

THE GREAT EXHIBITION

A Historical Romance Proposal
by Kaye Dacus

England, 1851.

Prince Albert's Great Exhibition provides the backdrop for a new series of stand-alone, light-hearted historical romances.

Genre: Historical (Early Victorian) Inspirational Romance

Target Market: Women, ages 25+, interested in reading sweet historical romance with light inspirational elements.

Book 1: *Follow the Heart:** An American woman is sent to England to marry wealth, but finds herself torn between the poor man she loves and the viscount who offers the wealth and stability that can save her family.

Book 2: *An Honest Heart:** A physician with a secret past falls in love with the daughter of one of his patients. He must choose between revealing his past and risk losing everything or keeping his secret and watching her marry another man.

Book 3: *The Heart That Waits:** Lord Brightwell wants to be loved for himself, not his money or title. Mercy Timperleigh has never married because of the shame of her family's past. When the aristocrat and the schoolmistress fall in love, is it a love that has been worth waiting for?

**Working Titles*

Competitive Titles:

- Tales of London series by Lawana Blackwell (Bethany House)
- The Gresham Chronicles by Lawana Blackwell (Bethany House)
- The Winslow Breed series by Gilbert Morris (Howard Books)
- Lady Trent Mystery series by Gilbert Morris (Thomas Nelson)
- *The Lady of Milkweed Manor, The Apothecary's Daughter, and The Silent Governess* by Julie Klassen (Bethany House)
- The Miss Pickworth series by Catherine Palmer (Tyndale House)
- *Before the Season Ends, The House in Grosvenor Square, and A Country House Courtship* by Linore Rose Burkard (Harvest House)
- The English Garden series by Lori Wick (Harvest House)
- *A Man Most Worthy* by Ruth Axtell Morren (Love Inspired Historical)

Historical Research: Kaye Dacus has a Bachelor of Arts in English, with a minor in history, and a Master of Arts in Writing Popular Fiction. Her love of the British literature and history started with Jane Austen. Her undergraduate literary thesis was entitled “Wealth and Social Status as a Theme in *Pride and Prejudice*,” and much of her final semester of undergraduate school was spent studying Austen’s novels, which led her in turn to studying the works of Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell, two of the most beloved authors of early Victorian literature. Her minor in history has given her a love—a thirst—for conducting in-depth, accurate research from original source materials as well as historical, academic, and literary criticism sources.

The Big Idea: The Great Exhibition series builds upon the brand Kaye has developed with her contemporary series (The Brides of Bonneterre, and the Matchmakers series with Barbour Publishing) for creating light-hearted, stand-alone novels which are tied together with recurring characters. It will also build upon the brand she has created with her historical series (The Ransome Trilogy with Harvest House Publishers) as an author who fully immerses her reader in the language, fashion, and details of the historical era. And each book fulfills Kaye’s promise of “Humor, Hope, and Happily Ever Afters” that her readers have come to expect.

The Readership: The Great Exhibition series takes a single event from history, Prince Albert’s Great Exhibition of 1851, and uses it to create a historical setting that is at once unique and familiar. Readers of Regency romances will identify with the “sitting-room romance” aspect of the novels—the rules and regulations of society must be observed!—and lovers of Victorian and non-Regency historicals will identify with the era’s move into the Industrial Age, including train travel, steam engines, and new inventions like the telegraph and the daguerreotype arriving on the scene.

Though the books are connected through the historical significance of the Great Exhibition, the setting of each book in and around Oxford, and recurring characters—encouraging readers to read the whole series—each is a stand-alone story, enabling readers to read the series in any order.

With the rise of the steam punk movement (focusing on more fantastical elements of the Victorian age) as well as the popularity of the movies *The Young Victoria* and *Sherlock Holmes*, along with miniseries such as *Cranford*, *North & South*, and *Wives & Daughters* (based on Elizabeth Gaskell’s novels), *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit* (based on Dickens’s novels), and the BBC TV series *Lark Rise to Candleford*, The Great Exhibition series will begin to feed the hunger for Victorian settings in Christian fiction.

BOOK 1: FOLLOW THE HEART (Working Title)

After her father lost most of the family money in a railroad speculation, American-born **MARGARET (MEG) DEARING** and her younger brother **CHRISTOPHER** were sent to their cousin, Sir Robert Buchanan, in England to find wealthy spouses. Christopher, who recently finished his law degree at Yale, is interested in science and technology, and since he's been reading all he can about Prince Albert's Great Exhibition, he's more than willing to go. Though she did not want to leave Philadelphia, Meg did want to escape the humiliation of all her wealthy friends looking down on her now that she cannot afford anything.

Originally an under-gardener at Chatsworth in Devonshire, **ANDREW LAWTON** came to the attention of Joseph Paxton with his garden designs and drawings of buildings. He apprenticed with Paxton, even attending him as he designed and oversaw the building of the Crystal Palace for the Great Exhibition. Through one of the other men on the committee, Andrew learned of Sir Robert Buchanan's desire for a redesign of his gardens and outbuildings at his country home near Oxford, Wakesdown Manor, as well as at his estate in London. Andrew asked if he could send a proposal, and Paxton agreed. To his great surprise, Sir Robert chose Andrew's design and hired him to spend six months at his estate overseeing the refurbishment of his grounds.

Though accustomed to moving in the highest echelons of society in Philadelphia, Meg finds high society in England much different than what she expected and seeks refuge outdoors. At their country home, outside of Philadelphia, Meg always enjoyed gardening—flowers, fruits and vegetables, ornamental plants—it was where she felt closest to God. But in Sir Robert's elaborate gardens, she cannot find the peace she seeks. Kneeling to replant a scruffy shrub that has fallen over, she is approached by a gardener and asked what she is doing. She explains that the rough, wild-looking shrub adds character and charm to the garden, and she did not want to see it die.

When Andrew hears the pretty houseguest's explanation for why she replanted the blight of a shrub he just pulled out of the ground, it is all he can do not to laugh at her provincial view of the beauty of the outdoors. He tries to explain that it is through control of nature that true beauty is achieved, but this seems only to offend her.

Christopher enjoys spending time with Andrew, learning all he can about the latest engineering methods used to construct the Crystal Palace. Sir Robert, indulging Christopher's interest in science and technology—knowing those can only help him build a future not based on speculations and wild gambles in the stock market that his father has made—encourages Christopher to travel to London with Andrew on occasion to meet with Paxton and the other engineers on the project.

Christopher has also developed an interest in the Buchanans' governess, **HONORA (NORA) WOODRIFF**, a woman of great intelligence and accomplishments but no wealth—unlike Sir Robert's two eligible, older daughters, Edith and Dorcas, both with large fortunes to be inherited upon their marriages.

Nora took the posting of governess in the Buchanan home two years ago, before Dorcas left for finishing school. Because of her youth and beauty, rumors started in the community that she

might have taken the job of governess, but it was the position of Lady Buchanan she wanted. Edith and Dorcas initially believed these rumors as well and made life at Wakesdown Manor as miserable as possible for Nora. Nora confined herself to her rooms and limited her contact with Sir Robert. Now, at twenty-eight years old with her youngest charge preparing to go off to finishing school in less than six months, Nora has resigned herself to the fact she's too old to marry, so she's looking for another situation to go to when Florie leaves home. Though she discourages Meg's overtures of friendship, she is drawn to the American—Meg is only two years younger, and they have similar ideas about education for women and universal suffrage.

Meg wonders if Mr. Lawton's attitude about controlling nature extends to his ideas about women—that they, too, must be strictly controlled. She finds herself spending more time outside, “accidentally” running into Mr. Lawton and taking pleasure in baiting him about his stodgy ideals, especially as concerns education and rights for women. Even quoting scriptures about how all are equal in God's sight doesn't move him.

Andrew allows Miss Dearing to believe his reaction to her revelation of her radical beliefs is because he is old-fashioned and set in his ways. Secretly, he agrees with her that God loves all people, men and women, equally. But though Andrew finds himself attracted to Miss Dearing, marrying someone so outspoken about her social beliefs could ruin his career before it is fully launched. Besides, if he marries at all, it must be for money—because he will not be able to support a wife and family for many years. And he is in on the family secret—the Dearings are poor relations sent to marry money.

Meg figures out she has taken her teasing too far when Andrew begins avoiding her. Though she desperately wants to make amends and show him that she isn't the radical she's pretended to be in her effort to tease him, she also realizes that her father would never approve of a near-penniless architect as a husband for her. So she tries to push her feelings for him aside.

Her prospects, though not her mood, brighten when a friend of Sir Robert's, Lord Stephen Brightwell, a wealthy viscount, shows favorable interest in her. Though Lord Brightwell is fifteen years her senior, he has the wealth, social status, and stability she knows will save her family. Warned by her family repeatedly, Meg keeps the truth about her family's lost wealth and status from Lord Brightwell—along with her thoughts and opinions on everything.

Though he has distanced himself from Meg, when Andrew sees her receiving Lord Brightwell's attentions, he is torn between his attraction for her and his dream for his career as an architect. He doesn't see how he can have both, so he doesn't even bother praying for both. But when a rainstorm catches them both unawares—and traps them at the old chapel he is measuring for restoration—their pushed-aside feelings rise to the surface and result in a passionate kiss.

Andrew apologizes and explains why they cannot be together. Meg tries to convince him they could make it work—that she would be more than happy to work side-by-side with him to make him successful, that she trusts God would help them. But Andrew refuses to subject her to a hard life—a life of deprivation, hardship, and constant upheaval, the way he grew up. His mother always told him that God would provide—even when sitting in the workhouse, lungs rattling with pneumonia weeks before her death. He admits he knows Meg's family has no money, and

no matter how much he loves her, he cannot ask her to give up the prospect of finding security by marrying someone wealthy, because he must do the same. Heartbroken, Meg accuses Andrew of not knowing what love really means and runs from the chapel.

Through Mr. Paxton, Christopher is offered a position as a lawyer with a railroad company that is looking to expand into America. It means staying in England only for a few more months—it also means he now has his own source of income and is not dependent on marrying for money. With Nora's position at Wakesdown ending on Florie's fifteenth birthday, Christopher asks Nora to marry him. She agrees and they marry in a small ceremony in the garden at Wakesdown the week before Christopher is to start his new job.

With Christopher married to someone with no money and all of her other siblings too young for marriage, the crushing weight of saving her family falls on Meg. She now has no choice but to marry for money to keep her parents and younger siblings from losing everything.

Andrew is requested by his mentor to be present for the grand opening of the Crystal Palace he helped design/build and, unable to watch Meg marry someone else, he receives permission from Sir Robert and leaves for London. Meg is devastated when she learns Andrew has left—and without saying goodbye.

Having set her own sights on Lord Brightwell, and jealous over the attentions the viscount is paying Meg, Edith Buchanan reveals to Lord Brightwell that she saw Meg and Andrew kissing in the chapel ruins. Lord Brightwell asks Meg about it. She convinces him, and tries to convince herself, that it meant nothing, that Andrew meant nothing to her. When Lord Brightwell proposes, she accepts, though she knows her heart will always belong to Andrew.

At family dinner, when Lord Brightwell announces that Meg has agreed to become his wife, Meg cannot take the guilt any longer—she stops him in the middle of his toast and admits that she isn't in love with him, that she loves someone else. She releases Lord Brightwell from their engagement. She spends that night packing and accepts Sir Robert's offer of a carriage to London and money for passage back to Philadelphia. In London, she stays with Christopher and Nora in the flat provided them by the railroad company. Because Christopher and Andrew are still friends, Andrew got several passes for the opening week of the Exhibition for Christopher. Not wanting to leave Meg alone in the flat, moping, Christopher insists she accompany them to the Exhibition.

Several times during the opening day, Andrew hears whispers through the crowd about Lord Brightwell and his fiancée. Each time, he changes direction to keep from having to see Meg on the arm of her future husband. Andrew regrets his decision—he should have married Meg, poor or not. He should have followed his heart and trusted God to provide for their needs.

Meg isn't certain why Christopher insisted she come if he's just going to drag her around without letting her stop to see any of the exhibits. After overhearing several people talking about how Lord Stephen Brightwell has been jilted by an American upstart, Meg finally breaks free and escapes outside to the park, losing herself in its grandeur and, for the first time since arriving in England, feeling God's presence assuring her all will be well.

