

As I sat there, facing Mr. Hawthorne in the carriage, staring out the side carriage windows, I knew I shouldn't have come. Why had I set myself up to walk alongside him for a stroll through the park? What was wrong with me?

I liked him more than anyone I'd ever met before, that was what was wrong with me. And there I was practically inviting him to take another chance.

And I shouldn't have wanted him to. I didn't know if I'd be able to resist giving in to him if he reverted to how very amiable he'd been the first time we'd met at Brittle Brattle Books.

On our ride to drop Sylvie off at her friend's house, while Vance and Mr. Hawthorne spoke of horses and made plans to go riding together sometime, Sylvie scooted closer to me on the bench and whispered in my ear, "Mabel told me what you overheard between Mr. Hawthorne and his friend at his house. So I think I'd better give you another lesson—"

"Really, Sylvie, I don't need any more lessons," I whispered back, though what I'd said didn't mean anything to anyone. "I've decided against everything I thought I needed help with."

"You need the lesson even more, then."

"All right. What is it?"

"Let Mr. Hawthorne court you." She made sure to cup her hand over my ear, which caught Mr. Hawthorne's attention. His gray-blue eyes met mine across the space of the carriage, even as he was in the middle of saying something to Violet.

My heart skipped as Mr. Hawthorne's ever-so-slight smirk kicked up at one side, and I drew in a quick breath.

"That sounds more like a demand than a lesson," I uttered back to Sylvie.

"And a marvelous one, if I might say so. Just imagine."

I didn't need her help imagining. Wondering what it would be like to allow Mr. Hawthorne his suit was already something I continually fought against on my own without her help in bringing up the idea. Especially when he continued to glance at me during our carriage ride throughout town.

It didn't take long to get to the park after dropping Sylvie off at her friend's house. When the carriage stopped on the east side of Riverway Park, Vance helped Violet out first. Then Mr. Hawthorne climbed out to help me. As Vance and Violet started down the path, Mr. Hawthorne offered me his arm.

I placed my hand upon his forearm until my fingers curled into the bend of his elbow. Goodness, I'd had no idea he was so solid.

I sucked in my breath, unable to refrain from thinking back to when I'd watched him in his home. How differently I'd thought of him then, how hopeful I'd been, and how thrilling it had been to study him with awestruck wonder for those few minutes before overhearing his conversation with Officer Underwood that had changed everything.

Mr. Hawthorne and I stepped down the path in silence, and I wondered again if the walk wasn't merely a terrible idea, but rather the most horrendous idea ever.

We didn't go far before he guided us off the path toward a stone bridge that went right over another path that Vance and Violet had taken. They'd already been well on their way to losing us, especially now that we'd stopped.

Trees surrounded us all along the hills that sloped up to each end of the bridge where it met the bridle path, and the green canopy of leaves overhead provided much-

needed shade. The bridge he'd chosen to take me looked quite peculiar, as if it were supposed to be built over a river or canal, but instead, a dirt path went under it.

Mr. Hawthorne guided me toward the wall of the bridge and I let go of his arm. He took off his hat, holding it in his hand. "Look, I wanted to apologize for what happened when you were visiting my sister."

I didn't give him an answer, for I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to say anything. And why did he want to apologize to me? I'd been the one in the wrong.

Mr. Hawthorne smirked, then looked over his shoulder to be sure no one was near enough to hear. "I don't want you to think I blame you for being in my house..." he leaned in and continued with a whisper, "for being found in my bedchamber."

I bit my lip, tried to control my breathing, and couldn't say a thing.

"I know how May—Mabel is. She's got something of a fearless spirit, and there's no stopping her once she gets something in her head."

Having failed to answer him still, he walked me over to where a wooden door with an iron lock built was into the stone wall of the bridge, as if there were a room inside. Beside this door, banked against the hill sloping up the bridle path, stood a short stone wall just the correct height to be considered a bench. The small, discreet area created something of a private alcove.

He set his hat upon the stone bench. "I also wanted to speak with you further about the discussion you had the misfortune of overhearing."

