air with one hand and grabbed his hand with the other. "Let's get on with things."

"What things?" Nick asked, his feet planted firmly in the middle of the aisle.

"Why, your wedding, of course," Rev. Corning said as he approached them from the front of the church in full robes. He blinked in confusion between Nick and Mavis. "That is why we're here, isn't it?"

"The bans have been read," Mrs. Corning added.

Nick whirled to face Mavis, heart pounding with fury. "Is that why you dragged me here?" he demanded.

"The bans have been read," Mavis said with a thready laugh and a shrug. "Why wait a moment longer?"

"Because I don't want to marry you, Mavis," he said, far louder than he intended.

Rev. and Mrs. Corning jumped in surprise. Mrs. Corning's sister gasped from where she stood, closer to the front of the church.

"Oh dear. This is quite irregular," Rev. Corning stammered, his large jowls flapping. "I'm not sure what the Church recommends one do in a situation like this."

Nick knew what he wanted to do. He wanted to turn around and march right out of the church, never seeing Mavis again. He got as far as turning toward the door when Ginny and Poppy burst through the entrance. They were both red-faced, windblown, and panting.

"Stop the wedding," Ginny managed to gasp as they rushed up the aisle. "It's a sham."

"What are you talking about?" Mavis yelled, clutching Nick's arm.

Nick shook her off and took a few steps toward Poppy as she leaned against the back row of pews, hand pressed to her chest as she caught her breath. "You can't marry her, Nick. She's been lying to you."

"That's ridiculous," Mavis laughed, high and nervous. "I've never told you an untruth in my life."

She tried once more to grab him, but Nick dodged her. He closed the distance to Poppy, but stopped short of pulling her into his arms.

"What do you mean she's lying?"

Poppy gulped and took a few more breaths, pushing away from the pew to stand straight. "She's pregnant."

Shock reverberated through Nick. Silence seemed to fill the church. He stared at Poppy, seeing nothing but honesty and love in her eyes.

"At least, she's probably pregnant," Poppy went on, her already pink cheeks growing

redder. "It's what the staff from London thinks."

"Those jealous cows?" Mavis laughed. Nick twisted to find her wringing her hands and glancing around anxiously. Guilt was written across her face. "They'd say anything to undermine me."

Nick studied her with narrowed eyes, desperate to know the truth. "Are you pregnant?"

"No," she laughed, then swallowed as though she might be sick.

"The London staff seems to think Mavis has had a great many gentlemen callers since moving to Town," Ginny said, moving to stand by Poppy's side. "They believe she was recently involved with a married doctor, and that the only reason she volunteered to come back to Cornwall was because she'd gotten in trouble."

"That's ridiculous." Mavis swayed from one foot to the other, sending a desperate look to Rev. Corning and his wife. "I would never do anything like that. I'm a good girl. I always have been."

Nick narrowed his eyes further. Mavis hadn't been particularly good when the two of them had gotten involved years ago. She certainly hadn't been a shrinking violet, and even then, he'd doubted she was a virgin. It hadn't bothered him. Women were free to pursue their interests as much as they wanted. But not when they'd made promises, promises they were forcing him to keep. And not when it meant innocent women, like Poppy, were hurt in the process.

"I don't think the London staff is lying," Ginny said.

Nick turned to her, but quickly glanced on to Poppy to see what she thought. Poppy's breathing had slowed, but her expression was pinched with regret. "I hate to think ill of anyone," she began, "but I don't think the London staff is lying either."

A blossom of warmth filled Nick's chest, his pounding heart at its center. If she had spoken out and condemned Mavis, he wouldn't have held it against her. But it was clear that she was trying hard not to speak ill of anyone, even the woman who was intent on destroying her chance for happiness. And Nick suddenly felt just how much he loved her. Nothing, not even familial duty, would stop him from marrying her.

All the same, he needed to be sure of the truth.

"Fine," he said, turning back to Mavis. "You tell me you've been faithful to me and that you're not carrying another man's child, and I'll marry you."

"What?" Ginny snapped, clearly irate.

"Really?" Mavis blinked at him as though she could hardly believe her luck.

Nick crossed his arms. He glanced to Poppy with nothing but confidence in his eyes. A slight smile touched the corners of her mouth. She trusted him. She might have even predicted what he was about to say.

He turned back to Mavis. "I'll marry you. In one year."

"A year?" Mavis's back snapped straight. "No! No, I won't wait a year. I need to marry you now."

"Need to?" Nick arched a brow.

"Want to," Mavis corrected herself, shaking her head. She was breathing fast and shallow, and raised a hand to her stomach. "I want to marry you, Nick. I've always

wanted to." Her nervous laugh was painful to watch.

"Fine. Then next year—"

"No, not next year. It has to be now."

