

The Reluctant Mistress

By

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CHAPTER ONE

Devonshire, England, 1817

Charlotte Merrow winced as the coach lurched over another hole in the rutted road. It was nearly noon, and her stomach grumbled. She had drunk a cup of coffee at the inn, but with no extra money in her purse, had gone without breakfast. The coach swayed as it sped up, and Charlotte hung on to the strap, her lips pressed tightly together. At least, with an empty stomach, there would be nothing to throw up.

The coach turned onto a narrow road, overhung by tall trees that brushed its roof. The sun flashed through the foliage at intervals, creating a pattern of sun and shadow that soothed her churning thoughts. She did not want to be here, on the edge of Dartmoor, headed to a new position in a household of strangers. It wasn't as if she had any choice. Her aunt had been quite explicit on that head.

"You will have to leave my house, Charlotte. I cannot have the total collapse of your morality infect your cousins. They are both young and impressionable."

As if she had some contagious disease. Her aunt had always been a hard woman.

"But where will I go?"

Without any money of her own, Charlotte was wholly dependent on her aunt and uncle. Now, they were casting her off.

Aunt Margaret's mouth tightened. "I should make you leave with only the clothes on your back. It's what you deserve. But I swore an oath to your mother that I would take care of you. I have found you a position as governess to two children living in the countryside. Everything has been arranged. I trust you will behave like a decent Christian woman while you are there."

"A governess? But I've no training..."

Her aunt cut her off. "You have often helped the children with their lessons, and you graduated from Miss Parkin's Seminary. Your new employer is satisfied with your credentials. That is all that need concern you. My maid has started your packing. You will go and assist her."

When Charlotte simply stood there, stunned by the turn of the events, her aunt's voice

turned sharp. "You are dismissed, Charlotte. You need not dress for dinner; you will eat in your room. I will bid you goodbye in the morning. You are not to speak to your cousins again."

Charlotte trailed up to her room. It was tucked away on the third floor, marking her position as an unwanted relative. She wouldn't miss this house; she had hated it here, especially once her aunt had made it clear that she found her useful only as a kind of unpaid servant. Margaret was quite unlike her mother.

Mama had been so bright and pretty, charming those around her without effort. "Look, Charlotte! I found a bird's nest. See their little heads popping up as they look for food? Aren't they darling?"

Charlotte and her mother had wandered the fields and lanes around Merrow House, her father's small estate, in all weathers, hand-in-hand. Papa had often been away on business, and when he was home, he was usually busy and aloof. But Mama had made up for all that. Her childhood had been happy and safe, until that dreadful night when her parents didn't come home. Their phaeton had overturned on the road, and they had both been killed.

Merrow House was shut up, and Charlotte was sent to live with Aunt Margaret and their family in Exeter. Her husband was a well-off solicitor, but Lady Margaret Farrell was generally supposed to have married beneath her. Perhaps that was what made her so fanatical about appearances. In fact, most memories of life in her aunt's house were of her lectures and strictures.

"Sit up straight, Charlotte. Your posture is a disaster. Why must your appearance always be so slovenly?"

"You must never smile at strangers. It is unbecoming, and quite beneath a girl of your birth."

"You must not run about on the grass like some hoyden. What would other people think if you were seen behaving so wildly?"

And, most of all: "You must never be alone with a young man, no matter how charming he is. Unless you have received a proposal of marriage, a man will only want one thing from you—your virtue. And without that, you will have no character and no reputation."

Unfortunately, Charlotte should have listened to that last one. Then she wouldn't be in the fix she was in today. The coach shuddered to a stop, and the door swung open.

"Welcome to Herleston House, miss."

Simon Eliot, Lord Herleston, whistled to the dog as it bounded through the shrubbery. Rex had a penchant for invading the kitchen garden, which enraged his cook and sent his gardener into despair. The dog ran to his side, panting furiously. Simon pulled his silky ears through his fingers.

"Bad dog."

The dog's ears pricked. He knew the words, but his master's tone was not angry. So he licked Simon's hand and trotted along beside him.

When his land agent had told him the rumors about someone squatting in the old cottage on the edge of the estate, Simon had been curious enough to go and investigate for himself. He had found the cottage empty, but the small hearth held the remains of a recent fire. It must have been some transient, trying to find a dry bed for the night. It seemed that whoever it was had moved on. He would have someone keep an eye on the cottage, just in case.

Simon reached the graveled half-circle in front of the house. He heard the rumbling of the coach a few minutes before it topped the rise leading down to the gates. He squinted in the morning sun. Yes, it was his carriage, dispatched to fetch the new governess from the inn in Okehampton. The children had been running wild for months, so that was one problem solved. Their old governess had been with them since George was born, leaving a few months before to marry a childhood friend. Simon could only hope the new woman would be as competent.

