

*The
Love
Note*

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This is for the #POstables—
especially Amy, Joy, and Crissy.
You are all a joy to know.

One

There are two ways to truly know a person—one is to begin a friendship with them. The other is to end it.

~A scientist's observations on love

BRIGHTON, ENGLAND, 1865

It always came to this, didn't it? Amid the glittering swirl of music and gowns, I looked up into the handsome face of Lord Cumberland and forced a smile as if nothing at all were about to happen.

He leaned close. "It's time we spoke privately."

No. No, not privately. I looked up, willing it not to be so, but his face was sober. Determined. *Decided*.

And things had been going so well between us.

I tried to swallow. Tried and failed. The grand affair swelled around me, sparkling beneath the crystal chandeliers. The vibrant music, the swish of gowns and shoes, faded into the background as our eyes met over the cup of cider he handed me with a lingering touch, and I couldn't

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look away. Good gracious, how I wanted to, but his gaze was relentless. Searching. Full of anticipation. Of course, to make matters worse, he was terribly handsome in that dark and reckless sort of way. Bows continued to hum over violin strings, shoes beating a rhythm on the wood floor, as if life weren't shifting dramatically in this shadowed corner by the drink table.

Cumberland glanced toward my father, the great Dr. Phineas Duvall, who was spouting his opinions to a senator and two solicitors across the grand parlor, then back to me with a self-satisfied smile. Unfortunately, the coast was clear. "Suppose we stroll out to the balcony?"

I was going to be sick. I forced a brilliant smile. "Oh, come now, I've hardly danced."

His brows knit. "Are there other men with whom you were hoping to dance?"

"Of course not." Too quick. Too eager. My voice had pitched higher than old widow Tarskin's roof. I took his arm, looking straight ahead at the dreaded balcony where words would be exchanged and futures altered.

Staring down the barrel of my fourth marriage proposal left me cold and shaky. I had no remedy in our little clinic for what I now faced, no antidote to reverse it.

An evening breeze slipped through the curtains from the balcony and cooled my face. "You'd have me catch my death, would you?" I kept my tone light and swept toward the waiter carrying a tray of tarts. I turned back to make another cheeky comment, but Lord Cumberland's eyes were brimming with the unasked question.

"Just for a moment." He moved close and I felt his breath. "I promise to keep you warm."

My arms prickled inside my long gloves. His voice felt invasive. Intimate. I glanced around for Father, but he had stepped out, likely to discuss the never-ending research for his new clinic. How I wish I could trade that discussion for the one being thrust upon me.

Cumberland leaned down, his hand cupping my elbow. “Come now, you know I’m a gentleman.”

But I *didn’t* know. How could I? With chaperoned outings and puddle-deep conversations, we were strangers. Yet he was about to suggest we share a home, our lives, ourselves, for good. Oh, heavens.

What was *wrong* with me, anyway? Hadn’t men and women been stepping into such a promise for centuries? Willingly, no less.

With an impulsive smile, I grabbed his hand. “Come. I’ve not given you your dance yet.”

His look darkened. “There’s no need—”

“Of course there is.” I could be relentless too. “I promised you, didn’t I? And I never make a promise I don’t intend to keep. Ever.” I let my gaze linger, but his expression didn’t register understanding. Only frustration at the interruption to his plans.

With a set jaw, he swept me into the dance, and the familiar rhythm pulled us along.

His voice was terse. Acidic. “I suppose this is the most privacy you will afford me tonight, so I’ll simply have to pose my question here.”

“What could two friends have to say to one another that couldn’t be said on a dance floor?” He’d been *such* a good friend too. Quite diverting.

He spun me close in the waltz. “You know I want more,

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Miss Duvall.” His mint-laced breath washed over my face. Deeper meaning darkened his eyes.

Innocent. Look innocent. Smile. “Nothing is greater than friendship.”

“Willa—”

“Especially when I’m so busy helping Father. He has more patients than he can tend, and plans for a most brilliant clinic.”

“You wouldn’t have to do that anymore. I’m offering you a fine home in Manchester.”

Offering four walls, closing in around me.

“I’m trying to rescue you from all this. You don’t deserve what’s been heaped upon you.”

Rescue me from a rich and glorious life, working beside a most beloved father? Rescue me from saving lives, from pouring myself out for the broken and desperately needy? And he was right—I had done nothing to deserve the beauty and richness of my life.

His arms framed me in a way that was strong and guiding, yet restrictive. “Please. I can give you everything you desire.”

But no one seemed to recognize what that was—least of all the men who proposed.

