

# One

“Charlotte?” no response. “Charlotte?” came a young feminine voice again, louder this time.

Still no response from sixteen-year-old Charlotte, who was deeply enthralled in her work. Her head was bowed in concentration and her hand holding her paintbrush was poised lightly upon its canvas surface.

“Charlotte!” the voice came much louder this time, directly behind her head.

Charlotte’s body tensed in alarm. With one quick motion, she painted an ugly smudge across her gorgeous sunset. “Now look what you’ve made me do, Silvia!” Charlotte cried out in dismay. She tried to blot the ugly streak, but to no avail.

Silvia’s chin trembled and her hazel-colored eyes filled with tears.

Charlotte sighed heavily. The day was not going in her favor at all. First, her run in with Charles. Oh, how he irked her. He had an awful habit of sticking his hands in and out of his pockets when he was nervous. And when she ran into him accidentally this morning—she doubted it was accidental on his part—he must have been very nervous. It took all that was in her not to laugh out loud right then and there.

He was quite a gentleman though. And she couldn’t truly find fault in him.

But Charlotte had no interest in Charles. She didn’t even want to think of life outside of her students and her painting. Not yet anyway.

Silvia’s soft crying brought Charlotte back to the present.

“I apologize, Silvy, for my rudeness to you a minute ago.” She put an arm around ten-year-old Silvia’s slender waist, and drew her close. “Could you possibly find it in your heart to forgive me?”

Silvy nodded and wiped away her tears with the edge of her maroon uniform. It was hard to stay angry at Charlotte for very long.

“Now,” Charlotte said, setting aside her painting supplies and giving her full attention to her little student. “What was it you needed?”

Silvia withdrew her sketchbook and handed it hesitantly to Charlotte.

“I’m having trouble with my people,” she responded, referring to her portraits.

As Charlotte flipped open the small black book, she couldn’t help but smile. “Maybe you should give more of your attention to the eyes and lips instead of their noses and ears, and make the nose just a little smaller next time,” Charlotte critiqued, giving the picture one last scan. “But, beyond that, you did quite a marvelous job.”

She handed the book back to Silvia and was rewarded with a bright smile. “Thanks, teacher!” Silvia replied happily, as she skipped lightly out of Charlotte’s studio.

Charlotte’s heart did a little flip every time she heard one of her students refer to her as *teacher*. She *was* in truth their art teacher, and she mustn’t forget she could be a big influence in these young girls’ lives.

Painting had always been Charlotte’s passion, ever since she was a little girl.

When they had moved to Chasahborough when Charlotte was four, there had been an opportunity for her mother to start a girls’ boarding school, a dream that was never rewarded until then. Charlotte had grown up with lots of other girls her age, but none of them saw joy in painting like she did, until all the girls had left and a new group of girls had come to live at Mrs. Porter’s School for Girls.

Silvy had been one of those girls. With her extraordinary gift in artwork and the fact she saw the world through an artist's eyes, Charlotte had quickly taken an interest in her. But with fourteen other students, Charlotte tried hard not to show partiality; that is, not in front of the others.

But she had to admit, she was a little harder on Silvia than the rest of the girls. But only because she saw so much potential in the young child.

Charlotte glanced toward her door as the bell sounded for afternoon studies. She had only an hour before art class. She set to work finishing her lesson for the day.

"Hmmm, let's see," she began, chewing upon the end of her pencil. "Sarah needs help in shading, and Eliza can't seem to grasp the art in aerial perspective." Charlotte exhaled loudly, slumping in her chair. She just couldn't meet each of their needs in the short hour they had together. A bright smile lit her face as a thought came to mind. "Yes, that's what I'll do!" she exclaimed joyously, pushing back her chair. "I will take them on an outing to the meadow!"

Did that really solve her problem though? Charlotte shrugged lightly as she stood up and stepped away from her art desk. Maybe not, but it would be such fun for the girls.

Charlotte set aside her books and supplies, took off her stained apron, and closed the studio door securely behind her. She just needed to ask permission from her mother, who no doubt would agree wholeheartedly to the plan.

"Oh, how excited my little students are going to be!" Charlotte exclaimed when permission was granted.

And she thought of little else over the course of the next hour.



Rachel Porter stood rigid and silent before her bedroom window.

She watched with pride as her daughter Charlotte led the group of excited girls over to the meadow beyond the school. A quiet smile lay upon her lips as she thought of Charlotte's adventurous spirit.

Charlotte had even been so bold as to climb to the top of one of the highest mountains in Chasahborough to find the perfect setting for a sketch, much to Rachel's dismay.

