

A REGENCY ROMANCE

JOANNA BARKER

OTHERWISE ENGAGED

*She's never been afraid
of breaking the rules—
until she risks breaking her heart*



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Praise for Joanna Barker

“I found *Otherwise Engaged* to be all it said and more. In my mind, I tried to tell Rebecca what I hoped she would do and kept turning pages until I got answers. Joanna Barker has taken all of the elements needed to write a wonderfully romantic historical novel. I highly recommend reading *Otherwise Engaged* and promise you will not be disappointed—it is a sure winner.”

—Readers’ Favorite Five Stars Review

“Lovely. Regency Romance fans will be utterly delighted.”

—Sarah M. Eden, award-winning author of *Forget Me Not*

“Joanna Barker has penned an utterly charming Regency romance focused on family and the wonder of falling in love. A joy to read.”

—Regina Scott, award-winning author

“*Otherwise Engaged* is exactly what a Regency romance should be and more. Rebecca Rowley jumps from the page as deftly as she jumps her horses.”

—Esther Hatch, Indies award-winning author of *A Proper Charade*

“*Secrets and Suitors* is a heartwarming romance with memorable characters and beautiful prose. I finished it and wanted to start it again.”

—Anneka Walker, award-winning author of *The Masked Baron*

“Barker wows again. *Otherwise Engaged* will pull you in from the opening scene. Rebecca and Nicholas are both flawed and beautiful, and you can’t help but want to turn page after page.”

—Chalon Linton, award-winning author of *Adoring Abigail*

“*Otherwise Engaged* is a delightful Regency romance filled with the deft touch and period details of a true Jane Austen aficionado. I thoroughly enjoyed the witty banter of the independently spirited Miss Rowley and Lieutenant Avery and know readers will appreciate the sparkling nature of this English historical romance.”

—Carolyn Miller, award-winning author of the Regency Brides series

“Joanna Barker delivers another charming romance in *Otherwise Engaged* in which Rebecca Rowley proves to be a lively heroine as she finds ways to evade society norms for young ladies. What she doesn’t expect is to be caught red-handed by a man who will both amuse her and confound her. A delightful read from beginning to end, with fresh turns of events that will keep any reader guessing until the swoon-worthy end.”

—Heather B. Moore, *USA Today* best-selling author of The Newport Ladies Book Club series

“With a swoon-worthy, kind-hearted lieutenant and a relatable, fiery heroine, *Otherwise Engaged* will vividly transport readers back to an era of romantic sensibilities and restraint. Another glued-to-the-pages read from Joanna Barker.”

—Megan Walker, author of *Lakeshire Park*

“This fresh and moving love story from Joanna Barker is sure to become a favorite for fans of Regency romance. Her spunky equestrian heroine and brooding naval hero make this tale of enemies becoming friends and turning into lovers impossible to put down. With its vivid prose, well-placed humor, and swoon-worthy romance, this is one of my favorites by Barker.”

—Arlem Hawks, author of *Georgana’s Secret*

To the little loves of my life, Benson and Liam

Chapter One

Hertfordshire, 1822

OF THE MANY THINGS THAT could be depended upon to make a young lady swoon, a love letter certainly made the list.

I perched on a low rock in the center of the quiet meadow, one knee tucked to my chest, the skirts of my riding habit spread about me. The sun shone fiercely against the cloud-strewn sky, as if demanding my attention, but not even the brilliance of the sun could steal my focus from the letter in my hands, though I'd read it a dozen times or more.

My dearest Rebecca,

How is it that I can miss you before you have even left Brighton? I know I will see you tonight, but already, I ache to let you go, not knowing when we will see each other again.

I sighed aloud. Stella snorted from where she grazed a few paces away, as if mocking me.

"Oh, hush," I said. "You cannot judge me. You've never been in love."

My horse did not offer a response, which was just as well. I'd heard that love could cause madness, and a talking horse would surely be an alarming symptom.

I read the rest of the letter once more and then touched where the writer had signed his name. Edward Bainbridge. He'd slipped it to me on our last night together in Brighton. A smile climbed my lips at the memory, and I made no effort to restrain it. After all, as my dear friend Marjorie had said, if a recently engaged young woman did not wish to smile all the day long, she had no business being engaged.

But then my smile faltered, as it always did. I could not ignore the larger problems that Edward and I faced. I folded the letter and stashed it in my pocket as I tried to keep my uncertainty and lurking questions at bay. I'd left Edward in Brighton only two days ago, arriving again in Hertfordshire yesterday. There was plenty of time yet to put my plan into motion.

Stella's not-so-gentle nudge all but knocked me to the grassy field. "All right, all right," I said with a laugh. "You've gotten bossier, you know. Let us hope you haven't also gotten lazy."

I gave the meadow a quick perusal as I stood. Empty, of course. I'd never seen anyone here in all my rides, as the neighboring estate, Linwood Hall, had stood vacant for years. I quickly unbuckled Stella's saddle and

heaved it over a nearby log, her bridle and reins soon following. Stella pranced as I returned to her, and her anticipation was contagious.

“Ready, girl?” I spoke quietly as I moved to her left side, facing her shoulder and gripping her mane with both hands. I could not hesitate, or I’d never make it up. With a quick breath, I took a running step and threw my right leg over her back, my arms pulling me up with every bit of their strength. Stella started a bit but did not run off as she had the first time I’d attempted it.

“There we go.” I tried not to feel too pleased with myself. Despite not riding in over a month, my body had remembered how to execute that rather inelegant mount. I wouldn’t even have had the slightest idea how to do it if Mama and I hadn’t visited Astley’s Royal Amphitheater multiple times in London. I’d stared open-mouthed as the bareback trick riders had done the impossible again and again: headstands, flips, balancing with one foot while playing a pipe. All riding bareback, and all breathtaking.

“Did you miss me?” I whispered to Stella as I stroked her neck, her golden coat smooth beneath my fingertips. Her only answer was a flick of her ears, but I fancied she had missed me a little.

I glanced around again, checking once more for unexpected visitors because the most difficult part of riding bareback was not mounting or keeping my balance. It was ensuring no one discovered I rode bareback at all.

Satisfied the meadow was secluded, I nudged Stella into a walk. It had taken me a year of practice for this to feel natural, the uneven ridges of her spine and the pull of her muscles beneath me. Her shoulders tensed as if she were tempted to throw me from her back, but slowly she began to relax. I allowed her stride to lengthen into a smooth canter as I led her in a long oval, using the signals we’d developed in lieu of reins: small nudges with my heels and short clicks of my tongue. We followed the natural shape of the meadow, similar to the ring at Astley’s. Perhaps one day we’d advance to the stunts the trick riders performed with such ease.

Except, try as I might, I could never entirely shake the shadow of memory from five summers ago. The emptying, rushing air. The cold, hard earth. And the pain—the splintering, twisting pain.

I pushed away the darkness and called above the thundering hooves. “All right, Stella girl. Let us see how far the wind takes us.”

She leaped into a gallop, her front legs reaching hungrily for the earth. My stomach gave that familiar, dizzying lurch, and I gave an unladylike whoop. Oh, I had missed this freedom, this exhilaration. The countryside streaked past us, the bright greens and pinks and yellows of summer painting a blurred landscape at the edges of my vision. I grinned wildly and leaned low beside Stella's lunging neck as her hooves drove into the wet grass. The wind rushed over me, throwing my skirts behind me and threatening to take my hat with it. I pushed my hat more firmly onto my head and pressed on.

We reached the end of the empty meadow, and I urged Stella around the curve, faster, faster as I closed my eyes, trusting her instincts. I was not a girl on a horse. I was a bird. A swift-winged sparrow alone in the endless expanse of the azure sky. I gripped Stella's mane in one hand and reached out my other to drift through a cloud as the summer breeze pulled against the sleeve of my habit.

Then I heard something above the steady thump of Stella's hooves. I pulled her to a stop, and she gave a snort, her hooves pawing the grass as I glanced around. All was quiet, save for the birdsong and breeze.

Likely, it was simply my fears at play. I'd long worried a tenant farmer would come across my little meadow, see me acting the barbarian atop my bareback horse, and spread embarrassing—if true—rumors about me. Or worse, that they would tell Mama and William.

But the meadow was still. My secret was safe. I gently nudged Stella forward again.

A scream pierced the calm summer air.

I froze, my spine stiff as the scream faded into the wind. *What on earth?*

The cry came again, shrill and panicked, echoing through the trees like a ghostly wail. My head whipped to the left. It came from the lake.

I kicked Stella, and she leaped forward. I gripped her sides with my knees, clinging to her mane as she dodged the trees separating my meadow from the lake. The wind stole my breath, and a suffocating weight grasped at my lungs.

Grass turned to pebbles beneath us, and Stella's hooves clattered over the loose stones as she broke through the last stand of trees. I yanked her to a halt, too hard. She tossed her head in protest, but I didn't have time to apologize. My gaze jumped frantically over the familiar scene. Enormous

willow trees, their branches reaching out over the water. The shore, edged with trees and rocks. The lake, a vastness of blue-green.

But the lake was not its usual smooth mirror. Ripples spread ten yards from the shore to my left. I gaped. A long branch, thick with summer's leaves, floated in the water, and a small hand fumbled over the wet bark. A face emerged, a young girl, gasping and choking, before disappearing once again.

I threw myself off Stella's back, stumbled across the rocky shore, and splashed into the shallow water, kicking up mud in great clouds that rolled through the clear lake. But my focus was on the branch, the hand. The girl hadn't surfaced again.

I sloshed forward, the skirts of my habit dragging behind me. When the water reached my waist—too slow, too slow!—I dove forward. The icy water enveloped me, and I inhaled a mouthful of bubbles. How was it still so cold in August? I kicked, breaking the surface and pushing myself forward. I was not a particularly good swimmer, and now I wished I'd spent more time in the lake. My boots clung like anchors to my feet, but there was no time to kick them free.

I threw my arms out again and again until my hands knocked into the leafy twigs of the branch. I grabbed the rough bark and pulled myself toward the spot where I'd seen the girl. Merciful heavens, she'd found the surface again, her face pale and her wet hair splayed across her cheeks. The poor girl could not have been more than eight or nine years old. She coughed, and the sound sent hot relief through my entire body.

"Help!" She hadn't seen me, her cry pitiful. And then she went under, her hair floating to the surface.

Why could she not stay above the surface? I kicked again and grabbed her arm. She froze and then lashed out, her boot colliding with my left calf. Pain shot through me, but I tried to ignore it as I dove under the surface, peering through the murky water. There it was—her skirts caught on a sharp offshoot of the branch. As I watched, the whole branch shifted and she was able to rise and gulp another breath before the unsteady motion of the limb dragged her back under.

I yanked on her skirt, hard, harder, until the fabric ripped in my hands. I grabbed her around the waist, and we broke the surface together. The girl flailed about, her hand smacking the side of my head.

"Calm down!" I ordered. "I'm here. I'll help."

She did not hear me with all her splashing and wailing. My weak legs couldn't hold us above anymore, and we went under, bubbles and arms and legs crowding my vision. Blast and bother. This child would *not* be the death of us both, and she certainly wouldn't keep me from marrying Edward. I kicked my legs, straining with the effort, and heaved her to air once more.

"Stop moving!" I shouted. "Let me help you."

Her thrashing calmed somewhat, and I slipped one arm across her chest, cursing my long skirts as I began awkwardly stroking toward the nearest shore. The girl gasped for air, unable to speak, coughing more often than not.

"It's all right," I assured her. "You're all right. We're nearly there."

Were we? We seemed to sink lower into the water with every inch I moved. I hefted the girl up higher. Even her skinny frame was a challenge to keep afloat considering my inadequacy in swimming. My skirts tangled about my legs, trapping them into the barest of movements. I gave another desperate kick, and my feet met slippery mud.

Thank the heavens. Thank the earth too, for that matter.

I managed to get my feet under me, my head just above the surface. The girl spun in the water and threw her arms around me, clinging like a leech.

"You're safe," I wheezed as I staggered farther up the shore. "We made it."

She did not answer, her face buried in my shoulder, her dripping hair plastered across my chest and face.

"Olivia!"

My head jerked up at the voice, and I stumbled, going down to one knee in the shallows. The girl in my arms gave a whimper as I focused on the man splashing toward us through the water.

Chapter Two

HE WAS TALL, TOO TALL, but that was likely because I was crouching like a toad in the water. He reached us in a second and pulled the girl—Olivia, was my very astute guess—from my arms.

“What happened?” he demanded.

Was he speaking to me or Olivia? I did not much care for the sharpness of his voice either way.

Then he reached a hand down to me, and as my arms and legs were shaking from exhaustion, I didn’t have much choice. I took his hand, and he pulled me to my feet before turning and wading back to the rocky shore, carrying Olivia in his arms. I staggered after him and collapsed onto a mossy log beyond the reach of the water. My dripping habit clung to me, every inch of my skin covered with soaked fabric. Even with the hot summer sun overhead, I shivered.

The man perched Olivia on a nearby flat rock. He shrugged out of his jacket and threw it around her shaking shoulders, rubbing her arms as if that would make any difference. She was a skinny thing, and the weight of the jacket made her slump. Stella remained where I’d left her, though her hooves danced in clear unease, and an unfamiliar bay hunter snorted a short distance away.

The man turned to face me, his eyes intensely green, narrowed, and not at all pleasant.

“What happened?” he demanded once again.

Did he think *I* had something to do with the girl nearly drowning? I’d never seen either of them before in my life. Olivia sat silently, mouth squeezed shut. Why did she not say anything?

Well, if she wouldn’t, I would. I scrutinized our surroundings. Beyond where the man knelt, an enormous willow tree reached out over the lake. One branch had a jagged edge, hovering directly over where I’d first seen the girl.

“I could venture a guess,” I said, probably a bit rudely. I didn’t care. “Your daughter fancied a climb, and the tree branch went too far over the lake.”

“She’s not my daughter.” His words were distracted as he followed my gaze to the broken tree branch and frowned. He knew I was right. “Olivia,” he growled.

“You only said not to go in the lake.” Olivia’s face pinched, her cheeks and nose sharp angles. If he wasn’t her father, they had to be related somehow. They had the same light hair and green eyes.

“Yet, that is exactly where you ended up.” He blew air from his mouth and pushed himself to his feet, pacing away with hands at his waist. Olivia glared at his back. They were quite a disagreeable pair. Clearly, the man was an incompetent guardian, whoever he was. Why would he allow a young child, who he must have known could not swim, to wander unaccompanied to the lake?

And though I’d never thought of myself as self-important, the fact that neither of them had thanked me for stepping in—or rather, diving in—to save her life was somewhat irritating.

“Pardon me,” I said stiffly as I stood, crossing my arms over my shivering body. The man turned suddenly, as if he’d forgotten I was there. “But delightful as it has been to make your acquaintance, I’m afraid I will be going now. I wasn’t anticipating a swim today.”

The man stared at me, taking in my soaked habit and dripping curls. “Curse it. I am sorry. I am being terribly rude.”

He was certainly correct about that.

He faced me fully for the first time. His broad face was tan, his eyes crowded by lines, as if he’d spent his childhood staring too long at the sun. “Please forgive me, Miss . . . ?”

“Rowley,” I supplied with some reluctance.

He squinted. “Rowley, you say? Related to a Mr. William Rowley?”

“Yes. William is my brother.” How did this man know William? I really shouldn’t even be speaking to him without a proper introduction, but we were far past that now. “And you are?”

“Avery,” he said. “Nicholas Avery.” I’d never heard of him. He waved at Olivia, still shivering and still scowling. “This is my sister, Olivia Avery,” he said, grimacing as if he’d sipped particularly sour lemonade.

“Half-sister,” she muttered.

Half-siblings, then. That explained their similar coloring and strange interactions, not to mention their age difference. Mr. Avery had to be nearly two decades older than his sister, though he *was* younger than I’d first thought. Even with the lines around his eyes, I placed him near to five and twenty years. Likely, he spent a great deal of time out of doors—with wild animals, judging by the angry white scar running down his left cheek and

disappearing beneath his cravat. His clothing was soaked from carrying Olivia, and his white shirtsleeves and fawn waistcoat clung to his rather well-built arms and chest.

He looked up and caught me staring. My face heated, and I said the first thing that rattled through my head. “Am I correct in my assumption that you are rather new to the neighborhood, Mr. Avery?”

“Lieutenant,” he said immediately.

“Pardon?”

He cleared his throat. “That is, you may call me Lieutenant Avery, as I’m still on half-pay.”

Lud, a military man. No wonder he had such an air of authority, even with a woman he’d barely met who had saved his ungrateful sister from a horrible death.

“And yes,” he went on, “we’ve just arrived in Millbury. I’ve let Linwood Hall for the time being.”

Unwelcome news, indeed. Was my quiet, secluded meadow part of Linwood’s estate? I did not know the boundaries well enough to guess.

“Will your sister often be wandering without proper supervision?” I asked in a clipped tone. “I cannot be rescuing her every time I ride.”

The lines around his eyes tightened. “Olivia is eleven years old. She hardly needs constant observation.”

Eleven? She couldn’t be. She was such a tiny thing. But Olivia raised her chin as if daring me to question her age.

“I would say she very plainly needs supervision,” I said. “Or have you forgotten why we are all so wet?”

“An accident.” He brushed me off with a wave of his hand. “And in any case, I was following her and was not a minute behind you.”

“You were following me?” Olivia stood, red climbing her pale cheeks.

A muscle ticked in Lieutenant Avery’s jaw. “I wanted to ensure you would obey my instructions, which you obviously did not.”

Olivia glared at him and then shrugged off his jacket and let it fall to the mud. “You are not my father. You are *barely* my brother. I needn’t obey you.” She darted off, the loose ribbons in her hair dangling behind her as she disappeared into the trees.

“Olivia!” Lieutenant Avery shouted after her, and his booming voice carried easily. Obviously he had a great deal of experience barking orders.

“Come back here!” But his only answer was the rustling trees and lapping water.

“I do not think she is coming back,” I said dryly.

He turned back to me, staring as if I were a tenacious weed that had sprouted in his perfect garden.

“Well, this has been just lovely,” I said, not particularly keen to prolong our conversation. The Prussian blue linen of my habit stuck to my legs and arms like the stubborn mussels I’d seen on the rocks at Brighton. “I do hope we meet again on slightly better terms.” Or never, if I could manage it.

I stepped back, but he stepped forward. “Miss Rowley, please wait.”

I paused as he scrubbed a hand over his face. The fellow looked exhausted. Not surprising, really, with such a shrew for a sister. “I am sorry for all that happened and for the way I acted. I hope you will forgive me.”

It was not a particularly eloquent apology. Not to mention he still hadn’t thanked me for saving his sister’s life. Although, perhaps he *wasn’t* grateful I’d saved her, if she was always this awful.

I sighed. Now who was the shrew? I ought to forgive him and put this whole mess behind us. I brushed a damp lock of hair from my face. My hand froze. My head was bare. “Dash it all.” I stalked to the edge of the lake in the vain hope that my hat would be floating conveniently within reach. But I saw no sign of black wool or ostrich feathers. Botheration. It had taken the milliner ages to get my hat fitted exactly right and had cost me a good deal of pin money besides. Mama had urged me to use a hat pin or ribbon to keep my hat in place, but I hated the feeling of securing it to my head. I wanted to be free of restraint, especially when riding. She would undoubtedly laugh at me now.

“Did you lose something?” Lieutenant Avery joined me at the water’s edge.

“My hat,” I said, my words curt. “I daresay it is at the bottom of the lake by now.”

“Oh.” He winced. “I am sorry for that as well. Perhaps you’ll allow me to replace it.”

Now he decided to try to act the gentleman. Edward would never have treated me such. He was all that was chivalrous and attentive, and I could easily imagine myself tucked into his warm jacket, his blue eyes filled with concern. Lieutenant Avery would do well to take a page out of his book.

Then my breath choked in my throat. My letter! I clawed at my pocket, though I already knew it was hopeless. I pulled out a wad of soaked mush, ink disappearing as it dripped onto the muddy rocks below. Edward's words—his sweet, romantic words. Gone.

"Is it too much for me to hope that this wasn't terribly important to you?"

I glared at him. "No, of course not. I am mourning the loss of my shopping list."

"Ah," he mused. "It *was* something important."

"Irreplaceable." I tossed the sodden lump into the lake and spun, marching to where Stella waited for me as she chewed absently on a mound of grass.

The dratted lieutenant followed me. "Please, let me assist you up—" He stopped when he caught sight of Stella completely bare. "Do you . . . not have a saddle?"

There went my long-kept secret. Months of careful practice wasted. Mama would likely never let me ride again once she heard. And William . . . I'd rather hide in the hayloft than face him.

Perhaps if I acted as though this were the most natural thing in the world, Lieutenant Avery would think nothing of it. Perhaps he would assume this was how girls rode horses in Millbury.

"I do not need a saddle." I moved to Stella's side. "But thank you all the same." I hoped my hard tone revealed how very unthankful *I* was.

I'd mounted only a half hour before, so I did not hesitate as I gripped Stella's mane. Unfortunately, that practice reminded Stella of her favorite joke to play on me. As I began to throw my leg over her back, she jolted forward a quick step. I slid off her like rain on a duck's feather, barely managing to keep my feet beneath me.

"Stella," I hissed as I resisted the urge to smack her shoulder.

A soft cough came from behind me, a sad attempt to hide his chuckle. "Are you certain you do not need help?"

"Quite certain, thank you," I said through gritted teeth. Then I lowered my voice and leaned toward Stella's ear. "If you move again, I'll not ride you for a week. A week, I swear."

I reassumed my mounting position, and this time when I pulled myself up, Stella did not move a hoof. However, I had underestimated the difficulty of mounting in a wet habit. I somehow managed to get my ankle over

Stella's back, but the soaked fabric of my skirts restricted my movement. Awkwardly—oh, so awkwardly—I wriggled and pulled until I sat myself upright. I arranged my wet skirts over my boots and sent the lieutenant a superior look. He watched me with crossed arms and a badly concealed grin.

“Good day, Lieutenant Avery,” I said. Then I kicked Stella's flanks, and we bounded away without a backward glance.

Chapter Three

THE STABLEMASTER STARED WHEN I returned Stella, both of us covered in dust and my hair a veritable bird's nest. He took my reins as I slid off my saddle.

"Are you all right, Miss Rowley?"

"Perfectly well, thank you, Mr. Mullens," I said briskly. There were far too many listening ears in the stables.

"I see." He scratched at his temple. "I'll just take Stella, then."

"Do give her a thorough brushing." She had earned it. I'd had a great deal of frustration to work off. After retrieving Stella's saddle, we'd raced the entire way back to Havenfield, the cool wind doing nothing to temper the heat trapped inside my chest.

Mr. Mullens nodded and pulled on the reins. I patted Stella's flank as he led her away. It wasn't her fault the ride had gone so terribly wrong. I stood for a moment, hands at my hips, trying to steady my breathing. The stables always had a calming effect on me. My friend Marjorie claimed horses smelled horrid, and although she normally had good judgment, I knew she was wrong in this case. Stella smelled of all that was wonderful: fresh hay and warm earth, oats and sunshine.

It was good that I'd returned from Brighton, for Stella. The grooms never exercised her like I did. They didn't know her potential, her spirit. But I'd seen it from the moment I'd laid eyes on the beautiful mare, with the sleek and refined build of the Arabian lines that dominated the race tracks.

I made for the arched door, and my stockings squelched in my boots with every step. Two stable boys watched me over one of the stalls. They ducked as I passed, but not before I heard their stifled laughter.

I ignored them as I left the stables and started across the vast green lawn. Havenfield rose before me, the two stories of gray stone almost completely covered in ivy, save for the countless windows that reflected the afternoon sun.

Home. That was what Mama had called the estate when I'd arrived yesterday. *Welcome home*, she'd said with a smile. And perhaps for her and William, it was home. Havenfield was lovely, yes—cheery, with its bright, airy halls and high ceilings. But Sir Charles and Lady Rowley, our distant relatives, had ruled the estate for so long before William had inherited. Their touch was everywhere still, subtle yet obvious at the same time. The library was precise, each book organized by subject and then author, as Sir

Charles had preferred. The butler and housekeeper, hired and employed by William's predecessors, sometimes gave me odd looks that made me feel like an unwelcome mayfly at a picnic. Lady Rowley's flower garden, while not forbidden, was her domain, and I always felt as though I were an intruder there.

Such feelings of disjointed belonging were to be expected, really. Especially as Lady Rowley still lived here, at William's behest, though she was presently away visiting family. But I still could not bring myself to call Havenfield *home*. That title was reserved for another house, another time.

At least I had the stables, Stella, and the warmth and welcoming that always greeted me there. Although today's incident somewhat dampened my enthusiasm.

Lieutenant Avery. His face pushed back into my memory, and I kicked the grass beneath my feet as I walked. I'd never met a man with worse manners. He clearly did not have much experience in proper society, or he would have thanked me profusely, offered to accompany me home, and made his sister apologize to me for ruining both my dress and my day.

How could a man like him be in the position to let a house like Linwood Hall? If he had family money, I assumed he would also possess decent comportment. More likely, he had amassed a small fortune during the war, like many naval officers, and intended to establish himself in Society.

So distracting were my thoughts that I did not notice the barouche waiting at the front steps until I'd nearly reached the house. I frowned. The carriage likely belonged to an associate of William's. They came by at all hours of the day, my brother in a constant state of busyness as he ran both our family's shipping business and the large estate.

Exhaustion pulled at my bones. I hadn't ridden in weeks, and that exercise, combined with my unexpected swim, was enough to protest my circling the entire manor house in search of a more discreet entrance. Besides, William and his guest were no doubt tucked away in his study near the library. No one would see me.

I mounted the low stone steps and pushed open the front door a few inches. The entry was empty. I slipped inside and closed the door behind me, blessing its well-oiled hinges.

As I crept across the sunlit marble floor, I looped the skirt of my riding habit over my wrist. Voices echoed into the entryway, and I froze. The door

to the morning room stood open, Mama's white cap floating above the back of the settee, her dark curls peeking from the edges as she poured tea for her guests.

"Where is your daughter today, Mrs. Rowley?" a hefty female voice said from inside the morning room. "I heard she returned from her visit to Brighton."

Of course it was the awful Mrs. Follett. With my luck so far today, I should have expected this.

"Indeed," was Mama's poised reply. "Rebecca arrived home yesterday."

"Does she not realize you have visitors?" Mrs. Follett sounded personally affronted, but as she generally sounded that way, I could not tell if it was me in particular who offended her. "My daughter has been anxious to renew their acquaintance."

That motivated me to begin moving once again. The younger Miss Follett only ever had criticisms and unhelpful observations to offer, though I could hardly *imagine* who she had inherited such inclinations from. The two of them were the worst sort of gossips. A secret around them was no safer than a handsome, rich bachelor on the Marriage Mart.

Still, I could not stop my wicked grin. What would they say if they knew about Edward?

I inched my boots forward, raising the train of my habit higher to ensure it did not cause any untimely stumbles; then I squinted as I crossed into a bright stream of sunlight. A familiar itching entered my nose. Dash it all. I turned away from the sun and squeezed my eyes and mouth shut. No, no, no.

But there was nothing for it. Sneezes erupted from my nose and mouth like gunfire during the shooting season. I lost count after five. When the sneezes finally ceased, I managed a desperate prayer that no one had heard.

"Who was that?" Mrs. Follett demanded.

Now would be the perfect time to use the first-rate curses I'd often heard my sister-in-law, Juliana, muttering.

I threw a hasty glance over my shoulder. Mama turned on her seat and peered out the open doorway of the morning room. When she spotted me—a dripping, unkempt statue trapped halfway across the entry—her mouth dropped open. I offered a sheepish smile, hoping to communicate that

although I looked a mess, I was unharmed. Her lips twitched. Of course she would find this rather hilarious.

“Is that Miss Rowley?” Mrs. Follett was not to be deterred. “Do invite her to join us.”

Mama raised an eyebrow, and I silently pled with her. Surely she wouldn’t give me up, not in my current state. Besides, she knew how much I disliked the Folletts; indeed, she disliked them even more than I did.

In the end, Mama winked at me. “Just a maid, Mrs. Follett.” She turned back to her visitors. “I’m afraid Rebecca has gone riding this afternoon, though I am certain she’ll be distressed to have missed your visit.”

Thank heavens for Mama. I let out a long breath as I moved across the floor once again, careful to keep to the shadows.

“Now tell me,” Mama went on as I reached the bottom of the stairs. “I have heard lovely things about your drawing room renovations. You chose a sage green, did you not?”

Mrs. Follett would talk for hours about her new drawing room. I owed Mama showers of gratitude.

I managed to navigate the creaky stairs and escape to my room. Fawcett drew me a bath and helped me scrub the lake scum and mud from my hair; then after dressing in a white silk evening gown and pinning up my still-damp hair, darker than its usual golden-brown, I returned downstairs for dinner, knowing I’d have an audience waiting for me.

I entered the drawing room, and sure enough, my family all looked up expectantly. My sister-in-law, Juliana, reclined on the fainting couch, one hand resting atop her protruding belly, while William stood near Mama’s armchair.

“Finally,” he exclaimed, his blue eyes mischievous. “We have been taking wagers.”

“On what, precisely?” I asked with no small amount of suspicion.

William began ticking off his fingers. “I myself am of the opinion that the lake was too much of a temptation for you in the summer heat, while Juliana is certain you were caught in a sudden storm that somehow skirted the rest of the estate.”

“I’ve seen it happen,” Juliana said solemnly, her chestnut hair arranged simply in a low chignon.

“And Mama has wagered ten pounds that your maid simply forgot to undress you before your bath.”

Mama swatted William’s arm. “Quiet, you. I’ve never wagered anything in my life.”

“Which made your ten pounds rather shocking, considering the odds.”

“Unfortunately,” I said, “you are all wrong, though I hate to spoil your fun.”

“What did happen?” Juliana straightened. “Your mama said you looked a mess.”

“Which, to be fair, isn’t entirely uncommon.” William could not seem to stop his quips.

I ignored him, a skill I was particularly good at. “I had something of an adventure at the lake.”

“A promising start,” Mama said as she stood. “Let us go in, and you may tell us the rest.”

She came to take my arm as William offered a hand to Juliana and helped her stand. She grimaced and pressed one hand to the side of her belly.

“Juliana?” All teasing vanished from William’s voice.

Juliana waved him off. “I’m all right. Just tired.”

He pulled her arm into his. “I ought to have made you stay home today.”

“Made me stay home?” she repeated, raising her brow.

William blew out a breath. “You take on far more than you should in your condition.”

Mama and I exchanged a glance and started for the door in unison, intent on escaping any marriage squabbles. With the expected arrival of Juliana’s first child only two months away, everyone but Juliana seemed to see that she needed to rest more. However, she insisted she was needed at the school and would hear no arguments to the contrary. I wished William luck.

“I do hope your story is worth the anticipation,” Mama said as we came into the dining room, her words quieting the whispered argument between William and Juliana, following behind us.

“Oh, it is,” I assured her as we seated ourselves around the table. “I had quite the memorable meeting with our new neighbor, whom none of you thought to mention at dinner last night.”

William held out Juliana's chair for her, and she tipped her head as she sat. "New neighbor?"

"A Lieutenant Avery." I shook my napkin as an attempt to hide my distaste for his name. "He's let the Linwood estate."

"Ah, yes, we met in town the other day." William took his seat. "Seems a pleasant enough fellow."

Pleasant was not how I would describe him, but that explained how they knew each other. "I came across him and his younger sister today while riding," I said. "In fact, his sister got into a spot of trouble at the lake, and I was forced to rescue her."

"Rescue?" Mama squinted at me as the footmen began serving the steaming soup. "What do you mean?"

I summarized the events of the afternoon, everything from hearing Olivia's scream to her brother's lacking manners. Well, everything except for the fact that I'd been riding bareback and that I'd blushed like a bride on her wedding day at the sight of Lieutenant Avery in his wet shirtsleeves.

"She is all right?" Juliana asked when I finished. "The girl?"

"Yes, although I do not envy her when she returned home. I daresay she had a tongue-lashing in store."

William scrutinized me. "But where was your groom during all of this? Why couldn't he have rescued the girl?"

Blast and bother. I had too many secrets to keep hidden, and I'd overlooked the most obvious weakness in my story.

"I . . ." I paused, hoping the perfect answer would miraculously materialize before me. But my bad luck for the day continued. I sighed. "I did not take a groom today."

"For heaven's sake, Rebecca." William leaned forward. "Why not?"

"I—I do not know. I hadn't ridden for a month. I simply wanted to be alone for a while. You cannot blame me for that."

"I certainly can blame you." He shook his head. "You promised you would be careful."

"I *was* careful," I insisted. "No harm came to me. And if I hadn't gone, what would have become of the girl?"

"If you had taken a groom, then *he* could have helped her." His voice held an edge. "But that is beside the point. Anything could happen while you are riding, and if you do not have a groom with you—"

"William," Juliana said, her voice soft yet firm.

William did not speak for a long moment. I pressed my lips together.

“I simply could not bear another accident,” he said finally. “You must know I am trying to protect you, not control you.”

Sometimes it felt very much the same.

But I forced a nod. William was not an unkind brother. Truthfully, we got on nearly as well as siblings could. Certainly better than Lieutenant Avery and his dreadful sister.

And I knew what drove William’s fear, because it was the same thing that drove my determination. The field, green with summer’s growth. My horse limping in pain. My habit streaked with wine-red blood.

I pushed my memories back where they belonged, locked away where they could not drown me. “I know, William. Truly, I do.”

“Then you’ll take a groom with you next time you ride? Or better yet, me?”

I nodded again. “I will. I promise.”

My bareback practice would have to wait. Perhaps until I was married.

A strange anxiety took hold of me at that thought. I’d never told Edward about my riding astride or bareback. I was not even certain he knew I liked to ride at all, considering our short and secretive courtship. But surely once I was a married woman, I could make my own choices.

“I could go with you,” Juliana said lightly, no doubt to ease the still-palpable tension. “I am certain Miranda would enjoy lugging this enormous belly around the countryside.”

Miranda was the calm and quiet mare William had gifted me three years ago, and it soon became clear he’d given her to me only because she was the steadiest and, therefore, the most boring horse I’d ever ridden. Luckily, Juliana had taken a liking to Miranda when Juliana and William had married. I’d graciously given the mount up and then promptly begged William for a thoroughbred, a real racing horse.

William stared at Juliana. “You certainly will not—” Juliana grinned, and he stopped. “You two will be the death of me,” he grumbled and returned to his food.

Juliana laughed, and I offered a weak smile as I raised a spoonful of tasteless soup. No, Juliana couldn’t very well go riding. Was that my future too? Would I be with child a year from now, unable to do the one thing that always brought me such joy?

Mama attempted to rescue the conversation. “What did you think of our new neighbor, Rebecca? I admit I am curious. Mrs. Follett was ever so eager to tell me about him today.”

“What did she tell you?” Better to put off any more details about the incident. Who knew what other secrets I would accidentally betray.

“Quite a lot,” she said. “Apparently, she managed to trap him outside the millinery the other day and pry information from the poor fellow.”

Poor fellow, indeed. I had no particularly warm feelings toward Lieutenant Avery, but not even he deserved the Follett women sniffing after him like a terrier catching the scent of a fox.

“He’s on reserve for the navy at the moment,” Mama went on, daintily sipping her wine. “Come to care for his sister after his stepmother’s death.”

“How long does he intend to stay in the area?” Juliana asked Mama.

Perhaps he wouldn’t stay long, and I could again claim my meadow for practice.

“Mrs. Follett did not know,” Mama said. “But I daresay it shall be nice to have another young man at assemblies. Don’t you think, Rebecca?”

“I suppose.” It was better to agree. I did not want to start another argument at dinner. And perhaps I could ease into the task that Edward and I had discussed before we’d parted. “I met a great many agreeable young men during my visit to Brighton.”

“Oh?” Mama waved the footman forward to serve the potatoes and chicken. “Any that we know from London?”

“Yes, a few.” I spoke matter-of-factly. “Mr. Granville was in town, visiting his aunt. And Sir Anthony came with his sister for the summer.”

Mama nodded. “Such excellent young men.”

Truthfully, both Mr. Granville and Sir Anthony were as dull as my pen after writing a long letter, but I knew Mama approved of them.

“Any suitors I should be aware of?” William raised his fork as if to ward off any challengers. “You are still far too young to marry, in my opinion.”

I normally would have brushed off his comment, but it rankled inside me. I was twenty, after all. “Am I now? Juliana was younger than I when you married, if you’ll recall.”

He held up a hand. “I am teasing, Rebecca. But you must allow me to play the part of the protective brother. Rachel did not allow me the chance since I was a bit young at the time.”

My older sister, Rachel, had married seven years ago, when William was nineteen and I but thirteen. I poked my roasted chicken, considering William's words. I had no real reason to be irritated with him. He did so much for our family, for me. He worked long hours and traveled constantly, all to support us. I was as ungrateful as they came.

"I shall be sure to inform you when any suitors come my way," I said with a lightness I did not feel. I hated lying, but it was necessary for the time being.

"Did you make any new acquaintances in Brighton?" Juliana rested a hand on the curve of her belly. She'd taken only a few bites so far.

"Yes, a few." I gripped my fork tighter. This was it. "Marjorie's parents hosted a party in my honor, and I met the most charming gentleman, amiable and attentive."

I'd been seated beside Edward at the table, and we'd spent the entirety of the dinner in easy conversation, laughing through the meal. I'd been taken with him from the first.

But I distanced my thoughts from that pleasant memory and focused on Mama's face. Her dark, kind eyes, so different from my blue ones, were still unsuspecting.

"Oh?" she said. "What was his name?"

I straightened my spine. "Mr. Bainbridge."

Mama paused, then slowly lowered her fork to the plate. "Bainbridge?" Her voice took on a cautious tone. "His mother is Augusta Bainbridge?"

"Yes, I believe so." I tried to pretend I wasn't perfectly aware of both the name and the reason Mama was reacting like she was. After that first dinner with Edward, we'd gone into the drawing room and Mrs. Bainbridge had practically dragged Edward from my side, glaring at me all the while. It hadn't been until the next day at an assembly that Edward had found me and told me why.

Mama exhaled sharply. "I do hope that was your only interaction with the family."

"I saw him a few times." The less I lied, the easier it would be to remember what secrets to keep. "He was always perfectly pleasant with me."

"Bainbridge," William repeated, squinting at Mama across the table. "You mean Papa's partner?"

“His partner?” I feigned ignorance in the hope that he might reveal more than I knew. “I thought Papa owned the company outright.”

“The elder Mr. Bainbridge was your father’s *former* business partner.” Mama’s voice, normally soft and unassuming, sounded as tense as my stomach felt. “Nearly fifteen years ago.”

“The one who cheated Papa,” William said darkly.

“Cheated?” My foot, anxiously tapping beneath the table, stilled. I knew of the unpleasant history between our families but had never heard it spoken of in such stark terms. “That must be an exaggeration.”

“Not in the least.” Mama pushed her plate back. “Mr. Bainbridge was a dishonest scoundrel. I know it for a fact.”

I had never heard Mama speak so forcefully. She was normally all that was grace and poise, but now, twin spots of color stained her cheeks, her posture stiff as William’s high, starched collars.

“But what did he do?” I asked. Edward hadn’t known, either, what had caused the falling-out between our fathers. His mother had forbidden him to see me, a command we were more than happy to ignore as we rendezvoused in dark hallways and exchanged notes at parties. But once Edward had proposed, we knew we had to find a solution to this enmity between our families.

Mama shook her head. “You do not need to know that. What happened is in the past, and that is where it should remain.”

My brows knit together. Edward’s task was to collect his family’s side of the story, while I discovered mine. Then we could best formulate a plan to reveal our engagement. It had been my hope that the matter was simple, nothing more than a misunderstanding. But at Mama’s reaction, that hope sank fast into the uneasy sea of my stomach.

I met Juliana’s eyes across the table, and she gave me the slightest shake of her head. I ignored her. “Surely, the sins of the late Mr. Bainbridge should not be held against his son,” I said. “He’s done nothing wrong.”

“He may not have, but that family is poisonous.” Mama’s voice returned to its normal, even tone, as if she were willing it so. “Mrs. Bainbridge is no better than her husband was, and you would do well to stay far from them all.”

I bit back another response. I could not say anything else without revealing I knew far more of the situation than I let on. This would not be the work of one night.

“I doubt I will be seeing much of them now.” I speared a boiled potato, though my appetite had vanished. “I gathered they would be staying in Brighton a few weeks yet.”

A few weeks. That was what Edward and I had decided on. A few weeks for each of us to discover all we could and convince our respective families that a match between us was beneficial. It hadn’t seemed so daunting back in Brighton, with Edward’s reassuring smile and encouraging words.

But now a shadow blocked the warmth of my heart. I hadn’t expected my task to be quite this difficult.

“Good.” Mama spoke the word with finality, dismissing the topic.

I forced down the bite of potato as my thoughts flitted away. I needed to find out more about what had happened between Papa and Mr. Bainbridge all those years ago. I eyed William over my wine glass. He knew more than he was saying, I was certain. Perhaps I could appeal to him for information.

I would find a solution. I would convince Mama that Edward was not who she thought he was, that the past had simply been a misunderstanding. Mama would see Edward the way I did: his wit, his sophistication, his intelligence.

And his good looks certainly did not hurt the matter. He could charm anyone, even my mother.

If only we could find the right opportunity.

Chapter Four

MY DEAR EDWARD,

I am hoping most desperately to receive a letter from you soon, as four days without word is nearly more than I can stand. I am glad to be reunited with my family, though I cannot help but think of you often. A few weeks apart seems an eternity, but I shall bear it better if I know you miss me as much as I miss you.

I paused my pen, tapping my fingers against the smooth paper. What to say next? Should I give him an account of my less-than-fruitful conversation with Mama last night? I felt I should be candid about the challenge still ahead of us, and yet I did not want to discourage him. My first letter to Edward ought to be hopeful but honest.

Mama hummed a simple folk tune across the morning room, sitting by the window, where the light was better as she embroidered a dress for Juliana's baby. The child would have more clothes than it would need in a year, and yet Mama insisted on continually sewing more gowns.

I watched her for a long minute. How did she do this every day and not grow weary of it? Sewing, reading, visiting. She had a patience I'd not been blessed with. I'd been in the room for less than an hour and was already growing restless, glancing at the clock every two minutes to see when I could slip away for a ride.

I was turning back to my letter, determined to find the right words, when the door opened. A footman stepped inside, holding a silver tray that displayed a single card. Excellent. A visitor would be most welcome. It couldn't be Mrs. Follett again so soon, and I did have a great many acquaintances I liked in Millbury, though my dear friend—and Juliana's cousin—Eliza had since married and moved with her husband to be closer to her parents.

Mama took the card, and the footman stepped back.

"Who is it, Mama?" I set down my pen.

"Lieutenant Nicholas Avery," she said with a raised eyebrow.

I straightened. The lieutenant?

"Please show him in," Mama directed the footman. As he left, she sent me a questioning glance. "Did you have any reason to expect a visit from him after yesterday?"

"None at all," I said, pretending calmness. But my pulse ticked faster as I stared at my letter to Edward. I couldn't leave it lying here on the

writing desk, where Mama might see it; she currently assumed I was writing to Marjorie. Unlike my habit, my useless morning dress had no pockets, and I had no reticule.

Only one option remained to me. Mama was busy putting away the little gown in her sewing basket, so I quickly folded my letter into a crooked square, the edges of the paper uneven in my haste, and as voices sounded in the entry outside the door, I worked the letter under the left side of my stays, wincing as the awkward corners poked the skin under my arm.

I stood just as Lieutenant Avery stepped into the room, my face heated from my harried movements. He did not spot me right away, as he faced Mama, and I took the chance to examine him. Light hair neatly arranged. Jacket and cravat perfectly pressed. Hessians shining like newly polished silver. Lud, what a difference a day and a bath could make in a gentleman. I would not have recognized him if he did not have that crooked scar along his jaw.

“Good day, Mrs. Rowley,” he said with a bow. “Do forgive us for calling on you without introduction.”

Us. I craned my neck and spotted Olivia lingering in the doorway, now dressed in a clean, pink gown, with her fair curls framing her shoulders. Her pinched expression remained the same as yesterday, unfortunately.

“Never mind that,” Mama said graciously. “You are most welcome, and I am glad to make your acquaintance.”

I stepped forward. I couldn’t very well hide the entire visit. “She has heard a great deal about you, after all.”

Lieutenant Avery’s gaze swept over me. I was not unused to a man’s attention after two Seasons in London, but I wasn’t prepared for the small jolt in my stomach at his appraisal.

“Miss Rowley,” he said, inclining his head.

I forced a curtsy, barely bending my knees. “Lieutenant Avery.”

He turned back to Mama. “I assume your daughter informed you of our misadventure yesterday?”

“Indeed, she did.” Mama gave me a pointed look, and I reluctantly moved to her side. “I was glad to learn there were no serious repercussions from what happened. Your sister is well, I hope?” Mama glanced curiously behind the lieutenant, where Olivia was still hiding.

Lieutenant Avery cleared his throat—a warning—and Olivia inched out from behind him, though she crossed her arms.

“Yes, she is well.” Lieutenant Avery’s voice held a taut edge. “And she has something she would like to say to Miss Rowley.”

Oh, lovely. A forced, insincere apology. My favorite kind.

Olivia said nothing for a long, awkward minute, then she raised her chin. “I am sorry for ruining your hat,” she said, though perhaps *hissed* was the more accurate word. “And I am sorry for being rude to you.”

She seemed finished, but Lieutenant Avery did not allow her off so easily. “And . . .” he pressed.

She sent him a glare before turning back to me. “And thank you for helping me,” she muttered.

I waited, but she said nothing else. I didn’t expect more, but I did think she ought to be left in suspense for a bit. I watched her closely: the stubborn set of her shoulders, the fierce determination in her eyes. In truth, she reminded me of—well, *me*. Odd, that thought. But it was true. She also had a protective older brother, and clearly, she had a craving for adventure, even if she went about it all wrong.

“I do hope you will be more careful next time,” I finally said. “But I would help you again without hesitation. I am glad you are all right.”

Her mouth opened for a short second before she slammed it closed again. Ha. She hadn’t expected me to say that. Neither had her brother, judging from his furrowed brow.

“Do sit with us and talk awhile.” Mama gestured to the seats around us. “I should like to know you both better.”

Lieutenant Avery sat stiffly on the sofa, his back straight. He adjusted his arms several times, as if not quite sure how to place them. Olivia perched on the edge of her cushion, a bird ready to take flight at the slightest disturbance. Surely, there had never been a more uncomfortable gathering.

“Tell me, lieutenant,” Mama said, folding her hands in her lap. “What brings you to Millbury? Have you any family here?”

Lieutenant Avery drummed his fingers against his knee. “Not family, no. Although, I did come on the recommendation of my uncle, who lived here as a boy. He thought it might be beneficial for Olivia to be in the country.”

Mama nodded. “Yes, country air is always good for the young.” She dipped her head to speak to Olivia. “How do you like your new home?”

“This is not my home,” Olivia said rigidly, a failed attempt at civility.

Mama smiled at Olivia. Perhaps such patience came with being a mother, though I could not imagine I would ever have such fortitude as Mama displayed. “Of course it does not feel like home yet,” Mama said. “But perhaps soon.”

Olivia fiddled with the tassel on a pillow, clearly uninterested in continuing the conversation.

Mama did not give up. “Do you like to read, Olivia?”

Olivia shrugged noncommittally.

“I’ve a few books that might interest you,” Mama went on. “Would you like to look?”

Olivia said nothing, and her posture did not relax. Then she heaved a sigh and nodded unexpectedly. But as the alternative was boring adult conversation, perhaps I shouldn’t have been terribly surprised.

“Wonderful.” Mama stood and went to the low, stained cabinet near the window. “They are just over here.”

Olivia followed her, though she kept an expression of careful disinterest on her face. Which, of course, left me sitting alone with Lieutenant Avery, a situation I did not find fortunate in the least. Now I would not even have Mama to smooth over an awkward conversation.

Mama took a small stack of books from the cabinet, set them on top, then began to sort through them, describing this book and that, with Olivia looking on in silence. Beside me, Lieutenant Avery was as quiet as his sister, and I stole a glance at him. He watched Olivia, hand rubbing his chin. Was he angry? Pleased? Confused?

“I did not think she would go,” he said quietly.

As I was the only person near enough to hear, I had to assume he was speaking to me. “Olivia, you mean?”

He turned his gaze to me. “Yes. She generally doesn’t like people.”

“Oh?” Shocking. “I wonder who she learned that from.”

Lieutenant Avery said nothing. I bit my tongue. I’d meant it as a truthful sort of joke, but we were barely on civil terms, let alone friendly, teasing ones.

Then the corner of his mouth twitched. “I like people,” he said. “Well, most people.”

Interesting. A sense of humor. Or at least the ability to recognize humor. “You certainly do not act like it.”

He leaned forward. “That is because no one prepares you for when a pretty young lady saves your exasperating sister from drowning, all while you feel guilty for not keeping a better eye on her.”

Pretty. It was an offhand compliment, but a compliment all the same.

“I daresay you are right.” I kept my tone light. “My education lacked that particular lesson as well. Shameful, really.”

“Indeed.” He still hadn’t fully smiled, but his features softened. I wouldn’t call him handsome, not like Edward, but he had a pleasant sort of face with strong features and a slight bump to his nose, as if he’d gone one too many rounds of fisticuffs.

He moved to the edge of his seat, clasping his hands as he rested his elbows on his knees. “Truly, Miss Rowley, I hope you will accept my sincerest thanks for what you did yesterday, even if I handled it rather terribly. I—” He shook his head. “Well, I was not thinking very clearly at the time. I am responsible for Olivia, and seeing her like that . . .”

His voice broke off, and that was all it took to forget my frustrations from yesterday. How would I feel seeing someone I loved nearly lose their life? I would not have been in a good state, that was certain. I swallowed, watching Mama and Olivia sitting beside each other on the settee as they read in silence.

“You needn’t thank me,” I said. “Especially as I was not particularly polite either.”

He gave a short chuckle. “I deserved every word. I promise I am not normally so ill-mannered, but I’ve discovered my temper is rather short when it comes to Olivia. She enjoys testing me.”

“That is what little sisters are supposed to do.” I used my most superior tone. “My brother William can attest to my own expertise.”

“I am not surprised,” he said. “Any lady who rides bareback is not one who—”

I grabbed his arm, cutting off his words. The motion startled me almost as much as him, but I ignored my lurching stomach and stared at Mama. She pointed at something in Olivia’s book. She hadn’t heard.

“Ah,” Lieutenant Avery said softly. “Not something I ought to mention, I see.”

My hand was still on his arm. I took it back, hiding it in the folds of my dress. I matched his low tone. “I’m afraid my family would not approve if they knew.” I did not particularly wish to go into all the details of *why*. It

was a far longer story than I could manage here, not to mention I did not know this man at all. Instead, I settled for a safer excuse. “It is not ladylike.”

“Not ladylike?” He straightened. “Why should that matter? You are riding your own land. It is a bit eccentric, but it hardly matters if no one is there to see you.”

“You would be quite alone in that assessment.”

“It would not be the first time I’ve stood alone,” he said. “I would rather be right than polite.”

I gave a puff of laughter. “I very much anticipate watching you face Millbury’s society.”

“Are they terrible, then?”

“Only if you insist on being, as you said, *eccentric*.”

He leaned back in his seat. “I am in no great hurry to impress anyone, I assure you. Perhaps I might enjoy more peace and quiet if everyone thinks I am rude and peculiar. And I cannot even say how long we will be staying.”

“Oh?” I kept my voice unaffected, hiding my interest. I wanted my meadow back. Even if Lieutenant Avery approved of my riding for some odd reason, I still valued solitude during my rides.

“I could be given orders at any time,” he said, “though I cannot say I anticipate it. There is no shortage of lieutenants in peacetime.”

“What would happen to Olivia if you were called away?”

“I do not know. I hardly know what to do with her *now*.”

“Has she always been this—?” I stopped.

“Difficult?” he supplied.

“Well, yes.”

He let out a long breath of air. “I could not say. Truthfully, I have met her only a handful of times in the last few years.”

“Really?” I tipped my head. “Your own sister?”

“I never had a strong connection to either my stepmother or Olivia. My father remarried after I joined the navy, and in the last decade, I have spent more time at sea than on land.”

That I could understand well enough. Papa had died when I was a young girl, but I still remembered my joy at seeing his face after months of absence. William also used to travel a great deal, after he’d taken on Papa’s merchant company. He was gone much less now, with a wife and a child on the way, but there were years in my memory in which I couldn’t recall

seeing him at all. But William chose when and where he traveled. Lieutenant Avery did not have such a luxury in the navy.

He shifted his weight as his gaze went back to Olivia. “She has had a challenging time of it lately.”