Rounding a corner in a path secluded by tall shrubs, she finds herself face to face with Andrew. After awkward greetings, Andrew congratulates Meg on her engagement, wishing her joy. Meg begins to explain what happened, but as soon as she gets her first words out—that she is no longer engaged to Lord Brightwell—Andrew stops her with a kiss, followed by an apology for behaving like an idiot, followed by asking her to marry him.

Certain marrying Andrew is why God brought her to England, Meg accepts his proposal, though she knows it will mean continued hardship for her own family. After a long walk through the garden, they return to the exhibition hall to find Christopher and tell him their news.

Christopher, who has been in a panic trying to find Meg, reveals that he had been trying to find Andrew so he and Meg could be reunited, knowing how they each felt about the other. He then pulls a letter out of his pocket and hands it to Meg, explaining that it arrived two days ago, but he wanted her to see Andrew again before reading it. It is a letter from their parents—the railroad scheme turned out not to be a bust, as the company for which Christopher now works has bought out the partners who originally spent the company into bankruptcy with no clear business plan. The family is well on the way to financial recovery, and they give Christopher and Meg their blessing to marry whomever they wish. They also include that if Christopher’s friend Andrew would come to Philadelphia, he could make his fortune, as everyone in society wants a true English garden. With Christopher now prepared to take over the company’s interests in Philadelphia, he and Nora travel back to America with Andrew and Meg.

Epilogue: Meg and Andrew are married in her garden at her parents’ house in Philadelphia.

BOOK 2—AN HONEST HEART (Working Title)

When **NEAL STRADBROKE**’s father, a surveyor, discovered gold on his claim in Mayday Hills, Australia, in 1825, he determined his son would not be forced to grow up in the hardscrabble world of speculators, land-hungry immigrants, and convicts. The government, however, made Stradbroke keep quiet about his find because they did not want the population to hear about it. The year Neal turned twelve, his mother died of typhoid. Because his father had not been able to do anything about the gold on his land, he and Neal dug up what they could, sewed it into the hems and pockets of Neal’s clothes, and Neal was sent off to England to live with his grandmother in Oxford and go to school. His grandmother, living on a meager income, helped Neal get the gold to an assayer, and they took home a small fortune. Accustomed to living on a strict budget, Neal’s grandmother continued in this way, leading everyone in their community to believe Neal was living off her.

CADENCE “CADDY” BAINBRIDGE is the child of a country curate whose parents scrimped and saved so they could send Caddy to school where she would meet wealthier young ladies who could be helpful to her in her future. To help earn her tuition money, she mended the other girls’ clothes and even began making frocks for the wealthier girls. Her father died during her last year of school, and when she finished, her mother insisted Caddy use what little money remained to start a business. Because of all her former school connections, Caddy’s dress shop in Oxford has

been very successful. But then her mother fell ill, and with her two younger brothers off seeking their fortune in California, most of Caddy's earnings now go for doctors, medicines, and trips to the seaside trying to get her mother better.

OLIVER CARMICHAEL is the son of local gentry. He's always drawn the eye of all the girls with no exertion on his part—all the girls, that is, except seamstress Caddy Bainbridge. So, even though he has plans to marry **EDITH BUCHANAN**, a baronet's daughter, he places a bet with his friends that he can make Caddy fall in love with him before the opening day of the Great Exhibition.

Caddy's mother has gone out for a walk with her companion when Oliver Carmichael comes by the shop with his mother to order a gown. Oliver is very flattering and attentive toward Caddy—she's always thought him attractive, but she knows her place and has never thought he knew she existed.

The end of the consultation is interrupted when a young man bursts in carrying her mother, who collapsed while out on her walk. Oliver tells Caddy to call on him if she needs anything before he and his mother leave. The young man who brought her mother home happens to be a doctor who also teaches at the medical college at Oxford.

When Neal asks Caddy about her mother's treatment, he is disturbed to hear about the archaic methods used for treating the woman's illness. He suggests she take her mother to see the senior doctor with whom he works, but she tells him she's happy with the doctors they've already seen. When he persists, she admits she can't afford any more doctors. When she insists on paying him for assisting her mother, he tells her he will take it in trade—he has several garments that need mending.

Even though Mrs. Bainbridge does not want to see another doctor, she's charmed by Neal, a young man who is somewhat mysterious about his past and how he came to live in Oxford. Caddy thinks he is too quiet and reserved—besides, she knows that most doctors, like most curates, spend too much time away from their families working, and she doesn't want to set herself up to fall in love with someone who could hurt her like that. So she tries to put Neal out of her mind.

Edith Buchanan has been disappointed in marriage prospects already, when a wealthy viscount first chose her American cousin over her, and then, when things did not work out with the cousin, he did not turn his attentions onto Edith. So she is not about to lose another suitor—wealthy, even if he isn't titled—to another woman of lower social status. Rumor around Oxford is that Oliver is paying an unusual amount of attention to the seamstress, so Edith starts her own rumors about the quality of Caddy's work and her reputation.

Knowing the rumors could ruin her business, Caddy informs Oliver that though she has been grateful for his attentions, he must stop visiting her shop, as she does not wish any taint to come upon his reputation.

Neal continues to find excuses to visit Caddy's shop—so that he can check in on her mother—even to the point of rounding up mending work from other doctors and students at the college so that Caddy will not be able to make him stop coming. He can see how hurt Caddy is by the vicious rumors being spread around town about her, and though he is impressed by the way she handles it (having overheard what she told Oliver), he is concerned that she has no one to talk to, no one to turn to for help and comfort, since she refuses to let her mother know about it.

When Neal confronts Caddy about keeping secrets from her mother, Caddy confronts him about keeping secrets as well. She's heard enough gossip to know he has a past he keeps hidden. Neal swore to his father that he would never tell anyone where he came from, as his father did not want the taint of being born in a territory still widely regarded as nothing more than a penal colony to ruin Neal's chances for a good life in England. He wants to be honest with Caddy, believes he can trust her, but he cannot break his word to his father.

Caddy is hurt when Neal won't tell her about his past—she had begun to like him. Things are strained between them, and this is complicated when Oliver continues to find ways to see her.

Flowers begin arriving at the shop bearing cards quoting romantic poetry, but not signed. Because she knows Oliver's family has a hothouse nursery at their estate on the edge of town, she assumes the flowers are from him.

Neal knows the flowers are from Oliver, and he wonders at the reason why. Oliver's mother—a patient of the senior doctor Neal assists—informed them on one of their many calls to treat her for imaginary ailments that Oliver's betrothal to the wealthy daughter of a baronet was almost finalized. He wants to protect Caddy, but when he tries to broach the subject of Oliver with her, she informs him it is none of his concern.

One afternoon, when Neal has come to check on her mother, Caddy is surprised by the entrance of a couple of men into her shop. They speak with strange accents when they tell her they were informed that Dr. Neal Stradbroke was known to be at the shop and they needed to see him. Caddy retrieves him from the parlor—not wanting these strange, rough-looking men to upset her mother, whose health has become increasingly fragile.

From the look on Neal's face when he sees the strangers, Caddy can tell he recognizes them and that they aren't welcome visitors. He leaves with them, giving Caddy no explanation as to who they are or what they want with him.

The next day, after another anonymous bouquet of flowers arrives, Neal comes by to see Mrs. Bainbridge. On his way out, he tells Caddy he must go to London for several days. When she asks him if it has something to do with the men who came by, he tells her it does, but that he cannot say anything more about it.

When Caddy goes out to the Carmichael estate to fit Mrs. Carmichael's gown for the Great Exhibition opening, Oliver is there and invites Caddy to take a turn about the gardens with him when she is finished. Oliver is concerned about the amount of time Neal spends at Caddy's place, and needs to win his bet—as the stakes are high and Oliver cannot cover the amount

without asking his father for money. So he tells Caddy that he's heard rumors about Neal and the men who came to see him—that the men are money lenders known for lending money to only the most notorious gamblers, so therefore Neal must be a gambler so far in debt that he has had to go to London to do something underhanded for these men as a way of paying his debt to them.

Caddy cannot believe Neal would be a gambler—he seemed such an upstanding, godly young man. Though, he does seem to have much more money than a young doctor ought, and no one in Oxford seems to know how he came to have it. She has no reason not to trust Oliver; he knows more about these things than she.

When Neal returns from London, he comes by to check on Mrs. Bainbridge—and refuses to tell Caddy anything he did in London, which, to her, only confirms Oliver's explanation. The pain this brings her makes her realize that, despite her determination not to fall in love with someone in such a consuming profession, she's done just that.

Over the next couple of months, Neal continues to make these mysterious trips to London while Oliver continues finding ways to see Caddy. Her business has increased with customers wanting new gowns for the grand opening of the Great Exhibition. The more people start talking about it, the more she wants to go—what better place for a seamstress to see the height of fashion but at an event attended by the cream of English, and foreign, society? But she cannot justify the expense, not when she has her mother to support and mounting doctors' bills to pay now that she's refused to let Neal treat her mother any longer. But late at night, straining her eyes by candlelight, she secretly makes a dress for herself, just in case a miracle happens and she is able to go.

Neal cannot stand the suspicion with which Caddy looks at him when she tells him he is no longer welcome in her shop/home. He wishes he could tell her why he's been making the trips to London, but to do so would be to break his word to his father.

Heartsick over Neal's unwillingness to tell her the truth, Caddy turns to Oliver for comfort. Even though she does not love him, she believes he will propose to her one day soon, and she plans to accept.

Caddy visits the Carmichael estate to fit another gown for Mrs. Carmichael, and is subjected to listening to Mrs. Carmichael rave about the grand opening of the Exhibition, of what everyone was wearing, and of the fabric goods from all over the world she saw there. Oliver insists on seeing Caddy home, who has begun to believe that unless she marries someone like Oliver, her life will continue in the same dreary path it is now on. At her doorstep, he kisses her and asks her if she loves him. Believing he is going to propose to her, she lies to him and tells him she loves him.

Unbeknownst to Caddy, the kiss is seen by others: Oliver's friends. The bet now won, Oliver can drop the pretense of courting Caddy and get on with the necessary courting of his betrothed. Edith tries to send him away—because of how he's embarrassed her with his public attentions to Caddy. Now that he's won his bet and is flush with his winnings, Oliver tells Edith everything. Edith forgives him—conditionally. She's still angry—at Caddy for drawing Oliver's attentions

away from her and making her the subject of rumors around town. Edith hatches an idea to get back at Caddy and put the seamstress in her place.

A ticket to the Grand Exhibition, along with a train ticket, arrives at the shop with a note from Oliver asking Caddy to meet him there. Though she'd rather see the Exhibition with Neal—who has been gone from Oxford for several weeks now, since just before the grand opening—she is thrilled that she's going to get to go no matter whose arm she sees it from. She has decided, though, that even if Oliver does propose, she will not accept. Even though he could provide financial security for her and her mother, she knows she would be unhappy married to someone like Oliver—someone who has said and done things that have proven he isn't the kind of man she wants to spend the rest of her life with.

With her mother and her companion off at Brighton enjoying the benefits of the seaside, Caddy boards the train early one July morning for the trip into London. She is surprised when Oliver does not meet her at the train station in London, but she manages to find her way to the Crystal Palace. For a while, she forgets all about Oliver in the wonderment of the displays around her—until she spots him not too far away. She is about to call out to him when she realizes there is a young woman on his arm—Miss Edith Buchanan, the young woman who tried as hard as she could to ruin Caddy. Never one to be squeamish, she approaches to greet them.

When Oliver introduces Edith as his fiancée, Caddy hides her shock as best she can—but from the amused look on the faces of several of Oliver's friends, she knows she did not do a good job of it. Realizing she'd fooled herself, by believing she'd ever be more than sport to someone of Oliver's rank, she congratulates them and excuses herself with as much dignity as she can muster and wends her way through the exhibition hall, not paying attention to where she's going.

She ends up in the Colonies exhibits area. The exhibits from India are packed with gawkers, so she goes to where the crowds seem to be thinning—Australia. She's just stepped into the area when she sees two familiar looking men: the two men who came to her shop looking for Neal.

