

A large, light gray decorative floral ornament with symmetrical, swirling patterns. The word "CHAPTER I" is centered within the ornament in a bold, black, serif font.

# CHAPTER I

*A*dventure awaits.

Charlotte Edmonds stood on the patio and looked out across the wide expanse of lawn. The canopy glowed flat white against a backdrop of trees, surrounded by men in linen jackets and women in pastel silks and floaty chiffons. Like ants at a picnic, milling and gossiping and picking at bits of food. Perfectly content.

But hardly an adventure.

Charlotte fidgeted with the buttons on her gloves, avoiding eye contact with her mother. Lady Diane sat on a chaise in the shade of an ancient oak. Her blonde hair didn't show a hint of gray, and her slate-colored and severely tailored day dress only served to heighten the steel of her eyes. The space beside her yawned empty, waiting for Charlotte to fill it.

Expectation of Charlotte's every future move laid out in pale silk and small talk.

The thought made Charlotte want to run. Across the terrace, over the ha-ha, and into the trees beyond. Never to look back.

But the ha-ha lay at the far end of the lawn, and she'd have to dodge neighbors, footmen, and her mother to get there. And then dive the four feet to the pasture below. Her bid for freedom would surely result in broken bones and a near-terminal decline in social standing. Her mother would scarcely give her time to heal before packing her up and sending her off to finishing school.

And her life would be over at sixteen.

So Charlotte smoothed the lace of her dress — an anemic-looking ecru that Lady Diane insisted was the height of fashion — and pasted on her best smile. She pointed herself in the direction of the party and stepped onto the lawn.

As she passed the new footman, Lawrence, Charlotte used her imagination to turn him into a dashing cavalier. Those high cheekbones and extraordinarily dark blue eyes were just too enchanting to be wasted on a mere manservant. He would have to be a deposed Italian prince, who would carry her off to live in a community of poets and adventurers who never talked about the weather.

“Think it will rain?”

Charlotte came crashing back to The Manor and her mother’s garden party. Lord Andrew Broadhurst hovered near her right elbow.

Safe, dependable, ever-present Andrew Broadhurst. With his dependably brown hair flopping over one dependably brown eye, dressed dependably in white linen and a straw boater hat.

Eighteen, heir to the Earl of Ashdown, with a good head for business and cricket and not much else. Lady Diane loved him, despite his rather quirky habit of asking how the pudding was made. *Perfect marriage material.*

The sun beat down on the back of Charlotte’s neck, making her feel itchy and cross. She opened her mouth to snipe, but over Andrew’s shoulder, she saw her mother watching.

So Charlotte lifted her chin a little and tipped her head to one side, smiling up at him from just beneath the veil of her new hat.

“Why, yes,” she said. “Yes, I think it will.” Adding in her mind, *Eventually.* It always rained in England eventually. It would be September on Friday. Surely the drought couldn’t last forever.

Andrew frowned up at the sky — a clear blue like something found in a hand-painted photograph.

Charlotte took the temporary distraction as a gift and used it to excuse herself, earning a glare from her mother but also a chance to breathe again beneath her corset, which seemed to tighten every time Andrew approached.

Skirting the edge of the party, Charlotte sought relief in the shade of the canopy and in the company of Frances Caldwell, her only friend in the entire crowd.

“What have you been daydreaming about?” Fran asked. Her blonde hair was cut daringly short, and perfectly framed her heart-shaped face, the corner of her little bow mouth tipped up into a teasing smile.

“Escape.” Charlotte cast a quick look at her mother, hoping she was less observant than Fran.

“And the new footman,” Fran whispered. “I can tell.”

Then she turned and waved Lawrence over.

Charlotte felt a blush start to rise and tried suppressing it with thoughts of throwing Fran into The Manor’s lake. But Fran just swiped a lemon ice from Lawrence’s tray and thanked him politely. Lawrence inclined his head and turned away.

“He *is* handsome,” Fran said before he walked out of earshot. Charlotte thought she saw Lawrence hesitate as if waiting to hear her reply, his head turned slightly so she could see the line of his jaw.