

THE GENTLEMEN'S GAMBLE

A Novel Engagement



ANNEKA R. WALKER

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Dedication

To Book Lovers Everywhere

Prologue

Rowan

The English Channel, December 1810

I faced certain death, so agreeing to marry a woman I despised in a harmless bet could hardly be held against me. The arm of the Atlantic Ocean was royally throttling our small packet ship, and I daresay my six comrades and I were incapable of thinking sensibly under the sound beating. None of us cared to be leg shackled, yet a marriage wager seemed to be the only form of distraction any of us could imagine.

The boat pitched, and I clung to my berth to keep from rolling off. Leonard was lying in the short bunk opposite me, scowling at the wall, and my leg just stopped him from going over the edge. It was my turn to commit to the bet, and I planned to do it before we capsized. “If I live, I swear I’ll do my duty by Miss Delafield.” I had to yell the words to be heard over the roar of the storm.

“You’ll never marry her,” Leonard growled, his mood especially foul.

“She hates you, or did you hit your head too hard to remember?” Thomas—the man I had to thank for this asinine bet—hollered back with a laugh from the berth opposite mine. His dark hair was matted in sweat, with only a straw-filled pillow between him and Ambrose—who we affectionately called Rosie. Rosie, always the planner, looked ill, and it was hard to say if his shiver was from the icy December temperatures or the talk of marriage. Standing beside the bunk, Andrew—always responsible—desperately tried to keep the lantern swinging from the deck head from going out. There were only three beds in our cramped private cabin, but once the storm hit fever pitch, we somehow squeezed all seven of us into the crowded room.

If we were going to die, we would die together.

Such a loyal and well-crafted sentiment brought Shakespeare to mind. What would he say to this madcap plan of ours? I thought of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Act 1, Scene 1, “*The course of true love never did run smooth.*”

“The storm has settled my mind on the subject, gentlemen. I will marry her.” I gave a half-smile, half-grimace. Now that I had finally said the words out loud, I knew I couldn’t take them back. I would wed Miss Delafield. It was Mother’s dearest wish, and if I lived, I would see it realized. Times like this made a man see what really mattered in life, and I didn’t want to die before I started a family.

The ship heaved once more. My body was thrown back, deeper into my berth, my shoulder slapping the wood. The pain only strengthened my decision. It had taken me to the brink of death to acknowledge what mattered most to me, and honoring the memory of my mother was my only grounded thought on this storm-tossed ship. Miss Delafield and I had been promised since her infancy, and though I had fought it with all my might, it was time to humble myself.

“But can you beat the rest of us to the altar?” Tristan said, nudging his twin brother Charles as the ship righted. He was the charmer and Charles the adventurer of the group.

Charles nodded and laughed, although not even he could hide the stress from his voice. They sat on two stools nailed to the floor against the wall, and they had a valid point. Regardless, I had no intention of playing the loser and paying £100 to each of the others. While my verbal pledge had committed me, how soon could I bring myself to marry? We were nearing

the end of our tour of the continent, hardly free from the leading strings of university life. Was there any rush for any of us?

“Time will tell,” I muttered. The ocean’s thunder drowned out my words as its furious fist slammed into us once more.

If we lived through this insanity, I would require more than just time. I’d need an abundance of courage to go with it. For I knew a different sort of fear—one with long legs and an infuriating tongue.

Miss Delafield was a tempest all on her own.

Chapter 1

Rowan

Six years later, June 1816, Surrey, England

“I know this might come as a great shock to you, Miss Delafield, but I do indeed wish to marry you.” My carriage bounced on the rough country road destroyed by the recent storms, but it was not enough to knock sense into me. I dearly wished I could call the whole ludicrous idea of marriage off. Regardless, I could not retreat now. A promise made under extreme duress was still a promise—even if I’d taken my precious time in fulfilling it.

Setting my hand against the black satin-lined carriage wall to steady myself, I began again. “I wrote ahead to your parents of my plans, hoping that a fortnight’s notice would be enough for you to adjust to the idea.” Although, if roughly twelve years since our last meeting had not been long enough, another fortnight would not matter. “Before you answer, Miss Delafield, please remember that this is our familial duty. Our parents’ hopes

are tied to this union, and it would be a grave disappointment to them should we not act upon it.”

I paused, wondering if I should mention my personal reasons for marrying. The greatest being the bet I had made with my friends, and the nagging collective price of six hundred pounds if I failed. I’d made the bet because I wanted to honor my mother’s wishes and start a family, but the longer I had been off the boat, the more those reasons had grown hazy. It had taken six years and letters from four different besotted friends to motivate me to propose marriage. With only three remaining bachelors, the race was on.

I couldn’t afford to dawdle and still have the funds to pay off my friends. My man of business had obtained a rare copy of Shakespeare’s First Folio. With thirty-six of his plays, it might as well be the bible of Shakespeare. The expense had nearly exhausted my allowance. If he succeeded in chasing down the recent rumor I had heard, I would soon have the Third Folio too, which was quite scarce thanks to the Great Fire of London destroying many of its valuable copies. Once I had the Third Folio, my collection of all four Folios would be complete. A dream come true.

I stared at the empty seat across from me, feeling a bit foolish as I tried to imagine Miss Delafield’s response to my practiced speech. Why did the red velvet upholstery on the bench look as if I had murdered the lady’s hopes and dreams to marry for love? The stain of blood would surely mar my conscience for all eternity, even if I was not one to take stock in love matches. The thought made me shiver with unease.

“Come now, Miss Delafield,” I pleaded with the empty carriage seat. “I am a much nicer person than when we saw each other last. It’s been, what?” I paused to count on my fingers just to be certain. “Yes, twelve blessed years of peace since our last not-so-pleasant encounter. I assure you that when we are wed, we can both reside in opposite wings of the house and only see each other at holiday parties.”

Parties? I hesitated, my breathing quickening and my shoulders rising.

Anyone like Miss Delafield who did not respect books and the sacred written word should not be permitted in polite Society. The selfish thought was greeted with another hard bounce in my seat that made me reach for my tailbone. No bruise would make me feel repentant. Not where Miss Delafield, the spindly girl with legs long enough to trip over and more freckles than sense, was concerned. I had enough memories of her to be

quite certain that an amicable marriage would only be accomplished with a great deal of tolerance. I would have to start praying for patience the minute the banns were read.

The carriage struck a deep rut in the road, and this time, there was more than my tailbone at stake. The carriage lurched to the left. Time suspended as my body momentarily levitated. The next moment was akin to a nightmare. The carriage crashed against its side, and I barely let out a yelp before my body followed, slapping hard against the conveyance wall. Everything went still—the only sound in my ringing ears a faint whine of a horse.

With a grimace, I pushed myself to a sitting position in the downed carriage. My left arm had taken the brunt of the crash. I slowly rotated it, assessing the limb. It hurt, but nothing seemed broken. My head pounded, and I gingerly dug beneath my hair to feel a small goose egg forming. The damage was minor, considering. There was nothing of lasting consequence to prevent me from marrying. A small whimper escaped my lips.

“Sir!” my valet called, thumping on the carriage. “Sir, are you alive?”

Perhaps I should have restrained my condemning thoughts about Miss Delafield after all. The universe did not care for the idea of me cursing my future bride and had punished me for it. “I’m alive, Hastings. How did you and the driver fare?”

“Well enough, sir.”

“Good,” I said under my breath.

With Hastings’s assistance, I was able to extract myself from the conveyance. The three of us stepped back and studied our plight under the unusually cool afternoon sun. Even the June weather was as off as I was. “Fortunately, the fall of the carriage was softened by that convenient row of shrubs,” I offered, unhelpfully. I slapped Hastings on the back. “And you look no worse for wear.”

“Unfortunately,” Hastings began, “the carriage wheel is decidedly broken.”

“Yes, there is that,” I sighed. Of all the rotten luck. At least in my anxious state, I had left home a few days early with time to spare.

“Stay here and rest, Hastings,” I directed. “As the horses were spared, I will ride to town for help.” I had no plans to go mad while sitting around waiting to be rescued.

“How good of you, sir,” Hastings said dryly, dipping his head in acquiescence. “The driver and I will unhitch the horses.”

A few minutes later, I was atop a gray mare and trotting down the unkempt road that had destroyed my carriage. Not more than a mile later, I was greeted by a crooked piece of wood labeled Quillsbury.

“Quillsbury it is.” With a fortifying breath, I followed the road until I reached the main street of town. I went straight to the nearest blacksmith and had a hand sent out to survey the damage to my carriage. After disposing of my horse at the mews, I attempted to dust off my disheveled attire and took in my first real glance of Quillsbury. It was quaint, to be sure. But was it too much to hope that I would not be stuck here long? With the way my friend Ambrose attacked his plans, he was likely well on his way to solidifying his own engagement. Even Leonard, shy and sullen as he was, was equally likely to find some smiling debutante to balance him. I hadn’t any time to lose.

I passed a country bank that Andrew Langford would have appreciated and shook my head. It seemed I was unable to keep my friends and the silly bet from my mind.

The sun at just past noon glimmered through the cloud cover against the sign of a small shop where a pleasant bench sat below a large bay window. I squinted to read the peeling paint: Inkwell Books Etc. A bookshop?

A sharp thrill of anticipation ran through me. It was highly unusual to see such a store in a small town. What luck! Every bookshop was a treasure hunt I could not resist. My feet were moving before I acknowledged them, and soon enough, I was across the street and reaching for the door handle. A bell rang to alert the store manager of a new customer. My eyes raked over the oak shelves stretching above my head, placed in neat lines through the confined space. I passed between two, only wide enough for a single person to cross at a time. I ignored the cheap chapbooks and fashion magazines and eyed a row of poetry. There was a decent collection, but nothing eye-catching.

Turning the corner, my eyes traced the myriad of books. This set of shelves was shorter, and my gaze drew up to a shelf on the row beyond mine. A line of books caught my attention—all Shakespeare. One spine in particular drew my gaze, even from across the room. It was not a hardback like the others. Paper covered it, tinted with age. It was too small to be a

Folio or one of the newer prints. I grinned; I knew a treasure when I saw one.

Chapter 2

Arabella

The small town in the country was the perfect discreet location to bribe a man to be my husband. Bribe might be too strong a word. Coerce? Trick? Was there a ladylike word that suited my task? I stared at the neat row of leather spines in the quaint bookshop I had discovered on my first trip to Quillsbury and tried to find the right descriptive word in my head.

I blinked away my stupor. Words were not coming easily to me these days, which meant the poor heroine in the story I was writing was terrifically doomed. Alas, Penelope was imprisoned in a tower and would remain there until I convinced the elusive Mr. Clodwick to marry me and bring back my muse. I had exactly four days to secure a proposal before my return trip to Writcombe. If I failed, I would be forced to marry Mr. Ashworth, my childhood nemesis and up-and-coming literary critic. If that happened, I might as well bury my weeping muse in the church graveyard, for I'd never see it again.

I filled my lungs with the scent of books—earth and wood, glue and ink—letting the essence permeate my person, hoping it would cure me and knowing it would not. Marriage was not a trifling subject, and the anxiety of the matter was wearing me thin.

My eyes fell on a popular novel, and it immediately reminded me of Mr. Ashworth and the literary review he'd written about it in Papa's magazine

subscription. I frowned in disgust. I had disagreed completely. Though I had yet to finish some of the newer books Mr. Ashworth selected, the few harsh appraisals I had read had told me enough. He hadn't changed at all. After all these years of not seeing him in person, it was quite obvious that he still had the same vexing personality he'd had since his adolescence.

Even Clodwick—dimwitted, tone-deaf, and boring—was a more suitable alternative to Ashworth. He, at least, knew how to be a decent human being. In my distracted state, I pulled a neighboring book from the shelf before remembering I had read it already and replaced it.

“You had better hurry!” Tabitha hissed from the end of a row of shelves. “You would not want to miss Mr. Clodwick when he finishes getting his hair cut.”

I bit back my own impatience. Tabitha hated reading and had been breathing down my neck since we had arrived. I should be grateful that my married sister had introduced me to Clodwick last year and had generously allowed me to visit her without notice. I should also be grateful that she had gone along with my mad scheme to secure a proposal and had accompanied me on this outing. But if I could not write words, I had to read them.

“Just a few minutes more,” I begged. “A good book will help me rally my courage to chase down Mr. Clodwick.”

She wrinkled her nose. “How can something so musty help anything?”

“Books are the perfect distraction. I can be braver when I pretend to be someone else. And it isn't musty but the smell of fresh paper. It's marvelous.”

Tabitha itched her petite nose, making her russet curls bounce. “Then fresh paper makes me sneeze.”

I resisted casting my gaze upward in petty frustration. “Very well, I will hurry. Wait for me outside.” If the smell of books could not help me, a gripping novel surely would—one with a spirited heroine who had men falling at her feet, someone I could emulate. After all, no one had come close to falling in love with me before, and I required all the help I could get.

I lifted my gaze to the top shelf and spotted a row of works by Shakespeare. Between the mass reprinted single volumes and multi-volumes of his collection, there was an unbound book—a thick pamphlet stitched together with a simple paper wrapper. My attention piqued. Could . . . could it be a Shakespeare's first quarto? Good heavens, it might be. It

was shorter than its neighboring spines and a degree narrower, just like all his first edition plays where the paper was folded into quarters, making eight pages per sheet. And it certainly appeared old enough.

All thoughts of marriage disappeared. This was the sort of rare book I had only ever dreamed of collecting. My heart soared, and I stood on my toes and reached for it. Instead of grasping the spine, my hand took hold of another hand—a very masculine one. A warm sensation crawled down my arm, causing me to shriek.

I yanked back my hand, whirling to meet the stranger who had suddenly appeared by my side and wanted *my* book. Mussed hair, dark brows, and a pair of deep-set dark eyes arrested my gaze. His firm jaw tightened, and his lips pursed into a sharp line. But my eyes were not done. They dropped to his well-fitted jacket over his athletic shoulders and chest, oddly streaked with dirt. He could have been a hero in a gothic novel.

I did not fully understand the entire picture before me, but what I knew was enough. This disheveled man, handsome though he may be, did not deserve a first quarto any more than I did. In fact, I could argue that I would take better care of it if his ill-kempt attire were proof of anything. First quartos were historic relics of literature.

His scowl deepened, and with the war speed of Ares, we both reached for the book again. This time our hands both met the book's spine—mine at the bottom and his at the top. We yanked it from the shelf, but there was no clear victor. Indeed, there was hardly enough space for a proper tug-of-war.

“Ladies first,” I argued, pulling it toward me.

“Ah, but chivalry must step aside for fairness. I clearly had the book first.” He drew the book closer to him this time, coincidentally pressing the back of my hand to his rather firm chest.

I tried to pull the book away, but he was much stronger than me. “That cannot be possible. We both reached it at the same time.”

His jaw worked together—I might have been watching with rapid interest. Only, of course, because I had not been this close to a man before and not because I was ogling him. At least, I did not think so, even if I was oddly fascinated by his every feature, including a freckle on his sharp jawline.

Ahem, not that I noticed.

After a moment, I found my voice. “I suppose we are at an impasse.”

His brows tightened and then relaxed again. “Unfortunately, we cannot share it.” The tension suddenly left the death grip between us, and the stranger released his end of the book. “Forgive me, it’s yours. I became excited and did not act in the manner of a gentleman.” He took a purposeful step back, allowing me breathing room.

I glanced down at the cover. *Romeo and Juliet*. The most historic star-crossed lovers of all time. And it was mine. I swallowed. This man’s generosity sent a wave of guilt crashing through my resolve. “Are you certain you want to give it to me?” He was a true gentleman to relinquish such a prize, but what did that make me? Abominably selfish?

“Will you at least humor me and tell me the date it was published?” he asked.

“Indeed,” I whispered, opening the book. I held it out for him to see the date.

He let out a low whistle. “1597. She’s a beauty.”

I liked that he called the collection a *she*, giving it a feminine note, and with an air of respect that he no doubt offered to all the ladies of his acquaintance. I could not even blame him for his rudeness moments ago because his passion aligned with my own. Indeed, I was the one with her manners in question.

“You . . . you should take it.” I could barely force the words out. I wanted this copy. I wanted it far more than I wanted Clodwick.

“You don’t mean that, and we both know it,” he said. “There is a bench outside the shop. You can excuse any guilt you feel by letting me peruse your copy for a few minutes after you purchase it.”

I smiled. “For such a small favor, I feel quite indebted. Thank you.”

The gentleman retreated from the shop to wait for me outside while I found my way to the proprietor of the shop, seated behind a counter. He paused his work in mending a broken spine long enough to help me.

“Find another gem, Miss Delafield?”

As Quillsbury was on the other side of Surrey from Writcombe, I had frequented the shop with my yearly visits to my sister. Enough time, it seemed, to become well acquainted with Mr. Wordsworth. “A gem, indeed.” I held up the book to show it to him.

Mr. Wordsworth’s eyes twinkled. “Ah, I thought that one might catch your eye.”

“You know my taste well.” As I did not carry enough pin money to pay in full, I requested the cost be added to my sister’s tab, which thankfully was in good standing. I would have to request money from Papa, but I knew he would indulge me. Although he did not like it known about my writing for the protection of my reputation, I had inherited my love of books from him.

After paying for the book and wishing Mr. Wordsworth well, I let myself out of the shop. Tabitha stood outside in deep conversation with an older woman I did not recognize. I pointed to the bench behind her, and she nodded.

The gentleman stood at the opposite end of it. “Please, have a seat, Miss Page.”

“Miss Page?” I frowned. Had he confused me with someone else?

His grin was disarming. Intriguing. Marvelous. For a fleeting moment, words were flying through my head with the utmost clarity.

“Forgive me,” he said. “As we have no mutual acquaintance to introduce us, I took the liberty of coming up with a name for you myself: Miss First Page. Seeing as all I know about you would fit in a few paragraphs, it felt fitting.”

I laughed at his cleverness and took a seat, handing him my new book. “Then you can be Mr. Prologue—the beginning of our acquaintance.”

“Brief acquaintance, I’m afraid. I am only passing through town.”

“Oh.” A pang of disappointment took me off guard. “Then by all means, you must look through *Romeo and Juliet* before you leave.”

Mr. Prologue took a seat beside me and reverently ran his hand over the book’s cover. “What a find. They say this is the abridged version of the play, whereas the second edition is the full version.”

“How fascinating. Someday I hope to know everything about Shakespeare’s works.”

“I feel the same.”

I smiled. “I have always wanted a First Folio, rare as they may be, but now I find I can be quite content with a quarto.” One story compared to a whole collection was still a prize.

His dark-brown eyes rose to meet mine. “Dare I tell you that I could only part with this because I have recently acquired a First Folio myself?”

I gasped, gripping the arm of the iron bench. “Where did you find it?”

“A baron’s private collection. He was sorry to part with it, but he needed the money.”

I leaned back in my seat, fanning myself with my gloved hand. “I feel as if I am meeting Prinny himself, knowing that I am sitting next to the owner of such a treasure. Not to mention my conscience is quite at ease in keeping this book from you. After you have perused my copy, I will gladly take it home.”

He chuckled as he opened my copy and studied the pages with a reverence I quite appreciated. “I find great pleasure in the feel of an old book,” he said.

“Yes, it’s like holding a piece of history.”

“A window to the past,” he added.

We stared at each other for a moment—two souls who understood books and possibly each other. Did he not look familiar to me in this moment? As if we had met in another life? I forced myself to look away. My gaze wandered across the street, settling on none other than Mr. Clodwick in his black stovepipe hat and perpetual black jacket, crossing from the barber to his carriage.

Drat! I was going to miss him!

I jolted to the edge of the bench, my back ramrod straight.

“What is it?” Mr. Prologue asked.

Clodwick stepped into his carriage and disappeared from my view. I sank back against the bench in defeat. “Nothing. Just the man I hope to marry.” My cheeks heated. Did I really say that out loud?

Mr. Prologue’s brow furrowed, marring his rather perfect forehead. “Unrequited love? Or is it thwarted love like a tragic literary couple we are both familiar with?” He lifted the book in his hands for reference.

I couldn’t very well explain my situation to a stranger, even if we had learned a few paragraphs of information about each other. “Neither. The situation is far too complicated to categorize so simply.”

He flipped through the pages of *Romeo and Juliet* before handing me the coveted book. “You have my deepest sympathies. I hope everything works out for the best.”

“Thank you.” I reached for it, my hand unintentionally resting on his. The same strange surge of warmth passed up my arm again, this time curling around my heart, sending it off rhythm.

Mr. Prologue pulled away, completely oblivious to my strange reaction to his touch, and stood. “Good day, Miss Page.”

Tabitha came to my side just as Mr. Prologue turned away. “Who was that?”

“I couldn’t say.” My eyes trailed after the gentleman, and my curiosity piqued. Suddenly a few paragraphs on a man like that did not seem nearly enough. I craved to know at least a chapter. Never had I met someone before who was so similar to myself—as familiar as if we’d met a thousand times in a book we both adored. But someone as sophisticated and handsome as he was would never be interested in an unremarkable woman who preferred scribbling away the nights over attending parties and balls.

I shook my head, hoping to dislodge my wayward thoughts. I was to be the master of my fate now, and I had already set my sights on Mr. Clodwick. I did not require the rare First Folio life . . . with some stranger who showed an interest in Shakespeare. Regardless of whether it was one far more dynamic, a connection of like minds, and had the smallest hope for true love . . .

I nearly snorted. That sort of life was surely impossible to acquire.

But neither did I deserve to be absolutely miserable with the likes of Mr. Ashworth. Twelve years was not enough to forget how *he* felt about my writing. With a man of my own choosing, such as steady, amiable Mr. Clodwick, I could be content with first quarto life—one with respect, security, and domestic tranquility—and most of all, a life where I could write to my heart’s content.

Under no condition would I end up like Harriet Gardner.

My best friend had been a talented musician, but her husband insisted that a woman was meant to be seen and not heard. Harriet was a shell of who she used to be. I hardly knew her. Poor darling was a sorry victim of an arranged marriage.

History told me that a union with Mr. Ashworth would be quite the same. He had no respect for my writing, and it was everything to me—my one talent. I would never lose myself in a marriage to the wrong man.

Chapter 3

Rowan

The town of Quillsbury and I were meant to become better acquainted. At least that is how I comforted myself when the smithy in town delivered the sorry news about my carriage wheel. After hours of waiting for news, I learned the damage was beyond repair. A completely new wheel had to be built, which meant I had to stay for at least another day and a half.

My courage to face Arabella Delafield had better not fail by then.

I checked myself into the Wit's End Inn, ordered dinner in my room, and ate down my frustrations with a rather surprisingly pleasant meal. Admittedly, I had had rather low expectations with the inn's name.

"Hastings," I said to my valet between bites. "A slight detour in plans should not affect my ability to win the bet before my friends, do you think?" Only three of us remained unmarried, and the race was on. Was I fooling myself to think having a promised arrangement meant I could beat them to the altar?

Hastings paused in pressing my jacket, smoothing back his already impeccable brown hair. "It is not likely, sir."

Hastings was not a man of many words and had a serious temperament with a dry sense of humor. With the wisdom of being ten years my senior, he had become a trusted advisor to me—and likely not by his own personal choice. He had married a few years back, and I valued his insight on a

subject I knew little about. Besides, Hastings had befriended my friends' valets, and based on the information he'd gleaned, his opinion about the gentlemen was often correct.

"Good," I said, pushing the potatoes around on my plate. "Because I considered taking my horse and riding ahead to Writcombe, but as I am already ahead of schedule, I have decided a little extra time might allow Miss Delafield to adjust to the idea of our marriage."

"The idea has merit, sir," Hastings replied.

As did the idea of refining my practiced speech from the carriage. I could write a dozen literary reviews for the most prestigious magazines and newspapers, but a proposal of marriage was far more delicate. I had to be selective with my words. If I had not forgotten my feelings about Miss Delafield from twelve years ago, there was a strong chance that she had not either.

A stark image of her thirteen-year-old self flashed in my vision. She stood hovering over the fireplace as she casually tossed a book into the scorching flames and watched it burn. The twisted sort of smile about her mouth had haunted my dreams for years.

A shiver ran down my back just thinking about it. Was I quite certain I wanted to marry a book murderer? I blinked and shook my head. Of course I was. I had a bet to win. I had the Third Folio to claim. I had a duty to our parents. Specifically, I had the promise I had made to my mother, God rest her soul.

Sheer determination finally lulled me to sleep that night after a few recurring memories of Miss Delafield's haunting smile over the fire. It was so clear, it was as if I had seen it again that very day. I slept well enough after that and was up early the next morning for a walk about town. Quillsbury was quite lovely at this hour. Proprietors tidied their storefronts of the otherwise empty cobblestone streets. Lights flickered in shop windows, opening for another busy day. If I had been at home, I would still have been asleep, having melted my candles into tallow stubs from reading into the early hours of the morning. I had to admit, I rather liked the quiet, slow pace at this hour of the day.

A feminine figure entered the bakery just ahead of me, the familiarity causing me to pause. Was that Miss First Page?

I had no intention of writing a second page together since I was about to be married, but I had left the inn without breakfast, and a baked good would

be just the thing. Surely, a paragraph together wouldn't be too much with an intriguing respecter of literature. A strong waft of yeast and treacle greeted me the moment I pulled open the door. Miss Page, with her tidy brown hair below her straw bonnet, and a woman I presumed to be her maid with red hair and a serviceable gray gown, stood at the counter conversing with a plump woman with white hair peeking out of her mobcap.

"A fresh batch of hot cross buns will be ready in a snap," the baker assured me.

"Sounds delicious," I said, coming up beside Miss Page. "I will have one of those as well."

"Yes, sir." The baker stepped away from the counter to see to our orders.

Miss Page turned to me, the flowers on her white day gown the same arresting shade of blue as her eyes—a shade that seemed both unnervingly familiar and so wholly unique at the same time.

"Mr. Prologue, we meet again."

I felt compelled to explain. "My carriage wheel broke, and my departure was delayed. It appears I am a guest at the Wit's End for at least another night."

"How dreadful about your carriage."

"Thank you. It is less dreadful when I have an excuse to bump into someone who appreciates Shakespeare as much as I do. I thought I was the only one wandering about town at this early hour. I am glad to be mistaken."

Her shrug made the chestnut curls by her face dance. "I could not sleep."

Only then did I notice the slight darkening under her eyes. "Surely not because of a certain man who had you jumping to the edge of your seat yesterday?" I raised a brow.

She bit her lip, dropping her gaze. "It feels silly sharing my thoughts with a stranger—"

"Uh, uh. A prologue, not a stranger." The only people I shared confidence with were my close friends and occasionally Hastings. And yet, I was asking a near stranger to do so with me. Had I been taken in by those down-turned sapphire eyes? In my defense, a man could write poems about their distinct almond shape, their bright luminescent hue, and the thick frame of lashes. If only I could pin what they reminded me of.

Her small smile grew. "You're right. Being a prologue changes everything. I should have no problem telling you then that the man I hope to

propose to me has not yet realized my expectation for him. Because of extenuating circumstances, time is of the essence.”

This man was an idiot. Miss Page had plenty to recommend herself—she had beauty, was well-read without the shy traits of a wallflower, and had a first-rate personality. “Your dilemma sounds like a justifiable reason to lose sleep. What do you plan to do?”

“I plan to send him hot cross buns.” Her voice was so matter-of-fact that I almost laughed.

“How brilliant. That will surely win him over.”

She shook her head, amusement filling her gaze. “Mr. Clodwick is not just any man. He is quite particular about his breakfast. He only eats bread from this bakery and only if it is fresh.”

“That does sound unusual. And will he propose to you over a bun?”

She laughed, the sound rather musical. “This is no simple children’s story. No, my plan must be more extensive.” She tilted her head. “Might you offer any advice? What would you say brings a man to propose marriage?”

“What a question.” I cleared my throat, thinking of my bet—of my promise. As this topic was not my strong suit, it was difficult to offer any sound advice. “Have you considered a well-rehearsed speech?”

“I cannot begin to know what to say.”

“You need a catchy first line, just like at the beginning of a thrilling novel. Such as: I know this might come as a great shock, but I want to marry you.”

Miss Page’s maid leaned forward with a look of disapproval. I shifted uncomfortably. “Then you add your reasons: family duty, security, connections, etcetera.”

Miss Page snickered. “You cannot be serious. One cannot say such things in a proposal. It sounds so mercenary—so unfeeling.”

I squirmed once more. It was the formula I often employed when writing my reviews. “It does get the point across.”

“I suppose.”

I half-jokingly added, “I suppose if that doesn’t work, there’s always bribery.”

“Bribery?” she repeated.

If it had sounded poorly coming from my mouth, it sounded utterly ridiculous coming from hers. “It was a joke. A bad one, I can see. But I

suppose there might be something to it. You are desperate, aren't you?"

"Well, yes."

"Then why not find out what this man *really* wants—aside from fresh bread—and perhaps you will have your answer."

Her smile widened, and it did strange things to my middle. "I believe you are right. Thank you, Mr. Prologue, for imparting your wisdom on a mere First Page."

I chuckled sheepishly. "Happy to assist." I had helped her, but what on earth was I supposed to do for my own proposal?

The baker brought out our hot cross buns. Miss Page stepped to the counter and praised the baker's service as well as complimented the display in the window.

The baker was all smiles and blushes as she handed over our goods. How remarkably kind Miss Page was to someone not of her station. I held the door open for her and her maid as they exited the bakery.

"Good day, Miss Page." I dipped my head and barely resisted looking back as we parted ways. Digging out a bun instead to distract me, I sampled it. The warm bread melted in my mouth. No wonder Miss Page's soon-to-be fiancé was so particular about it. The next time I passed by Quillsbury, I might stop on purpose. This town was full of delights: including one Miss Page. Thoughts of her kindness, warm smile, and celestial blue eyes made my steps light as I made my way back to the inn.

For her sake, I hoped she received her proposal of marriage straightaway. She was a delightful woman and deserved all the happiness in the world.

Chapter 4

Arabella

Thanks to Mr. Prologue's advice and my sister Tabitha's invitation for tea, I had Mr. Clodwick right where I wanted him. His black jacket, unbuttoned, displayed a nondescript green waistcoat and a cravat knot so high on his neck it appeared to choke him. I inched to the edge of the floral sofa in Tabitha's pink-papered sitting room to hand Mr. Clodwick his black tea. "I am so happy you could join us today, Mr. Clodwick."

"Mmm," was his only reply as he took his cup and saucer.

I shot Tabitha a private glance, hoping to convey my frustrations. After all, I had spent all of yesterday mimicking the role of Emily St. Aubert, from *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, by piecing together clues about the man in front of me. I wore his favorite shade of green and had his favorite tea cakes prepared. The least he could do is meet my gaze and form a proper word. I straightened and tried again, this time employing what I hoped was Mr. Clodwick's greatest weakness.

"Mr. Clodwick, I have heard that you are a great collector of art."

Mr. Clodwick's gaze shot up as if I had uttered a spell capable of ensnaring his full attention. "You are correct. I am especially fond of paintings. Are you an admirer of the arts as well?"

"Who doesn't appreciate a well-done painting?" I kept my words purposefully vague. My attention had always been on how *words* created

pictures rather than the image itself.

“What medium do you prefer?”

“It is so hard to choose.” I tried to imagine what would appeal to Mr. Clodwick.

“It would have to be watercolors,” Tabitha interrupted. “Have you seen my sister’s work? She is quite good.”

I shot her another look, one that I hoped communicated extreme annoyance. I hadn’t painted in years, and my skills were mediocre at best. If I had any spare time, I devoted it to my writing.

“You paint?” Mr. Clodwick’s lips quivered, and I thought he might actually smile. I confess, I had never seen Mr. Clodwick smile before. He was Tabitha’s husband’s cousin and often joined Tabitha’s parties when I visited—more for the food than for the social experience. In all that time, his long face had reminded me of a bloodhound with heavy jowls and a perpetual frown. Was it vain that I wondered if his smile would make him more handsome? After we were married, I would see his face regularly. It would be far easier to marry if there was some attraction.

Perhaps, if I were so fortunate, his smile would be as charming as Mr. Prologue’s.

“I paint a little,” I admitted.

To my disappointment, the hint of his smile slowly faded, but at least his eyes remained on me. “Will you indulge me?” he asked.

I opened my mouth and sputtered an answer. “I—I keep my work at my home in Writcombe.”

“Forgive me. I should have guessed. Perhaps you will allow me to call on you when I pass through next.”

“You would be quite welcome.” The enthusiasm in my voice might have been a touch overdone. But no one went to Writcombe unless they had connections there, and I did not think Mr. Clodwick had any. My toes danced in my slippers. Would he really go all that way for me? Finally, I was making progress. Which meant it was time to fully commit to my scheme. “When you are in Writcombe, I can show you my aunt’s art collection as well.”

