

 CHAPTER ONE

Bath, Somerset
January 1820

IT WAS THE sobbing that decided her.

The Honorable Verity Hatherleigh eased from her bed and stole across the room to the disconsolate girl whose snuffling and muffled weeping made sleep impossible. She touched her roommate on the arm. “Lucy, dear. What is wrong?”

The shrouded figure shifted, lowering the heavy blankets whose inability to stifle the sounds of sadness had perturbed Verity’s slumber. Clouded moonlight streamed pale from the window, framing a plain, round face made less lovely by red eyes and blotched cheeks. “It’s Papa. He . . . he’s—” Lady Lucinda Wainbridge gulped, her chin quivering, a sure sign more waterworks were in the offing.

“Now, Lucy, stop, take a deep breath”—Verity waited as the older girl complied—“and tell me what has happened.”

After another shaky breath, Lucinda exhaled noisily, then blew her nose with a honk reminiscent of a startled goose.

“If you don’t want Miss Pelling to check in here, you might want to do that more quietly.”

Lucy’s eyes flashed accusingly. “You weren’t here when I was telling the others.”

“No, because I was in Helena’s room, helping her with her French for tomorrow’s examination, as you well know.” Verity dashed back

to her bed and pulled on her padded dressing gown. These rooms, for all the exorbitant fees paid, were never heated properly. She returned, wrapping a woolen blanket around her shoulders. “Now, what happened to your father?” Had the Earl of Retford sickened? Her heart quickened. Had he died? Poor Lucinda . . .

Lucinda shook her head. “Nothing has happened to Papa. It’s what he will do.”

“Which is?”

“Remove me from Haverstock’s!”

This was a bad thing? “Why are you so certain he will?”

Lucinda wiped her eyes. “He’s bound to as soon as Haverstock sends him the letter she found from William.”

“She found it? I thought you had it well secured. Didn’t you place it under the floorboard as I suggested?”

“I was going to . . .”

Lucinda’s shoulders slumped, and she looked so miserable, Verity didn’t have the heart to scold her roommate’s folly. Dear foolish Lucy, with her silly infatuation for a squire’s son of whom her fastidious parents would never approve. Many had been the confidences Lucinda had whispered, ever since Verity had been forced to leave the room she had previously shared with Helena. Many a dull evening spent listening to Lucy prattle on about William’s inestimable qualities, whilst Verity strained to hear the telltale creaks in the hall that told of vigilant staff, waiting until the creaks had quite faded away before stealing across to the room which had fostered a friendship more dear than that of her family’s.

Helena Chisholm was the most loyal and encouraging person Verity had ever met, filled with a zest for life and mischief that rivaled Verity’s own. When Miss Haverstock had been informed about one of Verity’s previous secret visits to the headmistress’s study by the not-so-honorable Prudence Gaspard, Verity’s separation from Helena had been swift, painful, and irrevocable. Her punishment was to be bored by Lucinda’s ill-advised romance for the remaining weeks until their schooling was considered complete.

Not that Verity was against romantic attachments as such; more

that with such opposites involved, this particular attachment seemed a complete and utter waste of emotions, when anyone could see it was an attachment doomed to futility and failure. Her lips twitched. Although, judging from Lucinda's descriptions of her beau, he seemed as dull as she, so perhaps they were well-matched.

"This is not funny, Verity. What am I going to do? When Papa sees what we have been writing to one another, he'll have a fit, and threaten to marry me off to old Lord Winchester. I'd rather die than marry him!" Lucinda sniffed, as another tear tracked down her face.

"What did William write that is so concerning?" Normally Lucinda shared every phrase over and over until Verity could mouth along too, but lately she had been too busy helping some of the younger girls prepare for their upcoming examinations. "Surely it cannot be so bad."

The moonlight revealed a faint blush on Lucinda's cheeks. "It was most poetic. William was describing me, you see. He said I am beautiful." She smiled a wobbly smile.

