



**No Regrets**

June Girls

Mari Carr

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## **Blurb**

Tori Hamilton's two friends have disappeared without a trace. Mysterious clues lead to their possible whereabouts, but is she willing to do what it takes to find them? Even if it means traveling back in time?

Returning to the old oak tree at the edge of her parent's estate, she is transported back in time to regency England where she is discovered by Lord Benjamin Sinclair. When Tori awakes and cannot remember who she is or where she is from, Ben offers her a place to stay and a job as governess to his young ward and self-imposed mute, Chelsea. But trouble is afoot in jolly old England, and soon Tori is fighting to protect Chelsea from a villain determined to silence the child once and for all. As she fights this foe, she struggles to regain her memories while resisting her undeniable attraction to Ben, the son of a duke, who has captured her heart.

## Prologue

The sound of gunfire was getting louder, and the boom of a cannon roared from somewhere behind him. No matter how many men fell, more were there to take their place. The grass of the field no longer looked green—instead it was tainted by a deep red glaze that reflected in the eerie cast of the moonlight. Another flash of fire as the man next to him discharged his weapon, again the tremendous thunder of the cannon and the crackle of the never-ending gunfire. More men, more blood, more corpses were piling up around him until he was the only man left. A lone soldier standing atop a mountain of dead bodies.

A shrill scream pierced his ears, the sound louder and more horrible than all the moaning and sobs that had preceded it. On and on it continued and he covered his ears to attempt to block the piteous sound, but to no avail. Grasping his weapon, he raised it, determined to halt the incessant shrieking; to make the cursed noise stop. He pointed his gun toward the sound, his hand trembling, his finger twitching on the trigger. The screaming continued, growing even louder. He had to make it stop, make it all stop. Glancing toward the weapon in his violently shaking hand, he saw a face. Stark terror written in every line, anguish and desolation reflected in the black eyes that met his.

He lowered his weapon. The screaming was coming from him. It was his own face looking back at him.

## Chapter One

### V is for Voyage

June 2009

*Come for me. Please come. Take me too.* Victoria Hamilton paced around the ancient oak at the edge of her parent's estate just outside Dover, England, frantically begging for something, anything to happen. Exactly what she wanted to happen she didn't know. Just something. She'd spent the past year alone and angry, deserted by the only two friends she'd ever had. Deep inside, she knew they were together. Desperate to find them, she focused her attention on the old oak once again.

"Open Sesame," she chanted to the rough gray-brown bark.

"Abracadabra."

"I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow your ... hmm, not door down ... how about bark off? No, that just sounds stupid."

Straightening her frilly hot pink mini skirt, Tori reached for her backpack and bottle of Diet Dr. Pepper. All this pacing, chanting and waiting was making her thirsty. Glancing down, she considered picking up her latest romance novel to read, but she simply couldn't settle her mind to it. Today was the day, and this was the place. It had to be.

Out of habit, she tugged on her necklace, a gift from the June girls on her sixteenth birthday. She never took off the silver chain with the ornate letter V charm. V is for Victoria. Or V is for Virginia, where she now lived and worked. She loved word games, and sometimes, when Tori was bored or anxious, she would think about all the things her charm could stand for. V is for vexed, which certainly described her frame of mind at the present moment.

*What if I'm wrong?*

It was the tree. It had to be. It was the only connecting factor in Hayley and Erin's disappearances—one year apart to the day—this day, June 21. Her fellow June girls were somewhere out there without her. Erin had gone missing under this tree two years earlier on her birthday. Hayley disappeared the following year on the same day. The ancient oak with its leaf laden branches was the key, the portal, the time machine, the magic door, the—oh hell; whatever it was called, this had to be it. If she was wrong, well, she didn't want to think about what would happen if she was wrong.

Actually, Tori didn't make the connection between the oak tree and her friends' disappearances until this past Christmas when she discovered an old book in the library of her parent's home, Fernwood Grange. Edward and Michelle Hamilton had purchased the grand old estate situated near the White Cliffs of Dover shortly after she was born. The previous owner, Philip McCormick, had passed away and her father, ever the opportunist, swooped in immediately to buy the prime piece of property at a steal of price. McCormick, a hermit, had never married or had children, and the executors of the estate were happy to unload it since the house had fallen into disrepair during the fifty-plus years of Old Philip's residence there.

Two years ago, the June girls—so named because they all shared birthdays in June—

decided to change their summer routine by coming to Fernwood Grange instead of meeting at camp, anxious to tour the English countryside and spend a long weekend in Paris. It was to be the beginning of a new chapter in their lives as adults and they were excited traveling abroad together.

Tori slid down the trunk of the tree until she was sitting beneath its branches. At least it was a sunny day. It would be miserable to be biding her time in the rain that was so typical for this country. She felt the adrenaline and enthusiasm she'd felt as she embarked on this adventure, draining out of her.

Drowsily, Tori thought back to the chain of events that led her to this tree today...

She had begrudgingly returned to the Grange for Christmas, even though the place held nothing but sad memories for her. Her mother was decorating everything in the house that would stand still long enough for her to plaster it with garlands, greenery, candles, Christmas balls, mistletoe, and so on. The house smelled like a tree farm that had been liberally doused in cinnamon, pine, and cloves; the aroma gave Tori a perpetual headache.

Mother decided she would be in charge of decorating the library. Tori knew this assignment was simply a ploy to get her out of the way as she tended to be rather clumsy whenever she was in her mother's presence, or anyone else's for that matter. She knew her ungainliness was a result of the fact her mother made her nervous with her constant criticism. Her clumsiness in front of others she simply couldn't explain, except she supposed she'd never really lost all the shyness that had plagued her as a child.

Tori constantly struggled with her parents' huge ambitions for her—their only child. Ambitions she'd realized at a very young age she would never manage to live up to. Her father was a foreign diplomat and her mother a high-powered government attorney. They lived the lives of the super-rich and had every expectation she would follow in their footsteps on the path to wealth, power, and glory. Instead, all their megawatt genes produced was one painfully shy, chubby little girl with stringy blonde hair whose teeth took four years of braces to correct. One who preferred books over money and whose dream job turned out to be an elementary school librarian.

"Just don't start reading anything. I know how easily you get sidetracked," her mother chastised.

"Well, I am a librarian, mum. Perhaps the library is not the safest place to put me." She meant her words as a jest, but her mother merely raised her eyebrows in annoyance.

"I'd rather not discuss your chosen career path, or the fact that you are wasting your talents in such a silly job surrounded by children." Her mother said the word "children" as if it tasted like something particularly nasty.

Tori fought back the spurt of anger that came every time her mother criticized her job. She couldn't think of any career on earth more rewarding or enjoyable.

Her mother mistook her silence for daydreaming. Fact of the matter was she was biting her tongue off in an attempt not to get into a fight with her mother. She'd only been here a few days, and she was determined that this holiday would be a peaceful one. Even if it killed her.

"Concentrate, darling, on the task at hand," her mother purred, in her most annoying cosmopolitan-style voice, snapping her fingers in front of her face as if to wake her up.

"Yes, mum," Tori replied.

"Oh, darling, you've only been back in England two days and you sound British

again. I do wish you would strive to be more consistently American. You know how our European friends simply adore my accent. Why must you revert back to that coarse British one just because we're on this side of the ocean?"

"Sorry 'bout that momma." Tori replied twanging every syllable she could. She was certain her mother didn't tell her very British father he sounded coarse. Besides, she was a master at adapting her language to whichever side of the ocean she was on simply because she hated standing out, unlike her mother who was only truly happy when she was the center of attention. It was easier to blend in when you sounded like everyone else. Like children of bilingual parents, she could sound like the perfect Brit or American, depending on where she was and who she was with.

"Don't get smart with me, young lady. Now get started in that room."

"Yes, mother," she replied, rolling her eyes as she turned to enter the library. Closing the door to the library behind her, she was thankful for the chance to get away, as she knew her mother would rather "shop at Wal-Mart—so blue collar," than spend any amount of time surrounded by dusty, old books.

After an hour of sweat, cursing, and a crushed thumb, Tori had made good headway in the decorating, and was about to attach the last garland to the top of one of the ceiling-high bookcases when the ladder began to rock. Reaching out, she grabbed the first thing her hands could find, which happened to be the top shelf of the nearest bookcase. Looking down, she saw the traitorous ladder now lay below her on the floor. The shelf she was hanging on to, already overtaxed with its load of the oldest and dustiest tomes in the room, held her suspended in midair for all of a second and a half before it cracked. The broken shelf sent her tumbling, dumping no less than twenty-five filthy books on top of her.

Shaken and disoriented, Tori shook her head and began to cough uncontrollably due to the huge dust storm she'd stirred up. She sat on her sore bum, waiting patiently for her mother to burst in at what must have sounded like a tremendous crash. After several moments, she realized either no one had heard, or the servants and her mother, all too familiar with her tendency toward clumsiness, ignored the loud sound not wanting to know what she'd destroyed this time.

Still sprawled on the floor, partially buried in books, Tori surveyed the damage. The shelf, quite old, had splintered in two under her weight, and in her panic, she'd managed to pull down most of the garland she spent the last hour putting up. The most distressing part of the situation was the books. Several of them had torn loose from their covers, others had lost pages and one was ripped completely down the middle. Realizing these books were most likely over a hundred years old, she felt true regret for her awkwardness.

Remaining on the floor, she began to carefully pick up each book, separating them into stacks of undamaged and damaged ones, when the last one she picked up caught her eye. It was the most mangled of the bunch. The cover had flown off the body of the book, and several of the pages were ripped or bent. What drew her eye to it was not its damaged state, but the words written inside the front cover. They were faded and difficult to read, but she could very clearly make out her name—Tori Hamilton.

Glancing back up at the shelf, she couldn't help but wonder how her name could come to be in this book. It wasn't hers. Most of the books in the library came with the estate, and in fact belonged to Philip McCormick before his death. The latest additions to

the room were on a single lower shelf and consisted of her father's current copies of P.D. James, Tom Clancy, and Dan Brown novels. Tori had never met old Mr. McCormick, so it was highly unlikely he would write her name in this book.

She struggled to make out the other words under her name. The ink was faded and whole portions of the note were gone. The only other words she could make out clearly were oak, past, 1817 and—her heart began to race as she read the signature at the bottom—Erin Delancy. Erin? Her Erin?

*Oak, past, 1817.* The washed-out writing certainly looked as if it could have been done in 1817. *Oak, past, 1817.* Tori considered the words again. Erin disappeared from the old oak tree at the edge of the property in two thousand seven. The hair on her neck prickled as she considered the possibility Erin had actually written the note in eighteen seventeen as a message for her. She laughed at the idea. God, she thought, the books must have knocked me senseless in the fall. This is what comes from watching repeats of *The X-Files* all the time.

However, the idea was unsettling enough that she decided to dig into the history of Fernwood Grange. Her research uncovered a passage; a wedding announcement.

*“Lord Alex McCormick, Marquis of Dorset, announces his betrothal to Lady Erin Delancy, great-niece of the esteemed Lord Richard Sipe, Earl of Langley on this day, Thirty June, in the year of our lord 1817. The two plan to wed at Fernwood Grange, estate of the...”*

Finding the Marquis of Dorset's name opened the proverbial flood gates as there was quite a bit of information to be found on the nobility of the time period, and she continued her research, spending every night in front of her computer doing internet searches.

Then, she hit pay dirt, and her suspicions were confirmed, when she found the name of a Captain Jack Campbell, Earl of Wilshire. According to her findings, Campbell lived at the Homestead, an estate that bordered the Grange's property at the time. Information about Captain Campbell revealed he was married to one Lady Hayley Campbell, Countess of Wilshire. Convinced she had solved the mystery of her lost June girls, Tori felt strangely happier and lighter than she had in two years, even though the very thought they could be living in the past seemed like something out of an H.G. Wells' novel.

Unfortunately, that initial happiness faded when she uncovered an old article from a newspaper of the time that reported the tragic murders of Lady Dorset and Lady Wilshire on the nineteenth of August, eighteen nineteen. Tori shuddered to think of the deaths of her two best friends. As insane as it sounded, she refused to lose them after finding them again.

Determined to save the June Girls, she decided it was now her turn. She booked a flight to England in June. When the doorway to the past opened this time, she was walking through it, certain she could rescue her friends. Together the three of them would find a way to return home.

Tori was dragged from her memories beneath the tree, when a strong wind blew open her three-ring binder tearing the pages and scattering her notes and research across the grass.

“No!” she yelled, jumping up and frantically trying to grab six months' worth of painstaking work. She had only taken a few steps away from the tree, when a loud crash of thunder reverberated in the air, startling and stopping her in her tracks.



The wind was picking up, quickly taking on gale force proportions. She struggled to catch her breath, her lungs seizing against the strength of the wind. Frantic to steady herself, she grabbed one of the lower branches of the oak tree, trying to keep from being blown over. She watched with dismay as her romance novel flew out toward the sea.

The current of air picked her backpack up like a feather and she ducked as it went whizzing by her head. She feared the only thing keeping her from flying away was her death grip on the tree branch, and were she not so terrified, she'd laugh about the fact she resembled Dorothy on her way to Oz, sans Toto and house of course.

All feelings of false security vanished when the branch she was clinging to began to creak and groan under the powerful wind. Leaning forward and using all the strength she possessed, she reached out toward the thick, sturdy trunk of the tree. If she could just get her arms around it, she felt certain she could ride out whatever weird kind of storm was occurring.

"So long as lightning doesn't strike," she muttered. No sooner had the words crossed her lips, than her worst nightmare came true. A bright light flashed, and a bolt of lightning struck the tree above her head, sending an electrical jolt surging through her entire body. Unable to hold on as the flow of electricity passed through her, Tori felt herself being lifted up into the air, the wind tossing her body about like the pages from her notebook.

Strangely, she realized she was no longer afraid. The excruciating pain of being lashed against the branches of the tree was definitely interfering with the proper operation of her fear gene. Covering her face with her arms, she screamed as leaves, twigs and branches slapped her unceasingly, each stinging blow more agonizing than the one before.

"Help," she screamed over the roar of the gale, but the sound of her voice didn't even reach her own ears. She was being thrashed about, and she quickly lost all sense of her bearings.

When the pain became too insufferable, she felt herself being thrown high into the air, away from the tree. She was falling hard and fast, everything around her a blur of colors; nothing clear or in focus. Nothing, but the very large, very hard rock toward which she was hurtling.

Striking her head, Tori's last conscious thought was "Now I'm afraid."

## Chapter Two

### V is for Vexed

June 1819

“Waaaaaa.” The sound of a baby’s scream pierced the air.

“Perfect. Did I pick a bad time,” Lord Benjamin Sinclair grumbled as he climbed the porch stairs to Fernwood Grange. As was the custom, the front door opened before he had an opportunity to knock. Giles, the Grange’s ancient butler—efficient to a fault—bowed stiffly, giving what Ben suspected might actually pass for a smile on the old boy.

“Good day, my lord. You come at a very happy time.” Giles said, motioning for him to enter the house.

“Yes, I can hear that,” he replied, as the sound of the newly-born babe’s wailing continued to drift down into the hall. “I assume Lord Dorset is with his wife.”

“Yes, my lord. Lady Dorset delivered a daughter, just moments ago. My lord was with her at the time,” Giles said the last with enough disdain that Ben grinned. Alex had written him several weeks ago and mentioned that Erin insisted he be present for the birth of their first child. He was shocked by the idea and even more shocked that Alex seemed to be looking forward to the prospect.

“I am pleased to hear all is well. I do not wish to impose,” Ben said, inclining his head slightly. “If you would please congratulate your lord and lady for me, I will call again at a more convenient time.”

“But, my lord, surely you don’t intend to return to London after traveling all this way. Lord Dorset would be very displeased—”

“Oh, no,” he interrupted. “I have recently inherited a small estate from my great-aunt Mary. It is quite nearby, perhaps you have heard of it? Waterplace?”

“Ah, yes sir, very lovely home and not far at all. I daresay my lord will be quite pleased to have you living so close. By any chance, are the Henrys still the caretakers there?” Giles asked.

“Yes indeed. Not sure the place would still be standing without the very capable Mr. and Mrs. Henry,” he responded pleasantly. Actually were it not for the Henrys’ implacable sense of duty and diligent efficiency, Ben would have packed up and returned to London the first night after taking a tour of the once grand home owned by his wealthy widowed aunt. The house had fallen into disrepair in the last decade, and he suspected it would take much of his money to restore it to its previous splendor. In fact, he’d forego the splendor and settle for simply habitable.

The older Henrys, while capable, hadn’t been able to do much to prevent the overall decay of the house as they were the only servants left prior to his great-aunt’s death. Senility had taken hold of Lady Mary in her advanced years, and the only servants who’d remained steadfast despite the aged woman’s ravings and fits of madness were the Henrys.

“Actually,” Ben said, “I am in the process of hiring several more servants now that I have returned to stay. If you know of anyone looking for employment—”

“Ah, yes my lord, I will certainly pass the word along,” Giles replied. “In fact, I

know of several people in the area who would be delighted to join a household staff. I would be happy to send them to you, if that is acceptable.”

“Very much so. Thank you. Please give my regards to the McCormicks. I will return soon to see the newest McCormick,” Ben said. Then with a nudge of the elbow, he joked, “I do hope she looks like her mother.”

Giles, ever stoic, simply bowed. Ben shook his head as he walked back toward the stables. The butler had no sense of humor. The stable boy had only just taken the saddle off his chestnut bay, Scout, and looked a bit annoyed about re-saddling him so soon until he explained the baby had been born. The lads in the stable sent up a cheer at the happy announcement, and soon Ben found himself back on the road.

With a heavy sigh, he silently chastised himself for his depression. His best friend and lovely wife had delivered a healthy baby girl, and given the sound of her newborn wail, he ventured to guess that Alex’s daughter would be as outspoken as his wife. At least, his daughter would be able to speak. If he were a true friend, he would be feeling jubilant, festive, anything but overwhelmed by this melancholy.

*Damnation, I’m in over my head.*

Attempting to shake off the blackness that seemed to envelop his mind more and more these days, he considered the wasted trip he’d made. He was no closer to finding a governess for Chelsea now than he had been this morning when he’d left for the Grange. He was becoming desperate. His ward had been with him for nearly two months now, and she had yet to utter a single word. Frustrated, he slumped at the prospect of returning to his newly acquired, extremely run-down estate and the stifling silence that echoed off every wall.

He’d placed all his hopes in the marquis and marchioness of Dorset being able to suggest someone in the area who could serve as a governess, nurse and savior. Hell, who was he fooling? He was failing miserably in his duties to the girl and was simply anxious to pass the daunting task of raising a seven-year-old, self-imposed mute on to whoever else would take up the reins. He had his hands full simply taking care of himself and making the numerous repairs Waterplace needed to become fit for human habitation, despite the fact his true interest lay in the stable.

He’d made the move from London to the Dover countryside, intent on breeding and training horses in seclusion, while attempting to put his dark past behind him. Instead, the depression he’d begun to suffer from in London seemed to be getting worse, not better, in the damp, sea air. The ocean was supposed to calm and relax him, but instead he couldn’t seem to rouse himself from his bleak office and the bottom of a whiskey bottle. The overwhelming blanket of doom he felt no longer covered only himself, but was engulfing Chelsea and the kind-hearted Henrys as well. The thought of dragging them into his never-ending despair only increased his misery.

“That damn war,” he muttered. A soldier and spy in the war against Napoleon, Ben hadn’t spent a peaceful night in the three years since the war ended. His friends, Alex and Jack, had served as officers in the army as well, but the years back home had been kinder to them. Both had fallen madly in love and found their niche in life. Alex had taken up the reins as Marquis of Dorset, and Jack had inherited an earldom as well as a shipping business. Ben envied his friends’ happiness and the peace they’d found.

Upon his return from Waterloo, he’d immersed himself in the Home Office, ensuring peace with France continued and stifling any lingering insurrections. When work began

to run dry as peacetime prevailed, he started working on cases with Bow Street. As the second son of a duke, his association with the runners was strictly in an “unofficial” capacity. Had his father, the Duke of Pelsham, learned his son was doing such menial and dangerous work, he would surely have suffered an apoplexy.

As a second son, he wouldn’t inherit the dukedom and the numerous responsibilities attached to such a title. Mercifully, his older twin brother, Adam would be the duke and enjoy all the accompanying headaches attached to the haughty title.

His work with Bow Street, while keeping him busy during the too long nights, had never truly fulfilled him as it most often led him back into the violence he’d been trying to escape after the war. After thirty-two years of life, he felt his only true talent lie in being a killer. An expert marksman, feared for his amazing prowess with a sword, he also excelled in boxing. What a sad statement for a life. His years in the army and with Bow Street had honed his muscles and finely tuned his ability to use his fists and brute strength to overpower his foes. Well over six feet tall with broad shoulders and a dark disposition, he was an intimidating force with a reputation for aggression.

As his reputation in the underworld grew, so did the violent nature of the cases he was asked to solve. In the past year, he’d tracked down two murderers and a brutal rapist. The end of those cases concluded in the death of the villain, and Ben walked away each time with yet another black mark on his soul. He spent the days following the conclusion of every case buried in the darkness of his bedchamber battling back the demons, existing only on liquor and pain until he could pull himself together enough to do it all over again.

Two events occurring almost simultaneously quickly brought his self-destructive lifestyle to an end. His great-aunt Mary passed away, leaving him in possession of Waterplace, and he’d become guardian of Chelsea Duncan. Chelsea’s father, Ian, had served in his unit and was severely wounded in the battle at Toulouse. As he lay dying, Ian had asked him to see that his young wife and daughter were cared for and Ben, anxious to grant his faithful friend’s last request, had readily agreed. Maggie Duncan’s untimely death in a fire several months earlier had brought Chelsea to his home. The silent, orphaned seven-year-old had been the single witness to the demise of the only family she had left in the world.

Ben realized the only thing he could do was take the girl in as his ward and raise her. Aware he could not rear a child in his bachelor’s apartments and continue to prowl the streets of London all night, he’d decided a move to Waterplace was the best thing for both of them. Of course, he’d been unaware at the time that the cursed estate was probably more dangerous than the worst parts of London, given its rotten floorboards, crumbling walls and overgrown, thorny gardens.

As he approached the edge of the Grange property, a glint of something caught his eye in the sunlight. Years spent as a soldier caused him to proceed with caution, and he decided to investigate. Turning Scout, he approached the large old oak tree that stood alone at the edge of the woods. He slowed his approach when he saw someone sleeping under its branches.

“Hello,” he called out, but the person didn’t move.

Moving slowly, the person, a woman he could now see, appeared to be sleeping soundly.

“Hello,” he repeated louder this time. Leery, he glanced around, but could see no one else.

“Miss?” he asked, approaching cautiously as he reined Scout in. Glancing at the surrounding trees, Ben prepared himself lest the woman’s slumber was a ruse and some accomplice lay in wait in the woods to set upon him. Shaking his head, he realized the foolishness of the thought. This was Dover, not London and he was still safely on the premises of the Grange estate.

Closer investigation revealed an injured woman. Ben sucked in a deep breath as he gazed down into the face of an angel. Long, wavy blonde hair hung over her shoulders. Her cheeks, with the help of the sun, were covered with a tan most English ladies would have been mortified to possess, but Ben found himself admiring. Her lips were rose red and plump while thick, dark lashes hid her deep-set eyes. His fascination with her face ended as he glanced at the rest of her figure.

“My God,” he whispered as he took in her scandalous outfit. She was wearing a tight shirt, cut low and allowing him an ample view of her more than abundant breasts. Her bare legs were totally exposed from mid-thigh down as he took in what he could only assume was the shortest, smallest skirt he had ever seen. It was bright and colorful, the edge of the hem flared slightly with some sort of lacy ruffle.

On her feet, she wore the strangest footwear, consisting of only a bottom sole and a strap of leather that stretched across the top of her foot, the end of which disappeared between her first and second toes. Around her ankles were two thin silver chains and there actually appeared to be a ring on one of her toes. Her outfit, or lack thereof, enhanced her generous figure and left very little to the imagination.

The strange woman’s lack of response to his voice sent his eyes back to her face, where he could clearly make out the large purple lump on her forehead beneath her hair, apparently caused by the rock that was now serving as her pillow. Leaping from Scout and tying the horse’s reins to a low branch in the tree, he quickly bent over the inert form of the injured lady.

“Miss,” he said softly, shaking the woman’s shoulders lightly. When she didn’t respond, he ran his hands through her flaxen hair, dislodging several leaves and twigs, in search of other injuries. Glancing up, he wondered if she could have fallen out of the tree. Given her state of dress he discounted the idea immediately. Who climbs trees dressed in such scandalous fashion?

She had deep scratches and cuts on her arms and face, and he could see the beginnings of several large bruises on her legs, as well as one rather nasty looking contusion high on her right cheek. She appeared to have been beaten and knocked unconscious.

Furious someone would abuse a woman so, he tried to decide what course to take. He needed to determine who the woman was and if she had family in the area who would be concerned over her disappearance. Ben had spent a great deal of time in Dover as a child often celebrating holidays with his Aunt Mary. He’d been back quite a few times as an adult as well since Alex and Jack both owned estates in the area. Certain he had never seen this woman before, and certain he would remember if he had, he wondered if someone had simply dumped her here after abusing her.

The woman’s attire actually led him to wonder if she was a prostitute. It was entirely possible she had been beaten and dumped here by an unhappy lover or perhaps even her madam. During his time working with Bow Street, he’d been sent into many seedy parts of the city and he’d seen all kinds of abuse and violence. What he couldn’t understand

was how the hell she ended up all the way out here? London was several hours away, and Dover was typically a peaceful place with so few visitors that crime of any sort was rare.

Glancing back toward the Grange, Ben knew he couldn't take the woman there. The McCormicks had become parents for the first time, and he refused to spoil their joyous occasion by placing an injured lady of the night in their care. He also couldn't take the young woman to the next nearest estate, the Homestead. Although the Homestead now belonged to his good friend the Earl of Wilshire, Jack Campbell and his new bride had traveled to America on a honeymoon voyage and were not due back for another month.

Grimacing, Ben acknowledged the only place left to take the injured woman was to his home. "Perfect," he muttered. "Home, sweet home. Complete with a silent child, ancient servants, a whore and a miserable son of a duke. Can my life get any better?"

## Chapter Three

### V is for Vague Memories

The return trip to Waterplace took twice as long as Ben struggled to keep the unconscious woman on his lap, while moving her as little as possible. He was concerned about the blow she had taken to her head, and he didn't want to aggravate the injury. As he approached his home, he sent up a silent prayer to the gods no one would notice his return. He could imagine the looks on Mr. and Mrs. Henry's faces when he carried this lovely, half naked creature into the house. If he could simply get her up to one of the bedchambers, he could ... what? What was he going to do with this mystery woman once he got her inside?

His prayers answered, Ben's return was unnoticed by the two servants and his little ward. Dismounting carefully, he tied his horse to a fence post and carried the wayward lady into the house. With so many of the bedrooms closed off and in shambles, he climbed the stairs and headed to his own bedchamber trying not to look too closely at the disaster surrounding him. His was the only bedroom in the house he knew of that had clean sheets and a sturdy roof besides Chelsea's room across the hallway and the Henrys' bedchamber. He had seen to those rooms during his first week in residence. His sleep was disturbed enough with nightmares of unending battles and senseless death without adding the additional worry of the roof falling in on all of their heads.

Kicking the door to his bedchamber closed behind him as he entered, Ben crossed the room to his large bed and laid the injured ladybird in the middle of the feather mattress.

Walking to the dresser, he retrieved a bowl of water and a cloth, studying his unconscious patient as he approached. She was quite beautiful; shapely, with just the right amount of plumpness. Never attracted to thin women, he liked a woman with lots of curves and this lovely lady certainly possessed them. Were he the type of man to dally with whores, he would certainly be drawn to this one. However, he had never and would never pay for sex. He felt strongly that love-making was best shared between two consenting adults, not one consenting male and one starving woman trying to feed herself. No, it was best Ben treat her as he would any unfortunate stranger. He would tend her injuries, give her a hot meal, put some money in her pocket and send her back home—wherever that was.

Dipping the cloth into the lukewarm water, he gently washed the cuts and abrasions on her arms and face. Lifting her chin lightly, he cleaned around her neck and throat, taking note of the delicate chain he had missed in his initial perusal. Further investigation of the necklace revealed a small charm in the shape of a letter "V."

The lady stirred after several minutes of his soft ministrations, and he stepped back from the bed, watching as the wayward angel regained consciousness. As she awoke, he saw the most exquisite eyes he'd ever seen slowly focus on him. Sapphire blue. Then she gave him a heart-warming smile; a true smile that reminded him of a glorious sunrise. He was taken aback by the genuineness of it, and it dawned on him that people rarely smiled at him. He supposed it was because he usually looked so dark and forbidding, and it

struck him as odd that he couldn't recall the last time a stranger had looked at him without a touch of fear in their eyes. He scowled at the thought and watched her smile dim, uncertainly.

"Hello," she whispered before lightly clearing her throat. "Hello," she repeated, her soft voice gaining strength.

"Good afternoon," Ben answered. "I'm afraid you've had a bit of an accident."

Frowning slightly at his words and no doubt glowering face, the woman glanced around the room attempting to take in her surroundings. Raising a delicate hand to her brow, she lightly touched the lump on her head, wincing in pain.

"I ... it would appear so. What happened?" she asked.

"I was hoping you could tell me," he replied. "I found you unconscious beneath a tree. Do you remember how you got there?"

Still frowning, the lovely blonde shook her head slowly. "No," she murmured. "I don't remember anything about a tree. Where am I?"

"In my bedchamber. I hope you will forgive my presumption for bringing you here, but there truly wasn't anywhere else I could take you." He silently chastised himself for apologizing. After all, he had saved the woman. Well perhaps not saved, her injuries certainly weren't life-threatening, but he found himself a bit unnerved by her sweet, almost innocent stare.

"Oh, I'm not likely to complain. You are my knight in shining armor," she answered lightly with another smile so bright and so guileless the heart in his chest began to beat faster.

"Well," he began, clearing his throat to cover his embarrassment at her admiring, although incorrect, assessment, "if you will tell me your name, I will return you to your family. I am sure they are quite distressed by now."

Tears formed in her thick lashes as she struggled to fight against the pain in her head. "Don't you know who I am?" she asked softly.

"No," Ben answered, shocked by her question. Had they been introduced before and he'd forgotten? He found that possibility highly unlikely as he was certain he would never have forgotten a face as charming as hers. "I'm sorry, but I feel quite certain we've never been formally introduced. My name is Lord Benjamin Sinclair, son of the Duke of Pelsham and this is my estate, Waterplace. And you are?"

Biting her lower lip, the woman wiped away the tears forming in the corner of her eyes. After several moments, she whispered, "I don't know. I don't know who I am."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean, I don't know who I am. I c-can't remember my name." The tears began to flow down her pale cheeks. "Oh, God, I don't know who I am. How can that be?"

Her shoulders shook as she cried silently, fear and confusion written on her face. Concern for her washed through him as he struggled with what he should do. He couldn't stand to see a woman cry, yet he was certain he didn't know how to comfort her. Apprehensively, he slowly sank down on the bed beside her and was shocked when she sat up and reached out to him, her small frame leaning into his much larger one. Slowly, awkwardly, he wrapped his arms around her.

"Don't cry. It will be all right. You've taken a nasty knock on the head. A good night's sleep is all you need." He'd heard of people losing their memory after experiencing head injuries and had actually seen it happen to a fellow soldier during the



war. He only hoped in this young woman's case, the effects were temporary. He could barely take care of himself and Chelsea. He had no idea how he would care for a woman with no memories.

Ben continued to murmur comforting words as the young woman wept quietly, her fear and pain escaping in silent sobs that wracked her body. After several minutes, she pulled out of his embrace and looked at him with trusting eyes.

"I'm s-sorry," she said, her voice breaking. "You've been so kind to me and all you've gotten in return is a weepy woman in your bed. I can't tell you how frightening this is, Lord, um Lord, oh, now I've forgotten your name too," she said with a shaky laugh.

"Ben. My name is Ben," he replied, shocking himself for granting this stranger the informal use of his name.

"Lord Ben?" she asked, obviously remembering his previous introduction.

"No, simply Ben will suffice"

"Ben," she repeated, stifling a yawn.

"Ah, as I suspected, you need to rest," he said, rising slowly from the bed.

"No," she began to protest softly, but she lay back onto the pillow, sleep taking her quickly.

"Rest well, sunshine," Ben whispered, pulling the blanket over her. Determined to discover his mystery lady's name and to return her to her home, he sat in the chair, watching over her sleeping form the rest of the afternoon and well into the night.

\* \* \* \*

She awakened in a dark, unfamiliar room. The pounding in her head calmer, replaced now by a dull thud that left her dizzy and more than a little nauseous. A stirring next to her alerted her to the presence of another person in the room. Thinking back, she recalled the dark-haired, black-eyed man who'd been with her earlier. She wondered about those dark eyes. They'd seemed so sad, so despondent, she'd found herself wanting to reach out to comfort him as one might an abused child, despite the fact she was the one who was injured.

What had he said his name was? Her mind was groggy from too much sleep and her body felt weary from taking such a beating. Brad? Bill? No, she shook her head trying to clear the fog that seemed to be permanently clouding her thoughts.

Ben. His name is Ben. And my name is... She couldn't remember anything before waking up in this room, in this bed.

Swallowing past the lump blocking her throat, she refused to cry again. Tears wouldn't bring her memories back. Breathing deeply, she searched her mind for some scrap of memory until the pressure built up so fiercely she thought her head would explode. Exhaustion started to overtake her once more, but ultimately hunger won out when her stomach growled loudly, betraying her state of consciousness.

"My lady visitor has turned into a tiger," came a deep voice beside her.

"Ben?" she asked softly, recognizing his gruff voice even in the darkness. She thought any sane person would be terrified to wake up in a stranger's room, especially given the man's large size and dark visage. However, for some inexplicable reason, she felt safe, protected.

"Yes," he replied, leaning forward into the shaft of dim moonlight coming through

the window. "Venus awakes." While his words were light, his face was serious, full of concern and again she sensed the rather frightening undercurrent that seemed to flow from him. She suspected had she been strong enough she would be fleeing from him like the plague.

Smiling shyly, she wondered if this man ever smiled. He always seemed so grave. She took in his rumpled hair and wrinkled clothing and immediately felt guilty for stealing his bed. "You've been reduced to sleeping in a chair for showing compassion to a stranger."

"I spend many nights like this. Do not worry about my sleeping arrangements. It would seem a much more important matter that we feed you. I would hate to have you expire from hunger after all my tender care."

She wondered what kind of man sat up at night in a chair rather than sleeping in a nice comfortable bed. She grinned at his words. "I may not remember who I am, but I do know that I'm starving."

Ben bowed solemnly as he rose and crossed the room to a table by the fire. Lighting a candle, he took the cover off a tray. "As luck would have it," he replied, "I have some food here. I took the liberty of having a small repast prepared while you were resting. I thought you would be hungry upon waking."

She gratefully accepted the tray of bread, cheese and meat he presented her. After several silent moments of eating, she looked up to see him watching her as if he could see into the depths of her soul.

"Thank you for all you've done. Bringing me here and caring for me, giving up your bed, feeding me," she paused, glancing down at herself, "and changing my clothes?"

\*

Now it was his turn to flush slightly. While she'd slept, he removed her scandalous outfit and put her in one of his aunt's old cotton night shifts. "Ah, I, um, your clothing was torn and very dirty, and I thought perhaps you would be more comfortable thus. I assure you I was a perfect gentleman about it." He hoped the fact he was lying didn't show on his face. He simply could not resist taking one small peek at her luscious body. Besides, Mrs. Henry would raise the recently repaired roof if she knew he'd brought a woman who in all likelihood was a prostitute into the house. She was already beside herself with curiosity about the woman sleeping in the master's bed. Ben's responses to her unending questions had been vague at best.

Clearly mortified at the thought of him seeing her undressed, she merely nodded.

"Well," he started, anxious to change the subject, "now that you've had something to eat, perhaps you would like to get some more rest?"

"Oh, no," she said. "I couldn't sleep anymore. Not yet anyway. I wonder, I mean, I was hoping perhaps you would keep me company for a little while?"

"Of course."

"Since I don't know anything about myself, why don't you tell me about you?"

Ben hedged before answering. He rarely, no, that wasn't correct, he *never* spoke of himself. Thinking about his life in any detail generally sent him running for the nearest bottle of whiskey. "There isn't much to tell," he answered, trying to think of a way to change the subject.

"Oh, there must be something," she said enthusiastically, giving him little chance for escape. Given his suspicions about the woman's background, perhaps it would be best to

fill her in on his family connections, so she would fully understand their vast social differences once her memory did return to her.

"My father is the eighth Duke of Pelsham. He is extremely active in Parliament and played an important role during the war with France. My mother was a Bradshaw before she married, of the Yorkshire Bradshaws. My twin brother, Adam, is the Marquis of Shropshire, and upon my father's death, will become the next duke. My family has numerous connections in the government and is even related to Prinny himself, though rather distantly, of course."

Throughout his family tree recital, the blonde woman nodded politely.

"You have a very impressive family." Her tone suggested she was actually less than awed. A fact that surprised him given most of society was daunted by his high-*ton*, supremely aristocratic bloodlines. "But that really doesn't tell me much about you. Where you've been. What you do now. Things like that."

"Me?" he repeated sharply, unnerved by the fact he *hadn't* unnerved her. He'd yet to smile at the woman and was fairly certain he must appear downright ghoulish to her. He was too tall and broad, too dark. He'd once been told by an associate at Bow Street his success in tracking down villains was due to the fact they were so frightened upon seeing their captor they simply lay down and surrendered. "As I said before, there isn't much to tell."

He shifted uncomfortably in the chair. In all his life, he couldn't recall ever being asked about himself as a person. Most of the *ton* was only interested in his father and, as his father aged, his brother—the heir apparent and therefore the more powerful son. His dark and brooding nature generally discouraged most people from trying to get too close. The fact this odd woman wanted to know about him shocked and even annoyed him as he had no suitable response.

"I find it hard to believe nothing of any importance or interest has ever happened to you. Your face betrays you, you know."

"Pardon me?" He could hear the surliness in his tone and realized he felt insulted by her comment. He knew he wasn't what anyone would deem handsome, but for some foolish reason he wanted this woman to find him so.

"Your face is full of character and mystery. So many things written in your eyes. Your home—actually your bedroom since that's all I've seen—also betrays you. So many fascinating things," she added in a light tone. "I believe you can tell quite a lot about a person simply by studying their possessions."

Glancing around the room, he noticed her eyes had landed on a large weapon in the corner. Before he could direct her attention elsewhere, she asked, "Like that sword in the corner. It's well-used. Is it yours?"

He nodded, not sure how to respond to her astute observations and wondering at her lack of fear once more.

"Not some crazed killer?" she asked with a light-hearted titter.

Ben merely shook his head, again wondering why she wasn't running from the room as fast as she could.

"Well then, that says you are either a weapons collector, a soldier of some sort or perhaps a pirate?"

Ben genuinely struggled not to grin as he thought she sounded almost hopeful when she asked if he was a pirate. What a strange woman. "I was a soldier," he responded

before he could call the words back. "I was an officer in the war against France, against Napoleon."

"You were? That must have been terribly frightening."

The accuracy of her answer amazed and quite frankly offended him. Did she think him a coward? He winced at the curtness of his reply. "I was honored to serve my country, and I did so to the best of my ability."

"Of course you did. I didn't mean to imply otherwise." Her response was quick, and he could tell she was aware of the fact he had taken offense. He felt himself becoming unbearably warm and cursed the roaring blaze coming from the fireplace.

"Actually, it was quite frightening at times," he admitted after several moments of awkward silence. "War is not a pretty thing, regardless of how people attempt to glorify it. It is hard to describe the true horror of it, and I would not venture to try in a woman's presence. Men have spent fortunes and lifetimes creating countless ways to brutally harm and kill other men while no one takes the time to figure out how to bring these bodies back to life. And always it's in the pursuit of an ideal that no one ever seems to be able to keep within their grasp." His voice had taken on a dark, menacing tone.

"Peace? Freedom?" she whispered, seemingly entranced by his words.

"Power," he replied. His chest suddenly filled with the pain, fear and damned shadows that never seemed to allow him a moment of sunlight. He clearly spent too much time alone with his dark thoughts. Neither of them said anything for a long time and he struggled to close the door to his inner thoughts that he'd opened merely a crack for her. He wasn't the kind of man to tell tales. He was a man in control of his emotions and his thoughts; a man who kept his own counsel.

"Are you married?" she asked.

He was startled by her blunt speaking and unexpected change of subject. "I hardly think my wife would approve of you sharing our bed if I were. No, I am not married. Thank God."

"Why thank God?"

"Pardon me?"

"What's wrong with marriage?" she asked.

"Well," he stammered, "nothing really. For others. It's simply not for me."

"Why not?"

"Why not?" he repeated, no longer amused by her frank questioning.

"It seems a straightforward enough question. You're a handsome man with your own home, all your faculties—so far as I can see—and a kind disposition, given your willingness to care for a stranger. Why wouldn't you want to get married?"

She thought he was handsome and kind? The thought flattered him until he remembered himself. Christ. Chances were good she was a prostitute, well-versed in making men feel good about themselves. Hell, if this nighttime conversation was any indication of her usual charm, he imagined she probably did quite well in her profession as her forthright manner and compliments were intriguing and unique.

"I've never found a woman with whom I would like to spend the rest of my life. I don't find it comfortable sharing myself with another person. My friends have found love and companionship in their marriages, and I am happy for them. However, I would not be able to give so much of myself to another person. I realize it is not a typical attitude, but I would not marry without love, and love is something I don't have to give. It is simply not

within me.” He leaned back in the chair chagrined at the words he’d uttered aloud. He had never shared such private thoughts with anyone. Yet this lovely lady had him spilling his most personal feelings in the dark of the night like a condemned man confessing to a priest in hopes of redemption.

Unwilling to reveal more, he rose and walked to the fire, under the guise of building it up, when in fact he needed to escape her penetrating gaze. The woman was too perceptive and too intelligent for his comfort.

Apparently oblivious to his distress, she giggled. “What a load of crap!”

“Pardon me?” he said, glancing back at her darkly.

“You say that quite a lot, you know. ‘Pardon me,’” she mimicked playfully. “I said ‘what a load of crap.’”

“I don’t understand what you mean.”

“Well, I had cleaned it up, but if you prefer I’ll simply say what a load of shit.”

“Mademoiselle, I find your language offensive.”

“No, you don’t,” she said with a wicked grin. “I have a feeling you’re a connoisseur of offensive language yourself.”

“Something else you can read in my face?” He asked drolly as he felt the ends of his lips turning up slightly, despite his desire to look stern.

“Yes, actually, but you, sir, are changing the subject. You say you’re unsuited to marriage because you can’t share yourself with one person, but in the past few minutes you’ve shared quite a lot with me. I think you’re only afraid.”

“Afraid?” he repeated hotly, again offended by her attempts to paint him a coward. “What, pray tell, would I be afraid of?”

“Afraid of commitment.” Her answer oozed such self-assurance he longed to wipe the smirk off her lips, *perhaps with his own*. Good God, he shuddered, where had that thought come from? Although her lips were plump and full, he had no intentions of ravishing an injured woman in his own bed, even if her appealing nature begged to be kissed.

Shaking himself, he listened as she continued speaking.

“You’re afraid of those five little words.”

“And what five words are those, if I may be so bold as to inquire?” He was uncertain he wanted to know.

“‘Til death do us part.” Her reply was delivered with such an innocent, sweet smile it was all he could do to stay on his side of the room. The urge to kiss her into silence was creating an uncomfortable tightness in his breeches. Then she giggled again, pleased with her own jest.

“Ah, I see, and you find that particular character flaw in gentlemen humorous?” He turned back to the fire, away from her radiance, her pleasant countenance. The morning sun never lit up his room as brightly as her warm smile did in the dark of the night.

*Good Heavens, I’ve been too long without a woman. I sound like a damned poet.*

“No, not really,” she said, her voice still laced with mirth. “Don’t worry, Ben. I’m only teasing you. I have every faith you will meet and marry the perfect woman one day. You were made for marriage.”

Made for marriage? What on earth could she mean, and how could she determine that in only a few moments of conversation? The foolish chit *had* hit her head too hard. No one of his acquaintance thought him made for marriage. He was too serious, too

angry, too lost.

“Well,” he said after a few moments of silence, unwilling to continue the conversation and desperate to escape. “I have no wish to keep you from your rest. Why don’t you sleep more? It will be morning soon and you will need your wits about you if we are to figure out who you are and where you belong.”

With a small yawn, she confirmed that she was tired. “I suppose you’re right, even though I’m well aware you are avoiding the conversation. I feel bad taking your bed from you. Where will you sleep?”

“There is a very comfortable settee in my office. Do not worry about me. Good night.” He crossed the room and opened the door, turning to look at her one last time. Her breathing was already heavy, and he suspected she had fallen asleep the instant she closed her lovely eyes. Her face at rest still held the trace of a smile and he felt the corners of his mouth twitch in reply. Stepping into the hallway, it occurred to him he hadn’t enjoyed someone else’s company quite so much in a very long time.

## Chapter Four

### V is for Visitors

Opening her eyes as sunlight streamed across the bedroom and onto her face, she glanced around the room, frowning at the unfamiliar surroundings. Pulling a hand through her tangled hair, she felt the painful lump on her forehead as she recalled the strange dream she'd had during the night. In the dream the handsome son of a duke with thick black hair and eyes the color of midnight cared for her and told her war stories.

She struggled to remember. Remember. Remember what? Rubbing the lump, she attempted to recall the rest as the door to the bedroom opened, and the hero of her dreams walked in with a breakfast tray in his hands.

"Good morning," he said almost amiably, crossing the room to place the tray of delicious food onto the bedside table.

"Good morning." Her stomach growled loudly as the smell of fresh bread and hot tea permeated her senses.

"Just as I suspected, you're hungry."

Grinning, she ran her fingers through her hair once more, grimacing at the fact this incredibly handsome man was bringing her breakfast in bed while she looked like such a disaster.

"Actually," she replied. "I am starving. Again."

"Well, I must say I enjoy a meal much more when it can be shared with such delightful company."

Although his words were spoken lightly, she sensed he was uncomfortable with her presence despite the fact that he seemed more at ease this morning than he had the previous evening. None of the bleakness she'd seen in his eyes during the night lingered. Unfortunately, he was more aloof, and she didn't like this polite stranger as much as she liked the dark soldier of the night who shared confidences with her.

All thoughts of his nature disappeared as he handed her a plate filled with the most delicious looking homemade bread and jam she'd ever seen. Of course, she'd never met a meal she didn't like, which was why she was forever dieting and watching what she ate. Her recollection startled a gasp out of her, and Ben must have noticed the peculiar look on her face.

"What is it?"

"I, I don't know," she answered truthfully. "I can't remember my name or where I'm from, and yet I know that I'm always trying to lose weight. Does that seem strange to you?"

"Yes, why on earth would you want to lose weight?"

She giggled at his response, secretly pleased that he didn't find her plumpness unattractive. "That isn't what I meant and you know it."

"I suppose you must recall the essentials, like how to feed yourself, walk, talk, and so on, so it seems reasonable that you have retained certain ingrained information about your character as well. You are, after all, the same person."

"Yes," she responded, warming to the idea, "I suppose you must be right. The knock

on the head didn't change who I am, even if I can't remember exactly who that may be. Still, it's disconcerting, not knowing."

"If it's any consolation, I truly believe your memory will return before that lump on your head is gone. Now eat. I wouldn't want you to wither away to nothing." He spoke solemnly, although she thought she detected the distinct glimmer of humor in his eyes.

Blushing at his compliment, she shook it off. "Oh, now you're just being nice to the invalid."

"Not at all." He replied with such sincerity she was taken aback by his serious words and the look in his eye that showed he truly did admire her looks.

"T-thank you," she stammered.

\*

Ben sensed her uneasiness and wondered at her inability to believe or accept his compliments. Most women of his acquaintance deemed it a requirement for men to wax poetic over all of their charming qualities. One of the *ton*'s strictures he found vastly annoying as he was typically at a loss to find something positive to say to any females of the nobility. "If nothing else, you need to eat to regain your strength."

She laughed and lifted her toast in a mock salute. "Ah, the perfect excuse to blow a diet." She dug into the hot bread and jam with such pleasure he was struggled not to laugh with her.

Unfamiliar with her strange choice of words, he tried to place her accent. She was definitely English, but he couldn't understand the unusual dialect. "So I assume you still don't recall your name?"

She shook her head sadly.

