

THE
CORNWALL
NOVELS

The
LIGHT
at

WYNDCLIFFE

SARAH E. LADD

“An expertly woven tale of secrets, danger, and heartfelt romance.
A riveting and deeply emotional read.”

—Mimi Matthews, *USA TODAY* bestselling author



CHAPTER I



Cornwall, early autumn 1820

Wyndcliff Estate

Twenty-two years was a long time to wait for life to begin. Even now, as Liam Twethewey guided his bay horse down the narrow, deeply rutted path, he could barely prevent the grin from spreading on his face.

Only a mile or so more and he would be in his new home. Everything he'd been dreaming of—his plans for developing the moorland and making his own way in the world—was finally within his reach.

He filled his lungs with the damp earth-scented air. The rain had, for the moment, subsided. Night was falling and twilight's ominous light cast shadows on the barren land surrounding him, and he squinted to assess the ribbon of road winding before him through the moor's purple grasses and jagged crags.

He might be far from the home he'd known for most of his life, but he already felt a connection to this bit of earth.

For he was now on Wyndcliff estate land.

And it all belonged to him.

Perhaps it would have been wiser to wait for his solicitor, Edwin Kinden, to join him as they'd originally planned. Liam had never set

foot on Wyndcliff property, and the directions he'd received at the inn in town were vague at best. As the man tasked with overseeing the transfer of property, Kinden was the most appropriate person to handle all introductions to the place. But after nearly two hours of waiting for the older man to arrive, impatience won out. He'd anticipated this moment for far too long to spend another second sitting idly in a dark, smoky public house.

Liam had left word with the innkeeper for Mr. Kinden to meet him out at Wyndcliff Hall when he arrived. After all, how hard could it be to find a large manor house along the main road at the moor's edge?

Liam urged his horse to a quicker pace. This might be his property, but it wouldn't do to be caught in a storm on unfamiliar moorland, especially this close to nightfall.

A gentle rain began to drizzle from the heavens, and Liam was about to press his horse to an even faster pace when a sharp, panicked whinny met his ears. He slowed.

The sound echoed again, followed by a muffled voice.

Concern trumped his enthusiasm, and he halted his horse. But all was now silent. "Anyone there?"

"Yes!" a feminine voice snapped, high and sharp. "Here! Please help! My pony's caught."

Alarm pushed Liam from his saddle, and his boots landed with a splash in the mud. After securing his reins to a rugged piece of rock, he tracked the direction of the voice.

"Mind the bog!" The increasingly volatile wind distorted the woman's cries, tossing them amidst its gusts. "It's deep along the crag."

Heeding the warning, Liam stepped from stone to stone, testing each footfall before taking another step on the marshy ground. The wind tore at his greatcoat, threatening his balance. He cut through

THE LIGHT AT WYNDCLIFF

tall grasses and crested a rocky ridge, and then a flash of dark blue in the sea of brown and stone caught his attention.

A slight woman with windblown golden hair was yanking on the head collar of a gray pony knee-deep in mud.

Alarm at the potentially dangerous situation shook him from his surprise. One wrong step and the woman would be trapped in the bog, just like her pony. “Stay there. Don’t move.”

He retrieved the leather strap from his horse’s head collar and returned back down to the little valley formed between the crags. He inched down the decline, testing the firmness of the ground before committing his full weight.

The mud-caked pony thrashed and awkwardly bucked to free itself. It reeled back, tossing its muzzle and squealing, but instead of helping the pony break loose, each movement tightened the murky substance around its legs.

“Whoa, whoa,” Liam soothed, lowering and calming his voice. With careful, measured steps he approached the animal, ignoring the rain, now more like sharp bits of ice as it pounded his caped greatcoat and wide-brimmed hat.

He had to get closer.

In order to free his own movements he removed his coat, tossed it on higher land, and stepped farther into the bog. His foot instantly sank to his ankle. Like a noose, mud cinched around it. It would be unwise to go farther, so he reached as far as he could and made several attempts to secure the pony’s head collar.

The pony tossed its head in distress, but Liam’s fingers eventually caught on the head collar, and he pulled. He thrust all of his weight backward and pulled harder, careful not to lose control over his own stance.

The pony swung its head and, in a final display of momentum,

freed a foreleg. The animal then broke free, and with all the wild gracelessness of a newborn foal it stumbled up onto dryer, firmer land.

Unsettled by the pony's momentum, Liam toppled back and fell against the damp earth.

With a cry the woman scrambled from her position on the bog's outer edge and staggered toward the pony. Sodden muck coated the bottom half of her blue gown, and dirt streaked across her cheek and coated the ends of her long hair. Without so much as a look at her rescuer, she knelt to assess the pony's legs. "Oh, is she all right, do you think?"

Liam paused to catch his breath, then stepped forward and brushed past the woman to run his hand down the pony's leg. He urged it to take a step and saw that a slight limp marred the pony's stride.

"She favors that leg." A frown wrinkled the woman's brow. "See?"

"Frightened 'tis all, I should think." He gently guided the pony to higher ground. "Even so, she's fortunate. I know horses who've had their legs snapped thrashing about in deep mud like that."

Thunder cracked above them, as if to agree with Liam's statement.

"I never should have brought her out." The woman shook her head. "I must get her home before the storm worsens."

Liam looked toward the clouds rolling in like a determined wave rushing for the shore, prepared to decimate all upon impact. They needed to get to some sort of shelter before the heavens opened up full force. He wanted nothing more than to be at his new home, to see the structure he'd tried to visualize a thousand times, but this woman needed help. He could not leave her here helpless, not with this injured pony.

He'd waited twenty-two years. He could wait a bit longer. "Allow me to assist you to your home. Is it far?"

THE LIGHT AT WYNDCLIFF

“Oh no.” She stepped back suddenly, the confidence she’d displayed earlier when caring for the pony fleeing. “I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“You’re not asking me. I’m offering.” He smiled, attempting to appear as unthreatening as possible, and raised his voice to be heard above the rustling grasses. “But we must hurry—otherwise we’ll all be caught out in the tempest.”

She looked up at the turbulent sky, chewing her lower lip in a manner that suggested she did not like the thought, but as the rain pummeled them, practicality gave way. “I live at Wyndcliff Cottage at the moor’s edge, about half a mile from here.”

