

**September 1820**  
**Ivy Hill, Wiltshire, England**

**Chapter 1**

Rachel Ashford wanted to throw up her hands. Her private education by governess had not prepared her for this. Standing in the Ivy Cottage schoolroom, she paused in her prepared speech to survey the pupils. Fanny whispered to Mabel, Phoebe played with the end of her plaited hair, young Alice stared out the window, and Sukey read a novel. Only the eldest pupil, Anna, paid attention. And she was the most well-mannered among them and therefore least in need of the lesson. Whenever Mercy taught, the girls sat in perfect posture and seemed to hang on her every word.

Rachel was tempted to raise her voice but took a deep breath and continued evenly. "Always wear gloves on the street, at church, and other formal occasions, except when eating. Always accept gentlemanly offers of assistance graciously. Never speak in a loud, coarse voice, and—"

Fanny grunted. "That's the only voice I've got!"

A few of her classmates giggled.

"Girls, please try to remember that boisterous laughter is not acceptable in polite company. A lady always speaks and moves with elegance and propriety."

"Well, I am not in polite company," Fanny retorted. "I'm with you lot."

Rachel bit the inside of her cheek and persisted, "Vulgarity is unacceptable in any form and must continually be guarded against."

"Then don't venture into the kitchen when Mrs. Timmons is overcharged by the butcher. You'll hear vulgarities to make you blush, Miss Ashford."

Rachel sighed. She was getting nowhere. She picked up *The Mirror of the Graces* from the desk. "If you will not heed me, then listen to this esteemed author." She read from the title page. "A book of useful advice on female dress, politeness, and manners."

"Oh bother," Fanny huffed.

Rachel ignored the groan, turned to a marked passage, and read.

"The present familiarity between the sexes is both shocking to delicacy and to the interest of women. Woman is now treated by men with a freedom that levels her with the commonest and most vulgar objects of their amusement. . . ."

The door creaked open, and Rachel turned toward it, expecting to see Mercy.

Instead, Matilda Grove stood there, eyes alight. Behind her stood Mr. Nicholas Ashford, looking ill at ease.

Rachel blinked in surprise. "Miss Matilda. The girls and I were just . . . trying . . . to have a lesson on deportment."

"So I gathered. That is why I asked Mr. Ashford to come up with me. What better way to instruct on proper behavior between the sexes than with a demonstration. So much more engaging than dry text."

"Hear, hear," Fanny agreed.

Nicholas Ashford cleared his throat. "I was given to understand

that you wanted assistance, Miss Ashford. Otherwise I would never have presumed to interrupt.”

“I . . . It is kind of you to offer, but I don’t think—”

““Always accept gentlemanly offers of assistance graciously,””

Mabel parroted Rachel’s own words back to her.

Apparently, she’d been listening after all.

Rachel’s neck heated. “Very well. That is, if you are sure you don’t mind, Mr. Ashford?”

“Not at all.”

Miss Matilda opened the door wider and gestured for him to precede her. The lanky young man entered with his long-legged stride.

The girls whispered and buzzed in anticipation while Rachel tried in vain to shush them.

He bowed, a lock of light brown hair falling over his boyish, handsome face. “Good day, Miss Ashford. Ladies.”

Rachel felt more self-conscious than ever with him there to witness her ineptness.

“Why do you not act out the proper and improper behavior the book describes?” Matilda suggested. “First, I shall introduce you. For you know, girls, you are not to give your name to just any blade who happens along. One must wait to be introduced by a trusted friend or relation.”

“Why?” Phoebe asked.

“To protect yourself from unsavory connections. Or from being corrupted by low company. Let’s see now. I have always loved a little playacting, though as a thespian I am nothing to your dear departed father, Miss Rachel.” Matilda raised a finger. “I know—I shall pretend to be some great personage, like . . . Lady Catherine de Bourgh from *Pride and Prejudice*. Wonderful novel. Have you read it?”

Rachel shook her head.

“Oh, you should. So diverting and instructive.”

“I’m afraid I don’t care much for books.”

Matilda’s mouth stretched into a long *O*. She sent a significant look toward the students.

“That is,” Rachel hurried to amend, “I am sure books are quite worthwhile. For learning especially. I read many in my own years in the schoolroom. And my father loved books.”

Matilda nodded. “Very true. At all events. For now, we shall dispense with rank and introduce you as social equals.” She began in a royal accent, “Miss Ashford, may I present my friend Mr. Ashford. Mr. Ashford, Miss Rachel Ashford.”

Sukey murmured, “That’s a lot of Ashfords.”

“How do you do, sir.” Rachel curtsied.

Nicholas bowed. “Miss Ashford. A pleasure to meet you.”

