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Opening Extract from...

The Apothecary's Daughter

Written by Charlotte Betts

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Chapter 1

Inside the apothecary shop Susannah stood by the light of the window, daydreaming and grinding flowers of sulphur into a malodorous dust as she watched the world go by. Fleet Street, as always, was as busy as an anthill. The morning's snow was already dusted with soot from the noxious cloud blown in from the kilns at Limehouse and the frost made icebergs of the surging effluent in the central drain. Church bells clanged and dogs barked while a ceaseless stream of people flowed past.

Thwack! A snowball smashed against the window pane. Susannah gasped and dropped the pestle, shocked out of her lazy contemplation. Outside, a street urchin laughed at her through the glass.

'Little demon!' Her heart still hammering, she raised a fist at him. She watched him darting away through the horde until her eye was drawn by the tall figure of a man in a sombre hat and cloak picking his way over the snow.

Something about the way he moved amongst the hubbub of the crowd, like a wolf slipping silently through the forest, captured her curiosity. As he drew closer Susannah recognised him as a physician, one of her father's less frequent customers. Stepping around a steaming heap of horse droppings and a discarded cabbage, it became apparent that he was making his way towards the shop.

Susannah pulled open the door. 'Good morning,' she said, shivering in the icy draught that followed him.

He touched his hat but didn't return her smile. 'Is Mr Leyton here?'

'Not at present. May I help?'

'I hardly think that you . . . '

She suppressed her irritation with a sigh. Why did he assume she was incapable, simply because she wore skirts? 'Do, please, tell me what you require, sir.'

'What I *require* is to discuss my requirements with your father.'

The man's tone tempted Susannah to make a sharp retort but she reined in a flash of temper and merely said, 'He's gone to read the parson's urine.'

The doctor's dark eyebrows drew together in a frown as he took off his gloves and rubbed the warmth back into his hands. 'This is a matter of urgency. Please tell him Dr Ambrose came by and ask him to call on me when he returns.'

'May I tell him what it is you wish to discuss?'

Dr Ambrose hesitated and then shrugged. 'I have a patient who suffers from a stone in the bladder. Leyton mentioned to me that he'd had some success with his own prescription in cases of this kind. The patient's state of health is not so strong that I can recommend cutting for the stone since he has a chronic shortness of breath. Can you remember all that?'

'Oh, I should think so.' Susannah smiled sweetly and vigorously stirred up the ground sulphur with the pestle until it floated in a choking cloud between them. 'Father usually recommends spirits of sweet nitre for a stone, mixed with laudanum and oil of juniper. Your patient should sip a teaspoonful in a cup of linseed tea sweetened with honey.'

Dr Ambrose coughed and pressed a handkerchief to his nose. 'You are sure of this?'

'Of course. And you might try milk of gum ammoniac stirred with syrup of squills for the wheezing in the chest.'

Dr Ambrose raised his eyebrows and Susannah did her best not to

look smug. 'Perhaps you would like to warm yourself by the fire while I prepare the medicines for you?' she said.

'Do you know the correct proportions?'

'I am perfectly used to dispensing my father's prescriptions.'

She retired to the dispensary, a curtained-off alcove at the rear of the shop, and peeped through the gap in the curtains while he, apparently thinking he was unobserved, lifted his cloak and warmed his backside by the fire. Stifling a laugh, she turned to the bench and set to work. As she bottled up the last prescription the shop bell jingled. She pulled aside the curtain to see an elegantly dressed lady enter.

'Please, take a seat by the fire and I will help you in just a moment,' Susannah said.

She handed the two bottles of medicine to Dr Ambrose and, in the interests of repeat business, made the effort to be civil. 'I hope you are warmer now?' She wondered whether to tell him he had a sulphurous streak across his nose but decided against it. 'They say this bitter wind comes from Russia, which is why the frost has barely lifted since December.'

'Perhaps that's as well,' the doctor said. 'The cold moderates the severity of the plague.'

'Except in the parish of St Giles, of course. We must pray that the freeze destroys the pestilence.'

'Indeed. Put the prescriptions on my account.' He nodded and left.

Susannah, wondering if he'd been sucking lemons, watched him set off again down Fleet Street. What a shame his darkly handsome face wasn't matched by more pleasing manners!

