

A close-up, profile view of a woman with light brown hair styled in a braid. She is wearing a white lace dress and looking downwards. The background is a soft, out-of-focus green.

JOANNA
BARKER

The Truth about
Miss
ASHBOURNE

a regency romance

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Covenant Communications, Inc.

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Cover design by Christina Marcano © 2018 by Covenant
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Published by Covenant Communications, Inc.

American Fork, Utah

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First Printing: November 2018

ISBN: 978-1-52440-752-0

To Cody,
for your love and support

Acknowledgments

I AM TRULY LUCKY TO have so many amazing people in my life. This book would not have been possible without them.

First of all, thank you to my husband, Cody. You believed in me and supported me through all the crazy ups and downs of writing and publishing. Thank you for holding down the fort while I wrote and attended conferences (and for doing far more than your fair share of the dishes). And to Benson and Liam, for not complaining too much when Mom had to write. I love you all.

To my mom, for making me finish my very first book at the age of eleven. It will never see the light of day, but it helped me know I could do it. Thank you for being my first example of creativity and for your honest and uplifting feedback.

To my sister Jessica for being my reader and editor since I was fourteen. Your unending enthusiasm boosts me when I need it the most. You read this book just as quickly as I could write it, and you helped me find my way through so many early revisions. Thank you!

To my critique partner and friend, Heidi Kimball—I will be forever grateful we met! Our late-night chat sessions keep me sane (and laughing!), and your critiques make my writing stronger and better. You inspire me to continually push myself, and I'm so glad we could start our writing journeys together.

To my mother-in-law, Shelley. Thank you for reading my book and encouraging me and for wrangling my kids all the time. I appreciate it so much!

Thank you to my sisters for being my constant cheerleaders and to all my family and friends for everything you have done to help me along on the journey!

I've made so many wonderful friends in the writing community, and I'm grateful for all their help and support. Thank you to my beta readers: Lorna Hansmann, Jenny Flake Rabe, Cassy Watson, and Sally Treanor. You have each helped more than you think, and your insights and feedback were invaluable in making this book the best it could be.

And a huge thank you to Covenant and their team. I'm so thankful for their confidence in my book and in me and for their commitment to bring wholesome literature into the world.

Chapter One

A GOVERNESS MUST BE A model of modesty and decorum. She should speak with deference, act with propriety, and aspire toward all that is genteel, refined, and respectable.

At the moment, I feared I was failing quite miserably in all of these respects.

“Mrs. Seymour,” I said, pushing back a limp curl from my face. There was no hiding the disarray of my hair, the bonnet dangling from around my neck. “I am terribly sorry we are late.”

Mrs. Seymour’s expression remained rigid as ever, the sharp angles of her face highlighted by the setting sun behind me. “This is the second time this week. Am I paying you to picnic your days away at a *park*, Miss Ashbourne?”

Her harsh voice echoed in the lofty entryway of the Seymours’ London townhome. Charlotte and Daniel stood beside me, their young faces creased with worry. Charlotte gripped her sewing basket, her hands striped red and white with the effort; Daniel’s dark, wide eyes darted between his mother’s face and mine.

“I assure you we were quite proper,” I said, heat rising in my neck. “Miss Charlotte and I worked on our embroidery, and Master Daniel searched for a new specimen for his collection.”

Mrs. Seymour hardly needed to know that Charlotte and I spent more time laughing than sewing or that Daniel had passed the afternoon with a group of boys she would have disapproved of most vehemently, though I saw no harm in an innocent game of blind man’s bluff.

My stomach swooped as Mrs. Seymour eyed me from boots to bonnet. She raised one dark eyebrow. In the fading sunlight, I imagined her brow to

be a furry caterpillar perched above her eye, casting judgment upon us all. I fought the mad desire to laugh.

“I was unaware,” she said, narrowing her eyes, “that practicing needlework was such a filthy task.”

Blast. I’d hoped the state of our clothing would escape her notice. Daniel’s breeches were covered in smudges, while Charlotte’s skirts—and mine—were brown around the hems. Perhaps joining Daniel for a round in his game had not been a particularly good idea.

“Mama,” Charlotte said, stepping forward to stand by my side. Her ebony curls danced above her shoulders as she raised her chin, her voice holding only a slight tremble. “It was mine and Daniel’s fault. We pestered her all morning to go out. Please don’t blame Juliana.”

“Yes,” Daniel said with all the sincerity a nine-year-old boy could muster. “It’s not her fault.”

“She is Miss Ashbourne to *you*.” Mrs. Seymour stepped forward with a point of her finger, and Charlotte shrank back, Daniel half hidden behind her. “And that is hardly an excuse. You are both old enough to know better than to parade about town covered in dirt and grime and heaven knows what else. Any number of people might have seen you.”

Indignation clawed inside me. Mrs. Seymour was relentless in her determination to appear as proper and well bred as the rest of Society, a determination that too often came at the price of her children’s well-being.

I reached a hand in front of Charlotte as though to shield her. “Mrs. Seymour, children are bound to get dirty.”

She turned to face me once again, and I bit my tongue. Her eyes were hard, shrouded in the dying light. Dropping my gaze, I gripped the sides of my skirt.

“It seems you know better than their own mother,” she said, a dangerous edge to her voice. “I suggest you reconsider your position with my children,

Miss Ashbourne. You are not their friend, and you are certainly not their family. You are their *governess*. If you cannot find it within yourself to act as such, I shall find another who can.”

I forced myself to swallow the retort that sat on my tongue like a tantalizing bit of marzipan. Charlotte and Daniel were far more than just my pupils, and I was more than just their governess. If not for them, I would have sought out a new position long ago. But I would not let my stubbornness be the reason we were separated now. “I apologize most sincerely,” I said quietly, staring at the white marble floor. “It will not happen again.”

Mrs. Seymour regarded me with disdain, as though I were one of the bugs in Daniel’s collection jar. “See that it doesn’t.” She turned back to her children. “Upstairs, now.”

Charlotte and Daniel shot me concerned looks but murmured, “Yes, Mama,” and hurried up the grand, curving staircase. Mrs. Seymour swept after them without a second glance.

Blood pounding in my ears, I started for the back of the sprawling house, passing the parlor, the dining room, and the library. My pace quickened with every step, my surroundings a blur of mahogany and tapestries and sun-stricken windows. I reached the servants’ stairwell and took the stairs two at a time, around and around, up to the fourth floor. Marching to my room, I shut the door and snatched the bonnet from my neck, pins tearing at my hair, and flung it on my bed.

Breathing hard, I leaned on the door behind me, the cool wood against my back a stark contrast to the heat rushing through my veins. Frustration, anger, resentment, bitterness—each emotion battled inside me, struggling to dominate. One by one, I smothered and extinguished them until all that remained was weariness and a familiar headache.

Pressing my palm against my head, I took a deep breath and pushed away from the door. I went to my desk and dropped into the rickety chair before tugging out the drawer. Inside sat a small jewelry box that housed the entirety of my savings. I opened it to gaze at the coins and bills. I did not

count it; I knew to the last farthing how much it contained. Every penny I earned went into this box. I'd spent close to nothing in the last two years, the worn fabric of my dresses and frayed edges of my shawl bearing witness to my determination.

A few more years, I told myself, trying for optimism. I propped my chin on my hand and stared out my sliver of a window, rooftops bright with the golden rays of sunset spilling out in all directions. A few more years and I would have savings enough to start my own school. I would be my own person, teach what I wanted, teach how I wanted. And there would be no critical eye watching my every move, no unfair judgment from a callous mistress.

A knock sounded at my door, and I stiffened.

"It's only me," a soft voice called.

I exhaled and shut the drawer before going to the door and opening it with a frown.

"Sophie," I reprimanded. "You shouldn't be here now. Dinner will be on any moment."

Sophie balanced a tray against her side with one arm while she tucked back a lock of dirty blonde hair with the other, leaving a white streak of flour on her cheek. The tray held a simple spread: ham, cheese, bread, and a cup of tea.

"I've the time," she replied. "Never you worry."

She pushed past me and set the tray on my desk. Brushing off her hands on her flour-coated apron, she turned to face me, her blue eyes peering at me. "Mary was just in the kitchen. She said you were arguing with Mrs. Seymour."

I moved around her to sit at the desk. "She was simply her usual pleasant self, that's all."

She settled on my bed in her customary spot, draping her arm over the iron footboard. There was no other place for her in my cramped, drafty bedchamber. “What was it this time?”

I took up the chunk of bread and picked at it. I had no appetite, but I knew the trouble Sophie had risked in bringing this food to me right before dinner was to be served.

“She scolded me in front of the children again. We visited the park this afternoon and returned late and, admittedly, a bit dirty.” I rubbed my temples. “But it was just an excuse, I know it. She looks for every opportunity to chastise me.”

Sophie twisted her mouth. “And you deserve none of it. But once she found a reason to dislike you . . .”

I looked up at her sharply, my pulse quickening. “What do you mean?”

“Well,” she said, “it’s not your fault her children love you more than her.”

“Oh.” I almost wished she had guessed my secret. The constant unease, the tiresome anxiety; it twisted my stomach into an inescapable knot. “I’m not certain that is true, but she hardly encourages affection.”

“No, that she does not,” Sophie said with a frown. “She is so terribly unfair. I don’t know how you stand it sometimes.”

I attempted a bit of humor. “With gritted teeth and a friend who endures my complaints.”

She patted my hand sympathetically before she stood. “I’d best be getting back. Won’t you come down after dinner? I’ve a new recipe to try.”

The bleakness of my surroundings made her offer the most tempting it had ever been, but I shook my head. As a governess, I was trapped between worlds: not part of the family but also not welcomed by the servants below stairs because of my position of “favor.” My standing in the house was one of isolation and solitude, and I had learned to accept it.

I managed a smile. “No, I have my lessons to plan for tomorrow. But thank you.”

She nodded and opened the door, then started. “Oh, I’d almost forgot. This came while you were out.”

She walked back to me, pulling a letter from her apron pocket. My heart leapt. I snatched it from her and examined it.

As quickly as it had come, my excitement vanished. There was nothing familiar about the writing on the front. *Miss Juliana Ashbourne*. I bit my cheek to keep from crying out in disappointment. I should have learned by now.

“Thank you,” I managed and set the note on my desk, hand trembling. I knew Sophie was curious—I rarely received mail—but I felt only the softest touch on my elbow and heard her quiet footsteps as she left. I eyed the note. The curves of the letters looked strange, as if my name belonged to someone else. I reached for the envelope, cracking the wax seal and unfolding the paper. It was short, unnervingly so.

Miss Juliana Ashbourne,

Your presence is requested at the soliciting offices of Talbot & Finch, located at 67 Kemble Street, London, to discuss a sensitive and timely matter. Please visit at your earliest convenience.

Cordially,

Mr. Edwin Finch, Esq.

I stared at the note and read it again. *A sensitive matter?* What could that possibly mean?

A thought, a whisper of an idea, stole into my mind, and I caught my breath. Could it have to do with Papa? What if there was news? I tried to stop my thoughts, restrain them somehow, but they dashed away with wild abandon.

I dropped the letter onto the desk and tapped my fingers on the foolscap. My one free day a month allowed to me by the Seymours was only three days away. But from the tension already tightening my lungs, I could well guess they would be some of the longest days of my life.

* * *

I hesitated on the crowded London street, glancing up at the wooden sign hanging above me. Foot traffic moved about me—ladies window-shopping, delivery boys darting here and there, men arguing loudly with their companions. I reached for the door handle only to falter and pull back.

Go inside, I told myself. I would never find answers if I couldn't even bring myself to walk through a dratted door. Setting my jaw, I pulled open the door and walked resolutely into the soliciting offices of Talbot & Finch.

Any confidence I possessed, or pretended to possess, flew out of me instantly. I stood in a wide, high-ceilinged room tastefully decorated with brocaded fabric and gilded artwork. As the door swung closed behind me, a whiff of cigars and expensive perfume overtook me.

“Might I assist you with something?” The cool voice interrupted my gawking.

A clerk sat across the room behind a large desk. He spared me but a passing glance as he searched through a stack of paper in front of him. I edged toward him, eyeing the decadence of the room with growing unease. He straightened his papers as I approached, his lips pressed into a thin line. His thoughts were obvious—I belonged in this elegant room about as much as a fish belonged in a forest.

“I received a notice from this office requesting that I come here.” I resisted the urge to fiddle with my ring, trying hard not to let my nerves show.

“Your name?” He opened a large, leather-bound book, his ink-stained hands turning several pages.

“Juliana Ashbourne.”

His head jolted up. He closed the book with a thump and pushed it away, giving me his full attention. “Miss Ashbourne, yes, of course. I do apologize. We have been expecting you.” His voice had changed completely—now he was all politeness and charm. He gestured to one of the chairs against the wall. “Please, sit down. I will inform Mr. Finch you are here. I am certain he’ll wish to see you immediately.”

I nodded, murmuring, “Of course,” as though being summoned to a strange office under mysterious circumstances was a regular occurrence. I sat primly on the very edge of the nearest armchair, back straight and hands folded in my lap, though my foot tapped in restless anticipation beneath the folds of my dress.

Once the clerk disappeared through the doorway behind his desk, I fidgeted, smoothing the fabric of my dress and touching my hair. I had taken extra care with my appearance that morning. My chestnut locks were pinned neatly atop my head, my bonnet tied securely in place. I pinched my cheeks and bit my lips to add some color to my face. Though a pale complexion was generally considered attractive in a young lady, I doubted anyone envied my colorless features, especially with my muted brown eyes.

The clerk returned. “Mr. Finch will see you now.”

He led me through the doorway and down a row of desks as clerks bustled about. We reached an open door, and he ushered me inside an office, announcing, “Miss Ashbourne.”

A man sat behind an enormous desk, glancing up from the stack of papers he held. He had graying hair, quite a large nose, and a portly figure.

“Miss Ashbourne.” He rose, laying his papers aside. He offered a short bow, and I returned a wobbling curtsy. “It is a pleasure to finally meet you.”

He waved me to one of the chairs in front of his desk. “Please sit. Are you in need of any refreshment? Tea, perhaps?”

“No, I am quite all right.” I was the opposite.

“Good, good.” He took his seat once again, leaning back. “I suppose you are rather baffled as to why you are here.”

I tightened my grip around my reticule. “Yes. I haven’t the faintest idea.”

“I am sorry if my note caused you any alarm.” He looked quite indifferent to my distress. “I have pressing information that simply could not be put down in writing.”

My heart skipped a beat.

“First, I must confirm your information for our records.” Mr. Finch pulled a sheet of paper to him, slipping on a pair of spectacles. “You are Juliana Ashbourne, nineteen years of age, born on the fifth of April, the year eighteen hundred and one?”

“Yes?” My response sounded like a question. I cleared my throat. “Yes.”

“And your mother was Katherine Ashbourne, your father David Ashbourne?”

I hadn’t heard their names in so long, it took me a moment to respond. “Yes.”

“You are employed in the household of Mr. Robert Seymour as a governess?”

“Yes.”

He lowered his paper and pushed it aside. “Thank you. I apologize, but there is always a bit of clerical work. Now, I am terribly sorry to tell you I have some unfortunate news.”

I sat perfectly still, bracing myself.

“I regret to inform you about the death of your grandfather.”

I stared at him. “My grandfather?” Disappointment and relief wrestled within me. So this was not about Papa. “But my grandfather died when I

was a child.”

“Forgive me, I was not referring to your paternal grandfather. I meant your maternal grandfather, Sir Charles Rowley.”

I blinked, and my head pulled back involuntarily. “My mother’s father?”

“Yes. Her maiden name was Katherine Rowley, was it not?”

I managed a nod, my mind reeling. I had not a clue how to react to this news, but Mr. Finch seemed not to notice as he continued on.

“Sir Charles passed away nearly six months ago, rather unexpectedly. A condition of the heart, I am told.”

Somewhat surprising. I wasn’t aware he’d had a heart, from all accounts.

“We have been attempting to ascertain your whereabouts ever since.”

“My whereabouts?” I shook my head. “Please excuse me, sir, but I am not entirely certain what this all has to do with me.”

Mr. Finch leaned forward. “Because as executor of Sir Charles Rowley’s will, it is my responsibility to inform all beneficiaries of their impending inheritance.”

“His will?” I was surely driving Mr. Finch mad, repeating everything he said, but with each word he spoke, I grew more and more perplexed.

“Forgive me, but did I mishear you? My grandfather included *me* in his will?”

“Yes, at length.” He paused for emphasis. “You, Miss Ashbourne, are now an extremely wealthy young woman.”

Chapter Two

THERE WAS A LONG MOMENT of silence. Then I let out a bark of laughter; I couldn't help it. I was so astonished. I immediately clapped a hand over my mouth.

Mr. Finch frowned, clasping his hands over the desk in front of him.

I shook my head and lowered my hand. "I beg your pardon, sir, but I am certain this is some sort of terrible misunderstanding. You see, I never met my grandfather. In fact, I've never met any member of my mother's family, and there has been no contact of any kind between us. It simply is not possible for Sir Charles to have left me an inheritance."

"Not only is it possible, but it is also fact, confirmed by this extensive legal document before me." He tapped the thick stack of papers he had been examining as I'd arrived. "Your grandfather came to me close to three years ago and changed his will specifically to include you."

I had no response. My mind raced, intent on finding an explanation, even a feeble one.

He continued. "Your inheritance is comprised of land, various stocks, investments, and the like, but its total value is just short of ten thousand pounds."

I gaped at him. I'm certain I bore a most unflattering resemblance to a wide-mouthed trout, but there was nothing for it. "Ten thousand pounds?" I repeated in disbelief.

I knew, of course, that my mother's family was wealthy. My grandfather had received a knighthood as a young man and possessed the wealth and influence to match his title. But ten thousand pounds? What a ridiculous amount of money. Mr. Finch must be jesting or mistaken. Why would my grandfather leave me such a fortune? Why would he leave me anything at all?

Mr. Finch had continued speaking, not noticing my inattention. “—rather unfortunate that your grandfather had no direct male posterity. He is survived only by his wife and daughter, your grandmother and aunt. The entailed estate of Havenfield passed to his nearest male relative, a Mr. William Rowley. He is your grandfather’s third cousin, once removed. Sir Charles’s title, of course, does not pass on.”

I had never heard of this Mr. Rowley. I pictured a middle-aged man wringing his hands and cackling at his good fortune of inheriting his distant cousin’s property.

“There is one other matter.”

I refocused my gaze on Mr. Finch. How could there be even more? “And that is?”

“A condition in the will, set by your grandfather.” He cleared his throat. “Your inheritance is to be paid to you in full but only after you have spent a month at the family estate of Havenfield.”

Silence. A clock ticked on the shelf behind the desk, and the noise of the workers outside the door became uncommonly loud.

“You cannot be in earnest.” I did not even attempt to contain the incredulity in my voice.

“I assure you I am perfectly serious,” Mr. Finch said.

I did not move—I barely breathed. Visit Havenfield? Clearly, he was out of his wits. Or was he simply unaware of what he was asking of me? I met his gaze, my eyes narrowing. “Do correct me if I am mistaken.” Despite the tangle of emotions inside me, my words were cool, precise. “My grandfather left me an enormous fortune but only on the absurd condition that I leave my occupation, home, and birthplace, and travel to his family estate, from where my own mother ran away twenty years ago, and stay there for an entire month?”

Mr. Finch had the decency to appear chagrined. “Yes, that would be a concise summary.”

I stared down at my hands clenched in my lap. What on earth had my grandfather been thinking? I hadn’t even been certain he had known I existed until today. But ten thousand pounds. Oh, how very tempting that number was. I could leave the Seymours, leave their cold, unfeeling home, and make a place for myself in the world.

But how could I leave Charlotte and Daniel? They depended on me, loved me as I loved them. I’d thought to be with them for years yet. How could I think of abandoning them now?

“Miss Ashbourne?” I jerked up my head to look at Mr. Finch, his brows knit together as he observed me. “I understand this is something of a difficult situation,” he said. “But I do urge you to make your decision soon.”

Soon? I could no more make this decision than I could fly.

“I—” My voice caught, and I cleared my throat. “I’m afraid I cannot possibly decide now.”

And quite suddenly I needed to leave, to break from this stifling room and its unwanted pressures. I could not think clearly here. I stood in one swift movement, my legs strangely numb, and turned to the door.

“Miss Ashbourne, wait.”

I stopped, heart pounding in my throat.

“Please, Miss Ashbourne, I need but another minute of your time.” He moved around the desk, holding out an envelope, brandishing it like a sword. “I have instructions to deliver this letter to you.”

I deliberated for a moment, then took it from him and slid it into my reticule.

For the first time since I had arrived in his office, Mr. Finch's face softened. "I do implore you to read that, Miss Ashbourne. I believe it will help to answer many of your questions."

My questions? He could not even begin to imagine the number of questions currently flying through my mind. But I gave a short nod, hoping my acquiescence would allow me to escape all the faster.

He finally stepped back. "I appreciate your coming," he called as I opened the door and hurried through the workroom, clerks stepping aside to make room for me.

I slipped out onto the street and steadied myself for just a moment against the door. This day had certainly taken a jarring and unsettling turn.

With a deep breath, I started up the street, attempting to put as much distance as possible between myself and the offices of Talbot & Finch. I dodged the slower walkers in my path, my mind still spinning from Mr. Finch's revelations.

My shock wore thin, and irritation began burning deep within me. The presumption, the sheer audacity of my grandfather. How could he expect for me to turn my life upside down so that he might be absolved of whatever guilt he'd suffered from his own despicable actions? It was little wonder why my mother had left all those years ago, with a father such as he.

Oh, but how could I not think of taking the money? It was *ten thousand pounds*.

I reached the end of the street, and as I turned the corner, I threw a harried glance back over my shoulder, as if Mr. Finch would come after me and force me to make a decision. Foot traffic obscured my view of the office's entrance, but it was clear no one was following me.

I turned my head back and—

"Umph!"

I collided with something solid and warm. I staggered back, throwing out my hands to catch myself, but strong hands grasped me firmly under my elbows and pulled me upright.

“Careful there,” a low male voice cautioned.

I instinctively gripped the arms of whoever held me up in an attempt to steady myself further. My head spun, my vision was blurry, and I couldn’t seem to catch my breath.

“Are you all right?”

I squeezed my eyes shut for just a moment and then opened them again, blinking rapidly. A pair of clear blue eyes met mine, concerned.

“Yes,” I said, finding my voice. The rest of the man’s face came into focus, and I swallowed as my throat went unaccountably dry. He had a strong jaw and straight nose, and his tawny hair danced in the slight breeze.

Stomach leaping, I released my grip on his arms, but he continued to hold my elbows, watching me with a creased brow.

“You’re awfully pale,” he said.

“That is not unusual, I assure you,” I mumbled, still in a haze.

The corner of his mouth twitched. Was he laughing at me?

I raised a hand to rub my temple. My wrist was bare, and I inhaled sharply. “My reticule!” I pulled away from the man and searched the ground until I found it lying a few steps away, silver and copper coins winking in the sunlight in every direction. A comb and my mysterious note from Mr. Finch stuck halfway out. I gathered my things as swiftly as I could, but coins were in the street, under horse hooves and carriage wheels.

I made to dash into the street to save what I could when a hand grasped my arm again. The man with the astoundingly blue eyes stared at me in consternation. “It’s only a few pennies.”

“Only a few pennies?” I said, incredulous.

The man realized he had made a mistake. He dropped his hand from my arm. “I simply meant it’s not worth risking harm by running out into the street.”

I scowled at him. With his finely tailored jacket and newly shined boots, he clearly had never known the distress losing a few coins could cause.

Facing the street again, I peered through the mess of animals and people to try to spot any of my missing change. A team of well-matched bays snorted at me as they passed, hooves clattering on the cobblestones, and I backed away. It was hopeless; the stream of traffic refused to cease. My coins were gone.

I opened my reticule and counted what remained of my most recent pay. My heart sank. I’d lost close to a third.

“Miss?”

The man still stood behind me, his features filled with sympathy. “I do not wish to pry, but you seemed upset right before we . . . er . . . ran into each other. Can I help in some way? Perhaps I might replace whatever you’ve lost.”

The patronizing pity in his voice drained the last ounce of patience I had. Handsome or not, this man was cast in the same mold as my grandfather, as Mr. Seymour, and as every man of “superior” birth I had ever met. For the briefest moment, it was not the blue-eyed man standing before me; it was my grandfather, featureless and oppressive.

“No, I do not need your help,” I retorted, voice taut. “And I do not need your money nor your pity.”

The force of my words took him aback. His stunned expression did not last long, however. His eyes darkened, and his face hardened. “Pardon me for attempting to come to your aid. I’ll not make that mistake again.”

I clenched my jaw, a tinge of unease prickling inside me. Perhaps he *had* been simply trying to help.

But before I could speak, he offered a sharp bow. “If you’ll excuse me.” And without a backward glance, he disappeared into the crowd.

* * *

The three days that followed my ill-fated meeting with Mr. Finch were a jumble of activity. I had an impossible choice before me. I could ignore my grandfather’s inheritance and continue on my current path, saving for the day I could start my own school. Or I could leave my position and travel to Havenfield, abandoning Charlotte and Daniel to the whims of their intolerable mother.

And so, with all my usual decisiveness, I simply chose not to decide. My plan was straightforward: keep my mind occupied and my body exhausted so I had no opportunity for wandering thoughts. I threw myself into my teaching with renewed passion.

“Why is it,” I asked, addressing Charlotte and Daniel as I paced the length of the schoolroom, “that men and women are of such unequal stations in life?”

The children and I were in the midst of studying Mary Wollstonecraft’s essay *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that I’d happened upon at a secondhand bookstore. It was a text I knew Mrs. Seymour would undoubtedly abhor, which to me only increased the appeal of teaching it.

I continued without waiting for a response from my pupils. “Do either of you doubt that a woman has equally valid thoughts and ideas as a man? No matter a man’s position, he should not be able to dominate and rule over a woman simply because she is of a different gender. Men should not control women or make decisions for them, but rather, they should treat women as equals and value their opinions.”

I stopped pacing to face my pupils, clasping my hands behind me. They both stared at me. “Well?” I pressed. “What are your thoughts?”

Charlotte cleared her throat. “Juli—Miss Ashbourne, are you all right?”

“Of course,” I said briskly. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

She hesitated, glancing at Daniel for assistance.

He helped as best he could. “Because you’re acting very strangely, that’s why.”

Charlotte elbowed him. He protested, rubbing his arm, but she ignored him and turned back to me. “It’s only that you’ve never responded to our readings quite like this before.”

I sighed. I was clearly getting carried away again. I forced down the resentment that overwhelmed me, pushing away the thoughts of my grandfather that lurked in the back of my mind.

Moving to my desk, I sat and laid my hands on top of the smooth surface. “I am sorry. I should not allow my tongue to run away like that.” I smiled, hoping to calm the children’s uneasiness. “Come. Let’s set aside our reading for today. Charlotte, when was the last time you practiced your pianoforte? And, Daniel, I do believe you owe your uncle a letter.”

Daniel grumbled but set about preparing his paper and pen.

Charlotte, instead of going to the drawing room where the pianoforte stood, came to stand before my desk, wringing her hands. “Juliana?” she ventured. “Might I borrow the essay? I’d like to read it myself, if I may.”

I hesitated for the briefest of moments. Had I pushed too far in my lecture? Charlotte was not yet twelve, her opinions of the world still forming. Perhaps my encouragement of her education was only harming her, allowing her to believe she could ever be more than what Society—and her mother—allowed her.

But the light in her eyes was not mine to dim. She had every right to the knowledge she craved, and I had decided nearly two years ago to do my best to help her.

“Of course.” I handed it to her. “But do be careful with it.”

She nodded. More than physically caring for the book, she knew she needed to keep its existence a secret from her mother.

* * *

Dear Papa,

Do you recall when we lived in the basement of that horribly decrepit house in Lambeth? I could not have been more than seven years old. Mama had just lost her position at the shop, and you were unable to find work with any of the shipping lines. And after all that, a week of near constant rain flooded our rooms and ruined almost the entirety of our belongings.

I remember it very clearly. We spent all night frantically moving what we could save to a spare room upstairs, and then we huddled before the fireplace, trying to dry our shoes and clothes. I was miserable, crying over the loss of my favorite toy (which I cannot even recall now), and Mama tried to lift my spirits, repeating to me one of her adages. “Bad luck comes in threes.” I insisted we’d had our fair share, and you laughed, agreeing that our prospects could only look up from there.

And you were right, as always. The landlord felt so terrible about the flood, he let us stay in an upstairs apartment for a reduced rent. Mama found work at the dressmaker’s shop, and you were finally able to return to the sea with the Levant Company.

I’ve already had two instances of trying circumstances in recent days, and I feel as though I am waiting for the axe to fall. I only wish for it to hurry so it might be over and done with.

Resigned to my fate,

Juliana

Not bothering to read my letter, I folded it with sharp, precise movements, knowing the ink would surely smudge in my impatience. I melted my stick

of sealing wax for just a moment over my candle, then pressed it to the edges of the paper and set the letter aside to cool.

I gazed out my window, drumming my fingers on the pockmarked wood of my desk. Though the last streaks of sunset had long faded from the hazy smoke hovering over the city, I still had at least an hour before I could contemplate sleep.

Well, I always had lessons to plan. I reached for my pen and paper only to remember I'd left my in-progress plans down in the schoolroom.

"Blast," I said under my breath. I took my candle and made my way down the long flights of stairs to the second floor, my footsteps echoing in the quiet of the house. My candle cast a golden sphere around me, but as I passed through the darkened hallway toward the schoolroom, another light shone up ahead.

It came from Mr. Seymour's book room, a yellow sliver under his door. A shadow crossed the light. I hesitated for a heartbeat before continuing on, placing my feet with care as I edged forward. A floorboard creaked, and I froze. But I heard no response from within.

I slipped past his door and entered the schoolroom, strange in the moonlight, shadows draped along every surface. The quietness was unnerving; I was too used to Charlotte's and Daniel's laughter. I rustled through some papers on my desk until I found my lesson plans, then I returned to the hallway, closing the door behind me with a soft click.

"Miss Ashbourne."

I jumped, nearly spilling my candle. I recovered just in time, taking a moment to catch my breath before turning to face the man who stood watching me. "Mr. Seymour." I curtsied. "I'm sorry to have distracted you. I only needed something from the schoolroom." I held up my papers as evidence.

He stepped closer, the flickering light of my candle highlighting his long nose and wide forehead, his eyes bright against the shadows.

“I find I mind not at all,” he said in a soft voice. “In any case, it is not a terribly uncommon occurrence to find myself distracted by you.”

I gulped, the candle unsteady in my hands. Not again. He took another step, and I backed away; my shoulders hit the wall as he loomed over me.

“I am continually mystified,” he said, still in his low, quiet voice, “over a woman of your quality being content to be a mere governess. One would think there were many other . . . options open to you.”

The suggestive gleam in his eye left little doubt as to what my “other options” could be. Society men were not generally known for their faithfulness to their wives.

Panic edged into my mind. Mr. Seymour had never been so bold before, but neither had we ever been alone in a shadowy corridor so late at night.

“You are a rare specimen,” he said as he moved closer, his eyes following the curves of my face.

I turned my head to conceal my look of disgust; he fancied himself an amateur scientist, collecting and studying a variety of insects. Had he really just compared me to his revolting hobby? He raised his hand to touch my cheek, and I ducked under his arm and backed away.

“Good night, Mr. Seymour,” I said firmly.

His eyes narrowed, and he stepped forward, but a sound clattered at the other end of the hall. My heart nearly stopped. Mrs. Seymour stood wrapped in her dressing gown, hair curled in rags, holding a candle of her own. Her face was white, eyes blazing. She said not a word as she stared at the two of us.

I needed to leave, now. I hurried down the hall to Mrs. Seymour, curtsying with a soft “Ma’am” before darting up the servants’ stairs. My hands shook. How could I have been so foolish, tempting fate by passing Mr. Seymour’s book room this late at night? And now Mrs. Seymour had seen us. I was

uncertain how aware she'd been of her husband's attentions to me before, but now—

I reached my bedchamber and dropped into my chair beside the desk. Setting down my lesson plans and candle, I leaned forward and buried my face in my arms. I took a haggard breath. *Do not cry*. I hadn't cried in nearly a year, and I did not intend to start now. I took firm control of my rebellious emotions, locking them deep inside me. I did not have the luxury of being emotional.

I slumped back in my chair, staring at the dancing flame of my candle. Would Mrs. Seymour dismiss me? Or would she simply ignore the incident, pretend it never happened? That did not seem likely; she was not one to forgive and forget. I shook my head. Not that I had anything to be forgiven for. Her lecherous husband was completely to blame for my current predicament.

I groaned, rubbing my forehead. I'd thought myself fortunate beyond belief when I'd found this position. Darling children, located in a respectable London neighborhood, generous wages. The hidden pitfalls of the position had been revealed only after I'd worked for several months, and by then, I was far too attached to Daniel and Charlotte to leave.

My gaze wandered to the trunk peeking out from under my thin mattress. Inside was the note Mr. Finch had given me, hidden under my winter cloak and boots. An intense curiosity, one I'd ignored for three days, nipped at me. I had not so much as glanced at the unopened letter since that day. What could it possibly say? The high probability that I might soon find myself unemployed made me falter in my determination to ignore the letter.

Again, the words *ten thousand pounds* drifted into my mind. For the first time since I'd stormed from Mr. Finch's office, I allowed myself to imagine what I could do with such an implausible amount of money. I plucked at a stray thread in my skirt. New dresses and boots would be first on my list. A new bonnet. A stack of uncut books, the smell of fresh ink and paper. A fleeting vision teased me: a row of desks, young girls staring up at me in rapt attention. My own school.

Almost without realizing it, I found myself digging through my trunk, retrieving the letter. I broke the wax seal, hesitated one second more, and then opened it and began to read.

Chapter Three

MY DEAREST JULIANA,

I have longed for so many years to write this letter, and I can only imagine how difficult it is for you to read it. Nineteen years is a terribly long time to go without hearing from one's own grandmother.

I am not entirely certain as to where I should start; I am unsure how much you know about what happened those long years ago. You undoubtedly have a very settled opinion of your grandfather, formed by your mother's influence as much as the years of neglect on our side. But I can tell you this: your grandfather, while stubborn, strict, and often domineering, loved Katherine with all his heart. When she eloped with your father, it broke him in a way I had never seen before and that I never saw again after.

His pain soon turned to anger and embarrassment. To be a man of his position and to have his own daughter defy and reject him—well, it was simply too much. He disowned Katherine and forbade anyone in the family from contacting her.

I wish so very much that I could say I fought him on this. But I accepted his decision. I did not want to anger him further, and I told myself it would never last. Surely Katherine would come home. Surely Charles would give in and search for her. But it never happened. Juliana, do not ever underestimate the force of two very angry and stubborn people. Because of my husband's pride, I lost not only my daughter, but I lost you as well.

When my Charles died, I was shocked to learn he had changed his will without my knowing to leave you an inheritance. And my astonishment only increased upon hearing of his provision, that in order to receive your inheritance, you would be required to spend a month here at Havenfield. I believe that this was his attempt, albeit beyond the grave, to make recompense for everything he denied you. And I believe he acted with not just your well-being in mind but mine as well.

There is nothing I desire more than to meet you and have you as a guest in my home. Although I suppose I should say “our” home, since it is now the property of Mr. William Rowley. He is the kindest man alive and has insisted I stay as long as I like and asked that I convey that you are very welcome. My daughter, Lydia, and her husband are also staying through the summer. I know you and your cousin Eliza would be fast friends.

Oh, Juliana, please come. I am determined to know you and would have visited you already if I were not afraid of your shutting the door in my face. Please do not let the bitterness of the past ruin what future happiness we might know. It is an open invitation; you need only write, and I will send a coach to fetch you anytime you name. I am hoping so desperately to hear from you soon.

Your loving grandmother,

Eleanor Rowley

I stared at the letter. The paper bunched where my fingers clenched it, my grip rigid.

My grandmother *wanted* me to come to Havenfield. I had not anticipated this, not for one moment. Before Mama died, she rarely spoke of her past, particularly her upbringing and childhood. From what little she had said, I concluded that her family held nothing but deep enmity for her and for Papa and myself.

I simply could not comprehend that I had a grandmother who apparently loved me and wanted to have a relationship with me. And not just her but my aunt and my cousin as well. Like a family.

My family.

My walls flew back up. They were not my family.

No matter how many letters Lady Eleanor Rowley wrote to me, it would never make amends for the fact that she had ignored me the entirety of my existence.

I threw the letter into my trunk, slammed the lid closed, and shoved it back under the bed. I did not need the Rowleys. I had done well enough without them in my life for nearly twenty years.

But my mind remained as undecided as ever. I may not have needed a family, but I was beginning to believe I needed their money.

* * *

I found the schoolroom empty the next morning, though I arrived at my usual time. I frowned. If the children were unwell, the nursemaid was to inform me immediately, but perhaps she had been delayed. I headed back into the hallway, determined to check the nursery, but stopped when I heard my name called from behind.

Mary, one of the housemaids, hurried toward me. “Miss Ashbourne, you’re needed in the drawing room right away.”

“Is it the children? Are they unwell?” I asked.

“No, no, it’s not that. Except, well, it is about Miss Charlotte, I believe, but not that she’s ill.” Mary stumbled over her words, flustered.

“What is it about, then?” Icy threads began to work their way through my chest. The blazing look Mrs. Seymour had given me the night before in the hallway flashed across my mind. This could not be a coincidence.

Mary avoided my eyes and ignored my question. “You had better go up, miss.”

I ascended the stairs and approached the door to the drawing room, eyeing it with apprehension. That heavy, ornate door had never unsettled me so much before. Bracing myself, I knocked softly.

“Come.” Mrs. Seymour’s steely tone made me swallow.

She stood against the window, silhouetted by the morning sun. She did not look at me as I came to stand in the center of the room.

Charlotte sat on the settee beside the piano. Her eyes were red, but other than that, she looked well. I shot her a questioning glance, but she simply shook her head and stared at her hands in her lap.

“Good morning, Mrs. Seymour. Mary told me I was needed here. Is everything all right?” I almost winced at the sound of my voice. High. Anxious.

Mrs. Seymour turned, and my chest tightened; her eyes were as cold as I had ever seen them.

“No,” she said. “Everything is not all right. It has come to my attention that despite my constant warnings, you have deliberately ignored my wishes in regard to my children’s education.”

Charlotte’s and Daniel’s education? I almost breathed a sigh of relief. So this was not about Mr. Seymour. It had been foolish of me to think she would speak of such a thing in her daughter’s presence.

“I cannot guess what you mean,” I said, schooling my features into innocence. The children and I were always careful during our lessons. I was positive we had never been overheard.

“Oh, no?” She withdrew from behind her a slim, well-worn book and tossed it to the floor in front of me.

My mouth went dry. I gripped my hands into fists, fingernails digging into the soft skin of my palms.

“Charlotte, you are dismissed,” Mrs. Seymour said.

Charlotte rose from her seat, her small hands shaking, eyes darting to mine. I attempted an encouraging look, but she did not seem much comforted as she left.

Mrs. Seymour’s voice was victorious. “I cannot believe that after I entrusted you with the care and education of those most precious to me, you would betray my trust in such an underhanded manner. I am appalled.”

She sounded anything but. She fairly crowed at me in delight.

I refused to look at her. My eyes were fixed upon Mrs. Wollstonecraft's text on the floor, the pages bent, spine torn.

"My daughter is young and impressionable. That you would use your position of influence in her life to promote such unfeminine writings is absolutely unacceptable."

My chin jolted up of its own accord. "Unfeminine?"

"Yes, of course unfeminine! A young woman does not squander her time with philosophy, history, or literature. As I told you when you first arrived here, Charlotte must only work at developing her skills as a lady. You have filled her head with the worst sort of radical ideas when she must focus solely on what will one day make her a suitable wife."

Her words rang in the quiet of the room.

I lifted my eyes to meet hers. "Radical, you say?"

She did not respond, merely narrowing her eyes.

"Is it radical to be thoughtful and precise, intuitive and observant? Is it radical to wish to learn more about the world than what is within your four walls?"

She blinked once and then again, as if she did not quite believe her hearing.

I set my jaw, knowing there was no going back from what I was about to say. "But that is beside the point. We both know this has little to do with Charlotte. We needn't pretend any longer. Last night—"

Mrs. Seymour stepped forward, shaking a finger at me. "This has nothing to do with last night! It has everything to do with the fact that you are not providing my daughter with the education she needs."

"You know nothing about what she needs," I breathed.

There was a moment of shocked silence before she managed a response. “What did you say?”

I raised my chin another inch in response to her barely contained wrath. “You heard me quite clearly. You know nothing of your daughter, least of all her *needs*. Charlotte is a stranger to you.”

Mrs. Seymour’s nostrils flared. “How dare you speak to me in this way. I am her mother, and I am the one who—”

“No.” My voice rose over hers. The frustration I’d kept in check for two years would no longer be contained. I stepped forward, and she fell silent, mouth hanging open. “No, you will listen to me. Your daughter is intelligent, far more intelligent than you could imagine. Do you know she wishes she could study algebra and geography? Do you know she is teaching herself Greek and Latin just from books she found in your ridiculously sparse library? You would have her shut away her mind, her ideas, just so she might catch a rich husband?” I shook my head, my voice quieting once again. “No, I do not believe you understand at all what she needs.”

Mrs. Seymour was pale and shaking with rage. There was no ice in her eyes now, only fire and fury. “You are finished,” she hissed. “You are to leave this house immediately. You will not receive your pay for this month. Pack your things, and be gone within the hour.”

I stooped to the floor and picked up the thin book, smoothing the pages.

“You will never work as a governess again, not so long as I have breath in my body.”

I walked to the door, turning back to face her. “I do feel sorry for you, Mrs. Seymour. I only hope that one day you will grow to love your children as much as I do.” And without another word, I strode from the room, letting the door slam shut behind me.

Charlotte and Daniel sat in the stairwell across the hall, faces white and eyes wide as they peered through the banister. My lungs deflated. How

much had they heard?

I hurried up the stairs and gestured for them to follow me. We made our way to my room on the fourth floor, our footsteps clattering in the silence of the stairwell. I threw open my door and marched inside, yanking my trunk from its place under my bed and tossing open the lid. I went to my desk and began to stack my books.

“Juliana?”

The children stood just inside the door. Charlotte was on the verge of tears, but Daniel stared at me with awe.

I crossed to them, dropping to my knees and grasping their hands in mine.

Before I could speak, Charlotte burst out. “I am so sorry! It was all my fault. I was reading this morning in bed when Mary came to tidy up. I should have been down at breakfast, but I lost track of time. She saw me, and I know she told Mother, because she came right after and demanded I give the book to her.”

Her eyes begged me for forgiveness, and I squeezed her hand. “Oh, Charlotte, this is not in any way your fault. I made the decision to teach you things I knew your mother did not approve of, and I understood full well the consequences. This quarrel is completely between your mother and me.”

“But if I had just been more careful or hidden the book more quickly—”

I hushed her. “We would have been found out sooner or later. I wish it had been later, but—” My voice broke, and I allowed myself a steadying breath before looking to Daniel. “You must look out for your sister. She needs your help, whether she admits it or not. Keep reading, keep finding your disgusting little bugs”—he gave a half smile at my attempt of humor—“and do try to be happy. Do not allow your mother to take that away from you.”

He nodded, bravely holding back his tears. “I will.”

Charlotte had no such qualms. Tears fell freely down her cheeks as I turned to her. “Juliana, you cannot leave. You cannot. We can make it right, I am sure of it! We will go to Father, plead your case.”

I shook my head, swallowing the tightness in my throat. The poor girl had no idea her father was at the center of this entire mess. “Charlotte, you know it would never work. And your mother was quite clear.”

Charlotte’s sobs began in earnest, and I gathered her into my arms, her tears soaking into the shoulder of my dress. My hands shook, heart twisting. How was I to bear it?

When her breathing calmed, I pulled back and held her by her shoulders. “Charlotte, you mustn’t give up on your education. Read everything you can, and write your thoughts and ideas. That is the best we can do for now. Your mother will fight you harder than ever, but you must make her see you are of more value to her when you are educated.”

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. My stomach leapt, but it was only Sophie, face pale.

“Juliana, I just heard. It can’t be true, can it? You aren’t leaving?” Her eyes took in the state of my room, the open trunk and piles of books. Her face fell, and she leaned against the doorway.

I drew Daniel and Charlotte to me and embraced them together. I clenched my eyes closed, fighting the tears that threatened to spill over onto my cheeks. Crying would not help anything. The children needed to see strength and surety, not frailty. I pulled back, and they stared up at me with sorrow in their eyes. I understood so well.

“I know this feels like an end, but I will see you again, I promise. I will write to you, through Sophie”—I glanced up at her for confirmation, and she nodded—“and you will write to me.”

They bobbed their heads, a tiny blossom of hope sprouting in their eyes.

“We will tell you everything,” Daniel declared.

“I would like nothing more.” The lump in my throat was too much; I could barely speak. I touched each of their cheeks in turn, then stood and ushered them to the door. “Now go and be brave.”

With one last glance, they departed down the hallway, their footsteps fading as I turned again to my desk and continued stacking my books.

The bed creaked behind me as Sophie seated herself. “Where will you go?”

“I’m not sure.” My mind raced. “An inn, for now. I can find work. I may just need to leave town to escape Mrs. Seymour’s slander. My father has cousins in Derbyshire. Perhaps they would take me in while I find a new position.”

Sophie sat in silence for a few minutes, observing me as I packed away all evidence of my life in this house: my books and clothes, letters and knickknacks, drawings and little mementos from the children. I moved steadily and with purpose, wrapping my breakables carefully in shawls and chemises, stuffing stockings into empty spaces to prevent shifting. As long as my hands were occupied, the dread that steadily grew inside me was kept at bay.

Finally, Sophie could stand the silence no longer. “I simply cannot believe she would do this to you. You’re the best thing that ever happened to those children, and she’s a fool to let you go.”

A new, sharp pain stabbed in my chest. Though I knelt on the floor before my trunk, my arms full of dresses, I let them fall inside as I stood and embraced her. “Oh, Sophie, I shall miss you.”

Tears filled her eyes, though she did not sob as Charlotte had. She clutched me in a tight embrace, saying nothing.

After a few moments, she wiped her eyes and stood. “I’ll fetch George to carry your trunk.”

I touched her arm as she left. “You will look after them?”

She nodded. "Of course."

It took less than a quarter hour, and my room was bare. It looked smaller somehow, even with less to fill its space. Sitting at the desk, I slipped out a clean sheet of foolscap and trimmed my pen. Suppressing the agitation that rose inside me, willing myself to be calm and collected, I wrote the greeting.

Dear Lady Rowley,

I had lied to Sophie. I knew precisely where I was going, and it was not to Derbyshire.

Chapter Four

I GRITTED MY TEETH AND gripped the edges of the seat beneath me as the mail coach rattled along the road. The coach dropped to the right, and I jolted to the side, my shoulder colliding with my neighbor's yet again. The middle-aged man glowered at me as I pulled myself back to the middle of the seat.

I glared back. I had no handle to hold on to, seated as I was between him and a heavysset woman who smelled of boiled potatoes. I was at the mercy of the movement of the coach, unforgiving in its unpredictability.

We had set out from London early that morning and traveled the entire day, stopping every now and then to exchange passengers and horses. The shadow of the coach stretched out to the right of the road, long and spindly, flickering as we passed behind trees lining our path.

The coach slowed, and I spotted thatched roofs and storefronts. The passengers lurched as one when the coach came to a stop.

“Finally,” my surly neighbor said, reaching for the lever.

I could not have agreed more.

I escaped the coach, rolling my shoulders and neck in a hopeless attempt to relieve the stiffness of my body. Readjusting my bonnet, I examined the town of Millbury. Though there were several shops and residences, the entire village couldn't have been larger than a few blocks and would have fit very easily in St. James's Park.

One by one, the passengers departed, carrying away their bags and trunks. Only my trunk remained perched atop the coach.

The driver approached me. “You're still wanting to go on to Havenfield, then?”

I nodded, not allowing myself the opportunity to hesitate. “Yes. It’s not far from here, you said?”

“It’s but a short ride to the east. We’ll have you there before dark.”

He handed me up into the cabin, which I found remarkably more tolerable now that the smell of potatoes had faded. We set off, and I gripped the handle by the window, peering out with interest. The coach had been so crowded before that I hadn’t caught more than a passing glance of our surroundings.

The world rushed past in a blur of color. Spring had come on in full here in the country. Wildflowers bloomed, while trees welcomed leaves back to their lonely branches. Much of the countryside looked to be farms or estates, but there still existed an untamed quality about the land. Thickets of trees surrounded gently sloping hills; a flock of birds darted from the trees, startled, no doubt, by the noise of our coach. I had never imagined a place to be so green.

The sun dipped below the distant hills, and I noticed for the first time storm clouds moving in from the east, dark and heavy. I was watching the clouds uneasily when we rounded a bend in the road and I had my first glimpse of Havenfield.

I had long ago formed a picture in my mind of my mother’s childhood home. To me, it was an enormous building of blackened stone, tall, dark windows, and long, echoing hallways.

In truth, Havenfield was nothing of the sort. Only two stories tall, it unfolded across the grounds like a sleeping cat, ivy crawling up the light gray stones nearly to the roof. A garden stretched to the west and behind the house, and on the east, a manicured lawn extended to the edge of the nearby woods. It was as lovely an estate as I had ever seen.

I gulped.

The coach entered the long drive, circling around a large fountain and halting before the steps leading to the entry. The driver climbed down from

his seat, opened my door, and reached up a hand to help me down.

This was my last chance. I could turn back now, write my excuses to Lady Rowley. I could return to London or go on to Bath or any number of towns where governesses were in demand. I need not go through with this.

“Miss?”

Ten thousand pounds, I reminded myself. I took a deep breath, placed my hand in his, and left the safety of the coach. I stepped away to clear a space for my trunk, which the coachman lowered to the driver from the roof of the coach.

“Where would you like this, miss?”

I glanced at the entry. The wide door, with an elaborate iron-cast knocker, remained closed and showed no acknowledgment of my arrival. I had rather expected someone to come greet me, seeing as my note informing the Rowleys of my visit should have arrived two days earlier.

“Just there is fine. I’ll send someone for it.” I had not been looking forward to two strangers witnessing my first meeting with my family. This would likely work out for the better.

The driver shot me a strange look. “Very well.”

He set my trunk at the bottom of the broad set of stone stairs. I opened my reticule and carefully counted out the extra payment we had discussed. “Thank you. I do appreciate your agreeing to bring me here.”

No doubt delivering young women traveling alone to wealthy country estates was not an everyday occurrence for them. However, the coachman and driver simply tipped their hats, bid me farewell, and departed into the wind.

I climbed the steps, twisting my ring about my finger, and stopped before the door as it loomed above me.

One month. Four weeks of forced smiles and stiff conversation. Thirty days of waiting, enduring, and planning.

One month and I could leave and collect my inheritance. One month and all my hopes and dreams could be realized. I took hold of the enormous iron knocker and drove it against the door three times. Each blow resonated in my mind, reverberating with foreboding. I took a step back and waited.

The wind picked up, and I grasped my bonnet with both hands, intent on keeping my hair at least somewhat presentable. I waited for what seemed like several minutes, though it was likely only half a minute. No one came. I knocked again, with more determination, the sound echoing in the rooms beyond.

Still no one came.

I peeked in the window to the left of the door. A dim entry filled my view, tall and imposing, with an enormous grand staircase and a long hallway stretching to the rear of the house. No lights glimmered inside.

My hands shook, though with anger or fear I couldn't say. I'd spent nearly five days wondering what I would face when I arrived here. What would my grandmother be like? How would she react to seeing me? How would I feel entering my mother's childhood home, knowing those who lived here had brought her so much grief and pain? With all these thoughts to contend with, the possibility of arriving to an empty house had not even occurred to me.

Oh, why had I sent the coach away? Driving away in that smelly equipage was such a better prospect than attempting to enter this hollow, formidable building.

A drop of rain splattered on my cheek, and I wiped it away, peering up at the darkening sky. "Oh, *don't*."

I begged in vain. With a rumble of thunder, the heavens announced their intention, and raindrops began to fall in earnest. I eyed the door handle with

dismay, but I did not have many options at this point. I grasped it and tried to turn it. Locked.

I dropped any pretense of calm and dashed to the corner of the house, searching frantically for another entrance, an overhang, anything. There was nothing but rows of windows as the building extended to the gardens. I blinked rain from my eyes, panic rising in my chest.

Movement caught my attention. Some distance away, an open door banged against the side of a wooden structure, low and wide. A stable.

I had already taken a step in its direction when I paused. I couldn't leave my trunk in the rain and mud. My entire life was in that rickety, warped trunk, which was certainly not going to keep out any amount of water.

Darting back to the front of the house, I was at a loss for how to carry it. I tried lifting it but managed only a few steps before I stumbled and set it down. Why did I have so many blasted books?

I was completely soaked through, but the deluge had only just begun. Rain now fell in a solid sheet around me, and my hair whipped across my face and into my eyes, the wind howling like a wounded animal.

I clenched my jaw, grabbed the handle on one side of my trunk, and pulled with all my strength. It moved, substantially so, and I exhaled in relief.

It was the longest journey of my life, dragging that infernal trunk across the muddy lawn. I reached the stable door and pulled my trunk a few feet inside, startling several of the horses within the stalls as I dropped my belongings with a thud. I ran back and yanked on the door handle, wrestling with it as the gusts threatened to tear it from my grasp.

Finally, I managed to close and latch the door. I rested my hands against the damp wood, breathless, water dripping down my face. Why had no one answered my knock? Surely someone had heard me arrive. Was this all simply a cruel trick played by relations who never wished to see me in the first place?

I pushed away from the door and marched to my trunk, the urge to lash out welling up inside me. For once, I did not resist. I kicked my trunk once and then again because the release of anger was intoxicating.

Then I let loose a string of curses that even my sailor father would have blushed at. My trunk sat unmoved, mocking me with its inability to respond.

“Well, that was most unexpected.”

I started and spun, my stomach leaping. A man and horse stood at the other end of the stable, open doors behind them. The stallion whinnied, and the man led him farther into the shelter.

“Might I inquire as to what offense your unfortunate trunk has committed?” The shadows of the stables obscured his features, but amusement was clear in his voice.

My voice, however, seemed to have vanished, right alongside my wits. My lips parted, but not a sound escaped. He seemed indifferent to my silence and continued to lead his horse toward the center of the stable between us, where a lantern cast a sphere of golden light.

When I could finally talk, I ignored his question. “You frightened me.” My words were hoarse.

“I do apologize. Though, in my defense, I was not expecting to find anyone here when I returned, let alone . . .” He trailed off, waving a hand in my general direction. “Might I ask, what *are* you doing here?”

I dropped my gaze. What possible excuse could I give? “I . . . I was caught in the rain and needed shelter.”

