

*Six*  
MISSIVES



RACHAEL  
ANDERSON

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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*Six*  
MISSIVES

RACHAEL  
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HEA PUBLISHING

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ISBN: 978-1-941363-31-7

Published by HEA Publishing

For my sweet sister, Michelle,  
the woman who does it all so well.

Love you loads!



# MISSIVE ONE



*Miss Michelle Ellington*

*Miss Addison's School for Young Ladies*

*Brighton England*

*6 August 1820*

*Dear Miss Ellington,*

*I am flummoxed as to how I should address your allegations. I assure you, the Bancroft Seminary for Girls is not attempting to steal your teachers or your students. Despite what you believe, I am unable to control who responds to our advertisements. I have considered all applicants equally and have offered positions to the most competent individuals, regardless of their current place of employment. Any parents who wish to enroll their daughters in our school will be given the same consideration.*

*Perhaps your time would be better served improving your school in ways that will make your teachers and students wish to remain. You could offer those you employ a higher salary and improve your curriculum. Parents are more forward-thinking these days, and many wish to instruct their daughters in areas like science, astronomy, philosophy, and archery—all classes the Bancroft Seminary will make available to our students come January.*

*I regret that I cannot better assist you, but I hope you will come to us as a friend rather than foe. If you would like a tour of our facility, my partner, Mr. Samuel Baker, would be happy to oblige. You need only ask.*



*Best wishes,*

*Mr. Miles Bancroft*

# .. 1 ..

MISS MICHELLE ELLINGTON balled her fingers into fists. She wanted to crumple the letter into a tight wad and stomp on it with her boots. Instead, she shoved it aside and began pacing the small office at Miss Addison's School for Young Ladies.

*Allegations?* Hardly. Her arguments had been founded on evidence, not conjecture. If a business wished to advertise for positions, they would place notices in the local paper or on the walls of the lending library or tea room. They would not tack them to the front door of their nearest competition multiple times.

If all of the other residences on the street had received the same individualized attention, that would have been one thing. But they hadn't. Chelle had made a point to ask.

Furthermore, as written on their advertisement, the Bancroft Seminary promised to match, or even beat, any competing wage. Already Miss Addison's School for Young Ladies would lose a prized teacher, Miss Rebecca Harlow, over the promise of fifty pounds more per annum.

Mr. Bancroft's methods were as underhanded as they were unethical. Only a conniving and placating individual would

suggest that Chelle think of him as a friend.

She pinched the bridge of her nose to alleviate the sudden ache in her forehead.

*Susan, why did you have to leave?*

Mrs. Susan Brommely was the school's current headmistress. At the beginning of the new school year last January, she'd asked Chelle to step back from teaching and serve as her much-needed assistant. Chelle had reluctantly agreed. It had been a difficult thing to give up her closer associations with the girls, especially when Susan clung to tradition and deflected new ideas. But Chelle had enjoyed learning about the administrative side of things.

Until now, that is.

Only a fortnight prior, Susan had been called away to help an ailing sister. Chelle shooed her out the door, assuring the headmistress she could handle any issues that might arise. The students were on break the entire month of August, after all. Nothing would be simpler.

And nothing *would* have, had the odious Mr. Bancroft not arrived on the scene.

The man had probably known the headmistress would be away during the school's month-long recess in August. He'd likely chosen that precise month to swoop in and wave those extra fifty pounds in front of her teachers, luring them away during a time when Chelle could do nothing about it. She didn't have the authority to increase wages or counter Mr. Bancroft's offer. Her hands were tied. She could only write to Susan, alert her of the situation, and hope the pilfering of teachers would end with Rebecca.

A quiet knock sounded, and Chelle paused her pacing to glance at the door. It opened a crack, revealing a square-shaped face framed by platinum-blond curls.

"Ari, aren't you a sight for sore eyes. Do come in." Chelle ushered the petite young teacher into the room.

Lady Ariana Pixley took a few steps forward before clenching the fabric of her pink skirt and biting down on her lower lip—a sign that something troubled her.

Ari had been one of Chelle’s brightest pupils the previous year. Upon her completion of the program, Susan had offered her a position at the school, which she accepted, much to Chelle’s surprise.

Ladies did not become teachers. They became debutantes, wives, and eventually mothers. Chelle understood the expectation well. As the granddaughter of a duke, she’d once been a debutante herself. Her decision to leave London’s marriage mart for a teaching post in Brighton had shocked the ton and dismayed her family. But Chelle had her reasons, just like Ari had hers.

In a way, Ari’s addition to the staff had felt like providence. She fit in well with the other teachers and quickly became a favorite among the students, as well as Chelle’s dear friend. It had been nice having someone at the school with a similar background.

“Ari, your lip is going to swell if you keep nibbling away at it like that,” Chelle said with a smile. “Sit and tell me what occupies your mind.”

Ari released her lip, but her fingers continued to play with the folds of her skirt as a few stray curls fell across her forehead. How much she’d changed over the past year. She’d once worn her hair pulled back in severe, unflattering chignons. After a great deal of convincing, Chelle had finally encouraged her to loosen it up a little, with artfully placed curls framing her face. It softened her features and made her look more attractive.

“I, er... don’t know how to tell you this...” Ari bit her lip once more.

With a sigh, Chelle took a seat on the corner of the desk and folded her arms. “Never say you dropped another candle and singed the rug again. The maids had a devil of a time removing that wax, you know.”

Color brightened Ari's cheeks as she continued to wring her hands. "No, it isn't that."

"Hmm... Has the bird escaped again? Did you forget to latch the door?"

"No."

"Did you ruin another gown with Cook's raspberry sauce?"

Ari's hands at last stilled, and troubled blue eyes rose to meet Chelle's. "No."

"Bungled another embroidery project?"

"Goodness, Chelle. Am I really such a halfwit? 'Tis a wonder I haven't been given the sack."

"Ah, there is that spark I have always admired." Chelle grinned and unfolded her arms. "As long as you're not here to tell me you've accepted a position at that blasted Bancroft Seminary, I promise to be understanding."

Ari paled, and her gaze dropped to the ground.

Chelle's smile faded, and her hands slid down to grasp the edges of the desk. "Ari, no. You didn't!"

"I didn't want to." Unshed tears sparkled in her eyes when she met Chelle's, pleading for her to understand. "Fifty pounds may not be much to you, but it's a great deal to me."

The concession seemed to cost her. She closed her eyes and turned her head to the side.

Chelle didn't say anything more, only waited. It took nearly a full minute for Ari to continue.

"My father has not been wise in financial matters. Over the years, he has mortgaged our family home and accrued a great deal of debt. Creditors are now threatening debtor's prison. I have sent what money I can to help, but it is not enough."

Ari drew in a shaky breath and worried her lower lip again. "I fear it's only a matter of time before he's taken away and my mother and younger brother are left destitute. The property is entailed, thank goodness, so they will continue to have a home,

but any money made from the estate will be used to pay off debts. If that should happen, I need to be in a position to provide for them until the debts are paid in full and my father is released.”

The strain of Ari’s worries suddenly became evident—her thinner frame, sagging shoulders, and dark circles under her eyes. Chelle could have kicked herself for not noticing it before now. She’d been too wrapped up in her own concerns.

“Oh Ari, I’m so sorry. I had no idea.”

“You’ll hear about it soon, I’m sure. Our situation has now become public knowledge, and you know how quickly news like that travels among the ton.”

*Like a match to dry grass*, Chelle thought, her heart going out to her friend.

“Why did you choose to stay in Brighton and teach, Ari? Why did you not go to London last season and...?”

Chelle let her words trail off, but they both knew what she was asking. Ari could marry into more money in one London season than she could ever make in a lifetime of teaching. Her title alone would have attracted several wealthy, eligible men.

Ari shrugged. “Father kept the news from us until after I had accepted the position and moved to Brighton. When I told my parents of my desire to teach, he didn’t dissuade me. Instead, he sank all he had left in one last, risky investment, only to lose it. My mother was so angry at him for placing us in such a precarious position, but she blames me for their disgrace. If I would have gone to London and found a husband, everything would have turned out differently.”

When Ari looked up again, a tear trickled down her cheek, but she smiled nonetheless. “It was actually you who made me realize that marriage wasn’t my only option. The more I observed your happiness and independence, the more I craved the same. When Mrs. Brommely approached me about an opening, it was an easy thing to accept.”

Chelle tried to hide her dismay, but not without difficulty. The last thing she'd intended was to be an example to other young ladies like Ari. Their situations were completely different. Chelle had gone to London and experienced a season. She'd given it a fair shake.

Ari, on the other hand, had closed the door on the marriage mart without even taking a peek inside. Worse, now that she'd accepted a position and her family had fallen out of the ton's good graces, it would likely remain closed for good.

All because of Chelle.

"Do you regret your decision?" Chelle asked tentatively, afraid of the answer but needing to know.

Ari didn't hesitate. "I suppose I should for the sake of my family, but I don't. All of my life, I've been told how to behave and that I would be expected to marry a man of both rank and means. It felt like I was trapped in a cage with no way out."

She leaned forward, meeting Chelle's gaze with one of determination. "When you asked me to tutor Banjeet last year, I realized how much I adored teaching. It came easy to me. Whenever Banjeet grasped a new concept, I felt useful and needed, like I was finally doing something worthwhile with my time. The day Mrs. Brommely offered me a position was the most liberating day of my life. Don't you see? Your choice gave me the courage to choose my own path."

Ari's conviction spoke peace to Chelle's heart, though she still worried that the path Ari had chosen would become lonely in some ways. Would she wish she'd chosen differently in time?

If things had worked out differently for Chelle, she wouldn't have chosen this life.

After losing Cedric and enduring an excruciating season without him, Chelle's parents had brought her to Brighton with the hope of easing some of her grief. It was there that Chelle had seen an advertisement for a teaching position at Susan's school, and on a whim, applied.

Her father had tried to talk her out of it. Her mother had cried. But in the end, Miss Addison's School for Young Ladies became Chelle's salvation.

She loved teaching. She loved the girls and teachers she interacted with nearly every day. And she loved the independent life she now lived.

But she would give it up in a heartbeat if she could have Cedric back.

Chelle closed her eyes, pushing away the painful thoughts. He was gone, and she'd been forced to make the best of her life without him.

Chelle forced a smile. "You are a phenomenal teacher, Ari. Not only do you have a knack for explaining complicated ideas, but you care about your students. The Bancroft Seminary is fortunate to have you."

Ari wiped away the last of her tears. "Can you ever forgive me, Chelle?"

"There's nothing to forgive. Only promise to stay in touch. You've become a dear friend, and I should hate to lose the closeness we've developed this past year."

Ari's shoulders relaxed before she surprised Chelle with a fierce hug.

"Thank you, my friend." With a sniff, she departed the room, leaving Chelle feeling like she'd been abandoned on a sinking ship with holes too large to patch.

Another irreplaceable teacher gone. Would the one remaining soon follow? How many of their students would ultimately leave as well?

Oh, how she loathed the despicable Mr. Bancroft.

The walls of the office began closing in around her. She needed to escape its confines, feel the sun on her face, breathe in the salty air, and snuggle something soft and innocent.

Bunnies, after all, were the opposite of despicable.





## ... 2 ...

SIR MILES BANCROFT Wentworth sat atop his horse as he looked across the green expanse of the Steine. The sun hovered over the western horizon, promising to end the day with a spectacular display of blues and pinks. He enjoyed being out at a time when the majority of people returned to their homes to simply call it a day or ready themselves for the evening's entertainments. It was quiet and peaceful.

Each year, more and more people flocked to the seaside resort of Brighton. Some had made it their permanent home while others only came for a few months after the London season. An area primed for growth and opportunities, it was the perfect location for the school he planned to open.

The letter he received from Miss Addison's School for Young Ladies came to mind, along with a twinge of guilt. Despite his claims to the contrary, he *had* set out to filch one particular teacher from the competing school—Miss Michelle Ellington, a woman as unique as she was acclaimed. Not only could she boast connections with the highest circles in society, but she was also well known for her abilities to educate, inspire, and win over the most stubborn girls. Many parents sent their daughters to that school because of Miss Ellington.

Unfortunately, it had been Miss Harlow and Lady Ariana who had applied and Miss Ellington who'd sent a terse letter. She was now the assistant headmistress and had no intention of placing her loyalties elsewhere.

Had Miles been aware of her new position, he wouldn't have told his partner to target the school quite so blatantly. But he couldn't regret his actions. Both Miss Harlow and Lady Ariana had stood out among the rest of the applicants—so much so that he'd offered them more than their existing salaries to ensure their acceptance.

If that put Miss Addison's school in a bind, Miles wasn't to blame. It had been their choice to apply and his choice to offer them an increase in pay—at least that's what he continually told himself. Business was business, after all, and there was too much at stake not to succeed.

He sighed, wishing he could forget all about Miss Ellington, her unwavering allegiance to her school, and her disapproving letter.

He shifted positions on his saddle as movement from across the meadow caught his attention. Up ahead, a woman darted into the clearing, chasing what appeared to be..." He squinted. A bunny? No. *Three* bunnies. Six floppy ears hopped this way and that, two white and one black.

Miles urged his horse forward to get a closer look. Sure enough, the frazzled woman was indeed chasing all three bunnies. She'd run after one, only to change course and dart for another.

Miles was about to swing down when a black ball of fur bounced his direction. His horse shuffled nervously and began whinnying, finally rearing up as the bunny darted past his front hooves.

With effort, Miles managed to retain his seat and calm his horse. When he glanced up again, the woman had paused in her pursuit to offer him an apologetic look.

"I am very sorry, sir, although you did manage that horse beautifully just now. Well done."

She spoke in the cultured tones of a well-bred lady, but she wore an apron, and her long, dark hair spilled from a loose chignon, looking as though it had snagged on a branch. Or perhaps it had pulled free when she'd removed her straw bonnet, which she now carried. Despite her dishevelment, she was beautiful.

She picked up her skirts and raced away in a most unladylike fashion, going after the black miscreant. Miles craned his neck and nearly laughed when she tried to toss her bonnet over the top of the animal. It missed, and she cursed.

His attention was caught when floppy ears with a pink nose stopped near the trunk of a nearby maple tree. Unable to leave the poor woman to deal with her runaways on her own, he slid off his horse and draped the reins over the top of the saddle. One slow step at a time, he walked towards the bunny, making sure to stay directly behind it. As soon as he got within a stride or two, he lunged, barely missing as it hopped away.

Well, that didn't work.

Not one to back down from a challenge, he shrugged out of his restrictive jacket and followed the creature, determined to catch it one way or another. This time as he approached, he flung his jacket over top and grinned when it successfully caged the small creature.

"Got you," he said aloud, carefully scooping up his jacket and the bunny along with it. He looked around for something to hold the animal, and only then did he wonder how the woman planned to contain all three. He was tempted to take a seat and watch the spectacle play out.

Instead, he picked up his hat, which had fallen to the ground, and set the bunny inside of it. Then he carefully tipped it over and lowered it back to the ground, finally sliding his hand out to successfully trap it. For a moment, he worried the bunny would scamper away with his hat, but the tall grasses kept it in place.

He pointed a finger and said, "Stay," before looking up to spy the other white bunny disappear under a dense, prickly

bush.

Hands on hips, he examined two beady, black eyes taunting him through the shrubbery. The little devil. He got down on his hands and knees and reached for it, but those cunning black eyes only hopped further into the shrub, taking refuge behind a protective barrier of twigs and leaves. Miles had to commend the thing for its choice of hiding places.

Not far away, a broken branch lay on the ground. He picked it up and crouched back down, determined to prod the black-eyed devil from under the bush. It worked like a charm. As the creature scampered into the open once more, Miles jumped to his feet and leapt over a smaller bush, running in pursuit. Gads, it was fast.

Eventually it paused to sniff at something in the grass. Miles slowed his steps and approached, finally tossing his jacket over the top and snagging the little runaway like he'd done with the first.

He picked up the bundle in triumph, turning to show off his latest feat. But the woman hadn't even noticed. She was still attempting to catch the elusive black bunny. Much of her hair had fallen loose, and she kept batting it away from her face, looking quite comical.

Miles grinned and walked to where she picked her way through the grass, only a few strides away. He didn't know what she intended to do—throw herself on top of the thing as he'd attempted to do earlier? She no longer carried her bonnet and didn't have anything else to throw. Perhaps she expected the bunny to stay put while she snatched it up?

Once again, he was tempted to stand back and enjoy the scene. Had she not looked so frustrated, haggard, and exhausted, he might have done just that.

Instead, he took pity on her and approached. "It appears as though you could use some assistance."

The bunny startled and took off through the grass again. With her hands on her hips, the woman frowned at him. "Not if

that's the sort of assistance you're offering. I nearly had the blasted thing."

Miles chuckled as he removed the bunny from his jacket and held it out to her. "As much as I've enjoyed watching you scamper about, my method of catching them is more effective. Do you think you can keep hold of this one? I'd rather not go scavenging under another bush if I can help it."

Her eyes widened in surprise, but after a moment, she collected her wits and accepted the squirming creature, immediately tucking it against her chest.

Miles nodded his thanks, shook out his jacket, and went after the last bunny. It took two attempts, but he soon returned triumphant.

The woman stared at him wide-eyed, still clutching the bunny she held.

"Please tell me there are only three of them," he said.

She nodded but furrowed her brow, looking around in confusion, no doubt wondering where the third had ended up.

"Under my hat," he supplied, nodding to where it still sat under the tree. It gave a little jiggle as if to show there was, indeed, a bunny lurking underneath.

The woman emitted an unladylike snort before covering her mouth with her hand. Then she dropped down on the grass and let out an exhausted breath.

"What a day," she finally said. "I can't tell you how grateful I am for your help, sir. I was ready to concede defeat and wish them all to the devil."

Miles plopped down beside her and tsked. "Such language. No wonder the bunnies are frightened of you."

"As well they should be. There will be consequences, I assure you."

He quirked a brow. "A stern lecture, perhaps? Or will you put them to work sweeping the floors?"

She smiled a little. “The floors do need sweeping, and I’m very good at lecturing, but no. I believe I shall lock them in their cages for a few days instead.”

“I’m sure that will do the trick,” he agreed as his horse wandered over to munch on the grass near his feet.

“That is a well-trained animal you have there. How did you convince, er... him, is it? Not to wander off?”

“Perry is male, though you wouldn’t think so from the way he reared when confronted by this little thing. Had I not been riding him, he’d likely have run off, at least until the threat had passed. He would have eventually returned, however. He knows full well that if he ever left me stranded there would be no oats for him, and he’s rather partial to oats.”

“Hmm...” she mused. “Perhaps I need to withhold carrots from these little miscreants whenever they escape.”

She tucked her long, dark-brown curls behind her ears, but the cool evening breeze quickly sent them billowing back around her face.

“Or you could just train them to return whenever you call out, *Bunnies, come hither.*”

She had a nice laugh. Melodious. Her voice was a bit deeper than usual for her sex, and Miles decided he could listen to her talk and laugh all day.

“Might I ask who trained Perry? Your groom, perhaps? Does he train bunnies as well? I’d pay handsomely if he could get them to respond in such a way.” Her brow wrinkled as she studied the horse. “Perry... such an odd name.”

The bunny in Miles’s hands managed to escape his grasp, but he captured it again before it could dart away. “It’s short for Periwinkle.”

The look she gave him was one of amused disbelief, as though she couldn’t determine whether or not he was in earnest. She must have decided to believe him because she smirked.

“No wonder he’s frightened of bunnies. You took away all of his masculinity when you decided to call him that.”

“Actually, he was named by a blacksmith’s little girl from the village where I grew up. She has a leg that has never quite worked right and the brownest eyes you’ve ever seen. No one with a heart could say no to her. I purchased the horse from her father, and she was most adamant that I call him Periwinkle. When I asked her why, she revealed that his coat glows a light purple in the moonlight.”

“Does it?” The woman examined his horse with renewed interest.

“It does.”

“Well then. After a tale like that, I can no longer find fault with his name. Perry, you simply must overcome your fear of bunnies.”

“I’m certain he’ll start working on that straightaway.” Miles lifted the ball of black fur he held and puckered his nose at it. “Do you have a name, little fellow?”

“They all do.” She pushed her hair away from her face and gestured to the one on her lap. “This is Dahlia—she loves to eat them, you see. The one under the hat we call Mini, after her small size. And that escapee you have there is Bonaparte, though after today I’m more inclined to call him *bon appétit*. I should very much like to serve him up for dinner. He is the ringleader, and a naughty one at that.”

Miles laughed, enjoying the woman’s sense of humor. “What about you? Do you have a name?”

She shook her head. “Oh no. I’ll not have my name bandied about town. I may not be able to stop you from talking about the eccentric woman who chases bunnies across the Steine, but my name will stay out of it.”

“I’ll never tell a soul, I swear.”

“That would make you a saint, and I could never claim an acquaintance with a saint. I’m too much of a sinner. Why, only this morning, I cursed.”

“You cursed a few minutes ago as well.”



She frowned, then grimaced. “Devil take it, you’re right.” She immediately slapped a hand over her mouth, much to his amusement.

When the wind whipped dark curls around her face yet again, she crawled onto her knees. “Would you be a dear and hold Dahlia for me? I must do something with my hair before I take to cursing again.”

He chuckled and accepted the bunny, trapping it with the black one between his legs. Then he watched in amazement as the mysterious woman freed a few pins from her tangles and turned her body toward the wind. In a matter of minutes, she twisted her hair into an intricate knot—unlike anything he’d ever seen—then pinned it into place with just three pins. A few short tendrils danced around her face, and apron aside, she appeared ready for a garden party.

“How did you do that?” he asked in awe.

“Do what? Oh, you mean my hair. It’s not as complicated as it looks. I do it most every morning, actually. Well, not this particular style, but something.”

“You don’t employ a maid?”

“I have no need of one,” she said, not providing him with even a hint as to her identity.

The woman was a conundrum. She wore an apron, had no maid, and scampered about unchaperoned. Her dress, however, was finely made, and she was obviously well educated. In addition, she’d commented about her willingness to pay handsomely for a bunny trainer.

Miles had always enjoyed a good riddle, and he very much wanted to figure this one out.

With a sigh, she pushed herself up. “I suppose I ought to go. It’s past time I return these bunnies to their cage.”

She grabbed hold of her apron and folded it to make a large pocket. Then she took Dahlia from him and carefully situated the creature in the pouch before holding out her hand for the second bunny.

Miles climbed to his feet, keeping Bonaparte tucked against his chest. He wasn't about to let her walk away without a name or her direction. "Allow me to walk you home. I should hate for one of these scalawags to make another escape."

"You're kind to offer, but I have inconvenienced you long enough. This apron makes it easy to carry them all."

Miles hesitated, still clutching the bunny. Had she not found him at all charming, at the very least, handsome or intriguing? Most women could find something to like about him. Unfortunately, the mysterious keeper of bunnies seemed adamant that this was to be their first and last meeting.

Should he attempt to follow her home undetected and appear on her doorstep the following morning? She'd label him a cad and alert the authorities.

Palm still out, she wiggled her fingers. "Please, sir, I really must be going. Poor Mini is probably frightened to death under your hat."

Miles finally held out Bonaparte, his fingers brushing hers with the exchange of hands. Every point of contact tingled at the touch. Surely she'd felt *that*.

*Say something, idiot. Don't just let her walk away.*

He blurted the first thing that came to mind. "Do you enjoy morning walks along the beach?"

After settling the second bunny into her apron, she cocked her head at him, her dark eyes sparkling with the last rays of the sun.

"On occasion."

"How would you feel about one of those occasions taking place tomorrow morning at, say... six o'clock?"

Her eyes widened, and she choked out, "Six?"

"It'll be worth the sacrifice, I promise." He held his breath, hoping she'd at least consider the invitation.

She dropped her gaze to her wriggling apron and pressed her lips together. After a time, she finally said, "Perhaps."

It occurred to him that she didn't know anything about his character, other than the fact that he'd come to her rescue. Whether that was the cause for her hesitation or not, he thought it best to assure her.

"I didn't mean to imply that you should come alone. By all means, bring your maid—" Dash it all, hadn't she only just said she didn't employ one?

*Imbecile.*

"Or... a groom? Perhaps a friend?" Lud, he was making a mull of this. Who was this woman, and did she have any servants in her employ? Mayhap *she* was a servant, though he couldn't quite believe that.

He held out a hand. "I have no intention of absconding with your virtue, if that is your concern. I only wish to know more about you. Do say you'll come. You can bring a host of friends or a warren of bunnies for all I care, not that bunnies will provide you much protection. A pack of dogs then. Gads, what am I saying? You won't need protection."

She giggled and repeated, "Perhaps."

It wasn't a yes, but it wasn't a no either. Miles would have to accept it and hope for the best.

He gave her a quick bow. "It's truly been a pleasure, Miss... I really wish you would tell me your name."

"Out of the question."

He took a backward step towards his horse. "In that case, I will be waiting at the end of Middle Street tomorrow morning at six o'clock sharp. I beg you to not disappoint me."

She shifted her sack of wriggling bunnies and smiled. "Thank you again for your help, sir. I hope your valet will be able to remove that mud from the knees of your trousers. If not, you have my deepest sympathies."

With a parting wave, she began walking across the Steine. Her movements were a little awkward at first, until she hiked the apron higher and gathered the bundle closer to her

midsection. Then she moved with the grace of an upper-class woman, leaving him to wonder at her identity yet again.

At one point she glanced back over her shoulder, and he lifted a hand, not embarrassed to be caught staring. The moment she disappeared from sight, however, he was tempted to mount Perry and trail after her. He resisted the impulse and collected his horse's reins instead. If she chose not to join him on the morrow, there were other, albeit more laborious, ways to discover her identity.

Miles was nothing if not persistent.

# ... 3 ...

CHELLE STOOD IN her bedchamber, glancing from the velvet bonnet she held in her hand to the mirror above her small dressing table to the clock on the wall. Ten minutes to six, and she still waffled about whether or not she should meet that stranger for a stroll.

Without her maid.

She was six and twenty, after all, long past the age of requiring a chaperone. Her mother would say she still needed one, at the very least, a companion, but Chelle savored her independence. She liked doing things on her own, in her own way.

Now, however, she felt conflicted.

The bunny catcher had been a welcome distraction, but she wasn't sure if she wanted more of him. He was handsome, charming, and, judging by his horse and the fine cut of his clothes, wealthy. Well educated too, with an endearing sense of humor. The sort of man she usually kept at a distance, and for good reason.

Chelle twirled the ribbons of her bonnet around her fingers. She knew what it felt like to love a man with all of her heart.

She also knew what it felt like to lose him. In an instant, all happiness had been sucked from her life, leaving behind an oozing crater—one that had never healed. Even now, thoughts of Cedric brought back that all-too-familiar ache of loneliness. It was more subdued these days, but still there.

Always there.

No, she would not go to the beach.

Chelle sank down on her chair, foot tapping against the wooden floor. Her finger was now white where the ribbon wrapped around it, so she quickly unwound it and watched the color flood back.

*Should I go?*

*For what reason? You are happy as you are.*

She *was* happy. Truly happy. Why then, did she crave a little more time in the charming man's company? Why had she taken more care with her appearance, choosing her favorite rose-colored morning dress?

*You are attracted to him.*

She closed her eyes, hating to admit the truth. But the way he'd made her smile, that grin that lifted one side of his mouth slightly higher than the other, those expressive eyebrows and beautiful blue eyes...

Yes, he *had* been a distraction. A wonderful distraction. She could use a few more hours with someone who made her forget her worries and frustrations. With any luck, she'd return with a clear head, ready to figure out what to do about the school.

Besides, it wasn't as though she'd fall for him. She could never love anyone the way she'd loved Cedric.

*I will go.*

With no arguments left to make, she stood and pinned her bonnet to her head. Then she walked through the hall, down the stairs, and out the front door, only to turn around.

*Ninnyhammer. You can't go, especially not alone.*

She paused with her hand on the knob, despising the rules of society. She wasn't a naive debutante any longer. She should be able to go where she pleased and with whom she pleased. Besides, it would be cruel of her not to show up at all, and Chelle wasn't cruel.

*Two hours. That is all.*

With that final thought, she straightened and spun around with a sense of purpose. This time she made it as far as Middle Street before second-guessing herself. She nearly lost her nerve until she spotted him at the end of the cobblestone road, standing with his back to her as he looked out over the beach.

How she knew it was him, Chelle couldn't say. She just did. A few people milled about. A larger woman blocked her view for a moment as she crossed the road carrying a basket filled with leafy vegetables. Then he was in her sights again, broad shoulders, lean waist, and tall. Wonderfully tall. It wasn't often that her gaze would land on a man's chin instead of his forehead.

Her feet moved, propelling her forward, and as she closed in on him, an odd sort of peace settled over her, pushing away earlier qualms.

She had made the right decision, or so she hoped.

He turned around when she was about five steps away, and the crease in his brow melted away with his smile.

"I was beginning to think you wouldn't come." His voice was just right. Deep, but not too deep, with a pleasing cadence. He held his hat in his hands, fiddling with it in a nervous fashion. A breeze ruffled his thick, deep-brown hair, and the sunlight made it look almost silvery.

She wondered if it would glimmer periwinkle in the moonlight, like his horse.

"I'm not sure why I did," Chelle answered. "I probably shouldn't have."

It had been reckless, sneaking out for a clandestine assignation with a man she didn't know. She hadn't informed

anyone of her whereabouts—not her cook, coachman, or maid of all work. What if the man only *seemed* trustworthy?

He grinned, replacing his hat on his head. “If it makes you feel better, few can resist my magnetism.”

A fitting word considering Chelle had felt a definite pull to come, not that she’d admit as much to him. His arrogance made him slightly less attractive, however. Confidence was one thing. Arrogance another. She despised men who believed themselves irresistible to women.

Blast. What had she gotten herself into? He hadn’t come across as pompous the day before.

She watched him for a moment, trying to reconcile the man before her with the one who’d chased after bunnies.

“Perhaps I should go,” she said at last.

“Please don’t.” He rushed to add, “I was only teasing. In truth, I’ve been an anxious dunderhead all morning. I put salt in my tea instead of sugar and didn’t even notice until I had downed half of it.”

Chelle didn’t know if that was true or not, but she preferred this side of him. He held out his arm, and after a moment’s hesitation, she rested her hand on it. He began walking down the road that overlooked the sea. When they came to the wooden stairs leading down to the beach, he slowed and took hold of the rail.

Chelle resisted. “When you said we were to stroll along the beach, you didn’t mean actually *on* the beach, did you?”

“Of course. Were you expecting us to stay on the road?”

“Er... yes, I did.”

“You obviously don’t know me well.”

“I don’t know you at all, sir.”

“On the contrary, Miss...”

With him one step down, his eyes were just below hers. He stood so close her breath became ragged. His brows had a high,



natural arch, lending so much expression to his eyes and face. When he smiled, the one on the right arched a bit higher, and when he studied her as he was doing now, two vertical lines appeared between them.

Goodness, he was handsome.

“You were supposed to fill the silence with a name. Preferably your real name, but I’ll take anything at this point. Is there something you’ve always wished to be called? Miss Cobbler, perhaps? No? What about Miss Crabston?”

She sniggered. “You are inspired by your surroundings, I see.”

He tugged on her hand, prodding her down the steps. In spite of her concerns, she followed.

When they reached the bottom, he brightened and snapped his fingers. “I have it. Miss Pearl. You are an unexpected treasure, after all.”

She grimaced. “Gads, no. That’s doing it much too brown.”

“Perhaps you could decide on a name then.”

She looked over the beach, tapping her index finger over her lower lip until inspiration struck. Proud of her cleverness, she said, “What about Miss Shell, as in seashell?”

He had no idea just how close to her Christian name it came.

“Er...” The charming lines appeared between his brows as he stared at her. “Surely you can come up with something better. It doesn’t flatter you, and there are too many S’s.”

“Miss Cobbler or Crabston are more flattering?”

“They are easier to say,” he defended.

“Well, I like Miss Shell. You said to give you any name, and so I have. It suits me perfectly.”

He shrugged, apparently out of arguments. “Does that make you a protector of pearls then? Or do you find yourself often underfoot?”

She laughed. “As a matter of fact, I am both. Speaking of underfoot, are you certain you wish to stroll across this beach? It’s rocky, and, well... uncomfortable.”

The few times Chelle had ventured down to the beach hadn’t lasted long. While she loved to be near the sea, she preferred the sure footing of the road over the sinking pebbles that always found a way into her shoes. Thankfully, she’d worn her sturdy walking boots this morning. Those would help.

“I assume you’ve never walked the beach during an extremely low tide,” he said casually.

“Why would that matter?”

He stepped down on the loose pebbles and held out a hand. “If you can endure the discomfort for a few minutes, I will show you.”

She pursed her lips, only to throw caution to the wind and shrug. “How can I say no to that? You have intrigued me, and I’m not easily intrigued.”

He kept hold of her hand as they picked their way across the beach, their boots pushing and kicking pebbles this way and that. His grip was strong and firm but also gentle. It felt nice. Natural. Until this moment, she hadn’t realized how much she’d missed a man’s touch.

“What would you like me to call *you*?” she asked.

“Hmm... no one has ever asked me that before. What about Mr. Dash? You think me dashing, do you not?” A crooked smile appeared, and she could tell he was joking.

“Mr. Conceit would be more fitting.”

He made a face and shook his head. “No. I think Mr. Dash suits *me* perfectly.”

“As in *dash-it-all*?” She grinned. “Do you often drive people to swear?”

He chuckled. “As a matter of fact, I do. At least some people.”

“Mr. Dash it is,” she agreed, amused by how ridiculous it sounded.

Eyes still on her feet, Chelle was surprised when the pebbles gave way to a long and narrow stretch of smooth, wet sand. There was an occasional rock here and there, but a hidden pathway had emerged just for them along the shoreline.

He tucked her hand into the crook of his elbow. “What do you say now, Miss Shell? Would you still like to return to the road?”

The sand felt soft under her boots, and the sounds of gulls squawking and waves lapping made her feel... free.

She shook her head and smiled at him, charmed yet again. “Lead on, Mr. Dash.”

“I knew you’d come to see it my way.”

# .. 4 ..

A BREEZE WHIPPED around her neck as Chelle entered a magical space of serenity and beauty. Here, in this moment, only the two of them existed.

When a larger wave washed onto the sand, rushing at them and threatening to wet their boots, Chelle squealed, lifted her skirts, and jumped out of the way.

Mr. Dash, on the other hand, remained where he stood and let the water roll over his boots.

He grinned at her, eyes twinkling in that way she was coming to like altogether too much.

She scowled. “Laugh all you’d like, Mr. Dash, but your boots don’t have laces. If water rolls over the top of mine, it will wet my stockings and chill my feet.”

“We can always remove our boots,” he suggested.

She raised a brow. “I don’t know what sort of impression I gave you yesterday, but I am not the sort of woman who removes her shoes in public, especially not in the company of a man.”

He shrugged. “Pity. There’s nothing as liberating as walking barefoot along the shore. You won’t mind if I indulge, will you?”

Without waiting for an answer, he walked over to a small boulder, sat down, and removed his boots. When he tugged off his stockings and began rolling up his trousers, she averted her gaze, but not before she caught sight of his muscular calves. Heavens, the man could put her to the blush.

She forced her gaze back to the water, wondering what the smooth sand would feel like beneath bare feet. How she wished she could plop down and remove her shoes as well. It would be thrilling to walk through the water and let the waves roll over her ankles.

Mr. Dash strode towards the water and kicked at an incoming wave, splashing the water into thousands of drops that glistened in the sunlight.

When he looked back at her with a smile, he must have noticed the envy in her expression. “We’re far enough from the road that it’s unlikely you’ll be seen or recognized. Few venture down to the beach at this hour.”

Chelle glanced at the ridge above, which was currently devoid of carriages, horses, or people. He was right. Even if someone did notice them from the road, they’d only see small figures, not details.

She looked up and down the empty beach, running her tongue across the front of her teeth. Did she dare?

Mr. Dash lifted his arms as though he held an imaginary woman and waltzed across the shallow water, his gait smooth and graceful. Every inch of her wanted to kick off her boots and join in the fun.

Chelle tried her hardest not to laugh, but it proved impossible.

He danced in her direction, then bowed and said, “Would you do me the honor of the next dance, Miss Shell?”

His irresistible grin and wet, sandy feet were her undoing. Throwing caution to the wind, she walked over to the small boulder and plopped down. Miss Michelle Ellington might not be able to remove her shoes in public, but Miss Shell could.

More and more, she liked this new anonymity of hers. Hang propriety. Hang society's rules. Hang everything. This was true independence, and she relished it.

“Ah ha,” Mr. Dash called out. “You’ve seen reason at last.”

He waltzed towards her again, dancing circles around her until she’d removed her boots, stockings, and gloves.

The moment he pulled her to her feet, Chelle became keenly aware of his nearness. His hands were soft, warm, and smooth—the hands of a gentleman.

“Say you’ll waltz with me, Miss Shell.”

Her entire body shivered as she dipped into a curtsy. “It would be my honor.”

He swept her into his arms and spun her towards the sea. His muscles were solid beneath her hands, and he smelled of sandalwood and lemon.

As they splashed through the shallow water, she gasped at the chill that swept up her ankles and dampened her skirts. She laughed. When her gaze met his, warmth rushed through her entire body, and she forgot all about the cold. The world spun as they waltzed and splashed and laughed. At one point, she leaned her head back and felt the sunlight warm her face, wishing she had tossed aside her bonnet as well.

*Can this day never end?*

“You dance as though you’ve had years of practice,” he said as he tightened his hold around her waist.

“Of course I have. I am in my dotage.” Let him think what he’d like about that.

“Now that you mention it, I believe I do see some gray strands in your hair. They sparkle like ripples of water in the sunlight.”

She scowled. “How poetically disparaging you are, Mr. Dash. If I were a vengeful sort, I’d say that your hair, thinning as it is, provides a porthole to your shimmering scalp.”

Unlike her, he’d removed his hat with his shoes. His thick, luscious hair, swept up in the middle and cropped short on the sides, made her fingers itch to comb through it.

His lips twitched a bit, but he was quick to recover. “I’m hoping I have a few years left before the porthole becomes a large window. But when the unthinkable happens, you’ll still dance with me, will you not?”

“I’ll do better than that, sir. I shall sacrifice some of my own silver locks so that you can have a matching hairpiece made for yourself. Only imagine. Two heads sparkling like ripples of water in the sunlight.”

This time he laughed outright. “We’ll be the talk of the ton.”

Chelle nodded. “More than that, we’ll start a new trend. Every man will want to have matching headpieces made with locks from his beloved.”

“Which she will give freely as a token of her love,” he added. “It’ll be like the days of old when powdered wigs were the norm, only more colorful. Picture it. Matching red hair, blonde, brown, and black.”

“Don’t forget silver,” she added.

“Yes, yes, we will be there too, never you fear. Hobbling our way across the dance floor as the elderly often do.”

Try as she might, Chelle couldn’t keep a straight face after that. She giggled, thinking that she wouldn’t mind hobbling across the dance floor with this man, old or young. He was refreshingly diverting.

The world continued to spin as her feet splashed through the water. Fresh, salty air mingled with the scent of lemon. She tilted her head towards him and breathed in through her nose. Mmm... he smelled good.

If only they could stay in this world forever. No thoughts of school. No sadness over the past. No worries about the opinions

of others. Just a handsome man and smooth, delicious sand.

He pulled her close and whispered in her ear, his breath shooting happy shivers down her spine.

“Don’t look now, but we’ve amassed a small audience.”

Just like that, the magical spell shattered into reality. Chelle stiffened and pulled free, immediately backing away from him. From the corner of her eye, she could make out several spectators on the road above, watching and pointing.

Even though they would never recognize her or Mr. Dash from this distance—at least not without a spyglass—Chelle’s cheeks heated, and she faced the sea, keeping her back to them.

Devil take it, *did* someone have a spyglass? This was Brighton, after all. Many people owned them.