“I heard her mother recently passed?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “My father—our father—has been gone nearly three years now, but my stepmother died unexpectedly just six months ago. I was named as guardian, but since I was at sea, Olivia was sent to a cousin’s home.” He frowned. “She was not treated well, and when I arrived home from my last voyage two months ago, I found her and took her away immediately.”

Not treated well? I followed his eyes to Olivia. She sat without moving, a small book clutched in her hands. I could not tell if she was actually reading or not.

“I am sorry,” Lieutenant Avery said. “I did not intend to tell you all the unnecessary details of my life. Only to explain our situation somewhat so you would not judge either of us too harshly after yesterday.”

I *had* judged them. Quite harshly, in fact.

“It is forgotten,” I said. “Truly.”

He nodded. “I am glad you forgive more easily than I do.”

“I cannot hold a grudge when it is not deserved.”

He squinted so that lines ran across his tanned face, studying me as if I were something far off in his spyglass. I shifted my weight, uneasy at his attention.

Mama came to join us, and I was far too grateful for her return.

“I think Olivia would like to be left alone.” Mama reclaimed her seat beside me.

“I do not doubt it,” Lieutenant Avery said. “I am sorry if she said anything impolite.”

She waved him off. “She hardly said a word, but I have a sense about these things.”

Mama pulled the lieutenant into conversation, asking him about his family, his plans for Linwood Hall. It was all very structured, unlike the curious conversation I’d just had with him. I should not have spoken so comfortably with him, considering our short acquaintance and the unusual way it had begun.

And Edward, of course. But I could hardly be rude and aloof to every man I met simply because I was secretly engaged.

Mama and Lieutenant Avery spoke for several minutes. Apparently, they were both fascinated by the barley crop that would be harvested soon, or they were at least very good at pretending they were fascinated. I glanced at the mahogany bracket clock on the mantel. It was nearing three o'clock. I wouldn't have time to ride if our visitors stayed much longer.

"I am sorry, but we ought to be going."

My head turned at Lieutenant Avery's words, but he looked away from me in the same instant. "I do not wish to overstay our welcome," he said evenly.

Had he seen me watching the clock? I hadn't meant to hint I was bored or wished him gone.

"Not at all," Mama said. "But I daresay Miss Olivia is tired of all our talk."

Olivia stood abruptly and set her book on the cabinet. "Yes, thank you."

No one could say the girl was not honest. The lieutenant rose, and Mama and I followed suit.

"It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Rowley." He sounded sincere, if a bit guarded. "And to meet you under better circumstances, Miss Rowley."

"I do not think we could have met under *worse* circumstances than yesterday." I forced a smile.

He gave a short laugh. "No, indeed not."

Mama said her farewells, and Lieutenant Avery and Olivia left. The room fell quiet once more as the door shut behind them.

"That was one of the more . . . unique visits I've had at Havenfield," Mama said, sitting again. "But I think I quite like the lieutenant. I admit I was expecting someone rather severe based on your account of him yesterday."

"I was as well." I tugged absently at my sleeve. "But he was the perfect gentleman, to my surprise."

"Perfect, you say?" Mama asked innocently. "You have been out for how many years and only now you have found a perfect gentleman?"

I raised a finger. "Do not attempt any matchmaking, Mama. You know I am determined to find my own husband."

“Yes, well, you never said I could not help.” She took up her sewing and plucked the needle from the fabric. “Perhaps the lieutenant is precisely what you need. He is so very different from all the men you know in London.”

“You say that as if being different is the pinnacle of desirability.”

“Perhaps not for everyone,” she said. “But for you? I think that could be just the thing.”

I did not speak, turning to one of the clear windows that overlooked Havenfield’s wide, green lawns. Mama had no idea how right she was. Except, I had already found the man who was different enough to catch my interest. Edward Bainbridge was everything I wanted in a husband: charming, intelligent, handsome.

I wanted to say something, to bring Edward into the conversation again and perhaps allow Mama to see why he was right for me, but her reaction to his name last night unnerved me. I needed to change her mind subtly. I needed more time, more information.

The sun shone weakly outside, the sky covered in a thin layer of clouds, but the trees beckoned to me, waving their full, leafy branches in invitation. A ride. A ride would clear my head.

“Would you mind terribly, Mama, if I—”

“Go,” she said with a laugh. “I do not know how you endured so long without asking. But take a groom, or William will have your head.”

“I will.” I went to her and kissed her cheek.

She took my hand. “Do be careful. I know William makes a fuss, but I am on his side in all of this. Better to be safe.”

I nodded as a lump formed in my throat, aching like when I’d had a cold last winter.

She patted my hand. “Have a lovely ride.”

I left the morning room and was making for the stairs, my strides quickening in anticipation of my ride, when I heard footsteps behind me.

Lieutenant Avery stood framed in the doorway, the afternoon sun silhouetting him.

“Miss Rowley,” he said shortly.

“Lieutenant,” I said, trying for the smooth, unaffected voice my mother was so adept at. “Did you forget something?”

Lieutenant Avery hesitated. A footman stood inside the doors and moved back unobtrusively.

“No,” Lieutenant Avery said. His hands moved restlessly over the box he held, a round hat box covered in blue floral paper. “I am sorry. I did not plan on seeing you again.”

“Did not plan on seeing me or did not want to?” I could not help but tease him. He looked so very uncomfortable.

“I certainly did not *want* to be caught.” He stepped forward onto the creamy marble floor of the entry. “I planned to leave this for you to open later.”

“For me?” I scrutinized the hat box in his hands. I had an inkling I knew what was inside.

“I tried to think how I could make recompense for yesterday. This is my rather pathetic attempt, seeing as I can do nothing for the letter you lost. I did not bring it in earlier, as I was hoping to avoid the appearance of bribery.”

“Oh, but a gift would have softened me much faster than words,” I said. “Do remember that for the next time you need to buy my pardon.”

He chuckled. “I shall make a note, Miss Rowley.”

Then his gaze dropped below my neck, to linger on . . . well, there could be only one thing he was lingering on. I stiffened. My dress was not particularly low-cut, nor did I have many curves to boast of, but the object of his attention was clear. I cleared my throat, glaring at him.

His eyes jumped back to mine, but instead of blushing as any decent man would, he raised an eyebrow.

I grit my teeth together. Just when I’d begun to think him a decent sort of fellow. “Do excuse me, Lieutenant,” I said without any remorse at my harsh voice. “I’ve somewhere to be.”

“Of course.” He stepped back, but to my irritation, a grin began toying at the corner of his mouth. “Although, perhaps you’ll allow me to offer you a word of warning before you go.”

“Warning?”

“If you don’t remove that note from its precarious position immediately, you’ll soon think every man in Millbury to be a scoundrel of the worst sort.”

My mouth dropped like an anchor, and I immediately glanced down. Sure enough, my letter to Edward was sticking out rather inelegantly from the neckline of my bodice.

Confound it. I spun, putting my back to Lieutenant Avery as I snatched the letter from my stays. Of course this would happen to me.

“Good day, Miss Rowley,” he said from behind me, with no attempt to hide the laughter in his voice. His footsteps faded as he left the entryway and descended the front stairs.

I clutched the letter in one hand, my face warm as a steaming kettle. How could he say something so . . . so . . .

So *what?* He hadn’t said anything offensive or coarse. He’d only pointed out the reason why I had thought him a cad in the first place. I could hardly blame him for staring when I’d been at fault for using the worst possible hiding place.

I turned as the sounds of horse hooves and carriage wheels floated back through the open door. Lieutenant Avery drove a high-perch phaeton, and Olivia’s little bonnet looked almost comical beside his broad shoulders. As I stepped to the open front door, the lieutenant spotted me. He raised a hand in farewell, all the while sporting a wicked grin.

I couldn’t help it. I grinned, then I laughed out loud. The whole situation was so ridiculous I could hardly do anything *but* laugh. I offered a wave of my own as the phaeton hurried down the lane, and he touched the brim of his hat before disappearing out of sight behind the line of trees.

At least I could say my return to Havenfield had not been boring. Lieutenant Avery and his sister had made certain it was anything but.

I spotted the hat box on the sideboard as I turned back. The lieutenant must have put it down while I’d been so flustered. I went to it and pulled back the round lid. Rather unsurprisingly, inside sat a hat. A lovely little riding hat, dark blue instead of the black mine had been, and with a rounded crown instead of flat. But it had a generous plume of fluffy feathers and a band of cream velvet around its brim.

I perched the hat on my head and stepped to the gilded mirror hanging in the hall. Lieutenant Avery had bought me a hat. And a pretty one at that. I would never have guessed he had any sense of style, but clearly, my first impression of him was about as wrong as I’d ever been about a person.

Different, Mama’s voice whispered to me.

I took off the hat and smoothed my light-brown locks. I should refuse such a gift, truly. It was not proper, even if I hadn’t been engaged. And yet, wasn’t Lieutenant Avery just replacing what had been ruined when I’d

rescued Olivia? I needed a hat, and here one was. I shouldn't worry beyond that.

After all, I had a far more important problem to worry over and no idea how to solve it.

Chapter Five

I WAS NEVER MORE RELIEVED to see Marjorie's handwriting than I was the next day when Mr. Banfield, the butler, brought the mail during breakfast. A letter from Marjorie meant a letter from Edward since she was the only way we were able to exchange letters at all. I excused myself from the table as soon as I could.

I dashed upstairs to my room and nearly tore the letter in my haste to open it. I set Marjorie's note aside to read later and immediately unfolded Edward's letter. It wasn't particularly long, and after scanning the entire page, I sat rather heavily on my bed. His words did not buoy me as much as I'd hoped.

Mother will not tell me a thing about what happened. I have always known she and Father held a grudge against your family for whatever reason, but I never imagined it to be such a tightly kept secret. Mother insists I mind myself and leave the past in the past.

I sighed, leaning my head on the carved wooden bedpost. Leave the past in the past. That was all anyone wished to do, but it was, unfortunately, not an option for Edward and me. The secrets of the past were very real obstacles for our future, ones I was determined to overcome.

But at least Edward had included some optimism in his letter.

But I will not give up, Rebecca. If Mother will not tell me what we need to know, I will find someone who can. I have written to a number of my father's old friends and acquaintances in the hopes that one of them might shed some light on this situation. I am certain one of them will be willing to share information, and I will write to you when I have word.

I lay back on my bed, holding the note to my chest. *I will find someone who can*, he'd written. Should I do the same? I'd attempted to pry the truth from Mama, and she'd been less than willing, but perhaps I had another source I could turn to.

Asking William outright was a risky venture, but there were ways to find the answers I needed. When William had inherited Havenfield, he'd brought his entire London office here, settling into the study with all his records, ledger books, files, and copies of *everything*. If I could search through it all, back to the years of Papa's partnership with Mr. Bainbridge, perhaps I could find some hint of what kept our families apart. But I could hardly search with William present. He wouldn't take kindly to my snooping.

I would have to wait for the right opportunity.



Which was how I found myself creeping down the servants' stairs three days later. I did not want to meet Mama or William, although I had it on good authority William had left for the afternoon to meet with a tenant. His study, where he normally spent all his waking hours, would be blessedly empty.

I peered around the corner of the dim, low-ceilinged staircase, keeping an open ear for footsteps or voices. I heard nothing, so I slipped into Havenfield's main corridor. The floor-to-ceiling windows announced a thoroughly gray day, the oppressive clouds keeping the warmth of the sun from me. It was difficult enough to keep from feeling discouraged without the weather taking part. I focused instead on remembering the rest of Edward's letter, full of lovely, toe-curling sentiments.

He missed me and could not wait until these weeks were mere memories to us. My steps lightened, and I resisted the urge to hum "Bonny Highland Laddie," the song we'd danced to at my last ball in Brighton, a few days before my departure. Edward had been all that was sweet, kind, and attentive. When he'd whispered in my ear to meet him in the garden, I had not hesitated. In the shadow of an elm tree's reaching branches, he'd proposed. He'd admitted that mountains lay before us, challenges we would have to face, but knowing he wished to face them with me, as my husband, made it all too easy to accept him with a kiss. My first kiss, and it was just as lovely as I'd imagined.

Footsteps at the other end of the corridor snapped me back to attention. A maid strode toward me, a stack of linens under one arm. I had every right to be wherever I wanted in the house, yet my pulse sped to a trot.

The maid spotted me and gave a curtsy. I nodded and continued down the corridor, not looking back as she hurried past me. No need to appear any guiltier.

I reached the door to William's study. Did he lock it? I sent a wary glance both ways to ensure I was alone, then turned the handle. It opened, and I breathed easier as I slipped into the study.

Dark paneled walls were lined with bookshelves, cabinets, and paintings. The far side was dominated by an enormous stone fireplace. Unlit now in summer, it still exuded intimidation. Sir Charles, William's predecessor, had been the same way when I'd met him in my youth. Cold,

daunting. But William had brought his own touches to the study. His large mahogany desk made use of the space, the leather chair askew as if he'd just left. The desk was nearly buried in deep but orderly piles: books, letters, maps. The narrow windows behind the desk allowed a lovely view over the east lawn, and William kept the curtains drawn at all times to allow as much light as possible into the room. I had been here several times to pry William from his desk to ride with me or to talk when I was bored. He never minded when I came by, setting aside tasks to focus on me.

I swallowed. I should not feel guilty about this. I was rifling through a few papers, not ransacking his sanctuary. He would never know I'd been here.

I hoped so anyway. I hardly knew where to start. William must have organized everything in a perfectly logical way, but as I peeked in cabinets and opened ledger books tucked away on the shelves, it soon became clear this might be a much larger chore than I'd anticipated. One ledger contained the shipping schedules, cargos, crew wages, prices of goods, and so on for one month in 1809. *One month*. How on earth could I find what I needed? I knew nothing about our family's business, so it appeared I would be learning a great deal during this undertaking.

I blew a lock of hair from my face. Fifteen years ago. That was what Mama had said at dinner a few days past, giving me a basic timeline of events. That meant I ought to be searching for information during the year 1807. Perhaps also a couple years earlier and later, if Mama had estimated wrong. A span of five years. Staring at the thick ledgers, I ran a finger across their spines and counted how many books I would have to examine. This was not the work of a quick hour. This could take months, if all I had was a stolen afternoon now and again.

"Thinking of joining the family business, are we?"

I jumped at William's voice and spun. He stood in the doorway, hands at his waist.

"No," I said, quick and high-pitched. What was he doing here? "I was just looking."

"At boring old ledgers?" He moved to his desk and shuffled through the papers. "They're not quite Shakespeare, you know."

He did not *sound* suspicious. I moved away from the bookshelves. "I was looking for you, actually." The lie came too easily. "Fancy a ride?"

William straightened his papers, glancing out the window. "Why not? The weather is holding, and my meeting was postponed."

"Excellent." At least I would gain a ride from this failed attempt at snooping. And after seeing the amount of work it would take to sort through the ledgers, I was beginning to think that asking William might be the only way to gather the information I needed. Perhaps I might find a way to approach the topic of the Bainbridge family.

Once my racing pulse had returned to normal, that was. My skin still felt hot and itchy after being caught in the act. This engagement was certainly not good for my complexion.

We separated to change and then met in the stables. The day was still dull and gray, but it was better than the three days of rain we'd just endured. Stella danced when she saw me, and my spirits couldn't help but lift. After leaving the stables, William and I allowed our horses to warm to the exercise with a walk and then a few minutes of trotting.

"Shall we race?" William asked.

"Are you sure?" I pulled on Stella's reins, and he brought his mount to a halt beside me. "We trounced you rather badly last time. I should hate to cover you in dust once more."

"I think you would *enjoy* that more than anything," he said dryly and quite accurately.

"Yet you are willing to set aside your pride for my own enjoyment." I held a gloved hand to my heart. "What a dear brother you are."

He chuckled. "You only *won* because Stowaway had a stone in his hoof. It was hardly a fair match."

"So you say." I leaned forward conspiratorially. "Should we check for stones now so you do not have an excuse this time?"

"Just like your excuse the time before that, claiming your hair blew into your eyes?"

"It did!"

"Very conveniently, as I was winning already."

"Oh hush." I glanced around. We rode along the western edge of Havenfield's property, with gentle sloping hills and thickets of aspen trees with their green leaves dancing. I pointed north. "To that tree there, atop the rise?"

He nodded, reining in Stowaway as his hooves danced. "Shall we have a wager?"

“Of course. There’s no use winning if I cannot lord it over you somehow.”

He grinned. “I pity the man you marry. He shall need the patience of a saint.”

“I would not oppose that idea,” I said, “so long as he has the face of a Greek god.”

“Strange how you haven’t caught yourself a husband yet, with such a paltry list of requirements.”

Though we jested, that familiar prick deep in my chest reminded me of my deception, but I forced it away. One day, William would meet Edward, and I knew they would like each other. Until then, I would have to bide my time and pray I did not mess it all up somehow.

“What shall we wager?” I asked. “Let us make it good.”

He rubbed his chin with a gloved hand. “When I win—”

“If,” I interjected.

“*When* I win,” he said louder, ignoring me, “you shall donate a month’s worth of pin money to the church poorhouse.”

I drew back my head. “The poorhouse? Why?”

“I daresay it would go a long way in improving your relationship with Mr. Porter,” he said with a gleam of amusement in his eyes. “Though it might take a year of pin money for him to forget how you fell asleep during services last summer.”

“That was hardly my fault,” I protested. “He must know he bores the congregation to tears every Sunday.”

“Be that as it may, he is still the vicar. He has great influence in the community, and this is your home now, Rebecca.”

Why did everyone insist this was my home? We’d lived in half a dozen houses during my twenty years of life. None had ever felt truly like home except for the first, our tiny townhouse with rickety stairs and a musty smell that never seemed to leave. But we’d been all together then—Mama and Papa, Rachel and William and I.

“We have the London house still, William.” I tried to keep my tone indifferent, but he was too perceptive.

He shot me a sidelong glance. “Do you not like it here? I thought—”

“I do,” I said quickly. “I do like it here. But do you not sometimes feel as if you are simply visiting, living in someone else’s house?”

He considered the question. "At first, I suppose. It was odd, thinking I now owned everything Sir Charles had worked his whole life to maintain."

"But?"

His face softened. "But then I met Juliana, and it hardly mattered what house we lived in. Home became wherever she was."

I stared at him. I hadn't expected such sincerity from my teasing older brother. My mind flashed back to my last night in Brighton, when Edward had proposed. I'd felt giddy, yes. Elated, of course. He was everything I'd hoped for in a match. But . . . but I could not quite recall feeling as William did. To me, home was all that was peaceful, safe, comfortable. Was Edward my home?

I shook that doubt away. Of course he was. We had plans for the future, plans that made my stomach flip with anticipation. If he did not feel like home now, he surely would once we married.

"Careful," I told William. "Or I might accuse you of being a romantic."

"Oh, I am a romantic through and through," he said. "How do you think I won over Juliana?"

"Certainly not with your wits or looks."

He barked a laugh. "You could cut stone with a tongue that sharp. I would be kinder to the brother who is about to best you in a race."

"Except we've yet to set my prize," I said.

"And what is it you want from me?"

"*When* I win," I said, stealing his word from earlier, "I want to jump the Hendersons' hedge."

Any sign of joviality left his face. "The hedge? Why?"

"To prove I can do it."

He sat back in his saddle. "I know you can do it, Rebecca."

"Then why do you not let me?"

"You know very well why."

"It was five years ago," I said stubbornly. "I fully recovered and have only improved in my abilities since then."

I was pretending more bravery than I felt. In truth, I was already regretting my impulsive words. I hadn't jumped in years. Well, that wasn't true. I'd jumped plenty of times on my unaccompanied rides, but I'd barely had the nerve to take smaller jumps, logs and the like. I could never quite

convince myself to jump a bigger obstacle, like the hedge. Not alone. Not after what had happened.

But I could not back away now. That would reveal far more of my fear than I wanted William to see. And a small part of me knew that I needed this. I needed to face that memory, conquer it, and never let it swallow me up again.

“I do not like it,” William said, but he sounded less certain than before.

I pried at the crack in his armor. “Please, William? Just once. Stella could do it in a heartbeat.”

He exhaled a long breath. “Very well.”

My heart rose into my throat like the hot-air balloons at Vauxhall. “Truly?”

He raised a finger in warning. “But you’ll take it at the southern edge, where it is lower. And you’ll let me check the ground first to make certain it is not too muddy.”

“Of course,” I said, though my mouth went dry. I hadn’t expected him to agree.

“You still have to win, you know.” He patted his horse’s neck. “Stowaway and I have been riding every day while you’ve been eating too much in Brighton. Fawcett said she had to let out all your gowns.”

I shot him a glare. “She never said that, you cad. Now take on the challenge like a proper gentleman and stop throwing about useless insults.”

“Useless?” He urged his horse in line beside Stella and me, and both horses pranced in anticipation of our race. “I find it rather useful to cast doubts into your mind. All the better for me.”

I ignored him. “On my mark?”

He nodded, still sporting that infuriating grin of his. How he’d ever convinced any woman to marry him was beyond my comprehension.

I leaned forward. “Ready.”

William leaned forward as well.

“Go!” I shouted and kicked my heels into Stella’s flanks. She leaped forward, her hooves digging into the moist earth and kicking out mud behind us. I clutched the reins and bent over her neck, crouched above her back as she found her stride. William was right beside us, his horse’s flowing mane in the corner of my vision. The pounding hoofbeats were drowned out by the rushing in my ears, the current of energy in my veins.

I urged Stella faster, faster. This dizzying, heady exhilaration—I craved it constantly, every hour of the day. The ground began to slope upward, the long grass dancing as Stella and I raced toward the hilltop. I shot a glance at William, directly to my left. His face was set in determination, his form perfect. He'd taught me how to ride, after all. I'd learned from the best.

But there was much more to riding than knowledge and training. I had instinct and natural inclination—and I had Stella.

This was what she had been bred for. I let the reins fall atop her neck, careful to keep them from her flashing hooves, and grasped her mane instead. She felt the difference immediately, and she stretched out her neck, reaching forward as her strides lengthened and quickened all at once. She sprang ahead, and I bent even lower over her neck, feeling the vibrations of each hoof hitting the ground.

We reached the top of the hill, and the ground leveled out, flat and empty, save for the tree that was our finish line. I could not see William and did not dare turn to spot him. He was not ahead of me, and that was all that mattered.

The tree blew past in a blur of rustling leaves, and I pulled Stella to a stop as I twisted in my seat. William was behind us, both he and his horse panting with nearly identical expressions of defeat.

“How the devil”—he gasped a breath—“did you do that?”

I almost laughed at his expense, but seeing as I'd beaten him soundly, I could spare a bit of graciousness. “That is what I call riding, William.” My chest heaved as I leaned over to pat Stella's neck, damp with perspiration. “You ought to try it sometime.”

Well, perhaps *graciousness* wasn't the right word.

He shook his head, leaning back in his saddle as he stared at me. “That was something different. I've never seen Stella run like that.”

My proud smile froze on my lips.

He'd never seen her run like that because she'd only ever done so when I'd ridden bareback, when it had simply been me and her and the wind.

“We have improved, that is all.” My voice was strained. Had he noticed me give up the reins?

He eyed me, but I could not tell if it was with admiration or suspicion. “That is a mild way of putting it.” He turned back toward where we had

come from, and I snatched the reins from where they hung atop Stella's neck. Of all the foolish things to do, risking our secret simply to win a race, to satisfy my pride.

"I'm afraid I cannot claim as much credit as you wish to give me," I said offhandedly, as if it did not matter in the least what had just happened. "You must realize Stella is a superior mount."

"One I regret buying for you more and more every day."

I knew him well enough to realize he meant those words as more than a jest. Would he take Stella away from me if he thought her too much of a risk?

"Never fear," I said in an attempt to lighten the mood. "Perhaps next time, we might give you a head start."

William grumbled something about ungrateful sisters. I breathed a little easier, but perhaps a change of subject was for the best.

"We are not far from the Hendersons'," I said. "Shall I claim my prize today?" I was still nervous about jumping, but my win had given me a lift in confidence. Perhaps that would help Stella and me over the hedge.

"Only if I approve the ground." But he turned his mount to follow me as we started down the other side of the hill.

"Of course." There was no point in arguing, and the more obedient he thought me, the better. And, of course, there was the small fact that I hadn't dragged him out here just to ride. I hadn't the time to sort through every ledger in his study. I needed a much faster approach.

"William." I spoke with careful steadiness as we ducked under the low branches of an aspen. I did not want him to know how nervous I was. "Do you remember at dinner the other night when I mentioned the Bainbridge family?"

He cast me a sidelong glance. "I recall it rather vividly. Why do you ask?"

"No specific reason. But I am curious."

"You? Curious? How utterly shocking."

I ignored his quip, too focused on how to phrase my next words. "I cannot help it. A family secret kept for fifteen years? It is intriguing."

"It is not a family secret," he said in exasperation. "Just because Mama does not like to talk about it does not mean there is some scandalous revelation waiting in store. And in any case, I hardly know more about it than you do."

I hesitated. I hadn't wanted to use the next bit of my plan, but it was for the best. Wasn't it?

"I only ask," I said with a slight catch in my throat, "because I worry for Mama."

"Mama?" William managed to voice many questions with a single word.

"Yes. She's been rather quiet since that night, and I worry I may have dredged up some unpleasant memories for her." It wasn't truly a lie. Mama *had* been quieter of late, but I wasn't at all certain it was because of the Bainbridges. I often caught her staring out the window, a strange distance claiming her eyes.

I pressed on. "I could help her if I know what is bothering her. If you lend me some of your understanding, I might be able to make things right."

William did not speak for a long moment, and I forced myself not to push harder. This approach needed a light touch. He needed to think it was simple curiosity and a desire to help that drove my questions. We splashed through a small stream, droplets of water soaking into the hem of my habit, before he finally spoke.

"I truly do not know much," he said. "Mr. Bainbridge and Papa were partners for nearly three years. Eventually, Papa bought Mr. Bainbridge's shares and control of the company. I've read the records myself, and it seemed a fair and straightforward transaction."

"But?"

He shrugged. "But it is never so simple as that. From what our solicitor has told me, I gathered Mr. Bainbridge was not satisfied with the agreement, though he had no choice but to sell due to personal debt. Their friendship suffered for it."

My boots shifted in my stirrups. That was the first I'd heard of Mr. Bainbridge being in debt. Edward certainly hadn't mentioned it. Had he kept it from me? I shook that away. We'd shared everything with each other, realizing our best chance of success was through honesty. This was simply a problem that came from attempting to unravel what had happened so long ago. The truth was elusive, broken and divided until it was unrecognizable. I needed to piece it back together, like stitches in Mama's sewing.

"But why does Mama dislike the Bainbridges so?" I asked. "It seems like much more than a business arrangement gone wrong."

“That is what I am not so certain about.” He paused, a thoughtful expression coming over his face. “But perhaps there is a way to find out.”

A little thread of hope tugged inside me. “How is that?”

“Besides the official company ledgers and records, Papa kept a separate account of everything in the business. Rather like a journal but not of personal recollections. I think—” His voice broke off, and he shook his head. I watched him closely. “I think,” he started again, his voice thick, “that he knew he would not live long enough to pass such knowledge to me, so he wrote down what I would need to know once I was old enough to take control of the company.”

A weight like a horseshoe dropped into my stomach. I’d grown better at hiding my feelings about Papa’s death all those years ago, but seeing the pain on William’s face . . .

I’d been only eleven years old, yet the memory dug deep inside me, a splinter I could never reach. The little brick house in Portsmouth. Mama crying. My sister, Rachel, stunned and silent. William, a few years older than I, burying his face in his arms.

Papa, still and pale, his eyes closed for the last time.

I blinked and turned from William. We teased and jested together, but we never discussed Papa. Not in depth anyway.

William cleared his throat. “What I mean to say is that I’ve never read his notes from that time. Perhaps he wrote something that would clarify the situation. I must say, I am curious as well.”

I fixated on Stella’s twitching ears. William’s interest caught me off guard. I’d expected to draw out details from him, not set him on the very trail I intended to follow. What if . . . what if Edward’s father *had* done something terrible, as Mama had insinuated? I hoped not, but I had to prepare for the worst. If William learned the truth first, it might poison him against the Bainbridges.

“Oh,” I said. “I—I’m not sure that is necessary. I think I understand better now.”

William twisted on his saddle, eyeing me. I’d stirred his suspicion.

“Good day,” a familiar voice behind me said, deep and steady. William turned his horse immediately, but I took a moment to send a grateful prayer heavenward for the interruption before facing the newcomer.

Chapter Six

LIEUTENANT AVERY APPROACHED ON HIS mount, the bay hunter I'd seen that day at the lake. He rode effortlessly, one hand on the reins, the other raised to the brim of his hat in greeting. His fair, windswept hair escaped his hat, and his green eyes held a spark that I knew all too well. He'd just enjoyed a bruising ride, confirmed by the sheen of sweat on his horse's fine coat.

"Miss Rowley, Mr. Rowley," he said.

I forced a smile as I adjusted my half boots in the stirrup irons. Heat pricked at my face, though I refused to allow my blush to proceed any further than that. The last time I'd seen Lieutenant Avery, he had pointed out the letter escaping my stays. From the twitch in his cheek, I had no doubt he was thinking of the same memory.

"Lieutenant Avery," William said, nudging his horse closer. "Taking advantage of the break in the weather, I see."

"Indeed." Lieutenant Avery came to a stop beside us. "Though rain has never bothered me much, my horse does not seem to care for getting wet."

"Is that why he was so useless at the lake when we met the other day?" My quip left my mouth before I realized it.

He always looked rather surprised when I said things like that, and now was no exception. He gave a short laugh. "I shall have to train him better if he is to set about rescuing people. But why bother when the neighborhood is made safe by your efforts, Miss Rowley?"

He was teasing me, which was just as unexpected as if he'd insulted me. I'd grown used to William's endless jokes at my expense, but such lighthearted banter felt odd coming from a man I knew so scarcely as Lieutenant Avery.

"You like the hat, then?"

My eyes snapped up to meet his. "Pardon?"

His gaze moved pointedly up above my head. Of course. I wore the hat he'd given me. "Oh, I mean, yes. Yes, I do like it." The clumsy words spilled from my mouth. "I—I wished to thank you for it. It was kind of you to replace mine, though you hardly needed to."

He waved me off. "We needn't go through all that again. I am just glad you like it. The milliner assured me it is the height of fashion in London."

"Yes. I'm sure it is."

We fell into silence, interrupted by the bird twittering in the elm tree above us. I plucked at a stray thread on my habit.

“Are you off anywhere in particular?” William asked. “Or would you care to join us?”

“I am coming from town,” the lieutenant said, nodding to the east. “Planned on a ride myself, so I would be glad to join you.”

I shifted my weight. I liked the lieutenant; truly, I did. He had a quiet humor that made for interesting conversation, and he was agreeable enough. But my conversation with William had left an odd pit in my stomach. For the first time in my memory, I wished I were back in my bedroom instead of here riding.

“We were making our way to the Henderson farm,” William said. “I believe its property borders yours, if you are interested in seeing the boundaries closer.”

“I am indeed.” Lieutenant Avery settled both hands on the saddle before him. “I should not admit to my own neighbor how unfamiliar I am with this estate, but I would be glad for any knowledge you’re willing to share.”

The two of them fell into conversation as we started off. I followed behind, listening to their exchange about the surrounding farms and their crops. Lieutenant Avery glanced back once to offer a slight smile.

I’d almost forgotten our purpose in going to the Hendersons’ farm until the hedge came into view, a vibrant green stretching along the southern edge of the property. The top leaves would have reached my shoulders if I’d stood beside it, and my insides twisted like the reins between my fingers. What had I been thinking to suggest this jump? And now with Lieutenant Avery present as well.

“What business have you at the farm?” Lieutenant Avery asked William as we drew closer. “Is Mr. Henderson a good tenant?”

“The best, in fact,” William replied. “We’ve come for a different reason.” He gestured for me to explain.

I pushed aside my nerves. “William lost to me in a race this morning,” I said loudly, as if the volume of my voice would give me confidence. “We’ve come to claim my prize: a jump over the hedge.”

Lieutenant Avery tipped his head, but before he could voice his question, William dismounted and led his horse forward. “Once I deem it safe,” he called back. “Allow me a few minutes, if you will.” He strode away from us as he examined the ground, still damp from the rain. Perhaps he would find the area too muddy for a safe jump. As it was, I was

regretting more and more asking for such a prize. If something were to happen while William watched, he would never let me leave the house again. Why could I not have demanded a new gown like any other sensible woman?

“Forgive my curiosity, Miss Rowley,” Lieutenant Avery said as he directed his horse alongside Stella. “But why is it you must negotiate a jump from your brother? Does your family disapprove of jumping as well as riding bareback?”

William was too far to hear the lieutenant’s words, but I watched him carefully all the same. “They do not disapprove so much as they fear.” So did I, but I did not speak that part aloud.

“What do they fear?” Genuine curiosity colored his voice.

The memory of that day stole into my head. Pain shattering through my body like broken glass. Unable to breathe, my lungs shaking for air.

I never allowed myself to think about what had happened. I couldn’t risk letting the pounding, all-encompassing fear take away the freedom I felt while riding. I busied myself with tugging at my habit skirt, ensuring it fell evenly over both sides of my saddle. “They fear the unknown. The possibility of . . .” My voice faded.

“Of what?”

I set my jaw. Why was he prying so? But he met my gaze evenly, no sympathy or smugness or superiority touching his expression. He turned his body toward me, focused on me with great deliberateness. My irritation slowly melted away, like an ice at Gunter’s in summertime. He was only being thoughtful.

I sighed. “There was an accident a few years ago. There was an accident a few years ago. I went riding alone, and I took a jump that I’d done countless times before.” I paused to let the weight of the memory settle over me for the first time in months. “But my horse landed wrong and injured herself. And I—” My voice cut out.

Lieutenant Avery did not speak as I struggled to find words. How did one describe the feelings of helplessness, of brokenness, I’d experienced?

“I was hurt,” I said simply, attempting to ward off the lump constricting my throat. “Badly. No one realized for hours, until I did not return home. They found me eventually, though I was barely conscious enough to remember it.”

I might not remember my rescue, but I acutely recalled the hours of agony lying out in that field. Even now, I could feel the sharp, dried blades of late summer grass poking through my linen habit, the whine of my horse nearby, the heat of the sun pressing on me like an iron while my body refused to move, imprisoned by pain.

Silence stretched between us, and I bit my lip. Surely he hadn't anticipated such an answer when he'd pressed me. He watched me closely, his attention unnerving. But he did not turn tail and flee as I imagined most of London's dandies would have done. Instead, he remained quiet a few moments longer.

"May I ask how you were injured?" he finally said. "If it is not too forward. I only thought I might relate." He gestured to the long white scar across his cheek.

"Oh." I stared at him, at the scar that snaked beneath his cravat. Generally, a young lady did not discuss injuries and medical treatments. But this was hardly a normal conversation. "The doctor was rather impressed," I said, attempting a bit of humor. "My ribs were cracked, and I was covered in bruises and cuts."

"And?"

"Is that not bad enough?"

He raised an eyebrow. "I do not claim to know you well, Miss Rowley, but I cannot imagine a cracked rib is enough to incapacitate you for long."

That was an odd sort of compliment. If it *was* a compliment.

"I hit my head," I admitted. "Quite badly. And my leg was broken. I— Well, I shall only say that I have never seen my mother so pale as when she saw me that day." My leg had broken at the thigh, below a long gash where I'd hit the broken wooden fence post. Blood had coated my head and neck and soaked into my habit.

They'd thought me dead when they found me.

"But you've recovered," he said. "Fully recovered?"

"Yes." My voice caught in my throat like a sewing pin. "Though it was not easy, by any means." It had been something of a miracle that I hadn't been left with a limp or any worse consequences.

Even with the clamor of repressed memories inside me, it felt oddly . . . freeing to talk about that day. William and I rarely discussed my accident, much like we avoided talking of Papa. I'd never mentioned it to Edward, though our whirlwind courtship was reason enough for that. We

simply hadn't had time. Although, truthfully, how *did* one broach such a subject with one's intended? It was in the past. It hardly mattered.

But now. Lieutenant Avery made it easy—too easy—to talk.

I turned the topic to him. "What of you? How were you injured? And do not think of my feminine sensibilities. One benefit of my accident is that I am now rather unaffected by tales of gore and blood."

"Thankfully, such detail is hardly necessary in my story." He leaned back in his saddle. "It is not so uncommon, what happened. A French cannon blasted a broadside into my ship. I caught a shard of wood here"—he motioned to his neck again—"and in my shoulder. I survived with a fool's luck." He paused, gripping his reins tighter. "Six men died that day."

During my two Seasons in London, I'd met several army officers, men who had captivated London's ballrooms with their heroic tales. Swaggering in their regimentals, they had caused quite a stir among the young ladies, who had fluttered their fans and praised their bravery. I thought myself rather familiar with stories of battles and loss, considering the war against Napoleon had raged for most of my life, but never had I heard the understated sorrow that touched Lieutenant Avery's voice in those few words. *Six men died that day.*

"Were they your friends?" I managed to ask.

"One was." His voice was stiff. "He served as second lieutenant. He left behind a wife and child."

I pressed my lips together. I did not know how to offer my condolences without sounding empty and insincere. And I did not think he'd shared with me to gain my sympathy. "You've suffered a great deal of loss," I said instead, softly. I could not imagine a life aboard a navy ship, trapped with the same crew for months on end, with disease and storms and the threat of battle as constant companions.

He gave a nod. "I've always known the risk, as does every man who steps aboard. That is the way with life at sea."

"And you wish to return? To the navy?" I did not mean to sound as incredulous as I did, but I could not help it. Why would he want to abandon a comfortable life in the country, where he had a home and family and fortune, to spend months at a time in the middle of the ocean?

He dismounted abruptly and stepped to his horse's reins. Had I offended him? I followed his actions, sliding my feet to the grass beside

Stella and moving to take her reins. I opened my mouth to apologize, though not entirely sure why, but then he spoke.

“When your horse took that jump and you fell,” he said, his focus on a distant point, “was there ever a point where you decided never to ride again?”

I paused. “No. I never for a moment thought I would give it up.”

“Why is that?”

I set one hand on Stella’s neck. “I could no sooner give up my arm or leg. Riding is too much a part of who I am.”

He nodded. “It is the same with the navy for me. The sea is all I have ever known. Yes, my life has risks and sorrows, like anyone’s, but if you could see the ocean on a cloudless day or feel the gusts of an oncoming storm . . .” He paused as if he could see it before him. “The moments of beauty make every difficulty worthwhile and every hardship bearable.”

I stared at him. I stared because I could not reconcile his words with the man who stood before me. He was a navy officer. He was strict and unyielding, self-assured and principled. I thought I’d known who he was from the moment we’d met, but clearly I had only glimpsed the surface of his character.

He turned and caught me staring. He offered a slight smile, and I fought the urge to look away. Why shouldn’t I be allowed to look at him?

“I am boring you, aren’t I?” he asked. “I’m afraid I could talk about the navy far longer than most people can tolerate.”

“No,” I said, surprised that I meant it. “I am not bored at all.”

His grin faded, and his eyes wandered my face, examining me as if I were an artifact unearthed from a time long past. We were not standing particularly close, but with his gaze so fixed on me, a whisper of heat kindled inside my chest—a heat that felt both familiar and foreign. Edward had always inspired warmth and giddiness. But this. This was something different.

I turned away, my ears warm like when I spent too long in the sun without a bonnet. Tugging Stella’s reins, I stepped forward. “Let us see what William has found.”

Lieutenant Avery did not speak as he followed me through the low grass. William still stood at the hedge, but I barely registered him, too aware of what had just transpired. I had not been engaged for long, but I

was certain that men besides my betrothed were *not* supposed to make me feel this smolder in my chest.

William frowned as we approached. "I'll not deny I was hoping the ground would be wetter, but nothing in my examination has given me reason to deny you your prize, Rebecca."

My ears were still filled with a strange humming, and I forced myself to focus on his words. "Yes. Well. Did you check the other side of the hedge?"

"Of course I did."

I nodded, chewing on the inside of my cheek. When I had blurted out my desired prize, my old fears had been reawakened. And my conversation with Lieutenant Avery had only made them worse. An edginess pervaded my entire body. What if I fell again?

"Are you not wanting to go through with it?" Now William's voice held a hint of concern as he rested his hands on his waist.

"No, it's not that," I said. "I—I simply sensed some hesitation in Stella earlier and worry about pushing her."

Lieutenant Avery was scrutinizing me. How could I feel it when he stood *behind* me? "Of course you must not attempt it if you are not feeling equal to the task," he said evenly.

I stiffened. I should not have told him about my injury. Now he would join ranks with William and Mama, worrying over me when there was absolutely no reason. It had been an *accident*. Neither I nor my horse had done anything wrong. It might have happened to anyone.

"I am quite equal to the task, though I thank you for your concern." I did not look at Lieutenant Avery as I led Stella to a large rock nearby and pulled myself swiftly into the saddle.

"Be careful, Rebecca," William called.

Be careful. Of course he would say that to me, his reckless, silly little sister who couldn't keep her seat on a horse.

But I hadn't been reckless or silly when I'd had my accident, and I wasn't now. I knew my limits, my abilities. He hadn't any idea the person I'd become in the years he had spent abroad. He saw the child that I was to him.

I trotted Stella back a ways, giving us room to gain enough speed for the jump. My hands clenched the reins as I brought her around again and focused on the route to the hedge. A clear path through the grass, no hidden

dips or boulders. William and Lieutenant Avery backed away from the hedge, both mounted again and watching me.

Why had I thought it a good idea to have an audience?

I inhaled a breath, the warm air a sharp contrast to the cold determination inside me. Then I kicked Stella's sides, and she leaped forward.

For the second time today, I bent over her neck, floating above her back as she galloped toward the hedge. Nothing about Stella hesitated; she threw herself fully into every action, invested in every moment. We raced through the grass, and as we approached the hedge, she sped up even more, eager for the challenge.

We passed William and Lieutenant Avery in a flash, and then we were there. My stomach took a sickening lurch. What if—?

But there was no time to change my mind. Stella gathered on her hind legs and leaped.

I acted on instinct, years of practice and training coming to a head in an instant. I kept my weight on my heels, my legs strong and still, my hands light on the reins. We soared together over the hedge, Stella's legs brushing the topmost leaves.

Then she landed, all four hooves solid on the earth as she bounded forward again. The jolt of the impact ricocheted through me, reassuring me that I was still seated, that I was not lying broken on the ground. As confident as I'd been in Stella, I'd been much less confident in myself.

I let her run a few moments longer to celebrate our victory. I had forgotten how ridiculously wonderful it felt to take such a jump. How had I gone for so long without this coursing elation?

I turned Stella back in time to watch William and the lieutenant follow after me. William and his horse jumped, landing smoothly and effortlessly, as they always did. Lieutenant Avery jumped a few seconds later, and I wished I could find something to criticize in his seat or skill. How could a man who spent his life at sea be so comfortable on horseback?

As they rode to join me, I leaned forward to stroke Stella's neck. "Good girl," I whispered. "Good girl." She was the reason I'd been able to do it, her spirit and confidence and drive. I did not know if the fear would ever entirely leave me, but I knew it would be easier the next time and the next.

“Well done, Rebecca,” William said as the two men reached me. The pride in his voice tugged at my heart.

I accepted his compliment with a nod and then faced Lieutenant Avery. “Do you still think me unequal to the task, Lieutenant?” I’d meant it as a teasing question, but I never did have great control over my emotions. My words emerged short and standoffish instead of light and easy.

I’d thought he might look a bit guarded, like he normally did, or perhaps affronted since he’d spoken only out of concern for me. But instead, he looked . . . satisfied?

“I never thought you unequal,” he said. “But you did.”

If a fly had been unlucky enough to buzz by at that moment, it would have flown right into my open mouth.

He had tricked me. He’d goaded me into jumping.

Although, was *goaded* the right word for it? He had said nothing unkind. He’d simply sensed my hesitation—though I hoped he did not realize my hesitation had been *caused* by him—and pushed me through it.

I should not have spoken to him like I had about my accident. I’d allowed him to pry into my past and learn more about me than even my good friends knew. Even more than Edward knew, the man I meant to marry. My insides squirmed as if I’d swallowed a spoonful of ants.

Tension crouched between the lieutenant and me. William squinted at the two of us, then cleared his throat. “Lieutenant, have you had opportunity to meet much of Millbury’s society? Though I dare to suggest you’ve already met the best of us.”

Lieutenant Avery gave a wry smile. “I would not disagree with that assessment. And I cannot profess a great eagerness to venture outside Linwood’s estate. I had the . . . pleasure of meeting Mrs. Follett and her daughter in town a few days ago.”

“Ah,” William said. “Quite understandable. But surely you will be attending the assembly this week? You cannot deny Millbury’s matrons their chance to ensnare you for their daughters.”

“You certainly make it sound appealing,” Lieutenant Avery said with a shake of his head. “I hadn’t planned on attending, but as I was compelled to ask Miss Follett for the first set, I will indeed be making an appearance.”

I covered my laugh with a quick cough. I pitied any man forced to dance with Miss Follett.

Lieutenant Avery's amused eyes found mine. "But perhaps I might look forward to the evening more if Miss Rowley also favored me with a set."

My sudden joviality fled. Dance with the lieutenant?

"I—" I wavered, but what could I do but agree? "I should be glad to." My words did not sound particularly convincing, but, then, I hadn't tried particularly hard.

Perhaps I might be conveniently ill the night of the assembly.

In fact, it was never too soon to start acting the part. I touched the side of my head. "I'm afraid I feel a headache coming. I ought to return to the house."

"A headache?" William repeated.

"Yes," I said stubbornly. "Please do not feel you must cut short your ride for my sake. I can see myself back." We were not far from the house, thankfully.

"If you are sure." He did not believe me, but I did not care.

I nodded, then offered a glance at Lieutenant Avery. "Good day, Lieutenant."

I turned Stella and urged her into a trot, but I still heard his voice over the hoofbeats. "Good day, Miss Rowley."

He spoke with steadiness, as if my sudden rudeness had not affected him in the least. Which affected *me* all the more.

I made a full retreat, kicking Stella into a gallop. I had not anticipated this problem. All I wanted was to convince my family of Edward's worthiness, and now I'd attracted the attention of another man entirely.

I tried to calm myself as Stella's hooves thundered beneath me. I could be wrong. I hardly knew the man, after all. Perhaps he simply found me amusing. It would be rather big-headed of me to assume him interested, especially since I'd been less than polished during most of our meetings.

But if he somehow *had* formed an attachment to me in such a short amount of time . . .

A memory of Edward's face flowed across my mind as smoothly as we'd danced together at our last ball. His whispered words of love, of hope, and his handsome smile soothed my uncertain heart.

But my memory did nothing to solve my problem. What if Lieutenant Avery attempted to pursue me? Court me? That would make life difficult indeed.

I would have to find a way to deter Lieutenant Avery.
And soon.

Chapter Seven

“ARE YOU READY, REBECCA?” MAMA knocked on my door as she opened it, peeking her head inside. She looked lovely, as always, her dark hair perfectly curled and adorned with a white silk bandeau.

“Nearly,” I said, though Fawcett still fussing with my own hair was answer enough. “Fawcett clearly thinks I am to meet the king tonight.”

My lady’s maid glared at me in the vanity mirror. “I hope the king does make an appearance at the assembly just so you feel terrible about teasing me so.”

Mama came to stand beside me. “The king at the Millbury Assembly Rooms. That would cause a stir indeed.” She inclined her head. “You’ve done a lovely job, Fawcett. It almost looks as though she doesn’t spend most of her days covered in mud, with leaves caught in her hair.”

Now it was my turn to glare as the two of them giggled. “The one time!” I exclaimed.

“If you say so,” Mama said with a pat on my shoulder.

Fawcett focused again on my hair, tucking a pearl-studded comb among my curled tresses. She truly had done a lovely job. She must have picked up a trick or two from Marjorie’s maid while we were in Brighton.

Brighton. How I wished I were preparing for a ball in that glittering seaside town rather than this tiny country village. Not that I minded Millbury’s smaller gatherings. But a letter had arrived earlier that day from Edward, recounting a dinner party he’d attended the night before, which had included Marjorie and a great many of the friends and acquaintances I’d made during my visit there. I missed Edward so much, his charm and wit, his gallantry and laughter. Why should Brighton’s society be so lucky as to keep his company this long?

My fingers fiddled restlessly with a perfume bottle on my vanity. The days passed even more slowly than I’d anticipated when Edward and I had made our last goodbyes. Everything had turned out to be so complicated. Even with William’s small admissions a few days before, I’d made little progress in my task of untangling the issue between our families, and the loneliness of the venture made it that much more difficult. If only Edward could write more often and encourage me. Except Mama would grow suspicious if Marjorie wrote me daily. But a letter every few days from Edward wasn’t enough. I wanted him here beside me.

And not just because I missed him. That much I could admit. If he were here, if we could announce our engagement, then the other half of my troubles would be gone—Lieutenant Avery.

“There you are, miss.” Fawcett stepped back with a pleased expression. “Proper enough even for royalty, I have no doubt.”

I tore my attention away from the plunging spiral of my thoughts. There was no use feeding such despondency. I had a ball to attend tonight, and I might as well enjoy it.

“Thank you, Fawcett.” I turned my head so the shimmering pearls caught the candlelight, my hair shining more gold than brown tonight. I’d chosen to wear my blossom-pink ball gown trimmed in beaded embroidery around the low neckline. The beautiful elegance of the dress had always given me confidence. I’d last worn it the night Edward had proposed, and donning it again tonight brought back the lovely memory, the warmth of the night surrounding us in the garden, his sweet kiss.

This was what I needed to focus on, I decided as Fawcett left the room and I stood to fetch my shawl: Edward and our plan. Once this evening was over and I had sorted out the problem of Lieutenant Avery, that was.

I draped my cream silk shawl over my shoulders. “Ready, Mama?”

“Just a moment, Rebecca,” Mama said as I turned to her. “There is something I wish to speak to you about before we leave.”

I froze in the midst of smoothing my skirts. Had William spoken to her? Had he mentioned that I had asked about the Bainbridges during our ride? “What about?” I managed.

She sat on my vanity bench and gestured for me to sit on the armchair nearby. I lowered myself to the brocade cushion, eyeing her.

“I . . .” She took a deep breath. “I wanted to tell you something before we arrive at the assembly. I’m afraid it might be a bit of a shock.”

I squinted. A shock? This could not be about my prying information out of William. “You are making me nervous, Mama.” My mind hurried to invent whatever she could possibly have to tell me. Was she terribly ill? Had William lost the company? Had something happened to Rachel or her children?

She leaned forward. “I am sorry. I should have prefaced this by saying it is good news, not bad.”

“But what *is* it?”

Mama set her hands in her lap, twisting the fabric of her dress. “While you were in Brighton, I had a visitor. Mr. Hambley. Do you remember him from last summer?”

A vague image of a tall, balding man came to the forefront of my mind. “The farmer?”

She sighed. “He’s a gentleman who owns a great deal of farmland, yes.”

I remembered him. That was, I dimly remembered him. He’d visited Havenfield once or twice last summer and had occupied my mother’s side a bit too much at the last ball we’d attended in Millbury. He was quiet, unassuming, and . . . well, that was all I knew about him.

“He came to see me, like I said,” Mama went on, “and we had such a pleasant afternoon that he continued to visit me.” She paused. “Nearly every day.”

I straightened. Every day? We stared at each other, and I found myself at a loss for words, a rare occurrence for me. “What are you saying, Mama?” I finally managed. “Do you”—I gulped—“*like* him?”

She nodded. “I confess that I do, though I had not planned to. I thought we might be friends. But he is such a kind man, gentle and intelligent.”

I rubbed my ear as if the action would stop her words from reaching me. Kind? Gentle? “And is there—?” My voice cut out as my throat grew uncomfortably tight. “Is there an understanding between the two of you?”

Mama, married? Preposterous.

“No,” Mama said quickly, as if reassuring me that she wasn’t already engaged would lessen the impact of what she was telling me. “That is, we have talked of it. But I would not allow more than that without discussing it with you.”

“I’ve been home over a week, Mama. Only *now* you are telling me this?”

She exhaled. “I am sorry. I put it off because I could not find the right time or way to tell you. But . . .” Her voice drifted off.

“But he will be there tonight.” I could not bring myself to say his name.

“Yes,” she said simply. “I did not want to pretend in front of you. I’d rather have it all laid clear so we can be honest with one another.”

She might as well have landed a blow to my stomach. I stared at her. How ridiculous was this? I’d gone off to Brighton and gotten myself

secretly engaged to Edward all while Mama had been entertaining a suitor in my absence. We'd both deceived each other.

With the difference being that Mama was telling me the truth now.

I opened my mouth. I would tell her. I would tell her about Edward and our engagement and our hopes to fix whatever had divided our families in the past.

But then I closed my mouth again. I wasn't ready. I could not let the shock of Mama's revelation ruin all our well-laid plans. Our idea would work, but I could not rush it.

