*An Interview with Miss Arabella Beckett*

*New York City, 1880*

Mr. Horace Pitkin was in a foul frame of mind, brought on by the fact he’d been given the ridiculous assignment of interviewing Miss Arabella Beckett. From what little he’d been told about the lady she was a suffragist extraordinaire, but interviewing a lady with such peculiar beliefs was not exactly what he’d had in mind when he’d taken a position with the *New-York Tribune* a few months back.

 He glanced through the pages of notes his editor had thrust into his hands two hours before, shaking his head as he read one uninteresting question after another. It really was unfortunate that Miss Appleward, the lady who’d been given the task of interviewing Miss Beckett in the first place, had so foolishly decided to ride a bicycle. If the woman hadn’t attempted a feat that should be limited to gentlemen, she wouldn’t have broken a limb and he wouldn’t have been pressed into service at the last minute.

 Interviewing an old spinster lady with unusual ideas was not going to further his career in the least, and the last thing he wanted to do today was spend time with a dowdy lady waxing on and on about a cause he didn’t believe in and certainly didn’t support.

 Horace took a sip of the excellent tea one of the Beckett servants had brought him and then looked up when the sound of footsteps met his ears.

 A vision of loveliness gowned in pink suddenly glided into the room, causing him to choke on the sip of tea he’d just taken. He wheezed, coughed, and then finally had the presence of mind to set the tea cup aside right before the vision strode to his side and pounded him soundly on the back

 He was quite certain those pounds were going to leave bruises.

 Lifting a hand and sputtering out a breath of relief when the pounding stopped, he raised watery eyes to the lady and felt the small bit of air that was left in his lungs disappear in a flash.

 With her golden locks and perfectly sculpted face, she was, without a shadow of a doubt, the most beautiful lady he’d ever seen in his life.

 He began wheezing once again.

 “I say, sir, would you like me to fetch you some water?”

 The angel standing before him was obviously a compassionate soul. He managed a nod which had the lady hurrying across the room, pouring him a glass of water from a pitcher beside the tea service, and returning to his side. He took the glass, drained it in one gulp, smacked his lips, and belatedly realized he was in the presence of a true lady. Immediately jumping to his feet, he executed what he hoped was a credible bow and cleared his throat.

 “Thank you so much, Miss…?”

 “I’m Miss Arabella Beckett.”
 Horror was swift.

 “You must be mistaken,” was all he could think to say.

 Her rosy lips curled slightly at the corners. “No, I’m fairly certain I’m Miss Beckett, at least the last time I checked.” She held out a hand to him, and he, having no idea what was expected given her apparent fondness for the suffrage movement, shook it. Changing his mind a moment later when she sent him an odd look, he lifted the hand to his lips even though it almost seemed as if she were trying to take it back. He gave two of her fingers a quick kiss and quickly released his hold.

 “It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Beckett. I’m Mr. Horace Pitkin, reporter for the *New-York Tribune*.”

 Miss Beckett smiled, which caused a bead of sweat to pop out on his forehead. “It’s lovely to meet you, Mr. Pitkin, but tell me, what happened to Miss Appleward?”

 Horace made a quick swipe of his forehead with his sleeve. “Not to worry, my dear. Miss Appleward suffered a slight accident while attempting to ride a bicycle, but other than a broken limb I’m sure she’s fine.”
 “She broke a limb?”

 “Indeed, but I’m certain she’s learned her lesson and will, from this moment forward, leave bicycle riding to gentlemen as bicycle riding was meant to be.”

 Miss Beckett’s smile dimmed. “I have a bicycle.”

 Horace blinked. “Well, let us hope that you’ve learned something from Miss Appleward’s mistake and will get rid of your bicycle as soon as possible.”

 His collar suddenly seemed to grow rather tight when Miss Beckett leveled what could only be described as a glare on him.

 “Why, pray tell, do you believe bicycles should only be ridden by gentlemen?”

 Not appreciating Miss Beckett’s frosty tone of voice, Horace lifted his chin. “Bicycles take skill and coordination to operate, and it’s a known fact that ladies simply don’t possess either of those qualities.”

