

THE TALES BEHIND THEM
By Susan Gee Heino

*Little Bo-Peep has lost her sheep,
and doesn't know where to find them;
leave them alone,
and they'll come home,
bringing their tails behind them.*

*Village of Biggly Feld
Sussex, England, 1813*

“Come along, ladies. Do not dawdle, please!”

Miss Beatrice Shepherd led her small group of students from the church and back toward their school building. Which was actually a house. Miss Shepherd’s house, more precisely.

Since the untimely death of her father three years ago, it had become a school. Oh, certainly it was not nearly so grand as the prestigious boys’ academy that her father had run, but after his death it was impossible to keep that building. Papa, she had come to learn, was a brilliant educator, but a pitiful businessman. His school building was mortgaged, and he owed everyone in the county. Such had been his devotion to teaching that he had run up bills beyond anything she could hope to repay and still keep his school.

So, she had done what she had to do and sold all of Papa’s assets. The boys from Papa’s school had been sent elsewhere and Beatrice was left to start her life over again. At nearly 30 years old and beyond any hope of ever making a happy match for herself, she did the only thing she knew how to do.

She gathered up what few resources she had left and opened a school. Miss Shepherd’s Academy for Ladies had been running for two years now and she was just beginning to feel hopeful. True, she had only eight students, but this was a start. Each time Beatrice counted out potatoes for dinner or shivered at night rather than use up her allotment of coal, she reminded herself that she had not taken on this challenge to make a fine profit.

Indeed, her academy was not for the well-bred daughters of prominent gentry. Instead, Beatrice had answered a higher calling; her academy was open to young women who came from questionable backgrounds, girls who had perhaps made a few mistakes. Of course Beatrice could hardly expect them to pay great sums for her services, but she could offer them hope for a brighter future.

The school was her passion, the students were her life. Yes, she wore a gown

that was more mending than seams, but she wore it with pride. Just as she taught her ladies, she would hold her head high when walking through their village. After all, hadn't everyone some disagreeable element in their ancestry? Hadn't everyone made a mistake here or there?

Beatrice knew that she certainly had.

Looking beyond the cobbled streets and timbered shops of the only market area in Biggly Feld, she felt the familiar flutter inside her chest. She tried to look away from the landscape, but it was hopeless. Whenever her gaze caught on the beautiful home on the faraway hillside, she couldn't help but stare. And struggle with her emotions. Her reaction was always the same; a dancing, sinking sensation in her gut and the cold grip of pain over her heart.

Wolfenstone. That was the name of the house. It sprawled over the landscape, a palatial masterpiece that occupied a graceful ridge and was flanked by great forests of oaks, as if it were some grand being, perched on a kingly throne. The estate encompassed most of the lands around Biggly Feld, practically all the way to Crawley, and was known to everyone. The family who lived there enjoyed all the privilege, veneration, and excess that the massive stone façade seemed to represent. The Wolfe family, after all, owned nearly everything.

One former resident of the home owned slightly more than the others. Despite all the years and all the effort to forget, Beatrice still could not deny one simple fact: Lucius Wolfe still owned a bit of her heart.

"Wouldn't it be lovely to visit such grand place, Miss Shepherd?" her youngest student, at fourteen, said with a longing sigh.

"Don't be cheeky, Ella," an older student chastised. "We should be content with our station."

Beatrice sighed. Of course she should reinforce such sentiment; after all, her young ladies needed a firm grasp of reality before they could find their individual place in it. Papa would have agreed and complimented the student on being so sensible. Indeed, hadn't her own life taught Beatrice that there was no use in reaching beyond oneself? That way only led to heartbreak, as she well knew.

Yet still... she cared for these young ladies. They had potential. Despite who their parents were—or weren't—and despite the troubles they had found in their lives, didn't they deserve to have hope? She was bereft of it herself, but that seemed all the more reason not to rip it from them.

Or perhaps that should be the best reason of all to see that her ladies kept their wayward feet firmly planted on the ground.

"Wolfenstone does not often host visitors," she said simply. "The residents there wish to keep to themselves. However, Sussex is filled with beautiful country homes, many as lovely as that, and many of them open for viewing. Perhaps at some point I might arrange an outing for us."

“Oh, could you, Miss Shepherd?” Ella exclaimed.

The older girl, Theresa, seemed unimpressed. “I will not hold my breath. Outings for Miss Shepherd’s students never quite seem to happen.”

Beatrice wished she could argue that point, but Theresa was correct. Several times Beatrice had tried to arrange to take the girls off to see new things, visit interesting places. Never had she been able to make it happen. Quite often the reason was lack of funds, but just as frequently she decided—after deep consideration—that an outing was not in the best interest of her girls.

Frankly, some of them were still a bit rough around the edges. They came from families where education had previously not been encouraged, where language was coarse and condemning. They were daughters with no fathers, or daughters with scandalized mother, or daughters of parents who earned their livings through labor and toil. To make matters worse, some of the girls had proved unruly in their past. They were not quite ruined, but their families had placed them here to deter their headlong rush into that condition.

No, these young women were not gently bred nor generously treated, yet someone in their lives had seen fit to seek out Miss Shepherd and place them with her. It was her duty to see that she gave them every opportunity for improvement. And that meant protecting them from public scorn.