Chelle closed her eyes and swallowed, hugging her arms to her chest. What had she been thinking to behave so recklessly? Should anyone recognize her, not only would it reflect poorly on her family’s name, but the school’s as well. She could never allow that to happen, no matter how handsome and charming the temptation.

“I must go.” Chelle kept her head down as she returned to the rock where she’d left her stockings and boots.

Mr. Dash followed, arms folded. “Where do you intend to go? The way we came?”

He made a good point. The moment she ascended the stairs, she’d be recognized. Worse, she’d have to walk through the center of Brighton with sodden skirts.

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” she finally said. “Somewhere other than here, and preferably before one of those gossips procures a spyglass.”

Before she could tug her stockings back on, he took them from her grasp, stuffed them into her boots, along with her gloves, then collected his boots as well. He calmly placed his hat back on his head and held out an arm.



“If you’ll continue strolling this way with me, Miss Shell, I have a carriage waiting about a thirty-minute walk from here. Can you manage?”

She eyed him nervously. “If they follow?”

“They won’t,” he said, seemingly unconcerned. “The road winds away from the beach, so they’d have to climb down that wall of rocks to keep us in their sights. Do you really see any of them risking bodily harm for a chance at some gossip?”

He was right, of course, but that didn’t stop Chelle from worrying.

“Keep your head turned away, and spyglass or not, they’ll be none the wiser.”

She took her boots from him, accepted his arm, and they began to saunter along once more. She tried to get him to walk faster, but he maintained a slow and steady pace.

“It’s best to act as though we’ve done nothing worthy of gawking at. If we race to get away, someone might think us more newsworthy than we are.”

Chelle nodded and relaxed a little, hating that their dance had been interrupted. At times, she envied the lower class’s freedom.

“Have you always lived in Brighton?” Mr. Dash asked.

“No.” Chelle left it at that. She wasn’t ready for him to know her identity any more than those onlookers on the road above.

He nodded but also frowned. “It’s difficult to carry on a conversation when I’m not allowed to ask questions that are too personal. Can you tell me anything about yourself?”

Chelle thought for a moment before responding. “I like to sketch.”

That piqued his interest. “What do you sketch? Landscapes? Seascapes? Attractive men?” He lifted his chin to show off his profile.

Chelle smiled. “Hair, if you must know.”

He laughed outright then sobered when he realized she hadn't been joking.

“Hair?” The look he gave her made her giggle.

“Hairstyles, to be precise. I like designing chignons, braids, and the like.”

“Ahh... that makes sense. You draw them before trying them on yourself, is that it?” He undoubtedly remembered the quick knot she'd done on her hair the previous afternoon.

“It's like a puzzle to make real hair look like my pictures. I find it diverting.”

“So you're... an abigail?” He didn't appear sold on the idea, and why would he be? What abigail could dance the waltz or fretted about being caught on the beach without her stockings on?

“Perhaps,” Chelle hedged, wondering how long she'd be able to keep up this ruse. He had to be narrowing some things down.

“Hmm...” he mused. “An abigail who can dance beautifully, cares for bunnies, and has her mornings off?”

No, she wasn't fooling anyone. Perhaps he thought her a tradesman's daughter. She searched her mind for other cryptic information she could give him, but nothing came to mind.

“Just answer one more question for me,” he said. “Are you attached in some way? To a man, I mean.”

She couldn't answer that question without thinking

Thoughts of Cedric swarmed her mind, and her mood dipped. “I was at one point, but not anymore.”

“So you're unmarried,” he clarified.

“Yes.”

“Betrothed?”

“No.”

He let out a breath. “Very glad to hear it. I would hate for our outing this morning to result in pistols at dawn.”

Chelle cocked her head at him. “You’re not handy with a pistol?”

“Actually, I’m a crack shot. I just don’t believe in shooting people.”

Chelle smiled, then lapsed into silence, digging her toes into the sand as they walked. The tide had risen, narrowing the smooth pathway. In another hour, it would disappear altogether. Sad.

She was about to ask how often this low of a tide happened when he said, “I’m not attached either, in case you were wondering.”

His words were spoken with a teasing tone, but there was also a question there. Did she care to know more about *him*? Part of her did and part of her didn’t, but she wasn’t ready to return to the world where those answers mattered. She wanted to continue their light-hearted foray along this magical pathway.

Blast those gawkers. They had spoiled everything.

She cast a casual glance to her right, relieved to see only trees, rocks and shrubbery.

“Would you care if we walked through the water again?” she asked, not knowing when she’d get another opportunity.

He steered her back to the water.

A small wave caressed her ankles, feeling blissfully refreshing. Sand would stick to the bottoms of her feet and toes, only to be rinsed away with the next surge of water. She sighed with pleasure, wishing he would take her in his arms for another dance.

It took a conscious effort not to sidle up close to him and clutch his arm with both of her hands. She used to walk that way with Cedric when her parents weren’t watching, and she missed the closeness they once shared.

Cedric had never taken her in his arms for a waltz, however. He'd despised dancing.

Chelle shook off the memories, preferring to live in the moment.

Up ahead, a dog barreled across the beach in their direction. As it neared, it slowed, watching her and Mr. Dash with a wary look. It appeared to be some sort of foxhound mix. Long ears, sweet, chocolate eyes, and a coat of damp, brown fur with a white belly.

Mr. Dash was the first to take a step towards the animal. He bent at the waist and held out a friendly hand. "Hello there."

The dog crouched into an aggressive stance and growled. Mr. Dash stepped in front of Chelle, his hand on her wrist keeping her behind him.

"No need to get antagonistic," he said to the dog. "This beach is big enough for us all."

The dog barked, somewhat menacingly.

"I don't think he likes you," Chelle pointed out.

"That's absurd. What's not to like?"

She side-stepped around him and crouched low, not caring that her skirts were becoming more sodden.

"Where have you come from, little fellow?" she asked. "Are you lost?"

The dog looked her way and ceased growling, then started up again when her dancing partner stepped forward as well.

Mr. Dash slowly retreated with a frown.

Chelle laughed but kept her attention on the dog. "You really don't like him, do you? Tell me, are you a good or bad judge of character?"

"Bad," Mr. Dash muttered, drawing a giggle from Chelle.

The dog approached her tentatively, sniffing her hand before he allowed her to touch him.

“What a sweetie you are. Do you have a name?”

“Of course you’d wish to know *his* name,” said Mr. Dash dryly.

Chelle swallowed a laugh. After yesterday’s fiasco with the bunnies, when she’d played no part in their capture, it felt good to have the upper hand now. She’d always had a weakness for dogs, mostly because she’d never met one she couldn’t win over.

The dog stood tall and looked backwards. Chelle followed his gaze to where a young boy sprinted across the sand towards them. He stopped several paces away and bent over, his chest heaving.

When he finally called out, his voice was haggard. “Lu, you whelp! Come ’ere.”

The dog barked once and darted to the boy. Dressed in rumpled trousers and a dingy, oversized shirt, the scrawny boy couldn’t have been more than eight or nine. He dropped down on his knees to ruffle the dog’s head.

Mr. Dash assisted Chelle up.

“His name is Lu?” he asked the boy in a congenial tone.

“Aye,” the boy answered. “Short for Lucifer.”

Mr. Dash chuckled. “You’ve named your dog well, lad.”

The boy nodded, not appearing the least bit intimidated by the tall man speaking to him. “Always runnin’ off like the devil’s after ’im. Papa says we should toss ’im out to sea, but it’s all banbury. Says the same ’bout me, and ’e’s never tossed me anywhere.”

“Are you named after the devil as well?” Mr. Dash asked.

The boy stood and removed his cap to scratch his head before replacing it. “Nah. Mum saw to it I was named proper-like. It’s Campbell, but most call me Cam.”

“Well, Cam,” Chelle said. “You have a good dog there.”

“That’s debatable,” muttered Mr. Dash. Louder, he added, “He doesn’t seem to like me much. Watch this.” He took a couple steps towards the dog, and Lu immediately crouched, growling once again.

Mr. Dash lifted his palms. “Can you understand it, Cam? Is it the way I smell? The color of my coat, perhaps?”

“Nah. ’E just don’t like blokes.”

“He likes *you*,” Mr. Dash pointed out.

The boy’s grin turned downright cheeky. “What’s not to like?” he asked, saying the exact thing Mr. Dash had said moments before.

“My point exactly,” Mr. Dash said while Chelle laughed, seeing a younger version of Mr. Dash in the boy. The child had pluck, and she liked him all the more for it.

“We best be off, Lu, or you’ll be sleeping outside with the rest of the animals,” Cam said. “We’ve got chores to do.”

Without a goodbye or even a wave, the boy jogged back from where he’d come. The dog followed, tail waving cheerfully as he splashed through the water.

Chelle smiled as she watched them go. Without thinking, she took hold of Mr. Dash’s arm with both of her hands, drew in close, and very nearly laid her head on his shoulder before catching herself.

She jerked her head away and released him, heat rising to her cheeks.

She was behaving as though he were her beau, which he was not. She didn’t even know the man’s real name, for goodness’ sake.

A playful smile appeared on his face, and he cocked his head at her, holding out his arm. “It’s yours for the taking, Miss Shell. I rather like it when you let your guard down.”

With an embarrassed shake of her head, Chelle placed only one hand on his arm, as any woman of good breeding would do.

But that didn't stop him from covering that hand with his own. The simple touch made her want to curl into his chest.

It had been so long since she'd felt a man's embrace. Too long, apparently.

They continued walking, and the footprints of a boy and his dog began to fade. There had been a time when she'd looked forward to being a mother, but she'd given up on that hope years earlier.

Best not to dwell on it now.

She mustered a smile. "I'm willing to wager that you were once as saucy as young Cam—not that you've outgrown that particular trait."

He gave her a playful nudge. "How well you've come to know me in so little time. My father used to say I had the self-importance of a prince."

Chelle sniggered, suddenly wanting to meet his father. "Do you?"

He took his time responding. "I used to, I suppose. But age and experience tend to humble a person. Basically, I try not to think I'm better than others, and I try not to think I'm worse. My mother once told me that finding the worst in another only brings out the worst in you. Those words have always stuck with me. I can focus on the bad in others and in myself or I can focus on the good. I try to do the latter."

Chelle nodded, liking that perspective. For the most part, she tried to do the same, but every now and then a person came along who made it difficult to find the good, like Mr. Bancroft. With a twinge, she thought of the accusatory letter she'd sent to him and her not-so-Christian thoughts at his reply.

She had to admit, Mr. Dash was right. Her anger had only brought out the worst in herself. But how did one go about finding good in a man who so obviously cared more about his pocketbook than anything—or anyone—else?

Perhaps she could try to find the good in others for now. She could work her way up to Mr. Bancroft in time.

A long time.

All too soon, they arrived at a narrow path that wound its way up the small cliff. A curricle stood waiting above, the horses held by a short, stocky man who brightened at the sight of them. He didn't wear livery, and after Mr. Dash thanked him and dropped a handful of coins into his palm, he jogged away.

Once she and Mr. Dash were settled in the curricle, he picked up the reins.

“Well? Where to, Miss Shell? Are you ready to give me your place of address? Or would you prefer I behave the perfect cad and let you down at a corner in town?” The look on his face told her the second option didn't please him in the least.

“Actually, an acquaintance lives up the road. Would you mind taking me there?”

He sighed, not bothering to hide his disappointment. “An acquaintance, eh? Very well. This way?” He pointed over his shoulder, and she nodded.

He found a wide area in the road and turned the curricle around. As she directed him down the various lanes leading to Ivy Cottage, Chelle wanted to pepper him with questions. Their time together had been too fleeting. She wanted to know where he was raised, what sort of family he came from, what pursuits he enjoyed, and yes, his real name.

But she couldn't ask such things, not unless she was willing to reveal the same about herself, which she wasn't. Not yet, anyway.

If he'd known her grandfather was the Duke of Spencer, would he have invited her this morning? Would he have encouraged her to remove her boots and danced with her across the beach?

Not if he valued his unattached state.

Which was precisely why she *should* tell him. If the ton—or worse, her parents—became privy to her actions this day, Chelle would be thoroughly compromised. Her father would insist they wed, assuming he deemed Mr. Dash a worthy candidate, and all



would be ruined. As much as Chelle enjoyed the man's company, she wasn't ready to relinquish her independence.

"You're looking much too contemplative," said Mr. Dash as he guided his horses around the final bend.

When Ivy Cottage came into view, Chelle managed a smile. "I'm merely sad our outing has come to an end. It has been a wonderful morning. Thank you."

He pulled his horses to a stop in front of a modest, brown-brick home. It once appeared dilapidated, but her friends, Ian and Sarah Cullum, had seen to several renovations during the past year. Though it could never be called grand, it was quaint and charming. Or perhaps it was the occupants who made it so.

Either way, Chelle had come to love the house almost as much as its owners.

Mr. Dash shifted in his seat to face her. "You make it sound as though we are to part ways permanently."

"Are we not, Mr. Dash?"

"Only if you continue to call me that infernal name," he answered. "If you insist we keep our identities a mystery, please call me Went instead. It's a nickname from my youth, and I'd prefer it over Mr. Dash."

Chelle nodded. "Mr. Went it is, then."

"Not *Mr.* Went. Just Went. Now that we've seen each other's bare feet, formalities should be a thing of the past."

Heat crept to Chelle's cheeks. She looked down at her hands, grateful he hadn't mentioned ankles as well, even though he must have glimpsed hers at some point.

She forced her thoughts away from bare skin and focused on his nickname instead. Went. It suited him much better than Mr. Dash. She liked it.

"Well then, Went," she finally said, "If I am to dispense with formalities, I suppose you may as well. Call me Shell."

He gave her a pained look that resulted in those charming creases between his brows. "Can you not at least give me a

childhood nickname? Shell sounds ridiculous.”

She had to force her eyes not to narrow. Horrid man. Ridiculous? Hardly. She’d been called Chelle for as long as she could remember.

“Went is not equally ridiculous?” she countered. “It’s a verb in the past tense.”

“And Shell is a noun.”

“In this case it would be considered a proper noun,” she pointed out. “I daresay most of the ton would agree that proper is always best.”

He snickered and shook his head. “Touché. Though I would be among the naysayers in that argument. Proper is not always best, especially when it comes to dancing stockingless on the beach.”

Chelle had to agree, though she kept that thought to herself. They had been dallying long enough in front of Ivy Cottage. She needed him to leave before Sarah or Ian spotted them.

“Would you be so kind as to help me down, Went?”

His shoulders slumped, the prospect of goodbye not appealing to him either. But he set the reins aside and hopped down nonetheless.

Once Chelle’s feet were solidly on the ground, his hands remained on her waist. He was so close she could see the smile and laughter lines around his eyes and mouth. Goodness, he smelled good. Like lemon drops with undertones of amber, leather, and wood. She began to lean into him before catching herself and taking a step back, forcing him to let go of her waist.

The man unnerved her. She gulped in air that smelled more of earth and vegetation than him. It helped.

He cleared his throat. “Would you like to encounter me somewhere on the morrow? The library, perhaps, or tea room? Or shall we chase more bunnies across the Steine?”

She fiddled with the gloves she wore. “You’re assuming I will be free tomorrow.”

“Zooks. Are you not? Friday then? Saturday? Or would Sunday be better? I am at your beck and call, Shell.”

She pressed her lips together to keep from smiling. As much as she would love to continue seeing Went on a daily basis, she had correspondence to write, advertisements to compile, and new teachers to woo. When Susan returned at the month’s end, Chelle was determined to have several candidates at the ready.

“Perhaps Sunday,” she said in a noncommittal way.

“Do you plan to attend services?” he asked.

Chelle hesitated. She did attend most Sundays, but she didn’t want to happen upon him at church. Rather than answer, she lowered her guard and made a suggestion of her own.

“Have you seen the castle ruins near the village of Bramber?”

“I have not.”

“Would you like to? It’s about an hour’s ride from the St. Nicholas church.”

His eyebrow rose, and he smirked. “Are you suggesting we visit the ruins instead of services?”

“I’m suggesting we meet near the footpath west of the church at, say... one o’clock? Services will be over by then.”

“Ah, so you *are* planning to attend services. At St. Nicholas, perhaps?”

He really needed to work on his subtlety.

“I will spend my Sunday morning in whichever way I please, Went. Now off with you before someone sees us and comes to investigate.”

He didn’t move, cocking his head at the cottage instead. “You said an acquaintance lives here?”

“Yes,” Chelle answered, even though Ian and Sarah were much more than acquaintances. They were her closest friends.

“Are you certain you don’t wish to introduce me?”

“Perhaps another time.”

He took hold of her hand and lifted her fingers to his lips.  
“You are a wretch.”

“You’d do well to stay away from me.”

He relinquished her hand and stepped back, tipping his hat in farewell. “I’ve always been partial to wretches. I will see you Sunday.”

Chelle watched him climb onto his curricule, admiring the ease and grace in which he did so. The man was heart-stoppingly handsome. He was also intelligent, amusing and... well, different than any other man she knew. From their first meeting, he’d been on her mind, and she had no doubt he would remain there. Already she wanted to say something that would prolong their conversation.

She clamped her teeth together. Sunday would come soon enough, though it suddenly felt weeks away.

His eyes met hers, and he raised one of those interesting brows of his. “I’ll respect your wishes by not asking for an introduction from your friend, but I refuse to leave until you are safely inside. What if no one is home?”

His thoughtfulness sent a thrill through her heart, and she nodded her agreement before turning and walking to the door. She rapped loudly and waited almost a full minute before an older, slightly frazzled woman opened the door. The housekeeper.

A warm smile came to her face the moment she spied Chelle. “Fortune’s come callin’ on us, I see. ’Tis always a blessed day when you come to visit, Miss—”

“What a dear you are, Mrs. Tibbets,” Chelle quickly cut her off. “Is your mistress at home, by chance? As you can see, I’ve come a little worse for the wear and need to tidy up a bit.”

Mrs. Tibbets’s gaze dropped to Chelle’s sodden skirts, and her smile became a frown. When she noticed Went sitting in his curricule, her frown deepened and her eyes darted back to Chelle.

“Lawks, what’s happened to you, child? Come in, come in.” She ushered Chelle inside before glaring at Went and firmly closing the door. “Has that man harmed you? Should I send for the constable?”

Chelle smiled at the sweet, protective woman. She really was a dear. “This was my own doing, I’m afraid. I went for a walk along the beach and that man was kind enough to bring me here so I could clean myself up before returning to town.”

“Aye, I can see why. You’ve certainly ruined your dress, and such a pretty dress it was.” Mrs. Tibbets made a tsking sound and shook her head. “There’s nothing’ for it but to find you something of Mrs. Cullum’s to wear.”

“Is Sarah not at home?”

“Nay, she left for a ride ’bout—”

From down the hall, a door burst open, and Sarah’s voice called out, “Mrs. Tibbets, are you here? Who was that man I spotted driving down our lane? Mrs. Tibbets?”

The housekeeper rested her arms across her ample belly and smiled. “We’re ’ere, Mrs. Cullum. In the foyer.”

“We?” Footsteps shuffled, and Sarah finally appeared.

“Chelle, what a wonderful surprise! I did not see your carriage or horse out front. How very odd. Do not say that handsome gentleman I spied brought you here. Why did he leave? Goodness, what happened to your gown?”

Chelle sighed and mentally prepared herself for the onslaught to come. Unlike Mrs. Tibbets, Sarah would require a lengthy explanation.

# .. 5 ..

CHELLE LOOKED AT the hem of the borrowed afternoon dress that she had just slipped over her head. While it fit fine around her shoulders and waist, the green skirt only reached her mid-calf.

Her eyes lifted to Sarah's, and they both laughed.

“This will never do,” Chelle said between giggles. “Are you certain you don't have something longer?”

“If I did, I'd be constantly tripping. Why must you be so tall?”

“Why must you be so short?”

Sarah pushed back a strand of her curly, red hair and shrugged. “Ian has that same complaint anytime I ask him to reach something on an upper shelf. Hmm...” Sarah rubbed her chin as she considered the dress. “If only I had some very wide lace to add to the bottom.

A piece of lace that wide would look ridiculous, as they both knew, but Chelle managed to keep a straight face, offering an equally ridiculous suggestion of her own. “We could cut a strip of contrasting fabric and sew that on instead.”

Sarah snapped her fingers. “That’s brilliant. I have some old pink, floral drapes that will do nicely.”

Chelle’s twitching lips gave way to an unladylike snicker, which came out sounding more like a snort. She plopped on the bed and leaned back on her elbows, raising her leg so she could look at her bare calf.

“I could start a new style of shorter-length dresses. What do you think?”

“They would go beautifully with all of those scandalous hairstyles you’ve designed and relegated to that *Styles for the Boudoir* book you’ve been meaning to compile.”

Chelle lay back on the bed, closing her eyes to enjoy the softness of the quilt. It felt so cozy.

Sarah dropped down at her side. “I’m afraid there’s nothing for it. You’ll just have to stay here until after dark. No one will notice a muddied hem in low light.”

That wiped the smile from Chelle’s face, and she opened her eyes. “Drat. You’re probably right.”

“I can see why you are so put out. ’Tis a dreadful prospect to have to spend the day with your dearest friend.”

Chelle playfully slapped Sarah’s knee. “You know I would love nothing more than to stay several days, but I have work that needs doing, the sooner the better. I really shouldn’t have agreed to meet Went, but...”

“You couldn’t resist?” Sarah guessed, a knowing look in her eyes.

Chelle pulled herself up and wrapped an arm around the tall bedpost, resting her cheek against its smooth surface. “Why is it so difficult to say no to that man?”

“Because you like him.”

“I hardly know him.”

“Which is precisely why you *shouldn’t* say no and why you should tell him who you are. How else will you get to know him? He obviously wants to know you.”

“What if I don’t want to like him or know him or grow to care for him?” *More than I already have*, Chelle added to herself. Curse her easily swayed heart.

Silence met her questions, and Sarah gave her a look that said, *Have you gone daft?*

Perhaps Chelle had. Goodness, her thoughts were a muddle. Her feelings as well. The two were inseparably linked, after all.

“What are you afraid of?” Sarah finally asked, laying a gentle hand on Chelle’s arm, all teasing gone.

She could only shrug, then frown. “I don’t know, exactly. Perhaps I’m just weary of having to conform to the dictates of how a duke’s granddaughter ought to behave.”

“Since when have you ever conformed to that?” Sarah countered.

It was true. Chelle taught school, claimed a friendship with the wife of a tradesman, and often went about on her own, unaccompanied. Her actions likely met with a great deal of whispered censure, but thanks to her family’s connections and her friendship with the newly crowned King George IV, Chelle was still accepted in even the highest circles of society—assuming word of her barefooted dance on the beach never reached anyone’s ears. There was a thin line between eccentricity and scandal, and she’d crossed that line today.

“You’re afraid of falling in love again.” Sarah spoke the words that Chelle could not fully admit, even to herself.

She pressed her lips together while trying to keep those deeply rooted fears from surfacing. They hovered close, threatening to emerge any moment.

After a long silence, Sarah’s voice cut through the cacophony in Chelle’s mind. “Tell me this, my friend. If you could go back to the day you met Cedric and remove him from your life, would you?”

The answer required no thought at all. “No.”

As much pain as his loss had brought, not having the memories, the lessons learned, the love that had gradually



blossomed was unthinkable.

Sarah nodded in a self-satisfied way, as though nothing more needed to be said. In truth, nothing did. Sarah had made her point, and Chelle heard it loud and clear.

That didn't stop her from making a face and rolling her eyes. How vexing it was to be the receiver of advice instead of the giver.

"No need to be so smug," she muttered.

Sarah laughed as she stood and pulled Chelle to her feet. "It's rare I have reason to be smug. Let me enjoy it for a moment, will you? Come now. Let us find some biscuits to eat and see how Mrs. Tibbets is faring with your mud-stained dress."



# MISSIVE TWO



*Miss Michelle Ellington*

*Miss Addison's School for Young Ladies*

*Brighton, England*

*8 August 1820*

*Dearest Michelle,*

*It has been decided. Your father has rented a townhouse in Brighton, and we are coming for a visit. Two years is too long for a mother not to see her daughter.*

*By the time this letter arrives, Cecily, your father, and I will be en route. We know you are occupied with various affairs at the school, but we will take what little time you can spare to reconnect. You'll consider removing yourself to be with us at our townhouse, will you not?*

*All my love,*

*Your dotting mother*

# ... 6 ...

CHELLE CLENCHED HER jaw in consternation as she sank against the cushions on the sofa in her morning room. Her fingers thrummed against the padded arm in rapid staccatos.

*No, no, no.*

Under normal circumstances, she'd be thrilled to learn her family decided to visit. She had missed them greatly these past years and often yearned for more contact than the occasional exchange of letters.

At this moment, however, such news felt like one more complication to deal with—and a large one at that.

Despite her mother's claims that they would content themselves with whatever time Chelle could offer, that would not be the case. From the moment they arrived, Chelle would be expected to attend family dinners, soirées, and balls. She'd be enlisted to shop with her mother and sister, make morning calls, and, of course, sea bathe.

Ugh.

Chelle hated sea bathing. She'd attempted the feat a total of once in her life, and she'd come away from the experience cold,

sticky, and not at all happy. The salt water had dried out her skin and hair, and oh, the snarls she'd had to deal with as a result. It hurt just thinking about it.

Yes, it had been interesting to float with the surge and ebbs of the current but prying off the layers of wet clothes afterward had been too much of an ordeal. Yet her mother and youngest sister would insist on giving it a try, and if Chelle opted out of bathing or any other activity, there would be a large helping of guilt attached—guilt that would germinate until she inevitably succumbed.

Their timing couldn't be more unfortunate. Not only would they get in the way of her management of the school—or rather, *mismanagement*—but she could also kiss her clandestine outings with a certain gentleman goodbye.

Chelle rubbed her forehead, feeling a headache coming on. Why was it that after only two encounters, Went now factored into her latest dilemma? He shouldn't, not even a little. She didn't even know the man's real name, for pity's sake, and she wasn't ready to know it, especially now. If she allowed their relationship to become more than a secretive flirtation, she'd be obliged to introduce him to her family.

Gooseflesh appeared on her arms just thinking about it.

Chelle would willingly sea bathe every day for an entire year before she'd do that to herself or Went. As soon as her parents met the man, if deemed worthy, they would latch on to him as though Chelle were a parched, dehydrated wanderer and Went her drink of water.

Unless Went had a sordid past or connections to the most vile of criminals, he would indeed be found worthy. Chelle was, after all, six and twenty. The time for fastidiousness had long since passed.

If only this morning's post had brought a letter from Susan rather than her mother. More than anything, Chelle needed instruction on what to do about the school and its teachers, along with her headmistress's calm assurance that everything would work itself out. Why had Chelle ever agreed to become

Susan's assistant and take over in the woman's absence? She should have remained a teacher, leaving all management to the more experienced woman.

Under Chelle's control, come January, Miss Addison's School for Young Ladies may very well become a thing of the past.

With a weary sigh, Chelle tossed her mother's letter aside and picked up the advertisement she'd written for new teachers. She scanned through the short paragraph and scowled. Her bland, insipid words would undoubtedly attract bland, insipid personalities, or worse—stern, crotchety teachers that would terrify parents and students alike.

Which brought to mind yet another concern. If Mr. Bancroft was already on the hunt for teachers, he'd soon begin advertising for students as well, in a far more grandiose way than Chelle could devise. If she didn't come up with a plan to keep their existing students and entice others, the Bancroft's Seminary, with its promises of archery, philosophy, science, and who knew what else, would tempt away even the most loyal families.

But how to compete? Perhaps the Bancroft Seminary wouldn't offer their students interactions with bunnies and birds. Miss Addison's could adopt a few more animals and put the word out that... what, exactly? They intended to open a menagerie? Teach lessons on how to best care for animals? Offer instruction on how to extract milk from cows?

Gads.

Chelle pinched the bridge of her nose and frowned. Miss Addison's was a school for young *ladies*, not stable hands. What could she possibly say to woo interesting, qualified teachers and discerning families?

Her mind was as empty as the school in its current state.

Yet again, Chelle cursed the man who'd put her in this position. If she ever encountered the detestable Mr. Bancroft, she'd tell him exactly where he could put his new school with its pilfered teachers and its diversity of subjects.

No, she most certainly wasn't ready to find the good in him.

# ...7...

MILES, OR WENT as Chelle now called him, sat on his horse beneath the shade of a tree near the St. Nicholas church. It was a pleasant afternoon, with a few scattered clouds and a nice breeze cooling his neck. A glance at his pocket watch showed ten minutes after one. Had Shell opted not to come after all? He removed his hat to better feel the breeze and squinted in the direction of Brighton.

His horse sidestepped and swung his head, no doubt anxious to get moving.

Miles dismounted, allowing Perry to nibble at the grass while they continued to wait.

She couldn't possibly have forgotten about their outing to the ruins today. She'd been the one to suggest it. In addition, their last encounter had been too memorable to cast aside. Surely, she'd felt it too—that palpable pull between them that practically hummed with energy.

Miles was no stranger to attraction. Many beautiful women had caught his eye over the years. But Shell was different. This connection went beyond silky hair, long eyelashes, kissable lips, and alluring curves. It felt as though he'd known her for years,



which was completely asinine. He had yet to learn her name. But in those rare moments when she revealed something about herself, it came across like a lost memory rather than a newly learned fact. He couldn't explain it exactly. He just knew that if she didn't come, he would return to the house of her so-called acquaintance and not leave until they told him who she was and where he could find her.

Botheration. He really didn't want it to come to that.

Another glance at his watch. It was now twenty minutes past the hour.

His boot scuffed at a small mound of dirt, flattening it. He should have persisted in his efforts to uncover her name. If he hadn't been so quick to agree to this madcap scheme, he could have eventually weakened her resolve. Why was she so bent on secrecy anyhow? It made little sense.

He replaced his hat and looked around for something to sit on. Shell had arrived late for their walk along the beach, so perhaps she wasn't the most punctual of women. He'd wait at least twenty minutes more before admitting defeat.

A quick perusal of the shaded area revealed no large rocks or stumps. If they arranged to meet like this again, he'd be sure to suggest a more comfortable location. Even the steps of the church would have been preferable to the root-infested area of earth and lawn that surrounded him.

When the sound of galloping hooves met his ears, he twisted around to see a woman cantering towards him on the back of a chestnut horse.

The moment he recognized her slender frame, he thanked the heavens. She wore the same straw bonnet she'd used when trying to catch bunnies and rode with grace and fluidity, her body in perfect sync with her horse.

Who was this woman? Zooks, he wanted to know.

As she neared, Miles mounted his horse and moved forward to meet her. She slowed, finally coming to a halt in front of him. The color of her riding habit fell somewhere between that of a

blueberry and a strawberry. Not quite purple but not quite red either. It was unusual, like her.

“You must think me perpetually late,” was the first thing out of her mouth.

He cocked his head. “The thought did cross my mind, but if that is the worst of your failings, I’ll not complain.”

Her laughter was delightful. Low and airy, it made him want to join in. “I have far worse failings than that, sir.”

“Do tell.”

She shook her head as she prodded her horse forward, and Perry settled into an easy walk at her side.

“I’d prefer to let you go on believing that I am nearly perfect, aside from my propensity for tardiness, that is, which I’m truly sorry for.”

He dismissed her apology with a wave of his hand. “Lest you forget, you’re also incompetent when it comes to catching bunnies, and you’ve been spotted dancing barefoot out of doors.”

“Blast, you’re right. I suppose that makes me only partially perfect then.”

“There’s also the matter of your, er... wayward tongue.”

She scowled. “I thought you always tried to find the good in others. Where is that trait now?”

“Touché,” Miles grinned. “Let’s agree that you are perfectly imperfect and leave it at that.”

Her head swayed with the movements of her horse before she nodded. “I suppose that’s the best that can be said of me at this point. Perhaps we should focus on my positive attributes. Though if I am being honest, I have little to recommend me. I squawk when I sing, I’m much too forward thinking, and I can’t bluff to save my life. Oh, bl—” She cleared her throat. “There I go again. I think you should do the talking from now on.”

Miles chuckled as he ducked to avoid a low-hanging branch. He’d be content to listen to her ramble all afternoon. She may

not think she could carry a tune, but her voice was rich and confident, and he enjoyed her unpretentious sense of humor. Most women found subtle ways to boast of their accomplishments, but not Shell. She had the confidence to put her inadequacies on display without apology. She may as well have said, *I am who I am and you can like it or not. I really don't care which.*

Miles *did* like it. A lot.

“You’re not the only one with failings, Shell.” He grimaced. “Must I truly persist in calling you that?”

“Yes.”

“Well then. You ought to know that I am easily annoyed, especially when it comes to not knowing the name of the woman I wish to court.”

Her gaze snapped to his with a mixture of surprise and... fear? Hmm... interesting. She blinked and swallowed before looking forward once more.

He wasn’t sure how his confession had caught her off guard. He’d made his interest obvious, or so he thought.

“I’ve rendered you speechless, I see.”

“I... er... yes, you have.”

He sent her a sidelong glance. Her lips were pressed into a line, and her long, dark lashes fluttered as her eyes darted about.

“You’re quite fetching when you squirm.”

That only made her squirm more. And frown. “I’ve mentioned I’m a spinster, have I not?”

“A few times, actually.”

“Spinsters don’t court.”

“According to whom?”

“Well... everyone who is anyone, I suppose.”

“I disagree. A spinster is merely an unattached woman, which you are, correct? Or are you planning to say your vows

and become a nun? If so, I should warn you that nuns don't curse."

That did the trick. Her frown faded into a bit of a smile. "I'm much too outspoken to be a nun. I also look dreadful in black."

"I seriously doubt that, but I'll agree that color suits you better. As does more colorful language," he added with a grin.

She tried to scowl, but her lips twitched too much for her to mean it. "I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about."

"You're a liar as well, I see." He tapped his riding crop lightly on her knee. "Is there anything else I ought to know, other than the fact that you occasionally snort when you laugh?"

"I do not."

He ignored her and pressed on. "What about other unflattering noises, like snoring?"

"How would I know?"

"Surely someone has heard you sleep. Your parents, perhaps? A sibling? Friend? Whenever I have a case of the sniffles, my valet tells me that I sound like a wild boar on a rampage. But that's neither here nor there. If someone has never teased you about it, you're likely not a snorer. Moving on, then. Hmm... Have you ever committed murder or contemplated it?"

She raised a brow and cast him a stern look. "Have *you*?"

He shook his head. "Can't say that I have. Although there was this one fellow back in my Eton days. Horrible human. He found great satisfaction in sabotaging me every chance he could. I wouldn't have cared if he'd drowned or taken a debilitating fall from a horse, but that was the extent of my malevolent thoughts. Mostly, I just despised him. Still do, in fact. Age has not improved his disposition or his integrity."

"In that case, I despise him as well."

"You don't know him."

"If you despise him, he must be despicable."

He shot her a look of pleased surprise. “I’m flattered you think so well of me and my opinions.”

She shrugged. “A person who does not seek to improve himself is a person I don’t wish to know. What’s the point of living if there’s no progression?”

“Oh, he’s progressed in other ways. His business is thriving, and he’s now quite wealthy.”

“If he obtained his wealth through underhanded methods, which is likely the case, I’d call that regression,” she said firmly. “But just so we’re clear, I didn’t mean that sort of progress. I was speaking more internally. Those who are on a quest to become better versions of themselves are those I respect. Character means more to me than wealth, titles, or anything else.”

Miles admired her fervor. Not only had she taken his side without question, but she’d spoken with such intensity that her words were not just words. She felt and believed each one. He might tease her about her ever-growing list of failings, but she was a woman of strong character, that much was certain.

She pointed to a large tree in the distance and challenged him to a race. Before Miles could wrap his head around her abrupt shift in conversation, she took off on her horse, giving herself a significant lead.

Miles prodded Perry to give chase. Not one to accept defeat, the animal surged forward, eventually coming abreast of her for a time before pulling ahead near the end. As soon as he’d flown past the tree, he reigned in his horse, turning around to give Shell a look of triumph.

She glowered. The hard ride had loosened some of her curls, which now framed her flushed cheeks in an adorable way. Lud, the woman was beautiful.

His horse fell into step beside hers, and Miles cleared his throat. “Apparently, I should add cheat to your list of shortcomings, eh?”

She barked a laugh. “You must think me no better than that rotter you spoke of earlier. Let me assure you, sir, that most days I do try to better myself. There are times, however, such as a harmless horse race, when I fail. I do everything I can to give myself an advantage. Terrible of me, I know, but despite my extensive experience on the back of a horse, I have never won a race. Except once, years ago, when I beat my youngest sister to the stables. She was not yet six at the time and riding a pony.”

Miles laughed. He didn’t understand how a woman who cheated in horse races and used unladylike language inspired him to put his best foot forward, but she did. He wanted to be the sort of man she could respect. He had no doubt she’d spent her lifetime attempting to better herself—at least in the ways that mattered. When it came to horse races, bunnies, and her unruly tongue, however, he hoped she’d never change.

An old stone church came into view, though Miles may not have recognized it as such if the yard hadn’t been dotted with dozens of headstones. The building itself looked to be half-castle, half-house, with a gable roof on one side and a large, square tower on the other.

“It’s the oldest Norman church in Sussex,” Shell explained. “Isn’t it fascinating?”

“It is.” The arched windows and detailed crenellations gave it character, although the top of the tower appeared to be a different stone. Newer. “That isn’t the original stone, is it?”

“No. It was rebuilt in the mid 1700s, or so I’ve been told. The rest is original to the structure.”

“How do you know this?”

“I’ve made friends with the vicar—a kindly man who enjoys telling stories about the history of this place. He’s given me a tour of the church and the castle grounds. According to him, it dates back to the eleventh century, if you can believe it. Both the castle and the church were built after the Norman invasion.”

Miles suddenly wished he’d been more attentive during history lessons. The Norman invasion sounded familiar, but other than knowing it had something to do with the Duke of

Normandy, he couldn't remember the reason behind it or what happened as a result.

“Come. Let me show you what remains of the castle,” Shell said. “The church has been well maintained over the years, but the castle has withered away to almost nothing.”

She led him up a hill to where a small section of an ancient stone wall still stood as a one-dimensional tower. At its center, a small rectangular window peered down at them, showing a clear, blue sky in the background.

Miles helped her dismount under the shade of a tree, and they left their horses to graze while Shell took his arm and led him back to the wall. He liked the way she sidled close and clung to his bicep with both of her hands. It felt so natural to be near her, as though they often walked this way.

“This is the tallest portion that still exists,” Shell said of the castle wall. “Incredible that it has lasted over seven hundred years, don't you think?”

Her tone was almost reverent. Miles had to admit that if he'd come across this wall while out riding, he might have ridden over to inspect it, but other than finding it odd or interesting, he probably wouldn't have given it much thought. The way Shell talked, however, one would think it an architectural wonder. Which it was, he supposed. Anything that could remain standing after seven hundred years, dilapidated though it may be, deserved a certain amount of awe.

She continued to speak, her tone as thoughtful as her expression. “Only imagine the storms, winds, people, and battles it has outlasted. Each crevice and piece of rubble is like a scar with a story to be told. I wish I knew all of its stories.”

As she squinted at the tower, her forehead wrinkled, and she pulled her lower lip into her mouth. Gads, he wanted a taste of those lips. He wanted to hold her close, caress her cheek, and bury his face in her neck.

“Tell me one of your stories,” he said instead. Everyone had scars in one way or another, though no one would know by looking at her. She, like so many, kept them well hidden.

Her expression became wary, and she stepped away from him before moving deeper into the castle grounds. She clasped her hands behind her back as she walked.

Miles quickened his steps to catch up, but he didn't press her further. He merely walked at her side, taking in the lush vegetation and the occasional small, crumbling stone wall. What sort of people had lived here, and at what point had it been abandoned and left for dead?

