

ALWAYS by Cheryl Holt

EXCERPT

CHAPTER ONE

Selby estate, rural England, twenty-four years later...

Nell Drummond walked down the pretty lane toward the main road. It was a beautiful July afternoon, the sky so blue, the trees so green. Up ahead, she could see the sign that indicated the estate entrance, the simple word *SELBY* carved in the wood to announce the esteemed location.

She was carrying ribbons and a basket of flowers, and she placed the basket at her feet and surveyed the surrounding posts and fence that she intended to decorate. Back at the manor, the house was hectic, with the servants in a lather because guests were about to begin arriving and the final wedding preparations were still being completed.

In two weeks, her dearest friend, Susan Middleton, was marrying Selby cousin, Percy Blake. Nell, Susan, and Susan's mother, Florence, had already traveled to the country to participate in the celebrations that would lead up to the ostentatious event. Susan's busy father, Albert, wouldn't appear until the day of the ceremony, feeling no need to be present during the escalating mayhem.

Nell had to admit he'd been wise to delay. Now that she'd discovered how chaotic it would be, she wished she could have stayed in London until the very last minute too.

Though she would never confess it aloud, Florence always put people on edge, and she was being her typical annoying self, irking everyone with her pompous posturing. With her usual lack of awareness, didn't notice she was creating enemies right and left.

The groom's mother, Edwina Blake, was especially aggravated.

The two women had arranged the nuptials, so ultimately, they'd be related by marriage, but as the years rolled by, Nell couldn't imagine how they would ever socialize. They had naught in common, and Edwina's dislike of Florence was potent and evident.

The Blakes had been aristocrats for three centuries, and they were considered a premier family in the kingdom. The Selby title, currently held by the groom's cousin—the famous explorer and conspicuously absent Nathan Blake—was one of the oldest and most exalted in the land. Edwina

Blake—as a member of the lofty group—viewed herself as being very grand, very important, and she was.

The Middletons were obscenely wealthy due to Albert being a successful brewer. Florence ceaselessly, but erroneously believed their money could buy them a position in High Society, but it never could. They were too ordinary, their antecedents too low.

Despite how hard Florence tried, she couldn't purchase the spot she thought they should occupy. She'd hoped to use their fortune to snag a noble husband for Susan, but she'd had to settle for a nobleman's cousin instead.

The groom, Percy Blake—as a grandson of the prior Lord Selby—had very blue blood, but an empty purse, and Susan's dowry would fill it to overflowing. It was the reason his mother, Edwina, had sought the match. Once the vows were spoken, Percy would become very rich.

Yet the mothers—Florence and Edwina—were like an explosion waiting to happen. How would they all survive the next two weeks without a huge fight breaking out? If Percy and Susan could reach the altar without their mothers calling the whole thing off, it would be a miracle.

Nell was a pleasant person, and she couldn't abide discord or bickering, but her years of living with the Middletons had honed her skills as a peacemaker.

Her widowed mother, who'd died when Nell was twelve, had been Florence's childhood friend. After Nell was orphaned, she'd taken Nell into her home and had finished raising her. Nell was now a very elderly twenty-two, and for the past decade, she'd resided with the Middletons. She was a sort of second daughter they didn't like very much and hadn't really wanted.

Florence relentlessly reminded Nell of how lucky she was to have been welcomed by the Middletons, and she *was* lucky. Grateful too. But she spent an awful lot of time calming Florence's temper, and she often felt she should have been awarded a prize for her intervention skills. They were skills she assumed she would frequently employ as the wedding neared.

She didn't like the Blakes very much, and Percy Blake was an arrogant prig who didn't deserve a wife as sweet and lovely as Susan. But she and Nell were devoted to one another, like affectionate sisters, and she was glad Susan was about to be a bride. It had been Susan's dream, one over which they'd constantly fantasized as girls, and Nell would toil valiantly to ensure Susan's big day was as perfect as possible.