"So if he proposed," I said, the words thick on my tongue, "you would accept?"

She stared down at the thick woven rug under our feet. "I think that I would."

"And Papa?" I whispered. I knew what she would say, but I needed to hear it from her.

"I still love your father," she said softly. "You must know that I will always love him. But Mr. Hambley is a good man, and I think your father would be glad for me to have found someone."

I nodded, though my mind spun like a shuttlecock in a game of battledore. Mr. Hambley. Mama planned to marry Mr. Hambley, a simple farmer who stood out in my mind only because of how unremarkable I remembered him being.

"We ought to go down," I said, standing. "William and Juliana are waiting."

Mama stood as well. "I am sorry, Rebecca. I should have told you sooner."

I clasped and unclasped my hands. She had waited to tell me because she'd known I would react exactly this way. But how else was I to respond to the news that my mother, a widow of nearly a decade, had now decided to marry again?

Mama's forehead was creased with lines. I blew air from my mouth. This was silly. I was being selfish acting like this.

"No, I am sorry, Mama," I said, stepping to her. "I'm surprised, is all. I . . . I expect it might take some time to accustom myself to the idea. But I shall try to be happy for you."

Her eyes glistened, and she reached for me. As we embraced, I pressed my face into her shoulder, my stomach sinking low.

If only my feelings matched my words.



Our ride to the Millbury Assembly Rooms was quiet. Thankfully, William and Juliana had decided to accompany us, or the ride would have been unbearable, alone with Mama for a quarter hour. As it was, I could barely meet her eyes, smiling awkwardly each time.

Why now? Why did Mr. Hambley have to choose *now* to court my mother? My life was already a delicate balance of truth and lies. This was yet another complication added to my list, and I knew it would wear on me, having to pretend happiness while I sorted out my true feelings.

Thankfully, an assembly would provide reasonable excuses to avoid both Mama and Mr. Hambley. I would dance every dance if it meant not having to spend time with them. I could not avoid the situation forever, but for tonight, I needed my wits about me.

Because tonight I would convince Lieutenant Avery that I was the last girl he should be interested in.

I'd contemplated my problem for the last few days since meeting him during my ride with William. For a while, I'd debated simply telling the lieutenant the truth about Edward and me. Surely, he would understand my situation if I explained it to him. But what if he told Mama and William? I couldn't take that risk.

I straightened my back as the village flashed by the carriage windows. My next and current idea was much more promising. I'd been out in Society long enough to have observed a great number of failed flirtations and courtships. Before William had married Juliana, it had been a source of endless entertainment to Mama and me as we had watched all the ladies trying to catch his attention. Unfortunately for them, false laughter, shallow flirtations, and inane gossip were not the way to my brother's heart. I did not know Lieutenant Avery well, but I was certain that he and William were similar in this regard.

Now those ladies would be my source of inspiration. I would do everything I could to ward off the lieutenant. By the end of the night, he would be saying prayers of thanks that he'd escaped any serious attachment to me.

I simply needed to put Mama and her new beau from my mind long enough to be successful.

When we arrived at the assembly rooms, I went with Mama as she greeted all her Millbury friends and I answered questions about my visit to Brighton. All the while, I kept a sharp eye out for Lieutenant Avery. I hoped he might have forgotten about the dance I had promised him, but I would be prepared in any case. And I was anticipating watching him suffer through the first set with Miss Follett. At least I would have that simple amusement tonight.

“Rebecca!”

Sarah Mason wound through a passing group of ladies, a bright smile on her face. I embraced her as she reached me. “I hadn’t any idea you were in town. I thought you were touring the lakes?”

She pulled back and adjusted the dark curls bouncing around her cheeks. “I was, but we returned yesterday. What good luck you arrived just before us.”

Good luck indeed. When we’d arrived in Millbury after the Season, I had been disappointed to learn she and her family had left on a tour of the Lake District. We’d become rather good friends during my previous visits to Havenfield and had exchanged letters all winter, so I had been eager to renew our acquaintance.

I pulled Sarah’s arm into mine, and we slipped away from Mama’s group of chattering matrons. In the few minutes before the dancing began, Sarah shared news of her trip and the stunning sights they’d seen.

“And that is not even the best of it,” she said, flicking open her fan. “Another group traveled nearly the same route as we, a group of amiable young gentlemen.”

I swatted her arm. “Sarah! You ought to have started with that.”

She winked. “Ah, but I was saving that little tidbit for you.”

“So did any of the amiable young gentleman catch your attention?”

“None in particular. Though it made for an entertaining trip.” She leaned her head closer to mine. “I did hear we’ve a new arrival in town. A dashing lieutenant, from the rumors. Perhaps he shall be the one to finally catch my eye.”

My stomach constricted, the same feeling that had come over me when I’d read Edward’s letter earlier. Then I’d been jealous to have missed a party with both him and Marjorie. I hadn’t any reason to feel the same way now.

“Have you met him already?” Sarah said, examining me. “Perhaps I do not wish to meet him, based on your expression.”

I forced my face to relax. “I have met him.”

“And?” she prompted. “Is he handsome?”

“I—I hardly know.” How could I discuss one man’s good looks while being engaged to another? “He is not unattractive, in any case.”

She glanced about the crowded room, the crush growing every second. “Is he here? Do point him out. I shall have to beg an introduction from you later.”

I rose up on my toes. It was better for me to know where he was so I could prepare myself for when he came to claim me for our set. “I haven’t seen him yet.” I spun slowly to see all the corners of the room. Then I froze.

Lieutenant Avery stood not five feet from me, hands clasped behind him as he met my eyes. I’d had my back to him. And from his raised eyebrow, I realized he had heard everything we’d said.

“Good evening, Miss Rowley,” he said.

I slammed shut my open mouth. This was not how I imagined starting the evening.

Sarah turned and grasped the situation in an instant. “It appears I shall have to beg that introduction now,” she said as she flashed a charming smile.

There was nothing for it. “Lieutenant Avery, might I present my friend Sarah Mason?”

Lieutenant Avery bowed. “A pleasure, Miss Mason.”

“It is indeed,” Sarah said with a low curtsy, eyeing the man as though he was a new bonnet in a shop window.

The musicians began tuning their instruments, and Lieutenant Avery glanced away. Sarah elbowed me sharply. “*Not unattractive?*” she whispered. “Quite the understatement.”

I glared at her but did not have time to form a retort as the lieutenant turned back to us.

“I hope you have not forgotten that you promised me the second set, Miss Rowley,” he said in that even tone of his.

I cleared my throat. “I haven’t forgotten.”

He nodded. “And, Miss Mason, would you honor me with the supper set?”

“I would indeed,” she said smoothly. “I look forward to it.”

He gave another short bow and moved away. My lungs finally loosened in my chest. I'd been so taken aback at seeing him behind me that I'd not remembered to put any of my ideas into action. And how perfectly horrid was he for eavesdropping on us?

But perhaps this might work to my advantage. Perhaps he thought me a vapid gossip. Calling him "not unattractive" was not precisely a compliment.

Sarah looked as though she wished to pry every last bit of information from me, but before she could, Mr. Tilton asked her to dance.

"I'll have questions for you later," she whispered as she was led off.

Of course she would. Because why should anything be uncomplicated tonight?

I was asked to dance not a minute later by Mr. Downing, a rather quiet young man who was employed as a clerk by the town's solicitor. I spent a few useless minutes trying to pry a conversation from him before giving up and dancing in silence punctuated by polite smiles.

Thankfully, I was not disappointed in watching Lieutenant Avery dance with Miss Follett. She wore an overly fussy gown with a great deal of ruffles and bows, and her bosom strained against the bodice as if the dress had been made for a woman a few inches slimmer. She never stopped talking, and it was vastly amusing to see Lieutenant Avery's face change from careful politeness to barely concealed annoyance over the course of the set. Miss Follett was the perfect inspiration for me tonight. Shooting arrows at the lieutenant would not drive him off any faster than her incessant prattling.

The second dance ended, and the dancers applauded the orchestra. As Mr. Downing led me from the dance floor, I reviewed my plan, preparing myself for the role I was to play.

Lieutenant Avery would never wish to dance with me again after tonight, of that I was certain.

Chapter Eight

WHEN LIEUTENANT AVERY CAME TO claim me a few minutes later, I was ready.

“Miss Rowley,” he said as greeting.

“There you are, Lieutenant,” I said, layering impatience into my voice. “I’ve been waiting ever so long. I thought the dance would begin without us.”

In truth, only a few couples had already found their places on the floor. But *finding flaws* was first on my list of “Ways to Drive Lieutenant Avery Mad.”

He furrowed his brow, but I did not allow him time for a response as I took his arm without invitation and pulled him to the dance floor.

“How did you enjoy your dance with Miss Follett?” I asked. “She is such a dear, is she not? I count her as one of my closest friends.” He certainly did not know either of us well enough to gather if that was true or not. He opened his mouth to speak, but I hurried on. “Oh, how lucky we are to dance the reel,” I exclaimed. “I adore dancing, don’t you?”

I’d surmised from his comments during our last meeting that he hadn’t planned on attending the assembly, which indicated he disliked either dancing or socializing. So I would give him the worst of both.

The music began, and I threw myself wholeheartedly into the steps. This never would have worked with a waltz, but the high-spirited reel was perfect. Whenever Lieutenant Avery took my hands as the dance dictated, I stepped forward with too much energy, trouncing his feet and then apologizing profusely. I had to bite my lip several times to keep from laughing at his bewildered expression. That was, he was bewildered whenever he wasn’t in pain from all the trouncing.

When I wasn’t dancing abhorrently, I was talking abhorrently.

“Have you seen the newest fashions from this Season?” I asked without expecting any sort of answer. “Mama says the more voluminous sleeves are not at all flattering, but I find I am partial to the look. I’ve several dresses made recently that I think would be vastly improved by the new style, so I shall have them remade.”

There. Let him think me wasteful and extravagant. That would rankle against his sensibilities as a navy man, where his pay was insignificant without the added income from prizes.

“Miss Rowley, I think—”

“Oh, and the cravats,” I interrupted quickly, thwarting Lieutenant Avery’s useless attempt to enter my one-sided conversation. “You’ve been at sea, so you cannot be acquainted with what the men are wearing these days in London. But there are several new knots that are stunning in their intricacy. I daresay many gentlemen require a good half hour for their valets to adequately complete such a fine choice in fashion.”

Lieutenant Avery narrowed his eyes. His own cravat was tied in a simple knot, which I actually preferred to the ridiculous designs I’d seen this Season.

We parted with the movement of the dance, and I had a few moments to take a deep breath. The assembly was a veritable crush, quite thankfully. If the dance floor had been any less crowded, I might have drawn some attention with my behavior. As it was, I was glad to have escaped any close observation. Being this absurd was exhausting, but I knew my plan was working. The lieutenant hadn’t been able to get a word in edgewise, which must be irking him. He was an officer, accustomed to people listening to—and obeying—him.

When we met hands again, I leaped back into conversation. “Did you hear about—”

“Miss Rowley.” He cut me off before I was able to share my gossip about how much Mrs. Follett’s parlor renovations had cost. “I wanted to ask if you had been ill these past few days.”

I faltered in my steps. “Ill? Why would you ask that? I am the picture of health.”

“I haven’t seen you riding, which I imagined was a daily activity for you.”

It certainly was. But since our meeting when I’d jumped the hedge, I’d taken to riding the opposite end of Havenfield’s lands.

I tried for a superior tone. “Havenfield is a vast estate, Lieutenant Avery.” Perhaps a bit of snobbishness would aid my cause. “I could ride for days without seeing a soul.”

It was a ridiculous exaggeration and perhaps too much, but he did not say a word as he led me through the next steps. My fingers itched in his, and I looked away.

I spent the rest of the dance speaking on safer, duller topics: my preference for pink over blue in my wardrobe, how tedious I found country life, and my newfound passion for embroidery. All false, and all quite

effective, it seemed. After a quarter hour of debating what type of flower I ought to stitch on my next handkerchief, Lieutenant Avery stopped attempting to interrupt and instead bore my comments with admirable stoicism.

Our second dance eventually came to an end, and I hoped he was as relieved as I was. I would have to hide in the retiring room for a good while to regain my energy. Lieutenant Avery offered me his arm to escort me from the dance floor, and I persuaded one last too-wide smile to my face.

“I so enjoyed our dances,” I said. “I hope you’ll find me for another set later?”

He shifted his feet, which were surely bruised and aching. “I am not certain I can keep pace with your . . . enthusiasm.”

Finally, the reaction I was searching for. Hesitance. Withdrawal. And yet, why did the smallest part of me wilt at his words?

“Nonsense,” I pressed on. “You have simply forgotten the joys of dancing after being away so long on your ship, and I am glad to reintroduce you.”

We reached the edge of the dance floor, and I immediately slipped my hand from his arm. My uneasiness must be because I hated to have anyone think ill of me, especially a gentleman I might have liked in any other circumstance. But this was for the best. It was for Edward and me.

Based on Lieutenant Avery’s reticence, I’d already done a sufficient job of scaring the fellow off, but I wanted to end this charade with a thoroughly memorable interaction, something perfectly silly and off-putting.

“Now, you mustn’t let me keep you from dancing with the other ladies,” I said, tapping him on the shoulder. “I know they are all anxious for their turn.” I gave a laugh, high and staccato, rather like the wretched bird outside my bedroom window that woke me far too early in the mornings.

He stared at me, and I felt victory within the grasp of my fingertips. But as he stared, his incredulousness melted into irritation and then . . . understanding? Then, worst of all, was the heart-stopping gleam of mischief that slipped into his eyes.

“What is that, Miss Rowley?” he said loudly. “You are feeling faint?”

I blinked.

He took my hand and placed it once again on his arm, his voice filled with false concern. “Please, take my arm, and we shall find you a cool place

to sit.” He tugged me around the line of dancers forming for the next set. I stumbled after him, searching the surrounding crowd for anyone watching us. To be pulled from the room by Lieutenant Avery would create rumors I did not want in the least. But everyone seemed preoccupied with securing a partner for the next dance, and the lieutenant successfully stole me out to the shadow-laden and quite empty veranda.

“Pardon me,” I huffed, pulling free of his grasp. “But I am not feeling faint in the slightest and should like to return to the dance.”

He crossed his arms, unperturbed by my vehemence. He scrutinized me, his gaze traveling every inch of my face.

“Take me back in, please.” I lifted my chin.

“No,” he said calmly. “Not until you tell me why you are acting like the most unreasonable and nonsensical woman alive.”

“I see.” I gave an exaggerated nod. “You dragged me out here to insult me.”

He shook his head and leaned against the stone banister that bordered the veranda. “Miss Rowley, there are a great many things of which I am ignorant. Fashion, as you have so aptly pointed out tonight. How to talk to an eleven-year-old girl would be another.” He tilted his head as he examined me. “But if there is one thing I’ve learned from my time as an officer, it is to recognize when someone is not being honest with me.”

It was the second time tonight that my dishonesty had caused cracks of guilt to spiderweb throughout my body. I stood still, my feet rooted to the tiled floor beneath us.

Lieutenant Avery watched me a moment longer, then waved back toward the assembly room. “But never mind. I am sure you are missed. Plenty of other men’s cravats to abuse, after all.”

I did not move. Suddenly, I could not bear it a moment longer. The secrecy, the lies. Mama’s revelation about Mr. Hambley. Missing Edward and Marjorie. My future dangling just beyond my reach.

I stepped forward, turning to lean on the banister beside Lieutenant Avery. I needed him, just one person, to understand. “I am sorry,” I said. “I acted atrociously tonight for a very specific reason, for which I am embarrassed.”

That certainly caught his attention. His eyes did not leave mine, his body turning to face me.

“I . . . well, I am afraid I may have—” Bother, this was difficult. “I am afraid I may have mistakenly allowed you to believe . . . that I—and you—that there might be—”

Lieutenant Avery thankfully took pity on me. “That there might be more than friendship between us?”

I nodded, cheeks heating, but not looking away. I hadn’t done anything to be ashamed of, even if the subject was not entirely appropriate for an unwed lady and gentleman to discuss.

“And why, may I ask, would that be so terrible a thing?” Lieutenant Avery leaned back. “I am ‘not unattractive,’ as you so astutely observed earlier.”

He was teasing me, so he did not seem hurt by my rejection. But I hadn’t any idea how to phrase my admission.

“Ah.” He nodded with sudden understanding. “I believe I know. Your affections lie elsewhere, do they not?”

“How—?” My insides took a flying leap, as if we were still inside dancing the reel. “How did you know?”

He crossed his arms. “Your letter. Both of them, really. You were so distraught at the lake to discover it ruined and so embarrassed to have been caught with the other one when I came to Havenfield.” His expression turned thoughtful. “I’ve seen many a sailor’s face upon reading much-longed-for words from his sweetheart. I should have recognized such a look on you right away.”

He was not precisely right. Edward and I were more than sweethearts; we were engaged. The specifics hardly mattered though.

“Then you understand,” I said, “that I did not mean to string you along or create impossible expectations between us.”

Instead of blushing like I was or appearing at all embarrassed, Lieutenant Avery laughed. He *laughed*.

I straightened. “Apparently, the idea of courting me is quite hilarious.”

He shook his head, still chuckling. “No, please, that is not at all why I am laughing.” He set his hands on the stone banister to prop himself up. “I have only ever wanted your friendship, Miss Rowley, though I can easily admit you are lovely and charming and clever and possess an exorbitant amount of determination. And if I had any desire at all for a wife, I think I might have been tempted by you.”

That was better, at least. But now my curiosity was piqued. “You do not wish to marry?”

“I am perfectly content with my life as it is,” he said simply. “Olivia has been an unexpected . . . change, but once I have settled what to do with her, I am eager to return to sea.”

“But why could you not marry? Many officers have wives and families.”

His eyes sobered. “It is not an easy thing to be married to a navy man. It would mean a lifetime of waiting, months or years at a time, for a husband to return. Sometimes a man does not return at all.” He swallowed, and I watched him closely. Was he thinking of his friend who had died in the same battle that had given him his scars? The one who had left behind a wife and child?

His voice softened. “I could not ask that of any woman, least of all one I loved.”

His words curled inside me like warm smoke from a fire. The way he spoke of love, marriage—it was different from anyone I’d ever met. His choosing not to marry was an act of selflessness.

He exhaled. “All teasing aside, I am sorry if this confusion between us caused you any undue stress. When we met at the lake, I was intrigued by you.” He gave a crooked grin. “As much as I love the navy, the society is severely limited. I am not well acquainted with many young ladies and none at all like you.”

The tension in my shoulders eased. “Shall we be friends, then?”

“I would like that, Miss Rowley.” He pushed himself from the banister and extended his hand to me. “Should we return?”

I took his warm hand, studiously ignoring the way his broad fingers encircled mine. “Perhaps we might try another dance. I really am a superb dancer.”

He led me back toward the open doors to the assembly rooms, where candlelight and music wove together in a comfortable melody. “I knew you couldn’t be so terrible as all that. I fear my feet will never recover from such abuse.”

“I am sorry,” I said. “Though I am glad to know I have the skills to deter a suitor if necessary.”

“In plenty,” he said dryly as we stepped inside. The dancing continued uninterrupted, as if we had not been involved in a rather soul-baring

conversation just outside. “Now, Miss Rowley, tell me if I am overreaching, but I cannot contain my curiosity over your mysterious beau.”

“I hope you do not expect me to share his name. Not even my family knows about him.”

He pulled me to a stop. “Truly?”

“Yes. And I have my reasons for keeping such a secret.”

Lieutenant Avery raised an eyebrow, an invitation to explain. He already knew about my bareback riding. Could I trust him to keep all this from William? From Mama? I hesitated a moment more before giving in. “Our families have something of a sordid history,” I said. “Neither would be glad for such a match.”

“Ah,” he mused. ““A pair of star-cross’d lovers.””

I shot him a glance. “I did not take you for an admirer of Shakespeare.” *Romeo and Juliet* was my favorite of the Bard’s plays; I could not resist the romance, the beautiful words, the ultimate tragedy.

His face tightened almost imperceptibly. “I truly am not. I haven’t much time for reading. But your story is too similar to not draw the comparison.”

“Indeed,” I said. “It is quite shockingly similar.”

We began walking along the edge of the assembly room, behind the crowds of ladies and gentlemen watching the dancing.

“You are a woman of many secrets, Miss Rowley,” he said.

“I do not wish to be. I find all this deception entirely at odds with who I am.”

He opened his mouth to respond, but at the same moment, I felt a hand on my elbow.

“Rebecca, there you are.” Mama moved beside me. “Good evening, Lieutenant.”

He greeted her, but I did not hear it. Beyond Mama waited Mr. Hambley. I’d forgotten I was avoiding them both. I scrutinized the man who intended to wed my mother. Brown hair and even browner eyes. Average features, with a wide forehead and long nose. He wore a black jacket and waistcoat, and though finely tailored, they were plain.

“Would you pardon me for stealing my daughter away from you?” Mama said. “I have an introduction I am intent on.”

“Of course.” Lieutenant Avery lowered his arm, and my hand slid away, limp as a fish.

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” I hoped he knew how much I meant it. Even though I dreaded greeting Mr. Hambley and I was far from solving the problem of my and Edward’s engagement, it was good to know I had a friend. “I am glad we had a chance to speak tonight.”

“As am I.” He offered a short bow.

Mama took my arm and led me away, glancing back as she patted my hand. “You and Lieutenant Avery seem to be getting on rather well.”

I sighed. “A friend, Mama, nothing more.” And thankfully too. I had not anticipated the twists this evening would take, but I could hardly complain, considering.

She nodded, but she was focused ahead on Mr. Hambley. At least that would be one advantage to my mother’s entertaining a suitor—she should have a great deal less time to scrutinize me.

We approached Mr. Hambley, and I readied myself. I could survive a quick meeting and then escape into another dance.

I glanced back at Lieutenant Avery. He still watched me from across the room, arms crossed, his eyes fixed on me. The man was free to look wherever he wished, of course, but I rather wished he would not look at me quite like that.

Calm yourself, I ordered my stuttering heart and turned back to Mr. Hambley with a cheerful smile I did not feel in the least.

Chapter Nine

OUR COACH RUMBLED ALONG THE road to Millbury, far too slowly for my taste. If I had my way, I would arrive for church services on horseback in a quarter of the time it took to drive the three miles to town. But I'd never pressed Mama to allow such a thing, and I didn't truly wish for all the sidelong glances such an act would earn from the other townsfolk.

"It is a beautiful morning," Mama murmured from the seat beside me. "Your papa called days like this 'a touch of heaven.'"

A vague memory brushed across my mind: Papa's kind and gentle face looking down on me as he held my hand. *A touch of heaven*. He'd said it often enough that even I remembered it, young as I'd been when he'd died.

Another memory, this time from the assembly two days before, pushed away Papa's face. Mr. Hambley. He'd greeted me quietly when Mama had introduced us and asked about my trip to Brighton. We'd managed a stilted conversation for a minute or two before I'd thankfully been asked to dance. Those two minutes had yet to change my opinion of the man, but Mama had seemed so pleased I hadn't had the heart to say anything to her.

I leaned forward to peer out the coach window. I didn't want to think about Mr. Hambley—or my father. Brilliant sunlight drifted through the trees above, and a gentle breeze delivered the lovely scent of foxgloves.

We arrived at the church a few minutes later, the steeple piercing the sky like a needle through an endless length of azure silk. Parishioners flowed to the open doors, every head adorned with feathered bonnets and tall toppers. William handed down Mama and me before reaching to help Juliana maneuver to the ground. Heavens, she did not make pregnancy look particularly appealing. My older sister, Rachel, had seemed to rather enjoy the arrival of her two children, but poor Juliana was having a miserable time of it. I could only hope I would be more like Rachel when my time came.

When my time came. I let a hand glide down the front of my dress, hesitating for a second over my middle. What would it be like to have a child inside me? To anticipate being a mother? My chest tightened, and I dropped my hand.

"Are you coming, Rebecca?"

Mama stood near the open church doors, watching me curiously. Juliana and William had already entered, his arm circled around her back.

I stepped forward to join Mother, but a figure to the left of the church caught my eye. Lieutenant Avery paced in front of the gates of the cemetery, hands at his waist. I'd once seen a bear at the Royal Menagerie in London, surly and irritable as it prowled the narrow lengths of its cage. Lieutenant Avery looked even more cross than that bear had, and it took me all of a second to guess why. Olivia sat on a small stump on the edge of a stand of trees, arms crossed over her stiff body.

"Dare we ask what is the matter?" Mama appeared at my side, eyeing the lieutenant as he stalked back and forth.

"I think it quite obvious." I nodded at Olivia. "She is unmanageable, as usual."

"We ought to offer our help." Mama's expression softened as she watched Olivia.

"I hardly think he would take kindly to interference." I knew I wouldn't. Meddlesome neighbors prying into my family's personal affairs? A nightmare.

"Really?" Mama turned to me. "I think he would be glad for the help. He seems rather lost."

"Lost?" Not the word I would have chosen for the lieutenant. *Annoyed*, certainly, with *angry* and *frustrated* being my next choices.

"Yes, lost. The both of them, really." Mama pursed her lips. "You should go talk with her."

"Me? I think not."

"I would try," she said, "but I wonder if she might respond better to someone closer to her age."

"I doubt that. I am certain she dislikes me even more than I dislike her."

Mama sighed. "Really, Rebecca."

I bit off my impertinent response. Mama rarely scolded me, and this was as near as it got. She was right, of course. I was being unkind. Olivia had just lost her mother.

"Very well, I will ask," I relented. "But I wager I will only make things worse."

"Or you could make things a great deal better." Mama patted my hand as she left.

Services would begin soon, but I hesitated on the church steps. What could I even say to them? The lieutenant might actually growl if I

approached, and Olivia's red face studiously glared away from her half brother.

Neither seemed particularly approachable at the moment, but Lieutenant Avery was my safest option. I was terrible with children. I was never the sort of girl who'd longed for sons and daughters of my own, though I knew it was an inevitability. I had no younger siblings, no young cousins. When I'd held my infant niece for the first time four years ago, I'd felt nothing but awkwardness and an unaccountable anxiety.

This was a doomed mission from the start.

But Mama would no doubt fill me with guilt if I came in without attempting, so I moved toward the cemetery gates, worn wooden beams bordered by a crumbling stone wall that enclosed the gravestones. Lieutenant Avery had stopped pacing and stood with his back to me, arms crossed, black jacket pulled taut against his broad shoulders. The navy certainly did not let its officers laze about.

"Good morning, Lieutenant." I kept my words crisp and calm.

He turned with a start, but the tension eased in his face when he saw me. "Oh. Good morning, Miss Rowley."

He gave a slight bow, and I bobbed my curtsy. I then stood uncomfortably, waiting for the right words to appear in my mind. *I noticed your sister looks her usual hostile self today. Might I offer my worthless assistance?*

No, those were not the right words. I wanted nothing more than to excuse myself and rejoin Mama, claiming I had tried, but that would be dishonest, and I had more than enough lies in my life at the moment.

I lowered my voice. "Lieutenant Avery, I wondered if everything was all right. It only seems as though Olivia is . . . well . . ."

"Thickheaded?" he suggested, his voice laced with frustration. "Mulish? Unable to see reason?"

I stared at him. He seemed to realize that his response had been a bit abrupt, and he ran a hand through his fair hair, loosening the neat arrangement. One lock fell haphazardly across his forehead.

"I am sorry," he said. "I did not mean to be rude."

I shook my head. "No matter. Have you any idea what is bothering her? Today, that is?"

He rubbed his forehead. "She has made it very clear she does not want to go into church. I thought she would give in once we arrived, but—" He

waved his hand in her direction.

I eyed Olivia. If anyone needed Mr. Porter's sermons, it was her. She could use a few lessons of gratitude and obedience.

And I could use a lesson in patience, I reminded myself. She had been through so much. For the briefest of moments, I imagined my life without Mama. A stabbing ache shot through me, and I gulped. Yes, I ought to allow Olivia a little more grace.

Perhaps Mama was right. Perhaps Olivia simply needed the right person to talk to. Mama had tried, and clearly, Lieutenant Avery wasn't making any progress. I might as well take a stab at it. "Would you mind if I tried speaking with her?" I asked.

He waved one hand in his sister's general direction. "You are more than welcome to. Heaven knows nothing I do seems to make any difference."

"I think heaven knows you are trying," I said. "And that is quite good enough."

He did not respond for a long moment, and I looked up at him. He observed me with those guarded eyes, as green as the ivy climbing the stone walls of the cemetery. My cheeks heated under his scrutiny, and I ducked my head and moved toward Olivia.

She knew I was there, but she ignored me and stared steadfastly away.

I crouched beside her, arranging my skirts about my ankles. "Good morning, Miss Olivia," I said in my gentlest voice, the one I used when Stella was nervous or uneasy. I may not have understood children, but I did understand horses. It was my best plan. My only plan, really.

She did not respond, move, or in any way acknowledge that I was there. It was rather like speaking to a portrait. I chewed on my cheek. Ought I ask her straight out why she was acting like this? I doubted that would yield good results. Perhaps a simple conversation would loosen her tongue.

"I gathered from your brother that you do not wish to attend services this morning." I leaned closer. "I cannot say I blame you in the least. Mr. Porter is nearly as dull as he is long-winded. Not a winning combination in my book."

She turned slightly, eyeing me. A reaction, finally.

"Did you attend services where you lived before?" I asked.

She did not speak, but her fingers drummed restlessly against her side.

“I can only hope your vicar was a bit more spirited. Mr. Porter always seems as if even he is bored by his sermons.”

Her lip twitched. If I had blinked, I might have missed it.

I forced a dramatic sigh. “It is rather unfortunate we must suffer through such stuffy services in silence, don’t you think?”

Nothing again. The girl ought to take up gambling, with a stone face like that.

I glanced at Lieutenant Avery, lingering by the cemetery gate and watching us as unobtrusively as he could manage. He raised his brow—a question. I shook my head.

I needed another strategy. Clearly, Olivia would not simply open up to a complete stranger, even if I *had* saved her life just last week. And obviously, I was bungling this whole conversation anyway.

I smoothed my skirts. “I am sorry you do not like church. I was the same at your age. In fact, Mama used to bribe me into good behavior at church.” I was blathering. “She knew my favorite sweets were iced cakes, so she instructed our cook to bake them every Sunday, and I would be allowed one if I behaved myself through the entire service.” The bud of an idea took root in my mind, and I straightened. “Perhaps we might make an arrangement, you and I.”

“An arrangement?”

I had her attention. Good. “What sort of sweets do you like, Olivia? Baked apples? Banbury cake?”

She twisted her mouth to one side. “Why?”

“Because if you come into church today,” I said, “I will deliver to you an entire basket of your favorite treats.”

Her eyes widened. Aha. Success. I was not so removed from childhood as to have forgotten the appeal of dessert.

“So what is it?” I probed. “Your favorite?”

“Strawberry tarts.” Her voice had lost that scratchy quality and now sounded as fragile as a newly blossomed rose. “My favorite, and Mama’s.”

Her mama, who had died six months past. I forced a bright expression to my face. “An excellent choice.” I stuck out my hand for her to shake. “Do we have a deal, then? You may even sit beside me inside, if you wish.”

She stared at my hand, then me. Her shoulders stiffened, and she turned away without another word.

Botheration. I thought it had been going well, but that again revealed how very little I knew of children. I stood and moved to rejoin Lieutenant Avery.

“Did she say much?” His arms were still crossed against his chest.

“Nothing, really. Although I do not think she likes church.”

“Doesn’t like church?” He frowned. “Why would she not like church?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea,” I said, straightening my hat. “But if you would care for a bit of advice, I would not recommend pressing her on this.”

“Why is that?” he asked. “Besides the obvious awkwardness of dragging her into the chapel and causing a scene, of course.”

I grinned. “Yes, besides that.” It was really too bad Oliva made Lieutenant Avery so strained all the time. He was quite funny when he wanted to be. “Truly, though, she seemed very set against going in. Perhaps it is simply willful disobedience, or perhaps it is something more.”

He blew out a hard breath. “I wish I could understand.”

“Do you—?” The jolting bellow of organ pipes cut off my question, crashing through the tranquil morning. I spun to the church doors, now closed against the summer warmth. “Oh, I’m late.”

“I am sorry to have kept you,” he said from behind me. “Please, do not worry over us.”

I turned back as the choir inside joined the organ in the rousing hymn. “You needn’t apologize, Lieutenant. It was my fault for interfering.”

He smiled. He had a rather nice smile, wide and open. “I am glad you interfered. She at least spoke with you.”

I glanced at Olivia, who now tapped the trunk of a nearby tree with a long stick. I did not think I had made any difference at all, but I wouldn’t be the one to tell him that.

The choir inside climbed a crescendo into the second verse, and I took a step back. “I ought to go in, but I wish you the best of luck.”

“Thank you, Miss Rowley.”

I climbed the church steps, pausing with my hand on the worn wood doors. A strange urge whispered inside me to look back, see if Lieutenant Avery was watching me like he had the night of the assembly. But that was silly. A foolish womanly pride that I could command a man’s attention. I

already had the admiration of the only man who mattered. I opened the door and slipped inside.

The organ still wailed as I hurried up the aisle to our pew box at the front of the chapel. I wished I could have stolen into the gallery with Fawcett and the other servants. But Mama would come searching for me eventually, so I might as well make my entrance during the midst of a distracting hymn.

Except it was not as distracting as I would have liked. Heads turned as I passed, the people whispering with pointed stares. The vicar, seated at his desk below the pulpit, scowled at me as I pulled open the little door to our box and slid in beside Mama as quickly as I could.

“I hope you are pleased with yourself,” I whispered to her. “Your assigned mission has earned me Mr. Porter’s ire.”

“You already had Mr. Porter’s ire,” she replied. “But now you can feel justified in it, knowing you were aiding someone in need.”

I shook my head. “Olivia hardly spoke to me, so I would not count it a success.”

“Perhaps not today. But do not give up so easily.”

So easily? I thought I’d put in a good effort already. If Olivia did not wish to be befriended, I would be more than happy to give her such freedom. Notwithstanding my sympathy for her and her trials, I still did not particularly like her.

But I did not argue with Mama as the choir took their seats and Mr. Porter rose and climbed to his pulpit. As he began the morning’s recitations, I kept my focus ahead and my expression sober. No need to provide more reasons for the vicar to dislike me.

Mr. Porter droned on, repeating the general confession with all his usual lethargy. My thoughts began to drift away like a cloud in a summer breeze, but I reined them in. I was not a restless child any longer. I was a woman soon to be married, and I ought to act like one.

A sharp creak echoed from the back of the church. Heads turned all around me, yet I proudly focused my attention on Mr. Porter. But even he glared at whatever was behind me distracting his parishioners.

When Mama let out a whispered, “Oh,” I could no longer resist.

I peeked over my shoulder. Lieutenant Avery stood inside the church doors, hat in his hands and Olivia at his side. They both looked rather aghast to have the entire congregation staring at them, Olivia’s cheeks

stained red like wild summer strawberries. She found me watching her and tugged on her brother's sleeve, pointing. Lieutenant Avery's eyes traveled the distance up the aisle to our family pew, almost the entire length of the church. He shook his head and searched the back of the church, likely for a visitor's pew.

But Olivia wanted to sit by me, like I'd offered if she came into the church. Why she wanted that, I could not say, but I did not wish to disappoint her. There was plenty of room on our pew and no reason that they ought not share it with us.

I looked at Mama, but she was already nodding her approval. I turned fully in my seat and waved Olivia forward, trying for discretion.

She marched up the aisle without hesitation. Lieutenant Avery stared after her, then sighed and followed. The poor fellow. Strong-willed sisters were not for the faint of heart.

Whispers trailed behind Olivia as she arrived at our pew and I opened the half door for her to slip in beside me. Lieutenant Avery was right behind her, closing the door as he sat.

The congregation settled around us, and attention went back to Mr. Porter as he plodded along through his recitations. I glanced down at Olivia, the top of her golden curls barely reaching my shoulders. She gnawed her lip with such force that I was surprised not to see blood.

She must have felt my stare, because she looked up. I smiled tentatively. She did not respond for a long moment, but then she swallowed and set her lips in a smooth line, red from her biting. Her arms, crossed rigidly against her chest, loosened as she turned back to the pulpit.

I glanced at Lieutenant Avery above Olivia's head. His eyes were already fixed on me, softer than I'd ever seen them. *Thank you*, he mouthed.

When Stella and I rode, when she quickened from a canter to a gallop, there was always a flash of anticipation. Her hooves skipped a beat, and my pulse thrummed through me like a harp, filling me with the most delicious thrill.

Why I felt that same thrill now, I could not even begin to understand.

I ignored the swoop in my stomach as I turned my attention back to the pulpit. The service passed as slowly as a blind horse in a race, especially with Olivia fidgeting beside me—and Lieutenant Avery just beyond her. The church grew hot, the sun beating in through the stained-glass windows and not a breeze to be had.

When Mr. Porter finally concluded services, I had never been more grateful, which was saying quite a lot considering how tedious his sermons were as a whole.

Apparently, Olivia had the same opinion. As soon as the vicar began descending from his pulpit, before anyone in the congregation had stood, she looked up at me. “He was even more dull than you let on.”

Her sharp voice carried easily through the echoing chapel. The Winstons turned in their pew ahead of us, the miserly Mr. Winston glaring at the both of us. Across the aisle, Mrs. Follett’s gleeful smile nearly leaped off her rouged face. I did not bother to turn to see who else stared at us. Everyone had heard.

“Olivia.” I choked on her name. “You cannot say such a thing.”

She squashed her brows together. “But *you* said it, outside when we were—”

My eyes widened to an alarming extent, and she stopped, perhaps at last realizing how far her voice was carrying. Mama cleared her throat beside me. I was sure to receive a few choice words from her on our ride home.

Lieutenant Avery said nothing, to my surprise and annoyance. My face was hot as the summer sun, and he did not even bother to correct his sister. In fact—

He was laughing. Not out loud, of course, or he’d invite the censure that was now focused so horribly on me. But a grin battled his face for dominance, and his eyes danced.

I stared at him. Then, though I fought it with a fury, my own lips twitched. Blast it all. I should not find this funny. His sister had just embarrassed me in front of the entire parish, and he hadn’t said a word of reproach. And yet, as the congregation began to rise around us, voices blessedly filling the silence, Lieutenant Avery continued to grin at me, and I, for the life of me, wanted very much to grin back.

Thankfully, Mama elbowed me and stopped me from committing that egregious error. We all stood and filed out of the church. I wasn’t certain if Mr. Porter had heard Olivia’s comment, but I skirted behind Mama as she greeted him at the church doors. Better to avoid him altogether.

“Is that the infamous neighbor girl?” Juliana asked me in a low tone as she followed me out. Lieutenant Avery and Olivia stopped a short distance away, and it seemed as though he was finally delivering the reprimand she

deserved, though he spoke in a low tone and appeared more serious than angry. She stood with her hands clenched in her skirts, her eyes downcast.

“Yes,” I confirmed to Juliana. William stood beside Mama at the church doors, still conversing with the vicar. “Olivia Avery.”

“Hm.” She studied Olivia, one hand atop her growing belly. “She looks sad.”

“She ought to,” I said. “Or did you not hear what she said?”

“Oh, I heard very well. William had to bite his tongue not to laugh, seeing the hot water you found yourself in.”

“It would do him good to be in trouble.” I tucked my prayer book into my reticule. “I am always in Mama’s black books, while he remains the favored son.”

“I would be the wrong person to complain to about that,” she said with a nudge of her arm.

“Clearly, since you were foolish enough to fall in love with him.”

“Foolish?” Juliana repeated. “I think that was the most intelligent decision I’ve ever made.”

She patted me on the arm before moving to greet her friend Sophie, who worked as the cook at Juliana’s boarding school. Sophie slipped an arm through Juliana’s, and the two of them fell into conversation, heads bent together. I spotted Sarah Mason across the churchyard, flirting with a young man I vaguely recognized. Mr. Colton? Mr. Casper? Mr. C-something, I was sure. She would not appreciate an interruption from me.

I crossed my arms over my stomach, digging the tip of my boot into the soft earth. The chatter of the congregation filled the warm summer air around me, and it ought to have brought me contentment, yet I watched it all from afar. I knew most of these people from visits to Havenfield over the years, but my connection to them suddenly felt shallow, lacking. I missed Edward, Marjorie, my friends in London. I loved Havenfield, I did. But I wasn’t certain I loved living here.

It hardly mattered. I would soon be married and living far from here. Edward owned a lovely estate in Lancashire, and I would be its mistress. I could find my own place, my own friends rather than building upon the lives of others.

“I hope Olivia has not ostracized you from the town.” Lieutenant Avery joined me, his hands clasped behind his back.

“No, not yet,” I managed. “Though she undoubtedly tried her best.”

“That she did. And I’m afraid I did not help much.”

I sent him a mock glare. “You certainly did not, laughing at me when I was already in trouble.”

“Yet another apology I owe you,” he said. “But I hadn’t imagined for a moment she would say such a thing, and the look on your face . . .” He chuckled as if reliving the moment. “I should not have laughed, but you can hardly blame me.”

“I wish I could blame you. But this was my fault entirely. I tried to reach Olivia using my dislike for the vicar, and that was a lapse in judgment I won’t soon forget.”

“Nor will I.” He leaned toward me. “And Olivia will not forget that you promised her a basket of strawberry tarts.”

“Ah, so my bribe worked better than I thought.”

“It worked *too* well,” he said. “She already asked if I will provide plum pudding after next week’s service.”

I laughed. I could not help it. Mama always said I was like Papa in that way, that he had laughed more than he’d talked. It was, to me, a lovely way to be remembered. And I liked to think a bit of me grew closer to heaven—to Papa—with every laugh.

“I am sorry,” I said, still chuckling. “I did not mean to set such a precedent.”

He squinted at me. “You convinced her to come into church when she insisted she would never set foot inside. That is nothing short of a miracle, believe you me. I am everything that is grateful, Miss Rowley.”

“I was glad to help.” And I meant it. Seeing Olivia come into the church after our rather one-sided conversation had sent a spark of satisfaction through me. “Truthfully, I was surprised she listened to me. I haven’t any knowledge or understanding of children, I’m afraid.”

“We shall have to hope that your mysterious suitor is better suited to family life, then,” he said mischievously.

His words caught me like a fishhook, and I glanced about to see if anyone nearby had overheard. I was so unused to anyone knowing about Edward that to hear Lieutenant Avery speak of him in such an offhanded manner was unsettling.

“You needn’t worry,” he said. “I am not so careless as my sister.”

“Quite thankfully too,” I managed. But I did not want to discuss Edward with the entire town within earshot, even if the lieutenant seemed

certain we would not be overheard. I turned the conversation back. "In any case, I intend to bring Olivia every last tart I promised her. Where is she now?"

Lieutenant Avery nodded to his left, to a group of young girls all on the brink of womanhood. I recognized several of them from Juliana's school. Olivia lingered a few steps away, eyeing the girls with ill-concealed suspicion.

"I suggested she try to make friends," he said. "Clearly, that worked as well as my attempt to bring her to church."

I did not know what to say to that. I had no words of wisdom or life experiences that could lend him any understanding. I always made friends easily, and though I had lost a parent at a young age like Olivia had, I still had Mama.

And yet . . .

Seeing the group of young girls sparked an idea inside me. I turned to Lieutenant Avery. "Might I ask what sort of situation you are seeking for Olivia? A governess or a tutor, perhaps?"

He clasped his hands behind his back. "A governess, ideally. I've begun searching, but I imagine it will take some time."

"Would you, then, be opposed to a school?"

He squinted. "A school? I cannot say I have considered it. I worry about leaving her to fend for herself, especially the way she is now."

"But if she could make friends, stay close to Linwood Hall?" I pressed. "Then perhaps you might entertain the idea?"

Lieutenant Avery glanced at Olivia, now examining the roots of a nearby elm tree while the group of girls tittered away. "Please tell me you know of such a convenient situation. If not, I shall be cross with you for teasing me so."

"And I certainly do not want that," I said. "If you are bringing plum pudding after next week's services, I must stay in your good graces."

"You are very firmly in my good graces, Miss Rowley." He spoke matter-of-factly. "You needn't fear on that account."

He was not standing particularly near me, yet somehow, he felt too close. I could feel his warmth, and my nose caught a hint of his soap, fresh with a bit of spice.

"So, do you?"

I coughed. "Do I what?"

He looked at me as if I had forgotten my own name. “Do you know a school nearby that might have space for Olivia?”

“Oh. Yes. That is, I hope so.” Juliana’s school was new but quite popular, and she rarely had openings. “My sister-in-law, Juliana, runs a girls school in Millbury. She teaches a wide variety of curricula with the belief that girls should be taught the same subjects as boys.”

He appraised Juliana where she stood beside William and Mama across the churchyard. “Does she, now?”

“I have little doubt Olivia would have the best care and attention.” I nodded at the young girls. “Many of those girls attend the school, and Juliana hires the most qualified teachers and staff. Olivia could even live at Linwood while you are there and board at the school if you are ever away.”

Lieutenant Avery focused on me once again. “And you believe she might be happy there? Find a place?”

I could not predict what would make Olivia happy. Was I giving him false hope? But it was as good an idea as any, and I could not help but think Olivia would improve more being surrounded by girls her own age. “I think there is a very good chance she could be happy there,” I said softly.

He nodded. “And I think you are right.” His shoulders, though not precisely tense, softened. “In fact, I think this could be the solution I’ve been searching for.”

“I would be glad to make inquiries for you to see if Juliana might have an opening for Olivia. If you are not opposed, that is. I would understand if you are set on a governess.”

“No, I would be most grateful if you would.”

Mama waved me over then; our coach had been brought around, and William and Juliana were already ascending.

“Mama is summoning me,” I said. “But I shall let you know soon. Good day, Lieutenant Avery.” I bobbed a quick curtsy as he bowed, and then started forward. What I did not expect was for his hand to find the crook of my elbow and pull me to a stop. He stood close, his arm on mine causing a thrill to run up my back, like a current of energy in the air during a lightning storm.

“Thank you, Miss Rowley,” he said in a gentle tone.

“Of—of course,” I stammered. Curse his piercing eyes. They made me forget I was capable of speech.

I pulled away from him and cleared my throat. He'd done nothing improper, yet my body was reacting in a way that was not at all proper. I would need to have a very firm talk with my pattering heart and flushing cheeks.

Because this would not do. Not do at all.

Chapter Ten

WHEN WE RETURNED TO HAVENFIELD, I spent the rest of the afternoon alone in my room, composing a long and ardent letter to Edward. I had to find some way of relieving the emotions I felt in his absence. It was *his* touch that sent my heart racing, *his* low voice in my ear that made my face heat.

Not Lieutenant Avery's.

It seemed rather silly to me, the more I thought about it, that the lieutenant had such an odd effect on me. He'd said himself he was disinterested in marriage, after all. Perhaps it was simply difficult for me to believe any man of marriageable age and good fortune was not intent on a wife, but clearly, Lieutenant Avery was the exception. I should not interpret his actions as furthering such a cause. Perhaps he might tease and flirt a bit, but what young gentleman did not? I needn't see it as anything more.

There was no harm in being his friend, as we'd decided. I simply would have to master my own body and scold myself for acting like a sixteen-year-old girl just asked to dance at the first ball of the Season.

I finished my letter to Edward, holding it up to admire the strokes of my pen. Putting my feelings to words, remembering why I so wished to marry him, made me feel vastly improved. There were many things about which I was uncertain but my connection to Edward was not one of them. He'd been the first man to ever make me realize I was ready for more, ready for a real life beyond parties and balls and matchmaking games.

The weight inside me lifted as I folded and sealed the letter. This letter would solidify our relationship, even with the distance between us.

I scratched out a quick note to Marjorie, asking after her family and again thanking her for helping Edward and me in our deception. The two of them took quite a risk in exchanging letters at various social functions and visits. If anyone ever caught them, the gossip would be horrendous. But Marjorie had been a true friend to me since our first Season out together. And thank heavens for that, or I'd never have met Edward. She was our greatest supporter, always encouraging our secret rendezvous and distracting his mother whenever she'd come in search of Edward. I could only hope she would find someone who loved her as Edward loved me. She deserved such happiness and more.

I folded Marjorie's letter around Edward's and put it on my desk to send tomorrow, fully relieved that I'd sorted out whatever confusion lingered inside me. Then I set out to find Juliana. I'd thought about

discussing Olivia during our ride home from church, but I was acutely aware of the knowing smile Mama had given me when I'd stepped inside the carriage. She'd seen me speaking to Lieutenant Avery and had looked as though she knew precisely what was happening between us. If I'd mentioned Olivia then, it would have only encouraged her thoughts of matchmaking.

So instead, I'd waited to search Juliana out, and I found her reading in the library.

After I sat beside her and explained the situation, she leaned back in her cushioned armchair, resting her closed book against her round belly. "I do have room for her, actually," she said. "One of my students leaves in a fortnight, and I had planned to advertise the opening. But it is hers if she would like it."

"I haven't any idea if she would like it, truthfully."

She squinted. "Have you asked Olivia what she might think about attending school?"

"Not yet, considering I only thought up the idea this morning."

Juliana tapped her fingers on the leather cover of her book. "It can be something of an adjustment for a girl so young, especially when she has already suffered the loss of her mother. From my observations of her yesterday, I think she may have a difficult time making friends with the other girls."

"I had the same thoughts," I said. "But I also cannot help thinking it would be good for her."

She nodded. "You are likely right."

"Might I tell Lieutenant Avery the good news, then? I am going to Linwood Hall in the morning."

"Eager to see him, are you?"

I sighed. "Not you as well."

"I am only teasing," she said with a wave of her hand. "You ought to be used to that by now."

"William is a horrible influence on you," I muttered.

"That is a matter of much debate, I assure you," she said. "But to answer your question, yes, you may tell the lieutenant that there is room for Olivia at the school."

"Thank you, Juliana." I rose to my feet and kissed her on the cheek. "He'll be so relieved to hear it."

And I could not deny that I was anticipating being the one to tell him.



The next morning after breakfast, I dressed in my blue riding habit, laced on my half boots, and then hesitated over my hats. My riding hat—the one Lieutenant Avery had given me—stared back at me, and my stomach twinged. But why should I feel guilty over a silly little hat? Both he and I knew the gift was perfectly innocent. I eventually settled it over my chignon. There was no reason *not* to wear it, after all.

Skipping down the stairs, I came to an abrupt halt on the last step. Mr. Hambley stood inside the front doors as he handed his hat and gloves to the footman, and he looked up at my approach.

“Good day, Miss Rowley.” He offered a tentative smile.

“Oh.” I took the final step down to the polished marble floor. “Good day, Mr. Hambley. I did not realize you were here.”

He cleared his throat. “Yes, I came to see your mother.”

Of course he had.

Mama stepped into the entry hall from the morning room. “Mr. Hambley, how good to see you,” she said softly, sounding truly pleased. Then she spotted me. “Rebecca, are you going somewhere?”

Clearly, I was, but why was there such disappointment in her eyes? “Yes,” I said cautiously.

“Can it not wait?” she asked, stepping closer. “I hoped you might sit with Mr. Hambley and me awhile.”

I fought the urge to step back. This meeting felt like an ambush, and a small spark of irritation lit inside me. I had not opposed Mama’s match to Mr. Hambley, nor would I in the future, but that did not mean I wished to sit in awkward conversation with the man while he attempted to woo Mama.

“I am going to visit Olivia Avery,” I said, blessing the stars I had a real excuse. “I promised her I would.”

Mama did not frown, though a line appeared between her brows. “Oh. I see.”

I turned to Mr. Hambley before she could think of a reason to delay me. “I am sorry to miss your visit, Mr. Hambley. Perhaps next time?”

“Of course,” he said, and I could not begin to read his stoic face. I gave a quick curtsy and farewell before starting off for the kitchen. What was it about him that Mama liked? Or was she simply lonely and Mr. Hambley was convenient?

I shook my head as I clattered down the servants' stairs. That was unkind of me, to both Mama and Mr. Hambley. Mama had more respect for herself than that, and Mr. Hambley was hardly a horrible person. I knew I needed to allow him a chance. Just not today.

I reached the kitchen and claimed the basket of strawberry tarts from the cook with a kiss on her cheek. "Thank you, Mrs. Hale. I am certain these will be much better than anything I might have attempted."

She harrumphed. "I have no doubt. Not that I would've let you back in my kitchen, in any case."

I grinned. "We are both glad of that."

She shooed me away. "Out with you before you burn the kitchen down."

I settled the basket onto my elbow and made my way outside. Linwood Hall was but a quarter hour walk from Havenfield, but I had Stella saddled anyway and declined the company of a groom. I'd not ridden alone since I had promised William to be more cautious, but certainly a neighborly visit did not warrant supervision.