Perhaps he should offer Shell a position at his school. If she could get Miles interested in a history lesson, she'd likely work miracles in a classroom.

As they walked, he noticed a large berm at the center of the castle grounds. He had heard of castles being constructed around a large mound of earth, or motte, as they were called. It was interesting to actually see one, even covered in trees and shrubs as it was now.

They nearly made it to the opposite end of the grounds before Shell took hold of his arm again in a tight grip. Miles had to lean in to hear her words, they were spoken so quietly.

“Years ago, I lost someone I held very dear. It turned my world upside down, and I'm not sure I'll ever fully recover. Instead of remaining tall, like that portion of wall back there, I crumbled, becoming more like these sections of rubble here—barely a wall at all anymore.”

Miles didn't believe that for a second. “Will you tell me about this person you lost?”

The corner of her mouth lifted into a sad, half-smile, and for a brief moment, she rested her cheek against his shoulder before catching herself.

“His name was Cedric. He was the son of a neighboring landowner, and we grew up the best of friends. As children, we spent nearly every day coming up with new adventures, be it building a fort to protect us from our enemies or constructing a raft that fell apart almost the moment we tried to board it. Eventually, he went off to school and left me for months on end,



but whenever he returned on break, it was like no time had passed at all.”

Some of the sadness left her eyes as she recalled the happy memories. “On my thirteenth birthday, he told me he loved me and planned to marry me someday. I called him a fool and said I could never think of him as more than a crony. He didn’t take it to heart because he never gave up, and four years later, he finally brought me around to his way of thinking. It was such a gradual change on my part, but one day, the realization hit me that I had fallen in love as well.”

She fiddled with her left ring finger before continuing. “My mother had been planning my comeout for the following London season. She tried to dissuade me from accepting Cedric until I’d had the opportunity to meet other gentlemen, but I knew my own mind. It took some convincing, but she and my father eventually relented, and I found myself betrothed at the young age of seventeen.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. “We were so young and blissfully unaware of how difficult life could be as a grown up.” She stopped walking and turned to face Miles, though she kept her gaze focused on his boots instead of his face.

“Three weeks before we married, Cedric took a fall from a horse and died instantly. Just like that, he was gone.”

She finally looked up at Miles, and a sheen of tears sparkled in her deep, brown eyes. His chest wrenched at the sight, and it took restraint not to pull her to him in an attempt to comfort her.

“I’ve tried to love again, to care about another man,” she continued. “But it’s no use. I honestly believe that Cedric took my heart with him when he passed, leaving me with nothing left to give. I’m a spinster through and through, Went. You may think you wish to court me, but whatever connection exists between us will eventually fade, and we’ll come to the sad realization that my heart will forever belong to someone else.”

Miles swallowed, then swallowed again when the lump in his throat refused to budge. He tried not to react, but it was nearly impossible. She may as well have knocked him to the

ground with a solid punch to his stomach. Her words were so wrong.

There was no possible way the connection between them could fade. On the contrary, it grew stronger with every moment they spent together. Could she not feel it? Surely, she'd been around enough men over the years to realize that what they had was as unique as it was undeniable.

Miles flexed his hands as he tried to think of how to respond. No one, no matter how beloved, could actually take her heart with him to the grave. How could she believe otherwise? A person needed a heart to live and breathe, and Shell was still very much alive.

No. She only thought she could never love again, and that was rubbish. She could, if she wanted to, if she found the right man.

Miles just needed to convince her that *he* was that man, which brought him to the crux of the problem. How could he possibly compete with the amount of memories that childhood best friends turned to lovers had accumulated? Three days, a bunny rescue, a waltz, and a horse race fell sadly flat when compared to a decade of childhood antics, followed by another four years of romance. If that was how long it took Miles to win her over, they'd both be in their dotage by the time she came around.

According to Shell, she was already there.

His jaw worked as he tried to come up with something brilliant that would deflect her concerns and make her see reason. Yet another failing of hers. She expected him to capture her bunnies, dance with her on the beach, join her for a history lesson, then walk away without a backward glance.

She stepped in front of him and gripped the lapels of his jacket, the concern on her face evident. "Say something."

He searched her face with a desperation that was difficult to control. Mesmerizing dark brown eyes, pale skin framed by dark curls, a faint freckle on the side of her nose, soft pink lips...

Miles couldn't resist any longer. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her hard on the mouth, fully expecting her to shove him away. She didn't. She merely froze for the breath of a second then kissed him back, her lips matching the movements of his own. Her hands snaked around his neck, and she dragged him closer with a hunger he understood.

He threaded his fingers into her hair, loosening pins and freeing tendrils. So soft, and her mouth tasted like marmalade. Lud, she felt good. He clung to her like a man too long deprived, and she did the same.

*This fade? Ha.*

*It's just the beginning, he wanted to say. You were not meant to be with Cedric, or he would still be here. You were meant to be with me.*

She stiffened, as though hearing his thoughts, then tore her mouth from his and pushed her palms against his chest, breaking free from their embrace.

She gazed at him in horror, eyes wide, bonnet askew, lips red and swollen. If she'd been fearful at the mention of him wanting to court her, she appeared downright petrified now.

Good. It meant their kiss had affected her as much as it had him. In fact, it had made a mockery of her early concerns. She had to see that now. A kiss of such intensity could only have come from her heart.

“Why did you do that?” she gasped, her chest heaving.

He tried his best not to grin, but she looked so adorably disheveled he couldn't help it. “I was not the only contributor, my sweet.”

“Don't call me that, and how can you say such a thing? *You* kissed *me*.”

“You kissed me back.”

“You started it.”

“And you finished it. I'd say that makes us even.”

“No. No, no, no.” She shook her head as she spoke, backing away from him. “You shouldn’t have done that, Went. Why did you? I only just told you that—”

“Shell, it’s going to be all right.” He reached for her hand, but she took another step away from him and shook her head again. The fear in her expression hadn’t abated, so Miles didn’t press the issue. Now was not the time to point out the obvious fact that she cared for him at least a little.

He needed to exercise a little patience. Perhaps a lot of patience. How long had it taken Cedric to win her heart? Four years?

Zooks, that was a long time.

With a sigh, he tucked his hands behind his back, giving her the space she seemed to need.

“Shall we continue with our tour?” He waved his hand in front of them, wondering if he should tell her about the pin jutting out behind her left ear. No, better not draw attention to that detail just yet.

She fell into step beside him—or rather, an arm’s length away, so intent she was on keeping her distance from him.

An uncomfortable silence descended, but Miles could only let it linger for so long. He finally twisted around, walking backwards so he could face her.

He mustered a light tone. “After giving it some thought, I can harbor a guess at your problem.”

Her mouth fell open in surprise. “I don’t have a problem.”

“But you do,” He insisted, continuing with his backward stride. “You, my dear, are—”

“I told you not to call me that.”

“You told me not to call you *my sweet*.”

“No endearments at all, please.” She wrung her hands, at her wit’s end.

Miles couldn't resist a light ribbing. "You'd rather I continue calling you by the name of a crustacean's, er... carapace or whatnot?"

"As I've told you time and time again, *yes*."

His shoulders sagged in defeat. "Very well, *Shell*. Now, back to the matter at hand. Whether you realize it or not, you do have a problem. If my diagnosis is correct, which I'm certain it is, you're suffering from a severe case of... blind selectivity." Ho, not bad. Miles gave himself a mental pat on the back.

"What are you talking about?" The fear had left her voice, replaced by incredulity and suspicion. Not the emotions he'd been hoping for, but a decided improvement.

"You believe your heart still belongs to Cedric because you've made him out to be a paragon. You remember only the good and refuse to see the bad. Ergo, blind selectivity."

She opened her mouth to argue but seemed to think better of it and shrugged instead. "He *was* something of a paragon."

Miles shook his head. "There is no such thing, my—er, *Shell*. Paragons are figments of the imagination. They don't exist. I'm willing to wager that Cedric had many faults, just like you and me. For example, he likely snored. Loudly. You ought to thank the stars every morning for whatever sleep you received the night prior. Had you married him, you would have never slept soundly again."

"Cedric didn't snore."

Miles's foot caught on a root, and he stumbled backwards, landing with an *oof* on his backside. He ignored the pain and frowned at her. "How do you know?"

Her eyes sparkled with mirth, but she held out a hand to help him up.

Once he was back on his feet, she explained. "When we were young, we wagered about the number of stars in the sky, then snuck out at midnight to count them. He fell asleep after two hundred and didn't snore once."

Of course he hadn't. Miles tried again. "He was deathly afraid of snakes then. Probably squealed like a girl and leapt into your arms any time one made an appearance."

Her lips twitched as she shook her head. "Reptiles didn't frighten him in the least. He was always catching snakes and lizards, forever daring me to touch them." The look of disgust on her face conveyed her feelings about the scaly creatures.

Miles latched onto that information. "He was a relentless tease then, hiding frogs and the like in your boots."

"Never."

Miles barely refrained from rolling his eyes. No man was that saintly. "I know one thing with absolute certainty. You said it yourself. The man couldn't engineer a simple raft."

"He was twelve at the time—hardly a man—and he made it up to me by teaching me how to swim."

Dash it all, the man really *had* been a paragon. If it had taken him four years to win Shell's heart, how long would it take Miles? Likely a decade or more.

The thought was a depressing one.

Shell must have noticed his annoyance because she moved closer and actually slid her arm through his. Miles could scarce believe it. His heart thudded so loudly he half expected the ground to start shaking. He didn't dare say anything for fear she'd take it back.

After a few strides, she spoke. "He was a dreadful dancer, or so he claimed. I never danced with him."

Miles raised a brow. "Never?"

She leaned her cheek against his shoulder. Gone was the fear, incredulity, and skepticism, and in its place was something more peaceful. Despite her lopsided bonnet and misplaced pins, she looked beautiful. More than that, she felt... right. Everything about her belonged here, with him.

He covered her hand with his own and held his breath. When she didn't stiffen or pull free from his touch, he let

himself relax.

“I can dance,” he said.

“Indeed you can.”

# ... 8 ...

CHELLE WASN'T SURE what had changed, but her defenses had all but fallen by the wayside. One kiss, one conversation, the easy camaraderie, and her assertions and precautions had come crashing down.

Even now, as Went pushed a few hairpins back into place, tucked her hair behind her ears, and straightened her bonnet, she wanted to melt into his arms. The swipe of his palm across her cheek, the graze of his fingers at her neck, his warm, lemony breath on her forehead.

She could have fixed her own hair—and probably should have, judging by the skeptical look on his face. Her coiffure probably looked dreadful. But when he'd offered to pin it back into place, she couldn't resist the delicious feel of his touch.

During their brief betrothal with Cedric, they had shared a few kisses. They'd been wonderful and butterfly-inducing, but nothing compared to the magnitude of what Went had just made her feel.

Either she was starved for affection, or something big was happening. Chelle had never felt this way before. After only three days.



This was madness. She didn't know Went at all. She didn't know how he'd spent his days in his youth, what sort of brother or son he'd been, or even what position he held in society. She didn't know his preferred food, whether or not he gambled, or how he treated his servants. Did *he* snore? Was *he* afraid of snakes?

She'd known nearly everything about Cedric. She'd heard all his laughs and could discern their meaning. She'd known what made him anxious or angry, that he hated the taste of apricots but loved riding more than anything. He hiccupped whenever he drank too much tea, wanted a career in law instead of estate management, and had a weakness for puppies.

Went, on the other hand, was a veritable stranger. How, then, could he make her feel as he did?

Nothing made sense, but until Chelle could distance herself and sort through it all, she would enjoy his touch and allow him to rearrange her hair.

His hands finally rested on her shoulders as he looked over his handiwork.

“That'll have to do,” he said.

Chelle smiled. “You certainly know how to instill confidence in a woman.”

“What can I say? I'm no lady's maid. But the pins are now hidden, and your bonnet is square on your head. It doesn't look as well as it did when we began our outing, but it'll suffice.”

Chelle patted the back of her head and cringed at the haphazard lumps she felt. “Are you certain it looks better?”

“Like I said, the pins are no longer visible, and your bonnet is straight.”

Regardless of her concerns about the man before her, she was fond of his sense of humor and spontaneity. He'd listened to her difficult story with compassion and even found a way to lift her spirits when overwhelming emotions had threatened to drown her.

She may not know about his likes, dislikes, familial relationships, or situation in life, but her soul cried out that he was a good man.

A handsome man.

“Thank you,” she said, referring to more than her hair.

“You’re most welcome.” He continued to watch her, and Chelle wondered if he’d kiss her again, but he finally cleared his throat, dropped his gaze, and moved to collect their horses.

As they made their way back to town, he proposed a guessing game with her name, beginning with the letter A and working his way down the alphabet to Z, choosing Marcella for M instead of Michelle. When he got to the letter X and said something ludicrous like Xantheopia, Chelle laughed and laughed.

Although she still refused to give her name or ask for his, she agreed to meet him on the Steine the following Wednesday evening at seven.

Before parting ways, he touched her arm lightly with his riding crop and gave her a lopsided smile. “Try not to be late.”

“I won’t.”

As he rode away, Chelle contemplated the light feeling in her chest. Earlier, Went had dealt her a painful blow with his questions about her past, only to pummel her further with that confusing and unanticipated kiss. When her emotions felt ready to crumble, his teasing came to the rescue.

There was a time when Chelle had awakened with a fierce pain in her neck and shoulders. She couldn’t turn her head or even move without fiery darts shooting through her upper body. Later that morning, when her maid of all work had seen her grimace and discovered the cause, she set to kneading Chelle’s shoulders. At first, it had hurt like the devil, but after a few minutes, the worst of the pain began to subside and she’d at last experienced some relief.

She felt the same way now.

She wasn't sure how Went had done it, only that his unorthodox intervention had somehow helped. Her emotions still felt sore and raw but somehow better.

The man was a wonder.

# .. 9 ..

CHELLE EXAMINED A painting of a gull swooping low across a sandy beach. It hung on the wall of her family's rented townhome, a simple scene in an otherwise ornate salon. Gold paint coated the walls and burgundy brocade covered the sofa. Even the mantle had been gilded.

“My Chelle, at last.”

Only one person ever called Chelle *my Chelle*. Her mother, Lady Miriam. In a flurry of cranberry taffeta, she rushed across the room and pulled Chelle into a tight embrace. Then she held her by the shoulders to look her up and down.

“Gracious, child. You're thin as a rail and look as though you haven't slept in weeks. Mrs. Brommely has been working you too hard.”

Other than a few strands of silver hair woven through her mother's dark locks, she appeared the same as she had two years earlier. Tall, slender build, and eyes the color of mud.

Chelle smiled at the memory.

As a young girl, she'd arrived home from an afternoon walk with her nurse, her dress and hands coated in mud. The moment

her mother had seen her, she'd cried, "What on earth? How did you come to be so filthy, child?"

"Beggin' your pardon, Lady Miriam," Chelle's nurse had rushed to say, her own hands muddied. "There was no stoppin' 'er. The second she spotted that puddle, she—"

"Say no more. I understand completely." Lady Miriam crouched down to eye-level with her daughter and shook her head. "Let's stay out of the mud in the future, eh, my Chelle? Brown is not your color."

Instead of feeling properly chastised, Chelle had lifted her chin. "I think mud is a pretty color, Mama. It matches your eyes."

After a moment of surprise, Lady Miriam laughed, tapping the tip of her daughter's nose. "How can I argue with that, my Chelle?"

It had been something the family had jested about ever since.

Chelle breathed in the familiar scent of lavender as she returned her mother's hug. "It's wonderful to see you too, Mama. You haven't aged a bit."

"Oh, darling, how I've missed you."

"Stand aside, woman, and let me have a gander at our daughter." Her father, now thin of hair and portly around the middle, enveloped Chelle in one of his all-encompassing hugs.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead then held her at arm's length. "It's good to see you, dear girl."

"You as well, Papa."

Tongues had certainly wagged when Lady Miriam, the eldest daughter of the Duke of Spencer, had chosen the untitled Mr. Rupert Ellington to marry. The pair had faced society with the boldness of a young couple in love, never offering any excuses or explanations. They merely adored one another, and that adoration, along with the duke's blessing, had made their union a happy one.

Chelle had always admired her parents and the relationship they shared. Because of it, they allowed their children to choose various paths through life, even when it carried them in a different direction than one they'd hoped, as had been the case with Chelle.

She felt a thrill at seeing them again. The warmth in their expressions brought a peace to her soul she hadn't felt in a while.

"Come and sit with us." Her mother grabbed Chelle's hand and pulled her to the sofa. The house they'd rented wasn't extensive by any means, but it was happily situated overlooking the sea on the western side of town.

"Where's Ceci?" Chelle asked. Other than a maid setting down a tea tray, only her parents occupied the room.

They exchanged a glance, but it was her mother who answered. "She had a bit of a mishap and tore some lace from her hem. She ran upstairs to change and will return momentarily. She cannot wait to see you."

Cecily was nine years Chelle's junior. Despite the age difference, they'd kept up a steady correspondence over the past two years. Cecily saw to it that Chelle knew anything and everything, including her excitement and fears about her upcoming London season.

In six month's time, the last of Chelle's siblings would make her comeout. Perhaps it was good they'd come to Brighton beforehand. Cecily would have the opportunity to experience society on a less intimidating scale before making her bows to the queen.

Her mother took a seat on the sofa and arranged her skirts artfully across her lap before clasping her fingers together.

"Now, my dear, we want to hear all about you, the school, and anything else you wish to tell us. Your letters are sadly lacking in the details of your life."

Her father nodded his agreement, remaining by the mantle, an elbow draped on top. "Spare nothing. Your sister has given

us ample opportunities to perfect our listening skills. Isn't that right, my love?"

A wry smile met his question before Chelle's mother conceded his point with a weary sigh. "Cecily is quite the chatterbox, if you remember. I don't think she allowed more than a minute or two of silence during our entire journey here. Oh, how she makes my head ache at times."

"Mama!" a shocked voice came from the doorway. Cecily's striking golden-brown eyes stared daggers at her mother as she stalked into the room, folding her arms and looking as put out as anyone could. Gone were the plump cheeks and youthful lines that Chelle remembered. Her sister was now a woman with attractive curves, high cheekbones, and golden hair pinned into a simple, elegant knot.

She'd certainly grown up.

Unrepentant, Chelle's mother patted the empty spot at her side. "I adore you, Ceci, as you well know, but you do have a tendency to prattle on."

Cecily folded her arms, not at all pacified. "If I had not taken it upon myself to fill the silence, we would have had the most sluggish journey imaginable. You would have mentioned the breathtaking views here and there while Papa blathered on about that dratted Pains and Penalty bill. Faith, Papa, if I have to listen to one more conversation regarding Queen Caroline and whether or not she'll be deprived of her title, I shall scream."

Her father pushed his hands into his pockets and rocked back and forth on his heels. "I wasn't permitted to blather on about anything, dearest. Instead we were subjected to gossip, opinions on what should or should not be fashionable, and questions about how one might go about becoming an Incomparable. To say nothing about the adorableness of kittens."

"Kittens *are* adorable," Cecily countered.

This, of course, earned her a shake of her father's head.

Her mother intervened. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful, Ceci dear, if your unspoken thoughts could serve to keep you, and you alone, company at times?”

Cecily’s forehead scrunched in a look of confusion. “What’s the point in having thoughts if one is unwilling to share them? This world would be a quiet and lonely place indeed.”

“Sounds rather utopian to me,” teased her father, earning him another glare from his youngest daughter.

Chelle smiled, thinking of the girls she’d instructed throughout the years and how many of them had a propensity to gab. There were times Chelle had adored the trait and other times she’d wanted to paste their lips together.

Before her sister could embark on another tirade, Chelle stood and intervened. “Do you have a hug for your sister, Ceci?”

A smile replaced Cecily’s frown, and Chelle soon found herself pulled into an exuberant embrace.

“Oh, Chelle, you’ve no idea how difficult it is to be the sole child left at home. How I miss my sisters. You especially, considering Bethany is now married and therefore lost to me. She rarely replies to my letters, you know. Mama says it’s because she has a great many duties to attend to, being the mistress of her own home and all, but I think that’s a sorry excuse. If she wanted to write, she would write, and if she wanted to invite me to visit her, she would invite me. I hate that Norwich is so very far away.”

“Only imagine what *that* journey would be like,” Chelle heard her father say under his breath.

She might have smiled, if not for the reminder of Bethany and the unfortunate summer she’d spent with Chelle a few years prior. Her sister had fallen for a swine of a man who’d ultimately broken her heart. It had been a miserable culmination to what should have been a thrilling summer.

Thankfully, Bethany had rebounded and made a wonderful match the following season.



“I’m surprised you allowed Ceci to join you,” Chelle said. “After the fiasco that came of Bethany’s last visit, I would have thought you’d keep Ceci as far from Brighton as possible.”

“What you saw as a fiasco, I saw as a valuable experience,” her mother said good-naturedly. “Bethany went to London a wiser woman who refused to lose her heart to just anyone. She learned to value character over charisma and chose a man who suited her perfectly. I wouldn’t have changed a thing about her visit. I’m only sorry it was you who had to deal with the tears and drama of heartbreak.”

Before Chelle could say anything in return, Cecily’s voice filled the silence. “Never fear, Mama. I shall be wise from the start and will not lose my heart to just anyone.”

Her mother patted Cecily’s hand with a tolerant smile. “Would you mind if we listened to Chelle now? I would very much like to hear how she’s been faring.”

“Of course,” Cecily replied, taking the place on the sofa next to her mother while Chelle sat in the chair across from them. “I shan’t say a word.”

“For at least a few seconds, anyhow,” said their father.

Cecily opened her mouth to refute him, only to clamp it closed. With an upward tilt of her chin, she sent her father a look that said, *Only see if I don’t*.

He chuckled. Despite the teasing, his fondness for his youngest daughter was evident in his expression.

Yes, Chelle had missed her family. Her wonderful, perfectly imperfect family.

Her thoughts swayed to Went. His flirtatious grin, those dark, expressive eyebrows and bright eyes, his kindness and understanding, that all-consuming kiss... Heaven help her. The mere memory tingled her lips and fluttered her stomach.

*Tomorrow. I will see him again tomorrow.*

“Why are you smiling?” Her mother gave Chelle a penetrating look, jolting her back to the present. “You look a trifle warm.”

Blast. If she wasn't careful, her perceptive mother would unearth things Chelle preferred to keep buried.

She managed a nonchalant shrug. "Probably because I *am* warm. The sun is out, and it took longer to walk here than I thought it would."

"Why did you not take one of your horses or carriage?" her father asked. "You still employ Roddy, do you not?" Roddy had been Chelle's faithful coachman for years. While the other teachers and headmistresses boarded with the students at the school, Chelle kept a small townhouse several blocks away. She wasn't sure why, as she spent most of her time at the school these days.

"Yes, Roddy is still as faithful as ever. But after spending a few hours at the school this morning, I craved the fresh air a walk would bring."

In actuality, Chelle had *needed* the fresh air. It had helped to clear her mind and prepare her for the day ahead.

"What kept you so occupied at the school?" her mother asked.

Chelle hesitated, wondering how much to tell her parents about her current troubles—not that she really had a choice in the matter. If her mother sensed any vagueness, she would interrogate Chelle until all was revealed.

Yes, best to explain now and be done with it.

Once Chelle opened her mouth, it all came spilling out like a tipped-over cup of tea. She told them about the Bancroft Seminary and its dreadful founder, her school's eventual loss of good teachers, Mrs. Brommely's absence, and the advertisements she still needed to write.

Her parents listened while Cecily stayed remarkably quiet. She'd opened her mouth to say something several times, only to snap it closed and flash her father a look of annoyance. She didn't appreciate having to keep thoughts to herself.

"I need to also plan our annual benefit musicale for the end of September. Normally, we hold it in August, right before the

girls return to school, but with Susan called away, we decided to postpone it one month and involve the girls in the performances. I've actually been looking forward to trying something new, but who will want to enroll their daughters when they learn that two of our best teachers will soon pledge their allegiance to the Bancroft Seminary?"

Chelle pulled her lips into her mouth, thinking she'd prattled on too long. Perhaps she and Cecily were not so different after all. How incompetent and hopeless she must sound.

Her mother, kindhearted as she was, covered Chelle's hand with her own. "Set your worries aside, my Chelle. Your family is here to help you now. We need only a few days to think on this matter, and we'll come up with the perfect solution. We're nothing if not contriving."

A wonderful sense of calm embraced Chelle like one of her mother's generous hugs. Although a perfect solution didn't exist, the fact her family was willing to shoulder her burden meant a great deal.

Cecily couldn't remain silent any longer. Words burst from her lips like a ruptured dam.

"I already know the solution, Mama." She scooted forward and clasped her fingers together. "We need only spread the word that the Bancroft Seminary is not what it seems and *voilà*, problem solved. We could mention the mice in the cellars, the filth in the kitchens and larder, the crooked founder and his interest in smuggled goods, and, hmm... what else? Oh, the unsavory conditions of the rooms."

Her father looked momentarily impressed before shaking his head. "I'll have none of that, my dear girl. We'll not resort to such underhanded tactics."

Chelle gave her sister a sympathetic smile. "As fun as it would be to start such rumors, I must agree with Papa. In harming the school, I would also be harming Lady Ariana and Miss Harlow's prospects. I could never do that to them."

Her mother nodded as well. "You've proven yourself most creative, Ceci dearest, and I'm sure you can come up with more

suggestions that are less nefarious in nature. Let us give it more thought and revisit this conversation at a later date, shall we?”

A short and stocky man with balding hair—presumably the butler—paused in the doorway and cleared his throat.

“The post has arrived. Would you like it now or should I leave it on the desk in your study?”

Before her father could respond, Chelle’s mother waved her hand. “Bring it here, Gladston. I’m sure there are invitations that need answering straightaway.”

“Of course, my lady.” He set the silver tray on the table and quit the room.

The moment Cecily spotted the small mound of invitations, she began breaking seals and devouring the letters, gushing over each one while her mother made note of the days, times, and events. Within a matter of minutes, nearly three weeks had been filled with balls, soirées, picnics, musicales, and invitations for the Ellingtons to call on various families at their earliest convenience. Somehow, news of her family’s arrival had already spread far and wide.

Chelle tried not to slouch, but the invitations that brought Cecily such excitement made Chelle weary in the extreme. She’d been out of touch with society for nearly a year and wasn’t anxious to return. It was all so exhausting.

Although... Someone had to know of a niece or granddaughter or friend of a friend who had fallen on difficult times and was looking for work. Perhaps Chelle would get lucky and find two teachers among the crowds.

*Yes, think positively.*

Her father picked up a letter that had fallen to the side and opened it, holding it at arm’s length while he squinted to read the tiny scrawl. His brow furrowed, and he flicked a nervous glance in Chelle’s direction.

“It seems the Pattersons are in town as well and have invited us to dine with them tomorrow evening. They apologize for the

short notice but are hopeful we will come. It's to be an intimate affair with only our two families."

Chelle's heart hiccupped as she froze in place. The Pattersons had come to Brighton? When, why, and how long did they intend to stay? She closed her eyes briefly, praying the invitation didn't include her as well.

"We are *all* invited," her father added with a pointed look at Chelle.

No, no no no. Chelle couldn't go. She *couldn't*. Mr. and Mrs. Patterson would wish to dine, talk, catch up on old times, and... remember.

Mr. Patterson was too much like his son. They shared the same laugh, the same crooked smile, the same vibrant hazel eyes. Even the same name. The elder Mr. Cedric Patterson would be nothing more than a living, breathing, heart-wrenching reminder of *her* Cedric.

*I cannot go.*

Chelle lifted her gaze to her mother's, hoping for understanding. While she saw sympathy, there was also a determined look that said, *You can go, and you will. You're strong enough for this.*

No.

Her mother was wrong. Chelle had grown strong in many areas over the past several years, but not when it came to Cedric. She'd become too adept at avoidance—pushing aside as many memories, thoughts, and feelings as she could. It was the only way she'd known how to deal with the pain. The few hours she'd spent with his family following the funeral had made the hole in her heart feel like an abyss. Without Cedric, she didn't belong.

"Ceci, will you be a dear and fetch me some paper and a quill? I shall reply immediately and let the Pattersons know we are honored to accept."

She waited for Cecily to quit the room before lowering her voice. "You've avoided them for too long, my Chelle."

The truth of her words twisted Chelle's heart. Her hands turned clammy, and she had to clasp her fingers together to keep them from shaking.

It had been nine years since his death. *Nine*. Why couldn't she get beyond this? Why couldn't she face his parents with a smile and a fierce embrace? They'd grown close long before she and Cedric had decided to marry. It should be an easy thing to slip back into his family.

It wasn't.

Her mother's gaze remained unrelenting, and Chelle had no other option than to inhale deeply and square her shoulders.

*I can do this. I can.*

Perhaps if she repeated it enough, she'd come to believe it.

Her mother was correct. Chelle couldn't cry off, no matter how much she would like to. It wouldn't be kind, and the Pattersons deserved as much kindness as she could give them.

She cleared her throat and forced out the lie. "Tell them I would love to join you."

The look of pride in her mother's expression should have bolstered her spirits, or at the very least given her some comfort. But it didn't. Instead, an uneasy fear gnawed at her insides, warning her against oncoming pain.

Only a few days prior, Went intruded on her heart, stomping around and disrupting the fragile peace she'd been able to maintain the past several years. Hadn't that been enough?

Apparently not. Apparently, Chelle was to be gutted like a fish and tossed onto the coals before she could crawl back into her protective hole of avoidance.

At least Went had softened some of the memories with his teasing grin and tantalizing touch. Tomorrow, however, he wouldn't be there to tease her scars away. She would have to face them alone.

Wait.

Tomorrow.

Her meeting with Went on the Steine.

Oh, blast.

Not only would she renege on her promise to arrive on time, she wouldn't arrive at all—nor did she have any way to get word to him beforehand.

# ... 10 ...

UNEASE FEASTED ON Chelle's insides as she and her family bounced their way along Brighton's cobblestone streets. Ever since she'd agreed to dinner with the Pattersons, nothing had felt right—not the afternoon spent showing her mother and sister around town, not the pretty peach dress she'd donned earlier that evening, and not the interesting twists of curls that now adorned the back of her head.

Chelle should be readying herself to meet Went along the Steine and looking forward to a happy, carefree evening. She had planned to dazzle him by arriving first this time. He would have smiled and teased her in some way, and she would have taken hold of his solid arm and leaned into him as he guided her across the lovely landscape.

Time would have flitted by as they walked and talked and laughed.

Instead, she would be required to plaster a smile on her face, greet the parents of her deceased fiancé, and remember how her world had completely upended at his loss. It would be an evening of mourning Cedric all over again.



Chelle placed a hand over her stomach in an attempt to quell the queasiness. If she tried to eat anything in her current state, it would likely come right back up.

“Oh, how I wish King George would return to Brighton and throw a ball,” Cecily mused as she stared longingly at the pavilion. “It’s magnificent, isn’t it? How I would love to see the inside.”

As her parents had warned, Cecily had chatted on and on throughout the day, jumping from one topic to another like a frog on the run. While she loved her sister’s enthusiasm, her incessant cheerfulness was completely at odds with Chelle’s mood.

“If we return next summer, you likely will,” said her mother. “According to my father, the pavilion will be ready for the king’s arrival after the first of the year.”

“Truly?” Cecily asked, her curls bobbing as she swung her head to look at Chelle. “Did you hear that? Mother just said we will be able to visit you again next summer and attend one of the king’s soirées! Can you imagine?”

Chelle could imagine. She’d once been a frequent guest at the pavilion before all of the domes, spires, and minarets had been added. Back then it had just been the Marine Pavilion and the king had just been Prinny.

What she hadn’t imagined, or yet heard, was that King George IV would be returning in January. Most considered him a reckless devourer of food, women, and money—all of which was true—but he’d also done several kind turns for Chelle and others of her acquaintance, so she couldn’t think too ill of the man. Like her sister, she would also love to see the inside of the new and improved pavilion.

The carriage continued to bounce along before coming to a stop in front of a white brick townhouse. She eyed the three-story structure with misgiving as her family clambered down from the carriage.

With a hand on her stomach, Chelle followed them up the few steps and into the house, where Mr. and Mrs. Patterson

greeted them with welcoming smiles and smells of roasted ham and freshly baked bread.

Mrs. Patterson had always been a small woman, but she appeared fragile now. Her once-brown hair was streaked with gray and several creases framed her eyes and mouth.

Despite her added years, she still radiated kindness and warmth. Her bony fingers grasped both of Chelle's hands, and her eyes sparkled with unshed tears.

"Sweet Chelle, how lovely it is to see you again. It's been too long."

"That it has," her husband added, his hazel eyes looking so much like Cedric's. Chelle wanted to weep. He'd aged as well, but in a less fragile way than his wife. His side whiskers had turned silver, along with the hair at his temple. The rest was the same dark blonde she remembered. He stood tall and robust, and his good-natured smile set her immediately at ease.

Instead of the harrowing pain and sense of loss Chelle expected to encounter, a blessed sense of tranquility settled around her.

Oddly enough, it felt right to be here, not wrong.

Chelle took a seat on the tufted cream sofa in the drawing room and watched as Mrs. Patterson took her husband's hand and sat opposite Chelle.

"I feel as though Cedric is smiling down on us this evening," Mrs. Patterson said. "He would have insisted on serving chocolate cake after dinner because it is your favorite."

Chelle couldn't help but snicker at that. After all these years, it would be good to come clean about this one thing.

"Actually, Mrs. Patterson, it was Cedric who adored chocolate cake. According to him, you rarely put his favorite dessert on the menu, so he told you it was mine, knowing he'd get to enjoy the dessert anytime I dined with your family."

Eyes wide, Mrs. Patterson leaned forward. "Why, that little scamp. Do you even like chocolate cake?"

Chelle smiled. "I like it fine, but I enjoy custard more."

Mrs. Patterson looked around the room before her shoulders began to shake and she dissolved into a fit of the giggles. Her laughter was infectious and soon the entire room erupted in laughter.

"Oh, Cedric, you rascal!" Mrs. Patterson finally cried, wiping tears from her eyes. "I can't believe he did that, or that I believed him."

Her husband took his wife's hand to get her attention. "I'm going to venture a guess that chocolate cake is on the menu this evening."

Mrs. Patterson nodded and giggled all over again, and more of Chelle's trepidation melted away. While it hurt to talk of Cedric and remember him, it also felt... freeing. Chelle suddenly felt very glad she'd come.

The remainder of the evening was filled with a delicious dinner, delightful conversation, laughter, chocolate cake, recollections aplenty, a few tears, and a great deal of Cecily's chatter.

Throughout it all, Chelle came to realize that Mr. and Mrs. Patterson had mourned and ached just like she had, only instead of fleeing the memories, they'd embraced and cherished them.

Chelle would do well to follow their example.



# MISSIVE THREE



*Dear Went,*

*I'm sorry to say that my time is no longer my own. My family has come for a visit, and my schedule has now been filled with social and familial obligations. As much as I would like to cry off from tonight's engagement and walk with you across the Steine, I cannot. Nor do I know of a day we might be able to meet again in the near future.*

*Should you wish to renew our acquaintance in another fortnight or two (most likely two), you may leave a note with Mr. Cullum, the man who delivered this note to you. He resides at that cottage where you deposited me after our walk along the beach. His wife, Mrs. Cullum, is my dearest friend. They will see that your note reaches me.*

*Although our acquaintance has been brief in duration, it has meant a great deal to me. Thank you for the beautiful memories. I will never forget scavenging for bunnies, waltzing barefoot on the beach, or enjoying castle ruins at your side.*

*Your friend,*

*Shell*

# .. 11 ..

MILES SAT WITH his back against a large oak tree on the Steine and refolded the missive. A giant of a man stood over him, his shadow blocking the fading sun. It was difficult to see his features clearly, so Miles brushed several blades of grass from his trousers before standing and meeting the man face to face.

Ah, not so gigantic after all. Only a little taller, though the man did have an intimidating look about him with his nearly black hair and bronzed skin.

“Mr. Cullum, I presume?” Miles asked.

The man looked at Miles’s outstretched hand, only to ignore it. In a deep Scottish brogue, he asked, “What is your name, sir? You’re *real* name?”

Miles dropped his hand to his side and flexed his fingers, refusing to be cowed. “If I tell you my name, will you tell me Shell’s? I think it only fair.”

A quizzical look met his inquiry, and Mr. Cullum seemed hesitant with his answer, finally saying, “She’ll have to be the one to tell you that.”

Of course she would.

Miles rubbed at the back of his neck. He would get nowhere with this not-so-gigantic giant. He may as well tell the man what Shell refused to hear. Perhaps it would find its way back to her and, with any luck, inspire her name to be brought out into the open as well.

“As I mentioned when you first arrived, I occasionally go by the name of Went. Short for Wentworth. Sir Miles Wentworth, to be precise.”

The man’s penetrating gaze locked on Miles, no doubt trying to take his measure. After a few seconds of awkwardness, he said, “I’m the closest thing she has to a brother, Sir Miles. Should your intentions be less than honorable, I’ll have no problem carting you out to sea and tossing you overboard with the sharks.”

Not waiting for a response, Mr. Cullum walked away, leaving Miles to contemplate the exchange as he made his way back to his townhome on foot. Once seated at his desk in his study, he leaned back in his chair and raked his fingers through his hair. Tall bookcases loomed before him, spilling over with books on various subjects, while the stack of papers on his desk reminded him of all the work he and Sam had left to do.

There was no denying that Shell had been a distraction. On the days Miles hadn’t been with her, his thoughts consistently wandered in her direction, making concentration difficult. As much as he hated to admit it, a fortnight hiatus from her might actually be a good thing.

Why then, did a feeling of intense unease now plague him? She’d made it clear she wanted to see him again, had even provided him with a way to contact her. That fact alone should have given him comfort. He hadn’t scared her away, and she finally seemed to accept that they had something worth exploring.

Just not now.

Which brought Miles to the source of his unease. When it came to his relationship with Shell, a fortnight wasn’t a mere fourteen days. It was an eternity. During that time, she’d either

come to crave his company as he did hers, or she'd do exactly as she'd threatened to do in that clearing—gradually forget whatever feelings he'd managed to stir inside of her. In two weeks, he may very well find himself right back to where he'd begun. Perhaps she'd even come to regret revealing the identities of her friends.

It felt like a mistake to step aside now, but what else could he do?

His gaze drifted to the stack of papers on his desk. *That is what you can do.*

Miles sighed, knowing it was true. He needed to finish staffing the school, discuss plans with the new teachers, and discover a way to lure parents with promises of the most innovative and advanced education in England. Once they agreed to pay his exorbitant fees and send their daughters to his school, Miles could finally find a way to fulfill the promise he'd made to his dying father.

He grabbed the top paper and skimmed through its contents. The more he read, however, the deeper his brow furrowed. It was similar to many of the others that had arrived on his desk before. The applicant had no experience teaching, but she was certain that she was exactly what the Bancroft Seminary needed. Her penmanship was legible enough, but a few words were spelled incorrectly, and the overuse of commas grated.

Miles bit his lower lip in consternation, wanting to be done with this process. How had Mrs. Brommely gone about finding such excellent teachers for her school?

A pang of guilt accompanied the thought. That particular headmistress was likely on the same hunt as him *because* of him.

At least she had Miss Ellington on her side. Because of that woman's popularity and connections, they'd find replacement teachers in no time. He did not need to feel the least bit guilty.

Or so he continually told himself.



“You’ve returned earlier than expected.” Mr. Samuel Baker, or Sam as Miles called him, leaned a shoulder against the doorjamb and folded his arms. A small man with spectacles perched on a slightly too-large nose, Sam raised a brow. His hair had receded to the crown of his head, but despite nearing sixty years of age, it remained a pale yellow.

Miles didn’t know what he’d do without his solicitor turned partner and close friend. A man of wisdom and a genius with numbers, Sam played a vital role in nearly every aspect of Miles’s life these days.