“Wyndcliff Cottage?” He started. “I’m on my way to Wyndcliff Hall. Are they close?”

Her gaze narrowed, her unusually colored green eyes vibrant against the stormy backdrop, and she tilted her head to the side. “What’s your business at Wyndcliff Hall?”

The boldness—and perceived authority—in her voice caught him off guard. “My name is William Twethewey. I’ve recently inherited the property.”

“Twethewey?” she repeated, as if searching her memory, and after a few seconds her fair brows rose and pink bloomed on her cheeks. “Of course. William Twethewey. We weren’t expecting you. That is, we knew you were coming eventually, but . . .” Her voice faded before she straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. “My name is Evelyn Bray. My grandfather is Rupert Bray, Wyndcliff’s steward.”

He shouldn’t be surprised to find someone associated with the place on the property, but at the moment it did not matter. The rain increased its intensity and thunder grumbled its ominous warning. The pony pranced nervously.

“Pleasure to meet you, Miss Bray, but I think further

SARAH E. LADD

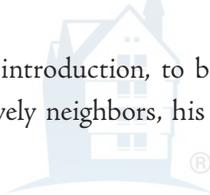
introductions can wait, don't you? You say we are not far? You are welcome to ride my horse if you like. I can lead the pony."

She eyed him, suspicion evident in the firm set of her jaw. She flicked her gaze to his horse, then stepped backward. "Thank you, but I will walk. Do you think Ada will be all right to walk the rest of the way?"

"She seems to be fine, and it will be easier to assess her out of this weather."

They fell into step with each other, each leading an animal. The wind now howled, making conversation nearly impossible. He cast a sideways glance at his unexpected traveling companion. In spite of the mud-streaked cheek and wind-tossed hair, her beauty was not lost on him.

An unconventional introduction, to be sure, but if Wyndcliff Hall came with such lovely neighbors, his new adventure could be off to a worse start.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



CHAPTER 2



Mortified hardly described Evelyn's current state. She drew her candle closer, leaned near the looking glass in the privacy of her small, darkened attic chamber, and scrubbed mud from her face with a cloth.

Being discovered helpless on the moors was humiliating enough, but to be discovered by Wyndcliff's new master, let alone a handsome stranger, was more than she could bear.

Burying her embarrassment, Evelyn exchanged her soaked shift for a dry one before attempting to brush the tangles and bits of mud from her damp hair. She should be grateful Ada had not been more seriously injured. The pony was not young, and Mr. Twethewey had been right. Many a pony—and horses and humans, for that matter—had endured harm in the moor's deceptive bogs.

Footsteps echoed on the stairs outside her chamber, and she turned as Bertie bustled in, the new servant girl Grandfather had recently engaged to look after them at Wyndcliff Cottage.

"Here's your gray gown." The maid shook out the folds of the garment as she approached. "'Tis wrinkled, but at least it's dry."

Evelyn turned to allow the young woman to help her don the gown over her dry shift and stays.

"It will take quite a bit of work to get that mud out of your blue

one,” Bertie muttered as she smoothed the fabric. “How on earth did you manage to get it in such a state?”

Evelyn pivoted so Bertie could tie the fastenings at the back of her neck and between her shoulder blades. “Ada spooked and ran toward the marshland. You know how nervous she can be during storms. She got caught behind Aaron’s Rock.”

Bertie tsked and shook her dark-blond head. “Your grandfather’s warned you about riding out in the moors by yourself, especially in such weather. I’ve heard him say it a dozen times or more. He’ll be powerful angry when he finds out you were out there alone.”

Bertie was right, of course. Grandfather was not shy about sharing his opinions, and he loathed disobedience. Bertie had only been at Wyndcliff a few weeks and already understood their unique relationship. Evelyn forced brightness to her tone. “Then let’s hope he won’t give it much of a thought now that Mr. Twethewey has arrived.”

Once the fastenings were tied, Evelyn resumed the uncomfortable task of brushing mud from her hair. She needed to hurry. Marnie, Wyndcliff Hall’s housekeeper, would need assistance—or at least moral support—with the new master’s unexpected arrival.

“Now then, what’s he like?” Bertie gathered the discarded shift and dirty linen cloths. “I saw only the back of ’im, and even then he was clear across the courtyard.”

Evelyn’s brushing slowed. She hardly knew how to respond. In truth she’d been startled by Liam Twethewey. It was rare to run across strangers on that stretch of moorland. And yet she was impressed by him. He was young with striking black hair and brilliant blue eyes, and that alone was arresting. And he’d been kind to her. Many men might have passed her by to deal with the pony on her own. After being discovered in such a perilous position, she felt small. Silly. Incapable.

THE LIGHT AT WYNDCLIFF

She tossed her damp hair. It would do no good to wallow in self-doubt. And as for Bertie's question, she was not willing to share her personal feelings with someone she'd known for such a short time. "I suppose we shall all find out soon enough. But for now, I must go to Marnie. She is no doubt beside herself."

Bertie chuckled and looped the dirty garments over her arm. "She was already wary of his arrival when she thought it was a month hence. But for him to show up sudden-like, with no warning . . ." Bertie's words faded into the small chamber's deceptive stillness.

For it was not still at all.

The entire fabric of Wyndcliff Hall was rippling and evolving, even now as Mr. Twethewey roamed Wyndcliff grounds. She'd be lying to say she did not share Bertie's curiosity about the new master. As far as Evelyn was concerned, any change to Wyndcliff's sleepy patterns was welcome.

In that moment she could not help but wonder what Mother would think of Mr. Twethewey. Surely she'd think him a handsome man, as Evelyn did, and since he now possessed such expansive property, she'd surely consider him an ideal suitor—if it weren't for the fact that he was associated with Wyndcliff. Mother hated everything about Wyndcliff, and Evelyn doubted that any amount of money would change her mind.

After instructing Bertie to return to her normal evening duties, Evelyn adjusted the long sleeves of her clean gown, donned a fresh cloak of brown wool, and made her way from the cottage across the mist-laden cobbled courtyard to Wyndcliff Hall's kitchen entrance.

Light glowed from deep-set windows that on any other night would be dark at this hour. She pushed open the timber door. Warmth and spicy scents met her.