I did not want to upset the tarts, the basket tucked into the crook of my elbow, so after mounting, I nudged Stella into a walk down the shady lane, the breeze ruffling my hair and toying with my skirts. After a few minutes, Linwood Hall edged into view through the trees. I'd only ever seen it from a distance, passing on the way to town or during rides, but on closer inspection, it was easy to decide it a lovely estate. The manor rose above the nearby trees, the three stories of windows and red brick a steadying influence on the more wild appearance of the surrounding land. In the absence of a tenant, the grounds had not been kept up as they should, though I could see two gardeners at work on the hedges to the south of the house. I had no doubt the land would soon be put to rights under Lieutenant Avery's direction.

I was nearing the house when I spotted the stables off to my left. I studied the building from a distance, my eyes expertly skipping over the solid stone walls and vaulted roof and landing on a wide archway with a dirt courtyard beyond, where a groom was leading a horse, a pretty chestnut mare. Dared I think the stables an even more attractive sight than the house?

As I approached the front door, another groom hurried from the stables. He took Stella as I dismounted, and she snorted at his touch.

“She’s sometimes uneasy around strangers,” I told the groom, who eyed my mare. “But I’ll return shortly.”

He nodded, and I climbed the stone steps to knock on the white double doors. A footman answered and bowed when he saw me.

“Good day,” I said. “Am I fortunate enough to have found Lieutenant Avery at home?”

“Sadly not, miss,” he said. “He left a few minutes ago.”

I frowned. I’d been so eager to tell him of my good news, and now it would have to wait. *And* I would have to visit Olivia without him. “No matter. Is Miss Avery available for visitors?”

He motioned me inside. “I shall be happy to ask the nursemaid.”

“Thank you,” I said as I stepped into the entry hall. I liked it immediately, with its bright white walls, detailed with intricate moldings, and a polished wooden floor beneath our feet. At the end of the hall, a double staircase met together at a joined landing leading to the next story, the entire space embellished by claret floral wallpaper.

The footman disappeared upstairs, and I took the opportunity to examine the entry closer. As I walked about, my footsteps sounded far too loudly. It was quiet here, which was not a terrible thing. But there was such a careful comfort in the design and furnishings that the echoing quiet lessened it somehow. It seemed like a home that ought to be filled with laughter.

The footman returned, accompanied by Olivia’s nursemaid. “I’m afraid Miss Olivia is feeling a bit unwell,” she told me. “Just a cold, but she is resting.”

“Oh.” Was it horrible of me that I was rather relieved? “I am sorry to hear it.”

“But,” she said, “she is well enough for a short visit. I think she would be pleased to see you. Shall I show you up?”

Visions of escaping to Havenfield disappeared. “Yes, thank you. I’ll stay only a minute.” With how little the girl talked, an entire minute might be a miracle.

I followed the nursemaid up the beautiful staircase and down the corridor to an open door. Olivia was waiting expectantly in her bed when I stepped inside her room. Her cheeks were flushed as if she’d been experimenting with rouge, and her eyes were red and droopy.

“I hear you are not feeling well today, Miss Olivia,” I said brightly while her nursemaid settled herself in the corner with some mending. “Thankfully, I have something that should cure you in no time at all.”

Olivia eyed my basket. “You brought the strawberry tarts?”

Such suspicion. Was it really so astonishing that I might follow through on our arrangement?

“I did indeed,” I said instead of the slightly pert response I wished to give. “The best in Millbury, I’ll have you know.” I set the basket on the bed beside her.

Without speaking, she pulled aside the basket’s lid and peeked inside. She plucked a tart from the top and took a nibble. Seeming to find no fault in it, she then took a larger bite. “They are good,” she said as she spoke through a mouthful of strawberry. “Did you make them?”

“Oh, heavens no. Mrs. Hale banned me from her kitchen long ago.”

“Why did she ban you?”

I shook my head ruefully. “It is rather embarrassing, really. Last summer, I attempted to bake an apple cake for my mother. I must have measured the ingredients incorrectly, because the batter overflowed and set the oven ablaze.”

She gave a short laugh, spraying a few crumbs over her bedsheets.

“It was no laughing matter!” I said, though I laughed with her. “The servants ran around in a dither before the fire was put out. It smelled like ash for a week.”

“Were you in trouble?”

“Yes, with Mrs. Hale for creating such a mess in her domain. I learned to avoid the kitchen after that.”

Olivia continued to grin as she munched on her tart, and I watched her with a curious tilt to my head. She’d never reacted so freely before.

I hesitated, standing there beside her bed. There was no reason to stay any longer, yet something told me I ought to.

“I saw you ride up the drive,” Olivia said, making my decision for me.

“I—yes, I rode.”

“Why did you use a saddle today?”

I blinked, then glanced quickly at the nursemaid across the room. She did not seem to notice or care about Olivia’s odd statement. I moved to the bed, sitting beside her so we could talk quietly. “I only ride without a saddle

when I am alone,” I said quietly. “And how did you know about that, anyway?”

I hadn’t thought she’d noticed Stella at all on that day I’d rescued her at the lake. Lieutenant Avery certainly hadn’t noticed until I’d mounted.

“Nicholas told me,” she said simply, inspecting her tart before taking another bite. It took me a moment before I realized she meant her brother.

“Did he, now?” Lovely. An eleven-year-old girl with no qualms about yelling in church knew my secret. Well, one of my secrets.

“He said he would never have imagined a lady like you could do it.”

That made my irritation dissipate somewhat.

“How do you do it?” she asked.

“Ride bareback?”

“Yes.”

I sat back a bit. “It is not easy. I have had to practice a great deal.”

She nodded, taking another bite of tart. What were all these questions about? I did not think she was particularly interested in riding, but it almost seemed as if she were hungry for conversation.

I toyed with the loose edge of her blanket. “Have you had a chance to make any friends in town yet?” I knew she hadn’t but could not think of a better way to introduce a new topic.

She chewed for a long moment before responding. “No.”

“Many of the young ladies attend my sister’s school for girls in Millbury. I’m sure they would love to know you better if you gave them the chance.”

She shook her head. “They wouldn’t like me.”

“Why would you say that?”

Olivia did not speak for a long moment, focusing on the half-eaten tart in her hands. “I am not good at making friends.”

Her brutal honesty struck once again. I gripped my hands in my lap. What was I to say to that? Was that why she had been so reluctant to attend church yesterday?

“Perhaps you simply ought to allow them the chance,” I said, my words far from adequate. “After all, *I* like you.” I was rather surprised to find I meant it. Olivia was temperamental and unpredictable, but she spoke her mind, and I quite liked that. “You’ll find the right friends soon enough.” I patted her hand, a sad attempt at comfort.

She nodded slowly. “Thank you, Miss Rowley,” she said and seemed to mean it.

Perhaps I was not so terrible with children after all.

“Good.” I stood and smoothed my skirts. “Do rest well, Olivia. I hope you recover soon.”

She sniffed. “Of course I will. It is only a cold.”

At least she would keep me humble.

I made my way back down the stairs, glancing about surreptitiously as I went. Lieutenant Avery was still nowhere to be seen.

I nodded my thanks to the footman as he opened the front door for me, and I skipped down the steps in anticipation of my ride back to Havenfield. Perhaps I could fit in a quick gallop on the road back.

A groom still held Stella’s reins, but as I started toward them, I spotted a horse and rider cantering away from the far end of the stables. I recognized the horse immediately. It was Lieutenant Avery’s bay hunter, and a quick examination of the rider’s broad physique and light hair confirmed his identity. He must have been in the stables the entire time.

I walked to Stella as I watched Lieutenant Avery and his mount grow smaller in the distance. If I were to guess by his direction alone, it would seem he was headed for the lake—or my meadow. I squinted at him, the afternoon sunlight causing white spots to dance across my vision. Was that a leather pouch slung over one shoulder?

I mounted Stella with a helping lift from the groom and took my reins. We started down the lane toward the road, but I glanced back in time to see Lieutenant Avery disappear behind a line of trees. Why was he going to my meadow? If he *was* going to my meadow, that is.

I had so wanted to tell him about Juliana and the school. When would I have the chance again? And I could not deny my growing curiosity as to what he had in that leather bag of his.

I allowed Stella to walk unhurriedly down the dirt lane as I kept the retreating groom in the edge of my vision. Even if the lieutenant and I knew there was nothing romantic between us, it would hardly do to be seen dashing after him into the woods. As soon as the groom reached the stables, I wheeled Stella around and kicked her into a canter, following after Lieutenant Avery.

Chapter Eleven

I KNEW I'D FOUND HIM when I spotted fresh hoofprints in the damp earth near the lake. I eased Stella to a walk, following his trail through the brush and around the edge of the water. If he wasn't going to my meadow, I hadn't any idea where he might be headed.

Then I spotted his horse tied to a tree not a hundred feet ahead. Odd. Where was the lieutenant? I dismounted beside his hunter and wrapped Stella's reins around an adjacent branch while I inspected the surrounding area. The ground was rockier here and yielded no discernable footprints.

A roaring crack split the silence. I spun and grasped the tree trunk to steady myself as the air shuddered around me. Stella skittered nervously, head bobbing and hooves dancing beneath her. I went to her and whispered calming words. The other mount beside us showed no reaction, as if he were comfortably stabled with fresh hay instead of foraging for grass on the rocky shores of the lake.

Another blast echoed through the trees, and I no longer wondered what Lieutenant Avery had in his pouch.

Stella eventually calmed, no doubt reassured by the other horse's steadiness. When a third shot echoed around us, she only swished her tail in response.

"I'll be back for you." I patted her neck as I stepped away, then wound through the trees and underbrush, following the sounds of intermittent gunfire until I reached the meadow. I finally spotted Lieutenant Avery through the reaching branches of a silver birch tree. He had removed his hat and jacket and stood in just his waistcoat and shirtsleeves, his back to me. The not-so-mysterious pouch now lay open on a flat rock nearby. As I watched, he set his feet in a wide stance, and both hands raised his pistol as he took careful aim.

I stepped closer, craning my neck around the tree. Some distance away, various items—glass jars and small fabric bags—swayed from ropes on a low-hanging branch. The lieutenant aimed for nearly ten seconds as the scant breeze ruffled his hair. When he pulled the trigger, the shot tore through my ears, almost painfully. A jar with a long neck shattered, glass spraying in all directions.

Lieutenant Avery showed no reaction as he lowered his pistol. Several other ropes hung empty from the branch, their contents no doubt gone the same way as that jar.

I stepped from the trees. Now seemed a good time to startle him rather than after he had reloaded. I readied an amusing quip. “A fine show of skill, Lieutenant, but—”

He spun, and my words froze in my throat. His eyes shone, his expression was fierce, and his pistol rose just a fraction before dropping once again. He breathed heavily as his scar pulled tight against his jaw. He stared at me and I at him, my hands clutching the skirt of my riding habit so hard I thought my bones might crumble.

“Miss Rowley,” he said, his voice rough. “What are you doing here?”

He still grasped his pistol, and though I felt no fear that he might harm me, I could not help the strange stirring in my chest. He was not like the men I danced with at balls or flirted with at parties. He’d survived cannon fire and faced down storms and commanded men during battle.

I dropped my gaze, hoping the words might come easier if I did not have to look at him. “I-I followed you. I was bringing Olivia her tarts and saw you leave.”

I heard him take a long, deep breath. “And you thought it an excellent idea to interrupt a man in the midst of shooting?”

He did not *sound* angry. I glanced at him. The tension in his posture had eased somewhat, and he eyed me with what might be amusement. Or possibly irritation. My mind was far too unraveled to trust its judgment.

“It was not an ideal situation,” I managed.

He fiddled with one of the pistol’s mechanisms. “No harm done, in any case. Though I’m afraid I startled you.”

“And here I thought I had surprised you.” I attempted a light tone as I stepped forward again. I did not want him to know how taken aback I’d been at the sight of him.

He knelt beside the large rock that held his powder, balls, and ramrod and began reloading his pistol. I stepped closer, watching as his hands moved deftly over his weapon.

“Do you come shoot out here often?” I asked.

“Only when Olivia is excessively irritating.”

“So quite often, then.”

He stood again, the corner of his lip tugging upward. “More than I should say.”

He stood and turned back to his targets and raised his pistol. This time, I was prepared for the ringing shot when it came, his bullet exploding into

what looked like a small bundle of dried peas.

“Are all navy men excellent shots?” I asked. “Or are you trying particularly hard to impress me?”

He cast me a sidelong glance as he again bent to reload his weapon. “Or are *you* simply trying to gain favor with me for some reason? Flattery is the devil’s work, Miss Rowley.”

His humor was so very dry that I could not help but laugh. “Perhaps when the flattery is untrue. But you *are* an excellent shot.”

He gave a small shrug as he worked. “I’ve been practicing a great deal since coming to Millbury.”

I eyed him. Most men would not have modestly deferred the compliment as he had. In fact, they likely would have exaggerated their prowess to a ridiculous extent, boasting of hunting trips and bagging dozens of fowl in one day. As if how many driven pheasants a man shot in one day was an accurate measurement of character or worth.

Edward had done that once. The men at a dinner party in Brighton had been discussing the upcoming shooting season, and Edward had taken it upon himself to crow about his success in the field the year before. Even I did not believe him when he’d insisted he’d shot too many braces of birds for the servants to carry.

I shook my head. That did not mean Edward was dishonest. It was simply the talk of the party, and he’d only been joining in. But I could not imagine Lieutenant Avery participating in such a self-important conversation.

The lieutenant’s fingers moved quickly over his weapon as he finished loading, his motions practiced and sure. When he stood again, he faced me fully, his back to the targets. “If you did not come here to flatter me, disappointing as that is, might I ask why you did follow me here?”

Straight to the point, as I’d come to expect from him.

“I spoke to Juliana,” I said. “About Olivia.”

His eyes focused on mine. “And?”

“She says there is an opening at the school, if you’d like it.”

“Yes,” he said immediately. “Yes, I would.”

“Not even a moment to consider it?” I said with a laugh.

“I’ve been considering it since yesterday.” He spoke matter-of-factly. “The more I think about it, the more right it feels to me.”

I nodded. Olivia ought to be around girls her own age, learning and growing. "I quite agree."

He frowned suddenly, and I tilted my head. "What is it?"

"I am only wondering how I might go about convincing her to attend." He rubbed his neck. "She is rather stubborn, if you hadn't noticed."

"A shocking revelation, to be sure." But I considered his dilemma. Olivia had just told me how terrible she was at making friends. Was that only her fear speaking though? "Perhaps you might ease her into the idea. Take her to visit the school, see the other girls, and meet Juliana. No one can help but love Juliana. When Olivia is more comfortable with the notion, you can tell her the good news."

He raised an eyebrow. "Should someone so young be so wise?"

I waved him off. "Common sense is not wisdom."

"Yet I seem to lack the common sense you have in droves, at least in relation to Olivia."

I lifted my shoulder. "It has not been so long since I was Olivia's age. I have no doubt you will grow to understand her better the more you know her."

"I certainly hope so." He scrutinized me for a moment. "Now, tell me truthfully. Did you come just to speak with me, or did you also come to practice?"

"Practice?"

"Yes, your rather unforgettable method of riding," he said. "I am more than happy to relinquish the meadow to you. I am perfectly able to shoot elsewhere."

That was all I had wanted from the moment we'd met, yet now that he said it . . . I did not want it at all.

"No," I said. "Please stay. In any case, I no longer have the opportunity to practice."

"Why not?"

"I promised William I would not ride without an escort, and since I must keep my practicing a secret . . ."

"I see," he said thoughtfully. "Well, *I* happen to know your secret."

"Which does not reassure me."

He ignored my addition. "If your brother is concerned over your riding alone, allow me to act as your attendant. We'll meet here. You can ride, and I will shoot."

The idea was immediately appealing—reclaiming my freedom and resuming my rides. But there was another issue.

“It is hardly proper for us to be alone,” I pointed out. “The two of us are settled being friends, but the matter would be different if we were discovered together.”

“A valid point,” he conceded. “But am I wrong to think you chose this meadow for its seclusion?”

I crossed my arms, contemplating the idea. Before Lieutenant Avery had moved to Linwood Hall, I’d never come across a soul here. “It might very well work. But it seems something of an imposition on you.”

His expression sobered. “I think we have already established I am deeply in your debt, Miss Rowley. Allow me to repay you in what small way I can.”

I hesitated only a second more. “Thank you. In truth, I have been growing restless, and I would hate to undo all my work of the last year.”

He waved me off. “Go on. I imagine you left your horse by mine. You may as well get on with your practicing while I tidy up.”

“You are finished?”

“I normally shoot a while longer, but I do not wish to frighten your mount. I daresay she’ll grow used to the sound in time, but let us not press it today, shall we?”

I hurried to fetch Stella, not wanting to waste a moment. I mounted quickly with the help of a tall rock and cantered back to the meadow, where Lieutenant Avery had already packed away his pistol, powder, and balls. He stood beside the target tree, loosening knots and removing the ropes. He eyed me as I slid from Stella’s back.

“So tell me,” he said. “Why is it you are so keen to ride bareback?”

I gave a little shrug as I bent to loosen the girth beneath Stella. “Last year in London, Mama took me to Astley’s.”

“Ah,” he said with a nod. “The trick riders.”

“Yes.” I tugged on the strap, pulling it from the buckle. “They were astonishing. I’d never seen anything so bold, so exciting.”

“If you thought that exciting, you ought to join the navy.”

“Since I do not have that option available to me,” I said wryly, “Astley’s is as close to adventure as I can get.”

“Adventure.” He repeated the word as if he did not understand the meaning. He took his hanging targets and placed them in a large, roughly

woven sack.

“Yes, adventure.” I laid a hand on Stella’s side as her hooves moved anxiously beneath her. She calmed. “Do not misjudge me, because I do enjoy parties and dancing and entertainment. But—” I stopped, my fingers curling about the smooth leather edge of the saddle.

“But what?”

I did not know how to put my feelings into words. I’d never thought to ask myself why I did such things as ride bareback or laugh too loudly at dinner parties only to earn disapproving glances from the hostess—or enter into a secret engagement with a man I’d known less than a month.

“But there must be more,” I said simply. “More to life than diversions and vying for a better position in Society. Because I feel as though I am floating on the surface of my future, and I wish to find it, grasp it, and be immersed in life and happiness and passion.”

That was what Edward had been to me. What he *was* to me. A chance for a life all my own, with a man who understood me.

Lieutenant Avery walked back toward me and set his sack by his pouch. “I envy you,” he said.

I turned to face him fully, one hand resting on Stella’s flank. “Why is that?”

“You know precisely what you want, and you are unafraid to reach for it.”

I huffed. “That is hardly true. I may know what I want, but I have more than enough fears.”

He set his hands at his waist. “But you do not let your fears overcome your determination. Like your riding. You suffered a horrible accident, but instead of refusing to ever ride again, you push yourself to excel at it, and you even broaden your skills on bareback.”

I waved that off. “Why should I worry over what terrible things *might* happen? If I suffer another accident, then so be it. But I’ll not relinquish the joy I find in riding because of my fears. It is the same with—” I paused. It still felt odd to discuss Edward with anyone, let alone an unmarried man.

“With your mysterious suitor?” the lieutenant filled in for me.

“Well, yes,” I said. “Our families present a challenge, to be sure, but they are only a temporary obstacle. The promise of happiness is worth the risk.”

“And he agrees?”

“Of course he does.” I tried to hide the trace of irritation that slipped through my words. “Edward knew all this when he—”

“Ah,” he said, snapping his fingers. “Edward is his name. I knew you would slip up eventually.”

I crossed my arms. “It hardly matters. There are a dozen Edwards in Millbury alone.”

“But considering you just returned from Brighton, I have a suspicion this particular Edward is not a local. I’ll discover his identity sooner or later.”

“Why the sudden interest in my suitors?”

“Suitors? Poor Edward has some competition, then?”

I tried to maintain my frown, but his boyish grin wore me down. I shook my head, turning back to Stella and adjusting her reins so Lieutenant Avery wouldn’t see my smile. “No, there is no competition, I’m afraid.”

Lieutenant Avery was quiet for a long moment, and as I faced away from him, I could not tell if his silence was because of what I’d said or if he was busy gathering his belongings.

I turned the subject back. “Why is it you feel you cannot do the same as me?”

“Collect secret suitors, you mean?”

His quick response made me give a short laugh. “No, pursue what you want in life. I thought you were set on returning to the navy.”

“I was,” he said. “Now I am less certain.”

What made him uncertain about a future he had been so intent on only a week before? But he gave the slightest shake of his head and glanced away, and I did not press him.

Instead, I turned and grasped my saddle on either side. This part was always difficult, as I was neither particularly tall nor strong. As I began pulling, a hand settled on the sidesaddle’s pommel near my head, holding it in place.

“Allow me.” Lieutenant Avery’s voice sounded in my ear. Too close.

“I can manage.”

“I have no doubt. But please let me act the gentleman since I’ve failed so often in the past with you.”

I stepped to the side; if I stepped back, I would have bumped into him, and friend or not, he was more attractive than I cared to admit. I did not need flaming cheeks at the moment. “Thank you.”

He grasped either side of the saddle and hefted it off, setting it nearby. Then he moved back to Stella and took her reins. He ran a hand down her neck as he examined her lines. “She is beautiful,” he said. “I am no expert on horseflesh, but even I know she is a diamond.”

“Stella is more than a diamond.” I stroked her back. “Her name is *star* in Latin, and I do not think there is a better word to describe her.”

“Indeed.” He gave her one last pat on her nose, then handed me the reins and stepped back. “I wish you better luck in mounting this time.”

I sent him a mock glare. “I should like to see you do better.”

“I am afraid that is a sight you will never see. I am content to keep a saddle between my horse and me.”

“Then you are missing one of life’s greatest joys,” I said, tugging loose the straps that bound the bridle to Stella’s head. “Nothing compares to a full gallop with only wind and horse beneath you.”

“Save for perhaps a frigate at full sail with naught but sky and waves to surround you.”

My hands paused in their task. When he spoke of the ocean or the navy, he spoke like no other man I’d ever known. His words held a natural poetry, the emotion that he felt for the things he loved.

He went on, not noticing my distraction. “In any case, I cannot even begin to understand how you stay mounted with nothing to hold on to.”

I slipped Stella’s bridle off and laid it beside the saddle a few steps away. “Why do you think I need to practice?” I asked. “It does not come easily, I’m afraid. It’s a matter of balance and trusting your mount.”

He crossed his arms. “Show me.” He sounded intent, curious.

“All right, then.” I turned to Stella, and before she knew what I was doing, I took her mane and pulled myself up, throwing my leg over her back without mishap. I quickly tugged down my habit skirts. I did not want him to think I was entirely wanton.

I rode long circles about the meadow, reacquainting Stella with the feel of me on her back and the subtle signals we’d developed without the use of a riding crop or reins. Lieutenant Avery watched from where he’d settled on a low branch. He occasionally called out questions or observations and made me laugh more than once. I’d thought I enjoyed riding alone, but that was just because I’d needed to keep my secret. After all, I’d never been a creature of solitude. This was far and away more fun.

After a half hour, I pulled Stella to a stop in front of Lieutenant Avery's tree, and he slid from his branch.

"Finished already?" he asked. "Here I thought I'd get to see you gallop. You speak of it so highly, after all."

He'd been so kind in offering to watch my practices, but still, I hesitated. Galloping bareback was sheer elation, shared between Stella and me, and to allow someone else inside that feeling . . .

But it was Lieutenant Avery. Nicholas, as my mind kept wanting to call him. He was the only one who knew my secret, and beyond that, he was the only one who did not judge me for such an improper activity.

And I *did* want to run. It had been far too long.

"Just for a minute, then," I said.

He nodded. I took a deep breath and kicked Stella. She bounded forward as if she'd been waiting every second for the chance, and then we were sailing across the meadow. My veins flooded with heat, blood pounding through me, and I bent low over Stella's neck, feeling every vibration of her hooves, every muscle pulling beneath me.

We reached the end of the meadow in a wink and raced around the curve back the way we'd come. I tried to capture this moment in my memory—no thoughts, just pure emotion. When we found this perfection together, Stella and I, it was beyond my ability to describe. She trusted me as I trusted her, and together, there was nothing that could stop us.

Except, perhaps, for having no more room to run. All too soon, I was forced to pull Stella back to a canter and then a trot.

"There you have it." My chest heaved, and I patted Stella's neck as we approached Nicholas standing where I'd left him. "Are you now tempted to try bareback?"

We drew even, and I forgot whatever teasing words I meant to say next. He stood unmoving, mouth parted, jaw slack. But it was his eyes that drew me in, staring at me with a strange intensity, gripping me.

Nicholas swallowed. "Yes," he said in a rough voice. "Quite tempted indeed."

I was not breathing. I tore my gaze away and dismounted in such a hurry that I stumbled.

"Are you all right?" He stepped forward.

"Yes, of course." I spoke briskly. "But I really ought to be going now. Mama will be wondering what on earth I've been talking to Olivia about for

so long.” I moved toward where my saddle lay, but he beat me there. “Thank you,” I said as he lifted it atop Stella’s back. When he stepped away, I moved in and immediately set to work tightening the girth and adjusting the buckles. Anything to busy my hands.

“Perhaps we might meet again in a few days?” Nicholas’s voice had thankfully lost that rough—and unnerving—quality. Instead, he sounded almost indifferent.

I straightened. I was being silly. I’d imagined something in his eyes, in his words, that I knew simply could not exist. He was not looking for a wife, and I was not looking for a husband. He must have been impressed by my riding or at least impressed I hadn’t fallen off. That was all there was to it.

“Yes, please.” I still wanted to practice, after all. And even if he did set me at odds more often than I would like, he *was* my friend. I both needed and wanted a friend, and I wouldn’t allow any silly misunderstandings to come between us. “Perhaps Thursday?”

He nodded. “I look forward to it.”

So did I.

Chapter Twelve

I LEFT THE LIEUTENANT A few minutes later, riding back to the road strung between Havenfield and Linwood Hall. I was intent on keeping up the appearance that I had been visiting Olivia the whole time instead of spending unchaperoned time with Nicholas Avery. No matter that we understood each other; Society would not look kindly on either of us if we were discovered.

That begged the question: what would Edward think if he knew? His was truly the only opinion that mattered. I flattered myself to think he might be a little jealous, but certainly, he would not care if he knew Nicholas was disinterested in marriage. In truth, I felt a bit deserving of this friendship. Edward and Marjorie had each other while I was trapped away in the country with not a soul who knew my secret besides Nicholas. Why shouldn't I be allowed to confide in him?

I sighed, and Stella snorted in response. I patted her to let her know I appreciated her empathy, but my thoughts went immediately back to Edward. We'd both hoped to have more information by this point. I'd had but two letters from him since I'd arrived at Havenfield, and they had been far from enough. But I'd sent my latest letter only that morning, so surely I would hear from him soon.

Now I felt the itch again, the need to make progress. I'd been distracted by both Nicholas and Olivia, but I had to focus on what really mattered: finding a way to be with Edward.

I reached the road, a sharp line of brown against the green of the trees and brush, and slowed Stella to a walk. I'd had my fun in the meadow and now would act the part of high society lady if anyone were to come upon me.

Which they immediately did.

"Rebecca," William called out as he approached on horseback.

I offered a wave, but before I could speak, his glare caught me off guard.

"Where is your groom?" He pulled his mount up short as he reached me. His words were a cross between an accusation and a demand.

I drew back my chin. "I was only riding to Linwood. I hardly thought that merited a chaperone."

"Why is it you were crossing that field, then?"

Of course he would notice that. But I wasn't about to tell him I'd been riding bareback with Nicholas. He would likely lock me in the cellar. For my own safety, of course.

"It was just a quick ride, William," I said stiffly. "You needn't make such a fuss."

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "I wouldn't make a *fuss* if you would only do what you promised when I bought you that horse. Need we review that agreement once again?"

We'd danced around this issue for long enough that I suddenly wanted to hear clearly what he meant. "You would take Stella from me?"

His eyes widened at my blunt words. "No. That is, I do not want to. But your well-being is my priority, Rebecca. Please try to understand that."

"Then when I tell you I am simply riding to a neighbor's home, can you not trust I am taking all precautions to be safe? I am hardly dashing about the countryside taking haphazard jumps." Although I *was* riding bareback. But I was doing it carefully, with Nicholas's observation. It certainly wasn't any more dangerous than a ride down this very straight, dusty road.

He considered my words, his mouth set in a hard line. "I want to trust that. But you're a bit too impulsive for me not to worry."

"Impulsive?" The satisfaction of riding and spending time with Nicholas was no match for the irritation that now fought to the surface.

He winced. "I did not mean how that sounded."

"I should hope not." My voice was short. "Because it sounded very much as if you do not think I have a sensible bone in my body."

He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "I am sorry. I've had a trying morning, and I'm afraid I am lashing out at the person who least deserves it."

I did not want to forgive him that easily, but he looked so very browbeaten. "What happened this morning?"

"Juliana." He waved his hand as if that should explain everything.

"And what has she done to warrant your frustration?"

"It's more what she hasn't done." He frowned. "She refuses to rest, even with her confinement fast approaching." He shook his head. "In any case, I am sorry for what I said. Frustrated or not, I spoke too harshly."

I took a deep breath, resisting the urge to reject his apology and ride away. "It is forgotten. But, William." I paused. "I intend to visit Linwood

Hall fairly often to see Olivia Avery”—and Nicholas Avery, though I did not mention that—“and I’ve no reason to take a groom on such a tame ride. Can you trust me enough for that?”

He scrutinized me. “I can,” he said eventually. “But do not take advantage of that trust, Rebecca.”

It was not the vote of confidence I had hoped for, but it was good enough. “I won’t.”

It wasn’t a lie, I told myself. And although it wasn’t precisely the truth either, I could not give up the one thing that brought me continual happiness, even if I had to hide my riding from my brother. I *would* be careful.

“I’m late for an appointment, or I would ride back with you,” he said, reining in his energetic mount.

I waved him off. “Trust, William.”

“All right, all right. I will see you at dinner.” He started off past me, but I’d gone only a few steps when he called me back. “The other day, when you asked about the Bainbridge family . . .” he began.

I straightened, though I fought to keep my face expressionless. “Yes? What about them?”

“I finally had time to look into the situation more. Papa wrote rather extensively about it, and I’ve just scratched the surface. But from what I can gather”—he paused—“All I can say is that Mama was right. The Bainbridges are not a family you wish to know, Rebecca. I am glad you returned home before any real problem came of it.”

My fingers froze around my reins as though it were the depths of winter and not late summer. What could he possibly have discovered? My insides screamed to know more, to question him until I knew every last detail, but I could not do that without earning his suspicion. Why could he not simply tell me what he knew? “No matter,” I somehow said, hoping he did not notice how strained my words were. “It is in the past, is it not?”

“Exactly right.” William nodded as if the matter were settled. He waved and started off down the road again.

But the matter was far from settled. And I knew precisely what I needed to do. After William disappeared around a bend, I wheeled Stella around and kicked her into a gallop. I had failed to learn anything in my first visit to William’s office.

I could not afford to fail again.



It took me nearly an hour to find what I was searching for. William's office was daunting as ever with its towering shelves of ledger books, and I wasted far too much time pulling down random volumes and flipping through them, hoping I might spot something obvious. But after replacing what felt like a dozen books, I had made no progress.

It was then my gaze focused on the wide mahogany desk filled with organized chaos. William was methodical but simply had far too much to do to keep his desk clear at all times.

I hurried to the desk and sorted through his piles. Loose papers, letters, a map of the estate, nothing at all that could be a record Papa had written.

Then I opened the top drawer on the righthand side, and there it was: a black, leather-bound book. It was too small to be a ledger, and no title crossed its cover. I set it on the desk. It was thicker than I'd first thought. Heavier. A scrap of paper poked out from the middle of the pages. Someone had marked a spot.

My fingers found the scrap, but I hesitated.

These were my father's words. They were about business, yes, but he had still penned them.

I hesitated a moment longer, then I opened the book, spreading it over William's desk. The left page was dated the twelfth of September 1806.

Discussed the situation today with Mr. Needham. He had little to say on the matter, never having come across such circumstances before. But he advised me to be careful. Thorough. Whatever I choose to do, I must ensure he does not come back.

Unease trickled into my stomach. Mr. Needham was our family's solicitor; Papa had to be speaking of Mr. Bainbridge here. Why else would William have marked this spot? I skimmed the rest of the page and the next but saw no mention of the Bainbridge name. I flipped the page.

Bainbridge came to see me today. He insisted I pay him the money I owed him. When I replied that I'd already paid him fairly for his shares, he began ranting and refused to leave. I threatened to call the Runners, and he finally left, though not before spitting on the floor. The man cannot be trusted.

The account went on to describe a different business dealing, saying nothing more on Mr. Bainbridge. I sat back in William's chair, reading the words again to clarify them in my mind. Mr. Bainbridge had tried to force

more money from our family, even after Papa had fairly bought him out. To me, Mr. Bainbridge was clearly in the wrong, but his family thought otherwise. Likely, Mr. Bainbridge had spun a tale of woe, blaming Papa for his financial failures and fooling his wife in the process. Thankfully, Edward had not been so poisoned by his father.

Or had he?

If Mr. Bainbridge was as bitter as he seemed from this account, how could such animosity not spread to his only son?

I brushed away such a baseless thought. Edward would have been so young, not yet ten years old, when all this had happened. That was young enough to be ignorant of such things, and I couldn't begin to guess if Mr. Bainbridge was the sort of father to air his grievances at home. In any case, Edward was different from his parents.

I closed the book, tapping my fingers on the front cover. From this evidence, I wanted to conclude that Mr. Bainbridge had been entirely at fault for our families' division. But would Edward agree with me?

Voices came from outside the house, and I spun in the chair. Leaping to the window, I spotted William standing beside his horse near the front door, speaking with a groom. Botheration. He'd already found me here once. I couldn't possibly find another excuse for why I was in here again.

I darted back to the desk and snatched up the leather book. A folded letter fell from the pages and landed askew against my boots. I grabbed it and was about to slip it back inside the book when my eyes landed on the wax seal. The relief image of a fox and rose stared back at me. I *knew* this family crest.

Voices again. Before I could think, I stuffed the letter into my pocket and slammed the book back in the drawer. Then I ran for the door, closing it behind me and dashing down the corridor just as I heard William's steps in the entryway. I ducked into the library and leaned against the opposite door as I tried to hear above my own heartbeat. His footsteps, steady and quick, went into his study, and the door closed behind him.

I allowed myself one moment of relief before moving farther into the library. No one would be in here. Only Juliana frequented the room, and she would likely be at school for hours yet.

I found a secluded corner facing the wide wall of windows and lowered myself into a cushioned armchair. Then I removed the letter from my pocket and held it in my shaking hands.

It was the Bainbridge family seal, I had no doubt. It was the one Edward had used when he'd slipped me notes in Brighton, and I'd loved the romantic image of the rose entwined with the fox.

But now.

Now I could not muster an ounce of excitement for what I might read in this letter. The paper was aged, the ink that addressed the note to my father faded. It could only be from Mr. Bainbridge. Did I *want* to read something that would further incriminate Edward's father?

My curiosity won out in the end. I opened the letter.

Rowley,

My bank received your payment yesterday. As agreed, I will decamp to Lancashire with my family. But do not think this is the end. If you do not uphold your part of the arrangement, I will waste no time revealing to anyone who will listen what I know about you and about Rowley Shipping and Trade. You would not last another day, you may count on that.

Rumors fly faster than a sparrow on the wind, after all.

Mr. Bainbridge signed the letter with such a flourish that I could barely make out his name, but I focused on the words, reading the letter again and again. Payment? Arrangement? And what was he on about, speaking of rumors and such?

I searched for the date at the top of the page. November 1806. My stomach tensed like a coiled rope. In Papa's entry in the record book, he'd mentioned purchasing Mr. Bainbridge's shares, and that had been in September of that year. So why was he then extending another payment two months later?

I will waste no time revealing to any who will listen what I know about you.

The paper crumbled in my hand, bent by my rigid grasp. I set the letter on the table beside my chair, though I stared at it as if it might burst into flames at any second.

Had Mr. Bainbridge . . . *known* something about Papa? Something Papa had not wanted to be common knowledge? But that was absurd. Papa had been all that was upstanding and moral.

Hadn't he?

I'd been eleven years old when he died. I thought I'd known my father, but was that even possible for a child? Could he be the sort of man to be involved in corrupt dealings?

I leaned forward, my elbows on my knees, and pinched the bridge of my nose. This was ridiculous. I could not fall into suspicion so easily, not about my own father. After all, William had read the record just as I had and likely much more than the few pages I'd glimpsed.

But had he seen the letter? It had fallen out only when I'd hastily grabbed the book. If William had read that letter, would he have been so quick to reassure me earlier that the Bainbridges were terrible? Or would he now be trapped in doubt and confusion, the same as me?

The longer I sat there, the more my mind returned to one fact again and again, and it made my stomach sink lower inside me.

If Papa was innocent of wrongdoing, then *why* had he paid off Mr. Bainbridge?

Chapter Thirteen

I HAD NEVER BEEN TERRIBLY good at hiding my emotions, and the next two days tested my meager talents. Mama asked again and again if I was feeling ill, and Juliana suggested that perhaps I had caught Olivia's cold from my visit to Linwood Hall. William teased, as always, jesting that he had learned over the years to never interfere with what he called "feminine troubles," which ought to have annoyed me but, instead, only made me glad that he at least was not determined to discover what was the matter with me.

I waved them off repeatedly, insisting I was tired or that I had a headache. Thankfully, I did not have to lie about either of those reasons. I was sleeping terribly, and the lack of rest contributed to my aching head. But how was I to sleep when questions constantly paraded through my mind, pounding with disbelief and suspicion?

I very nearly confided in William the day after my discovery of Mr. Bainbridge's letter. Surely, my brother could shed some light on the situation and put my worries to rest. But doing so would mean also telling him about my engagement, and I was far from ready to do that.

Especially as I could not even bring myself to write to Edward.

Every time I sat at my desk, hoping that writing my thoughts and fears to him would help sort them out, my hand froze. The words would not come. If Papa *was* the wrongdoer in all this, how could I admit it to Edward? I'd been prepared to forgive Edward's father of his mistakes, but could he do the same for my father?

No, I could not write Edward until I was certain. And though I could have tried to read more of Papa's record, sneak back into William's study, I did not. I no longer had any desire to discover what had happened fifteen years ago.

I received another letter from Edward, this one shorter than the last. He reaffirmed that he missed me terribly and said he'd had no success in learning anything from his father's friends to whom he'd written. It was not a very uplifting letter, and reading his words did not bring me much comfort.

I tried to distract myself as much as possible. I read in the library, staring blankly at my unturned pages. I rode a great deal, a fruitless struggle to outrun my thoughts. I wrote letters to anyone in my acquaintance, save for Edward, of course. I even attempted to sew Juliana's baby a gown,

which was likely the reason Mama realized something more than a simple headache was bothering me.

“Blast,” I muttered as I held up the infant-size garment.

“What is it?” Mama looked up from her own perfectly even stitches on a little cap for the baby.

I dropped the fabric to my lap, where it lay in a pathetic heap. “I attached the sleeve backward.”

Mama did not laugh as she normally would have, which revealed how worried she was over me. Instead, she scrutinized me thoughtfully. “No matter,” she said, setting aside her own sewing. “I think we’ve had enough sewing today. Ought we go into town?”

Shopping had never failed to cheer me in the past, but the effort it would take to smile and pretend for an entire afternoon felt enormously exhausting.

“You haven’t had a gown made in a while,” she said. “Perhaps Mrs. Notley has new fabrics since our last visit.”

I could not say no. Refusing a new gown would signal to her that there was far more wrong than she could imagine, and I did not want to worry her.

So instead of sighing, I smiled and agreed. “That sounds lovely, Mama.”

The first few minutes of the carriage ride were blissfully quiet. I stared out the window, absently toying with the ribbons on my bonnet, but I should have known Mama would not let it be.

“Rebecca,” she began, and I turned to her. “I cannot help but think this is all my fault.”

I blinked. “Your fault?”

She hesitated. “You’ve been so quiet these last few days, and I am certain I know why. I should not have ambushed you the night of the assembly with my news about Mr. Hambley. It was too much and too soon, and I am sorry.”

I opened my mouth and then shut it again.

She went on. “I intend to tell him that things between us cannot progress as they have.”

“What?” I blurted.

“It is clearly overwhelming to you, and I cannot in good conscience allow myself to—”

“Stop. Please, Mama.” I held a hand to my forehead. “You would stop seeing him—not marry him—for me?”

She nodded, her posture as proper as ever, even if her hands were clasped rather tightly in her lap. “I cannot stand the thought of anything coming between us, Rebecca. If this will keep us apart, then I will not go through with it.”

“Oh, Mama.” I hadn’t meant to cause such distress. But of course Mama would think my distance lately was because of Mr. Hambley. She did not know about the plethora of other problems I was currently attempting to solve.

I exhaled. I could not let my inner turmoil affect those I loved. Mama deserved a better daughter than me.

I reached for her hand. “Mama, I will not deny that your connection to Mr. Hambley has been quite the adjustment for me. But I promise that it will not come between us. I love you too much. In fact, I can only hope Mr. Hambley loves you even half as much as I do.”

Her cheeks reddened, even as she brushed a tear from her eye. “You are sure? I would never wish for you to be uncomfortable.”

I laughed, the first time in two days, and it felt wonderfully renewing. “Oh, I have no doubt this will be horridly uncomfortable. But who am I to deny you happiness? Please, Mama, do not worry over me for one minute more.”

She squeezed my hand. “You are the best of daughters.”

“I shall be sure to inform Rachel on her next visit that she has fallen from grace.” I tried to ignore the snaking guilt inside me. I was *not* the best of daughters. I was far, far from it.

She gave a smile at my jest, but it soon faded. “But if it is not Mr. Hambley, what has bothered you so much these last few days?”

Here it was, another chance to tell my mother everything I kept locked away. I could tell her about Edward, ask her about Papa. But the truth no longer held the appeal it once had.

I was too frightened of it.

“I think Juliana is right and I did catch Olivia’s cold.” Each word felt like oil, slimy. “I shall rest more and be back to normal before long.”

Mama did not look particularly convinced, but as I was lying through my teeth, I could hardly blame her. Thankfully, our carriage came to a stop in front of Mrs. Notley’s dress shop, and I grasped at the chance to escape. I

opened the door and made the small jump to the road, not waiting for the coachman to lower the step and help me down.

“Rebecca,” Mama said from behind me, reproachful. “You should not jump down like that. You could twist your ankle or catch your dress.”

“Sorry,” I muttered as the coachman came around and lowered the step. “I hate waiting.”

She took the coachman’s hand and descended gracefully, one hand holding her skirts. “Patience is the mark of a lady, my dear.”

Patience. I was not good at patience. I was not good at a lot of things, really, but normally, I did not feel that deficiency so keenly as I did now.

“Good day, Miss Rowley.”

My insides jumped as if the ground had suddenly shifted beneath me. Nicholas stood near the dress shop window, and he stepped forward, that crooked smile playing about his lips.

“Lieutenant Avery,” Mama said as she moved to my side. “Good day to you.”

He bowed. “Mrs. Rowley.”

I curtsied, straightening slowly as I ordered my uneven pulse to steady. Nicholas wore a dark jacket with a carefully knotted cravat and blue waistcoat. I could not deny that he looked rather well as he was, but he somehow seemed less himself than he had the other day at the meadow.

“What errands have brought you to town today?” Mama asked.

“Shopping, I’m afraid.” He grimaced as if shopping were akin to losing a leg.

“It is not the gallows, Lieutenant,” I said wryly.

He leaned toward me. “It might as well be with Olivia.”

“Ah. That makes a bit more sense.” I glanced around. “Where is she?”

He nodded at Mrs. Notley’s shop behind us. “Finishing a fitting.”

Mama tipped her head. “How kind of you to take an interest in such things. You are a most attentive brother, Lieutenant Avery.” She shot me a pointed glance, which I ignored. She did not have to know I was already thinking the same thing. Even when Olivia scowled and complained and argued, he cared for her. I could recognize an admirable quality when I saw one, but that did not mean I was setting my cap for him.

Nicholas shifted his weight. “*Attentive* may not be the right word since I escaped out here as soon as I was able.”

“As I cannot think of any man who enjoys a dress shop,” I said, “I daresay you have paid your dues.”

“Quite thankfully too,” he agreed. Then his eyes sharpened on me. “Actually, Miss Rowley, I am fortunate to have crossed paths with you.”

“But not me, I see,” Mama said, straightening her hat with a pert expression.

Nicholas laughed. “You as well, Mrs. Rowley. I only mentioned Miss Rowley because of the school.”

“Juliana’s school?” I asked. “What about it?”

He glanced back at the shop door, no doubt to check if Olivia was emerging. “I thought to perhaps bring Olivia by to see it, but I hadn’t any idea if that would be disruptive or if your sister preferred an appointment.”

I shook my head. “Of course she would not mind. But have you told Olivia that she will be attending?”

“Not yet. I am hoping your plan from the other day might be effective. Let her adjust to the idea more slowly.”

Mama was watching the two of us most attentively. Of course. I hadn’t told her about helping find a place for Olivia. Naturally, she would again read far more into our conversation than what it was.

“I don’t suppose you would . . .” Nicholas shook his head. “But you are engaged, of course.”

I choked. Had he truly said that aloud? He saw my reaction and furrowed his brow. Did he not realize my mother stood right beside me?

“Otherwise engaged, that is,” he said slowly, still watching me with confusion. “This morning. Surely, you’ve somewhere to be.”

My shaking hands fiddled with my reticule. Of course that is what he’d meant. “Y-yes. That is, no. We thought to visit Mrs. Notley’s, but we’ve no firm obligations.”

I did not dare glance at Mama. She must have noticed my bizarre reaction, and bringing even more attention to it would certainly not help.

“I only wondered if you would accompany us.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “To the school, I mean. Olivia has taken a liking to you, and perhaps it might ease some discomfort if you were there.”

“Of course you must go,” Mama insisted. “If it would help that sweet girl.”

Sweet? Hardly. And I wasn’t particularly delighted to be volunteered for this mission. I was still rattled by Nicholas’s accidental *almost*

admission of my biggest secret. I'd much rather disappear into the dress shop behind us and spend an hour sorting through fabrics and fashion plates.

Olivia chose that moment to step out onto the street and glance around. She spotted me, and although she did not smile, her brow lifted. Perhaps she *had* taken a liking to me.

Or perhaps she only liked strawberry tarts.

"Good day, Olivia," Mama said kindly as the girl joined us. "How was your dress fitting?"

"Well enough," Olivia said, frowning. "Mrs. Notley talks too much."

Mama covered her mouth, but I knew she was laughing. Olivia did not notice as she looked up at Nicholas. "Are we finished? Can we leave now?"

Nicholas cleared his throat. "Not quite yet, Olivia. Miss Rowley here was just suggesting an excursion I thought you might be interested in."

Oh, I was, was I?

But with Olivia, Mama, and Nicholas all watching me expectantly, I had no choice. "Yes. I was. We planned to visit my sister's school here in town and wondered if you'd like to accompany us."

"A school," Olivia said.

"A boarding school for girls," I explained. "It's a lovely place, and I think you might like it. There are a great many girls your age there."

"Oh." She tried to hide it, but a flicker of interest crossed her eyes.

"What do you think, Olivia?" Nicholas crouched beside her. She was so small that he nearly knelt to the ground. "Shall we go for a visit?"

She shrugged, trying for nonchalance. "I suppose. We've nothing better to do."

From Olivia, that was practically a resounding yes. I sighed. It would be good for her, and perhaps for me, if I was being honest. I needed a distraction from all my thoughts of Papa and Mr. Bainbridge and Edward.

I turned to Mama. "Shall we stop by Mrs. Notley's after seeing Juliana?"

She had a look of careful contemplation. "I wonder if I might beg off the visit. I see Mrs. Patterson down the way, and I so wished to ask about her daughter's new baby. But I do not want to keep you all. Why don't you go on without me, and I will find you when I am finished?"

There truly was nothing more maddening than a determined, matchmaking mother.

She bid us a quick farewell, trying very hard to keep her knowing smile from taking charge. She failed, of course.

“Shall we?” Nicholas asked as Mama crossed the road.

I nodded, and we started off down the street. Juliana’s school was not far, as Millbury was rather small, but it was on the outskirts of the little town, which meant a ten-minute walk.

Olivia hurried ahead of us. The girl was eager to prove she was independent, that she needed no one else. Did that come from losing both her parents at a young age? Or was it her natural inclination?

Nicholas interrupted my thoughts. “Your mother seemed anxious to be rid of us.”

I blew out a breath. “Can you not guess why?”

“Rather easily,” he said with a shake of his head. “This is not the first time a mother has set her aim on me.”

“Even with you at sea so much?”

He winked. “Why do you think I was gone so often?”

I laughed. “Mama is certain you would make me an excellent match, and I must warn you, she can be quite determined.”

A strange look crossed his face, like a shadow from a passing cloud. But then he tipped his head, and the look was gone, replaced by a teasing glint in his eye. “Why does she think that? Is it my impressive naval career? My wit and charm? My dashing scar?”

“Or perhaps your humility and unpretentious nature.”

“Well, yes, that too.”

I tried to stop my laugh and instead produced a rather strangled noise. He only grinned.

We passed other patrons, messenger boys, men talking outside the gentleman’s club. Olivia glanced back every now and then but did not slow her pace.

“Thank you for coming with us,” Nicholas said, lowering his voice. “You may not believe it, but you are the closest thing Olivia has to a friend.”

It was not difficult to believe Olivia had no friends, but it was difficult to believe she thought of *me* as one.

“I’m relieved to learn she is not simply using me for treats.” I tugged on my bonnet’s ribbons as I watched Olivia’s golden head moving through the crowd ahead of us.

“That may be part of it,” he said. “But she has been talking of you a great deal.”

“Me?” I squinted at him.

“Unless you know another Rebecca Rowley who rides bareback, rescues young girls from drowning, and makes bribes in church.”

“Quiet, now!” I sent him a stern look. “You are making me sound much more brash than I am.”

“Here I thought I’d gotten the amount of brashness just right.”

I shook my head as my lips fought to turn upward.

“In any case,” he said, “*brash* is not the right word for you.”

“All right, then,” I said with a challenge in my voice. “What word would you choose instead?”

He considered that as we stepped onto the street to cross, Olivia now passing the haberdashery ahead. A carriage rattled toward us, moving too fast, and Nicholas quickly moved closer to me, rested his hand on the small of my back to usher me forward, and glared at the driver of the carriage as it passed by.

I barely noticed, far too distracted by the warmth of his steady hand on my back, my shoulder brushing against his as he guided me to the opposite side of the road. I swallowed hard.

Once we were across, he dropped his hand, though he stayed close to my side.

“Brave,” he said.

“Pardon?” My mind felt as foggy as the early mornings in Brighton.

“To describe you. You are fearless and confident.” He spoke matter-of-factly. “Brave.”

Even a few days ago, I might have agreed. But before a few days ago, I’d never doubted myself. I hadn’t doubted my family, my father. I hadn’t doubted that Edward would still want to marry me once I told him what I’d learned.

“Rebecca?” Nicholas slowed our pace, taking my arm and slipping it through his. “What is wrong? What did I say?”

My mouth opened to say that nothing was the matter, but I stopped. I had no difficulty flirting through a ball or guiding a conversation at a dinner party or racing my brother on horseback across the estate, but confiding in someone—that did not come naturally to me. Even when I’d told Nicholas

about Edward at the ball, it had just been because he had found out my charade.

Nicholas did not press me, and it was his patience that finally encouraged me to speak.

“It is only that I do not feel brave about anything lately,” I said softly. “More like confused and discouraged.”

“Do you . . . ?” He paused. “Do you wish to talk about whatever is troubling you?”

I couldn’t talk to Mama or William. I couldn’t write Edward or Marjorie. Could I tell Nicholas? “I—I do not know.”

“If it helps,” he said, “you should know I have a great deal of experience in both confusion and discouragement.”

I gave a halfhearted smile. “Olivia?”

“Among other things.”

“What things?”

He narrowed his eyes at me; he knew precisely what I was doing. But then he looked ahead and pulled me to a stop. Olivia had turned back and now waited a few steps ahead, peering at us curiously.

“Is that your sister’s school?” She pointed down the road.

I hadn’t realized we’d traveled so far so quickly. “Yes,” I said, taking my arm from Nicholas’s. Olivia was young, but if she was even half as perceptive as her brother, I did not want her forming any unwarranted conclusions about the two of us. “Yes, it’s that building just ahead.”

I moved forward to walk with her, and Nicholas followed a pace behind. But I felt his eyes on me, and I rubbed my neck.

Chapter Fourteen

JULIANA WAS INDEED GLAD TO see us, as I'd predicted. The maid who answered the door immediately showed us to Juliana's office on the ground floor, and Juliana welcomed us graciously, shooting me a questioning glance.

I shook my head. *No, Olivia did not know she would be attending the school yet.*

She nodded.

After introducing both Nicholas and Olivia, I eyed Juliana's desk across the room, which looked remarkably similar to William's that I had searched the other day: papers and books piled high.