“She couldn’t make it.”

Sam’s brow rose a little higher. Rather than explain, Miles slid Shell’s letter towards his friend. Without a word, Sam brought it close to his face and peered through his spectacles as he read over the words. Once he’d finished, he set it down with a thoughtful nod of his head.

“The woman of mystery has a family.”

Miles folded his arms behind his head as he leaned his chair back, balancing it on two legs.

“Mr. Cullum was an intimidating figure of a man. He made it clear that he’d make mincemeat of me if I wronged Shell in any way.”

“Good thing you don’t intend to wrong her.” It was a statement, perhaps even a warning.

For the first time since his encounter with Mr. Cullum, Miles cracked a smile. Sam had yet to meet Shell, but already she’d earned his respect. Or perhaps the mere fact that she was a woman brought out his protective side.

“Not to worry, my friend. My father taught me well.”

“He was a good man.”

Miles nodded. “Much like you.”

This earned him one of Sam’s rare smiles. It didn’t last long. A man of little emotion and few words, he usually wore a contemplative look.

“One month, eh?”

“One fortnight,” Miles corrected. She may have said it would most likely be two, but if fourteen days was an eternity, he wasn’t about to wait any longer. She had left it up to him to contact her, and he would do that sooner than later.

Sam tapped the stack of papers on the corner of the desk, apparently ready to shift the conversation in another direction.

“You’ve seen the latest answer to our advertisement?”

Miles gave him a nod, trying to think of a more flattering response than *I was underwhelmed*. “I’m sure she has a delightful personality.”

Humor flashed in the older man’s eyes as he pulled out a chair and sat across from Miles. “Shall I request an interview?”

“Gads no. I haven’t arrived at that level of desperation yet. I simply need to find a way to reach more qualified women.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Sam reached for a small box of unopened letters on a nearby shelf and plopped it on the desk between them.

Miles frowned. He’d been in Brighton for nearly two months and had yet to accept any invitations. Still they came like clockwork.

Without asking permission, Sam cracked the seal of an invitation and read. Once he’d finished, he looked over the top of his spectacles at Miles.

“Perhaps Lady Briar might know of someone. Her garden party sounds like it could be an informative, if not diverting, affair.”

Miles shook his head. Baronets managed estates, not schools. “If word got out that I am behind the Bancroft Seminary, my reputation—and the school’s—would be called into question. I thought we already agreed to keep my identity a secret. Isn’t that the reason you’ve conducted all of the interviews? There are precious few who would ever associate me with the name of Bancroft.”

“I’m beginning to think you are giving the ton too little credit,” Sam said. “From what I understand, Miss Ellington has fared well enough.”

“I think you’re not giving Miss Ellington *enough* credit,” Miles returned. “Aside from her connections to the Duke of Spencer, she has the approval of the king. Those, my friend, are the only reasons she is still accepted in polite society. I’m a mere baronet, and only because a great-uncle that I never knew existed died. I don’t have the clout that Miss Ellington does.”

Sam seemed to consider his words before giving a sigh of resignation. “I see your point. But there are ways to get information from people like Lady Briar without giving away the fact that you intend to open a school.”

Miles had been thinking much the same thing, but only as a last resort. He had no desire to enter society and become a target for onlookers or matchmaking mothers. He’d never enjoyed being the center of attention, and if he were to finally make an appearance in society, that’s precisely what he’d be.

“Why don’t you go in my stead? I could become the estimable Mr. Samuel Baker, and you could play the part of the new baronet.” Miles suggested, only half joking. How he’d love to hand over his title to someone else.

“You’re forgetting about the gentlemen who have already sought out an introduction. I’m fairly certain they’d recognize the difference between you and me.”

As much as Miles wanted to continue debating the matter, Sam was correct. If Miles wanted to make any headway on his hunt for additional teachers, he’d have to do the deed himself.

Sam had taken to examining the other invitations in the box, setting one down after another. As he neared the end of the stack, he fingered an elegant, cream-colored paper.

“Perhaps you’ll encounter your mysterious Shell at one of these functions. At Lord and Lady Dresdell’s ball, for example?” he said casually, holding up the invitation.

Miles chuckled. His friend was no fool. If there was even a chance Miles would encounter Shell at the ball, he'd don his finest jacket and pantaloons and face the ton without hesitation.

Come to think of it, Shell *had* written that her schedule had now been filled with social obligations. Was it possible that Lady Dresdell's ball was one of them? If the talk around town could be believed, that particular ball was expected to be quite the crush.

Slowly, Miles lowered his chair back to all four legs and held out his hand for the invitation. "Perhaps I could accept a few of these—for the sake of the school, of course."

"A worthy cause." Sam kept a straight face, but as the invitation exchanged hands, there was a decided gleam of victory in his eyes.

# .. 12 ..

THE SMELL OF freshly cut flowers met Chelle the moment she entered the crowded ballroom. People swarmed around more people, and the dance floor held over a dozen men and women while the orchestra played a lively minuet.

Although she'd expected a large crowd, her spirits sank. It would mean a long and tedious night.

She breathed in another whiff of the flowers, trying to focus on the smell rather than the stifling heat that oppressed the room. Good grief, had Lord Dresdell stoked a fire for the occasion?

Normally, Chelle thought fans were ridiculous flirtation devices, but oh how she wished she'd brought one. Why couldn't tonight's function have been an intimate dinner party in a well-ventilated room?

Cecily, the lucky creature, hadn't neglected to bring *her* fan. She waved it prettily in front of her face while taking in the scene with glittering eyes.

"Mother, only look. Mrs. Hewes and Lizzy are here. May I say hello?"

“Of course, darling. Tell Mrs. Hewes we’ll be along shortly.”

Chelle was sorely tempted to snatch the fan from her sister as she scurried past.

“Why has no one opened a window?” Chelle asked her parents. “There is bound to be a swooning exhibit if someone doesn’t rectify the situation soon.”

“Agreed,” her father said. “I shall see to it.” He gave his wife’s arm a squeeze before slipping away.

“It is a bit warm, isn’t it?” her mother said.

A bit? Chelle could toast a piece of bread in the room. Already, she could feel beads of perspiration under her arms and across her brow. She stood on tiptoe and spied a pair of doors leading to a balcony behind the house.

“I believe the gardens are calling to me,” she said.

Her mother slipped her arm through Chelle’s and smiled at a passing woman before lowering her voice. “You will not escape so easily, my Chelle. According to Mrs. Yarrow, you’ve not been seen out in society in quite some time. How do you expect to hear about potential teachers if you continue to hide in gardens or sequester yourself in that school?”

“I haven’t spent more than a few hours there since your arrival, Mama, and I will not be hiding in the gardens, merely cooling myself down. Do you have a spare fan, by chance?”

“I didn’t bring a fan.”

“A mistake I made as well.”

“Ah, Miss Ellington, what a happy surprise. It seems an age since I’ve seen you out in society.” Mrs. Malken, a petite, middle-aged woman with more gray hair than brown, paused before Chelle.

After a quick introduction to her mother, Mrs. Malken curtsied. “A pleasure to meet you, my lady.”

She moved between the Ellington women and linked arms with Chelle. In a low voice, she asked, “Have you met him?”

“Who?” Chelle continued to envy the many fans waving about the room.

“The new baronet, of course. Sir Miles. He’s as dashing as he is charming, even asked if I was Eleanor’s elder sister.” She tittered and blushed like a debutante.

Miss Eleanor was the woman’s youngest daughter. Unless Sir Miles suffered from blindness, he was a toady. There was no way the two could be mistaken for sisters.

Chelle couldn’t fault him too much, however. He’d made Mrs. Malken glow with happiness.

“You do look beautiful this evening,” Chelle told her truthfully.

The woman’s shimmering blue gown matched her eyes perfectly, and gray notwithstanding, her hair had been pinned into an attractive weave.

“Bless you, my dear.” Mrs. Malken patted Chelle’s arm. “I’m very glad you have come. Be sure to make Sir Miles’s acquaintance at some point. I am curious to hear what you think about him. I believe he’d make an excellent match for my Eleanor.”

The woman moved on, sparing Chelle from having to answer. Sadly, Miss Eleanor had not been blessed with her mother’s kind disposition. Her expression wore a perpetual scowl, and she found much to criticize in everyone and everything. If Sir Miles thought those traits attractive, they’d be well-suited indeed.

“Chelle, is that not Lady Ariana with the Hewes?” her mother asked. “Let us say hello and see if we can’t procure your sister a partner for the next set.”

Without waiting for an answer, her mother grasped Chelle’s elbow and led them to where Cecily stood speaking with their old family friends. The Hewes had spent many summers visiting the Ellingtons over the years, and it was always good to see them. Ari stood at their side, and Chelle was pleased to see her

hair arranged in an elegant knot that Chelle had taught her how to do.

She greeted Mrs. Hewes and her daughter before turning to her friend. “Ari, I’ve missed you around the school. Are you enjoying the break?”

Ari leaned in close, her voice quiet. “In truth, I haven’t known what to do with myself these past few weeks. Parties and balls don’t thrill me as they do other girls, and I’m already anxious for school to begin again. I’ve been working on some new lesson plans that I’m excited to share.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Chelle tried to sound pleased, but it saddened her that Ari would be leaving the school come January. She was a gifted teacher and a dear friend. Chelle would miss her.

Blast that horrid Mr. Bancroft.

A wave of heat swept through Chelle, and her head pulsed with the beginnings of a headache. Thankfully, a servant had begun opening windows, and a cool breeze flitted across the back of her neck. If only the dance floor didn’t stand between her and the outside air.

Cecily’s voice cut through the pulsing. “Chelle, Lizzy was only just telling me about a new gentleman in town. Sir Miles is his name, and he’s reportedly the most dashing man in attendance this evening. He has been here for an entire hour and has yet to dance. Can you believe that? Lizzy and I have only just concocted a wager, and you must join us. You as well, Lady Ariana. The first one to procure a dance with him will win Mrs. Hewes’s shawl.”

Ari was quick to shake her head. “No, thank you, though your shawl is very pretty, Mrs. Hewes.”

The woman frowned at Cecily. “Begging your pardon, dear girl, but I don’t recall offering my shawl as a prize—not that I have any need for it at the moment.”

Mrs. Hewes’s fan began moving rapidly in front of her face, and Chelle edged a little closer, hoping to benefit from the air it



stirred. Sadly, it made little difference.

“’Twas Lizzy who offered your shawl as the reward, not I,” Cecily answered.

Lizzy, a petite girl with a head full of bouncing, almost-black curls, grinned at her mother. “I thought it was the perfect prize, Mama. You were only just complaining about the warmth. I assumed you’d be happy to part with it.”

Those mischievous eyes reminded Chelle so much of a former student that she felt a pang. As exhausting as teaching could be, some of the girls were delightful. She missed those interactions. Next year, she would insist on teaching at least one class, assuming the school would still be around.

No, she would not think that way, especially now. For the remainder of the night, she would limit her dire thoughts to only one—the high probability that she would soon expire from this interminable heat.

“Lizzy, honestly. What am I to do with you?” Mrs. Hewes chided in a good-humored way.

“I wouldn’t be too worried about losing your shawl,” Chelle’s mother said. “If Sir Miles has yet to stand up with anyone, these girls will be hard-pressed to finagle an invitation.”

“The faith you have in us is astounding, Mama,” Cecily muttered dryly, causing the others to laugh.

Mrs. Hewes’s coveted fan began waving once more, and Chelle watched with envy as the tendrils framing the woman’s face tossed to and fro. The fan was larger than Cecily’s and achingly desirable.

“If you’d offer that fan as the prize, I’d be tempted to join the wager,” Chelle said, half serious. She’d brazenly ask this new baronet to dance if someone would just point her in the right direction. Curse her stupidity for not thinking to bring a fan of her own. Perhaps she could steal a plate from the refreshments table and use that instead.

Cecily’s expression brightened, and she immediately clapped her hands. “Oh, you simply must, Mrs. Hewes. Chelle

has vowed her dancing days are over. How I'd love to see her join in the fun."

"I'd like to see that as well," Chelle's mother added, giving her friend a challenging look. "What say you, Matilda? Are you willing to stake your fan, assuming Chelle remembers how to dance?"

Cecily frowned at her mother. "Will Chelle not be hard-pressed to finagle an invitation as well? Or is it only my abilities you doubt?"

"Of course not, dearest. I'd simply like to watch your sister flirt. She is too young to give up on finding a husband."

Cecily continued to frown while Mrs. Hewes examined her fan. She must have decided its loss would be worth seeing Chelle grovel because she finally said, "Oh, very well. Chelle, if you can get Sir Miles to dance with you, my fan is yours. Should one of the other girls succeed first, however, it's the shawl they'll receive."

Chelle nodded her agreement, anxious to locate the man in question. "Where is this Sir Miles, and who can introduce us?"

Another light breeze teased her neck, providing some relief. One dance. She could put up with the heat for one dance—assuming the man would choose a spinster over two young and beautiful debutantes.

"Ah, here comes Mr. Hewes," Mrs. Hewes announced, still taunting Chelle with her waving fan. "He was told not to return until he'd made Sir Miles's acquaintance. Perhaps he can introduce us."

The tall and burly form of Mr. Hewes squeezed past a small group of people to join them. Another man emerged from behind, and Chelle froze the moment she recognized those familiar blue eyes, small cleft in his chin, and expressive eyebrows.

Went.

He caught her gaze, and a slow grin spread across his face. Chelle's breath hitched, and her heart pattered alarmingly. He

was here, at the ball, standing directly in front of her and looking so handsome she felt her knees weaken.

How she'd missed that smile.

Mr. Hewes cleared his throat. "Ladies, I'd like to introduce Sir Miles. Sir Miles, this is..."

Chelle heard no more after that. Her head swam.

Sir Miles? Went was the dashing man everyone had been talking about? He'd been the one to sweet-talk Mrs. Malken? Of course he was.

A woman would have to be mad not to hope for an introduction.

She stared at him, head pounding, thoughts racing, heart thumping.

"Sir Miles..." she breathed.

Judging by the way his brows arched and his eyes widened when Mr. Hewes stated her name, he was equally surprised. Why, she had no idea. The ton was certainly not all agog about her.

He stared at her for a few moments, disbelieving. "You are Miss... Ellington?"

"Yes."

"Of Miss Addison's School for Young Ladies?"

What an odd connection to draw, at least in this setting. Most would have commented on her family's connections to the duke rather than her employment, as high society preferred to overlook the latter.

"I am a teacher at that school. Actually, I'm more of an assistant to the headmistress of late. Why do you ask?"

The question seemed to remind him that he'd been introduced to more than one person. He blinked then glanced at the other women in the circle, all of whom appeared curious and confused.

“Forgive my poor manners. The beauty surrounding me has obviously dulled my wits. It’s a pleasure to meet you all.”

He nodded to each in turn before returning his attention to Chelle. “If you hadn’t already guessed, Miss Ellington and I are already somewhat acquainted.”

*Somewhat?* Chelle thought wryly. They’d spent hours together, dancing and talking. He’d even kissed her. Yet they were only *somewhat* acquainted?

“How is it you know Chelle?” Cecily asked.

“Chelle?” He threw a questioning glance at Cecily, his confusion evident.

Cecily nodded. “I suppose I should have said my sister or Miss Ellington, but I’m too used to calling her Chelle. It’s short for Michelle, you see.”

Enlightenment sparked, and his mouth twitched into a smile. “Chelle,” he repeated with a chuckle. “Of course.”

Cecily gave him an odd look. “Many people shorten the names of close family and friends.”

“Yes, Sir Miles, they do,” said Chelle. “If not Chelle, than what? Mich or Elle? Thank you, no. I prefer the former, even if it brings to mind a crustacean’s carapace.”

He barked out a laugh, and several heads turned their way—some curious, others envious. Miss Eleanor stared daggers.

Went didn’t seem to notice. “Better a noun than a verb in the past tense, eh?”

“Indeed.” Chelle loved that he recalled their conversations with as much detail as she did. It made her feel like she was someone worth remembering.

*He* certainly was.

Her head felt heavy, the air thick. All windows were now open, yet the room still threatened to suffocate her. She wanted to take hold of Went’s arm and ask if he’d care to stroll in the gardens. No eyes would stare at them there. The cool air would

clear the fog in her brain, and she would have him all to herself. Really, there were no downsides to the plan.

“You’ve yet to answer my question, Sir Miles,” Cecily intruded. “How do you know my sister? She’s never mentioned your name before.”

One of his brows shot up, and he looked at Chelle. “Hmm... what about Went? Has she mentioned him?”

“I don’t believe so.”

He gave a little tsk and shook his head disapprovingly at Chelle. “Surely I made more of an impression on you than that. How very disappointing. Truly, you’ve cut me to the core.”

“No one asked,” Chelle said, even though no one had *known* to ask.

They would now.

Her energy depleted just thinking about it and weariness took hold. How wonderful it would be to curl up on a sofa at this moment. Next to a window with Went at her side.

The evening was beginning to feel like a dream.

Her mother finally entered the conversation. “Am I to assume, Sir Miles, that you are this Went person you speak of?”

“You are most astute, Lady Miriam. For most of my life, I was known as Mr. Wentworth, or Went as my cronies would call me. Sir Miles is a recent change. To answer your question, Miss Cecily, I happened upon your sister on the Steine one evening last week. She was chasing after bunnies, and I offered my assistance, along with my jacket.”

Cecily looked confused. “Your jacket? Was it cold out?”

“No.” He chuckled. “We used it to capture the wily creatures.”

“I see,” Cecily replied, though her furrowed brow said otherwise. Everyone else appeared equally flummoxed.

Chelle couldn’t blame them. The conversation couldn’t have made much sense to them. But now was not the time to explain.

Perspiration dampened the back of her neck, and Chelle felt a sudden desperation to distance herself from the crowd. Dancing would help. Went's hands at her waist would help. He always made everything better.

“Are you dancing this evening, Sir Miles?” she blurted.

Humor sparkled in his eyes, and he cocked his head. “Why do you ask?”

He knew very well why she had. A woman couldn't be any more obvious. Instead of obliging her unspoken request by asking her to dance, he feigned naivety.

Horrid man. Now was not the time to tease her.

She tried again. “If I'm not mistaken, a waltz is now forming. Surely you know the steps.”

His meaningful smile told her that he did indeed know the steps. They *both* knew them. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

“What luck,” she quipped. “So do I.” Apparently, she *could* be more obvious. She blamed the heat for her desperation and Went for not cooperating.

*Devil take it, Went, ask me to dance*, she silently pleaded. Her father was nearly upon the group, and she had no desire to re-explain what little they already had to the others. The walls crept ever closer. She needed an escape.

To her frustration, the maddening man continued his evasiveness. “It is a lively dance, isn't it? In fact, I recall a particularly dewy morning on a beach not long ago, when there was an especially low—”

“Sir Miles, will you dance with me?”

Chelle ignored the shocked expressions around her, not caring that her family and friends now thought her the most brazen woman in existence. Her patience had come to an end, as had her sense, apparently.

Left with no other recourse than to outright reject her, Went took her hand and bowed over it. He straightened, amusement

sparkling in his eyes. “I would love nothing more, Miss Ellington.”

Chelle couldn't say she'd ever felt giddy and cross at the same time, but the emotions warred within. She did her best not to glare as he led her to the floor, knowing the sort of talk her sister and Lizzy would be engaging in the moment she was out of earshot. Chelle could only pray the two girls would be asked to dance as well, if only to distract them from that humiliating scene.

Couldn't Went see she wasn't in the frame of mind to be teased?

He guided her to the middle of the floor, but she continued walking, pulling him near the windows where the air was blessedly cooler.

He drew her into his arms and grinned, smelling strongly of sandalwood and faintly of lemons. His arms were muscular and his touch intoxicating. She basked in his closeness as her irritation melted away.

“Was that your way of punishing me for not meeting you on the Steine the other night? I had a very good reason why I couldn't be there.”

“No, I was not punishing you. I just found it humorous that you were so insistent on dancing when you claim to be a spinster. I was certain *I'd* have to do the convincing.”

“There was a fan at stake.” Even near the windows, the heat pressed upon her, and the movement of the dance made her breathless. Or was it him? Two forces were at play, wreaking havoc on her senses.

“A fan? Do explain.”

When the room began to tilt at an alarming angle, she gripped his hand more tightly. “Are you not excessively hot? I'm not wearing a jacket, and I'm roasting.”

“It is warm, but the windows help.” He allowed her to spin him in the direction of the doors before adding, “Normally it is the man who leads.”

“I did ask you to dance.”

He chuckled. “True. Lead on, madam.”

She nearly crashed them into another couple as they reached the doors, at which point, she practically yanked him outside before releasing his arm and grabbing hold of the balustrade. She leaned forward, gulping in the sea-laden air. What the deuce was wrong with her?

He placed a hand on her arm, his tone unusually somber. “Chelle, are you well? You look flushed.”

She didn’t answer, just stared at the swirling grounds, trying to catch her breath.

He removed one of his gloves and gently touched her forehead. “You’re warm.”

“Considering I was sweltering before, that is a positive change.”

“No, I mean you’re fevering. We need to get you home.”

Chelle shook her head, only to immediately regret it when the world tilted again. She couldn’t have a fever. The room had just been hot. So very hot. But now she felt... cold? How strange. Her body began trembling, and she wrapped her arms around her chest, anchoring her hip against the balustrade.

“Went, I think I am ill. I’m burning up one moment and freezing the next.”

He removed his coat and slung it around her shoulders. It smelled like him and felt blessedly warm. She tugged on one lapel, wishing she felt well enough to finish their dance.

“Thank you,” she said.

He guided her to a bench. “Wait here. I’ll be right back.”

She wanted to grab his hand and keep him with her, but that would be absurd. The moment he left her side, it felt like winter was upon her. All thoughts of fans, windows, and cooler air faded, replaced by the desire to be near a roaring fire. So very odd. She didn’t have the sniffles or a scratchy throat. Other than an aching head, she just felt weak and cold.



Went soon returned with her father. He, too, felt her forehead and declared her feverish.

“I’ve already called for the carriage. Let’s get you home, my dear.” He reached for her hand, but she resisted.

“No, Papa. This is Ceci’s first ball, and I’ll not be the one to cut it short. Just help me to the retiring room.”

“Nonsense, my girl. Ceci can remain here with your mother, and I’ll return for them once I get you settled at home.”

That sounded much better than the retiring room. Chelle nodded her consent as Went stepped forward. “Sir, would you allow me to accompany you and your daughter home?”

Her father stared at him in surprise before shrugging his consent. He gestured to the coat that surrounded Chelle’s shoulders. “You probably shouldn’t wear that when we return inside. It’ll cause talk.”

She reluctantly shrugged out of it, immediately missing its warmth and scent. Her body began trembling again, and her haggard breathing made it sound as though she’d just jogged up a steep hill.

As her father guided her through the ballroom, voices, images, and faces blended together in a cacophony—Cecily beaming at her partner on the dance floor, her mother’s look of worry, the gentle squeeze of her hand.

“We should come with you,” she said.

“No, Mama. I will be fine. Please, let Ceci stay.”

Near the door, her father paid their respects to their host and briefly explained the situation. Went did not accompany them through the room, but once she and her father had finally emerged from the house, he waited near the carriage, coat in hand.

She smiled weakly at him. “It’s silly of you to come. You should stay.”

In answer, he placed his coat around her shoulders. “I’ve wanted to know where you reside for a while now. This is my

chance.”

Hardly. Now that he knew her name, it would have been an easy thing to locate her. The worry in his expression was endearing, however, and she didn't argue further.

Her father slid in next to her while Went sat opposite them. Chelle stifled her disappointment. While she adored her father, it was Went's arm she wanted to hold, his scent she craved.

Her eyes grew heavy, and she rested her head on her father's shoulder, allowing them to close. She must have drifted off because it felt like only a few minutes passed before the coach lurched to a stop in front of her family's rented townhome. Her father helped her from the carriage, into the house, and up the stairs. At the top, she glanced over her shoulder for one last look at Went. He stood at the base of the stairs, frowning, one hand on the rail.

Chelle wished she could curl up at his side and lay her head on his lap. She wanted his comforting arm around her shoulders and his soothing voice in her ear.

She wanted him.

Instead, she allowed her father to lead her to one of the rooms, where her mother's maid assisted her into a borrowed dressing gown then into bed.

# .. 13 ..

MILES WAS SHOWN into the salon, where he awaited Chelle's father in an armchair upholstered in a fabric with cream, burgundy, and gold lines. His fingers drummed against the fabric while his boots tapped the carpet. Unable to sit for long, he began wandering the room. One lone candle glimmered on a side table, and he lifted it to inspect a seascape. It didn't catch his interest for long, so he trailed his fingers along the intricately carved, gilded mantle.

He exhaled, and the small flame flickered, nearly going out. Gads, why had he come? Other than get in the way, there was nothing he could do for Chelle or her father. But he couldn't remain in that stuffy ballroom either, attempting to smile and make small talk without knowing how Chelle fared.

Her skin had looked so clammy, her eyes, cloudy. He'd wanted to scoop her into his arms and carry her up the stairs, send for the doctor, and direct the housekeeper to steep some restorative tea.

Instead, he wandered a stranger's salon like a helpless, lovesick fool.

“Sir Miles, would you care for something to drink?”

He spun around to find Mr. Ellington standing just inside the room. He tossed Miles's coat over the arm of a chair before removing his own. His mussed hair looked as though he'd run his fingers through it a few times.

"How is she?" Miles asked.

The man considered him for a moment before nodding to the chair. Miles forced himself to sit once again, while Chelle's father meandered to the sofa across from him.

He stroked his jaw tiredly. "She's the same as when you saw her ten minutes ago, my good man."

Lud, had it only been ten minutes? It felt like hours. Miles rubbed a hand across his face. "You must think me overly anxious, and I probably am. But an illness that once began as a fever took my father's life in a matter of weeks. Ever since, even the sound of a mild cough sets me on edge."

Mr. Ellington nodded his understanding. "If it eases your concern, my housekeeper is tending to her now. She swears by a tea made of honey and ginger, which has proven effective in the past. But if it does not do the trick by morning, I will send for a doctor. I believe Chelle is just run down and in need of some sleep."

Miles nodded, forcing himself to relax.

An awkward silence ensued as Mr. Ellington crossed his legs, his elevated boot bouncing in the air. He watched Miles with a half-amused, half-curious look that would have made him squirm in his younger years. Now, however, Miles steadily met the man's gaze, ready to answer the questions brewing in those dark eyes.

It didn't take long.

"How well do you know my daughter?"

"We met last week on the Steine."

Eyebrows shot up. "Only one week?"

"Ten days to be precise." At the look of skepticism on the older man's face, Miles added, "Odd as it sounds, it feels like

I've known her much longer."

He nodded. "Does she feel the same—that ten days is the equivalent of a lifetime?"

Miles shifted in his seat, which now felt hard and uncomfortable. "I did not say a lifetime, sir, and that's a question for your daughter, not me."

The man lowered his foot to the floor and leaned forward to rest his forearms on his knees. His gaze bored into Miles's. "What are your intentions?"

The question caught Miles a little off guard. Chelle's father didn't beat around the bush—something that was both refreshing and disconcerting.

Miles took his time answering, his thoughts drifting to Shell—or rather, *Michelle*.

Gads, how had he not made that connection? It seemed so obvious now. Of course she was a brilliant teacher. Of course she'd chosen a profession over the lonely life of a spinster. Of course she had the respect and friendship of the king. The woman was captivating.

Miles felt like a fool when he said, "I'd like to court your daughter, sir, assuming I have your permission."

"Ha. Chelle is six and twenty, Sir Miles. She no longer needs my permission and would likely rebuff you if she learned you asked such a thing."

Miles could easily picture her doing exactly that. "It just felt wrong, or inconsiderate, not to ask. You did inquire about my intentions."

Mr. Ellington acknowledged the point with a grunt, then straightened and draped an arm across the back of the sofa. "Tell me about yourself."

Such an open-ended request. Did the man really wish to know that Miles liked to snatch biscuits when the cook wasn't looking or take brisk walks in the evening? Or that he took no less than ten attempts to tie a decent cravat.

Miles finally shrugged and replied with an equally vague answer. “Not much to tell, sir. I’m the only son of a clergyman, and when my great uncle passed away last year, I became Sir Miles Wentworth.”

Mr. Ellington stretched his neck from side to side. “Any property come with that title?”

“It went to my aunt, thank goodness. I have no desire to live in Northumberland.”

“Do you own an estate elsewhere?”

“Not presently.”

Mr. Ellington’s brow furrowed. “With no estate, how do you support yourself?”

“I received a generous inheritance from my grandfather on my mother’s side and live comfortably on the interest it accrues.”

“Generous enough to provide for a family?”

“Yes, sir.”

“In comfort?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I see,” Mr. Ellington mused, his ankle back on his knee, boot bouncing in the air. “What brought you to Brighton?”

Miles had been asked the same question several times over the past few weeks, and he’d always given the same answer: *Brighton has become quite the sensation, and I wanted to see what all the fuss was about.* With Mr. Ellington, however, the words tasted like a lie, and Miles couldn’t force them out.

Now that he’d learned that the mysterious Shell was actually Miss Michelle Ellington, it complicated matters further. If he continued to pursue her, as he intended to do, the truth would come out eventually. Perhaps it was better to be forthright now. But could he trust Mr. Ellington not to share it with the rest of society, or would Miles soon be known as the founder of the Bancroft Seminary? Any credibility Miles had managed to obtain thus far would be lost.

There was also the matter of Chelle. What would *she* think once she learned he was Mr. Bancroft?

“I didn’t realize that would be such a difficult question to answer,” Mr. Ellington said.

Miles exhaled, opted to confide in the man. He deserved the truth, as did Chelle. What they did with the information was out of his control.

“I came to Brighton with a friend. We have plans to open a school called the Bancroft Seminary for Girls after the first of the year.”

Recognition sparked in the elder man’s eyes, which was odd. He gave a low whistle before shaking his head and chuckling. At what, Miles had no idea.

“Is Chelle aware of this?”

“Not yet. Until tonight, I didn’t know of her association with Miss Addison’s. She has been insistent that we keep our identities a mystery. Tonight’s ball was a pleasant surprise. I was finally able to learn her real, or rather *full* name.”

The man frowned. “Why the secrecy?”

“Another question only your daughter can answer.”

Mr. Ellington nodded slowly, contemplatively. “There was a great deal of speculation about the new baronet this evening, but I didn’t hear any mention of your school. I assume you’d like it to stay that way?”

“I’d appreciate that. I don’t yet have the clout in society to weather the scandal that comes with taking on a trade, and I need this school to succeed.”

“Why open a school when you can live comfortably without it?”

Again, Miles hesitated, not ready to share everything just yet. It was one thing if the ton learned of his affiliation with the Bancroft Seminary, another if they turned their scrutiny on those he sought to help.

“I’m hopeful that the profits from the school can be used to fund another charitable endeavor—one my father began during his lifetime and asked me to carry on in his stead.”

Another slow nod. “I see.”

Did he? Likely not, but at least he didn’t press the issue. For that, Miles was grateful.

“I realize I have no right to ask this,” Miles said, “but I’d like to be the one to explain everything to your daughter. Once she has made a full recovery, that is.”

Mr. Ellington looked momentarily surprised before he scoffed. “Oh, I would not do that if I were you.”

“Do what?”

“Tell my daughter what you just told me.”

“Why?”

“Let’s just say she doesn’t hold Mr. Bancroft in very high esteem at the moment.”

Miles frowned, thinking back to their brief communications as Mr. Bancroft and Miss Ellington. Admittedly, his reply had been somewhat impertinent, but the letter she’d initially sent had been downright accusatory. What had she expected, for him to withdraw the offers Sam had made to Lady Ariana and Miss Harlow? According to his partner, both teachers were thrilled about a higher pay and greater diversity in classes.

Granted, Miles probably shouldn’t have paid that errand boy to tack an advertisement directly to the door of Miss Addison’s school on multiple occasions. But how else could he ensure the teachers were aware of this new opportunity?

Botheration.

He’d known his letter would cause Miss Ellington some irritation, but if she’d cried foul to her entire family, it apparently went beyond that. Gads, had she made him out to be a complete boor?

“Once she’s aware that I am Mr. Bancroft, perhaps—”



Another chortle, along with a hearty slap to his knee. “No, no, my dear boy. You do not understand. If you tell her the truth now, you can kiss any hope of courting my daughter goodbye.”

Miles shifted uncomfortably. Surely it wasn't that dire. Businesses often pilfered employees from other businesses. It wasn't illegal.

“If our relationship grows in the direction I hope it will, she will learn the truth eventually and despise me even more for keeping it from her. I think it best to tell her now.”

Mr. Ellington shook his head with the confidence of a man who knew his daughter well. “Sir Miles, it's obvious you care about Chelle, and she seems to care about you as well. So I will tell you this: Of all the people in all the world, including the most hardened criminals, my daughter believes Mr. Bancroft is the worst of the lot. Wouldn't it be wiser to first convince her that he is not such a bad fellow?”

Surely the man exaggerated. Chelle couldn't possibly place Mr. Bancroft lower than murderers or thieves. Well, she apparently considered him something of a thief, so perhaps just murderers then. But even if she despised him half as much, that put him in a tricky place.

Still, wasn't honesty always best? His clergyman father had impressed that lesson upon Miles time and time again.

*Sometimes it can be a difficult thing to be truthful, but in the end, you will only be sorry if you are not.*

“As much as I appreciate your perspective, sir, I will take my chances with the truth.”

Another shrug. “'Tis your funeral, my boy. I hope I am present for the conversation, however. It will be highly entertaining.”

“For you, perhaps.”

“Ha. Yes, indeed.” Mr. Ellington yawned and stretched before pulling himself up, one knee popping loudly in the silence of the room.

“Deuced knee,” he muttered, bending and stretching his leg a few times. “Makes me sound ancient.”

Miles rose as well, grabbing his coat as he did so. “My father had the same condition. He often said he needed to be oiled.”

Mr. Ellington clapped Miles on the back. “Ho, isn’t that the truth. Come. Let’s return you to that infernal ball. I believe enough time has passed that I can safely collect my wife and daughter without too many arguments from the latter.”

Miles slowed his steps and turned to Mr. Ellington. “Would you entrust me with the task?”

At the look of surprise on the older man’s face, he added, “I could return in your carriage, fetch the rest of your family, along with my horse, and accompany them safely home. That would leave you free to remain here should the need arise to send for a doctor.”

Mr. Ellington hesitated before nodding his agreement and giving Miles another clap on his shoulder.

“’Tis a shame Chelle will soon tear you to pieces. I rather like you.”

# .. 14 ..

CHELLE AWOKE TO find her mother setting a tray on her bedside table containing a cup of tea, a piece of toast slathered in marmalade, and a vase of lavender blooms. The refreshing scent wafted around her, and she examined the bouquet with interest. Typically, lavender was used as filler, not the main attraction.

“Morning, Mama,” she murmured sleepily. Her head no longer throbbed, but her body felt drained of energy. The simple act of scooting herself to an upright position left her breathless and weary.

Her mother sat on the bed and felt her forehead. “Your fever appears to have abated for the most part. How do you feel?”

“Still tired, but better,” Chelle replied. “What time is it?”

“Nearly two o’clock. You’ve slept the day away, but I’m glad of it. I worry that all of your troubles with the school have brought this on. You need to set your concerns aside for a few days and rest.”

Chelle closed her eyes and exhaled. “Those concerns will not go away by staying in bed, although more rest does sound heavenly.”

“Why not leave the fretting to me and Ceci for now? We have some ideas that may help.”

“Truly?” Chelle opened her eyes, but her mother shook her head.

“Later. For now, eat some toast, drink more of Cook’s restorative tea, and enjoy your bouquet. Sir Miles delivered these flowers himself, along with this.”

At the sight of the folded note, a thrill of anticipation swept through Chelle, and she pushed herself up a little higher before cracking the seal.

It was brief.

*Chelle,*

*Many would think me presumptuous to call you that after so brief an acquaintance, but you were most insistent that day on the beach. You were also correct. The name does suit you perfectly, though it will always bring to mind a crustacean’s carapace.*

*Lavender is said to promote restful sleep and relaxation. Breathe it in deeply and recover quickly. I felt cheated out of a waltz last evening and would like a repeat opportunity. Perhaps on the beach at low tide?*

*Your comrade, especially when it comes to bunnies, beaches, and ruins,*

*Went*

“He makes you happy,” her mother said. “Even your eyes are smiling.”

Chelle couldn’t deny it. The man *did* make her happy. His attention to her last night, the concern in his eyes the moment he realized something was wrong, his insistence on accompanying

her home, the warmth of his coat around her shoulders... how could her eyes not smile? He was special.

“He hopes the aroma will help me relax and sleep.”

Her mother fingered one of the blooms. “He’s a thoughtful man. When he returned to the ball, he danced with Ceci, Lizzy, and Lady Ariana before accompanying us home. He waited for an update on your health, and only after assuring himself that you were resting peacefully did he leave.”

Chelle gathered the bedclothes to her chin and smiled, feeling a boost in energy. She breathed in the lavender scent and, like a giddy school-girl, wanted to confide in her mother.

“Why didn’t you tell us about him?” her mother asked.

“Because there wasn’t much to say. It’s madness, really. I’ve known him less than a fortnight.”

A slow nod and then, “He certainly is handsome. Ceci nearly swooned when he asked her for a dance.”

“Oh, Mama. He’s handsome, kind, and has the most delightful sense of humor. I can scarce believe he’s singled me out.”

Her mother touched Chelle’s cheek and smiled. “It’s been a long time since I’ve heard you speak about a man in that way. It’s wonderful, and I want to hear the entire story as soon as you are well. But now you really must rest. I shall do my best to keep Ceci away even though she’s bursting to tell you every detail about the ball. She’s also hoping you’ll show her how to style her hair like Lady Ariana’s last night.”

Chelle couldn’t sleep now even if she was surrounded by lavender. Elation had taken hold, making her want to jump on the bed, giggle, and dance.

A ridiculous response for a spinster, but there it was.

“Let her come in, Mama. I would love to hear about the rest of the ball and talk awhile longer. I have slept enough for now, and the knot is fairly simple to learn. I will rest after that, I promise.”

Her mother waffled a few moments before nodding. “Very well. But only because I want to hear more about this Sir Miles of yours.”

*Yours.*

The word swelled Chelle’s heart to nearly bursting, even though it was much too soon to think of him as anything other than Went.

“He’s not mine, Mama.”

“Oh, I think he is.”



TWO DAYS LATER, Chelle carried the vase of lavender down to the salon, where she set it on a side table before plopping down on the sofa. Her family had left for Sunday services earlier and still hadn’t returned, leaving Chelle to fend for herself in the elegant townhouse. She debated taking a walk to clear her head, but decided against it when she spied the overcast skies and rain dotting the cobblestone road.

It was just as well.

She retrieved her notebook from the table and tapped a pencil against her lower lip. Then she began writing.

*Wanted: Two educated females who enjoy teaching young ladies in subjects such as poise, needlepoint, manners, literature, and arithmetic. Must be available to begin in January. Please reply to Miss Addison’s School for Young Ladies in Brighton.*

Chelle reread her words only to frown and scribble out the word *two* and replace it with *one*. No need to advertise the fact that two teachers were leaving the school.

The advertisement was decidedly dull, but what else could she say? She needed to start somewhere, the sooner the better. It could take months to locate the right teachers for the positions. She only hoped Susan would approve of this decision to move forward. If only the headmistress would send some sort of reply or direction.

A loud rap on the front door startled Chelle into dropping her pencil. Footsteps sounded as the aged butler strode into the foyer and opened it with a creak.

“Ah, you have come again, Sir Miles, and are bearing more flowers, I see.”

Chelle’s heart skipped and danced at the same time her hand flew to her hair, which she’d left in a long braid down her back, not thinking she’d be required to entertain anyone this morning. She pushed her hands into her pockets, hoping to find a pin but came up empty.

