

Innocent Beauty

By

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Chapter One

The year 1781...

"Oh, Mama, is the sea not as blue as the sky!" exclaimed Louisa as she raced down the narrow, windy path to the beach. Her mother, Mrs. Tomlinson, shook her head and continued at a more sedate pace, her arm enfolded in her eldest daughter's for safety as they trod the uneven path.

"Louisa takes much delight in this place, Anne, does she not?"

"Yes, Mama. Although, I fear the fresh sea air sometimes goes to her head a little!"

Mrs. Tomlinson smiled. "It's just youthful exuberance, Anne. She enjoys life and after recent events, it gives my heart joy to see her so carefree. It has been five months since your dear father passed away and it is right that she now enjoys herself."

"It is a shame we had to move from our childhood home," Anne commented, "but I think Belstone cottage is as fair a place as any."

Her mother sighed wistfully. For twenty-five years she had been mistress of Ellis Hall but since her dear husband, Henry, had passed away, the house had reverted to her son, Harvey, and his wife, Mildred. Harvey had made it clear from the start that he would not live under the same roof as his sisters and mother. Mrs. Tomlinson knew it all came from Mildred—poor Harvey had always been a weak soul, and now married, his wife ruled him completely. So within a few weeks of Henry's death, Mrs. Tomlinson, Anne and Louisa had moved out to Belstone cottage, an adequate-sized dwelling on the cliff tops of Lulworth Cove along the Dorset coast.

She had been left a small yearly income from her husband's estate that allowed them to rent the cottage and have enough to live on throughout the year. She had hoped for good marriages for both her daughters, but without dowries, she doubted they would marry men of high society. All she could hope for was that they married for love.

Louisa looked out to sea and threw her hands wide, embracing the blustery wind and strong, salty sea air. Moving to the coast had been the best thing that had ever happened to her in all her eighteen years upon this earth.

She watched the waves crashing against the shoreline, the wind whipping the crests into foamy peaks. Bending down, she picked up a large pebble nestled in the sand and threw it with all her might, aiming for the very tip of a wave. Her aim was perfect and laughing aloud, she picked up another.

As she launched it towards the sea, her sister joined her, leaving their mother sitting comfortably on the rocks a little way off. Anne stooped down and began to gather shells for her collection at home.

Louisa selected a smoothly polished pebble and turned to Anne behind her. "Watch this, Anne! I bet I will catch a crest again." Her hand raised in the air, she turned back and launched the stone just as Anne shouted, "No!"

Louisa saw the rider too late; the strong winds and soft sand had skilfully masked the sound of hooves. She clapped a hand over her mouth in horror as her pebble sailed straight towards him. Luckily, it missed the man's head by inches but it clearly startled him. He reined in his horse and cantered over to them.

With a whirl of skirts, Louisa quickly hid behind her older sister for safety. Even from that distance, she could tell his expression was thunderous.

"Which one of you threw that stone?" he demanded, bringing his horse to a stop in front of them. Anne immediately came to her aid.

"I beg your pardon, sir. My sister meant no harm."

"Indeed!" His horse paced the sand impatiently. "You were lucky I was not thrown from my mount!"

Louisa listened to his tone and winced. He was mad as hell. She peered around her sister and stared at one of the most dashing men she'd ever seen. Sitting tall upon his horse, he glared down, piercing her with eyes that were so dark they were almost black.

"So, you are the culprit!"

She swallowed hard. "I apologize, sir. I did not see you. I will be more careful next time."

"You had better be!"

She bristled at his tone but before she had time to retort, he was already reining his horse around. "Good day to you." He raised his hat and quickly galloped away.

"How rude!" declared Louisa, emerging from behind her human shield, suddenly becoming very brave now the man had gone. "He did not even have the courtesy to tell us his name."

Anne was looking at her and shaking her head. "Louisa, you just threw a stone at his head...I do not think he was the least interested in who we were or introducing himself."

"It is still rude. I did not throw it on purpose, you know!" She fiddled with a rock and watched him disappear into the distance, her expression growing wistful. "He was quite handsome, was he not?"