At this subject, I was no longer able to remain silent, and turned to face him. "But I'm glad I did have the *misfortune* of hearing it, Mr. Hawthorne. It has saved me a great deal of heartache."

He looked at me long and hard at this. "Is that so?"

Too late, I realized I'd let him know a bit too much of my conflicted feelings regarding him. But then again, he likely already knew from how obviously attracted I'd behaved at the bookshop, and how differently I'd been since the day at his house. What I'd said had probably only confirmed his strong suspicions.

In an attempt to gain better control of where the conversation was headed, I turned about, paced a bit, and fiddled with the strings of my reticule. Then I sat upon the half-hidden bench abutted to the wall of the bridge, next to his top hat. "Father told me you left your previous position at his bank without a word. Is that true?"

"So you've been speaking about me to your father?" he asked, evading my question.

"Simply trying to figure out the mystery you've presented."

"Ah, a mystery. How thrilling for you."

Looking apprehensively to Mr. Hawthorne, I found him leaning against a tree, staring at me.

I couldn't help it as my gaze traveled the length of him, from his tousled brown hair, to the breadth of his shoulders, down his long, muscular legs to his fine leather shoes.

Yes, what a distractingly handsome mystery he made.

"I never knew I was so intriguing... but I'm immensely glad your thoughts of me have—"

"Not intriguing," I promptly interrupted. "Secretive. There's a difference."

"I haven't been secretive with you." His leveled gaze focused entirely on me. "You

know exactly what I think of you.”

“Oh yes, let me remember,” I stated lightly. “You said something about me being difficult to forget. Perhaps a comment about my looks from back when I’d just come out...”

“I may have commented on your appearance years ago, but the same would be true now. You were, and *are* very beautiful. Especially when you’re being inquisitive,” Mr. Hawthorne said, and then he quickly pushed off the tree and raked his fingers through his hair. “May I have the chance to explain what you heard while you were eavesdropping on *my* private conversation?”

Scared of what he would actually say—and how hearing such things could possibly change my mind, make me want to give in—I said, “You needn’t bother. It won’t change—”

“Let me... anyway, for the benefit of you knowing a little more. And from how ill-informed Mabel is, and how she enjoys altering the truth a bit about how long and why we’ve been in Boston. I can imagine how confused you may be.”

“If you must, Mr. Hawthorne.” I spread out the creases of my shirt.

“It will make me feel better, and I think it might do the same for you.” Suddenly, he sat down beside me, took my hands in his, and turned his entire body to face me, grazing my skirts with his knee.

“Officer Philip Underwood is a friend of mine, and I do what I can in the situation I’ve been given to be a help to him.”

That this was the part of the conversation he wanted to discuss—and not the part about his interest in me—was quite relieving, and I allowed my hands to relax in his grip. This was a much better topic, and one that would do me good to hear again.

“Oh yes, your dangerous situations, like the one in which you were shot last summer. Do tell me more about what a daring life you lead.” I knew it was silly to say such things, all while letting him hold my hands.

He gently moved his hand around mine, cradling the back of my hands, curling his fingertips into my palms. Stunned, I simply stared down at our joined hands for a moment, watching as my fingers treacherously covered over his in response.

A brief, gentle smile stretched across his face at this, but when he went on, he was still quite serious. “What I do is not that dangerous, and it’s also not about me. Everything we do concerning this case is for the sake of others. Others who don’t even know they’re in danger, and wouldn’t know until it was too late.”

“What do you mean? Who are you talking about?”

“Girls like a Miss Philomena Lassiter, a Miss Sadie Martindale, and even your own sister-in-law, Violet. Among many others.”

“Violet?”

“You were traveling Europe last summer, of course.” He squeezed my hands, but then let go, turning to face the tree-lined path again. “Of course, you have no idea.”

“About what?”

“I’m not supposed to tell anyone anything about what I’m doing, and especially not speak of such things to young ladies, but you’ve given me no choice. Not if you’re going to hold what I’m doing against me without knowing the truth of the matter.” He refrained from turning to me again, and instead, he spoke to the trees. “But you need to promise me that you won’t tell anyone what I’m about to tell you.”