My heart sifted through tender memories from earlier this day. A new child entering the world. A man whose foot had been spared by my work and a girl whose life had been saved. I had saved a life. A whole *life*. How could anyone think I’d wish that taken away from me? We twirled faster and harder, my heart thudding the rhythm.

I recalled the girl’s mum clinging to that dear child, sobbing in messy relief. Even now I had a lump in my throat thinking about it. I wasn’t ready to stop having days like this.

Not for any man in the world. I lifted my chin and looked directly into his handsome face. “I’m sorry, but I cannot accept your offer.”

He blinked. “You are refusing me?”

“Most apologetically, but firmly.” I was probably the only girl who would. Myles Cumberland was a squire’s son, well-educated and handsome to boot.

His neat mustache twitched. “After all the time we’ve spent together, I demand a reason.”

“As for the time together, my reason is simply that I enjoyed your company as another human being. As for the refusal . . . I cannot say.” How desperately I wished to, for the truth burned my tongue, but I restrained myself. There lay the problem with every failed courtship I’d ever experienced—the men had expected to lay claim to all I was, minus my brain. Female intelligence was an unwelcome intruder in every romance. But why? *Why?*

The music crescendoed and his voice grew loud. Urgent. “I must request that you tell me.”

I racked my brain, but found it overrun with patient data, clinical trials, and the periodic table, of all things. “We are not suited. Oil and water. Sodium and nitrogen.”

He frowned. “Sodium and . . . ?”

“Nitrogen is stable, and sodium would never react with it. In fact, sodium is stored—”

“In the queen’s English, please.”

I sighed. “There’s no combustion, no change to either element. They’re a terrible combination.” His eyes narrowed, and I pushed myself to land closer to the truth. “I do not have feelings for you that a wife should possess for her husband.”

“Perhaps I can change your mind.”

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Not unless you can change yourself. I cut my thoughts short before they tumbled out of my mouth. “I’m sorry, but my answer is firm. I cannot marry you.”

He glared with the threat of argument in his eye.

Louder. Firmer. I collided into his arms as he stopped. “Myles, I do *not* love you.”

I froze in the sudden awareness that the music had ended—before I’d made my bold pronouncement. Chittering laughter and whispers filled the silence, and heat spidered up my face.

He stepped back and cleared his throat, voice low and private. “Well, now. It must be true, for you’ve ensured there are a hundred witnesses to verify your blatant lack of affection.”

“Myles, please don’t—”

“Good evening, Miss Duvall.” He bowed deeply. “Good evening, and goodbye.”

• • •

I escaped home and up to my attic room with a sickened heart, a biting conscience, and a burgundy-colored stain on my gown where I’d collided with someone’s drink. Fanny, our only maid, loosened the fastenings of my gown, then I dismissed her in a fit of agitation and pulled off the heavy gown myself. I had yet to face Father, who had buried himself deep in conversation at the reception. Hopefully the carriage had already returned for him so he wouldn’t be stranded long. I let down my hair, the great untamable mass of curls, and finished undressing.

Down to my chemise and stays, I donned a soft wrapper and shoved aside the notebooks and medical journals cluttering my desk. A little framed portrait smiled up at me and

I leaned close to it. “Mama, I said no again.” I touched her face, forever preserved in the sepia-colored daguerreotype. It was a strange, rather starkly empty world when one’s mother was no longer in it, but here in this private attic dormer room, I felt traces of her. “I said no this morning to a doctor who tried to brush aside my concerns, and I saved a girl’s life. Then I said no to a man who wished to marry me . . . and I believe I saved my own.” I laid my cheek on the desk, tracing her gentle eyes. “Are you terribly disappointed?”

Her warm smile made it impossible to think she would be.

Yet the truth remained. I had a problem. Spinsterhood was setting in like a malignant disease, and I had an adverse reaction to the only remedy—marriage. I pulled out my lined notebook and fitted the last nib to my pen. It was time to address the illness, look for patterns, and determine an acceptable treatment.

The inevitable result of any friendship with the opposite gender seems to be, unequivocally, romance and matrimony—or a complete break. Therefore, the solution is that I must either give myself over to such a fate or end all friendships with the entire male population.

I recalled the bouncing lanterns of Lord Cumberland’s retreating carriage. Perhaps a lack of men in my life wouldn’t be terrible.

How anyone can find a remedy of any sort in—

The nib popped off my pen and went flying, rolling into the dark crevice on the left side of the desk. I attacked the little

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space with a hat pin, threading the nib out, and something crinkled as the nib inched out. I prodded deeper. A lovely vellum envelope appeared, still folded and sealed with wax, the corners softened by years. How long had it been there? I looked over the unmarked missive with delight, only hesitating a moment before breaking the seal and feasting on the lines meant for someone else.