"Yes, and wealthy, by the cut of his cloth. I wonder who he is."

Finlay Armitage rode back to Broadmayne Manor, exhilarated from his morning ride. He liked nothing more than to gallop across the golden sands, feel the wind in his hair and take great lungfuls of the fresh sea air. So much better than the foul odours to be found in London, where he often had to be, due to one thing or another.

This morning, however, he kept thinking about the girl with the blue eyes and fair hair; as pretty a maiden as ever he'd seen. He wondered who she was. Politeness dictated that he should have introduced himself, but angered by her actions, he had thought to admonish instead. Not very gentlemanly of him. Perhaps he would be able to rectify the situation the next time he saw her...if indeed there was a next time.

Arriving back home, he threw his reins to a waiting stable hand and dismounted, taking the steps two at a time as he made his way inside.

His younger brother, George, was reading the morning's broadsheet whilst taking a late breakfast. He looked up as Finlay strode in. "Good ride, brother?"

"Yes, the new stallion is turning out to be worth every penny I paid for him."

"Told you he would be good, did I not? McKinnon only breeds the best."

"Expensive, but worth it." He helped himself to some toast. "Where is Millicent?"

"Our dear sister has gone into town with Aunt Beatrice."

Finlay raised his eyebrows. "She rose early? Is it a special occasion?"

George lowered his paper. "Aye. There is a ball to be held in town and she just *has* to have a new gown. Father's coffers will take a hard hit this morning, of that I am certain."

"What ball?"

"Tomorrow night, at Ollerton's." His eyes flicked back to the paper. "Mother will expect you to go, you know."

Finlay sat down. "Botheration!" He detested balls, all that pomp and ceremony with the mothers trying to foist their daughters off onto eligible bachelors. His mother would expect him to show his face. Perhaps he would be able to get away with just an hour, just enough for people to notice he was there and then he could leave on the pretence of urgent business. Yes, that ought to work.

Louisa's mother had asked if she would take a letter to the post office in town, so Anne had decided to accompany her.

Walking along the main thoroughfare, they spotted their cousin striding towards them. Gilbert Westbridge was an amiable fellow and could be counted on to lift one's spirit even on the gloomiest of occasions.

"Gilbert!" Louisa smiled as he reached their side.

"Louisa. Anne." He bowed, a broad grin on his face. "Both as beautiful as ever, I see."

Anne blushed and Louisa rolled her eyes. "Gilbert, flattery will get you everywhere. What do you do in town?"

"I came in search of you, believe it or not! I know you've only been here a short while, but Henry Ollerton wished to extend an invitation to his ball tomorrow night."

"A ball!" exclaimed Louisa and Anne in unison. They looked at each other and laughed.

"Aye, a ball. Ollerton's is one of the finest halls around, and their balls are tremendously lavish. Do say you will both come?" He looked from one to the other, gauging their response.

"Most definitely, Gilbert!" expressed Louisa, turning to her sister. "You see, Anne. Just because we live in the country, it does not mean to say we cannot have fun."

"Wise words, dear cousin," said Gilbert. "I shall send a carriage for you at eight. Will my Aunt come, do you think?"

"Yes, I shall make sure of it," Louisa said excitedly.

"Oh, I confess to being quite nervous," said Mrs. Tomlinson, moving her fan rapidly over her face to cool a sudden attack of the nerves when the carriage came to a stop outside Ollerton's the next evening.

"Oh, Mama! Fear not," exclaimed Louisa. "We shall keep you company and ward off anyone with bad intentions."

"Yes, Mama, Louisa is right. You have no need to worry," Anne added.

The coachman opened the door and lowered the steps, extending his hand to help them out. Anne, being the nearest, stepped out first, quickly followed by Mrs. Tomlinson and then Louisa.

Stepping out onto the gravel drive, Louisa was immediately greeted by the sound of music and laughter. Her face lit up with excitement. "Oh, Anne, it sounds wonderful!"

"Aunt, cousins!" Gilbert, having just dismounted from his horse, quickly walked forward to escort them inside. "Allow me."

