



## CHAPTER 1



The first morning after their arrival at Cassfield Manor always began at sunrise, at least for the Harrison sisters. After spending a long winter in Rothershire, the two sisters could hardly wait for the salty air and the sound of crashing waves.

Christine and her sister, Lizzy, walked arm in arm toward the water's edge. The rising sun warmed their faces as they walked through the rocky, grass-lined plateau toward where the sand met the water.

"Do you think Meg and Ivory will join us soon?" Lizzy asked, her bright-blond hair disheveled and falling into her face. A few freckles dotted her nose, which wrinkled just slightly when she smiled. Christine pushed her own slightly darker hair away from her eyes and gathered her skirts around her slight figure, the wind having just switched directions. This morning they had not called their maids. The sea at the sunrise held more allure than perfecting their appearance, especially since any male suitors would not call for several days.

"I cannot say," Christine replied with a smile. "You know how Ivory likes her sleep. She and Meg arrived very late last night, and I am sure they are much wearied from the journey."

"Ah, but how could one not come right to the water's edge with the sound of the waves ascending to our windows?" Lizzy exclaimed, throwing her arms wide and spinning.

Christine walked on, passing a few shells and moss-covered gray boulders, considering more practical matters. "You know, Lizzy, I must pride myself on even convincing Ivory Rusket to come all the way from London to our manor. I still have great hopes that her friendship will

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provide us many advantages.” Christine gazed back at the stone house rising above the grasses with its large latticed windows. They continued to walk alone. “I would even go so far as to suggest that she would never have started visiting Meg so often had it not been for our connection.”

Lizzy stopped. “You really think so, sister? Meg and Ivory are cousins. It is so very natural for them to visit each other!”

“Ah, Lizzy.” Christine took her sister under her arm like a mother bird. “Your sweetness would assume so. But you know Rothershire is far from London, and Ivory connects herself with others to serve her advantage. Meg’s circumstances would not have been so reduced if her mother had not married for love. And the consequence is that the Allensbys will never have a tenth of the income of Ivory’s family. So it is beneficial to Meg to have rich friends like us, and it is beneficial for Ivory to have high society to enjoy when she comes to the north country. And”—Christine’s voice lowered—“it *was* my plan, before Mr. Davenport came to Rothershire, to marry one of Ivory’s connections. But hopefully I have secured an admirable catch for myself, so *you* ought now to invest in meeting some young acquaintance of Ivory’s circle.”

Lizzy smiled. “I do not think I shall ever marry a man with half as many credentials as you have found. I know so little of men and the world! Just think,” Lizzy said, her ever-hopeful air showing itself, “this shall be our last summer before you become my *married* sister.”

Christine puffed herself up a little. “Yes, Mr. Davenport will arrive in a few days, and I do hope to receive an offer of marriage from him soon. But it will not happen yet, to be sure. I have not quite won his heart. These things take time.”

Lizzy, being only sixteen, nodded in agreement, like she did with most things Christine declared, but added, “Say what you want, sister, but I have seen the way he looks at you.”

Christine smiled and sighed to herself as she thought of the rich young beau from Cheshire. Two months ago he arrived at dinner with the Grenvilles, boasting a handsome figure, piercing eyes, and six thousand a year. And when Christine learned of his recent purchase of a second estate, increasing his per annum by two thousand, she declared him almost perfect.

As the sun crept just above the ocean's edge, Christine recalled why she loved their days at Cassfield Manor. The beauty and serenity of the scene stood without compare, the cool blue-green of the ocean extending westward as far as the eye could see.

Christine had given up wading a year ago, proclaiming herself too old. And although Christine allowed herself now only the seaside stroll—for it was time to give up childish things and become a lady—this morning, convinced by Lizzy, she walked through the sand, searching for shells.

The sisters shared years of memories at Cassfield. Years ago when their older brother tormented them with splashing and shaking wiggling crabs in their faces. Then as he married and moved away, years of just Christine and Lizzy, pretending to be mermaids washed up on some foreign land with people who had legs, searching for seashells, playing in the sun and disregarding the multitude of warnings from their mother. “You will ruin your complexion!” “Girls, you will look like peasants by the time we return home!” The summer Christine found a shell with a hole in it and wore it on a necklace until it broke. The summer Christine and Lizzy first decided to invite Meg. And then last summer when Christine found it imperative that they invite Meg's cousin, Miss Ivory Rusket, to join them. The dynamic of the group would never again be the same.

