

A woman with reddish-brown hair and blue eyes, wearing a blue dress with a white lace collar, is sitting in a garden. The background is a lush green garden with yellow and pink flowers. The title 'A Summer Romance' is written in large, elegant, yellow cursive script across the middle of the image. The author's name 'SARA BENNETT' is at the bottom in large, white, serif capital letters. In the top right corner, the series title 'THE Starlings OF STARLING HALL' and 'BOOK TWO' are written in a mix of cursive and serif fonts, enclosed in a decorative frame.

THE
Starlings
OF
STARLING HALL
BOOK TWO

A Summer Romance

"Get in the coach, Miss Starling.

You are coming with me to London so
that I can keep a close watch on you."

SARA
BENNETT

A Summer Romance

A SUMMER ROMANCE
SARA BENNETT
THE STARLINGS OF STARLING HALL BOOK #2

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ROLOGUE

Spring, 1838, the Norris Ball, Barton Manor

Francis spun Breana around and around until she was quite giddy. This was the best ball she had ever been to, and she desperately didn't want to leave. All too soon Abby would be seeking her out to tell her they must go, and Breana would beg her not yet, just a little longer, *please*.

"I don't want to go home!" she declared, throwing her head back so that the chandelier and its candles spun above her. Francis's blue eyes shone, and his grin was wicked. He stopped her from spinning and held her steady when she wobbled a little. "I don't want you to either," he said. "Perhaps you should hide from your sister and I'll tell her I have no idea where you are."

Breana wondered if he was serious. Could she? He was so handsome and charming, and she desperately wanted him to kiss her. She had never been kissed. At least, not the sort she imagined Francis was capable of.

"Would *you* come and find me?" she asked playfully. "I would not want to stay hidden forever." "I would find you," he assured her. Francis leaned in closer. "Especially if you go and hide in the library. There's a deep cupboard there that Father uses for his treasures. If you hide there, then I'll know where to look, won't I?"

Breana was tempted to ask if he would kiss her when he found her, but that was too forward, even for her. Instead, she gave him a flirtatious smile and slipped through the mob of guests toward the library.

The library turned out to be a gloomy sort of room, with shadows in the corners and a strong, lingering scent of leather and tobacco. There were mounted animal heads on the walls, which she found distasteful, and piles of books that looked as if they hadn't been opened in a very long time. She couldn't imagine many people would search for her here.

She found the cupboard Francis had mentioned and opened the door. The space inside was large, and although it had shelving upon which rested various vases and statues—Mr. Norris's treasures, no doubt—there was room to stand. One of the statues was of a woman's face, whose wild hair was in fact tangled with snakes. Breana shivered, but she wasn't a faint-hearted girl, so she stepped in and closed the door. The narrow crack between the door and the jamb didn't give much light, making the place even gloomier.

She waited for Francis nervously, but as the minutes ticked by she began to wonder if he had been teasing her. He was taking such a long time, and it was creepy in here. There were all sorts of creaks, and she was beginning to wonder if the woman with serpents for hair was watching her. Breana was just about to give up and return to the ballroom, where everyone was no doubt having *fun*, when she heard the door to the library open and then close.

She froze, holding her breath, waiting. For a moment there was no other sound, then footsteps began to move further into the room.

Was it Mr. Norris, come to smoke his pipe and read his books? What if he stayed there for hours and hours? She wondered what would be worse, being trapped here in the cupboard, or being discovered by an angry Mr. Norris. At least she was well concealed.

She looked down and realised that a fold of her dress had been caught *outside* the door. It must have happened when she slipped inside the cupboard, and now the swath of cloth might be perfectly visible to whoever was in the library.

She gave her dress a desperate little tug, but it was stuck fast, and she couldn't open the door and free herself without being noticed. Her heart began to beat faster, as it seemed to her that the footsteps were now approaching the cupboard. Breana had gone from hoping to be found as soon as possible, to no longer wanting to be found at all. She shrank further into the back and held her breath.

The door was flung open.

She gave a squeak of fright, blinking at the dark shape that loomed in the doorway, but before she could make it out, the door was closed again. Whoever had found her was now in here with her.

She might have screamed, but she almost immediately recognised the cologne the person was wearing. It was made up of bergamot and clove and jasmine. Francis wore that cologne!

Relief left her dizzy.

"Oh, I am so glad you found me!" she cried out. Then, *because* when she was nervous she always said the first thing that came into her head, "Are you going to kiss me?"

She stared at the dark shape of his head—stooped slightly due to the cupboard ceiling—but it was impossible to see his features and read his expression.

When he didn't answer, she became nervous again, and began to wish herself somewhere else. But then he wrapped his arms about her and bent his head toward her. His lips brushed hers softly, making her gasp, and then began to kiss her more purposefully. The darkness made everything feel more intense. She felt the sweep of his tongue and the masterful way he tilted her head so that he could delve more easily into her mouth.

It was the sort of kiss she had only ever imagined. It was certainly not the sweet, safe kiss she had thought would be her first. This was hot and dizzying, as though she were caught in the midst of a fire storm. She sagged against him, suddenly weak at the knees.

His strong hands held her up, and warmed her through her thin dress. She suspected he was going to apologise and let her go. But Breana didn't want that. She wanted more.

She lunged at him, wrapping her arms around his neck—which seemed further to reach than she had expected—and found his mouth after a few awkward moments.

He was smiling.

She tried to kiss him in the same way he had kissed her, and he must have appreciated her efforts because he immediately began to kiss her back. Hot, passionate kisses. Breana wasn't sure what would have happened next—she hadn't thought that far, nor expected to have to—but he let her go.

Before she could say a word, the door opened and quickly closed again. Once more, she was alone.

It took her a while to recover from the experience. All of her senses had heightened—her skin was tingling, and the scent of his cologne filled her head, and the muffled pounding of her heart was in her ears. The minutes ticked by until eventually she felt calm enough to leave the cupboard and make her way back to the ballroom.

Immediately her elder sister Abby took hold of her arm to prevent her from escaping.

“Where have you been, Breana? I looked everywhere for you.” Her eyes narrowed. “I do hope you have not been up to any mischief.”

Breana tried to appear as innocent as possible.

Abby sighed, and then announced in a firm voice that they were leaving. As they said their goodbyes to Mr. and Mrs. Norris, Breana looked anxiously over her shoulder, looking for Francis, wanting to keep that connection between them just one second longer.

But he was nowhere in sight. It was his brother Theodore who caught her gaze. He was frowning, as usual, as if she had done something wrong. She always felt uncomfortable when he looked at her like that, and she quickly looked away.

Abby and Breana took their coach home to Starling Hall. Neither had much to say, and Breana stared dreamily up at the stars in the velvet sky and thought about that wonderful kiss. She knew she would never, ever forget it, and very much hoped it wasn't the last time. She very much hoped he would kiss her again.

Chapter One

Breana Starling's mare trotted along the lane that led to the Norris's home. Barton Manor was a great deal bigger and more imposing than Starling Hall, and Breana considered it far superior—no matter what her brother Will said. He called it ramshackle, and she supposed it *was* a little uncared for, but this was only the country home of the Norris family. Their real home was in London.

Will wouldn't be happy if he knew where she was going today. Much to her relief, he had been too busy to notice her set off, otherwise he would have quizzed her as to her destination. *That* was irritating, because at nineteen years of age, Breana considered herself fully grown up, and therefore it was no one's business but hers as to where she went and why.

The *where* was the Norris house, and the *why* was because Francis Norris was expecting her. Ever since the spring ball at Barton Manor, she had been longing for another assignation with him.

They had met only once since that memorable night, at a garden party arranged by Mrs. Norris. Breana had had high hopes for another of those earth-shattering kisses in private, but the event had turned out to be a disappointment.

At the garden party, Francis had sought her out. They had conversed, perhaps even more flirtatiously than usual. Breana had giggled at his jokes, ignoring Abby's disapproving looks, before Francis had suggested she see his mother's roses. They were particularly beautiful at the moment, and he was sure she would appreciate them.

"For you are a beautiful rose yourself, Miss Starling," he had said quietly.

Once they were alone, he had taken her in his arms and kissed her, just as she had hoped.

Only, it wasn't *quite* what she had imagined. At first they had fumbled awkwardly, bumping noses before his lips found hers. He hadn't been nearly as masterful as she remembered either. She supposed no two kisses were ever the same, but this was not at all like the magical moment in the cupboard that she had played in her mind so many times.

It was possible the matter would have improved, but then they had been interrupted by Francis's hateful brother Theo, forcing them to pretend they really *were* looking at the roses. The next day, Francis had returned to London, and she hadn't seen him since.

The last two months had seemed like a lifetime to Breana. Then, this morning, she received a note from Francis informing her that he had returned and asking her to meet in the orchard at two o'clock in the afternoon.

It was serendipitous because Breana had had an invitation from her old school friend Chloe Bennett, inviting her to visit her in London. Breana was leaving that very evening, catching the mail coach that stopped at the road junction between Barton Lacey and Starling Hall.

She had thought she might be able to visit the Norris house in the capital, and see Francis there, but now she could tell him of her plans in person.

Breana had been up early to help her younger brothers and sisters dress, and two o'clock seemed like such an awfully long time to wait. She had considered arriving at the orchard before two, but that would mean kicking her heels among the pear trees until Francis finally turned up. He was not known for his punctuality, and it was doubtful he had changed in the past two months. Living in the fashionable part of London, he may have become even more removed from the country hours of Barton Lacey. The Norrises spent most of the year in the capital, and it seemed to Breana that they were far more sophisticated than the Starlings. She longed to be part of that life.

Mrs Norris could almost be said to be lackadaisical, as if village life bored her because she was so used to the excitement of London. She had yawned once when speaking to Breana's mother, Lady Meg Starling. Abby considered her to be very ill-

mannered, but Breana rather admired her indifference. She had often wanted to yawn during one of her mother's lectures but knew she would be given a stern talking to about manners.

Starling Hall was so *tedious*, and she was hoping to have some fun with Chloe in London. Anything was better than the mundane predictability of Starling Hall.

