

MASTERPIECE MARRIAGE

Quilts of Love Series

Gina Welborn

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a novel approach to faith
Nashville

Masterpiece Marriage

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1

May 9, 1891

In all his thirty-one years, Zenus Dane had never expected to see seven inches of rainfall during a six-hour period.

He trudged through the flooded floor of the textile mill he was able to inspect since the fire marshal had declared it safe. Still, the water reached the third metal clasp of his vulcanized rubber boots, a product he wished he had invented, but was thankful Charles Goodyear did. Although, at the moment, he felt more nauseated than thankful. Through the hole in the roof, the morning sun revealed the full extent of the destruction caused by Friday afternoon's deluge setting a record for one-day rainfall in Philadelphia.

April was the month for deluges. Not May.

His mouth sour over the damage, Zenus looked to his foreman at the other end of the mill. The man didn't have to speak for Zenus to know he shared his grim thoughts.

Zenus stopped at the loom farthest from the collapsed roof. A floral cotton print lay half-woven in the machine. Unlike the bolts of textiles in the storage room, the print was as dry as his gabardine suit. It was also water-stained on the bottom portion of the roll. As he had with the other machines, he examined the loom's frame, the crankshaft, tight-and-loose pulleys, picker stick, shuttle, and race plate. All damp. Oxidation here, too, on the bolts where the

floodwater reached its highest level. The looms hadn't even had a month of usage, and now rust?

As if his flooded warehouse of raw cotton bales wasn't a torturous enough loss.

A fitting *why God?* moment if there ever was one.

Zenus whipped his newsboy's cap off his head, ran his hands through his hair, then put the cap back on. Living by faith could be hazardous.

With a shake of his head, he released a breath.

No sense bemoaning fate. Count it all joy—it was the only contingency he had. And he *would* count it all joy that he'd fallen into this trial, because the testing of his faith was producing patience in him. He didn't consider himself an impatient man. His well-planned schedules allotted time for the unexpected and diversions; they resulted in maximum efficiency. Everything would work out, in time. Optimism: the first necessary ingredient for success. Don't lament the obstacles was the second. A few days were all he needed to solve this setback.

He could—no, he would—do it.

After a slap to the loom beam, Zenus stood.

"Cousin Zenus!"

He looked across the mill's vast floor to the entrance. His ten-year-old goddaughter Aimee stood with her father, waving frantically, while wearing her perpetual smile. The parts of her blue dress not stuck in her rubber boots grazed the surface of the floodwater.

He waved back with a silly expression, knowing it'd make her giggle.

And she did.

"Morning," his cousin Sean Gallagher called out, his voice echoing in the practically empty mill.

Sean said something to the fire marshal then touched Aimee's head. The fire marshal, nodding, motioned Sean to enter. As they did, he resumed pointing to the second-story rafters and speaking to three other firemen, likely, about the hole in the flat roof.

Sean gripped Aimee's hand. He slogged forward with the pants of his gray suit tucked inside his own pair of shin-high galoshes,

his arm and Aimee's a pendulum between them, their legs creating ripples in the water.

"I should've insisted you buy flood insurance," Sean said.

Zenus's lips twitched with amusement. Typical of Sean to cut to the *should've*. "Buying flood insurance wasn't logical. When was the last time this part of Philly flooded?"

Sean gave a yeah-you're-right shrug as he waded through the water.

"I'm sorry about your mill," Aimee said in almost a whisper.

"It'll be all right, sweetheart." He gave her a gentle smile. "Did Noah have flood insurance?"

She shook her head, her dark corkscrew curls swaying.

"Did he survive?"

She nodded.

"Then things will work out for me as well."

"Sometimes your optimism annoys me." Sean stopped with Aimee one loom from where Zenus was. He rubbed the back of his neck as he glanced about the mill, his blue eyes even lighter in the morning sun. "You'll need a new roof before production can resume. Insurance will cover it. Unfortunately, it won't cover damage caused by rising water."

Zenus motioned to the looms around the mill floor. "Is any of this fabric covered by insurance because the damage was caused by the collapsed roof brought on by an act of God, not by flooding?"

"Yes, but" —Sean removed folded papers from his suit coat's inner pocket—"let me see what your policy says."

Zenus blinked, stunned his cousin actually remembered to bring the policy. Details, Sean never forgot. Items—always. If the man ever married again, his wife would have to accept Sean would remember their anniversary, but wouldn't remember to get a gift. Or if he did remember to buy a gift, he would leave it at his law office or in the cab or at the café where he always had a coffee after leaving work.

Good man. Honorable. Just forgetful.

“What isn’t excluded,” Sean said, “is included, so it’s covered. But from what I can tell, none of the fabric on the looms looks damaged.”

Aimee ran her hands across the orange-and-brown plaid, one of his new textile designs. “It’s not wet.”

“Because it dried overnight.” Zenus trudged to the loom where Sean and Aimee were. He looked to his cousin. “Even if the textiles don’t have stains, I have to declare they were exposed to water and sell them at a drastic discount, which means no profit. I lost all the raw cotton bales in the warehouse, too.”

Sean repocketed the policy. “You’ll get insurance money to help you equal out. Why are you shaking your head?”

Zenus leaned back against the loom. “I have forty-seven bolts in the storage room”—Aimee touched his hand, and his fingers immediately curled around hers—“all damaged or partially damaged by the flooding.”

“How much fabric is it?”

“A hundred yards per bolt. Each bolt, fifty-four inches wide.”

Sean opened his mouth then paused, clearly thinking, running numbers through his head. “Were those bolts already paid for?”

“Almost all. They were scheduled for cutting and delivery this Monday. Forty-five days of weaving will go to fulfilling those orders.” Zenus loosened his tie. “Insurance money will go to repairing the roof and making my loan payment. I have enough left in savings to make payroll for a month.”

“Maybe this is God’s way of telling you to sell the business and do something different.”

Zenus nodded thoughtfully. Maybe this was God at work. He’d go to his grave believing God worked in mysterious ways. He also knew God generally did not cause a field of wheat to grow unless a farmer sowed said grain. Made no sense for God to tell him to expand his business if God wanted him to sell the business. The loan he took out to buy the looms—to “grow his flock”—could now cause him to lose everything.

He needed guidance. Heavenly guidance. Jesus-inspired guidance.

"Maybe," he answered.

Sean stared at him in shock. "Maybe?"

"I should consider all my options."

"How adventurous of you, Queen Victoria."

Sean's face shared how much he believed Zenus was capable of doing something different. It pricked. Court a mail-order bride. Take out a loan. What else did he need to do to prove to Sean he was open to change? And he *had* changed.

Zenus withdrew his pocket watch, holding it in his palm. "The problem is the MacKenzie brothers' offer was made before rain created a hole in my roof," he said calmly, restraining the twinges of irritation from growing into a roar. "Would be foolish to presume their offer stands as-is."

"Then take a lesser offer and be done with—"

"Boss," his foreman called from the exit doors, "I'll get some mill hands to start clean-up here and at the warehouse."

Zenus nodded and hollered back, "I'll lock up." He looked to Sean.

"No. I can't risk my employees losing their jobs. A quarter are unmarried women—" His gaze shifted to Aimee long enough for Sean to understand his silent *with children*.

Sean leaned against the loom, his shoulder slightly touching Zenus's. "All right, Coz, selling isn't an option then. Insurance will help you through a month, maybe two. Then what?"

"You could ask Great-Aunt Priscilla," Aimee cheerfully offered. "She likes helping people."

If his eyes rolled, Zenus would not admit to it. His aunt was the last person he'd go to for aid.

"Thank you for the suggestion, sweetheart." Zenus gave her hand a little squeeze. "But I can't ask her."

"Why not?" she asked.