The coach bowled up the drive. Jenkins, the coachman, waved his whip in a salute, and Simon nodded. The coach rolled to a stop in front of the entrance, and Jenkins dismounted, throwing the reins to the stable boy who ran up to assist him. Jenkins opened the door of the coach and pulled down the steps, before extending his hand to the passenger inside.

"Welcome to Herleston House, miss."

The woman who stepped down from the coach was young, her neat figure displayed by a green pelisse that was well-made, but not fashionable. Her straw hat was tied with green ribbons, its brim concealing her features as she lifted her face to survey the house. Would she be impressed with his home, or would she think it a medieval pile? She let her hand fall, and Simon stopped in his tracks. This was never going to work—she was far too pretty.

He was close enough to see her complexion, a fine creamy skin that deserved to be

touched. Her mouth was lovely, too, with rosy lips, the lower one fuller. A mouth made for kissing. Her eyes were an unusual shade of amber, very nearly the same color as the curls tucked into her hat.

Simon walked towards her, feeling like he was wading through treacle. In contrast, his every sense was on high alert. As he drew nearer, he fancied he could even smell her, the scent of freshly-pressed cotton and lilacs. Clearly, he had been too long without a woman.

"My lord," Jenkins greeted him as he swung the lady's trunk off the coach.

What the devil was her name? Simon was so captivated by her face, that he clean forgot it. She turned to look him over, an appraising gaze not unlike the one she had used on his house.

"How do you do? I am Herleston."

Her eyes widened—did he look so disreputable—before she curtsied. "How do you do, sir? I am Miss Merrow, the new governess."

The sunlight fell into her eyes as she straightened, turning them to pure gold. He was dazzled, until he realized everyone was waiting for him.

"Welcome to my home. I hope you will be happy here."

Her fingers tightened on the string of her reticule. "Thank you, Lord Herleston. I am pleased to be here."

Simon didn't think that was true. On closer examination, and that was a pleasure, he could see faint blue shadows beneath those astonishing eyes.

"You are tired, of course, after such a journey." He beckoned to Mrs. Dow, his housekeeper, who came puffing down the steps to greet them. "Mrs. Dow will show you to your room. You will need time to settle in." He hesitated for a moment. "If you would join me for dinner, we can discuss the children then."

Simon walked past her into the house, while the staff rushed to carry out his orders. Why had he asked her to dinner? An interview in his study or the schoolroom would have served his purposes. This woman seated across from him, bathed in candlelight, well, that was an invitation for disaster. Only sheer will had kept his cock from swelling his breeches while he spoke to her. He would keep his distance after tonight. She was his employee, not his concubine. That was the wrong word to spring to mind, because he was now fully erect. He passed down the corridor to his study. It was early for brandy, but he needed a drink. He was a baron, not some lusty stripling with nothing on his mind but a good fuck. But he could not deny that something about Miss

Merrow called to him.

The housekeeper showed Charlotte to a small room tucked under the eaves. The schoolroom lay across the landing. When Charlotte said she would unpack her own things, Mrs. Dow curtsied and left. The room was simply furnished with a single bed, wardrobe, desk and chair, but everything was clean and well-cared for. Two windows overlooked a rose garden. Yes, she would try to be happy here.

Lord Herleston was not at all the man she had expected him to be. Charlotte had imagined someone older, gray-haired and fatherly. Not this tall broad-shouldered man with light brown hair, styled in a Bedford Crop, and penetrating blue eyes. She supposed that he would be considered handsome by most, with those high cheekbones and firm chin. But it was Lord Herleston's air, his presence, which Charlotte found intriguing. Of course, as the lord of the manor, he would be in command of every situation. But when Lord Herleston had looked at her, his gaze measuring, Charlotte had the impression that, for once, she was not found wanting.

How ridiculous she was, tired and on edge, at the end of what had been a trying and humiliating episode, in a life already chock full of them. Though not anywhere near the spectacular mess she had made with Edward Martin.

Charlotte had been flattered by Edward's attentions. They met in the park by chance, and walked under the trees while her aunt's footman shadowed them.

He was everything that she was not—witty, cultured, and fashionable. Charlotte was the unwanted relative, dressed in quality but plain clothing, and warned never to overshadow her cousins. But Edward had smiled at her, and her heart fluttered. She had smiled back.

She was scolded for that, of course, but she couldn't care. Not while Edward charmed and wooed her, for he did court her, despite what Aunt Margaret said later. Finally, at a country house party, he proposed to her. He was so sweet, so loving.

When he came to her room later, his kisses hot with desire, and promised to marry her, Charlotte couldn't resist her own responses. He had bedded her, and that was not so pleasant. His intrusion into her body hurt, though she had welcomed his embrace at first. He had apologized, but that hadn't stopped him from taking his own pleasure. He had grunted his satisfaction as he

thrust into her. She had cried at the end, and he had held her.