"We're not interrupting, are we?" Nicholas asked. "We could come another day."

"No, no, not at all." She waved him off as she set one hand on her belly. "I've finished my lessons for the day." I knew lessons were but a fraction of the work Juliana did, so I did not quite believe her, but she gave me no chance for debate. "I am glad you visited, really," she said. "I needed a respite. Would you all like to see the school?"

I watched Olivia carefully as we followed Juliana about the building. Juliana showed us the main floor, where the parlor and drawing room had been converted to classrooms, furnished with desks and bookshelves and a chalkboard along one wall. Olivia was quiet, only once asking a question about the hand-painted globe on the windowsill in one of the classrooms. But she examined every room and paid attention as Juliana spoke.

"Where are all the girls?" I could hear voices coming from somewhere nearby.

"Outside. They have time in the garden every afternoon." Juliana waved us forward as she stepped back into the corridor. Olivia was right behind her, and I sent Nicholas a hopeful glance as we followed behind them down the hallway to the back of the house. He gave me a quick nod, his expression thoughtful. He too was watching Olivia.

We stepped out into the garden, blinking in the sunlight as we were surrounded by laughter and voices. A few younger girls darted around the garden in some game that involved a great deal of giggling. The older girls, young ladies, really, had grouped themselves into twos and threes and walked arm in arm. The garden boasted a wide grassy lawn, a reaching apple tree in the far corner, and a winding path through rosebushes and shrubberies.

Olivia clasped her hands behind her back, but her mouth parted as she watched the girls play. There it was, the spark of interest I'd been hoping for.

"Charlotte!" Juliana waved to one of the older girls, a pretty young lady of thirteen or so with dark, curly hair and porcelain features. I recognized her—Charlotte Seymour. She and Juliana were rather close, Juliana having been her governess before marrying William. Charlotte brightened when she spotted Juliana and left her friends to join us.

"Charlotte," Juliana said, wrapping one arm around the girl as she turned her toward Olivia. "I'd like to introduce you to Miss Olivia Avery. She is new to Millbury, and I think the two of you will get along splendidly."

Charlotte bobbed a curtsy. "Pleased to meet you."

Olivia kept silent but managed a lopsided curtsy of her own.

Juliana did not allow time for more awkwardness. "Charlotte dear, why don't you take Olivia to meet the other girls while I talk with Rebecca and Lieutenant Avery?"

Charlotte waved Olivia forward. "Do you want to play? We were about to join the game."

Olivia stared at her as if unsure that Charlotte was speaking to her. Then she looked at me, of all people.

"Go on, Olivia," I said with an encouraging smile. "We'll wait here."

She gulped and followed Charlotte across the lawn. To her credit, she did not glance back but instead nodded at each girl as Charlotte introduced her.

"Charlotte will take good care of her," Juliana assured Nicholas and me. "She is likely the sweetest girl in all England."

"I have no doubt," he said. "But as Olivia can be the most contrary girl in all England, you must forgive my unease."

Juliana nodded. "I've had several girls attend who had similar dispositions. Quiet, stubborn, slow to make friends."

"How did they do? At school?" There was more than curiosity behind Nicholas's words. He sounded nervous.

Juliana tipped her head to one side. "Most adapted quickly. Others took a while longer but, in the end, were able to settle into life here." She paused. "I do not wish to make promises I cannot fulfill, but I can promise

to do my best to make certain Olivia is comfortable here, that she is happy. I cannot abide anyone in my care being miserable.”

“That reassures me a great deal, Mrs. Rowley.”

I snorted at his use of “Mrs. Rowley.” She and William had been married two years now, but it still sounded strange to my ears.

Juliana shot me an amused glance. “That is my name, Rebecca.”

“You still seem too young to be ‘Mrs. Rowley,’” I said. “It is my mother’s name.”

“Though not for much longer,” she said.

She was right. If Mama married, she would be Mrs. *Hambley*. I wrinkled my nose.

“It looks as though they may play awhile.” Juliana nodded at the girls. Sure enough, they had begun darting around the yard, laughing and shrieking. Olivia stayed close to Charlotte’s side as she followed her every move, but . . .

She smiled. A very small but very *real* smile played on her lips.

I glanced at Nicholas. He crossed his arms as he watched her.

“You may stay as long as you like,” Juliana said gently. “I will be inside, and I would be happy to answer any questions for you, Lieutenant Avery.”

“Thank you,” Nicholas said, his voice thick.

She patted his arm as she went back inside. When the door closed behind her, I moved closer to Nicholas. He had not looked away from Olivia since she’d begun to play. I slipped my arm into his.

“She will be all right.” I squeezed his arm.

“I hope so. I hope I’ve done enough. She—” His voice caught for a moment. “She is all I have left. Of my family. Of my father.”

I hadn’t thought of that. His parents, her mother—all gone. The two of them had only each other.

“You love her a great deal.” It wasn’t as though I did not know this. All brothers loved their sisters. But theirs was such a complicated relationship that it was not always obvious.

“I do,” he said ruefully. “Even though I make a great many jokes at her expense.”

“Which she does deserve,” I pointed out. “She is not blameless.”

“I still wish for her to be happy. Especially if I—” He stopped again.

If he was called back to the navy. That was what he meant.

I hadn't thought about him leaving, about him *wanting* to leave since we'd spoken in the meadow. But now the idea of him leaving Millbury and returning to the navy felt strange. I couldn't help but think that he belonged *here*. At Linwood Hall, with Olivia. In Millbury, with me and William and Mama and Juliana. Not that it should matter to me all that much, I realized with some unease. If everything went according to plan, I would be married and gone before winter set in.

Still. Nicholas had begun to make a home for himself here. Would he truly give that all up? I knew how he felt about the navy. He'd made that perfectly clear before, and if that was the future he wanted, then I could hardly say anything against it.

I simply couldn't say anything *for* it either.

We let Olivia play until the teachers called the girls in to resume their lessons on geography or Latin or whatever Juliana insisted they be taught. Olivia waved at Charlotte as she came to stand beside us, her eyes brighter than I'd ever seen them.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?" I teased her.

She crossed her arms, but her expression remained clear and relaxed, so different from her usual pinched features. "Charlotte is nice," she admitted grudgingly.

"And the school?" Nicholas watched her with a close eye. "What did you think of the classrooms and Mrs. Rowley?"

She considered the question. "I liked them."

Nicholas and I exchanged a glance. Her response was better than we might have hoped.

"Olivia," Nicholas began, "what would you think about attending the school?"

"Attending?"

"Yes, as a student. Spend your days here, learning with the other girls, and then come home to Linwood."

She squinted as if not comprehending his words. "I could do that?"

"Yes, of course," I said. "Juliana would be glad to have you, and certainly, so would the other girls."

She gnawed on her cheek, staring about the garden that had moments ago held a dozen giggling girls.

"And," Nicholas went on, "if I am ever called away, you could board here. Live with the girls. Wouldn't you enjoy that?"

Olivia stiffened, her crossed arms rigid against her stomach.

“Olivia?” I spoke her name softly.

“No,” she said, the word tearing from her.

“No?” Nicholas stared at her, bewildered.

“No, I do not want to come here.”

Nicholas shot me a glance, but I shrugged helplessly. He focused again on his sister. “Why not?” he asked, and even though I knew he tried to hide it, his voice was laced with a new edge.

She only shook her head and glared steadfastly across the garden. Nicholas set his jaw. “Olivia, I have searched for weeks to find a good situation for you, and now that I have one, I’ll not allow your ridiculous stubbornness to—”

I stepped forward. “Perhaps this is something Olivia might think about,” I said with false calmness. “Should we start back to town? I am sure we’ll find my mother along the way.”

Nicholas made a sound, but I shook my head at him. Now was not the time to push Olivia. Although I did not know her well enough to understand why she had said no, I did know she never responded favorably to demands or pressure.

Olivia stomped across the garden to the gate that led back to the road. I followed her, and Nicholas soon caught up to me.

“I am not sure you helped her just now,” he said shortly. “Yes, some things need patience, but in this case, I think she may need a dose of reality.”

I tried not to rise to his frustration. Why I was sympathetic to Olivia, I could not say, but there had been something in her eyes when she’d rejected the idea of the school that gave me pause.

“She did not refuse simply to be belligerent,” I said as we followed Olivia from the garden, closing the gate behind us. “There is something more at play here.”

“There is always something more with her.”

“And have you ever bothered to discover what it is? Or do you expect her to simply obey you without question?”

So much for not rising to his frustration.

He glared at me. “I *have* tried. Endlessly. But you cannot see it because you do not live with her day in and day out as I do.”

“Perhaps that is the problem. Perhaps you are too close and unable to see the issue clearly.”

He shook his head and did not speak again as we retraced our steps, trailing behind Olivia’s too-swift strides. I did not break the silence either; I had no reason to apologize. But the tension between us intensified with every step, as did the tightness in my chest. I crossed my arms as we walked. I did not want to chance brushing his arm with mine.

“There you are, Rebecca.” Mama crossed the street toward us, smiling rather too cheerfully, and I had never been so glad to see her. Olivia stopped ahead, her face unreadable.

“Finished your visit already?” Mama came to stand beside Nicholas and me. “Was Juliana busy?”

“No,” I said, biting off the word. Mama raised an eyebrow, and I regretted my curtness. “No, she showed us the school, and Olivia had the chance to play with the girls.”

“That is good,” Mama said, though her voice trailed upward on the last word as if asking a question. But I did not particularly feel like answering her at present.

“Thank you for accompanying us today, Miss Rowley.” Nicholas’s voice held none of the warmth I’d come to expect from him. Instead, he sounded rather like he had that first day at the lake when we hadn’t known each other. “I shall beg my leave now and take Olivia home.” He offered Mama a quick bow, and I barely had the chance to curtsy before he left, collecting Olivia as he passed.

“What on earth?” Mama moved closer to me, and both of us watched as Nicholas and Olivia climbed into his carriage waiting near the dress shop.

I exhaled. “My thoughts precisely.”

“If I did not know better, I would hazard a guess that you and the lieutenant are not particularly happy with one another at the moment.” She examined me from the corner of her eye.

“You would be entirely correct.”

“What—?”

But I cut her off. “Oh, look, there are the Masons coming from the tea shop.” Sarah spotted us, and I offered a wave, which she enthusiastically returned. “Let us go and speak with them a minute.” I started forward, and Mama followed behind. But as I greeted Sarah and Mrs. Mason, Mama’s

gaze was on me continually. I kept a smile on my face and focused entirely on our conversation about Sarah's new bonnet and the Masons' trip to the Lake District.

Because I knew if I relaxed my concentration for even a moment, my thoughts would trail after the exasperating lieutenant, whose carriage was just disappearing around the corner.

Chapter Fifteen

THE CARRIAGE RIDE HOME WITH Mama was silent, but that was certainly not the case inside my own mind. My conversation with Nicholas—or, rather, argument—played again and again. He had been impulsive and temperamental, accusing me of interfering in his and Olivia’s relationship. Hadn’t he?

I’d just been trying to help Olivia, be her advocate. Why had he snapped at me so? She could be vexing, of course, but Nicholas had no sense of what the girl needed. This was not a naval frigate at high sea; discipline would never have the effect he desired. Although Olivia pretended indifference, it was clear to me now that she was acting. I only wished I knew why.

Well, that was not the only thing I wished I knew. The twisting inside me was as baffling as Olivia’s refusal. But I was determined not to feel guilty. Nicholas needed to know his method of dealing with Olivia was *not* working.

I put our argument from my mind and focused instead on convincing Mama that I was perfectly all right. Between our conversation about Mr. Hambley and my reaction to Nicholas in town, I had no doubt she still worried over me. Through the rest of that afternoon and evening, I did my best to appear as if everything was just as it should be. At dinner, I relayed an entertaining story Sarah had told me about her trip, ensuring my voice was carefree. I teased William about his too-long hair, even as he insisted he was too busy to find time for a trim, and I plied Juliana with questions about how she was feeling, hoping to avoid any discussion about our visit with her that day.

When I finally retired to my room that night, the stars hanging low in the sky, I sank into the chair beside the window, thoroughly exhausted. I leaned my head back and closed my eyes, and of course, Nicholas’s face appeared, irritation in every line of his face.

My own words came back to me, ringing sharply against my skull. *Or do you expect her to simply obey you without question?* I’d tossed that at him without thinking, but I knew now it was my own frustration speaking. William set rule after rule about my riding, not realizing I was perfectly able to understand my own limits. Then both he and Mama demanded I stay away from Edward and his family but told me no details as to why. And now I had reason to doubt my own father’s integrity yet did not dare question my family about it, entrenched as they were in their prejudices.

I squeezed my eyes even tighter. I should not have said what I had to Nicholas. As little as I knew about my own family, clearly there was far more I did not know about his. He had been right: he lived day in and day out with Olivia. I saw her but rarely. How could I think to know her better? No wonder he had been so heated.

I shook my head and stared out over Havenfield's shadowed landscape. It had just been a fight. It did not mean we were no longer friends.

Tomorrow was the day we had arranged for another meeting in the meadow. Would he still show after our disagreement? I could hardly expect him to after I had treated him so poorly.

I grimaced. I would apologize and hope it would be enough.



I rode to the meadow the next morning, wishing nearly every step of the way that I could turn back. I did not particularly like knowing I was in the wrong, but I pushed myself forward. I would rather apologize and keep Nicholas as a friend than be stubborn and lose him.

No sounds of gunfire greeted me as I arrived at the meadow, and a cursory glance revealed no waiting Nicholas. I'd arrived first, then. Good. I could practice what I planned to say. I rehearsed my apology to Stella as I dismounted and began removing her saddle.

"I am sorry to have assumed I knew best what to do with Olivia," I said slowly, trying to find my most contrite voice as I unbuckled the girth. Stella tossed her head and snorted, so I must have been on the right track. "I am sorry I doubted your competence as her guardian. I could never do what you do for her."

That sounded rather good, really. But though I meant every word, the apology still rubbed me wrong somehow.

"I still think there could be another way to help her," I experimented as I paused, both hands on the saddle. "You mustn't see her as a task to complete but rather as a child to help."

"As far as apologies go, I suppose it could be worse."

I spun, the saddle nearly slipping from Stella's back. Nicholas sat on a low-hanging branch of a nearby tree. He leaned against the trunk with one arm set casually on his bended knee.

"Blast it, Nicholas." I took a sharp breath as my heart still attempted to convince my head we were in some sort of danger. "Why didn't you tell me

you were here already?”

“And lose the chance to hear that heartfelt apology?”

“I *did* mean it,” I snapped. “But now I am tempted to take it all back.”

He slid from the tree branch, landing effortlessly in a crouch, then straightened his jacket and waistcoat as he stood. “Please don’t. I did not mean to startle you, but you arrived before *I’d* decided how to apologize.”

“You?”

He sighed. “I’ve apologized to you so many times, you see, that I was afraid they have all begun to sound the same. I do not wish for you to doubt my sincerity.”

I hardly knew what to say to that. I had expected to ask for his forgiveness, not the other way around. My hands ran over the smooth leather of Stella’s saddle as I found the words I wanted. “Perhaps we can simply both forgive and forget.”

“I’d rather not forget, if it’s all the same to you.” He moved forward, coming to Stella’s head and gently taking her bridle. Normally, Stella hated anyone but me or Mr. Mullens to handle her. But except for her twitching ears, she did not react as Nicholas rubbed her nose.

I tried to focus on the conversation, not on how much my temperamental horse seemed to like Nicholas. “And why can we not forget it?”

“Because you spoke the truth.” He spoke with great resignation. “Difficult as it was to hear, I know you were right.”

“I . . .” I broke off, shaking my head. “I spoke in haste. I did not mean to suggest you do not know—”

“Rebecca.”

I stopped. My name on his lips was quite enough to forget what I had been saying.

But he seemed not to notice as he considered his own words. “You were right to reprimand me,” he said finally. “Because I haven’t tried to know Olivia as I should. Why would she tell me anything when she cannot trust me?”

I wholeheartedly agreed but kept that to myself. “Please do not blame yourself entirely. She hasn’t exactly made much effort, from my viewpoint.”

He shook his head. “But she is a child, like you said. Sometimes I find it easy to forget that fact since she tries so hard to act grown up.” He

crossed his arms. “In any case, your words stayed with me all of the day. And last night, I felt chastised enough to act on it.”

“I did not mean—”

He held up a hand in a show of exasperation. “I will never be able to tell you what Olivia said to me if you insist on interrupting.”

I pressed my lips together even as they fought to turn upward, then tipped my head, an invitation for him to continue.

“I sat with her,” he began. “I told her that even though neither of us had chosen our lots in life, that did not mean we could not make the best of it. We had to be honest and open with one another if we were to find any sort of peace in our home.”

I tried to imagine Olivia’s face during this conversation. Likely, she had crossed her arms and glared at him. “And what did she say to that?”

He hesitated for the first time. “She . . . she cried.”

“Olivia?” The image in my head shifted: Olivia, with red-rimmed eyes and a sniffling nose.

“Yes,” he said simply. “She told me that since her mother’s death, she has felt utterly abandoned. Both parents gone, and her cousin who took her in while I was at sea neglected her terribly. Then I came for her, and I—” He blew air from his mouth. “I do the best I can, but it is not what she needs.”

“You cannot blame yourself,” I said gently. “You were near strangers to each other for such a long time.”

He rubbed his chin. “I know that. I do. But I wish I had tried harder. I was so fixated on finding a place for her and a way to return to my life in the navy that I did not think about what was best for her. That should have been my sole focus.”

“Did you tell her that?”

“I did. And she told me that was precisely the reason she reacted as she did at the school yesterday.”

Then I understood. “She felt as if you were abandoning her as well.”

“Yes,” he said heavily. “I ought to have realized she would feel that way after all she’d been through.”

“She has something of a point, I’m afraid.” I ran my hands over Stella’s golden coat, my fingers light as I fought the memories that struggled to resurface after years of forgetting. The day Papa left for a

voyage to India. My tears that night as Mama consoled me. At least I'd had my mother then. Olivia did not.

"I wish I did not have to leave her," he said. "I will worry over her constantly, even if she is happy at school." He rubbed his neck. "I tried to reassure her as best I could. I promised her that if I did leave, I would always come back."

I shot him a sharp glance. "That is not a promise you should have made." Even if England was not currently at war, a navy lieutenant was never assured of a safe return. Illness, storms, accidents. Any number of misfortunes could befall Nicholas and leave Olivia alone once again.

"I am fully aware." He shook his head. "But I could not stand to see her so distraught, and my promise did seem to help. In fact, Olivia agreed to attend the school. I daresay she might even be a bit excited at the idea, if nervous. And I hope I do not have to leave her. Indeed, my chances of being given orders are slim."

"Why do you—" I stopped my question. I did not have a right to his answer.

But he waved me on. "I can imagine what you'd like to ask."

I faced him full on, one hand resting on Stella's side. "Why are you so determined to return to the navy? You have a life here now, with Olivia, Linwood Hall."

I almost said *me*, but that was ridiculous. I was nothing more to him than a neighbor, a friend. I was certainly not a reason for him to stay.

He ran his hand through his hair and left it adorably mussed. "The navy has been my life since I was a ship's boy at twelve years old. And I love it, I do. The challenge of mastering the sea and visiting places others only dream of." He shook his head. "At first, the thought of giving it all up was impossible. How could I spend the rest of my days in leisure, without purpose? I could not imagine it."

"But now?" I ventured.

He looked at me then, his eyes exploring mine. "Now . . ." he said softly. "Now I find I am imagining a great deal more."

A tiny burst of heat began spreading from my chest, but I ignored it. "Good," I managed. "That is good, isn't it? For you, and for Olivia?"

He nodded. "If I were to purchase Linwood, I think I could be rather happily invested in its success and thus escape the tedious existence I was so wary of."

He'd meant Linwood Hall, not me. Of course not me.

I cleared my throat. "You would leave the navy?"

He clasped his hands behind his back. "I am sure of nothing at the moment. But the idea becomes more persuasive every day."

I wanted to say more. I wanted to tell him how I valued our friendship and that I would miss him dreadfully if he went away, but that ridiculous heat inside my chest had yet to dissipate, and fueling it by even a small measure would be a mistake. Because *I* would be the one leaving soon enough.

So instead, I turned back to Stella, grasping the saddle and swinging it off her back. The weight made my arms tremble, but I tightened my grip and edged around Stella.

"You are supposed to allow me to do that," Nicholas said as I heaved the saddle onto its usual log.

"If I allow you to help every time," I said, brushing my hands together, "I shall lose the ability to do it myself."

He nodded. "And you are determined to do everything on your own."

"I rely on myself," I said briskly. "Is that such a flaw?"

"Only if it prevents you from relying on others."

I moved to place my hands on my hips but felt a bit too much like a stubborn child, so I crossed my arms instead. "It sounds as though you have something you want to say to me."

He stepped closer, crossing his arms as well. "Something was bothering you yesterday, and I would warrant it is still bothering you today."

I did not speak, and my fingers clenched around my elbows.

His expression softened. "You do not have to tell me. But know you can, if you have need."

I *did* want to tell him. About Papa, Edward, everything. But that was the problem. Should I want so desperately to bare such secrets to Nicholas? I'd known him for all of a fortnight. He hardly knew my family, even if he did seem to guess my thoughts and motivations with frightening accuracy.

Then again, I'd only known Edward a month before accepting his proposal.

Perhaps Nicholas's limited knowledge would work to my advantage. He had no bias against the Bainbridges. Could he help me find a direction through this mess?

I released my hold on my elbows, lowering my arms. “I do have need.”

He blinked. He had not expected me to give in. But he recovered quickly. “Come.” He nodded at two smooth-topped rocks a few paces away. “I cannot promise to have answers, but I can promise to listen.”

After wrapping Stella’s reins around a branch, I settled myself on one of the rocks and arranged my skirts around my ankles. Nicholas sat beside me.

I braced my hands on the rock on either side of me. “I learned something the other day about my father.”

He nodded but did not speak.

I went on, desperate to get the words out before I lost my nerve. “I’ve always thought my papa to be everything Mama said he was. Everything I remembered him to be. Honest. Kind. Honorable. But I found a letter.” I paused, Mr. Bainbridge’s word marching across my vision. “It was from Edward’s father and revealed that Papa had paid him a bribe to keep quiet a secret.”

“A secret?” Nicholas leaned forward. “What sort of secret?”

I shook my head. “It did not say. Only that it would have ruined my father and his company.”

“And you think this is what drove your families apart all those years ago?”

“Undoubtedly.” I rubbed my forehead. “Edward’s father was blackmailing mine, but Papa would not have paid if he were innocent of wrongdoing. I cannot come to terms with it all. I thought I knew who my father was, yet now . . .”

He listened with a deep frown, letting me speak.

“I hardly know what to do,” I said. “I feel I cannot talk to Mama or William without revealing my connection to Edward and his family, but the thought of Papa involved in any sort of dishonesty or cheating—” I let out a shaky breath. “I am lost, Nicholas. Truly lost.”

He moved his hand as if for a moment he meant to reach for mine, but instead, he balanced his elbows on his knees as he clasped his hands together. “A question for you,” he said.

“All right.”

“If this is all the evidence you have seen against your father, why do you doubt him so quickly?”

I toyed with a fold in my skirts. "I suppose," I said, "it is because this is the first time I've ever been forced to think of him differently. I've realized I do not know who he was, and that frightens me."

"Do not be afraid of the truth," Nicholas said. "Never that."

"But there is so much I do not know still—"

"Then you should reserve judgment until you *do* know more." His voice held a surety that I hadn't felt in days. "If all other signs point to your father's innocence, then you mustn't jump to any hasty conclusions about his character."

This puzzle still did not fit together quite right in my head, likely because I still missed far too many pieces. Yet, at his words, the breath I drew into my lungs felt lighter and the tension in my temples lessened. He was right, of course. I was worrying about something I could do nothing about without more information. For all I knew, this letter from Mr. Bainbridge was complete dross that my father had kept for some unknown reason.

"What does your beau think of all this?" Nicholas asked, leaning back. "He must have some insight into what you've learned."

"I . . . I haven't had the chance to write Edward yet." I paused. "Well, it is not precisely that I haven't had time. Truthfully, I was worried what he might say or if he would doubt *me* after all this."

"He would be a cad if he did," Nicholas said. "And a fool. As I can abide neither, let us hope he is not so weak-willed as that."

I laughed, a strange airy sound that felt as freeing as the swift-moving clouds above us. He grinned, though his eyes did not lose their careful sharpness.

"In any case," he said, "you ought to speak to your mother and brother."

"I want to," I said. "I promise I do. But . . ." My voice trailed off. If Mama and William could not find it in themselves to mend this rift between our families, would I be forced to choose between them and Edward? I sighed. "I need more time."

Nicholas did not speak for a moment, only watched me, his torn expression a puzzle all its own. He opened his mouth to speak, then shook his head. "It will all work out as it should," he said simply, though his voice held a rough edge. "I have no doubt."

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to believe Edward and I could be together, that Mama and William would accept him, that Papa had indeed been honorable and good. I wanted to believe Nicholas would fully mend things with Olivia, that he would choose to stay at Linwood Hall instead of returning to the navy. I wanted to believe Nicholas and I could remain friends, even after I married and went away.

I stood, brushing my skirts to busy my hands. "Thank you, Nicholas," I said softly. "I am grateful to have such a friend as you."

He stood as well. "As am I since I can only imagine the state of my and Olivia's relationship without you."

"You would find a way, surely. Just perhaps a bit slower."

"Indeed," he said. "Now, you had better get on with your practice before it grows too late."

"Are you certain you do not wish to join me today?" I teased.

"Quite," he said. "I do not think I was made to ride without a saddle." He stretched his shoulders as if to emphasize his point, but it just served to draw my attention to how well his jacket fit over his broad chest and arms.

I coughed and moved to take Stella's reins. "Will you shoot today, then?"

"If Stella would not be too alarmed."

I stroked her neck. "She seemed all right last time. I imagine she'll grow accustomed to the noise, like your horse."

Nicholas fetched his leather bag from below the tree he had been sitting in when I'd arrived. "We shall see how she does."

As he set about hanging his targets and laying out his pistol and instruments, I watched curiously. I'd never shot a pistol before or even held one. William had a great many guns, for hunting and shooting . . . and dueling, though he likely thought I did not know about the box he kept atop the mantel in his study.

"Nicholas?"

He turned from where he'd knelt to load his pistol.

"Have you ever taught anyone to shoot?" I stepped closer, tugging Stella behind me.

He set his pistol down. "You want to learn to shoot?"

"As evidenced by my inquiry."

He shook his head. "I really should be used to you surprising me."

It was not a yes, but neither was it a no. "And?"

He stood slowly, eyeing me. “Why do you wish to learn?”

“I’ll not be embarking on a life of crime as a highwaywoman, if that is what concerns you.”

“It does now that I know it’s a possibility. But do not avoid the question.”

I set one hand on my waist. “It seems a useful skill to have. And I am curious.”

“A curious woman? Such a phrase strikes fear into most men’s hearts.”

“But not yours?”

“No, though I must admit to a great deal of trepidation.”

My pulse tripped. “So you’ll teach me?”

“If you’ll agree to listen closely and be careful.”

I opened my mouth to immediately agree, but he raised one hand to stop me. “*Truly* be careful,” he said. “No risks, Rebecca.”

“I promise I will be careful.”

I led Stella to a nearby tree and knotted her reins on a branch. When I returned, Nicholas had laid out all his instruments and supplies on a flat rock.

“Have you any experience at all with a pistol?” he asked when I again joined him. He was holding his weapon in one hand as if weighing it.

“Would you expect that I had?”

“I would not be terribly shocked, considering.” I nearly asked him what he meant, but he went on before I could. “We’ll start with the fundamentals, then.” He took the pistol by the barrel and held it out to me.

I stared at it. “Should I—?”

“It’s not loaded,” he said dryly. “I simply want you to have a feel for it.”

He held it out farther, and I took the handle. It dipped as he released it; it was heavier than I’d expected. I brought my other hand up to support it. The stock was made of smooth stained wood, the barrel shining steel.

“Never forget that you are first and foremost holding a weapon,” he said, his voice as serious as I’d ever heard it. “It is certainly a tool, and a useful one at that, but if used improperly, a gun could harm not only others but also yourself.”

I nodded, a weight heavy as the pistol dropping into my chest.

He went on to explain how the pistol functioned, the position of the flint and the frizzen, how the spark they created would travel through the

pan to the barrel. I practiced cocking the hammer to both half and full and repeated back to him everything I'd learned, twice, before he decided I was ready to move on.

I watched closely as he loaded the pistol, adding a measure of gunpowder to the barrel and wrapping the lead ball in a small square of cloth before ramming it down firmly over the powder. Lastly, he added a small amount of powder to the pan and snapped the frizzen in place. He held it up for me to observe.

“What remains to be done?” he asked.

A test. I scrutinized the pistol, trying to recollect everything he'd just taught me. “All that is left is to pull the hammer to full cock.”

He nodded. “Once the hammer is cocked, it is ready. I will shoot first, to show you what to expect.”

He faced the targets and set his feet in a wide stance as he raised the pistol with both hands. “Hold it as steady as you can,” he said. “Two hands are better than one, especially as you are just learning.”

I stepped closer—but not too close, as I was still a bit wary of the pistol—to gain a better vantage point. He kept his even gaze on the targets, his eyes narrowed in focus.

“Expect some recoil when you pull the trigger,” he warned. “It is not so bad with a pistol since it has a short barrel, but be prepared.”

“What does it feel like?” My voice thankfully did not reveal any of my nervousness. “When it fires?”

“Rather like something is exploding in your hands,” he said with a wry smile.

“How very reassuring.” But somehow, it was. His slight jest set me more at ease.

“Now watch closely.” He straightened even more, and his fingers tightened around the pistol.

I stood without moving, not wanting to disrupt his focus. A few seconds later, a sharp burst of flame shot from the flintlock at the same moment a crack echoed in my ears. The pistol bucked back in Nicholas's hands, but he kept firm control the entire time.

He turned back to me as the small cloud of smoke brushed past him to escape into the trees, the sharp smell of sulfur hovering in the air. “Are you ready to try?”

I nodded. I was still more than a little apprehensive, but it was not in me to back away from a challenge. I took the pistol from him and knelt in front of the rock. Nicholas observed as I followed his every action from before: measuring the gunpowder, wrapping the ball in cloth, using the ramrod to press it all firmly into the barrel. He only helped once when I was unsure how much powder to add to the pan, but soon enough, I was presenting the loaded, slightly terrifying weapon to Nicholas for inspection.

He nodded as he looked it over. "Perfectly done. And you'll grow faster with practice."

"How fast are you?"

He gave me a crooked smile. "I'm not sure that knowledge would prove helpful to you."

I tipped my head to one side. "Shall I be terribly intimidated and give it up before I even begin?"

"Possibly."

But when I gave him a pointed stare, he gave in. "I can manage four shots in a minute."

Now I was truly staring. "A minute? But that is fifteen seconds apiece." How on earth could he do in seconds what had taken me full minutes?

"It is indeed." He handed me the pistol. "As I said, I have been practicing."

I took the pistol, though it somehow seemed even heavier now, loaded and prepared to fire. I turned and faced the targets, inhaling a breath that felt far from sufficient. I gulped several more for good measure.

"What will you aim for?" Nicholas came to my side.

I eyed the various targets dangling below the branch. "The jar," I decided. It was the largest target and my safest bet.

He nodded. "Now show me how you stand before you cock the hammer."

I planted my half boots in the dirt shoulder-width apart, the skirts of my habit swirling around me. Then I raised the pistol in both hands as he'd shown me, aiming at the jar.

"Good," he said. "But straighten your arms. That will help with the recoil."

I straightened my arms. "Anything else?"

I was so focused on my stance, on the jar just beyond the barrel, that I nearly jumped when his arm brushed mine as he stepped forward.

“Try adjusting your hold,” he said quietly. “Bring your fingers around here, and you’ll have a better grasp.”

He might have been speaking Welsh for all I comprehended. His deep voice so close to my ear was doing ridiculous things to my body. How could I suffer both shivers *and* coursing heat? But I allowed his steady, sure fingers to move over mine, correcting my position.

“There.” He stepped back. “Now you are ready to cock it. Fire when you feel ready.”

I doubted *that* would ever happen, but I cocked the hammer as I’d practiced before, though my arms began to shake from the weight of the pistol.

I aimed, squinting as I concentrated on that floating jar. I stood closer to the targets than Nicholas had when he’d shot, but the jar still seemed much too far away. The barrel of the pistol kept moving in and out of my narrow line of vision, my arms wavering.

“Deep breaths,” Nicholas said from behind me. “Steady.”

I would breathe easier if he would step farther away, but I did as he said and allowed the rhythm of my breaths to anchor my arms. The barrel settled on the jar, the tip barely hesitating. I allowed myself a few seconds more to be sure, then moved my finger to the cool metal bar.

Then I gritted my teeth and pulled the trigger.

A blinding flash and a puff of smoke. The pistol tried to leap from my grasp, but I held on, tensing my arms to keep it in place. My ears rang as I blinked through the smoke, and I lowered the pistol to inspect the targets. My jar still swung, irritatingly whole.

“How did that feel?”

I turned to Nicholas. “I did not hit it.”

“I hardly expected you to. But that is not what I meant. How did it feel to pull the trigger?”

I considered his question. My insides felt as if I’d stepped too close to a cliff, nerves on end. But my hands tingled as they still gripped the pistol. I grinned. “I think I shall like shooting.”

He matched my grin. “I never doubted you would.”

“May I try again?” I stepped forward, holding the pistol before me. Strange how it suddenly felt much more comfortable than even a minute

ago. “I want to hit it.”

He waved me on. “You may try as much as you’d like. But please do not be frustrated if you are unsuccessful. It takes time and practice.”

I would practice as much as he would allow me, today and any other day. The power I’d felt when the pistol had fired—I knew already it was intoxicating.

“I no longer wonder why you shoot so often.” I ran my fingers over the steel of the barrel. I’d just sent a lead ball blasting through that black opening. “Perhaps one day I’ll be able to match your skill.”

“If anyone can, it is you.” He spoke sincerely. “The key is to focus. You cannot allow anything to distract you.”

“You must have incredible focus, then.”

“I pride myself on it.” His voice shifted as he studied me with a curious intensity. “Once I’ve set my aim, I never miss.”

I swallowed, telling myself to look away even as my heart sped like Stella on an open run. But in the end, it was Nicholas who broke our gaze as he stepped back and gestured me forward.

“Let us see you do it again,” he said. “Faster this time.”

I went to the rock and began again with the powder and ramrod, trying to hide my trembling hands.

A trembling that had *not* been caused by shooting a pistol.

Chapter Sixteen

I FINALLY WROTE TO EDWARD.

It took me three full days to construct a letter I was satisfied with. I laid out the facts as fairly as I could, trying not to lay blame at either of our fathers' doors. I was honest and open. I told him that no matter who was to blame, we could endure it together.

As I wrote, I allowed all my memories of him to flood my heart and mind: dancing at our first assembly together, sharing secret smiles across dinner tables, and, of course, that lovely quiet moment in the shadowed garden where we'd promised our futures to each other.

This was good. This was *right*. Edward and I were perfect together. We were so similar, in stations, in temperament, in goals. Just the thought of the dimple on his left cheek made my pulse trip, so I knew attraction certainly played a part.

After I was satisfied with my letter, I sent it with a great deal of relief. Edward would know what to do, how to proceed with what I'd learned. I would wait for his response, and then we could decide what to do next. Perhaps it might be time for us to tell our families and pry the truth from them. Perhaps it might be time for Edward to come to Havenfield, as we'd discussed all those weeks ago.

How odd it was to think of Edward here at the estate. My time with him in Brighton seemed like another life, another age. What would it be like to walk the grounds with him, to sit with him in the drawing room after dinner, conversing with William, Juliana, and Mama? If they could ever overcome their prejudice, that was. I could not imagine such a scene, not yet. But soon it would be my reality.

I calculated that I could expect an answer from him no sooner than a week, and likely closer to two. Letters traveled quickly between here and Brighton, but I also accounted for the time it took Marjorie to deliver my letter to Edward and for how long it might take him to give her his response. I could not imagine they saw each other with any great regularity, and they most likely passed letters only when they attended the same social functions.

As I could do nothing until I heard from Edward, I determined to enjoy my time. If I married soon, then these would be my last weeks at Havenfield. My last weeks as a single woman, that was.



My days passed quickly, each one like the swift summer wind that caught the leaves and swirled them at a dizzying speed. Mama and I spent every morning together, and I rode every afternoon, most days meeting Nicholas at our meadow.

We'd settled into something of a routine. I always rode bareback first, and then Nicholas continued to teach me to shoot. It took me longer than I would have liked to grow accustomed to the constant loading, aiming, and firing. It did not come easily to me, not like so many other skills. But I did not give up. A fortnight after our first lesson, I successfully—*finally*—loaded and fired his pistol twice in a minute, both shots finding their targets swaying from the tree, sending showers of glass to the dirt below.

Nicholas clapped as I lowered the pistol. "And to think you hadn't held a pistol before two weeks ago."

"Yet, you can still fire twice as fast. I shall not be satisfied until I can do the same."

"I have had years of practice, Rebecca," he reminded me. "There is plenty of time yet for you to improve."

Except there wasn't. Once Edward and I were married, would I continue practicing? *Could* I? It was hardly a proper pastime for a married woman, and I could not guess if Edward would approve. What would he say if I told him I'd been learning to shoot? Or ride bareback?

I put that from my mind. He surely loved me enough to overlook a few peculiarities in my personality.

I glanced at the sun beginning to lower toward the horizon. The evenings had grown cooler as autumn approached, but today was still warm, even if the breeze held a new sharpness.

"We had better be done for today," I said with a sigh. "Mama has invited Mr. Hambley for dinner, and I cannot possibly miss it."

"Have he and your mother made anything official?" Nicholas moved to the flat rock we used as a table and began to pack away the powder and balls.

I joined him. "Not yet. But it is only a matter of time. The two of them look at each other like Olivia looks at strawberry tarts."

Nicholas gave a laugh. "That is quite the image. And how do you feel about it all?"

I knelt beside him and handed him the pistol. "I have resigned myself to it. If Mama is to marry, she could certainly do worse than Mr. Hambley." I paused. "He does seem to make her happy, though I cannot account for how."

"Love is not reasonable," Nicholas said, "and rarely does it make any sense."

He spoke evenly, as if we were discussing the weather and not *love*, of all subjects. What did he know of love? Did he have some romantic past?

"In any case, they seem to like each other a great deal," I said. "But I do not know if love is part of the equation." I stood and brushed my skirts. "Now, how can I help you?"

He waved in the direction of the targets. "If you would gather the targets, I will tidy up here."

I strode to the tree where the targets hung, the ropes now empty after our lesson. I set to work untying the swaying ropes, bits of glass and scraps of fabric clinging to the ends.

"How is Olivia enduring school?" I called back to Nicholas. Olivia had started two days before, and though Juliana had told me she was doing well, I wanted to hear it from Nicholas. I'd visited her a few times at Linwood during the past weeks, but now that she spent all day at school, I somehow missed her blunt honesty and pert, upturned nose.

"I think she is rather enjoying it," he said. "She hardly tells me as much, of course, but neither does she tell me she hates it."

"She *must* like it, then." I tugged at a particularly stubborn knot. Nicholas seemed to have forgotten this was not a ship in the Royal Navy; this rope was secured by what appeared to be a Gordian knot, or one as equally complicated.

"She likes your sister-in-law a great deal," he said as he cleaned his pistol, supplies spread before him on the rock.

"I am not surprised in the least," I said, focused on prying loose the knot. Finally, it gave, and I tugged the rope free from the branch.

A sharp pain sliced across my palm. I gave a yelp and clutched my injured hand in the other. Scarlet drops of blood leached out from between my fingers, dripping to the ground below.

"Rebecca? What happened?"

Footsteps sounded as Nicholas ran to me. I squeezed my eyes shut, the sight of blood on my white skin plastered against my eyelids.

“Are you hurt?” Nicholas took my shoulders in his hands. I lifted my bloody hands still clutched together, and he cursed under his breath as he fished out his handkerchief. “Let me see it.”

I shook my head. The pain was red-hot in my mind as it pulsed through my hand to my chest. Blood ran warm across my hands, the scent biting against the fresh air of the meadow.

“I need to see it.” Nicholas left no room for argument. “Please.”

My vision swam. And here I thought I’d completely recovered from my accident all those years ago. I had physically, at least. But there were much more lasting consequences than a broken leg.

My legs felt like Mrs. Hale’s raspberry jelly. “I need to sit down, I think.”

“Yes, of course.” Nicholas’s arm, warm and steady, came around my back as he guided me to a nearby stump. After sitting, I took a few deep breaths, trying to force back my pain. It was just a cut, I told myself. Nothing at all like what I’d suffered before.

Nicholas knelt beside me and gently took my hands in his. “I’ll use my handkerchief to stop the bleeding,” he said. “But you must let go.”

My hand clutched around my palm felt like the only thing that held me together, but I gritted my teeth and released my injured hand. Nicholas immediately pressed the handkerchief to it but not before I glimpsed the cut—jagged across my palm, with angry red edges and slippery with blood.

“It was the glass,” I said faintly. “The shards on the end of the rope.” Beneath the pressure of Nicholas’s hand on mine, my pulse drummed like hoofbeats.

Nicholas shook his head. “I should not have asked you to take them down.”

I gave a shaky laugh. “I was a fool and cut myself, and somehow, you manage to make it your fault.”

“You would not be hurt if I hadn’t been teaching you to shoot.”

“And you would not have been teaching me to shoot if I had not asked you to.”

He blew out a breath, adjusting his grip on my makeshift bandage. I winced, and his eyes found mine, just inches away. For the first time, I noticed streaks of brown in his green eyes and the hint of golden stubble on his jaw.

“I am sorry.” His soft voice whispered against my skin. “I think you may need to call a doctor.”

“We can’t,” I protested weakly. How could I explain this? And even if I could, William would never trust me again.

Nicholas pressed his lips together, considering. “We’ll let the bleeding slow and then I will look at it again. Perhaps it is not so bad as it seems.”

I could only hope so, as I was already imagining William’s face when he saw my bleeding and bandaged hand. The stinging pain in my palm had dulled to a throb, but my chest still felt too tight. I forced my breaths in and out.

“May I ask if you are occupied in two days’ time?”

I blinked at Nicholas. “Pardon?”

“I am planning a dinner party,” he said. “Rather last minute, I know, but the idea just came to me this morning. I’ve been careful to stay apart from Millbury as a whole, since I did not know when I might have to leave, but now I think it worth my time to know the society better.”

I gave a halfhearted attempt at a smile. He was trying to distract me from the shadow that grasped at me from my memories. “I do love a good dinner party.”

“Your family is invited, of course.” He kept his eyes fixed on my hand between his. “I thought to also invite Mr. Hambley, if you are not opposed, and perhaps the Masons.”

My chin bumped up. “The Masons?”

“Miss Mason is a particular friend of yours, is she not?”

“Indeed, but I hadn’t thought you knew her well enough to invite her.”

He gave a wry grin. “What better purpose is there for a party?”

I leaned back. He—he wanted to know Sarah better?

“I imagine we will be able to attend,” I managed, “and I’m certain the Masons will as well. It is not as though Millbury is as busy as the London Season.”

“Quite thankfully,” he said, but I barely heard him. Was he interested in Sarah? I did not think they’d met more than a handful of times. They had danced at the assembly, hadn’t they? And spoken together at church once or twice. But Sarah was pretty and clever and certainly did not need more opportunities than that to turn a gentleman’s head.

Nicholas did not seem to notice my inattention, or if he did, he attributed it to my injury. He pulled back the handkerchief, now stained

with a blotch of red, and inspected my hand. I eyed my cut as well, keeping my head turned slightly away as if that would help it not look so bad. I'd done the same thing when the doctor had tended to my broken leg, and it hadn't done much good then.

"The bleeding has slowed," he said. "It is not as deep as I thought before. I think you may have avoided sutures."

"Good," I managed. "Good."

"But please have someone bandage it for you. Your maid or housekeeper." He took my fresh handkerchief and tied it firmly around my palm in a makeshift bandage, then gently cleaned my other hand of any trace of blood. He stood and held out his hand to me "Can you ride?"

I took his hand with my uninjured one, and he pulled me up beside him. "Yes, of course." Stella would bring me back, no matter that I could not use one hand.

He did not look convinced. "Perhaps I ought to escort you."

"I can manage." My voice was more curt than I'd meant. He squinted at me, clearly concerned. I softened my voice. "It only hurts a little now. I will be fine, I promise."

He nodded. "All right. You start home, and I will finish here. Perhaps we ought to break from our meetings for a few days until you've recovered?"

He did not sound particularly bereft at the idea. Would he not miss our time together?

"I quite agree," I said briskly. "And I will be sure to tell Mama about your dinner party."

"I am not so uncivilized as that," he promised. "I'll send your mother a proper invitation tomorrow."

Nicholas helped me saddle Stella again, but when I approached to mount, he shook his head. "Let me lift you up," he said. "You cannot mount with one hand."

"It is hardly a dismemberment."

"Humor me, please."

I stiffened as he stepped to me, his broad hands finding the smallest part of my waist. He lifted me, and I barely remembered to slip my leg over Stella's side.

"All right?" he asked, one hand still hesitating on my waist as if I might topple over at any minute.

I cleared my throat. "Yes. Thank you, Nicholas."

"Ride slowly," he warned. "I'll not have you unable to hold on if Stella were to spook."

If William had said those same words, I might have prickled with indignation. But I knew Nicholas spoke not because he doubted my abilities but because he was concerned over my injury.

"I will," I said softly. "I promise."

As I urged Stella forward, I told myself to keep my eyes focused ahead. Because I should not want so very much to have one last look at him, to have my heart beat so intensely at his nearness.

I should not want that at all.

What was wrong with me? I was happily engaged to a man I knew was perfect for me, and yet Nicholas set me off balance at every turn. Was it because I missed Edward? Or was there more to the heat that swam through my insides whenever I was around Nicholas? I'd never had a close friend of the opposite gender before. Perhaps it was always this confusing, especially as Nicholas was . . . well, he was blasted attractive, that was what he was. I could acknowledge that much. I simply could not allow my feelings to run deeper than that. And yet, how could I stop myself from spending time with him? We were friends, after all, and neighbors. It would hurt him if I were to cut him out. It would hurt *me*, if I were being honest.

Stella and I left the meadow behind us, starting in the direction of Havenfield. I cradled my hand in my lap, though it twinged with every bump as I thought back over our conversation. What had Nicholas meant by his comment about Sarah Mason? I was not foolish enough to ignore my own reaction to it. I had been jealous, that much was clear, but the *why* was a little harder to pin down. Likely, it was because I did not want to share Nicholas. I had grown used to having him to myself, but if he'd decided to step into Millbury society, I could hardly hold him back.

In fact . . .

An idea dove into my mind. Nicholas had been the one to mention Sarah, proving he had at least a passing interest in her. And although she was a bit of a flirt, she was goodhearted and sweet when it mattered.

Nicholas and Sarah. Would they suit each other? Could I convince them that they would? Perhaps if Nicholas had a sweetheart of his own, he would not affect me so very much. Surely, it would be easier to be around him if I knew his heart was taken by another. I could use his dinner party as

an opportunity to test my strategy, to play matchmaker between the two of them.

This would work, I told myself as Stella plodded along beneath me and my stomach swam uneasily. I could find love for Nicholas, and then he would be as happy as Edward and me.

Chapter Seventeen

LINWOOD HALL SHONE IN THE darkness, the windows displaying the warm candlelight within as the darkening sky settled upon the house like a winter cloak. The air held a pronounced chill tonight; autumn had begun to show its face, the leaves touched with gold and red, the wind whipping against our coach as we came to a stop before the front door of Nicholas's home.

I took a steadying breath as William stepped down lightly and reached back to help Mama. My emotions had been something of a mess the past two days. I still had yet to hear from Edward, and even though I told myself a fortnight was not so terribly long, I could not dismiss the fear that something was wrong. Had he read my letter and, upon learning my suspicions about Papa, decided this was a union he no longer wished for? My stomach twisted at the thought. That could not be it. He was too honorable to abandon me so easily.

Then, of course, there was tonight's plan. I had debated the idea almost constantly since I'd thought of it in the meadow. Would Sarah and Nicholas be good together? They had their differences, certainly. Sarah was more lighthearted, while Nicholas tended toward thoughtfulness and quiet wit. But they were both good people, and in the end, was that not what mattered? Perhaps her carefree personality would be good for Nicholas, help him in his aim to settle into Millbury.

"Rebecca?" William stood in the open coach door as he offered me his hand, having just helped Juliana down.

"Sorry." I made sure to give him my uninjured hand. Even though my cut was healing well, it hurt now and again, and I was still determined to keep it a secret. William helped me down to the pebbled drive. Mama and Juliana had already started up the front stairs, anxious to escape the wind that threw my curls into my eyes and whipped at my skirts.

"And what were you woolgathering about?" William asked.

What would he say if I told him the truth? That I worried over the lack of correspondence from my affianced? That I even now was plotting to matchmake my two friends because one of those friends made me feel things I should not feel?

"Just anticipating the evening ahead," I said instead. "It has been so long since we've had a party."

He seemed to accept that and offered me his arm. He rarely did that anymore since Juliana occupied his side most of the time. I took his arm,

memories of my first Season stealing into my mind. William had accompanied me to a few events whenever he was in London, and I'd so loved the chance to be escorted by my older brother, lacking the father that most young ladies had.

As we handed our things to the footman, I spotted Olivia on the stairs, her head peeking around the corner, curls about her shoulders. I gave her a secretive little wave, which she returned after a slight hesitation, then she scampered back up the stairs, no doubt to the relief of whatever nursemaid was searching for her.

I followed my family into the drawing room, where a welcoming fire crackled along the far wall. Nicholas stood speaking with Mr. Hambley near the bank of windows that overlooked the lawn. Nicholas looked very handsome in his dark jacket and black waistcoat, his stance easy and confident. If Sarah didn't already harbor a tendre for the man, she certainly would after tonight.

The two men glanced up as we were announced, and Nicholas moved to greet us, a quick smile lighting his face. But as his gaze settled on me stepping through the door, his smile faltered. He stared at me, my upswept hair and evening gown—an ivory silk with gathered sleeves and low neckline—and swallowed, meeting my eyes for the briefest of moments before turning to greet Mama with a bow.

What was that about? Did he not like my dress? I thought I'd put together a rather fetching appearance when I'd dressed earlier. But perhaps that was it. He hadn't seen me in anything other than my habit for weeks. I allowed myself a moment of satisfaction that I could still surprise him.

He welcomed Juliana and William, and they moved into the drawing room to speak with Mr. Hambley. Nicholas finally turned to me, his expression careful. "Good evening, Miss Rowley."

"Lieutenant Avery." I gave a low, graceful curtsy, and he raised his brow.

"After all our time together, I thought perhaps you'd forgotten how to curtsy," he said.

I tipped my head. "Like you have clearly forgotten how to bow?"

The corner of his mouth twitched, then he bent into the slightest bow without looking away. "Not to mention I hardly recognized you without your hair in disarray and smelling of gunpowder."

I gave a huff. "I can present myself as well as the next lady."

His gaze traveled over me again. "I do not disagree."

Heaven help me. My plan tonight had been to *avoid* the heat that now swirled inside me like embers stirred from a banked fire. I tried to think of a reason to excuse myself and join Mama, but Nicholas stepped closer, and my breathing hitched.

"How is your hand?" he asked softly.

I rubbed my injured palm through my gloves. "Much improved. The cut was not so bad as it looked the other day, like you said." Thankfully, too, or I'd never have been able to hide it from Mama and William. Fawcett had cared for my hand without inviting any suspicion.

"Good," he said. "I was worried you'd be frightened off from shooting."

"It is as if you do not know me at all."

He leaned in. "I should have known a mere scratch would never scare you away."

"Quite right."

The sounds of new arrivals in the entry interrupted us. I glanced back to see Sarah with her parents, handing their things to the footman.

"I'll let you greet the Masons," I said quickly as I stepped back. I needed space from him right now, just for a minute. I could collect myself and reapply myself to the task at hand.

Escaping to stand near the fireplace, I pretended to warm myself, though the heat inside me did the job quite thoroughly.

"How are you this evening, Miss Rowley?" Mr. Hambley came to join me, Mama having gone to greet Mr. and Mrs. Mason.

I cleared my throat. "Well, thank you, Mr. Hambley."

We stood in silence for a few moments as the chatter from the Masons' arrival surrounded us. Mr. Hambley shifted his weight, clasping and unclasping his hands behind his back. The poor fellow seemed uneasy.

It took me a moment to realize *I* made him uneasy. Which was silly. We'd spoken a few times in the past weeks, enough to claim something of an acquaintance. Although this was the first time Mama had not been there to ease our conversation.

