

CAPTIVATING THE COUNTESS

SCHOOL OF MAGIC, BOOK 6



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ONE



YORKSHIRE, CASTLE YATES

"MARRY THE GIRL BEFORE I DIE, RAINFORD!"

Rainford—otherwise known as Jasper Winchester, marquess and heir to a dukedom—considered crushing his teacup. Rain was known as a man of icy civility and professionalism. He would not strangle his father. "I will, as soon as Rutledge returns from India so I may properly ask for his daughter's hand and arrange the settlements."

His father, the Duke of Sommersville, sat up against his bed pillows and scowled. Inherently tall and lean, the duke was gaunt now. His blond hair had turned to silver and had started to thin with his illness—an illness Rainford was unable to cure, much to everyone's distress. "Dammit, Rain, that cold, calculating brain of yours can't *buy* a wife! Romance Miss Rutledge, tell her she's special, woo the woman, and she won't want to delay!"

Rain stoically waited for his father to fling the Ice King epithet at him, as everyone else did. He accepted the sobriquet. Someone in this household had to be the sensible one, and as heir, responsibility fell on him. "Araminta is shy. She has requested that we wait for her father. I don't wish to terrify her."

He didn't want to romance the child either. He'd hoped she'd show a little more interest if she stayed at the castle in rural splendor. She hadn't.

"You can marry any damned female in the kingdom!" his father muttered. He was too ill to roar these days. "Why did you choose one who won't marry you now? I won't last forever."

Because Rain had thought he'd have decades more before inheriting the burden of the family estates and eccentrics. The estates, he could manage. The eccentrics. . . were beyond his control. His molars had ground to nubbins these last months of dealing with the well-intentioned family gathering to pay their respects to the dying duke.

He'd had to hire a footman just to shut doors on the escape-artist monkeys one of the aunts had left in her last visit. The parrot. . . wasn't any worse than the musicians Alicia hired. Left to their own devices, his family would turn the castle into a jungle with banana trees, native drummers, and a lion. He'd forbidden the lion.

"No one lasts forever, including *me* if I don't get some rest," Rain retorted. As trained physicians, he and his father knew their limits. He thought if he sat down now, he'd fall asleep while his father was in mid rant. "I should go to London and leave you with this madhouse. At least I might be able to complete some portion of my work."

"It's December." Disliking helplessness, the duke picked fretfully on anyone in his vicinity. "There's no one in London."

Well, that was the point. In London, he could work without querulous fathers, bored sisters, visiting aunts and cousins, a nursery full of screaming brats, and a cousin who had brought London home with him for the holidays. Rain had a medical treatise to complete and an entire book of legislation he should be reading through.

If all of that went away, he might even have time to look into creating a medical clinic of his own. But since that wasn't happening, Rain longed for the quiet of his club where no women could demand his time and attention.

Which was how he'd landed in this unmarried state, he recognized.

"You promised your sisters and their families a proper country holiday." The duke continued his complaint. "You can't run away and leave them for London. Your duty is to marry and produce an heir. Work can wait. Do you even know what your intended is doing right now? Why aren't you busy seducing her?"

Rain respected his father. The duke had a reason for his desperation. But Rain had been raised as a gentleman. Only a rogue would impregnate his intended wife before marriage. And since the female in question refused to marry without her father's permission, he either waited or found someone

else. His family had spent the entire thirty-four years of his life looking for his bride. He didn't have time to start anew.

Or the patience to repeat the argument. "I believe Miss Rutledge is avoiding my sisters' séance and Teddy Junior's bacchanalia by praying in the chapel. Or perhaps hiding in the library. She knows these are the hours I reserve for patients—although at this point, you may be my last one. Most patients can't wait until visiting hours twice a week to break limbs or become ill."

Just being aristocrats practicing medicine established the family as eccentric, but it was family tradition. Descendant of druidic Malcolms, the duke was a brilliant healer.

"Going to that herbalist in the village, are they? Shame. Even if you have no gift for healing, you're still a trained physician."

The half-hearted grumble pierced Rain's heart and twisted like a knife. The one duty he *had* to accomplish, the one he desired to succeed at more than any other, he'd failed at. He couldn't heal the duke, with training or with any mystical *gifts*.

Unable to answer the unanswerable, he walked out.

A flute and a fiddle echoed from his cousin Teddy's studio on the floor above, on the far end of the enormous, sprawling mansion. Like many ancient edifices, this one was called a castle, but it hadn't resembled one in centuries. Winchesters had an affinity for architecture. Once the dukes and their families had added every conceivable eccentricity to the main Sommersville estate in Somerset, they'd started on Castle Yates in Yorkshire.

Teddy, being one of the more artistic Winchesters, was intent on stamping his architectural fantasy on the castle's stately Georgian exterior. He had drawn up a neo-Gothic monstrosity with turrets, battlements, and even a portcullis, if he could manage a moat. If Teddy inherited the family fortune, the conversion would drain the family coffers, as one of their ancestors once had done in Sommersville.

And that was just *one* reason Rainford had to marry and produce an heir—soon.

In the family parlor below, his sisters and their guests screamed in horror. Rain didn't even bother to investigate. He wasn't about to be dragged into their search for apparitions from beyond the veil. His sisters were bored and looking for entertainment, he understood. The husbands of the three married ones were out hunting, leaving the women to their own devices. All four of them depended on the income from the vast Winchester fortune.

The fortune that insane Teddy would inherit if Rain was unmarried when the duke died.

