

*Spellbound Seduction -*  
*Prologue*

*The Brightley Sisters Book Two*

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## *Prologue*

*July 25, 1849*

**A**rabella Brightley tried to do as she was told. Rules lent a simple structure to life that helped everything run smoothly. So she didn't understand why her sisters were keen to bend and even break them.

Under ordinary circumstances, Bella would never have left Cortwood's grounds without her father's consent. However, as her eldest sister, Charmaine, had pointed out, Papa was engaged in London for the day, while the Hampstead Summer Fair would not return for another year.

Frothy clouds traversed a sky alternating between bright blue and stormy gray over the vast grassy expanse of heath that bordered Cortwood Manor. As they approached the rows of colorful tents and stalls, she savored the ginger cake scent drifting in the air. The sound of children's laughter and barking dogs grew louder, along with the discordant notes of a barrel organ. Peddlers with boxes strapped to their chests hawked sweetmeats, hot potatoes, and onion pasties.

At London's social functions, Bella endured the expectation to make chit-chat with ladies and gentlemen she scarcely knew. In contrast, she roamed free of any such obligation on the heath, making for a near-perfect state of affairs. While Rosalind ran off to join a skipping rope game, Charmaine inspected crowns fashioned from fresh purple peonies and dainty Queen Anne's lace. And Bella kept her distance from the crowd.

After taking the last delicious bite of a currant-stuffed penny pie, Bella riffled through a silk satin reticule, its delicate ribbon handle looped around her wrist. Her fingers brushed against the hard metal of a shield sovereign.

She stood on tip-toe to peer over the crowd of visitors to the heath. The Union Jack sashes tied to wooden posts marking the entrance fluttered in the summer breeze. Earlier, she'd noted a stall near the front where merchants sold fetching spools of thread, glimmering in the sunlight like spun gold.

Bella glanced back at her sister. Charmaine was still haggling with a vendor over the price of her floral coronet, hands gesticulating but face hidden under the ribbons and rosettes adorning her bonnet. Purchasing the thread should only take a few minutes. And so Bella headed down the dirt pathway that led to the entrance alone.

Working around a pair of laughing boys trundling a hoop with sticks, Bella passed a limp, lopsided tent. If the wind gusted, the entire structure might collapse. Still, the chartreuse hue caught her attention. The man crouched before it wore a loose brown robe, drab as the tent was vibrant. When he spotted Bella, he stood and made his way to the path, blocking her route forward.

"Care for a flower, my lady?" His bony wrists stuck out from under the folds of the robe as he angled a single rose in Bella's direction. "Sixpence, if you please."

The rose looked well enough for this late in the season: burgundy-red with bright petals and the lingering fragrance of summer. But she'd no wish to part with the coin for something that would soon wither and die. "I'm sorry. I've only a sovereign and no pence to spare."

"Only a sovereign," he muttered. "What troubles you must face in this life." The man hunched over to tuck the rose into a large pouch hanging from a loose belt around his waist, taking care not to let a petal drop. He withdrew a deck of cards from the bag. "Have you heard of tarot?"

Some unseen enchantment lured her closer. The cards' painted frontispieces resembled dyed oils on crinkling brown papyrus. She recognized the Eye of Horus on the one facing out, similar to its depiction in *Description of Egypt*, a book filled with illustrations of obelisks engraved with hieroglyphics and statues of long-forgotten gods.

The man ran a slender finger along the edges of the deck. "I once played it as a common card game, but can now re-purpose the cards for divination."

Though intrigued, the notion frightened her. Bella had no desire to hear invented tales of her future. "I've no interest in the dark arts."

"Dark arts? This is but recreation. Besides, you have that perceptive presence about you." The man lowered the cowl to reveal sleek silver hair crisscrossed with black strands. The lines etched on his face suggested time spent in the sun without benefit of a hat. "Perhaps you claim the gift of prophecy yourself, my fine lady."

Her throat felt parched, as though sprinkled with salt. She should have bought one of the lemon ices Rosalind had swooned over. Either of her sisters would have summoned a diplomatic fib in this situation. But Bella could scarcely speak to strangers at all, let alone muster plausible lies to make such encounters less taxing. "I don't care for fortune telling."

"Try a hand," he urged, his stare as mesmerizing as that of any wizard from King Arthur's day. "I can use the cards to divine who you will marry. A young lady of your age and stature should find such information useful."

A small smile tugged at her lips. Bella had already met the gentleman she intended to wed, and for whom she would break any rule. Only she hadn't divulged her secret just yet.

Not even to the man in question.

Tall and broad-shouldered, Thomas Beecham had thick ebony hair and a firm jaw marked with an adorable cleft in his chin. *Pretty is as pretty does*, as Cortwood's housekeeper, Mrs. Darlington, would say. But Bella was fond of everything about Mr. Beecham, not only his pleasing appearance. She adored

his gentle bearing, distinct from the swaggering gentlemen of the *ton*. Most of all, Bella loved the tenderness in his luminous, cobalt-blue eyes when he asked if he might call on her.

Arabella Brightley. The odd weed between the two captivating blossoms who were her sisters. Society only tolerated Bella for her father's title and her family's standing.

Of all the ladies who might occupy his time, Mr. Beecham had chosen *her*. Any future which didn't include Thomas Beecham was no future at all. If this would-be clairvoyant told her otherwise, he'd only upset her.

"If not for yourself, do it for your mum." He reordered the cards between his hands. "All mothers want to know who their daughters will marry."

Gray spots gathered before Bella's eyes, shadowing her vision. Thoughts of Thomas Beecham faded, replaced with an all-too-familiar ache. She tried to focus on her leather ankle boots, dusted with earth.

*The marchioness passed from the world when I was but fifteen years of age.* Bella didn't speak the words aloud. That would make the sad fact real all over again. Five years had gone by, and her mother's death remained a demon trapped in her heart, poised to burst.

"Or are you too fine a lady for all this? Can you not even look me in the eye?"

Bella found it challenging to look anyone in the eye. And she couldn't bear the thought of breaking down here, a spectacle for all the world to gawp and whisper over. At that moment, she wanted nothing more than to run away.

"Every mother wants to secure her daughter's future. Why, when you think of it that way, you're doing her a favor."

She needed him to stop talking about her mother. Desperate to fight the surging panic, the words slipped from her tongue before Bella considered how he might receive them. "Let me pass, or I shall report this incident to my father. The marquess. His lordship won't countenance harassment of his daughters."

Bella hadn't intended to mention her father's title nor to sound so arrogant. A moment of worrying silence passed between them.

"Your manner is condescending and rude." The man's deep voice rattled as though pebbles had slipped down his throat. "Keep your coin, but understand this. One day soon, you will regret not parting with your sovereign. Despite your beauty, no man shall love you as a wife. And if a gentleman harbors such feelings, you will cause him nothing but pain."

Those words landed like blows to her head. Bella loved Thomas Beecham with all her soul. And she'd grown to believe he loved her. Neither of them would cause the other pain.

The man drew closer. Too close. So near, Bella caught the pungent odor of his skin. She shrank back, stumbling a bit.

"You have a beast's heart, my lady," he whispered. "I needn't bother with the cards. Your destiny is to die alone and bitter. Only a fool would fall in love with a witch."

