A woman in a long, white, flowing Regency-style dress stands in a field of tall grass at sunset. She is holding a lantern in her left hand, and the light from the lantern and the setting sun creates a warm, golden glow. The background is a mix of orange, yellow, and blue sky. The title is centered in a decorative, light-colored frame.

AN
UNCHARTED
DEVOTION

A Royal Navy Regency



AMANDA TAYLOR



AN
UNCHARTED
DEVOTION



AMANDA TAYLOR



Covenant Communications, Inc.

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Praise for Amanda Taylor

“*An Uncharted Devotion* is the first book in the Royal Navy Regency series by Amanda Taylor, and she showcases her vast knowledge of this era . . . *An Uncharted Devotion* is well written and organized, with simple yet beautiful designs added. The story perfectly captures the early-1800s era: the gowns, balls, culture, language, and lifestyle. If you want a historical romance with great character development and some action and suspense, then *An Uncharted Devotion* is the book for you.”

—Readers’ Favorite Five-Star Review

“James and Sarah are a couple you can’t help but root for from page one. This book was tender, funny, and well researched. I loved every bit of it.”

—Jennifer Moore, author of the Blue Orchid Society series

“Amanda Taylor’s debut, *An Uncharted Devotion*, blends the best of historical romance, adventure, and emotional journeys . . . Taylor brings us along as James and Sarah each take seemingly impossible steps to repair what is broken within themselves and each other and arrive at a warm, sweet, wonderful happily ever after.”

—Rebecca Anderson, author of *Isabelle and Alexander*

“Amanda Taylor’s lovely debut, *An Uncharted Devotion*, showcases beautiful prose, both heartbreak and healing, and a heroic rescue steeped in espionage. History lovers will be enthralled with the covert journey from Regency-era London to Napoleon’s France and rejoice in the hard-won happily ever after.”

—Anneka R. Walker, author of the Matchmaking Mamas series

To Justin
You are in every line of this story.

And for God,
who in answer to a most particular question, whispered, "Write!"

*"For whatsoever from one place doth fall
Is with the tide unto another brought:
For there is nothing lost, that may be found, if sought."*

—EDMUND SPENSER

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CHAPTER 1

Somerset, England, June 1805

WAS MARRIAGE FOR LOVE A foolish inclination? Lieutenant James Turner did not think so. He felt most fortunate indeed as he drew in an invigorating breath of crisp morning air. His usual confidence was coupled today with a feverish enthusiasm, so much so that he was nearly bursting at the seams. He faced Patrick, his best man and oldest friend in the world, on the stone steps behind the old parish church. "I cannot decide whether I am a silly lovesick fool or the luckiest devil in all of England."

Patrick folded his arms and cocked his head to the side with an eye of scrutiny. "That ridiculous grin on your face would suggest the former."

"Ha!" James threw back his head in a chuckle. Patrick's goading did little to affect his mood today. He was far too exultant. "At the very least, I look like a *handsome* lovesick fool." James gripped the lapels of his uniform and straightened his shoulders. His stance mimicked that of a king standing for a portrait.

Patrick only smiled and shook his head. "You look like a lovesick fool who's been happily shackled to the mainmast while the ship is going down."

James fisted Patrick's shoulder. "Your remarks have always been a welcome source of entertainment, my friend." Patrick was more like a brother than friend. People had always told them they looked almost like a copy of each other, except for James's darker hair and eyes. The two had spent most every day of their childhood playing together, wrestling, and sparring. They had attended school together and enlisted in the navy together, but today James was set to begin his very own enterprise. He turned and looked up, squinting into the bright azure sky. The morning sun beamed across the valley as if Mother Nature herself approved of his wedding day and had removed any natural barrier from dampening the occasion.

"You managed to hold on to your bachelorhood until the ripe old age of twenty-seven. Well done." Patrick arched a brow as he brushed a piece of lint off his jacket.

"You, sir, might be jealous," James said as he stepped down onto the grass and continued to look out at the nearby meadow. It really was a picturesque day. "I don't blame your envy of me. Sarah is heaven itself." He conjured her image in his mind. Sarah's tall, slender frame set her just a few inches below

him, providing him the perfect view into her eyes. Those amber-colored eyes that twinkled with warmth whenever she smiled or spoke of something she loved. Her eyes were one of his greatest allies in guessing her thoughts. They were always telling.

“James, I commend you for your choice of bride. She is first-rate, I grant you. She is intelligent and not at all irritating, but one can only tolerate so much of your besotted devotion. At some point you must recover your reason.” Patrick leaned against the stone retainer that must have been five hundred years old. “If I ever behaved like that, I’d expect you to take me out to the stables and horsewhip me.”

“That is quite a pronouncement.” James raised his brow. “When you do fall for some young lady—which you will, I have no doubt—I will gladly hold you to that declaration.”

“There is little chance of that. We set sail in two weeks’ time.” Patrick eyed the horizon as if he could see a great expanse of ocean in the distance. “Besides, having a bride back home would leave me feeling homesick and completely distracted.”

“Are you questioning my devotion, good man? You know I am the hardest-working lieutenant in all the navy.”

The sudden sound of footsteps caused the men to turn, and both shared a glance when the back door of the church swung open to reveal Peter standing in the archway. James’s older and shorter brother stood erect, puffing his chest out as though he were trying to enlarge his person. The knot in his cravat was so thick it caused him to crane his neck upright. The thought occurred to James that Peter might not be able to turn his head from side to side.

Peter rested his fist on his hip. “I am not sure if you realized there is a wedding happening today.” The words slid off his tongue like sap. “Momma sent me to fetch you. It is time.” He nodded and turned to walk inside, not swiveling his head in the least, confirming James’s suspicion.

Peter disappeared inside and James turned to Patrick with a wide knowing grin. He sank into a deep bow, as one might in the presence of royalty. He knew Peter relished his title of viscount and relied upon it to bolster his confidence. James, however, had never wished for such a circumstance. As a younger son, he felt liberated to be who he was, unfettered from a title and the expectations that accompanied it. He relished the freedom to explore his

own path, even if it did mean he had to make his own way in the world. Though Peter could not have been more his opposite, James felt grateful to his brother for bearing the weight of the family's responsibilities.

"This is your last chance for escape, Lieutenant." Patrick grabbed James by the shoulders and examined him one last time.

"My only escape today will be from this church with my beautiful bride." James grinned.

"Off you go, then." Patrick resigned with a nod.

James was all ease and contentment standing next to the vicar at the altar. He looked down to see his mother sitting in the front pew next to Alice, Peter's wife. He glanced to the other side of the aisle, where Sarah's parents would be seated if they were still living. James felt a twinge of sadness for his bride and was grateful to his mother and Peter, who would watch over her in his absence. He was soon leaving. He acknowledged that fact as he drew in a deep breath and blew it out slowly.

When he turned to face the back door of the church, there she stood. Sarah's chestnut-brown hair was pinned wispily atop her head with tiny wildflowers weaved throughout, the same flowers that adorned her bouquet. Her pale-pink dress seemed to glow in the morning light that streamed in through the windows. She was an angel; he was certain of it.

Their eyes found each other, and James held her gaze as she seemed to float down the aisle. He may have been floating himself, feeling weightless and breathless as he watched her.

As the vicar began the ceremony, James barely registered his words. He found everything a haze except Sarah. All he could see were the details of her eyes and the way the strands of her hair swept across her forehead. He noticed her tiny pearl-droplet earrings that grazed her neck every time she moved. They matched her pearl necklace James knew was a gift from her father, years ago.

It took several minutes before he registered the serious and weighty nature of the vicar's sermon. As the rector proclaimed his rather weighty discourse to the congregation, James flashed Sarah an easy smile. He could see her suppressing a laugh just beneath her expression.

"Duly considering the causes for which matrimony was ordained: first, for the procreation of children; second, as a remedy against sin . . ."

Was this really the script? James could not remember a wedding ceremony

ever taking this long. He continued watching Sarah as she listened to the vicar's tedious babble. Focusing on her made the sermon bearable.

"If any man can show just cause why this couple may not be lawfully joined together, let him speak now." The vicar looked into the congregation. He seemed to wait for an inordinate amount of time, as if someone were eventually going to spring forth and declare a previous claim upon James's fiancée.

Finally, the time came for their vows to be exchanged. As James listened to Sarah repeat hers, he reveled in the sweetness of her promises. She was choosing him. She had chosen him. His heart raced when it was his turn to do the same. He had to concentrate to make it through the pronouncement of his own vows, and after, he slipped a tiny brass ring onto Sarah's finger, sealing the fate of their shared union. As he did so, she inadvertently brushed her fingers across his palm, sending a shiver through his entire body.

When the ceremony drew to its close, the couple faced each other. It was done. They were married. Sarah smiled at him, and James felt lighter than air.

"Let us leave this place," he whispered and tucked Sarah's arm into his, escorting her from the church. They clung to each other as they made their way through the tunnel of well-wishers, James raising his arm to shield them from the sprays of rice. As Sarah waved farewell to the crowd, James lifted her into the carriage. He'd had enough of the onlookers and wanted his wife all to himself. He climbed into the carriage and seated himself next to her.

She turned to him. "Well, Lieutenant, I do believe we are married."

"At last! That ceremony was interminable."

"The vicar's piety was admirable." She sighed. "I was happy to let him have his moment."

"You are the kindest, most selfless person I have ever known."

"That sounds very unromantic," she teased. "You sound like you're describing your mother."

James's eyes widened at the suggestion. "My mother is not that selfless, and I don't think of you anywhere near the vicinity of my mother. And I am very glad she is not in this carriage with us." Sarah laughed aloud. James loved to hear her laugh. He usually tried to keep her laughing, but this time his voice softened, and his expression grew tender as he reached for her hand. "It is just you and me now." He took her delicate fingers and kissed each one of their tips, soft as a whisper.

Sarah sighed, leaning in to him, and relaxed against his shoulder.

James reached down and lifted her chin to face him. He looked into her eyes and then shifted his gaze down to her lips. He had never kissed those lips before. Sarah froze, watching him—waiting.

The carriage lurched forward, but neither of them shifted. James lifted his other hand and caressed the side of her neck, brushing his thumb against her jawline just below her ear. She closed her eyes and leaned her cheek against his hand. He could sense the soothing effect his gesture had upon her. He lowered his mouth and, ever so gently, touched his lips to hers.

Sarah's mouth was soft and warm. She lifted her chin just a fraction, as if to prompt him further, and that was all he needed. He threaded his fingers into her pinned-up curls and thoroughly kissed his wife. Sarah returned his affections again and again as they rode toward the seaside. It was a promising beginning.

CHAPTER 2

Five years later, late February 1810

SARAH RESTED HER ARMS ON the ledge of the front window and looked out onto the wide expanse of landscape before her. She had not left the drawing room or this very spot since breakfast. She could not predict when exactly the carriage would arrive, conveying her husband home. She had scarcely seen him in the five years since he had left for war, and she was determined not to miss his approach. She tucked a piece of hair back that had fallen from its place and straightened the sleeve of her pale-blue dress. James liked her in blue, she remembered. The warmth and crackle in the fireplace behind her seemed to echo her current emotion. She felt ablaze with anticipation.

Though the room was warm, Sarah shivered, thinking on the few weeks preceding Peter's death here at Whitfield Manor. They had been abysmal. Pneumonia had struck him so suddenly, and within days his condition had turned grave. Sarah had hardly entered the sickroom, as Lady Whitfield and Alice had remained vigilant to his care. Alice had not left his side.

The image of Lady Whitfield draped over her son on his deathbed, sobbing, while Alice stood in the corner, cold and lifeless, still haunted Sarah. She had not known what to do or where to be on that day or any day after. Alice had retreated into herself and would not be comforted. And Lady Whitfield continued to swing on a pendulum between hysteria and exhaustion. Shock and grief permeated every inch of the household. In all the years without her parents and without James, Sarah had never felt so alone.

She stepped into the entryway and slipped her shawl around her shoulders before opening the front door. The chill of the air caused her to wrap herself more tightly, and yet it was a mild day for winter. She hoped the dry roads meant no delays for James. Portsmouth was less than a day's journey. He might be here before dinner. Sarah's gaze followed the road that carved through the honey-colored grass all the way to the edge of the woods and over the horizon line. The thought of James traveling that road very soon filled her with warm affection. She yearned to see his face and be near him again, to embrace and comfort him in the loss of his brother. As much as she needed him, more than anything, she wanted to offer her sympathies and support to him at this time. The cool air enlivened her senses as she watched the evidence of her breath disappear in front of her. But after a time, she

began to shiver and returned inside to resume her post at the window. A shuffle behind her caused Sarah to turn, and she saw Alice enter the drawing room.

“I left my book,” Alice muttered in a whisper that was barely audible. Alice’s black dress hung loose on her skinny shoulders, and Sarah worried at how hollow her cheeks had become.

“You are welcome to stay.” Sarah stepped away from the window and extended her hand to the armchair near the hearth. “I am just waiting here by the window.”

“No.” The response from Alice came soft and quiet, but it still stung a little.

That one word seemed, to Sarah, the theme of her entire relationship with Alice. *No*. But how could she fault her in this moment? Alice had just lost her husband. Sarah shuddered to think of it. Even in James’s absence, she had always lived in hope. She had hoped and dreamed, every day, of their future together. She felt guilty for feeling such excitement at the prospect of his homecoming when the circumstances were born from such sorrow.

“Alice, I am always here,” she said to Alice’s back as she was leaving. Alice did not turn but left the room in silence. *Oh, James, please hurry home*. His arrival would change everything. He would take care of everything.

In the early afternoon, Lady Whitfield joined Sarah in the drawing room for teatime. “Have you been at the window all day, my dear?”

“Yes, I do not want to miss his arrival.” Her nerves had kept her at this window. What would he think of her after all these years?

“The servants will alert us of his coming.” Lady Whitfield passed her a cup, and Sarah sat down on the edge of the sofa, still mindful to keep an eye to the window. There would be no pretending to occupy herself with anything else today. As she sipped the warm, sweet-tasting liquid, she tried to relax a little.

A slight vibration in her seat caused Sarah to look outside again, and she saw a dark shadow moving swiftly on the horizon. She darted to the window, nearly dropping her teacup on the floor. She had expected to see a mail coach driven by several horses, but instead it was only one man on horseback. Was it he? She could not tell. The figure galloping in the distance wore a dark outercoat that flapped behind him and seemed to give him wings. A low-brimmed hat obscured his face from view, but he looked to be the same

height and breadth as James. It must be him. Sarah's heart leaped.

"I think he is coming! He is here," she called back to Lady Whitfield.

Without hesitation, she set her cup down on the end table and ran to the door, not bothering to seize her shawl. As James advanced, Sarah hurried down the front steps and onto the drive to meet him. Her chest felt near to bursting as she watched him ride closer to the house. He slowed his horse and came to a halt just before her. His hair was pulled back, exposing his rough, weathered skin, and when he removed his hat, she noticed his low-set brow and the deep crevice between his eyes. She stepped back when their eyes met, surprised by the austere expression she encountered on his face. She knew he had been riding for hours in the cold, but where was his smile?

James grabbed the reins and dismounted, landing not three feet from where she stood. They surveyed each other, not speaking. He seemed very different than she remembered. She had stared at his portrait in the downstairs corridor so many times to help her remember his features, and yet that picture was of a boy. She barely recognized this robust man standing before her. But his eyes were the same.

Sarah felt her breath catch as she tried to string together the first words of a greeting. "Welcome home, James."

"Thank you." He averted his gaze before he even spoke the words.

Had she said something wrong? She had always called him James, but after so long, did he expect to be addressed as Captain Turner? Of course, he now bore the title of Lord Whitfield, but surely he did not expect her to use his title. She was overthinking, but his intimidating presence caused her to doubt everything she thought she knew. The breath in her lungs deflated. She could not think of what else to say. His familiar eyes now seemed hollow of feeling. She looked to the ground, trying to avoid the awkward space between them.

From behind, Lady Whitfield came bounding down the steps, almost wheezing. "My son has come home!" She opened her arms wide and threw them around James. He stumbled back at the force of her embrace. Sarah noted he tried to smile, but he could not quite accomplish it, as if his skin were hardened clay and no longer malleable.

"I should get him to the stables." James inclined his head toward his horse. His voice sounded dry and raspy. The sound concerned Sarah. She wanted to take him inside near the fire, wrap a blanket around his shoulders, and sit by

his side for the rest of the day.

“Surely a footman can do the job,” Lady Whitfield called after him, but James had already turned his horse in the direction of the stables and was leading him away. He made no reply and waved his hand in dismissal of her suggestion.

Sarah did not move, confused. She had imagined their first greeting and James’s reaction to her so very differently. The chilly reception she had just received made her feel like they were strangers. Where was the warm, affectionate man she once knew? For the first time since leaving the house, she felt cold. She wrapped her arms around herself and watched him round the corner of the manor house until he disappeared from view.

“He just needs a proper meal and a good night’s sleep.” Lady Whitfield must have noticed Sarah’s forlorn expression. “All will be put to right; you’ll see.” Lady Whitfield tried to console her, but Sarah continued to stare in the direction James had gone. “Come, my dear. Let us ready ourselves for a nice welcome-home dinner.” Sarah turned to see Lady Whitfield’s hand extended to her. Without another option, she took it and walked up the stairs. She tried to take comfort in her mother-in-law’s words, but in her heart she felt something must be very wrong.

She thought of the letters she had received from James over the years. At first, he had written her often, but as the years went on, she had heard from him less and less. It had not bothered her though; she’d understood he was fighting a war and was focused on the task at hand. She had been so proud when he received his captain’s papers and knew it was a result of his attention to duty. He had been away for years, but she clung to the feeling of those first weeks they had shared together.

As she walked into the house, she tried to brush off her initial reaction. She had judged the situation too quickly, and with all that James had been through, he deserved her patient consideration. She drew in a few breaths and rallied her spirits. He needed a wife who was compassionate and tolerant, and that was exactly who she was going to be.

At dinner, though washed and shaven, James still had the look of a rough-hewn sailor. He behaved much the same as he had upon his arrival this afternoon, but he did ask Lady Whitfield of the circumstances surrounding Peter’s death. The subject only seemed to trouble him further. Eventually, Sarah stopped trying to participate in the conversation because every

response he gave, or lack thereof, felt like another rejection, over and over.

After a long evening of forced conversation and awkward silence, Sarah retreated to her bedchamber for the night. She felt desperate to understand what was happening, but none of it seemed real, like she was having an awful dream and would surely wake from it at any moment. The ache in her head reminded her that she was not dreaming, yet she was thoroughly exhausted.

Eve assisted her in removing her gown and changing into her nightdress, then left her in peace. Sarah pulled back her covers, but before tucking into bed, she looked at the door adjoining her room to James's. She knew he must certainly be weary after his long day, but she thought perhaps she might wish him a good night and kiss him on the cheek if she dared. She walked over and put her ear to the door. Hearing soft footsteps, she felt sure he was still awake. She balled a fist at her side and worked up the courage to knock on the door. Her knock fell soft and quiet as she waited and listened. With no sign of movement on the other side of the door, she thought perhaps the knock was too soft. She knocked again a little louder. This time she heard a quick shuffle away from the door, and she was certain James had heard her knock. She felt a lump form in her throat when she realized he would not be opening the door.

Though Sarah was in mourning, she had not yet shed a tear until tonight. A solid droplet leaked onto her cheek, and she swiped it away before it could travel any farther. She blew out her breath, trying to suppress any more tears from forming, and walked over to her bed. She folded herself into her bedcovers, letting herself disappear under them until her mind drifted away into numbness.

CHAPTER 3

JAMES SAT FROZEN ON THE edge of his bed until Sarah's room went dim and quiet. Was she asleep? He could not will himself to move again until he was certain. He blinked up in the dark. The ceiling felt as tall as the hull of his ship. He was used to the space of his captain's quarters and his cramped berth with walls that creaked from the force of the ocean behind them. But here his room was vast and silent and still.

He thought back to his arrival at Whitfield this afternoon. Sarah's warm expression and soft smile had not disguised the shocked aspect of her eyes when she first saw him. His appearance had startled her, and she was hesitant to greet him, as if he were some unearthly creature.

She was still so fresh and young—so innocent. And he was now a weather-beaten old sailor. He felt he had lived three lifetimes in the years he had been away at sea. He couldn't even remember what it felt like to be the man who had left her five years ago—a man who hoped, dreamed, and loved. That man was gone forever. If he would've remained as he was then, the sea would have broken him.

He shifted his weight and the bed creaked. He stilled but heard nothing in response, so he stood and stretched his back. It felt like a week since he woke this morning in the Portsmouth harbor. His only measure of relief had come when he retired to his bedchamber this evening, away from tilted heads and expectant gazes. Sarah's knock had pulled him right back into the shock of his situation, and though she'd knocked twice, it was not in his power to open that door. He did not have words or excuses or explanations of any kind to give. He couldn't make sense of anything that was happening, other than knowing his family was unrecognizable to him. His mother was a ghost of the woman he once knew, his brother a distant memory, and his wife a stranger to him.

In the silence he heard tiny sobs through the wall. His throat thickened at the delicate sounds. He felt for Sarah. She must feel as miserable as he did. He laid back on his bed, which felt entirely too soft, and closed his eyes. After several minutes he drifted into sleep.

The following morning he woke before dawn not certain of where he was. Birds sang in the distance. His bed did not move and sway. When the realization dawned on him, he rubbed his eyes and considered how he would

conduct himself today. With no immediate tasks to fulfill, no schedule, he groaned into his pillow.

He must leave his room, of that he was sure, or someone would come knocking. He left his bed and paced to the window. The manicured grounds surrounding the house were pristine. What was there to do? It all seemed to be done for him.

A soft knock at the door startled him, but it was followed by a request from the valet to enter and assist him in dressing. He opened the door and let the man in. Mr. Holtz, the man James remembered dressing his father, set down a washbasin on the table.

“Thank you.” James plunged the soap into the water. It was warm, and the soap didn’t burn his skin.

When he was fully dressed and shaven, he turned to Sarah’s adjoining door. There was still no noise, but after last night he thought he should extend an offering of some kind. After all, she was his wife, and though he felt unprepared to step back into the role of husband, he would at least invite her to eat breakfast with him.

He walked out into the corridor and knocked on her outside door. A young maid answered the door. “Lord Whitfield.”

He blinked. That was his title now.

“Lady Whitfield is not yet dressed. May I give her a message?”

“Um, yes,” he sputtered. “Would you tell her, ask her”—he paused—“invite her to join me for breakfast?”

The maid lifted her brow and waited for him to speak again. “Now, sir?”

“Um . . .” He eyed his pocket watch. It was early. “Whenever she is ready.”

The maid nodded. “Yes, sir. I shall give her the message.” She closed the door.

He stood in the corridor. What a disaster. His jumbled words sounded like he had summoned her. He was so accustomed to giving orders in a straightforward manner, he felt out of practice with genteel speech. Perhaps he should have written her a note. He mussed his hair with his fingers, feeling strange without his bicorn, and walked to the stairwell in search of breakfast and his new life.

He stepped into the empty breakfast parlor, wondering how and when such a meal was to commence. He checked his pocket watch again—eight thirty. If he were aboard the *Phantom*, breakfast would be long over and he would

have already set about logging his morning reports, approving inventories, and supervising inspections. He never found himself alone in the morning hours like this. He looked to the sideboard, where a tray lay with some mail or correspondence. He stepped over and sifted through the contents.

“Good morning, sir.” Mr. Thomas, the butler, entered the room.

“Good morning.” James stepped away from the sideboard.

“We are accustomed to serving breakfast at nine o’clock, but if Your Lordship would prefer an earlier hour, we can certainly accommodate you.”

“No, no. Nine o’clock is all right.” James forced a smile.

“Very well, then, sir.” Mr. Thomas bowed. “The trays will be brought out momentarily.”

James nodded and pulled the chair out at the head of the table. Should he sit? Should he wait for Sarah? He felt like a child, wishing for instructions on how to behave at teatime. “This is madness.” He plunked down in his chair.

“Pardon?” Sarah’s quiet question touched his ears, and he turned to the sound of her voice as he stood from the table.

“Um, nothing.” He darted a glance at her, and her golden eyes penetrated right through him, unraveling him. He dropped his head and extended a hand to the chair next to him.

She took his invitation.

Two footmen soon entered the parlor with trays and set them on the sideboard while James and Sarah sat in silence. While the footmen positioned their breakfast, James fisted the palm of his hand, trying to think of what to say.

Sarah beat him to it. “Did you sleep well?”

He dipped his chin and thought of telling her the bed was too soft and the night was long in his unfamiliar surroundings, but he didn’t. “Yes.” When he thought to ask her how she slept in return, he instead remained silent at the memory of her soft sobs. A pit formed in the base of his gut, turning over in his hollow stomach.

Sarah stood and walked to the sideboard, and he watched her assemble a small plate of toast and preserves. “I don’t usually eat very much in the morning. If you like, we could have some cheese or eggs brought out,” she said, still facing away from him.

“No, this is adequate.” He stood as she nodded and turned back to her seat.

While James served himself some toast, he felt her gaze on him from

behind. His back stiffened at the sensation. He averted his gaze to the window as he sat down. Where was his mother? Where was Alice? He looked down at his food. What did Sarah want from him? He cleared his throat before biting into the dry toast. The crunch of the bread crackled in his ears, but the silence was deafening.

“Tea?” she asked.

He nodded, finding no breath to speak. Sarah slid a cup and saucer across the tablecloth toward him, and an image of this same breakfast parlor from long ago invaded his mind. His father and mother were there, and Peter. Joyful laughter had filled the room as if it were Christmas morning. Peter had stood and stepped to Father, wrapping his arms around him from behind. James strained to keep his eyes dry. He could not swallow his toast. His throat pulsed with an ache. The loneliness was excruciating.

“James?”

He lifted his chin and could not avoid her eyes or the questions in them. He stood. “Will you excuse me?” he sputtered. He had no excuse to offer.

She sighed. “Yes, of course.”

He stepped into the corridor, blinking the images from his memory. He could not retreat to his bedchamber. The air felt suffocating. Perhaps outside. He strode to the kitchen, out the back door, toward the stables. He would ride until he chased away all feeling—all day if he had to. He would try again tomorrow, but right now, this was the only course he could think to survive. He must survive.

CHAPTER 4

SARAH TOSSED AND TURNED FOR most of the night, which had become a ritual in the month since James's return. She finally gave up trying as she saw the beginning light of dawn creep into her chamber. She rose from her bed, dressed, and ensconced herself on a pillow in the corner of the windowsill. It had become her spot as of late. She'd spent hours here, taking in the view overlooking the garden, where this morning she noticed some of the summer perennials were starting to appear. Her primroses looked as if they were ready to emerge; their tips of green had nudged their way through the fallen leaves, braving the chill of early spring.

Just beyond the garden, her gaze followed the pathway extending out to the stables, where she often spotted James going out for an early-morning ride. But there were no signs of activity yet this morning. She looked along the tree line behind the stables at the thick wood of oak trees that stretched on to the horizon. The serenity of the setting soothed her aching heart.

Sarah closed her eyes, wishing she could remain in her windowsill for the rest of the morning. She did not want to leave it and face the day, face him. She knew James would be waiting for her to join him for breakfast, although she could not imagine why. Since his return home, he'd rarely spoken to her, except for the exchange of general pleasantries. She dreaded this morning ritual of theirs, trying to muster cheerful conversation and ask questions while he provided the shortest responses possible, never offering more. James always seemed trapped in the intensity of his own thoughts and distracted from whatever was right in front of him, namely her. Why did he not care to reacquaint himself with her after all this time? Why did he not even look at her? The unanswered questions drove her mad with frustration.

She leaned her head against the chilly windowpane. The cool, smooth surface against her cheek numbed her senses. She closed her eyes, again recalling the first night they'd met.

Sarah was nineteen when Lieutenant James Turner had approached her at the Noringtons' ball in London. She could remember with clarity his broad shoulders, confident stride, intense dark eyes, and crooked smile as he came to stand next to Lieutenant Patrick Sloane, a mutual friend. As Patrick began the introductions, James's gaze homed in on Sarah. The intensity of it caused her to cast her eyes down to the floor, and when she dared look up, his gaze

was still fixed on her. She could not help the color from rising in her complexion, and she cast her eyes down once again. Why could she not look at him? In defiance of her shyness, she glanced up again, this time resolved to meet his gaze. As she did so, his smile widened and the spark in his eyes caught fire. She could not help but stare back at him. There they stood, oblivious to the room around them, caught in a brilliant magnetic pull.

Lieutenant Sloane, having observed the complete disregard of his introduction by both parties, cleared his throat. “I see my good friend Mr. Fields standing by the door, and since I am no longer needed here”—his eyebrow arched in amusement—“I will take my leave.” He backed away, smiling at the scene he had just witnessed.

Lieutenant Turner stepped toward her and leaned in. “If you are not otherwise engaged, I would be honored if you would join me for the next dance, which I believe is a waltz.”

Sarah did not answer right away. She could not imagine her nerves would sustain her through a waltz with this gentleman. She barely held her composure through their introduction. Answering her silence with a smile, he offered his arm and led her to the open floor where other couples took their positions.

“I never practiced my waltz steps in the navy,” he said. “I hope your toes survive this dance.” They laughed together, and before she could anticipate what was about to happen, James placed his hand in the small of her back and drew her into a rather close embrace, even for the waltz. Sarah’s breath came quickly. She concentrated on slowing her heartbeat and slipped her right hand into his.

That first dance felt representative of their courtship—an intense whirlwind of such emotion she could not find her bearings. James’s open, expressive disposition invited her heart to unfurl and embrace all his attentive and thoughtful gestures. Sarah let her instincts be her guide, and her young heart had no reservations about falling in love with James Turner. Although he was set to return to his post in two months’ time, she had thought the separation to be nothing and settled into a feeling of hope and expectation for the future.

The creak of the bedroom door interrupted Sarah’s thoughts. “Good morning.” Eve stepped into her room and went about straightening the bedclothes. “How did my lady sleep last night?”

It was not lost on Sarah that Eve referred to her as the lady of the house.

That title brought with it only anxiety and discomfort. “Not well at all, I’m afraid.” She did not elaborate. She wished to but could not bring herself to speak the words aloud. *My husband has returned to me a stranger. He is cold and stoic, and I barely recognize him.* She had already felt alone in this house filled with such grief from Peter’s death, and James’s icy disposition had upended any remnant of contentment she may have once had.

As Eve finished tidying the room, Sarah stood from the windowsill. In familiar unison, they both approached the dressing table. Sarah sat as Eve brushed through her hair, gently separating the curls and attending to the tangled sections, which were surely made worse from Sarah’s restless night.

“How would you like me to fix your hair, my lady?” Eve asked as she drew Sarah’s locks away from her face.

It does not matter, as the only thing of note I will do today is take a long walk to escape the tensions in this household.

“A low bun will do.” Sarah forced a smile, and Eve continued to brush and smooth the length of her hair. She closed her eyes, feeling the tingles glide across her scalp from the ministrations.

Be patient. Give him time. What had become her mantra to cope with the situation was quickly losing its potency. She knew James was grieving and adjusting. To have gone from the life of a naval captain to taking on his brother’s title and inheriting his family’s estate must be overwhelming. *But why does he remain so withdrawn? Why does he shut me out?*

“How is that, my lady?” Eve set down the brush as Sarah looked up at her reflection.

“Very nice. Thank you.” She nodded and, amid crippling self-doubt, tried to muster some confidence. There was nothing left to do but go down to breakfast.

Sarah slipped down the stairs and stopped in the doorway of the dining room, observing James from behind. Having spent the morning clinging to distant memories, the sight of him was all the more crushing. He sat at the head of the table, reading a document. His damp hair looked darker, almost black, and his form-fitting jacket flexed around his shoulders and arms. Physically, he was changed from war—solid, commanding, and fully formed. An intimidating presence, to be sure, his handsome profile nearly startled her. She found herself wanting to walk over, run her fingers along his neckline, and place a gentle kiss on the back of his neck. How long had it been since

she had touched him in that way? The thought stirred a twinge of sadness inside her.

When she entered the room, James rose from his chair and gave her a curt nod. “Good morning,” he said, his eyes darting back to his reading.

She could barely believe she had once thought him so much in love with her. She knew many couples whose marriages were made of convenience, circumstance, or otherwise, and she had pitied them, thinking she had achieved all those things while still making a love match.

As she took her seat, unfolded her napkin, and placed it in her lap, he spoke again. “Alice informed me she would like you and me to attend the house staff meeting this afternoon to acquaint us with the management of the household.” Sarah looked up from her napkin, encouraged they had something to do together. “But I will not be able to attend.” James turned his focus back to his papers.

Of course not. Sarah did not bother to reply. She found herself staring at him, longing for a glance or the tiniest hint of interest—anything. She would will his gaze upward, as he had once done to her. *Look at me!* her thoughts pleaded with him. After a few moments, she relented and glanced out the window, her heart stammering in confusion.

“Will you be able to attend?”

“Hmm?” Sarah looked back at him.

“The meeting with the staff?” James asked.

“Oh. Yes. Why can you not attend?”

“I have some matters of business that require my immediate attention.” James grimaced, his low brow now a permanent fixture.

“Is anything the matter?”

“Nothing to bother you with.”

“Of course not,” she muttered under her breath. *Heaven forbid you speak to your wife about a matter of importance.* She mustered the courage to speak again. “James, I would like it if we talked more.” She waited for a response, and when none was given, she continued. “I read about every battle in which the *Phantom* was engaged. I am most eager to hear about them, along with your travels to foreign places.”

James looked up from his reading with a look of consternation. “I was not traveling or playing toy soldiers, Sarah. I was at war.” The muscles in his jaw clenched. “I am not accustomed to sharing military matters with anyone, and

I daresay you will not enjoy the details.” His words invited no further comment.

Sarah put down her teacup and straightened her back, wiping the crumbs from her napkin. She stood. “If you will excuse me.” She could not tolerate this exchange any longer. She needed air. “I will take my walk now.” She did not wait for a reply as she exited the dining room.

Hot tears streaked down her face as she walked down the path toward the stables. She found she could no longer repress her disappointments. She may as well try to stop the waves from crashing in on the seashore. She picked up her skirts and began to run. The cool breeze whipped across her damp cheeks as she ran past the stables, all the way to the edge of the woods. Coming to a standstill, she gasped for air, her chest tight from running and crying. Tears turned to angry sobs. *How could I be so naive?* She had been as patient as Odysseus’s Penelope, waiting faithfully for her sailor to come home. She had navigated coming to live with James’s family at Whitfield Manor with cheerfulness and positivity. And even when the days were long and the company was sparse, she had never allowed feelings of self-pity or loneliness to overtake her. But she found she could no longer generate the strength.

The sound of footsteps drew her attention, but instead of a repentant James come to apologize, her heart sank further when she instead saw Alice walking the path along the edge of the woods. Her head hung down as she walked, seeming deep in contemplation, as if she might meander there all day.

When Sarah had first come to live at Whitfield Manor, she’d hoped to form a friendship with Alice, perhaps even a sisterly bond. But it did not take long to learn that when Alice was not with Peter, she kept to her room or her books. Sarah had not minded then, as James’s mother was always very engaging and filled the awkward spaces in their conversation, but these last weeks, Sarah had desired to comfort Alice—to offer friendship. If she were honest, she had also desired such things from Alice, feeling lonelier than ever since James’s return. But Alice had remained aloof.

Sarah expected her to walk straight past without a word and was surprised when Alice came to stand right next to her and whispered, “Hello.”

“Hello, Alice.” Sarah felt awkward as both stood in silence, focusing on the nature in front of them. She patted her eyes with her hand, hoping she did not appear too distraught.

Alice reached into her pocket and offered her a handkerchief. “You don’t

have to hide your tears from me,” she said. “I wish I had some left, but it seems mine have all dried up.”

Alice’s offering surprised her, but she was grateful. “I can’t seem to stop mine.” As if on cue, another tear slid down her cheek. She swept it away with her finger.

Alice turned around and took in the scenery around them. “I find most days are tolerable when I walk outside. Even with a chill in the air and frost still on the ground, the outdoors are more preferable to the house. No eyes on me, watching, wondering why I’m not crying.” She paused. “The truth is most of the time I just feel numb.”

Sarah’s heart, though still breaking, now ached for Alice.

“The woods don’t pity me as most people have done all my life.” Alice returned her gaze to Sarah. She stared right through her with a vacant expression.

Sarah wondered at Alice’s openness. Her usual reserve seemed to have disappeared and Sarah sensed in her an exhausted indifference to life in general.

“I, too, enjoy walking alone. Sometimes it is nice not to worry about what one should say or do in the company of others.” Sarah thought of her many strained conversations with James as Alice stared up at the massive trees. She breathed in the cool air, letting the stillness wash over her, as Alice seemed to do. “I wish it were not such a struggle.”

“I used to worry a great deal about what people thought of me. I was terrified at my coming-out. I felt paralyzed by the prospect of not attracting a husband or, even worse, that I would.” A tiny curve appeared in Alice’s lip. “Before every outing I found myself sick with worry at the thought of conversing with anyone, let alone a gentleman.”

It was not hard for Sarah to imagine this younger version of Alice. “How did you come to know Peter?” she asked quietly.

“When I first met Peter, I could see he, too, struggled in company. Oddly, it gave me comfort to see he seemed more tortured in our exchange than I was.” The words spilled out of her like a dam that had burst from the mounting pressure behind it. “I knew him very little when he proposed marriage, but my parents were thrilled that his position would elevate the status of my family. I was terrified, but Peter was kind and patient, and he seemed to understand how difficult all of it was for me. I felt he cared for me

immediately in his own tentative way.” Alice’s breath slowed. “I don’t give a fig for titles or status or wealth. I would give anything to spend one more afternoon with him.” She fell quiet and stood still for a long while.

Sarah grieved for Alice. She wished to offer her solace. “You are not alone. Lady Whitfield and I want nothing more than to help ease your pain.”

“I know. In truth, it is difficult for me to be at the manor house around Peter’s family.” Alice’s voice softened. “I know they loved him, but I don’t think they ever understood him, not really. When we were alone, he was different.” Her expression brightened a bit. “We made our little world together, he and I. Everything seemed to be all right as long as we were together.” Her countenance fell again, and a grim expression returned to her face. “Now he is gone, and I feel lost.” She paused as though the breath had escaped her lungs. “So I venture outdoors most days, where no one endeavors to placate me or pretend it will be all right because I know it will not be. I know my heart will never be the same.”

Sarah understood the particular kind of despair Alice described. She had felt it acutely the day her parents had died six years ago, and it had stayed with her in varying degrees ever since. “You are right, Alice. Your heart will never be the same. But I promise you the aching will lessen over time, and perhaps you will even be able to make room in your heart for a little bit of hope again.” She took Alice’s hand in hers, and her own heart felt a little lighter giving comfort to Alice. She was surprised to realize she still felt some hope in her own circumstances. She would continue to hope and pray for them both.

CHAPTER 5

JAMES LISTENED TO THE SLEEPY waves roll over the narrow stretch of beach below as he, Patrick, and Lieutenant Angus Booth scurried up the steep switchbacks of the coastal cliff. The darkness felt thick under the new moon, and he used his hands and feet to steady his progress as he climbed. When he reached the lip of the cliff, he hoped the long grass would hold as he gripped it to hoist himself over the ledge. Looking down to the beach below, he could see the tracks where they had dragged their dinghy across the sand and hidden it away in the brush. Patrick reached the top just behind him, and James offered his hand to help him over the edge. In turn, Patrick leaned down and extended his hand to Angus.