"Perhaps this is a clue." He reached toward her neck. "I should have mentioned it last night, but forgot until this moment." His fingers lightly brushed her throat and he felt a tremor of heat rush through his body at the feeling of her soft skin against his fingertips. Looking down, she examined the charm hanging on a necklace.

"The letter V?" Her voice shook slightly and Ben wondered if she was also unsettled by the feel of his fingers on her skin.

"It would appear so," he answered. "Does that bring anything to mind? Perhaps it is an initial?"

"V," she repeated. "I suppose it could be, but ... it's not ringing any bells." She rubbed her head, no doubt attempting to force her memories to return.

"Well, why don't we list some potential names? Maybe that would help. Vivian?"

She shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

"Well, there's Virginia? Velma? Vanessa?"

Again, she shook her head. "No. None of those sound right. Maybe the 'V' stands for my last name."

"Ah, yes, perhaps. In which case, there are too many possibilities to list. Well, regardless, we need to think of something to call you until we find your family."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. I don't think I'd like responding to Hey You." Her words were light, but the fear in her eyes betrayed her concerns. "Ben, what if I never remember?"

He stopped her line of thought. "That's not going to happen. Once you've had time to recover, your memory will return. Actually, I've taken the liberty of summoning a doctor. Let's wait until he arrives to begin fearing the worse. I'm sure he will confirm



what I've said. It will merely take time. In the meanwhile, how about Esmerelda? You look a bit like an Esmerelda to me."

She giggled at his teasing. "Uh-oh Ben, be careful. That was perilously close to humor there. And for your information, I do not look like an Esmerelda."

Pleased with his joke, he rubbed his chin in mock consideration. "Very well, how about Ophelia? No? Hilda then. That's a good strong name."

She groaned loudly, swinging a pillow at his head, nearly toppling her breakfast plate over in the process. "Ugh! I shudder to think what you would come up with to name a daughter!"

He faltered briefly at her words. The idea of fatherhood left him uneasy, as he was sure to be a failure—his relationship with Chelsea was certainly indicative of that. The small girl disappeared every morning into the surrounding woods only appearing again for meals. She avoided him like the plague and, unsure how to bridge the gap between them, he was only too willing to keep his distance. He'd failed in his promise to her father. He'd failed to keep her mother safe; therefore, he didn't blame the child for keeping her distance. She'd been robbed of both parents, only to be offered him as a poor substitute.

"How about Vee?" she asked quietly and he sensed he'd somehow destroyed the lightheartedness of the moment, allowing his own dark thoughts creep back in again.

"Vee," he repeated. "As in the letter?"

"Yes," she replied, her easy smile still in place. "More than likely some part of my name contains that letter. Why not use it? Sort of like a nickname. That would be better than getting used to a name that isn't my own."

He nodded, intrigued by the logic behind the suggestion. "Very well, Miss Vee it is."

"Oh, no," she said, shaking her head. "Just Vee, my lord."

"Vee then. And no more of that 'my lord' nonsense. Yes, Vee. It suits you. Now then, if you've finished breaking your fast, you should try to get more rest."

"What? I've only just woken up." She gave him a sulky look and Ben suspected she was going to be a difficult patient now that she'd had a good night's rest and a meal.

"You've taken a nasty blow to the head. It is quite possible you have a concussion. Try to sleep some more. Until the doctor gets here, at least."

"Okay," she agreed, with her usual charming smile. Ben was becoming quite fond of the dimples that appeared in her cheeks when she smiled like that. "I guess it would be poor manners to disobey such a hospitable host."

"Yes, it would." As he spoke, he was aware that she brought out a casualness in him he thought had perished in the war and if not then, certainly in the back alleys of London. He found himself actually feeling happier in the last twenty-four hours than he had in a year. She was extremely pleasing company, and that notion was more than a little unsettling to him.

He certainly didn't have any reason to feel happy. After two months in his care, Chelsea still wouldn't speak or come near him. His house was falling apart around his ears. He still needed to find a cook, footman, chambermaid, governess and head groom as well as begin work on his new business of breeding horses. Yet, here he was losing himself in the bright blue eyes of a woman, possibly a prostitute, who made him feel not only relaxed, but downright cheerful.

The thought of her with another man caused a sudden twinge in his stomach. He

frowned when he tried to picture her in a brothel, soliciting work. He didn't like to think of men using her in such a demeaning way. In fact, the very thought left him wanting to punch any man who tried to touch her.

He could only assume it was this sudden unaccountable attack of jealousy flowing through his veins that caused him to bend down and place a light kiss on her brow. Shocked by his own impetuous action, he pulled back quickly as the soft heat of her skin singed his lips and sent a jolt of electricity throughout his entire body. Flushing slightly, he bowed and very quickly took his leave.

\* \* \* \*

Vee lay down on the bed considering his charming gesture, a bit shocked by the sweet kiss. She simply couldn't understand what it was about this man that drew her to him. The sadness in his eyes called out to her in a way she felt hard-pressed to resist. *He needs me*, she thought briefly, before pushing the wayward notion away. He was a grown man, obviously very strong given his sheer size and no doubt, very brave given his past in the army. This son of a duke definitely did *not* need her. She was foolish to even think so. If anything, she needed him. She was the one with no memories, home, money or even clothing of her own.

Yet she couldn't shake the idea that Lord Benjamin Sinclair was somehow, unconsciously, reaching out to her for help. She continued to ponder the strange notion until her eyelids grew heavy again. Ben's troubled face was the last thing she saw when oblivion came to claim her, more quickly than she would have expected.

When next she opened her eyes, Vee discovered she had a new visitor. Groggy from so much sleep, she found herself looking into the bright green eyes of a little girl.

"Hello," she said, her voice husky.

The little girl didn't respond, but looked at her shyly. Vee suspected she was uneasy at the sight of her bruises and cuts, plus the coconut sized lump on her brow that must surely look like an extra head.

"I know I must look a fright, but I can assure you I am perfectly harmless," she said with the friendliest smile she could muster in her tired state.

Again the girl merely stared, offering no response.

"My name is—" she began, stumbling as she realized she still didn't recall her real name. "My name is Vee."

The girl frowned at the introduction, turned and ran from the room. Vee gaped at the closed door for several minutes wondering if perhaps she had been hallucinating. She didn't ponder it for long as sleep claimed her sore body once more.

Once again when she opened her eyes she was greeted by yet another new face. This one belonged to a woman in her late fifties, dressed in a long black dress and white apron. Her gray hair was tied back in a tight bun at the base of her neck. She appeared to be tidying the room and startled briefly when she realized Vee's eyes were on her.

"Oh, heavens, my dear, I do hope I didna wake ye," the lady said, her voice betraying the slightest Scottish burr.

"Actually, I think I've slept enough for a month."

"Weel, that is a nasty knock ye've taken there. Rest is surely the best thing for ye. Certainly was a shock when the master said we had an injured lady in the house. I didna see when ye arrived. Back in the kitchen with my Mr. Henry trying to get the blasted

stove to light, pardon my language, miss.”

Vee grinned, amused by the woman’s endless chatter and tireless cleaning.

“Oh, ye poor dear girl. The doctor should be here anytime now. He was delivering Mrs. McCarty’s newest babe this mornin’ when I sent Mr. Henry to fetch him. But as it’s her fifth babe, I doubt the doctor’s doing little more than merely catching it. Mark my words, Myrtle McCarty will have that babe this afternoon and still have Edgar McCarty’s supper on the table as he comes in from the field. He, Mr. McCarty that is, lives down in the village. Hard worker, he is. Does the smithy work for everyone around here. My Mr. Henry would never trust anyone but Edgar to shoe the horses on the estate.”

Vee tried to keep up with the woman’s conversation, amused by the story of the McCarty’s lives. “You seem to know quite a bit about the people who live in this area.”

“Ah, Lord yes, girl. I’ve lived in this very house working for Lord Benjamin’s dear departed great-aunt Mary since I was a wee girl. My mother was the housekeeper before me, ye see. After me mum passed, bless her soul, I took up the reins and have been working here as housekeeper for nigh on forty years.”

“My goodness,” Vee answered “That is a very long time. My name is, well, it’s Vee.” She wished she could introduce herself properly, but what else could she do?

“And I’m Mrs. Henry,” the kind lady replied. “Lord Benjamin told me about your accident, ye poor girl. How awful. Not knowing your own name. Couldn’t imagine it meself.”

Startled by Mrs. Henry’s sudden pause in conversation, Vee decided to attempt to enter it herself. “Ben, I mean Lord Benjamin, believes it will return once I’ve had time to rest and recover, so I am trying to keep a positive attitude about it all. Mrs. Henry, you seem to know so much about everyone around this area. Do I look familiar to you?”

“Actually, I did a hard study of your face while ye slept, and I’m afraid to say I’ve never seen ye before, nor can I see any resemblance between ye and the families from the village. Of course, Lord Benjamin believes ye are from London and I tend to agree with him.”

“Why is that?” Vee asked.

“Ye’ve an air about ye. And that accent. I can’t quite place the dialect. Rather queer actually. But don’t ye worry, Lord Benjamin is determined to find your home and family and he is a man of honor with more determination in him than any six men. I’ve never met such a hard worker, excluding my Mr. Henry, of course. Why he’s come into this house and worked miracles in just a few short weeks.”

Vee nodded, unable to say anything as Mrs. Henry chatted on endlessly. She began to wonder if the woman ever took a breath.

“Mr. Henry,” Mrs. Henry continued, “and I worried every night the place would crumble to bits with us in it, but Lord Benjamin has come in and hired all sorts of local men to fix Waterplace right up again. Why, I believe, he’ll have it lookin’ better than it ever did. And he’s not so high and mighty that he won’t roll up his sleeves, pick up a hammer and start workin’ right alongside the men. He’s not afraid of a little sweat and a hard day’s labor. Men in the area respect him fer that.”

“He does seem like a good man,” Vee interjected, but Mrs. Henry, enamored of her new master continued speaking.

“And look at all he’s doing for his young ward. How many men, I ask ye, would take in a damaged little girl, not even his own flesh and blood, mind ye, and raise her as his

own?"

"Little girl?" Vee asked, remembering the green-eyed child in her dream.

"Miss Chelsea Duncan," Mrs. Henry replied. "She's the daughter of a young man who served in Lord Benjamin's regiment in the war against that nasty, little Frenchman. Chelsea's da was killed on the battlefield and milord promised the dying man he would care for his wife and young babe. Mrs. Duncan passed away in a fire a few months ago and the child hasna spoken a word since that day. Lord Benjamin, bless his kind, gentle heart, moved here from the city thinking the quiet, country air would soothe and mend the girl's broken heart. Imagine a man of his social standing, he's the son of a duke, ye know, giving up the fast-paced excitement of city life to come to the country all for the well-bein' of a child."

"That is quite something," she replied, fascinated by Mrs. Henry's nonstop narrative. The entire time the housekeeper spoke, she'd been cleaning and by this point in her tale, she'd dusted all the furniture, swept the floor, fluffed the pillows under Vee's head, straightened the bedclothes and laid out a fresh nightgown for her. Vee was quite exhausted simply watching her.

"Oh, Miss Vee, ye're so lucky to have been rescued by milord. He is a wonderful man. Simply marvelous. Always was, even as a boy. So good to his Aunt Mary, ye know. That's why she left him this house. He always took the time to write her and visit when he could. He sent her gifts on her birthday and for holidays. Such a thoughtful lad. My mistress adored him before the madness took over her mind. It's truly wonderful having him here at Waterplace to stay." Mrs. Henry wiped away a wistful tear, her happiness overwhelming her for a moment.

"Of course," she continued after only taking the merest breath, "he's not the same since the war, but that happens to so many men, doesn't it, dear? War changes our men. Takes something out of them. Ah, milord was always such a carefree boy, and yet I haven't seen him laugh since he's been back. I was saying to my Mr. Henry last night, 'Mr. Henry, our master doesn't laugh like he used to.' Mr. Henry nodded, he's a man of few words you know. He's also noticed the sadness in milord's eyes and the way he roams the house in the wee hours of night. Well, I always say, there's nothing the love of a good woman cannot cure. Perhaps, milord will find himself a sweet, young wife to put the sparkle back in his eye." At this, Mrs. Henry looked at her as if trying to decide if she were worthy of such a privilege.

Uncomfortable under Mrs. Henry's scrutiny, Vee cleared her throat. "I'm sure Ben, I mean Lord Benjamin, will find someone eventually. After all, as you say, he's from a distinguished family and he's so very kind and deserving of happiness."

"Exactly," Mrs. Henry interjected, beaming over Vee's comments. She suspected Mrs. Henry of being a master matchmaker and decided she had better change the subject.

"I believe Chelsea was here earlier," she said.

"Was she now? I am surprised. Child usually keeps to herself. Not at all fond of strangers. Did she say anything?" Mrs. Henry asked hopefully, pausing in her duties.

"No, I spoke to her, but she didn't respond."

"Ah, weel, that is the way of it, is it not? Poor wee thing. Hasna spoken a word since her mum died. They say she watched the house burning, her mum and grandda trapped inside. What to do, what to do?" Mrs. Henry muttered more to herself than Vee.

"Weel, that's this room tidy. Is there anything else you'll be needing, my dear?"

“No, thank you,” she answered, and then a thought occurred to her. “Actually, do you know if my clothes are clean? I’d like to get out of bed.”

“I don’t think milord would be pleased to see you out of bed until the doctor’s had time to examine ye, but I will see to yer clothes. It’s strange, but milord didna give them to me to wash, and I don’t see them anywhere in here. Shame on him for changing ye himself. Should’a called me for that, but he’s an honorable man, so ye don’t have to worry on that account.”

Vee blushed once again recalling it was Ben who had changed her clothes. Hopefully, the room was dark when he did it. She might not remember her name, but she remembered what her body looked like and how unhappy she was with it. She was plump when she wished she was thin. Her breasts were too large, as was her bum, and her hips were far too wide. Her legs were short and, well, sturdy was about the nicest word she could use for them. The only small thing on her was a waist that nipped in enough to give her a true hourglass figure and, honestly, what good was that when the rest of her was full to bursting?

“I’ll have a word with milord about yer clothing, Miss Vee. If ye’re going to be here for awhile, I’ll nip up to the attic and find some of milady’s old dresses for you,” Mrs. Henry replied, pulling her from her reverie.

“Oh, I hate for you to go to any trouble on my account. I’m sure you’re busy enough with your household duties, and I really don’t know how long I’ll be staying here.”

Mrs. Henry beamed at her words, pleased to have the importance of her station acknowledged.

“No trouble at all, my dear. It will be so nice to have a lady in the house again, even if it’s only for a few days. Now ye get some rest.” With that, Mrs. Henry left, and Vee slumped back against the freshly-plumped pillows feeling as though she’d just witnessed a whirlwind. Mrs. Henry was a bundle of energy and efficiency, and she liked her very much. She reflected on how fortunate she was to have been rescued by Ben—no, Lord Benjamin. It was really only appropriate she call him by his title. She’d have to remember that, even in her thoughts.

Mrs. Henry’s recitation on the upstanding character traits of “milord” played in her mind. Vee agreed that he was a good man and that the war had affected him and wished she could find a way to teach him how to laugh again. Laughter was so important and something told her that she was the type of person who laughed a lot, even if she couldn’t remember for sure and Lord Benjamin certainly seemed to have the potential for humor. After all, he had teased her about possible names. Yes, she decided, she would make it her mission to try to make the inhabitants of Waterplace a little happier during her stay here. Between poor little Chelsea and Lord Benjamin, laughter was needed to lighten their heavy hearts.

With that thought, she settled back onto the pillows to await the doctor and made a mental list of all the things she hoped to accomplish during her time at Waterplace.

1. Cheer up Lord Benjamin.
2. Help Mrs. Henry with household chores.
3. Befriend Chelsea.
4. Remember who I am.

\* \* \* \*

The rest of the day passed quickly for Vee. The doctor came and concurred with Lord Benjamin that there was a good chance her memory would return to her in time, although much to her dismay, he insisted she remain in bed for another day or two. Dr. Jonesbury, like Mrs. Henry, had grown up in the area and said he was very sure she was not from Dover at all. Lord Benjamin nodded, saying he would send a message to a friend in London to see if there was any word about a missing woman. While no one said anything, she sensed they were all more than a little perplexed by her arrival in Dover in such a battered state.

Vee gave herself a migraine trying to force her memories to return, so Mrs. Henry gave her a tisane and insisted she remain in bed, bringing her a simple dinner of bread and cheese on a tray. She didn't see Lord Benjamin after the doctor left and Mrs. Henry explained he'd gone to London himself to see if anyone was looking for her and would return in a couple of days. Vee hated that he'd gone to such trouble for her, knowing he was overwhelmed with work here. Still, she couldn't help but hope he would return with her true name. She was finding it increasingly difficult to keep a positive attitude.

She also didn't see Chelsea again. Obviously, the girl was too shy to attempt to visit and she vowed tomorrow she would rise early and begin to make herself useful. Perhaps working would take her mind off her troubles. Perhaps tomorrow she would remember everything.

## Chapter Five

### V is for Valuable

After as much bed rest as she could stand, Vee awoke with a clear—if still memory-free—head and a lighthearted feeling two days later. Unwilling to wallow in self-pity, she rose from the bed and crossed to the window. Bright sunshine and the beautiful English countryside greeted her. “It’s lovely here,” she said to herself.

“Indeed it is,” Mrs. Henry’s voice answered.

“Good morning,” she said smiling.

“Good morning yourself, Miss Vee. What are you doing out of that bed?” Mrs. Henry asked, reproach in her voice.

“I feel much better today and I cannot spend one more moment in that bed,” she replied.

“I don’t know if yer weel enough yet,” Mrs. Henry said, scrutinizing every inch of her.

“Oh, I am,” she insisted. “I am much, much better. Honestly.”

“All right then. Me mum always said too much bed rest was as bad as too little. I didna have a chance to talk to milord about yer clothing before he left for London, so I went diggin’ about in the attic. Milady was a tad bit bigger than you, so we’ll have to nip these dresses in at the waist, but they should do fine for the time bein’. As luck would have it, milady wasna much taller than you. You are a wee thing, aren’t you? I thought so when you were lying down, but to see you standing up, confirms there isna much of ye!” Mrs. Henry, who towered over her by at least six inches, laughed at her own joke.

Vee smiled, extremely pleased to be referred to as “wee.”

“They are wonderful. I’m sure they will fit fine,” she replied, relieved to be able to get dressed. Vee waited for Mrs. Henry to leave, but it soon became apparent that the woman wasn’t going anywhere.

“I’ll get dressed and then come downstairs,” she said, hoping Mrs. Henry would get the point.

“Very weel then. Off with that nightrail and I’ll help you. We don’t have a chambermaid to serve as your lady’s maid, so you’ll have to make do with me, I’m afraid. Shouldna be a problem as I served her ladyship in the same capacity the last few years of her life off an’ on. She never could keep a lady’s maid. Her tongue, God rest her soul, got sharper every year. Not many of the young ladies could take the constant criticism. Didna bother me though. I’d been with milady for my whole life, and I knew her bark was worse than her bite. Weel, off with it then.”

Vee blushed at her words. “I’m perfectly able to dress myself. As I said, I feel much better.”

Mrs. Henry looked surprised, then chuckled. “This dress buttons all the way up the back, my dear. Besides, there’s no reason to be shy. You aren’t accustomed to a lady’s maid?”

“I suppose not,” she replied. “I’m fairly certain I usually dress myself.” Although looking down at the dress in her hands, she did feel a nagging sense of uncertainty. The

feeling had grown in the past two days as she slowly recovered. Nothing in the house seemed to be familiar. The house and its amenities left her bewildered. She had her hands full getting used to the chamberpot, struggling to fix her hair in a chignon as Mrs. Henry insisted was proper and found the thought of cleaning herself with only a bowl of cold water more challenging than seemed possible. She wondered how she could have forgotten how to do such seemingly simple tasks, yet remembered how to read and write.

"I see," said Mrs. Henry as she studied the dress. "Weel, that seems to narrow down a bit about your background."

"It does?" she asked, suddenly excited that she stumbled upon a clue to her past. "How?"

"Seems likely you are not from a titled family. Otherwise, you would have had a lady's maid."

"That doesn't seem to narrow down much," Vee grumbled, realizing there were probably far fewer titled families than common folk.

"No, it doesn't at that," Mrs. Henry agreed. "Still, ye will need help with this dress, so off with that." She pointed at her nightgown.

"Very well," she mumbled, well aware that Mrs. Henry was not going to back down on this point. Heat rushed to her face as she took off the nightgown, embarrassed to discover she was completely naked beneath it.

"My goodness," Mrs. Henry exclaimed taking in her high color and nervous hands covering herself. "Never seen such a timid lass. Don't worry, girl. You don't have anythin' I don't." Mrs. Henry chuckled at her joke and Vee grinned ruefully, chastising herself for her shyness. She didn't think she'd ever been entirely naked in front of anyone before. Mrs. Henry continued to chuckle as she quickly and efficiently dressed her. It seemed everything Mrs. Henry did was fast and efficient.

"There you are," Mrs. Henry said, circling her to examine her work. "Just as I thought, too loose. Weel, it'll have to do for today. I'll put a few stitches in it tonight. Now then, I'll show ye around the house so ye won't get lost, and then we'll nip into the kitchen for some breakfast."

Vee nodded her agreement, happy to be leaving the room and anxious to eat. She was more than a touch hungry. That seemed to be her constant state, not that that seemed so terrible. After all, Lord Benjamin said she didn't need to diet and Mrs. Henry called her a wee thing. Yes, Vee decided smiling, in spite of her uneasiness, she liked it here quite a lot.

Her decision that she liked Waterplace lasted only until she took three steps out of the bedchamber. Then, she was suitably horrified. She thought Mrs. Henry had been exaggerating when she said the house was crumbling, but realized with each room she saw the comment was meant literally. "Oh, my," she exclaimed when a piece of plaster in the hallway fell, missing her shoulder by mere inches.

"I know, my dear, isn't it a shame? Waterplace used to be such a lovely home. I know it doesn't look like it now, but twenty years ago, it was a wonderful place. Full of visitors, parties, teas, balls." Mrs. Henry shook her head, mourning the loss of better days.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Weel, that is when the baron died, my mistress' beloved husband. After he passed, Lady Tolley fell into despair. She was never the same. Such a sweet lady, but without



him, she seemed lost and sad all the time. Eventually, sadness turned to anger and resentment.”

“Resentment?”

“Over losing her true love,” Mrs. Henry replied as if the answer was obvious. “She became ill-tempered and mean. Servants began leaving, and she refused to replace them. Soon, it was only me and Mr. Henry left. Not that we would ever leave milady. Her heart was broken, and if we left her, there’d have been no one left to care for her. Milord was away with the army during the worst of it, so he didn’t know. We did all we could to take care of the place, but as you can see it’s a large house. With only the two of us to cook, clean, care for the grounds and stables, it fell into disrepair. Mr. Henry isn’t getting any younger you know. His bones ache in the cold and rain somethin’ fierce.”

“Oh, I understand,” Vee said, aware that Mrs. Henry was embarrassed by the state of the house and blamed herself. “You and Mr. Henry were wonderful to stay with Lady Tolley. She was fortunate to have such loyal servants. I’m sure you did everything you could to keep the house together and make your lady comfortable ‘til the end. Your contributions to Waterplace and its owners have been invaluable.”

Appeased with her praise, Mrs. Henry patted her on the shoulder affectionately. “You are a sweet young lady. I hope milord finds your family soon. I’m sure they are fair distraught over losing you.”

Mrs. Henry’s caring words were nearly her undoing as she felt a stinging behind her eyes and a pain in her chest. She hoped with all her heart someone was missing her.

“Now, that’s enough of a tour. Ye’ve got the basic layout of the house. How about that breakfast I promised ye?”

After breakfast, Vee was able, after considerable begging, to convince Mrs. Henry to allow her to help with some of the household chores. Actually, the only room Mrs. Henry would let her clean was the bedchamber adjoining Lord Benjamin’s. The housekeeper insisted it was the only other room on the wing with a roof she would trust not to leak besides the master’s chambers and Chelsea’s. Vee, knowing Mrs. Henry was overworked, was able to persuade her to let her prepare the room for herself as she didn’t think it fitting the lord of the house should give up his own room. Mrs. Henry, agreeing with this argument, opened the room for her, and then set off to do her own countless chores.

Thankful to be up and moving and doing something useful, she threw herself into her task. Her entire day was spent changing the sheets, airing the mattress and pillows, sweeping and scrubbing the floors and dusting all the furniture. Glancing down, she laughed as she noticed all the dirt from the room now appeared to be on her body. Her borrowed apron was filthy and her hands were pruned from the mop water. Looking up, she realized the last chore was likely to be the hardest one to complete. The material in curtains was not only too dark for the room, it was filthy. Determined to brighten the room, Vee decided the drapes should go.

“Weel,” she said to herself, mimicking Mrs. Henry’s accent, “I can take care of that in a jiffy.” Pulling the desk chair over to the window, she climbed up only to realize the tops of the curtains were higher than she’d realized. Cursing her height, or lack thereof, she looked around the room until she spied a small table by the fireplace. Testing its sturdiness, she dragged it over to the window before placing the chair on top of the table. Satisfied that she could now reach the tops of curtains, she slowly climbed onto the table

and then the chair.

"Don't look down," she mumbled, as she reached above her head to the curtain rods. Reaching up, she experienced a strange sense of déjà vu and paused, excited that perhaps, finally, her memory might be returning. She could remember doing this very thing before, reaching above her head grasping for something, when—

"What the devil are you doing?" A deep, angry voice asked from behind her. Startled, Vee felt herself beginning to sway.

"Oh, no," she said as she teetered, arms flailing briefly before falling backward off the chair and into the arms of an extremely vexed Lord Benjamin Sinclair.

"Oops," she said weakly, hoping to erase the furor she saw in his eyes.

"I will repeat, what the devil were you doing up there?" His face was mottled red, and his black eyes had gone even darker if such a thing was possible. He looked ready to do her the bodily harm he'd just saved her from.

"Cleaning?" she said softly, suddenly aware she was still in his arms and he gave no indication of putting her down anytime soon.

"Cleaning," he repeated heatedly. "Cleaning what?"

"My room?" she added, struggling to escape his hold. "You can put me down now."

"I'll put you down when I'm ready," he replied, tightening his grip on her.

"But I'm too heavy," she said, uncomfortable with the idea of him discovering how much of her there truly was.

"You weigh practically nothing. What do you mean your room?" he asked.

Their faces were too close this way and she realized that up close he was far more handsome than she'd previously thought. His eyes were coal-black and his hair was magnificent. It was not merely inky black, but an amazing array of colors as she noticed dark auburn and chestnut highlights blended in and a smattering of silver at the temples. She had no idea there could be so many different, subtle shades of color in one head of hair.

Briefly, she wondered about his age. In his thirties, she imagined. His tanned skin showed off the whiteness of his perfectly straight teeth and there was the most endearing cleft in his strong chin. Dear God, the man was entirely too attractive for his own good. And strong. Goodness gracious, but the feel of his muscular arms holding her was enough to make her swoon, if swooning was something she did, which of course she didn't know.

*And once again, I look like a street urchin.* Her dirty dress and hands couldn't hold a candle to her straggly hair. Even now she could feel the strands that had escaped her inexpertly braided hair matted to her cheeks with a day's worth of sweat and hard labor.

Lord Benjamin cleared his throat, and her face flushed when she realized she was staring far too intently at him.

"I didn't feel c-comfortable staying in your room anymore, while you were sleeping on a couch, so I convinced Mrs. Henry to let me clean up a room for myself." Her voice betrayed her discomfort in his arms and she sighed in disgust for sounding like such a weakling.

"You are not a servant, and I do not expect you to clean my house," he replied, apparently oblivious to her uneasiness and still angry.

"Ben, I mean, Lord Benjamin—" she started.

"Ben," he interrupted gruffly. "You will call me Ben."

"I don't think that's appropriate. I mean you're from nobility and I—" she struggled

for release once again before giving up. "I don't think I am," she added, anxious for him to put her down so she could assume a more comfortable distance.

"It is perfectly appropriate to call me by my given name if I give you leave to do so, which I have. Several times," he replied sharply.

"Very well, Ben," she answered, secretly relieved. Lord Benjamin was a mouthful. "I simply wanted to make myself useful. You and the Henrys have been so kind to me and I wanted to help. I know you've been working hard to make this house nice, and I thought perhaps I could repay your thoughtfulness by chipping in. Doing something of value."

"And you thought you would 'chip in' by placing yourself in peril by climbing upon that chair upon that table?" he hissed.

*Yep, he's still mad.*

"I couldn't reach the top of the curtains," she replied with a sheepish grin.

"Need I remind you that you have a serious head injury? What if I hadn't been here to catch you when you fell? You could have injured yourself again even more seriously."

"Well, to be perfectly honest, I wouldn't have fallen if you hadn't startled me, and let's face it, you can only lose your memory once," she replied lightly, trying to release some of the tension in the room.

His eyes narrowed at her response. "You will not clean anymore rooms while you are a guest here."

"But, Ben, I—" she began.

"I will not change my mind on this," he replied, cutting her off.

"Please, put me down," she said, annoyed by his haughty attitude.

"No," he said, although she suspected his anger had abated and he was now toying with her. "It would appear I cannot leave you unattended without worrying about what perils await you. You have a knack for injuring yourself. This seems to be the only safe place for you."

His words suddenly made her feel less safe than if she'd climbed on twenty chairs stacked upon each other. His eyes fell to her lips, and she had only a moment to react before he bent his head and kissed her. She marveled at the tenderness behind the kiss. His lips pressed against hers with the lightest of touches, yet she was overwhelmed by the impact of it. It was an amazing kiss, as far as kisses go, and it made her entire body tingle, even her toes. As quickly as it began, it ended.

Ben slowly released his hold on her, and she swayed slightly as her feet touched the ground. Raising her gaze to his, she noticed he was now the uncomfortable one. Confusion swamped her as she wondered what possessed him to kiss her, what caused him to stop and what she could do to make him kiss her again. She couldn't recall if she'd ever been kissed before, but something told her if she was knocked on the head a thousand times in the future, she would never forget his kiss.

Clearing his throat, he said, "I apologize. I should not have taken such liberties."

She smiled shyly. "That's all right. I, I mean, that is to say, I rather enjoyed it." Heat swamped her cheeks, and she had no doubt she'd turned a bright shade of red. Damn her blushing. Why couldn't she act sophisticated instead of stammering like a teenager getting her first kiss? Of course, maybe it was her first kiss. God, she hoped not. How depressing to think she'd never been kissed before. Surely someone, somewhere in her past had stolen a kiss.

"Nevertheless, I do apologize." He bowed slightly in that rather endearing, terribly

annoying way of his, leaving the room and shutting the door a bit too loudly behind him.

Vee flung herself back on the bed, cursing her flushed face. Her humiliation over blushing soon turned to giddiness as she recalled the kiss. Smiling and touching her lips she wondered again what prompted it. She was no raving beauty and Ben was entirely too attractive for her own comfort. He was tall, dark and handsome, rather like a prince in a fairy tale.

She suspected she was not bold by nature, but in this place who was to say she couldn't step outside the box a bit. After all, losing her memory was almost like getting a new lease on life. She could be anyone she wanted here because she didn't have her past experiences to limit her choices or influence her decisions. And one thing she was sure she wanted was another kiss from Lord Benjamin Sinclair.

\* \* \* \*

Leaning against the door, Ben cursed himself for a fool. What the hell had he been thinking to kiss her? That hadn't been his intention at all. Seeing her perched atop that chair set his heart to racing. Catching her in his arms, he'd felt compelled to hold on and never let go. She was a luscious armful. *Good God*, he thought, *never let go?* What was wrong with him? He didn't lose his head over women and certainly not over one who in all likelihood was a prostitute. For heaven's sake, he was the son of a duke. The disparity in their stations could not be greater.

There was something about her that tied his insides in knots. She was unlike any woman he'd ever met before and not at all what he thought a courtesan would act like. She'd blushed after he kissed her. Blushed, for God's sake. The woman was a complete enigma to him. Sometimes shy, sometimes bold, she was beautiful in an unassuming way and, though he hated to admit it, exactly the kind of woman his body cried out for. Her curvaceous hips and abundant breasts left him hard as steel every time he looked at her and holding her as he had only made matters worse. It had taken all his will to put her down.

Accustomed to using his height to intimidate others, he found the opposite to be true for her. Vee's small frame left him wanting to coddle and protect her. She was such a tiny little thing. The top of her head barely came to his shoulder. Damn, he thought, pushing away from the wall, walking back to his bedchamber. The last thing he needed right now was this diminutive package of temptation sleeping in the adjoining room. He had a house to rebuild, a business to start, and a little girl to ... to what?

What was he going to do about Chelsea? He couldn't very well seduce a woman with a seven-year-old sleeping right across the hall. His ward was his first priority right now. If only she would speak. Ben was at a complete loss as to how to help her. The child seemed terrified of him and wouldn't come within ten feet of him. Thankfully, she'd taken a liking to Mrs. Henry, and the dear woman was doing the best she could to care for her. But dammit, he couldn't in good conscience ask Mrs. Henry to do one more thing. The poor woman was already filling too many roles in the house. He needed a governess and now. Each day, Chelsea seemed to retreat further away from him and deeper into herself.

On top of all that, his trip to London had been a complete waste of time. Not only did his latest attempt to find a governess fail, but no one had reported a woman missing, which only reinforced Ben's opinion that Vee was most likely a prostitute from the

underbelly of the city left for dead. He had spoken to one of his friends at the Bow Street office asking him to keep his ears open for any word of a lady of the night who had gone missing, but he didn't hold out much hope. Who was going to raise a fuss over a missing ladybird, especially if it was her madam who'd disposed of her?

And how could he explain his suspicions to Vee? Explain to her that no one was coming for her, no one cared, no one considered her valuable enough to even look for her. Isn't that what she'd just said? She wanted to be valuable. To help him in his endeavors. How she had escaped her previous life with her humor and her cheerful nature intact he would never know. All he did know was that no matter how he broke the news, she would be devastated.

## Chapter Six

### V is for Victuals (or a lack thereof)

The next few days passed uneventfully for Vee as she sensed Ben was avoiding her. He remained holed up in his study, and whenever she asked Mrs. Henry about him, the housekeeper claimed the master was such a busy man he had to take his meals at his desk. Several times, she'd spied him leaving the stable on horseback, but she could never catch up to him before he made good his escape. Unable to help with the cleaning of the house after Ben's admonishment, she passed the time walking the grounds as the house was simply too dangerous for exploring and trying to find young Miss Chelsea, who was also nowhere to be found.

Finally after nearly a week of solitude and unbearable boredom, she received an invitation to dine with Ben and a new dress from Mrs. Henry. The dear woman had reworked one of Lady Tolley's evening gowns for her and Vee was amazed how well it fit. The neckline was disturbingly low, but she didn't dare say a word, unwilling to hurt Mrs. Henry's feelings.

"It's beautiful," she exclaimed, hurrying across the room to hug Mrs. Henry. "I feel like a princess."

Mrs. Henry was clearly uncomfortable with her show of affection. "Oh, go on now. It's not every night a girl gets to dine with the master of the house." Mrs. Henry, convinced of Vee's humble beginnings, was apparently a romantic at heart. "Weel, get going girl. You don't want to keep the master waiting. You'll turn his head in that dress, see if you don't."

Vee rushed down the stairs before pausing outside the dining room door. Her stomach was doing nervous flip-flops and she wondered how Ben would react to her new dress. She had taken special pains, mainly in her scalp, allowing Mrs. Henry to fix her hair in a style the housekeeper insisted was the latest. The time and hair pulling involved in acquiring the coiffure convinced her women would not subscribe to this fashion for long. Her long blonde waves were perched precariously on top of her head with several long ringlets hanging by her cheeks and down the back. Vee was determined tonight Ben would not see her as an invalid or rag-a-muffin, but as an elegant lady.

Ben rose as she entered the room, crossing to meet her. He raised her hand to his lips and pressed a light kiss on her knuckles. "My lady, you look lovely." His dark eyes confirmed his words and she felt lightheaded with joy.

"Flattery will get you everywhere," she teased with a giggle.

He placed her hand on his arm and led her to the table. Pulling out the chair beside his, he helped her sit down as he resumed his place at the head of the table.

"Mrs. Henry seems to have gone to a great deal of effort to make this evening special. I feel it only fair to warn you that meals are not usually this fancy, as I assume you have discovered. Wine?" he asked.

"Yes, please. I'll be sure to thank Mrs. Henry for her trouble. She certainly is a wonderful housekeeper. She remade this dress for me from one of your great aunt's. I hope you don't mind."

"I'm sure Aunt Mary never looked as exquisite in it as you do. That shade of blue suits you. It matches your eyes perfectly."

She lowered her head at his compliment, sipping the wine, determined not blush again and anxious to turn the conversation away from her appearance. He didn't mention the kiss and for that, she was relieved. She was determined that tonight she would be charming, refined and a clever conversationalist. And she would absolutely *not* blush.

Unfortunately, in terms of witty banter, her mind was completely blank. *Nothing new there*, she thought with a loud sigh.

Mercifully, Mrs. Henry bustled into the room with a tray followed closely by Mr. Henry carrying a tureen of soup, breaking the uneasy silence. Vee had met the silent Mr. Henry at breakfast her first day out of the sick room and attempted to draw him into conversation only to receive grunts in reply to her comments. She assumed years of marriage to the outspoken Mrs. Henry had probably robbed him of the ability to speak. The housekeeper made it very difficult to get a word in edgewise, and Vee decided that after several years of marriage, Mr. Henry had simply stopped trying.

"Ah, dinner," Ben said, clearly grateful for the Henry's presence. "Mrs. Henry, you are a wonder."

Preening under his praise, Mrs. Henry placed the bowls in front of them, carefully ladling each of them a portion of a soup Vee couldn't recognize. Ben thanked the Henrys as they left before turning his gaze to the bowl before him.

"Chowder?" he asked, picking up his spoon cautiously.

"I was going to guess potato," she answered, following his lead.

"Yes, well, shall we?" he asked somewhat hesitantly, almost as if he were hoping for the best.

She was confused by his reticence. "Yes, I'm starving." Dipping her spoon into the thick soup, she saluted Ben before taking a big bite and immediately froze. Her mouth was assaulted by the most repulsive flavor imaginable. No, flavor was definitely not the correct term. It was quite simply the most repulsive taste she could ever recall, though granted, her memory was not long. She quickly glanced around the table for somewhere to spit it out before realizing that would be the worst possible thing she could do in front of the son of a duke. Swallowing heavily, unwilling to attempt chewing and prolonging the agony, she quickly attempted to stifle her unseemly choking with a healthy gulp of wine.

"Oh, my God," she said after several painful swallows, trying to rid her mouth of the horrific aftertaste.

"Yes," Ben said, putting his spoon back down without sampling the fare. "I was afraid of that. I really need to hire a cook. First thing tomorrow. Maybe even tonight."

"You knew," she said. "You knew what that would taste like, and yet you let me take a bite."

"Well, in all fairness, I've never had this particular soup from Mrs. Henry. At least, I don't think I have," he replied, seriously considering the soup.

"Ben, don't you think it would have been a nice gesture to warn me?" she asked. "I mean you just sat there and let me put it in my mouth. Of all the things I've forgotten, that soup is the one thing I'd like to forget and likely will never be able to."

He laughed at her comment, a loud, long laugh that stopped Vee in her tracks. She was utterly amazed at how the smile transformed his entire face. If she thought him

handsome before, now he was utterly gorgeous.

He struggled to maintain his composure obviously unaware of her close scrutiny. "I'm sorry, but it was worth your anger to see your face when the taste hit your tongue."

Losing her battle to remain irate and thrilled by his laughter, she began to snicker as well, deciding suffering the ghastly flavor was worth hearing Ben laugh. It was quite possibly the nicest sound she'd ever heard. "I'm so glad I amuse you," she said.

"However, I do fear that permanent damage has been done to my sense of taste."

"Yes, well, if it's any consolation, that may help you consume the rest of the meal, while *my* sense of taste, sadly, is still functioning." He was still smiling as he spoke, a fact that pleased her greatly. She suspected he didn't smile nearly enough, and the fact that she'd been able to make him laugh made the past week of tedious boredom worth the wait.

"I don't understand. I've been here for nearly a week and a half and the food has been quite nice," she said.

"There is a girl from the village who comes in each morning to prepare breakfast. She also does the baking, breads and some desserts. If you will recall, the rest has been rather simple fare—meat and cheeses. The reason I don't insist on formal meals is because, unfortunately, for all her talents, Mrs. Henry is a terrible cook." Ben shrugged as if this didn't pose a problem, which she found surprising. For the son of a duke, this man certainly didn't seem to be pampered or spoiled as she suspected many members of the aristocracy must be.

"How are we going to eat this soup?" she asked, suddenly concerned. "Or the rest of the meal? I don't want to hurt her feelings after she's gone to so much trouble."

"I agree," he said, considering their predicament. "I suppose there is no help for it. We'll simply have to—"

"I'm not eating it," she interrupted, her refusal adamant. "I adore Mrs. Henry, but that is asking too much!"

"I was going to say we'll have to throw it out the window."

"What?" she asked, thinking she'd surely heard him wrong.

"It's quite simple actually. I've done it before," he replied as if it were perfectly normal for a wealthy aristocrat to toss his evening meal out a window. "And as you said, we can't hurt the poor woman's feelings."

"That's true." Vee reconsidered his suggestion. "Very well, you toss and I'll watch the door."

Grinning at her mischievous tone, he grabbed their soup bowls and made a great pretense of tip-toeing to the window, feigning surprise over the fact that it was already conveniently open and dumping the contents into the shrubs below. Both raced back the table, resuming their seats mere seconds before Mr. and Mrs. Henry returned with the second course.

Vee bit her lip the entire time Mrs. Henry served them in an attempt to stifle the snickers threatening to burst out, especially when she noticed the suspicious look on Mr. Henry's face when he saw the empty bowls. Then she had to cover laughter with a feigned coughing fit when Ben complimented the unique flavor and texture of the soup. Once the Henrys departed, they broke out into peals of laughter.

Gasping, she said, "Dare we try to eat this?"

"You can," Ben said, attempting to catch his breath. "As I said before, my sense of



taste is still fully functioning.”

“This time you watch the door and I’ll dump.” She picked up what appeared to be some sort of white fish, raw on one side and burnt on the other.

The entire meal passed mirthfully as they took turns tossing each course out into the yard, praising Mrs. Henry for her fine cuisine and choking down laughter as Mr. Henry scanned the room looking for where they were stashing the food. After dessert—a very runny bread pudding—Ben rose from the table, rubbing his stomach as if he couldn’t eat another bite.

“Would you care to join me in the newly renovated and recently repaired library for a glass of brandy?”

“Dare I hope there is edible food in there?” she asked hopefully.

“Sadly, no.”

“Well, I don’t suppose it will hurt me to skip a meal. Wait a minute. Did you say library?” she asked excitedly. “Mrs. Henry didn’t show me that on the tour. Do you have many books?”

“It is quite an extensive collection, if I do say so myself. My great aunt and uncle were both avid readers and, of course, I added my books to theirs when I moved in. You like to read?” His voice was laced with surprise.

“Oh, I love it!” she said, as shocked as Ben by her response.

“Another clue to your past,” he said, acknowledging her confusion. “Your memories are already beginning to return to you. It won’t be long before they are all restored.”

Placing her hand on his proffered arm, he led her to the library.

As they entered the room, she gasped and let go of his arm, rushing over to the freshly painted bookshelves. “Oh,” she said, her voice full of awe. “Oh, it’s wonderful.” She ran her finger along the spines of each shelf of books, pausing now and then to take one off and look inside. “Would you mind if I read some of these while I’m here?” Vee asked, suddenly envisioning the end of her dull days.

“Of course not. Be my guest. I’m rather pleased to see this is something we have in common. I, too, am rather fond of reading. Have you read any of these?”

At her frown, he realized his mistake. “I’m sorry,” he said. “Of course you don’t recall specific titles.”

Her frown quickly turned back to a smile. “Well, if I have read them before I can’t remember, which means every book in the world is new to me. I can start over and enjoy them all again.”

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“Ah, ever the optimist, I see.” Ben was curious about her ability to read. While it was obvious she was an educated woman given her proper, albeit strange manner of speaking, it was out of the ordinary for a prostitute to be able to read. The entire idea led him to believe she was either a well-paid courtesan or simply a gently-bred woman who had fallen on hard times that left her with no choice, but to pursue her unsavory career. The thought of her falling from comfort to poverty angered him, and he realized that despite of where she came from, he would not let her return to that life. Once her memory returned, he would find her respectable work, perhaps as a paid companion.

He was pleased she was not the type of woman to constantly bemoan her state and it was her positive outlook on life that gave credence to his theory that she had most likely faced hard times in her life, yet come out a survivor. He admired that about her.

He began to wish he could be more like her in that regard. The last few years of his life he'd been living under a dark cloud. Memories of the war, the insalubrious nature of his work with Bow Street, the shabbiness of this house and Chelsea's silence left him constantly battling back a deep depression that never seemed to completely leave him. Somehow, this lady could make him laugh, make him forget his own woes, bring out a blithe part of him he thought died long ago.

He'd carefully avoided her for almost a week until he couldn't stand the thought of not seeing her again. He'd immersed himself in all the tedious paperwork that had piled up in the months and years, prior to his aunt's passing. When that failed to remove Vee from his thoughts, he'd decided to leave the house altogether and spent hours riding in the countryside. Yet all his efforts were for naught.

It was that damned kiss. He couldn't get it out of his mind. The softness of her lips as she accepted his kiss, the whisper of her sweet breath on his face. He'd spent the last week in a royal state, ready to break down the door between his room and hers every night, willing to beg her for one more kiss.

"Well, if you can't remember the books, then it is likely you cannot recall the taste of brandy either. Let me be the first to reintroduce you to it." Crossing to the sideboard, he picked up a crystal decanter and two glasses, pouring each of them a healthy share. Handing her the glass, he raised his in a toast. "Here's to new stories."

"And new friends," she added, tapping her glass lightly against his before taking a large sip. Hot tears sprang to her eyes.

"Uhh." She covered her mouth with her hand before glancing at his amused face. "You got me again," she said angrily.

"It is an acquired taste. Perhaps I should have mentioned it is best sipped, not gulped."

"Perhaps you should have," she replied, wiping the tears from her eyes. "You, sir, are not as nice as I once thought."

She turned away from him walking back to the bookshelves. Silent as a stalking tiger, he followed her, turning her and taking her into her arms.

"Oh, but you're wrong," he replied, his face inches from hers, his arms encasing her before he could think about his actions. "Let me show you how nice I can be."

With that, he bent his head to hers and his lips caressed hers in a kiss that was not gentle, not soft as the previous one had been, but full of passion. Coaxing her lips apart, his tongue swept into her mouth, touching her brandy-laced tongue lightly with his own. Ben was swept away by the sensations the kiss created in his body, and he silently rejoiced when her arms wrapped around his neck, her hands running through his hair as she pulled it gently, seemingly desperate to keep his lips and tongue on hers, desperate to keep his arms around her.

"Ben," she whispered, when he separated for the briefest of moments. Looking into her blue eyes, he was startled and distressed to see the depths of her desire, all too aware of where this could lead. Quickly, he dropped his arms, suddenly unsure of himself and of her. His undeniable attraction toward her was overwhelming, and he wondered if he'd ever felt such powerful feelings before.

"Vee," he said, keeping a firm grip on her elbows to steady her swaying.

"That was nice," she said breathlessly.

He stepped away, the distance he attempted to place between them physically

painful. "But once again, inappropriate. Until we discover who you are and where you belong, it would be inadvisable for us to continue down this path. I vow to you now I will not make anymore of these improper advances."

She seemed to consider his words, and he saw a definite glimmer of disappointment in her eyes. It was apparent she was familiar with kissing and not at all opposed to sleeping with him. Her promiscuous response drove home the thought that this woman was a ladybird. He didn't pay for whores or keep mistresses. He'd never paid for sex and never would. The problem with her was his feelings for her didn't seem to revolve around business affairs as much as an affair of the heart. The longer he spent in her company, the more he was convinced she truly was a prostitute and the more he was convinced he didn't stand a chance in hell of resisting her allure. Dammit, he didn't need this complication in his already convoluted life.

"You're right," she said. "It would be the height of foolishness to continue this way. Her voice quivered slightly. "After all, you are the son of a duke. And I am, well, I'm just Vee. For now anyway. The wine and brandy have gone straight to my head, and I'm feeling quite tired. I think I'll retire for the evening. Thank you, Ben, for a lovely dinner."