Once inside the ballroom, they were instantly joined by a thick-set man in his fifties. "Good to see you, Gilbert," the man said gruffly, his moustache quivering with the force of his tone. He grabbed Gilbert's hand and shook it firmly, his eyes roaming over the three women, admiration in their depths. "And who are these fine ladies, may I ask?"

Gilbert smiled. "Allow me to introduce my aunt, Mrs. Tomlinson, and my two dear cousins, Louisa and Anne." He turned to them. "This is Mr. Henry Ollerton, owner of this fine house and organiser of the ball."

Henry smiled warmly. "How do you do?"

"Very well, thank you," Mrs. Tomlinson responded. "This is a most handsome place you have."

"Yes, I am blessed to have such a charming family home. It has been in our family for generations. Come, I will show you around. Perhaps your daughters would prefer to stay and dance, leaving us to become better acquainted?" His eyebrows waggled as he looked at the girls enquiringly.

Louisa looked at her mother for approval and when she gave a discreet nod, she responded, "Of course, Mr. Ollerton. We should love to dance."

Satisfied that their mother was in good company, the two girls followed Gilbert as he led them around the room, introducing them to people he knew.

"Louisa!" hissed Anne suddenly. "It is the gentleman from the beach. Look!"

Louisa turned to find the very man who had scolded her, staring intently at her from across the room. She felt herself flush and quickly looked away. He seemed even more

handsome than she remembered, but his countenance seemed no more welcoming that it had on the beach. Did the man not know how to smile?

Her thoughts were interrupted when another man approached and blocked her view.

"I do not believe I have had the pleasure of an introduction?" He smiled and held out his hand. She gave him hers and he raised it slowly, his eyes never leaving hers.

"Bertrand Hollings, at your service. Most people call me Bertie." He kissed her gloved hand and raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to speak.

"Louisa Tomlinson," she replied, smiling. "How do you do, sir?"

"Very well indeed, Miss Tomlinson, and all the better now I have seen you."

She blushed becomingly and turned to her sister. "This is my sister, Anne."

"Two finer beauties I have not seen!" he exclaimed. "You simply must allow me the next two dances, for I shall not be satisfied until I have danced with both of you."

Louisa looked at Anne and grinned. "I think we can afford you a dance, Mr. Hollings."

"Bertie, please." He turned to watch the other dancers, his foot tapping in time to the music as he waited for the next set to begin.

Anne whispered in her ear, "I think he could charm the birds from the trees!"

Louisa placed a hand over her mouth to stifle a giggle and glanced about the room, only to come into direct eye contact once again with the man from the beach. His expression never faltered as he stared back. Leaning towards Bertie, she asked. "Who is that man over there?"

Bertie looked over. "Who? Oh, him. That is Mr. Finlay Armitage, my cousin."

"Oh?"

"Be warned, he has little humour."

"So I gathered," she muttered. The music stopped and the next dance was announced. Bertie held his arm out to her. "May I ask for this dance, Miss Tomlinson?"

She beamed at him. "Of course, Bertie!"

As they lined up, she couldn't resist another glance over to Bertie's cousin. He was still staring at her, his expression unfathomable. She found it a bit disconcerting that he should still be looking at her so, but as soon as the music began, she soon forgot about him as she concentrated on keeping in step.

A little while later, after another dance and two glasses of punch, Louisa took a seat at the side of the hall. The ball was turning out to be just as much fun as she'd thought it would be. Henry Ollerton hadn't left her mother's side and seemed more than attentive. She'd learned from Gilbert that he was a widower these past five years and watching him with her mother, she believed him to be quite enamoured.

Suddenly, her thoughts were interrupted as Gilbert stepped into view. "Louisa. I want to introduce you to a friend of mine, Finlay Armitage."

Finlay stepped from behind Gilbert and bowed stiffly. "It is a pleasure to meet you properly, Miss Tomlinson. Gilbert has told me much about you."

"Oh, has he?" She shot Gilbert a slightly irritated look. "He has told me little about you, sir!"

"Well that can be rectified. Have the next dance together," Gilbert suggested.

Finlay looked at Louisa enquiringly, and deciding it would be rude to refuse, she agreed. "Thank you, I shall."