"I'm not allowed back into her home."

"Until he apologizes," Sean tacked on.

Aimee's confused gaze shifted between them. "For?"

"Being me," Zenus answered.

Sean, to his credit, did not snicker.

Aimee looked at Zenus with some surprise. "I don't understand. What's wrong with you?"

Sean chuckled. "His sentiments exactly."

Zenus quirked a brow. "Flaws, I have, as everyone does, and I can admit—"

"Confession is good for the soul." An unusual edge tinged Sean's words. His gaze never wavered from Zenus, never flickered, never stopped hammering nails right there in the center of Zenus's chest. He couldn't know. Couldn't.

Zenus looked away. Not everything needed to be confessed.

"The problem is," he said to Aimee, "Aunt Priscilla sees flaws which do not exist. She is quite secure in her opinions, thus she and I are at an impasse."

"Impasse?"

"It means when neither person can win," Sean answered. "What about the girl from Boston you've proposed to? Maybe her family could loan—"

"No." Zenus's response sounded a little tight, which betrayed a lot of emotion to anyone who knew him well, and Sean did. Fact was being emotional about another failed courtship would not do, considering Zenus had not yet formed an attachment to the lady in question. "No," he repeated this time in a lackadaisical tone. "My courtship of Miss Boesch has reached a mutual conclusion."

"You proposed in your last letter." While Sean didn't add a *didn't* you? the implication was clear.

Zenus checked his pocket watch. He needed to get to the next item on today's agenda. "Yes," he answered, pocketing his watch again. He began the slow walk back through the mid-calf-deep flood water to the mill's entrance, Aimee clinging to his hand.

Aimee looked over her shoulder. "Papa, can we have ice cream for lunch?"

"Certainly. Your mother would have insisted," Sean said, the water sloshing against his boots as he caught up to them. "I'm confused. The time line doesn't make sense. You mailed the letter on Wednesday, three days ago. Mail doesn't travel overnight even to Boston."

Moments like this were when Zenus wished his cousin was less tenacious. He gave Sean a bored look. “She mailed her proposal acceptance before I mailed my proposal offer.”

Sean’s frown deepened with his continued confusion. He grabbed Zenus’s arm, halting him. “Explain.”

“The proposal she accepted was from a Wyoming rancher to be his mail-order bride.”

“Ouch.”

Ouch, indeed.

“Do you mean you aren’t getting married?” Aimee asked, brow furrowing.

Zenus shook his head.

“Are you sad?”

He ignored the interest on Sean’s face from Aimee’s innocent question. Irritation, not sadness, was his more prevailing emotion.

“Things always work for our good.” Believing that didn’t ease his sour mood. He resumed their trek, the water splashing and rippling, Aimee singing “Row, row, row your boat.”

Five months of courting Miss Boesch through letters. Five months of weekly correspondence. Five months of examining his schedule for the next year and finding the best date for a wedding and honeymoon to Niagara Falls so he wouldn’t miss . . .

- (1) Thursday Canoe Club meeting, or
- (2) Friday symphony attendance (both had free nights on the fifth Thursday and Friday of a month), or
- (3) Saturday hunting trip (off-season), and
- (4) he would have been home in time for Sunday morning worship.

Five months wasted. Why? Because even when he’d had hours—days even—to plan what to say in his letters, she chose another man over him. He was cursed to remain a bachelor. And someone with his qualities and assets shouldn’t remain a bachelor. Women should be fighting with each other to marry him. It was a logical and self-possessed—not vain—assessment.

His current financial quandary aside, he was well-to-do: owned his own business, house, two canoes, and a box at the opera house. Zenus also faithfully attended church, where he taught a Sunday school class for boys, and dutifully gave to charities. Yet, upon at least two occasions, he'd overheard women describe him as "a Gothic rogue, so aloof and cold." Even though he and Sean had the same dark-hair-with-blue-eyes coloring—not surprising considering their mothers had been identical twins—Sean always earned a sigh and a "he's so charming."

A man's appearance should not define him as a rogue.

Nor should his past forever delineate him as one.

He should count it joy God spared him from the wrong match with Miss Boesch because there was a better-suited woman for him. If only he could find a way to convince the lovely and vivacious Arel Dewey to see him for the charming, devoted man he truly was.

"Too bad you couldn't figure out a way to repurpose the damaged fabric," Sean said, breaking into Zenus's thoughts.

"What?"

His voice raised an octave. "I said it's too bad—"

"No, I heard you." Zenus stopped at the opened double-door entrance and met his cousin's gaze. Repurposing the fabric? He should have thought of it on his own. "I could cut up the fabric to sell as packaged scraps and then I could charge at least the minimum market price. Or . . ." Think. He closed his eyes and pinched the skin between his brows.

Aimee kissed the back of his other hand, then let go. Sloshing. Humming.

There had to be some way he could repurpose the fabric and get a better return.

"I should introduce you to Miss Corcoran," said Sean.

"Uh-huh," Zenus muttered.

What if he added something to the fabric? Like a bonus. The prime buyers of his textiles were women who purchased them at the mercantile who bought them from the distributor. He needed to become the distributor himself to increase his profits. He needed

something to entice his prime buyers to buy small pieces of fabric instead of yard sections.

"You aren't such a bad catch," Sean continued.

"Uh-huh."

With his eyes closed, Zenus could hear the fire marshal yelling to his men to leave. Could smell the dirt in the floodwater. Both distracted him from focusing. Think. Ignore Aimee's humming too. Find something to lure buyers. Who wants fabric even if it's water-stained? With a little washing, the fabric would look like new anyway. He needed a woman who would settle—no, who actually desired something less than perfect. A cast-off. Leftover.

" . . . my new transcriptionist."

Zenus opened his eyes, absently noted the pirouette Aimee performed with all the grace her mother used to have. "What?"

Sean was grinning. "I said I am going to introduce you to my new transcriptionist."

Aimee didn't stop pirouetting to say, "She's nice."

Zenus kept his grimace internal. The dozen of secretaries and transcriptionists Sean had hired in the five years since his wife's death all looked the same: lackluster black hair with unmemorable faces that had forgotten how to smile. "Does she look like your last one?"

"She's not married, knows how to read and write, and is still within childbearing age," Sean said in a most pitying tone, "and it makes her the prime matrimonial catch for you."

Aimee nodded. "And she's nice."

Zenus let out a low growl. "Having Aunt Priscilla fail to match-make me last Christmas with the niece of her quilting friend was humiliating enough. You were there. You saw how—Whoa! That's it." He held his hand up, stilling his cousin from speaking. "Wait. Quilters use every textile known to man. They love scraps." He snapped his fingers and pointed at Sean. "They're what I need."

Sean's brow furrowed. "A quilter?"

"Quilters. Plural."

"Trust me, you don't want more than one wife."

"I'm not talking for marriage, Sean. I'm talking about buying my textiles."

"Miss Corcoran doesn't look like the sewing type."

Aimee stopped pirouetting. "What's a sewing type?"

Sean scratched his dark bristled jawline, having clearly not taken time to shave this morning as Zenus had. He didn't appear to have any more of an idea of what the sewing type looked like any more than Zenus did, beyond being the female sort and domesticated.

Zenus stepped to the threshold. He patted the top of Aimee's head, murmured "Keep dancing, sweetheart," and then reached in his suit pocket for his set of keys. "Sean, I need you to hire a couple of guards today to watch over the mill during the night while I go arrange for the roof repair." He withdrew the keys, finding the one for the lock. "Offer a week's pay, although I doubt I'll need them so long. Hopefully when I return, the mill can resume operations."

"Return from where?"

"Belle Haven. I'm leaving early Monday morning. Return Wednesday."