He cursed himself for allowing her to retreat without a word. He'd upset her, but he refused to continue making such a mess of a night that had begun so perfectly. As he stared at the empty doorway, he felt like the biggest fool in the world.

He didn't know if he was coming or going with this blasted woman. Her damned cheerfulness and happy personality had infected his blood causing him to act like an idiot. How could he have made that imprudent vow not to touch her again? Dear God, it was all he could do to keep from chasing her up the stairs right now. He'd never lusted after a woman like this. He needed to make a more concerted effort at finding out about her past and failing that, he needed to secure her a future. Somewhere else. The sooner the better because too many more nights like this and he would surely lose what little was left of his mind.

## Chapter Seven

### V is for Void

The next day Vee rose early hoping to catch Chelsea before she escaped. She'd noticed the little girl spent most of each day away from the house and its inhabitants, and she was determined to find out what she did with her time. She couldn't believe Ben and Mrs. Henry would condone Chelsea's actions.

Allowing a seven-year-old girl to spend hours alone in the woods was certainly not an appropriate way to raise a child, nor was she entirely sure it was safe. She didn't know the area well, but surely there could be wild animals and snakes in the woods. No one would know if any harm had befallen the girl until it was too late to help her.

Besides, shouldn't Chelsea be in school? What about her lessons? Since she was forbidden to clean the house or help with any other household duties and her attempts to cheer Ben up last night had fallen flat, she decided to turn her attention to the next item on her list of things to do at Waterplace—befriend Chelsea. God willing, she would be more successful in this endeavor.

Her wait in the hall didn't last long as Chelsea crept from her room just after sunrise.

"Good morning," Vee said softly, not wanting to startle her.

Fearful, green eyes rose to meet hers.

"I've wanted to see you again to thank you for coming to visit me the morning after my arrival." She pointed to the fading bruise on her forehead. "I had a bit of an accident and your, uh, Lord Benjamin was kind enough to help me."

Chelsea looked at her as she chatted on, her brows creased. Vee realized most people were probably unnerved by the girl's silence, but it made her feel sad. No child should have suffered what this little one had, and Vee's heart ached to reach her. "I was wondering if you would mind some company on your morning walk. I'm not familiar with the area, and I was hoping to convince you to serve as my guide."

Chelsea's face briefly betrayed her shock before her eyes shuttered closed, blank slates once again. It dawned on her that she'd never seen anyone talk to the child. It was almost as if the other adults in the household believed her refusal to speak was due to some inability to hear. Perhaps the way to break through Chelsea's self-imposed solitude was through words, not through more silence.

Although given Chelsea's blank expression, she assumed it may take a lot of words. She looked at Vee for a long time before walking past. Vee shrugged and decided to take it as an invitation to follow.

"Wonderful," she said as she reached Chelsea at the front door. "Where should we go first?"

Chelsea glanced at her over her shoulder, obviously shocked by her doggedness, before continuing down the front steps and through a well-worn path in the woods to the right of the overgrown gardens.

"Oh, my," she exclaimed. "Ben needs to add a gardener to his list of servants to hire." Chelsea continued on as if she hadn't spoken at all. Her continual silence and utter lack of expression was unsettling, but she decided regardless of her failure to respond,

Chelsea was listening. She could tell by the girl's brief pauses and sidelong glances.

"I love flowers myself, but hate the actual chore of pruning and weeding and keeping a garden up. Oh, another recollection. I'll have to tell Ben, I mean, Lord Benjamin," she corrected, aware that it would be inappropriate to refer to Ben in such informal terms to his young ward.

Chelsea's gait was fast and sure, in spite of the high grass and rocks in the way. Vee stumbled several times in her attempt to keep up, determined not to let the child lose her in the woods, which after fifteen minutes of fast walking, became quite obvious as the girl's intention.

After several stumbles and near falls on Vee's part, Chelsea's increasingly fast walk turned into a run. Not willing to back down from the girl's blatant challenge and a bit unsure she could find her way back to the house, she took off after her. They raced for several minutes, Vee keeping pace with the child until an unseen root captured her left foot and sent her sprawling facedown into a pile of crisp leaves.

"Oof," Vee cried, the wind knocked from her lungs. She didn't have to look up to know that, mercifully, Chelsea had stopped running.

Gingerly, she rolled over, lying amidst the dry leaves for a few minutes, taking several long, deep steadying breaths before rising.

"Ow," she cried when she attempted to put pressure on her left foot. "I was afraid of that," she murmured, sitting back down heavily and glancing at her rapidly swelling ankle. "I've twisted it." She looked over her shoulder to make sure Chelsea hadn't escaped. The girl's expressionless face, of course, betrayed nothing.

"I'm not sure I can walk back alone. Would you help me?" She hoped the silent girl had an ounce of compassion in her.

Chelsea walked over to where she was sitting in the grass and studied her injured ankle. Without a word, she took off running back through the woods. "Wait," she called desperately. "Please don't leave me." But the small girl was gone in an instant.

"Great," she mumbled. With a sigh, she rose slowly, hopping on one foot in hopes of finding a large stick. If she was going to make the long trek back to the house alone, she was going to need a cane of some sort to lean on. Eventually, she gave up her hopping search, dropping to her hands and knees to look. Crawling around in a long dress was no easy chore, and she was beginning to become quite worried when it was apparent that she wasn't going to find any fallen branches large enough or strong enough to support her weight. After nearly half an hour, she was completely frantic, wondering how she would get back and if anyone would miss her before nightfall.

"Why do I get the feeling this always happens to me?" she murmured aloud.

"Because," a deep, familiar voice answered, "despite your amnesia, you seem to have a strong sense of who you are."

Relief enveloped her as she turned around to see Ben standing over her.

He reached a hand down to help her up. "You do seem to be somewhat clumsy, Vee."

"Clumsy?" She was insulted briefly, before realizing he was likely right. "Yes, it would seem I am. How did you know where to find me?"

With a slight smile and strange look in his eyes, he stepped aside and for the first time, she realized that Chelsea was standing behind him. Delighted that she hadn't truly been deserted, she bent over to hug the tiny girl, all her weight supported on her one good

leg.

“Oh, Chelsea, I knew you’d never leave me. You sweet, sweet girl.” Vee felt the child go stiff in her arms at the unexpected embrace, but she refused to let go. The child needed love and she was going to see that she got it.

“You’re my hero,” Vee whispered, pulling away to smile down at her, then rise once more.

Unfortunately, she forgot about her injured ankle and began to totter again, arms flailing. “Ouch,” she cried only to be scooped up by Ben before she hit the ground.

A small smile, noticed by both Ben and Vee, broke out on Chelsea’s lips before she recalled herself. She stifled it quickly before turning and escaping once again.

“Did you see that?” Ben whispered with Vee in his arms.

“She smiled.” She suddenly felt happier than she had been since her arrival. She was in Ben’s arms once again, and her clumsiness had made Chelsea smile. In fact, it had encouraged the girl to go to Ben for help. Not bad for a day’s work, she decided, and she hadn’t even had breakfast yet.

“She smiled.” He looked at her with something closely resembling awe.

Taken aback by his wonder, she struggled for release. “You can put me down,” she said. “I can walk back if you don’t mind me leaning on you.”

“Nonsense,” he said, starting back toward the house. “I’ll carry you.”

“Ben—” she started.

“And none of that foolishness about being too heavy.”

“All right,” she conceded, since she was right where she wanted to be. “I’m probably lighter today anyway. I didn’t have much dinner last night.”

Ben laughed and they continued along the path, each taking turns listing all the wonderful foods they wished they could have for dinner that night instead of the standard meat, cheese and bread fare, and she sensed the beginning of a beautiful friendship blooming.

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The next few days passed in a timeless sort of quality. The swelling in her ankle was gone by the next morning, and she and Chelsea seemed to have reached a silent truce. Each day they went for a long walk after breakfast, Vee talking about anything and everything they saw, while Chelsea observed in silence. She wasn’t able to provoke another smile from the girl, but she hadn’t given up trying. Ben worked all morning with the men from the village, making repairs to the house and stable. She and Chelsea helped the newly hired cook make a simple lunch for the men at noontime and then the entire household would eat al fresco in the grass under the tall trees at the front of the house, enjoying the lovely summer weather.

Each afternoon, she and Chelsea would escape to the library, sitting for long hours. She read as the child looked at pictures in the books. She was convinced there was an intelligent mind inside the girl. Several times, she offered to read to her, but each time, Chelsea would scowl, pick up her book and leave the room.

The evening meal was Vee’s favorite time as she and Ben would sit alone together and discuss the day. He told her of his plans for the house and stable, describing his plans to begin breeding and training horses. Fascinated, she asked if he would teach Chelsea and her how to ride and he readily agreed. Sometimes they would talk about what she

was reading. She began to believe that somewhere in her past she had at least been educated and well-read. Shakespeare's plays and Byron's poetry emerged as her new favorites since she couldn't recall her old ones.

Each night ended with the two of them sharing a brandy in the library, reading quietly by the fire until bedtime. True to his word, he didn't attempt to kiss her again. She realized that it was foolish to hope for more than friendship from the duke's son, and after several days of such quiet contentment in his presence, she convinced herself that his pleasant companionship was enough to fill the void she felt without her memories.

The one topic of conversation he no longer seemed willing to talk about was her past. Every time she mentioned her fear of never regaining her memory, Ben brushed the comment aside with a simple reassurance that it would return and if it didn't, the past was the past. Every day when she asked if he'd received word from London, he mumbled something about these things taking time.

After a few days of his vague comments, a small, niggling suspicion began to take root and grow in the back of her mind that he knew something about her identity he wasn't telling her. Each time the thought appeared, she dismissed it, chastising herself for doubting Ben, who had been nothing but kind to her. Surely if he knew anything, he would tell her. After all, he knew how important it was to her that she discover her name and her place in life. To fill the black void that was her unknown past.

## Chapter Eight

### V is for Visitor

By the end of Vee's first month in residence, daily life at Waterplace had taken on a stable, comfortable feel. Standing at the edge of the yard, Ben watched her attempt to master the side saddle. She'd been practicing for days and he had to admit, she was a terrible rider. In direct contrast to her unease atop a horse, Chelsea had taken to riding as a fish takes to water. Even now, she and Chelsea were circling the yard, Vee stiff and uncomfortable, Chelsea carefree and relaxed.

Smiling, he was amazed when he considered the difference one woman's presence could make in a home. With Vee's help, he'd managed to employ a gardener, two chambermaids, a young stable boy and he finally had the time to begin the interviewing process for the important position of head groom.

Mrs. Henry was embracing her role of housekeeper now that she actually had servants to guide and organize and Mr. Henry was pleased with his new role as the butler. Years of hard work had taken their toll on his body, and the older man was grateful for the opportunity to take on a job that was less physically challenging.

The happiest day was the day he'd finally managed to retain a capable cook—a stout woman whose name, ironically, was Mrs. Cooke. The night he announced Mrs. Cooke's employment, they had a miniature celebration and Vee, delighted with Mrs. Cooke's name, decided to rename everyone in the house according to their roles. She'd teasingly referred to him as Mr. Dukeson and Chelsea as Miss Ponygirl. Mr. Henry became Mr. Butler and Mrs. Henry she simply referred to as Her Majesty, much to the housekeeper's delight. It was the first time he'd seen a genuine smile cross Chelsea's lips and stay there. Vee brought life and laughter to the house and for that, he would be forever grateful.

The greatest change she had wrought in the house was Chelsea's presence. Although the child still wouldn't speak and rarely smiled, she no longer hid. Following Vee's lead, he began engaging in one-sided conversations with the child in an effort to set her at ease. No major bridges had been crossed with regards to their relationship, but for the first time since Chelsea's arrival in his life, he felt hope for their future together not simply as guardian and ward, but perhaps someday as father and daughter.

His biggest success with the child came due to Vee's simple behest. He'd purchased a mare and a pony and true to his word, took the two females out for riding lessons. Glancing across the yard, he had to admit he was thrilled by Chelsea's enthusiasm for it. The child was a natural equestrian and he was delighted to share his expertise with her. A love for horses was something they shared, and he rejoiced to see her smile now when she thought no one was looking. Twice in the past week, he'd spied her sneaking apples out to the stable as she clearly adored her little pony.

Sighing heavily, he considered all the things still left to do. His hunt for a governess hadn't been as successful as his search for the other servants, but if he was truthful with himself, he hadn't been looking very hard lately. Chelsea seemed at ease in Vee's presence and his lovely ladybird, over the course of the last fortnight, had taken over all care for the girl herself. She fed, bathed and helped Chelsea dress, in addition to seeing to



the child's meals and tucking her into bed each night.

Vee's personal riding lessons, unlike Chelsea's, were not as successful. She was clearly terrified of the horses, in spite of his assurances that they would not harm her.

"Try not to sit so stiffly," he coaxed.

"I'm sitting stiffly because I am stiff," she answered sharply. "We've been at this for days and my legs and bottom are crying in agony."

"You simply need to give your body time to become accustomed to the position. It will get easier."

"I don't want it to get easier," she said, a slight whine in her voice. "Why can't I ride in the carriage behind the horse?"

"Vee, we've been through this before. It's not always practical. You need this skill," he cajoled.

"Why? Apparently, I've lived this much of my life without it."

Her words drove home to him again her likely origins. It would not be uncommon for a prostitute to never have ridden a horse. It would have been more unlikely if she had. Horses were a commodity the lower classes couldn't afford.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of another horse approaching the house. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a tall man with light brown hair approaching on a black gelding. He sat upon the seat with confidence, and Ben could see he was an excellent horseman.

"Ah, my afternoon interview," he said.

"Another candidate for head groom?" Vee asked, aware of his frustration at not being able to find someone he felt worthy of the important position. He'd held several failed interviews in the past few days.

"Yes. It looks like this one may have some promise. If you will excuse me, I'll go join him. Do me a favor and take two more laps around the circle before you dismount? Practice makes perfect," he said with a smug smile. He turned away, but not before he caught her sticking her tongue out at what she thought was his back.

"Tsk, ts, ts. That's not very ladylike." He looked back at her over his shoulder. "Just for that, perhaps we should make it four laps. Chelsea," he called to the girl as she came up behind Vee. "Be a good girl and make sure Vee does all her laps, all right?"

Chelsea nodded, grinning widely at his jest. He felt his heart go warm at her response until her smile quickly faded and her face went stark white. For the briefest of moments, he thought he saw sheer terror flash in her eyes.

"Chelsea?" he asked. Vee turned at the anxious note in his voice and also noticed the girl's pasty complexion.

"Chels," she said, as the stranger interviewing for the job approached them.

"Good afternoon," the man said, curiously studying the tableau before him.

"Good afternoon," Ben answered, riding over to where the man had stopped. "I am Lord Benjamin Sinclair." He held out his hand to the stranger.

"Frank Prescott, milord. I'm here about the groom position," he replied shaking Ben's hand.

"Yes, if you will give me a moment." Ben turned quickly to look at Chelsea again. Her head was bowed and she looked as if she was in serious danger of becoming ill. He knew she was uncomfortable in the presence of strangers, but he'd never seen her respond like this.

He rode back to Vee, who hadn't taken her eyes off the young girl. "Vee," he began. She looked at him, her face full of concern.

"I think perhaps I should take Chelsea back to her room. We've had enough riding for one day."

"I agree," Ben added, dismounting. Reaching up he helped Vee off the horse, noticing that Mr. Prescott had also dismounted and was approaching Chelsea with the intention of assisting her. He watched as Chelsea, watching him with fearful eyes, went stiff in the saddle, her small hands trembling violently on the reins.

"Mr. Prescott." Ben hurried past the man before he got any closer. "Why don't you go on to the house? The butler will show you to my office and I will join you in a moment."

The man paused for an instant, his eyes still locked with Chelsea's. "I was only trying to help the little lady," he said, as Ben lifted Chelsea from the pony.

"Yes," he replied. "And I appreciate that. If you will go on to the house, I will be right there."

The man paused for a moment before turning abruptly, leading his horse back in the direction from which he'd come.

Bending down, he looked at Chelsea's ashen face. "Chelsea?" he asked, uncertain what had come over her.

She refused to meet his eyes and he watched as the young girl slowly retreated back into herself as if the past few weeks had never happened. The blank, dead stare that had all but disappeared reappeared with a vengeance.

"I'll take care of her," Vee said softly, her hand resting lightly on his shoulder. Glancing up, he saw that she had noticed Chelsea's retreat as well.

Rising, he sighed heavily, wondering if he would ever be able to do anything right for this child. Depressed, he nodded stiffly before turning and heading back to the stable, leading Scout and Chelsea's small pony. He watched Vee kneel in front of the small girl and heard her speaking in calming tones to the child.

"Chelsea," she said softly. "I know how much you've lost. But I want you to know that you can trust Lord Benjamin. He only wants the best for you, as do I."

His heart sank as he watched Chelsea's young face and eyes remain expressionless, an ability of hers that he had come to despise. Wordlessly Chelsea turned and ran off toward the woods. Vee, still in possession of her horse's reins, couldn't follow. Instead she turned toward him, her smile sad, yet hopeful.

"Not to worry," she said in her typically optimistic tone. "No doubt she's just tired from all the riding. Things will look up tomorrow. Come on," she continued. "I'll help you with the horses, and then you have an interview to conduct."

\* \* \* \*

Later that afternoon, Ben asked Vee to join him in the study.

"How is Chelsea?" he asked.

She shook her head solemnly. "I wish I knew. She's still hiding in the woods. I haven't seen her since our riding lesson."

"What the devil set her off? She was doing so well." He couldn't shake his frustration, upset by her retreat.

"I know. Ben, perhaps it was foolish of us to expect so much so soon. She's young

and has suffered a great deal. It's going to take time and patience. I know how much you've come to care for her. If nothing else, the last few days have proven there truly is a sweet, little girl inside that frightened shell just waiting to break out."

Sighing heavily, he leaned back in his chair and considered her words. Somehow, she always managed to help him see the bright side of things in even the darkest situations. Quite frankly, he had long ago reached the end of his rope as to what to do for his young ward, and Vee seemed to be the answer to a prayer as far as Chelsea was concerned.

"Perhaps you're right," he said at last, feeling slightly more relaxed. "Thank you."

"For what?" she asked.

"For helping me through the muddy waters of this guardianship. I fear I would still not be allowed anywhere near the child if you hadn't been here to ease the way." He realized the seriousness of his words and the truth behind them. She had brought the young girl out of the woods and back into the house. She had helped Chelsea not to be frightened of him and vice versa. He'd learned, by Vee's example, how to have a conversation with Chelsea, where before the two had lived in total silence.

"You would have figured it out on your own, with or without me," she said modestly. "So did you hire Mr. Prescott?"

He grinned, amused by her uncanny ability to turn the topic away from herself, uncomfortable with praise of any sort.

He let her escape this time. "Yes, I did. His references were impeccable and I was impressed with his horsemanship. He's gone to retrieve his belongings from the inn where he stayed last night and will be back first thing in the morning."

"I suppose it was his initial appearance that spooked Chelsea," she added, though her voice betrayed her uncertainty.

"I must confess I thought twice about hiring him given Chelsea's response. Do you think I was wrong?" he asked.

"Oh, no," she reassured him. "You said yourself she's always been skittish around strangers, especially males. I'm sure she will warm up to Mr. Prescott, just as she has Mr. Henry, Jimmy and William." William was the new footman and Jimmy the young stable boy. Vee had told him several nights ago that she suspected Chelsea had actually developed a small crush on the affable chestnut-haired lad.

"I'm sure you're correct. Actually, I called you in here because it's your situation I wanted to discuss."

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Vee felt her blood run cold. She'd been waiting for this conversation for weeks. She was beginning to come to terms with the fact her memory may never return. She couldn't expect Ben to allow her to continue living under his roof indefinitely and she'd already overstayed her welcome.

Unfortunately, she truly didn't know where she could go or what she could do to earn a living. Even without her memory, she had a sense that nothing around her was familiar, not the clothes she wore, the food she ate nor the books she read. She'd had to figure out how to brush her teeth and during her woman's time, Mrs. Henry, much to the embarrassment of them both, had to explain how she was to take care of her monthly flow. She couldn't explain the fact that everything and everyone around her seemed somehow off. It all felt wrong, but she was at a loss to explain it, so she kept her feelings

to herself.

"I've been thinking as well," she began. "I cannot begin to express my gratitude to you for all that you've done for me."

"Vee, it's a pleasure having you—" he started, but she continued without allowing him to finish his statement.

"I realize that I cannot stay here much longer, but I was hoping perhaps you would give me a few more days to figure out where I can go."

"Go?" Ben asked, perplexed. "Do you mean leave? Here?"

"I can't impose upon you forever. You have enough responsibilities and I'm not one of them." She crossed the room to the mantle, hoping he wouldn't see her hands shaking. The thought of leaving the sanctuary of Waterplace frightened her more than she cared to admit.

"Like hell you aren't!" he replied loudly, rising to come to her side.

"Pardon me?" She looked into his dark eyes, shocked to find them clouded with anger.

"You are my responsibility. You have been since the moment I found you under that blasted tree. You aren't leaving here until you've recovered your memory, so get that notion out of your head. Good God, woman, where would you go?" His anger grew and for the first time, she could imagine what a force he must have been on the battlefield. He was towering over her and roaring like a hungry lion.

"I don't know where I can go, but—" she began.

"But nothing," he interrupted. "You are staying here and that is final."

She smiled at the image of her gentle giant looming over her with his arms akimbo and his glowering expression daring her to contradict him. She was also immensely relieved. She was terrified at the prospect of striking out on her own with everything around her so unfamiliar.

"Very well," she said softly. "Thank you, Ben."

"Well, that's good," he said, somewhat calmer after her quick concession. "That is not what I wanted to talk to you about, although I suppose, it is somewhat related. I think until we are able to determine who you are, you should consider working for me." Ben suddenly looking uneasy and she wondered what on earth he was suggesting.

"Work for you?" she asked. "Doing what?"

"I would like to hire you as a governess," he answered. "For Chelsea."

"Governess?" His proposition took her by surprise. She turned to walk toward the bay window by his desk. Through the curtains, she could see Chelsea reemerging from the woods to sit on a secluded bench in the garden.

"I know it won't be an easy task, teaching a child who won't speak, but to be quite honest, you're the only one who seems to be able to reach the child in any way. I mean, she smiles at you," he added with a sheepish grin, as she considered the fact that Chelsea's smiles were so very important to him.

"Smiles at me?" She shook her head. "Ben, I adore Chelsea, you must know that, but I don't know how to—I mean—I'm not trained to work with a child like her. I don't know the first thing about encouraging her speak, and I would be too afraid of failing. She's such a precious little girl. She deserves a teacher who knows how to teach her. I'm, well, I don't know what I am, do I?" She tried to speak lightheartedly, but her words sounded flat even to her own ears.

“You’ve been here only a month and you’ve made much more progress with her than I did in the two months previous. I’ve made inquiries into finding a proper governess for her, but all my attempts have failed. No one will take a job teaching a child who won’t speak. Vee, please. I’m imploring you. If you won’t take this position, I have no other choices. I’m terrified Chelsea will only withdraw deeper into herself until no one will ever be able to reach her. You saw her this afternoon. Every step forward seems to be followed by ten paces back.” Ben rested his fists on his desk, his head bowed.

Each word he spoke seemed to reinforce his misery, and she suspected he considered each of his failed attempts with Chelsea as another chink in the promise he’d made to his friend. He had been unable to save Ian on the battlefield or protect his wife from the fire that had robbed her of her life, and now he felt helpless to save Ian’s young daughter.

“Please,” he whispered.

She saw the anguish in his eyes as he pleaded for her help and a feeling of protectiveness flooded her body. In the few weeks she’d been here, she’d witnessed enough of the overwhelming sadness that continually lingered in Chelsea and Ben’s eyes. They were two lonely people adrift in the world looking for someone, anyone to help them find their way. She knew what they truly needed was to find their way to each other.

Smiling sadly, she realized she could empathize with their pain. After a month of no memories, she was feeling much the same way. Why was no one looking for her? Who was she and where did she belong? She was as alone and adrift as the inhabitants of Waterplace.

“Okay,” she said, without another thought. “Okay, I’ll do it.”

With a loud shout of joy, Ben circled the desk, picking her up in his arms and spinning her around. Laughing, she struggled to get loose. “Put me down, you lunatic,” she said mirthfully. “I have a few conditions you’ll need to agree to first.”

“Anything,” he agreed, gently placing her back on her feet.

“Don’t you want to hear the conditions first?” she asked, a bit dizzy from his joyful spin and his closeness. It had been weeks since his vow not to kiss her, and she was beginning to wish he’d never uttered the words, no matter how sensible they were.

“Whatever they are, I’m sure they are fine,” Ben replied.

She shook her head, exasperated with his enthusiasm. “Maybe you should hear them first.”

“Very well,” Ben said, bowing formally. “What are your conditions?”

Tucking her dress beneath her, she sat on the chaise, motioning for Ben to join her. “First, I want to have time to continue to find out who I am. I cannot give up on discovering my identity.”

“Of course not,” Ben said. “I wouldn’t expect you to. As you know, I have sent numerous inquiries to all the surrounding towns and to friends in London. If anyone hears of a missing woman, they will let me know immediately. I’m as anxious to help you in this endeavor as ever.”

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Cursing himself for being a coward, Ben silently hoped she would eventually give up her quest to find out who she was. As the days passed, it seemed less and less likely that her memories would return. Hiring her as Chelsea’s governess gave him the perfect opportunity to save her from returning to her unsavory past as well as still the questions

he saw in the eyes of the townspeople in regards to the strange woman living in his house.

It was only a matter of time before word spread from the newly hired servants to the upper echelons of society that Lord Benjamin had a mistress living under his roof with his ward. He refused to see either Vee or Chelsea hurt by such vicious lies. She was a kind-hearted beautiful woman, and she deserved a second chance at a good life. As Chelsea's governess, her presence in the house would be respectable, acceptable.

Besides, he simply couldn't stand the thought of her returning to a life of prostitution. The idea produced feelings of anger and violence in him; he feared what he would do to anyone who learned the truth of her past. He was anxious that her inexplicable and suspect arrival never be revealed.

"Thank you Ben. I don't think I've said that to you enough for all you've done. I can never repay you for your kindness to me."

"Yes, you can," he said. "You can help me with Chelsea."

"Right, about that, you said you would like to hire me as Chelsea's governess. While I will agree to serve as her teacher, temporarily of course, until you find a proper governess, I will not accept payment from you." He began to protest, but she cut his argument short.

"No," she said, "hear me out, I insist. As I said, I am quite frankly at a loss as to how to convince Chelsea to trust me enough to speak. I'm also uncertain how I can teach her, but I am willing to try. There is a sharp mind inside that head of hers, and I don't think the actual teaching will be the problem. However, you must admit, it will be difficult to evaluate how well she is learning the lessons if she doesn't answer the questions or read aloud."

"Vee," Ben interrupted, "I cannot expect you to work with her day in and day out for no compensation. That rings too much of slave labor and I refuse to agree."

"You've given me a safe place to stay, and you cared for me when I was injured. Room and board is more than enough compensation."

"I disagree." Ben rose to stand by the mantle. "All governesses are given room and board in addition to pay. It will be the same for you. I must insist. You will need the money when your memory returns."

"We don't know anything about my family, so how do you know I need money? For all we know, I'm quite wealthy," Vee replied, suspicion clouding her eyes.

"That's true," Ben answered slowly, cursing his wayward tongue. The last thing he wanted to do was share his personal suspicions about her past with her. For one reason, he didn't know for sure she was a courtesan, although all the evidence certainly seemed to point in that direction. Her attire upon her arrival was scandalous to say the least. Her heated responses to his kisses and the fact no one was looking for her in the immediate area suggested she was not a proper lady from an upstanding family or even a servant. It was quite frankly as if she had dropped from the sky.

"You haven't discovered anything about me or my family, have you, Ben?" she asked, eyes narrowed.

"Of course not." He turned his back to her as he spoke. She was far too perceptive for his comfort, and on more than one occasion, he'd begun to think she knew he was hiding the truth from her. "I merely meant, in case you needed the money."

"Funny, it sounded as if you knew for certain that I would need it." She rose and

crossed the room to stand before him. "This isn't the first time you've alluded to knowing something about my past. What is it? What do you know that you aren't telling me? Please. I need to know."

As he gazed into her tormented eyes, for the first time, he began to question whether he had been right to withhold his suspicions about her previous occupation. All he had was the scandalous outfit he found her in, the fact that no one was looking for her and the undeniable sexual appeal that seemed to seep from every pore in her body.

"Vee," he began, intent on sidestepping the question once again.

"No! Enough!" she yelled, sensing his retreat.

Shocked, he realized it was the first time he'd ever heard her raise her voice.

"No more lying," she continued, hotly. "If you can't tell me what you know, then the deal is off. I—"

"Dammit, Vee. I don't want to hurt you!" he yelled back.

"Hurt me? Is my family dead? Am I destitute? What? What is it?" she cried, her eyes welling up with tears as he felt overwhelmed with guilt for concealing his worries from her. She considered him a friend and she trusted him. The idea that he'd betrayed that trust by hiding his suspicions about her past from her left him feeling as though he'd been punched in the stomach.

"You lied to me," she whispered, as his eyes exposed his feelings of guilt. "All this time, you've been lying to me."

"No," he answered, his voice full of anguish. "I've never lied to you, Vee. I don't know who you are. I swear it."

"But you know something, don't you?"

He averted his eyes, afraid to let her see the accuracy of her words reflected back.

"Good God, can you not understand how much not knowing hurts? I can't take this anymore! I can't stand this—this horrible, empty feeling inside of me!" She stormed away from him across the room, clearly plagued by the frustration of her situation, angry tears threatening to fall.

"Wait here," he said roughly as he walked out of the room, leaving her alone. He was only gone a moment and when he returned, he placed a small bundle on the desk beside her.

Curious, she approached the desk.

"This is what you were wearing when I found you," he said gruffly.

Holding up the material, she looked at him sharply. "Why didn't you give me this earlier?"

He merely shrugged and she examined the clothing more closely.

He waited, hoped, prayed the clothing wouldn't serve as a jolt to her memory. God help him if his suspicions were correct and she was bombarded with what he was certain would be distressing recollections for her. After a few moments, he could see that the clothing was as foreign to her as everything else.

After the outfit failed to evoke any recollections, he watched as a tremor of shock traveled through her body.

"I was wearing this?" she asked weakly, no doubt realizing how shameful the garments were. He nodded, unwilling to look her in the eye.

He realized the moment she comprehended what the clothing must represent. The outfit was improper in the extreme. The non-existent skirt and tight shirt couldn't

possibly fool her into believing anything other than the truth. He pondered how foreign the long dresses Mrs. Henry altered for her must have felt. Perhaps these clothes would feel more natural to her, but if that was the case, then there could be no question as to her role in society. She wasn't a noble woman, servant or even villager.

"My God," she exclaimed. "That would mean I'm a—"

"Vee," he began, upset by the overwrought look on her face. "This clothing means nothing."

"Nothing?" she repeated, her voice thick with mock laughter. "Then why hide it from me? Why not show this to me? Why strip it off me in the dead of night before Mrs. Henry could see me?"

When he didn't reply, she threw the clothing back on his desk angrily. "I'll tell you why, Ben. Because they most definitely insinuate that I, that I am—" she paused, taking a long, deep breath to calm herself. "I'm a whore."

"No," he protested, but she held up her hand, stilling his words.

"Yes," she whispered.

Then without another word, she turned and fled from the room. Ben rushed to the window as he listened to the front door slam shut. He watched her escape into the still overgrown garden. He wanted to run after her, reassure her she was wrong, tell her any lie he could conjure to put a smile back on her lovely face. His feelings toward her were too powerful, too overwhelming, too confusing. If he followed her, he was afraid of what he would say, what exactly he would do to take away the desolation he'd just seen in her eyes. And regardless of his feelings, he knew acting upon them would only hurt her worse. A quick glance at the sky confirmed a storm was brewing outside as well as inside, and soon his demons would return.

Clenching his hands into a fist, he walked back to his desk, determined to block out the blackness threatening to engulf him again. Perhaps if he worked hard enough, he could beat back the dark fog clouding his mind. For an entire month, he'd managed to keep the angry, painful thoughts at bay.

He had work to do. He couldn't lose control again. Not now. He still had too many problems to solve—a stable to repair, horses to buy, more servants to hire, a seven-year-old to care for and now Vee. Dammit, he could barely take care of himself and the child. He did not have time or room in his life for a clumsy courtesan with hair the color of the sun's rays and eyes as blue as the sky. Her bright, sunny disposition didn't belong here. It left him unsettled, confused. It made him hope for things that could never be.

"Too late," he muttered as he watched the dark clouds forming outside before closing the curtains. Slowly, he walked across the room and locked the door as the black humor consumed him, dragging him back down into its too familiar damned pit. For him, there was no escape. His soul had been condemned to Hell years ago and there it would remain.

\* \* \* \*

Vee sucked in the fresh air, trying to still the tears threatening to fall. She hated crying all the time, but the idea she could be a prostitute upset her more than the fact she couldn't remember her own name. She'd spent the last month desperate to recall some part of her past and now she was suddenly anxious to keep it all buried.

"This can't be true," she mumbled. The idea of sleeping with men for money



repulsed her. Surely a simple knock on the head couldn't change her personal values and her morals, as well as rob her of her identity. It wasn't possible. Was it?

Finding a bench concealed amongst the rose bushes, she sank onto it, weary beyond belief. The sky had gone as dark as her mood, yet she refused to return to the house. Her optimism gone, she gave into the utter sadness she felt and let the tears come. For weeks, she tried to remain cheerful and positive, despite the fact her memory was not returning, no one appeared to be looking for her, she had no money, no home and no decent clothing of her own.

Ben's offer, asking her to serve as Chelsea's governess, had been a gift. It would have given her life a purpose, an escape from the limbo in which she'd been living and a means by which to repay the handsome gentleman for all his kindnesses to her. But now, she couldn't possibly accept the position. Now, she couldn't even believe he had offered it. What could he have been thinking? What person in his right mind would want a prostitute teaching his child?

And why had she insisted Ben tell her about his suspicions? Why hadn't she left well enough alone? She could have accepted his generous offer and been happily ensconced in her room right now planning lessons and looking toward the future rather than trying to recall some seedy past. Free from this hell and all these questions tormenting her.

For the first time, she considered the fact that perhaps she didn't want her memories to return. Perhaps her subconscious was purposely keeping them buried because they were too unhappy, too unpleasant to recollect. Perhaps the events that led up to her being knocked unconscious under that tree were too painful and her mind was locking them away to protect itself.

Running her finger through her hair roughly, she muttered a curse. A hand on her shoulder jerked her out of her reverie.

"Oh!" She turned to see Chelsea's head over the back of the bench. The little girl flinched at her startled response. "Oh, Chelsea. You scared me."

Vee turned around quickly trying to hide her tears, her feeble attempts at getting herself back together failing. Her breath was still coming in great sobbing gasps that were resistant to her efforts to stop. Chelsea came around the bench slowly and stood in front of her.

"Oh, honey, I'm so s-sorry to let you s-see me like this," she said, her words breaking as she saw genuine worry in the young girl's eyes. "I'll be okay."

Without a word, Chelsea climbed onto her lap facing her. With tiny hands, she brushed the tears off Vee's face, leaning forward slowly to place a soft kiss on her cheek. She smiled tremulously at the tender gesture, slowly embracing the young girl, silently marveling over how sensitive the girl was to her suffering. She has a heart of gold in that small chest, she thought, clinging gratefully to the warmth of the tiny child. Chelsea, a connoisseur of pain, could recognize true anguish in another and knew exactly how to console her.

They sat under the roses for nearly an hour, even as the dark clouds began to sprinkle them with tiny raindrops, holding onto each other, each lost in the sad thoughts plaguing them. Soon, the embrace turned into a gentle rocking as Vee listened to Chelsea's breathing turn into the deep inhalations of sleep. Shifting her slightly, she held her as one would an infant, looking down into the girl's peaceful face at rest.

She silently chastised herself for her self-pity. No matter what problems she faced,

they couldn't be worse than what this child had endured. Losing her mother and grandfather in a fire, coming to live in an unfamiliar house surrounded by strangers—regardless of how kind—and too fearful to open up and speak to anyone. Ashamed of herself, Vee vowed that regardless of what happened to her, she would dedicate herself to helping Chelsea for as long as she could. Decision made, she closed the door to her past firmly behind her and carried Chelsea into the house just as the black skies opened up and a pounding rain began to fall. Determined to make amends for her past sins, she walked resolutely into the house and into the future.

## Chapter Nine

### V is for Violence

The next morning Vee went in search of Ben. Things always look better in the morning, she decided, and today was no exception. She felt better, more like herself, whoever that was. She even felt optimistic and was anxious to share those feelings with him. She felt bad about the way she'd left things yesterday, and she wanted to apologize for running out during their conversation and to ask if she could stay on to work with Chelsea until a proper governess was found.

Once a true teacher was hired for the young girl, she realized she would have to leave. It was the height of impropriety for a woman of her questionable past to be living with a nobleman and his young ward. She'd already stayed too long and could only imagine the reason Ben was not being ostracized was because he hadn't gone out into society since her arrival.

According to Mrs. Henry, several of the local ladies paid calls the moment they learned the Duke of Pelsham's second son had taken up residence. One awkward visit seated on rubble and inches of dust with a glowering, silent giant intimidated the busybodies enough that they did not bother to return after Ben's first week here. Still, the new servants knew she was staying there, so word was bound to leak out sooner or later.

"Oh, good morning dear," Mrs. Henry said as Vee descended the staircase.

"Good morning," she replied. "I was looking for Lord Benjamin. I need to have a quick word with him before breakfast."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible for a day or two," Mrs. Henry said with a deep sigh.

"Oh, has he gone somewhere?" she asked, concerned her anger yesterday had driven him away.

"No, nothing like that," Mrs. Henry replied vaguely with a glance at the closed door to Ben's office.

Vee followed her gaze. "Is he in his office? Is someone with him?"

"No." Mrs. Henry's gaze studied her intently as if she was trying to decide something. "Oh my, I suppose it was only a matter of time. Come with me to the dining room. You can have some toast while I explain."

She felt a niggling tightness in her stomach as she suspected she was about to get more bad news. She honestly didn't know if she could take much more of it. She followed Mrs. Henry's large bustling form into the dining room and watched as she closed the door behind her.

"He isn't sick or hurt, is he?" she asked as she glanced into Mrs. Henry's worried face.

"Oh, he's not had an injury. No, that's not it." Mrs. Henry paused as if deciding how best to continue.

"Mrs. Henry—" she began, however the elderly housekeeper found her words.

"But perhaps sick is the correct word."

"Does he have a fever, an infection? My goodness, why is he in his office? Shouldn't

he be in bed?" Panic began at Mrs. Henry's odd behavior and bizarre comments.

"Oh, it's not that kind of sickness, dear. Why don't you sit down? I'll pour you a nice cup of tea."

"Mrs. Henry," she said, suddenly annoyed by the woman's evasions, "what is wrong with Lord Benjamin?"

"I had such hopes." Mrs. Henry wrung her hands as she walked over to the sideboard. "He hasn't had a spell since you arrived and he's seemed, oh dear, what word to use? Lighter, I suppose is as good as any. Maybe even happy. But—" she paused again.

"But?" Vee prompted, unable to make sense of anything the woman was saying.

"It's simply this, Lord Benjamin has these bad spells, dark days. He had them quite a lot when he and the little one first arrived. He goes into a black, black humor, disappearing into his office for a couple of days, although one did last for nearly four."

"Black humor?" she asked.

"Violently bad tempered. He won't eat, doesn't sleep, only sits by the fireplace drinking spirits. I tried to take him food once only to have him throw the tray against the wall and yell at me to get out."

"He yelled at you?" she asked in disbelief. She couldn't imagine Ben raising his voice to the same woman whose food he pretended to eat and enjoy because he didn't want to hurt her feelings.

"Oh, he apologized most prettily the next day. Once the spell had passed." Mrs. Henry's voice rose in defense of her beloved master.

"And this happens often?" She was still a bit confused by what was wrong with him. Depression?

"Oh, as I said, not at all since your arrival," Mrs. Henry answered.

"And before that?"

"Weel, perhaps a day or two a week."

"Every week since he moved in here?" she asked.

"Yes," Mrs. Henry answered succinctly. "Mr. Henry and I give him a wide berth during those days as he requested after the tray-throwing incident. He simply wants to be left alone during the spell. I think he fears what harm he may do someone when he's in the grip of it. He's such a kind man." Mrs. Henry began wringing her hands again.

"I think he was fair distraught when he realized he'd thrown the tray and yelled at me. It's not in him to be cruel normally, but his face that day," Mrs. Henry paused, as if remembering something truly horrible in her mind. A slight shudder passed through her body. "I don't know any other way to say this, but when I looked at him that night, he was quite simply out of his mind. I was afraid for my life."

"My goodness." Her concern for Ben was growing by the minute. "Certainly something must cause these spells. Set them off?"

"No, nothing specific I can tell. One day he is fine, the next he has locked himself into his office. Perhaps it is to be expected. After all, his great-aunt also suffered from bouts of madness. These things pass through the blood."

"I see," she answered as she began to suspect that the catalyst for this particular 'black humor' was their conversation in Ben's office yesterday, coupled with Chelsea's relapse. Swamped with guilt, she sat down at the dining room table and considered what she should do now.

“Weel, if you aren’t interested in breakfast, my dear, I really need to be getting along with my duties.” Mrs. Henry began to tidy up the already spotless dining room. So many improvements had been made to the house since her arrival, Vee could hardly believe it was the same place.

“That new upstairs chambermaid hasn’t gotten the knack of the bed linens yet. I’ve got to show her again.” Mrs. Henry grumbled lightly, but Vee knew the irascible old lady was already fond of the new servants and delighted to actually have a staff, albeit a small one, to command. Turning at the doorway, Mrs. Henry pinned her with a look. “Please do not disturb the master. I—” Mrs. Henry, who was never for a loss of words, fumbled again.

“Yes,” Vee prompted.

“I wouldna want ye to be hurt,” Mrs. Henry replied and with that parting advice, she left the room.

\* \* \* \*

Mrs. Henry’s words kept creeping back into her mind as she worked alone tidying up the small room the servants set up to be a schoolroom, in the event Ben was able to secure a governess. During her disturbing conversation with Mrs. Henry, Chelsea successfully escaped the house and Vee knew from experience no amount of hunting through the woods would track the girl down. She clearly had good hiding places.

The sound of a horse approaching reached her ears. From her bird’s eye view on the third floor, she saw Frank Prescott arrive with his bag. Recalling Chelsea’s fearful response to the new groom, she watched him dismount. He was a fairly attractive man whom she guessed to be in his late thirties or early forties. His dirty blond hair and dark complexion bespoke of his profession as he clearly spent most of his time outdoors. She couldn’t quite put her finger on why, but something about the man disturbed her and, although she didn’t know the reason for Chelsea’s unusually strong reaction toward him, she determined she would keep an eye on Mr. Prescott. She continued to study him until he entered the stable, and then turned her attention back to the school room and her previous concerns about Ben.

“I wouldna want ye to be hurt,” Mrs. Henry had said. Ben would never hurt her. Certainly not intentionally. And yet Mrs. Henry, who adored him, did not feel safe with him when he was in this so-called “black humor.”

When Ben and Chelsea failed to appear for lunch and then again for dinner, Vee decided enough was enough. She stationed herself by the back door in the kitchen and waited for her young charge to sneak back into the house. When Chelsea appeared just before dusk, she was there.

“Good evening, Chelsea,” she said softly from her seat in a dark corner.

The girl jumped lightly at the unexpected sound of her voice.

“I hope you had a good time today,” she continued as Chelsea turned toward her. Her eyes quickly darted to the back stairway that would lead her to her bedroom and away from Vee.

“No,” she replied, in answer to the young girl’s desperate look. “You aren’t going to bed yet. There are a few matters we need to discuss first.” She took a deep breath and rubbed her damp palms lightly on her dress. She silently chided herself for being nervous in front of a seven-year-old. “Lord Benjamin has decided I will be your governess until a

more suitable teacher can be found.”

Chelsea’s face remained blank. Not even with a glimmer in her eyes did she betray her feelings about Vee’s announcement. Irritated by the events of the day, or lack thereof, she wanted to shake some sort of response out of the child, but she managed to continue speaking in an even, professional tone.

“We will begin in the morning after breakfast. While you were out, I spent the day preparing a classroom and lessons. After your morning meal, you will report to me and we will begin.”

Again the girl remained motionless, emotionless.

She took a deep breath for patience. “Do you understand, Chelsea?”

Bright green eyes darted longingly for the stairway again before returning to hers. For only a moment she detected the same fear she saw in the girl’s eyes the first day she’d come to Vee’s room after her arrival. The same fear that had faded a bit each day until Vee had forgotten about it, only to have it return with a vengeance yesterday afternoon. It broke her heart to see it again.

“Oh, Chels,” she whispered, rising to cross the room to the small girl. Kneeling before her, she clasped Chelsea’s tiny hands in hers. The little girl’s hands were ice cold and trembling slightly.

“First and foremost, I am your friend and that will never change,” she said softly, wanting so much to be able to comfort this child. “While I’m sure I’m not exactly governess material, I promise you, I will do my very best. Will you let me try to be your teacher?”

Chelsea looked down at her hands clinched in hers for so long, Vee gave up. It was obvious the girl was rejecting her and without her cooperation, she would be more successful attempting to teach Chelsea’s pony how to read and write. A small sigh escaped and she began to rise, but Chelsea stopped her, squeezing her hands tightly. Raising her bright, damp eyes to Vee’s, Chelsea nodded awkwardly one time before letting go and racing up the backstairs to her room.

Vee remained on her knees in the middle of the kitchen floor for several more minutes feeling as though she’d been handed the crown jewels. Chelsea would allow her to teach her and she vowed, she would banish the fear in those pretty green eyes if it was the last thing she ever did.

Rising stiffly, she took a steadying breath, then walked toward the front hallway and to the locked door of Ben’s office. One hurdle cleared and one to go. Stiffening her spine, she raised her hand and knocked.

A muffled “go away” met her ears. Determined, she knocked again, louder. This time, a glass shattered somewhere in the room. “I said go away!” Ben yelled.

Digging into her pocket, she produced the key to the office door she had lifted from an unsuspecting Mrs. Henry’s key ring shortly after dinner. She would apologize tomorrow for her actions, but tonight she was determined there would be no more backward steps. From this point on, the inhabitants of Waterplace would only march forward. Chelsea would learn to trust again, Ben would overcome his depression, and Vee vowed she would take the fresh start on life she had been granted. She was determined it would be so.

Quietly, she turned the key in the lock and opened the door. The room was pitch black, except for the slight orange-red glow given off by the embers of the dying fire. The

chilly room smelled strongly of liquor. From her vantage point by the door, she could only see Ben's sprawled legs as he slouched in a large wingback chair facing the fading flames.

"Ben," she whispered.

When she received no response, she took two tentative steps toward him whispering his name again. Still there was no response and she wondered if perhaps he was asleep. Or passed out given the empty decanter lying on its side on the table by his chair. Around the table were shards of glass, probably the remains of the tumbler from which he'd been drinking.

She continued her slow, silent trek across the room until she was standing in front of him, the small amount of heat provided by the fire lightly touching her back.

"Ben," she repeated softly.

Raising his black gaze to her, she shuddered as she remembered Mrs. Henry's description. He did appear to be, if not out of his mind, then certainly not in his right mind.

Taking a calming breath, she struggled to say what she'd come to say. The overwhelming guilt she felt about his present condition kept her voice steady. "I wanted to apologize for running out the way I did yesterday."

Ben merely looked at her as if she were a mirage and not quite real. When he failed to respond, she added, "I realize now you were trying to keep me from being hurt. Protecting me."

At her words, he seemed to shake himself free of his trance. His voice was harsh, virtually unrecognizable. "Didn't Mrs. Henry tell you to stay away from here?"

Surprised by the malice lacing his tone, she took a small step backwards before nodding.

"Then why are you here?" he asked, his face twisted with anger.

"I—" she stumbled, fear beginning to course in her blood. "I was w-worried about you."

A harsh bark of a laugh cut the silence of the room.

"Worried?" he asked sarcastically.

"Y-yes," she answered, glancing back at the door, feeling very much like Chelsea must have only minutes earlier. Desperate for escape.

"Oh." He slowly rose from his chair. "Yes, you should be worried, but not for me." His clothes were wrinkled as if he'd slept in them, which she assumed he had. His white shirt was open at the neck and, as he approached her, she was able to make out the lightest smattering of dark hair on his chest. His hair was disheveled, as if he'd tried to pull it all out. His feet were bare, except for his stockings and she worried briefly about him cutting himself on the broken glass on the floor.