Less than a half hour later, Christine and Lizzy spotted Ivory and Meg making their way to the sea wall. Christine saw Ivory first, looking almost the same as the year before but perhaps slightly more beautiful, if that were possible. Her figure, still slight, had more alluring curves than a year before, and her stunning full lips and large bright eyes seemed even more striking. Her shorter cousin Meg ran behind, her dark hair bobbing up and down in a disheveled bun as the two came toward the Harrison sisters.

As soon as she reached earshot, Ivory exclaimed, “I am so very glad to see you both in your day dresses with unkempt hair. I daresay we will see no one. Meg seemed quite anxious to join you for a morning stroll, even though both of us could benefit from some attention to our appearance.”

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Meg gave a half-smile toward her taller, slender cousin but said nothing, for she always spoke the least of the four. The girls then began to walk along the water's edge, the companions bursting into raptures, relating a year's worth of chatter all at once. It was Ivory's speech, true to form, which prevailed over her peers.

"Ladies," Ivory said, her round, green-hazel eyes opening wide, "I have so much to tell you from London!"

Christine sighed and carefully concealed her eye roll, wondering how her friend had waited so very long to begin such an address, for Ivory believed all she had to say to be quite important.

"Do tell!" Lizzy answered, eager for any news, especially from London.

Ivory looked at them all and began. "At one of the first balls of the season, I was introduced to someone, and I am very taken with him. And . . ." Ivory paused, "I daresay he is *very* taken with me."

Christine and Meg, both older than their esteemed friend and cousin, exchanged a dubious side-eyed smirk as Ivory looked more intently at Lizzy, who received her raptures without hesitation. "You would have loved it, Lizzy! And I know you would all approve of him!"

"What are his credentials?" Christine asked, skeptical of such open praise. Someone of Ivory's status ought to list his holdings and social status before all else.

"To be candid," Ivory replied, "I own I do not know! But we had a delightful time together. His name is Mr. Henry Robertson. He was introduced in a very high circle and he has scores of friends and acquaintances, so he must be respectable, I daresay! He carries himself so well, and he presents himself just as a gentleman ought. At *that* very ball, he asked me to dance his first dance, and I saw him later at a few others. We have since danced several more times—and dined together more than once!"

Ivory linked her thin arm through her cousin's and cocked her beautiful mouth to the side. Meg smiled as Ivory continued, "I even invited him to visit us at Cassfield this spring."

Christine's eyes widened as she processed such a comment. Her walk halted for a moment.

“You invited a complete stranger to my parents’ manor? Do you know what my father and mother will think? We do not know anything of his character! He has not been properly introduced!”

“I told Mr. Robertson of our plans, and he said he might be stopping by Broughington Lake on business. I mentioned to him that we would be near there at Cassfield! So, naturally, he promised to come visit us for a few days!”

Christine’s mind filled with quizzical incarnations of Ivory’s beau as she repressed several additional comments on such a scheme. A businessman? Surely one did not first describe a man of character by his business dealings. What of his holdings, his status, and procurements? Was he to inherit anything more than a business ledger? Why would Ivory condescend to associate with someone so much below her—and then presume to bring him to Cassfield? And above all else, what if his stay interrupted Mr. Davenport’s visit? Nothing could get in the way of making every moment of Mr. Davenport’s time perfect at Cassfield Manor.

These were the questions that so eagerly presented themselves before Christine’s mind. She was doubtful, however, if Ivory had as of yet entertained such analytical thoughts toward this man—or any man, for that matter.

And Christine had made sure to inform Ivory of Mr. Davenport and Mr. Grenville’s visit very clearly. How could Ivory invite an unknown gentleman to her family’s manor? It was not Ivory’s place to do so, nor did Christine want any of Ivory’s male guests usurping the spotlight and prominence of the men Christine’s father had already invited. Christine sighed, studying Ivory’s perfect figure and beautiful, inviting mouth. Of course this Mr. Robertson would chase her all the way to Cassfield, regardless of social implication or connections.

They had started walking again, and at last, Christine contented herself by saying, “I must have you know that I do not approve and I do not like the sound of such impropriety. A true gentleman would wait until the head of the house invited him to stay, as our guests Mr. Davenport and Mr. Grenville have done. I am not sure your invitation will stand at Cassfield, Ivory. You will have to be the one to tell

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my father about it. I could never have the audacity to propose such an activity.”

*And I will not have it interfere with my time with Mr. Davenport,* Christine added silently to herself. She would not allow Ivory to upstage her.

“I am happy to tell your father of my proposal,” Ivory said. “Mr. Harrison will *not* mind. And after all of you have the pleasure of making Mr. Robertson’s acquaintance, you will be glad for his company. You will surely approve of him, I know it.”

Christine exhaled audibly and then begrudged a smile, reflecting that her father, Mr. Harrison, was among the happiest, most obliging of men and would in fact most likely concede to Ivory’s request. He never wanted to displease anyone.