“I have indeed, Gladston,” came Went’s familiar voice. “Have I been lucky enough to catch Mr. Ellington or Lady Miriam at home?”

“I’m afraid they have not returned from services just yet.”

“In that case, could you tell me how Miss Ellington is faring? Is she up and about?”

Gladston kept his answer vague. “She is doing much better, I believe.”

“Very glad to hear it. Is she at home to visitors?”

Chelle grinned, enjoying his persistence. She began coiling her braid as she called out, “That all depends on who is asking. If it is Sir Miles, then perhaps not, but Went is most welcome.” She shoved a pencil into the knot to keep it in place and quickly smoothed her skirts.

A long pause followed her words, and Chelle began to wonder if either man had heard her.

A throat finally cleared, and Went did his best to explain. “I realize you only know me as Sir Miles, but I also go by Went,

which is apparently what I must be called today if I am to be received.”

“Er...” Clearly, Gladston had no idea how to take such a pronouncement.

Chelle giggled as the butler appeared in the doorway, Went’s head popping up behind him.

“Do try and explain, if you will,” Went said. “The poor man is most perplexed, as anyone would be in his situation.”

Gladston startled at the sound of Went’s voice and tossed a frown over his shoulder. “I beg your pardon, sir.”

Chelle laughed. “I was only jesting, Gladston. Forgive my poor manners. Of course Sir Miles is welcome, especially if he has brought more lavender.”

“Er... no.” Went made a face as he stepped around the butler and held out a bouquet of orange lilies. “I heard your fever subsided, so I thought you’d want something to brighten your day instead of put you to sleep. Perhaps you’re still in need of an additional nap, however. Hence the need for that lavender there?” He nodded in the direction of the vase at her side.

“Shall I fetch a maid, Miss?” Gladston asked, a disapproving expression wrinkling his brow.

Chelle waved him off. “That won’t be necessary. Sir Miles hasn’t come to threaten my virtue, have you, sir?”

“I will behave as the perfect gentleman,” he vowed.

The butler remained in the doorway, still frowning, so Chelle added, “Would you be so kind as to have a tea tray sent up?”

The butler finally took his leave, albeit reluctantly, and Chelle flashed a smile, happily accepting the beautiful lilies.

“I should have asked for a vase filled with water as well,” she commented, laying them on the table next to the lavender. “I suppose this can be an experiment on which blooms are more potent—the lavender or the lilies. If I begin to drift off, the lavender will prove the winner.”



He sat across from her and rested his elbows on his knees, looking so casually handsome that her pulse began to thrum.

“If it’s the lilies? What behavior should I expect then?”

*A thrumming pulse, apparently, she thought. Along with difficulty breathing and concentrating, head in the clouds, that sort of thing.*

“Twirling. Lots of twirling.”

He cracked one of his oh so charming smiles, and her heart did indeed twirl.

“Now that’s a sight I would like to see.”

“You just might, Sir Went,” she said cheekily. “I’m feeling perkier already.”

“You don’t say.” His brows quirked together, and he cocked his head to the side, as though trying to see around her. “Is that a pencil in your hair?”

She turned her profile to him. “When an unexpected visitor comes calling, one must improvise. I had no pin, you see.”

He chuckled. “Most inventive, I must say. Is that a skill you teach at your school?”

“How to create a quick chignon using a pencil?” she asked.

“Or perhaps you’ve just come up with a new tool: A writing instrument that doubles as a hair pin. A lady never knows when she might need to send off a quick note, after all.”

“You’re teasing me.”

“Never.”

“I could have let the butler turn you away, you know. Perhaps I should have.”

“But then you would feel more tired than happy. I’m expecting the twirling to start any moment, by the by. Will the pencil throw you off balance, do you think? It is exceptionally long.”

Her twitching lips finally gave way, and she laughed.

“Ha,” he said, pointing at the bouquets. “I believe the lilies are the clear winner.”

“Yes, it’s certainly the lilies and not the charming man across from me.”

He smiled briefly before looking her over with a concerned brow. “You look... well. Are you?”

Chelle settled against the back of the sofa and lifted a brow. “Only well? Surely you can think of a more flattering word than that.”

“You do have a pencil jutting out of your hair at a rather odd angle.” He waved his hand around the back of his head, indicating the direction of the pencil and exaggerating its length.

“For pity’s sake.” Chelle pulled the pencil from her hair and allowed the braid to fall to the middle of her back. “Is that better?”

“Beautiful.” His grin fell away, and he shifted positions. “It’s good to see you like this, looking more like yourself. You had me worried, Chelle.”

The combination of concern and tenderness in his expression caused her heart to trip over itself. She hadn’t been gazed at in that way since she’d sprained her ankle racing through the woods with Cedric in hot pursuit. He’d immediately dropped down next to her, so fearful for her welfare.

Went cleared his throat and dropped his gaze to his hands.

Chelle inhaled deeply. A fortnight. She’d only known him a fortnight. He couldn’t possibly feel the same about her as Cedric once had. It was too soon.

The sound of clattering dishes pulled her thoughts from the man across from her. A petite maid stood in the doorway, bearing a tea tray.

“What excellent timing you have, Molly. Thank you. You may set it here.”

“Aye, miss.” She placed the tray on the table and nervously bobbed a curtsy. “Will there be anythin’ else?”

“Actually, yes.” Chelle lifted the lavender stems from the vase and held them out to the maid. “Would you be so good as to find another vase for these and return them to my room?”

Chelle tried to ignore the trail of water across the rug at her feet, but the look of bewilderment on the maid’s face made the task difficult. Any sane woman would have asked for the *dry* bouquet of lilies to be put in a new vase. Or hand over the lavender in its current vase and ask for another one to be brought for the lilies.

Not Chelle.

A glance in Went’s direction only made things worse. His twitching lips were barely repressing a laugh.

Honestly.

Chelle jiggled the lavender stems, hoping to shake the maid from her stupor, but the move only served to splash water across her skirt as well.

“Molly,” she said finally, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, sorry, miss.” The girl rushed forward to take the bouquet, tucking her apron around the dripping stems before leaving the room.

Alone once more, Chelle avoided Went’s gaze as she picked up the lilies and situated them in the now empty vase at her side, pretending as though nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

“There we are,” she announced, looking over her handiwork. Sadly, she had never been adept at arranging flowers, and the lilies leaned to the side, leaving an unattractive gap in the middle.

“You were correct about these flowers. I’m feeling much more the thing now.”

Only when he said, “I’m not sure your maid would agree with you,” did she turn back to meet his grin.

Chelle gave up her ridiculous ruse and laughed. “No, I daresay not. That was quite the spectacle, wasn’t it? She must

think me daft.”

“Probably,” he agreed with a chuckle. “I, on the other hand, am still waiting for the twirling. I can’t fully believe in the power of lilies without it.”

Chelle considered telling him that she would need twice the amount of lilies for that result, but he’d likely return with a larger bouquet on the morrow, and she’d be expected to twirl then—in the company of her family, no less.

Besides, she’d already made a fool of herself. What was one more embarrassment?

“Oh, why not.” She stood and took three elegant twirls—well, *two* elegant twirls. The third landed her against the arm of the sofa, and she stumbled a little.

She didn’t dare look at Went as she returned to her seat and smoothed out her dress. “Good thing the maid wasn’t here to witness that, or she’d think me daft *and* tipsy.”

“Or just mad.”

Chelle smiled. “Perhaps. Do lilies cause madness as well?”

“As I said before, they only serve to brighten.”

“In that case, I shall take them with me to the asylum.”

He nodded as though it was a probable outcome. “I promise to visit often. You’ll need someone to bring you bunnies to hold then catch them when they escape.”

“Will you dance with me as well?”

“But of course.”

“You are a good friend.”

“Friend?” He immediately frowned and shook his head. “My dear Chelle, even the best of friends would not go to such lengths, I assure you.”

Even though the conversation had become outlandish, and his eyes continued to laugh at her, there was also sincerity in his words. It made her heart tumble and her thoughts fuzzy.

“No?” she managed to ask.

“No.”

Her eyes locked with his, and heat sizzled between them. His expressive brows, that small cleft in his chin, those penetrating eyes. She could practically hear his thoughts. *I'm much more than a friend, as you well know.*

Deep down she did know, though admitting it to herself still frightened her.

Thankfully, he didn't press the issue any more than that. Instead, he disconnected his gaze and leaned back in his chair, running his hands along the armrests.

“Now that you're on the mend, there is something we need to discuss.”

The front door burst open, and Cecily barreled into the foyer. She didn't even glance in the salon before darting up the stairs, her voice trailing behind her.

“Chelle? Are you awake? Mother and I have the most exciting news!”

Unlike Cecily, Chelle's mother took a moment to look into the room where Chelle and Went sat. Her brow lifted a margin—probably at the sight of them alone together—but she chose not to mention it.

Went stood as she walked into the room and offered her a slight bow. “Lady Miriam.”

“How nice to see you again, Sir Miles.”

He glanced past her to the now empty foyer. “Should we fetch Miss Cecily?”

Her mother shook her head as she sank down beside Chelle. “I need a few moments to collect my thoughts. She will return shortly, I have no doubt.”

“Tell me about this exciting news, Mama,” said Chelle.

“Oh no. Ceci would never forgive me if I did. You'll have to wait for her return.”

They didn't have long to wait. Rapid footsteps clattered down the stairs as a worried voice called out, "Mama, where have you gone? I cannot find Chelle anywhere."

"In the salon, darling," her mother answered wearily.

More footsteps pounded and Cecily practically charged into the room, her cheeks rosy from the exertion.

Her hands went immediately to her hips, and a frown marred her face. "You could have told me you were in here."

"And spoil all the fun? Nonsense," Chelle teased, patting the sofa on the other side of her. "Sit, and I shall pour you some tea. Mama tells me you have some exciting news."

The distraction worked like a charm. Cecily brightened. "I do!" After a quick glance at her mother, she amended, "That is to say, *we* have news. Hello, Sir Miles."

He returned her greeting with an amused nod. "Is this a personal matter? Would you like me to take my leave?"

Cecily waved him off. "We wouldn't dream of depriving Chelle of your company. She's rather fond of you, so of course you are welcome to stay."

Chelle refrained from rolling her eyes, at least until Went wiggled his eyebrows in a look that said, *Ah ha, you do adore me. I knew it.* Only then did she roll them dramatically before turning her attention back to her sister.

"Ceci, you have me on pins and needles now. Pray tell us your news."

That was all the prodding her sister needed. As she moved to take the seat next to Chelle, Cecily launched into her tale, beginning with the premonition she'd received that very morning while her maid dressed her hair.

"I couldn't put my finger on the feeling exactly. I simply knew something wonderful was about to happen, and I was right. Of course, we had to first get through the most interminable sermon ever uttered. The clergyman went on and on and on about the evils of modern thinking. One would

assume the man had been born in the middle ages, so ancient were his views. Did you know that he—”

“Ceci, dear,” interrupted their mother, “if you do not get to the crux of the matter soon, I shall do it for you.”

Cecily blinked a few times before realizing she’d gotten off track. She nearly scooted off the sofa as she twisted to face Chelle. “You’ll never guess. We have found you a teacher!”

Before Chelle could do anything more than widen her eyes, Cecily rushed on. “Her name is Miss Verity Standish. She has worked as a governess for Mrs. Merryweather’s niece for years, but her charge is to be launched into society this coming season, so the family won’t have need of her services beyond December. Isn’t that wonderful? What’s more, she will be accompanying the family on a brief sojourn to visit Mrs. Merryweather soon, at which time you will be able to meet her and ascertain her character and qualifications for yourself.”

Chelle’s wide eyes went to her mother for confirmation. It seemed too good to be true. Had her mother and sister truly found her a new teacher?

Her mother nodded, her smile just as wide as Cecily’s. “Most providential, wouldn’t you agree?”

Her sister continued prattling while much of the heaviness Chelle had been carrying for weeks eased from her shoulders. Her family—the people she had been so worried would only add to her burdens—had just lightened them. Guilt mixed with relief and the sort of gratitude that caused her eyes to grow teary. How blessed she was to call such people her mother and sister.

Cecily stopped mid-sentence to frown at Chelle. “Why are you crying? This is celebratory news.”

Chelle wiped the tears from her eyes and threw her arms around her sister. “Of course it is. I’m just so grateful to you and Mama. Thank you.”

Cecily beamed.

Her mother placed her hand over Chelle’s. “Rest assured, my Chelle, we’ve only just begun. We fully intend to find you

not just one, but two new teachers. In the meantime, Ceci has an intriguing idea to tell you about. We'd love your input as well, Sir Miles, should you have any."

"I'll do my best," he said gallantly.

Chelle turned her tearful smile on him, feeling a decided shift in her luck. For the first time in days, she could push aside her worries and embrace the blessed exhilaration that so often accompanied hope. How liberating it felt.

Still beaming, Cecily clapped her hands together and bounced up and down. "I was thinking about the Burtons, our dear gardener and his wife. You remember them, don't you, Chelle?"

She didn't wait for an answer. "I was always so fascinated with how Mr. Burton could grow a plant from the clippings of another one, and how Mrs. Burton could turn a bundle of roses into a picturesque arrangement. I wanted to learn from them and began following them around."

Chelle could well imagine her sister chasing after the Burtons and peppering them with her questions and thoughts. She caught Miles grinning as well and had to cough back a giggle.

Cecily didn't seem to notice. "Eventually, Mr. Burton showed me how to propagate various plants, including roses, and his wife taught me how to arrange flowers. By the by, this lily arrangement is a bit of an eyesore. I can fix it as soon as we are done here. Isn't that right, Mama?"

Pride lit up their mother's eyes. "You should see some of her creations, Chelle, especially lately. They really are stunning."

Impressed by her sister's newfound talent, Chelle still had to wonder what any of this had to do with her school. Perhaps Cecily thought Miss Addison's could benefit from flower arrangements or prettier landscaping? Chelle could only guess.

Cecily continued, "My experience with the Burtons got me to thinking that you should offer a variety of lessons to your students. It could just be an hour or so each day, for the duration



of a few weeks, but wouldn't it be fun to learn how to propagate or arrange flowers? Or a class on medicinal herbs—I've always been fascinated by that as well. Or a lesson on how to style one's own hair, as you do, Chelle. You could easily teach such a class."

Chelle ran her hand down her braid, thinking of the pencil and Went's teasing. He may not agree, but her pupils had always been amazed by Chelle's creations, and she'd taught a few of them some tips over the years. Before she'd become an assistant to the headmistress, she would spend hours sketching new hairstyles. It had been some time since she'd picked up a pencil for that endeavor, and teaching a class on the subject would be fun. She could pull out some of her favorite sketches.

"Chelle," Cecily pressed. "I can't tell you how much I'd love to have some lessons to choose from on subjects that actually interest me. Wouldn't you? Although embroidery is a nice skill to know, I'd as lief learn about plants and herbs."

Chelle leaned against the back of the sofa and considered her sister's idea. Many of her students had expressed interests in varying things. It was one of the reasons Susan had finally allowed bunnies at the school, although what the girl had really wanted was a puppy.

At some point, one of Chelle's students wished to become more proficient in shuttlecock while another hoped to bake a cake for a friend's birthday. They were not the sort of activities usually taught, but Chelle couldn't bear to see them disappointed. She'd instructed one girl on the basics of shuttlecock and convinced the cook to assist the other girl in baking a cake. Susan had disapproved when she'd stumbled upon the latter, but Chelle had been able to soothe away her concerns.

"Ceci, I love that idea. I just don't know how we'd go about making it work. Already the school is short on teachers. How could we possibly fill a demand for more, let alone pay them? I just don't see it as a possibility at present."

She flicked a glance at Went, who shifted in his seat, looking uncomfortable. The topic probably bored him.

“Obviously, you would only offer classes that you could find instructors to teach,” Cecily said, unphased. “I, for example, would love to teach a six-week course in flower arranging, and you wouldn’t have to pay me a farthing. I could stay with you.”

This suggestion came as a surprise to their mother. Her eyes widened momentarily before she shrugged.

Cecily persisted. “We could find a gardener willing to teach the girls about growing plants. Or better yet, Mama, isn’t there a woman among the ton with that aptitude? Surely someone of your set would be willing to donate their time for a worthy cause. Perhaps we could find a willing apothecary to instruct the girls on medicines and herbs as well.”

Chelle had to smile at that. Her sister made it sound so easy—and maybe it would be if parents wouldn’t mind their daughters learning the skills of certain trades. But would a mother willingly allow her daughter to learn how to arrange hair like an abigail?

Susan would be difficult to convince as well.

“I was also thinking,” her mother added, “that it might be fun to offer dancing lessons at the Royal Pavilion once renovations are complete. I’ve heard King George is planning to return in January, and he’ll be anxious to show it off. I can’t imagine him not allowing you to move your dancing lessons to his new music room. From what I understand, that particular room is nearly complete.”

Why had Chelle never thought to brainstorm with her mother and sister before? They were full of ideas. “That’s brilliant, Mama. In fact, one of the advertisements I’ve been struggling to write is finally coming together in my mind, thanks to you and Ceci. As soon as Mrs. Brommely returns, I will get her opinion as well. I’m certain I can convince her to try a few new things.”

A wary glance at Went had her adding, “You must find this topic of conversation tedious in the extreme, Sir Miles. Do forgive us.”

He stopped tugging on his neck cloth and cleared his throat. “Not at all. I only wish I had something to contribute. Perhaps I could offer my services as well. I can teach the girls how to capture bunnies when they go missing.”

Chelle laughed. “That would be a useful skill to know, especially at our school. Would you also teach them about the nature of tides, especially those rare times when it is exceptionally low?”

“I’d prefer to keep that information to myself.”

She smiled. “No dancing lessons on the beach then?”

“Not for your students.”

Her cheeks heated at the meaningful look he gave her, and she suddenly wished she could be back on that smooth sand, spinning circles in his arms.

Chelle looked to find her mother’s gaze trained on her, much too perceptive for Chelle’s comfort. Although her mother knew about Chelle’s morning stroll with Went during an unusually low tide, she knew nothing about the dancing—or the fact that Chelle had removed her boots and stockings in public. She’d kept that tidbit of information to herself.

Blast. She shouldn’t have mentioned anything about dancing on the beach.

Cecily clapped her hands together once more, unaware of the silent exchange. “When Mama and I are done, everyone will wish to come to your school instead of that blasted Bancroft Seminary.”

“Ceci!” Her mother’s horrified tone conveyed how she felt about her daughter’s choice of words. Chelle, on the other hand, was grateful for the timely distraction.

“Would you rather I do something more unladylike, Mama? Like pelt Mr. Bancroft with overripe tomatoes and rotten spinach?”

Her mother closed her eyes in exasperation while Chelle looked worriedly at Went, wondering what he must be thinking.

Cecily could be a little too forthcoming at times. Perhaps an explanation was in order.

“Sir Miles,” Chelle began. “Do you remember telling me about that horrible human from your days at Eton—the one without integrity that you still despise?”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Bancroft is no better. He has targeted my school with the intent to lure away our best teachers. Two of them have already succumbed to his underhanded tactics, and I won’t be surprised if he goes after our students next. He is sadly lacking in both ingenuity and principles, hence the reason for Ceci’s, er... desire for comeuppance. She’s never met the man, but her loyalty to me makes her fiercely protective. I adore her for it. And Mama, even you have to admit that tomatoes and spinach would be no less than he deserves.”

Cecily grinned. “We could have him placed in a pillory on the Steine and allow any passerby to throw food at him. It would be great fun.”

Her mother sighed in defeat. “Ceci, I do worry about you sometimes. The man may have behaved in an underhanded fashion, but honestly. Sir Miles must think us quite sinister.”

Cecily turned to Sir Miles, ready to defend herself. “Chelle became physically ill because of that man. She has been so worried about her school and hasn’t slept well because of it. Do you truly think us sinister, or would you like to throw the first tomato?”

# .. 15 ..

DREAD AND UNEASE sat like spoiled food in Miles's stomach as he left the Ellington's townhome. He'd nearly told Chelle everything. If her mother and sister hadn't returned, he would have, and gads, what a disaster that would have been.

Her father hadn't exaggerated the extent of Chelle's distaste for Mr. Bancroft. She *loathed* him. As did her sister. The two had done a thorough job of mincing his character into a fine pulp before spewing it out like vomit.

It hadn't taken more than a minute or two for Miles to bury his confession and make his escape.

He tugged on his suffocating neck cloth again, feeling the full weight of his sins.

The relief on Chelle's face when she'd learned about that governess who would soon be looking for work had told Miles exactly how worried she'd been these past weeks. She'd shed actual tears. Had her worries truly brought on that illness?

Gads, he was a lout.

How would she feel when she learned it was Miles who'd been the cause of her strain? Overripe tomatoes and rotten

spinach would be the least of his worries.

Why couldn't Chelle have been the one to apply for a position? He would have hired her on the spot, and everything would have worked out as it should. Instead, Miles had been subjected to all kinds of intriguing ideas to improve Chelle's school, knowing full well that if the Bancroft Seminary were to add classes on plants, medicines, hair, or flower arranging, its founder would become even more of a scoundrel.

Not to mention a complete and utter idiot.

Dancing lessons at the Royal Pavilion? Genius.

Gads, what now?

Mr. Ellington's counsel suddenly sounded very wise. Although... how the devil would Miles change Chelle's opinion of him? Her father had made it sound like it was a doable thing. What rot. After today's revelations, he could think of only one way to repair the situation: close the school and have the cowardly Mr. Bancroft disappear.

Unfortunately, that wasn't a possibility. There were too many people counting on him to succeed, too many lives that would be hurt if he walked away now.

He'd face Chelle's wrath before he'd do that.

Gads, would she ever be able to forgive him? Surely, if she listened to his side, if she saw the faces of all of those children...

Uneasiness threatened to turn his stomach. She may come to understand his reasons, but would she overlook the underhanded way he went about it? The fact that she'd clung to Cedric's memory for as long as she did told Miles that she didn't let go of things easily. The same could be true of her anger.

Miles glanced up at the skies, thinking he'd been dealt a pretty lousy hand for trying to do something good. He didn't complain to God often, but every now and again, he couldn't help griping.

*Would it be so difficult to intervene this once?*

Dark clouds billowed overhead, and a raindrop landed on his cheek. Miles frowned and quickened his steps, suddenly anxious to unload his frustrations on Sam. His friend would know what to do.

“Ho there!” Somewhere in the chaos, a voice intruded. But it wasn’t until Miles heard his name that he realized someone was attempting to greet him.

He followed the voice to where Mr. Ellington crossed the street in front of him. Either the Almighty was enjoying a good laugh at his expense, or He had just sent help in the form of Chelle’s father.

Miles chose to believe the latter.

“Coming from my townhouse, are you?” the man asked, both hands shoved into the pockets of his trousers. Despite his place in society, Mr. Ellington didn’t come across as stuffy or superior. Rather, he seemed completely at ease with himself, like his daughter.

Light rain began falling as Miles answered him. “Yes. It was good to see your daughter much improved.”

“She came down from her bedchamber, did she?”

“She was already in the salon when I arrived, looking rather bored.”

The elder man chuckled. “I’ll wager your arrival was a godsend then. Unless, of course, you disregarded my advice and...” He studied Miles closer, his smile dipping into a frown. “You didn’t tell her about your school yet, did you? I was so hoping you would come to your senses.”

Miles let out a sigh and pushed his hands into his own pockets. There was something oddly comforting about the move. “No, sir, I did not. Instead, I’ve come away with a new respect for her loathing of my character.”

The man leaned back on his heels. “Ha, she told you her feelings on the matter, did she? I wish I’d been there to see the look on your face.”

Not wanting to relive the conversation or describe what his expression may or may not have looked like, Miles pushed the conversation forward. “Any idea how I might go about making Mr. Bancroft less dastardly in her eyes?”

The man laughed before clapping Miles on the shoulder. “No idea, my boy. But I will very much enjoy watching you try.”

Miles stared blankly at the man before the rain began coming in earnest. He used it as an excuse, muttered a quick farewell, and made yet another escape. He didn't even bother looking up at the skies this time. If he did, he was fairly certain he'd see the clouds laughing as well.



# .. 16 ..

CHELLE TUGGED ON one of her gloves as she entered the salon to find her sister standing in front of the large window with her profile to Chelle. Cecily pressed a sealed note to the glass and squinted at it, no doubt trying to see what was written on the inside. She must have noticed Chelle in her peripheral vision because she spun around and held out both the note and a cluster of pencils tied with a ribbon.

“These just arrived for you. Such an odd gift. Do you think Sir Miles sent them?”

Exchanging a glance with her mother, Chelle pulled on her other glove. “I can’t imagine why he would. We have a picnic planned for today. In fact, he should be here any moment to collect me.”

As though cued, a knock rattled on the door, and Chelle smiled, taking a backward step. “There he is now.”

With the butler nowhere in sight, she crossed the foyer and opened the door herself. Went stood on the step, looking at something down the street. Her heart gave a lurch, and she wondered why she had tried so hard to keep him at a distance

when what she longed for was to feel his arms around her and experience the thrill of being close to him.

Everything had changed since they'd been officially introduced at the ball. Without the secrecy surrounding their identities, she felt a deeper connection to him. Talking of Cedric and visiting his family had also helped. She knew now that he would always hold a place in her heart, but she had room for more, and Went filled that space nicely.

Liberation from past fears was a powerful feeling. Chelle was suddenly ready to trust again, ready to care, ready to see what would come of this new and unexpected relationship. The feeling exhilarated, and she wanted to embrace it.

She also wanted to keep Went to herself.

In the past week since the ball, Sir Miles's name swirled in the air around town, carrying whispers about how handsome, charming, diverting, and intelligent the new baronet had turned out to be. Everyone wanted to know how the Ellingtons knew him. Inquisitive mothers and jealous daughters had called on Chelle's family in various attempts to learn more, only to leave disappointed.

At first, it had been a diverting game to see who could come up with the vaguest answers to their questions. But after a few days, it had become tedious, at least for Chelle. She'd as lief spend her free time with Went than field any further questions about him.

Although she'd seen him practically every day since the ball, it had always been in the salon, surrounded by her family or at a dinner party or musicale, where she'd had to share his attention with too many others.

Today, however, she would have him all to herself.

"Good morning, Went." She didn't suppress her delight at the sight of him. His top hat dipped rakishly over one eye, making him look both boyish and devilish at the same time.

"Is there a reason you answered the door and not Gladston?" he asked, giving her one of his irresistible grins. "Never say

you're now the butler.”

“Of course not. A butler would invite you in, and I have no intention of doing that. As you can see, I am ready for our picnic. It is a glorious day, and I have no wish to stay indoors one moment longer.”

Only a smattering of clouds marred the light blue of the sky while the salty tang of sea floated on the breeze. It promised to be a glorious day.

Before he could answer, her mother's voice called from the salon. “Chelle, dear, do invite Sir Miles in. We'd like to say hello before you steal him away.”

Cecily's voice came next. “Did you send Chelle a posy of pencils, Sir Miles?”

Chelle rolled her eyes. She should have known Cecily would not let the matter drop. She was as patient as a puppy waiting for a treat.

Miles appeared confused. He leaned closer and lowered his voice. “Did she just say posy of *pencils*?”

Chelle sighed and swung the door wide, gesturing for Went to come inside. As she did so, she backed into the butler, who must have come up behind her at some point.

“Pardon me, Gladston. I did not see you there.”

Went was quick to add, “Lest you think she is attempting to steal your job, rest assured that she is a sorry excuse for a butler. She wasn't planning on inviting me in. You, my good man, are more cordial.”

Gladston looked from Went to Chelle before clearing his voice. “I would announce you, Sir Miles, but there is no need to any longer. Do come inside.”

Went gave Chelle a pointed look and murmured, “See? *Much* more cordial.”

Chelle's mother's voice came again. “Gladston, before you go, will you send for Mary Beth? I would like her to accompany Chelle on her drive.”

“Yes, my lady,” he answered before quitting the foyer to do as directed.

*Botheration*, Chelle thought as she stepped into the salon. “There really is no need, Mama. I’m no longer a young girl just out of the schoolroom, and Went has always behaved as a perfect gentleman.”

“Be that as it may, she will be joining you.”

“But, Mama—”

“Chelle.” Her mother’s warning glance effectively silenced Chelle’s protests.

Went gave her elbow a nudge and grinned. “It seems your plan to entrap me into a compromising situation will have to wait for another day.”

Chelle nudged him back. “You are underestimating my ability to adapt, Sir Miles. One quick strike over the head will take care of Mary Beth, and my plan will proceed as intended.”

A small gasp sounded from behind, and Chelle turned to find a wide-eyed, pale-faced maid standing on the other side of the foyer. Her blonde hair and white cap gave her a ghost-like appearance.

A pang of guilt registered as her mother strode past, giving Chelle a sharp look before addressing the young maid.

“Mary Beth, never you mind my daughter. She can be quite vulgar at times, but I assure you, she was only joking. She has never, nor *will* ever, strike anyone over the head.”

Chelle couldn’t agree. If given the chance, she’d very much like to strike a certain Mr. Bancroft over the head—not that she’d convey as much to the maid.

Instead, she shrugged. “I’m a sorry excuse for a jokester, am I not? Forgive me, Mary Beth.”

Still wide-eyed, the young maid retreated a step, apparently not convinced.

Went coughed, or attempted to cough. It sounded more like a strangled laugh, and there was no mistaking the amused gleam

in his eyes. In a ridiculous show of gallantry, he removed his hat and gave the maid an eloquent bow.

“Consider yourself saved, Mary Beth. I should have mentioned this sooner, but I have brought my tiger along to serve as chaperone, so your head is safe from the nefarious Miss Ellington this day. You may return to your duties if you wish.”

Visibly relieved, the girl bobbed a curtsy and darted away.

Chelle frowned at Went, ready to question his use of the word nefarious, but her sister shoved the unopened note into Chelle’s hand, still clutching the bouquet of pencils in the other.

“You must read that before you leave, Chelle. I’m unable to decipher a word of it, even with the light from the window. I swear I shall expire from curiosity if you do not read it this very moment.”

Chelle considered telling her sister that both she and the letter could wait, but that would only prolong their departure. Her family had already intruded on the limited time she had to spend with Went, so she complied and cracked the seal. A glance at the signature made her stiffen and wish she’d left it unopened. Her cheerful mood departed.

Mr. Bancroft, the louse.

“Well?” Cecily sidled next to Chelle, trying to read the missive. “What does it say?”

“For goodness sake, Ceci, let Chelle read it first,” came their mother’s now testy voice.

Cecily frowned but immediately stepped back, folding her arms with a pout as she watched her sister anxiously.

Chelle skimmed the contents before rereading it out loud. “Dear Miss Ellington, Please accept these pencils as a small token of apology for any offense I may have caused in the past. It has come to my attention that you are highly respected in this community, and it is my hope that we might set aside our differences and work together to improve both your school and mine. Best wishes, Mr. Bancroft.”

Chelle immediately crumpled the paper and crossed the room to throw it on the unlit grate. The man had some nerve. She would have tossed the pencils in as well, but that would be wasteful.

When she spun back around, several faces of various expressions stared at her. Her mother was the first to speak.

“That was, er... kind of him?” It came out more like a question, as though she wondered why her daughter didn’t think the same.

Chelle shook her head. “No, Mama. Kind would have been to apologize and leave it at that. Or not steal our teachers to begin with. Instead, he’s learned that my reputation carries clout, and he now wishes to use that for his own personal gain. I don’t find that kind at all. I find it loathsome.”

Cecily was quick to nod her agreement. “I concur, Mama. The note clearly implied he was only reaching out because of her respected place in the community. The man is a scoundrel.”

Went cleared his throat, looking somewhat uncomfortable. “Whoever this Mr. Bancroft is, perhaps he meant it as a compliment rather than the reason behind his apology. I’m sure if he realized you’d take it as such, he would have worded it differently.”

Chelle blinked at him, unsure what to say. Was he defending the man who’d been nothing but a burr in Chelle’s side since the day she’d learned his name?

“Of course he would have,” she said. “He is attempting to earn my regard, after all.”

Went nodded slowly for a moment before shrugging. “Very well. Continue to think the worst of him and allow him to spoil your, and therefore my, day. That will show him exactly how loathsome he is.”

Chelle eyed him a moment before her shoulders sagged. Went was in the right of it. Mr. Bancroft had already taken enough from her. She wasn’t about to give him this lovely afternoon as well.

“How right you are, sir,” she finally conceded, forcing her lips back into a smile. “Let’s not dwell on him a moment longer.” She took the pencils from Cecily and held them out to the butler. “Gladston, please distribute these among whichever servants might find them useful.”

Went placed a hand on her arm. “Are you certain you don’t want the pencils for your school? Your students will soon be returning.”

“I would have to be in dire need of pencils before I’d accept even one from—” She abruptly stopped when she realized she was scowling again and forced her expression to brighten. “Well, never mind him. Shall we be off, Went? The sun is shining, and the outside air beckons.”

With a strained smile, he followed her out the door to his waiting curricule. The proper chaperone he’d procured was, in fact, the lad they’d encountered during their morning stroll along the beach. Cam, if Chelle remembered correctly. He wore no livery and stood in front of the matching grays, holding tight to the reins. Not far from his booted feet, his dog, Lucifer, slept in the shade of the townhome. There was no forgetting *that* name.

Cam let out a low whistle, and the dog’s eyes opened. The moment he spotted Went, he rose to his feet and gave a low growl.

Went scowled in return, and Chelle smiled at the boy. “Hello again, Cam. I see your dog still dislikes my friend.”

Cam grinned. “Aye, that ’e does, Miss. But Sir Miles is a good bloke. Lu’ll come ’round soon enough. Just see if ’e won’t.”

Warmth settled in Chelle’s chest as she glanced at the man in question. “If you think he’s a good bloke, Cam, then he must be.” More and more, she felt the truth of those words.

“Ah, you’ve finally seen the light,” said Went as he handed her up. “I’ve been trying to tell you.”

Once he'd settled in next to her, Chelle leaned into him and quietly asked, "Is it Cam or Lu who is to be our chaperone?"

"Both, as you can see. I could not engage one without the other."

Chelle sat back with a grin. The crispness of the day held promise, she had Went all to herself, and she found no fault whatsoever with his choice of chaperones. Mr. Bancroft and his unwelcome gift would soon be nothing more than a memory.



"SHALL WE WALK?"

Chelle's voice cut through the thoughts racing in Went's mind. He looked up to find her giving him a questioning smile and realized he'd been wool-gathering.

He quickly brushed a few breadcrumbs from his trousers and stood, holding out his hand to assist her up. As usual, she took hold of his arm with both of her hands, and he immediately relaxed. She cared for him. He knew she did. She liked being close, her gazes held affection, and she didn't hide the fact that she enjoyed his company.

Once she discovered that he also happened to be Mr. Bancroft, her opinion of the person she knew would override her opinion of the one she didn't.

Surely.

Every time he tried to convince himself of this, doubts crept in, poking him like a finger to the ribs. Lud. How had his attempt at an apology gone so wrong? He should have asked Sam to read over the note before he'd sent it. His friend would have discovered its flaws before it was too late to do anything about it. Miles had truly meant to compliment her, not come across as an upstart. It was nothing short of a miracle that Chelle had retained an impeccable reputation as a gentlewoman while



also holding a position as a teacher. He'd only meant to point that out.

Gads. His efforts to appease had only worsened the situation.

“Thoughts are more easily sorted when spoken aloud.” Chelle's voice snapped his attention to her once more, and he inwardly chided himself.

“Forgive me. It seems I'm poor company today.”

A dog barked from the pebbly beach below, and Chelle halted to watch Cam play fetch with Lu. She smiled, and Went had the sudden urge to pull her close and hold on tight. During their drive, she'd complimented him on his choice of tigers. He'd liked her use of the plural, and he especially liked the way she'd given his hand a tender squeeze. Many would have found fault with Cam's boldness or the way he'd begged to tie the horses to a tree so he and his dog could roam the beach below. Tigers were paid to stay with the horses, not frolic on the sand.

Chelle, on the other hand, had called it a grand idea.

“You could never be poor company, Went, even when you're in a pensive mood. But should you wish to unburden your mind, I'm happy to listen.”

Would she still be happy once he told her he was also Mr. Bancroft? Miles doubted it. More than anything, he didn't want to lose her trust or good opinion. But how could he not? He should have told her the truth the moment he'd realized it himself. He should tell her now.

She nodded towards Cam and his dog. “How did they come to be in your employ?”

His thoughts returned to the day prior, when he'd encountered the pair along the road—both looking too gaunt. On a whim, he'd offered Cam the few remaining biscuits he'd stolen from the kitchen earlier that day, along with employment.

Miles had explained the role of a tiger and suggested Cam leave his dog at home while on duty. The lad had jutted out his chin with a firm, “Where I go, 'e goes.”

Hence the reason he now found himself with two tigers.

He smiled at the memory. “A fortuitous meeting along the road.”

She cocked her head, giving him a curious look. “Why fortuitous?”

“He was in need of a job and I in need of a tiger.”

“A boy of eight was in need of a job?”

His jaw tensed at the memory before he gave her a quick nod. “He’s actually nine, and yes. He devoured two biscuits as though they were the only food he’d eaten that day. It would have been four, but he gave two to his dog.”

She loosened her hold on his arm and stepped around to face him, halting their progress. Her intoxicating deep brown eyes searched his, and a soft smile made her lips look extremely kissable.

“You’re a good man, Sir Miles Wentworth.”

If only she knew how at odds that characterization was with her opinion of Mr. Bancroft.

“How can you know for certain?” he asked, wanting to know. *Needing* to know.

“Aside from the fact that you rescue boys and bunnies, are kind to all you meet, and has always treated me with thoughtfulness and respect, I feel it like I feel the sun on my face. I now think of the day I met you as *most* fortuitous.”

Her earnestness warmed his heart, quieting some of his doubts.

A breeze lifted a few tendrils around her face, tantalizing him. Grateful he’d left his riding gloves on the seat of his curricule, he caught a curl and twisted it around his finger. So soft and smooth, like her skin. He ran his fingers down her cheek, taking in her long, dark lashes, the slope of her nose, her lips... she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever known.

He cupped her cheek, and her eyelids fluttered closed as she tilted her face into his hand. He fought the desire only a moment

before framing her face with his hands and kissing her.

She responded instantly, grabbing hold of his wrists and returning the kiss with the sort of confidence that had been slow to come before. A heady sensation pulsed through his chest, and Miles felt himself tumble into something he'd never felt before.

This woman had taken hold of his heart with unrelenting fierceness. She was bold and vulnerable, confident and meek. She faced life with the fearless determination to mold, rather than be molded. She was like a silhouette against a brilliant backdrop, not seeking attention but standing out nonetheless.

He, on the other hand, hid in the shadows, afraid and unwilling to be his true self—either Went or Mr. Bancroft, never both.

It was a sobering thought, and he slowly drew back with a keen sense of unworthiness.

Her eyes fluttered open, and she looked at him dreamily at first then with concern.

“Is something the matter?”

“Not with you,” he said, before pressing a kiss to her forehead and gathering her close. He held her tightly, as though she might slip from his grasp at any moment.

More than anything, he needed to tell her the truth and face the consequences. He needed her to care enough about Went to forgive Mr. Bancroft.

He needed a miracle.



AS LUCK WOULD have it, the miracle Miles had hoped for arrived at the Bancroft Seminary the very next day in the form of a new application on his desk. Just arrived from Cornwall, Miss Tilly Baker had ten years of teaching experience at a small girls'

school. She'd moved to Brighton to live with an aunt, saw an advertisement from the Bancroft Seminary at the library, and had applied to the school with impeccable recommendations.

The more Miles looked over her paperwork, the more his smile grew. Once finished, he reached for his quill.



