

# CHAPTER I

Derbyshire, England

March 1884

Nolan Price scanned the fields of newly budding greenery that stretched as far as he could see and slowly inhaled the scent of grass, soil, and freshly spread manure. Warmth curled through his chest with a feeling of such intense satisfaction that he wished he could ring the village bell to let everyone know of his joy. This moment would remain etched in his memory as the day he'd finally taken a bold step toward his future.

His future with Hannah.

Nolan turned to see Mr. Simpson, the farmer who owned the property, coming up beside him. He was a small, wiry man, still full of energy that belied his advanced years.

"It's been good doing business with you, son." Mr. Simpson stretched out his hand. "I'm glad to see the place go to someone who will love it and nurture it the way I did."

"Thank you, sir. I appreciate this more than you know." Nolan shook the older man's callused hand. The hand of a farmer, seasoned by years of hard, honest work. The type of

life Nolan would soon become very familiar with. He held no illusions that his job as a groom in the Stainsby Hall stables these past eleven years had been in any way as arduous as the path that lay ahead. Still, he was prepared to trade in his life at the manor to become master of his own destiny and not the servant of a rich nobleman.

“You’re a smart lad,” the farmer said as they turned back toward the barn. “Saving up to buy your own land, a small piece though it might be. Me and my Sarah—God rest her soul—we had a good life here. I’m sure you and your young lady will too.” The man’s smile revealed several missing teeth. “You come by here at the end of the month, and we’ll take care of transferring the deed to your name. A short trip into Derby will take care of that.”

“I look forward to it.” Nolan settled his cap more firmly on his head and untied the stallion’s reins from the hitching post. “Thanks again, Mr. Simpson.” He pulled himself up onto King’s back and, with a quick nod at the farmer, set off down the lane toward the main road.

Partway along the path, he couldn’t resist looking back for one more glimpse at the property that would soon belong to him. A rush of pride filled his chest. Imagine being a landowner at the age of one and twenty. Not many men born into his station of life could boast the same.

Nolan smiled to himself. Not many men had such a strong incentive—a girl of uncommon beauty named Hannah.

He could recall with stunning clarity the exact moment he’d first met Hannah Burnham. A waif of a girl with sad eyes the color of new spring grass, she’d captured his heart from the very first glance. Even then, at the tender age of fourteen, he’d vowed that he would one day make her his wife.

The black steed snorted and tossed his head, a sure sign that

they were nearing home. Nolan tightened his grip on the reins and lifted his head. Sure enough, the tall peaks of Stainsby Hall became visible over the trees in the distance. Around the next bend, the estate's imposing structure—his home since his mother had come here eleven years earlier to take a position as housemaid—came into full view.

For the first time, Nolan found he could be objective in his assessment of the mansion and observe it as someone who would soon no longer call it home. Stone walls towered high above the tree line—the mansion's many turrets and peaks seeming to scrape the sky. Nolan would never describe the building as beautiful. Majestic, yes. Imposing, certainly. But there was nothing comforting or endearing about the structure. No warmth or sense of welcome.

Just like its owner.

The overbearing Earl of Stainsby was one person Nolan would *not* miss when he left Stainsby Hall.

Nolan glanced at the sun overhead and tried to gauge the time. A little before noon, if he calculated correctly. His half-day off was over. Time to get back to work. He gave King a gentle nudge and set the stallion to a swift trot. Soon, they had traveled the main road that led to the estate. On reaching the stables, Nolan swung down from the saddle and led King into the impressive building. The finest stable this side of London, Bert always said. And Nolan couldn't disagree.

Bert had been the blacksmith on the estate for over thirty years, and a better man Nolan had yet to meet. His chest tightened at the realization that leaving Stainsby meant he wouldn't get to see the burly Scotsman every day. He'd surely miss the big man and his words of wisdom.

Nolan grabbed a brush from the hook and began to smooth out King's black coat. Another shaft of regret sliced through

him. "I wish you could come with me too, boy. But even if I could afford to buy you, we won't have need for a stallion on the farm. Working horses only. Besides, I could never see you pulling a plow." He smiled at the ridiculous thought.

On a burst of fresh resolve, he grabbed a pitchfork and threw some clean straw into the stall. He would not allow any trace of disappointment to ruin this day for him. Instead, he focused on the happy fact that he'd soon be able to take his dear mother away from the hard life she endured here. As head housekeeper, she put up with long days, overseeing not only the underlings, but every detail of life in the manor. It was hard work, and her health had suffered as of late. This winter had been especially harsh, leaving her with a cough she couldn't seem to shake.

Nolan put King in his stall and latched the door, then returned the grooming brushes to their proper spot. If luck were with him, he might catch Hannah coming outside to sit under the tall elm for a break. He couldn't wait to give her the news that Mr. Simpson had agreed to sell him the farm and that they could soon be wed.