I took pity on him. "Are you very well acquainted with Lieutenant Avery?"

Mr. Hambley grasped on to my words gratefully. "No, not very. It was a kindness for him to include me in the party."

Perhaps less kindness than the fact that Nicholas hardly knew anyone beyond the souls in this room here. But I did not mention that.

“He is kind indeed,” I said instead.

“You must know him better than I,” Mr. Hambley said. “Your mother mentioned you and he are friends, and that . . .” He hesitated, shifting his weight uneasily.

“That she thinks we would make a good match?” I finished for him. “You needn’t worry about spilling her secret. I am well aware.”

He gave a chuckle. “The two of you are as close as any mother and daughter I have known.”

Guilt pooled inside me. That statement had perhaps once been true. I could only hope it would be true again soon, once I could finally tell her the truth about Edward and me.

“Your opinion means a great deal to her,” he went on. “She quite depends on it.”

My fingers had been toying with my skirt, but now they stilled. “What do you mean by that?”

He grimaced, his face reddening. Mr. Hambley was no master of conversation. He’d just given something away he should not have. I quickly thought over the happenings of the last few weeks. When Mama had told me about Mr. Hambley before the ball, it had seemed as if the two of them had been very nearly engaged. And what of our conversation in the coach when we’d gone into town? I’d told her then not to hold back on my account. Why then had they not announced anything?

But I knew why. It was because of me. I may have told Mama I had accepted Mr. Hambley, but my actions said otherwise. I only interacted with him when necessary and avoided conversation if at all possible. I hadn’t meant to be rude. But I had been uncomfortable, and Mama had seen it, despite all my assurances.

“Mr. Hambley,” I said, looking him in the eye. “Do you love my mother?”

He blinked at the sudden change in topic but did not shy away from my bold question. “I do.”

“And you would see her happy?”

“I would.”

“Then please know I have no objections to your marrying her.” I laid a hand on his arm. “It is clear that I have been the cause of some anxiety

between you, and I am sorry for it. It was never a judgment against you but rather a reflection of my own problems.”

He did not respond for a long moment, but then he patted my hand. “Thank you, Miss Rowley.”

“Rebecca,” I corrected him. “You must call me Rebecca if we are to be family.”

Family. It had been Mama, Rachel, William, and me for so long. But Rachel had married, then William, and now Mama. Hopefully, Edward would add to our ranks soon. Our family was growing, and I would have to adjust.

Mr. Hambley nodded, pleased. “Rebecca, then.”

A cascade of laughter caught my attention. Sarah stood beside Nicholas by the door, and she leaned forward to set her hand on his arm, smiling up at him as she said something.

Well. Good. It seemed as though Sarah would not be difficult to convince. Why my hands clenched into the skirts of my dress, I could not say.

Nicholas was harder to read. He wore a smile, but if he meant more than politeness, it was impossible to tell. He did not lean toward Sarah though. Not like she was.

“If you’d like to be with your friends,” Mr. Hambley said, noticing my distraction, “I’ll not be offended, I promise.”

“If you are sure?” I couldn’t play matchmaker from across the room, though Sarah hardly seemed as though she needed any aid.

“Of course,” he said kindly. “Though I should like to know you better in the future.”

“I would like that as well.” I was surprised to find I meant it. Mr. Hambley was certainly not who I would have picked for my mother, but perhaps that was a good thing.

I left him and made my way across the room, eyeing Sarah and Nicholas as I approached. Sarah saw me first.

“There you are, Rebecca!” she exclaimed. “Come, I was just telling Lieutenant Avery about the assembly last summer. Do you recall?”

“Wherein you danced so much you fainted?” I came to stand beside Nicholas.

“*Nearly* fainted,” she emphasized. “Mr. Clark saved me, did he not?” But then she looked quickly at Nicholas. “That is, he helped me to a seat.

But I cannot resist dancing until my feet refuse to move. Are you not the same, Lieutenant?”

“I am afraid I only attend balls when coerced,” Nicholas said. “Dancing is not a particular skill of mine.”

“Nonsense,” Sarah said, swatting his arm. “You danced splendidly at the assembly. You cannot hate it entirely.”

“No, not entirely.” He sent me a sly glance. “I tolerate it so long as my partner is competent and does not leave bruises on my feet.”

I had to cough to hide my laugh. It seemed so long ago, that ball where I had tried to frighten him off. How glad I was to have been unsuccessful. Although I couldn’t help but think my life would be a great deal simpler if that attempt *had* worked.

I put that idea from my head and focused on Sarah. I needed to convince Nicholas of her virtues, of all she had to recommend her. “Will you be singing for us tonight? I cannot say when I last heard you perform, but surely, it has been too long.”

She waved me off, though her chest puffed up. “Oh, I haven’t practiced in weeks. I couldn’t possibly.”

I leaned toward Nicholas as if confiding a secret. “You must convince her to sing. She has absolutely the loveliest voice. You would be enchanted, I have no doubt.”

“Enchanted?” He raised an eyebrow.

“You are building his expectations too high, Rebecca,” Sarah scolded me. “Now he shall be disappointed when he does hear me.”

“I doubt that very much,” he said. “I have no ability to judge musical talents. So even if you are terrible, Miss Mason, I would be the last to know.”

She laughed again, that tinkling sound that somehow felt equally effortless and deliberate. “What a tease you are, Lieutenant Avery.”

Another twinge of jealousy. At least now I could admit that was what I felt. I was far too used to having his attention to myself, his dry humor and quick wit. But that he was jesting with her was a good sign. A sign that he . . . liked her.

“I cannot say I’ve ever been accused of such a thing before,” Nicholas said. “But if it helps, I am glad to insist you perform for us all later. I am woefully unprepared with any entertainment, so I would be most grateful, really.”

“But of course,” Sarah said, one corner of her mouth turning up coyly. “If you insist, I cannot say no.”

The butler stepped in and announced dinner, and we made our way to the dining room. The evening was going exactly as I’d hoped, and yet, the satisfaction I’d expected did not come.

All through dinner, I kept a close eye on the two of them seated across the table from each other while I sat at the other end. Sarah kept up what appeared to be a delightful conversation. Nicholas never appeared bored, in any case, though I did catch his eyes coming my way more than once. I looked away each time.

After dinner, Sarah sang, as promised, and she was just as gifted as I remembered. I’d never held much envy for musical talents, but the way she captured the attention of everyone in the room made me wish I had applied myself more. I sat beside Mama and Mrs. Mason, fighting the urge to turn back to see Nicholas’s face. Was he *enchanted*?

Sarah curtsied to our enthusiastic applause, and the party scattered to various entertainments. Mama and Mr. Hambley challenged William and me to a game of whist, while the Masons and Juliana sat nearby discussing her school. Sarah sought Nicholas out, and they stood near the windows, apart from the rest of us, talking and laughing. That was, Sarah laughed. Nicholas offered smiles that never seemed wholly sincere. Was I wrong about him liking Sarah? Or was he simply terrible at showing affection?

Our game of whist lasted an age and a day. When at last William played a trump and claimed the win for our team, I forced myself to join in as he teased Mama and Mr. Hambley over their loss. The two of them did not care in the least, smiling at each other.

I stood from the table to join Juliana and the Masons, but as I crossed the room, Nicholas caught my eye and gave a pointed gesture with his head, an invitation to join them. I studiously ignored him. They were doing perfectly well on their own. My interference now would only be a distraction.

I had scarce seated myself before Sarah’s voice exclaimed behind us, “Oh, everyone, do come look at the moon! I declare, I have never seen it so full and bright.”

“Like how it is every month?” Juliana murmured.

I smothered a laugh.

“We should all go outside to see it,” Sarah suggested, facing the rest of us. “I am certain there is a lovely view from the garden.”

“Yes, let’s.” Mrs. Mason stood immediately.

If Nicholas cared that his evening had been appropriated, he did an excellent job of hiding it as he and Sarah led the way from the room.

Juliana stood with a grumble as she awkwardly rose from her armchair. “I am not sure why we could not admire the moon from the window, where we might have the advantage of cushions,” she muttered to me.

“Hush,” I whispered, though I grinned. “She is simply enthusiastic.”

“Or perhaps she is attempting to create a romantic atmosphere for some odd reason?” She shot me a knowing look before accepting William’s arm as he led her out of the room, following after the Masons and Mama and Mr. Hambley.

I trailed behind them all. A full moon *was* rather romantic. Sarah was brilliant, if that was what she’d intended by this excursion.

As we made our way into the main hall and toward the back of the house, a maid appeared on the landing of the stairs. She hesitated, then descended and approached Nicholas at the head of our line, Sarah at his side.

“Might I have a moment, Mr. Avery?” she asked nervously.

Nicholas waved us ahead. “Go on without me. I shall join you shortly.”

Sarah gave a small pout of disappointment but went with her parents to follow the butler through the house. As I passed where Nicholas stood listening to the hushed words of the maid, I strained my ears. Why would she have interrupted him amidst a dinner party?

“. . . won’t be calmed, sir,” I heard her whisper as I came closer. “. . . crying for you.”

Nicholas did not hesitate as he turned and mounted the stairs two by two, the maid scurrying in his wake. I stopped in the middle of the entryway and stared after them. She had to mean Olivia. What had happened to her? Was she ill again? She had seemed perfectly well when I’d glimpsed her on the stairs earlier.

I glanced at William and Juliana disappearing through the doorway across the room. No one would notice if I was gone for a few minutes.

I darted up the stairs, dimly lit by the sconces lining the walls. Reaching the top, I paused to gain my bearings. Though I had visited Olivia

a few times, I'd been upstairs just the once, when I'd delivered her basket of tarts. A sharp wail from my left reminded me where to go. I crept forward, my footsteps muffled by the thick carpet lining the corridor. Olivia's door was ajar, allowing the sounds of her wild sobbing to escape. My hand stilled on the doorframe. Her cries were raw, aching.

I peeked inside the room, lit by the single candle held by the nursemaid, whom I recognized from my visits. She held her free hand to her mouth, eyes wide and focused entirely on the bed just out of my sight. I inched forward. Nicholas sat on the bed, holding Olivia in his arms, her mop of blonde curls spread over his wide chest as she curled into him. Her slight arms clenched around his neck as she wept, shoulders shaking.

Nicholas shushed her as he rocked her. "It was a dream," he whispered, his voice barely audible over her cries. "I'm here. I'm here."

"Mama," she whimpered.

I pressed a hand to my heart, so badly did it ache for her, and backed away from the door. This was not a moment I was meant to see, no matter how I wanted to help. This was a moment between family, between Nicholas and Olivia.

I slipped back down the corridor but stopped at the top of the stairs. I couldn't bring myself to go back to the party, to the frivolity and meaningless conversation. I sank to the top step and leaned my head against the cool wood of the banister. Sniffles sounded from the open door, the crying calmed, but the image of Nicholas comforting Olivia was etched in my mind.

Nicholas constantly doubted that he did enough for Olivia, that he was a good brother and guardian, but tonight only confirmed what I knew about him. He was kind and gentle and generous. His capacity for love was beyond anything I imagined—he loved Olivia, even in her most difficult moments.

"Rebecca?"

Nicholas moved toward me through the shadows, passing in and out of the candlelight. I scrambled to my feet and tugged my skirts straight.

"What are you doing here?" He met me at the top of the stairs.

"I . . . I heard the maid," I stammered. "I was worried for Olivia." He did not respond for a long moment. I tried to be patient, but my tongue did not listen. "Is she all right? She seemed so upset, and I wish there were something I could do to help, but—"

“She is fine,” he interrupted. “Once her panic calms, she goes back to sleep almost immediately. Her nursemaid is with her now, and Olivia will likely sleep until morning.”

I leaned back on the banister, balancing against my hands behind me. “It happens often, then?”

“Not lately,” he said. “This is the first time in weeks. But in the beginning, it was almost nightly.”

Nightly. I could not imagine. “I hadn’t any idea.”

He rubbed his neck. “It is Olivia’s struggle, not mine, and she has endured it remarkably well. She used to take hours to settle again, but now it is a matter of minutes. Usually, her nursemaid can see her through it, but sometimes . . .” His voice drifted off.

“Sometimes Olivia needs you.”

He nodded and looked back toward Olivia’s room, the candlelight catching the angles of his face—his slightly crooked nose, the wide planes of his jaw, the ridge of his scar along his cheek and neck.

“She will be past it all soon enough,” he said. “The dreams come so infrequently now, I may dare to hope that was the last.”

“Then I will hope for that as well.”

We stood in silence, quiet now that Olivia had gone back to sleep. From beyond the walls, I heard the faint sounds of laughter and voices. Was Mama wondering where I’d gone off to? Perhaps Mr. Hambley kept her sufficiently distracted. But likely, Sarah had noted both my absence and Nicholas’s, which could not be terribly good.

“We ought to rejoin the party,” I said, pushing away from the banister.

But he waved me off. “In a moment. I wanted to speak with you.”

My pulse ticked faster. “What about?”

“I am only curious,” he said slowly, “why you seemed so determined to pair me off with Miss Mason tonight.”

I widened my eyes innocently. “Pair you off? I do not know—”

“You needn’t deny it. It was far too obvious.”

Why was I so terrible at manipulation? Although, it wouldn’t precisely be something to boast about if I *were* good at it.

“I hoped you wouldn’t notice,” I managed. “I thought that you might like her since you invited her tonight.”

“I invited her because she is your friend.” He crossed his arms. “And I’ll have you know that even if I *did* like her, I hardly need your help in

matters of romance. I am quite capable of wooing a woman.”

Just those words made my veins run hot. *I am quite capable of wooing a woman.* I had no doubt about that.

“I am sorry,” I managed to convince my mouth to say. “I should not have interfered.”

He scrutinized me, eyes reflecting the golden warmth of the candlelight. “You seemed rather determined. I should tell you that although Miss Mason is pleasant enough, I hardly think her the sort of woman who could—what did you say?—*enchant* me.”

“Oh?” I tried to ignore the sudden flutter in my stomach. “So you have begun to think of marriage, then? If you were to leave the navy?”

He watched me with a curious expression. “Yes, I cannot deny it.”

“Then I will scour my acquaintances in search of just the right woman for you.” What on earth inspired me to say *that*?

His fingers drummed against his arm. “Do not be ridiculous, Rebecca. After tonight, it is perfectly clear that you haven’t the faintest idea what sort of woman I wish to marry.”

“Sarah Mason is hardly the dregs of Society,” I said dryly. “Your standards for marriage must be demanding indeed.”

“*Realistic* is the word I would choose.”

“And what *realistic* qualities would such a wife need to possess?”

He pressed his lips together, debating. Then he stepped closer, a wicked gleam in his eye. “All right, then. Let us play this game. What do I want in a wife? She must be intelligent, first of all.”

“Naturally,” I agreed, suddenly not certain *I* wanted to play, judging by that gleam.

“She must be kind and compassionate,” he went on. “Someone to help me care for Olivia.”

“Yes, of course.”

Nicholas moved closer, dropping his arms as his gaze fixed on mine. “Good humor is important as well.”

I swallowed. “The value of laughter cannot be underestimated.”

He took another step forward, only a pace away from me now. Why was he so close?

“I would not complain terribly much if she were beautiful,” he said softly as his eyes followed every curve of my face.

His words seemed to steal the very air from my lungs. “Attraction is essential,” I managed to whisper. He was too close—his warmth lingered between us, my skin prickling as if I’d just come in from the cold to warm myself at the fire. I edged backward, and the small of my back hit the wooden banister behind me. My hands found the smooth, cool wood, bracing myself, but Nicholas closed the distance between us once more. My heartbeat echoed in the quiet of the stairway.

“But there is one quality more important than the others.” Nicholas set his hands on either side of me, trapping me between him and the banister. I stared up at him, unable to look away from his scorching gaze.

“And what is that?” I breathed out the question, both terrified and exhilarated at what he might answer. I should leave. Now. But my mind had given up, my body in complete control. And my body wanted nothing more than to stay right where it was.

Nicholas ducked his head beside mine, and his breath tickled the curls against my cheek. “Bravery,” he whispered.

His lips found the skin beneath my ear, brushing so softly I wasn’t entirely sure he had touched me at all. But then his mouth traveled up my jaw, and the fire that followed made his touch all too apparent.

I inhaled sharply, gripping the banister behind me, certain that if I let go, my knees would buckle. My vision spun, my mind unable to comprehend what was happening.

Nicholas leaned into me, his arms intertwined with mine, his nose just skimming mine. I closed my eyes. “*That* is the sort of woman who could enchant me,” he said, his voice husky and deep.

And then his lips were on mine, aching tender, irresistibly sweet. He ran his hands up my arms, taking my shoulders and pulling me to him.

I let him.

I let him kiss me until my mind flared into being once again. Until I could remember why I could *not* want this.

Edward.

I broke away from Nicholas, my heart nearly splitting from how intensely it pounded. He dropped his arms from me and stepped back, though his eyes still held the fire I knew he had been holding at bay.

“Nicholas,” I rasped, my thoughts racing to keep pace with my pulse. “I—I cannot—”

Footsteps sounded on the stairs below us.

“Rebecca?” Mother’s voice, and more footsteps. “Rebecca, are you up there?”

I spun and scurried down a few steps until Mama’s dark hair came into view around the corner of the staircase. “Here, Mama. Just here.” My movements were harried, my face surely splotched with pink. I blessed the relative darkness.

She squinted at me, her pale dress ethereal in the evening light. “Are you all right? What’s happened?”

“Nothing,” I blurted. “That is, Olivia had a nightmare, and I came to see if I could help.”

She couldn’t see Nicholas at the top of the stairs from where she stood, could she? I did not dare look back at him.

Mama’s brow furrowed. “I see. And she is recovered?”

“Yes.” I spoke too quickly. “Yes, I was coming back down. Lieutenant Avery will be along soon.”

“All right.” Mama eyed me but turned to make her way back downstairs. “Everyone is gathering back in the drawing room.”

I nodded, though she could not see me. As I followed her down, I glanced back up the stairwell.

Empty.

Nicholas was gone.

Chapter Eighteen

HOW I SURVIVED THE REMAINDER of the dinner party, I could not say. When Nicholas reentered the drawing room a few minutes after me, my lungs nearly collapsed from the strain of keeping me breathing.

He did not glance to where I'd retreated, the corner of the room with Mama and Mrs. Mason. He went instead to join William and Juliana near the fireplace, Sarah soon following after. I clenched my hands in my lap. I toyed with the idea of pretending an illness so we might leave, but I wanted no suspicions whatsoever cast over the evening. Except then I applied myself to Mama's conversation with a bit too much fervor, which earned me an odd look from her. I reined myself in and settled for a nod or murmured agreement here and there, all while trying to ignore the dark storm that had taken hold of my insides.

Finally, *finally*, the party began to disperse. The Masons left first, after Sarah offered Nicholas a deep, grandiose curtsy. I fought the urge to glare at her.

But then it was our turn, and I shifted my weight as Nicholas bid farewell to Mama and Mr. Hambley, William and Juliana. When they went to collect their things from the footman, Nicholas faced me for the first time since—well—since he *kissed* me. I was wholly unprepared for the drop in my stomach, the shaking in my hands.

"Good night, Miss Rowley," he said quietly, as if nothing stranger had passed between us than an innocent evening of cards and conversation. "I do hope the evening was to your satisfaction."

How was I to answer *that*? Irritation bubbled up inside me. Even though I knew why he acted so indifferent—we could hardly let anyone know what had happened between us—how was it he seemed so unaffected by our kiss? Why had he kissed me at all, for that matter?

"*Satisfied* is not the word I would use," I said shortly. "Good night, Lieutenant Avery." I swept past him without another word, joining my family as we left Linwood Hall.



It felt as though I would never sleep again. The little clock on my shelf ticked its way toward midnight and then past, but still, my body showed no signs of weariness. I paced the floor, across the thick rug to the window and back, for near to an hour in hopes that it would exhaust me enough to sleep.

I pulled out a book that Juliana had gifted me, but as it had failed to entice me six months ago when I'd first attempted to read it, I was not surprised when it failed again tonight.

My efforts were beyond useless. Nothing could drive Nicholas from my mind—his burning touch, his whispered words. And my reaction. What had I been thinking? I'd not encouraged him, or at least, I hadn't meant to. But neither had I rejected him as I certainly should have. I was engaged. *Engaged*. What sort of woman was I to allow Nicholas to kiss me when I had already promised myself to Edward? The worst sort, that was for certain.

But why had he kissed me? Nicholas was not a flirt. I could never imagine him kissing a girl without meaning it. And heavens, he had seemed to mean it.

Not to mention all those breath-stealing things he'd said before he'd kissed me, about me being beautiful. Brave.

I threw myself into bed, drawing my blankets under my chin. No one had ever said such things to me. Not even Edward, though he was always full of compliments. His had just never felt as . . . real. And that only made this all the more confusing.

Because Nicholas *knew* about Edward. I'd been clear with him from the start that my heart was already taken and that I was perfectly happy. But he'd still kissed me, effectively ruining our friendship when he knew I could not give him anything more.

Could I?

I gritted my teeth. I would not allow myself to even think that. I may have foolishly allowed Nicholas to kiss me, but I would not be inconstant to Edward. I would be faithful. No matter that Edward's kisses had never left me faint or shaken me to my core.

It had just been unexpected, I decided. Nicholas had surprised me, and really, it had been somewhat ungentlemanly of him to presume I *wanted* him to kiss me.

Even though I had. Quite badly.

Blast.

I threw a hand to my eyes, rubbing them ferociously as my brain insisted on playing again the moment Nicholas's lips had skimmed across my skin. Blast it all.



I fell asleep when the barest touches of light brushed the horizon and, then, for just a few hours.

Fawcett helped me dress, and I refused to look in the mirror the entire time. I was sure I'd see the guilt written across my face. What a trollop I was—engaged to one man while kissing another.

As Fawcett tightened my stays, I decided there was only one thing I could do. I could not see Nicholas anymore. There would be no more shooting lessons or riding bareback. No more flirtations hidden as friendship. I had made a promise to Edward, and I would keep it.

And I loved him. I loved Edward. It was a phrase I repeated to myself again and again throughout the morning as I breakfasted with William and then retired to the morning room with Mama.

Mama sewed for an hour while I plucked away at the pianoforte, a halfhearted attempt at practicing. I wanted nothing more than to go for a bruising ride through the cool morning air, but I did not deserve a ride. I would sit right here and polish my lacking drawing-room talents. Edward needed a wife who could reflect well on him and, thus, my refocused attention on the pianoforte. I really ought to have one song I could perform for company, even if I could not play like Sarah.

The thought of Sarah—and consequently, the events of last evening—made my fingers trip over the keys in an indelicate trill. How long would my body react like this? It had just been a kiss, for heaven's sake, and not even my first.

But it had not been just a kiss, a voice inside whispered. It had been Nicholas.

I switched my tune abruptly, from a legato ballad to a lively folk tune. Such was my determination that I did not realize someone had arrived until heavy footsteps sounded behind me.

“Miss Rowley.”

My hands crashed down on the keys, nothing like that slight indiscretion from earlier. The cacophony of notes ricocheted inside my head but was still not enough to drown out the familiarity of the voice.

I sat for a long second, the notes ringing unpleasantly in the air around me, then snatched up my hands and spun on the stool.

Nicholas should not be allowed to look so attractive, not when the simple memory of him was enough to send my pulse into tremors. Now, as

I took him in—fair hair ruffled from his ride, that jagged scar much too dashing, eyes intent and serious—I could not find my tongue.

“How are you this morning?” he asked, clasping his hands behind his back.

I stood abruptly and sent the stool teetering behind me. I bent to steady it, cursing my clumsiness. When I straightened again, he watched me with a raised eyebrow. Amused, was he? Thought it rather funny how out of sorts I was, did he? And after I’d spent half the night worrying over hurting him.

“Quite well, thank you,” I said tightly as I shot a glance at Mama. She stared steadfastly at her sewing.

Nicholas scrutinized me. “Did you not sleep well?” he asked in a quiet voice so Mama could not hear. “You look tired.”

If he was trying to make amends for his severe breach in conduct last night, he was off to a terrible start.

“I slept perfectly well, thank you.” I managed a clipped tone, though his intense gaze was doing indecent things to my pulse.

He took a step forward, not so close as to be improper but certainly closer than was comfortable.

“I did not sleep a minute all night,” he said, low and full of meaning.

I stared at him. Because of me? Because of our kiss?

“Ah, Avery.” William’s voice boomed unexpectedly from the doorway. I jumped. “What brings you here this morning?”

Nicholas turned to greet my brother. I both blessed and cursed his appearance. I’d wanted Nicholas to say more, and yet I could *not* want that.

“Just passing by,” Nicholas said. “Thought I would pay a visit, though I’m sure both your mother and sister have had enough of me after last night.”

He was absolutely correct in that.

“Never,” Mama said from her seat. “We are always glad to see you, are we not, Rebecca?”

I forced a smile. “Indubitably.”

Mama raised an eyebrow, but William saved me again.

“Banfield brought me one of your letters by mistake,” he said to Mama, striding across to her and handing her a letter. “I would never question the man’s impeccable service, but I daresay his vision is not what it once was.”

I barely listened, busy as I was avoiding Nicholas's eyes. I moved across the room and dropped into a chair beside Mama's, careful to leave no seats near me for him to claim.

"Won't you sit with us, Lieutenant?" Mama asked brightly, as if to make up for my rudeness.

He sat on the settee across from us. "Yes, for a few minutes. I cannot stay long."

"Have you some pressing business?" William asked, leaning on the cushioned back of Mama's chair as she set her letter on the table beside her.

"No, not terribly pressing," Nicholas said, but from the way his fingers drummed on his knee, I knew he did not speak the truth. "I simply have some matters that need my attention."

I refused to allow any curiosity to show on my face. He could have his secrets. I wanted none of them.

"Have you given any more thought to purchasing Linwood?" William asked.

My chin shot up, and I stared at Nicholas. When had he spoken to my brother about that? So much for not wanting his secrets.

Nicholas spared me a quick, searching glance. "I have, though I'm afraid that decision is more complicated than I expected."

William glanced at me as well. "I see. In any case, I would be more than glad to have you as a permanent neighbor, but I understand that you wish to be sure."

So Nicholas was serious about purchasing Linwood Hall. From his actions last night—from his *kiss*—I couldn't help but think I might have a little to do with it. Or perhaps everything to do with it.

I needed to put an end to this. If he thought there was anything besides friendship between us, I could not lead him along, no matter how little I wished to have that conversation. He deserved to know my feelings toward Edward had not changed.

Even if my feelings toward Nicholas had.

But that did not matter. It *could* not matter. I was engaged to Edward, and that was all there was to it.

I opened my mouth to suggest a walk in the gardens with Nicholas, something to get us away from Mama and William so we could speak in private, but before I could, a footman stepped inside the parlor and bowed.

"A visitor," he said, "for Miss Rowley."

I moved to the edge of my seat as he presented the small white card. A visitor? It could not be Sarah since we'd seen her last night.

But as I took the card, I choked. The swirled, engraven *B* leaped into my mind, chasing out every bit of calm determination I'd just scrounged up.

Footsteps. My gaze flew to the open door, to the man framed within—his dark hair and slim figure, strong cheekbones, and brown eyes.

Eyes that were intent upon me as he swept his hat from his head and stepped forward.

“Rebecca,” he said, his voice uneven, ragged.

Edward.

How—*why*—was he here? I could not speak. Edward had stolen my voice and my breath in one instant of shock.

“Who might you be?” William moved into my line of view. His voice held an edge of disapproval. Edward had used my given name.

Edward did not back away, instead squaring his shoulders and facing William directly. “I am Edward Bainbridge.”

William's brow shot to his hairline. Mama froze, her sewing abandoned in her lap. Nicholas . . . well, I could not bring myself to look at him.

“Bainbridge?” William repeated in disbelief. “What is this about? And what business have you with my sister?”

Mama stood, and her sewing fell to the floor. “Rebecca?”

I swallowed as Edward turned to me, begging me to intervene. No matter the why, he *was* here. And I had no choice but to tell the truth. Finally and completely.

“Edward is here for me.” My voice, faint and unsteady, somehow still filled the quiet of the room. “We are engaged.”

The silence rang as loudly as any church bells and lasted far longer. Then—

“Engaged?”

I whipped my head around. Nicholas gaped at me, hands braced on the arms of the settee. But why was he so surprised? He'd known all along I was engaged to Edward. He'd known—

My memories came back to me in a whirlwind of realization. The night of the assembly, when he'd pieced together why I was acting so terribly and I'd first told him of Edward. Then each conversation after—that Sunday outside the church, our afternoons in the meadow—every time

we'd spoken of Edward. Nicholas had teased me about him, called him my secret suitor. My *admirer*.

He hadn't known I was engaged.

Had I never . . . No, clearly I never had. But *how* could I never have told him I was marrying Edward?

My eyes were too wide, pricking as we stared at each other. Then his jaw tightened, and he stood abruptly. He strode to the door, Edward stepping out of his way, and he disappeared into the entry.

I stumbled to my feet, steadying myself against the arm of my chair. I had to run after him, beg him to understand. I hadn't known! How could I have known he thought Edward to be just another beau, a flirtation?

I took one step before I faltered. I could not leave. Mama. William. They deserved the truth just as much as Nicholas did. More.

And Edward. I could not abandon Edward.

"Rebecca?" Mama's voice rang in my ears as though she'd shouted. But her voice was quiet. Too quiet. "How can this be true?"

I slowly turned back to her and William, both wearing stunned expressions.

"I am sorry," I whispered. "I meant to tell you everything. We met in Brighton, and—"

"You *meant* to tell us?" William's shock wore thin rather quickly, anger taking its place. "Did you somehow forget over the past few weeks that you were engaged to the son of the man who nearly ruined our family?"

Edward stepped forward, eyes flashing, but I sent him a silencing glare. We were in this mess because of him. The least he could do was keep quiet and let me try to fix it.

"I only kept it a secret because I knew you would react like this," I insisted. "We had a plan." One Edward had apparently forgotten completely. What was he thinking, appearing in my sitting room without warning?

"A plan?" Mama stepped forward, her voice sharp. "What on earth do you mean?"

I took a steadying breath. I had to manage my emotions, no matter that they threatened to spill out of me like a spring river. "Neither of us knew what had happened all those years ago. We had to know in order to move

ahead, and since you were less than forthcoming when I first broached the subject—”

“Is that why you’ve been questioning me?” William asked suddenly. “Why you’ve been sneaking about my study?”

I blinked. “You knew?”

“Of course I knew.” He shook his head. “You’re a terrible liar. I thought you were curious about Papa and this was how you managed with Mr. Hambley courting Mama. I never imagined you hid an *engagement*.”

Edward had been waiting in stiff silence but could not be put off any longer. “We hadn’t any idea how deep the divide between our families ran,” he said, and I knew he tried to keep the heat from his voice. “The more we learned, the more difficult our path became.”

“Difficult.” Mama gave a strange laugh, high and choked. “You must know it is impossible. Your mother will never allow it, and neither shall I.”

“My mother,” Edward said coolly, “has no say over who I marry.”

“But *I* have a say over who my daughter marries,” Mama snapped. “And if you think for one moment I’ll allow her to marry into your family —”

“Mama, please,” I begged. “Please, try to see reason. Why can’t we sit and discuss this sensibly?”

“I’m afraid sense was forgotten when you hid such a secret from us.” She breathed heavily, her eyes burning. I had never seen Mama like this. She’d always been calm, collected.

“I am not the only one keeping secrets though,” I said. “I have tried for weeks to understand what happened fifteen years ago, and all I have is more questions. Why can you not simply tell us the truth?”

“Because the truth is complicated,” Mama said. “And I haven’t any idea what sort of lies Mr. *Bainbridge*”—she spoke his name with derision—“has been telling you about your father.”

“I haven’t told her any lies,” Edward retorted. “I myself know only the barest of details from my mother.”

Mama did not respond, her taut expression refusing to ease. I pressed a shaking hand to my stomach. I could not settle my thoughts; they flitted about like dust motes in the sunlight, unable to be caught.

“I am sorry,” I said again. The word felt as useless as a lace parasol in a downpour, but what else could I say? “I never meant for this to happen. I wanted desperately to tell you. But you were so against their family, so

adamant that I should have nothing to do with any of them, let alone Edward—”

“I am your mother.” She spoke fiercely as she stepped toward me. “You cannot keep such things from me.” She shook her head. “This is not like when you were younger, Rebecca. This is no white lie about a broken doll or missing pie.”

I fought my tears, just as I fought the childhood memories that struggled to the surface. In both of those instances—the doll and the pie, which I had certainly broken and eaten respectively—I had lied to Mama. She had known, of course, and had convinced me to tell her the truth. I’d been punished, yes, but I’d also learned that I wanted her to trust me. Trust me to make good decisions, to be honest and sincere.

I had broken that trust.

Mama took one last look at me and swept from the room, her footsteps echoing in the horrible silence she left behind.

William moved to follow her. “Honestly, Rebecca. You’ve always been imprudent, but this is beyond anything.”

Mama’s departure left a crack inside me, and William’s comment only split that crack more.

I clenched my skirts in both hands to keep them from finding something to throw at him. “And that is precisely why I kept it a secret,” I said stubbornly. “I knew you would never understand.”

He shook his head. “Understanding is not the issue here. This is about your decision to withhold news of your engagement for *weeks*, all the while plying me for information about Papa and Mr. Bainbridge. You manipulated me into thinking you worried for Mama, but you only worried for yourself.”

“That is not true,” I said. “I care for Mama. That is *why* I kept this from her. I did not want to shock her.”

“You did not wish to shock her.” William gave a humorless laugh. “You certainly failed in that endeavor.” He turned away. “I am going for a ride to clear my head. I suggest, Mr. Bainbridge, that you not be here when I return.” He strode from the room, and as he took his hot anger with him, I was left alone with Edward in the morning room.

I stood there, my chest heaving as if I’d run up a flight of stairs. I’d dreaded for weeks what might happen when I finally told Mama and William the truth.

But *this*. I could never have anticipated a catastrophe of this magnitude.

“Rebecca.” Edward stepped to my side, hat still in his hands, expression torn.

“What—?” I stopped, trying to force my voice into an even tone. “What on earth were you thinking? How could you not tell me you were coming?”

He tilted his head, and a lock of dark hair fell over one eye. In Brighton, I’d found it maddeningly attractive, but now it was simply maddening. “I am sorry. I swear that I am. But I am tired of the whole affair. I am tired of pretending.” His voice broke.

“What happened, Edward?” I crossed my arms. “What made you come?”

He blew out a breath. “My mother found me out. She discovered me passing your letter to Marjorie, Miss Lane, that is, and confronted the two of us. I was forced to tell her everything, lest she accuse Miss Lane of any impropriety.”

I shook my head. “But why should that keep you from writing and telling me all this? Why did you appear unannounced at the worst possible time?”

Try as I might, I could not keep Nicholas’s stunned face from my mind. How he’d not said a word as he’d left. How he hadn’t looked back. I raised a hand to rub my temples, closing my eyes against the too-bright sun.

“Mother and I fought,” Edward said simply. “Terribly. She demanded I break off our engagement, and I refused. She threatened to never see me again.”

I squinted at him. “What did you say?”

“I said nothing.” He clasped his hands behind his back. “I left. I packed my things and rode directly here, only stopping to sleep. I am finished with waiting for some uncertain time where everything will work out just as we hoped. That will not happen, no matter how we wish it.”

“So you believed rushing in to shock my mother was the best method?” I turned away. This was not at all how I’d imagined our reunion. There was always a great deal less anger in my daydreams and a great deal more smiling.

“Please do not be angry with me,” he pleaded. “They will come around in time, as will my mother. But don’t you see how this will be better for us?”

No more pretense. No more lies. We can face our challenges together, directly.”

“That might have been best for your mother,” I said sharply. “She cannot see reason. But my family would have if we’d presented it in the right way. If we’d had more time.”

He was silent for a long minute, and when I faced him again, he looked so contrite that my anger faltered. He’d only done what he’d thought he had to. But why could he simply not have talked to me first?

“This is not how we can start a marriage,” I said, my voice hard in my throat. “You cannot decide for the both of us what our course will be. You must talk with me.”

“I know. It was thoughtless of me, and I am sorry.”

“I must handle this.” I smoothed my skirts to steady myself. “They will calm soon, and then I can speak with them, persuade them to allow you a chance.”

“Of course.”

“I cannot say how long it will take,” I warned. “They are nearly as stubborn as I am.”

Edward stepped to me, taking my hand. “I will stay however long it requires,” he said softly. “I’ll take a room in town.”

His hand was familiar in mine. How many times had he led me through a country dance or tugged me down a dark corridor for a stolen moment together? I stared at his hand, his long fingers enclosing mine.

“We’ll do this together,” he said, running his thumb across the back of my hand. “I promise.”

His confidence, his firm belief that all would be well, made my heartbeat steady for the first time since he had stepped into the room. He raised my hand and kissed it softly. “I missed you, Rebecca.”

I’d missed him as well, truly I had. But my feelings over his unexpected arrival, the confrontation with my family, everything—they clouded my mind. I could not see past the fog that had rolled over my life. But he looked at me expectantly.

“And I missed you,” I whispered. “Now, you had better go. I will write to you once I’ve had a chance to see how things lie with Mama and William.”

I pulled my hand from his, and frustration flickered in his eyes. But I could not worry over that now. I had to manage one problem at a time, and

if he was irritated that I was not thrilled to see him, then perhaps he might finally realize how his appearance had rattled the delicate balance of my life.

“All right.” He stepped back. “I will be patient.”

“Thank you.” I clasped my hands.

He gave a low bow and left the morning room with a fleeting smile, which I could not find in me to return.

Only when I heard his footsteps on the stairs outside did I allow myself to collapse in the chair behind me and drop my head into my hands.

Chapter Nineteen

WHAT AN UTTER DISASTER. THIS was worse than anything I'd imagined in the past few weeks. Mama had been so angry, so betrayed. William was angry too, but worse was that I'd solidified in his mind that I was foolish and careless.

And Nicholas. The betrayal in his eyes burned through my memory. How could this have happened? I'd *told* him. I'd told him there could be nothing more than friendship between us. And yet I could not pretend this was his fault. I had been the one to follow him to the meadow all those weeks ago. I had insisted he teach me to shoot. I had encouraged our connection in every way.

I had allowed him to kiss me. I had *wanted* him to kiss me.

Because I was the most horrible woman alive. Deceiving my family, misleading Nicholas, being unfaithful to Edward. How could it all have gone so wrong? The plan had seemed infallible back in Brighton. Now it had fallen to pieces about me, like the broken shards of glass that littered the ground where we practiced our shooting.

I pressed a hand to my mouth to stifle the sob that threatened to escape. The lump in my throat ached, but I swallowed against it, trying to retain control of whatever I could.

What could I do? How could I even begin to fix this? I could go to Mama, force her to listen to me and forgive me for keeping such a secret from her. But William had been right, that she did not want to see me.

I stood, my legs shaking beneath me. I would stay out of the way while both Mama and William worked through their shock and anger, and then I would try again to explain. They would understand eventually, I told myself. They had to.

Until then, I had to get out of this house.

William was riding, but that did not mean I couldn't as well. I knew where he liked to go, and I would avoid him, but I could not sit here a second longer.

I strode from the morning room and ran up the grand staircase, ignoring the two maids who dodged out of my way as I reached the corridor. I rang for Fawcett to help me into my habit. If she noticed my raspy voice or shaking hands as she helped me change, she did not mention it.

Fawcett left, and I looked in the mirror. The skin around my eyes was red and puffy. I went to my wash basin and splashed my face with cool

water in an attempt to improve my appearance. The attempt failed.

It hardly mattered. In fact, it did not matter one whit what I looked like. I dried my face and hands, then tugged on my gloves and reached for my riding hat. My hat. The one Nicholas had given me.

I spun and strode to the door. I did not need a hat.

As I stepped into the corridor, voices and pounding footsteps sounded from the front of the house. What could possibly be wrong now?

I hurried to the top of the stairs and started down, peering over the banister as I descended. The front door had been flung open, and a group of servants—a broad-shouldered footman, a maid, and the butler—gathered as a carriage stopped just outside. It was William’s carriage, the one that—

The air went cold around me. The one that Juliana used every day to travel to school.

I clattered down the stairs, jumping the last two, and reached the front door just as the footman turned. He carried Juliana in his arms, her face contorted in pain, her hands wrapped tightly over her belly.

“Take her to her rooms,” the butler, Mr. Banfield, directed. “I’ll inform Mr. Rowley immediately.”

I braced myself against the wooden doorframe. “What’s happened?” I demanded. “What is wrong?”

The footman climbed the low stairs leading to the door, and Juliana winced with every step, her eyes closed. She did not seem to be in any state to speak.

“She began having pains an hour ago,” a female voice behind the others said. It was Sophie, Juliana’s friend. She stepped down from the carriage, her face taut as her blonde hair flew about in the wind. “The baby is coming.”

I gaped at her. “But it is too soon.” Juliana’s time was not for a few more weeks.

Sophie only pressed her lips together. I did not know much about childbirth, but I knew that this was not good. Not good at all.

I stepped aside when the footman reached the front door and maneuvered Juliana inside. Her breathing came fast, her shoulders bowed.

“What is all this fuss about?”

Mama’s sharp voice sounded from the stairs. We all turned to her as she descended, and the moment she focused on Juliana in the footman’s arms, she came to a halt and grasped on to the banister.

“Juliana,” she whispered. Then her eyes found mine for the briefest of moments, and an understanding passed between us. Whatever problems we had, nothing was more important than Juliana at this moment.

Mama straightened. “Bring her here,” she commanded. “Sophie, has Dr. Turner been sent for?”

The footman was already crossing the entry, Sophie following right behind. “Yes, I sent him a note from the school,” she said as Mama met them at the bottom of the stairs, her eyes flitting over Juliana’s face.

“William?” I could barely hear Juliana’s voice, but her words sent a sliver right into my core. “Where is William?”

Mama looked to me, a question in a glance.

“Riding,” I managed. “He went for a ride.”

The butler stepped forward. “I’ll send grooms immediately to find him.”

“No.” The word sprang from me. “No, I will find him. I know where he is.” There was only one place he could be.

Mama hesitated, then gave a short nod. “Quickly, Rebecca. Quickly.”

Then she turned and ushered the footman up the stairs, holding Juliana’s hand as they climbed.

I wasted no time. I ran out the open front door and down the low, wide stairs. I snatched up my long habit skirts, anything to help me reach William faster. The lawn seemed to stretch for an eternity, an endless green, until at last I reached the stable doors.

I darted inside and startled a groom mucking one of the stalls. Stella neighed as I ran to her stall and threw open the door. She skittered back, kicking hay all around. I stopped, chest heaving. I could not startle her so much she would not let me mount.

“Hush, girl,” I whispered. “It is only me.”

Her restless hooves calmed, and she allowed me forward to rub her neck.

“I need you,” I said softly. “Will you help me?”

She nudged me with her nose—an agreement. I led her from the stall so I would have more room to mount.

“Miss Rowley?” Mr. Mullens approached from my left. “Will you be riding? I’d be happy to saddle her.”

“No,” I said, moving to Stella’s side. “There’s no time.”

“No time, miss?”

I barely heard him. I grasped Stella's mane and threw myself onto her bare back. Mr. Mullens gawked at me as I straightened, but I could not stop to explain.

I kicked Stella's sides, and she leaped forward. The dirt floor of the stable soon turned to grass beneath us, and I leaned low over Stella's back as she flew across the lawn, her neck bobbing with the motion of her stride.

I knew William would be at the church ruins to the east of Havenfield. He loved those old stones, though I never quite understood why. The surrounding area was too hilly for any amount of galloping, so I'd always preferred the more level ground near the lake.

But William liked the ruins, the seclusion they offered. He would be there, I was certain.

The ride to the ruins was ten minutes at most, but with every hoofbeat and every heartbeat, it grew harder to control my worry. Juliana had been in such pain. Was that to be expected? I had not been present at either of Rachel's birthings. But neither had Rachel given birth so early.

I closed my eyes, offering up a prayer. I often teased Mama about attending church, but if ever I needed God's help, it was now. *Please let me find William*, I begged. *Please let Juliana and the baby be all right.*

Because this was all my fault. William should have been at home. He should have been working in his study when Juliana arrived, and he would have taken control of everything immediately. Instead, he was not even aware his wife was in pain and needing him. All because of me—and because of Edward.

I did not dare release my grip on Stella's mane to swipe away my tears, so they flew from my cheeks as we raced across the fields. To reach the church ruins, I was forced to take a horribly long route, around the rock wall and—

The wall. It came into view ahead of me, a gray snake among the grass. If I jumped the wall, I could cut a few minutes from my ride. The passing seconds pressed upon me, smothering me, but still, I hesitated. I was alone. What if . . . ?

But I could not let myself think it. I had to take the chance.

I turned Stella to the wall and pushed her even faster. She saw the jump coming, her head stretching out to greet the challenge. My vision was edged in black as my painful memories did their best to fight for control of

my determination. I forced them away and focused again on the wall, on making this jump, on reaching William.

Stella leaped, and I held her mane, grasping her sides with my legs as tightly as I could. We soared over the wall in a blink, a jarring landing, and then Stella was running again, faster. I leaned lower, overcome by the amazing creature that Stella was.

Finally, finally, we approached the hills around the ruins. I slowed Stella to a canter as we wound through trees and tall grass, and I glimpsed the crumbling walls of the old church.

“William!” I cried as I pulled Stella to a stop in front of the curved archway that led inside. I could not see him. “William, are you here?”

No answer. Not even the rustling of grass or leaves, as even the wind had deserted me.

But then—

“Really, Rebecca. I told you I needed to clear my head. That was not an invitation to follow me.”

He was here. He was angry, but he was here. “William, you must come home.”

“If this is some ridiculous ploy to convince me you were not in the wrong—”

“No, it’s not, it is—”

“I’ll not have it. I’m not in a forgiving mood at the moment, and—”

“Blast it, William, this is not about you and me,” I snapped. “It’s Juliana. The baby is coming.”

Silence. Then stumbling footsteps through the brush and William appeared in the archway, one hand grasping a protruding stone. “Now?” he asked, dumbfounded. “The baby is coming now?”

“Yes, the carriage brought her home just a few minutes ago. The pains have started, and Mama is with her, but Juliana wants you.”

He disappeared back through the archway, and for a wild, ridiculous moment, it seemed as though he was ignoring me. But then I heard the snort of his horse, hidden behind one of the walls, and William appeared around the corner, leading his mount with purposeful steps.

“What happened?” he demanded, his voice clear and sharp.

“I don’t know the details,” I said. “Sophie brought her home, so she can tell you.”

William focused on me for the first time, and he came to a jolting halt. “Where the devil is your saddle?”

I’d anticipated his reaction, but I could not let his surprise delay us. “I needed to find you quickly,” I said. “And I did. Now, please, hurry. We do not have the time for this discussion.”

He opened his mouth to argue, no doubt, and then shook himself and turned to his horse. “Is Juliana all right?” he asked as he pulled himself smoothly into the saddle. “Has Dr. Turner been sent for?”

I avoided his first question. “Yes, he’s been sent for.”

“Rebecca,” he growled as he adjusted his seat.

I gulped. “I only saw her a moment. She . . .” I shook my head. “She did not look well.”

He paled as his hands grasped the reins. Then he whirled his mount around and kicked, galloping faster than he ought over this terrain. I urged Stella to follow him, though I kept my words of caution to myself. It was his wife, his child. There was nothing I could say to slow him.

I barely kept pace with him all the way back to Havenfield. *He ought to have wagered on this race.* I shook my head to dismiss such a flippant notion. What was wrong with me to have such silly thoughts at a time like this? Perhaps he was right. Perhaps I was selfish and uncaring.

I gritted my teeth, urging Stella faster as William extended his lead by another length. I needed to focus on Juliana, on helping however I could, no matter my own personal circumstances. That was what our family needed, and I would not let them down.

We dashed together across the lawn, the gray stones of Havenfield rising before us. When at last our horses’ hooves met the pebbled drive before the front door, William threw himself from the saddle before his mount came to a stop, not even bothering to hand the reins to the waiting groom. He darted up the stairs and disappeared inside the front door, held open by Mr. Banfield.

The poor groom stared at me as I dismounted, then at my saddle-less horse. All my secrets were out now. At least I needn’t worry about that anymore.

I followed William inside, though he was already halfway up the stairs before I even stepped through the front door.

“How is she?” I asked the butler as I tugged off my gloves. “Any changes?”

“The doctor arrived and is with her now,” Mr. Banfield said, closing the door behind me.

I raised a hand to my forehead as a sudden weakness gripped me. I’d found William, brought him home. I’d done that much.

“Pardon me, Miss Rowley, but you’ve a visitor.”

“A visitor?” My day had already been ruined by one unexpected visitor. I hardly wanted another.

“Yes, and I told him he had unfortunate timing, considering, but Lieutenant Avery was insistent about speaking with you.”

“Lieutenant Avery is here?” I stared at him.

“I am, indeed,” Nicholas’s voice said from behind me.

I gripped the skirts of my habit. Why did he have to come now? I turned to face Nicholas standing in the parlor doorway. He watched me, eyes guarded. I’d never seen him so disheveled, with a loose cravat and dusty Hessians.

“I—” My mouth was dry. “I did not expect to see you.”

“I only wanted to speak with you a moment,” he said. “Please.”

I tugged on my sleeve. It had been but an hour, at most, since he’d learned I was engaged. Twelve hours since he’d kissed me. I was in no condition to hear whatever it was he had to say to me.

“I heard what’s happened,” Nicholas said, stepping forward as Mr. Banfield disappeared down the corridor. “That the baby is coming.”

“Yes.” The word came out far too weak. I cleared my throat. “Yes, and I really should go upstairs.”

He nodded. “I’ll not hold you long. I simply wanted to apologize.”

“Apologize?” I shook my head. “You’ve nothing to apologize for, Nicholas.”

“Except I do.” He lowered his voice, though we stood alone in the entry. “I was completely at fault. You were honest from the beginning about”—he winced—“Mr. Bainbridge, and I was a fool for thinking . . .” He stopped, exhaling as he ran his hand through his untidy hair. “I was a fool,” he repeated. “And I hope you will forgive any trespass on my part that was unwelcome.”

Trespass. As if his kiss had been a nuisance rather than entirely overwhelming and exhilarating and—

Improper. Entirely improper.

“You have no need of my forgiveness,” I whispered. “If anyone is to blame, it is I. I depended on you too much. You were the only one I could trust, and I needed that so desperately. I am sorry for . . . for . . .”

For what? I’d not meant to encourage him. I’d meant to do the opposite. But somehow, I had made a mess of it all anyway.

Because he was not the fool. I was. I’d told myself again and again that there was nothing but friendship between us. I’d explained away every moment where he’d made my breath catch or my pulse race. But I could not explain away what I felt now, and I could do nothing except hurt him.

I closed my eyes. “I am sorry, Nicholas.”

Footsteps echoed through the entry, and I turned as Mama came to the top of the stairs. She paused as she spotted Nicholas and me.

“Lieutenant Avery.” She began descending. “I apologize for not greeting you. I did not know you were here.”

He bowed. “There is no need, Mrs. Rowley. I am aware your attention is needed elsewhere. I only needed a moment to speak with Miss Rowley.”

“How is Juliana?” I asked as Mama reached the marble floor.

Her face tightened. “Not well,” she said softly. “I am sending for Lady Rowley now.”

I nodded. Juliana’s grandmother had planned to return in three days from visiting her daughter and family. We’d all assumed there was plenty of time yet before the baby.

An idea lit in my mind. I stepped forward. “Let me go and fetch her. You know I ride faster than any groom. I could be to Brayton in a matter of hours.”

Mama was already shaking her head. “You cannot go such a distance alone, so sending a groom will be just as effective. And I need you here, to help.”

“To help?” I waved my hand. “How can I be of any help? I’ve no experience.” In much of anything, really, but certainly not in childbirth.

“You need to be here,” she insisted. “In case—” Her voice cut out, and she held a hand to her forehead.

I furrowed my brow. “In case of what, Mama?”

“Nothing,” she said briskly, dropping her hand. “But you are staying here, and I’ll hear no argument.”

I hesitated but then nodded. After what I’d put her through today, the least I could do was listen now.

“I will go.”

My head snapped to Nicholas, determination claiming his face.

“I will go and bring Lady Rowley,” he said. “Please. I should like to help how I can.”

“We cannot ask it of you.” Mama pressed a hand to her stomach. “I can easily send a messenger.”

He shook his head. “It is no imposition, I promise. I have many regrets in my life”—his eyes found mine before flicking away again—“but helping a neighbor will never be one of them.”

Mama still did not look entirely convinced, glancing between Nicholas and me. “If you are sure.”

“I am.”

Mama nodded. “Then I would be most grateful to accept your offer.”

I barely listened as she explained where the Woodwards lived and how best to reach them quickly. I could not look at Nicholas; I could not bear to see his face so full of pain. I hated being the cause. I’d never wanted this.