 Miss Beckett muttered something he didn’t quite catch under her breath before she suddenly gestured to the chair he’d recently vacated. “Perhaps we should get this interview over with as quickly as possible.”

 He moved to the chair, waited until she took a seat on a cozy-looking settee, then sat down. “You probably have a tea or some gossiping with your friends you need to attend to later today, don’t you?”

 “Or a hanging.”
 “I beg your pardon?”

 Miss Beckett smiled. “I have a feeling you’re going to be doing that quite a bit over the course of this interview, but please, let us begin. What would you care to know about me and my involvement with the suffrage movement?”

 He reached into his jacket pocket and withdrew a pen, taking a moment to look through the questions Miss Appleward had been planning to ask. When nothing of interest caught his eye, he raised his head.

 “You’re quite attractive.”

 Miss Beckett settled back against the settee. “Thank you, but I have to say, you sound somewhat surprised by that.”

 “I willingly admit I am *pleasantly* surprised. I was expecting to spend my time today interviewing an old spinster, one wearing black I might add. You’re gowned in a delightful shade of pink, and you’re definitely not an old spinster.”

 “Strictly speaking, I am a spinster.”

 He leaned forward. “I find myself curious as to how that happened.”

 “How what happened?”

 “Come now, Miss Beckett, surely you must realize that it’s rare for a lady as beautiful as you are to be unmarried. I would have to think you’ve been inundated with offers from the moment of your debut.”

 “Well, ah…”

 “May I assume that, given your peculiar involvement with the suffrage movement, you’ve taken issue with gentlemen in general?”

 “Not *all* gentlemen, just a select few.”

 For some reason, Miss Beckett was once again glaring in his direction. He ignored the glare and continued. “What is it about gentlemen you find so unappealing?”
 “I never said I found gentlemen unappealing.”

 “Ah, so may I presume there is a special gentleman in your life?”
 For a brief second, something interesting flickered in Miss Beckett’s eyes, but then she blinked and the look was gone. “Forgive me, Mr. Pitkin, but my personal life has absolutely nothing to do with my work regarding the suffrage movement.”

 “I must respectfully disagree. Your personal life must be responsible for your involvement with your cause, and I would have to imagine your disdain for gentlemen is firmly rooted in a past heartache.”

 “I’ve never had a past heartache.”
 Horace smiled. “Never?”

 Miss Beckett crossed her arms over her chest. “Never. Next question, and may I suggest you ask one from those notes you have on your lap?”

 Since nothing interesting sprang to mind to ask her and her glare was causing sweat to now dribble down his face, Horace looked down and rifled through the notes Miss Appleward had prepared. He looked up. “Ah, here’s a lovely topic: a wedding. Your brother, Mr. Hamilton Beckett, recently got married, or so Miss Appleward’s notes state. Did you enjoy the wedding?”

 “I wasn’t in attendance.”

 “You missed your brother’s wedding?”

 Miss Beckett nodded. “I was traveling around the country at the time, speaking at rallies, and my family had no idea where to find me, which is why they sent Mr. Theodore Wilder to fetch me home.”
 “Mr. Wilder, as in the private investigator?”

 “Yes.”
 Horace tilted his head. “Mr. Wilder is known to be one of the best private investigators in the city. If he was sent to bring you home, how is it that you missed the wedding?”

 Miss Beckett shifted on the settee. “There was a bit of an extenuating circumstance.”

 Horace arched a brow. “Would you care to expand on that?”

 “Not particularly.”

 His instincts, honed by his time as a reporter, began humming. “Where did Mr. Wilder finally locate you?”

 “Did you know that I was given an opportunity to personally speak with Elizabeth Cady Stanton? She’s a marvelous lady, and…why aren’t you writing that down?”

 “I’d rather write down where Mr. Wilder ran you to ground.”
 “That has nothing to do with the suffrage movement.”

 His instincts for a great story hummed stronger. “Tell me, Miss Beckett, have you ever found yourself in jail because of the work you’ve done for the suffrage movement?”

 Her eyes widened just a fraction, but then she shook her head. “I can state quite truthfully that I’ve never landed in jail while doing anything for the suffrage movement.”