“Excellent,” Matilda said. “Now let us progress to how to deal with impertinent males.” She picked up Rachel’s book, skimmed, then read aloud, ““We no longer see the respectful bow, the look of polite attention, when a gentleman approaches a lady. He runs up to her, he seizes her by the hand, shakes it roughly, asks a few questions, and to show he has no interest in her answers, flies off again before she can make a reply.”” She looked up at Nicholas.

“Can you demonstrate this—how *not* to approach a lady.”

His mouth parted. “I would never—”

“I think it will be all right this once, Mr. Ashford. It is for the sake of the girls’ education, after all.” Matilda said it innocently, but Rachel saw the mischievous glint in her eye.

“Ah. Very well. In that case.”

Nicholas retreated a few paces, then advanced on Rachel in two long strides, grabbing her hand and shaking it vigorously. “I say, Miss Ashford. What a beautiful day it is. You are in good health, I trust? Well, we must take a turn soon. Good-bye for now.” He turned and strode out the door.

The girls giggled and applauded. Nicholas stepped back into the room, blushing furiously. He sent Rachel an uncertain look, and she smiled encouragement in return.

Matilda shook her head in mock disapproval. “Such shocking familiarity! Icy politeness is a well-bred woman’s best weapon in putting vulgar mushrooms in their place.”

“Mushrooms?” Mabel echoed. “Mr. Ashford, she called you a mushroom!”

“I’ve been called worse.”

“Now, let us repeat the scenario. But this time, Miss Rachel, if you will demonstrate the proper response?”

Again Nicholas Ashford stepped forward and took her hand in both of his. She glanced up at him from beneath her lashes. He was tall—and looking down at her with warm admiration. His fair gaze traced her eyes, her nose, her cheeks. . . .

When she made no move to rebuke Mr. Ashford, Miss Matty prompted from the book, “‘When any man, who is not privileged by the right of friendship or of kindred, attempts to take her hand, let her withdraw it immediately with an air so declarative of displeasure, that he shall not presume to repeat the offense.’”

Matilda stopped reading and Rachel felt her expectant look, but she could not bring herself to jerk her hand from his. Not when he had offered to marry her. Not in front of an audience. It seemed so heartless.

“Is it ever all right to let a man hold your hand?” seventeen-year-old Anna Kingsley whispered hopefully.

Matilda turned from the uncooperative couple to answer. “Well, yes. But remember, Anna, a touch, a pressure of hands, are the only external signs a woman can give of entertaining a particular regard for someone. She must reserve them only for a man she holds in high esteem.”

With another glance at the frozen pair, Matilda closed the book and cleared her throat. “Well, girls. What say we end a bit early and go outside for recess. You don’t mind if we cut our lesson short, Miss Rachel? No, she does not. All right, girls. Out we go.”

Rachel pulled her gaze from Mr. Ashford’s in time to see the amusement glittering in Matilda’s eyes as she shepherd the pupils past her demonstration partner, who still held fast to her hand.

When the door shut behind the girls, Rachel gave a lame little chuckle and gently tugged her hand from his. “The lesson is over, apparently.”

He clasped his own hands together. “Do you think it helped?”

*Helped . . . what?* she wondered, but replied casually, “Heavens, who knows? More than my poor attempts to teach them at any rate.” She stepped to the desk and tossed her notes into the rubbish bin. “I have no talent for teaching. I must find another way to contribute here. Or find another livelihood.”

He followed her to the desk. “You need not be anxious about supporting yourself, Miss Ashford. You have not forgotten my offer, I trust?”

“No. I have not. Thank you.” Rachel swallowed and changed the subject. “Shall we . . . um, walk together, Mr. Ashford? You did mention it was a beautiful day.”

“Oh. Of course. If you’d like.”

Did she want to be seen strolling side by side with Nicholas Ashford? She did not want to encourage the inevitable tittle-tattle, but nor was she ready to remain alone with him—and his offer—in private.

She retrieved her bonnet, then led the way downstairs. There, he opened the front door for her and ushered her through it.

*Which way?* Not toward the busybody’s bakery or Brockwell Court, she decided. She gestured in the opposite direction. “Shall we walk this way?”

He nodded, and at the corner they turned down Ebsbury Road and passed the almshouse.

She took a deep breath to steel herself. They would soon reach Thornvale. Beautiful, beloved Thornvale. When they reached its gate, she looked at the fine, red-brick house with its dark green door. Oh, the happy years she had spent there with her parents and sister before their troubles started. It was also where her brief courtship with Timothy Brockwell had begun, and then ended all too soon. When her father died, the house went to Nicholas Ashford—his heir and distant cousin. He and his mother lived there now.