"Why not leave today?" True to lawyer form, Sean focused on the least significant detail in what Zenus had said.

"Why doesn't matter," Zenus bit off.

"I think it does." A knowing smirk on his face—

With a growl under his breath, Zenus grabbed the left door's iron handle and drew it closed.

Sean let out a bark of laughter. "Church is tomorrow, and you don't want to lose out on another perfect attendance pin. Isn't eight enough?"

Zenus grit his teeth. "It's not about the pin." He drew the right door closed then threaded the chain through the handles. "As a Sunday School teacher, my responsibility is to model faithfulness to those boys."

"You have a point there."

For as many years as they'd known each other, Zenus couldn't consistently tell when his cousin was being sarcastic. It was disturbing.

Zenus knelt down and kissed Aimee's cheek. "See you tomorrow, sunshine."

Her curly hair and bubbly effervescence were all her mother's. Aimee should have been his daughter, not Sean's. Clara Reade should have been his wife, not Sean's.

She kissed him back. "I love you, Cousin Zenus."

"I love you too."

Sean held out his hand, and Aimee took it. "So you are actually going to your Aunt Priscilla for help?" was what he asked. Unstated was *Have you forgotten what she said to you last Christmas?* and *I'm glad I have no blood relation to her.*

Zenus stood and gripped the iron lock, cold against his palm. He hadn't forgotten. In fact, what Aunt Priscilla had said spurred him into deciding to stop playing life safe. The next day he'd filled out a loan application and begun the courtship of Miss Boesch, the niece of a deacon in his church. He'd been determined to disprove Aunt Priscilla's assessment of him and his apathetic (pathetic, according to her) approach to finding a wife. His first two risk-taking attempts both ended in setbacks, which he wouldn't bemoan. Every failure brought him one attempt closer to success.

Despite his optimism, Zenus did nothing more than nod his response to Sean. The thought of having to grovel before his aunt soured his mouth, churned his stomach, and warmed his cheeks with embarrassment. Her last lecture included "mule," "pig-headed," and "scaredy-cat." Nothing like being viewed by a woman as a barnyard animal.

But she was his best hope. No one knew quilts like Priscilla Dane Osbourne.

No quilter had national name recognition like her either.

To save his business, home, livelihood, and future, all he had to do was the impossible: Convince a fiercely protective quilter to give him one of her precious patterns. This was one wooing at which he could not—would not—fail.

2

Eastern Shore, Virginia

The following morning

Headmistress Whitacre warned that a lack of dedication to drawing class would one day lead to ruin.

Mary Varrs refolded the letter from her father, the fold of each crease earning a shake of her head. Left. Then over. Once more. Then, with precise care, she returned it to the envelope. Wax-sealed. Not gummed like practically everyone else in the world used. Only fools tossed away tradition for ease, or so her father believed. Her eyes burned. What was wrong with photographs? They captured accurate images. Botanical illustrations were nothing more than Gibson Girl versions of the truth. All she had worked for during the last two years—her future—now hinged on a set of botanical illustrations. Illustrations she had absolutely *no* ability to draw.

Two years. Wasted.

She twisted the edges of the envelope. It could have been mailed four months earlier after Director Preston—her father’s supervisor—had been hired. His waiting until this stage . . .

He couldn’t want her to fail. Could he?

Mary sniffed, rubbing the tip of her nose, blinking rapidly to rid the tears before anyone noticed. Before someone asked what was wrong. Before she broke.

She laid the envelope on the table then stared absently at the Bumblebee Café’s Sunday Breakfast Special: chicken spinach quiche

with a side of fresh fruit. The plate had been delivered while she read her father's latest correspondence and as a burnt smell from the kitchen spread into the eating area. All the relaxation brought from her hour-long walk disappeared. Two years of dedicated work and persistent hope.

Wasted. Wasted. Wasted.

The motorized ceiling fans turned the air about in the stuffy, open-windowed room. Yet perspiration beaded on her forehead like the condensation on her goblet of lemonade.

Her stomach growled. Mary blinked repeatedly to ensure every last tear was destroyed. Then she forked a piece of quiche and ate with precise monotony. One bite. Another. The usually well-prepared lunch here in this tiny hamlet in the Commonwealth of Virginia fed her stomach but did little to ease the ache in her soul. She swallowed the dry-as-her-straw-hat quiche before sipping the lemonade and almost spitting the watered-down beverage back in the goblet. Her list of the day's frustrations kept increasing.

- (1) Napoleon's gastronomic distress
- (2) A broken bulb in her germination light heater
- (3) A flat tire on her bicycle
- (4) This tasteless food
- (5) The letter from her father should have been received yesterday, but Postmaster Hamilton "miraculously" found it on the floor of the post office this morning when he returned for the spectacles he'd "accidentally" left there the night before. Of course, knowing she always took her meals at the café, he insisted on "personally" delivering the letter.
- (6) Herself for whining about all she had (justifiably) to whine about. This was not the person she wanted to be.

Mary rested her goblet on the table with a soft thud, earning her several curious glances. None of the dozen Belle Haven residents in the café needed cause to look her way. From the moment she arrived in town, she'd become their object of curiosity and obsession—and much disdain like a stunning heiress in her London debut. Few would

declare her a classical beauty. Too sun-lightened brown hair. Too sun-bronzed skin. Too deep-set eyes. Nor was she an heiress. Although, she was the granddaughter of a marquess, which counted for little in the academic field—the one world in which she desired success.

She sighed. Her heart hurt too much for her to care who heard the dejection in the sound.

Eleven days—all the time she had left to produce those illustrations. Her father would not give her another chance to prove her merit. Mother would not give her more time to be free. And Prince Ercole . . .

My darling Mary, I expect to see a great return on my investment.

For all he had done for her, she owed him.

She stabbed a melon wedge, then, upon second thought, laid her fork across her plate. Harvested too soon, the melon tasted like cucumber. She didn't dislike cucumber. It merely tasted better combined with, say, tomatoes in vinaigrette.

"Excuse m-m-me, M-M-Miss Varrs?" came the voice, deep for a woman.

Mary glanced up to see the café owner's gaze intent on her letter. More likely intent on the Blacksburg postmark.

Those in the café went silent.

Mary left the envelope where it was, because snatching it from view would look suspicious. "Yes, Mrs. Taylor?"

"Would you c-c-care for a slice of blackberry p-p-pie? Fresh baked."

"Your pies are commendable, but today I shall pass." Mary placed her napkin on the table, avoiding the gaze of all in the café. "Thank you for the offer." She reached inside a pocket in her Turkish trousers to retrieve the coins to pay for her meal.

Mrs. Taylor wiped her hands on the apron she wore around the skirt of her simple yet practical calico gown, typical of what she wore while working at the café. "M-m-my sister's grandson attends Virginia Agricultural and M-M-Mechanical College. First in the family."

Mary didn't even try to look shocked upon the news Mrs. Taylor knew someone who lived in Blacksburg. Three hours from now, during church, at least a dozen Belle Havenians would feel the need to inform her of a friend or family member who lived in Blacksburg.

And then they would wish to discuss who she knew who lived there. The more the Belle Havenians determined to see who could discover the most information, the more she determined to keep as much as possible private.

What did shock her was this shy woman who rarely spoke to anyone—and who was rarely spoken to—because of her stutter had begun a conversation. With her. And Mrs. Taylor seemed to want to continue it because she was genuinely proud of her great-nephew's achievement.

"Virginia A&M is an excellent school for those interested in the sciences," Mary responded, placing the coins next to her half-eaten meal.

"He's m-m-majoring in it. Science, that is. Chemistry."

"It's a fitting career path for men," Mr. Hamilton, the postmaster, called out from the table he shared with the mayor. "God created women to be a man's helpmate, not scientists."

