

Miss Watson's First Scandal

Miss Mayhem, Book 1

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CHAPTER ONE

David Hawke breathed a sigh of relief when the first sign of Brighton came into view through the grimy coach window. He marked his place in the latest K. L. Brahm novel he'd been reading and reluctantly closed the book on the wonderful tale. The journey from London to the seaside resort town appeared to grow longer each year and he longed to already be at his destination, at home in his snug terrace house. If not for his client's witty novel, he would have drowsed the entire way or grown cross with his companion's frequent jostling.

He pressed the heel of his hand against his thigh as impatience clawed at him. He was desperate to stretch his legs, desperate to escape the strangers seated opposite in the mail coach and their assessing glances. He'd dressed a little too finely to be completely ignored by his companions and his seat partner kept reading over his shoulder. Their curiosity compelled him to be vigilant of his possessions and he was weary to the bone.

The coach drew to a stop and he jumped out as quickly as he could manage. He should have hired a chaise for the journey but sitting in the large conveyance alone was a wasteful way to travel in his opinion. He caught his remaining possessions as a groom tossed them down from the carriage rooftop then he set off for his seaside home.

By design, his path took him the long way through the deserted streets of Brighton just so he might catch a glimpse of the dark waters of the channel before he went to bed. The gentle ocean breeze blew the stench of London from him; the scent of brine cleared his head and cooled his exposed skin. He drew in deep cleansing breaths and a smile broke free. It was good to be home again. He'd missed swimming each morning with his neighbors, if they still came here at this time of year. It had been a long while since he'd had a letter from any of them and he'd come with no illusions they would have time to see him.

But the destination itself still made any uncertainty worthwhile. He'd spent many years here as a boy and his pulse raced at the familiar sights and sounds. Returning each year for a week-long holiday had become a necessary pilgrimage.

After a time, he forced himself away from the water, making his way up Cavendish Place toward his home. Lights burned in the windows of several residences along the street. The Radleys appeared to be here, the Mertons, too. The George's residence was dark and silent but that was not an unusual circumstance. The young Walter George preferred to go out and his sister was rumored to retire early.

He stopped outside the Watson residence, a three-story town house, second from the end of the street. Peter Watson's front door stood beside his own, but their circumstances couldn't be more different. His good mood evaporated. There was one unpleasant matter David needed to take care of for the bank before he could truly settle down to a much needed rest.

The Watson's account was substantially overdrawn with no certainty of further funds arriving to repay the debt. His partner, Knight, had wanted to close the account three months prior. However, David had managed to convince him to wait and give the Watsons more time. Unfortunately, time had run out and he couldn't stall any longer. He had to arrange a meeting with Peter Watson for tomorrow morning. Best to get the unpleasantness over and done with so he could try to enjoy the rest of his stay.

He stepped up to the door. Raucous laughter filtered through a partially open window. Damnation. He'd forgotten it was games night: cards, food, and copious amounts of wine. The fellows from Cavendish Place had likely come to gamble with Peter Watson, a man who should be saving every penny and pound and not wasting it on Lady Luck. Would it be better to wait until tomorrow to pay his call?

If David had learned one thing in London it was that business came first before fun and friendship. He applied the knocker soundly and waited.

Eventually, the door opened and the Watson's butler squinted at him. "Good Lord, Mr. Hawke. I nearly didn't recognize you. Is everything all right?"

David winced. He'd been dodging the same question from every customer of the bank he'd met with for the past month. The constant enquiries about his health set his teeth on edge. "Of course, Simpson. But I am travel weary." He pulled a card from his pocket. "Would you be so good as to inform Mr. Watson, after his guests have departed, I've come to Brighton and need to speak with him about an urgent matter. I'd like to arrange a meeting with him tomorrow morning if it suits."

Simpson opened the door wide. "Come in, come in, sir. Your friends will be so happy to see you. They were just remarking on your absence from the game, but I knew you wouldn't be able to stay away from Brighton altogether."