The other customer was a fair-haired woman of about Susannah's own age and dressed very finely in a fur-tipped cloak with a crimson skirt just visible beneath. She stood on tiptoe, examining the preserved crocodile which hung from one of the ceiling beams. Her small nose wrinkled with distaste. 'Is it real?'

'Certainly! It came from Africa. My father bought it from a sailor.' Susannah still remembered her mixed fear and fascination when

he'd brought it home many years before. She had tentatively touched its hard, scaly body with the tip of her finger, shuddering as it stared back at her with beady glass eyes. Her younger brother, Tom, had hidden behind the counter until their mother assured him the creature wasn't alive.

'This *is* Mr Leyton's apothecary's shop, at the sign of the Unicorn and the Dragon?'

'As you see, the sign hangs over the door.'

'Is Mr Leyton here?'

'Not at present. May I help you?'

Pursing her lips, she looked Susannah up and down. 'I would like . . . ' She glanced around at the bottles and jars that lined the walls, frowning a little. 'Yes. A bottle of rosewater will do very well. Tell me,' she said, running her gloved finger along the counter, 'how many hearths do you have in this building?'

'Why, we have three bedchambers, the parlour and the dining room and then there is the shop, dispensary and kitchen,' stammered Susannah, taken aback.

'The house is narrow and crooked with age.'

'But it is also deep.' Susannah stood up very straight, a flare of temper bringing warmth to her face. 'And the parlour is panelled and we have a good yard.'

The woman sighed. 'I suppose it is well enough.' She put a handful of coins on the counter, picked up the rosewater and waited until Susannah snatched open the shop door for her.

Relieved to be rid of the woman with her prying questions, Susannah stood shivering in the open doorway for a moment, glancing up the snowy street beyond the waiting sedan chair. She saw Ned, the apprentice, hurtling along towards the shop, returning from delivering a packet of liver pills to the Misses Lane. His head was down against the bitter wind and she realised that he was on course to collide with the departing customer.

'Ned, look out!' she called.

At the last second he swerved, narrowly avoiding barrelling into the lady as she climbed into her sedan chair.

She gave Susannah an accusing look, put her nose in the air and motioned for the chair to leave.

'Take more care, Ned!' snapped Susannah.

He banged the door behind them and hurried to the fire to warm his hands and stamp the feeling back into his feet.

'For goodness' sake!' Susannah's repressed irritation with both her recent customers made her voice sharp. 'Fetch the broom and clear up all that ice from your boots before it turns into puddles.'

'Sorry, miss.'

'And then you can dust the gallypots.'

'Yes, miss.' He blew on his fingers, collected the broom from the dispensary and began to sweep the floor.

Susannah relented. Sometimes Ned put her in mind of her brother, Tom, now living far away in Virginia. She reached a large stone jar down from the shelf, scooped out a spoonful of the sticky substance from inside and smeared it onto a piece of brown paper. 'Here!' she said, handing him the salve. 'Rub this on your chilblains and it will stop the skin from breaking. And don't forget to dust the gallypots!' She retrieved the sulphurous pestle and mortar from the counter and carried it in to the dispensary to mix up an ointment for pimples.

She had lived in the apothecary shop for all of her twenty-six years and it held her most precious memories. As she measured ingredients and mixed the ointment she hummed to herself as she remembered how, when they were children, she and Tom had learned to add up by counting out pills. She recalled experimenting with the weighing beam, fascinated that a huge bunch of dried sage weighed exactly the same as a tiny piece of lead. In the big stone mortar, the same one she was using now, she'd made gloriously sticky mixtures of hog's lard combined with white lead and turpentine as a salve for burns. She'd learned to read by studying the letters, in Latin, painted on the gallypots which lined the walls and then to write by tracing her father's exquisite handwriting on the labels fixed to the banks of wooden storage drawers.

Now she busied herself setting a batch of rosemary and honey

linctus to boil, sniffing at its sweet, resinous scent. Cold weather and London's putrid fog was excellent for business since most of the customers had a perpetual winter cough. Licking honey off her thumb, she glanced through the gap between the dispensary curtains to see Ned lying over the counter, teasing the cat with a trailing piece of rag. Suddenly he slid back to the ground and with meticulous care began to dust the majolica jars. Susannah guessed from this that he'd glimpsed his master returning.

