

## CHAPTER 1



Grace was running down a twisted path. Her legs felt stuck deep in mud and she could hear her sisters calling for her through the trees. Her brother was beside her. “You’re failing us, Grace,” he accused her then fell back and it was her parents on either side.

“You’ll never make it, Grace,” her father said as he walked calmly beside her while she struggled.

“You won’t save them.” From her mother. Her voice was so sad and so missed, Grace wanted to weep. She woke in a sweaty tangle of sheet and night gown, her breath coming in short pants and her stomach queasy and empty, making her retch. She climbed from her bed and went to the open window and took several deep breaths to calm and steady herself then went through her problems, or rather, duties for the day. Her stomach grumbled. Right, breakfast first. At least that she could do.

She washed and dressed in a serviceable gray dress that began its life lavender. Her half mourning for her parents had been over for several years now, but money for new gowns was a luxury she couldn’t afford. Besides, she had finished growing anyway, it was

her younger siblings who needed new clothes for their growing bodies.

She twisted her long golden blonde hair around her hand and pinned it up in a simple knot in back and left her room to go downstairs to the kitchen. Lighting a lamp, she opened the pantry hoping some friendly fairy had gifted them with food and supplies overnight, then sighed as she pulled out a half a loaf of bread and a small piece of smoked ham wrapped in cheesecloth and the last three eggs; their laying hen had gone into the soup pot last night.

Grace bent to light the stove. Once she had it burning, she went outside with the milk pail and found Isabelle. Her sleepy, big brown bovine eyes made Grace smile. "Good morning, beautiful," she said to the old cow, giving her a pat and sat on the little stool to milk her. Only a quarter of a pail could be coaxed from her ageing teats and Grace felt a chill trace her spine as she realized the milk would be gone in a matter of days. She filled the water trough and gave Isabelle her breakfast and another pat on the rump.

She had to resist the urge to weep for tears would accomplish nothing. They only had two months to go until they received their yearly stipend from her cousin. She felt a wave of despair crash over her, but shook it off with a ruthlessness she hadn't known she possessed and marched back inside.

She pulled down the skillet and cracked the eggs into it and gave them a stir. She cut the ham into small chunks and added them to the eggs along with some dried parsley and basil from their garden and stirred until they were light and fluffy. Removing the skillet and setting it down on the worn counter top she cut the bread into thin slices and laid them on the hot cooktop to toast.

"Morning, Gracie," William, her fifteen-year-old brother said, stifling a yawn as he sat down at the table. "Can I help?"

"No thanks, I'm good." Grace smiled, placing a bowl of eggs and a plate of toast on the table. She poured him some milk then peeled a cucumber and sliced it along with a large ripe tomato and arranged them on a plate as well.

The ten-year-old twins, Emily and Elizabeth, came down and sat grumpy faced at the table. Grace poured them all milk then sat down to eat. When breakfast was finished Grace asked Will, "So what are your plans for today?"

"I am helping Mr. Roberts build a new fence. He said he'd pay me. I'll take my gun and maybe manage to shoot us a rabbit or two for dinner."

Thank you, God, she sent up to heaven. "That would be wonderful, Will." Turning to the girls she said, "You two have lessons this morning and after that we will work in the garden." More grumbles answered her, and Grace smiled. Her youngest siblings were never very communicative for at least an hour in the mornings.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you last night," Will said tucking his feet into his too small boots and shrugging into his worn and patched coat. "Lord Somerset returned to the country house. I heard it from Mrs. Miller yesterday when I popped in at the general store.

"Aiden is in residence? My goodness how could you forget to say something?"

"If you recall, I had to kill a chicken when I came home and that rather held my focus."

Grace smiled grimly at her beloved brother. He was a healer, not a killer. He should be in school, but they desperately needed the money he earned doing odd jobs around the village.

Aiden Sommers, Lord Somerset was in town. This opened whole new opportunities. Other than the penny a week she earned reading to Mrs. Bisbee every Sunday, there were precious few jobs available for young, unmarried women in the village.

Grace glanced at the battered old clock and saw it was eight o'clock. She would have to wait until at least noon before she could pay a call. Feeling optimistic for the first time in weeks, she settled the girls at the table and set them to doing math problems for the first twenty minutes. Then they switched to reading aloud from a

battered old history book while Grace washed the dishes and swept the floor.

She wasn't the best teacher, but she also wasn't the worst. The girls really needed a proper governess, she thought grimly. Something else to add to the list. Another twenty minutes of math then the girls ran around the table and out the door Grace held open for them. She called out to remind them they only had five minutes then on to French. Chuckling over their energy, she fetched her sewing basket and worked on mending while the girls told her a story in French about a princess trapped in drudgery, forced to cook and clean until her handsome prince showed up to rescue her.

Grace sewed a button on Will's shirt and wondered when her prince would show up. He didn't even have to be a prince. She would settle for a baron if he was able to afford a cook and a couple of housemaids. Close enough to noon, Grace put the girls in the garden to pull weeds and harvest anything ripe then ran upstairs to change her dress.

She was startled to realize she had not seen Aiden since he came from London to attend his own parents' funeral two years ago. Their families had been great friends since she was just a girl. She and Aiden had often played together, though he was a few years older than she.

She donned her Sunday best—a rich blue velvet, several seasons out of date, but still in decent condition. She brushed her long golden blonde hair and arranged it in a fetching top knot, then pulled a few curling tendrils down at her temples to soften her face. She was very proud of her hair. She was the only child with her mother's fair coloring, her siblings favoring their father's dark looks. She loved how it looked with her peach complexion and how it gleamed like sunshine in the light. It was a mixed blessing, however. She thought of it as a reserve fund. If things ever got really bad, she could sell it. Thank goodness it hadn't yet come to that.

She grabbed her cloak and pulled on her half-boots then went back down the stairs. She said good bye to her sisters and traveled the well-worn path through the woods to the Somerset country house on the other side.