“I promise,” I sighed, meaning the words from the depths of my heart.

“There’s a good reason I’m working with the police. There are helpless young women being targeted by monsters of men who want to own them and use them for their own personal gain. Monsters like Violet’s brother—Ezra Hawthorne—my own cousin. And because he’s my cousin, and I’ve been in the position to help, I’ve been doing what I can to get close to him and his friends here in Boston. The police thought, since I was in the area and had a connection to him, I would be able to find out important information about his meetings, his friends, and his plans regarding tricking the young women to board the train north.”

“Why north? What does that mean?”

“Ezra has friends of his posing as respectable couples recruiting young women to work at places like your sister-in-law’s Everston or the grand hotels in Bangor, Bar Harbor, or Portland. But once kidnapped, there’s no one to help them get away from the real plans, which truly have nothing to do with respectable hotels.”

“Then what?” I swallowed. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

“They’re enslaved, forced to work in brothels.” His words were to the point, but I understood why he’d had to tell me like that, to make the severity of the situation clear.

“And that’s how... why you were shot last summer?”

“Saving those girls I mentioned—and many others—from being kidnapped and taken to the brothels servicing the many lumberjacks working the forests in the northern half of the state.”

“What ever happened to the girls you saved alongside Violet?”

“They work at the Trinity School for Girls—one in the kitchen, the other as an assistant to the school nurse... but there are so many others.” Mr. Hawthorne covered his left thigh with his hand and rubbed it subconsciously, and then looked at me with what almost looked like regret in his eyes... regret that he’d had to tell me so many disturbing, yet soul-stirring details concerning his cousin.

“Is that where you were shot? Your leg?”

“It is.”

“But... saving young women and getting shot at, isn’t that what you’re normally doing?”

“Hardly.”

I didn’t know what to think. Of course I was happy Violet and those other young women hadn’t been harmed, but why did *he* have to be so intricately involved?

He was the most remarkable man I’d ever met, and the thought of his safety, and then also the safety of the young women targeted by such vile men warred within me. I didn’t want to like this—admire this—about him.

But then, how could I not? His convictions regarding his work with the case were immovable... but would not my regard for him lessen if he were less concerned for them?

“Mrs. Everstone, I think I can understand your concern for me, but please, be rest assured, I know what I’m doing. It isn’t nearly as dangerous as your imagination leads you to believe.”

“You merely talk with and stay in contact with your cousin?”

“That’s about the extent of it.”

“Violet’s brother... Vance married her knowing about this awful brother of hers?”

“Yes, Vance saved her from her brother, in more ways than one.”

The idea that Mr. Hawthorne’s cousin, and Violet’s brother, could be such a wicked man was astonishing, but I couldn’t find it in me to judge her for having such a brother. And therefore, I found, his being Mr. Hawthorne’s cousin had no bearing either. Vance certainly hadn’t minded when he’d married Violet, and neither had his family, apparently. But I was fairly certain that Miss Abernathy wouldn’t have known, or she wouldn’t have been nearly as graciously accepting of Violet and her cousins, not if her views of someone like Mr. Chauncey Hawthorne III were so tainted merely by the despicable actions of his father.

“But you mentioned something about catching your cousin, a possibility of getting shot at again? There is still danger?”

“Once he’s caught, it will be over. They won’t want my help anymore. I am a mere civilian, after all.” He stood at this point and pressed his hands together, rubbing them vigorously and then wiping them on his thighs, which made me wonder, did this conversation make him nervous? But when he continued, he didn’t seem nervous, only strong and confident. He shook his head. “There are times I wish I didn’t have to involve myself, but then, who would? I feel honor bound to do what I can.” He darted his eyes down to me, as I still sat upon the bench staring up at him. “Is it not our Christian duty to help, even if our lives are put in danger?”

I couldn’t refute that, so I said, “Helpless girls...do you mean orphans?”

“Sometimes. Other times, they are runaways or young widows without connections. Or, like in Miss Lassiter and Miss Martindale’s cases, simply young woman who need a job, and think traveling north to work in a bustling resort sounds interesting. But yes, most times, they are destitute and looking for a way to survive.”