"And if he loves you, then I suppose he should." Verity nodded her affirmation, while wondering at how men could be so blind. Lucinda, beautiful? Even at her best she could only be described as somewhat attractive. Verity knew herself to hold no pretensions to beauty—her hair was too black, her eyes too pale, her eyebrows too slanted, her chin too pointed, the whole effect considered to be odd-looking rather than attractive, or so her mother said. But it had always surprised her how men could see what they wanted to see, such as the men who loved her elder sisters and openly admired their golden beauty, most recently at last month's Boxing Day Ball during which Cecy's betrothal had been announced. In Verity's mind, Helena was more attractive, her smile even brighter than the red curls that adorned her head. "Titian-haired" their drawing master had once remarked.

Lucinda sighed, reclaiming Verity's attention. "I suppose he did get a little carried away." She smiled coyly, clearly inviting Verity to enquire further.

Verity stifled the yawn. "It's very late—"

"He said my lips are like a scarlet ribbon!"

MISLEADING MISS VERITY

Verity blinked. Well, that *was* poetic. And rather surprising for prosy William to have thought of such a thing.

“He wrote that my hair is like a flock of goats and my neck is like a tower—”

She bit her lip to stop a smile. Surely a lovesick fool could be the only one to believe squat Lucinda held any aspirations to towers.

“But I think the part Miss Haverstock took particular exception to—”

And she whispered something about deer and breasts.

“Lucinda!” The heat of embarrassment traveled from Verity’s cheeks to her toes. “I can fully understand why Miss Haverstock might take exception to these things.” She paused, uncomfortably aware just how much like her mother she had sounded. She gentled her tone. “I do not think your William has much sense if he is writing to you in such an ungentlemanly manner.”

“But he said it’s from the Bible!”

“Yes, but the Bible isn’t all true, is it?”

Lucinda stared at her. “How can you be Helena’s friend and think such things?”

Verity shrugged. While she and Helena held very different opinions on matters of faith, and had even engaged in several animated discussions resulting in an agreement to disagree, their contrasting views had never marred their friendship. But that was of no matter now, nor likely to ever be of any great importance. “Where William found such words is of little consequence. What matters is that Miss Haverstock knows and will doubtless write to your father immediately, and you can be assured William will forever be banished from your company.”

“But whatever will we do?”

Verity thought hard. “What gives you confidence she will act so soon?”

“She said she would write tonight! And she’s like you, she always keeps her word.” Lucinda’s face crumpled, reminding Verity of a dropped pink handkerchief.

“Do not fret.” She patted Lucinda on the shoulder. “I am sure that

your father will be none the wiser." She rose, shrugged off the blanket, and exchanged her pale dressing gown for something darker.

"But—"

"Go to sleep, Lucy. I will retrieve the note and ensure any letter to your father is not incriminating."

Lucinda sagged in relief. "Thank you."

"My pleasure."

Verity spoke the truth. Nothing gave her greater pleasure than righting wrongs and seeing justice prevail. And if it allowed another adventure with Helena, all the better.

She eased open the door, quickly glancing both ways. Nobody. She closed the door gently and stole past the next room, taking care to avoid the squeaking floorboard. Her lips flattened. Nothing squeaked louder in this school than Prudence, or Gasper, as she was widely known, the moniker saying much about her unfortunate propensity for sharing what news she could about others' misdemeanors. She hurried to the room a further two doors away and crept inside.

"Helena?" She tiptoed to the bed and gently shook her friend. "Helena, wake up."

"Verity?" Helena squinted, her voice soft to not disturb her slumbering roommate. "Whatever is the matter?"

"We need to get into Haverstock's study once more."

All vestiges of sleep drained from Helena's face as she abruptly sat up. "But why?"

Verity sighed. "Lucinda's young man wrote her a letter with most salacious content."

"Lucy? But that's ridiculous."

"Ridiculous it may be, but she fears she will be forced to marry some old man and never see William again."

Helena yawned, shifted the bedcovers, and pulled on a dark tartan-patterned dressing gown. "And you must play the knight in shining armor again."

Verity grinned. "I'm afraid I must."

"Then I suppose I must as well."

A minute later they were moving quietly down the staircase at the

end of the hall, not the grand central staircase, but the little one used by the maids—and sly teachers. Around them the house sighed and whispered, the building, almost as ancient as Aynsley Manor, settling into slumber. Soft snores emanated from Miss Pelling’s room. Verity exhaled. Haverstock’s didn’t need a watchdog, not when that terrier of a teacher was on the prowl.