Marnie Taymer whirled from the fire, her wiry white hair

hanging from beneath her dingy cap, her dark eyes wide. "He's here! An' without a proper warnin', neither."

"I know." Evelyn stepped farther into the room and closed the door behind her, barring the swirls of wind determined to make their way indoors. "But consider, Marnie. It's his home."

"Home or not, a bit of notice would've been sorely welcome. Probably just came early to catch us all unawares, I'd wager."

"Oh, I doubt that." Evelyn removed her cloak and hung it on the peg next to the door. "Besides, if you were Mr. Twethewey, wouldn't you be eager to lay claim to your estate?"

Ignoring Evelyn's reasoning, Marnie bustled across the kitchen to grip a copper pot. "And now we've got an entire house to get ready. La, my soul! Dusty an' dirty—we ain't even seen the inside of some of these chambers in years, what with naught but myself to see to it."

Evelyn shrugged in genuine empathy. For years Marnie and her late husband lived in the house and saw to its keeping, but since his death two years prior, everything shifted. Grandfather's main focus had always been the tenants, and as a result he neglected to add new staff to care for the house. That, compounded by Marnie's bad leg, hindered her ability to keep up with the duties.

"We'll send word for Kitty to come," Evelyn suggested. "She's a hard worker and fast. Lizzie Jones too. Don't fret. Mr. Twethewey seems like a reasonable man, and everything will settle soon. Where's he now?"

"He and your grandfather are still in the stable, tendin' to his horse and that pony o' yours."

Evelyn bit her lip and looked out the window toward the stable. A simple lantern's glow hinted they were still inside. She wanted to check Ada for herself, but she'd seen the fire in her grandfather's eyes when she told him about what happened on the moors. Now was not the time to test him.

She snatched an apron from the hook, stepped farther into the kitchen, and refocused her attention on Marnie. "What are you doing now?"

Marnie nodded to a makeshift clothesline strung in front of the fire laden with men's attire: coats, a linen shirt, a striped waistcoat of gold and green, and two pair of breeches—much finer attire than they were used to seeing in the village. "Most of the clothes in his pack were soaked through. I've hung some of 'em to dry, but there are more. He asked to have a bath drawn, an' Tom took the tub up to the master's chamber, an' I'm heatin' the water now."

Evelyn drew a deep breath, considering the state of the chambers upstairs after having been closed for so long. "Is the bedchamber ready?"

Marnie chortled. "Course not. Tom's to kindle a fire whilst he's up there with the tub, but la. The dust! No one's stepped foot up there in I don't know how long. If Mr. Twethewey had the courtesy to tell us he was comin', I'd have remedied that, but as things are . . ."

Evelyn slid the apron straps over her shoulders. "I can have it tidied in no time."

"Oh, thank ye, child. Dear, these bones. The last thing I want to do is make the master angry an' be out on my side afore I can prove meself."

Evelyn placed a comforting hand on Marnie's shoulder. "Nothing is going to be very different, Marnie. Mark my words, he'll be far too occupied with the tenants and such to worry about the inner workings of Wyndcliff Hall. Grandfather will no doubt see to that."

Once the last of the clothing was hung to dry, Evelyn offered Marnie her arm and helped the older woman up the stairs, creaky and worn and uneven from centuries of use. The bedchambers were at the top of the stairs, but the master's chamber was at the far end of the house.

Evelyn had often roamed Wyndcliff's halls since her arrival nearly a decade ago. With Grandfather gone most of the daytime hours and Mother away in Plymouth these past two years, she'd often found solace within Wyndcliff's thick stone walls by stealing into the library to read or daydream. And even though she enjoyed free rein of the house, she'd never really ventured into the upstairs rooms, especially the master's chambers—a cluster of three rooms that had been Mr. Treton's personal domain when he was alive.

With slight hesitation she followed the housekeeper into this space. As Marnie indicated, Tom had built a fire in the grate, and cheery flames danced and popped. The light flickered on paneled walls that were so dark, they appeared almost black, and ominous carvings of gargoyles on the bedposts met her with intimidating expressions.

Marnie clicked her tongue and propped her hands on her ample hips. "Master Treton died in this room, an' I'd né'er step in it for the memory, if I can help it. A sad day for all of us."

Only half listening, Evelyn stepped to the bank of east-facing windows. Damp coolness seeped in from the cracks around the windows' leading, and light from the room directly below spilled to the courtyard. She'd only ever seen Mr. Treton in passing, and yet stories of him were shared so frequently, she felt as if she'd known him. He was as much a part of this home and land as the wild moors and windblown beaches, and people often spoke of him as if he alone were responsible for any positive aspects of the village.

She let the faded curtain fall and assessed the oblong chamber as if she were seeing it for the first time. At the north end a large fireplace stood adjacent to a great carved oak bed, the heavy tapestry canopy having been a deep crimson at one time. A large trunk sat at the bed's end, and in the corner was a round table with two chairs. The plaster ceilings had at some point been painted white,

the brightness of which stood in sharp contrast to the dark paneled walls. Beneath her feet a roughly woven rug covered the entirety of the planked floor, and chairs were scattered around the room. A thick layer of dust covered all, making everything appear ancient and almost otherworldly.

“Chilly in here, but there’s naught that can be done for that but time.” Marnie handed a cloth to Evelyn. “Here, see to that dust gathered on the table and chest. But first we need to freshen this air. Open that window there.”

Evelyn obeyed and turned the archaic iron handle. With a creak the window swung outward, and the pungent moorland air swirled in, brimming with the scent of the sea, rain, and wet earth.

Evelyn took her rag and began to sweep away the dust on the wardrobe. Bertie’s earlier question rang in her mind, and she absently repeated it. “I wonder what sort of man Mr. Twethewey is.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Marnie huffed. “Kind or ill tempered, industrious or aloof, shouldn’t affect us much. He’s a young man. What is he, but two and twenty? He’s just now findin’ his way. As for me, I know my role here an’ what’s to be done.”

Evelyn moved to the table and wiped it clean, her nose wrinkling in protest as the dust swirled upward. Marnie was right. The older woman’s role as housekeeper was very defined—and about to get much busier. Evelyn, on the other hand, did not have an official role at Wyndcliff. Not really. She was the granddaughter of the steward and had no real responsibilities, and little of significance was expected of her by her family, other than to marry well.