Listen to me, Mary Varrs, women are not meant to be scientists.

Headmistress Whitacre's words a decade earlier during one of Mary's "improving" sessions lived in perpetuity in her mind. Someday, though, the evergreen belief espoused at Wellons & Whitacre School for Young Ladies in Brighton—and in Mr. Hamilton's words—would come to an end. Had to.

"Mrs. Taylor, I see a prosperous future for your sister's grandson." The moment the words left her mouth, Mary wanted to take them back. She sounded as pompous as the fortune-teller Edward had coaxed her into seeing in Paris. Life's decisions should not be left to the roll of the dice or turn of a tarot card.

Mrs. Taylor glanced from Mary to Mr. Hamilton then back to Mary. "I suppose," she said quietly, "a p-p-person would need to be dedicated to earn a science degree. Let alone two."

At this tidbit of gossip—a minor detail Mary had shared with Arel Dewey when they first met—Mary looked to the café owner. Really looked. No more eyes demurely fixed on the ground. Mrs. Taylor gazed at her with awe. It was as if she was saying, albeit silently, *I am impressed with your accomplishment, even if no one else is.*

Mary's eyes burned again. How she envied the Americans' ability to treat everyone, even those common, like a familiar friend. She wanted to. One simply did not forget all she'd been taught as easily as shedding a cloak. Not as if she hadn't tried. Those few attempts at allowing people into her life, into her heart, always resulted in a disaster.

She offered a timid smile in return. "Mrs. Taylor, I appreciate being able to take meals here. You are"—her voice tightened, weakened—"a blessing. Please save me a slice of pie for lunch."

Mrs. Taylor nodded.

Mary nodded too, because . . . well, nodding was an easier form of response than crying. Ugh. What had come over her? She had never been such an emotional person before today.

"Mrs. Taylor, by chance, do you draw? Sketch?"

She shook her head.

Mary looked about the room. Twelve sets of eyes watching her. Regardless if they heard, she would not pose the question to them. She claimed her letter from the tabletop and slid it between the wide triangular front collars of her brown tailored jacket. The blue poplin bloomers and double-breasted jacket, crafted for a cyclist, were ideal attire for tending to her garden. Not the ideal attire, though, for blending in.

Her chair scraped against the pine floor as she stood and turned to leave.

"Who do you receive weekly letters from?" Mayor Erstwhile asked, blocking Mary's path to the exit. His head tilted as he looked up at her. "I've heard of a group of socialists who meet in Blacksburg. Are you a spy for England? Darwinist like the Linwoods? Union worker?"

Mary winced at the hardness Americans gave to words ending in "r."

"Why are you *really* here?" he said with his dark eyes narrowed.

"Harold," Mrs. Taylor warned. She took a step closer to Mary. "M-M-Miss Varrs, you don't have to answer him."

Mr. Hamilton, sitting at the table next to Mary's, leaned back in his chair, crossed his legs, and slid his hand between the first and second button of his black suit coat. "I *wager* Miss Varrs has a *suitor* in Blacksburg." Like many Americans she'd come across in her trav-

els, the postmaster spoke slowly and tonally. “It *would* explain the twice-weekly correspondence *to* and *from* there.”

How gracious of him to share.

“I hope the news was good,” the woman who lived across the street from Mary practically yelled, as if Mary being English also meant she was deaf.

“Miss Varrs picked at her food, sister,” said the gray-haired woman at the table with her. “A lady does not do so if the news is good.”

Their eyes focused on Mary, expecting her to explain. As if they, save Mrs. Taylor, all believed with their collective mind power, they could pressure her into a confession. The only pressure Mary felt was tension between her temples.

The rotating *whuuump whuuump whuuump* of the overhead fans filled the awkward silence. Only two escape routes. Either past the stout and almost-a-foot-shorter Mr. Erstwhile. Or past a still-silent trio of ladies whose names she couldn’t remember, but whose disapproving and judgmental glares she knew too well. Despite the desire to slump and lower herself to a more womanly height, Mary held her shoulders level.

“I am neither socialist, unionist, Darwinist, nor spy,” she answered with a tug at her jacket’s buttoned-front. “Now, if you would excuse me, I must hurry home and ready for church.” She tipped her head in their direction. “Good day to you all.”

Mary eased past Mr. Erstwhile and quickly exited the café.

She stepped into the immediate stickiness from the May humidity. Thankfully, when she began her sunrise constitutional—a brisk walk instead of her usual bicycle ride—the temperature had been moderate. Her straw hat shielded her face from earning additional bronzing as she strolled down the sidewalk toward her spring home. Occasionally the heels of her black boots would hit an errant brick, jutting slightly where flooding from last summer’s hurricane damaged the sidewalk. Carriages, wagons, horse riders, pedestrians, and bicyclists added to the traffic and morning noise.

Any one of them could be an artist. But how could she go about asking without dozens claiming skill for the purpose of learning why she needed help?

Tomorrow she would post personal ads in the *Richmond Times* and the *Maryland Gazette*. God would bless her with an immediate answer. She chose to believe it. To be hopeful. To ignore the doubts.

Mary breathed in the clean, salty air, satisfied with her strategy. Sea breeze. Loblolly pines. Dogwoods in bloom. For all she didn't like about the snoops of Belle Haven, she loved how Virginia smelled.

As she passed a lamppost, the pair of seagulls resting on it jolted into flight. They raced across the street and landed on the lamppost besides a two-story brick building. Little Archie Blanchard paused in washing the window of his father's mercantile. He waved, and she returned the motion. For a child of ten, he was clever and restrained. Perhaps she would accept the Reverend Jaeger's invitation for her to attend Children's Hour at the library and to speak about botany. Every child and youth she had met, thus far, in Belle Haven behaved like Archie. The simple truth—and one quite contrary to the prevalent view that being a mother was a woman's highest calling—was that disliking children did not go hand-in-hand with not wishing to have any of one's own.

"Mary Varrs! Miss Mary Varrs!"

Mary stopped at the intersection. She glanced over her shoulder to see who called. "Splendid," she muttered under her breath.

Arel Dewey, the leading local suffragist, came running up the sidewalk. Six of her friends followed. Each wearing similar cotton blouses and pleated linen skirts. Each holding a wooden sign. For women who championed individual thought and equality, they came across as nothing more than pretty sheep to Miss Dewey's even-prettier shepherdess. Unless Miss Dewey elected to attend college, she doubted any would consider venturing into academia.

Mary turned to face them as they stopped in front of her, their gazes all direct and unshrinking. A bit unnerving. "Yes?"

Miss Dewey reached forward and shook Mary's hand. "Arel, Arel Dewey. It's so good to see you again, Mary Varrs." From their first meeting and subsequent ones, the gregarious younger woman began the conversation by introducing herself and shaking hands, which had not taken Mary long to learn she did with everyone who she didn't know well.

"Is there something I can help you with?" Mary asked, more so because it was polite than because she had the inclination.

Miss Dewey smiled. "In fact, there is."

Panic slid along with beads of perspiration down the sides of Mary's face. The day was too humid to have a conversation outside.

Yet the petite beauty named Miss Dewey didn't look to have a drop of sweat on her. "Tomorrow we are participating in a rally. We depart for Richmond on the four o'clock train today, and we wish for you to come along as our mentor and chaperone." Her fun-loving grin was as tightly fixed in place as her wheat-colored chignon. "It's vital we take a stand, as our forefathers did more than a hundred years ago against a deaf tyrant, and ensure our voice is heard. The women's revolution is at hand."

"We've made signs," a curly-haired lamb explained, holding hers up. Painted in red were the words *Marriage = Slavery*.

Oh, good gracious. Mary managed to keep her eyes from rolling.