Down the hall came a scurrying noise. Verity shivered. She hoped tonight would not bring a repeat encounter with a rodent. Rats, with their wormlike tails and bold black eyes gave her pause like nothing else. Not even Stephen Heathcote’s most absurd pranks had ever elicited so much fear.

But so far, so good.

They reached the heavy oak door to Miss Haverstock’s study. All was quiet, no light spilled from underneath, so Verity grasped the door handle and turned. It clicked and swung silently open. They hurried inside, closing the door as quickly and quietly as they’d opened it. Inside, wavering moonlight cast a ghostly sheen over the detritus-laden desk: papers stacked in untidy piles, wax-spattered stubs of candles, several vases of wilting flowers, whose smell of decay wrinkled Verity’s nose.

“Where do you think it might be?” Helena whispered.

Verity pointed to the *escritoire*. “Look for an envelope addressed to the Earl of Retford, and I’ll search for the letter from William the silly goose.”

Helena giggled softly then began pulling out drawers, rummaging through the compartments whilst Verity concentrated on finding the telltale blue paper William used for all his correspondence. She opened a tall cupboard where essential information was kept on students, past and present. She flicked through until she found Lucinda’s file, scanning the basics: parents, county of birth, social position, her father’s estimated income, a column on Lucinda’s academic achievements, which was sadly short. Truly, there seemed little of real value to be gained by reading such things, especially when it felt so intrusive. Exactly why Miss Haverstock felt it necessary to keep such precise information on her students was something of a

mystery, but time did not permit speculation now. She placed Lucinda's file back and picked up her own, scanning it quickly to see what had been added since last time.

"Helena, look!" she whispered. "Apparently you and I are ill-advised companions."

"What?" Helena shut the *escritoire* a little harder than necessary. "Show me that." She frowned, her bottom lip protruding as she read the file. "I have never understood why that woman despises you so much." Her finger jabbed the page. "She has three pages of notes about your misdemeanors, but not once has she mentioned your assisting of the junior girls. And look, there she lists your academic achievements, but no mention of your perfect marks in geography, French, nor anything about mathematics or the sciences. I don't understand her at all!"

"I believe the only science she values is that of the domestic variety, and that is something at which I will never excel."

"Not that you will ever need to, not with your income."

Verity inclined her head, acknowledging the truth of Helena's comment. Yet another reason why she valued her friend so highly; Helena did not possess one jot of jealousy. She took pleasure in Verity's good prospects as if they were her own.

"Come, we best find this letter if we are to return before dawn."

Helena yawned, as if the remark had reminded her of the late hour. "I have found nothing here. You?"

"No," Verity muttered. Where could it be? Unless she'd already posted the letter to the Earl, and included William's epistle as evidence. "She couldn't have posted it yet . . ."

"But it might be—"

"—ready to be posted!" Verity finished.

They tidied as best they could—but really, would Miss Haverstock even notice her desk had been picked over?—and moved to the small table near the front door, where a silver salver held the mail to be posted.

"*Voilà!*" Verity fished out an envelope addressed in perfect copperplate to the Earl of Retford. "Now we shall see."

MISLEADING MISS VERITY

They stole back to Miss Haverstock's room, closing the door and lighting a candle before carefully peeling open the paper. Inside, a second blue paper was folded neatly, the page of writing as primly precise as the penmanship lessons they'd been forced to endure under Miss Haverstock's tutelage.

Verity read it quickly, biting her lip as she read the familiar accusations.

"She is unbelievable!" Helena whispered. "How can she think you would have ever encouraged Lucinda to form such an attachment? I call it monstrous."

"I suppose it is easier to blame someone else rather than inform the earl he has a silly widgeon for a daughter."

"Yes, I imagine that must be so." Helena sighed. "But what will you do? You cannot let her tell such lies."

Verity smiled. "Of course not. But what truth do you wish the earl to know?"

Helena's eyes grew round. "Are you asking me to do what I think you are?"

"For the last time, I promise. You know there is nobody with a better hand than you."

"But what if I get caught?"

"We have not been caught so far. And don't you think that so many parents have been relieved to learn their daughters are thriving here at Haverstock's? Really, are there any parents who need to be told in long and glorious detail about their offspring's shortcomings?" Verity smiled wryly. "If they are anything like my mama, they would already be all too conscious of that."

