

His Grace's Payment

Bethany may have been sent to Clayton's home to serve as repayment of her father's debt, but what she didn't expect was for the man to be so handsome. Neither did she ever think she would fall in love and want to remain with him forever. She didn't think she'd want to be anywhere but in her own home. Now she has to convince Clayton that this was where she belongs, with him.

Clayton Merrick, Duke of Wiltshire, loves his life of freedom and has no intentions on giving it up anytime soon. When Warren Thurlow leaves his only daughter in his care, Clayton's at a loss as what to do with the young woman. She scares him. Just being near her does things to him, makes him feel things he'd never felt before. Can he let her go when the time comes, or will he claim her as his own?

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Chapter One

Bethany Thurlow looked up from her sewing when her father stepped into the sitting room. He staggered slightly. She shook her head in disgust. He'd been out drinking once again. How many more nights could she stand to watch him come home this way? How many more nights could his body take the abuse? She just prayed that he hadn't been gambling as well. He'd already lost almost everything they owned, or at least everything that was worth anything. All they had left was their home, what clothes they wore, and the little bit of her mother's jewelry she'd managed to hide away from him. Their home was in desperate need of repair, but there was no money for that. They wouldn't even have food to eat if she hadn't taken it upon herself to start a vegetable garden.

Her father had been this way ever since her mother's death a few years ago. She and the unborn baby had died in childbirth. He'd begun drinking, which had led to gambling. He stopped being a solicitor, he'd let all the servants go, and then he began selling off everything in their home, a piece at a time.

Bethany had lost all hope of ever getting married to a gentleman. She no longer had a dowry to offer. Besides, what man would want the daughter of a poor drunkard with no means of supporting himself? Perhaps she'd meet a nice man from the country who didn't know anything about her father, or obtaining a position in a home taking care of someone else's children. She didn't have much hope of that happening, either. They would probably want someone with more learning than she'd gotten. If nothing else, she could always get a position as someone's kitchen help. She had learned to cook some, once all the servants were let go. She believed she did a good job with what little she had to work with. Her father certainly hadn't complained whenever he chose to eat. She watched him through lowered lashes, pretending to sew once more. She hoped he would just go to his room and go to bed. He wasn't very nice when he'd been drinking.

She normally tried to avoid him. She hadn't expected him to return home so early. Most of the time, she'd already gone to her room before he returned. He was home early this evening and acting quiet nervous, wringing his hands and pacing the bare floor. What had he done now? There was nothing left for him to sell, only their home and lands. Her heart skipped a beat. Surely, he hadn't sunk that low. She didn't know where they would go or what they would do if he gambled those away.

"I need for you to pack a few things and put on your heavy cloak, girl," Warren Thurlow grumbled.

She sucked in a harsh breath. No, he wouldn't have. She began to panic a little, but pretended not to understand him. Her father never took her anywhere, especially nowhere that she would need extra clothing. Why did he suddenly want to take her somewhere? What was he up to? He couldn't have lost their home. She wouldn't allow herself to believe that until she heard it with her own ears.

"Why, Father? Where are we going?" She laid her sewing aside and clasped her hands in her lap to keep them from shaking. He looked more agitated than normal, when he stopped pacing long enough to look at her.

"Not that I need to explain anything to you, but we are going to His Grace, Clayton Merrick's estate," he answered, turning to look through the shambles that was left of their home. He began to gather anything left that still had any value at all. Most of it was just sentimental value, things her mother had loved that weren't worth much of anything to anyone else.

"Who is Clayton Merrick?" she had never heard of the man before. Was he one of her father's gaming friends? At least he hadn't said he'd lost their home. Did her father owe this man money? She knew something was wrong with the way her father was behaving, strange, even for him. Why was he making her go with him? What purpose would she be there for?

"He is a very important man that I owe a great deal of money to," Warren Thurlow declared.

"Then why do I need to pack a few things? Are we going to be staying there for a few days?" Why was her father being so secretive? Something wasn't right.

She could feel it in the pit of her stomach. Why did he want her to go with him? Just how much money did he owe the man? Did he think the man would take pity on him if he brought his daughter along? She didn't have the proper clothes to go to some important man's home.

Hell, the servants there would probably be dressed better than she was. There had to be a reason he wanted her to go with him. She stood and followed him to the doorway.

“No, we are not staying...you are, Beth.” he made it sound like a demand, his voice was hard and uncaring, sounding very much like the tyrant he had become.