Dear one,

I have no business writing to you, and I'm not certain I'll even have the courage to deliver this, but I must open my overfull heart and let it spill onto the page. I have no right to care for you, but it simply wasn't a choice. You inspired in me a passion both bright and deep when I wasn't looking, and I cannot help but feel you are a sort of clever thief. As I've watched your nature unfold, it leaves me breathless with wonder and profound respect for who you are, and involuntarily craving more of you.

Lest you think my affections misplaced, let me remind you that I've known you long enough to see it all. I've seen the strength and kindness you believe go unnoticed, watched when you thought no one was looking, and observed what exists below the surface. I know your strengths, and I know most of your weaknesses too—know them and appreciate them as part of the person I have come to admire deeply, the one who has now utterly and unexpectedly captured my heart after all this time. I marvel at the way you are, those strengths and weaknesses woven so deftly together, driving you through life with such passion and sometimes holding

you back until I simply want to wrap my arms around you and whisper everything I've tried to say in this letter.

I even know that secret you hoped to keep from everyone. Yes, I know all of it, and I choose you in spite of—or maybe because of—all those things. I choose those unbelievable strengths, those weaknesses you try to hide—every bit of it because it's all you, and I choose you. Every day, every moment, I choose you.

You needn't feel any obligation concerning me. My deepest wish is simply to openhandedly offer up to you these words of affection, that you might walk through your day knowing someone loves you and finds you remarkable. Dearest, if only you could see yourself from where I stand—how brave and unstoppable you would become. I want that for you, more than I want a return for my affection.

If this letter finds you favorably disposed toward me, I'll be happy beyond all comprehension. If I hear nothing from you, I will cut all ties to Crestwicke and go far away, for I cannot bear to remain. Even then I would not forget you. Every time I smell forget-me-nots, I will think of you . . . and remember.

*Warmly, your most
affectionate and ardent
admirer*

I drank it all in, the painfully authentic words wrapping themselves around my heart, and I could not look away. I'd made the right decision each time I'd said no, because every romance I'd ever encountered was nothing compared to the

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passion and devotion in this single page. What a farce they all seemed in comparison.

I fitted nib to pen and wrote again.

My adverse response to the cure of spinsterhood may indicate a problem with the treatment rather than the patient. The missing ingredient in the tonics I've been offered is authenticity. A thick coating of that, and I should be able to swallow any marriage without breaking out in hives.

Alas, most of the men with that virtue have already become someone else's antidote to spinsterhood . . .

I pushed aside my notes and tucked my legs up to my chest, returning to that wonderful letter, both giddy and enchanted with my find. I had a healthy obsession with love stories, after all—as long as they were not mine. I read it again, and a surge of energy bore through me, like a calling. What had happened to its writer, and why had it never been delivered?

When I came to the name “Crestwicke,” an idea took shape, like a silent whisper answering my morning prayer for direction. I blinked at its brilliance and wondered if I had the audacity to see it through.

Low voices below distracted me. A door slammed. When footfall pounded on the stairs, the rail creaking under the force of Father's grasp, I had an instinctive urge to flee. I shoved the letter into a drawer and rose, fumbling in my wardrobe for a simple front-button frock.

Trinkets rattled on the hall table as Father pounded toward my room.

Bang, bang. His fist rattled the door. “Willa!”

I stiffened. “I need to dress.”

He shuffled in the hall as he always did when presented with such awkward declarations. He used to pass me off to Mother at this point, God rest her. “Things went well with your suitor?”

I buried my face in a clean dress and cringed, then slipped the simple thing over my stays. “I should say not.” *Please don't ask, please don't ask.*

More shuffling. “So. He did not propose yet.”

I braced myself, awash in prickly heat. My silence answered his question.

He growled and banged the door with his fist again. “What are you *thinking*? Four proposals, Willa. *Four!*”

My nervous fingers fiddled with the buttons as I tried to fit them into the holes that seemed to have suddenly shrunk. “What of it?”

“That's four fine men who entered our home with hopes for a future with you and left empty-handed.” Then he asked the question I dreaded. “*Why?*”

I leaned against the metal bed rail. “Oh Papa, we weren't suited.” When faced with the men who offered to share their various homes, freedom always seemed sweeter and ripe with possibilities in comparison.

“Aaargh. At least come up with a new excuse! Some man pours his heart out and asks for your hand, and the only word in your foolish little head is *no*?”

“My soul cringes at the idea of marrying any of them, Father. Please understand.”

He exhaled, and I could imagine him looking heavenward as if begging the Almighty for patience. “What am I expected to do with you? You are breaking hearts, girl.”