Helena's brow furrowed. "I am sure your mama loves you."

"Perhaps. In her own special way." Verity finished mending the pen, then moved the quill and inkpot to Helena. "Now, write to the earl something that more correctly informs him as to who has been influencing his daughter."

Every tick of the wooden clock seemed to take an hour, so by that estimation almost a lifetime passed before Helena finished, and was completing the copied direction on the front. "But it must be sealed."

“And so it shall.”

Whilst Helena stuffed the original letter in her dressing gown, Verity eased open the bottom drawer, pulled out the stump of wax and held it near the sputtering flame until melted crimson dropped on the parchment. With a few swift thrusts of the knife she approximated the twisted S and H that constituted the Haverstock seal, before wiping the blade on the inner hem of her gown and returning quill, wax, and ink to their rightful place.

Something clattered outside.

Verity blew out the candle, heart thumping as steps creaked near the door. She pulled Helena down and they crouched, two rabbits burrowing in the pocket of space beneath the desk.

“Is someone here?”

Verity held her breath. Miss Pelling! She was a bull terrier, persistent until she found her prey. She heard a sniff, then another. Could she smell the candle? Oh no! She placed her fingers on the still-hot wick, wincing at the burn.

The door thudded as it opened wide, hitting a crowded bookshelf behind. Beside her, Verity could feel Helena squirm. They silently shifted deeper into the leg space beneath the desk, pulling their dark gowns to cover every area of pale skin.

A sudden urge to giggle tickled Verity’s chest. Whatever could they say to get out of this predicament? It was more than a little absurd, the two of them, cramped, crowded, craning their necks as they awaited their fate. Not for the first time she counted it fortunate Helena was not that much more rounded than she. Slenderness might not be to men’s taste, so Mama often intoned, but it had its advantages.

Verity peered over her shoulder as the lower part of a white nightgown appeared. Her pulse thundered in her ears. Beside her she could feel Helena shaking. Was it restrained laughter or fear? Remorse bubbled up within. Tonight’s episode was all Verity’s doing. She did not fear punishment for herself, but Helena’s attendance at Haverstock’s was entirely due to her wealthy godmother’s goodwill. If she should be expelled Verity could never forgive herself. She wondered for the first time exactly how one should pray.

MISLEADING MISS VERITY

“Little better than a pigsty,” Miss Pelling muttered.

That desire to laugh swelled again. Long had she suspected Miss Haverstock’s deputy as harboring such feelings, fostered by the flash of impatience Miss Pelling had exhibited on more than one occasion, but to hear it from her own lips . . .

The gown moved away. Verity exhaled silently. Then a crackling sound was followed by Miss Pelling’s face!

Verity shut her eyes, waiting for the retribution, waiting for the most tremendous scold of her life, waiting—

“Drat these eyes! I cannot see a thing!”

Verity cracked open an eye and stifled a gasp. One bony hand was stretched toward her, was almost touching her shoulder! She shifted fractionally, squashing poor Helena even more in the process, until the hand withdrew, to be followed by a hard slap on the desktop, which reverberated in Verity’s ears.

“I’ll be back as soon as I have my pince-nez, my dear.” And the scurry of feet suggested it would not be long.

After a few seconds of awkward maneuvering, Verity and Helena escaped from their hidey-hole. Verity snatched the letter from Helena’s grasp. “I’ll replace it while you go up the far stairs.”

“But—”

“Go!”

With a quick grin Helena melted into the dark hall, while Verity stuffed William’s letter in the bodice of her nightgown, and rounded the corner to the front door. She crouched behind the small table, replacing the rewritten letter with the others to be posted on the morrow. Her heart raced as she waited until she saw the white of Miss Pelling’s nightgown return to the study. Quick as a flash she sped to the main stairs, slipping through the shadows, being careful to avoid the creaking steps as she neared the top.

“You there! Stop!”

Something like terror bade wings to her feet, but she forced herself to halt. Verity Hatherleigh was no coward. Neither did she want to run the risk of Helena being discovered. She turned and met Miss Pelling’s angry glare.

Her face seemed pinched, all except for her nostrils, which appeared twice as large as normal. "I knew it was you! What have you got to say for yourself, young lady?"