Cornelius Leyton struggled through the door with a large box, which he placed on the counter between a cone of sugar and the jar of leeches. The frost had nipped his nose cherry red.

'What have you bought, Father?'

Taking his time, he began to untie the string.

'Let me!' she said, snatching a knife from under the counter and slicing through the knot.

'Always so impatient, Susannah!' Carefully, Cornelius lifted the lid.

Susannah caught a glimpse of dark fur and gasped. Was it a puppy? But then, as her father lifted aside the tissue paper, she realised with disappointment that she was mistaken.

Cornelius gathered up the wig and shook out its long and lustrous black curls. 'What do you think?' he asked.

'It's . . . magnificent. Put it on!'

Eyes gleaming with anticipation, he snatched off his usual wig, a modest mid-brown affair that he'd had for a number of years, to expose his own cropped grey hair. Then, reverentially, he placed the new wig over the top.

Susannah stared at him.

'Susannah?'

Speechless, she continued to stare. Her father was fine-looking; tall, with dark eyes and an air of authority, but she had never thought of him as a vain man. In fact, she'd always had to chivvy him into buying a new coat or breeches and his hat was embarrassingly old-fashioned. But this wig was an entirely different affair. It turned him into an elegant stranger and it made her uneasy.

'Well?' His expression was anxious.

'Astonishing,' she said, at last. She lifted up one of the silky curls which fell near enough to his waist. 'It's very handsome.' She fumbled for words. 'I hardly recognise you. It makes you seem so . . . young.'

A quickly suppressed smile flitted across his face.

Ned said, 'You look exactly like the King, sir.'

Cornelius threw his apprentice a sharp look. 'You have time for idle chatter, Ned? Shall I find you something to do? The copper still in the yard must be scrubbed. Of course the ice must be scraped off it first . . . '

Ned hastily returned to his dusting. 'I was talking to my old friend, Richard Berry,' continued Cornelius, with an amused glance to Susannah, 'and he said a more fashionable appearance will be good for business. Perhaps I should have a new hat, too?'

'I've been suggesting that for months!'

'Have you?

'Father!'

'I have some visits to make. Did you brush my blue coat?'

'Of course.'

'Then if there's nothing that needs my attention here . . . ?'

'Oh! I forgot. Dr Ambrose asked you to call on him to discuss a patient of his with a kidney stone. I prepared the prescriptions for him.'

'Good, good.' Cornelius picked up his old wig and went upstairs.

Susannah stared after him. What on earth had inspired him to suddenly start taking an interest in his appearance? Shaking her head, she returned to the dispensary to pot up the sulphur ointment. As always, spooning that particular mixture into jars evoked the familiar recollection of an afternoon eleven years before when she'd helped her mother to do the same thing. Her mother's gentle voice was imprinted on Susannah's memory and she could recall, as if it were yesterday, how her hand had rested tenderly upon the swell of her belly. That was two days before she died and there had been the same sulphurous reek in the air then, mixed with the usual aromas

of rosewater and beeswax, liquorice and oil of wormwood, turpentine and drying herbs. Those were the scents of her father's trade and they ran in Susannah's blood.

The shop bell jolted her back to the present and she was pleased to hear Martha's voice. Until her marriage Martha had lived in a neighbouring house and been her closest friend for twenty years, despite her Puritan leanings. Pulling back the curtain, Susannah went to greet her.

Martha, as neat as always in a starched apron and with her dark hair tucked firmly into her cap, recoiled as they kissed. 'Ugh! What is it this time?'

'Nothing dangerous! Merely complexion ointment.'

'It certainly smells dreadful enough to frighten pimples away.' Martha turned bone white and held her slim fingers over her mouth while she swallowed convulsively.

'It's not *that* dreadful, surely?'

Martha smiled faintly. 'The slightest thing turns my stomach, at the moment,' she said pressing her hands to her apron. 'I came to ask for some of that ginger cordial you made for me last time . . . '

'Last time? Oh Martha! Not another one? Little Alys isn't even weaned.'

'I know.' Martha sighed, the shadows under her hazel eyes dark against her pale face. 'I did warn Robert that if he insisted Alys went to a wet nurse it was likely I'd fall again but you know how stubborn men can be.'

'Stubborn and peculiar,' Susannah added, thinking of her father's latest purchase. She pulled the joint stool from under the counter and stretched up to the top shelf for the ginger cordial, then decanted some of the golden liquid into a bottle and stopped it with a cork.