“The lantern, if you please, Lieutenant Booth,” Patrick whispered to Angus as he found his footing.

“Aye, Lieutenant.” Angus slipped the knot of the rope holding the lantern from his belt and handed it to Patrick.

James looked out over the vast darkness and barely saw the Phantom anchored a mile offshore. Patrick struck the flint and lit the lantern. All three watched and waited until they saw the signal. Another lantern light appeared off the ship’s bow in the distance. Both parties snuffed their lanterns.

“We’d best run, men,” James said. “We must reach the fishing cottage in under an hour, and we have ground to cover.” The other two sailors followed his lead at a brisk pace. After running for a solid three-quarters of an hour, the men slowed as they crested a hill, where a small inlet of water came into view.

The three sailors crouched in the cover of the tall grass. James could just make out the silhouette of a rundown little cottage nestled in the cove. A small pier extended out into the water with a fishing vessel tied to its edge. Angus placed his fingers to his lips and blew a low two-toned whistle. The men watched and waited. After a few moments, a figure emerged from the cottage. The light from the doorway highlighted the man’s silhouette. There he stood—the man they called Chappelle. Although his frame was short and rotund, he was an imposing presence, to be sure.

“Wait here, men.” James moved to stand.

“No.” Patrick grabbed James’s arm. “It is better that I go. As our newly appointed captain, you no longer have the luxury of anonymity. Chappelle

has never encountered my face before and is not likely to in the future. Should anything go awry, the Phantom and her crew need their captain.”

James was not comfortable with this arrangement. The only way he was willing to put any of his men in danger was to lead them there himself.

“Lieutenant Sloane is right, Cap’n,” Angus chimed in. “We do nah ken what Chappelle’s intentions are. Lieutenant Sloane can handle himself. He’ll retrieve the intelligence, and we’ll be swiftly on our way back to the ship.”

James nodded against his better judgment. Patrick stood and sprinted to the cottage, where Chappelle was waiting. James heard the muffle of voices but could not discern what was said. A loud clamor erupted from behind the cottage, and in an instant ten French soldiers surrounded the front doorway, all muskets pointed at Patrick. Chappelle stood in the doorway, like a statue, while Patrick was clapped in irons. One of the soldiers stepped forward, directly in front of him, and jammed the butt of his musket into Patrick’s gut. Patrick groaned, doubled over in pain from the force of the blow. In a fit of rage, James leaped forward, but Angus grabbed him and pinned him to the ground, covering his mouth before he revealed himself. From the ground, James watched as another soldier struck Patrick across his brow and the rest came forward and took turns bludgeoning him with their muskets. James fought to free himself from Angus’s hold, but the man’s brute strength won out. By the time the soldiers were done, Patrick no longer moved. They picked up his limp body and dragged him along the pier to their vessel.

James woke with a start. He sat up in the darkness. Where was he? As his eyes adjusted, he saw the fire had gone out in the library. He pulled his handkerchief from his breast pocket and wiped the sweat off his brow as he stood from the settee. He had been reliving this nightmare for months, tortured over and over by the unknown fate of his best friend. Had Patrick been imprisoned in France, bloodied and wounded or, worse, executed? James had done everything in his power to avoid sleep these last weeks, but inevitably it found him. His brow knit so tightly together a dull throb pulsed between his eyes.

He walked over to the large windows that lined the western wall. What time was it? Past midnight, he supposed. The night sky was pitch-black, similar to that night on Jersey Island. Once again, he began reviewing the details of that night. Chappelle had looked on as the soldiers attacked Patrick. James fumed thinking of it, of Chappelle’s betrayal. James had tried to spring

into action out of sheer instinct, but Angus's cooler head had prevailed. They were outnumbered and outgunned. Had James revealed their position, they all would have been captured and likely killed. Napoleon's army did not treat English spies with leniency.

James stopped pacing at the window, walked to the fireplace, and relit the embers. He leaned his shoulder against the mantel, where the letter from yesterday still sat, and letting the beam bear his weight, he rubbed his forehead.

The Admiralty had replied to his correspondence with no news of Patrick's whereabouts. James suspected they had not even instigated a search, as they had made no agreements with France for the exchange of prisoners of war—they knew Napoleon had no intention of releasing English prisoners, believing they would once again fight against the French, and probably believed Patrick to have been executed.

James had spent the last month combing the papers and public lists of war casualties, however, and had not seen Patrick's name. He was starting to suspect his friend was being held prisoner. He had heard tell of entire ships full of prisoners that had never left the harbor in France.

Overheated by the flames, James stepped away from the fire. He felt powerless. Days after Patrick's capture, James had received the news of his brother's death and his own subsequent inheritance of his family's estate. He had been thrust back into a life in England he did not recognize, and he did not recognize himself in it. Five years ago, he'd been an immature young lad with no experience in the real world. Impulsive dreamer that he was, he had fancied himself in love, had married Sarah, and promptly left her to fend for herself while he dove headfirst into the war. It had been easy for him to detach himself from life in England while at sea. His life in the navy was filled with work and responsibilities. He had thrived in that environment, even amid the rough living conditions and constant threat of danger. Now back home, he had far too much time to spare, and he could not avoid *her*.

Sarah had gone to bed hours ago. He thought back to her expression at breakfast this morning. She had resembled a wilted flower, left exposed under a rain cloud for far too long. He could sense her wanting more from him, more of something he could not give. He had failed Patrick, and now he was failing Sarah. Whenever she entered the room, his heart would thrum and flutter, but dread immediately followed. Whenever James considered

enjoying a life of wedded bliss, his throat clenched and his stomach went sour at the thought of his best friend starving in a French prison somewhere—or worse.

He was exhausted, but the idea of going up to his bedchamber was disconcerting. The only things that greeted him there were more nightmares and the thought of Sarah in the adjoining room. Sarah, with her perceptive hazel eyes that saw right through him and her skin—skin that appeared so soft he found himself thinking about brushing his finger along her arm just to see how smooth it felt.

That cursed door! His first few nights home, she had knocked on the door. She no longer knocked, and he felt relieved and disappointed.

James heard a quiet knock at the library door and turned in haste, thinking of Sarah. But when his mother entered the room, he blew out a breath.

“Hello, son.” Her greeting was not in her typical cheerful tone, but cool and impassive.

James braced himself for the lecture he knew was coming. “Hello, Mother. What has kept you up into the late hours this evening?” He kept his tone light, pretending not to have taken the meaning of her tone.

“I’ve wanted to speak with you in private, and since I have observed you staying up way past a time that is prudent night after night, I thought I would join you this evening.”

The dowager formulated her words carefully to make her opinions known. “What is it, then, Mother?” He preferred she just come out with it. He would rather not tiptoe through this conversation any longer.

“Son, I know your return from the war has been challenging.” She paused. “Losing Peter was a shock for all of us, but you in particular have had to adjust to a new role and new responsibilities.” The dowager began to pace along the same threadbare track on the rug that James had created. “We have all been sympathetic to your situation and patient with you, Sarah most of all.” James felt acute discomfort at the mention of her name. “But you have remained withdrawn and, to be frank, quite bristly.”

“Bristly?” James replied in mocking disdain.

“Yes, bristly.” His mother sensed his tone, and she displayed no patience for it. The dowager’s volume escalated. “James William Turner, you have a family who loves you very much and wants nothing if not to offer you support and care, which you reject at every turn. I know this is a difficult time

for you, but Sarah does not deserve your contempt. She has been a great support to me in your absence and very loyal to our family, and you treat her like rubbish. She is putting on a brave face, but I see how you've hurt her. It is time you stop this behavior and come back to us, come back to her."

Angered by his mother's reproach, James huffed out a long breath. A thunderous storm of emotions sprang up inside of him, his pride banishing any thought that she might speak the truth. She reprimanded him as though he were a child whose pouty tantrums needed to stop. He exerted what felt like superhuman strength to mask the intensity of emotion he was feeling. "Mother, I appreciate your concern, but I am a grown man who has managed quite well without a mother for years now," James retorted, a little embarrassed by his defensive tone. But he would not discuss this with her. She had no concept of the burden he was carrying. A nagging mother was the last thing he needed.

She paused and softened her tone. She shifted her approach. "You may not feel my role as your mother is necessary in your life anymore, but a mother never stops caring. I will always be your mother." She swallowed, seeming overcome by the thought. "My maternal instincts did not disappear the day you left for the navy or the day you got married, and they never will." She paused. "I will continue to worry for your well-being and desire your happiness until the day I die."

James did not respond. He put his head down as the storm inside him tempered. He did not know what he could say to relieve her concerns. The truth was he felt guilt-ridden and utterly displaced with no idea as to which course of action to take next.

They stood in silence, resigned that their dialogue had run its course. "James, I want you to know I will persist in my efforts to draw you out. You may resist, but just remember from whom you inherited that stubbornness."

James looked up at her, surprised. "Thank you, Mother. This talk has been most instructive." He tried to sound flippant, but she had nailed him down, and she knew it.

"Good night, my boy." She smiled, satisfied to have made her point, and walked out of the library without another word.

* * *

The following evening at dinner, James eyed his mother at the other end of

the dining table while she prattled on to Sarah and Alice about some nonsense or other. She had promised him last evening that she would not acquiesce to his reticence, and he believed her. And though he thought her a formidable opponent, sitting over there, dressed in her finery, and unrelenting in her opinions, he knew he would not and could not let his guard down. The only way he knew to survive the deep chasm of guilt and regret that threatened to swallow him whole was to guard himself from others and from his own sensibilities.

He was relieved, however, to find that tonight she had shifted her focus to Sarah and Alice and was grateful they were there to divert his mother's attentions. He chuckled internally at the irony of the situation. After so many years at sea, sailing with only men, he was surrounded by females at every turn, though he thought the dowager could certainly hold her own with any admiral in the navy.

He glanced at Sarah as she sipped soup from her spoon. Her unaffected beauty almost caused him pain. The black mourning attire she wore did nothing to diminish her radiance, and he could not stop himself from staring at her familiar string of pearls that ran along her neckline. Composed as she was, James noted the thinly veiled expression of sadness in her eyes. He had grown accustomed to it and could not remember the last time he saw her smile, really smile. He had seen the polite version of the expression she gave for other people's sake but not her smile that reflected true delight in her eyes. She glanced his way, and he dipped his head, averting his gaze. Alice made no effort to hide her misery. Even his mother had gone quiet. A dreary bunch they were.

He thought back to dinners in his captain's quarters aboard the *Phantom*. They were never without boisterous talk and laughter among the officers about any number of subjects. The topics were as varied as the sailors themselves and would often last long into the night. Their manners were crude and the language colorful, but oh, how he missed them. He felt the dark chasm start to open in his chest and was relieved when his mother broke the silence.

"I have a splendid idea."

James lowered his head, bracing himself for what was coming. *Oh, Mother, here we go.*

"I think we should host a dinner party in honor of James's safe return home

from the war.” She had warned him, and now here it was.

James glared at his mother, but whether she noticed or not, she seemed unaffected. In a cheerful tone, she revealed the details of her plan. “James and Sarah, I know deciding these matters of hospitality falls within your realm of duties, but I think it would be just the thing.”

James darted a glance at Sarah, who had put down her spoon and was listening to his mother. The last thing he felt anyone desired was to invite guests into their house that resembled a tomb.

Before he could protest, Alice looked up from her soup in some surprise. “Lady Whitfield, we are in mourning. Is a dinner party appropriate, considering our family’s situation?” She flinched, as if she had just been stuck by a pin.

“My dear Alice, it is not as if we are venturing out into Society. And I think Peter would have been pleased to honor James for his service to our country. He was most proud of his brother.”

James doubted that was true. He was uncertain whether Peter had even missed him while he was away. Most likely happy to be rid of him. James thought back on their strained relationship. He could not recall many fond memories with his brother, especially in their adolescence. He looked again at Alice, her face pale and drawn. She grieved for Peter in a way that honored his memory. Her heartbroken expression felt like a rebuke. Why had he ever thought himself superior to Peter? Why had he not valued their relationship more? James added that to the list of regrets he carried.

“Mother, I returned home a month ago. I daresay the time for a homecoming celebration has passed.”

“Nonsense,” she persisted. “We have been pent-up in this house for far too long, and I think it would do us all good to enjoy the company of friends and neighbors. It will breathe new life into this house.”

Alice bowed her head, and James felt his shoulders tense.

“James has not yet met Lord and Lady Ramsey,” she said to Sarah, then turned to James. “Did you know your wife has become a most particular friend of the Countess of Ramsey?”

Sarah looked up and sighed, appearing quite uncomfortable with Mother’s boasting of her connections.

James rubbed his forehead. He had no desire to dress up and be paraded around as a war hero when he knew it was the furthest thing from the truth.

He found himself wishing he could trade places with his friend. Even if Patrick was locked away in a prison somewhere in France, at least he was still engaged in a cause worth fighting for.

The most pressing engagement on James's schedule at present was a dinner party planned by his mother. The frivolous and decadent nature of polite English Society made James's stomach turn. Dinner parties, balls, and social engagements all seemed like a colossal waste of time. Now his mother was going to bring it all here, where he could not possibly avoid it.

As his mother rambled on about the details of the dinner, James noticed Sarah's posture had straightened a bit and her expression had brightened. She seemed almost pleased with the idea of this dinner. He suspected she was in desperate need of company. Heaven knew he had not offered her any, and that left only his mother and Alice for company. He shook his head. His sympathies for Sarah were increasing by the minute.

He deliberated, drumming his fingers on the tablecloth. The presence of guests in the house would give his mother an occupation other than trying to fix him. He might be left in peace to further investigate the whereabouts of Patrick, and Sarah would be provided with more elevated company. A houseful of guests would be difficult to endure, but what was the alternative? More of the same misery they'd all endured this past month.

"Mother, I think you should invite some of our dinner guests to stay a few days at Whitfield, perhaps a week or so." What was he saying?

Mother stared at him in utter shock, which transformed immediately into animated delight. He bristled a bit, knowing she saw this as a start to his transformation and surely credited herself with his progress. "Oh, James, what a wonderful idea!" She turned to Sarah, who seemed to mask her excitement, but James knew she was also pleased. "The Earl and Countess of Ramsey must be at the top of our guest list . . . and Lord Calcourt." Mother's eyes sparkled with excitement as she looked to Alice for confirmation, but Alice just bowed her head and wiped her nose with her napkin, clearly wanting no part of this. Mother turned back to James. "Lord Calcourt is a widowed gentleman who has joined our circle of friends for several social engagements these past years. He has been very kind and attentive to our family in your absence."

James imagined this Lord Calcourt, an unattached, somewhat youthful man, galivanting among the ladies while the serious men went off to fight a

war. Anger, and perhaps a touch of jealousy, surged through his body, quickening his pulse. The thought was absurd, but suddenly he felt the desire to meet this Lord Calcourt and stake his claim upon his territory. There was no way Calcourt had not noticed Sarah. Her beauty was irrefutable. James was surprised by his primal reaction. Had he not, only moments ago, been looking for a reprieve from Sarah's company, from her attention? He glanced around the table, hoping the others did not see the internal wrestle inside him. His mother was oblivious, enthralled in her planning, and had now enlisted Sarah's help for the guest list.

"Who else shall we invite, my dear?" Mother leaned toward Sarah, intent on her input.

"Perhaps Mr. Wilkes and his daughters? I am fond of Amelia and Catherine," Sarah suggested.

James remembered Mr. Wilkes from his youth. He'd always appreciated that Mr. Wilkes had been inclined to share memories of James's father with him.

"And the Danburys must come," Lady Whitfield rejoined. The high pitch of her voice sounded shrill in James's ears, indicating her enthusiasm had escalated. "We shall have a party of twelve altogether. How splendid!" She clapped her hands together, giddy with delight.

When Alice asked to be excused, complaining of a headache, James could not blame her. He found his own head was starting to split as well. He felt warm. It was improper to loosen his cravat at the table, but it had to be done. Why had he agreed to this? He peered at his mother. He was outmatched on this—she was a formidable opponent indeed.

"I'll send the invitations tomorrow, and we shall plan to commence within a fortnight. The weather will surely improve by then." She was a whirlwind of energy. "We might even be able to have a picnic or two while our guests are here." She stood from the table and began pacing the room.

James watched the familiar movement and thought, *Like mother, like son*. He was on his last nerve and needed this dinner to come to an end. "Might I excuse myself, ladies? I think I will retire for the evening."

He caught a flicker of disappointment in Sarah's eyes before it disappeared. Though she tried, she could not hide it. His mother did not speak but made no effort to disguise her disapproval. His short fuse ignited. *What do they want of me?* He stood abruptly, pushing his chair back with a

little too much force, and the back leg of the chair caught the edge of the rug. The inertia of his body pitched him back into his chair, and both he and the chair tumbled backward to the floor.

James had been athletic all his life in boxing, cricket—any sport, really. He was used to beating his opponents with his superior coordination and strength, but tonight he had been bested by the dining room chair. It was an appropriate ending to a perfectly wretched evening.

At once he saw his mother's face hovering over him. Before she could say anything, he hopped to his feet, his cheeks flushed. He avoided Sarah's gaze and tried to excuse himself again when he heard what sounded like a loud, guttural pig snort. He looked over. Sarah's head was lowered, her shoulders were shaking, and her hand was cupped over her mouth. She could not suppress the sounds of giggling that escaped her mouth. She was laughing at him.

Astonished by her reaction, James stared at her. This was not a giggle one would expect from a refined lady. It was full-bellied, side-splitting laughter. Sarah raised her napkin to her mouth in an effort to hide her improper conduct, but she could not.

His mother watched in bewilderment.

James stood over her and folded his arms, waiting for the laughing to stop. It appeared, however, that it had elevated to a level she could not control.

"Excuse me." As she worked to compose herself, wiping her tears, James could not help but smile a little himself at the absurdity of the whole situation.

"Lady Whitfield." He bowed to Sarah. "It has been my pleasure to be such a source of amusement for you. As your jester, I would like to be excused, having quite worn myself out entertaining you this evening." He smiled up at her from his bow.

Sarah smiled as well and gave an approving nod, sighing in relief after such an outburst.

He removed himself from the dining room and walked up the stairs, feeling conflicted. For a moment, he'd lost his breath, watching Sarah let down her guard and laugh. He could not remember the last time he had heard her laugh. A part of him had wanted to set his burdens aside and laugh with her unreservedly, but he could not. Instead he felt his burdens bear down on him. He knew he could not just let them go, for they would not release him.

Regret, guilt, disillusionment—each one had embedded itself in his heart like a parasite, siphoning away all his peace and contentment.

When he reached his bedchamber, he released all the breath from his lungs. Fatigue set in as he closed the door behind him. His mother would not attempt to bother him in here.

CHAPTER 6

THE WEEK FOLLOWING, THE HOUSEHOLD swirled with activity as everyone worked to prepare for their guests' arrival. The entire house had been aired out, dusted, and made to shine. The extra bedrooms had been readied for the guests, and fresh-cut flowers adorned every room. The dowager had been right. The house party was a good idea. It had given them something to look forward to.

The entire six days of the house party were filled with an agenda of dinners, picnics, horse riding, and shooting, all culminating in a private ball the final evening. Sarah had been working closely with the dowager to plan the anticipated event, and she was enjoying the task. The whole ordeal was an education for her in the many aspects of how a household was run. She was learning how to navigate her new role as lady of the house and develop the skills of a proper hostess. She could not have imagined how many details there were to consider, and she felt grateful to Lady Whitfield for her guidance.

Alice had relinquished any role she might have played in the planning to further reinforce her disapproval of the gathering. Sarah knew that for Alice this was not just about how things were done. Her heart was still bound up in grief for Peter. Through it all, Sarah tried to be mindful of Alice, but with the entire household in a whirl, it had proved difficult.

The morning before the guests were set to arrive, Sarah and the dowager sat at the dining table, finalizing the menu for the party.

"I just received word that Mr. and Mrs. Danbury will not be able to attend our party," Lady Whitfield confessed. "Mrs. Danbury has taken ill. I am sorry they will not be with us, but I suspect she may be in the family way." She pursed her lips, smiling at having worked out the truth of their situation. The dowager did love to be the first with news of the goings-on in the county.

"They will be missed, but we are still sure to be a merry party." Sarah crossed Mr. and Mrs. Danbury off the guest list.

"We will have to adjust the seating arrangements for dinner." Lady Whitfield sighed as if it were quite the inconvenience.

"Let me do that, Lady Whitfield," Sarah offered. She knew if the task were left to the dowager, she would deliberate over the seating for hours.

The dowager turned and looked through the open door. "My dear, have you

seen Alice this morning? Oh, how I wish she would come and sit with us. I think it would do her good to put her mind to something other than Peter.” Lady Whitfield sighed again. Even she knew it was an unreasonable request. “And she need not disapprove of our party. Peter would want us to enjoy time spent with our friends.”

Sarah doubted Peter would have approved of the timing of the house party. He was scrupulous about following societal protocol.

But she smiled at her mother-in-law. Lady Whitfield spoke as if this occasion were just an afternoon picnic. The week-long house party may have been overdone just a touch, but Sarah was enjoying herself, even if Lady Whitfield was getting a bit carried away. It had all been a welcome distraction—something to keep her mind off James.

He had scarcely been seen since that episode at dinner when he’d fallen over his chair. Sarah smiled thinking of it. That evening, she had seen the tiniest glimpse of the James she had once known. But just as quickly as she had seen it, it had disappeared. In fact, in the following days, he had retracted even further, if that was possible. Sarah swept away the tears pooling on her eyelashes, refusing to succumb to sadness this morning. She had spent enough nights crying herself to sleep. If this was going to be her situation, she had best adapt. Guests would be arriving in the morning, and she was determined to surrender the melancholy that beset her. She would rise to the occasion and perform her hostess duties with confidence and grace while enjoying the company of friends.

“Sarah, my dear?” Sarah looked up to see Lady Whitfield watching her. She realized the dowager had asked her a question and was waiting for an answer.

“Oh, I am sorry. I fear you have caught me daydreaming. Forgive me; I am a bit distracted this morning.”

“Not to worry. I think we have inspected this menu long enough. I daresay we shall be prepared to receive our guests tomorrow.” Lady Whitfield clapped her hands together once again in delighted anticipation. Sarah had seen her perform this gesture several times over the last week. She was beginning to think perhaps a mourning period should be a time when friends and neighbors gathered, if it could draw smiles and fill hearts with happiness.

Later that afternoon, Sarah joined Alice in the library for a bit of quiet reading and then retired early. It was a nice reprieve from the frenzy of

preparations. The next morning she awoke early as usual. She was filled to the brim with excitement. She dressed in her favorite periwinkle day gown and had Eve spend a little extra time and care arranging her hair. She had picked forget-me-nots of the same color from the garden to weave into her bun. Their rich color reflected her cheerfulness, and she felt wonderful.

Mr. Wilkes and his two daughters, Amelia and Catherine, arrived promptly after breakfast. He stood no taller than five feet, but his kind eyes and jovial expression filled the room with warmth. His daughters, both taller than he, stood behind him, framing him in their matching coats and bonnets. Mr. Wilkes opened his pocket watch that hung on its chain across his middle. He seemed to value promptness and was pleased they had been the first to arrive.

Sarah allowed Lady Whitfield to approach their guests first. She was still uncertain whether she should take the lead in this circumstance and decided, for now, it was best to defer to the dowager.

“Mr. Wilkes, it is my pleasure to welcome you into our home for this occasion.” Lady Whitfield gestured toward Sarah to include her in their welcome. “We have been anticipating your arrival with eagerness.”

Sarah did not hesitate to approach Amelia and Catherine. She did not think it necessary to curtsy and bow with such dear friends. She embraced Amelia, the eldest sister, and before letting her go she extended an arm to Catherine and hugged them both together. “It has been an age since last we met.”

Catherine and Amelia relayed news of their family in perfect tandem, completing each other’s sentences and communicating together with ease. Sarah thought the two could be twins, the way they gestured in unison. As she visited with them, she saw from the corner of her eye James descend the stairs. She had not anticipated him being present to greet their guests but was surprised and happy to see him. He greeted Mr. Wilkes with a smile, and Sarah was pleased he was treating their guests with more civility than he had offered her recently.

Alice entered then, and when the Wilkes sisters saw her, they offered their sincere condolences. Alice seemed uncomfortable with the attention and removed herself from the room as soon as she was able. Not a moment later, Lady Whitfield approached the ladies, and Catherine greeted her.

“We are most delighted to have received your invitation, Lady Whitfield.” Catherine’s eyes widened as if she had discovered something. “Oh my, now there are three Lady Whitfields in the same house. How shall we ever

manage?” Amelia and Catherine smiled.

Sarah interjected before the dowager could speak on her behalf. “Please, call me Sarah.”

“Heavens no!” Catherine cried, shaking her head. “That would never do.”

Sarah eyed James in the corner and knew he was listening to their conversation. She did not know what to say. She felt like an impostor in her marriage and in the running of this household. Her new title was a constant reminder of how unsettled she felt in her own life. Things had seemed so much simpler when she had been Mrs. Sarah Turner.

She was thankful for a reprieve from the awkwardness when Amelia chimed in. “Papa was especially thrilled to accept your invitation. He does not like to be away from home for any length of time, so his coming to this house party is high praise for your family.”

Mr. Wilkes joined his daughters in their circle, and James followed. Sarah nearly lost her breath when he stood just next to her. She felt, for a moment, as though they actually looked like a married couple.

“I would never turn down an invitation from such dear old friends,” Mr. Wilkes said.

“Why don’t we move into the drawing room, where we will be more comfortable, until the others arrive,” Lady Whitfield directed. “And let us have your trunks taken upstairs.”

Sarah was disappointed when James left her side to help his mother direct the footmen where to deliver their guests’ traveling cases. She looped her arms in Amelia’s and Catherine’s in hopes of hearing some happy news. “Have you entertained any suitors these past months?” she asked as she led the sisters into the drawing room.

“At twenty-nine, you must know I am quite contentedly resigned to the role of spinster in our family.”

Catherine reached over and tugged on Amelia’s arm, displaying her obvious disapproval. “Amelia Wilkes, I will not let you speak such nonsense.” She eyed her sister.

“No, it’s true. Papa has placed all his hopes for marriage on my beautiful, saintly younger sister.” Amelia took Catherine’s hand in hers. There was not an ounce of resentment in her sentiment.

Catherine leaned in toward Sarah. “Amelia is a treasure, and any man who recognizes it and manages to win her heart would be fortunate indeed.”

“Then what would Papa do?” Amelia countered. All three ladies looked over at Mr. Wilkes, who seemed to be relaying an exuberant tale to James and Lady Whitfield. He did not seem like the kind of man who needed much taking care of, but Sarah admired the loving concern the two sisters had for their father and each other.

Amelia leaned in to Sarah and whispered, “Even though the circumstances that brought your husband home are regretful, it must be sublime to have him returned home to you safe and in one piece. Everything is just as it should be.”

Sarah shifted her gaze over to James. *Sublime—one piece—just as it should be. Indeed.* The description laid before her of what her life could be colliding with the reality of what was made her feel nauseous, but she nodded and smiled. She had become quite good at masking her true feelings.

“Another of your guests have arrived.” Miss Catherine peered out the front window, where Lord Calcourt could be seen on horseback on the front drive.

His hair was blown back by the wind, and his cheeks were rosy in color after his long ride. Although still quite young, his side-whiskers were starting to pepper, and Sarah imagined the loss of his wife had aged him a few years.

He was soon shown into the drawing room, where he proceeded to greet each person with enthusiasm. When Lord Calcourt approached her, she was surprised to see James step to her side once more.

“Lord Calcourt,” James greeted the man, but a curtness laced his tone.

Lord Calcourt bowed to him. “Lord Whitfield, thank you for the invitation.” He turned to Sarah. “Lady Whitfield, it’s wonderful to see you again.”

Sarah curtsied, and a small lump formed in her throat as she caught sight of James’s severe expression as he regarded their guest. She tried to make amends for her husband’s cold greeting by infusing an extra dose of warmth into her own. “We are so pleased to welcome you into our home.” She glanced at James again, and he appeared like a statue, expressionless and stoic, standing beside her. As she tried to engage Lord Calcourt in more conversation, from the corner of her eye she watched James back away and turn toward the window. He did not even bother to excuse himself. Mortification warmed her cheeks as she worked to appear unaffected, but she saw Lord Calcourt’s eyes dart over to the window where James was now standing.

Before Sarah could apologize for James's behavior, Lord Calcourt spoke. "I was grieved to hear of the passing of your husband's brother. I am sure Lord Whitfield feels the loss keenly, as does the rest of your family, my lady."

Sarah was surprised and relieved by Lord Calcourt's kind words. James had snubbed him just now, and he had responded with more grace than he had reason to. He was a true gentleman.

When Sarah and Lord Calcourt joined the others, he went on to apprise the party of how his two young daughters were faring in their mother's absence, maintaining a positive tone throughout his commentary. Sarah was astonished. Here was a man who had also experienced loss, yet amid his heartache he had managed to stay hopeful, optimistic, and most of all, kind. *How refreshing.*

The bustling clip-clop of horse hooves alerted the party to another arrival, and they looked out the front window. A shiny black barouche pulled by four dark horses could be seen driving up to the front entrance. Lady Whitfield leaped from her chair in anticipation of greeting the earl and countess, for who else would arrive in such elegant style? By the time the footmen of the house rushed out to attend to the travelers, the entire party had come out to the front steps to greet them.

Lord Nicolas Ramsey—a tall, slender man in a green velvet waistcoat, with an immaculately knotted silk cravat—first appeared out of the carriage. Once his feet were planted on the ground, he offered his hand back into the carriage, and the slender, delicate fingers of his wife appeared, clasping his hand. They preceded the striking figure of Lady Margot Ramsey herself. When she emerged from the barouche, Amelia and Catherine gasped. The countess's shiny dark hair swept loosely across her forehead, framing her striking features. She was dressed in a bright teal-green gown, very different from the typical pastel tones of British fashion. But then, she was not British at all.

Lord Ramsey offered Lady Ramsey his arm, and they walked straight up to Sarah. "My dear Lady Whitfield, thank you for the invitation," Lady Ramsey said.

Sarah curtsied to her friends and extended a hand to James. "Lord Ramsey, Lady Ramsey, may I introduce Lord Whitfield?"

Lord Ramsey stepped forward. "Lord Whitfield, we have enjoyed the

association of your lovely wife in London these past several Seasons. She has become a treasured friend to Lady Ramsey, and now it is our pleasure to, at long last, make your acquaintance.”

“Your Lordship, the honor is all mine.” James bowed his head, and Sarah smiled just a little. There was no way James was going to snub Lord and Lady Ramsey. Even he was not immune to their charms.

She observed the awed reverence of the other party guests as well. The earl and countess really were a remarkable sight to behold. Lady Ramsey turned to Sarah and took both her hands. “Ah, *mon ami*, I have missed you these many months. Have I not, Nicolas?” She nodded to Lord Ramsey. Her silky French accent only enhanced her beauty, and her dark eyes were alight with brightness.

“It has been far too long,” Lord Ramsey added.

As Sarah and Margot clasped hands, Lord Ramsey leaned over to James. “Lord Whitfield, I must warn you these two are as thick as thieves. They will sit and talk all afternoon. I imagine you and I must find a shared hobby to occupy ourselves while these two while away the hours.”

“I see.” Though James’s expression remained impassive, unaffected, Lord Ramsey winked and offered his hand to James, who shook it in solidarity. He was as amiable as any man could be. James did not bristle at all, and Sarah suspected he might even like Lord Ramsey.

Once again, Lady Whitfield gathered everyone into the entryway. “I imagine some of you may want to get settled in your rooms. The staff will show you the way.” Sarah glanced at the neat row of servants waiting to attend to their guests. Lady Whitfield had organized every detail with precision. “We will commence our party tonight at dinner.”

Sarah waited at the base of the stairwell for the guests to disperse, pleased that the occasion was off to a tremendous start. She noticed Lord Calcourt observe Amelia Wilkes as she ascended the stairs, and thought perhaps there might be more than one positive outcome from this house party. When she turned toward the corridor, she found James watching her from the archway of the library door on the opposite side of the front hall. Averting his eyes to the floor, he stepped away and walked back into the library. Mystified as she was by his behavior, he could not diminish her elation at being in the company of such friends. Even he would not dampen her spirits today.

* * *

Sarah dressed early for dinner in order to be the first down to greet their guests in the drawing room. She decided to wear her sapphire gown this evening. And though she felt the choice a bit conspicuous for just dinner, with Lord and Lady Ramsey present, she knew she would not appear so to them. She had acquired the silk gown last Season in London under the direction of Lady Ramsey. Sarah might not have made such a bold purchase of her own accord, but the countess had persuaded her that the deep-blue color brought out the gold flecks in her eyes. Margot had also gifted her a diamond brooch encircled with tiny sapphires, to be worn at her empire waistline where the silk gathered to the center. It appeared as if all the material flowed from the brooch to the floor like ripples of dark water. Although Sarah thought it too generous a gift, Margot was determined she have it. The brooch was perfect for the gown, and Sarah felt beautiful when she wore it.

After Eve stopped fussing over her hair and doused her with a splash of rose water, Sarah made her way downstairs. When she entered the drawing room, she was surprised to find the whole party already present and eager to begin the night's festivities—all except James.

She surveyed the room and saw Lord Ramsey standing by the window conversing with Mr. Wilkes while Lady Whitfield monopolized Margot's attention on the sofa. Alice was tucked into the corner of the room in an armchair, reading a book. Alice still wore black and her usual melancholy expression. She had wished to see improvement in Alice's demeanor today. Apparently, this house party was not having the same effect on Alice as it was on her. She felt content, except for the nerve-racking undercurrent of her husband's unpredictable behavior.

She walked farther into the room, and Lord Calcourt stood to greet her and then sat back down at the pianoforte, where he continued to play what sounded like a sonata, soft and melodic. Amelia and Catherine stood at the end of the grand instrument, listening. They seemed mesmerized by Lord Calcourt's fingers gliding along the keys.

"Isn't the music heavenly?" Catherine sighed and beckoned Sarah to join them. When Sarah came to stand next to the piano, Amelia and Catherine examined her from head to toe.

“You look like a goddess in that dress,” Amelia praised. “You were not meant for this gathering of mere mortals.”

Sarah dipped her chin in a smile, flattered by the compliment. Looking down, she grasped the side of her gown and lifted the fine material, surveying it herself.

“And that brooch,” Catherine added. “I’ve never seen anything so exquisite!” Both ladies fixated on the jewels with wide eyes.

Sarah glanced at Margot, beaming in gratitude. She felt fortunate to have such a friend, not because she had given her the brooch or persuaded her to buy the dress but because Margot had such a generous heart. Sarah knew she had found a true friend in Margot Ramsey. Having such company in her midst, Sarah was starting to feel more self-assured, less fragile. She was still a touch anxious about James’s absence, but no one seemed in any rush to commence with the evening meal, so she relaxed and enjoyed the music with the others. Lord Calcourt was quite an accomplished pianist, and the ladies found themselves requesting selections from their favorite composers.

Sarah did not see when James entered the room, as she was still turned to face the pianoforte, but she sensed a shift in the room when the others turned their attention to the doorway. Her eyes met his for a quick moment before James’s gaze was drawn to her dress and diamond brooch. Sarah could not perceive his thoughts. Did he think her ostentatious? She could not tell.

“Mother, you look lovely this evening.”

“Thank you, son.”

James stepped past her and bowed to Lord and Lady Ramsey. “Are you comfortable in your sleeping quarters?”

Sarah could not account for his amiable behavior. He went on to greet every guest in the room, and she felt suspicious, wondering if he would greet her in the same amenable manner, but he did not. *Of course*. Was it her? He did not say a word when he approached but merely offered her his arm and led her toward the dining room. As they walked, he fixed his attention straight forward and Sarah did the same. She tried to appear unaffected, but she wondered if he could feel the same tingling in their touch as she did when she held his arm. Why did he affect her in this way? Why did his touch still move her so? She desired to be as unaffected by him as he obviously was by her.

She heard Lord Ramsey behind them whisper into his wife’s ear, “There is

something afoot between those two. You can cut the tension with a knife.”

Heat flushed Sarah’s cheeks. James must have heard them as well. She felt mortified at the transparency of their situation but could not think why. Margot had always been a trusted confidante, and if they had had a few minutes to talk, Sarah likely would have laid the whole story before her anyway.

They walked into the dining room, and James escorted her to her seat at the foot of the table. Usually at family dinners, the dowager sat at the far end, facing James, at Sarah’s request. After Peter died, Sarah had felt uncomfortable displacing Alice so soon and had had no desire to usurp anyone’s position as lady of the house. But with guests present, it was her duty to sit at the end. She felt rather conspicuous.

She concentrated on unfolding her napkin, not desiring to make eye contact with anyone at the table, least of all James. She felt relieved when Mr. Wilkes began asking Lord and Lady Ramsey about their estate in Somerset. A long conversation about hunting and fishing ensued between the men, and Sarah drifted in and out of the conversation as she sipped her soup until she heard her name spoken by Miss Wilkes. “And, Lady Ramsey, pray tell us, how is it that you came to be acquainted with Lady Whitfield?”

Sarah and Margot looked at one another, and Sarah inclined her head, prompting Margot to tell the tale.

“Lady Whitfield and I met at a social gathering in London not three years ago. I cannot remember whether it was a ball or a card party.” Margot paused for a moment as she seemed to sort through her memories. “Though I had lived in England for twelve years, Sarah was my first true friend here.”

The guests at the table were captivated with her story.

“England was a very foreign place to me. I felt shy and uncertain about my speaking and accent.” Margot looked around the table, receiving nods of understanding. “I may have relied too heavily upon my husband to get along in the beginning.” She smiled at Lord Ramsey, who returned her gaze with affection.

“In all my life I have never met a woman braver than my wife,” Lord Ramsey declared. “She would’ve done perfectly well without me.” Looking to his wife, he added, “My pearl, you can never rely too heavily upon your husband. That is the very purpose for which I was made—to attend to you.”

Witnessing this display of tender affection between Lord and Lady Ramsey

gave rise to an ache in Sarah's chest. She had become accustomed to the openness that existed between the two, but in James's presence, she felt uncomfortable. She stared down at her hands clasped in her lap.

Margot continued. "When I was introduced to Lady Whitfield, then Mrs. Turner, I still felt very nervous to attend social outings in London. I thought people would think me strange." Margot chose her words and articulated them with clarity. As she listened to her friend's story, Sarah was struck by her sincerity and vulnerability. Though Margot was a high-ranking lady of Society and strikingly beautiful, she had not lost her humanity to the nonsense of wealth and status.

"The hostess of the party approached me and declared that Mrs. Turner was most anxious to make my acquaintance and practice her French with me. I was so pleased that someone wanted to speak with me in any language." Margot looked around the table, smiling. "We were introduced and spent the rest of the evening conversing, she in French and I in English, helping each other and laughing quite a lot at our mistakes. And since that time, Lady Whitfield has become beautifully fluent in the French language."

Before Margot could say another word, James interrupted. "You speak French?" he sputtered. "Fluently?"

The whole party turned to look at him, but his gaze was fixed across the table on Sarah.

She looked directly at him and answered plainly. "Yes." All eyes turned toward her, and she felt a bit like she was being interrogated. She was surprised James had asked her such a question in front of their guests. Answering it was awkward, and she looked between the other guests as she told her story. "As a child I traveled to France twice with my parents on one of my father's merchant ships. He taught me some French, and after my parents died, I kept learning where I could. I did not have the opportunity for formal education like many young ladies, but I loved to read, and I taught myself. It was not until I met Lady Ramsey that I was able to test my skills and become more proficient." She tried to look anywhere other than James as she worked to hide her confusion. He had had more than a few opportunities over the past weeks to ask her as many questions as he would have liked, but only now, in front of an audience, had he expressed any interest. James Turner was an enigma to her. "I have always wanted to go back and visit," she added, keeping her tone light and pleasant.