When she woke the next morning, Edward was gone. Charlotte learned later that he had asked her uncle's permission to marry her, and been denied. She was underage, with her only fortune—and it was not large—tied up in her father's estate, now leased to tenants. Charlotte was distraught. What if there was a child? Then, the next worst thing had happened. Aunt Margaret's maid told her aunt that she had seen Edward leaving Charlotte's room at dawn. Hauled in front of her aunt, Charlotte had broken down and confessed. She had been bundled back to London in disgrace, and she had never heard from Edward again, but the damage had been done. Aunt Margaret called her a fallen woman and informed Charlotte that now her virtue was lost, no decent man would ever marry her.

She was nineteen years old and her life was ruined. She knew the fate that befell most governesses. Neither fish nor fowl, they existed in a kind of limbo. Considered more high status than a servant, none of the other staff would befriend her. And, not being family, she would be cut off from that social sphere as well. She would be a drudge, ill-paid and beneath notice for the rest of her life.

Charlotte collapsed on the bed. She would cry, except all her tears had already been shed. Enough. Mama would be ashamed to see her so spiritless. Perhaps the children would give her life meaning and direction. She had enjoyed her studies; she could try to imbue them with the same love of learning. Unless they hated her on sight. Goodness knows her cousins had always treated their own governess poorly, with frogs in her bed and pins on her chair.

Though Lord Herleston did not look like the kind of man to put up with such nonsense. No, what was she thinking? He wouldn't help her. Most men left the child-rearing to their wives and servants. He was married, Aunt Margaret had told her, but lived apart from his wife. Perhaps Lady Herleston was ill. What would a virile man like his lordship do without a wife? He probably had a mistress, or several of them. A man would not have to suffer without companionship, without the touch of another. He could take any number of women to his bed, and no one would speak against it. In fact, such behavior was expected from an aristocrat, bred from the cradle to have exactly what he wanted.

Edward would not suffer from bedding her, though there might be whispers. No, it was Charlotte who was ruined and disgraced, as if she had been branded on the forehead and set apart from all virtuous women anywhere. Edward would find someone else to marry.

But Charlotte would never again be kissed or touched. Never feel a man caress her and call her his darling. Never achieve the fulfillment of the dark desires that overwhelmed her at times, when she dreamed of what it might be like to be bedded by a man of experience, to feel him thrusting deep inside her, until she climaxed, as he wrung every last drop of pleasure from between her willing thighs.

Heavens, what was she thinking? She was a proper girl, in spite of what had occurred with Edward. She should not think like this. She should not have these feelings. And she must especially not have them about her new employer. Whatever would he think if he knew her perverse yearnings?

Miss Merrow was shown into the dining room promptly at seven. As before, she was neatly attired, this time in a tasteful gown of bronze silk cut too high across her bosom for his liking. He would have liked to see more of that creamy skin.

"Thank you for inviting me to dinner, my lord."

"The pleasure is mine, Miss Merrow. Will you sit?"

Simon pulled out a chair adjacent to his. As she sat down, he bent forward to smell her hair. Lilacs. His cock stirred, and he made himself step back. He could conquer his lust for the little governess.

They ate a white soup, removed with fillets of sole served with artichoke hearts, while Simon made conversation about the house and the estate. Miss Merrow was a good listener, her expression open and attentive. He couldn't help being thoroughly charmed.

"Will you tell me about the children, Lord Herleston?"

Simon sipped his wine. "Their last governess was quite competent, and George appears to have a good grasp of reading and arithmetic."

Miss Merrow looked like she was waiting for him to say something else.

"Do they have hobbies? Do they enjoy the outdoors?"

Simon thought for a moment. "They like to be outside. As to their hobbies or other interests, I have no idea. I believe your predecessor, Miss Lyme, left a record of their achievements that you can peruse tomorrow. More wine?"

She shook her head. "When shall I meet them?"

Simon waved a hand. "They are visiting their grandmother tonight. Will tomorrow be soon enough?"

Miss Merrow blushed at the edge in his voice, a charming pink that colored her cheeks, and made him wonder how her bottom would look in that same shade. He supposed he couldn't spank her just for sitting there and looking so pretty, but his hand itched to do just that. It had been so long since he'd had a woman.

"That will be fine, my lord."

He was being rude, he supposed. After being absent from polite company for so many years, it was hard to dig up the memory of what proper manners looked like.

Dessert was Mrs. Appleby's attempt at a pie. As usual, the crust was dense and the filling bland. He was used to the cook's pastries, but poor Miss Merrow would suffer.

"What are the children's names, and how old are they?"

"George is seven and Leticia is four."

Simon didn't want to think about the children right now. He wanted to look at the creamy skin of Miss Merrow's lovely neck and follow its path to the hint of bosom that damned dress only hinted at. Her color was high, unlike many light-haired women, with coral-pink lips. Were her nipples the same shade as her lips? He longed to find out.