# MISSIVE FOUR



*Miss Tilly Baker  
12 Roberts St  
Brighton England*

*26 August 1820*

*Dear Miss Baker,*

*While I'm impressed with your extensive qualifications and references, I believe you may be better suited to Miss Addison's school for Young Ladies. I recommend that you inquire there first in person. I believe you'll find Miss Michelle Ellington to be likable, fair, and well-respected in the community. If you do not receive an offer of employment as I expect you will, please inquire again at the Bancroft Seminary for Girls. We can certainly put your talents to good use here as well.*

*Sincerely,*

*Mr. Bancroft*

# .. 17 ..

CHELLE RETURNED THE letter to the middle-aged woman seated across the desk from her. Despite her small size, Miss Tilly Baker was intelligent, confident, well-informed, and pleasantly energetic. What Chelle couldn't understand was why Mr. Bancroft had directed her here. It's the reason she had asked to read the letter he'd sent her.

Chelle steeped her fingers, not knowing whether to be suspect or grateful. Was there an underlying reason Mr. Bancroft did not want Miss Baker for his school? Did she have some objectionable failing Chelle could not discern? Or had he already retained enough teachers and had no need of Miss Baker?

No, that couldn't be it. He'd specifically told the woman to inquire at his school if she didn't receive an offer of employment at Miss Addison's School for Young Ladies.

"Oh, I nearly forgot. This came with that missive. It's addressed to you." Miss Baker held out a small, sealed note, which Chelle warily cracked.

*Please consider what I hope to be Miss Baker's timely arrival as another apology. I truly am sorry for any distress my actions have caused you.*

—*Mr. Bancroft*

Chelle refolded the letter and tapped it slowly on her desk, not sure what to think. Every instinct told her the man had some devious motive for this latest apology. Why was he suddenly so interested in making amends? Nothing made sense. Her father had once told her that if something seemed too unbelievable to be true, it was likely untrustworthy.

This felt a little like that.

“Is something amiss?” Miss Baker’s voice jolted Chelle from her whirling thoughts, and she blinked as she pulled her mind back to the present.

“Not at all.” Chelle shoved the note into a drawer and stood. “I’m merely surprised is all. I consider your visit most providential. Would you care for a tour of the school? Our girls will not return for another week, so we can continue our discussion while I show you around.”

A relieved smile met the suggestion, and Miss Baker followed her from the office. As they walked, the new teacher found much to like. The music room, the windows overlooking the gardens, the teachers’ quarters, the library. When she learned of Chelle’s desire to offer dancing lessons at the newly refurbished Royal Pavilion, along with a few short-term classes, Miss Baker responded with an ecstatic clap of her hands.

The more Chelle came to know the woman, the more she liked her. She’d write Susan straightaway and inform her that she’d taken the liberty of hiring at least one replacement teacher. The second, she hoped, would be retained once they met the following Wednesday.

In the meantime, she’d begin composing invitations for the school’s benefit musicale that would take place near the end of September. Chelle let out a satisfying breath. At last, everything



that had fallen out of place was finding a new way back together.

After bidding the recently hired Miss Baker good day, Chelle retrieved her sketch book. It had been some time since she'd drawn a new style of hair, but Miss Baker had inspired Chelle in more than one way. The older woman's severe chignon did not do justice to her enthusiastic, kindhearted demeanor. Add in the modicum of sass Chelle had detected as well, and *voilà*, a simple, loose knot at the crown of the head with a few softening curls spilling out here and there.

Yes, perfectly lovely. At some point, Chelle would find a way to convince Miss Tilly Baker to soften up her look just a little.

She bent the line of her pencil into one last curl before Ari's voice startled her.

"Ooh, I like it."

Chelle jumped, her pencil making an ugly gray slash from the base of the final curl. With a hand over her heart, she met Ari's abashed gaze.

"I didn't mean to startle you."

Chelle laughed and set her pencil aside, rubbing absentmindedly at the streaks of graphite residue on her fingers.

"Ari, what are you doing here? I figured you were out enjoying your last week of freedom."

"I came to rearrange a few things in my room and work on some lessons. As much as I've enjoyed my lazy mornings, I'm itching to get back to teaching. Any word from Susan?"

Chelle gnawed on her lower lip before giving her head a shake. "Nothing, which is strange. I worry something has happened to her. She promised to only be gone one month at the most, so if she does not return by Friday, I shall send an inquiry to her sister."

Ari perched on the edge of the desk. "I did not mean to spoil your good mood just now. You were humming when I walked in and looking ever so happy."

“Was I?” Chelle smiled a little. “I didn’t realize. But yes, my day has taken a turn for the better. I have officially filled one of the vacancies our school will have come January.”

Ari winced at that, but Chelle was quick to wave her off. “No more apologies, Ari. You are doing what is best for you and your family, and I cannot fault you for that. Everything will come about all right, you’ll see. I am meeting with a governess named Miss Standish on Wednesday next, and with any luck, both positions will soon be filled.”

Ari offered her a strained smile. “What is the new teacher like?”

“She could never replace you, but I believe she’ll fit in nicely. She has several years of experience behind her, and she’s quick, kind-hearted, and enthusiastic.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Ari answered, though she didn’t sound genuinely glad. She sounded as though she was only *trying* to be glad.

Chelle rested her elbows on the desk, her brow furrowing. “What is it, Ari? Has something happened?”

Her friend fidgeted as her brow puckered. “I’m not sure exactly. Mother wrote that she has found a solution to my father’s financial distress.”

“That sounds like wonderful news. Why do you look troubled?”

Ari continued to fidget as she walked from one end of the desk to the other before spinning around to face Chelle. “It sounds *too* wonderful.”

Her words immediately took Chelle back to Miss Baker’s arrival at the school and her father’s grave advice.

Ari continued. “My father’s debts are astronomical. What sort of solution could turn that around so quickly?”

Chelle could only shrug. “Perhaps she’s come to an agreement with those he’s indebted to?”

Ari dismissed the suggestion with a shake of her head. “He’s already attempted to make arrangements with several debtors. But unless our apple trees have sprouted money instead of blossoms, he can’t even afford the payments.”

“Perhaps he or your mother has stumbled into some money, such as an inheritance?” Chelle offered.

Ari seemed to mull on that for a moment as she tapped two fingers against her lips. “Perhaps, though I cannot understand why my mother wouldn’t have just said that. I don’t know, Chelle. Something just feels odd.”

“Well,” Chelle said firmly, “if there is one thing I have learned in the past few weeks, it’s that fretting does absolutely no good. Why not simply write to your mother and ask what solution they have found?”

Ari gave a determined nod of agreement. “You’re right. I’ll do that.”

Chelle offered a sympathetic look, knowing how difficult it was to set concerns aside. Much easier said than done.

“As soon as you are finished with your letter,” Chelle said, “Can I entice you to set your lesson plans aside for one more day? I’ve missed you and Sarah both. I propose we pay her a visit and talk her into a walk or ride through the moors. Perhaps her cook will even bake us some custard. What do you say?”

“Give me twenty minutes, and I’d love to join you.”

# .. 18 ..

MILES GUIDED HIS grays around a tight curve before tugging lightly on his reins. The horses slowed immediately, while Cam's dog trotted at their side. It had taken only a week for the horses and dog to become fast friends. Even Miles had risen in the mutt's esteem. Lu no longer growled at him.

This particular Tuesday afternoon was proving to be idyllic. The sun had moved from behind the clouds and the air smelled clean and fresh. 'Twas no wonder people came to the sea in hopes of better health. There was something hale and hearty about Brighton. Or perhaps Miles was just in a good mood.

He turned onto the road leading to the Ellington's rented house. A tall woman exited the front door, tying her bonnet strings as she walked. Miles recognized the graceful stride and attractive curves immediately.

Chelle.

Instead of turning in his direction, however, her feet carried her the opposite way.

Miles frowned, curious as to where she was going at the precise time he'd arranged to pick her up. She didn't appear to

be in a hurry. Rather, she tilted her head towards the sun the way she liked to do when out of doors. Why she bothered to don bonnets was a mystery to him. She didn't seem to care much for the shade they offered.

When his curricle came up beside her, he slowed his horses to match her pace. It took several seconds for her to notice the dog trotting at her side. Her curious gaze went from Lu to his curricle and to Miles before she stopped short in surprise.

He quickly reined in his horses, but not before he'd outdistanced her by a few strides.

“Good afternoon, Went. What are you doing here?”

He craned his neck to look back at her. Gentle curls framed her flushed cheeks. Egad, she was a beauty.

“I'm here to collect you, goose. Or did you forget about our scheduled outing this afternoon?”

Her brow furrowed, and she frowned. “You're early, are you not? You did say two.”

He chuckled and shook his head. “I said noon.”

She remained where she stood while his neck began to ache from looking back at her. He called for Cam to hold the horses before hopping down to face Chelle.

She was still frowning in that adorably confused way. “I distinctly remember you saying two. Though it was rather loud when we said our goodbyes last night. I suppose I could have heard you wrong.”

Loud was an understatement. The dinner party had gotten out of hand. Too many people had imbibed too much, and chaos ensued. Miles's ears still rang when he thought of it.

“Perhaps your ears just need a good cleaning.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “Can you hear me now?”

Ah, there was that look of challenge he so loved. A slight cock to her head, that spark in her eyes. Chelle was a woman he would never tire of.

“I assure you, sir, my ears are not the problem.”

“What is the problem then?”

“Your enunciation, obviously.”

He laughed and stepped aside, waving at his curricle. He purposefully slowed his speech, emphasizing every word.

“Shall. We. Be. Off. Then?”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “Now?”

“No time like the present.”

“But...” She looked down, taking hold of her pretty, rose-colored dress. “You said there is a very good chance I will muddy my hem. I must first change.”

“You heard me say *that*, but you did not hear me say noon?”

“It isn’t every day a gentleman tells me he will bring ruin upon my gown.”

Miles pulled his pocket watch out and flipped it open before returning his attention to her. “How long will it take you to change?”

“I should be ready in thirty minutes if you’d like to return for me then.”

Thirty minutes? Did it truly take that long to exchange one dress for another? Hmm... that would not work. Earlier, he’d realized that he’d miscalculated low tide, which meant every minute wasted was another minute of rising water.

Gads, why hadn’t he simply said he’d pick her up at midday? She couldn’t possibly have mistaken that for two.

“I’m afraid that you must either come with me now, or we’ll have to reschedule for another day. We are running behind as it is.”

She frowned then bent to rub Lucifer’s head, taking her time. Had she not heard him say they were already late?

“Where, precisely, do you wish to take me?” she asked.

“It’s meant to be a surprise.”

“How am I to decide if it’s worth ruining my gown?”

He lifted an eyebrow. "I believe the question you should be asking yourself is if *I* am worth it. You will be spending the remainder of the afternoon with me, after all. And the answer is yes, I most definitely am."

That made her smile. "Are you, now?"

He resisted a groan. "Chelle, we are wasting time we do not have. Will you come with me now or drive yourself mad wondering what extraordinary outing you are missing?"

"That is something my sister would do, not I."

His patience at an end, he held out his hand. "Will you join me or not?"

Cam had apparently reached his limits as well. His young voice rang out, "These 'orses don't like all this talkin'. Let's be off."

She flicked a glance at Cam before sighing and accepting Miles's hand. "Oh, very well. But I really do love this dress."

"As you should," he agreed. "It looks smashing on you."

"Flattery will only get you as far as the first mud puddle," she grumbled as he helped her into the curricule.

They were soon on their way, with Lu trotting beside them and Cam taking his place at the back. Miles directed the horses down the road to the west, the sun hovering high overhead.

He glanced at Chelle and smiled when he saw that she was once again tilting her face towards the sun, eyes closed.

He took hold of her hand.

"Where did I stop you from going just now?"

Her eyes remained closed as she answered. "Just on a quick walk to the milliners. I wanted to purchase a few ribbons for my mother and Cecily as a goodbye gift. They're preparing to leave early next week, you remember. I can't believe it is already time for them to go. It seems as though they've only just arrived. I shall miss them."

"Will you see them again at Christmas?"

“I hope so. I told them I would do my best to sneak away for at least one week. I don’t want another two years to go by before seeing them again.”

It was strange how one short month could bring about so many changes in both of their lives. Really, it had only taken him one day. From their first meeting, Miles had recognized that Chelle was someone worth knowing.

He’d come to Brighton for the sole purpose of establishing a successful school, not to hunt for a woman. But in attempting to do the former, he’d stumbled upon the latter. Now, he wanted both.

“Mr. Bancroft sent me another gift,” she blurted, pulling Miles from his thoughts. She’d already told him about the circumstances surrounding Miss Baker when he’d been invited to dine with her family a few days prior. There had been a great deal of conjecture about why Mr. Bancroft had sent Miss Baker to her door, but in the end, Chelle and Miss Cecily grudgingly agreed that it may have been a sincere apology.

It gave Miles reason to hope.

“Did he?” Miles feigned surprise, happy her tone was free from the distaste that usually accompanied Mr. Bancroft’s name.

A few more days, a week at most, and he’d tell her.

Chelle picked at something on her dress. “He sent a collection of books for the school. Truth be told, I’m unsure what to do with them.”

Miles shrugged, trying to act nonchalant. The books had been among his father’s prized collection. Surely she wouldn’t toss them into the fire or give them away. They had been meant to benefit her students.

“Perhaps you could add them to your school’s library,” he mused.

She bit down on her lower lip, looking out across the sea. When her attention returned to him, her expression appeared troubled.



“I’m still not sure I trust that he doesn’t have ulterior motives. Why is he so apologetic? Why does he suddenly care for my good opinion? It’s as though he knows something I do not, and I despise the feeling of ignorance.”

Miles had no argument to make. He *did* have ulterior motives and he *did* know something she did not. He also happened to crave her good opinion. She’d been correct on all three counts.

To think he’d only just congratulated himself on a well-played hand. Ha. She’d seen right through his every move. He ought to just be done with it and tell her everything. Now, on this road, where she would be forced to listen to him.

All he had to say was, *Speaking of Mr. Bancroft...*

“Forgive me, Went,” she said. “I did not mean to dampen the mood by bringing up Mr. Bancroft again. I just can’t bring myself to like the man. Ari is leaving because of him, and that is something I can’t forgive.”

At her words, his hopes sank, and cowardice won out. Swallowing the words, he tucked her hand through his arm. “Say whatever you’d like, Chelle. I want you to always be open and honest with me, no matter what.”

Which, of course, made him a hypocritical coward.

She sidled closer, going so far as to lay her head on his shoulder. “I wish you wouldn’t say things like that.”

“Why?”

“Because it makes me like you even more.”

How he loved her open nature. Every time she spoke her thoughts or even smiled, the pathetic fool that was he lapped it up. When she spoke of Mr. Bancroft, on the other hand, he wanted to squirm and duck his head.

Their relationship felt like a volatile ride on horseback, soaring one moment and lying face down the next. She’d essentially been telling him, *I like you, I hate you, I like you, I hate you*. Over and over again.

Miles was ready for the turbulence to end.

A bump in the road caused her to lift her head, leaving his shoulder feeling bereft.

She still clung to him, so he nudged her with his arm. “How much would you say you like me, exactly? Do you think me merely tolerable or are you madly in love?”

She pulled away a little and wrinkled her brow. “Are those my only two options? They’re rather extreme.”

“Ah, so I’m more than tolerable. Good.”

She laughed and snuggled close once more. “Yes, Went. You are definitely more than tolerable.”

He lifted her fingers to his lips. “You’re more than tolerable as well.”

“High praise indeed.”

Miles continued driving, keeping an eye out for the small tree he and Cam had found the day before. Located close to the trail, it would be the perfect spot to tie up his horses.

Ah, there it was. He tugged on the reins.

After tying off the horses, he held Chelle’s hand as they picked their way down to the vacant beach. Once there, gulls squawked in the air and water lapped against the rocks. It was a peaceful spot, and he hoped Chelle would like it as well.

Cam had told him about this particular beach a few days prior, when Miles had asked the lad if he knew of any places Miles could take Chelle for an afternoon outing. At low tide, the rocks scattered across the sand created pools of water. For those willing to pick their way around the rocks, small fish, crabs, or starfish could be spotted.

Miles had come yesterday and had been amazed at the sea life they’d discovered after perusing the beach for merely one hour.

“Where have you brought me?” Chelle’s dubious look made Miles grin. It wasn’t the most appealing beach with all of its rocks and grime, but she had yet to see many of the things it hid.

“Will you never learn to trust me?” he teased.

She gestured down the length of her body. “I’m here, am I not? Dressed in one of my favorite gowns, no less.”

Miles did feel guilty about her dress. It probably wouldn’t recover from this outing. “It will be worth it, I promise.”

He took her hand and pulled her forward. Cam and Lu were already working their way around the rocks, crouching, searching, sniffing—at least in Lu’s case—and discovering. Every now and again, Lu would bark and Cam would run over to see what all the fuss was about.

“Sir Miles,” his young voice eventually called out, his arm waving frantically for Miles and Chelle to join them. “Come quick. Lu’s found a crab!”

Miles cocked his head at Chelle. “Yesterday we located several crabs, some small fish, and two pink starfish.”

Interest sparked in her eyes, and she released his hand to pick up her skirts, making her way to where Cam crouched over a pool. Miles chuckled, quickening his pace to keep up with her.

“I have never seen a live starfish before. Do you truly think we might find one? If not, I’ll be vexed that you didn’t include me in your plans yesterday.”

He assisted her over a large rock. “Then we’d best find one before the tide rises. I estimate we have thirty minutes at most.”

She cast him a sidelong glance and frowned. “Only thirty? Why did you allow me to stand at the side of the road for so long? You could have said, *Chelle, I’ve found a place where you’ll be able to observe a living starfish and there is no time to waste*, and I would have climbed into your curricule straightaway.”

“I wanted to surprise you.”

“It would have been as much of a surprise then as it is now, only I would have looked forward to this outing with anticipation rather than skepticism.”

“Duly noted, though I can’t say I’d behave any differently in the future. You’ll just have to learn to trust me, my love.”

She stopped abruptly and searched his face, and only then did Miles realize his slip of the tongue.

Lud.

“I meant to say wretch,” he quickly corrected.

A smile tugged on her lips, and she shook her head. “You did not, and you know it. Admit it, you’ve fallen madly in love with me.”

Her tone was teasing, her eyes sparkling with humor, but Miles could only swallow and watch her nervously. So, it was to be now, was it? She would learn the depth of his feelings here on this rocky beach, with a boy and his dog only a few strides away.

Her smile began to fade as her eyes widened with understanding.

Miles could only guess at the thoughts spinning through that beautiful mind of hers. She wasn’t immune to him, that much he knew, but did she feel as strongly as he did—enough to forgive his deceit?

He held his breath, waiting, knowing he needed to tell her the truth before he said anything more.

“You wantin’ to see the crab or not, Miss Ell?” Cam had taken to shortening her name of late. Miles would have corrected him if it didn’t make her smile every time.

Except this time.

She blinked at Miles once more before looking away, clearing her throat, and moving past him to catch up with Cam. She crouched down next to him.

“Show me where,” she said with a slight shake to her voice.

She didn’t spare Miles even a glance as she watched the tiny crab walk sideways while Cam prodded it with his finger.

After a moment, Chelle's voice sounded more natural. "Do you think he is practicing his dancing steps?"

Cam gave her a scowl of disgust and shook his head. "Looks to me like 'e's foxed."

Chelle snickered, and Lu nuzzled her cheek before scampering off.

"You're wrong, Cam. I believe he is counting out the steps to the minuet. See that sidestep there? Oh, and there's a pli . He most certainly is dancing, though he does appear to be a bit tipsy."

Cam's expression puckered into a dubious frown before Lu's bark distracted him. He hopped to his feet and darted off after his more sensible canine friend.

Miles helped Chelle to her feet. "I think you just lost all credibility with Cam."

"Don't I know it. At least Lu still seems to think well of me."

Miles studied the boy. "He's got a quick mind and could go far in life if he's willing to take time away from scavenging the beach to do some lessons. He hasn't yet learned to read or write, but if I can find a way to teach him those skills, along with some mathematics and science, several opportunities could open up to him."

She lifted her chin and met his gaze. "So find a way."

With her looking at him like that, Miles could easily believe anything was possible, especially with her at his side. She obviously cared about Cam and wanted good things for him. She'd likely want the same for anyone in a similar circumstance.

Just like his father had.

Miles sighed. He had to tell her the truth. Now, before another day passed with her not knowing, not understanding, not seeing.

She'd probably yell at him, curse his name, possibly even slap him. But once she'd unleashed her anger, Miles would have the long drive home to explain everything else. It may take a few days for her to come around, but she *would* come around. She had to.

Until that time, he could wait.

He took hold of her hands, met her gaze, and forced out the words. "Chelle, there is something I must tell you."

"Now?" Her eyes widened, and he realized that she probably thought he was about to declare himself.

Gads, what a debacle.

She glanced over her shoulder at Cam, who was still scouring the rocks with his dog. When she looked back to Miles, she pulled her lips into her mouth and nodded.

"I'm listening."

Miles closed his eyes briefly. When he opened them again, he plunged forward.

"My full name is Sir Miles Bancroft Wentworth. To some, I am known as Sir Miles. To you, I am Went, and to a select few, I am Mr. Bancroft, founder of the Bancroft Seminary for Girls."

Her eyes grew wider and wider as he spoke, her fingers stiffening in his. He searched her face, silently pleading with her to not despise him.

She didn't say anything, merely stared down at their clasped hands before slowly pulling hers free.

Not to be deterred, Miles took her by the shoulders, encouraging her to look at him again. But she wouldn't.

"I should have told you the moment I learned who you really were at the Dresdell's ball. But I was too afraid. I didn't—*don't*—want to lose you over this." He swallowed. "You were right before. I *have* fallen in love with you, Chelle. I—"

"Stop," she said quietly, shaking her head as she stepped away from him. "Please, just stop." Her expression appeared

more stunned than anything, as though she didn't believe him, or didn't want to believe him.

At that inopportune moment, Cam's youthful voice rang out. "Lu's found a starfish, and it's a big 'un!"

Chelle looked Cam's way but did not move. All of the excited sparkle had left her eyes, and it gutted Miles to see it.

*Go, he silently encouraged. Go and see the thing you've never seen before. It's beautiful.*

Instead, she began walking back the way they'd come.

Miles darted after her and caught her arm, hating the way her body stiffened at his touch. He quickly dropped his hand.

"At least come and see—"

"Another time," she said, her feet moving forward once more.

Every part of him wanted to grab her hand and drag her to see that starfish. Maybe then she would show some emotion. He wasn't fool enough to think the playful sparkle would return to her eyes, but it would spark *something*. Anger at being manhandled, most likely, but an angry Chelle would be preferable to a dispassionate one.

She continued to pick her way across the rocks while he inwardly berated himself. Why hadn't he waited just a little longer to tell her? His need to unburden himself had resulted in her need to get away from him as soon as humanly possible. Now she wouldn't get to see that blasted starfish.

He waved at Cam to follow him. When the lad opened his mouth to argue, Miles said firmly, "Tigers do as they're told, Cam. Off you go."

Cam frowned but whistled for his dog and followed them to the curriele.

The entire drive back to town, Chelle refused to speak or even look at Miles. She didn't sidle up close or take his arm as she normally did. She remained perched on the edge of her seat, as far from him as she could safely sit, her head turned away.

He opened his mouth several times to better explain, but any words he came up with sounded wrong in his head. By the time they'd arrived at her family's townhome, he'd had enough of her silence. He twisted to face her.

“You can despise me all you'd like, Chelle, but we have something that people search for their entire lives and never find. If you can only forgive me, we could be great together.”

She didn't wait for him to assist her. She jumped down from her seat, tripping over her skirts in her eagerness to be rid of him. She fell forward, landing with a small cry on her hands and knees. Miles leapt down behind her, taking her by the arms to help her up.

The moment she regained her footing, however, she broke free and darted past him, but not before Miles caught a glimpse of her face. Instead of the anger or coldness he'd expected to see, her eyes were red from the tears dripping down her cheeks.

Devil take it. She wasn't angry. She was hurt.

He removed his hat, threw it at a nearby shrub, and looked across the road to see two women gaping at him.

With an inward groan, he retrieved his hat and drove away.



# .. 19 ..

CHELLE'S BOOTS PLODDED against the wooden floor of her office as she paced back and forth. Normally the room felt spacious and bright, but today, it was a cage. Out the window, a cloud shrouded the sun, and a lonely, hollow sound echoed off the surrounding walls.

Chelle gazed at the small clock on her credenza and frowned. Miss Verity Standish should have been here thirty minutes ago. Had she misread Chelle's note or forgotten their meeting? This was not a good sign in her favor. If the woman couldn't be relied upon to arrive on time for an interview, how was she to be entrusted with a teaching position at the school?

Chelle pressed her fingers to her temples, her emotions already overwhelmed by the shocking news of Went not being Went.

Lightheadedness overcame her, and she sank down on a nearby chair, leaning forward to draw in slow, deep breaths. How could he have done this to her? In truth, she didn't know how to feel or what to think. The man she thought she loved was the same conniving man who'd made her life so difficult of late.

It had been an agonizing blow, bringing her to her knees.

Why hadn't she listened to her initial instincts and stayed far away? She should have learned her lesson after Cedric died and never opened her heart again.

*I am a fool.*

As soon as Chelle had arrived at the school this morning, she'd reread the initial missive Mr. Bancroft had sent, and all of her frustration and anger returned. He'd behaved in a scheming, manipulative way to get the teachers he wanted, and now that she knew the truth, his apologies, the books, pencils—even the appearance of Miss Baker now felt scheming and manipulative as well. He'd taken those steps because Sir Miles had taken a liking to her, not because Mr. Bancroft felt bad about what he'd done.

If Chelle hadn't turned out to be Miss Ellington of Miss Addison's School for Young Ladies, she wouldn't have received any apologies from the man.

She knew that now.

Pain registered in her palms where her fingernails dug into her skin.

Dash it all, where was Miss Standish? Chelle needed to stop thinking of Went or Sir Miles or Mr. Bancroft or whoever he was. He was a mistake of the past, not part of her future.

Her heart throbbed at the thought, which only angered her further.

A maid entered the room and curtsied quickly. "This just arrived for you, and there's a Miss Standish 'ere to see you."

"Please show her in."

Chelle accepted the letter, recognizing the script immediately.

Susan had finally written—and none too soon. School would begin again in only five days, which meant the girls would start arriving in a day or two.

A woman about Chelle's age entered the room. Petite with chestnut hair and an average build, she had a pleasant-looking

demeanor. In her hands were a bonnet and a handbag, and she met Chelle's gaze frankly.

"Are you Miss Ellington?"

"I am," Chelle answered, tossing Susan's unopened letter on the desk before gesturing for the newcomer to take a seat.

Chelle sat down across from her, hands on desk, clasped together.

Before Chelle could ask if she'd gotten the time wrong, the woman spoke.

"I must apologize for arriving so late. I had another meeting prior to this that went longer than expected, and I rushed here the moment I was free. I would have sent a note, but I was unable to do so given the circumstances."

Chelle nodded her understanding. "Well, you are here now, and you've come highly recommended by Mrs. Merryweather."

Miss Standish set her things on her lap and smiled. "She's a dear creature, to be sure, although she's never witnessed my abilities firsthand, so I'm not certain how reliable her recommendation truly is."

Chelle raised a brow. "Were you a dreadful governess then?"

"I hope not. I adored my charge and her family, but she has yet to make her bows, so at this point, I can only trust that I have taught her enough to be successful in society. Only time will tell if that is indeed the case. I was very green when they first offered me the position."

Chelle admired the woman's candor. Honesty meant a great deal to her, especially of late. "You seem a woman of integrity, Miss Standish, which is something we look for in all of our teachers. The girls will look to you as an example. Do you happen to have a reference from the family who employed you?"

Miss Standish nodded but made no move to retrieve it from her bag. "Before we go any further, I must tell you that I am no longer at liberty to accept a teaching position at this school. Perhaps I should have sent you a note, but I was unpardonably

late, and it felt wrong not to deliver the news in person. I'm sorry for any inconvenience this causes you."

Chelle sank against the back of her chair, not bothering to hide her disappointment. Until this moment, she hadn't realized how much she'd been counting on Miss Standish.

*There are other teachers out there. You'll find another one in time. A better one.*

It was no use. Her mood had already been broken and no amount of positive thinking could make it better. All she could do now was pray she wouldn't cry, at least not until after the woman had gone.

She cleared her throat, and to her credit, her voice only sounded a little wobbly. "I'm sorry to hear that. Have your circumstances changed? Are you to take another governess position?"

"In truth, I just received an offer from a neighboring school. The Bancroft Seminary for Girls, in fact. Do you know it? I intended to investigate both schools before making my decision, but I was so impressed with the Bancroft Seminary that, on a whim, I accepted. It's truly unlike me. I am never impulsive."

She was quick to add, "I'm certain your school is equally commendable, Miss Ellington, but what's done is done, and I'm now committed elsewhere."

Chelle could only stare at the woman, her mind whirling. She'd taken another position that very morning? How was that even possible? She'd only just arrived in town.

Then it dawned on her.

Went had known she had a meeting with Miss Standish today. He'd even asked about it a few days earlier, smiling that heart-stopping smile of his and telling her he hoped everything would work out in her favor.

Chelle's jaw clenched as anger boiled and raged.

Of all the despicable, duplicitous, deceitful, dishonest, double-dealing—

“Miss Ellington, are you all right? You suddenly look, er... extremely out of sorts.”

Because she *was* extremely out of sorts.

Chelle pushed her chair back and stood. “You’ll have to forgive me, Miss Standish, but there is somewhere else I need to be. I do appreciate that you took the time to deliver this news in person. It was good of you, and I truly wish you the best. I should warn you, however, that you will be working for the most shady, two-faced scoundrel in all of England. Good day.”

Chelle forced her mouth into a brief, parting smile before storming out the door. At least one good thing had come from this interview. She no longer felt the need to cry.



MILES SAT AT HIS desk, attempting to push aside nagging thoughts of Chelle and focus on the ledger before him. But it was no use. No matter his persistence, he couldn’t train his mind to finish the calculations, not with everything so out of sorts.

If only Chelle would have given him the chance to explain. At least then she would have left with a better understanding of why he’d done what he had, and his chances at earning her forgiveness would have been a little higher. Instead, her emotions had landed her on what she likely saw as an impasse.

Stubborn woman.

Perhaps she would be in a better frame of mind to listen this evening. He would pay a visit to her family’s townhouse and hope to find her there. If not, he could speak to her father or try again on the morrow. He’d written it all out in a letter but had yet to send it. In her current frame of mind, she’d likely tear it to pieces and toss it into the fire before even cracking the seal.

Obstinate, headstrong woman.

With that plan in place, he pulled the ledger to him once more and forced his mind to concentrate. The costs of supplies and improvements were adding up quickly. If they weren't able to maximize enrollment for January, a profit would be nonexistent.

He pressed his thumb to an ache between his brows. That sort of thinking would get him nowhere. He and Sam would find a way to spread the word and convince fathers and mothers to entrust their daughters to a new and untried school.

Somehow.

With a sigh, Miles picked up his quill, dipped it into the black ink, and began writing in a few additional expenses.

The office door flew open and banged against the wall, causing Miles's hand to jerk and leave a dark slash across the page.

What the devil?

His glare traveled from the ledger to the intruder. The moment he spied Chelle standing in the doorway, he jumped to his feet. Dressed in an ice-blue dress with curls spilling around her beautiful face, she looked stunning.

And angry. Her eyes flashed, and her jaw was set in a hard line.

Miles swallowed.

Only yesterday, he'd hoped to see such a reaction. Now that she stood before him, however, looking ready to unleash fire and brimstone, his stomach filled with unease.

His timid, maid-of-all work was attempting to edge her way around Chelle's tall frame, only to give up, stand on tiptoe, and peek over her shoulder instead.

"Beggin' your pardon, Mr. Bancroft, but she was most insistent and wouldn't wait for me to fetch you."

Miles could well imagine the scene that must have played out at the entrance. He might have grinned if not for Chelle's cold stare.

He sucked in his breath and tucked his hands behind his back, ready to take whatever licking Chelle had come to deliver. With any luck, once she had her say, she would allow him to have his. Perhaps then she'd be able to see reason.

"It's all right, Tessa," he said in a calm tone. "Miss Ellington will always be welcome here, no matter her..." He nearly said *disposition*, only to rethink the word and amend it to "insistence."

The moment he said it, her expression became even more frigid. Apparently, *insistence* hadn't been a good choice either.

He cleared his throat and asked Tessa to bring a tea tray while gesturing for Chelle to take a seat.

She stepped into the room, her gaze shooting daggers at Miles. "There is no need to bring any refreshment, Tessa. I will not be here long. You may leave us, however."

The maid shot a questioning look at Miles, as though worried for his safety, or, more likely, whether or not it would be proper to leave them alone. He gave her a slight nod, and she bobbed a curtsy before footsteps scurried away.

Miles folded his arms and met Chelle's gaze, waiting for her to speak. When she didn't, he said, "It's good to see you, Chelle."

It was likely the wrong thing to say, but he couldn't abide the silence any longer.

When she finally spoke, her tone was surprisingly calm.

"Why did you direct Miss Baker to my school last week? Was she not qualified enough to teach here?"

The question caught him off guard, and he frowned. He'd expected a tongue-lashing, not a reminder of a kindness he'd done for her. "In all honesty, I never met the woman. But if she was half as competent as her references and application made her out to be, I would have offered her a position. As I wrote in my note, I sent her to you as an apology. Did she not give it to you?"

Chelle ignored the question, taking another step into the room. “If that was an apology, what would you call the recent offer of employment you made to Miss Standish? A retraction? Renouncement? Withdrawal of said apology?”

She jabbed a finger his direction. “You, Sir Miles or Mr. Bancroft, or whoever the deuce you are, are nothing more than a hypocritical, backstabbing charlatan.”

He could only stare as he tried to make sense of her accusations. Perhaps he *was* something of a charlatan, but a hypocritical backstabber? That, he was most certainly not, nor had he made a recent offer of employment to anyone.

“Who, pray tell, is Miss Standish?” He couldn’t defend what he did not understand.

The question only angered her further. Her fingers clenched into fists at her side.

“You know very well who she is. You were in the room when my sister first mentioned her, and I’ve spoken of her several times since. You even inquired about my interview with her only a few days ago. I thought you were so considerate, but no. You only wanted to know so you could approach her first and pilfer her as you have the others.”

He blinked a few times while he wracked his mind to remember. Ah, yes. Miss Standish must be the governess Miss Cecily had spoken of a few weeks ago—the woman who would be looking for a new position at the end of the year. Chelle had hoped to hire her.

He lifted both of his hands in surrender and walked around the desk.

“I haven’t the slightest idea what you are talking about. I have plundered no one, Chelle.”

When her eyebrow lifted into an accusatory arch, he sheepishly added, “Other than Lady Ariana and Miss Harlow, that is. But I have since reformed and have no wish to come to loggerheads with you over this issue ever again. You have obviously been misinformed.”



Her eyes narrowed. “Misinformed? Truly? Explain to me then, Mr. *Bancroft*, why Miss Standish arrived thirty minutes late to our appointment this morning, only to tell me that she was no longer free to entertain offers because she had just accepted a position at the Bancroft Seminary? If your memory is that faulty, sir, perhaps you should reevaluate your ability to run a school.”

Miles frowned, feeling a bit like someone had clubbed him in the head. Nothing made sense.

Then he remembered. The woman Sam had met with this morning must have been Miss Standish. He leaned his head back and swallowed a groan. Sam had mentioned something about a promising new applicant, but Miss Standish’s name didn’t sound at all familiar. It had to be her, however. Chelle wouldn’t be here otherwise.

*Gads, Sam, what have you done?*

Not that his friend had really *done* anything. Miss Standish must have seen an advertisement and reached out to the school. Sam couldn’t possibly have known that Chelle had discovered her first.

“Chelle, I—”

A stinging slap met his cheek and forced his head to the side. Miles closed his eyes and bit back a curse that accompanied the pain.

Dash it all. There were always two sides to every story. Could Chelle not at least listen to his perspective before railing on him?

“How could you?” she said in a hoarse whisper. “How could you smile and charm your way into my heart while pretending to be something you are not? I despise you.” She spun and stormed from the study, leaving Miles with no opportunity to explain.

Again.

Every instinct prodded him to go after her, grab her by the shoulders, and force her to listen. But when he moved forward

to do just that, a long-ago memory flooded his mind, stopping his feet on the threshold.

*An emotional woman is not a rational woman, his father had once said after his wife had run crying from the room. I will give her some time, and then we will talk through this disagreement of ours. Not to worry, my boy. All will be set to rights in the end.*

His father had been so confident, so sure he could bring his mother around. He'd also been correct. The following morning, his mother had entered the breakfast room on the arm of her husband, smiling radiantly.

Miles, however, felt no confidence whatsoever.

## .. 20 ..

A WARM BREEZE blew across Chelle's neck as she angrily swiped the tears from her cheeks. The weather was completely at odds with her mood. The mostly blue skies should be filled with lightning, thunder, and heavy, dark clouds, not cheerful white mounds of fluff.

Chelle gave the door in front of her three loud raps.

Then she waited.

Sarah and Ian employed only two servants—a cook and a maid-of-all-work, so it typically took time for someone to answer. Often, it was Sarah, Ian, or their ward, Banjeet, who'd pull open the heavy wooden door.

This time, however, Chelle didn't have the patience to wait. She grabbed the knob and pushed open the door, letting herself inside. Where was Sarah? She needed Sarah. Only her friend would understand.

Hearing a deep, male voice coming from the morning room, Chelle tossed her bonnet and gloves on a nearby table and crossed the foyer, ready to tell Ian that she was sorry for the

interruption but she had more need of his wife's company than he did at the moment.

As Chelle approached the door, however, it wasn't Ian's Scottish brogue that met her ears, nor did she see a head of lush black hair. Rather, seated across from Sarah was the profile of an elderly man with frizzy white hair, bushy gray eyebrows, and spectacles perched on the end of his nose.

Chelle paused, wondering at the man's identity and purpose for his visit. His timing couldn't have been more unfortunate, and she immediately wished him to the devil.

He didn't seem to notice her, nor did he appear to have heard her knock. Perhaps both his eyesight and hearing were failing.

He continued speaking to Sarah in a dramatic voice. "... I found my wife's observations most interesting. By her calculations, it's been seven weeks since we have had the pleasure of your husband's company at Sunday services. *Seven*, Mrs. Cullum. I understand he is a busy man, but that is too long to go without hearing the word of the Lord from a man of the cloth. I worry greatly for his spiritual well-being."

He used his hands a great deal when speaking, emphasizing each point with a flail here or a jab there.

Chelle's heart sank. So this was Sarah's new vicar. She and Ian had both grumbled about the man, his lengthy sermons, and his self-importance. Would he be leaving anytime soon?

Sarah glanced at Chelle, only to return her attention to the man. The fact that she didn't acknowledge Chelle spoke volumes.

*Save yourself.*

Chelle had no desire to meet the vicar, but she didn't wish to wait for his lecture to come to an end either. What she wanted was to charge into the room and send the man packing.

Instead, she let out a frustrated breath and took one slow step backwards, followed by another. She was about to

disappear from the vicar's sight when his hand flew in her direction, followed by his gaze. He stopped mid-sentence.

“Oh, hello there.”

Chelle had no other choice than to give Sarah a pained smile. Curse her rotten luck.

The vicar immediately stood and bowed, waiting for an introduction.

With a look of apology, Sarah cleared her throat. “Mr. Fellowes, I'd like you to meet a dear friend of mine, Miss Ellington.”

“A pleasure,” Chelle said. “Please forgive my intrusion.”

The vicar brightened and ushered her inside, as though he were the man of the house. “Come in, come in. All are welcome here.”

As Chelle passed him to sit next to Sarah on the sofa, the vicar's bushy eyebrows furrowed.

“Goodness me, are you quite well, child? I know the look of a woman who has been weeping. Pray, tell me what has brought you such distress. I'm certain I can be of assistance.”