Mr. Clodwick’s brow rose to an infinitesimal degree. “Is she an art enthusiast?”

“Indeed. She is a great friend to Thomas Hope.” I was not one to boast of connections, but I could not leave a stone unturned.

Something in his eyes changed. “You don’t say. I have always longed for a private tour of Deepdene, his country estate—which is not far from Writcombe, I believe. I’ve heard his collection is unrivaled. Could your aunt be persuaded to connect me with Mr. Hope?”

These were the most words I had ever heard Mr. Clodwick string together. But I was unprepared for his request. Why didn’t he want to see my *aunt’s* collection instead? That invitation alone would be difficult enough to procure, especially since my aunt did not like me. Or should I say, she did not care for women who wrote fanciful stories. It was nothing less than a scandalous endeavor, and I regretted that she had discovered my secret.

I chewed on my lip. “Oh, dear. I am not certain if I could persuade my aunt.”

Mr. Clodwick lifted his hand. “Say no more. I have overstepped.” His gaze wandered to the window, as if I no longer interested him.

This! This was what I desired. A man disinterested in and oblivious of me would equate to more writing time in the future. Imagine, while Mr. Clodwick traveled to exhibits all over the country, I could have the house all to myself. But while this was the exact reason I desired to marry him, it made it quite difficult to secure a proposal of marriage. Was I willing to give up so soon?

Absolutely not! My future was still mine to navigate, and I had no intention of marching home to marry Mr. Ashworth.

“If I were married . . .” I blurted.

Mr. Clodwick glanced at me once more. “Married?”

I gave a light laugh, one laced with panic and a touch of regret. “Yes. If I were married, my aunt *might* look at the situation differently. She *might* be convinced to request a favor of Mr. Hope.” Might, as in a possibility. In this case, a distant possibility. I cleared my throat. “A favor for my husband, that is, if he should care for the arts.”

My unpolished words rang in my head. Would he take the bait? And if so, was I prepared for the consequence? I had given up marrying for love when I was but a child and thrown myself wholeheartedly into my writing. But a small part of me still harbored hope for a romance of my own. With every step closer to Clodwick, I severed that hope indefinitely.

“Have you thought much about marriage, Mr. Clodwick?” my sister asked, her words breaching all the rules of polite etiquette. I had already

been much too bold, and it seemed I had encouraged my sister to do the same.

Mr. Clodwick pulled at his cravat, damaging the suffocating knot. “I have been a bachelor for so long, I fear I will make a very dull husband. I am often squirreled up in my study for long hours.”

“Wonderful,” I breathed.

“Wonderful?” Mr. Clodwick asked, confusion pulling his brow low.

My eyes widened, and I hurried to remedy my blunder. “Wonderful . . . that you can stay focused for long periods of time.” I smiled for effect.

His nod of appreciation eased my worries that I had caused offense. In fact, I think I had done the opposite. I could almost see the gears whirling in his head. He was appraising me with new eyes.

One would think I would be gleeful, considering my situation, but I only felt a hollow sense of accomplishment. Once I accepted Mr. Clodwick’s proposal, there would be no going back. But then again, with Mr. Ashworth as my alternative, it wasn’t much of a decision. I had recurring nightmares for years about the day he and his friends had found the story I had been writing—reading it out loud and laughing over it. I had cried for hours in my hiding spot, long after I had secretly observed the most humiliating moment of my life.

Mr. Ashworth had never been kind to me during any of our family visits, but this had solidified my dislike of him. Dislike might be too weak a word. I *loathed* him.

Writing was part of me, and that would never change. I slaved over each word I wrote, breathing life into my work with fragments of my soul. I would never, ever marry a man who belittled my purpose on this earth.

Mr. Clodwick might be an interesting choice to some, but a man who perceived beauty in brushstrokes and handcrafted sculptures would surely appreciate the allure of captivating stories and memorable turns of phrase. It might not be a love match, but it was the only way I knew how to be happy.

Chapter 5

Rowan

Every small town ought to have a proper bookshop. Inkwell Books Etc. was proving to be a delightful way to pass the time. While the majority of books were for sale, the proprietor, Mr. Wordsworth, showed me a selection on a shelf near the back that belonged to his lending library. The book I had selected yesterday had been my sole companion for the entire evening, and I had crafted a half-page synopsis along with my opinion of the work to be printed in the Quarterly Review.

I had been writing reviews since my second term at Oxford, and for some insane reason beyond me, people enjoyed reading my thoughts on various works of literature. Publishers had begun sending me presentation copies of newly released works so I could bring attention to their books with my reviews. If only I had more time in Quillsbury, I had a feeling I would find another gem or two in this bookshop to share about. But as my carriage would be ready soon, my present goal was to return my book and part ways with the quaint little town.

Finding my way to the shelf of worn spines, I searched for the alphabetical spot for Samuel Richardson's novel. A thick volume shifted on the other side of the shelf, opening a window of space between the books. A most beautiful face appeared in the gap, capturing my complete attention.

I grinned. "We meet again, Miss Page."

Miss Page's pretty smile, along with her head and shoulders, was framed perfectly between the rows of books. "Good morning, Mr. Prologue. How are your carriage repairs coming?"

"Excellent. The smith should have it ready at the turn of the hour."

She shifted a book in her arms. "I am so pleased for you. Where do your travels take you next?"

"Sadly, a place that cannot compare to Quillsbury."

"It is delightful here, is it not?" She set her arm on the shelf and casually dropped her chin on it.

I stepped closer without invitation. "Yes, the people here are . . ." I paused, wondering if I dared describe her. "Charming," I finished.

A blush colored the tips of Miss Page's ivory cheeks lightly dotted with freckles. "Surely, you appreciate the books as well. This is the second time we have met in this very place."

"Indeed, I always appreciate good books." At the moment, I also very much appreciated the lovely vision in front of me. She wasn't an exceptional beauty that men would trip over to be near, but I found her fine features to be just to my taste. Her bright, intelligent eyes to the round curves of her lips . . .

The thought of her mouth pulled me back to reality like a splash of cold water to the face.

I was loyal to Miss Delafield, even if our engagement was not yet finalized. Since that fateful day on the ship, I had kept myself aloof from other women because of my promise. Never had I felt such a powerful pull of temptation to do otherwise. I cleared my throat and shifted my thoughts and our conversation to safer ground.

"Unfortunately, the book I borrowed did not live up to my expectations." I lifted the copy of *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* so she might see it. "Have you read it?"

"Oh, yes. I thought it was quite good. Why did you not care for it?"

I shouldn't have been surprised that she had read it too. I frowned at the black cover with gold script. "I liked the epistolary form well enough, but Sir Charles is too perfect to be realistic."

"There is nothing wrong with a virtuous hero," she argued.

I shook my head. "The problem is that there *is nothing wrong* with him. It is in our flaws that we are unique and relatable." I made a mental note to add that to my review.

She scoffed. “I must disagree. Sir Charles would be the paragon of a husband. The only part of the book that was unrealistic is Harriet Byron’s constant mooning over him.”

I chuckled, surprised and pleased to have a woman speak her mind without simpering about. “And here I thought mooning was in a woman’s nature.” Though I did not expect Miss Delafield to do so, part of me wished this woman in front of me would.

Miss Page scrunched up her nose. “For some, perhaps. But you must remember it was a man who wrote this story.”

A devilish grin crossed my face. “A fair point indeed.”

She gave a delicate shrug. “I suppose a man would want a woman who is obsessed with him.”

My rebuttal shot from my mouth. “And a woman would want a perfect husband.”

Miss Page laughed, and not in a soft, demure way. “You are right. It is not a very realistic book, is it?”

I shook my head, quite enthralled with our conversation—indeed, quite enthralled with Miss Page herself. “No, but your opinion is enlightening. I might have taken the text too seriously and forgotten the element of entertainment. Thank you for sharing your thoughts with me.” My friends were not voracious readers as I was, and it was rare I had someone to discuss books with. It was why I had begun to write my book reviews to begin with. Perhaps that’s why speaking to someone who appreciated literary analysis and spoke with such candor was so thoroughly enjoyable.

“You are most welcome,” she said.

I reminded myself of the man she hoped to marry to keep my thoughts firmly in place. “I do hope your intended enjoys books as much as you do.”

“He is partial to art.” Miss Page’s smile dimmed. “But he is of the gentle type and will allow me to read to my heart’s content.”

I could not interpret her expression. Did this please or disappoint her? With a woman as passionate as Miss Page, I could at least conclude that she would have a love match. How could someone not fall in love with her? She was nearly as perfect as the fictional Sir Charles, but with a spirited personality that made her unique and desirable.

“Then have you secured his proposal?” My stomach tightened while I anticipated her response. I wasn’t staying in Quillsbury beyond the hour,

and I would never see Miss Page again, but the selfish devil in me did not want her to answer yes.

“I am invited to dinner tonight at his home with my sister and her husband. He never entertains company, so I hope a proposal is imminent.”

“Congratulations,” I whispered. I did not mean the words enough to utter them any louder.

“It is all thanks to you,” she said. “I focused on his interests, like you advised.”

“So no bribery?” I teased.

Her cheeks took on a pink hue again. “Not quite.”

Of course, she did not have to bribe him. Any sensible man of his acquaintance would be overjoyed to learn they had secured Miss Page’s regard.

“Haven’t you selected a book yet?” a feminine voice at the end of Miss Page’s side of the bookshelf called to her. “I secured the poems Miss Peterson recommended, hidden on a bottom shelf, and my nose is itching abominably.”

Miss Page gave a compassionate frown to the woman just beyond my sight. “Forgive me. I am ready.”

The woman sneezed. “Good. I will wait outside.”

When she passed by my side of the shelf, I glanced her way. There was something vaguely familiar about her profile, but I did not have a decent look to identify her.

“I must go,” Miss Page said, her reluctant tone pulling at me. “My sister is waiting.”

Ah! Her sister. That must’ve been why she seemed so familiar. She resembled Miss Page.

Miss Page offered me a parting smile. “I wish you a safe journey, Mr. Prologue.”

“Thank you.” The silly nickname repeated in my mind.

Prologue.

Was that all I was ever meant to be to someone? Days ago, I was not just content with a future of that nature, but I had planned on it. With every step Miss Page took to the door, I felt an invisible thread between us being pulled taut. I had to grip the shelf beside me to keep from chasing after her and insisting she consider me instead of that fool she was chasing.

For the first time in six years, I questioned my life plan. When I married Miss Delafield, she wouldn't care to know anything about me beyond what she already knew, let alone my thoughts on books I read—not after the vexing memories of our youth together. When the door shut behind Miss Page, breaking the thread between us forever, I sighed in bitter disgust.

I suddenly wished I had never come to Quillsbury. I had never felt more dissatisfied.

Chapter 6

Arabella

The door of Inkwell Books Etc. closed behind me with a thud of finality. A cool summer breeze encircled my drooping shoulders, and yet part of me felt alive from my stimulating conversation with Mr. Prologue. If anyone should write literary reviews for the papers and magazines, it should be a man like Mr. Prologue, with principles. Admittedly, I had only read a few of Mr. Ashworth's reviews, but only because they were not to my taste at all, and I refused to sully my thoughts with his perpetual rudeness. His inflated ego had marred his view of what made literature worth reading.

Mr. Prologue's intellectual insights, however, had made me reconsider a text that I had been quite certain about. If only I had been promised as an infant to a man as wonderful as him, I would not be in this ridiculous situation chasing Mr. Clodwick. A regretful sigh sang from my lungs, and I pushed away from the door. I would always remember my fleeting acquaintance with Mr. Prologue fondly.

"Who were you speaking to just now?" Tabitha asked, latching on to my arm and pulling me down the walk toward her carriage. "I tried to give you privacy as long as I could, but my nose would not allow me to be patient a moment longer."

"Just Mr. Prologue." I glanced behind me, half wishing he would leave the shop at that precise moment so I could see him one last time. He had a

face a woman could dream about.

“Mr. Who?”

I gave a soft laugh. “It isn’t his real name, but then again, I don’t know his real name. Though I feel as though I ought to. Perhaps I have passed by him dozens of times, but we have only now noticed each other.”

Tabitha’s head drew back. “You were conversing so comfortably with a stranger? And I, as your chaperone, allowed it? Mother would have my head if she knew.”

“There was nothing untoward,” I clarified. “We met briefly in a bookshop. That is all. And Mr. Prologue is a gentleman if he is anything.”

Tabitha twisted her mouth to the side. “You wish me to believe that you gave a nickname to a man you met in passing?”

“We might have passed each other a few times.” Any more run-ins and I would insist on calling him by something more substantial than Prologue. Mr. Smoldering Stare with the heart-pounding smile and a passion for the words had a certain ring to it. Or should I say, Mr. *I’m going to be in trouble if I continue to think about him this way*. I tried to shrug the whole thing off, but Tabitha was watching me with her keen eyes.

“Good heavens, Arabella. You are about to be engaged to another man. You cannot be flirting with a stranger.”

I balked. “Flirting? Who said anything about flirting? We were discussing books in a bookshop. It was a perfectly harmless conversation.”

Maybe not perfectly. Mostly harmless was more accurate. But I dared not admit as much to Tabitha. I daresay, no one who had met the man could blame me.

“Harmless, indeed.” Tabitha steered me around a barrel outside of a shop. “I am quite sure I heard you giggle. I had hoped you were speaking to a known acquaintance—one that might be a better match for you than Mr. Clodwick.”

Clodwick, right. I should be thinking of him and only him. “Mr. Clodwick is a good match, Tabitha. You told me that yourself.” I would spend the rest of the day reminding myself.

Tabitha stopped outside the carriage. “He is a good match for some young lady, but I never thought he was good enough for you, except that his house is so very near mine.” She paused. “Never mind. I still think he is a good match. Having you close is a convenience we cannot ignore.”

I absently smoothed my dress. “Regardless, it’s too late to find a better candidate. It’s Clodwick or Ashworth, and I refuse to marry that vexing idiot from my childhood.”

“What about Mr. Prologue? We could find someone to introduce us, and we can invite him to dinner.”

My feet slowed to a stop in front of her carriage, my imagination running wild with possibilities. It only ever did this when I was writing fiction, which was precisely what this daydream was. I was still me, and he was still perfectly him. “He is leaving town straightaway,” I admitted, barely able to hide my disappointment. “It has to be Clodwick.”

A footmen assisted us inside the carriage and as soon as I was seated, I repeated the words in my head I had spoken to my sister. It has to be Clodwick. It *has* to be Clodwick. The mantra kept rhythm with the carriage ride back to Tabitha’s and again that night all the way to Mr. Clodwick’s house for dinner. Upon arriving, Mr. Mason hopped out first, helping Tabitha out of the carriage and leaving a kiss on his wife’s hand before reaching for mine.

The tender moment between the couple pulled at my heartstrings, but I whispered under my breath one last time, “It has to be Clodwick.”

My sister and her husband led the way up the gravel walk. Behind them, I tipped back my head to admire the large front portico of Gravehurst Manor. Even in the evening light, I could tell the house was massive, with two wings featuring a colonnade and three floors worth of windows.

Think of what masterpieces I might write in a house such as this!

A butler let us in and guided us to an oversized drawing room with more Baroque architecture. Old manor homes such as these were full of history and untold stories.

Mr. Clodwick entered the room and dipped his head in a perfunctory bow. “Welcome, friends. Please, make yourselves at home.”

“Thank you.” I took a step toward him. “Your house is beautiful.”

He cast his gaze about the room. “If you don’t mind a few ghosts haunting the corners.”

I blinked a few times and furrowed my brow. Did he just say ghosts?

Mr. Mason, the most relaxed man I knew, gave a soft chuckle and leaned against the wall in front of the fireplace. “Well done, Clodwick. I do believe that is your first joke.

Mr. Clodwick's mouth did not so much as reveal a hint of mirth. "It was no jest, I assure you."

Mason straightened his tall, lean form. "You do not mean to scare away your first guests, do you? We came hungry and plan to stay through all the courses." Mason's friendly jests did not seem to be getting through to Mr. Clodwick.

"Now you know the reason I do not entertain," he said, coming slowly to my side. "I had hoped that your passion for the arts would help you to overlook the angry spirits who lord over this manor."

I tried not to draw back in disbelief. Why did it feel like I had walked right into the pages of a Gothic novel? Was this house really haunted? "Can you tell us why the spirits, er, ghosts are angry?"

He kept his face stoic and voice without inflection. "If only they could talk, they would surely tell me. I speak to them, of course, but a one-sided conversation is not the most effective."

Tabitha burst out laughing beside me, desperately covering her mouth to smother the noise. "Forgive me," she choked.

"Maybe a ghost tickled you with a feather," I whispered, not intending for her giggles to overwhelm her again.

Mr. Clodwick must have heard me. "Stranger things have happened at Gravehurst."

Now I knew why the manor had such an unusual name. Even with Tabitha's laughter to break the tension, a strange feeling permeated the room. It was obvious Clodwick believed in ghosts, but did I? When dinner was announced, I took Clodwick's arm and smiled sweetly at him.

He did not frown in return, which had to mean progress. "I expected to see more art on your walls," I said, noting the bare corridor.

"I keep most of it locked in the gallery. One cannot be too careful with one's valuables."

Did he expect to be robbed, or was this because things had turned up missing? Because of the angry spirits . . .

A footman pulled open the door to the dining room, and I half expected to find a dead body seated at the table.

I sighed with relief when the room looked blessedly normal. Clodwick pulled my chair out for me like a proper non-ghost-believing gentleman, and I took the seat beside him at the head of the table. Sitting beside each

other was another good sign. My gaze drew upward to the gold chandelier drooping with crystals.

My appreciation of the extravagant picture nearly made me miss Mr. Clodwick pinch salt from the bowl and throw it over his shoulder. He caught my wide-eyed stare.

“To ward off the evil spirits,” he explained.

“I . . . see.” He was both superstitious and paranoid. Panic seized the air in my lungs. Shifting uncomfortably, I attempted to change the subject before I ruined a perfectly good opportunity with Mr. Clodwick because of a silly case of nerves. “Your chandelier is exquisite.”

“Like a work of art,” Clodwick answered, his lips barely moving. “I am quite passionate about art, if you remember.”

“Yes, you have said as much.” While there were no fine paintings on the wall in this room either, the house itself boasted of artistic interest, with exquisite molding and elegant olive wainscoting.

While my sister and brother-in-law occupied themselves in their own private conversation, and a footman set the soup on the table, I seized the opportunity of brief privacy to push my cause. “I had hoped to persuade you to come to Writcombe to see my aunt’s collection.”

Mr. Clodwick cast his gaze about the room as if searching for something, his eyes settling on an empty chair farther down the table. “Just so you know, even if you whisper, *they* can still hear you.”

I chill ran down my back. “Oh . . . I did not think about that.” Was it too late to find someone else to marry? I swallowed hastily. It was much, much too late. I forced myself to think of dear Harriet and the cruel man she had married. Surely, a few ghosts were nothing in comparison.

Mr. Clodwick cleared his throat. “I should like to see your aunt’s collection, but I am not sure if the spirits who reside here will like me leaving for overlong.”

“I wouldn’t want you to upset them, but uh, you did hope to receive an invitation to Mr. Hope’s home, did you not?”

His eyes brightened in the candlelight. “Yes, but—”

I did not let him finish. My mantra returned to my mind with vengeance: It *had* to be Clodwick! “But of course, you would have to marry me first. But isn’t that worth seeing the art you have so longed to see?”

I had resorted to bribery once more. Mr. Prologue had truly inspired me. I wondered if I would ever get the chance to thank him once I was happily

married.

“Marriage?” Mr. Clodwick said the word as if it was a bland, undercooked vegetable.

I nodded. “For art’s sake.” My heart pounded. He had to say yes. He had to!

“Very well,” he said. “It seems a worthy endeavor.”

Cool air whipped around me, and the lights were suddenly doused, leaving us in total blackness. Tabitha screamed and a platter hit the floor somewhere behind me.

Oh, dear. While it was very likely the effects of an old, drafty house, I couldn’t help but wonder if the spirits of Gravehurst disapproved of my methods of securing a husband.

Chapter 7

Rowan

I had not expected to ride through Writcombe, all the way to Elmhurst Hall, to find my future wife absent. I hadn't been to Elmhurst since I was a child, but the beautiful yellow stone manor home—preceded by an expansive yard and towering elm trees on either side—was not what I had come for.

And just when I had my speech exactly as I wanted it.

Despite my misgivings, Mr. Delafield, thin and long with wispy blond hair, lovingly slapped me on the back. “The prodigal son returns! Welcome home!”

“Thank you, sir.” Mr. Delafield had long treated me as if I were the son he'd never had. I couldn't help but smile at his warm, enthusiastic greeting, but I also had to bury a twinge of guilt for procrastinating this visit for so many years.

Mr. Delafield put his arm around my back and led me out of the wet and gloomy weather. Inside, the butler took my coat and hat while Mr. Delafield gave his regrets once more. “Our deepest apologies about Arabella's absence. She is due back from visiting her sister on the morrow.”

“Tomorrow is soon enough,” I assured him, now grateful I had taken my time in arriving.

Mrs. Delafield greeted me with a watery smile as wide as I had ever seen it. “We are so glad you have finally come.” Her short arms wrapped tightly

around me, squeezing me as if she'd never let go.

Something about her hug reminded me of my own mother. It had been a long time since anyone had embraced me this way.

When she pulled back, she wiped tears from her eyes. "We've had our best guest room prepared in your honor. You must stay for at least a month!"

That decision would not be difficult to make. Of course I was staying. I wasn't leaving until the engagement was official, the banns read, and the ceremony was held at the crumbling, smallish box of a church in Writcombe. "You are too kind, Mrs. Delafield."

"Arabella will be so impressed with how tall and handsome you've become."

No amount of time or height would likely impress the Arabella I remembered, but steps on the stairs caught my attention and kept me from answering.

A young woman of at least seventeen, possibly eighteen, descended toward me. I guessed her to be the youngest Delafield sister. There was something in her smile that reminded me almost painfully of Miss Page. Even gone from her presence forever, I had to make a valiant effort to dismiss her lingering presence in my mind. With renewed focus, I studied the young Miss Delafield. Her auburn hair had darkened, and her features had matured. I was not sure I would have recognized her if we had passed on the streets. As she descended the stairs in her over-trimmed sage-green day gown, I was hard-pressed to recall her name.

Mrs. Delafield searched between us. "You remember my youngest daughter, Elizabeth, do you not?"

"Yes, Elizabeth." That was it. How could I have forgotten? Twelve years had not seemed so long, but then again, I hadn't stayed the same, had I?

"Elizabeth, you recall Mr. Rowan Ashworth."

Elizabeth dipped into a shallow curtsy, her mouth turned down into a disapproving frown. "We wondered if you would show your face here again."

My brow lurched.

"Elizabeth," Mr. Delafield censured. "Mr. Ashworth is our guest."

"An uninvited guest," Elizabeth corrected, turning at the bottom of the stairs and saying over her shoulder as she walked, "I hope he does not *critique* us too harshly."

Mrs. Delafield gave an anxious laugh. “She says the silliest things from time to time. Please do not pay her any heed.”

I shifted uncomfortably. I spent the rest of the day doing my best to ignore her presence, but it proved difficult when Elizabeth glowered at me that evening over the dinner table. She clearly took after Arabella. On the way to bed, I was quite certain she said *good luck tomorrow* instead of *see you tomorrow*, followed by a satisfied smirk.

Her overconfident manner left me worrying about my meeting with her sister. A man does not like to sleep in a strange bed with that sort of foreboding tone hovering over him. Did Elizabeth know something I did not? Or was it only the stark reminder of the rather vexing girl from my childhood that I was fated to marry?

The next morning, I woke with a renewed sense of courage. Despite Elizabeth’s attempts to shake me, I remained undeterred. I welcomed the expiration of my bachelorhood. After dressing in a cheerful yellow waistcoat, breeches, and dark-brown jacket, I strode confidently to the breakfast room and ate as if I were preparing for a peace talk with the enemy.

Mr. Delafield caught me as I finished and ushered me into his office. “I thought we might discuss a few particulars before the engagement is official.”

“By all means.” My solicitor had sent ahead the marriage settlement papers, and I was ready to sign my name in blood if it was required. I wanted everything in order before I spoke with Miss Delafield.

I had a faint memory of the blue-papered walls of Mr. Delafield’s office, but the walnut bookshelves behind his desk appeared to be a more recent addition. I took the seat opposite his desk when he motioned to it and perched on the edge in anticipation.

Mr. Delafield pulled out a folder of papers for me to view, including the details of Miss Delafield’s dowry. Everything seemed to be in order. I could not think of a single reason we could not be married straight away.

“In addition to what has been prepared, I have a formal request to make,” Mr. Delafield said.

His cautious tone caught me off guard. “Please, tell me.”

“It’s a matter of particular importance to me.” Mr. Delafield folded his hands on his desk and leaned over them, his blue eyes searing into mine as only a future father-in-law’s might do.

Though tempted to squirm, I held steady, feeling this might be some sort of test. “Whatever you ask, sir.”

“An appropriate answer, which is why I have no problem asking this of you. I want you to promise to love my daughter.”

I suddenly tasted the acidic flavor of my breakfast rising in my throat. Love Miss Delafield? This was a marriage, not a romance. But how could I look her dotting father in the eye—a man who seemed to trust me without a second thought—and tell him his wish was absurd.

“It’s been twelve years,” I hedged. “We have yet to be reacquainted.”

Mr. Delafield nodded. “That is to be expected, but I must have your word. A man ought not to have a favorite child, but Arabella and me are of similar interest. She possesses an open temperament and a keenness of mind. I cannot part with her for anything less than a marriage where I know she will be deeply cared for.”

My mouth hung ajar. “But you sought an arranged marriage. Am I wrong?”

“I did not seek just any arrangement, mind you. I sought one with you. I also did not press to make anything official over the years in case my daughter found a match more suitable to her.”

“Forgive me.” I rubbed my forehead. I did not expect to find any issue with Mr. Delafield. He had long been a supporter of mine, writing every few months and asking about my studies or my friends. I had willingly replied with details of my pursuits, though I declined any offer for a visit. Occasionally, he would include a detail or two about his daughter and remind me of my duty to marry her.

Never once had he mentioned love.

Mr. Delafield smiled patiently. “As you might have learned already, women are complex creatures. If they do not feel loved and appreciated, their spirits wither. I must have your word that you will try your hardest to show her the love and affection she deserves.”

An image of my friends and the bet flashed through my mind. I couldn’t afford to walk away from this deal. A second image followed the first—one of Miss Delafield’s wicked smile over her burning book. Love was much more than I had bargained for. Was I even capable of having more than obligatory affection for that spindly girl with an abundance of freckles?

My leg began to bounce, and a bead of sweat formed on my forehead as I considered my choice.

“Well?” Mr. Delafield prompted, his eyes probing again.

“I . . . I promise.” My world tilted on its axis—my words as binding as when I’d agreed to the marriage bet that fateful night on the English Channel. Would I live through this insanity too?

Mr. Delafield slapped his hand against the table, making me jump. “Splendid!” He pushed back from his chair and circled the table to me. “We will be family at last.”

“Certainly,” I said, pushing out of his bone-breaking hug. For a narrow man, he had arms of steel. “I will write to my father and tell him of our progress.”

Father would be proud. My angel mother would be ecstatic. I, on the other hand, would be sick. My stomach roiled as I exited Mr. Delafield’s study. I hurried toward the staircase where I could be privately ill in my room.

Voices sounded from the drawing room. Mr. Delafield caught up with me. “What’s all the commotion about?” He set his arm around my back and steered me toward the room and away from my reprieve upstairs. “Shall we not find out and share our good news?”

I dared not open my mouth to answer. It turned out that I didn’t need to. A second later, Mr. Delafield propelled me into the drawing room where I found myself staring at the back of a young couple. The woman had her arm tucked into the gentleman’s as they conversed with Mrs. Delafield, Elizabeth, and another couple I could not see properly.

“I know it is sudden, but Mr. Clodwick and I are engaged to be married.”

That voice . . .

I knew that voice.

Mrs. Delafield shrieked and clutched her chest, while conversely, the second mystery couple clapped their hands and shouted congratulations. Elizabeth’s hand swung over her mouth in apparent shock.

But it was Mr. Delafield who did the unexpected.

Beside me, he roared like an angry lion. “What?!”

The young lady in front of me released her hold on the gentleman and swung around to face us. In a sudden rush of air, I came face-to-face with the woman I could not dismiss from my mind, whose features now seemed achingly familiar—Miss First Page.

My heart stuttered to a stop.

Or should I say, Miss Last Page.

In other words, Miss Arabella Delafield.

Chapter 8

Arabella

I do not know what I expected upon announcing my engagement. Tears of joy? A small dose of shock? A line of embraces? I certainly did not expect to see the one man I thought I would never see again.

Nor the red hue of sheer anger on Papa's face.

Papa. The one person I knew would be persuaded to accept Mr. Clodwick once I explained how happy we would be together.

Papa shoved Mr. Prologue toward me. "You are confused. This is your betrothed."

"W-what?" Had Mr. Prologue followed me to Writcombe? Had my absurd secret fantasy of love at first sight come true? Had he longed to see me again as I had him?

And then, with the leeching of blood from my face, did I realize the obvious. There was only one man I was promised to—one man who could be my intended in my father's eyes. Mr. Prologue had not followed me to Writcombe. He had come because he was none other than *Mr. Rowan Ashworth*. My nemesis.

And I had not recognized him.

My vision whirled, and I reached for something to hold on to.

Mr. Ashworth's arms jerked forward and caught mine. I blinked rapidly, my vision clearing to reveal his perfectly handsome face—a face I had once

hated but now made my heart race. His features, once full, were thinner now, more defined. He had a jawline sharper than a ruler's edge. And his dark eyes—far more deep-set than his youthful pair—sparked with energy that seemed to ensnare me.

I gulped. Life had a funny way of abusing a person. I had just announced my engagement to Mr. Clodwick but was clearly attracted to another man—a man I loathed. A man who had yet to release me.

It was only then I noticed the entire room had grown eerily silent.

“I am well enough now,” I whispered, blinking rapidly to clear this strange grip he had on my attention. “Just a dizzy spell.”

That seemed to jolt sense into Mr. Ashworth. He stepped away from me, his arms dropping to the side.

“Who is this man who has the audacity to announce an engagement without speaking to me first?” Papa commanded, pointing to Mr. Clodwick.

I swallowed. “Papa, of course nothing is quite official. This is Mr. Clodwick, and he has every intention of asking you for my hand. Mr. Clodwick, this is my father, and this is . . . ahem . . . Mr. Ashworth.” My tongue barely managed Mr. Ashworth's name, like a child learning to pronounce it.

While the men performed stilted bows, I awkwardly turned away from them. “Mr. Clodwick, may I present my mother, Mrs. Delafield, and my sister, Miss Elizabeth Delafield. And you know my sister and her husband, the Masons.”

Mr. Clodwick bowed to the room at large, stoic and unmoved by the circus around him. “I am Mr. Mason's cousin.” He motioned to my brother-in-law, as if the relationship would dissipate the unbreakable tension in the room.

“Please, Mr. Clodwick,” Mama urged. “Sit down and take some tea while we adjust to the news you have shared with us.”

“I prefer my tea black, no sugar or milk. And if you have any fresh biscuits, I will take two.” He flipped back the tail of his coat and sat rigidly as if waiting for someone to hop to his command.

Mother gave me one of her rare quelling looks, and I moved quickly to take a seat as far away from her as possible. Papa intercepted me. “Not you, Arabella. You will see me in my study.”

“But Papa,” I stammered. “We have guests.”

“If he cares for you enough to propose marriage, he’ll still be here when you return.”

I gave a reluctant nod and stole a glance at Mr. Ashworth. That name had become stuffy and vile to me, and I could not reconcile it with the man I had met in Quillsbury. But he could not be Mr. Prologue either because that man did not really exist. I suppose he would have to be simply Rowan again, as he had been twelve years ago. Rowan, as in, untrustworthy and still full of surprises.

Not that it mattered what I called him in my head. He would not even meet my eye. In fact, his entire being had gone as rigid as stone. I had thought to laugh at him when he learned how I had thwarted his plans, but there was nothing at all humorous about the situation I now found myself in. Would it be too much to ask that he be gone by the time we returned from Papa’s study?

With somber steps, I followed Papa down the corridor, taking a seat across from his all-too-familiar oak desk. His light eyes, narrowed and hard, were absent of their usual warmth. I had underestimated his hopes for my marriage to Rowan. He was not just disappointed, but livid.