"Since 1869," a lamb Mary thought was Postmaster Hamilton's daughter, said, "women in Wyoming have been allowed to vote, which has set a precedent." The brown-eyed girl looked to Miss Dewey, who nodded approvingly at words Mary remembered hearing in the first conversation she and Miss Dewey had had two months ago, an hour after Mary had arrived in Belle Haven.

Whatever could be said of Arel Dewey, she was the most welcoming person in town. And the most talkative. The fact she couldn't bake an edible pie made the list, too.

Mary looked from girl to girl whom she guessed to be between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two. All idealistic, adoring, hopeful, and a bit angry. *Papa, why is he so angry?* she'd once asked after her grandsire returned home after the year's first Parliament session. *Politics steals one's joy*, her father had interjected, and it must have been true because Lord Iddesdowne never denied it.

She focused on Miss Dewey, who still didn't look to have a drop of perspiration on her. "As someone who is not a citizen of this land, I am unqualified to be your political mentor. Nor do your parents know me well enough to approve me as your chaperone. Do know, however, I am honored you thought of me."

"But—" Miss Dewey's eyes, as dark and large as an owl's, shifted to Mary's Turkish trousers. "You are one of us."

Mary released a frustrated breath. The pertness of American girls—and their candor—never ceased to surprise her. "My clothing choice, Miss Dewey, is a matter of practicality, not political posturing. Now if you would excuse me, I need to ready for church."

She turned and hurried across the street.

"I'll see you there!" Miss Dewey called out.

Mary raised a hand high enough to acknowledge young lady's words.

While she understood, even applauded, the reasons for votes for women, she had too many of her own woes to manage.



The mile walk from the café never seemed so long.

Mary reached the front yard of the three-story, white-framed house, the lone residence on the street surrounded by an iron fence. The gingerbread trim, dark blue shutters, and abundant flora in the front and back of Linwood House reminded her of the Honeymoon Cottage on Grandsire's country estate. She hurried over the bricked path and up the steps to the covered porch. The Linwoods' piebald English bulldog, Napoleon, peeked between the curtains and the window and whined.

She moved to open the door, something ivory catching in her peripheral vision. She opened the door to let Napoleon out, then stepped to the wicker table. In the center sat an envelope atop a napkin-covered plate. The script on the envelope unrecognizable, yet elegant.

Miss Mary Varrs

"I see we had a visitor," she said as Napoleon attended to his business. She opened the flap and withdrew a card.

Dear Miss Varrs,

You are cordially invited to attend my annual Quilting Bee beginning this Monday and continuing each

weekday over the next two weeks. We will be working on a Bride's Quilt for Miss Lydia Puryear. Breakfast will be served promptly at eight, with quilting immediately following the meal. Lunch is potluck. Following the evening meal, the menfolk will join us for outdoor festivities. Music by the esteemed Lovell Brothers. I do hope you will come.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Priscilla Dane Osbourne

P.S. I do pray the elixir helped Napoleon.

A quilting bee? Needles, thread, fabric, and room full of talkative women?

Mary shuddered.

Yet, as the moments passed, Mrs. Osbourne's missive in her hand weighed as heavy as the letter from her father inside her jacket. Neither invited her to something enjoyable.

Heart chilled, she sat in one of the wicker chairs and looked to the Georgian-style house next door where Mrs. Osbourne lived. Napoleon curled at her feet. She had far greater issues to occupy her day than to stitch a quilt with those whose prime mission was to find out everything they could about "the strange and aloof Englishwoman." Namely, her.

Unless those ladies were more like Mrs. Taylor than like Mr. Hamilton and Mayor Erstwhile. Could she be sociable? Was it worth the risk?

Her gaze fell to the covered plate. Curiosity getting the best of her, she lifted the napkin. Shortbread biscuits with some type of yellowy glaze. Perhaps lemon.

"Look here, Napoleon," said Mary, "Mrs. Osbourne made us biscuits. What do you Americans call them?"

Napoleon whined.

"Oh yes, cookies. Alas, your persnickety bowels need none." From the looks of the finger-length biscuits—and the smell—they were freshly baked. The last time she had tried to bake biscuits, the

dough wouldn't adhere into a workable consistency until she added additional water. They'd tasted like sugary sawdust.

Her stomach growled. Considering how unappetizing her meal at the café had been, a midday snack couldn't harm anything. Besides, after the day she'd had so far, she needed a moment of bliss. She exchanged the card for a biscuit. As she took a bite, the almond-flavored crust crumbled onto her tongue and dissolved. She closed her eyes in delight.

"Mmmm." Perfect lemon buttery blissfulness.

Napoleon sat up and whined.

She looked at him. "No."

He whined again.

"Shall I give you more elixir?"

He flopped down, head resting on her boots.

"Smart boy." Mary grabbed another biscuit. She took a bite of the crisp shortbread and groaned again, licking the crumbs off her lips.

If she knew her way around a kitchen like the woman who made these biscuits, she would never visit a café for another meal. She popped the remaining bit in her mouth, brushed the crumbs off her hands and lap, and then took another biscuit from the plate. As she ate, her gaze settled on the card. She turned it over and stopped chewing. Brow furrowed. Head tilted.

Goosebumps raced from one arm to the next.

There, on the front, was an expertly sketched illustration of a dogwood branch in bloom. In the corner—the initials PDO.

"Priscilla Dane Osbourne drew this?"

She looked across the yard, mouth gaping, heartbeat pounding in her chest. The answer to her dilemma lived next door. But between now and the deadline to have her study submitted to Director Preston at the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station, the esteemed Widow Osbourne was hosting a quilting bee. The same bee to which she'd invited Mary. The woman had won numerous county, state, and world's fair ribbons with her quilts, *and* she didn't share her patterns with anyone—information Miss Arel Dewey provided during their first meeting. She wouldn't relinquish quilting and hostess duties to draw pictures.

Unless—

“Napoleon, do you think she would work a trade with me?” She looked down, but his eyes were closed.

Leaning back in her chair, Mary nibbled on another biscuit she didn’t need to eat but, heaven help her, they were so delicious. She had to think of something to offer to be enticing enough to sway Mrs. Osbourne away from quilting and into sketching. Even if she had exorbitant wealth to offer beyond the dwindling allowance set up by the prince, the railroad investor’s widow didn’t need more.

And Mary’s abysmal cooking skills were Arel Dewey level.

The singular worthwhile skills she had were gardening and canning, both part of her duties to the Linwoods this spring in exchange for living in their home—and for caring for their pampered *he never likes to leave home* dog. None of which Mrs. Osbourne needed. She could also fish and hunt (thanks to Prince Ercole) and maneuver a canoe through a swamp, the latter skill learned by necessity, not desire. Upon occasion, she made a tasty porridge, the only food she could cook well.

But . . . quilting?

She picked up the card and reread the invitation. The palpitations in her chest increased. In rhythm. In noise. Go. Go. Go. GO.

She tossed the card back onto the table. “I shan’t.”

There had to be another person in Virginia or Maryland who could draw botanical illustrations. Had. To. Be. To find someone else meant spending time searching. Spending time searching meant wasting time. Why waste any time when she knew a skilled artist lived next door? Who was also hosting a quilting bee. To which she’d invited Mary. Oh dear.

Go go go go gogogogogo.

She leaned forward. Elbows on knees, forehead against open palms. She breathed deep. Slow. Steady. To ease the anxiety in her pulse. In her spirit. In her mind. If she wanted to be a research assistant at the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station in Blacksburg, she needed to ask Mrs. Osbourne for help. Had to. Today. After church.

It was the best solution.

And the worst.

3

Later that morning

I made you your own rally sign.” Miss Dewey’s words were punctuated with a squeal reminiscent of a piglet’s first gleeful discovery of slop.