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“You overestimate their affection for me, Father.” The only reason they’d offered for me at all, I was convinced, is because I’d kept my hands busy and my lips closed in their presence. They noticed my vigorous efficiency about Father’s clinic, my prudent nursing nature, and they thought how well those skills would be applied in their own homes. Yet there was so much about me they didn’t know—or care to know.

How is your dear aunt these days? She’s well, thank you, but she has a touch of the stiffness. Did you enjoy the jaunt into town? I hear the queen has ordered new curtains for the third largest parlor in Osborne House. That’s all my courtships had ever amounted to, and every fiber of my being craved to be worth more.

Explaining this to Father would be useless, for he had chosen my own dear mother on their second meeting, and they had been inseparable. Embarrassingly so, at times.

His second wife, my honored stepmother, had wheedled her way into our home after two years of “assisting the widowed doctor,” and theirs was a functional relationship. “It’s good to have someone,” he’d said when announcing his engagement, and my ten-year-old self had wondered why I was not a “someone.” Despite the countless hours I had spent assisting in his research, caring for his patients, all I poured into his dream to open Brighton’s first hot springs clinic, marriage was the only solution he saw to his problems—and mine, apparently.

Yet I shivered every time I thought of all the people dying in London’s hospitals, and I knew *that* was the problem I wanted to solve. I crossed to the door, leaning my back against it. “Let me make a go of it, won’t you? I could take nursing positions, earn my own tuition for university.” I had one life

to spend, and I wanted to use it on those who truly needed me. I would be different than all those busy, overworked doctors in hospitals, and I would save people.

“All the funds in the world won’t help if they all refuse you admission.”

“One. Only *one* school rejected my application. But Durham will consider a woman eventually, I’m sure of it. They’re progressive, I’ve heard. And next week is the general election—anything could happen, if Darby’s government doesn’t gain majority in the house.”

A growl rumbled deep in his chest. “What’ll you do if nothing changes? Become a spinster?”

“There are worse things a body could be.” I rested my fingertips on the paneled door. *I saved a life today, Father. Fought for a little girl and won. She’s with her mother now because of me. Because of what you taught me. Aren’t you proud?*

“You’ll be forever shuffling about my house, eating at my table when you’re thirty. When will you grow up and make something of yourself?”

I stepped back and perched on the edge of my bed, the burden of my very existence weighing me to the quilted cover. How did he do that? They were mere words, but everything the man said had the ability to pierce deep and remain lodged in my heart, my world forming around them.

“Cumberland has offered you security, comfort, and ease.”

None of which I wanted. I closed my eyes, willing this man who had raised me to understand. I’d spent years of my life buried in reports and clinical studies, poring over design ideas for the very modern and sterile hot springs clinic Father meant to open. I’d given up socials and plays, trips to town and all novels, to devote myself to perfecting his dream—*our*

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dream. A contrast to London's "death halls," it was needed. I was needed—and not as a manager of some man's home. "I'd never make a suitable wife, Father. I'm not cut out for it. I'm meant to heal and serve and study medicine. Like you."

His voice had a gruff edge to it. "It's time you find your own way. Not mine. You're four and twenty, and you need a home of your own." He sighed. "It's that infernal Blackwell woman, isn't it?"

I clenched my fist at the mention of her sacred name—one that was now recorded in the General Medical Council's Medical Register. It was the first female name there, which opened up the possibility for a second. "Won't you let me—"

"No."

"Not even a small—"

"What part of no isn't clear?" He spun, mumbling down the hall.

"Papa, wait. What if I promise . . ." I gulped. The boot clomps paused. "Promise to consider marriage if it doesn't work?" That's how drastically I believed in my passion. I staked my freedom on it.

A shuffle. "Without argument?"

"I have an idea." Rising, I walked back to my little teak-wood writing desk and dipped the pen tip.

I, Willa Duvall of Brighton, do solemnly vow and promise to return and entertain more proposals in the event that I am not able to successfully complete one long-term nursing assignment. However, if I am successful, I will be allowed to pursue a medical education and never be forced to marry.

I whipped it off my desk and shoved it under the door with a swish. Grumbling reached my ears from the other side. I pictured the great Dr. Phineas Duvall lowering those dark thundercloud eyebrows and whipping the pen from behind his ear to sign. I heard intense scribbling against the door as I picked at the hem of my sleeve, then the note was shoved back under the door. *Swish.*

I, Willa Duvall of Brighton, do solemnly vow and promise to return and ~~entertain more proposals~~ immediately marry the man of my father's choosing in the event that I am not able to successfully complete one long-term nursing assignment within one month's time.

I frowned at the change, then added one of my own.