Father crossed his arms over his chest in a way that turned his slender figure into an impenetrable wall. “You cannot be engaged to two people.”

I swallowed, tugging at the hems of my sleeves. “It’s a rather complicated story.”

Papa glowered at me. “Then, uncomplicate it.”

I adopted the same carefree tone John Mason, my brother-in-law, often employed. “What I meant to say is though the *story* is complicated, the solution is simple and easy enough to explain. However, before I go into the details, I have to tell you the most exciting news. While in Quillsbury at that darling bookshop we both adore, I discovered a copy of Shakespeare’s first quarto! It was in prime condition with not so much as a bent corner. Of course, I had to buy it for our collection, but I will need an advance in my allowance to repay Tabitha. I think we should have a glass case made for it. I—”

“Arabella,” Papa interrupted. “You said you had a simple solution.”

“Yes, but I thought you would want to hear about the first quarto.”

“Shakespeare is well enough, but my daughter’s future means more to me than any rare book.”

I blew out my breath. So much for an attempt to lighten the atmosphere in this cramped room. Papa would not be as easy to convince as I had thought. I folded my arms across my chest. This was my doing, and I had to hold my ground. “Since I am content writing books and keeping my own company, I really cannot see why marriage is so important at this time. I propose that I marry neither of them.”

“Try again,” Papa said.

I ground my teeth together. It was a wild shot, but I was not surprised I had missed completely. “Then I will marry Mr. Clodwick.”

“Wrong.”

I huffed. If he could be angry, then I could be too. “I cannot marry Mr. Ashworth.” That name again. It flew out like a curse word.

“And why not?”

“Because . . . because I cannot.” How could I explain how horrible all our childhood interactions had been? It would not be substantial evidence to a man as intelligent as Papa that a marriage between Rowan and me was doomed to destroy my spirits for all of eternity. I grasped for the only argument that Papa might understand. “I cannot marry a man who does not share the same taste in literature as I do.”

Papa groaned. “He adores books as much as anyone, and I daresay he likes the very same ones as you. I thought you were a sensible woman, Arabella, but the last quarter hour has made me question if I even know my own daughter. A husband and wife can be perfectly happy without sharing the same passions.”

He was right. It was a silly excuse, but it was the only one I felt comfortable sharing. I gripped the desk’s edge, refusing to back down. “You have read some of his criticisms. He thinks he knows everything there is to know about a book. The man is conceited.”

“My dear, you also do not know all there is to know about a book. Perhaps if you spend time together, your perspective will improve his literary analysis.”

“Perhaps,” I agreed. “But I would rather focus on improving my relationship with Mr. Clodwick.”

Papa rubbed his temples. “You cannot tell me that you care for that imbecilic man out there, for I would not believe you. Why, he’s nearly twice your age.”

“He’s not more than fifteen years my senior. He cannot help that he appears older than he is.”

Papa stared at me. “I believe you have made my point for me.”

His words hurt deeply, but they also prompted me to defend myself. “You can insult him all you want. He is currently the man most capable of bringing me happiness.” No man could ever do that completely, so I was not lying. This was a path to gaining my independence in the only way I knew how. Besides, he had not seen Harriet at tea last month. He had no idea how altered she had become. The wrong marriage had power to cripple an otherwise healthy individual.

Papa’s features marginally softened. “Happiness is not a guarantee.”

He was right. And that’s why I wrote stories where I could control the ending. What would I do if that was taken away from me? “Please, Papa. Let me marry him.”

He moved away from his desk to the small window overlooking the side yard and pushed back the blue velvet drapes to gaze upon the green expanse of yard. “Since Mr. Ashworth has earned my approval but has yet to speak to you, and since Mr. Clodwick has yet to gain my approval, I suppose neither engagement is entirely official. I will grant you a portion of your wish. I will give you the chance to convince me that Clodwick is better for you than Ashworth. You have two weeks.”

“Two weeks?” I wanted to balk at the impossibility of my situation. It would be like convincing a cat to prefer cheese over a mouse. Clodwick was decent enough on paper, but he did have a few idiosyncrasies that were hard to explain . . . such as his preoccupation with ghosts. I had not had time to come to terms with it myself.

Papa shook his head. “Two weeks is generous. I do not think I can keep the neighbors from discovering this wretched situation should I extend even a day more.”

Well enough for him to say. Papa was particularly fond of Rowan! “Is my partiality not sufficient?” I pinched myself to keep from admitting to myself that I was actually more attracted to Rowan, because I was weighing qualities that mattered.

His eyes turned to steel. “You raced to your sister’s house the moment you learned Ashworth was coming for you. It does not take much discernment to discover that you lost all your good sense and threw yourself at Mr. Clodwick.”

All my clever planning and Papa had deduced it to be an act of madness in a mere few sentences. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps Rowan brought out the worst in me. If that were the case, then I would not need the entirety of two weeks to convince Papa—Rowan would revert to his vexing self and prove how horrible he was himself.

I left his study seething, my eyes on the wood floor as my feet slapped against it with each fuming step. My shoulder hit someone, and I looked up to see I had bumped into Mr. Ashworth just outside the drawing room.

My heart did a somersault in my chest. Drat! If only I had waited in the study for one measly minute longer.

“Forgive me,” I mumbled. “Are you leaving?” Did I sound too hopeful? I was so flustered, I didn’t know how to act.

Rowan folded his arms and shifted his weight to his right leg. He had grown so tall in all these years. No wonder I did not know him. “Your parents have insisted I be their guest.”

“Oh.” No other words came to my mind. Not a single descriptive one. What was this curse over me? Whatever it was, the name was Rowan Ashworth!

Rowan glanced at the drawing room door. “Congratulations on your engagement, Miss Delafield. An interesting plot twist.”

“It is not official . . . yet,” I squirmed. “And for the record, it’s obvious that I did not recognize you in Quillsbury.” I clasped my hands together in a casual attempt to hide my shame on that count. “I suppose this means you will no longer call me Miss Page?” I do not know what possessed me to ask such a question. We weren’t friends and never would be—not now that I knew who he really was. But I needed to establish our new footing. One where I attempted to act like a lady before I politely asked him to leave.

Rowan shook his head. “No, I will not call you Miss Page. I know far more than a few paragraphs about you now. I know entire chapters.”

Some, he no doubt wished to permanently purge from his memory.

I tried to control my breathing, feeling unaccountably vulnerable. While he had been cruel to me, I had not been a passive actor in our childhood past. “Be that as it may, you cannot claim to know all of my story.” My voice was weak and without feeling, though the memory of him ripping apart my words had settled so deeply inside me that it had grown roots and sprouted branches of hurt that stretched to every corner of my frame. In that

moment, he had killed my dreams of ever having a happy ending of my own.

I met his gaze head-on, desperately trying to hide my nerves that his presence brought. Gone was the soft gaze that I had become accustomed to this past week. This one was guarded and resolute. He clasped his hands behind his back and lorded over me. “No doubt we have both changed in all these years, but I find you have only altered in appearance.”

I had surprised him with Mr. Clodwick, just as I hoped. But was he really insulting me? “What exactly do you mean by that?”

He pointed to the drawing room. “That stunt in there. I find that I don’t have a taste for whatever genre that is.”

I pursed my lips. Horror? Comedy? Whatever it was, it was definitely not a romance. No thanks to him. So why did I feel absolutely horrible? Like this was my fault and not his?

“Excuse me.” Rowan frowned before my muteness could fade. “I am going for a ride.”

I stood pitifully in the corridor, wondering how he had rendered me so incapable of arguing with him. Wasn’t I supposed to have the last word? He was the man who thought he could waltz in here and marry me after twelve years of mutual loathing from afar. So why did I feel cold and alone in his absence? Was I confusing Rowan for Mr. Prologue again? They were not two different people. They were one and the same!

If I was going to survive two weeks in the same house with him, I had to draw clear battle lines between us. I couldn’t let my kind heart have any sympathy for him. There could be no guilt over my decision. Sure, he had come here expecting to finalize our engagement, but he was *the enemy*.

And I planned to come away the victor.

Chapter 9

Rowan

My ride had not been long enough to help me find purchase in my new situation at Elmhurst Hall. Neither had dinner. How quaint of Mrs. Delafield to sit Miss Delafield between Mr. Clodwick and me. We were a merry threesome, I assure you. And if I dared turn from her glower to my left, I met Miss Elizabeth's sweet look of death.

Notwithstanding Mr. Delafield's kindness all these years, if not for the bet, I would have left already. And if not for Mrs. Delafield's constant compliments, I might think all the Delafield women a fearsome bunch, for even the eldest sister seemed to be shooting poisoned arrows from her eyes every time she looked at me. I wasn't trying to ruin their sister's happiness, whatever they thought. Marriage to me wasn't the worst a woman could do—especially if Clodwick were the alternative.

I leaned slightly to my right so Miss Delafield might hear me. “Your sisters have been so welcoming. How am I deserving of such kindness?”

Miss Delafield's smile was as fake as the waxed fruit at the center of the table. Her answer came in a hushed whisper. “Do not flatter yourself. You do not deserve anything from us.”

That much had been made perfectly clear. But I still had a bet to win, and win it I must. “Is Mr. Clodwick ill?”

Miss Delafield's head whipped toward her other seatmate before turning back to me. "Of course not."

"Oh." I lifted my glass to cover my words. "So then he always looks that way."

Her fork clanged against her plate, causing everyone's conversations to pause and them to look her way. She picked up her fork as if nothing had bothered her and shoved a bite in her mouth. The conversations picked up again, and I had to stifle my laugh. It had been rude of me, but I had been behaving well for the entire day, and it had cost me a great deal. I was not vain about my own looks. I thought myself average enough, but I was certain I was younger and better looking than Clodwick.

What sort of name was that, anyway? A clod was a lump of earth. I leaned forward to steal a look at him. Indeed, a lump of earth was an adequate description. But didn't clod also mean abominably stupid? I leaned forward a second time to look at him over Miss Delafield. Mr. Clodwick cut his mashed potatoes with a knife and ate his peas by stabbing them individually with a fork to eat them one at a time. It seemed both descriptions of the word fit the man quite perfectly. Not to mention that I had sworn that he had thrown salt over his shoulder a moment ago.

And she had chosen him over me?

Now that was a tough bite to chew.

My irritation simmered, rising with each hour as the night progressed. Moving to the drawing room after dinner, I sat on the end of the sofa directly across from Miss Delafield—some breathing room was needed—and had the unfortunate view of her pretty face as she pretended to be besotted with Clodwick. He gave her one-word answers, and she pretended to be satisfied with them.

Absolute rubbish.

It did give me an adequate angle of her, and I could not help but compare this mature version of herself to the much younger one. Her legs were still long, although she had grown into them nicely. She was taller than average, which meant she was just two or three inches shorter than me. And gone was her scrawny face with too many freckles. While hints of those sun-kissed spots still existed, they enhanced her beauty rather than covered it.

If I had known that Arabella Delafield would grow into a beauty who was interested in Shakespeare's Folios, perhaps I wouldn't have waited for

a bet to race here to marry her. Except for the fact that she was still the most vexing woman of my acquaintance.

She met my eyes at that moment and caught me staring rather unabashedly her way. My stare only intensified, though I did not know what I meant by it. It was hard not to admire her, even when she made me boiling mad. Her cheeks reddened, and I would not be surprised if steam poured out of her ears like a porcelain tea kettle. She broke the connection between us and turned more fully toward Mr. Clodwick.

Interesting. It was quite possible that she hated me more than I detested her. Such a conclusion did not bode well. Unable to stand Arabella praising Clodwick's name a moment longer, I excused myself for bed. With fists clenched only marginally tighter than my jaw, I moved toward the library to select a book to help me sleep. I was going to lose my bet, disappoint both my parents and Mr. Delafield, and lose my opportunity to purchase the third and rarest Shakespeare Folio.

But at the moment, I was most angry at the spoiled woman I was supposed to be marrying. Shoving the library door open, I stalked to the shelves and stood staring at them, unseeing a single one.

I don't know how long I stood there, reviewing every word Arabella had spouted since she had arrived home. Arabella. And now I was thinking of her casually too. What the blazes was wrong with me?

The library door swung open, and Arabella herself stalked into the room. She stopped in front of the shelves on the opposite side of the room from me, not seeing me at all. Then she stood with her hand on her hips and glared at the books. I glanced down and realized I had the exact same stance and likely the same expression of utter frustration.

It nearly made me laugh. Or it would have if I had been in a laughing mood. I dropped my hand and turned to her. "If you purchased *Romeo and Juliet* with the intention of *burning* it, please have the decency to let me buy it from you."

Arabella startled, her hand landing on her chest. "The only thing that is going to *burn* is your soul."

I balked. "For wanting to marry you? Yes, I believe it's *burning* with regret already."

She stomped across the room, stopping a few feet from me. "I meant for lying and misleading me. But I am impartial to your reasons for suffering."

My brow furrowed. "So long as I suffer? How thoughtful."

“Indeed. You are not a gentleman at all.”

Scoffing, I shook my head. “For the record, I did not recognize you either. Here, I thought I had helped you find happiness. How selfless of me to help my fiancée fall into the arms of another man.”

Her frown deepened. “Perhaps you are innocent about our time together in Quillsbury, but there is more fault I can lay at your feet. Selfish is you coming here with the intention of imprisoning me with your name in marriage.”

My glare deepened. “Yes, my name comes with protection, security, and position—mere trifles, of course. I would hate to sentence you to such comfort.”

“Ha! At the cost of my sanity? It does not sound like a worthwhile trade.”

My arms folded tightly across my chest. “So you threw yourself at Mr. Clodwick? How wise of you. You are sure to keep your sanity married to that one.” I watched her mouth fall open before I spun on my heel and stormed to the library door.

“Stick to your literary reviews, Mr. Ashworth,” she called after me. “Your criticisms are not wanted here.”

I let the door fall shut soundly behind me. Forget the bet. I would rather be cut off from my family and living in the poorhouse than married to a woman with such backward thinking.

She could have Clodwick. I wished her all the happiness in the world.

“I thought you had gone to bed,” Mr. Delafield said, sticking his head out of his study door. “I heard voices in the library and hoped it might be you. I would like your opinion on a few books I recently purchased.”

“Now?” I was hardly in the mood to discuss anything at present.

“There isn’t any time like the present.” He put his arm around my shoulders and steered me into his study. “How fortunate to have such a famous literary reviewer in my home.” His proud smile did me in.

I wanted to tell him that I planned to leave his home, but I was not a cruel man, and Mr. Delafield would be crushed. I had only just arrived after all this time away. Surely, I could bear a few more days of torture before I politely declined marrying his daughter and fled for my life.

I just hoped a sliver of my good sense would be intact to take home with me.

Chapter 10

Arabella

I stood staring at the row of books in front of me for a solid five minutes, my shoulders lifting with each fuming breath I took. The spines in front of me blurred, my mind completely absorbed in the argument I had had with Rowan. Choosing a book in this state was madness. No, it was that man who was maddening. How galling of him to show up here in my house after toying with me in Quillsbury. Well, there was no use staying here. I wouldn't be reading a word with this mindset.

Clenching my fists, I marched from the library all the way to my bedchamber. Once in my room, I yanked the cord for my maid and paced until she arrived. It was a wonder the woman managed to unbutton my gown with how restless I felt, but somehow, I undressed and donned my nightgown. I sat down hard in front of my dressing table mirror, repeating my conversation with Rowan over and over, trying to make sense of how I had managed to be fooled by that man again.

My maid brushed my long hair and began wrapping the front section in curling papers. My foot bounced beneath my chair. Before one side was fully finished, I couldn't take it any longer. I had to speak with my sisters.

"Pardon me." I jumped from my seat and grabbed my powder-pink robe laid out on my bed.

"Miss?"

I ignored her, not because I wanted to, but because my brain was not in a proper state. I shoved my toes into my satin slippers, my heels stepping on the backs, and darted from my bedchamber. Shoving an arm through one of my robe's sleeves, I hurried toward Tabitha's room. My second arm got lodged in the second sleeve halfway through, and in my rush to walk while sorting it to rights, one of my slippers fell off my foot.

Growling impatiently, I spun around to fetch it. Before I had even bent over, I heard my name called.

"Miss Delafield?"

I whirled back around. Rowan had just rounded the corner of the stairs and was walking down the corridor toward me. His face was screwed up in confusion as he eyed my current state—the night-clad version of me with one side of my head in curling papers, my left arm stuck in my robe's sleeve, and only one slipper on my foot. So like the intelligent being I am, I stood there gaping at him with my mouth unhinged. It was surely a familiar, dumbfounded expression at least, since I had no doubt stared in much this same way when I had first seen Rowan at Elmhurst earlier that day.

"Do you require any assistance?" His tone was much softer and kinder than it had been a quarter hour before. There were lines of fatigue under his eyes, but I swear I caught a glimmer of amusement in his gaze.

My floundering mouth managed to produce a few words. "No, thank you. I can manage." My own tone still held a small bite to it, even in my mortified state. I attempted to cover my very modest nightdress with the one side of my robe that was capable of hiding anything and hobbled to the far side of the wall of the corridor. With my free hand, I motioned for him to pass. Any effort I had made to put him in his place in the library now seemed to laugh at me in the face.

"Are you quite sure?" He pointed to the wadded sleeve partially on my arm.

I yanked it as far as I could away from him. "Mm, quite."

His lips tightened, as he fought a smile. Drat that man.

"Goodnight then, Miss Delafield." His eyes remained on me as he passed, and I dared stare back, dearly wanting, to my shame, to know what he was thinking. I never got the chance to know, because a moment later, Rowan tripped. On my slipper. His tall body came crashing down in front of me.

My hand, fisted on the knot in my robe, bent over my heart. “Are y-you hurt?”

“Just a little humbled.” In a limbered motion, he jumped back to his feet, my slipper now in his hand. His complexion was slightly pink as he extended the slipper to me. “I believe this is yours.”

I swallowed, my eyes incapable of blinking. “Yes, thank you.”

He nodded, turned, and walked the rest of his way to his room. At least we had both embarrassed ourselves? Right? Or wrong, since it was my fault he had tripped. Oh, good heavens. I wasn’t going to make it to Tabitha’s bedchamber. I grabbed the closest door handle, which belonged to Elizabeth, and practically threw myself inside.

“Arabella?” Elizabeth turned in her desk chair, her nose wrinkled. “What’s wrong? Did you see a mouse again?”

I collapsed against the door behind me. “Worse.”

Elizabeth instinctually drew her feet up under her nightgown. “A rat?”

“Not exactly,” I said, my breath short. “I had two run-ins with Rowan Ashworth. Two! And both were enough to scar me for the rest of my days.”

“You mean you ran into him looking like that?”

Her expression was all I needed to know just how horrible I looked. I squeezed my eyes shut, but it was not enough to prevent great big tears from welling up and pouring down my face.

“Goodness,” Elizabeth said. “It looks like we are going to need Tabitha for this.”

A few minutes later, my sisters dragged me to Elizabeth’s bed. They sat on either side of the butter-yellow coverlet from me.

I took a deep breath and blurted the worst of it. “Rowan Ashworth is Mr. Prologue.”

“Who?” Elizabeth asked.

Tabitha gasped and started coughing. “The man from the bookstore? The one you were flirting with? I can hardly believe it. Then neither of you recognized each other?”

I shook my head over and over again. “It’s uncanny. Too uncanny.”

“It sounds like something strange enough to be in one of your books,” Elizabeth said.

I shook my head. “I think he tricked me.”

Tabitha patted my leg. “You don’t know that for certain, do you?”

“No, but it is awfully suspicious.” I covered my face with my hands. “This whole night has been so humiliating.”

Elizabeth produced a handkerchief from a drawer in her nightstand and handed it to me. “Are you embarrassed because you care for him? If so, why not consider marrying him after all? It would certainly simplify a lot.”

“It isn’t that at all. I cannot like him. He’s Rowan Ashworth.” I wiped my eyes dry with the soft linen. “Besides, what about Mr. Clodwick?” I asked with a snuffle.

Tabitha frowned at me when I had fully expected an encouraging smile. “About Mr. Clodwick . . . did you not think his obsession with ghosts a bit . . . odd?”

“Ghosts?” Elizabeth perked up. “You cannot be serious.”

I shook off their concern. “He is superstitious, that is all.” Everyone had their quirks of character. His was one I was certain I could live with.

Tabitha didn’t seem so easily convinced. “I asked John about it, and he said that Mr. Clodwick had quite a lot of family members die in the past decade, and to be suddenly alone in that old house must be a heavy burden for one’s mind.”

Elizabeth made a noise of disgust. “So you’re saying that Arabella is marrying someone who is a trifle cracked?”

“Elizabeth, where did you pick up such crude slang?” Tabitha shook her head.

I cast my gaze toward the ceiling. “Mr. Clodwick is strange but harmless, I assure you.”

“Yes,” Tabitha began, “but is he truly a better option than Mr. Ashworth? While you were in the study with Papa, John brought up Mr. Ashworth’s literary critiques. I know you do not agree with them, but Mr. Ashworth was quite humble about it. Indeed, he acted as if he were no expert and encouraged others to see literature in their own way.”

I guffawed. “Rowan Ashworth? Humble? I would sooner believe the man could sprout wings and fly.”

“He was,” Elizabeth chimed. “It quite surprised me. I did not remember him well outside of your description of him, but you must agree that he has improved with age.”

He couldn’t have changed. It wasn’t possible. Once a holy terror, always a holy terror. “He might have altered in appearance, but his bad-tempered and selfish core remains very much the same.”

“A shame, indeed,” Elizabeth noted. “I have been trying to hate him for your sake, but he is much more handsome than Mr. Clodwick. In my opinion, looks outweigh several slights of character.”

I tried not to picture Mr. Ashworth’s captivating eyes or his alluring smile and had to shake myself to disrupt the fanciful image. “His appearance is . . . pleasing, to be sure,” *the understatement of the century*, “but it could never make up for his grating personality.”

“Your loss,” Elizabeth muttered, standing and finding her way back to her desk. She picked up her pen and started writing on a piece of paper.

“How can you write a letter at a time like this?” I asked, my selfish misery catching me off guard.

Tabitha frowned. “I did not know you had anyone to correspond with.”

Elizabeth scoffed and hovered over the paper as if we might desire to read it. “You might think you know everything about me, but Arabella isn’t the only one full of surprises.”

My brow hitched upward. She could have all the surprises. I did not want them.

“Never mind her,” Tabitha said. “We will stand by your decision. If it is Mr. Clodwick you desire, you have our full support.”

Tabitha glared at Elizabeth until she set her pen down and sighed. “Yes, yes. We will support you.”

“Thank you,” I said. “The next two weeks will be trying enough as it is. I will need my sisters.”

Tabitha set her arm around Arabella’s shoulder. “Trust us. We will make certain you are not hurt.”

Her words gave me strength, and I set my head on her shoulder. My gaze settled on the small shelf above Elizabeth’s desk. She was not a great reader, but two of my books sat neatly on her shelf as if they were her most prized possessions. They were unpublished, of course, but I had had them bound myself and gifted them to Elizabeth as Twelfth Night presents. I would never tell her, but my favorite books were the ones I had gifted Papa. One was a great pirate story, and the second was a story of sisters—inspired by Elizabeth and Tabitha—who banded together to save lives during the Revolutionary War. I did not discriminate between genres, provided the tale contained an adventure.

Still, I was grateful for sisters who championed my writing and would not abandon me now. Alas, my own biographical adventure was getting

wildly out of hand. The story was already in motion, and I would have to see it through to the bitter end.

Chapter 11

Rowan

I woke up with a sick feeling in my gut. I stared at the now familiar burgundy canopy above my bed, squeezing my eyes shut to block out the memories of last night crowding my vision. This wasn't indigestion. It was much worse. It was guilt. Guilt for being attracted to Arabella in Quillsbury. Guilt for losing my temper when she had acted out of sheer desperation to protect herself from me. Guilt for arguing with her and then thinking she was adorable in her haphazard state last night.

Yesterday had been a colossal mess. It was never good to start an argument when one was tired, for things were always clearer in the morning. Painfully clear, in my case. I was still frustrated with the situation I had found myself in, but I was not livid like I was last night. Nor was I dreaming that Arabella would think fondly on our time in Quillsbury, forget the years of my adolescent teasing, and throw herself in my arms.

Because that would never happen.

Ever.

I flopped the pillow beside me over my head to muffle my audible groan.

Miss First Page was really Arabella. The little string bean from my childhood. How had I missed it? I should have at least recognized those mesmerizing blue eyes! Of course she hadn't recognized me. I had been a late bloomer, not shooting up until I was nearly sixteen. It wasn't until I was

nineteen that I had grown my last inch. Around then my baby face had started to thin, and my jawline had taken a definitive shape.

Now Arabella . . . there was a transformation. I tore the pillow off my face, revealing the burgundy canopy once more. There were traces of her youthful self that I could now identify, but she was a butterfly with stunning wings now. If God had wanted me to regret how poorly I had treated her when we were younger, I was certainly getting my comeuppance now.

Not that we had always been enemies. We had been courteous enough toward each other until Mama died. Then I no longer wanted to be nice to the little girl Mama had wanted me to grow up to marry. Arabella had come to see us with her family after the funeral wearing Mama's gold chain with the single pearl medallion—the one Mama had gifted her on her previous visit. It made me so angry to see it on her neck.

Now I wondered if it was because Mama had not left me something so significant. Regardless, I had needed someone to take my anger out on that day. I still remember that vivid moment as a grieving eight-year-old—the day I yelled at Arabella and changed our relationship forever. She had tried to follow me to a fort my friends and I had built, and I desperately needed to be left alone.

I sat up and swung my legs over the side of my bed, the reasons for my annoyance with the child version of Arabella stacking together like neat blocks. I hadn't liked her and her sisters visiting after that. Their feminine presence, their sweet smells, their dainty manners. They all reminded me of my missing mother. But no one more than Arabella.

It was generally just Papa and me at the dinner table the rest of the year, until we visited Elmhurst or the Delafield's visited us. And before I knew it, it had become a habit to argue with that vexing little string bean. Her own role in the situation had not helped. She was no mollicoddle, and I had a list of offenses she had committed back to me. Undoubtedly, I deserved every single one. Though she had certainly earned a few herself.

But that was no excuse now. We weren't children anymore. We were mature adults capable of reasoning together.

Blast. I was going to have to apologize, wasn't I?

She had been right to say I was not a gentleman last night. I should have held my tongue instead of lashing out at her without an iota of restraint. But would she listen if I tried to apologize? I didn't know about this adult

version of her, but the string bean I once knew would not be thrilled about having a conversation with me after an argument.

A letter would have to suffice. I would express myself better on paper while avoiding any opportunity for an argument to spring up between us again.

I dug out my writing box from my trunk and fished out a piece of paper. Sitting at the small desk by the window, I tapped my bottom lip with my finger until the right words came.

Dear . . .

I paused. How did I address her? Casually or formally? Should I call her String bean? Would that make her laugh or cry? I had no idea what was offensive or nostalgic between us. Perhaps her full name would be best.

Dear Miss Arabella Delafield,

Please forgive me for being a dunce and not treating you as I should have. I've never courted anyone before, and I am botching it terribly. Someone as lovely and refined as you deserves the best. I know I am far from that, but I promise to do right by you if you give me the chance.

I paused, wondering how to sign it. Apologies, Rowan. Yours hopefully, Rowan. Sincerely, Rowan.

Gah! They were all terrible. Forget it. I wouldn't sign it at all. I had sacrificed enough pride to write as much as I did. I folded the parchment until it was small enough to fit in my hand and sealed it with a wafer. On the back side, I scrawled her name: Miss Delafield.

By the time Hastings arrived at my room, I was already half dressed. He selected a dark cravat and insisted on tying it in a more fashionable knot. After last night, it would take much more than a cravat to keep Arabella's attention.

On the way to breakfast, I shoved the letter in my waistcoat pocket. A household never woke at the same time, but as a continuation of my poor luck, the entire family filled the breakfast room—including a grim-faced Mr. Clodwick. Arabella would not so much as glance my way, and there was no opportunity to speak to her or secretly pass her my note.

After breakfast, I excused myself first. I waited in the corridor with my back against the wall for the family to come out. If she came out alone, it would be easy to hand her the note, but if she came out with someone else, I would not have the courage to give it to her.

I propped one leg against the wall behind me and strummed my fingers on the wall. Finally, the door opened. Mrs. Delafield stepped out. “Did you eat enough at breakfast?”

“Yes, thank you.”

She reached out and put her hand on my arm. “I know things became a little chaotic yesterday, but I am so glad you’re here. We’re rooting for you.” She gave me a little wink and walked away.

That little minx! Siding with me over her daughter’s choice. I had never loved Mrs. Delafield more. My grin fell when Elizabeth stepped out.

The younger sister who competed with Arabella in despising me.

I gave her a pleasant smile, my teeth gritting behind it as I prepared for an attack.

Elizabeth studied me for a moment, undecided about something. Then with a quick smile of her own, she said, “Good morning,” and walked away.

Odd. No glare? No verbal scorn?

I did not have the mental capacity at the moment to analyze her behavior. I had to save that for her older sister. Several moments passed without another person exiting the dining room. Was Arabella planning on eating all morning?

My fingers went back to their strumming when the door opened a third time. Mr. Clodwick exited with Arabella. I straightened, my pulse racing. She was supposed to come out alone. Would I get another opportunity to give her my apology? I wanted to deliver it now and fix things between us.

Just as she passed me, I slid the letter from my pocket and reached behind her to tuck it in the space between her arm and her body, thinking she would feel it, reach back, and grab it.

Instead, it fell to the floor, and the small sound caused them to stop.

Arabella glanced at me, and I opened my mouth to explain but wasn’t exactly sure why I had thought sticking a note there of all places was better than simply handing it to her. I felt like an utter idiot.

Mr. Clodwick reached down and picked up my note before I could conjure up a single word. “For you, Miss Delafield.”

Arabella turned and faced Mr. Clodwick. “Oh? Thank you.” She accepted the note, read her name across the top, and shot me a glance. It wasn’t one of gratitude, but a dark glower because I was hovering. I jerked back a step and raised my arms in innocence.

Arabella slipped her arm through Mr. Clodwick's before bestowing a sweet smile at him and turning away from me. "I shall read it in my room straightaway."

I shook my head, trying to restrain my frustration. At least she would know that I was sorry, even if yet another delivery from me had not gone well. And maybe, *maybe* she would consider forgiving me.

Chapter 12

Arabella

Mr. Clodwick led me to the bottom of the stairs. “Your father wanted to meet with me this morning. Please excuse me while I wait for him in his study.”

I released his arm, hoping Papa would behave. “I wish you success then. Should we take a walk afterward?”

Mr. Clodwick hesitated. “The sun gives me a rash.”

“Oh . . .”

His emotionless eyes bored into mine. “I have some correspondence to take care of this morning, but I will be done by luncheon.”

I smiled at him because it seemed one of us should at least smile. “Then I shall see you later.”

He dipped his head and slipped away from me.

I held the letter he had given me in my hands, wondering what it could possibly say that he couldn’t tell me himself just now.

I squeezed it tightly and rushed up the stairs. Once ensconced in my room, I used my penknife to break the seal and read Clodwick’s words. My eyes widened. His sweet words surprised me. Did he really think me lovely? I grinned. Mr. Clodwick might not be as handsome as Rowan Ashworth, but he had much better manners.

It was just the reassurance I needed, especially after last night's catastrophe with Rowan. I held it to my chest and took a deep breath. Everything was going to work out in good time.

The next two days, I avoided any opportunity for a personal conversation with Rowan and devoted myself completely to Mr. Clodwick. I showed him our one piece of art that had any value to it—a Chinese vase in the library. I couldn't be certain, but I think I had impressed him. With Rowan silently brooding behind a book or spending his time arguing literature with Mr. Mason or Papa, my life was becoming almost tolerable. It had given Mama time to pepper Mr. Clodwick with questions and get to know him better, and me time to become more comfortable in his company.

His lack of expression and inflection of tone did not irritate me as much as it had, and I did not shiver at all the last time he looked at an empty chair as if someone were sitting there. He had other oddities too, I was learning. He was the lord of naps. I had never met a man of his age who required so much rest. Not that I would ever complain. It meant even more time in the future to write the dozens of books in my head. Truly, the benefits outweighed whatever cost I would have to pay.

On the fourth morning at home, I woke up with thoughts of Harriet.

In all honesty, my first thought had been Rowan's face—all grown up and much more handsome than he deserved to be—sitting on the bench beside me in Quillsbury, looking at me over Shakespeare's quarto in his hand.

