

Chapter One

“Trust me.” Charles’ voice was as deliberate as his posture.

“Trust you.” A stifled laugh followed. “You’re wielding a cane. Haven’t you ever heard the saying *once bitten, twice shy*?”

“The cane doesn’t bite.”

“It bloody does.” Abigail was looking over her shoulder.

“You’re standing in far too precarious a situation to be using that kind of language.”

“And you sound just like a prefect.”

“I will be, soon enough. Head Boy, even.” Charles swished the cane through the air twice, as if solidifying the assurance. “Now, keep still. I need to practice.”

“Practice with two.”

“But then you cursed.”

Abigail stood up and pulled her navy blue pleated school skirt back down to the length of propriety. “I said you could give me two,” she reiterated.

“You earned yourself a third. Back over you go.” Charles nodded toward the arm of the leather Chesterfield and then tapped it with the end of the cane.

“Charles.”

“We had a deal.”

Her eyes hardened. “There’s always a deal.”

“Unless you want me to tell Auntie Grace and Uncle Henry where you spent six months of your weekends away from school last year?”

“Don’t.” She shook her head as Charles bent the cane gently into an arc in lieu of replying. “You would ruin me.”

“You would ruin yourself.”

“You can’t.”

“No, Abigail, I can, but I chose to leave it.” He nodded toward the arm of the sofa. “And I will continue to leave it, if you bend over and let me practice like you already gave permission for me to do.”

“You’re a real git, you know that?” Abigail narrowed her eyes before bending over again.

“That’s four now, by the way.”

“Four!”

“You name-called. Do you really think it’s appropriate to call me a git?” Charles clicked his tongue three times.

“You aren’t Head Boy of Walden School just yet, mate.”

He swished the cane through the air again and then used it to lift Abigail’s pleated school skirt up onto her back. It looked just as pressed and orderly as it did when she wore it to Walden the year before.

“This is absurd. I’m older than you,” she spoke under her breath.

“You’re also in debt to me.”

“Everyone is always in debt to you, Charles.”

“Back chat?” He raised his eyebrows and nodded once. “Very, very well played, cousin.”

“I’m not doing it for your benefit. Now you’re just being a royal bloody pain in my backside.”

“Glad to be.” Without warning, Charles swung the cane through the air and absolutely smashed it against the backs of his cousin’s exposed thighs—the tender flesh just below her bottom.

Abigail gasped for breath and gripped the leather arm so fiercely she felt her nails digging into the decorative brass studs. She was fairly certain she’d just chipped one.

“Charles,” she tried to reason. That wasn’t a stroke. It was a blow.

He ignored Abigail and pulled his arm back before she could prepare, ensuring the second stroke landed just below the first. This was not how Walden or anyone with a heart caned for proper discipline. It was brutal.

“Oh please,” she whimpered, her legs now shaking. “You shouldn’t—”

The third stroke ran across both backs of her thighs and she instantly broke down into a rough sob. The fourth came after an unexpected pause, which caught her completely off-guard. The tone of her cry this time was pain coupled with outrage.

“Bloody hell!” She wiped her eyes with both hands and then pulled her skirt back down angrily and faced Charles as more tears threatened her eyes. “You must be joking! I don’t know where you learned how to handle a cane, but that is not how one does it!”

“Perhaps you think so because you grew up under the assumption you were always right.”

Her gaze hardened. “You got your four strokes. That’s all you’ll get out of me ever again.” With an abrupt exit from his presence, Abigail pushed right past the arm of his school blazer.

“Stop pretending you don’t like it.”

Abigail halted, keeping her back to him. She looked down and slightly to the side, in order to give the impression that he had some of her attention.

“We were children and they were innocent smacks,” she justified. “All of us played house like that.”

“But ours only frequented with age.”

She closed her eyes briefly when she heard the hard soles of her cousin’s shoes against the ancient floorboards of the library. When Charles appeared in front, her brows were furrowed to help her appear brave.

“They frequented because you could never get enough.”

Charles rested his hands, still holding the cane, behind his back. She couldn’t mistake that he was still very much in the mood for discipline. He always was. That was the point.

“No matter what it was.” Abigail’s momentum propelled forward in a reflective manner. “If I owed you a debt, you wanted to smack my bottom. I needed to copy your homework, so you let me in exchange for a trip across your lap. If my mother might find out about some small indiscretion during our holidays here, you would find a branch in the woods and offer to keep it a secret in exchange for a few swats. Ever since primary school, all you’ve ever done is find an excuse.”

He didn’t look ashamed or moved by his cousin’s words. “Then why did you always consent?”

“Because you frightened me.”

“Frightened you,” he said through a chuckle. “I am two years your junior.”

“And yet your dominance has always surpassed your age.”

The amusement of the situation had just been taken from the moment. “I was born this way.”

“That’s the world’s excuse for everything now.” Abigail wiped one eye quickly and brushed past him again. “By the way, you don’t know how to handle that cane. Might as well burn it.”

“What did you just say?”

Abigail pushed open a pair of wooden sliding doors and then looked over her shoulder. “I said you don’t know how to cane.”

His face visibly darkened. Abigail knew precisely the kind of words that would invalidate his ego.

“You should be ashamed of yourself, using that kind of force. If anyone knows better, it would certainly be a Walden boy. Especially one who is up for a prefect position.”

The cane came out from behind his back in an instant and he slammed it into the nearby leather wing chair with such force that Abigail flinched, even from where she stood across the library. Her chest rose and fell beneath the blouse, tie and school blazer she used to wear to Walden with the unmistakable presence of anxiety. Charles had that kind of effect on most people.

“What do you know? If I recall, you were never even invited to interview as prefect.”

Abigail wasn’t moved by the attempted insult but the corner of her mouth rose slightly. “What I know, having completed my two years already, is that the Head Boy is supposed to be of superior character and integrity. By the way, I never wanted to be a prefect. The difference between you and me is that I know my limitations.” With that, she turned for a third and final time to leave her cousin’s presence.

“I beg your pardon?”

She didn’t turn or stop this time. “You should.”

“Abigail, don’t walk away from me. Abigail!”