At that moment, the music stopped and the next dance was announced. Finlay held out his arm and she placed her small hand on his sleeve. They took their places opposite one another and as the music began, they stepped in time around each other.

"You are a fine dancer, Miss Tomlinson," he noted.

"Thank you."

"I apologize for not introducing myself the other morning upon the beach, but circumstances prevented it."

"Prevented it, sir?" Louisa commented, unable to keep the look of disdain off her face. "We thought you quite rude!"

"Throwing stones and unsettling a horse is rude, Miss Tomlinson, and under such circumstances I forgot my introduction. For that I apologize."

"I did not throw the stone at you on purpose," Louisa retorted, glaring at him as she stepped past him and back again in time to the music.

"You were careless, Miss Tomlinson. I think anyone in my position would have acted the same."

"I doubt it, sir!"

For a brief moment, Finlay was silent. The only noticeable acknowledgment that he'd heard her impolite comment was a tightening of his jaw before he responded, "I could not help but notice that my cousin, Bertrand, has been paying you attention this evening."

She was slightly startled at the sudden change in conversation and the disapproving tone in his voice. "Yes, he has. Your tone implies disapproval."

"You are new to this area, so I take it upon myself to tell you that he is of a somewhat...dubious character."

Louisa bristled. "I thank you for your advice, sir, but it is not needed. I am quite capable of making my own decisions as to someone's character." If anyone was of dubious character, it was Mr. Armitage himself, she thought.

The dance came to an end and he bowed. Before he could speak, she quickly said, "If you will excuse me?"

She grabbed a glass of punch off a waiter and moved away from the dance floor. She could feel Finlay's eyes boring into her back and resisted the urge to turn around and poke her tongue out at him.

She had been thoroughly enjoying Bertie's attentions, and she wasn't about to let a pompous man like Mr. Armitage intervene. She was no fool, and Bertie seemed the perfect gentleman to her. She rejoined him as he sat talking to Anne and Gilbert, relaxing in their company immediately and dismissing the arrogant Mr. Armitage from her thoughts entirely.

Much later...

Bertie whispered in her ear, "Shall we take a walk outside? It is a wonderful moonlit night."

Louisa nibbled her bottom lip. "On our own, Bertie?"

"Yes! Let us be devils and slip out without anyone noticing. Come on!" He grabbed her hand before she could resist and she allowed herself to be taken outside into the dark. She giggled quietly as he led her along a path, knowing she was being reckless but at the same time enjoying the freedom. The further they walked, the quieter it became, the sound of the music getting fainter with each footstep.

He came to a halt and looked up at the moon. "Is it not beautiful, Miss Tomlinson?"

She looked up and stared at the full moon. "Yes, Bertie. The light is so bright, it could almost be daytime."

They were interrupted by someone clearing their throat close by. They both spun round to find Finlay Armitage a few feet away, his arms folded across his broad chest as he stared at them. "I hate to disturb you, Bertrand, but I do believe Louisa's mother would be most upset if she found her alone in your company. I suggest you both go back inside before tongues begin to wag!"

Louisa bristled but before she could respond, she was astonished at Bertie's reaction. Gone was the rebellious spirit she had encountered earlier, replaced by a blustering fool. "Oh, I see, I see," he sputtered. "Well, then, we should go back."

Louisa frowned. "No. We shall stay a while. It is not for Mr. Armitage to decide for us!" She shot Finlay a look of defiance. "You may return to the hall, sir. We are happy to remain."

"You mistake my intention. I do not ask, I demand!" His eyes pierced hers, and for a moment, she was speechless.

"Demand? Well, I..." She began to object.

Bertie pulled on her arm. "No, my dear. He is quite right. It was my mistake. I should never have brought you outside on your own."

She pulled away from him, astounded at his change in attitude just because Mr. Armitage had demanded their return. She flung her arms wide and backed away.

"If you want to go, then go! Do not let me stop you. But I intend to stay right here!" She glared angrily at the pair of them. Bertie looked at Finlay's stern countenance and, with an apologetic glance in Louisa's direction, quickly disappeared back inside the building.