Arel Dewey slid into the padded mahogany pew as Mary opened the hymnal to the first song listed on the board. Most people were still finding seats or already seated and in deep conversations. Unlike anyone else in Belle Haven, Miss Dewey dared to share a pew with Mary. Her sheep always assembled with their parents. Today, their ninth Sunday service together, Miss Dewey sat so close their thighs touched. She had also uncharacteristically changed clothes. Next to Mary’s simple black-and-white-checkered dress, her yellow one with its pink and orange trim looked like a bouquet.

Speaking of flowers . . .

Miss Dewey’s new and cloying perfume cloaked Mary in a garden cloud she suspected would leave them both scented for hours. She sniffed. Lilac. With a touch of magnolia, heliotrope, and nectarine. Sweet and fruity. Like lemonade with berries. Not altogether unpleasant if doled out in moderation.

Moderation seemed not to be a virtue Arel Dewey espoused.

“It’s very—” Mary hesitated. Kind? Thoughtful? Imposing? Unsure of the least offensive yet most appropriate adjective, she settled on, “You didn’t have to.”

"Oh, but I did." Miss Dewey leaned in. Her heavily lashed brown eyes sparkled and widened, making them appear even more owlsh. "It's what friends do, one for the other." The heavens would open and the ocean beds would split to flood the earth again before it was possible for Miss Dewey's voice to hold any more delight.

Mary dropped the open hymnal into her lap. Her every muscle, tendon, joint, bone, and strand of hair tensed. Perhaps she exaggerated a bit on the latter, but—friends?

Acquaintances, yes.

Perhaps friendly acquaintances.

Being friends meant spending time together, having deep intimate conversations where one shared mistakes, dreams, fears, and desires, and it was *not* going to happen if Mary had any say in the matter. If she were to have a friend, and she would like a confidante when her life had settled down, she certainly wouldn't choose a happy-as-a-piglet one who was preternaturally disposed toward conversation.

Mary leaned back and looked past Miss Dewey to spy Mrs. Priscilla Dane Osbourne. Now there was someone with whom she needed to become friends, or at least friendly acquaintances. The dark-haired widow, elegant as ever in her blue walking suit, sat beside her housekeeper, Mrs. Binkley, who was clad in a dove gray gown with a white lace fichu, as elegant a scarf as Mary had seen. A cough broke free from Mrs. Binkley's chest. She opened her pocket-book and withdrew a handkerchief. She then slid what looked to be a butterscotch candy into her mouth.

"Mary, don't forget we're leaving on the four o'clock train."

She looked back to Miss Dewey and chose her words carefully, as to be as clear and direct—as American—as possible. "Spare no time waiting for me, for I shan't be your chaperone."

Miss Dewey's eyes rolled and head bobbed in a faux offended manner, her straw hat not shifting an inch on her braided wheat-gold chignon. "Oh, pishposh, of course you will," she said calmly. "You can sit with me and we can catch up on old times."

Mary blinked. They've been in each other's acquaintance for two months. Spoken upon no more than twenty-three occasions,

during which Miss Dewey did most of the talking. No old times to be found. Nor would they sit in a railway car together on way to a rally. On the way to anywhere.

She shifted on the pew to put several needed inches between them. "Miss Dewey," she started, "I must elucidate—"

"Call me Arel." Her sparkling grin filled her face. "For you are simply Mary to me."

No. Not Mary. Not Arel. Not either of them using each other's Christian names, and they certainly were not friends who had old times to reminisce over—despite Miss Dewey's delusion.

Miss Dewey's head tilted to the side. She was still grinning. "I must admit I view you more as an older sister than"—her face quirked as if she licked a lemon and her voice sounded like a chipmunk—"a mere friend."

There was morning effervescence. Then there was Arel Dewey. Five minutes in her presence was enough to compel Mary to require a nap from sheer social exhaustion.

Mary gripped the hymnal as she resisted the urge to punch a fist through her own straw hat. She didn't dislike Miss Dewey, but how was one to be friends with a wild girl with no sense of proper decorum? Miss Dewey was the antithesis of the ideal English lady.

Mary eased another few inches away from Miss Dewey then shifted to face her pew mate. "Miss Dewey, I—"

"Arel," she corrected, placing her hand on her bodice, just under her red lily corsage bearing her *Deeds Not Words* pin and yellow *Votes for Women* ribbon. "As in Arl. One syllable. Think of it as Karl without the K. Everyone pronounced my name correctly until Zenus called me Owl last summer during the croquet tournament, and when Zenus Dane speaks, people listen and follow and adore. He's Mrs. Osbourne's nephew, in case you don't remember. He hasn't been to visit since Christmas because she attempted to match-make him with Lydia Puryear, who I made sure to warn away because Lydia deserved someone less . . ."

Her upper lip curling, she uttered an I-am-so-revolted-by-him *errrg*.

Mary looked away long enough to notice the dozens of Belle Havenians watching them from the pews behind, next to, and in front of them. Her neck and face felt unusually warm. She closed the hymnal and slid it into the pew back next to the congregational prayer book and Bible. If she left now—

She couldn't leave. She needed to stay and talk to Mrs. Osbourne.

Miss Dewey gripped Mary's clenched palms and didn't respond to Mary's immediate flinch.

"Zenus Dane believes *he* is a Titan and we are insignificant mortals," she groused. Her voice became happy again. "Be thankful you will never meet him. He had a fight with Mrs. Osbourne last Christmas, and now they aren't speaking." Arel's lips curved in a contented smile, and Mary presumed it meant she had finished talking.

Thank you, Jesus.

Mary withdrew her hands from Miss Dewey's grasp. She fiddled with the pearl earring in her right ear, not because her skin itched but to disguise her reason for pulling away. Whoever this Zenus Dane was, Miss Dewey had an abnormal fixation on him. Mentions of him crept, ever so often, into Miss Dewey's conversation. If she didn't like the man, why talk about him? What Miss Dewey needed was something more noble to occupy her thoughts. Something like—

Despite the volume of the congregational noise, Mary lowered her voice to keep those watching them from hearing. "Can you draw? Sketch plants or leaves?"

Miss Dewey looked mildly offended. "Why?"

"No reason," she answered with a dismissive wave and a disappointed sigh. At least she tried. She reclaimed the hymnal and flipped through the pages.

"Four o'clock train."

Mary flinched, startled by the sound of Miss Dewey's voice so close to her ear.

"Don't. Be. Late," Miss Dewey added, reaching to claim a Bible from the pew back.

"Regarding the railway, I—"

“Oh, and bring the necessities for four days in Richmond.” She looked to the wallboard that listed the day’s scripture location. “I’ll bring your sign.”

Mary released a frustrated breath. “I am sorry to say you have mistaken the degree of our acquaintance and made presumptions upon my acquiescence regarding your trip to the Commonwealth’s capital. You will have to—must, actually—rally without me.”

Miss Dewey stopped flipping through the Bible and gaped at Mary. Then she blinked. “No matter what British people say, they sound smarter. It’s the accent. My dearest and bestest sister Mary, this is why you must come with us. We need an educated woman such as you to communicate our passions and convictions in such a manner.”

“A collegiate education is available for anyone who seeks it.” In fact, college would be good for Miss Dewey, whose mouth gaped again.

Her mouth gaped again.

Oddly encouraged by the silence, Mary continued, “There are over ninety mixed-sex colleges alone in your country.” Which she knew because she’d researched them all looking for a professorship. As the other conversations in the chapel began tapering off, thankfully with gazes focused more on the podium than on them, Mary whispered, “You should enroll. Secure for yourself the education you admire in me.”