He hurried over to the water trough, scooped a handful of cool liquid, and splashed it over his dusty face. With damp fingers, he attempted to tame his wild locks into some semblance of respectability, then went to stand at the open stable door, his spirits lifting even higher at the possibility of a few stolen moments with the girl he loved. By all rights, he should have a ring for Hannah and propose to her properly. She deserved that much at least.

Well, ring or no, once they were both off duty tonight, he would tell her how much she meant to him and ask her to be his wife.

"Dinna tell me you're mooning over young Hannah again?"

The booming voice snapped Nolan to attention. He turned to find Bert McTeague standing behind him, grinning.

"I'm not mooning over anyone." Nolan fixed him with an annoyed glare.

The big man belted out a laugh, his blue eyes twinkling with merriment. "Ach, there's nothing wrong with eyeing a bonny lass. Wouldn't be normal if you didn't notice her. Especially now that spring's in the air." He winked at him. "Have you kissed the girl yet?"

Nolan jerked back from the doorway, heat infusing his neck. "No."

"What are you waiting for, lad? You're not getting any younger."

The broad-shouldered blacksmith had taken Nolan under his wing soon after Nolan had started as a stable boy. Maybe it was because he'd learned Nolan had no father, or maybe because he and his wife, Franny, had not been blessed with children. Whatever the reason, Nolan had forged a strong bond with Bert, who'd eventually become more friend than mentor.

Usually Nolan tolerated Bert's good-natured ribbing, but for some reason today it chafed.

"That's a private matter between Hannah and me. Besides, you know how his lordship feels about the servants . . . fraternizing," Nolan bent to pick up a forgotten piece of rope coiled on the dirt floor and returned it to its peg. "Sneaking a few moments to talk each day is risky enough."

"Ach, I'm sure there are many below-the-stairs romances going on under his lordship's nose," Bert said.

"Well, I'd never compromise Hannah that way. Nor bring shame to my mother." When Nolan and Hannah left Stainsby Hall, it would be on their own terms, not because the heartless earl had sacked them.

Bert's expression softened. "One of these days you'll learn to put your own needs ahead of your mother's."

“Nothing’s more important than Mum. She’s all the family I’ve got.” Nolan itched to tell Bert that he’d soon be able to rescue his mother from this life of drudgery, but he owed it to Hannah to hear the news first.

“You’re not still fretting over your lack of a father, are you? Because you’re a fine man in your own right.” Bert crossed his arms over his large chest, pulling the material tight on his muscled arms. “Finding out who sired you canna change that.”

The familiar ache that resided deep within Nolan reared its ugly head, fueling a rush of insecurity. Why couldn’t Bert understand Nolan’s need to learn the identity of his father? Sometimes he felt he’d never have peace until he knew where he came from. But Nolan didn’t intend to rehash that subject again. “You needn’t worry, Bert. I’ve put the issue to rest.”

*For now.*

Three years ago, Nolan had been prepared to leave Stainsby to seek the answer of his paternity, one his mother refused to disclose, but Hannah had begged him not to leave. Only his love for her had kept him from going. But one day, when the timing was right, he intended to travel to the town of his birth and solve the mystery of his parentage, no matter what the outcome.

A sound in the distance made Nolan’s pulse sprint. Eagerly, he scanned the expanse of lawn and spotted Hannah starting across the yard toward the chicken coop.

A slow grin stretched Nolan’s lips as he clapped Bert on the back. “If you’ll excuse me, my friend, there’s something I need to do before I get back to work.”



With a few minutes to spare after the midday meal, Hannah strolled across the grass, hoping the sunshine and the gentle afternoon breeze would lift the worry from her soul. She ducked

around the side of the chicken coop and took a seat on a wooden crate beneath the welcoming branches of the stately elm.

For a moment, she looked over at the lush Stainsby gardens with the majestic reflecting pond at its center and wished she could take refuge there among the fragrant spring flowers. But servants weren't allowed to linger in the gardens in case the master or one of his guests wished to partake of its loveliness. Perhaps one day she'd have a garden of her own, where she could sit and admire the blossoms whenever she wished.

Hannah's thoughts turned from daydreams of the future to the unsettling news contained in her mother's latest letter. The knot in her chest tightened as she removed the envelope from her starched white apron and drew out the pages she'd all but memorized. She skipped the beginning of the correspondence, which contained the usual description of life on her stepfather's farm, and skimmed to the part where her mother mentioned Molly.

*Now that your sister is of marriageable age, Robert has picked a suitable husband for her. Mr. Elliott lost his wife last year and needs someone to help with his children and the farm. Robert is most pleased to join with his neighbor to the south, since the combined acreage will be of benefit to both. Their betrothal will be announced very soon.*

Hannah's fingers tightened, crumpling the pages. It was bad enough to pledge Molly in marriage, but did it have to be to Mr. Elliott? Hannah had met the man briefly on her last visit to the farm. The image of a man with a straggly beard, a sweat-stained shirt that barely covered a large belly, and teeth blackened from tobacco came to mind. Worse than the man's appalling personal habits was the fact that he had to be approaching forty.