"I'm sorry I disturbed you." She wished she had taken Mrs. Henry's words more closely to heart. This man towering over her was not the Ben she'd come to consider a friend. He was a cold stranger who oozed danger through every pore on his body. "I can see you aren't in the mood for company tonight."

"Yes," he hissed. "Sorry. You should be sorry. You were warned."

"I'll leave." She turned quickly for the door.

"Oh, no," he said as he roughly grabbed her shoulders preventing her from taking a single step. He lowered his face until it was only inches from hers. His dark eyes bore

into hers with an intensity that stole her breath. This man was not a friend. She shivered in his grasp as she looked into the eyes of a stranger, a madman.

“Ben,” she whispered, hoping to dispel the anger in his eyes, the violence in his face, the powerful grip of his hands.

“You were warned, and now you must pay the penalty,” he said softly. Before she could reply, his lips descended to hers in a painful kiss. His grip on her shoulders tightened as he held her still for his assault. She struggled to turn her face away, but he moved his hands to the side of her face, refusing to allow her retreat.

His lips roughly ground into hers, his tongue pounding into her mouth, his teeth nipping her lower lip until she could taste the bitter metallic flavor of her own blood. She shoved against him with all her might, but her slight strength was no match for his power.

She began to fight back in earnest, pummeling his chest with her fists, as he continued to back her against the wall, his mouth relentlessly attacking hers while his hands moved slightly to capture her head in an even more forceful grip. Roughly, he pulled the pins from her hair, the sound of each one hitting the floor like another nail being driven into her coffin as he continued his assault. She realized she was defenseless against his might, and for the first time since she’d met Ben, she was truly terrified of him.

Her soft whimper of alarm and violent shaking must have broken through his crazed mind as he slowly softened the kiss. His grip loosened as he brought his arms slowly around her back in an almost gentle embrace. His tongue, when it touched her this time, attempted to soothe the damage he’d wrought on her lips. It was if he were trying to heal the wounds he had inflicted with his own. The power of the previous kiss was gone, replaced now by lips that gently caressed hers.

The fear that had permeated her body only moments earlier fled, replaced with something perilously close to raw desire. Her clenched fists on his chest opened as she slid her arms over his muscular shoulders to wrap them around his neck. Driven on by her sudden capitulation, his hands roved over her body, touching her everywhere, desperately, as if she were about to vanish from his sight forever. No part of her was safe from his frantic, tender exploration. Her back, bottom, waist, breasts, stomach were all touched with a compassion and adoration she would never have suspected given his frightening mood. Shocked by the force of her own desires, she was helpless to resist his touches, his kisses. Her own cravings replaced the fear and uncertainty. She wanted this. She wanted him.

His hands returned to her head, soothing her scalp where he’d roughly pulled her hair before, clasping her cheeks gently, almost reverently in his large palms and the kiss turned even softer, his lips barely brushing hers in a wordless plea for forgiveness.

He worshipped her mouth as his hands slid through her long silken tresses savoring the feel of each strand. She mimicked the motion with her own hands as she ran her fingers through the soft, thickness of his hair, pulling him closer to her, unwilling to allow him to remove his lips from hers.

Her contented sigh cut through the silence breaking the spell that surrounded them. Replacing his hands on her shoulders, tenderly this time, he pushed her away from him slowly. One look in his eyes revealed, not the desire she knew was glowing in hers, but unadulterated anger tinged with something else—anguish. True heart-wrenching anguish.

She opened her mouth to speak, to comfort, but before she could utter a sound, the



anguish turned back to pure rage as he turned her toward the door, leaning down from behind her to whisper one word in her ear.

“Run.”

Without a backward glance, she did.

## Chapter Ten

### V is for Victory

Vee and Chelsea threw themselves into their lessons the next morning with a vengeance, taking breakfast on a tray in the schoolroom. Neither of them seemed anxious to leave their safe haven and descend the stairs to whatever lay below. Chelsea, though still silent and emotionless, seemed resolved to participate in her lessons and spent several hours learning how to write her letters correctly. They had just completed all twenty-six capital letters when there was soft tap at the door.

Vee glanced up to see Ben lounging in the doorframe. Gone was the dangerous stranger of the night replaced with the same harmlessly scowling man she'd come to think of as her friend. He cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Good morning, ladies."

He glanced at Chelsea and the schoolwork before her. "I see you've been quite productive this morning, little one." He ruffled her hair as he had started doing in the past couple of weeks after each of her riding lessons. Neither he nor Vee missed the immediate stiffening of Chelsea's spine as he touched her head and her quick retreat to the other side of the room.

"I see," he muttered, his face crestfallen for only a moment before he turned to face Vee. "I wonder if I might have a moment of your time."

She watched him brace himself for her rejection as well. The reaction confused her. She was as much to blame for last night as he was, perhaps even more as she was warned to give him space and blatantly disregarded it. She'd spent the entire night tossing and turning, torn between leaving Waterplace and its miseries, of which she only seemed to be adding to, and going back to Ben's office and letting whatever happened happen.

She'd kicked the covers off despite the chill in the air, feeling hot and bothered and desperate for more of his embrace. The strength of her desire set off her own feelings of depression as she realized she truly must be a wanton to feel such overwhelming sexual tension radiating through her. As far as she was concerned, her reaction to his overtures was the final proof of her unsavory past.

Sleep eluded her until dawn when she'd finally given up and come to the schoolroom to await for her pupil. Chelsea straggled in shortly after her looking as if she hadn't slept much better and the two of them managed to remain successfully hidden away from their problems until now.

"Of course, my lord," she answered, mimicking of the formality of his request. Her cool response seemed to deflate him even further.

"Vee." His voice was soft, but she turned to Chelsea instead.

"Chelsea, you did a marvelous job this morning. I'm so proud of all you accomplished. I believe this would be a good time for a break. Perhaps you'd like to go down and help Mrs. Cooke prepare lunch?"

She looked from Chelsea to Ben sadly and wished she could convince the girl to trust her guardian. It was apparent he had come to love the small child and so much of their personal pain could be overcome if only they would reach out to one another.

"I was wondering if after completing your schoolwork you would like to continue

our riding lessons?" Ben offered softly, throwing yet another olive branch at the small child's feet.

Chelsea backed up against the wall as far away from him as possible, her eyes once again wild with fear. Vee was as confused by the response as Ben. He'd done nothing to harm the girl. Or, she considered, had he? Had Chelsea stumbled upon him in one of his fits of madness? Was that what had frightened her out of the house all day yesterday? Mrs. Henry knew Ben had locked himself away, so it stood to reason that Chelsea understood what was happening as well.

"Chelsea," she said softly. "Go help Mrs. Cooke prepare the luncheon. I'm afraid you won't have time to go riding today. I have a math lesson planned and we need to work on that." Chelsea, relieved to be given a reprieve, quickly left the room.

She felt a pang of guilt at giving the child the opportunity to escape the riding lesson, but until she could discover why the girl was suddenly so afraid, she thought it best to wait. She was aware she'd hurt Ben's feelings in the process.

"Math lesson?" He growled, anger evident in every line of his face.

Suffering from a lack of sleep and hanging precariously on to her patience, she felt it slip slowly away. "Yes, a math lesson. You know, numbers, addition, subtraction and such."

"I know what math is," he bellowed. "I would simply like to know what is so damned important about math that it can't wait until after her riding lesson."

"In case you failed to notice, she didn't want to go riding!" she yelled back.

"I could hardly fail to see that, but she loves riding. Whatever silly fear she has would have gone away when she got up on that pony. Why would you keep her away from that? Away from me?" His voice was calmer now, but it broke a bit on the last question and she felt her heart shatter. Riding was the only common ground he and his young ward had discovered. Of course, he was desperate to try to get it back. However, the girl was terrified again, and she had yet to discover why.

"Has Chelsea ever come into your office when you are in one of your black moods?" she asked, unwilling to beat around the bush.

Taken aback, he stared at her for a full minute before answering. "No," he said softly. "I always lock myself in to protect the people around me. Only you and Mrs. Henry have breached that locked door, and I trust neither of you will ever do it again." The last was said with anger and smallest touch of regret.

"I wouldn't trust in that," she replied softly and again she sensed she'd shocked him. "What I'm asking is, are you certain Chelsea has never seen you in that state?"

"Yes, I'm certain," he answered. "The curtains are always drawn and the door locked. In case you've forgotten, prior to your arrival, the child never came within twenty feet of me." The pain and frustration of that fact rang out in his words and she believed him. If it wasn't his black humor that frightened the girl, then what? She'd been making real progress. What could have happened to set her back so far?

"I owe you an apology for last night."

"No," she said, her fingers covering his lips. "No, you don't, but I do. Mrs. Henry said you wanted to be alone, but I simply didn't believe her. I should have respected your wishes and her words. It is I who am sorry."

Ben grabbed her fingers from his lips and clasped her hand in his. "You have nothing to be sorry about, but if you think it possible I would like to put last night behind us.

Forget the whole thing as it were.”

Vee considered his request. “I don’t think that will be possible. Ben, you need to talk to someone about these spells. Do you know what causes them? Was it my fault? When you showed me my old clothing—”

“No,” he interrupted. “It wasn’t your fault. You did nothing, I assure you. I suffered from these spells long before you came here. I’ve learned how to deal with them the best I can and I ask that you respect my wishes and simply stay away. Promise you won’t unlock the door again.”

“I—I cannot promise that,” she replied.

“Dammit Vee, do you realize what kind of danger you were in last night? I’m not myself in those moments,” he said.

“I don’t believe you would hurt me,” she replied.

“Do you know what I wanted to do last night?” he asked angrily.

She shook her head and attempted to turn away, unwilling to continue this conversation, unwilling to consider all that could have happened.

Refusing to allow her retreat, he roughly grabbed her upper arms. “No, don’t turn away. Look at me. I wanted to rip that damned dress off of you, throw you across the desk, and—and—” Frustrated, he released her and turned away, walking across the room to the window. “Vee, I would have taken you whether you wanted to or not.” His voice was so soft she barely heard him.

“I wanted you to,” she replied calmly.

“What?” he asked, turning back to face her.

She could feel the heat creeping up her cheeks and silently cursed her blushing, but she couldn’t let him continue to believe she was an unwilling participant in last night’s activities. Perhaps at first, when he was so rough, but after that, she wanted everything he gave her and more. Much, much more.

“Please don’t make me say it again,” she replied, embarrassed by her bold proclamation. “Let’s just say last night there were two people in that room who wanted the same thing.”

“Christ,” he breathed out, shocked by her words. “You’re killing me. What am I going to do with you?”

Vee had to stop herself from grinning at his anguished response, pleased by the desire she could see in his face. She must truly be a wanton to be so flattered by his attraction to her. Unfortunately that stray thought sobered her again as she recalled why she had gone to seek him out in the first place yesterday morning.

“I guess that lays to rest any doubts about my background. I don’t suppose any proper lady would admit to such a thing.”

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Her face betrayed her attempt to lighten her words and he noticed the melancholy lingering in her eyes. A sorrow that hadn’t been there before he’d put it there.

“We really don’t know who you are or where you came from. Those clothes don’t necessarily mean what we think.”

“No, Ben,” she said, cutting off anything else he might say. “Please don’t try to explain this away. Let’s stop pretending. I am what I am and it all makes sense now. It explains the beating I suffered and the fact that no one is looking for me. I haven’t made very good choices in life, have I?” Her attempted jest fell short again as her voice

betrayed the pain she was suffering.

"For what it's worth, you don't have to go back to that life. I meant what I said before, I want you to stay here and be Chelsea's governess."

"You know what I am. You can't seriously want me to teach your ward. I can't imagine you want me to even remain in the same house with her—or you, for that matter."

Panic struck as he thought she might try to leave. There had been laughter and conversation in the house since she'd arrived. All the problems that constantly seemed to cast shadows over him were somehow less with her around. Even the setback with Chelsea didn't seem so serious with her there, and he was shocked to realize how much he relied on her to set everything right again.

"You aren't leaving," he said quickly, forcefully.

She laughed mirthlessly. "Where would I go? I don't know where I belong."

"You belong here. I mean it, Vee. I won't let you leave," he said.

"How could you stop me? Am I a prisoner?" she whispered, clearly uncomfortable with the intensity of his words.

"No," he answered. "You're not a prisoner. You're a friend and you aren't going anywhere until your memories return and not even then, if you don't want to. No one around here knows anything about your past, and as I plan to reside in Dover with Chelsea permanently, the chances of running into someone who may know you are slim at best."

Crossing the room to her, he grasped her small hands in his large palms tightly. "I'm offering you a second chance, a way to start your life anew. Not many of us get that kind of opportunity." He secretly wished he had the same opportunity she was now being offered. What would he give to forget his past and start over?

"Take the chance. Stay here. Teach Chelsea." Silently he chastised himself for the pleading tone in his voice. Why did it matter so much to him that she remain?

"I'm sorry," she said, with a soft smile.

"Again?" he asked, returning her grin.

"Again," she said. "You are simply too good to be true."

"Well, that's true." She laughed at his teasing comment and he was struck by the differences he saw in himself. He was so different from the man whose bed she'd woken up in a month ago.

"So you'll stay?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied. "I'll stay, but I meant what I said earlier. I won't take money from you."

"Vee," he started.

"No, no discussion. My mind is made up about this. Let me have one victory today."

"We will discuss it again, but later. Right now, I need to see about getting Frank Prescott settled into his new role in the stable. I was a bit remiss in my duties yesterday. Since you and Chelsea won't be joining me this afternoon, I'll see you at dinner."

"I know how much you enjoyed the riding lessons. I didn't mean to insinuate Chelsea shouldn't spend time with you. It's just, well, until we find out why she's suddenly so fearful, I thought it may be best to wait."

"I understand," he answered, although he really didn't. While she was merely baffled by Chelsea's sudden retreat, he was truly hurt.

“Oh, Ben,” she said with a smile, once again trying to lighten the heavy burdens that constantly seemed to wear him down. “Don’t worry about it. The sun will come out tomorrow.”

He chuckled. “How profound.”

“Yes, it is, isn’t it? The funny thing is I’m sure I didn’t make it up. Must’ve heard it somewhere in my previous life.” A yawn escaped in the midst of her giggle.

“Just as I suspected. You didn’t get much sleep last night.”

“No,” she admitted. “I suppose I didn’t.”

“Why don’t you and Chelsea forgo the math lesson after your lunch and take a nap. It’s been an emotionally trying couple of days for all of us. A bit of rest should go a long way to restoring you to your old self.”

“Oh, my God,” she said with a horrified shiver. “I hope not, but a nap sounds like a wonderful idea.”

She left the room leaving him to ponder this changed Vee. Had he made a mistake in showing her the clothing? The guilt he felt over keeping his suspicion a secret was now replaced by the remorse he felt over hurting her. Her sunny disposition had been dimmed by his suppositions, and he’d give anything to take back the darkness he’d put in its place.

## Chapter Eleven

### V is for Vehemence

The days passed at slow, idyllic pace and July soon gave way to August. It was an uncharacteristically warm and mild summer with very little rain. Ben blessed the good weather as it helped him complete most of the immediate repairs to Waterplace, as well as keep his demons at bay. The house began to take on the look and feel of a true home. No longer did he have to worry about the roof caving in on his head or the floorboards cracking under his feet. No more dodging loose plaster as it crashed to the floor.

While he'd only made repairs to the rooms necessary for habitation, it was evident to those in the surrounding neighborhood the pervasive gloominess that always seemed to hover over the house was finally vanquished.

The physical changes in the house were not the only transformation marked by the servants and neighbors. The master of the house, Lord Benjamin Sinclair, was also a changed man. Mrs. Henry remarked to him that morning at breakfast it wouldn't be long until the ladies of the local gentry began to make their way back to the front door. He leaned back in his desk chair considering Mrs. Henry's comments. According to the servant's gossip mill, the story surrounding his move to the country to help his emotionally disturbed little ward had made the rounds. According to Mrs. Henry, the local society dames were impressed with his supposedly kind-hearted nature as they marveled over the fact that he was providing Chelsea with not only a beautiful home, but a proper education as well.

Word of Vee's presence in the house as a talented governess from London was also making its way throughout Dover. For that, he secretly thanked Mrs. Henry and Doc Jonesbury. He had no doubt the two conspired to put a positive light on Vee's questionable presence in the house during those first few weeks, and they were working hard to build up a solid, respectable background for her. He'd never told either of them his suspicions regarding her past and felt confident their unwavering support was based solely on Vee's optimism and cheerful personality. The kind-hearted housekeeper and no-nonsense doctor had adopted the young woman as their own, deciding if her family was foolish enough to let her disappear without searching for her, they weren't worth having.

A movement at the window caught his eye. Rising, he peered outside to spy Vee organizing her latest attempt at drawing Chelsea back into the sunshine. Much to his chagrin, the changes in his young ward were much slower in coming. The child still wouldn't speak and eschewed all talk of riding lessons, and had in fact, stopped going outside altogether. Vee planned picnics, nature lessons and scavenger hunts all to no avail. If he guessed correctly, it looked like today's effort would be a tea party in the garden. Chuckling, he watched as she stumbled over the table leg, nearly upsetting the whole arrangement. Her clumsiness continued to be a source of amusement amongst the servants. Very few days passed without some small mishap or broken dish. Two nights ago, Ben had caught the male servants in the stable placing bets on when her next calamity would occur.

One change in Chelsea for which he was grateful was that she no longer continued to hide from him. At Vee's insistence, he had begun putting the child to bed at night. After a few awkward nights, he got the hang of the routine, and he now found those precious few moments with Chelsea the time of day he looked forward to most. He was never so touched as when she crawled into his lap so he could read her a bedtime story. Many nights he continued to hold her long after the story was finished just to savor the feeling of her small heart beating against his chest and to listen to the soft inhalations of her breath in sleep.

"Pardon me for interrupting," a voice said from the doorway. Glancing up, he spotted Frank Prescott making his way into the room.

"Good morning, Frank. Is there a problem?" Ben asked. Any concerns he may have had about hiring Frank Prescott had long since disappeared. The man was a wonder in the stable with a knack for breeding and training horses.

"No, milord. No problem at all. That little pony of your ward's has thrown a shoe. I need to get it replaced. We planned on working with the black mare today, but I may be a bit late returning from the smithy."

"That's fine, Frank. I've got a great deal of work to do here. Take care of the pony. We'll push back the training until this afternoon."

"Very good, sir," Frank answered. Rather than leaving the room, the man paused as if he had more to say.

"Is there anything else you needed, Frank?"

"No sir, I mean, well, I was wondering when your ward will begin riding the pony again. It's been several weeks and—"

Ben interrupted, uncomfortable with Frank's inquiry. "Chelsea hasn't been feeling well of late. She'll begin her lessons again as soon as she's able."

"I see, sir. I understand from the lads in the stable that she doesn't talk."

"I fail to see how my ward's welfare is any of your concern," Ben answered, more sharply than he intended.

"Of course not, milord, but the young lad, Jimmy, mentioned how much she enjoyed the pony. I thought perhaps to offer my services. To continue her lessons myself."

Ben chastised himself for his groundless suspicions. "I appreciate the offer, but once Chelsea is able, I will instruct her. I enjoyed teaching her very much."

"Of course, milord. I hope the little miss feels better soon. I'll see you this afternoon then." Frank left quickly as Ben pondered the brief conversation, wondering at Prescott's sudden interest in Chelsea. No doubt, word of Chelsea's troubles had passed through the stable, and Frank merely meant to offer his assistance, but something in the man's tone set off a warning in his head.

Rubbing his temples, he tried to ward off the onset of a headache. He hadn't suffered any other black days since the night Vee had come into his study, yet he didn't fool himself into believing those days were behind him.

Since the day after he had revealed his suspicions regarding her previous occupation, Vee embraced her life at Waterplace as a woman who'd received a new lease on life. She was constantly in motion. When she wasn't teaching Chelsea in the schoolroom, she was in the kitchen with Mrs. Cooke learning the secrets of the elderly lady's delicious recipes. As it turned out, Vee was a marvelous cook, and she'd begun preparing one dinner a week, often experimenting and creating some of the most delectable things he had ever



tasted.

She asked Mrs. Henry to teach her how to sew and had begun to make a new dress for Chelsea. She'd taken an active role in decorating the newly renovated rooms and he couldn't enter a room in the house without noticing many of her special touches. She had an eye for color and material and most of the rooms were considerably brighter and breezier after she'd been there.

The only room Ben insisted he be allowed to decorate was his own study. He shuddered to think of the bright yellows or vivid pinks she would attempt to talk him into adorning the furniture with. Instead, he settled for darker colors, covering the walls with a deep burgundy, while re-covering the chairs and chaise lounge with crushed velvet of forest green. He'd had his favorite Oriental rug placed in the center of the room. Although Vee bemoaned the fact that his choice of deep colors with the walnut furniture left the room too dark, he was pleased with the finished result and felt the room was actually quite cozy.

Leaning back in his leather chair, Ben propped his boots up on his desk and surveyed the study again. It may have taken some time, but the move from London to Dover had clearly been the best decision of his life. Glancing down at his desk, he picked up the message he'd received from his friend Alex McCormick that morning.

The Earl of Wilshire and his bride had returned from America, and the McCormick's were hosting a small dinner party to celebrate their return. Alex apologized for not calling sooner as they now lived so close; his daughter had been colicky and, as new parents, he and his wife were exhausted. He also mentioned in his missive that he'd heard about Ben's ward and governess through the servant's line and encouraged him to bring both of them as well.

It was to be an informal affair with only family and close friends, and yet Ben was torn between whether or not to attend. It had been nearly a year since he'd seen his friends and, until June when Vee arrived, the months preceding had been the darkest of his life. In addition, he was uncertain how he could explain Vee's presence in his life to Jack and Alex. Both men knew him as well, if not better than his own twin brother, and it would be difficult to keep the questions surrounding her identity a secret, not to mention his undeniable attraction to her. He had no doubt his friends would call him out if they suspected any impropriety between him and the governess.

One glance at him with Vee would reveal to his friends his true feelings. Somewhere along the line, Ben had quite foolishly fallen in love with her. He'd given up the notion of denying it to himself. He loved her. He, Lord Benjamin Sinclair, son of the Duke of Pelsham, had fallen head over heels in love with a clumsy, cheerful ex-courtesan with amnesia.

The realization almost made him laugh until reality crashed around him, and he realized there was absolutely no way he could pursue the relationship and for several reasons. Despite the fact her past was a secret, the minute word leaked out that he was courting his governess, the *ton's* elite would be turning over every stone in an attempt to ferret out his angel's true identity. He would rather die than see her unpleasant past spread through the gossip mill. It would also leave her open to all kinds of unsavory comments and possibly even propositions. He refused to see her belittled after all she'd done to break free of that life.

Secondly, titled gentlemen with any honor at all simply did not seduce an employee

and despite her refusal to accept pay, for all intents and purposes, she was his employee.

And lastly, he wasn't foolish enough to think any woman, even a former prostitute, could truly love a man such as him. In all his time with her, he'd been careful never to mention his previous occupation with Bow Street, and after the night they'd met, he never again mentioned the war. How would she feel to know she was working for a killer, a man well-versed in snuffing out the lives of others, a man who couldn't face thunderstorms without succumbing to fits of insanity?

Vee was the epitome of all that was good and kind. Yesterday morning, he'd watched her spend twenty minutes trying to capture a small spider that had made its way in to the dining room rather than step on it, so that she could set it free in the back garden.

For that reason, he refused to drag her into his own brutal nightmares. During the last couple of months, he'd nearly succeeded several times in extinguishing the light that shone inside her. How much longer could her sunny nature survive in his presence? She deserved better than him. She deserved a man whose soul was his own, not confined to Hell for all of eternity.

Ben once again considered his response to the invitation, when a knock at the door interrupted him.

"Do you have a minute?" Vee's soft voice said from the doorway.

"For you? More than a minute," he replied, with the same smile she always seemed to pull from him.

"It's about Chelsea." She came into the study and closed the door. "Oh, how I wish you'd let me at least replace those curtains," she muttered, complaining again about the lack of natural light in the room.

"I like the curtains," he replied, this conversation now very familiar to them both.

"Sunlight is good for you," she said.

"Who says?"

"Everyone," she said with a smirk.

"Well, then, everyone you know is wrong. Everyone I know thinks candlelight is good for you."

"You're making that up," she replied.

"Just as you made up the sunlight fact?"

"Forget it, if you are bound and determined to wallow in this dungeon of a room, far be it from me to stop you."

"Ah, at last, the concession I've been waiting for. Now what is your concern about Chelsea?" He enjoyed their easy banter. He would swear the only illumination good for him in this room was the brightness that radiated from her whenever she was around.

"I want you to continue her riding lessons."

"Has she made some indication that she wants to resume?" he asked hopefully.

"No, of course not. She's still determined to lock herself away in this house. But it can't continue."

"I agree." He rose and crossed to the chaise, gesturing for her to join him. "But short of dragging her kicking and screaming across the yard to the stable, I don't know what we can do. You've tried a million different ways to lure her out into the summer sunshine and she's rebuffed each one. I take it she refused your tea party." He gestured toward the window where Vee's fancy table remained empty.

"Yes, she did." Her continued frustration reflected in the furrow of her brows. "But

we can't give up."

"What did you have in mind?" he asked, suspecting she had an idea.

"Mrs. Henry said you received a message this morning from the marquis of Dorset. She said you and he are very good friends from your school days."

"Ah," Ben replied. "Mrs. Henry has been busy spreading stories about me again, I see."

"Don't look so annoyed, Ben," she answered. "The woman thinks you walk on water. Every comment out of her mouth is yet one more tribute to your greatness. If anyone should be annoyed, it's me."

Ben laughed at Vee's astute observation as well as her rolling eyes. He, too, had noticed his housekeeper's rather unnerving doggedness on his flawless nature. It was disconcerting to be constantly praised with such devotion. Especially, he thought, when the adoration was truly misplaced.

"Well, in this instance, Mrs. Henry is correct. I did receive a letter from my friend Alex. I believe I mentioned before that the McCormick's live fairly close by and recently became parents."

"Yes," she replied, nodding. "I remember you speaking about them. I was wondering if perhaps you could tell Chelsea that you will be calling on your friend to meet his new daughter and that you wanted to take her with you. In fact, I'd like you to insist that she come along."

"Insist," he repeated wincing slightly.

"Yes," she repeated more forcefully. "Insist. I've watched you and everyone else tiptoe around the child like she's made of glass. I've even caught myself doing it. But I tell you Ben, it's got to stop. The sooner we begin to treat Chelsea like a normal child, the sooner she will become normal. Children live up to just what adults expect of them and no more."

"Interesting hypothesis, but why the change now?" he asked. "As you said, you've also been treating her with kid gloves. What happened to change your mind?"

"I was watching her this morning in the schoolroom when she didn't know I was there. I've been trying for several days now to teach her how to write sentences. I told you last week how I hoped that by learning to form sentences perhaps she could communicate through her writing since she won't speak."

"I remember," Ben replied. "But I thought you said she was thus far failing to grasp the concept."

"That's what I thought. Every time I attempted to get her to write a sentence she would simply hook together a bunch of words she's learned. You know, dog cat run hot see. None of her sentences made sense. But I've been played for a fool."

"A fool?" he asked, surprised by her comment.

"As I said, I was watching her this morning when she didn't know I was there. She was writing a note to that little doll you gave her a couple of weeks ago. She adores that thing. Never goes anywhere without it."

Ben grinned, pleased that Chelsea was so enamored with a toy that he'd given her. "I still fail to see how you've been made a fool."

"She wrote 'I love you' on a tiny slip of paper and slipped it into the pocket of the doll's apron. I waited until her back was turned and emptied the doll's pockets. There were five little notes tucked in there. All of them containing perfectly formed sentences."

With this, she handed him a stack of small pieces of folded paper. In addition to the “I love you” note, the others said “You are mine,” “Sta with me,” and “I take care of you.” However, it was the last one that bothered Ben the most. “He will hurt us.”

“My God,” he whispered.

“Yes,” she said. “As you see, Chelsea is far brighter than we thought.”

“And perhaps far more disturbed?” he asked, pointing out the last message. “Who is ‘he,’ do you think? Me?”

“Oh, no,” she replied. “Not you at all.”

“How can you be so sure?” he asked, not convinced. “After all, I seem to be the only ‘he’ she’s been frightened of since she moved here.”

“Don’t be silly.” She shook her head at him as if she were addressing a child. “I haven’t said anything because I really don’t have any proof other than a feeling, but I think she is referring to Frank.”

“My head groomsmen?” he asked incredulously.

“If you recall, she was quite terrified of him when he first arrived,” she responded.

“Yes, that’s true, but she hasn’t laid eyes on the man since.”

“That’s right. Because after his arrival, she stopped going outside.”

“No,” Ben replied. “She went outside the very next day. You told me so yourself. I was in my office all day and Chelsea disappeared into the woods again. Clearly if she were petrified of Frank, she wouldn’t have gone out the very next day.”

“That’s true, but he wasn’t here when she left the house. He didn’t show up until later in the morning. All I know is the riding lessons stopped when he moved into the stable. She adored her pony and your lessons up until that day.”

“Perhaps the ‘he’ is someone from before she even arrived here.”

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“It’s not,” Vee said utterly convinced. She didn’t mention the fact that many times she’d caught Frank watching her on her morning walks. He’d never spoken to her, but she couldn’t help but feel somewhat threatened by his constant staring. It felt almost as if he was stalking her, but she wasn’t about to admit that to Ben. First of all, she was probably just imagining that he was trying to intimidate her and she didn’t want Ben to think she was paranoid. And second, and most frightening of all, she wondered if perhaps Frank had known her before she came here. What if he knew about her past? It would explain his leering looks and she was determined to keep that part of her past buried.

Ben said he didn’t mind about what she was before, but she loved Waterplace and had come to think of it as home. She adored Ben, Chelsea and the Henrys. They felt like a family and she simply couldn’t face the idea of losing them should the truth about her past surface.

“I’ll admit I was a bit leery of hiring Frank after seeing Chelsea’s initial reaction to him, but the man has been nothing but an upstanding employee. His knowledge of horses is astounding. Besides only this morning, he expressed concern over her silence and offered to continue her riding lessons in hopes of cheering her up. Does this sound like a dangerous man?” Ben asked.

“Well, no.” She’d hesitated bringing her concerns to Ben at all, wondering if perhaps she wanted Ben to get rid of Prescott, not because of his threat to Chelsea, but because of his threat to her.

“I didn’t say he threatened to hurt her. I just—”

“What?” he asked.

“Oh, never mind. I didn’t really come in here argue about Frank Prescott.” She was unwilling to enter into a conflict with him and she was beginning to feel foolish for her suspicions. She had no proof against the man other than her own uneasy feelings. Ben was obviously impressed by the man’s ability and skill with horses. She decided it was time to change the subject. “What I really wanted to discuss is the fact that Chelsea knows how to write sentences, but won’t.”

“Well, that’s not so surprising, is it?” he asked. “I mean she knows how to speak as well and won’t. I told you when I first returned from the war the solicitor I sent to check on Chelsea, and her mother insisted she was a vivacious little girl who talked incessantly during the visit.”

“That’s true, but I hate being deceived. Even if she does understand the concept of writing complete sentences, why hide it? I’m not asking for her secrets,” she said, leaning back on the chaise, facing Ben. “All I asked for was ‘See Spot run.’”

“See Spot run?” he asked with a puzzled grin.

“Oh, forget it,” she said, feeling her anger and frustration bubbling over. She’d been working with Chelsea for weeks and hadn’t made any progress. The child adamantly refused to talk and now she refused to write. How could she teach a child who fought her every step of the way?

Besides, Ben had just dismissed her concerns about Prescott with no more than a pat on the head and a condescending “there, there.” His cavalier attitude toward her uneasy feelings infuriated her, and she did something she never did, she lost her temper.

“It’s obvious you don’t care if the girl ever speaks again. Maybe you think it’s only proper children should be seen and not heard. Maybe you’re fine with the current arrangement—both of us out of sight and out of mind while you go play with your horses!”

“Now just a minute,” he retorted, shock written on his face at her outburst. “You know damn well that’s not true.”

“Do I?” she yelled, rising to stand in front of him, pointing her finger at him. “No, I don’t think I do. Now that I think about it, I think it’s exactly the truth. You’ve been saddled with an orphan and a whore. What better way to escape then to tie them together and send them to the schoolroom all day long!”

“What the hell are you talking about?” he asked, his voice laced with fury. He rose as well towering over her in a rage.

“I’ll tell you what I’m talking about. I’m talking about you spending every minute of daylight outside with those bloody horses, rather than in here with your ward. I’m talking about you avoiding me like I’m some great annoyance,” she continued screaming.

“When have I ever complained about you or Chelsea living in this house?” he interrupted, his ire now full-blown and matching hers. “When have I ever given you the idea that I didn’t want both of you around me every damn minute of every damn day? How dare you accuse me of such callous treatment!”

Each word brought him closer until her neck hurt in the attempt to look him in the eye. Each word he uttered cut her like a knife as she realized he spoke the truth. It wasn’t his fault she was proving to be such a bad governess. It wasn’t his fault her memories, no matter how nasty, had not returned to her and Prescott frightened in a way she couldn’t put into words.

However, it was his fault that he had not made one overture toward kissing her since that night a month ago in his study when he'd turned her body into a simmering flame that never seemed to cool. She hadn't had a single decent night's sleep since then. Not one night passed where she didn't burn for his kiss, his touch. He'd been so determined to turn her into a proper lady that he seemed to forget that she very obviously was not one. She wanted him—badly.

"Callous treatment?" she replied, her voice still trembling with anger. "I'll tell you what callous treatment is. Callous treatment is keeping your distance from me as if I have the plague. Callous treatment is refusing to kiss any part of me other than my blasted hand. Callous treatment is allowing me to toss and turn in a bedroom right next to yours night after night without ever coming to hold me. Callous treatment," she continued hoarsely, tears starting to course down her face, "is making me feel the way I feel right now."

Shocked, he stared into her eyes and she knew he saw the undisguised desire she'd been feeling since the first moment he'd kissed her.

Abruptly, he reached for her, pulling her into his arms. "Oh, God, I'm sorry," he said. Embracing her, he held her so tightly she feared he'd break her. "Vee, I'm so sorry. I want you too, sweetheart. So much it hurts."

"Then why have you stayed away," she asked, pushing back slightly, her blue eyes filled with tears.

"Because this cannot be," he said, planting light kisses on her brow, her eyes, her cheeks.

"Why?"

"You deserve so much better than me, love."

She laughed scornfully at his words. "Didn't you get that backwards?"

"No, I didn't." He pulled away from her, desperately trying to put some distance between them. "Vee, I'm a broken man. You know that. You've seen it with your own eyes. I cannot give you what you need. What you deserve."

"Ben," she cried softly. "You're what I need. And you are far more than I deserve. You know what I am."

"What you were," he added. "Were. No more."

She scoffed at his words as if they were meaningless. "Why can't you see what I see when I look at you. You constantly try to paint yourself a villain, and yet everything about you screams of honor and compassion. You've shown nothing but kindness for Chelsea, for the Henrys, for me. The reason you have this house is because you cared for your great-aunt. What on earth could make you believe you aren't worthy of love and happiness?"

"You're starting to sound like Mrs. Henry," he replied bitterly. "You don't know me. Not really. You don't know what kind of man I am."

"I don't believe that. I think it is you who don't know."

"Dammit!" His anger grew as it towered over her. His face was mottled with fury as his voice rose even louder. "I'll tell you what kind of man I am. I'm a killer. I'm not a man. I'm a human weapon!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I've killed so many men in my life, I've lost count."

"You were a soldier," she replied, confused. "That's the price of war. That doesn't

make you a murderer.”

“And what about the men I’ve killed since the war?” he asked, laughing scornfully.

“What about them?” she asked, refusing to back down. “Tell me, who were they?”

“It doesn’t matter.” His anger was quickly dwindling back into something she considered much worse, depression.

“Oh,” she started hotly, hoping to stop his downward spiral. “Apparently it does matter. So tell me, Lord Benjamin Sinclair. Tell me about these deaths that haunt you so. Talk to me, milord.”

He winced at her return to formality and backed away from her. Crossing the room, he placed his big desk between them as a barrier. She could see his internal walls being reconstructed, silently and swiftly.

“Oh, no you don’t” she screamed, following him behind his desk. “You aren’t going there again!” she yelled with vehemence, pounding on his chest with her fists. “I won’t let you. Do you hear me? I won’t let you.”

Her blows rained on his chest, but Ben remained motionless and emotionless. He refused to be baited and she watched the blackness of his eyes go blank. She started to cry in earnest then, clinging to him, but he did not move to comfort her. In fact, he didn’t even acknowledge her presence in the room. After several sobbing moments, she pulled away to look into his face.

“Ben?” she whispered.

“Lock the door on your way out,” he replied quietly.

## Chapter Twelve

### V is for Vow

The gloomy weather outside only served to exasperate the atmosphere inside. Black clouds rolled in over the channel bringing chilling winds and drizzling rain. Ben didn't emerge from his office. During that time, Vee stayed in her bedroom, canceling her classes with Chelsea.

*Why bother, she thought darkly. I've failed.*

She spent the days in bed, sleeping for hours on end, although her rest was fitful at best. Disturbing images inundated her mind. Images of Ben on the battlefield, swinging that brutal sword, killing man after man until all she could see was red. Images of Chelsea as she watched her home burn down and listened to the screams of her mother and grandfather, powerless to save them. Over and over, she replayed the pictures in her mind until she felt as though she'd actually been a witness to all of it. The pain in her chest intensified until she fell into a restless sleep simply to escape it all.

The third morning brought Mrs. Henry to her door.

"Weel," the housekeeper said, taking in Vee's haggard appearance, the disheveled bed sheets and the darkened room. "That's enough of that."

"Excuse me?" she asked, her voice husky from lack of use.

"Your pupil is waiting in the schoolroom for her teacher. Two days of feigning an illness is quite enough," Mrs. Henry said, her usually jovial voice laced with anger.

"I am sick," she replied, insulted.

"You are no more sick than milord," Mrs. Henry replied.

"Then why do you allow him to lock himself away? I only ask for the same thing. Leave me alone."

"No," the housekeeper said, vehemently pulling the covers off her and gripping her arm tighter than a vise as she yanked her from the bed. Vee attempted to pull against her, but the older lady was no slouch.

"Why?" Vee cried, losing the battle to remain in her bed. "Why won't you leave me alone?"

"Because they need you!" Mrs. Henry yelled. "You are the only one who can set things right!"

"No," she said, no longer struggling. "You're wrong. I can't make it right. I've failed."

"That is where you are wrong," Mrs. Henry replied as she tossed a folded piece of paper at Vee's feet.

"What's this?" she asked, bending down to retrieve the crumpled sheet.

"Read it for yerself," Mrs. Henry replied, leaving the room. "Breakfast is getting cold, so I suggest you hurry up with your morning constitutional."

Confused, she glanced down at the note in her hands. On the outside, she recognized Chelsea's childish script. It simply said "V."

Her heart leapt into her throat. Chelsea had written a note. To her?

Quickly she unfolded the sheet and read.



*I sory. I be gud. Pleese com bak.*

She clutched the paper to her heart as the tears began to fall. Chelsea had spoken to her. For the first time, the child had reached out to her with words. Overwhelmed, she collapsed to her knees and cried. Great heaving sobs erupted from her chest.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered. “What have I done?”

She’d nearly quit. Nearly given up on the sweet, lonely girl. Nearly given up on Ben, the man who’d claimed her heart, despite his aloofness and his attempts to push her away.

Never again, she vowed, never again would she fail them. She would fight to her last breath, but she would not give up on Benjamin Sinclair or Chelsea Duncan. It was her task to make things right. For some reason, she’d been sent to this house and she would not leave it until she’d succeeded in saving its inhabitants. *And then, she thought, God willing, perhaps I will be saved as well.*

\* \* \* \*

Vee didn’t see Ben much over the next couple of days. She spent most of her time in the schoolroom with Chelsea. The two of them had reached an unspoken truce. She would continue to teach her lessons, and Chelsea would no longer pretend ignorance. Although the child did not write anymore personal requests, she did master the art of writing in complete sentences. “See Spot run,” “Run Spot run,” and other dull sentences were meticulously copied, and Vee knew without a doubt she was dealing with an extremely bright young student.

Chelsea also excelled in math, much to her chagrin, as it was her weakest subject. She had taken to reading chapters aloud from one of Ben’s books about the history of England. After each chapter, she would ask a series of questions to which Chelsea would write the answer. Spelling errors aside, the answers were always correct. Teaching the young girl became a pleasure and Vee was instantly caught up in it.

Mrs. Henry observed the schoolroom happenings one afternoon and, pulling her aside, declared her a natural teacher. She beamed at the praise and felt perhaps she had finally found her niche in this foreign environment. The feelings of not belonging had grown less as the days turned into weeks, but she still could not shake the notion she truly did not fit in somehow. She could only assume it was because this house was far grander than whatever hovel she’d actually crawled out of.

She no longer wished for her memory to return, but instead feared the day it would happen. She’d begun to suspect that it would eventually come back to her. There had been numerous times during her days in the classroom with Chelsea when she’d felt a brief sense of familiarity, a small recollection, only to have it disappear into the recesses of her mind again.

After five days apart, Ben appeared one morning as she and Chelsea were settling in to lessons. He’d gone to London after emerging from his locked study under the pretense of buying yet another horse, but she suspected he was really trying to remove himself from her presence. Chelsea was just finishing up her handwriting lesson when they both became aware of someone standing behind them.

“That’s marvelous,” his deep voice said.

Chelsea, thrilled by his arrival, jumped up from her seat and wrapped her arms tightly around his waist. Ben, delighted by her enthusiastic response, picked her up and

swung her around laughing.

“What a nice greeting!” he declared, spinning her around the room.

Chelsea giggled in spite of herself at his twirling, and Vee found herself laughing as well.

“I warn you, she’s just finished breakfast. Unless you wish to see firsthand what she ate, you better stop that,” she joked.

Ben, still laughing, returned Chelsea to her chair as the young girl grabbed up the paper she’d just completed copying and thrust it into his hands.

“What’s this?” he asked, looking at Chelsea’s childlike script on the paper.

“I think she wants you to see how much her handwriting has improved,” she said for Chelsea, who was looking at Ben with such longing in her eyes it almost hurt her to look. The little girl was desperate for her guardian’s approval.

He didn’t disappoint her. “Well, this is perhaps some of the finest writing I have ever seen,” he gushed. “I must say my very own father, a duke and peer of the realm cannot write nearly so beautifully as this. Chelsea, my little angel, you are a wonder.”

Chelsea, blushing, reached up to him with open arms. Bending down to the small girl, he received a welcome home kiss on the cheek that brought tears to Vee’s eyes.

“Oh, my sweet little Chelsea,” he whispered. “I have missed you so.” Gathering the small girl up in his arms, he embraced her tightly, while looking down at the paper still in his hands. When he finally put her down, he glanced up at her. “I must say this is quite a wonderful poem, but I don’t believe I’ve ever heard it before.” Softly, he began to read it aloud.

*‘Two roads diverged in a yellow wood  
And sorry I could not travel both  
And be one traveler, long I stood  
And looked down one as far as I could  
To where it bent in the undergrowth.’*

He paused and looked at her questioningly.

“Oh,” Vee added. “It’s my favorite. I know it by heart. You’ve really never read it before? I thought it was quite famous.”

“No,” he replied. “I’ve never seen it and as you know, I consider myself to be fairly well-read. Who wrote it?”

“Robert Frost,” she replied without thought.

Ben shook his head. “I’ve never heard of him.”

“That’s strange,” she muttered. “Do you think it could be a clue to my past?”

“Perhaps,” he said uncertainly. “Perhaps he is a local poet. Someone who lived near you, but is not well known to the populace at large.”

“Maybe,” she replied unconvinced.

“Anyway,” he said. “It is a nice poem made even nicer by the way in which it was written.” With this, he pressed an impromptu kiss on Chelsea’s nose, which led to more giggles from both the females in the room.

Ben clearly decided to grasp at the moment of peace and jovialness. “And now, I am going to take my favorite two girls out for a ride, and I won’t take no for an answer.”

Chelsea frowned.

“I’ve taken the liberty of having both your horses saddled,” he continued. “They are awaiting their ladies in front of the house. No need to even go to the stable.”

Chelsea, although still uncertain, seemed to seriously consider this last piece of information. Truly a horse lover at heart, Vee watched her reticence give way to eagerness as she reached for Ben once more. Unwilling to lose the joy of the moment, he grabbed her up in his arms. "You hold tight to me and I'll see you safely to the saddle. Your pony has missed you terribly."

Vee and Chelsea both laughed at his words, relieved. Perhaps, Vee thought, Ben had believed her when she'd voiced her suspicions about Frank Prescott.

"Shall we?" he asked, as he gestured for her to precede him with Chelsea in his arms.

"We shall," she said with a laugh. "But I warn you, if that horse even looks at me sideways—"

\* \* \* \*

The rest of the morning passed in absolute bliss as far as Vee was concerned. Chelsea, delighted to return to her much-loved outdoors and even more beloved pony, giggled and smiled during the entire adventure. Ben, spurred on by Chelsea's gushing enthusiasm, was at his most charming. Telling funny stories and doing silly tricks upon Scout's back, Vee and Chelsea laughed so hard they had to dismount to catch their breath.

Mrs. Henry arranged for a picnic lunch, courtesy of Mrs. Cooke. The fried chicken, cheese and fresh bread were delicious. Ben and Vee polished off a bottle of wine, while Chelsea drank fresh water Mrs. Henry had sent along. He told them about his purchase of a new thoroughbred that was certain to be the success of his breeding program, while she gushed about Chelsea's excellent progress in math and history. Chelsea blushed, but was obviously pleased by the compliments.

The day ended too soon for all of them as they returned to Waterplace in the late afternoon. Frank Prescott was there to greet them as they approached. Vee, still wary of the groomsman, kept a close eye on her young ward and realized the moment the small girl stiffened in her saddle upon seeing the fair haired man.

"Good afternoon," Prescott hailed. "Twas a lovely day for an outing."

"Yes, indeed, it was," Ben replied, oblivious to Chelsea's sudden shaking.

"But tiring," Vee added, hopping down from her horse none too gracefully.

"Chelsea," she called, anxious to attract the young girl's attention, which lay riveted upon the groomsman.

"Chelsea," she repeated, approaching the girl's pony and dropping the reins of her own horse into the unsuspecting hands of Prescott. "Take my horse, will you?" she asked shortly, while reaching to lift Chelsea off the horse.

"I will see to the young girl, ma'am," Prescott said, apparently anxious to place himself between her and her student. She noticed he never took his eyes off Chelsea and wondered briefly at the slightly menacing look behind them.

"That won't be necessary." She grabbed Chelsea from her pony, sorry for the roughness, but desperate to get the child safely into her own arms.

"Vee," Ben said, viewing her haste with surprise. "I will see to Chelsea."

"No." She grasped the child closely to her chest and placed herself between Prescott and her precious pupil. "Not necessary. As you both can see, I have her. Thank you for a wonderful day, Lord Benjamin," she said formally as she attempted to calm the shaking girl clasped in her arms. "Good day, Mr. Prescott," she added, walking quickly toward

the house.

As they approached the house increasing the distance between them and the stable, she whispered comforting words to Chelsea. "I will always keep you safe, angel. I promise. He'll never hurt you." At her words, the girl's undeniable fear seemed to leave her as she wrapped her arms tightly around her neck.

Vee couldn't be sure, but she thought she heard Chelsea breathe the words, "I know."

## Chapter Thirteen

### V is for Visions in the Night

A summer storm passed through during the night. Bright flashes of lightning jerked Vee out of a sound sleep. Wide awake, she crossed to close the window as the rain that had been threatening to appear all evening began to fall. No sooner had she started back to bed then she heard a cry. Chelsea?

Hastily donning a robe, she rushed down the hall to Chelsea's room. The small girl was suffering from a nightmare. Crossing the room to her bed, she lightly shook her shoulder, trying to wake her.

"No," Chelsea whispered. "No, please. Mummy!" she cried.

Shocked to hear her little voice for the first time, Vee continued to lightly shake her. Terrified the child was reliving the horrors of the fire that killed her mother, she shook harder, spoke louder, desperate to save her from suffering that anguish again.

"Chelsea, wake up. Wake up, sweetheart. It's Vee," she said.

Chelsea's eyes opened slowly, unfocused and filled with unshed tears.

"It's Vee." Her voice was laced with worry and she was anxious to rouse the child from terror of her memories. Gathering the small, quaking girl in her arms, she rocked her gently, offering comforting words until Chelsea's shaking stopped.