He stopped near the center of the stable, a good ten paces from me. I refused to look at him. It occurred to me that the last time I had been alone with a man, it had not ended particularly well. I stepped away from him, putting my trunk between us.

“You were caught in the rain . . . with a trunk?”

“Yes,” I said stubbornly. I did not know what I was attempting to avoid. If this man was a stable hand, he could help me into the house and perhaps find Lady Rowley. And yet I was still in complete shock that my arrival had been—ignored? Unexpected? To admit that to anyone would be mortifying.

I glanced up to gauge his response, and my eyes froze on his. I stared in consternation. I *knew* him. Though he was soaked and dripping, the same as I, the lantern light clearly showed his tall build and blue eyes, in which recognition was also dawning.

“I know you,” he said, stepping closer. “From London. We bumped into each other.” I made as though to speak, but he continued. “Rather, you knocked into me, spilled your coins, and then shouted at me when I offered to replace them.”

“I did not shout,” I said, heat rising in my cheeks. Had I shouted? Our run-in was hazy in my mind; I couldn’t recall the exact words I’d flung at him.

“It certainly wasn’t a ‘please’ and ‘thank you.’”

I could not fathom what was happening. That I would run into this man, quite literally, in London and then, not a week later, encounter him again in a decidedly more awkward situation was unimaginable. I eyed him more closely. He wore boots covered in mud and a riding jacket that would not have looked out of place in the seediest tavern. How had I thought him a wealthy gentleman? I must have been in quite the state to imagine that after meeting with Mr. Finch.

He stepped forward and spoke in a commanding voice. “Now, who are you? A name, please.”

I did not care for his tone. “My name is Juliana Ashbourne, and I must say ___”

“*You* are Miss Ashbourne?” He cut off my well-deserved rebuke, staring at me through wide eyes.

“I am,” I said, taken aback. How did he recognize my name?

He gazed at me with an indecipherable expression before shaking his head, his dripping curls pressed against his forehead. “This is a strange coincidence indeed. I knew Lady Rowley had written to you, but she never received a response.”

An odd thing to say. Why would a stable hand be aware of anything the family did?

“I did write, and the postmaster assured me my note would arrive two days ago, though, clearly, it did not.” The coolness of the evening began to settle into my damp dress. I needed to find somewhere warm; I bit back my pride as I spoke my next words. “Would you—if you could—be so kind as to help me into the house? I’m afraid no one answered my knock.”

He grimaced. “No, I would imagine not. The family is dining out, and the servants were given the evening off.” He gestured to his horse. “I apologize. I must be so presumptuous as to beg a few minutes. I need to dry him off.”

I was beginning to tremble from the cold. “Could you not send out another stable hand to do that?”

He pulled his head back. “I beg your pardon?”

“Is there not another who can cover for you?”

A strange spark appeared in his eyes. “I am terribly sorry, but I must ask. Who do you think I am?”

“Are you not a stable hand?” Who else would be out in this weather, dressed as he was?

A grin stole over his face, and he laughed, throwing his head back.

I scowled at him. “I am glad you find my confusion so amusing.”

He still chuckled, shaking his head. “Oh, it’s not you. Well, it is, but only partly.”

He was making absolutely no sense.

“Just last week my mother was harping on me to purchase a new riding outfit, claiming she could hardly distinguish me from the servants.”

An awful suspicion began to creep up through my body.

He stepped forward and bowed. “Please, allow me to introduce myself. I’m William Rowley.”

This was Mr. William Rowley? Heir to my grandfather’s estate? My thoughts raced through the conversation I’d had with Mr. Finch and the letter from my grandmother. Had neither of them mentioned his age?

I flushed. My humiliation reached deep to my core. “I did not mean to . . . That is, I just assumed—”

With sudden, excruciating clarity, the absurdity of my situation came upon me full force. Here I was, soaked and dripping, sheltering in the stable of the estranged family I had never met, only to come across the heir to the estate. And not only had he witnessed me cursing in the foulest language imaginable, but I had mistaken him for one of his servants.

He watched me with amusement, his mouth twitching. He seemed to enjoy my obvious distress. My embarrassment quickly turned to irritation.

“Why did you not say anything?”

He held up his hands in defense. “You hardly gave me the chance. I was not intentionally deceitful.”

All my training in polite conversation had not prepared me for this horrifying scenario. I hadn’t the slightest notion of what to do now. I could not look at him; my eyes searched out the dirt floor, the dark corners of the stalls, as though I might find the answer hidden within the gloomy shadows.

A gust of bitter wind blew in through the open doors behind Mr. Rowley, and I shivered. He grabbed a blanket hanging over one of the stalls nearby

and closed the distance between us, holding it out to me. “Here, take this. You’re cold.”

My stubborn side argued that I ought to refuse the blanket when it was offered by such a disagreeable gentleman, but it looked warm and soft. My practical side won out. I snatched the blanket from him and wrapped it about me. He strode back to the open doors and pulled them closed with one swift movement, then latched them.

“I’d suggest we wait a few minutes before going in,” he said, walking back to his horse and taking the reins. “These storms blow over quickly, and I need to rub him down before he grows chilled.”

I acknowledged his words with a short nod. I didn’t trust myself to speak, considering my record for the evening.

Seating myself on a short bench in front of one of the stalls, I watched Mr. Rowley as he led his stallion into a stall across from me. He removed the saddle and hung it to dry, then took another blanket and began drying the horse. He worked quickly but thoroughly, murmuring soft words to his mount.

While he worked, I attempted to recover what little dignity remained to me. I removed my bonnet and smoothed my hair away from my face, wincing at the knots and tangles my fingers encountered. After pinning my hair back as best I could, I settled the blanket around my shoulders once again. I rubbed my forehead as though I could dash away my frustrated thoughts. Since that day in Mr. Finch’s office, my patience had been all but nonexistent, my temper simmering dangerously near the surface. I hated to think my grandfather’s inheritance had influenced me in such a noticeable way.

Be calm, I told myself. Consider your words with care before you speak. Do not act rashly. Five years of attending Mrs. Stanton’s Academy for Fine Ladies had trained my mind and behavior until these traits had become second nature. And yet, in just the last week, I had run my mouth at Mrs. Seymour, consequently lost my position, and traveled the length of two

counties to insult Mr. William Rowley. I had a terrible suspicion my current emotional state would only continue to make my situation more difficult.

Mr. Rowley laid a fresh, dry blanket over his horse and led him to a trough in the corner of the stall. He patted the animal gently, then closed and latched the stall door. Turning to face me, he leaned his back against the door and crossed his arms in front of him. He examined me with interest.

I lifted my chin and met his eyes. “I feel I ought to offer an apology.”

It was the best course I could manage at the moment. This man was my grandfather’s heir and, as such, owned the very ground beneath my feet. Though Lady Rowley had made clear in her letter that Mr. Rowley held no objection to my visiting the estate, there was no guarantee his opinion would not change. And then where would I be? Was there a legal precedent for forcing a new owner to abide by the will of the previous occupant? I had little desire to find out. Better to attempt to mend our issues now.

If my words surprised him, he did not show it. “And what would that be for?”

I took a deep breath. “For my treatment of you when we met in London. I was not myself that day and beg your pardon.”

He tilted his head to the side, still watching me with a critical eye. “I appreciate your apology and will accept it, but only if you would be so kind as to answer a question for me. That day in London, what was it that upset you so very much?”

My pulse quickened, though I kept my face impassive. “It was nothing.”

Merely that my grandfather had suddenly died and left me a fortune but only if I visited this awful, humiliating place.

“I sincerely doubt that,” he said wryly. “You were out of sorts about something.”

“Even if I had been,” I shot back, “I would not likely tell *you*.” I clenched my jaw and looked away. That apology had not gone very well. *Be calm*, I repeated yet again, spinning my ring with my thumb, hoping the familiar movement would soothe my agitation.

We sat in silence, surrounded by the sounds of the steady rainfall on the roof above us and the movements of the horses. Although I stared steadfastly at the door of the stable, Mr. Rowley’s gaze remained fixed upon me. I could hardly blame him; I was quite a sight at the moment.

“Lady Rowley has been most anxious to hear from you.”

When he spoke, it startled me enough for me to look at him again. “I did write,” I reminded him.

He nodded, dropping his gaze for the first time. “She wanted to go see you herself in London once Mr. Finch had located you. But we—that is to say, myself and Mrs. Woodward—”

“My aunt.”

“Yes. We thought it best to try a letter first. Perhaps a bit less shocking?”

I did not offer a response, though I knew he sought one.

After a pause, he continued. “She’s been quite restless these past weeks. She will be pleased you decided to come.”

Neither of us seemed inclined to mention the very compelling reason that had forced me here. I nodded, and he finally let us drift back to silence.

The minutes passed, and eventually, the rain slowed to a drizzle.

“Shall we?” he asked.

I stood, eager to escape the awkwardness of the stable.

Mr. Rowley strode to my trunk and lifted it with ease. I frowned, annoyed that what had caused me so much trouble seemed to come effortlessly to

him.

“You needn’t have brought the candlesticks,” he said, grunting a bit as he shifted it in his arms.

“It’s books,” I said stiffly.

He raised both eyebrows at me. “Books?”

I did not bother to explain further. I was a governess; what precisely did he expect me to have in my trunk?

A gleam of curiosity flickered in his eyes, but he said nothing more as he started toward the stable door. I opened it for him and followed him out into the misty evening air, clouds obscuring the moonlight. Water dripped from the trees around us, and raindrops clung to our boots as we walked through the grass. The dampness of the air filled my lungs, the scent of newly fallen rain reviving my senses.

“We’ll go through the servants’ entrance,” he explained. “Since the family is not expected until late, no one is keeping watch at the front door.”

“Clearly,” I muttered.

He pretended not to hear, thankfully. Why did my mouth continue to release such inappropriate responses?

I grasped at the first question that came to mind, hoping to smooth over yet another rough patch in our disaster of a conversation. “And why did you not join the family?” I could not quite manage to call them “my family.”

“I am afraid I do not care for social calls. Though if anyone inquires, I was buried in work and could not spare the time.”

Mr. Rowley led me around to the rear of the house, the stillness of the night a strange contrast to the storm that had just departed. I pulled the blanket closer about me, my nerves returning in full at the thought of finally entering the house.

“If you would?” He nodded at a plain wooden door. I pushed it open, holding it for him as he maneuvered my trunk inside. We made our way down a shadowy hallway, light glowing at the far end. Laughter and loud voices echoed through the narrow passage as we approached. Mr. Rowley entered the servants’ hall first, and I joined him with reluctant resignation.

“Mr. Rowley!”

Servants leapt to their feet, faces showing varying degrees of shock as they stood along the wooden table that stretched the length of the hall. No one seemed certain how to respond to the master of the house appearing in the middle of their gathering.

“Do sit down, everyone. I apologize for interrupting.”

Mr. Rowley set my trunk down against the wall. The servants continued to stand until a tall, distinguished gentleman signaled them. They perched on their seats, whispering, staring at me with obvious curiosity.

Mr. Rowley went to speak with the distinguished-looking man, a dark-haired woman joining them, surely the butler and housekeeper from their dress and authority. I stared at my muddy boots and clutched my blanket around me, avoiding the eyes of everyone in the room.

Mr. Rowley walked back to me, the man following him while the woman went to speak with one of the maids. “Miss Ashbourne, this is Mr. Banfield, the butler.”

“Miss Ashbourne, do allow me to apologize most profusely,” Mr. Banfield said. “I am terribly embarrassed you arrived without our knowledge and just as the storm began. I hope this will not have a lasting impression on your visit here.”

I managed a nod. “Thank you.”

The dark-haired woman finished speaking to the maid and came to join us, offering a curtsy in greeting. Mr. Rowley introduced her as Mrs. Pike.

“I’m having a room prepared for you as we speak,” she said. “I’ll take you there myself, and we’ll have a footman bring round your trunk.” She glanced around. “Where are the rest of your things?”

“It’s just the one trunk,” I muttered.

“Oh.” Mrs. Pike peered at me with interest. “No matter. Let me arrange a bite for you to eat, and then I’ll take you upstairs.”

She moved up the table and waved over a woman in an apron and white mob-cap. Mr. Banfield bowed and hurried off, barking orders at two of the footmen to carry my trunk.

Mr. Rowley and I were left standing together, the servants around us occupied with their tasks. I did not look at him, instead busying myself with sliding the blanket from my shoulders and folding it over my arm. My hands trembled; my thoughts and nerves still had not settled over our mishap in the stable, and I rather hoped he would leave.

Instead, he spoke in a quiet tone. “I will be sure to inform your grandmother of your arrival when she returns.”

The thought of facing Lady Rowley after all that had happened today made me want to slide to the floor then and there. I closed my eyes.

“And I will make certain you are not disturbed tonight.”

I blinked my eyes open, looking up at him. He watched me, expression serious.

“Thank you,” I said grudgingly.

His features softened. Even with drenched clothing and a mess of damp curls, he was rather handsome. “Try and rest. You’ll have quite a few people eager to meet you in the morning.”

As quickly as his sincerity had come, it fled, and the corners of his mouth curved up into a grin. “And do try not to wander off. I shall have to be on my guard if our meetings are always to be so eventful.”

Any goodwill he'd earned from me vanished. I glared at him, but he only offered a short bow.

“Good night, Miss Ashbourne.” And he strode away, leaving me wet and irritated.

Chapter Five

I FOUGHT A RESTLESS BATTLE with sleep that night.

Not for lack of comfort, by any means. The vast mountain of fluffy blankets and down pillows Mrs. Pike had called a bed made my mattress at the Seymours' seem a wooden board in comparison. When I sat, I sank into the cushion a good two inches.

No, comfort was not my trouble.

I lay staring at the frilly curtains that framed my bed for close to an hour before I slid from the warmth of my covers and paced the length of my room. Though weary to the bone, my body had neglected to inform my head that I was in desperate need of rest. Surely one mind could not hold so many thoughts as mine did: fear of meeting my relatives, worry for Charlotte and Daniel, uncertainty over my future. They whirled and swooped, switching from one anxiety to the next faster than I could keep up.

I finally succumbed to exhaustion well after midnight, curled up on one corner of the massive bed. I slept for a few hours and awoke to the faintest traces of sunrise peeking through my curtains. For the briefest moment, I entertained the notion of returning to sleep, but my unease of the night before returned, demanding my attention as it twisted my stomach.

Wrapping my dressing gown around my shoulders, I moved to the window and drew back the curtains. I settled into the window seat and drew my knees to my chest. My window overlooked the east lawn, and I could just make out the edge of the wood in the muted light. For a moment, I imagined a young girl with a crown of golden curls and laughter on her lips skipping across the grass without a care in the world or a thought for the future.

Had Mama really spent her childhood in this place? How strange it was to picture her here, surrounded by elegance and beauty and wealth, when all

my life I'd seen her only in the humblest of settings.

A soft knock came at my door. I jerked my head up. It was early yet; who could that possibly be?

I crossed the room and opened the door a few inches. "Yes?"

A maid stood there, a girl with shy eyes and auburn hair pulled beneath a cap. She bobbed a quick curtsy. "Pardon me, miss. I wanted to return your things." She held out a bundle—my wet clothes from the night before, now clean and dry. "And I hoped to see if you needed me. Mrs. Pike asked that I attend you during your visit."

"Attend me?"

"Yes."

She saw my uncertainty and took pity, explaining, "As your maid."

My face flushed. "Oh. Um, yes. Come in, I suppose."

I opened the door wider to let her in.

She took in the room quickly and moved to my open trunk, still full, at the end of the bed. "May I?"

I closed the door. "It's only a few things. You needn't bother."

But she was already moving to the wardrobe with an armful of my dresses.

I cleared my throat. "May I ask your name?"

"Emma, miss," she replied. "Would you like this hung, Miss Ashbourne?" She held out my spare nightdress.

"No, that can be folded. And do call me Juliana."

"Oh, I couldn't do that." Her expression was so horrified at the prospect that I didn't argue further.

I stood by the door, watching her work and feeling horribly out of place. I had never been waited upon before. Did I watch? Or help?

I decided on the latter and moved to my trunk, unwrapping a few of my trinkets from a shawl and placing them on the writing desk by the window.

“Oh, I can do that, miss,” Emma said as she turned from the wardrobe.

I waved her off. “I’ve two hands.”

She shot me a bewildered glance. “I can’t say I’ve ever had a lady help me with my work before.”

I shook my head. “I’m nearly the farthest thing from a lady, so you haven’t broken your streak.”

“Not a lady?” Her voice held a note of disbelief. “Why would you think that?”

“It is not what I think; it’s just who I am.”

“But you’re . . .”

I offered a wry smile. “The granddaughter of Sir Charles Rowley? Oh, I’m fully aware, I promise you.”

Emma returned to the trunk and picked up my shawl. “Then how can you think you’re not a lady? Begging your pardon, miss, but you outrank nearly everyone in this house, not to mention the county.” She returned to the wardrobe and so did not see my eyes widen in surprise.

I had not thought of it at all like that. I wasn’t certain I liked the idea. “Well, it hardly changes who I am,” I said, stacking a few of my books that had tumbled over in my trunk, no doubt during my wild flight to the stable the evening before. “I’m but a governess and the daughter of a seamstress and a sailor.”

Emma turned back to me, still holding my shawl. “Truly?”

“Yes, truly.” I had assumed the servants knew only the vaguest details of my family’s history and was unsurprised she did not know my circumstances. “Not a week ago, I worked for a family in London.”

She stared at me with wide eyes. “That is remarkable. What good fortune it must have been to learn of your inheritance.”

“Good fortune indeed,” I muttered, carrying my books to the writing desk.

She did not respond, and we finished unpacking the trunk in silence. It took a painfully short amount of time.

“Which dress shall I lay out for you, miss?”

If Emma hadn’t believed my circumstances before, she certainly did now. I had but four dresses to my name, a shawl and winter cloak, a pair of boots and slippers, and not much besides.

“The blue?” I suggested, sounding not at all certain. She nodded and pulled it from the wardrobe.

“If you like, I’ll fetch you a tray for breakfast, and then I’ll start on your hair.”

“I can do my own hair,” I said, caught off guard.

She dropped her gaze. “Oh. Of course. I beg your pardon. I didn’t mean to presume—” She backed away toward the door.

“Please, wait.” I stepped forward. She paused, glancing up at me apprehensively. “I am sorry. I don’t know what is expected of me, what is proper. I’ve never had anyone to do my hair before, let alone act as my maid. I apologize if I said something wrong. It would scarcely be the first time.”

Emma shook her head. “You needn’t apologize to me, miss. I’m only here to help in whatever way you like.”

I gave her a kind smile in an attempt to set her at ease; I knew how it felt to be in her shoes. “Then what I’d like is for you to arrange my hair. I’m sure you have much more skill at it than I do.”

She matched my smile with a timid one of her own. “I’d be glad to.” She curtsied and left.

I exhaled, fingering my ring. It was not yet breakfast, and I’d already offended my maid. That did not bode well for the remainder of the day.

I slipped into my dress, fastening the back as I went to stand in front of the ornate full-length mirror. A thin, pale girl with wavy dark hair stared back at me, shadowed circles under her dull-brown eyes. Her dress was simple, unadorned, and well worn, if one cared to look close enough.

I brushed my hair back from my face, leaving my hand on my cheek for just a moment. Perhaps the single feature I had inherited from my mother was the heart shape of my face. My father claimed everything else, from my dark eyes and hair to my stature, a touch too tall to be fashionable.

I sighed. Emma would have to be very good indeed to make me presentable this morning.

A knock sounded at the door.

“Come in,” I called, turning to the door.

The door opened slowly, and then a woman, certainly not Emma, stepped into my room.

I knew her to be my grandmother at once. Her bright blue eyes—my mother’s eyes—gazed at me from a face softened with time. Her blonde hair was tinged with gray and arranged into gentle curls that framed her face. She wore an elegant black gown trimmed in lace; I felt underdressed by comparison in my ordinary day dress.

She stood still, studying me intently. And then her eyes filled with tears. She held a hand to her mouth, her other arm wrapping around her waist. “I

had not expected you to look like him.”

Look like whom? My own father? I was debating whether I ought to be annoyed at her statement when she crossed to me and took my hands in hers. A cloud of delicate rose perfume surrounded us.

“Oh, my sweet Juliana, I have hoped so long for this. I could scarce believe it when William told me you had arrived last night. What terrible luck for us to be away! We received a last-minute dinner invitation that we couldn’t possibly refuse, and really we had no reason to since we hadn’t any idea you were coming.”

I began to speak, to point out that I had, in fact, sent a letter, but she continued. “Oh yes, William mentioned you had written, but it must have been lost somehow. Which is a terrible shock, as the post between here and London is usually quite reliable. I do wish you had allowed me to send the coach for you. I cannot imagine how dreadful it was traveling in a hired coach. And William told me of your being caught in the rain! I’ve never heard of such a thing happening, and I am absolutely mortified. Do say you forgive me for allowing such a welcome as that?” She paused for the first time, watching me closely, still grasping my hands in hers.

“It was a simple misunderstanding,” I murmured, taken aback in the face of such chattering. I pulled my hands from hers, tucking them behind my back. “I hold no ill feelings about it, I assure you.”

She took a step back with a little smile of embarrassment. “Oh dear, I’ve overwhelmed you, I can see. I am sorry, I tend to blather when nervous.”

Her resemblance to my mother was unsettling. Mama used to prattle on and on for hours when she got worked up.

I cleared my throat, my shoulders tight. “Not at all.”

Lady Rowley clasped her hands in front of her. “I simply had to see you first thing. I hope you do not mind my intrusion.”

“No, I . . .” I paused, not certain what response I ought to give. I cleared my throat, looking at my feet. “I wanted to thank you for your letter and your invitation.”

“But of course! I do wish it could have come sooner, but I . . . well . . .” She stopped, and the silence stretched for an uncomfortable moment before she spoke again. “I know it is early still, but everyone is most anxious to meet you. We will be in the morning room whenever you would like to join us.”

“Yes, thank you.” I could not think of what else to say.

She smiled, more cautious than before, and walked to the door. She hesitated. “I know that our situation is . . . unique.” A euphemism if I’d ever heard one. “But I am glad you’re here.”

I only nodded, not trusting my voice. She gave me one last glance before she left.

I slumped onto the chaise beside the mirror and rubbed my forehead. It was going to be a long month.

* * *

Following Emma’s directions, I approached the door of the morning room an hour later, listening to the murmur of voices coming from inside. I touched a hand to my hair. My maid—it felt odd to even think the phrase—had worked something of a miracle with my tangled locks; they were pulled back, curled, and pinned into an elegant knot at the base of my neck. It gave me a lift of confidence, small though it was.

I took a moment to collect myself, taking a deep breath, before opening the door and stepping into the room. Five sets of eyes immediately turned to me, conversation coming to a halt as I closed the door behind me.

Lady Rowley sat perched on a satin-covered couch with two other ladies, while a middle-aged man sat in an armchair beside them, newspaper open before him.

And William—Mr. Rowley—sat at the writing desk by the window, in the midst of drafting a letter. He had looked up with the rest of them at the sound of my entrance, but I avoided his gaze, focusing instead on Lady Rowley as she stood and came to me.

“Juliana, come in, come in.” She took my arm and led me back to the couch. “I have been aching to introduce you.”

The two ladies stood as we approached.

“Juliana, may I present your aunt, Mrs. Lydia Woodward.”

I dipped into a curtsy, peeking at my mother’s sister from under my eyelashes. There were similarities, to be sure. She had the same blue eyes as both my mother and Lady Rowley, as well as their slim and petite stature. But her hair was a darker shade of gold, more brown than yellow. And her eyes were not as soft as Lady Rowley’s. She nodded a greeting, her gaze inscrutable.

“And your cousin, Miss Eliza Woodward.”

I turned my attention to the younger of the two women and could not help but stare. She looked to be about my age but was clearly my superior in every other way. Her flaxen hair was artfully arranged with braids and curls, her blue eyes, which evidently ran in the family, gazing at me in curiosity. Her cheeks were rosy, and she had a perfect upturned nose and full lips that smiled at me shyly.

We also exchanged curtsies, though Eliza’s exhibited such grace that I felt quite clumsy in comparison.

I met Mr. Woodward next, Aunt Lydia’s husband. He stood, offering a quick bow and a word of welcome before returning to his newspaper.

“And you already met William last night, of course.”

He came to stand beside the couch, looking remarkably altered in his tailored jacket and cravat and much more imposing.

“Oh yes, we had something of an interesting encounter.” His eyes were bright with mischief. “You wouldn’t know it to look at her, but Miss Ashbourne here has quite the impressive vocabulary.”

I flushed. How much had he told them about last night? Did they know about my cursing? Or mistaking him for a servant? Or had he possibly told them about our first meeting in London? The fact that I had so many horribly embarrassing instances to choose from was not comforting.

Whatever the case may be, I would try to be civil. I was determined to not be undone by this man, though he seemed equally determined to vex me.

I curtsied. “Mr. Rowley.” He inclined his head in a bow, though his eyes continued to tease me.

Aunt Lydia and Eliza seated themselves back on their couch, and Lady Rowley led me to the settee across from them.

“Now, dear, you must tell us all about yourself,” Lady Rowley said eagerly. “Mr. Finch informed us you were employed as a governess in London, but did not say much else. Where in town are you living?”

“My position was with the Seymour family, who live just off Green Street.”

Lady Rowley tilted her head. “Seymour, you say? I cannot say I know the name. How did you like it there? Did you get on well with the family?”

I shifted uneasily. I did not particularly care to divulge that I had been dismissed from my position only days before, let alone the reasons why. “Well enough, I suppose.”

Aunt Lydia spoke. “I confess I am woefully ignorant of the life of a governess. How did you enter into that profession?”

Her words were innocent enough, but the uneasiness in my stomach deepened when I met her eyes, cool and detached.

“I daresay I didn’t have many options at the time. After Mama—” My voice cut out, and I swallowed. “After Mama passed, I attended boarding school while Papa was abroad, and becoming a governess seemed the natural fit once I left school.”

From the corner of my eye, I watched William return to his desk as we spoke, presumably to finish his letter, though his pen did not move.

“And what news of your father? Still abroad?” Lady Rowley spoke with careful nonchalance, but she gripped her hands in her lap, betraying her discomfort.

My father was not a subject any of us wished to discuss, of that I was certain. I spoke the line I’d rehearsed during my travels the day before. “Papa captains a merchant ship for the Levant Company. From his last letter, I know he arrived at the Cape of Good Horn en route to India.”

The tiniest sensation of guilt prickled in my stomach. I pushed it away. I had not spoken anything that was untrue.

“You mentioned you went to school?” Eliza spoke for the first time, her voice quiet but her eyes keen. “What did you learn there?”

“Oh, the usual. Reading and writing, embroidery, music. Papa thought it best for me to be amongst other girls rather than accompanying him on his ship.”

“Well, I should think so,” Lady Rowley exclaimed. “A young woman like you dashing about the globe? Why, any manner of awful things could have befallen you.”

I ignored the sudden ache in my chest, keeping my voice light. “Oh, but I loved sailing. Mama and I used to travel with him on some of his shorter journeys, to France mostly. I quite enjoyed it.”

The disbelieving stares I received informed me this was not a normal hobby for a proper young woman.

“I admire that,” Mr. Woodward said, laying down his newspaper. “I traveled a good bit before we married. At the time, there was nothing I enjoyed more than being on the open sea.” I shot him a grateful glance as he continued. “And I’d wager Mr. Rowley feels the same. He is the real expert here.”

William did not so much as glance up from his letter. “Oh, I am quite in agreement with you and Miss Ashbourne.”

I had hoped for a bit more revelation. What exactly made him the expert in sea travel?

Aunt Lydia huffed. “That is fine and well for you, my dear. But I cannot imagine what would have driven Katherine to take her daughter out on a ship in the middle of the ocean, far from any help, where anything could happen.”

The fluttering nervousness in my stomach vanished; simmering irritation took its place. Aunt Lydia hadn’t any idea of how my mother had missed my father when he’d been away or that both Mama and I had loved the sea almost as much as Papa. “No, I doubt you could imagine that,” I said, an edge to my voice.

Silence. Lady Rowley looked aghast; Eliza glanced anxiously between her mother and myself. Aunt Lydia narrowed her eyes.

“Lady Rowley, perhaps Miss Ashbourne would like a tour of the estate.” William’s voice sounded from where he sat by the window calmly folding and sealing his letter. “It is far too fine a morning to remain inside.”

Lady Rowley nodded, clearly grateful for his interruption. “Oh, yes, that is a lovely idea. Juliana?”

I didn’t much care to wander about the house alone with my prattling grandmother, but it would not be wise to spend much longer talking with Aunt Lydia. “Yes, I’d like that,” I said, voice stiff.

“Who can we convince to join us?” Lady Rowley looked about the room, eyes expectant.

I forced myself not to look to where William sat. Aunt Lydia declined coolly, declaring she and Eliza had neglected their needlework as of late. Eliza frowned but did not argue. Mr. Woodward merely held up his newspaper as an excuse.

William’s chair scraped as he stood. “I have some business to attend to first, but I’ll join you when I can. We can’t have Miss Ashbourne getting lost again, now can we?” He grinned at me, and I glared knives and swords and daggers at him.

Chapter Six

AN HOUR LATER, LADY ROWLEY and I strolled down the east hallway. She showed me the more frequented rooms of the house—the drawing room, parlor, ballroom, and library. The house was enormous, with wide hallways stretching every way I looked and sunlight streaming in through the towering windows that lined the walls. Last night, as I'd been shown to my room, the house was full of shadows and had seemed a foreboding, dreary place. Now I fought not to gawk as we passed stunning artwork, elaborate tapestries, and more rooms than I could ever have imagined fitting into one house. I'd thought the Seymours' London townhouse was grand; Mrs. Seymour would surely be green with envy at even the smallest of Havenfield's rooms.

The library was a pleasant surprise. Lady Rowley led me to a set of intricately carved mahogany doors and opened them to reveal row after row of bookshelves, cozy chairs, and tables scattered about the room. Sunlight filtered through the diamond-paned windows, flecks of dust floating lazily around us.

“It is a lovely room, is it not?” Lady Rowley said. “I confess, I rarely spend much time here, though Eliza is quite the voracious reader. She spends many afternoons here.”

“It is not difficult to see why,” I said. The room was comfortable and secluded, and I found myself imagining what it would be like to have such an impressive library to teach from. The Seymours' library had been pitiful at best, but this . . . Oh, Charlotte would have adored this room. Though I enjoyed reading as much as the next person, she devoured books nearly as quickly as her mother did a box of sugared almonds. I could picture Charlotte's face quite clearly, eyes lighting up as she glimpsed the rows and rows of books.

“Do you have a fondness for reading, Miss Ashbourne?”

William's voice from behind startled me. I spun to see him standing in the open doorway, hands clasped behind his back, his mouth tilted into a roguish smile.

"I seem to recall you having a significant collection of books," he said.

I crossed my arms in front of me, tightening my fingers around my elbows. *Do not let him rile you.* "Reading is somewhat of a necessity for a governess." My voice was cool.

"Not in every case, I would imagine," William said, moving to take a seat in one of the leather armchairs near the door. "Anything you enjoy in particular?"

"No, not really." I did not want to offer him anything more. He possessed the uncanny ability to take my simplest statements and turn them on me for his own amusement. I stepped away from him with the pretense of admiring the view of the east lawn.

I spent a few minutes walking the length of the room while Lady Rowley went on about an addition to the house made some fifty years earlier to accommodate the growing library. I listened with half an ear—she did talk so very much. But I took careful mental notes about the library; already, an image was forming for a library of my own in the near future. I would have to come back on my own time to examine the shelves for anything interesting. I did not intend to tell anyone about my plans for a school.

We left the library and made our way to the second floor, Lady Rowley and I side by side, William a few steps behind.

"Oh, here is something I think you will like. The family's portraits are just down this hallway, and—"

I stopped short. "Portraits?" Trepidation pooled in my stomach.

"Yes. And I would so like to show you—"

“I am sorry,” I interrupted. “I think I could use a bit of fresh air. Might we have a look about the gardens?”

“Of course, if you would like.” Lady Rowley knit her brow, dropping her gaze. A tinge of guilt squirmed inside me—but I brushed it away, ignoring William’s inquiring eyes. I was not in any state to be looking at my mother’s portrait.

We made our way down the stairs again and out a side door. The garden was extensive, stretching around the entire west wing of the house and behind. The disappointment Lady Rowley had shown upstairs vanished; she was clearly in her element among the greenery and blooms. She positively beamed as we walked out into the sun.

“Let us start over here,” she said, gesturing to the left. “Mr. Gibbon and I—the gardener, that is—we have been working on breeding a few different types of roses, and we are exceedingly optimistic about our progress this spring.”

She slipped her arm through mine and led me from one flower to the next, naming each one and gently touching their petals. As she tittered on, I examined the landscape around us. Daniel would have loved it here in the sprawling green hills and woods. A boy through and through, he was happiest when he was exploring and getting into a bit of trouble.

“Ah, so she does know how to smile.”

My smile vanished from my face as quickly as it had come. William grinned at me, eyes twinkling.

“Oh, hush, William,” Lady Rowley said, patting me on the arm. “I would not smile either if you antagonized me so.”

He surely deserved that reprimand, but he only chuckled, entirely unconcerned.

“Oh, there is Mr. Gibbon now.” Lady Rowley shaded her eyes in the morning sun as she looked back at the house. “Would you mind very much

if I spoke to him for a moment? The Damask rose was looking a bit dry.” She was already striding away. “You two go on. I will join you shortly,” she called over her shoulder.

I froze, watching her leave, not daring to glance at William. As awkward as my grandmother’s prattling was, I found it far superior to the idea of conversing with William alone.

“Shall we?”

I sighed and nodded, and we continued along the pebbled path between two perfectly shaped topiaries. I prayed silence would rule the morning, but I had no such luck.

“Something tells me you and your grandmother do not share the same interest in gardening.”

I had no desire to encourage his conversation. I was careful to keep Lady Rowley in my sight as she spoke with Mr. Gibbon near the gardening shed. “Oh?”

“Although I suppose your air of indifference could merely be an attempt to hide your extreme excitement and passion for the activity.”

“Mmm,” was my noncommittal reply.

“No, I don’t believe that is it. Gardening would be a rather tame pastime for a lady such as yourself.”

What did he mean by that? I refused to let my curiosity show in my voice. “You don’t say.”

“Oh, come now, you must give me something. There must be effort on both parts in order to have a conversation.”

“That is where you are mistaken because you are under the impression that I desire a conversation.”

William stepped ahead and wheeled about to face me, forcing me to come to an abrupt halt. I snapped my mouth shut, taken aback by how very close he suddenly stood to me.

“Miss Ashbourne, I know we met under . . . unusual circumstances. But I cannot say I know what I have done to deserve this coldness.” His blue eyes were wide, innocent, but a trace of amusement hid in his gaze. Was he laughing at me again?

I stared at him. “You cannot think of a single reason?”

“Not a one.”

“Do allow me to assist your memory.” I crossed my arms. “Last night you were witness to possibly the greatest embarrassment of my life—”

“Only possibly? I must hear your other stories.”

I ignored him. “The rain and mud and my appearance and my horrifyingly unexpected arrival—”

“And the cursing,” he reminded me most unhelpfully.

“Yes, of course the cursing. I had never spoken those words aloud in my life until last night, and, of course, *you* were there to hear it. And then you failed to introduce yourself, letting me go on thinking you were a stable hand, for heaven’s sake—”

“To be fair, I cannot read minds. I had not the faintest idea you were thinking that—”

“Do stop interrupting. And then you have the audacity to tease me about it all in front of the family I had scarcely met—”

“Just friendly banter.”

“Then I can only suppose that your *friends*, Mr. Rowley, must be very patient indeed to endure your so-called banter, not to mention your constant interruptions.” I was breathing hard, frustrated by how very unworried he

seemed at the charges I laid at his door. In fact, he had the nerve to look amused.

He spread his hands out wide in front of him. “It seems we are at an impasse. I cannot see any wrongdoing on my part—”

I shook my head, casting my eyes to the cloudless sky above me, but he continued. “And you are quite convinced I simply aim to further agitate you. I think we will have to agree to disagree on this if we are to be friends.”

“Friends?” I eyed him, considering his proposition. I’d not thought to make any friends during the next month. I’d barely thought beyond surviving the initial meeting with my grandmother and aunt.

“Or perhaps acquaintances who can carry a civil conversation?”

I bit my lip, hesitating still, but William waited patiently. Finally, I nodded. “Yes, I suppose we can attempt that.”

“Well, let us practice, then. To continue our earlier discourse, if gardening is not your true passion, may I ask what you do enjoy? Besides running down strange men on the street or insulting trunks in stables, that is.”

I turned away from him, moving again down the garden path. “You are teasing again.”

He caught me in a step and walked beside me. “Bantering,” he corrected. “Do not avoid the question.”

“I have not exactly had an excess of time to pursue hobbies.”

He was unfazed by my dry response. “I am certain your work ethic is most admirable. But even a governess has free time and her own interests. I am merely curious as to what yours might be.”

Though a simple question, I struggled to come up with a suitable answer. What little free time I had was usually spent preparing my lesson plans or

daydreaming about my future school, neither of which I felt any inclination to share with him.

He interrupted, of course, before I could respond. “No, wait, let me guess.” He tilted his head to one side as he examined my face. I met his gaze, raising my eyebrows in a challenge. He kept his face serious. “Music. That is my guess. You play the pianoforte, or perhaps sing?”

“I suppose a little of both, though I would not call it a passion.”

“Art, then? You are a painter.”

“No, sadly I inherited my father’s talents as an artist. That is to say, I have none.”

“You are a mistress of needlework? Your skill for embroidery is known far and wide?”

“Hardly.”

“You could not really expect me to get it on my second try. Let me see, what about riding?”

“I do believe that was actually your third try and this your fourth. Precisely how many attempts will this require?”

“Oh, at least a dozen. Ladies these days have so many interests it is impossible to keep them all straight. And you did not answer my last guess.”

“Riding? I do not believe I have ever touched a horse, let alone ridden one.”

“Truly?” The surprise in William’s voice was so apparent that I turned to where he stopped a step behind me.

“Well, yes,” I said, surprised at the incredulity in his eyes. “I was raised in town on the salary of a sailor. When precisely would I have had the opportunity?”

“But surely you’ve patted a horse on the street or ridden a pony?”

“No, and frankly I have never felt the desire to.” I continued walking around the corner of the garden framed in by manicured hedges and trees.

He followed me, shaking his head. “Never ridden a horse. Well, we can fix that easily enough—”

“No.” My voice sounded forceful even to me. I softened my tone. “No, thank you.”

William, undaunted, continued pressing me. “If you simply give it a try, I am certain you would like it. Even Mrs. Woodward is known to ride occasionally.”

Though the image of Aunt Lydia bouncing on the back of a horse was entertaining, it did not change my mind. I could not explain exactly what it was about horses that made me nervous, but I knew I wanted to keep as much distance as possible between the beasts and myself. “I would prefer not to.” I turned back to the house, scanning the bushes for Lady Rowley. She still stood with Mr. Gibbon, and I could not imagine what they had talked about for so long.

“A wager, then, Miss Ashbourne?”

I peered at him suspiciously. His eyes held a mischievous glint already familiar to me. “What sort of wager?”

He removed a coin from his coat pocket, a silver shilling. He flipped it in the air and caught it smartly. “Heads, you join me for two—no, three riding lessons.”

“And what would be the incentive for me?”

“If it lands on tails, I promise not to tease you for the remainder of your visit.”

“I thought you said it was banter.”

“I am only using language you seem to understand.”

I shook my head. “Tempting though that is, I feel the advantage is entirely yours in this bargain. I can endure a bit of teasing.”

“Very well. In addition, I pledge to never repeat to anyone the words I heard you shouting at your unfortunate trunk last night.”

I narrowed my eyes. “If you were a gentleman, you would keep a lady’s secrets.”

“Ah, but if you were a proper lady who did not use such words, we would not be in this situation.”

I bit the inside of my cheek, considering using a few of those choice words now. “Very well,” I said, displeased. “Heads, and I will submit myself to riding lessons. Tails, and you will be the picture of politeness and cordiality. And you will never repeat what happened in the stables. Any of it.”

He smirked, knowing I meant mistaking him for a servant as much as my language.

“Very well. I accept your terms.” He held his hand between us.

I stared at it. Obviously, he intended for me to shake it. I hesitated, then extended my hand. His grip was warm and strong as we shook, and I glanced up at his face for the briefest of moments. An unfamiliar emotion flickered in his eyes, and I quickly withdrew my hand, hiding it within the folds of my dress.

He tossed the coin. It flashed in the sunlight, spinning above our heads before landing soundlessly in the grass between us.

Heads. Of course it was heads.

William picked it up, satisfaction lighting his face. “It seems the fates agree with me today.”

“The fates really ought to consider their alliances more carefully,” I muttered.

“Do not be so gloomy. You will be an expert horsewoman in no time at all.”

Lady Rowley finally made her way toward us, and I turned to meet her. “That I doubt very much, indeed.”

* * *

After dinner that evening—a dinner full of my grandmother’s endless chatter, Aunt Lydia’s thinly veiled disdain, and William’s frequent grins from the head of the table—I claimed a headache and retreated to my room. I sat before the vanity and began removing my hairpins, my shoulders sagging with weariness.

A knock came at the door, and Emma’s head poked into the room. “Miss Ashbourne, Lady Rowley said you had a headache. Might I do anything to help?”

I thought to send her away, but I paused. This day had been every bit as exhausting as I had imagined, but one thing I had not anticipated was my intense curiosity about my family. And if there was anyone who could answer my questions, it was Emma. Servants always had the best information. “Er, yes, actually.” I cast about for a task I could occupy her with. “Would you mind helping me with my pins?”

“Of course.” She came to stand behind me, and I examined her in the mirror as she tugged the hairpins from my thick curls.

“Emma,” I said, choosing my words with care. “Might I ask how long you have worked at Havenfield?”

“Oh, it’s been close to four years now. I was but fourteen when I was brought on.”

“You must know the family fairly well, then, being here for so long.”

“As well as anyone really can, I suppose. I used to serve as Miss Eliza’s maid when the Woodwards came to visit, so I feel I might know her a little more than the others, though she has her own maid she brings with her now.”

“She would talk to you?” To my knowledge, Eliza had uttered but a handful of sentences all day.

Emma laughed. “Yes, after a few attempts. She is painfully shy, to be sure, but also perhaps the sweetest girl I ever knew.”

“What about Mrs. Woodward? Do you know her very well?”

“I’ve only spoken to her myself a few times, but she has always been kind to me. She was the one who suggested Lady Rowley have me trained as a lady’s maid.”

That was completely at odds with what I observed about my aunt. Perhaps it was just me that inspired such dislike. I mused over that before turning the subject once again. “Lady Rowley seems a very . . . talkative sort.”

“Oh, yes.” Emma smiled. “Her skills for conversation are quite unmatched.”

“Has she always been like that?”

Emma finished with the pins and now reached for my brush, her expression thoughtful. “Yes, in a way. But more so since Sir Charles passed.” She began brushing my hair in long, even strokes. “I think it’s part of how she copes. They were married for nearly forty years, after all.”

My stomach pinched, an echo of my earlier guilt outside the portrait hall. I had mostly ignored my grandmother’s seemingly endless chatter.

“She and my grandfather—were they happy?” I spoke the question softly.

She met my eyes in the mirror. “I believe so, although they had their disagreements, of course. From what I’ve heard, she never quite recovered after . . .” Her voice trailed off.

“After my mother ran away?”

She nodded. “It was something of a bitter topic between the two. They rarely argued in front of the servants, but I’ve heard stories of the rows they had.”

“About . . . ?”

Emma ducked her head. “I’m sorry, miss. I don’t know if I should say.”

Abashed, I nodded. “Of course. They are your employers. I am sorry for pressing you.” She continued brushing my hair as I phrased my next question. “What about Mr. Rowley? He seems very familiar with the family.”

“That’s because he’s been coming here since he was a boy. His father was heir to the estate before him, and his father died when Mr. Rowley was young. Sir Charles invited them both to visit often.”

“Where did he live before he inherited?”

“He is very often abroad, but he has a home in London with his mother and a younger sister, Miss Rebecca. He also has an older sister, married and living in Bath. I believe Mrs. Rowley and Miss Rebecca are expected to come to Havenfield in a few weeks.”

I couldn’t help the look of surprise that showed on my face in the mirror. “He has sisters? I would never have guessed.”

“Oh, he is quite the doting brother.” She set down the brush and began pulling my hair back into a loose braid. “He and Miss Rebecca were here last summer, and for her seventeenth birthday, he surprised her with a new horse. She was so thrilled she couldn’t stop thanking him for a week.”

“A horse?” The frugal governess in me was shocked. “An expensive gift, to be sure.”

“Oh, I’m certain it was nothing to him.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. The Rowleys own a shipping business, and Mr. Rowley has managed it ever since his father’s death. He’s incredibly wealthy, even without Havenfield.”

I had not really thought about William’s background; I had assumed him to be of relatively modest means, in comparison to my grandparents, that is. I wasn’t certain what to do with the information that he was independently wealthy and that he worked for a living, unlike so many Society men.

I didn’t know what Emma saw in my face, but she gave a knowing look in the mirror. “And, of course, he’s terribly handsome. He’s about as respectable as they come and regarded as quite the catch.”

I made a small noise at her insinuation. “I suppose. Although he would do better to be less irritating if he ever wishes to convince a sensible girl to marry him.”

“Irritating?” Emma tied off my braid. “I’ve never seen Mr. Rowley to be anything less than perfectly amiable.”

“Lovely,” I said wryly. “Then it is only me he enjoys bothering.”

Emma must have missed the sarcasm in my reply; she merely stepped back. “I suppose so.”

After laying out my nightdress and bidding me good night, Emma slipped from my room. I leaned back in my chair and brought my knees to my chest, weariness again stealing my attention.

Twenty-nine days still remained in my visit. I could only pray they would not all be nearly as taxing as today.

Chapter Seven

I PEEKED IN THE OPEN door of the morning room. There was no sign of William, though Lady Rowley sat on one of the couches with Eliza. Aunt Lydia stood by the window overlooking the front of the house.

I weighed my options. I could keep to my room, where I'd already taken my breakfast tray. But while it was admittedly much more spacious and comfortable than my room at the Seymours', my bedchamber still held little in the way of entertainment.

I could explore outside or escape to the library. I doubted anyone would be there this early in the morning. But if William was not in the morning room, there was a very real chance I would run into him while in the very act of avoiding him.

I sighed and stepped into the room.

"Juliana!" Lady Rowley said. "Good morning, dear. I trust you slept well. How is your headache?"

I shifted my weight. "Much better, thank you."

"Do come sit." She patted the cushion beside her on the couch.

I hesitated. I could not stand the thought of yet another stiff conversation. "I—I actually hoped to keep up on my correspondence this morning. Might I borrow the use of your writing desk?"

Lady Rowley's shoulders dropped slightly. "Oh. Yes, of course. I am certain you have many people to write to inform them you have arrived here safely."

"Indeed," I lied. In truth, there was not a soul on earth who knew I was here. "Thank you."

I went to the writing desk beside the window, where William had sat the morning before. Setting out a fresh sheet of paper, I trimmed my pen and prepared my ink, all the while attempting to ignore the hushed conversation taking place not ten paces away.

“Incredibly rude.” That was Aunt Lydia.

“She is likely shy.” Eliza’s quiet voice.

“Or understandably overwhelmed.” Lady Rowley’s gentle tone.

I put them from my mind as I began writing. I wrote first to Daniel and Charlotte, asking after their studies and if they had a new governess yet. I tried to keep my words light and carefree; my anxiety had no place in their young minds. I could only pray Mrs. Seymour would not hire a replacement like so many I’d known while associating with other families of the *ton*. My throat closed at the thought of the children in the care of a strict and unfeeling governess.

I wrote Sophie next, reassuring her that I’d found a place to stay for the time being, though I kept the details of my current circumstances to myself. The whole situation was so bizarre I found it difficult to explain. One day, I would tell her everything.

I bundled those two notes together and addressed the outside page to Sophie. If I attempted to write to Charlotte and Daniel directly, Mrs. Seymour would surely confiscate my letters. As it was, I took a risk involving Sophie in smuggling them. But I could not bear to leave the children thinking I did not miss them.

I laid out a fresh sheet, smoothing my fingers over the page. I tapped my pen and pondered what to write.

Dear Papa,

You will never guess where I am at this very moment. In fact, I am so certain you shall never guess, I will simply tell you. I am currently at Havenfield with Mama’s family, and I would give nearly anything to see

your face right now, though I can imagine it well enough. I doubt it would be very much different from your expression when I nearly set our sofa ablaze trying to toast bread and cheese over the fire.

It is a long tale, and I've not the coins to send an exhaustive letter, but the short of it is I have been left an inheritance by Sir Charles. But to receive it, I am sentenced to spend an entire month here at the estate. I've been here one full day and already feel the price is almost too dear.

Almost. For the size of my inheritance is nearly as unbelievable as it was unexpected.

I read my letter over. Should I mention Lady Rowley? Or Aunt Lydia? Or William? Had my father ever even met any of Mama's family? Since arriving, I'd only been more aware of how little I knew of the past.

I had just pressed my pen to the page once more when voices sounded from the hall, laughter and indistinguishable words. Lady Rowley, Aunt Lydia, and Eliza broke off their conversation and watched the doors expectantly. A moment later, William strode into the room. His light-brown hair was tousled, and he tapped a riding crop against his leg. He was wearing the same shabby outfit he had when I'd met him in the stables.

His eyes found mine, and I looked away, focusing instead on the man who followed him into the room.

He looked to be a few years my senior, with a wide, pleasant face and broad shoulders, though he stood a touch shorter than William. His red-brown hair was similarly windswept, and he also wore a riding coat and boots.

I rose with the other ladies to greet them, and they both bowed.

"Mr. Brooks," Lady Rowley said brightly. "How was your journey? I hope your travels were not too dreary."

"Oh, not at all!" Mr. Brooks replied. His voice boomed, though not unpleasantly so. "The weather was lovely, save for the brief storm a day or

two ago.”

My eyes flicked to William; I couldn't help it. He did not look at me, but a corner of his mouth twitched.

“I am glad you came by,” Lady Rowley said. “I must introduce you to my granddaughter Miss Juliana Ashbourne.” She waved me forward, and I reluctantly left the desk to stand at her side. “Juliana, this is Mr. Henry Brooks.”

Mr. Brooks tilted his head at me. “Ah, so this is the infamous Miss Ashbourne.” He shot a glance at William, but it was so brief I couldn't begin to interpret its meaning. “I am very pleased to make your acquaintance. I hope you have enjoyed your stay here thus far.”

He was so endearingly cheerful I did not have to work hard at my smile. “I have, thank you. Everyone has been most welcoming.”

“Mr. Brooks manages the estate,” Lady Rowley said as the ladies returned to their seats. The men remained standing. “He was quite indispensable to Sir Charles.”

“And I would be lost without him as well,” William said, clapping him on the shoulder.

“I do not disagree,” Mr. Brooks said, a twinkle in his eye.

I stood beside the couch, unsure if I should join Lady Rowley or return to the desk. In the end, I edged back to the desk, apprehension winning over propriety. William's eyes followed me, but I ignored him.

I observed Mr. Brooks as I seated myself, picking up my pen. He was clearly a comfortable member of the group. Even Eliza looked pleased to see him, though she had yet to say a word since the two men had entered the room.

“Now, have we interrupted some important happening this morning?” Mr. Brooks asked. “Mr. Rowley met me on the road and insisted I come meet

Miss Ashbourne, but I was hesitant to impose on Lady Rowley yet again.”

She waved him off. “Oh, your visits are never an imposition; you know that. We have only been talking while Juliana writes her letters.”

My face burned under the gazes of everyone in the room. I knew I was being rude by stubbornly clinging to the solitude of the writing desk, but I did not look up. A spot of ink pooled where I let my pen linger too long. I exhaled and began writing once again.

The conversation turned away from me as Mr. Brooks recounted the details of his trip, something to do with meeting a wool merchant the next county over. I tried to focus on my writing but was acutely aware when William came up behind me. My shoulders tightened in response.

He leaned over, examining my work. “You have lovely penmanship.”

I shifted my hand to cover the majority of my letter. “And you have no sense of privacy.”

He adopted a serious expression. “I can very well admire the strokes of your pen without reading the words, Miss Ashbourne, graceful as they are. Can it be calligraphy is your secret passion?”

“No, and I must say, your guesses are growing worse.”

He shrugged, not disappointed in the slightest, hands clasping the riding crop behind his back. The others in the room were involved in their own conversation, not paying us any attention.

“I shall discover it eventually. You do have a skill for it though.” He gestured at my page.

“Not nearly as much as my mother,” I said and then bit my tongue. What had possessed me to say that? And what was more, I had nearly gone on to tell him of my mother’s love of writing beautiful letters. I tore my eyes from his. I needed to be more guarded around him.

It struck me then that my mother might have written at this very desk. I pressed my fingers to the glossy wood, steadying the lurch of my stomach. William seemed not to notice as he moved to lean against the window to my right.

“Still a talent in my book. And while we are speaking of developing talents, I do believe you still owe me riding lessons.”

I swallowed. “I had hoped you were not serious about that.”

“Quite serious,” he said, tipping his head at me. “You would not go back on our wager, now, would you?”

I certainly wished I could. Even now, the thought of sitting atop a horse made my lungs tighten uncomfortably. I cast about for some excuse, any excuse, that might free me from this obligation. I glanced at the sleeve of my dress. “I haven’t a riding habit though. I can hardly wear this.”

He took in my dress, and I regretted drawing attention to my apparel. I did my best to care for my clothing, but alterations and mending could do only so much. My dress had seen many, many better days.

“You may borrow mine, if you like.” Eliza’s quiet voice sounded from across the room, and my head snapped to her. Eliza looked almost as surprised at her words as I was. While William and I had been talking, the other conversation had dwindled, and I was mortified now to see everyone watching us.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t possibly.”

She ducked her head. “I mind not at all. I scarcely ride anyway.”

“There,” William said. “That was solved easily enough. Now you have no excuses. Shall we meet after lunch?”

I sighed in resignation and nodded.

* * *

I made my way to the stable later that day, the sun high overhead as a few lazy clouds wandered the sky. I strolled, in no hurry to keep my appointment, enjoying the warm breeze and a few moments of quiet after having spent the morning in almost constant conversation. I could write only so many letters, and eventually, Lady Rowley had coerced me from my solitude. She was determined to know every detail about me, and the endless flood of questions drained both my patience and my energy. Just being outside in the sunlight for a few moments revived me, and I breathed in the scent of hay and wildflowers that drifted on the breeze.

I tugged the long sleeve of my jacket. I had never worn a riding habit before, let alone someone else's. It was a deep blue, with a high-waisted skirt, a close-fitting jacket, and a double row of brass buttons lining the front. Eliza was quite a bit shorter than I, but thankfully, the current fashion called for a longer skirt in a habit to better preserve a lady's modesty. Without the extra length, Eliza's skirt would have been much too short on me.