She started working on her decorations, weaving strands of ribbons and flowers that she could wrap around the fence posts. She was humming an off-key tune, engrossed in her task, when she realized a man was approaching.

He was strolling along on foot, his horse plodding behind, as he meticulously assessed the quiet woods. He noted every tree and shrub as if he were a soldier wary of attack.

A very handsome fellow, he was tall and broad-shouldered, with black hair and very blue eyes. He needed to shave, and his hair was much too long, tied with a strip of leather and hanging halfway down his back as if he hadn't been to a barber in ages.

And while he was probably burly and fit when in prime physical shape, at present, he was thin and gaunt, as if he might have been ill for an extended period. He appeared to have traveled some distance, and it must have been a grueling trip. His boots were dusty and scuffed, his jacket tattered, the elbows patched.

She might have wondered if he'd suffered a calamity, if she should send him to the servant's door to request a free meal, but he didn't seem imperiled. Though his outward condition was a bit bedraggled, he carried himself like a warrior or a prince.

There was a powerful aura about him that was tangible, and she was curious as to his identity and purpose. Obviously, he'd have many stories to tell, and she always liked to encounter an intriguing character. Her own life was so small and so boring that she relished any chance to enliven it.

Eventually, he noticed her, and he stopped and stared, scrutinizing her with those magnificent eyes of his. He studied her as if he hadn't seen a female in years, and he didn't miss a single detail, his evaluation commencing at her head and meandering down in a manner that was almost inappropriate.

"Hello." She flashed the pretty smile for which she was renowned.

It was her mother's smile, and fortunately, Nell had inherited it. Her mother had been a great beauty, and Nell—with her curly chestnut locks, big green eyes, pert nose, and dimples—resembled her exactly. Men found her to be very fetching, but none of them would ever act on it.

Her deceased father had been an officer in the Royal Navy, her mother his adoring and very common wife. They'd left her no inheritance, no bequests, no dowry, and no wealthy kin. It was why she'd always resided with the Middletons.

She was old enough to be declared a penniless spinster, and her winsome looks and curvaceous figure were her only viable attributes. But they couldn't take her anywhere she'd like to go—that being into a happy marriage and a home of her own—so they were merely a method for garnering empty praise.

"Hello," he said in return, and he kept coming until he was very close. "Do I know you?"

"I'm sure you don't. I have a good memory for faces, and I don't recall yours."

“You’re not a Blake.”

“No.”

“Is this still their property? Or have they finally lost it and moved away?”

“No.” She pointed to the sign that marked the lane to the manor, the one that had *SELBY* carved into the wood. “They’re all here and limping forward in a tremendous fashion. I can safely state that they’re quite as grand as ever.”

He scoffed at that. “I suppose *grand* might be a bit of an exaggeration.”

“Yes, I suppose it is, but I find them to be very illustrious.”

“Why are you decorating the fence?”

“We’re having a wedding, so guests will be arriving. I’m hoping to generate a festive tone from the moment people ride through the gate.”

“Who is getting married?”

“The Earl’s cousin, Percy Blake.”

“Who is the bride?”

“Miss Susan Middleton.”

“Never heard of her...” he mused. “Is it a love match? Was Mr. Blake swept off his feet?”

“It was nothing so thrilling as all that. It was all very mundane, with it arranged by their mothers when the parties involved weren’t paying attention.”

“That indicates Miss Middleton must be very rich and he’s marrying her for her money.”

Nell chuckled. “I will neither confirm nor deny your appraisal of the situation.”

“Percy always was a mercenary. His mother too. They must be walking on air over their windfall.”

“I can’t say they’re complaining about it,” Nell indiscreetly agreed, even as she recognized she should guard her unruly tongue.

She was in no position to comment on any facet of the nuptial machinations. Florence was vigilant as a spy, and the least little infraction always made its way back to her.

Nell decided to steer the conversation in a different direction. “It sounds as if you know Edwina Blake and her son, Percy.”