"I'm right here," she crooned. "I won't leave you. I promise. You're safe. You're not alone."

Only as sleep began to reclaim her did Chelsea's vise-like grip loosen. Laying her gently back on the pillow and covering her up, Vee sat by her bed until the storm passed, the night ended and the morning sun rose, holding her hand and wondering what on earth she could do to help vanquish the poor child's fears once and for all.

\* \* \* \*

In his room, Ben was fighting his own demons. Cursing the storm, he began to feel his grip on sanity leaving him. Night storms were the worst for him. The thunder sounded too much like the roar of cannons, the flashes of lightning too much like ignited gunpowder. Struggling not to succumb to the powerful grip of madness, he tried to pour himself another glass of brandy but his hands shook too badly. He gave up the effort.

"No," he said, gritting his teeth. "I'm not going back. I'm not going back." Another flash of lightning tore across the sky, illuminating the room. He dove to the floor, feeling the bullets of his imagination whizzing above him.

"No," he whispered, rising up on his hands and knees to cross the room until he reached his bedside table. Reaching inside the drawer while still on his knees, he retrieved his pistol just as another boom of thunder sounded outside.

Burrowing down beside his bed, his pistol in his hand, he slowly raised the muzzle to his brow. For one brief moment, he considered what it would feel like to pull the trigger, to drive the visions of blood and pain from his head. He had the power to kill the memories. He didn't want to see the broken bodies, men wailing in pain, the faces of

women who'd lost their children and their husbands only to be raped repeatedly by soldiers. He couldn't live with the pain, the memories anymore. His finger tightened on the trigger.

In the fog of his mind, he heard a voice. Faintly, in the background. "It's Vee," he heard. "I'm here. I won't leave you." He listened as she soothed him softly, struggling to hear each word she said. "You're not alone," she murmured.

Slowly, he lowered the gun to his lap, closing his weary eyes, waiting for the storm to pass, and the battle in his head to end. Long after the rain ceased, he stayed on the floor, cradling his pistol on his lap, aware that for him there would never be any escape from the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Rising early, Vee decided to let Chelsea sleep in. She could see dark circles under the young girl's eyes left by the visions of the night. Despite her lack of sleep, she felt restless in the house. Eschewing breakfast, she decided to take a walk, anxious to shake off her worries about her student. While the storm from the previous night had abated, dark clouds loomed overhead, waiting to spill more rain upon the earth.

Cursing the weather softly, she considered Chelsea's bad dreams. In all her time here, she had never known Chelsea to dream about the fire that had killed her mother, and she had no doubt that was what the child was seeing last night in her sleep. What could have brought the nightmare on?

She recalled Frank Prescott's presence when they returned from the picnic yesterday. It was obviously the man who spooked Chelsea, and it was more than her normal reticence around strangers. Chelsea was terrified of the groom.

Exiting the house by the rear, she wandered aimlessly through the recently restored gardens. Free of weeds, she admired the new blooms on the roses. In just one month, the newly hired gardener had fought a valiant battle to reclaim the backyard and it was truly going to be a showplace someday.

Placing a blanket on the damp bench, she inhaled deeply, enjoying the sweet scent of fresh flowers. The beauty of the garden always lightened her worries and helped her focus on the positive side of life. In spite of last night's setback, Chelsea was making wonderful progress. Each day that passed brought the small girl out of her self-imposed prison a bit more. In the past week, she had begun to feel that a real breakthrough was possible. Yesterday, the smile had never left her lovely young charge's face and her constant giggles at Ben's antics made her seem more like a normal child than ever before.

Even Ben seemed like a different man than the one she'd met nearly two months earlier. He smiled more and his laughter was becoming a common sound in the house. She enjoyed his lighthearted teasing, regardless of the fact he remained committed to maintaining a platonic relationship with her. After her last attempt to move them beyond simple friendship, she decided to keep her heart's desire a secret.

He had more demons in his closet than she'd realized and, although it broke her heart, he didn't seem capable or willing to give her anymore of himself. She wished he would open up to her about his past and more than a few times, she'd found herself wondering about his claims of being a killer. She no longer believed that it was only the war that tormented his mind, but something more, something that had happened in the years since he'd returned from France.

A noise behind her startled Vee out of her reverie and she turned to see Frank standing behind her at the edge of the garden. Had he followed her here? How long had he been watching her?

"Beg pardon, ma'am," he said, as she turned. "I didn't realize there was anyone else back here."

She felt her heart begin to race and silently chastised herself for her irrational reaction to this man. He'd made no overt threat to her or Chelsea, yet she couldn't shake the feeling that he was a danger to all their newfound happiness.

"Hello, Mr. Prescott," she replied, proud of the strength of her voice. "Is there something I can do for you?"

"No'm," he replied. "I was lookin' for Mr. Harvey, the gardener. He promised me some fennel. One of the horses has an upset stomach."

"I see," she answered, comforted by his perfectly acceptable excuse for being in the garden. "I believe Mr. Harvey is in the greenhouse."

"Don't see you out and about much lately," Frank added, approaching her for the first time. "Where is your young student today?"

Immediately the hackles on her neck began to rise. "Inside. I thought I'd take a few minutes to enjoy the break in the weather. That was quite a rain we had last night." She hoped Prescott would pick up on her change of subject, but he didn't.

"Looks like we're in for some more," he said, looking up at the dark sky. "I hear tell she don't talk, but I can't figure out how you can teach a young'un who don't. Figure she must talk to you when nobody's around. That right?" Frank asked, his eyes alight with interest.

Although his tone was light and his voice friendly, she sensed an undercurrent to his questioning.

"My charge is none of your concern, Mr. Prescott, just as the horses are none of mine. If you will excuse me." She rose, but was stopped by a strong hand on her upper arm. Glancing down at the offensive hand, then back up into Prescott's face, she witnessed the murderous look in his eye a split second before he shuttered it away.

He removed his hand and smiled genially. "Beg your pardon, miss," he said. "I didn't mean to offend you. I was just makin' conversation. Seein's as how we both work here."

"No offense taken," she offered tightly. "Now, I need to return to the house. Excuse me."

This time her escape from the groom was successful, but she couldn't beat back the sense that there was something sinister lingering inside the man. Unfortunately, once again, she had no proof to offer Ben besides her suspicions. She would simply have to be more diligent in her efforts to keep the man away from Chelsea until she could learn more about him.

One thing she was sure of now. Prescott's attention was directed at Chelsea, not her, as she'd previously feared. All she could do for now was wonder why.

## Chapter Fourteen

### V is for Virtue

Another night and another storm. Vee cursed the weather for the second time that day as she left Chelsea's room around midnight. Once again, the small girl had awakened, crying out in the darkness, frightened by nightmares. It had taken her two hours to calm the unaware child until she'd finally succumbed to a deeper, more peaceful sleep. Her restlessness and fears only served to upset Vee, who was now wide awake and worried. After lying quietly beside the child for the last half hour, she was finally convinced the sweet lass would not awaken again tonight.

Unfortunately, Chelsea didn't seem to be the only person bothered by the storm. As she traversed the dark hallway back to her own bedroom, she heard pacing coming from Ben's room. Pausing briefly, she listened to his heavy footfalls wondering if he'd heard Chelsea's cry. She didn't think so or he certainly would have gone to her. She'd been around him enough to know that Chelsea's welfare was of the utmost importance in his life.

Another flash of lightning illuminated the house followed by booming thunder. She winced at the sound and rushed back toward her own room, anxious to crawl under the covers and hide until the storm passed. The crash of breaking glass broke her stride. Concerned, she walked back to Ben's doorway and knocked softly. No reply. Knocking a little louder, she called out his name. Again, silence met her call. Trying the knob, she found the bedroom unlocked. Opening the door slowly, she stepped into the dark room.

"Be—?" she whispered, but her question was cut off by a strong arm pressed against her throat and another at her waist. Her back was roughly pulled against a large, powerful body. Panic gripped her until she recognized the harsh, agonized breathing in her ear. Ben was gone and the stranger was back.

Desperately attempting to dislodge his arm from her windpipe, her voice choked out his name hoping he would recognize her. Apparently he did as the muscular arms released her so suddenly she stumbled forward, coughing lightly and struggling to catch her breath.

"What are you doing here?" he asked harshly, his voice once again alien to her.

Rubbing her throat, she squinted in the dark, trying to make out his face. "I h-heard glass breaking. I wanted to see if you were all right."

Lightning pierced the darkness followed by a loud rumble. In the brief light, she saw his distorted features, his eyes dark against his pale face, his jaw tight and his typically well-groomed hair tousled as if, once again, he'd been trying to tear it out.

"Oh, God, Ben," she cried, crossing back to where he stood. "Not again."

"Get out," he growled.

"Ben."

"Get out!" he roared. She shrunk back at his menacing yell and intimidating stance, but made no move to leave. Looking through her, he turned and walked toward a chair by the fireplace. She noticed his slight limp. Glancing at the floor, she could see dark patches on the floor and realized his foot was bleeding. Concern washed through her as



she followed him. "Ben, your foot. You're hurt."

Reaching out to him, she was halted by two painful hands grasping her wrists. "Ben," she cried, "you're hurting me."

"Get out," he said, through clenched teeth. "Now!"

"No," she yelled back, angry by his harsh treatment. She only wanted to help him.

Surprised by her response, he suddenly released her hands, his arms falling loosely by his sides. Taking his silence as acquiescence, she lightly pushed him into the chair. Bending down, she threw two logs on the dying embers to build up the fire. The chilled, dark room brightened with light and heat. Striding to the bedside table and carefully sidestepping a broken pitcher, she dipped a cloth into the washbasin, wringing out the water. Returning to him, she noticed how much it was costing him to control his anger. Undaunted, she knelt at his feet, gently lifting the injured one for inspection.

"You have a piece of glass in your heel. Be still and I'll take it out."

The sound of rain pounding on the roof surrounded them and she wondered if he knew she was there. Frowning, she set to work removing the shard by the light of the fire and washing his wound. Satisfied she had taken out all of the glass, she tore a strip off the hem of her cotton night rail and wrapped the foot tightly. Pleased with her work, she leaned back on her heels and looked into his face. He sat woodenly, staring at the fire. She doubted he'd even felt the pain of her nursing.

Tentatively, she reached out to touch his cheek. The pain and fear in his eyes ripped her in two and she wanted nothing more than to comfort him. He shuddered at her touch before slowly turning his head and placing a soft kiss on her palm. Shaking, he clasped her wrist pulling her hand into his.

"Please," he whispered desolately. "Go."

Unwilling to leave him alone with his dark thoughts anymore, she simply shook her head.

"Go," he repeated, his voice cracking under the strain. "You're in danger. I told you what will happen."

"No," she said, squeezing his hand with hers. "You won't hurt me, and I won't leave you alone. Not again."

"Dammit, Vee! Get out! I don't want you to see me like this!" His fear and distress turned back to the red-hot anger she hadn't seen in him since the night he kissed her roughly in his office.

"Well, that is a shame because I'm *not* leaving," she calmly replied.

Without warning, he rose, lifting her in his arms and carrying her to his bed. He deposited her in the center of the silk counterpane, following her down and covering her with his own large body. "I warned you," he growled, as his mouth covered hers in a hard kiss.

Shock was quickly replaced by desire as she opened her lips to receive his tongue. She wanted this, wanted him, and this time she wouldn't run from him. It was her turn to shock him as she nipped at his lips with her teeth. His calloused hands gripped her head harder holding her still for his passionate assault. With dueling tongues, teeth and lips, they devoured each other, starving for more.

"Go," he whispered.

"No."

Ignoring her protest, his lips traveled across her cheek, his tongue caressing the

delicate shell of her ear, before taking the lobe in his teeth. She moaned with desire as his hands parted her light robe, touching her everywhere through her conservative gown.

He dragged his lips down her neck, continuing downward, licking her breasts through the material. Nipping softly, he pulled on her nipples, making them hard and eliciting an excited gasp from her kiss-swollen lips.

“Leave,” he said as he drew one of the tight nubs into his mouth.

“No,” she answered breathlessly, grabbing his hair to hold him in place, terrified he’d continue and terrified he’d stop.

With shaking hands, he seized the top of her night rail and tore the material down the center to her waist. Spreading the cloth, he studied her full, white breasts, spellbound for almost a full minute before drawing the rosy nipple into his mouth again.

He filled his hands and mouth with her round fullness, playing with her until she felt an unfamiliar, overpowering twinge in her stomach and even lower. She arched into his powerful hands anxious for something more. As if aware of her feelings, his lips trailed lower, grazing her stomach as his hands grasped the ends of her destroyed gown once again. She waited breathlessly, readying herself to be completely bared to his sight.

He froze, looking up and waiting for her eyes to meet his. “This is your last chance. Tell me to stop.”

Gazing into his eyes, she saw all the vulnerability and uncertainty he tried so hard to hide. In her time at Waterplace, he’d become her friend, protector and employer. Tonight as she looked into his beloved face, she wanted him to be her lover as well. She wanted to erase his past, to make him happy, even if only for a short while.

“No,” she whispered once more. She watched his fear turn to relief and she smiled. “Don’t stop,” she said again, stronger this time.

“I don’t pay for sex,” he said softly. “If we do this, you’re mine. Mine,” he repeated gruffly.

Taking an unsteady breath, she only had time to nod once before he ripped her gown to the hem. His rough hands suddenly felt soft as they brushed up her legs, beneath her knees, between her thighs. His lips followed his hands placing wet kisses until his head rested at the opening to her body. He looked up at her again, as if waiting for her to deny him. Instead she placed her hand on his cheek as she had done only moments earlier after she’d tended his cut foot. Again, he kissed her palm before he moved to her center, parting her for a much more intimate kiss.

With his tongue, he delved into her delicate folds licking and sucking, her hips thrusting up desperate for the heat of his breath. Nipping at her delicate petal, his tantalizing kisses were pulling her closer to the abyss, pushing her over in a tumult of cries as he thrust his tongue deep inside her. Arching up, she reached down to pull him into her embrace as the climax roared through her body. Quivering with delight, she let the dark vortex swallow her, reveling in the feeling.

Catching the last of her moans with his mouth, he quickly unbuttoned his pants, pulling them off completely to dump them unceremoniously onto the floor. She caught only a glimpse of his throbbing manhood before he spread her legs and positioned himself at her threshold.

“Mine,” he groaned as he roughly pushed her legs even farther apart. “Mine,” he repeated as he shoved into her with one thrust.

Pain ripped through her body as she cried out, tears springing to her eyes. Struggling

violently, she attempted to push him off her. Push him out of her as her earlier pleasure was replaced by the most invasive feeling she'd ever encountered.

Ben froze, not moving a muscle as she shoved at his shoulders, frantic to dislodge him.

"Don't move," he murmured in her ear. "It will pass in a moment."

Breathing harshly, her body immediately responded to the gentleness in his voice, and she stopped struggling, trying to accustom herself to his thickness within her. After several calming breaths, she became aware of him gently kissing her cheek, whispering comforting, sweet words in her ear. She started to speak, but he hushed her with a loving kiss, his lips caressing hers with feather-soft touches.

"Better?" he whispered against her lips. Without waiting for a response, he slowly began to pull out. The reverse movement sent unexpected waves of pleasure through her body as her inner muscles clenched attempting to hold him in.

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Moaning, he cursed before slowly pushing back in, anxious to stay in her tight, wet heat forever. At the sound of her pleasure, he repeated the motions slowly at first, then harder as she began to meet him thrust for thrust.

Soon, their lovemaking took on a frantic pace, both of them impatient to find their release while unwilling for it to end. They clung to each other as they cried out in bliss. His seed filling her womb as his passion filled her soul.

For long moments, neither of them moved as he covered her with his body—unwilling to part—unwilling to let the magic of the moment pass. His black eyes locked onto her blue ones as his forehead rested lightly against hers. Slowly, he bent down to kiss her lips gently, softly. She sighed against them and he was aware of every feeling she created in his body. Aware he never wanted this night to end.

Ben withdrew carefully before rolling to his side, enveloping her in his arms, kissing her brow, holding her tightly as if to protect her.

"The storm has passed," she whispered.

His heart stopped briefly at her words as he realized for the first time since the war, he had beaten the darkness that surrounded him during storms. The thunder of bombs, the flashes of gunpowder lightning hadn't tormented and taunted him into madness this night—not with her here to comfort and console him. She had taken him out of the shadows of his haunted past and thrust him into the bright light of her sunny future.

"I can't imagine forgetting anything as amazing as that," she whispered, leaning forward to place her own innocent kiss upon his lips.

"Oh, sunshine," he murmured. How could he tell her, tell her he'd been so terribly wrong? She would hate him. With his foolish assumptions, he had darkened her own past, robbing her of her self-esteem and causing her more than a few moments of unhappiness. And now with his careless, selfish actions tonight, he'd destroyed her future, stealing her innocence, ruining her. "I'm so sorry," he said.

"What?" she said, leaning up on one elbow. "Why sorry?"

Sitting up with his back turned to her, he rested his head on bent arms. "Vee, I was wrong. Wrong about everything. How can I ask you to forgive me?"

Confused, she sat up, pulling the sheet over her, modest about her nudity. "I don't understand. What were you wrong about?"

His heart began to beat furiously with the thought that he had hurt her. It was her

first time. It should have been special, and yet he'd handled her with all the finesse of a clumsy, green boy. No worse than that. He was a brute, a monster. Ben stood up and crossed over to the fireplace, bracing both hands on the mantle. She was quiet—too quiet—for several long moments before finally he heard her move on the bed.

"Ben?" she whispered. The wall of silence broke loose at the sound of her anguished plea.

"Dammit, Vee!" He was suddenly overcome with rage, at himself, at her, at the fates which constantly seemed to conspire against him. "Don't you see? You didn't forget this! This has never happened to you before."

At her perplexed look, he strode back to the bed and pulled the sheet away from her. "Look, Vee, look! You were a virgin! You were a virgin and I took you. Took your innocence."

Glancing down, he winced as he saw a small smear of blood upon her thighs. Then mortified he realized that he had hurt her once again with his harsh words and the way he'd exposed her. She looked up at him with hot tears gathering in her lashes, and the sight of them tore his heart to pieces.

"I forced myself upon you."

"Forced?" she gasped.

"God, I've been such a fool. Everything about you, everything told me you weren't a prostitute. You couldn't be. It isn't in you! Your blushes, your untried kisses, your trusting nature. All the signs were there, and I ignored them. Ignored them because I didn't want to see it. I've wanted you since the first moment I saw you battered and broken under that damn tree and the only way I could have you was to cast you in the same dark light that hovers over me. To make your soul as black as mine. Sweet Jesus, I've ruined you. Ruined your future. Ruined everything."

"Stop it!" she yelled, "Stop it! Don't say another word." Tears were streaming down her face as she reached out to him. "You need to understand. You need to listen to me. What happened between us tonight was the farthest thing from force."

He laughed scornfully, but she swatted at him, her face flushed with anger.

"You didn't force me to do anything I didn't want to do. My God, Ben, what we did, it was wonderful, astounding, perfect. Don't you dare belittle it! Don't you dare steal tonight away from me."

"The only thing stolen tonight was your virtue," Ben began, anguish in his voice.

"No, no more words, not from you." Her furor had grown to match his, hell it seemed to surpass his and she punctuated each word she spoke with a sharp finger to his chest. "You're wrong. Wrong about everything. You've had your turn to talk, and now it's my turn."

He grinned suddenly, amused by the power of her anger. She rarely lost her temper or raised her voice and the fact that he found her fury funny enraged her even more.

"Ruined me?" she continued. "Is that what you truly think? You didn't ruin anything. You saved me. You picked me up from under that tree, cared for me, befriended me, kept me safe. These months with you and Chelsea have been the best of my life."

He felt one eyebrow rise at her words. He realized he was taunting her about the fact that she couldn't recall anything about her life prior to her time at Waterplace, but she didn't stop speaking, her tirade full-blown now.

"And, yes, I know I don't remember anything except the last couple of months, but I

still know, somehow, deep inside of me, this time with you is special, unique, a gift. You make me feel good about myself. You laugh at my stupid jokes. You don't care that I'm clumsy, and when you look at me, I actually feel beautiful."

"You are beautiful," he said, but she didn't acknowledge his words.

"If I live to be a hundred years old, I will never, *never* regret tonight. Do you hear me? Never!" Her voice had risen throughout her outburst and she rose up until was kneeling on his bed, standing so close he could see the high color in her cheeks and the slight trembling of her lips. Her finger still jabbed him mercilessly in the chest, as she seemed to be struggling to catch her breath.

Taken aback to see his mild-mannered governess in a true rage, he simply nodded, afraid to say anything that may set her off again. Unfortunately, she wasn't finished.

"Don't you ever act like what we did tonight was anything less than making love. I never want to hear you tell me you forced me to do anything. I wanted this. I wanted you. Dammit, I still want you!"

With that, she grabbed his face, pulling his lips down to hers, kissing him in a manner that left no doubt of her desire.

Overwhelmed and amazed, he could only wrap his arms around her pulling her to his body, desperate to hold onto her. His sunshine, his angel, his love. In that moment, Ben knew his love for her was more potent than any force on earth. He loved her with every part of his being. He loved her in a way he'd never imagined possible. He loved her with a heart he thought long dead to the emotion.

"Vee," he whispered into her hair, kissing her brow, cheeks, ears, throat, neck, every part of her he could reach. "My God. It's you who's wrong. You saved me."

With the care one took with a small babe, he tenderly placed her back on the bed.

"It was your first time. I should have been more gentle," he said remorsefully.

"Shh," she said placing her fingers to his lips. "It was perfect. No regrets?"

"No regrets," he repeated, leaving the bed to cross to the washbasin on the table. Filling it with warm water, he took a cloth and dampened it before returning to her on the bed. Without a word, he gently cleansed her inner thighs, soothing her. When he finished his nurturing, he crawled in beside her, settling her firmly against his chest, his muscular arm encircling her waist.

"No regrets," he whispered, kissing her lightly on the brow as two sleepless nights caught up to both of them and they fell into a sound sleep.

## Chapter Fifteen

### V is for Vast Experience

Lying on her stomach, Vee struggled to make her way back to consciousness. It was still dark in the room, but something stirring in the bed caught her attention. A large hand brushed against her buttocks and she realized it wasn't a what, but a who that was disturbing her sleep. A small smile pulled at the corners of her mouth, but she didn't open her eyes.

Ben's callused hand moved lightly from the small of her back to the top of her thighs in seductive circles. Sighing softly, she heard his deep chuckle before he leaned forward to place a kiss on the nape of her neck. She started to roll over, but was stopped by a strong hand on her shoulder.

"No," he grumbled. "Don't move."

Intrigued, she lay still and let his hands work their magic, roaming along her back to her bottom and down her legs. She giggled when they lightly brushed the bottom of her feet.

"Ah," he said. "Ticklish."

Moving back up, he lifted her right leg at the knee and bent it up to her waist before grabbing the pillow beside her and placing it beneath her hips.

"Ben?" she asked, but he shushed her.

She was completely open to his wandering hands and they continued to explore, returning to caress each cheek of her buttocks before investigating the line between. Her breathing accelerated as his fingers traveled between her delicate folds, finding the magic spot he'd introduced her to earlier. Rubbing in slow circles, he leaned over her, placing moist kisses along her spine. She was reaching her climax quickly, and her breathing hitched as she arched her back up to his hand seeking more, wanting more.

Aware of her desire, he slowly pulled his hand back to her entrance. "Is this what you want?" he whispered, his voice husky. As he spoke, he slid a finger into her wet passage.

"God, yes," she sighed, and she felt his smile against her spine.

His finger found the rhythm she had been longing for, and after several thrusts, he added another finger to the dance. Her hips were gyrating wildly, desperate for more.

"Easy," he said, though he didn't stop moving. "Just let it take you."

His words and fingers pushed her over the edge of the cliff. She screamed into her pillow, falling into that realm of stars and bright lights and glory. As she slowly came back to the room, she felt Ben poised behind her, his member slowly edging its way into her.

"Christ," he murmured, entering her inch by inch. "You're soaking wet and hot as fire." She sensed he was going slowly, trying to be gentle for her, trying to make amends for the first time. Unwilling to be coddled, she arched her bottom up, capturing the rest of him quickly in her sudden backward thrust.

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All the air flew from his lungs as he froze for only a moment. "Now," she sighed, her

voice still rough from sleep, yet sounding every inch the proper governess. "Do it right."

Not needing any further instructions, Ben grabbed her hips and began his own journey to heaven. She met him thrust for thrust, as they pounded their way into each other's bodies, driving themselves deeper and deeper into each other's hearts. Their movements became frantic as they tried to prolong the moment, tried to make the night last longer. When Vee cried out with her second orgasm, he followed her, pouring his seed deep inside her, his grip on her hips almost painful as he called out her name before collapsing on top of her.

Sweat-soaked and exhausted, Ben rolled to her side, one hand still lingering on her bottom. Taking a deep breath, he smiled at her before lightly swatting her rear end. She giggled and he realized that was all he had the strength left to do. He chuckled when she mirrored his thought with her words.

"I don't think I could move a muscle if my life depended on it," she said.

"We better hope the house doesn't catch on fire, because I have a feeling we'd both be consumed in the flames."

"I think we already were. That was—" she stumbled, trying to find the words.

"I know," he replied. "It was."

"You must have quite a bit of experience with this," she asked, blushing softly.

"With what?" he asked, merely to see the color in her cheeks darken.

"You know," she said, uncomfortably.

"Come now sunshine, with all we've done in this bed, surely you can say the word," he provoked.

"Sex," she said.

"Making love," he corrected.

"That's two words," she added with a giggle.

He smiled at her joke, then placed his hands behind his head, feeling for all the world like a man completely relaxed and satisfied. He continued to lay in silence pondering how to answer her question. Finally, he decided on the truth.

"Would you believe me if I said I didn't have much experience with making love?"

"Not on your life," she answered. "Besides, I may not remember my own past, but according to Mrs. Henry, men are initiated into—" she waved her hand at their tangled, naked bodies, clearly still uncomfortable with the words. "Oh you know, all of this at a very young age and according to her, they don't stop until they die."

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Ben laughed at her comments and gestures, a full-blown laugh that took her breath away. He truly was heart-stoppingly handsome and when he laughed, the change that came over his face was mesmerizing. His eyes twinkled, his cheeks dimpled, the scowl lines in his forehead vanished and all his other features softened and brightened.

"What's so funny?" she asked.

After several moments, he calmed down enough to speak. "I just made the mistake of actually trying to picture the Henrys in their bed."

She crinkled her nose at the thought of the rather robust housekeeper and her pencil-thin, silent husband in bed. "He must disappear in all that—" Again, she waved her hand about, letting the motion speak the words she wouldn't say and he chuckled louder.

"Yes, I can imagine it would be hard to find him."

They laughed together and for several minutes the bed shook with their continued

mirth.

"You made a fine effort of changing the subject," she said, after they'd sufficiently calmed down. "But I believe it is your experience, not the Henrys, we were discussing."

"Ah, yes," he said thoughtfully. "My vast experience as a rake among London society. My nights spent seducing the ladies of the *ton*. My numerous mistresses scattered throughout the countryside still nursing their broken hearts. Is that what you wanted to hear about?"

"Well," she stammered, not sure she wanted to know about any of that at all. "I suppose—"

"Never happened," he replied.

"What?"

"I am not like most of the gentleman of the *ton* or even like my dearest friends, who certainly had their fair share of affairs before marriage. No, my sweet sunshine, you see before you an anomaly. Counting you, there have been, but three women in my checkered past."

"Three," she whispered, so swamped with unexpected relief, she hadn't even realized she was nervous about his response. Then, she pictured in her mind all the lovely ladies in evening gowns and stunning courtesans in revealing lingerie she'd seen in drawings. How could she compete with them?

"Yes," he continued, clearly unaware of her shock. "Although, I don't suppose you can truly count the first time as it was with a chambermaid who thought I was actually my twin brother."

"What?" she asked, intrigued.

"My brother is much more in line with what Mrs. Henry described to you. A more charming rogue you've never met. All the maids in our household were half in love with him. You see, Adam is witty and clever, always the center of attention, always ready with a story or a joke. He is in his element when at a ball or musicale. His easy-going manner has made him a favorite with society, not to mention the fact that he is heir to a prosperous dukedom."

She watched him as he talked about his twin. He cared for his brother, which made her even more curious as it appeared the two no longer spoke very often. In all her time there, his brother had never come for a visit or even written to him.

She also realized the twin brothers must be the epitome of opposites considering every word Ben spoke about his brother was completely untrue about himself. After the past few weeks in his company, she sensed he was most happy when comfortably ensconced in a chair in the library with a brandy and a book or laying across Chelsea's bed as he read her a bedtime story.

"So the chambermaid thought you were Adam?"

"Persistent, aren't you?" he teased, foolishly believing she would let the subject drop. "Yes, Adam and I were about fifteen and home from school on holiday. My father was away for a few days, checking on a problem at one of his estates. Adam and I, having completed a rather trying year at boarding school, decided that as the men we now considered ourselves to be, we should unwind with a glass of brandy before bed."

"A glass?" she asked suspiciously.

"A glass, a bottle," Ben waved her question away. "Needless to say, we became rather intoxicated."



"I gathered that," she replied. "That doesn't explain the chambermaid."

"I'm getting to that, Miss Impatience," he teased, playfully swatting her bare bottom again in a gesture that she was suddenly growing quite fond of. "We decided we'd best retire and stumbled through the house to our rooms. My room was the first one in the hallway and we were carrying on as drunken schoolboys will do. We started tussling around in the room, play-fighting. In the midst of our wrestling match, Adam passed out. I was in no condition to carry him to his room, so I laid him across my bed, threw a blanket over him and staggered down to his room. A couple hours later, I woke up to discover I wasn't alone."

"Oh, no," she grinned, adding with a giggle, "you must have been terrified, poor boy."

He ignored her jest, unwilling to rise to her bait. "Terrified is not the word I would use, though I definitely stiffened up."

She swung her pillow at him, laughing at his crude joke, but he snatched it away.

"I received quite an education that night. I realized the young girl had the wrong brother as she kept calling me by Adam's name, and while I was still a bit drunk, I wasn't so far gone that I didn't know a gift when I saw it. I knew Adam was far more experienced in that realm, and I was determined he wasn't going to stay that way. I'm afraid the alcohol made me more adventurous than I may have been otherwise."

"What happened then?" she asked, caught up in his tale.

"She sneaked out shortly before Adam stumbled in at dawn, and we switched places."

"Didn't you tell her who you were?" she asked.

"No."

"Didn't you tell Adam what had happened?"

"No," he replied with a grin.

"Why not?"

"Didn't seem to matter in the long run."

"Well, that certainly wasn't much of a story. Hope your second love affair was more exciting."

"Actually, that story is duller than the first."

"Try me," she said, not willing to let him change the subject.

"Shortly before I left for war, I became involved with a young widow. She was twenty-seven to my nineteen. We had a brief, but passionate, affair. I assuaged her loneliness and she taught me about the pleasures to be had between a man and a woman. It wasn't an affair of the heart, merely two people reaching out to each other in loneliness and taking what they needed. It ended when I joined the army, and I have seen her since my return. She is remarried and the mother of two beautiful little daughters."

"That's it?" she asked. "That is the extent of your vast experience?"

"That's it," he added. "Disappointed?"

Vee thought for a moment about his question. Was she disappointed? She didn't think so. She rather liked that he wasn't a womanizer or a rake. However, there was still one question lingering in her mind.

"Why weren't there more?"

"More? Women?" he asked, taken aback.

She nodded.

“There weren’t too many opportunities when I joined the war. I mean there were women available, but they were usually whores, camp followers, and I didn’t relish the thought of surviving a battle only to succumb to syphilis or some other horrible disease. I saw women suffer ill-treatment at the hands of men in the villages through which we traveled. I’ve witnessed more rapes than I care to admit. War creates a blood lust in some men. I don’t know how to explain it, but somehow it negatively influenced my opinion of the act.”

She was horrified by his past experiences.

“After the war, I went to work, albeit covertly, with Bow Street. Spent a lot of time in St. Giles and other unsavory sections of London. I saw women sell themselves to keep food on the table and blue-ruin in their men’s hands. I was disgusted with what I saw. How men could use women, demean and degrade them.” He shook his head unable to say more.

One more question kept tugging at the back of her mind, but she knew she wasn’t brave enough to ask it aloud. Why her? Her wavering self-esteem wouldn’t allow her to ask the question. He’d been upset, disturbed deeply by the storm, and she hated to think he’d reached out to her simply because she’d been here and convenient. Shoving her misgivings aside, she shivered lightly.

Mistaking her movement for cold, he rose from bed, crossing the room to build up the fire. She hadn’t actually felt the chill in the room until he left her side. His warmth seemed to permeate her entire body. She suddenly felt very uncertain of herself and their unusual situation. “I suppose I should go back to my room.”

“Move one foot from that bed, and I will be forced to punish you,” he growled.

“Punish me?” she asked with a grin.

“You don’t want to know.” He came back to the bed, crawling in and pulling her into the protective strength of his arms. “You aren’t leaving.”

“But Mrs. Henry—”

“Doesn’t rise for hours. Besides, contrary to what she may lead you to believe, she works for me, not the other way around.”

She grinned, thrilled that he wanted her to stay.

“Tell me more about your family,” she asked, so he did. He talked for a long time about his father and mother and numerous sisters. She was pleased to hear he’d had a happy childhood. His parents loved each other and their children very much, although he expressed concern that he was a bit of a disappointment to his father.

Wistfully, she wondered what her childhood had been like, if she were as adored as Ben and his brother and sisters were. He told stories about his school days and about his dearest friends, Alex and Jack. He enthralled her with stories of their exploits and how often they’d gotten in trouble.

“I can’t wait to meet them,” she said. “So far, besides the Henrys, Doc Jonesbury and the other servants, I haven’t met anyone. Why don’t you see your family and friends more often?”

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Until she asked the question, Ben didn’t realize how much he had cut himself off from the people who cared about him. He had been afraid his friends and parents would realize he was going mad and he didn’t want to put them through the pain of watching his dark descent. Waterplace was his hideout, his escape from the world until in a fit of

madness he took his own life. A shudder ran through him now as he thought about Vee and how she'd changed all that with her unassuming nature and peacefulness. She'd brought happiness to a lonely child, light to a dark house and life to his cold, still heart. What would she say if she learned the true depths of his despair?

"Ben," she began, no doubt sensing his retreat back into himself. "When I came in earlier, during the storm—"

His harsh laugh stopped her words. "Ah yes, when you witnessed my madness," he replied sharply. "I wondered when we would get around to that. You see, my dear, I am afraid of storms. How's that for a brave war hero? Afraid of storms." He refused to face her, unwilling to see the disgust and pity that must lie in her lovely eyes.

"Not storms," she whispered.

"What?" he asked.

"Not storms," she repeated. "You aren't afraid of storms. I saw you. You're afraid of the memories that accompany the sounds of the storms. Isn't that right? Each boom of thunder, each flash of lightning reminds you of the battles." Reaching up, she cupped his cheek in her delicate hand. "I can only imagine the horrors you must have endured."

He sighed deeply, unwilling to look at her lovely face, amazed that she'd grasped the heart of his fears so quickly and succinctly.

"You're right," he said after several minutes. "It's the memories. For the past three years, I've spent every thunderstorm locked in my room surrounded by weapons, fighting the same losing battle. With each storm, the fears, the madness become worse. The week before you came I sat in this very room with the muzzle of my pistol in my mouth. I was going to end the memories, the pain. Isn't that ironic? Here you are trying to recall your past, while all I want is to forget mine."

"What stopped you?" she whispered.

"Chelsea," he answered. "I realized I hadn't seen to her care after my death. That is the reason I went to see my friend Alex. Or one of the reasons actually. I needed to find Chelsea a governess, but I also needed to make sure her future was settled. The McCormicks are my dearest friends, and I knew Alex and his lovely wife would consent to take care of Chelsea should anything happen to me."

She seemed to consider the seriousness of his words. Studying her worried face, he wondered if she was recalling his scowling, bleak features the first night she'd woken up in his bed. So much had changed about him since her arrival. She'd brought so much laughter and happiness to the household it was amazing even to himself to think that he could have fallen into such a deep depression that he'd actually considered suicide.

Well, he decided, it was past time for him to move beyond it. She'd explained to him that Chelsea would only live up to their expectations and no more. It was time he learned the same lesson. No more wallowing in self-pity or self-inflicted pain. No more dark days. From here on out, he only wanted to be with the woman who had become his lifeline, his best friend and now his passionate lover.

Hoping to relieve her worried look, he was surprised when she began to giggle. Shocked at the sound, he looked at her. He just admitted he'd considered suicide and she was laughing at him?

"I'm sorry," she said, her giggles turning to full-blown laughter, "but it is pretty funny."

"Vee," he began, unable to believe his ears or her unrestrained mirth. He'd shared

the darkest secret of his soul and she—

“B-Ben,” she gasped. “I—I—”

Soon, she was holding her sides in pain, tears streaming down her cheeks, her face red with amusement and still she laughed.

Caught up in her hysterical laughter, she didn’t even seem to notice that he was hurt by her response.

“Dammit, Vee,” he said. “It’s not funny.”

“Y-yes it is,” she replied, still giggling. “You take life far too seriously, Ben. The only thing wrong with you is that you don’t take time to enjoy life as you should. The past is the past. God knows you’ve said that to me enough in the last few weeks.”

“That’s because I thought you were a, well, you know what I thought.”

His discomfort over saying the word set her off giggling again. “Come now, Ben, after all we’ve done, surely you can say the word. You thought I was a whore, a ladybird, a woman of loose morals. If you think about it, that’s the funniest thing of all! What a pair we make.”

He struggled to retain his composure, but in the face of her cheerfulness, it was a battle he was glad to lose. No woman he’d ever met could be more courageous. She didn’t know her true name, had lost her virginity, had stood up to him in his madness and yet through it all she’d retained her humor, her optimism and her beautiful spirit. Every moment he spent in her presence, he fell more in love with her.

He began to believe her free-spirited approach to life was the right path for him. The past *was* the past. It was only the future that mattered and his future included Vee, Chelsea, his dear friends, the Henrys, as well as this house and the horses in the stable. These were the important things, the only things that truly mattered. He’d spent too much time lingering in the shadows of his past to recognize how much he had to live for in the present. It was the here and now that mattered and she had shown him the way. The way back to happiness, light, and laughter.

“God, I love you,” he said, drawing her to him and taking her lips in a kiss that was neither gentle nor hard. A kiss that showed her the depths of his feelings. His tongue swept her bottom lip before feasting on the contours of her mouth. She joined the battle, her tongue lightly caressing his.

When at last he released her, he gently laid her back on the bed, pulling the covers over her.

“No more of that or we won’t stop,” he said, rolling her to her side and joining her spoon-fashion beneath the blanket.

“Why do we have to stop?” she asked, her breathing still irregular from the fervor of their kiss.

“Because you were a virgin, and I’ve already taken you twice tonight. Your body needs time to recover. Go to sleep, sunshine.”

He knew she wanted to protest, but already her eyes were drifting shut. It had been a long, but glorious night.

“Sweet dreams,” she whispered.

“Sweet dreams,” he whispered back, his arms loosening as a peaceful sleep came to claim him as well.

## Chapter Sixteen

### V is for Venus

Before dawn the next morning, Ben woke Vee with sweet, lingering kisses as he roused her from her sleepy state.

"Time to return to your own bed, my love or Mrs. Henry will surely find us. I, for one, would not like to be on the receiving end of that particular lecture," he joked.

"Nor would I," she replied, rubbing her eyes and stretching.

"Come, I'll help you dress," he said, rising from the bed.

"That should be quick seeing as how you destroyed my nightgown. I don't know how I'll explain the state of it to Mrs. Henry," she said.

He grimaced.

"Don't," she said as she looked at his guilty face.

"I was too rough with you. I'm afraid I have a great deal to make up for."

"Ooh, I like the sound of that. You, in debt to me."

"Nevertheless, I'll replace your gown as soon as I'm able. In the meantime, perhaps we can invent a plausible story," he added ruefully as he pulled her robe around her.

She raised her eyebrows, fairly certain they would not find any story even remotely believable for the remains of her tattered gown. "I'll come up with something," she said with a blush, remembering the cause of the destruction.

"Come," he said, as he led her through the doorway and back down the hallway, kissing her lightly as he left her at the door to her room. "I'll see you later," he whispered.

She returned to her room feeling lighter and happier than she'd ever been. Or at least as light and happy as she could ever remember being. She blushed again when she thought of the things she and Ben had done.

So many happy memories made in only two months. She recalled him watching her with delight as she choked on Mrs. Henry's soup and his brandy. How he'd teasingly referred to her as Esmerelda and Hilda before landing on her favorite nickname, sunshine. She enjoyed his constant teasing about her clumsiness. There was so much good inside of him that got lost in the mire of his self-recrimination and regret. It was past time to pull out the fun-loving, generous aspects of his personality and bury the rest.

And, the most exciting thing of all, he'd said he loved her. She wondered if he even remembered saying the words. She knew she would never forget. Lord Benjamin Sinclair, the most handsome son of a duke, said he loved her. Her. Miss Vee no-first-or-last-name. She was certain nothing she'd ever done in her previous life was good enough for her to deserve this wonderful fate. The man she absolutely adored loved her back.

She collapsed backwards onto her bed as she joyfully planned the future. The past no longer mattered, she decided, as she considered waking up every morning next to him, spending her days helping him raise Chelsea and perhaps even children of their own.

"Good God," she thought. The possibility of children was quite real as she recalled their actions during the night.

"No protection," she murmured as she remembered Ben taking her—twice.

“Oh, God,” she thought, “please. Please let me be having his baby.”

She knew it was a completely selfish, irresponsible wish, but she wished it just the same. The idea of having his baby brought her undeniable happiness. It was with that happy thought that she drifted off to sleep, dreaming of Ben’s dark haired, black eyed son. Ben’s baby.

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Ben awoke in his bed alone later in the morning with a smile on his face. The first thought to cross his mind was Vee, in his bed, in his arms. The previous night seemed like a dream to him, one from which he hoped never to awake. Her appearance in the midst of his darkest hour was a miracle. She was his miracle.

Glancing out the window, he was shocked to realize how late it was. Never one to sleep much past dawn, one glance at the full sun convinced him it must be nearly noon.

Vee, he thought again, suddenly very anxious to see her. To bask in her presence, smell her uniquely fresh, light scent, sneak her away to a dark corner to steal a kiss. Dressing quickly, he descended the stairs with the single-minded purpose of finding his governess and whisking her away somewhere private to have his wicked way with her once again. Or perhaps twice.

He’d already checked the schoolroom and upon finding it empty, decided she must be having a late breakfast herself. However, the dining room, study, morning room and library were also empty. Knowing her aversion to riding and Frank Prescott, he eliminated the stables from his ever-shorter list of places to search. Finally, the smell of bread baking and voices raised in laughter reached him—the kitchen. Shaking his head for forgetting her love of baking, he headed to the back of the house.

Standing at the doorway, he was shocked at the sight his eyes beheld. Mrs. Henry, Mrs. Cooke and Vee were singing and cooking while Chelsea danced, all of them laughing over their strange song. He stepped back into the shadows when Mrs. Henry passed by the door to retrieve a bowl from the opposite wall unwilling to trespass on their fun. Vee, apparently the instigator, was teaching the ladies the chorus of the song. Ever sensitive to Chelsea’s silence, she had created hand motions for the young girl so she could participate in the silliness.

“Okay,” Vee announced to her small choir. “Let’s take it from the top. And please, forgive my voice.”

“Ach, Miss Vee, you have a lovely singing voice,” Mrs. Henry said, still bubbling with enthusiasm at their private performance.

“Well, here goes nothing!” At that, she proceeded to sing a song Ben had never heard before. By the way she was swinging her hips and humming between verses, it was apparent she could hear the music in her head. He was entranced by her free-spirited nature and absorbed by the sight of his beautiful governess—singing without inhibitions, dancing and swaying. How much she had blossomed since her arrival at Waterplace.

Frowning suddenly, he listened more closely to the words of her song.

*What the devil is she singing?* He silently wondered as Mrs. Cooke and Mrs. Henry joined in. “I am woman. Hear me roar. I am strong,” they crooned. “I am invincible. I am woman.” At their words, Chelsea held her arms up as if to display some great muscular strength, much to the delight of the other women.

She sang of the power of women and he couldn’t help but be reminded of Hayley

Campbell and Erin McCormick, the wives of his friends. Both of those women were unconventional, outspoken and rather headstrong. He felt a slight uneasiness as he considered for the first time the similarities between Vee and the other two women. They were known to be kind and intelligent, but among members of the *haut ton*, he had heard whispered comments about their innate oddness. He'd never mentioned the rumors surrounding the marchioness and countess to his friends because both men were so smitten, he feared they'd challenge the entire *ton* in an effort to silence the cruel comments. He couldn't deny to himself that there was something different about them, something unique and more than a little strange that he couldn't quite put his finger on. Now, for the first time, he had the same feeling about Vee.

Prior to last night, he thought he had her past figured out. He'd blamed her differences on the fact that she was part of the lower classes, a prostitute. Now, he realized that she had been an innocent, which left him with more questions than answers regarding her past, her strange clothing, her odd manner of speech and this song.

Unwilling to allow her to fall victim to the nasty remarks of the members of his parent's society, he stepped forward just as Vee bent to pick Chelsea up and swing her around. All the women froze in mid-song and Ben would have laughed at the image they'd presented if he weren't so upset by Vee's behavior and the inappropriate example she was setting for his ward.

"Vee," he said, his voice tense, despite his attempts to appear normal. "Might I have a word with you?"

Still smiling, she put Chelsea down, placing a light kiss on the girl's nose. Groaning to himself, he watched the girl's smile turn to one of fear as he realized, once again, he'd taken the joy out of the room. Chelsea had been acting like a normal child for once and he'd ruined it. Smiling down at her, he picked her up to swing her about himself.

"I had no idea you were such a talented dancer," he said, desperate to rectify his mistake. "Had I known I would have taken you to every ball in London."

Chelsea giggled as he continued to dance her about the kitchen.

"Forgive me, ladies," he said, bowing after releasing Chelsea, "I did not mean to interrupt your party, but I need to speak to Miss Vee for a moment." His face and voice were lighter this time, more charming, and he could sense both the older ladies silently sighing with relief that he was not angry at them.

Bowing slightly, he gestured to Vee with his arm. With a playful curtsy, she walked ahead of him toward his study. Ben closed the door as they entered, yet as she turned to face him, her eyes sparkling with laughter, he felt the chastisement he'd planned leave his head. Stepping forward, he grabbed her, pulling her into a tight embrace, his lips covering hers in a possessive kiss.

Silently rejoicing, he sensed her desire matched his own. Her hands tangled in his hair, keeping his lips on hers. His hands slipped down from her waist to her buttocks, gripping firmly, forcing her lower body toward his. He feared his intensity would frighten her. After all, she was newly initiated to the art of love, but rather than shying away, she moved her hands to the waistband of his trousers, ripping his shirt from where it was tucked so that her hands could reach underneath to caress his chest. Shocked by her boldness, he felt his control slip even further.

Within moments, he moved across the room, lifted her up onto the top of the desk and raised her skirt. Opening her knees, he had just stepped between when he felt the

smallest shred of guilt stab his conscience.

"Vee," he whispered, attempting to regain control of his body.

Sensing his retreat, she pulled him to her as she wrapped her legs around her waist.

She broke his waning willpower with a single word. "Please."

Unwilling and unable to cease, he quickly opened his trousers and entered her in one thrust. At her quick intake of breath, he cursed aloud. He was helpless to resist this Venus sent to bewitch him.

"Dammit, Vee," he said on a sigh. "I'm so sorry. I should have realized you would be sore."

Regardless of his crumbling resolve, he attempted once again to retreat only to be surprised by the strength in her lovely, shapely legs as they tightened around his thighs.

"Don't leave," she said. "It will hurt much worse if you stop. I need you, Ben."

"God, sunshine," he muttered. "You are killing me."

"What a way to go, eh?" she teased.

The afternoon sun was casting its bright yellow light across her face from the window beside her and for a moment, Ben could swear she was not human, but a shooting ray from that glorious ball of fire sent to warm him.

"Let's go together." He kissed her soft cheek, coming into her again with a gentleness he didn't know he possessed. He made love to her slowly, as if they had the rest of eternity to spend in this one precious moment, and when the climax came upon them it was as sweet and as powerful as the moment itself.

How long they clung to each other afterward, he couldn't say. All he knew was that his life had been forever changed by this oddly unique woman. Realizing he'd failed to lock the door to his study, he forced himself to leave the warmth of her body, despite her soft protest.