“What do you mean...I will be staying?” Had her father lost his mind? Why would she be staying at the home of a stranger? Did he have children for her to attend to? She leaned against the crumbling wall of the foyer, her arms crossed over her bosom. She didn’t like the sound of what her father was suggesting. She had never met this Clayton Merrick before and had no intention of going to his home to stay.

“I have no other means in which to repay the man my debt. He is expecting me there tomorrow.” He started past her on his way to search through the house, for what she had no idea. There wasn’t anything of great importance left that he hadn’t already sold, so what could he be looking for? Just what did she have to do with repaying the man?

“So, you are just going to give me to him? What kind of man is he—what kind of man are you?” she put her hand to her mouth when she realized she was screaming at her father’s back.

Warren Thurlow stopped and turned, moving back to her side. He drew back his hand as if to strike her, but seemed to think better of it when she closed her eyes and flinched, because the pain never came.

“Must I remind you of whom it is you are speaking to?” he threatened.

She swallowed against the bile rising and shook her head. “No, Father, I know very well *who* it is I am speaking to.” She tried not to tremble in fear as she opened her eyes to look at him once more. He’d never struck her before, but then she usually tried to avoid him whenever he’d been drinking. She just wasn’t sure that he wouldn’t actually do it one day.

“It’s not as if I am just giving you to the man, Bethany. I’m sure he will find something for you to do until my debt is satisfied.”

When her father reached for her, she flinched again and then watched as he lowered his hand back to his side. He turned away from her as if he were ashamed to look at her after what he’d just said and done. He should be ashamed, she thought. How could he just expect her to accept what he was doing? Oh, how she wished her mother were still alive. Things could have been so different. Perhaps she would have a suitor by now and be planning her wedding.

“What sort of work is it that *I* am to do for him? I have no skills, Father.” She had never done anything outside of this home. She couldn’t even remember the last time she had left home for anything.

They hadn’t had the money for her to go to town for anything. She hadn’t seen another soul besides her father in at least three years. She had never been alone with a strange man. She had never been alone with *any* man except for her father. Was this man rich? Did this man have a wife and family? Was he young? Was he old? He had to be someone important. Her father had referred to him as His Grace.

“You will learn to do *whatever* it is that His Grace demands of you,” Warren barked, his voice echoing in the empty hall.

Her insides began to jerk, her hands shook no matter how hard she grasped them together, and there was a throb beginning to form the front of her head. She wouldn’t know how to prepare fancy meals. Their diets had consisted of vegetables from her measly garden. She wouldn’t know how to prepare meat. She could barely remember what it even tasted like, for that matter. No one would want her in their kitchen. She didn’t even have proper clothes to go out in society.

What would this man think of her when he saw her shabby clothing? She’d lost her tutor years ago, so she didn’t have the knowledge it would take to teach children. It was highly doubtful anyone would want her for a governess. She closed her eyes as a wave of nausea overtook her. What if the man wanted her for a different reason altogether? She grasped the wall to keep from stumbling and falling.

She placed her other hand over her stomach. She opened her eyes to look at her father, fear gnawing at her insides.

“What if he demands something I cannot do? What if he...” She took a deep breath, closed her eyes once more and swallowed hard. “I don’t know anything about being with a man, as you well know.”

She opened her eyes, but kept them downcast. She could feel her father’s gaze on her. He was looking her up and down with a snort, as if she were some dirty beggar out on the streets. She felt self-conscious as she wrapped her arms around her waist.

“I quite wager that will not be one of the services His Grace will demand of you, but if he does then you will lie there and do as he tells you to.” His voice sounded so uncaring.

“Please, Father, I beg you, don’t do this to me.” Tears streamed down her face. She didn’t know why she was crying, besides fear of the unknown. There was nothing left here for her to stay for. Their home had long since begun to crumble, yet she didn’t wish to leave.

This home reminded her of her mother. She knew she’d probably never marry, but she had no desire to become a man’s mistress, either. She’d overheard her mother speaking with one of her friends one day when she was younger. The woman had been crying because her husband had taken a mistress. Neither woman had anything nice to say about mistresses. Bethany couldn’t imagine becoming something so detestable.

“Stop begging, it is very unbecoming, Bethany. This is just the way it has to be. Now be quiet and do as I tell you.” He took her by the arm, pulling her along with him up the stairs.