They simply needed time. Another term—or two—and her older students would be ready to step out. People would see what they had become and have faith in Miss Shepherd. More girls would enroll, and her academy would grow. Yes, Beatrice felt that they were all well on the way to success.

These girls had futures before them. They could be governesses or teachers. For the ones who hoped to marry, their training here meant they could expect to marry men of good character and solid means. They would have daughters and one day send them to the academy where they would, in turn...

A commotion in the street interrupted her happy daydreams. She and the girls barely jumped out of the way as a pack of loud young boys came racing around a corner. They were waving sticks, pointing them as guns or brandishing them as swords. Each boy whooped and hollered as he ran along.

“They’re coming! They’re coming!”

The girls squealed in surprise and gathered into a tight group to defend themselves. The boys, however, were more intent on creating general mayhem than in terrorizing the girls. Beatrice reached out and grabbed one passing boy by the collar.

“Hold on there, lad. What is all this? *Who* is coming?”

The boy wriggled, but Beatrice held him fast. Annoyed, he looked up at her and wrinkled his dirty face.

“The regiment, of course! They’re camping outside the village. Isn’t that a jolly

rip? We'll have soldiers in our town!"

The boy squirmed away from her before she could ask for any more details, but the shouts and calls of the other boys clearly supported his assertion. It appeared someone had brought word of the regiment's arrival and now every boy in Biggly Feld was rushing out to the encampment. Indeed, it was not every day that a regiment set up so near to them all, but Beatrice truly did not see any reason to be quite so excited about it as these wild boys seemed to be.

And then she noticed the giggles and obvious excitement in her girls.

"Soldiers!" Ella sighed. "Do you think they will come into the village?"

"I'd be glad to send them a personalized invitation" another girl laughed.

"Officers are perfectly dashing."

"Oh, but I hope we get to see them!" another said breathlessly.

"See them?" one of the older girls giggled. "I hope we get to talk to them."

Theresa was clearly already far ahead of the others. "I plan to dance with them! Surely with so many young men in our area someone will host a ball."

Before the girls could become completely swept away with this notion, Beatrice stepped in.

"Ladies! We do not stand on the street gossiping like laundry maids. If the regiment is encamped near our village, I have no doubt some of their men will be seen upon occasion. Your behavior, of course, is expected to be above reproach."

"But Miss Shepherd, surely if there is a ball... and we are invited... no one could think it wrong if we danced."

"None of you are out of the schoolroom. Dancing at a public ball is entirely out of the question! Now come along, ladies. This is a senseless conversation. There are no soldiers at hand, no ball has been planned, and we must get back to our rooms."

She hurried them along but their displeasure with her was quite obvious. If the rumor of a regiment was true, and if anyone in Biggly Feld did decide to hold a ball, Beatrice knew she'd have a battle on hand. And this was *not* one that she wanted the gallant lads bearing His Majesty's arms to win!

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Lucius Wolfe raked a hand through his hair and rolled his shoulders to try and untie the multiple knots there. He had been sitting at his father's broad desk for too many hours today. Books and ledgers for the estate spilled over the edges while piles of papers cluttered each corner. Candles burned low and the clock on the mantle had wound itself down so that it no longer ticked.

Lucius glanced over the mess on the desk and couldn't help but smile at the weary man seated across from him. Mr. Brown, the family steward, looked just as

exhausted and ragged as Lucius felt.

“Forgive me,” Lucius sighed. “I had no idea it would be so very involved. Today was the Harvest Festival off in Cawley and I’ve made you miss it.”

“I’m too old for such things, sir. Festivals are for young people. Besides, everyone is attending to see if the soldiers will come out. They’ve been the talk of the county for weeks now, ever since they set up camp.”

“Yes, I have heard of the encampment. Nearly a month now, is it? Sorry I’ve kept you here when you could be off gawking with the others.”

“I’ve no interest in gawking, sir. It is much more important that I stay here and help you.”

“Thank you, Brown,” Lucius said. “I owe you completely. But perhaps we should give up for the night. No doubt things will begin to make more sense in the morning.”

“But you wanted to leave for London first thing tomorrow, sir,” Mr. Brown reminded. “Perhaps if we go over the past six months’ accounts one more time—”

“We’ll merely find the same jumbled results that we’ve found twice already,” Lucius said with a sigh. “No, I’m willing to admit defeat. My father’s books are in such disarray that it will take days—maybe weeks—to sort everything out. I will cancel my plans back in London. I need to be here at this time.”

It wasn’t as if he had anything there that couldn’t get by without him. His business partner in Town could certainly handle things and getting the estate back in order was most important. Lucius should have seen that his father was failing, but he’d been gone most of the time, too busy with his own work to notice.

Perhaps if he and his father had shared a more amiable relationship... if they had been more like father and son and less like strangers... But that was ancient history. Nothing good could come of wishing for what had never been. George Cragston Wolfe had always been a cold-hearted man. He was bitter for losing his young wife, and he was even more bitter that she left behind a soft-hearted son. Despite what Lucius may have wanted, there was never any hope that the two would truly be a family.

“I should have kept a closer watch over things,” he admitted. “Thank you for alerting me to my father’s condition.”