The stable doors were open as I approached, the sound of horses snorting and hooves thudding greeting me. I paused just outside and squinted as my eyes adjusted from the sunshine.

William stood with a groom near the center of the stable. My arrival went unnoticed, as they were busy saddling a russet-brown mare, easily taller than either of the men. The groom held the horse's head while William buckled the saddle. Two other horses, one a speckled gray, the other nearly white, stood to the side, already saddled.

I might as well get this over and done with. Forcing back the lump of anxiety in my throat, I walked toward them. William looked up at the sound of my steps. His hands paused their work when he saw me, his brow lifting, mouth parting slightly.

I smoothed my skirts, feeling a surge of self-consciousness. "The fit is not quite right."

He shook his head. "It suits you." His eyes lingered on me for a moment before he turned back to his work, finishing the last buckle, tightening it,

and tucking the extra length behind the strap. The saddle was unlike any I'd ever seen; it had a large pommel on the end closest to the horse's head and a second one below it that curved down. The seat was broad and flat and heavily padded.

"What type of saddle is that?" I asked. I did a remarkable job keeping the nerves from my voice.

William glanced up. "Have you not seen a side saddle before?"

"No." I'd never spent any amount of time in a stable before. And though I'd certainly seen ladies riding about London, they'd always remained mounted. Then the implications of his words hit me. "A side saddle?"

He seemed not to notice the alarm in my voice. He walked around the horse, inspecting the saddle with an expert eye, making small adjustments. "Yes, of course."

When I didn't respond, he looked back at me. I stood frozen, hands clasped tightly across my middle.

"Are you all right?"

I cleared my throat. "I, um . . . I had not thought about using a side saddle." In fact, I had not thought much about riding at all.

He eyed me. "Would you prefer to ride astride?"

"No!" The word burst from me, and I ducked my head at its force. Only the most brazen women dared to ride like a man, cross saddle. "No, this will do."

He fought a grin, returning to his inspection. "If it helps, many women claim riding a side saddle to be easier."

"I won't lose my balance? How do I hold on?"

"I will explain that in a moment. First things first."

He reached the horse's head, taking the reins from the groom and beckoning me forward. "Come meet Miranda."

"Miranda?" I could not think of a stranger name for a horse.

He grimaced. "My sister is an avid reader of Shakespeare."

I recognized it then. I forced myself to take two small steps forward. "*The Tempest* was never a favorite of mine."

"Nor mine. The idea of a shipwreck is not one I find entertaining."

I stared at him. His comment so closely echoed my thoughts at that moment that I was at a loss for words. The familiar pain in my chest throbbed.

"Miss Ashbourne?"

I blinked and took a deep breath. Avoiding his questioning gaze, I edged a step closer. "This is your sister's horse?"

It must be the one Emma had mentioned last night, the birthday gift.

"Yes, and she has not been exercised nearly as much as I would like, as Rebecca has been in town since the Season began."

The horse tossed her head and snorted. I stopped a few paces away from William; my feet were incapable of moving closer.

He examined my face, and understanding grew in his eyes. "You are afraid of horses, aren't you?"

Though his tone was kind, devoid of his normal teasing, my defenses rose anyway. "Of course not."

He raised his eyebrows.

I lifted my chin and closed the distance between us. The mare's ears flicked, and she eyed me with indifference, smelling of fresh hay and

leather.

“Now, let her get to know you.”

“Pardon?”

“Your scent, your touch. It helps calm her when she has a new rider.”

“What about calming me?” I muttered.

He merely grinned. “Here.” He switched the reins to his left hand and took my hand in his firm grip. The sudden contact startled me, and I shot a surprised look at him.

He did not notice my glance. He raised my hand to the horse’s head, stopping just below her nostrils. The horse sniffed and nudged my hand.

“There,” William said. “Now stroke her along the head.”

He released my hand, and I clenched it for just a moment to hide its trembling, then raised it above the horse’s eyes. I let my fingers glide along the curve of her head, the glossy hair smooth and foreign under my touch. Miranda stood remarkably still. Her hind legs stepped lightly, but her head and gaze were steady as she blinked one cinnamon-colored eye.

“That was not so terrible, was it?”

I dropped my hand and stepped back. “Seeing as we haven’t done any actual riding yet, I think I will withhold my opinion for the time being.”

“Let us amend that now, shall we?”

He led Miranda to a block of wood near the open stable door. It stood about two feet tall, with a single step on one side. He lined up the mare so she was directly adjacent to it. “This is a mounting block. When you have a taller horse, you use this to pull yourself up.”

“Could I not just use a smaller horse?” I stared at Miranda. She towered above me, muscles rippling.

He shook his head. “Do not let her size fool you. Miranda is the gentlest horse in the stable and easy to manage.”

I nodded, thoroughly unconvinced.

“To mount, put your left foot in the stirrup here”—he pointed at the stirrup iron on the mare’s left side, the one closest to the mounting block—“and grip the saddle. When you pull yourself up, bring your right leg up in front of you over this top pommel and tuck your left leg under this lower one.” He tapped the curved pommel. “Try to sit with your shoulders even with Miranda’s. It will make for a smoother ride.”

I listened to his instructions with increasing dismay, and now I simply gaped at him. “I cannot possibly—” My pulse pounded furiously, and I was certain my already pale face was stark white.

William took one look at my face and handed the reins back to the groom, then came immediately to my side. “If you do not wish to come—”

“No, it is fine,” I said distantly. “I will be fine.”

“It is not nearly so hard as it sounds. And Miranda is as steady and tame as they come, truly. I will be right beside you. You will come to no harm, I promise.” His voice was quiet, and I looked up at him. His brow was furrowed, his azure eyes concerned as they examined my face. I hadn’t seen him so sincere.

My head seemed to move of its own accord, and I found myself nodding. “All right.”

I took a fortifying breath and forced myself to walk to the mounting block, William close behind. I tried to picture Miranda as a great big armchair, one I just needed to climb upon. I failed. She was very clearly a horse.

I stepped up on the block, holding my skirts in one hand. The groom steadied the mare’s head.

“Grasp here,” William instructed as he touched both the front and rear of the saddle. “Your left foot here.” He held the stirrup steady for me as I edged in my boot. Beneath my nerves, I held a vague hope that he didn’t notice how worn my half-boots were, the leather scuffed and cracking.

“On the count of three, pull up and push off your foot,” he said. “Ready?”

I nodded.

“One.”

I tightened my grasp on the saddle.

“Two.”

His hands came around my waist.

“Three.”

I barely remembered to pull in time, but it hardly mattered, as William lifted me easily onto the horse’s back. There was an awkward shuffle as I settled myself on the saddle; I was not entirely certain where my legs were to go, but I did not intend to ask for direction.

I finally found the right position, and to my surprise, it felt quite secure. With the higher pommel under my right knee and the lower one curving firmly over my left, I was able to balance with little effort.

William released my waist and stood just to my left, looking up at me. He was tall enough that even without the mounting block, his hands could rest on either end of the saddle as though he would reach up to help me in an instant. “Are you on all right?” he asked.

“I think so.”

Miranda had not moved so much as an inch. Steady was right. William moved about me, making small adjustments on the saddle here and there, though I could hardly guess what he was changing. He finally gave a

satisfied nod, then handed me the reins. I held them and shot him an inquiring glance.

“To steer her,” he explained, “use them to turn her head in the direction you wish to go. But you need not worry about that today. She will be following Stowaway.”

He left my side before I could question him further and went to the speckled gray stallion that waited with hooves dancing as he saw his rider approach. William mounted smoothly, his lines so graceful I was embarrassed by the spectacle I’d caused in mounting my own horse. But my embarrassment retreated as he directed his horse to the side of Miranda; anxiety ruled yet again.

“I thought we might take a short ride around the estate,” he said, rising on his stirrups and adjusting his seat. “Show you a bit of the countryside.”

“Precisely how short is ‘a short ride’?” I asked suspiciously.

He chuckled. “I promise it won’t be long. I hardly want to wear you out on your very first lesson. Just remember to keep your back straight and to balance your weight evenly.”

Miranda tossed her head suddenly, snorting, mane flowing. I grasped the saddle as fear surged through me. But the mare only shifted her footing and then stood still.

William saw my reaction, of course, but wisely decided not to mention it. I was incredibly tense perched so high above the ground. If he attempted any teasing, it would not end well for him.

William nodded to the groom, who released Miranda’s head and mounted the spare horse behind me.

“A slow pace, to start,” William said, nudging his horse forward.

I lurched back as Miranda stepped forward, but I instinctively pressed my legs against the pommels and was able to keep my seat with surprising ease.

I clutched the reins uselessly in my left hand, my right still grasping onto the front of the saddle.

We stepped out into the bright afternoon sun and headed west toward a line of trees that marked the path of a stream. We rode in silence, William studying me as I struggled to accustom myself to horseback. The groom followed at a distance, acting as chaperone.

“Try to relax,” William said. “It is easier for your body to learn if you are not so tense.”

My initial reaction was to snap at him, but I stopped myself. I clearly had no idea what I was doing, and just from watching him these past minutes, it was obvious he was an expert horseman.

I tried to imagine my body being loose and relaxed, though I kept my back straight. I felt ridiculous for a moment, until . . .

There was something familiar about my mare’s rolling gait, the steady rise and fall of her back as she walked down the slight hill to the stream, closely following William’s horse. And I realized that I recognized it.

The movement was as known to me as my reflection in a mirror. It was the same feeling I had every time I stepped aboard the *Providence*, the ship rocking each time a swell of water crashed into its side.

I closed my eyes and imagined the cool sea breeze against my face, the constant rolling and buckling of the deck beneath my feet as the ship fought the waves for dominance. I could almost see my father’s face as he beckoned me to join him at the aft.

“Generally it is best to keep one’s eyes open while riding.”

William’s teasing tone had returned, and I opened my eyes to see his eyes flashing bright in the sunlight.

I tried to think of a witty retort, but—“It feels like sailing.” The words spilled from my lips. The images of my father’s ship were fresh in my

mind, and the sudden nostalgia caused an almost physical ache in my chest.

William's grin slipped from his face, and the look he shot me sent a thrill running up my spine. It was intense, piercing, as though he saw something no one had ever seen before.

I focused my eyes on my horse's bobbing head and fought the heat in my face. Would I never stop saying ridiculous things? "I only meant it reminds me of my father's ship. It was just a flighty thought."

"No," he said. "It was decidedly the opposite of flighty."

We rode again in silence. We reached a line of silver birch trees and passed under the flickering shade of the leaves overhead as we followed the meandering course of the stream. Miranda's plodding, comfortable stride made it difficult to recapture the fear I'd felt only minutes before. My reins rested uselessly in my hand as she trailed beside the stallion William rode. I watched William's mount, with his dancing hooves and constant surging against his bridle, and was grateful for my less-spirited horse.

The silence stretched, and I cast a curious glance at William. I'd not known him to be so quiet.

I cleared my throat. "Your horse's name, Stowaway. I feel there must be a story behind it."

"Indeed," he replied. "And if my mother were here, you would have undoubtedly heard it already. It is one of her favorites."

"Do enlighten me," I said.

He gave me a sidelong glance. "Very well." He ducked under a low-hanging branch and then held it high as I passed beneath. "When my father first started his shipping line, he was constantly away on his ships, establishing contacts along the trade routes, overseeing the purchasing and hiring. I was perhaps eight or nine at the time, and all I wanted was to see my father more."

I nodded. Although Papa had tried to accept only shorter sailings when I was young, he often had no choice in the matter and sometimes was forced on longer voyages. I could empathize with young William's feelings.

"Father was leaving on one of his trips, to Spain. My mother, sisters, and I went to see him off, and when no one was watching, I stole aboard and hid myself."

"*You* were the stowaway?" I did not find it difficult to believe.

"The ship left port before my mother realized I was missing, and it was two days before I was discovered aboard. My father was furious but had to allow me to accompany him. And in truth, I do not think he was nearly as angry as he pretended. My mother went almost a week before she received the missive from my father about what I had done. At the time, I thought it was an exciting adventure. Now I only think of the panic it caused my mother."

"Did you not think to leave a note?"

"I did," he defended with a laugh. "I left it with Rebecca, who was but three years old at the time. I told her to give it to Mother once they returned home, but I don't know whatever became of it. In hindsight, entrusting such a note to a child was not the brightest idea."

I surprised myself by laughing as well. "Your poor mother."

"Yes, my poor mother, indeed. But I hardly escaped without consequences. I had imagined running free throughout the ship, but my father insisted I learn my lesson by serving as a cabin boy."

"I daresay you did not mind too much, considering you were able to remain on the ship."

"No, I minded not at all. Though I had to perform the lowest, dirtiest tasks, I was so pleased to be with my father. And to my surprise, I soon learned I also loved sailing. I have been a slave to the sea ever since." He glanced at me. "That is why your comment earlier surprised me so much, that riding

feels like the sea. It is one of the reasons I ride as often as I can. I am unused to being landlocked for so long.”

“Why are you—?” I stopped myself. It was none of my affair.

“Why am I what?”

I hesitated, shifting my weight on the saddle, then pressed on. “Why are you here, then, instead of out there? Mr. Brooks seems capable enough. Surely he can run the estate for you.”

William was quiet for a moment as he pondered the question, then he replied in a careful voice. “I know you likely do not have the best opinion of your grandfather right now, and that is understandable.”

I made a sound, but he held up a hand. “Hear me out. I cannot say I know all the details of what happened between your mother and Sir Charles, but from what I do know, he was in the wrong.”

“Of course he was,” I interjected. “To completely cut my mother off from her family and fortune—”

William shook his head, chuckling. “Now who is interrupting?”

I cast my eyes to the branches above us as I remembered how I had berated him the day before. “Go on, then.”

“As I said, Sir Charles was wrong. But that does not mean he was wrong about everything.” His eyes softened as he spoke, surveying the landscape around us. I followed his gaze. Emerald hills sloped upward from the stream we followed, and oak trees dotted the tall grass that rippled in the gentle breeze. To our right stood the estate, windows glinting in the sun, gray stone nearly hidden under the climbing ivy. In the garden, I could just make out a man, Mr. Gibbon, pruning the branches of a rosebush.

“Your grandfather loved Havenfield, and he cared for the buildings, the tenants, and the servants with a passion and energy that continually amazed

me. He invited me to visit nearly every year from the time I was a boy so he could pass on everything he knew and loved about the land.”

He turned his gaze back to me. “This estate is your grandfather’s legacy, and he entrusted it to me. I will do anything I can to ensure the continued care of it. And that includes Lady Rowley and her family.”

I waited, but he didn’t continue, so I thought it safe to speak. “Lady Rowley mentioned in her letter that you told her to stay as long as she liked.”

“And I meant it. This was her home for forty years. Who am I to take it from her?”

“So you give up your life to run an estate and to care for a family, both left to you only by the coincidence of being the closest male relation?”

“A lucky coincidence, if you ask me, and not because of the estate,” he said. “Your grandparents, as well as the Woodwards, have been incredibly kind and welcoming to me. They could have turned bitter and angry at the entailment, but instead chose to include me. They are my family now as much as they are yours.”

“They were hardly mine to begin with.” I spoke in a carefree voice, but underneath was a tinge of bitterness.

William reined in his horse, turning in his saddle to face me. I lurched in my saddle as Miranda came to a stop.

“Miss Ashbourne.” His voice was hesitant. “I know it is not my place to offer you any advice, but perhaps you’ll humor me.”

“That will depend entirely on the advice.”

His face grew thoughtful. “We both know your grandparents made their fair share of mistakes. But I believe Sir Charles left you that inheritance not as a way to control your life, as you seem to believe, but as recompense for his wrongs.”

“Forgiveness cannot be bought,” I said stiffly. “It must be earned.”

“Then perhaps you ought to allow the family you have left to earn your forgiveness. Lady Rowley is one of the kindest women I know. She deserves a fair chance, as do your aunt and Eliza.”

I pursed my lips, avoiding his eyes. “Perhaps I would be willing to give Aunt Lydia a chance if she would offer one to me.”

“Do you not know why she acts the way she does toward you?”

“I could not begin to guess.”

“She depended upon the inheritance you received, assuming it would go to her.”

“Did she not receive her own inheritance?” I asked with a raise of my eyebrow.

“Yes, but not as large as she had counted on.”

“So it is all about money for her?”

He eyed me carefully. “Is it not for you?”

We were at the crux of the matter, and I had no satisfactory answer for him. I merely offered a noncommittal shrug.

He nudged Stowaway forward, and we continued our ride, the rustling of the leaves overhead and the trickling of the stream accompanying us down the worn path.

I changed the subject. “Do you think you will ever return to your ships?”

“Someday, I am sure. Running an estate is no simple task. Brooks has most of the day-to-day tasks well in hand, though I have much to learn still. But, yes, in due time.”

I was about to pose another question when a sudden movement caught my eye, a slithering line of green, vivid against the dirt of the path.

Miranda balked, front legs straight as she stopped short, an anxious whinny sounding in my ears.

And then, without warning, she reared up on her back legs, tossing her head and front legs into the air. I threw my arms around her neck, my face pressed against the hair of her mane, my hands desperately grasping for anything to hold on to.

With a crash of hooves, Miranda returned to the earth, and the force ripped my arms from her neck. I tumbled to the ground with a bone-numbing jolt, and I instinctively scrambled away from her hooves as she continued backing away from the garden snake. My vision swirled; the trees above me blurred into a mess of vibrant green.

“Miss Ashbourne!” William’s voice was in my ear. He crouched beside me, eyes wide as he grasped my shoulders. “Are you hurt?”

I could hardly breathe, let alone talk. I held up a hand, then rested it on my chest, where my heart pounded frantically as though reassuring me I was still alive. My ears rang, and I shook my head in an effort to clear it.

The groom seized Miranda’s dangling reins and calmed her with soothing words. The serpent was nowhere to be seen.

“Are you hurt?” The concern and fear in William’s repeated question finally caused me to look up at him.

“No,” I managed. I sat in the dirt, covered in leaves and dust. I struggled to my feet as William grasped my left elbow in an attempt to help.

“I am so sorry. I’ve never seen a snake so near the house before, and Miranda has never acted like that—”

I brushed off my dress as best I could and then touched my hair, grimacing when I felt twigs and leaves. I yanked out as many as I could find, all the

while trying desperately to calm my racing pulse.

“Are you certain you are not hurt?”

“I’m fine.” In truth, I could feel an ache beginning in my ankle I’d landed on. I was sure to have an impressive bruise. Now that my heartbeat slowed once again, embarrassment and anger began to rise inside me. Why was it I could never do anything without humiliating myself?

“Here, ride with me. I’ll take you back to the house.” He started toward Stowaway, who pranced impatiently a few feet away.

I glared at him. “I am not riding.”

“If you are injured, I must take you back as quickly as possible.” He took his horse’s reins and led him back to me.

“I told you I am fine,” I snapped. “And I am not riding on that horse. I don’t know how I let you convince me to do it in the first place.” I turned and marched away as fast as I could without actually breaking into a run. Havenfield loomed in the distance, bouncing in my vision. He caught me before I’d gone ten paces and grabbed my arm.

“Juli—” He stopped. “Miss Ashbourne, I cannot allow you to walk back.”

“Oh?” My tone was dangerous as I narrowed my eyes at him.

His eyes flashed with a heat of their own. “You may not feel hurt, but that does not mean you weren’t injured.”

The ache in my ankle testified to the truth of his statement. A sudden flare of pain caused me to grimace and shift my weight to the side.

His perceptive eyes missed nothing. “You *are* hurt.” His voice was thick, and I avoided his gaze.

“I will not ride a horse,” I said stubbornly.

He was silent for a few seconds.

“Very well.”

He called back to the groom, who stood holding the reins to all three horses, watching us. “Take them back to the stables. I will accompany her to the house.”

And then without any warning, he was at my side. His arms slid under my knees and behind my back, and he swept me up, holding me firmly against his chest.

Chapter Eight

“WHAT ARE YOU—? PUT ME down!” I pushed against his shoulder with my right hand, my left arm pinned between us.

“No.”

“No?” I echoed in disbelief. I squirmed, but he only tightened his grip. “I can walk perfectly well. Just put me down.”

“You hardly left me any choice,” he said. He strode effortlessly across the lawn as though he carried struggling, angry women on a regular basis. His breath tickled a strand of my chestnut hair that had fallen over my cheek. I swiped it away with my free hand.

“This is ridiculous.”

“No, this is necessary. You will not ride back, which I understand. But I also cannot allow you to walk without knowing the extent of your injuries.”

“I am not injured,” I hissed, enunciating each word. “Now put me down before someone sees us.”

His eyes were still serious, but a shadow of a smile graced his lips. “And why would that matter? I am simply aiding an injured lady.”

“For the last time, I am not injured!”

He paused his steps to readjust his hold on me. I took advantage of his brief halt, wriggling free of his arms and finding my feet. A sharp pain reverberated from my ankle, but I bit my lip to keep the grimace from my features.

“Miss Ashbourne,” he said, his frustration clear. “I insist you allow me to help you.”

I ignored him and took a few steps, surreptitiously testing the pain in my leg. It throbbed but was bearable. I continued walking, forcing my steps to be even and steady.

William kept close to my side, one hand hovering under my left elbow as if to catch me if I fell. His jaw was tight, and he shook his head as he muttered under his breath. I made out the words *stubborn* and *mulish*.

The house rose over us as we approached, and I made for the garden entrance. It was closest to my bedchamber and the least likely place to encounter anyone.

“I am sending for a doctor,” William said.

I stopped short, the movement causing another twinge of pain, and stared at him. “No, you most certainly are not.”

“You understand I am not just being obstinate.” His eyes were dark as he gazed across the garden. “You are a guest in my home, and I need to know you are unharmed.”

The thought of having a doctor called sent the blood rushing from my face. A memory flashed across my mind: my mother, pale and weak, a sheen of sweat on her forehead. And the physician, useless for all his knowledge, shaking his head, telling my father and me the worst news we would ever hear. Even now, his image in my mind brought dread to my chest. No, I would not see a doctor.

I pressed my hand across my stomach and forced my breathing to calm. William’s face was set; I needed to try a different approach if I were to avoid this. “Please,” I asked, trying for a gentle tone. He looked at me as I continued, his eyes unreadable. “I would hate to have a doctor come. I cannot stand to be the focus of attention. I could not bear it.”

His expression softened somewhat.

I pressed on. “I will send for my maid. She can examine me and decide if I need any attention. But I can already promise you I will not. It is nothing

more than a twisted ankle. I am absolutely certain.”

He studied me through narrowed eyes, and then he shook his head with a sigh. “Very well. But you send Emma to me the moment she is through.”

I nodded, eager to assure him of my compliance.

“And,” he continued, “you allow me to carry you the rest of the way.”

My head stopped mid-nod, and I glared at him. “No.”

He shrugged. “It seems a very reasonable compromise to me.”

I crossed my arms, debating internally. Which was worse: William carrying me another hundred paces, or a doctor being called to the estate? Not only would I have to endure the doctor’s visit, but it would surely alert my grandmother and the rest of the family to the incident. I frowned, imagining the smirk Aunt Lydia would give me upon learning I couldn’t even stay atop the tamest horse. A throb from my foot made the choice for me, though I would never admit it to him.

I eyed him. “You won’t tell anyone what happened?”

“I will add this to the growing list of secrets I am never to reveal about you,” he said with a crooked smile.

I exhaled sharply. “Very well.”

He did not hesitate, no doubt afraid I would change my mind. He lifted me smoothly, careful not to bump my ankle, and settled me once more against his chest.

I instantly regretted my decision. Whereas before I had been in a haze of embarrassment and anger, now I was distinctly aware of every awkward element of our situation.

My left arm settled over his broad shoulder, but my right arm had nowhere to go. I brought it to my chest, curling it against my collarbone. My shoulders were tight, my chin ducked; I didn’t know where to look.

He mistook the tenseness in my body for fear. “I am not going to drop you.”

His voice was quiet in my ear, and my gaze flitted to his face. He watched me, a lock of tawny-brown hair curled over his ear, and I noticed he had the lightest smattering of freckles across his nose and cheeks. His arm under my shoulders was solid and strong, the muscles in his shoulders tight under his fitted riding jacket.

Flushing, I tore my eyes from him. “Remind me to stop making bargains with you,” I muttered.

He chuckled, the sound reverberating from deep in his chest. “I would, except they tend to go my way.”

The veiled suggestion in his voice caused my blush to deepen, and I refused to meet his eyes, though I knew they were on me.

We reached the edge of the garden and entered through an arched stone gateway lined with manicured hedges. William had to turn sideways to fit us both through, and he carefully maneuvered so my ankle came nowhere near the edges. Clearly, he had realized my injury was worse than I was saying, even as I continued to deny its existence.

The gardener had disappeared, to my extreme relief, and a quick scan of the surrounding bushes yielded no unexpected visitors.

“Set me down by the door,” I said, still avoiding his gaze.

“I think not.”

“But we are here. Just set me down.”

“There is an enormous staircase between here and your room and not a chance I am allowing you to climb it alone.”

I blew air through my mouth in frustration, but he continued through the garden, up the step, and into the open door. I was wondering why Mr. Gibbon had left it open when William came to a sudden halt.

“Juliana! What on earth?”

At the sound of my grandmother’s voice, I groaned. I looked over my shoulder to see Lady Rowley, Aunt Lydia, and Eliza standing in the airy hallway, all with matching expressions of shock. They had bonnets and parasols in hand, clearly on their way to a turn about the garden.

“My goodness, what happened? Are you all right?” Lady Rowley hurried to my side, her eyes wide and face pale. I was keenly aware of William’s arms around me. I thought I was blushing before, but now an uncontrollable fire spread across my face.

“She is well,” William answered for me. “Just a twisted ankle.”

“How did that happen? I thought you were riding.”

I cleared my throat, already forming a lie in my mind when William spoke. “We were just walking the horses a bit, and she simply took a wrong step. Nothing to worry about.”

I attempted to look unsurprised by his story, nodding to reassure Lady Rowley that I was indeed fine.

She was far from convinced. “Bring her to her room. I will send for Dr. Turner at once.”

“No, please.” She looked at me, surprised, no doubt, by the alarm in my voice. “I promise I am fine. I just need to rest, and I will be up and about in no time.”

I chanced a glance at Aunt Lydia, certain I would see a wild glee in her eyes at my mortifying situation. Instead, I met her stormy gaze, a muscle in her jaw standing out as she glared at me. Why was she so upset?

Eliza was unreadable, as always. She simply watched the ongoing exchange as she peered at us from under her lashes.

“I do not know.” Lady Rowley hesitated. “I would feel much better about it if someone looked at you.” Her expression turned thoughtful. “Mrs. Pike,

our housekeeper, has had some nurse's training. Would you feel comfortable if I asked her to look in on you?"

I had to think for only a moment. "Yes, yes, of course." I was grateful for any outcome besides a doctor.

After leaving Aunt Lydia and Eliza to their walk and dispatching a servant for Mrs. Pike, Lady Rowley led the way down the hall and up the broad, curving staircase. If I thought William would grow tired toting me about, I was proven wrong as he climbed the stairs with ease. She opened the door to my room and held it for William as we entered.

"Lay her here," Lady Rowley said, hurrying to the chaise beside the vanity table. She set the pillow up against the back and fluffed it. "Should I have Mrs. Pike fetch you some laudanum? Are you in much pain?"

My only memory of taking laudanum when I'd been ill as a child was not particularly pleasant. In my opinion, the benefits of the tincture did not outweigh the side effects. "It hardly hurts at all," I said as William followed her across the room.

I expected some protest from Lady Rowley, but she only nodded and bustled across the room to my bed, no doubt in search of another pillow.

William stooped beside the chaise and laid me down gently, his arm supporting my back until it rested against the pillow. For the briefest of seconds, his eyes met mine. I couldn't identify what emotion burned there, but it lit something inside my chest, and my breath caught in my throat.

"I am truly sorry," he said quietly. "Especially as it happened under my watch. I hope you can forgive me."

My lips parted, but I couldn't form an appropriate response. I simply nodded, and he straightened as Lady Rowley returned with two enormous satin pillows.

"Thank you, William," she said. "I will take it from here."

It was a clear dismissal, but he lingered, his expression torn. “You will inform me of what Mrs. Pike decides?”

Lady Rowley glanced to him from where she bent over me, and they exchanged an indecipherable look. But her face softened. “Of course.”

With a nod my way, William strode from the room, closing the door behind him.

Mrs. Pike came a few minutes later. After a quick examination of my ankle, which had begun to turn a nasty shade of purple, she diagnosed me with a slight sprain. She wrapped it tightly in a light, gauzy fabric and ordered me to wait at least three days before putting weight on it.

Lady Rowley spent the rest of the afternoon at my side, fetching books, my sewing basket, paper and pen, anything to keep me occupied as I lay trapped on my chaise. I was initially exasperated at her hovering. Surely she had better things to do than wait on me hand and foot.

But then I recalled what Emma had mentioned the night before about Lady Rowley talking so much because she missed my grandfather and what William had said about giving her a fair chance. I watched her closely as she chattered on about the wedding of a neighbor’s daughter, her gray-blond curls bouncing as she spoke. Her eyes were alight as she tucked a loose end of my blanket around me, pushing my glass of water closer to me on the side table.

She enjoyed caring for me. The realization made my throat tighten, and I looked away as my eyes stung. I had not been cared for like this since before Mama had died.

“Oh, does it hurt?” Lady Rowley scooted her chair closer, peering at me.

I cleared my throat and shook my head. “No, not at all. Go on. You were saying she has eleven bridesmaids?”

She eyed me but went on. “Absurd, is it not? Granted, I do understand having a large family and a number of friends, but there should be some

exclusivity in a wedding party, wouldn't you agree?"

I did agree, and she continued happily, filling me in on all the country gossip.

The sun was close to setting when she finally sighed and stood. "I had better go down to dinner. Mr. Brooks is dining with us, and I would hate to leave William to host alone. Will you be all right? I will be sure to send up a tray."

"I will be perfectly fine," I assured her. "Though I would be grateful for Emma's help."

"Of course. And please, if you need anything, I hope you know you need only to ask." Her eyes, my mother's eyes, were sincere, and the concern etched in her face was genuine.

"I will." A sentiment passed between us then, an understanding that did not need to be vocalized. I had not yet forgiven her for what she'd done in the past, but I found myself resolving to try. "Thank you."

* * *

"Crutches?"

I gazed dubiously at the contraptions. William stood just inside my open door, holding one in each hand.

"I went to Dr. Turner's last night. I had to guess at your height, but I think it will be fairly close."

It was the next morning, and I sat on the chaise once again, my ankle propped up on a pillow. Lady Rowley and I had continued our companionship of the night before and had been interrupted only a minute before by William's arrival.

Lady Rowley frowned. "I hardly think Juliana wants to hobble about the house on those. She needs rest."

I examined the crutches from where I sat. Their construction was straightforward; the tops curved upward into half-circles, heavily padded, and each connected to two sturdy wooden poles about four feet tall, a handle inserted between.

I very nearly agreed with Lady Rowley, but the earnestness of William's face gave me pause. As afraid as I was to make a fool of myself once again, I did not relish the idea of spending three days trapped on a couch. "I suppose it couldn't hurt to try," I said, hoping Lady Rowley would not be offended that I disagreed with her.

"Are you certain?" Skepticism ruled her voice.

"They are very simple to use, I assure you." William knew he'd won, and he came to my side as I sat up, swinging my legs over the side of the couch, tugging on my dress to ensure it fell over the tips of my toes. Though I wore a slipper on my left foot, my right had only a stocking and gauze wrap.

He held the crutches in one hand and offered his other to me. I took it, doing my best to ignore the flame flickering inside my chest. I stood and balanced on one foot, the other bent. William handed me one crutch, and I tucked it under my left arm, and then he released my hand as I positioned the second. I gripped both handles firmly.

"All right, now move them both forward a pace, and then bring your feet to meet them."

"I have seen crutches before," I said with a half smirk.

He motioned me forward. "Go on, then."

Lady Rowley's anxious eyes followed me as I crossed the room, shifting the crutches forward and swinging my legs to meet them. It was not the most graceful way to move, but move I did. William stayed beside me for my first length, hand poised beneath my elbow.

"I suppose they are steady enough," Lady Rowley said reluctantly as William came to stand beside her. I took another length of the room, my

confidence growing with each step. “But do go slowly. And do not think of attempting the stairs without someone to help you.”

I arrived back at the chaise. William moved to help me, but I waved him off, seating myself and leaning the crutches against the armrest. “I daresay I’ll be able to manage them well enough.” I glanced up at him. “Thank you. I would have gone mad confined to a chair for three days.”

“I guessed as much,” he said.

Lady Rowley leaned forward. “Perhaps you had better rest now. I don’t want you to tire yourself.”

“Oh, I am not tired in the least. I was actually hoping to go out to the garden and sit awhile.” My eyes flicked to William’s face of their own volition.

His face was—regretful? “I am pleased you like them. But my main purpose in coming was to let you both know I have to go down to London for a few days.”

“Oh.” I dropped my gaze and focused on the pillow beside me, picking at the tassels with my fingers, wrapping the silky threads around my little finger.

“A few issues have come up that need attending to. I am leaving today.” His gaze went to Lady Rowley, then back to me. “Now, actually.”

A strange new sensation turned inside me. Calling it disappointment was not quite right, nor sadness. Less than an emotion, it was more of a single thought: I did not want William to go. But that was absurd. I’d known him all of two days, much of which I had tried to avoid him.

“I hope it is nothing serious,” Lady Rowley said.

“No, not terribly, but it does need my attention.”

“Well, do travel safe, and let us know when we can expect your return.”

“Of course.”

There was a silence; I was expected to say something. Clearing my throat, I met William’s eyes studying me as though my thoughts were written upon my face. “Thank you again for the crutches.”

“Of course.” He paused. “And do try to keep out of trouble while I’m away.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He was only trying to get a rise out of me.

He grinned. “Lady Rowley. Miss Ashbourne.” With a bow of his head, he left.

* * *

The morning after William departed for London, I successfully navigated the halls and stairs with my new crutches and joined Lady Rowley and Eliza on the couches in the morning room. Aunt Lydia stood gazing out the window, not bothering to acknowledge me.

Lady Rowley greeted me with an uncharacteristic frown. “I hope you did not take it upon yourself to descend the stairs alone.”

“Of course not,” I said. In truth, I had forgotten about her fear of my taking the stairs unaided. “Emma helped me.”

She looked as though she did not quite believe me but, thankfully, changed the subject. “How are you feeling this morning?”

My ankle ached almost constantly, but I could not stand being confined in my room a moment longer. Even the company of Aunt Lydia was better than the monotony of my bedchamber. “Much improved, thank you.”

“We were just talking about poor Eliza,” Lady Rowley said, flapping her hand about. “The most awful thing—she found a horrible rip in her favorite dress this morning, and her maid is at a complete loss as how to mend it.”

Though she'd proven herself kind and considerate, my grandmother was apparently prone to the dramatic.

Eliza seemed to be thinking along the same lines. She dropped her gaze, cheeks reddening. "It is nothing. I only mentioned it in passing," she said softly.

I examined her face carefully as she stared at her hands folded neatly in her lap. And then, not entirely certain why, I asked, "Where on the dress is the tear?"

"Just a few inches below the waistline, on the skirt," Lady Rowley answered. "Is that not the worst spot? It is no wonder her maid is hard pressed to fix it."

My father had always told me I was a good judge of character. As I looked at Eliza, I felt a tug on my heart. "Have your maid bring your dress here," I said. "I would like to take a look at it."

She lifted her eyes, blinking. "Pardon?"

"Mama was an excellent seamstress," I said. "I helped her often, and though I am not an expert by any stretch of the imagination, I did pick up a few things."

Her eyes widened, and she glanced at her mother still standing by the window, now turned toward us. "Oh no, I couldn't. It is such an imposition."

"Yes," Aunt Lydia said. "I am sure you have far better things to do with your time."

I ignored her and directed my response to Eliza. "I would not offer if I did not mean it. I would be glad to look at it for you."

Eliza met my gaze for the first time that morning. There was hesitation in her eyes, but she smiled. "Thank you," she said. "I will send for it."

A maid brought the dress, a lovely pink gown with a ruffled bodice, along with my sewing basket. I examined the tear carefully as Lady Rowley clucked her tongue.

“However did you manage that, Eliza? Such an odd place for a rip.”

Eliza flushed. “It was just—just a nail sticking out from my doorway.”

“A nail?” Lady Rowley was appalled. “You should have told me sooner. I’ll have Mr. Banfield send someone to repair it immediately.”

“Oh, no, that is not necessary.” Was I the only one who could see the panic in Eliza’s eyes? “Jane already took care of it. You needn’t worry yourself.”

Eliza swallowed and fidgeted with her hands. She was very obviously lying. But what reason would she have to lie to her grandmother?

“It really is such an awkward place for a tear,” I said, drawing Lady Rowley’s attention. Eliza nearly sagged with relief. I turned the fabric over to see it from beneath. “But I think if I tucked it just here and used an invisible stitch, then we might be able to salvage it.”

“Perhaps we ought to take it to Mrs. Notley,” Aunt Lydia said, crossing the room to sit by her daughter. “It might be better to have a trained seamstress.”

I was about to snap a not-so-polite response when Eliza surprised us all. “No,” she said, an unexpected strength in her voice. “No, I trust Juliana.”

Aunt Lydia glowered, and I shot Eliza a grateful look. She ducked her head, but her shoulders relaxed by the smallest margin.

As I threaded and knotted my needle, a servant entered with the day’s post.

“Oh, a letter from Rebecca,” Eliza said, pleased. “I have been impatient to hear how her first Season went.”

“Did you not spend the Season in town?” I asked.

“Oh, no,” she replied. “I had my coming out last year, and it quite overwhelmed me. And then this year, there was Grandpapa, and . . . well, we decided it would be best to stay close to home.” Eliza spoke quietly but easily. A change had come over her in the last few minutes, and her shyness toward me seemed to have dissipated somewhat.

“And where is home for you?”

“They live but a few hours’ ride from here, in Brayton,” Lady Rowley said, looking fondly at Eliza. “I am fortunate to have them visit so often.”

I began my work, careful to keep my stitches tight and straight. There were a few minutes of silence as the ladies read their letters, and then Eliza broke the quiet with an excited murmur. “Oh, wonderful. Rebecca says they will arrive here in time.”

Recognition clicked in my mind. “Is this Mr. Rowley’s sister, Rebecca?”

“Yes, she and her mother often spend time with us in the summer. If we are lucky, they are able to come during the summer ball.”

Uneasiness crept over me. A ball?

I cleared my throat to ask my question, but Aunt Lydia spoke, interjecting herself into our conversation. “Eliza, it has been days since you’ve practiced your singing. I would so hate for your voice to grow rusty.”

No, what she would hate is for her only daughter to befriend me, whom she clearly detested. William had said it was the inheritance Sir Charles had left to me instead of her; the look in her eyes at that moment made me believe the reason was much more complicated.

I looked away from her gaze to Eliza, who made as though to stand. “You sing, then?” I asked, as much to spite my aunt as to get to know my cousin better.

Her eyes lit up, and she settled back into her cushion. “Oh, yes. I enjoy it immensely. And you, do you sing?”

“A bit, though I have little talent for it. My skills at the pianoforte are a slight improvement.”

“We shall have to sing a duet while you are here,” she decided.

I looked at her in surprise. “You perform?”

She dropped her chin. “I know, it seems a contradiction. But I have always loved music and have never felt timid when I share it. I find it easier to sing a rehearsed song than to force a conversation.”

“And she would never claim it,” Lady Rowley said, “but she is the closest we have to a prodigy in the county.”

“The Earl of Lockwell himself once complimented her voice,” Aunt Lydia said smugly. “He said he’d never heard its equal.”

Eliza blushed and deflected the praise, but her gift was difficult to hide. After I finished mending her dress—“You would hardly know there was ever a tear!” Lady Rowley exclaimed—we spent the remainder of that morning choosing a piece and practicing it around the pianoforte. Aunt Lydia oversaw us, offering unhelpful advice as I tried to match the angelic clarity of Eliza’s voice.

Even with Aunt Lydia’s constant criticizing, I found my uneasiness and anxiety slipping away with each hour I spent at Havenfield. I was unused to having so much time to myself. It was a strange transition from spending every moment with Daniel and Charlotte, teaching and guiding them, to having the day stretch out before me with no demands on my time.

I settled into a pattern over the next five days. I relegated my mornings to slowly acquainting myself with Eliza and Lady Rowley while simultaneously warding off disdainful comments from Aunt Lydia. We sat in the gardens together, sewed and embroidered, and talked on a number of topics. Though I enjoyed my time with my grandmother and cousin, there was a restlessness inside me that refused to dissipate. The country was quiet, too quiet; I missed London, the children, having a purpose.

And so the afternoons I claimed for myself. I kept to my room, assuring my grandmother I was resting my ankle. In reality, I dove headfirst into plans for my school. I began outlining lesson plans, listing what subjects I imagined being taught in the curriculum, and pondering over the unique challenges that lay before me.

How could I, an unmarried woman with no connections or substantial experience, successfully start and run a school? Even with the promise of a large fortune, such a task seemed insurmountable. I possessed an abundance of determination and did not fear hard work, but I unfortunately had very little knowledge of how to go about starting my enterprise.

You have nearly a month, I reassured myself. *You will find a way.*

I still intended to revisit the library and take advantage of whatever useful books I might find there, but seeing as I couldn't carry anything while using my crutches, I was resigned to wait until I could more easily smuggle books to my room. The three days on crutches that Mrs. Pike had recommended turned into four, then five. My ankle was healing but much more slowly than I would have liked.

As I sat at my desk, scribbling away at my plans, my thoughts would turn to William far more often than I would ever dare admit. What was he doing at this moment? What business had called him away, and how long would it keep him? I had met him in London only a week before he'd left; how often did he find it necessary to leave Havenfield?

And why—*why*—did I keep thinking of the way he had looked at me when he had set me on the chaise? I tried to push away the image of his intent eyes and the unknown emotion within that had sent a shiver of warmth through me.

I convinced myself it was simply because I was unused to male company. He had proven himself a friend, and that was all. But no matter what I told myself, my anticipation for his return only grew during each day of his absence, and I was helpless to stop it.

Chapter Nine

JUST OVER A WEEK HAD passed since my arrival at Havenfield, and I was dressing for the evening in my room. Lady Rowley had received an invitation from one of the neighboring families for dinner and a musicale. I wore my satin ivory gown, one I'd used for social functions when I'd worked for the Seymours. I'd bought it secondhand, and it had needed every ounce of my knowledge of needlecraft to make it presentable. Originally covered in mounds of lace and ruffles, I had painstakingly removed yards of flounce and trim to unearth a dress with relatively suitable lines.

Emma stood behind me at the vanity, pinning back my thick curls. When she pronounced me finished, I thanked her and stood, heading for my door.

“Miss Ashbourne, your crutches?”

I did not stop. “Oh, I've used them long enough. I would rather not meet the neighbors looking the part of a cripple. I am certain to be the source of much gossip. No need to further fuel the rumor mills.”

Despite my assurances, I paused at the top of the stairs. I'd been sure my ankle would be completely healed by now, but it still sent a shiver of pain through my leg if I stepped wrong. However, I was determined to go without crutches tonight. I gripped the railing tightly, holding my skirts away from my feet to keep from tripping.

I made it down the stairs without incident and entered the parlor, where Lady Rowley, Mr. Woodward, and Eliza had already gathered.

“And where are your crutches?” Lady Rowley demanded as I sat beside Eliza on the sofa.

“Oh, I am quite all right without them now,” I said. A twinge in my ankle suggested otherwise, but I ignored it.

She eyed me but did not question me further, turning back to her conversation with Mr. Woodward.

“You really ought to still use them,” Eliza said with a concerned frown. “I would hate to see you reinjure your ankle.”

I shook my head. “I honestly could not stand them for another minute. And really, you know very well we will be sitting all evening anyway.”

We were interrupted by Aunt Lydia’s arrival. We all stood and made our way to the coach waiting at the entry steps. The drive to the Pembrokes’ was short, and I found my nerves still entirely unstable as the coachman handed me down to face an intimidating manor, the thick columns that framed the doorway nearly disappearing into the night sky above us. I trailed behind Eliza, trying very hard not to look as tense as I felt.

Eliza looked back at me and took my arm in hers. “I hate it too,” she whispered.

A tiny amount of confidence trickled through me. It helped to have a friend.

The butler greeted us at the door and guided us through the imposing entryway to the drawing room. He announced my grandmother first, then my aunt and uncle, and my stomach clenched as he finished with “Miss Woodward, and Miss Ashbourne.”

As Eliza and I followed her parents and Lady Rowley into the room, the chatter that preceded our arrival came to an almost complete silence, save a whisper here and there. There were perhaps twenty people in the room, and all of them, to a one, had their eyes fixed on me. Lady Rowley seemed not to notice, or perhaps she just did not allow it to bother her the way it bothered me. She greeted a couple who stood to the left of the door, smiling as though she hadn’t a care in the world. Conversation slowly picked up again, but I could still feel the inquisitive eyes of the other guests.

“They are all looking at me,” I murmured to Eliza.

Lady Rowley turned and waved me over.

“I noticed,” Eliza whispered back dryly, cheeks pink as she avoided meeting any of the onlookers’ eyes. “And I deeply regret walking in with you.”

She gave my arm an encouraging squeeze as she urged me forward, and I had to hide my laugh. Eliza had a quiet wit that often went entirely unnoticed. I took a fortifying breath as I reached my grandmother’s side. She wrapped an arm around my shoulders as she turned to our hosts.

“Mr. Pembroke, Mrs. Pembroke, may I introduce my granddaughter Miss Ashbourne?”

As I offered the obligatory curtsy, I examined the couple before me. I’d never put much faith in the idea that married couples grew to look alike until I saw the Pembrokes. Both Mr. and Mrs. Pembroke were stout, with round faces, ruddy cheeks, and the general impression that they’d never missed a meal in their lives. The only difference between husband and wife was Mrs. Pembroke’s tight lips in contrast to her husband’s beaming.

“Very pleased to meet you, Miss Ashbourne,” Mr. Pembroke said with delight. “We are so glad you were able to come tonight. Might I make known to you my nephew, Mr. Fitzroy? We are fortunate to have him visiting with us for a few weeks.”

In my careful inspection of Mr. and Mrs. Pembroke, I hadn’t noticed the man standing behind the couple. He stepped forward now and squinted at me with small dark eyes, his features pallid above his weak chin. “I am very glad to meet you all,” he said, eyes darting from my face to the floor and back to my face in a matter of moments. His voice was oddly deep for such an unassuming person.

There was no time for anything more, as another family arrived just behind us. Lady Rowley ushered me to a cluster of older ladies gathered about the fireplace. As she introduced me and my knees bent involuntarily in a round of curtsies, my eyes were drawn back to the Pembrokes. To my surprise, Aunt Lydia and Mrs. Pembroke stood in discussion, heads close

together. As I watched them, Aunt Lydia met my eyes. Mrs. Pembroke followed her gaze, and they both turned away from me wearing crafty smiles.

I focused my attention back on the women Lady Rowley introduced me to. I vowed to remember each and every one of their names, only to forget them immediately as we moved to the next matron. They twittered over me, proclaiming me lovely and delightful and diverting. I wasn't sure how they were able to ascertain any of those qualities, as I was unable to get a word in edgewise. Their faces blurred before me, and my face must have revealed how overwhelmed I was, as Lady Rowley took pity on me, excusing us and guiding me to an unoccupied grouping of chairs.

Eliza joined us soon after and offered me a smile. "You are through the worst of it now," she assured me.

Lady Rowley gave a tut. "It is a drawing room, not a battlefield, Eliza."

"It may as well be," I muttered under my breath.

Eliza giggled, and Lady Rowley pretended not to notice.

"You did well," she said, clearly pleased. "I doubt even Mrs. Follett could have found anything to fault you for." She watched her group of friends with calculating eyes. "Do you two mind terribly if I speak with them for a few minutes before dinner?"

We assured her we did not, and she hurried back to the crowd, clearly in her element among the gossiping women. I chanced a glance around the room and was met by a sea of unfamiliar faces.

"Will Mr. Brooks be coming tonight?" I asked Eliza. I'd hoped to have at least one friend present outside my family.

Eliza shook her head, her face tight. "I'm afraid the rest of the neighborhood does not share our fondness for Mr. Brooks."

She did not have to explain further. I'd nearly forgotten how different Mr. Brooks's status was from the Rowleys'. As a land agent, he was certainly looked down upon by the majority of Millbury's society.

I wanted to remark upon the unfairness of the situation, but Eliza's attention was taken by something behind me.

She craned her neck to see. "Well, this is an unforeseen complication," she muttered, eyes darkening as she settled back into her chair.

I turned but could not see anything out of the ordinary in the horde of guests. Not that any of this was ordinary for me. "What is it?"

"Not what. Who." She nodded at the entrance to the room. A young woman about our same age, perhaps slightly older, stood on the threshold. She was lovely, with dark hair arranged in thick ringlets, her eyes bright against the clear complexion of her skin. She stood with an easy confidence, knowing every eye in the room was upon her and reveling in that knowledge. She scanned the room with precision, skipping over faces until she came to rest on me. The weight of her stare settled upon me, and I met her gaze, confused at her attention. Her eyes danced with a secret. I had not a clue as to who she was, but I had a suspicion my ignorance was one-sided.

"Who is she?" I whispered to Eliza as the dark-haired woman greeted the Pembrokes.

"I will tell you later." Eliza continued to frown. We watched as the lady finished her greeting, then turned and strolled directly to us.

We stood to receive her.

"Miss Woodward, it has been far too long," the woman said, her voice low and throaty. "I do not believe I saw you in Town at all."

"No, my mother and I preferred to spend the Season in the country this year," Eliza said quietly, though her flushed face betrayed her underlying distress.

The newcomer turned to me, her brilliant green eyes traveling the length of my shabby dress before meeting my eyes with a mixture of amusement and pity. I forced myself not to fidget, not to show any signs of discomfort.

“I do not believe I’ve had the pleasure of your acquaintance,” she said.

Eliza cleared her throat. “Miss Isabel Radcliff, this is my cousin, Miss Juliana Ashbourne.”

Miss Radcliff widened her eyes in a show of surprise. “Oh, how lovely. I was unaware you had a cousin. Where have you been hiding her all these years?”

Eliza didn’t seem to know how to respond, as her cheeks turned an even deeper shade of pink.

I would not be similarly cowed; clearly Miss Radcliff knew my background, or she would not have asked such a pointed question. “I worked in London as a governess until recently.” My voice was cool, refusing to match the false sweetness of her tone.

“A governess!” She opened her eyes wide. “How very unfortunate. It is lucky indeed that your relatives have taken you in.”

Is that what she thought? That Lady Rowley had rescued me from a life of depravity and hard labor? I would have snorted if I were not distinctly aware that everyone in the room watched our exchange with great interest. It was as though Miss Radcliff and I were being judged in a contest, though I had no idea of the rules or end goal.

“Very lucky,” I agreed. “They have been most welcoming.”

None of Miss Radcliff’s words were unkind, by any means, and yet the way she delivered them made me feel as though she were laughing on the inside. It was unsettling, to say the least.

Miss Radcliff turned back to Eliza. “And where is William this evening? I confess I hoped to see him.”

My stomach flipped at the familiar use of his name. Eliza's eyes flicked briefly to mine before she answered. "He was called into town a few days ago on a matter of business. We are not certain when he will return."

Disappointment marked Miss Radcliff's face. But then her eyes fluttered to the door, and her mouth curved into a smile. "Apparently tonight."

I turned on my heel, following her gaze. William stood just outside the wide doorway, handing his hat and gloves to the butler. He was absurdly handsome in his black dinner jacket and intricately knotted cravat. He stepped inside, searching the room. As his gaze met mine, a slow grin lifted his lips and crinkled the corners of his eyes. The dormant flame inside my chest leapt.

Then his eyes shifted to Miss Radcliff standing beside me, and the smile fell from his face faster than a stone through water. He and Miss Radcliff stared at each other. She maintained a demure expression, tilting her head, but William's face displayed only unadulterated shock.

At that inopportune moment, the butler stepped into the room to announce dinner. Any hope I'd had of speaking to William vanished as the crowd began working their way from the drawing room, taking William with them.

What had I just witnessed? A host of questions consumed me as I followed after Eliza. How exactly did the two of them know each other?

Miss Radcliff slipped away, and I rather hoped I could avoid speaking with her for the remainder of the evening. Her superiority was exhausting, even after such a short conversation.

As we were seated along the length of the enormous mahogany table that took up the entire dining room, I glanced about to try to spot William, but I couldn't see him in the crush. The large windows lining the western side of the room let in the last of the day's light, and candles warmed the corners of the room; shadows reigned in the garden beyond.

A footman had just shown me to my seat when Mr. Fitzroy appeared at the chair beside me. “Miss Ashbourne, it appears I have the pleasure of having you as my dinner companion tonight.”

I forced a smile. “It seems that way.”

As he seated himself, I shot a glance up the table, wishing Mrs. Pembroke had seated me elsewhere. Now I had to endure yet another tedious exchange. Lady Rowley was seated beside Mr. Pembroke at one end, Aunt Lydia and Mr. Woodward sat across from me, and William and Eliza had the luck of sitting directly beside each other. Their heads were bent in conversation, William’s face lined with tension, Eliza speaking in a quiet tone.

“I understand you are recently come up from London,” Mr. Fitzroy said, an attempt to claim my attention as the footmen began serving the first course, a carrot soup that smelled enticing.

I snatched my gaze from William and my cousin, pushing away my curiosity and resigning myself to four courses of stilted dialogue. “Yes, I arrived a week ago.”

“And how have you found the country? I imagine it to be quite the change from Town life.”

“They do have their differences.”

“Such as . . . ?” He was turned entirely to me, eyes focused on me in a way that made me squirm.

“Just the usual,” I said edgily.

“The scenery? The company? The food?”

“The incessant interrogation by a near stranger?” I bit my lip. The words had flown out of my mouth; he had just been prying so!

After a startled moment, he smiled. It was an uncomfortable experience, Mr. Fitzroy smiling at me. His eyes grew even smaller, and his cheeks

seemed to clench in a way that looked painful.

“That was a joke,” he observed.

I shifted in my chair. “Yes, of course.”

“Beauty and wit. A rare combination, indeed, Miss Ashbourne.”

His voice was just a touch too loud, and heads turned along the length of the table. I flushed, looking down at my china bowl. I’d thought his smile before to be uncomfortable, but his flattery was unbearably awkward, especially as he’d done it loud enough for the whole party to hear.

After a few moments, when I thought everyone was once again looking away, I allowed a quick glance down the table. William watched me, expression flat. I drew my eyes away from him, annoyed he was witness to my embarrassment yet again.

The rest of the meal passed in a haze of clinking silverware and decadent dishes. Mr. Fitzroy attempted valiantly to keep up a steady conversation, and I responded as best I could. My eyes flitted to the end of the table every few minutes, but William did not meet my gaze again.