Will was marrying in two months to Molly Lacey, and as much as Breana loved them and wished them happy, she felt a little left out.

Now, just as she was leaving to stay with Chloe, the Norrises had returned to Barton Manor for the summer. Such a pity. But at least she had this meeting in the orchard to look forward to, and perhaps some cherished memories to sustain her until she returned.

Would Francis kiss her again? Would he say he could not live without her by his side? Would he ask her to marry him? Perhaps he'd declare his desperate love for her and ask her to run away to Gretna Green with him! They would set up house together in one of the fashionable parts of London and she would arrive at balls dripping with jewels and wearing the latest ensemble. And Francis would gaze at her admiringly and tell everyone how lucky he was to have her as his wife.

Sometimes Breana's imagination ran away with itself, a habit of which she was fully aware, but what was the harm? Fantasizing about her future gave her something to look forward to, and was so much more exciting than real life.

By now she had reached the back gate into the Barton Manor gardens. She tied her mare to one of the gateposts and set off on foot to the old orchard.

The trees were heavy with their crop of fruit, and Breana wondered idly why they had not yet been picked. Lady Meg had her own orchard and liked to make preserves from the fruit, so there was always jam for their breakfast toast. Over the years, Abby had taken on some of their mother's household tasks. Breana had a recent memory of her sister stirring the fruit over the range in the kitchen, her face red and sweaty. When Abby had asked if Breana wanted to learn, Breana had wrinkled her nose at the idea.

She was not going to be *that* sort of wife. She would be a lady of leisure, lying upon a settee with a novel while her servants brought her coffee and chocolates. And then in the evenings her husband—it was always someone who looked at least a bit like Francis in her daydreams—would join her for supper and then sweep her up in his arms.

And he would kiss her. It was always that kiss from the library, perfect in every detail.

The dreams always stopped there, but she told herself that whatever he did to her was sure to be very nice.

There would be no farmer's son in Breana's future, not if she could help it, nor the curate who made eyes at her in church on Sunday. She was going to marry a wealthy man—someone like Francis—and live the sort of life she felt she deserved.

And sometimes, if she wondered whether she might become very fat eating all of those chocolates, and whether she might become bored lying on a settee all day, then she refused to listen to the contrary whispers in her head.

She wasn't actually sure *how* wealthy Francis was, but she knew he must be quite rich. He was the second brother of four. Breana barely knew the two young brothers, but Theodore, the oldest, had always made her feel uncomfortable. He frowned at her in a way that made her think he disapproved of her. Or, worse, that he could see right through her to her silliest imaginings. She was sure that he would be even more disapproving if he knew she was here, trysting with Francis and longing for another kiss.

Surely Francis hadn't told his brother about the kiss in the cupboard? The thought of him knowing made her even more jumpy, and she glanced behind her several times as she made her way through the orchard, as if expecting Theo to be lurking by one of the trees, frowning.

The old pear tree mentioned in Francis's note was easily found, the perfect place for their rendezvous. She wondered why he had chosen this particular spot. It occurred to her that he may have met other girls here before, but Breana pushed the idea aside. She had never heard his name linked with anyone else in Barton Lacey, and gossip was currency in their village.

Her pretty blue skirts brushed over the damp grass, and she held them up above her ankles. It was the new dress she had begged her mother for, and she would hate to get it soiled just before she went to London. A fetching straw bonnet with matching blue ribbons shaded her face and kept her skin from freckling. That was the awful thing about having red hair; one did tend to freckle.

But Francis had said he loved her hair. He said it was like a bonfire. Breana wasn't sure that was *entirely* complimentary, though he was smiling when he said it. Last time they met, by the roses in the garden, he had tried to persuade her to take out her pins and let the thick, curly strands fall around her shoulders. He said he wanted to run his fingers through her hair as he kissed her.

She'd been tempted to comply, but it was just as well she hadn't because that was when Theodore had interrupted them. He had sent Francis inside, saying their father wanted to speak to him. To Breana's surprise, Francis had obeyed immediately, without even a protest. Breana had been about to follow when Theodore had offered her his arm.

She had pretended not to see it.

Had Theodore seen them kissing? She'd blushed at the idea that he might have, and didn't want to take his arm and be forced to walk with him. What if he lectured her? How mortifying. It would not fit in with her fantasy at all. In fact, it would feel very much like real life!

Just then she noticed a tall figure by the old pear tree, standing with his back to her.

Francis! Her heart quickened as she hurried toward him. It was only when he turned at the sound of her eager approach, that she saw that it wasn't Francis after all. It was Theodore. And, as usual, he was frowning at her.

Breana thought about beating a hasty retreat, pretending she had an urgent appointment somewhere else. But it was too late. Theodore had seen her. Why was he here in this particular spot at this particular time? How much did he know about her meeting with Francis? It was possible, although unlikely, that it was all just a coincidence. And if that was the case, she didn't want to make him suspicious.

She came toward him, her steps slowing despite her brave smile. "Mr. Norris," she said sweetly and dropped a little curtsy.

"Miss Starling," Theodore replied, though it was more of a growl than a greeting. And he didn't respond with a bow, which was simply rude. Instead, he came toward her until he was far *too* close, and loomed over her in a way that made her want to shrink away. It was only her resolve not to be intimidated by such a bully that kept her back straight and her chin up.

"I was out walking when I fancied a ripe pear," she said pleasantly. That would show him who had the good manners here!

"In *our* orchard?" His dark brows wrinkled in a scowl over his dark eyes. "I hardly think so, Miss Starling. I know for a fact that you are here to meet my brother Francis."

So he *did* know. But she refused to admit it. Why did he have to be so awful? Wouldn't a gentleman simply accept her explanation?

"I was out walking," she repeated but felt her cheeks warm, no doubt matching with her hair.

"You are trespassing," he answered without a pause. He acted as though he was in the right, which he was, she supposed, but how *dare* he show such a lack of consideration for her embarrassing position?

She had had enough of him.

"Well then, are you going to have me arrested?" she asked, her voice rather high. "The constable is a friend of my brother, and I am quite sure he would let me go."

He blinked. Then his mouth quirked, almost as if he was going to smile, but she knew that couldn't be possible. Theodore Norris *never* smiled.

"I see no need to go that far. Not if you tell me the truth, Miss Starling. And I should warn you that Francis has already admitted that he had an assignation with you here at two o'clock today."

"Assignation'?" she spluttered, as if she hadn't been thinking in those very same terms just moments ago.

"What would you call it then?" Theodore said, more curious than argumentative. "Two unmarried, unrelated persons meeting alone? I would call it an assignation. Maybe a tryst. Perhaps even an ill-conceived rendezvous."

"It was none of those things! We are *friends*. Friends are allowed to meet, aren't they?"

"I don't know how you do things at Starling Hall, Miss Starling, but at Barton Manor it is proper for a man to be chaperoned when encountering a woman he is interested in."

She knew he was right. She tried not to imagine what her family would say if they were to find out. Her mother would be disappointed, and her father angry. Will would give her one of his looks that told her he thought she was being foolish, and as for the other Starling children... They would never let her forget it.

She knew he was right but she wasn't about to admit it. "*You* are *not* chaperoned, Mr. Norris."

"That is because I am not interested in you."

That left her momentarily speechless. She wanted to toss her head and say she didn't care because *she* wasn't interested in *him*.

"You hardly know Francis," Theodore was carrying on in that stern voice. "If you did, you would not be here, lurking in my orchard."

Lurking? He made the meeting she had been so looking forward to sound like something seedy and nasty. "Perhaps you don't know him as well as you think!" she said, remembering not to shout just in time, so that her words came out in a strangled squeak.

"Francis? Oh, I know my brother very well." There was a weary note in his voice.

Breana was suddenly struck with the worry that something had happened to Francis. Was he hurt? Had Theodore locked him up like the villain in a novel? Did he tie him up in a chest and drop him into the village pond? Was he even now chained and on his way to a secret location, to be hidden away forever?

Breana struggled to tame her wild imaginings.

"Where is Francis?" she demanded. "What have you done to him?"

Theodore raised an eyebrow—illogical as it was she had always disliked men who could do that. "All you need to know is that Francis could not keep his 'appointment' with you today, so I have come in his place."

For a bizarre moment, Breana found herself imagining Theodore taking Francis's place in holding her hand, stroking her hair, *kissing* her. Her gaze went to his mouth. His lips were soft and full, and she imagined them pressed to hers. Hastily she reminded herself that this was Theodore, the last man in all the world she wanted to kiss, and rearranged her face into a haughty glare, just in case he had noticed her interest in his mouth. She laughed heartily for good measure. "You must be joking!"

That frown! It was more fiercesome than before. Breana wondered if she had hurt his feelings, until she reminded herself that he had none.

Before she could think to apologise—which she wasn't going to anyway—he leaned in close to her, no doubt thinking he could intimidate her with his imposing height and breadth.

“If you knew me better, Miss Starling, you would know that I do not joke. My brother should never have raised your hopes. He cannot marry you. Even if he has damaged your reputation, he *still* cannot marry you. Such a thing is impossible. Because he is soon to be engaged to another lady.”

His words were horrible and insulting, but it was that last sentence that made her blurt out, “I don’t believe you!”

Breana wanted to sound furious and scornful, but instead she heard the voice of someone who was young and very upset. Disappointed, that was how she felt, because she *had* been daydreaming about Francis and it didn’t seem possible her romantic fantasies could end like this. “*What* other lady?”

He was silent. He looked as if he didn’t know how to answer her. Did he feel sorry for her? Pity her? She did not need his *pity*. She folded her arms and glared at him. “I won’t leave until you tell me who this lady is, so you may as well. I have all day. Do you? If there was someone else, Francis would have told me before he—”

“Before he what?” Theodore asked abruptly. “What has my brother done?”

“Nothing.”

“Has he asked you to marry him?”

Surprised by his urgent manner, Breana burst out with the first thing that entered her head. “No, he kissed me, that is all. I’m sure a kiss won’t sully my reputation.”

At first, Theodore looked relieved, then annoyed. “Perhaps not in a rose garden when anyone can come upon the couple.”