“I’m sorry, sir. He demanded that no one contact you, but I simply couldn’t help myself.”

“You did the right thing, Brown. The doctor says he may recover some of his mind if the infection can be cured, but brain ailments are difficult. He may never be whole again. I’m glad that you sent for me when you did.”

“I only hope it was not too late, sir.”

It was always too late. Lucius kept his thoughts to himself, though. The staff here at Wolfenstone needed no reminders that they served a cruel, difficult master.

Lucius, at least, had the benefit of being able to leave.

He wished it truly was a benefit and not a necessity. Wolfenstone, for all its chilly grandeur, was home and he loved it. He'd hoped that by this stage in his life he would be living here daily, raising a family of his own. It would do much for his soul to hear laughter ring in these halls, see children playing on the furnishings, share his life with another soul who truly cared about him.

But that, also, was wishful thinking that could serve no constructive purpose. He had thought to marry once, but that did not happen. There was no point in dwelling on the past. Or the future.

All that mattered now was seeing that his father got the care he needed and tending to the disaster of estate finances. The way things looked, his father had neglected things far too long. If Lucius hadn't gone off and built his own fortune, there was a very good chance the estate might be lost. Not that he would ever expect his father to thank him.

In fact, if the older man did regain his senses, he would no doubt have nothing but harsh words for Lucius' interference. George Wolfe never missed an opportunity to criticize his son. One would think that after all this time Lucius would be immune to it.

One would be wrong.

A timid rap at the door startled him. Mr. Brown jolted as well, then jumped up to find a footman nervously bringing them word.

"I'm sorry, sir, I know you're busy just now, but there is someone come to the door asking for you!"

Lucius was instantly concerned. He'd only just arrived here this morning and it was now nearly midnight. No one in Biggly Feld would pay a call this late at night, so who could this be? Had something happened back in London?

"It's a *lady*, sir!" the footman added in a scandalized whisper. "A *lady* to see you, at this hour!"

A *lady*? Only one lady instantly flashed through Lucius' mind, but that was impossible. She would never pay him a visit, and certainly not in the middle of the night. He had no idea who it could be. How very perplexing!

Leaving Mr. Brown to tidy up for the night, he followed the footman through the cold corridors to the grand entrance hall. Only a few lamps had been left burning so even when they reached the hall Lucius could not see who was waiting there. It was only as he approached that he could make out the form—a woman, indeed, covered in a cloak and holding it tightly about herself. She paced, nervousness evident in everything about her.

Lucius came closer and held up the taper candle he had brought from the office. She must have heard his footsteps; her pacing stopped. She stood frozen, keeping her back to them. The hood of her cloak covered her head and she seemed more

specter than person.

“May I help you?” Lucius asked.

Finally, she turned. The hood slipped back and he met her eyes. They were just as blue as he remembered.

By God, Beatrice!

“Forgive me for coming,” she said, her voice as thin and fragile as glass. “I heard you were here and... I didn’t know who else to turn to.”

“Of course you are welcome here,” he said, although they both knew there was no “of course” about it.

She had never been welcome here. Yet here she was.

“Come,” he said, nodding a dismissal to the footman who made a polite bow and then left them. “We can speak in the drawing room.”

But she would not budge. “No! This is not a social call. I cannot stay.”

“What is it, Beatrice? What has happened?”

She paused before replying, then cleared her throat and went on.

“I need you to tell me how to enact an elopement.”

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The words sounded silly to her even as she said them. If she weren’t so very desperate she never would have found the courage to speak them aloud! Indeed, just coming here had nearly broken her. To see him again... well, there would be time later to wallow in all the devastating emotions this would dredge up.

For now, she needed to keep her focus on the matter at hand.

“*An elopement?*” he asked, clearly as shocked by her words as she was. “Didn’t we already fail miserably at that?”

“No, I realized my folly and spared us both from it,” she said. “You, however, went on to be quite the expert at it, I’ve heard. At least the initial parts of it, and that is what I need you for tonight.”

“Er, thank you? But what on earth... here, please come and sit down so we can discuss this.”

“No! I’m in a terrible rush, don’t you see?”

“Not even the slightest,” he said, shaking his head. “Please Beatrice... Miss Shepherd. Tell me what has you so upset.”

“My girls, of course.”

“Girls?”

“At the school! My students!”

“Ah yes, I heard that you have students.”

“But that’s just it, I’m afraid. I *don’t* have them!”

“Don’t have them? Well, whatever did you do with them?”

“I’ve lost them! They’ve run off!”

More than anything, she wished she did not have to admit this. It was dreadful, the worst thing that could happen. If Mr. Wolfe should tell anyone about this, her school would be ruined and she’d be put out on the street. He was the last person she wanted to involve in this, but she could think of no one else. She simply had to ignore her feelings and concentrate on her girls. They were the only ones that mattered just now.

He seemed puzzled at first, but then a smile slid over his face. “So, Miss Shepherd has lost her sheep, has she? I suppose I will call you Bo Peep now.”

“You will not!” she snapped. “What you will do is tell me how I can go about stopping an elopement.”

“So that’s why your girls have run off? They are eloping?”

“I believe so.”

“With each other?”