“Not likely while Boney is having his way with Europe,” Mr. Wilkes chimed in, oblivious to the subtle tension in the room. “This war might never come to an end. But at least we have the seas conquered. Boney is no match for the British navy, eh, Lord Whitfield?” He looked to James for an affirmative, but James’s facial expression had turned solemn.

“It has not been without cost.” James’s bowed head looked as though he wore a ball and chain around his neck.

The entire party stilled to a quiet.

Sarah had always known there was an entire life James had lived while at sea, but he had chosen not to share it with her. She watched him from across the table with his head bowed, looking wounded and heavy. She knew he had hurts, and she wished to understand, but the wall he had built between them seemed impenetrable.

The dowager intervened, doing her best to rescue the party from the doldrums. “Why don’t the ladies follow me into the drawing room, and the gentlemen may join us for cards whenever you are ready.”

Sarah stood, frustrated. She wanted to stay. She wanted James to expound on what he had just said. What cost? To whom? She wanted to hear about the weightier matters of the war and, specifically, what her husband had been through. She was desperate to understand. She wanted more from him. But instead, she exited the dining room with the other ladies.

The countess tucked her arm into Sarah’s as they walked back to the drawing room. Sarah knew Margot had sensed the tension at dinner and would not be satisfied until she knew the whole story from her. “Mon ami?” Margot whispered. Her expression was urging, and Sarah knew what she sought.

She sighed with a quick glance into her friend’s eyes. “Can we leave it until morning?” The lightness she had felt earlier this evening had once again been usurped by her husband’s erratic behavior. She did not think she could speak of it to Margot while maintaining her pretense of cheerfulness for the rest of the evening. Margot nodded in understanding and, to Sarah’s relief and gratitude, went on to lead the ladies in a game of whist. Sarah did her best to put her feelings aside and join in the game. *Leave it be, Sarah. Leave it be.*

CHAPTER 7

THE FRIGID MORNING AIR WHIPPED through James's hair as his horse, Jet, galloped through the dense trees. He had ridden through these woods so often as a boy that he could have done it with him and Jet blindfolded. At James's urging, Jet began to pick up speed, his hooves cutting through the mist hovering on the forest floor. Jet's black coat, for which he was named, gave him an ominous appearance as he whisked through the fog. Though he was nearly twelve years old, Jet was just beginning to stretch his legs, and James knew he could push him for miles.

James was glad to have worn his overcoat, thinking the temperature must have dropped overnight, but it did not deter him in the least. This was the thing he had missed most while he was away. There was no sensation like it that could be replicated on a ship. They raced ahead, pressing on. How much distance could he put between himself and the manor house?

Thoughts of the previous evening raced through his mind. Lord Ramsey and Lord Calcourt were all too pleasant and congenial. Men of leisure who, he was sure, were content to rub elbows with the elite of the *ton*, drink brandy, and not dirty a fingernail. Lord Ramsey was not *as* abhorrent. He was interesting, at least. But a man like Lord Calcourt, who had set his designs upon another man's wife while that other man was away fighting a war, disgusted him. James had risked life and limb so that the English nobility could carry on in their superficial manner. He blew a puff of air off his bottom lip, releasing steam that needed to escape.

And then there was Sarah. James thought of her last night in her gown that outlined her silhouette too perfectly. She was as elegant a creature as he had ever seen—refined, sophisticated, and yet completely oblivious to Lord Calcourt's attentions. And to the real world. They all were. His mother, Alice, the Wilkeses, and Lord and Lady Ramsey. Did they not know there was a world of turmoil just outside the borders of England? This endless tea party was starting to grate.

A tiny niggling in the back of his mind reminded him that Sarah had urged him on multiple occasions to share with her about his life in the service. She wanted to know, but how could she possibly understand, having lived such a sheltered life? Again, an inkling crept in, reminding him what she'd said of her interest and desire to see other parts of the world, her travels as a young

girl with her parents, and her desire to speak other languages. She spoke French. He chuckled at that surprising piece of news. Sarah did not altogether fit the caricature he had been creating in his mind. He wrestled with these thoughts all morning, but in the end his obstinance won out. She would not understand, not all of it.

He rode on, and coming to a clearing, he could see the brooklet where he used to play as a boy. He and Patrick would fashion boats out of sticks and leaves and race them to the dam a resident beaver had built and meticulously maintained. He never could stand it when his boat got stuck in the reeds or caught in an eddy and flipped sideways or, worse, when Patrick's boat won. He thought back to how zealous he could become in those instances and how good-natured Patrick had been. He had just humored James. Some things hadn't changed.

He reined Jet to a stop, hopped off his mount, took the reins, and led the horse over to the water. As Jet drank his fill, James bent down and cupped some water into his hands to wet his brow. Though the morning air was chilly, he felt overheated from the long vigorous ride. The water was refreshing and the scene familiar, and some of the tension he felt started to leave his body.

For a moment, he felt serene, until he reached down into his coat pocket and felt the crisp parchment still there. The letter, correspondence he'd received yesterday from the Admiralty, was burning a hole in his pocket. They had denied his request to return and resume his service in the navy. James could tell by the curt response they were growing weary of his requests, but he had to keep trying. With his ship and crew at his disposal, he would surely be able to instigate a search for Patrick. Even with orders, he would find a way. But the *Phantom* and its crew had a new captain now. With the change in his circumstances and his new title, the powers that be felt his time was better spent in his new position in Parliament.

James grabbed a stick from the ground and scraped a particle of mud from the sole of his riding boot. He would not give up, this he knew. Next, he would petition the foreign office for intelligence regarding Patrick, and if that proved fruitless, he would find another source to aid him in discovering Patrick's whereabouts. As a captain in the navy, or former captain, as it were, he felt duty bound to find his first mate. James's stomach growled, and he felt the subsequent hunger pains. He reached for the reins and hoisted himself up

into his saddle. It was time to turn around.

An hour later, he closed in on the last leg of the journey home. His ride had done the trick to temper the fury that had been bubbling inside him. He thought perhaps he was once again fit to tolerate and rejoin the house party.

Coming to the woods' edge, he stopped. He surveyed the open valley before he set off on the final stretch back to the manor house and saw a smallish figure standing near the trees in the distance. He thought perhaps it was a child, but as he rode closer, he could see that it was the outline of a woman. It was still early, and the fog was dense. Within moments, James rode in close enough to see that it was Alice, standing barefoot on the frozen ground, in her nightgown. Startled by the sight, James jumped off his horse and drew near her.

"Alice? You should not be out here in the cold, dressed in nothing but a thin gown." Unresponsive, she did not seem to care he was there to offer her aid. He removed his coat and draped it around her shoulders. "Alice?" He spoke with more urgency this time, eager for a response. "Why are you out here?" Confused, he looked around, thinking perhaps she had ridden a horse or someone else was with her.

Her skin was a gray pallor, her eyes were hollow, and her lips were blue. She looked like a statue. Finally, in response to James's ministrations, a tiny shrill moan escaped her lips, and she began to tremble.

He extended his hand toward her. "Alice, I must take you home. You will catch your death out here," he urged. "I am going to lift you onto my horse. Jet is a gentle beast. You need not be afraid." He tried to reason with her, but she appeared like a frightened animal. He tempered his tone of voice so as not to frighten her. When she made no sign of protest, he wrapped his coat more tightly around her and lifted her onto his saddle.

They were far enough from the stables that he thought it best to ride with her, rather than lead her back on foot. He nudged her forward toward the pommel as he mounted the horse, steadying her the whole time with his arms for fear she would slide right off the saddle. Her feet were exposed and dangling to the side, but he could do nothing for them now except hurry home and place her in front of a fire. As he spurred Jet into motion, Alice's small frame sagged back onto his chest, flaccid and limp. His concern surged to alarm as he felt her fade out of consciousness.

"Alice, stay with me, please." His voice trembled as he pled with her. All

he could do was ride harder, keeping her locked in his firm grasp. How had this happened? Clearly, Alice was past melancholy; she was beside herself. What would Peter think? James had not attended to Alice as he ought to have done. He rode straight past the stables up to the front entrance of the house. He dismounted, still clutching her in his arms, and lunged up the staircase, yelling for assistance. A footman opened the door in haste, followed directly by the butler, who ushered them into the library, where a fire was already lit.

James set Alice down in the armchair positioned closest to the fire. She made no sound and stared vacantly into the flames. Though still very concerned, he was relieved to see she was conscious.

He turned back to the butler. "Mr. Thomas, please send for the doctor right away, and have Mrs. Jeeves bring us some blankets and hot tea as quickly as possible," he instructed. "And send someone to wake my mother." The butler nodded, hastening toward the door, and James turned to face Alice but then spun again toward the butler. "And could someone wake my wife, if you please?"

Left alone with Alice, James crouched down in front of her chair. He remained most concerned for her feet. She had curled them up under her nightgown, and he hoped they were not frostbitten. She still wore his coat, and he wondered if he should remove it so the fire could warm her more thoroughly, but then he thought it better to wait until he had a blanket to wrap her in. She appeared so small, almost childlike, sitting in that large chair. He had never seen her hair out of its tight bun, and she looked so much younger, so vulnerable, to him.

Sarah appeared within moments after the butler left. Alarmed by the mere sight of Alice, Sarah ran to her side. She had not bothered to pin her hair up either, and her brown mane fell unimpeded down her back and around her shoulders. James wrestled to look at her, it felt so intimate. It had been years since he had seen her hair undone and down like this.

She crouched down by Alice's side and put a hand on her knee. Alice did not respond or even seem to notice she was there. Sarah glanced back at James. "Where did you find her?" Of course she noticed Alice wrapped in his outer coat. "Has she been outside like this?" she questioned, her eyes large and impassioned. Seeing the deep concern on her face, James remembered her compassionate heart. It had always been in her nature to care for the needs of others.

Before he could answer, Mrs. Jeeves appeared with the requested blankets, a maid following behind with the tea tray. Sarah grabbed the blankets, and without a word James lifted Alice forward and held her upright while Sarah removed his coat from Alice's shoulders and handed it to Mrs. Jeeves. Alice shivered until Sarah enveloped her in the blankets, one around her shoulders and the other around her legs and feet, before James settled her back in the chair. Sarah sat down on the floor and cupped Alice's feet in her hands. She watched Alice's face to make certain her touch was tolerable, then wiggled Alice's toes and massaged the bottoms of her feet.

James marveled at Sarah's presence of mind. Finding Alice the way he did had almost paralyzed him. He had struggled to know what to do or how to help her. Watching Sarah now, on the floor, hair undone, attending to Alice in such a personal way, struck him. She looked a stark contrast from her regal appearance last night.

He walked over and sat on the footstool beside her. "I thought it was a good idea to warm her by the fire before putting her in bed. She might not have been able to keep herself warm without aid," he said in the stillness between them.

"It was a good idea, James," Sarah acknowledged, keeping her voice small as she attended to Alice's feet. Then she looked up at him without warning, and he could not tell whether it was a result of the events of this morning, her informal appearance now, or her closeness, but her glance coupled with the mention of his name on her lips, stirred an ache in his chest.

He took a deep breath. As he hesitated, Sarah tilted her head in question. She looked deeper into his eyes, as if she were seeking an answer. The room was silent, except for the occasional crackle of the fire, and James thought he should say something, but he could only study her face.

His mother's entrance into the room startled them both, breaking the trance James was under. His mother whirled around the room in a frenzy, yet James noticed her appearance was perfectly attended to. "Oh my! James! Sarah! Alice? Have you summoned the doctor?"

She leaned over Alice, her skirts knocking Sarah off her balance, and touched Alice's cheeks. "She is cold as ice." Alice flinched at Mother's touch.

"Mother, why don't you come and sit on the sofa," James urged. He chose the piece of furniture farthest away from Alice and patted the seat to invite

her over. “The doctor has been called, and Alice seems to be comfortable. You need not concern yourself like this.”

His mother sighed, walked over to the settee, and sat down in a huff. It appeared even she felt exhausted by her hysterics, but his efforts to calm her seemed to be working.

As James situated his mother, Sarah walked out of the library, leaving him to wonder where she had gone. But a few moments later she returned with a tray that held a basin of water with some sprigs of lavender and some cloths. She carried it over to the fire and knelt down again. James and his mother watched as Sarah submerged the cloth in the warm water, wrung out the excess, and placed it on Alice’s brow. She repeated the steps and placed the warm cloth on each cheek. Alice closed her eyes, soothed by Sarah’s touch. She had been able to do what neither he nor his mother were capable of. She had remained calm enough to know what Alice needed.

Then he remembered he hadn’t answered Sarah’s question. “I found her outside, barefoot, not a mile from the house.” He pinched the bridge of his nose until he heard the calm tone of Sarah’s voice.

“I’m glad you were there.”

James opened his eyes to see the same concern he felt still written on Sarah’s expression. He nodded to her. The burst of feeling he’d experienced over the last hour had drained him of all his strength. His limbs suddenly felt like they were filled with lead. He sat on the sofa, hoping for respite before the doctor arrived.

It wasn’t until the long-case clock in the entry chimed eleven that he saw the doctor out, though the quiet in the house would have suggested an earlier hour. In light of the morning’s events, their guests were sent news of the incident and breakfast trays to their rooms. No one had ventured downstairs yet, and James was glad of the reprieve.

Shortly after the doctor’s arrival, thunderous clouds had rolled in and began to pour sheets of rain. If James had not found Alice when he had, she might have come to real harm. He bristled at the thought. The doctor had inspected Alice and informed them that a deep chill had set into her bones. She needed warmth and rest but would recover and be set to rights in a day or two.

James was more concerned, however, for Alice’s emotional well-being. He saw it in her eyes. There was a lifeless, despondent aspect to them he had

seen before. He knew what could come of such melancholy. Aboard the *Phantom*, he'd seen that same look before in the eyes of a sailor who'd been brought very low and drowned himself in the sea.

James determined to keep a close eye on Alice, and he knew Sarah would do the same. He had spoken to the staff, instructing them that Alice was not to be left alone. Her maid was to sleep on a cot in her bedroom and alert anyone if she attempted to leave again.

In the late afternoon, he stood by the large windows in the drawing room, watching the droplets of water trace perfect lines down the glass panels. When he turned to survey the room, however, he was not alone. Lord Ramsey and Lord Calcourt were seated in the high-back chairs near the fire, sharing pages from the *London Times*. Miss Wilkes and Miss Catherine were seated at a small table in the corner, playing chess, and Mr. Wilkes had nodded off on the sofa nearby and was snoring. His daughters smiled when he woke himself with one of his more vigorous snorts, and flustered, he sat upright and checked his pocket watch, as James had noticed was his habit.

A moment later his mother came into the library followed by two footmen holding large tea trays. "Oh, my dears, I am sorry the rain is keeping us indoors today." She apologized as if it were the only reason they had stayed at home. Her original plan had been an all-day excursion to the seaside for a picnic.

Lord Ramsey readily acknowledged and answered her concern. "My lady, we would not think of having a picnic today when dear Lady Alice is feeling so unwell." He seemed to speak for the group, as the others nodded.

"If the rain stops later this afternoon," Lord Calcourt piped in, "I thought perhaps I might give the ladies a lesson in archery." He looked over at the earl. "What say you, Lord Ramsey? Yea or nay? Shall we show the ladies a thing or two?"

Lord Ramsey smiled. "I say yea! If my wife is up for it, that is."

James wondered why Lady Ramsey was not in the drawing room. *She must be upstairs resting*, he thought. The two Misses Wilkes seemed enthusiastic about the archery idea, and although James was hesitant, especially given that it was Lord Calcourt's suggestion, he told the party he would talk to the groundskeeper and have some targets set up on the east lawn, weather permitting.

By the time they had finished with tea, the rain had stopped. Lord Ramsey

left the library to go see about his wife, and the party dispersed to ready themselves for the activity.

James climbed the stairs to inform Sarah of the group's new plan. The door to Alice's bedchamber sat ajar, and before he announced himself, he peeked his head through the doorway and scanned the room. Alice appeared to be sleeping, and Sarah sat in a chair close to the foot of her bed. As he observed her posture, he thought she could be the subject of a painting, resting her cheek against her hand as she read her book. He tapped his finger on the door, hoping to alert Sarah of his presence without waking Alice. Sarah looked up, and before he could speak, she put her finger to her lips, signaling him to keep quiet. She rose and walked over to the door.

"Lord Calcourt is offering lessons in archery on the east lawn to anyone who would like to learn." He hoped Sarah would decline. He had never honed the skill of archery and was a beginner himself. It annoyed him that Lord Calcourt would be the expert in this situation.

To his dismay, however, Sarah perked up and smiled. "I would love to go outdoors and stretch my legs for a while. I have neglected our guests for most of the day. I will send for Alice's maid to come and sit with her." She turned to collect her things, and James withdrew from the room. At first, he thought he would not join them for the lesson, but then his curiosity, which was quickly growing into a protective instinct, persuaded him to change his mind. He grabbed his coat and gloves in the entryway.

When he walked out the kitchen door and onto the east lawn, he saw a groundsman setting up two targets. The grass was quite wet under his feet, and the late-afternoon sun shone over the lawn, causing the grass to glisten in the warm light. The air was crisp and fresh, and despite his reluctance to participate in Lord Calcourt's archery lesson, James thought it a nice idea, bringing the party out of doors, though the guests had not yet ventured out to the lawn.

He saw a wagon that appeared to be full of archery equipment, and when he walked over, he wished he had had more time to assess the condition of the equipment before the guests would see it. From what he could tell, it looked quite old and worn. His pride flared a bit as he asked the groundskeeper if there was any other equipment in the shed. He was assured there was not, and he set about helping the man.

He heard ladies' voices chattering away, coming around the south side of

the house. Sarah and the Wilkes sisters appeared first, bright-eyed and smiling, clearly enjoying the freshness of the outdoors after rainfall. They were followed by Mr. Wilkes and Lord Calcourt. James assumed his mother had declined the invitation to join them in order to spare her shoes from the damp ground. He smiled. She thoroughly enjoyed social gatherings, unless they were coupled with a vigorous outdoor activity; then she was not too keen.

As the group approached, Lord Calcourt went straight to the equipment and began adjusting one of the bows. After James greeted Mr. Wilkes and his daughters, his eyes fell on Sarah, who watched him from behind the rest. As she approached, he could see the pupils of her eyes had retracted against the setting sunburst in the western sky, and the amber color of her irises matched the warm tones of orange and pink that sprayed across the horizon. The bright light behind her cast a halo around her dark hair. The whole scene scrambled his thoughts, and he could not think of what to say as she stopped a few paces away from him. Finally, in the haze of her glowing presence, he thought of a question.

“Where are Lord and Lady Ramsey this evening?” James asked, still examining the variations of light and color in her eyes.

“Lady Ramsey has a headache that has persisted all afternoon, and Lord Ramsey decided to stay in with her.” Sarah’s smile looked pensive.

James knew she respected how attentive Lord Ramsey was to his wife. He cleared his throat, trying to initiate more conversation, muddled as his thoughts were. “Speaking of . . .” James paused. “I want to thank you for the care you have taken with Alice. I know neither my mother nor I would have been able to attend to her the way you have done today.”

She looked out over the serene valley for a moment before she spoke. “The truth is I feel I should have been more attentive to her these past weeks. I came across her walking outside several days ago, and her demeanor was so very downcast. It concerned me then, and I should have done something or said something to someone.” When she turned to face him, James saw a glint of moisture in her eyes. He could not think of what to say. “I feel I left her alone in her grief for far too long.”

He watched as the moisture in her eyes escaped and slid down her cheeks. She turned away, patting her face with the back of her gloved hand. In that moment, all he wanted to do was take her in his arms and comfort her, but his

feet remained glued to their spot, and he dared not move. Having grown so accustomed to their estrangement, he could not see his way forward with his wife, and suddenly he felt very vulnerable. He had cocooned himself in his own misery for so long, he dared not expose himself. What would she do if he moved to touch her now? The thought caused his heart to race at a galloping pace, and his breath matched his heartbeat. In his mind's eye he saw himself rest his hand on her shoulder and draw her toward him, but instead he looked away. *Coward.*

Mr. Wilkes called for them to join the group. Both the Misses Wilkes, with bows in hand, aimed their arrows toward the targets while Lord Calcourt offered them instruction and guidance. As James and Sarah approached, Lord Calcourt left the sisters and ushered Sarah over to the equipment, offering her a bow. Sarah drew in a deep breath, patted her face again, and brightened her expression before she took the bow. James clenched his teeth in frustration. She was pained. He knew it and yet he could not help her. He could not even help himself.

Lord Calcourt showed Sarah how to set her feet and shoulders and draw back the bow string to practice her stance. He then led her over to the targets, where she could have a go with an actual arrow. The Wilkes sisters, having practiced several times, moved to let Sarah try.

She concentrated as she set her stance the way Lord Calcourt had directed. Every muscle in James's body tensed as he watched Lord Calcourt cup Sarah's elbow from behind and help her lift it to improve her aim. Pressure mounted in James's temples. Lord Calcourt was touching her elbow. He was doing exactly the thing James would not, or could not, bring himself to do only moments earlier. *Blast!*

When Sarah released the arrow, it sailed through the air and hit the second ring from the bull's-eye. She squealed and bounced on her heels, elated to have hit the target. Everyone clapped but James. Pressure mounted in his temples as Lord Calcourt smiled and praised Sarah. Under his direction, Sarah improved her aim with every shot. James wanted to pummel the man.

Once Lord Calcourt had gone back to helping the Wilkes sisters, James walked over and grabbed a bow. He'd be hanged before he would allow Lord Calcourt to tutor him. He had done this a time or two in his youth; how difficult could it be? Before anyone could say a word, he drew back his bow and released the arrow in a sort of frenzy. The arrow sailed four meters or so

past the target and punctured the grass. At least what he lacked in aim, he made up for in strength. He tried it again. This time the arrow grazed the target but still missed and spun to the ground. He ignored the others watching his embarrassing display and kept his gaze fixed on the target.

When Lord Calcourt offered to help him with his form, James shot back, "Thank you, but no." His irritation seeped out in his tone. Twice more he tried to hit the target, but to no avail.

Sarah approached him, but James stopped her before she could speak. "I don't need your help or *his* help or anyone's help." Even as he spoke the words, he regretted them. The tone of his voice was cutting, and Sarah reeled back and retreated from him, her expression and posture wilting with every step she took. He stepped toward her and grabbed her arm before she could walk away. "I am sorry, Sarah." His offering fell flat as he was not quite able to muster a tone of true contrition.

She did not reply. She just looked at his hand on her arm, confusion and hurt filling her expression. James let go, and she turned toward the group. He looked back at the target. He could not account for his emotional outbursts. It was as if he had no control over his own faculties. He had once considered himself to be a logical, astute, clear-minded leader of men. Now it was like a childish impostor had infiltrated his psyche and dismantled his rational thinking. He was beyond frustrated. He could not seem to stop himself from making a mess of things.

He rallied his last bit of civility and suggested to the group that they return indoors for the evening. The light was fading, and it had been a long day for all of them. He could hardly believe he had found Alice on his ride just this morning.

He walked over to Sarah and offered her his arm. She took it, but he felt the stiffness in her body. She was hardening to him; he could feel it. And he did not know how to salvage whatever this was. He saw the exhaustion in her eyes. Perhaps there was nothing left to salvage. Perhaps whatever they had once had had already been lost long ago. He stiffened at the thought, but it was not uncommon to be estranged in one's marriage. That young man with romantic notions who had proposed to Sarah five years ago did not exist anymore.

The last remnants of sunset disappeared behind the tree line, covering the sky in gray twilight as they walked back into the manor house. And for the

rest of the evening James was left to consider the stupidity of his actions.

CHAPTER 8

WHEN SARAH DID NOT SEE Margot at breakfast, she decided to check on her before spending a few hours sitting with Alice for the morning. Lady Whitfield and Sarah had reserved their finest guest chambers for Lord and Lady Ramsey. The view from their rooms overlooked the north lawn, where a fishing pond could be seen in the distance.

Sarah loved the interior of Margot's room. The color scheme of soft greens and blues was tranquil and soothing. The design of the wallpaper displayed hummingbirds sucking the dew from cherry blossoms dispersed among the thin branches that weaved along the wall. Sarah had made this her room while James was away, but upon his return she had moved into the adjoining bedroom reserved for the lady of the house. She was glad the countess could enjoy her stay in this room that Sarah loved so dearly.

She peeked her head into the open doorway to see Margot sitting up in bed with her breakfast tray. Lord Ramsey was seated at the writing table, quill in hand, scribbling what looked like important correspondence of some kind. Before Sarah could knock, Margot lifted her gaze to her. A bright smile emerged on her face. "Bonjour."

As Sarah walked in, Lord Ramsey put down his quill and turned toward the ladies. "I heard you turned out to be quite the archer last night." He smirked, and Sarah could not tell if he was teasing her or if he was truly impressed. "Lord Calcourt said you hit the target every time. Where were *you* when Robin Hood assembled his merry band of thieves?"

Sarah waved her hand, dismissing his question, while Margot snickered at her husband. "You seem to be doing well this morning." Sarah sat down on the edge of her friend's bed.

Margot sighed in her husband's direction, a touch exasperated. "I *do* feel much better this morning, but Nicolas insisted I rest in order to be fit for our trip to the seaside this afternoon."

"I am so glad you will be able to join us, and it seems the weather has cleared. We will be a jolly party indeed," Sarah chirped, perhaps a little too cheerfully.

Margot appraised Sarah, then asked her husband, "*Mon chéri*, could you give us a few moments in private, please?"

Without another word Lord Ramsey gathered his papers. "I think I will

venture downstairs to see if the others have found themselves a diversion this morning. I feel quite left out after missing the grand archery competition.” He smiled wryly. Sarah dipped her brow at him. “I’ve seen that furrow on my wife’s face many a time before.” He feigned concern. “I think that is my cue for a hasty removal.”

He left the room, closing the door behind him, and before Margot could even ask a question, Sarah blurted out, “The long-anticipated return of my husband has turned out to be quite different from what I imagined it would be.” She scooted toward Margot, who tilted her head to one side, her eyes full of sympathy.

“Upon his return, I was surprised not to have heard from you,” Margot replied. “I was curious about how you were getting along.”

She rested a hand on Sarah’s until she replied. “The truth is I have not been able to speak of it to anyone, let alone write it in a letter.” She laid back on the pillows next to Margot, and the two listened to the silence for a moment. Sarah found that, even with Margot, it was difficult to articulate the words aloud, but she felt she must try. Her loneliness was unbearable. “The change in him was apparent from the moment he returned. He is so very solemn and serious now. I understand he has returned from war and it will take time for him to adjust.” She sighed. “But he has not warmed to me in the slightest. He is not just solemn but often severe.” Tears welled up in her eyes.

“What do you mean?” Margot asked.

“He barely speaks to me, and when he does, he is rude and abrupt. I have waited and listened and fairly begged to help him, but all I receive in return are sharp one-word answers.”

When Margot inched closer and wrapped an arm around her, Sarah collapsed into her friend’s shoulder, sobbing. “I never know what I will encounter with him. I spend most days wondering what hurtful thing he will say or do.” She spoke through her sobs, and now that the words had come, they were spilling out of her. “Some days he ignores me altogether.” She looked into Margot’s eyes, imploring her to understand. “When we married, he was kind and attentive. I felt adored by him.” More tears slid down her cheeks. “It is a cruel form of torture remembering, living with this hollow version of the man I love—the man I once loved.”

Margot handed Sarah a handkerchief, tenderness in her eyes.

“Don’t worry,” Sarah said as she wiped her cheeks. “This is what I do of

late. I have become a watering pot these past months. I am quite proficient at having a good cry.” She took a breath to calm her nerves, but then she thought of Alice. “And poor Alice . . . she has been in such a state. I should have done more to help lift her out of her grief. I feel partly responsible for what happened to her yesterday.” Sarah finally stopped talking and wiped her nose with a handkerchief.

“Mon ami, you have been suffering so. Your heart is hurting, and I hurt with you.” Margot paused. “When we first arrived, I noticed right away that you were unhappy, even though you tried your best to convince me otherwise.”

Sarah smiled with her lips, but her eyes drooped down.

“May I speak frankly with you, my dear?” Margot asked with some hesitancy.

“Please, I wish you would.” Sarah was relieved to finally be open with someone. She had no reservations about hearing whatever it was her friend had to say.

“I have known you for almost three years now. I have watched how you care for me, for your husband’s family, for everyone around you. You think of the happiness of others before your own, until you are weary.”

Sarah did feel weary.

“I want you to know that your happiness is just as important as those you love. You deserve to be loved and cared for in the same way you care for others.” Margot proceeded with some caution. “I fear Lord Whitfield does not understand this. He should value the beautiful heart you have and take more care with it.” Her words hung in the air between them.

Sarah tensed as she sat upright.

“I am not suggesting Lord Whitfield does not have a heart. I know he must be hurting too. I do not pretend to know what he has been through, but his misery is costing you greatly. His actions are selfish.”

“What would you have me do, Margot? I am his wife.”

Margot stroked Sarah’s back in soft circles. “I do not discount your commitment to him . . . but perhaps you could pay attention to your own happiness for a while.”

Sarah’s breath came quickly, and she was desperate for an explanation. What was Margot saying? “How?”

“You were a loving, devoted daughter, and then you lost your parents

suddenly. I remember you sharing with me that the time after your parents died was very hard for you. You felt abandoned and alone.” Sarah nodded, hearing the truth of her words. “And when James swept into your life, you were thrilled to be able to love again and to be loved by him. Even while he was away, you were devoted and true.” Margot paused again, and Sarah leaned forward, waiting for her to finish her thought. “You have always loved with all of your heart. But I want you to know you can choose to love yourself also. Love is a choice.”

“Love does not feel like a choice. Love feels inevitable,” Sarah argued.

“That is because you feel it and give it so freely,” Margot countered, “to everyone but yourself.” Sarah pondered her friend’s words while Margot continued. “I want you to search for ways to care for yourself, to allow yourself to feel joy, despite James’s mood, each day.”

Confusion and despair riddled through Sarah’s heart and mind.

“I do not pretend it will be easy, but perhaps it is time to strengthen your heart just a little.” Margot offered her hands, and Sarah took them. Her head was spinning. She closed her eyes and heard her friend’s voice again. “I know this is difficult to hear, and I want you to know I have never had a better friend. I love you, Sarah. I have said these things only because I want you to be happy.” She tipped Sarah’s chin up with her finger, causing her to open her eyes. “You deserve to be happy.” She pressed a kiss on Sarah’s cheek.

“Yes, I know,” Sarah replied, bowing her head. She watched the tears drop onto her gown. How many tears could one person produce?

She knew Margot was speaking from a place of love, but somehow it made her stomach feel ill. She embraced her friend, and although she could tell Margot was concerned about her, she did her best to conjure a reassuring smile as she thanked her and slipped out of the room.

She spent the next three hours sitting by Alice’s bed. Alice was awake, reading her book, and Sarah was left alone with her thoughts. She sorted through all Margot had said, and in doing so, she felt herself a whirling mess of emotions. She felt sadness for her marriage, anger at James, confusion in her circumstance, and a tiny bit of hope that something might change in her future. She wanted desperately to feel happiness again, but she did not understand how it was possible. She was afraid of the idea of giving up on James or giving up on the possibility of his love, no matter how distant he

seemed now. Was that what Margot was suggesting?

When the time came for her to ready herself for the picnic, she felt exhausted. Her head hurt from crying, and she did not feel like socializing, but she rallied her spirits just like she had always done. She fastened her bonnet, picked up her gloves, and went downstairs.

It was only an hour's ride to the seaside, but Sarah hoped she did not have to share a carriage with her mother-in-law or, worse, Lord Calcourt and James. For reasons she could not understand, her husband openly detested Lord Calcourt, and she did not think she could tolerate his tantrums today.

She came to the entry, and although the sun shone outside, it was still a touch chilly, and she was glad she'd brought her shawl. The seaside was always windy. She was also relieved to discover that a carriage had already left with the Wilkes family and Lord Calcourt. The Ramseys' carriage was so spacious that she, James, and Lady Whitfield were able to ride with them comfortably. Lord Ramsey offered the ladies the forward-facing seats, and conversation was light and easy due to his charm. She was grateful to be able to sit and listen, enjoying the landscape from her window seat. Using her bonnet as a shield, she did not look at James the entire ride.

Upon arrival, they walked down the hillside path to the wide stretch of beach below. The weather was clear and crisp and slightly breezy. She breathed in the salty air—her favorite smell. Mr. Wilkes and Catherine were already seated on the picnic blankets that had been laid, and Lord Calcourt and Amelia were hoisting a kite into the air.

She walked down to the water's edge, where the waves almost touched her slippers. The sunlight cast a million tiny jewels across the water all the way to the horizon line, where the ocean met a cloudless sky. Her heart swelled at the sight of it, and it was then that she felt it—joy. It had been so long that it surprised her, but there it was, a sense of wonder and awe as her soul answered to the beauty surrounding her. She closed her eyes and breathed it in, letting it penetrate to her bones.

Smiling, she sent up a small prayer of gratitude to heaven, and in that moment, Sarah knew Margot was right. She could no longer chase a joyless existence. She had no idea how she would manage it. James was like gravity, pulling her down whenever he was near. But somehow, she would endeavor to find more peace, more cheerfulness, and most importantly, more joy in her life. It was, after all, all around her.

CHAPTER 9

JAMES SAT WITH HIS BACK against a boulder, drawing the shape of a ship with his finger in the sand. He glanced up at Sarah standing at the water's edge and clenched his teeth. Though she stood still just a few paces from where he sat, he imagined her drifting away from him on the tide until she was miles out to sea.

Every interaction they had had of late had served only to widen the divide between them. All he wanted was to pull her back toward him, but he didn't know how, and especially not in the presence of all these people.

He observed the rest of the party on the far side of the beach, merrily laughing together in conversation. This house party had magnified just how broken he was. And he was sure Sarah had noticed as well. He suffered mightily by comparison. He was neither genteel nor amiable. How could he be? He had worked for years to adapt to life at sea, and now he was ill-equipped to reenter polite society.

He continued to gaze at Sarah, and just as he gathered the nerve to stand up and approach her, she turned and began walking down the sand in the opposite direction of the party. Where was she going? He stood and followed her. She stepped over some rocks where water had pooled in the crevices and leaned down to examine them. James paused a few paces back, watching.

"Are you stalking me like your prey?" Her voice startled him, and he rolled back on his heels.

"No," he chuffed. "I was just curious what you are doing."

"You were curious what I was doing?" She turned to face him with strained eyes and a deep crease between her brows. "Why?"

"I . . ." He didn't have an answer for her pointed question. "Sarah, what would you have me do?"

"I am not certain." She sighed and peered out to the ocean. "I imagined our life together a thousand different ways in the five years I waited for you to return, and I must say, none of them prepared me for the reality of it."

James dipped his head in defeated acknowledgment. "Nothing is as I imagined it either."

"And what did you imagine?"

"I just meant that nothing is the way it should be."

"Should be?" she pressed. "I don't understand."

He huffed out a breath into the ocean air. When he did not say more, Sarah turned from him with confusion in her eyes and continued inspecting the tide pools in front of her.

James wanted to say something, but only silence choked in his throat.

“Lady Whitfield,” Miss Catherine called, walking toward them. “Look what I have found.” She carried something in her hand and smiled at James as she passed.

Sarah examined Miss Catherine’s finding, and James backed away. Sarah didn’t even seem to notice when he retreated as she focused on her friend. He walked along the wet sand just next to her footprints, facing the opposite direction. He clenched his hand, picked up a stone, and threw it as far into the waves as he could manage.

Ten minutes passed before Sarah and Miss Catherine paced past him back to the group. Sarah sat down on a blanket and popped a berry into her mouth with an easy smile he had not seen from her earlier.

Gone was the woman who desperately cared to hear his stories and spend time with him. She was lost to him. Her new indifference chilled his bones.

Upon their return home, James craved a quiet spot in the library where he could bury his thoughts in a book. He retreated to his favorite chair and set to reading an old favorite, *Robinson Crusoe*. This book usually felt like an old friend, but after an hour of reading he still felt wretched. He glanced over to the decanter on the sideboard. The drink would surely numb his senses where the reading had not. The liquid burned his throat as he drank it down without pause. Another. He thought of his early morning tomorrow shooting. Just one more. He poured the glass to near full and sipped it until he had drained the glass. His thoughts began to fog. Better.

CHAPTER 10

THE LAST THREE DAYS OF the house party passed quickly for Sarah as the men spent the days shooting. She had seen James only from the opposite side of the dinner table and when the ladies had gone out to join the shooters for an afternoon picnic luncheon, but even then they'd barely conversed. She tried to put it from her mind, thinking it was better than the tension-filled exchanges they'd had before. She had tried to take Margot's advice and enjoy the company she did have—Margot, the Wilkes sisters, Lady Whitfield, and Alice.

Each morning, Sarah had taken Alice out for a walk. She'd made sure they talked, asking many questions, and Alice had begun to share her feelings about her childhood, about Peter, about many things Sarah had never heard before. As she listened, she felt Alice was at last beginning to mend, and as the last night of the house party arrived, Sarah found herself eager with anticipation. It had been an age since she had last attended a ball, and even though this event was small and private, the thought of music and dancing gave her a thrill.

She hesitated over what to wear and finally decided on her wedding dress. She worried over what James might think, but in the end, she decided it did not matter. He would not remember. She had rarely worn it in the five years since their wedding, but the gown seemed perfect for dancing, with its many layers of pale-pink muslin that flowed around her when she moved. She attached a green silk ribbon around her waist and instructed her maid to thread some of it through her hair as well. As a final touch, she fastened the pearls her father had given her around her neck, which always gave her a touch of comfort.

A string quartet had been hired for the evening, and when she heard the musicians tuning their instruments downstairs at seven thirty, she felt a lightness as the varied host of sounds prickled her ears. The ball was set to begin at eight o'clock, but Sarah could not wait until then. She picked up her gloves and was about to venture downstairs when she heard a soft knock at her door. She opened it, surprised to discover Alice in the corridor. She was still dressed in black, of course, but she donned a white feather in her hair, which Sarah thought looked lovely. She knew Alice would not dance tonight but was pleased she had decided to attend. The music alone might sooth her

aching heart.

“Come in.” Sarah opened the door wide, curious to learn the reason for her visit. In the five years she had lived at Whitfield Manor, Alice had never come to her bedchamber.

“I hoped to find you here before the ball begins.” Alice paused and walked farther into the room. “I have had a letter from my aunt Margaret, my mother’s sister. She is a widow also who currently resides in Bombay.”

“India?”

“Yes.” Alice slowed her speech and Sarah sensed a declaration was coming. “She has invited me to come and stay with her there.” Alice bowed her head a touch, but her eyes were fixed on Sarah.

“For how long?” Sarah uttered in haste. Based upon Alice’s behavior over the past week, traveling abroad seemed unwise.

“It would be for an extended visit, perhaps a year or two.”

“A year or two?” Sarah endeavored to temper the surprise in her reaction. She was likely the only person Alice had dared tell. If she had told Lady Whitfield, surely the entire household would have known by now due to a frenzied outburst and subsequent collapse. No, Alice was confiding in her, and Sarah did not want her to regret that decision.