“I do.” He sighed, the weight of the world on his shoulders. “I know them all too well.”

“Then I will be very nosy and ask how you’re acquainted.”

“I’m a Blake cousin.”

“Oh! How nice. Are you just passing by? Or will you be staying for the celebration?”

“I guess I’ll have to stay. I don’t have much choice.”

“We all have choices, Mr. Blake.”

“I haven’t ever found that to be true.” He stared down the lane, torn over whether he should continue on. He scowled at her. “What is your role in this madness?”

“I’ve tagged after the Middletons as a sort of poor relative who’s not a relative at all.”

“Meaning what? You live with the Middletons, but you’re not family?”

“Precisely. I intended my reply to be a riddle, but you deciphered it immediately. Mr. Middleton is my guardian, and I am his ward. You’re very astute.”

“I can be when I try.”

“Susan and I are very fond of each other, like sisters only better, so it’s as if I’m helping my *sister* stagger toward her wedding.”

“When is it to be?”

“Two weeks from today.”

“Will it be a huge event?”

“Yes. Dozens of your Blake kin are coming, and of course, the whole neighborhood has been invited.”

He wrinkled his nose. “The manor will be packed.”

“Yes. The housemaids are in a frenzy, what with preparing all the bedchambers.” She grinned. “It’s why I’m outside, decorating the fence. The furor inside is overwhelming.”

She studied him, thinking he appeared as worn down as his clothes, as if he’d recently been pummeled by life and was struggling to regroup. He looked as if he could use some pampering.

“You’ll be the first cousin to arrive,” she said, “and the staff is just waiting to serve someone. They’ll spoil you rotten.”

“I might actually enjoy that for a change. I can’t remember the last time I was fussed over.”

“That’s the saddest statement I’ve ever heard. We all deserve a little coddling.” She waved him on. “You’re dead on your feet. Why don’t you go to the house?”

“Am I that decrepit?”

“Yes. Have you traveled far to get here?”

“It seems as if I’ve traveled forever.”

His voice was fatigued, his demeanor drained, and she’d always been much too sympathetic. As a girl, she’d been the type who’d dragged home stray kittens and puppies. As an adolescent, living with the Middletons, she’d nursed the sick dogs and worried over the lame horses. She was no different with people.

He was such a tragic figure, standing there in his shabby coat and scuffed boots. She had no idea what ordeals he'd suffered on his journey to Selby, but she was swamped by the perception that they had been punishing and dreadful. She was desperate to wrap her arms around him, to hug him and tell him everything would be all right.

"Can you find the manor on your own?" she asked him.

"Yes." He stared down the lane again, and he was wretched, as if he couldn't bear to spur himself toward it.

"It's quite a distance. With you being so tired, maybe you should jump on your horse and ride the rest of the way."

"Is my fatigue that clear?"

"Yes. You have no secrets from me, sir."

"How terrifying."

She lifted her hand to urge him on, and the lace on the cuff of her sleeve caught on a nail in the fence post. She managed to halt just before she tore it.

She frowned and glanced down, and he asked, "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing. My sleeve snagged on a nail."

She started tugging at it to free herself without damaging the gown. The Middletons provided her with a tiny allowance, and Susan gave Nell her castoffs, so she had clothes to wear, but her benefactors weren't overly generous, and she would never deliberately ruin a garment.

She was much too pragmatic to be frivolous with her wardrobe.

"Don't rip it," he said, his tone scolding, and he dropped his horse's reins and stepped over to her.

Suddenly, they were very close together, and she was thrilled in a peculiar feminine fashion by how he towered over her. At five-foot-six in her slippers, she wasn't exactly a petite person, but he was much taller than she'd initially assumed, six feet at least and perhaps even more than that.

Even though he was currently too thin, he oozed male virility, making her wonder if he wasn't a soldier or an athlete. He was so thoroughly masculine.

Without requesting permission, he clasped her wrist, then wedged the lace off the nail. It came loose, and she should have thanked him and pulled away, but she didn't. Neither did he.