“But, Father, you can’t just leave me with a man I don’t even know. How can you expect me to do something like that? I cannot believe he agreed to this madness. What sort of man could he be to do so?”

“He doesn’t know that you will be there as my payment. He doesn’t know anything about you at all. At least he doesn’t know anything...yet.” He stumbled on the stairs a few times, almost bringing them both down.

“Then maybe he won’t even agree to such a thing. Can’t we please just talk about this a little more, Father?” she implored. There was still hope, then, she thought. Maybe this Clayton Merrick was a gentleman and would refuse her father’s offer. There had to be another way to repay her father’s debt. Perhaps she could speak with the man herself, work something out. She realized that hope must have shown on her face with her father’s next words, and then all hope was lost.

“He will agree. He won’t have any choice.” He deposited her at her door, then turned away from her to finish looking through the upstairs section of the house. “Pack your things tonight and then get some sleep. We will be leaving early in the morning.”

Bethany knew she had been dismissed by him, and there wasn’t any sense trying to reason with Warren Thurlow in his current mood. She could smell the whiskey on him, as if he’d taken a bath in the stuff. She knew she would have to do as he said for now, but she would find a way to change the situation as soon as she could come up with a plan.

She made her way into her sad, almost-empty room. It had once been filled with so many beautiful things, but that was before her mother had died and her father had begun drinking and gambling away everything they had.

She hid her mother's jewelry in the bottom of her satchel. Most of the dresses she owned had once belonged to her mother as well. They were worn and dated, plus her mother had been a very petite woman.

Bethany wasn't much bigger, but enough so that the dresses were small on her. She had let the dresses out as much as she could, but they were still a little small and tight on her. It didn't take her any time to gather what she had left.

She looked at herself in the floor-length mirror she still had, and she shook her head. Her unruly hair was a mess on its best days. She hated the color. Nothing went well with the red tint. Her skin was pale except for her cheeks that had turned red from being out in the sun.

The dresses had her breasts mashed almost flat. They weren't flattering at all.

She could only imagine what a rich gentleman would think of her once he saw her. He'd probably laugh her and her father out of the house. It would be embarrassing, but at least she'd still have her virtue intact. How could her own father try to force her to become a strange man's mistress? She closed her green eyes as a shudder went through her. She turned away from the mirror and began to pack.

She lay down on her bed once everything was packed and let her tears flow freely. She would miss the only home she had ever known if she was forced to stay at the man's home, but she vowed she would return here one day, and she would fix this place back to the glory it had once been.

* * * *

Bethany's father was waiting by the door as she descended the stairs. He didn't look any happier than he had last evening. He looked a little green, and she was almost happy that he wasn't feeling well.

He didn't deserve to feel good while she was the one feeling punished for something he'd done. She had hoped he'd changed his mind when he sobered some, but she wasn't that lucky. He had already fastened their only horse to the raggedy buggy. He pried the satchel bag from her trembling fingers and placed it in the back, then helped her up.

She didn't speak as they passed homes and lands close to theirs. She didn't even have the heart to look back at the only home she had ever known.

She certainly couldn't look at her father, feeling only disgust for him at the moment. She kept her head lowered or turned the other way, anything to avoid looking at the man next to her. She was appalled that he was trying to tell her about relations between a man and a woman. Her face burned and she tried to block out the sound of his voice. No daughter should have to listen to her father stumble over such things.

She was thankful when he'd finally stopped speaking and turned the buggy down a long lane, trees lined both sides. She pulled her cloak tighter to her as cold air and fear bit into her flesh. Her body trembled as they neared their destination.

What would this man be like? Would he be old and cruel? Would he hurt her, punish her for her father's sins? She couldn't imagine a gentleman who would agree to the scheme her father had set into motion. What would her father do if His Grace refused his offer?

Would he simply try to sell her to another man? What would become of her once the man finished with her? She had no future. Her life would be ruined. She hoped her father wouldn't lose their home. It would be the only place she had to return to.

She saw the massive manor before they ever reached it, it stood so tall and wide. She'd never seen a home so huge. What sort of man lived in such a place as this? The large stone steps reached all the way to huge, double wooden doors. Their entire home would fit inside this one, with plenty of room left over. She could get lost in a home as big as this. She shivered violently, and it had nothing to do with the cold wind. Good heavens, this man was beyond rich. What would he want with someone like her?

"Stay seated until I tell you otherwise," Warren Thurlow ordered, bringing the buggy to a stop before the stone steps. If she knew how to drive the buggy, she would leave her father standing there before the door and return home. She silently prayed the man would send them away.