“The voyage alone will take as long as four months,” Alice explained. “There is no such thing as a brief visit to India.”

“Who will accompany you?”

Alice relaxed a little. “Of course, I will bring my lady’s maid. And my cousin, Charles, Aunt Margaret’s son, has just graduated from Cambridge. He will accompany me on the voyage as well.”

“By the sound of it, you have made all the arrangements.”

“I have not yet written my aunt, but I feel quite certain what my answer will be.” She watched Sarah, who did not respond right away. Sarah could not think of what to say. Though she felt reluctant to agree to such a venture, she knew Alice needed an ally in this. She had seen her sister-in-law’s disposition improve over the past few days, but naively, she’d thought it was due to her own efforts.

“Sarah, I cannot stay here,” Alice said as she looked out the window. “Peter is everywhere. I cannot escape him. Everywhere I turn in this house, I am reminded of our life together.” She looked back at Sarah. “I have no desire to forget, but perhaps if the scenery changes, if I find new things to

look at and new things to learn”—she took a deep breath—“it might be possible to heal my heart and these wounds I have been nursing. You promised me I would find hope again, but I know I cannot find it here.”

Sarah remembered Margot’s words and knew she could no longer be responsible for the feelings of everyone around her. Alice was trying to find her way through this grief, and despite Sarah’s instinct to shelter her, it was not the right thing to do. She needed to let Alice go.

“I cannot pretend I am not surprised and somewhat reluctant to see you go. Travel of this nature is fraught with risk and perhaps even peril. The sea voyage alone will be difficult and dangerous, and India is quite a foreign place.” She paused. “But I gather you have considered that.”

“Yes.” Alice was as calm as Sarah had ever seen her.

“I want you to find happiness again, more than anything, and if you feel this is your best chance, I will not stand in your way.” Sarah smiled, hoping she was doing the right thing.

Alice stepped toward her and took her hand. “Thank you for trusting me. I know this will be difficult news for Lady Whitfield.” They both smiled, understanding the truth of that statement.

“I will do what I can to help you.” Sarah nodded to Alice with resolve. “Shall we go down?” She put Alice’s arm in hers, and they walked down to the drawing room together. They were the last to arrive at the ball, and as they were greeted, Sarah sensed the excitement of the guests matched her own. The furniture had been removed to the periphery of the room, and the quartet was set up by the windows, leaving a large space open for dancing.

Without delay, Lady Whitfield whisked Alice and Sarah into the group, already busy orchestrating partners for the first dance. The dowager led Sarah over to James and placed her hand in his. Sarah had barely seen or spoken to him in the days succeeding their picnic at the beach.

“Hello.” She lowered her gaze and dipped into a quick curtsy.

James grunted and nodded a bow, but when she rose to meet his gaze, he looked straight past her. Sarah sighed but was surprised to discover his behavior did not unravel her as it had before. She sensed a strength in her heart and felt less pulled from her center, more sturdy. Even so, a flare of anger rose up in her chest. She wished to drop his hand and find another partner, but she did not.

The dowager stood in the center of the room and extended her hand to

them. “As our hosts this evening, will you lead us in the minuet as our first dance?” It was not so much a question as a polite command.

Without a word, James led Sarah to the middle of the room. Lord and Lady Ramsey followed, and after them Lord Calcourt and Amelia and Mr. Wilkes and Catherine. The dowager and Alice sat down together, observing.

As Sarah and James began the dance, James stumbled a bit and grabbed her arm to right himself.

“Are you all right?” she whispered.

“Of course,” James said. But his eyes were bloodshot with dark-gray circles under them, and his cravat was loose and disheveled.

Sarah did her best to concentrate on the movements of the dance, and James followed her lead, leaning in to her several times.

“That is a lovely gown you are wearing, Lady Whitfield.”

“Thank you.” Sarah could not remember the last time James had complimented her, but it made her uneasy. His manner seemed flippant and his words unmeasured. She wondered if he even remembered her gown from their wedding day.

She turned and smiled at the other guests but realized something was very amiss. James continued to concentrate on the steps, with his eyes down and brow furrowed. As they weaved in and out of the other couples, Sarah hoped they did not notice James’s odd behavior. She thought to step to the side and ask if he was unwell, but he persisted in dancing and she followed his lead. *Oh, heaven help us make it through this evening,* she prayed.

The dancing continued throughout the evening with success as Lady Whitfield made sure there were always four couples standing up together. Sarah continued to eye James as she danced with Mr. Wilkes and Lord Ramsey. She even convinced Alice to stand up with her once. Obliging his mother’s wishes, James stood up with both the Misses Wilkes and Lady Ramsey. With more ladies than gentlemen present, there was no doubt of his participating, and their guests seemed to be thoroughly enjoying themselves.

During the last set before dinner, Sarah found herself sitting out a dance with Lord Calcourt. As the music began, he leaned toward her and said, “Lady Whitfield, I must thank you for including me in your house party. I have not enjoyed myself this much in ages, and this evening is no exception.”

“Believe me when I say it has been our sincerest pleasure.” She caught James’s eye as he shifted his glare between her and Lord Calcourt. She

glanced back to Lord Calcourt, ignoring James.

“I have not danced at a ball since before I lost my dear wife.” He smiled sadly. “I thought it would be difficult, but it has turned out to be quite the opposite. There may yet be life left in this old fellow.” He winked at Sarah.

“Old?” she laughed. “Sir, you are still quite young, I think. Your presence here has set everyone at ease, and you have taken care to ensure all our guests have enjoyed themselves.”

As they conversed, she spied James again, still glancing in her direction a time or two, and though it set her somewhat ill at ease, she continued to ignore him. She dipped her chin and huffed a sigh. Whatever the reason James did not like Lord Calcourt, his assessment was completely erroneous.

“Lord Calcourt, I hope you will not think me impertinent, but I wonder if perhaps I may ask you a”—Sarah paused, searching for the right phrase—“personal question.” She had no wish to offend this man, who was the most affable and gentlemanly of all her acquaintance.

“Of course. You may ask me anything at all,” he replied with ease.

“Do you think you might ever marry again?” The words spilled off her tongue. Even though Lord Calcourt had invited her to speak openly, Sarah still felt her question a touch too impertinent.

After some thought, he replied, “I do not know that I will. My daughters have been through an ordeal, losing their mother. I have no desire to upend their lives again.” He paused. “And besides, I do not know many young ladies who would desire to step into the role of mother of two at the same time as marriage.”

Sarah sensed she had unmasked a vulnerability in him. He discounted himself. “I think life may still hold some surprises for you and your girls. A new mother might be a great blessing for them,” she offered. “I see the possibility of a blossoming connection right here.” She eyed Amelia on the dance floor.

He looked at her in surprise, and though he did not respond, his expression relaxed into a subtle knowing smile.

“Amelia Wilkes is lovely, intelligent, thoughtful, and caring,” Sarah said.

Lord Calcourt stopped her before she continued. “She is all of those things you say.” He glanced at Amelia, who appeared to be enjoying the dance with her father, and sat up on the edge on his chair, visibly unsettled by their conversation.

Sarah knew she did not understand the whole of the situation and did not want to press, but perhaps she had opened the doorway of possibility just a crack.

As the music and dancing concluded, she stood and found James staring at her from the dance floor. He made no attempts at discretion as the fire and indignation coming from his eyes burned into her from across the room. She sighed again and shook her head in confusion. She could not account for his behavior and had learned from sad experience that she might never learn the reason for his current vexation. Margot's words again came into her mind, and she stepped away, trying to brush it off.

At dinner she noticed a crystal glass full of brown liquid on the table next to James's place setting. She found it odd, thinking perhaps he might have a brandy once the dancing was over, but before dinner? She had not thought him prone to drinking.

The evening's events had left the party guests lively and energized, and there was much talk around the table in various small conversations. Sarah tried to engage in the discussions, but it was no use. She had lost the optimism she had tried so desperately to maintain all evening. She sat across the table from James, who glared as he drank from his glass. He was intoxicated—she knew it. What was she to do? James shot her another indignant glare.

She tried to steer the conversation away from James. "Lord Ramsey, will you be so good as to tell me where you procured the jewels your wife is wearing this evening? It is clear by their size and breadth that she did not choose them herself. A man is always more generous in the choosing than his wife would be." Sarah smiled at Margot, who shook her head, feigning irritation.

Lord Ramsey, never one to shy away from playful banter, replied, "Well, my dear, we all have our secrets, and if I told you, you might attend our next social gathering wearing the very same adornments as my wife, and then where would we be?"

"There is little chance of that," Sarah joked. "I happen to know that no one could ever make an impression quite the way your wife does. She is unforgettable in all the best ways." She nodded to Margot, who was now blushing. The whole party seemed to delight in their friendly sparring, and Sarah felt relieved. She knew she could rely on Lord and Lady Ramsey's

good nature to entertain the table.

“Lady Ramsey is my pearl, and I would give her the world if I could.” Lord Ramsey glanced at his wife with a look of affection.

Just as Sarah was beginning to relax, James raised his voice, a little too loudly. “I hear you, Lord Ramsey. A man’s wife is his treasure, one whom other men might try to plunder.”

Sarah’s heart sank in her chest. The entire party turned to James with looks of confusion. Before she could intervene and distract them from his rude comment, however, he sat back in his chair, glass in hand, and glared pointedly at Lord Calcourt. “Lord Calcourt. How might I persuade you to stop paying such particular attention to *my* treasure? There are many unattached gems here in England with whom you may flirt.”

Sarah could not speak. Her discomfort had turned to complete mortification. The shock of his statements reverberated through her body, paralyzing her thoughts. She could not believe he had spoken those words.

The entire table fell still, except for some back-and-forth glances between the guests. To Lord Calcourt’s credit, he exercised an extraordinary ability to maintain his composure, but he addressed James’s impertinent question with a cool head. “I do not know to what you are referring, sir. My words and actions toward Lady Whitfield have only ever been respectful and appropriate.” He spoke with a forced calm in his voice, his demeanor sober and direct.

The truth of Lord Calcourt’s words ripped Sarah from immobility, but before she could move to act, Lady Whitfield stood and spoke. “Son, I have no idea how you can account for this ludicrous behavior, but I ask you now to apologize to Lord Calcourt and leave this room at once.” Even the dowager knew there was no coming back from this. She chastised her son as if he were a child, but Sarah applauded her internally for it. She knew the dowager must be furious in order to engage further in this display of family embarrassment.

The room watched as James ran his hand through his hair, stood, and without apology to anyone, tossed his napkin onto his plate and exited the dining room. Sarah was equal parts relief and humiliation. The precipice on which she and James had been teetering for so long had finally given way and come crashing to the ground.

She looked around the room at her friends, in desperate vulnerability. She did not have the ability to rescue any of them from this moment, least of all

herself. The breath in her lungs left her, and the embarrassment she felt surged to anger. How could he treat her friends this way? His selfish arrogance had ruined what had been the happiest time for her since his return. Tears began rolling down her face, and immediately she heard Alice ushering their guests back into the drawing room. Whether the party resumed the dancing, Sarah did not know. She could not face them. She stumbled up the stairs to her bedchamber and fell upon her bed, sobbing into her pillow until she reached total exhaustion and drifted off into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 11

JAMES AWOKE TO A KNOCK at his door and a thrashing headache. Sharp, pitiless sunlight streamed in through the window, assaulting the dark room, and he could barely pry his eyes open. He looked to his night table and picked up his pocket watch. It was past noon? When he moved to stand, his brain seemed to crash against the side of his skull, screaming in protest. The pounding was relentless. He sat for a moment, waiting for the throbbing to subside, and vague recollections of last night trickled into his memory. A jumbled mess of images and intense outrage swirled, further intensifying his headache. He needed water.

The knock at the door came a second time, and James looked around the room for his trousers. When he finally made his way to the door, the corridor was empty, but at his feet lay a sealed missive. He picked it up, closed the door, and sat down at his writing table. There was no inscription. Curious, he opened it.

Dear James,

By the time you read this letter I will have already gone. Lord and Lady Ramsey have invited me to accompany them to London, and I have accepted. I have come to discover that my presence in your life is undesired and unwelcome. Whatever you face, you have decided to go it alone.

I wanted nothing more than to join with you in conquering life's challenges, to be your wife in the truest sense of the word, in every sense of the word, but that is not what you desire. I am not your treasure and have not been for a long time. You have turned to destructive means, and the cost has become too great for both of us. I cannot continue to swing on your pendulum between neglect and some peculiar, unfounded jealousy.

Somehow, I have come to represent a cage to you. You have been searching for an escape since the very moment you returned. I have no wish to impede you further. I release you from any perceived confinement where I am concerned.

I truly wish things were different. I hope you find whatever it is you are seeking. I hope you find peace.

Sincerely,

Sarah

P.S. You are blind, you know. Blind not to see the only romantic intentions Lord Calcourt ever had throughout his stay were toward Miss Amelia Wilkes. You need not persist in your misplaced contempt of him. I suspect, however, that whatever has occurred between you and I has nothing to do with Lord Calcourt.

James hunched over in his chair, letting the letter drop from his hand. He watched it float to the ground and land on the floor, lifeless. She was gone. He had done everything in his power to push her away, and now that she was gone, he felt hollow inside, like a shell abandoned by its life source.

If he'd felt up to it, he would have mounted Jet and ridden far from Whitfield Manor until his senses were numb. But his body was staging an all-out assault against him. He had abused his body mightily, drinking far too much, so much so that he could not fully remember the details of last night. Based on his hazy recollections and Sarah's letter, he could guess it was not good.

Sarah had mentioned leaving for London. She could be gone for months. But she'd made no mention of returning. Did she plan to stay away permanently?

James put his elbow on the desk and rubbed his forehead. He felt like he'd swallowed a lead ball that sank deep into his gut. In his obsession with finding Patrick, James had not allowed himself to consider the future. He had been existing from day to day, looking for a course of action to take. What if he never received word of Patrick's whereabouts? Having so thoroughly damaged his relationship with Sarah, they could be estranged forever.

Since that fateful night when Patrick was captured, James's life had unraveled into a pile of broken fragments. In the space of a few months, he had not only allowed himself to spiral downward but had actively participated in destroying any good thing he'd had left to hold on to. But he could not stop himself. He felt like he was drowning and didn't know how to swim.

Another knock at the door jogged him to attention, and this time he rushed to answer the door straightaway. His mother stood in the doorway. When James saw her face, which looked as dismal as he felt, he dared not speak. Her expression was as solemn as he had ever seen her. She made no greeting and pushed past him as he awkwardly stepped aside for her.

"Since you were not present this morning, when all our guests departed, I

have come to tell you the news.”

“I already know, Mother,” he said in a near whisper.

“About what?”

“About Sarah.”

“Your wife’s broken heart is yesterday’s news,” she snapped, and James reeled back. “Alice has just informed me she is leaving to India.” She spat the words, her forceful declaration reverberating in his skull.

James struggled to find his bearings. “India?”

Before he could inquire further about Alice, his mother continued. “You have effectively managed to chase away every member of this family and every friend and neighbor of our acquaintance.” Her voice now exuded a calm her words did not convey.

“Mother, I—”

“Do not speak!” she interrupted. “Your words mean very little. Your actions last night spoke volumes.” She whipped around, her skirts following behind, and walked out of the room.

James sighed and closed the door. He tried to ignore the pounding in his head and his empty stomach as he dressed and went downstairs in search of Alice.

The house was empty and quiet, a stark contrast from the bustling houseful of guests he had been tirelessly trying to avoid the past six days. The lonely house seemed to echo his melancholy. He found Mr. Thomas at the bottom of the stairs and asked if he would trouble the kitchen for a tea tray. “You will find me in the drawing room or the library,” James instructed.

He was not surprised to find Alice in the library, reading, as was her usual pastime. When he entered the room, she looked up, and seeing him, her facial expression turned to what his mother’s had been—critical. He walked to the sofa facing her and sat down. Alice, now aware he was there to speak with her, set her book down and turned to face him. James did not bother with pleasantries but began with the simpler questions. “So you are off to India? When?”

“There is a merchant ship that sails for Bombay before month’s end, and I hope to be on it.”

James nodded, impressed by Alice’s resolve. “And Sarah knows?” he inquired.

Alice nodded.

Of course Sarah knew. He now understood how she could have left so suddenly. Knowing Alice had plans of her own, she would not worry as much about leaving her behind.

“Alice?” James paused before asking his next question. He was not certain he wanted to hear the answer. “How bad was it? Last night?”

Alice widened her eyes. “By ‘it’ you mean your insolent and rude attack on one of our guests?” She was not going to let him off so easily.

James realized he had been fishing for a bit of respite, but he was not going to find it. He took a deep breath as embarrassment washed over him. He knew to whom she was referring. “I am sorry.” It was the most contrite apology he could muster.

“Thank you, James, but I am not the person who deserves your apology.”

James bowed his head in humble submission. “I will apologize to Lord Calcourt as well.” Truthfully, he doubted he would ever see the man again.

“And?”

James looked at Alice with a questioning expression until he realized who else she meant. “And of course I will apologize to Sarah as soon as I am afforded the opportunity,” he answered, still contrite.

“I have never known you to be a passive man. You might do well to create the opportunity.”

James was surprised by her reply. She was far cleverer than he had ever realized.

“May I speak frankly?” she asked.

James dropped his gaze again. He did not know how many times he could be rebuked in one morning.

“Peter always thought you an arrogant, self-important, over-licked cub.” Alice’s words stung. “He used to say when you played as children you would take any toy you wanted, sometimes straight out of his hands, no matter the consequence. He suspected you did not even care about the toy except that he wanted it. It took only a few moments before you would cast it aside in search of something new.” James was doing his best to submit to this lambasting. If he was honest with himself, he knew Peter’s assessment of him as a child was accurate. “People are not toys. You cannot just cast them aside once you lose interest.” James let the air in his lungs deflate and sank back into the sofa. Alice’s face softened a little. “He also told me he has never known anyone quite like you. Growing up, you had confidence in droves that

he never had. You had no fear and the capacity to accomplish anything you put your mind to,” she said. “He admired you.”

James lifted his brow in surprise. He’d never expected to hear such praise, especially from Peter. He was taken aback by a feeling of longing that welled up in his chest. He missed his brother. An unexpected image flowed into his memory, of Peter helping him learn his letters in the nursery. The two boys had sat on the ground as Peter pointed to each letter in his reader and spoke it while James repeated after him. There had been no rivalry then, no guile, only a brother helping his brother. When had things changed between them?

He looked up to find Alice observing him. Her expression lightened a little. “We all make mistakes, James. And perhaps if you stop with your foolishness, you might be able to keep those mistakes from turning into regrets.” Her lips pulled down, and James could see she was suppressing a smile. She was enjoying this.

Although he felt a bit like a sheep who had been shorn down to its bare skin, he was glad to see Alice addressing him with such candor. No doubt she felt liberated in expressing her thoughts so freely. Now that they were talking, he felt brave enough to inquire further and leaned forward. “May I ask . . . am I the reason you are leaving?”

A smirk escaped her, and she chided, “I know this might surprise you, but the answer is no.”

“Mother implied I was the reason everyone left, including you.”

“She *is* exceedingly angry with you.” Alice smiled. “But my plans were made before last night’s disaster. And, again, I am not the one you injured.” She looked down at her book.

“Yes, I am starting to understand.” James leaned back again on the sofa, absorbing Alice’s appraisal of him. Even though it had been uncomfortable, hearing the truth from her had helped him. He thought he should offer her the same. “Alice, based on my previous actions, I know you might not think me capable, but I loved my brother, and I miss him every day.” His voice trembled as he worked to keep his emotions in check. “My respect for him grows daily, especially as I consider what it means to fill his shoes.”

“Thank you, James,” Alice replied. “I know he loved you too.”

CHAPTER 12

“MR. ELLIOT, SET A COURSE *for south by southwest!*” James would sail around the storm if he must.

“Aye, aye, Captain Turner.”

As the storm raged in the open sea, the crew worked tirelessly to secure the rigging on deck. Waves crashed down onto the quarterdeck as the Phantom teetered between the large swells of the dark ocean.

“Hold fast, lads!” James called to the men aloft tying down the sails.

All at once, just off the starboard bow, a massive swell crashed down onto the Phantom, sweeping a man from the sails out to sea.

“Man overboard!” James ran to the rails, searching the waves. “Swim, man! Swim for your life!” he yelled in desperation.

The next instant, James was submerged in the cold, black water. He burst through the surface of the tumultuous waves and watched as his ship sailed through the giant swells and eventually disappeared into the darkness.

He was the man! He was the man overboard! He fought to stay above the water, but the waves kept coming, beating down on him until he was forced under. With no air, he felt his chest constrict. Down, down he went, sinking farther into the suffocating blackness.

James bolted upright in his bed, gasping. His bedcovers were swiveled around his legs, constricting his movement. He fought his way out of them, falling out of bed and onto the floor. *Breathe.* He sucked in several deep gulps of air until he was sure he was no longer drowning. He found his feet and stood up in the darkness. He was alone.

This nightmare was new—spurred on, no doubt, by the desperate feeling of all he had lost recently. Still breathing heavily, he looked over at the door, *her* door. What he would not give to know she was sleeping just behind it. Knowing Sarah was in this house would have been a comfort somehow, but no. Nearly a month had passed since her removal to London.

Each time he woke, the realization that she was no longer there barreled into him like a musket ball. Awake, asleep, in the darkness and quiet, she infiltrated his thoughts. He could not avoid her. His mind conjured up numberless images of her beauty, memories of her kindness, her intelligence, and her patience with him. He recalled her countless efforts to reach him and the many times he had dismissed her vulnerable offerings. He saw it all now,

laid out before him.

Instead of her closeness at night, he had chosen regret, remorse, and revenge as familiar companions to feed and foster in place of any real connection in his life. It was torturous. But at least she was somewhere he could not hurt her anymore. He was starting to think it better that she stay away. At least she would be free of his pain.

He tried to go back to sleep but instead spent the rest of the night staring at the ceiling. When morning came, he was desperate to be out of his room and out of his head. He dressed and made his way to Peter's old study. James had made a habit of working here recently. In the days preceding Alice's departure, she and James had sat down together and discussed in detail Peter's responsibilities as the Viscount of Whitfield. As James educated himself on the running of the estate and his added responsibilities in Parliament, he realized he had shirked many of his duties. But he would not shirk his duty to Alice. He sent a communiqué making arrangements for her and her cousin, Charles, to sail aboard a Royal Navy vessel patrolling the trade routes to India. It was the least he could do for her and Peter. Sitting among his brother's things was reassuring somehow. He felt less alone, even though the quiet of the house seemed to mock him, stretching on and on hour after hour—an effective prison.

His mother was intent on punishing him with her silence. She was heartbroken by the disappointment of losing the companionship of both of her daughters-in-law. She took a breakfast tray in her bedchamber each morning and could be seen only at dinner, where she did her best to ignore him. He was impressed with her commitment to shun him. She was very good at pretending he was not in the room, and James wondered if his father had ever endured such treatment. He tried to endure her silence with compassion.

He planted his elbows on the desk and ran his fingers through his already-mussed hair. After an hour of trying to concentrate on his paperwork, it was clear he would not be able to focus and needed some respite out of doors. He walked back to his bedchamber and asked his valet for some work clothes. How strange he must seem, as the Viscount of Whitfield, to be dressed in work boots, old jackets, and trousers day after day.

He had taken to riding the perimeter of the estate, familiarizing himself with the outlying farms and residents. He found that being out among the

tenants and even working alongside them gave him a measure of peace. The hard work and physical labor gave him a reprieve from his thoughts and distraction from his troubles.

The crisp air invigorated his senses as James strode out to the stables in search of an occupation for the day. Yesterday, James had seen some sections of his stone wall that needed repairing, and it seemed like just the kind of heavy exertion he needed to occupy his mind today.

As he stood just outside the stable, readying himself to mount Jet, he heard an old Scottish lilt behind him. "I thought I'd seen riffraff slinking into yer barn, but then I caught sight of yer wee legs sauntering by, and I knew it was ye, Cap'n."

James would recognize that voice anywhere. He whipped around to see Lieutenant Angus Booth, his old shipmate, his comrade in arms, a man he'd trusted with his life again and again, standing before him. Angus looked like a true sailor. His skin was weathered and worn from the wind and heat and his uniform tattered from service. His tricorne hat perched atop his head, front flat, with his hair pulled back in a tattered ribbon. A scruffy beard of auburn-and-brown whiskers covered his face, and the twinkle in his eye indicated to James that nothing had changed. James had relied on the man's jovial nature to keep their crew in good spirits on many a dark day. Seeing his face now was a balm to his tattered soul.

He grabbed his friend and pulled him into a close embrace. The two men slapped each other's backs heartily.

"How is it you are here, Lieutenant?"

"A wee shore leave." Angus removed his hat and smiled.

"And you walked here from Portsmouth?" James surprised himself with his sarcasm. It was good to see his friend.

"Nay, I caught a ride on a ruddy stagecoach." Angus huffed. He was not a land creature, and jostling around in a cramped stagecoach for half a day would have been uncomfortable for him, to say the least. He had made quite the effort to come all this way.

"And how 'bout ye, Cap'n? I thought I would come here to find ye in silk robes and all such finery, sitting on yer throne." Angus assessed James's appearance, eyeing him incredulously. "And here ye are, lookin' like a ruffian, skulking around the barn."

"It is a long story, but may I just say that a long day of manual labor is

preferable to an empty house with only one's mother to keep one company." James began with humor in his tone, but the truth of the situation cut through him.

"Mother? I thought ye had yerself a wife?"

"I did. I do." James could not find the words to explain he had effectively run her off. He drew in a long, deep breath and wiped his clammy forehead.

"I have seen that look before. There's a story there; I can tell." But Angus did not press.

"How long do you have?"

"I can stay the night if ye'll have me, Cap'n."

James slung his arm around Angus and led him back to the barn. "Do you ride?"

"Ride what? A horse?"

"Yes, a horse. What did *you* learn to ride on? A goat?" James teased.

"I ken how to ride a ruddy horse," Angus sneered.

It was obvious Angus had spent little time on a horse, but James was not interested in taking his friend back into the house and introducing him to his cantankerous mother. "Then, we ride." He felt energized. Angus's sudden appearance had heaved him straight out of the doldrums and flung him into something in the realm of high spirits.

James chose Bonny as Angus's mount. She was his calmest horse and a stable choice for an inexperienced rider. Angus was keen to ride her, especially after James told him she was his only Scottish horse. He smiled to himself, having no idea whether that was true. Angus rode well, but Bonny, it seemed, was a better choice for a small child to be led around on a brief jaunt across the meadow. She was not calm; she was inert. Poor Bonny brayed and snorted as Angus prodded her up the hillside. The rocky terrain made riding difficult, but James was intent on reaching their destination. He knew his friend would agree soon enough. James and Angus dismounted and led their horses to the crest of the hill, where an emerald-green pond with a lively waterfall came into view.

The men surveyed the setting, watching the water cascade down the rockbed and plunge into the pool below, their eyes following the cool mist that sprang up and covered the mossy rocks at the water's edge.

"This charming oasis can be found only when there is heavy rainfall."

"It looks like Scotland," Angus remarked in awe as he took in the scenery.

Before James could tie up the horses, Angus had ripped off his jacket and shirt and jumped feetfirst into the pond. As his friend broke through the surface of the water, his yelp echoing through the rocks, James bolted back in surprise as the spray covered James in water.

“A little cold there?” James appraised his drenched comrade.

“Nah, it’ll put hair on yer chest.”

James could not help himself. He followed suit, removing his boots and jacket. “How deep is it?” He started scaling the rocks, looking for a proper ledge.

“I’ve not touched the bottom there, Cap’n.” Angus disappeared under the water, testing the depth, and popped back up a moment later. “More than a fathom, I’d say.”

James found a flat spot on the rocks nearly two meters above the water and dove into the center of the pool. The cold water flooded his senses as he plunged into its depths. The sensation was shocking and refreshing. He swam to the rocks, whipping his dripping hair to the side, intent on jumping again. Angus followed suit and the two men jumped, dove, and swam well into the afternoon.

After a while, they lay on the rocks, drying themselves. James felt exhausted. But it was not the same kind of tiredness that came from a sleepless night. This kind of fatigue, from heavy physical exertion, he welcomed.

“You must be starving by now, Lieutenant,” he said. “We should start back soon.”

“Ah no, Cap’n, not yet,” Angus countered. “I have not yet heard the tale of how ye were left here in yer grand castle with naught but yer mother for company.”

James sat up and sighed. His shoulders slumped forward as the lightness he’d felt only moments earlier left him. He scooted back and situated himself against a rock, contemplating where exactly to begin. “Well, to start”—James blew out a puff of air—“I drove my wife away by means of impudence and callous neglect.”

“Where’d she run off to?”

“London.”

“’Tis not far. Run after her.” Only a man who’d never had a wife would say such a thing.

“It’s not that simple, Angus.” James bowed his head.

“And why not?” Angus whipped back, still reclined on his rock.

“I don’t know how to do it.”

“Do what?” Angus sat up, confused.

“Be a husband and a viscount and a gentleman of leisure.” James spat out the words as if they tasted terrible. “Every time I try, I am plagued with the vision of Patrick rotting away in a prison somewhere . . . It should’ve been me.” He took a large breath and tried to recover himself from purging his deep, dark secret. He had not expected his doubts and fears to come flooding out of his mouth so readily, but now that they had, he felt some relief. He was tired of keeping it all hidden away in the dark corners of his mind. At least now the ugly truth was in front him, spoken. He had to acknowledge it.

“Aye, now we come to the heart of it,” Angus said, pondering. “So yer out here thinkin’ Patrick is still alive somewhere, a prisoner?”

James nodded.

“And ye feel guilty about the way things went on Jersey?”

He nodded again.

“And ye’ve been broodin’ round yer castle all this time?” Most confident in his analysis, Angus did not bother looking at James again. “And this keeps ye from enjoyin’ sittin’ on yer throne day after day, sleepin’ in yer soft bed with yer fluffy pillow, with a bonny lass by yer side to boot.” Angus eyed him with a raised eyebrow. “That *would* be horrible.”

James’s face grew hot—from anger or embarrassment he could not tell. “I stood by and allowed Patrick to be captured by French soldiers. I watched as they clapped him in irons, beat him within an inch of his life, and took him aboard their vessel, never to be seen again.”

“I was there with ye, Cap’n. I held ye back, remember? If there was fault to be taken that night, it may well’ve been mine.” Angus matched his intensity as he continued. “Lieutenant Sloane was a soldier and a spy. He accepted the risks of his own accord. The only one I see who bears any of the fault in this is that double-crosser Chappelle. We were betrayed, Cap’n.”

Both men fell quiet as the words hung in the air like a death knell. James looked around his feet and found a smooth, flat stone next to the water. He picked it up, slung back his arm, and pitched it across the water. It skipped along the surface before it reached the opposite side of the pond, where it clapped against the rocks and rolled to a stop.

He looked back at Angus. “I have been stripped of any authority I may have had to help me find Patrick. The blasted Royal Navy will not even consider instigating a search.”

“May I ask ye a question, Cap’n?”

“Are you asking my permission to speak freely?” James gave his friend a half smirk as he picked up another rock.

Angus huffed and ignored his comment. “If ye think Lieutenant Sloane is still alive somewhere, what do ye plan to do about it?”

James dropped the rock from his hand and shrugged. “I have written letters to the Admiralty but to no avail.”

Angus picked up a stone and mimicked James. He threw a nice one that skidded along the water before it sank below the surface. “If we were aboard the *Phantom*, you would probably throw me in the brig for saying so, but . . .” When he hesitated, James braced himself. “That night on Jersey Island, if ye had been captured instead of Lieutenant Sloane, how would ye expect Patrick to go on livin’?” Angus stared him down. “Would ye want him to be eaten up by guilt?”

“Of course not,” James said. Angus did not have to spell it out for him. He clearly took his meaning. “I have to find him, Angus. I owe this to Patrick. And until I do—”

“What then? What happens when ye do find him?” Angus challenged him. “Will ye pick up the pieces of yer life *then*?”

James thought of Sarah. This past month had been a misery without her, but he dared not think of asking her forgiveness. He was not sure he could be the man she needed. He felt broken beyond repair.

“How many years have we served together, Cap’n?” Angus stared at James.

“Many, Lieutenant.” James could tell Angus was trying to recover from his brutal frankness.

“In all those years, I watched ye confront every challenge with boldness and conquer every foe without fear.” Angus nodded in respect to his captain. “Ye’ll see yer way through this one too.”

James stood and made his way over to his clothes, Angus following him. Angus’s encouragement was not very reassuring. James’s skills that had served him well in the navy were of no help to him now. In fact, his guarded, reticent nature only seemed to be hurting Sarah and those closest to him.

Before Angus could carry on further, James tossed him his shirt and jacket before turning toward the horses. He walked over and took hold of Bonny's reins and offered them to his friend. "I hear you, Lieutenant," he said in surrender and mounted Jet. "Now, shall we ride home before my stomach protests further?"

When they returned to the manor house, James suppressed a smile when he introduced his mother to Lieutenant Booth and watched her eyes widen as she assessed their sopping wet hair and clothes. She touched her finger under her crinkled nose as she stuttered, "It is lovely to meet you, Lieutenant."

Angus nearly scooped her up in his arms as he bowed to her. "Lady Whitfield, it is an honor to meet the mother of a man I admire so much as Cap'n Turner."

Mother arched a brow at Angus and then offered him a stiff smile. "Thank you." She didn't last long at dinner and retired early while the two men stayed up long into the night reliving story after story about their time in the service.

Before dawn, James rode out with Angus to meet the stagecoach and bid him farewell. He felt a pang of envy as Angus waved his hat out of the departing carriage. Angus was headed back to his ship, back to a life James knew how to live.

His friend had been right on one score. James could no longer ignore the truth of his circumstances, wishing they were different. He did not sleep that night as thoughts of Sarah consumed him. He dreamed up more than a few scenarios of riding out to London and whisking her back to Whitfield. The fulfillment of his fantasy was continually obstructed, however, the moment he considered how he might persuade her to return with him. He half smiled, thinking his only option was to kidnap her.

But what would happen next? Was she to return and simply remain a fixture in his household? How could he ensure their life together would be different from what it had been these past months? He hoped his isolation as of late had taught him something about not taking her for granted, but could he really make her happy? Their entire post-navy history together caused him to think otherwise. Self-doubt and indecision crept in, stalling his thoughts' momentum.

James was surprised to see Mother the next morning for breakfast. Perhaps Angus had warmed the chill of her resentments.

“Good morning, Mother.”

“Good morning.” Her greeting was pleasant but still reticent.

Perhaps he was wrong. He was glad to see her but did not press her for conversation. They ate in silence, except for the occasional clinking of a fork on a plate or a teacup to its saucer. When James was resigned that she would not utter a word, he picked up the *Times* and began shuffling through the pages. He tried to focus on the news of the day, but his mother’s gaze burned through him.

Without warning she proclaimed, “I hope Sarah is getting out to socialize. Although the Season is not yet in full sway, I want her to enjoy herself.” She spoke with a hint of provocation in her voice.

“I hope so too, Mother.”

“I daresay she deserves it after what she has endured from you.”

James set down his paper. He could tell his mother meant to cross swords with him. After the refreshingly frank conversations he and Angus had shared, he had no desire to play games. “I do wish Sarah happiness, and if you want me to admit I regret my actions these past months, well then, here you have it. I do, absolutely,” he declared.

Mother seemed stunned by his answer. James imagined she had expected him to defend himself as he had always done in the past, but he had no wish to argue. He had been wrong. He owed his mother an apology, too, and this was his moment to offer it. “Mother, I must express how sorry I am for my behavior toward you, toward Sarah, toward everyone. I know you have had to endure much from me over the years. My selfish antics as a boy have turned into the negligent, hurtful actions of a man, and I can only tell you that I am fully aware of the pain I have inflicted and the damage I have caused you and this family.” He kept his gaze fixed on her in hopes of conveying his sincerity. “I have come to realize that while in the navy I became a man, but many aspects of my character remained underdeveloped.”

Mother lifted her chin and appeared curious to hear what he was about to say next.

“I never learned the virtues of thoughtfulness, compassion, and tenderness. Those were in limited supply in the navy. My time there had the reverse effect. In the service, I learned to be guarded and reticent.” He collected the papers on the table and straightened them out of sheer nervousness. He was not comfortable sharing his feelings, especially when he no longer had the

facade of arrogance to hide behind. He guessed it was time he learned.

Mother sat poised in her chair, her expression so severe that James could not read her. He realized in that moment that he yearned for her understanding. He had thought himself a self-contained being who had learned long ago to live without affection, but he was wrong. “‘No man is an island,’” he muttered under his breath.

Finally, she spoke. “James, you have always been a stubborn child who would not be told what to do or not to do. If there was danger present, you would not heed the warnings given. You needed to see it, touch it, or smell it, and usually the consequence was not severe enough to deter you.” She sighed. “You learning this lesson on your own has been painful for all of us, but I daresay you needed to experience it for yourself in order to truly understand.”

James nodded in resignation. “I do hope to make amends.” But his hope felt feeble. He feared he had damaged things beyond repair.

His mother nodded. “If you have wrecked something, son, the only way to properly rebuild it is to start over with the foundation, one piece at a time.”

Her words struck him. James mulled them over in his mind. *One piece at a time*. Every time he had considered making amends with Sarah or anyone else, he’d been paralyzed by the prospect of needing to be everything to everyone. The idea of being Sarah’s knight in shining armor, producing an heir, perpetuating the success and welfare of his title and estate, and living happily ever after did not feel possible. He had not even been able to manage his own struggles. But an idea began to form in his mind. Perhaps he could simply start with making amends. He desired to see Sarah’s face again, to look into her eyes and offer a sincere apology for how he had treated her. He owed her that much.

Though Parliament was not yet in session, perhaps he might travel to London and begin to acquaint himself with other members of the House of Lords who were not still in the country and call on Sarah a time or two. Beyond that he did not know. He had no desire to rip her away from her friends and no right to expect anything from her. But to see her again . . . the possibility made his heart feel lighter.

He noticed his mother eyeing him from across the table while he ruminated. “If I’d have known my mother had so much wisdom, I would have started listening to her a long time ago.” He smiled.

Mother tried to feign offense, but the twinkle in her eye exposed her, and a smile eventually crept across her face too.

James stood, stepped over to her, and placed his hand on her shoulder. The physical contact was not familiar or comfortable for him, but he was committed to try. In response to his gesture, she stood and threw her arms around him. James was stunned for a moment. The sensation was almost more than he could handle. He slowly lifted his arms and patted her on the back. The embrace felt awkward yet oddly comforting. When she let go at last, he noticed moisture in her eyes and reached up with his handkerchief, offering it to her.

His mother claimed it and patted her cheek. “Never forget, son, real strength is born out of admitting weakness, not suppressing it.”

He lifted his brow at her. “Wise woman,” he whispered. “Thank you, Mother.”

“No, son, thank you.”

CHAPTER 13

SARAH AND MARGOT SAT ON a blanket spread out under the large canopy of an oak tree in Hyde Park. They had had their fill of the carriage road, where the whole of London's peerage could be seen walking and riding. Lord Ramsey had procured them a lovely spot by the Serpentine, quite out of the way, while he rode the perimeter of the park on horseback.

Margot set down her parasol and let the sun warm her face.

"Margot, chin down, please. Sketching your jawline is difficult when your face is tilted up like that," Sarah admonished. "I am aiming for a true likeness. You must hold still."