But such a distrustful image had been easy to force from my mind and replace with thoughts of Harriet. I missed her. Tabitha and Elizabeth were doing their part to support my decision to pursue Mr. Clodwick, but not for the same reasons I was. Tabitha did not want me living far away, and Elizabeth feared Papa would suddenly promise her to someone in marriage should I choose Rowan instead.

Harriet, however, would take a completely different avenue of support. She would see through my confidence and force me to admit how scared I was. I would cry, and she would listen to how I hadn't been able to write my story since Rowan *Beastly* Ashworth had written that he was coming—how I didn't really want to marry Clodwick, but how it was the only choice I had. Because of her situation, she would understand better than anyone.

I played with the binding of my quilted lavender coverlet—the same one I had had for half a decade. Would today be the day? Would I finally be able

to write? Last night I had attempted once more to write Penelope Waters out of her tower. She was the ideal heroine, intelligent and resourceful, but she could not fathom a method of escape. Each solution I imagined was followed by Rowan's voice in my head, criticizing and ripping it apart.

My moping had to come to an end. In the dull light of the sunrise, I threw off my coverlet and dragged myself from its warmth. Padding to my writing desk, I pulled out a fresh sheet of paper from the bottom drawer. Instead of thinking of Penelope and her tower, I was determined to focus on simple words only. I scribbled a brief letter to Harriet, inviting her to come for tea again. I longed to escape and visit her, but the last two times I had gone, she had not been allowed visitors. Besides, she needed to be out of her confining house more than I did.

I sealed the letter and donned my riding clothes. I might not be able to visit Harriet, but some fresh air would help me endure another day with my two almost fiancés. After giving a footman my letter to post, I slipped off to the stables, grateful for the clear skies and decent weather. One of our groomsmen saddled up Honey for me and assisted me in mounting.

"Thank you . . ." I paused. This particular groomsmen, a young man close to my own age, had only been in our employ a month or so, and I had already forgotten his name. I blamed it on my writing habits. I was always trying to balance all the characters' names in my head. It was hard to manage real people's names at the same time.

"Philip Townsend, miss." His smile was a little too confident, but I paid it no heed.

"Thank you, Philip."

He nodded and stepped away.

With one hand on the reins, I reached forward and stroked Honey's amber fur. "I need a good, hard ride today, girl. Think you can manage?"

Her ears twitched in response, and I took that as a yes. I maneuvered the mare toward a clearing, and as soon as we entered it, I gave Honey a nudge. We broke into a trot, and I spurred her on to a hard gallop. We raced along the edge of a field, the stately English elms to our right, their green canopy of leaves casting a shadow on my path, making me shiver in the cool morning air. The wind whipped at my hat, pulling strands of hair across my forehead and cheeks. The steady rhythm of the horse's gait matched the beating of my heart, and I felt like I could finally breathe.

Ahead, Nott's Hill loomed, and I angled toward it. I rounded the side of a hill toward a path between it and a grove of trees, my destination a creek just ahead. Suddenly, a fox jumped out of the trees directly in front of us. I choked on my scream and clung to Honey as she attempted to stop her gallop cold. Her momentum was too great, and when she planted her feet, it propelled me forward.

I hit the ground with a painful thud. For a moment, shock dulled my senses, but then the pain hit again with a vengeance, and I cried out. Honey was already skittish, dancing around me, but when I let out my sharp-pitched moan, she bolted.

"Honey!" I called after her. I attempted to push myself into a sitting position, but my wrist gave out, and I collapsed again.

I bent my head to look at it. The skin was scraped and bleeding, but throbbing pain identified that the damage lay beneath the skin. No! Not my right wrist! How would I write if it was broken? A sob escaped my throat. Why was every aspect of my life falling apart?

"Arabella!" I glanced over to see Rowan on his horse, looming above me. I had not even heard him approach.

Drat! Why him? Why now?

I rapidly blinked away my tears, but I knew he had seen them. He swung off his horse and bolted to my side. I sank back, resigned to the fact that at least someone had come to my rescue.

"Blazes, Arabella. That was some fall. I was riding through the trees and saw you go down." He ripped off his riding gloves, shoving them hastily into the waistband of his breeches. Kneeling down beside me, he carefully slid his hand under my neck. Then he lifted my head as if I were some precious treasure instead of the woman he delighted to argue with. His hand was warm on my skin and his fingers spread into my hair to support me better.

My mouth gaped open, and I stared at him.

In turn, he studied every inch of me. "Where does it hurt?" His brow furrowed with concern, and his voice was infinitely tender.

"Everywhere." My embarrassment was real, but I hurt too badly for my pride to interfere. "I think my wrist might be broken."

"Which one?"

"My right." I didn't dare move it. Fear for the diagnosis was nearly as bad as fear of more pain.

“May I?” he asked.

I pursed my eyes shut, fighting more tears. After the way I had laid into him in the library and ignored him ever since, it would serve me right if he tortured me while he had the chance. Still, with no one else around, I wasn't in the position to seek a better offer. “Go ahead,” I mustered.

Rowan shifted me closer to him and gently rested my head on his lap—his lap! I was laying on Rowan Ashworth's lap. Surely, this was not happening. Then he reached forward and carefully lifted my hand and arm. I winced but did not cry out this time.

“Can you move your fingers?”

I attempted to straighten them, and though the whole limb shook violently, I could still move my fingers with a degree of pain.

Gently, he tugged my glove off. It was strange seeing my hand in his. Perhaps I had hit my head and was imagining this whole ordeal. My eyes stole to his, which were carefully examining my hand and wrist. He was being so careful . . . so thorough.

It reminded me of the bird he'd rescued as a child from one of the house cats. On his insistence, the gamekeeper helped him build a cage for it. I had been jealous that he had a pet, but instead of saying so, I pretended to be absolutely bored by it. He had rescued a fawn too when its mother had died. Everyone said it was a miracle that the fawn had lived and attributed it to Rowan.

When Rowan ran his finger down the back of my hand, I had to speak to break the mounting tension between us. “Do you still care for injured animals?”

He looked down at me, surprise lighting his face. I suppose I deserved it after ignoring him for so many days strung together.

He went back to examining my hand. “I haven't done that for some years. My last patient was a red squirrel. I still have a scar on my leg from his nasty bite. You can imagine why my parents forced me to stop.”

I managed a small smile but winced as he lifted up my sleeve a few inches. “Do you think it's broken?” I asked.

“It could be a bad sprain. It's starting to swell, so I cannot be sure. We'll get the doctor to look at it when we return to the house.” He pulled my sleeve back down and gave me a comforting smile.

I was not used to looking at anyone at this close angle, but especially not at Rowan. Drat his tanned skin and handsome, disheveled hair. Didn't the

man wear a hat? I turned my head so I could not see him, but my face went into his shirt. His personal scent mixed with the soap used to launder his shirt nearly overwhelmed me. I whipped my face straight again. This day could not possibly get any worse.

“You’ll have to ride with me,” he said.

I was wrong. It was about to get much worse. I groaned at the thought.

“Has the pain grown more severe? Do you have another injury?”

Should I tell him about all the ways *he* made me suffer? It should be a sin for an ill-mannered man to smell so wonderful. And it should be an ever-greater sin for him to suddenly turn gentle and entirely confuse a woman.

“I don’t think anything else is broken.” I had tested my toes and ankles to be certain. “But I would not be surprised if every inch of me has bruises.”

“I understand. When my carriage tipped outside of Quillsbury, I felt as if I’d been slammed into a mountain. Except I had the benefit of a padded carriage wall for my accident, where you did not.” He scooped up my head again. “I am going to help you slowly sit up.” His arm slid beneath me until I was in a sitting position. “Is the world spinning?”

I glanced at him, and my nose grazed his chin. Spinning was a most accurate description of the sudden whirl in my middle, but I did not think he meant my personal world, but the world at large. “No, everything is clear.”

“Excellent. Cradle your wrist to your stomach so I do not jar it, and we’ll try standing.” Just as I moved to protect my hand, he shifted himself and lifted me to my feet. “Do you feel steady?”

“I think so.”

“Blast,” he said. “Your leg is bleeding.”

I glanced down, and sure enough, my dress had a dark smear down the side of my leg. “I don’t think it’s as bad as it looks. It stings, but I can put weight on it.” Before I finished my last word, Rowan swooped me up into his arms. Instinctively, I threw my good arm around him. “What are you doing?”

“Carrying you to my horse. And don’t bother arguing because I am not putting you down.”

When he reached his horse, with unfathomable strength, he set me on his saddle. I stared down at him completely baffled. “Why are you being so kind to me?”

His face screwed into one of exasperation. “I don’t know who you think I am, but I am not a monster.”

I dipped my chin. He might not be a monster, but he had said a few unforgivable things about me over the years, not to mention my writing—and an author's words were carved from her soul. He was my first and harshest critic, and I refused to let him be my last.

“Never mind,” he said. “Please, do not answer that. I think I can well imagine what you think of me.”

He took the reins and dragged them in front of his horse and began leading us toward Elmhurst. Did he intend to walk the entire way? We were at least three miles from home. I held my tongue. Nothing would bring me to complain. Since the alternative was him pressed up against my back on a saddle meant for one, I was content to let him walk ten miles if he had to.

His horse stepped over a rock, and I started to slip off the saddle. Shrieking, I clambered to hold on with my injured hand. Pain jolted up my arm, and I cried out again.

Rowan dropped the reins and was beside me in an instant. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m slipping!”

“Dash it all. I thought I could avoid this.” He shifted me back into the saddle and seconds later swung himself up behind me. “Before you object, this is the only solution at present.”

I was about to suggest I walk, but my hand and wrist were throbbing, and I wanted to return home as fast as possible. With my good arm, I snagged the reins for him and let him wrap his arms around my person. A soft whimper fell from my lips.

“Are you well?” he asked. “Do you need to rest again before we proceed?”

“No,” I answered. “The pain’s tolerable.” *Barely tolerable*, I finished in my mind. My wrist, this position I was in, and everything else that was going on in my life was going to be the death of me. I had less than two weeks left with him, and if I survived them, I would be equal to some of the great heroines of literature. It’s a shame that I never sought to be any of them.

Chapter 13

Rowan

I had never planned to be this close to Arabella—not like this, with her back warming my chest. I knew eventually there would be the matter of an heir after we were married, but I did not imagine us having a relationship that would merit sharing a horse. My own parents were respectful and kind to each other, but it was more of mutual tolerance than affection. I had always assumed it would be the same for me.

I never imagined this level of attraction.

Not when she drove me mad with her temper.

Yet, here I was, holding Arabella in my arms, blood pumping rapidly through my veins, and my thoughts racing just as wildly. It felt wrong for my body to react to her when there was a strong possibility that we'd never be married. For the last few days, I had wanted to ask about the letter I had sent her, to assure her of the sincerity of my apology, but she had avoided me at every turn.

I wanted to demand an explanation about Clodwick—force her to admit that she hadn't any feelings for him, and that she had brought him here purely to come between us. My own feelings felt reckless, uncontrolled, and unwarranted. How had my life become so convoluted? Every hour I had fought the temptation to leave Elmhurst Hall forever, but this morning, it had felt too hard to continue. There had to be another way to come up

with the funds I needed. I still had time, as I had not received any more wedding announcements from my friends. If I only had an ounce of hope from Arabella, I would stay. But she would give me none.

I had gone for a ride to pass the time until Mr. Delafield had woken and I could say a proper goodbye. What if I hadn't gone riding just then? Arabella's cry of pain and subsequent sobs still rang in my ears. And her tears . . . my heart constricted at the thought of them. She had always been so strong and fiery, and seeing her that way had deeply unsettled me.

"Rowan?" Arabella asked, interrupting my thoughts, her soft voice barely above a whisper. "Do you hate me?"

What a question. The apology in my letter must have been poor indeed. I cleared my throat to stall. "Hate is a strong word."

"I know. I've hated you for a very long time."

She said it so matter-of-factly and without emotion that it was hard to take offense. "I am sure you have."

"Well? Do you hate me too?"

I had used plenty of negative adjectives in my mind to describe Arabella over the years. "To be honest, I was more annoyed than anything."

There was silence for a few minutes; the only noise was the sound of Argent's slow, but steady steps and the occasional birdsong until Arabella spoke again. "I'm sorry for trying your patience. I wanted very much to vex you so that you would never want to grow up to marry me."

It was a good thing I was sitting behind her because my jaw dropped. Had she really just apologized? Never in a million years did I imagine it possible, especially after the long days of her completely ignoring me. I closed my mouth and forced down an awkward swallow. "I am sorry too, for not being kinder on our visits. I could have been more patient toward you."

Our apologies did little to dissolve the tension between us, and in a way, I felt it more acutely.

"I cannot forgive you just yet," she whispered. "But I must admit, you were kind to me in Quillsbury, and you were a true gentleman just now. I'm not saying I will ever marry you, but I will try not to hate you so completely."

I nodded against her head. "Fair enough." This was the most real conversation we had had. Well, I had a few with Miss Page, but never Arabella.

We rode the rest of the way without speaking. We were on uncertain footing, but by the time we reached Elmhurst, Arabella had begun to relax against me. The brick wall of tension between us had narrowed considerably. It was a far cry from friendship, but something had happened between here and Nott's Hill. Something that had me rethinking my decision to leave.

Could I turn an almost friendship into something more? I liked the way Arabella felt in my arms—as any man would—but the argument from our first evening together was a vivid reminder that our past was a third player in our present act. We weren't passing strangers like we had been in Quillsbury. If I had any sense, I would bow out gracefully like I'd planned before I'd set out to ride.

I directed Argent to the front door of Elmhurst and dismounted before Arabella. "Easy now," I directed, as she slid into my arms. I had schooled my thoughts, so it was easier not to let her affect me this time.

"I can walk," Arabella said, her tone acerbic as she pushed away from me with her good hand.

I set her down, my hands coming up to show her I meant no harm. She fisted her skirt with her good hand and rushed ahead of me.

"You're welcome," I muttered to her back. I would be a fool to stay. One horse ride together wasn't the same as waving a peace flag between us. I followed close behind her, observing her slight limp. I would offer my arm, but I doubted she would accept it. She might not hate me entirely now, but she was back to the independent, headstrong woman I knew too well. We climbed the few steps to the door, and this time, I acted without permission. I stepped ahead and opened the door for her.

"Thank you." She did not so much as look at me as she said it but swept past me.

The butler rounded the corner, having heard us arrive. "Send for a doctor," I ordered. "Miss Delafield has been injured."

"Straightaway, sir." The butler ran down the corridor to do my bidding, and a moment later, a lanky footman burst out the door before Arabella had even reached the bottom of the staircase.

I followed behind her as she ascended, and we were not halfway to the top before the housekeeper shouted after us. "Miss Delafield! Oh, Miss Delafield!" I let her pass me, and she whisked Arabella the rest of the way to her bedchamber. I had not yet reached my room when I saw Mrs.

Delafield and Arabella's two sisters following the same route—the entire house on alert. There was no need to worry for Arabella now. She was in more capable hands than my own.

My lips drew into a crooked smile. When I had broken my leg as a child, there had not been the same level of concern. My father guarded his emotions after Mama died, and the entire house followed suit. I had spent much of my recovery alone in the nursery, my storybooks my only company. Perhaps that is why I found it so terrible when I learned that Arabella did not like books.

I wondered again what had caused her to change her opinion of them. When a maid with tufts of red hair bursting out of the top of her mobcap rushed down the corridor toward Arabella's room, I stopped her. This was the same maid from the bakery in Quillsbury, and I had a feeling she would do anything for her mistress. "Pardon me, but I have a great favor to ask. Will you see that some Shrewsbury cakes are sent to Miss Delafield's room? She will appreciate the comfort of her favorite treat."

"What a kind gesture, sir," the maid said. "Will there be anythin' else?"

When we were children, there was nothing that Arabella devoured more than those buttery biscuits. I was tempted to send for a small bouquet of violets, but I did not want there to be confusion behind the gesture. Violets might be her favorite, but they also had a romantic connotation. Arabella would hate that they had come from me, and I dared not upset her and delay her recovery.

"No, that will be sufficient," I finally said.

The red-haired maid dipped into a quick curtsy. "I will tell the cook then, sir."

Just as she turned away, I added, "Please, refrain from mentioning my name when they're delivered to Miss Delafield."

"I won't, sir."

I nodded and pushed my way into my room. I wanted Arabella to enjoy her Shrewsbury cakes, and I doubted she would eat them otherwise. In the meantime, I needed to find Hastings and tell him to start packing. Then I would have to find Mr. Delafield. Though, it would be harder to find the opportune time to say goodbye with everyone piled into Arabella's bedchamber.

"Sir!"

I had almost closed the door behind me, but I pulled it open again and stuck my head out. A footman was striding toward me; this one was opposite from the runner sent for the doctor. He was stout and ruddy faced.

“A letter for you, sir.”

Likely from my father. “Thank you.” I accepted the missive and shut myself in my bedchamber to read it. He would be eager to know if the engagement was official. As his only child, I had never wanted to disappoint him, but it seemed that I must in this.

Breaking the seal, I read through the contents. It was not from my father at all, but the man I had hired to track down the Shakespeare Folios. My eyes raced down the page. He had found it! And in record time. He had found the third and rarest Folio!

My enthusiasm plummeted at the sight of the cost. The sum was more than I had in the bank. I could ask Father for an advance on my allowance, but after he learned that I had failed to engage myself to Arabella, he would see his denial as a way to teach me a lesson.

Sinking onto the edge of my bed, I raked my hand through my hair. Could I borrow from my friends? With our bet on the table, everyone would have to keep their funds available. Even those who had already won should keep their money close, as they would need it to set up their new wives with whatever needs they might have. A loan would get back to Father, and I had nothing to sell of equal value besides my horse, and Argent and I had been together for too long for me to consider it.

There was Arabella’s dowry . . .

No, I would never touch it.

I folded the letter and shoved it into my waistcoat pocket. I would not respond until I had exhausted every other avenue. Pushing back to my feet, I paced the room. A few moments were all it took for me to feel like a caged animal. Letting myself out of my room, I stalked down the corridor. My feet paused of their own accord at Arabella’s door. I couldn’t help but stand and listen in case I heard her sobs again. I prayed I would not.

Taking a step closer to the wood, I set my ear against it. I could hear unintelligible voices but no cries of pain.

Relieved, I continued on my way, jogging down the stairs. I was nearly to the library when I heard male voices in the drawing room.

If Mr. Delafield was inside, it could be my chance to say goodbye. I changed course and let myself through the open door.

To my disappointment, it was not Mr. Delafield but Mr. Mason and Mr. Clodwick, sitting on opposite sofas with their arms spread on the sofa's backs as they visited. It was too late to turn around, as they'd both seen me.

"Join us," Mr. Mason called.

"Thank you. I will." I took a chair by the cold fireplace, my knee bouncing.

"The doctor does not live far," Mr. Mason explained, likely reading the concern on my face. "He should be here forthwith and reassure us all about Arabella's health."

"I'm glad of it." I hoped he had something to ease her pain. Her groans had been nearly as bad as her tears.

"Should we ring for more cake?" Clodwick asked.

My brows lowered. We were discussing Arabella's health, and he was thinking of cake? "You must be beside yourself to know that the woman you love is injured."

Mr. Clodwick frowned. "I should have known that the spirits would follow me here. I will chastise them most profoundly when I return home."

I jerked forward, my elbows on my knees. "The spirits?"

Mr. Mason gave an awkward chuckle. "He means the drink. I will send for cake and a drink, Mr. Clodwick."

Clodwick shook his head. "No, Mr. Mason. I meant the other kind of spirits."

Mr. Mason froze halfway off the sofa and sat back down. "Cousin, we discussed this before we left. There would be no talk of . . . you know." He said the last bit under his breath, but I heard it easily enough.

"I don't mind if you speak of it," I said. "In fact, I am quite curious. Tell me about these spirits and what they have to do with Miss Delafield."

If possible, Mr. Clodwick's face grew more solemn than it already was. "They are jealous."

"Jealous of what?"

"That I have chosen to devote myself to another."

My eyes widened with alarm, but Mr. Mason laughed loudly, coming to his feet. "It's all a great joke. Mr. Ashworth, there is something I wanted to show you in the library. Will you join me for a moment?"

Annoyance flared in my chest. I knew an evasion technique when I saw one. I would humor Mr. Mason, but then I would return again to hear

exactly what Mr. Clodwick had to say. Pushing to my feet, I followed him out into the corridor.

Mr. Mason took a few steps past the door before turning to me. In a hushed voice, he said, "Clodwick has always been a bit eccentric, but he is quite harmless."

I set my hand on my hip. "He believes he is somehow responsible for Miss Delafield's accident. Is there any truth in that?" The spirit talk was rubbish to me. If he was involved, there would be no blaming it on a supernatural being.

Mr. Mason shook his head. "No, it is nothing like that at all. He thinks his house is haunted. Half of England believes the same."

"So you're telling me that he's mad?"

Mr. Mason lifted his hand and pinched his first finger with his thumb. "Just a little."

I blinked rapidly. "And you would recommend him to be the husband to your sister-in-law?"

"Of course. As I said, he is harmless. Besides, his house is very near mine, which will allow my wife to be with her sister every day if they wish. Whatever heir they produce will inherit a vast estate and a large fortune. Not to mention the family connections are excellent," he winked, but I found no amusement in his words at all.

I had my answer on how to get the Third Folio. I had changed my mind about leaving. If this was a contest between myself and Clodwick, surely I could win against a mad man. In fact, I had to win. Arabella might be a vexing woman, but not even she deserved to live with a man who believed he lived with ghosts.

Even as I thought the words, my commitment wavered. It would be an unprecedented feat to win Arabella's good opinion. To do so would mean changing how she perceived me as an adult compared to my mischievous, youthful counterpart. I had to become Mr. Prologue once more. She had liked him well enough.

I would work out later how to keep my promise to Mr. Delafield. Because even if I convinced Arabella to marry me, could a woman go from hating a man to loving him? And my attraction was one thing, but could I *love* her in return? I shook my head. It would do no good getting ahead of myself. A seed did not flower overnight.

Chapter 14

Arabella

It felt as if an entire week had passed since Honey had thrown me, instead of only yesterday. I tucked my injured wrist, wrapped in strips of linen, close to my stomach, glad it was only a bad sprain and not a break. Then, I proceeded down the stairs after having breakfast in my room. My back hurt, my leg wound itched, and my wrist throbbed, but I could not stay confined to my bedchamber a moment longer. If only Harriet would respond about visiting. She would be the perfect distraction.

Laughter drew me toward the drawing room. Inside, my sisters sat with Mr. Clodwick and Mr. Ashworth. Ashworth stood and waved his arms to emphasize a part of a story he was telling, and my sisters burst into laughter once more.

What was happening? They couldn't actually find Rowan Ashworth entertaining. They were on my side and weren't supposed to like him at all. I hurried to the sofa where they sat.

My good hand went to my hip. "Tabitha! Elizabeth! What is the meaning of this?"

"Should you be up on your feet so soon?" Rowan asked, coming up beside me and resting a gentle hand on my shoulder.

His sudden kindness surprised me—again. "I was growing stir-crazy," I admitted.

“You must sit down, Arabella,” Tabitha coaxed. “This will be the perfect distraction. Mr. Ashworth tells the most delightful stories.”

I did sit, but only because I needed to make certain my sisters stayed on *my* side. “Did you steal all your stories from books?” I asked Rowan. Though I could not avoid the subtle jab, I tried to keep it as light and friendly as humanly possible. I had promised not to hate him, after all. And I could be just as nice as he was.

“Not at all,” he said. “They’re mostly stories about you.”

“Me?” I gasped.

He laughed. “I might have made a slight exaggeration or two. I have always been a bit of a storyteller.”

Him, a storyteller? How the idea irked me. *I* was the storyteller! And yet, because of him, any words I managed these days were absolute rubbish. My heroine had been stuck in her tower for weeks! Weeks, I tell you!

“Shall I share about the first time we met?” Rowan’s mouth slid up on one side, and his gaze settled warmly on my own.

My ire melted beneath it like a traitor succumbing to the enemy without a fight. Was . . . was he flirting with me? Unsure of what to do with such information, I cleared my throat. “I don’t think it’s necessary to reminisce. After all, we both were too young to remember that particular moment.” I quickly shot a kind smile Mr. Clodwick’s way, worried this interaction was making him uncomfortable. I shouldn’t have been worried. His chin had fallen to his chest, and he had clearly nodded off.

Lovely. I couldn’t even encourage his affection by making him jealous. He had yet to show any concern about my health, and the few private conversations we’d had since his arrival had all been inquiries about my aunt and Thomas Hope. Our marriage was going to be rather interesting at this rate.

“I have never heard the story of how you two met,” Elizabeth said. “Do tell us.”

I glowered at her. Elizabeth wasn’t the type to get sentimental. She needn’t start now.

“It was a perfect summer day,” Rowan began.

“Spring,” I corrected.

“Aw, so you do remember the story.” He winked.

My eyes widened. Was he allowed to wink at me? Wasn’t that against the rules for a childhood nemesis? “I—er—I remember what my parents told

me about that day.”

Rowan grinned. “Then by all means, please interrupt if you recall any details I get wrong or unintentionally leave out.” His smiles were full of charm and . . . and . . . he was directing them at me as if I were once again Miss First Page.

While I was left gawking, Rowan began his story. “On this delightful spring day, the Delafield family departed from their London Season and traveled to a house party my parents were hosting. This was the Delafield’s second trip to Ashworth Hall, but this was the first time they had brought with them their two little girls.”

“Darling little things,” I added in an exaggerated voice.

“Indeed, with brown curls and cherubic faces. The youngest, in particular, had the most stunning pair of celestial blue eyes.” He met my gaze for good measure. “Even at two and a half years of age, I was enraptured.” His voice dropped, and a shiver ran down my back.

The moment passed, and he quickly recovered—though I could not say the same.

“Of course,” he continued, “those blue eyes were soaked with tears after being confined in a carriage. I had the perfect solution. I extended my arms to baby Arabella and cried, ‘Hold me, hold me!’”

Tabitha broke out into a giggle.

“Mrs. Delafield was quite confused by my childish babblings. ‘You want me to hold you?’” she asked.

“‘No, hold me!’ I demanded, pointing to the baby. The adults laughed when they finally understood that I had flipped my words as young children often do. Then they praised the charming young boy before them for his desire to help.”

“You were two!” I interrupted with a laugh. “All little boys are charming at that age.”

“But I must have been the most charming, because you were not at all happy until I had you in my arms. To everyone’s surprise, you ceased your crying, grinned, and squealed with delight.”

“I did not squeal.”

Rowan perched on the arm of the sofa next to me. “That *is* how the story is told.”

“Very well, I squealed.” I cast my gaze to the ceiling, surprised how involved I was getting in the story.

Rowan picked up the story again. “The entire house party went on this way. Every time baby Arabella cried, they brought her to young Master Ashworth to cheer her back up. On each occasion, to their delight, it worked. Our parents could not believe how effortlessly the two children took to each other. There was something fitting about them, and the way they were drawn to each other’s sides. No one could fathom how or why, but they were clearly meant to be.” He dragged out those last few words as if he were telling them more to himself than the rest of us. His sudden somber tone quickly shifted back to one of cheerful storyteller. “And that, my friends, is how we became promised to be married. For the story goes, that I am the only one truly capable of making Miss Arabella Delafield happy.”

I had heard the story a dozen times, but it struck me differently this time. How strange it was that we had gone from such eager playmates to such enemies in our adolescence. Regardless, our parents had been wrong about us being a perfect pairing. It had been many, many years since Rowan Ashworth had been capable of making me happy.

My time with Mr. Prologue, excluded.

Rowan’s eyes settled on mine. “Do you have anything else to add?”

I had become too lost in my thoughts for any witty remark to the contrary and shook my head.

“What a darling story,” Tabitha said, her hand going to her heart. “I hope something similar can happen to my children.”

With a tight smile, I reached over and squeezed my sister’s arm. “You must remember that not all that begins well ends well.”

“Don’t be too hasty where we are concerned,” Rowan said, jumping to his feet. “Our story is not over yet.” He crossed to Clodwick’s side and slapped him on the arm. “Eh, Clodwick?”

Clodwick jolted forward out of his nap, his eyes blinking rapidly, and his jaw opening and closing. “W—what happened? What did I miss?”

“Nothing at all,” Rowan said. “Just waiting for you to ask after Miss Delafield’s wrist.”

I dipped my head. So he had noticed Clodwick’s lack of attention to me as well.

When I lifted my gaze again, Mr. Clodwick wiggled his nose as if waking it up. “Yes, I have been meaning to ask about it. I was worried that Miss Delafield would no longer be able to paint.”

“Paint?” Rowan frowned. “Arabella—er—Miss Delafield, are you hiding such a special talent from me?”

I hadn’t heard him call me Arabella since the moment he had come to my rescue. Was he doing it on purpose to soften my resolve toward him? I would have to think on that later. “My skills as an artist are too limited to call a talent,” I explained. “And I am sure there are many things you do not know about me, *Mr. Ashworth*.” I emphasized his surname so he would understand that we were not on such casual terms for him to keep calling me Arabella. Even if I kept calling him Rowan in my head.

His mouth curled. “Are you issuing a challenge?”

“Absolutely, not.” My sharp words surprised me. It was all too easy to forget my manners where Rowan was concerned. Mr. Clodwick would think I was a woman possessed. He had enough delusions with his ghost friends to worry about me as well.

“Can we see your paintings today?” Clodwick asked, completely oblivious to the tension right in front of him. I didn’t know whether to be grateful or annoyed. That man had only two interests in his life, and I did not think I was one of them.

“Yes, my art. Of course.”

“Surely, not now,” Rowan said quickly. He had a strange look in his eyes that reminded me of his mischievous youth. “Miss Delafield has just exerted her energy to come down the stairs. Tomorrow is soon enough.” He slapped Clodwick on the arm again. “Isn’t that right, Clod?”

“Clodwick, sir,” Mr. Clodwick corrected.

“That’s what I said,” Rowan argued. “Now who is up for a game of riddles to distract Miss Delafield?”

My mood brightened. I did love a good riddle. With Rowan’s promptings, Clodwick started us out, his voice monotone and mechanical, like a dying clock. “I haunt the house where my body expired. Up.” Clodwick pointed to the ceiling. “Down!” He pointed to the ground. “In your bed, in your chair, in your study, in your mirror, and,” he sighed heavily, “sometimes even in your hair. Who am I?”

I hid my grimace with a forced laugh. “A ghost.” Then I clapped excessively to cover how my laugh sounded more like a cry.

The rest of the riddles were far more normal, many of which I had heard before. But it was the perfect distraction from my irritation and achiness.

How could Rowan have known? He couldn't possibly have remembered how fond I was of riddles.

Rowan came to perch on the arm of the sofa beside me again, as if he sensed my conflicted thoughts about him. His presence proved more distracting than any riddle. "Thank you," I whispered.

His brow lifted. "For what?"

"For this." It was the most words I could manage, but I could see by the look in his eyes that he understood.

A maid brought in a tray of tea and sandwiches just as Mr. Mason joined us. Elizabeth took the opportunity to excuse herself to see to her correspondence in her room—though I could not fathom who she would be writing to. In the bustle, Rowan gently picked up my injured hand. "Your bruise is healing."

I glanced down to see the faint ink stain on my middle finger. I quickly withdrew it. I was not, nor would I ever be, ready to tell him I wrote stories. For if I did, he would surely inquire after them like he did the paintings. Where would I begin? I couldn't very well tell him the reason no one outside my family could read them was because of him—how I had stopped writing all together for a time after his barbed insults when we were children, but how I had started again to console myself that there was still something beautiful for me in this cruel world. There was no use sparring with him on the subject. He would never read my words. No one unrelated to me would ever read any of them ever again.

"I am glad to see you are feeling better today," Rowan said, ignorant of my dark thoughts. "I hope your injuries heal quickly." He gave me a smile before fetching me a sandwich on a plate while Tabitha took over the tea things.

There it was again. More kindness.

Was it me, or was Rowan vastly different from the adolescent I had once known? No, it was impossible. It had to be an act. But what was he playing at? I wasn't certain, but I would find out. For if I did not, I feared I would fall under whatever spell his presence seemed to cast over me.

Chapter 15

Rowan

Winning over Arabella was proving harder than I thought, and yet, was I wrong that I still sensed a connection between us? It seemed to flare to life at the strangest moments, drawing me to her like a moth lured to a flame. Outside of my adolescent childishness, I considered myself to be an honorable man with upstanding manners, but Arabella seemed intent on ignoring the growing sentiment between us, seeing something else in me entirely.

For the briefest moment, she would forget she hated me, and her eyes would soften with such tangible warmth that spread through my limbs with one glance, only for her to turn a moment later and skewer me with her icy blue glares. I had fallen exhausted into my bed last night, wishing I could have five minutes of privacy with her to unburden our feelings and finally put the past behind us.