"Hush," he whispered, when she asked him to stay inside her for a little longer. "I forgot to lock the door." He helped her up, setting her dress to rights. Refastening his pants, he took her hand and led her to the chaise by the fireplace.

"I'm afraid all my best intentions fly out the window when it comes to you," he said after a moment.

"What do you mean?" She curled up next to him.

"What I mean," he replied, his voice suddenly tight as he tried to rein in his body's response any time she got too close, "is that I meant to bring you in here to chastise you for attempting to start a revolution amongst my female employees and ward. I'm not sure where I went wrong."

"Revolution," she asked, backing away. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"I am woman, hear me roar," he said. "What kind of song is that to teach a young girl?"

She laughed at his question. "I have no idea," she said. "The tune popped into my head as I was kneading the dough. Mrs. Cooke asked me if there were words to go along with the song I was humming and suddenly I was singing it. She and Mrs. Henry were so enthralled, I kept singing until they learned it as well. Then Chelsea started dancing and giggling, and there was no way I could stop. She was so happy. Did you see?"

The genuine joy on her face as she remembered Chelsea's glee touched his soul. "I did see her. It was marvelous." His answer was sincere as he saw her overwhelming love and concern for his ward's welfare shining in her delightful blue eyes.



“I didn’t think it would amount to a revolution,” she added, teasing him. “Now that I think about it though, perhaps women should start roaring a bit.”

“Heaven forbid,” he said with a mock shudder. “We poor men are barely keeping our heads above water with you confusing creatures now as it is.”

She laughed at his words, rising to cross and look out the window. “It’s turning into a beautiful day. It looks like the storm has finally passed for good.”

“I think perhaps you are correct. The storm has passed, for good.”

She turned to smile at him, aware of the deeper meaning behind his words.

“Should we partake of the sunshine? A picnic in the garden?” he asked.

“Oh yes,” she said enthusiastically, walking back to him. As she approached, her shoe tangled up with the edge of the rug and she fell directly in his arms.

“I must say,” he said with a laugh, tightening his arms around her, “there are times when your clumsiness comes in quite handy.”

He kissed her.

“I think that for the first time in my life, I’m very glad to have two left feet,” she joked, pulling his lips back on hers.

*Apparently, Ben thought, as he let himself get lost in her arms once again, the picnic would have to wait.*

## Chapter Seventeen

### V is for Visiting Friends

The remainder of the day passed in idyllic bliss as Chelsea, Ben and Vee frolicked in the sunshine and enjoyed the blessings of a fine summer day. Upon returning to the house, Ben retired to his study.

Arriving there, he found yet another invitation from Alex. With all that had happened in the past week, he'd forgotten about the small dinner party being held in honor of the Campbells' return from America. Vee's words from the previous night floated through his mind again, and he thought about how much he'd cut himself off from the people he cared about. He hadn't seen much of his family or friends in the past year, and it was time to come out of his self-imposed hiding.

The main problem he could foresee in attending the party was in taking Vee. Again the invitation said he should bring Chelsea and her governess. There was no way he would be able to hide his true feelings for her and treat her like a servant. He also couldn't confess to his friends that he'd fallen in love with his governess. A relationship between titled lords and their employees wasn't acceptable in polite society, but he didn't view her as an employee anyway. In truth, she would be viewed as his mistress to anyone who learned of their relationship, and he wouldn't allow that shame to fall on her.

Now that he had discovered the truth of who she was not, the incident of the song in the kitchen kept niggling at the back of his conscience. When he'd thought she was part of the lower classes, he'd dismissed her actions and innate oddness as part of her upbringing and lifestyle. Now he couldn't help but notice the similarities between Vee and the wives of his friends. In order to save her reputation, it made more sense for her to remain at Fernwood Grange. She could no longer live under his roof without damaging her own reputation and future. Decision made, he spent the remainder of the afternoon ensconced in his study trying to determine how he could break the news to his lovely lady. More difficult than that was determining how he could live without her until the mystery of her identity was solved.

\* \* \* \*

The three inhabitants of Waterplace didn't see each other again until dinner and although Vee tried to keep the conversation light and lively, she couldn't help but notice Ben's distracted silence. She wondered what could have happened to change his mood so suddenly, but as night fell, she relaxed as he accompanied her upstairs to read a bedtime story to Chelsea before tucking the small child in for the night. Chelsea giggled when he tickled her as he bent down for his kiss, and then she and the tiny girl exchanged butterfly kisses—each of them taking turns brushing their eyelashes against the other's cheek.

In the hallway, she paused at the door to her own bedroom wondering what he would do. She hoped he would want to spend the night with her, but she was too embarrassed to ask him in, afraid he would think she was forward or even worse, needy.

"Well," she said softly, "I wanted to say thank you, Ben. It was a lovely day."

"Yes," he agreed. "It was. Vee, I wonder if I might have a word with you before you retire for the evening."

The seriousness of his request set off alarm bells in her head. She'd hoped perhaps the return of his somber mood was simply because he was tired. He hadn't slept well the last few nights, and the pace he'd set for himself over the past couple of months, working relentlessly on the house, had to be taking their toll as well.

She offered these excuses to herself, praying that he was not falling back into his dark despair. She couldn't understand what else could account for his sudden change of mood. After returning from the picnic, he had gone into his study to open the mail that had arrived that day and deal with some estate affairs.

"Did you receive bad news in the post?"

"Not bad news, no," he replied, "but I did receive another letter from my friend Alex. Would you mind joining me downstairs in the study? I don't want to disturb Chelsea."

Stomach churning, she merely nodded and followed him back down the staircase. What could his friend Alex have written to distress him?

As they settled themselves on the chaise in front of the fire, she glanced over her shoulder at the desk, images of him taking her on its gleaming top causing her to blush.

Noticing her look, Ben cleared his throat, admonishing her. "This is exactly what I wanted to talk to you about."

"What?" she asked, turning back to him.

"I cannot be alone in your presence for five minutes without wanting to ravish you." He ran his fingers through his dark hair, frustration clear in the movement.

"And that's a bad thing?" she asked again with a light laugh.

"Yes, no, dammit, yes, it is." He was so clearly disturbed she didn't know how to respond.

"I failed to respond to Alex's invitation to a dinner party he is hosting this weekend."

"This weekend?" she asked.

"Yes. The thing is, Vee, I think we should attend."

Smiling, she nodded. Although the thought of meeting his best friends made her terribly nervous, she was delighted that he wanted to take her. "I think that would be wonderful." She wondered if his sudden change in disposition was because he thought she might say no.

"Actually, I think we should attend, and then I want you to stay there."

Confused, she looked at his anguished expression. "Stay there?"

"I'm going to ask Alex if you can live with his family until your own can be found," he explained.

"Stay there," she repeated, dumbfounded. He was trying to get rid of her. She'd made a mistake of profound proportions, and she could hear the sound of her own heart shattering within her chest.

"Oh, God," she whispered, desperately battling the tears threatening to flow. She refused to let him see her fall apart. She'd misunderstood everything, and now he was getting rid of her. "I need to leave," she said. She rose quickly, staggering on weak legs.

Astonished by her response, he rose and caught her in his arms. "Vee, what is it? I knew you wouldn't like the idea, but you must see that it's for the best, sunshine."

"Don't call me that!" she cried, trying to escape his iron grip on her. "Just let me go!"

“No.” Ben shook her lightly, clearly taken aback by her tears. “Not until you let me explain.”

“Explain,” she said, with a shrill laugh. “What could you possibly need to explain? You’ve had your fun, and now I’m in the way. You wish to pawn me off on your friends. Get me out of your sight. Well, don’t worry. I won’t fight you. Now please, let go of me.”

“Dear God.” He shook her even harder now that he understood her distress. “Are you mad? You think I *want* you to leave. I’d rather cut off my right arm than see you leave this house, but I can’t keep up this farce anymore.”

“Farce?” she whispered, tears falling freely despite her best efforts to stem the flow.

“Farce,” he repeated. “You aren’t a governess, Vee. You aren’t some lost ladybird and you aren’t going to be my mistress. Dammit! Do you know what society will say when they learn you’ve lived with me without the benefit of a chaperone for two months? You’ll be ostracized. I’ll be lucky if your father doesn’t challenge me to a duel. The fact of the matter is I want to have a future with you, but I sure as hell cannot do that honorably with you living under my own roof.”

Calming down, she sank slowly back down to the chaise. “I thought—” she started, but he cut her off, kneeling before her.

“I know what you thought, and by God, I’d love to get my hands on whomever it is who taught you that you aren’t worth being loved. I’ve never met a more beautiful, intelligent woman with less self-esteem. How could you think after everything that’s happened in the last twenty-four hours that I would want to send you away?”

“I-I don’t know,” she mumbled, still breathless from her initial fears and his unbelievably kind compliments. He thought she was beautiful and intelligent. However, the idea of him sending her away, even for honorable reasons made her blood run cold. Waterplace and its occupants had become her home and her family. The thought of leaving them scared her more than she cared to admit.

“The fact is I have lived here for nearly two months, and people in the area know that. You know how servants talk. Frankly, I don’t see how sending me away now will make any difference. Plus, I can’t leave Chelsea. She’s only beginning to make real progress.”

“I’m not saying you’ll never see us again, but Chelsea is one of the main reasons I’m asking you to stay with Alex’s family.”

“What?” Vee asked.

“There is no way we can keep our intimate relationship a secret. As you said, servants talk. What would people say if they knew I’d brought my mistress to live in the same house as my ward? The harm to her reputation is real. Society has a long memory. When Chelsea is ready for her come-out, I don’t want the occasion to be marred by any impropriety on our parts. What we decide to do tonight will have long reaching effects for all of us. We’ll travel to the party and explain our situation to my friends. I know Jack and Alex. Between the three of us, we can find your family and begin to set things right. If I hadn’t been such a damned fool for so long believing you were a—” Ben stumbled.

“A whore,” she supplied with a grin.

Shaking his head, he berated himself for his insane assumption. “You would think I was the one who’d been hit on the head,” he said. “How could I ever believe such a thing of you?”

“I believed the same thing when I saw the outfit I was wearing. Plus I had been

having quite inappropriate thoughts about you and what I wanted you to do to me.”

He groaned at her suggestive remark and she bent over to kiss his cheek.

“I still can’t explain the clothing, and until I regain my memory, if I regain my memory—”

“You’ll remember,” he replied, taking her hands in hers. “I won’t rest until you do. We’ll find your family.”

“You really think your friends will help us?” she asked, once again nervous at the thought of leaving.

“Absolutely and you will love their wives. There are quite a few similarities between you. I’m sure you will all become marvelous friends. Trust me,” he added, his voice reassuring.

\* \* \* \*

Ben’s words “Trust me” were still ringing in Vee’s ears when she was awakened several hours later by Mrs. Henry scuttling around the room muttering. “There’s no time to waste. You must hurry.”

“Mrs. Henry,” she asked, rising slowly from the bed. One glance out the window convinced her it must be close to noon. “Oh, dear, I’ve overslept.” She spent most of the night tossing and turning alone in her bed, much to her dismay. Ben had insisted they not sleep together again, and she was a bit disgusted with how far he seemed to be taking this ‘honor’ thing.

“Yes,” Mrs. Henry said, shaking her head reproachfully. “Indeed you did. His lordship is this very minute across the hallway packing up Miss Chelsea’s things.”

“What?” she asked, still a bit discombobulated with sleep. “Packing up Chelsea’s things for what?”

“Why for the weekend party at the Grange. Surely Lord Benjamin told you?” Mrs. Henry asked.

“Oh, yes,” she replied, suddenly in no hurry to move. Perhaps if she dragged her feet long enough, they would have to put off leaving until the next day. “It must have slipped my mind. How silly of me.”

“Slipped your mind?” Mrs. Henry asked. “An invitation to a marquis’ home and it slipped your mind?”

“Well, you must admit, I’ve been rather busy with Chelsea this past week.”

“Busy?” Mrs. Henry huffed, but before she could explain further, she was saved by a handsome lord at her door.

“Yes, she’s been busy, Mrs. Henry,” Ben said from the doorway. She blushed when she realized how scandalous Mrs. Henry must think his presence in her room was and she quickly covered herself with her cotton robe.

True to form, Mrs. Henry was horrified that Ben would invade her privacy.

“Milord,” she cried. “Miss Vee is not yet ready to receive visitors. Shame on you.”

“Ah, yes,” he replied with a smug and far from chastised grin. “Please accept my apologies, Miss Vee.” Turning to leave, he looked over his shoulder, and she knew he must have somehow ascertained her plot to stall their delay. “Be ready to depart in an hour, or I’ll be up to retrieve you myself, modesty be damned.”

Mrs. Henry gasped at his bold proclamation, but Vee merely laughed at his audacity. “Never mind, Mrs. Henry,” she said good-naturedly, determined to make the best of the

situation. "I'm going to a party. Let's hurry!"

\* \* \* \*

Vee was ready to depart from the house in one hour and fifteen minutes, and Ben met her at the bottom of the stairs.

"I apologize for the mad rush this morning," he murmured as they stood in the foyer.

"Did you mention last night that we would be leaving immediately in the morning?" she asked.

"No, I didn't want you to run away," he added with a grin.

"Touché," she replied, smiling back. Obviously, he realized that her agreement to stay at the McCormicks' was given with reservations and not a little unwillingness. The only reason he'd truly convinced her to go was his request on Chelsea's behalf. She never wanted to intentionally harm the girl, and if her removal to another house would prevent that, she would go.

"Are you sure *you* really want to go?" she asked after a moment. She knew Ben hadn't seen his friends in a long time and although he seemed willing to accompany her in an attempt to help her discover her past, she wondered how he felt about leaving the sanctuary of Waterplace.

"Actually, it was something you said a couple of days ago that convinced me to attend."

"Something I said?" she asked.

"You mentioned the fact you haven't met anyone since your arrival here. I realized how much I have cut, not only myself, but you and Chelsea off from society. I have decided to come out of hiding, as it were. I intend to rejoin civilization."

She grinned at his words, pleased to hear the optimism and excitement laced within. "Weel," she said, mimicking Mrs. Henry, a talent she'd perfected in her two months at Waterplace. "Might I be the first to say, milord, it is about damn time."

He laughed. "I don't think Mrs. Henry would be pleased to hear such strong language being used with her accent."

"I agree," she added. "But you will have to pardon me as I am feeling a bit frustrated."

His expression quickly turned to one of concern. "How so?"

"Apparently, I am about to attend a weekend party at the home of a marquis, and I haven't got a thing to wear. Benjamin Sinclair, couldn't you have made this decision to rejoin the land of the living after I'd finished making a couple of decent dresses?"

"Oh, dear, I didn't even stop to consider that. But don't worry. Erin and Hayley are the least fashion-conscious women I know. Anything you wear will be fine. Truly," he added, taken aback by the odd look on her face.

"Erin and Hayley?" she repeated.

"Alex and Jack's wives. Haven't I ever told you their names?"

"No," she said, shaking her head. "Don't mind me, I'm not sure I'm completely awake yet. Long night."

"I agree," Ben said, giving her a look that proved he knew exactly why the night was so long.

"Don't worry about the dresses, Ben. I was only teasing you."

"For a moment, I thought you were genuinely upset."

“No,” she answered, “it’s just—” She paused, considering her words. “For a moment there, I felt a twinge, almost as if I were remembering something. But I’m afraid it’s gone now.”

“Milord,” Mrs. Henry said from the doorway. “I believe everything is ready.”

“Ah, wonderful,” he said. “Time to depart.”

“Does Mrs. Henry know I won’t be returning? I mean, she helped me pack, and I’m only taking enough for the weekend.”

“I didn’t want to seem presumptuous by taking all your things with us. Once I’ve explained your situation to Alex and Jack and we figure out a way to proceed, I’ll have the rest of your things sent on to you. To be perfectly honest, I was too much of a coward to tell Mrs. Henry there was a possibility you won’t be returning.”

She laughed. “Why on earth would you be afraid of telling her that?”

“For one thing, she’s far too observant. Chances are good she’ll put two and two together and figure out that I’ve compromised you.”

“And you wouldn’t want to fall off that pedestal she placed you on, would you?” she teased.

“Actually, that’s the other reason I’m afraid to tell her you aren’t coming back. You took my place on that pedestal weeks ago. She thinks of you as a daughter, and I don’t relish the thought of her response when she realizes you’re going away and it’s my fault.”

She sobered at the thought. She’d come to care deeply for Mrs. Henry as well. She’d spent most of the night tossing and turning, sick at the thought of leaving this new and very special family.

Sensing her distress, he bent to kiss her lightly on the cheek before taking her arm in his. He led her outside, helping her into a plush carriage as the servants finished piling the luggage onto the back and strapping it in place. Chelsea was already waiting inside.

Despite her anxiety, she couldn’t help, but feel excited at the prospect of a trip. Since her accident and subsequent memory loss, she’d yet to leave the grounds of the estate, meeting no one except new servants. The idea of meeting a true marquis and his wife thrilled her to no end, and she prayed they wouldn’t mind being saddled with a clumsy girl with no past. She also hoped she didn’t disappoint Ben. She knew how much this visit meant to him as well.

“So are my girls settled?” Ben asked from outside the carriage window. Vee was surprised to see he had mounted Scout.

“You aren’t riding in here with us?” she asked, disappointment in her voice.

“No, sunshine. I’m going to ride ahead and warn them of our arrival. I failed to respond to the invitations, and I wanted to give them ample time to prepare. As I said, I’ve realized the error of my ways. I have been avoiding my family and friends for too long. Besides, it’s high time I stopped hiding the two prettiest girls in Dover and started showing them off.”

Chelsea giggled at his words and Vee grinned, delighted to hear him so happy and thrilled that he wanted to introduce her to his friends.

“Mr. Henry will be driving you to the Grange. He will see you both safely there.”

Feeling better knowing Mr. Henry would be with them, Vee relaxed, enjoying the comfort of the carriage.

“I’m off. I will see you in a couple of hours,” he said, tipping his hat and riding off.

“Well, you heard Lord Benjamin, my sweet. It’s a long ride. Are you sure you don’t

need to relieve yourself before we leave?”

Chelsea shook her head.

“Okay, then. Let’s see what I’ve got in my bag of tricks here,” she started. While Mrs. Henry saw to the packing of her dresses and toiletries, Vee gathered things to entertain Chelsea on the long ride. “I’ve some playing cards. I’ll teach you how to play rummy. And if the road is not too bumpy, I’ve brought a sketch pad and pencil. Perhaps you could draw a picture as a gift for the McCormicks. And should all that fail, I’ve brought along a couple of books for us to read.”

She realized she was rambling, full of nervous energy. Ever since learning she was embarking on this new adventure, she’d felt edgy. She didn’t want to embarrass Ben in front of his friends, yet she couldn’t help but feel more than a little intimidated by their titles—the Marquis and Marchioness of Dorset, the Earl and Countess of Wilshire. Since discovering who she wasn’t two nights ago in Ben’s bed, she had once again begun to actively ponder her past. Could she possibly fit in with the aristocracy?

When she thought she’d been a prostitute, she’d stopped searching her mind for memories, content to hide at Waterplace forever.

Now, she was once again anxious to discover her true name. She knew Ben shared this desire. He said he wouldn’t rest until she found her family and she believed him. However, she couldn’t help but worry about what would happen when she did discover her family? She loved Ben. Of that there was no doubt. What if her true identity was one that prohibited a relationship between them? Or what if she never discovered who she was? How long would Ben help her look before he insisted she leave the past there, in the past, just as she’d insisted he do with his? They couldn’t look for her family indefinitely, and after so many weeks, she’d begun to give up hope of her memory ever returning.



## Chapter Eighteen

### V is for Victoria

All the “what ifs” continued swirling through her mind until her worrisome thoughts were interrupted when she felt Chelsea stiffen up beside her.

“Chels,” she whispered, looking up and seeing the cause of the small girl’s distress. Frank Prescott’s face peered in the window of the carriage.

“Ladies,” he said affably. “I’ll be driving you to the Grange today. Just bang on the roof to let me know if you need anything.” As he spoke, he looked only at Chelsea, who refused to meet his eye. The entire bench upon which they sat shook with the child’s distress.

“Excuse me, Mr. Prescott,” she said coolly, drawing the groomsman’s eyes to her. “I believe you are mistaken. According to Lord Benjamin, Mr. Henry will be driving us.”

“Oh, no,” the groomsman replied, his swarthy face growing more menacing. “Didn’t anyone tell you? Mr. Henry took ill this morning. I thought sure someone mentioned this to milord before he left.”

The smug grin on Prescott’s face belied his false words. No one told Ben anything about Mr. Henry’s supposed illness. True concern for the beloved butler’s welfare surged through her. What if Prescott had harmed the dear old man?

“Ill?” she asked, reaching for the door handle. “Well, then there is no way we can travel today. I must go see Mr. Henry.”

“Oh, there’s no need for that, miss,” Frank replied, holding the door closed. “His missus is looking after him. She insisted you not be late for your party. Don’t you worry about anything. I’ll take care of you. Both of you.”

With that, he gave them a malicious smile before disappearing. She felt the carriage shake with his weight as he climbed aboard. She reached for the handle of the door, only to find it locked. Before she could react further, the carriage was on its way with them trapped inside.

After a few frozen moments, Vee chastised herself for the paralyzing fear she was allowing to overtake her.

“Enough,” she muttered. “Chelsea,” she whispered, leaning close to the terrified child. “You must tell me, do you know Frank Prescott? I mean, did you know him before he came to work for Lord Benjamin?”

Chelsea, stark white, remained motionless for so long Vee feared she hadn’t heard her question. Then, the girl looked up at her and nodded.

“You are frightened of him. He did something bad to you?” she asked, unsure she was willing to hear the answer.

Again the small girl nodded.

“When?” she whispered, aware it was foolish to speak so low. There was no way the groomsman could hear their conversation over the noise of the horses and the carriage wheels.

Realizing her question could only be answered with nods, she reworded it.

“When you lived with your mother?”

Again, the single nod.

“Your mother knew Mr. Prescott?” she asked.

Chelsea nodded again.

“Was he a friend to your mother?”

Tears formed in the small girl’s eyes, but, to Vee’s amazement, they did not fall. The child had long ago blocked out painful emotions. Chelsea shook her head slowly.

“He wasn’t a friend,” Vee said aloud. “Did he hurt your mother?”

Chelsea remained motionless for a full five minutes. During that time, Vee’s heart shattered several times over. She could see what her questions were costing the little girl. Her face had lost all its color, and the trembling that had begun in her tiny hands was now rumbling throughout her small frame. Vee was terrified she would pass out, but the small girl held her gaze as if it was her only connection to earth.

“Did he hurt your mother?”

Chelsea nodded.

“How?” she asked, then realized again she’d have to reword the question. Before she could think of a way to do so, she heard a raspy whisper from the bench next to her.

“He k-killed h-her.”

Looking up, she realized Chelsea had spoken her first words since the horrific tragedy that claimed her mother and grandfather’s lives.

“He killed her?” she repeated, true fear coursing through her as she realized the danger she and her young ward were now in.

“Yes,” Chelsea hissed.

“Your mother perished in a fire,” she said.

Chelsea only shook her head in response, tears streaming down her face.

“Oh, my God,” Vee said on a sigh, confusion coursing through her veins. Could Frank Prescott have been responsible for the fire that killed Mrs. Duncan? Had he come to Waterplace with the intention of silencing the only witness to his crime? Had he merely been biding his time posing as a groom waiting for the opportunity to kill Chelsea?

She wrapped her arms around the trembling girl as she glanced out the window. Nothing looked familiar to her, but she hadn’t been off the Waterplace property since the beating that robbed her of her memory. Her mind raced as she tried to think of a way to get her and Chelsea out of the danger that now faced them.

Each minute that passed seemed to last an hour. Vee searched the entire carriage for a weapon, but could find nothing. Frustrated, she clung to Chelsea attempting to appear calm for the child’s sake.

If Frank Prescott had been responsible for the fire that caused Chelsea’s mother’s death, then surely his arrival at Waterplace had been no coincidence. His intentions toward Chelsea and now Vee were obviously quite deadly. And Ben had unwittingly handed the man the means to his vengeance by hiring him. Frank had no intention of letting her and her ward arrive at the Grange safely if his earlier words and behavior were any indication. But how? How would he kill them?

“I’ll take care of both of you,” he had said.

Her mind traveled back to Mr. Henry, and she silently prayed he was all right. If anything happened to that dear old man, she shuddered to think of how Mrs. Henry would live without him.

She guessed they'd been on the road for nearly an hour, which meant they must be getting close to their destination. Of course that was providing that Frank was even headed toward the Grange. Perhaps he was leading them in the opposite direction, intent on taking them as far away from Ben as possible before acting on his deadly threat. After all, neither she nor Chelsea knew the area. They could be halfway to London for all they knew.

Deciding the best offense was a good defense, she realized she needed to take the choice of when he acted out of Prescott's hands. Perhaps she could catch him off guard. Before she could reconsider her actions, she banged on the roof of the carriage. After only a moment, she heard the groomsman call for the horses to stop.

She opened the window calling out to him. "We need a moment to relieve ourselves."

"We're almost there," Prescott answered, disgruntled at having his plans delayed.

"I'm afraid we cannot wait," she said. "It will only take a moment."

She reached over to clasp Chelsea's hand and whispered her plan. "When I say the word, run."

The young girl looked confused for only a moment before she nodded. The door to the carriage swung open a second later and Vee stepped out first, careful to always keep herself as a shield between her young ward and Prescott.

"We'll only be a minute," she said. She forced a smile to her face as panic began to claim her again. Quickly, she pushed Chelsea through the thickest foliage she could find. When she was sure the groomsman could no longer see them, she bent down. "Run, my sweet angel, and don't stop, no matter what you hear. I will keep you safe."

At her words, the small girl took off at the same amazingly surefooted pace Vee had witnessed the first day she'd tried to follow the girl into the woods only to fall and twist her ankle.

"You all right, Miss?" she heard Prescott call from the clearing. She had to give Chelsea a decent head start before leading the evil man on her own chase. Chelsea's safety was all that mattered to her. After all the poor child had lost, she would not let Prescott claim her young life as well.

"Just a moment more," she called and cursed when she heard her voice quivering slightly. Glancing behind her, she could no longer see Chelsea. Peering through the foliage, she saw Prescott stop his pacing to pull a rather nasty looking knife out of his boot. Glancing around, he must have decided this was as good a place as any to commit his crime as he slowly began to approach where she was hiding.

Deciding she could no longer delay, she also began to run away, taking a different direction than Chelsea had and making enough noise to draw him after her.

"Miss," she heard his call after only a moment. He was clearly giving chase. The tight shoes she'd worn for the trip were ill-fitted for running, so she stopped briefly to remove them before continuing her escape barefoot. The twigs and dead leaves cut the bottoms of her feet, but she kept on as if the hounds of hell were nipping at her heels. She ran for what felt like ages, her breathing labored and loud in her own ears when she came to a clearing.

She could hear Frank's footsteps coming, not far behind her. Continuing on, she realized there was no longer anywhere to hide. She left the woods only to emerge by a large oak tree. Stepping behind it, she attempted to still her breathing, hoping the wide

trunk would conceal her from Prescott's view. With any luck, he would assume she'd changed direction and remained in the shelter of the forest.

She was clearly in no condition to continue running. If only she could make it to the Grange. She could alert Ben to the danger. True fear consumed her as she worried about Chelsea. Had the little girl outrun Prescott? Had she managed to hide? Vee remembered the days after she'd first come to Waterplace. She'd never been able to find Chelsea in the woods. She prayed the child would be able to remain out of sight again.

Looking up into the branches of the oak tree, she shuddered violently as she suddenly recalled being in this very same spot before. Flashes of light exploded in her head as a powerful pounding started in her ears.

"Open Sesame," she whispered without conscious thought, the memory of the place assaulting her.

"Abracadabra," she murmured. "Please come for me." The words ran through her head as she was assaulted from all sides by color, sound, bright flashes of light, pain, wind. Crying out, she felt herself fall forward, desperate to escape the onslaught of emotions, memories, feelings. All of which were racing toward her, bombarding her with painful sensations.

She'd lost someone. Who? Chelsea? No.

Erin.

Hayley.

"Oh, my God," she screamed. "Somebody help me! I know who I am. I know where I am."

\* \* \* \*

Standing on the front porch of the Grange, Ben was speaking with Jack and Alex and enjoying the return of pleasant summer weather, especially after suffering through the torrential storms of the past week.

"I'm glad you could make it, old man," Alex said, patting his friend on the back. "We haven't seen enough of you this past year."

"An oversight I intend to rectify," Ben answered, wondering why he'd ever sought to avoid his friends. He'd been to hell and back with these men. They understood him, knew him, accepted him. Vee was right. Shutting himself away from the people he cared about had only exasperated his depression, not lessened it.

"I'm anxious for you to meet Vee," he added, having already explained her memory loss. Ben was hopeful Alex or Jack would recognize her. If not, both men had offered their assistance in discovering her identity. Ben avoided discussing the romantic turn their relationship had taken. He was sure both of his friends would chide him for his foolishness in entering a relationship under such strange conditions. Alex had readily agreed to allow her to stay until her family could be found. He suspected both men were curious as to why after two months he would want, to use Vee's words, to "get rid" of his governess, but so far, neither man had inquired.

"So she has absolutely no memory of who she is?" Jack asked.

"No, none whatsoever. I will be forever grateful to both of you for any assistance you can give me in discovering her identity."

"I'm surprised there's been no outcry about a missing woman. If what you say is true about her education and bearing, it only stands to reason she is a gentlewoman. I cannot

begin to fathom why no one is looking for her,” Alex added.

Jack was agreeing with Alex’s comment when Ben heard the screams.

“Vee,” he said, running toward the sound as fast as his feet would carry him. He heard his friends following closely behind him. A cold chill ran through him as he prayed he would reach her in time. He knew that voice, knew it was his Vee, and from the sounds of her screams, she was in pain.

As he crested the hill, he could see her in the distance lying on the ground below the oak tree where he’d first found her. A large man was standing over her, a knife in his hands. Fury beat through his chest and he yelled her name. “Vee!”

The man, alarmed by the sound of his voice, escaped into the shelter of the woods. Ben, still too far away, continued toward her. She had stopped screaming and he could see she was crying now. Good God, he shuddered. Had the man stabbed her? He’d never heard such agonizing sobs. He reached her a few moments later, but she was clearly out of her mind. Jack and Alex reached him as he stooped to gather her in his arms. She was trembling, flailing, unaware of her surroundings. He ran his hands all over her body searching for a wound, but none was present.

“Vee,” he cried, shaking her gently. “Vee, it’s me. It’s Ben. Please. Please, sunshine. It’s me. I’m here.” He shook her even harder desperate to drag her from the strange, delirious state.

His voice seemed to break through the fog that was clouding her mind.

“Ben,” she whispered, her voice hoarse from her cries. “My head hurts.”

“It’s me, my love, it’s me.” He cradled her in his arms, feeling as if his heart would break in the face of her agonizing pain.

“Chelsea,” she whispered. “He’s going to kill her.”

“Who?” he asked, alarmed. “Who’s going to kill Chelsea?”

“Frank Prescott,” she replied without opening her eyes, the pain in her head clearly still excruciating. “He killed her mother.”

“Dear God,” Alex replied behind him. “Who is this Prescott?”

“My groomsman,” Ben answered, his voice steely with anger. It was Frank who’d been hovering over Vee only moments earlier. She had been right all along. Her suspicions about the man correct. Frank Prescott was not what he’d seemed.

The familiar cold killing rage coursed through Ben’s veins as all his old instincts began to kick in. “He’s a dead man.”

Rising slowly and gently laying Vee back against the trunk of the tree, he turned to his friend. “Alex, please watch over her. She’s my life,” he added. “Don’t let anyone hurt her. Jack—”

“I’m right behind you,” his friend answered coldly as they took off in the same direction they’d seen Frank escape only a few moments earlier.

\*

Several long moments passed before she felt she could open her eyes without pain. Shielding her eyes from the bright light of the sun, she found herself under the intense scrutiny of a handsome, dark-haired man she’d never seen before. Her head was pounding and she still felt weak, but she felt an overwhelming need to rise. “Chelsea?”

“Ben has gone off to find her,” the man replied, offering a hand at her elbow to help her stand. Her legs wobbled unsteadily with the effort. “Perhaps you should continue to sit here. You were in quite a lot of pain just now.”

“No, I’m fine. Prescott has a knife. He’ll kill Ben,” she said roughly, coughing slightly, then wincing at the soreness in her throat.

“Don’t fear. Jack and Ben have dealt with worse villains than that groomsman. Your throat is likely to be sore.” The man offered her a sympathetic smile. “You were screaming loud enough to wake the dead.”

“Who are you?” she asked.

“I’m Alex McCormick, marquis of Dorset. And you are Vee, the governess?” he asked, giving her a friendly smile.

“Actually, I am Victoria Elise Hamilton,” she replied confidently, her memories fully restored at last.

“Tori,” Alex murmured awestruck. “The last June girl.”

Amazed by his comment, Tori looked up into his face, recollection dawning. “Yes, and you are Erin’s Alex. She married you.”

“Yes, she did,” he replied with puzzled grin.

She could immediately see why her friend had been so drawn to the handsome marquis. “And Hayley?” she asked.

“Married to my good friend, Jack Campbell.”

“Yes,” Tori replied. “I read about that too.”

“You did?” he asked, surprised.

“It took me awhile, but I found both Erin and Hayley in my research of this time period. This time period!” she repeated, realizing what she’d said. “Is it really—?” she started, pausing, suddenly unwilling to make such a ridiculous comment.

“The nineteenth of August, 1819.”

Tori’s astonished reply was interrupted by the arrival of a young man in livery. “Ah, Charlie, excellent timing. Please escort Miss Hamilton back to the Grange. I’m afraid my assistance is needed at the moment in finding a young girl who is missing. When you return to the Grange, please gather every available man to comb these woods in search of a seven-year-old girl, but warn the men to be wary. There is an armed man who intends to do harm to anyone who tries to stop him from finding her himself. Have my wife and the countess of Wilshire returned from Lady Linley’s home yet?”

“Not to my knowledge, milord.”

“Just as well. Please inform them upon their return that they are not to leave the house. I will explain why when I return. Do you understand?”

“Yes, milord.”

“Very good.” Alex glanced back at her. “It is indeed a pleasure to meet you at last, Miss Hamilton. Please return to the house with Charles and I will do my utmost to return Chelsea and Ben to you safely.”

With that, he rose and disappeared into the woods. Tori started to return to Fernwood Grange, Alex’s home—her home, when something the marquis said flashed through her mind.

“August nineteenth, Eighteen nineteen. Hayley, Erin,” she cried.

“Milady,” the young footman called, but she was already running toward the woods in search of her friends. She had to find them all before it was too late.

## Chapter Nineteen

### V is for Villainy

Tori was on her way to becoming well and truly lost when she finally stopped to catch her breath and take stock of her bearings. She'd been foolish to waste so much time running around the woods aimlessly. Regardless of how well she thought she knew this area, the fact of the matter was these woods were very different from the ones surrounding her house nearly a hundred and ninety years in the future.

Doubled over at the waist and breathing harshly, she cursed herself for the second time today for letting herself get so out of shape. How many times had Hayley sent her articles about different types of exercises she should try? Grinning at the thought of Hayley lecturing her about her inactivity, she felt giddy, ecstatic. She could remember. Unfortunately, it was the return of her memory that had her traipsing in the woods looking for her two dearest friends in the year eighteen nineteen. Good God, it would take her ages to get her mind around that little fact.

"I need a game plan," she muttered, trying to recall the specifics of the article she'd found about the murders of Hayley and Erin. Rubbing her head, she remembered her notebook flying away in the crazy windstorm that had then blown her through the tree. The article, written in old fashioned language, hadn't been very helpful at all as far as she could recall. She remembered the date and the names of her friends, and that no suspect had been found. Her search for subsequent articles had been unsuccessful.

"Wait a minute," she exclaimed aloud, "there was something else." The bodies had been discovered in a cabin on the outskirts of the marquis' property and she knew where that cabin was or at least where the ruins of it were in future. The cabin had long ago crumbled and collapsed on itself until all that was left was the foundation and a bit of one of the walls. She had gone to see the ruins before embarking on her trip through time.

Glancing back in the direction she'd run, she tried to determine where the cabin would be in relation to the oak tree.

Ben, Jack and Alex had all taken off in the opposite direction, heading back toward the road that led to Waterplace. Feeling confident she was on the right track, she continued on through the woods as quickly as she could without taking one of her all-too-frequent tumbles. The last thing she needed now was to fall down and break her leg. She'd walked less than ten minutes when she spied the log structure, still very much standing in this time, about fifty feet in front of her. Slowing down, she took care to make as little sound as possible in case Prescott was nearby.

Circling around the cabin from a safe distance, she approached from the rear as there were no windows at the back of the structure and it would be less likely someone would see her. Her heart was pounding by the time she reached the back wall, fear and desperation taking over inside her.

What if she was too late? What if no one was inside and she'd wasted precious time following the wrong lead? If she had half a brain in her head, she would have gone straight after Ben and told him everything she knew. He and his friends were far better able to fight Prescott than she. All her instincts warned her time was running out for her

friends, and her fears and questions were laid to rest when she heard voices coming from inside the cabin.

“Damn interfering women!” she heard a man shout. Positive it was Frank’s voice, the next voice she heard made her heart race even faster.

“You bastard, let us go!” said a haughty female.

Despite her fear, Tori had to stop herself from giving a hoot of joy at the sound of Hayley’s irritated tone. Prescott better watch out, she thought with a grin. It was never wise to piss Hayley Garland off. The woman was a powerhouse.

Tiptoeing around to the side of the house, she spied a small window cut out of the log walls. There was no pane of glass, merely a rough piece of cloth covering the opening, connected to the wall with hooks. There was a slight breeze blowing and through the crack in the curtain she could see into the room. What she saw made her blood run cold.

Hayley and Erin were tied together in the center of the room. They were back to back with a large rope wrapped several times around their waists and upper torsos. Clearly, Hayley’s bravado was just that. There was no way Tori could rely on her friends to help her defeat Prescott.

Just then a soft whimpering caught her ear. Bending down to cross below the window without being seen, she looked into the rear of the room. Cowering in the corner was Chelsea. The small girl was not bound in anyway, but she was clearly terrified of the man pacing around the room, muttering in anger.

“More trouble than you’re worth, you damn brat.” He yelled at Chelsea, causing the small girl to wince before becoming completely silent again. “You were supposed to be in the house with that bitch you called a mother.”

Hayley, never one to condone the bullying of a child, spoke up at Frank’s tirade. “Hey, asshole,” she yelled. “Why don’t you try picking on someone your own size?”

“Hayley,” Erin murmured, clearly aware of the danger they were facing. “It might not be wise to make this any worse than it is.”

“Yeah, bitch,” Frank screamed in Hayley’s face. “Shut yer trap.” With those words, he reached back and slapped her across the face, hard.

Fury replaced the fear in Tori’s blood. There was no way she would let this man terrorize sweet little Chelsea or hurt her friends. Glancing around for some sort of weapon, she spied a large, sturdy stick. Better than nothing, she decided. At the very least, perhaps it would help her disarm the man. He was still wielding the knife she’d seen him pull out of his boot at the carriage before she ran off.

Frank continued to pace the room, five steps toward Chelsea, then five steps back to the June girls. Clearly he was deciding how to proceed. She could only assume that murdering a marchioness and a countess had not figured into his original plan, and he was now working up the courage to do the deed. Apparently he’d had no qualms about killing a child and her governess.

Moving stealthily around to the front of the cabin, she glanced wistfully toward the surrounding woods. If only Ben would arrive. She could definitely use the Calvary about now. The total sum of her life’s troubles cast her as the victim, never the hero, and quite frankly, considering her current circumstances, she wasn’t so sure she didn’t prefer the first role.

This hero stuff was the pits. She was in the midst of a full-blown panic attack. Her



stomach was rolling so strongly, she wasn't sure she could keep from vomiting, and her knees and hands were trembling hard enough to shake the ground surrounding her. She was light-headed and not at all sure she could do anything, short of pass out. This superhero stuff was Ben's territory or even Hayley's, certainly not hers. She was a clumsy, shy, elementary school librarian. She wondered what the heroine in one of her romance books do? Oh, hell, she thought. Typically they were the victims, too.

"Okay, enough panicking," she murmured, taking a deep breath in an attempt to calm down. She didn't travel all this way only to fail. She'd come to protect Hayley and Erin, and if she'd known about Chelsea, she was sure she would have come to help her as well.

Peering in the front door of the cabin, she could see Frank pacing and muttering threateningly. Erin was facing the doorway, while Hayley was facing the back corner where Chelsea was huddled up into a ball. The small girl was silent now and so deathly white she worried that if she didn't get her away from Prescott soon, the poor little thing would slip into a state of shock.

Counting Frank's heavy footsteps, she could tell when he was facing the door and when he had his back to her. She tried to catch the rhythm of it. Her plan was simple and consisted of sneaking in when Frank has his back turned and whacking him on the head as hard as she could. Lame plan, she knew, but the best one her terrified mind could conjure.

Peeking in again to make sure she had timed it right, she saw Frank's back once again. However, Erin caught a glimpse of her this time. Her astonished gasp captured Frank's attention and he turned back to the marchioness.

"Damn," Tori whispered.

"What's wrong with you, yer highness?" Frank asked maliciously. He'd found the courage he seemed to be lacking previously, and he wasn't willing to waste another second. "Is the pampered princess tired of sitting on the dirt floor? Maybe you'd prefer to be buried under it!" As he spoke, Frank walked over to the June girls until he was standing directly in front of Erin. Blessing the fates, Tori noticed he had turned his back to the door.

Without a second to spare, she rushed into the room like an avenging angel just as Frank raised his knife. Tripping over a piece of firewood on her way across the room, she fell heavily into Prescott's back, taking him down hard. To her dismay, she dropped her stick on the way down.

Prescott fell forward hitting his head hard on the corner of a trunk located at the end of the bed while Tori landed on top of Erin.

"Tori?" Hayley yelled as Erin and Tori attempted to unwind themselves. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Rescuing you," she replied with a delighted grin. Looking around, she spied Frank's knife, which he'd dropped in his unexpected fall.

"That's a new one," Erin added with a giggle. "I can't believe you're here. What amazing timing."

Tori used the knife to saw at the thick rope surrounding her friends. "Actually, I knew you were in trouble. That's why I came."

"How did you know we were here?" Hayley asked, surprised by her words. "I mean, you do know what year it is, right?"

“Yep,” Tori said. “Eighteen nineteen. God help us all. When the June girls get lost, they *get* lost!”

Finally freed from their bonds, the June girls grabbed each other in a fierce hug, laughing and rejoicing at being together again.

A small cry from the corner reminded Tori of the trauma Chelsea had just faced.

“Oh,” she cried, rushing to embrace the small girl. “My poor Chelsea, it’s okay now,” she whispered, holding the girl tightly in her arms. “I promise I won’t let that hateful man hurt you anymore.”

“Speaking of hateful men,” Hayley added from across the room looking down at Frank’s inert form. With a vindictive gleam in her eye, she soundly kicked him in the stomach, delighted to be able to get her own bit of revenge against the man.

Her kick seemed to revive him, and he reached out, grasping her ankle and roughly pulling her to the ground.

Like a pile up on the one yard line of a football field, the three June girls pounced, hitting the evil man with everything they had. Erin was flailing her fists into his back as he attempted to rise, while Hayley, from her position on the ground, was kicking his leg continually, preventing him from standing. Tori, scrambling for her lost stick, pummeled Frank’s head with one fist as she continued to fumble for a weapon.

Finally able to escape the onslaught, Frank ran to the door of the cabin fleeing as quickly as his battered legs would carry him.

The women winded from their attack started to pursue him until they heard Chelsea’s quiet cry in the corner.

Shocked by the anguished sobs pouring from the poor girl, Tori froze, looking down into the little girl’s frightened eyes.

“Chels,” she said softly. At her words, the other June girls halted the chase as well.

Rushing back to her side, she gathered the girl in her arms, holding her as the pain and sorrow of the past few months poured out of her. No doubt these were the first real tears Chelsea had shed for her dead mother, and she felt the girl’s pain like a gunshot wound to the chest.

“Oh, angel,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry. So sorry for everything.”

Several quiet moments passed as the three woman comforted the grieving girl. After a quarter of an hour, Chelsea finally cried herself to sleep in her arms. Sitting in the relative silence, Tori explained to her friends about the circumstances surrounding Chelsea’s presence in Ben’s home as his ward. She had begun to explain her role as governess when she was interrupted.

“It would appear we are too late to play the conquering heroes,” came a deep voice from the doorway.

“And when have I ever needed a man to play hero?” Hayley replied teasingly to the speaker.

Tori could only assume the tall, handsome man was her husband, the earl. One glance at him confirmed in her mind that this man was certainly more than up to the challenge of dealing with Hayley’s opinionated, headstrong ways.

“Are you sure you want me to answer that, firebrand,” Jack answered, walking toward his wife. The look in his eyes said that while his words were light and teasing, he was far from happy with the fact that his wife had been in danger. As he bent down in front of her, he grasped her chin looking at her reddened cheek.

“Someone struck you,” he said darkly.

Hayley quickly attempted to calm him down. “I’m fine, Jack. In fact, I’m better than fine. I’m over the moon.” She gestured over to where she leaned against the back wall with Chelsea. “Tori saved us.”

“Your Tori?” Jack asked.

“Tori?” Ben repeated from the doorway. It seemed the tableau before him had cast him speechless until that moment. Shaking off the killing rage she saw in his gaze, she watched him study her face, worried about how he would interpret what he saw there.

Rising slowly, she approached him, uncertain how she could explain who she was and how she’d arrived there. Hell, she didn’t even know how she’d gotten here. Sheer dumb luck, she figured.

“Victoria,” she said softly as she halted before him. “‘Vee’ stands for Victoria. My father is British, and he thought I should have a name fit for a queen, hence my namesake Queen Victoria.”

She felt silly rambling on about her name, but Ben’s blank stare left her feeling uneasy.

“There is no Queen Victoria in British history,” he said, confusion written on his face.

“Not yet,” she muttered, cursing her foolish words. There was no way Ben was going to believe she was from the future. He’d think she was crazy.

“Tori,” Erin’s voice said from behind her. “When did you get here?”

She turned slowly, eager to escape Ben’s searching, intent gaze. “On your birthday. I figured out where you were at Christmastime.”

“How?” Erin asked.

“You told me,” she answered with a shy smile. “You left a message in a book.”

Erin giggled. “I should have known you’d find it eventually. It was the reason I wrote the message in every book at the Grange.”

“Much to my dismay,” Alex added with a grin.

“Oh, you and your precious books, Alex,” Erin said lightly, elbowing her husband in the stomach before continuing to rub the sore spots on her arms left from the rough rope that had bound her. Noticing her movements, Alex’s eyes narrowed before he took her arms in his hands and gently massaged the raw rope burns.

“I figured if anyone would find a message in a book, it would be my sweet librarian friend who forever has her nose buried in one,” Erin joked. “I have missed you so much.”

“Oh, Erin,” she said with a grin. “I’ve missed you, too. I can’t tell you how happy I am to see you. To see both of you.”

“Oh, jeez,” Hayley said laughing. “Here we go with the mushy stuff.”

“Erin,” Alex interjected, “perhaps if it’s not too much trouble you could explain to us exactly what occurred here. I, for one, do not like finding that my wife has been tied up.”

“Yeah,” Jack added hotly, looking at Hayley. “What the hell happened? I thought the two of you were off paying a call on Lady Linley.”

“We went to her house,” Erin said, before Hayley could take offense at her husband’s tone of voice as she watched her friend’s eyes narrow. “But she wasn’t home. On the way back, Hayley and I decided to take a little detour here. This cabin holds rather fond memories for both of us, as you know.”

“We were discussing fixing the place up,” Hayley added. “Perhaps making it our

own little hideaway.”

“We left our carriage at the turn off before the entrance to the Grange drive, so I suppose no one was aware we’d returned. We bid our driver and footman to stay with the horses while we walked here,” Erin added.

“We’d only been here a few minutes when this little mite ran through the doorway.” Hayley gestured at Chelsea, who was still asleep in Tori’s arms.

Tori glanced up as Ben bent down toward her.

“My little angel,” he whispered to Chelsea’s sleeping form. “I’m so sorry. I should have been with you. I should have protected you.”

At the sound of his voice, Chelsea’s eyes fluttered open. Looking up into his face, she let go of Tori to reach over for him. Grasping her small body in his arms, the two clung to each other, Chelsea crying softly as he mumbled more apologies into her hair.

Tori’s heart felt as if it would break at the sight of his remorse. “You weren’t to blame. None of us realized Frank was such a dangerous man.”