Margot lowered her chin as Sarah examined the details of her face while she sketched. "May I speak while you sketch?" she asked wryly.

"Yes, you may," Sarah replied, still eyeing her with scrutiny.

"I've had a letter from Mr. Wilkes this morning." Margot tried not to move her head, gazing forward as she spoke. "He and his daughters are in London, and they have invited us to join them for a concert this evening. It is a string concerto."

Sarah placed her pencil in her sketchbook and looked up. "Shall we attend?"

"It is your decision, *ma chérie*. Lord Ramsey and I have committed to attend a private dinner this evening, but I thought a concert with friends would be much more preferable to you than attending a dinner with persons you have never met."

Sarah felt a touch awkward at the thought of joining the Wilkeses. She had not seen them since that awful night in the dining room at Whitfield, when she had cried in her room after James's outburst. Lady Whitfield had seen them off the next morning while Sarah had packed her trunks for London in a frenzy.

"Would James's absence be too conspicuous?" she asked.

"You need not offer any detailed explanation, and I daresay they are aware you are in London without Lord Whitfield, for the letter made no mention of him—only a particular mention of his daughters' wish to see you again."

Sarah nodded, hoping the details of her life were not the talk of the *ton*. She had, however, accompanied Lord and Lady Ramsey to many social gatherings without her husband. Did she imagine no one had noticed during

those occasions?

As if Margot knew how she felt, she added, "I think you will enjoy yourself very much, and the Wilkeses are the best kind of people. You need not concern yourself on that account."

Sarah nodded in agreement. "Then, I will go," she relented. "It might be nice for you and Lord Ramsey to be free of me for one evening."

"Oh heavens, surely you know that is not the reason." Margot dismissed Sarah's remark with a wave of her hand and took advantage of the break in Sarah's sketching to once again lift her face to the sun.

Sarah did so as well, and the two sat in silence for a long while, which was not unusual for the two friends. Their companionship had fallen into an easy rhythm in which conversation was not always needed. Lord Ramsey was always in the periphery, accommodating the ladies, protecting them, and procuring anything that was needed, like this lovely patch of grass in Hyde Park.

Sarah was adjusting quite well to her new environment. Lord and Lady Ramsey's London home was not unlike the earl and countess themselves: luxurious and resplendent yet somehow accessibly warm and inviting. They kept a robust social calendar, and Sarah enjoyed accompanying them on their many engagements. It kept her mind quite occupied, and although she missed certain aspects of her life at Whitfield, she tried to focus on the positives and not dwell too much on her disappointments.

She looked around the park and could not help but think of the many sprawling acres and the surrounding forest at Whitfield Manor. She could walk for miles there without encountering another soul. Now here she was in the middle of a crowded park where half the residents of London came each day for a sight of some green. Nevertheless, she reminded herself that she was contented.

She and Margot reclined, undisturbed, for the better part of an hour, soaking in their reposeful surroundings. When Lord Ramsey came riding up, his carriage following closely behind him, he helped them to their feet and into the carriage. As they drove back to Ramsey House, Sarah felt her nerves prickling her insides, thinking of the evening ahead.

The Wilkeses came to collect her in their carriage at a quarter past eight, and she was thrilled to be met with warmth and good humor. Not long into the carriage ride she realized her sweet friends did not begrudge her in the

least for James's behavior or her emotional display when last they'd met. They were gracious enough not to ask after him, and she was relieved their associations were still intact.

"We have a surprise for you, Lady Whitfield." Catherine Wilkes could not contain her excitement. "Our host for this evening's concert is our own Lord Calcourt."

Sarah looked over to Amelia, who gazed out the window, her features fixed in a demure expression. Sarah had long practiced the art of hiding her emotions, enough so to detect Amelia's masked anticipation. "What a delight," she remarked. "I am not surprised a musician such as Lord Calcourt would host this kind of event."

"We are honored to be a part of his private gathering," Mr. Wilkes proclaimed, "and your joining us has made our evening complete."

Sarah wondered if he had been apprised of the blossoming connection between Lord Calcourt and Amelia or, perhaps, if Lord Calcourt had officially asked Mr. Wilkes's permission to court his daughter. No doubt, Mr. Wilkes would be pleased with such a match. She herself was pleased Lord Calcourt had not let his reservations dissuade him from spending more time with Amelia.

When they arrived at the concert, Sarah was pleased to discover that Lord Calcourt had saved them seats near the front. The gathering was intimate, with nearly as many musicians as guests. Two large candelabras lit the room with warm, glowing light, an ideal setting for such beautiful music. Sarah sat next to Catherine and Mr. Wilkes while Amelia sat on the end of the aisle next to Lord Calcourt, who paid her particular attention.

Although there had not been very much time for pleasantries before the concert, Sarah could tell he bore her no ill will either. She felt quite at ease and fortunate to have such kindhearted connections.

As the first violinist began playing an ethereal melody, Sarah closed her eyes and was taken away in such rapture that she felt as if she had died and gone to heaven. To her, there was nothing more exquisite than the delicate timbre of a violin. She savored every moment of the string concerto, so much so that the evening hastened on far too quickly.

After the concert, as the carriage drifted through the quiet London streets, Sarah felt tired yet invigorated. The music and company had elevated her spirits such that when she left the Wilkeses' carriage and made her way into

the front entry of Ramsey House well past midnight, she felt giddy with delight. She crept quietly through the ornate entry hall, as it appeared everyone had retired for the evening, yet she could see a candle burning in the parlor. Curious, she removed her gloves and poked her head through the doorway to see who was there.

Confusion and disbelief barreled into her when she saw her husband sitting on the settee. He stood as she gazed at him in shock, unmoving. She surveyed every detail of his face and person, making sure her eyes were not deceiving her. The same dark, wavy hair and intense features she knew so well caused her heartbeat to stammer wildly. She dropped her gloves on the rug in front of her, and the movement seemed to jolt her from her bewilderment.

As she picked up her gloves, James moved closer but halted when she straightened and looked up at him.

“How are you, Sarah?” he whispered.

The greeting seemed trite, considering the past months. She was dumbfounded by his presence and could not pretend to carry on with pleasantries. “Why are you here, James?” She laid her gloves on the nearby table and folded her arms, waiting for a reply.

“I thought perhaps I might persuade you to speak with me,” he replied. The tone in his voice was filled with humility. She immediately felt distrustful of it and wanted to scream out, “Why are you here?” She wished he did not have the ability to discompose her so. But her confidence grew as she realized he was nervous and hesitant to speak further. “As I remember, you had much time to say anything you ever wished to say to me at Whitfield, but you took no opportunity,” she spat with boldness.

“I—”

“I fairly begged you to speak with me on several occasions, but you refused. I was met with either your disinterest or censure.” She found she had no desire to hear what he had to say. She was angry—angry he had showed up here unannounced. She had finally found contentment and was just beginning to feel like herself again. Tonight she had felt inspired, even euphoric. Had he come here to rob her of that? *No*. She would not let him.

“I realize you are angry with me, and rightly so. My behavior these months has been inexcusable. I have broken your trust and treated you horribly, but I beg of you, please allow me to explain. What I came to say cannot be spoken in a word or a phrase.”

She found she was curious, but it was too satisfying to deny him the opportunity, as he had done to her these past months. He would have to wait. “James, I am tired, and I would like to retire. I am sorry you came all this way for nothing.” When she turned to leave, she felt a trace of discomfort. Part of her wanted to hear what he had come to say, but she could not allow herself to fall into the same pattern with him the moment he came calling. With that thought, she walked upstairs to her bedchamber. As she undressed, it occurred to her that she had not properly seen him out, but she decided she did not care. Lying in bed, she felt triumphant. She had not meant to act in a manner that was spiteful, but she had stood her ground, and for that she was pleased.

* * *

The next morning she found herself buttering a slice of toast, trying to carry on normally while she watched Lord and Lady Ramsey eye each other across the breakfast table. They had to be aware of her late-night visitor, though they made no mention of him. Instead, they ate their breakfast in awkward silence until Sarah could bear it no longer. “I gather by your not-so-subtle looks that you are both curious about a certain visitor last night, so go on. Ask me.”

Lord Ramsey feigned surprise at her comment, but Margot dropped the theatrics and asked, “What was the reason for his visit?”

Sarah shrugged her shoulders while drinking her tea. “I cannot tell you.”

Lord Ramsey jumped in. “We understand. Matters between a husband and wife should be kept private.”

Sarah felt somewhat amused. “No, the reason I cannot tell you is because I did not allow him to utter the words.”

Lord Ramsey lifted his brow and pursed his lips, glancing over to his wife.

“You dismissed him without a word?” Margot asked.

“We spoke, but I stopped him prematurely.”

Lord and Lady Ramsey appeared flummoxed, and Sarah could not help but relieve their confusion. “It was late, and I was quite caught off guard by his sudden appearance. I did not feel prepared to delve into . . .” She searched for the words. “Into matters with him.”

“Well then, you might be cross with us for what has transpired this morning.” Margot cringed a little.

“What did you do?” Sarah looked between them with wide eyes.

“We received a note this morning from Lord Whitfield asking if he could call, and well, I would have refused him had I known.” Lord Ramsey took a sip of his tea, hiding the smirk on his face.

Sarah nearly dropped her own teacup. “He is coming back this morning?”

“I assumed from Lord Whitfield’s appearance last night you might have sorted things.” Margot shrugged her shoulders.

“Sorted things? Margot, I thought you were on my side.” Sarah’s thoughts roiled until she felt near panic.

“I am, mon ami, but he *did* come all this way.” Margot’s eyebrows knit together as she entreated her. “And he did seem rather contrite.” Margot also seemed rather contrite.

Sarah glared at Lord Ramsey. “I blame *you* for this. Is there some kind of brotherhood or code between gentlemen that you cannot violate?”

Lord Ramsey shook his head, chuckling at her contempt. The chimes on the clock bellowed through the house, announcing the eleven o’clock hour.

“Incredible.” Sarah patted her mouth with her napkin and scurried from the breakfast table, out of the room and up to her bedchamber. She opened the door and called to Eve. “He will be here any moment, and I look a mess!” The confidence she felt last evening had left her and was now replaced with a frenzied uncertainty.

Eve walked out of the closet, perplexed, and inquired, “*Who* will be here, my lady?”

“Lord Whitfield, of course.” She began pacing the floor as she kneaded and squeezed the palms of her hands. “I think I will change my dress.” She scuttled to the closet in a flurry.

“You look lovely, my lady. Come sit down.”

Sarah obeyed, and Eve worked to smooth and fix the few loose strands of hair that had come undone in the hour since she had first arranged it.

“May I trouble you for a glass of water?” Sarah needed a moment alone to think. James would be here at any moment. *Oh, heaven help me!* her heart pleaded. She did not have any idea what she might say to him. Fear crept into her mind, and she felt herself spiraling further when a tiny thought entered her mind. *Be honest; be kind.* Where that thought had come from, she could not tell, but it calmed her. All too soon the doorbell rang.

Sarah did not wait to be summoned. She descended the staircase to find

James in the entryway, alone. Lord and Lady Ramsey were nowhere to be found, thank goodness. Sarah tried to act composed, but James's gaze upon her pierced her defenses and set her heart to stammering at such a rate.

Breathe, Sarah.

"Thank you for agreeing to see me." There was a gentleness to his voice that she found disconcerting. She did not trust it.

"I did not agree to see you." Concern pulled at the corners of his eyes. "But now that you are here . . ." She shrugged, feigning indifference, and walked straight past him into the parlor. Her back stiffened as he followed. What was she supposed to do now? She gestured toward a chair, and they sat facing one another. *Honest and kind*, she remembered. "I cannot guess the reason for your visit, but before you begin, I must explain something to you." Her voice sounded calmer than she felt. "After you left last night, I realized something. You were right when you said you have broken my trust. That is true. But more than that, I allowed you to break my spirit." She paused long enough to see him bow his head low in response to her words. "Seeing you here, I was upset—angry, even," she explained. "I am not angry now, but I am cautious, and I hesitate to entertain whatever you have come here to say." She smoothed the wrinkles on the lap of her dress. "You may have come all this way for naught."

James nodded, still quiet, still listening. Finally, he spoke, but the words came slowly, as if he knew not how to express them. "Sarah, I understand I have hurt you, and I feel fortunate you will even speak with me after I . . ."

"Cast me aside?" Her tone was not angry, but the memories of sadness, still quite fresh in her mind, stung.

"Yes." He winced. The admission seemed to hurt him as well. "I offer no excuses for my behavior, and I know words cannot repair what I have done, but I must say them nonetheless." James took a breath and faced her. "Since my return home, I have been deeply negligent of your feelings. I have been arrogant, ill-tempered, and selfish. My behavior toward you was deplorable, and you bore it with patience, even kindness."

As Sarah tried to absorb his words, a jumbled array of emotions rose within her. A part of her desired to accept his apology, and yet there was another part that wanted to take this opportunity, while he was vulnerable, to stomp on his offering and wound him so he would understand what she had felt. But she did not speak. She could not, as yet. It would take her some time to sort

through her feelings. For now the best she could do was listen as James struggled to express himself. She imagined it must be difficult for him to talk to her like this when he had closed himself off for so long.

“I do not say this to excuse myself of any wrongdoing, but I would like to recount to you the circumstances of the past few months”—he paused, drawing in a deep breath and letting it go—“and finally share with you some of what I have been through while I was away. I cannot pretend this is easy for me, but I feel I owe you that, at least. You deserve the truth.”

Now he had piqued her interest. She had yearned for an open dialogue between them, and now she could barely believe he was willing, even wanting, to have one. “I think now might be a good time to call for some tea.”

His stiff posture seemed to ease at the suggestion. Why did he want this? What had changed? They could have gone on as before. She did not dare hope he might feel differently about her, but her heart stuttered a bit despite herself. *Steady now.*

Once the tea tray arrived, James went on to describe in detail the events of the night Patrick was captured and then, shortly following, his receiving news of Peter’s death and James’s subsequent discharge from the navy. Sarah listened, her sympathies for him growing by the moment.

“I was devastated when I returned home. I lost Patrick, Peter, and my charge in the navy all within weeks. I had expected to captain the *Phantom* for at least the next five years, with Patrick as my first lieutenant. I was fully entrenched and committed to that life.” He ran his fingers through his hair, and Sarah could see the recollections still affected him. “I never in my wildest imagination expected to become the next Viscount of Whitfield. Peter was supposed to live a long life and have a son who would become the heir to his title and lands. That was his destiny, not mine, and I felt trapped by the finality of it.”

He took a moment to drink some of the tea she had poured, while she pondered the particulars of what he had just relayed, astonished.

“Upon your return, you made no mention of Patrick, so I just assumed he was still aboard the *Phantom*, fulfilling his duties,” she said.

James set his cup on the saucer in his lap. “I could not bring myself to talk about it. The guilt I felt for what happened was overwhelming and paralyzing. It still is.” His chest heaved at the admission.

Sarah nodded in understanding. “I knew something was terribly wrong when you returned, but I could not reach you. You would not let me.” James gave no reply. They had both lived through it. “And you feel he is being held prisoner?”

James dipped his head.

Sarah hesitated to ask her next question. “Could he have been executed?”

“I have pondered that question a thousand times,” he said, his expression pained. “I have scrupulously combed the lists of war casualties since his capture, and I have yet to see his name. He is an officer whose name and rank would be known and counted. If he had been executed, I believe there would be a record.”

Sarah looked at the clock on the mantel. It was past two. They had been talking for hours. “James?” she asked. “I am curious; why are you able to share this with me now?”

“I don’t know.” His brow furrowed in uncertainty. “I did everything I could to push you away, and when you left . . . let me just say your departure affected me.” She watched him sort through his feelings as he articulated the words. “I was alone, left to ponder the stupidity of my actions and their consequences. I also had a visit from Lieutenant Booth, who was with me the night Patrick was captured. He helped me understand some things as well.”

“Such as?”

“Well, to start, Patrick would not want me to spend my life in pain and regret.”

“I agree. He would not.” Sarah nodded. “I understand why, as his captain, you feel responsible, but it was not your fault. From what I can tell, Patrick volunteered to protect you. I think you should honor his choice. He desired to save and protect his comrades, same as you.”

James nodded. “It sounds so simple, but for a long time I could not let myself believe that. And if I am honest, I used the pain; I used Patrick as a barrier from accepting my new life, my new position.”

Sarah was surprised at James’s vulnerability, but she still felt distrustful of it. “I am trying to understand the struggle you have been through, and I do feel for you.” She made sure he saw her face as she spoke the next words. “But I am not certain you understand the struggle I have been through.”

James rushed, “I know I have been selfish—”

“James, please listen to what I have to say.” If they were going to begin

talking again, he must understand. “I lived in hope the whole five years you were gone. But looking back, you began to distance yourself from me long before you returned. I barely heard from you the last two years. I heard more from the papers of your conquests and battles than I did from you. And then you returned, and I was confused and hurt by your coldness, but I wanted to understand. I wanted to help you. As time went on and I was continually denied not just your affection but also your kindness, I began to shrink.” She could see he was listening intently and wanted to understand. “I retreated inwardly as I continually focused on you and your indifference to me until I lost myself completely. I became Ophelia.”

“Who?”

“Ophelia, from *Hamlet*.” By the look of his furrowed brow, Sarah realized she had lost him. “Surely somewhere in your schooling you read Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*?”

“It was a very long time ago.”

“Ophelia and Hamlet loved each other, and when Hamlet’s father died, Hamlet’s love for Ophelia died also. He became bound up in grief and obsessed with finding who was responsible for the King’s death.” Sarah took a sip of tea. “She was left heartbroken and alone, until eventually she spiraled into madness and took her own life.”

James’s eyes widened with surprise.

“Perhaps if she had been a little older or had more support from her father and others, she might have been able to care for herself in the way she needed to heal from her broken heart.”

James swallowed hard, his expression pained, and cried, “Sarah.” He closed his eyes and whispered, “I’m so sorry.”

“But don’t you see? I couldn’t save you. And I had to leave in order to save myself, in order to heal.” He nodded, and she thought perhaps he did see. “If I had thought my staying at Whitfield would have helped lift you out of your despair and anger, I would have stayed.” Her voice quieted as she mourned the loss of things once hoped for.

They sat in the quiet for a time, and Sarah pondered the situation in which they found themselves. “I do not expect you to love me.” The words felt like barbs that injured her as she spoke them. She did not even know if they were true. “I just cannot endure the hurt anymore.”

James’s eyes seemed vacant, as if his sight had retreated into difficult

memories. And still Sarah was not sure why he had come. Perhaps out of duty or to save the reputation of his family.

“Sarah.” She looked up at the sound of her name. “I don’t want to hurt you anymore.” His sincerity seemed genuine, and she wanted to believe him. “My mother explained something to me recently.”

“You’ve been listening to your mother now?” She half smiled, hoping to ease the tension just a little.

“Yes, and she helped me see that the only way to rebuild something that has been broken is to start again with the foundation.” His countenance seemed to lift just a fraction.

Now Sarah was confused. “The foundation?”

“Our foundation.” James paused. “I thought perhaps we could spend some time together, to become reacquainted.” The vulnerability in his eyes returned. Sarah did not think she had ever seen him like this. “It has been so long,” he added.

Her first instinct was to jump in and save him from the awkwardness, but she stayed quiet. She wanted him to express what he truly felt.

“I cannot promise I will be who I used to be.” His hands clenched together and shifted their positions, revealing his discomfort. “But perhaps we may get to know each other as we are now. Me as me and you as you.” He looked up at her. Even though his attempt was feeble, it was nice to see him trying. “Perhaps we might even become friends.”

Sarah’s stomach sank. So theirs was to be a marriage of convenience now. Sorrow from deep down in her chest surfaced. She must still have been harboring the smallest hope of a renewal. But she reminded herself that this was far better than what the alternative had been.

“Would you allow me to call upon you again?” James asked, sounding boyish and timid in his request.

“Yes.” It was the only response she could think of.

His lips curled into an actual smile. The first smile she had seen from him in such a long time. She reminded herself this was no time to let down her guard, but she did want to spend more time with him. Besides, he was not asking her to come home with him; this was a far cry from reconciliation. But he was treating her with kindness and respect. She could not help but enjoy talking with him in this way.

When James left, Sarah sat on the sofa considering what had just occurred.

She recounted all she had learned in the few hours that had passed and felt lighter for having had the opportunity to express her feelings about what she had been through. And part of her even felt giddy that he wanted to spend more time with her.

As the day went on, she spent most of it trying to still her churning emotions. She reminded herself that months of heartache could not be erased in a matter of hours and that, anyway, nothing much had changed.

She wanted to seek Margot's advice on the matter but concluded that neither Margot nor she had enough information to guess at how this was going to turn out. She did not even know yet whether James really meant to change. Perhaps he had ridden to London on a fancy, feeling lonely and desperate, and would only return to his brooding ways. She determined to proceed with caution and give herself time. It was the only way she could move forward, the only way she could hope to trust him again.

The next morning at breakfast Lord Ramsey announced that he'd had a letter from James. "It was most interesting," he relayed with his usual cheerfulness. "Lord Whitfield, *your husband*," he reminded Sarah, amused by the whole situation, "wrote to me asking if he could call upon you tomorrow." He was grinning from ear to ear. "And since I am your protector, or should I say guardian, it is my duty to either grant my permission or not." Lord Ramsey seemed most pleased he had a part to play in this.

Sarah shook her head, a touch embarrassed, and looked over at Margot, who was hiding behind her teacup, trying not to smile.

"Pray tell, Lady Whitfield, what should my answer be?" Lord Ramsey raised his brow, waiting for her answer.

Sarah sighed at his teasing tone. "Yes, he may call upon me." She buttered a slice of bread.

"You speak as if it were obvious, when only yesterday you scolded me for allowing him to visit." Lord Ramsey was enjoying this far too much, yet he did have a point. The situation was odd indeed, and he and his wife had not been apprised of all she had learned during yesterday's meeting. She could not fault them for finding amusement in some of it. "I think I will invite him to join us for dinner this evening," the earl proclaimed. "As your guardian, it is my duty to assess all prospective suitors."

He did not quite understand. James was not her suitor. She could not really determine what he was. He was her husband, who was asking to be her

friend. “Jest if you must, Your Lordship.” Sarah said wryly. “But I do like your idea. James should earn his place among us.”

CHAPTER 14

THOUGH QUITE A DISTANCE, THE London air was mild enough that James felt an urge to walk to Ramsey House. Since receiving Lord and Lady Ramsey's invitation to dinner, he'd been full of nerves and needed the time and exertion of a walk to dispel them. He was encouraged by the progress he had made with Sarah yesterday. They were talking again. And he had done the thing he'd thought he could never do. He had shared some of his burdens with her. But doubt continued to dismantle his confidence. He still did not trust his feelings. He had had some good days as of late, but most days he still felt bogged down by worry and regret.

Though, something interesting had happened yesterday while he was talking to Sarah. The familiar feeling of isolation and loneliness he usually felt had dissipated, just for a moment, like clouds parting in a stormy sky. A tiny sliver of light had broken through, and they had shared a moment of understanding, a connection.

This past month had taught him what it felt like to live without her, and he knew he did not want to live like that. But even as the thought came to him, uncertainty gripped his heart. He wanted to be near her, yet he did not know if he was capable of something more, of loving her. *Ridiculous*. He couldn't act like their old barn cat who came slinking around for attention sometimes and then retreat back into his solitude. What of her feelings?

A soft drizzle began to fall from the sky, and the cool droplets of water prickled the skin on his face. Hoping not to be caught in a downpour, he picked up his feet and ran the rest of the length to Ramsey House. He stopped a block short of his destination to catch his breath and collect himself. And although the rain was coming down in sheets now, the running had quelled some of his anxiety, and he felt a bit more settled.

He stepped into the alcove on the front step, bent forward, and shook his hair like a wet dog. He was drenched, but there was nothing for it. He rang the bell and was promptly greeted by the butler. As he entered the pristine home, he felt sloppy in his wet clothes, but before he could think of a solution, Lord Ramsey sauntered into the room, the absolute picture of refinement. The man's elaborately tied cravat was tucked into a silver waistcoat worn under a dark-green velvet jacket. He carried himself with poise and grace. The only thing that gave him a human touch was the smirk

on his face as he surveyed James dripping on the doormat.

Before James could utter a word, Lord Ramsey instructed his butler to take James's coat and retrieve a towel. "You are wet through, my good man." Lord Ramsey reeled back in feigned horror at the sight of him. "Can I offer you some dry clothes?" James shed his coat and handed it to the butler.

"Thank you, Lord Ramsey, but I think my outercoat shielded me from most of the drenching. A moment or two by the fire and I should be set to rights." James used the towel to dry his face and then wipe his boots.

"The ladies are not yet down. Come into the parlor, where we may await their arrival comfortably." Lord Ramsey led James upstairs to an elegant drawing room with a glowing fire.

"Have a seat near the hearth." Lord Ramsey extended his arm to the leather armchairs framing the hearth, and James took a seat.

The heat of the blaze in front of him warmed his arms and feet, and his trousers began to feel a little less soaked. He untied his cravat, hoping Lord Ramsey was not thoroughly appalled by his behavior. "Would you mind if I set my neckcloth near the fire? I'm afraid it is wet through."

"Not at all. I am sure my valet could bring you a fresh one, if you prefer?" He seemed sincere, but James felt utterly embarrassed to borrow Lord Ramsey's clothing and politely declined.

As intimidating as the man appeared, however, James found conversation with him to be relatively painless. Back at Whitfield Manor, even amid the tension and awkwardness, he and Lord Ramsey had found a natural rapport. He was somewhat surprised Lord Ramsey was neither vain nor snobbish, as one might expect from a man of his wealth and station. And although playful much of the time, the man seemed quite sincere.

"If I had known I would be caught in such a downpour, I would never have thought to walk here this evening," James confessed.

"London weather." Lord Ramsey sighed. "The only thing worse than the rain here is the soot. I simply cannot wear anything cheery in this drab city."

James nodded. He knew Lord Ramsey jested, but he quite agreed.

"And how are you enjoying your stay here, Lord Whitfield?" Again with the smirk.

"If I am honest, I much prefer the country, but a particular lady has drawn me here, you see." James dipped his chin, his gaze still fixed on the earl. "I think I have you to thank for helping me gain entry to your home yesterday."

He nodded in gratitude. "I might not have been admitted otherwise."

Lord Ramsey pursed his lips and raised his brow. "Lady Ramsey and I nearly lost our heads for that tiny error in judgment, but I am glad it all came to rights."

"All is not right yet. I have much to atone for." James shifted in his seat. "I am fortunate Lady Whitfield has chosen to be tolerant and give me an opportunity to try to make amends."

"I have found one need not be perfect in marriage; one need only have the courage to try." After behaving so badly, James appreciated the earl's kindness, but for a moment, Lord Ramsey's vibrant expression sharpened. "I do want to express how precious Lady Whitfield is to us. Lady Ramsey and I will do whatever we must to see her happy."

"I understand," James answered as he held Lord Ramsey's gaze. The earl did not have to remind him what was at stake. James had no wish to cause Sarah further pain. He was determined to treat her with the utmost care.

Just as rapidly as it had turned, Lord Ramsey's seriousness melted away to his previous humor. He leaned over and peered at the doorway. "It is not evident, however, if we shall see this lady you speak of or her stunning companion. I cannot imagine what is keeping them." He looked back at James and arched his eyebrow. "The struggle I have had trying to keep a schedule with two ladies in the house." He opened his hands to the sky in hopeless resignation.

"Perhaps while we wait, Lord Ramsey, you may relay the tale of how you and Lady Ramsey came to be acquainted." Since meeting the earl and countess, James had been curious about the nature of their connection, given Lady Ramsey's foreign birth, but he had not had a chance to ask Sarah before her abrupt departure to London.

"Well, that is quite a story, and one I would be delighted to tell, but as I see the ladies coming down the stairs, we might have to wait until dinner."

Both men stood and bowed to the ladies as they entered the room.

Sarah was stunning in the soft firelight, and James's heart raced at the sight of her. He walked up to Sarah, lifted her gloved hand, and laid a soft kiss upon it. "Good evening, Lady Whitfield." He worked to steady his voice, hoping it did not betray him and reveal the upheaval ensuing in his chest.

A flash of surprise crossed her face before she recovered herself. "Lord Whitfield." Her voice was tender and quiet as she dipped into a petite curtsy.

“Bonsoir.” Lady Ramsey curtsied as well. “I am sorry for the delay. I had some trouble with my gown this evening, and it took my maid and Lady Whitfield to help me remedy the situation.”

The men looked at each other with raised eyebrows, not daring to ask the particulars of such a dilemma.

“Well, my pearl, you are here with us now, and whatever the trouble, it seems to be remedied indeed, for you look ravishing.” Lord Ramsey smiled and offered his arm to his wife. “Shall we venture into the dining room?”

He led the discussion throughout dinner, peppering James with questions about his naval service, his upbringing, and his family. James worked to keep his answers light, not wanting to delve into memories that would haunt him later.

Toward the end of the meal, as a scoop of sorbet in a crystal dish was laid before them, James inquired once more how Lord and Lady Ramsey came to meet. The countess glanced nervously at her husband, then at Sarah, then back at Lord Ramsey, and James wondered why his question had made her uneasy.

“My pearl, it has been almost two decades. I daresay there is little need for worry at present. Besides, I gather Lord Whitfield, a former captain in His Majesty’s navy, having fought the French himself, is *not* their informant.” He gave James a brisk nod. The earl seemed as at ease as his wife was concerned.

“Informant for the French? Surely not.” James half smiled, thinking the earl jested, until he realized no one else in the room was the least bit amused. Lady Ramsey and Sarah stiffened in their seats. Now James’s curiosity was piqued. What could Lord Ramsey be speaking of?

“I apologize, Lord Whitfield. For several years the origin of our connection has been a sensitive topic we don’t often share with others.” Lord Ramsey dabbed the corners of his mouth and placed his napkin over his dish of half-eaten sorbet. “There are few who have heard the whole of our story, but I feel confident inviting you to join our circle of trust.” His expression turned serious as he eyed James. “Sir, can your discretion be relied upon in this matter?”

James was surprised at the turn the conversation had taken. It seemed he was about to receive information of a highly confidential nature, but he understood the importance of discretion. He had lived by it for many years in

the service, and he was honored Lord Ramsey felt he could confide in him. “Of course, Lord Ramsey.”

“Good. Now, where to begin?” The earl paused. “When I attended Oxford as a young man, a group of us became quite close friends, like brothers.” James understood, thinking of Patrick. “After some years, we even assembled ourselves into a secret society of sorts. We called ourselves the League of Noble Brothers. We had high hopes of confronting the injustices of the world and making a difference for the betterment of mankind. At first, we were just academics—passionate young men who read, studied, and debated the issues of the day. But as we matured, our passions turned to principles, and it was then that our mission and purpose began to take shape.”

James leaned forward, curious as to how this context would lead to the earl meeting his wife.

Lord Ramsey continued. “Most of us were titled, and by the time we graduated, we began learning our responsibilities in Parliament. It was a precarious time, as just across the water France was engaged in a full-fledged revolution that had virtuous beginnings but was starting to descend into a chaotic bloodbath.”

James glanced at the countess and saw in her eyes that the memory of that time still upset her.

“After Louis XVI and his queen were executed at the guillotine, fear and panic began spreading through France. Nobles were rounded up and executed for any number of erroneous accusations.” The tone at the dining table was somber as they were all reminded of the terrors and bloodshed of that time. “One of our noble brothers had a cousin in France, a *compt* with a wife and young son. They planned on traveling to England to stay with his family until things settled down in France. Their plans must have raised suspicion, for they were detained and accused of treason.” Lord Ramsey shifted in his chair, crossing his legs. “With the borders of Paris closed, nobles were not allowed to leave the city. The news of the treatment of these people outraged our noble brothers, and we began devising a plan to rescue our friend’s cousin and his family. One among us had a small vessel we used to cross the Channel, our objective being to enter the city disguised as fishermen bringing in a catch from the coast.”

James considered Chappelle and his similar disguise.

“It was most effective. The guards did not detect anything untoward from

our party, and we entered the city without delay. I imagine they never suspected gentlemen of noble birth would ever dress in rags and transport smelly dead fish as a disguise.” Lord Ramsey half smiled. “We thought ourselves indestructible, but looking back, I realize our youthful exuberance was quite dangerous. Still, our rescue mission proved successful. The thrill of that first rescue was exhilarating, and the prospect of saving more lives propelled us to carry out several more rescues that year. In total, in a matter of nine months, we helped rescue over fifty noblemen, women, and children from *Madame la Guillotine*.”

James could hardly believe what he was hearing. He was awestruck. As a soldier, he had not saved anywhere close to that many lives. In fact, the soldiers in battles he’d fought had killed far more men than they had ever saved. In his willful ignorance James had thought himself a better man than most for having fought in the war. This Lord Ramsey, whom he had initially thought to be a privileged gent of polite society was a hero. He lowered his head and rubbed his temples, feeling foolish and humbled once more at how wrong he had been in his assessments.

Lord Ramsey carried on. “As young Society bachelors, we developed a reputation at home for behaving like foolish, indulgent fops who cared little for anything of substance, preferring the fashions of the day and our next social engagement. As rumors surfaced of these daring rescues, it served us well to perpetuate our reputations and convince the *ton* we were incapable of such heroics.”

James had heard tell in his youth of this League of Noble Brothers, but he had been just a boy. It seemed more like a myth to him than the truth. He glanced at Sarah, and it was clear by her expression that she had heard the story before. *Of course*. Lord and Lady Ramsey were her family. They had been there for her all the years he had left her alone. Sarah’s words last evening, about having friends and loved ones to help her heal, pierced James with the shame of his neglect. He was grateful to Lord and Lady Ramsey for providing the care she had so desperately needed.

He thought back to his first year away. Sarah had been a devoted wife from the beginning, writing him often. And he had clung to her letters and looked forward to the briefest of shore leaves. As the months went on, his homesickness had subsided and been replaced with focus and ambition. He’d no longer needed the comfort of home and had written less and less. His

shore leaves had most often been filled with the business of ship and crew. He had not even considered *her* loneliness. He had presumed her to be safe at home, comfortable and content, with not a care in the world.

Lady Ramsey spoke, interrupting James's thoughts. "Shall we move into the drawing room, where we may be more comfortable while you finish this thrilling tale, *mon amour*?"

"Certainly, my pearl. Forgive me. I was quite taken up in the glory of my youth." Lord Ramsey flashed a quick smile at his wife. James understood how the earl and his brothers had concealed their antics from Society in both England and France. Lord Ramsey played his part well.

James offered his arm to Sarah when they stood from the dining table.

"It is quite a story," Sarah remarked as they entered the drawing room. She smiled at James, and the light in her eyes reflected the kindness he saw there. Even after she'd endured so much of his blindness and stupidity, she was still here, extending him grace. She had not withheld her generous spirit from him.

Once they were all situated and the footman had poured their drinks, Lord Ramsey continued his account. "Now we come to the pinnacle of the story, where Mademoiselle Margot Laurent enters the picture." Lord Ramsey reached over and took hold of Lady Ramsey's hand. Adoration for his wife emanated from him every time he looked at her. James thought all men should look to him as an example of how one should treat his wife.

"On a cold February night, our league was set to rendezvous with the Marquis de Castelnau, his wife, and their three daughters. The wealth, power, and stability of the Laurent family was formidable, and the Committee of Public Safety had devised a lie to cast suspicion on them. Ultimately, Lord Castelnau was accused of treason, thought to be working with the King of Prussia to form a counter-revolutionary alliance against France."

"*Incroyable.*" Lady Ramsey scoffed at the accusation, shaking her head in disbelief.

Lord Ramsey took a sip of port and continued. "We knew disguising and smuggling a family of five with four women out of the city would be a challenge, so we decided on disguises that were quite the opposite of how the public was accustomed to seeing them.

"We procured two large wagons fit for transporting farm animals. One we filled with goats and chickens and the other with manure. The smell was

repugnant, I can assure you.” Lord Ramsey cast his eyes over to Lady Ramsey. The countess placed her finger underneath her nostrils, as if the stench were still present.

“We dressed ourselves in the rags of peasants, covering ourselves in mud and filth, and then met the family to help them complete their disguise as well.” Lord Ramsey continued. “As I was introduced to Lord Castelnau’s eldest daughter, Margot”—Lord Ramsey leaned his head to his wife—“I encountered a pair of the most piercing, beautiful brown eyes peering at me from under a hooded cloak. The smudges of mud on her face and her shabby costume did nothing in the least to diminish her beauty. I just stood there, mesmerized by this creature. And that was it. My heart was lost, never to recover again.” He squeezed Lady Ramsey’s hand. “It took my comrades tossing an apple at my head to break the trance I was under.”

Sarah and Lady Ramsey laughed in unison at the image the earl portrayed, but James remained quiet. As Lord Ramsey described the captivation of seeing his beloved for the first time, he was reminded of when he had first encountered Sarah. He had not thought of it in years, but the rush of feeling was no less powerful in his memory. Perhaps when he returned home this evening, he would write down some of his memories from those first weeks after he’d met Sarah. Perhaps it would reconnect him to the person he was then.

He looked up at the countess. “And did you feel the same in that moment, Lady Ramsey?”

“I hardly knew what to think,” she explained. “All I knew was this handsome man and his brave comrades were there to rescue my family. It felt like they were not of this earth, angels sent from heaven to save us from the devil himself. They offered us the first glimmer of hope we’d felt after weeks of paralyzing fear.” She looked between James and Sarah. “You cannot imagine the terror we felt at this time. Close friends and associates of our family were murdered, brutally beheaded in the public square. It was horrifying.” Lady Ramsey dipped her head and took a moment to breathe. “We felt sure it was to be our fate also.”

The room fell quiet, allowing James to ponder his own experience. War and violence were like a disease that robbed people of their humanity. He had seen it again and again. He wondered if those who had stood in the square, watching those beheadings, had felt any kind of compassion for the accused

or if it had all been bloodlust.

“We hid the marquis and his wife in a secret compartment under the manure wagon, and their daughters, including Margot, crouched under hay in the wagon full of animals. Not once did anyone from this highborn family complain of the discomfort they were asked to endure. They were simply grateful for the risk we were taking and expressed it often.”

“My family was so very blessed; there was nothing to complain about,” Lady Ramsey said.

“Our caravan was a sight to behold, and the smell preceded us for a mile.” Lord Ramsey chuckled. “The guards at the gate were so offended by the appearance and aroma of our band of peasants, they barely investigated the wagons.”

“Those minutes at the gate, hiding in that wagon, were petrifying,” Lady Ramsey said. “I did not even hear the goats bleating. The only sound I heard was the feverish pounding of my own heart. I thought it would burst from my chest at any moment.” She shook her head as if to shake the unnerving thought from her mind.

“How did you remain undetected as Englishmen?” James inquired.

“My French accent is very good.” Lord Ramsey smiled. “Once we were well out of the city and no one appeared to be following us, we concealed the wagons in a dense patch of woods and stopped to give the family some respite and wait for cover of night before traveling to the coast. We freed Lord and Lady Castelnau from their confining compartment and gave the goats some oats. I was sure to be the one to assist the eldest daughter from her wagon that I may catch another glimpse of those brown eyes and have an excuse to be near her, even if she did smell like a goat.” He smiled devilishly as his wife gasped at his remark.

“You are wicked, Nicolas.” A smile escaped her mortification. “And what about her two younger sisters?” She narrowed her eyes at her husband.

“Oh yes, they smelled like goats as well,” Lord Ramsey agreed.

All laughed except James, who was still taken up in the details of the story. “Did you make it to England without incident?”