As the servants cleared away the last of our plates, Mr. Pembroke stood, signaling us to stand and follow him to the drawing room for the evening’s activities. Mr. Fitzroy jumped to his feet and pulled out my chair as I stood.

I turned to step around my chair, and a sharp pain resonated from my ankle. I winced and paused, cursing silently. I should have stepped more carefully.

It seemed no one had noticed my mishap, distracted as they were in standing and straightening their dinner jackets and skirts. Until my eyes stopped on William. He was inexplicably glaring at me.

I returned his look with a furrowed brow. What had I done to invoke such ire?

“Miss Ashbourne?” Mr. Fitzroy stood beside me, arm extended. He hadn’t noticed my stumble or my unspoken exchange with William. He offered his unnerving smile, and I fought off a shudder. What could I do to stop him from smiling at me again?

I took his arm and leaned on him as inconspicuously as I could, taking the tiniest of steps. The pain had vanished, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

We followed behind the line of couples as we made our way down the darkening hallway. Normally, the men would split off for a time, but as the Pembrokes had declared the evening to be a musicale, the company stayed together.

Mr. Fitzroy and I entered the drawing room, the richness of the draperies and furnishings only enhanced by the evening light, a pianoforte shining in the corner near the large window overlooking the lawn and woods. I promptly searched for a place to sit. The ache in my ankle was quiet now, but I did not trust it.

“Mr. Fitzroy,” Lady Rowley called, beckoning him to where she stood just to the left of the open door. “I have a question I hope you can help me with.”

I gave her a look of such relief that she had trouble hiding her amusement.

He turned to me. “I hope we can speak more later, if you are not opposed.”

“No, of course not,” I said and lifted my hand from where it rested on his arm. I resisted the urge to wipe it on my skirts.

He walked toward my grandmother, hands clasped behind his back. Immediately, I felt a hand under my elbow, and I started, jerking my head over my shoulder until my eyes met William’s, standing just behind me. Normally, his were a light blue with a teasing glimmer; now, they were serious and concerned and . . . annoyed?

“And where are your crutches?” His voice was curt, his words short.

I had been about to greet him agreeably, but his words set me on the defensive. “In my room, if you must know. I used them for five days, and I am quite back to normal now.”

He pulled on my elbow, guiding me to the rows of chairs that had been set up facing the pianoforte. “You think I didn’t see you step wrong at dinner? You are hardly back to normal.”

I bristled as I sat. He stood before me, his arms crossed.

“You’re back for barely an hour and you have formed an opinion already?” I asked.

“I can tell your ankle is still paining you, though your pride won’t allow you to admit it.”

I sniffed and turned away from him. “That is none of your business, though you are kind to pretend it is.” He stood not two paces from where I sat, my hands clasped tightly in my lap. A furious heat burned between us, building with each word we exchanged.

“It is absolutely my business, as you are a guest in my house.”

The domineering tone of his voice caused a hot swell of anger to rise in my throat. “If you cared so much for a guest, I wonder that you dashed away to London so quickly after that disaster of a horse ride *you* forced upon me.”

His eyes narrowed. “My leaving had nothing to do with you. It was just unfortunate timing.”

Eliza approached, shooting me a questioning look. Our hushed argument had attracted unwanted attention; among the heads craned in our direction was Miss Radcliff’s, her eyes calculating. I bit my tongue to keep from responding further.

William left without another word and joined Mr. Woodward where he stood with a group of men. I clenched my hands tighter. I’d almost been

happy to see him earlier, when he'd appeared before dinner. Now I could barely contain my resentment for that arrogant, interfering man.

“Are you quite all right?” Eliza’s voice was hesitant as she sat beside me. I doubted she’d heard much of our spat, but our expressions had surely exposed us.

I offered a strained smile. “Yes, of course.”

She looked unconvinced but thankfully stayed silent. Out of the corner of my eye, I could just see William. I was debating whether to catch his eye so I could send him a withering glare, but Miss Radcliff stepped up to him, claiming his attention. His face was still stern from our quarrel and did not soften in the slightest as he looked at her. If anything, his shoulders grew stiffer, his eyes narrower. Miss Radcliff stood rather close to him, and he took a step back so they were a more appropriate distance apart.

Miss Radcliff spoke, undeterred, leaning toward him. I could not read William’s face as he listened. His expression was hard. Did I imagine a hint of irritation in his features? She did not seem to notice, gazing up at him with those wide, green eyes. He spoke few words in return. My chest felt strangely tight as I watched them. They obviously knew each other well. I’d gathered that from her use of his given name earlier.

I shook my head, scolding myself. It did not matter that William had a connection to the beautiful Miss Radcliff. It did not affect me at all and, frankly, was none of my affair.

The guests around us began moving to sit in the rows of chairs. William bowed sharply to Miss Radcliff before leaving her to sit on the opposite side of the room. He did not spare me a glance. Miss Radcliff looked taken aback by his abrupt departure, but not a second passed before she rearranged her smile and also moved to sit.

Lady Rowley took the empty seat beside me, and the evening began with a performance by a timid girl, hardly sixteen, who played a sonata with trembling fingers. The applause had scarcely started before she curtsied and hurried back to her seat. A line of performances followed, some enjoyable,

most mediocre. I was grateful now that Eliza had suggested we practice a duet. If I'd been compelled to present a solo, I likely would have been ill.

I willed myself not to look at William where he sat along the edge of the chairs nearest the windows.

If only the evening had been planned with more involved entertainment, games, or a dance. The performances allowed my mind far too much freedom. My thoughts wandered almost constantly to William, and each time they did, I reined them in with an irritation I didn't quite understand.

The evening wore on. Miss Radcliff gave a dramatic performance of a difficult Mozart concerto, which the crowd enjoyed immensely, if the applause was anything to go by. I wondered if anyone else in the audience had noticed how often her eyes had wandered to where William sat. I doubted he had, at least. He had stared out the window to his right for most of her song.

After Miss Radcliff took her seat with a flurry of skirts, Eliza and I were announced as the final performance of the evening. I took a deep breath and pushed away my nerves, rising and following Eliza to the pianoforte in the corner. The tiniest pain pinched my ankle, but I ignored it. I would not allow William the satisfaction of witnessing another moment of weakness. Eliza and I sat beside each other on the bench, her hand poised to turn my pages.

I began playing the prelude, my fingers slipping softly over the keys. After a few measures, Eliza's voice sounded from beside me, and I nearly shivered from the sound. Her voice was truly beautiful. She touched the delicate notes with gracefulness and fragility and then tamed the high-soaring passages with equal ease.

I joined her for the second verse, my lower voice adding a harmony to her entrancing melody. It was a lovely Italian aria, a song of homecoming and reunions, and I couldn't stop my mind from straying to Papa. Despair threatened to overcome me. I took a quick breath to regain my careful composure and blinked to clear my vision.

Our singing paused for several measures as I played a brief interlude. My fingers knew the notes well—too well. I fought hard, but my eyes acted of their own accord, darting to where William sat.

But he was no longer in his seat. He now stood beside the window, his shoulders angled to us but his face turned toward the encroaching darkness. Just as I was about to turn back to the music, his stormy eyes clashed with mine and sent a jolt through my spine. My fingers tripped over a key, and I tore my eyes away, fuming that he'd caused me to make a mistake.

We finished the song, Eliza's voice fading softly as she held the final note. Silence ruled for but a moment before the group burst into applause.

"Stunning," Mr. Pembroke said as his wide hands clapped slowly. "I cannot say I have ever heard a voice quite like yours, Miss Woodward."

She blushed and offered a quick curtsy as a response. Miss Radcliff's face stood out among the admiring gazes of the guests. I could safely hazard a guess that she disliked sharing the veneration of her audience. Disliked it so much, in fact, that she allowed her demure mask to slip as she glared at Eliza and me with unconcealed envy.

"I quite agree. And Miss Ashbourne matched it beautifully," Mr. Fitzroy said.

I pressed my lips together and looked away.

Eliza made her way back to her seat. I stood from the bench and worked on gathering the music into an organized pile.

"Miss Ashbourne." I looked up at the voice, the room quieting to listen. It was Mrs. Pembroke. I hadn't heard her speak a word all evening. "I hear that you are visiting from London. Might I ask where in Town you live?"

"I was born and raised in Lambeth," I said hesitantly, "but more recently living off Green Street."

Her eyebrow arched, and she tucked her substantial chin against her chest. The room remained quiet as everyone listened to our exchange. “Lambeth, you say?”

I nodded, struggling with my music now, wanting to regain my seat as quickly as possible.

“I would imagine you know a great deal of . . . interesting songs, growing up in that neighborhood.” She waved her hand dismissively.

I did not have to guess at her meaning. Lambeth was not precisely a slum, but it came very close. It housed many of London’s laborers, tradesmen, shopkeepers, and merchants, and it did not have the respectability of some of the wealthier areas of Town.

“I suppose,” I said, jaw tight. I finally arranged my music into a passable stack and made to leave the piano.

“Do play us one more. Perhaps a song you learned as a child? I am as fond of classical songs as anyone, but I would love to hear a simpler tune.”

I stopped, resting my hand on the smooth surface of the pianoforte to steady myself. Her disparaging tone brought a flicker of memory to me: my mother tucking my blankets around me, smoothing back my hair. And her voice speaking words I’d reflected upon again and again.

“There will always be those, Juliana,” she whispered, “who seek to make you feel inferior.” Though she was weary from a day’s work at the dressmaker’s, her eyes shone bright with determination. “And you cannot—you must not—allow it.”

I looked back at Mrs. Pembroke, who waited with a smug expression. William watched me as alarm spread across his features. I smiled, my cheeks twitching at the effort. “I would be glad to.”

I sat at the pianoforte, allowing my fingers to hover over the keys as I ran through the song in my head. I’d first heard it sung aboard my father’s ship, belted by one of the roughest, rudest crews of sailors I’d ever met. Though I

was only eight at the time, it had obviously made an impression upon me, as I remembered its tune and words all these years later. The song had displeased Mama, but Papa had only laughed.

Allowing a few moments of quiet to build suspense, I finally began with a startling crash of notes that dived headfirst into the quick-paced melody of my favorite drinking song.

“I’m sick in the head, and I haven’t gone to bed

Since I first came ashore from me slumber.

For I spent all me dough on the lassies, don’t you know,

Far across the western ocean I must wander.

And it’s all for me rum, me jolly, jolly rum,

All for me beer and tobacco.

Well, I spent all me tin on the lassies drinking gin

Across the western ocean I must wander.”

I finished with a run up to a high, clanging chord, which rang in the deafening silence that followed. I rose, stepped away from the bench, and curtsied with a flourish. Oh, but the looks on my audience’s faces. Mrs. Pembroke’s eyes were enormous, her mouth gaping, while the rest of the crowd wore various expressions of surprise and exchanged astonished looks with their neighbors.

The sound of clapping came from the window. William attempted a serious demeanor, but a grin tugged at the corners of his lips. His slow applause was soon joined by the others, tentative and rather unenthusiastic. Aunt Lydia raised her hands not at all, keeping them clasped in her lap.

Mrs. Pembroke stood, eyes narrowed into slits, anger prevailing over her shock. “Thank you, Miss Ashbourne. I doubt anyone here will forget that performance for a very long time.”

I met her stony gaze for a long moment, then turned and made my way back to my seat. Lady Rowley and Eliza did not say a word to me. Had I embarrassed them? The thrill of my indecent behavior was wearing off, and heat began creeping into my cheeks. Every time I swore I would never embarrass myself again, I somehow managed to do one better than the previous mess. Would I never learn?

Chapter Ten

I APPROACHED THE BREAKFAST ROOM with quiet steps the next morning. I'd come down to eat much later than normal in the hopes of avoiding as many family members as possible. I was determined to go without breakfast if Aunt Lydia or William was inside. Our evening had ended quite abruptly the night before, the party dispersing soon after my disastrous performance. It had been a quiet ride home in the coach, and I'd hurried up to my bedchamber without a word to anyone.

I knew I could not evade them forever, but perhaps, at least, until the shock of last night had worn off. I peeked in the open door of the breakfast room; the table was empty. I gave a sigh of relief.

"There you are."

I jerked my head to the side. Eliza stood on the far side of the room, beside the buffet of breakfast dishes, a half-filled plate in hand.

"It's only me," she said reassuringly. "The others have already eaten."

I stepped into the room, scanning the remainder of the space despite her words, then joined her at the buffet and took a plate of my own.

"I wondered when you would come down this morning," Eliza said as she handed me the spoon she'd used to serve her eggs.

"I slept late," I said lamely.

"Of course," she said. She did not mention my performance from last night, and I relaxed, filling my plate and following her to the table.

"Did you enjoy your first taste of Millbury society?" she asked as she cut her sausage into dainty bites.

I frowned. “Between Mrs. Pembroke, Miss Radcliff, and Mr. Fitzroy, I hardly had a chance to catch my breath. Is it always like that?”

“Oh no, last night was quite the exception. Or rather, *you* were quite the exception.”

I pushed my eggs about my plate. “I thought there would be some interest in me, naturally. A governess come into a fortune from her estranged family? It is a gossip’s dream. But I was still a bit surprised, I confess. I’d not expected anything like that.”

“What did you think of Miss Radcliff?” Eliza added three drops of cream to her tea, watching me closely.

I grimaced. “A bit high in the instep, isn’t she? I cannot say that I would be entirely disappointed if I never met her again in my life.”

“You would not be the only one,” she murmured.

“Do you know her well?”

“Not very,” she said, running her finger along the curve of her cup. “Her family owns the estate just north of Havenfield. She is older than I, so our paths do not cross often. I saw her during my Season last spring but not since.”

I tried for nonchalance as I phrased my next statement. “She seemed to know Mr. Rowley well.”

She sighed. “Indeed.”

“How do they know each other?” I hardly knew why I pressed her. It was not as though I had any claim to William. What did it matter if he had a connection to Miss Radcliff?

Eliza dropped her gaze and fiddled with her napkin. “She and William were often thrown together whenever he came to visit Havenfield. He was wealthy, set to inherit the estate, and she came from a well-connected and

respected family. The match was assumed nearly from the moment they met.”

I swallowed. “They were engaged?”

“It was never official.” Eliza’s voice seemed to come from far off. “She broke off their courtship two years ago when William’s company suffered some terrible losses that threatened his fortune. She thought she could do better.” She paused and leaned closer to me. “I confess it gave me no small amount of pleasure to see that she has returned from her third Season yet unmarried.”

I managed a smile at her uncharacteristic spite as she continued. “He left the country directly after she ended their understanding, and he has spent most of his time abroad, rebuilding his company. When William returned after Grandpapa died, Miss Radcliff was in Town and has been for close to six months now. I believe this is the first time they have met since their falling out.”

“I suppose I should not be terribly surprised,” I said evenly, a vain attempt to mask my reeling emotions. I took up my fork again, stabbing my sausage with a bit too much force. “Though I cannot help but wonder at his choice of women.”

Eliza looked relieved at my humor, and her face softened. “To his credit, Miss Radcliff acted much differently before. It took the loss of William’s fortune for her true self to show, and for that, I believe we are all very grateful, him most of all.” She shook her head. “Though her appearance last night is worrying.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Considering the Season is ongoing, it would take something significant for her to leave London at this time of year.”

“You mean William,” I said. A foreign sensation crept into my stomach, roiling, twisting. “You think she means to renew their attachment?”

She shrugged, sipping her tea. "I cannot say for certain. But I have little doubt she is aware that he has made back his fortune these past years. And, of course, he now has Havenfield as well."

I sat back in my chair and picked at a bit of toast. My appetite had vanished.

"I daresay Miss Radcliff will find William much altered," Eliza said quietly. "She will not charm him so easily as she did two years ago."

The thought of William and Miss Radcliff together made me feel ill, but there was absolutely no logical reason I ought to react so strongly to news such as this; I hardly knew the man.

Eliza watched me with perceptive eyes as she continued sipping her tea.

I had little desire to discuss the subject further, so I cleared my throat and turned the conversation to a more harmless topic. "What are your plans for the morning?"

She raised a napkin to dab at the corner of her mouth, a useless gesture since she ate with such ladylike grace. "Mama and Papa are out walking, so I thought to spare a few hours for my reading."

"Oh, in the library?" I'd wanted to return to the library. "Might I join you?"

Her eyes widened, and she gulped. "I . . . well, I generally like to read alone. I am quite easily distracted."

I would have been hurt if not for the look of panic in her eyes. This was not a matter of her preferring to be alone. No, she was clearly hiding something.

"All right, then," I said, baffled. She avoided my eyes, standing to refill her teacup at the buffet. I did not press her. She was entitled to her secrets. Heaven knew I had my fair share.

I found myself wandering the spacious hallway that followed the line of windows overlooking the garden. The sky was a cloudless blue, sunbeams falling through the windows in delicate lines. I tested my ankle as I walked, but any residual pain from the evening before had dissipated. I was debating the merits of a walk in the garden against a quiet morning in my room when I heard my name called behind me. Lady Rowley strode toward me.

“Juliana, there you are. I looked for you in the breakfast room, but you had already left.”

“Oh,” I said. “I didn’t know you wanted me.” I steeled myself, certain a scolding over my performance last night was in order. “Lady Rowley, I wanted to apologize for last night. I did not mean to embarrass you or cause unwanted attention—”

She waved me off. “Oh, you are being silly. You merely surprised me, that is all. It was really quite entertaining. I do not know that I have ever seen Mrs. Pembroke so out of sorts.”

“Oh.” Her words afforded me some relief, though I was certain the consequences of my performance were far from over.

“I actually wished to speak with you and was waiting for a time when the others would be occupied.”

Her comment piqued my curiosity. What did she not want anyone else to hear?

“First, I would like to show you something, if you have some time?” She twisted her hands together, eyes inquiring.

“Er, yes. Of course.”

She led me down the hallway to the servants’ stairs located at the rear of the house. She was quiet as we walked, which unnerved me more than anything she had said. *Silence* was not a word I associated with Lady Rowley.

A thought flickered in my mind that she was taking me to see the family portraits I had unceremoniously avoided my first day here. But instead, she led me to the rooms I knew to be the family's own quarters. She stopped outside an innocuous door midway down the hall, then opened it and ushered me in.

The room was similar to my guest room in a few ways. It had a large bed along the south wall, a writing desk by the window, a vanity and chaise alongside the door. But that was where the similarities ended. This room was lived in much more than my room where my meager belongings only took up a fraction of the space. Here, there were books piled high on the desk, writing paper scattered about them. A row of shelves hung beside the bed, filled with a complete mishmash of small framed drawings, dainty jewelry boxes, and embroidered samplers. The four-poster bed was covered in fringed purple velvet and mounds of pillows.

A warm fluttering awoke inside me, whispering a realization. The room was decidedly feminine, and although it could have belonged to a number of people, the telltale stacks of fabric leaning alongside the wardrobe made it obvious.

I hardly breathed and glanced at Lady Rowley, who stood by the door. "This was my mother's room."

She nodded, her eyes tentative.

"But it has been—"

"Twenty years?" She came a few steps farther into the room. "I am aware it seems strange. Heaven knows Charles argued with me constantly over keeping it this way, even after so many years. I simply always wanted it to be ready when she came back." She took a deep breath. "Because to me, Juliana, it was always a matter of when, not if, Katherine would return. She was my first child, and I loved her beyond belief. There was never a doubt in my mind I would see her again."

I looked away, trying to focus on anything but my grandmother's words. They filled me with a heaviness for which I was wholly unprepared. During

the past week, I had grown more comfortable at Havenfield and with Lady Rowley. But there still existed a hesitancy between us, an unspoken unease I was not entirely certain how to overcome. “So you kept everything,” I said, my gaze traveling once again over the details of the room.

“Yes,” she said. “Save for dusting and my occasional intrusions, this is how your mother left it the night she ran away.”

A vision of my mother came to life before me, young eyes alive with excitement and impetuosity as she threw her belongings into a traveling case. Did she have any idea how drastically her life would change by her decision, choosing freedom and love over comfort and security? After having experienced Havenfield for myself—the beauty of the land, the ease of life with servants, but also the constant care I had to take with my actions—I found myself with new insight into my mother’s life. It could not have been a choice she’d made lightly.

I gestured to the bolts of fabric. “She sewed even then?”

Her eyes lit up. “Oh, yes. We could afford the best dressmakers in the county, but Katherine insisted on making her own dresses. And I could hardly argue since her work matched or exceeded any we hired out.” She walked to the wardrobe, brushing her hand on the fabric leaning beside it before pulling open the doors.

I stepped forward to see a row of dresses that hung inside. My breath hitched in my throat; I would have known Mama to be the maker of these dresses even without Lady Rowley’s words. Her style and flair were apparent in every inch of silk, lace, and ribbon. My eye was drawn to a lovely peach gown, the soft silk overlaid with the most delicate, intricate lace. My fingers drifted over the skirt of the dress. How many days and nights had I watched Mama bent over yards of fabric, painstakingly making the tiniest, most perfect stitches possible? And yet, it was always for someone else. She could never afford to make such a dress for herself, instead keeping to the plainer and rougher dresses of the working class.

To see an entire wardrobe filled with her creations . . . It was unimaginable. I touched them all softly, with the knowledge that she had

made and worn each one of them. My heart rose in my chest, and tears clouded my eyes. It had been years since I had felt so close to Mama.

“She made these for her coming-out,” Lady Rowley said from behind me. I blinked, forcing the tears from my eyes. “She only had the one Season, but she was the talk of the Town.”

“Mama rarely spoke of it, but I know she loved it,” I said. “The balls, the parties, the theater.”

Lady Rowley’s eyes grew wistful, and she shifted her gaze back to the dresses. “Oh, yes, she loved it. She quite adored being the center of attention. She was beautiful, especially in these dresses, and she was quite sought after. She had several suitors and even a proposal of marriage.”

“And you and Sir Charles wanted her to accept the man who proposed to her.”

Lady Rowley sighed, moving to sit lightly upon the edge of the chaise beside the wardrobe. “Yes, Lord Staverton. He was everything we wanted for her. Titled, wealthy—he was even so fortunate as to be handsome. She did not seem to favor him especially, but neither was there any reason for her to reject him. Except . . .”

“Except for my father.”

She nodded, smoothing her skirts with practiced motions.

I left the dresses with one last touch and went to sit beside her. “Did she ever tell you how they met?”

It was during Mama’s Season that she first met Papa, a story I loved for them to tell during the bitter cold winters, tucked around our cozy stove. It made my young heart light and hopeful, a feeling that soon became scarce in the difficult years that followed.

“Not in specifics,” she said, her brow creased with lines as she regarded me. “One day, she simply . . . changed. She returned from an outing with

Lord Staverton, and she was smiling. She had never done that before. I thought it an encouraging sign, but I later learned it was because of your father, not her hopeful suitor.”

“She’d gone on a drive with him.” I spoke without thinking, my mouth racing ahead of my mind. There was an inexplicable need burning in me to share this story with my grandmother. “They were just near Hyde Park when one of his phaeton’s wheels came loose. Lord Staverton hadn’t any idea what to do. My father was passing by on his horse at the time. He stopped and helped them, tightening the wheel so they could drive again.”

I loved my memories of Mama recounting the tale. She had included a great many more details: how incredibly useless Lord Staverton was, how able Papa was with the carriage, and, my favorite, how handsome he’d looked as he’d handed her back up into her seat. “She always said she was lost to love from the moment they met,” I said.

My grandmother turned in her seat to face me, regret etched into her features. “I wish I had known how deeply attached she was. Charles and I, we assumed it was a passing fancy. We did not realize how much she loved him until it was too late. Your grandfather demanded that she marry Lord Staverton, and she refused. They had a terrible fight. There were words spoken I will never forget.” Tears clouded her eyes, and she lowered her gaze to her hands in her lap, twisting one hand over her wrist. “The next morning, she was gone.”

I swallowed and rubbed my boot along the thick, woven rug that adorned the floor.

“Charles was wrong in what he did,” she said. “It required a few long and lonely years for me to realize it. But when I did, I wrote to Katherine.”

My head snapped up, and I stared at her. “You what?”

“I wrote her,” she repeated. “Several times over the years. But she never responded, though I know she received them.”

“She never said a word.”

She let out a slow breath. “I thought as much.”

A week ago, I’d harbored resentment for this woman, a woman who had allowed my mother to be driven from her home. But now there was only sadness and regret for the time wasted and memories lost. Lady Rowley had written to my mother. And Mama had never replied or even told me my grandmother had reached out. I knew now that Mama held more than a small part of the blame. Surely there had been a chance for reconciliation over the years if we had only made the attempt. But pride won out, and we had all been worse off for it. And I had been part of the problem.

“I am sorry,” I said. My chest was tight, heavy with the weight of so many jumbled emotions.

She blinked through her tears. “Whatever do you have to be sorry for?”

I exhaled, thinking through my words carefully before speaking. “You wrote in your letter, the one Mr. Finch gave me, that Sir Charles and Mama both had the same fault. Pride. And I think—well, I know—that I have the same flaw.” I met her eyes. “Even though I did not know you had written Mama, I should have spoken to her, convinced her to speak with you, send a letter, anything. But I was certain we were better off without you, that we did not need you, any of you.”

My grandmother shook her head. “My dear girl, I cannot allow you to believe this was in any way your fault. Your mother, my husband, myself, Lydia—we made these decisions before you were even born, and the consequences were far more long-reaching than we could ever have imagined.”

“Aunt Lydia?” I peered at her. “What has she to do with any of this?”

She was taken aback. “Did your mother never tell you anything about her?”

I shook my head. “She barely mentioned she had a sister.”

She sighed, brushing a curl from her cheek. “I do not doubt it. They never got along, even as girls. And then to have Lydia betray her confidence like that . . .”

“What did she do?” My voice held only the slightest note of anger, but Lady Rowley swallowed before speaking.

“She was the one who told Charles about your father. Katherine had been meeting him in secret, but Lydia found them out. She promised Katherine she would not say a word.” She held her hands out helplessly. “Lydia informed Charles not two days later.”

It did not surprise me in the least. I could just picture Aunt Lydia’s face, smug and superior, triumphantly tattling on her only sister.

“But why? Why would she do that?” I had always longed for a sister or brother. After my birth, the midwife had told Mama that to have another child would put her life in terrible jeopardy. That Lydia seemed to care not at all for her sister made my teeth grind.

“You must understand,” she said softly. “Katherine was everything Lydia was not. Social, talented, beautiful—though Lydia was lovely in her own way. I tried to ensure both my daughters felt my love equally, but Charles . . .” She shook her head. “Katherine was his clear favorite. Nothing Lydia did seemed to make any difference, and she felt the disparity quite keenly. After Katherine left, I know Lydia hoped to claim some of her father’s affection. And she did, but never as much as she wanted.”

A small part of me understood; Mrs. Seymour had treated me terribly no matter what I had done. But I did not want to feel empathy toward Aunt Lydia. I wanted to feel anger and bitterness, especially in light of the way she’d treated me since I’d arrived here.

Lady Rowley seemed to sense the battle going on in my mind. She reached over and took my hand. I stiffened at the sudden contact but did not pull away.

“Please do not blame Lydia overmuch. We would have found out eventually, and I doubt the outcome would have changed.” I managed a noncommittal shrug, and Lady Rowley sighed. “It is my turn to apologize. I did not mean for this to be such a difficult conversation. I only wanted to show you this room and perhaps talk about Katherine. I have been unable to do so with much freedom over the years. Charles and Lydia never cared to mention her.”

A pang echoed inside me. My grandmother had lost a daughter all those years ago, and those closest to her had not allowed her to grieve or even speak of her. I squeezed her hand. It was the first contact I’d ever willingly made with my grandmother, and the significance of it was not lost on her. Tears came once again to her eyes.

“Thank you for coming to Havenfield,” she said. “I know it could not have been easy.”

“It was not,” I admitted. “Though Sir Charles hardly allowed me a choice.”

She laughed, choking a bit on her tears. “No, he did not.”

“I am glad I came,” I said, and I meant it. Though up to this point it had been a long, confusing, exhausting visit, I never anticipated learning so much about my mother and my family and even myself, if I were being honest.

“I will be forever grateful you did, or I would not have had this chance to know you. You are more lovely and bright than I ever imagined.”

I shook my head. “You are clearly observing me from the colored viewpoint of a grandmother. I’ve much to improve on, not the least of which being how not to constantly embarrass myself.”

She squeezed my hand once more before releasing it. “It only reminds me of your mother. The two of you have the same spirit, and it does my heart good to see it.”

We smiled at each other for a long moment before a knock at the door made us both jump.

A maid stuck her head in the partly open door. “Lady Rowley, Miss Ashbourne, there you are. We’ve been looking all over.”

Lady Rowley tilted her head. “Whatever for? I was certain I had nothing planned all morning.”

“There’s a Mr. Fitzroy come to call.”

Lady Rowley’s eyebrows raised, her eyes containing not a small amount of curiosity. “That is most unusual. Did he mention a reason for the visit?”

The maid shook her head. “Beggin’ your pardon, my lady, I should have said. He asked most specifically to see Miss Ashbourne.”

My mouth dropped open as both the maid and Lady Rowley turned to look at me. I had not given Mr. Fitzroy a second thought since last night, so involved had I been in my musing over William and Miss Radcliff and now my own mother.

The maid spoke. “He’s in the parlor. Shall I tell him you’ll be down soon?”

“Yes,” Lady Rowley said. “Thank you.”

The maid was gone before I recovered from my shock enough to speak. “What on earth?”

“Apparently you made quite the impression last night,” Lady Rowley said as she stood and brushed her skirts.

“I am certain I did,” I said, standing as well. “Though I assumed after my performance it would not be a favorable one.”

Her eyes twinkled. “Shall we go and see?”

I sighed and followed her from the room and down the grand staircase at the front of the house. Mr. Banfield, the butler, waited outside the parlor. He bowed as we approached, then opened the door and preceded us into the room, announcing us as we entered.

Mr. Fitzroy, seated on the upholstered sofa, leapt to his feet. His beady eyes never left my face as he bowed. Lady Rowley and I returned his greeting with brief curtsies.

“Lady Rowley, Miss Ashbourne, it is such a delight to see you both again.” There was that awful smile of his. How could a smile be so dreadful?

“And you as well,” Lady Rowley said. I was impressed by the smoothness of her voice and her seemingly sincere words. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?”

Mr. Fitzroy stood holding his hat and gloves. His eyes darted between my grandmother and me. “I recently had the good fortune of purchasing the most charming little curricule and have yet to take it for a ride of any substance. I hoped Miss Ashbourne might be willing to accompany me for a ride this morning?”

My eyes widened, and I glanced at my grandmother in desperation. A curricule only seated two and in very close quarters. I most certainly did *not* want to accompany him but had no idea how to escape his invitation.

Lady Rowley acknowledged my pleading with the slightest twitch of her cheek. “I am terribly sorry,” she said, shaking her head. “But I cannot approve such an excursion without the attendance of a chaperone.”

I sighed in relief. Mr. Fitzroy’s face fell for a brief moment before he brightened.

“Perhaps we could take a walk about the estate instead? I’ve been told the views around Havenfield are incomparable at this time of year. And might we convince you to join us, Lady Rowley?”

Lady Rowley waved him off. “Oh, no, I am afraid that is impossible. I am quite indisposed this morning.”

I had never been so grateful for my grandmother. I arranged a look of regret on my face, about to offer my apologies to Mr. Fitzroy about the failed outing, when Lady Rowley spoke again.

“Although,” she began, “perhaps we can find a suitable chaperone.” She paused as though thinking. “Mr. and Mrs. Woodward are away, and I am not certain where Eliza has disappeared.”

Her act did not fool me. My gratitude of the moment faded as I narrowed my eyes at her.

Her face lit up as though just thinking of something. “What about Mr. Rowley? I happen to know he is currently in his study.”

I stared at her.

She gave an innocent smile.

Mr. Fitzroy spoke, voice eager. “I would be glad for Mr. Rowley’s company, if it means enjoying Miss Ashbourne’s.”

“I . . .” Why could I not think of anything to say?

“Juliana, run along and ask William. He would be glad for an interruption. He always works so very much.”

I clenched my jaw. “I am sure Mr. Rowley has better things to do than act as my chaperone.” Did Lady Rowley think she was doing me a favor by including William? I could think of nothing worse.

She waved me off. “Nonsense. He would be happy to, I am certain of it. Now hurry on and fetch William. Mr. Fitzroy will meet you out front.”

I hesitated, though I had no choice but to leave the room, glaring at Lady Rowley the whole way. She only chatted with Mr. Fitzroy about his new curricula and ignored me completely.

Chapter Eleven

I PACED DOWN THE HALLWAY, apprehension growing with every step. Not only did I have to suffer through a walk with the repellent Mr. Fitzroy, but I also had to ask William, of all people, to accompany me and witness my mortification.

I remembered generally where William's study was from the tour Lady Rowley had given me my first day, but as I made my way past several identical doors, it soon became clear I had no idea which one concealed his study. I paused in the hallway, looking around in exasperation. Should I call out and hope he heard me? I might as well start off this humiliating outing with an appropriately awkward situation.

The sound of rustling paper came from a door that stood ajar a few steps ahead of me. It was as good a place as any to start. I edged toward the door, strangely grateful for my practice in sneaking past Mr. Seymour's book room, and peeked inside the gap.

William sat behind an enormous oak desk, piled high with neat stacks of papers and books. He held his chin in one hand as he tapped his pen on the desk, deep in thought as he considered a ledger book lying open in front of him. As I watched, he exhaled deeply and rubbed a hand over his face.

I hesitated. He was plainly in the middle of some important task, and the thought of interrupting him made me squirm. I would simply tell Lady Rowley he was busy, and no one would be the wiser. I backed away from the door, but I bumped into the edge of a small accent table, making the slightest of noises. I cursed silently, hoping he hadn't heard.

"Brooks, is that you?" William called.

Blast.

I sighed. There was nothing for it. I pushed open the door and stepped into the room.

He glanced up with an expectant expression, but immediately, his eyes widened. He set down his pen and stood. “Miss Ashbourne.” His expression was guarded, and my name sounded strange, formal almost. The memory of our disagreement last night weighed upon my mind. Was he still angry with me? “Is there something I might help you with?”

I swallowed. “I . . . that is, Lady Rowley suggested that I . . . ask you”—I closed my eyes briefly, giving my head a shake. This was ridiculous—“I’m sorry, it is clear you are very busy. I should not have bothered you.” I moved for the door, berating myself.

“Juliana.” William’s voice was exasperated. “What is it?”

I stopped at the door, my hand on the knob, wrestling with my thoughts. I could not tell if he was annoyed or not. I made a decision. If he looked irritated at all, I would leave.

I looked at him over my shoulder. He watched me, his features unreadable but not irritated. I faced him slowly, tucking my hands behind me. A thought occurred to me then. Perhaps I could convince William to tell Lady Rowley he was too busy to accompany me, thereby freeing me from any obligation to Mr. Fitzroy. It was worth a try, in any case. “I have a . . . favor, of sorts, to ask you.” I grimaced at my words.

His eyebrows lifted. “Indeed?”

I took a deep breath. “You recall Mr. Fitzroy, from last night?”

“How could I forget?”

I couldn’t begin to guess what that new edge to his voice meant. I pressed on. “Well, somehow, he got it into his head to come calling this morning and ask me for a walk about the estate.” I avoided William’s gaze, staring instead at the intricate carving along the edge of his desk. “Lady Rowley thought that you would not object to acting as a chaperone, as she is apparently indisposed.” William did not respond. I cleared my throat. “If you would be so kind as to tell Lady Rowley that you are far too busy, I

would be grateful.” I chanced a glance at him. Though his expression remained as impassive as before, a familiar look appeared in his eyes.

“Do correct me if I am mistaken, but it sounds to me as though you are asking me to lie to Lady Rowley so you might avoid the company of Mr. Fitzroy.”

“Not lie,” I protested. “You are busy; I can see that.”

“Oh, but I would so hate to disappoint Mr. Fitzroy.” He came around the edge of his desk. He stopped in front of it and leaned back against it, crossing his arms across his chest. “It probably took all the courage that poor fellow had to come here. The least you can do is walk out with him. It would only be polite.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “There is a line between politeness and decency. I am not the type of woman to string a man along.”

His face softened. “No, I don’t believe you are.”

I allowed myself a moment of relief, certain he would agree to my undertaking.

“But then again,” he said, “Brooks has apparently abandoned me this morning, and it is such a lovely day out; I would hate to waste it.” He moved around me and out of the room.

I gaped after him for just a moment before coming to my senses and hurrying after him. I caught him with some difficulty; he was much taller, and I had to take two strides for every one of his.

“You cannot be serious,” I said, breathless. “Just tell them you are busy, and it will be done.”

“Lying is a serious sin, Juliana,” he said with false solemnity. “You certainly ask a lot of me. I do not think my eternal salvation is worth the convenience of avoiding an unwanted suitor.”

I groaned. “You are the most vexing man I have ever met.”

“So says the pot to the kettle.”

“I am not vexing!” I protested. “You simply tease me beyond what anyone would put up with.”

“Speaking of teasing,” he said, glancing over at me as we made our way down the hallway that led to the front doors. “I have yet to compliment you on your performance last night.” I blew air out of my mouth in frustration. “If I’d known you had such an impressive repertoire of songs, I’d have asked you to sing long before last night. Will you be taking requests tonight?”

“Do not be absurd,” I said. “You know perfectly well I only did that to spite Mrs. Pembroke.”

“Be that as it may, you have unknowingly revealed your secret pastime to me. With your talent, it is fairly obvious you spend your free time entertaining in taverns of ill-repute.”

“Ah, yes,” I said dryly. “You’ve found me out at last. Governess by day, tavern singer by the dark of night.”

He laughed, and I fought to keep myself from joining him, reminding myself I was angry with him. He was, after all, marching me to Mr. Fitzroy’s side for the sake of his own entertainment. We reached the open front door and started down the steps. But then William stopped and stared ahead of us.

I followed his gaze. Mr. Fitzroy and my grandmother stood admiring his curricule, and beside them was Miss Radcliff, a self-satisfied smile upon her face. Another woman I vaguely remembered meeting at the Pembroke’s party also stood with them. She must be Miss Radcliff’s mother, as they shared the same dark hair. My shoulders tensed, and I looked back at William.

“Blast,” he muttered. He watched the group for a moment before meeting my eyes. “I am sorry.”

Before I could respond, he started down the steps again, and after a moment of surprise, I followed him. He was sorry? For what?

Miss Radcliff saw us first, and her smile broadened. “Ah, here they are.”

William’s shoulders tightened at the sound of her voice, but he continued walking, his stride even. The group turned to watch us, Lady Rowley with an apologetic expression. I walked just a pace behind him, letting him lead the way.

Miss Radcliff’s green eyes fairly sparkled in the morning sun, delight playing across her features. “Mr. Rowley, Miss Ashbourne, what a lucky happenstance! We were coming to pay Lady Rowley a visit, and Mr. Fitzroy was kind enough to invite me on your walk.”

I grimaced inwardly. I thought my morning could not get any worse after Mr. Fitzroy’s appearance, but I’d tempted fate by thinking so. Now I had to endure Miss Radcliff’s superiority and thinly veiled insults as well.

“How very lucky, indeed,” William said with only a touch of wryness. He turned to the older woman and offered a bow. “Mrs. Radcliff.”

She curtsied. “Mr. Rowley.”

“Mother is going to visit with Lady Rowley while we are out,” Miss Radcliff said, twirling her parasol in one hand. “This worked out just perfectly.”

From the look on Lady Rowley’s face, *perfect* was not the word she would have chosen to describe the situation. Clearly, she and Mrs. Radcliff were not the closest of friends. I sent her a reproving look. She had started this whole mess to begin with, but she very astutely ignored me.

Mr. Fitzroy stepped forward. “Shall we, Miss Ashbourne?”

If I claimed a headache, surely they would not make me go. Would they? Or perhaps I could claim my ankle was paining me again. Except I had been so adamant that I was fully recovered that my pride would not allow me to

exploit that as an excuse. I sighed and gave a nod, trying my best not to grimace. I must not have been entirely successful, based on the amused look in William's eyes. But his amusement soon fled as Miss Radcliff stepped to his side, looking at him expectantly.

"Perhaps Mr. Rowley would be so kind as to lead us out," Mr. Fitzroy said. "I daresay he knows the grounds better than any of us."

"Undoubtedly," Miss Radcliff agreed. "Though I have had my share of turns about the estate. I remember it well." Her eyes flicked to me as she finished speaking.

I pretended not to notice.

Bidding farewell to Lady Rowley and Mrs. Radcliff, we departed, William leading Miss Radcliff and Mr. Fitzroy and I following behind. He walked rather closer to me than I would have liked, and I had to stop myself from leaping away from him every time his arm brushed mine. We headed past the stables where a dirt path meandered through the trees, their branches reaching toward each other over our heads, providing a pleasant, dappled shade.

"Miss Ashbourne," Miss Radcliff said, turning to look at me over her shoulder. "I wanted to express my admiration of your performance last night. It was . . . refreshing."

I met her gaze steadily. Though I generally pretended otherwise, I cared a great deal about what most people thought of me. But I found I cared not one whit what Miss Radcliff's opinion of me was.

"Oh, but it is I who must compliment you," I said. "We are ever so fortunate you left London early so we could share in your talent here." Her expression hardened before she turned forward again. Apparently she did not appreciate the reminder that her third year in the marriage mart had yielded poor results.

"I thoroughly enjoyed your duet with Miss Woodward," Mr. Fitzroy said. "Though I confess I found your second song a bit bawdy for my taste."

I cast my eyes heavenward. Was he really so thick that he did not realize I sang that drinking ditty only as a response to his aunt's snobbery?

"I must disagree." William's rich baritone entered the conversation for the first time. Even though all I could see of him was the tawny curls of the back of his head, I knew he was grinning. "I thought Miss Ashbourne's song to be the highlight of the evening."

I did not doubt it. In one minute of impulsivity, I had provided him with ammunition for days of teasing.

Miss Radcliff stepped closer to William, placing her hand on his arm. "William," she said, her voice soft. I could barely hear her words as they drifted back to me. "I have neglected to ask after your family. I saw your mother and sister several times in London but not for the past few weeks."

"They are well," William said, his voice cool. He clasped his hands behind his back, forcing Miss Radcliff to drop her hand. "I saw them only yesterday."

She looked entirely unruffled. "Do they plan to summer at Havenfield again? I recall Rebecca particularly enjoying their visits."

Why did it bother me that she knew so much more of William's family than I did?

"Indeed they do. They assured me they would arrive in time for the ball."

That was the second time I'd heard mention of a ball. Strands of nerves began weaving their way through my stomach.

I cleared my throat. "What ball is this?"

"Have they neglected to tell you?" Miss Radcliff turned, eyes wide. "I cannot believe it did not come up in conversation. Millbury does not boast much in the way of society or parties, but there is always an enjoyable ball at the beginning of summer. It is quite the to-do."

Her words did nothing for my anxiety. A ball? I'd never been to a ball. I had never even danced with a man before. I'd learned all the popular dances while at school, of course, but had only ever practiced with my female classmates. Not to mention I had nothing at all to wear. My secondhand gown I wore to dinners now would surely have me laughed all the way back to London.

"Might I ask when it is?" Perhaps I would be fortunate and the ball would be after my departure from Havenfield.

"I do believe it is at the end of the month," Miss Radcliff said. "Will you still be in the area?"

There was no hiding the hope in her voice. Little did she know that we both wished for the same thing. But fortune was not with me this time. The end of June coincided nearly exactly with the conclusion of my visit to Havenfield.

"Yes, I expect so," I said with a frown. It was just my luck to have a dratted ball as my send off.

Miss Radcliff leaned close to William and said something I could not quite hear. He listened but did not respond.

"Do you enjoy dancing?" Mr. Fitzroy asked me, his voice quiet in my ear. My shoulders pulled in tightly, an unconscious reaction to him being too close.

"I have not had much opportunity to decide," I said, the volume of my voice not matching his. I had no desire to be as intimate as he seemed intent to be. "This will be my first ball."

I immediately regretted my confession, as his small eyes widened.

"Your first ball? Well then, we shall have to make it one to remember."

I tore my gaze from the unnerving gleam in his eyes. I did not like his insinuation, not one bit.

The rest of our walk passed uneventfully. Mr. Fitzroy peppered me with questions, which I managed to answer without too much awkwardness. William and Miss Radcliff walked some distance ahead of us. Every time I tried to surreptitiously quicken my steps to catch them, Mr. Fitzroy commented on how much he enjoyed a leisurely walk, and I was forced to give it up. But my eyes continually found them, wishing I could read William's thoughts as Miss Radcliff's laugh carried back to us on the breeze. She kept close to his side. Did he find he enjoyed her company as he once had?

“Miss Ashbourne?”

My head jerked back to Mr. Fitzroy, who watched me with puzzled eyes. “I only asked if you have any preference for riding.”

His question brought to mind my conversation with William a week before, where he had asked nearly an identical question, resulting in our wager for riding lessons. I shook myself mentally and reapplied myself to the conversation at hand. “I have only ridden once,” I said, “and I am afraid it did not agree with me.”

Mr. Fitzroy looked surprised and a bit disappointed, though he simply went on to describe the finer points of a horse he was considering purchasing. My mind wandered immediately; he was dreadfully dull.

I was not entirely truthful in answering his last question. Before I'd so embarrassingly tumbled off my mount, I had largely enjoyed myself during my first riding lesson. The rolling gait of Miranda's steps, the easy exchange between William and me—those parts were soured by the association with my inelegant fall and subsequent bruised ankle.

We halted when we reached the south end of a nearby pond. Willows grew along the edges, their branches trailing in the water, and lily pads spread from the pond's edge. When we had our fill of the scene, we turned and made our way back in the same direction.

As Havenfield came back into view, a small sigh of admiration escaped me. I'd not seen it from afar since the day I'd arrived, and its beauty had

only grown in that time. Or perhaps my feelings toward it had softened. In any case, the estate was stunning. The passing clouds caused the sunlight to streak over the gray stone of the walls, highlighting the ivy that crawled over nearly every surface. The windows shone with reflected light, and the surrounding grass and trees rustled in the scant breeze.

William and Miss Radcliff still walked ahead of us, reaching the columned portico while we were yet halfway down the drive. They faced each other, deep in conversation. Miss Radcliff wore a serious expression as she again touched William's arm. He did not shake her off as he had before; it required the interruption of Lady Rowley and Mrs. Radcliff descending the front steps for Miss Radcliff to remove her hand and step away.

"How was your outing?" Lady Rowley asked as Mr. Fitzroy and I finally joined the group.

"Perfectly splendid," Miss Radcliff answered brightly. "It has been far too long since I've explored the woods about Havenfield, and I enjoyed it just as much as I recalled."

She cast a knowing look at William, but he offered no response. I would have given a year's salary to know what was going on inside that head of his.

"I am in complete agreement with Miss Radcliff," Mr. Fitzroy said. "Though in my opinion, the view was quite incomparable to the beauty of our company."

I flushed and looked at my hands. Why did he insist on saying such ridiculous things in front of others? Miss Radcliff laughed, a lilting trill that sounded as practiced as the song she'd performed the evening before.

"You are a flatterer, Mr. Fitzroy," she said. "Miss Ashbourne must have blushed the entirety of our walk with you as her companion."

I clenched my jaw, but my irritation only caused my face to redden more quickly. Thankfully, the subject was soon changed, as Mrs. Radcliff was

anxious to be on her way. With one last graceful curtsy, Miss Radcliff and her mother departed in their carriage.

As the sound of horse hooves and the crunch of wheels on gravel faded, William spoke for the first time since returning, avoiding my eyes as he addressed Lady Rowley. “There are some matters I need to discuss with Nathaniel in the stables, so I will take my leave.” He bowed and strode toward the stables without a second glance.

I frowned.

“That was one of the more delightful afternoons I have enjoyed in a long while,” Mr. Fitzroy said, moving closer to me. “I am grateful to have had the chance to know you better.”

I resisted the urge to step back. What did I have to do to discourage the persistence of this man? Short of being completely rude, I hadn’t any ideas. “It was good of you to come by,” I said for lack of a better response. I could see William just beyond Mr. Fitzroy’s shoulder, head bowed as he trudged across the lawn. I had a sudden, pounding desire to speak to him. I let a bit of dismissiveness slip into my tone. “I hope we will be seeing you again.”

“Our next meeting cannot come soon enough, in my opinion.” He took my hand and bowed low over it. His thumb caressed the top of my hand with the slightest of touches before he released me and straightened. I swallowed and tucked my hand behind me. “Until next time, Miss Ashbourne,” he said, walking to where his curricule stood waiting, horses held by a groom. He mounted, and with a touch to his hat, he was gone, curricule rattling back down the lane.

I stood still for just a moment, then shook my head to clear it.

“I would say our morning took a rather unexpected turn,” Lady Rowley said, stepping to my side as we watched Mr. Fitzroy disappear into the trees.

I looked at her in exasperation. “All thanks to you, I might point out.”

“At least I rescued you from a carriage ride. That would have been infinitely worse, I am certain.”

“I do not know how it could have been much worse,” I said wryly.

She patted me reassuringly on the arm before turning to the entry. “Are you coming in?” she asked.

I hesitated and glanced at the stables. William had vanished inside moments before. “I . . .”

Understanding crossed her face, and she smiled gently. “William always was one to find sanctuary in the stables. If I am not mistaken, I gather he enjoyed his walk about as much as you.” And then she was gone, strolling up the stairs and through the front door.

I wavered only a moment more before starting across the lawn, fighting the beating of my heart. I had no plans of what to say to William; I only knew I could not leave matters between us as they were. I entered the stables to see two stable hands working on a mare, rubbing her down and brushing her vigorously.

William stood in the center of the stable, his back to me. He watched the men work for a moment before he walked to a stall just to his left. He leaned against the stall door, resting his elbows atop as he rubbed the nose of a horse’s russet-brown head. Miranda.

I approached him, the sound of my steps masked in the noise of the grooms’ tasks. I called to him, making my voice heard over the bustle. “William.”

His head snapped around to me, startled.

Then I realized my mistake. “That is, Mr. Rowley,” I said, flushing. I’d never spoken his given name aloud before and had no idea what had prompted me to do so now.

He waved his hand. "I much prefer William, if you don't mind. What are you doing in here? Surely you are not locked out again."

The similarities between my arrival at Havenfield and now were obvious. I was relieved to hear the familiar note of teasing in his voice, though his tone did not seem to match the darkness of his eyes.

"No," I said. I stood a few feet away from him, my left arm grasping my elbow across my stomach. "I simply wanted to speak with you."

"Oh?" He turned back to Miranda, his hands rubbing the sides of her head. She closed her eyes in enjoyment and let out a low whinny.

I took a step closer, not particularly wanting to be overhead by the groom who walked past, leading the horse he'd been working on. "I only wanted to apologize for forcing you into that whole mess of a morning."

He shrugged as he stroked down the fine lines of Miranda's neck. "It was hardly your fault. It was unavoidable once Miss Radcliff involved herself. She is rather used to getting her way."

Though his voice was light, his jaw remained taut, his eyes focused anywhere but mine. He was obviously more affected by his time spent with Miss Radcliff than he cared to admit. I fiddled with my ring; had he really been so very in love with her that even two years later a simple visit undid him?

I balanced upon a dangerous edge. If I left now and returned to the house . . . well, that was the safest option. I should not wade into matters I did not fully understand, especially in light of my pulse that quickened the longer I observed William.

But my feet made the decision before my mind was allowed the chance. I moved until I stood beside him, following his lead by leaning against the stall door. Miranda offered me a snort in greeting and pushed her nose against my hand. I hesitated and then raised my hand to rest between her eyes, which she blinked at me. She stood amazingly still; I had the strangest

sense that she was apologizing for what had happened during our ride together nearly a week ago.

I took her head between both my hands and leaned in, pressing my cheek to hers. “It was not your fault,” I whispered so softly only she could hear. She nudged me gently, and I smiled. That was all I needed to make my decision.

She finally pulled away, going to the overflowing manger in the corner of her stall. I leaned back on my elbows and turned my head to William. He was closer to me than I’d thought. The noonday sun behind me cast a golden hue over his face, softening the ruggedness of his features. He had the strangest look in his eye as he appraised me, and it unnerved me to be the subject of his consideration for so long.

“I never thought you to be the sort of man to break his word.” I forced my voice to be serious.

“I beg your pardon?” His brow crinkled, and he turned so his body faced mine. I matched his position, one arm still resting on the stall door.

“Oh, you have many faults, to be sure, not the least of which is your insufferable teasing.” I allowed a small smirk. “But I did overall think you an honorable man.”

He shook his head. “Miss Ashbourne, I cannot imagine what you are talking about.”

The sound of my name caused me pause. Should I ask him to call me by my Christian name as he had done only moments ago? I was not entirely certain I was comfortable with that yet. I ignored my hesitating mind and pressed on.

“I distinctly recall you promising me three riding lessons. But by my reckoning, I still have two and a half remaining.”

His bewildered expression quickly turned to one of surprise. “You wish to ride again?”

I offered the tiniest of shrugs. “I know it was an accident, what happened. And much as I hate to admit that you were right, I did enjoy it before.”

He examined me, eyes raking over the features of my face, before a grin slowly stole over his lips. “I daresay I could grow accustomed to this. I quite enjoy being told how right I am.”

I rolled my eyes but could not help a laugh.

“Are you certain you are ready? Your ankle is not still bothering you?” The touch of concern in his voice made my stomach flutter, pleasantly so.

“I am right as a line,” I assured him. My ankle had not pained me since the evening before. “Though perhaps it might be best to keep our exploits from Lady Rowley’s attention.”

He leaned his head closer to mine. “You are proposing subterfuge yet again? That is the second time today. I am beginning to think you are a terrible influence on me.”

The bold look in his eyes caused the flame in my chest to burn brighter; heat rose in my cheeks. I broke our gaze, stepping away and leaning my back against the stall to catch my breath before responding.

“You know as well as I that she would only protest and fuss over me. It will be infinitely easier to keep her in the dark.”

The grooms continued their work across the stable, cleaning saddles and mucking out stalls.

“I do not think you mind her fussing nearly as much as you let on.”

He was far too perceptive. I avoided his gaze and scuffed my boot against the dirt of the stable floor. “I am not . . . accustomed to someone caring enough for me to fuss.”

It was the truth. Though Papa loved me intensely and I had Sophie and Charlotte and Daniel, there was a certain comfort that seemed to only come from someone with a mothering instinct. Since Mama had died, I had not

felt the contentment of having someone worry over me as she used to. Until I met my grandmother, that was.

“I think you will find you have your fair share of people who care for you now,” William said, voice quiet.

I did not dare glance his way; I knew too well the force of his gaze. I cleared my throat, pushing away from the stall. “It is nearly time for luncheon. Lady Rowley will be wondering where I am.”

She would not wonder at all, of course, but this conversation had taken a turn I was ill prepared for. I took two steps before he called from behind me.

