

Little Conspiracy

By

Lucy Wild

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Chapter One

York, 1868

Vanessa White awoke to the sound of hammering on her front door. Whoever it was sounded angry, their ferocious knocking echoing inside her skull as she climbed reluctantly out of bed. “All right,” she muttered. “I’m coming.”

“I know you’re in there,” a man’s voice shouted up through the letterbox. “Get down here, Miss White.”

Fear rose up in Vanessa’s stomach. It was the voice she least liked to hear, that of her landlord. Frantically, she dressed, still tying up her hair as she ran downstairs.

“Mr. Woodhouse,” Vanessa said with a smile as she pulled open the door. “What can I do for you?”

“Do not attempt to talk your way out of this one, Miss White. Two months to the day. I have come to take back my house.”

“I can explain. My benefactor’s payments have not been forthcoming this month—”

“Or last month.”

“Quite. But I have had assurances that the money will be with me shortly. I just need a little time, that’s all.”

“There is always an excuse with you people.”

“What do you mean by ‘you people,’ Mr. Woodhouse? Is there something about me that offends you?”

“It is your lack of payment that offends me, Miss White. I should never have let to someone so young, this is what I get for dealing with children.”

“I am twenty years old, Mr. Woodhouse, I am no more a child than you are.”

Mr. Woodhouse grunted before shaking his head. “No, you are not a child. You are an adult and you have a responsibility to ensure your rent is paid. You have not paid so I am here to take possession and that is an end to the matter.”

“But, Mr. Woodhouse, I need only a little more time. I am certain my benefactor will make good the money you are owed, if you would only grant me another week.” She took his hands in hers, her eyes widening as she looked up at him. “Please.”

Snatching his hands away, Mr. Woodhouse shook his head again. “Do not use that look on me, it was that look that made me give you this place against my better judgment and on a monthly rental instead of an annual term. I was a fool to trust you.”

“Please. A little more time.”

“You have the length of time it takes me to empty your belongings onto the street.”

“You wouldn’t, not to an innocent woman?”

“Innocent, my foot! You want something for nothing, same as everyone else in this city.” He pushed past her, slamming the door shut behind him, leaving Vanessa out on the street.

She tried the door but it was already locked. “You can’t do this to me!” she shouted through the letterbox. “I demand you let me in.” Her voice began to falter, “I have nowhere else to go.”

“Then I suggest you go and see your benefactor,” Mr. Woodhouse shouted back through the door. “Get me my money.”

“I do not know where he lives. I have never dealt with him personally.”

“Well, isn’t that convenient? Here.” The landlord’s hand emerged from the letterbox, thrusting out an envelope.

“What’s this?”

“Your payments came from that address. I suggest you make haste to pay them a visit, Miss White. My patience with your excuses is at an end.”

Vanessa tore open the envelope. In her landlord’s poor handwriting the letters were hard to decipher but eventually she was able to read:

10 Micklegate

So that was where he lived, a mere few streets away from her. All this time he had lived so close to her and yet she knew nothing of him, not even what he looked like. When the letter had first arrived at her single garret room, informing her that he would pay for any house she chose, that all bills incurred would be paid by him, it had seemed too good to be true. Yet how quickly she had become used to having her every extravagance funded by her anonymous benefactor.

She had spent readily and easily once the first few bills were paid. She did not know how he was able to ascertain to whom she owed money at any given time but whoever she bought from, no receipts were ever issued, no bills of sale given, yet the accounts were always settled by the next time an urge to spend struck her.

As she walked through the streets towards Micklegate, she began to ponder. She had not once thought about the oddity of her bills being paid by someone she’d never met. Why had she taken for granted that her rent would be paid without fail? Why had it never occurred to her to have a contingency plan for this eventuality? All good things came to an end, she knew that. Yet she had wilfully ignored it, and now here it was biting her on the behind. She was to be made homeless if she did not secure two month’s rent from whoever was waiting for her at 10 Micklegate.

Crossing the road, she passed under the arch of the medieval walls and down the cobbled hill, clutching the envelope tightly in her hand whilst wondering who might be waiting for her there. She stopped outside number ten, surprised to find herself looking at the tall glass windows of an office rather than a house. It was part of a terraced row of tidy Georgian houses and stood out as the only commercial premises amongst the fine properties that surrounded it.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door and stepped inside. From behind a desk, an elderly gentleman in a dark blue suit looked up from his ledger. “Good morning,” he said, inclining his head slightly as he rose to his feet. “May I help you?”

“I hope so,” Vanessa replied, taking a tentative step towards him. “This may sound strange but I was told this was the address of my benefactor.”

“Your benefactor? Forgive me, my dear, but this is merely an administration office. Perhaps you have been given the wrong address?”

“This is 10 Micklegate, is it not?”

“Yes, but I do not think I can help you.”

“Perhaps it is someone else working here whom I seek. My name is Vanessa White; does that mean anything to you?”

“I am afraid not. Now if you don’t mind, I’m rather busy this morning.” He began ushering her towards the door.

“You must help me,” Vanessa replied, digging her heels into the rug at her feet. “For the last two years, all my bills have been paid by whoever runs this place but now they have stopped and my landlord has thrown me out of my house. I was given this address. Please, I have nowhere else to go. I beg you to help me.”

The man sighed. "Wait here a moment, would you?" He vanished through a door in the back wall of the office.

Vanessa paced up and down in front of the windows, waiting for him to return. What if he came back and said no, what if she had been given the wrong address, what if this was just a cruel trick her landlord was playing on her? What then, homeless once more, back on the streets she thought she'd left behind forever? She shuddered at the very idea, taking a lock of her hair in her hand and twirling it round her finger at an ever increasing speed.

The door opened so suddenly it made her jump. She looked across to see the old man holding a sheaf of papers, smiling up at her. "You are in luck, Miss White. I have looked into the paperwork and your benefactor does exist."

"Wonderful, where is he?"

"He is not here but I believe you may find him at his school. You are welcome to visit and find out for yourself if you wish."

"A school? But my landlord is currently tossing my possessions out onto the street! Could you not lend me the money yourself?"

"That I cannot do. I can give you the address of his school, nothing more. Anything else is up to you."