"I am very sorry your sleep was disturbed?"

An angry hiss suggested her attempt at humor had fallen sadly flat. "Were you or were you not in Miss Haverstock's study?"

"I was."

"Yet you did not speak up when I asked you to! Why?"

"I did not want to get into trouble, Miss Pelling."

"A likely story."

"It is the truth."

A loud sniff. The pale eyes narrowed. "And can you tell me why you felt it necessary to be there?"

"She had something I needed."

"At this hour of the night?"

"She was going to dispose of it tomorrow morning."

"And this item is . . . ?" Thin brows rose.

"A letter."

"Have you got it in your possession?"

Verity sighed inwardly and withdrew the blue paper from her nightgown. Miss Pelling snatched it and whipped it open, her eyes widening as she read the brief missive from William.

Verity's thoughts ran quickly. Did Miss Pelling think it was addressed to Verity? She might well assume such a thing, for he never wrote Lucinda's name, save on the direction. Of course, if Miss Pelling turned the paper over she would realize, but if Verity pretended . . .

"Can you tell me who this William is?"

"He . . . he is a neighbor, Miss Pelling." Lucinda's neighbor, but so far she wasn't actually lying.

"And can you tell me why he finds it necessary to write in such *lurid* detail?"

"No, miss. I can only assume he is religious. It is a description from the Bible," she added helpfully.

"I know very well where it is from!" Miss Pelling drew in a deep breath. "Can you tell me why you stole it?"

MISLEADING MISS VERITY

“Is it stealing to retrieve your own possessions?” A philosophical argument, so not technically a lie. “I rather think it stealing for it to have been taken from my room.”

“Do not—!”

“But you asked why I retrieved it.” Verity gave a deep sigh. “You see, I do not want to lose his words as I have never had anyone express such admiration to me.”

Which was true. It was also true that she had not met any man from whom she wanted to hear such words. Not that she wanted to be described in *quite* the same way as Lucinda preferred. But still, it would be nice if one day a gentleman could think her as alluring as a heroine in Miss Austen’s work, and express similar thoughts to her. She bit her lip. Was such a thing possible? “Miss Pelling, wouldn’t you like to see the words penned from your *paramour*?”

The older woman rubbed her forehead and glanced away.

Verity took a step forward. “My father would not like to be the recipient of this letter. He’s not religious, you understand, and I do not imagine he should like to be burdened with such things.”

“You do not, do you?”

“No. I am so terribly sorry to appear to be so underhanded—”

“Or so sorry to have been caught?”

That, too. “But I really thought it best for everyone if William’s letter was not included in any correspondence to one’s father.” Verity put on her most pleading face. “Please, Miss Pelling, please tell me you understand?”

The teacher squinted, studying her as though Verity were an unpleasant specimen in a museum. “And the letter to your father?”

“Is undisturbed.” An unwritten letter to her own papa could not be disturbed, could it?

“I agree that the, er, contents are not appropriate for a young girl to receive”—Verity held her breath—“but I can also understand your reasoning in removing unnecessary pain from your parents.”

Verity nodded. “I am sure Miss Haverstock has written a full account of my misdemeanors. Anything further might result in my immediate removal from this place.”

And such an event would likely result in the removal of the Viscount Aynsley's sizeable financial support, thus possibly affecting Miss Pelling's future at the Seminary, too.

"I will need to mention this to Miss Haverstock—"

"Oh, but do you think that prudent? I am sorry to say she often does not seem to make the wisest of decisions."

"Neither do you, it would appear," replied Miss Pelling tartly.

"Of course." Verity hung her head. "I have done all number of unwise things, but you do understand there has never been any malicious intent. Please, Miss Pelling, do not mention this to Miss Haverstock, as I fear she will insist on mailing William's letter, and I am sure that will not serve anyone's interests." Not Lucinda's interests, to be sure, and after tonight's little charade, definitely not Verity's, either.

Miss Pelling sighed. "Very well. I will not mention it to her."

"Oh, thank you, Miss Pelling!"

"And you may keep your letter, but I must insist you tell your young man to never write to you at this address again."

"Of course, Miss Pelling! I will ensure he never does." Verity would throttle Lucinda should he do so.