So he had seen them in his mother’s rose garden. Before she could think of an answer, he carried on sternly.

“But a kiss can lead to other things. Did it?”

“No! I would never...” She drew in a calming breath. “Tell me about this other lady.”

He met her eyes. His were very dark, almost mesmerizing. She was so busy staring into them that she didn’t catch what he was saying, and then she did.

“Francis is about to be officially engaged to Miss Ingram of Mayfair, London.”

Chapter Two

TWO

Theo hadn't expected to feel so remorseful when he saw the expression on Breana Starling's lovely face. Before he had been angry with Francis for dallying with the girl when he was promised to Miss Ingram, but now he was angry with himself. Did the silly chit actually *love* his brother? Had Francis broken her heart?

Perhaps he should have been kinder in his telling.

The truth was, Theo had always had a tendre for Breana, ever since they were young. First he had seen her at various village events, then later at Barton Manor when his mother threw her extravagances for the local gentry. Breana had always been so vivacious, a breath of fresh air to a man like himself, whose soul was weighed down with family problems.

He understood only too well why she was drawn to his happy-go-lucky brother Francis, but that didn't mean he didn't resent her for it. He was angry at Francis, yes, but he was also annoyed that Breana could not see that Theo was the far better choice. It made him frown at her far more than he would have liked.

Now her big blue eyes were full of tears, which she tried to blink back. She was too proud to let him see, and he felt sad about that too. He would have liked to take her in his arms and comfort her, but she would scream blue murder. Apart from the inappropriateness of such a gesture, Breana did not like him. She had never liked him, and he wondered now why he had never tried to win her over.

He had sat listening to her chatter to others on many occasions, smiling at her flights of fancy, but he had never taken the time to make himself agreeable to her or to show her his true self. What if she knew he was the only responsible one in a family that seemed oblivious to the disasters looming ahead? He thought she might be sympathetic—she had a kind heart—but he could not pinpoint *exactly* what it was that attracted him to her. Perhaps it was many things. Yes, she was very pretty, and she smiled a great deal, and she seemed happy most of the time. Like sunshine on a dull day, he craved her. He wanted to forget his worries and bask in her uncomplicated presence. He suspected that if she was serious and practical like him, then he would not be charmed by her. If only she hadn't set her sights on his bloody brother...

"Miss Ingram?" she said. "Francis has never mentioned a Miss Ingram. Why wouldn't he tell me?"

"The answer to that is self-evident," he said as gently as he dared. "If you knew then you'd hardly be kissing him, would you? Or am I mistaken?"

"How *dare* you!" She stepped back so hastily that she stumbled. There was a log behind her that had been left carelessly lying in the long grass—Theo had had to cut back on the number of gardeners at the manor. Breana cried out and would have fallen, but Theo finally did what he had been wanting to do. He gathered her in his arms and saved her from a nasty tumble.

She clung to him, trembling. Instead of letting her go as he should have, he folded her even closer.

"I am sorry, Miss Starling," he whispered to her. "I should not have been so blunt. I thought it easier to tell you the truth without prevarication. I was wrong."

She leaned back so that she could look into his face while still being held in his arms. Her eyes were bluer than the sky, and he found himself lost in their depths. The moment seemed to last forever, and Theo found himself thinking: *This is what it would be like if Breana loved me, if she was my wife. If I could hold her whenever she needed me to, and welcomed me with a smile.*

But it was only a moment. She looked away and began to struggle in his hold so that he quickly let her go.

Just as well. Theo didn't have time for distractions. There was too much to be done, and too many problems needing to be solved. Yet he couldn't help but yearn for Breana to smile at him as she did his brother.

"Apologies," he said gruffly. "I didn't want you to be hurt."

She stammered over her words. "I...T-thank you."

“You should go home,” he added, more composed now.

“Yes, I should.”

And yet neither of them moved.

There was a shout, and they both looked up. Francis was running toward them from the direction of the house, jacket flapping behind him like the hero of some romantic novel. Theo tried not to groan with frustration. He glanced at Breana and saw the relief on her face. A moment later, his wretched brother had reached them.

Francis and Breana did not embrace, but Theo wondered bleakly if, had he not been watching, they would have. He tried not to be upset by the thought, because surely that was just ridiculous. Francis looked at him guiltily and then his eyes darted away. There was a flush in his cheeks.

“I had wanted to explain things to her myself, Theo,” he said, with a pleading note.

“Yes, you should have, long before today.” Theo said sternly. “Fortunately, I was able to assist in that matter. Miss Starling knows about Miss Ingram.”

“You are a heartless brute,” Francis declared, but it was all bluster. His brother knew he was in the wrong.

“One of us is. Now say your goodbyes and go.”

Breana looked to Francis as if she wanted him to stand up to Theo, but Francis would never do that. He knew he had to marry a wealthy woman, and there was nothing objectionable about Miss Ingram. Francis would enjoy living the sort of life her money could provide, and even someone as pretty as Breana Starling wasn’t going to change his mind.

Francis swallowed hard, and Theo wondered if he had underestimated the attraction his brother felt. Was he being cruel? He did not wish to be a cruel man.

“I am sorry,” Francis said quietly. “My marriage to Miss Ingram has already been arranged. She is not my first choice. She is boring and-and silly, and I don’t enjoy her company nearly as much as yours, but...”

“Can’t you say no?” Breana asked bluntly. Theo smiled at her ability to get straight to the point.

“I wish it were that simple,” Francis said, as if it wasn’t.

It occurred to Theo that his brother might be trying to have the best of both worlds. A wealthy wife *and* a pretty mistress. He felt his hackles rise as he growled, “*Francis*, it is time we returned to the house.”

Francis rolled his eyes and Breana caught her breath on a laugh that was almost a sob. Theo watched with suspicion as his brother leaned in close and had a whispered conversation with Breana that he could not hear. Her blue eyes widened at whatever it was he said, and then she smiled. But it did not seem to be her usual, natural smile. This was forced, and Theo wondered what his brother had said.

Francis bent to press his lips to the back of her hand. “Soon.”

It was the sort of ridiculous romantic gesture he’d seen his brother practise in the mirror when he thought he was alone. But before Theo could admonish him, he was striding back to the house, leaving Theo alone with Breana.

“I don’t know what harebrained scheme my brother is concocting, but I trust you are too sensible to be taken in by his honeyed words,” he said in his sternest voice. “For your own sake, Miss Starling, I suggest you think before you act.”

Breana said nothing as she too walked away, back toward the gate.

Theo watched her, anxious and at the same time admiring her slender figure and flaming hair beneath that pretty bonnet. He hoped this was the end of the matter. That Francis would accept his future was with Miss Ingram and leave Breana be. But he had an uncomfortable feeling that it was not, and it would be up to him to untangle yet another mess.

Chapter Three

THREE

Breana wiped furiously at the tears spilling down her cheeks, quickening her steps. If Francis had been the man of her imagination, he would have told his brother he would never marry Miss Ingham. That he wanted Breana more than he wanted some wealthy young lady. He might even have challenged Theo to a duel.

But he hadn't. Such things only happened in novels and fairy tales... and Breana's daydreams.

Instead, Francis had apologised to her, while his brother glared at them, and Breana had wanted to walk away right then. She felt so foolish and disappointed and needed to be alone to assess her feelings.

But then Francis had moved closer, so that only she could hear him, and said the things she was still struggling to believe could come from the lips of the man she had believed was her friend.

"I assure you I do not love Miss Ingham."

Breana hadn't known what to say, and stammered, "You do not...not...?"

"No," Francis assured her. "I love *you*."

She tried to read the emotion in his eyes. This felt so bizarrely like one of her fantasies that she knew it couldn't be true. Her practical side surfaced, and she asked him bluntly, "Then why marry her?"

"Because my parents insist. If it were up to me..." His expression grew thoughtful and then he grinned wickedly. "Come with me to London. Just because I am marrying Miss Ingram does not mean we cannot be together. I will find you a house, and shall visit often. We will have such a marvellous time."

Breana might long for excitement, but she knew the difference between right and wrong. She might take risks, but she was not a fool. She knew not to dally with married gentlemen, nor engaged ones, and understood all too well what Francis was proposing.

That he thought for one moment that she would consider such a thing was upsetting and insulting. She wondered what she had done to make him believe she was such a ninny, and suspected at some point she had not behaved in a sensible fashion. Was this her fault?

"I shall collect you in the coach this evening," he went on, eyes shining, as if this was the best idea. "Wait at the end of your driveway and we can run away together. By the time your family knows it will be too late. Just think of it, Breana. What an adventure!"

All the time, Theodore had been standing, watching them with that look on his face. *Soon*, Francis had said as he left. Theo could have no idea what his brother had been saying, but clearly he had his suspicions.

She reached the gate now, where her mare still waited patiently, and stopped to catch her breath.

She was *not* going to run off to London with Francis. She was going to stay with her friend Chloe, and if she did not see Francis again for the rest of her life, it would be too soon. An hour ago she had dreamed of marrying him, now the thought of being in the same room with him revolted her. She could only assume that she had never really loved him at all. Yes, it had been a game, but she had thought she had *some* feelings for him.

Evidently, there was a sizeable gap between what she fantasised about and what she truly felt.

Breana wondered rather bleakly if it might be time for her to start facing up to life in the real world, deadly dull as it was. Dull like Theo.

The strange thing was that when she had almost fallen and Theo had caught her, she realized she quite liked being held by him. She had noticed how dark his eyes were, like inky pools she could see her reflection in. How his square jaw had the rough start of a beard, as if he hadn't had time to shave. Breana had had the urge to run her fingertips along the side of his face.

All of this was disturbing, to say the least, given how she had been telling herself how much she disliked him for ages.

She had always believed herself nervous in his company, but perhaps that wasn't the case at all. She had stood up to him just now, hadn't she? He didn't frighten her; he intrigued her. And he would be a handsome man if he did not frown so much.

She found herself wondering *why* he frowned. What was so weighty in his life that he felt the burden of it so?