“Tomorrow afternoon?”

I stopped and turned back to him. “Pardon?”

He clarified. “For your next lesson. I have appointments all morning with Brooks, but I will make time later. Perhaps late afternoon?”

I nodded, warmth spreading from my heart with distressing speed. “I should like that.”

As I walked back to the house, I could not help the smile that lingered on my lips.

Chapter Twelve

“IT IS YOUR TURN.”

William’s voice carried back to where I rode atop Miranda, following in his horse’s shadow as we made our way up the wooded hill just east of the house. As promised the previous day, William and I had embarked on our second attempt of a riding lesson. So far, it had gone remarkably better. I was able to mount with little difficulty—and no helping lift from William, though he’d stood nearby—and we’d been riding without incident for nearly ten minutes now, a groom following close behind.

“A moment, please,” I said. “I want it to be a good one.”

He acquiesced, turning back to face the faint trail through the woods we followed. “Well, do not deliberate overlong. It is only a few minutes farther.”

Curiosity over where we were headed threatened to distract my thoughts, but I pushed them away and tried again to think of a good question. We’d started a game of question and answer, the only rule being we had to answer honestly. I studied William as I thought, his tall figure perfectly at ease on horseback, broad shoulders swaying with the gait of his horse. A stray breeze rustled his tawny hair and the flaps of his riding jacket. His jacket—originally black—had now faded to the extent that it almost appeared blue. He held the reins with his right hand, his left rested on his hip, and he looked over his shoulder at me, no doubt wondering at my silence.

“All right,” I said. “I have one. Why have you not bought a new riding outfit?” I gestured to his worn jacket and boots. “You told me that first night in the stables that your mother had been bothering you to buy one.”

It was entirely at odds with his personality. William was organized to a fault, and when he dressed for any other occasion than riding, he was meticulous in his appearance.

He was quiet for a few moments, the silence stretching as we wound through the thick trunks of the surrounding oak trees. Had I offended him in some way? I ran through my question in my head and decided it was fully innocent just as he finally responded.

“I had not thought much about it until this moment,” he said, gazing straight ahead. “My first thought was that I did it solely to exasperate my mother, but I do not believe that is perfectly honest, which would be at odds with the rules of our game.” He sighed and adjusted his seat slightly. “I did not eagerly await inheriting this estate, not really. I do love Havenfield, and I am obviously fond of your family, but there is such an added weight of responsibility that I still have not adjusted fully to the change. I suppose that is why I’ve kept these clothes—to prove I am still the same man, even beneath the estates and wealth.”

I should not have been surprised, but I was. I knew almost from the start that William was not like most men, but his sincerity and honesty continued to catch me unaware.

He glanced over at me. “You were not expecting that.”

“No,” I admitted. “I thought to hear ‘I simply have no time’ or more likely, ‘Why do I need a new outfit? There is nothing wrong with this one.’”

“Perhaps I should have given a more innocuous answer,” he said.

“No,” I said quickly. “I much prefer your candor.”

We rode in silence for a minute, and I was glad for how comfortable silence could be with William. Though we had our “bantering,” as he liked to call it, we also had an abundance of moments like these, where we did not feel the need to fill the quiet.

“Nearly there,” William said. He pointed ahead to our right. “You’ll see it in a moment.”

As we topped the gentle slope, I focused in the direction he pointed. Nestled in the valley of two hills was . . . a broken wall?

I shielded my eyes from the late afternoon sun to secure a better look. “I cannot tell. It looks to be a pile of stones, but I daresay you would hardly drag me out here to visit something so dull as that.”

“Hardly,” he said dryly. “No, it is a church. Or it used to be. It fell into disrepair over a century ago when they built the larger one closer to Millbury.”

As we drew closer, the shape of the building became more apparent among the ruins. I made out three of the four walls, only one of which was higher than my head, and an archway along the closest side. How an arch still stood when most of the east wall was lost in its entirety I could not comprehend. Bright green moss covered the stones, and the bottom third of the walls was lost to the weeds and grass that grew nearly knee high.

“It is lovely,” I murmured as we came to a stop just outside the archway.

“Would you like to look around?” William asked.

At my nod, he dismounted, looping Stowaway’s reins around a nearby branch.

“We will stop here for a few minutes,” he called to the groom, who had stopped his horse several paces away. The groom nodded, dismounting and leading his horse to a grouping of bushes away from the ruins, where he sat on an outcropping of rock.

William made his way to me through the weeds. “Dismounting is much easier than mounting,” he assured me, taking the reins from my hands. “Unhook your right leg from the saddle, and facing your horse, simply slide down.”

I nodded, though I wished there was a mounting block for me to step down to. The ground looked much farther down without it. I inhaled quickly, then did as he’d said. I hit the ground with a soft thud.

“Perfectly done,” his soft voice sounded in my ear, his hand warm on the small of my back. I spun to face him, but he was already gone, leading

away Miranda to the same branch that held Stowaway's reins. I collected myself, undone by his simplest of touches. What had I gotten myself into with these lessons? I'd almost convinced myself that I had renewed our lessons solely as a way to atone for the horrible walk I'd subjected him to the day before, but the heightened sensation that ran over every inch of my skin when he'd touched me spoke of a different, much more complicated reason.

William returned to my side, and I followed in his wake as he cleared a path through the grass and weeds, the reeds snapping and bending as we passed. I touched the lichen-covered stones as we entered the archway, glancing above me to see if my touch would cause it to fall. But it was solid under my hand; I very much doubted it would fall, even if it stood for a hundred years more.

"How did you come to find this place?" I asked, walking alongside the southernmost wall, needing to put some distance between us. My hand glided along the smooth rocks until I reached what used to be a window. Now it was a gaping hole, the edges worn away by time and the elements.

"Chance," he replied from where he stood along the opposite crumbling wall. "Though it is hardly a secret. I found mention of it in Havenfield's records. But I have never encountered another soul here."

"You come here often?"

"I ride nearly every day," he said. "Havenfield is a large estate, but in terms of solitude and beauty, there is nothing that compares to this."

I continued my walk about the perimeter of the walls. The eastern wall was little more than a line of rock in the grass, but thick-branched trees grew into the space, filling it with their full, green leaves. Overhead, there was nothing left of the roof, and beyond the rustling branches the blue sky appeared, streaked with passing clouds.

My walk eventually took me back to where William had seated himself on a large, wide rock no higher than my mounting block. He watched me with a half smile as I approached.

“And what are you smiling about?” I asked.

He only shook his head. “It is not your turn to be asking a question.” He gestured to the open space beside him on the rock, and I hesitated only for a moment before I sat, tucking my skirt neatly about my ankles and looking up at him expectantly.

“Your ring,” he said with a nod to it. “You always seem to fiddle with it when you are distressed. Where did you get it?”

My fingers found the item in question, and I slipped it from my finger and passed it to him. He examined the tarnished silver, worn and scratched, with a single tiny pearl held within a delicate silver setting, the whiteness of it bright against the greens and grays of our surroundings.

“It was my mother’s.” My voice was steady, though my thoughts were anything but. “A gift from my father when they were married. He could not afford an extravagant ring, but he found this pearl on one of his first voyages as a sailor and had it set for her. It was her most cherished possession, beyond anything she ever owned. She gave it to me before she died.”

“When did she die?” His question was quiet, reserved.

“Nearly seven years ago.” Long enough for her face to have begun to fade from my mind, the sound of her voice but a distant memory. “It was a fever that came on so quickly we hardly knew she was ill before it was too late.”

He returned my ring. I slid it back onto on my right-hand finger, touching it briefly to ensure it was secure.

“My father died when I was seventeen.” He leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees; his head lowered to stare at the weeds smashed beneath his feet. “A condition of the heart, nearly the same as Sir Charles. I’ll never forget my mother’s face when she told me.”

I knew the feeling so well. Even now, I could see my father’s face as he told me Mama had passed in the night while I lay sleeping.

“I am sorry,” I said and laid a hand on William’s arm. He looked to where my fingers rested lightly on the sleeve of his jacket, and then his eyes flicked up to meet mine. I pulled my hand back, swallowing.

He sat up straight again and cleared his throat before speaking. “Perhaps we ought to continue our ride.”

He helped me to my feet, releasing my hand as soon as I stood. I followed him back to where our horses rested and managed to mount without too much of a struggle, even with just William’s interlocked hands acting as my mounting block.

“It is your turn again,” William prompted as I settled in the saddle once more.

He mounted Stowaway, the groom following suit with his horse, and we started off again through the shade of the thick foliage overhead.

Our conversation had grown somber in the ruins, and the heaviness lingered as we departed. Perhaps a lighter topic was in order.

“Chocolate gateau or strawberry trifle?” I asked, lifting an eyebrow.

He twitched his head at me in surprise, then laughed. “You are nothing if not consistent in your ability to surprise me.”

“Do not avoid the question,” I said with false soberness. “I know it is an impossible choice.”

“I shall have to say . . .” He assumed a position of intense deliberation, squinting his eyes. “The trifle.”

“Oh, I had pegged you with the chocolate for a surety,” I said. “I suppose you are allowed a lapse in judgment every now and again.”

“Am I, now? How very kind of you.”

We grinned at each other before William broke our gaze and focused straight ahead, though he wore a slight smile. We rode for a time, content

again in our silence, before William spoke.

“I have a question for you,” he said.

“That is the purpose of our game,” I teased, but he only offered a brief shrug.

“It is perhaps a bit more prying than you are willing to answer.”

Curiosity nipped at me, but his hesitation gave me pause in my reply. What question would he think too personal? “Ask your question, and I will decide for myself,” I finally said.

“Very well,” he said, his eyes following the line of trees to our right. “I have not been able to keep myself from wondering what you will do, where you will go, after your visit to Havenfield is ended.”

I inhaled sharply. “Oh.”

He appraised my expression. “You do not have to answer, as I have no right to know. But I am curious.”

I adjusted my grip on the reins, thoughts flitting about as I debated how much I should tell him. Would he think me a fool for even considering such a venture? I attempted a lighthearted tone. “I will not be returning to my position as a governess, if you have been wondering that.” Not that I had any choice in the matter, seeing as Mrs. Seymour had nearly thrown me from the house.

He shook his head. “No, I had not imagined you would need to return to work.”

I bit my cheek. Speaking my plans out loud would somehow make them more real, more solid, and I did not know if that excited me or terrified me. “This might sound strange,” I began, testing the waters, “but I enjoyed my profession. Many governesses are forced into the position by unfortunate circumstances or necessity, but I chose it.”

“And why did you choose it?”

I smoothed back my hair under my riding hat, more out of nerves than for any actual need to fix my hair. “I love to teach, simple as that. And after I found my position with the Seymour family, I soon learned I loved children as well.”

His brow furrowed. “So you will continue teaching when you return to London?”

I took a deep breath. I may as well spill it all now. “In a manner of speaking. I do not need to work to support myself, as you said, but neither do I need the entirety of my inheritance to live a comfortable life. I thought that perhaps . . . I might start a school.”

“A school?” The surprise in his voice was clear, matched by his expression as he turned to face me.

“Yes,” I said, pushing on before my fear overtook me. “One for girls. An academy that teaches subjects beyond music and manners, where a girl can be unafraid to show her interest in ‘unladylike’ topics: science, philosophy, history—everything I would have loved to learn in school but was forever forbidden to take.”

He stared at me, and I could not begin to guess what his thoughts were.

I gulped and looked away. “I know it is not entirely realistic. I would need to find a location, hire teachers, a staff. Not to mention that I would need to convince parents to send their daughters to such a school when a well-educated woman is hardly valued—”

“I think it a wonderful idea,” William interrupted.

“You do?” I could not keep the relief from my voice.

He nodded. “Of course I do. In fact, I do not believe I can think of a pursuit for which you would be better matched.” And then he chuckled.

“What is it?” Was he only pretending? Did he really think my idea ridiculous?

“Now I have finally discovered your secret pastime,” he said. “Teaching. And it was right there in front of me.”

I gave a small shrug. “Hidden in plain sight.”

“How was I to know you enjoyed your profession? Most people could not claim more than bare tolerance for their work.”

“Undoubtedly true,” I said. “Though my time with the Seymours was not without its challenges.”

William looked as though he meant to question me but instead pressed his lips together and looked away. I was grateful he did not pursue the topic further. Talking with William was a dangerous thing; we spoke so comfortably that most of the time I did not stop to think on my words. And I had no particular wish to discuss my former employers at the moment. I turned the subject back before he changed his mind and pursued his question.

“I know my challenges in starting a school are vast, especially as an unmarried woman. I hope you do not think me naïve.” The list of things I needed to accomplish still weighed heavy on my mind.

“On the contrary,” he said. “Your idea has merit, and you are determined and intelligent. I’ve no reason to believe such an undertaking would not be successful.” He spoke logically, without any hint of falseness.

Hope blossomed within me at his praise, and I focused my eyes on my horse’s twitching ears. To hear that he thought my idea had promise, that he thought me capable of running such a school . . .

“Thank you,” I said softly. “I’ve not told anyone of my plans, and it means more than I can say that you think well of it.”

He met my eyes. “I do. And further, I would like to offer my assistance to you, such as it is. I am not an expert in business, but I have some experience I feel might be useful to you.”

I was taken aback. “You wish to help me?”

“The surprise in your voice makes me feel quite the gentleman,” he said dryly.

I laughed. “I apologize. I did not mean it like that. It’s only that you are so busy with your work and running the estate, and you are already teaching me to ride. I could not possibly steal any more of your time.”

“It is not a theft I particularly mind,” he said, his voice soft.

“I . . .” I shook my head, organizing my thoughts. Part of me, the stubborn part, argued to decline his offer. I had been on my own for so long that accepting help now felt as though I were betraying the person I’d become.

But another part of me, a small but vocal part, begged to accept his aid. Though I had much to recommend me in terms of my teaching ability, I had little knowledge of what it would take to actually make my school a reality. William possessed that knowledge, as well as connections and guidance that could prove invaluable.

“I would be glad of your help,” I finally said, meeting his eyes. “However much you are willing to offer.”

“Good,” he said. “I will start thinking of where we should begin.”

Our conversation turned to other topics as we guided our horses slowly among the thickets of trees and flowering shrubs. I lost our bearing once we left the ruins, and I was uncertain how William could know where we were; every direction looked the same to me. The sun was just beginning to descend in the west, casting long shadows behind us as we broke through a stand of alder trees to see the northern walls of Havenfield.

“I am glad one of us knew where we were,” I said. “I’d not imagined it would be so easy to lose sight of such a building.”

“We had not even gone far,” William said, shaking his head. “Remind me to not let you out on your own.” He observed me as our horses walked side

by side. “How confident are you feeling in your riding abilities?”

“To be honest, I never thought to feel so at ease on horseback.” I patted Miranda’s neck, and she tossed her mane in response.

“Are you up for a bit of a run?”

I inhaled sharply, glancing down to where my hands held the reins, nerves getting the best of me. “I don’t know.”

But I did know. I was enjoying our slow walk, but I knew there was so much more I’d yet to experience. I looked back up at him. “Yes, let’s.”

He nodded ahead of us. “Hold on, then.”

Stowaway lurched forward into a trot at William’s urging. Miranda quickened her step to match the new pace, and I jolted briefly before righting my balance. This new gait was not so smooth, and I put more weight on my left foot in its stirrup, allowing me to rise and fall more easily with the movement.

William looked back. “Are you ready?” he asked.

I nodded.

And with a kick of William’s heels, Stowaway bounded away, his hooves flashing in the sunlight, William leaning low. Miranda seemed to skip a step. My heart was in my throat—and then we were away, chasing after the gray stallion in a full gallop.

Wind whipped at my hair and riding hat, exhilaration coursing through my veins. I copied William’s stance and leaned low over my saddle. Miranda and I soared across the ground, her feet not even appearing to touch the earth. William glanced back to check on me every few seconds, but I held to the saddle and reins, keeping my balance easily. The scenery flashed by, and hoofbeats thundered in my ears, and I could not help but laugh in pure elation.

And then William was pulling back on his reins, slowing his stallion, though the horse still surged against his bridle. I tugged on my reins as well, but Miranda was already slowing. I pulled myself back to sit straight again as we came to a walk, and I attempted to fill my lungs. I'd forgotten to breathe. The stables were directly before us, and I glanced back to see how far we had come.

William met my gaze as I turned back. His face was more alive than I had ever seen it, eyes dancing with delight, grinning widely. His hair, normally so neatly arranged, was tousled and windswept. His eyebrows raised in expectation. "And what do you say to that?"

I tried to slow my rapid breathing, though I couldn't say if it was from the ride or from how handsome William looked at that moment. "It was tolerable," I finally managed. "I suppose."

But my beaming face told him otherwise. "You loved it," he said. "No denying it."

I only shook my head. "I never imagined it could feel like that." I held a hand to my heart, where it pumped furiously. "I do not know if my heart will ever return to normal."

"I should hope not," he murmured, and I stared down at the reins, trying desperately not to wonder what he meant.

* * *

I hurried into my room a few minutes later. Our ride had lasted longer than I'd thought, and we were expected for dinner in just a short while. Emma waited for me, laying out my dress on the bed.

"Miss, your hair!" she exclaimed.

I glanced into the mirror and burst out laughing. My hair was wild; strands were pulled loose from their pins, framing my face and floating in every direction.

“I am a right mess,” I said as I unbuttoned my riding jacket and handed it to her. “You will have to work your magic to sort me out before dinner.”

She scolded me as I changed, which only made me laugh more, then spent a good twenty minutes removing my pins and attempting to rearrange my hair as best she could.

“That will have to do.” She gave a sigh and stepped back from where I sat before the vanity. My chestnut locks still had an element of disarray to them but were presentable. My normally pale cheeks had a tinge of color. “Now hurry down. You’re late.”

I stepped into the parlor a minute later. Aunt Lydia gave a disdainful sniff at my tardiness, but I received cheerful greetings from Lady Rowley and Mr. Woodward, all seated together. I thought I would be the last to arrive, but William and Eliza had yet to appear.

I moved to the window, feeling too restless to sit. I looked out over the lawn in the direction from which William and I had made our run, relishing the memory of the wind in my face.

The door opened, and William stepped in. He caught my eye, and after exchanging greetings with the other three—Aunt Lydia hadn’t dared sniff at him—he came directly toward me. He had done a much better job of taming his disheveled hair, and his eyes inspected me as he came to stand by my side.

“Oh, this will never do,” he said, clasping his hands behind him.

I touched my hair. “What do you mean?” My voice was a bit defensive. I’d not had time to fix myself up any better.

“You are practically glowing.” He leaned his head closer and lowered his voice. “If you mean to keep your grandmother in the dark about our riding, it would help to look a little less enchanting.”

My face burned, and I couldn’t seem to make myself meet his eyes. Luck was with me, as Eliza entered at that moment, and I was saved from a

response as we went in to dinner.

Afterward, as we gathered in the drawing room for the evening, I seated myself beside Eliza, not trusting myself to be too near William. My emotions were still in a riot after our ride, and I needed a distraction.

“Eliza,” I started as I smoothed my skirts. Even as I tried to ignore him, I was fully aware that William stood beside the mantel, engaging Mr. Woodward in conversation. “How far a walk is it to Millbury? I hoped to run a few errands.”

“Oh, not two miles. Though you can certainly take the carriage and be there in half the time.” Her face brightened. “We should go together, make an outing of it.”

“I should like that. Shall we invite Lady Rowley and your mother?” I was feeling gracious in my good humor.

Lady Rowley accepted immediately, exclaiming that of course we should have the carriage. Aunt Lydia also accepted, albeit with less enthusiasm. Glad to have something to occupy my time the next day, I allowed myself another glance at William, across the room. He was already watching me, and as our eyes met, he smiled, slow and warm, and the flame in my chest flared alarmingly.

Chapter Thirteen

DEAR PAPA,

It is decidedly strange that I have come to feel so comfortable in a place I arrived at but a fortnight ago. Havenfield is unlike anywhere I ever lived before, and not just for its grandness. There is an easy calm to every day, a contentedness I have not felt since you went to sea again.

This calm is only overshadowed by my missing you and wanting you here. I wish you could write me.

Your very favorite daughter,

Juliana

* * *

It rained for the next two days, though *rained* was too tame a word. The sky fairly howled as it sent down torrents of water and enormous gusts of wind damaged outbuildings and knocked down tree branches. A few of the nearby tenants' homes flooded, and William and Mr. Brooks tended to the crisis, arranging for the tenants to live elsewhere for the duration of the storm, overseeing the removal of livestock from flooded fields, and attempting to save whatever equipment and possessions they could.

The storm made the roads impassable, delaying our trip into town. After the excitement of my last riding lesson, I found being trapped indoors a monumental chore, especially with William gone from the house. He left each morning before sunrise and did not return until well into the night. I had not seen him since the evening of our ride and could not account for the strange edginess that pervaded my body the longer I went without having a glimpse of him.

But I was finally able to slip into the library and was pleased to find a near treasure trove of books that intrigued me. My grandfather's predecessors

were quite well rounded in their reading, and I eagerly browsed the shelves that related to my preferred fields of study: classics, history, and politics. I also made certain to select books on subjects I was less familiar with: Latin, Greek, mathematics, philosophy, and the like. If I was to head my own school, I needed to have at least a basic grasp of all that was being taught there.

I managed to secrete a towering stack of books to my room, and during those two days of rain, I spent every spare moment poring over them. Why I was still so determined to hide my plans for a school, I could not say. Though William had responded better than I could have hoped for and I had certainly grown closer to my family, doubt and hesitation still clouded my thoughts whenever they turned to my future. There were still so many specifics to work out and issues to solve that panic often overtook anticipation. I distracted myself with another book rather than dwell on what obstacles still remained.

As much as I enjoyed my studying, I was more than happy to put it aside when I received letters from Sophie, Charlotte, and Daniel on the second day of rain. Sophie, with her usual insightfulness, hinted that she knew I was not telling her the whole truth in my last letter but did not press me, instead recounting to me an amusing story about Mrs. Seymour and a stray cat that had somehow made its way into her drawing room. The culprits did not remain a secret for long, as Charlotte and Daniel told me in their individual letters that they'd found the cat outside in the servants' courtyard and had thought it would be terribly amusing to leave it as a surprise for their mother. To say she was not pleased was an understatement. I laughed out loud at their description of her shriek and missed them all more than ever.

The third morning after the storm began, the rain finally let up, slowing to a drizzle before stopping outright. Though the sky remained overcast, clouds hanging low, the sun made feeble attempts to peek through, and Lady Rowley declared herself entirely bored of the house. After lunch—from which William and Mr. Brooks were still absent—we took the closed coach and started for Millbury. Even Aunt Lydia looked glad at the chance to escape the house for a few hours.

“Now, what errands do you have?” Eliza asked me. She sat beside me while Lady Rowley and Aunt Lydia sat facing us across the coach.

“I hoped to pick up some lace or ribbon,” I answered. “And perhaps look at a new pair of boots.” Mine were embarrassingly worn, and I had found a new hole in one the day after my ride with William. I currently had only a few pounds to my name that I was willing to part with, but half-boots were hardly something I could do without.

“What are you using the lace for?”

“Just trimming my ivory gown,” I said. “I hoped to dress it up for the ball.”

“Why do you not order a new gown?” she suggested. “I know Mrs. Notley was expecting a new shipment of fabric. I am sure she will have something suitable.”

I picked at a thread in my shawl, avoiding her gaze. “Oh, I am certain if I find the right lace, my ivory will do just as well.”

“But it is such fun to pick a new pattern and fabric. I had a new one made only last month, but I would dearly love to find something for you.”

The sincerity and enthusiasm in her voice made me waver. I could well imagine a gown, beautifully new and created just for me. Mama had sewn me dresses when I was a girl, and I could still remember the swish of my skirts about my ankles as I spun, entranced by the flow and crisp cleanness of the fabric.

I bit my cheek. Just over a fortnight still remained in my visit to Havenfield, after which I would receive my inheritance. A new gown would not make a dent in my finances then. An image flashed through my mind, that of Miss Radcliff’s pitying gaze at the musicale when she had seen my dress. If I appeared at the ball in something new, perhaps it would do away with the condescending smile on her face.

And I couldn't help but imagine what William might think to see me in something other than my threadbare dresses and borrowed riding habit.

"Perhaps," I said carefully, trying to mask my sudden eagerness, "we might take a look about the shop. To see if anything takes my fancy."

Inwardly, I was counting what I had in my reticule. I hadn't planned on purchasing a gown today; did I have enough to cover the cost? Perhaps a payment to start the gown, and I could pay the rest upon completion.

"Juliana," Lady Rowley said, eyes bright. "If you are wishing for a new gown, I would like nothing more than to purchase one for you."

My mouth parted slightly. "Oh, no, I would never presume that of you. I have the funds, I assure you."

She waved me off. "This has little to do with whether or not you possess the money. As your grandmother, I insist you allow me this indulgence."

"I . . ." I shook my head. I should have anticipated my grandmother's offer. Of course she would want to pay for my gown. "I am very grateful, but I would prefer to make my own purchase."

A flash of hurt crossed her features. Now I'd gone and injured her feelings. How could I explain? Since I'd arrived at Havenfield, my every need had been met. I had more spare time than I'd ever imagined and enjoyed the comfort and security that came with being a member of the Rowley family. But with that comfort came complacency. I hurriedly spoke on, attempting to find the words to smooth over our exchange. "I simply . . ." I paused. "I simply am accustomed to paying my own way, solving my own troubles. It does not mean I do not appreciate your offer. I do very much. But I'm afraid I am far too attached to my independence." I forced my gaze back to Lady Rowley's face.

She watched me closely, and then her face softened. "An unusual sentiment, indeed," she said. "One I can admire, even if I do not entirely understand it. Very well; I shall yield. But only on the condition that you

allow me to gift you a pair of gloves. Surely you cannot protest over such a small purchase.”

I could not seem to refuse her again. “I shall swallow any such protests on your behalf.”

Eliza clapped her hands in excitement, launching into a discussion on whether ruffled or capped sleeves would flatter me more. But the most surprising response was Aunt Lydia’s. She regarded me not with the cool disdain I’d grown used to but with a thoughtfulness I had not realized her capable of.

We arrived in Millbury a few minutes later. The road was still a muddy quagmire, but after such a long storm, we were not the only ones willing to venture out. Carriages and gigs lined the wide cobblestone street, and there was a constant stream of people entering shops and visiting with neighbors. The coach came to a stop outside the modiste’s shop, and the coachman helped each of us down the step and safely inside without too much of a mess.

The shop was a lovely assortment of organized shelves of fabric and spools of ribbon, displays showing a variety of lace, feathers, and other notions and trimmings. Though the street outside the shop bustled with activity, it was quiet inside. The wide counter at the back of the room was unattended as I entered.

“Over here, Juliana!” Eliza waved me over to a shelf of elegant fabrics—silk and chenille and the softest muslin.

A light-blue silk caught my eye immediately. I fingered it, the smooth surface catching on my skin. I’d never had a dress made of such a fabric before, and my excitement over our errand grew.

The frugal governess in me demanded to at least know the price of the fabric before deciding: a silk dress would come at a heavy cost. Leaving Eliza, Lady Rowley, and Aunt Lydia, who were still debating over the other bolts of fabric, I carried the blue silk to the counter that stood empty. A door stood slightly ajar behind it.

“Hello?” I called, and movement came from above my head as someone crossed the upstairs room and hurried down the stairs.

A moment later, a middle-aged woman, whose dark hair was just beginning to gray, appeared in the doorway. “I am terribly sorry,” she said as she hurried to the counter. “I’d not heard anyone come in.”

Her attentive expression suddenly soured as she took me in. Her critical eyes found every mended hole in my dress, the loose threads in my shawl, and the limpness in my bonnet that I’d had for nearly three years now.

I tried to ignore her obvious distaste for my appearance. “I wondered if you could tell me the price of this silk?”

She glanced down at the bolt of fabric I’d laid on the counter and gave a disbelieving huff. “Far more than you can afford, I’ll safely bet.”

I narrowed my eyes. I understood very clearly I did not look like the most prosperous customer, but must she be so appallingly rude?

“Pardon me.” Lady Rowley’s voice, hard and challenging, carried from behind me as she crossed the room. I’d never seen my grandmother angry before. Her normally bright blue eyes darkened, and her lips pressed so tightly together that they nearly vanished altogether.

The woman looked over my shoulder, her eyes widening. “My dear Lady Rowley, I’d not seen you there! How kind of you to visit my shop again.”

My grandmother came to stand beside me and rested her hand on top of the blue silk. “Mrs. Notley, my granddaughter asked you the price of this fabric, and I would ask that you attempt your answer again.”

Despite the tenseness of the situation, I could barely hide my amusement at the look on Mrs. Notley’s face. Her mouth gaped, and she glanced almost frantically between the two of us. “Your granddaughter?” she stammered. “I did not . . . That is to say, if I’d known, I would never have—” She finally swallowed and named the price, after which Lady Rowley picked up the fabric and swept back to Eliza and Aunt Lydia without another word. I

trailed behind her, peeking back at Mrs. Notley, who was pale and utterly terrified.

“I am sorry, Juliana,” Lady Rowley breathed, face still tight with anger. “I would leave now, but this is the only shop that can finish a dress in time for the ball.” She shot an irritated look back at the shopkeeper, who pretended to straighten her displays along the counter. “And she is rather good, though she would do better to practice her manners as much as her sewing.”

“It is nothing,” I said. She cast me an unbelieving look, which I returned with as sincere an expression as I could manage. “Truly.”

While I was bothered by Mrs. Notley’s treatment, it did not compare to my feeling of comfort in the wake of my grandmother’s defense.

We spent the better part of an hour looking through all the fabrics and the latest dress patterns Mrs. Notley had just received from London. In the end, I selected the light-blue silk that had originally caught my attention but left the choice of the pattern up to my three companions, who knew far better than I the current fashions.

Mrs. Notley took my measurements and spoke hardly a word, skirting about me like a frightened mouse. I insisted on paying her directly for her services, though she protested weakly as she shot a wary glance at Lady Rowley. It gave me no small pleasure to count out the exact amount from my reticule, setting the coins on the counter with a satisfying clink.

We next visited a neighboring shop filled with quite a stunning variety of gloves, fans, and silk stockings. Lady Rowley insisted I model several pairs of long evening gloves before deciding on a pair I could not distinguish in the slightest from any of the others. But she seemed terribly pleased with the purchase, so I smiled and thanked her.

Eliza and I parted from Lady Rowley and Aunt Lydia after that, walking to the shoemakers while they stopped to chat with an acquaintance outside the milliner’s.

The sun finally decided to make its full appearance, and I tipped back my head for a moment to bask in its warmth on my cheeks and neck. When I looked back down, it was just in time to see Mr. Fitzroy step out of the tailor's shop ahead of us. He saw me in the same moment, and my stomach sank.

"Miss Ashbourne, Miss Woodward! What a pleasure to see you both."

He met us as we approached, offering a sharp bow, black hair shining in the sunlight. We bobbed curtsies and echoed his greeting, though far less eagerly.

"And what draws such lovely ladies into town today?" Though he addressed us both, he looked at me. Why did he part his lips so widely when he smiled? It felt as though he bared his teeth at me.

"Only a few errands," I said, forcing a pleasant expression on my face. "And I daresay neither of us could stand being cooped up in the house a minute longer."

I glanced at Eliza, but she ducked her head, shyness overcoming her. I would not have much help from her in this conversation.

"Oh, I feel precisely the same," Mr. Fitzroy said. "I live to be out of doors, in the freshness and beauty of nature."

I doubted his statement was truthful in the least. With his perfectly shined boots, bright-blue waistcoat, and ornately knotted cravat, he toed the line of being a dandy.

"I planned to call on you later today," he said as he stepped closer and gave me a meaningful look. "You have saved me the trouble."

"Oh." I fiddled with the reticule hanging from my wrist.

If he noticed the awkwardness of my response, he did not show it. "Where are you off to next?"

Eliza made a valiant attempt to speak, her voice hardly above a whisper. “The shoemaker’s.”

He turned, gesturing in the direction we’d been walking. “Might I walk with you?”

I didn’t know if I’d ever wanted anything less in my life, but how could I refuse him? Especially as a short walk through town might save me from a visit in the near future. And at least here I had Eliza.

I nodded, and his dark eyes brightened. My experience with romance was laughable, but I knew Mr. Fitzroy was attempting to court me, and I had not a clue how to respond. On the one hand, it was almost flattering that an eligible young man, however awkward his appearance and behavior might be, was interested in me, the ill-mannered, too-tall governess that I was.

On the other hand . . . well, what was not on the other hand? First of all, I had no intention of remaining in this town for more than another fortnight. And though Mr. Fitzroy was amiable enough, I had spent enough time with him to know that what I felt toward him was nothing more than a vague tolerance. And then, of course, there was the fact that I could not banish a certain teasing, blue-eyed gentleman from my mind.

A certain teasing, blue-eyed gentleman who at that very moment appeared on the cobblestone road to my right, mounted atop his gray stallion and looking much worse for the wear. Though William still sat up straight on his mount, his Hessians were coated in thick mud, and it seemed as though he hadn’t seen his bed in days. Dark circles hung under his normally bright eyes, now dull and unanimated, and a shadow of stubble covered his jaw. Mr. Brooks rode at his side, appearing much the same.

Neither of them noticed us, and before I stopped to think, my voice called out of its own accord, my arm raising to wave at them. “Mr. Rowley! Mr. Brooks!”

William’s eyes found mine in an instant, and his face lightened for a moment before he noticed whom I stood beside. He raised his eyebrows but

maneuvered his horse around a passing carriage, Mr. Brooks following. They dismounted and stepped onto the boarded sidewalk.

“Eliza, Miss Ashbourne,” William said, still holding Stowaway’s reins. “I’d not thought to see you here. The roads are barely passable, even on horseback. Did you have much trouble with the coach?”

I had not seen him in nearly three days, and in that time, I’d almost managed to convince myself that my feelings toward him were solely platonic. The uneven rhythm of my heart as his eyes met mine seemed to suggest otherwise. I made to respond, but Mr. Fitzroy was quicker.

“Oh, the roads are not so terrible,” he said, indifferent to William’s concern. “I managed my curricle quite nicely.”

William only clasped his hands behind his back, shooting me a curious glance. “Indeed? You must be quite the accomplished whip.”

Mr. Fitzroy pulled back his shoulders. “I daresay I might claim it, though I dabble in a few different hobbies.”

“I’m certain you do,” William said. Though his tone was pleasant, his words were filled with meaning, and Mr. Fitzroy narrowed his eyes. Was there some other conversation taking place than the one I was hearing?

Mr. Fitzroy cleared his throat, voice tight as he spoke on. “I was just offering to walk Miss Ashbourne and Miss Woodward to the shoemaker’s.”

“Oh.” William’s gaze turned back to me, questioning. I knew he was asking if I needed a rescue. I shook my head just an inch. He had enough to contend with already. Mr. Fitzroy was my problem.

We were interrupted by the arrival of Lady Rowley and Aunt Lydia, who had caught up to us. There was a flurry as each party exchanged greetings, and under the guise of moving out of the way of a passing gentleman, I managed to place myself at William’s side, our arms nearly touching. At this closer proximity, his exhaustion became more apparent. His forehead was creased with anxiety, his mouth set in a straight line. I forced my eyes

from his face, watching Eliza and Mr. Brooks converse while Lady Rowley and Aunt Lydia spoke with Mr. Fitzroy.

“Are you well?” I asked softly, not wishing to be overheard.

He tilted his head. “I am the very picture of health. Why do you ask?”

He knew very well how he looked. “You only look as though you were wrestling with the pigs.”

“And if I had?” His tired eyes held a spark of his normal teasing, encouraging me.

“I daresay it sounds like good fun, and I am disappointed to have been left out.”

He chuckled, though the shadow did not lift from his face entirely.

“Earnestly though,” I said as I stared at the tips of my boots, where they peeked out from the edge of my skirt. “I have not seen you for days. And I would hate to insinuate you look anything less than polished, but I—”

“Is that a touch of concern I sense in your voice?”

I turned my eyes heavenward. “Do pretend for a moment that you are not the most irritating man alive and answer the question.”

He grinned, and I was glad to see the lines in his brow relax and smooth as he observed me. “I am well. Tired, but well. We only stopped into town for a bite to eat before heading back to the southern farms. There is still much damage from the storm to assess.”

I was about to ask him what damages he’d already seen when Mr. Fitzroy appeared at my side. I nearly jumped at his sudden arrival.

“Miss Ashbourne,” he said, his eyes narrowed at William. “We ought to hurry on to the shoemaker’s. It looks as though it might rain again.”

He was right, to my surprise. The sun that had bathed the town only minutes before had receded once again behind the thick clouds.

“We shall find the coach and meet you there,” Lady Rowley said, offering me a cryptic look before turning and walking back the way she’d come, Aunt Lydia at her side.

I forced a nod at Mr. Fitzroy. “Of course.”

Eliza still conversed with Mr. Brooks, and Mr. Fitzroy turned to see if she was ready. I took a step after him, but William caught my arm, stopping me. I met his eyes, his face very close to mine, and I forgot how to breathe for a brief moment.

“Meet me in my study tomorrow afternoon,” he said in a low voice.

“Your study?”

My confusion must have been obvious. “Just come,” he said with a hint of mystery as he stepped back.

Mr. Fitzroy and Eliza stood a few steps away, waiting for me, and I hurried to them. As we set off down the sidewalk, Mr. Fitzroy rambled on about a new watch fob he’d purchased that day. I told myself that it was nothing, that William was only a friend. But that excuse grew increasingly unbelievable with every step I took, feeling the force of his gaze on my back.

* * *

“This is incredible,” I breathed, staring at the paper I held in my hand. “How did you even find the time to come up with any of this?”

William watched me with a smile. We sat side by side behind his desk, the afternoon sunlight streaming over us from the window to my right. The paper I read was a cost analysis of what I could expect to pay monthly for my school, including maids and cooks and manservants, food, and the lease, if I didn’t purchase a property outright.

“It’s nothing detailed,” William said, though he looked pleased at my response. “I only hoped to give you a basic idea of your costs. I haven’t yet included teachers, since I was uncertain how many you thought to employ.”

“Oh, at least three or four,” I answered, setting the paper down among the others on his desk. “I want the greatest variety of subjects possible. I myself thought to teach history, reading, and writing, but I would obviously need to hire teachers with more experience in language, philosophy, mathematics, and the like.”

He made a quick notation on the paper, his handwriting bold and strong. “Excellent. That gives me a much better idea. Now let us discuss the number of students, tuition, and perhaps what you imagined in terms of location and property.”

He looked up at me expectantly, his pen still hovering over the page.

“I thought London for location.”

“Naturally,” he said. “Any particular neighborhood?”

“Nothing that immediately comes to mind. Somewhere respectable but not overly stuffy. Perhaps near a park or if the property had a garden?”

He scrawled my thoughts onto the page. “In order to balance the costs of the staff and the lease, I would say you will need at least a dozen students paying a reasonable tuition. With two to a room, that is six bedchambers, as well as servants’ quarters and rooms for the teachers. And chambers for the headmistress, of course.” He shot me a pointed look.

I grimaced. “A pretentious title if I’ve ever heard one. I shall have to think of something less intimidating.”

“You don’t wish to strike fear into the hearts of all your young, impressionable students?”

I pretended serious thought. “I suppose a little fear would be helpful. Only to keep them in line, of course.”

“Of course,” he agreed with a wink. “Now, a property of that size will be costly, especially if you want a reputable neighborhood. My recommendation to you would be to find a place to lease for the time being and look into purchasing outright once you establish yourself more fully. That way if you find demand higher or lower than you imagine, it will be much easier to simply find a new location to lease than to sell.”

I nodded as he spoke. His logic was sound, and I found myself agreeing with his every word almost as soon as he spoke it. He may have denied any kind of expertise in the world of business, but it was obviously only modesty at play.

“I’ve a man of business who has excellent connections with estate and land sales within London. With your permission, I will write to him and ask him to inquire on any property matching your needs.”

My stomach twisted. It was one thing to talk of my school with William, a friend and now a confidante, but to send a letter inquiring about possible properties was an entirely different idea altogether.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “It’s only . . . well, I’ve been dreaming of this school for such a long time, and to have any part of it made into reality is honestly quite terrifying.”

William set down his pen and turned in his chair to face me. He regarded me, eyes thoughtful. “I wish there were something I could say to take away your anxiety,” he said. “But there is not. That is the nature of beginning a new enterprise. The uncertainty, the unknown, the risk.”

“If you are trying to reassure me,” I said, “you are doing a terrible job of it.”

He grinned. “You did not let me finish. I meant to say that in my opinion, success is most often based on determination, hard work, and a bit of luck, all of which you seem to have in spades.”

“You think me lucky?” Aside from my inheritance, I could not say that I thought myself to have the best of fortunes.

“Oh, no,” he said with a wave of his hand. “You have terrible luck. I was referring to me.”

“You shall provide the luck I need, then?”

“But of course,” he said, picking up his pen. “I am just about the most fortunate man alive. I have plenty to spare. Now, what do you say? Shall I write Mr. Smith?”

I took a deep breath and clasped my hands in my lap. This was no time to be afraid; this was the time to take a leap of faith.

And my faith rested almost entirely on the man who now looked at me with expectation as the silence stretched between us.

“Yes,” I finally said, a surge of confidence breaking over me. “Yes, please do.”

We spent another hour discussing the various tasks that starting a school would entail. Once we had a response from William’s man of business, I would review the various properties and select one. Then I would need to hire servants and find teachers who would be willing to educate girls in such an untraditional manner. And then there were the multitude of smaller undertakings, such as furnishing the rooms, writing and approving lesson plans, and the not-so-simple chore of spreading the word about my school.

William only shook his head when I voiced my last concern to him.

“That should be the least of your worries. You need only mention your school to Lady Rowley and you will have students lined up at your doors. She has quite the influence among the *ton*.”

“I could never expect her to do that,” I said, startled at his suggestion. “She has already done so much for me.”

“And I would wager you’ve only brushed the surface of your grandmother’s generosity.” He set down his pen once again and turned to

look at me. “You had better not leave her out of this, or you’ll never hear the end of it.”

I wanted to argue, but he was right. Lady Rowley would be terribly hurt if I didn’t allow her to help me, and if I was being perfectly honest, I knew her influence could make a world of difference.

Our conversation soon wandered away from business, our topics ranging from childhood memories to our favorite books to everything between. I learned the story behind the long scar on his right hand—a fish hook when he was fourteen—and he listened as I told him of my first day as a governess, when Daniel and Charlotte had been so afraid of me that they had not spoken a word the entire day.

“By dinner, I was nearly convinced they were both mutes,” I said. I propped my chin on my right hand, my elbow resting on William’s desk, and I turned my head to look at him where he sat beside me. “Apparently, their previous governess was a beastly woman who had thought silence the mark of an obedient child. It took a long while, weeks even, before they would talk to me. And then the trouble was how to get them to stop again.”

William leaned back comfortably in his chair. “I have no doubt they adore you.”

“And I adore them,” I said wistfully.

“Do you miss them?”

“Very much.” I focused my gaze above his shoulder. Through the wide window, the landscape was alive with the breeze rustling the grass and trees. “And I don’t know if I shall ever see them again.”

“Why would you not?”

His voice was full of curiosity, and I was suddenly aware of how quickly our conversation had gone wayward. I sat back up straight in my chair. What could I tell him?

“Mrs. Seymour and I did not get on very well,” I said carefully. “To be perfectly candid, she dismissed me only days before I arrived here.” I cringed internally, not knowing what response to expect from him.

“She dismissed you?” William sat forward, a touch of indignation in his eyes. “Whatever for?”

I lifted one shoulder in a shrug. “A difference of opinion. I thought Charlotte ought to be properly educated rather than simply primed for marriage, and Mrs. Seymour did not approve. We had quite the dramatic parting, I assure you.”

“I would have liked to see that.” He studied me closely. “But surely there must be a way to see them again if you truly love them so much.”

I shook my head. “I’m afraid there is more standing in the way than my quarrel with Mrs. Seymour.”

“What is it, then?”

I gulped and looked down at my hands clasped so tightly my fingertips turned red. Mr. Seymour and his inappropriate attentions to me were the very last subject I wished to discuss with William. I relaxed my grip, rubbing my fingers together.

He waited expectantly, but I only sighed. “I don’t wish to speak of it right now.”

I thought that he might press me, but he nodded, leaning back again in his chair with an unsatisfied frown. Though William had managed to pry many of my secrets from me, this was one I would not give over willingly.

Chapter Fourteen

WILLIAM AND I SPENT EVERY afternoon together after that, day after day, until each one blended into the next, an exhilarating mixture of sunshine, laughter, and conversation. We continued our riding lessons, and neither of us thought to mention it when our three lessons came and went. We spent even more time discussing my school—in his study, on our walks in the garden, and in the evenings gathered about the fireplace.

Each day, when I woke to the barest glimmer of sun peeking through my window, I counted how many days remained in my visit. A fortnight soon turned to ten days, then eight, then five. And each day, I viewed my approaching departure with increased anxiety. William and I created detailed plans for my school, and I was certain in time I could put those plans into action. But the thought did not give me a great deal of comfort, in view of my more immediate problems. What would I do when I returned to London? Where would I live? I had no family, no one to take me in. An unmarried woman living alone, even temporarily, was a very precarious situation.

Time and again I toyed with the idea of extending my visit at Havenfield. My grandmother would surely be thrilled if I decided to stay, and I could imagine Eliza's feelings to be similar. And William . . . he would be pleased, no doubt.

I knew that part of my desire to stay was born from fear, fear of being on my own once more, fear of failing in the only real aspiration I'd ever had. What if I put all my plans into action, leased a property, hired teachers, furnished schoolrooms . . . and no one came? Was there really enough demand for a proper female education that I could stake my inheritance on it? And was I prepared for the demands of owning my own school? How could I, a nineteen-year-old woman with little in the way of worldly experience, expect to manage such a venture?

William seemed to sense my fears. Through our careful planning and budgeting, he soothed my worries, proposing solutions to problems I never

voiced, buoying me up with his confidence and optimism. But what would I do once I left Havenfield and no longer had William to rely upon?

The more time I spent with William, the more I came to realize it was not just his steadiness I would miss. I would miss *him*—his good humor, his insights, his unique way of drawing me out and setting me at ease. There was no man like William in London, of that I was sure. The thought of not being able to see him every day . . . Suffice it to say, I did not like to ponder it much because my stomach tended to twist into an uncomfortable knot.

If my time spent with him made me doubt my intentions to leave at the end of my month-long visit, my continued visits from Mr. Fitzroy had the opposite effect. He called at Havenfield every few days, and I came to dread the time he spent with us ladies in the morning room. The longer I spent with him, the more I wished for my month to be up so I would never have to sit through another conversation with him again. His clear interest in me was disconcerting, and I was at a loss as to how to proceed.

“What on earth do women do in a case like this?” I asked Eliza one morning at breakfast when it was just the two of us. We were seated side by side at the long dining table, picking leisurely at our plates of fruit and pastries. “I do not wish to encourage his affections, but neither do I want to be rude.”

Her eyes teased me. “Oh dear, to be courted by an eligible bachelor must be terribly trying.”

“Your irony is noted,” I said dryly. “But it hardly solves my problem. Come now, you’ve had a Season in London. How do you fend off unwanted suitors?”

She gave a little laugh. “I was never so much in demand as that.”

I did not believe her for a second. Even with her shyness, she was a beauty, one with a sizable dowry. And in the past few weeks, I’d come to learn she was the gentlest, kindest girl to ever exist. She was surely much sought after.

I raised one eyebrow to let her know I was skeptical of her claim.

She shook her head at my look. “I am in earnest! I am far too timid to attract any amount of gentlemen callers, and I quite prefer it that way. It is far more fun to observe you and your suitors.”

“*Suitor*,” I corrected before continuing. “But surely you hope to marry?” Marriage had never been terribly high on my to-do list. Even as a young girl at school, I had never been keen on romance. I knew my future was likely that of a spinster; as a governess, there were not many opportunities to meet marriageable men. Though now my future was not so settled as it once had been. Perhaps there was—

I shook myself mentally. I should not allow my thoughts to even wander that road. I turned my attention back to Eliza. For her, with her connections and status, marriage was an almost certainty.

She thought on the question, sipping her tea and settling her cup back in its saucer before answering. “If the right man were to come along, I suppose.”

It was my turn to tease my cousin. “Eliza, I do believe you are a romantic.”

She offered a ladylike shrug, cheeks pink. “If one must marry, would it not be better to marry for love?”

I would have liked to continue the conversation, but at that moment, Mr. Brooks popped his head into the breakfast room in search of Lady Rowley. Eliza’s already pink face turned a deep red, and she changed the subject quickly.

* * *

“There you are.”

I had just wandered inside from the garden, the heat of the early afternoon finally driving me inside in search of cooler air. I turned at the sound of William’s voice.

“I looked all over for you,” he said as he strode toward me from the direction of his study. His eyes were bright, and he held a sheet of paper in his right hand.

“If I’d known that, I would have found a better hiding place,” I said.

“Now is hardly the time for bantering,” he said with mock solemnity. “Though I know how much you enjoy it.”

I waved my hand at him. “Go on, then. Tell me your news.”

“Actually, it is *your* news.”

“My news?”

He handed me the paper, and I examined it as he spoke. “My man of business, Mr. Smith, has sent a list of properties he thinks would match the needs of your school best. He lists the sizes and locations of each property, their lease, and any pertinent details you might need.”

The letter was extensive. It filled both sides of the paper in a clear, firm hand. There must have been a dozen properties listed, each more promising than the last.

Each more intimidating and tangible than the last.

“This is—” My voice broke off. The letter shook slightly in my hand. “Well, this is very real, isn’t it?”

I felt a fool in the next instant. What a ridiculous thing to say. I should appear calm, collected, decisive. Not shaking and squeaking like a cornered mouse.

William regarded me for a moment before he took the letter back from me.

“I was reading that,” I protested.

“You will have plenty of time to read this later,” he said, tucking it inside his jacket. “For now, I think we ought to take advantage of what daylight

remains to us and go for a ride.”

I knew he was attempting to distract me from the realities of what I faced, but I did not care. At the moment, with anxiety filling my chest at the mere thought of that letter, I was all too eager to forget my cares in wind and thudding hooves.

“All right, then,” I agreed. “Shall we change and meet at the stables?”

“We really ought to see about purchasing you a habit of your own,” William said, gesturing for me to walk with him toward the grand staircase at the front of the house. “I have no doubt I’ve converted you to be a rider for life.”

“You are very sure of yourself,” I said. “After how our first lesson went, I would suppose you to be less confident.”

“Ah, but I’ve surely made up for that mishap by now. And I am not entirely blind. Your smile never leaves your face when we ride.”

He was certainly correct in that, though he didn’t know it had more to do with his company than it did my enjoyment of being on horseback.

We were very near the wide front doors, and as we approached, we were met by the sounds of jangling harnesses and wheels crunching on gravel. A carriage pulled past the windows framing the door, and William grabbed my arm, pulling me to a halt.

“Who is it?” I asked, peering around him, but we were too far down the hallway for me to see.

Mr. Banfield, the butler, strode to the door from the direction of the parlor, not noticing us as he pulled the door open. He stepped outside, and as he bowed, I caught my first glimpse of our visitors.

Miss Radcliff stepped down from the carriage, dark ringlets arranged into a perfect coiffure atop her head. Mrs. Radcliff followed her, and at Mr. Banfield’s invitation, they started up the steps to the front door. My

anticipation for our ride deflated immediately. I grimaced at the idea of spending any amount of time with Miss Radcliff and her pointed remarks.

A hand slipped into mine, warm and strong. I started, meeting William's mischievous eyes.

"Run," William whispered in my ear, and he tugged me back down the hallway. A grin blossomed on my lips, and we dashed to the nearest door, our steps nearly in time. William pulled it open and hurried me inside before closing the door behind us, leaving us in darkness. We breathed hard, leaning against the closed doors. I could not make out what room we stood in, the details of the space disappearing into the shadows. We were just in time; the sounds of Miss Radcliff's honeyed voice rang in the hallway as she stepped through the front door.

"Is Mr. Rowley at home? I did so hope to see him, though, of course, we would be pleased with Lady Rowley's or the Woodward's company."

"Yes," Mr. Banfield said with the slightest touch of irritation. "I believe he is in his study. Shall I inform him of your visit?"

"If you will." Miss Radcliff's voice was dismissive as she made her way to the parlor, her footsteps quick and confident in the quiet of the hall, her mother following behind her.

"I wonder that she makes no mention of me," I whispered to William. We stood facing each other, our ears pressed against the door as we listened to the exchange.

One side of his mouth pulled up crookedly. "I do not think you endeared yourself to her on our ill-fated walk." He also whispered, and his quiet tone caused a shiver to race over my skin. "Miss Radcliff is rather used to getting what she desires, and you have proven to be an unforeseen complication, I have no doubt."

His eyes were lit from the sun filtering through the crack between the doors, and he looked at me with such meaning that my heart tripped. If I

had understood Eliza correctly, what Miss Radcliff desired was William. Did that mean she considered me competition? *Was I competition?*

I dropped my gaze from William, pushing away from the door to inspect the room around us. To my surprise, we were not in some unused music room or parlor. Instead, the space around us spread far beyond the dim light offered by the crack in the doors. As my eyes adjusted, the details of the room came into view: chandeliers hanging far above us, a wide and empty wooden floor, and an entire wall of windows directly across from us, shuttered tightly against the bright afternoon sun.

The ballroom. I'd seen it only once before, very briefly, on my tour with my grandmother. Behind me, William opened the door just a sliver, allowing him to peek into the hallway. He closed it almost immediately.

"It seems we are trapped." He did not seem particularly upset about the idea. "Mr. Banfield is still out there, and I've no doubt he will turn us in if we try to sneak past him to the stables. Shall we wait it out?"

I nodded. "I can only hope Miss Radcliff is not so long-winded as my grandmother."

"More so, unfortunately." William's voice echoed strangely in the spacious room. "Or perhaps fortunately, in this case." He smiled but did not wait for a response, striding across the ballroom to the row of windows.

I watched him, unable to stop a surge of pleasure at the idea that he would rather be stuck in a dusty, gloomy ballroom with me than visiting with Miss Isabel Radcliff. He reached the windows and undid several latches before pulling open the shutters, which sent a stream of light across the floor and bathed the room in gentle sunshine.

"I've not been in here since—" He shook his head. "I can't even recall. It has been years."

"My grandparents did not host many balls, then?" I came to stand beside him at the window, inspecting the expansive room now that it was better lit.

“Not a great many, although I would have missed them in any case. I was so often abroad.” He sounded wistful. Was he thinking of how much he missed sailing? He refocused on me. “Are you looking forward to the ball?”

I shrugged.

“You are not?” He tilted his head. “Why is that?”

“A great many reasons,” I said.

“Such as?”

I looked away. “I would think them to be painfully obvious. I always feel uncommonly anxious in social situations. The stiff conversations, awkward introductions, constant curtsying—it is enough to tempt me to play ill the night of the ball.”