“Of course not! Don’t be thick, Mr. Wolfe. They have run off with *soldiers*. Ever since the regiment has been camped outside the village it has been all I can do to keep my young ladies from dangling after them.”

“I see. And now you believe they have stopped dangling and have actually been snagged?”

“That’s an indelicate way to put it, but yes.”

“And you believe your young ladies have now run off with their beaux?”

“That is exactly what I believe, and I need you to help me stop them!”

“Because you’ve heard what a dastardly, dissolute fellow I am, you assume I would know how to do that.”

“Yes. Precisely. You know the ways a man might lure a young innocent, and you know the places he might take her.”

“Do I?”

“Please, Mr. Wolfe. I do not have time to play games. My girls are in great danger and if we don’t act straight away, they might be ruined!”

“Very well, Beatrice. Your students are in a precarious position and I will do whatever I can. Consider me at your disposal.”

He was mocking her, she was sure, but she couldn’t fret over that now. She didn’t dare go to anyone else and he was uniquely qualified in this matter. Like it or not, the fate of her girls depended on Lucius Wolfe tonight.

“You will be discreet, won’t you? For their sakes?”

“I will be discreet, Beatrice; you have my word. Now quickly, tell me what you know and how you think we should begin.”

“We should begin by you referring to me as Miss Shepherd.”

“Very well. Just so you know, though, I would not mind at all if you referred to me as Lucius.”

She let out a slow breath and tried to remain calm. “I won’t be doing that, sir. You are Mr. Wolfe, if I must refer to you at all. Now look, here is the letter that I found hidden amongst one of my student’s things.”

Taking the folded paper from her pocket, she smoothed it and held it out for his perusal. He took it, read it, then looked at her with suspicion.

“You rummaged through their things?”

“Of course I did! When I found them missing in the middle of the night, of course I looked for any clue I could find.”

“And this is it?”

“Yes.”

She had read the letter six times already and knew it by heart. A young lieutenant named Wilding had written to Theresa, not only professing his love, but hinting at some late-night meeting that involved others of his regiment and, apparently, Theresa’s classmates. His mention of the date was proof positive of his involvement in tonight’s mass disappearance. Given the struggle Beatrice had had keeping the young ladies involved in their studies and not racing off to the parade grounds at every opportunity, the meaning of this letter was obvious; the girls had been persuaded to run off with these men and Beatrice had failed in her duty to them.

“What else do you know?” Mr. Wolfe asked her.

“What else? Nothing! I have heard the girls giggling over soldiers they see in the village, of course, and I had heard that they have been bold enough to speak to them on occasion—a matter I have spoken sharply to them about, I assure you—but I had no idea they were exchanging letters! No, this is a complete shock to me.”

“I have no doubt,” he muttered, studying the letter again. “Have you met this Lt. Wilding?”

“Never.”

“And you do not know these comrades he speaks of?”

“I do not.”

“Clearly your young ladies do.”

“It would appear so. But we must do something! Shouldn’t we be off, going out to find them and bringing them home?”

He turned the letter over as if looking for more information. “Where do we go? The lovesick lieutenant failed to record that particular detail.”

“That’s why I came to you! You know about these things! Where would you take a young lady to ruin her?”

“Where would I? Oh, that’s a difficult question, Beatr... er, Miss Shepherd. There are so many places perfect for just such a thing! Why, I could bring the young lady right here to my home late at night—a night just such as this—and lock her away. Yes, that should to the job, don’t you think?”

“You’re teasing me, Mr. Wolfe, and I’ll not have it. If you don’t wish to be

helpful, then I will just take my leave.”

“No... I’m sorry. Very well, I’ll be sensible. But honestly, Miss Shepherd, it isn’t as if I can know the young man’s mind. I need more of a hint, something further to go on if I’m to deduce his nefarious plans.”

“Well, I suppose there could be another letter or something I missed back at the school...”

“Excellent idea. Lead the way, Bo Peep. I will follow gladly, bringing my tail behind me.”

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The house was little changed from what he could remember. Lucius had only visited Beatrice in her home once—the night he arrived full of hopes and dreams for their future only to have her decimate them in one word.

No.

She looked him square in the eye and told him she had changed her mind. She *didn’t* wish to go away and spend her life with him; she *didn’t* love him as she had claimed. Worse, she *didn’t* want to see him ever again.

It was probable that she never would have, if not for tonight’s sudden emergency. Lucius tried not to be too grateful to these imperiled girls. He should not let himself take any joy from their apparent misfortune, yet he couldn’t help himself.

It was good to see Beatrice again. Good to be near her, to hear her voice and watch the candlelight dance off her golden hair when she removed her hood.

“Here is the room where the older girls stay,” she said, leading him up the stairway and into one of the bedrooms. “Theresa tends to be the leader of the group and I know the younger ones would have nothing to do with this if the older girls had not included them.”

“It is odd that all of them should run off together like this,” he said, looking around for anything out of place. “I’ve not heard of such a crowded elopement before.”

“I suppose you never included extra couples in any of your escapades?”

He whirled to meet her eyes. “You seem to think I’ve taken elopement up as a... as a hobbyhorse.”

“Haven’t you? Truly, I suppose I don’t know what you do in your free time, but I daresay it is unusual for the average person to be involved in more than one elopement in their lifetime.”