Breana used the wooden gate rails to mount her horse, settling herself and smoothing down her blue skirts. She noticed stains around the hem from the grass in the orchard, which would need to be explained, but she would think of something.

She always did.

Theo stood just outside the glass side doors that led onto a paved area where his mother liked to sit and nap. Dandelions grew through the cracks in the terracotta, and he made a mental note to inform the gardeners. Well, *gardener*, as there was only one left. The Norris family had been gradually sliding down the social scale, frittering away the funds their father had inherited from his father. It had been shaky enough to begin with. Now they were hanging on by their fingernails.

Their London house had been sold, and they had leased another in a less influential part of the capital. Theo had taken up a position as secretary to his maternal uncle, which at least meant he could help with some of the bills that were forever flooding in, even if the majority of the debt remained untouched. It hadn't helped that his brother Francis had a penchant for gambling, but no skill. His steady losses only made matters worse.

Theo was only in Barton Lacey now because his mother had begged her brother to give him leave so that he could help. His father was unwell and spent most of his days reliving his past in the library, with those revolting heads of dead animals on the walls.

The two youngest Norris boys were still at school—one at Cambridge and the other at Eton. For how long they would remain no one knew, but Theo feared the next time they were asked to pay what was an increasingly large bill the bewildered boys would be sent home.

Someone, and Theo suspected that would be him, would have to explain to his brothers that the glory days of the Norris family were well and truly behind them. That they needed to find employment and quickly.

Which meant the last thing the family needed right now was for Francis to create a scandal with one of the Starling girls. The Starlings were well thought of in Barton Lacey, and Breana in particular was treated like everyone's favourite sister. Should Francis visit scandal upon her, his family would probably be drummed out of the village.

His hope that Breana might see through his brother's smiles had amounted to nothing; she was still bedazzled by Francis, and had barely looked at Theo.

But he had a secret, although he wasn't sure whether to be ashamed of it or jubilant. Both, perhaps.

At his mother's ball this spring, while their guests were dancing or gorging on the sumptuous supper Theo's family could ill afford to provide, he had spotted Breana and Francis whispering secrets. He suspected his brother was up to something, and had kept a close eye on them. He told himself he wasn't jealous, just disappointed Breana should be taken in by Francis, and worried she would be hurt.

Then Breana had slipped away, and Theo had followed. She had gone into the library, and although he had waited patiently, she hadn't come out.

Hide and seek? It was one of Francis's little tricks, his way of getting a girl alone. He saw Francis start off in the same direction, but intercepted him before he left the room. He'd sent his brother to accompany a gaggle of ladies to the supper table, which would keep him occupied for some time. Once Francis was out of the way, he hurried into the library. He had assumed the sight of him would have her scurrying back to the party, but Breana was nowhere to be seen. Then he had noticed the fold of her skirt trapped in the door of his father's treasure cupboard.

Theo's only intention had been to rescue her from his brother's questionable games, but when he had opened the door and stepped inside, he had been unprepared for the reception he got.

"Oh, I am so glad you found me!" Her cry had startled him into silence. "Are you going to kiss me?"

He had imagined kissing Breana Starling many times. She had soft, plump lips, and he had thought far too often about what they might taste like. Well, now he knew. They tasted of the strawberries he had seen her devouring earlier.

He had felt guilty about abandoning her the way he had, but he had begun to lose control, and feared doing something even more foolish. Theo had seen her before she left the party, looking for his brother, but he had sent Francis on an errand to replenish the champagne. By the time he returned the library was empty, and Theo had caught him sneaking out of the room. His brother had made up some excuse for being in there but Theo had known the truth.

Breana had not suspected it was Theo who had kissed her. He knew he should be relieved—she would not be happy with him—but he was also disappointed.

He wanted her to know. He wanted to kiss her again.

Now, he pushed his way through the doors from the terrace and into the cool, dim interior of Barton Manor. There were spots on the walls where paintings were now missing, having been sold. An expensive Chinese vase had also disappeared off its plinth. Family heirlooms, all of them. The most depressing thing was that no matter what was sold, it was never enough to make more than a chip in their debts.

Theo knew what had to be done. The house in Barton Lacey had never been viable, and as much as they loved it, there was no justification in keeping it.

Except... in his heart, Theo believed he *could* make the place a going concern. Look at Starling Hall. Will Starling had done extremely well there with hard work and clever planning. Why couldn't Theo do the same? Turn Barton Manor into a working farm, fix up the cottages that now stood empty and take in paying tenants, grow crops and keep animals. He could picture it all in his head, just within his grasp, but the frustrating thing was he could not do it.

And the reason? His father. Theo had broached the subject several times, and on each occasion Mr. Norris had waved him away, saying he was busy and he would listen to him later. But later never came, and Theo couldn't wait any longer.

He dreaded the coming confrontation between himself and his parents, and the timing couldn't be worse. Francis's engagement to Miss Ingham had come as a windfall. A decent dowry could help settle some of the worst debts, and Theo may even begin to return the family to solvency. The problem was his parents would think the matter sorted, when in fact it was only a brief reprieve.

"Theo!" His mother appeared suddenly in the doorway, a handkerchief clenched in her hand, her eyes wide and teary. "Maybelle says she is leaving!" Maybelle was his mother's maid, a French woman who had been with her since Theo was a baby.

"I will speak to her," he said soothingly, already trying to work out how he was going to persuade Maybelle to stay.

"She says she hasn't been paid in ages!" his mother wailed.

Another of his father's failings. It was he who dealt with the servants and the running of Barton Manor, and when Theo had tried to make him listen to sense, he had resisted.

"I'll deal with it," Theo promised, although how he was going to do that he truly didn't know.

His mother sagged against him. "Thank you, Theo. I don't know what we would do without you."

Theo didn't know either. That was the problem. That was why he always behaved as though the weight of the world lay on his shoulders.

Theo set off to try to prevent Maybelle from leaving, doing sums in his head, wondering where he was going to find the money needed to pay her.

Chapter Four

FOUR

Breana arrived home in a bad mood. What she had hoped would be a pleasant summer afternoon in the orchard, with some flirtation and perhaps another kiss, had turned into a betrayal. Francis had shaken up her pretty daydreams with a cold, hard dose of reality.

There could be only one reason why he had not mentioned his engagement to Miss Ingram. He was a liar, and probably a cheat.

Was Breana's heart broken? She had seen friends in the throes of a broken heart, and they had stayed in their bedrooms and sobbed for days, refusing to eat, refusing to be comforted. But Breana wasn't about to do that—she enjoyed eating and was already experiencing hunger pangs. So no, her heart was far from broken.

In fact, she felt remarkably pragmatic about the whole thing, now that the first shock had passed and simmered into resentment. Indeed, to her surprise, she discovered she was thinking far more about her encounter with Theo than Francis's lies.

For your own sake, Miss Starling, I suggest you think before you act.

Was he calling her a feather brain, who didn't give due consideration to her actions or the trouble they might cause her and others?

Breana was starting to realise that was the impression she gave people. She was capable of that sort of behaviour, yes, but beneath her vibrant imagination was a solid foundation of common sense. She moaned about the less pleasant aspects of her life, and the notion that she might spend years doing the things she did not want to do... but who could blame her for wishing to escape *that* reality?

Marrying Francis had seemed like the perfect way to avoid that drudgery, but not at the cost of her reputation and her family's disappointment. When Francis suggested that they run off together... What did he think would happen? That she would live in a cottage somewhere eagerly awaiting his visits, while he enjoyed his life with the wealthy Miss Ingram? Ridiculous!

No, Francis was a terrible disappointment to her. She was almost grateful Theo had shown her that her daydreams were nothing more substantial than dandelion fluff on the wind. It was time she set aside any thoughts she might have had about a future with Francis, though she would hold onto that one kiss they'd shared in the library.

Once the horse was stabled, Breana returned to the house, and Lady Meg Starling met her at the door.

"Will and Molly are sitting together in the parlour, so don't disturb them," she warned. "I have already told the other children to leave them be! They should have some privacy now the wedding is barely two months away. I'm sure they have a great deal to discuss."

Breana doubted there was much discussion going on behind the parlour door, but said nothing.

"Are you looking forward to your stay with Chloe Bennett? I remember how close you used to be when you were at school together. Before her family removed to London."

Chloe's father had been the school headmaster in Barton Lacey but had been offered a job at a more prestigious school. Chloe was forever boasting about the friends she had made and the social events she had been invited to, making Breana feel as though she were missing out. Perhaps that was one of the reasons she had been so silly when it came to Francis.

"I *am* looking forward to it," Breana said with a smile. "I miss her dearly. Life has been very dull without her."

Lady Meg gave her a sceptical look. "One cannot be giddy with excitement *all* the time, my dear. Imagine how exhausting that would be."

Breana supposed she was right. All the same, she doubted she would be bored in London.

"The coach leaves at six from the crossing, and Will shall make sure you are there on time. He will wait with you."

Breana did not want to admit how comforting the thought of Will's presence was after Francis had talked about running off with her. Though surely by now he must have thought better of such a ridiculous suggestion? She really didn't want to think about it, so she pushed it aside.

Her mother was watching her. "Breana, my dear, I have felt that of late you have been a little out of sorts. You seem distracted, throwing yourself into anything that might take your mind off whatever it is that is worrying you. You are such a lovely girl, but you are young. Chloe was always sensible, so perhaps you can talk to her. Reflect on what it is you truly want for your future."

Breana wondered if her mother knew of her silly daydreams about Francis and the sort of behaviour that had led him to think she would even consider running away with him. She squirmed at the thought, knowing how disappointed her mother would be with her if she had seen what had happened in the orchard.

"Thank you, Mama," she said, and kissed her mother's cheek. "Chloe will not let me get into any mischief, if that is what is worrying you. You are right, she has such a level head on her shoulders—like Abby."

Her mother sighed. "Abby," she said. "There is another daughter who needs to think hard about her future."

Breana did not know what she meant by that, but she was eager to escape in case her mother somehow discovered what she had been up to. She turned to go.

"You will need to sponge the hem of your new dress," Lady Meg called after her. "I won't ask how it happened because I am sure you will spin me some tale."