Silence ensued as Louisa stared after him. It seemed he was scared of Mr. Armitage, but she wasn't!

"Mr. Armitage, you had no right..."

"Maybe, maybe not. But I do have the right to protect your mother from idle gossip. Something perhaps you should think upon, Miss Tomlinson—or do you not care about such matters?"

"Of course I care!" she snapped angrily. "I just did not think..."

"No, obviously," he interrupted. "Now, go back inside before anyone notices your absence."

"I shall go back inside when I am good and ready!"

"Get back now, before I turn you over my knee and spank you!" he threatened.

Louisa bristled and folded her arms across her chest defensively. "Spank me? How dare you threaten such a thing! If I want to stay here...I shall." She raised her chin and glared at him.

His eyes glistened menacingly in the light of the outside lamps and despite her bravado, Louisa felt a shiver of fear snake its way up her spine. Her heart began to race as the flight or fight syndrome began to take effect.

"Be under no illusion, Miss Tomlinson," he warned ominously. "If you defy me, I *will* spank you!" He pointed to the house. "Now, inside, if you please!"

Reason took to the wind at his arrogance. "No! I shall not!" She stomped her foot and glared at him, her stubborn nature coming to the fore. Why should she obey him? He had proved himself to be nothing but a rude individual, and she wasn't about to let him push her around!

"So be it. Have it your way." He reached out to grab hold of her wrist, but she had already anticipated his move and quickly turned to run, evading his grasp. Fleet of foot, she sped towards the moonlit rose garden, hoping to hide amongst the thick bushes. Despite being annoyed at him, she found herself responding to his dominance, a frisson of excitement coursing through her.

Just when she thought she'd outrun him, she felt a firm hand close around one of her wrists. "Let me go, sir!" she squealed, struggling and pulling backwards, while slapping at his hand with her free one. "You have no right to manhandle me!"

He quickly upended her over one of his solid thighs. "I gave you fair warning."

She felt her skirts lifted and then a sharp sting as his hand laid into her bloomer-clad bottom. She gasped with shock and tried to push herself off him, but his grip was too tight. His free hand walloped her backside with precise accuracy, and all she could do was kick out and cry as each spank fell.

"You brute! How dare you!" she cried out.

"I dare, Miss Tomlinson. You are insolent and rebellious. Some manners would not go amiss."

"Why, you...aow!" She grit her teeth as he continued to spank her, slapping her buttocks alternately, his hand feeling more like iron than flesh. How could he inflict so much pain with just his hand?

Finally, he let her up. She backed away from him, rubbing furiously at her bottom and looking at him with loathing.

"You had no right to do that!"

"I had every right. You are disobedient and wayward. Now, do as I say and get back inside else I give you some more." His eyes bored into hers, brooking no disobedience.

Her eyes widened in alarm. The man was mean enough to do it again, she could see that. Thrusting out her bottom lip mulishly, she balled her fists at her side and brushed past him, her small chin in the air defiantly. She hated him. Handsome he may be, but with a brutish nature such as his, it was wasted.

Finlay watched her small frame bustle back into the hall, her golden curls bouncing with indignation. What a wayward madam she was, and how refreshing. Used to having women simpler all over him, it was a change to meet one so independent and somehow immune to his vast inheritance. It had felt good to have her bottom draped over his thigh—a lovely, pert bottom, perfect for a good thrashing. He felt a stirring in his loins and quickly controlled himself. It wouldn't do for him to return inside in such a manner.

Casually, he strode back into the hall and took a drink off one of the waiters. He was immediately accosted by Hortense Bellamy.

"Mr. Armitage. How lovely to see you. Mama told me you were here, but I have only just found you." She tapped him with her fan in admonishment. "Where have you been hiding, pray tell?"

He smiled graciously. "I was taking some air, Miss Bellamy. It proved to be extremely invigorating." His eyes sought out Louisa amongst the crowd. She returned his look with a scowl before turning her back on him.

His expression grew thoughtful. Louisa Tomlinson was intriguing, and he found himself eager to know more about her. Tomorrow, he would make it his first priority to ride out and pay her a visit. Perhaps this time, she would refrain from throwing stones at him.