Chelle tried not to gape at the man's audacity, but how could she not?

“'Tis nothing, sir.”

“Oh, 'tis something all right. Come, my dear. Allow the good Lord to assist you through one of His servants.” He placed a hand over his heart to show that he was such a man. “I am here to help. You may very well be the reason I felt inspired to pay Mrs. Cullum a visit this afternoon.”

He studied her with pursed lips. “Hmm... you look well physically, so we can safely rule out illness or a carriage accident or something of that nature. You aren't overly anxious either, so it must not concern a loved one. No... I believe someone has hurt you. Is that it?”

How the man had come to that conclusion, Chelle had no idea, but she didn't like it—or him. If she'd wanted his aid, she

would have asked for it.

“Yes, yes, that is the problem, isn’t it?” His expression brightened, and he grappled for the bible that sat next to him on a side table. With the tip of his tongue jutting out from the side of his mouth, he began flipping through the pages.

Chelle gave Sarah a meaningful look. *How can we be rid of him?*

She shrugged an apology.

“Ah, here it is,” boomed Mr. Fellowes as he squinted through his spectacles. ““Love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you.””

Sarah pressed her palm to Chelle’s forehead, rearranging her expression to one of concern.

“Forgive me, Mr. Fellowes, but I believe you are mistaken. Miss Ellington may look well, but her skin is burning, and, dear me, is that a rash I see?” She leaned forward, making a show of inspecting Chelle’s neck. “Merciful heavens, never say you’ve come down with the fever like your sister. I must send for the doctor at once.”

The bible closed with a thud and Mr. Fellowes shot to his feet, hugging it to his chest like a shield. “I... I’m afraid I must cut our visit short, Mrs. Cullum. I’ve only just remembered I’m expected at the Simmons’. Do forgive me.”

He scurried from the room, and the slamming of a door confirmed that he had, indeed, fled. The so-called servant of the Lord hadn’t even offered to summon the doctor himself—not that there was an actual need of one—but he ought to have at least made the suggestion.

’Twas little wonder that Ian hadn’t attended services for the past seven weeks. Chelle had no desire to hear that man ever speak again.

“Bless you and your quick thinking, my friend,” Chelle said.

Sarah sighed and collapsed against the back of the sofa, appearing exhausted. “Remind me to send a note of explanation

to the doctor. It's only a matter of time before he catches wind of my fib and begins hunting down those inflicted with scarlet fever."

"Do you think word will get out?" Chelle asked. "He didn't seem interested in locating the doctor."

Sarah gave a humorless laugh. "That wretched man spends more time attempting to guilt his thinning herd into returning to church than he does tending to the sick and afflicted. Gossip, on the other hand, is one of his special talents. Mark my words, news of a scarlet fever outbreak will have spread far and wide by this evening. I really should have thought of something less nefarious, but that was the first thing that came to mind."

Chelle attempted to smile, but it was no use. The day had been a trying one and rumors of scarlet fever were the least of her concerns. What she needed most was a good hug and perhaps a large helping of custard. Sarah's cook was known for making the best.

"Tell me what's happened," Sarah said, ready to get to the heart of Chelle's visit.

Chelle tried to think of where to begin, but her mind blocked out everything except the vicar's absurd counsel.

"Did he truly advise me to bless my enemies and pray for them?" she scoffed. "Ha. What a suggestion. If I pray for anyone, it'll be for myself—that my temper won't drive me to do something I'll regret. Oh, Sarah, how could I have allowed myself to care for such a man?"

"Oh no. Are you speaking of Sir Miles? What has he done?"

The concern and sympathy in Sarah's voice were Chelle's undoing. Tears gathered once more as the pain, heartache, and frustration of the past few days reemerged. As much as she'd tried not to dwell on the happy unions of her parents and friends, Chelle had always ached for something similar. She wanted a man to talk and laugh with—one who would hold her while she slept and be there when she woke up. Cedric had nearly been that person, and it killed her to lose him. She'd been so sure she could never feel that way about another.

Every time she saw a couple hold hands or exchange a tender look, Chelle experienced a pang of hunger. At a baby's cry or a toddler's laugh, she would feel bereft. As much as she'd enjoyed her fellow teachers, and the girls at her school, a void remained.

Until Went.

With him, she'd laughed, talked, danced, and cried. He'd kissed and teased her sorrows away, worried about her when she fell ill, and made her world complete. In only a few weeks' time, he'd become her everything.

And then nothing.

Through watery eyes, Chelle met her friend's gaze. "He lied," she whimpered.

Sarah's arms came around her, and she clung to her friend. As devastating as it had been to lose Cedric, he hadn't chosen to leave her. Went, on the other hand, had made a conscious choice to deceive. He'd stolen her teachers, her peace of mind, and now, her happiness.

Curse that horrid man and his equally horrid school.

"Tell me everything," Sarah said again.

Through sobs, stutters, and sniffles, Chelle explained how she'd fallen in love with the one man she detested most in the world. While she cried, Sarah held her close, cried with her, and listened.

In the end, Chelle was a blubbering mess. She angrily wiped at her tears. "I don't want to cry anymore. He doesn't deserve it."

"No, he doesn't," Sarah agreed, procuring two handkerchiefs from a nearby drawer.

Once they had dried their tears, Sarah's tone turned angry. "Do you know what we are going to do? Exactly what that dratted Mr. Fellowes said we ought. We are going to pray for Sir Miles or Mr. Bancroft or whoever the deuce he is—that he falls headfirst into a mud puddle. No, that won't do. We need something more dastardly."



She began pacing the room, only to halt and snap her fingers. “I have it. We will pray that he wakes up tomorrow morning to discover that his hair has fallen out and his face is covered in... oh, I don’t know... hives? Boils? Would that make him less appealing to look upon?”

The combination of Sarah’s absurd words and hopeful look caused the ache in Chelle’s heart to unclench just a little. A smile even tugged at the corners of her mouth. It was nice.

“Perhaps his ears could triple in size as well,” she added.

Sarah grinned and clapped her hands. “Yes, brilliant. What else?”

Chelle gave the matter some thought, ready to climb on board this shift in conversation. It was much less sad. “That a terrible stench overruns his precious school and drives away everyone in the nearby vicinity. Or perhaps an infestation of rodents would be better.”

“I see no reason why we cannot pray for both,” Sarah said, and Chelle nodded her agreement.

“And,” Sarah went on. “While dancing at the next ball, I’ll pray that he splits his pantaloons in the middle of the floor.”

Chelle nodded, liking all of her friend’s ideas. “In addition, a witch can come to Brighton and turn him into a hideous toad.”

Sarah pointed at Chelle. “Or better yet, a horse. We can hitch him to a cart and whip him as much as we like while he drives us around town.”

Chelle snorted. “I think a donkey would suit him better.”

Sarah’s answering laughter had her doubling over, clutching her midsection. “Yes, a donkey *would* be better. Sir Miles will already have large ears, after all.”

Chelle began laughing as well, and the worst of the heaviness lifted from her heart. It felt so... freeing. If she could smile and laugh now, there was hope she’d be able to do the same tomorrow and the next day and the day after that.

*I will get over you, Sir Miles Bancroft Wentworth. Just see if I don't.*



# MISSIVE FIVE



*Miss Michelle Ellington*

*Miss Addison's School for Young Ladies*

*Brighton England*

*21 August 1820*

*Dearest Michelle,*

*I was sorry to hear about the loss of Lady Ariana and Miss Barlow. They are both fine teachers and will be sorely missed next year. Mr. Bancroft seems a foul creature to be sure, but I have complete confidence in your ability to find adequate replacements. There is no one I trust more in the world than you. I have no idea what I would have done without you these past few years. You have proven that you can manage the school's affairs with intelligence, efficiency, and creativity.*

*Now for my sad news. Much as it pains me to write this, I have made the difficult decision not to return to Brighton or the school. My sister's health has worsened since my arrival, and I'm afraid that she will soon be taken from this world. My heart is so very heavy. She is my youngest sister and will be leaving behind a grief-stricken husband and four children. They have become so very dear to me in the short time I have spent with them. Should the unthinkable happen, my sister has begged me to remain and see to her children's care and education. Her husband has no one else, you see, nor can he afford to take on a nursemaid or a governess. As a widow with no children of my own, I am in a position to help, and I cannot, in good conscience, walk away from them.*

*I realize this places you in a difficult position as well, and I'm sorry for it. But my dear Michelle, you are more than*

*capable of running the school, and it is my hope that you will take on the duties of headmistress, at least for the remainder of the year. I would love for you to continue beyond that, of course, but I'm not sure if that is a responsibility you are interested in shouldering.*

*If you find yourself unable to step into my shoes, let me know post haste, and I will begin making arrangements to close the school. Whatever you decide, know that you've become a close friend, and I will support you fully in your choice, whatever that is.*

*Best wishes,*

*Susan*

# .. 21 ..

WITH A HEAVY sigh, Chelle pushed the missive aside and dropped her head onto her folded arms. She hadn't slept well the past few nights, and weariness pressed down on her, along with the overwhelming responsibility Susan had just asked her to accept. But to lose one's sister... Chelle couldn't even contemplate such a thing. Poor Susan.

It had been hard enough to say farewell to her own sister and parents—all of whom had chosen the most inopportune time to take their leave. Chelle missed them already. Her parents had offered to rent the townhouse for another month, but they had responsibilities of their own to return to, so Chelle had smiled, hugged them tight, and assured them she would visit at Christmas.

With the arrival of Susan's news, however, that might not be a possibility any longer.

Giggles and chatter floated through the door of Chelle's office, and she let her eyes drift closed. Her young charges had been back in school for over a week now, and the halls were no longer silent. The added busyness had been a blessed distraction, but until Susan's letter had arrived, Chelle had been

hoping and praying for the headmistress's return. She had no desire to continue carrying on in her stead.

Had it really come to this?

Susan was mad to think Chelle was more than capable of running the school. Ha. The only reason she'd survived the past month was because of her mother and sister. If not for them, Chelle would have become the most recent addition to Bedlam.

Already, a few parents had come by the school, wanting a word with Susan. A stack of correspondence also awaited the attention of the headmistress, along with some questions regarding a change in the curriculum. In addition, the musicale benefit was only three weeks away, and invitations had yet to be sent out. Susan and Chelle had agreed to work on it together once Susan had returned, but now it would be up to Chelle to make it all happen.

How had this become her life? She'd come to this school to teach, not become the headmistress. She didn't want any of this newfound pressure and responsibility. She simply wanted to help the girls better themselves.

Chelle groaned. Why had she come to Brighton in the first place? She could be home with her mother and sister, her greatest concern being what color of dress she should wear or which dinner party she should attend. How wonderful that sounded now. How much easier life would be if she could simply walk away from it all—the school, Brighton, Mr. Bancroft.

The door creaked open and footsteps entered the room. Chelle couldn't bring herself to lift her head, hoping the intruder would leave her be.

“Chelle?” It was Ari. “Are you well?”

Without looking up, Chelle pushed Susan's letter across the desk and breathed in the scent of oil and wood. If she could forget everything for just a few minutes, maybe it would help.

Her peace lasted only the amount of time it took for Ari to read the letter.

“Chelle!” her friend cried.

It wasn't sad or sympathetic or anything of the sort. It was a happy cry. Happy? For pity's sake, had Ari actually read the letter?

Chelle dragged her head up to see Ari's glowing expression. It didn't make sense. Nothing made sense. The entire world had become preposterous.

Ari planted her palms on the desk, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “Do you know what this means?”

Confusion swarmed in Chelle's foggy mind. Did Ari not understand? “It means I'm now permanently responsible for this school.”

“Yes!” Ari said. “This means we can finally make some changes, beginning with the addition of new classes. Like science, Latin, history, philosophy, astronomy, anatomy, chronology. Only think, Chelle! We can offer the most extensive education for young ladies anywhere. Susan would have never condoned it, old-fashioned as she was. Why do you think I was drawn to the Bancroft seminary? A higher wage, to be sure, but I have always been fascinated by the sciences and want to instruct other young ladies in that subject. Women have minds just as bright as men, and we ought to be able to learn whatever interests us.”

Ari's conviction and enthusiasm lightened Chelle's mood a little. She was also correct. Susan didn't care for any change that deviated from the traditional. She was about as set in her ways as a brick was set in mortar.

Wait. Had Ari just said *we*?

Such a small word yet so mighty.

“We?” Chelle repeated aloud, not daring to hope.

Ari clasped her palms together, wearing a grin more delighted than Chelle had ever seen.

“*We*, my dear friend. That is the reason I sought you out this morning—to tell you I have decided to remain here rather than go to the Bancroft Seminary. I came upon Sarah at the landing



library yesterday, and she let slip a little about Sir Miles. I cannot believe he is capable of such deception. He seemed so..."

She must have noticed the stricken look on Chelle's face because she rushed on to say, "Well, never mind him. After my visit with Sarah, I decided I could no more teach at that school than I could become a highwayman—or woman, in my case. Now that I have learned you are to be our new headmistress, I count myself fortunate indeed. Say you will take me on as your assistant. I would love nothing more."

Chelle had no words. She could only stare at her friend as her mind contemplated this change in circumstances. If this past month had taught her anything, it was that she didn't like to go at things alone. But with Ari at her side, maybe they could do it together.

Chelle didn't really want to walk away from her life here. Yes, it had involved hoards of frustration and difficulty and challenges, but it had also brought her joy, a sense of accomplishment and the sort of fulfillment that had been lacking in her life before. She had loved being part of something bigger than herself and enjoyed the many connections she'd made along the way.

Chelle drew herself up and gave her friend a grateful smile. "Thank you, Ari. Your kindness, friendship, loyalty, and most of all—enthusiasm—is exactly what I needed this morning. I would be lost without you to assist me. Of course the position is yours."

Ari clapped her hands and bounced up and down on her heels. "I have so many ideas."

"I have a few myself," Chelle said. "Or rather, my sister and mother do. Perhaps we could meet later today and discuss a few things in greater detail? You have an arithmetic class to teach in a few minutes."

Ari glanced at the clock on the mantle. "Goodness, I nearly forgot. I must go. Perhaps after my comportment lesson this afternoon?"

Chelle nodded. "I will see you then."

Ari spun around, pausing with her hand on the frame to look back. "I was sorry to hear about what Sir Miles did to you. Should you ever need to talk or rant or cry, I'm here. I'll have no wisdom to impart, but I can listen." She smiled. "I've also become fairly adept at making scones if that would help. Smothered in Cook's marmalade, they can be most comforting."

Chelle smiled. "Sounds delicious. Perhaps we can hold our discussion in the kitchen."

Ari spun again, nearly knocking into a maid who had stood patiently behind her, apparently waiting for a break in the conversation.

"Do forgive me, May. I'm running late."

"No 'arm done, Miss." The petite girl with raven hair bobbed a curtsy to Ari before holding out a note to Chelle. "This just came for you."

Chelle took one look at her name on the front and recognized the handwriting immediately. Her heart gave a traitorous skip even as her jaw firmed.

Before she gave in to the temptation to read it, she handed it back. "Will you see this is returned to Sir Miles, please?"

May's brow furrowed. "You don't wish to read it?"

"No," Chelle lied, wanting more than anything to rip it open and devour the contents. But the man had trampled upon her trust and her heart. She wouldn't open the door for further trampling no matter how much she still ached for him.

Another bob and the maid left, taking the note with her.

With a sigh, Chelle retook her seat and pulled a sheet of paper from the top drawer of her desk. She dipped her quill in some ink, knowing she needed to compile a list of details she and Ari would need to discuss. But as she stared at the blank paper before her, her quill began drawing the outline of a man's head, gradually adding strands of wavy hair.

She'd never been good with faces and usually left them blank, choosing to focus on the hair. This time, however, she tried adding those expressive eyebrows, teasing light eyes, sturdy nose, and lips quirked into half a smile. By the time she'd finished, it didn't look at all like him, nor was it helping her to forget and move on. She scratched out the image, crumpled the paper, and tossed it into the fireplace with a frown.

Why did she yearn to see him again? Why did her arms ache to hold him close and her mouth to feel his kiss? She may as well go for a walk in a thunderstorm, asking to be struck.

Demented.

Chelle closed her eyes and drew in a fortifying breath, then pulled another paper from the drawer—this time to write that list. Together, she and Ari would show the Bancroft Seminary just how successful they could be.

# .. 22 ..

WENT GUIDED HIS horse across the Steine, watching the last of the sun's rays filter through the trees. When he'd venture out to clear his head each evening, he almost always ended up here, the place where he'd first met Chelle. Perhaps he hoped to find her chasing bunnies again or he just liked to torture himself. Regardless of the reason, he came, looked around, and tried to think of the best way around the woman's stubborn defenses.

Gads, how he missed her.

He missed the way her nose would crinkle when something troubled her or how her unleashed laughter caused heads to turn. He missed the lift of her eyebrow when something struck her as ridiculous or the way she'd sidle up to him and take his arm with both of her hands. He missed her banter, lavender scent, and her cheek on his shoulder.

She'd become the light he looked forward to the most every day, and now that he'd lost her, everything in his life had dimmed.

He kicked at a rock embedded in the ground beneath him, trying to dislodge it, but the stupid thing refused to budge. Giving up, he shoved his hands into his pockets and leaned a

shoulder against the tree, wondering when he last genuinely smiled.

He used to smile often. His mother had once told him he'd been blessed with a cheerful disposition, and he should never stop finding amusement in even the littlest of things.

If she could see him now, she'd be both sad and disappointed.

Nearly a fortnight had passed since he'd last spoken to Chelle—or rather, *her* to him. He'd not seen her about town, on the beach, or around the Steine. Now that her family had gone, the likelihood of encountering her at a social event wasn't high, so he'd left the socializing to other, happier people.

When Chelle had returned his letter, he'd considered pounding on her door late at night when he'd find her there or even barging into her precious school and demanding she speak with him.

He held back because she'd asked him to, praying time would cool her anger, and she'd eventually demand an explanation. At the very least, he hoped she'd come to miss him as much as he missed her and would magically appear on the Steine one evening.

Instead, he stood here every night, alone.

*Nothing changes if nothing changes*, came his father's voice in his head.

Miles knew it was the truth. He also knew that *he* would need to be the one to bring about that particular change. Chelle was too stubborn and unyielding, at least when it came to him.

What he needed most was advice—some tidbit of help from someone who knew her well. But Chelle's father gave horrible counsel, and it would take weeks to hear back from her mother and sister, if they replied at all. Miles could think of no one else.

An image of a large, intimidating man came to mind, but Miles was quick to cast it aside. Mr. Cullum would no more help Miles than he would a mouse in his attic. He distinctly

remembered the man threatening to cart Miles out to sea and toss him overboard should his intentions be less than honorable.

If Chelle could be believed, his intentions had been downright self-serving.

He briefly considered Mrs. Cullum only to scoff at the idea. Chelle's friend would be loyal only to Chelle. Approaching either of the Cullums for help would be akin to wagering his entire fortune on a game of poker with a high card of three. Completely daft.

Still, the idea persisted, likely because it was his only idea. If there was even a miniscule chance he could get one of them to at least listen, he'd be an imbecile not to try. Not long ago, Chelle had confided that the house he'd delivered her to after they'd danced on the beach belonged to the Cullums, so he knew where to find them.

He pulled out his pocket watch and looked at the time. Half past seven. It was long after calling hours but not so late they would already be in bed.

*Nothing changes if nothing changes.*

With a shrug and a prayer, Miles mounted his horse and nudged the beast toward the road that would take him west of town. Not twenty minutes later, he stood in front of the large wooden door, hoping against hope he would find at least one sympathetic listener on the other side.

As luck would have it, Mr. Cullum answered Miles's knock. His initial look of confusion quickly turned into a condemning frown.

Before the slightly taller man could say anything or shut the door in his face, Miles held up a hand.

"Ten minutes," he bargained. "If you're still of the same opinion as you appear to be now, you can give me the boot."

A petite woman with a head full of deep red curls ducked under the man's arm and eyed him appraisingly. Miles could only assume she was Mrs. Cullum.

Mr. Cullum tucked one arm around his wife's waist and raised the other to the doorframe, and in his no-nonsense Scottish brogue said, "Ah, we meet again, Went. Or is it Sir Miles? Mr. Bancroft?"

He was no less intimidating than he'd been that night on the Steine, and for good reason. Miles deserved to have the door slammed in his face. Chelle would have done precisely that. The fact they hadn't gave him hope.

"What is it you want?" The man's accent was heavier this time, more impatient.

Refusing to look as uneasy as he felt, Miles stood straight and tucked his hands behind his back. He'd only asked for ten minutes, so he couldn't waste time with a lengthy back story.

"To put it bluntly, Mr. and Mrs. Cullum, I'm in love with your friend. She rather detests me at the moment, so I find myself in need of your help."

Mrs. Cullum lifted a brow and folded her arms. Although significantly shorter than her husband, she was no less intimidating. "You expect us to help you?"

"I'm only hoping you will allow me to explain why I did what I did. What you choose to do with the information is up to you."

The pair watched each other in an unspoken conversation. After a few uncomfortable moments, Mrs. Cullum finally sighed and stepped back, tugging her husband along with her.

"I suppose we can do that much," she said. "Do come in out of the chill, Sir Miles."

Miles nodded his thanks and stepped into their home. The sun was beginning its descent behind the horizon and candles were already lit in the drawing room. The walls had been painted a light yellow and served as the backdrop for three large paintings of tall ships. Above the mantle hung another painting of a pebbly beach with blue, rippling waters and small waves.

"I believe you're down to five minutes," drawled a Scottish accent.

Miles turned around to find the couple already seated. Mr. Cullum lounged with his arm draped across the back of the sofa while Mrs. Cullum remained on the edge of her seat, watching him curiously.

Miles sat on the chair next to them, leaned forward, and began his tale, beginning with his father—both a vicar and a teacher—who had a dream to educate everyone within his reach. He told them how he'd posted multiple advertisements on the door of Chelle's school, hoping it would be she who applied rather than her fellow teachers. He mentioned the letter he'd received from her, along with his impertinent response. And he told them about the woman on the Steine who chased after bunnies.

By the time he arrived at the latest fiasco involving the accidental hiring of Miss Standish, along with Chelle's interpretation, it had gone well past his allotted five minutes. Candlelight flickered in the now-darkened room as he concluded.

"I've tried to explain all of this to her, but she refuses to hear me out. My letter was returned unopened, and she has chosen to think the worst of me. Frankly, I don't know where to go from here."

After a thoughtful silence, Mrs. Cullum was the first to speak. "Tell me this, Sir Miles. If Chelle had not turned out to be Miss Michelle Ellington, would you still regret offering positions to two of her friends?"

Miles had asked himself this same question several times. In the beginning, his honest answer would have been, *Other than a few twinges of guilt, no*. But now that he'd witnessed firsthand the anxiety his actions had caused, resulting in her illness, he felt remorseful. The way he'd gone about finding teachers had been wrong. He shouldn't have sought them out nor should he have purposefully offered them a higher wage.

"That's a difficult question to answer, Mrs. Cullum," Miles finally said. "It's because I've gotten to know her that I now feel regret. In part because it cost me her friendship, but I've also seen the physical toll it has taken on her. Initially, I felt sure that



with her connections, she'd have no trouble replacing the teachers by January. But that was just thoughtlessness and rationalization."

Mr. Cullum sat forward and rested an elbow on the arm of the sofa. "I'm curious as to why you have come to us. Are you hoping we will plead your case to Chelle?"

Miles twisted a loose string on the chair cushion. As much as he would love for them to do just that, he would never ask that of them.

"What I've come for is advice, Mr. Cullum. You've both been friends with Chelle for some time. I'm just hoping you can tell me how I might go about earning her forgiveness when she refuses to speak to me."

They both stared at Miles before Mrs. Cullum relaxed against the back of the sofa and snickered.

"I'm afraid I haven't the faintest idea, Sir Miles, other than walking into her school and forcing her to listen to your side—which would not go over well at all, I assure you. Perhaps you could soften her up with a few posies or gifts to the school?"

"Wouldn't she return those like she did my note?"

Mrs. Cullum frowned. "Yes, I can see your problem."

"Perhaps you could arrange to cross paths with her," Mr. Cullum suggested.

"I've tried that as well, to no avail. Granted, I have not laid in wait for hours on end, but I've frequented the Steine, the library, and other places around town, and I've yet to see her out and about."

Mr. Cullum actually smiled a little, giving his wife a playful nudge. "Women can be a stubborn lot, can they not?"

"Only when we have good reason to be," she countered, "and you once gave me a very good reason, just as Sir Miles has done with Chelle."

Mr. Cullum chuckled and shook his head. "You gave me the cut direct time and time again. Did you know Anthony

suggested that we dress up as highwaymen and abduct you and your sister? He was certain it was the only way to get you both to see reason.”

His wife giggled. “You’re joking.”

“Nae, he was in earnest. ’Twas I who had to point out the idiocy of such a plan.”

Mrs. Cullum laughed again, and as the sound rolled through Miles’s ears, an idea sparked in his mind. He mulled it over, thinking it had some merit. At the very least, it was a plan. At this point, any plan, however ludicrous, gave him something to work with.

When he noticed Mrs. Cullum watching him curiously, he rose to his feet.

“I fear I have overstayed my welcome and should take my leave. I’m extremely grateful for your help and wish you a good evening.”

He nearly made it out of the room before Mrs. Cullum’s voice stopped him. “Sir Miles, did we somehow help you? I don’t recall giving you the advice you sought.”

“Do you not? How very odd.” Miles gave her a half smile before making his way out of the house and whistling the entire ride home.

# .. 23 ..

CHELLE TWISTED A pencil between her fingers, despising how all pencils now reminded her of Miles and the ridiculous posy he'd sent her under the guise of Mr. Bancroft.

Horrid man.

With a frown, she shoved the writing implement into a drawer and stood. Perhaps she'd pop in on Ari's arithmetic class to get her mind on other things. Ever since Chelle and Ari had begun hatching new plans for the school, Ari's imagination had come alive with engaging, new teaching methods.

There was now chatter in the halls about arithmetic and how much fun the lessons had been of late. The girls were excited for the following school year, when Lady Ariana would introduce the magic of science to them.

Chelle stole into the back of the classroom to find Ari distributing bowls filled with sticks, rocks, and... were those gooseberries?

Chelle smiled, wondering what activity her friend had in store for the young ladies today. An excited hum of voices echoed through the room as the girls wondered the same thing.

“Hello, Miss Ellington,” whispered Bella, a former student of Chelle’s. Her blonde curls were affixed into an unruly and attractive knot that Chelle had taught her how to do the year before.

“It appears as though you might get a snack during your lessons today.”

“Oh, I hope so. Ripe gooseberries are my favorite.”

A ringing bell rose above the chatter, and the room soon quieted. Chelle sat in a chair behind Bella as Ari began to instruct the young ladies on the basics of algebra, explaining to them that each item in their bowls had a hidden value they must decipher. Using the formulas written on the board, they must first calculate the value of the rock and the stick before they would be able to discover the value of the berries. If their final answer was correct, they could eat the berries. If not, Ari got to eat them.

As a special surprise, Cook had promised to make a large gooseberry tart for every girl who mastered their lessons by the end of the week.

The girls cheered, and Chelle sent a silent prayer of gratitude that her friend had decided to stay with this school.

A large, unkempt dog barreled into the room, causing Chelle to jump and several girls to cry out in alarm. A few girls even hopped onto their chairs, looking terrified, while others giggled, no doubt delighted by the interruption.

“Oh, my goodness, what do we have here?” Ari asked in surprise.

Chelle could only stare at the familiar long-eared brown and white dog. He sniffed at Ari’s skirts before winding his way through a gaggle of girls, finally stopping next to Chelle, his tail wagging happily.

Her hand instinctively reached out to pet him. “How did you get in here, Lu? Where is Cam?”

A young voice hissed from somewhere down the hall. “Lu, where’d you go, boy? Get back ’ere.”

Lu barked in response but remained at Chelle's side.

Cam soon appeared in the doorway, wearing a too-large tricorne hat that fell forward over his glaring eyes. He shoved it back, looking ready to give his dog a tongue-lashing until he caught sight of Chelle and brightened.

“Ah, there you are, Miss Ell. Been lookin’ ’igh and low for ya.”

Disregarding the classroom full of giggling young women, he strode into the room and brandished a simple wooden sword, his hat falling over his eyes again.

He pushed at the hat and pointed the sword at Chelle. “You must come with me or face the...” He screwed up his face as though trying to remember the right word. “Galley?” It came out as a question rather than a demand.

Chelle smiled even as her heart stuttered. She glanced past the boy to an empty doorway and breathed a little easier.

“Do you mean the gallows?” she asked. Went couldn’t be far away. What had he been thinking to send Cam and his dog into her school? She didn’t relish the thought of facing him at all, let alone in front of an audience of young girls.

“Aye, that’s right. The gallows.” The hat fell forward again, and Cam pushed it back with a frown.

Several girls snickered, and his frown became a look of annoyance, as though he’d been tasked to do something beneath him.

He thrust the sword in Chelle’s direction once again. When her only reaction was to scoot back a little, he wiggled the sword as if to get her attention. Only then did Chelle notice the folded paper tacked to the end.

With a wary look at Cam, she tugged it free.

Not wanting to read it in front of the class, Chelle glanced at Ari, but her friend only shrugged. Cam dropped the tip of his sword to the floor and began tapping one booted foot impatiently. They looked like new boots—a gift from Went,

undoubtedly. He'd probably told the boy that all tigers needed new boots.

Her heart tripped over itself at the inconsistency of his character. How could such a good man be so self-serving?

"You plannin' to read it or not?" Cam nodded towards the note.

Chelle fingered the note as her head and heart waged battle inside of her.

"Read it!" Bella whispered loudly, earning a nod of approval from Cam. In so doing, his hat fell forward yet again. He must have decided he'd had enough of the thing because he pushed it off of his head and let it hit the floor, his foot still tapping.

"If I refuse?" she asked.

Cam tugged a large square of blue fabric from his trousers and held it up with a smirk. "I'm to tie you to your seat and tell Lady... er... Areena?"

"Ariana," Chelle corrected.

"... to read it."

Chelle flicked another glance at Ari, but her friend was no help whatsoever. She appeared as intrigued as the girls.

"If the lady refuses as well?" Chelle countered.

"I'll read it," Bella said, no more patient than Cam.

Cam grinned and pointed to the girl. "She'll read it."

He reached out as though to retrieve the letter, but Chelle held it up. She gave Cam a stern look. "I'm rather cross with you at the moment, young man."

He looked more annoyed than contrite. "Sir Miles said I had to come 'cause you don't listen. If'n you did, I could be searchin' the beach for trinkets and the like with Lu instead of standin' 'ere dressed like some fool bandit. Beggin' your pardon Miss E, but you should just stubble it and read the thing."

Heavens. Had Cam really said that aloud? If only she could have told him to stubble it. Chelle could already imagine what

the girls would be writing home to their parents this week.

“What’s the harm in reading it, Miss Ellington?” Bella asked.

Aside from the fact it terrified her, if Chelle had to read it, she wanted to do so in private—not here in this room, filled with young girls who couldn’t possibly understand the precariousness of the situation. Yet how could she not now? Their protests and questions would follow her out of the room and pester her for days to come.

Chelle let out a breath and cracked the seal.



# MISSIVE SIX





*My Dearest Chelle,*

*You are undeniably the most obstinate woman I have ever known. You may have good reason to think and feel as you do, but you have refused to hear my reasons. I'm not the blackguard you think me, at least not completely, and I cannot accept your dismissal of me until I have had the chance to say my piece as well.*

*I strongly encourage you to go amicably with Cam. Should you refuse, I will be forced to do the deed myself, though I doubt you'll take kindly to being tossed over my shoulder and manhandled from the school.*

*Once you are in possession of all the facts, I will abide by your wishes.*

*Yours now and always, whether you wish for it or not,  
Went, Sir Miles. Mr. Bancroft, etc.*

# .. 24 ..

ETCETERA? HOW MANY more names did the man have?

Chelle lowered the note, feeling short of breath, as though she'd just sprinted across the Steine.

Apparently, she would be forced to face Went this very moment. She wasn't ready. She still felt too weak, too vulnerable, too drawn to him.

He may have his reasons for doing as he did, but he could never undo the fact that he'd broken her trust. Something like that couldn't be mended, at least not completely, and she could never be with a man she didn't trust.

“What did it say?” Bella asked.

Chelle's gaze snapped to the young woman's. She had an entire audience of impressionable young ladies before her, all wondering the same thing. Chelle was the headmistress now. The girls could not know that Cam and his dog had come to take her hostage. What could she possibly say to appease them?

“Er... it seems we've all been invited to, er... a picnic... next Wednesday... on the Steine... at midday.” Gads, she was a terrible liar.

Chelle sent Cam a look that dared him to refute her. He wisely remained silent.

Cheers erupted at the news, but before anyone thought to ask who'd invited them, Chelle added, "You may go only if you complete all of your lessons between now and then."

Some girls frowned, others nodded excitedly, and Chelle took the opportunity to make her escape.

"Please return to your lessons, girls," she said. "Lady Ariana, a moment with you in the hall, if you please."

Chelle looked at Cam and nodded towards the door. Thankfully, he understood and whistled for Lu to follow him out.

The moment the three were out of the room, with the door shut behind them, Chelle explained the true contents of the note to Ari. When she finished, she found Cam flipping a piece of fabric around and around into a makeshift tie. Good grief. What did he intend to do with that, truss her up like some sort of criminal?

"There is no need to tie my hands, Cam. We have made enough of a scene already. I will go without further arguments. Ari, can you manage things here while I'm away?"

As much as Chelle did not want to face Went again, she would listen to whatever it was he wished to say then tell him goodbye once and for all.

"Ain't plannin' to tie your 'ands, Miss Ell. I'm to blindfold you."

Of all the ridiculous things. Blindfold? Truly? "Is that really necessary?"

"Sir Miles said it is," Cam said, "and I aim to do his biddin'."

Chelle rolled her eyes while Ari frowned, looking from her classroom door to Chelle. "Should I ask one of the maids to go with you?"

Chelle shook her head. “That’s not necessary. I will return shortly.”

Ari nodded, putting her hand on the door. “Don’t worry about the school. We’ll be fine.”

“Thank you, Ari. I’m sorry for the disruption. Cam, here, will find some way to make amends, won’t you, young man?”

The boy scowled in response, and Ari smiled a little before slipping back into the room.

Cam held up the makeshift blindfold, his patience at an end. “If you could turn around and get on your knees, I’d be obliged.”

“No, I will not.” Chelle took the fabric from Cam and quickly affixed it to her head. She left a narrow gap at the bottom, so she could see at least a portion of the floor in front of her feet. She didn’t trust Cam to keep her from tripping or running into something.

“There. You successfully have me in your clutches. Now take me to Sir Miles so I can throttle him.”

Just as she’d expected, Cam grabbed her elbow and dragged her down the hall. Her hip hit the wall, and her shoulder caught a corner when they turned. At least she was able to avoid tripping over a shawl that had been dropped along the way.

Eventually, she made it outside and down the few steps with only one mild stub of her toe. Cam didn’t seem to notice any of her near mishaps. He was a boy on an errand, and that was the extent of it.

Once Cam finally stopped near the road, a familiar voice sent shivers through her body.

“Take my hand, Chelle.”

She suddenly felt grateful for the blindfold. The last thing she wanted to do was look into those blue eyes. He’d undoubtedly see the unsettling effect his nearness had on her.

His large, warm fingers wrapped around hers as he gently guided her into the carriage, talking her through each step and

making sure she didn't trip or bump her head. The carriage was enclosed, which was odd. Where was he taking her?

Every touch of his hand ignited sparks throughout her body as he assisted her onto the bench. The moment he released her, however, all heat fled, and she suddenly felt chilled. It was a colder day, and she wished she had been able to grab her shawl.

Just as she had the thought, a rug was placed over her legs, giving her immediate warmth, along with a fluttering sensation in her stomach.

"Thank you," she murmured.

It wasn't until the carriage lurched forward that Chelle spoke again. "Where are we going?"

Silence met her question.

Chelle bounced along for another minute or two, growing more restless by the second. She had no desire to drag this out any longer than necessary. Blindfolded or not, every moment spent in Went's company unnerved her.

"You have what you came for, Sir Miles. I am here and ready to listen. What is it you wish to say to me?"

More silence. Chelle knew he sat across from her, but she peeked out the bottom of the blindfold just to be sure. As expected, two black boots took up most of the space, nearly touching her legs. Why did he persist in ignoring her?

"May I at least remove the blindfold? I will become ill if I cannot look out the window." It wasn't the most truthful thing she'd ever said, but it finally got a response from Went.

Rustling, and two warm hands came around her head to loosen the knot. Her skin burned where he touched it, and her heart whimpered in protest when his hands and the fabric slid away.

She blinked against the light shining through the small window at her side. After a moment, Went came into focus. He sat with his arms folded, looking out the opposite window, a veritable statue.

Chelle waited another few minutes before crossing her arms as well. “How long are we to ride in silence, Sir Miles? Your note said you wished to say your piece. Will you not do so now?”

He finally spoke but didn’t glance her way. “All in good time, Chelle. Now hush and enjoy the ride.”

“You sound like Cam. He told me to stuttle it as well.”

Went actually smiled a little, but continued to stare out the window, apparently mesmerized by scenery he’d seen hundreds of times.

Chelle sighed and looked out her own window, watching the streets pass her by. They were heading north out of Brighton. Where was he taking her and for what purpose? Why wouldn’t he explain anything? The silence was excruciating, his nearness even more so. Every bump in the road caused his knee to graze hers, and she had to tighten her muscles to keep her leg from leaning in his direction.

She forced her eyes to remain on the passing trees and shrubs, counting each one in an effort to keep her mind occupied.

*Five, six, seven... eight-two, eighty-three, eighty-four...*

When Chelle could stand it no longer, she turned her glare on Went. “Are we to drive for hours in silence?”

He finally looked her in the eye, his expression maddeningly blank. “You weren’t interested in hearing me before. Why the curiosity now?”

“You have taken me hostage, sir. I can only assume I will not be freed until I have heard you out, and I don’t wish to be cooped up in this carriage for hours on end.” Every second further undid her. Too much more of this, and she’d give into the temptation to cross over to his side and tuck her head into that cozy spot on his neck.

“Fair point.” He adjusted his position and returned his attention to the window. “We will reach our destination in just over one hour. If you wish to fill the silence during that time,

prattle away. I, on the other hand, will speak only when I am good and ready.”

Chelle’s frustration threatened to boil over, and she clamped her mouth closed. Another hour of this torture? Heaven help her.

“You call *me* obstinate,” she muttered under her breath.

He must have heard her because his lips twitched ever so slightly before straightening into that maddening poker face.

The rest of the ride felt interminable. At some point she had to cast aside the rug because the heat from where his leg continually touched hers had radiated through her entire body. By the time the carriage pulled to a stop in front of a small, somewhat dilapidated cottage, Chelle’s head and shoulders ached from the strain, her head from the war within.

Before climbing out, Miles finally said, “A lovely drive, was it not? I make it about two times each week, though I’m typically on horseback.”

He exited the carriage while Chelle stared after him. Two times a week? Here? She looked at the cottage, more confused than ever. Where were they, and why had he brought her here?

She forced herself to ignore his hand as she climbed from the carriage. Inhaling deeply, she waited for what he’d say or do next, assuming he was now in a talkative mood.

He waved an arm toward the house. “Welcome to the humble village of Rayburne, my childhood home. I was raised in the vicarage, about a ten-minute drive from here. When my father passed away, my mother took up residence in the upper rooms of this rented cottage.”

Chelle nodded, trying to take in all of this newfound information. She had no idea his mother lived so close to Brighton.

He held out his arm, and she hesitated before curling her fingers around his elbow. She had to make a conscious effort not to sidle close and grab hold with both hands. Sandalwood and lemons wafted into her nose, muddling her thoughts and feelings.