"Six months from now." Nick shrugged.

"No, now. Now, now, now."

"If you won't wait, I won't marry you," Nick insisted.

"But you have to," Mavis said, swaying, eyes wide, looking as though she would jump out of her skin. "If you don't, I'll be humiliated."

"No you won't," Nick said. "Plenty of women have broken engagements. Unless that's not what you're talking about. Unless you mean something else entirely."

"But...you can't...if you won't..." She gulped in a breath as though she were drowning. "He said he'd leave his wife and marry me," she burst. "Or if not, that he'd keep me on the side. But...but when I told him it was his baby, he refused to believe me."

A strange, awkward sense of relief splashed through Nick as the truth came out. Mavis had been false, and he wouldn't have to marry her. Not even his mother would expect him to now. He was free to get down on one knee to Poppy and promise to love her forever. But that didn't stop the odd sense of embarrassment and pity that rushed in as Mavis continued to talk, as though she'd held the truth inside for too long.

"And then he refused to help me get rid of it," she went on, bursting into tears. "And him a doctor. Said it was immoral. But he wouldn't marry me or give me any money. Like that's any less immoral than getting a girl in trouble and casting her aside. So what was I supposed to do?" she pleaded with Nick. "What was I supposed to do?"

"You could have told me the truth, and we could have figured out a way to deal with it," he said, surprised by the pity he felt for her.

"You...you would have married me if I'd told you I was carrying another man's child?" She blinked at him, incredulous.

"No." Nick shook his head. "I love Poppy, and I'm going to marry her. Nothing could possibly change that." He glanced quickly to Poppy with a smile. She hadn't moved from her spot, but her hands now covered the bottom half of her face as if she were shocked. But her eyes shone with love and happiness. Nick wanted to run to her, but he wasn't quite finished. He turned back to Mavis. "I would have helped you find a way to have your baby without ruining your life. We all would have." He glanced back to Poppy and Ginny.

Ginny's face was a mask of ire, but Poppy rushed forward until she reached Nick's side. "We can still find a way to help," she said, taking Nick's hand.

Mavis stared at her, incredulous. "You would help me?"

Poppy looked up at Nick. In spite of everything, in spite of how horrid Mavis had been to her every step of the way, the look Poppy sent him appealed to every bit of kindness Nick had in him. Poppy's selflessness left him breathless. She was far and away the best person he'd ever known, and he would gladly spend the rest of his life working to deserve her love.

"Of course we'll help you," Nick said, not so much because he harbored any burning need to help someone who had played him for a fool, but because Poppy wanted it.

"Maybe Jack Fisher would be interested in a woman who's already expecting a child,"

Poppy suggested.

"Surely not," Nick said, his mouth twitching into an incredulous grin.

Poppy shrugged. "He was willing to marry me, even though he knew I loved you and would only ever love you."

Nick smiled. The warmth of Poppy's sweetness filled him, body and soul. "You really love me?"

"How could you possibly doubt it," she said, her eyes shining.

He turned fully to her, sliding his arms around her. "I don't. I just like to hear you say it."

"I love you, Nick Parsons," she said, smiling so widely she laughed. "I love you, and I will always love you."

"I love you too," he said, feeling it to the bottom of his soul. "And I swear, I'll do whatever it takes to make you the happiest woman in the world."

"You already have," she said.

And, bold as brass, she lifted up on her toes to kiss him. Nick held her tighter, letting her warmth infuse him. He would never grow tired of kissing her, never grow tired of her smile or the way her laughter made him feel as though his heart was filled with sunshine. He would never disappoint her again, if he could help it, and he'd never let anyone hurt her. Because she was his, now and forever.

## EPILOGUE

The wedding took place on a blustery, November day. The wind beat against the walls outside the small, seaside church, but inside, the congregation was cozy and happy. Poppy held tightly to Nick's hand, beaming with joy as the priest read the wedding vows.

"The bride looks so pretty," she whispered, leaning closer to Nick.

"Really?" Nick whispered back, sliding his arm around her shoulders, even though they were in church. "I hadn't noticed."

Poppy shook her head and tried to hide her laughter. "You know she's pretty."

He shook his head. "The most beautiful bride I've ever seen was you on our wedding day. No one else will ever come close."

She couldn't help herself. Poppy twisted and beamed up at her husband. They'd only been married a fortnight, but it felt as though they'd been part of each other since the dawn of time. There hadn't been any reason to wait, once things with Mavis had been sorted out. Before they left the Porthleven church, Nick had dropped to one knee and begged Poppy for her hand in marriage, in spite of all the trials and confusion they'd had to endure to get there. Poppy had said yes before Nick could finish his question, which had seemed as clumsy as tripping over her own feet at the time. Nick had laughed and then kissed her, and the two of them had asked Rev. Corning if there was any possible way they could be married immediately.