“Please impress upon her the urgency of the situation.” Mama’s voice broke into my thoughts. “She cannot arrive too soon.”

He nodded. “Of course. I will return as quickly as possible.”

He offered a bow, and without another glance my way, he strode to the door. As he closed it behind him, the dull thud echoed through the quiet entry.

Mama turned immediately and lifted her skirts as she started back up the stairs, acting as if I were not even there. My insides twisted like the storm clouds I’d seen over the sea at Brighton.

“Mama,” I said, starting after her. “Please, let me explain everything with Edward. If only you could understand—”

“Not now, Rebecca,” she said, not with anger as I’d expected but with weariness. “I haven’t the capacity to deal with two crises, and Juliana is far more important at the moment.” She disappeared up the stairs without another word, and I followed without question. She was right, of course. Juliana needed us, and we could not fail her.

Chapter Twenty

TIME WAS A STRANGE THING. It seemed as though only minutes had passed since William and I had arrived at the house that morning, but as I stepped back into Juliana's room with a stack of clean linens, dark shadows crept in through the windows, the horizon a line of dull purple against the black sky.

Dr. Turner and Mama stood beside Juliana, speaking quietly with her as William kept his spot on the bed next to her. I remembered the debate months ago when William had wanted to hire an accoucheur to see Juliana through her confinement, but she had refused. She preferred the local physician to a stranger.

I eyed Dr. Turner as I handed the linens to Sophie, who set about organizing them. I'd never had occasion to meet Millbury's physician before tonight. I hoped he lived up to Juliana's trust in him.

"Any word?" Sophie asked quietly.

I shook my head. "It has only been a few hours. She'll likely not arrive until after midnight, if she leaves directly after the messenger arrives."

Nicholas was an excellent horseman. He must have arrived at Brayton by now, so it was just a matter of time. Even with all that had happened between us, I knew he would do everything in his power to bring Lady Rowley quickly. Juliana had asked after Lady Rowley only once, but I saw how often her eyes went to the door. Though I knew she loved Mama, she needed her grandmother.

A low string of curses came from the bed. Juliana's shoulders hunched together, and she hissed as she pressed both hands to her belly. Sophie and I exchanged a worried glance. The pains were coming quicker now.

"Devil take it," Juliana breathed as she fell back against her pillows.

William took her hand, watching her anxiously. "Is it worsening?"

She glared at him. "No, of course not. I reserve that sort of language for the most pleasant of circumstances."

I snorted, and Sophie hid a smile as she turned back to the linens. Not even childbirth could lessen Juliana's spirit.

William gave a halfhearted chuckle. "History would suggest otherwise."

Dr. Turner cleared his throat, and the joviality in the room, slight as it was, instantly vanished. "I must ask for the room again so I might examine Mrs. Rowley."

Everyone save for William and Mama acquiesced quickly, used to the way of things in the past few hours. Sophie and I waited silently in the dark corridor while the housekeeper and maid whispered nearby. I could not hear their words, but I knew their tone—the worry that we all tried to keep from Juliana.

When Mama came to the door a few minutes later, her lined face held a grave expression.

I stepped forward. “What’s happened?”

“The child is positioned wrong,” she said quietly. “Footling.”

Sophie grasped my arm. Even I, in all my inexperience, knew what that meant. An older cousin of mine had given birth footling, and neither she nor the child had survived.

“What can be done?” I tried to keep my voice from shaking.

“He will try and turn the baby, but if he cannot . . .”

My balance shifted, as if the house stood at an angle. “Juliana and the baby . . . they are in danger?”

“There is always danger in childbirth,” Mama whispered. “But more so now.”

I could barely speak. “How can we help?”

Mama shook her head, not meeting my eyes. “Pray, Rebecca. Pray.” She went back into the room, followed by a distraught Sophie and the servants. I moved to the open doorway, one hand on the door to steady myself.

Juliana clasped tight to William’s hand as if he were all that kept her from sinking into oblivion. William leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Juliana’s forehead. Beside them, Dr. Turner stood explaining the details of the procedure, how he would push and twist Juliana’s belly to force the baby’s head down and that there could be a variety of complications.

And quite suddenly, it was far too much for me. I’d tried to be brave, to be strong for Juliana, but could not do it any longer. She did not need to see another face full of fear.

With all eyes on Dr. Turner as he spoke, no one noticed as I backed away, the cool darkness welcoming me. Retreating to my room was out of the question; I had to be nearby, no matter that I could not be in the same room. I would never forgive myself if something happened and I was locked away, trapped by my own inadequacies.

I sat on the floor instead, some distance down the corridor. The cold of the wooden floor leached through my skirts and wrapped around my lungs, and I forced myself to inhale and exhale. I hated feeling like this, like there was nothing I could do. I desperately wanted to act, to help, to ensure that some way, somehow, everything would be well. But I could not. The cruel reality of life had taken my family in its jaws, and nothing but time could tell the rest of the story.

The calm murmur of voices from inside Juliana's room was a sharp contrast to the aching knot that had taken hold inside my chest. This was why I did not belong in that room. I would do more harm than good.

A clatter from outside the house caught my attention, and I straightened. Then the sounds came more clearly—horse hooves on the drive. I scrambled to my feet and flew down the stairs, reaching the ground floor as Mr. Banfield opened the front door. A woman swept inside without hesitation, her fair hair and lined face shadowed in the candlelight.

“Lady Rowley,” I cried. How was she here already? I'd done the calculations a dozen times in my head. A carriage could not have made the journey in the time she had.

“Rebecca.” She grasped my hands, her eyes intent. “How is she? Are we too late?”

“No, no,” I managed. “But please hurry. They are about to turn the baby.”

She did not hesitate a moment longer and rushed up the stairs, her cloak billowing behind her. She knew precisely where to go, this having been her home for more than forty years. I took one step to follow her and then stopped. I couldn't force my feet to move. Surely, Juliana had enough support, enough help. She did not need my paralyzing dread.

Besides that, I had someone to thank.

I turned back to see Nicholas's familiar silhouette fill the doorway, and he removed his hat as he stepped inside. In that moment, I wanted nothing more than to run to him, to have him envelop me in his arms. He knew how to calm my fears and silence my doubts.

But I could not expect that from him, not now. Any friendship between us was ruined, and I no longer had any claim to his comfort.

I stepped forward, my hands clasped before me. “Thank you,” I said softly. “You arrived not a moment too soon.”

He nodded but did not speak, toying with the brim of his hat.

“How—?” I swallowed. Simply talking with him was painful. “How did you manage the journey so quickly? We did not expect you for hours yet.”

He waved a hand up the stairs. “It was Lady Rowley. She insisted on riding instead of waiting for her carriage to be readied. A remarkable woman.”

“She is certainly that.”

Silence fell between us, thick as mud. I stared at the floor, tracing the grain of the marble. If this was how it would be now, I did not think I could bear it. No more comfortable teasing or frank discussions, only cold indifference.

“How is your sister-in-law?” he asked gruffly.

“As well as can be expected.” I rubbed my arms. The butler had closed the door behind Nicholas and retreated, but the entry was still cold, and the chill raised bumps along the length of my skin. “She will be bolstered by her grandmother though. You cannot imagine how you have helped.”

He nodded again, accepting the thanks without fanfare. That was Nicholas through and through—sincere and unassuming.

“Mama will wish to thank you.” I took a step backward. “I will go fetch her.”

“No,” Nicholas said, holding out a hand. “That is, I do not expect it. She has far more important things to attend to.”

I stopped. “Yes, you are right, of course.”

“But please send word when you have news of the baby.”

“I will.”

He hesitated, shifting his weight. “And if you have any need of me,” he said, “please know I am willing to do all I can.”

Why did he have to say such things? His kindness only made me feel all the worse.

“Are you all right, Reb—?” He stopped. “That is, Miss Rowley.”

Miss Rowley. At the moment, I quite hated the appellation.

“Fine,” I managed. “Fine.” How could I answer anything else when Juliana and her child struggled just upstairs?

A cry stabbed through the quiet of the house. Juliana. I clutched a hand to my throat as I spun to face the stairs. I had to go upstairs. I had to help, support, anything.

But I did not move.

“Do not let me delay you,” Nicholas said urgently behind me. “I will see myself out.”

My mouth would not form words, just as my feet would not move. Dr. Turner must have tried to turn the baby, but what had Juliana’s cry meant? That it had worked? That it had made everything all the worse? But even my burning questions could not overcome the overwhelming fear that clutched at my soul.

“Rebecca.” Nicholas was beside me, and his warm hand took my elbow and forced me to face him. His concerned eyes raked over me, like when I’d cut my hand in the meadow.

My vision blurred. “I am sorry,” I whispered. “I simply need a moment. It’s only that—” My voice cracked.

His hands found my shoulders, and his calm steadiness eased the rush of my heart. “Only what?” he asked quietly.

I stared up at him. “Only I am afraid.”

“Of course you are,” he said, squinting. “But that has never stopped you before.”

I shook my head. “It is not the same. Juliana—the baby—they could die, Nicholas. I cannot see beyond that. The panic chokes me, and I cannot bear it.”

His hands squeezed my shoulders. “That is not true in the least. You *can* bear it. You are strong and brave, Rebecca, more than you know. Do you remember what you said to me in the meadow? About your accident?”

Our conversation came back to me in broken pieces through the haze of my memory.

“You said you do not worry over what might happen in the future,” he said softly, “but instead focus on the joys of the now.”

I sniffed. “I’m afraid there is no joy in my life at present.”

“If you believe that, then I am not certain I know you at all.” He dropped his hands, leaving my shoulders cool from lack of his warmth. “Focus on your hope. That is your greatest strength, and it will see you and your family through tonight. They will need you, no matter the outcome.”

Hope. I took a deep breath. Hope. I had to endure this dark night, the endless hours that still stretched before me. If everything went well, Juliana and William would have a child. A baby, a new niece or nephew for me. I tried to imagine William’s face as he held his baby, a beautiful boy or girl. That would be joy indeed.

I looked up at Nicholas, his eyes still fixed on mine. “I will try,” I whispered.

“Then go be with your family,” he said. “Help them.”

He should not be so kind, so thoughtful. Not to me, the girl who had deceived him, however unknowingly.

My throat closed over, so instead of speaking, I rose up on my toes and pressed a kiss to his cheek, unshaven and rough against my lips. He stiffened, and I pulled away with a jerk, my face flaming. What was I thinking? I could not pretend things were the same as before.

I stared at the buttons of his waistcoat. “I . . . I will inform you when I have news of Juliana,” I said, stumbling over the words.

He nodded, and I hurried up the stairs, not daring to see if he still watched me.

When I reached Juliana’s room, I paused outside the door to listen. Was that Dr. Turner’s voice? I could not make out the words. But there were no more cries and no sign of tears. I straightened my back and slipped inside the room.

Juliana still lay on the bed, her pale face stark against her dark hair, damp and matted on her forehead. Eyes closed, she rested against her mountain of pillows. Lady Rowley sat beside her as William paced at the foot of the bed.

“Where have you been?” Mama murmured as I joined her near the window.

“Thanking Nicholas,” I said without thinking. Then I coughed. “Lieutenant Avery, that is. For bringing Lady Rowley so quickly.”

Mama eyed me but did not press further.

“Did it work?” I managed. “Did the baby turn?”

She nodded. “Yes. It was difficult, but Dr. Turner says the position is right now, and he is hopeful there will be no more complications.”

The knot inside me loosened by the slightest margin. Hope.

I slipped my arm through Mama’s. She froze, her arm rigid. I bit my cheek. I’d already lost Nicholas because of my wretched secret engagement. Would I lose my relationship with my mother as well?

Then she exhaled and placed her other hand on my arm, her soft touch reassuring. I had no misconceptions—our problems were far from over. But I would do everything in my power to rebuild her trust in me.

“Please,” I said. “Tell me how I can help.”

I spent the next hour working with Sophie, serving tea, directing servants, bringing anything Dr. Turner requested. Lady Rowley, Mama, and William stayed by Juliana's side in turns, helping her through each pain as it came. She barely made a sound as she bore the agony inside her, but she was weakening. She did not speak unless Dr. Turner asked a question, and even then it was in short, gasping words.

I did everything I could to keep my mind occupied. I stoked the fire and fetched water, things the maids certainly could have done, but I could not bear to be idle even a moment. The second I stopped, I would remember my fears.

Juliana's pains came quicker, only a minute or two apart as she clenched her teeth and ducked her chin into her chest. Dr. Turner examined her once more, and when he allowed Sophie and me back into the room, his somber expression told me all I needed to know, though his words confirmed it.

"It is time."

A strong dose of panic shot through my veins. Juliana lay in bed, her eyes glassy and unfocused, while Mama and Lady Rowley bustled around her, adjusting the bed linens and helping her into position as Dr. Turner directed. William stood at the foot of the bed, and both hands grasped the bedpost as he watched his wife prepare to deliver their child.

No matter how I loved Juliana, William's fear must have been a thousand times worse than mine. I stepped to him and laid a hand on his arm. He swung to face me, his eyes wild and red, his hair in disarray. William was always neat and tidy to a fault. But this night had undone him, as it had all of us.

"She will be all right," I whispered. "And the baby too. Dr. Turner is experienced. He knows what to do."

William stared at me, almost as if he had not heard me. "And if they are not all right?" he rasped. "If something happens and—"

I tightened my hold on his arm. "You cannot think like that, William. Juliana is strong. She can do this, but she needs you."

He turned back to Juliana, his face etched with unease.

"Have hope, William." I released his arm.

He gave a short nod, then straightened. He moved to Juliana's side and brushed back the hair from her face. She gave him a wan smile.

"Are you ready, Mrs. Rowley?" Dr. Turner asked.

Juliana took William's hand. "Yes," she said, and though her voice was weak, determination shone through. "I am ready."

Chapter Twenty-One

THE MILKY LIGHT OF DAWN slipped through the windows. My body protested as I sat up, knowing perfectly well that I'd had a fraction of the sleep I was used to. Well, that and the fact that I had slept in an armchair, which, while cushioned, was not nearly the equivalent of a bed.

"Ah, she awakes."

William's quiet, teasing voice crowded into my head, and I rubbed my eyes before focusing across the room. Juliana slept, her head tipped to one side, her cheeks claiming their natural pink once more. Mama sat in the chair beside the bed while William stood near the window with a bundle in his arms. No, not a bundle. A baby.

The events of last night blurred in my mind, but even exhaustion could not make me forget the moment just after midnight when all my fears had left me in a rush of exhilaration.

"A boy," Dr. Turner had declared.

"A boy?" William had gaped from where he'd held Juliana on the bed. "Is he well?"

"Perfectly well."

"A boy, William," Juliana whispered.

Lady Rowley had gone to Juliana and laid the wailing child in her arms. She had beamed, taking one tiny hand in hers as she'd shushed the sweet cries. William had wrapped one hand around her, laying the other gently on his child's tuft of dark hair.

Now that dark hair was hidden beneath a white cap, though William's soft smile remained as he gazed down at his son in his arms, both lit by the morning glow outside.

"What time is it?" I spoke quietly so as not to rouse Juliana. She needed her rest. In fact, she deserved a week of sleep after all she'd gone through.

"Not yet six o'clock," Mama said.

"Where have the others gone?"

"To bed, hopefully," William said. "Where you both should be."

"I would have gone to bed if you had woken me," I grumbled, not at all serious. I hadn't wanted to leave.

William narrowed his eyes. "Your snores were so soothing to little Andrew that we didn't dare disturb you."

"I was only preparing him for his father's wretched snores."

“Oh, hush, you two,” Mama said. “You’ll wake Juliana.”

William shook his head. “I doubt she would wake even if you brought the pianoforte up here and pounded out a concerto.” He made his way across the room to me, bouncing his precious bundle with every step. “You did not have the chance to hold him last night,” he said.

“Oh.” I’d purposely kept back and allowed Mama, Lady Rowley, and Sophie to shower the baby with love. “All right, then.”

“You needn’t sound so thrilled at the prospect.”

I did not answer as he gently laid the baby in my arms, his head in the crook of my elbow. I sat frozen, staring down at him. Small, round nose, smooth skin, and pink eyelids closed to the world. His breathing was the tiniest rhythm against my chest.

A lump formed in my throat. “Hello, little Andrew,” I whispered. “You gave us a fright last night. But I am so glad you are here.”

His lips puckered at my words, as if displeased, and I traced his little fingers that curled about the edge of the blanket. When I’d first held Rachel’s oldest, a testy girl who had howled at anyone’s touch beside her mother’s, my fifteen-year-old self had anxiously handed her off as soon as possible. But now . . . the rough edges around my heart began to fall away. Perhaps children were not so terrible.

I looked up to see Mama and William exchanging a glance as they came to sit beside me, some understanding passing between them.

I cleared my throat. “Now seems as good a time as any to apologize.”

Mama sighed. “Please, Rebecca.”

“No, I must say this, Mama.” I held Andrew a little tighter, as if he might calm my unease. “I knew I was lying and that I was breaking your trust. I convinced myself it was for the best, that *I* knew what was best. But if I’d told you both from the start, yesterday would not have been such a mess. Neither of you needed the extra strain that I caused.”

Mama held up a hand. “You cannot blame yourself for what happened with Juliana. It was unfortunate timing, to be sure, but not of your doing.”

“I can certainly still blame myself for not telling the both of you about Edward.”

She leaned back in her chair. “Indeed, I spent a great deal of last night doing the same thing. Blaming you, that is.”

I hated the disappointment in her voice. I’d never made such a mistake before, never tested our relationship in this way.

“I am sorry for it,” I said softly. “I went about it all wrong, and I fear I have forever ruined not only your opinion of me but also of Edward. He is a good man, I swear.”

“A lady does not swear, Rebecca.” Mama spoke in reproach, yet her voice was almost amused.

“Save for Juliana,” William said. “Though she might also take issue with being called a lady.”

I squinted at the two on them. They were *teasing* me. “Are—are you not angry with me?”

Mama’s fingers ran over the arms of her chair as if searching there for the right words. “I cannot say what I am feeling. I was angry; I cannot deny it. I could not imagine why you felt you could not tell me about—” She waved her hand, and I knew she could not bring herself to say Edward’s name. “But after last night, it all seems less important now. And I do not want to be angry anymore.”

“Neither do I,” William said quietly. “I think it is time we were all truthful with one another. About everything.”

I looked at him, then back to Mama. “Does that mean you will tell me what happened? Between Papa and Mr. Bainbridge?”

“Yes,” she said. “There is no reason you should not know.”

Andrew still breathed softly in my arms, warm against my chest. It was unfathomable to me that he was here, safe, when only hours ago he had struggled for his life.

Mama set her hands carefully in her lap. “Perhaps it might be helpful for you to tell us what you already know.”

I nodded. “Yes, of course. Well, I read Papa’s record, though not much of it. And then I found his letter.”

“Letter?” William repeated “What letter?”

“From Mr. Bainbridge,” I said. “He threatened to reveal a secret about Papa and the company, something that would ruin him.”

“You read that?” William sat back in his chair and crossed his arms. “Why did you not ask me about it?” He shook his head. “Never mind, because it would have given away your secret, of course.”

“Yes.” I shifted my weight. “But it troubled me; I will not lie. I could not understand why Papa would pay Mr. Bainbridge unless he had been involved in some wrongdoing.”

Mama’s shoulders dropped in resignation. “You are right.”

I'd spent the last two weeks attempting to convince myself it had been an error, a misunderstanding. I could not fool myself any longer. "What happened?"

"Your father made a mistake," she said, voice thick. "All good men do, and he was no exception."

"What mistake?" I pressed.

"Fifteen years ago, the company was still in its infancy, barely afloat. While Papa was traveling to India to procure a shipment of silks, the tariff was raised in England. When he returned, he did not have the money to pay the full amount." Her eyes hardened. "Mr. Bainbridge convinced him to bribe the tax collector, told him it was commonly done. Your papa was desperate. He would have lost the company without this shipment. He felt he had no choice and agreed."

My stomach twisted painfully. Papa *had* been in the wrong. But not at all like I had imagined.

"He regretted it immediately," Mama went on, voice laced with sorrow. "Afterward, he decided he would never compromise his integrity like that again. Mr. Bainbridge was less willing to make the same decision. That is what drove them apart and, consequently, our families."

"So that is the secret Mr. Bainbridge meant to reveal?"

"Yes," she confirmed. "After Papa bought Mr. Bainbridge's share in the company, the horrible man was greedy for more, bitter he'd had to sell. He knew all the details of the bribe and could prove it happened. Only your father would take the blame. So Mr. Bainbridge threatened to expose him if he did not pay him an exorbitant amount once a year."

"Papa paid," William said. "Though you know that from the letter. He was determined to fix what he'd done to save our family's future. He paid every year until he died."

His words spun in my mind. "Why did you not just tell me this weeks ago?" I said softly.

"I . . ." Mama paused. "I know how you carry your memories of Papa. That is also my fault, building him up in your head as the image of perfection. But when he died—" She hesitated. "When he died, you no longer had your father. You were so young."

"I am no longer eleven years old, Mama." My voice ached in my throat, raw. "You needn't protect me from the truth."

“There was never any reason to tell you.” She shook her head. “Even when you asked about the Bainbridges when you returned from Brighton, I never imagined you had any motivation other than curiosity. If I’d known you were engaged, this conversation would have happened a great deal sooner.”

“Would that it had,” I murmured. How many problems could have been avoided if we hadn’t all been so determined we knew what was best? The image of Nicholas standing in the entry last night, consoling me in my fears, flashed across my mind. My heart withered.

“In any case,” Mama said, her voice taking on an odd, businesslike tone, “what has happened is in the past, and we must decide how to face this all moving forward.”

“What do you mean?”

She regarded me intently. “Are you certain of this man, Rebecca? That he has your best interests at heart? That he will love you and care for you?”

I swallowed, looking down again at the sleeping baby in my arms. There were very few things I was certain about at the moment, and I wished desperately that Edward were one of them.

I’d known him but a few weeks in Brighton, weeks where we’d been forced to hide our growing affection from his mother. Followed by over a month where our only communication was letters smuggled through Marjorie. And of course, our reunion yesterday had not gone at all as planned. We’d hardly had enough time to know each other, let alone sort out how we might work together.

But I knew him. I knew he was kind and honorable and intelligent. I had to trust that we would find our way together.

“He is a good man,” I said softly. “I know he is.”

Mama looked to William, who nodded. “Then we think you ought to invite your Mr. Bain—” She stumbled a little on his name. “Your Mr. Bainbridge to dinner. If he is as worthy as you say, he will have his chance.”

I stared at her, her words hanging in the air between us. This was all that I had wanted—a chance for Edward to prove to my family that he was different from his parents. This future had seemed so unattainable for so long, and now it was right here before me. My chest felt full, as if it would burst. With happiness? No, that was not the right emotion. This was too heavy, too uncertain to be happiness.

But Mama watched me with such expectation. I pushed away my hesitation. She was giving this to me, this gift. She was putting aside her own experiences and pain to help me, and I could not ignore that.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “I know he will be glad to hear it.”

A knock came at the door, and Lady Rowley stepped inside, remarkably refreshed for a woman who had galloped through the night to reach her granddaughter in labor. Not to mention it was early yet; she could not have slept more than a few hours after leaving Juliana with William, Mama, and me last night. I was certain my hair was a matted mess from sleeping on the chair.

“Good morning,” she said cheerfully. “And how is our newest arrival?”

For a moment, I thought she meant Edward, until I remembered the baby in my arms.

“All is well,” Mama said. “He is sleeping, and so is Juliana.”

“Good.” Lady Rowley stepped to me and held out her arms. “May I? I feel like I barely had a chance last night.”

“Of course.” I stood and gently transferred Andrew to her. No matter that holding him hadn’t been quite so awkward as I’d thought, I was still relieved to give him up. Lady Rowley held him with such practiced care. I could not imagine being so comfortable with an infant.

“You all ought to find your beds,” she said reproachfully. “Especially you, William. You will be of no use to Juliana if you cannot keep your eyes open.”

“He’s not much use anyway,” came Juliana’s voice from the bed.

We all turned to see her propping herself up against the pillows, wincing as she adjusted her position.

“I am glad to know my wife appreciates my many talents,” William said as he went to her side and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

She gave him a tired smile. “You really should sleep a few hours. I will be fine.”

“I’m not tired,” William said.

Lady Rowley joined him by the bed. “Perhaps not now, but you will be soon enough. Now go. I will stay with Juliana and little Andrew.”

William hesitated, but when Juliana raised an eyebrow, daring him to challenge them both, he sighed. “All right,” he said. “But only a few hours.”

As we stepped into the corridor a minute later, Mama bid us farewell, her eyes vague with exhaustion. She started away toward her room, and I moved to follow.

“A moment, Rebecca,” William said.

I turned back. From his crossed arms, I wagered I knew what he wanted to discuss. “Yes?”

“You said you meant to tell us about your engagement, eventually. Can the same be said of your tendency to ride without a saddle?”

“Ah,” I said. “Here I was, hoping you’d forgotten.”

“Not a chance.” He shook his head. “I hardly know what to think, Rebecca. You insist that I trust you, that you are aware of your abilities, but then you do something like this that puts your safety in obvious question. Clearly, you haven’t been riding with a groom, or I would have heard of this, so—”

“You are right.”

He stopped midbreath, squinting at me. “What?”

“You are right,” I said. “I haven’t been riding with a groom.”

He dropped his arms. “Then you must understand my frustration. I only want to keep you safe.”

“I do understand.” I spoke quietly. “As I hope you will understand when I explain.”

He considered that a moment, then nodded for me to go on.

“I haven’t been riding with a groom,” I began, “but that does not mean I’ve been riding alone.”

“With who, then?” But his furrowed brow lifted almost immediately. “Lieutenant Avery.”

“Yes,” I confirmed. “He has been watching me during my practice. We thought it the perfect arrangement since neither of us—” My voice caught. “In any case, I have tried to keep my promise to you. I took no unreasonable risks.”

“Save for the very act of riding bareback.”

“Which in and of itself is not terribly risky,” I countered. “In fact, I would argue it is safer than a sidesaddle, since it is much easier to slip off in the event that my mount spooks or rears.”

He opened his mouth and then shut it. “All right,” he said. “Since I have no experience in either of those methods of riding, I shall have to concede that point.”

I tried not to let my hope rise too much. A hit in our match did not mean I had won.

“Please, William,” I said softly. “I did not ride bareback as a way to defy you or to rebel against any of your rules. I may have felt that at times, but that was not how it began. I only—” I exhaled. “I only wanted a chance to fly.”

He stared at me, his face curiously pained. “And I have spent the last few years terrified of what would happen if you did,” he said softly. “I thought I had to be the one to catch you if you fell. I thought I was doing my duty, trying to keep you safe.” He shook his head. “*Trying* being the key word. But that is no longer my responsibility, and I should have given it up ages ago. You may not make decisions I agree with, but they are yours to make, not mine.”

His words brought me a strange mixture of satisfaction and fear. For so long, I had wanted this—this acknowledgment that I was more than just a child to him. But he was right. I was the one responsible for my decisions. And my decisions had consequences.

“I can only hope that your Mr. Bainbridge can handle a wife such as you,” he said, lightening our conversation.

I thumped him on the shoulder. “You would not wish me any different, admit it.”

He chuckled and rubbed his shoulder as if I had actually hurt him. “Sometimes I imagine how simple it would be to have a timid and obliging sister.”

“Then you realize it would be utterly boring?”

“Precisely.”

We grinned at each other, and although I still felt the turmoil of all that had happened in the last day, I could not help but count myself lucky. Even with so many unknowns before me, I had my family.

I went to my room, bone weary, and fell onto my bed. I would be rather happy to lay here without moving for the rest of the day, but I needed to write Edward, tell him everything I’d learned. I ought to have been filled with blissful joy, knowing everything I wanted was finally within reach.

Instead, all I felt was the emptiness that had claimed me since yesterday. Since Nicholas had learned the truth about me.

I wrapped my arms around my knees. We had both made mistakes, Nicholas and I. The closer we’d grown, the more dangerous it had become,

like gunpowder near a flame. And just like gunpowder, our lives had exploded.

And they would never be the same.

Chapter Twenty-Two

I PACED THE ENTRY, THE cool evening light coloring everything shades of red and purple. I stopped at the window to check the road once again. He could not be late, not tonight.

I had written Edward yesterday before I'd slept away the rest of the morning and told him everything, though I wished I could have done it in person. Now that it was all settled with Mama and William—well, more or less settled—I had a restless itch to see Edward again. Our reunion had been such a disaster that I felt as if I had lost some important part of our relationship. I wanted to reclaim the excitement from Brighton, find that smile he kept just for me.

But I also did not want to test Mama's newfound goodwill toward the Bainbridges, and leaving to see him so soon after Andrew's birth would likely have done just that. In my letter, I'd explained what Mama had said about Papa and his father, telling him I thought it to be the whole truth. How might he react to learning what his father had done? Would he struggle as I had when I'd thought Papa to be in the wrong?

But his note in return, delivered last evening, had held no hint of resentment or disagreement. Instead, he'd said that what I'd told him made a great deal of sense in light of what his mother had said over the past few weeks. She had no lack of bitterness against my parents, especially now that he had defied her to come to Havenfield.

I rested one hand on the window beside the front door, still searching the empty road, my stomach twisted. I would have to face Mrs. Bainbridge eventually. She would be my mother-in-law, after all, no matter that she hated me. Perhaps in time, she would grow to like me. Or at least tolerate me.

Finally, just before six o'clock, a horse and rider appeared at the end of the lane leading to the house. I breathed a sigh of relief as the footman went to the door. Edward was not late.

When Edward stepped into the entry, he handed the footman his hat and gloves before spotting me and offering me a smile, though it held a touch of stiffness. We met in the center of the marble floor, where he bowed and I offered a curtsy.

"I did not expect so lovely a welcome," he said.

"What sort of welcome did you imagine?"

"Your brother with his dueling pistols certainly crossed my mind."

I let out a strangled sort of laugh. “I would not have put it past him two days ago.”

Edward stepped closer, his dark brows furrowed. “I am sorry for forcing you through that. I was not thinking rationally.”

“No matter,” I said with a false brightness. “What is done is done, and now we press forward. You must make an excellent impression tonight since you failed to do so upon your first meeting.”

“I will try my best, I promise.”

For a moment, it seemed as though he would lean forward and kiss me like he had all those weeks ago in the garden when he’d proposed. I froze.

But instead, he cleared his throat and offered me his arm. “Shall we?”

I took his arm, and he pulled me close to his side, with one hand on mine. But it did not feel the same as it once had, when we’d skirted the shadows at balls.

But of course it does not feel the same, I reasoned as I led the way to the drawing room, where Mama and William waited. Things were different now. We were different. In time, we would settle into this new normal between us. But right now, we were simply unused to being together without hiding our true feelings.

Once this evening was behind us, once Mama and William accepted Edward and he them, everything would be well.

It had to be.



Dinner was nearly as awkward as I’d imagined. Since Mama was determined to put the past behind us, she had insisted beforehand that there be no discussion of Mr. Bainbridge or Papa or anything to do with their pasts. But at least then we might have had something interesting to discuss. The uncomfortable silences that hung between comments on the food or weather were almost as unbearable as accusations of cheating might have been.

When Mama and I rose to leave the men and retire to the drawing room, poor Edward sent me a look of such panic that I would have laughed if this all weren’t so serious. But William showed no intention of following us, clearly wishing for a word with Edward, so I had no choice but to trail behind Mama as she left the dining room.

“What do you think William will say to him?” I asked, tugging up my gloves.

“They won’t erupt in a round of fisticuffs, if that is what you are worrying about,” she replied as we started down the corridor. “I daresay your brother simply wishes to ensure Mr. Bainbridge is serious in his attachment to you before this all goes any further.”

I glanced at the closed door behind us. What I wouldn’t give to eavesdrop on that conversation. But I trailed behind Mama as she swept into the drawing room and seated herself beside the fire.

“Lady Rowley is with Juliana and the baby?” I asked as I sat across from her.

She nodded. “She seemed pleased to have them to herself for the night. William hovers rather terribly, does he not?”

“And it is only the start, I have no doubt.”

We lapsed into silence again, the crackling of the flames far too loud in my ears. Mama and I had never lacked for words before this, but apparently, our ease of conversation was another casualty of my wretched secret-keeping.

“I know it is likely too soon to pose this question,” I said, keeping my voice even and unaffected. Mostly. “But—”

“But what do I think of young Mr. Bainbridge?”

I nodded, watching her closely.

She twisted her mouth to one side. “Truthfully, I expected to find some horrible flaw in him, considering his parentage.”

“So you like him?”

“That I cannot say yet.” She leaned back in her chair. “But I do not immediately dislike him, so I suppose that is a point in his favor.”

“If he had been anyone else,” I said, “anyone but Mr. Bainbridge’s son, *then* would you like him?”

Her expression sharpened. “I am trying, Rebecca, I promise. But this will take time, no matter how polite and charming your affianced may be.”

“Ah,” I said with a ghost of smile. “Then you concede he is charming.”

“Unfortunately, that is not the most important quality in a husband.”

My throat pinched, and I tried to swallow against the sudden pain. Nicholas’s words came back to me from the night we had kissed, when he’d listed the qualities he wanted in a wife. *That is the sort of woman who could enchant me.* The memory sent a shiver over my skin even though I sat before the fire.

“Of course not,” I managed. “He has other admirable qualities that I know you will see in time.”

She eyed me. “I hope so. I must admit that beyond my shock at your engagement, I was disappointed.”

I sighed. “I know, Mama, and I am sor—”

She waved me off. “That is not what I meant. I simply thought that perhaps you had begun to develop affection for another gentleman entirely.”

I stared at the fire, the wisps of flame reaching out to lick the air only to retreat back a second later. “You mean Lieutenant Avery.”

“Of course I do. The two of you get along so well, I could not help but hope. And just think, if he were to purchase Linwood Hall, you could live nearby.”

“Mama.” I shook my head. “You must drive such a notion from your head. I am engaged to Edward, and I am perfectly happy as such.” My tongue felt dry. “In any case, I am afraid my relationship with the lieutenant is thoroughly ruined.”

She stayed quiet a long moment. “Might I ask what happened between the two of you?” she finally asked. “I have my own guess, but I’d rather hear it from you.”

I slumped back in my chair. “I made too many mistakes. That is what happened.”

“I hardly think that could be the entirety of the problem,” she said. “Because if I do not miss my mark, Lieutenant Avery is quite in love with you.”

“Mama!” I straightened and glanced at the open drawing room door. “You cannot say such things when Edward is here.”

“But I am not wrong, am I?”

My hands found the arms of my chair, something solid for me to ground myself. “I do not know. I—I think he may have had feelings for me . . . once. But surely not any longer.”

“I sincerely doubt that,” she said. “I have enough experience with love to tell you it is not so easily abandoned.”

I shook my head. “It does not matter one way or another.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I am marrying Edward, regardless of Nicholas’s feelings.”

“But what of your feelings? Have they no bearing in your future?”

“Please stop, Mama.” Why did she press me on this? Was it her prejudice against Edward or her preference for Nicholas? Either way, I could not let her words take root inside me. I could not let myself doubt the course I had chosen. If I allowed one thread of uncertainty to come loose from my tightly woven future, it would all unravel.

Mama still watched me with pursed lips and fine lines around her eyes. “I am sorry,” I said. “But I do not wish to talk about this any longer.”

She sat forward in her chair as if she intended to ignore me, but then voices sounded outside the door. William and Edward stepped inside the drawing room, and I stood immediately, my hands shaking. Mama’s words had brought my roiling guilt to the surface yet again. I’d kissed Nicholas, no matter that I regretted it. Though I was determined to put it behind me, my guilt seemed equally determined to be remembered.

William gave me a searching look before taking the seat beside Mama, and Edward sat to my left, blocking the warmth of the fire.

I was finished dancing around this business. “May I take it as a good sign that you both appear relatively unscathed?”

Mama choked slightly, and Edward froze beside me, but William gave a bark of laughter.

“I cannot comprehend how you managed to keep this a secret for so long,” he said, propping one ankle up on his knee. “Subtlety is not your strong suit.”

“Nor yours,” I pointed out. “But you did not answer my question.”

William raised an eyebrow. “Because you needn’t worry about the answer.”

“I—”

Edward coughed, and I stopped, though I wanted nothing more than to interrogate them both. But clearly this was something that would remain between the two, and I had to be content with that.

“I was glad to learn your brother is an Oxford man,” Edward said, sitting forward as he forced the change in subject.

“Indeed,” William said. “In fact, I wonder that we did not meet while at school. When did you attend?”

They fell into a rather bland conversation about shared acquaintances and a certain professor of philosophy who was universally abhorred. It was not precisely the connection I’d hoped for between my future husband and

my brother, but it was certainly an improvement on their interaction of two days ago. At least there was no shouting this time.

When tea arrived a quarter hour later, Mama rose to serve and William went to help her, though that should have been my responsibility. Did he wish to escape more conversation with Edward? I pushed that thought away. I could not fall into this trap, analyzing every little thing.

“I think it is going well,” I whispered to Edward beside me. “Notwithstanding your mysterious conversation.”

He nodded, focused on my mother and William at the tea service. “As well as can be expected.”

He said nothing more, and I hurried to find a new topic. “Have you heard from your mother yet?”

“A letter came this morning,” he said. “She seems to have calmed, having realized she has no control over my fortune or future.” He hesitated. “But I do think it will take her some time to adjust to the idea of you.”

“Surely, she cannot hate me forever.”

He inclined his head. “No one can hate you, Rebecca, not once they come to know you. She will grow to love you; I have no doubt.”

I did not particularly care that Mrs. Bainbridge disliked me; I’d known that for weeks. But hearing Edward’s opinion of me, that he thought me worth the fight, settled a few of the fears that had begun to nag in the back of my mind.

“And you shall have plenty of opportunity to show her how wonderful you are, of course,” he went on.

“What do you mean?”

“Only that you’ll be in such close quarters that it would be difficult for her not to realize—”

“Close quarters?” I cut him off. “Will your mother not be staying in Brighton?”

“I thought she might, but in her letter, she professed a desire to come to Somerford once we are married.”

“To *live* there?”

He frowned. “Yes. Of course.”

I did not speak. The Bainbridges owned two homes besides Somerford. Why should Mrs. Bainbridge feel any need to live with us?

Edward turned to me, understanding filling his face. “I know it is not ideal, Rebecca, but this is her olive branch. She wants to make amends, I

think.”

“And she could not make amends from Brighton?”

“She wishes to help you in running the household, show you how it is done,” he said. “You must allow her a chance.”

So not only would she live with us, but she would also be usurping my role as mistress of the house. I’d been raised well by my mother. I knew how to run a household, even if it did not inspire any great passion in me. Now it would be an extra chore knowing Mrs. Bainbridge watched my every move.

But what could I say that would not paint me as unforgiving? And it would not be forever. Perhaps in time, Mrs. Bainbridge and I could get along, once she moved past her prejudices against me. Would it not be worth some patience on my part, to help heal the wounds between our families?

“All right,” I finally said. “I shall concede. But you can be sure I will use this as leverage the next time we have a disagreement.”

He smiled. “I would never think otherwise.”

Mama and William joined us again, and as I sipped my tea, I hoped the soothing warmth would calm my twisting stomach. This development was one small problem, especially compared to what we had faced even days ago.

Still. If only I could talk to Nicholas. He could always reason with my worries, help me understand how to approach a problem. But talking with him was no longer an option.

And I was just beginning to realize how deeply I’d come to rely on him.

Chapter Twenty-Three

MR. PORTER'S VOICE DRONED FROM where he stood at the pulpit, the morning light filtering through the stained-glass window behind him. One would think that sitting beside one's intended would ease the dullness of Mr. Porter's sermon. Unfortunately, not even Edward's presence beside me made the vicar's sermonizing any more interesting.

In fact, Edward seemed even more bored than I was. He shifted his weight, crossing and uncrossing his arms, and his gaze strayed from Mr. Porter every few seconds. At least we would be equally matched in terms of tolerance for boring church services.

It had been three days since that uncomfortable but not entirely disastrous dinner. Mama had invited Edward to stay at Havenfield, in the hopes that we might all grow to know one another better. It was utterly strange to have him there, at every meal and during all hours of the day, as if I were living in a half dream.

The awkwardness between Edward and me was easing but not as swiftly as I'd hoped. Of course, every conversation we had was in Mama's presence. Now we had an audience for every word—an audience who, despite her assurances to the contrary, was eager to find any flaw in Edward that she could. But Edward was all that was thoughtful and proper.

Perhaps *too* proper. In our time together, he had not yet tried to kiss me. Should such a fact bother me? But we were still reacquainting ourselves, after all. One could not simply fall back into the same intimacy as before when so much had changed between us. That must be the reason.

It was certainly *not* because of Nicholas's kiss.

This parade of thoughts was, of course, a meaningless distraction from the fact that I was fully aware of Nicholas sitting a few pews behind me. I'd spotted him and Olivia as we'd made our way up the aisle, and although Olivia had given me a little wave, Nicholas had kept his eyes focused forward. Had he not seen me, or was he purposely avoiding me? In any case, I did not allow my attention to waver during the entirety of the service.

When at last Mr. Porter concluded his sermon and the congregation filed out the open doors, I followed behind Mama and Edward.

"Rebecca Rowley." Sarah Mason came toward me through the crowd. "I have heard the strangest rumor about you, and I am determined—" She stopped, spotting Edward beside me.

“It is true,” she declared. “You are engaged.”

I could hardly have expected to keep such news quiet much longer. Edward had sat in our family’s pew for the whole town to see, after all. I also had no doubt Havenfield’s servants had been talking, spreading word throughout the town. Yet knowing that my name and Edward’s were now being bandied about Millbury—and all England, for all I knew—made my stomach squirm as if I’d just been asked to sing in front of the entire church congregation.

“I am indeed,” I said, my voice a bit too bright. “Sarah, may I introduce Mr. Edward Bainbridge. Edward, this my friend Miss Sarah Mason.”

“A pleasure, Miss Mason,” Edward said, offering a bow.

She bobbed a curtsy. “Forgive my lack of manners, Mr. Bainbridge, but you cannot imagine my shock at learning the news.”

One corner of his mouth turned upward. “I can imagine a very little.”

“I assume you met in Brighton?” Sarah asked, turning to me. “But why such secrecy?”

I bit my lip. I hardly wanted the enmity between our families to be common knowledge, but perhaps it was only a matter of time. “I simply wasn’t certain my mother would approve of the union,” I managed. “She is ever so protective of me.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow, and for a moment, I thought she would voice her suspicions. But before she could, I felt a tugging on my shawl. I turned to see Olivia behind me, her sharp chin jutted upward. I nearly dropped my prayer book but gathered my senses and glanced about. Nicholas was nowhere to be seen.

“Good morning, Miss Olivia,” I said, forcing a smile. “How are you today?”

She ignored my question. “Are you angry with Nicholas?” she demanded.

My throat was suddenly hot. “Angry? Why on earth would I be angry?”

“He told me I should not come speak to you.” She frowned. “I asked him why, but he would not say, so I thought perhaps you were unhappy with him.”

My mouth parted. “I—” I stopped. How could I respond to that? Edward and Sarah both watched with a bit too much interest. “No, of course

I am not unhappy with him.”

“Then why can I not speak with you?”

Because your brother kissed me, and I deceived him, and our friendship broke beyond repair, and I cannot bear to see him, just as I am sure he does not wish to see me.

I laid a hand on her shoulder. “I am certain you simply misunderstood. Of course you may speak with me whenever you like. We are friends, after all.”

The tension in her face eased. “Good. I was worried, because now that Nicholas is le—”

“Olivia.”

Nicholas’s sharp voice came from behind me, and blast it all if it didn’t make my heart stumble like a foal first finding its feet.

I turned. Nicholas stood a few feet away, his expression made all the more severe by the scar taut against his jaw. He avoided my eyes as he gestured for Olivia. “Come, it is time to go.”

Olivia hesitated. She had been about to say something to me before Nicholas had interrupted. What was it?

Before Olivia could speak, Sarah rose up onto her toes beside me. “Oh, Lieutenant Avery, do come join us. Have you heard the news that our dear Miss Rowley is to be married?”

I stiffened, and Nicholas froze. For a moment, I thought he might ignore Sarah, drag Olivia away to their carriage, and leave. But then his eyes found mine. For a moment, I saw everything inside him. Broken, torn, shattering pain. My breath felt like ice inside me.

His gaze shifted to Edward beside me. “I had heard.” His voice was gravelly, cool. “Allow me to offer you both my congratulations. I wish you the happiest of futures, Miss Rowley.”

He took Olivia’s hand, and they left without another word, though she looked back at me in confusion.

“How odd,” Sarah said. “He is generally very amiable, is he not, Rebecca?”

I watched Nicholas’s retreating back, tense beneath his jacket. I had allowed a small part of myself to hope that we might remain friends, but now . . . now that hope withered like an apple left too long on the branch. I’d never imagined he would treat me so indifferently.

But Sarah had spoken to me, and I needed to respond. “Perhaps the sermon did not sit well with him,” I said quietly.

Edward gave a short laugh. “He would not be the only one.”

Sarah claimed Edward’s attention with questions about Brighton and how we had met there. Fortunately, she seemed intent on learning all the details of our engagement from him, and I was not required to speak more than a few times. My pulse had not yet resumed its normal rhythm.

Eventually, Sarah’s mother called her away, and Mama came to join us.

“Are you ready, Rebecca?” she asked, straightening her hat.

I nodded. Seeing Nicholas had unsettled me more than I would have imagined, and all I wanted was to hide away in my room for the remainder of the day.

“I wondered if I might ask for the privilege of accompanying Rebecca home?” Edward asked. “Since the weather is holding today, I thought we could walk.”

“Oh.” Mama glanced at me. “Of course, if Rebecca is not opposed.”

A long walk with Edward sounded as appealing at the moment as sitting through another of Mr. Porter’s sermons. I did not think I had the energy to keep up a conversation for the half hour it would take to return to Havenfield. But I smiled as cheerfully as I could manage. “A walk would be lovely.”

I took his arm as we bid Mama farewell and then started along the lane. We walked in silence for a minute or two as carriages rumbled past us and the chatter from the townspeople faded into the trees behind us. The day’s warmth surrounded us, the sun shining too cheerily amid the streaks of clouds.

A touch of heaven. My father’s words whispered on the breeze, my memory of his voice distorted by the years since his death. What would he think of my marrying Edward? Would he have held his grudge, or would he have allowed the son of his former partner a fair chance?

I could not stop my mind from asking the next question. What would he have thought of Nicholas?

I tightened my hold on Edward’s arm.

“Am I allowed to ask about the gentleman who just congratulated us?” Edward asked as if he’d guessed the direction of my thoughts. “Is he not the same man who was with you the day I arrived?”

I immediately regretted accepting his invitation for a walk. I did not want to discuss Nicholas, especially not with him, but neither could I invite Edward's suspicion by refusing to answer. "That is Lieutenant Avery," I said. "He has let the estate that borders Havenfield."

"Is he a friend of yours?"

Ha. A friend. I'd thought he was my friend. After all, I had made perfectly clear that was all I could offer, and he had gone and disregarded that notion completely. Now it seemed he was determined to ignore me, even after all we'd been through together.

"Not anymore." I shook my head. "Let us talk of something else, please. The lieutenant is of no concern to you or me."

He did not seem terribly convinced. "All right, then. I do have another subject I wished to discuss with you." He paused. "I have been thinking we ought to decide upon a wedding date."

"Oh." Obviously, we needed to discuss this, yet I hadn't anticipated it. "Already? I daresay Mama is only just starting to warm to the idea of you."

"I understand," he said. "I do. But I should like to be settled at Somerford before the weather sets in."

I fidgeted with the strings of my bonnet. "Yes, of course you are right."

"The banns will need to be read, and we must allow Mother time to travel here, as I am certain she'll wish to attend the wedding. Might we say the end of the month?"

Three weeks. The end of the month was three weeks away. Such a short time was not unheard of, especially as we'd been engaged far longer than that.

I stifled the bloom of panic that had begun to rise inside me. What had I expected? That we'd remain engaged for years on end? Of course Edward would want to marry soon. We'd waited long enough.

"I shall broach the subject with Mama and William tonight," I said with far more confidence than I felt.

"Good." He patted my hand, his touch warm and familiar. I was being silly. Every bride was nervous before her wedding, was she not? Edward and I would be happy together. I needed only to endure the next few weeks.

Although *endure* was entirely the wrong word. I should be blissfully happy, not trapped by doubt and regrets. This was no way for us to start our lives together. No matter what had happened, we both deserved to enjoy our

engagement, and I would do everything I could to reclaim what happiness we'd known before.

"If the weather is still fine tomorrow," I said lightly, "perhaps we ought to go for a ride? I would so enjoy showing you the estate."

"I should like that very much. Your mother has gone on about your skill on horseback, and I've yet to witness it firsthand."

"My mama doesn't know half the skills I have," I said with a wink.

"Oh?" Edward smiled down at me, and for the first time since he'd arrived at Havenfield, it felt like a true smile. This was the smile he'd given me in Brighton, the one that had made me catch my breath. "What do you plan to dazzle me with?"

His smile made me reckless. "Well." I leaned toward him conspiratorially, though there was no one to overhear us on the deserted country road. "I have been teaching myself."

"Teaching yourself what?"

"To ride bareback, like the trick riders at Astley's. I am not nearly as skilled as they are, of course. You'll not see any flips or—"

He stopped, and since my arm was still wrapped in his, I stopped as well. "Bareback?" he repeated in disbelief.

"Yes, and you mustn't look so shocked. It is not terribly difficult, and I am getting quite good at it. Learning to mount was the greatest challenge, what with my height, but even then I think I've mastered the skill at last." I was blathering, but I could not help it. Why was he not saying anything?

"Rebecca," he finally said. "You must know that I would never forbid you to ride, not when you clearly love it so. But bareback? You cannot expect to continue after we are married. Such a thing is hardly a worthy pursuit for a respectable lady, especially a married one. What would people say?"

I narrowed my eyes. "I do not plan on galloping around Lancashire, if that is your worry. I am more than able to be discreet, I assure you."

But he shook his head. "You cannot keep such a thing hidden. Someone would see, a servant or tenant. Then where would we be? I am only thinking of your well-being. I would hate for your reputation to suffer, not when there was anything I could do to prevent it."

"You mean *your* reputation." My pulse quickened. "Because anything I do would reflect upon you."

He looked relieved. “Yes, of course. You must see how it is important to uphold appearances. We are still a relatively new family in our town, and any hint of scandal would hurt our name terribly.”

“Yes,” I said shortly. “I do see.”

I pulled my arm from his, and for the first time, he seemed to realize I was not particularly happy with him.

“Rebecca,” he said, stepping forward. “Please. I do not mean to sound so heavy-handed. But this is important to me. My mother would agree with me, I have no doubt.”

“Oh. Your mother, who lied to you and who hates me? Yes, we should certainly defer to her superior knowledge on this matter.”

A glint came to his eye, one I had never seen before. He was irritated with me. Well, that was perfectly fine because I was irritated with him.

“Mother may have made mistakes in the past, but she knows better than either of us how to rise in Society. We should be lucky to have her guiding us.”

I bit my tongue, hard. If I hadn’t, a great many words I knew I would soon regret would have flooded from my mouth. I turned away. “I think I should like to walk the rest of the way alone.” I stalked off before he could speak again. He had to go the same way, but that did not mean I had to walk with him.

I could not imagine what he was thinking. He knew how I felt about his mother, especially in light of everything we’d learned about his father. And he knew *me*. At least, I thought he did. If he did know me, I could not imagine why he would be so shocked at my reaction.

I could feel Edward’s eyes on me still, so I quickened my pace and soon left him behind.

Chapter Twenty-Four

DINNER WAS AN AWKWARD AFFAIR that night. I had avoided Edward the rest of the day, but when I'd come down for dinner, he had taken me aside and apologized, saying he hadn't meant it to sound as if he'd chosen his mother over me or that he would be such a domineering husband as to forbid my various pastimes. Since I'd wanted to escape the conversation as soon as possible, I'd accepted his apology, but now that we sat beside each other at the dinner table, it was clear to the both of us that our argument was not so easily forgotten.

"How is your meal?" he asked, his third question of such trifling insignificance.

I cut into my pork too hard and scraped the china beneath, the sound grating in my ears. "Fine."

Juliana raised her eyebrow across the table, but I ignored her. I hadn't expected to see her at dinner so soon after giving birth, but as she tended to flout most of Society's rules, her refusal to remain confined to her rooms was hardly a surprise.

"And how did you spend your afternoon?" Edward's voice held a hint of uncertainty as he attempted to claim my attention again. "I'd hoped to see you."

"I found myself entirely engrossed in a book and forgot the time."

He did not question that blatant lie, though he knew it was such. I enjoyed Shakespeare and a few of the popular Gothic novels, but I was no great reader.