CHRISTMAS, 1871, EDINBURGH, SCHOOL OF MALCOLMS

"Oh, isn't she precious! Look at her beautiful pink fingers." Teacher and half owner of the School of Malcolms Lady Agatha bounced the infant in her chubby arms. "Look, Isobel, tell me you don't want one of these."

To Isobel's alarm, her hostess shoved the infant at her.

Her twin rushed to the rescue, sweeping the sleeping child into her own arms and cradling her. "Sit down," Iona hissed under her breath. Then she addressed the new mother while smiling and rocking the bundle of joy. "Olivia, you are truly blessed. Look how well she sleeps!"

Isobel had so wanted to have a peek at the baby. . . She sighed and obediently settled on the nearest chair like an invalid, knowing the messiness and embarrassment of keeling over at the slightest startlement would mar this holiday gathering. Worse yet would be breaking anything she held when she fell, like a vulnerable infant. Of necessity, Bell had learned since childhood to sit still and allow others to regulate how much of life came to her. In disgruntlement, she waited for her twin to hand over their friend's bundle of joy.

Fortunately, Iona understood and placed the infant in her arms. Finally, Bell could cuddle the babe. Given her curse, she would never have one of her own, but that didn't stop her from enjoying others.

"You're a natural," Lady Phoebe cried. Tall, with a headful of chestnut hair, she nurtured animals instead of children. "You should stay with Olivia instead of returning to your drafty estate."

Only recently granted the title and estate of the Countess of Craigmore, Bell laughed at the notion. She would keel over the instant she encountered Olivia's large, boisterous family.

"You could stay here, dear," Lady Agatha suggested.

Here was the newly renovated School of Malcolms. The original two medieval townhomes had been connected to a third building, allowing them to expand schoolrooms and the parlor they used for entertaining. Tonight's grand opening holiday celebration was spilling over with former students, teachers, and family. Bell had taught here briefly, before taking her position as a steward with the Malcolm Librarian. She'd enjoyed the company, but the continuous riotous noise had left her prostrate much of the time.

"Thank you, but I think I really should return to Craigmore. It's my

responsibility, after all." She might be a countess in her own right, but she possessed naught more than an ancient manor house near Inverness, barren land, and sheep. Still, she knew how to manage money. She'd figure out how to save her tenants from poverty. Somehow.

The infant started to squirm, and Bell held it out to Olivia. "You will have your hands full when she is older. It's always interesting to guess what gifts they might have."

"I'll just hope she's not her father's daughter and want to dig mines," Olivia said with a laugh.

The recently refurbished parlor smelled of the huge evergreen the students had decorated. Candles twinkled in all the windows, and a generous fire blazed in the fireplace. Forced to sit straight by the corset required for her unaccustomed fancy gown, Bell sat primly in a lovely new wing chair and soaked up the camaraderie as best as she could while everyone milled and towered over her. She dreaded the moment the men returned with their loud voices and masculine rowdiness. But for now, the parlor was a jumble of colorful femininity as the women caught up on all their news.

In her glittering red sari, Lady Dare, another of the school's teachers, claimed the infant next, cooing to her in two languages. "Lydia, quit looking at the bookshelf and come admire this little beauty. How in the name of heaven will you tend your own bundle of joy if you have your head in a book?"

Heavily pregnant, Lydia, the Malcolm Librarian and Bell's former employer, set down the book she'd been perusing and accepted the babe. "She looks as if she'll write her own story someday. So much has happened in these last years, it's hard to imagine what the future will hold for our children."

"If my husband has anything to say about it, we'll all be bouncing around in horseless carriages and have telegraphs in our homes." Unencumbered by the usual feminine frippery, Lady Phoebe dropped into an unladylike sprawl in a chair near Isobel's. "You should stay here in Edinburgh, Bell. There are so many exciting things happening."

Bell's twin rapped Phoebe on the head with Lydia's book. "*Think*, my friend. You just put *Bell* and *exciting* in the same sentence. Are you trying to kill her?"

Bell laughed. "I'm not likely to die from overexcitement. But I would prefer to limit how often I topple from being caught by surprise. Craigmore is peaceful and familiar."

"We'll miss you dreadfully," Lydia said, making a face at the babe to hide her distress.

Bell loved the generous librarian, but she also knew when it was time to take destiny in her own hands. "You do not need two stewards, and I am not capable of dealing with the farmers you require to rent your land. Your new estate agent is excellent and well-trained. I could—"

Lady Gertrude, the other co-owner of the School of Malcolms, opened the door and gestured for a parade of servants bearing refreshments to enter. "Agatha, why have you not told the child about Yatesville?"

The plumper, shorter of the sisters nodded vigorously. "Oh yes, I forgot. It seems the duke will be in need of a house steward in his Yorkshire estate. I know you're a countess now, Bell, but. . . well. . . the duke is in ill health. He's a Malcolm, you know, and he's been good to us. They could really use someone quiet and efficient who might slip into the role without much ado. It's a much bigger estate than Lydia's, of course. But that means you needn't worry about tenants, just the house servants. I'm sure a duke has multiple estate agents for handling his fields."

"Castle Yates?" Isobel asked warily. "The duke of Sommersville's estate?" As far as she was aware, the duke was elderly, but she'd met his son—

The parlor door blew open, bringing in a gale of cold winter air and a mass of masculinity in boots and overcoats, all smacking each other on the back and talking at once.

Startled, Bell felt her chest constrict. She struggled against it, gasping for breath. But the spirit was there waiting, pushing into her head.

As Bell lost consciousness, she heard a plaintive voice cry, *Save my son, please. Save the duke.*