“Yes. I daresay it is—for the average person. But here we are, Miss Shepherd. Both of us above average.”

She furrowed her brown, taking umbrage at his insinuation. “I’ll have you know

I've made no hobby of elopement."

"But you've been involved in several, as of these tonight. Now, let us stop judging one another and concentrate on rescuing your young ladies, shall we? I hardly know what your life has been since we last parted, and you surely know little of mine."

"Very well," she said with a resigned sigh. "Here is where I found the letter to Miss Theresa, hidden under her pillow."

Lucius noted the area and checked the other girls' pillows. Beatrice assured him she'd done the same, as well as the drawers and chests in the rooms. If Miss Theresa's sweetheart had written her other love notes, she did not leave them to be discovered.

"What of their clothing? What sorts of things did they pack to take with them?" he asked. "Perhaps that will tell us something of where they intended to go and how long they expect to be traveling."

Beatrice pursed her lips and considered his question. "I'm not really certain. I glanced through the clothespress and the cupboard where they keep their shoes, and I can't say that I noticed many things missing..."

"Of course they would have taken their clothing, wouldn't they?"

"But they didn't! See, here is the press with their day gowns, still neatly arranged, and... but wait, not everything is here."

She had been going through one of the two cupboards in the room with shelves and drawers for the girls' clothing. He came to stand at her side and peer over her shoulder to examine the cupboard contents. It would have been much easier to concentrate if Beatrice had not smelled so delightfully of rosewater and lavender. He recalled that she had smelled just as sweetly the last time they were together.

"What... what is missing?" he asked, dragging his mind out of the past and back to the present.

"One of the girls just received a package from her mother—it was a very pretty silk gown. I notice it is not here now."

"A silk gown? Do your ladies often have need of such niceties here?"

"It was not inappropriate in any way. If Ginny's mother wished to send her a silk gown, that is no matter for me."

"Were the other girls jealous? What sort of finery do your ladies possess, Miss Shepherd?"

"Each girl has at least one evening gown, of course. Although we do not attend balls or go out for dinners, I do see that my girls learn to be graceful and have proper composure for society."

"So we should see several silk gowns in these drawers?"

Her hands moved swiftly as she rifled through the clothing. "Yes... as a matter of fact, we should."

“I’m no expert on the matter, but are we finding none?”

“Theresa’s nicest gown is missing... and Margaret’s, too!”

A quick look through the rest of the girls’ things in this room discovered that slippers, hair combs, ribbons and various bits of jewelry the girls had were also missing. They ran to the room used by the younger girls and discovered the same thing—in every case, the nicest gown for each girl was simply gone, while many more practical items were put neatly away. This was the oddest elopement Lucius could ever imagine. If these girls were planning to steal away with their beaux and go somewhere to be married, they certainly did not take anything useful.

“They have not prepared at all for a journey!” Beatrice complained. “Don’t they realize how far they will have to travel to marry without banns or proper permissions? How will they live? What will they wear? I can’t understand this at all. It’s as if they haven’t thought at all beyond tonight.”

Lucius had thought the very same things. He had come to a conclusion, however, that it seemed Beatrice had not.

“Or perhaps... it could be that marriage isn’t their ultimate goal,” he said.

She paused, shocked into silence by his suggestion. “Do you mean... No, I can’t believe that. My ladies would never agree to such a thing! Certainly not. An elopement is bad enough, but to ruin themselves with no hope of a marriage... Oh, Lucius, do you truly think it could be as bad as that?”

He was momentarily distracted from the urgency of their situation. She had called him by his first name! True, it had been an accident and surely she never would have done that if she’d not been so terribly upset and worried, but he could not help the way his heart raced and his breath caught in his lungs. He had heard his own name on her lips once again.

Now he prayed he could offer some hope. “Perhaps it’s not as bad as that. Come, Miss Shepherd, I believe I might have some notion where your little lambs have gone.”

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When had she fallen asleep? Good heavens, she’d been riding beside Mr. Wolfe in her father’s old gig and the night chill had caused her to shiver. She recalled that he noticed and had put his arm around her.

If she’d been sensible, of course, she would have scolded him. But she was not sensible. She’d been nervous and cold and worried, so she’d welcomed the calming warmth of Lucius’ arm.

Apparently, it had been so warm and calming that she’d drifted off to sleep on his shoulder! How mortifying. She jolted awake quickly, only to realize that what probably woke her was the fact that he’d pulled the carriage to a stop. They were

no longer clattering through the countryside. Houses and buildings surrounded them on all sides.

Before them was a broad house—no, it was not a house. This appeared to be an assembly room. The windows were brightly lit, and she could hear sounds of laughter and music.

“Where are we?” she asked, groggy and disoriented.

“Crawley,” he replied.

“Crawley? You’ve brought me all the way to Crawley?”

“You said we needed to find your students,” he said with a shrug. “I believe this is where they are.”

“In Crawley? But there is no place for a hasty wedding here.”

“Of course not. There is, however, a rousing ball. The annual Harvest Ball, if I’m not mistaken. It is the traditional ending for the Harvest Festival, correct? My servants were all running on about it when I arrived home this morning, so I gave them the rest of the day off.”