Christine turned her head and said no more. Her eyes followed the curve of the shore, gazing at the long grasses and silty path before her. She breathed in deeply, the fresh, crisp smell of ocean filling her nose.

Every past spring, she had felt safe at Cassfield. It was her sanctuary, devoid of gentlemen and social protocols. But this spring would be different and hopefully occupied with a new kind of amusement. Christine had pressed her father to invite Mr. Davenport and his friend Mr. Grenville to visit. She wanted to use this time at Cassfield to further her relationship with Mr. Davenport—and now Ivory came with her own agenda, trying to outshine Christine.

Christine then gave way to a tug of emotions. Mr. Davenport excited her. He met or exceeded most of her requirements for a husband. But she knew life would never be the same if her future continued with him. Her days of female enjoyment and camaraderie would be exchanged for the illustrious position of mistress of the house with servants and carriages at her disposal.

It was a fine prospect, but how she sometimes still resisted change.

But Christine desired marriage more than anything else and knew it must be her pursuit. She was of age and the eldest daughter of a rich gentleman and knew she ought to make the best of her situation before she grew too old. She had carefully preened herself over the last year for such obligations and opportunities. Mr. Davenport showed the most

promise and the handsomest face, not to mention he seemed quite taken with her.

Christine listened again as Meg began her part next. Meg looked radiant in the morning sun, always becoming, yet much less ostentatious than her cousin. Her quiet, grounded personality contributed most to her overall prettiness. Her pale skin turned rosy, and her blue eyes twinkled while she described to her friends the many seascapes she hoped to portray in her artwork. She would paint Cassfield Manor, the ocean and its various lights and stages, and—if they would allow her—each one of her dear friends amongst her masterpieces.

Lizzy agreed and encouraged all speeches, while Christine stayed unusually silent, lost in reflections. The chatter eventually subsided, and having walked a long distance, the girls turned back.

Lizzy, Meg, and Ivory returned to dress for the day, but Christine chose to remain near the water's edge a little longer, slipping off her shoes, abandoning custom now that she sat alone. To Christine, the blue of the ocean, with its crisp wet bubbles kissing her bare feet, shone as a metaphor for the changes before her. This summer could bring much excitement and improvement—if Ivory and her beau did not disrupt Christine's plans with Mr. Davenport.



## MR. OLIVER DAVENPORT

Mr. Davenport took the letter from the tray hastily, perplexed by the feminine hand of the address, which seemed a bit messy for Miss Christine Harrison. Mr. Davenport knew Christine always wrote with a decided, accomplished design. He would travel to this lovely Miss Harrison in a few days, and perhaps she wrote the address quickly to assure its arrival before he left to her.

But upon opening the letter, he stopped. His eyes narrowed, every muscle in his body tightened, and he released hold of the single sheet of paper, its unfolded edges landing on the table. It seemed to burn his palm like a fire. He peered warily as he read its contents.

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*Mr. Davenport,*

*I am sure you did not suspect my pen to write this letter, but alas, I must do my father's bidding. He wishes to inform you that the last shipment you directed has been properly placed and the deposit of funds has entered your London bank account.*

*As for myself, I hope that when you return to London, I might have the good fortune of seeing you again.*

*Sincerely,*

*Miss Estelle Braxton*

Having understood both the success of the shipment and the sentiment of the writer, he hastily crumpled the paper and threw it directly into the hearth, full of disgust.

Why must she write the letter? He would not see her again. She ought to know he still felt the same today as he had a year ago—resolute in his refusal of her. And now he stood even more determined to never think of Miss Braxton again. He had decided to marry Miss Harrison, and within the next few months, he would ask for her hand.

He would send no reply.

Thrusting the unexpected note from his thoughts, Mr. Davenport tried for the rest of the evening to think of ways to promote his relationship with Christine. He felt drawn to her open smiles and witty comments. He reflected on her hair, full of loose curls, and her pleasing figure. He felt grateful for his friend Mr. Grenville for presenting such a favorable option to him. Mr. Davenport had known of her person and family for years, but now he believed her mutually interested, and his holdings had increased enough to win her. Their temperaments suited each other well, humor and intellect among them. She seemed drawn to his alluring charm, and he thought her dazzling and quite well bred.

Eventually, the advantage of Christine Harrison displaced his unpleasant thoughts of the letter and his former love. He slept soundly that night, recalling Christine's beautiful dark-blonde curls, her blue-green eyes, and the sum of fifteen thousand pounds upon her marriage to him.