“Yes, we escaped with relative ease. Of course, that was not the case with every mission we endeavored to carry out.” He lowered his chin and furrowed his brow, accentuating his meaning. “But those stories must be kept for another time.”

“What happened then, Lady Ramsey?” James asked. “Where did your family go? What did they do here in England?”

She smiled at his concern and gestured to her husband. “Lord Ramsey was kind enough to allow us to stay at his family estate in the country for some weeks. It felt safer than London or some other populated city. Being French during the war, we felt so conspicuous in England. From there my father secured property in Scotland and my family moved north, where they still reside today. By the time they moved, however, I was engaged to a dashing young earl.”

Lord Ramsey’s voice grew tender as he looked at his wife. “I found my most precious treasure, my pearl, in an unexpected place.”

“He plucked me out of the dark abyss.” Lady Ramsey took her husband’s hand. “My sister Natalia is the only one of our family who has returned to France.” Lady Ramsey sighed. “When we first came to England, she continued correspondence with her childhood beau, Monsieur Lucas de Vitré. After a year he traveled to England to marry her. They have since returned to his family home in Saint-Cloud, in the suburbs of Paris. Fortunately, his father was able to retain their land and holdings.” She placed her hand on her chest. “It was so brave of her to return to France after what we endured.”

“It is brave of any woman to leave all she knows behind and join with her husband’s family,” James said, casting his gaze on Sarah, who met it. “Especially when he leaves her there alone for many years. That is devotion.” He stayed fixed on Sarah so she understood him.

“I don’t think we are speaking of your family any longer,” Lord Ramsey whispered to his wife.

Lady Ramsey smiled at James and Sarah, whose cheeks were now colored by James’s compliment. “That is why Sarah is such a gift to me. Her heart is true.” She glanced over at Sarah, her eyes moist with emotion, and then to James, who nodded in agreement.

He looked at the clock then, noticing the hour was late. “Before I say good night for the evening, may I ask just one more question?”

“Of course.” Lord Ramsey reclined in his chair. “You have given me the opportunity to speak of nothing but myself this entire evening. How can I object?”

James furrowed his brow. “As Napoleon is now in power, do you still feel it unsafe to return to France?”

Lord Ramsey sat forward in his chair. “Napoleon is more conqueror than revolutionary. I am not as concerned with losing my head just now as I am with my wife’s comfort. We have been considering the idea of returning as of late.”

“But I am still very hesitant to visit my home country. There might still be danger there, especially for my husband.” Concern returned to Lady Ramsey’s expression. “Nicolas made fools of many in France. There may still be those seeking revenge, even after these many years.” She looked at her husband. “Lord Ramsey feels there is little chance of his past identity being revealed, so as he said, we are considering returning. I am most desperate to see my sister.”

“I see,” James replied. He looked over at Sarah and returned his attention to Lord and Lady Ramsey. “I have most definitely overstayed my welcome.”

“Nonsense,” Lord Ramsey replied. “It has been our pleasure.”

But James stood to leave. “Lord Ramsey, would it be appropriate if Lady Whitfield escorted me downstairs to the entry hall?” He did not need to ask. She was his wife, but James wanted to show his respect to both Sarah and his host.

Lord Ramsey raised his eyebrows and looked at Sarah, then at his wife. “I do not think there is anything untoward in a quick jaunt down the staircase. Perhaps we shall keep the drawing room door open to remain vigilant chaperones. What do you say, my pearl?”

Lady Ramsey sighed with a smile at her husband’s playfulness.

Sarah stood and took James’s arm as they exited the drawing room. They were alone for the first time all evening, and James suddenly found it difficult to produce conversation, though he did have one question. “If I may ask, how is it that Lord and Lady Ramsey have no children?”

Sarah hesitated. “That is a mystery. Margot desires above all else to have children, but it is a blessing they have not yet been afforded.” She sighed. “Life is not without its disappointments.”

James nodded. He knew she was right, but he was also starting to think blessings and disappointments were weaved together through life, sometimes so tightly, it was difficult to discern the two. For one, he realized that of all the rash blunders and mistakes of his youth, marrying Sarah was not one of them.

“Thank you for inviting me this evening,” he said.

“I didn’t.” She smiled. “Lord Ramsey did.”

“Well, thank you for allowing me to join your party.” He brushed his fingers through his hair. “I have resigned myself to being uncomfortable in order to be more comfortable.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You saw when I returned home I desired only isolation. I avoided the company of others for so long, but it took you leaving for me to realize isolation is not good for me.” James blew out a breath as they stepped out the front door and he faced her on the highest step. “After talking to you yesterday, last night was the first night in months that I didn’t wake from a nightmare.”

A tender smile formed on Sarah’s lips. “I’m glad.” Her gaze fell from his.

James wanted to reach over and lift her chin with his finger so he could see into her eyes again, but he dared not. “Sarah?” he called out to her in a whisper. When she looked up at him, he saw her fragile heart reflected in her eyes. “It pains me to think of how much I’ve hurt you.”

As he stepped closer to her, her breath caught. His thoughts were hazy, but his only instinct was to be near her. His heart fluttered as he considered grazing her cheek with his finger. She stepped even closer and lifted her hand to touch his face. The sensation turned his heartbeat from a flutter to a pounding hammer. In an instant, he felt cold all over. He stepped away and her hand dropped from his face.

“James?”

He stepped backward down the steps. “Thank you for dinner,” he sputtered, then turned to go.

He heard the faint echo of Sarah’s voice as he paced away into the dark night. “You’re welcome.”

CHAPTER 15

BEFORE SARAH OPENED HER EYES the next morning, she felt sunlight streaming in through the window, warming her pillow. The material felt soft and cozy against her cheek. In those first seconds of consciousness, however, she recalled the last moment she had spent with James on the front steps of Ramsey House. He had stepped toward her with the kind of intensity that had caused her stomach to flip. She had thought, for a moment, that perhaps he desired to kiss her, and she had boldly stepped forward and placed her hand on his cheek. Why had she done that? She had scared him off. She had stood on the steps and watched him all but run away from her. He had warned her. He had told her he just wanted to be her friend. *Friend*. A term she had always treasured, but where James was concerned, it held very little appeal. She pulled her covers over her head and let out a sigh.

Eve knocked at the door before entering with a breakfast tray. Sarah sat up and was surprised to find a note propped up on the teapot. It was artfully folded into the shape of a small sailboat. She smiled as she unfolded the edges of the paper, knowing it was from James.

My Lady,

I am sorry to have left so abruptly last night. If I may, I would like to make amends by inviting you for a stroll in the park at four o'clock.

—J

P.S. I have invited Lord and Lady Ramsey to accompany us on our outing.

Sarah could not make sense of any of James's behavior. Last night she had felt he was trying, but she also knew he was still hurting. When he'd stepped away from her on the steps, she had seen an unguarded strain in his eyes and had half-expected him to run all the way back to Whitfield Manor. And now here he was, inviting her on an outing in the park. She imagined how early he must have risen to ensure she received his note this morning. These did not seem like the actions of someone who wanted to run away.

When she made her way downstairs for their outing just before three o'clock, she found Margot in the drawing room, working to unpick a missed stitch in her embroidery. Margot looked up when Sarah sat down on the sofa, her expression brightening. "You look lovely, my dear. That blue gown is just perfect for an afternoon stroll in the park."

“Thank you.” Sarah smoothed the front of her dress.

“I have no talent for embroidery.” Margot sighed, setting down her fabric.

“I have no patience for embroidery.” Sarah smiled at her friend.

She glanced at the clock on the mantel. It was still an hour before James was set to arrive. *Patience is a virtue*, she reminded herself as she tried to curb her anticipation by picking up a book. After reading the same few lines over again, she gave up. She set the book down and watched the clock tick closer to four, becoming rather fidgety in the process. She reminded herself to breathe long and slow, in and out.

She had nearly unraveled the lace on her sleeve hem when she at last heard James’s voice in the entryway as he greeted the butler. When he entered the drawing room, she stood and curtsied, all the while cataloging the details of his face, posture, and expression. He seemed relaxed and in amiable spirits today.

Lord Ramsey walked up to their visitor and shook his hand enthusiastically. He and James had seemed to become fast friends last evening.

James bowed to the countess and then to Sarah, looking into her eyes. “My lady, may I sit with you?” he asked. The rich tone of his voice tickled the hair on the back of her neck, causing it to stand on end.

Sarah tried to maintain her composure as he sat next to her on the sofa, but her heart betrayed her as her breathing sped. He looked far too handsome today. She averted her eyes, reminded herself that her handsome husband was to be her friend. *That word*. “Thank you for the note this morning,” she managed. “I think you must have risen quite early to pen that letter.” She looked back up at him to discover him watching her.

“I wanted to apologize for last evening.”

“You need not apologize.”

“I . . .” He fell quiet, and Sarah waited for him to finish his sentence. Even if their arrangement was merely an amicable one, she wanted to understand his feelings.

She looked over to see Lord and Lady Ramsey watching them, smiling. She had forgotten she and James were not alone. She felt warmth in her cheeks as she imagined how awkward they must appear to the earl and countess. Husband and wife, feebly attempting to have a conversation.

Before she could speak, Lord Ramsey chimed in. “Shall we take the

carriage to the park or walk the half mile?” Before anyone could answer, he kept on. “Of course, the weather is fine today, but I would hate for the ladies to be trapped in a sudden burst of rain.” He eyed James. “This fellow can relate.”

“I am not afraid of a little rain.” Sarah perked up to the edge of the sofa. She preferred the opportunity to walk with James rather than sit in a carriage under the watchful gaze of their so-called chaperones.

“Neither am I,” Lady Ramsey said.

“Well then, it is decided. We are going on an adventure,” Lord Ramsey announced. “My lord, we must be brave. If the ladies have no fear, we must also have courage.” The earl clipped a curt nod at James and offered his arm to his wife. “Let us away!”

James followed Lord Ramsey’s lead and offered his arm to Sarah.

When they stepped outside, the clear sky and afternoon breeze delighted Sarah’s senses. Although they had endured quite a wet summer season, the moisture seemed to have left the air fresher and clearer. She drew in a few deep breaths, savoring the crispness.

“It is a perfect day for a walk,” James observed.

“I agree.” James seemed more at ease today than he had when he left her last evening. “It is good to see you smile.”

As they strolled along Sussex Place toward the park, Sarah was glad she wore sturdy shoes, rather than a scant pair of slippers, as she traversed the uneven paving stones on the street. She held to James’s arm for steady support and listened to the cadence of their footsteps. She wondered about the man beside her, contemplating his regret and worry about Patrick that surely still plagued him. But James had slept with no further nightmares since he’d at last confided in her. Did he suffer from such horrors every night? She felt perhaps it would benefit him to keep talking to her. She had questions but hesitated to broach difficult topics. She did not want to spoil the peace of their lovely walk. In the end, she decided it was better to try than to let the words go unspoken.

“James?”

“Yes, my lady?” he replied. He seemed relaxed as he looked out into the street.

“I was just curious . . .” She paused to gather the courage to ask her question.

“Yes?”

“I was just wondering if you’ve made further inquiries of Patrick.” She waited for his response, fearing that the mere mention of Patrick might discompose James and send him running back to Ramsey House.

“I have made inquiries here in London, but there are no leads yet.” He paused. “In my heart, I feel that he is alive.” He glanced at the sky and seemed to be contemplating his next words. “But there is a chance I won’t ever learn of his fate. It’s the not knowing that haunts me.”

“I understand.” Her heart hurt for him. “I will continue to hope you learn of his whereabouts. But, more than that, I hope you find him.”

“Hope. Such a tricky notion.” James’s arm stiffened under her hand. “I have found it can be painful to hope.”

“It can,” she agreed. “But I think the alternative is worse.”

He nodded. Perhaps not in agreement, Sarah thought, but more in reflection.

They walked for a time, not speaking. She observed the people in the streets, going this way and that. Thoughts and images of the past still clung to her memory. She recalled the loneliness she’d felt after losing her parents and the solitude of living without James for so long, only to have her hopes dashed upon his return. It was difficult to hope in such circumstances. But in her heart of hearts, she knew the only way to fully protect herself was by not caring at all, and that was an impossibility. If James found it difficult to hope right now, she would hope for them both.

Upon their approach to Hyde Park, carriages lined up at the entrance formed a continuous procession, barely moving along the circular roadway. She was glad their party was on foot. As they passed each equipage, many painted in bright colors and elaborately adorned, she thought they looked like parading peacocks, splaying their feathers for all to see. The earl and countess had finer carriages than anyone here, yet they did not give a fig if they were seen on foot today.

They moved to the grass. “Apparently, the park is the place to be today,” Lord Ramsey observed, his wry humor ever the undercurrent. “We may see any number of the *ton*’s elite.” He feigned excitement, but Society was but a game to him, a trifle, and in his true nature, he cared little for such things.

“I am glad to have worn my best walking shoes.” Lady Ramsey winked at her husband, playing along.

“You are the picture of fashion, my pearl.” Lord Ramsey chuckled.

Lady Ramsey was, in fact, the picture of fashion, but she seemed to achieve it effortlessly without fussing too much about any of it.

Sarah inspected those on the footpath, an endless sea of top hats and bonnets and couples walking arm in arm before she caught sight of some familiar faces. Walking toward her party from the opposite direction were Mr. Wilkes, his two daughters, and Lord Calcourt. Sarah froze and leaned down, pretending to fix her shoe, quite caught off guard by their sudden appearance. James stopped to offer her his assistance.

Sarah fiddled with her laces, unsure of what to do. The last time James had encountered Lord Calcourt was that dreadful last night of the house party. When she straightened, she was glad to see Amelia Wilkes on Lord Calcourt’s arm and felt somewhat vindicated that James would finally see proof of what she had suspected all along.

When Mr. Wilkes spotted them, he waved his top hat. He was quite a sight, his compressed, plump frame nearly leaping off the ground to get their attention, and Sarah could not help but smile.

As the members of the Whitfield house party converged on one another, they were a merry crowd indeed. Lord and Lady Ramsey greeted their friends with excitement as Sarah and James remained on the periphery. Sarah hesitated to approach her friends, but all at once, keeping her arm in his, James walked right up to Lord Calcourt. Sarah’s heart hammered until he extended a hand to the man in front of him.

“Lord Calcourt, I am most anxious to take this opportunity to apologize for my behavior when last we met. I fear I was uncouth and ungentlemanly.” James kept Lord Calcourt’s hand in his grasp, and Lord Calcourt, quite taken aback at first by James’s approach, relaxed into an affable grin.

Sarah smiled in relief, both surprised and pleased at James’s humble apology. As the men conversed, she left the crook of James’s arm and stepped over to Amelia to embrace her friend.

Bonnets overlapping, Sarah whispered into Amelia’s ear. “I am most pleased to see you on the arm of this fine gentleman.” She tilted her head in the pointed direction of Lord Calcourt. Amelia glowed, her expression conveying more to Sarah than words ever could.

James and Lord Calcourt talked for a moment and then joined Lord Ramsey and Mr. Wilkes, who regaled them with a tale about a broken

carriage wheel he and his daughters had suffered on their way to a ball last evening.

Keeping Amelia's hands clasped in hers, Sarah turned to Catherine, who was far more likely to share news of the burgeoning union between Amelia and Lord Calcourt. "Has there been an announcement?"

"Not yet!" Catherine squealed.

"Shh, Catherine Wilkes!" Amelia chastised her sister, her face a bright pink as she looked around to see if anyone heard. "We are good friends," Amelia corrected.

"Amelia's *good friend* has invited us to his home for Christmas to meet his children." Catherine widened her eyes at Sarah, and Amelia's blush deepened to red.

"What happy news." Sarah grinned at Amelia's good fortune.

"I am guessing he will propose to her after Amelia wins over his daughters, which she is sure to do," Catherine declared.

Amelia glared at her sister.

To reassure her, Sarah squeezed Amelia's hand and whispered. "I understand your reserve in jumping to conclusions about Lord Calcourt's intentions. But this is all very good news."

Amelia allowed herself a tiny curl of a smile. She changed the subject. "I am glad to see Lord Whitfield here, and in friendly spirits, it seems."

Sarah offered her own reserved smile. She hoped, for Amelia's sake, that Lord Calcourt wanted more with her than mere friendship. The thought stung. *James is right, she thought. Hope can be painful.*

The weather stayed fine as the afternoon stretched on into a mild evening. The dipping sun bathed them in golden hues as they reached the steps of Ramsey House. Lord and Lady Ramsey promptly said their goodbyes and disappeared inside before Sarah untied her bonnet.

James removed his gloves and fidgeted with his hands. "I have a rather unconventional invitation," he blurted out. "You seem to be a sturdy walker, and tomorrow I would like to show you something."

"What it is?"

"You will find out tomorrow." James half smiled.

"You aren't going to tell me?" Sarah asked.

"It is a surprise."

"Well then, what does one wear for such a surprise?" Sarah prodded

innocently.

“I see what you are doing, my lady, trying to wriggle out my secret.” He hesitated. “Although, that is a fair question.” He pursed his lips to the side. “Wear your walking shoes and dress for the outdoors.” He nodded, satisfied.

Sarah closed the door after James bid her good night, trying to imagine all the places he might take her. She could not guess where, but she delighted in the prospect of another outing with him. It was easy to picture a lifetime of days like these together. And, though she knew it was unsafe, she allowed herself to imagine it as she walked to her bedchamber. Despite herself, her dreams began to come to life again.

CHAPTER 16

SARAH SPENT THE EARLY MORNING feeling equal parts excitement and trepidation for the day's adventure. With little to no detail about James's surprise outing, she attempted to dress for any location or weather. After much deliberation, she decided on a dark-green traveling dress. She instructed Eve to fasten her hair into a bun that would fit nicely under her bonnet so weather and wind could not easily discompose her. She wore her most comfortable walking shoes, riding gloves, and a cloak.

James greeted her in the entryway with a glint of enthusiasm in his eyes. Her slight apprehension turned to anticipation at the mere sight of him, and she felt his smile warm her cheeks.

"Where are we going?" she pleaded with him, realizing she did not like surprises.

"No." He stopped her with a raised hand. "I am sorry, but I fear you will have to wait until we arrive at our destination." He spoke as if he were not in control of the events planned for the day.

"Very well," Sarah conceded as she placed her hand in his and allowed him to assist her into the carriage awaiting them outside. When she entered, she saw the windows were covered. "Is this necessary? We will not see a thing on our drive?" She sat down in the dark, enclosed cab. Sunlight penetrated through the seams of the coverings, offering very little light.

"That is the point." James sat down opposite her.

Though his secrecy was perplexing, his thoughtfully laid-out plans marked something of a sign of affection. She decided to release her feelings of trepidation and enjoy the day, not fussing about things she could not control.

While riding in the carriage, she discovered there was nowhere else for her to look except at James. Their eyes did somewhat of a dance, looking at one another, then down, then side to side, and back. After some moments, their eyes met again, and Sarah could not help but smile. It was a funny little game they were playing. The side of James's mouth lifted into a repressed sort of grin. She noticed, however, that his eyes seemed relaxed, less strained, than in days past. Was it too much to hope that his wounds were healing? His mood was certainly improving.

The carriage ride lasted less than half an hour, and when they came to a halt, James announced, "I think we are here." The glint in his eyes returned.

“Now will you tell me where we are?”

“Not yet, I’m afraid.” He insisted on covering her eyes.

She guessed, by the length of their travel time, that they were still somewhere in London. As soon as the footman opened the carriage door, she smelled dampness, mildew, and perhaps coal in the air, and she was more confused than ever. Once they had carefully maneuvered outside, James still covering her eyes, she heard gulls squawking overhead, the bustling sound of activity, and men’s voices in the distance. James kept her eyes covered as they walked a short length, Sarah proceeding with caution in each step, her hands outstretched so she might touch anything in front of her.

They stopped, and James lifted his hands from her eyes. Sarah squinted in the brightness, and when her eyes adjusted, she gazed in wonder at the massive sight before her.

“What is this?” she asked in amazement, surveying the size and breadth of the massive structure before her. In all her life she had never seen anything like it. Its construction incomplete, it looked like the skeleton of a mammoth sea creature.

“It is a man-of-war,” James answered.

“A ship?” she confirmed.

He nodded, his eyes, too, filled with wonder. “The construction is a marvel, isn’t it? Two thousand oak trees were felled to build this vessel. The majority of the hull, right here, will float underneath the waterline, not to be seen, once she is launched.” James’s expression filled with intensity as he pointed to the large underbelly of the ship. “The planking and framing would suggest she is bluff above the water and sharp below. She will be the fastest of her kind.”

He beckoned Sarah closer to the ship, pointing upward. “Do you see how the planks are fixed edge to edge and fashioned together with those wooden pegs? By the time she is finished she will be two feet thick of solid oak. I doubt there’ll be a cannon at sea that could dent her.”

Sarah hardly knew what he was talking about but was fascinated all the same. As a girl, she had sailed on a merchant ship with her father and mother, but the size of this vessel out of the water . . . this dwarfed any ship she had ever seen.

The guts of the ship were exposed, revealing the many levels and compartments throughout. James followed as she walked along the pier, examining every detail. “I know it appears very large, but when there are

eight hundred men living and working on a ship like this, with food, livestock, supplies, guns, and artillery, every space is utilized and every inch accounted for.” James’s tone shifted, like he had reverted to his post as captain—confident, authoritative. “Up here is the quarterdeck.” He pointed to the top of the ship. “The quartermaster stands at the helm and steers the ship from there. And back here is the stern.” He led her to the back side of the ship. “This is where the captain’s quarters are.”

“Is that where you spent much of your time?” she asked.

“I spent a fair amount of time there and on the quarterdeck, but as captain, I knew and often examined every inch of my ship,” he said proudly.

Sarah was mesmerized by it all. She wanted him to explain every part of the ship and every aspect of life on this vessel.

“The three masts have not yet been erected. The foremast will be here, toward the bow, the mainmast, the largest of the three, will of course be right in the center. The mizzenmast is back here, close to the stern.” He drew long lines in the air above the upper deck, where the masts and the sails would eventually exist. “There is no sight more impressive than when the command to make sail is given and within minutes those massive sails unfurl to harness the mighty power of the wind.”

“How do you manage it?” Sarah could not imagine how such a thing was done.

“Many sailors climb aloft and release the sails from the rigging by hand.” He appeared as if he could see the men obeying orders and climbing the ropes. “Naval life is not for the faint of heart, I can tell you that. I was lucky to have an education, entering the navy as a midshipman and earning the rank of lieutenant shortly thereafter. Having the rank of an officer, I avoided many of the dangerous duties and grunt work that are necessary for any ship to run.” James looked over to her. “But, make no mistake, every sailor on a man-of-war knows the nature of the hard labor that is required.”

Sarah looked past the ship and around the dock, observing the varied and detailed scene before her. She had never been to Greenwich or a work yard before now and was in awe of how many ships were in the yard, some being built while others seemed older and in need of repair. The workmen had already begun the day’s work, hauling and hammering, working pullies with ever so much rope. She marveled at the industry all around them, that such a structure—a vessel that could sail the world round—could be built by men.

“This dock here is called Nelson’s Wharf, named after Admiral Horatio Nelson himself.”

Sarah sensed the pride in James’s tone. “I imagine you became closely acquainted with your shipmates, living in such close quarters,” she said.

“Many were like brothers to me, but once I received my captaincy, mine became a much more solitary existence. A captain whose aim is to be popular among his crew will often lose the respect of the men and the order of his ship. To maintain discipline, I was required to set myself apart. I often ate alone, and I learned to portray strength and leadership at all times.”

Sarah loved hearing James share the details of his life at sea. She began to piece together what his life in the service must have been like. She even understood now a little of why he’d been so closed off and aloof upon his return home. He had been conditioned for so long to show only strength and authority, to have complete control at all times. His life and the very lives of his men had depended on it. She could see why he had hidden his struggles from her and kept her at a safe distance.

“Were you lonely?” she asked.

He looked at his feet and kicked a small scrap of wood across the dock and into the water. “Yes and no,” he answered. “The life of a sea captain is a busy one, and whenever I did have quiet, I welcomed it, but there were very few people I could truly call friends. I rose in rank quicker than most and had few peers and even less I brought with me to the *Phantom*.” He paused. “Patrick was the only one who knew me before the navy, who knew who I was really. We relied on each other. He was my right hand, and I welcomed his counsel and advice.”

They walked farther along the dock, surveying the river. The water below had collected debris and sludge that floated into the stagnant waterways. It was quite dirty and not a setting one might deem preferable for a morning walk, but to Sarah, it was perfect.

“Did you fear for your life during battle?” she asked.

“As a young lieutenant, I did feel nervous prior to a battle. But once the gunfire roared, fear fell away and was replaced with energy and focus. Most sailors do not fear battle or even injury, but there is something they do fear.”

Sarah looked up at him, imagining a great whale or sea monster of some kind.

“Disease,” he confessed. “Far more men died of sickness than injury. We

strove to keep our hammocks dry and our constitutions strong, but . . .” He trailed off before continuing. “I was lucky. I seemed immune to such woes.”

“Whatever kept you safe and well, I am grateful. I often lived in fear of receiving news you had been injured or worse.” She stopped and turned to face him.

James took her hand. “I never considered your worry all those years. I should’ve sent word more often.”

Sarah took in a deep breath along with his tender apology. Sweet relief accompanied his sentiment.

They ambled the full length of the dockyard as James continued answering her questions and sharing stories of his naval adventures. Sarah waited for a break in their conversation to ask something else she had been wondering all morning—an important question. “James, why did you bring me here today?”

He stopped again and turned to her. “I felt it was time to honor your request I have so long denied.” Raw vulnerability appeared in his eyes. “I built many walls, it seems, to protect myself and survive the war.” He breathed out as if confessing his innermost secrets. “And without fully realizing it, I became a very hardened man.”

Sarah felt a lump form in the base of her throat. How long had she yearned to understand this part of his life? She thought perhaps he was not ready to talk about the battles he fought or the men he had lost, but this was a beginning. She waited in the stillness of their conversation, letting this experience sink into her heart and mind. Whether it was through their conversations or a decision he had made or just the time they were spending together, James was changing. She could feel it. Though this was a small change, she welcomed it. Each new memory they made together replaced a portion of the sadness in her heart, and she felt he might be healing too, bit by bit.

“Thank you for bringing me here.” She turned away from him, wiping moisture from her eyes.

He reached out, offering her a handkerchief.

“Thank you,” she said again. “This means a great deal to me.” She patted her cheeks.

“The day is still young. If you are ready, I thought perhaps we might travel to a more”—he assessed the setting around them—“suitable location for a picnic.”

More surprises? “Can I look out the window this time?” she teased.

“Your wish is my command, my lady.”

As they strolled back to the carriage, Sarah considered all she had learned at the shipyard. “It is incredible, the lengths some men go to to fight a war. They conquer; they plunder. It is like they never learned how to play nicely as children.”

“True.” James nodded.

“I think much of it could be avoided with basic human decency,” she concluded.

When James assisted her into the carriage and placed his hand at her waist, Sarah lost her breath. The draw she always felt toward him flooded to an urgent pull whenever he touched her. She did not know how to manage it. Could she really spend this much time in his company without reaching out for his embrace? Without expressing affection?

He retook his seat opposite her, and the carriage lurched forward, and though she had no idea where they were going, she decided she did not care. Now that the windows coverings were down, she could steal a glance at James whenever he looked out the window. She was also pleased to discover he glanced her way a time or two.

“Our next destination is a bit farther than some others we could stop at along the way, but it is well worth the added travel,” he said.

“Dare I ask?” Sarah eyed him as she removed her cloak. The temperature in the coach was warming.

“Please indulge me. This is my last surprise,” he promised.

The carriage turned down a narrow stretch of road that wound through a lane of trees whose golden leaves had all but left them. When they finally stopped, James exited the carriage, and the footman handed him a basket wrapped in a cloth covering. He reached for Sarah’s hand and helped her out of the carriage.

Outside, the aroma was quite the opposite from the one she had encountered at Nelson’s Wharf. She drew in the fragrance of an array of flowers and earthy foliage. The air here was fresh and lovely. The setting was also quite different. She noticed what appeared to be a walled garden with a metal arbor and gate for the entrance. Vines climbing over the wall and along the arbor seemed to be looking for an escape. She stepped closer to the entrance and lifted a bloom to her nose, enjoying its sweet aroma. James

followed with his basket and opened the gate for her.

“Though London has its virtues, I thought a wilderness setting might be nice for a change. I encountered this delightful little spot the other day as I was walking and wanted an excuse to return.” He led her down a narrow stone path, ducking under the low-hanging branches of an elm tree, to the other side of the garden.

“I would never have guessed a garden such as this hid behind these walls. The only thing better than a garden is a secret garden.” Sarah felt like a child discovering a new place; inside the wall were blossoms and foliage everywhere.

“I remember you enjoyed walking out of doors at Whitfield, and I suspect you need a reprieve from the city as much as I do.” James was observant and correct.

Sarah smiled, surprised he had given any thought to her daily activities at Whitfield. She spied a little stone bench underneath a tree with a lovely wide canopy. She sat down, letting her senses delight in the magical setting. The garden had a wild quality to it. Green ivy snaked along the outside walls, almost covering them completely. But she thought there must be a gardener here, for the plants seemed to be thriving and well cared for.

James sat down beside her and opened his basket to reveal a loaf of bread with jam and butter, cold pork, and two green apples. He tore off a piece of bread and buttered it for Sarah. Her stomach grumbled, and she realized she was quite hungry after their long walk on the wharf. The skin on her fingers tingled as she accepted his offering. This tiny piece of buttered bread may well have been a piece of glittering jewelry for how it made her feel.

“There is something about this place,” she said. “It feels like I must have played here as a child.” She surveyed the familiar garden on every side. She could not pinpoint it but decided this place answered all her wishes and dreams for a garden of her own one day.

“Do you like it?” James asked.

She huffed a giggle. “Of course I like it. This is the most beautiful patch of earth in London, I think.” Sarah sighed and took another bite of bread.

“I am glad.”

“I think perhaps I would love to have a garden like this one day, with a gate like that one.” She pointed to the arbor. “With vines winding around it, concealing it from view.”

“I could certainly build you walls like those,” James offered. “I’ve become quite good at repairing stone walls of late, but you might have to plant the flowers.”

Sarah froze where she sat. James’s suggestion felt like a romantic gesture, a tiny glimpse into their future together. But perhaps he was only thinking in practical terms. They were married, after all, and building a garden wall did not necessarily denote love, did it?

“I love flowers,” she said. “To plant a garden someday at Whitfield would be heavenly.” She thought of their home and a patch of meadow just past the east lawn—the perfect spot for her own secret garden.

“Do you miss Whitfield?”

The question took Sarah by surprise. “I do sometimes. But in recent months, Whitfield became such a sad place, I find I am enjoying the time away.”

“I understand.” James cast his gaze to the ground, and Sarah hoped she had not offended him. “I miss a lot of things,” he said, “like riding Jet . . . and I miss Peter.”

Sarah nodded. So much loss.

He shuffled to face her more fully and gazed down at her. “I missed you when you left.”

His hands rested on his knees, and she wished to reach out and rest hers on top, but instead she clasped them together in her lap.

As if he perceived her very thoughts, he said, “Sarah, I am sorry for the other night.” He kept his gaze fixed on the ground. “When you touched me, a rush of emotion flooded into my heart, and it was as if my body did not recognize how to respond. I simply shut down.” He paused. “I wanted . . .”

Sarah wanted him to finish his sentence more than she wanted a heartbeat.

He huffed out a breath of frustration.

Her chest clenched at his silence, and she pulled her arms around herself.

“It has turned chilly. I think it must be time to go.”

The tightness in her chest reached her throat and she could not speak. She nodded and blinked hard several times to halt the formation of any tears. She would not allow herself to spoil an almost perfect day with her unrealistic hopes. She had much to be thankful for and should be contented. She stood and walked toward the garden exit, shaking off her romantic fancies.

CHAPTER 17

THREE DAYS LATER JAMES FOUND himself lying awake in the early-morning hours, daydreaming of Sarah. Images of her eyes, her smile, even the crinkle of her nose when she scowled at him, flooded his hazy, sleep-filled thoughts. It felt like an eternity since last he saw her. Since his arrival in London last week, he had called on her every day until the day before yesterday, when he had received news that she had developed a touch of a fever and a sore throat. He hoped it had not been a result of their daylong adventure to the shipyard and their garden picnic. Oh, how he longed to see her, to be near her again.

His thoughts drifted back to the garden bench. He had wanted to tell her. Tell her he had desired to kiss her. Why could he not express himself in that way? He was afraid, afraid if he let go of the tight grasp he held on his emotions, all his feelings would come flooding out, the horrors along with the passion.

Sarah's voice emerged in his thoughts. *"But the alternative is worse."* Sarah. Even her presence in his thoughts set his mind and heart at ease.

He hoped she would be well enough to accompany him to the dinner party of a former admiral on Friday. He schooled himself—he knew it was selfish to wish her well for his own purposes—and offered a prayer that she would be well again for the sake of her own health.

A knock at the door interrupted his thoughts, and a moment later something slid under the door. Not quite ready to rise for the morning, he sat up and hunched over in bed, rubbing his eyes into focus. He managed to find his slippers, stumble to the door, and scoop the letter off the floor, surprised to receive a missive so early. His curiosity piqued even further when he realized the seal on the parchment was from the Royal Navy. He broke the wax and unfolded the paper.

*Lord Whitfield, formerly Captain Turner,
In light of recent inquiries made to the Admiralty, we have obtained
intelligence pertinent to your questions regarding Lieutenant
Patrick Sloane's arrest and subsequent capture.
The man we knew as Chappelle was found dead on Jersey Island,
washed up on the shore in a small fishing vessel. We believe the man
Lieutenant Sloane met the night of his capture was not Chappelle at
all, but one masquerading as him. Chappelle's supposed betrayal*

was not his own, but that of someone who murdered him and assumed his identity.

We know this information does not account for the whereabouts of Lieutenant Sloane, but it is a vital piece of news nonetheless.

Sincerely,

Admiral Harrison of the British Royal Admiralty

James set the letter on his reading table, stunned by its contents. Chappelle murdered? He could not reconcile such a thing. He had rendezvoused with Chappelle many times before at the fishing château. The silhouette of the man he'd seen that fateful night had looked to be Chappelle. His appearance was unmistakable. But if not Chappelle, who could it have been? A French soldier too far gone in age and constitution to be useful in the military?

James paced across the room to retrieve his trousers. This was the first piece of news related to Patrick he had received in months. But instead of giving him answers, it merely served to assault his mind with a myriad of other questions. How had Chappelle been found out? How had the French known the date and time to rendezvous with James and his men? And who bore such a close resemblance to Chappelle to be able to masquerade as him? This was the most important question. What was the identity of the man standing on the porch that night?

James walked to his writing table and spent most of the morning scribbling correspondence to other captains in his former fleet who patrolled the coast near Spain and France. The man masquerading as Chappelle had been a day's boat ride from France only months ago. If James were to describe the traitor's stature and appearance to all he knew, surely someone would have encountered him. The blackguard must hold some level of rank in Napoleon's forces to be involved in espionage.

Once his letters were written, James found he could not rest until he explored this further. There were no more active British ambassadors to France due to the war, but perhaps some in the House of Lords had previous contacts or relations in France. He sat at his writing table, thinking.

Having been titled only recently, he knew very few members of Parliament. He thought first of Lord Ramsey, who would have friends and associates in France, but then he thought better of asking him. The earl and countess had worked hard to keep their past activities in France confidential. He did not want to ask them for such a thing or go poking around for contacts

in France in the name of Lord Ramsey. Then James remembered a moment back at Whitfield, during dinner one evening. He had fumed with discontent as Sarah mentioned Lord Calcourt's active participation in the House of Lords. Lord Calcourt would surely have the information James desired. He sighed as he shook his head, considering the irony in asking Lord Calcourt for help, but he could not ignore the possibility that Calcourt might be able to point him toward someone with ties to the French military. An ambassador, perhaps, from before the war. James went back to his writing table and penned one more letter.

When he opened the solid wood door to White's gentlemen's club the following afternoon, his eyes worked to adjust to the dim lighting inside. He surveyed the large room, the focal point being a large stone hearth in the center of the opposite wall with groupings of mahogany tables and chairs surrounding it. He saw no windows, and the only light source was the occasional flicker of a candle perched on a wall sconce that further contributed to the dim atmosphere. A low hum came from the various conversations of gentlemen gathered throughout the room in threes and fours, playing cards, drinking, and eating.

James spotted Lord Calcourt sitting near the hearth in a leather armchair. In one hand he held a small drink and in the other a cigar. Most men smoked pipe or tobacco, especially in a gentlemen's club; however, James had never picked up the habit. Smoking was strictly forbidden aboard a ship, given the fire hazard, and the thought of chewing tobacco disgusted him.

He crossed the room, and upon reaching Lord Calcourt, the man stood and they bowed to one another. Lord Calcourt extended his arm to the adjacent chair. "Good afternoon, Lord Whitfield. Won't you sit?"

"Good afternoon, Lord Calcourt." James flipped up his coattails and took a seat on the edge of the chair.

"I must say I was most surprised to receive your message yesterday, but as always, I am happy to meet with a fellow gent for a drink." The man's pleasantness and good nature reminded James just how ungraciously he had behaved toward him in the past.

"I am glad to meet you here also, but I must confess I have motive for extending the invitation." James settled deeper into his chair. "There is a delicate matter I would like to discuss with you." He tried to navigate the facts without disclosing too much detail.

Lord Calcourt perked up in his chair. Though still smiling, he was clearly intrigued.

“Toward the end of my service, some events transpired that were left . . . unresolved.” James assessed Lord Calcourt’s reaction thus far. He seemed attentive but not alarmed. “I am still investigating certain aspects of those events.” James knew he was being vague but hoped Lord Calcourt would understand the sensitive nature of the matter. “I know you to be a highly respected member of Parliament, and I was hoping”—he drew in a breath—“perhaps you might direct me to someone with relations or ties to the French government or military? At this point in time, they seem to be one and the same.”

Lord Calcourt sat back, thinking. He furrowed his brow and took a drag from his cigar, slowly blowing out a puff of smoke. “I certainly need not explain to you the precarious nature of our current relations with France,” he said, arching a brow. He looked up toward the ceiling and pursed his lips, ruminating over the matter.

James’s eye began to twitch. What if Lord Calcourt thought him impertinent for asking for his help? He was about to retract his question and apologize for the bother when Lord Calcourt finally spoke.

“There are a few men I recommend you speak with.” James heaved a breath, relieved as Lord Calcourt continued. “You might start with the Earl of Cornwallis or Lord Clinton, both ambassadors to France before the war. They might be able to help you, I think. Lord Cornwallis lived in France for many years and even stayed through much of the Revolution. Lord Clinton, though much older, might also prove to be a resource, as he has very actively pursued diplomatic relations with France throughout the war, though his efforts have not proved successful.”

James listened and pulled out a small journal and pencil from the breast pocket of his waistcoat to jot down the names as Lord Calcourt gave them.

“As to whether either of them still has connections in France, I cannot tell you, but it is worth the asking.” Lord Calcourt reached for his glass, took a swig of his drink, and reclined back in his chair.

The chances of finding and pursuing any real leads would be slim, but he would do it just the same. Perhaps these gentlemen knew something of military personnel or prisoners.

“Where are my manners?” Lord Calcourt rose his hand to signal a man.

“We cut straight to it without providing you with refreshment. Would you like a drink, Lord Whitfield?”