But she was failing at that too, for at the moment her prospects were limited. Few suitable men resided in the village, and until her mother called her to Plymouth to introduce her to her acquaintances, there was little to do. In the meantime, Evelyn needed something to pass the time, and if that meant dusting the master’s chamber, then

SARAH E. LADD

so be it. But if she was honest, her curiosity about this new master, with the vibrant blue eyes and cleft chin and the change he could bring to Wyndcliff, was deepening with each passing moment.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



CHAPTER 3



Liam blinked away the icy moisture and fixed his gaze on the soft glow emanating from the kitchen's square window before him. He had not been sure exactly what to expect when he arrived at Wyndcliff Hall, but he was certain this was not it.

Where are all the people?

Prior to his arrival, Kinden had informed him that a full staff was employed to see to the property's upkeep, but besides Miss Bray, a housekeeper, and the steward who now accompanied him, Liam had not encountered another soul. Even now as they crossed the courtyard after seeing to Miss Bray's pony and his own horse, all was still and eerily silent, save for the stormy gusts racing through bare branches and skittering dead leaves over the cobbled ground. He'd not seen enough of Wyndcliff yet for a true assessment, but judging by the size of the manor house alone, there should be evidence of stable hands or kitchen maids.

But Wyndcliff had not had a proper master since his great-uncle Treton died nearly a decade ago. He'd never met his father's uncle, but since Liam was the closest male heir, he left the property to him to inherit when he reached the age of two and twenty. During the interim the estate and tenants had been overseen by Rupert Bray, the steward, and Mr. Kinden oversaw the finances. It had seemed like a fairly simple arrangement, but as Liam looked from the muddy

cobbles beneath his feet to the crack in the kitchen window at eye level to the black spire reaching toward the dark-purple sky, he wondered. He was far from the home he was so comfortable in and the people he loved.

They'd almost reached the kitchen door when Bray stopped abruptly. "Cellar door's open over there. I've a mind to go and close it. Go on in—don't wait on me." He crossed the courtyard.

The wind had caught the indicated door and it now swung on its hinges. Liam groaned. Clearly the latch either had given way or was in ill repair. Either way, the property seemed to have seen better days. With each passing moment the enthusiasm he brought with him was dissolving into concern.

Determined not to succumb to frustration, Liam entered the kitchen and was pleasantly surprised at the warmth it afforded. It possessed a surprisingly high ceiling, with dried herbs and flowers hanging from the exposed wooden rafters. An open fireplace ran the width of the room at the far end, and in it raged a healthy fire that heated two large iron kettles. Inviting scents of stew and strong coffee reminded him that it had been hours since he last ate. The housekeeper, whom he'd met briefly upon his arrival, tended to one of the pots above the fire. Miss Bray stood near her.

He stepped farther into the kitchen, and the stone floor groaned beneath his wet boots. Both women snapped their gazes toward him.

"There now." Mrs. Taymer at last turned from the fire and wiped hair from her face. "Are the animals settled then?"

Liam nodded and removed his coat slowly so he didn't shake water all over the floor. He watched the younger woman from the corner of his eye, careful not to draw attention as he did so. How different she looked without the soiled cape over her shoulders. No trace of mud remained on the curve of her cheek. Her long, honey-blond hair draped damp and loose down her back.

THE LIGHT AT WYNDCLIFF

How many times had he tried to imagine what his home and the people who worked and lived on Wyndcliff estate would be like? He'd received brief and random updates from Kinden's letters, including tidings of the old steward and the older housekeeper, but up until this point, they had been figments of his imagination.

"Yes." Liam pulled himself from his silent musings and hung up his coat. "They're settled."

"And Ada?" Miss Bray advanced a pace, the fire's light accenting a slight dimple in her cheek. "How's her leg?"

Liam thought back to the frightened pony. "Her leg is perhaps bruised, or perhaps the muscle is strained, but she will recover."

Her shoulders relaxed in relief, but before anyone else had a chance to speak, Bray burst in behind him, accompanied by the damp scent of the outdoors and horses, and shed his coat and hat, revealing a shock of white hair and bushy white eyebrows. "Ah, Mrs. Taymer, I hope you've something warm to offer our young master. Traveling always takes it out of a man, 'specially when that travel is on horseback."

"I do, sir." The older woman twisted her hands before her. "Stew and coffee."

"You'll not find a more capable housekeeper than Mrs. Taymer in all of Cornwall." Bray advanced farther into the room. "She's been at Wyndcliff longer than any of us, myself included."

"My husband worked for Mr. Treton since he was a lad," Mrs. Taymer offered, a quiver in her thin voice. "An' I been here since I was but a bride meself. Nigh on thirty years, I reckon."

Bray's expression softened as he turned his attention to Miss Bray. "And then you've met my Evelyn here. Unexpectedly, I'll admit, but you've met her nonetheless."

Miss Bray smiled and offered a slight curtsy.

Liam returned the greeting with a slight bow. "And you are well after the ordeal?"

Before she could respond, Bray once again interjected himself and placed a hand on her shoulder. "We've spent the better part of the last half hour with that pony of yours. How many times have I told ye to stay off the moors, especially by the bogs? A dangerous bit of land. Best leave it to the wind and the fairies."

"Yes, you've told me." Her face flushed, and her former air of confidence faltered as she tucked her hands behind her back and diverted her gaze. "It won't happen again."

Bray straightened his shoulders, patted his granddaughter's cheek, and smoothed his hair neatly over his forehead. His control of this skeleton of a household was evident, proved by the knot of tension tightening in the air.

Attempting to lighten the atmosphere that Mr. Bray's reprimand had conjured, Liam turned to the housekeeper. "So I have met the three of you. Is there anyone else on the property I should know?"

Once again, Bray answered in her stead. "Tom, our manservant, is about somewhere. You'll meet him soon enough. Kitty, the kitchen girl, comes during the day to help Mrs. Taymer as needed, and Joshua and Jeb, the boys I mentioned earlier, assist as needed with the grounds and the animals, not that there are many. And, of course, Evelyn and I have a housekeeper at the cottage called Bertie, but other than that we're a self-sufficient lot."

Liam shoved his disappointment down further as his suspicions were confirmed. There was a great deal to learn about Wyndcliff, and it would be best to avoid jumping to conclusions until he could see his property by day's light. He pushed his growing list of questions to the back of his mind and looked back to Mrs. Taymer. "I see."