"Would you still like to ride tomorrow?" he asked, not yet giving up on our conversation. "I would more than welcome the opportunity."

Would he, now? "Perhaps."

I was thankfully saved from any more attempts at civility between us when Mama cleared her throat from where she sat at the head of table. "I thought this a good time to tell you all some wonderful news."

I tried to focus on her, far too aware of Edward's fingers tapping on the tablecloth beside his plate.

Mama stood. "I am so pleased to share that Mr. Hambley and I are to be married." Mr. Hambley reached over and took her hand, squeezing it. She smiled at him. "As soon as possible."

Juliana rose immediately and descended on Mama with congratulations and excitement, while William shook Mr. Hambley's hand

with a great grin. Edward even extended his good wishes to them both as I sat there without moving. I waited for the familiar weight to worm into my chest, the ache that I was losing part of myself—my mother and what memories remained of my father—but nothing of the sort came. Instead, peace settled on me like a cool rag on a fevered brow.

I did not like change, but I finally knew this one was for the best.

I went to Mama as the rest of the group found their chairs again and chattered about the wedding. She eyed me as I approached, but when I wrapped my arms around her, she did not hesitate to return my embrace.

“I am so very glad for you, Mama,” I whispered. “You shall be the happiest bride; I know it.”

She laughed as I pulled away. “Not happier than my own daughter, I am sure.”

Her words twisted inside me and yanked at my heart. But I gave her another hug and a kiss on her cheek, then found my seat again, trying to hide the fact that I could not breathe properly.

“We should like to be married soon,” Mr. Hambley said. “The end of the month.”

My eyes shot to Edward, and he was already staring at me. He opened his mouth to speak, surely to contest that we planned to marry at the same time, but I shook my head, the barest movement. He closed his mouth, though his hand fisted tightly around his fork.

“That is wonderful,” Juliana said, leaning forward. “Shall you have a wedding breakfast? I should so like to help you with it.”

Mama waved her off. “You have more than enough to occupy your time, my dear. Just a simple ceremony is all we need and perhaps a small breakfast with a few friends. The Masons, of course, and the Woodwards and Mr. and Mrs. Brooks, if they can come.”

I nodded. It would be a lovely gathering, perfect for Mama.

“And perhaps Lieutenant Avery?” Mama suggested innocently.

I stopped nodding.

“The lieutenant?” Juliana squinted. “I hardly think he’ll have returned by then.”

“Returned from where?” Mama asked.

“His assignment, of course. I daresay the navy intends to keep him at least a few months.”

I'd taken a sip of wine to distract me, but now I choked, nearly spewing droplets of wine along the length of the table. I raised my napkin to my mouth and swallowed hard, then coughed.

"Are you all right?" Edward's hand was on my back, his voice in my ear, but I had no attention to spare for him.

I stared instead at Juliana. "Lieutenant Avery is leaving?" My voice cracked.

"Yes." Her face paled. "He sent the school word a few days ago that he had been requested for an assignment and that Olivia would be staying at the school while he was away." She leaned forward, reaching out a hand as if she meant to touch me. "I am sorry, Rebecca. I thought you knew."

I shook my head. "When does he leave?"

She hesitated. "Tomorrow, I believe."

Tomorrow.

I sat back in my chair. The carved wood dug into my shoulder blades, but I hardly noticed. Nicholas was leaving tomorrow.

The conversation went on without me, Mr. Hambley making an admirable effort to direct talk of the wedding, but that hardly stopped the worried glances Mama, William, and Juliana constantly sent my way. Not to mention Edward, horribly still and silent beside me.

I couldn't stand it. I stood abruptly. "I-I am sorry." My words tripped over each other. "I must beg your leave. I am not feeling well."

The men rose, all with varying degrees of confusion and concern, but I waved off any offers of help and hurried from the room. The cool, quiet entry beckoned to me, covered in long shadows cast by the descending sun. It would be full dark in an hour. I stopped at the foot of the stairs and leaned on the banister.

Nicholas was leaving.

Why should that matter so very much to me? I myself would be leaving Havenfield in mere weeks, as soon as Edward and I were married. I hadn't imagined I would see much more of Nicholas, save for passing in town or church, though the thought pained me.

But that was not why Juliana's news struck deep into my soul, scorching me like a brand. It wasn't that he was leaving. It was that he hadn't told *me*.

My skin burned as if I'd spent too much time in the sun, and my pulse leaped and bounded within me. I had to do something to rid myself of this

energy. Vanishing into my room held little appeal. No appeal.

I caught sight of William's open study door down the corridor, and I straightened. Normally, when I felt this way, the only solution was a bruising ride in the cool wind. But now there was one other thing that brought me the thrill of riding, the release of emotion that I craved.

I did not hesitate. I strode to the study and went to the mantel, where a long wooden box lay settled amid books and framed maps. I maneuvered it free. It was heavier than I'd anticipated, but that did not dissuade me. Tucking it beneath my arm, I strode out the front door and started across the lawn. If shooting did not relieve my frustration, nothing would.

And I needed words with Lieutenant Nicholas Avery.

Chapter Twenty-Five

IT TOOK ME A GOOD quarter hour to reach the meadow on foot, the air around me a hazy blue as the sun began to sink toward the horizon. When I arrived, I immediately set about the routine that had become familiar to me during our shooting lessons. I found the sack of targets hidden behind the tree and tied them to the low-hanging branch, then I set the wooden box on the flat rock and propped open the lid.

Inside lay William's dueling pistols, though I doubted he had ever used them as such. They were much finer than Nicholas's well-worn flintlock. I lifted one pistol, light and sleek. It was different, certainly, but it would function the same.

I loaded both pistols. When all was ready, I stood and raised one gun, training my practiced eye on the targets spinning in the breeze. I aimed for a small bundle and, after a few seconds of focus, pulled the trigger.

The flash of fire and cloud of smoke were nearly as satisfying as watching the bundle burst apart, peas flying through the air. But the sharp crack that echoed around me was what I most wanted. As loud as it rang in my ears, I knew the shot would be heard for miles around.

I set down the pistol and took up the other, loaded and ready. I aimed and fired, missing this time. I fell to my knees and immediately reloaded both weapons. I was slower than I wanted; I narrowed my eyes in focus and let the memory of all the weeks of practice guide my hands.

I shot again and again, hitting more than I missed, but that hardly mattered. I wanted the roar of the gunshot, the wild jerk of the pistol as the ball burst from the barrel. This I could control. *This* I could understand.

One target refused to be hit, a small clay jar that mocked me as it swung unhindered. When I aimed and fired at it three times without claiming a hit, I let out a low growl of frustration. "Blast it," I muttered.

"You should not shoot when you are angry."

I spun, dropping my arm that still held the pistol. Nicholas watched from the edge of the trees, arms crossed and expression indifferent. Only his eyes, intent and piercing, revealed any hint that he was at all affected by seeing me.

I turned away, falling to my knees again to reload. My hands shook as I measured the gunpowder. "And why should that matter?"

"Anger makes it difficult to see clearly." His footsteps moved toward me. "Anger leads to mistakes."

I rammed the lead ball down the barrel with a bit more force than necessary. "I do not need your lectures, Nicholas. I am perfectly able to manage."

I snapped closed the frizzen and cocked the hammer. But as I stood and raised the pistol to aim, Nicholas's hand came from behind me and wrapped around the barrel, pointing it downward.

"I am trying to shoot," I said shortly, even as bumps spread along my skin. I was far too aware of his arm against mine.

"No," he said. "You want to talk. You knew I would come. So let us talk."

He was right. Of course he was right. I hated that he knew me so well, and I hated that my feet longed to move closer to him, that I wanted to lean into his chest.

I let go of the pistol and stepped back. Nicholas released the hammer on the flintlock and lowered the pistol.

I did not move, hoping he would speak first. But when he remained silent, the demanding question inside me would not be held back any longer. "Why did you not tell me?" I whispered. "Why did you not tell me you were leaving?"

He looked down at the pistol as his fingers moved over the wooden stock. "I thought it would be easier if I simply faded from your life."

"Easier?" I gaped at him. "I might never have seen you again if Juliana hadn't told me tonight. How would that have been easier?"

"I did not mean easier for *you*," he said shortly. "I can admit selfishness in this regard. I thought only of how to escape Millbury with the least amount of pain. Avoiding you was the best course I could find."

"You would leave without a word, after everything between us, even after—" I stopped, the words hovering on my tongue. But I was finished with any secrets between us, any unknowns. "Even after you kissed me." My memories of that night swam through my head, thick and sweet like honey. His touch, his words, his warmth.

His shoulders tensed as if awaiting a lashing. "You must know why I kissed you."

As if I could read his mind. He was maddening.

"That is quite the assumption to make, as I certainly do *not* know why," I insisted. "We both understood precisely what sort of arrangement we were entering into. You told me you had no interest in me or in

marriage, and you knew—” My voice broke off, and I shook my head. “You knew about Edward.”

“I thought I knew.” He scowled at the sky above us, now streaked with brilliant orange clouds, with darkness beginning to claim the eastern horizon.

I shook my head. “You did not know we were engaged, but you knew enough. I have been blaming myself the past few days, but the fact remains that I was honest with you from the start. So I cannot fathom why you would be so determined to ruin our friendship when we both understood it could never be more than that.”

He did not respond, still focused on the pistol in his hands. Then he bent and set the pistol on the rock. When he straightened, his neck was tight, his eyes blazing. “Do you think I planned this?” he asked, his voice rough. “Do you think I wanted to fall in love with someone who had already lost her heart to another man?”

My chin tucked back, and I parted my mouth to speak, but he did not allow me a chance to respond.

He stepped forward. “You are right, of course. I knew. I knew you thought yourself in love with him, but that did not matter because I had no plans to marry. I had the navy, after all. I knew the life I wanted. But then”—he shook his head once, hard—“then everything changed. I cannot explain what happened, but you took hold of me. Your strength, your vivacity—it was like facing an oncoming storm and being unable to turn away. I did not *want* to turn away.”

Every word he spoke burned inside me. I stood frozen, unable to move or breathe as he stopped just a step away from me.

“So, yes,” he said, his voice jagged. “I blame you entirely. For being the only woman who could ever tempt me to give up a life at sea. For being everything I never knew I wanted. *That* is why I kissed you.”

I tore my eyes from his and stared at the ground, as if blocking the intensity of his gaze would clear the haze in my mind. “You never said,” I whispered.

“How could I?” His voice broke. “The next morning, Edward appeared on your doorstep and you were *engaged*. He was no longer a distant, faceless suitor. You’d already made your choice, except I had not known it.”

He crossed his arms. “The day of the dinner party, I received a letter from a former captain of mine, telling me he planned to request me for an

assignment. I drafted a letter immediately. I meant to turn it down, retire from that life.” He gave a short, humorless laugh. “I meant to propose.”

Propose. He wanted to marry me. Or he had, anyway. My heart pounded hard—too hard. It hurt, banging about in my chest like a bucket in a well.

He shook his head. “Now I have to leave. I’ve spoken with Olivia, and she understands that I cannot”—he grit his teeth—“that I cannot be here now. She told me to go, that she would be well with her friends and teachers. I took her to the school this afternoon, as I leave early tomorrow for Portsmouth. It will only be a few months this time, and when I return, we will begin again somewhere else.”

“Somewhere else? But she’s just settled here.” I hardly knew why I was protesting. I was simply causing more pain, more problems. “You mustn’t leave because of me. I’ll soon be—” I stopped.

“Gone?” he supplied. “Married? I am well aware. But staying is not an option. Not in a house I had meant to share with you.”

I closed my eyes against the vision that caught me. He and I, together at Linwood, filling that quiet house with laughter and light.

But that was impossible.

“I must go,” he said.

I forced my eyes open as he turned away.

“Please.” The word escaped from my mouth as I stepped forward. “Please do not leave like this.”

He stopped. “And how would you have us part? As friends?”

I said nothing, my stomach a knotted mess. I wrapped my arms around my waist as if that would help the pain.

His expression softened by the slightest degree. “We cannot be friends, Rebecca. You must see that. There is too much between us.”

“Perhaps in time, we might—”

“My feelings will not change,” he said sharply. “But you do not love me, and I’ll not torture myself by watching you marry another.”

I stared at him, unable to respond. Because a truth had begun to pound inside me, one I’d never given voice to, never admitted. I pressed a fist to my heart, trying to silence it, keep it from spilling all it contained.

Nicholas was too perceptive. He narrowed his eyes at me, scrutinizing every inch of my face. “Am I . . .” He stopped, then shook his head. “Am I wrong, Rebecca?”

I backed away a step as heat billowed across my cheeks and neck. Why could I never hide my feelings?

“Am I wrong?” he asked again, certainty growing in his voice. “Do you love me?”

I shook my head wildly, but he did not seem to notice. He stepped closer.

“Tell me right now that you do not love me,” he ordered. “Tell me, and I’ll stop. I’ll leave.”

I opened my mouth, then slammed it shut, biting my lip hard. I tasted blood for a moment before it faded.

He took my face in his hands, and his fingers buried themselves in the hair at the nape of my neck. He wore no gloves, and his touch was electrifying, sending a wave of shivers across my skin.

“Tell me I am wrong,” he whispered again.

I couldn’t.

And he knew it.

He pulled me to him, his lips finding mine as if he’d done it a thousand times. My hands pressed against his chest, trapped between us, but I made no effort to free them.

Because I was lost.

Lost in the emotion that flooded my chest in a raging torrent. Lost to the heat that flamed everywhere he touched me. Lost to my own mind, which ceased to function the moment his lips touched mine.

Only the small, real things brought me back. The smooth silk of his waistcoat beneath my fingertips. His smell, a delicious spice blended with the scent of the woods. And his mouth. His mouth doing lovely, heart-stopping things to mine.

He pulled back abruptly, and I gasped as I stared up at him.

“I’m sorry,” he said in an exhale, his eyes determined. “But I cannot —”

I did not let him finish. I threw my arms around his neck and rose onto my toes as I forced his lips to meet mine again. A deep sound escaped his throat, and his hands slid to encircle my waist. He pressed me up to him so my feet nearly left the ground altogether. This was not Nicholas’s sweet and gentle kiss from that night on the stairs. No, this kiss held a new intensity, a new hunger. He held me tightly, as if daring me to pull away, and his lips traced the shape of mine, learning their secrets as no one ever had before.

My insides rioted—reckless exhilaration battled against the sharp ache in my chest. I should not be kissing Nicholas. I knew it. And yet, there was no force that could tear me from him in that moment. He kissed me again and again as his hands explored every inch of my back, leaving a searing heat in their path. My fingers curled into his hair, and his heart beat against mine, matched in rhythm.

I had never let myself imagine what it would be like to be truly kissed by him, to be *loved* by him. It was more intoxicating than anything I'd ever experienced. Not even an exhilaratingly perfect jump could rival this headiness.

When I finally drew away to breathe, he again brought his hands to my face, cradling my cheeks and not allowing any distance between us. My lungs could not draw enough air—my chest rose and fell too quickly.

"I knew," he whispered. "I knew you loved me, yet I convinced myself it could not be."

I shook my head, my voice vanished. I tried to manage my breathing. In and out, deep and slow.

"You cannot marry him now." Nicholas's voice grew insistent, his hands around my face firmer. "You have to see that."

I blinked up at Nicholas. He looked so handsome, with his jaw set and fair hair ruffled, that my stomach flipped madly inside me. My hands, still wrapped around his neck, slid down his jacket and came to rest over his broad chest. "I love you." My voice cracked like a vase shattered on the ground. "But I should not."

"You do not mean that."

"I do." The pure pleasure of our kiss began to seep away as reality slipped back into my life. "I never meant for it to happen or to ever confess my feelings, even to myself. But of course you had to be wonderful and kind and—" I shook my head.

Nicholas did not speak, only watched me. Shame filled every last inch of me, like the swells of an angry sea. What had I done? How could I kiss him, hurt him when my heart was not mine to give?

"Nicholas." I let my hands fall from his chest. "I—I'm sorry. So sorry. I should not have done that."

"And why not? No vows have been said." He nearly growled, refusing to give up his hold around my face.

"I am *engaged*." I choked on the word.

“And an engagement has never been broken before?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but no words found their way from the tangled web of my mind.

“I made a promise,” I somehow whispered.

“A promise?” A hint of anger. His hands dropped to my elbows. “You would so easily dismiss everything you know is real and true simply for a promise?”

I stepped back, pulling free of his arms. I needed distance from him. He let me go, though his eyes still blazed.

“This is not *simple* in any way,” I insisted. “I spent the last two months fighting to marry Edward, and now—” I waved a hand wildly in the air, my words barely clinging to reason. “Now I feel as if I took a wrong turn on a road I’ve known my entire life, and I do not know how to find my way back.”

“Then let us take that road together.” Nicholas stepped forward. “I would walk any road, travel endless miles so long as I am with you.”

His words ripped at me. I did not deserve his love, his kind words. Not when I kept hurting him again and again.

“You do not love him,” he said. “I know you do not.”

He was wrong. I did love Edward, even if that love was different than what I felt for Nicholas. And that was precisely the problem.

A woman should never have room in her heart for two men.

“You would not be happy with him.” Nicholas did not back away. “And it is clear to me that you only agreed to marry him because of the risk, the excitement.”

I stared at him. “What?”

His eyes narrowed. “I am no fool. I see this engagement for what it is—a flight of fancy. You could have had your choice of suitors, I have no doubt, and yet you engaged yourself to the *one* man your family disapproved of. You could not resist the thrill of such high stakes, just as you cannot resist riding bareback or jumping hedges.”

The earth felt uneven beneath my feet. “Is that what you think of me?” I rasped. “Irrational and reckless?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Confound it, Rebecca, that is not what I meant.”

“But it is what you said.”

“Because I am angry,” he said. “Angry and desperate. You cannot marry him, and I am trying to understand why you cannot see it as clearly as I do.”

Nothing was clear in this moment. I turned my back to him and paced a few steps away. I needed space. I could not think when the memory of our kiss lingered between us. I pressed a hand to my forehead, an attempt to relieve the pressure building there. His words pounded into my mind, confusing me and turning me about so quickly that my thoughts tripped over each other.

“I want to marry you, Rebecca,” Nicholas said from behind me. “But if you will not see reason, I am at a loss.”

Every inch of me protested, begging me to turn back to Nicholas. But I could not. Because that darkness had taken hold inside me, a nauseating mixture of guilt and regret and self-loathing. As my head continued to spin, I knew I could not trust either it or my heart to come to an agreement.

Nicholas’s footsteps crunched through the dry grass, and I dropped my hand from my forehead as I turned. But he was not coming toward me. He stalked across the meadow, and as he disappeared into the trees, he did not look back.

Chapter Twenty-Six

I DID NOT KNOW HOW long I stayed in the meadow. The night grew dark and cold around me as I sat on my flat rock, my arms wrapped around my knees. My thin, silk evening gown did nothing to warm me.

You only agreed to marry him because of the risk, the excitement. Nicholas's voice tortured me again and again as our conversation—our argument—paraded through my head. Each unflinching word stabbed a new wound inside me until my chest felt raw and weak. Was he right? I tried to think back on those few weeks in Brighton with as much indifference as I could. I'd been immediately attracted to Edward, I knew that much. He was handsome, charming, witty. But I'd met my share of handsome, charming, and witty gentleman. London was full of them. What was it about Edward that had drawn me to him?

My memories settled on that first night, the dinner party where we'd met. We had laughed and talked all through dinner, then when we'd adjourned to the drawing room, his mother had immediately dragged him away to another corner of the room, glaring at me. It wasn't until we met again at an assembly a few days later that Edward had told me of our families' enmity. And when he had . . .

My arms tightened around my knees. When he *had*, I'd felt that thrill. That thrill of excitement that told me I should back away, retreat. But I hadn't. I'd thrown myself toward it without hesitation, involving myself with a man I had hardly known simply because I *shouldn't have*.

Nicholas was right. I *was* irrational and reckless, though those were my words and not his. That did not change the truth of them. When Edward had proposed, I had not stopped to think of the consequences, though I'd known there were plenty. I only thought of myself and what I thought I wanted.

Nothing had changed in the time since.

While being engaged to Edward, I'd allowed myself to fall in love with Nicholas. I'd been so naive as to think I could be friends with him, but I had known all along there was more than friendship between us. If I'd had any kind of integrity, I would have cut off all ties to Nicholas ages ago, before this mess had gone any further. Instead, I'd encouraged our relationship, betraying Edward—and myself—in the process.

I was selfish and senseless and foolish. I was everything I'd been trying to prove I *wasn't*.

And the knowledge choked me like a weed.



When I finally escaped from the fog that was my own head, the last traces of daylight had vanished, the sky painted inky black. I gathered William's pistols with wooden movements and packed them away in their box, then carried it under my arm as I trudged back to Havenfield, each step heavier and heavier. The nearly full moon hung low in the sky, casting a silvery sheen across the grounds.

I made my way across the lawn, but as I approached Havenfield, I slowed my pace. I did not know the time. Was dinner over? Had they all gone into the drawing room after my abrupt departure, or had everyone gone to bed? I had no desire whatsoever to speak to anyone.

Unfortunately, my wish went unfulfilled.

"There you are," a male voice said as I stepped inside a minute later. I tensed until I realized it was not Edward's voice. William stood at the door to his study, watching me closely. "Mama was beginning to worry."

"I needed a walk," I said rather lamely.

His eyes focused on the box I held in my arms. "With my pistols?"

"Oh." I'd forgotten I carried them. "I borrowed them. I am sorry. I should have asked."

William stepped toward me. "I feel there is something of a story behind this." His expression softened. "But not tonight, I think. Here, I will take that."

I handed him the box, glad to be rid of its weight.

He tucked it under his arm. "I'll tell Mama you've returned."

"Thank you." I rubbed my forehead. "Will you also tell her I've gone to bed, please?" All I wanted at that moment was the encircling blankets of my bed and the crackling of my fire.

"Of course." William looked for a moment like he wanted to say something more, but he shook his head instead. "Good night, Rebecca."

"Good night, William."

I escaped upstairs, my footsteps quiet. When I reached my room, I did not call for Fawcett. I removed every pin from my hair and let my curls fall haphazardly around my shoulders, then slipped from my evening gown and into my night rail. I climbed into bed, shivering though a fire burned in my grate only feet away.

Nicholas loved me. He wanted to marry me. And now, lying in my bed and clutching my blankets around me, I could finally admit that I wanted *him*. I wanted more of him. All of him. I wanted his quiet steadiness, his confidence, his willingness to do anything for those he loved. When he looked at me with those intent green eyes, I had no defense. When he kissed me . . . Well, when he kissed me, I lost any ability to think whatsoever.

I allowed myself a brief, agonizing moment to imagine. To dream of saying yes to Nicholas and seeing his expression lift, his soft smile appear. Our quiet wedding at Millbury's church. A not-so-quiet life, full of laughter and disagreements and trials. A family, together with Olivia and our own children.

Children.

The pain of that thought was too much for me, and I sat up in bed. I could not do this any longer. Carefully, deliberately, I tore those hopes from my future. The holes left jagged edges inside me.

I was not meant to be with Nicholas. And neither was I meant to be with Edward.

The past few weeks had revealed parts of myself I'd never seen before, and as difficult as the truth was to face, I now knew what my course would be.

Because I could see myself clearly, as if the answer had always been waiting for me but I'd never wished to discover it. I was the sort of woman who fell in love with another man while engaged. I was the sort of woman who had never longed to have children. I was the sort of woman who lied to my family for weeks because I thought I knew best.

My heart was fickle, and I would not subject any man to its unreliability.

Both Edward and Nicholas were too good for me—too kind, too honorable. Neither deserved a wife such as I.

So I would let Nicholas leave tomorrow. He would return to the navy, to the life he loved, and then he would find someone new to love. Someone who would be better for him and for Olivia. I'd never been anything more than a bare imitation of a friend to her. I could not be her mother, nor did she wish me to be. But she needed a guiding influence in her life, and Nicholas would undoubtedly find a woman who could do the job much better than I could.

And Edward. My stomach twisted at the thought of having to hurt him. But I had never loved him as I should, and I could not betray him any longer. That was the least I could do now, considering what I'd already done to him.

I lay back on my pillow, the cool fabric soothing against the heat of my face. I waited for the rightness of my decision to settle on me, to relieve the coiling pit inside my stomach.

But there was nothing but sadness and regret.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

I SLEPT. SOMEHOW.

But when the first light of dawn met my windows the next morning, I awoke, blinking back exhaustion. I ached like that summer day all those years ago when I'd been thrown from my horse. But I did not think I could recover from this kind of brokenness.

I dragged myself from my blankets and rang for Fawcett. She said only a few words as she helped me dress in my riding habit and then fixed my hair, not asking the obvious questions. Why was I awake at this hour? Why were my eyes rimmed in red? Why on earth was I going riding?

I wasn't riding, though, not yet. Not until I'd spoken to Edward. But once I did, I would need to escape and drown my emotions in a dizzying gallop.

After helping me place my riding hat on my head—Nicholas's hat—Fawcett left, and I took a steadying breath. I'd never ended an engagement before, but I could not imagine Edward would be terribly pleased about it. I tried to prepare myself for anything, for his hurt, his anger, his sadness. But it would be better in the end, after this all faded. Better for him.

The sky outside was covered in deep-gray clouds, but even still, I could tell the sun would fully rise soon. The room remained light around me as I blew out my candle and slipped into the hallway. I tried very hard not to think about the fact that Nicholas was likely preparing to leave for Portsmouth at this very moment.

The house stood quiet and still, though I knew most of the servants were already awake downstairs. I made my way down the corridor to Edward's room, placed a great distance from my own. Mama's doing, no doubt.

I stopped outside his door and attempted to collect my thoughts. When I realized that would never happen, I sighed and knocked softly three times.

No response, though I waited a long minute. I knocked again, a little louder. I heard shuffling within, then footsteps. The door parted, and Edward appeared, wrapped haphazardly in his banyan, eyes bleary and hair askew.

"Rebecca?" He rubbed his face, and his confusion quickly turned to alarm. "What is it? Has something happened?"

"No, nothing," I said quickly. I hadn't meant to panic him. But what else would he think with me arriving at his door at the break of dawn?

“That is, I am sorry to have caused such worry. There is no great crisis.”

Unless one could count what had happened in the meadow yesterday between Nicholas and me. Or perhaps the war in my head during the night. Or, of course, the fact that I was about to break his heart.

He shook his head and closed the door behind him as he stepped into the corridor. He eyed my riding habit. “Did I forget we were to ride this morning?”

“No, we never had decided.” I rubbed my boot along the smooth wooden floorboards.

Edward crossed his arms. “What’s this about?”

“I—” My voice failed. Every word I’d practiced last night flew from my mind with him standing there before me, concern creasing his handsome features. I should have written a letter instead.

But he deserved more than a letter. He deserved knowing that this was the hardest decision of my life. I clasped my hands together and looked him square in the eyes. “I have thought all night about what I could say to you, how to explain. But the only thing I can do is be honest with you. Straightforward.”

“What do you mean?” Edward moved forward as if he couldn’t quite hear me.

My throat constricted. “I am so sorry, Edward, but I cannot marry you.”

For a moment, he did not react, as if I’d just made a comment on the weather. Then his chin drew back. “Pardon?” was all he managed.

“I am sorry,” I said again, too fast, my voice high. “I hate so much that I must do this to you after all we’ve been through.”

He shook his head. “I do not understand, Rebecca. How—?” He stopped, dropping his hands to his sides. “Why?”

This was the part I had most dreaded. Because I was determined to be honest.

“I do not love you as I should,” I said softly. “I am not the person you thought I was when you proposed, and you deserve a better wife than me.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

I shook my head, my eyes beginning to sting from holding back a barrage of tears. “I never meant for it to happen, I swear. I thought I was being faithful and true, but under it all, I was nothing but deceitful and unkind.”

“Rebecca.” He took my arms, his gentle hands warm through the fabric of my sleeves. “Just tell me.”

I could put it off no longer. “I fell in love with someone else,” I whispered.

He was quiet for a long minute. “It is that lieutenant. Isn’t it?”

I could only nod, my chest so tight I wondered if I would ever breathe again.

Edward stared at me in disbelief. To my utter shock, the tension in his face eased, the lines around his eyes vanished, and then . . .

Then he laughed. He laughed as if I had said the funniest thing he had ever heard, and I gaped at him.

“Thunder and turf,” he finally managed, his grin split wide. “Are you serious, Rebecca? You do not want to marry me? At all?”

“Are you all right, Edward?” Had our broken engagement sent him spiraling into madness?

“I am perfectly well.” He took my hands in his. “Better than I’ve been in weeks.” His expression did not hold a craze that might have doomed him to an asylum. Instead, he looked more alive than I’d seen him since Brighton.

“I have a confession of my own to make,” he said, squeezing my hands. “I also have fallen in love with someone else.”

It was my turn to stare. “You have? But who?”

His face softened. “Someone I would never have spent so much time with, save for her aid in keeping our secret.”

Thoughts in my head connected so quickly that I gasped. “Marjorie? You are in love with Marjorie?”

He nodded, sobering. “Like you, it was never my intention. But when we would meet to exchange our letters, I could not help but notice her, her sweetness of character, her steadiness, her beauty.” He hesitated. “I mean this as no reflection of you, Rebecca, but there is something with Marjorie that I have never felt with you.”

“And does . . . ?” I hesitated. “Does Marjorie feel the same?”

I tried to imagine it, Marjorie and Edward secretly exchanging letters over the weeks, falling in love though they knew it was hopeless. Marjorie, my kind and generous friend.

Edward released my hands and stepped back. “We never spoke of it, but I am certain she does. What could I say to her when you and I were

engaged?”

“But you . . .” I shook my head. “But you came to Havenfield. You would have married me in spite of your feelings?”

He squinted at me. “When my mother found Marjorie and me together, I was forced to face the reality I’d been hiding from. I’d promised to marry you when I proposed. How could I abandon you?”

Then the full truth of everything he’d said sank into me. He did not love me. Or, at least, not as much as he loved Marjorie. He did not want to marry me. I could never have imagined the relief and joy such a realization brought to me.

I could not stop my own laugh that burst from my mouth. “Heavens,” I managed. “We are quite the mess, aren’t we?”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Nearly from the beginning. But I daresay that is the folly of a rushed courtship. We did not have time to realize we would not suit each other in marriage. You are more . . .” He paused. “*Spirited* than I’d imagined my wife to be.”

I shook my head. “I thought as much.”

Edward’s smile faded. “I do wish you to know that I care for you, Rebecca. You must know that. And I do think we might have been happy with each other once our families reconciled.”

“I am not at all certain of that,” I said. “You and I are very different, and your mother would never have forgiven me for marrying you.”

He chuckled. “You might be right.”

I set my hand on his arm. “But I understand. I want only happiness for you and for Marjorie.”

“If she’ll have me, that is.”

“She would be out of her wits to turn away such a man as you,” I said, squeezing his arm. “Only I am foolish enough to do that.”

He leaned forward slightly. “Imagine if you’d never said anything. We would have married, both thinking the other still in love.”

“Now you have your chance, Edward. You must go to Marjorie immediately.”

His shoulders straightened. “I will,” he said. “As for you, I must hope this lieutenant can match your zeal for life.”

I thought of Nicholas goading me to jump the hedge, teaching me to shoot, and kissing me breathless in the meadow. “He might outmatch me in that regard,” I said softly. “Though it hardly matters.”

“Why is that?”

I shook my head. My troubles were not his.

“Rebecca.” Edward tipped his head to one side. “Please. Tell me what is bothering you.”

I shifted my weight. “Edward, you have seen more of me than most. You know my flaws and my oddities. And now you know the worst of me. You cannot think I would make any man a good wife.”

He scrutinized me. “Of course I think that. I would not have proposed if I’d thought otherwise.”

I hesitated. “But what of . . . ?”

His eyes focused on me for a long moment. “I think I understand. May I venture a guess that you are feeling rather unworthy of happiness after all that happened?”

“We were engaged, Edward,” I said in a sudden rush. “I should never have fallen in love with someone else, even if you and I *were* ill-suited.”

His expression softened. “You are thinking about this all wrong, Rebecca. You forget that even the most well-intentioned people make mistakes. Ours was leaping too quickly into an engagement. But does that mean that neither of us deserves the futures we long for with those we love?”

I did think that. Or, I *had*. But now, with him looking at me so kindly, not judging me in the least for what I considered the greatest error of my life, I began to reconsider. He had made the same mistake, after all.

And I could not help but think of my father. He’d made numerous mistakes, ones that had led to the feud between our family and the Bainbridges. Yet I could not bring myself to think him a terrible person. He’d made efforts to change, to never make the same bad decisions. He was my father, and I still loved him.

“Please,” Edward said softly. “Please know you are worthy of happiness, as much as anyone.”

“I . . .” I swallowed. “I want to believe that.”

“I hope you change your mind. I could not bear to think you let your chance slip you by.”

I nodded, though my mind still teetered on the cliff of indecision. “Thank you, Edward. Am I right to suspect you will be leaving for Brighton immediately?”

“As soon as I can pack.”

“Then I shall give you my farewell now. I wish you all the best in life and in love.”

He took me in his arms for just a moment, a quick embrace that reminded me of all the good between us—our laughter and conversations, his kindness and goodwill. Then he released me and stepped back.

“Goodbye, Rebecca.” He gave a smile and slipped back inside his room. I slowly made my way back down the passage, my arms wrapped around me. *Even the most well-intentioned people make mistakes*, Edward had said. I’d certainly made my fair share.

Nicholas had seen me at my worst and my best. He knew the choices and blunders I’d made. He’d seen all of this, and he loved me despite it all, despite the fact that I would never be the perfect Society wife or mother. Because—and it was just striking me now—because he had never wanted that. He never expected it of me. He only wanted me and all the flaws that came with me.

“Rebecca.”

My head jerked up. Mama stood in her open door, staring at me as she held her dressing gown around her. Oh dear. Though Edward’s room was far from mine, it was quite close to Mama’s.

“Mama,” I said. “I did not know you were awake.” How much had she overheard?

“Oh, Rebecca,” she said again, stepping to me and folding me in her arms. Ah. She’d heard enough.

Her warm arms around me were enough to wear down my last reserves of resistance, and I closed my eyes against the tears.

“I knew you had feelings for Lieutenant Avery,” she whispered in my ear. “But I had no idea you tortured yourself because of them.”

“I cannot help it,” I said, my voice muffled in her shoulder. “I have a wandering heart, and any good man deserves far better than that.” As I said it, Edward’s words continued to parade through my mind. *Know you are worthy of happiness, as much as anyone.*

Mama stayed quiet for a while as her hands rubbed comforting circles across my back. “Did you love Edward Bainbridge?” she asked.

“No.” The answer came easily to me now. “At least, not the way I love Nicholas.”

“That should be answer enough.” Mama pulled back and raised my chin with her fingers. “Your heart finally found what it has been searching

for. Now you must be true to that love. I have no doubt it will be enough.”

My pulse skipped faster. “Even after everything that has happened between us?”

“Especially after,” she insisted, taking my hands. “Love is not so easily frightened away, and yours has been tested more than most.”

The morning light filled the corridor, reminding me that Nicholas could be leaving Linwood Hall at any moment. Yet trepidation filled me. We had not left each other on good terms yesterday. He would not have changed his mind, would he?

“Do not tell me you are hesitating now,” Mama said with a hint of reproach in her voice. “I saw how he looked at you at church. He is more in love with you than ever.”

I took a deep breath, then gave a swift nod. Now was not the time for doubts and second guesses. Now was the time to embrace my future and the golden happiness it promised, like a light in a storm.

“Off with you,” she said. “If you hurry, you might stop your lieutenant before he leaves.”

My lieutenant. The words had never sounded so perfect, so right. Because I wanted nothing more than for Nicholas to be mine and for me to be his.

Hope rose inside me like the full moon, and I threw my arms around Mama yet again. Then I spun and darted away, her warm laugh filling my ears. I clattered down the stairs to the surprise of two maids at the bottom, who squeaked as they ducked out of my way. I bid them a hasty apology as I darted past, not able to stop my feet if I tried.

A minute later, I was atop Stella, flying down the road, her hooves echoing the beating of my heart.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

THE SUN PEEKED OVER THE distant hill, and I cursed it. How dare it show its face when I was still a mile from Linwood Hall. But surely, Nicholas was still preparing to leave, packing his things and ensuring his horse was properly saddled for his long journey. I could not let myself believe otherwise.

When we reached the lane that led to Linwood, I did not slow Stella. The windows of the house were dark, the surrounding land quiet. Did that mean Nicholas was still here? Or the opposite?

I pulled Stella to a stop as the front door opened. A footman emerged and bowed, unsuccessfully hiding his surprise at my unexpected arrival. It was far too early for visitors, especially ones riding without saddles.

“Lieutenant Avery,” I said breathlessly as Stella’s hooves danced beneath me. “Is he here?”

My words seemed to snap the footman back to attention. “Er, no, Miss Rowley. He left for Portsmouth.”

Gone. I closed my eyes, my hope sinking into the ground far below me. I’d missed him. All because of my foolish inadequacies.

“Are you all right, miss?” Concern filled the footman’s voice. He likely thought me about to faint.

“Fine,” I said vaguely. “Fine.”

“It is a pity you did not arrive a few minutes ago, or you might have caught him.”

His words did not register for a long moment, but then I tore my eyes open and stared at him. “A few minutes?”

“Yes,” he said, rather oblivious to the fact that he held my future in his next few words. “He departed not ten minutes past.”

My stomach leapt with a dizzying jolt. “Which way did he go?” I demanded. “What road?”

The poor footman now looked rather alarmed. “South, miss. He went south.”

I did not wait another second as I wheeled Stella about and kicked her forward. I could hear nothing but hooves beating the ground, my pulse racing in my ears. I had to find him. I had to.

The countryside flew past in a blur of greens and browns. We crossed a short wooden bridge over a dried-up stream, the thundering of hooves against wood hollow in my ears.

I rode hard, my vision focused on the farthest stretch of road I could see. Where was he? Had he changed his mind and taken another road? Or had the footman been mistaken in his timing?

Desperation grasped at me, tearing my heart to pieces inside of me as I whispered encouragement to Stella. She was not used to running for such long distances; she was far more suited to the sprints of racetracks and leisurely country rides. Her golden coat gleamed with sweat, her lungs heaving, but she did not slow, did not hesitate to give me her everything.

And then . . .

I saw a shadow in the distance, beneath a line of trees that ran alongside the road. I rose up, peering so hard my vision blurred. A figure on horseback. Was it him?

“Nicholas!” I could not tell if he heard me, but I pushed Stella faster, faster. “Nicholas!”

Then I could see him. He turned at my shout, reining in his mount and staring back at me. I was too far away to see the details of his face, but I could easily imagine the surprise taking hold, his eyes wide.

I slowed Stella to a trot when we were still a ways off. My mouth went dry, my hands grasping tightly to Stella’s mane. I hadn’t allowed myself to imagine this conversation, so focused had I been on Edward.

Nicholas did not greet me as we drew closer, only scrutinized me with narrowed eyes. A man should not be allowed to be so handsome. His light hair was untidy beneath his hat, and he sat with a rigid posture that I assumed came from a lifetime of naval service.

I stopped Stella when we were but a few steps away, and suddenly, I could not look at him. There was too much between us, too much that whispered of hope and broken dreams and desire. I stared instead at his mount, the bay hunter I’d first seen that day at the lake. The day all of this had begun.

“I . . .” I stopped and cleared my throat. “I went to Linwood, but you’d already left.”

Silence, broken only by the murmur of the wind and my own ragged breaths.

“Why are you here, Rebecca?” he asked finally, his voice guarded. But when he said my name, I could not help the warmth that spread inside me as though I’d taken a sip of too-hot tea.

I dismounted smoothly, then rested one hand on Stella's neck. "I could not let you leave," I said. "Not after yesterday."

"If you've come with another offer of friendship, I have no interest in it." He spoke without emotion, as if this conversation were simply something to endure before continuing on his way.

"You misunderstand me." I stepped closer, and Stella snorted behind me. "I did not chase you halfway across the county simply to offer my friendship."

He squinted, sending lines from the corners of his eyes across his tanned skin. For a moment, it seemed like he was tempted to smile at my ridiculous exaggeration, but instead, he shook his head and dismounted, leading his horse nearer to me. "Then what is it, Rebecca? Because I should like to be on my way if I am to make any amount of distance by nightfall."

I did not know if it was his gruffness or the way he refused to look at me, but his words set me on edge like never before. Was this the Lieutenant Avery everyone else saw? Was this who he might have been to me, save for a few chance encounters that had allowed me to see the man he truly was?

But I raised my chin and ignored his cool tone. He would have to try much harder to frighten me off. "Don't go to Portsmouth." I spoke quietly, but I knew he could hear every word. "Don't return to the navy."

Nicholas froze, his hands knotted in his reins. He did not speak, and I took advantage of his silence.

"I want you to stay." I took another step forward. "I *need* you to stay, Nicholas. I"—I shook my head—"cannot imagine my life without you in it."

A flash of hope, but then he scrubbed a hand up his face. "What are you saying, Rebecca? What about Edward?"

"I spoke to Edward," I said softly. "This morning. And while I wish to tell you more about that conversation, all you need to know is that—" I paused to gather my courage. "Is that I am no longer engaged."

His eyes shot to mine. "What?" he managed, his voice hoarse.

"I could not marry him." My confidence grew at his reaction. "You were right, about everything. He was never the right man for me. But I was stubborn and refused to believe I was wrong."

"You're not engaged." He shook his head as if he did not believe he'd heard me properly.

“No. I am not.” I closed the distance between us. I slid my hands up his chest and toyed with the fabric-covered buttons of his waistcoat. He hitched a breath. “Nicholas, everything changed that day we met at the lake. *I* changed because of you. You make me feel . . .” I shook my head. “I cannot even describe it. You challenge me. You understand me. You take me as I am and, yet, make me wish to be better.”

Though his eyes searched my face, he did not interrupt me, for which I was grateful. I’d never before declared my feelings for a man, and blast it all if this wasn’t horribly nerve-wracking.

“I love you, Nicholas,” I whispered. “I do not know how I withstood my own heart for so long, but I have no doubts anymore. I want to spend the rest of my days with you, if you’ll still have me.”

He stared at me. “*If?*” he repeated in disbelief. “You speak as though I have any choice. I was lost to you the moment I saw you at the lake with fire in your eyes.”

I did not allow him another word as I took hold of his cravat and pulled him down to meet my lips. Nicholas hardly needed any more encouragement than that. His arms wrapped around my waist, securing me against him as he kissed me slowly, deeply. I thought I might have known what to expect from kissing Nicholas—we’d had a bit of practice, after all—but I could not have prepared myself for the joy that caught in my chest and threatened to burst from all it contained.

This was it. This was the love I’d longed for. I had tried to convince myself I could have it with Edward, but now I knew that what I’d felt for him was but a shallow reflection of what love should be. Love was real and strong and brave. Love was sacrifice and compromise. Love was everything I felt between Nicholas and me, everything that had brought us together and bound our hearts as one.

When Nicholas’s mouth left mine to scatter dizzying kisses along my jaw and neck, I could not help but shiver at his touch.

He gave a low, throaty laugh as he pulled back, his hands finding my elbows. “Are you cold?” he asked with a teasing grin.

“Not in the least,” I said, barely able to catch my breath. “And I no longer doubt your claim that you know how to woo a woman. You may consider me quite properly wooed.”

His eyes were bright, even against the morning sun. “It was more of a challenge than I had anticipated, I’ll admit. But entirely worth it.”

Stella gave a snort behind me, and then her nose nudged my shoulder, nearly knocking me over.

I chuckled and rubbed her nose. "I think she might be jealous of you."

"She has good reason," he said. "I do not intend on sharing you anytime soon."

"She will learn to cope, I have no doubt." My hand brushed back a lock of hair and then stopped. "Oh, not again," I muttered as I glanced to the road behind me.

"What is it?"

I sighed. "I've lost my hat again. It must have fallen off during my run."

He tipped his head. "You mean the hat I already bought to replace the first? What have you against hat pins?"

"They are so uncomfortable," I defended. "I hate the feel of them, and —"

He laid a finger on my lips, silencing me. "I am only teasing. You must know I will buy you a thousand hats if you insist on losing them."

My throat tightened. How could I have been so lucky to have found this man, the one man in England who understood me and loved me, despite knowing every bad thing about me?

As if sensing my thoughts, his face sobered, and he took my hand in both of his. "I never thought I would surrender myself so easily or so willingly. But you have captured me, Rebecca Rowley, and I have no desire to escape." He pressed a kiss to the inside of my wrist, a thrill racing along the length of my skin. "I am yours," he whispered. "Forever." He kissed my palm, his lips a soft whisper.

I swallowed against the lump that rose in my throat. "Forever," I breathed, a promise in a word.

He kissed me again, and I decided I would be perfectly happy if he never stopped.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Seven years later

I SQUINTED INTO THE BRIGHT afternoon sun, leaning low over Stella's neck. Her hooves drove a steady rhythm into the earth, still damp from yesterday's spring shower, and I inhaled the deepest breath I could manage, thick with the scent of budding bluebells and crocuses.

The air was alive, and I could feel it.

Stella could feel it too. I sensed it in her gait, the way she responded to my barest touches. We were one, a connection shaped through years of trust and companionship.

Through the trees ahead, I spotted a flash of white, another of pink. I slowed Stella to a trot as we approached the meadow. Our meadow.

"A good run, Stella girl," I whispered, patting her neck, feeling her heaving sides beneath me. She was hardly ancient at twelve years old, but neither did she have the vigor of her youth.

"She's back! She's back!" Hazel's sing-song voice said. She danced around the edge of the thick blankets, little Bianca following in her footsteps, as always, chanting just a beat behind. Olivia sat primly on the blanket, ankles tucked beneath her and parasol blocking the heat of the sun. At eighteen, she was far too grown up to join the playful antics of my daughters, but she watched the two girls with a lift to her lips.

"I am first!" Hazel demanded as I dismounted, bouncing on her toes. "You said I might ride first, remember?"

"I want to go," Bianca protested. "Hazel is always first."

"Hush, girls," I said. "You will both have your turns; do not worry. But where has your father gone off to?"

I'd left Nicholas with the girls, but now he had disappeared from our little picnic, though the wicker basket and food remained. I raised an eyebrow at Olivia.

"He said he would be back soon." She frowned. "He would not tell me where he was going."

"Odd." I rested my hands on my waist as I glanced around. Our carriage still stood at the edge of the meadow, horses grazing nearby, but I could see no sign of Nicholas.

"*Mama*," Hazel said again, pulling on my habit skirts.

"All right, all right," I said with a laugh.

I managed to placate Bianca into going second by bribing her with the last strawberry tart, which Olivia had been eyeing. Then I lifted Hazel onto Stella's bare back, and my daughter immediately held the golden mane and bent her knees into the correct position. Only five years old and she took to riding like a bird to the sky.

I slipped Stella's bridle back over her head so I might lead her by the reins, and then we started around the meadow, leaving Olivia to answer Bianca's endless questions about where clouds came from. I made small corrections to Hazel's posture, though she hardly needed it. Her face shown brightest when she was on horseback, and she always tried to urge Stella to go faster when she thought I was not looking. Stella bore the child's enthusiasm with steady amusement as we circled back around.

A voice called out from ahead. "If we are not careful, she'll up and join Astley's before we can present her to Society."

Nicholas leaned against a nearby tree, cravat loose around his neck, hair disarmingly disheveled.

"I can only hope so," I said with a grin. "Think of all the horribly awkward parties we could avoid if we were shunned."

"On the contrary," he said, coming to walk beside me as I continued to lead Stella and Hazel around the meadow. "I daresay we'd be invited to more events. People love a good scandal."

Hazel grew impatient with our conversation. "Papa, look how well I'm doing."

He tugged on one of her blonde curls. "I was watching, little one. You are quite the horsewoman these days."

Hazel beamed. She might have my riding skills and strong-willed personality, but she was the image of her father—green eyes and a wide smile.

"Where did you run off to?" I asked him as we approached the picnic. "Olivia seemed put out that you would not tell her."

"Olivia is always put out about something." Then he spoke a little louder. "And I cannot say I trust her very much after she told you about Italy."

Olivia gave a huff. "I was thirteen," she protested. "And it was an accident. You must stop blaming me for that."

"Months of planning," Nicholas said with a shake of his head. "All gone to waste in a single moment."

I laughed as I lifted Hazel from Stella's back and set her on the grass. "Fortunately, I still enjoyed the trip despite knowing about it beforehand."

Bianca ran to me, her face still claiming a babyish roundness even though her body had begun to slim. "My turn, Mama!"

Nicholas intercepted her, grabbing her and tossing her in the air. She shrieked in delight as her tawny curls floated in the spring air.

"Again," she demanded when he settled her in his arms.

He gave a mischievous grin and glanced at me. "What if I gave you a little surprise instead?"

I knew he'd been up to something. Nothing pleased my husband more than spoiling his children—and me.

"What have you done now?" I asked with a dramatic sigh.

"It is not quite a trip to Italy," he said, waving Hazel to come stand by us. "But I think you shall like it all the same." He gave a sharp whistle, and immediately, we heard rustling in the brush to our right. We turned just as one of Linwood's grooms stepped out holding the reins to a beautiful Welsh cob, a short, sturdy horse with white stockings and a black body.

"I thought perhaps Hazel was ready for her own mount," Nicholas said.

"For me, Papa?" Hazel stared at the cob in clear disbelief, fisted hands raised to her cheeks.

"Yes," he said, bending to set Bianca down. "For the both of you, though your sister still has some growing to do, I think."

Hazel gave a little shout and ran to the horse, Bianca following more hesitantly.

"You scoundrel." I poked Nicholas in the side as we started after them.

"I know, I know," he said, grabbing my hand to avoid further pokes and pulling me against his side. "But William said it was an excellent price."

"I knew William had to be involved." He and Juliana had gifted Andrew a pony last month, and Hazel had been green with envy. But we'd decided the time was not yet right.

"I am sorry. I could not resist," he said. "I wanted to surprise the both of you, and I knew it would make her happy." He nodded at Hazel, who, with the groom's help, was reverently patting the cob's nose. Our daughter's eyes were bright and alive.

After seven years of marriage, he knew precisely how to avoid my black books.

I pulled him to a stop and stretched up on my toes to kiss him, his touch familiar, and it still made my heart speed. How could I ever have thought my love for him would falter? Every day that passed, I loved him more wildly, like falling into the brightest summer sky, the deepest starlit night.

“You really should not encourage my bad behavior,” he said, smiling against my lips. “Think of all the ponies I will buy if this is how you react.”

I laughed, but then he was kissing me again, and I had no chance to respond because my mouth was quite happily occupied.

“Not again,” Olivia grumbled, and we pulled apart as she rose from the blanket, exaggerated irritation on her face. “Do you really have nothing better to do than kiss all day long?”

“I can certainly think of one thing,” Nicholas whispered. Olivia pretended not to hear, thankfully.

“I daresay you’ll better understand the fun of kissing after you are married,” I said to Olivia. Her face went red as the roses embroidered on her white muslin dress. “Perhaps we ought to reapply ourselves to finding you a husband.”

We’d taken Olivia to London for part of the Season earlier that year, and though she’d had several suitors, no doubt attracted by her handsome dowry, she had yet to receive an offer. Seeing as she criticized every man who dared look at her, it was not terribly surprising.

“I am not certain I wish to marry at all,” she said, snapping closed her parasol. “I doubt there is a gentleman alive who can tempt me into the tedium of matrimony.” She moved to join the girls beside the Welsh cob.

“Tedium?” Nicholas repeated in amusement as he turned to me. “Do forgive me for entrapping you in such a horrid existence.”

I slipped my arm through his. “She’ll learn soon enough. Fate enjoys taking the best-laid plans and turning them on their heads.”

“For which I shall always be grateful.” Nicholas pressed a lingering kiss to my forehead, and I closed my eyes. A memory slipped into my mind of William and me riding, of his words of Juliana that I’d found surprisingly romantic. *Home became wherever she was.*

I had never been more certain that I’d found my home.

“Mama! Papa!” Hazel ran back to us and tugged my hand. “Come and see!”

I dragged Nicholas with me, and we joined our little family, petting the horse and exclaiming over how pretty he was. I smiled up at Nicholas, who met my gaze with unexpected emotion in his eyes. He tightened his hold on my hand.

It felt unfair to everyone else in the world that I should be this deliriously happy. But I was not about to question my good luck. Not when I had a lifetime to enjoy it and the man I loved beside me to experience it all.

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About the Author



JOANNA BARKER WAS BORN AND raised in northern California. She discovered her love for historical fiction after visiting England as an eleven-year-old and subsequently read every Jane Austen book she could get her hands on. After graduating from Brigham Young University with a degree in English, she worked as an acquisitions editor before devoting herself full-time to writing. She enjoys music, chocolate, and reading everything from romance to science fiction. She lives in Utah and is just a little crazy about her husband and two wild-but-loveable boys.

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