"Now go straight to bed, and catch whatever sleep you can before dawn arrives. And I will need to cancel your privileges for the next month, and shall expect you to attend to the juniors for another two weeks as punishment for such shameless behavior."

"Of course, Miss Pelling. Thank you, Miss Pelling."

Helping the younger girls was no great trial, as she suspected Miss Pelling knew.

She curtsied and ran up the stairs, quickly checked that Helena had made it back safely, then headed to her room, where Lucinda snored in blissful oblivion. After placing William's letter underneath the loose floorboard she'd suggested weeks ago, Verity stripped off her cloak, climbed into bed, dropped against the pillows, and closed her eyes.

"Verity? Is that you?"

A wave of tiredness refused her eyelids from opening. "Yes, Lucy." She yawned. "And yes, I have your letter."

“Good.”

“Good night, Lucy.”

“G’night, Verity. Oh, and thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Verity smiled in the darkness, pulled her blankets up to her chin, and allowed the tension of the evening to slowly ebb away. Her mind drifted, wondering what the enamored William looked like, and how he could think of plain, plump Lucinda in such exalted terms. Truly the heart was a mysterious thing. She rolled to her side as her earlier thoughts resurfaced. Would she ever meet a man who caused her heart to flutter faster? Did he even exist, or was she doomed, like poor Miss Haverstock and Miss Pelling, to don the cap of spinsterhood? Her lips flattened. Somehow she didn’t think Mama would permit such a thing, even if her dowry were not a very respectable fifty thousand, sure to make her one of the upcoming season’s most eligible young ladies.

No, she sighed internally. She would probably marry. But would her future husband’s feelings be that of ardor or mere friendly esteem? Her sisters had both found love; was that possible for her, too? And if he were someone for whom she held tender feelings, what title would he hold? For, to be sure, Papa, and especially Mama, would never allow Verity to be so unevenly yoked. She’d sensed her mother’s disappointment that her sisters had settled for mere second sons, gentlemen who were unlikely to attain the high titles their brothers held. Not that she had any desire to be a marchioness or countess. Such things had never held appeal. No, other things mattered far more. Would he share her fascination for other lands? Would he enjoy the outdoors and riding? What would he look like? Where did he live? What was he doing now?

The questions continued to prod and tease, ideas swirling and shifting, until finally exhaustion dragged her into oblivion, and she lay dreaming of faraway castles and a starlit sea.



Sydney Town, New South Wales

“Stop! Thief!”

Anthony Jardine ran after the weedy youth, whose skill at dodging pedestrians and carts alike suggested this was not the first time he had fled his crime. Around him, the sound of Irish and English accents filled his ears, while January sunshine beat down as mercilessly as whips upon a convict’s back, sending clouds of dust into his nose. Yet he could not give up. Newly widowed Mrs. Hetherington could scarce afford to lose her purse. He sped past a wagon piled high with skins (calf, sheep, kangaroo—the stench was appalling), then continued the chase, along George Street, following the urchin around the corner into Brown Bear Lane, whereupon he disappeared into the darkness of The Romping Horse.

His nose wrinkled as he pushed past the sweat-drenched mass of swarthy-faced laborers, of whom he suspected not a few were recently emancipated, judging from their ragged clothes and foul language.

“Has anyone seen a young lad?”

There was a jeering sound. “Ye should be ashamed of yerself, reverend!”

Anthony fought the urge to tug at his clerical collar and raised his voice. “He has stolen from a widow—”

“Cor, it’s a widder now!” A woman cackled. “He gets around, this one does, worse than a bull in a paddock full of—”

“Please! Can anyone help me?”

A woman—she was hardly a lady—of indeterminate age and hair color pushed her ample bosom into his side and smiled up at him, revealing stained teeth. “I can help yer, luv.”

The inn filled with raucous laughter. “Millie helps anyone for a few bob a tumble!”

Anthony’s cheeks burned. “Ma’am, please, have you seen the lad?”

“Listen to him speak so fancy!” She fluttered a hand in imitation of a fan. “And so handsome, though I’ve never been over fond of red hair, meself.”