Breana thought it best not to answer that, and hurried upstairs to her bedchamber.

There were too many children in Starling Hall for her to have a room to herself, and she shared hers with Christine. Her trunk was only half packed and she still needed to finish it. She had hoped to do so in peace and quiet.

Unfortunately, Christine was there, and Breana wouldn't have been surprised if she had been going through her things. The other day she had been wearing one of Breana's bonnets as if it were her own.

Breana glared at her as she closed the door, while Christine hummed to herself innocently. This was never a good sign.

"Where were you?" Christine asked once it was obvious Breana was not going to speak. With a sly smile, she added, "I'll wager you were at Barton Manor. Mama would not like that. Should I tell her?"

"If you do," Breana snapped, "I will tell her who pulled up her favourite marigold and thought it was a weed, then fed the evidence to the goat."

Christine's eyes widened, and then she laughed. "All right," she said, "keep your secrets. Make a fool of yourself over Francis Norris if you want to. I couldn't care less."

Breana opened her mouth to tell her sister she wouldn't want Francis if he was covered in custard and put in an apple pie—her favourite pudding—then thought better of it.

"If you want to set your cap at one of that family," Christine went on, sounding much older than her sixteen years, "then it should be Theodore."

Breana scoffed, startled, and a little guilty. "*Theodore*! Why on earth would I want to marry him?"

"Because he is kind and looks after his parents and his brothers, and sometimes has a lovely smile, though I admit not often. I think he doesn't smile often because he worries so much about keeping everyone happy."

Breana wanted to tell Christine she was talking nonsense, but it was possible that it might not be. Her heart sank a little, remembering her behaviour in the orchard today, going to meet Francis and lying about it. If Theodore was working so hard to look after his family, then what must he think of Breana's selfish actions?

Christine watched her with interest. “Ah, you think I’m right, don’t you? Well, if you want to marry Theodore, you’d better hurry up. Otherwise, when I grow up *I* intend to marry him.” With that, she flounced off, leaving Breana to her thoughts.

When Theo’s eyes had looked into hers, they had been very intent. He had warned her about his brother, and he had been right. Then, when she had almost fallen and he had caught her, it had felt very nice to be held in his arms. Why had she never noticed these things before? Why had she shown him only the careless side of her nature?

She wasn’t going to marry Theo. Of course not. She would probably never marry at all and die a spinster, just as she imagined was Abby’s fate. But she told herself she should be kinder to him next time they met. Perhaps *she* could make him smile? Christine was right, he had a nice smile, though he frowned far more often.

She put her hands to her cheeks, feeling them heat in embarrassment.

It was never too late to change his opinion of her. The next time she saw him, she resolved to make him like her better. There was no harm in that, surely? But it would have to wait until she returned from London.

Chapter Five

FIVE

Theo took a deep breath and rapped loudly on the library door. There was a grunt and the rustle of a newspaper, which he took as an “Enter.” The room was rank with pipe smoke, and he tried not to breathe too deeply.

“Father, we need to talk,” he said.

His father looked up at him with a frown. “Not now. Can’t you see I am busy?”

This was how every conversation started, and most of the time ended. Theo almost gave up then, but this might be his last chance. He stiffened his spine and pushed back his shoulders, and prepared to do battle. No more could his father bury his head in the sand.

He had tried to win his sire over to his plan, but he continued to avoid the problem. Very well. Theo would insist that he be put fully in charge of the matter instead.

“You need to sign over the Barton Lacey house and the land to me. If I don’t start putting my strategies into action, we will lose everything. Do you understand what I’m saying, Father? *We will lose everything.*”

His father blinked at him and set the pipe down. “Just had a letter from the bank,” he said grumpily, but there was something guilty about his manner that gave Theo pause. “You’re too late, son. They are foreclosing.”

Theo felt lightheaded and grasped the bureau to steady himself. There were many things he could have said, there were many things he felt like saying, but he held them back and concentrated on the most important matter.

“I need to talk to them immediately. Do I have your permission?”

His father stared at his pipe for a moment, then nodded. “You do, son.”

Theo was out of the door in a moment. He would leave for London immediately. There was no time to waste, but first he needed to tell his mother what was happening.

“Mother?”

Mrs. Norris woke with a snort, blinking up at him from her comfortable chair on the terrace. She seemed to have aged in the past few days, and Theo felt a pang to think of the toll the situation had taken on her.

“What on earth is it, Theo?” she said irritably, searching for her glasses. “Is it Maybelle? I will not speak to her. She has insulted me beyond forgiving.”

“No, it isn’t Maybelle. I am going to London immediately. Father will explain.”

An expression of dread clouded her features. It was clear she had known a great deal more than she had let on. *What was wrong with this family?* Theo asked himself in frustration. Was he the only one with any sense or the desire to avert disaster?

“I am sorry I have not been able to find the funds to pay Maybelle,” he added, hoping to cheer her up, “but if she is prepared to wait I can pay her when I return.” At least he hoped that would be the case.

His mother made a face. “Well, as for that... Maybelle says she will not stay even if we do pay her. She said other things too, which I find hard to forgive. I would have thought her loyalty to me would have been more important than mere pennies.” She heaved a sigh. “It is all very distressing, and I told her so. You can take her with you, Theo, and good riddance.”

Theo wanted to refuse. Having Maybelle in the coach might be awkward, and he had enough to deal with, but Theo was used to his family taking advantage of his good nature. He sent word to the Frenchwoman’s room that he was leaving as soon as he could manage it, and if she wanted to leave with him, she must pack and be ready to go.

He went to his room and was throwing some clothing into a port manteau when Francis burst in. “You can’t take the coach!” he cried, then dropped his voice to an urgent hiss. “Theo, you can’t take the coach.”

Theo stopped and stared at him. His brother was shuffling about, looking everywhere but at Theo. “Why not?” he asked quietly.

“I... You just can’t. I *need* it.”

“Why do you need it?”

“Damn it, Theo. I need it because I am running away with Breana!”

Silence. Theo could hear the sound of a dog barking outside, but it all had the sensation of being in a dream, even though he knew this was no dream. Then he was furious.

“You *fool*! Eloping with Breana Starling when we are about to lose everything? If I don’t get to London posthaste, we *will* lose everything. And what do you think Will Starling will think of you running off with his sister?”

“But I love her,” Francis said sulkily, “and she loves me.”

“And what exactly were you planning to do about Miss Ingram?”

Francis shrugged as if it were obvious. “Marry her and make Breana my mistress.”

Theo groaned. “You aren’t going anywhere with Miss Starling,” he said angrily. “You are staying here and keeping an eye out in case the bailiffs arrive and try to take away what few valuable belongings we have left. And I am going to London to try to persuade our bank that we can pay our debts and make everything profitable again. *Do you understand*, Francis?”

His brother nodded, eyes wide, and then he swallowed. “It’s just...”

Theo sighed and closed his port manteau. “It’s just what? Spit it out.”

“Breana will be waiting for me. I said I would call for her this evening and to wait at the end of the driveway.”

Theo groaned again. Could this get any more cliched and ridiculous? And would Breana Starling really let herself be drawn into such a scandalous mess? Despite her youth and inexperience, he had thought better of her.

“I will go and see her myself,” he said. “I haven’t got time to tell you what a fool you are right now. I must go at once.”

Francis stepped aside. “Good luck!” he called as Theo hurried down the stairs and outside.

Dusk was falling. Soon it would be dark, but he needed to make as much time as possible. And now he had Breana Starling to worry about. He would have to persuade her that she was making a terrible mistake.

A voice in his head asked him why she would choose Francis, anyway. What did his brother have to offer that he didn’t?

He wouldn’t go there. Not now. He had more important things to think of than his hurt pride.

Maybelle now arrived, red faced and eager to climb aboard the coach, her eyes suspiciously teary. “Your mother,” she began, and then let loose a torrent of French that did not at all sound complimentary.

“Yes, yes,” Theo said. “I agree entirely.”

Maybelle huffed and subsided into her corner.

The coach clattered out of the gates of Barton Manor, and he sincerely hoped it would not be for the last time. If only his father had seen reason earlier, or he had been more forceful, or they had never fallen into this fix in the first place.

But there was no point in wishing for things that might have been. He had to deal with the here and now.

And the first thing he needed to deal with was Breana Starling.

Chapter Six

Breana had been waiting for what seemed ages while Will paced about next to her impatiently. The coach was running late. She sat on her trunk, which lay at the road's edge, tapping her foot.

Just then, she felt a rumble through the soles of her shoes and saw the coach looming out of the fading light.

"At last," Will muttered.

The coach began to slow and then to stop next to them. Except it wasn't the stage to London after all, but something smaller and with only the coachman on the box in front of the four horses. Will strode to the door as it opened.

"Theodore?" he said, surprised.

Breana felt a little jolt go through her. She took a step toward her brother as Theo's large form descended from the coach. It was indeed Theodore Norris, complete with his usual frown. His gaze settled on Breana, and she could see once again that he was not happy with her.

"Will. Miss Starling," he said sombrely. "I am on my way to London."

Will glanced back at Breana. "My sister is catching the stagecoach to London," he said. "It is running late, which is inconvenient for me. I had a meeting with some tenants about..." He shook his head. "Never mind."

Theo gave her a searching look. "Miss Starling is going to London?"

"Yes, she is going to..." Will started to explain, but he was cut off.

"Perhaps I can be of service," Theo said. "If you would entrust your sister to me for the journey? My vehicle is far more comfortable, and she will reach her destination much sooner."

Will looked surprised, but no more than Breana. They exchanged a look. "Thank you, Theo, but I'm afraid I could not let her go without a chaperone," he said awkwardly.

"My mother's maid, Maybelle, is leaving Barton Manor. She is inside the coach and can act as chaperone."

How fortuitous, Breana thought. But there was something about the way in which Theo looked at her that made her uneasy. As if she had done something wrong and he was waiting for her to admit it.

"Well then, that is a stroke of luck!" Will said, sounding relieved. "The stage is so late it may well have broken down."