The bloody woman was asking him another question, but Simon had wearied of their conversation. He could think of much better uses for her mouth, like thrusting his cock deep inside to see how much of his length she could accommodate. As if a gently-bred woman would ever allow that. Though she *had* been sent here because of some scandal he didn't care about. There had been a young man, he remembered.

Perhaps Miss Merrow wasn't a virgin. That would be considered crime enough to get exiled to the depths of Devonshire. And if she was no longer innocent, why, then she might not be adverse to her master's attentions. Christ, what was wrong with him? He was as hard and randy as a sixteen-year-old.

"I beg your pardon?"

He had not been attending. Now, he really would appear rude.

"I was wondering if the children had any particular friends in the neighborhood."

"None. The nearest neighbors have no children. We are rather isolated here, as you will

see."

Miss Merrow was silent for a moment. "The children are close, then?"

Simon shrugged. "As any siblings are, I suppose. Leticia is a bit of a handful—very high spirits. George is quieter, but he can be as naughty as any little boy. Nothing you cannot manage, I am sure. I understand you had the care of your young cousins for several years."

"I did."

She looked as if she wanted to say something else, but took a sip of wine instead. Confidences were not forthcoming, apparently. She would come to trust him soon enough, and then, she would be his to command. He quite looked forward to it.

After dinner Lord Herleston invited Charlotte to have tea in his study. She accepted with some surprise. She had not expected to be welcomed at the master's dinner table or to take tea in private. Most governesses she knew led a lonely existence.

Lord Herleston invited her to pour the tea. It was freshly brewed and delicious, particularly after the indifferent fare at her aunt's house. He took a sip and asked Charlotte about her background. She had not spoken of her family in ages, and it was pleasant to sit in this comfortable room with its oak furniture and fine carpet with her new employer listening to her.

"Your pardon, Miss Merrow, but it would seem to me that your aunt behaved as though you lived with her solely by benefit of her charity. Did your parents not leave you their estate?"

"Oh, yes, but I was told there was little money. Only the house and farm and they are both let to strangers."

"So you have not received any offers of marriage?"

Charlotte blushed deeply. "Just one, but my uncle would not entertain it. He said he could not countenance the match."

"And you, Miss Merrow, did you want to marry this gentleman?"

"I did." Anything was better than living in her aunt's house.

"Strange that your uncle did not snatch at the opportunity to marry off a poor relation with very little expense to himself. I collect that you were not held in much affection."

He was very discerning, this new employer of hers.

"No, I am afraid not. I was considered a burden on the household. My aunt was my mother's elder half-sister, and I gather that they were never very close."

"Well, their loss is my gain. I feel sure that you will suit the children very well."

She blinked rapidly, to dispel the sudden tears that gathered there. It had been very long since anyone had spoken to her like this.

"Thank you, sir. It is kind of you to say that."

"I'm afraid, my dear Miss Merrow, that you will soon discover that I am not a particularly kind man. I believe in order and discipline, and do not countenance anything less, both from myself and from my staff."

"Of course, Lord Herleston."

"Are you a virgin, Miss Merrow?"

Charlotte froze. His question was like a slap in the face. Had her aunt revealed all her secrets?

"I asked you a question, and I expect an answer."

Charlotte moistened her lips. "I am not obliged to answer such an impertinent question, sir."

"You believe that a question from your employer concerning your moral character is impertinent? Miss Merrow, please recall that you have been hired to teach two young children."

Of course, he had the right to ascertain if she was proper enough to teach his children. But she quailed at the thought of telling him. What if he dismissed her, outraged by her lapse in judgment?

"I await your reply, Miss Merrow."

Charlotte swallowed. She closed her eyes for a moment and then met his gaze squarely. "No, my lord, I am not a virgin."

Something flared in his eyes, but she didn't know quite what it was. Disappointment or disgust? She dropped her gaze. A hard hand lifted her chin.

"You need not be ashamed, my dear. You thought you were to be married and acquiesced to the man's seduction. You are not the first or the last young woman to be used so ill."

"Will you dismiss me then, sir?"

Her voice quivered.

"Certainly not. You have, through circumstance, been forced to seek a new life. I am

pleased that new life will be spent here. I hope you will be happy in my house."

Charlotte felt a surge of gratitude. "Thank you, sir, for your forbearance. Indeed, I am not a light woman."

"Now that is the first thing you have said to disappoint me."

"I don't understand, my lord."

"You are a pretty young woman, living in my house, without the drawback of virginity. Your family doesn't want you back. I require a mistress. Perhaps we can come to an understanding."

Charlotte's mouth dropped open. She must have misheard him. "You cannot mean...you want me to become your mistress?"

Lord Herleston's smile was slow and ever so wicked. "I look forward to it."