He nodded. “I understand better than you think. I am not particularly fond of balls either. But are you not hoping to dance?”

I waved a hand. “Oh, I would be more than happy to avoid dancing.”

“A lady who does not enjoy dancing? I am shocked.”

“It’s not that I do not enjoy it,” I protested. “Only that—” My voice broke off, and I shifted my weight. It was embarrassing to admit the true reason behind my reluctance. But he waited patiently, curiosity clear in his eyes. I sighed, relenting.

“I have not danced in over two years,” I admitted. “I am afraid I’ve forgotten everything. And while I am certain I shall find *some* way of embarrassing myself, I would prefer for it not to be on the dance floor.”

A slow grin spread over William’s face. “There is a simple enough solution to that.” He stepped toward me and held out his hand.

I stared at him. “What are you doing?”

“You are in need of some dancing instruction, and we are most conveniently trapped in a ballroom. I thought it fairly obvious what I was doing.”

I looked from his face to his outstretched hand and back again. “You wish to dance? Now?”

He gave an exasperated sigh, though his eyes never lost their humor. “Yes, of course now. Come, you are being very rude leaving me so.”

I took a step forward, eyes narrowed. “If I hear one word of teasing about my dancing, I will push you out into the hallway and leave you to the mercy of Mr. Banfield.”

“Not a word,” he promised. He held his hand closer, waiting. I placed my hand in his, and his fingers closed around mine, his touch all at once familiar and new. With a tug, he pulled me to him, our free hands meeting. My heart leapt, and my lungs forgot their purpose altogether.

Breathe, I reminded myself.

“How shall we start?” he murmured. “A country dance, perhaps?”

And then we were off, William leading the way, naming each of the steps in the dance as we came to them. He was easy to follow, and I found that I knew most of the steps, to my great satisfaction. He slowed whenever I faltered, reminding me of the next movement until I made it through the dance without hesitation.

“You are not as entirely terrible as you insinuated,” he said, our hands still joined in front of us as we paused.

“I said no teasing,” I reminded as I looked up at him. Tall as I was, William was taller still, the top of my head reaching just past his chin. This would have been a matter of little consequence, except he stood at such a convenient height that my eyes found their way to his lips far more often than I would ever admit.

“It was a compliment,” he protested and gave me no opportunity to retort as he started into a quadrille, counting the steps as we moved. After the quadrille, we reviewed a cotillion, then a scotch reel. He made me laugh continually, and the dances became easier with each passing minute.

After nearly an hour of practice, we finally stopped to rest, dropping into chairs set against the wall near the windows.

“Thank you for that,” I said. “My confidence is entirely restored.”

“Oh, I hardly did it for you,” he said innocently. “I simply did not wish you to trod on my feet at the ball.”

I cast him my darkest scowl, but he only laughed.

“So this is where you two have been hiding.”

We straightened at the sound of my grandmother’s voice, looking to where she stepped through the ballroom doors. Though her words were reproachful, her tone was far from scolding. She walked toward us, and her smile grew with every step. We stood as she approached.

“I just had the pleasure of the Radcliffs’ company for nearly an hour. You, William, had mysteriously vanished from your study when Mr. Banfield sent for you, and Miss Radcliff seemed particularly intent on waiting for you.”

“Oh?” William possessed the knack of sounding completely unaffected. “How unfortunate we missed them.”

“Indeed,” Lady Rowley said. “In any case, it is quite safe now. The Radcliffs have departed, disappointed but hopeful they will receive a visit in return.”

“I’m afraid I am far too busy to be making visits,” William said, waving his hand about us. “As you can see.”

“Very clearly,” she agreed with a knowing look.

I did not think it possible for my face to grow any hotter than it was at that moment. The way my grandmother looked at William and me—there was no mistaking that she was pleased at the thought of a connection between the two of us.

And there was a connection, no matter how I tried to hide it. The flutter in my stomach every time I saw him, the grin he kept especially for me, our easy conversations, the natural comfort that came from his company.

It should not have surprised me to realize how very in love with him I was.

But it did surprise me. And it was that single, petrifying thought that caused me to back away from the two of them.

They watched me with concern, William stepping forward.

“I am sorry. I hadn’t realized how late it was.” I stumbled over my words, avoiding their eyes. “I ought to go change for dinner.”

It was clearly a fib; the sun had only just begun to sink into the horizon, hours from dinner. But I turned without waiting for a response and hurried from the ballroom. My feet moved without guidance, for my mind was far too distracted.

How could this have happened? Love was never part of my plans, was never something I wished for. Love was for those who wanted it, and I certainly did not want it.

Did I?

The grand staircase blurred as I took the steps two at a time, nearly blinded by the whirlwind of my tempestuous thoughts. My pulse raced, the throb of my heartbeat matching the echo of my steps.

My dream, the only dream I’d had since I was a girl, was to run my own school. I was never romantic like many of my school friends who had read far too many novels. I was a realist. I knew my future would not likely include a husband, and I had never before questioned that.

But William made it so easy to imagine a different future, one with comfort and security, laughter and love. Happiness. Havenfield could be more than just a distant memory in years to come; it could be my home.

I was nearly certain William felt the same about me. How could I not think that when he looked at me the way he did? He cared for me, at the very least, and love was a very real, very frightening possibility.

Reaching my room, I closed the door behind me and leaned against it. I pressed both hands to my face, blocking out the sun, blocking out every distraction.

My thoughts swirled, drifting about like leaves on the wind. I attempted to rein them in, collect them, tighten my grip on them. They resisted, and flashes of memory escaped to play through my head: Miss Radcliff's superior smile, Mrs. Pembroke's clear condescension, Mrs. Seymour's undeserved contempt, and every horribly embarrassing episode I'd endured during my visit here. And above it all, I saw Aunt Lydia, eyes dark and narrow, her disdainful expression a constant reminder that I did not belong, that I was not wanted.

What was I to do? Stay at Havenfield or leave to start my school. The decision should have been simple, but I felt myself drawn in so many directions I thought to be torn apart. I slid down the door until I sat, then pulled my knees to my chest. I slowed my breathing, willing my heart to calm its painful hammering.

An answer to my question floated just out of reach, fuzzy and undefined. I clutched my knees closer to me, gripping them tightly. I needed to find a solution, and soon.

Chapter Fifteen

“THAT WAS OUR BEST RUN yet,” I said to Miranda quietly, stroking the side of her head. Her warm brown eyes watched me, and she gave a soft whinny in response to my caresses. “Perhaps one day we might learn to jump like our companions.”

“Not on a side saddle, you won’t,” William called from across the stable, where he assisted the groom in removing Stowaway’s saddle.

“I was talking to Miranda,” I said sternly. “I’ll thank you not to eavesdrop on my conversations.”

He hefted the saddle from Stowaway’s back and dropped it with a thump in its spot among the other tack and riding gear. He patted his horse lightly on his flanks before coming to join me outside Miranda’s stall, leaving the groom to finish.

“If you truly wish to learn to jump,” he said as he leaned against the stall door, “a side saddle will never do.”

I frowned. “I would have to ride astride?”

He crossed his arms. “It’s not so awful a thing. I seem to manage well enough.”

An understatement if I’d ever heard one. William cut quite the dashing figure on horseback. When he and Stowaway rode, it was a thing of beauty. They seemed to know each other’s thoughts and move as a seamless entity. And when they jumped, they soared.

“Perhaps one day,” I said without thinking. An awkward silence ensued, and I bit my lip, turning back to Miranda. I could hardly say such a thing now, not four days from the end of my visit. William had tactfully not mentioned my abrupt departure from the ballroom the day before, for which

I was grateful. I still had not made a decision about what I was to do, and I hardly needed any more confusing input in my already stressed mind.

He made no response, and I spoke quickly to fill the silence as I stepped away from the stall door. “We ought to go in. I will undoubtedly have another lecture from Emma on the state of my hair.” I touched it, knowing from experience the wild condition it was in. “And if I’m late for dinner again, Aunt Lydia will surely develop a twitch from glaring at me so harshly.”

William gave a chuckle. “She has no sympathy for lack of punctuality.” He nodded at the open stable doors, and we made our way down the aisle of stalls.

“She never glares at *you*.” I was mostly teasing, but a note of frustration found its way into my voice. Aunt Lydia’s clear disapproval of me was a never-ending irritation.

“Ah, well, I am an extremely amiable man. Perhaps you could try that.”

“Being a man? I would rather not.”

He inspected me. “I daresay you would be the prettiest man I’d ever seen.”

I had to clear my throat before responding. “I am not entirely certain if that was a compliment or an insult.”

William’s eyes shone with amusement, but before he could respond, the sound of crunching gravel caused our heads to turn. A sleek black coach appeared from the main road, rumbling along the drive toward the house. We were still some distance away when it stopped before the columned portico that surrounded the front door. The door bounced open before the coachman could descend, and a small figure dressed in a fashionable yellow gown hopped down from the coach. She immediately turned to us with a wave.

“William! Eliza!”

My brow furrowed before I remembered my borrowed riding habit. With my hair tucked away under my hat, I surely looked much like my cousin. I glanced up at William as he returned her wave. He quickened his step, and I followed suit.

“It appears my mother and Rebecca have arrived a day early,” he said, his face alight with excitement as he looked over at me. “Come. I want you to meet them.”

I swallowed as I hurried after him, my throat dry. I’d thought to have another day before meeting William’s family. And I certainly had not expected to be an unkempt mess from riding when I did so. I straightened my jacket as best I could and brushed back strands of hair from my face. My fingers found my ring, twisting it.

William glanced over, noticing my movement. “You haven’t any reason to be nervous. They are not nearly so bothersome as I am.”

“Not entirely reassuring,” I muttered, and he chuckled.

Rebecca stood beside the carriage with her hand shading her eyes, watching as we approached. I saw the moment she realized I was not Eliza; confusion crossed her face, then understanding. Did she know who I was? An older woman joined her as the coachman handed her out, her height similar to Rebecca’s small stature.

Rebecca met us as we arrived, skipping the last few steps as she flung herself into her brother’s arms. “Oh, it is so good to see you! It feels a lifetime since we were last here.”

“What did I do to deserve such a welcome?” William teased. “I thought you hardly noticed my absence with all the diversions of the Season.”

She pulled back from their hug. “You are glad to see me, and you know it.”

“I am for now. But ask me after you run up credit at every shop in town.”

She smacked him on the arm, and I couldn't help but smile at their playful meeting. Rebecca had an infectious laugh, joyful and uninhibited. She did not have Eliza's classic beauty, but with her bright-blue eyes and small, upturned nose, she was undoubtedly lovely. Her resemblance to William at that moment was clear, with curly, golden-brown hair and a familiar light sprinkling of freckles across her nose.

William turned to the older woman standing beside the coach, swooping down to peck her on the cheek. "Mother, why did you not warn us you would be arriving early? We were not expecting you until tomorrow morning."

Mrs. Rowley looked pleased at his attention, the corners of her eyes crinkling. She had a darker complexion than her children, her brunette locks just beginning to gray. "We hardly had the chance. We were making such good time, we simply decided to press on instead of stopping for the night."

William turned back to me and beckoned. Their gazes focused on me as I hesitantly stepped forward and stopped just behind him. I jumped when I felt his hand on the small of my back, pushing me forward another step to stand directly beside him. Mrs. Rowley's eyes danced as she watched us.

"Mother, Rebecca, may I introduce Miss Juliana Ashbourne." His voice was calm, though it held a tinge of pride.

I was already dipping into my curtsy when Rebecca's arms came around me in a tight hug, wafting me with the subtle scent of lavender. "I am so pleased to meet you! I have heard all about you."

I looked to William in surprise. He was grinning, no doubt unsurprised by his sister's friendliness. I hadn't been embraced like this . . . well, ever. And yet, for some reason, I did not mind her intrusion. I tentatively returned her embrace, and then she pulled away.

"I am terribly sorry to have mistaken you for Eliza earlier. Your habit looks just like hers."

“It is hers,” I admitted. “She was kind enough to lend it to me since I haven’t one of my own.”

“That is just like her,” Rebecca said, untying her bonnet and removing it, fluffing her hair as she did. “Isn’t it, Mother?”

“Indeed,” Mrs. Rowley agreed absently. Her eyes were intent upon me, and a bit of concern entered her voice. “Is your ankle quite recovered, Miss Ashbourne? William told us about your accident when he came to town a few weeks ago. I’d not thought you would want to ride again so soon.”

I shot a glare at William. “He told you about that, did he?” He only raised his eyebrows innocently, unruffled as usual. “I am quite well now, though I am grateful for your concern.”

“In my defense,” William said, clasping his hands behind his back. “I did not think you would ever find out.”

“Hardly reason enough to break a lady’s confidence,” I reprimanded him, though a smile tugged at my lips.

“Perhaps if I did not have so very many secrets to keep, it would be easier.”

I blushed and looked away from him just in time to see a knowing look pass between Mrs. Rowley and Rebecca, and I wondered what exactly William had told them about me when he’d gone down to London.

* * *

The next morning, the ladies gathered yet again in the morning room. I sat with Rebecca and Eliza while the older women gossiped across the room. Names of people I’d never heard of flew off their lips at an astounding pace, followed by appropriate gasps or laughs, depending on the news.

“I think my mother misses London,” Eliza said with a sigh. I turned to see what she observed: Aunt Lydia giggling at something Mrs. Rowley had said, leaning forward with a spark in her eye.

“Who would not?” Rebecca said as she flounced backward onto the settee she shared with me. “It truly is the most diverting place. I wish you could have come for at least part of the Season.”

Eliza shrugged, smoothing her skirt where she sat back straight and shoulders squared, ever the perfect example of a proper lady. “We thought it best to remain in the country. To be here for Grandmama.”

“Yes, of course,” Rebecca said with sympathy. “I imagine she is dreadfully lonely. Though the house is near to bursting with visitors now, it seems. How long do you plan to stay at Havenfield, Miss Ashbourne?”

My eyes widened at the bluntness of her question, and Eliza coughed. There was an unspoken agreement among the family that we never discussed my leaving, though the end of my month-long visit approached with alarming swiftness. My indecision obviously made me reticent toward the subject, though I was not entirely certain why my family never pressed me. Perhaps they thought they might spook me into leaving if they broached the topic.

I ran a few answers through my mind before picking the one least likely to inspire a follow-up question. “I expect to stay at least a few more days.” I was pleased with how unaffected my answer sounded. “And do call me Juliana.”

She grinned. “Lovely. And you must call me Rebecca. I rather hate formalities.”

“A quality you share with your brother,” I said, thinking of William’s constant teasing.

“Oh?” Rebecca sat up, interest clear in her eyes. I immediately regretted bringing him into the conversation. “He is usually ever so polite around company. He turns into quite the bore when we go to any social engagements. Whatever did you do to break him out of his shell?”

My face pricked with heat. I hardly wanted to detail the embarrassing moments of our first meeting in the stable.

“What did she not do?” A deep voice from behind answered for me. We turned as one to see William approaching us with an amused smirk. “She followed me about day and night, spouting all manner of flattery and compliments. Why, I even hid in the stables to escape her, though she found me eventually.”

“I did nothing of the sort, and you know it,” I said with narrowed eyes. I turned back to Rebecca as William came to sit beside Eliza. “Your brother teases mercilessly—”

“Banters,” William’s familiar correction cut me off, and he winked at me.

“Banters mercilessly,” I said with a roll of my eyes. “Though I am sure you know this well.”

“Yes, unfortunately, I am overly familiar with that particular quality of his,” Rebecca said. “Though if he is extending his teasing from immediate family, I ought to warn the ladies of the surrounding neighborhood to prepare themselves before the ball tomorrow.”

My stomach gave a sudden swoop. In all my worrying over the dancing and my dress and making conversation with people I hardly knew, I hadn’t thought about William keeping company with other women, let alone dancing with them. I found I was not at all fond of the idea.

William caught my frown and gave me a questioning look. I only shook my head once, and he changed the subject, asking Rebecca about an acquaintance they had in London. I barely listened, instead trying to come to terms with my unexpected testiness at the idea of William dancing with anyone besides me. It was not as though I had any particular claim to him. Of course he would dance with other ladies; it would be expected of him.

So lost was I in my thoughts that I did not notice the entrance of Mr. Banfield or the visitor he announced. I only recognized when William’s expression tightened and his eyes focused on someone behind me.

I twisted in my seat to see Mr. Fitzroy greeting Lady Rowley and the other ladies. My fingers, ever anxious, spun my ring about my finger. Heavens,

just being in the same room as him made me edgy. After a moment, he left the others and made his way to our grouping of chairs.

I turned back to sit straight in my chair. William watched me, his gaze fixed on my fingers fiddling with my ring. He knew very well I only did that when I was anxious. I stopped immediately and clasped my hands in my lap. The discomfort I felt in Mr. Fitzroy's presence was taking its toll on my nerves.

"Good morning to you all," Mr. Fitzroy said and offered a low bow. Rebecca, Eliza, and I stood and dipped into curtsies; William responded with only a nod. As Mr. Fitzroy straightened, his eyes worked their way among the four of us, stopping with a look of surprise on Rebecca.

"Why, Miss Rowley, I did not know you were in town. What a fortunate coincidence."

Rebecca looked anything but pleased at the "coincidence."

"Mr. Fitzroy," she said with a nod, voice cool and detached. I hadn't yet seen her so unenthusiastic. Granted, I'd known her all of a day, but the change I saw in her was dramatic. Perhaps she felt an inkling of the uneasiness that filled my stomach when he turned to look at me next.

"Miss Ashbourne, it looks as though I interrupted a bit of a party. I would hate to interfere in a family reunion."

I sighed in relief. He did not plan on staying, then.

"Might I be so bold as to ask for a word out in the hall before I leave?"

Blast it all. I stood frozen, the eyes of everyone in the room on me. The last thing in the world I wanted was to have a private conversation with Mr. Fitzroy. And yet he stood there, watching me with that aggravating smile.

"Of c-course." I stuttered slightly and avoided looking at anyone as I followed him from the room, though I could easily imagine the expressions of curiosity.

I left the door open as I stepped into the hallway, hoping the nearness of my family would discourage him from whatever he had to say. But he only moved farther down the hallway until we were well outside earshot. He turned to face me, and I squeezed my hands into fists, preparing for . . . well, I hardly knew what I was preparing for.

“Miss Ashbourne, I wanted to ensure you would still be attending the ball tomorrow night.”

I blinked. That was all? “Yes, of course.” Though, at that moment, playing ill sounded awfully tempting if it meant not having to spend any prolonged amount of time with him, especially dancing.

“Excellent,” he said, baring his teeth yet again. “My aunt mentioned you may not be staying much longer in the area, and I was desperate to disprove the rumor.”

“The rumor is not entirely untrue,” I said stiffly. “I plan to return to London in the near future.”

He stepped closer, and I forced my chin up, unwilling to back down.

“I had hoped you might have found a reason to stay in Millbury.” His voice was low, and his small, dark eyes darted over me with an intimacy that made me squirm. “Though London is not so far to travel for the sake of a beautiful woman.”

For a brief moment, it was Mr. Seymour who stood before me, eyes flickering with desire, trapping me in the moon-drenched hallway outside the schoolroom. I shuddered, and Mr. Fitzroy’s face came back into focus, though it was hardly an improvement over my imaginings. I took a solidifying breath.

“Mr. Fitzroy,” I said with determination and took a deliberate step back. “I am sorry if I have given you a different impression”—I knew very well that I had not—“but I have no intention of remaining in this county longer than necessary and will most likely leave within the next week. I am flattered by your attentions, but I feel I must be truthful to avoid a misunderstanding.”

I rather hoped his smile would vanish and that he would leave immediately. But he only gave me what I was certain he thought was a coy wink.

“I understand completely,” he said. “I shall simply enjoy our time at the ball together for what it is.”

Before I could react, he seized my hand and dragged it to his lips, kissing it firmly. I tugged it away, but he had already released it as he stepped back.

“Until tomorrow, Miss Ashbourne.” With one last brazen look, he strode down the hallway to the entryway.

I suppressed an exasperated groan. What a horrid, presumptuous man. Shaking my head in annoyance, I turned to rejoin the group in the morning room.

I stopped in surprise. William stood just a few paces behind me, and the pained look in his eyes made my heart stop completely. He stared at me without moving, as though he had never seen me before.

I thought frantically over my words to Mr. Fitzroy. Had he overheard something? What had I said to make him look at me in that way?

“William?” I stepped forward, and my movement seemed to jar him from whatever stupor had come over him.

He shook his head, clearing his throat. “I am sorry,” he said. “I hadn’t meant to interrupt. I only . . .” His voice drifted off, and I watched him in confusion. Before I could pose a question, he continued on. “I only wanted to ask you if you still wanted to ride today.”

“Oh.” The sudden change in subject unsettled me. “Yes, I suppose.”

He nodded, the matter seemingly settled.

“But do you?” I asked. “With your mother and sister here?” I had assumed he would want to spend time with them since they had been apart much of the last few months.

“They won’t mind,” he said with a tight smile. “After all, they’ll still be here in a week.”

My words echoed back to me. *I have no intention of remaining in this county longer than necessary, most likely within the next week.* So he had overheard some of my conversation with Mr. Fitzroy. I stared down at the tips of my slippers. I had no response for him, though my heart begged me to say something.

“I’ll meet you in the stables after lunch.” His voice was strained.

I nodded.

When I looked up a moment later, he was gone.

Chapter Sixteen

LATER THAT EVENING, WE GATHERED in the drawing room after dinner. Mr. Brooks challenged Eliza to a game of chess, and the others broke into smaller groups for cards or conversation. I declined a hand in the game of whist being dealt—William cast me a curious glance as he sat at the table—and wandered to the far corner of the room. I settled into a cushioned armchair and picked up a book that lay near me. I flipped through the pages absently, finally opening to one at random, though I had little hope the book would prove an adequate distraction from my tangled thoughts.

My ride with William that afternoon had not been particularly pleasant. We had spoken only every few minutes and on such banal topics that it had been almost painfully uncomfortable. We only rode for a half hour before I invented some sort of excuse to return to the house. By dinner, he seemed to have returned to his normal self. I much preferred my teasing, grinning William to the tense and testy William he'd been earlier.

“Juliana?” Rebecca asked as she came to stand beside my chair. “I wondered if I might speak with you a minute?” Her normally cheerful eyes were anxious.

I sat up from where I'd slumped into the cushions. “Certainly,” I said, puzzled. I gestured to the chair beside me, and she sat, keeping her hands clasped tightly in her lap. What could possibly have her so uneasy? “Is there something wrong?”

“No, not exactly,” she said. “That is, I hope there is nothing wrong.” She took a deep breath. “I wanted to ask you about Mr. Fitzroy,” she said quickly, as though she wanted to throw the words out before she had second thoughts. She glanced up to gauge my reaction before carrying on. “I knew him very slightly when I was in London. Our social circles overlapped every now and again.” Rebecca paused, seemingly uncertain as to how to continue.

I was baffled. “What did you want to ask me about him? I cannot claim to be very well acquainted with him either.”

“You are not?” Her voice was hopeful.

“No.” I drummed my fingers on the cover of my book. “I have spent only a few hours in his company. Not particularly enjoyable hours, at that.”

She exhaled, and her shoulders relaxed as though I had just relieved her of an enormous burden. “Oh, I am glad to hear it.”

“And why is that?” I could not keep the surprise from my voice. This was an exceptionally unexpected conversation.

She looked over her shoulder, checking to see if anyone would overhear, but no one spared us a second glance. She leaned closer to me.

“I thought when he came to see you earlier that you two might have an . . . understanding, of sorts.”

I sighed and placed my book on the table beside me. “I can assure you with absolute certainty that there is no ‘understanding’ between Mr. Fitzroy and myself.”

Her usual smile appeared once again. “Lud, that is relieving. I thought you might have liked him.”

I gave her a searching look. “For the sake of my curiosity, might I ask why you were so concerned that I might have formed an attachment to Mr. Fitzroy?”

“I only thought I had better warn you about what kind of gentleman Mr. Fitzroy is. Though I use the term ‘gentleman’ very loosely.” She waved her hand dismissively.

I tipped my head. “What do you mean?”

She frowned. “There was an incident in London a few weeks past. Apparently, Mr. Fitzroy was found in a compromising situation with a

young woman.”

Mr. Fitzroy? Alone with a young woman? “Are you certain?” I stared at her in bewilderment. “Was she blind, perhaps? Or deaf? If she were both, it would make the idea much easier to believe.”

She let out a bark of laughter, causing the rest of our party to look at us in curiosity. She covered her mouth, her eyes bright with mirth. “He is terribly uncomfortable, isn’t he?” she asked. “I always feel out of sorts when he looks at me.”

“I feel the same,” I said, “which lends to my confusion over how he could have ended up in the sort of situation you speak of.”

She shrugged. “I cannot explain it, but I do not doubt the veracity of the rumor. My mother heard it straight from one of the patronesses of Almacks. The young lady in question was sent to her family in the country, certainly hoping to ride out the rumors, and I assume Mr. Fitzroy is doing the same here.”

I shook my head, still unable to wrap my mind about the idea of socially inept Mr. Fitzroy being the center of a reputation-ruining scandal. And the thought that he now pursued me gave me no little anxiety.

“I am grateful you told me,” I said, my voice calmer than I felt. “I hardly planned to involve myself with him, but I prefer to be informed either way.”

Rebecca nodded. “I thought you might feel that way. I am glad to have gotten that over and done with.” She looked for a moment as though she meant to stand before she turned back to me. A mischievous glint came into her eyes. “How was your ride with William this afternoon?”

“My ri—” My response was stillborn as she giggled, no doubt at the look of surprise on my face.

“I saw you from my window,” she admitted. “How is Miranda treating you?”

I flushed, only now realizing I should have asked her permission to ride her horse. “I am so sorry. I hadn’t thought—that is, I should have asked you if—”

“Oh, you are welcome to ride her anytime you like,” she interrupted yet again, reminding me of William and his constant interjections. “To be honest, I prefer a feistier mount. I think William only gave her to me in the hopes that she would temper my risky riding.”

“She would certainly do that,” I said as I thought of Miranda’s steadiness. “Though that is what I like best about her.”

“You have a remarkably good seat. How long have you been riding?”

“Only the last few weeks. William has been teaching me.”

She smirked, glancing over at her brother now speaking to Mr. Woodward across the card table. “That is very generous of him.”

“I quite agree.” I traced the curve of my armchair with my fingers.

“William is an excellent rider, is he not?” She attempted an offhand manner, but her eyes scrutinized me.

I answered honestly. “Indeed. I’ve not seen his equal.”

She leaned forward as if sharing a secret. “That is only because you have yet to see me ride.”

I burst out laughing, and she laughed with me. I decided at that moment that I liked Rebecca Rowley very much.

* * *

I lay in bed that night, my eyes clenched shut in a desperate bid to force sleep. It was past midnight, according to the tolling of a clock somewhere in the house. I blew out an exasperated huff of air; this was useless. I threw off my covers and marched to my window.

I pulled back my curtains and took in the scene: a nearly full moon cast eerie shadows across the landscape, trees quivering in the slight breeze. I leaned my forehead against the glass and closed my eyes, the coolness of the glass soothing my skin that was heated from my constant tossing and turning. But even with my eyes closed, my thoughts refused to settle. My nerves were on edge thinking of the ball tomorrow. In my head, I replayed the steps to every dance William and I had practiced two days ago. I could only hope my newfound assurance would not desert me the moment I set foot on the dance floor.

Rebecca's words from earlier ran through my mind, her shocking revelation about Mr. Fitzroy. I simply could not reconcile the awkward and odd Mr. Fitzroy that I knew with the irresponsible cad who had ruined a girl's reputation.

Though the longer I considered it, the more his interest in me began to make sense. I'd long wondered why he pursued me as he did, and now I began to suspect a reason. Rumors from London could only be delayed so long; he had to know they would eventually find him, even hidden away in the country. Although a gentleman's reputation was far less affected by such scandals than a woman's, there would hardly be a line of well-bred ladies hoping for his attentions. And then, of course, I had arrived in Millbury with no connections, little experience in the world, and an attractive inheritance. I must have seemed the perfect mark to him.

Pain shot through my hand. I had clenched my fists so tightly that my nails had left deep-red crescents in my palm. I relaxed my hands, rubbing them together to relieve the pain, then I sighed, pushing away from the window. I scrutinized my room: books stacked haphazardly on my writing desk, the full-length mirror reflecting the silvery moonlight, my bed linens in complete disarray. The room suddenly felt small and stifled.

My gaze fell upon a painting that hung near the window—that of two young girls, parasols in hand as they walked over a dainty garden bridge—and a notion struck me.

Hesitating but a moment, I threw on my dressing gown, knotting it loosely in front of me, and carefully lit a candle. I shielded the small flame as I left

my room, not bothering with my slippers. I would move quieter without them.

The wood floor was cold and smooth against my bare feet as I treaded down the hallway. The house was unnaturally still. The quiet surrounded me, as engulfing as the darkness that hovered just beyond the reach of my candle. I moved on silent feet toward where I knew the family's rooms were. No lights showed under any doors. The house was asleep.

I let my hand linger on the door to my mother's room, but I didn't open it, instead continuing down the next passage. I had never been in this part of the house before, and the faint light of my flickering candle gave me only the barest impression of the rooms I passed.

Finally, I turned a corner and found myself in a wide, lofty corridor, the ceiling arching far above my head. One wall of the passage consisted entirely of soaring windows, the other of framed paintings of various sizes and styles.

The portrait gallery.

I moved into the space, my confidence waning with every step. I had avoided this room since I'd arrived, but with the end of my visit drawing ever nearer, I needed to face it sooner rather than later. There was nothing more I could do to prepare myself to see the face of my mother. It had been seven years since her death, and tonight I would look into her eyes once more.

A lump rose in my throat as I examined the first portrait I came to, that of an older gentleman with an enormous, burly mustache. His style of dress was decidedly antiquated, so I passed it and continued on. I spent a quarter of an hour inspecting portraits and was nearly to the end of the hall when I held up my candle to a heavily gilded frame. I took a cursory look at its subject and was already beginning to move on when the light fell upon a set of bright, inquisitive eyes surrounded by a halo of golden hair. I inhaled sharply and moved my light back.

It was undoubtedly my mother. Dressed in an exquisite white gown, standing by a window with a book in hand, she teased me with her familiar smile: warm, affectionate, content. She was every bit as beautiful in the painting as she had been in life, and my heart ached at the sight.

“Mama,” I whispered, tracing the line of her face with my finger. The portrait must have been done not long before she ran away from Havenfield, as she looked to be about my age. How different her life must have been then. Had she already met my father when she’d sat for the painter? Is that why her eyes twinkled with a knowing secret?

The candlelight flickered on the frame beside my mother’s, and I moved to see it more clearly. It was my grandmother, years younger, seated with her skirt pooling around her feet in graceful folds of blue fabric. Hands clasped in her lap, she also smiled, but with less cheerfulness than my mother. A hand dominated by an enormous signet ring rested on her shoulder, and I raised my eyes to see my grandfather for the first time. Piercing dark eyes stared at me from under thick brows, his gaze commanding. He had wavy brown hair, only just beginning to gray at his temples, and a strong jaw.

An uneasy suspicion began to rise inside me. I studied the serious set of his face, the calculating nature of his eyes. I knew that face beyond the familial similarities. Where had I seen him before?

Remembrance hit me. My breath caught in my throat, and I nearly choked. It couldn’t be. It was not possible.

My mind flew back to nearly three years prior. I was living in London, attending Mrs. Stanton’s Academy for Fine Ladies. It was a Sunday, I recalled, because we walked home from the church only a few blocks from the school. We traveled in rows of two, following Mrs. Stanton at a leisurely pace as we peeked in shop windows and giggled as gentlemen tipped their hats at our passing. I walked arm in arm with my friend Fanny, and when we came upon a particularly colorful window display, she dragged me out of line so we could admire its contents further.

“Oh,” she squealed, pointing at a rather showy bonnet with delicate ribbons and a gaudy floral pattern. “It is the loveliest thing I have ever

seen!”

“Really, Fanny.” I shook my head. “I thought you to be much more practical than that. How would you look in a bonnet like that when all your dresses are gray and black?”

Fanny also planned to enter a living as a governess. The floral bonnet would look ridiculous against the normal colors of dress for our profession.

“I hardly care,” she said with a sigh. “It is positively gorgeous. I wonder what it costs?”

“You cannot possibly think of buying it.”

She turned to me. “Of course I am; how could I resist? And what about you? Were you not just saying how you needed a new bonnet?”

I touched my bonnet self-consciously. It was limp, and the ribbon tied under my chin was frayed and faded. “Well, yes, but I would never spend my money on something so useless as that.”

Fanny only rolled her eyes at me. “And pray, what bonnet would you deem appropriate for a governess?”

I ignored her poking fun at me and instead inspected the several bonnets displayed in the milliner’s window. One in particular caught my eyes; it was made of sturdy straw with a dark-blue ribbon adorning the brim. It was plain but well made.

“That one there.” I nodded to it. “A sensible color and not likely to fall apart at the first hint of a breeze.”

“An admirable choice,” a gruff voice behind me spoke. Fanny and I both spun to face an older gentleman standing behind us, leaning on a polished walking cane. He was impeccably dressed and clearly a man of means, with his golden watch chain and shined boots. His shrewd eyes watched me from under his heavy brow.

“Pardon?” I managed, my voice squeaky. Mrs. Stanton constantly warned us of the dangers of being accosted by strange men and insisted on chaperoned excursions. But as I glanced about, I could see neither her nor any of our fellow students. They had vanished into the Sunday morning crowd ahead of us.

The man gestured to the shop window with his cane. “It is an unusual young woman who chooses practicality over style.”

I wasn’t certain I wanted to be “unusual” if it brought unwanted attention from a stranger.

“It is simply a matter of preference,” I replied stiffly. I pulled Fanny’s arm tighter against my own, ready to hurry away in pursuit of our companions.

But the man grunted and looked away. “I’ve made you uneasy. I apologize. It’s only—” His voice broke off, and he looked away as though overwhelmed.

Something about the look in his eyes made me pause, even as Fanny tugged on my arm. “Sir?” I asked softly. “Are you quite all right?”

He jerked his head back to look at me, surprise written over his features. His mouth opened but made no sound. He cleared his throat and tried again. “I beg your pardon.” His tone was hoarse. “It’s only—only that you remind me very much of my daughter.”

I understood then why his pain looked so familiar. I saw it often in the mirror, even years after my mother’s death. I phrased my next question carefully. “How long ago did you lose her?”

If he was again surprised, he did not show it this time. “Years,” was his terse reply.

I nodded, not knowing how to respond. Nothing ever said to me after Mama died had helped very much.

“I am sorry for your loss.” My words felt empty, but I had nothing else to offer.

He shook his head. “It is nothing for you to be sorry for.” He took a step back. “Excuse me for interrupting. Good day to you both.”

He made to leave, but something inside caused me to drop Fanny’s arm and step after him. “Sir?”

He turned back, eyes grave and impenetrable. I gulped. I hadn’t planned what to say. I only knew I did not want that poor man to leave with such hurt inside him. “Your daughter must have been very lucky to have you for a father,” I said.

He stared at me. With incredulity? Distress?

“I could not disagree more,” he said, his voice pure agony, and then he turned on his heel and strode away without a backward glance. I could only watch in confusion.

The next day, a package was delivered to Mrs. Stanton’s Academy addressed to me. I unwrapped the paper to reveal the straw bonnet I’d admired the day before. There was no note, no hint of who had sent it, but I did not wonder for long. I knew it had been the gentleman from the street. But how did he know where I lived or what my name was? Curiosity plagued me for weeks before I gave it up as a mystery I would never solve.

Until now. I stared at my grandfather’s portrait in disbelief. It had been him all those years ago. Had he come looking for me, or had our meeting been chance? Why had he not told me who he was? And why had he sent the blasted bonnet?

“Juliana?”

I whirled, nearly upsetting my candle. William stood a few paces away, watching me with inquiring eyes.

“I saw your light from the corridor. What are you doing here?” He moved closer, and his steps echoed in the quiet of the gallery. How had I not heard him before?

“I couldn’t sleep,” I said. My hands shook, and I set my candle on a small table beneath my mother’s portrait. I was in a daze from the remembrance of my grandfather, and I watched William approach with a strange numbness, as though I were awakening from an impossible dream.

He came to a stop but an arm’s length away. His hair was disheveled, his cravat loosened, and his waistcoat undone. He ran a hand over his weary eyes, rubbing them with his thumb and index finger, and then looked at me once more. “So, naturally, a visit to the portrait hall was in order.” His eyes shone in the candlelight, amused even in his exhaustion.

The haze inside my mind faded into the silent darkness surrounding us, and I was suddenly very aware of my state of near undress. I wasn’t even wearing slippers, for heaven’s sake. I pulled my dressing gown tighter around my waist with one hand while my other tugged on the end of my braid that hung over my shoulder. My restlessness in bed had loosened it, and I tried in vain to smooth my unruly locks.

“Naturally,” I replied with a wisp of a smile. “What are you doing up and about?”

“Working.” He grimaced. “Never a dull moment with me.”

“Do you always have so much to do that you work into the night?”

“Only lately,” he said, unconcerned.

Guilt crept over me. We had spent hours together every day for the last fortnight, riding and arranging matters for my school. How much sleep had he sacrificed on my behalf since I’d arrived at Havenfield?

“Because of our rides?” I asked with hesitation.

He squinted his eyes at me. “Believe me, Juliana, our rides are easily the most enjoyable hours of my day.”

I fought the warmth in my cheeks, ignoring the acute pleasure that bloomed inside me at his words. “But if you are working past midnight every evening, surely we can cut our rides short, or—”

“You doubt my ability to know when I’ve had enough rest? Or have you simply tired of spending time with me?” His mouth teased up into a smile, but I did not feel much like bantering at the moment.

“Neither,” I said. “Forgive my concern.” I bit my lip; my words came out more defensive than I had intended.

His smile faded, and he regarded me, his gaze gliding across my face in gentle consideration. “Something is bothering you,” he said as he crossed his arms over his unbuttoned waistcoat.

I tugged on the end of my braid and turned away from him. I desperately wanted to share my newfound realization about my grandfather. If anyone could help me piece together the actions of such a mystifying man, it was William. But I was already in dire straits with him, that much I knew for a fact. My heart tugged at me constantly when he was near and yearned for him when he was not. I should bid him good night and leave before anything was said or done that could not be unsaid or undone.

“Tell me,” he said, his eyes searching mine. “Please.”

I was defenseless against his intense gaze, and my resolve crumbled. I sighed and waved at the paintings in front of me.

He followed my gesture, and understanding grew on his face. “Your mother.”

“And my grandfather.” He stepped closer to examine at the other painting. “I thought tonight I would face them both. My grandfather for the first time—I assumed.”

“You assumed?”

“I met him, William.” My voice shook. Whether it was with anger, frustration, or confusion, I couldn’t be sure. All those emotions stirred inside me at the thought of my grandfather.

“You met Sir Charles?” William returned his gaze to me. “When?”

“Nearly three years ago. In London, on the street. We spoke for but a minute.” I brought my fingers to my ring and twirled it reflexively. “But I remember him well.”

William remained quiet for a few moments, and I couldn’t begin to guess at his thoughts. He leaned back against the table my candle rested on. The light was behind him, silhouetting him so his face was hidden. “Three years ago?” he asked quietly.

“Yes.”

“Would it surprise you to learn it was three years ago that Sir Charles changed his will to include you?”

My mind raced. The solicitor had told me that, but I did not know then what I knew now. “You mean to say he changed it after meeting me?”

“That would be my guess.”

I mulled that over for a moment. “But how did you know he changed his will? Not even Lady Rowley knew.”

He had not moved from his position, still leaning against the table, face undecipherable in the shadows. “I was a witness. He made me swear to tell no one.” He paused for a moment before continuing. “I often wondered what made him change his mind. He must have seen something in you that day.”

“I can’t imagine what.” I was about as unremarkable as they came.

“I can,” he said in the softest of voices. “Very easily.”

There it was again, the flickering flame that grew ever hotter in my chest. I looked away.

“You are far too generous in your opinion of me,” I said lightly.

“And you are far too severe in your evaluation of yourself.”

I gave a tight shrug, not wishing to argue the point.

“You look like him, you know.” William nodded at my grandfather’s portrait.

I raised an eyebrow at him. “You do know how to compliment a lady.”

He grinned. “I only meant you resemble him. Your hair and eyes and even something about your mouth.”

His eyes dropped to that particular feature of mine, and I swallowed. Though he stood at least two paces away, he suddenly seemed too close, and yet, not nearly close enough. These were dangerous thoughts to have so late at night, alone with William in a secluded corridor, with quiet and moonlight hovering over us.

I tore my gaze from his, heart hammering so loudly I was certain he could hear it in the stillness of the gallery. I stepped closer to the portraits to put more distance between the two of us and to examine my grandfather more closely.

“I always thought I took after my father,” I said, but as I scrutinized the face staring back at me, I did see similarities. His hair was the same chestnut as mine, with a few lighter streaks to break up the russet tones. Our eyes were nearly identical, muddy brown with specks of yellow. Now that I thought about it, my father’s features were darker than mine, his hair so deeply brown it was nearly black.

“Lady Rowley swears she sees him in you constantly.”

I had not expected you to look like him. My grandmother’s words, the first she had ever spoken to me, filtered back through my memory. So that was

what she had meant.

I was silent for a long while, simply staring at the paintings. What sort of man was my grandfather, really? Twenty years ago, he had driven my mother from his home, disinherited her, and never attempted to contact her for the remainder of her life. From that very clear evidence, I could easily judge and try him as a cruel, prideful man, with no thought for other people's happiness.

But now . . . was my judgment just, knowing how he had clearly mourned his daughter, knowing he'd left me an incredible fortune as an attempt at redemption? I did not know if I would ever discover my grandfather's true character. I was continually surprised with what I learned of him, and my opinion of him was ever evolving.

William took his cue from me and remained quiet, allowing me time to sort out my thoughts. Eventually, I sighed and turned again to him. I intended to bid him good night, but he cleared his throat and spoke first.

"This may not be the best time or place, but there is something I wanted to discuss with you."

Discuss? I tilted my head to the side. It was such a formal, businesslike word.

"I am glad to have found you tonight. I . . . Well, I was uncertain how to go about this."

"Go on," I said, my curiosity overwhelming the small voice that begged me to leave. I pulled my dressing gown tighter around me and crossed my arms over my stomach.

William looked away, across the corridor and out the window. He fidgeted with the loose buttons on his waistcoat. He was nervous. That more than anything set me on edge. I'd seen William annoyed, frustrated, even mournful, but never nervous.

“First, I must confess something,” he said. “Do you recall your first week here, when I interrupted you writing a letter? I couldn’t help but notice it was directed to your father on his ship, the *Providence*.”

My pulse quickened, but I forced my face to remain calm. “Hardly worth confessing.”

He shook his head. “No, my confession is for a far greater grievance. When I read that name, the *Providence*, I knew I had seen it somewhere before. I should have let it be. It was none of my business. But instead, I wrote to one of my agents in London, requesting more information. That is what I must confess to. I should not have interfered in your affairs.”

I remained silent, neither forgiving nor condemning him.

“I received a letter from my agent a few days ago.” He finally looked at me again, and once I saw the look of sympathy and compassion in his eyes, there was no doubt. He knew. I closed my eyes as though it might shield me from his coming words.

“I know why the name sounded so familiar. I’d read about it in the papers.” His voice was low, tentative.

I wished to be back in my stifling room, wished I had never left my bed that evening. I had no desire to relive my nightmares.

But I knew it was not a secret I could keep forever. It rankled inside me, piercing me with sharp pains at the most unsuspecting moments, reminding me constantly of its existence.

I opened my eyes to meet his concerned, hesitant eyes. Perhaps he had overstepped himself, but he’d pried open the door I’d locked inside myself months ago, and there was no going back now.

“The *Providence* was en route to India,” I said in a whisper, “stopping in port at the Cape of Good Hope for supplies.” I turned away from him, staring out the row of windows overlooking the dark and impenetrable garden. “The ship had just left port when witnesses claimed to see the first

sign of a fire. From all accounts, the ship was lost within minutes. There were no survivors.”

“Juliana?” He sounded so desperate.

“The shipping line informed me nearly a year ago.” My voice lacked any emotion. I wrapped my arms around my middle and squeezed tightly as though I could hold myself together. “They even sent me a payment. Twenty pounds.” As though they could buy my grief.

“But why—?”

I looked at him, and his words died.

“Why have I not told anyone?” I asked softly. “Why do I still write him?”

William only watched me, uncertainty clear in his features.

I took a moment to phrase my answer. It was not anything I had ever put words to. “I could not bear the thought that I”—I blinked back a sudden stinging in my eyes—“that I was alone. At first, I kept hoping, praying. Perhaps he survived, swam to shore, or was rescued by fishermen. I imagined dozens of possibilities of how he could be alive. Surely he would come back to me. And so I wrote to him.” I shook my head hard, loose strands of my hair whipping across my face. “But I know now he did not survive. He would have written; he would have returned if he could have. But I keep writing, as if—as if it keeps part of him alive.”

My voice broke, and I covered my mouth with my hand to suppress a sob. And then William’s arms were around me, pulling me into his embrace, holding me tightly against his chest. I grasped the lapels of his jacket and buried my face in his shoulder. The tears I’d resisted for months streamed down my cheeks, and my shoulders shook as I tried hopelessly to regain control. His hands smoothed my hair, rubbed circles on my back until, slowly, my tears subsided. I trembled, my forehead still pressed against him, my cheeks wet, and my eyes swollen.

“Juliana.” The tenderness of his voice made me shiver. “I am sorrier than I can ever say. I cannot imagine what you endured, thinking yourself alone in the world. But I need you to know you are not alone. Not anymore. You do know that, don’t you?”

I knew he was right. It was a truth that had come on so gradually I hadn’t even noticed its arrival. I wasn’t alone anymore. I had my grandmother and Eliza, and our relationships were more comfortable and sincere than I had ever imagined possible.

And there was William, though I was hesitant to attach the term *comfortable* to our friendship. In spite of our hours of conversations and sharing of secrets, he still was able to unnerve me with a single look, unhinge me with the slightest touch. What power did he possess that made me so completely aware of him? Even now, my pulse raced at his nearness, at his breath on my neck.

I finally nodded a response to his question, unable to say anything more. I relaxed my grip on his jacket, flattening my fingers against his chest, firm and steady beneath my touch. His arms still encircled me with warmth, and I clenched my eyes shut even tighter, unwilling to surrender this moment of true solace.

But William pulled away, just a few inches. I tipped my head up to look into his eyes, and the sincerity in those blue depths made me want to cry once again as he spoke. “And you have a home here as long as you desire one.”

“Thank you,” I said, my voice raspy.

His arms shifted around me, and I reacted instinctively, pulling away from him and wrapping my arms about me as I stepped back. Without his warmth, the coolness of the floor seeped into me and caused gooseflesh to run along the length of my skin. I thought I imagined a flash of disappointment cross his face, but if it had been there, it was gone in the next instant.

He clasped his hands behind his back and cleared his throat. “And do you forgive me for prying into your affairs?”

I attempted a bit of humor, wiping my eyes on the sleeve of my dressing gown. “Only if you forgive me for ruining your cravat.”

He did not seem bothered in the slightest. “That would be my own fault. A true gentleman never finds himself without a handkerchief to offer a lady. Though I have always thought cravats make excellent handkerchiefs in a pinch.”

“You often have ladies crying on your shoulder?” I gave a weak smile.

“Just the one,” he assured me.

We stood quietly for a moment before William looked at his feet, arms crossed once again across his chest. “You ought to tell Lady Rowley. About your father. She would want to know.”

I nodded. “I know. And I will. Just . . . not yet.” I stared down at my hands, the pearl on my ring reflecting the candlelight, shimmering like the pinpoint of a distant star in the darkness. “But I am glad you know. That someone knows.”

He nodded, and I moved to the table where I’d left my candle, the flame hovering just above the puddle of melted wax. I took one last look at the portraits of my mother and grandfather before turning back to William, who watched me with a creased brow.

“Thank you, William.” I hoped my quiet voice somehow conveyed all that I felt for him in that moment. No matter the muddle of emotions he inspired in me, he had been a true friend tonight, and I would always remember this moment with gratitude.

He nodded, his eyes flickering in the candlelight.

“Good night,” I whispered.

“Good night, Juliana.”

And I hurried away into the darkness, more confused and unsure than ever before.

Chapter Seventeen

“EMMA, YOU HAVE TRULY OUTDONE yourself.”

Emma beamed in pleasure as she watched me in the mirror. I twisted my head back and forth, trying to get the best view of the elaborate coiffure she'd worked on for the better part of an hour. She had painstakingly curled my thick, wavy locks, added a few intricate braids, and swept it all into a mass of curls at the crown of my head. To top it off, she strategically placed pearl-studded pins throughout—borrowed from Eliza—which caught the light in an understated but elegant manner.

I met her eyes in the mirror. “Truly, I am grateful. At the risk of sounding immodest, I doubt anyone there tonight will have as lovely a hairstyle.”

“If anyone ought to feel lovely tonight, it's you,” she said earnestly. “Now, give me just a moment to fetch your dress. I took it down to be pressed earlier. I'll be back in a wink.” She slipped from the room, leaving me to again admire my hair.

It was truly amazing what a few curls and braids could do for my self-assurance. Suddenly, the ball did not seem quite so daunting.

The minutes slowly passed, and the time of our departure for the ball crept closer with no sign of Emma. My impatient eyes wandered to the door every few seconds. Where was she?

Finally, a small knock came, and Emma edged into the room, carrying my gown draped over her arms.

“There you are. I thought you had run out on me.” I stood. “We really must hurry. I'm to meet the others in just a few minutes.”

I moved closer to her, but my steps paused when I glimpsed her face. She looked utterly terrified.

“Emma?” I took another step. “What is it?”

She dropped her gaze, and her lips trembled. “I’m so sorry, miss. I don’t know what happened. I turned my back for just a minute—” She gulped frantically.

“Whatever are you talking about?” Had she been hurt?

“Your gown, miss.” She lifted it so I could see it clearly for the first time. A jagged black burn the size of my fist marred the bodice. The contrast was shocking against the light-blue silk. “I swear, I didn’t leave the iron on it; I’d never have done that. But Mrs. Pike asked me something, and when I came back, it was there.” Her eyes were shiny with unshed tears.

Though my heart sank at the sight of my ruined dress, I took a deep breath. “Never you worry. I am certain we can make it work. Perhaps a brooch or a shawl?”

We tried everything we could think of to hide the ghastly burn, but nothing succeeded. Emma grew closer and closer to tears with every passing minute, and my own dejection became harder to hide. I’d spent a good portion of my savings on this dress, intending it to last me for years. And now I couldn’t even wear it once.

“It’s no use,” I said with a sigh. “I will have to wear the ivory.”

“I can’t believe I ruined it,” she whispered as she helped me out of the dress. “And for your first ball.”

“Please do not blame yourself.” I caught her arm. “I know it was not your fault. It was an accident.”

She only shook her head and hurried away with the dress. My shoulders slumped. I had so wanted to wear that dress. A gentle knock sounded at the door, interrupting my moment of self-pity.

“Juliana?” It was my grandmother.

“Come in.”

She bustled into the room, looking wonderfully grand in her embroidered black gown. She took one look at me and tutted. “Not even dressed yet, my dear? Everyone is waiting.”

“There was an accident.” I spoke quietly, not wanting Emma to hear as she fetched my ivory gown from the wardrobe. “My gown was burned while being ironed. We tried to make it work, but—”

“Oh, child, this is terrible! How did this happen?” She cut me off as she strode over to where Emma had laid my gown on the chaise.

Emma returned to my side, pale. “It was my fault, Lady Rowley. I wasn’t watching carefully enough.”

“It was an accident, pure and simple,” I said to them. “I do not blame you in the slightest.” I turned back to my grandmother. “I will be down shortly. Perhaps I can take another carriage and join you there. I would hate for anyone to be late on my account.”

She seemed not to hear a word I said, so intently was she gazing at the ivory gown in Emma’s arms. “No, this will never do,” she muttered.

“Pardon?”

Unexpectedly, her eyes brightened, and she turned to Emma. “Will you please inform the others we will be taking another carriage and that they should go on ahead of us?”

Emma nodded, though the lines of tension did not leave her face.

“And if William should protest, as I know he will, tell him I have everything in hand and that we will be there shortly.” Lady Rowley’s eyes fairly twinkled with excitement.

Emma curtsied and left the room, and I turned to my grandmother in suspicion. The last time I had seen that look in her eye, I had ended up on that dreadful walk with Mr. Fitzroy.

“What on earth do you have in mind?”

“Just wait here. I will be but a moment.” She hurried after Emma without another word.

I paced the room, disappointment gnawing at me. I had so depended on wearing my new gown. Vain as it was, I’d imagined more than once what William’s face might look like when he saw me in it. I couldn’t help it; all my other dresses were threadbare and dreary. I was so hoping for him to see me in something new.

My grandmother was as good as her word. Hardly a minute had passed before she returned carrying something in her arms.

“I thought this might make an adequate substitution,” she said.

My breath caught as I recognized what she held. It was one of the dresses from my mother’s room, the one that had caught my attention the morning we had spent together there. The color was a soft peach, and it had a sheer lace overlay that complemented the ornate embroidery. It had delicate, fluttering sleeves and a low neckline edged in lace.

I touched it softly. “Are you certain?”

“I consider them to be yours,” she said. “They were your mother’s, after all. She would have wanted you to have them.”

I threw my arms around my grandmother, dress and all, and hugged her tightly.

She laughed before scolding me. “As much as I would like a hug from my granddaughter, I simply cannot allow you to wrinkle your dress.”

I pulled back, laughing as well. “I will be sure to hug you again tomorrow, then.”

“See that you do.”

Emma returned at that moment, and after exclaiming over the dress—and looking extremely relieved—she helped me into it, doing up the delicate

buttons and tying the ribbon that ran just under the bodice behind my back. As I turned to face my grandmother, she had tears in her eyes.

“You look absolutely lovely, my dear.”

I stepped to the mirror, and a slow smile spread across my lips. When I’d first arrived at Havenfield, I’d looked into this very mirror and seen someone entirely different: a tired, nervous, and pale girl. Now as I studied myself, the differences were startling. My face and arms had taken on a golden hue, no doubt from the countless hours in the sun on horseback, and the peach of my dress looked rather good against my tanned skin. My eyes sparkled, and my cheeks grew pink from anticipation, and my upswept hair was still the perfect finish. I’d never in all my life felt so lovely.

But it was more than just my appearance. Before, I’d clung to my independence and my isolation, determined to endure my visit for the sake of my inheritance. I’d had no desire, not in the least, to come to know my mother’s family. And now I stood with my grandmother, whom I had come to love so very much in such a short time, as she beamed at me fondly. I had the dear friendship of Eliza. And most of all, I had William.

If only I had not been taller than my mother. The tiniest gap between the hem of my dress and my slippers reminded me of the problem.