The narrow door to the staircase creaked open and Cornelius appeared, wearing the new acquisition and his best blue coat. He showed more lace than usual at his throat and new blue ribands on his shoes. The air around him carried the distinct aroma of lavender water and self-conscious pride.

'Martha. Are you keeping well?'

Martha's freckled face turned from white to red as she bobbed a curtsy. 'Mr Leyton. Thank you, I am very well.'

Cornelius's eyes flickered to the bottle of cordial and then to Martha's waist. 'And all your little ones?'

'Well, too.'

'Good, good. I shall not detain you.' He picked up his cane with the silver head. 'Susannah, do not wait up for me; I shall not be home for supper.' He launched himself into the hurly burly of Fleet Street, raising his cane to attract a passing hackney carriage.

Martha stared at her friend with wide eyes. 'Your father looks so different. I never realised before what a handsome man he is.'

After Martha had left, Susannah began to wonder where her father had gone, all dressed up in such finery.



Two weeks later Susannah was baking sugar jumbals with the maid, Jennet, when Cornelius came into the kitchen. He stood by the fire, shifting from foot to foot and watching as Susannah pounded the sugar and Jennet washed the salt from the butter. His dead wife's recipe book lay open on the table, a sprig of dried lavender marking the place.

'Was there something you wanted?' Susannah asked after a while.

Cornelius picked up the lavender and twirled it between his fingers. 'Your mother's favourite flower,' he said.

'And we're making your favourite biscuits.'

'So I see.' He replaced the lavender and in so doing knocked the book to the floor.

A dozen scraps of paper flew out and Susannah scrambled to pick them up and tuck them back between the precious pages. 'Father, why don't you go into the parlour and I'll bring you some of the biscuits when they're baked?'

'Yes, perhaps that would be best. There's something . . . '

'Hmm?' Carefully, she broke eggs into a basin.

'Later.'

'He's as jumpy as a cat with fleas!' said Jennet, after he'd gone. She dried her hands on her hips. 'I think he's up to something.'

When the jumbals were ready Susannah dusted them with powdered sugar and carried them up to the parlour where she found Cornelius standing by the window, staring down at the street. He turned, his face taut with worry.

'Father, what is it?' she asked, suddenly anxious.

'You are so like your mother. Sometimes I catch sight of you with your pretty auburn hair and just for a moment I can almost believe Elizabeth has come back to me.'

'I never feel she's really left us.'

'I know.' He sighed deeply. 'But she *has* gone. And it's been eleven long years. You have been a great comfort to me, especially since Tom left too.'

She squeezed his hand. 'We've been a comfort to each other.'

Abruptly he turned again and paced across to the hearth.

'Susannah, I fear I have done you a disservice.'

'A disservice? How could that be?'

'I've been selfish. Your companionship has been so dear to me that I have kept you close to my side . . . '

'But that's where I want to be!'

'You've learned my craft better than any of the apprentices I've taken on over the years and your writing is neater than my own. Even your Latin is as good as any scholar's.' He smiled wryly. 'But you should be married by now, with a brood of little ones, like Martha.'

'I've never wanted babies.' It wasn't true, of course. She wanted children as much as any woman but . . . she shuddered, remembering.

'I have been remiss in finding a husband for you.'

'I'm perfectly happy keeping house for you. Besides, what man would I find who could match up to you?' There had been Nicholas, of course, but Father hadn't considered him good enough for her. And then there had been the young man with the smiling eyes who delivered herbs to the shop from the farm in Essex . . .

'Susannah, times change.'

'What do you mean?'

He took her hands between his, not meeting her eyes. 'I love you as much as any man could love a daughter, but we've grieved for your mother for too long. I have made a decision.' Still he didn't look at her. 'I intend to take another wife,' he said.

She gave an uncertain laugh. 'You should not jest about something like that.'

His mouth tightened. 'I've made myself perfectly clear. I shall be married again. And I have met a suitable lady, a widow.'

'But we manage very well.' Susannah helped to keep the account books for the shop and she knew that they were far richer than anyone might suspect from the simple way they lived. Puzzled, she shook her head. 'Your old age is secure; you have no need to marry to increase our fortune.'