Since there wasn't any legal way to marry without the bans being read over three Sundays, or with a special license, which neither of them was fancy enough to obtain, they'd had to settle for an early November wedding. Miss Victoria was sad to lose Poppy as a maid, but happy enough for them to attend the ceremony, along with Lord Peter and Lady Mariah, which was considered a stunning show of approval for the wedding of two servants.

But Nick and Poppy's wedding wasn't the only one that made a great many people happy.

"Do you, Jack Fisher, take this woman, Mavis Jenkins, to be your lawfully wedded wife, to have and to hold, in sickness and in health, 'til death do you part?"

"I do," Jack said with a fond smile for Mavis.

And do you, Mavis Jenkins, take this man, Jack Fisher, to have and to hold, to love,

honor, and obey, 'til death to you part?"

"I do," Mavis answered, a look of gratitude in her eyes. Poppy could have sworn that she added a mouthed, "Thank you," before the priest moved on to the rings.

Poppy sighed in contentment and leaned into Nick. Watching Jack and Mavis pledge their troth to each other was strangely satisfying. Mavis did look pretty, in a sea-green dress that did just enough to hide the bump of her stomach. If things worked out the way Poppy hoped they would, Mavis would realize how lucky she'd been and mend her ways. She'd certainly seemed penitent in the last few weeks, as Poppy and Nick had helped arrange the marriage between her and Jack. And while there was no way to be certain someone would stay on the straight and narrow, Poppy felt content, knowing she'd done everything she could to help a fellow woman in need.

"I think things have turned out better than any of us could have anticipated," she told Nick after the ceremony, as the two of them stood near the fireplace in the fisherman's hall during the reception.

"Mavis has had an astounding bit of luck," Nick agreed. There was an edge of wariness in his eyes, as though he wasn't sure Mavis had really turned over a new leaf, but it vanished as he turned to face Poppy, pulling her into his arms.

He kissed her thoroughly on the mouth, even though they were in a room full of people. His hands strayed far lower down her back than they should have. The kiss was heavenly, though, and left Poppy hoping they could leave and head home to bed as soon as possible.

"What was that for?" she asked, feeling herself heat from head to toe, when Nick let her go. "People are watching us."

"Good," he said, adding one more light kiss to her lips. "I want everyone here to see that you're mine." He kissed her again. "And that I'm yours."

"I'm fairly certain everyone knows," she giggled, sliding her arms around his neck. "But what I don't know is how I got so lucky as to marry you."

"I'm the lucky one," he said. "I have an angel in my arms, and in my bed every night," he added with a sultry whisper, bending to kiss her neck.

Poppy giggled. "Perhaps it's time to leave," she sighed in return.

"Excellent idea, Mrs. Parsons."



I hope you've enjoyed both *Starcross Dreams* and [Starcross Lovers](#), continuations of the story of *Starcross Castle* that began with [December Heart](#). Will there be more stories from the staff of the Castle? There just might be! But not until this summer.

In the meantime, coming April 6<sup>th</sup>, book two of *The Silver Foxes of Westminster*, [August Sunrise](#). Remember Alexander Croydon from [A Place to Belong](#)? He's ready to marry at last, and industrial heiress Marigold Bellows is his ideal mate. But can he recover from the heartbreak and mistakes of his past, and is Marigold ready to accept James, Alex's illegitimate son? When James becomes the target of Alex's enemies, will it bring Marigold and Alex together or tear them apart?

Be sure to [sign up for my newsletter](#) so that you can be alerted when all of these exciting books are released!

[Click here for a complete list of other works by Merry Farmer.](#)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I hope you have enjoyed Starcross Dreams. If you'd like to be the first to learn about when new books in the series come out and more, please sign up for my newsletter here: <http://eepurl.com/cbaVMH> And remember, Read it, Review it, Share it! For a complete list of works by Merry Farmer with links, please visit <http://wp.me/P5ttjb-14F>.

Merry Farmer is an award-winning novelist who lives in suburban Philadelphia with her cats, Torpedo, her grumpy old man, and Justine, her hyperactive new baby. She has been writing since she was ten years old and realized one day that she didn't have to wait for the teacher to assign a creative writing project to write something. It was the best day of her life. She then went on to earn not one but two degrees in History so that she would always have something to write about. Her books have reached the Top 100 at Amazon, iBooks, and Barnes & Noble, and have been named finalists in the prestigious RONE and Rom Com Reader's Crown awards.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my awesome beta-readers, Caroline Lee and Jolene Stewart, for their suggestions and advice. And double thanks to Julie Tague, for being a truly excellent editor and assistant!

[Click here for a complete list of other works by Merry Farmer.](#)