She fussed with her apron. "I-I've set the stew on. If I'd have

THE LIGHT AT WYNDCLIFF

kn-known ye were comin', I would have prepared somethin' more fit-tin'. An' the water is hot for a bath in yer chamber."

Dinner and a bath would be most welcome. Liam's limbs ached with exhaustion, and his skin had been damp for quite some time from the rain and mud. He was eager to trade his damp clothes for dry ones. "Thank you. And I'll take dinner in my chamber tonight. I've no wish to disrupt things any more than I already have."

"Disrupt things?" Bray released a rough, almost abrasive laugh. "This is your home now, Mr. Twethewey. The house staff, such as it is, is at your service."

A fresh gust of wind rushed against the windowpane, rattling it and whistling through the cracks. Had Kinden arrived at the inn yet? Regardless, there was no way the man would venture out in this blustery weather. He turned to Bray. "I know you're acquainted with Mr. Kinden, my late uncle's solicitor."

"Yes, sir, I am."

"I was to meet him in the village earlier, but he did not arrive. I left a note at the inn for him to join me here. I doubt he'll come yet tonight, but he'll stay for a few days as the transfer of property is finalized. I should like a room prepared for him."

"Of course." Bray bowed low. "Would you like to see the rest of Wyndcliff Hall before retiring?"

Liam glanced down a dark hall leading from the kitchen. He was curious to see the dining hall, but without the fires lit and the candles ablaze, he was not sure how much he would actually see. "It can wait until tomorrow's light."

"Very well. A thorough review of the house and grounds tomorrow then. It is Market Day tomorrow so the tenants may be away, but you'll see them soon enough."

"That is fine. But for now, if someone could show me to my chamber, I will leave you all to your evening." Liam took up a candle

SARAH E. LADD

of his own. The warmth of the kitchen subsided as he followed the steward up the stairs. With each step the passageway grew narrower and the ambience grew darker, and the impending sense of dread of what would meet him eclipsed his excitement.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798



CHAPTER 4



Liam rolled his shoulders forward slightly to fit through the stairwell. The tight turn and the narrow passage made for an uncomfortable climb for a man of his height. If there had been any room for doubt, this walk confirmed it. Wyndcliff Hall was in quite a state of disrepair. Plaster curled off the walls. Dust and dirt covered each tread.

Despite the unsettling disappointment, he would hold out hope that the servants' staircase was not an indication of the rest of the house's condition. But for now his body ached from a long, arduous ride and a battle with a bog. At the moment he was hungry and in need of a hot bath and a warm bed. There would be time enough tomorrow for assessing the state of his property.

They reached the landing, and the air was even cooler. The light from his candle fell on thick cobwebs and reflected off shadowy dust motes balancing in the stale air. The corridor widened as they stepped past several closed doors, and eventually the plaster wall to his left opened to a banister.

"You can't see it now, but this walkway overlooks the great hall. The family sleeping chambers are on the other end, past the minstrel gallery. There's a portrait gallery as well. Some of the paintings there go back two centuries."

They continued down a labyrinth until at last Bray stopped

before a wooden door. "We're here, the master's chamber. Of course, you can take any room you'd like. There are six sleeping chambers in this part of the house, but Mr. Treton was fond of this one on account of you can see the sea and the stable yard from the south windows."

"I'm sure it will suit me fine."

Bray's hand, trembling with age's effect, hovered over the tarnished iron handle for several seconds, and then it dropped. In a jerky motion, Bray spun back around to face Liam, the glint in his dark eyes hard and unwavering. His candle reflected light on the deep grooves in his cheeks that at one time might have been dimples but had been altered by decades of smiling. Or scowling. "Before I show you to this room, a word, if I may."

Liam eyed the man, his skepticism growing. He'd been in Bray's presence for well over an hour, and even in that short period an odd, unspoken challenge for dominance had hovered. Bray's harsh demeanor suggested he did not accept that Wyndcliff Hall was legally Liam's property now.

Liam hoped this transition would not be a problem.

He nodded and remained silent until Bray spoke again.

"You've indicated that you want to tour the estate tomorrow, which is right, but I feel a more appropriate introduction is in order before we proceed. After all, I've been at the helm here while you were coming of age and learning the ways of the world."

Liam stiffened at the whisper of condescension in the man's tone.

Bray did not wait for a response. "You'll come to hear my story sooner or later. Every soul in these parts is familiar with it, and every soul is keen on a bit of gossip. I was born not a mile from here at Keverne Park. I was married there. Raised a son there. Eventually welcomed a granddaughter and later buried my wife and son there. Yes, I had the same look of opportunity and optimism you have in

your eyes, but foolish decisions on my part led to a reduction in circumstances, and I'm as you find me now—a steward. Nothing more, nothing less. I've seen this land from both sides—as a gentleman who enjoyed privileges and plenty and as one who worked the land, desperate for it to be kind and provide.”

Liam watched the man, with his neatly combed white hair and his expertly tied crimson cravat. He did possess a certain air—the posture and self-assuredness of a member of the gentry.

“With age comes clarity and, dare I say, wisdom. I'm as loyal as they come, and I will serve you faithfully in the role bestowed upon me by Mr. Treton. But there is one thing you must understand.”

Liam folded his arms over his chest. Now they were getting to it, the reason behind this man's monologue. “And that is?”

“My son is dead, and my daughter-in-law, fickle, vile woman that she is, chose to make a life for herself in Plymouth. Consequently, my granddaughter, Evelyn, is in my care.” Bray's gaze narrowed. His voice lowered. “She's here as my family and is a lady in her own right. Let me be clear. Evelyn is not in the estate's employ.”

Liam's shoulders tensed. He'd be lying if he said he hadn't been curious about the young woman. She seemed wildly out of place, but it was far too early to make assumptions.

“She's had free rein of the area, as well she should, but mind you, she's caught many an eye. She's all but spoken for, and . . .” He paused. “I'll not have any newcomer setting his sights on something that will not be.”

Liam raised his brows. Had he heard correctly? Was Bray really suggesting that Liam would attempt to woo his granddaughter, mere hours after his arrival?

“I'd go to my grave to see her protected and happy.” Bray's cheeks shook with intensity. “So as long as you and I are in agreement on

that subject, I see no reason that we shouldn't look forward to a long and prosperous association."