Perhaps if I told her she could have the Third Folio as her—well, *our*—wedding present, she might fall to her knees and propose herself. I stared at the burgundy canopy above my bed, at the places where the color seemed more red where the morning light touched it. Could I be sure she truly valued Shakespeare and did not have a secret desire to burn the sacred works? No, I couldn't imagine anyone, even Arabella, would stoop so low. I

had to believe after her purchase of *Romeo and Juliet* that she would be elated by such a gift.

A sudden memory of my promise to Mr. Delafield killed my enthusiasm before it fully bloomed. Bribery might have worked for Arabella and Mr. Clodwick, but it couldn't work for me.

A new plan formed in my mind—one that did not include bribery but did include a bit of mischief reminiscent of our childhood. There was something about Arabella that brought out a playful side that I couldn't resist. It would be a risk, of course, but it might show her that there was no harm in a little fun, and that it was a far sight better than marrying a superstitious stiff.

Before anyone was up for breakfast, I crept up the stairs to the conservatory. I hadn't been to that room since I was a young boy, but I remembered there had been an easel with a painting Mrs. Delafield had been working on. If I was going to discover any of Arabella's art before Mr. Clodwick, then this is where I hoped to find it.

The warm hues of sunrise spilled through the door as I opened it. Tall windows lined the long outer wall of the conservatory, making it the brightest room in the house, even with the sun barely poking its head up over the horizon. The narrow room housed a variety of plants: ferns, orange trees, roses, and even a few pots of herbs. It smelled like a forest to me. An easel stood in the corner, just as I'd hoped. I shut the door behind me and crossed to it. The paper on the easel was unfortunately blank, but a leather case sat on the floor beside a large basket of paints and brushes.

Kneeling down, I rifled through the contents. The first I pulled out was a charcoal by Mrs. Delafield. I carefully slipped it back. The second piece was also from Mrs. Delafield. I switched to the other end and discovered a small stack of watercolors tied together with pink ribbons to prevent any bends. In the bottom corner, I saw the initials A.D. in pretty cursive.

With a tug of my fingers, the bow released, and the ribbon fell away. The top watercolor depicted a bouquet of flowers. It was really quite good. I lifted it to reveal a second painting. This one was of Elmhurst Hall. A smile tugged at my mouth. She had captured it in the fall, with the trees dressed in reds and golds, an orange hue painting the sky, and the grass dotted with leaves. I suddenly wanted to return here come autumn, just for a view such as this.

The next image was a girl sitting in the shade of a large tree, a book open on her lap. The details were simple because of the medium, but they were altogether impressive. I had no idea Arabella had such hidden talent. She had grossly undersold her skills.

I dug through the rest of the leather case, hoping for more treasures from Arabella. Sadly, this was it. I wondered why she had not painted more. She clearly had a natural gift that deserved to be shared.

There was no time for me to return downstairs to share my complaints. I had work to do. I carefully set aside Arabella's pictures and pulled out the paints. It was time for plan B to begin. This was a little more desperate than my usual tactics, but then again, I *was* desperate. It would take time to convince Arabella to see me differently, so today I would shift my focus to convincing Mr. Clodwick to give up his suit.

I rubbed my hands together. "Prepare to be impressed, Clod."

Chapter 16

Arabella

I couldn't help but look around the corridors after luncheon for the elusive Mr. Rowan Ashworth. He had been everywhere I had been yesterday. I had hardly been able to turn around without bumping into him. And to my great dismay, even after pulling each of my sisters aside and warning them, he had done an admirable job charming them back into his good graces. I was absolutely baffled by it. Father hadn't helped. He praised Rowan again and again at the dinner table last night, heralding us all with tales of his accomplishments at university. I couldn't get a word in edgewise about Clodwick's merits.

The worst was after dinner when Rowan had told everyone about a footrace we'd had as children, and how I had cheated by cutting across the edge of a field containing stinging nettle. I had tripped and developed a painful rash on my face and hands. The whole story was mortifying and, unfortunately, quite true.

Then he had told everyone how he had had to carry me on his back all the way to the house while I cried loud enough for the county over to hear it. Mr. Clodwick had even cracked a smile at that part, after shamefully staring at an empty chair at the table for the entire first two courses. He was not helping our cause at all.

My eyes trailed to the tile floor as I thought of the story Rowan had told last night. Oddly enough, I hadn't remembered him carrying me until he had mentioned it again. I suppose I had been too focused on his mean-spirited words the next day when he had called me a strawberry face. Perhaps I should be grateful that, like a puff of smoke, he had disappeared this morning. I turned to glance toward the library, curious if Rowan was inside.

He was not my concern. With a shrug, I spun on my heel to join the others in the drawing room so we might go over our plans for this afternoon. Elizabeth had said something about wanting to purchase ribbons to match her new gown. It would be a good time to stop and purchase new ink, as mine was running low.

My gaze strayed to the library behind me again as I reached the door. Was it too much to hope Rowan would stay away for the entire day? I liked imagining that he was hiding away, disappointed that he was losing any suit he'd thought he had with me. I smirked and turned again, reaching for the door.

My shoulder rammed hard into the wall.

No, not a wall.

I had found Rowan the hard way.

My good hand went to my shoulder, and I rubbed it.

"Blast!" he exclaimed, reaching for me. "Your bad arm! Did I hurt your wrist?"

"No, just my life," I grumbled.

He cupped his ear with his hand. "Pardon, you wish to be my wife?"

In a reflexive moment, I smacked his arm . . . with my bad hand. Pain shot through my wrist, and I gritted my teeth to keep from saying something highly improper.

"Really, Arabella. You ought to be more careful."

I straightened and glared at him and all his pretentious concern. "I didn't know I had to be careful. I thought you might have finally realized how completely futile your presence here was and returned home."

"Let me clarify so no further confusion occurs." Rowan leaned back against the drawing room door and casually tucked one hand into his waistcoat pocket. "I'm not leaving this house until you vow you love me and consent to be my wife."

"Excuse me?" There is no way I had heard him correctly.

“You are excused, my dear.”

My dear? This was getting worse by the second. I set my good hand on my hip. “You might have grown out of some of your more vexing traits, but I have no plans to fall in love with anyone but Mr. Clodwick.”

He smirked. “Is that even possible?”

I stuck out my chin. “I am well on my way already.”

“This wasn’t the setting I imagined for talking this out with you, but I suppose now will have to suffice. Based on your confessions in Quillsbury, you wanted to be engaged to him because of a complicated matter, and time was of the essence. I do not believe you care one wit for Mr. Clodwick.”

“And you believe I care more for you?” I shook my head. He had always thought highly of himself, but this was insufferable.

His voice lowered. “I think there is a strong possibility.”

I refused to let his sultry voice affect me. “There is also a strong possibility that I might strangle you if we were ever to wed.”

He tilted his head as if he believed me capable but was calling my bluff. “Then there is not even the smallest part of you that could think of me as your husband?”

I clasped my hands tightly together, pushing images out of my mind one by one as they surfaced: reading together on a blanket by the seaside on vacations, discussing literature over cups of steaming melted chocolate with our feet by the fire on a cold winter’s night, or him smiling at me like I was the only one who mattered to him in the world. Those were figments of an overactive imagination, but hardly realistic. I was much too intelligent to think we would get along for a minute, let alone a lifetime. “Not at all,” I spat.

A flash of vulnerability crossed his face so quickly I almost missed it. “Is there *any* quality I possess that you might be drawn toward?”

I set my jaw. I didn’t want to wound him overmuch, but I had to be firm so there was no doubt in his mind. “You are a decent fellow for some. But there is nothing that even the devil himself could say that would tempt me to accept your suit.”

He drew his cheeks in and scoffed. “Nothing that would tempt you? So then you do not find me even the *least* bit attractive?”

Could he be more conceited? “I have more fondness for a half-dead tree.”

“Half-dead tree,” he repeated.

I cleared my throat. I would revise that insult later. I was merely grateful some of my words were making sense at all.

Rowan pushed away from the wall and closed the gap between us with two purposeful steps toward me, leaning his head terribly near mine. “Then being this near to me shouldn’t bother you at all.”

I wanted to pull away, but I couldn’t show any sign of weakness. I shook my head and held firm.

He lowered his head another inch.

Heat flooded my cheeks, and I could barely think past his warm breath on my lips. My heart thudded dangerously in my chest, like a warning drum.

Danger. Danger. Danger!

No one had died from being near a man before, had they? If he dared kiss me, I might expire. But he wouldn’t dare . . .

Or would he?

My skin tingled and my lips softened, waiting for the inevitable. A strange curiosity flared in my chest. I suppose it wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world to kiss Rowan Ashworth. That’s all this uncanny pull between us was. Curiosity.

And the *smallest* bit of desire.

His eyes drifted closed.

My own eyes followed suit—wanting what I shouldn’t want.

Then nothing.

I opened them again.

His eyes were open too, his lips curled into a smile. “I have my answer.”

“W-what?” I stuttered, completely dazed.

“You’re a liar, Arabella Delafield. You’re more drawn to me than you dare admit. So fight all you want, but in the end, we both know I’m the only one for you.”

I swallowed, incapable of mustering more than a whisper. “You’re delusional.”

“You’re right. I did have some delusions where you were concerned. My vision is clearing rapidly now. When you’re ready for that kiss, let me know. I’ll be all too happy to finish this.”

He turned toward the drawing room door and stalked inside.

I sputtered. Me? Ask him to *kiss* me? He was mad!

And yet, I could barely catch my breath. He hadn't been right, had he? We weren't meant to be together. Just because our parents thought we were a sweet pair when we were no more than babies did not make it so. He was still thinking of me as Miss Page. That was the only logical answer. He wasn't seeing clearly; he was forgetting. Forgetting years of contention.

But I would not forget. I would not excuse his cruelty for a passing attraction.

My conscience pricked. I suppose I could forgive a few small indiscretions if he could. I could overlook when he had passed by me as a child and pulled my hair. I could excuse when he'd called me a giraffe or string bean and snickered when no one was looking because I had grown faster than the boys my age. But only because I had gotten even with him by tripping him with my long legs so he fell into the creek, and by hiding his slingshot.

But some things were too hard to forget. Some things stay with a person, pulling tears from their eyes years later, keeping them awake night after night, repeating in one's mind until one actually believes them . . . effectively ruining all their hopes and dreams.

My throat tightened. I had wanted to publish my work. I had wanted to have my books found in small, obscure bookshops like Inkwell Books Etc. I had wanted to bring someone else joy with my words.

But his cruelty had paralyzed my courage.

And I despised him for it.

Or at least I had . . . and I was desperately trying to hold on to those feelings before they were entirely replaced by this new sensation that tucked around me like the warmth of a coverlet.

I set my hand on my cheek and tried to pull the remaining heat from it. Clodwick was the man for me. Clodwick! With a shaky breath, I followed Rowan into the drawing room, my feet dragging with every reluctant step.

Chapter 17

Rowan

I made my way to the window and leaned against it, feigning boredom. In reality, boredom was the last word I would use to describe my state of being. Flustered, hot, and short of breath seemed more accurate descriptions. I had meant to greet Arabella and compliment her dress. That had been my goal. Instead, I had argued with her and never even made it to the compliment.

I had pushed her into the proverbial corner. In one hasty moment, I had gone too far, too fast. Hiding her paintings, which she had yet to discover, and now this? I was a man out of his mind. What had I been thinking to almost kiss Arabella?

Dash it all! I should have followed through if I was going to go that far.

Now I had her floral scent in my head, and I could think of nothing else but her. I set my hand on the cool glass and turned my head so the others might not see my remorse. I owed her an apology, but that was the last thing I wanted to give her. That woman deserved to have some sense talked into her, but it was better her family do it than me. I was well on the way to digging my own grave—and hers—which was a far cry from a wedding.

I felt more than saw Arabella enter the room. The hair on the back of my neck seemed to stand to attention.

“There you are,” Tabitha said behind me. “Are you ready for a trip to town?”

Arabella’s voice held the tiniest of trembles, but not one I missed. “I will be once I fetch my bonnet.”

Some ladies would be reduced to tears after their childhood enemy threatened to kiss them, but Arabella had always been the strong sort. She had only been eleven when she took to her bed with a terrible fever during her summer visit to my home. After two weeks of suffering, the doctor had told us to prepare for the worst.

She didn’t know this, but I had visited her in secret every night for those fourteen days. I hadn’t liked her very much, but neither did I want her to die. Even with our disagreements, I had always felt a tie to her, likely from our parents telling me that she would someday be my responsibility, my wife, the mother to my children. So at my own tender age of thirteen, to see her skin so very pale beneath her freckles, and her hair matted to her pillow, and that fierce scowl so smooth and expressionless scared me more than anything I had ever experienced.

After the doctor had told us that she would likely not live through the night, I had gone to her bedside and begged her to live. I did more than beg; I yelled at her and challenged her to get up and hit me as hard as she could. I would let her do it.

She didn’t move an inch.

By the next morning, a miracle had happened. Her fever had broken. It had nothing to do with me, and everything to do with her fighting spirit. She did not cower or waver when faced with death, and I knew she would do the same when faced with marrying her worst enemy.

Only, in this scenario, a little wavering from her cause would not be the worst for either of us.

“Mr. Clodwick,” Arabella said behind me, her tone normal and very unlike the way she ever addressed me. “There is a beautiful painting in the tearoom in town. I would love your opinion of it.”

With my head lowered, I heard Clodwick’s monotone acceptance.

“Mr. Ashworth.” Mr. Mason’s voice pulled my head from the window. “Will you be joining us?”

I hesitated. It would be the kind thing to do to bow out. But if Clodwick was going, shouldn’t I go too? I might not be the best man, but my house wasn’t haunted, and I could guarantee that I had the better library out of the

two of us. Arabella would never learn these advantages of marrying me—however small they may be—if I did not persist in my suit.

“I will come,” I answered. And this time, I would be the perfect gentleman.

Not fifteen minutes later, we were all squished into a carriage together. Mr. Mason, his wife, and Elizabeth were sandwiched on one end, while Arabella sat rigidly between Clodwick and me. This sort of arrangement was getting old. It was about as cozy as it was awkward.

I turned my head to ask about our agenda and accidentally grazed my nose against Arabella’s hair. It smelled of lavender and vanilla.

“Do stay on your side of the carriage, Mr. Ashworth,” Arabella hissed.

The perfect retort came to mind. Perhaps I had spent too much time in my friend Tristan’s company, because I found I wanted to take up the role as flirtatious tease. But I bit my tongue, knowing nothing I said at the moment would be appreciated. I had promised myself I would behave. “Of course, excuse me.” I didn’t attempt to make any further conversation. It was my own fault that I had chosen to sneak away to the conservatory this morning and didn’t know the plans for the afternoon. I would consider it my punishment for interfering. A small smile crept over my lips. A punishment I would gladly endure a second time if it worked.

After a long carriage ride that consisted of silence on my behalf, we made it to town. The other bench dispersed first, and I was the first to the door on our end. I motioned the groomsmen aside and lifted my hand to help Arabella down, taking her good hand.

She raised a brow but accepted. “You were rather quiet on the ride to town.”

I could hear her underlying accusation, as if I was either scheming something or wallowing in the guilt of my transgressions. “I do not desire to wear on your nerves,” I said. Then I quickly added, “Overly much.”

She gave a soft shake of her head as Mr. Clodwick stepped out. My gaze flicked to see Elizabeth speaking to a groomsman by the head of the horses. She smiled coyly at the groomsman while he stood much too close to her.

Arabella seemed to follow the line of my gaze. She went rigid beside me.

When Elizabeth made no hurry to move, I spoke up. “Miss Delafield,” I called to her. “Are you ready?”

Elizabeth turned, a trace of guilt crossing her face. With a last glance at the groomsman, she moved to join us. “Where shall we go first?”

Arabella frowned. "I thought you wanted to look at ribbons."

"I did? Oh, I did. Let's go there now."

Arabella's gaze met mine, and I could read the concern there. I likely mirrored it. Either the groomsman had distracted Elizabeth, or her desire for ribbons had been an excuse to see said groomsman. Either way, a relationship across stations was more challenging than an arranged marriage of two childhood enemies. I dared not read too much into it, but if my suspicions were correct, Elizabeth was setting herself up for a world of hurt.

While we walked to the haberdashery, Arabella held back until we were beside each other. "Good heavens, what do I do?" she whispered.

I knew she spoke of Elizabeth. "There is nothing you can do now," I said under my breath. "But when we return home, you might caution her."

"When did a Delafield woman ever listen to anyone?" She scoffed and stepped away from me to flank Mr. Clodwick once more.

I had to bite my cheek to keep from laughing. This might not be an appropriate time to gloat, but I was quite pleased that in her moment of frustration, she had turned to me for help. Did this mean she was admitting that I was right, and that the two of us stood a chance together?

The thought made a smile spread across my face.

"Miss Delafield," Mr. Clodwick said just loud enough for me to catch. "Did you have a chance to speak to your aunt?"

Arabella's answer held a note of weariness. "Mother gave me permission to invite her to dinner the day after tomorrow. She helped me write to her this morning. I would not be surprised if there is an answer awaiting us upon our return."

I only knew of one of Arabella's aunts and that was the distinguished Lady Farthington. I had met her once—the last time I had seen Arabella, actually. Lady Farthington was a stuffy old thing and a stickler on propriety. So, of course, she loved me. I might have been a tiresome charge for my nurse, always escaping, reading books in trees, and having adventures with my friends, but when it came to presenting myself to my elders, I could be a perfect angel. And I distinctly remember Arabella's aunt pinching my cheeks and gushing about how sweet I was. It had driven Arabella mad, so I had encouraged it all the more.

What would Mr. Clodwick want with Lady Farthington?

Mr. Clodwick clasped his hands behind his back and seemed to step closer to Arabella as they walked down the boardwalk. "When might you

grace us with your paintings? I am a patient man, but I do not wish to be missed at home. I hope you allow me to see them soon.”

“I thought you lived alone, Mr. Clodwick.” Arabella turned so I could see the confusion on her profile.

“Oh, I am never alone, Miss Delafield.” He shook his head, grimly.

“I . . . see,” she said. “Since Mama has planned some card games this afternoon, perhaps we can see my paintings after breakfast tomorrow.”

“Very good.”

An uncomfortable breeze tickled my neck, causing the faintest of shivers. Mr. Clodwick’s peculiar ways were most unsettling. A sudden smirk formed on my lips. I hoped he would be satisfied with Arabella’s paintings. Any nagging guilt for interfering on that count was rapidly dissipating.

Sometimes a man had to act irresponsibly for the sake of the greater good. I was quite looking forward to tomorrow morning, but until then, I would keep my ears open for any word about Lady Farthington.

“Oh!” Arabella’s voice drew me from my musings. “Excuse me, Mr. Clodwick. I see a friend of mine. Please have a look around the haberdashery. I won’t be but a moment.”

Mr. Clodwick dipped his head and proceeded into the haberdashery. I remained outside and watched as Arabella rushed toward a young lady outside a market stall. Instinct set me to follow her.

“Harriet!” Arabella called as she approached.

Harriet lifted her head, allowing me to see a clear view of raven curls and a look of clear distress on her otherwise pretty face. After she met Arabella’s gaze, she darted past her, coming straight toward me. Right before she passed me, she tripped over her feet. I was in the right place at the right time and was able to catch her before she fell.

Arabella was beside us by the time I had Harriet back on her feet, and she looped her arm through Harriet’s to help support her.

Harriet’s face crumbled and tears streamed down her face. “What a mess I am.”

I whipped out my handkerchief and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” she said.

Arabella squeezed her friend’s hand. “Whatever is the matter? Why did you run from me?”

Harriet shrugged. “I’m embarrassed. My husband keeps such a tight rein on my time that with an hour of freedom granted to me, I should have come

to see you and not gone to the market. It's only that I had to be alone to clear my head. I can barely bring myself to eat, I've been so overwrought."

"Harriet . . ." Arabella hedged. "Mr. Lawrence does not abuse you, does he?"

"He does not hurt me, if that is what you mean. I am merely afraid I will do something to displease him. He has such high standards, and I am constantly disappointing him."

Arabella did not have to say a word for me to read her thoughts. Her eyes narrowed much like that when they had skewered me this morning, and I was grateful they were aimed at Mr. Lawrence and not me this time.

"You must come home with us," Arabella said. "I will see you are fed a feast."

Harriet shook her head. "The servants will report to my husband if I am gone more than the hour I promised. I was only supposed to come to town long enough to have my glove mended."

My own gaze narrowed. "And what happens if you are late?"

Harriet seemed to see me for the first time, even though I had caught her from falling moments ago.

"Forgive me," Arabella said. "This is Mr. Ashworth. Mr. Ashworth, this is my good friend, Harriet Lawrence."

"Mr. Ashworth?" Harriet asked, her eyes bulging. "Surely, not *the* Mr. Ashworth."

Arabella sighed. "He's not as nice as he looks."

I grinned. "You think I look nice?"

Arabella cast her gaze to the sky. "Never mind, him. How can we help? I've been worried sick about you. No one lets me see you, and I am not even sure if you are receiving my letters."

"I am sorry you've worried. I am well enough as you can see. At least once a month, Mr. Lawrence rides to see his parents in London. He will leave again next week. I will sneak away then to see you."

Arabella squeezed Harriet's hand once more with a tenderness of friendship. "I look forward to it with the greatest of anticipation. Any visit from a good friend is well worth the wait."

The words set Harriet's mouth into a smile. "Thank you."

Arabella shrugged off her words. "You had better hurry home. I don't want to be the reason you're in trouble."

Harriet nodded and pulled away. There was a glimmer of hope in her countenance that had not been there before, and I knew Arabella had been the one to put it there. I studied Arabella out of the corner of my eye. I had never appreciated the way she had treated me when we were children, but she was very good to everyone else around her. There was a reason her father loved her so dearly, her mother made excuses for her, and her sisters wanted her to live near them. It was likely the same reason that Clodwick wanted to marry her too. She didn't simper and bat her eyelashes like some, and each of her emotions were authentic and true to her nature. When she cared, she really cared.

And unfortunately, when she hated, the emotion was equally intense.

Arabella sighed when Harriet turned at the street corner. "Poor Harriet." She extended her arm out in the direction her friend had taken. "This is what comes of arranged marriages." She turned her head and gave me a long hard stare before retreating toward the haberdashery.

I stood there gaping after her, thoroughly annoyed. Perhaps I should tell her that my friend Charles Shepherd had a very happy arranged marriage. Did she really think I would be the same kind of man as Mr. Lawrence? That I would control her movements and time with her friends? If she saw me as that kind of man, no wonder she did not care for me.

I glanced back at Harriet. I wondered if Mr. Lawrence's parents were the same Lawrences in London who were friends with my own parents. As soon as I returned home, I would write and ask. If there was something I could do for this poor young lady, I would do it. Arabella might not believe it, but I was capable of being a decent human being.

Chapter 18

Arabella

Lady Farthington did not respond to Mama's dinner invitation until the following morning at breakfast. What a relief to tell Clodwick that he could finally meet her.

"I am overjoyed," he said flatly when I told him over my plate of ham and eggs. Neither his expression nor his hunched shoulders did anything to display emotions that matched his words, but I believed him. Sometimes a woman just knew what the man she was going to marry was thinking.

"How is your wrist this morning, Miss Delafield?" Rowan asked, reaching forward and refilling my water glass. The footman could have done it, but I admit it was nice seeing a man act the part of a gentleman—especially this one. What surprised me more was his continual concern about my wrist. No one else besides my parents had remembered to ask about it.

"It is much improved this morning." There was still a bruise, but the swelling had almost completely disappeared. "Thank you for asking," I added as an afterthought.

"You're most welcome."

I tried not to read into his sincerity. It both bothered me and intrigued me when I wished to have my mind empty of thoughts of him altogether. Today was about pleasing Mr. Clodwick by finally unveiling my paintings.

By the time we finished eating, everyone had gathered in the breakfast room besides Mr. Mason, who had slipped out for a ride. I didn't care to showcase my unpracticed painting skills for all and sundry; however, I could not bring Clodwick to the conservatory alone. It would not only be improper, but the very idea made me a tad nervous. I was certain it was natural for a bride-to-be to feel this way. Someday soon we would be married, and by then, I had no doubt that I would be comfortable with the idea of being alone together.

"Would anyone be willing to trek up to the third floor to the conservatory?" I asked the room at large. "I have promised to show Mr. Clodwick my paintings." My eyes settled first on Tabitha and then Elizabeth, my brow arched in question.

"I know you long for the company of a wise old man," Father said, "but my solicitor should be here at any moment.

"And I must review the menu if Lady Farthington has agreed to join us tomorrow," Mama said.

I really hadn't meant to invite them in particular, but their responses made me smile.

"I will join you," Rowan announced, his cheeky smile momentarily distracting me.

"Anyone else?" I asked, pointedly ignoring him.

"Elizabeth and I will come." Tabitha stared at Elizabeth, brows raised. I had shared my concerns about Elizabeth with Tabitha before bed, and she and I were determined to watch Elizabeth and keep her from throwing away her future on a handsome groomsman—who we had learned through a little sleuthing knew how to read and write and might be the source of all her correspondence.

"I appreciate the company," I said to my sisters, before reluctantly including Rowan in my gaze. We all pushed back in our seats and stood, dropping our napkins on the table. I waited for Mr. Clodwick to come to my side before accepting his arm and leading the way from the room.

My sisters followed closely behind us, laughing at something Rowan said.

Once we were all enclosed in the conservatory, warm sunlight bathing the room, I released Mr. Clodwick's arm and took a wide step away from him. I would not complain about my lack of attraction, but neither could I

force myself to enjoy his nearness for overlong. It was a small problem—one I was certain I could address once we were married.

“Shall we see your paintings?” Clodwick asked.

I had been so caught up in my thoughts, I had momentarily forgotten to find them. “Oh, certainly.”

“I will fetch them.” Tabitha crossed to the opposite end of the room where a large easel stood. “I know where to look.” She rifled through the leather case on the tiled floor and pulled out three paintings tied in a pink ribbon. “Oh . . .”

“What is it?” I asked.

“They are not quite as I remember.” She slipped the ribbon off and peered at one and then another. “I suppose it has been three or so years since I’ve seen them. I cannot be expected to remember every detail.”

Her sheepish laugh left me uneasy. “I hardly remember them myself.” I *had* tried to tell everyone that she had exaggerated my talent. I wasn’t Girtin or Sandby, but at least I was decent enough not to be ashamed.

Tabitha crossed the room and handed me the paintings. I blinked several times. The one on top was clearly a house with two lines for outer walls and a black rectangular roof. The door was another rectangle and completely out of proportion—as if a toddler had painted it. I frowned and held it away from me. “I didn’t paint this.”

“Let me have a look,” Rowan said. “I have been just as anxious as Clodwick to see your hidden talent.” He took the simple watercolor house from my extended hand. “Ah, a . . . house.”

“A solid guess,” I bit out sarcastically.

“And look, your initials: A.D. How old do you suppose you were when you painted it? Four? Five?”

I wouldn’t give him the pleasure of knowing, especially since I knew these were not my paintings. I reached for it, and as soon as I had it in my hand, Rowan grabbed the next in the pile. A stick figure girl lying underneath a tree. My eyes widened.

He clucked his tongue. “Did you paint someone who died, Miss Delafield?” Then he bent forward and whispered. “I am not sure that’s in good taste.”

I snatched that one back too, dropping the third in the process. “I am quite certain I did not paint any of these. Tabitha, look again inside the case. There has to be more.”

Mr. Clodwick picked up the third painting, and I grimaced. The moment of reckoning had come, and I couldn't even say what the pictures were of. A series of vertical lines covered the bottom half, and the top was dots. Lots and lots of dots. Perhaps I *had* done these as a toddler.

"What an interesting painting." Mr. Clodwick turned and held it up to the window as if the natural light would improve it. "What is it?" he asked.

I barely withheld a groan. "I couldn't say."

"It's flowers, obviously." Rowan strode to Mr. Clodwick's side and tapped it. "See, this is a rose."

There was nothing obvious about it to me. Wait, how did he know the details of the painting? My eyes narrowed. Did he have something to do with this?

Tabitha returned to my side. "The only other art belongs to Mama."

"Extraordinary," Mr. Clodwick announced, his voice fluctuating in tone the barest degree. "I have never seen anything like it. We must have it framed."

"Pardon?" I asked.

A small smile hovered on his lips—a generous smile if I might say. "I want to hang it over the drawing room mantel at Gravehurst."

"You do?" The offer was unaccountably sweet. But then again, all the art he *valued* was locked up in his gallery. Even so, I could tell in his eyes that this was costing him, and I was truly thankful to him. Beyond all that superstition and paranoia was a good heart.

Rowan coughed. "Did you say Gravehurst? That's the name of your house?"

Mr. Clodwick nodded.

"Perhaps you should pick the painting of the dead girl then."

I had to bite my tongue to stop the sudden desire to laugh. Even if it had been a good joke, it was in poor taste. I cleared my throat and forced a glare. "None of these are being framed. Once I find my actual paintings, Mr. Clodwick may have his choice of any of those."

"At a price though, right?" Rowan asked. "Because if your talent is at all improved from this," he tapped the page of lines and dots, "then they could be worth at least a shilling."

"Very funny." Mr. Clodwick's praise was worth much more than a shilling to me. Not everyone could praise such a pathetic painting. His gentle kindness had been one of the reasons I had thought we had suited

from the beginning. With Rowan around, I had nearly forgotten this desirable attribute, as it was often a quiet quality and outshone by others.

“Can I keep the one of the house?” Rowan asked, standing much too close. “That one is the best of three, I think. And if Clodwick gets to keep the roses, then it’s only fair I get the house.”

“Take it,” I said, thoroughly annoyed. “You likely know the real painter better than I do.”

He nodded. “We did grow up together.”

“That is not what I meant.”

He looked genuinely confused.

I was about to accuse him of substituting my paintings, but his expression left me unsure. Which meant, even though my wrist was improving, I probably should not hit him again. “Never mind. I have a headache. Excuse me, Mr. Clodwick. I will see you at dinner.” Not even for him could I summon better manners. Once he had a chance to think on how completely unartistic I was, he would be excessively disappointed. It would be up to Lady Farthington to impress him now.

Otherwise, I might end up engaged to Rowan Ashworth. Heaven forbid. He was back to his old tricks. I knew he hadn’t changed completely, and somehow I would prove he was responsible for this catastrophe.

Chapter 19

Rowan

I leaned against the chest of drawers in my room and stared at the simple but lovely watercolor of the girl reading beneath a tree. I could easily replace the girl for myself. I would be reading my favorite book from my youth, *The Highwayman's Escape*, written by a passing traveler. And father would have all the servants searching for me while I evaded my tutors.

Holding the painting close, I imagined the details a watercolor did not allow for. Could it be a self-portrait of Arabella? Here, she looked pretty, even whimsical. It was not at all how I had thought of Arabella as a youth. However, thinking of her gangly legs that constantly tripped over her long dresses and rail-thin arms that would attempt to push me away when I whispered irritating words in passing did not quite conjure up the same distasteful image.

In fact, her awkwardness and too many freckles now seemed slightly endearing. The youthful Arabella wasn't the beauty she was now, but neither was she as horrid as I had thought her to be. That day in the library, where she had burned the book, had ruined my opinion of her likely more than it should have. Someday, I would ask what book she had so cruelly destroyed.

Opening my top drawer, I tucked the painting back with the others beneath a stack of nightshirts. I would have a maid return them at the first

opportunity. It was time to head down to dinner and see if Lady Farthington recalled the angelic boy from years ago.

Leaving behind my bedchamber, I made my way down the stairs just as a footman opened the door to allow Lady Farthington to enter. My timing had been beyond perfect. I took quick stock of the woman before me. Her hair was possibly whiter under her black lacey mobcap and her scowl lines had deepened since I last saw her, but I hoped there would still be a glimpse of mischievousness in her gaze. As soon as the door was shut behind her, I stepped forward.

“Lady Farthington.” I bent into a deep bow. When I rose, I gave her my widest smile. “You haven’t aged a day since I saw you last.”

She met my smile with a glare. “I hate flattery above all else. Who are you? Have we been introduced?”

“Years ago. My name is Rowan Ashworth.”

She harrumphed and tapped her cane with a thud against the marbled tile floor. “So the prodigal betrothed returns.”

Why did this family keep using the word prodigal to describe me? Clearing my throat, I attempted to smooth over my absence. “I had to stay away until we were both of an appropriate age. I couldn’t very well court a girl of twelve, now, could I?” I stepped up beside her and offered her my arm.