She blinked, shaking off the fog of sleep, and realized that he was correct. Her girls had mentioned this ball some days ago, but of course Beatrice had been sharp with them and insisted they would not be attending. Had they defied her? Oh, she hoped that they had! What a relief it would be if the girls had traveled here simply to dance instead of eloping.

“Come,” he said, hopping out of the gig and holding out a hand to help her alight. “Let us go see if we can find your young ladies.”

She let him hand her down and, once again, her body relished the heat of his touch. Even after all this time, he was still as familiar to her as if they’d never been apart. Very likely she could blame the fact that she still thought of him often and saw him in her dreams. Despite the distance between them, he had never truly been gone from her.

She trembled with nerves as he led her into the building. They announced themselves and were admitted into the ball. Lamps shone in every corner and the familiar tunes of country dances filled the air with gaiety. The crush of locals in their finest attire made viewing the dancers nearly impossible, but Beatrice had no doubt that if her girls were here, that’s where they would be. She clung to Lucius’ arm as he parted his way through the crowd.

“There! That is Lt. Wilding!” she cried when she caught sight of the tall officer in his bold uniform.

“Is that your student with him?” Lucius asked loudly over the din.

The lieutenant shifted position and Beatrice could see clearly. “Yes, that is Theresa!”

The couple was standing off to the side, rosy and smiling as they sipped lemonade. They looked as carefree and innocent as every other couple in the room.

For just a moment Beatrice forgot her anger and was simply relieved to see her student, safe and sound.

Lucius, however, seemed to carry enough anger for both of them. He held her hand firmly as he led the way across the room toward the happy couple. Theresa was unaware of them until Beatrice was directly before her, flanked by a fuming Lucius whose hand shot out to grab the young lieutenant by the collar.

Theresa's eyes went wide. "Miss Shepherd! I... I didn't expect you to be here!"

"No, I doubt that you did," Beatrice said sharply. "And I take it all the girls are here with you?"

A quick glance around allowed her to see three of them on the dancefloor, and two of the younger ones deep in conversation in chairs at the wall.

"Er, yes—"

"I say!" the lieutenant protested. "Unhand me, sir."

Lucius did not. He practically snarled at the young man. "What have you to say for yourself, an officer behaving this way? Your superiors will certainly hear about this!"

"No! It isn't his fault. He's done nothing wrong!" Theresa protested vigorously. "Please... I can explain."

To judge by the confusion on Lt. Wilding's face, Beatrice almost believed that he truly did not understand the reason for Lucius' violence. The young man had to be acting, however. Beatrice could not forget the letter he'd sent as the mastermind of tonight's unauthorized outing. Surely he knew his actions would bring repercussions. How could he not?

"I'll see them toss you in jail for this!" Lucius said, shaking the lieutenant for good measure.

"Stop, please!" Theresa pleaded.

"Let them be," Beatrice scolded. "He deserves what he gets, just as you do, young lady."

"But *I'm* the one to blame, not poor Lt. Wilding. He didn't know; truly he didn't. I'm sorry, Miss Shepherd, but... I told him you gave us permission!"

Beatrice would have expressed disbelief, but Lt. Wilding was quicker. He gaped at his young lady in astonishment.

"You did *not* have permission to come?"

"No, I'm so sorry, my dearest. I shouldn't have lied to you."

Beatrice caught Lucius's eye. He seemed skeptical, yet at the same time the young man's shock and concern were believable enough. It was clear Lucius was waiting for Beatrice to decide what was the truth about this situation.

She realized she needed no further evidence—she knew Theresa and knew the girl was headstrong and reckless. The lieutenant's letter had been his profession of love, but his mention of their midnight meeting could have simply been making

plans for what he thought was an approved outing. The young man would have to be exceptionally thick to think any school mistress would allow such a thing, but he did not have an especially clever air about him. From all that Beatrice could see, this was a case of her student acting impulsively and not a matter of the young man's intentional misconduct.

"Very well," Beatrice acknowledged, giving Lucius a nod. "We will hear an explanation before we consult the authorities."

The lieutenant was understandably thankful. Theresa blushed with shame as she told the story of how they had come to be here tonight.

"I met Lt. Wilding in the village and managed to see him several times over the past weeks," the girl went on. "We became friends."

"You wrote letters?" Beatrice asked.

The girl blushed more deeply, and the young man shuffled nervously.

"A few," Theresa confessed. "And when he asked me to attend the ball with him, I said yes before I even consulted you."

"And when I forbade anyone's attendance, you simply chose to ignore that."

"Yes, Miss Shepherd. The regiment might be shipping out soon and I was afraid this might be my only opportunity! And of course, the other girls wanted to go, so I simply let Lt. Wilding arrange for things. He has very good friends and they provided conveyances..."

"So the whole lot of you stole out of the house once you thought I was asleep and allowed these men to cart you all the way here to Cawley. It was a foolish, disgraceful thing to do! And why on earth did you involve the younger girls? It is one thing to risk yourself this way, but did you not think at all of the others?"

"They all insisted!" Theresa claimed. "Ella threatened to tell you of our plans if we did not include her and the other younger ones. Oh, Miss Shepherd, I'm so very sorry! But please, please don't punish Lt. Wilding. He truly did nothing wrong. He and his friends have been so very pleasant and kind to us tonight."

