

## The Bluestocking and the Blueblood

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## ***Chapter 1***



***This*** certainly wasn't the trip I'd planned on.

Engine problems delayed my flight into Manchester. On top of that, the rental company gave away my luxury car and I was left with something that looked like a toy. Worst of all, this honeymoon had turned into a trip for one.

At least the cottage was everything I'd imagined.

I stood for a moment in the waning light, admiring what I could see of it. White stucco

walls seemed to almost glimmer in the fading light. Roses climbed the trellis and onto the slanted, thatched roof. Their sweet fragrance reached me, for a moment overpowering the scents of exhaust and travel grime that clung to me.

Sighing, I hefted my bookbag full of romance novels and hooked it over my shoulder. I'd been planning this trip for six months. I should be happy. I was happy. So why did this ugly feeling of disappointment rising in my throat make me want to cry?

Because I had dreamed it differently?

Who needed a man to carry the luggage, anyway?

It took some effort, but I wrested my suitcase from the miniature trunk –wasn't it called something else here in the U.K.? – and trudged up the walk. As I juggled my luggage and tried to find the key that had disappeared into the abyss of my backpack, my cell phone

began playing the Oklahoma State University fight song.

“Not now,” I mumbled. For a nanosecond I considered who it could be. I’d called Aunt Donna from the airport earlier and promised to call again tomorrow. Considering that my best friend had run off with my now ex-fiancé a week before the wedding, hearing from either of them was out of the question. That left only one person.

Erik.

I ignored the ringing phone and kept digging. I knew what Erik wanted, and it wasn’t something I could give, not right now. I could still feel his hug as he had dropped me off at the airport in Oklahoma City. “Find a way to forgive them,” he’d whispered against my temple. “Don’t let your hurt turn into bitterness.” I shook my head to dispel the memory and the pinprick of guilt that it brought with it. I didn’t want to think about the people or the God

who'd betrayed me.

Finally, my fingers closed around the key. "Aha"ing with triumph, I stuffed it into the lock.

The inside of my dream cottage was as beautiful as the outside. Warm wood floors showed off a recent buff job. An oversized sofa and chair created a perfect reading corner in front of the fireplace, while the other half of the room made up a kitchenette and small dining area. Everything about it spelled warmth and promised relaxation. It was everything I'd dreamed of.

Before Jared shattered my heart.

Too keyed up to sleep yet, I dumped my stuff on the king-sized bed just around the corner from the fireplace and patted myself on the back when I didn't tear up thinking about being in it alone tonight.

A quick apple-snack in the stocked kitchenette was all I needed before I headed out the back door. A bark, almost a yelp, was the

only sound in the twilight stillness and made me pause on the step. It had sounded close.

“Here, boy.”

I don't know what made me hesitate, but I felt a peculiar reluctance to step out into the gathering darkness. The familiar, heady scent of roses swirled around me. Decaying leaves rustled in a random dance, provoked by the light breeze that tickled my bare arms. I could barely see the outline of the gate that led to the garden.

When the yelp came again, I imagined the poor dog caught in a fence or lying in the street, hurt. That wouldn't do. Not when I could do something about it.

Ignoring the peculiar quivering in my stomach that warned me to go back inside, I stepped from the stoop and pushed through the garden gate.

As soon as I moved through it, dizziness engulfed me. A swarm of bees thrummed inside

my head and my limbs felt as if an anvil weighted each appendage down. My heart fluttered erratically against my ribcage. Blackness took over the edge of my vision and then I was falling, falling...



The sound of unfamiliar voices roused me. For a moment, I couldn't place where I was. My head throbbed, making it doubly hard to understand the thick British accents. I strained my ears anyway.

“We’ve naught left to trade, miss.”

“There has to be something.” A clanging noise, like heavy metal pots being thrown together, almost made me cry out. “Where is the little jar we hid back here?”

“Gone. It’s all gone. There’s naught but the locket Miss Matilda kept and she won’t give it up.”

In my sleep-dulled state, I couldn't

understand their conversation. Who were the two women? How did they know my name?

And why did I taste dirt?

I cracked open my eyes to dappled sunlight shining directly in them. Quickly, I shut them again. But not before I'd seen the rose garden that surrounded me.

With a groan, I remembered coming outside in the near-dark last night. I must have fainted or something, and spent the night out here. And I had been planning to get full enjoyment out of that king-sized bed, too.

A shiver crawled up my spine, reminding me that I hadn't been dressed for a night out in the elements. My jeans and t-shirt weren't much insulation against the cold creeping from the ground into my bones. Maybe that's why my entire body ached. Or maybe I was just getting older and needed a mattress.