James’s first instinct was to leave immediately, now that he had obtained the information he’d come for. But he thought better of it, feeling perhaps he owed this gentleman his congeniality. It would not hurt him to make friends either. “I’ll have a drink,” he said as he crossed his legs and settled into his chair once more.

The two gentlemen sat in silence for a time. James tried to think of something he might say to ignite their conversation. He was not used to making small talk and found he felt very awkward. He wished Sarah were here. She had the extraordinary talent of setting people at ease and making interesting conversation.

James was brought his drink and took a sip just before Lord Calcourt asked him, “Might I inquire after Lady Whitfield?” Lord Calcourt’s tone was light and amiable, and James could not imagine why he had once thought him so odious a man.

“You may,” James replied, trying to match Lord Calcourt’s friendly air. “My wife is feeling a touch under the weather today.”

“Oh, I am sorry,” he said. “I should tell Miss Wilkes, and we shall have some flowers sent over.”

Flowers. Why had James not thought to send flowers? Especially since only days ago he had sat with her in a beautiful garden, hearing her dreams of planting her own someday? “I am sure they would brighten her day,” he replied. Suddenly, he felt eager to leave the club and find an impressive offering of blossoms for his wife. Perhaps he should drop it by himself and ascertain the status of her health. He stood. “If you will excuse me, I am reminded of an errand I must fulfill before the day’s end.” If he were honest, he was most anxious for *his* to be the first floral offering of the day. To his gratification, Lord Calcourt did not hesitate to bid him a cordial farewell.

He opened the door and walked out onto the street, where he looked both ways for a flower stand. Nothing. Where did one procure flowers in London? He found himself at a complete loss. Surely there must be a patch of earth somewhere where he may pluck up some blooms. He scanned the street in each direction. A gentleman should know these things. He thought of asking someone when an idea occurred to him, and he set off in search of the perfect bouquet.

He walked nearly two miles to the garden where he and Sarah had shared their picnic days earlier. He spent a fair amount of time there, assembling a collection of peonies and some sprigs of lavender. After he finished, James looked down at his work. It appeared to be a sufficient offering, although he had seen many arrangements of flowers adorning tables and entryways in homes he'd visited, and his did not look quite as impressive. He looked down at his hands, which were covered in scrapes, having been assaulted by the thorns of a prickly vine. He sighed. His offering would have to do.

It was nearly sundown when he ascended the steps of Ramsey House and rang the bell. He hoped to find someone at home, as he did not have a note to accompany his gift. The butler opened the door and surveyed him from head to toe. It occurred to James that his appearance might be a little disheveled, and he quickly ran his fingers through his hair. Why did he always come here looking like a ruffian?

"Is the mistress of the house here this evening?" James inquired as he fidgeted with his cravat.

Without a word the butler disappeared, leaving James standing in the entryway, flowers in hand, unsure of what to do. Minutes later, Lady Ramsey appeared at the top of the stairs.

"Lord Whitfield?" She seemed surprised yet pleased as she descended the staircase, which set his mind at ease.

"Good evening, Lady Ramsey." He held up the flowers, hoping they might explain his unexpected visit at such an hour. "I thought perhaps you might give these to Sarah—pardon me, Lady Whitfield," he stuttered.

"Oh, how lovely." She looked down at the slightly wilted, hastily assembled bunch.

James eyed his bouquet, bound together with a piece of string, and handed it to Lady Ramsey. She took the flowers from his outstretched hands, smiling at his efforts.

"Will you tell her I wish her a swift recovery?" He wiped his dirty hands together, fumbling over his words.

Lady Ramsey smiled. "I am certain these flowers will lift her spirits." She lowered her nose down to the blossoms. "Their scent is lovely."

James wanted to inquire whether Sarah might be recovered before Friday, but Lady Ramsey had not invited him in, and he did not want to press her.

When he turned to leave, however, she called to him. "Lord Whitfield, it

was a very sweet gesture.”

“Oh!” He turned back in a whirl, having remembered an important detail.
“Will you tell her they were picked from her secret garden?”

Lady Ramsey smiled and nodded. James walked down the stairs of Ramsey House, wondering how on earth he would make it to Friday.

CHAPTER 18

THE DAYS WERE INTERMINABLE, WAITING for Sarah to recover, waiting for responses to his inquiries made about Chappelle's imposture. James found himself mulling over again and again whether he should tell Sarah of Chappelle's death and his subsequent investigations. Before he came to London, he would not have even considered the idea of telling her, and still his first instinct was to protect her from the burden of this knowledge. Yet, he had come to realize, he always felt more settled after talking with her, and she would want to know. He could not reconcile what to do, and the more he grappled with it, the less sure he felt about any of it.

To combat the torture of inertia, James filled his time walking the streets of London. The bustling activity of the city helped quiet his thoughts. He found his exploring was quite an education as he wandered into some of the less desirable parts of the city. He had not spent much time in London, and it was fascinating to him—a world with which he was unfamiliar.

When Thursday morning arrived, he received word that Sarah was quite recovered and able to join him Friday evening. They were set to attend the Dobsons' dinner party, and James's only regret was husband and wife were not usually seated next to one another at dinner parties. He wanted to be near her.

Friday evening he could not help but arrive a few minutes early. He stood in the entryway, expecting at any moment the appearance of Lord Ramsey. The earl never passed up his duty as man of the house and Sarah's protector, to gibe James a bit. But James enjoyed their exchanges and had come to develop a feeling of fondness and respect for both Lord and Lady Ramsey. As if he knew what James was thinking, Lord Ramsey sauntered through the doorway. He and the countess must have been going out as well this evening, for he was dressed in fine evening apparel.

"Here is our fair Romeo, the young lover who climbed the balcony at sunset to deliver his lady a delicate bouquet of flowers."

That was not quite how James remembered it, but he *had* dropped in unannounced the other evening. He merely nodded, not supposing to contradict the earl.

"Well done, sir." Lord Ramsey tipped his imaginary hat. "As a fellow romantic, I applaud you for your efforts. You must never let propriety stand

in your way.”

Lady Ramsey appeared in the entryway, dripping in jewels and finery, ever the picture of poise and sophistication. “Lord Whitfield.” She curtsied. “Lady Whitfield will be down soon.” Her accent adorned her pronouncement with a touch of sophistication.

“In fact, she comes presently.”

James glanced up at the soft timbre of Sarah’s voice to see her graceful form descending the staircase. He could not imagine how she had grown more beautiful in the mere days they had spent apart, but when she came to stand before him, he felt his breath catch in his throat. “My lady, you look the picture of health,” he said. He heard Lord Ramsey snicker behind his wife and knew his compliment fell flat, especially considering how stunning Sarah looked. When had he become so bad at this? He tried to shake off the awkward greeting, offering his arm to his wife. “Shall we?” He turned to the earl and countess, seeking their approval to depart.

“Enjoy your evening.” Lady Ramsey waved them out the door.

Seated across from Sarah in the carriage, James tried a compliment once more. “My lady, I did not adequately express how exquisite you look this evening. I think your presence stopped my tongue. Forgive me.”

“I have told you before; you have no need to apologize.” Sarah’s expression seemed subdued. “You need not feel obligated to bestow compliments or express feelings you do not feel.”

What? James sat stunned by her words.

“I know,” she said.

Know what? he thought. How could she know? He did not even know. “Sarah, what is it you think you know?” He felt desperate to understand what she meant.

“I have resigned myself to the idea that our marriage is to be an amicable arrangement. I know we are to be just friends.” Her voice fell quiet, as if she had no wish to continue speaking. “Amicable,” she whispered.

James blew out a breath of air and sank back in his seat. Did she not see it? Did she not see his attraction to her and his struggle to navigate his feelings? They had shared much recently, but it appeared they did not understand each other.

The carriage remained quiet for a long while as he worked to order his scrambled thoughts. “Sarah—”

The carriage's progress came to a halt in front of the admiral's residence, and a footman opened the door, putting an abrupt end to their conversation. James exited the carriage and reached for Sarah's hand to assist her. She swept past him, not looking into his eyes.

At the Dobsons' dinner, James watched Sarah mingle with the other ladies in the room. He noticed how she made no attempts to draw undue attention to herself. Although he knew her mind to be alight with observations and ideas, she did not speak over anyone. She listened. Her grace and beauty surpassed those of everyone in the room. But she did not seem to understand how she affected *him*.

Dinner was an elaborate succession of at least twelve courses, during which he found himself seated next to one Lord Huxley. James worked to exercise patience, listening to this man, who seemed never to stop talking for fear he might forget the sound of his own voice. At least James had a clear view of Sarah, who was seated diagonally across from him at the long, crowded dining table. She seemed to be indulging the gentleman to her left in thoughtful conversation, but as he watched her closely, there was sadness in her eyes. She could not hide from him. He caught her glance once or twice, but she averted her gaze quickly. She had no wish to look at him.

He could not wait until the evening was over. He had to speak with her, even if he was terrified of what he might say, even if he did not feel prepared for the consequences. When dinner concluded, he reached for his pocket journal and scribbled a note. He dropped it into Sarah's hand as the ladies crossed over to the drawing room. It said but one word—*Library*.

James eyed the clock, and after what appeared to be a decent amount of time sitting with the gentlemen in the smoke-filled dining room, he excused himself. He figured he and Sarah would be able to steal away a few moments before the men joined the ladies in the drawing room. He had never been to the Dobson house before and only assumed there would be a library in a London house of this size. He tiptoed down the main corridor, peeking into doorways, hoping he would not run into a servant or a member of the household.

Finally, toward the end of the corridor, he discovered a set of double doors, and before he entered the room, he smelled the aroma of old books. It was dark inside and a touch drafty, but there was enough moonlight streaming in from the window to give their meeting location a chance. James heard the

door creak behind him and turned to see Sarah's silhouette standing in the doorway. She walked toward him.

"Is everything all right?" she whispered, looking behind her and from side to side.

"Yes, of course." James closed the door behind her. "But I could not wait a moment longer to speak with you." It was difficult to read her expression in the dark, but he pressed on. "I fear you misunderstand something. And the fault is mine." He paused. His hands tremored at his side, but he continued to step toward her. "I *am* grateful for your friendship, Sarah." In the darkness, he heard her sigh. This she already knew. "But . . ." He paused, the words caught in his throat. *Say it!* He could not speak. Instead, he grabbed her hands and pulled her into a shadowy corner of the room and into his embrace.

His breath came quickly due to the hard, drumming beat of his heart. With his eyes closed, James lowered his lips to hers, but in the darkness, they missed their mark, landing on her cheek. When he swept across her cheek to her lips, a soft sigh escaped her, like relief, like drinking water in a blazing desert. As he kissed her, firm and insistent, again and again, an ache formed in the base of his belly. It had been so long, he felt as though he kissed her for the first time. Though his body recognized the sensation, his chest tightened as she clasped her hands around his neck and kissed him back just as insistently.

When they broke apart, only for air, they still clung to each other.

Whatever chasm might open inside of him, whatever internal fury this moment might unleash would be worth it. He could no longer linger in lifeless gray twilight, trying not to feel anything. He took her hands in his and led her closer to the window. He surveyed her face in the moonlight, and her smile reached deep into her eyes.

Hearing footsteps down the corridor, they turned and looked at the door, and James instinctively pulled Sarah away from the window and back into the dark corner. Both stood frozen until the footsteps passed. He looked down at her, and the awareness of her closeness sent tingles down his spine. She rested her hands on his chest, and he felt sure her fingers could feel the rapid beat of his heart. He was surprised to discover the only feeling threatening to overwhelm him now was happiness.

"Will they be missing us?" Sarah's soft breath brushed against his chin.

Raising his hand, he grazed her cheek gently. "They can wait." He dipped

his chin toward her, and her lips felt soft as he fit them into his. This time their kiss was delicate and tender.

How long they stayed locked in their embrace, James did not know. But after a time, he heard pianoforte music coming from the drawing room and felt certain the men had rejoined the ladies. "I fear we have stayed too long and may be found out." As he whispered into her ear, her wisps of stray hair grazed the underside of his jaw. He could have stayed there and held her forever. He felt cold when she stepped out of his embrace.

They tried to slip back into the drawing room as discretely as possible. With everyone focused on the pianoforte performance, the other dinner guests barely noticed. Besides, James and Sarah were married, after all. No one except Lord and Lady Ramsey were privy to their past troubles and subsequent separation.

James did not hear the music end or the guests applaud. He barely remembered the goodbyes of the evening. He could think only of their kisses, her touch.

In the carriage ride home, as much as he wanted to leap across the space between them and continue what he had begun in the library, he did not. He exercised restraint and hoped it would serve them well in the future. This feeling . . . it was enough for now, and he dared not ask for more.

He wanted to rebuild their relationship in the right way. He thought of the methodical building practices of the craftsmen in the shipyard. One could not set sail with confidence unless the framework was solid and the construction sure; otherwise, water would permeate the barrier and the ship would sink. But one thing he knew. He had conveyed more than friendship to Sarah. That thought made him smile.

"Thank you for tonight, James." Sarah's voice, almost a whisper, echoed from the other side of the dark carriage, pulling him from his thoughts. "It was wonderful." She sighed. "You were wonderful."

Though James could not see her face, the warm affection in her voice was both comforting and thrilling. As he said goodbye to her on the steps of Ramsey House, he left her with a light kiss on her cheek, soft as a cloud.

"Good night." She smiled and slipped into the house.

When James ascended the stairs of his own London home, the light of dawn was already emerging. His eyelids felt heavy and his whole body sagged with fatigue, yet his heart felt lighter than air. He found himself

smiling lazily as he entered the dark, quiet house.

Draping his jacket over one arm and using his free hand to untie his neckcloth, he noticed the silver receiving tray on the side table held a letter. Curious, he retrieved it, and when he read Lord Clinton's address on the letterhead, a sudden alertness chased away any fatigue he felt in his body.

CHAPTER 19

SARAH WOKE LATE THE NEXT morning with the memory of last evening rippling through her consciousness. She replayed her stolen moment with James in the library and his kiss over and over in her mind. A knock at the door brought her to attention, and Margot peeked her head through the doorway of her bedchamber.

“Bonjour, mon ami.” Margot slipped through the door and closed it behind her. She had one arm arched behind her back and seemed to be hiding something in her hand.

Sarah sat up in bed, tucking her knees up under her nightgown and wrapped her arms around her legs. Margot sat on the side of the bed.

“What is it?” Sarah asked.

Margot smiled. “Another letter was delivered to our door quite early this morning, and I could not wait a moment longer to bring it to you.” She brought her arm out from behind her back and offered the note to Sarah. “I think it must be a love letter.” She pursed her lips in anticipation.

A blush came to Sarah’s cheeks as she took the letter. It appeared like the other James had sent, and her heart fluttered in anticipation of reading it. She thought it romantic that he had foregone sleep again in order that she might have his letter when she woke. Eager to read the letter’s contents, she did not bother to wait until she had more privacy. She tore open the wax seal.

Dearest Sarah,

I regret that I must deliver this news by means of a letter. I should have told you of these events last night, but our evening together was so lovely, I did not want to dampen it with talk of these matters. While you were ill, I received a letter from the Admiralty, which I have enclosed here.

Sarah separated the pages and found the letter James described. Upon devouring its contents, she learned of the events of Chappelle’s betrayal and death.

Intent as I am on finding Patrick, obtaining the identity of Chappelle’s imposture has been my first objective to that end since I learned of it. Lord Clinton, a former diplomat to France, has informed me of a Frenchman, one of Napoleon’s inner circle, who nearly perfectly matches the description of Chappelle’s impostor. I

have gone to France in search of this man and to pursue further leads on Patrick.

Gone to France? Sarah lost her breath.

I am sorry to deliver this ill news in a letter. It pains me to leave you, especially after the time we have shared together. But in order to leave painful memories in the past, in order to be a whole man once again, I must see this through—for Patrick, but more importantly for us. Sarah, whatever happens, I will keep the memory of last night's kiss close to my heart forever.

Yours,

James

Sarah dropped the letter onto the bed and looked at Margot. “Do you know of a Lord Clinton?” She sputtered the words in a near frenzy. “I must find him and speak with him.”

“Will you tell me what the letter said?” Margot entreated with wide eyes.

Sarah said nothing, still stunned by its contents, but picked up the letter and handed it to Margot. She and James had just begun to find each other again, and now she might lose him forever.

She could not sit still any longer and hopped from her bed, pacing to the window in her bare feet. She considered the grave danger James would encounter in France. The thought that he might be injured or, worse, killed sent waves of hot panic through her body. Her breath turned fast and shallow. She would have to wait in agony for days, maybe weeks, for news of his fate.

Margot turned to Sarah as she finished reading the letter. “I will find Lord Ramsey. Surely he must hear of this.” She stood, walked over to Sarah, and embraced her.

Tears emerged from the corners of Sarah's eyes as she looked at her friend. She felt helpless. And angry. “Why did he just leave? Would he travel to France alone?” Even with how far James had come in manners and sensitivity, she still felt he just might be brazen enough to waltz into Paris and try to take on Napoleon's men by himself.

Margot called for Sarah's maid before she went in search of Lord Ramsey. Sarah dressed in a rush, barely allowing Eve to arrange her hair. She could not sit still. She rubbed the palms of her hands with her thumbs until they felt raw to the touch.

Margot soon returned and informed Sarah that Lord Ramsey had gone in

search of Lord Clinton. Sarah felt an overwhelming swell of gratitude that Lord Ramsey had recognized the urgency of the situation. She hoped he would bring Lord Clinton back to Ramsey House forthwith so she may question him herself.

She and Margot spent what felt like an age waiting in the drawing room for Lord Ramsey to return. When the earl, accompanied by Lord Clinton, entered the drawing room, restless fire coursed through her veins. While introductions were made, she worked to contain herself from blurting out interrogating questions. She and Margot curtsied.

Lord Clinton looked to be twenty years past his prime with a receding hairline, yet his posture was dignified. She could tell by his expression that he was a man of esteem and consequence.

After all were seated, Lord Ramsey cut through the pleasantries and began speaking. "Lord Clinton, I apologize that I must speak with such boldness, but time is of the essence."

Lord Clinton sat upright on the edge of his chair, surprised by Lord Ramsey's directness.

"I am sure you must have guessed by the presence of Lady Whitfield that we wish to inquire about your correspondence with Lord Whitfield."

Sarah, too, sat on the edge of the settee, restless for information.

"He left just this morning for France, and we believe he is alone," Lord Ramsey explained.

Sarah nodded as he looked to her for confirmation. "Might you be able to help us determine where he may have gone or what his objective may be?" Lord Ramsey asked.

Lord Clinton glanced between the ladies, concern sprinkled through his expression. He turned in the direction of Lord Ramsey and spoke quietly. "My lord, shall we not converse somewhere the ladies are not present? Need we trouble them with such seriousness?"

Lord Ramsey straightened his posture and replied in full volume. "I think you will find that these two ladies, although lovely and graceful, are made of tougher stuff than most men. They have just as much and more concern for these matters than you and I do. Please."

Lord Clinton smiled awkwardly at the polite rebuke and nodded to the ladies in apology.

Sarah was ready to take this man with both hands by the cravat and shake

him until he relayed his news.

“Well.” He scratched his forehead, seeming to organize his thoughts. “I received a letter from Lord Whitfield not five days past.” He looked around the room, clearly uncomfortable to be under such scrutiny. “In it he described Monsieur Chappelle, asking if, to my knowledge, such a man of similar stature and appearance existed in the French military.”

Sarah exercised as much patience as she could possibly muster as a footman entered the room with a tea tray, delaying the conversation further. Margot thanked him, informing him that she would pour out.

After he left, Lord Clinton continued. “There was a man I considered right away to be a match. He is one of Napoleon’s generals, who serves just beneath him.” Lord Clinton huffed out a breath. “I doubt a man of such high standing in the French army would ever pose as a spy, but he matches Lord Whitfield’s description.”

“A name?” Lord Ramsey asked.

“General Jean-Claude Damas,” Lord Clinton said. “I told Lord Whitfield there was little chance of General Damas impersonating a spy, but he seemed quite convinced he was the man.”

“And how do you know of this General Damas?” Lord Ramsey questioned further.

“For the past seventeen years, British relations with France have been quite precarious,” Lord Clinton said. “After the French Revolution, when Bonaparte emerged as the clear leader in France, we attempted to meet with him in an effort to reestablish peaceful relations.” Lord Clinton’s brow dipped low as he recalled the events of the past. “We met only twice, but at each meeting the same military leaders were in attendance.” He looked at the ladies and explained the details he evidently thought they might not understand. “Since the time of Napoleon, you see, the military is the government.” He nodded to them and turned back to Lord Ramsey.

Sarah looked at Margot, and the two shared a knowing glance. They had been talked down to on more than one occasion by men of their acquaintance.

“General Damas was among those officers, a notably stout and portly man. I have encountered him a time or two in subsequent years.”

As Lord Clinton took a breath, Sarah considered what he had said. Still so many questions raced through her mind. She doubted very much that James planned to infiltrate Napoleon’s circle, kidnap this Damas, and interrogate

him for Patrick's whereabouts. She could not see how this information was enough for James to pursue him all the way to France, until Margot asked Lord Clinton another question. "My lord, did you inform Lord Whitfield of this man's whereabouts?"

Lord Clinton perked up. "Well, yes, and I believe that to be the reason Lord Whitfield departed for France so urgently."

Sarah's entire body felt hot. Instinctively, she knew this next piece of news would be vital to understanding James's plan.

"On Saturday next, there is to be a grand celebration in France. Napoleon has commissioned for himself a grand monument in the center of Paris. Its erection will commemorate his military victories and stand as a symbol of his power and dominance in Europe. I believe it also to be a tribute to his new bride, Marie Louise, Archduchess of Austria."

Lord Ramsey stopped Lord Clinton. "Old Boney has built a monument to himself?" He seemed amused.

Lord Clinton nodded. "The celebration is to be held for Napoleon and his military in front of the arc de triomphe—that is what they call it. And that evening there is to be a ball at the Tuileries Palace."

"How do you know all of this?" Sarah asked.

"It is not quite a secret," Lord Clinton replied. "In fact, I believe Bonaparte wants all of his neighboring opponents to hear tell of the magnificent and grand structure he has erected."

It seemed to Sarah that Napoleon had done his job well, for even Lord Clinton seemed impressed by the spectacle.

"When I spoke of these events to Lord Whitfield, they seemed to pique his interest. I assume he plans to be in attendance," Lord Clinton went on, but it sounded like babble in the periphery as Sarah pieced together what she imagined James's stratagem to be. Still, she could not understand how he intended to carry out such a perilous plan in such a dangerous place. This prompted another question.

"Lord Clinton?" she interrupted, and all eyes turned toward her. She dipped her chin and proceeded. "Did Lord Whitfield give you any indication of whether he would travel to Paris alone?"

"That I do not know." Lord Clinton huffed out the reply, no doubt as impatient with her as she was with him. Sarah knew she appeared ill-mannered to the gentleman, but her mind was in a frenzy. Her husband, that

same husband who had left her in raptures with his kisses last night, was at this very moment departing on a most treacherous mission. It was impossible to sit here politely. She needed to act.

She eyed Lord and Lady Ramsey, hoping to convey urgency in her expression. She was grateful to Lord Clinton for relaying this information, but she needed him to leave in order to discuss it further with her friends.

Lord Ramsey seemed to catch her meaning. “Lord Clinton, we are most grateful to you for the wealth of information you have given us, and I daresay we have taken up too much of your time.” He made quick work of showing Lord Clinton out, and upon his return he pronounced, “I shall rally my men. We depart for Paris tonight.”

“My darling, please sit down.” There was a tone of authority in Lady Ramsey’s voice that Sarah had not often witnessed. “I think you are forgetting your most effective asset for this particular mission.”

Stumped by her declaration, Lord Ramsey asked. “And what might that be, my pearl?”

“The two ladies sitting right here with you.” Her eyes twinkled.

Confused, Lord Ramsey waited for further explanation.

“Lord Clinton said there was to be a ball Saturday evening. How do you imagine a group of not so youthful-looking men might appear attending such an event in a cluster?” she inquired. “Would you not be less conspicuous accompanied by ladies?” Margot’s eyes were alight with intrigue. “If this ball is of the scale Lord Clinton describes, my sister Natalia and her husband will surely be invited.”

Lord Ramsey raised his eyebrows at his wife. He was at a total loss for words. Margot used his silence as an opportunity to elaborate. “My dear, I am French, am I not?” She smiled. “And Sarah speaks fluently.”

Sarah understood Margot’s suggestion immediately, and the hair on her neck prickled with new resolve. There was nothing she would not risk in order to help James, and the idea of traveling to Paris sent waves of eager anticipation through her.

“With Natalia’s assistance, we will adorn ourselves in the latest Parisian fashions and accompany you to this ball. I feel Sarah and I might be able to impress this General Damas and make conversation with him more easily than you or Lord Whitfield might.” Margot’s face displayed an air of confidence Sarah quite enjoyed.

Lord Ramsey, still aghast, replied, “My dear, I thought you were most leery of returning to Paris.”

“This is quite different. Our friends need our help.” Margot seemed just as determined as Sarah felt.

“I quite agree, my darling, but I do not feel comfortable with the idea of you taking up the role of spy and flirting with General Damas right under Napoleon Bonaparte’s nose.”

“You have always said I am the bravest woman you have ever met, have you not?”

“Yes, he has,” Sarah interjected, hoping to strengthen Lady Ramsey’s argument.

“You *are*.” Lord Ramsey eyed Sarah, clearly not appreciating her added pressure. “But you are also my pearl, my greatest treasure, and I find it very disconcerting, putting you in harm’s way.”

“That is the whole point, my darling. The presence of ladies will help you avoid such danger. Who would guess a man accompanied by his wife would attend a ball for any other reason than for dancing? We will use our manners and decorum as armor. Our presence will be your protection”—she looked at Sarah—“and Lord Whitfield’s.”

“If we can intercept him before he does anything foolish,” Sarah added, still anxious to convince the earl. If it were up to her, they would be halfway across the Channel by now.

Lord Ramsey looked at his wife, then at Sarah, then back at his wife. Sarah sensed his resolve was beginning to crumble. Margot’s argument was most persuasive, and now that this plan was starting to take shape in Sarah’s mind, she would not be dissuaded.

“Who are the other men you thought might assist us in this effort?” Sarah asked. She hoped to move past Lord Ramsey’s hesitations right into the planning. Perhaps he might forget to object further.

He took his wife’s hand in his and stared into her eyes as if to reach her very soul. “You will stay right by my side throughout this whole ordeal.”

The countess nodded.

He then focused on Sarah. “And *you* will also be under my protection. You do as I say until we reach Lord Whitfield.”

Sarah nodded. She had never heard Lord Ramsey speak in such a severe tone. She was prepared take his orders as would any soldier going into battle.

“And to answer your question, Lady Whitfield, I have a few old comrades in mind. They have been with me in life-and-death situations before, and I would not do this without them.”

Sarah thought of Lord Ramsey’s League of Noble Brothers during the Revolution. As they must be nearing forty years, she hoped they were still just as keen as they were then. Before disclosing their names, Lord Ramsey went to his writing table and began to pen his correspondence.

Sarah took Margot’s hand and knit her eyebrows together as she asked, “Are you sure you want to do this, my friend? I fear it will be dangerous.”

“I know it will be, but I also know in my heart that we are their best chance of succeeding.” Margot glanced at Lord Ramsey. “I know my husband knows it too, or he would never have agreed to this.”

Not two days later, Sarah followed Lord and Lady Ramsey from the carriage to the port where they were to board Lord Timothy Brumley’s vessel and set sail from Dover at low tide. As she approached the edge of the dock, she found herself looking out at the vast ocean. She thought the dark water looked beautiful at night as the moonlight glistened over its surface, though the black depths gave her an ominous feeling as she considered the small vessel that would carry them across the Channel. It looked a great deal smaller than any of the ships she had seen at Nelson’s Wharf, but it also looked well made, and the thought of coming one step closer to James gave her all the courage she would need to board this vessel and sail to France.

An energetic, spry-looking man jumped out from the interior of the boat and yelled Lord Ramsey’s name, causing Sarah to jump in surprise. “Lord Nicolas!” he shouted. “It does my eyes good to see you, man!” The man’s voice boomed across the inlet as he rushed to meet them. The two men embraced, slapping each other heartily on their backs. Their bonds of friendship ran deep.

Another gentleman appeared from behind the sails. His was an imposing presence; he was large in stature but much less gregarious than his friend. Even so, he greeted Lord Ramsey with no less enthusiasm.

Margot also seemed to know the men and greeted them with cheerfulness. “Lord Brumley and Lord Martin, I am most happy to see you. It has been far too long.” She managed to look stunning even in her dark travel clothes.

Sarah noticed Lord Brumley eyeing her, and she stepped forward.

Before Lord Ramsey could make introductions, however, Lord Brumley

had taken her gloved hand and, lifting it before him, bowed in front of her. “Lord Brumley, at your service, my lady. Lord Ramsey, where are your manners?” His jovial nature set her at ease, and she liked him right away. Lord Martin stayed back where he stood and gave her a polite nod, which she returned.

“I am sorry, gentlemen.” Lord Ramsey nearly laughed when he said the words. “May I introduce Lady Whitfield.”

Sarah furrowed her brow at Lord Ramsey’s silliness. She knew him to be lighthearted and often humorous, but in the present company, he was acting like a naughty schoolboy, carrying on in such a manner one would think he was setting off on a pleasure voyage.

“Lady Whitfield, Lady Ramsey.” Lord Brumley extended his arm toward the smallish sailboat behind him and declared with pride, “Welcome aboard the *Whispering Penny*. She may not look like much, but her lovely lines will bring us swiftly and safely to our destination.”

Somehow his confident little speech gave Sarah some comfort; she felt completely reliant on these men for safe passage across the sea.

Lords Brumley and Martin were accompanied by a crew of three hired men who busied themselves preparing the vessel to make sail. Lord Ramsey assisted Margot and Sarah onto the boat and down into the main cabin, where they found seating in a small berth.

Once they had departed, Lord Ramsey gathered his wife, Lords Brumley and Martin, and Sarah into the cabin to delineate the details of the mission for the company, and the quarters became quite cramped. Sarah was relieved to hear Lord Ramsey’s tone change once he commenced with the business at hand. “The winds are favorable this evening, and with any luck, we should be able to port in Calais with no incident well before dawn. From there, arrangements have been made to travel by carriage inland to the Hotel de Bourbon. There, we will display our issuances to gain entry into France, signed by the Duke of Wellington himself, and we’ll receive adequate privacy our first night. Based on my handsome *douceur*, I expect to forgo any searches at the custom house. I mean to cut our travel time to three days. We should arrive at Château de Vitré just outside Paris with a day to spare before the military parade and ball on Saturday.”

Sarah tried to focus on Lord Ramsey’s words to distract herself from her frazzled nerves. She had not sailed since she was a young girl, and this

smaller boat seemed to rock about much more than the one she remembered. Inside the berth, she held tight to the railing and took deep breaths in and out. With no adequate space or privacy to lie down, she was forced to remain sitting upright the whole of the night. She did not want to believe she was too fragile for such a trip, but after several hours of rocking and sometimes jarring, her courage started to wane. Even Margot seemed far more accustomed to the sea travel than she was. Sarah focused her eyes on a small brass hook nailed to the wood panel opposite her. She vowed she would not be the first to retch.

It was still dark when they reached solid ground, and the all-day carriage ride seemed a trifle compared to the incessant knocking about at sea. By the time they reached the inn the next evening, Sarah was dead on her feet. Margot encouraged her to eat some dinner, but she quickly excused herself and did not even bother to remove her boots when she lay down upon the bed.

I can do this was her last thought as a haze of sleep closed in around her.

CHAPTER 20

JAMES CROUCHED IN THE NAMELESS, faceless crowd of French civilians as they waved their flags and cheered the military regiments marching along the Champs-Élysées. The condition of the soldiers impressed him; they were clean and orderly, their puffed chests crossed with brilliant white sashes, their muskets upright, affixed with bayonets, all marching in unison.

“*Vive la France! Vive l’empereur!*” The crowd’s cheers rang in James’s ears as he peered out from under his cloak. He meant to blend in as a menial laborer, but his roughness did not match the appearance of the crowd. Most people had dressed in their finest for the occasion. He hoped the vast number of people in attendance would shield him from suspicion.

Thousands of citizens filled the streets of Paris, hoping to catch a glimpse of the emperor himself. James inspected the procession to the end of the avenue, where Napoleon Bonaparte stood perched atop a wood platform built for the spectacle. His military waistcoat and jacket were heavily ornamented with braids of gold rope, medals, and shiny buttons. And his black bicorn hat perched atop his head made him more visible, as it added a foot of height to his person.

A willowy feminine figure who stood beside Bonaparte looked to be twenty years his junior. James knew the lady to be Napoleon’s new bride, the Archduchess of Austria. The rows of generals framing the couple seemed to augment their importance as they oversaw the massive company.

James’s eyes darted across the rows of military leaders, examining each general for a man of Chappelle’s stature. He clenched the cold steel of his pistol underneath his cloak. Once the crowd dispersed, he was intent on seeking an interview with the general, down a shadowed alley, perhaps. If coercion was the only means by which he could obtain Patrick’s locale, then so be it.

This is madness! His quest that had seemed reasonable only yesterday now felt like suicide.

James shifted his position in the crowd to gain a better vantage point when he saw him. At the far end of the platform, a short, plump figure stood proud amid the other generals. His posture and appearance mimicked exactly that of Chappelle’s. James felt his blood run chill as he stared at the deceiver, the man responsible for Patrick’s brutal capture.

At once, a hand seized James's arm in the crowd. His body surged in alarm as he felt the man behind him lean in and whisper, "How is it possible we cross paths in such a place as this?" Relief flooded into James's mind as he recognized the voice behind him.

"Man, what are you doing here?" James whispered back, not daring to turn around and attract undue attention from the crowd.

"I told you I have been itching to return to France, and this seemed like as good an opportunity as any." *What?* Lord Ramsey's jesting seemed displaced in such a setting, but in truth, James could not have been happier to hear the earl's whimsical remarks in his ear. "Walk with me." Lord Ramsey directed and James followed, the two men pushing through the crowd, exiting to a quieter street and down an empty alleyway. There stood another man, whom James did not recognize. "May I introduce Monsieur de Vitré." Lord Ramsey extended his hand, presenting the gentleman. "We two married sisters long ago, and I could not have asked for a better man to call my brother."

James remembered hearing of Lady Ramsey's sister Natalia and her husband. He nodded to the man and turned to Lord Ramsey. "How is it you are here?" He could not account for Lord Ramsey's sudden appearance.

"A particular lady was most concerned after reading your note and could not rest until she persuaded us to come."

Sarah. James's brow rose in surprise at Lord Ramsey. "You came all this way by yourself?"

"No, I brought reinforcements," Lord Ramsey replied casually, brushing a speck of dust off his pristine lapel. "Let us finish our conversation in Monsieur de Vitré's carriage just up the street here."

James stopped as the men turned to go. He could not leave. The general was just now in his grasp.

Lord Ramsey turned to him with an arched eyebrow, guessing James's thoughts. "What is your plan, man? To walk up onto that platform and threaten the general in front of the emperor himself?"

James blew out a breath. Any response he thought to give sounded foolish even to him.

"I am glad I found you before you came to any real harm. Let us retreat for a short time to Château de Vitré, where we may devise a sounder strategy."

Lord Ramsey, it seemed, had come to help him. James nodded and followed the men to the carriage. When they arrived at Château de Vitré,

Lord Ramsey whisked James into the house and promptly released him to two valets, whose charge was to bathe and dress him for the evening's ball. "Give him a good scrubbing. He looks a fright," Lord Ramsey directed, then turned to James. "Once you are dressed, come to the drawing room, where we may devise a plan for our subterfuge." He seemed more concerned about James's appearance than the harrowing task of infiltrating Napoleon's palace.

When James donned the attire set before him, he felt ridiculous. His bright-white cravat plumed out of his black-velvet waistcoat, which was ornamented with diamond-shaped buttons and lay over white-satin breeches. He had never worn such clothes in all his life and felt rather conspicuous.

"In order to gain entry into the palace, he must wear the appointed costume," Lord Ramsey announced as he sauntered into the drawing room. "You have never looked finer, my good man. I cannot wait for you to see the rest of our party."

Just then a streak of red caught James's eye. He turned and was sure his eyes deceived him. Sarah, *his* Sarah, dressed in a striking red gown swept into the room. She was followed by Lady Ramsey and a woman he assumed to be Madame de Vitré. The bold color of Sarah's gown struck him, its style decidedly more dramatic than the fashions one saw in London. Sarah had always been beautiful, but the glow in her cheeks and the rich color of her dress gave her an added aura of sophistication. Her hair was done up in an elaborate coiffure, and her lips seemed more red than usual. Was she wearing rouge?

Sarah's gaze fixed on him as she walked straight toward him, declaring, "Did you think, James Turner, that I would allow you to run off to France by yourself to get yourself killed?" She arched her brow as she stepped in front of him.

Sarah's mild rebuke and his bewilderment at her presence left James speechless until alarm surged inside of him. "What are you doing here? How is this possible?" He turned to Lord and Lady Ramsey, who smiled together at him. He could not imagine how Lord Ramsey could have allowed Sarah and Lady Ramsey to leave the safety of London and accompany him to Paris! Before James could protest, however, Sarah stepped closer and the scent of her nearness muddled his thoughts.

"It's lovely to see you too." She arched a brow.

Lady Ramsey and Madame de Vitré joined their husbands on the sofa, but

James did not move. He could only stare at the warm tones of Sarah's hair and the abundant diamonds spilling off her earlobes. The last time she had been this near was that blissful night when they had stolen away to the library.

"You left without even saying a proper goodbye." Her expression sharpened.

James bowed his head. "I did not want you tangled up in this mess." He hesitated and raised his eyes back to hers, and he whispered, "And, if I am honest, I did not want you to stop me. I had to come."

Sarah did not reply but continued to meet his gaze with acuity. Where had the timid young lady he had married gone? Standing before him was a keen, courageous woman.

He looked around the room and, seeing Monsieur and Madame de Vitré and Lord and Lady Ramsey conversing, began to piece it all together. "I gather you spoke with Lord Clinton."

"We did," Lord Ramsey interjected.

"And are you here to stop me?"

"My good fellow, we are here to offer our assistance, the ladies most particularly."

James was confused. He turned back to Sarah.

"There is a ball tonight, Lord Whitfield. One *does* require a partner." The left corner of her mouth lifted into a half smile, and she took his hand in hers and squeezed it. Seeing her here set his heart ablaze. In his darkest hour he had thought he would never see her again. And now she was here, eager to help him, despite his best efforts to go it alone.

"When the ladies heard tell of the ball, they conjured this plan, and I daresay it is brilliant," Lord Ramsey said as his wife leaned in and brushed his jaw with her lips.

"A lady can be far more effective at wielding her powers of persuasion than most men," Lady Ramsey remarked.

"Touché," Lord Ramsey muttered as he lifted his wife's hand and pressed a gentle kiss on it.

"Obviously," Madame de Vitré added.

James looked between Sarah and the countess and her sister. "What do you suggest, ladies?"

Two other gentlemen entered the room in concert, and Lord Ramsey

extended a hand to them. “Lord Whitfield, may I introduce Lords Brumley and Martin. These two gentlemen are always good to have around in a pinch.” The two men gave James stiff bows.

Monsieur de Vitré joined the conversation. “I have made some discreet inquiries, and it has come to my attention that the military offices of the palace are in the south wing.” He spoke to James next. “Do you have any skill for picking locks, Your Lordship?”