'That has not been a consideration in my decision. Through no fault of her own, the death of this lady's husband has left her in straitened circumstances.'

'This widow has no jointure?'

Cornelius studied his shoes.

'Then I do not understand. Why would you want to do such a thing?'

'Because it is time. Because I need . . . companionship.'

'Companionship? But we have each other! We do everything together. What more companionship could you possibly need?'

Cornelius's face flooded as crimson as the phials of cochineal in the dispensary. 'A man needs a wife for . . . ' He gestured with his hands, at a loss for words.

Suddenly she realised what he meant and the heat rose up in her own face. It had never occurred to her to even *imagine* that her own father had those particular needs.

'The lady is looking forward to meeting you.'

'I don't want to meet her!' Her fingers tingled and a cold shiver ran through her whole body. 'Father, this is madness! Consider . . . '

'Enough! I shall bring her to dine with us the day after tomorrow.

That will give you and Jennet time to prepare a good dinner.' His tone brooked no argument.

Susannah swallowed and stood up very straight. 'Am I to know the name of this widow?'

'Arabella Poynter. A pretty name, is it not? She has two sons and a daughter, Harriet, who is intent upon becoming your friend.'

There was a roaring in Susannah's ears and for a moment she wondered if she might faint. 'Father, you cannot. Everything will change!'

'My mind is quite made up.' He turned his back on her and picked up a book from the table. She was dismissed.

Her knees trembling with shock, Susannah returned to the kitchen.



Determined that Mistress Poynter would be unable to find fault with what was to become her new home, Susannah and Jennet set to the housework. Tight-lipped, they swept and scrubbed the hall, stairs and parlour from top to bottom, obliterating the film of soot that continually settled everywhere from the sea-coal smog.

Jennet, her hands red and weeping from scouring the pans, took the rugs into the yard and beat them until the cloud of dust mingled with the frosty mist of her breath. Susannah polished the plate with horsetail so that the pewter shone with the translucent gleam of still water under a thundery sky. Lost in thought, she stared at her reflection while she tried to understand why her father would wish to change their lives. It cut her deeply that he'd not told her he was lonely. She'd believed they were such close companions that they had no secrets from each other.

On hands and knees, Susannah rubbed the wide elm floorboards in the parlour with her own beeswax and lavender polish, each sweep of the cloth feeding her smouldering resentment. Who *was* this gold-seeking widow who had the temerity to imagine she might take her mother's place? And why did Harriet, the daughter of this interloper, imagine that they might be friends?

The following morning Cornelius counted out a fistful of coins from the locked chest in his bedchamber and placed them in Susannah's palm. 'It is my express wish that you do not stint on the quality of this celebration dinner,' he said.

Susannah stared at the coins in her hand. She doubted that she had spent as much on food over the past month. Usually bid to be frugal, Jennet and Susannah argued over what to cook as they trekked through the snow to the market but agreed that a beef and oyster pudding, to Susannah's mother's special recipe, of course, was an essential centrepiece for the banquet.

Nearly two hours had passed by the time they returned with their baskets filled with provisions fit for the feast that Cornelius expected for his future bride. Frozen to the bone, they took off their wet overshoes and built up the fire. Susannah made the pastry while her hands were still cold and Jennet put the mutton on to boil and peeled the turnips. All the while she was rolling out the pastry Susannah was praying to herself that her father would change his mind about this unwelcome marriage.

The oysters took longer to open than expected and they began to worry that they had been too ambitious in their choice of menu for the time available. When the bells of St Bride's chimed a quarter to three Susannah flung off her apron and left Jennet to the greasy work of turning the chickens on the spit.

Upstairs, Susannah put on her best green silk bodice and the skirt with the petticoat of gold damask. Then she lifted the lid of her little marquetry box and took out one of the two most precious things she owned. She slipped the gold chain over her head and kissed her mother's pearl pendant before settling it into place over her breast. The other treasure lay in the box wrapped in blue velvet; a miniature of her mother. The artist had caught the likeness well and she smiled steadily back, her face forever fixed in youth. Susannah suffered again the familiar, aching loss of a mother snatched away too soon. How could Father even *contemplate* replacing Mama?

She wiped her eyes and knew that she could delay no longer. She peered into the looking glass. Would she do? She bit her lips to

bring the colour back. The steamy kitchen, as always, had caused her hair to spiral into ringlets and she only had time to smooth them into place and pin on her lace cap before running down to the parlour.