David smiled ruefully. "The sea has called to me all year up in dreary London." He crossed the threshold, set his bag aside, and then removed his hat and gloves before handing them to Simpson. He checked his watch. "I assume they are rather bosky by this hour?"

"It *is* growing a touch rowdy, sir," Simpson confessed. "If you'll follow me."

Simpson led David through the Watson residence, an exact mirror image to his own, and stopped before the open doorway to the dining room. Simpson cleared his throat loudly and then announced him.

The room erupted into shouts of welcome and David was engulfed by acquaintances that he hadn't seen for a whole year. Their greetings were so

exuberant he had no idea who was speaking at first. When they eventually settled down, he counted heads. Linus Radley, Walter George, and even Valentine Merton had pried himself from his observation of the stars, and they all sat around the table. Peter Watson, the man who owed his bank three thousand pounds, remained seated, cards clutched in his hand and a strained smile spreading across his face.

Watson must realize why he'd come, and all of a sudden David didn't want to think of the notice awaiting delivery inside his bag.

"Join us, Hawke?" Valentine Merton demanded, slapping the tabletop with the flat of a hand.

"Only fools gamble," David replied. "I'll keep my money thank you very much."

"So says the banker," his acquaintances intoned as one then burst into fits of laughter.

"Still as unfunny as it was when I was eighteen and went to work with my father in London." David shook his head, amused they were far deeper in their cups than they had first appeared "Will you never leave off about my chosen career?"

"Well, you were going to be a composer," Walter George accused, his round cheeks shining pink in the candlelight.

Linus Radley chipped Walter's shoulder with a fist. "Wasn't it sculpture?"

Valentine Merton cleared his throat. "No, you are wrong on both counts. Our Hawke was going to be a world renowned painter of beautiful, scantily clad courtesans and actresses were you not?"

That young and carefree man was but a dim memory. "In my salad days perhaps, Val. Painting does not pay the piper. A man must earn his way in the world."

He deliberately kept his gaze from Peter Watson. As far as he could tell, Peter did nothing but chase the next game or other sources of excitement. While their friends had each found employment, a career to make their fortunes from—great or small—Peter appeared to have done nothing productive with his days.

David moved into the room, coming to a stop behind Valentine to observe the game while they recommenced play. As usual, Val was winning.

"Swimming tomorrow?" Val asked, tilting his head back to make eye contact.

David raised an eyebrow. "Is there another way to start the day in Brighton?"

Val twisted in his seat and ran his gaze over David from head to toe. "I thought, perhaps, you might have stayed in to rest. You've lost weight since I saw you last."

It was true, though David didn't like to admit it. He had lost enough weight that his clothes were roomier. His work at the bank demanded long hours and he frequently lost track of time. Meals were snatched when he remembered to be hungry. Aside from that, there was nothing wrong with him. In Brighton he would relax, eat well, and take some exercise.

The sideboard was littered with half-empty platters of food and his growling stomach reminded him he'd barely eaten since breakfast. "Merely lost my puppy fat." He glanced across the room at Walter George. If anything, the younger man's cheeks had grown even more round since last summer. He tipped his head in Walter George's direction. "Unlike some."

"He's swimming with us this year. Becoming quite proficient at it, too." Val leaned closer. "Yesterday, I stopped checking that he hadn't sunk to the bottom."

David chuckled but weariness made it sound false to his own ears. He should go home to dine and catch up with everyone's news in the morning while they swam. He was exhausted but glad to have finally reached his destination.

He cleared his throat. "Gentlemen, I'm afraid I will have to leave you to your game. Merely wanted to let you know I've arrived and pay my respects."

Although they protested he should stay, David waved a hand as he strode to the door.

"Swimming tomorrow?" Peter Watson called loudly before David left the room.

He halted and turned slowly, looking at his friend. Peter appeared anxious—he had every right to be. David forced a smile to his face. "I wouldn't miss it."

When he arrived at the front door, his hat, gloves and his bag had been taken away. He looked for his possessions.

"Good evening, Mr. Hawke."

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