But that had been when Charlotte was only eleven, and Rachel had since then learned not to grow anxious about her daring adventures. As long as Charlotte didn't instill her mountain climbing interest into her pupils, she didn't see much need to be concerned.

Rachel walked over to the rocking chair by the fire and picked up a sample she'd been working on. She sat down, skillfully threading her needle with bright green thread. She hummed softly as she worked on a pattern of pale pink rosebuds with bright green leaves.

A short while later, she lifted her head from her work as she heard a horse coming down the school entrance.

With a glance out her window she knew at once who it was. With trembling hands, she put her embroidery down and slowly descended the stairs.

She pressed her hands against the bodice of her dress, willing her heart rate to slow. Why did she still suffer such anxiety when she saw that familiar uniform? With a silent plea for help, she opened the door and transformed into a relaxed, gentle, and carefree woman.

"May I help you, Constable Walker?" Rachel inquired, opening the door just wide enough for him to step in.

"I can't stay, Mrs. Porter," he said, looking her up and down with one sweep of his gaze. *Nor would I want to stay if I could*, he thought inwardly. *Mrs. Porter continues to confuse me the more and more I get to know her. It's most unsettling.* "I have only come to report of a missing slave from Mr. Thrutworst's plantation." He paused, glancing discreetly past her and into the spacious school. He hesitated a moment too long.

"If I see anything suspicious I won't hesitate to inform you of the matter." Her tone was brisk, and with a nod to the constable, she shut the door firmly behind her.

Leaning against the door for support, she turned and pressed her forehead gently against the cold wood and listened, almost without breathing, to the fading footsteps.

Why, oh why, could she not just erase the past from her memory?

*It wasn't wrong*, Rachel justified within herself. *I was merely saving a life, a life that would have been full of pain had I not interfered.*

And as she looked out the window and watched the retreating figure of the constable, she left it at that.



"I'll take care of the dishes," Stephen offered, giving William an anxious look. "You look terrible," he commented, noting William's pale face and strained expression.

William smiled halfheartedly, biting back a response. He pushed his chair away from the table and walked over to the sink. He was thankful they had finally dug a trench and placed a pipe from the pond to the kitchen so they wouldn't need to haul water every day. It had been a chore to get the new pipe set, but it was a luxury, so he had no need to complain. Of course, the water still needed to be heated on their wood stove for things such as washing dishes, clothes, and bathing, but it cut down on half the work.

Stephen stood up and joined William by the sink. "No, really," he repeated. "I'll take care of everything, Your Highness, just *please go* and get some rest."

William looked at Stephen and decided there was no point in arguing. And since he was beginning to feel quite ill, he merely nodded his consent. He stopped at the doorframe and turned around, calling Stephen's name.

Stephen glanced up from the pile of dishes.

"Please do away with 'Your Highness,'" William begged, looking Stephen in the eye.

Stephen nodded slowly. "Yes, Your High—" he started, but caught himself mid-word. "I mean, sure thing...William...sir."

Stephen shook his head slightly as William disappeared into the bedroom. "Well, that's going to take some getting used to."



"All right, class," Charlotte bubbled happily, motioning to a pretty patch of bright blue Cornflowers. "Notice how these cornflowers have many different shades of blue just in a single flower."

Her class huddled around the flowers and let out exclamations of delight at the pretty sight.

"They've just bloomed, teacher, haven't they!" declared a little girl with bright red hair, freckles and glasses.

"Yes, Camilla, they have." Charlotte smiled, patting her gently upon the back.

"Now, everyone take out your drawing pads and pencils and work on sketching this patch of cornflowers," Charlotte instructed. "And remember the proper shading techniques I showed you in yesterday's lesson."



"William?" a voice called out in the distance.

William couldn't tell which direction the voice was coming from. But she sounded distressed, as if she were in dire need of help.

If only he could find her, but it seemed a dim hope. He could see nothing in front of him for the fog was too thick.

"William!" the voice was getting louder now.

William began running faster than he'd ever run before.

But why was he running? Why did he care so much about this woman he had never even met?

But that was just the thing. He felt as if he knew exactly who the damsel was, and it was up to him and him alone to save her.

But save her from what? He was unsure of the answer.

"William, help!" the voice cried out again.

William stopped at a fork in the path and began listening carefully to everything around him.

Was that running water he heard? A stream! It must be a river of some sort! As quickly as he could, he began running towards the sound. But nothing could be seen in front of him. His foot caught on something and sent him flying and water surrounded him as he plunged beneath the icy waves.

He was being pulled under by the current!

He fought against the cruel waters but to no avail.

Everything went out of focus, and the world seemed to grow even darker than the blackness he was engulfed in, deeper and deeper and deeper beneath the torrent of the angry abyss.