Her father hadn't stood at the doors long when one opened. An aging man with thinning white hair stood there. She couldn't hear the words they had exchanged, but the door closed, leaving her father standing there. He turned to her and motioned for her to join him. She shook her head, refusing to obey him. She didn't think her legs would carry her even if she wanted to get out...which she didn't.

He came down the steps in a huff, pulling her from the buggy, and grabbed her satchel with his other hand. He yanked her unwilling body up the stairs, threatening to beat her the entire way. Once they reached the top, he released her and dropped her satchel at her feet.

He reached into his overcoat and took out two sealed envelopes.

“Give these to the butler when he returns. Tell him they are for His Grace, and do as His Grace tells you.” He cupped her face and looked down at her. Bethany could have sworn she saw tears gathering in her father’s eyes, but he turned away quickly and hurried down the steps away from her. Was he upset that he was doing this to her?

Bethany watched in silence as he climbed back onto the buggy, turned it around and headed back down the lane. She should have run after him, and probably would have if she didn’t feel so weak and numb.

How could he leave her here to face the man all alone? She had no idea what would become of her if Clayton Merrick turned her away. She feared she’d catch her death from the cold, trying to make her way back home on foot. Would he at least see her back home?

She turned back toward the door when she heard it opening. She held the envelopes out to the same man she’d seen before. He looked taken aback when he first laid eyes on her. He craned his head and looked past her to see that the drive was empty, and then shook his head.

“Pick up your satchel and follow me.” He looked down at the envelopes as he waited for her to step through the door. The great hall was huge and finely decorated, the floors shining like glass beneath her old, worn-out shoes. She was amazed at how large the place was.

She jumped when he closed the doors with a thud and then headed toward the other end of the hall. They stopped before a closed door.

The man turned toward her and shook his head once more. She lowered her head, feeling inferior to the superbly dressed butler.

“Remain here and don’t touch anything until I come back for you.” He turned away from her and opened the door.

“Thurlow, glad to see that you are not a liar, although I must admit I was beginning to think you weren’t going to show yourself today.”

“Excuse me, Your Grace, but the man left these for you,” Bethany heard the servant say as he stepped through the door with the sealed envelopes clasped in his hand.

Apparently, the lord of the manor hadn't been paying attention to who had entered his library. She listened to the men intently, trying to decide what sort of man His Grace was. His voice had sounded almost jovial at first, but then there was a bit of irritation to it when he realized he wasn't speaking to her father.

"Where is Mr. Thurlow?" The stranger's voice was deep, resounding off the walls of the room. She tried to picture what the man would look like. Would he be short, rounding at the middle and old like her father, or young, tall, and lean? She certainly hoped for the latter. She couldn't imagine how she'd feel about a man like her father touching her. Her body shuttered at the thought and her nausea returned with a vengeance.

The servant interrupted her thoughts as he spoke once more. "I am afraid that he is gone, Your Grace, but he left something else as well."

"Well, what else did he leave, Simpson?"

Bethany let out a gasp as the servant reached outside the door, grasping her arm and pulling her inside the library. She kept her gaze downcast as he led her tense body before a massive oak desk. Her body quaked with fright. What would she say to this man? What would he do to her when he realized she was his payment? *Lord, help me I can't do this.* She was sure she'd die from fear and shame.

"This, Your Grace." The butler stopped a few feet from the desk.

"Who are you, girl?" Clayton Merrick's voice was deep and soothing, but held a bit of anger and cruelty to it as well. Bethany tried to back away, but Simpson held her in place with his hand wrapped tightly around her upper arm.

"Bethany Thurlow, Your Grace," she answered softly without looking up. She was surprised her voice worked at all. Her throat was so tight, she wondered how she was even still breathing.

"Why are you at my home, Miss Thurlow, and where the devil has your father gone?"

"I do not know where he has gone, Your Grace. He said to give you the envelopes. They are supposed to explain everything. He also said that I am to be part of his payment to you." Her voice trembled.

His Grace began to laugh, causing her body to tremble harder. He stopped laughing and she could feel his gaze upon her. Was he studying her? She was too afraid to lift her head to see.

"You may leave us, Simpson." His voice was calm and quiet.

“Should I prepare some refreshments, sir?”

“No, Simpson, that won’t be necessary just yet.”