 He got the uncanny sensation she’d just skirted the question.

 “How about when you haven’t been working on a suffrage issue?”

 “How about we stick to my work and only my work?”
 It was suddenly clear he was going to have to use every skill he possessed as a journalist to get anything worth writing about out of her.

 “Mr. Wilder is considered quite the catch here in the city. Did you find him attractive?”

 Miss Beckett blinked, just once. “Everyone knows Mr. Wilder is attractive, but he’s also incredibly old-fashioned.”

 “So you weren’t attracted to him?”
 “He’s very opinionated.”
 “Yes, but that doesn’t answer my question.”

 “You’re right.”

 He couldn’t help but realize that even though Miss Beckett was incredibly beautiful, she was also somewhat annoying.

 “Did you travel alone with Mr. Wilder or did you have a chaperone with you?”
 Miss Beckett narrowed her eyes. “Mr. Pitkin, I am a lady of a certain age. I no longer require a chaperone, although I normally do travel with a paid companion.”
 “And this companion was with you while you were in Mr. Wilder’s company?”
 “Next question.”

 He looked down at the notes again and decided to try and catch her off guard.

 “Did you find the food in jail to be somewhat satisfactory?”
 “I’ve never been given an opportunity to eat in jail.”
 “Ah, so you have been in jail?”

 Miss Beckett looked at him for a long moment, and then she smiled, making him lose his train of thought. “Getting back to Mrs. Stanton, did I mention the fact she’s well-read? Write that down.”
 His hand, seemingly of its own accord, diligently wrote down what she’d told him, but then, since he wasn’t looking directly into her exquisite face, his brain began working once again and a better question flashed to mind.

 “If Mr. Wilder was forced to fetch you from jail and then escort you home, doesn’t it stand to reason that there should be some type of an announcement occurring soon? I can only assume the two of you spent time alone together since you’ve been rather vague regarding the paid companion situation.”
 “This is 1880, Mr. Pitkin, not the middle-ages, and no, there is no announcement coming soon. If you must know, Mr. Wilder is no longer even in the city.”
 “Is he fleeing from you?”

 “What?”

 “Since he apparently spent quite a bit of time with you, he most likely needed a bit of a break. From what little I’ve discovered about you so far, you seem to have the ability to be exhausting.”

 “Do you normally insult the people you’re interviewing?”

 “I’m not insulting you, simply stating the obvious.” He looked through his notes again. “Ah, here’s a riveting question Miss Appleward seems to believe readers will want to know. Do you long to have children someday?”

 “I haven’t really given it much thought.”

 “You would get married first before you had those children, wouldn’t you?”
 Miss Beckett’s eyes suddenly went glacial. “Forgive me, Mr. Pitkin, but how long have you been a journalist?”

 He waved the comment aside as he glanced once again at Miss Appleward’s notes. “Let me see, education, no, inspirational women, no, ah, here’s a good one.” He looked up. “You’ve been seen in the company of Mr. Grayson Sumner. Is he the reason you’re not married? Have you set your sights on him, but he shows little interest in a lady with such abnormal ideas?”
 “Why did they send you to interview me again?”

 “I was the only reporter available.”
 “That explains much, and Mr. Sumner and I are strictly friends.”
 “So your interest really lies in Mr. Wilder?”

 “I never said I had an interest in Mr. Wilder.”
 “But you never vehemently denied it either, and since he did rescue you from jail, I can certainly understand why you’d hold the gentleman in affection.”
 “I never said he rescued me from jail.”
 “I do hope that your association with the gentleman helps you to understand that your thinking in regard to a woman’s place in the world is completely skewed. Why, a gentleman such as Mr. Wilder will only want to marry a traditional sort of lady, so if your heart is set on him, take some advice from me, a traditional gentleman, and abandon this foolishness about the suffrage movement you seem to hold dear to your heart.”

 Less than three minutes later, Horace found himself standing on the front stoop, watching in dumbfounded amazement as the butler shut the door firmly in his face.

 His attempt at interviewing Miss Arabella Beckett had, apparently, come to a rapid end.