

Gloved hands folded neatly in her lap, she waited for Mr. Quincey's questions. But he didn't give voice to them. Not immediately. He only looked at her with a pensive frown, as though something about her person prevented him from pursuing his logical course.

"Forgive me," he said at length. "Mrs. Royce failed to mention that you were lately bereaved. Had I known of your loss, I would never have pressed you to—"

"I am not bereaved," Nell said.

"No?" He swept a glance from her black-veiled hat to her lusterless black mourning dress with its tight-fitting bodice and wide, untrimmed skirts. "You can doubtless understand my confusion."

Nell would have thought it plain enough. "I travelled alone from the Academy. I preferred to do so unmolested." She paused, adding, "Widows are generally accorded a degree of respect not offered to unaccompanied young ladies."

Mr. Quincey didn't bat an eye at her explanation. She suspected he was a man who wasn't easily surprised. "In other words, it's a disguise."

Nell's expression tightened. Leave it to a man to reduce a woman's desire to protect herself to a childish pantomime. "It's a practical necessity," she said.

"I see. And do all teachers at Miss Corvus's Academy for the Betterment of Young Ladies employ such arts? Or is it only you who..." His words died away as she pushed back her veil.

Ah. Perhaps he was capable of being surprised after all.

Nell met his gaze, a hint of a challenge in her own. She wasn't vain. Neither was she guilty of false modesty. She knew herself, both her weaknesses *and* her strengths. "Feminine ingenuity isn't limited to the staff room at the Academy," she informed him. "Though, I assure you, it's in no short supply there."

Mr. Quincey collected himself in a blink—so quickly Nell wondered if she’d imagined the look of masculine alertness that had flared in his eyes on first seeing her face. Clearing his throat, he very slowly and very methodically returned his pen to the brass holder on his desk.

“Something else Mrs. Royce failed to mention.”

“What might that be?”

“How young you are.”

Nell stiffened at his tone of disappointment. She wasn’t used to anyone implying that she was lacking in wisdom or experience. Quite the reverse. In times of crisis, people generally looked to her for guidance. During Miss Corvus’s recent illness, Nell had all but been running the school. “Is my age of importance to your inquiries?”

“Only as it pertains to your tenure,” he said. “You can’t have been in your position long.”

“I have been employed as a teacher for five years, sir.”

He sat back in his chair, frowning at her again with an attitude of impatience. One would think she had wasted his precious time. “Mrs. Royce led me to believe you had been present at the Academy’s founding, nearly twenty years ago. It’s why I consented to meet with you instead of pursuing an interview with Miss Corvus herself. I had anticipated your providing certain information about the institution’s origins.”

Nell at once grasped the cause of his irritation. He’d wrongly presumed she would be a much older woman. One who had spent the whole of the past eighteen years teaching at the charity school. “Mrs. Royce did not mislead you.”

“Not only Mrs. Royce,” he replied. “You, as well, Miss Trewlove. Your letters gave me to understand that you had decades of experience at Miss Corvus’s Academy.”

“I do,” she said. “Or nearly that long. I was one of its earliest students.”

Understanding registered on his face. He stared at her with renewed attention. “You were an orphan?”

Nell’s chin ticked up a notch. “That’s correct.”

There was no shame in it. Not as far as she was concerned. It was just as she often told her girls. One wasn’t accountable for the circumstances of one’s birth, only for the choices they made and the actions they took. It was that which defined a person, not pedigree.

“As are all the students at the Academy?” Mr. Quincey asked.

“To a one,” she said. “They come to us from all over the county. I flatter myself that we do our best for them.”

“Your best being...?”

She lifted one shoulder in an artfully casual shrug. “We feed them, house them, and provide them with an education that will best help them meet their potential.”

Mr. Quincey narrowed in on the word with single-minded precision. “Their potential for what, exactly?”

Nell’s mouth curved in a slow smile. She comprehended the unspoken crux of his question. He believed the Academy was a home for dangerous revolutionaries. Budding feminists and crusaders for equality, willing to go to any ends to achieve their goals, even if that meant destroying the occasional man who got in their way.

He wasn’t wrong.