Breana wanted to tell him she'd prefer to take the stage, no matter how late it was, or how crowded and slow and rattly, but he was already shaking Theo's hand. He returned to give Breana a stern look and said in a low voice, "Behave yourself in London."

She found that insulting, but Theo was listening and so she had to pretend to be uncharacteristically subdued. Will climbed into the gig and headed back to Starling Hall, leaving her standing in the road, her trunk at her feet, and Theodore Norris holding the coach door open.

The coachman climbed down and was retrieving her trunk. There was nothing for it but to graciously enter the coach. But Theo stopped her in a gruff, angry voice.

"What on earth are you thinking? You are acting in the most reckless and foolish way imaginable."

"W-what?" she managed.

"Francis told me about your plans. I was coming to Starling Hall even though I could not believe you would be so *foolish*, yet here you are. Have you lied to your brother too?"

To her surprise, Theo's harsh words hurt her deeply. Tears stung her eyes, but anger dried them up again. "You know nothing. I am not—"

"Get in, Miss Starling. I am in a hurry."

"How *dare* you speak to me in such an obnoxious manner!"

“And if you think Francis will be meeting you in London, you are sadly mistaken. He will remain at Barton Manor until his wedding, under lock and key if necessary.”

There was something about Theo’s angry, intractable face, and the raw look of pain in his eyes that hurt her so much and made her furious. He thought so little of her that he assumed the worst of her in any situation. He did not know her, yet considered her a failure in every measure. If that was how he felt, then she would not dissuade him. As illogical as it was, she felt it a way to punish him for his lack of trust.

“You can’t stop me from doing as I wish,” she blurted, “and you can’t stop Francis either!”

“So you admit I can’t trust you not to run off? And I know I can’t trust Francis.” He looked at her and suddenly smiled, though there was no humour or kindness in it.

“Get in the coach, Miss Starling. You are coming with me to London so that I can keep a close watch on you.”

“I will not!”

“If you don’t, then I will pick you up and place you inside. Believe me, at this moment I am entirely capable of it.”

She said nothing, standing stubbornly on the step. Theo made a move as if to carry out his threat, and Breana made haste to scramble into the coach with an unintended squeak of alarm. The maid, Maybelle, was in there, her eyes very wide, but saying nothing. Theo followed behind, and Breana sat down in the spot farthest from Theo.

Once he had made himself comfortable, and with barely a glance at her, he tapped on the ceiling to let the coachman know they were ready to depart.

The vehicle moved forward with a jerk, then the horses quickened their pace. Breana sat in silence, shocked at what had just happened and wondering how on earth she had gotten herself into such a situation. She comforted herself with the thought that when they reached London, Theo would learn how wrong he had been. He would beg her forgiveness. That would be satisfying.

But until then...? Was she really going to allow him to continue to believe her to be such an idiot? The sensible thing to do would be to lay the truth bare before him. And she might have done so if at that moment he had not insulted her again.

“I had thought *better* of you, Miss Starling,” he said. “I am very disappointed.”

The anger that had begun to subside reignited, and she felt her cheeks heat. “Not as disappointed as I am in you, Mr. Norris,” she retorted.

“Miss Starling,” Maybelle hissed. “You must not speak like that to Mr. Norris. He is on his way to London to save his family and the home they live in. He is a good man.”

“Well, he is not being very good to me,” Breana retorted. Then, to her horror, her voice trembled. “He *immediately* thought the worst without even taking the time to ask me whether it was *true*!”

There was silence as she looked out the carriage window, ignoring them both. She risked a glance at Theo and found him frowning at her—of course he was! But there was something else in his expression that made her think her words had struck home.

She relented, just a little. “Are you really on your way to London to save your family and your home?”

Theo put his hands over his face and heaved in a breath. When he lowered them, he looked... shattered. Like a man who was at the end of a tether, desperate not to fall.

“I will tell you if you tell me truthfully whether you are planning to run away with my brother.”

Maybelle gave a squeal of shock, but they ignored her.

“Of course I am not!” Breana said, her voice ringing out.

Maybelle gave a gasp.

Theo seemed to relax a little. “I am glad to hear it, Miss Starling, because Francis is not the man for you.”

“That is not very complimentary to your brother,” she said mildly.

“I love my brother,” he retorted, “but I would not trust him to make you happy. Not even for a moment.”

“Oh? And who *would* make me happy?” Breana asked.

Theo opened his mouth, and then he closed it again.

She sighed. “I am not running away with your brother. Quite the opposite. He asked me, and I have never been more insulted in my life. That you think so little of me that you would believe me capable of such...” She stopped and took a calming breath.

“It just so happens that my friend Chloe Bennett has invited me to stay with her in London and that is where I am going.”

That frown was back. “You led me to believe... You wretch.”

“A wretch, am I? You are the one who so easily believed that I would agree to such an arrangement with your brother. It was no less than you deserved.” The hurt she felt at his accusation was obvious.

“I apologise. I jumped to a wrong conclusion. I believed you were under my brother’s spell, but I can see now you are far too sensible for that.”

It was nice to see him contrite, and Breana basked in the moment, even though she wasn’t completely sure she deserved it.

“No woman would be silly enough to run off with Master Francis,” Maybelle scoffed.

To Breana’s surprise, Theo smiled at that. “I couldn’t have put it better myself,” he said.

That was when she admitted that her sister Christine was right. Theo Norris *did* have a lovely smile.

Chapter Seven

SEVEN

Theo admitted he had been far too quick to believe the worst of Breana. His long-held belief that she was infatuated with his brother had made him jump to the wrong conclusion.

She was going to London to stay with a friend, and he had insulted her by believing she would do something so silly as run away with Francis. Now she looked at him as if she found him... Well, he wasn't sure *what* she was thinking, but at least it wasn't that he was repulsive and uninteresting.

Theo should be concentrating on the task at hand. He had to decide how best to approach the bank, how he would lay out his plans and persuade them to listen to him. To make them believe he was capable of what he was promising to do.

But was it already too late, as his father had said? He sincerely hoped not. He knew with every fibre of his being that he could make a success of the estate. It would be painful indeed if he wasn't even allowed to try. Mostly because it was his own fault for not forcing the issue sooner.

Breana's quiet voice interrupted his thoughts. "I would be very sorry if you lost Barton Manor."

Somehow, that was enough to draw the words out of him. "There is so much I want to do, if only they will let me. I want to make Barton Manor more like Starling Hall. A working farm, a profitable concern, instead of a place that sits idle as it has done for years."

"My brother works very hard," Breana admitted, as if just realising it herself. "Would that mean you would have to stay in Barton Lacey year round?"

"It would. The London house has been sold."

She looked startled at this news, and then sad. Theo wondered if he should have told her all of this earlier, and whether it might have made a difference. Not that he wanted her pity, but it was nice to have her empathy.

Her big blue eyes gazed into his. "I'm sure Will will help you, if you ask," she said. Then, with a smile, added, "He is very proud of everything he has achieved so far. All you need are a few words of flattery and he won't be able to stop telling you about it."

Theo gave a huff. "Justifiably proud. But thank you, Miss Starling. Let us see what happens first."

Breana glanced at Maybelle but she was dutifully not paying attention to the conversation, so she carried on.

"I don't believe the bank will refuse to let you make Barton Manor a profitable concern. If they see you are firm in your resolve to save your home and your family, and more than capable of doing so, then they should at least give you a chance. Who would buy Barton Manor, anyway? It is rather..." She seemed to be seeking a word that wasn't insulting, and he decided to put her out of her misery.

"In need of repair? Yes. Things have been let go for years. My mother makes sure the ballroom and supper room are sparkling, but as for the rest of the house... The ceiling in one of the bedrooms leaks and I am worried it is going to fall down, and the garden has become a wilderness, even the formal part."

He stopped himself. She did not want to hear this, but for some reason he wanted to tell her. Theo did not share his problems often, but it was easy to share with her, and her responsiveness encouraged it.

"At least Barton Manor is so big you can always find another bedroom," she said. "Starling Hall is so full we have to share rooms. My sister Christine sleeps in my room with me."

"Is that so bad?" he asked.

She sighed. "I suppose not. Will is building onto the hall, to give him and Molly some privacy. It would be rather awkward being a newlywed and having to share with someone else, don't you think?"

“Very awkward,” he agreed. “I hope whomever I marry enjoys the challenges I am facing. Probably there are not many ladies who will jump at that idea!”

It was meant to make her laugh. Instead, she looked thoughtful.

He decided it was time to change the subject. “Who is this friend you are going to stay with, Miss Starling?”

Breana’s expression brightened and she began to tell him about Chloe Bennett, the old school friend who now lived in London, and how much she looked forward to seeing her. She seemed a little self-conscious at times, as if her happiness was something she should hide because of his circumstances, but he urged her to talk. He found he liked to hear her voice and see her animated expression. She was a very vivacious girl, and just being with her had the effect of raising his spirits.

She is what you need in your life.

That might be true, but was this the moment to be considering his romantic future, if he had one? If he lost the house and land, he would have to return to London and his job, and it was unlikely he would ever see her again. It seemed his fate was in the hands of the bank, and wishing alone would not change things for the better.

Maybelle had fallen asleep. He had not wanted to take her to London with him, but in hindsight it was a brilliant move. Without the maid as chaperone, Breana would not have been allowed to accompany him in the coach, and he would have been very sorry to miss out on her company. They may have started off badly, but now it felt as if they could be friends.

He looked across at Breana, discretely observing her pensive expression. What was she thinking about? Not Francis, of course. He wouldn’t make that mistake again. He had thought her in love with his brother and tried, in his awkward way, to save her. But she hadn’t needed saving. Despite some of the situations she had gotten herself into and her flights of fancy, she was no nitwit. But she *was* young. Perhaps what she needed was a steadying influence.

He rolled his eyes. And *he* could be that influence? It seemed Breana was not the only one prone to whimsy. He was sure she would not be agreeable to that.

Once he had made his proposal to the bank, he would know how his future lay. Even if he lost the house and land, he still had that connection, so perhaps he could try to keep in touch with Breana. Friends was better than nothing.

