

Part 1

Lutterworth, Leicestershire 1820

Chapter 1

The man stood in the doorway, silently watching for several minutes. *What is a servant girl doing in Father's library? Is she reading? And she is lounging in his favourite chair no less! What cheek! But she is an attractive wench, even in her servant's garb. Look at those golden ringlets and rosy cheeks. She is so engrossed in her book, she has absolutely no notion that I am watching her. I wonder if Father knows she is in here? She looks very dégage, as if she does this all the time.*

Florence's favourite place was this old leather chair in the library at Stanford Hall. Soon after coming to work here, she had begun to use it as her refuge, her sole means of escape from her life of drudgery. Today, a rainy afternoon some weeks after her sixteenth birthday, her chores were finished and she decided on another stolen half-hour. Completely engrossed in Jane Austen's new book *Persuasion*, she failed to hear the man's approaching footsteps. When she did finally register his presence, she looked up smiling, expecting to see the owner of the grand house, Sir Robert Luxford, MP for Leicestershire. Instead, a stranger stood before her, a younger and slimmer man, quite unlike her sandy-haired employer. Startled, Florence rose abruptly from her chair, dropping the precious book to the floor. She began apologising once again, exactly as she had to Sir Robert three years previously.

'Sir, I... I... I am sorry, sir. I was not aware anyone would be using this room today. I, I shall leave at once, sir.'

'No. Tarry awhile, there is no great rush. Who are you and what is your name?'

'I... I... my name is Florence, sir, and I am employed here as a housemaid.'

'Well, I am pleased to meet you, Florence. My name is Mr Thomas and I am the son of Sir Robert. Only son, in fact.' Smiling down at her genially, his calm demeanour belied his racing thoughts. *My God! What sparkling eyes—they are so blue—a man could lose himself in those eyes.*

'How do you do, sir?' replied Florence, giving a little curtsy and lowering her gaze. She remained very much afraid that her reading times would reach the ears of the veritable ruler of Stanford Hall: the housekeeper Mrs Wellings. In the three years she had been here, her snatched half-hours of reading were a closely guarded secret. Always circumspect in her library sorties, she only ever ventured in here after her daily work was complete. Yet despite her misgivings, Florence felt herself calming as this man stood smiling down at her. *Perhaps everything will be all right. He seems pleasant. Perhaps he will not report me. And he is rather comely.* Florence blushed as her racing thoughts threatened to belie her outward

composure, nevertheless still admiring his coal-black, curly hair and blazing green eyes.
What are you thinking, Florence! This is the son of Sir Robert!

God! Look at her fine figure! Even in her uniform she is a beauty. I just might be able to win her if I play my cards right. Though she is rather overly confident for a servant girl. She does not seem terribly discommoded by my company now that she is over her initial shock ... But I think I shall pursue her regardless. It may be a good bit of sport. Yes, I must put my mind to it. I wonder how long it will take me? I wager I can do it in four weeks, maybe six. Yes, definitely six. Besides, I have only eight weeks left before I leave. As he stood before her in his fashionable waistcoat and frockcoat with a garish floral cravat in reds and yellows tied neatly in front over his shirt collar, he brought his thoughts back to a more acceptable conversation and began to enlighten her of his recent past. 'I have been in Oxford reading history for these past three years, which explains why I have not come across you before. Er... Can I ask if my father is aware of your reading in his library?'

'Oh, yes sir,' Florence answered at once.

Thomas nodded.

'Your father, sir, very kindly gave me permission to read here, once I have completed all my work. He also said he would keep my presence in the library away from the ears of Mrs Wellings,' she added, raising her eyebrows slightly to him as she smiled a little, recalling Sir Robert's conspiratorial pledge.

'Then I shall do the same,' he replied lightly.

As they conversed further, Florence relaxed a little more and answered his questions freely, firstly about herself and then about the book she was reading. 'It is Jane Austen's new book *Persuasion*, Mr Thomas. Your father recently bought it and suggested I might like it.'

'And do you?'

'Oh, yes! I am engrossed. Jane Austen's characters are so true to life.'