This man would be the death of her.

Once inside, a friendly foyer greeted them, and there was a door on the right, opened a crack. A quiet hum of voices came from within, reminding Chelle of what it sounded like at her school when the girls were working on one project or another.

Went pulled the door open just enough for Chelle to see several girls seated at desks, conversing quietly while sewing. Some appeared to be embroidering and others mending. Though dressed shabbily, with their hair in various states of tidiness, they appeared happy.

Went softly closed the door before taking Chelle's arm and continuing on to a room at the back of the house. Several younger girls sat at mismatched desks, working on penmanship or letters, Chelle couldn't tell. A tall, slender woman wandered the room, her hands tucked behind her back.

With warmth in his gaze, Went pointed at the teacher and lowered his voice. "Like you, my mother runs a school. Unlike yours, however, the girls here attend free of charge. They are from impoverished families who cannot afford to educate their daughters."

His mother must have heard whispers because she looked up. The moment she spotted Went, her expression brightened.

"Look who has come for a visit," she said, causing several small heads to turn their way. Two girls around the age of seven or eight rushed to Went, wrapping their arms around his legs—one with straight, dark hair and the other with a mass of strawberry-blonde ringlets. He chuckled, obviously adoring the attention.

"Now, girls," said his mother, "what did we say about assailing our visitors?"

The girls slowly released their hold and backed away, the dark one bowing her head in embarrassment while the strawberry blonde bounced up and down.

"Have you brought us lemon drops?" she asked, her chubby, rosy cheeks several shades redder than her hair.



Miles crouched down, pulling a small bag from his pocket. He handed one to the strawberry blonde, who popped it into her mouth before she sped back to her seat. When he held out a second drop, two dark eyes peeked up at him. When the timid girl reached for it, Went held it back and shook his head. “Not until I see that pretty smile of yours.”

She immediately grinned, and he handed her a drop, then gave her the bag. “Will you see to it that the others get one?”

She nodded and darted away.

Chelle realized then why Went always smelled of lemon.

While the drops were being distributed, Went’s mother came to the door and accepted a hug from her son.

“Must you always disrupt my class?” she chided with a smile.

Went put his hand on Chelle’s arm. “Mother, I’d like you to meet Miss Ellington.”

The older woman took hold of her hand and gave it a squeeze. “I wondered when I’d finally get to meet you. Miles speaks so highly of you.”

Chelle wished she could say the same, but Miles had said very little about his parents. “I’m honored to make your acquaintance as well. Your son has been telling me about your school. It’s a wonderful endeavor.”

She smiled and glanced at her room of girls, who now chatted, giggled, and sucked on lemon drops.

“It’s a sacrifice for their families to allow them to come, but we are hoping to give these girls a better future. Many of our former students are now working as ladies’ maids, dressmakers, or in London shops. They are accomplished in reading, writing, sewing, basic arithmetic, and a few other things.”

“That’s remarkable,” Chelle said.

“It is,” she agreed. “But If I don’t restore order soon, they’ll start to think they’re on holiday. Would it be all right to continue our conversation later over tea?”

Went nodded and bestowed a light kiss on his mother's cheek. "Forgive me, Mother."

"Always," she replied before returning her attention to her class.

Went guided Chelle through a back door and into a garden bursting with flowers. Several tables and chairs spoke of charming picnics held here, and two large trees cast shade on a cozy area covered in neatly trimmed grass, likely used for play and exercise.

"My father started the school nearly thirty years ago, when he accepted the post of vicar and saw a need in our community. My mother chose to stand at his side, helping out however she could, and when he passed away, she and I both promised to do everything in our power to keep it going."

Miles directed Chelle to a bench in the shade, and they both sat. A bird tweeted in the branches above, a warm breeze rustled the leaves, and a sense of peace settled around her. There was a feeling of goodness here that she couldn't dismiss.

"My father received an inheritance from his mother and used it to fund the school. However, that money is nearly depleted. We've attempted to fundraise, but it hasn't been effective. What we need is a constant revenue source, which is where the Bancroft Seminary comes in. It is my hope that the profits from that venture will be enough to keep this school running for as long as possible."

He leaned forward and rubbed his hands together. "I've come to care about these girls and their families. I've seen what a decent education can do for them, and I can't stomach the thought of taking away their hope for a better life. For some, it's all they have.

"Chelle, I regret how I went about it, but I hope you can now understand my desperation to succeed. The Bancroft Seminary is new and untried. In order to convince wealthy families that our steep tuition rates are worth the investment, I need to hire the best teachers and offer the highest level of education available to young ladies. I cannot fail these girls,

Chelle. I cannot fail their families or my mother or my father. But in so doing, I transferred many of my burdens to you, and for that, I'm truly sorry."

It was becoming more and more difficult to stay angry, or even apathetic, with Went. Her mind was a jumble, one thought completely at odds with the next.

"Why didn't you tell me all of this back when you first learned of my association with the school?"

"I should have," he admitted. "But the way you spoke of Mr. Bancroft, with so much loathing... I worried you'd send me packing, and I would lose the only woman I couldn't stand to lose. And I swear to you I had nothing to do with the hiring of Miss Standish. Unbeknownst to me, she submitted an application. It was Sam who offered her a position."

He twisted so he could meet her gaze, his eyes filled with intensity. "Chelle, I think the world of you. You're intelligent, stunning, and delightfully forthright. From the moment we met, you captured my interest, and the more I got to know you, the more captivated I became. You have so much conviction. You left a comfortable life to instruct young ladies and help them make the most of theirs. You don't care for society's good opinion, yet you have it in spades. Everyone who knows you admires and respects you, and for good reason. You care about your family, friends, and the girls in your care. You fight for what you believe in, and you love deeply."

He moved as if to hold her hand but seemed to think better of it and clenched his fingers instead. "If these past few weeks have taught me anything, it's that I don't like my life without you in it. I am in love with you, and I'll do whatever it takes to earn your forgiveness, even if it takes years."

Chelle swallowed the ever-increasing lump in her throat. *This man*. Weeks ago, he had pulled her heart out of hiding, only to send it scurrying right back, more injured than before. Chelle had vowed she would never forgive or trust him again, but now she wanted so badly to do exactly that.

Went cared about those in his charge just as much as she did. His mother and father, those darling girls, Cam, Lu... her.

As a young girl, Chelle had gone for a ride one afternoon. A snake slithered from the bushes, spooking her horse, and she'd been thrown to the ground. A groom rushed to her aid, making sure she wasn't injured. Her horse slunk back as well, sniffing at her aching shoulder, but Chelle had pushed it away and told it to go to the devil.

The groom had assisted her to her feet and gestured at the horse. "She didn't mean to toss you, Miss. The snake scared 'er, is all. But see 'ow she came back, all 'umble-like? That's 'er way of makin' amends, and a good thing too. A 'orse willin' to make amends is a 'orse worth keepin', I'd say."

Perhaps a man willing to make amends was a man worth keeping as well.

Her jumble of thoughts slipped away as she studied Went's face. Imperfection, humility, and forgiveness were beautiful things. They healed and mended—not erasing the wounds, per se, but somehow creating a stronger bond than before, the way scars could do with skin.

Chelle grazed Went's cheek with her fingertips, noting the smile lines around his mouth, the creases around his eyes, and the grooves between his brows that always expressed so much.

Yes, he was definitely worth keeping.

"I love you too," she said.

He sat up straighter, and his eyes conveyed a mixture of disbelief and hope. He covered her hand as though worried she'd withdraw it.

Without thinking, Chelle pressed her lips to his. He stiffened for a moment, then his mouth moved across hers, stirring up feelings she had tried so hard to suppress. Not anymore. She let them come, savoring the warmth of his lips and the touch of his fingers at her neck. She inhaled the smells of lemon and sandalwood, kissing him with the fervency of a woman who'd been starved for his affection.

How she wanted this—him—always and forever.

“Yes,” she whispered against his lips.

He pulled back, his expression a delightful combination of confusion, amusement, and pleasure. “Yes?”

Chelle nodded. “Yes, I forgive you, yes, I will help you run our school, and yes, I will marry you.”

His grin widened. “I, er... don’t believe I asked you to marry me, and did you say *our* school?”

She frowned, and her hands fell away from his face. “Not in those precise words, but you said you wanted me by your side, that you didn’t like your life without me in it, and that you love me. What else am I to infer—that you wish me to be your assistant?”

He laughed out loud, then stood and pulled her into his arms, holding her close.

“Obstinate *and* presumptuous. I like it.”

His warm breath on her ear sent goose bumps racing down her skin. She breathed him in, thinking lemon drops the best treat in the world. How good it felt to be in his arms again.

“What did you mean by *our* school, exactly?” he murmured.

She buried her forehead in his neck, feeling like she couldn’t get close enough. “Have you not heard? I am now the official headmistress for Miss Addison’s School for Young Ladies. Rather than continue to compete for teachers and students, would it not make sense to combine our efforts into the creation of one, larger school?”

He took her by the shoulders and stared at her. “Do you mean it?”

“I do.”

He pulled her close and kissed her soundly. “I like the way you think.”

And she liked the way he felt.

She wound her arms around him and buried her face into his neck. “There is the matter of the name, however,” she murmured.

“Mine? Or the school’s?”

She looked up at him, her fingers playing with his hair. “While I don’t mind Bancroft, especially now that I know it was your father’s name, I don’t care for the word seminary. It’s too bland. Or stern? Something. I can’t say for certain. What about the Bancroft Academy for Young Ladies instead?”

He shrugged. “I would name it The School for Giggling Girls if that is your wish, although I doubt such a title would go over well with parents.”

She laughed. “You should leave the name to me then. With Ari’s help, we will make it the biggest and the best school for young ladies in England. We’ll focus on education, improvement, innovation, and fun. Parents from far and wide will wish to send their girls to our school, and we will use whatever profits we acquire to help educate as many underprivileged children as we can—boys and girls alike. Cam would surely benefit from some tutelage, would he not?”

“He would indeed.” Miles pulled her close once more. “I have to say, when I arranged to have you abducted, I did not expect such a happy outcome.”

“Should you ever have me abducted again, you will not *get* such a happy outcome.”

He dropped a quick kiss on her forehead. “As much as I’m enjoying holding and kissing you, I should tell you that my mother’s class is through that window there.”

Chelle sprang away from him, her face burning. What had he been thinking to allow them to carry on as they had for so long? In front of his *mother*, of all people, not to mention those young, innocent girls.

She’d never felt more mortified.

“Not to worry, my love, the girls face the opposite direction.”

Her shoulders relaxed in relief, at least until he added, “My mother, on the other hand...” He waved at the window and Chelle caught the movement of someone waving back.

Merciful heavens.

She grabbed his arm and dragged him away from the window and behind a hedge. What an impression to make. She would never be able to face that woman again.

“I may very well pummel you, sir,” she muttered.

“Can you wait until after we are wed? I would hate to have a blackened eye or a broken nose on our wedding day.”

She pressed her fingertips to her forehead, her face still burning. “What wedding day? As you so callously pointed out, you’ve not yet asked for my hand.”

“I don’t need to any longer. You’ve already agreed.”

Chelle could only stare at him and wonder how she’d gotten herself into this regrettable conversation. He’d undoubtedly tell their friends or future children about how his wife had thrown herself at him, brazenly asking for a dance at a ball then later agreeing to marry him before he had a chance to propose.

Heavens. His version of the tale would not flatter her in the least.

She played with the simple chain at her throat. “It seems our story is in need of a revision, sir.”

He watched her with a playfulness that was entirely too attractive. “What sort of revision?”

“You *did* ask me to marry you.”

“I did?”

“Yes. But only after a great deal of begging and pleading and groveling did I finally say yes.”

He grinned. “How very glad I am that you did.”

He said it so agreeably that she didn’t mind at all when he kissed her again.





# .. 25 ..

CHELLE CLUTCHED WENT'S arm as they crept through the dark hallways of her school, stopping to check each classroom along the way. The sun had long since retired, and from the stillness surrounding them, so had the teachers, the girls, and the rest of the staff. Chelle should have asked to be dropped off at her townhome, but she wanted to collect her reticule and see that all was well with the school first.

Went had insisted on accompanying her.

The hallways were freshly swept and mopped, the classrooms tidy, and the windows and doors locked tight. Everything appeared ready for the following day.

"Bless Ari," Chelle whispered as she led the way to her office. It seemed her friend had managed very well in Chelle's absence.

He pulled the office door open and gestured for her to precede him inside. "Do you think she'll be glad of our, er... alliance?"

A small candle flickered in the room, and Chelle was surprised to find Ari still awake and seated behind the desk, her

profile to them as she stared out the darkened window. She had probably been working on a new lesson plan or something of that nature. She and Chelle had taken to sharing the large desk as Chelle and Susan once had.

“Why not ask her yourself?” Chelle told Went with a smile. “Ari, I’m glad you have not retired just yet. We have news.”

Chelle’s smile faded when Ari grabbed her shawl and began wiping her eyes. What in the world? Ari wasn’t one to cry without a good reason. Something must be terribly wrong.

Chelle stepped forward, her stomach in knots. “Ari, what has happened?”

Ari abruptly stood and turned her back to them, obviously horrified at being caught in such a state. She wore her dressing gown, and her long blonde hair hung loosely about her shoulders.

Chelle looked at Went in confusion, but he was already pulling a handkerchief from his coat pocket. Silently he handed it to Chelle before saying quietly, “I will wait for you in the carriage.”

Chelle nodded, but Ari held up her hand with a sniff. “Please stay, Sir Miles. I’m sorry you have discovered me in such a state. Give me a moment, and I will be better.”

She inhaled deeply and turned to face them, her puffy eyes darkened by the shadows in the room. “I’d like to hear your news, especially if it means the two of you have come to an understanding. Is that what you meant by *alliance*? Is there to be a wedding in your future? I so hoped that would be the case.”

Her voice wavered as she spoke, and Chelle understood completely. Ari was barely holding herself together.

Before Chelle could say anything, Ari rushed on to add, “If that is the case, you should consider a merger of your schools. It is the perfect solution.” She paused, and her eyes grew wide. “Or is that the alliance you spoke of? Goodness me, did I jump to the wrong conclusion? Please say you are to be married as well or I shall die of mortification.”

Chelle approached Ari and tucked the handkerchief into her hand before giving it a gentle squeeze. “We will share our news in time, but for now, will you not tell us what has you so upset?”

With a dab at her eyes and another sniff, Ari finally nodded. “A letter arrived earlier from my mother, but I’d forgotten about it until I was preparing for bed, so I sneaked down to read it.”

She closed her eyes and shook her head as more tears trickled down her cheeks.

“A wealthy tradesman has purchased all of my father’s debts. If he cannot pay him by the month’s end, he will be sent to debtor’s prison. That is, unless I agree to marry the man’s son. In that event, the debt will be forgiven.”

Chelle’s mouth fell open, and any words of comfort she’d been about to say became a bitter dust in her mouth. She could only stare, her mind empty of everything except an incessant thrumming. Shock had a bizarre way of slowing time and making reality feel like it couldn’t possibly be real.

“No,” Chelle finally managed to say, her voice so quiet she could hardly hear herself.

As her thoughts reformed, she shook her head, saying, “No” again, only louder this time and with more conviction.

What sort of man would manipulate another in such a way? This tradesman must be a selfish, unfeeling sort who cared more for Lady Ariana’s title than anything else.

“You don’t have to, Ari. They cannot force you to wed.”

Even as Chelle voiced her thoughts, she knew what Ari’s answer would be. Chelle’s would have been the same. But oh, how she hated the answer.

“What sort of daughter would I be if I allowed my father to go to prison when there is something I can do to stop it? I could never live with myself if I did that.”

Chelle frantically searched her mind for another solution. “How much does he owe?” Perhaps Chelle could—

“Sixty thousand pounds.”

The widening of Went's eyes told Chelle that he was equally astonished. The sum was astronomical. How had her father gotten in so deep?

Chelle swallowed a large and painful lump, knowing there was little she or anyone else could do to change the circumstances. This couldn't be happening to Ari. She was too good, too kind.

"Do you know anything about his son?" Chelle asked.

Ari sat down on the top of the desk and gave a pitiful shrug. "Mother writes that he's pleasing to look upon and congenial. But how congenial can he be with a father such as his? Oh, Chelle, what if he's an upstart as well and only wishes for a wife who can adorn his arm and gain him entrance into balls and parties?"

"What if he's not?" Chelle countered, determined to choose hope over hopelessness. "Many children are not like their parents. You and your mother, for example, are opposites. Perhaps he has a good heart and feels the same as you do now."

"I can only pray that he does." She dabbed at her eyes again, adding, "They want us to wed in January. At least I'll be allowed to finish the school year."

Only then did Chelle realize that this was more than an unwanted union. It was an unwanted life. Ari would be required to leave behind everything she held dear to live with a stranger somewhere away from here.

"Where will you live?"

"We are to be given a small estate in Essex near the coast," Ari choked out. "Essex is lovely, isn't it? I've never been."

Chelle's heart ached for her friend. Some obstacles were misery to bear, but at least Cedric's death had come with options and multiple paths to take. Ari's, on the other hand, did not. One path. One choice. All because of mistakes her father had made.

It wasn't fair.

*Please let him be a good man, Chelle prayed. Let Ari find some happiness along this path.*

Her friend deserved nothing less.

With renewed determination, Chelle took Ari by the shoulders and tried to sound as confident as she could.

“He will be handsome, kind, funny, and supportive. He will come to love you to distraction, because how could he not? And he will rent a house for the both of you here in Brighton so you can continue teaching with us. I know it, Ari. You deserve nothing less.”

Ari nodded, and with shimmering eyes even managed a smile. “I shall *make* him love me. Perhaps he’ll agree to come for at least part of the year. We can hire an excellent steward to manage the estate while we are away.”

“For the first year, perhaps,” Chelle insisted. “But then he will fall in love with Brighton as well and decide to make it your new home. That is what I’ll be praying for.”

Ari nodded even though they both knew the odds of such hopes coming to fruition were not in her favor. She wrapped her arms around Chelle and hugged her tight. “Essex is not so far away. Say you’ll visit me.”

“I’ll come as often as I can. I swear.”

Ari drew in a deep breath, released Chelle, and squared her shoulders. “I can do this. For my father, I can.”

Chelle nodded, knowing without a doubt Ari could do anything. She was strong, wise, creative, and determined. One way or another, she would create a beautiful life for herself.

But oh, how Chelle would miss her.

Went cleared his throat, reminding both women of his presence. “Perhaps something could be written into the marriage contract stating that Lady Ariana will be at liberty to return to Brighton every four or five weeks to instruct a two-week class. She can teach one of those temporary classes that your sister suggested, Chelle.”

Ari’s brow wrinkled in confusion. Chelle had yet to tell her friend about Cecily’s idea of temporary classes because they’d had too many other things to discuss. She corrected that

oversight immediately, explaining that Ari's situation could work perfectly with it, assuming her new husband and father-in-law-to-be would agree.

“My business partner happens to be a solicitor,” Went added. “He could easily draw up an addendum to your marriage contract. If this tradesman really does only care about your title, he shouldn't have a problem with the terms.”

For the first time since they'd happened upon Ari in her distraught state, her expression brightened with hope. “Do you truly think that we could arrange such a thing? I believe my father would be amenable to it as well.”

“I don't see why not. If you write to your father, I'll ask Sam to begin the paperwork first thing in the morning.”

“Sir Miles, thank you. Even if my marriage turns out to be a disaster, at least I'll have those precious weeks to look forward to every other month. I could not ask anything more.”

Chelle disagreed. Ari could ask for a great deal more. She was just too good to do it.

“In the meantime,” Ari said, wiping away the last of her tears. “I propose that we raid the kitchen for some leftover scones and gooseberry jam while you tell me about your alliance.”



BONUS  
MISSIVE



*My Obstinate, Presumptuous Crustacean's Carapace,*

*Please do not question or torment young Cam and his scalawag dog. (I heard you made his task rather difficult the last go around.) Accept your fate with your usual grace, and there will be a pleasant surprise awaiting you in the end. Hurry. Time is of the essence.*

*Your cohort, now and forever,*

*Went*



# · · · Epilogue · · ·

CHELLE'S SMILE WILTED when she looked up to see Cam rolling that blasted blue piece of triangular-shaped fabric. Did he really mean to blindfold her again? Honestly.

Cam must have refused to wear the tricorne hat this time because the only thing he entered her townhouse with this morning was that pitiful-looking wooden sword. Chelle had only finished her coiffure when her maid had announced a visitor. Cam stood at the bottom of the stairs with Lu, tapping his foot impatiently.

Silently, Chelle held out her hand, and with a confident tilt of his chin, Cam placed the blindfold in it. Lu barked as she tied the fabric around her eyes, leaving it loose like she'd done before.

As soon as she'd finished knotting it, Cam grabbed her arm and began pulling her out the door.

Her left shoulder hit the door and her right, the door frame. Chelle inwardly cursed, deciding she needed to have a word with Went about training his young tiger in gentlemanly manners. One was never too young to learn etiquette, after all.

“I hope you don’t intend to make a career out of abducting people,” she said to Cam as he dragged her down the steps.

“Nah,” he replied. “I aim to be a cabin boy on one of Mr. Cullum’s ships.”

In the two months since Chelle and Went had announced their betrothal, they had introduced Cam to the Indian boy Mr. and Mrs. Cullum had taken on as their ward. Banjeet had rhapsodized about the virtues of life on board a ship, and Cam was now convinced he wanted the same. He couldn’t wait for his first excursion to France, which would occur only once he’d mastered all of his letters.

Larger, gentler, and more desirable hands clasped Chelle around the waist, holding her close.

“That didn’t take long, Cam,” Went said. “You’re to be commended.”

Chelle opened her mouth to say she deserved equal commendation, but Went scooped her into his arms and set her on the seat of what had to be his curricule. She peeked out the bottom of her blindfold to make sure.

“I see that Cam forgot your bonnet and shawl. Would you like him to retrieve them? We’ll be out of doors for a few hours at least.”

“Yes, thank you.” She could only imagine the scowl on Cam’s face when he was tasked with going back to retrieve her items.

The moment Went settled on the seat beside her, Chelle grabbed hold of his arm. “Do you remember me telling you that if you had me abducted again, the outcome wouldn’t be a happy one?”

“Perhaps you should consider this more of a surprise than an abduction.”

She smiled and shook her head, not feeling at all put out, even with the blindfold on. “Where are you carrying me off to today?”

“If I told you that, it wouldn’t be a surprise, would it? Now hush, and enjoy the ride.”

Cam returned with her bonnet and shawl, which she placed on her lap for now. She would put them both on once they reached their destination, wherever that was.

A slight chill in the air had her snuggling closer to Went’s side, soaking up his warmth and breathing in the mixture of salty air, sandalwood, and lemons.

The past two months had come and gone in a blur of activity. The benefit musicale went off without a hitch, thanks to the help of Ari, Went, and even Sam. They had also been busy readying the new school and advertising for students. Already, thirty-two young women were registered to begin the first of January, with openings for eight more. They’d had so much interest that Chelle was certain the last few spots would fill up in no time at all.

She couldn’t wait.

There would be lessons, excursions, recitals, banquets, and a great deal of fun. For the girls whose parents approved, Chelle hoped to take a small group to Went’s childhood village and introduce them to Mrs. Wentworth and her girls. Perhaps they could organize a collection of clothes, school supplies, and other necessities to donate.

Chelle hoped to open her pupil’s eyes to the needs of others and encourage a more charitable spirit among them. She wanted her girls to aspire to more than just making a good match. She wanted them to be involved in their communities, raise kind children, and find the sort of fulfillment she had found as a teacher. There was so much more to life than balls, parties, and picnics. There was a community of people from all walks of life who could benefit from the variety of skills and talents her pupils possessed.

She laid her head against Went’s sturdy shoulder. “Only forty-one more days until we are wed. Are you ready to take me on as your wife?”

“I was ready two months ago,” he answered.

They had decided—or rather Chelle insisted—that they would marry in December, when most of their family and friends could attend. The date had been set for the seventeenth, eight days before Christmas and the day after school would end for the year. Many of her students and their parents planned to attend as well.

It would be a chaotic, beautiful time, surrounded by all those they cared about.

So much to do and so little time.

Oddly enough, however, Chelle didn't feel the usual strain and worry that accompanied such thoughts. Went had a delightful way of calming her nerves and making her believe that everything would work out as it should. She loved that about him. She loved so many things about him.

The curricle finally rattled to a stop, and Went directed Cam on how and where to tie off the horses. As Went lifted her down, the sounds of Lu scampering away and Cam chasing after him barely registered. Chelle was caught up in Went's nearness and the gentle way he took care of her.

She leaned into him and wound her arms around his waist, holding him close. If there was one benefit to having her eyes covered, it was this. She was oblivious to anyone who might be watching.

He returned her hug and placed a lingering kiss on her forehead.

“Can I remove the blindfold now?” she asked.

He chuckled. “Obstinate, presumptuous, *and* impatient. What will be next? Domineering?”

“And more,” she warned as she nuzzled her face into that cozy nook under his jaw.

He kissed her cheek, his breath warm against her ear as he murmured, “Come. We are nearly there.”

He placed her shawl and his arm around her shoulders and guided her down a sandy and rocky path. It was slow going, but

eventually a variety of sounds reached her ears—giggling girls, a dog panting, gulls squawking, water lapping at the shoreline.

As Went finally stopped to untie her blindfold, Chelle knew with certainty it was *her* girls who had gathered around them. Bella's voice shushed the others, and Lily's giggle was too distinct to be anyone else's.

When the blindfold at last fell away, the happy scene before her included the cheerful faces of twelve young ladies and their good-natured teachers, Ari included. They were all there, watching and waiting with anticipation.

What they expected her to do or say, Chelle wasn't sure.

Still behind her, Went took hold of her shoulders and said in her ear, "Look down."

Near her boots, in a small pool created between some rocks, two pale-orange starfish clung to dark stones. Chelle gasped and dropped down into a crouch, loving that Went had brought her here.

She ran her fingers along the ridges and bumps. They were unusual, remarkable creatures. So beautiful.

"It's a starfish," one of the younger girls said excitedly.

"She already knows that, silly," came another response.

Chelle smiled at them both. "I've never seen a live one before. Aren't they fascinating?"

The girls all nodded, and Bella pointed behind them. "We found a few more over there if you wish to see them. After we are done searching, Lady Ariana has arranged for us to have a picnic with jams and scones. Isn't that exciting?"

Ari was quick to correct her. "This outing was actually Sir Miles's idea. I only asked Cook for her help."

The girls must have tired of the conversation because many of them scampered off. Chelle brushed her hands on her skirts before standing and placing a kiss on Went's cheek. There were a few giggles and whispers, but Chelle didn't care. She adored the man.

“Thank you,” she told him.

“For muddying your frock? You’re most welcome.”

Sure enough, the hem of one of her favorite blue gowns had turned brown and dingy. But Chelle didn’t care. It was a glorious day, and her spirits were high.

Went set her bonnet on her head and tied the strings below her chin.

“All set,” he announced.

She took his proffered hand and began walking along the beach with him. Lu barked and splashed, making the girls near him squeal and laugh. Cam doggedly searched for treasure while Chelle and Went observed a few more starfish, along with some crabs and small fish.

Later, while they ate, talked, and laughed, gulls swooped low, trying to steal the scones Cook had prepared. The morning couldn’t have been any more perfect.

As soon as they’d eaten, Ari made efficient work of gathering everyone together for the return trip to the school. The teachers still had lessons to teach, after all.

The girls grumbled, but Ari won in the end.

When Chelle began to trail after them, Went held her back.

“We don’t have to go just yet. Ari said she could manage things until you return.”

Of course she could. Ari could do anything. Chelle hated thinking about the day they’d have to bid her friend goodbye, at least for a short while.

Went moved in front of Chelle and lifted her hands, intertwining their fingers and pressing his palms to hers.

“There is something I must ask you.”

Chelle cocked her head and waited, the breeze whipping around them and blowing his hair across his forehead. He was so handsome, so good. She couldn’t believe he would soon be hers.

“Will you do me the honor of marrying me next month?” he asked with that endearing crooked smile.

Chelle opened her mouth to say that she would very much like that, but before she could speak, he added, “No need to say anything. I already have your answer—which cannot be changed at this point, mind you. I just needed to ask the question. It has never set well with me that you skipped that part.”

She laughed. “Does this make our story complete then? Lest you forget, you begged and pleaded and—”

“Groveled. Yes, yes. Though I think it only fair that if *you* should get to embellish a story, so should I.”

“Very well. Which story would you like to embellish, sir?” She grinned.

After a thoughtful moment, he said, “Should someone ask us how we first met, I think you should say that I assisted you in catching... well, something that sounds more impressive than bunnies.”

“Such as what? Reptiles or foxes?”

“Foxes will do nicely.”

“Why, exactly, would I be attempting to catch foxes?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t the faintest idea. Why were you?”

His so-called embellishments weren’t his at all. They were hers. The toad.

“Because they threatened my bunnies, of course. Rather than hunt the foxes down, I was hoping to catch then release them somewhere far from the school.”

He seemed to consider the idea before shrugging. “I suppose that could work. It also paints you in a better light. Rather than sounding forgetful or scattered for losing bunnies, you come across as a humane guardian angel, and I your brave champion. I was the one who actually captured the beasts, you remember. That part is true.”

Chelle smothered a laugh with a cough. “I disagree. I think we both come across as imbeciles.”

He chuckled and slung his arm around her back, guiding her down the beach. “Perhaps, but I still maintain that foxes sound better than bunnies.”

She let out an exaggerated sigh. “Honestly, Went. What am I to do with you?”

He pulled her against his side and kissed her temple. “The only thing you can do, my sweet. Love me, marry me, and kiss me multiple times a day.”

“Is that all?”

His words took on a wicked tone. “What else would you like to do with me?”

She twisted to step in front of him and rose to her toes. “That is for me to know and you to find out, Sir Miles. You are not the only one who can plan surprises.”

She pressed a lingering kiss to his lips before taking hold of his arm with her hands. They continued walking down the now empty beach, making plans, teasing, laughing, dancing, and, of course, kissing.

Years ago, Chelle had come to Brighton with the desire to change her circumstances and replace the sorrow in her life with joy. The school had given her a purpose, and for many years, that had been enough.

Until Went.

Now, she couldn't imagine a life without him. In the short months they'd known each other, he'd become her closest friend, her greatest support, the first person she turned to for advice, and the last person she thought about each night.

He made her smile and laugh, loaned her a handkerchief when she cried, and cherished her more than she deserved. She loved him with a ferocity she wouldn't have thought possible after Cedric.



One day, when their children asked how they'd met, Chelle would tell them about the horrid and ornery Mr. Bancroft and the charming man who had chased down her bunnies. Foxes, impressive they may be, would never make it into *her* version of the story. After all, a man who could lower his pride to chase bunnies was a man worth holding on to.

And she would hold on—fiercely, doggedly, and without a doubt, obstinately.

Dear Reader,

This time last year I received the unwanted news that I had breast cancer. It was a rough year with surgeries and treatment, but if I hadn't been consistent with my screenings, the doctors wouldn't have caught it as early as they did and my situation would have been so much worse. One year later, I'm grateful to be cancer-free.

I put this out there to not only explain why this book is woefully behind my projected release date, but to encourage all of my female readers who are in their mid-thirties and beyond to make annual screenings a priority. According to my cancer surgeon, 1 in 8 women will develop breast cancer in their lifetime. That number is insane to me, but if caught early, it's highly treatable, so please get those mammograms!

Soapbox aside, thanks so much for reading this latest edition to my At Home in Brighton series! If this story made you smile or laugh (even a little), and left with you with a happy taste in your mouth, I've accomplished my goal.

For those who are interested and hadn't already guessed, there will be at least one more story to come—Lady Ariana's tale, which I plan to release in August 2024. If you'd like to be notified when it's available, you can find my newsletter signup online at [RachaelReneeAnderson.com](https://RachaelReneeAnderson.com). (I only send out notifications when I have a new release.)

Lastly, if you can spare a few minutes, I'd be incredibly grateful for a review from you on [Amazon](https://Amazon.com) or [Goodreads](https://Goodreads.com). They make a huge difference in every aspect of publishing, and I am always so thankful whenever readers take a few minutes to review or recommend a book.

Thanks so much for your support!

*Rachael*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

No words can convey my gratitude for all the people who have aided, supported, listened, and encouraged. I have been blessed to have so many wonderful people in my life—from friends and family to readers who I've never had the pleasure of meeting. Thank you ALL.

Years ago at a book signing, I met Kathy (Bookworm Nation), who took a chance on one of my books. She has since become a well-known book reviewer and supporter of clean romance, including mine. (How lucky am I?) At one point, she emailed me about a few ideas for stories she had floating around in her head—ideas which inspired each tale in my At Home in Brighton series. I can't thank her enough for helping me out of a writing rut and giving me the push I needed to keep at it.

I have a truly awesome team of helpers. No writer creates the perfect story, no matter how many revisions (least of all me), but if not for Alison, Andrea, & Karey, my stories would have plot holes, incongruent characterizations, and a ton of typos. More than that, they push me to become a better writer with each story I write. I owe them so much!

I still have no idea how I landed the world's greatest agent, Meire Dias, at Bookcase Literacy. Not only is she the sweetest woman alive, she has also managed to get my stories published in the Czech Republic, Hungary, France, Italy, Germany, and Brazil. I am in awe of her talents, connections, and poise.

My hubby, Jeff, is my greatest supporter and biggest fan (even though stories written by Brandon Sanderson and Clive Cussler are more up his alley). He gives the best hugs and willingly takes over the cooking, cleaning, and parenting whenever I have a deadline looming or just need a break. I

adore the man and think every woman should have a husband like him.

When it comes to finding the right words to say or type, I'm a fumbler, always stumbling and groping around. (The delete key has become my very best friend!) But there have been many times in my writing journey when something magical happens. Words and ideas flood my mind in a way that can only be described as inspiration. Those moments leave me in awe and make me supremely grateful for all the help I've received from above. I'd be nothing without my Heavenly Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit.

## ABOUT RACHAEL ANDERSON



RACHAEL ANDERSON is a *USA Today* bestselling author and mother of four crazy and awesome kids. Over the years she's gotten pretty good at breaking up fights or at least sending guilty parties to their rooms. She can't sing, doesn't dance, and despises tragedies, but she recently figured out how yeast works and can now make homemade bread, which she is really good at eating. You can read more about her and her books online at [RachaelReneeAnderson.com](http://RachaelReneeAnderson.com).

## OTHER BOOKS BY RACHAEL ANDERSON

Five Kisses (AT HOME IN BRIGHTON)



TO OBTAIN A coveted property, Mr. Ian Cullum must court the beautiful and infamous Miss Shrew—a woman as intent on eluding Ian as he is on pursuing her.

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## My Sister's Intended (SERENDIPITY)



WHEN MISS PRUDENCE sets out to help her sister and Lord Knave find love, she doesn't foresee the possibility she might fall in love with her sister's intended herself.

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JUST MONTHS INTO her marriage, Abby is widowed, penniless, and increasing. Even more precarious are the feelings she's developing for a man the law prohibits her from marrying—her late husband's brother, the Marquess of Brigston.

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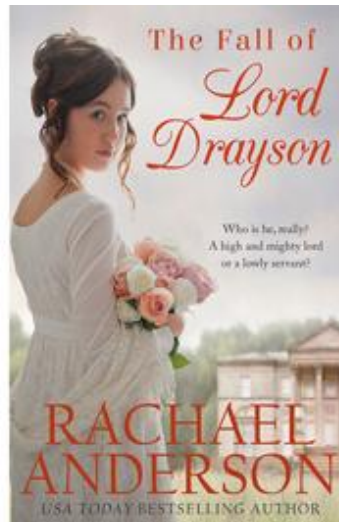
## The Solicitor's Son (SERENDIPITY)



WHEN MISS SOPHIA GIFFORD decides to accept a suitor she likes but cannot love, her sister intervenes by bringing an old childhood friend—now a handsome and successful, yet completely unacceptable tradesman— back into Sophia's life.

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## The Fall of Lord Drayson (TANGLEWOOD)



WHEN THE ARROGANT Lord Drayson awakens from a fall with no recollection of who he is, the fiery Miss Lucy Beresford takes it upon herself to humble him.

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## The Rise of Miss Notley (TANGLEWOOD)



WHEN MISS CORALYNN NOTLEY'S father barter her off to the first titled gentleman to come along, her only recourse is to run away—then apply for the position of housekeeper at Tanglewood Manor, home of the handsome Mr. Jonathan Ludlow.

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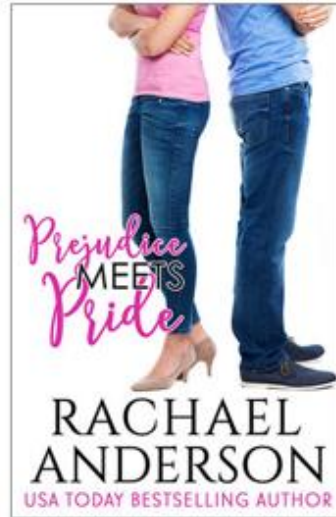
## The Pursuit of Lady Harriett (TANGLEWOOD)



AS LADY HARRIETT sets out to put an ungentlemanly lieutenant in his place she discovers there is more to him than meets the eye, and when it comes to matters of the heart, she has no control whatsoever.

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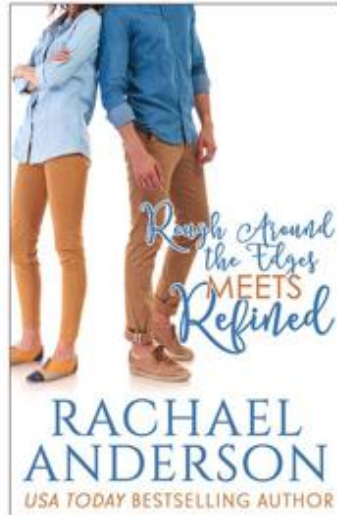
## Prejudice Meets Pride (MEET YOUR MATCH)



WHEN EMMA TAKES temporary custody of her two nieces, she isn't about to accept the help of her handsome neighbor, who seems to think she's incapable of doing anything on her own.

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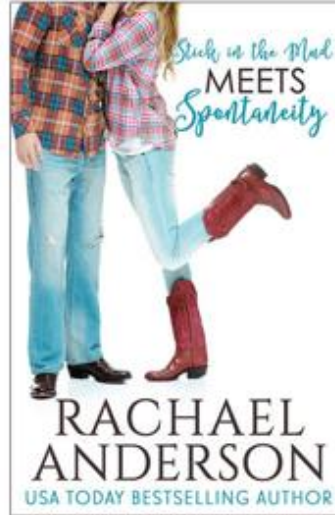
Rough Around the Edges Meets Refined  
(MEET YOUR MATCH)



NOAH DOESN'T HAVE time for dating—especially not someone like Cassie, his girls' beautiful and sophisticated dance instructor, who is as open and approachable as a brick wall.

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Stick in the Mud Meets Spontaneity  
(MEET YOUR MATCH)



WHEN SAMANTHA LEARNS her favorite young charges need a chauffer instead of a playmate for the summer, her outlook turns from fun to bleak. That is, until she meets Colten—a charming cowboy who’s as set in his ways as he is handsome.

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## STANDALONES



WHEN TAYCEE IS unknowingly cast as the bachelorette for her town's charity event, she does what she can to get a certain bachelor voted off the show. But Luke's an eye-for-an-eye kind of guy, and when he discovers what she's up to, it means revenge.

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WHEN GRACE GETS roped into helping a friend with a bachelor auction, she encounters Seth—an irritating man who unexpectedly kisses her then walks away. The nerve! If she never sees him again, it will be too soon.

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LANI IS THROWN for a loop when she's suddenly faced with a marriage proposal, her sweet but conniving grandmother, a cryptic Asian woman, and an unexpected guest—a man who is as handsome and charming as he is mysterious.

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