But in his heart, he wanted more. So much more.

Breana found herself thinking deep thoughts, the sort she rarely allowed herself to ponder. She had begun to realise that, although a little bit boring, her life was stable and settled, and she was so very lucky. She never went without and did not worry about her future. Will had made certain his family—including his large number of siblings—were safe from the sort of domestic and financial chaos the Norris family were now experiencing.

How had she been so blind? She’d believed she could live a life of leisure with Francis, when in fact it would have been a life of debt and despair? She had wanted a fairytale rather than appreciating what was around her at Starling Hall. Looking outward rather than inward at the bountiful joys she already had. Surely that was where true happiness was found.

Breana hadn’t always been like that, but she was beginning to think that she had been a very silly girl of late.

On the occasions when she glanced up, she saw Theo’s dark eyes watching her, as if he wanted to read her thoughts. She was very glad he couldn’t.

Breana resolved to be better in the future. A better daughter and sister, and a better friend. Things would change when Molly and Will married. They could not expect poor Abby to do everything, which often seemed to be the case. She had not appreciated her elder sister nearly as much as she should, had never thought a great deal about what her life must be like. Abby carried considerable weight upon her shoulders, and endured it without complaint.

It was time for Breana to step up and do her part.

“You are quiet,” Theo said softly, with a glance at the sleeping Maybelle.

“Am I?” she said with a sigh. “I suppose I am indulging in some self reflection, Mr. Norris.”

“Ah. I do rather a lot of that myself.”

She smiled. Was that what all of those frowns were about? “Will I see you while you are in London?” she asked before she could stop herself.

He looked surprised. “You mean after the bank business? Do you want to see me?”

Breana’s cheeks heated as she met his gaze. “Yes, of course. I want to know what happens. I will be worrying otherwise.”

“Ah.” He looked away, and she wondered if he might be blushing too. “Then I shall of course call on you. Can you give me your friend’s direction?”

She did so, and he jotted it down in a notebook which he returned to his jacket pocket. “I will call when I can. Although you will no doubt be busy enjoying yourself,” he said, a little disheartened. Then, as if embarrassed by his words, he added, “You *should* enjoy yourself. You are young.”

She wondered how old he thought she was. “I am nineteen,” she said. “How old are you, Mr. Norris?”

“Twenty-five, though at the moment I feel decades older,” he added, meaning it as a joke, but it only made her wish she could make everything better for him.

“I feel a little older myself after all that has happened, Mr. Norris.”

“Do you think you could call me Theo?” he asked abruptly. “We know each other well enough now, and you already call my brother Francis.”

She smiled and saw that he was smiling back. “I would like that. If you will call me Breana.”

He raised one of his eyebrows, and she found she did not hate it as much as she used to. “Thank you,” he said. “Breana.”

Chapter Eight

EIGHT

It had been a long time since Breana had been to London and it was only the once. When she was a child, before many of her younger brothers and sisters were born, her parents had brought her, Abby and Will to the capital. She could not remember the details, only that it had been so exciting. She still remembered the amazement she had felt at the noise and the crowds and the famous buildings.

It was still exciting, but she did not quite feel the same wonder. Her thoughts were still engaged with what was happening to Theo, and whether he would manage to save his home. When the words had poured out of him in the coach, she had heard the determination and fear in his voice as he was driven to get what he wanted, and afraid he would not get the chance.

She wanted him to have that chance. Wanted it with all of her heart.

When she arrived at the Bennett household—Theo insisted on taking her to the door—Chloe was glad to see her, although she thought her friend looked a little pale. Despite what she had said in her letters, it turned out that the move to the prestigious new school had not been as successful as the family had hoped. Chloe missed the countryside and her friends there, but her main worry was her mother.

“You are so lucky to live in Barton Lacey,” Mrs. Bennett said, clutching Breana’s hand rather tight. “The air here is not all that pleasant.” She coughed, as if to give truth to her words.

Once Breana was settled in, Chloe took her for a stroll in the nearby park. “Mama is not well,” she said at one point. “She wants to return to Barton Lacey, or at least some quiet part of the country. But Father says he cannot leave just yet, and how would we live if he did not have a job? So we are stuck here for now, I’m afraid. It is very worrying, Breana.”

Breana expected it was. She then told her friend, in confidence, about the troubles facing the Norris family. Chloe had been shocked.

“I never would have suspected!” she declared. “Mrs. Norris never seemed to have a care in the world. It just shows you can never be certain of anything.”

“I do hope Theo can save them,” said Breana.

Chloe gave her a curious glance. “It was kind of Theo to offer you his coach for the journey to London. The stage can be so uncomfortable. The times I have ridden on it, I have been sick from the bumping and the swaying.”

“Yes, it was kind.” Breana smiled to herself, remembering. “And I am glad for the opportunity it afforded me. I do not think I knew Theo properly before, but he is a kind man.”

Chloe nudged her. “You like him.”

Breana was blushing now. “I do.”

Later that day, Theo called upon her at her friend’s home. Chloe was in the room with her, and after the usual pleasantries were exchanged, Breana could wait no longer.

“What did the bank say?” she asked, almost hopping from foot to foot. “I must know, Theo!”

He laughed, his dark eyes sparkling in a way she’d never seen before. “They have agreed to set aside their demands. For now, at least. I am to have a year’s grace, and by then I hope to have turned matters around. Well, more than hope. I *must* turn them around.”

Breana couldn’t stop smiling. “Oh, that is good news!”

Theo took a step toward her, and she wondered if he was going to take her hand in his, or perhaps even embrace her. He changed his mind, but Breana was sure he wanted to. And to her surprise, she realised she wanted to touch him. It felt natural to do so.

“I am very happy for you, Theo,” Chloe said.

Breana was now blinking away tears. “What happens next?”

“I shall return to Barton Manor, but first I will speak with my uncle and explain I can no longer continue my employment with him. He has been very kind, but I’m sure he can find himself a more suitable secretary. I’m afraid my mind has been occupied with other matters.”

Breana thought about him leaving, with her still here in London. It was odd, but she had been longing for the excitement of London and now she was longing for home. How things had changed!

Just then, Chloe was called away by a servant, leaving them alone. Breana felt suddenly shy and self conscious. She glanced up at him through her lashes. “I will look forward to seeing you again when I return to Starling Hall.”

“You can expect me to be there rather a lot,” he admitted, but he was smiling. “I will need to pick Will’s brains, if he will let me.”

“I’m sure he will be happy to help,” she said, and looked into his eyes. “As will I... If you need help... That is, if you want me to...” Her words became hopelessly tangled.

The next moment she was in his arms. She wasn’t sure whether she had moved first, or he had, or perhaps they both had together. It didn’t seem to matter because now that they were together, it felt perfect. It felt right.

His warm breath stirred her hair. She could smell his cologne, the same one Francis used. She fit nicely against him, and if he would just kiss her... That kiss in the library was still the pinnacle of kisses, but she was sure Theo’s would be almost as good.

“Of course I do,” he said at last. “Miss Starling... Breana... there is something I should tell you...”

She waited expectantly for his words, but Chloe chose that moment to return, and gave a little giggle when she saw them together. They hastily stepped apart. No more intimate conversation could be had that day, and Theo took his leave soon after.

Once he left the Bennett house, Theo looked up at the sky and smiled. It was cloudy and threatened rain, but as far as he was concerned, the sun was beaming down upon him. His day couldn’t get much better. The bank had given him leave to save Barton Manor and turn it into the sort of place he always believed it could be. He had held Breana Starling in his arms. And she had looked at him in such a way as to make him think she would welcome his attentions.

But before he began to pay court to her, he knew that he must tell her the truth about that kiss in the library. She needed to know it wasn’t Francis who had kissed her, but he was worried about the inappropriateness of the moment, of being swayed by his own weakness, and whether she would think him as bad as his brother. He should have told her before, but he hadn’t wanted to spoil the rapport that was growing between them.

Theo told himself he would have plenty of time to choose the right moment to tell her once they were back in Barton Lacey. There, he would have all the time in the world.

Chapter Nine

NINE

Theo wiped the sweat from his brow and caught his breath. He had blisters on his hands and his back ached. Had he really thought he would have time to dally with Breana when he got home? What a fool he'd been. In the six weeks since he had returned to Barton Manor, he had never worked so hard in his life.

He was no slug, but he was not used to physical work, other than riding his horse or some boxing when he was at school, and that was hardly work. Now he was repairing cottages with the men from the village he had employed, climbing ladders and hammering boards and setting tiles on roofs. And if he wasn't busy with that, he was out doing what he was doing now, digging trenches to drain the water from the boggy fields so they could once again be productive.

He couldn't afford to pay for others to do all of the work needed. To save money, he had to do as much as possible himself—though he needed some instruction, of course. He might be good with sums and adding up figures, but this was all very new to him. Will Starling had been an enormous help, happy to share his experiences and offer advice. Theo had soaked it all up.

Francis's upcoming marriage to Miss Ingram had been brought forward. Theo had heard no more arguments from his brother. And after spending a day helping paint one of the new cottages in readiness for a tenant, Francis had set off to London to use his wiles on his wife-to-be. He must have been successful, because the wedding was to take place in a week's time.

Making plans for Francis and his new wife gave Mrs. Norris plenty to do. Miss Ingram's mother was an invalid, and needed Mrs. Norris's help, and she seemed quite cheery about it. At first, Theo's father had been glum about all the changes going on around him. To him, it was a reminder of his own shortcomings and his failure to heed his son's warnings. But recently he had begun to come around, and had even taken an interest in the livestock Theo had purchased to start his herds.

"Well!" he had said, standing at the newly repaired fence that looked out over the fields. "It looks like it did in my grandsire's time. He was a farming man, you know. It must be in your blood, son."

Theo took that as high praise.

His mother, while appreciative of his efforts, did not like to think of what she considered the high social cost. "Such a shame you have to work with your hands," she had sighed, when she glanced up from sorting wedding invitations.

Theo had held up his hands, currently scarred and bloody, and she had shuddered.