Liam inhaled as anger seared through him. He should dismiss this man on the spot. The insinuation. The insolence. He may be young, but he would not be spoken to in such a manner on his own property.

Then reason stepped in.

Liam didn't know his tenants. Didn't know the inner workings of this estate. He was determined to make this estate profitable, and whether he liked it or not, he needed Bray.

Several seconds slid by, beckoning him to remain calm. He met the man's sharp gaze, his unwavering determination standing testament to his past as a gentleman.

Liam forced confidence into his tone and refused to look away. "I understand your concerns, I do. I've three sisters whom I'd go to pistols to protect. I assure you, your granddaughter will be treated with nothing but the utmost respect."

The corner of Bray's mouth quirked in satisfaction.

Liam squared his shoulders. "You've served Wyndcliff faithfully and productively. That's not in question. I may have only assumed responsibility here just this day, but I'll not allow my integrity to be questioned, especially as it pertains to my behavior toward women."

Bray's brows shot up. The men locked eyes in a silent battle of wills—the older man intent upon clinging to his authority and Liam determined to take control.

Liam broke the tense silence. "And now it is my turn to ask. Do we understand each other?"

In a sudden turn of events, Bray emitted a condescending laugh, as an adult laughing to a child. "You've a great deal of your uncle's blood flowing through your veins, lad."

"I'm hardly a lad. And rest assured that the depth of my

THE LIGHT AT WYNDCLIFF

convictions has nothing to do with whom I'm related to or whose blood flows in my veins."

The steward stepped closer. His laughter faded to a throaty grunt. The hard glint returned to his gray eyes. "Yes, then. We understand each other, I think." Bray stepped back and pushed the door open. "Your chamber, sir. A bell pull is located inside the door to your left. Should you need anything, pull it and Tom or Mrs. Taymer will be summoned to assist you."

Liam nodded.

Bray retreated.

Once the steward's lumbering footsteps faded, Liam expelled his breath in a whoosh. Of all the unexpected events since his arrival, that was the oddest. Perhaps Bray was nothing more than an over-protective grandfather, but he suspected there was more to Bray's motives than Liam realized. Regardless, he was glad the man had finally left him in peace.

He entered his chamber and closed the door behind him. The fire in the grate provided most of the light, but candles and a lantern were scattered throughout the oblong room. As promised, a large copper tub had been brought, and steam rose from the water within. Several items of clothing that had been packed in his satchel now hung near the fire, drying. He unbuttoned his damp coat and shrugged it from his shoulders. He looked around in the dark, low-ceilinged room, from the old canopied bed to the heavily carved wardrobe to the paneled walls to the uneven and worn floor.

This was what he'd waited for. Planned for. Now he was here in the master's chamber, where he assumed every master had laid his head since the building was constructed well over a century past.

As he loosened his neckcloth and began to unbutton his waistcoat, he moved to the window and looked down at the stable courtyard. An inky midnight mist obscured the cobbles and shrouded the grounds.

With the exception of the occasional pop from the fire and the angry wind whistling through the window cracks, all was silent.

The silence and solitude were surprisingly unwelcome.

His thoughts turned to the others who resided on this land. Mrs. Taymer seemed a kind soul, if not a nervous one, and he'd yet to meet the elusive Tom.

Maybe Miss Bray was still in the kitchen below. Or perhaps she had gone back to her home. In the end he had to respect Bray's determination to protect his loved one. After all, Liam was not unreasonable. He understood why any guardian would be concerned with such a beautiful charge, for she was just that. It would have been impossible not to notice her blonde hair, the depth of her uniquely colored green eyes, and her complexion that rivaled porcelain.

He shook his head. No, his goal was clear. Before he could even think of a sweetheart, let alone a wife, he had to establish a living, one that would allow him to keep his home in better repair than he now found it.

He headed over to his bags and riffled through the letters he'd brought with him. He found the letter he sought—the one from Mr. Porter. Inside lay the plans for the china clay pits, the endeavor that would launch and ensure his future.

He opened the letter and read it again. It was not necessary to do so, for in truth he'd memorized every detail, from the timeline to the costs to the goals. No, he could not afford distractions. The sooner this night passed and the dawn broke so he could put his plans into action, the better.



CHAPTER 5



Of all the self-important, impertinent . . .” Grandfather’s grumbling echoed from the plaster walls, and his footsteps pounded the ancient stone stairs with unusual fervor, prompting Evelyn to peek up from the silver spoon she was polishing.

It had been nigh a quarter of an hour since Grandfather had accompanied Mr. Twethewey upstairs. She had wondered what was taking him so long to simply show the new master to his chamber, but as Grandfather entered the kitchen, the deep frown lines on his forehead suggested the interaction had not been pleasant.

As Grandfather crossed the threshold, Marnie ceased her sweeping and leaned on the broom handle. “There now, is he all settled?”

But Grandfather did not answer. Instead, his bushy brows furrowed and he snatched his hat from the table where he’d left it.

Evelyn tensed. She knew that look—that expression of simmering contemplation.

“The stew then? The bit we left in his chamber?” Marnie raised her voice, oblivious to Grandfather’s irritation. “Did he like it?”

Grandfather huffed, stopped, and turned to face them both. His round, clean-shaven face flamed red, making his gray eyes more vibrant. He ignored Marnie’s question and pulled his greatcoat from

the hook before muttering, "We're in for a great deal of trouble with that one."

Evelyn and Marnie exchanged glances. It was not unusual for Grandfather to form opinions fast, but this one seemed decidedly negative.

Keeping her tone light, Evelyn returned to her task of polishing. "What makes you say that?"

"Fetch your things, Evie. Let's go home and put this day behind us."

This was not the time to challenge him. She lowered the silver, shrugged the work apron from her shoulders, hung it back on the hook, and offered Marnie an encouraging smile. "Try to get some rest. And I'm sure he enjoyed the stew."

"If I'd have known he was comin', I'd have used the salted pork. But who had time? Descended upon us with nary a warnin'." Marnie sniffed.

"Don't fret. Everything will be all right once everyone is settled in this new situation." Evelyn squeezed Marnie's hand as she walked past the older woman. "I'll be by in the morning."