Bethany waited as the servant exited the room. She jumped as he shut the door behind him. She was now alone in the room with the man. What did he have planned for her? Maybe he didn’t want the servant to hear what he had to say.

She closed her eyes, but opened them when her body swayed. Her knees were knocking together, she was shaking so badly. Could he hear her heart racing in the quiet of the room?

“Are you cold, Miss Thurlow?”

“No, Your Grace.” Her voice cracked, and her knees went weak.

She feared her legs would fail her at any moment.

“So, what am I supposed to do with you, if you’re meant to be my payment? I’ve never won a child in a card game before.” She could hear the merriment in his voice.

How old was *he* to believe that she was a child? How old did he think she was?

“I do not know, Your Grace. I believe my father penned everything on those letters.”

She waited and listened as he tore the seal from one of the envelopes. She jumped when he shoved his chair backward, knocking it over as he stood. Whatever her father had written had apparently angered the man. She heard him take a deep breath before he spoke again.

“I’ll wager your father will see the error of his way and return for you shortly, Miss Thurlow.”

“No, he won’t.” She shook her lowered head. “He’s not the same man he once was. I do not know my father any longer, Your Grace.”

She watched as his shiny black boots appeared at the side of the desk and moved around it to step closer to her, and then he made his way completely around her. Her body began to tremble violently once more. She felt faint, but refused to give into the black depths of unconsciousness for fear of what would happen while she was out.

He stopped before her and pushed the hood of her cloak from her head. He placed his hand beneath her chin, lifting her face. She closed her eyes, afraid of what she would see, tears streaming down her cheeks, unbidden. She swallowed hard and inhaled deeply before forcing her eyes open to look up at him. He looked shocked as he stared down at her.

Her heart skipped a beat when she looked at the man. He didn't look anything like what she had feared. She had expected an old, fat, angry-looking man with a red face and balding head. This man was none of those things.

He was a tall, well-built man with hair the color of a raven's wing. His hair hung loose, reaching a little past his shoulders. His skin was a lot darker than hers. His eyes were a bright, brilliant blue that reminded her of the ocean her mother had taken her to see once when she was a small child. It scared her the way her body reacted to the sight of this man. He was beautiful. No man had the right to look the way he did, it had to be a sin. He raked his other hand through his hair as he stared at her.

"How old are you, Miss Thurlow?" He studied her reaction to his question.

"Eighteen, Your Grace," she answered softly. "I will be nineteen in a few days."

"What the hell am I supposed to do with you?" His voice echoed through the room, loud and violent-sounding. His face was twisted as if he was in some sort of pain. "What the bloody hell is your father up to?"

Bethany jumped at the menace in his voice and backed away from him. Fresh tears streamed down her face.

"Oh hell, stop sniveling. I'm not angry with you." He turned away from her. "Simpson!"

The older man appeared within seconds of his name being called.

She wondered if he'd been standing just outside the door the entire time.

"Yes, Your Grace?"

"Get Miss Thurlow something to eat and some hot tea to warm her. I also want you to have one of the guest rooms made ready for her to rest in, while I figure out what to do about her and her father," he ordered calmly, moving back behind his desk once more.

"Yes, Your Grace...please follow me, Miss." Simpson took the satchel from her hands.

She turned to follow the servant and then turned back to stare at Clayton. She didn't know why she should concern herself, but she had to know.

"You won't hurt my father, will you, Your Grace?" She tried to avoid looking him directly in the eyes. She wouldn't deceive herself. No matter how handsome she found this man, he still frightened her. She feared for her father's safety.

"To be quite honest with you, Miss Thurlow, I'm not entirely certain what I would do to the man at the moment."

Bethany nodded her head and then turned to follow Simpson. She could certainly understand the man's anger with her father. She was angry with him as well, but he was the only family she had left. She couldn't imagine what would happen to her if something happened to her father.

Simpson led her to the kitchen where he'd instructed her to sit after taking her cloak. He shook his head once more after seeing the way she was dressed, and then introduced her to Mary, the cook, before he disappeared with her things, leaving her with Mary to wait on her food and tea.

Bethany felt ravenous as Mary sat the plate of food down before her. She hadn't seen so much food since before her mother's death, and thought to never see as much again. The ham, eggs and sweet rolls melted in her mouth as she savored every last bite.

She looked up to catch Mary watching her from the corner of her eye. She almost felt ashamed of the way she'd ravished the meal, but Mary smiled approvingly at her. She thanked Mary just before following Simpson to her new room.