"You will wear *gloves* at the wedding, I hope?"

Theo sighed and said he would.

At night he fell into bed completely exhausted, only to be up at dawn again the next morning. But the tide was beginning to turn, and with every step forward it was clear that his efforts were sending them in the right direction. He *could* turn Barton Manor into the working farm it had once been.

His younger brothers were still at school, but he wasn't sure for how much longer. His uncle had kindly taken over the payment of the school fees, so they could stay for now. Theo wondered if *they* expected to be gentlemen when they returned home and smiled to himself, as he imagined the looks on their faces if he handed them a shovel each and explained to them the reality of their futures. Although, fun as that would be, he suspected neither of them would end up working on the farm. His uncle was already planning to offer one of them a job, replacing Theo as his secretary.

Breana had returned to Starling Hall a fortnight since, but he had not seen her, other than briefly, and not to talk to. Not properly. She had smiled at him when he came to seek her brother's advice, carrying in a tray with tea and cake upon it, and paused to ask after his family. But Will had been impatient, and keen to get back to the business they were engaged in.

Molly and Will's wedding was only two weeks away, and Theo had received an invitation. His parents had also been invited, but Francis had wisely declined after Theo had a word with him. The last thing they needed was his brother making

eyes at Breana over the wedding cake. Besides, Theo had decided the wedding would be the place to speak to Breana properly and confess about the kiss.

And then, the day before the wedding, he received a note.

Dear Theo,

Please meet me by the pear tree in the old orchard at Barton Manor at two o'clock.

Your friend,

Breana Starling.

He sat smiling at the letter for some time, the paper crinkling in his hands. He didn't know what she wanted to meet him about, but the very idea that she had taken the trouble to set them a tryst gave him a warm, happy feeling. Even just to see her lovely face would be enough. Although, it would also be the appropriate time to mention the kiss, and that may not make him, or her, very happy.

He was ready well before two o'clock and took a leisurely stroll down toward the orchard. He looked over his lands with pride in what he'd accomplished so far, but recognised how much work there still was to do. At Starling Hall there were fruit trees and vegetable gardens, all providing food for the people who lived there. He wanted to do the same, and in time, he would.

Theo was already well ahead of the bank's predicted timetable, and he hadn't run out of steam yet. In fact, with every task he completed, his enthusiasm grew for the next challenge. It would not be easy, and he would not always feel this positive, but today he was in a good place and was determined to enjoy it.

And if Breana chose to enjoy it with him, he would be very happy indeed.

When she had sent the note, Breana hadn't been sure whether Theo would meet her or not. She had grown impatient, tired of waiting for a serendipitous moment when they could be together, just the two of them, so she had taken matters into her own hands.

She understood why it was difficult, and she had been willing to wait up to a point. She needed to *be* with him, even if it was only for a few minutes.

She missed him.

Now she stood by the old pear tree, the same one where she had waited for Francis. She had been a very different girl then, her head full of silliness and fantasies.

And now? Well, it wasn't as if she had learned to love making jam and weeding the vegetable garden, but she understood these were tasks that had to be done. She was helping Abby far more than she used to, and Abby—not the most emotive of people—had been so grateful she had given her a hug. Which made it feel as if her efforts were worthwhile. But there were times when she missed her daydreams. Lately she had learned to channel them into the more practical parts of her life, and that had felt good.

For instance, Theo's farm and how she could help him to improve his kitchen garden. When she had mentioned some of her ideas to Will he had shrugged and said he was too busy to listen to her. That had hurt, because Breana was genuinely trying to be helpful.

Theo strolled toward her, his tall figure moving gracefully, and to her relief he was smiling. The breeze stirred her hair—she had forgotten her bonnet—and she could feel the chilly promise of autumn in the air. Summer would be over soon, the year moving on as it always did, but Breana would never forget *this* summer.

“Breana,” Theo said as he reached her. His gaze slid over her. She was wearing the same blue dress she’d worn when she was waiting for Francis, and her cheeks felt flushed with the pleasure of seeing him here. “I am so glad to see you. I meant to visit, but I have been—”

“Busy,” she cut in. “I know. I understand. But I needed to see you without Will talking about improving your sheep or cows or whatever it is this week.”

He laughed, looking so carefree her heart swelled with happiness for him. “It will get better,” he assured her. “When the winter comes, there will be less to do, so long as none of the tenants’ roofs spring a leak.”

“You know, Will isn’t the only one with ideas.”

“Oh?” He gave her a puzzled look but at least he wasn’t telling her he was too busy to listen.

“I can’t say I care for half the things the two of you talk about, but I know a little about gardening. There are many crops you can grow in the winter rather than leaving the ground fallow. Not just Brussel sprouts,” she pulled a face, “but other more interesting vegetables like...” She thought a moment, and then smiled. “Like leeks and parsnips, even lettuce grows well in the cold, if a little slowly. You could make a walled garden, to keep out the worst of the weather.”

She could see it in her imagination, and was so busy explaining it to him she didn’t realise she had been monopolising the conversation.

But Theo didn’t appear bored. He looked impressed. “Hasn’t Will followed your advice?”

Breana’s smile went awry. “Everyone is always so busy at Starling Hall and they think my head is in the clouds most of the time.”

“You have a vivid imagination,” he said gently, “but that is one of the reasons I enjoy your company. You lift me out of my hum drum life. And your idea about the garden is a good one. I will put it into practice exactly as you described it.”

Breana flushed with pleasure “Perhaps I can help?” It was a question because despite knowing what she felt, she wasn’t sure he felt the same. The words had never been spoken between them.

“I would like nothing more. In fact, I wondered...” He hesitated. “Is it too soon to ask if you might do me the honour...”

Breana stepped closer until they were only inches apart. “It isn’t too soon,” she said.

His dark eyes warmed and he bent his head. Their lips touched, a mere brush, but it felt like a promise. She slipped her arms about his neck and he rested his hands at her waist. He leant in again. This time his lips pressed to hers, his tongue sliding along the bottom one, so that she gasped in surprise and pleasure.

This kiss was longer and certainly more masterful, full of intent. Not here and not now, but for the future. When it was over, she rested her cheek against his chest, breathing in that cologne.

“Breana,” he said, his voice so close it was a rumble in his chest. “I have something to tell you. Do you remember the night of the Spring ball? You went into the library to hide from Francis.”

She stiffened. How did he know about that? She swallowed and peeped up at him through her lashes. She could deny it, make up a story, but she was done with that. “I remember,” she said. “I hid in the cupboard. There was a stone head with snakes instead of hair.”

He laughed softly. “Yes, an ugly thing. So you *do* remember?”

“I hid there for ages, waiting for Francis, before I knew the sort of man he was. Eventually he came and kissed me there. It was my first such kiss. I suppose he told you all about it.” But even as she said the words, doubts began to form. “Although, he kissed me in the rose garden some weeks later and it wasn’t nearly as nice.” Her eyes widened, a new theory emerging. “It was *you*, wasn’t it? Just now, when you kissed me, it reminded me of that night in the library.”

Theo gave a laugh that was close to a groan.

She buried her face in his chest. “It *was* you!”

“Yes, it was.” He tipped her chin up and spoke in a heartfelt way that made her want to melt into a warm puddle. “I saw you go in there and didn’t want Francis to take advantage of you. So I went after you to warn you off. However, before I could declare who I was, you suggested I kiss you. And, in a moment of weakness, I did. I apologise, it was...” He shook his head. “The truth is, I had been wanting to kiss you for a long time, Breana. Long before the library. But you seemed to prefer my brother.”

“Only because I didn’t know him properly. And, at the time, I didn’t know you at all.” Then, feeling a smile warming her face, “Have you really wanted to kiss me for so long?”

“Yes.”

She stood on her tiptoes and he bent down. Their lips caught and held once more, this time going on for much longer. Breana was very lucky to have found a man who could kiss so well. Or perhaps it wasn’t some magical skill he possessed, but rather the everyday magic of them being compatible. No awkward bumping of noses, just pure delight.

He took her hand in his. “Will you come back to the house with me?” he asked. “I want to tell my parents that they are about to have another wedding. Of course, I will ask your father’s permission first.”

“I think he will be more than happy to agree,” Breana said. “One less Starling in Starling Hall.”

Theo smiled but his thoughts had wandered elsewhere. They walked for a time toward the house, hands clasped, before he found the right words.

“Breana, I cannot promise you that our lives will have the sorts of things you hope for, full of social engagements or endless afternoons picnicking on the lawn. Barton Manor will never be like that again, I fear. But if you are willing to stand by me, help me through the difficult times ahead, then it would make me the happiest man in the world.”

Breana sighed, but it was a happy sigh. “I find I don’t much care about those things the way I used to. I care about you, and I want to be with you through those difficult times, and the good times, for I am sure there will be many of those.”

His eyes grew bright with tears as he kissed her again, and they held each other tight, making promises for their future.

The Spring Promise

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Sara Bennett is an Australian bestselling author of Historical Romance. She has written many books set in various time periods—Medieval, Regency and Victorian—as well as Paranormal Romance under the name Sara Mackenzie.

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A Most Sinful Proposal (Husband Hunters Club 2)

To Pleasure a Duke (Husband Hunters Club 3)

Sin with a Scoundrel (Husband Hunters Club 4)

Wicked Earl Seeks Proper Heiress (Husband Hunters Club 5)

Miss Debenham's Secret (Husband Hunters Club novella)

Mockingbird Square series (Novellas)

Unforgettable (Book #1)

Enraptured (Book #2)

Surrender (Book #3)

Reckless (Book #4)

Mockingbird Square series 2

Fascination (Book #1)

Seduction (Book #2)

Temptation (Book #3)

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Pendleton Manor Series

Meant To Be

Romancing the Dukes

Dreaming of a Duke Like You

My Secret Duke

Second Chance Prince (May 2026)

Disgraceful Duchesses Series

Seducing the Duchess

Tempting the Duchess

Dalliance with the Duchess

A Duke By Any Other Name Anthology

The Duke's Difficult Daughter

The Starlings of Starling Hall

The Spring Promise

A Summer Romance