

LOVE ALONG THE WIRES • 2



CROSSED
LINES

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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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I love the LORD, because he hath heard my voice and
my supplications.
Because he hath inclined his ear unto me. . . .
What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits
toward me?
I will take the cup of salvation, and call upon the
name of the LORD.

—Psalm 116:1–2; 12–13



For Zana Rose

A friend loveth at all times . . .
and there is a friend that
sticketh closer than a brother.

—Proverbs 17:17; 18:24

CHAPTER

One

London, England

June 1881

Mitchell B. Harris, better known to readers of the *Era* as Our London Correspondent, leaned casually on the desk of John Munson, toying with his cane while Munson chuckled over what he was reading.

Mitchell had to admit this was one of his better pieces. Although he worked days at the Central Telegraph Office, this side job as a theater critic provided him with a lot of satisfaction in addition to extra cash. What could be better than to get free tickets to the latest shows *and* be paid for his reviews?

“There is no doubt Mr. Rutger and some in the audience thought his interpretation of Hamlet rivaled that of the great David Garrick,” Munson read aloud. “They are absolutely correct: like the long-dead actor, Rutger’s performance is a hundred years out-of-date. Stiff and posed with arms outstretched, he declaimed the words of Britain’s immortal poet like a barely

alive statue.” Munson looked up, grinning. “It’s rather a savage assessment, Harris.”

“Thank you for that compliment,” Mitchell returned with a smile. “You know the *Era*’s readers have come to expect brutal honesty from Our London Correspondent by now.”

“Oh, I’m not complaining. Your incisive theater reviews are increasing our readership.” Munson tossed the paper onto the desk. “However, it will hardly win you any favors from the theater managers. They might force us to buy the tickets instead of getting them for free.”

“I agree that would be bad. I would be especially grieved if I’d had to pay for that overstuffed performance. Sacrificing three hours of my time was a high enough price.”

Munson lifted a brow. “Was it truly that bad? You must admit you veer close to hyperbole at times.”

“Nonsense. I never exaggerate. In point of fact, I consider that review to be the epitome of restraint. You know how it irks me when actors—and schoolteachers, for that matter—purposely make Shakespeare difficult to understand.” As he spoke, Mitchell rose from his position on the desk. Keeping his weight on his good left leg, he set his cane in position next to his right boot to secure his balance. Fired up by his favorite subject of complaint, he set off at an agitated clip toward the open window. The day was warm, and the office felt stifling. “There’s a reason Shakespeare was so popular with the ordinary people of his day. Why do you suppose he could pack the theater for every performance with three thousand people from all walks of life? It’s because they connected viscerally with his characters, who are exquisite combinations of goodness, foibles, and follies. Those characters are living and breathing creations—so long as the actors don’t suck the life out of them.” Reaching the window, he leaned forward to find some fresh air. “I’d pay good money to see a production that did them justice.”

Sam Boyle, one of the *Era*’s most prolific journalists, hap-

pened to be passing by along the pavement outside. Hearing Mitchell's remark, he grinned. "That's quite a statement, Harris, considering what a pinchfist you are."

Mitchell motioned with his head back toward the office. "I think you have me confused with Munson on that score."

"Careful, Harris," Munson warned. But there were no teeth in his threat.

Mitchell settled himself on the windowsill, his thoughts still on the point he'd been making. He knew how thrilling a performance of Shakespeare could be when done properly. He'd seen it once, when he was an eight-year-old pauper in Manchester. On a bitterly cold, blustery day in February, he'd snuck into a theater, seeking warmth he would never find at home. The burly man who normally guarded the stage door had stepped away, and Mitchell slipped inside. He'd made it all the way to the wings. Heat from the bright stage lights seeped even to the backstage area. The afternoon performance was in full swing. Mitchell hunkered down behind a pile of unused stage furniture. From there, he could see and hear the actors.

It had been a revelation. Many of the words were unfamiliar to him, as though the actors were speaking a different language. Yet somehow he'd understood them perfectly. Their movements, inflections, and the easy way they'd spoken the lines brought the story vividly to life. During the interval, he'd been caught by the stage crew and tossed out on his ear, but by then he'd seen enough to awaken him to a new world. That was the beginning of his love for the theater. He'd even nurtured dreams of becoming an actor when he grew up. Unfortunately, the factory accident had ended those dreams forever.