She took my arm, but her pointed glare had not reduced at all in severity. “It’s been done before, although I found it quite abominable. Don’t you think you could have returned a year sooner?”

“Before I finished making a name for myself?” I tsk-tsked, pulling her slowly toward the drawing room. “A man must offer his best self if he hopes to marry someone as fine as Miss Delafield.”

Her features softened the barest amount. “I suppose. But could you not have visited for the holidays at the very least?”

I leaned closer and adopted a conspiratorial tone. “Miss Delafield required time to forget the youthful version of me. I do not think she cared for me as much as she ought to have.”

Lady Farthington’s eyes narrowed. “That girl is an ungrateful twit.”

I drew back, both confused and surprised that her aunt would be so condescending to her own niece. “Now, Lady Farthington. You mustn’t insult the woman I am to marry.”

“Then she had better marry you forthwith. No daughter has been more trying to a mother than that young lady.” She shook her head and made a disgusted sound.

A *trying* woman, I could believe. Arabella was certainly trying my own patience at the moment.

“When are the banns to be posted?” she asked. “It had better be forthwith.”

I pinched my lips together. “Well . . . that is an excellent question. I think forthwith is my ideal timing, but since we have been apart for so long, I am attempting to win her good opinion first. In the name of marital felicity, of course.”

Lady Farthington growled. “What will these young people think of next?”

“I know it must seem silly, but I do wish for Miss Delafield’s happiness. She has grown on me since my arrival, and I find she suits me more than I had thought possible. You don’t have any advice for me, do you?”

“Advice?” Lady Farthington gave a sharp laugh. “I have enough wisdom to fill a library.”

“I would expect no less, Lady Farthington.” Though she was unaware of Arabella and my childhood feud, I did care for her opinion. My own grandparents had died when I was young, and I had a great respect for older individuals. They had lived twice as long as I have, and their experiences had value. I paused outside the drawing room, curious what she would say.

Lady Farthington tugged on my jacket, and I leaned closer to hear her whisper, “There’s only one piece you really need. Don’t make her angry.” The last sentence wasn’t whispered, and each word was punctuated.

I couldn’t help myself; I laughed. “You *are* brilliant, aren’t you?”

“Not many appreciate that fact.”

Arabella appeared in the open doorway, dressed in a fetching pink gown with ruffled sleeves trimmed with lace. I wasn’t into fashion as some men, but I admired how the pink brought out the color in her cheeks and the style flattered her figure.

“Lady Farthington! I did not know you had arrived. Mr. Ashworth’s boisterous laugh gave you away.” She frowned at me before turning a smile toward her aunt.

I opened my mouth to retort, but no words came out. Arabella’s smile had become increasingly lovely. How had I never noticed the slight dimple

on one side?

Lady Farthington pointed the end of her cane at Arabella's legs. "You did not include the names of your guests in your invitation. That is an oversight I cannot abide."

Arabella's demeanor dimmed. "Forgive me, aunt. We're so glad you chose to come despite my many failings. Dinner should be announced at any moment. Please come in and sit down." She stepped aside, and I directed Lady Farthington into the room. I stole a look at Arabella as we passed, hoping she had not been truly wounded by her aunt. My level of concern was growing increasingly alarming. Something had shifted inside me, and I couldn't quite find words to define it.

Yesterday's near kiss had confused me as much as I had hoped it would confuse her.

As soon as Lady Farthington was seated in a sturdy chair on the end where it would be easier for her to stand from later, Mr. Delafield introduced her to Mr. Clodwick.

"He is my cousin," Mr. Mason added from beside Clodwick, as if that somehow made the boring man much more exciting.

"What brings you to this part of Surrey?" Lady Farthington asked Clodwick.

I grinned, eager to see how this would unfold. I took a purposeful seat next to Arabella on the sofa—to her dismay.

Mr. Clodwick steepled his hands together as if he was some great philosopher. "For personal reasons, including an interest in the art and sculpture in the area."

I blinked. Would he not admit that he had come with the express intent to marry Arabella?

Lady Farthington frowned. "Should you not have gone to London instead? They have the best museums."

Mr. Clodwick did not flinch under her powerful scrutiny. "I have seen them. I am interested in private collections at the moment. Miss Delafield mentioned you are an appreciator of the arts as well."

"I am."

"I would be most grateful if you would allow me to see your collection."

Her lips pursed together. "I shall consider it."

So this is why Clodwick had insisted on meeting with Lady Farthington. Did he know about her connection to Mr. Hope? The family had spoken of

it for years, so it was possible. Was he using Arabella to get to her aunt? If so, he was a complete dolt, and I wouldn't let him get away with it.

A footman came in and whispered something to Mr. Delafield. "Ah," he said. "Dinner is ready. Shall we adjourn to the dining room?"

I couldn't resist prodding Arabella about Clodwick's statement. As we stood, I bent over and whispered, "Will your *other* almost fiancé not claim his true purpose for coming here?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean his undying affection for you."

Her brows lifted. "And you would make such a claim?"

I thought of our near kiss again and gave her a devilish smile. "I already have."

My words must not have charmed her, for she growled under her breath and stalked off to Clodwick's side. I didn't understand. I was transparent with my intentions and Clodwick was . . . well, Clodwick. Why did she keep pushing me away for that irritating man? Why did it seem that I had the perfect words to describe a book, but when it came to speaking to Arabella, I said all the wrong things?

Arabella sat between Lady Farthington and Clodwick, while I was forced to the other side of the table.

While the first course of soup was set before us, I heard Lady Farthington speak to Arabella. "I hope you've been practicing your music instead of scribbling away in those books of yours."

Arabella's gaze shot up to meet mine, her cheeks darkening. "Yes, aunt."

Scribbling away in books? I chewed on my lip, wondering what her aunt had meant by it and why she had been embarrassed for me to overhear it. The sudden recollection of her ink-stained hand came to mind. Was this yet another secret Arabella was keeping from me? I smiled ever so slightly into my soup, some of my earlier frustration waning. It would be a pleasure extracting the knowledge from Arabella. Did she make annotations in the margins of books? Did she write essays about them? I relished the idea of another challenge where she was concerned. The more she tried to push me away, the more she ensnared my interest.

"How was your recent trip to London?" Mrs. Delafield asked Lady Farthington.

"I kept my visit to the Royal Academy brief, as I do not care for the smells in London during the summer."

“Did you do anything else exciting?” Tabitha asked. “Did you visit any shops?”

Lady Farthington’s wrinkled brow pinched in the middle. “I detest shopping. The only other outing I permitted was a quick visit to Westminster Abbey for services.”

I nodded, impressed. Not just anyone attended services at the prestigious abbey.

Mr. Clodwick bent his head forward so he might see Lady Farthington. “Did you wear a sprig of rosemary, my lady?”

“Why would I do that?” she asked.

“To ward off evil spirits and protect the wandering spirits’ passage to heaven.”

Arabella gave a stilted laugh. “Mr. Clodwick is a spiritual man.”

He shook his head. “I never attend church. Most of them are veritable graveyards.”

Mrs. Delafield gasped and coughed into her hand.

Now Elizabeth was coughing . . . or laughing. I couldn’t say which, but I appreciated it nonetheless. I couldn’t have hoped for a more delightful conversation.

“Graveyards, you say?” I was hoping the man would continue and maybe even bury himself.

“Westminster has nearly three hundred burials. Rosemary would hardly be enough.”

“What about salt?” I asked, baiting him.

His face turned grim. “Indeed, evil spirits cannot abide pure resources.”

I pulled the salt bowl toward me and pinched off a bit. “You don’t say?” I tossed the salt over my shoulder as I had seen Clodwick do a time or two when he thought no one was watching. “Three hundred? That is most disturbing.” Then, for good measure, I tossed a few more pinches over the opposite shoulder.

I caught Arabella’s heated glare.

“Forgive me, this talk must upset you. Have some salt.” I placed the salt bowl where she could reach it.

“It’s upsetting all of us.” Lady Farthington pushed back in her seat. “What nonsense is this? Evil spirits in the royal abbey? I will not hear it.”

“It is true nonetheless,” Clodwick said. “Many claim it is haunted.”

Lady Farthington sputtered. “H-haunted? Where is my cane? Someone help me stand.”

“Aunt, please,” Arabella said.

An oblivious footman jumped forward and extended his hand.

“Lady Farthington,” Mr. Delafield begged. He pushed to his feet, and the rest of us men followed. “Please finish your dinner before you leave. We will speak of more pleasant topics, I assure you.”

“Yes, please,” Mrs. Delafield said.

“No. I have quite lost my appetite.”

Arabella turned in her seat. “I can sit with you in the drawing room.”

Lady Farthington objected. “I find I am excessively tired and do not have the energy for foolish speculation. I will return if you host an engagement party for you and Mr. Ashworth. Otherwise, do not expect me until the wedding.”

“It’s Clodwick, my lady,” Mr. Clodwick corrected.

“Pardon?” Lady Farthington said.

“You misspoke. You said the engagement party of Miss Delafield to Mr. Ashworth, but Miss Delafield has accepted my hand in marriage—it’s Mr. Clodwick, not Ashworth.”

Lady Farthington’s face turned a muted shade of purple. “Delafield!”

Mr. Delafield hurried to take her arm. “Nothing is official.”

“Why do you not have a better rein on your daughter? How can she possibly be engaged to *two* men?”

“Two?” Mr. Clodwick asked.

His surprise mirrored my own. Did he really not know of my suit? Poor chap. How had he not logically put together our situation?

“It’s not what you think,” Arabella assured him.

“This is intolerable.” Lady Farthington pounded her cane against the floor. “Take me to my carriage, Delafield!”

I sighed. The entertaining dinner I had hoped for had taken a rather nasty turn.

As soon as Lady Farthington was escorted from the room, Arabella’s eyes welled with tears. “Excuse me.”

Before her mother could grant her request, Arabella darted from her seat. With her skirts fisted in her hands, she disappeared from the room. My feet begged to chase after her, but they were simultaneously filled with lead. The last person in the world she wanted to comfort her was me.

My stomach soured, and the few bites I had eaten turned in my stomach. When we were children, seeing Arabella run off upset meant that I had won and she had lost. As an adult, there was no such pleasure. The reality of this struck me hard. If Arabella was upset, we had both lost. And not just because, as her husband, I would soon be responsible for her well-being. No, this new sensation hit deeper. An unexplainable connection had formed between us, one where her happiness now greatly affected my own.

Was this . . . was this the beginning of love?

Chapter 20

Arabella

Elmhurst's library had a significant secret I had never told anyone about. Just behind the sofa was a space of two feet between it and the wall. With the way the room was designed, I could hide there, practically in plain sight, and never be discovered. It was a little dusty, as the servants often forgot to clean the small section of the room, but it was easily remedied with the occasional few swipes of a handkerchief against the dark wood paneling along the wall. I could haul the throw pillows from the sofa and sit there in peace for hours reading, or scribbling away on a story, as Lady Farthington had called it. Sometimes I had even been known to fall asleep there.

This time, I hovered behind the sofa without any notion of rest or peace. I should have fled to my room, but somehow I ended up here. My mind was caught up in the storm of events that had led to this night, and I was not thinking clearly. I had a plan, and the plan had failed. Without my aunt's permission to see her collection or her request to Mr. Hope for us to see his, there was no inducement for Mr. Clodwick to marry me. My chest heaved as I attempted to catch my breath, but with emotion clogging my throat and tears streaming down my face, it was not easy.

I was Penelope Waters from my story, locked in a tower with no perceivable way out.

The library door swung open, and I froze. Of all the times to be discovered, it couldn't be this time. I didn't want to talk to Father or anyone else right now.

"Arabella?" The whisper sent a wave of fear through me. I didn't want Rowan of all people to see me like this. I clasped my hands together and prayed for him to leave.

The door shut and I relaxed my head against the back of the sofa in utter relief. My mouth opened and I took a deep gulp of air. A loud hiccup surfaced, rattling my ribcage.

"Arabella?"

Fear seized me, and my hand slapped against my mouth. Another hiccup shook me. It was noticeably quieter, but my anger flared, and my eyes filled with new tears. How could my body betray me at a time like this? At least Penelope was allowed to suffer in her tower alone.

I felt more than heard Rowan close in on me. "There you are." I did not look up to see him peering down at me; I hated the warmth I would feel penetrating from his gaze. A moment later, he circled the sofa and slipped onto the floor beside me. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him pull his long legs up to his chest and wrap his arms around his knees. "This is a cozy spot. Do you think if anyone catches us that they'll force us to marry?"

I growled. "That isn't funny."

"No," he sighed. "I suppose it isn't, but at least you're responding to me."

His tone was too nice, too sweet for my mood. I turned my head away from him. It might be childish, but conversation with him was the furthest from what I wanted.

"I'm sorry that dinner went poorly."

"No, you aren't. Don't you get it? You win. No one likes Clodwick, and they adore you." Another hiccup rattled my body. "You'll get your wish, and we'll be married. We'll live miserably-ever-after." Hiccup.

Rowan didn't speak for a long moment. He was no doubt preparing his gloating victory speech.

"That's not what I want," he said, his words impossibly soft like velvet on my skin.

The humility in his voice sent my head whirling to face him. It was too late to hide my blotchy face, streaked with tears from him. His eyes penetrated mine, his gaze almost . . . tender.

My body was still now . . . my hiccups were gone. Indeed, I could hardly breathe.

“Arabella.” His hand reached toward my face, but I pulled back.

“I’m not yours to touch. Not yet anyway.” I might as well have struck him, for pain seemed to lance across his face.

“I’m sorry I’ve hurt you,” he said. “I’m so sorry.”

Like an old habit, I fought hard against the sincerity in his voice, refusing to believe him. “Is that why you had the paintings returned? Why did you throw salt over your shoulder? Because you were sorry?”

He dipped his head. “I admit, I wanted to draw attention to Clodwick’s absurdities to make myself look more appealing. It was juvenile and wrong.” He met my gaze. “I’ve been a fool where you’ve been concerned. Truly, Arabella. I’m sorry.”

I didn’t want to forgive him, not after the years of hurt I harbored, but I felt my own anger finally slipping. “Is it so wrong to want to choose for myself who I marry? Shouldn’t I have the right to select the man who will dictate the rest of my life?”

His brow puckered. “It’s not wrong to desire that. And no man should have the right to dictate the rest of your life. You should be free to choose.”

I frowned, wiping moisture from my cheek. What was he saying?

“I release you, Arabella. From whatever contract we had, unspoken or otherwise, I will not marry you.” His brown eyes, vulnerable and imploring, darkened and his mouth tightened.

“Why?” I shook my head. “I don’t understand.”

His head turned to face the wall in front of us, and I could no longer attempt to decipher his feelings painted so clearly in his eyes.

“Like you said, it’s only right for you to choose.”

“It is?” I shook my head. “I mean, of course it is.”

He dropped his chin. “I am sorry that my presence here has caused you pain.”

I swallowed, my throat now completely clear of the emotion that had been choking me only moments ago. Was this really happening? Was Rowan really giving up his suit? It was a miracle. I was truly indebted to him.

“Thank you, Rowan. You have given me the greatest gift I could ask for.”

He stole a glance at me. “Yes, well, living miserably-ever-after doesn’t sound particularly enticing.”

I chuckled, surprised by his answer. “No, it doesn’t.”

His shoulders relaxed, and he sighed. “It won’t be easy to tell your father.”

“I don’t envy that task.”

“He’s been a good friend to me over the years—like a second father. But his love for you is primary, and I know he will understand, eventually.”

I hadn’t realized that severing our relationship would mean doing the same for him and Papa. That did not sit well with me, but I was too grateful for my freedom to say otherwise. “If there is anything I can do to help smooth the way between you and my father, please let me know.”

He shook his head. “You had better concentrate on smoothing the way for you and Clodwick. I don’t mean to criticize your preference for a husband, but he does have some social tendencies that your father will be wary of.”

I groaned. “Don’t I know it.”

“He truly believes that ghosts are haunting him.”

“I admit he is peculiar, but he has his sweet moments too.” His letter of apology with his compliment on my beauty came to mind.

“Oh? Does he make your heart race when you are near him?” He turned his head to gauge my response, his lips curling into his flirtatious smile.

I wish I could say I had that reaction with Clodwick, but my heart only ever betrayed me for one person. Even in the low light, my pulse quickened seeing Rowan’s handsome features. “I don’t trust my heart,” I confessed.

“Why not?”

I shrugged. I refused to tell him that my heart kept telling me to choose him of all people. I couldn’t change my convictions because a man’s smile made my knees weak. He was no longer the villain in my story, but the history between us still stood like an uncrossable barrier. “Can we speak of something else?”

“Certainly. We can speak of anything you want. What do you fancy talking about?”

I didn’t fancy anything beyond distracting him from talking about these unexplainable feelings between us. “Tell me something about you.”

“You want to know about me?” The shock in his voice made me feel repentant about the way I had been treating him.

“I could use the distraction . . . unless of course, you are ready to return to the others.” There was nothing proper or auspicious about sitting together in the cramped space behind the sofa.

Rowan smiled. "I am quite content to stay here until my legs fall asleep if it pleases you. What do you want to know?"

I wanted to know how he could act like a nice man now after being such a mean child. I wanted to know what had changed, how he could bring himself to smile and talk with me like this, but I dared not ask any of those questions. I searched for another topic. "I have heard a few stories from Papa's correspondence, but surely there was more happening in your life in the last twelve years than you could fit in a dozen letters."

Rowan rubbed his jaw. "Let's see, I suppose I could tell you about my grand tour."

My interest piqued. I had not traveled much, and I had always wondered if seeing new places would strengthen my writing. "What countries did you see?"

"We traveled through Austria-Hungary, Spain, and Italy. We were never long in one place, but it was enough to experience their unique cultures."

"Father had a letter from you before you'd left. I remember it said something about traveling with friends. I admit, I did not pay close attention."

"No? You did not anticipate every word from every letter? You disappoint me." He shook his head playfully. "Yes, I traveled with six of my closest friends from school. I do not believe there are better men in all the world. They are not perfect, mind you, but they are loyal, and that is a quality that I deeply admire."

Loyal. My chest stung. I had not been loyal to him. How he must despise me. I smoothed the skirts in my lap. "What place was your favorite?"

"Honestly?"

I nodded.

"Seeing the shores of England when we returned home."

"Really? Were you homesick?"

"Something like that." He reached over and touched the lace on the hem of my dress that had pooled near his hand. "Our ship was caught in a great storm as we crossed the channel. Our mast fell and the hull took on water. I thought it was the end."

My hand went to my stomach. "How frightening."

"I was terrified. I thought of you, actually."

"Me?" Nothing he could have said would have surprised me more.

"I thought of our future family that would never exist if I died."

My breathing became stilted. Even though he had lived, that family still wouldn't exist. "Did it bring you relief that you did not have to marry me?"

He shook his head. "Even with our rocky relationship, the idea of not having a future to look forward to—of not having my own posterity—felt rather bleak and depressing." He cleared his throat, adopting his carefree tone once more. "Don't worry. I will find another unsuspecting girl who doesn't know how vexing my personality is and win her over with my rusty charms. You need not look so guilty."

I tried to school my expression. How did one not look guilty? And how could he read me so easily? "I have never faced a near-death experience. I can see how one would regret a myriad of things. I am glad you survived."

"A few spoke of jumping ship, but the captain told us to hold strong. My friends and I tried to keep each other's spirits up and even made a marriage pact. Family seemed to be the only aspect of life we would really miss if we died, so we all agreed to start our own if we returned to England."

"You must have lost."

"Actually, I haven't lost yet."

"No?"

"I wrote to you half a dozen times after I returned, but I couldn't bring myself to mail any of the letters. I kept putting off speaking to you, letting my work distract me. The first friend got married this spring, and it was a timely reminder. I knew I had to keep the promise I had made to our family and to myself on that ship.

"That's why you wrote so suddenly about our marriage."

He nodded and his mouth curled with amusement. "That and the last one married has to pay the others one hundred pounds each."

I gasped. "That's a ghastly amount."

"Isn't it? We might be full-grown men, but as you well know from being around me, there is still a bit of a child in each of us. I suppose we wanted accountability . . . and to never forget what really mattered."

While I did not approve of the bet, or my small, secondary role in it, my respect for Rowan and his friends grew. They could have sought after riches or positions in Society, but they had all decided to marry and begin families. It was rather refreshing.

"Do you think I'm despicable for waiting so long?" Rowan asked.

"Haven't I always thought you despicable?" I joked.

He laughed. “I suppose so. And I thought the same of you for a long time. I think . . . I think you reminded me of my mother.”

“Me?”

“She always spoke about you—how pretty you were, how you made her laugh, how you always made her a little present when you visited. I didn’t want any reminders of her. It hurt too much. Being with you hurt too much.”

“I had no idea.” My chest grew heavy.

“Seeing you this time doesn’t feel that way at all. In fact, I’m finally seeing you in all the ways she did.”

I swallowed, the weight on my heart dissipating as rapidly as it had come. Did he really mean that?

His expression grew solemn. “You’re more than a bet to me, Arabella. You do know that, don’t you?”

My words were quiet, barely audible. “Does it matter? We aren’t getting married any longer.”

His face seemed to fall, but then his smile appeared so quickly, it made me question what I had seen. “That’s right. I have granted us both our freedom.”

Without thinking, I set my hand on his that still had my hem between his fingers. “It’s the right thing to do.”

“I know.” He turned his hand under mine and clasped my fingers to his. “Does this mean we can be friends at last?”

My stomach clenched to still the fluttering from his touch. I did not think this was what friends felt like when they held hands. I couldn’t bring myself to speak so I nodded.

His smile was sweet and touched me. “Thank you.” With a squeeze of my fingers, he released me and attempted to stand. I moved quickly to do the same. His foot stepped on my hem, and I flung forward, my hands slapping his chest. My eyes lifted to meet his amused ones.

“Careful, now. Those long legs are forever getting you in trouble.” His hand came up and brushed back a curl that had fallen over my eye and tucked it behind my ear, sending a shiver across my skin. “Have I ever told you how beautiful you are?”

I shook my head, my body paralyzed against his. “I think string bean was your favorite descriptor.”

He clucked his tongue, his hand not leaving my hair. “I could never have called you something so condescending.”

“Do not pretend like you don’t remember.”

A grin spread across his face. “I am quite sure if I called you anything, it was only terms of endearment.”

“Like giraffe?”

“I was jealous of those long legs of yours. They intrigued me. I saw them more than once as you hiked your skirts to wade in the creek, if you recall.” I felt his other hand come up and rest lightly on the back of my waist.

I swallowed, not daring to move—to end whatever this was. “I was clumsy and awkward. I *was* a giraffe.”

His gaze intensified on me. “That is the *last* way I would describe you now.” His thumb grazed my cheek, leaving a trail of heat. “Your skin is so soft,” he whispered. His gaze traced the features of my face until his eyes landed once more on my own. “It gutted me to see you crying tonight, but now your eyes are as bright as two silver moons.”

“Do you give that sort of compliment to all your friends?” I asked, my chest rising.

He shook his head, his gaze growing heated. “Just you.” He leaned closer, stopping inches from me. His jaw tightened. “Friends can think other friends are attractive, can they not?”

“I . . . suppose.” The word came out breathless. If by attracted he meant they desperately wanted their friend to kiss them, then a million times yes.

He seemed to read my mind, his finger slipping to my bottom lip, slowly grazing it as if time was coming to a stop. “Is this goodbye then, Arabella?”

I couldn’t speak. I wanted him to read the thoughts my lips could not speak. The ones that screamed with confusion, wishing our past would fade into a history book so he could stay.

With me.

My hands closed around his waistcoat and shirt, fearing what goodbye would look like. If only we could remain like this and pretend away any consequences. Unintentionally, I tugged him a hair closer.

His head lowered once more, and I pushed off my toes to meet him. At the last moment his head shifted, and his lips brushed the corner of my mouth. He stayed there for a moment, his breath teasing me. His arms came fully around me then, crushing me to him. I clung to him in return, my cheek pressed to his rough one, the smell of him filling every sense I

possessed. Tears filled my eyes once more. If this was goodbye, I didn't want it to end.

But it had to. I had asked for it expressly only moments before. How could I be so changeable?

Rowan stepped off my hem and away from me, my whole body feeling hollow and empty.

He cleared his throat. "I'll go first so no one sees that we've been together."

The warmth on my hands from his chest seemed to burn my skin, and I clasped them tightly together. Not an hour ago, I had felt trapped in my own proverbial tower built with walls of unjust obligation and years of loathing a man, but now I feared I was in far greater trouble. Rowan's presence hadn't just distracted me but comforted me. Our conversation had been easy and enjoyable. He made me laugh and was far more kind than I had ever given him credit for.

It wasn't just about this attraction to him that I had been fighting for weeks now, but I wanted to see him happy. I wanted him to have the family he wanted. No, there was more. Much more. I wanted to be the one to *make* him happy.

"Goodnight," Rowan said, his tender gaze finding mine again right before he slipped from the room.

"Goodnight," I whispered after him. I had finally freed myself from Rowan, but I felt like I had made the worst mistake of my life.

Chapter 21

Rowan

I leaned back in the chair in my room, stretching my neck so Hastings could shave it better. I normally preferred to see to this task myself, but I was in no condition to wield a razor. With how preoccupied I was with my time spent with Arabella last night, combing a sharp object against my neck would be disastrous.

“Are you all right, sir?” Hastings asked, stepping back for a moment.

“Yes. Why do you ask?”

“You keep moaning.”

“I do?” I had not even realized it. “I’m just mulling over a few things. You may continue.”

Hastings brought the razor back to my neck, allowing my mind to wander once more. When I arrived at Elmhurst, I did not believe in love. I had planned to marry, start a family, and find purpose in the action thereof. What a fool I’d been to think I could do all those things without my heart being entirely invested. It had been a selfish agenda.

Now I found my thoughts and desires were for someone else. I could not bear seeing Arabella unhappy. She had invaded my heart, likely from the moment I had met her again in Quillsbury, and somewhere between there and now had taken up permanent residence. Like a cold, I had developed

one symptom and then another, and before I knew it, I had succumbed to loving her.

Was there a cure? Would it pass in time?

Because I think I was reaching a fever pitch moment where it either took a turn for the better or did me in. While it had hurt to sever my promise of intention to Arabella, I had lived through it. Surely, my feelings would start to improve at any moment.

Hastings wiped my face clean and turned to do the same to the razor.

“Hastings,” I hedged.

“Yes?”

I tapped my hand on my leg. “I plan to speak with Mr. Delafield at the first opportunity and quit Elmhurst.”

“Sir?”

I shrugged. “I am not going to marry Miss Delafield after all.”

Hastings frowned. “I am sorry to hear this. Has something happened?”

I tipped my head back again and stared at the ceiling, wishing it had the answers for me. “Yes, I fell in love with her.”

There was a long pause, and I looked up to see Hastings’s reaction. His frown had only deepened.

“It’s the right thing to do,” I explained.

Hastings suddenly chuckled. “You are in love with her.”

“I already said that, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but this is proof.”

I stood and reached for my riding jacket. “I suppose it is. I’m not certain when I’ll find the right opportunity to speak with Mr. Delafield, but I wanted to prepare you.”

“Thank you, sir. I wish you luck with both Mr. Delafield and his daughter.”

I sighed. “I’ll need both.”

I avoided the others in the house and strode right to the front door. At times like this, a man needed fresh air and the steady bounce of a horse beneath him. Or rather, any distracting activity to keep from facing the grueling task of speaking with Mr. Delafield. I hated to be the one to disappoint him. He was like family to me.

After a hard ride and stalling as long as possible in the stables grooming my horse, I made my way back to the house. Once I had changed, I forced myself to go to the drawing room. I doubted I would find Mr. Delafield

there, but like a glutton for punishment, I still hoped for a glimpse of Arabella. Mayhap she would smile at me when I entered the room. There was a first time for everything.

One smile would be enough to strengthen me for the task ahead. Though, I would not complain if her warm blue eyes beckoned me nearer or her willowy fingers reached for mine. I violently shook my head. It would be better if a glimpse of Arabella helped regulate my growing obsession to a reasonable level.

I stepped into the drawing room just as Arabella embraced Harriet in a firm hug. It was hard not to be jealous. I had been in those arms just last night, and they were a wondrous place to be.

“I am here if you need anything at all,” Arabella said to Harriet.

“Thank you,” Harriet said, pulling back.

They both seemed to see me at the same moment.

“Excuse me. I am interrupting.” I took a step back toward the door.

“Not at all,” Harriet said. “I was just leaving.” She turned back to Arabella. “I will come again as soon as I can.”

Arabella nodded. “See that you do, and we will have an afternoon of music where you can play to your heart’s content. I will even have cook prepare the lemon cake you enjoy so much.”

Harriet grinned. “With the almonds and that delicious glaze I love?”

Such a description was making me hungry.

Harriet clasped her hands in front of her chest. “Now you will not be able to keep me away.”

“Nor me,” I said, speaking before thinking. I cleared my throat when they looked at me. “But I will have my cake in a separate room. Alone. Where I am not intruding.”

Harriet glanced at Arabella and shared a secret smile. “I will see myself out.”

Arabella nodded and took a seat, much more relaxed and happier than she had been last night when I had found her in the library. I was relieved to see Harriet had helped restore her mood.

Once Harriet had vacated the room, I clasped my hands behind my back and strode slowly to the opposite end of the sofa from Arabella. “Harriet seemed well.”

“Yes, I think a break from her husband was just the medicine she needed.”

I nodded slowly. "I am sorry she is so unhappy."

She shrugged. "I tried to be a listening ear and even managed to make her laugh once. It sounds pitiful saying it out loud when my efforts have not really changed her situation at all. I wish there was more I could do to help."

"Simply being her friend is enough." The irony of my words hit their mark. Arabella's friendship would have to be enough for me as well.

She leaned forward to tidy the tea things, avoiding my eyes. "Being there for her will be harder after I marry Mr. Clodwick and move to Quillsbury."

My hands tightened their hold on each other. "Indeed." It was the only word I could muster. It was somewhere between an affirmative and a question, and as vague as I could manage without balking outright. "Where is the lucky man, anyway?" I asked, barely keeping my tone civil.

"He went to town with Mr. Mason and my sister and mother." She motioned to the tea things. "Would you like me to have a cup sent up for you?"

"No, thank you." I paused for a moment. "Did Elizabeth not join the outing to town?"

Arabella's look said she was thinking the same thing I was. "No, she insisted on taking a ride instead."

"That could be worse," I said under my breath.

She nodded, apparently having heard me. "I attempted to sway her, but Harriet arrived at the same time, and I missed my opportunity."

I perched on the edge of the sofa, not certain if it was a good idea to stay and torture myself with Arabella's fetching appearance. I swear, she became lovelier with each passing day. "Have you had a chance to speak with Elizabeth about this groomsman? Is it a passing fancy?"

I could only hope my own attraction to Arabella would be so fleeting.

"It very well could be," she said. "I brought it up, but instead of answering, she claimed she'd left a candle burning in her room and fled my side to extinguish it."

"Do you plan to speak to your father about it?"

"I do hate to upset him prematurely. I thought to wait a few days after you left before I broached the subject. Not that I am rushing you away."

"No, I understand. It will be too much for him at once."

"My thoughts exactly."

I ran my hands down my thighs and rested them on my knees. “I haven’t spoken with your father yet, but I intend to.”

“I believe you.”

I raised my brows.

“Don’t look so shocked. Last night . . . last night was nice. I admit, you’re not the same ill-tempered boy I remember.”

I grinned at her. “I was only a merciless tease with you, you know. No one got under my skin like you did.”

“I know exactly what you mean. I considered myself a sweet girl until you were around. You brought out the worst in me.” She smiled. “You still do.”

I sucked in my breath through my teeth. “If I did not apologize enough last night, I will continue to do so.”

“No, you said sorry at least a dozen times.”

I relaxed into my seat. “We have progressed to mature adults who can have civil conversations. We should be very proud of ourselves.”

Her look turned uncomfortable. “So you have forgiven me for pushing you in the lake?”

I shifted toward her. “I forgive you for all your wicked pranks.”

“Wicked?” Arabella sputtered. “They were not as wicked as yours. You used to pull my hair.”

“The perfect excuse to touch it. It’s astonishingly soft.”

“Your charm won’t work on me. I know you weren’t thinking of how soft my hair was when you were ten or twelve or even fourteen.”

I shrugged. “Maybe when I was fourteen.”

She shook her head. “I don’t believe it.”

“Very well, then I have something I cannot believe either. You enjoy books now?”

She folded her hands together in her lap—a hand I wanted to clasp in my own. “If we are being honest now, then yes. I do. The truth is . . . well, the truth is that I’ve always loved to read. I didn’t want you to know we had something in common when we were younger.”