The two men greet her and tell her if she's looking for Neal, he is over at the raw materials display with his father and the rest of the Australian delegation.

Caddy makes her way over and stands at the back of a small group as an older man talks about surveying the land and the gold that has been discovered recently in several areas of the colony. The disbelieving crowd disperses—leaving Caddy standing there. Neal breaks away from the officials and comes to her, drawing her away.

He explains everything—about his childhood in Australia, about his father finding gold twenty-six years earlier and sending Neal to Oxford to be educated, about his father's insistence Neal tell no one of his background, about the Australian delegation choosing to put together a committee for the Exhibition comprised of Australians already living in England—that the men who came to get him knew his father and had known Neal's whereabouts all along.

Caddy tells him that knowing his background would not have made her think less of him, but that she forgives him because he proved he was a man of quality by keeping his word to his

father—to whom he introduces Caddy (the man who was speaking to the group). Caddy tells Neal about Oliver and Edith and their plan to embarrass Caddy, and asks Neal to forgive her for believing anything Oliver told her about him. He asks her about the kiss he saw, and she admits she allowed Oliver to take the liberty because she was hurt by Neal's keeping secrets from her and thought Oliver would propose. But she is careful to let Neal know for certain that she does not love Oliver.

Neal asks her if she thinks she might someday be able to love him. She admits she's loved him since the first day he walked into her shop, carrying her mother. Neal kisses her and proposes. She accepts, generating cheers from everyone looking on.

Epilogue: Caddy and Neal are married in the country church where her father was curate.

BOOK 3—THE HEART THAT WAITS (Working Title)

BENEDICT NORTON-CONYERS left his position as a tutor to an earl's sons in Northern England on the promise of a position as a schoolmaster of a prominent school in London. But when he arrived, the school had closed and Benedict was left with no job and no prospects—until he read about the need for guides at Prince Albert's Great Exhibition. While it is a temporary position—lasting only until the Exhibition closes in October—Benedict loves the opportunities to both teach and learn the Exhibition provides, along with the opportunity to meet people who might help him secure another permanent position.

FRANCES GREY would be at the Exhibition every day if she could afford it—and if she were not employed as a teacher at Miss Timperleigh's Seminary for Young Ladies, the school at which she was a student up until five years ago. But Frannie has been able to take her students to the Exhibition several times. And while the displays of unique products, tools, and machines from all around the world are interesting, what makes her want to spend even more time at the Crystal Palace is the presence of a handsome young guide, Mr. Norton-Conyers.

Growing up, **MERCY TIMPERLEIGH** enjoyed all the benefits wealth could bring an only child. But when her father died shortly before her eighteenth birthday, she discovered that her privileged life included being sheltered from the truth about the origin of her family's wealth—a fortune gained through her grandfather's and great-grandfather's success in the transatlantic slave trade in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Ashamed at being the sole heiress of such a legacy, Mercy decided to put the money to use in such a way as to bless those less fortunate. So she opened Miss Timperleigh's Seminary for Young Ladies, a school for promising young women who would not otherwise be able to afford a quality education.

After a brief engagement to a woman he admired but did not love, **LORD STEPHEN BRIGHTWELL**, Viscount Thynne, is determined he will find a woman he can both love and respect—who loves and respects him in return, not one who wants the comfort and social status his title and wealth provide—for they are a burden to him, a reminder of his father's profligate and entitled lifestyle. At forty-two years old, he is not interested in the fortune- and title-seeking debutantes his friends and family keep putting in his path. Now, having spent a few months in London, Stephen is shocked and saddened by the arrival of his young niece, thirteen-year-old

Isabel, and nephew, twelve-year-old Dutton, with the news that Stephen's younger brother and his wife died of cholera in India.

To try to cheer the children up, Stephen takes them to the Great Exhibition. He is impressed by the young man who acts as their guide and asks him if he has ever considered becoming a private tutor, knowing his nephew is far behind where he should be in order to qualify for entry to Eaton in a year. Benedict takes Stephen's job offer and agrees to start in three weeks, after the Exhibition ends October 15. Stephen sees something else of interest at the Exhibition—a lovely woman surrounded by girls who are obviously her students. He observes them for a while and is awed by the woman's ability to engage, educate, and control the young women, when he is having a hard time handling one thirteen-year-old girl. He approaches the woman and learns she is Miss Timperleigh, headmistress of Miss Timperleigh's Seminary for Young Ladies in Oxford.

The petulant young woman had caught Mercy's eye, so when her uncle approached her about enrolling his niece in her school, Mercy knows she can help. She assumes from the man's dress and demeanor he's wealthy, if not titled, but he introduces himself only as "Stephen Brightwell," and, even after learning her school is for daughters of merchants and farmers, he asks if there is a place open for Isabel. So Mercy sets aside her assumption that he would snub her and her school at learning the background of the girls it's meant for and sets a time for him to bring his niece by the school for an in-depth interview.

Stephen did not mean to mislead the schoolmistress, but something inside of him wanted Miss Timperleigh to see him as a man—not as a viscount. With a tutor for Dutton hired and a possible place at a school for Isabel set, Stephen packs them up and returns to his estate outside of Oxford.

Upon returning to Oxford to get the girls settled back in to school for the Michaelmas term, Mercy mentions her run-in with a Mr. Brightwell to her good friend, Caddy Stradbroke. Caddy asks Mercy if she means *Lord* Brightwell, Viscount Thynne. When Caddy describes what the viscount looks like, Mercy realizes it is the same man she met at the Exhibition. At first, she is angry over the deception and considers refusing to admit his niece to her school. But when "Mr." Brightwell and Isabel arrive at the school the next day and Mercy sees the wistful look in Isabel's eyes as she stands outside a classroom door looking in on the group inside the room, Mercy realizes she cannot let her own personal prejudice against people of wealth and entitlement get in the way of reaching out to this hurting, grieving young woman. And, though her own inheritance is far from being depleted, even with as much as running the school costs, Mercy is not at all ashamed of asking Mr. Brightwell to pay tuition in an amount that would rival one of the best finishing schools for daughters of the aristocracy in London.

Stephen cannot imagine that anyone else whose daughter attends Miss Timperleigh's school can afford such a high tuition cost, but having seen first-hand the quality of education and facilities Miss Timperleigh's institution offers its pupils, he agrees to pay it, assuming the school needs all the funds it can get. He is also surprised that Miss Timperleigh has not learned his true identity, since most people in Oxford seem to know him on sight or recognize his name. But he is only too happy to let the misconception stand as long as it can—because he likes the way Mercy Timperleigh looks at him and treats him as someone on an equal social standing as herself.

Mercy wonders if Lord Brightwell is truly concerned about the education of his niece or if he's wanting to foist her off on someone else so he does not have to think about or come into contact with the temperamental adolescent. But she knows it is important for Isabel to have as much contact as possible with her only remaining family. So when he returns the next day to bring Isabel to move in to the residential school, Mercy asks him if he would be willing to help with the school's Roman Days events, which are to be held the last week of the term before the Christmas holiday. She is somewhat surprised when he readily agrees—and tells her that if she needs the help of his nephew or his nephew's tutor, to let him know.

Isabel's first week of school does not go smoothly—she is disruptive in classes, insults the girls she is rooming with, and refuses to participate in the assigned household chores each girl must perform. Mercy initially decides to let the teachers handle it, but when Isabel throws a bucket of dirty water on Frannie after refusing to help scrub the dining tables, Mercy intervenes and takes Isabel to her office. After enduring the young woman's insults, she is able to get to the core of the problem—Isabel is grieving for her parents and feels abandoned by her uncle. She assures Isabel, she hopes honestly, that her uncle loves her—after all, he agreed to help with the Roman Days. And, unlike when her brother goes off to Eton next year, Isabel will get to see her uncle and brother on Sunday afternoons after church. This seems to appease Isabel, but for the rest of the week, Mercy keeps watch on the young woman to ensure she behaves. She must intervene once more—when two other girls begin to tease Isabel for being behind in Latin and Isabel takes the teasing personally—but when she has Isabel come to her office for tea on Saturday, the girl seems to have calmed down and be settling in better.

Having gotten out of the habit of attending church himself many years ago, when Dutton mentions it, Stephen decides it is a good idea to get back in the habit, for the boy's sake—and they are to pick up Isabel after church anyway. At the cathedral, he sees Mercy in the nave along with her students many of whom are dispersing to sit with their families. In response to his greeting, she addresses him as *Lord Brightwell*, and the expression on her face tells him she's known all along who he is. He inquires after Isabel's first week of school. Mercy is cryptic in her response, and Stephen wonders what that means. When Isabel joins them, she acknowledges Stephen with a proper curtsy and formal greeting, but when he offers his arm to escort her to the family pew, she takes a step back—toward Mercy—and asks if she might be permitted to sit with the girls from school who have no family to sit with.

To keep from upsetting Isabel, Mercy agrees to allow her to stay with the rest of the girls during the service. But when Isabel begins to walk out of the church with the school group, Mercy stops her and reminds her she is to spend the afternoon with her uncle and brother. She can see a fear of the unknown hollowing Isabel's eyes, but, after a long hesitation, Isabel takes her uncle's arm. Isabel then asks if Miss Timperleigh might be invited to Thynne Manor for dinner, but before her uncle can respond, Mercy thanks her for the kind thought but tells them she must return to the school to have dinner with the girls whose families live too far away for them to go home on Sunday afternoons so that the rest of the teachers and house mistresses can go home as well.

Stephen wonders if Mercy takes any time away from the school herself, but is left to ponder that question when she leaves to walk with the rest of the students back to the school. Isabel is quiet

and withdrawn on the ride back to Thynne Manor, but Dutton manages to draw her out and get her to talk about her first week at school. Dutton's eyes sparkle with envy when Isabel talks about being surrounded constantly by the other girls and how she cannot have any time alone. Perhaps finding some boys for Dutton to spend time with would be a good idea. After a pleasant afternoon, Stephen and Dutton ride back into Oxford with Isabel to deliver her to school. She hardly takes time to give them a proper farewell at the door before rushing inside. While hurt by his niece's lack of enthusiasm at spending time with him, he is pleased that she seems to like the school so much.

When Benedict arrives in Oxford in mid-October, he is charmed by the town and flabbergasted by the situation in which he finds himself. He expected a nice country home; what he finds is an imposing manor dating back to Elizabethan times. But though the exterior of the structure wears a centuries-old façade, inside it is the home of a thoroughly modern man—indeed, Benedict recognizes several inventions and contraptions he saw, and told others about, at the Exhibition. He quickly discovers Lord Brightwell is a man of many interests, including science and technology, and likes to read and discuss the latest scientific journals, something Benedict has always enjoyed. But though the uncle is learned and well read, the same cannot be said for the nephew. For Dutton to be ready to enter Eton next year, Benedict has his work cut out for him.

On the third Sunday in October, attending church on her day off, Frannie Grey is startled upon seeing Benedict Norton-Conyers across the sanctuary. When their eyes meet, she knows he is just as surprised—and pleased—to see her. Afterward, Benedict offers to walk Frannie home. She tells him about her family—her sisters who attend Miss Timperleigh's, her brothers whom she tutors as best she can on Sundays, her day off. Benedict offers his tutoring services, and, though Frannie would like to accept, knows that is a decision her parents must make.

After a hopeful farewell, Frannie tells her parents of Benedict's offer. Having watched the two on the walk home, her mother warns Frannie against allowing herself to develop feelings for the young man, as it is against the rules for teachers to have suitors and she could lose her position. She assures her parents she has no intention of Mr. Norton-Conyers becoming her follower, though secretly wishes she could.

Benedict asks Stephen for permission to use some of Dutton's schoolbooks for tutoring the Grey boys, explaining he has offered to tutor the boys on his day off. Seeing an opportunity for Dutton to have some boys to socialize with—and to be taught how to interact with people from all levels of society—Stephen pays a visit to the Grey home to see if they would mind if Benedict brings Dutton to their home twice a week to share lessons with their sons—and for Dutton to work with the boys, helping them with all the work they must do around the small dairy farm. For now, Dutton is heir to the title and estates, but if Stephen marries and has his own son, Dutton will have but a small inheritance and his education and skills to live on, so Stephen wants him to be as prepared as possible for whatever life brings his way. And he needs to be around boys his own age. The Greys agree, and not only does Dutton's morale pick up, but he seems to learn better in the company of his new friends.