Once at the door Evelyn retrieved her cloak, lifted a lantern, and followed her grandfather out into the damp, mist-laden night. He sighed, as if unburdening himself from the cares of the world, took her free hand in his, and looped it through his arm, protective and insistent, then patted it. His voice softened from the brash tone he'd used in the kitchen to one more suited to speaking with a child or a frightened kitten. "You know you're not to be polishing silver."

Evelyn swiped her hair away from her face. "I was only helping. Now that Mr. Twethewey has arrived, there's much to do. And you know how nervous Marnie gets."

"Let her see to it then, or ask Kitty or Lizzie by to help. You're

THE LIGHT AT WYNDCLIFF

not a hired hand, Evie. I've told you dozens of times, and I'll not have you acting like one."

Evelyn bit her lower lip. It would do no good to argue her point. Marnie was her friend—a relationship Grandfather tolerated—nay, permitted—most of the time. Yet she'd not do anything to vex him further. "How did you leave Mr. Twethewey? Was he settled?"

"Bah." Grandfather snorted. "He's a high-and-mighty gent, or at least that is what he'd have us think. But he's naught more than a lad."

"He is two and twenty, is he not?" she asked, knowing full well the answer. Everyone knew of that particular term of the inheritance.

"Still a boy. It takes time and experience to be capable to run an estate like Wyndcliff. He's not had enough years on this earth for such an undertaking. He'd be wise to heed the expertise of his elders."

As they crossed the cobbled courtyard, Evelyn carefully adjusted her pace to match her grandfather's slower one. The damp weather was difficult on him, even though he'd never admit it. His lagging pace proved it. The rain had subsided, and a chill descended in its place. They continued in silence, and for that Evelyn was grateful. For all of his good qualities, the tendency toward anger was Grandfather's flaw, and when faced with something that vexed him, he was unlikely to dismiss it.

As they approached the canopied door of Wyndcliff Cottage, a broad-shouldered figure emerged from the shadows, holding a lantern aloft.

Evelyn recognized Jim Bowen, keeper of the White Eagle Inn, instantly. Charlie Potts, a short, fair-haired miner from the village, walked next to him.

She didn't know Charlie well, but it was always good to see Jim.

He and his father had been friends of her family for as long as she could remember.

Eager to put the day's events behind her, she drew a refreshing breath. A lighthearted conversation was just what she needed to end the day on a better note. "Jim, whatever are you doing poking around here in the dark?"

Despite her attempt at cheerfulness, lines of concern etched Jim's broad forehead. "Evening, Evelyn." He looked past her to Grandfather. "I heard that Mr. Twethewey has arrived. Heard he stopped by the inn earlier when I was out."

She raised her brows at the odd greeting. Normally Jim would have a playful word for her or, at the very least, flatter her in some manner. It had been their way with each other for years. But now a strange tension had invaded.

When Grandfather only nodded and grunted a reply to Jim, Evelyn forced a smile. "Yes, he has. I first encountered him on the moors. Ada got stuck in the bog and he helped me free her."

Jim smirked. "Did he now? Well, that's very friendly of him."

Evelyn sobered at the cynical tone of Jim's voice. It seemed no one was happy about Mr. Twethewey's arrival. But why?

Jim returned his attention to her grandfather. "The Kinden fellow's at the inn now and has been inquiring after him. He wanted a ride out tonight, but we talked him into waiting for the morrow."

Curious as to why Jim would feel the need to inform her grandfather of such a trifling detail, Evelyn pivoted to hear his response, but Grandfather gripped her hand looped through his arm. "Run along, lamb. Tell Bertie to fetch the port and prepare it for us in the parlor. We'll be in shortly."

She opened her mouth to protest, but Jim caught her eye. As if sensing her confusion over the odd conversation, he smiled. "Tomorrow's Market Day."

"It is," she answered slowly.

"Will you be there?"

"As long as the weather changes and I can be spared here." Evelyn tilted her head to the side. "Marnie's nearly beside herself."

"Oh, she'll be fine." The twinkle she'd grown accustomed to returned to Jim's expression, and for a moment it felt like any other visit. "Maybe I can walk with ye a bit when you're in Pevlyn. What say you to that?"

Her shoulders relaxed slightly. "I suppose I can spare some time. That is, if you can free yourself. Your customers will be clamoring for your attention."

"I'll make time for you. You know I will. Besides, Charlie here will be wrestling. You wouldn't want to miss that, would you?"

Normally, a man talking so familiarly to her would embarrass her, but Jim . . . Jim was different. He was one of the few men her grandfather permitted her to speak with openly. He even encouraged it.

"Very well, Jim. Tomorrow then."

He bowed, and she left them and entered the cottage kitchen. Though it was much smaller and far less impressive than the massive space in Wyndcliff Hall, it held the familiar charm of home.

She placed her lantern on the table and called for Bertie.

No response.

Evelyn poked her head in the pantry and into the cellar.

Bertie was nowhere to be found.

Finding herself alone, Evelyn paused and stood very still, attempting to overhear the men's conversation outside, but the blustery gusts of wind carried away the murmurings. With a sigh she untied her cloak, hung it on the hook, and turned to leave the kitchen when a missive on the table caught her eye.

The writing on the letter boasted large, strong strokes.

Her mother's handwriting.

She stared at it for several seconds as conflicted thoughts tumbled within her. How long had it been since she'd heard from her? A month? Perhaps more?

Mostly the child within Evelyn wanted to run to the letter, scoop it up, and devour every word her mother wanted to share with her.

The adult portion of her heart—more cautious and suspicious—argued to ignore it.

The contents might provide temporary happiness, a fleeting glimpse into the life of the mother who had left her two years prior, but the ensuing heartache that inevitably accompanied each missive would sneak in, winding its way into her emotions and tightening to the point of pain.

Despite the threat of sadness, the child within her won out.

Evelyn snatched the letter, lifted her lantern once again, and made her way to the small parlor next to the kitchen. Once settled, she slid her finger under the fold to dislodge the wax seal. She unfolded the paper, drawing a deep breath to prepare herself for what lay inside.

It had been well over a year since she'd last seen her mother in person, and even then, it had been for but a day when Mother stopped in the village on her way to the coast. Now her mother's recent marriage and new family kept her busy. All the while Evelyn had expected to be included in her mother's new life. She would not get her hopes up that this would be the letter summoning her to Plymouth. It was easier that way.