'Do you think so?' *Yes, I shall definitely chase this one. It seems she has some education too. I wonder how she acquired that? It is most unusual in a servant girl. But I shall have to go carefully. I do not want to frighten her.*

After further discussion of the book, he decided to tell her his immediate plans.

'I am home only briefly to see Father, before I begin an extended tour of the Continent.'

Florence found him easy to talk to, as they discussed places he hoped to visit in Europe. She could see he was surprised at the scope of her knowledge and would have had him stay talking, but he soon excused himself, pleading some business matters needing attention.

From that first accidental meeting, however, Thomas contrived many more and a liaison slowly developed. He would happen upon her whilst she was cleaning out a fireplace in one of the drawing rooms or seek her out as she was polishing the silver in the dining room. Twice more he encountered her in the library. On each occasion, he would gaze into her eyes, compliment her in his easy way, and then engage her in a discussion about something literary.

Florence's head was soon turned. Being both young and naïve and believing him to be sincere, she revelled in his attention. Thoughts of him invaded her every waking moment. For the first time in her young life, a man was enjoying her company. It did not take long until she imagined herself in love with him.

One morning, some four weeks later, after another 'accidental' meeting within the house, Thomas asked if she would like to meet him in the grounds on her next free day. As Florence had told him she was accustomed to walking in the woods around the hall on Sunday afternoons when the weather was clement, he knew no one on the staff would think it strange to see her walking out at this time. Thomas assured her that he would be discreet and leave on horseback well after she had departed, so she agreed. As he took his leave, Thomas suggested a place where they could meet.

As Florence walked away from the hall on that Sunday afternoon in June, she wore her summer cape and carried an umbrella borrowed from the kitchen. A strengthening wind delivered a shower of rain and low misty cloud shrouded the nearby hills. Yet the overcast weather did nothing to dampen her mood. She felt more alive and carefree than she could ever remember. Once she had disappeared amongst the trees, she began skipping across the grass, exhilarated and laughing out loud with sheer joy. Slowing again as she neared their point of rendezvous, she felt a momentary unease, asking herself whether he would come as planned. Her doubts proved unfounded.

He was there waiting when she arrived, his horse tethered nearby. It was a small clearing, not too far from the house, and the lush grass sparkled silver with the recent raindrops. She was breathless with anticipation yet her heart was in her mouth as she looked into his eyes and returned his smile. *Oh! I am so nervous! I know I should not be meeting Mr Thomas here like this. It is so wrong. Yet it feels so right. I know he loves me. Everything will be all right. We shall be married soon and spend the rest of our lives together.*

'You look beautiful this afternoon,' he said as he took her hands in his and kissed them lightly.

As soon as he touches me, electric sparks fly up my arms and my body is on fire. Can he feel it? My heart is thudding so loudly in my chest it feels like it is going to explode. Can he hear it? Has he noticed what he does to me? Wholly captivated by his charms, she was his to do with as he pleased. She smiled at him again and they began to walk. The sky darkened and,

within minutes, a summer storm was upon them. The light rain became a downpour as lightning flashed and thunder reverberated ominously around the hills. Florence stood beneath her flimsy umbrella that was wholly unsuited to the task while Thomas released his horse, knowing it would return to the shelter of the barn. She was happy to follow his suggestion that they seek refuge in a nearby gardener's shed, one he said he knew from his childhood. Guilelessly, Florence ran with him through the slanting rain.

Though musty and dimly lit, the shed was a haven from the tumult outside. As they stood panting from their exertions, they shook off their wet capes. Florence breathed in a rich blend of mould and freshly cut hay. Cobwebs hung from the rafters and old tools stood rusting in the corners, yet new straw thickly carpeted the earthen floor. Florence thought this strange and mentioned it to Thomas, but he made light of her observation and abruptly changed the subject.