The office door opened, and Sam Boyle breezed in. "Brought in another gem, Harris? Who's getting raked over the coals today?"

"Lyman Rutger," Munson supplied.

"Really?" Sam let out a low whistle. "You're brave to attack a revered actor like him."

“*Attack* is such an ugly word,” Mitchell protested mildly. “I merely dissected his performance and found a few flaws.”

Sam chuckled. “I’ve no doubt it was a *dissection*. You’re the best anatomist out there! However, I can’t help but think this will ruffle a few important feathers.” He turned to Munson. “What does our esteemed editor have to say?”

Munson puffed out his chest. “The *Era* is the vanguard of popular opinion. We don’t parrot it; we create it. If Rutger is past his prime, we have every right to say so.”

“Excellent.” Sam turned back to Mitchell. “Heaven help you, though, if anyone ever finds out you’re Our London Correspondent.” He pulled out a half-smoked cigar and stuck it, unlit, into his mouth. “On the other hand, maybe they have. Maybe those weren’t just random street thugs you fought off last week.”

“I’d like to think I’m famous enough to merit such attention,” Mitchell said. He rubbed a hand over his fist, which was still sore from the punch he’d been forced to land on the man who’d been threatening him. He’d proven he could take care of himself, though, despite his defect.

“You coming with us to the Blue Crown?” Sam asked.

Mitchell shook his head. “I’ve got a report due at the office tomorrow, and I need to work on it.”

Last week, Mitchell had been pegged by his overseer to help with a restructuring project to improve the work flow at England’s busiest telegraphic hub. Mr. Price had noticed Mitchell’s facility with a pen and had assigned him to compile the needed documentation. Mitchell was happy to take on this task. He was seeking a promotion, and doing extra work could only improve his prospects.

However, the report was far from complete. He’d spent much of yesterday finishing the theater review in order to submit it by the press deadline. Now he owed the CTO some unofficial time in return. Keeping up with two jobs was a bit of a balancing

act at times, but Mitchell was good at balancing—especially the kind that didn't involve physical feet.

He appreciated that these men at the *Era* treated him like an equal. He didn't get that level of respect at the CTO—at least, not from everyone. Mr. Price understood his worth, but other men there were not so intelligent.

"It's too bad you can't come," Sam said. "The barmaid always seems more attentive when you're with us." He waggled his brows. "I've seen her send more than a few admiring looks your way."

Mitchell let out a disbelieving grunt. "That's because I'm the only one who gives her good tips."

"Not so, my friend. It's because you make her laugh."

Yes, but was she laughing *with* him or *at* him? It was often hard to tell. Too often women mistook his limp as a sign of mental weakness, just as many men did. He shrugged. "She's not the type for me."

No, there was only one woman interesting enough to turn Mitchell's head—a beautiful blonde who always looked as though she were walking on air, as though gravity had a tenuous hold on her. Lovely beyond anything Mitchell had ever seen or imagined.

The first time he'd seen her, he'd been riding in an omnibus, idly looking out the window as he traveled to work. The route had grown familiar over the past five years. He knew every street, building, and store along the way. Nothing was especially noteworthy—until the day he'd spotted *her*.

Mitchell had been instantly charmed by her jaunty stride and the way she occasionally sent a smile skyward, as though happy the sun had joined her that day. The scene had bordered on magical. It was as though an invisible hand had purposefully slanted a beam of sunlight toward her, the way a photographer puts extra light on a subject to illuminate it. From that day on, he'd always looked for her and had seen her a few more times. He'd never been disappointed at the display.

Then, last week, he'd made the most remarkable discovery. He'd learned where that woman had been heading every morning—to the very building where he himself worked. His omnibus turned onto St. Martin's Le Grand from Newgate Street just in time for Mitchell to see her going through the main doors of the CTO. It made perfect sense for why he'd often seen her. Hundreds of women worked there as telegraph operators. She must be one of them. Still, Mitchell couldn't help but view this as a miracle. He'd expected she would forever remain a mystery, as ethereal as a mirage.

But one day, if he was truly lucky, he might be able to meet her.