I gaped at her. “You aren’t deceiving me again? You’ve truly liked books since you were a child?”

“Books have always been my greatest joy.”

“Then why did you burn a book that day in the library?”

Arabella winced. “You saw that?”

“It haunts my dreams.”

She did not laugh this time or even smile. “That wasn’t a good day.”

“What happened?”

“We might be starting on a fresh page, you and I, but we are not so good of friends yet that I want to confess *all* my secrets.”

Her tone was full of jest, but her words did not settle. A few weeks ago, I could have let her silence alone. Now, I wanted to be her very best secret keeper; the one she told everything to. Her hesitation served to remind me that though we were friends, we were nothing more.

“Someday,” I said.

“Someday?” she repeated in question.

I nodded. “Someday I hope you’ll feel safe enough with me to tell me.”

I don’t know why I said it. She was marrying someone else, and I was leaving. When would she have the chance to learn to trust me? I stood and forced a smile. “I should see if I can find your father. Excuse me.”

Chapter 22

Arabella

With absolutely no decorum, I ran to the drawing room door after Rowan. I stopped just short of it, plastering my body against the nearby wall. With all the discretion I possessed, I leaned forward and peered around the corner. Sure enough, Rowan was headed straight for Papa's office.

This was the plan.

I wanted this to happen.

I needed this to happen.

I wanted to scratch out last night's verbal agreement between us with my pen and write a new ending—one where I gave Rowan a second chance. But that was foolish, wasn't it? I had let my heart overrule my intelligence. There was still the fact that Rowan didn't know about my writing and the part where he would mock it and destroy the greatest source of happiness I'd had these many years.

The door to the study opened, and Papa stuck his head out. My feet began to dance in place. Dare I create a scene and put an end to this madness? Or should I stop the madness that was me, Arabella Delafield, the insane woman who had developed feelings for her archnemesis?

My deliberation had taken too long, and the decision was made for me. Papa and Rowan entered the study and shut the door behind them. My feet

were moving before I could stop them. Not a moment later, I had my ear to the study door, wishing I could decipher the mumbled sounds from within.

In a fictional story, I could have made out every single word. Why was this door so thick?

Frustrated, I pushed back and marched away.

It was done. Rowan and I were no longer promised to each other. Now that my future was safe, I could return to my writing pursuits. I made my way up the stairs to my bedchamber.

There on my writing desk were my paintings. I knew Rowan must have taken them and then had felt too guilty to keep them. Why had he been trying so hard to win me? Was it because of the bet with his friends? My body seemed to conjure up the recent memory of standing in Rowan's arms.

I was too scared to believe that those feelings were real, and yet my body felt flushed and warm, and there was no pretending that I felt myself spiraling like a top ready to crash against the nearest wall.

I smothered every thought and desire as deep as I could. I had a book to write.

In the bottom drawer, beneath my stack of blank parchment, I pulled out the adventure of Penelope Waters. She needed no man. No hero. She only required her wits about her, and she would be able to return home a legend. I stretched the fingers above my sprained wrist, testing their strength. It seemed much improved, just as Penelope's future would be. Taking up my pen, I dipped it in ink and set it to paper, writing the first words that came to my mind. Now was not the time for finesse, but results. Penelope was going to be as free as I was.

Penelope rushed to the window. If she could manage to squeeze through the narrow opening, could she survive the forty-foot fall to the alligator-infested moat below? She studied the swirling, muddied water below and gasped when a man's arm stretched forth from its depths and grabbed hold of the castle wall. Another arm came up, and then his upper body emerged.

Gasping, she stepped back from the window. Even without seeing those daring brown eyes, she knew his identity. It was the man she swore she would never love . . .

I jerked my pen from the paper. No! This was all wrong. I did not write gothic romances. And I most certainly wasn't about to memorialize Rowan Ashworth in a book. Penelope was supposed to save herself!

Disgusted, I pushed the paper away from me. I was certain my regular writing flow would return the moment I was free from my promised arrangement. At least now my words had come as easily as before—even if they had come out all wrong. Romantic fantasies did not belong in my writing.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my temples. Perhaps it wasn't the agreement but my feelings that were causing the trouble. Only half of my problems had been resolved. I still had a ball of emotions in my chest that needed to be unraveled. I both disliked and liked the same man. I had to get to the bottom of it. With a little work and a few direct questions, shouldn't I be able to discover how Rowan could possibly be both those people? If he had truly changed and I could forgive him, would I be able to return to my normal writing habits?

With tears in my eyes, I prayed it was so.

I needed my writing desperately. It was how I coped with the world, and it was going to be how I managed to survive a marriage to Mr. Clodwick. I rested my forehead on my desk, my lips trembling. There was no happy ending in my story, was there? Not for me and not for poor Penelope. My hand went to my heart. It felt like it was bleeding with how it ached.

Chapter 23

Rowan

“I cannot marry your daughter.” I sat rigidly in my seat across from Mr. Delafield, bracing myself for his reaction. The desk between us felt too small to hold the man back should he desire to kill me. I braved a few words of explanation. “She deserves to choose a husband for herself.”

I had given up everything. My father’s approval, Mr. Delafield’s trust, the bet with my friends, and even my precious Folio. I had done it all for Arabella, and knowing so made me sit a little taller. Even if I lost her, this much I had to do.

Even if it meant my own demise.

Mr. Delafield rubbed his jaw and then leaned back in his chair and crossed one leg over the other. I braced myself for his anger—for the bloodcurdling tone he had used the night Arabella had announced her supposed engagement to Mr. Clodwick. Mr. Delafield’s expression, however, remained remarkably stoic. “This is exactly what I hoped would happen.”

I blinked, then blinked again. “Y-you did?” I could feel a bead of sweat forming at my hairline from the stress of my confession. There was no way I had heard him right.

“I had hoped you would begin to care for Arabella and desire her happiness above all else.”

“I don’t understand. Why did you want us to marry each other then? If it was love you wanted, then why promise her to me?”

“You have a lot in common. Even when you were young and fought like a pair of angry pups, I saw the similarities. You both possess good hearts and care for those around you. You both love the human story and the connections you find to it in morals and themes in the books you read. You both are passionate and fight for what you want in life. Son, with loving hearts such as yours, you have a chance of having what my wife and I have.

“The best matches are not between two perfect people but two intentionally good people trying and working toward their happiness. I cannot guarantee your future together anymore now than I could when you were children, but I’ve tried hard to provide the opportunity.”

My arms erupted in gooseflesh, his words taking root in my chest. “Thank you, sir, for wanting the best for me.”

“I still do, Rowan. There’s hope yet.”

I shook my head. “I have already told her that I would release her from any expectation of marrying me.”

Mr. Delafield grinned. “Yes, but *I* did not release her from it.”

I frowned. “Then you will force us to wed? I cannot let that happen.”

“Not at all.” He batted his hand and sat forward. “You can choose it for yourselves. In good time, I am sure all will be taken care of.”

I chewed on my bottom lip. I did not see how to make it work between us. Mr. Delafield spoke again before I could reach any conclusion that did not equate to me being alone and miserable.

“Lady Farthington has asked me to escort her to London. My back has been bothering me, and since you insist on leaving, I wonder if you could take her in my place. You would depart at dawn.”

“I would be happy to help.”

He stood and moved to his library shelf. “I have a few remarkable books you should read on the way. I have no doubt you will find them quite enlightening.”

“Oh?” I stood and stepped to the side of the desk with interest. If Mr. Delafield had a book recommendation for me, I would not refuse it. He had excellent taste.

I stretched out my hand, and just as I gripped the spines, he paused before relinquishing them. “There is only one condition. This is the only

copy of these books in the world, and you must return them on your way back from London before returning to Ashworth Hall.

“Elmhurst is not exactly on the way to Ashworth Hall,” I hedged. “Besides, Arabella would not like it.”

“Trust me when I say that these books will change your life.”

My brow furrowed. Were they religious texts? They appeared more like cheap diaries rather than anything of worth.

“Trust me,” he added.

I sighed and took the books. “If I promise to return in a few days, what am I to tell Arabella?”

Mr. Delafield shrugged and motioned me to the door. “That will be entirely up to you. Write a poem. Buy her a meaningful trinket. Get on one knee and profess your love. Whatever it takes.” He opened the door.

“But—”

“You’re a smart man. You’ll figure it out.” He pushed me out and closed the door in my face.

I groaned and stepped back until I hit the wall of the corridor. I slumped against it, falling until I was squatting on my knees. Arabella was going to kill me if I came back. I leaned forward and rested my head against the books. Was this a second chance with Arabella? Or should I say a third or fourth? Or was I setting my heart on a cutting board for it to be thoroughly mashed and beaten?

Chapter 24

Arabella

I entered the dining room a few minutes late for dinner. I had been a terrible host and had left Mr. Clodwick in the hands of my mother and brother-in-law after they'd come back from town. Admittedly, I had been hiding. Did that make me a terrible human without any manners at all? I couldn't face Papa—or worse, Rowan if he was still here—and nothing could induce me to face Mr. Clodwick—I'd be seeing him every day for the rest of my life.

Not to mention Mr. Clodwick was likely upset that I had promised him a private art tour, and I had nothing to show for it.

My eyes focused on the silver chandelier full of glowing candles instead of the faces at the table as I dragged my feet ever closer. I dared not look down and discover Rowan gone. The guilt and disappointment would be too much to face. Something had happened while I'd been hiding away. After attempting to write a new story, from the very first page, I discovered all I wanted to write was about love. And not just any love story.

My own personal romance.

Every heroine I could imagine resembled me, and every hero was the devastatingly handsome Rowan Ashworth. He played the daring knight as well as he did a stern duke with a secret heart of gold. It was hopeless. I was hopeless. I blamed his charming smile that warmed my middle, and the soft words that had wrapped around me like a cocoon of security last night. He

had offered his comfort so readily, so naturally. I had tried to resist, but could one push away a soft breeze that curled around them, leaving them warm and safe? It was impossible.

And then when I had driven myself mad with frustration, I had snuck into Papa's office and read every paper and literary review of Rowan's I could find.

I had been wrong about him.

So very wrong.

He was a literary genius.

And I was an utter fool.

A man stepped forward to pull out my chair.

My eyes betrayed me, and I looked at him. Not Rowan. It was only a footman. Rowan had jumped up to take my hand or pull out my chair so many times that my brain had thought for a moment that it could be him. In desperation, my eyes darted to the faces at the table. Straight across from my chair sat Rowan. Before I could stop it, the corners of my lips jumped, and my heart sang with relief.

His own smile, though more hesitant, greeted me with its familiar warmth.

"It's nice of you to join us," Papa said.

Papa. Was he angry with me? Bitterly disappointed? I swung my gaze his way and took my seat. His face was impassive—unreadable—but there were no traces of temper that I had seen on my return from Quillsbury. "Forgive me. I lost track of the time."

"Scribbling away, no doubt," Elizabeth said under her breath beside me, her tone low like she was impersonating Lady Farthington.

My eyes widened, and I reached under the table and pinched her. What if Rowan had heard her? Yes, she was right. But I had lost track of time. I had been quite caught up in my writing once I had allowed myself to explore what a story would look like with both Rowan and me as the leads. But the last thing in the world I wanted was for Rowan to find out.

I glanced up to find him staring at me, brows furrowed. Had he heard? Please, please, please let it not be so.

Mr. Clodwick leaned toward me. "Have you been ill, Miss Delafield?"

My head darted his way, only now realizing he was sitting beside me. "No, I am well."

"Are you sure? Your complexion is quite pink."

“I assure you, I feel . . .” Well, another partial truth might be best in this case too. “I feel . . . not sick.”

“Good. May I recommend an afternoon nap in the future? They are most restorative.”

“Oh. Uh, thank you. I shall consider it.”

Mr. Clodwick smiled in his barely there sort of way and went back to his soup. I glanced down at my own soup, seeing it for the first time, and forced myself to pick up my spoon.

After dinner, I followed the women into the drawing room while the men remained behind to drink port together. “How shall we entertain ourselves tonight?” Tabitha asked, sitting between me and Elizabeth on the sofa.

“What about a night ride?” Elizabeth’s voice held more enthusiasm than I thought she was capable of.

“That’s too dangerous for a lady,” Mama said, picking up her sewing basket and bringing it to a chair near the cold fire. It was much too warm to burn anything, which was probably a good thing, or I might have tried to burn Penelope’s story this afternoon.

“If men can do it, why can’t we?” Elizabeth pushed.

She had enjoyed riding before, but I knew perfectly well what was motivating her on this occasion. “It’s improper,” I answered. “Which I know is terribly unfair, but sometimes unfair situations are not what we think they are. Sometimes they’re for our best, and we won’t appreciate them until it’s too late. And then we will wish for the situation back, but we can’t reverse time. That’s not how life works.” I paused, realizing I had been rambling, my thoughts having strayed to Rowan . . . again.

I looked up to find Elizabeth’s brow screwed up in confusion. “Are you feeling well?”

Why did everyone keep asking me that? “I am the picture of health.”

“She is probably too warm. The heat in this house has been oppressive today. What about an evening walk?” Tabitha asked. “Would that satisfy you, Elizabeth?”

“It’s not the same.” Elizabeth folded her arms across her chest.

“A walk could be refreshing,” Mama agreed. “We have been cooped up every night trying not to let the neighbors know about Arabella’s unique situation. And we did purchase those torches for that garden party last summer and haven’t used them since. We could have the servants light a path for us.”

Grimacing, I apologized. "I had no idea everyone was feeling that way on my account. I'm terribly sorry."

"Mama turned down dinner at the Peterson's and the Randall's," Elizabeth explained.

"And we were happy to do it for Arabella's sake," Tabitha said. "A walk with the torches sounds lovely. I will take care of the arrangements, Mama. I'll instruct a maid to gather light shawls for the women and direct the footmen to the proper placements for the torches." She stood with purpose from her seat between us and hurried away with a skip of anticipation in her step.

Elizabeth sighed in her wake. "I still think a ride would have been manageable."

"Elizabeth," I hedged, my voice low so Mama would not catch it. "Don't you think you are spending too much time in a certain groomsman's company?"

"I don't know what you mean," Elizabeth hissed, turning her face away from me. "I am not spending time with anyone."

I folded my arms across my chest. "And I do not have feelings for my childhood enemy."

Elizabeth's gaze jerked to mine. "What?"

I hadn't meant to blurt such a statement, but I was glad it was said. Elizabeth needed to know she could trust me. "Not everything is how we wish it to be, but as sisters, we should be honest and try to help each other through it. That is all I'm saying."

Elizabeth scooted closer, taking Tabitha's seat. "You care for Mr. Ashworth?"

I took a precautionary glance at Mama to make sure she could not hear me. "It doesn't matter. He told Papa today that he would not marry me."

Elizabeth's hand stole to her chest. "What will you do?"

"How am I supposed to know? I just realized the depth of my feelings this afternoon. It's too late."

"So that's why you were rambling earlier."

I shrugged. "It might be too late for me, but there is still hope for you. Philip is not from our station, Elizabeth. You cannot have his life and ours. Society does not work that way."

"Society is boring," Elizabeth said. I thought about her statement. She might not think she cared, but she enjoyed nice things more than anyone in

this house. Her pink gown with embroidered chiffon overlay was the perfect example. It was finer than most of my evening gowns. Elizabeth always insisted on having the very best.

I was quite certain if I brought up her expensive habits, she would argue that she could do without. I tried another avenue instead, ready to be on her side if she could convince me. “Can you tell me that Philip is the best man you have ever met?”

My question took her off guard. Her lips worked, as if she wanted to tell me the truth but was fighting against it. Perhaps I should start with what I thought of Rowan. I cleared my throat. “Even though I have been unkind to Rowan—”

“Rowan?” Elizabeth’s brows raised.

I gave her a droll look. “He was not Mr. Ashworth when we were children, so it is hard to call him anything else.”

“Sorry, you may continue.”

“I was unkind to Rowan, but he did not hesitate to help me when I fell from my horse. I have done much to provoke him, but for some reason, he keeps forgiving me and bestowing more kindness. There is not a better man in all my acquaintances.” My heart thudded in my chest, the truth of my words settling deep within my soul.

Elizabeth sighed. “I tried to stay on your side, but I must agree that Mr. Ashworth is a good match for you. If I could remedy your situation I would, but I find my own problems are consuming me. I admit Philip is rough around the edges. His words are sweet, but I cannot tell if he speaks that way to everyone. I thought I saw him flirting with a maid the other day outside the kitchen while I was walking in the garden.” Elizabeth glanced at Mama, then back at me. “What do I do?”

“You have always been a smart young lady, Elizabeth. I think you know the answer already.”

Her face fell, and she nodded. “I want someone who treats me as Rowan treats you.”

I knew the feeling. I wanted that too.

The men entered the drawing room, having taken longer than usual, but I was grateful for it. Elizabeth had finally trusted me with her feelings. Now if only I could discover what to do about my own.

My eyes met Rowan’s as he took a seat opposite of Mama’s near the fire, the farthest chair in the room from me. He quickly looked away and struck

up a conversation with Mama. It was a small slight, but it was a sharp reminder that I should not harbor any hope for resolution. My stomach knotted in a million different ways.

Maybe Elizabeth had the right to it. It was hard to rescue another when you felt like you were drowning.

Mr. Clodwick took a seat on the sofa perpendicular to ours, his knee brushing mine. I immediately shifted away from him, self-conscious of the awkward touch.

“Miss Delafield,” he asked. “Have you heard any word from Lady Farthington?”

“Pardon?” I don’t know why his mention of my aunt brought instant annoyance. I knew he had agreed to marry me for this express reason, and it was a miracle he was still here. But could he not think of me just once?

Mr. Clodwick set his hands on his lap. “I have written her a letter of apology. I did not think she would be so sensitive to my concerns about churches. Your father says Mr. Ashworth will take it with him when he leaves in the morning to escort Lady Farthington to London.”

“I knew nothing of these arrangements.” They had likely been made this afternoon.

Mr. Clodwick adopted a look of contrition. “I fear it is on my account. I hope my letter will make amends.”

His humility touched me, and my annoyance evaporated like dew in sunshine. “Lady Farthington has quite a bark, but she will appreciate your apology.”

He nodded and sat back, apparently having used up all his words. The temptation to glance at Rowan again proved too strong to resist, and I raised my eyes to his corner of the room.

He was still in conversation with Mama.

I sighed. What did it matter? I wasn’t marrying Rowan. I was marrying Clodwick. Safe, reliable, ghost-obsessed Clodwick. But even the sweet letter he had written to me with his apology and compliment could not buoy my spirits.

I might as well climb back in the tower with Penelope.

This was not the freedom I wanted.

Chapter 25

Rowan

“The torches are ready,” Mrs. Mason announced, breezing into the drawing room and going straight to her husband. “I hope everyone is up for an adventure.”

“Torches?” Was this a game I had not yet heard of?

Mrs. Delafield clasped her hands together over the ruche hem of her blue bodice. “Dear me. We forgot to tell you. We have planned a night walk.”

My spirits perked. I could use some fresh air after the confines of the dining room, and the drawing room held little improvement. I needed more space between Arabella and me. The weight of her gaze continued to settle on me throughout the evening, and it was all I could do to resist meeting it. It was only a matter of time before she would corner me and remind me that I was to leave. The truth would come out that I was returning, and then she really would hate me.

The very idea felt like its own form of bondage. It wasn't *hate* I wanted from Arabella.

A maid entered, bestowing shawls to the women as everyone clamored to their feet. Arabella wrapped a white gauzy shawl about her shoulders, and I had to drag my eyes away when she set her arm on Mr. Clodwick's. The next few days would be sheer torture for me.

Everyone filed into rows of two, leaving me to walk beside Miss Elizabeth. She gave me a wan smile, which was quite the improvement from when I'd first arrived.

"Don't worry too much," Elizabeth said right before we crossed through the front door into the night.

"Pardon?" I asked.

"About Arabella."

I scratched the spot behind my head, just above my cravat. "I don't understand your meaning."

"You're an intelligent man. You'll puzzle it out easily enough." My confusion must have made her take pity on me, for she sighed heavily and said, "She doesn't hate you anymore."

I nodded, not at all comforted.

Elizabeth gave a short laugh. "Maybe you aren't as intelligent as I thought."

My current state of frustration left me incapable of smothering my annoyance. "You're too kind."

"Very well, I will tell you a secret, but you must not tell Arabella I said anything."

I shook my head. "I don't want you to betray her confidence."

"Oh? Then I shouldn't tell you that she cares for you? Then by all means, I will keep it to myself. Excuse me, Mr. Ashworth." She gave me a coy smile and waltzed ahead to link arms with her sister, Mrs. Mason, as they descended from the portico.

My own legs stood stock-still. I was incapable of taking another step. So Arabella did care. I knew it! I mean, I didn't really know, but I had surely hoped. But what was I to do about it? Despite developing feelings for me, she had stubbornly chosen Mr. Clodwick.

I couldn't allow it. I had to do what Mr. Delafield had suggested. I would buy her a dozen trinkets and get on my knees and beg if I had to. But how? When? Surely, not tonight. She was all the way at the front of our little company beside Mr. Clodwick.

Maybe it was the romantic glow of the lanterns lining the path about the yard and casting a haze of yellow about us. Perhaps it was the pull of my soul yearning to repair the broken link between Arabella and me. Or maybe I felt pushed to the edge by yet another timeline working against me. Regardless, I am not proud of what I did next.

I hurried down the steps, catching up with the others. As soon as I met them, I yelled out, "String bean!"

The group at large halted, each one turning to look over their shoulder at me. I only paid attention to one of them. Arabella's eyes were wide, and her mouth unhinged.

"String bean," I repeated, this time in a more normal volume. I felt like the characters in novels that I continually criticized in my articles who acted out of character. But desperate times gave rise to newfound courage, and I would not step down. I had meant to get Arabella's attention, and now I had it, but could not fathom what to do next. I glanced upward for some heavenly guidance and saw the bright white stars gleaming above me. "The stars." I pointed to the celestial landscape. "In the shape of a string bean."

"Oh?" Mrs. Delafield cranked her neck backward and several others followed. I pointed at a random set of stars, since any one of them could be connected into a line. "There, do you see it? You might have to step away from the torches. It's as clear as day." I jumped off the path myself and walked backward with my hand pointing to the sky, moving in the direction of Arabella until I maneuvered myself beside her. "Do you see it?" I asked.

She stared at me as if I had gone mad.

Mr. and Mrs. Mason had stepped off the path and started calling out the well-known constellations. Mr. and Mrs. Delafield followed them.

"Mr. Clodwick, can you make it out?" I asked. "I daresay, it could even be a giraffe. A rarer beauty I have never seen . . . with such celestial legs."

Arabella coughed next to me, her hand fisted to her mouth.

"Is it attached to the Vega star?" Mr. Clodwick asked.

I hesitated, feeling undereducated in my star-mapping abilities. "Well . . ."

Elizabeth came forward and took Mr. Clodwick's arm. "I would be happy to show you. Step this way." She led him several feet off the torched path in the opposite direction from us.

Arabella glowered at me, though I saw a hint of amusement playing around the corners of her mouth. "What exactly are you trying to do?"

I cleared my throat and clasped my hands behind my back. "I found your childhood likeness in the stars. Is that not flattering?" *Please* let it be flattering.

"That you think I look like a string bean is as insulting now as it was then."

“I’ll have you know that string beans are my favorite vegetable.”

Her lips quivered, and I knew she was fighting a smile. “They are not.”

“They might have been lower on the list before my visit here, but I assure you that they sit at the very top now.”

“Let me guess, the giraffe is your favorite animal?”

I feigned a look of shock. “How did you know?”

She shook her head. “Does this flattery come with a purpose?”

I stepped closer, lowering my voice. “I cannot help it if I find you as radiant as the stars.” If there was any more light, I swear I would have caught a subtle blush. Could Elizabeth be right? Did Arabella care for me as I did for her? “Would you do the honor of walking with me?”

She glanced at the others engaged in their stargazing pursuits. “I suppose it would be all right to walk ahead.”

I held out my arm. The pressure of her small-gloved hand against mine might as well have been an intoxicating kiss. I felt a touch heady as I led us back onto the path. Our privacy would be short-lived, and I had to make the most of it. “Arabella, I hope you know that I am in earnest about my desire for you to select your own companion in marriage.”

“I know,” she said softly.

I glanced at her, my measured steps leading us away from the others. Her skin gleamed like milk in the moonlight, and the glow of the torches in her eyes held enough warmth to burn me. It was time to confess the feelings storming in my chest, mounting with every swish of her skirt against my leg, and the press of her fingers on my arm. “Do you also know that I am equally earnest in another direction as well? I desire above all else for you to change your mind about me. Something has shifted between us these last few weeks. Something real and tangible.” The path curved out of view of the others, and I stopped just beyond it, turning to face Arabella. My hands slid up past her evening gloves to her bare forearms.

“I came here for a wife and no other expectation, but I fell under your spell the moment I saw you in Quillsbury. Am I alone in my feelings for you?”

I held my breath, studying her serious blue sapphire eyes, wishing I could read them better in the low light. I feared she would yank herself away, disgusted by my words. Instead, she did the unthinkable. She stepped into my arms, embracing me, and resting her head against my chest. For a moment, I was too stunned to act. But then I was too excited not to act. My

hands found her waist, sliding around the sleek fabric of her gown. I clung to her, my nose burying against her hair, inhaling her sweet scent. “Is it too late?” I asked. “Please, tell me it isn’t too late.”

“I’m confused, Rowan.”

My chest tightened. Those weren’t the words I so desperately wanted to hear.

I pulled back just enough to lift her chin so we could see each other. “Your confusion is only natural considering our history, but can we not sort it out together?”

A commotion of steps sounded on the other side of the bend, and Arabella pulled away, leaving the front of me doused with cold in her absence. I squeezed my hands into fists to keep from reaching for her again. If only we had a few more minutes to speak privately. Arabella rubbed one arm and glanced anxiously at the bend in the walk as we both anticipated the others to join us at any moment. “C-can we speak of this later?”

“I leave at first light.”

Her eyes bored into mine. “I’ll find you before you go.”

I gave her a subtle nod just as Mr. Clodwick and Elizabeth rounded the corner.

“Miss Delafield, I regret I must turn in for the night,” Mr. Clodwick announced. “I missed my nap today on account of my correspondence, and I find I am too tired to continue. May I walk you back to the house?”

Arabella’s smile pulled tight. “That would be nice.”

Her gaze flicked to mine just as she took Mr. Clodwick’s arm and disappeared back around the corner. I hated seeing her walk away with that man. Loathed it. He did not deserve her.

I did not deserve her.

But I would. I would dedicate the rest of my life to earning the privilege to be by her side, if she would let me. I doubted Mr. Clodwick would do anything for her at all.

Elizabeth gave me a commiserating look. “I stalled as long as I could.”

I nodded, my smile tight and forced. “I will be forever grateful to you.”

“I suppose I should be grateful to you as well. I rather like the idea of a romance that my parents approve of.”

I had not expected her admission. “Do you, really?”

She smiled. “It’s not nearly as fun, but it has me reconsidering my future.”

Mr. and Mrs. Delafield joined us a moment later. Mrs. Delafield seemed entirely in her element out of doors, though I rarely saw her outside. “The Masons chose to follow the others back to the house but will rejoin us shortly. They told us not to wait for them. Shall we proceed?”

Elizabeth feigned a yawn. “I am suddenly overtired and think I will turn in for the night as well.”

“Shall I walk you back?” I asked.

She was already retreating. “Don’t bother. We are not far from the house, and I will be just behind the others. Besides, I have a lot to think over.”

I hoped that meant she would finally put the groomsman from her mind. I gave Mr. and Mrs. Delafield a smile and pointed to the path ahead. “Shall we?” I kept pace a few steps behind them as we continued our night walk. For the first time all day, hope lightened my step.

Chapter 26

Arabella

I overslept.

The small, rosewood clock on my fireplace mantel read a quarter to eight. One would think that my anxiety and anticipation for this morning's conversation with Rowan would have kept me awake all night. Instead, I had felt more restful than I had in weeks, thanks to the conclusion I had reached last night.

I had planned to tell Rowan about my writing and make him swear to never read a word I had written. If he could agree, I would be able to make peace with my past and allow myself to truly love him. For love was what I was sure was brewing inside me.

But now it was too late.

He was gone.

I dug my fingers into my hair and squeezed my eyes shut. How had this happened? Why now when I couldn't stop thinking of him and I longed to be near him? I had started to believe that our parents had been right all along, and that Rowan was the only one capable of making me happy. I had thought it was my writing, but that night with Rowan in the library, when his lips had brushed the corner of my mouth, had surpassed any fulfillment any words had ever brought me.

Tears coursed down my cheeks. I hadn't wanted to depend on people. I desired to be like Penelope Waters from my story and save myself. But Rowan's plea last night had stayed with me: Can we not sort it out together? With him, I believed that happiness could be twice what I had been capable of on my own.

If he would only make me that one simple promise.

Now I would never know.

He was well on his way to London.

And I was here . . . without him.

It was hours later before I finally climbed out of bed. My family thought I was ill, but my red, swollen eyes would not fool them if I came down to visit. If only I could escape to see Harriet. I knew her words would soothe me. But would her husband let me in?

I stewed over the decision for a few minutes more before making up my mind to at least try. Hurrying from my room, I nearly collided with Mr. Clodwick at the top of the stairs.

"Good day, Miss Delafield."

"Good day." I took a step back and clutched my chest to slow the fright the sudden encounter had caused. I had forgotten all about Mr. Clodwick and his presence in the house. Such a realization made me feel like a terrible person.

"Any word from Lady Farthington this morning?" he asked.

"Lady Farthington?" I stared at him, my annoyance flaring. Did he not worry about my health? My swollen features? "No, I haven't had a single word."

"That is a shame. I thought she would respond as soon as your father gave her my note."

My foot tapped beneath my skirt. For weeks I had smothered my irritation for this man, but this morning it was beyond my capacity. "I cannot tell you if Lady Farthington gives a hoot about your note. If I were you, I would forget all about her or any private tour. She does not easily forgive—I should know. Now if you'll excuse me, I have an important errand to run." I stalked past him, deciding once and for all to be done with the man. Without Rowan, no amount of writing freedom was worth Mr. Clodwick's selfish tendencies. He was far too single-minded for me to want any part of him reproduced in my future children. The very thought made me shiver with disgust.

On my ride to Harriet's, I prayed that fortune would smile on me and let this be the day she accepted callers. I knocked on her door and waited with bated breath.

The door swung open, and the butler smiled. *He smiled!* "Please, come in, Miss Delafield."

I blinked in a stupor for a moment, hardly believing my good fortune. The butler led me into her sitting room, where the melodic vibrations of a harp filled the room with sweet music.

Harriet stood from behind the large instrument, passing the expensive furnishings and heavy damask drapes the color of the Royal Navy to greet me with a hug. "I just sent my maid to fetch my bonnet so I might visit you. How did you know to come?" When she pulled back, her eyes widened. "Arabella, are you ill?"

"Just in spirit," I said with a weak laugh. "How is it that you can play your music again? And how can you have visitors today?"

Harriet directed me to the sofa and sat beside me. "It's all thanks to your Mr. Ashworth."

"I don't understand."

"He wrote to my in-laws and now Mr. Lawrence has to allow me more freedoms. They threatened his inheritance if they heard of any mistreatment. Apparently, they want the absolute best for the mother of their future heir. Isn't it wonderful? So much has changed for the better almost overnight."

"Mr. Ashworth did that?" I stared in awe. That man never ceased to surprise me.

She grinned. "Perhaps he is not as terrible as you once thought."

She knew my heart had been softening, but she would be surprised to learn how far I had fallen for the man. "I have much to tell you." I shared in confidence about his confession, about his reading work, about how I had promised to meet him and had overslept.

"Is this not the worst scenario imaginable?" I felt my eyes welling once more with tears.

"I don't know. If it was so terrible, then why do I feel jealous?"

"Of me?" I snorted. "What an absurd notion! I care for a literary critic who once had a very strong and scarring opinion about my writing. I care for him so much, and yet the opportunity to tell him about my books is gone. The whole situation is maddening."

She shrugged. "Perhaps, but you are experiencing something I have only dreamed about."

"What do you mean?"

Her smile turned wistful. "Falling in love."

Fall? Yes, and it was enough to break me.

I blinked rapidly, but the tears escaped just the same. I took a handkerchief out of my reticule and dabbed at my eyes. "If only I had asked my maid to wake me. Now it might all come to naught."

Harriet reached for my hand. "It could, but without the risk, you will never reap the reward. Don't miss this opportunity. For my sake, Arabella. Do for yourself what I cannot do."

"Oh, Harriet."