Clearly no help was to be found here. “Excuse me.” He inclined

his head and shoved through the stench of smoke, cheap whiskey, and lower values. A tattered blue coat caught his eye. He maneuvered around a giant with bullock-wide shoulders and followed the urchin. The hall led past a few closed rooms—whose occupants he had no wish to disturb—stepping down to a makeshift kitchen before a propped-open door gave abrupt exit onto a small courtyard. The boy hurried to a beefy-faced man and handed him the pink purse Anthony had seen him lift from poor Clara Hetherington back on William Street.

“You there! Stop!” He stepped forward. “That money does not belong to you.”

The large man looked him up and down. “I be fancyin’ it don’t belong to you, neither.”

“A lady of my acquaintance—”

“Of yer acquaintance, eh?” The red-faced man grinned at a couple of shadows that had detached themselves from the brick-lined walls and were moving in to listen.

“From my congregation,” Anthony said loudly. Technically, it wasn’t his congregation—he was only the assistant curate after all—but he didn’t think these people would care about the niceties of ecclesiastical management. He held out his hand. “Now, if you please?”

The shadows moved closer to the beefy man, their features wizened but eyes sharp, while the boy looked on from behind his protector’s large frame.

The large man grinned unpleasantly. “And wot if I don’t please?” He slipped the coins into his coat. The courtyard chilled, the sun having disappeared.

“Then . . . I shall have to report you both to the authorities.”

“And how’s yer gonna do that?”

Anthony glanced over his shoulder. The doorway was filled with spectators, their mouths curling as he imagined a wake of buzzards might regard a rabbit. His stomach clenched. Exactly what had they gathered to see?

“Ye may be a parson, but ye won’t find much love ’ere. Yer a greedy lot, preyin’ on the weak an’ gullible.”

Indignation dissipated, replaced by unfurling compassion—to not care about God or want to know His love? “I am sorry you feel that way.”

The man shrugged. “It’s nowt to me.”

Anthony’s oft-treacherous sense of humor begged his attention. How many times had his superiors decried the crass and difficult convicts as being “nowts”?

“Do ye be laughin’ at me?” The beefy man frowned and turned to his henchmen. “I do be thinkin’ he is laughin’ at me.”

Anthony stiffened as they nodded and murmured agreement. “Sir, I dinnae—”

“Oho, sir is it now?” He stepped forward aggressively. “Y’know what I do with them that laugh at me?”

“I was not laughing at you.”

“But I thinks you was.” The space between them shrank into nothing as the man’s spit-flecked mouth drew closer. “And roight now, it don’t matter wot anyone thinks but me.”

Anthony swallowed a retort as his predicament grew in stature. Would it be cowardly to run or simply the wisest course of action? His early morning reading of the exhortation to be as bold as a lion suddenly seemed as far-fetched as the sailor stories he’d heard of fish that flew. He gritted his teeth. *Lord, give me courage!*

“I see ye might be a fool but a bold one for all that.”

Anthony exhaled. Perhaps the man might be won over to reason, after all—

Crack!

Pain splintered through his cheek, piercing through to his brain as the beefy man lowered his fist. “That be for lyin’ ’bout my Freddie, ’ere.”

“But—”

Ooof!

Anthony doubled over, sucking in air as agony ricocheted through his midsection.

“And that be for being a God-botherer.” The man spat and swore loudly. “We don’t need none of your sort ’ere.”

MISLEADING MISS VERITY

Anthony groaned.

“Did I asks ye to speak? Did I?” The man’s eyes held a reddish glow, like an enraged boar, his mouth pulled out in an expression more snarl than smile. “Let ’im ’ave it, Jim.”

At once a rain of blows fell on his back and legs. Anthony tried to defend himself, but memories of wrestling with his cousin seemed so far away, and his feeble attempts availed nothing. A thump on his skull sent him to his knees, a kick to his lower back left him gasping amidst the dirt and slurry.

He wrenched open his eyes to see dung-covered boots inches from his nose. Sour whisky fumes breathed in his face as the man bent down. “Don’t ever be letting me see your ugly mug again.”

Anthony lay prostrate on the dirt, unable to move, his mind slipping between awareness and dark, conscious only of dust swirling in the cold breeze and pain so immense he could almost understand those who begged to be released from this mortal coil.

His eyes closed as the first tears from heaven fell from the sky.