“It is not quite long enough,” I said, pulling up the edge of my dress to accentuate the issue.

“No one will be looking at your feet,” Emma said sincerely, and Lady Rowley agreed, both looking at me with such admiration that I blushed and stepped away from the mirror.

“Let us hurry, then,” my grandmother said, ushering me out the door as we bid Emma a hasty farewell. “We do not wish to miss the opening dance.”

“I would not be terribly heartbroken if that were to happen.” I did not look forward to the stares and whispers that would be certain to follow my arrival as they had at the Pembrokes’ musicale. I would be glad for an

inconspicuous arrival during the middle of a dance, when all the attention would surely be focused on the dancers.

She glanced at me knowingly, amusement clear in her eyes. “In that case, perhaps I will order the coach to take us the long way around.”

* * *

The Millbury Assembly Halls were brightly lit as our coach joined the line of equipages waiting to deposit their passengers. I fidgeted with my skirt. Though my appearance gave me a heightened confidence, I was much less certain about my manners and social graces. Suppose my feet failed me in the dances I’d learned so many years ago and had practiced only very briefly? Or perhaps I would find the opportunity to make an utter fool of myself as I so often did?

My grandmother knew me well enough by now to sense my worries. She laid a hand on my arm as our coach jolted forward in the line. “Please do not be nervous, my dear. I so wish to introduce you to everyone and everything, but I shall try to restrain myself for your sake.”

“Thank you,” I said, trying my best to suppress my nerves. I peered out the window and watched a pair of bedecked ladies exit their coach ahead of us.

“Juliana, I—” My grandmother stopped. Her voice was cautious, hesitant. I squinted at her in the shadows of the coach. She seemed to be struggling, but at last she spoke. “I know your visit is coming to an end, and I cannot tell you how grateful I am that we had this time together.”

She paused, deliberating for a moment before continuing on. “I imagine you are anxious to return to London, and I can hardly blame you, as it is your home. But I worry so very much over what you will do once you return.” The rest of her words spilled from her mouth as though she could not contain them any longer. “I only wished to tell you that I have a sister, Mrs. Harding, who lives in London with her husband. They have no children of their own. I have written to her, and they would be delighted to have you stay with them for however long you might need, if that is something you would not be opposed to. And it would certainly prove a

balm to my fears if I knew you to have a place to live and someone to watch over you.”

Tears pricked at my eyes, and I dropped my gaze to my gloved hands in my lap. My grandmother continually surprised me. I knew she did not want me to return to London. She wanted me to stay at Havenfield; I knew that as well as I knew my own name. And yet, she put aside her desires and thought only of mine and how she could help me.

I had teetered for so long on the edge of a decision: to stay at Havenfield or return to London. But the answer suddenly seemed so clear to me in the wake of my grandmother’s selflessness and caring. How could I leave now, when I’d only just begun to know my family? When would I have another chance to build upon my fledgling relationships with my grandmother and Eliza? Once I began my school, I doubted I would find much opportunity to visit Havenfield. I needed to stay, at least for a while longer.

That was the reasoning of my mind. The urging of my heart was much simpler, but equally persuasive: William.

I blinked several times, clearing my throat before trusting myself to respond. “I confess,” I said, eyes still cast downward, “I have had the same worry, of where to live. And I will not pretend this is anything short of an enormous relief. I would be most appreciative of Mrs. Harding’s hospitality.” Then I met her gaze. “Though I wonder if they would mind terribly if I delayed my arrival. Perhaps by a few weeks?”

My grandmother furrowed her brow. “A few weeks?”

I allowed a smile to grow on my lips. “I’ve heard Havenfield is lovely in the summer. I would hate to miss it.”

She grabbed my hands and nearly crushed them in her grip. “You are in earnest? You wish to stay?”

I nodded, enjoying the delight in her eyes. “For a while longer, if it is agreeable to you.”

“It is more than agreeable,” she said breathlessly. “It is wonderful.”

We came to a halt in front of the stairs, and the coach bounced as the driver descended.

“Have you told William?” she asked, still gripping my hand. “That you are staying?”

“No,” I said, a bit sheepish. “In truth, I only just decided.”

“Tell him tonight.” Her eyes fairly danced. She released my hand with a squeeze as the door beside her opened. “He should know.”

Before I could respond, she was stepping down from the coach, and I hurried to follow, grasping the coachman’s hand as he helped me down. My thoughts spun like a splash of cream added to tea, swirling and mixing. Had I really just decided to remain at Havenfield? I had so much I needed to do in London: see Mr. Finch about my inheritance, decide on a property for my school, interview and hire teachers and staff, and so much more. And I desperately missed Charlotte and Daniel and Sophie. I’d depended on seeing them soon. And now that I had a place to stay at the Hardings’, many of the misgivings I had about my future were vastly reduced.

But surely those things could wait. A few weeks would not matter in the end, would they? It hardly made a difference if I began my school now or in the autumn.

My mind continued to buzz, but as we entered the assembly hall, all thoughts of my decision vanished, and I caught my breath. Everywhere I looked, ladies swept about, jewels glittering at their throats, hands meeting their gentlemen partners’, the men looking every bit as stylish and refined in their formal wear. The dancers ruled the center of the spacious hall, and onlookers lined the edges. Ladies gossiped behind postured fans. The walls were swathed in white fabric, and the space was alive with light from the chandeliers overhead.

To those who enjoyed any Society in London, this country ball was surely nothing to be impressed with. But as it was, I could hardly contain my

amazement and then subsequently my distress. I did not belong here, with my borrowed dress and pretended airs. Not with these intimidating examples of sophistication and grace.

My grandmother stood a step ahead of me. She looked back at me in concern, and I glanced away, overwhelmed, again watching the dancers with growing apprehension. How could I explain what I felt when she fit into this world like the final thread of an elaborate tapestry?

A figure stood out among the movement of the dancers, catching my erratic gaze. William. He danced with a young lady in a white gown, dark-haired, pretty, with captivating eyes. Miss Radcliff, of course. I was unsurprised she had managed to ensnare him for the first dance.

William paused his step as the ladies in his group circled about the gentlemen. Miss Radcliff smiled up at him through her eyelashes. He did not smile back at her, a fact that gave me no small amount of satisfaction. His irritation was clear in the lines of tension on his jaw. He looked away; in fact, his head turned directly to the entrance, where I stood, as though he'd done so many times already. His gaze fixed on me straightaway. His mouth parted, his eyes widening. He stared at me, and in that brief second, all my insecurities rushed back into my mind, and my heart faltered.

But then his eyes softened, and he grinned the slow, familiar grin he kept just for me. My heart restarted, skipping a beat until it returned in full force, pounding against my chest with leaps and lurches. I smiled back, knowing my face was pink but unable to do a thing about it.

And then Mr. Fitzroy stepped in front of me, cutting off my view.

“Lady Rowley, Miss Ashbourne.” He greeted us with a deep bow. I recovered from my surprise and curtsied in response, my pleasure at seeing William already fading.

“I was distressed to notice your absence when I arrived,” he said. “I hope it was not too great a crisis that delayed you.”

“Not at all.” I certainly did not wish to go into detail.

“I am glad to hear it,” he said. I hoped desperately he wished only to exchange pleasantries, but I hoped in vain.

“Would you do me the great pleasure of dancing the next set with me?” he asked.

Still unsettled by Rebecca’s revelation to me the evening before, my stomach clenched at the thought of having to dance with such a man. If I were not worried of the scandalous talk it would cause in refusing him, I would not hesitate to walk away.

“Oh.” I glanced at my grandmother. She only frowned, knowing as well as I that there was no acceptable excuse for me to turn down an offer at the very onset of the ball. I forced the words out. “Yes, I suppose.”

As we spoke, the music ended, and the dancers turned to the musicians and applauded before making their way off the dance floor. My eyes followed William as he led Miss Radcliff to the edge of the room, then left her with a short bow.

Mr. Fitzroy spoke, extending his hand. “Shall we?”

I stifled a groan and placed my hand in his. I had to force myself not to withdraw my arm when he tightened his fingers familiarly around mine.

“Do return her to me after,” my grandmother said, a warning noticeable in her calm voice. “I have a great many introductions to make.”

“Of course,” he said and led me away from her onto the dance floor. I glanced about in what I hoped was an inconspicuous manner, but I had lost sight of William. I spotted Eliza just down the line of ladies, paired with a young gentleman I did not recognize. She smiled at me, eyes bright with the excitement of the night, while her partner stared at her with adoration, as though unable to believe his good fortune. Rebecca stood farther down, engaging her partner in conversation, and it was clearly an amusing one from her laughter that traveled down the line of dancers.

Fortunately for me, the next two dances were a country dance and a reel, which were so lively and quick-paced they did not allow for much conversation. I soon found my worries over forgetting the dance steps unfounded, as my feet remembered the steps I had reviewed with William just days before. I only wished it were him who winked at me and squeezed my hand instead of the loathsome Mr. Fitzroy.

Finally, the music came to a close, and I joined the crowd in applause before turning to Mr. Fitzroy. “Thank you for the dances,” I said, taking his offered arm. I expected to be led to the edge of the crowd, but he turned us back to the dance floor.

“Oh, but the waltz is a favorite of mine,” he said rakishly. “I would not wish to dance it with anyone else.”

My eyes widened. The waltz? The thought of sharing such a daring dance with him made the blood rush from my face; the dancing required the couple to hold each other quite close. That was besides the fact that he presumed much in asking me for a socially unacceptable third dance. Rumors spread thick and fast about any lady who danced too exclusively with one partner.

I tried frantically to formulate an excuse. “I am actually feeling a bit—”

“There you are, Miss Ashbourne.”

The tenseness of my shoulders immediately relaxed at the sound of William’s voice, and I turned to see him standing behind me, looking far more handsome than he had any right to be. He wore a navy jacket over his tan waistcoat, the finely tailored lines suiting his broad shoulders.

His eyes flashed mischievously at me. “I thought you might have forgotten I’d claimed this dance with you.”

He had done no such thing, but I was hardly about to disagree.

“Miss Ashbourne is my partner for the next dance,” Mr. Fitzroy said, his grip on my hand uncomfortably firm.

“I do hate to disagree, but she promised me the waltz nearly a week ago,” William said amiably, though his eyes narrowed. “I can hardly be held to blame for Miss Ashbourne’s lacking memory.”

I glared at him, but there was little force behind it, seeing as I smiled at the same time. He winked at me.

Mr. Fitzroy had no choice but to give my hand over, and he frowned in annoyance. I didn’t dare glance around me. I could only hope we were not causing a scene. The last thing I wanted was more people looking at me.

But the instant William took my hand, all thoughts of Mr. Fitzroy flew from my mind. Even through my glove, the warmth and steadiness of his touch made my breath catch. A thrill ran up my arm, and I inhaled deeply to regain my composure.

It was absolutely ridiculous to react to him in such a way. Had we not spent most of the last fortnight in each other’s company? Had I not danced with him alone in the Havenfield ballroom for nearly an hour?

“How did you know I was in need of a rescue?” I whispered to him as he led me to where the couples formed a large circle around the dance floor.

“A rescue? Is that what that was?” he whispered back a little too innocently. “I had just assumed that wide-eyed and desperate was simply how you looked at balls.”

“I would cuff you on the arm if there were not a hundred people watching.”

He chuckled as we came to our spot. The difference between my two partners was almost humorous. Mr. Fitzroy’s touch repelled me, and his attempts at conversation were filled with stilted awkwardness. But William . . .

As we faced each other and waited for the music to start, a fluttering in my stomach awakened every sense in my body. I ought to feel panicked, tense;

the waltz was the one dance William and I had not practiced. But I felt only anticipation. I knew he would not allow me to slip up.

As the hum of violins filled the air, we offered the obligatory bow and curtsy and then stepped forward to meet in the middle. We turned and stood side by side, his arm behind my back, our free hands joining as we promenaded forward, following the circle of couples. I was vaguely aware of Miss Radcliff's glower from the edge of the dance floor as we passed but could not seem to focus on much besides William's warmth beside me.

"Are you feeling much improved this evening?" His voice was quiet, unassuming.

I had not seen William since the night before in the portrait gallery. I had been so consumed with preparations for the ball that there had not been ample opportunity to contemplate what had occurred between us. But now, as I examined my emotions, there was a difference. I felt a bit lighter, a bit less burdened. Just the knowledge that someone else *knew* about Papa . . . "Yes, actually," I said, matching the low tones of his voice. "I feel . . . relieved."

He nodded. "I am glad for it."

And then the music quickened. I turned to face him once again, and William pulled me closer with his hand on the small of my back, just a breath separating us. I swallowed, darting a glance up to his face. There was no hint of a smile; his features were indecipherable as he looked down at me.

I gathered my skirts with one hand, and he took my free hand in his. On the next beat, William turned and led me across the dance floor as we spun. There was no chance to think on the steps. My body moved instinctively, following William's firm guidance without hesitation. A blazing heat radiated from where we touched: his arm on my waist, my hand in his. We whirled, the candles, onlookers, and dancers fading into a flood of color. And through it all, his eyes locked on mine, his gaze penetrating, searching, as though he sought an answer to a question I could only guess at.

The music slowed, and William twirled me to his right as we resumed our side-by-side promenade from before, following the circle of dancers. Though we slowed enough to speak, I couldn't seem to catch my breath, let alone find any words. William remained silent as well, the gentle pressure of his hand on my waist our only connection. Was he as affected by our dance as I was?

The song came to a close, and we parted, though his hand lingered on my waist as he pulled away. He bowed long and low, and I curtsied, hoping he would not notice my unsteadiness. We rose and regarded each other for a long moment, oblivious to the dancers around us as they applauded and moved off the dance floor.

"You did well," he said. "I would never have guessed it was your first ball." The corner of his mouth twitched. "Though perhaps your second."

I laughed, the tension instantly broken, and took his offered arm. "It is little wonder you are yet unattached if that is a sample of your best flattery."

"Then I will make another attempt, if you will allow it," he said, leading me toward the edge of the room. He tucked my hand tighter against his arm, his voice low and earnest as he bent his head to me. "Have I told you yet tonight how beautiful you are?"

It was suddenly very warm in the hall. William had never said anything like that before. He had offered me compliments, of course, but always with the hint of teasing. I did not meet his gaze, instead focusing on my grandmother holding court with a group of matrons. I could not keep pace with William tonight. He vacillated between teasing and sincerity so easily I was trapped in a constant state of blushing.

"I do think I would remember if you had," I said in an attempt to carry on the previous light tone of our conversation. Surely he only offered a compliment out of politeness. He was not one to bandy about flirtatious words.

"Then perhaps I should say it a few more times," he said, capturing my eyes in his gaze, "so you can more easily recall. And perhaps the more I say

it, the more you will believe it.”

My heart skipped. I was unable to come up with an adequate response as his gaze lingered on me.

Lady Rowley waved to us, and William slipped my hand into his as he prepared to lead me into the crush.

I pulled him to a stop. “Can we dance again? Later?” I ignored social propriety by asking him, but dancing in his arms was the closest to bliss I’d ever felt.

William looked back at me, and his eyes caught the candlelight as he nodded. “I’ll find you.”

Chapter Eighteen

I SPENT THE NEXT DANCE set at my grandmother's side, smiling and curtsying as she introduced me around the assembly hall. In fact, it was difficult to stop smiling, considering the rush of pleasure that filled me every time I thought of my dance with William. My eyes followed him—he was always dancing—and I found his gaze on me more often than not.

When my grandmother's introductions ran dry, a young gentleman approached and was presented as a Mr. Barrington. He requested my hand for the next dance, and I did not have a moment's break from then on. As soon as one gentleman returned me to the edge of the dance floor after a dance, another one appeared, some seeking an introduction with their mothers and some imposing on my grandmother's good graces to introduce them. Most of them were kind and conversational, though a few stood out with their haughtiness and self-importance.

I tried my best to enjoy the dances, but every time a partner smiled at me, I couldn't help but wonder if he had hidden motives, as Mr. Fitzroy clearly did. How many of these men would ask me to dance if I were without my inheritance?

I made a valiant attempt not to examine William's partners too closely, but it was an impossible task. All of them were lovely, more graceful and more comfortable in this dazzling world than I could ever be.

After one particularly awkward dance with a gentleman who seemed unable to talk about anything other than his prized bloodhounds, I escaped to my grandmother, turning down two offers with an excuse of fatigue.

Lady Rowley watched in amusement as the gentlemen left in disappointment. "You are making quite the impression tonight. I have not seen the young men in this town so persistent since Eliza came out last year."

As though she heard her name, Eliza appeared at my side, accompanied by Mr. Brooks, with whom she had just been dancing. She murmured something to him before he left, then turned to join us, eyes glowing.

“Juliana, I have been aching to talk to you,” she said. “Emma mentioned something happened to your dress. But where did you come upon this one? You look absolutely beautiful.”

I was thinking the same of her. With her golden hair pulled into an elegant knot, her enviable figure complemented by the stylishly cut white gown she wore, she was stunning.

I smoothed the skirts of my dress. “It was Grandmama’s idea.” I borrowed Eliza’s term of endearment. It was the first time I had referred to her as anything other than Lady Rowley out loud. My grandmother beamed. “It was one of my mother’s.”

“It is perfect for you,” Eliza said. “I have never seen you in such high spirits.”

We were interrupted by a man requesting Eliza’s hand. She accepted politely, though she sent me a look of long-suffering as he led her away.

My grandmother and I were soon joined by another group of her friends, who twittered and gossiped over dresses and hairstyles until my foot began to tap in impatience.

“My dear Miss Ashbourne, are you not a sight tonight?” Miss Radcliff appeared at my side without warning, flashing a charming smile before she hid it with her fan. She wore white, the same as Eliza, though her dress was swathed in so much lace and beading I wondered that she could move at all. My grandmother and the group of ladies turned to her as she continued on. “I have not seen that style of dress in years.” Her eyes were wide with an innocence I doubted anyone believed for a second. “You certainly draw the eye.”

Lady Rowley’s eyes darkened, but I spoke first. “You are very kind to notice, Miss Radcliff,” I said demurely. “It is terribly sentimental to me.

You see, it was my mother's dress, sewn by her own hand."

The ladies around us cooed and ahed, admiring my gown and saying what a sweet girl I was to honor my mother's memory so. Miss Radcliff blanched; clearly, her plan to embarrass me had failed. I had only endeared myself even more to the matrons. She snapped her fan closed and shot me a scowl as she beat a hasty retreat.

I met my grandmother's eyes, and she nodded in approval as I accepted the compliments of the ladies with a modest bow of my head.

"Miss Ashbourne, might I have this next dance?"

I turned, already prepared with an excuse before I realized it was Mr. Brooks who stood beside me, smiling pleasantly. "Oh! Of course." I took his extended hand.

"How are you enjoying your Society debut?" he asked as he led me to our place. I'd grown used to his booming voice, but it still made me smile.

"It has been . . ." I paused in an attempt to think of the right word. "Interesting."

He laughed loud and full, causing the dancers closest to us to look over. I did not care. He was genuine in a way I'd found rare that evening.

"That is an excellent way of putting it," he said, still chuckling. "I am glad you have not found it altogether terrible."

My mind flashed back to my dance with William, and the back of my neck tingled. "No, not at all."

"I observed you dancing with Mr. Walford."

I could not have picked out a Mr. Walford from the crowd if my life depended on it. He prompted me. "With the bloodhounds?"

I remembered then. "Oh yes, how could I forget. Especially with their unusual names."

“Galahad and Lancelot?” His eyes twinkled with mirth. “What is so unusual about those?”

We laughed, and I felt more at ease than I had all evening. Our dance began, and we chatted congenially as we went through the steps. My gaze occasionally wandered down the line of dancers to where William was.

Eventually, Mr. Brooks caught the direction of my glances. “Mr. Rowley is in high demand tonight,” he observed.

“Indeed.” My cheeks warmed, and I looked away from William.

“He is not the sort of gentleman to stand about, leaving a lady with no partner,” Mr. Brooks said. “And with all the matchmaking matrons here tonight, I would be surprised if he has even a second to himself.”

Disappointment tugged at me. William had promised me a second dance, but the night was nearly through. If Mr. Brooks was right, then I doubted he would have time for me again.

Our dance ended, and Mr. Brooks led me off the dance floor, thanking me for the dance and leaving me with a bow. I looked for my grandmother, but another face caught my eye. Mr. Fitzroy’s. He craned his neck as he looked over the crowd. I had a horrible suspicion I knew who he searched for.

I glanced about myself, desperate for somewhere to hide. A few feet to my right was a row of open doors leading out onto a terrace overlooking a garden. It was dark outside and as good a place as any to hide. I hurried out the doors, not daring to look behind to see if he noticed me. The terrace was not empty; a group of older gentlemen stood talking. I moved away from them, away from the light and music spilling out the tall doors, until I stood beside a set of white stone steps leading to the garden below. I breathed a sigh, enjoying the relative tranquility of the terrace.

“I thought I saw you slip out here.”

Any peace I’d regained fled immediately upon hearing Mr. Fitzroy’s voice behind me. I spun, watching him walk toward me, the light from the doors

illuminating his silhouette. I glanced to the group of gentlemen some distance away. I hoped he wanted only to talk, but having others nearby made my heart calm slightly.

“I needed some fresh air.” I fidgeted with my ring.

“It is rather warm in there,” he agreed, coming to stand beside me. I tensed as he leaned closer to me. “There are far too many people. It’s much better out here. Much more . . . secluded.”

I did not like the suggestion I heard in his voice, nor the way his eyes followed the length of my body, a glint of pleasure appearing.

“You look utterly breathtaking tonight, Juliana,” he said, and he moved even closer.

“I do not recall allowing you the use of my given name,” I said, irritated. He stepped forward again, and I caught a whiff of his breath, the strong scent of alcohol almost making me cough. “Have you been drinking?” I asked, backing away.

“It is a party.”

A movement caught my eye; the group of men headed for the open doors, departing the terrace. Rebecca’s story about the scandal in London flashed through my mind. I’d not believed it possible when I’d first heard it. But now, witnessing Mr. Fitzroy’s glazed eyes and loose tongue firsthand, it became much more real and much more possible.

I moved for the closest door, but before I had gone two steps, Mr. Fitzroy’s hand encircled my wrist and brought me to a jolting halt.

“Leaving so soon?” His voice was unsteady.

I pulled away from him, but his grip was unyielding. The coldness of his fingers leeches through my gloves. “Release me,” I snapped.

He laughed, a wild sound that made a shiver run up my spine. “Come, Juliana, you needn’t pretend any longer,” he said in what I was sure he

thought was a soothing voice. “I’ve seen the way you look at me. It’s only the two of us out here.” He pulled hard on my arm, jerking me forward and into his arms.

Blood pounded in my ears, and I shoved against his chest as hard as I could. He only laughed again and grabbed both of my arms. He loomed over me, leering.

Panic rose in my throat. I struggled against him frantically, but his hold on me was tight. I opened my mouth to scream, hoping against hope that someone would hear me above the music.

“Unhand her *immediately*.”

I nearly sobbed in relief at hearing William’s voice, furious and fierce, directly behind me.

In Mr. Fitzroy’s surprise, he loosened his grip, and I was able to yank my right arm free, though he regained his grasp on my left hand. I spun to William, who stepped out of the shadows of the terrace, his face hard and eyes blazing.

“This doesn’t concern you, Rowley,” Mr. Fitzroy hissed. His fingers twisted cruelly on my wrist, and I winced.

William’s eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. A muscle in his jaw twitched, and he curled his hands into tight fists. He clearly wanted nothing more than to trounce Mr. Fitzroy, but I stood between them.

“On the contrary,” William growled. “It concerns me a great deal that you would threaten a woman who is under my protection.” He moved closer, his steps slow but deliberate. “Release her at once, or this will be the last ball you ever attend. My dueling pistols have laid unused for far too long.”

“You would call me out?” Mr. Fitzroy sneered, spittle flying from his mouth. “Over her, a governess?”

I closed my eyes. With my defenses already weakened by the exhausting façade I was forced to wear tonight, Mr. Fitzroy's words pierced every defense I'd built around myself. No matter how I arranged my hair, no matter what gown I wore, I was still a governess, a servant. And I would never be the equal of any lady inside the ballroom that evening.

But William's voice broke through the struggles I bore in my mind. "In an instant," he said with firmness and unequivocal conviction.

The air in my lungs released, and I opened my eyes to stare at him, willing myself to hear, understand, *believe* his words.

Mr. Fitzroy only hesitated a moment longer before he released my arm in disgust. I snatched it to my chest and stumbled in William's direction. He was already moving, putting himself between Mr. Fitzroy and myself, one arm outstretched as a shield in front of me.

"You will leave at once," William ordered, his voice steel.

"Hardly a sacrifice," Mr. Fitzroy spat. "You call this ball entertainment?"

"You misunderstood," William said flatly. "You will leave Millbury straightaway. Before dawn. And if I ever hear of you coming within a mile of Miss Ashbourne again, so help me, you will regret it dearly."

Mr. Fitzroy's eyes were unfocused but fuming, though he possessed enough presence of mind to realize he had lost. With a last withering glare, he skulked off into the shadows of the garden.

William watched him go, breathing hard, his shoulders tense. When he turned to me a few seconds later, his face was tight, though concern shone in his eyes. "Did he hurt you?" he asked, voice catching.

I shook my head, but unconsciously rubbed my arm where I imagined I could still feel Mr. Fitzroy's fingers around my wrist.

He took my hand gently and examined it as though he could see through my glove. "Are you certain?"

I nodded, my voice unable to function. It had been such a near thing. I had not had a chance of breaking free from Mr. Fitzroy, I knew that much.

A cluster of ladies exited the doors of the assembly hall, laughing and talking. William withdrew his hand from mine and stepped back. I understood; though a horde of people stood just through the doors, it was not proper for us to be out together in the dark, especially holding hands.

The group passed by without incident, though a couple of the younger ladies watched William. As the ladies made their way across the terrace, William's eyes found mine again, probing them intently.

"I am all right, I promise." At least I thought I was. I hoped my nerves would return to normal once the memory of Mr. Fitzroy's rancid breath and leering eyes faded. I could hardly believe this had happened yet again, first with Mr. Seymour and now with Mr. Fitzroy. Why was it that I attracted the very worst of men? I was hardly a great beauty; it had to be my status as an orphaned governess, seemingly without protection, that drew in such blackguards.

William exhaled, turning so he faced the bright windows of the halls. The light illuminated the tension still etched on his face.

I cleared my throat. "How did you know . . . ?" I was not entirely certain how to phrase my question.

He observed me with an emotion I couldn't quite name, but it was far from unpleasant.

"I was looking for you when Brooks found me and told me *Fitzroy*"—he spat the name—"had followed you out here. I arrived in time to see him take hold of you and—" His voice broke off. Fury still burned in his eyes as he scowled in the direction Mr. Fitzroy had disappeared into the night.

A hollow pit settled into my stomach. William would never threaten something he would not follow through on. Would he even now decide to follow Mr. Fitzroy and challenge him? The idea of William in any amount of danger brought such distress to my mind that I found it hard to breathe. I

needed to redirect his thoughts, calm his anger, anything to keep him here at my side and not dashing away into the darkness.

“That is twice you have rescued me tonight,” I said, my voice doing a horrible job of sounding unaffected. “I must stop getting into scrapes, or I will be forever in your debt.”

The music from the ball washed over us, filling the air. I looked up and found his eyes fixed upon my face, narrowed as though he was trying to read my thoughts. The lines of tension around his jaw eased slightly.

“Not an entirely terrible place to be,” he said.

“No, I suppose not.” I attempted a smile, but it faded as I found myself pinned beneath his gaze. I was unable to move, unable to breathe, the force of his eyes resting upon me. He raised his hand to my face as though he meant to touch me, but a loud giggle from one of the ladies behind us reminded him we were not alone. He dropped his hand, but his eyes did not move from mine.

“Juliana, I—”

There was an abrupt silence as the music ended, just before the applause filled the air. William’s head jolted toward the assembly hall.

“Blast,” he muttered. He looked back at me. “I promised Eliza the last dance.”

I nodded, fighting my disappointment. I would have liked nothing more than to spend a few hours, or perhaps days, out here on the terrace with William looking at me the way he was.

He extended his arm. “I’ll take you in. Forgive my selfishness, but I am not allowing you out of my sight for the rest of the night.”

I took his arm. “I have not the slightest notion of leaving your sight.”

A multitude of emotions crossed through his eyes, and he tucked my hand tighter against his arm. As we walked back into the hall, a sense of

rightness settled upon me. My arm was wrapped securely in William's, and though Mr. Fitzroy's actions still remained fresh in my mind, I felt safe, safer than I'd felt in a long time.

William left me with my grandmother, sending me a reassuring glance before leaving to find Eliza.

"Are you not hoping for one last dance?" Lady Rowley asked. "I am certain it would not be difficult to find a partner."

She was correct; from where I stood, at least two different gentlemen headed my way. I stepped closer to her side and linked my arm with hers, hoping to make it clear I had no intention of dancing. My ploy worked. The gentlemen backtracked quickly and looked around for different partners.

"I would rather not dance just now," I said dryly.

She seemed to know I did not wish to speak, so we stood in companionable quiet, watching the dance. My eyes found William, as they always did, dancing nearby with Eliza.

As I observed him, his eyes flicked to me. He raised his eyebrows, asking a silent question.

I nodded in answer.

I hadn't yet had the chance to tell him I'd decided to stay at Havenfield. But I allowed myself the tiniest grin as I pictured his face when I told him tomorrow.

Chapter Nineteen

I AWOKE THE NEXT MORNING with a smile. I could not remember the last time I'd felt so light, so unburdened, so . . . content. The dreary clouds and blustering wind outside could do nothing to temper my disposition. I was astonishingly happy. I hopped from my bed and went to my window, throwing it open so the breeze rushed about me, blowing my hair into a mad tangle. I leaned into the gale and breathed in the scent of rain thick in the air around me.

It was early yet. The sun was but a vague light in the east, obscured by the billowing clouds. I doubted anyone else in the house was awake, save the servants. I had slept only a few hours, but there was no chance of me returning to sleep now. Not with memories of the ball dancing through my mind: the look in William's eyes when he'd first seen me, the warmth between us as he'd held me close during our waltz, his furious voice commanding Mr. Fitzroy to unhand me. Even with the dark moments I'd endured the evening before, it had been difficult for me to concentrate on much besides William.

I dressed quickly, arranging my own hair for the first time since arriving at Havenfield. Compared to Emma's usual elegant twist, my effort was poor indeed, but it would do. All was quiet as I made my way through the house. Anticipation filled me; would William be awake too? If he was, I would tell him right away that I'd decided to stay.

I approached the breakfast room, but a voice called out from behind me. "Miss Ashbourne."

It was Mr. Banfield. He stopped before me with a bow.

"Good morning, Mr. Banfield," I said.

"And a good morning to you," he said, a strange rigidity to his face. "I beg your pardon, miss, but you have a visitor this morning, in the parlor."

“A visitor?” Who could be here at this hour? My thoughts flashed to Mr. Fitzroy before I scolded myself for my irrationality. He would not be so foolish as to show up here after what he had done last night. “Who is it?”

“Miss Isabel Radcliff.”

I could not have been more stunned if he’d claimed the King himself to be waiting for me in the parlor. “Miss Radcliff? What on earth is she doing here so very early?”

“I attempted to ascertain that very fact,” Mr. Banfield said, a muscle in his jaw ticking. “But she refused to tell me, insisting she needed to see you as soon as you came down.”

I glanced at the door to the breakfast room. I wished more than anything to simply ignore Miss Radcliff. Not only was she being very rude in coming here so early, but I also had very little desire to hear whatever she had come to say. Insulting condescension was not generally how I preferred to start my mornings.

“She says she will not leave until she has spoken with you.” Mr. Banfield looked positively incensed at the idea.

“She said that, did she?” I pursed my lips. “That is very presumptuous of her.”

“Shall I tell her you are occupied?” Mr. Banfield asked. “I would be perfectly happy to make any excuse you wish of me.”

Mr. Banfield was rather stuffy, but he was sympathetic underneath his cool exterior. “That is very kind, but I would not ask that of you.” I sighed. “Let us simply go and have this over and done with.”

I followed the butler down the hallway to the parlor. I did not hesitate as I opened the door and entered the room. Miss Radcliff stood on the far side, near the window. She turned as I stepped inside and closed the door behind me.

“Miss Radcliff,” I said, not bothering to mask the annoyance in my voice. “I hope there is no urgent crisis that requires my attention so early this morning.”

She stepped forward. “No, not so very urgent, though I can presume to call it a crisis.”

I did not answer as I seated myself. She sat primly across from me, her expression unreadable, eyes guarded. Even at this early hour, her dark ringlets were arranged in her usual elaborate coiffure, every aspect of her appearance flawless. I normally would have felt lacking in comparison, but this morning, not even Miss Radcliff’s irritating perfection could dampen my good spirits. I only wished for her to be gone so I might find William.

“And what is this catastrophe that brings you to my door?”

“That is just it,” she said, her throaty voice self-assured. “It is you.”

“Me?” I was taken aback. “What on earth do you mean?”

“You need not play the naïve innocent with me,” she said, eyes narrowing. “You know very well the game you are playing.”

“I assure you I have not the faintest notion of any game.” My patience grew thin. “If you would kindly state your purpose in visiting, we can be finished with this conversation, as I am sure you cannot be enjoying it any more than I.”

“Very well,” she said, her nose so high in the air I wondered that she could see me at all. “If you prefer to speak without pretenses, I am happy to oblige you.” She paused, letting the full force of her penetrating green eyes wash over me. “I have come to convince you it is in your best interest that your visit to Havenfield come to a swift conclusion.”

My eyes must have widened considerably, as she looked pleased at my surprise.

“I beg your pardon?” I managed.

“I do not believe I spoke unclearly.”

“No,” I said with barely concealed ire. “I heard you distinctly. I simply cannot imagine what would cause you to say such a thing, especially as I have no intention of submitting to your senseless request.”

“Oh, I have little doubt you will change your mind once you hear what I have to say.” She reached into her reticule and pulled out a letter. “When my mother visited with Lady Rowley a fortnight ago, she discovered the most interesting of coincidences.” She paused, clearly to keep me in suspense.

I pressed her, keen for this interview to be done and over with. “And that would be?”

“That she is acquainted with your former employer, a Mrs. Seymour. It seems her mother and mine were old school friends.”

I maintained an unaffected air, though my stomach tightened. “I cannot see what Mrs. Seymour has to do with anything.”

“No?” she asked in false surprise. “I would think it to be perfectly obvious.”

I gritted my teeth, not bothering to respond. The effrontery of this woman was almost more than I could stand.

“I suppose I had better lay it out plainly, then, for your sake.” Miss Radcliff’s eyes narrowed. “After learning of your shared acquaintance, my mother wrote to Mrs. Seymour to tell her of the coincidence. And she received the most interesting letter in return.”

She fingered the letter she held in her lap, and my eyes dropped to stare at it. An icy surge rose within me as I recognized Mrs. Seymour’s long, graceful hand. What could possibly be in that letter? What would Mrs. Seymour write to Mrs. Radcliff, a near stranger, save for her mother’s connection to her? Would she write of my unapproved teachings to her daughter?

“I must confess,” Miss Radcliff said, “that although I thought you to be a scheming girl, I had not supposed you capable of such a scandalous endeavor.”

Teaching a young girl profound political and social truths could hardly be called scandalous, but Miss Radcliff seemed prone to theatrics.

She went on, confusing me even further. “To attempt to entrap your employer in such an underhanded manner. It is positively abhorrent.”

What was she talking about? “Entrap my employer? Why would I have any need to entrap Mrs. Seymour?”

She raised one eyebrow as though amused by my ignorance. “You mistake my meaning. I am not speaking of the wife. I am referring to Mr. Seymour.”

And with her words, I froze. I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t move. I stared at the letter she tapped against her other hand, watching her movements with a peculiar detachment. Was this bizarre conversation actually taking place, or was I in the midst of an unnervingly realistic dream? Although *nightmare* might be a better term.

“Apparently your conduct with Mr. Seymour was quite atrocious. If I may be so bold as to quote the letter, you were ‘a relentless flirt whose indecent behavior toward Mr. Seymour forced an immediate termination.’”

I gripped my hands together so tightly the muscles in my forearms clenched with the effort. “That is a lie,” I whispered.

“Is it, now?” Miss Radcliff watched me with an almost sympathetic tilt of her head. “What motive could she have for creating such a falsehood?”

“She hardly needs a reason.” My voice shook. “She is a bitter, ill-content woman set on ruining any happiness I might have. And her lecherous husband is no better.”

“I am afraid in a case like this, it will be your word against hers, a mere governess against a respected member of Society. Once the rumors begin

spreading, everyone will finally know the truth about you, Miss Ashbourne.”

Her purpose in coming this morning became painfully, horribly clear.

“You mean to ruin me.” I seemed unable to provoke any sort of emotion into my voice. My tone was flat, impassive. “You will spread the rumor that I attempted to seduce my employer.”

“It is hardly a rumor. I have the proof here in my hand. And in any case, I am not so unfeeling as that.” She drummed her fingers on the letter. “Did I not say I wished to convince you to leave Havenfield? That is my offer. If you leave immediately and never return, I will speak not a word of this affair to anyone.”

I stared at her. I had never wanted to strike a person before today, but the sight of her calculating smile at the expense of my entire future put my spotless record in very real jeopardy.

“And for what? So you may have a clear path to William?”

She frowned at me. “You insult me with your assumption. I have only his best interest in mind, and that of Lady Rowley’s and Miss Woodward’s. They are dear friends of mine, and I will not stand to have a conniving minx take advantage of their kindness.”

I shook my head. “I will not sit here and listen to your insults and slander.” I stood and strode for the door.

“You would do well to think of your family,” she called after me. I came to an abrupt halt, chest heaving. “Do you think Lady Rowley would be unaffected by rumors surrounding her errant granddaughter? Or that Eliza would ever be courted by any eligible gentleman once it is known that her cousin is a wanton, unseemly girl, no better than the lowest of courtesans?” I could hear her harsh breathing as she stood and moved closer to me. “And what of William? Even if he were to believe you and stand by you, is it worth his reputation? He would be snubbed by every proper society.”

“William does not care for proper society,” I whispered, but even as I said it, I knew she spoke the truth. Even if William did not care for the company of Society, it was clear that his sister and mother did, as well as my grandmother. Would a scandal touching my name affect them as well?

And though I could pretend I did not care what others thought of me, the blunt fact of the matter was that I depended on it almost entirely. Miss Radcliff had no idea of my plans for a school, but if such a rumor were to follow me, there would be no escaping the consequences. No parents would send their daughters to be educated by a woman with such a dubious reputation. I would have no school, no future.

I turned to face her. Her eyes gleamed triumphantly. I had no choice, and she knew it.

“If I leave,” I said slowly, forcing the words, “you will give me that letter, and you will never tell a soul what was contained within it?”

“If you leave,” she retorted, “I will make that promise. But I will not hand over the letter. How am I to ensure you will not simply destroy it?”

There was a tense silence as I considered her words. But the letter did not matter in the end. Mrs. Seymour could always write another one.

“I am expected to remain until at least tomorrow.” The words came from somewhere else, from someone else. There was no possible way I was speaking them. “If I leave any sooner, it will rouse my family’s suspicions.”

She eyed me in distaste. “Very well. Tomorrow, at the latest.”

I watched her with an acute hatred. “You cannot think this will work. Even once I am gone, you must know there is not a chance William will return to you. You ruined every opportunity of that happening when you abandoned him two years ago.”

She gave me a pitying look. “You have known William but a few weeks, and you think you know him better than I? I have known him for years,

years spent talking, dancing, planning for the future. Believe me when I say I do not doubt in the slightest I will earn his affection once more.”

That more than anything shook my dangerously depleted confidence. I trusted William’s sincerity for me. I knew he cared for me. But Miss Radcliff was everything I was not: beautiful, accomplished, comfortable in Society. Once I was gone, would she again be successful in winning his heart?

She made her way around me to the door, pausing with her hand on the handle. “You had better hurry on upstairs,” she said dismissively. “I expect you have some packing to do.”

And then she was gone, and my world crumbled around me.

Chapter Twenty

I PACED MY CHAMBERS, ANALYZING the situation from every angle. I debated again and again whether I should just tell William and my grandmother about Miss Radcliff's threat. I was not alone or friendless anymore. Surely they could help me, stand by me.

And yet I knew they would suffer for it if they did. My grandmother would claim she didn't care about her standing in Society, but it would pain her nonetheless to be rejected by the people who had surrounded her for decades. And William . . . At the thought of him, my chest throbbed with an agony I couldn't begin to describe. I had never in my life thought to find someone like him. Kind and generous, lighthearted but sincere, gentle yet commanding. I could see our future together so clearly. How could I leave him now, knowing we were on the verge of something wonderful, something I wanted so desperately?

My anger burned hotter with every minute I deliberated. Oh, how I wished I could have slapped Miss Radcliff's smug smile from her face. That she sought to ruin my life to improve hers—the injustice of it all swelled up inside me, and I snatched a pillow from my bed and threw it across the room. It landed with an unsatisfying thump beside the chaise, and I stared at it, my heart pounding out a stilted rhythm. *Unfair*, it seemed to say with every beat. *Unfair, unfair, unfair, unfair.*

I wanted to stay at Havenfield. I knew the sordid truth of what had happened with Mr. Seymour, and I knew William would believe me. But how could I stay? This was not his fight. He did not deserve to have a wife tainted by scandal. He deserved a proper wife who was graceful and lovely and good.

There was nothing for me to debate any longer. I had only one possible course before me.

I worked out the details of my plan. I would spend today packing, avoid my family and William as long as possible, and leave first thing in the

morning. Surely Lady Rowley would allow me the use of a coach to travel to London. My heart dropped at the thought of saying goodbye to her, of never seeing her again. It would hurt her terribly for me to leave in such a way. But I could not think of a better option. I could only hope the pain of my departure would fade quickly once I was gone.

I skipped breakfast, my riotous emotions leaving me without an appetite. I packed my trunk methodically, with slow, detached movements. I hesitated over my dress I'd worn to the ball, fingering the skirt. In the end, I folded it and laid it on top of the rest of my belongings. My grandmother had said she considered the dresses mine. She would not begrudge me this one, I was certain.

Rebecca and Eliza appeared at my door midmorning with an invitation to join them for a ride into town. I pled exhaustion from the ball and declined. They exchanged a worried glance, and I forced back a fresh wave of regret as they left.

Another unexpected knock came at my door just after lunch, which I had also decided to miss.

"Yes?" I called out.

"It's only me, miss."

I opened the door to see Emma peering at me in concern. I hadn't spent so much time in my room since the first week I'd been here.

"Mr. Rowley asked me to give this to you since you weren't at meals today." She handed me a folded slip of paper.

I read the note. Written in William's strong hand, there were only two words. *Ride today?*

My traitorous heart leapt, ecstatic that he missed me, but my mind clamped down. I was leaving tomorrow. It would never do to lead him on any longer.

“Will you wait a moment?”

Closing the door behind me, I went to my writing desk, scrawled a quick response, and handed it back to her.

“You may give him that as my reply,” I said.

Emma stared at the folded paper in her hands. “Miss, are you certain you don’t need—?”

“Thank you, Emma, but I would like to be left alone the rest of the day,” I said firmly.

She nodded, bobbed a curtsy, and left. I felt a tinge of guilt for speaking to her so, but I pushed it away. I would be gone soon enough.

I returned to packing, checking every surface of my room for anything that I may have missed. As I searched the drawers of my desk, another knock sounded.

“I do not wish to be disturbed, Emma.” I attempted a more commanding tone than before. There was no reply, and I turned back to my task, certain she had finally gone away.

Another knock came, harder. I exhaled in frustration and crossed the room, wrenching open my door. “Emma, I told y—” My voice died instantly.

William stood in the hallway, and from the look on his face, he was not particularly pleased with me.

“What is this?” he asked tersely. He held up the slip of paper I’d given to Emma a few minutes before. I said nothing but stepped into the open crack of the door and blocked his view of my room. The disarray behind me would surely give away my plans.

He continued on, reading from my note. “No, thank you. I am indisposed this afternoon.” He lowered the note and looked at me in disbelief.

“I am feeling unwell,” I said defensively.

“Eliza said you were tired.”

Blast. They were talking behind my back.

“Yes, that too.” My voice sounded false, even to my ears.

He regarded me for a long moment before shaking his head. “You are not ill.”

“I am,” I retorted. “And I’ll thank you not to imply I’m lying.” Even though I was, quite dreadfully.

He was undaunted by my response. “What is wrong, Juliana?” His eyes were a mixture of frustration and concern. “Is this about what happened last night? I promise, you have no reason to be afraid—”

“No.” I shook my head. I hadn’t anticipated him thinking Mr. Fitzroy was the reason for my strange behavior. “No, I swear it’s not that.” I stepped back into my room. “I will try to come down for dinner tonight, if I am feeling better. Thank you for your concern.”

I closed the door with a click, William’s confused and hurt face the last thing I saw. I stood without moving, my hands pressed against the door until I heard his footsteps move slowly down the hall. I let out my breath and gasped for air. How was I going to do this? How could I leave William thinking I did not care for him?

It was the best thing for both of us, I reminded myself resolutely. I would go back to London, and his life would return to normal. He would move on, perhaps forgetting he ever cared for me.

I doubted I would ever do the same.

* * *

I stood outside the drawing room and listened to the quiet voices that passed through the closed door. I’d decided to come down to dinner; I needed to ask Lady Rowley about a coach for tomorrow, and I knew I had to do it in person.

And besides that, I wanted to leave Havenfield on good terms. I didn't know if I would ever return, but if I escaped in the dim light of early morning, without so much as a goodbye, I knew the chances would be much lower. I couldn't bring myself to close the book completely on my family and on William.

I took a steadying breath and opened the door, entering the room as silently as I could. My efforts were in vain.

"Juliana!" my grandmother said. "Oh, I am glad to see you. Are you feeling better?"

"A bit, thank you," I said in a soft voice.

William, Eliza, and Mr. Brooks sat in the far corner, while my grandmother, Aunt Lydia, Mr. Woodward, Mrs. Rowley, and Rebecca were closer on the sofas. I sat on an armchair, listening vaguely to the conversation, attempting to focus on anything but William's burning gaze from the corner of the room.

After a minute, I couldn't stand it any longer, and I allowed my eyes to flick to him. He watched me with a frown. I looked away. One more night. I could endure one more night, and then I would be free from this agony.

But as we sat, conversation flowing around us, his gaze only grew more intense. I fidgeted with my ring, determined not to look at him, but feeling the force of it. My resolve weakened with every passing minute, and I found myself second-guessing my decision to leave. We could ride out the storm of gossip, couldn't we? People would forget, wouldn't they?

Out of the corner of my eye, William stood and moved in my direction. I quickly overpowered my deceitful emotions. No, I could not stay. I would leave and ensure no hint of gossip marred my family. But I would not torture myself with thoughts of a future that was no longer possible.

I was on my feet and to the door before I even realized I had stood.

“Juliana?” my grandmother called after me, but I did not stop. I rushed down the hall, pushed open the heavy front door, and made it down the low set of steps before I broke into a run. I ran toward the stables, the lantern inside the open doors bouncing in my vision, beckoning to me in the twilight. As I arrived, panting and no doubt looking ridiculous in my evening gown, I spotted a groom with an unfamiliar horse, light in color, saddled. Clearly, he had just finished giving the horse a workout, as the animal was covered in a light sheen of sweat.

I’d only meant to escape the house, but my plans changed when I saw the ready horse. I marched to the groom.

“I’d like to take him for a ride,” I said, my voice unsteady. “Please.”

The groom gaped at me. “Now, miss?”

“Yes.”

“But he’s not in a sidesaddle. If you’ll just give me a mo’, I’ll have Miranda saddled up for ye.”

I could hear footsteps coming from the house. I would have bet my entire inheritance I knew who followed me.

“He’ll do just fine,” I said quickly. I approached them, and thanking my lucky stars that the horse was much shorter than Miranda, I mounted smoothly and took the reins from the groom. It felt strange to ride astride but not completely foreign. I could do this.

He looked doubtful. “I don’t know about this, miss. Perhaps I ought to ask Mr. Rowl—”

But I was already gone, heading out the opposite end of the stable in a canter. I heard William call from behind me, but I did not slow. I turned my horse east of the house. I’d gone this way many times before with William. The church ruins had always had a calming effect on me, and I desperately needed that now.

I nudged my heels gently into my horse's flanks, as I'd done countless times with Miranda. She always responded with a small increase of speed, which I now expected from my new mount. Instead, I was nearly thrown backward as my horse took off at a full gallop.

I regained my seat, barely, and held on with all my strength, leaning low and pulling frantically at my reins. My horse didn't slow one whit and tossed his head in defiance. Panic rushed through my veins as we dashed across the lawn, shadows long in the setting sun. I couldn't stop him—how was I going to stop him?

Rapid hoof beats sounded just beside me, and a hand reached out for my reins. William! He pulled hard on the reins, and my horse responded, slowing his gallop to a trot and then to an abrupt stop with a nervous whinny.

I didn't look at William. I *couldn't* look at William. I threw my leg over and slid from my horse's back. William did the same and rounded on me as soon as both boots hit the ground.

“What the devil were you thinking?” he shouted. “You've never ridden astride or on any horse but your own. You could have been killed!”

I stalked away from him. I was angry but not with him. I was furious with myself for creating this situation, William and I alone. My entire plan depended on not being alone with him again. He followed me, leaving the horses behind. My heartbeat pounded in my ears, my head filled with a strange rushing sound.

“What is happening with you?” he asked, his voice incensed. “You won't talk to me, you won't look at me, you take a strange horse out on a dangerous whim when it's nearly dark out—”

I hurried on, and his footsteps told me he was close behind.

“Juliana, stop,” he commanded.

I shook my head, quickening my pace to the house in the distance.

“Why are you constantly running away from me?” The sheer frustration and pain in his voice grabbed ahold of me, and I whirled on him. He came to a sudden halt, eyes wide.

“Because I am terrified of you!” It was as though a dam had broken inside me. I could not keep my emotions contained a moment longer. “I am terrified of the way you make me feel, of how I think of you constantly. I am terrified of how much I love this place”—I gestured wildly at the countryside around me—“and I am terrified of how much I love you.”

My words seemed to echo in the stillness of the night.

“I am absolutely terrified,” I whispered.

He was silent for a long second, his expression unfathomable. Then he groaned and took one step and then another, catching my wrist and pulling me roughly to him. And then he was kissing me, his lips warm, unyielding. One arm wrapped around my waist, the other behind my head, holding me tightly against him as though I might fly away at any moment.

Every thought in my mind vanished; he was kissing me—*William* was kissing me. The flame smoldering in my chest flared, and I grasped his lapels and pulled him closer, my lips burning against his. All I could focus on was William’s lips, the heat of his arms encircling me, and the thought that this kiss must never, ever end.

He kissed me with all the fervor I’d expected from him, sliding his hands up my back and then my neck, and then he cradled my face. His fierce passion melted into tantalizing tenderness, and the softness of his touch caused a thrill to run over every inch of my skin.

He finally pulled back, his chest heaving as he leaned his forehead against mine. I kept my eyes closed, fighting for breath, fighting against the war in my heart.

“Juliana.” His voice was low, hoarse.

I shook my head still pressed against his. I knew what he wanted to say, but I couldn't bear to hear that he loved me. Not now.

I memorized every detail: his hands gentle against my cheeks, his breath warm on my face, the faintest smell of soap and parchment that lingered on his clothes.

"I've wanted to do that for a very long time," he whispered. He stroked his thumbs along my cheekbones, and I leaned into his touch.

"Me too." I opened my eyes and met his. They were filled with hope. I cursed inwardly, my momentary joy evaporating. I should not have allowed him to kiss me. It had only made things worse.

The unfairness of it all hit me once again. Why did I have to fall in love with him, of all the men in the world?

"Why did it have to be you?" I breathed, my voicing breaking.

He didn't respond, but the happiness in his eyes faded as he watched me. I took a ragged breath and forced my feet backward, pulling away from him. He let me go reluctantly, following me a step before stopping when I held out my hands.

"I can't," I said shakily.

His eyes pled with me, bewildered. "I don't understand."

"I know." If I told him about Miss Radcliff's threat, I was certain he would try to find a way to make it work, to make our future possible. But no matter what possibilities I imagined, they all ended with my family's damaged reputation. "I know, and I am sorry."

I winced at the inadequacy of my words. But I had nothing else to offer him. I wrapped my arms around my waist, chilled by the absence of his body against mine in the cool evening breeze.

"You're leaving, aren't you?"

I nodded and stared at my boots, unable to bear the agony in his features. “I have to.”

William turned away from me, running his hand through his hair in frustration. “And nothing I say will make a difference?”

“I’m sorry,” I whispered, repeating myself, but I had nothing else to give him. He didn’t respond as he stared out over the rustling trees and grass as though I hadn’t spoken.

I took one last look at him. His back was to me, his head bent, shoulders bowed, and my heart nearly ripped in two at the sight. I backed away. He did not move as I left, as I turned and walked back to the house, the last light of day disappearing behind the horizon.

Chapter Twenty-One

THE WEATHER DELIGHTED IN PLAYING tricks on me. Yesterday morning, when all was well and my happiness was near to overflowing, the sky had been dark with clouds, wind gusting, and it hadn't bothered me in the slightest. Yet now, as I stood watching my trunk being loaded onto the coach, I cursed the sunshine, the cloudless sky, even the chirping birds. If I was miserable, it seemed only right that nature ought to be as well.

I tightened my bonnet's knot under my chin, smoothed my skirts, fiddled with my ring—anything to keep from looking in the direction of my grandmother, Aunt Lydia, and Eliza standing just behind me. I had said my goodbyes to Rebecca, Mrs. Rowley, and Mr. Woodward inside, and only these three had followed to see me off.

Finally, everything was in readiness, and I could avoid my farewells no longer. I turned to see my family's faces, ranging from sorrow to confusion, with Aunt Lydia standing out with her expression of indifference, though I flattered myself by imagining a touch of uneasiness in her eyes. I wished with a desperation I'd never felt before that they, especially Lydia, understood that my leaving had nothing to do with my inheritance. I couldn't bear the thought that they might misunderstand my actions of the last month, that I had only pretended an attachment to them in order to secure my grandfather's money. But I didn't know how to speak my worries to them without sounding contradictory.

I approached Aunt Lydia first, dipping into a curtsy. "Goodbye, Aunt Lydia."

As I rose, her eyes followed me, and a struggle seemed to take place within her. She opened her mouth to speak, then shut it again with a tight jaw. She simply nodded and looked over my shoulder into the distance.

I had expected nothing different, and yet her response still stung. I turned, attempting to hide my hurt, and faced Eliza.

She stepped to me and took my hands in hers. “I wish you could stay longer,” she said. “I feel as though we’ve only just begun to know each other.”