"I'll bet they have," Lucius muttered.

By this time some of the other students had noticed Beatrice and began to sheepishly work their way over to her. Beatrice realized they were starting to attract attention—which was exactly what they did not wish—so she ushered the group into a small anteroom. Each girl was present and accounted for and appeared to be quite unharmed by the night's escapade.

They all uttered the same story, confirming what Theresa had said and insisting that the soldiers had no idea they were engaging in illicit activity. The soldiers, to their credit, did not abandon their charges but instead appeared fully prepared to face whatever consequences might befall them. They seemed earnest, simple boys who merely wished to enjoy a night at a ball before heading off to war.

Lucius was less inclined to exonerate them than Beatrice was—he ranted and

lectured on how they should have taken more care to assure that the young ladies were properly chaperoned and looked after. The young men cowered and groveled appropriately. Beatrice was amazed that the infamous Lucius Wolfe could be such a defender of the virtue of young women.

“Well, Miss Shepherd, it seems everything is up to you now,” Lucius said when there seemed nothing else to say. “You and I have one small gig for transport and eight naughty girls. How should we go about getting them back to your school?”

Indeed, they were in quite a bit of a tangle. With everyone traveling to and from this ball tonight, it was doubtful there would be a carriage for hire that hadn’t already been spoken for, and certainly not one large enough for the whole group of ladies. Beatrice couldn’t very well try to find room for them to stay at a local inn overnight, either, as that surely would invite public censure.

“If you please, ma’am,” Lt. Wilding said slowly. “I know you have every right to be completely against us, but my comrades and I secured several carriages that we used to bring our party here tonight. If you would trust us, I can promise that we will escort the young ladies safely home.”

It would, of course, solve all their problems. It would also, of course, be the exact opposite of the sort of punishment her young ladies deserved for their behavior! She turned to Lucius, hoping he might have insight for this.

He smiled and took her off to the side, leaning in to speak softly so only she could hear. “You are wondering how to preserve your student’s reputations after this, no doubt.”

“Yes, exactly,” she said.

“It seems to me there is only one thing that we can do.”

“What is it?”

“If the young ladies are dragged back to your school in disgrace, that is what people will talk about. Word will travel, you know, and I doubt there’s anything you can do that will save them once it is learned what they did.”

“But there must be! You said there is one thing we can do!”

“Yes. You can declare this a sanctioned event.”

“What?”

“Of course! Give your young ladies permission. Send them back out there to dance. After another half hour, you can announce it is time to leave and coordinate a proper departure. Who is to say you haven’t been here watching over them all night?”

“But... how can we trust these young men?”

“They’ve behaved themselves so far, and you are here now to chaperone. Plus, you have me! I will personally keep my eye on each one of them.”

She wasn’t sure she was hearing him correctly and it was a struggle to keep her voice low. “You want me to approve of all this?”

“No, I want you to *act* as if you approve of all this. Everyone in the ballroom saw you gather your girls and drag them in here. If you take them out now with stern looks and boxed ears, you can imagine what people will say! Trust me, I know a bit about living with public scrutiny. People do not need to be in possession of facts before they rush around telling tales about others.”

She realized he spoke those last words especially for her benefit. She had, indeed, heard stories about him—stories that did not at all match up with the person she had known years ago or the man she had come to know again tonight. Perhaps she had judged him unfairly.

And that is, of course, what society would do to her girls! They were not bad, they were simply young and prone to foolish behavior. Of course they wanted to attend the ball, to wear their best gowns and dance with handsome young men. It was terribly wrong for them to run away like this, but she should have considered they needed social interaction. She would not have condoned a ball, but surely she could have arranged other, more appropriate opportunities for fun.

Now all that mattered was getting them home without becoming the talk of the county. Yes, Lucius’s suggestion had merit. She hated it, but she couldn’t deny that it would serve the purpose.

“Very well,” she agreed. “If you do not mind helping to keep an eye on things with me.”

“Not at all, my dear. I’ll gladly help you shepherd your flock.”

“Thank you. I don’t quite know how I can ever repay you...”

“I do. How about a dance?”

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The rest of the night went remarkably well, at least as far as Lucius was concerned. Miss Shepherd’s girls were on their best behavior, and Lt. Wilder was a man of his word. Lucius watched him like a hawk, but he and his comrades acted as complete gentlemen. There was even a moment when Lucius met the man alone in the refreshment room and found him quite forthcoming. It seemed the letter he sent to Miss Theresa was truly heartfelt and not simply some way to get into her good graces. The young man had every intention of marrying the girl when his military commitment would allow it.

Content that she had made enough show of approving and chaperoning her girls, Miss Shepherd announced that it was time for the group to leave. Not surprisingly, no one complained. It was with curtsies and smiles that the young ladies bid good night to the new friends they had made at the ball and allowed the soldiers to escort them—under their teacher’s watchful eye—out to the carriages to travel home.

Once the youngsters were settled in, Lucius helped Beatrice into his gig and climbed up beside her. They started out, following the others. It had been heavenly to ride next to her on the journey here, and when her head drooped onto his shoulder and she slept peacefully, he thought the night could not get any better. Now, however, it seemed he had been wrong.

“Lucius, have you really had to live under society’s criticism and false accusations?”