Though it sounded odd, it seemed as if the Earth stood still for a moment. The breeze stopped blowing in the trees. The birds stopped singing. It grew very quiet, the silence almost eerie.

There was the strangest sense in the air, as if powerful forces were at work in the universe, as if she'd been destined to cross paths with him for some reason. She gazed up at him, fully expecting him to utter a profound comment that she would mull forever.

When he finally spoke, she bit down a laugh as he voiced a perfectly mundane question instead.

"What is your name?"

"Eleanor—Nell—Drummond."

"Is it *Miss* Drummond?"

"Yes."

He scrutinized her in the same intense manner he'd scrutinized the forest: as if he was assessing every detail for later reflection. She'd never had anyone stare at her so meticulously, and she might have fidgeted, but she wasn't a silly debutante, meeting a potential beau. She was a twenty-two-year-old spinster. She could survive a male inspection.

"Where did you get all your lovely chestnut hair?" he asked.

It was her best feature, curly, lush, long, and uncontrollable. She gave it a vain shake. "From my dear, departed mother."

"Was she very beautiful?"

"Yes, she was."

He actually grabbed a strand and wrapped it around his finger. Then he leaned in and evaluated the color, and she was frozen in her spot, absolutely breathless to discover what he might attempt next.

But he swiftly remembered himself. He released her and moved away. She couldn't decide if she was relieved or disappointed.

"I'd better head to the manor," he said.

"Would you like me to walk you? You seem awfully weary."

"There's no need. I've come such a distance on my own. I'm sure I can make it the remainder of the way without collapsing."

"Will you join us for supper?"

He snorted, perhaps with disgust, perhaps with amusement. "I probably will."

"If you're seated near me at the end of the table, I can talk your ear off."

He smiled—the only one he'd displayed—and told her, "I might like that."

"There's to be dancing after. And cards."

He winced. "I thought I was the first cousin to arrive."

"Mrs. Blake has invited many of the neighbors for the evening."

“Aren’t I lucky?” he muttered.

“Are you a dancer? Or are you more prone to drink in the corner with the bachelors and irk the ladies who can’t find a partner?”

He gaped at her, as if he’d never heard of dancing before. “I guess I *was* a dancer in a different period of my life.”

“Well, once you’re fed and spoiled for a bit, will you dance with me? Since I welcomed you so warmly, I ought to receive a reward.”

He snorted, this time with amusement. She was certain of it.

“You’re sassy,” he said. “I didn’t think I liked that in a woman, but maybe I do.”

He sauntered off, his horse obediently plodding after him. A cloud floated over the sun, the sky darkening, as if the world was colder and duller without him standing beside her.

She was sad to have him leave, which was ridiculous. After all, he was staying for the wedding, so they’d have chances to socialize. But still, it felt wrong that he’d abandon her so quickly after they’d met.

“Goodbye,” she called. “I enjoyed our chat.”

He glanced over his shoulder, his potent gaze rocking her.

“It’s not goodbye, Miss Nell Drummond,” he offered like a threat. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Yes, you will—and I will expect that dance you promised.”

“Don’t be greedy.”

He kept on, and she yearned to call out again, but she forced herself to refrain. He likely already deemed her to be a nuisance, and she wouldn’t lower his opinion any further.

It was a rare occasion when she flirted. Had they been flirting? It definitely seemed like it, and she couldn’t wait to bump into him again at the earliest opportunity.

From the moment she’d arrived at Selby, she’d been afraid the entire celebration would be a boring slog, but it might not be. She might be introduced to handsome men, mingle exhaustively, and head back to London with a dozen new friends.

It could happen. Couldn’t it? It didn’t have to all be unpleasant.

She grinned and returned to her basket of flowers, but she could barely concentrate on her task. She wanted to chase after him, to babble a mile a minute as he proceeded to the house, but that was insane—and rude as well. She’d see him later.

Oh, yes, she would!