As autumn draws to a close, Stephen spends more time at Miss Timperleigh's school helping the girls build chariots—figuring out how to fix broken wagon wheels and attach them to old

barrels—for the father-daughter chariot races, build catapults from their own designs, and construct a replica of an aqueduct in the garden. He is pleased to see how well Isabel fits in with the rest of the girls—but concerned at how she, more than any other student, looks to Mercy Timperleigh for approval.

At Stephen's request, Mercy allows Stephen's nephew, his tutor, and Frannie Grey's brothers get involved in helping the girls finish their projects for Roman Days. She cannot help but notice the barely suppressed longing between Frannie and Benedict, but knowing that the tutor is employed by Lord Brightwell only until Dutton goes to Eton next September, she does not want to see her favorite former pupil hurt. So she gives Frannie a gentle reminder about the rule that teachers are not to have followers. After Frannie leaves her office, Mercy gives herself a reminder that Lord Stephen Brightwell is not a man who would fall in love with, and especially would not marry, a schoolmistress. Yet her heart still sings at the thought of seeing him the next time he comes to help the girls with their projects.

The week before the Roman Days festival at the school, Stephen's stepmother, the Dowager Lady Brightwell, arrives at Thynne Manor from her villa in Italy—having sent no acknowledgment that she received his letter informing her of her only son's death. She is appalled to learn that Isabel is attending a school for “lower class” girls and that Dutton is being forced to perform manual labor on a farm. She accuses Stephen of oppressing the children because they are the offspring of his *half* brother, and threatens that she will take them back to Italy with her if he does not put Isabel in a proper school in London and cut off all contact between Dutton and the Greys. While he is not concerned that she would be able to take the children away from him, it is when she threatens to cut off Dutton's inheritance and Isabel's dowry—both of which are secured to them through the wealth she brought with her in her marriage to Stephen's father—he realizes he must at least appear to capitulate until she does what she's been doing since his brother was a little boy: disappear back to Italy. He tells himself that the devastation he feels at the idea of pulling Isabel from the school is for Isabel's sake—knowing how much she loves it there—but, being honest with himself, he admits that he's devastated because it means he will have no excuse to spend time with Mercy, the woman to whom his heart now belongs. When Stephen informs Isabel he will have to pull her out of Miss Timperleigh's school until her grandmother leaves, Isabel throws a fit and locks herself in her bedroom.

Shortly before midnight, Isabel's chambermaid enters the study where Stephen is reading to inform him Isabel is not in her room. After a thorough search of the house and grounds, Stephen concludes that Isabel must have run off to go back to the school—in the middle of a heavy snowfall. But when he arrives at the school, Isabel is not there. Mercy knows the fields and farms that lie between the manor house and the school well, so she goes with Stephen to try to find Isabel. Finally, near dawn, they discover her huddled under a tree near the creek that runs along the back of the school grounds. She hovers near death for a week, leading Lady Brightwell to hurl more accusations at Stephen.

When Mercy tries to visit during the Christmas holidays, she is taken to the receiving room and coldly dismissed by Lady Brightwell, who tells her she will never see Isabel—or Stephen—

again. Mercy, who believes Stephen to be a better man than that leaves, knowing as soon as Isabel is well, she will once again be at the school.

But when the spring term begins, Isabel does not come to school. Frannie reports that though Benedict still tutors her brothers on Saturdays, he is no longer taking Dutton there twice during the week to teach the boys and let Dutton work on the farm. The first week that Isabel is at church, she starts toward Mercy, only to be jerked back and reprimanded by Lady Brightwell. The tears that well in Isabel's eyes bring them to Mercy's eyes as well—disappointed in not getting to talk to Isabel and heartbroken by Stephen's tacit approval of the action by not countermanning his stepmother's actions.

As the spring wears on, Benedict and Frannie can no longer fight their feelings for each other and admit to each other their love. But then Benedict is offered an opportunity he cannot refuse—the opportunity to become the headmaster at a new school in Melbourne, Australia. Though Frannie wants nothing more than to marry Benedict, she cannot leave England, and she cannot stop working—her family relies on her teaching salary. When Benedict proposes to Frannie, asking her to marry him in September and then go to Australia with him, she refuses. Back at school that evening, a tearful Frannie tells Mercy everything.

Mercy wishes she could share her own heartbreak with her young protégé, but it would be too embarrassing to reveal her girlish attraction to a man whom she could never have dreamed of marrying. But she does not want Frannie to end up like her—a dried-up old spinster at thirty-six years old, as the matrons of the town like to remind her—so she puts her own heartbreak aside in order to try to come up with a solution for Frannie and Benedict.

With Isabel off at a school in London and a withdrawn, nervous Dutton falling further and further behind in his studies daily, Stephen has come to the end of his tolerance with his stepmother. But when he hints to her, as she complains about the cold English winter one afternoon, that she might prefer to return to Italy, she tells him she will not return until she is certain that he will not put the children right back into the situations in which she found them. Stephen is gearing himself up for the argument he has been hesitant to have with the woman for the three months she's been at Thynne Manor, when they're interrupted by the butler who shows Mercy—and Isabel—into the room. According to Mercy, Isabel managed to get out of the school in London, get to the train station, and take the train to Oxford—and walk from the Oxford station to the school.

When the dowager viscountess begins to shake Isabel and berate her for running away from the finest school in London, Mercy does not wait for Stephen to act—assuming he won't—and pulls the child away from Lady Brightwell, putting herself between them. She informs Lady Brightwell that the young ladies who attend her school are more respectable and better behaved than Lady Brightwell, given the way Mercy has seen her act, and that there is not a school anywhere in the country that is turning out better-educated young women than hers. Lady Brightwell tells Mercy to mind her place and when Isabel steps between them to tell her grandmother not to speak to Mercy in such a way, Lady Brightwell raises her hand as if to strike the child.

Stephen intervenes, grabbing his stepmother's wrist. He tells her he does not care if she retracts all promised money from Dutton and Isabel—he can no longer stand by and let her behave in such a way, and the children would be better off knowing they are in no way beholden to her for anything. He will do what he can for them, given the legal constraints on his own inheritance, but she is to leave Oxford and not interfere further with their upbringing or education. Lady Brightwell is aghast at her stepson for taking the side of a woman *like that* over someone of his own station. Stephen informs her that Mercy Timperleigh is more of a lady than Lady Brightwell will ever be—and he intends to confirm that conclusion to everyone by marrying Mercy and making *her* Lady Brightwell.

Shocked by Stephen's impassioned speech, Mercy is not certain how to react. But when Lady Brightwell turns her disdain upon Mercy once again, she responds to the pleading look in Stephen's eyes and, for the moment, makes it clear to Lady Brightwell that if Stephen intends to ask her to marry him, she will not be persuaded by the likes of Lady Brightwell out of making her own decision. Lady Brightwell leaves in a huff, calling for the carriage and for her maid to pack her belongings.

After assuring Isabel—clinging in an overjoyed hug to Mercy—and Dutton, who came down to see what the commotion was about, that they can return to school and the farm the next day, Stephen asks them to leave him to speak with Miss Timperleigh alone. Once they have left, Stephen takes Mercy's hands and begs her to forgive him for not being a stronger man, for not sending his stepmother away immediately when she began making demands on him and the children that he knew were not in their best interest. She forgives him, telling him that in her heart, she always believed him a better man than his actions made him look like and if she waited long enough, he would remember it, too. If she can forgive him, he continues, could she possibly love him—love him enough to marry him?

Mercy withdraws her hands from his and tells him the truth about herself—her family history, the shame attached to her wealth, and the reason she started the school. She believes that as a man of decency and honor, he should want nothing more to do with her now that he knows. Stephen asks her what she has done wrong that he should not love her. She is not certain she understands what he means. He tells her his story—of his father's and grandfather's philandering ways, of their many marriages to women who would bring wealth but not happiness to their homes. Of their underhanded business dealings and shady land deals that turned dozens of families off land that had been in their families for generations. He asks her if she should not love him because of the way his predecessors behaved and how they expanded their wealth. Of course not, she responds, he is his own man, and she has seen the good he has done in the community. So he asks her why she is any different, why she should not be considered free from the taint of her ancestors' chosen profession. She had no say in it, and what matters most is the kind of person she has become, and the lives she has impacted so positively over the years her school has been in operation.

The concepts of redemption and forgiveness that she's heard in church so often become clear to Mercy—it does not matter what happened in the past. It is now and the future that matter—how she chooses to live her life going forward, not living constantly with the shame of the past. So when Stephen asks her again if she will marry him, she says yes—she's never shied away from

scandal, and she knows this will definitely cause one. But when Stephen kisses her, all thoughts of the shame of the past and the social scandal to come disappear in favor of the present and allowing herself to feel the love for Stephen she's long held at bay come rushing in. The bliss of the moment is short-lived, though, as Dutton and Isabel burst in and attack them with hugs and kisses and excited chattering about how they'd made a pact to pray that Stephen and Mercy would fall in love and get married.

Mercy and Stephen decide to keep their engagement secret and wait until the summer break from school, and then to marry quietly, by special license, with only a few friends in attendance. Her own happiness allows Mercy to see even more clearly Frannie's heartbreak over Benedict's impending departure in a few months. But she cannot keep paying someone a salary who no longer works for her, and she has made it her practice to hire only women as teachers at the school. And even if she did hire Benedict, she could not pay him more than she pays the other teachers, which would not be enough for him to support a wife and continue to provide support for Frannie's family.

Shortly before the summer break, Stephen, on one of his many visits to the school, asks to speak privately with Mercy. He's had an idea and he wants to discuss it with her to see if she thinks it is possible. Inspired by her success of opening a school that accepts all, regardless of financial ability to pay tuition, he wants to endow a school for boys that will do the same. Mercy fully supports the idea and asks him if he can do it soon enough that he can offer a teaching position to Benedict. No, he responds, he cannot offer Benedict a teaching position. Before Mercy can protest, he explains why: He intends to make Benedict the headmaster of the school. Mercy tells him that it is the most perfect plan; and, after a kiss she knows they should not share in her office, she sends him off to tell Benedict.

Frannie is surprised when, at supper that evening, she is informed that she has a caller asking for her at the front door. She is dismayed when it turns out to be Benedict—and even more so when Mercy happens to walk through the main hall on the way to the dining room. After giving them a stern look, Mercy gives in to Benedict's pleading to have a private word with Frannie and offers to let them use her office—for ten minutes, no longer. Once alone, Benedict draws Frannie into his arms and, after a long kiss, tells her of the new school Lord Brightwell is starting and that he has asked Benedict to be the headmaster—at a salary that will not only enable Benedict and Frannie to marry, but allow them to continue to help her family until her siblings are old enough to help out as well. This time, before he can finish getting the question out, Frannie tells him emphatically that she will, most definitely, marry him.

Epilogue: The citizens of Oxford cannot decide if Lord Brightwell's engagement to a wealthy but untitled schoolmistress or if his determination to start a school for working-class boys is the bigger scandal. Never ones to bow to public sentiment, rather than holding a private, clandestine wedding as originally planned, Stephen and Mercy invite everyone—all of the children and parents from the school and their close friends—to share with them the happiest day of their lives.

FOLLOW THE HEART
Book 1 of the Great Exhibition Series
by Kaye Dacus

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

Prologue

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
November 23, 1850

Would the rustle of her skirts against the floorboards give her away?

Margaret Dearing lifted the burdensome bulk—pink silk-taffeta flounces over layers and layers of starched petticoats—and padded down the hall in her soft kid dancing slippers.

Christopher said he'd seen Father and Calvin Montgomery head toward Father's study.

Calvin wanted to ask for Father's blessing before he proposed to her. At least, Meg assumed so. Calvin had been courting her for almost a year now, and even though she could hardly tolerate being in the same room with him for the hour his calls lasted, at twenty-seven years old, she had no alternatives—for no other man had paid court to her in more than five years, despite the family's wealth and her large dowry. Calvin was wealthy and somewhat handsome, and his family owned hundreds of thousands of acres of land in western Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio. And the railroad company in which father had invested his fortune wanted to

lay new rail lines through it.