If Rachel married him, she could leave life as an impoverished gentlewoman and return to her former home. Should she? She could not keep him waiting forever.

His voice penetrated her reverie. “Shall we turn here?”

“Hm? Oh, yes.”

Diverting onto the wide High Street, they passed the bank, now closed. A few houses. Fothergill’s Apothecary, its window displaying colorful bottles of patent medicines. The butcher’s with his gruesome slabs of hanging meat and dead fowl, and the greengrocers with crates of produce.

Nicholas gestured toward Prater’s Universal Stores and Post Office. “Do you mind if we stop here? I have something to post.”

He pulled a letter from his pocket.

Rachel acquiesced but said she would wait for him outside. She avoided smug Mrs. Prater whenever she could. The sour shopkeeper’s wife had once treated her with fawning respect, but that was before her father’s financial ruin.

While she waited, Rachel glanced toward The Bell next door, wondering if she had time to stop in and greet Jane before Nicholas returned. But at that moment, two people on horseback rode out through the coaching inn archway—Jane Bell and Sir Timothy

Brockwell. Rachel's stomach twisted at the sight.

They did not notice her, talking companionably as they directed their mounts down the Wishford Road. Both were well dressed—Jane in a striking riding habit of peacock blue. Together, they were the picture of a perfectly paired couple.

Rachel found herself transported back to her youth. She, Jane, Timothy, and Mercy were all from the area's leading families. The other three were close in age, but Rachel was a few years behind them. Judged too young to tag along, Rachel had frequently been left behind when the others went off together on some adventure. Especially Jane and Timothy, who had always been far more active and athletic than she or bookish Mercy Grove.

Standing there on the High Street, Rachel felt twelve years old all over again. That plump awkward adolescent, watching the enviable adults ride away together.

The shop door opened behind her, and Rachel turned toward it. Nicholas followed the direction of her gaze and nodded toward the riders. "Who is that with Sir Timothy?"

"My friend Jane Bell."

As if sensing their scrutiny, Sir Timothy glanced over his shoulder at them but did not smile or wave.

Nicholas studied her face. "He has never married?"

She shook her head.

"I wonder why."

*So do I*, Rachel thought, but she made do with a shrug.

"Has he ever courted anyone?"

"Not in years, as far as I know."

"But you two are . . . friends?"

"Family friends, yes. But that doesn't mean he would confide something of such a personal nature to me."

Nicholas turned to watch Sir Timothy again as he and Jane disappeared down the hill. "I gather he is considered quite the eligible bachelor. A desirable catch."

"Yes, he would be," she answered truthfully. "For the right woman."

Rachel had once thought that she might be that woman. But that was eight years ago. She took a deep breath. It was long past time to forgive, forget, and move forward.

She gestured across the street toward Potters Lane. "Shall we continue on together?"

For a moment Nicholas held her gaze, his eye contact uncomfortably direct. "Yes, I very much hope we shall."

Jane Bell inhaled a deep breath of fragrant autumn air—apples and blackberries, hay and oats drying in the sunshine. The green leaves of chestnut trees and underbrush were beginning to mellow and yellow, which made the colors of the remaining flowers and ripening fruit seem more vibrant. Riding past, she noticed a goldfinch feeding on burst pods of thistle seed, and in the distance, workers harvested a field of oats.

She and Timothy talked sparingly as they cantered along Wishford Road. Dressed in the new riding habit she'd given in and purchased, Jane felt prettier than she had in a long while. Sir Timothy was well turned out as always in a cutaway coat, leather breeches, and Hessian boots.

When they slowed their mounts to a walk, he looked over at her. "Is that a new habit?"

"Yes, it is."

"I like it. You looked like a bedraggled sparrow in that old brown one."

She mock gasped. "Thank you very little, sir! You are most ungallant."

Inwardly she was pleased that he felt free to tease her. It made her feel closer to him—to the Timothy of old, her childhood friend. He smiled. "I am glad we can ride together now and then. I missed it."

"Me too. Who did you ride with all those years we . . . didn't?"

"On my own mostly. Occasionally with the farm manager to look over the fields, or sometimes with Richard, though he comes home less and less."

Jane had not seen his brother in years. "But no friends?"

He shook his head. "If you think about it, there is a dearth of men my age around Ivy Hill."

"I never really considered it. I had Mercy and Rachel, but you had few friends close by."

"I didn't need more friends." He sent her a sidelong glance. "I had you."

Their gazes met and held, and Jane felt a poignant ache beneath her breastbone.

He lightened the moment with a wry grin. "Oh, don't feel sorry for me. Horace Bingley wasn't too far away, but I saw more than enough of him at school."