When I tried to sit up, I found my legs caught in a net. I looked down to find that I

wasn't wearing jeans after all, but some long nightgown that I didn't remember putting on last night.

“What the—”

I struggled with the gown that seemed to be longer than I was tall and finally managed to get to my feet. Too bad my movements and noise had attracted notice.

Two women, one who looked to be about my age and the other only in her teens, appeared on the cottage's back stoop and gaped at me over the hedge of roses.

“What are you doing in my rental?” Thankfully my mouth was functioning better than the rest of me. I cleared my throat, embarrassed. “I mean, who are you? And what are you doing in my rental?” There. Hopefully the firmness in my voice would scare them off before I had to call the cops. Did they even have 911 in the United Kingdom?

The older woman, whose features seemed

vaguely familiar to me, glared at me and turned to go back inside. Whoa. That was some major fury steaming from her eyes.

Stepping down to my level, the younger woman approached me, concern wrinkling her brow. “Miss Matilda, what are you doing outside at this hour? And without a wrap? Why, you’ll catch your death of cold.”

She reached for me, as if to pull me inside with her. I yanked my arm out of her reach.

“How do you know my name?”

Surprise flickered over her face for a moment, but it quickly disappeared and her brown eyes darkened. With sadness? “Why don’t ya go back to bed, miss? It’s early yet.”

She reached for me again. Distracted by a remembrance of the big bed I’d left behind last night, I wasn’t as fast to pull away this time. She was stronger than her thin frame suggested, easily propelling me toward the cottage. I dug in my heels.

“Who are you?” I asked again, as she pushed me through the door. Instant surprise overtook me, and I froze.

The interior of the cottage had morphed from the warm ambiance I remembered to something more like a living history museum.

Where had all the sparkling appliances gone?

A rough wooden table and chairs almost touched the back of a sofa, but not the one I’d seen last night. This one was covered in an awful striped pattern and looked old-fashioned and uncomfortable. Somehow, a wall had been erected to block off the kitchenette.

The furious woman sat at the table with papers strewn over almost the entire surface. She chewed her lip, but when I came in the door her face blanked, going completely neutral.

Again, I was struck by a feeling that I knew her from somewhere. I couldn’t place her dirty-blond hair or blue eyes, but maybe I’d seen her

last night in my hurry to get away from the bustling airport and to my country cottage.

That two strangers were invading right now.

“Who are you?” The question was beginning to feel redundant.

The younger girl squeezed my arm before letting go and moving to stir the fire that danced merrily in the fireplace. “Miss Matilda, I’ve been serving your family for years now. Don’t you remember, I styled your hair for the Rochdale Ball, where you met—” She broke off and looked chagrined, before quickly turning back to the fire.

Serving my family? The closest thing to a servant Aunt Donna and I had been able to afford was Eddie, who mowed our yard every other week during the summer. This wisp of a girl definitely didn’t look like Eddie.

I glanced around the room again, a ball of panic rising in my throat. “What happened in

here? Where did all the nice things go?” There was no way these two women were strong enough to steal the appliances and furniture. Did they have help? I glanced around, but the three of us seemed to be the only ones here.

Now the woman at the table sighed. She kept her eyes on the papers in front of her. “I dare say you are aware that we’ve been trading the candlesticks and china for some time now.”

“What?” Who cared about plates and candles? “I’m talking about the dishwasher, the couch, all the appliances. Where did you put them?”

She looked up, her eyes flashing. “Matilda, you know very well that we have not had a dishwasher in ages. We’ve had no servants save Ruth for more than three years.”

I began to feel lightheaded. Was I speaking a foreign language or something? This time, I spoke slowly so she would be able to understand. “I want to know where the

dishwasher,” I pointed to the place it stood last night, “stove,” I wasn’t sure you could call the black wrought iron thing I pointed at a stove but I went with it, “and refrigerator are. You can keep the microwave for all I care.”

She shook her head, her lips compressing until they were white, and began to pore over the papers again. Her nonchalance bothered me more than I cared to admit. She was sitting in my cottage, after all! And acting like she owned the place.

“Is this a scam?” My voice rose. I couldn’t help it. I watched her for signs discomfort while she pretended to ignore me. “Because I don’t have any money. I’m a veterinary student. Well, I was – before...”

The woman stood up. For the first time, I noticed how drawn and pale her face was. Her shoulders were slightly hunched, as if she bore the weight of the world on them.

“You seem a bit addled this morning.

Perhaps you should rest for a bit. In fact, I insist upon it.”

“I don’t want to rest. I want to know what’s going on!”

Ruth, who'd been silently picking up the worn rag rugs from the floor, looked up from her stooped position. “Forgive me, miss, but you shouldn’t talk to your sister that way. You two have only each other left and you shouldn’t bicker.”

Sister?