She squeezed through the narrow door of the storage room behind Father's study. She and Christopher discovered the hiding place many years ago.

Trying to mash her bell-shaped skirt flat, to keep it from catching on any of the old, framed paintings stacked against one wall, Meg sidled down the cramped space toward the thin beam of light that trickled through a crack in the wall. Too high to see through, it carried sound from the adjacent room quite well.

"You lied to me." Calvin's voice held a venom she'd never imagined the staid young man possessed.

"Lied?" Her father sound shocked—offended. "Is Meg not beautiful and accomplished? Intelligent and well capable of running a large household?"

Calvin snorted at her father's words. "When she keeps her mouth closed and her radical beliefs about abolition and voting rights for women behind her teeth, yes, she is passing pretty."

Meg stifled a gasp. Only passing pretty? Then she shrugged. She'd always known she'd never be a great beauty like her mother, God rest her soul.

"It is not of Miss Dearing that I speak," Calvin continued. "It is of you and the deception you used your daughter to try to draw me into."

Meg frowned. Father had nothing to do with Calvin and her meeting. Aunt Dolly arranged the introduction.

"I am certain I do not take your meaning," Father said, though Meg recognized the tremor of fear in his voice. It was the same as when he'd tried to convince seven-year-old Meg and four-year-old Christopher that their mother and newborn sister would be just fine—and the same as when he'd told them the next day of Mother and Emma's passing. Now, as then, her

heart caught in her throat.

“You may have everyone else in Philadelphia fooled, but we Montgomerys know better.”

Father laughed nervously. “I do not know to what rumors you have been listening—”

“They are no rumors. Your business partner has been jailed for failure to pay his debts. He has admitted the railroad speculation is bankrupt. And since you boasted to my father of how you invested all your wealth in the railroad, it is obvious you are also now penniless. And you intended for me to marry your spinster daughter—whom no man with use of his senses would have now, with no dowry—to save the railroad and your fortune.” A loud thump followed Calvin’s pronouncement as if he’d hit his fist against the table or desk. “I will not be your dupe.”

The thud of footsteps followed by the opening and slamming of the study door masked the whoosh of Meg’s skirts as her knees gave out and she sank to the floor.

Bankrupt? Penniless?

Surely not. Yet . . . the invitation list for tonight’s ball, in honor of Christopher’s graduation from Yale Law School and completion of his first apprenticeship in Boston, had been kept suspiciously small. Father had spent more time than usual away from the house in recent weeks. And when he returned home, his haggard appearance made her wonder if he was coming down with a chill.

Bankrupt. Penniless.

Meg pushed and pulled herself back up to her feet and squeezed through the small space and back out into the wide hallway. The *dark* hallway. Never before during a social event had so few candles been lit. And when had the exquisite Persian rug that had dressed the hall floor since before her birth been removed?

Though not a proper ballroom, the large room in the back of the house served the purpose

well, looking much larger tonight with the pared-down number of guests who had come to celebrate Christopher's homecoming.

Maud gave her a questioning look when she stepped into the room. Meg smiled at her stepmother, hoping to keep her believing everything was fine.

How soon would all of these people know that the Dearings were ruined? How soon would they turn their backs on Father and Maud, on Christopher and her? On their younger half-sisters? Once Philadelphia society discovered their new financial status, doors would be closed, connections severed. No one would want to be associated with a man who invested unwisely and lost everything.

Calvin had been correct—no man would want to marry her now, with no dowry.

Ignoring the cold of the late-autumn evening, Meg escaped through the back doors to the solitude and peace of her garden, its wildness beautiful even in the light of the half-moon.

Dear Lord, what am I supposed to do now?

Chapter One

SS Baltic
Off the Coast of England
January 18, 1851

“You should come back down to the saloon, where it’s warm.”

Meg did not turn from the vista of gray, choppy water in front of her at her brother’s voice. The last fourteen days seemed as nothing to Christopher—a lark, an adventure, not the exile Meg knew it to be.

An exile that came with an edict: Find someone wealthy to marry.

“I do not see the point in sitting in the grand saloon, pretending as though everything is fine when I know it is not. I have no talent at pretense.” Meg wrapped her thick woolen shawl closer about her head and shoulders at a gust of icy wind. “If any of those other passengers knew we were being sent to England as poor relations, they would shun us.”

Just as everyone in Philadelphia had. Word of Graham Dearing’s financial misfortune spread like last summer’s great fire that consumed the Vine Street Wharf—quickly and with

almost as much destructive force. Maud had even been too embarrassed to come down to the train station to see them off to New York two weeks ago—too afraid she would see someone she recognized on the street and not be acknowledged. Only Father had come with them to New York to say good-bye. And to remind Meg why she was being sent to her mother's cousin: to find and marry a fortune that would save their family.

“What's wrong with enjoying the trappings of money while we can?” Christopher sidled up beside her and leaned his forearms against the top railing. “Besides, from Cousin Robert's letter, it doesn't sound like he plans to treat us any differently than his own children, just because we're 'poor relations' as you put it.”

“But they'll know—*Sir* Robert and his daughters and whatever house staff they have—they'll know that we're completely dependent upon their charity. It will be written in their eyes every time they look at us. Every time we sit down at a meal with them. Every time they take us to a ball or party. We will be creating additional expense for them.” Meg trembled, though not just from the cold.

“You had no problem with our creating additional expense for Father when we lived at home. Why start worrying about it now?”

Meg finally turned to look—to gape—at her brother. Certainly he was younger than she, but only by three years. However, he was a qualified lawyer, a man full-grown at twenty-four years old. How could he speak so juvenily? Did he not realize what Father and Maud had done to afford to send them abroad? Had he not noticed the missing paintings, carpets, and silver—sold so Father could afford their passage? And, Meg had a suspicion, much of Maud's jewelry had met the same fate. Not to mention Father's sacrifice of pride in begging Mother's cousin, Sir Robert Buchanan, to take them in.

His light-brown eyes twinkled and danced. “Come on, Meg. I’ve heard that wealthy men can be plucked up at every store in London, so you’ve nothing to worry about. They will take one look at you and be lining up at Cousin Robert’s door to court you.”

Heat flared in her cheeks. “You can stop that nonsensical flattery right now, Christopher Dearing. It will get you nowhere.” But she couldn’t stop the smile that forced its way through her worry.

“It got me exactly what I wanted.” He put his arm around her shoulders and gave her a squeeze, then turned and forced her to walk back toward the stairs leading down to the grand saloon on the deck below. “We will be docking in a few hours, and you’ve been sulking the entire voyage. I insist you come below and enjoy yourself, just for a little while. Or pretend, on my account.”

Tiny snowflakes floated down and landed on Meg’s shawl and the mittened hand holding it to her chin. “Oh, all right. I will come. But only to get warm before we dock.”

It took her eyes several moments to adjust to the darkness of the stairwell. Reaching the grand saloon, Meg slowed and waited for Christopher to regain her side. Though not yet noon, the candles in the hanging lamps and wall sconces had been lit against the gloomy gray skies outside. The large, etched-glass columns in the middle of the room, which connected to the skylights above, brought in little light to reflect from the mirrors lining the walls between the doors to the sleeping cabins.

Several younger men, playing cards in the corner near the foot of the stairs, called out to Christopher, entreating him to come join the game.

He waved them off with a laugh and then offered Meg his arm. “Come, there are a few people who would like to speak to you.”

At the opposite end of the long room, partially hidden by one of the glass pillars from the card players near the stairs, sat a group of middle-aged women—and a few men. The rest of the men, she assumed, were in the smoking room.

“Ah, here is your beloved sister, Mr. Dearing.” An older lady patted the seat of the settee beside her. “Do, come sit, Miss Dearing.”

Meg removed her mittens and shawl and perched on the edge of the sofa. “Thank you, Mrs. Headington.”

“We were just speaking of the Great Exhibition.” Mrs. Headington’s clipped British accent made Meg more nervous than she usually felt before strangers.

“The Great Exhibition?” Meg folded the shawl and set it on her lap, where she rested her still-cold hands on it.

“Oh, Meg, I’ve told you all about it. Prince Albert’s Great Exhibition. It’s to be the largest display of industry and arts from all over the world.” Christopher’s eyes took on the same gleam as when he talked about laws governing the railroads. “Imagine—delegations are coming from as far as India, Algiers, and Australia and bringing displays of their industry and manufacturing, their artwork, and some are even bringing wild animals.”

He lost the dreamy expression for a moment. “And I have heard there will be agricultural exhibits, Meg. You may find some exotic plants for the garden.”

She smiled at the memory of her garden, her favorite place in the world—but melancholy and reality struck down the moment of joy. She might never see her garden again. For either she would marry some wealthy Englishman and stay in England for the rest of her life, or Father would be forced to sell the house.

Talk continued around her, rumors of fantastical exhibits and inventions supposedly

coming to this great world's fair, which would open in just under four months.

What would she be doing in four months? What about Father and Maud and the girls? She shook her head, trying to stave off the unwanted visions of her father, stepmother, and little sisters begging on the streets of Philadelphia.

The steward entered the saloon and called everyone to follow him in to luncheon. Christopher offered Meg his hand. When she gained her feet, he bent over, placing his mouth close to her ear, as if to place a kiss on her cheek.

“I know what you're thinking about. Don't let it get you down. Everything will be all right. You'll see.” He tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow and led her through the steward's pantry, where the beautiful silver plate winked in the candlelight, mocking her with its opulence.

Mrs. Headington invited them to sit at her table for the meal, and Meg sank gratefully into the chair Christopher held for her. Though Christopher knew almost all of the hundred or so first-class passengers traveling with them, Meg had kept to herself most of the voyage, unable to laugh and flirt and pretend the way Christopher could.

“You appear sad, Miss Dearing.” Mrs. Headington gave Meg a knowing look. “Is it a young man you have left back home who occupies your thoughts?”

Meg latched on to the question. “I had—have a suitor, ma'am. He courted me for over a year. I believed he would propose before. . . before Christopher and I left for England, but, alas, he did not.”

Christopher's jaw slackened, and Meg felt a kindling of amusement at his astonishment over her ability to spin the story in such a manner.

“I do not know what the fellow could have been thinking, allowing a woman like you to

slip away with no firm commitment. Does he realize how easily he could lose you to one of our fine English gentlemen?”

If only Mrs. Headington knew what Calvin Montgomery knew.

“If the blighter is not man enough to propose before you left, you should consider yourself free to accept other suitors, Miss Dearing.” Mrs. Headington raised her teacup in emphatic punctuation to her pronouncement, though speculation filled her gaze. “There are plenty of lords who will look beyond the lack of a title when it comes to a pretty face, so long as she has a substantial dowry.”

Meg hoped one of them would also look beyond the lack of the dowry. Rather than let Mrs. Headington’s unintentional disparagement send her back into the doldrums she’d been in since that awful night in November, Meg continued smiling and trying to engage in conversation with Mrs. Headington and the two couples who joined them at the marble-topped table.

Dowry or no dowry, she must and would find a wealthy husband. No matter how little she cared for him.

He hated traveling in the middle of winter.

Andrew Lawton drew his coat collar higher around the lower part of his face and pulled his hat down, wishing it would cover his ears, exposed as they were to the frigid winter air. Beyond the inn’s small front porch, snow blew and swirled on the indecisive wind—first toward, then away; left, then right. White dust skittered this way and that on the cobblestone street.

He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, longing for spring and the orderliness and

discipline he would bring to the gardens at Wakesdown Manor. He had the plans all laid out in his head—he needed only to commit them to paper. But instead, he was in Liverpool.

Who would choose to travel in the middle of January?

He'd only just managed to get away from Mr. Paxton and the Crystal Palace in time to catch the train from London to Liverpool yesterday. Nine hours on an unforgiving wooden seat in the unheated third-class car—not wanting to part with his hard-earned wages in order to ride in the warmth and comfort of second class or the luxury of first—had done his sore back no favors.

Rather than go to the expense of a hiring a cab for the mile walk to the train station, Andrew adjusted his collar again, hooked the handle of his valise over his left wrist, stuffed his gloved hands into his coat pockets, and leaned into the swirling wind with a brisk pace. The inn's distance from the station had made it economically attractive for the overnight stay—half the cost of those within a block or two of both the train station and the Mersey River ports, where everything and everyone came in and out of Liverpool.