"Don't oh, Harriet me. My situation has improved, but I want more for you."

"I don't even know where to start. Even if I can convince Papa to take us to London for the Season, it won't be for six months at the very least. His feelings for me could expire by then. Indeed, they might have already when he realized I had not kept my word in meeting him before he left."

"If you can chase down a stranger and convince him to marry you, then you can find a way to tell Mr. Ashworth about your writing and about how you feel about him." I opened my mouth to object, but Harriet stopped me. "Promise me."

I sighed and sank back into her couch. "Very well. I will find a way to tell him." If given the chance, I'd rather marry Rowan and keep my writing a secret, but Harriet was right. If I wanted the unconditional love that so few had, then I had to take the risk.

Harriet treated me to a platter of food before letting me leave, assuring me that her appetite had returned. I was happy for her. It was good that I had come. I had needed to see the world from her eyes for a moment and to realize that my story wasn't over yet. I could not be a weak protagonist who gave up at the climax of her story.

Upon returning to Elmhurst, I was greeted by Tabitha at the door, her face drawn and pale. "What is it?"

She motioned me inside and shut the door behind us. "I'm afraid it's Mr. Clodwick."

I froze. "Is he ill? Did he see another ghost?"

She shook her head. "He's returned to Quillsbury."

Now this I had not expected. “Did he say why?”

“He said that after losing Lady Farthington’s favor he had no reason to stay.”

I coughed. “He said that?” I shook my head in disbelief. He truly did not care about me at all then. Guilt and relief swirled briefly inside me, settling into a measure of peace. “Do not worry overmuch, Tabitha. It’s for the best.”

Tabitha raised a brow.

“At least now I will not have to think of a way to break our *almost* engagement.”

“Then you aren’t hurt by his departure?”

“I have been very foolish, Tabitha. I thank you for unconditional support, but now you may be at ease.”

Tabitha sighed, her relief palpable. “Well, that is one crisis averted. What about Papa? You have lost two suitors in one day.”

I chewed on my lip for a moment. An idea had formed on my ride home, and there was nothing to keep me from acting upon it. “Don’t worry, Tabitha. I have thought of something even Papa would approve of.”

It must’ve been the mischievous tone leaking into my words because Tabitha’s demeanor changed to one of suspicion. “What are you up to, Arabella Delafield?”

I continued my charge up the stairs. “I’m climbing out of my tower.”

“What?” Tabitha asked.

I glanced back long enough to see her hike up her skirts and chase after me.

For the first time all day, I smiled. “Come, we have a love letter to write.”

Even after the worst of storms, there was a rainbow to look forward to. I was about to chase mine.

Chapter 27

Rowan

Soft yellow beams of afternoon sunlight streamed through the carriage windows and danced on Lady Farthington's sagging cheeks while she dozed. Her purring snores filled the small space like the sound of bees swarming in the distance. Stale air from hours of confining ourselves in the bouncing conveyance had me reaching for my cravat. The knot had lost any neat appeal hours ago, and I longed to rip it from my throat.

My mind whirled as steadily as the bounce of the carriage on the road, reviewing all the moments I had had with Arabella—from my earliest memories to this morning when she had dashed all my hopes for a future together. How could I return to Elmhurst Hall now?

My eyes fell on my satchel on the seat beside me. A corner of a book peeked out the opening. I had forgotten about Mr. Delafield's books. My mind had been so completely consumed that I had not thought of them once. Sticking out of one was a letter from Ambrose Hartley that I had received only last night. I had been too caught up in my thoughts of Arabella to read it, and I had shoved it in my bag.

I slipped the letter out and unfolded it. Besides Leonard, Rosie was one of my only friends still unmarried and at risk for losing the bet. He was a good friend, and I wanted him to be happy. But if he mentioned one word

about being in love, I would cast it out the window before finishing. And my reasons had nothing to do with money or competition.

Ashworth,

I have not the time to respond properly to your last, but I could not let the week lapse without asking after your efforts at Writcombe. Has Miss Delafield consented, or are you still at odds? While I do not precisely envy your situation, this task would be easier if my parents had the foresight to arrange a wife as well. My sister has taken pity on me and offered to matchmake. Can you imagine?

After the miserable season I had, and all the wretched luck in the world, I am tempted to accept her offer. I must be mad. Matchmaking was not even a contingency in my plans. Though it must be noted that none of this effort would be required if not for Thomas and this ridiculous bet. Or does the blame lay with Charles Shepherd and his addled scheme to tour the continent six years ago? I suppose it is no matter now; the wager ensures that we are all for the parson's noose.

All things considering, I will make the best of it. I suppose the alternative is an eternity of loneliness. Especially if the rest of you are leg-shackled and I'm not. Dear heavens. That sounds abominably miserable. Please write so I may know my standing in this blasted wager.

Good luck to you, my devoted bibliophile.

Your fellow sufferer in this matrimonial campaign,

Ambrose

A lump of bitterness formed in my throat. An eternity of loneliness? What wretchedness was this? I tossed the letter back in my bag with disgust. I felt sorry for Ambrose and the troubles he'd faced, but with every mile of distance put between Arabella and myself, I was sorrier for myself. There was no way I could write a decent reply until I had a better hold on my emotions. I dug one of Mr. Delafield's books out with vengeance now, crying for a distraction. If ever I had needed to escape into the words of a book, it was now.

Flipping open the first cover, I was startled to find it was written by hand. It was quite possible Mr. Delafield had penned it, and if so, his handwriting was decidedly feminine. Interesting. My gaze fell to the rather ordinary title: *The Pirate's Escape*. It was not a religious text after all. Good. I was in no mood for a sermon.

I skimmed the first few pages but soon found myself reading every word. The main character—an Englishman of high birth—bored with Society life, attempted without success to join a pirate crew. Though he was weak and had a sickly pallor from lack of exercise and overindulgence, he was determined to succeed, and tried again and again to fulfill his lifelong dream of piracy. Each attempt was more ridiculous than the last.

The fast-paced tale kept me turning pages, and soon I was swept up in the story of how one unassuming man, without any experience at sea, unexpectedly saved the lives of an entire crew because of his book learning. He not only became a pirate but lived to captain his own ship. The narrative was both a diverting satire and a heart-rendering tale of the human experience. The story ended just before we arrived in London. I closed the book with excited reverence. It was fresh, exciting, and sure to sell more than one round of printing. I knew a half a dozen publishers who would eagerly empty their purses for a chance to sign this mystery author.

I spent the night at Lady Farthington's, but in the morning, I no longer dreaded the idea of returning to Elmhurst. It was imperative I return the books and ask Mr. Delafield who had written them. While it was impossible to suppress the ache in my chest when I thought of Arabella, there was naught to do about it.

I couldn't force her to love me.

But neither did I know how to release her from my heart.

On the ride home, I picked up the second book—*The Liberty Sisters*—set in the Revolutionary War. Written in a different style from *The Pirate Escape*, this tale felt real and raw. It was a story that would outlive its pages. Mr. Delafield was either a brilliant writer or was harboring one.

Waiting to discover the answer to that question was the only thing keeping me in that carriage the closer we came to Elmhurst. For not even the remarkable words in my bag could grip my heart the way Arabella could. And facing her again would be a feat braver than any fictional war hero or pirate. This time, I was not afraid of her, I was afraid of myself. It was a crippling fear not unlike being on a sinking ship in the middle of a storm. The first time I had arrived with confidence on my side, but this time, I was a fortress ripped bare of its walls. I could not see how to return unscathed.

Chapter 28

Arabella

After dinner, my sisters and I gathered in our quiet drawing room, settling on the sofa near each other while Papa and Mr. Mason whispered quietly by the fireplace. Mama brought out her sewing basket like usual, squinting over her embroidery under the dim glow of the candlestick beside her. The last few weeks this room had been filled with a near constant chatter of family and guests. Now, with the absence of Rowan, it felt like an empty tomb in comparison.

“Are you certain mailing this letter is a good idea?” Tabitha asked, bent over so both Elizabeth and I could hear her. “You are not engaged, and therefore, it is highly improper.”

“She has to,” Elizabeth argued. “I need Mr. Ashworth’s connections to find a husband.”

Tabitha guffawed. “What about my husband’s connections?”

“You mean Mr. Clodwick? No, thank you.”

I gave a half-hearted chuckle. “Please, no more quarreling. It is decided. I will read it with fresh eyes in the morning and send it on its way.”

“This isn’t one of your novels,” Tabitha cautioned. “We must prepare ourselves for an unhappy ending.”

“Thank you for your encouraging words. I will prepare myself to be perfectly miserable.” I groaned softly and rested my head back against the

top of the sofa. I had leaned on Rowan's words spoken the night before he'd left, and I wanted to believe he would give me another chance once he read my explanation. But as the color of the skies had dimmed into muted darkness, feelings of bleakness threatened to consume my hope.

"I think I'll call it an early night. I'll have a clear head in the morning."

My sisters gave nods of sympathetic understanding.

I stood and bid my family goodnight.

Leaving the drawing room, I rounded the corner to the front vestibule, surprised to find the candles were not yet lit. The servants had not anticipated my desire to go to bed early. Not that it mattered. The dark did not bother me, for I knew the way by heart. I began my way up the stairs when the front door creaked open a few inches behind me. I jumped and instinctively grabbed the banister and braced myself against the far wall of the staircase.

A faint line of an arm slipped through the narrow gap of the door into view. My heart stuck in my throat, and I could barely breathe. Were we about to be robbed? A moment later, the shadow of a man fully entered and shut the door quietly behind him. He tiptoed closer, his gaze focused on the corridor, missing my presence entirely. My whole body seized with fear with his every step nearer, and though tempted to squeeze my eyes shut, I squinted at the passing figure.

Instinctively, I knew he was headed to Papa's study. If I screamed, he would likely run for the door and escape before he was caught. But with everyone in the drawing room, and not a servant in sight, there was no one else to stop him but me.

Me?

But what could I do? Thoughts fired in my head, but all of them were better fit for a fictional character than a woman who spent her free time at a writing desk. But I had to do something or the opportunity would be lost much as it had been when I had let Rowan leave without stopping him.

Before I could properly think through my decision, I hiked up my dress, scrambled over the railing, and threw myself over it. My body slammed into the shoulders and head of the man, and I knocked him to the ground.

Pain flared from my knee, but my thoughts were on the man beneath me. My hands went to his neck, as any great hero would do, and I squeezed with all my might.

"Arabella!" croaked the man, his much larger hands clasping my wrists.

My rational mind caught up with my actions. That voice, choked as it was, belonged to Rowan!

I released him and brought my head closer to his. “Ro-Rowan?”

“Are we back to trying to kill each other?” His breath was short, and I felt terrible for hurting him.

“I thought you were a robber.”

He coughed. “I suppose it was worth almost dying to get you to throw yourself at me.”

Heat flamed my cheeks, and it was a wonder they did not light up the room. I rolled off of Rowan and straightened my dress over my knees.

Rowan sat up too and rubbed at his neck. My eyes had adjusted to the dark, and I could make out more of his features than before. “You came back,” I blurted.

“Did your father not tell you?”

“Tell me what?”

“That he asked me to read and return some books on the carriage ride before I made my way back to Ashworth Hall.”

“Papa said nothing to me. I thought . . . I thought . . .”

“You thought you were rid of me?” His voice held a note of derision. “I was afraid that you wouldn’t want to see me again, which is why I tried to sneak in.”

“Not at all. I thought I had missed my chance to speak to you. I overslept the morning you left.”

“You did?”

“I feel terrible. I wanted to tell you—”

The door of the drawing room swung open, and we jumped to our feet.

“I knew I heard something,” Mr. Mason said, swinging his candlestick our way. “Arabella? Mr. Ashworth?”

“Surprise,” Rowan said sheepishly.

My family crowded into the corridor, everyone talking at once.

“Did you make good time?” Mama asked.

“We didn’t know you were returning.” Elizabeth’s gaze swung to mine, but I had nothing to tell her. I was as surprised as she was.

“Let’s move to the drawing room,” Papa said. The housekeeper and butler had heard the commotion and hovered on the edge of the servants’ stair. “Bring up some tea and sandwiches,” Papa ordered. “Mr. Ashworth must be famished.”

Rowan's gaze found mine in the chaos, holding it captive and keeping me from following as everyone filed back into the drawing room. Candlelight from the vestibule table now left dancing shadows on his profile. His hair was as disheveled as the day he'd arrived in Quillsbury. A dark scruff lined his jaw, making him appear older than he was, but not at all in an undesirable way. In fact, even as tired as he appeared, he was the most handsome man I had ever seen. My heart knew it too. It stumbled all over itself, tripping to keep up with my racing thoughts that were all about him.

"Was there something you wanted to tell me?" he asked.

I wanted to say a million things. I wanted to tell him that Clodwick was gone and explain that I didn't care because I loved *him*. Yes, I loved him. I knew it now just as much as I knew that not even my writing could keep me from him.

His feet brought him ever closer, and in a rush of excitement, I found myself uttering the first thought that came to my mind. "Thank you for helping Harriet. She said you wrote to her in-laws, and now she has been granted more freedoms from her husband."

His mouth turned up at the corners. "Of course. It's what friends are for."

Friends? I dared not say the word out loud, but my heart sank like a rock dropped in a well—falling all the way to the bottom where not even a splash could be heard. He didn't mean us, did he? I didn't think he did, but it was late, and the room was dark, and I couldn't tell anything for certain.

"What's wrong?" he whispered.

"I . . . I think we should join the others." I forced a tight smile. The morning was soon enough to sort everything. I needed to think things through properly—when his presence wasn't muddling my mind.

"Nothing has changed, Arabella," he said, stepping ever closer to me, our heads only inches from each other. "I still feel exactly as I did before I left."

How had he read my mind? "Do you really?"

"My back has a knot the size of England after being tackled to the floor, and my throat may be a little sore in the morning, but my heart?" His eyes seemed to drink me in. "My heart is still yours."

I felt myself reaching for him, despite the servants nearby and family on the other side of the wall from us. Let them talk all they wanted.

Rowan stepped right into my arms but kept his head back—close but not close enough. "I see absence makes the heart grow fonder."

“I see you’re still an obnoxious tease.” I wasn’t angry that he wasn’t kissing me, but my patience was wavering like a boat about to capsize under pressure.

“A tease who would never force you to marry him—not again—even if it sounds rather exciting to be caught in this position with you.” He leaned close to my ear. “But that does not mean that I will behave tomorrow.” His breath tickled below my ear, sending a shiver down my neck and arms. “Meet me in the library?”

I nodded, my cheek scratching against the scruff on his jaw. “Before breakfast.”

I felt the faintest touch just below my earlobe, a kiss so brief I’d almost missed it. He pulled back and smiled at me, as if I was worth a thousand rides to London and back and having a woman drop on him upon his return. This man that I had hated only weeks ago I was now loath to be parted from for even a few more hours. With great reluctance, I released my hold on his waist. Tomorrow morning felt like an eternity, but I would suffer with the patience of a saint if it meant he still wanted to marry me. And by the way he took my hand and tucked it in his arm, I think it was safe to say that he very much did.

Chapter 29

Rowan

Arabella was not at breakfast, and I wondered if she had overslept yet again. The smells of salty meat and cheese greeted me as I entered the breakfast room, but my eyes were not on the sideboard. My gaze traced the empty chairs, feeling disappointed. Was I the only one eager for our meeting?

Last night, I had learned that Mr. Clodwick was gone, and I had jumped to the conclusion that the road for Arabella and me would finally be smooth. We would declare our love for each other this morning, post the banns, and be married in a month's time. We would live an exceptionally blessed life together too. I had not gone searching for love, but I had found it just the same. Now all I had to do was confirm Arabella's feelings. My gut was telling me that she cared for me, but her absence this morning made me second guess all the conjectures I'd made.

It wasn't normal for me to feel uncertain and apprehensive, but not being completely sure of Arabella's feelings left me more nervous than any feedback from any literary opinion I'd ever published. I daresay my entire future happiness weighed on her verdict about us.

I plopped some cheese and bread on a plate and made my way to my chair. I had just sat down when a footman entered with a silver salver that appeared empty on first glance. When he extended it to me, I saw a letter

with my name written across the outside. I knew at once it was from Arabella.

I unfolded the paper to reveal a beautiful script that flowed effortlessly across the page. I knew this handwriting. It was as familiar as her blue eyes had been in Quillsbury, but I discarded my curiosity and the connections forming in my head. It was the content that mattered at the moment. The words, however, were not in typical letter form. I leaned over it, eager to learn why Arabella had written me.

It all started with a framed landscape painting of Rochester, Kent by Thomas Girtin. My aunt, Lady Farthington, brought it home from London and hung it in a prominent place in her morning sitting room. At ten years of age, I knew little of popular artists and only wondered about the scene depicted. A fine blue sky lay over the river Medway, which wound past the little houses with smoke curling from their stone chimneys. A cluster of men circled together, conversing upon the grassy banks as if they had known each other all their lives. I wondered what it would be like to live in Kent and why one of the men was pointing away from the city. He had the look of an adventurer about him, daring his friends to join him as he traveled to see the grand sights of China, the ancient temples in Greece, and to smell the spices fresh from Bombay and Madras.

For days, I thought about the painting, daydreaming about the perils of Roma life and contrasting it with the thrills of crossing an ocean to see new vistas. Real adventure scared me, but I could endure it through my imagination. I was ten when I wrote my first story: The Quest of the Horatio Tuffin. It was thirteen pages long and quite bad.

Writing, however, was addictive. More characters came alive in my mind, and the stories of their lives begged to be told. By the time I was twelve, I had read everything I could get my hands on to improve my writing, including boring lessons on rhetoric and grammar. I much preferred studying the techniques of classic literature, and I still do. I wrote my third book that year: The Highwayman's Escape.

I knew that title. Lowering the letter, I thought of the well-used book in my drawer I had thought had been dropped by a passing traveler. I had devoured the book a dozen times if not more. It read like a simple children's book but had wit and insight an adult could appreciate. The hero—Mr. Eustace Pimm—was a poor bank clerk who had pretended to be a highwayman to impress a woman. Through his bumbling efforts, he'd been

mistaken for a real highwayman who the runners were pursuing, and was cast into prison. The story is about how he managed to escape certain death at the last harrowing minute. He never married, but his experience gave him the courage to take over as the new bank director.

Arabella had written that story? I could scarcely believe it. At a mere thirteen? My eyes widened with realization—the familiar handwriting clicking into place. She had been the one to write *The Pirate Escape* and *The Liberty Sisters*. I lifted the letter to continue reading.

I was terribly proud of my newest book. I wanted nothing more than to read it to my family, but a group of boys discovered it first. They called it utter rot and mocked its every page. Horrified, I swore to never share my stories outside my family again. They ran off with my final copy, but I burned the draft of The Highwayman's Escape that was still in my possession.

I tried to stop writing, but the words returned again and again. I care for you, Rowan Ashworth, but I want to protect this part of me. You're a well-known literary critic, and I have no intention of—

I pushed back from my chair so quickly it nearly toppled over behind me. After steadying it, I hastily folded the letter in half without finishing it. I didn't need to read the rest. I understood better than ever why she had kept me at arm's length for so long. And there was no one to blame but myself. I fled the room like it was on fire. My feet skidded across the tiles in my hurry to the library.

I threw open the door once I reached it, the force making it slap against the wall on the other side. Arabella stood from her seat. She was positioned directly in front of the sofa she'd hidden behind the night I had made waves with Mr. Clodwick. The reminder was like a knife in my chest. I hated that I had been the one to hurt her—again.

“Arabella.” My feet came to a halt three paces in front of her. Her hands stilled over the handkerchief she had been wringing. And while her color was perfect, much like the rest of her, I knew she had been fretting. I longed to ease her worries.

“I'm so sorry.” I lifted the letter as a way of explanation. “I would never, ever, knowingly hurt you again. My friends and I were rude and callous. We thought only of making ourselves sound smart. But you must believe that I did not mean what I said that day. I kept your book. Indeed, I still have the

copy of *The Highwayman's Escape* in my room at home. I've read it dozens of times."

"Truly?" her smile trembled, and her eyes flashed with uncertainty.

I shuffled forward another step or two. "I hope you write many more stories to come, and it would be an honor to read every word."

She bit her lip. "This isn't your way of convincing me to marry you, is it?"

"I hope to do plenty of convincing, Arabella, but I do not speak lightly when I tell you that your words are brilliant. I unknowingly borrowed two of your books from your father. They were fantastic—not just the mechanics, but the creativity is superb."

Arabella gave a disbelieving laugh. "And Father didn't tell you to say that?"

I hated that she thought so little of writing and that I had been the reason. "Your father did not tell me who authored the books. I only discovered it was you when I saw the handwriting on your letter. My opinion means nothing, but I tell you this not as your friend but as a critic. There will be a bidding war over who gets the rights to your work, should you choose to publish."

Her wavering smile suddenly burst into a wide grin as bright as the sun debuting in the sky. "You exaggerate worse now than you did as a child."

"I would not exaggerate about something so dear to your heart—especially to someone so dear to mine." I closed the gap between us with two long strides. As soon as my arms opened, she threw herself into them with a half-laugh, half-sob. I would hold her until every last fear that I had inflicted upon her disappeared forever. Dipping my head, I pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I'm so, so sorry. How can I make it up to you?"

She lifted her bright blue eyes to meet mine, the color gleaming with a sheen of unshed tears. Her smile, however, brimmed with happiness. "You're doing a fair job of it right now."

"I think I can do much better than this." My lips fell naturally to hers, as if they belonged there. Her sweet fragrance soothed and invigorated my soul. The feel of her hands cradling my face breathtaking and wonderful. Her hands traveled down my neck and around my back. Everywhere her fingers touched left a streak of heat, sending fire through my veins.

I kissed her until we were out of breath. "I love you, Miss Arabella Delafield." I stroked the downy skin of her arm just below her sleeve. "I

want to spend all the chapters of my life with you until the very last page. Will you marry me?"

Her eyes danced like two gleaming crystals. "I love you too, Mr. Rowan Ashworth. But the last page of a good story always leaves me sad. I would like to counter your proposal and insist we write an epilogue together too."

I chuckled. "You shall have it then. One very sweet epilogue, as you command." I wrapped my arms around her waist, tucking her close to me. "Before we can have any happy ending though, there is something you must understand. I am not marrying you because of our family, or the silly bet with my friends, or any fancy book. I simply want you and only you."

"I believe you. You're too stubborn to hold me like this for any other reason."

I grinned. "You know me well. Is everything right between us then? I don't want anything left unresolved."

"I suppose your kiss made up for a few years of grief. You can work on the other years later."

"Later?" I wrapped one leg behind hers and dipped her back. She squealed with laughter. I bent over her, my lips hovering just above hers. "Why wait?"

She giggled. "By all means, you have my permission to apologize at your leisure."

I dropped a kiss on the hollow of her neck. The silken skin nearly undid me. I could not believe that this woman would be my wife. "This may take all day." I pulled her back up and thoroughly kissed her. I figured if someone found us and forced us to marry straightaway, they'd be doing us a favor.

Chapter 30

Arabella

While Rowan met with Papa to finalize our engagement, I rallied Elizabeth from her bed chamber and managed to gather her, Tabitha, John, and Mama in the drawing room.

“Did the letter work?” Tabitha inquired.

“What letter?” Mama asked.

“A love letter to Mr. Ashworth,” Elizabeth explained. “Did he like the part about the painting?” It had been her idea to start my life’s tale at the very beginning.

“The letter was perfect,” I gushed. “Thank you for helping me get it right.”

Just then Papa and Rowan entered the room, and my heart danced like rain on a windowsill. I couldn’t remember ever feeling this happy. Not even with all my wild imaginings could I have understood what genuine love felt like until now. Rowan had shown it to me. It was selfless, like when he’d given up Shakespeare’s quarto for me. It was resilient, like when he’d pursued me, despite my every effort to thwart him. It was brave, like how he’d chosen to support my writing, despite how I’d held it over his head all these years. It was humble, like when he’d apologized again and again for his mistakes.

I had a lot to learn to deserve him.

Rowan's gaze found mine on the sofa, and like a current in a river, I was pulled to his side. He extended his hand, and I took it as if I had been doing just that for a thousand years.

Tabitha gasped, and Mama looked as if she might cry tears of joy. Elizabeth's smile was quiet and knowing, like she already knew what we were going to say.

Rowan spoke first. "The Delafield family has been dear friends to the Ashworths for many years. I know many of you were wondering if Arabella and I would ever get along long enough to marry, but we are here to assure you that the impossible has happened. We have decided that we cannot live without each other and hope to have the banns read straightaway."

"About time!" Papa said with a laugh. He was the first to clap, and everyone joined him. John whistled and Tabitha yelled, "Hip hip huzzah!" They lined up to shake our hands and embrace us.

After Elizabeth hugged us, she pulled back and said, "The next time you're in a bookshop, maybe you could find a gentleman to suit me."

Rowan slipped his arm around me. "We won't simply search in the bookshops. I have a few unattached friends you might take a liking to. What do you think of the names Leonard Stanton or Ambrose Hartley?"

Elizabeth laughed. "As if I could fall in love with a name. However, if you think we are a good match, I would not be averse to an introduction."

She moved aside for Tabitha and John who were eager to congratulate us.

Tabitha threw her arms around me. "I am so happy for you!"

"Then you aren't sorry that I will not be living close?"

"Sorry is not the half of it," she said, squeezing tighter. "But I am glad you aren't going to marry Mr. Clodwick. He never made you smile like Mr. Ashworth does."

It was Mama's turn next. She managed to hug Rowan and me both at the same time. "You two are just as sweet together as you were as children."

I cast a look at Rowan, who choked down his laugh. Sweet was not exactly the description either of us would have used.

Then Mama took Rowan's face in her hands. "Your mother would be so proud of the man you have become. And now you will be my son too, which makes me just as proud."

Rowan's eyes shone. "Thank you, Mrs. Delafield."

Papa slapped Rowan on the back and kissed my forehead. "It's a treasured feeling, knowing you will have each other forever and always."

Remember how you feel right now, and may it comfort you and help you persevere through hard times.”

“Wise words, Papa.”

“We will do our best to remember,” Rowan said.

“Excellent, now you two deserve some time to talk through your plans. It’s a pleasant enough day for a walk about the gardens, don’t you think?”

“A walk would be nice.” I looked at Rowan with eager anticipation. Being engaged had its advantages.

Rowan grinned and held out his arm.

While we walked, we talked about the events of the past few weeks. I had been quite the fool, and I wasn’t too proud to admit it.

“I was wrong about you, Rowan.”

“Oh? I am not the villain you thought I was?”

“No. You’re too sweet to be a villain.” I now understood that when he’d been mean, he’d acted that way to appear stronger than he was. The boy I thought to be tough was actually a grieving, lost child. He had hurt me, true enough, but his insults—carelessly cast with shallow aim—had entrenched themselves far deeper than he had ever intended. It was my fault for becoming bitter, and I would try hard never to repeat my mistake.

“I never thought I would hear you call me sweet. I thought you’d never forgive me for how rude I was that first night in the library. After I wrote that apology letter, you seemed intent on ignoring me forever.”

“What apology letter?”

“The one I awkwardly shoved between your arms.”

I coughed into my hand. “I thought that was from Mr. Clodwick!” I shook my head, hardly believing it. “Then it was you who said I was lovely?”

“Do you doubt that I feel that way? Because I will all too happily remind you of your loveliness every day for the rest of our lives.”

I couldn’t help the warmth stealing over my cheeks. Rowan Ashworth was a charmer indeed. “The apology in your letter was perfect. I’m so sorry for the confusion.”

“I might have a lot of faults, but apologizing has become one of my strong suits.”

“You mean kissing?” I had experienced plenty of his apologies today, and I was rather partial to his methods.

“Let me amend my statement: Apologizing, in the form of kissing, is becoming one of my strong suits.” He dropped a chaste kiss on my cheek.

I gave him a side-eye. “Are you going to apologize for how weak that apology was? I cannot accept such a half-hearted effort.”

“Weak, you say? We cannot have that.” He willingly wrapped his arms around me and apologized with his whole heart. Quite convincingly.

Epilogue

Arabella

Four months later . . .

Tugging Rowan's arm, I weaved through the crush of the ballroom to have a better view of Elizabeth. "I see her! By the woman with the peacock feathers in her hair."

Rowan tucked me in front of him so a couple could pass us. "I see her. Here comes the master of ceremonies with Samuel Pritchard right behind him."

Mr. Pritchard was a school chum of Rowan's—not one who had participated in the infamous bet, but a good friend just the same. We had thought that a discreet introduction would feel more flattering to Elizabeth. Both of us were sure that Mr. Pritchard would treat Elizabeth like a queen, but it would be up to her if she let him.

We watched as the introduction unfolded and Elizabeth's countenance brightened. Her smile made the corners of my own mouth lift.

"I think she said yes," I whispered. "Look, she's taking his hand." Mr. Pritchard led a beaming Elizabeth to the dance floor.

"Our work here is done," Rowan said, guiding me away. I glanced over and saw them standing in a long line of couples preparing for the next set to begin. She laughed over something Mr. Pritchard said. My heart sang at the

warm sight. Violin music began, filling the walls of Mr. and Mrs. Burnett's townhome with a lively reel.

"Look, there is Harriet in the dance line." I stopped Rowan, motioning to the opposite end of the couples.

Rowan followed my gaze. "Good, her husband looks properly miserable."

I bit back my laugh. "The poor man doesn't dance very well, does he?"

"No, but he is a puppet to Society and would not miss being seen on the dance floor."

I leaned against his arm. "It is a good thing you befriended him and cleared up some of his misguided thinking about the treatment of one's wife."

"If he had not learned that I was so well thought of in certain circles, thanks to my printed opinions, I do not think he would have listened."

"Then I should be very glad that I have such a famous husband, and I will be sure to convince him to visit this side of Surrey often so we might continue to use your cultured influence to aid my friend."

"If you insist," Rowan said, leading me away once more.

"Are we to dance?" I asked, wondering where he was taking us.

"Not this set." A moment later, he whisked me through the open doors to the veranda. A cool breeze greeted us. This particular garden was overly spacious, but it was larger than I had expected for a house in town.

"You're always trying to get me alone," I teased.

"That was only my second goal. I thought you could use some fresh air. Your cheeks are flushed."

Rowan was always noticing things and acting before I could even voice a concern. But this time, I had concealed my secret well—with the exception of my flushed appearance. I kept waiting for the perfect opportunity to surprise him with my news, but the man was always surprising me instead.

I still could not believe how he'd presented his completed Folio collection as my wedding present. He teased regularly that he had only afforded the last book because I had helped him win the bet against his friends by marrying him. Another surprise came when, beside the prominent place in the Ashworth's library where the Folios were shelved, he placed all the journals filled with my stories. He had read every word of them with me while we picnicked on the lawn or strolled through the trees, and he hoped I would publish them when I was ready. For so long I had

thought of Rowan as my biggest critic, but now I saw him as my greatest support. Everyone deserved a second chance, and I am grateful he gave me one.

A cool breeze encircled my neck and made me shiver. Rowan immediately had his arm around me. “Is it too cold out here for you?”

“Not at all. I find it refreshing.”

“Are you certain? Your lips look cold. Let me warm them for you.” He bent forward and covered my mouth with his.

I pulled back. “Rowan, we’re in company!”

He grinned. “But we are the only ones on the veranda. Besides, I must take every opportunity I can. If you ever write about kissing, I want to be your inspiration.”

I laughed and shook my head. Being married was even better than being engaged—and far better than being promised to one’s enemy. Although, I could never regret our journey, for it had led us here—to each other.

Rowan fingered the single pearl at my throat, the one his mother gifted me. When he’d first seen it again, sorrow had shadowed his gaze, but now he insisted I wear it often. He had said that the memory of his mother had been made sweeter by the manner of which I chose to honor her.

“I love you, Arabella Ashworth.”

And in that moment, I knew that it was time to share my news. Some surprises did not need all the fanfare. They simply needed to be shared. I removed his hand from the necklace and set it on my stomach. “And *we* love you, Rowan Ashworth.”

It turns out that Rowan is even better at celebratory kisses than apologetic ones.

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About the Author



Anneka R. Walker is a best-selling author of historical and contemporary romance. With humor and an abundance of heart, she crafts uplifting stories you won't soon forget. She is the winner of the Swoony Award, the LDSPMA Praiseworthy Award, and various chapter contests. Her books have received praise from Publishers Weekly, Historical Novel Society, Midwest Book Review, and Readers Favorite. She graduated from Brigham Young University-Idaho with a Bachelor's degree in English and history and hopes to never stop learning. She is a blessed wife, proud mother of five, follower of Jesus, connoisseur of chocolate, and believer in happy endings.

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