Cornelius, dressed in his new wig and best coat, was peering down the street. 'Mistress Poynter should be here any minute,' he said. 'You look very well, my dear. I always liked you in that shade of green; it matches your eyes.'

Susannah admitted to herself that jealousy probably made her eyes greener than usual. 'All is in readiness,' she said. 'Jennet burned the carp a little but I removed the skin and smothered it in a butter sauce with herbs.'

A sedan chair stopped in front of the house and Cornelius stood back from the window. Susannah wasn't so well mannered and stared, heart galloping in her chest as she waited to catch a glimpse of her future stepmother. She was disappointed though, since the woman was swathed in a dark cloak with a hood. Daintily she picked her way through the slush and snow to the front door.

Downstairs Jennet's clogs clattered across the hall.

Susannah swallowed back a sudden surge of queasiness and hoped Jennet had remembered to put on a clean cap and apron.

Cornelius took up a carefully nonchalant position leaning against the mantelpiece and adjusted the lace at his cuffs again.

Waiting with her shaking hands gripped together, Susannah listened to the footsteps coming up the stairs.

The door opened.

Susannah caught her breath. It was the inquisitive young woman who had visited the shop a few days previously. She stared at her, frowning. 'I wasn't expecting to see you,' she said. 'Are you Harriet? Could your mother not come, after all?' She felt a flicker of annoyance for all the time she and Jennet had spent preparing the house and the dinner, only to find that Father's intended had not appeared.

The woman raised her finely plucked eyebrows. 'My mother has been dead these past five years, may the Lord keep her.'

Cornelius held out his hands to her and she offered her powdered cheek to be kissed. 'Arabella, what a delight it is to have you join us,' he said.

'And for me to be here, my dear Cornelius.'

'Let me present my daughter, Susannah.'

Bemused, Susannah took the small, cold hand and struggled to reconcile her expectations of a forty- or even fifty-something widow with the girlish creature dressed in forget-me-not blue silk that stood before her. Had her father taken leave of his senses?

'We have already met, Father,' she said.

'How so?'

Arabella flushed rosily and fluttered her eyelashes. 'I confess curiosity had the better of me, dear Cornelius. I came to make a trifling purchase the other day.'

'But why did you not call for me?'

'You were not at home and since it was before you proposed to me I hardly liked to introduce myself. Besides, what could I have said to dear Susannah without appearing too forward?'

The yearning way Father looked at Arabella made Susannah deeply uncomfortable. 'Father tells me that you have a daughter?' she said, to break the spell between them.

Smiling, Arabella turned to Susannah as if she'd just noticed her. 'Harriet is my eldest; eight years old and a sweet child, as you will find out. And then there are my two sons, Mathew, six and John, four.'

'But . . . ' Shock ran through Susannah like an icy river. It had simply never occurred to her that her future stepmother's children were still young and would likely need to live under her father's roof. 'But where on earth will we put them all?'

'I am sure we shall manage, shan't we, Cornelius?' Arabella gave him a radiant smile.

'Of course we shall!'

'And you, dear Susannah,' she said, 'will have the pleasure of a little sister and two new brothers.'

Susannah watched her father pat Arabella's arm. This woman had

bewitched him! Suddenly, she couldn't bear to be in the same room with them both. 'I shall go and see if dinner is ready,' she said.

In the kitchen, Jennet gave her a wide-eyed look. 'She's not at all what I expected,' she said.

'No, she isn't,' said Susannah, still barely able to comprehend this turn of events. It was bad enough that Father wanted a wife but this girl was hardly a suitable companion for him.

She returned upstairs, carrying the roasted chickens on a platter. She hesitated in the doorway as she caught a glimpse of Arabella encircled in her father's arms, toying with the buttons on his waistcoat.

Cornelius let Arabella go but he didn't look at his daughter as she set the platter on the table.

The dinner made an excellent show. There was the stewed carp, the famous beef and oyster pudding, boiled mutton with turnips and carrots, apple pie, candied quinces and a splendid cheese. Hardly any of it was eaten. Cornelius was too lovesick, his eyes never leaving Arabella's simpering face, and Susannah was too sick with apprehension as she began to appreciate just how much the household was likely to change.