Arel Dewey continued to stare as if the thought of earning a higher education never occurred to her. At twenty-two and the youngest of five children, heir to a substantial inheritance from her fishing empire father, and under no pressure to marry and produce grandchildren thanks to her prolific older siblings (information Mary never asked to know), Miss Dewey had a world of opportunities and adventures before her. There was nothing wrong with her suffrage cause. It was merely a case of how she was going about it, which was rather off-putting at times.

Mrs. Binkley fell into a fit of coughs.

Mary mimicked the gaze of everyone on her side of the meetinghouse and looked to where the gray-haired woman now stood.

Mrs. Binkley motioned to Mrs. Osbourne to remain seated. Then with her kerchief covering her mouth, she eased out of the pew and down the back of the room to the door.

“Let’s bow our heads in prayer.”

The exit door opened then closed.

Mary turned to the podium to where the Reverend Jaeger now stood. He bowed his head, giving all in attendance a prime view of his balding scalp. She followed suit, desperate for a moment away from her chatty pew mate to focus her thoughts. She’d been raked across the conversational yard by Arel Dewey. The poor girl was going to be devastated—but hopefully disillusioned—when Mary did not show up for the four o’clock train. But she couldn’t. She had no time to be distracted by other causes. Or people. Once the service was over, she had to find a way to convince Mrs. Osbourne to agree to turn her plant photos into illustrations.

As far as what to do about Karl without the K . . .

She peeked to see Arel holding the open Bible to her chest and mouthing her own prayer while Reverend Jaeger was praying aloud. One more thing to say about Arel Dewey: She had the courage to be herself. English society trained a woman from the cradle to be pleasing, thereby obliterating her individuality in the process. Mary certainly felt obliterated.

She looked away. What would life be like if she were free to be herself? Free to express her feelings and opinions, even disagreeable ones?

Free like Miss Dewey.

A strange warmth rushed through her, bubbles of—dare she say—hope. Never before had anyone insisted on being her friend or viewed her as a true sister. Not even her brothers claimed her as one. To them, she was the unspoken black sheep of the family, a female Varrs with two baccalaureate degrees. Worse, even, than her mother. Horrors upon abnormal horrors.

My dearest and bestest sister Mary . . .

Not just friend but—

Sister.

For one second—just one—Mary yielded to a slight smile.



A quilting bee would, simply, not be the death of her.

Mary nibbled on the last lemon-glazed biscuit and held the curtains back to spy on the house next door. Another quilting lady entered Mrs. Osbourne's home. Ten ladies so far this morning. Not including Mrs. Osbourne or her housekeeper Mrs. Binkley. A coughing fit like the one that had caused Mrs. Osbourne to leave the service early to care for Mrs. Binkley would not derail her plans.

Her own fears may.

Mary glanced at the crumbs on her fingers, the sweetness of the biscuit no longer a tasty trifle on her tongue. Monday morning arrived all too soon.

Napoleon whined.

She knelt, holding her fingers out. "How can I go to a quilting bee?" she asked as his sandpaper tongue found every last crumb. She'd never felt comfortable talking to strangers.

If only she had the extraordinary vivacity of Arel Dewey.

"Should I go"—she sighed—"or put an ad in the paper and hope someone answers immediately?"

Napoleon stopped licking. He didn't have to speak for her to know what he would answer. Mary scratched behind his ears until he stopped arching his head for her to scratch more. She then stood and walked to the kitchen to wash her hands. The water cooled her skin but not her nerves. Her hands shook. Her heart pounded in her chest. She turned off the water and gripped the edge of the porcelain sink. No reason to panic. Stop panicking! Be calm. Somehow, she and Mrs. Osbourne would work a trade, and it wouldn't include Mary spending one minute quilting. Simple and easy.

The idea brought a morsel of comfort.

Mary toweled her hands, retoweled, wiping until not a drop of moisture remained. Then she folded the towel in proper alignment and laid it over the edge of the sink. Nothing else to do. Nothing else to stop her. Go. Go. Go. GO.

"All right, I will," she muttered.

Mary dusted the front of her bodice, brushing away any biscuit crumbs. She smoothed the belt around her waist. Her gaze shifted to the straw hat on the kitchen table, still where she'd left it, following her morning constitutional. Wear it? Not wear it? Stop stalling.

Go. Go. Gogogogogogogo.

Fine!

"Wish me luck," she said to Napoleon as he trailed her to the front door.

Before she talked herself out of it, she was at Mrs. Osbourne's house. Standing at the bottom riser. Not moving. Don't think. Just go.

Mary raised the front of her white skirt and hurried up the stairs, crossed the porch, reached for the door, and gripped the handle tight. A wave of dizziness hit, blurring her vision. She desperately held onto the door. Not now.

Closing her eyes, she breathed deep.

Speak of nothing save the weather and other idle chatter. All would be well and easy and comfortable and fine.

She relaxed her hold on the door. Opened her eyes. Steadied her shoulders.

After another deep breath, she walked into Mrs. Osbourne's house in the same manner as she'd observed the other quilting bee attendees do—without knocking. Not a soul stood in the open foyer to welcome her except an orange feline on the carpeted stair runner. Its tail flicked with a *you may pet me if you must*.

Mary laid her calling card in the empty gold-plated receiver, her fingers hovering over the white card. Leave it. Don't leave it. What was the proper Virginia protocol?

"We're in here, Rheba," someone called out. "Leave your pies on the table. I'll take care of them in a moment." Sounded like Mrs. Osbourne, but since they'd only spoken upon a handful of times, Mary couldn't be sure.

Mary looked around. Covered baskets rested atop and underneath two folding tables that looked to be handcrafted from rosewood and inlaid with ebony, similar to a design she once saw in

Paris. Wait. Pies? She cringed. *Lunch is potluck* the invitation had specified. She should return home for some canned jalapeño pickles.

Splendid idea! If she wished to lose what courage she'd built up coming here.

Mary rested her hands on the increasingly tight, black v-shaped belt she wore with her pique skirt and pink-with-gray-dots blouse, an outfit usually worn when golfing, which she enjoyed often during her studies in Florida. Despite bringing her clubs, she had yet to find a golf course. But she hadn't tried looking. She ought to. In fact—

She released an unladylike grunt. Golf and fashion? She had far more pressing worries at the moment than golf and fashion.

Still, the white bow tie around her shirt's high collar now felt like a grip around a putter. The internal tension from interrupting a quilting bee was enough to strangle her. And she missed calculating the trajectory of the ball, the influence of the wind, the—

Dawdling is what she was doing.

Stop avoiding the inevitable!

She breathed deep. Her lungs had to have the capacity of an ocean steamer. She released the breath and walked to the parlor.

Underneath the ornate chandelier and surrounded by gold-painted, velvet-cushioned furniture were the quilters. Ten to be precise. All gathered around a rectangular wooden frame covered with muslin. Each wearing dark skirts with white or gray blouses, hair drawn back in simple buns, instead of the elaborate braided and twisted chignon Mary wore. Without taking turns, they spoke. Five, six maybe, conversations going.

So many people talking at once. So much laughter.

Instead of covering her ears and running from the house, Mary opened her mouth. "I am not Rheba."

Silence blanketed the room.

All gazes turned her way, emotions clear on their faces. Shock: *You?!* Then suspicion: *Why are you here?* Finally, rejection: *This is a private event; we don't have a place for you.* Responses similar to those she'd endured since she was ten. Their gazes shifted to Mrs.

Osbourne, the singular soul in the room looking delighted to see Mary.

"Miss Varrs," she said, standing and stepping back from the quilt frame. "I am thrilled you decided to attend." Her words held a sincere graciousness.

About this. She wasn't actually attending if she could get out of it.

"I have no pies." *That* was the best she could say in response. Pathetic.

"No need to fret," Mrs. Osbourne said sweetly. "You're my guest."