Just as Hannah feared, Molly had become a bargaining tool for her stepfather, sold to the highest bidder. How could her mother allow such an atrocity?

*Are you really surprised?* a bitter inner voice taunted. *Did she not ship you off into servitude around the same age?*

But back then, her mother had been desperate—widowed, penniless, and turned out of their home. She wasn't desperate now. She was the wife of Robert Fielding, farmer of over two hundred acres. This had to be *his* idea—that dreadful man who always put his own welfare above all else. Now he would condemn Molly to a loveless marriage with a man who would likely view her as his property. Much like how Mr. Fielding treated Mum.

Hannah lowered her face into her hands. *Please, God, help me to save Molly from such a terrible fate.*



Nolan rounded the side of the henhouse and stopped cold. The sight of Hannah seated on a chicken crate with her head in her hands had all thoughts of his happy news flying from his mind. Was she praying or crying? Either way, she seemed far from her usual cheery self.

“Hannah? What’s wrong?”

She raised misty eyes to his and blinked several times. “Nolan. I didn’t hear you.”

“No wonder. You seem rather preoccupied.” He pulled a handkerchief from his trousers and passed it to her.

She dabbed the white square of cotton to the corners of her eyes. Loose strands of blonde silk escaped her cap and clung to her damp cheek.

Tension coiled in Nolan’s stomach as he crouched in front of her. “It’s not that Bellows character, is it? If he’s bothering you again—”



“It’s nothing like that, I promise.”

A small measure of comfort eased the tension in his muscles. Nolan would be glad when he could claim Hannah as his wife, so all the eligible men, especially a certain shady footman, would leave her alone.

Hannah sniffed and returned the handkerchief to him, then twisted her hands in her lap, offering no explanation for her tears.

“If it’s not Bellows, then why are you crying?”

She lifted a letter from her lap. “It’s Molly.”

“What about her?” Hannah tended to worry overmuch about her younger sister, but not usually to the point of tears. “She’s not ill, is she?”

“No. It’s my stepfather. He’s arranged a marriage for her and is set to announce the betrothal very soon.”

Nolan frowned. “What is he thinking? Molly’s too young for marriage.”

“Mr. Fielding doesn’t seem to care.” Hannah slid the letter into the pocket of her apron. “I wish Mum would let her come here with me. At least then she could have a decent life, without having to look after some old farmer and his brood.” Her bottom lip trembled.

The need to comfort Hannah overcame the need for propriety. Nolan rose, tugged her to her feet, and with a quick glance around to make sure they weren’t being watched, he gathered her to his chest. She laid her cheek against his shoulder with a sigh.

His arms tightened around her, a fierce protectiveness rising up through him. How he wanted to promise her the world. Yet all he could offer was life as a farmer’s wife. He hoped it would be enough.

He rubbed her back in a soothing manner, inhaling the

scent of fresh bread and apples that always seemed to surround her. “We’ll find a way to help Molly. I promise. As soon as—”

“I know. As soon as we leave here.” She sniffed again, then her head snapped up. “Oh, I haven’t even asked how it went with Mr. Simpson.”

Despite Hannah’s distress, Nolan couldn’t withhold a giddy grin. “He accepted my offer. The farm will be mine at the end of the month.”

“Oh, Nolan. That’s wonderful. I’m so proud of you.” She squeezed him in a tight hug, then pulled away, a soft hue coloring her cheeks.

The admiration shining on her face humbled him. How had he ever earned the affections of such an incredible woman? He’d wanted to wait until a more opportune moment to propose, but maybe now was the perfect time. He turned her hand to press a kiss into her palm. A soft gasp escaped her lips, and her eyes widened.

*Have you kissed the girl yet?* Bert’s question echoed through his brain as Nolan’s gaze focused on her mouth. He knew he should resist, but heaven help him, it was way past time. His heart beat double time in his chest. He could almost imagine the sweet taste of her lips. His pulse thundered as he lowered his head toward her.

The swish of approaching footsteps in the grass beyond the henhouse snapped him to attention. Quickly, he released Hannah and took a step away. Surely the earl wouldn’t come looking for him here.

“Nolan! Are you there?” His friend Mickey’s urgent call echoed across the open air.

Relief trickled through Nolan. At least he needn’t worry that Mickey would fuel the servant gossip mill. His friend and fellow

stable hand abhorred gossip as much as Nolan. He stepped out into the open. "Here I am. What is it?"

Mickey Gilbert turned and jogged over, his linen shirtsleeves flapping in the breeze. Instead of his usual jovial grin, a frown creased his brow. "I'm sorry, Nolan. It's your mother."

The air in Nolan's lungs thinned. "What about her?"

"She collapsed in the kitchen. They've taken her to her room and sent for the doctor." Mickey's eyes filled with sympathy. "You'd best hurry. She's asking to see you."