Nursing situation to be chosen by Willa without complaint from her father.

Swish. It was shoved again, and I waited. More scribbles. I chewed my fingernails—when did I *ever* do that?

The day I considered signing my independence away, apparently. I reached for the knob to fling open the door and retract the deal, but it was too late. *Swish.* The contract came back.

Signed.

I lifted it with shaky fingers and read it several times without truly digesting it all. I stood on the edge of a precipice. Soon I'd be a full-fledged medical student—or a wife.

Checking to ensure my hastily donned frock covered everything necessary, I opened the door and stared at Father, taking

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in the long gray frown of his mustache, arms folded over his broad chest as if letting nothing penetrate his heart.

I'd seen the list of his patients requesting a nurse, but I didn't even have to think about which name I'd choose. I lifted my chin, thoughts of that beautiful letter making me bold. "I choose Golda Gresham at Crestwicke."

"*Crestwicke?*" He paled, a red vein protruding on his forehead, then those storm-cloud eyebrows lowered.

Crestwicke Manor stood on the salty coast outside of Brighton, a rambling old Tudor structure of dark wood and shadowed mysteries—much like my lovely desk that had come from it. Its walls contained one Golda Gresham, in need of a nurse, as well as the writer of that enchanting letter.

Father's powerful gaze that could wither full-grown men on the hospital board was now directed at me. "*Gresham's Crestwicke?*" A growl vibrated his chest. "Out of the question."

I simply pointed a steady finger at the last line. He was allowed no arguments. If he insisted on choosing my husband, I was owed that.

His eyes flashed. "No, no, no, *no!*" He kicked the wall, rattling the little bottles on my dresser.

Footsteps hurried up the stairs, and Thelma's generous, pudgy face with too-close eyes appeared on the landing behind Father, shadowed by the lamp she carried. Compared to my beautiful mother, she was, like her position here, merely serviceable. "Phineas?"

Father handed her the paper we'd signed. The very gown about my ribs seemed to constrict as I stood before them, waiting for her appraisal.

"She chose Crestwicke." Father growled and slapped the paper with the back of his hand. "*Crestwicke.*"

She looked up at both of us with raised eyebrows, her face like the lump of dough she kneaded every evening. I held my breath. Sometimes life hinges on a few words, and these were the ones that would pivot mine: “Crestwicke it is, then.”

My breath gushed out.

His eyes widened. “You can’t be serious, woman.”

“There are some things, Phineas, that you eventually must let her decide for herself.” She sent Father a look heavy with meaning.

When the door closed behind them, I dug out that wonderful letter and read it four more times, losing myself in the poetry of its lines. How beautiful it was. How romantic. Languishing for years in a dark crack of my old desk, this letter had waited for the right person to find it—one who would become enchanted by its contents and do something with it. I, the spinster scientist who had just rejected yet another suitor, was the keeper of this letter, and nothing could be more fitting. Normally I heal people’s bodies for a living. Now I hoped to heal hearts as well.

Downstairs, I touched my stepmother on the arm as she kneaded dough with the strength of a cart horse. We had a maid-of-all-work, but bread was her specialty and she insisted on torturing herself this way. “Thank you, Thelma.”

She turned, wiping her forehead with the back of her floury hand, and gave a single nod. Her eyes searched mine as if wishing to connect to something there. “I know what it is to love someone deeply. Every girl ought to have that chance.”

I studied this woman with whom I’d shared a house for many years and wondered at the soft heart that beat within her sturdy chest. “Father?”

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She turned away and kneaded harder, her bent neck mottled with rosy color. “He’s a fine man, that Phineas Duvall. A fine, fine man.”

I was speechless.

“You’d best win yourself a husband at Crestwicke or you’ll come back to find one waiting for you.” She cut through the dough with a long knife, then brandished the tool in my direction with narrowed eyes. “And whatever you do, keep that tongue in your head. Hear me? *In your head!*” She swatted my cheek with her floury hand for good measure.

“Words have always been my secret weapon.”

She glanced at me, a tiny sparkle in her eyes. “Aye, and you have a quiver full of them.”

I smiled as I backed away, thinking of the powerful words in that letter. Maybe being in the presence of such a raw and beautiful love story, of helping two souls find their end of the rainbow in each other, would finally inspire my own.

Because secretly, very secretly, much as I feared it, I did wish to fall in love. I just hadn’t any idea who . . . or how to still be who I was.

I pictured Crestwicke Manor, that proud old country house hunched on the coast watching decades of shipwrecks and sunsets and lovers on the beach. Somewhere in those vast ivy-covered walls lived a person who was about to have the happiest surprise ever.

As long as it wasn’t too late.