“Don’t events like the Charity Ball for the sake of raising money for the Children’s Aid Society of Boston help?”

He laughed under his breath as he paced before me. “In its own way.”

“You don’t support benefits for—?”

“I didn’t say that.” He gave me a harsh look. “It’s just that what I’m doing for the police is on a completely different level than that of the wealthy Bostonians opening their pocketbooks for the sake of keeping the orphan school funded. They cannot even be compared. They are two very different things.”

I hated—and adored—that everything he did was for a deeper cause, for the benefit of those lost and alone girls on the verge of being tricked into a life of helplessness. The same girls my parents and I had always taken pride in supporting through our charitable donations to the Children’s Aid Society of Boston, as well as the Boston Inland Mission Society, which housed the Trinity School for Girls. Then there was the Charity Ball. We’d always had a large role in putting those on every year, at least while we were in Boston. Not that he’d insinuated that they were useless events that didn’t help...but he was right. They were two totally different things. What he did, and what I did, for ultimately the same cause.

He *was* a hero, many times over, and sacrificial and dedicated...and I...I helped plan a community event and merely shared the task of securing the items that would be donated for the silent auction with my parents. Which was basically nothing in comparison.

“Are you planning to attend the ball?” I asked.

“I am not,” he answered as he again took his place against the nearest oak.

“Oh,” I answered, disappointed by the fact that he might not make it. I’d expected he would. I knew his sister had plans to be there.

“Tell me, do you have a specific role concerning the Charity Ball, Mrs. Everstone? I know your parents are on the arrangement committee and were doing their duty with reaching out to the community to collect items for the silent auction, but what do you do? Are you also involved?”

“I’m not part of the committee, but I have helped with making requests for items, and I also help with the organization and setup of the silent auction at the ball.”

“Then God is using you in the best way possible, for I’m certain no one is able to say no to anything you request of them.” His eyes gleamed as he looked down at me.

Although he’d made the sudden switch to being flirtatious, my thoughts wandered back to what he’d asked. My part in the whole scheme of things was fairly insignificant compared to what he was willing to do for the sake of the helpless. And suddenly I realized how he must have felt when faced with the option of helping to capture his cousin, or turning his back on the entire situation.

“It isn’t much, is it?”

“But you know more now. You can do more.”

Could I? I wasn’t so sure.

And was God using me?

I took a moment to think, realizing I had no idea how to answer this startling question.

Was it enough that I volunteered my time at charity balls and the like for the purpose of raising support and funding for organizations like the Children’s Aid Society? Suddenly, it didn’t seem like I did much of anything. I’d had acquaintances who had volunteered their time teaching the girls at the school once a week, but I’d always been too busy. And my mother had always seemed to think that our participating in the benefits was enough. But did she know what kinds of things were happening to these young girls, the ones who might not have the safety of the girls’ school anymore? What happened to the orphaned girls once they graduated and were forced to leave?

“Apart from the case,” he went on, “and apart from being shot last summer, there was something else my friend and I discussed that day you were listening behind my bedchamber door....”

I knew exactly what subject he wanted to discuss now. It was the only subject left, and I stood, ready to walk away, straight into the park to look for Vance and Violet. But I only got as far as standing before him, facing the tree he leaned so casually against. His blue gaze burned with unconcealed desire, and I couldn’t walk away.

Something inside held me back, something a little too much like *anticipation*.

I couldn’t just sit down again, not with him standing there looking at me like that. So I turned around and walked back toward the rounded door in the wall of the bridge, hoping that merely moving about would perhaps divert me, calm my nerves.

“Yes, Officer Underwood said something about ‘the likes of Cal Hawthorne,’” I said, grasping at any last straw of resistance I could. “What did he mean by that?”

“I will tell you more about that if you’d like.” He pushed off the tree and took a few steps in my direction. “But you need to know: that knowledge comes with a hefty price.”

I backed up a bit and found myself standing against the stone wall of the bridge. "I'm not *that* interested then," I lied.

"I didn't say *what* I wanted specifically."