After shaking the water from her hair, Florence did not resist Thomas as he took her in his arms, her excitement and the flush of first love melding with the innocence of childhood. This secret assignation was both morally forbidden and exquisitely exciting. *Oh! I love him so much! He is so handsome and manly and he smells so nice—a mixture of sweat and soap and something else that I cannot quite ...* Putting aside a momentary unease, she responded hungrily to his first kiss that rapidly became a passionate embrace.

I am guessing she is a virgin. I wonder what she will be like? Wonderful, I imagine. Her lips are delectable and her breasts so utterly delightful. When I enter her, it will be heaven. Probably she will pretend it is painless, just to please me. It will be a moment to treasure.

Florence was as eager as he. No one had ever kissed her like this and his lips were delicious. Swept up in this newfound passion, she found herself lying in the straw beside him, her petticoats hitched around her waist. The most wonderful feeling overwhelmed her as he slipped his hand inside her chemise and, tingling from head to toe, she gave herself up to his caress. *A feeling as strong as this cannot be wrong, can it? I am in a fever with wanting him. Oh! He is so wonderful! Please let it be all good! Please let him feel the same way I do!* Totally under his spell, Florence let Thomas remove her underwear and then watched in fascination as he stood to unbutton his breeches, letting them fall to the floor. He gently lay on top of her and asked softly for permission to continue. Blushingly, she nodded and kissed him again.

A searing pain enveloped her and she bit her lip to stop from screaming. All the pleasure of the previous few moments evaporated in an instant. It was then that she panicked for the first time. *What have I done?* Panic soon gave way to shame, though ultimately she calmed herself, remembering that Thomas loved her. *Everything will be all right. Mr Thomas and I shall be married and live together in Stanford Hall. Everything will be all right.* These thoughts gave her the fortitude to smile through her pain and she resolved to endure this unpleasant part of lovemaking for his sake.

Wholly unaware of Florence's emotional turmoil, Thomas rolled off her and lay panting on the floor. After recovering, he stood and dressed, then waited while she did the same. He swept her into his arms once more, kissing her and telling her that she was the most wonderful creature in the world and that he could not get enough of her.

She melted once again under the warmth of his embrace. *Everything will be all right.*

This was her incantation over the weeks that followed. There were four more times when they stole time alone, sneaking away to make love in the gardener's hut. Each time became a little easier for Florence. As the burning pain became a dim memory, she found she could better respond to his lovemaking and actually began to enjoy it, secure in the belief that she would presently become his wife.

Her world was shattered a week after their last assignation when they met in the library and she naïvely mentioned a wedding.

Thomas looked at her for a moment in dismay before casually dispelling her dreams. 'What? Marriage? My dear, you cannot possibly be serious! As much as I enjoy your company, I could not possibly entertain the idea of marriage. What are you thinking? You are merely a servant girl while I... Well, I am destined for far better things. I expect I shall marry an heiress or even a countess someday. My father would hear of nothing less. I am sorry if I have misled you. Besides, I leave for the Continent next week.'

Stunned into silence by his words, Florence mustered what little pride remained and walked swiftly from his presence. Numb with shock and with tears blurring her vision, she went straight to her room, where she collapsed onto her bed. She was helpless to stop her world from disintegrating around her. She lay there for hours, not caring whether she lived or died, and certainly not in the least concerned that Mrs Wellings may miss her. Luckily, the formidable housekeeper was out shopping that afternoon and none of the other servants commented on her absence. By the following morning, she had recovered sufficient composure to report for work.

After his proclamation, Thomas did not seek her out again, nor did she see him about the house or grounds. She learned later from Sir Robert that he had left for Europe. Valiantly Florence tried to mask her despair. She continued to work hard, bravely facing each new day and pretending that her world had not fallen apart. Mechanically, she forced herself through her chores and fell asleep each night on a pillow wet with tears.

Sir Robert noted the change and was not fooled by her stoicism. He could see that her heart was broken and rightly suspected that her anguish involved his son.

As Florence continued to grieve silently and to come gradually to a realisation of her folly, she vowed that never again would she let a man dupe her in that way. She would avoid all

men and, although completely uncertain of how she was to achieve it, she would somehow live a life free of class distinction and servitude.

Then she discovered she was with child.