Mary nodded to the ladies in the parlor. "But they are your guests, too, and they brought . . . on the tables . . . the invitation said potluck. I wasn't thinking and . . ."

Oh, good gracious, she was babbling like a brook. Her pulse even raced like a kayak down said brook. All panicky. Just like the day Headmistress Whitacre drew her to the front of the great hall. *Ladies, this poor soul needs improving to become a lady.*

Mary gave her head a shake to dispose of the memory. She smiled as best she could to appear at ease. "Mrs. Osbourne, might I have a word with you?" She motioned to the foyer. "In private."

"Certainly." Mrs. Osbourne touched the shoulder of the quilter on her right. "Peggy, take over for me please, and remember to continue layering the scraps out from the center." She then walked to Mary and stepped with her into the parlor, leaving whispers in her wake. "Did the elixir not help Napoleon?"

"It did. He and his bowels have returned to docility."

"Then, if this is about not bringing a dish, you need not feel embarrassed. We always have enough food."

"It's not —. I—" Her throat choked as the words *I need your help* petrified inside her larynx.

Mrs. Osbourne took Mary's hands, surrounding them together with hers. A tender action. A typical American action. "You look ghastly," she whispered. "What's wrong?"

She didn't look at Mrs. Osbourne's hands clasped around hers, nor did she draw away despite her desire to escape being at the complete mercies of her neighbor who had invaded the private—and

comfortable—bubble surrounding her. Yet, she relaxed her grip, in hopes Mrs. Osbourne would receive the action as a subtle clue to let go, like other people had when holding her hands. Instead, Mrs. Osbourne held tighter.

Speak and ignore her touch.

“For the last two years, I have lived around the world doing a study on tomatoes,” she rushed out. “My intention has been to submit it to the Virginia Agricultural Experiment Station with the express purpose of obtaining a research assistant position. The VAES is open to hiring females.”

Mrs. Osbourne nodded for her to continue.

Mary glanced down at their joined hands and pinched her eyes closed, drawing in a steadying breath doing nothing to ease the nervous tumble of her pulse. Do not insult her by pulling away. She looked up, meeting her neighbor’s compassionate gaze, a gaze clearly aware of her unease. Why? A caring person would not force closeness. Even animals knew to respect another’s territory. Granted, their establishment of territory required the use of urine, which was not an option for her.

Abruptly Mrs. Osbourne dropped Mary’s hands and, with a gentle smile, took a step back. “About your tomato study . . .?”

“Yes, I, uh . . .” Mary clasped her hands together with a concerted effort to look relaxed. “I have recently learned the photographs I’ve taken for my study will nullify my application. I need classical illustrations of my photographs”—she nipped the corner of her mouth—“and I have no artistic ability.”

For the longest moment, Mrs. Osbourne just stood there, giving Mary time to notice how her ski-slope nose tipped up at the bottom. The little bump made her classic features more amiable. Even with heavy wrinkles and gray-sprinkled dark hair, the woman was aging well. Of course, what she was thinking, Mary could not fathom. While she knew little about her temporary neighbor, she sensed the woman was old enough to be her mother and did not suffer fools.

“And?” Mrs. Osbourne finally prompted.

“When I saw the drawing you did on the invitation . . .” She gave a little shrug. “I need a botanical illustrator. I need . . . you.”

Understanding dawned in Mrs. Osbourne's blue eyes, and she released a pent-up breath. "Is this all? I would be happy to help."

Mary blinked, stunned. "You would?"

"It brings me joy to help others." Said with enough maternal concern to cause Mary's eyes to feel unusually moist for the third time today. "When do you need them?"

Mary cleared her throat. "Ten days."

"Ten days? Dearest, my quilting bee—"

"Yes, I know," cut in Mary, "and it is the quandary I am in. They need to be in the mail by next Wednesday in order to arrive by the submission deadline. I would seek aid elsewhere, but I am desperate, and your sketching is beautiful. I'm willing to negotiate a trade of my time for yours."

Mrs. Osbourne fingered the falls of lace at the neckline of her gray-on-gray-striped blouse. "How many illustrations do you need?"

"For a study of this size," Mary explained, relieved by the comfortable topic, "five types per species is common, along with a rate of growth related to nutrients and sunshine, and I have seven major varieties per type, although I have fifty-three different seed plants, including cultivated and wild and—"

Mrs. Osbourne's brow rose in a headmistress manner. *Minimum requirement, please.*

Mary cringed awkwardly. "Um, well, for the top tomato in each of the five types: germination, mature plant, leaf, fruit size and shape, and a cross section of a mature tomato. Each illustration approximately palm-size."

Mrs. Osbourne smiled warmly in return. "So five individual drawings on five separate canvases?"

"Yes, mum," Mary said with an embarrassing exuberance in her tone spewing forth before she could contain it. This time the racing of her pulse made her feel giddy, hopeful. "Each set of sketches needs to fill a traditional sheet of art paper, not canvas. The mercantile had drawing and charcoal paper. I bought both this morning not knowing which you would prefer."

"If it must be paper, then Bristol board would be better."

"I purchased it in two-ply and three-ply, white, but if you prefer ivory, I could—"

Mrs. Osbourne just arched her brow. Again.

Mary avoided wincing this time.

"Your diligence to be prepared for all scenarios reminds me of my nephew."

"Thank you."

"It was not a compliment." Mrs. Osbourne's gaze shifted to the parlor, where not a peep could be heard. Wherever her quilting friends were standing and listening, they were far enough back not to be seen.

Afraid to say more and risk losing her neighbor's willingness to help, Mary eyed the cat. The cat—with its *you poor worrisome human* flick of the tail and an arrogance befitting Marie Antoinette—lifted its paw, rubbed its head from back to front, then proceeded to lick its paw as if it literally did not have a care in the world.

Oh, to be a cat.

"I will help you, Miss Varrs." Mrs. Osbourne turned her full attention on Mary. She took a step forward, closing the comfortable distance between them. "I will sketch in the day during my quilting bee, and in exchange, you will take my place embroidering the quilt."

Mary could do nothing to stop her eyes from widening and jaw dropping in a most unladylike manner. "Embroidering the quilt?" she echoed. "But—"

Mrs. Osbourne's brow rose again, and Mary held back any further argument.

Mrs. Osbourne patted the side of Mary's arm with a *you'll do fine*, then added a verbal "You do know how." Not a question, but a statement made in confidence. Likely from the assumption all Englishwomen knew how to embroider; thus, Mary knew, simply by location of her birth. Which was an unfair presumption. One would not have to do a case study to prove not all Englishwomen were intrinsically skilled with the needle. This said, her needlework skill was passable. When she concentrated on giving her best

effort, some—all right, one: the prince—even declared her skill to be exceptional.

Mary nodded.

“Excellent,” was said with all the delight Arel Dewey had when discussing votes for women. Mrs. Osbourne smiled. “Now, Miss Varrs, while I collect my pencils and easel, you will bring over the Bristol board and your first set of photographs.”

Lifting the front of her black skirt, she moved up the stairs, around the cat continuing to flick its tail even with its eyes closed.

“Holly Jane Ferris,” she intoned, “in recompense for listening to a private conversation, please find Miss Varrs a chair between you and Peggy. The rest of you, get back to work. Posthaste.”

Mary didn’t move. She had hoped for a trade. For an exchange of goods, perhaps. She clenched her hands together, nipping her bottom lip, staring nervously at the parlor’s entrance. But—

Embroider a quilt? Heaven help her, what had she gotten herself into?

“Miss Varrs?”

Mary looked to the top of the stairs where Mrs. Osbourne stood. “Yes?”

“A quilting bee will not be the death of you.” She paused, smiled. “I promise.”