By the time he reached his destination, the swirling white dust had turned to hard, pelting ice. According to the timetable written on the board in the ticket office, the *Baltic* docked ten minutes ago, shortly after three o'clock.

Catching the four o'clock train would mean arriving in Oxford after ten, but he desperately wanted to sleep in his own bed tonight, after so many nights away. He purchased three first-class tickets and tucked them into his waistcoat pocket, then went over to the telegraph office and wired Sir Robert so he would know to be expecting them tonight.

Back out on the platform, at the far end, the ferry carrying passengers from the steamship landed, and passengers disembarked while crew unloaded baggage through a lower-deck portal.

A young man and young woman traveling together. Americans. That was all Andrew knew. He scanned the passengers coming toward him.

Dismissing several older people and a couple of women traveling alone, Andrew released his breath in frustration.

“You look lost, young man.” A woman in a dress too tight and juvenile for her ample form and age stopped in front of him.

Andrew doffed his round-crowned bowler hat—and the woman frowned at it a moment. If Andrew had known he would make this side trip when he left Wakesdown, he would have packed his top hat, since the more serviceable bowler served to emphasize his working-class roots.

“Good afternoon, ma’am.”

“Mrs. Headington.”

“Andrew Lawton, ma’am.” Andrew tucked the hat under his elbow. “I am supposed to be meeting a Mr. and Miss Dearing. You do not, perhaps—”

“Christopher and Margaret. Of course I met them. It is hard not to get to know all the other passengers on a twelve-day voyage.”

Andrew inclined his head in relief. “Would you mind pointing them out to me?”

“No, not at all.” She turned and squinted at the ferry. “Yes, there they are. Good-looking fellow in the indigo coat. The young woman is, alas, much plainer than her brother. And,” Mrs. Headington leaned closer and dropped her voice, “if what I heard in Philadelphia is true, their father just lost all his considerable fortune in a railway speculation that failed. Poor dear. Only way she would have caught a husband at her age and with her lack of beauty would have been with a substantial dowry.”

Andrew scanned the passengers coming off the boat. There—a young man in a dark blue overcoat. But that could not be Christopher Dearing. For the woman beside the man in the blue coat was anything but plain. Not beautiful—not like Sir Robert’s daughters—but far from plain. A straw-brimmed bonnet hid her hair, but her brown cloak and shawl emphasized her bright blue eyes, even from this distance.

“Now, if you will excuse me, I must arrange my travel to London.”

Andrew gave the older woman a slight bow, then turned and stepped forward to meet the Dearings.

The taller man looked at Andrew in consternation when Andrew stepped into his path.

“Are you Mr. Dearing?” Andrew asked.

A smile replaced the frown. He stuck out his gloved hand, which Andrew shook in greeting. “Christopher Dearing.” He turned and pulled the young woman in the brown cloak forward, as she’d stopped a full pace behind him. “And this is my sister, Meg—Margaret.”

Margaret gave a slight curtsey, red tingeing her cheeks.

“Andrew Lawton.” He dragged his gaze from the woman—whose face was, perhaps, a bit too square for her to be considered truly handsome—back to her brother. “Sir Robert sends his apologies for not coming to meet you personally. But his youngest daughter fell ill two days ago and he did not want to leave her.” He glanced back at Margaret Dearing, to keep her from feeling excluded from the apology.

Concern flooded her striking blue eyes. “I hope it isn’t a grave illness.”

Andrew reminded himself that Miss Dearing was Sir Robert’s cousin and therefore no one who should garner his interest in any capacity other than as one of the masters—fortune or no. “When last Sir Robert wired, he did not believe it to be more than a fever due to the wet

winter we are having and Miss Florence's insistence on riding every day no matter what the weather."

Miss Dearing transferred a tapestry bag from one hand to the other.

"May I take that for you, miss?" Andrew pushed his hat back down on his head and reached for her bag.

"Oh, you don't—" But she let the protest die and handed him the bag. "We arranged with the steward to have our trunks transferred directly to the Oxford train. The schedule they had aboard ship indicated there is one that leaves at four o'clock."

"Yes, that is our train."

Miss Dearing looked up at her tall brother. "We should get our tickets now so that we are ready when it's time to board."

"No need." Andrew shifted her bag to his left hand with his and patted the waistcoat pocket through his frock and overcoat. "I have already taken care of the tickets. The train arrived just moments ago, so we can go find a compartment." He motioned with his free hand for Christopher and Meg to join him, and he led them down the platform.

"How long a trip is it from here to Oxford?" Christopher asked.

"About six hours, so long as the tracks are clear." Andrew looked past the roof of the station. Snow mixed with the icy precipitation from half an hour before, and it looked to start piling up quickly. Hopefully, traveling south and inland from here would mean away from the snow.

He found a compartment in the first class car, set his and Margaret's valises on the seat, and turned to assist her in. Once she was settled, he and Christopher lifted the small valises onto the shelf over the seat opposite Margaret, and then sat, facing her.

Margaret wrapped her shawl tighter around her shoulders and arms. Christopher leaned over and opened the grate of the small heater and stoked the glowing red coal. “I’d hoped maybe to see one of those new steam heaters I’ve been reading about—where steam heat is pumped from the fire in the locomotive throughout the cars in the train.”

“Have you an interest in the railway, Mr. Dearing?” Though he had no desire to make the sister feel left out of the conversation, Andrew was in great danger of allowing himself to stare at her now she was in such close proximity. Upon second thought, the squareness of her jaw did not detract from but added to the symmetry of her face. And above all else, Andrew preferred symmetry.

“Yes—my apprenticeship was with a firm that specializes in railway law. It’s fascinating to see how, just in a matter of ten or twenty years, the railroad has changed our way of life.” Christopher stretched his lanky frame into a position of repose, obviously accustomed to the comforts of first-class accommodations.

“I was twenty years old when the railroad came to Derby—my home—in the year ’40. It has quite changed the way of life for everyone there.” Andrew removed his hat and gloves and set them on the seat beside him.

Christopher’s eyes—brown, rather than blue like his sister’s—flashed with curiosity. “Really? I hardly remember when the first railroad opened in Philadelphia in 1832.”

“That’s because you were not quite six years old when it came.” Margaret’s soft voice reminded them of her presence—as if Andrew needed reminding. “I remember it well. Father took us to the parade and to see the locomotive take off. It was the first time we were all happy since Mother and Emma died two years before.” Margaret’s focus drifted far away along with her voice.

“I wish I could remember.” But whether it was the memory of the train or his mother Christopher longed for, Andrew could not be certain.

“Will you continue to read the law now you are here?” Andrew must try to keep the conversation on a less emotional tone—they had not even left the station yet.

Christopher nodded. “I brought some books with me to study, yes. And I expect I’ll pick up many more on the British legal system while I’m here.”

Andrew opened his mouth to ask if Christopher were joking with him—but then pressed his lips together. Perhaps they had a different term for it in America. “Will you seek out a lawyer to apprentice with here in England?”

“If Cousin Robert doesn’t mind, I might do that just to keep myself busy.”

Margaret made a sharp sound in the back of her throat.

“Oh, right, I’m supposed to call him *Sir* Robert until he gives us permission to call him *Cousin*.” Christopher winked at Andrew. “Though really, in this modern era, why anyone would stand on such formality is beyond me.”

Under the wide brim of her bonnet, Margaret rubbed her forehead with her fingertips, now freed from the mittens she’d worn earlier, and Andrew got a greater sense of the way of things. Upon first seeing the Dearings, he’d assumed Christopher the older and Margaret the younger—from the way Margaret hovered behind her brother, shy and unassuming, when they first met. Now, however, from Margaret’s motherly tone and nonverbal reprimand toward her brother—along with her memory of something that happened almost nineteen years ago—she was obviously the older sibling. And if Christopher had been six years old in 1832, that meant he was now around four- or five-and-twenty. Meaning Margaret must be in her late twenties, if not already near or at Andrew’s age of thirty.

That was what Mrs. Headington meant by “at her age.” Andrew was not certain how things were done in America, but here in England, Miss Dearing would be considered well past the prime marriageable age. And if the rumor Mrs. Headington heard was indeed true, without a substantial dowry, Margaret had no chance of marrying well.

For the first time in his life, Andrew felt true pity for another person. The last thing he’d promised his mother before she died of lung rot was that he would not end up like her—condemned to live out her days in the poor house. He’d worked hard to get where he was today, and he would do whatever it took to continue bettering himself and his condition.

He thanked God he had not been born a woman.

Chapter Two

Wakesdown Manor
Outside Oxford, England
January 18, 1851

Why had God made her be born a woman?

Honora Woodriff crumpled her brother's letter. Off in California, making a fortune selling supplies and dry goods to gold seekers. If only she'd been born a brother instead of a sister, he'd told her when she saw him off in London a year ago, he would have been happy to take her with him as his business partner.

Instead, she would have a life of solitude, caring for and teaching others' children.

She glanced at the clock on the mantel. Almost nine o'clock. Time for Florie's medicine. Tucking a stray wisp of hair back into the braids pinned low at her nape, Nora picked up the bottle the physician had left behind earlier this afternoon. At the door, she stopped, returned to her desk and picked up the book from the top of the pile there, and then started across the house

to her charge's bedroom.

Though Florie had been moved to the family wing of the manor house a few years ago, she would still be Nora's charge until her fifteenth birthday in August, when she would leave for school, relieving Nora of her responsibility—and her employment.

She paused, reaching out to steady herself against the wall. It was a miracle she had been hired as governess to Sir Robert Buchanan's two youngest children five years ago. Only twenty-one at the time and having taught for a scant eighteen months at Miss Timperleigh's Seminary for Young Ladies in Oxford, she had applied for the position at Miss Timperleigh's urging, who knew how overwhelmed Nora could get being surrounded day-in and day-out by the gaggle of girls at the school.

But despite Nora's certainty her letter would not garner a full reading, Sir Robert had interviewed and then hired her. Now, here she was, five years later, and preparing to send her last charge off to be finished at one of the finest schools in London.

And, five years later, the rumor still followed her whenever she went into town on her day off each week.

She straightened, squared her shoulders, and continued toward Florie's room. In eight months, the rumor would no longer matter.

Miss Florence Buchanan sat up in her bed, supported and surrounded by pillows. Her black hair hung in two limp braids, and bright red patches on her cheeks emphasized her pallor.

"I see the maids have got you set up and comfortable as a queen." Nora forced cheerfulness into her voice. "I brought your medicine. And I thought I'd check to see if you finished the book I brought earlier and wanted something else to read."

Florie waved a limp hand toward the book under the lamp on her bedside table. "I

finished it before supper. Where have you been, Nora? I've been frightfully bored."

Nora set the medicine bottle and spoon on the table, then perched on the edge of the high bed, the book she'd brought on her lap. "I am sorry. You should have had one of the maids fetch me, and I could have brought you something earlier."

Florie wrinkled her turned-up, freckled nose. "Please don't make me read anything for lessons while I am ill. I'd like to read novels—like *Udolpho* or maybe, do you think, perhaps, I might read *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*? I heard Edith and Dorcas discussing it when Dorcas was home last week, and they said it was scandalous."

Nora hid her smile behind an arch expression. "And you want to be scandalized?"

Florie nodded, eyes wide. "So may I read it?"

"That is a request I must clear with your father. Here is one you may read—and it might scandalize you, just a little bit." Nora handed over the book.

Florie angled the cover so that the light from the lamp glowed off the embossed title. "*Jane Eyre*. Oh, I've been longing to read this one, as well. Even more than the other. Thank you, Miss Woodriff." She snuggled down into the pillows and opened the book.

"Before you get lost in that . . ." Nora picked up the medicine bottle and measured out a spoonful.

Florie pinched her nose but took the medicine without protest, though she did give a delicate shudder after swallowing it. Nora handed her the glass of water the chambermaid had left on the bedside table. As soon as Nora took it back from her, Florie once again wiggled down into the pillows and started reading.