"Feel sorry for the lord of the manor?" Jane teased. "Hardly."

Although she did, a little. His life, his family, his responsibilities were not always easy.

He looked down, then asked, "Did you and Mr. Bell ride together? I never saw you, if you did."

She looked at him in surprise. He almost never asked about John.

"No. My father sold Hermione while I was away on our wedding trip, and John was always too busy with the inn."

"Then I am glad you have Athena now. She suits you."

Jane stroked the mare's sleek neck. "Yes. I am grateful to have her."

She thought of Gabriel Locke, who had given her Athena. His ruggedly handsome face shimmered in her memory, along with the feel of his strong, callused hands holding hers.

Timothy's gaze swept over her again. "It is good to see you out of mourning, Jane. Are you . . . over the worst of your grief?"

She considered that. "I am, yes." *At least where John is concerned.*

"Will you ever marry again, do you think?"

Jane coughed at the question.

"Dust," she mouthed, but knew he wasn't fooled. She swallowed and said, "I don't know. Maybe. In time."

He winced. "Tell me truthfully, Jane. Did you marry Mr. Bell because you wanted to or because I disappointed you?"

Jane drew in a sharp breath and stopped her horse. Timothy had never broached the subject so directly before.

He reined in close by. "Had I not hesitated. Had I not—"

"Fallen in love with someone else?" she supplied.

Again he winced, but he neither confirmed nor denied it. He didn't need to. At Rachel Ashford's coming-out ball, Timothy had looked at her with a powerful admiration beyond anything Jane had ever noticed directed at herself. He'd begun treating Rachel with formal deference, almost like a stranger—an intriguing, beautiful stranger. It had stung at the time. Jane knew Timothy had felt himself honor bound to *her*, so he had hesitated to act on that attraction. But Jane had not wanted him to marry her for duty's sake. For simple loyalty or the expectations of others. What woman would? Perhaps if John Bell had not pursued her with such singular determination, she might not have noticed the warm devotion missing from Timothy's eyes.

"I cannot deny that turn of events influenced my willingness to be courted by John." Jane looked at him. "Timothy, why did you never marry? I had wed someone else. You were free to marry as you liked."

"Free? Ha. You know why I did not marry."

She saw the anguish in his eyes, and her heart went out to him. He referred to more than his obligation to her, she guessed. His family had high expectations.

She said gently, "You know how much you mean to me, Timothy, don't you? And how grateful I am that our friendship is on better footing again?"

"I value our friendship as well, Jane. That is why I need to ask. You are not waiting for . . . anything more from me, are you? I know how presumptuous that sounds, but God help me, I don't want to disappoint you again."

Jane took a deep breath. "You did disappoint me—I can't deny it. But that was a long time ago. You have every right to marry someone else." She reached over and squeezed his hand. "Truly. I want you to be happy."

"Thank you. I am glad we agree. I wanted to be certain before I . . . do anything else."

They rode on. Jane hoped Timothy had not waited too long to act now that Nicholas Ashford was on the scene. Or was he thinking of someone besides Rachel?

With that in mind, she added, "However, I hope you will marry for love, not family duty."

He frowned. "I don't know that I can separate the two. It has been ingrained into me since I was a child: Marry the right person for the family's sake, and love and happiness will come in time."

"Like our own parents did?"

"Yes. Mine barely knew each other."

"Were they happy, do you think?"

"Daily evidence to the contrary, Mother claims they were. She was devastated when he died."

Jane nodded. "I am sure she was. And you were too, no doubt. I'm sorry I was not there for you. Again, I am glad our friendship is on better terms now."

"Me too." He smiled at her, but it was a sad smile. A smile of farewell.

Would she have been happier if she had pretended not to notice his feelings for Rachel, rebuffed John Bell, and married Timothy anyway?

Jane shook off such futile second-guessing. Timothy was master of Brockwell Court and must have an heir to leave it to, which was beyond Jane's abilities.

They stopped to let the horses drink from a clear stream. Jane inhaled deeply, then exhaled the final lingering remnants of what might have been. With a determined smile, she said, "Now, let's not spoil our ride with any more gloomy talk. I have to return to The Bell shortly to greet the one o'clock stage."

He nodded. "I agree. Shall we . . . race back?"

Her smile became genuine. "With pleasure."

As they galloped home, once again that question went through her mind: Would she have been happier if she had married Timothy? If she had forgone marriage to an innkeeper, the death of that innkeeper, and taking his place at The Bell?

*No* . . . she realized, oddly startled at the revelation, and at the peace that flowed over her as she pondered it. She would not give up where she was today, and who she was today, to go back in time and marry Sir Timothy Brockwell.