“You knew,” he replied. “I just refused to listen.”

“That’s not true. You were leery of the man. Besides, all I had were suspicions. Only Chelsea knew and she couldn’t say.”

“He told me not to say anything,” Chelsea whispered.

“What?” Ben asked, shocked by the sound of the little girl’s voice.

“That night,” Chelsea continued. “He told me not to talk, so I didn’t.”

“Chels, did Frank see you the night he killed your mother and grandfather?” Tori asked.

“There were new puppies in the barn. I sneaked out to see them. I was supposed to be in bed. He thought I was inside with Mama and Grandpa.”

“Why did he want to hurt them, Chelsea?” she asked.

“He asked Mama to marry him, but she said no. She said he wasn’t a very nice man.”

“And he threatened you that night?” Ben asked.

“He was running from the house when he saw me coming out of the stable. I think he wanted to hurt me, but a couple of neighbors saw the fire and were shouting at us. He grabbed my arms and shook me. He said if I talked, he’d find me and kill me, too.” Chelsea shuddered and Tori felt hot tears falling down her cheeks as she considered how literally the poor child had taken the evil man’s words.

Her eyelids drooping, exhaustion winning out after the extreme emotions of the day, Chelsea whimpered softly, unable to say more.

“Perhaps this is a conversation best saved for morning,” Ben said, obviously anxious to move his small ward as far away from the reminder of Prescott’s evil machinations as possible.

“I agree,” she added, hoping that in the time it took to return the Grange, she would decide how to tell Ben about her past in the future.

“Yes,” Alex said, his arm securely around his beloved wife. “This is no place to linger. Besides, sweetheart, I’m sure little Elise is wondering where her dinner is.”

“You named your daughter Elise?” Tori asked, piping up in delight.

“Oh, yes,” Erin said. “We named her after you. Wait until you see her, Tor. She’s so precious and perfect. A little June girl in the making!”

“You named her after me,” she repeated, awestruck by the compliment.

The return trip to the Grange was slow as the group walked unhurriedly, speaking

little. Each of them appeared to be deep in thought as they considered all that might have been lost. Tori felt numb as the previous emotions of panic, fear and sadness slowly gave way to a gnawing worry that wouldn't let her go. Ben hadn't spoken another word since Chelsea's revelations. She knew he was confused by her relationship with Hayley and Erin and suffering extreme guilt for failing to protect Chelsea.

On top of all that, what would he say when she told him the truth about her past?

## Chapter Twenty

### V is for Vim and Vigor

Upon arriving at Fernwood Grange, Erin rushed upstairs to check on her baby daughter. Concerned about Chelsea, Ben carried her up to a small guest room to put her on the soft bed there. The exhaustion and stress of the day had taken their toll on the girl, and she remained fast asleep. He sat with her for nearly an hour making sure that her rest was easy and nightmare-free, trying to make sense of all he had learned in the cabin.

Vee was the last June girl. Hayley, prior to her marriage to Jack, had told Ben all about her friendship with Erin and how much she missed Tori, the one friend still living in America. Why was she here? What were her plans? Did she intend to return to America? Where was her family? Surely, she hadn't traveled all the way from the continent alone. Questions swirled in his mind as he tried to determine what he should do now. When he was certain Chelsea was sound asleep, he left her room in search of his friends.

As he reached the bottom of the stairs, he could hear voices coming from the library. Glancing in the doorway, he noticed everyone was assembled together once again except for Tori. Hayley and Jack were seated beside one another on a chaise while Jack fussed over the scrapes on his wife's arms. Erin was rocking baby Elise to sleep, humming a lullaby as Alex looked on. Sensing his arrival, they all looked toward the door.

He had just stepped into the room, when he sensed someone behind him.

"Vee," Ben said, as she entered the room. "I mean Victoria."

"Vee is fine. I've gotten rather used to it."

"We were waiting for you before we continued our discussion," Hayley said, her eyes narrowing suspiciously as she looked at Tori and Ben. "After all, you did save the day, Tori. We thought you should be present while we sang your praises."

"I don't know about saving the day," she said dubiously. "Tripped my way to success would be more accurate."

Smiling for the first time all day, Ben laughed. "Suddenly your heroism is beginning to sound feasible." The relaxed mood in the room quickly dispelled some of his earlier fears. Clearly these June Girls were closer than sisters and he was pleasantly surprised by the small glimpses he was seeing as Vee, no Tori, resumed her true personality.

"Ha ha," Tori said mockingly.

"Why don't we pick up where we left off," Alex said, gesturing for Ben and Tori to have a seat on the couch. "Hayley, you said you and Erin were in the cabin when Chelsea ran in?"

"Yes," Hayley answered. "She was quite terrified and no matter what Erin and I did or said, she simply would not speak."

"We had both knelt down in front of her, attempting to console her and figure out who she was when that horrible man threw a rope over our heads," Erin said.

"We never saw him coming," Hayley added. "Bastard caught us by surprise. Had us tied up before we could say 'boo.'"

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Tori grinned at the disgust in Hayley's voice and was surprised by the lack of response the men gave her rather questionable language. Recalling her memories and all the romance novels she'd read about the regency period, she couldn't quite figure out how Hayley and Erin, with their love of four letter words, had managed to survive in this time. She also knew it was probably eating Hayley alive that she'd been rendered helpless by Frank Prescott so easily. Her friend liked to think she could take care of herself and Tori had to admit, most of the time she could.

Once again, she marveled at the differences between this time and their own. This Fernwood Grange and the one her parents owned in the future were vastly different, though the same. Even without the modern day conveniences, she knew she preferred this Grange. It felt cozy and inviting, full of family, love and laughter, whereas the Grange of the future, the one her family owned, was more showplace than home.

"I don't think he liked the idea of having more witnesses to his crime," Erin said. "Once he tied us up, he seemed quite distraught about having to rid himself of us. Kept muttering to himself and pacing. It was at that point I saw Tori peeking in the doorway. I cannot tell you what a shock that was."

"What I would like to know is how you got to the cabin alone, Vee? I thought I'd left you with Alex." At this, Ben cast a furious glance toward his friend.

"Don't look at me," Alex said defensively. "I stayed with her until one of my footmen arrived. I gave him strict instructions to escort Miss Hamilton back here before following in the direction you and Jack had gone. I thought I'd be able to lend a hand."

"Don't be angry at Alex," Tori added. "It was my fault. Alex mentioned the date right before he left. My head was pounding something terrible. I suppose it was caused by the return of my memory or the long run through the woods trying to escape Frank. Anyway, when he left, I realized Hayley and Erin were in danger, and I ran off before the footman could catch me."

"How did you know we were in danger?" Erin asked.

Glancing at Ben, she took a deep breath before answering. "I read about your murders. It was in an old newspaper at home. You were both stabbed to death on the nineteenth of August, eighteen nineteen."

"Good God," Jack muttered.

"Shit," Erin mumbled.

"Oh, hell," Hayley added.

"What?" Ben asked incredulously. "Where would you read such a thing?" Looking around the room, Ben apparently realized no one else was disturbed by her strange comment, rather they all accepted her words as the truth and were more concerned with the story of the murders.

"After I found your message in the book, I began doing research. I came across an article that talked about your deaths." Tori looked only at her friends as she spoke, too afraid to see how Ben was reacting to her words.

"What the hell are you talking about?" he asked, when no one else responded.

Biting her lip, she rose from the couch and crossed to the front window. Gathering her courage, she turned to face Ben. "Let's just say for now I knew they were in danger and that they were in the cabin. I hurried along the path and when I arrived, Frank had already captured them. I knew he intended to kill them, so I made a plan."

"Ah, yes," Hayley said teasingly, trying to lighten the heavy mood in the room. "The

plan. And what exactly was this plan of yours, Tor?"

Tori narrowed her eyes at her friend's smug jibe. "I found a big stick, and I was going to sneak up on Frank when he had his back turned and knock him out."

Erin giggled. "Well, you certainly succeeded in that."

"What happened?" Jack asked, clearly unsure why the ladies were joking about such a serious matter.

"Tori has a bit of a reputation for clumsiness," Hayley answered.

"That's an understatement," Ben muttered, still looking at Tori as if she was a puzzle he couldn't quite solve.

"I tripped," she said.

"You tripped?" Alex asked.

"On my way to hit Frank on the head. He had his back turned, and I was about to hit him when I got tripped up by a blasted piece of firewood on the floor."

"She fell into him," Erin continued. "Then he fell and hit his head on the corner of an old trunk. It knocked him out instantly."

Jack and Alex laughed, while Ben's scowl grew darker. "I don't see anything funny about this," he growled.

"Anyway," she said, anxious to finish the tale, the memories of Frank's deadly attack causing her stomach to roll. "He regained consciousness after Hayley kicked him."

"You kicked an unconscious man?" Jack asked his wife, his voice ripe with amusement.

"He had it coming. Sneaking up on us like that when we were trying to comfort a little girl," Hayley answered defensively.

"Seems so unsporting of you, my dear," Jack teased.

"Bite me," Hayley hissed.

"Gladly," Jack murmured.

"Anyway," Tori repeated impatiently. "The three of us attacked him and somewhere in the midst of the melee he managed to get away. He's still out there somewhere," she added with a shiver, uneasy with the thought of what Frank may do next.

"And that is when you fellas arrived," Erin said, concluding the tale.

"You could have been killed," Jack said, pulling Hayley closer to his side.

"I'm too ornery to die," Hayley answered, taking her husband's hand in hers. "You've said so a thousand times."

"You could have been killed," Ben threw at Tori, his voice laced with anger. "What the hell were you thinking? Why didn't you come find me? How the devil did you expect to be able to stop that man on your own? He's twice your size. You didn't really think a little tap on the head was going to render him unconscious, did you? Christ, Vee! I cannot believe you would do something so ill-advised and dangerous!"

"Why can't you believe it? My friends and Chelsea were in danger. Do I seem so weak and useless that I'd just stand by wringing my hands while Prescott killed them?" she yelled.

"You tell him, girlfriend," Hayley cheered.

"Hayley," Jack admonished.

"Ben," Alex interjected, puzzled by his friend's anger, but Ben was too far gone to stop his tirade. The stress of the last couple of days had obviously escalated until it had nowhere else to go, but out.



“Not only did you endanger yourself, but your friends and Chelsea. Did you stop to consider what he would have done to my daughter?”

“Daughter,” she repeated softly, surprised to hear him, in the heat of anger, refer to Chelsea as his daughter.

“Now just a minute,” Hayley yelled, but Ben continued his attack.

“She was your charge, in your care. She was your responsibility and you let that man capture and threaten her. She’s just a child, for God’s sake. You should have protected her.” As he bellowed the last, a tear escaped and ran down his cheek. “You failed her,” he repeated. “You failed her.”

Tori fell dumb, horror-struck by his angry words.

His voice cracked. “No, wait, I didn’t mean—” but it was too late. The words hung between them like a dark cloud. “Tori,” he began, struggling to find a way to make amends for his hateful words. “I failed her. Oh, God,” he whispered. “I failed you both.” With that, he turned and left the room. The sound of the front door slamming proved his escape from the house was complete.

Tori attempted to follow, but was stopped by a strong hand on her arm.

“Tori,” Alex said, concern etched in the lines on his face. “Perhaps you should give Ben a few moments to calm down.”

“Give him a few moments?” Hayley asked aghast. “If I were her, I’d give him a kick in the—”

“Hayley,” Jack interrupted. “Enough. You’ve said enough.”

“Tori,” Erin said, removing Alex’s hand from her friend’s arm. “I think you should go after him.”

The tears that had threatened to fall all day came freely now. Great heaving sobs wracked her entire body as all the strength left her body, and she fell to her knees.

Misunderstanding her sorrow, Erin knelt before her. “None of that tirade was directed at you.”

“I-I don’t know what to do,” she choked out as she continued to weep, the tension of trying to determine where to go from here overwhelming her. She’d spent the last hour roaming through the house, rehearsing her speech to Ben. Telling him she was from the future, each time imagining his laugh as he told her she was out of her mind.

“Well, I know,” Hayley said roughly. “How dare he talk to you like that?”

“Hayley,” Erin said, taking Tori’s shaking, cold hands into her own. “I think Tori understands why Ben said what he did. She is clearly in love with him. It hasn’t been an easy day for either of you, has it?” Erin asked, looking at her with such compassion and understanding that she began to cry again. “I also think we should have spent a few minutes explaining to Lord Benjamin Sinclair that Miss Victoria Hamilton hails from Virginia, circa two thousand nine. No doubt he’s very confused by all of this.”

“He’ll never believe me,” she said miserably.

“Of course, he will,” Erin said. “We all believe. We can convince him.”

“For what purpose? It’s obvious he doesn’t care about me. He blames me for, oh God, he blames me for everything,” she cried.

“No honey,” Erin said. “You heard him. He blames himself. He’s a typical man for this day and age. He thinks it’s the man’s job to protect his woman and children. Instead, you protected Chelsea, and you saved yourself as well as Hayley and me. That kind of left him with a lot of pent-up anger and nowhere to vent it. Looks to me like he decided

to throw it all at your feet.”

“You know, I’m not sure I care for that analysis,” Alex muttered. “It certainly doesn’t make us sound too intelligent, does it?” he asked, looking at Jack.

“Intelligent or not, it’s probably fairly close to the truth,” Jack said.

“Ben was right,” she added. “I should have gone to find him. I knew as soon as I found you all captured in that cabin that I was in over my head. I was a fool to rush in there, and the only reason we’re sitting here is because of dumb luck. If anything had happened to Chelsea, I don’t know what I would have done.”

“I don’t buy that luck stuff, Tor,” Hayley said. “It took a lot of guts to come into the cabin and face that man. Besides, it’s pointless to worry about what might have happened. The fact of the matter is you saved everyone because you loved us enough to risk your life for us. Now go find Ben, force him off his high horse, make him apologize, and if he still can’t handle it, tell him to kiss your—”

“Ah, my sweet wife, what a way you have with words and soft sentiments,” Jack interrupted, placing a quick kiss on her lips, hoping to distill the heaviness of the moment.

“Go to him, Tori,” Erin said. “We’ll explain it all to him. He’ll understand, and then you can both move on with your lives.”

“That’s the other problem,” Tori replied. “I didn’t come here to stay. Only to save you and Hayley from a murderer. I wanted to find you and take you home with me.”

Hayley laughed at her words. “You may have to wrestle this pirate to get me back to that tree,” she said, wrapping her arms around Jack’s waist.

“Tori, Hayley and I aren’t going back. Ever. We’ve both found our perfect lives here, but—” Erin paused.

“Can I go back?” she asked, surprised to discover that she hoped she couldn’t return. She truly couldn’t picture a life in the future without her best friends. Or Ben—no matter how angry he was at her.

“You want to go home?” Erin asked.

“Can I go home?” she repeated.

Erin simply nodded. “I think so,” she said. “There may be a way.”

“How?”

“The tree has magical properties. It’s a wishing tree,” Erin answered with a light laugh, realizing how ridiculous her words sounded.

“You’re joking, right?” she asked.

“Not at all, although I admit, it sounds pretty farfetched. When a person stands under the tree and wishes for their heart’s desire, the tree becomes a doorway. When the tree brought me here, I was wishing for a home, a real home. One without wheels and a carburetor,” Erin joked, recalling her childhood spent on the Delancy Dreamer’s bus.

“I went to the tree that night after you and I spoke at the Grange,” Hayley said. “Remember I had the nightmare and woke you up.”

“Yes,” Tori said. “I thought you were going back to sleep.”

“I couldn’t,” Hayley replied simply. “I remembered I’d left a book and few other things under the tree earlier in the day. I decided to go get them. At the same time I was wishing I could find Erin and that I could stop having those damn bad dreams. Both wishes came true.”

“I found your backpack the morning you disappeared,” Tori replied. “I realized

you'd gone back to the tree, and that's when I began to suspect that you and Erin had both suffered the same fate."

"Suffered is an interesting word," Hayley teased, looking at her husband.

Jack pulled Hayley close to place a kiss on her cheek.

"The point is that we both made wishes and they were fulfilled," Erin said.

"So what's the secret to returning?" Tori asked skeptically. "I sit under the tree and wish to return home."

"I've never tried," Erin confessed. "I have another friend for whom the tree has worked. She was able to return home after traveling to another time. She believes that the solstice plays a part in the magic. If that's true, you may not be able to return until December, around the time of the winter solstice."

Hayley grinned, teasing her. "On the bright side, you'd be home in time for Christmas. I know how you love spending the holidays with your mum."

"My mother's probably spent the last two months relieved to have me out of her hair."

"First of all, for all her faults, Tori, your mother is probably quite distressed about not knowing where you are. That's the worst part about choosing to stay here. Our loved ones back home will never know what became of us," Erin said.

"I hate to think about putting my parents through that kind of pain. I nearly died thinking the worst had happened to the two of you," Tori admitted.

"I think about Marian every night," Hayley confessed quietly, clearly upset at leaving her mother behind.

"Oh, Hayley," Tori added. "I should have told you right away. She's fine. She misses you terribly, but she met this really sweet accountant in the firm where she took a secretarial job. They're engaged. She invited me to their wedding. It's scheduled for October."

"Really?" Hayley asked, thrilled with the news about her mother's newfound happiness. "I was so afraid she'd be alone. She got a secretarial job? She's getting married?"

"Yep," Tori answered, pleased to be able to share such comforting news. "He's a widower with a twelve-year-old son. They're both crazy about your mom. She and I wrote a few times. The last time she sent me a picture of the three of them together. She looks terrific."

Hayley brushed a tear from her eye, and Jack's arms tightened around her. "She's happy," Hayley whispered to her husband, her smile bigger than the room.

"There is one other thing, though," Erin added and Tori looked back at her friend.

"The tree doesn't listen to the words you speak, only what's written on your heart. If it's truly not your heart's desire to return, the tree won't take you back."

"You mean if there's something holding me here, I'll stay regardless of my wish to return."

Erin shrugged. "I think so and I'm fairly certain you can never return once you leave, so you have to be very sure you want to go back."

"What?" Tori said. "I can't just click the ruby slippers three times, chanting 'There's no place like home.'"

"Ruby slippers?" Alex asked, confusing on his face.

"Nope," Erin said with a laugh, ignoring her husband. "Your heart will make the

wish for you.”

“How do you know all this?” she asked intrigued by Erin’s knowledge on the subject considering the fact she’d clearly never attempted to return.

“I met someone who knew about the tree’s magic. Her name is Lady Linley and she explained it all to me.”

“And she’s the one who believes the solstice plays a part?” Tori asked, recalling the fact that regardless of what she desired in her heart, she might not be able to return until December.

“June 21, my birthday hits around the summer solstice, and that’s the day all three of us traveled through time. Lady Linley traveled first during the summer solstice and then returned during the winter one.”

“Well, I suppose I’ve done what I came to do so my heart’s greatest desire has been answered.” As soon as she spoke the words, a chill ran through her at the thought of returning to the future and leaving her friends so soon after finding them again.

“Do you think that really was your heart’s desire? What you were truly wishing for under the tree?” Erin asked. “Perhaps you wanted more than merely to find us.”

“What else could I have been wishing for?” Tori asked, although she knew the answer. All her life, she’d wanted to find true love, a man who loved her for herself. She’d spent a lifetime wishing she could find a handsome hero like those on the pages on her romance novels.

“What are you going to do now?” Erin asked, as a roll of thunder crashed in the distance jerking Tori to her senses.

“Oh, no,” she cried, jumping up. “Another storm. Ben.”

“I wouldn’t worry about Ben,” Jack said, in response to her distress. “He’s weathered worse than a little rain.”

“No,” she cried, genuinely upset. “You don’t understand. I have to find him. Oh, my God, why did I let him leave like that? I wasn’t thinking clearly. We have to find him,” she said. “Now.”

“Why?” Alex asked. “Tori, Ben will be fine.”

“No, he won’t,” she yelled, looking at Hayley. “Please, help me.”

Without pause, Hayley nodded. “Okay,” she said. “Take it easy, Tor. We’ll find him. Where could he have gone?” she asked, turning to Jack.

“Firebrand,” he replied, clearly intent on putting her off.

“Save your breath, Jack Campbell. We are going to find that idiot friend of yours, come hell or high water. So are you going to help or not?” Hayley said, driving her finger into his chest.

“Dammit,” Jack muttered under his breath. “I don’t suppose I can ask you ladies to wait here while Alex and I go fetch him.”

“Nope,” Hayley replied with a smile. “We’ll split up,” she said. “We can cover more ground that way.”

“Fine,” Jack said curtly, “but we are going to discuss this habit you have of jumping into things regardless of the danger.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” Hayley said grinning. “Like we haven’t had that conversation a hundred times before.”

“Jack,” Alex said. “Why don’t you and Hayley head in the direction of Waterplace? Maybe he decided to go home. With the storm coming, it’s likely he’ll try to find shelter

and there are a couple of homes between here and there. Check those.”

“What about us?” Erin asked, gesturing to her and Tori.

“Erin,” Alex said hesitantly. “I really think you should stay here with Elise and in case Ben returns.”

“Very well, husband,” Erin agreed. “I don’t think Chelsea should be left alone either, and I can see Tori has no intention of remaining behind.”

Tori hugged her friend. “Thank you Erin. What about us?” she asked Alex.

“You and I will head back to the cabin. Perhaps he didn’t intend to go far at all and he would go there for shelter to ride out the storm.”

“Okay,” she answered, anxious to be on her way.

“If the storm becomes too bad, find cover and ride it out for the night. We’ll meet back here first thing in the morning,” Alex added as the four of them started to depart.

“Hayley,” Tori said, pulling her friend away from the men. “If you find Ben, don’t leave him alone.”

“What?” Hayley asked.

“The s-storms,” she stumbled. “They bring up bad memories for him.”

“I see,” Hayley replied with a nod. Tori knew she did. Hayley, no stranger to nightmares, had apparently exorcised her own ghosts in the past year and she was glad to see it. She knew Hayley would know how to help Ben if she found him. She only hoped the same was true for her.

“What is it?” she asked when Hayley continued to look at her smiling.

“I can’t put my finger on it,” Hayley replied. “But you’re different, Tori. More confident, self-assured. As my mother used to say, full of vim and vigor.”

“In love,” she whispered, afraid Hayley would laugh at her silly confession.

“Well, that was obvious the second Ben walked into the cabin. Feels terrific, doesn’t it?”

“I’ll let you know when all of this is over,” she replied with a worried grin.

“Are you ready, firebrand?” Jack asked gruffly from the doorway, angry at the thought of taking his wife out in the middle of a thunderstorm.

“Ready, Captain,” Hayley fired back with a smug salute. Turning back, she squeezed Tori’s hand. “I’ll bring him back to you if I can.”

## Chapter Twenty-One

### V is for Veracity

Due to the high winds and driving rains, the ride through the woods to the cabin took much longer than normal. Tori could barely see the ground in front of the horse, and she had no idea how Alex was managing to direct it. Because of her poor equestrian skills, she chose to ride with Alex on his large stallion rather than risk attempting to control her own horse in the storm.

As they approached the cabin, they could see a light flickering through the window.

"It would appear we've found our lost sheep," Alex said pointing.

"Yes," she murmured, suddenly concerned about what state Ben would be in. As they reached the edge of the copse surrounding the cabin, she looked at Alex. "Would you mind very much letting me take it from here?"

"Pardon me?" he asked.

"I'd like to go in alone," she answered, unwilling to expose Ben's secret depression to his friend. If he was truly in the depths of his despair, she knew he would not want Alex to witness it.

"Are you certain?" he asked, concerned about leaving her alone in the face of Ben's previous anger. "I could help you explain about your circumstances."

"I'm sure," she replied. "I'd really like to handle this myself."

"As you wish," Alex answered. "Promise me, no matter what happens, you will remain with Ben in the cabin until the storm abates. This is no night to be out alone." Even as he spoke, Alex had to raise his voice to be heard over the rain and thunder.

"I promise," she yelled back.

"I'll wait until I see you enter. Give me a wave if he's there, and then I'll head back to the Grange," he said.

"Be careful," she said as he helped her slide down to the ground.

Watching her make her way through the mud and driving rain, Alex yelled, "You too," before turning his horse to wait for her signal.

\* \* \* \*

The cabin was only dimly lit, the light of a lone candle and dying fire the only illumination. The room was tidy, and no evidence of the afternoon's adventure remained.

Despite the day's unpleasant events, she thought the small cabin was rather quaint and she could understand why Hayley and Erin were drawn to it. It would make a welcome haven for the June girls in this time so far away from their true lives. It would be a place of absolute peace and privacy where Erin could sing her favorite songs without fear of being overheard. There was also plenty of room for Hayley to practice her Taibo moves and karate kicks without distressing the servants. It was a home away from home. It was perfect.

Shivering with the cold, she turned briefly to wave to Alex before stepping completely into the room to confront her lonely soldier. At first she didn't see him and

panicked she'd sent Alex away too soon. But a soft voice from the corner set those fears to rest.

"Couldn't stay away?" Ben asked, his voice completely devoid of emotion. "Why am I not surprised?"

Taking a deep breath, she crossed the room to the fire. "It's cold as a tomb in here," she said, wincing at her words, recalling his fears of committing suicide while in the grip of his madness. "I mean—"

"I know what you mean," he replied, rising slowly to build up the fire. "How did you get here? Please tell me you didn't venture out alone, or I may be forced to take you over my knee."

"I rode out with Alex. When we saw the light, I asked him to let me come in alone. I didn't think you would want him to see—" She paused, unsure how to finish.

He clearly understood her concern. "Thank you for that, but I'm afraid you've wasted the trip. As you can see, I've not fallen into one of my dark humors."

"The storm," she added. "I was worried—"

"I've been sitting here for the past half an hour listening to the thunder, the howling wind, watching the lightning through the trees. Nothing."

"Nothing," she said hopefully. "No memories?"

"Not bad ones, no," he answered.

"Not bad?" she asked, confused.

"Oddly enough, when I see the room flash with brief flickers of lightning, all I can see are your eyes—the way they sparkled that night in my bed—or your face with your golden hair spread out across my pillow. Every boom of thunder reminds me of how it felt to pound myself so deeply inside you, I never wanted to be alone again." As he spoke, he reached out to run his hands through her hair.

"You're wet," he accused, the romance of the moment shattered as he took in her soggy attire and cold shivers with a disapproving glare.

"Maybe that's because it's raining outside, Einstein," she said with a teasing smile.

"Einstein?" he asked.

"Never mind," she said, not wanting to impede his previous comments. "You really aren't upset by the storm?"

"Now that you're here with me, no, not at all," he answered, a look of amazement crossing his face. "Why did you come here?" he asked. "After everything I said—"

"You were right," she added.

"Oh, no, sunshine, I was completely, absolutely, utterly wrong. Please forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," she answered. "The entire situation was insufferable. I'd just as soon put it all behind us. Chalk it up to the 'all's well that ends well' category."

"You're going to get sick if you continue to stand around in this drafty room in those wet clothes. Turn around. Let me help you," he said, turning her leisurely, his hands resting on her shoulders.

"I don't see how getting undressed will make me warmer," she said with a small giggle.

"Oh, don't worry about that, my love. I don't intend to make you merely warm, but hot." His fingers unclasped buttons down the back of her damp dress one by one, as he lingered between each to plant a small kiss on her back. When he had the dress parted

fully, he pushed it off her shoulders making sure it fell completely to the floor. She stood with her back to him, dressed only in a light shift.

She started to turn, but he stopped her, wrapping his arms around her, crossing them below her breasts, resting his chin lightly on her shoulder.

"I'm so sorry, Vee," he whispered in her ear causing her heart to race. "For everything."

"Everything?" she asked.

"Sorry for not believing you about Prescott, sorry for accusing you of endangering Chelsea's life, sorry for what I am about to do."

"About to do?" she whispered.

"I need you," he said, his clasp on her waist growing tighter.

"I need you too," she answered.

"You deserve someone gentle, someone kind. I can't promise to be soft with you. I need you too much," he said, his voice rough with desire.

"I don't want soft," she said, turning in his arms. "Only you. All I've ever wanted is you. Demons and all."

Unable to speak further, he put his words to action. Grabbing her hand, he guided it down his chest to the hard thickness beneath his pants. Taking him at his word, Tori's caresses were light only a moment before they grew firmer, stronger, more heated.

Reaching down, he moved her hand as he quickly unbuttoned his breeches, parting the material to give her complete access to his erection.

"Touch me," he demanded, his harsh breath in her ear.

Wrapping him within her grip, she rubbed him from base to tip, slowly lingering over the head, capturing each tiny drop of moisture as it escaped. He groaned and Tori, delighted by his desire, tightened her hold even more as her free hand descended lower to touch his balls.

"Oh, sunshine," he muttered. "I can't take this much longer."

Smiling, she went slowly to her knees. He had no time to refuse as she bent forward to kiss the tip of his penis. His breathing grew heavy, labored as she teased him with her tongue, drawing it in a slow circle around the head several times before drawing him completely into the wet, warmth of her mouth.

"Sweet Jesus," he groaned, as she slowly slid down his erect member, taking him to the back of her throat before reversing her motion, only to return again. She felt his hands tighten in her hair as he continued to gasp and moan. Thrilled and overwhelmed by the passion of the moment, she felt her own desire grow. She felt the familiar moistness between her legs as her body began to scream for more of him.

All too soon, he was pulling her mouth away from him, bending over to pick her up. He dismissed her complaints. "One day, sunshine. Tonight, we come together," he whispered.

Placing her gently on the bed, he divested himself of the rest of his clothing, before sitting beside her. "Are you fond of this shift?" he asked.

Shaking her head, she could only smile as he tore the material down the middle rendering her completely naked.

"What is it with you and my clothes?" she asked, feigning anger.

He smiled at her. "I find I resent anything that touches your body that isn't me."

"Well, I can tell you right now, I do not intend to spend the rest of my days nude."



“Then I suppose I will simply have to spend my entire fortune buying you new clothes.”

“Come here,” she invited, crooking her finger. Unable to resist her sultry manner, he lay beside her on the pallet, pulling her to him.

His powerful kisses made her dizzy as his hands roamed freely over her body. She had to admit she no longer felt the cold. In fact, she felt downright feverish. With a firm grip on each knee, he pulled her thighs apart, settling between them before stopping briefly.

“Sunshine,” he started, prepared to warn her once again before his control slipped away.

“Now,” she interrupted with a seductive smile.

He entered her to the hilt in one thrust. Gasping, she didn’t have time to catch her breath before he continued his assault. He’d warned her he couldn’t, wouldn’t be gentle, but this? This was sheer bliss. She held tightly to his shoulders as his pounding became more forceful, more exciting. Every nerve-ending in her body was screaming with ecstasy, with a pleasure-pain she’d never experienced before. Screaming for more. More. Surprisingly, she realized she’d made the request aloud. Yelled it at him actually.

“More,” she demanded, scratching his back, biting his lower lip as his mouth descended to hers. “More.”

Grabbing her ankles, he raised them to rest on his shoulders, never ceasing his movements, thrusting into her as if his life depended on being inside her at that moment.

“God, sunshine, now,” he called, coaxing her. His words served as the trigger, and she felt herself fall into the abyss as her orgasm shook her to the core. He followed her into the void, yelling her name as he plunged, his body covering hers heavily. For several, heart thumping moments, neither of them moved, as the power of the moment, the force of their shared rapture rendered them weak.

Coming to himself, he lifted himself to her side, and she sensed that he was ashamed of his rough treatment.

“Vee,” he started, but she cut his apology off with a sweet, soft kiss determined to show him that she enjoyed his attentions. Quite a lot. In fact, she suspected she’d enjoy some more if only she could find the strength to move.

\*

“Marry me,” Ben whispered, shocked as the words escaped his lips without a moment of thought. Then he realized no thought was necessary, only she was necessary. Necessary in his life, his house, his bed. She was everything he’d never dared to hope he could find. She knew his weaknesses and accepted them, accepted him. She’d raised him up out of the depths of darkness and brought him out into the full, bright light of the day. She was his sun and moon wrapped into one beautiful, clumsy package.

Caught up in the excitement of his own personal revelation, he didn’t notice at first the look of utter dismay that crossed her face. When he did, his heart plummeted. Her memory had returned. With it, she now had a past as well as a present. Was there something in that past that would not allow her to stay with him?

Surely, she wouldn’t have come to him tonight, she wouldn’t be naked in his arms, if she were engaged to someone else. Would she?

“Tori,” he began, his use of her true name startling her into speech.

“I need to tell you something. Something about my past, about who I am.”

He laughed uneasily, trying to lighten the look of pure anguish on her face. "Surely it can't be as bad as being a prostitute."

She smiled weakly at his jest. "I don't know. It may be." Again, she paused. Obviously she was afraid to utter the words and he was consumed with the fear of her unknown past.

"Perhaps it would be best if you simply said it. I'm sure it cannot be as bad as you fear. You aren't engaged to be married? In love with someone else?" he asked, aware that the idea of losing her to another man was the worst thing he could imagine.

"Good lord, no," she said, indignation crossing her face. "Do you think I would be here with you like this if I were in love with someone else." As she spoke, she gestured at the two of them naked and together on the rough bed. "What kind of woman do you think I am?"

"Not that kind," he added. "Dammit, Vee, just tell me. Tell me what could be so bad that you think it would make me not want to marry you. Because I can assure you, I can't think of a damn thing myself."

"I'm not from here," she said, stumbling over her words.

"I assumed that," he added, when she didn't continue to clarify. "I mean Hayley and Erin are both from America, and although you clearly speak with a bit of a British accent, I understand that you are American as well. I can assure you, my love, that does not warrant concern. Although the grand dames of the *ton* prefer titled lords to marry their own daughters, it is not unheard of for a nobleman to marry an American lady. Look at Jack and Alex, for example." He smiled, taking a deep breath of relief, pleased to think her concerns for their future were so easily overcome.

"Unless you wish to continue living in America," he added. The idea that she would prefer to live in another country caught him unaware for a moment as he considered the possibility of moving across the ocean. He continued to ponder the idea until she spoke.

"No," she reassured him. "I don't wish to live in America. And society's strictures about whom you should marry don't concern me overly much either," she added. "Although as the son of a duke, I do think my background, or actually lack of background, would be a detriment."

"Explain," he said, the gnawing in his stomach returning with a vengeance.

"As I said," she repeated, "I'm not from here. And I don't mean simply America or Britain. I mean I actually live in both of those places, but not really. Oh dear," she sighed. "This is not, what I mean to say is I, I am—"

"Good God, Vee, what? You are what?" he yelled, his fear overshadowing his patience.

"I'm from the future," she replied so quickly, he wasn't sure he'd understood.

"Pardon me?" he asked, bewildered.

"I'm from Fernwood Grange. My parents own it actually, only not in this century, but the next, or well, no, that's not right, it's the one after that."

"You're rambling," he said and she sighed heavily.

"I did spend summers with Hayley and Erin in America, but before the, um, incident at the oak," she said for lack of a better word, thinking of her battered state under the tree. "I was living in the year two thousand nine. I was born in nineteen eighty-five, so you see, Ben, I think that is quite a bit worse than merely being engaged to someone else, although I can assure you I'm not. Men of my time don't even glance in my direction. I

mean not that I'm hideous or anything. I'm just kind of shy and, well, oh hell, you don't believe me, do you?" Her incoherent explanation left him with an aching head to match the gnawing pain in his stomach and more questions than answers.

Surely in the last two months, he would have realized if she were insane. And the fact of the matter was, despite her disjointed speech, he believed her to be totally in command of all her mental facilities.

"I'm not crazy," she interjected, as if she could read his thoughts.

"I didn't think you were," he added, unsure how to reply to her comments.

"Of course you do. How could you not? I'm the one saying these utterly preposterous words, and I think I'm insane. But the fact is, Ben, however I arrived here, it was from the year two thousand nine."

"And Hayley and Erin?" he asked, thinking mention of her friends might bring her back to her senses. The countess and marchioness would prove the lack of veracity in her outlandish tale.

"They are from the future as well. Erin disappeared in two thousand seven and Hayley the following year. I was able to piece together where they'd gone and I followed."

"I suppose time travel is perfectly normal in the future?" he asked, appalled that he was actually encouraging her to continue with this farce. What the hell could she be hiding that would cause her to resort to such a peculiar story?

"Good Heavens, no," she answered, unaware of his growing anger. "No one there will believe me, either," she said. "I mean, that is, if I'm able to return."

"Return?" he asked, suddenly unsure he wanted to hear anymore of her lies. "You are planning to return—" he paused, before practically choking out the next words, "to the future?"

"I don't know," she said, sitting up, studying his face. He was certain she could read the disbelief and frustration there, but he didn't care. He'd given this woman his heart and here she was ridiculing his marriage proposal with the most deceitful narrative he'd ever heard. From the future? He fumed. Right and he was King George's illegitimate lovechild.

"You don't know," he replied hotly. "You don't know! I must confess I've always had a longing to travel to the future. Why don't we pop ahead a couple of hundred years and take a grand tour? Perhaps we could squeeze in a journey to the moon while we're at it."

"You don't believe me," she said softly, clearly hurt by his words. "I'm not surprised. In fact, I understand, and I don't blame you at all." She rose from the bed, crossing the room to the fireplace. Bending down, she scooped up her clothes, dressing as she spoke. "Honestly I don't," she said, as if trying to excuse his lost temper, as if she was humoring him, as if his response to her ridiculous lie was irrational. Her attitude drove his hot-temper even higher.

"Don't you dare pretend to be the injured party here! You stand here spouting the most ridiculous nonsense I've ever heard and then have the effrontery to be hurt when I don't believe you. Dammit, Vee, if you don't want to marry me, a simple 'no' would suffice. Believe me!"

"I don't blame you for being skeptical. I mean traveling to another time simply isn't done. Not in this century or in mine. And I can't explain to you how I was able to pull off

this incredible magic trick.”

Nearly dressed, she glanced through the shutters at the front of the cabin, the sound of the rain falling heavily outside. She was obviously trying to discern whether or not she could safely attempt a return to the Grange.

“Don’t even think about it,” he growled. “You aren’t going anywhere tonight in that storm, and you’ve wasted your time getting dressed as well because I refuse to watch you catch your death of a cold sitting around in a damp dress regardless of your prevarications.”

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“Lies?” she retorted back hotly. Tori seldom lost her temper at home, but with Ben, she seemed to feel comfortable enough to let loose with her anger. Besides, the stress of the day had taken her to the brink. “Lies,” she repeated, this time her voice shrill. “That’s right, Ben, you’ve found me out! I’m nothing, but a liar and not even a very good one at that. I mean of all the asinine tales I could have told you to explain my past, I come up with a far-fetched tale about being a time-traveler! Don’t want to believe that? Well then, how about this one? I’m a gypsy, desperate to enter your elitist world and family.” Angry tears began to fall as she spoke. “No? You don’t like that one either? Well, let’s try this one. I’m the queen of Timbuktu, and I’m here on a secret mission as a spy. Do you believe that?” Voice breaking, she crossed to the door, trembling, her heart shattering into a thousand pieces.

“And as well as a liar, I am a complete idiot,” she said, turning to face him, tears streaming down her face. “An idiot to think that in the past two months we had become friends. No, more than friends! Lovers! I’ve helped you rebuild your home, hire servants, overcome your own painful past, as well as battle depression. I’ve cared for your daughter and tried to help you become a good parent to her. Today I risked my life to save hers. I gave myself to you. I gave you everything, my body, my heart, my soul. I, I—” she stopped, unable to continue as a painful lump clogged her throat.

Ben stared at her, speechless. Shame suffused him as he considered everything she said. It was true. All of it. She had done all that and more, and here he was calling her a liar when all she asked for was his faith, his trust in her. The same faith and trust she’d given to him time after time in spite of how undeserving of it he was.

Regardless of how crazy her account appeared to be, his Tori, his Vee, was not crazy. Whether she truly believed she was from the future or was merely overwrought after all she’d been through, she deserved to be treated better by him.

Rising, he approached her slowly as she struggled to contain the sobs that were wracking her body. Too many times he’d made her cry. He made a silent vow to himself these would be the last tears caused by him she would ever shed. Wrapping his arms around her shaking body, he grasped her tightly in the shelter of his arms. He expected to her to pull back from him, to reject him, but as always, she managed to surprise him by unfolding her own arms to cling to him.

How long the two of them stood by the fire as she cried softly, Ben had no idea. All he knew was he loved her, and no matter what lay in her past, it was only her future he cared about. The future they would build together.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

### V is for Vitality

Dawn peeked through the shutters in bright rays of sunshine. Ben awoke with a start, sensing they were no longer alone in the cabin. Opening his eyes, he discovered Alex and Jack standing inside the door, studying him. Both were scowling with their arms crossed across their chests, and he grimaced at what his friends must be thinking. He and Vee were completely naked under the thin blankets and she was wrapped around him, her arm across his chest and one leg slung over his thighs, her head resting on his shoulder. No one with half a brain would doubt for an instant that the two of them had been intimate.

Recalling the previous night, he attempted to hide his gloating grin. After consoling her, Ben had taken her back to the small bed where he'd made love to her twice more, keeping her up well into the wee hours of morning. He suspected a fired gun wouldn't wake her.

Unwilling to embarrass his timid lady, he slowly extracted himself from her embrace, careful not to wake her. Escaping the bed, he quickly pulled on his trousers, silently motioning for his friends to precede him outside. They could and probably should beat the hell out of him for this, but he refused to allow her to witness it.

Braced for a thrown punch, he walked out into the sunshine, hands outstretched.

"Before you say anything," he started, halting any unsavory accusations his friends may toss at him, "I asked her to marry me. I love her and want to spend the rest of my life with her."

"So she's agreed to stay and not return to her time?" Alex asked so casually that Ben had to lean back against the wall of the cabin in order to stay upright. He'd dismissed her outrageous claims, blaming them on the stress of yesterday's events. Now Alex was corroborating the tale.

"What did you say?" he asked, shaking his head to clear away the gray spots appearing before his eyes.

"He asked if Tori has agreed to stay here, rather than attempting to find a way back through that blasted tree to the future," Jack answered.

Flabbergasted, he looked from one friend to the other, trying to determine if he was actually awake. Perhaps this was a dream and he was still in the small bed with Tori.

His friends studied his stunned response before both of them burst into laughter together.

"What's so funny?" Ben asked, torn between anger and confusion.

"She told you, didn't she?" Alex asked, tears of mirth falling down his cheeks. "She told you and you didn't believe her."

"Of course, I didn't believe her," he responded, anger suddenly winning out. "Who could believe such an incredible story?"

"Me for one," Jack answered, his laughter now under control. "My wife doesn't lie."

"Neither does mine," Alex added softly.

"Ben, you're simply going to have to take our word for it. Those three ladies are from the future. Roughly one hundred and ninety years in the future," Jack said.

“Jack. It’s impossible. There is no way—” he began, before a small voice behind him cut him off.

“You still think I’m lying,” she whispered from the doorway behind him. Her hair was tousled and her dress wrinkled. She’d dressed in haste, but he thought she was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen until he looked into her sapphire blue eyes. Then, he cursed his wayward tongue, seeing the anguish on her face, the beginning of tears forming in her lashes.

“No,” he replied, “I don’t.”

“But you just said—” she continued, stopping suddenly, her voice breaking. “After last night, I thought—”

“Dammit, Vee, listen to me. I’m a fool,” he said, anxious to console her, wishing he could take back his hasty words. He’d simply been bowled over by his friend’s admissions. They believed. They’d heard the crazy story from their own wives and they believed it.

“No, you’re not,” she said, the sudden fury in her voice cutting him like a knife. “That seems to be the role I’m playing. Alex, would you mind escorting me back to the Grange?”

“Vee, wait,” he said, reaching for her hands.

She avoided his touch, angrily facing him. “My name is Tori. Victoria Elise Hamilton, and I don’t belong here. Now let me by.”

Ben continued to move toward her only to be halted by a strong hand on his arm. Glancing back, he narrowed his eyes at Jack, ready to eviscerate the man for attempting to restrain him.

“Let her go,” Jack said softly and in his eyes Ben glimpsed something very much like understanding. “We need to talk.”

“Very well,” he muttered as Tori walked by him, head held high, refusing to look in his direction.

“But you and I aren’t finished,” he shouted to her retreating back. If she heard him, she gave no indication as she simply kept walking away, Alex at her side.

“Nicely handled,” Jack said, but Ben cut him off before he could censure him anymore.

“Dammit, Jack,” he yelled, frustration rife in his voice. “I don’t recall you wooing your wife perfectly either. In fact, all I do remember of your courtship last year is quite a bit of fighting. Either offer me some constructive advice or leave me the hell alone.”

Jack grinned. “You know, that fighting continues. I’m still trying to learn how to deal with my wife. It’s what comes after the fighting that keeps me coming back for more. That woman sure knows how to make up.”

“It’s clear you and Hayley are well-suited, in temperament and passion. I thought, I hoped that perhaps Vee, I mean Tori and I were as well. What the hell is going on?” he asked, genuinely upset, by the situation, by her angry departure, by everything.

“I always wondered when you would ask me,” Jack began, gesturing for Ben to reenter the cabin.

“Ask you what?” he asked, sitting in one of the two rough, hard-back chairs around the small circular table.

“Why Hayley was so different. Why she didn’t behave like other ladies of this time,” Jack replied matter-of-factly. “Alex used to worry about the same thing when he and Erin

were courting. I know that you and I discussed Erin's odd behavior and manner of speaking, but somehow, neither one of us felt comfortable addressing the issue with Alex. He was so damn smitten with the chit we were sure he'd beat the hell out of us for even insinuating she wasn't normal."

"Then you took up with her friend Hayley," Ben added, "and I felt like odd man out. I know both of you adore your wives, but the fact is Jack, people do talk about them. They don't think or behave as is expected of women."

"Because they were raised nearly two hundred years in the future. And what a future," Jack exclaimed. "I can't tell you how many times I've wished I was the one to make the trip through time. The stories Hayley and Erin have told us about the things to come, the songs they've taught us, the inventions that will be created. Did you know people can fly in the future? In this amazing device called an airplane. It's all so incredible. How I wish I could see it."

"So you truly believe their claim?" he asked, still uncertain.

"Ben, I've seen it," Jack replied.

"Seen it?"

"I was there when Hayley made her leap through the tree. Alex was there when Erin made the trip as well. I'm sorry you couldn't be there for Tori. It sounds as though her journey was particularly violent."

"She was injured," he answered. "I thought she'd been badly beaten by some attacker. She lost her memory when she hit her head on a rock."

"According to Hayley, the trip isn't an easy one. I'm not even sure how to describe it. Hayley tried once to explain that it was a bit like being caught in a cyclone, thrashed about like a rag doll, completely helpless to the rough elements with nothing to hold on to or to keep you pinned to the earth. Erin told Alex that childbirth was simple compared to the journey through the tree."

"Why?" Ben asked after several silent moments. "Why were they sent here?"

Jack shook his head. "I stopped asking why. Now all I do is thank my lucky stars everyday that Hayley was sent to me. I don't know what force brought her here, but I know there is no force on earth that will make me relinquish her. She's as vital to me as the air I breathe."

Closing his eyes, Ben considered his friend's words. "Vee has come to mean the same to me," he replied quietly. "I've never met anyone quite like her. Her inner strength, her loving nature, her kind spirit, her vitality. She is truly remarkable."

Jack smiled. "Hayley and Erin have spoken of her often, although I don't think they see this inner strength you speak of. In fact, I suspect they were actually Tori's self-appointed guardians in their time. I know Hayley was shocked beyond words when Tori crashed into this cabin yesterday, hell-bent on rescuing them."

"She was strong from the beginning," Ben replied. "She woke up in a strange bed to see this grim, miserable face hovering over her and all she did was smile and say hello."

He grinned as he remembered her innocent, endearing conversation that night. From the first moment they'd met, it seemed she had seen right through him. Found a window to his soul, he didn't know existed. "You know as well as I that most of polite society would run in fear of my glowering visage."

"You are too hard on yourself," Jack replied. "I know the years since the war have not been particularly easy for you. You chose a difficult path. I cannot imagine how

unseemly your work with Bow Street must have been.”

Ben reared back, shocked clear on his face.

“Yes,” Jack added, in response to Ben’s unasked question. “Alex and I knew what you were doing. Your father did as well.”

“My father,” he repeated, stunned to discover his dark secret was not so dark.

“I doubt there is much that gets by the Duke of Pelsham. It was he who told Alex and me. I think he was rather at a loss as to how to reach you. He hoped we would be able to persuade you to give up the dangerous work.”

“I don’t recall either of you attempting to stop me. In fact, until this moment, I didn’t know any of you were aware of my actions.”