"I shall return in one hour to put out the lights and see to it that you go to sleep instead of staying up all night reading." Nora picked up the medicine bottle to take it back to her own

rooms. The doctor had warned Nora of the medicine's strength—and the possibility of coma or death if Florie accidentally took too much. Best not to leave it lying around.

“Miss Woodriff.”

She stopped and turned at the echoing voice of Wakesdown's housekeeper. “Yes, Mrs. Trevellick?”

The severe-looking woman gave her a kindly smile. “Young Mr. Lawton will be arriving with the master's American cousins in less than two hours. The staff will be lined up to greet them. I wanted to invite you to join us if you so desire.”

“To see the Americans up close to find out if they're as wild as Indians, as all the penny fantasticals make them out to be?”

Mrs. Trevellick chuckled. “Aye, more than few of the footmen and chambermaids read those stories and have spent the day leaping from one wild fancy to another of what the Americans will be like.”

Nora opened her mouth to decline the invitation, but stopped. She railed against the forced solitude of her position—not part of the family, but not part of the household staff, either—yet if she turned down Mrs. Trevellick's invitation, the solitude would be self-imposed. “I believe I will join you. I'll get a good look at these Americans so I can describe them in full to Miss Florence in the morning, since she will not be allowed to see them until her fever is gone, I would imagine.”

She and the housekeeper parted ways, and Nora returned to her chambers. The schoolroom seemed unusually dark and quiet tonight—as if Florie's absence the last two days had drained its essence.

Yes, she would see these American cousins of Sir Robert's. And, if she could work up

the courage and find the appropriate means to do so, she would ask these Americans about the need for governesses in America. For America, her brother wrote, was indeed the land where dreams came true—if only one had enough gumption to follow her heart.

For Christopher, the hours he spent on the train listening to Andrew Lawton talk about his work as an apprentice to Joseph Paxton, designer of the Crystal Palace, was the first time since leaving Philadelphia two weeks ago that he had not been almost utterly consumed by a sense of dread. He simply had a different way of dealing with it than Meg.

“So you came straight to Liverpool from London?” Christopher kept his voice low to keep from waking Meg. Only minutes after the train pulled out from the station, Meg fell asleep, rousing only briefly the few times the train stopped along the way.

Though three years his senior, Meg had always looked to him to take the lead socially, as he was far more gregarious and outgoing than she. Those who did not know the family well usually assumed Christopher to be the older and Meg the younger sibling. He hoped that would continue to be the case here in England so her age would not be an issue in trying to find a wealthy husband.

Christopher almost groaned at the thought. His poor sister—with as much as she wanted to help and protect the family, her only recourse now lay in finding a wealthy man to marry her and overlook the fact she had no dowry and the family had no money. And given that she'd had very few suitors over the years, even with the promise of a substantial dowry, Christopher prayed there would be at least one wealthy man in England who would be able to see beyond Margaret's

seemingly aloof and unsocial exterior to the warm, generous person underneath.

“Yes, Mr. Paxton recalled me to London a week ago to help transplant some of the trees and shrubs from inside the Crystal Palace to a hothouse nearby where they will be tended until the palace is dismantled when the Exhibition ends in October.” Over the past several hours, as Christopher and Andrew had talked and gotten to know each other, the Englishman had transformed from stiff and formal to relaxed and friendly. Christopher quite liked him, especially as he had firsthand knowledge of the goings on surrounding the Great Exhibition.

The train jolted and began slowing.

“This will be our stop, then.” Andrew stood, carefully, and shrugged back into his greatcoat.

Christopher was about to reach over and shake Meg awake, but withdrew his hand when her blue eyes opened and she blinked a few times to clear the sleep from them. “We’re pulling into Oxford station, Meg. Let me help you on with your coat.”

Unlike most of the women he’d seen on the boat, who seemed to believe their wide-skirted dresses, with as many petticoats under them as possible, were just perfect for traveling in close quarters, Meg’s brown traveling suit featured plenty of skirt, but not one that stood out from her two or three feet in all directions. She stood and turned so he could help her into the coat that had been designed to go with the suit—and to button over it close to her body, which Christopher was not so happy about. But once she topped it with the matching cloak and shawl, he felt much better about his sister’s appearance.

He hoped she had not brought with her the pink dress she’d worn to his homecoming ball two months ago. It had taken all his willpower to keep from dragging her upstairs and finding something to drape around her exposed shoulders and chest. That the cut of her down had been

more demure than any other woman's in attendance that night had not mattered. She was his sister, and he did not want men ogling her.

Leaving Meg to don her cape and wrap her shawl around her bonnet and neck, Christopher managed to get into his own coat; though with all three of them standing and wavering about as the train jerked and hissed its deceleration, elbowroom was limited. Finally, the train came to a stop, and someone on the platform called, "Oxford! Oxford station, end of the line."

"Mr. Dearing, if you would take your sister to wait in the station house, I will find Sir Robert's driver and we will see to the luggage." Andrew pressed the round bowler hat onto his head, nodded at Christopher, and touched the brim of his hat to Meg before opening the compartment door and disappearing into the dark.

Meg stared through the window at the dark platform beyond. "I'm sorry I left you to the entertainment of a stranger." She stifled a yawn behind her mittened hand. "I don't know why I should be so exhausted."

Christopher reached across the narrow compartment and settled his hands on her shoulders. "Most likely due to the fact you have not been sleeping but a few hours each night for the past couple of months."

Meg looked startled and then ashamed at Christopher's words. He gave her a quick hug. "Never you mind. If anyone has a right to lose sleep over this situation, it's you."

Moisture flooded Meg's eyes, but she quickly blinked it away. "Don't coddle me, Christopher. I'm not a child."

Taken somewhat aback by his sister's sharp tone, Christopher let his hands drop to his sides. Assuming she was grumpy because she was so tired, Christopher said no more but instead

turned to pull down their two valises, Andrew having taken his with him. After buttoning his coat and pulling on his gloves, Christopher opened the compartment door and, taking the handles of both bags with one hand, assisted Meg out onto the platform. Bitterly cold wind whipped around them, and Meg huddled close to him pulling her shawl up to cover her mouth and nose. He wrapped his arm around her and hurried her over toward the light beaming through the window of the station house.

Though they could not get close to the coal heater inside, the number of travelers in the room kept the room warm. Just when Christopher was thinking about getting impatient enough to go look for Andrew and the driver, the door opened and Andrew entered, coat collar held up to protect the bottom half of his face and ears.

“Mr. Dearing, Miss Dearing, the luggage is loaded and the coachman is eager to take us home to Wakesdown.” Andrew held the door for them and then led them to the carriage. Christopher was glad for his sake—and for Meg’s—that it was a closed coach, and hot bricks had been wrapped in the lap blankets to give them added warmth on the ride from Oxford out to their cousin’s country house.

With Meg leaning on his shoulder, and a long day of travel behind them, Christopher found himself fighting a stupor on the half hour drive from Oxford out to Wakesdown. When the carriage finally pulled to a stop, and Christopher climbed out, it was to find an obscuring snowfall blinding him to anything but the light coming through the open front door of the house. He turned to assist Meg down from the coach and then gave her the support of his arm to the front door.

“Margaret, Christopher, welcome to Wakesdown.” The man who greeted them had closed cropped curly hair of a silvery gray hue.

“Sir Robert, thank you so much for your kind invitation to let us visit with you.” Meg dipped into a courtesy without releasing Christopher’s arm.

Christopher had to admit that what Meg lacked in the ability to make small talk with strangers, she more than made up for with her ability at formal greetings. He removed his hat and bowed. “Yes, thank you, Sir Robert.”

Sir Robert, who looked at least ten years younger than Father—though Christopher knew that to be impossible—guffawed and raised his hand in protest. “Come, come. We’re not so formal when it is just family.” He stepped back and motioned for them to enter the house.

Meg released Christopher’s arm, lifted her skirts, and stepped over the threshold, Christopher following directly behind. He blinked against the bright, glittering lights of the dozens of candles in the chandelier overhead and the sconces that lined the walls of the wide entry hallway.

Also lining the walls of the wide hallway were dozens of men and women—the men in formal suits, the women with frilly white aprons over their black dresses. Christopher tried not to gape at the sheer number of staff. He had imagined Wakesdown to be similar in size and scope to their house in Philadelphia at which they employed—had once employed—only around a dozen.

Sir Robert stopped in front of two beautiful women with raven hair dressed in full-skirted colored gowns that marked them as part of the family, not staff.

“Edith, Dorcas, I’m pleased present our cousins, Christopher and Margaret.”

Though Christopher could admire Sir Robert’s daughters’ beauty, the cold haughtiness in their icy blue eyes kept him from finding either one the least bit attractive. He remembered to bow a split second after Meg began her curtsy. From the way the two sisters regarded him, his inability to find them worthy of his admiration would make no difference.

Sir Robert took a position beside his daughters. “I do apologize for the absence of my youngest daughter, Florence. But we expect the fever will be completely gone tomorrow, so you will get to meet her then. My oldest son and his new wife plan to come out from London in a few weeks to wait upon you. Indeed, the only family member you will most likely not get to meet is my second son, an army captain who is off making his fortune in India.”

For someone who went by the title *sir* and lived in a house that required such a large staff to run it, Robert Buchanan sure did smile a lot. Of course with everything he had, why shouldn't he smile?

The rest of the introductions passed in a blur. The butler, the housekeeper, the footman who would be serving as Christopher's valet, the maid who would be assisting Meg. What was not a blur though was the young woman in the simple gray dress standing near the housekeeper, hands folded demurely in front of her, her brown hair in a plain, almost severe style.

“And this is Miss Woodriff, Miss Florence's governess.”

Curiosity filled Miss Woodriff's golden brown eyes before she dropped them as she curtsied to Christopher and Meg. Though nowhere near as beautiful as Cousins Edith and Dorcas, or even as pretty as Meg, something about Miss Woodriff drew Christopher's attention like iron shavings to a magnet.

Meg was not the only one who had been sent to England to try to marry money. But if Christopher could parlay his education and work experience from his apprenticeship in to finding a job here, he could make his own money instead of trying to marry it.

He looked around the hall but didn't see Andrew Lawton anywhere. Tomorrow, Christopher would seek him out. Because from what he had learned in the last two months, Andrew's connection with Joseph Paxton could be just what Christopher needed.

Chapter Three

Meg lay still, her eyes closed. Surely it had all been a dream. A vivid, horrible dream. Calvin. The tense months in which precious items disappeared from the house. The train ride to New York. Twelve days on a steamship surrounded by strangers. Another train ride. And more strangers.

A soft whoosh preceded a clatter. Meg's eyes popped open and she sat up in bed, heart pounding.

"I'm so sorry, miss." A slender blonde woman in a gray dress and white apron adjusted the fire screen. "I didn't mean to wake you."

No. It had most definitely not been a dream. Meg swallowed past the thickness in her throat. "I was already awake." She knew she'd met this young woman last night, but everything blurred in her mind. "I'm sorry, I've forgotten your name."

The maid dipped a quick curtsy. “Joan, miss. I’m to be your lady’s maid while you’re here. Since I hadn’t heard from you by the time the rest of the family had breakfasted, I thought I’d better come up and make sure you knew where the yank cord is for the bell.”

Joan approached the bed and pointed to a long, narrow strip of tapestry cloth with a gold silk tassel hanging from the end. “From now on, you just give this a yank and I’ll know when you’re up and ready for your breakfast.”

“Ready for my. . .?” Meg’s gaze followed the maid back to the table in front of an enormous paned window.

Joan turned. “Do you want to have it in bed or sitting here?”

Except for when she was too ill to move, Meg had never been indulged with taking breakfast in bed. “I’ll sit at the table, thank you.” She reached for the dressing gown draped across the foot of the bed and pulled it on before turning and sliding off the high bed. Shivering, she slipped her feet into the bed shoes Ada, the middle of her three younger half-sisters, had embroidered for her Christmas present.

“I’ve stoked the fire, miss, so it should be toasty here soon enough.” Joan indicated the chair closest to the hearth that surrounded a fireplace so large, Meg’s entire bedstead at home would have fit into it.

Everything about Wakesdown Manor seemed oversized. And Meg had never felt more insignificant in her life.