She left her real question unspoken. Why was I leaving? She, at least, would not think ill of me for leaving in such a manner. She always sought to see the best in others, and I was never more grateful for that quality than I was now.

“I feel the same.” My voice was almost nonexistent.

“Mama says we might go into town for the Little Season in a month or two.” She grimaced.

I managed a small smile, even in my gloominess; Eliza’s abhorrence for public gatherings was so similar to my own that I could easily imagine how little she looked forward to the trip.

She smiled as well. “I shall bear the burden a little better if I know I might see you then.”

“I . . .” I didn’t know how to respond. My arrangement, as it were, with Miss Radcliff had spoken nothing of seeing my family in London, only that I was to leave Havenfield and never return. Did I dare test the boundaries of our agreement? “I don’t know for certain what my days will look like.”

She looked so disappointed that I hurried to speak again. “But, of course, I will be very happy to see you again, whenever that may be.”

It was the best I could offer her, and from her dropped gaze, I could see it wasn’t enough. I embraced her, wrapping my arms around her. She returned the hug and held me tight.

“I can’t tell you what your friendship has meant to me these past weeks,” I whispered. “Thank you.”

She sniffed and stepped back with watery eyes. I took a deep breath, steeling myself as I looked at my grandmother, my last goodbye. To my

surprise, she looked neither teary nor distressed. Instead, she had a look of such painful resignation that it hurt me all the more than tears would have.

She clutched a bundle of papers that she held out to me. “William asked that I give this to you before you left,” she said.

My heart leapt at the sound of his name. “When did you see him?” I asked softly, taking the bundle. I had hardly expected to see him before my departure, considering how I had left him last night, but I still nursed a reckless hope that he would appear at the open front door at any moment, just so I might have one more look at him.

“This morning.” She watched me with a concerned eye. “So very early that I don’t know if he slept at all.”

I knew the feeling. Even now, a pounding in my left temple gave a constant reminder of my exhaustion.

I nodded, pulling the papers close to my chest. “I wanted to thank you, for everything. For inviting me here, for allowing me to be a part of—” My voice broke off, and I stared at my feet. After a moment, I tried again. “I’m sorry to leave you in such a way. I wish you to know that this has been one of the happiest times of my life.”

And then her arms surrounded me, enclosing me in her steadiness and love. I clung to her and fought my tears.

“It is I who must thank you,” she whispered. “For being brave enough to come and for being willing to open your heart. Please know you will always be welcome here.”

I allowed myself a long moment, not knowing when I would see her again. I had come to depend on her so much in such a short time. She had watched over me, defended me, and helped me understand my past. I tried to impart all I felt in our embrace, and from the tender smile she gave me when we finally parted, I thought I may have at least partially succeeded.

“Do give my regards to my dear sister when you arrive,” she said. “Travel safe.”

I nodded and turned, exhaling a slow breath. The coach stood before me, its door open, and the coachman waited to help me inside. I walked across the fine stone gravel of the drive, each crunching step reminding me that I would never stand here again. I took the offered hand and climbed into the coach, arranging my skirts about my feet in an effort to appear calm, but the trembling of my hands betrayed my true emotions.

“All ready, then, Miss Ashbourne?” The coachman stood expectantly outside the open door, prepared to close it. My head rose to give a nod, but I hesitated. I recalled a very similar situation, the day I had arrived at Havenfield. I had wavered back and forth inside the coach, utterly terrified, and had almost turned around and fled back to London.

But I hadn't.

And despite the heart-wrenching anguish that tore at me now, I did not regret that decision, and I didn't think I ever would.

I nodded at the coachman, and he closed the door, securing it before climbing up to his seat. I moved closer to the window so I could see my grandmother, Aunt Lydia, and Eliza. I raised my hand to wave but froze.

Beyond my family, on the rising slope that led to the ruins of the church, stood a horse and rider. Their figures were dark against the wooded hill, the mount tossing his head impatiently. I knew William watched me, though I could not see his face.

Every bone in my body pleaded with me to throw open the door and run to him, to explain away everything that had come between us, and to beg his forgiveness for hurting him.

But I only raised my hand and pressed it against the glass of the window that had been warmed by the early morning light. And then the coach jolted forward, turning around in the drive, cutting off my view of him. When I

spun on my seat to look out the opposite window, he was gone, dashing away through the trees and out of my life.

I opened the packet of papers as we passed through Millbury, unable to resist my curiosity any longer. As soon as I read the first page, I knew what it was. These were the plans for my school, the ones William and I had so carefully constructed during our afternoons together. I traced my finger over his writing, lost in the remembrance of our conversations and laughter. I rifled through the stack; everything was there, even the letter from his man of business detailing the several properties he had found that might be suitable for my school.

At the very bottom of the stack was a page I'd not seen before, with only a few lines of writing. A note from William. I closed my eyes briefly, exhaled, and then looked back to the note.

Miss Ashbourne,

If you should discover you are in need of any further assistance in establishing your school, Mr. Smith, my man of business, is ready and willing to be at your disposal. You will find his address on the enclosed letter.

Yours,

William Rowley

My throat clenched, and I dropped the note to my lap. I despaired at the formality of the letter, of the emotionless words it contained. Even when we had first met, he had never been so detached. But at the same time, he cared enough for me and my dream to ensure that I had the tools necessary to achieve it. And I loved him even more for it.

I leaned back into the thick cushion of my seat and finally let the tears drip down from my cheeks and splash onto the letter.

* * *

“As you can see, Miss Ashbourne, everything appears to be in order.”

I nodded without looking up, still reading the paper the solicitor, Mr. Finch, had set before me. It detailed the exact whereabouts of my newfound wealth; a portion was tied up in a variety of investments, while the majority sat in an account, waiting only for my signature before it was mine.

A name in the list of investments caught my attention. *Rowley Shipping and Trade*.

I cleared my throat and pointed at the line of text. “This here. Rowley Shipping and Trade. Is this the company owned by Mr. William Rowley?” My stomach twisted as I spoke his name.

Mr. Finch raised his eyebrows. “Indeed. Your grandfather invested quite heavily in the company many years ago. His stock took a severe dip a few years back, and I recall he was urged to sell. He refused, and it has since proven to be one of his more profitable investments.”

I stared at the paper before me. My grandfather had been a strange and difficult man, but he had not been a foolish one. He had made the decision to trust in William as an heir and as a businessman, and he had made the right choice. William would succeed in anything he did, and my grandfather had seen that as clearly as I.

I finished reading the paper, though it was filled with so much legal jargon I could hardly understand it. I simply had to trust that it said what Mr. Finch promised. I looked over to where he sat across the desk from me in his office, watching me with unconcealed curiosity. No doubt he wondered what had happened to the emotional woman who had run from his office only a month before.

“Everything looks well enough,” I said.

Mr. Finch slid a pen and ink across the desk. “Just sign there at the bottom, if you would be so kind.”

I signed my name, careful to make it as legible as possible. I passed the paper back to Mr. Finch, and he examined it briefly before sprinkling dust over the ink, blowing off the excess and pushing it to the side.

“And that’s that?” I asked.

He clasped his hands on his desk. “Yes, that is that. I am happy to direct you to a man of business, if you ever have future questions about your investments or stock.”

“I thank you for the offer,” I said. “But I’ve already had a recommendation come to me most highly, and I will be visiting him directly.”

He nodded, and we both stood.

“It has been a pleasure, Miss Ashbourne,” he said with a shallow bow.

* * *

I returned to the Hardings’ residence later that day, exhausted. The sights and sounds of London had grown so unfamiliar to me in just a short month that reimmersing myself in Town life was a much more tiring business than I had expected. I found myself longing for the clear air and sprawling hills of Havenfield.

Stepping into the lofty entryway, I handed my bonnet and gloves to a maid and stood before the mirror that hung across the hall. I tucked a wayward curl back into place and wished once again that I had brought Emma with me.

“Miss Ashbourne, is that you? We are just here, in the parlor.”

I followed the voice, a deep male tone that could only come from Mr. Harding. I stepped inside the parlor to see Mr. and Mrs. Harding seated beside each other. They stood as I entered, beaming.

My grandmother’s sister and her husband had proven to be gracious hosts. They’d had only a few hours’ warning before I had arrived two days before and yet had greeted me with warmth and welcoming. Since then, they had

engaged me in conversation on a variety of subjects, insisted I play the pianoforte for them every night, and delighted overall in having me as a guest.

“And how did you find your meetings today?” Mr. Harding asked, gesturing to a chair beside him.

“Tiring,” I admitted as I sat. “Though everything went as expected, for which I am grateful. I saw my solicitor and signed the papers, and then met with Mr. Smith, who is to help me look over a few different properties.”

I had told the Hardings of my school the day before. I could hardly keep it a secret since I would be dependent on their hospitality during the time it took my new enterprise to become a reality.

“Oh? Anything promising?” Mrs. Harding asked with a tilt of her head. She looked remarkably like Lady Rowley and had a similarly kind disposition, though Mrs. Harding was a great deal quieter than my grandmother. Mr. Harding did most of the talking, and from what I gathered, they were both quite happy with the arrangement.

“Yes,” I said. “There are several options I think could work very nicely. He plans to set up appointments for me to see each one. Though I’m sure I won’t know what I am looking for exactly. I am hardly an expert in real estate.”

“If you would like a second opinion, I would be glad to come along,” Mr. Harding said. He had a wide, open face, with a great bushy mustache that tended to overreact to whatever emotion he was currently expressing. “I’ve purchased a few properties in my time.”

“Oh, no,” I protested. “I couldn’t possibly ask that of you. I’ve already taken advantage of your kindness by staying with you.”

“Nonsense.” He gave a dismissive wave. “It is nothing. In fact, I think I will rather enjoy it. And heaven knows Mrs. Harding is forever nagging at me to get my old bones out of this house every now and again.”

I ducked my head while Mrs. Harding swatted half-heartedly at her husband, though she couldn't help a laugh. "In that case, I would be grateful for your help. I will let you know when Mr. Smith contacts me with the appointments."

"Capital," Mr. Harding said, mustache quivering.

I retired to my room shortly after to change for dinner. As I entered my bedchamber, the smile the Hardings brought to my face slipped slowly away, and the quiet of the room settled upon me. Sounds of carriages and voices on the street below my window seemed very far away in my solitude. I walked to the bed and sat, my breathing unsteady, before falling backward onto my bedspread and folding my arms over my face.

It was no use. Wherever I was, whatever I did, my thoughts turned continually to William. I saw his face constantly, both in my mind and in brief glances of men passing on the street. My heart would leap before I realized it wasn't him, just another man with light-brown hair and a tall figure.

In the few days since I had last seen William, I had done whatever I could to occupy my time and keep him from my thoughts. But it was impossible. If I had a thought, an idea for my school, I wished for his opinion. When Mrs. Harding complimented me on my skills at the pianoforte, I wanted to share a secret glance with him, knowing we both remembered my shocking performance at the Pembrokes'. And most of all, I wished he were here to tease me when I spilled my glass of wine down the length of the Hardings' dinner table. I had so hated his teasing when we'd first met, but what I wouldn't give now to see his grin and mischievous eyes.

And what I wouldn't give to have him kiss me again the way he had in the glimmering twilight, the cool night air wrapped around us. I pressed the palms of my hands against my closed eyes, trying to block the memory of that beautiful, horrible kiss. His lips, scalding, unyielding. His hands, holding me tightly against him. His eyes, broken when I'd told him I was leaving.

Did he think of me as often as I did him? Was he angry with me? Or had he already begun to move on? Miss Radcliff would surely not allow my absence to go to waste. I could easily picture her finding ways to be thrown together with him, flashing her horrid, coy smile and fluttering her lashes.

My chest constricted at the thought, and I sat up, the afternoon light dancing in my eyes. It would not help to think on such things. It would only bring me more pain, and I did not think I could survive much more.

I should be happy. I should be content. I had my inheritance, my school, a comfortable and safe home, however temporary it was. I had everything I'd dreamed of only a month before. Why could I not find it within myself to be satisfied with all I did possess instead of dwelling on what I now wanted more than anything but was completely beyond my reach?

Chapter Twenty-Two

I CRANED MY NECK, STARING around the corner of the alley for the twentieth time in as many minutes, and I frowned yet again. Still no one had emerged from the steps leading down into the servants' entrance of the Seymour house.

I paced up the block, turning my head away whenever I passed anyone. This would be a terrible place to be recognized, considering the rumors I was attempting to keep hidden. If anyone recognized me as the Seymours' former governess lurking around the rear of the house, Mrs. Seymour would surely hear of it and heaven only knew how she would react. But I had to try to see Sophie.

I returned to my previous spot and peeked around the corner again. Finally.

Sophie stood at the top of the steps, wearing her bonnet and fiddling with her reticule. Midmorning was the least busy time in the kitchens and was generally when Sophie was able to leave the house, if she could at all. I hurried toward her, and she looked up in surprise as I approached.

"Juliana!" she cried. Then she clamped a hand over her mouth and looked back down the stairway in fear. But no one had heard; no one emerged, in any case. I grabbed her hand and dragged her a short distance away, hiding in the shadows of an alley.

When I turned back to her, she threw her arms around me, and I returned her embrace. She smelled like freshly baked bread, and at the moment, it was my favorite smell in the world.

She pulled back and examined me with her wide, uncertain eyes. "Where on earth have you been? Your letters were terribly vague. I couldn't tell if you were happy or safe or—"

I shushed her. "I was with family, like I said. My mother's family."

“And you are well?” she asked, brow creasing.

“Yes, very well.” It was only a small lie. I was as well as I could be.

“But why are you back in London? I thought you planned to find a position in the country.”

I hesitated. “I haven’t been entirely truthful with you, Sophie. I want to tell you everything, but first I must ask after Charlotte and Daniel. Are they well?”

Her eyes darkened. “They are well enough, I suppose, but the new governess, Miss Covington, is absolutely horrid. She has an awful temper, and those poor children never know what will set her off.”

I sighed. “I was afraid of that.” I fixed her with an anxious look. “I wish to see them so very much. I don’t want to involve you if I can help it, but can you think of a way to have them meet me?”

She squinted her eyes as she thought. “I know that after lunch they are allowed some time to themselves. Not for their own good, of course, but because Miss Covington has a lie down every day at that time, lazy old crone.”

I grinned at Sophie’s slight, knowing full well she did it out of loyalty to me. “Do you think you could pass a note to the children? I’ll ask them to slip out and meet me at the park.”

“I’ll do one better,” she said, “and bring them myself.”

“Sophie,” I reprimanded. “You cannot be drawn into this. You know Mrs. Seymour would punish you most severely if she knew.”

“Hang Mrs. Seymour,” she said with a huff. “She hasn’t a clue what goes on inside her own home. She’ll never know.”

I rubbed my chin and glanced up the street. I hadn’t anticipated this, but I should have known Sophie would want to help however she could. And I would feel much better if I knew Charlotte and Daniel would have her with

them. “Very well,” I relented. “But do be careful. And if anything should come up, anything that might arouse Mrs. Seymour’s suspicions, do not hesitate to call it off. I would much rather be kept waiting at a park than to have your position in jeopardy and the children in trouble.”

“I’ll be careful,” she promised. “Meet us there at one o’clock. And you swear you’ll tell me everything?”

“I will.” We looked at each other for another second before I hugged her again. “Oh, it is so good to see you again. I’ve missed you.”

“And I you,” she said, her eyes soft. “Now hurry, before someone sees you.”

* * *

I spotted Daniel and Charlotte as soon as they entered the park, Sophie herding them along, casting a critical eye at anyone who happened to look their way. A wave of relief washed over me; they looked well and much the same, though Daniel had perhaps grown a bit taller in the weeks since I had seen them. They looked about in bewilderment, whispering to each other. And then Charlotte’s eyes found me beneath the shade of a nearby tree as I attempted to appear as inconspicuous as possible.

“Oh,” she cried, her face lit with delight. She ran to me, and I caught her in my arms. She clutched me about my waist, holding me fast as though I might disappear altogether if she didn’t keep her grip on me.

Daniel was a bit slower to realize who I was, but once he did, he shouted “Juliana!” and he, too, ran to me and threw his arms around us both.

Sophie followed at a slower pace, her eyes pleased.

I pulled back from them, taking each of their faces in my hands in turn and kissing their foreheads. They beamed and hugged me again and again.

“We missed you ever so much,” Charlotte said, her voice muffled from where her face pressed against my shirt.

“Not nearly as much as I missed you, I am absolutely certain.” I smoothed her hair back.

“Where have you been?” Daniel asked. “Sophie said you had gone away into the country. We thought you had left for good.”

“It’s a bit of a story,” I said.

I took their hands and led them to a thick patch of grass, where we seated ourselves. Daniel, Charlotte, and Sophie looked at me expectantly, and I sighed and began relating my story. I told them of my grandfather and the inheritance he had left me, of its condition that I visit Havenfield, of how I disliked it at first but quickly grew to love it. I told them of my family, of my grandmother, and of Eliza, though I did not mention William. It hurt far too much to speak of him.

The children interrupted me throughout my telling with questions and exclamations, while Sophie listened intently. But once I finished speaking, they all simply stared at me.

“Are you so very rich now?” Daniel asked in a reverent whisper.

I laughed and ruffled his raven hair fondly. “You never were one for tact, were you? But yes, I suppose I am.”

“Perhaps Mother would take you back now that you’re a proper lady.” Charlotte’s dark eyes were wide, hopeful.

I sighed. “I don’t think I shall ever be proper enough for her. And in any case, there is more standing between your mother and I than my properness.”

“I do wish you could come back,” Daniel said glumly. “Our new governess is a witch. She never lets us play games and is always correcting us and snapping at us.”

“I corrected you a great deal, if I may remind you.” I attempted a bit of humor. “Though I certainly hope you didn’t call me a witch behind my

back.”

Daniel looked offended at the idea. “I never would, not about you. And anyways, you were never so mean about it as Miss Covington.” He said her name with distaste.

“What will you do now?” Sophie asked, speaking for the first time. “You hardly need to find a new position, if you’re as wealthy as you say.”

There was a tone of awe in her voice that I did not care for. I may have more money than I’d ever dreamed possible, but that didn’t change who I was.

“No, I don’t plan to work as a governess,” I said. “Although I do plan to continue teaching.” I paused, looking into each of their eyes before continuing. “I am going to start a school. A boarding school for girls, where I can teach them anything I think they ought to know. I’ve already started searching out properties.”

“A school?” Charlotte’s eyes widened. “Oh, that sounds so wonderful.”

“I quite agree,” I said, more pleased than I could say at her excitement. I turned to Sophie and took her hand. “And I will soon be hiring the staff, including a cook. The post is yours if you want it.”

“Me?” Her eyes widened. “A cook? I’m naught but a kitchen maid now. I’m sure I’m not close to qualified.”

“As I have the lucky task of setting the qualifications for the position, I think you are more than qualified, and I can guarantee to pay at least thrice what Mrs. Seymour is paying you now.”

She stared at me. “You are in earnest?”

I squeezed her hand. “I am. I hope to have everything arranged within a month or two, so you will have to wait a bit longer.”

“I can well do that,” she said with a burst of joy. “Oh, to think I might have my own kitchen to run as I please! My ma and pa will be so happy.”

“I wish I could come away to your school,” Charlotte said with wistful eyes.

A weight settled into my chest at her words. “I wish for that as well. Perhaps in time, your mother might change her opinion on your education.”

My assurances felt hollow. Daniel at least had a chance to escape, as he would likely begin attending Harrow within the next year. But Charlotte’s future seemed very bleak indeed. Even if Mrs. Seymour did have a change of heart about Charlotte’s learning, she would never allow her daughter to attend a school I ran. At the thought of my old mistress, I sighed.

“We’ve been too long. You need to be getting back before they notice you’re gone.”

The children nodded, though they did not look very pleased at the thought. I walked them back to the edge of the park.

As I hugged them all once more, Charlotte watched me with apprehension. “You’ll come see us again, won’t you?”

“Of course I will,” I assured her. “As often as I can manage it.”

* * *

I spent the next week in a frenzy of activity. Mr. Harding and I visited close to a dozen properties with Mr. Smith and found one that seemed particularly promising. I posted advertisements in the *Times*, seeking out teachers and maids and manservants, and I received several replies, which gave me reason to be optimistic. I found the most wonderful bookshop just a street or two away from the Harding residence, and I visited it often. Each visit resulted in a large stack of books sent back to the house, the start of the extensive library I planned for my school.

I’d never had such freedom; I was unrestrained in my time and money, though my frugal upbringing forced me to keep close track of my spending. I budgeted with such fastidious care I surely would have impressed even the thriftiest English housewife.

I did allow myself one indulgence, and that was a visit to a modiste, one highly recommended by Mrs. Harding. I purchased several new dresses to replace my shabby ones, and it gave me no small delight to pick out new slippers, gloves, shawls, and even a lovely new bonnet, though I carefully laid away the one my grandfather had gifted to me. It was a reminder that he had cared for me, no matter how ill he had shown it.

With each day that passed, I grew better at training my mind not to think of William. One day, I went nearly an hour without thinking of him, and I was both pleased and distraught at my progress. Did I really wish to forget him, though his memory brought me only pain?

I dressed for dinner one night nearly a fortnight after I had returned to London, wearing my mother's gown and trying in vain not to think of the last time I had worn it. I sat before my mirror and attempted to replicate Emma's skill for taming my wavy locks into a presentable coiffure. I couldn't seem to get it exactly right. I frowned at my reflection in the mirror. Perhaps I ought to look into hiring a lady's maid.

A knock came at my door, and one of the Hardings' maids poked her head into the room.

"Pardon me, Miss Ashbourne," she said. "But there's a young lady downstairs who wishes to see you. She came in the servants' entrance." She looked affronted at the idea. "She insisted you would know her. Gave me the name of Sophie."

I rose immediately. "Yes, of course I will see her. She is a friend of mine. Where is she now?"

"Down in the servants' hall." She dropped her eyes, embarrassed. "I'm sorry, miss. If I thought you knew her, I'd've put her in the parlor."

"No matter," I said, waving off her concern. "I'll go down now."

Whatever could Sophie be doing here? We had arranged another visit with Charlotte and Daniel, but it was not for another two days. A tendril of fear

wound its way into my stomach. Perhaps something had happened to one of them? Or had Mrs. Seymour found out they had seen me last week?

I hurried down the back stairs, reaching the basement and striding toward the servants' hall. Sophie looked up as I entered, and she leapt to her feet, jaw dropping at the sight of me.

"Sophie, what is it?" I crossed to her. "Has something happened? Is it the children?"

"No," she managed. "No, the children are well." She still stared at me, and I grew self-conscious. I had never worn anything so fine as this dress when I'd worked at the Seymours'.

"You look lovely, Juliana," she said fervently. "Upon my word, it is decidedly easier to believe you're an heiress when you're not in your old dresses."

"Never mind what I look like," I said perhaps a bit too sharply; she looked taken aback. I sighed. "Sophie, you are my only friend who knew me before all of this"—I waved at my dress—"and I don't want you getting any ideas that I'm not still just plain, dull Juliana underneath it all."

She shook her head. "You were never plain or dull."

Grateful as I was for her compliment, I was more concerned about what had brought her to the Hardings' at such an unusual hour. I gestured to the chairs behind her, and we both sat. "Now, tell me what this is all about."

She sighed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you overmuch by coming. I just thought you ought to know."

"Know about what?"

"A man came by the house this afternoon," she said. "To see Mrs. Seymour. They spoke in the drawing room for close to half an hour."

I furrowed my brow. "What has this to do with me?"

“Mary was cleaning the hall near the drawing room, and she swore to me that she heard your name mentioned more than once, though she couldn’t make out the substance of the conversation.”

I stared at her. “My name? Why would Mrs. Seymour have any need to discuss me?”

She shook her head. “I haven’t a notion. After the man left, Mrs. Seymour ordered that she not be disturbed. She’s been in her rooms ever since.”

My mind was a whirl of thoughts. “Did the man not give a name?”

“I’m certain he did, but Mr. Elkins was very tight-lipped about the whole affair.”

I was unsurprised. The Seymours’ butler was about as stiff and proper as they came. I tapped my foot against the wood-plank floor, a rush of hope making my limbs restless. Who could have visited Mrs. Seymour to speak about me? My first thought was William, but he would have no reason to visit my former employer. Would he? There was no possible way he could know about Miss Radcliff’s threat to me or Mrs. Seymour’s involvement.

“What did the man look like?” I tried to keep the anticipation from my voice. I stared at my hands clasped on the table before me.

“Mary didn’t get a good look,” she admitted. “She only said that he seemed very severe and that Mrs. Seymour had a very ill look about her.”

Severe. That was never a term I would use to describe William. Of course it wasn’t him. I released the breath I’d been holding, berating myself for allowing hope to enter my heart.

Then if it wasn’t William, who could it be? I knew only a handful of gentlemen. Mr. Woodward, Mr. Brooks, Mr. Harding. My jaw tightened when I thought of one more.

I looked back to Sophie. “Did he have a horrible smile, as though he only sought to make you uncomfortable?”

She quirked her head, perplexed. “An odd description, if I’ve ever heard one.”

“Odd perhaps, but very accurate,” I said with a grimace.

“I’m sorry, but I simply don’t know.” She frowned. “The man had come and gone before I knew of him, or I’d have tried to get a look at him.”

“Oh, please don’t be sorry,” I said. “I can hardly expect you to go about spying on Mrs. Seymour’s visitors. You’ve already done more than enough to sneak out and tell me of him.”

She hesitated before speaking. “Do you know who the man might be? Is he someone you are acquainted with?”

I straightened in my chair. “I certainly hope not, if it is who I am imagining. He is not a man I ever wish to see again in my life.”

In fact, my stomach turned at just the thought of Mr. Fitzroy, my hands shaking at the remembrance of his foul breath, his bruising grip on my arm, his wild, drunken laughter. If it was indeed him, what cause could he have to visit Mrs. Seymour? Was he bent on revenge against me after what had happened at the ball? What could he hope to gain from continuing to antagonize me?

“I hope I did right in coming to tell you,” Sophie said, her expression uncertain.

I leaned forward to touch Sophie’s arm. “You did absolutely right. I am indebted to you, time and time again.”

She blushed. “You would do the same for me. I know it.”

“If I could be half so loyal and kind as you, I would count myself lucky, indeed.”

Sophie left a few minutes later, and I made my way back up the stairs. My emotions were not nearly as calm as I had pretended in front of Sophie. I stumbled to a halt halfway up the stairs and sat on the steps, not trusting my

trembling legs. I hated how strongly I reacted to the thought of Mr. Fitzroy. He was nothing more than a sodden cad, not worth my thoughts, let alone my fear.

But I could not help how I felt. Though I knew myself to be safe in the Hardings' household, I found myself wishing for the security and peace that came from being with William. His image floated before me. His eyes were full of concern and caring, his expression soft. It was his face after he'd saved me from Mr. Fitzroy at the ball.

I closed my eyes, dropping my face into my hands. Would I never be free of William?

Chapter Twenty-Three

“AND HERE, YOU WILL RECALL, is the garden entry,” Mr. Smith said the next morning as he led the way through the door out into the bright morning sun. I followed directly, Mr. and Mrs. Harding close behind, all of us blinking the spots from our eyes as we took in the view.

“Oh, it is such a lovely garden,” Mrs. Harding admired. “You were quite right to favor it, Juliana.”

The garden belonging to the property was not expansive by any means, but it had all the charm and practicality I was looking for. Besides the rose bushes and stone pathways, there was also a small plot for a kitchen garden, which I knew would please Sophie.

“And the house is more than adequate,” Mr. Harding said. “Exceptionally well kept up, and the price very reasonable.”

“I confess, I do like it,” I said. “When we saw it before, I was immediately drawn to it.”

I could picture my future here clearly. Converting the drawing room and parlor to schoolrooms, furnishing the bedchambers into comfortable, clean living quarters, settling Sophie in the open and airy kitchens that overlooked this pretty little garden. It was perhaps a bit more modest than some of the buildings we’d seen, but there was so much possibility and promise within the walls of this house.

I took a deep breath and turned to Mr. Smith, who waited patiently. “I think I shall take it.”

“An excellent choice,” Mr. Smith said. “I shall draw up the papers and have them to you by tomorrow morning. If the owner is agreeable, I can arrange for your immediate occupancy.”

“Yes, please do.” The time for hesitation was over. I was going forward with my plans, and I would not let fear or my own inadequacies hold me back. “How shall I have my bank arrange for payment?”

“Payment?” Mr. Smith asked. “I believe the matter of payment has already been settled.”

“I don’t recall us ever discussing the subject before, Mr. Smith,” I said with a frown.

“I have a note here saying that the first six months have already been paid for,” he said.

I blinked. “How could you have that note when I only just now decided to take the property?”

“The payment was to be made regardless of the property you chose,” Mr. Smith said. “He was quite adamant about that.”

I exhaled in frustration. “I beg your pardon, Mr. Smith, but I simply cannot follow what you are saying. Who exactly has made a payment on my property without my consent or knowledge?”

Mr. Smith opened his mouth to respond, but a voice spoke from behind me.

“I’m afraid I must claim credit for the payment.”

I froze, my hands clenching my reticule. I knew that voice. In fact, I’d spent the last fortnight trying very hard to banish that gentle baritone from my mind, the memory of it more painful than I ever thought possible. I swallowed and slowly turned to look behind me.

William stood in the doorway leading down into the garden, eyes fixed intently on me. His gaze raked over me with such intensity that I fought to breathe.

“I must beg your pardon, Miss Ashbourne, if it was presumptuous of me,” he said in his quiet, steady voice, and I closed my eyes briefly at the sound

of it. Did he have any idea the effect he had on me?

His expression was impassive. I couldn't have guessed his thoughts for anything, though I was certain mine were embarrassingly obvious from my wide eyes and inability to move or speak.

“Mr. Smith,” Mr. Harding said with only the slightest mirth to his voice. “Would you be so kind as to show Mrs. Harding and me the kitchens again? I had a few questions for you.”

“Of course.” Mr. Smith gave a little cough. “I should be glad to.”

The three of them passed by William, greeting him in turn before disappearing into the house. My thoughts, generally so chaotic and jumbled at times like these, now abandoned me altogether. I dropped my gaze.

“Are you well?” he asked, stepping closer to me.

I cleared my throat. “Yes, I am well.” My voice shook, but I was grateful enough to have even made a sound that I pressed on before I lost it again. “I'd not heard you were in Town.”

“Not surprising since I told no one I had come.”

I brought my hands together before me, fingering the delicate pearl of my ring as my ability to reason gradually returned. I still refused to look at William and instead stared at the stones of the garden path. What was he doing here? How had he known I would be here?

“Please do not think I am ungrateful for your offer to pay my lease,” I said. “But you know perfectly well I have sufficient funds.”

“Yes, I know,” he agreed. “But that doesn't change my wish to become a patron of your school.”

“I'm not certain that would be the best idea,” I said softly.

He did not speak, but I could feel his eyes on me. He moved toward me again, and I stepped back, feeling a stone garden bench just behind my

knees. I skirted around it, unable to meet his gaze.

“Juliana.” His voice was a cross between exasperation and amusement. “You are running away from me again.”

I finally raised my eyes to his. He stood in the center of the garden, watching me. He was somehow even more handsome than I remembered, which was quite an accomplishment.

“I am not,” I protested.

“You are,” he said. “Although this time I finally know why.”

This was not good, not good at all. I had only just begun to make progress in forgetting him, in putting him behind me, and here he was, teasing me and reminding me how easy it was to love him. I needed to end this conversation before I found myself in dangerous waters. No matter what I felt, Miss Radcliff’s threat was still very real.

“I am certain I don’t know what you mean.” I forced my voice to be uncaring, emotionless. “I do appreciate your generosity in offering to pay my lease, but I cannot possibly accept. If you would be so kind as to excuse me—” I started to move, intending to brush by him and escape into the house, but he grasped my hand as I passed and held me back. I stiffened at his familiar touch, wishing I could lean into him instead of continuing past, as I knew I must. I pulled my hand free and stepped away.

“I know everything, Juliana.” It was his tone more than his words that gave me pause. His voice was full of understanding, and he looked at me with such burning that I couldn’t remember why I was in such a hurry to leave him.

“I know about Isabel Radcliff and why you left,” he said.

I stared at him. “How could you possibly know that?”

“Your Aunt Lydia heard you and Miss Radcliff speaking that morning.” His jaw was tight. “She was passing in the hallway and overheard

everything.”

My heart stopped. He really did know.

“What did she tell you?” My voice was hardly above a whisper.

“She told me that Miss Radcliff”—he said her name with distaste—“threatened to spread horrible, false rumors about you if you did not agree to leave Havenfield immediately. And she told me that only when Miss Radcliff claimed that the rumors would hurt more than yourself, that they would injure Lady Rowley, Eliza, and myself, did you agree to leave.”

I could not seem to look away from him as he moved closer, stopping but an arm’s length away.

“You were willing to give us up rather than see us harmed by that spiteful, vindictive woman.” He raised his hand to my face and gently, softly brushed a lock of hair back from my cheek. I shivered at his touch and turned my head away. It did not matter that he knew, that he understood now why I’d left. It did not change the facts.

“And did Aunt Lydia not tell you the rumor that Miss Radcliff meant to spread?”

He dropped his hand. “She did. A preposterous claim about you and your employer, Mr. Seymour.”

I flushed. This was the absolute last subject I wished to discuss with William, but I needed for him to see that there was no other path for the two of us, that I had chosen the best I knew how. “Miss Radcliff has a letter,” I said, each word sharp as it left my mouth. “A letter from Mrs. Seymour full of lies about me. Against the two of them, no one would believe the word of a mere governess. And though there is not a shred of truth to their gossip, the damage would be done. I would be ruined, any hopes for my school completely shattered. And you and my family would be tainted by association. Surely you can see that?” My voice broke on the last word as emotion threatened to close over my throat. I looked back up at him, expecting understanding to dawn in his eyes, sorrow perhaps, at realizing

what I already knew—that it was hopeless. But my impassioned plea had little effect. Instead, his expression grew determined.

“Juliana,” he said. “I arrived in town yesterday morning. Can you imagine the reason I did not come to see you immediately?”

I shook my head. I had no right to expect him to visit me at all, considering our last meeting.

“I had some unpleasant business to attend to,” he said. “A conversation with your employer, Mrs. Seymour.”

I stared at him, thoughts suddenly connecting in my head. “It was you.”

“Pardon?” He furrowed his brow.

“Sophie told me a man came to see Mrs. Seymour yesterday and that he left her in quite a state.” I felt foolish for thinking it had been Mr. Fitzroy. Of course it had been William.

He narrowed his eyes. “I will admit I hoped for that result. That woman is likely the most dreadful person I’ve ever met.”

My mind raced, and my heart hurried to keep up. “But what on earth did you speak to her about?”

He cleared his throat, looking away from me for the first time. “I was intent on learning the truth of what had happened while you were in her employ.”

“William.” I swallowed. “What purpose could that possibly—”

My words died as he held up a hand to stop my protest. He paused for a moment before pressing on. “Am I correct in my guess that Mr. Seymour was the one forcing his attentions on you?” His voice was calm, though there was cold fury in his tone.

There was no use denying it. I turned away from him, unable to look him in the eye as I admitted the truth. “Yes,” I whispered. “But I was lucky.

Nothing ever came of it, except my dismissal by Mrs. Seymour.”

“And as undeserved as that was,” he said, “her intention of ruining you through gossip was by far her worst decision. A decision she now regrets, I can assure you.”

I looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

His words were biting. “I simply informed Mrs. Seymour that your friends and family will not stand to see you hurt. Lady Rowley is quite popular in London, as are my mother and sister. And even I can boast a few friends in the House of Lords. Between us, we would be able to sway quite a few minds.”

“But what difference can that make?”

“It makes all the difference in the world,” he said. “The Seymours are hardly part of Society’s elite. If it became common knowledge that you were mistreated—well, suffice it to say, a word from any of us to the right people could have the Seymours forever excluded.” His face tightened. “And though I admit I was tempted to take this route, I did not want your name involved any more than necessary.”

My breathing hitched. I could see Mrs. Seymour’s face in my mind, hard and fuming. “And what did she say to that?”

“She did not manage to say much at all, if you can imagine,” he said. “But we were able to strike an agreement. She would rescind her false claims about you in exchange for our silence. And Mr. Seymour is never to come near you again.”

“I—” Did he mean it? The Seymours had loomed over me for so long, a never-ending threat to my happiness. To learn that they no longer had any power over me—

“And,” he continued, and his face softened, “her daughter Charlotte will be allowed to attend your school, whenever it comes to fruition.”

My jaw dropped. “Truly?”

He nodded. “Truly. She was quite eager to agree to anything I suggested. And you need not worry about Miss Radcliff either. Though she is devious, she is not a fool. Without Mrs. Seymour to back her claims, there is no chance she will be believed. It would hurt her reputation far more than it would harm yours.”

I grasped at my thoughts, trying to think of anything to say that would rescue me from the intensity of his gaze. “What I can’t understand is why Aunt Lydia waited so long to tell you what she had heard. I know she dislikes me, but it seems terribly underhanded, even for her.”

He grimaced. “That, unfortunately, is something of an awkward subject. Apparently, your aunt got it into her head to play matchmaker. After all, I am young, wealthy, not entirely unattractive”—he gave me a ghost of a smile—“and she had the perfect candidate in mind. Someone close by, of a convenient age for marrying . . .”

I stared at him. “Eliza? Aunt Lydia wanted you for Eliza?”

He gave a short laugh. “Yes, and so you can see why she would not be unwilling to see you leave.”

A horrible thought occurred to me. Aunt Lydia clearly thought William and Eliza to be a natural, well-made match. What if Eliza thought the same? “Eliza, she . . . that is to say, does she—?”

“No, no,” he cut me off. “Eliza and I have never had more than friendship between us, although Mrs. Woodward was clearly under the assumption that Eliza did, in fact, harbor feelings for me. But once she learned that Eliza’s affection lay elsewhere . . .”

“What do you mean?” I shook my head. “Eliza has no suitors that I know of.”

“That is a question you will have to ask of Eliza.” He clasped his hands behind his back.

I fiddled with my reticule, my hands unable to be still.

“So,” he continued, “once your Aunt Lydia learned that a match between myself and Eliza was impossible, she came to me and told me all that she knew about your leaving. She was quite remorseful about the whole affair. If I didn’t know better, I’d say she may have grown somewhat fond of you.”

“Out of all the things you have told me today,” I said, “I somehow think that might be the most unbelievable.”

My mind continued to race, running over the words of our conversation, examining every revelation. William had somehow found a solution to each problem I had agonized over for weeks. Was it possible that everything could be solved so simply? Was there really nothing holding us back any longer?

Slowly, hesitatingly, I turned back to him. For the first time since he had appeared so unexpectedly, I allowed myself to really look at him, and my heart stumbled at the sight. His features were serious, jaw set, his hands clasped behind his back as his tawny waves danced in the light breeze.

But it was his eyes that captivated me. There were not words to describe what I saw there. They pierced through every wall I’d built around me, saw through all my defenses and excuses, observed all my weaknesses, and astoundingly, incomprehensibly, he did not look away.

“Juliana,” he said, his voice thick. “That night when you said you couldn’t stay—”

The night he’d kissed me. Every word of that exchange was burned into my memory, though just being near him again lessened the pain of it.

“Was it only because of what Miss Radcliff said to you?” William had never looked so bare as he did in that moment. He watched me with uncertainty, though hope lingered in his every feature.

I did not hesitate now. “Yes.”

“You wished to stay, then? You would have stayed?”

“Yes,” I repeated. “I told my grandmother as much the night of the ball.”

He gazed at me for a long moment. “And was there,” he said, “any reason in particular you wanted to stay?”

I stared at him. Was he speaking in earnest? Did he really not know that he was the reason I had been miserable for the past fortnight? Could he not hear my heart beating frantically even across the space between us now?

He waited for my answer, eyes fixed upon mine, unmoving.

“There were several reasons,” I said. I paused as an idea occurred to me. “I wanted to spend more time with Eliza and my grandmother, of course. And I did enjoy the grounds and walking in the garden.” I looked at him with wide, innocent eyes. “And I have grown so attached to Miranda. If I was not there to ride her, I think she would be lonely.”

He squinted his eyes at me as though I spoke a foreign language. “You did not want to leave Havenfield because you thought your horse might miss you?”

I nearly laughed out loud at the look of disbelief in his eyes but managed to restrain myself to a light smile. “Yes, of course.”

The look of bewilderment on his face finally forced me to take pity on him. “I suppose there was one other reason,” I said. “Though he is terribly vexing and teases me to distraction. But I find that in spite of his glaring faults, I quite enjoy his company.”

He stared at me, and then he grinned, the warm, familiar grin that was mine alone. “I see you have finally learned how to tease properly.”

“Banter,” I corrected him, and he laughed.

“Yes, banter. You are absolutely right.” He took a step forward and then another until he stood only inches away. “Will you come back? To Havenfield?”

“Before everything happened,” I said and looked down at my hands, “I thought to stay a few more weeks.”

William’s fingers caught me under my chin, lifting my face so I was forced to look at him. “I do not want you for a few weeks, Juliana.”

I made to speak, but he placed his thumb over my mouth to quiet me. I trembled as his thumb traced my lips, as his eyes roamed over every inch of my face.

“I have a much longer stay in mind,” he said in a low voice. “Forever, if you’ll have me.”

Forever. The idea of spending the rest of my days on Havenfield’s sunlit grounds, with William as my constant companion, my *husband*, was almost more than I could bear, so lovely was the thought. But what of my dream, the one I had clung to, depended on, lived and breathed for?

“What of my school?” My voice was raspy. “I know London is not so very far away, but—”

“I have been thinking on that,” he interrupted, of course, as he always did. “What would you say about establishing your academy in a quiet country town with a convenient proximity to Havenfield?”

“Millbury?” The thought had never even occurred to me, but now it seemed absurdly obvious. Millbury would be an ideal location for such a school: beautiful countryside; clear, pure air; an easy distance from London.

“I think—” I paused to gather my thoughts. It was difficult to think when his face was so very close to mine. “I think I could be persuaded.”

“Then I will do everything in my power to persuade you.” He fixed me with an unrelenting gaze, his eyes determined. “These past weeks have been the most excruciating torture, being separated from you. Without you there, Havenfield is empty, bleak. I cannot—I will not—be without you ever again.”

I did not doubt he cared for me; it was clear from his every word, his every action. But what I could not comprehend was why. I was absolutely unremarkable in every way. There was no reason someone so extraordinary, so wonderful should want me.

“Are you certain?” I whispered, my eyes stinging with unexpected tears. “Are you certain it is me you want?”

Even now, the racing rhythm of my heart betrayed my fears, that he would realize I was not who he thought I was, that I was simply me, ordinary me.

He slipped both hands around my face and brought me closer to him, his hold warm and firm. “I have never been more certain of anything in my life. You are real, Juliana, more real than anyone I’ve ever met. You have shown me what it means to live, to forgive, to dream.” His eyes caressed my face with unbelievable tenderness. “You taught me that love truly exists. I used to doubt its existence, but loving you is as easy and natural as breathing. And just as I cannot live without air, I cannot live without you.”

I closed my eyes, hardly believing he was speaking these words I’d so often wished to hear from him. My knees were weak, and if William had not been holding me so close, I certainly would have collapsed onto the garden bench beside us.

My lashes were heavy with unshed tears as I met his gaze, open and vulnerable. I held his arms, ensuring he did not pull away as I finally spoke the words that had gone unspoken for far too long. “Since I left Havenfield,” I breathed, “all I can think of is you. All I want is you.” I smiled, even as tears fell freely down my cheeks. “I love you more than I ever thought I could love anyone.”

The look he gave me then stole away any breath remaining in me. His eyes held all the warmth of a brilliant summer day, the joy of unrestrained laughter, and all the hope of a beautiful, brilliant future. He kissed me gently and then more fervently as I slid my arms around his neck, pulling him closer. I never wanted him to stop kissing me, and if I had any say in the matter, he never would.

Chapter Twenty-Four

“ENGAGED?” I COULDN’T BEGIN TO keep the shock from my voice. “To Mr. Brooks?”

Eliza nodded with a blush and adjusted her parasol in the early afternoon sun. Havenfield rose behind us as we set out on our walk. Lady Rowley, Aunt Lydia, and Mrs. Rowley followed just a few paces behind, allowing us younger girls to have our conversation.

Rebecca had a less reserved response to my expression of complete surprise. She laughed out loud and took my arm in hers. “Oh, I can just imagine that is what we all looked like when she first told us!”

I couldn’t look away from Eliza. “But how? When?”

“We’ve been engaged since last summer,” she admitted.

My jaw dropped even further, if that was possible. “A year? But why did you keep it a secret?”

Eliza sighed. “We both knew Mother would never approve. Although Henry is a gentleman, he has neither rank nor fortune. Mother has always been very outspoken about the kind of match she’s wanted for me. We hoped that if we bode our time, she might come to see him in a more favorable light.”

“Your father approves, then?”

“Quite heartily,” Eliza said. “He is my best hope at convincing Mother to come around.”

“Engaged to Mr. Brooks,” I repeated. “I can scarce believe it.”

“I did so wish to tell you,” Eliza said. “In fact, there were times I was certain you had guessed. Do you recall when you mended my torn dress?”

“Of course.”

“I ripped it one day when I met Henry in the stables.”

It was all beginning to make sense. “So that is why you looked so terrified when Grandmama asked you how it happened.”

“Yes,” she said. “And that day you asked if I would show you around the library—”

“You were meeting Mr. Brooks.” I shook my head. “Now that I see it all so plainly, I wonder that I didn’t realize it at the time. And we all thought you were simply a voracious reader.”

“No,” she said. “I hardly read at all.”

Rebecca and I joined in her laughter, and I took Eliza’s arm, so all three of us were linked as we walked. “I think you two shall do very well together.”

“I think the same of you and William,” she said. “I couldn’t be more pleased that everything turned out the way it did.”

“I knew all along you and he belonged together,” Rebecca said, squeezing my arm. “I could tell from the first time he spoke of you that he was a smitten fool.”

“And you never thought to mention it to me?” I teased.

“But then he might never have had the chance to follow you to London and bring you back.” Rebecca sighed. “It was so romantic, don’t you think? Oh, how lucky the both of you are. To be done and settled.”

Eliza leaned forward so she could see Rebecca on the other side of me. “You are not fooling either of us for a second. You live for balls and dinner parties and flirting.”

Rebecca grinned. “Of course I do. But that does not mean I’m not also prepared to be completely swept off my feet.”

We were interrupted by footsteps behind us; my grandmother and Aunt Lydia approached, and we turned to wait for them.

“Juliana,” my grandmother said. “Lydia has been aching to talk with you since you returned. Why don’t you walk together while we all go ahead?”

Aunt Lydia looked as though she would rather stick pins in her eyes than walk with me, but she offered no argument as the other women continued on, though we received more than one curious glance.

We slowed until we were behind everyone, walking nearly two paces away from each other too, neither one of us wanting to be the first to speak. Finally, I sighed and broke the silence.

“I feel I ought to thank you, Aunt Lydia.”

She looked at me sharply. “Thank me? What have you to thank me for?”

“For telling William that you overheard Miss Radcliff. I don’t know where I would be now if you hadn’t.”

She exhaled and gazed out across the lawn. “I am only sorry I did not do it sooner, the very moment I heard that horrid woman threatening you.”

Was Aunt Lydia admitting that she cared for me? That she cared what happened to me? “I’m grateful all the same,” I managed.

“I am certain you wouldn’t be if you knew all I have done.” She still refused to look at me, instead watching the group ahead of us, their laughter carrying back to us.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “What is it you have done?”

She shook her head. “What haven’t I done? Since you arrived at Havenfield, I did everything in my power to make you feel unwelcome and uncomfortable.”

I couldn’t deny that. Her continued barbs and barely concealed insults had been a continual irritation during my visit, though now I knew why she had

done it. She had thought Eliza to have feelings for William and had reacted as only a mother would.

“It is not too late to put everything behind us,” I said. “It would take more than a few disagreements to ruin our relationship completely, don’t you think?”

I expected a tight smile or at least a nod, but Aunt Lydia did not respond. I sighed inwardly. Just when I thought we were making progress.

When she finally spoke, she did so quietly, with no small hesitation. “It’s more than a few arguments standing between us, I’m afraid.”

“What is it, then?”

“Before you came to Havenfield, you sent a letter informing us of your arrival, did you not?”

I tilted my head. “I did.”

“Did you not wonder what happened to that letter?”

“I assumed it was lost in its journey.”

She shook her head. “It was never lost. I received it before anyone had a chance to see it, and I burned it.”

I stared at her. “You burned it? Why?”

Aunt Lydia raised a hand to her temple, rubbing it as though her head ached. “I did not want you to come. I advised Mother against sending you her letter. I told her you would want nothing to do with us and that if you did come, it would only be for the money and not because you cared one whit for any of us. When I saw your letter, I thought that perhaps if you arrived to an empty house, you would simply leave and return back to London. And so I arranged for us to dine at a neighbor’s that evening.”

I made to respond, but she waved me off. “That is not even the half of it. That day when you injured your ankle and William carried you inside, it

was clear to anyone with a set of eyes that he was developing feelings for you. But I had my own plans for William, so I conspired with Mrs. Pembroke to pair you with her nephew at the musicale.”

“Mr. Fitzroy,” I said with distaste.

“Yes.” She ducked her head in shame. “And when that didn’t seem to deter either you or William, I thought that if perhaps you didn’t look quite so stunning at the ball, it would be in Eliza’s favor.”

“My dress,” I whispered. “You burned my dress that night.”

Aunt Lydia finally turned to look at me, and I was shocked to see her eyes full of tears. “I cannot tell you how sorry I am. I wish I could claim I did it only in defense of my daughter’s feelings, or what I imagined her feelings to be. But I was so much more selfish than that. I wanted Havenfield to remain in the family, and I wanted Eliza to be its mistress.”

She shocked me even further by stopping completely and grabbing my hand. “What I did not count on, quite simply, was you. From the start, I assumed you to be like your mother and that there was no possible way for us to get along. But you surprised me almost constantly, and I soon realized you to be very different from Katherine.” She dropped my hand, though she still gazed at me through pleading eyes. “And that is why I must beg for your forgiveness and ask for a second chance, though I never even allowed you a first one.”

I pressed my fingertips against my stomach. She had been the cause of nearly all my misfortune since coming to this place. She had slighted me, ignored me, and even gone so far as to try to destroy every chance of happiness I had with William.

But though I hardly approved of her actions, I could at least understand her motives. And she had apologized. She admitted she was wrong, that she had made mistakes. Could I really ask any more of her than that?

“I will forgive you,” I said, “on one condition.”

She squinted at me. “And that is?”

“That you give Mr. Brooks a fair chance. He is a good man, and I cannot imagine anyone who could make Eliza happier.”

She regarded me for a long moment before shaking her head. “And you still continue to surprise me. Very well. I think that agreement more than fair. I shall allow Mr. Brooks to prove his worth if you allow me to prove mine.”

We smiled at each other tentatively, uncertainly. It would take time, I knew, but I hoped that someday we could be friends.

“There they are!”

Rebecca’s voice carried back to us from where the other women approached a small farmhouse. We hurried after them, catching them just as they arrived.

A short distance from the farmhouse stood a long line of fences and pens, each housing a different variety of animal. Three men were gathered about one pen, and my eyes found William immediately. He spoke with the other two men, Mr. Brooks and a man I assumed was the tenant farmer. I couldn’t help but smile at the sight of William. He had removed his jacket in the warmth of the day, wearing only his shirtsleeves, cravat loosened and waistcoat undone. His hair was in disarray, and he wiped sweat from his forehead, laughing at something Mr. Brooks said.

All three looked up as we neared. Mr. Brooks had a special smile for Eliza, and she blushed as we came to stand beside them.

William grinned at me. “Are you all so starved for entertainment you came to watch us fix a fence?”

“Hardly,” I said. “We are quite aware you still must catch the sheep that live in the pen. And that will be entertainment indeed.”

“In that case,” William said, “we will do our best to put on a show. Shall we get on with it, Brooks?”

“Aye,” he agreed, winking at Eliza.

A dozen sheep grazed in the meadow about the farm. We stayed near the pen, watching as William and Mr. Brooks attempted to herd the sheep through the open gate, where the farmer stood calling to them. One particularly playful ewe evaded their capture again and again. William finally made a grab for her and ended up splayed on the ground as the ewe bounded away.

I let out a burst of laughter.

William rose to his feet and mock-glared at me, dusting himself off. “I would appreciate it if my audience refrained from laughing at me,” he growled and moved in my direction.

“I did not laugh,” I said, though I covered my mouth to hide my twitching lips.

“You are laughing now.” He placed his hands on his hips as he reached me.

Rebecca had been standing beside me, but now she slipped away to join her mother, shooting me a knowing glance.

“Very well,” I admitted with false chagrin. “I did laugh, though it only seems fair after all the times you found so much amusement in my failures.”

“Ah, but there is the difference.” He fixed me with a serious look. “I never laughed *at* you.”

“Oh? Then what, pray tell, were you laughing at all those times?”

He took me around the waist and pulled me close, raising a hand to brush back a lock of hair. His clear eyes found mine, and I took a sharp breath.

“I laughed at the pure luck,” he said, “at the incredible, miraculous twist of fate that led you into my life.”

Without thinking of all those surrounding us—my family and his, Mr. Brooks and the poor tenant who was now witness to our display—I grabbed his cravat and pulled him down into a firm kiss. Because what else was I to do when the man I loved spoke to me in such a way? I hardly had any choice in the matter.

It was a short kiss, chaste and sweet, and when I pulled back, blushing, William only grinned. “If I am to be rewarded like that every time I am bested by a sheep, I shall be tempted to take up shepherding.”

I pushed against his chest. “That was a one-time offering, I’m afraid. Now go on. Mr. Brooks needs you.”

With a saucy wink, William headed back into the meadow, calling out as he strode. “Brooks, I have it on good authority that if you make a fool of yourself trying to catch that ewe, you will be rewarded with a kiss. I am certain we can find some young lady willing to oblige you.”

Mr. Brooks laughed, the sound booming across the grass, and Eliza turned bright red, though the rest of us only laughed along with him.

I walked to her side, and she shook her head at me.

“I am certainly glad you are willing to put up with him,” she said. “I’m sure I couldn’t stand it.”

“I find I can bear it quite cheerfully,” I whispered, “so long as he kisses me the way he does.”

Poor Eliza blushed again, and I took her arm and squeezed it. My grandmother came to stand on my other side, chuckling as Mr. Brooks made a valiant attempt at the sheep. How could I have ended up here when only a few weeks before my life had been so very different? Surrounded by family in a place I had grown to regard as my home, my school a very solid surety in my future, and the love of a handsome, kind, incredible man made

my very own; I had never imagined to have so much happiness inside me. Surely I would burst from attempting to contain it all.

I would just have to learn how to endure this overwhelming happiness. I found that I did not mind, not in the slightest.

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 lovable boys.

JOANNA LOVES TO CONNECT WITH her fans. You can reach her on the following sites:

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