Jack grimaced. “That was my fault. We convinced the duke that returning from war was hard and that your work for Bow Street was probably giving your life a purpose, filling a void that needed filling. I know you despise the *ton* as much as I do. I had the shipping company to keep me going. Alex had the marquise. I figured working with Bow Street was keeping you sane.”

“Sane,” he whispered, before quickly asking, “And that convinced my father not to interfere?”

“I suppose so,” Jack admitted. “He realized you would never be able to embrace the *ton* and all its silly strictures.”

“And he wasn’t worried about his reputation?” he asked.

“No,” Jack answered. “I don’t believe he was a bit concerned about any scandal that would follow should your work be discovered. I suspect he was even proud of you.”

“Oh,” he said, genuinely surprised. His father took his title and responsibilities very seriously. “So, why did he ask for your help rather than come to me himself?” His father had never had trouble letting his sons know when they displeased him.

“I believe he was afraid.”

He laughed at the comment. “My father has never been afraid a day in his life. That I can assure you.”

“Perhaps not,” Jack conceded, without conviction, “but I do think fear played a part in his request.”

“What on earth could he have feared?” he asked, dismissing Jack’s statement out of hand.

“Losing you,” his friend replied simply.

Stunned by the response, he glanced toward the small cot, the thin blankets tangled in a ball upon it. He thought back to the night he’d considered putting a gun to his head, ending it all. The night Tori had saved him from the ultimate enemy—himself. “He was right to be afraid.”

Jack studied him, considering his response a long time before acknowledging the telling comment. “I see. I am sorry, old friend.”

“Sorry?” he asked.

“I feel as though I failed you. I could see the changes occurring in you upon our return, but I convinced myself you merely needed time. Time to adjust, time to become accustomed once again to normal life. Then Hayley appeared in my life, and I stopped paying attention.”

Rising slowly, Ben placed a hand on Jack’s shoulder. “You have nothing to apologize for. I stopped paying attention as well.”



At Jack's confused glance, he continued to speak. "I was so mired in my own self-hatred and depression, I failed to see all the marvelous things I had to live for. A loving family, kind servants, a new daughter who has become more precious to me with each passing day, a home, two wonderful friends. I foolishly risked losing all of that." Walking over to the small bed, he picked up the blanket, carefully spreading it out, smoothing the wrinkles.

"No more depression?" Jack asked.

"A clumsy girl with amnesia whom I mistook for a whore seems to have chased all my dark clouds away," he answered with amusement.

"A whore?" Jack repeated, shock evident in his tone.

"Yes, well, apparently fashions change somewhat in the next two hundred years or so."

At Jack's laughter, he turned his thoughts back to the night, recalling Tori's face, her kisses, her soft caresses. Trust and love had been written in her lovely eyes. Then he remembered how he'd replaced that look with tears. He couldn't begin to imagine how his life would have turned out without her. Actually, without her, he seriously doubted he would still be here to ponder the fact.

He sighed heavily. "I suppose I've made a mess of it all."

Smiling, Jack approached him, his hand strong upon Ben's shoulder. "Oh, I wouldn't worry about that too much. It's clear to me that woman is as in love with you as you are with her. Go back to the Grange, say you're sorry, grovel if necessary, then grab hold of the lady with both hands and never let her go. It'll be the best decision of your life, trust me."

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### V is for Vanished

Upon returning to the Grange, Ben was met, not by Vee, but by her two livid friends.

“Good job, asshole,” Hayley cried as soon as he crossed the threshold.

“Hayley,” Jack admonished, but Hayley was far too angry to acknowledge her husband’s warning.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Her finger poked into Ben’s chest hard. “How dare you make her cry.”

Taking a deep breath, he tried to stem the overwhelming emotions coursing through his body. Anger, confusion, desperation, hopelessness all surged through him, and Hayley’s tirade broke the dam.

“My affairs are none of your concern, madam,” he answered tersely. “Nor will they ever be.”

“Tori’s *affairs* are my concern.” Hayley stressed the fact she was well aware of his and Vee’s actions during the night. “They have been since she was ten years old.”

“Has it not occurred to you that perhaps she no longer needs your assistance? That in fact she is a grown woman who can take care of herself?” he asked angrily.

Taken aback by his comment, Hayley fell silent.

Erin stepped forward. “I believe that perhaps you are right. Tori is not the girl we remember who was too shy to stand up against bullies or her overbearing mother, nor is she the shy young lady who was always most at home surrounded by children and books. She is different somehow. Stronger, more confident, more, well, just more. Wouldn’t you agree, Hayley?”

Hayley appeared to be slightly calmer than she’d been only moment before. “I guess now that you mention it, she does seem different. I’m not sure Tori would have come storming into that cabin yesterday waving a club in her hands if we’d been back home.”

He grinned at her description, despite the fact that Tori’s reckless actions still terrified him. He never wanted to see her risk her life or put herself in such a dangerous position again. In fact, after they were married, he would—His thoughts paused. After they were married. If they were married. If his careless comments this morning hadn’t destroyed her trust in him, once and for all.

“Where is she?” he asked, looking at Erin.

“She went upstairs to lie down. She looked wiped out, so I suggested a nap,” Erin replied.

“Help me,” he muttered.

“Let her sleep for a little while,” Erin suggested.

Hayley grinned, adding her own two cent’s worth. “Then crawl in on your hands and knees and beg for her forgiveness.”

“And that will work?” he asked, amused by Tori’s friends’ advice though his heart was aching.

Erin nodded while Hayley replied, “It works for Jack every time.”

\* \* \* \*

Tori looked out the window of her bedroom. No, not her bedroom, at least not yet. She had another hundred and ninety years to wait before she could officially claim this space. Rubbing her forehead to ease the tension headache forming there, she wondered again why she wasn't falling apart. Ben had lied to her. No, worse than that, he thought she was a liar. And a crazy one, to boot. When she'd woken this morning to find him no longer in the bed, she'd been overcome by a feeling of dread. It was as if she knew all along that everything in this time was exactly as it seemed. An illusion. The trip through time, her romance with Ben, finding Hayley and Erin again, all of it was too fantastical to be believed; too good to be true.

Clearly the other June girls had found their niche in this life, falling in love with their soul mates, creating a home here. Of course, that wasn't surprising. Her friends were nothing if not adaptable, unlike her. She was unfortunately a creature of habit, a person afraid of change, uneasy with confrontations of any kind. Despite her parent's relentless rearing efforts and because of some freaky, mixed-up genetics, this was basically as good as it got. Too shy, too clumsy, too weak to ever be taken seriously. Too ordinary to ever be loved by someone as wonderful as Lord Benjamin Sinclair, the lying, miserable, son of a, well, duke. Here she was, stuck in the past, failing to fit in any better than she did in the future. A fish out of water, again.

"No more," she whispered to herself. "No more," she repeated louder, gaining strength. Perhaps she didn't belong here, but she'd be damned if she'd sit in this room shedding one more tear over Benjamin Sinclair. She'd done what she'd come to do. Her friends were safe and sound, both happily married. Heck, Erin was a mother. It was time for her to stop looking back and begin to move forward with her own life. Her future was out there waiting for her. Without the anxiety surrounding her friends' disappearances, it was time she began to take steps to secure her own happy ending. Feeling lighter, she decided to escape the stifling atmosphere of the room and take a walk. She felt an overwhelming desire to be outside, soaking up the sunshine.

Taking the back stairwell, she meandered through the lovely garden at the rear of the house. Remembering to take time to smell the roses, she stopped briefly to pluck a bud of deep red, tucking it behind her ear. Leaving the garden, she followed the first path she encountered, unconcerned with her direction.

Glancing up after several moments of quiet contemplation, she was surprised to discover the path led directly to the old oak tree. A small shiver snaked down her spine as she studied its familiar leaf-laden branches. How could such an innocuous thing be the catalyst for so much turmoil and change? Even now, she was amazed by its power.

Approaching it slowly and wearily, she walked around the thick trunk, running her hands lightly on the rough bark. "What are you?" she whispered to the silent tree. "Can you truly send me home again?" she asked, wondering if home was where she wanted to be. Could she return to the future, even with all its amenities and comforts and leave her friends behind? She missed her job, tiny apartment, lovely library and sweet children desperately, but were those things enough anymore?

Her time in the past had taught her so many things about herself that she wouldn't have discovered had she never made this miraculous journey. Could she leave Hayley and Erin again after only just finding them?

"Who am I fooling?" she muttered, sliding her back down the trunk of the tree,

sitting beneath it in the shade. "I can't leave Ben and Chelsea. Hell, I can't even leave the Henrys." She smiled as she thought of her serious lord and his no-longer silent charge, the robust housekeeper and her slight husband. In her short time here, the residents of Waterplace had treated her like a beloved and cherished member of their family. They'd completely accepted her, warts and all, which was more than her own parents had ever done.

"Stay or go, Hamilton?" she asked herself, lightly tapping the back of her head against the tree. Never before had she felt so torn. "Come on, magic tree. Give me an answer. You did this to me. Straighten out the mess you've made of my life." When nothing happened, she started to laugh lightly. "On my own, eh? Thanks a lot," she muttered, her voice laced with humor.

"Talking to a tree," came a deep voice behind her. "You're crazier than I thought."

Startled by the unwelcome, familiar voice, she attempted to still the sudden pounding of her heart.

"I thought you'd be miles from here by now," she replied with more calm than she felt, standing and turning slowly.

"Unfinished business," Prescott answered, a pistol in his hands.

All thoughts of running were washed away as she considered the weapon pointed directly at her in his all-too steady hands.

"You'll never get near that little girl," she replied, the strength in her voice surprising her. She was sounding more like Hayley everyday. "She's well-protected here."

"Don't give a damn 'bout that little brat anymore. Truth's out about me. I won't never know a minute's peace. Always runnin' til they catch me and hang me for murder."

"So why run?" she asked, praying someone would happen by. Where was everyone? "Why not give yourself up?"

A harsh laugh erupted from Prescott as he took a step closer to her. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? You interfering bitch. You ruined me," he shouted. "Ruined me! Now you are the unfinished business."

Throwing caution to the wind, she twirled around hoping she could outrun Prescott once again, but this time he was too close and ready for her. She hadn't taken two steps before he was upon her. Grabbing at her shoulders roughly, she felt the chain on her necklace break and fall to the ground. Struggling to free herself from his grasp, she kicked back, missing her target by mere inches. Prescott, unwilling to prolong the fight, hit her head hard with the butt of the gun and for the second time, Tori lost consciousness beneath the giant oak.

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Taking Hayley and Erin's advice, Ben paced the floor of the library for half an hour practicing his apology. Unable to wait a moment longer, he quickly ascended the stairs in search of Tori. He needed to make things right with her, once and for all. Then she could nap. If things turned out all right, maybe they could nap together.

Regardless of her past, he no longer had any doubt that she was destined to be his present and future. If he had to crawl on the floor, begging for forgiveness, as Hayley suggested, he would do it. He simply couldn't imagine his life without her in it. Somehow he had to convince her to stay, to believe in him and in his love for her.

Knocking on the door to her bedchamber, he tapped his foot impatiently, anxious

about his reception. Would she be angry? Throwing things and yelling. Or would she be disappointed? Quiet and resigned. He wasn't sure how he would deal with either response, but he was determined that one way or another, he would make amends.

When there was no answer, he knocked louder, then turned the knob. Finding the door unlocked, he pushed it open, surprised to find the room empty. Her friends thought she was here, yet he knew she hadn't come downstairs since his return.

Chelsea, he thought. She's with Chelsea in the nursery. Hastily leaving the room, he walked down the hall and climbed the stairs to the schoolroom Erin and Alex had set up for Elise on the third floor. Rushing into the room without knocking, he was disappointed to discover only Chelsea with baby Elise and her nurse.

"Oh," he said, at the nurse's surprised glance. "I beg your pardon. I was hoping to find Miss Hamilton."

"She hasn't been here all mornin' milord," the nurse replied.

Aware of Chelsea's close study of his worried face, he knelt down, careful to hide his anxiety with a smile.

"Well," he said lightly, "perhaps this angel has seen her." Kissing her softly on the forehead, he scooped her up in his arms, pleased when she quickly wrapped her arms around his neck giggling. No longer did she turn stiff at his touch, but instead she embraced him and returned his own kiss with a sweet one of her own on his cheek.

"How are you, my little angel?" he asked, ashamed of himself for not coming to check on her earlier.

"Fine," she whispered, still timid in her responses.

"Truly?" he asked, looking closely at her. His heart broke every time he considered the private hell this small child had endured. Her strength in the face of such pain and suffering humbled him.

"Truly," she repeated louder, hugging him tighter.

"I love you," he whispered into her soft hair.

Smiling, Chelsea pulled back to look at him. "I love you, too, Daddy," she replied.

He stumbled back a couple of steps until he felt a chair press against his legs and he fell into it with Chelsea in his arms. The worry and uncertainty of the past few months washed away with her words, and he was certain he'd never seen his little girl look so peaceful and relaxed. He held her tight to him for several minutes, savoring the feeling of her in his arms. His daughter, he thought, his.

"Sir," the nurse said, glancing out the window. "Now that I think on it, I believe I did see Miss Hamilton."

"Oh," he said, loosening his grip on Chelsea "Where?"

"She was out in the back garden. I'm not certain, but I believe I saw her leave by the south gate on the path that leads to the old oak at the edge of the property."

His heart stopped at her words. He hadn't considered that she would attempt to leave without speaking to him again.

"No," he breathed out and he felt Chelsea's jerk at his anguished word.

Looking at him with confused eyes, he struggled to hide the fear pulsating through his body. Somehow he managed to force a smile to his lips. "I need to speak to Vee, Chelsea. Will you be alright here?"

Nodding at him, he sensed the young girl could read his worries despite his efforts to hide them.

“She’ll come home,” Chelsea said softly, and he wondered if the girl could truly read his thoughts so easily.

“Of course, she will,” he said, more to reassure himself than the child. “I won’t be long. Maybe I can convince her to accompany us on a picnic this afternoon. Like the one we took at Waterplace.”

Laughing, Chelsea jumped up and down with excitement, resembling for the first time since she’d come to live with him, a true seven-year-old girl.

“A picnic,” she sang happily.

“Let me go fetch her,” he added, praying he would get to her in time. “Wait here.”

Rushing from the room, he took the back stairs two at a time, running out into the bright sunshine. He traversed the path to the oak without a sideways glance, desperate to stop Tori from making her escape. Hoping against hope that he was wrong, that she wasn’t trying to leave. Perhaps she was simply taking a walk. A feeling of dread crept through him as he approached the tree.

She’s not here, he thought, a sharp feeling of pain stabbing his chest. Fearing the worse, he circled the tree, his eyes scanning the ground for some clue, some sign that his apprehensions weren’t founded. That the love of his life hadn’t returned to the future. That she hadn’t left him forever.

Something shimmering in the sunlight caught his eye. Leaning down, he reached out and found Tori’s necklace. The chain had been broken. He thought back to the day he’d first found her beneath the tree. She’d been badly battered by her trip through time. Hayley and Erin both insisted that the time-travel was rough, frightening. Could the chain have broken during her return? Deep dread filled his chest and he sank down onto the ground, struggling to breathe past the ever-growing lump in his throat, her beloved necklace clutched tightly in his palm.

She’s gone, he lamented. Vanished. Gone without a word. Without saying goodbye. Without ever giving him a chance to tell her how much he loved her.

“Oh, God,” he cried. “What have I done?”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### V is for Vengeance

“Ouch,” Tori winced. She’d been struggling for several minutes to untie the rough twine around her wrists. She was tied to a chair in the same damn cabin where she’d saved Erin and Hayley only the day before. Where she’d made love with Ben all night last night. She had awoken several minutes earlier to find herself alone. God only knew where Prescott was hiding. The man was clearly out of his mind.

If she could manage to get loose before he returned, she could run back to the Grange and warn the others that he was still in the area. Alex and Erin had been discussing his whereabouts this morning when she’d returned, and she knew the Grange servants had been combing the area since yesterday afternoon. Alex had been sure that Frank was long gone.

What a fool she had been to leave the immediate area around the house. What had she been thinking? No, not what was she thinking. Who was she thinking of? Ben. He’d consumed her thoughts for weeks. She’d always prided herself on being a fairly intelligent person, and yet a few moments in his presence reduced her to a mindless bimbo thinking only of the man she loved and nothing else. Damn, she thought, the man she loved. The man who considered her to be as big a lunatic as she considered Prescott to be.

A drop of liquid trickled down her hand, and she glanced over her shoulder just in time to see a drop of her blood hit the floor behind her. Choking back the tears and fighting to ignore the pain, she continued the pick at the knots, but to no avail. A sound outside the door set her heart to racing. Frank was back.

“Damn women,” he was muttering as he entered the cabin. “Interfering, lousy bitches. Need to learn their place.”

“And where would that be?” she asked, when she noticed he no longer carried the gun he’d rendered her unconscious with. Where she was finding the nerve she didn’t know, but she had come to realize that her forthright nature confused him. Perhaps she could keep him talking long enough for someone to find her. Silently she sent up a prayer that the servants were still searching the area.

“Cooking and cleaning the house!” Prescott yelled. “Warming my bed!”

Tori shuddered at the thought, but kept her mouth closed, allowing him to continue his tirade.

“You are just like her,” he accused, pointing his finger. “Think you’re damn better than me. Spread your legs for a rich man, but not for a working man like me! Titles and uniforms are all that matter to faithless bitches like you. You think I didn’t see you last night with Lord Benjamin. I saw you. You’re a whore just like they say. Just like her.” Frank towered over her, ramming his finger into her chest with each horrible comment.

Her stomach turned at the thought of Frank watching her and Ben last night.

“Just like who?” she asked, wishing he would step back. He was hurting her and she couldn’t hide her shaking if he didn’t back away. He was furious, and she didn’t think she’d ever been more terrified.

“Maggie,” Frank whispered, his anguished tone shocking her. Who the hell was Maggie? The mere mention of the woman’s name and she sensed he no longer realized she was in the room. He walked away from her to stare unseeing out the door of the cabin. For several moments, he was silent. With his back turned, she fought desperately against the ropes once again. Finally she felt the knot give. Her bonds were loose enough that she could get away. Keeping her hands in place behind her back, she frantically tried to think of a way to get Frank out of the cabin.

“Wouldn’t marry me,” Frank continued, jarring her from her thoughts. “Took one look at Ian Duncan in his soldier uniform and run off with him. She was my girl. Always my girl. Then the damn fool gets himself killed in the war, and she still wouldn’t marry me. Says we didn’t suit. Says she didn’t love me. I showed her,” he said louder, coming back to her, anger blazing in his black eyes. He leaned down close enough that she could see the tick beside his left eye and smell onions on his rancid breath.

“I showed that bitch,” he said, smiling evilly. “She didn’t love me. She wouldn’t love anybody. I sneaked up to her da’s house one night and set a fire. Killed her and her father. He deserved to die as well. Wouldn’t accept my suit, told me the choice was his daughter’s. Weak man. He should’ve made her marry me. Then they’d both be alive.”

She shivered at the unrestrained malice in both his words and face. Frank was truly proud of his actions. Determined he was right to take the lives of two innocent people whose greatest crime was to say “no” to him. No doubt Maggie and her father had seen the cruelty in his soul and yet, not realized the danger he posed until it was too late.

“Only that bastard girl wasn’t in the house like she was supposed to be. Saw her coming out of the stable as I was leaving. Went back to kill her, but the damn neighbors started coming out of their houses. Told that little bitch if she ever said anything about what I’d done, I’d come back and kill her, too. Got a job with that high and mighty lord of yours to keep an eye on her.”

“Why try to kill her then?” she asked softly, sensing he was calming down. “She wasn’t talking to anyone.”

“How did I know that? She wouldn’t come out of that damn house, and you never left her side. You didn’t like me right from the start so I figured she tole you somethin’.”

“If I’d known, don’t you think Lord Benjamin would have had you arrested?” she asked. “No one knew. By coming around Waterplace, you put yourself at risk.”

“You questioning me?” Frank yelled, his temper rising again, raising his hand as if to strike her.

“No,” she said, but Frank’s hand came down hard against her cheek.

“Damn you,” he yelled, wrapping his hands around her throat. “None of this would’ve happened if you’d just kept your nose out of my business. Left that stupid kid alone. But you kept on and on, trying to get her to talk.”

Gasping for breath, she shook off the ropes, bringing her hands up to beat at Frank’s face. She took advantage of his temporary surprise at her freedom by digging her thumb into one of his eyes. She swallowed the bile that leapt to her throat at the squishy feeling of his eye popping as she pushed it with all her might. Hayley would have been proud she’d remembered her self-defense lessons so well.

Injured, Frank released his hold on her neck, both of his hands flying to his bleeding eye. Taking the opportunity, she leapt up from the chair and ran out the door amidst Frank’s cursing and screaming. She’d nearly reached the edge of the woods when a



gunshot sounded in her ears. She felt a hard jolt and a strange burning sensation in her arm, but she continued running, determined to get away. To get back to the Grange, to Chelsea, to the June Girls, to Ben.

Black spots danced across her eyes, and she struggled to dodge around the trees in her path. She could just make out a figure approaching her from the direction of the house. Someone had heard the shot, she thought. Help is on the way. A brief feeling of relief was quickly followed by a lightheadedness that had her stumbling forward. Strong arms encased her as she fell toward the ground. Looking up, she saw the worried eyes of Ben. His lips were moving, but she couldn't hear anything he was saying. The roaring in her ears was too loud.

"Frank," she whispered, then she gave up the fight as she realized she was now safe. *Ben is here. He'll protect me.* With that final thought, she fainted.

\*

Ben looked down at the Tori's unconscious form. He'd been under the oak tree when he'd heard the gunshot. Dashing toward the sound, he thought he'd been dreaming when he first saw her running toward him. A mirage, he thought, until she came closer and he saw the bloodstains on the front of her dress.

He could hear raised voices in the distance coming from the direction of the Grange. Clearly he wasn't the only one who had heard the shot fired. Holding her gently on his lap, he quickly studied her wounds. It appeared she'd been shot in her left shoulder. Given the hole in both the front and back of her dress, he could only assume she'd been shot while trying to escape, and the bullet had passed straight through. He struggled to swallow, his mouth dry with fear at the sight of so much of her blood flowing from the wound. Staunching the flow with his cravat, he took in the rest of her. There was a bruise forming on her right cheek and her wrists were bleeding as badly as her shoulder.

Prescott hadn't left the area as they'd all suspected. Anger, black and thick, suffused his body as he thought of his Tori prisoner to the man who had caused his little family so much pain and suffering. He'd killed Chelsea's mother and grandfather, terrorized his daughter, attempted to kill his best friends' wives, and now he'd kidnapped, tortured, and shot Tori.

Running feet dragged him from his thoughts as Jack and Alex approached. Both men came to an abrupt stop at the sight of Tori's still form in his arms.

"Good God," Alex cried. "Is she—"

"No," he answered, "but Prescott will be. Alex, Jack, can you take her back to the Grange? I have some unfinished business to attend to."

"Ben," Jack started, but Ben shook his head.

"No, Jack," he added harshly. "Prescott is mine to deal with. He has hurt someone I love for the last time. Please take care of Tori. I won't be long."

Jack considered his words for only a moment before bending down to gently relieve him of his burden. "She'll be fine," Jack whispered as he leaned over, carefully taking Tori out of his arms. "I'll see to it personally."

He nodded his thanks, as Jack rose with Tori and started back to the Grange. Alex remained behind.

"I need to do this alone," he said.

"But not unarmed," Alex replied, handing him the pistol he carried. "The man is dangerous and clearly cunning, Ben. He alluded my men all night and half of today. He

managed to take Tori without any of us realizing it. Promise you will take care.”

Ben smiled grimly. “You forget, my friend. Killing is my talent.” And with that, he let his dark nature loose and turned away to stalk his prey.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

### V is for Vindication

Ben crept through the woods quietly until he reached the now abandoned cabin. Apparently satisfied he'd hit his mark, Prescott had deserted the shelter. Instinct kicked in as Ben studied the footprints outside the door. Distinguishing which prints were Prescott's took several minutes. Beginning the slow and methodical process of tracking, he took off in the opposite direction of the Grange. Ironical, he thought, that years of cursing the training he'd received, first as a soldier, then with Bow Street, would ultimately help him to save his family. Failure was not an option. He would kill Prescott, then he would do whatever it took to ensure that Chelsea and Tori would never be in danger again.

The minutes turned to hours as he moved with painstaking slowness, tracking Prescott's trail. Once, he found a rag with bloodstains and felt an immense sense of pride that Tori had managed to fight back. Glancing toward the sky, he cursed the approaching dusk. Picking up his pace, he prayed he would find Prescott before dark.

After several minutes more, he heard the sound of a branch breaking up ahead and he stopped walking. Straining to hear more, he began to move silently through the woods, careful to avoid making any noise at all. Soon, he saw a figure about a hundred yards in the distance, sitting beneath a tree. He recognized Prescott's large figure.

Approaching stealthily, he crept forward and circled around until he was standing directly behind the tree where Prescott rested.

"Time's up, Prescott," he said menacingly.

Frank tried to jump to his feet, but Ben was ready for him as he placed his foot in the man's lower back, kicking him back to the ground.

"You killed Maggie Duncan," he accused, his voice low and calm.

"Bitch deserved it," Frank spat back, crab crawling away from Ben as he approached. At his words, he kicked the man's shin hard. Frank cried out, sitting forward to grab his leg.

"You threatened my daughter," he continued, ignoring the man's howls of pain.

"Damn brat shoulda died with her mother," Frank replied, rising to his knees, no longer trying to escape, but ready to fight.

Ben waited until he staggered to his feet before landing a crushing blow to his face. Prescott fell back against a tree, but remained upright.

"You kidnapped my governess," he added, ticking off his list of grievances against the man. He wanted Frank to know exactly what he was dying for.

"Your whore," Frank spat, hoping to shake Ben's unnerving calm.

He replied with a strong blow to Prescott's gut, followed by a knee to his groin.

Frank gasped for air as he fell to his knees.

"You shot her," he added, his voice betraying his intense anger for the first time.

Frank didn't answer this last accusation as he gave up any pretense of trying to fight back and made one last attempt at escape. Flinging himself forward into Ben's chest, he would have run away had Ben not caught him and pulled him down as well. The men fell

to the ground together in what Ben quickly realized would be a fight to the death. Fists flew and connected amidst groans and grunts. Kicks landed as blood began to flow. It was soon obvious who the victor would be as Frank only landed one punch to every three of his. Years of honing his fighting skills paid off as he used all his knowledge in combat to defeat his foe. This man had inflicted unspeakable pain on Chelsea. He'd shot his beloved Tori, and now he was going to see justice done at last.

The fight ended as quickly as it began when Ben delivered one last punch with so much force Frank's neck snapped in two as the evil man fell for the final time.

For several moments, he stared down into the dead man's sightless eyes. How many times had he looked into the face of death? A familiar chill crept into his bones as he imagined the soul of his victim passing through him as it left its earthly form. Shuddering against the cold, he turned his back on Prescott's still form before retching under a tree. Overwhelmed by fatigue, he remained motionless as the events and the emotions of the day played in his mind. In one day, he'd experienced love and heartbreak, joy and fear, happiness and anger, life and death. Death, he reflected. Always death.

"No," he said aloud, startled by the loudness of it in the silence of the night. "No," he repeated, calmed by the sound of it. "No more death," he vowed. Raising his face to the blackness of the encroaching night, he made a silent pledge. Never again would he take the life of another. His days as a killer were past. From this day forward, he would dedicate himself to living. No more darkness, no more self-recrimination. Only Tori and Chelsea. His family. His life.

Feeling a peace he hadn't known in years, he rose slowly, starting back through the dark woods toward the Grange.

\* \* \* \*

It was after midnight when Ben returned. Alex was waiting at the door as he trudged in wearily.

"I was about to send out the troops," Alex said.

Ben's grin turned into a grimace as the cut on his lower lip split open. He imagined Alex's troops would include Erin and Hayley. He shuddered to think of Tori's June girls coming to his rescue, then decided they would no doubt be the best back up a man could hope for.

"Tori?" he asked, walking straight past Alex to climb the stairs.

"Resting," Alex replied. "If you have a moment," he added, causing him to stop and turn at the bottom stair.

"She is well?"

"She's fine," Alex assured him, gesturing for him to follow him to the front parlor.

"Doc Jonesbury said the bullet passed straight through her shoulder. She was lucky. Few inches to the right and down and it would have pierced her heart."

Ben's blood turned cold at the thought.

"Actually, the house has been quite busy since you left." Stopping outside the closed door to the parlor, Alex murmured to him. "Ben, your father is here. He's waiting up for you."

"My father?" he repeated, reeling at the news. "What on earth is he doing here?"

"I gather that he is concerned about you."

He paused, staring at the closed door, torn between entering the room to speak to the

father he'd been avoiding for months and rushing to be by Tori's side. He looked at Alex. "Tell me what the doctor said."

Alex, understanding his fears, recited the doctor's diagnosis. "She needed a few stitches in the front and back of her shoulder, and she mustn't use the arm at all for a few days."

"Poor thing," he muttered. "Must have hurt like hell."

"You wouldn't have known it the way she was ranting and raving," Alex added with a grin.

"Ranting and raving?" he asked as the door to the parlor open, and he found himself face to face with his father, the Duke of Pelsham.

"Yes," his father responded in answer to Ben's question. "That was precisely what she was doing. I've never met a more determined woman in my life."

Entering the cozy front parlor at his father's bidding, Ben glanced at his friend with a raised eyebrow. Interpreting the gesture correctly, Alex smiled and followed them into the room. He was hoping for moral support and Alex was more than willing to provide it.

"I'm trying to imagine Tori as determined," Ben said lightly.

"Demanding would perhaps be more accurate," his father replied.

"Now I am confused," he replied.

"When she woke up, she asked for you," Alex added, filling him in on the events of the afternoon and evening. "When Jack explained where you had gone, she went, and I'm using Hayley's description here, ballistic. Whatever the hell that means. She insisted that Jack and I go after you. Erin and Hayley tried everything to calm her down. Twice she tried to get out of the bed to follow you herself."

"Good God," Ben exclaimed. "She could have seriously injured herself."

"It was at that point I arrived. She demanded that as your father I should go out looking for you," the duke added. "Strange chit even suggested that I call the king and demand that troops be sent out in the search. Naturally, I was appalled that your ward's governess would attempt to order me about in such a fashion."

"Father, perhaps I should explain—" he started.

"Your friends have given me all the explanation needed. They claim you love this imperious girl."

"I do," he replied, unable to discern his father's opinion of his relationship with a woman who had served as his governess for the past two months. Unfortunately, the truth of her background was even more difficult, if not impossible, to explain. "I can assure you Father that despite what you witnessed this afternoon, Tori is anything, but imperious. She's kind, patient, intelligent, funny."

"And in love with you, given her fear for your safety, notwithstanding the fact she'd been badly injured."

For the first time since he entered the room, his father smiled. A genuine smile Ben hadn't seen in many years on his father's face. He returned it easily before crossing the room to embrace his father.

"I truly love her," Ben added. "It is good to see you again, father."

For the first time since his return from the war could he see the toll his dark moods and depression had taken on his father as he spied deep lines of worry creasing the older man's eyes and forehead.

"Ah, Benjamin," the duke said after several moments. "I'd quite given up on ever

reaching you again. I have missed you, son.”

“I must apologize for my behavior, sir,” he added, but his father waved away his comments.

“You have nothing to be sorry for. You’ve survived some difficult times, and I am extremely proud of the man you have become.”

“But Father,” he said, thinking he should explain, but again his father surprised him.

“I know about your work with Bow Street, Benjamin, and I know you’ve been suffering ill effects from that work and from the war.”

“How?” he asked.

“I believe,” his father said, “you will find there is very little I do not know about my children.”

Ben wasn’t particularly surprised by his father’s words. He always knew his father loved him and worried about him.

“I hoped the move to Waterplace, given its close proximity to your friends and its distance from Bow Street, would help you heal. And I knew you took your pledge to care for young Miss Duncan seriously. Although, I must admit that the governess came as a surprise.”

He laughed at his father’s confession. “She was a bit of a surprise to me as well.”

“Yes, well,” Alex continued, recalling the afternoon, “even with your father’s arrival, we were at our wit’s end how to reassure her that you would be well and that she needed to allow the doctor to treat her wounds.”

“You said Doc Jonesbury put in the stitches,” he repeated for reassurance.

“Oh, yes, indeed,” Alex confirmed. “She’s been well-cared for. It was actually Chelsea who convinced Tori to calm down and let the doctor help her.”

“Chelsea?” he asked, once again surprised by the difference one day had made in the young girl.

“She told Tori she would hold her hand while the doctor took care of her, so she needn’t be afraid.”

“Conniving child,” the duke said with a grin.

“Clever girl,” Ben replied with a painful smile, his lower lip swollen and sore. “I believe I see now. Tori would never allow Chelsea to believe she was afraid of the doctor.”

“You will have your hands full with those two young ladies,” the duke added.

“Looks like we wouldn’t be remiss in calling the doctor back to take a look at you,” Alex said, taking in his disheveled appearance and bloody clothing.

“Be a futile trip,” Ben replied. “Nothing but cuts and bruises.”

“And Frank Prescott?” Alex asked, concern etched on his face.

“Futile trip for him, too,” he replied softly.

“So that’s it then,” Alex said. “According to Tori, Frank felt no remorse for killing Chelsea’s family. Said he was most distressed about the fact he hadn’t taken care of the girl in the fire.”

“He was a sick man,” Ben agreed, angry with himself. “Tori sensed it right from the start. She even warned me, but I ignored her fears, dismissed them.”

“I believe it was Shakespeare who said, ‘All’s well that ends well,’” the duke added.

Ben laughed at his father’s words. “Funny, but that is the second time in a day I’ve had that quote tossed at me. Only problem is nothing seems well to me.”

“Why is that, son?” the duke asked. “You’ve vanquished your enemy, your young ward is speaking again and you have a lovely, fierce protector awaiting your return.”

“A fierce protector perhaps, but I’ve handled everything so badly with her, Father,” he admitted wearily.

“Clearly nothing has been done that cannot be undone, Benjamin, or the young lady would not have been so concerned for your welfare.”

“I need to see Tori,” he said, anxious to reassure himself that her injuries truly weren’t life-threatening and desperate to make amends for his actions.

“You may need to get in line,” Alex said with a mysterious smile.

“In line?” he asked. “I thought you said she was resting.”

“Oh, she is,” his friend reassured him. “Maybe you should see for yourself.”

He followed Alex and his father upstairs silently and then opened the door to her room to glance in. Tori was sleeping peacefully in the middle of the big bed. Chelsea was curled up beside her sound asleep. Dozing in the chair was Mrs. Henry. Surprised, he turned, the question in his eyes.

“Mr. and Mrs. Henry arrived shortly after the doctor left,” Alex answered. “Seems Mr. Henry had been knocked unconscious and locked in the tack room of the stable by Mr. Prescott so he couldn’t drive Tori and Chelsea here. The young stable boy didn’t find him until much later when Mr. Henry came around and began banging on the door. They were so concerned for Tori and Chelsea’s welfare they came here as soon as Mr. Henry was able. When Mrs. Henry discovered Tori had been shot, she took over.”

“My goodness,” the duke added with chagrin. “That woman is a force to be reckoned with. I could have sworn she was the duke instead of me given the way she was issuing orders. Benjamin, you really need to take that woman in hand.”

“Actually, I’m wondering where was she during the war against France. We could have used a few generals like her,” Alex joked.

Ben laughed at his father and friend’s apt description of his commanding housekeeper.

“I keep trying to decide whether to throw her out my house or attempt to hire her away from you,” Alex added.

Turning back to the room and taking in the sight of the three strong females in the room, Ben shook his head. “Sorry,” he said softly. “They are all mine.”

Walking quietly into the room, he lightly shut the door leaving his father and Alex laughing in the hall. At the sound of the door closing, Mrs. Henry roused.

“Oh, milord,” she whispered, quickly crossing herself. “God be praised, you are back. Your face,” she hissed as she approached. “You’ve been injured.”

“It’s nothing serious, Mrs. Henry,” he reassured her. “Mr. Henry?” he asked, overwhelmed with concern for the silent man.

“Ach, weel,” Mrs. Henry said with a smirk. “Take more’n a little lump on the head to stop that man. Always did say he was more hard-headed than a man has a right to be.”

“I’m glad,” he replied, careful not to smile lest she see him wince.

“Miss Hamilton,” Mrs. Henry announced, pointing to Tori’s sleeping form on the bed. “Isn’t it nice that she’s finally found her memories? Imagine her being a friend to the marchioness and countess all along.”

He groaned to himself as he could see the wheels in her matchmaking mind churning at a frantic pace. Clearly, with the revelation of Tori’s true identity, Mrs. Henry felt the

way was clear for them to have a “happily ever after” ending. He wondered what the woman would say if she knew he not only had to apologize and proclaim his love, but he also had to convince her not to crawl back through some tree and return to her life in the future.

“Weel,” Mrs. Henry continued, interrupting his thoughts, “it’s high time this little lady was returned to her own room.” She gestured to Chelsea’s sleeping form. “She was a fierce protector tonight and to hear her sweet, little voice.” Mrs. Henry stopped talking, wiping away a tear as she recalled hearing the child speak for the first time.

Touched by the older woman’s genuine concern and love for his small family, he took her hand, raising it to his lips to press a kiss upon her knuckles. “Mrs. Henry,” he said, looking into the woman’s astonished eyes. “You are a wonder. Thank you.”

Blushing lightly, he remarked that for the first time since he’d met her, Mrs. Henry was truly speechless. With a pleased smile, she nodded before turning and gently lifting Chelsea into her arms. Without another word, she carried her young charge out of the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

Sighing, he approached the bed. Exhaustion had taken over. Moving slowly, he pulled his shirt over his head before sitting in the chair Mrs. Henry had just vacated to pull off his boots and stockings. Finally, he stood and removed his breeches. Reaching out, he lightly brushed a few strands of hair away from her face, leaning down to press a soft kiss on the dark bruise marring her lovely face.

Then he climbed on the bed and crawled under the covers, careful not to jar her injured arm. Gently he turned toward her, wrapping her in his arms, smiling at her satisfied sigh as she curled closer to him without waking. Placing another kiss on the top of her head, he fell into a deep and peaceful sleep.



## Chapter Twenty-Six

### V is for Victory

"You're back!" A loud voice shouted in his ear jarring him from sleep.

Glancing next to him, Ben could see the first rays of dawn peeking through the window and shining across the face of his personal diminutive sunray.

"It would appear so," he answered dryly.

"Your face," she said, studying his injuries closely.

He thought he must look worse than he felt, given everyone's response upon seeing him.

"I'm fine," he added, suddenly realizing she was sitting up beside him. "Lie down," he demanded roughly. "You're not to move your arm."

"It's fine. Ben, what happened? Did you find Frank Prescott? What happened to your face?" Her gaze was anxious as she questioned him, and he couldn't help but feel relieved she had forgotten her previous anger toward him.

"I found him. He won't bother you or Chelsea again," he replied.

"How can you be so sure? Where is he? Was he arrested? Is he in jail?" she continued to fire questions at him.

"Vee," he said, gently helping her lie back down on the bed. She struggled only briefly before allowing him to cover her up with the soft quilt. "Prescott is dead."

"Oh," she whispered. "You killed him. Oh, Ben." She rose up again touching his face with her uninjured hand. "I'm so sorry."

Touched by her concern and understanding, Ben struggled to speak. Only she would truly realize what it had cost him to go after Frank. To kill him in order to protect his family. To seek vengeance for Ian Duncan and his wife. He wasn't surprised to see a tear fall down her face.

"You did what you had to do," she said, obviously thinking he needed her consolation. "He was a madman. Nothing, short of death, would have stopped him."

Smiling, he slowly pulled her into his embrace. "I know that, sunshine. I'm fine, truly. Now that I'm here with you, everything will be okay."

Snuggling closer, he could feel the strong beat of her heart against his own chest.

"I love you, Victoria Hamilton," he said.

Pulling away, she looked into his eyes through the tears misting in her long lashes.

"I love you, too," she replied. "But Ben—"

"I believe you," he added before she could finish her statement. "I believe everything you've ever told me," he repeated more firmly at her look of skepticism. "I don't know what force of nature or act of fate or magical power brought you to me. I only know that I cannot live without you. You saved my life."

Blushing, she shook her head. "I didn't do anything."

Gently placing his hands on her arms, he waited until she raised her eyes to his. "You did, Vee. Make no mistake. I wouldn't be here without you. Chelsea wouldn't be speaking. Hell, Waterplace would probably still be a shambles."

"Well," she said teasingly, "I must admit your home does look lovely, except for that

damned dark study, of course.”

He laughed loudly at her jest, before contributing his own. “I like my study just the way it is. However, perhaps, in time, I may be persuaded to redecorate it. Mind you, it may take a lot of time and a great deal of persuasion.”

“Oh,” she answered, grinning. “About how much time do you think it would take to persuade you to brighten that room up?”

“I don’t know exactly. I suppose a lifetime should do it.”

“A lifetime,” she whispered.

“A lifetime,” he continued. “Together. You and me and Chelsea and, hopefully, a whole brood of our own children. I know I could never hope to be deserving of your love, but I swear to you I will spend everyday of my life trying to make you as happy as you’ve made me. Stay here. Marry me. Please.”

Crying in earnest now, she sniffled before nodding. “Yes. I would love to marry you.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, feeling the need to make sure she wouldn’t regret her decision later. “Jack’s told me a bit about the future. It sounds like a remarkable time. Are you sure you don’t want to return? Because make no mistake, if you choose to stay and we marry and have a family, I will never let you go.”

\*

Tori considered his question. It was a question she’d pondered since her memories had returned. For her, the answer was simple. She would stay. For the first time in her life, she felt like she truly belonged. Growing up in the shadow of her parent’s tremendous accomplishments, dealing with their seeming lack of affection, and struggling to find her own niche in a world where she never quite fit in had taken its toll.

Quite frankly, she preferred the simplicity of life in the nineteenth century. She enjoyed the slow pace of each day and the kindness of the people around her. She was drawn to the simple pleasures to be found in a world devoid of traffic, pollution, and noisy crowds. She craved nights of quiet reading and talking without the interruption of television. She was relieved not to have to stress over make up and blow dryers every morning, and she was delighted to be reunited with Hayley and Erin. Why return to the future when the best parts of her life were here plus so much more?

Most of all, she loved her new family. Mr. and Mrs. Henry had taken her under their wing and cared for her in a way her parents never had. She’d come to think of Chelsea as her own daughter, and she would gladly risk her life everyday for the tiny child who had claimed a large part of her heart. And Ben. If she lived to be one hundred years old, she would never get enough of the way he was looking at her right this moment. His eyes were filled with love mixed with desire and lust and understanding. He found her beautiful, just as she was—clumsy, shy, awkward, chubby. He loved all of those things about her, and he didn’t seek to change a single thing.

“I want to stay here, Ben. With you and Chelsea. No looking back. No regrets. I promise.”

“Well,” he said with a smile, “then I suppose we have only one last thing to do.”

“Oh?” she asked.

“Ask Mrs. Henry for permission to marry,” he joked.

## Epilogue

### V is for Vows, Wedding Vows

Tori's wedding day dawned bright and sunny with nary a cloud in the sky; the perfect beginning to her new life in the past with her handsome husband. Hayley and Erin stood behind her fighting over how Tori should wear her hair.

"Her hair looks lovely in a chignon," Erin insisted.

"Maybe so, but Ben likes it better down," Hayley replied.

"How the hell do you know that?" Erin asked.

"All men like women to wear their hair down," Hayley answered. "Makes them think about sex."

"Which is exactly why she should wear it up," Erin replied with a laugh. "God knows with those two, we'll never make it through the ceremony if she starts down the aisle with her hair loose around her shoulders."

Tori turned around to join the fray. "Good lord, you make Ben and me sound like a couple of rabbits."

"Well," Hayley added, "in the past few days here, I haven't noticed much restraint on either of your parts."

"Oh," Tori said, "well if that isn't the pot calling the kettle black!"

"Yes," Hayley taunted, "but I'm married."

"Right," Erin teased, "you are now, but last year when you and Jack were courting—",

"Never mind that," Hayley interrupted loudly. "It's Tori we are discussing at the moment."

"You hypocrite," Tori said, laughing at the absurdity of their argument. "Let's just agree that after this morning's ceremony, this argument is meaningless."

"Agreed," Hayley replied, picking up a brush and gesturing for her to sit in front of the mirror. Her friend ran it none-to-gently through her long blonde waves. "I can't believe we're all together again."

"Neither can I," Erin added, coming to stand beside Hayley. "Here," she said. "Give me that brush or you'll have it a tangled mess."

Hayley grinned at the truth behind her words. "Never had much practice brushing hair," she confessed. "God knows if I tried to put one through this curly mop, I'd never get it out again."

Tori smiled at the easy banter between them. The years apart hadn't changed their friendship a bit, except to perhaps strengthen it. At home, they'd been separated by hundreds of miles and months of not seeing each other. Now they would all live close enough for weekly visits. They would have the opportunity to raise their children together, to grow old together.

A knock at the door interrupted their conversation as the door opened to reveal Chelsea, dressed in a beautiful yellow dress.

"Oh, Chels," Tori exclaimed. "You look beautiful, sweetheart."

Chelsea ran across the room into her outstretched arms.

"Miss Henry says I can be in the wedding," Chelsea said, showing Tori the basket of flowers in her hands.

"Of course, you're going to be in the wedding. You're my flower girl, precious. Do you know what you are supposed to do?" she asked.

"Throw these petals down on the floor for you to walk on," Chelsea replied proudly.

"That's right," she said with a smile. "Chelsea," she asked, "are you sure you don't mind me marrying your new daddy?"

"You'll be my new mommy?" Chelsea asked.

"I will be anything you need me to be, Chels. Teacher, mother, friend. I will always be there for you. Do you know why?"

Chelsea shook her head.

"Because I love you very much," she replied.

"I love you, too," Chelsea whispered against her cheek before adding, "Mommy."

She kissed Chelsea's forehead softly, as Hayley and Erin wiped their eyes surreptitiously.

"There you are," came a boisterous voice from the doorway. All three women turned to see Mrs. Henry bustle into the room. "The wedding is about to begin, and we are missing our flowers, Miss Chelsea," she admonished.

"I'm coming," Chelsea replied, looking at her with such exasperated eyes that Tori had to stifle laughter at the sight. Yes, she thought, this child will be a definite handful when she gets older. She shuddered to think of how Ben would handle the beautiful, headstrong girl when she had her come-out.

"And you, too," Mrs. Henry added, pointing at her. "You best hurry up. The menfolk are all gathered around and you don't want to keep milord waiting."

"We are almost ready, Mrs. Henry," she replied, unwilling to anger her domineering housekeeper. "We won't be a minute."

Mrs. Henry and Chelsea left the room as Hayley turned to Tori. "That woman is amazing. I wish I had someone like her around to keep Jack in line."

"Yes, Hayley," she replied with a laugh, "but keep in mind, that she would keep you in line as well."

"Well, she might try," Hayley added.

"Come on," Erin said. "Mrs. Henry is right. It's time. You look beautiful, Tori."

"Perfect," Hayley added.

Tori turned to face her dearest friends in the world. "This is the happiest day of my life. I'm so glad you are both here to share it with me."

"Wouldn't miss it for the world," Hayley replied.

"Are you ready?" Erin asked.

"Absolutely," she replied.

"Then give me a minute to get in place," Erin said, as she rushed downstairs to her place at the piano. Erin was playing the wedding march for her as well as performing a song she'd written specifically for the wedding.

"Well," Hayley said looking at her friend. "Who would have thought that two years ago when we sat in this room wondering about Erin's disappearance we would end up here?"

She thought back to the night her friend referred to when the two of them were still together, yet terribly alone and grieving for the loss of Erin. Hayley had suffered a

nightmare, and Tori had fallen apart that night; their heartache was so great.

“We certainly were two lost souls that night,” she agreed.

“Looks like we found our way home,” Hayley added.

“Right back where we started,” she said, with a teary-eyed laugh.

“But always together,” Hayley added, grasping her hand in her own. “June girls until the end, no matter what the year is.”

“June girls until the end,” she agreed.

## **The End**

### **About the Author:**

Writing a book was number one on Mari Carr’s bucket list, and on her thirty-fourth birthday she set out to see that goal achieved. Now, years later, her computer is jammed full of stories—novels, novellas, short stories and dead-ends, and several of her books have been published.

High school librarian by day and mother of two busy teenagers, Mari Carr found time for writing by squeezing it into the hours between 3 a.m. and daybreak when her family is asleep and the house is quiet.

To learn more, visit her website at [www.maricarr.com](http://www.maricarr.com)

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