## CHAPTER 2



Mr. Harrison,” Miss Rusket began the next morning, her large eyes full of triumph. She looked over her breakfast plate and turned with authority to the head of the table. “I have an acquaintance from London that might be passing through Broughington Lake within the week. Might he visit here?”

There was a hint of a pause, and then Mr. Harrison clapped his hands together. “Of course!” he replied. He turned his shoulder opposite the direction of Ivory and slightly shook his head, so that only Christine could see his expression, which she met with her own incredulous glance. Christine knew exactly how to interpret his face. Requests without regard to societal norms were not altogether unexpected from Ivory. Mr. Harrison did not fall prey to such schemes, and yet Christine’s father granted the request because of his generosity, regardless of the imposition. This characteristic of her father endeared him to her and Christine could not help but accept his generous kindness, notwithstanding Miss Rusket’s untoward request.

The talked-of Mr. Robertson arrived at Cassfield just before dinner. Ivory had insisted that the girls wait inside that day, and the friends now stood huddled around an upper-story window, carefully out of sight, watching the stranger step from his carriage. They heard the butler usher him in.

“Mr. Harrison, I presume,” said a hearty, confident voice a moment later, a bit muffled as it carried up from downstairs. “I must apologize for arriving without being formally introduced. My name is Henry Robertson. I would like to thank you for allowing me to visit.”

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Christine harrumphed grudgingly. At least *he* had the sense of propriety and decorum to officially point his arrival at Christine's father. From the rest of the conversation, Christine could tell that Mr. Harrison liked him straightaway and, upon hearing Mr. Robertson planned to stay at an inn, immediately insisted he stay at Cassfield instead. Mr. Robertson heartily accepted. At Ivory's urging, Christine consented to the four of them descending downstairs for dinner.

Just before they started the stairs, Christine inspected him, though she did not have a perfect angle from above. She could see his hair, the color of bleached sand, curled over his forehead. He had a strong nose, but not too large. He had broad shoulders, and his quite tall form stood adorned in the jacket of a gentleman, though it was still to be seen if he deserved such a title. Christine tried hard to stifle her resentment toward Ivory. How dare her beau arrive even before Christine's planned guests?

Supper was served promptly after the girls came down, as receiving Mr. Robertson over food seemed only appropriate in the Harrison home. Mrs. Harrison entered and joined her husband's side, and the rest of young ladies curtsied toward the new visitor.

"Allow me to introduce my dear wife, Mrs. Harrison, whose scrupulous eye attended to every detail of this evening, including most of all the menu. And then we have my eldest daughter, Miss Harrison; my youngest, Miss Elizabeth; and, of course, our dear friends Miss Allensby and Miss Rusket, whom you know, of course."

Mr. Robertson bowed to each, smiling amiably. "It is a pleasure to meet the esteemed acquaintances of Miss Rusket." He walked toward Christine. "May I have the honor of escorting you?"

Christine stifled a sigh. He was trying to win her over with his gallantry. It was his *duty* to escort her, as the eldest of the household. She took his arm anyway, determined to be unimpressed as they filed into the dining room.

Hosting meals was a matter of pride for Christine's mother. They kept an excellent cook with the budget to complement her. The dining room matched the finesse of Cook Cooper's abilities, done up in the newest style, a lush green brocade upholstering the dark wood chairs. Beautiful Italian pictures hung on the wall, and every piece of etched

china and crystal perfectly coordinated. Mounted candlesticks showcased the long rectangular table, providing a welcoming glow to the abundant surroundings.

After everyone took their places, they were served soup, which Mr. Robertson greeted with an excitement not usually given to an opening course. In truth, Mr. Robertson seemed thrilled with just about everything. He sat in between Christine and Miss Rusket, whose elated face said much concerning her feelings toward the evening. As he complimented Miss Rusket on her appearance, Christine took a moment to inspect him, sipping discreetly from her bowl to hide her scrutiny. He was tall—even when seated—and his hair, light blond and slightly curly, waved perfectly across his brow. It could be said that his bright-blue eyes were his best feature, and he was fairly handsome, but it was the way his eyes wrinkled and his wide smile opened that drew a person to him. One might conclude, after even a few minutes in his presence, that he was amiable, perhaps even slightly charming. As the meal carried on, Christine found that he asked interesting questions, laughed a great deal, and carried the conversation with finesse.

After a half hour, Christine begrudgingly thought to herself, *Well done, Ivory*, contrary to all previous misgivings. Christine had not yet made out his character, but he seemed like a fine man—presenting himself admirably on many fronts. He was not quite as well established or attractive as Mr. Davenport, but Ivory seemed quite taken with him, and if she really did not care about his income or standing, he might just do the job credibly.

Will Christine end up with Mr. Davenport?  
Or will someone else win her heart?

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