Dear child,

So much has happened I hardly know where to begin! We have returned from a holiday in London to meet Mr. Drake's mother, and she could not have been more enchanting. My husband

THE LIGHT AT WYNDCLIFF

is from a long line of barristers, and they were a fascinating group to be sure.

Evelyn's chest tightened as she skimmed the rest of the letter. It described in detail each of Mr. Drake's two daughters. Their accomplishments, their beauty, their prospects. She swallowed the lump in her throat as the meaning behind the words sank in.

Her mother's efforts had paid off. She'd found happiness in a world outside of Wyndcliff. Happiness with another family, with new daughters, and with ample funds to live the life she expected.

But it was all without Evelyn.

Tears blurred the words as she continued to read.

One day, dear child, you will join me here and get to know your stepsisters. They ask about you frequently, and now that we are home from the season, we shall have you to Plymouth very soon for a proper introduction, once everything is settled.

Evelyn sniffed and tossed the letter onto the table.

"Once everything is settled." Mother had been writing those exact words ever since her first visit to Plymouth, when her intention had been merely to tend to her ill cousin. A trip that was supposed to last only a month stretched into a year, and then as her attachment to Mr. Drake intensified, she continued to remain away from Wyndcliff, all the while promising to call for Evelyn to join her.

But she never did.

Now her mother was Mrs. Archibald Drake.

Now she was stepmother to two more daughters.

Anger and anguish twisted together within her so tightly, Evelyn could not accurately assess which emotion pulled strongest.

Was her mother embarrassed by her? Or did she simply want to

start a new life and leave her old one, including her daughter from a disgraced family, behind?

A strange panic seized her. She'd never allowed herself to think that she wouldn't join her mother one day. But truths were truths. Evelyn was twenty and would quickly be past her prime. Perhaps her grandfather was right. He was always encouraging her to consider Jim as a suitor, and he made no effort to hide his esteem for the young innkeeper. After all, Jim was a leader in their little community. Influential. Liked and respected by all. And he was, at the very least, her friend. He was a far cry from the wealthy gentleman she and her mother always dreamed of, but perhaps it was time to accept that that dream might never come true.

With a deep breath for fortitude, Evelyn picked the letter back up and finished it. There was no invitation. No inquiry as to how she was faring.

A tear slipped. Then another.

But then a sharp tone, high and curt, from the courtyard caused her to jerk her head around. Were they arguing? Whatever it was, it was far from the friendly banter she usually overheard between Jim and her grandfather.

She made her way back to the kitchen and neared the door. The wind still whistled, but now the voices were louder, the edges sharper.

She recognized Jim's voice first. "What are you going to do about this?"

"What can I do about it?" Grandfather's retort was curt. "He owns the place. Every bit of sand on the shore, every bit of heather on the moorland."

"I thought he wasn't coming for two more months. How were you not aware he was to arrive? The timing couldn't be worse."

Evelyn held her breath. They were talking about Mr. Twethewey.

"He's naught but a boy with a shiny new toy, Jim. He's nothing to worry about."

"You know what's expected. Don't make me repeat it."

Silence ensued.

Frustration swelled within her. She did not like Jim's uncharacteristic harsh tone. Never had she heard anyone speak in such a threatening manner to Rupert Bray, except for perhaps her mother. Concerned, she tucked her letter in her pocket and opened the door once more. Surely they would not argue in front of her.

Both men turned to face her. Grandfather's eyes narrowed and he lifted his lantern. "I thought you were abed."

"It's far too early for bed." She stepped out into the night.

"Be on your way then, lass." Grandfather's voice was low. "We've business matters to discuss."

"Sounds more like you were arguing." She glanced pointedly at Jim. "I told myself surely that was not the case."

"Not all matters are pleasant to discuss," grunted Grandfather. "That's why it be men's talk, not suitable for a lady."

"Men's talk, is it? Well, if that's all it is, then . . ." She let her voice fade as she smirked and tilted her head to the side. "I'd hate to think there was an argument or such taking place right here in my courtyard."

"*Your* courtyard, is it?" Grandfather belted out a laugh, his countenance mellowing. "Well now, it might as well be."

She cut her eyes toward Jim. He'd not joined her grandfather's change in demeanor. His square, unshaved jaw clenched and then unclenched, and he gripped his hat with such force the rim folded.

Yes, she liked Jim, but her grandfather had been the only person to be constant in her life. The only person to truly show her love. She'd not tolerate any disrespect toward him if she could help it.

She waited for the customary smile that would crack Jim's scowl

and reveal that this conversation was some sort of misunderstanding, but the expression in his dark eyes seemed unsettled. "It's late. I'd best get back to the inn. Evelyn, the rain is starting again. You'd best get back inside."

Why did everyone think they had the power to tell her when to go inside, and when to go to bed, and when to make herself scarce? Before she could respond, Jim, along with Charlie, had already turned, and the shrouded moonlight barely illuminated the dark cloak on his broad back.

"Why's he so upset?" Evelyn folded her arms over her chest and leaned back against the door frame. "Is it because Mr. Twethewey's arrived?"

Grandfather stared in the direction of Jim's departure, as if he could still see him. "Jim's a good man but excitable. Don't give his behavior another thought."

"That doesn't sound like you to back down from someone who was speaking to you so brashly."

"Jim and his family have stood beside us when others wouldn't. One can forgive a great deal when you take such matters into account. Besides, he's got a great deal of responsibility on his shoulders. He's the sort of man who will make things happen, mark my words. He's the sort of man you need to align yourself with, child, and not the fancy sort your mother's got in mind for you."

Evelyn held her breath at the reference to her mother. Had he seen the letter on the table? As she shifted, the letter crinkled in her pocket.

Grandfather pushed past her and entered the cottage, leaving her alone in the courtyard. He would never see why it was so important for her to leave this village and be with her mother in Plymouth. Despite her seeming indifference, her mother always had spoken of plans for her—plans that had occupied her childhood daydreams

THE LIGHT AT WYNDCLIFF

and infiltrated her dreams at night. Here she might not be a lady, but her mother had expectations for her. And one day she would make her mother proud.

Yes, Grandfather would never understand. Perhaps it was time she stopped trying to convince him.



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798