“I assumed you had heard what people were saying about me.”

“But... you eloped with that girl and then...”

“And then I didn’t even marry her.”

“Yes! That’s what everyone says.”

“And you assumed it was true?”

“Of course, but... wait, you *didn’t* marry her, did you?”

“No, I assure you I have never married anyone, Beatrice. I have never ruined anyone and abandoned her, either.”

“So it was all false? You didn’t take her away?”

“Oh, I most certainly did! But it wasn’t to elope—at least not with me. She was in love with my friend. I simply helped her escape from her terrible family so she and my friend could be together.”

“She married your friend?”

“Yes, and they are quite happy today, living in Yorkshire with two little children.”

“Oh! That’s wonderful! But... oh, I’m so sorry, Lucius. I believed all the horrible things people said.”

“I know. Her family was furious that I helped her, so they did nothing to correct the cruel gossip. My father was still upset with me, too, so he did nothing to help.”

“He was upset with you over me, wasn’t he? It’s all so very sad. And you never did elope, not even once.”

“I would have, if the girl that I loved had not thrown me over,” he said quickly, before common sense made him hold his tongue.

She stared down at her hands, wringing a handkerchief furiously. “I’m sorry about that, too.”

“Don’t be sorry, Beatrice. You could not help it if you did not feel for me the same way I do for you.”

“But I do! Er, that is I *did*. I wanted to marry you, but I could not be the reason your father disowned you. I could never live with myself if I caused that.”

“You mean to say... you jilted me for my own sake?”

“It was the best thing I could do for you.”

He couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of it. All this time he thought she had not loved him, had not truly cared! To think... she *did* care. She loved him

enough to break both their hearts.

“Why are you laughing at me?” she asked.

“Because you are wonderful!”

“I don’t feel so very wonderful. I have thought terrible things about you for years now! And I am not even an adequate teacher—I lost all of my students and the only way I could bring them back home was to let them do the very thing I had forbidden them to do.”

“You are an excellent teacher; I could see that by the care and concern that you have for your students. You were so worried for them that you came to me, a veritable ogre in your mind!”

“You were never an ogre.”

“Not even when you believed I had run off with some poor innocent and left her abandoned?”

“I’m such a goose. How could I ever believe you would do such a thing? I heard what everyone said about you, but I should never have listened. In my heart I knew you were better than that.”

“Little Bo Peep, we’ve wasted too much time. Will you please give me another chance? Marry me, Beatrice. Let’s finish what we started years ago.”

“But I barely have the funds to keep my school running, and surely your father won’t be any more in favor of me now than he was back then. No, he will disown you and we will have nothing and eventually you will resent me for ruining your life.”

“Nothing you just said is true.”

“It is! My father left me nearly destitute, I’m afraid. I have nothing to offer you, Lucius, and if your father decides—”

“My father is in no position to decide anything. Besides, even if he was, it would make no difference. I haven’t relied on him for years now, Beatrice. He may be my father, but I am my own man. I have a thriving business in London and it will be *my* funds that support Wolfenstone, not my father’s. He has no hold over me; he never did. If he had disowned me, even back then, we would have been just fine.”

“But he is your father!”

“Yes, and I love that you are so considerate of that. But please, Beatrice, forget about him and think about me. I want to spend the rest of my life with you!”

“Oh Lucius... do you really think it would work? Your family is so very grand and I am...”

“A simple shepherdess who can’t keep track of her sheep?”

“It is nearly that bad.”

“It is not. Look what you’ve done for your students—you’ve saved them from ruin and given them a lovely evening at a ball.”

“But if their families ever find out...”

“It’s very likely that they will. No doubt your girls will go home to their families, bringing those tales behind them.”

She sighed in frustration. “No parents will trust me after this.”

“What does that matter? Someone else can manage the school, if you’d like. You’ll be married to a wealthy man. At least... I hope that you will. Please, Beatrice, give me a yes.”

She finally relented, dropping her handkerchief and reaching out to take his hand in hers.

“Very well, Mr. Wolfe. I listened to too many cruel tales about you for too long. I suppose the least I can do is marry you so there are no more silly rumors of elopements.”

“That’s very sensible, Miss Shepherd.”

“But I will want to continue my academy!”

“Of course you will, and so you shall. But before we get too far into discussing that, I’m afraid I have another question for you.”

“Yes?”

He cleared his throat before admitting what he’d only just realized.

“As we’ve been deciding our fate, I’m afraid I rather lost track of our party. Here’s a fork in the road now. Can you see which direction the young people have gone?”

She sat up straight, scanning the roadway. “Good heavens, I don’t believe it. I’ve lost my sheep once again!”

“I’m so sorry, Beatrice. I should have been paying better attention. Both branches of the road will lead toward Biggly Feld, but I cannot tell which one they took!”

He waited for an outburst, but instead she merely sat back in her seat and sighed. In fact, she snuggled up against him.

“If both roads go the same way, then it doesn’t matter. We’ll just leave them alone and let them go home, bringing their tales behind them.”

“And what of us?” he asked, wrapping his arm around her as he guided the horse to take the darker, longer branch of the road.

“I’m sure by the time we find them, we’ll have some tales of our own,” she replied with a smile. “At least, I hope so...”