"I can tell what you want, Mr. Hawthorne." My gaze willingly scanned his face as he continued to draw nearer, and I had to admit, if he meant to kiss me, I wasn't nearly as disagreeable to the notion as I should have been. In fact, I was shocked by how much merit the idea had. Suddenly, I was unable to keep my mind off the clear image of all of him pressed to all of me against that wall, hidden away in the leaf-and-stone alcove, right there in the middle of Riverway Park.

When he reached me, he stood about a foot away and placed his hand against the wall above my shoulder. "It would seem you have quite the knack for reading my intentions, Mrs. Everstone. But I can assure you, they are much more complicated than what you're thinking at the moment."

"Oh, you've been quite clear about those intentions from the beginning of our acquaintance, Mr. Hawthorne."

"I can tell you're scared." He leaned over me a bit, dropping his gaze to my lips. "I want you to trust me."

Did he mean to imply my fear concerning his willingness to put himself in danger for the sake of others, or how scared I was to give in to everything I couldn't help but feel for him? Or were the two matters so intricately involved that conquering my fear of the one could dissolve the power of the other?

"Put your guard down," he whispered. "Let me in."

His words hammered at my heart, and if it weren't for everything we'd just discussed at length, I would have gladly done what he asked. If only he weren't involved in such dangerous ventures, I could let myself fall in love with him. Quite easily.

"I can't," I said, gazing into his eyes, giving away entirely too much. But as I was already well aware, it wasn't a secret I liked him much more than I ought.

"That's a fair answer, I suppose." His thumb grazed my bottom lip. "You simply can't...right now. Which is understandable."

I ducked away from the wall and walked past the tree he'd been standing against earlier. Turning, when I felt I was a safe-enough distance from him and his ability to make me want to do highly inappropriate things, I found him still leaning with his hand against the wall, just as he'd been when I'd practically let him kiss me. Only now he looked over his shoulder, the look in his eyes inscrutable.

"I must thank you for clarifying the details about what you do for the police, Mr. Hawthorne." Though I didn't have the first clue what I was going to do with the information I'd been given. I already felt that what little defense I'd had at the beginning of the outing was now toppled to the ground merely by being near him and hearing everything he'd had to say.

Letting out a long breath, Mr. Hawthorne took his hand from the wall and gathered his hat from the bench. "Well, we'd better get back to our walk. Vance and Violet should be back soon."

"Yes, I suppose they will," I replied.

A little later, after we'd picked Sylvie up from her friend's house, I was let off at Faircourt before the carriage was taken farther down the street to Everthorne. Mr. Hawthorne took it upon himself to climb out before me and help me descend the small

metal steps.

He then escorted me to my parents' front door. "I hope you realize what a great pleasure it has been, my having the chance to see you again, Mrs. Everstone," he said, as my hand still rested on his arm.

"I...I..." What could I say? It hadn't all been a pleasure for me. Most of it had been an extremely difficult conversation, one that I knew he could have easily taken to a much different level...if only I'd been able to do as he asked. If I'd been able to let my guard down.

But I couldn't let myself like him.

No matter how much I did.

"I'm glad we had our conversation today," was all I ended up allowing.

He seemed to understand this was enough, for he made a bow and rang the bell. Once my parents' butler opened the massive carved-wood front door, Mr. Hawthorne took the steps down to the sidewalk. But instead of climbing back into the carriage, he tilted his hat to Vance and kept walking in the direction of Everwood.

Forcing myself to close the door as he walked away, I then ended up watching him from the front windows to see if he were indeed heading to Everwood. And he had been, for some reason.

Turning from the window and swishing the curtains back in place, I knew I shouldn't have cared. But then again, with Mr. Cal Hawthorne, doing what I should, and not doing what I shouldn't, was becoming something I couldn't quite master.

And I felt like kicking myself.

For one thing had become vividly clear during this outing to the park: No matter how I tried, there was something about him—about his every word to me—that made it impossible for me to keep the treacherous feelings he'd first induced at the bookshop tucked away. And despite what I knew of his involvement in the case concerning his rotten cousin, I cared entirely too much about Mr. Cal Hawthorne and what he thought of me.