She choked down the food without tasting it as Joan bustled about the room, making the bed, adding more wood to the sluggish fire, and straightening the toiletries Meg had left scattered on the vanity last night as she’d pulled them out of her valise in the search for her sleeping gown.

“Shall I unpack your trunk for you, Miss Dearing?” Joan stood at the end of the bed,

hands folded at her waist—though the position of inactivity seemed unfamiliar to her.

“No, I—” Meg closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *When in Rome . . .* “Yes, Joan, I would appreciate that.”

Joan seemed pleased by Meg’s change of heart—and to have something to busy her hands with.

“How long have you worked here, Joan?” Meg leaned against the oval cushion on the back of the chair and sipped the dark tea. She preferred coffee in the morning, but this tea was almost as strong.

“Me, miss? I started here as a between maid when I was thirteen.” Joan pulled one of Meg’s gowns out of the tissue paper layered between them and shook it out.

“A between maid?”

“Working either in the kitchens or house as needed. Then a parlor maid, and now a chambermaid. Though, with you here, now I’m acting as a lady’s maid. That’s rising pretty smartly through the ranks in ten years, my ma would say.” Joan spread the dress on the freshly made bed and reached for another.

“Do your parents live nearby?”

Joan had a soft, tinkling laugh that made Meg feel close to smiling for the first time in days—months. “Oh, no, miss. Ma’s a lady’s maid for a countess over in Ipswich. My pa’s the butler for a marquess in Norwich.”

Meg poured another cup of tea, frowning. “Is everyone in your family a—” She couldn’t bring herself to say the word *servant*.

“In service? Oh, aye, miss. Me, and my two brothers, as well. Ma and Pa used to work in the same house—that’s how they managed to marry and have the three of us. But then the old

baron died and the heir sent all of his uncle's servants away so he could bring in his own people. We all had to take work wherever we could."

Meg had so many more questions she wanted to ask, but asking how much the maid earned and how hard it was to get a position in a large household like this would probably be better kept for another day—once she'd gotten to know Joan better and knew if she could trust her to keep her confidences. For, if worse came to worst, Meg could always try to find work.

"This one should do quite nicely." Joan held up a dark purple day-dress. "Yes, I believe you will look quite fine in it when receiving callers, miss."

Meg dragged her mind out of the mire of worry about the family's financial problems. "Callers?"

"Yes. There's many hereabouts who will want to come by and see the newly arrived Americans. And though Miss Buchanan will turn most of them away, there may be one or two she will want to see, so you'd best be prepared."

After a quick sojourn behind the dressing screen with a washcloth and the basin of water Joan had heated beside the fire, Meg allowed herself to be corseted and dressed by a young woman who was, in Meg's estimation, better off than Meg herself. At least Joan knew what her future held—and that she had a way of earning her own living. Marrying money was a much riskier prospect.

After being layered into her undergarments, Meg sat at the vanity and tried to feign interest as Joan chattered about her family and their places of service while she brushed, twirled, and pinned Meg's hair.

"Beautiful hair you have, miss. The color of bronze, it is." Joan smoothed the wings that swept down to cover the tops of Meg's ears before pulling up again into the cluster of ringlets

she'd arranged at the back of Meg's head.

"Thank you, Joan." The hairstyle was much fancier than the braids Meg usually wore pinned in a thick coil between her crown and nape. But, again, she reminded herself that things were done differently here.

Joan helped her into the gown, remarking on the exquisite lace collar, the fine stitching of the gathers of the full skirt, and the beautiful slope of Meg's shoulders, emphasized by the dropped seams of the bell-shaped sleeves. Meg adjusted the chiffon under-sleeves so the cuffs hit the base of her hand.

"Right pretty you look, miss." Joan turned her toward the freestanding mirror near the dressing screen.

Meg tried to judge herself objectively, but turned away from the mirror with the lingering impression of a very plain girl trying too hard to look beautiful.

"It looks to be a pretty day today. Perhaps after tea, you might want to take a walk in the gardens." Joan picked up the dresses from the bed, draping one after the other over her long, slim arm.

"The gardens?" Meg's heart lifted. Yes, outside, in nature. That was where she would find solace, comfort, and peace. "I think that would be lovely."

"Then I'll have your coat and winter boots ready for you, miss." Joan headed toward the door with Meg's wardrobe wrapped in her arms. "I'll take these downstairs now to be pressed."

"Thank you again, Joan." She followed the maid toward the door.

"No need to thank me, miss." Joan opened the door and started down the hallway, then paused and turned back toward Meg. "If you'll take the main stairs down that way"—she pointed the opposite direction from where she'd been headed—"you'll find yourself in the entry hall.

The drawing room is directly opposite the foot of the stairs. That's where you'll find Miss Buchanan."

"Thank you, Joan."

Joan grinned and shook her head, but didn't tell Meg not to thank her this time.

Not wanting to draw attention to herself, Meg stayed on the soft toes of her shoes, to keep the clack of the heels from echoing down the wide stone staircase. The entry hall at the bottom soared above her and spread out, looking twice as large as it had in the shadowy candlelight last night.

Meg stopped at the bottom of the stairs and drew a deep breath—as deep as she could with how tight Joan had pulled her corset. She closed her eyes and pictured herself in her garden in the middle of the spring bloom. Calm crept in like ivy and wrapped around the worries and fears that had taken root the last two months. She wasn't certain what her future held, only that she would never find a husband if she continued on in the withdrawn and sulking manner she'd exhibited since learning of the family's financial ruin.

Raising her chin and forcing herself to smile, she crossed the great hall to the room directly opposite the foot of the stairs.

The drawing room reminded Meg forcefully of the enormous lobby of the hotel in New York where she, Christopher, and Father had stayed the night before boarding the ship. She clung to the thin vines of calmness and continued into the room, with only a small hesitation in her gait.

The two black-haired young ladies she'd met last night sat in the seating cluster near one of the two fireplaces in the room, along with two women in bonnets and shawls.

"And here is our cousin, Miss Dearing." Miss Buchanan's voice rose above the soft din

of conversation.

Meg stopped when the two visitors turned to gape at her. She curtsied and folded her hands at her waist, proud of herself for not wringing them.

Miss Buchanan made the introduction of the two women—one the wife of an important local squire and the other the wife of a dean at the university in Oxford. Meg repeated their names to herself as she took the empty chair beside Miss Dorcas.

The voyage over had prepared Meg for the rapid-fire questions that now came her way. Who was her family? What was life like in Philadelphia? Did they still have trouble with the Indians? Had she ever seen a city like Liverpool or Oxford before?

“I did not get to see much of Oxford last night, as it was very late when the train arrived.” Meg ran a finger down one of the wide openwork stripes of her dark purple wool skirt. “I understand that it is much smaller than Philadelphia, though, so it might take me some time to get used to living in more of a rural setting.”

From the way the squire’s wife’s lips disappeared, she did not like to think of Oxford as rural. Meg hid her amusement. She would be cautious and not shame her cousins by insulting Oxford . . . or England. But she would not sit here and let anyone belittle her beloved Philadelphia.

After that, the two visitors turned their attentions back to Edith and Dorcas—effectively ignoring Meg. Which she much preferred.

She stood when the two visitors took their leave. As soon as they disappeared through the wide doorway, Dorcas turned and took hold of Meg’s arm.

Meg’s heart pounded, but she steeled herself for the coming reprimand and vowed she would not betray any emotion other than remorse.

“Rural?” A wide smile brought a sparkle to Dorcas’s pale blue eyes. “Well met, Cousin Margaret—may I call you Meg as your brother does? I would not have sat there so long as you did and listened to those women insult my homeland that way. They know Philadelphia is not out in the middle of the wilderness—as we all do. Of course, you will now have a reputation for impertinence amongst all their friends.”

Meg’s growing pleasure waned. “Oh—I did not want to do anything that would tarnish—this is terrible!”

Dorcas laughed. “No, it is not. The social circle those two . . . ladies rule over is not one that should be of any concern to you.”

“Dorcas, do not go filling our cousin’s head with your own radical nonsense.” Edith adjusted the fire screen and then picked up a book from the small lamp table beside her chair. “Margaret, do not worry about today’s interview. You will have many more opportunities to establish that you are not”—Edith shot an icy glare at her younger sister—“a radical like Dorcas.”

Even though she knew she must be several years older than Edith, Meg suddenly felt like a sixteen-year-old debutante once again, and vowed to keep her opinions to herself. During the next two calls, she did just that, offering up no more than general information and pleasant nothings to add to the conversation.

After the final callers left, Dorcas and Edith excused themselves. Meg returned to her room for her coat, bonnet, and stout boots and escaped to the beckoning sunlight outside. The only door she knew of was the front. The footman who opened it for her bowed, but not before she glimpsed the curiosity in his eyes.

The gardens would most likely be behind the house. And just walking around the house

proved a great task. Finally, she found a gap in the tall shrub row she'd been following and entered the garden. The gravel path split to go around a fallow fountain, and Meg took the right fork.

The footpath led her into a setting that reminded her of Fairmount Park, though this park had the misfortune of too much attention from shears and clippers.

Farther down the path, Meg saw something that made her forget the last few hours. A gloriously overgrown boxwood bush, bright green against the winter browns surrounding it, lay on its side, ignominiously uprooted.

She knelt and, not caring that it would ruin her mittens, pulled the cold soil apart and worked to set the three-foot shrub upright, back in its rightful place again.

“I do beg your pardon, but may I ask what you think you are doing?”

The male voice so startled her, she lost her balance and ended up sitting in the pile of muddy dirt she'd been trying to push over the shrub's roots. Above her, the light from the winter sun shining behind him, creating a halo effect to his crown of brown curls, stood one of the most handsome men she'd ever seen.

Though vaguely familiar, his work clothes and heavy boots—and the long-handled spade on which he leaned—confused her as to how she would have met this man. He reached out his free hand toward her.

And Meg suddenly remembered him. “Mr. Lawton?”

“Miss Dearing. Do let me help you up.” He wiggled his gloved fingers.

As he was wearing work gloves, Meg didn't bother removing her soiled mitten before taking his hand. “Thank you.”

Once back on her feet, she turned to examine the damage to her clothing. Her coat had

protected the gown, thankfully, and the mud barely showed against the dark brown wool.

“Is there a reason why you decided to re-plant the shrub I just dug up?” Andrew Lawton leaned against the spade handle again. His eyes encompassed the colors of their surroundings—green and brown and golden, all at the same time.

Meg wanted to sigh in appreciation of his appearance, but stopped herself with a reminder of why she was here, seeing him. If he worked here as a laborer, she could have no interest in him. “I saw that the bush had fallen over, so I was putting it back into the earth—you dug it up? Why?”

Andrew’s expression turned pitying. “I dug it up because it is an eyesore, and it has no place in the plan I have for this area of the new garden.”

“But . . .” Meg glanced around the otherwise pristine area. “It is rough and wild-looking, and it adds character and charm this garden desperately needs.”

She turned back to Andrew when he made a choking sound. Those green-brown-gold eyes danced with amusement now, and Meg felt none of it. He was laughing at her.

“Miss Dearing, you are not a gardener, so you do not understand. It is not roughness or wildness that makes a beautiful garden. It is through the control, the discipline, of nature that true beauty is achieved.” Pity laced his deep voice.

Meg crossed her arms—no longer feeling the need to control her tongue or hide her true opinions. “Mr. Lawton, I will thank you to not make assumptions about me and what I do and do not understand. Nature was not meant to be controlled or disciplined. True beauty comes from allowing nature to take its own course, to be what God intended it to be.”

But Andrew kept smiling at her in that infuriatingly superior way. He straightened and hefted the spade over his shoulder. “And that, Miss Dearing, is the very attitude that leads to

overgrowth and destruction in nature—and chaos and ill discipline in people.” He inclined his head and walked away, whistling.

Meg stared after him, speechless. Had he just called her chaotic and ill disciplined? She took a few steps after him—desperate to ask him to clarify—but two other men approached him and she stopped.

She looked down at the shrub, which had started falling over again. With determination, she crouched and shoved as much of the dirt Andrew Lawton had dug up back over the shrub’s roots, and pounded it back into the hole with all of her frustration.

Next time she saw Andrew Lawton, she would be the one to walk away whistling. Just see if she didn’t.