“I cannot say that I do.”

“It is up to me, then.” Monsieur de Vitré winked.

Lord Ramsey piped in, “In the meanwhile, Brumley and Martin and I will stand guard while the ladies seek an audience with General Damas.”

“We won’t allow them out of our sight,” Lord Brumley said.

“You can be assured.” Lord Martin nodded in agreement.

James was surprised by the boldness of their plan, and though the thought of Sarah conversing and dancing with that traitorous spy made the skin on the back of his neck crawl, he did have to concede that having these gentlemen there to assist him and help protect his wife gave him a small measure of comfort. “Thank you, gentlemen.”

Lord Ramsey must have seen the worry in James’s expression. The earl turned to him and met his gaze in solemn awareness. “I do not mean to take my eyes off these ladies even for a moment.” The men nodded to one another in understanding.

When the clock chimed eight, the entire company departed in the de Vitrés’ largest barouche with Lord Martin riding on the rear, having donned the coat and hat of a footman, and Lord Brumley, the appointed coachman, driving the carriage.

The coach felt stuffy with the three couples, and everyone was quiet as they wound through the streets of Paris toward their destination. When they approached the entrance gate of the Tuileries Palace, James hoped the guards took no notice of their party’s footman and driver. He kept his gaze fixed forward and clenched Sarah’s hand in his as the palace guard examined their invitation. When their carriage was waved through the front gate, James heard Lord Ramsey exhale a puff of air, as if he had been holding it in the entire ride.

Up ahead, an endless succession of carriages crept through the trees toward the palace entrance. Paper lanterns lit the surrounding pathways of the

extensive grounds, and James thought if they had been here under different circumstances, the setting would be enchanting. But as it stood, his heart was in his throat.

He slid a finger underneath his cravat collar in a futile effort to relieve his discomfort. His legs felt shaky underneath him and his hands were clammy. He patted his brow with a handkerchief and took several deep breaths while the carriage proceeded through the tunnel and stopped at the grand entrance.

“It’s going to be all right.” Sarah patted his arm, offering an easy smile, and James took courage from his wife’s assurance and opened the carriage door.

He assisted her down from the carriage, and before letting go of her hand, he winked and dipped his head in an affirming nod. They would do this together, and he would ensure they would be all right.

They ascended the front steps, arm in arm, and passed through the entryway that opened up into a grand hall. The intricately carved arched ceiling drew James’s eye upward and down the hall to an equally grand staircase. He watched the guests ascend the stairs toward what he assumed was the ballroom. He arched an eyebrow at Sarah when they encountered two life-size portraits of Napoleon flanking the stairs on either side. At the top of the stair, in the salon, stood a replica of Bonaparte’s monument, the arc de triomphe. James could not help but chuckle to himself at Napoleon’s blatant self-aggrandizements. But he also knew what it was to govern men and was impressed that the young military officer of little consequence had risen to absolute power. He was a formidable opponent indeed.

In the salon he left Sarah with Lord and Lady Ramsey and slipped through the crowd entering the ballroom. Men and women stood wall to wall, dressed in their finery. James could barely see more than two feet in front of him. He looked up at the ceiling and counted twelve crystal chandeliers lighting the room. How had he found himself here? Standing in this crush of people, he felt unsure of his task as he inched his way through the large crowd.

As the orchestra began, couples took to the dance floor, allowing James more visibility. He spotted Monsieur and Madame de Vitré across the room and shuffled through the crowd until he positioned himself just behind the couple.

Monsieur de Vitré arched his head in the direction of the opposite exit, and James followed the couple as they made their way to the door. He grabbed

the railing and slid past the guests down another staircase, where he was met with two sets of double doors flanking the portrait hall on both sides, one to the north and the other to the south. He sighed; a royal guard was posted in front of each.

Without a word or a glance, Madame de Vitré glided up to the guard at the south door and began conversing him. She smiled and laughed as she pointed to the ballroom upstairs. It was clear the guard was trying to ignore her, his gaze fixed forward, not answering, but she persisted. After some minutes, the guard stepped away from the door, and she slid her arm into his, leading him to the north door to converse with the adjacent guard. James had no idea what she had said, but to distract both guards and draw their attention to her was brilliant. He and Monsieur de Vitré slipped through the south door and into a long dark corridor.

The men eyed each other as they crept down the corridor. James tested the first door they encountered—unlocked. He surveyed the inside to find a large open parlor with nothing of consequence inside. They continued around the corner to a much smaller corridor with a succession of three doors, all of which they found to be locked.

“Perhaps we should start with the first.” Monsieur de Vitré extracted from his pocket two thin instruments and maneuvered them into the brass lock above the doorknob. After a few moments of manipulating the tools, the lock released. Monsieur de Vitré looked up at James, smiling with an air of confidence.

“Where did you ever learn to do that?” James whispered.

“I am a man of many talents.”

James opened the door slowly, careful not to let it squeak. He was surprised to discover this room was not small but large, with all three of the passage doors entering into it. In the center of the room lay a large rectangular table, and an array of bureaus and writing tables lined the walls.

James looked over at his coconspirator. “Monsieur, this is treason. You could be executed for entering this room.”

Monsieur de Vitré’s expression reflected soberness. “*Oui*, my lord.” His volume was barely above a whisper. “Lord Ramsey is my brother. He rescued my wife from the clutches of death when I was not able. I would do anything I could to help him and, by extension, you.” The men nodded to each other in understanding, and without another word they proceeded into

the room.

“What are we looking for?” Monsieur de Vitré called out in a whisper.

“A prison log or a map diagraming the locations of prisons in France.” James sifted through the maps on the large table. All seemed to be of regions of other countries meant for tactical planning. The dim moonlight from the windows was very little help as both men rummaged through the bureaus, careful not to disrupt the placement of documents. In one of the bureaus, James found a stack of paper, a log of sorts. He read down the page of British names, his eyes darting back and forth, scanning the pages until he found *Lieutenant P. Sloane* scribbled near the bottom. James heaved out a breath. Patrick had made it to France alive! This was a prison log. With it was also a map of various locations, marked mostly around Paris, but there was one mark distinctly to the north in Compiègne.

“Monsieur, look here,” James called out.

After examining the log and map, Monsieur de Vitré whispered, “We have combed the room. I think this is all the information we will find here. We must leave. We cannot risk any more time.” He waved his hand to the door, bidding James to follow him.

James rolled up the papers.

“No, no. Leave them.”

Monsieur de Vitré was right. He slid the documents back into the bureau and followed him to the entrance from whence they had come.

In the corridor, the Frenchman whispered back to James before opening the door to the outer corridor, “Follow my lead, sir.”

James stepped back in shock as Monsieur de Vitré began pounding on the door. “Let us out!” Again, pounding. A palace guard opened the door and yelled, red-faced, “How did you get in here? You cannot be in here!”

“Sir, I am looking for the water closet. I think I must retch.” Monsieur de Vitré slurred his speech and hunched over, placing his arm around the guard’s shoulder. The guard threw his arm off and pushed Monsieur de Vitré back, glaring at both men. James pretended to be just as inebriated as he closed his eyes and leaned against the wall. The guard looked behind himself and from side to side, clearly not wanting any undue attention.

“The water closet is that way, behind the staircase.” The guard pointed to the adjacent corridor, distain in his tone.

“*Merci, monsieur.*” Monsieur de Vitré swung his arm under James’s

shoulder and led him away, behind the staircase.

“You could have warned me,” James whispered as the men slinked away.

“What fun would that have been?” Monsieur de Vitré chuckled.

James shook his head in disbelief, relieved to be out of view of the guard.

When the men made their way back up the stairs and into the ballroom, James immediately caught sight of Lord Ramsey. The earl raised his brow in question and James gave a stiff affirming nod. A decorated officer approached the countess, and after conversing for a moment with him, she dipped into a curtsy and followed him to the dance floor.

When James looked away from Lady Ramsey, he realized he did not see Sarah. Where was she? Lord Ramsey had also procured a partner for the dance and took position near his wife and Monsieur and Madame de Vitré. But James could not see Sarah. Panic seized his heart. He forced eye contact with Lord Ramsey, hoping to communicate his urgent fear. Lord Ramsey caught sight of his message and, while dancing, arched his head to the side and glanced diagonally across the floor. James followed his gaze until he found Sarah among the line of dancers, standing up with none other than General Damas.

This was the second time she had astonished James in one day. He could not believe what he saw. How had she attracted the general’s attention so quickly? What was he thinking? She was exquisite. She could attract anyone’s attention if that was her design. They looked quite the pair standing opposite each other, her long and graceful line on the dance floor in contrast to the general’s portly frame. She was taller than he by a hand and was more than ten years his junior. It was apparent the general was most pleased with his dancing partner, and they seemed to converse naturally.

Sarah smiled at James as her attention swept past him, calm and poised. Her courage astounded him. He felt ashamed of himself for having just left her in London with nothing but a note. For so long he had kept her at a distance and made a habit of underestimating her willingness and ability to help him. Here she was, along with all her friends, saving him at great risk to herself—and just as readily as any comrade with whom he had ever served. The wrestle he’d suffered to leave her in London and the relentless longing he’d felt to be near her had been agonizing, and standing there, watching her, he realized he loved her, most profoundly. Perhaps it had always been there, reduced to cinders for a time. But now it was ablaze, demanding all his

awareness as he considered the deep concern he now felt for her well-being and safety and the peace he felt whenever they talked, even about difficult things.

The music concluded, and the general escorted Sarah off the dance floor, but the man did not leave her. James followed as the general led her out a pair of double doors and into the salon, where the replica of the arc stood. Keeping his distance, he stood behind the open doors, pretending to watch the crush of the ballroom. Out of his periphery he saw the general approach another decorated military officer. James's eyes widened as he realized this was not just another general but the Emperor of France himself. He turned toward them and watched in disbelief as General Damas introduced Sarah to Napoleon Bonaparte and his new wife.

The emperor carried himself with an air of command and authority. His uniform rivaled the decoration of his fiancée's costume, adorned with large gold medals, epaulets about his shoulders, and a bright-red sash draped along his waistcoat. The archduchess appeared regal as well, her silvery-blue gown trailing behind her. Atop her head she wore a large diamond tiara, and she seemed to stand next to the emperor as merely an ornament while he prattled on to their company.

No doubt Sarah knew who they were, yet she maintained her poised, easy confidence as she spoke with the couple.

"She is conversing with the man himself," Lord Ramsey whispered to James from behind with a touch of surprise and admiration in his voice. "Your wife has made quick work of our objective here, rubbing shoulders with the elite of France."

"Let us hope the general may disclose to her something that will help us."

"Or Lady Whitfield might just have to unearth the intelligence we need from Bonaparte himself." Lord Ramsey chuckled.

Sarah dipped in a curtsy, her right leg sweeping behind her as she held the general's arm for support. The emperor and archduchess nodded and turned away while General Damas walked Sarah over to the replica and seemed to be describing the monument's design and construction to her.

"I found his name," James whispered to Lord Ramsey. "I found Patrick's name on a prison log."

Lord Ramsey raised a brow. "Any idea as to where he was imprisoned?" He barely moved his mouth as he spoke.

“No.” James pressed his lips together in a grimace. “We did see a map with the log, but it was not clear what it was for.”

“Hmm, let me round up the others that we may surround Lady Whitfield from all sides,” he muttered and turned in search of his brother- and sister-in-law while James kept his eyes glued on Sarah and the general.

The general led her to the window and pointed toward the city center, where James assumed he was showing her the exact location where the arc would stand. With so much talk of the monument, Sarah might be able to point the conversation toward military matters. James altered his position, sauntering to the other side of the room, where he gazed out the window adjacent to them. He had done a very poor job of finding a dance partner but thought it better to keep a close distance to Sarah in case she needed his assistance. Though, behind enemy lines, Sarah continued to act her part, laughing merrily. James smiled to himself, thinking that had he known of her talents, he might have recruited her to the navy. What an effective spy she might have been.

Lord Ramsey returned with Lady Ramsey and Madame and Monsieur de Vitré following closely behind. Nodding to James as they walked past, they entered the salon and nonchalantly planted themselves around the room. James felt much more settled with the reinforcements, but the watching and waiting was trying his patience.

He thought it quite bold of General Damas to spend this amount of time and attention on one lady, but he gathered the man felt himself above adhering to societal conventions, and the celebratory drinking was certainly lessening his concern for such matters. A footman soon brought Sarah and the general two more flutes of champagne. The man drained his glass and acquired another before the footman moved on. Sarah’s first glass was still full, and as she sipped its contents, James noticed none of the liquid disappeared. Clever girl. She was not going to allow her faculties to be compromised in the least. James blew a breath through his clenched teeth as he watched her on the arm of this inebriated, foolish man. As unnerved as he was, he knew he needed to trust Sarah and her newfound skill in the art of deception.

Lady Ramsey approached the general then, and as Sarah introduced them, the countess curtsied gracefully. James looked at Lord Ramsey, eyes wide. Standing betwixt these two sirens, he did not stand a chance.

With a lady on each arm, the general led them in the direction of the stairs. James made eye contact with each protector as they all sought to change positions and follow closely behind. The other guests seemed to be consuming an inordinate amount of champagne as well, diminishing their observational powers.

James and Lord Ramsey descended the stairs and, once outside, spotted the trio strolling a path to the gardens. It would be trickier to remain unobtrusive with far fewer people outside. The men spread out and took different paths, ensuring that the ladies and the general were surrounded at all sides. James positioned himself farther down the garden path near a large oak tree, and when the general and the ladies passed, he noticed Lady Ramsey had a bottle of champagne in one hand and was filling the general's glass each time he finished it.

The full moon shone down, illuminating the garden, but James's view was soon obstructed by the tall rows of shrubbery as the group continued walking. The mazelike garden proved difficult to navigate, but fortunately, the general's booming voice alerted James of the man's location at all times. The general's speech started to slur and then turn to incoherent babble, when suddenly a great thud sounded as something hit the ground, followed by silence.

James's heart stopped. Desperate to find the ladies, he scurried through the garden toward where he'd last heard the general's voice. He peeked through a hedge and found the general collapsed on the ground, unconscious, and Sarah and Lady Ramsey leaning over his hunched figure. Startled by his footsteps as he dashed around the hedge, Sarah whipped her head around but quickly relaxed when she saw him.

"He just keeled over," she whispered.

Lord Ramsey rounded the hedge from the opposite direction, somewhat breathless. He, too, must have suffered alarm by the abrupt thud on the ground.

"What shall we do with him?" Lady Ramsey placed her hand over her mouth to suppress a smile. The situation was absurd.

"Let us find a bench whereupon we may leave him to sleep it off," Lord Ramsey suggested. "Ladies, you have done what you could. Now, walk toward the palace, and we shall have the carriage pulled round."

Sarah and Lady Ramsey scurried away, arm in arm, toward the palace

while James and Lord Ramsey hoisted the general up, each with an arm under one of his shoulders. Both hunched quite low under the weight of the general's body. His girth propelled Monsieur de Vitré to lift him from behind as they carried him out of the gardens. They hefted him to a stone bench nestled in the tree line, and when they set him down, his form collapsed to the side.

"Is he breathing?" Monsieur de Vitré queried.

James nodded as he saw the rise and fall of the general's chest. "We shall leave him to his sleep, and I think the worst he can expect when he wakes is a throbbing headache."

The men smiled at each other. "We are fortunate no one happened upon us this evening during this little ordeal." Lord Ramsey placed his hand on James's shoulder. "Gentlemen, I think this is the ideal time to exit. Let us go in search of our carriage." The men nodded. "Move with discretion. We are nearly out of danger."

Everyone dispersed except James, who paused to look back at the general. He wanted to pummel the man in the same way this man had allowed Patrick to be beaten. Perhaps he should search the man's pockets. He lifted the general's jacket and slipped his two fingers into his waistcoat pocket. He felt nothing and then, checking the other pocket, found a folded white handkerchief with Napoleon's crest stitched in gold thread. James stuffed the handkerchief into his own pocket and set off into the trees toward the parked carriages.

He could feel the weight of his pistol jostling in his jacket. This day could have turned out quite differently without the unexpected appearance of Lord Ramsey and Sarah. *Sarah*. She had been extraordinary tonight, and he yearned to tell her so. He also yearned to tell her he loved her. Until he did so, how could he rest?

CHAPTER 21

SARAH HAD NEVER FELT SO invigorated and yet so exhausted in her life as she lay her head back on the soft velvet bench of the de Vitrés' carriage. As they bumbled over the stone streets, away from the center of Paris and farther from danger, she began to relax for the first time since receiving James's note. She wondered at the time; surely it was hours past midnight. Just a hint of light touched the eastern sky, suggesting the coming of dawn. She smiled, thinking she had done her duty by attracting the particular attention of General Damas. Though at times her mission had been extremely nerve-racking, she felt beyond satisfied with how the evening had transpired. She had convinced not only the general of her ruse but Napoleon Bonaparte himself.

She had proclaimed herself a French-born cousin of Madame de Vitré who had lived in England for some years. The only thing that gave her pause was knowing James and the others would be anxious to hear about her conversation with the general. That man was as odious as Narcissus.

"The manners of the French must be refreshing after spending so much time among the spiritless, boresome English." The general stumbled through the steps of the waltz, throwing Sarah off balance.

"Yes, they are, General. I do feel most refreshed to finally be back home." Sarah batted her eyes in his direction. "I have been desperate to come home to France. For the food, the fashion, and especially the people. The British did tire me so." Sarah pressed her lips into a pout.

"A charming lady such as yourself has come to the right man. I am everything the British are not—intelligent, passionate, and French." He thought himself so clever, his smirk dripping with conceit. "And I have become their very worst nightmare. I have deceived some of England's finest." He chuckled as if he were dying to boast of his secrets.

"Whom do you mean, sir?" Sarah feigned innocence. She tried to keep the general dancing and talking.

"Mark my word, mademoiselle, we shall have them conquered within the year."

"Even the British navy?" Sarah prompted.

"Idiots, all of them. We have an entire prison, hidden away, full of naval officers."

Sarah gasped. "Here in Paris?"

"My dear, rest your pretty head. They are not so near," the general said. "I am in need of more refreshment. Follow me."

A touch of trouble had arisen when the general became tipsy from the champagne. His behavior toward Sarah had turned improper, and she was most grateful when Margot had stepped in to assist her. She was not sure how she would have handled the man otherwise without making a scene.

She knew not whether it was the crush of the ballroom or her nerves, but she had not stopped perspiring all evening. The breeze from the window of the moving carriage now felt marvelous. She unclasped her earrings, her lobes aching under the weight of the diamonds she had been wearing.

She heard Lord Brumley urge the horses on as they ascended the hillside to Saint-Cloud. When they rounded the last bend and turned into the de Vitré estate, Sarah breathed a sigh of relief. The gates closed behind them, and they came to a halt on the circular drive in front of the house.

When James exited the carriage and extended his hand to Sarah, doubt came unbidden into her thoughts. She cast her eyes down to the ground. Until now, she had pressed forward, focused solely on his safety and the success of their mission. But now, as she descended back into the stark light of reality, she was reminded that back in London, James had left her again. And she had boldly pursued him all the way to France. Yes, he had kissed her, but what that meant she did not know. Perhaps nothing. Feeling foolish, her cheeks flushed warm and she brushed past him into the house, not daring to look his way.

When the entire party piled into the drawing room and seated themselves, there was silence, and they all seemed to be waiting for a report on Sarah's evening with the general. She took in a breath and looked at Margot, needing some support.

Not knowing quite where to start, she began with her most obvious observation. "It is very possible General Damas could have been the man who masqueraded as Chappelle. His arrogance compelled him to brag of his many deceptions."

"Did he tell you of any specific subterfuge?" The intensity of James's expression gave her pause.

"No."

Monsieur de Vitré interjected. "I have no doubt the pomposity of this man

can only recommend him to Bonaparte.”

“The size of Napoleon’s own ego can be witnessed by that ball. That entire palace is a shrine to the emperor,” Lord Brumley huffed.

“I do envy his stables though,” Lord Martin jested. “I counted thirty-seven horses.”

“Let Lady Whitfield continue.” Lord Ramsey quieted his comrades, and all eyes returned to her.

Sarah hesitated. “He did speak of a prison, full of British officers, hidden away somewhere in France, though not close.”

James sat up in his chair, his eyes wide with intrigue. “Did he give a name?”

“No.” James’s face fell, and Sarah glanced at Margot again. “After excessive champagne he became nonsensical, and it was difficult to converse with him before he collapsed in the garden.” She knew they had narrowly escaped incident, and now James knew it too.

“Lord Whitfield, the map we saw had several marks throughout Paris but only one outlying,” Monsieur de Vitré piped in.

“Compiègne,” they said in unison.

James stood abruptly. “Do you have a map?”

Monsieur de Vitré left the room and returned with a large atlas. “This book has more than a few detailed maps of France.” Everyone stood and gathered around the small table as he opened the book and flipped through its oversize pages to a map of northern France and ran his finger along the page until it reached its mark. “Here it is.”

Madame de Vitré spoke next. “Lucas, do you remember after we returned home from England, we heard of a most horrific event toward the end of the Revolution in the village of Compiègne? Sixteen Carmelite nuns were thought to be housing a young aristocratic girl. They were expelled from their convent and executed by guillotine.”

Monsieur de Vitré nodded.

Sarah bristled at the thought. “How is that possible?” she asked.

“The government at that time was looking for any reason to suppress the church and seize their lands,” Monsieur de Vitré explained. “They justified the most unimaginable horrors in the name of equality and human reason.” His eyes filled with soberness, and the room went quiet.

Sarah thought of Margot, who at such a young age might have easily

succumbed to the same fate as those nuns had it not been for the heroic rescue of her family by Lord Ramsey and his noble brothers. Lords Brumley and Martin stood with crossed arms, listening. She wished the nuns would have met such heroes as these.

“Many religious orders were abolished during the Reign of Terror, which has left churches and convents vacant throughout France.” Monsieur de Vitré’s eyes darted back and forth as though he were computing numbers. “The convent.” He looked at his wife. “That is the prison.” He then looked at James. “The convent in Compiègne sits in dense woodlands with nothing but a small fishing village for miles around. It would be an easy location to keep confidential.”

“And it is right on the river Oise, not thirty miles from the coast”—Lord Ramsey pointed his finger to the map as well—“which makes for easy transport of foreign prisoners.”

“And a direct escape route to our sailing vessel,” Lord Brumley agreed.

“Nearly. There is a bit of land to cross from the river’s outlet to the *Whispering Penny*.” Lord Martin also drew his finger along the map.

“Monsieur de Vitré, might you be able to escort the ladies to the coast by carriage, where after we have freed Lieutenant Sloane, we may rendezvous with them and drive the thirty miles north to the *Whispering Penny*?”

Sarah’s brow rose in surprise at Lord Ramsey’s question. His casual tone suggested they were planning a day at the seaside. In that instant he had just turned the conversation into a rescue plan. She usually appreciated his lightness and confidence—in the past it had been reassuring—but tonight was different. An awful sense of dread closed in on her, weighing her down.

Madame de Vitré answered for her husband. “Of course we will escort them safely to you, and I will relish every moment I have left to spend with my sister.” Margot and Natalia hugged each other and exchanged a kiss on the cheek.

Her words, too, should have comforted Sarah, but they did not. Just a short time ago, they had fled one perilous situation, and now she watched as a new plan took shape for an even more dangerous rescue. She paced to the window, if not to breathe the fresh air, then at least to look at the open sky. The sun had risen, and the sky was now bright. She stood beside the curtain and watched the wispy clouds glide along the horizon. Saint-Cloud sat atop a large foothill, and the view of the city extended for miles. It was picturesque,

but the serenity of the scene did nothing to soothe her.

Sarah could no longer repress her feelings. She loved James. She had always known it, but what was she to do? She looked back at him scanning the maps, his brow fixed with intensity. He kept running from her, and he would leave her again tonight. She could not allow herself to confront the dangers he would face. Dread seized her lungs, stealing her breath and deflating the courage she had previously felt. But was this not what they had come for? She knew if there was any chance of finding Patrick in that prison, James would take it, or he would never be able to find peace and come back to her. But would he ever find peace? Would he ever come back to her? The questions pressed on her heart, but she could not seek answers, not yet. For now, Patrick's rescue was foremost on everyone's minds. She would seek a quiet moment with James once the rescue was in place, but the afternoon came and went with no such opportunity.

At dinner, Lord Ramsey repeated the details of their plan, and Sarah hoped four men would be sufficient to carry it out without coming to any harm. She was relieved, however, to learn they were not set to leave until morning, giving them a little extra time to say goodbye.

After dinner James and Sarah took a walk in the garden. Sarah had to admit, outside of Paris, France was beautiful in the moonlight. Sprays of pink and orange bougainvillea clung to the trellised walls of the château. She breathed in the fragrance of the blooms, trying to calm her unsettled heart.

"Do you think this as lovely as your secret garden?" James asked her.

"It is not only mine; it is yours as well. You did discover it." She glanced in his direction. "And nothing could be as lovely as our secret garden, simply because it is ours." She smiled at him.

James's pleasant expression fell away, and his eyes narrowed with intensity. He stopped to face her and took her hands in his. "Sarah, I love you." The words sprang from his mouth as if they could not be contained.

She breathed in the silence for a moment as she tried to register his words. "You do?" She could not believe it.

"I do." He sighed. "Most profoundly."

He loved her? She let his sweet words sink into her heart. "I love you too, James."

"You do?" He seemed as surprised by her declaration as she was by his.

"I never stopped." She paused. "I have been angry and mistrustful, but I

never stopped loving you, not for a moment.”

Her entire body melted as James wrapped his arms around her and buried his head in her shoulder. She could feel his heart pounding against her. Could this be true? Her own heart raced as she gently caressed the back of his neck.

James lifted his head from her shoulder and looked down at her lips. “That kiss in the library. I have thought about that kiss every day, every hour, since.” He hovered over her lips, a breath away, but she could not wait. She lifted herself onto her toes and brushed his lips with hers, soft and sweet.

James responded with intensity, urging her backward against the trellised wall. His kisses, mingled with the aroma of the flowers, felt like heaven, pure heaven. Her affection, no longer denied, spilled out of her. With every kiss, every soft touch, she hoped to convey all the feelings she had buried away for so long.

After some moments, James lifted his head and looked into her eyes, his breath labored. “Sarah, I want you to know something.” He stroked her back in gentle circles. “I would not be able to attempt this rescue if you had not been courageous enough to travel to France. It was you who made this possible.”

A portion of the dread she felt earlier crept back into her mind. James reached into his pocket and pulled out a white handkerchief. He set it in her hand, and she surveyed it. “What is this?” she asked, running her fingers along the gold-threaded crest.

“I acquired it from off the general’s person after he collapsed. I want you to keep it and always remember that you rescued me that night.” Sarah accepted the gift, desperately hoping this was not the last gift he would give her, that this embrace was not the last they would share. She worked to quell the anxiety that threatened to rob her of the bliss of knowing he loved her. He loved her. James continued to search her countenance. “You have rescued me in more ways than I can number. You never gave up on me.”

Sarah rested her hands on his chest. “Don’t give up on us now, James,” she whispered into the space between them. “Come back to me.”

His only response was to keep her in his embrace for as long as he was able.

CHAPTER 22

JAMES MOUNTED HIS HORSE ON the front drive of Château de Vitré, a slight rainfall sprinkling the drive. He patted the dark-brown gelding's neck and adjusted the reins. This horse was not Jet, but he seemed powerful and strong. He could feel the life in him, his suppressed movement that at James's first command would spring into motion. James felt the same. He was ready to ride.

He peered down from his horse at Sarah, standing on the drive, and saw in her eyes distress she could not mask. He smiled at her with affection, hoping to convey a measure of confidence, perhaps more than he felt. Gratitude welled up in his breast as he considered her bravery in supporting his efforts again and again. The connection between them severed, however, when Monsieur de Vitré exclaimed, "You look like the four horsemen of the apocalypse."

"I quite agree," Lord Ramsey replied. "We do look ominous, hooded and cloaked as we are."

James examined the sky. It was filled with black clouds, and he was sure this slight drizzle would turn to a downpour soon. The horses stamped their hooves and huffed visible puffs of steam.

"Let's be off, gents." Lord Martin gripped his reins, ready to lead out.

"It is a day's journey to Compiègne, and with any luck we will be to the coast by morning," Lord Ramsey called out as his horse circled the drive.

"We will be there to receive you," Monsieur de Vitré agreed as he and his wife and Sarah waved to the riders.

Lord Brumley rode up next to James. "After you, sir."

James nodded and turned back to Sarah. "Goodbye, my love." He tipped his hat one last time and spurred his horse into motion, hoping against hope that he would see her again.

Before long, they were galloping at a full sprint, heading north into the woods. They followed the instructions of Monsieur de Vitré and kept off the main roads, their plan to follow the river, which would lead them straight to Compiègne. Lord Ramsey and Lords Brumley and Martin were all exceptional riders, and they made excellent time. After some hours of riding, they stopped to rest and water the horses. They had outrun the weather, and the sky was now clear, which would aid them with their rescue plans. James

stripped off his cloak and laid it over his saddle. He turned when he heard someone approach him from behind.

“Lord Whitfield.” Lord Ramsey paused and took a breath. “I am sure you have considered the possibility that Lieutenant Sloane might not be a prisoner in Compiègne?”

“I have, Your Lordship.” James was a touch surprised by the question. As they had made their plans for Patrick’s escape, Lord Ramsey’s mood had been light, almost cheery. He now suspected the earl had acted this way for the same reason he had, to bolster the confidence of his wife and the others.

“And if we do not find him?”

James could not fault him for asking, but this was not the first time he had contemplated this question, and he knew the answer. “Then, having exerted my best efforts to find my friend, I will be able to return home with no regrets.”

Lord Ramsey nodded, seeming satisfied with his answer.

When the earl turned, James called after him. “Lord Ramsey? I have not properly thanked you for the support you provided Sarah in coming to France and for the aid you have given me on this mission, which is not without risk.” He paused. “Neither you nor your comrades have ever even met Lieutenant Sloane.”

Lord Ramsey put his hand on James’s shoulder. “I know what it is to lose a brother.” Lords Brumley and Martin, now listening, nodded their agreement. “Besides”—Lord Ramsey’s jovial expression returned—“we are always ready for a jaunt in the woods, am I right, brethren?”

“Too right,” Lord Brumley replied with a glint in his eye, and Lord Martin grunted, smacking Lord Brumley on the back.

James felt more than a bit lucky to have these gentlemen as allies. He had no idea how he had thought to go it alone.

“Shall we, gentlemen?” Lord Ramsey mounted his horse, and the rest followed, setting off along the river.

By early evening they made their approach to Compiègne. The village was small and eerily quiet. James hoped they did not appear too conspicuous and was glad there seemed to be little activity near this place.

Lord Ramsey led the men to an inn situated on the outskirts of the village, where a signpost over the door read La Maison du Fleuve. He dismounted and said, “Let me inquire within and see what I can learn. Perhaps I may find

our bearings with the innkeeper.”

James surveyed the quaint inn while he waited with the others. It looked more like a cottage than an inn, with its thatched roof and flower boxes beneath the windows. He watched the smoke as it escaped from the chimney and meandered up into the sky. He breathed in the crisp air, wondering if the prison was nearby. Was Patrick nearby?

“What’s taking him so blasted long?” Lord Martin muttered.

“Have you ever known Lord Nicolas to be short with words?” Lord Brumley cocked his head at both the men.

Lord Martin did not reply and only huffed a snicker as James half-smiled.

They waited outside for what seemed like half an hour before Lord Ramsey emerged from the public house.

“Follow me.” He did not stop but led them around the back of the inn. “The convent prison is only a mile up the river,” he whispered as they put their heads together. “I did not even have to inquire. The innkeeper’s wife assumed the prison was my destination. I think most travelers who pass through this area must have some kind of business there. She suggested I conduct mine before ten o’clock, when the night watch begins and no one is let in or out after that.”

The men shared a nod.

“That is our window. The changing of the guard,” Lord Martin said.

“We must make haste and survey the lay of the land before nightfall.” Lord Ramsey began moving toward the river. “If we can assess the guard activity outside the prison, we have a much greater chance of finding a weak point where we may gain entry.”

They followed the river, leading the horses on foot, until they reached an arched bridge that led to the old convent’s front gate. When James saw it, he felt his blood course rapidly through his veins. Patrick was here, in this very place—he could feel it. Any hesitation he may have felt earlier left him and was replaced with resolute purpose.

It seemed ironic that this building was quite beautiful, nestled in the trees and looking very much like a church. Stone arches surrounded the building like buttresses supporting the structure. The focal point was a bell tower, which emerged from what appeared to be a courtyard in the center of the convent. A large iron gate fortified the entrance, a guard on each side.

“We must cross the bridge if we are to investigate the perimeter,” James

whispered to the others.

“Martin and I will tie the horses in the woods,” Lord Brumley whispered, and James handed him his reins.

When they returned, Lord Ramsey directed, “The river is shallow just here. We will cross under the bridge so as not to expose ourselves if there is anyone on the road. Brumley and Whitfield, take the east side, and Martin and I will go west. Find out what you can—the locations of doors and guard posts.”

They crouched low, looking for the right time to move. At Lord Ramsey’s signal, they waded through the river under the bridge and found cover in the trees fifty paces from the front entrance to the convent. James and Lord Brumley hunched low in the foliage and moved to the east, where they saw two more guards walking the perimeter. There seemed to be guards stationed on each wall of the prison. James wondered if it would be the same during the night watch. There were no doors on the east wall of the convent, only barred windows, but as they made their way to the backside of the prison, they saw what looked like another entrance on the far-east corner. A small wooden door, a utility entrance, perhaps? They kept low, watching and waiting.

Before long, Lords Ramsey and Martin rounded the corner on the opposite side of the building and carefully made their way to James and Brumley. It was a fortunate circumstance that dense woods surrounded the convent on all sides.

“Two guards on the west wall,” Lord Ramsey called in a whisper.

“No entrance,” Lord Martin added.

“It’s the same on the east,” James responded.

“See that door?” Lord Brumley pointed to the door at the corner of the back wall. “That’s something.”

All four men sat low in the foliage, waiting while they watched the guards pass back and forth on the rear wall. Some minutes later, the small wooden door opened, and a young man, not older than eighteen, emerged, carrying a knapsack on his shoulder and a large net.

“I will follow him,” James whispered.

“What for?” Lord Brumley asked.

“By the looks of his net, he is a fisherman and might lead us to a boat. And if this river leads to the coast, it will be a far better means of escape than on

land.”

Lord Brumley nodded as he took his meaning.

“What of the horses?” Lord Martin asked.

“Lead them downstream, well past the bridge, and tie them by the water,” Lord Ramsey instructed. “I will inform Monsieur de Vitré where to recover them, but right now I will go with Lord Whitfield. Meet back here in one hour.”

James and Lord Ramsey crept through the woods toward the river. They crouched in the foliage, watching, having lost sight of the young man for some minutes. James shrugged his shoulders at Lord Ramsey, as it appeared they had lost him. Then they heard a loud scraping noise coming from the trees to their right, and the young fisherman appeared once again from out of the woods, pulling his skiff to the river’s edge. They watched as he launched the boat into the river and rowed upstream a bit.

“It appears we have found ourselves a boat,” Lord Ramsey said. “It looks large enough to carry five men.”

James swallowed his nerves, hoping they would leave this place at all, let alone with five men. They followed the young man, staying a good distance behind so as not to alert him of their presence as he anchored his vessel to the riverbank and tied a rope around his waist. They watched in surprise as he dove headfirst into the dark water. He soon emerged from the surface and hoisted himself back into the boat, pulling a full net behind him, his empty one still in the skiff. He kept pulling and eventually hauled a fair-sized catch over the side of the boat. He fastened the net together and then took the empty net and, with it, dove back into the water, where James assumed, he was securing another net for tomorrow’s catch.

When he came ashore, it was tempting to think of apprehending him, wet and exposed, as he pulled his boat back out of the water, but James thought better of it, thinking it would be easier to just follow the young man back to the prison. James felt the pistol in his jacket, acknowledging that if he had to use it, they would lose the advantage of being concealed. The longer they could remain undetected, the better. There was a distinct chance, however, that they would have to use force to gain entry into the prison.

It took some time for the boy to haul his catch back to the convent, and James and Lord Ramsey returned to find Lords Brumley and Martin waiting for them in the woods. Both men nodded, communicating that the horses had

been moved, and they all watched as the fisherman propped the door open, lit a lantern, and proceeded to gut his fish on a rock just outside the door. They had intended to wait for the changing of the guard, but they were now looking at an open door. James eyed the others and knew they were thinking the same. They waited for the prison guards to walk in the opposite direction.

“Now, before they turn around,” Lord Ramsey whispered.

They ran from the cover of trees toward the young man. Lord Martin snuck in from the side and grabbed him, holding his arms down with one arm and covering his mouth with his other hand. “Agh, he smells like fish guts,” Lord Martin spat in a whisper.

The fisherman squirmed and tried to shout as they pulled him through the door. Lord Brumley ripped the young man’s apron in half and used one piece to tie his hands and another to gag his mouth. James pulled his pistol from his jacket and followed Lord Ramsey, locking the door behind them.

The kitchen was dark and quiet, except for a lone candle burning in the corner. The stench of fish was thick, and James wondered if that was the only thing the prisoners here ate. They left the kitchen, fisherman in tow, and continued down a dark corridor, the whole place quiet, until they heard men’s voices and the clamoring of a gate in the distance. They froze, listening to the voices, which seemed to be growing quieter.

“It is nearly ten o’clock,” James whispered to Lord Ramsey. “Perhaps the guards have left their posts.” They rounded a corner and heard more voices behind the two large doors in front of them. “I have an idea. Tie my hands, Lord Ramsey.” James placed his hands behind his back, and Lord Ramsey tied them with his neckcloth. “Brumley, we will distract the guards at the door, and you come from behind and render them unconscious, if you take my meaning.”

Brumley nodded.

Lord Ramsey opened the door and yanked James inside, proclaiming in gruff, brash French, “We have another one!”

The smell of urine and filth nearly knocked James to his feet in the large chapel-like room.

“What?” The guards stood and turned to them.

“Another prisoner.” Lord Ramsey yanked James forward again, positioning them so as to face the guards away from the doors.

“Who are you, sir?” The guard to the left scanned Lord Ramsey up and

down, squinting at him incredulously. "You are not a guard."

Before he could inquire further, Lord Brumley came barreling through the door and thumped him over the head with the butt of his pistol. The guard fell to the ground. The other guard looked down at his comrade and then up at Lord Brumley, who smiled. "Down you go," he said as he struck the second guard, who also fell to the ground. Lord Martin and the kitchen boy pushed through the door as Lord Ramsey untied James.

The men surveyed the room. The darkness was thick, as the lower windows were boarded and barred. Men slept on cots lining the walls from one end of the stone hall to the other with only a narrow aisle in the center. James looked up at the vaulted ceiling and the stone pillars extending upward into the darkness. So much space above and so much filth below. The shock of it pulled him into action. He grabbed a lantern from the wall and walked the aisle briskly, looking for someone he could rouse. "You, sir?" James crouched low beside a prisoner with whom he made eye contact. "Do you know of a prisoner here by the name of Lieutenant Patrick Sloane?"

"You are English?" The prisoner sat up in astonishment. "Who are you?" James did not have an answer.

Lord Ramsey jumped in from behind him. "Our business is none of your concern, but we mean you no harm." He spoke low and curt.

The prisoner roused his companion, sleeping on the cot next to him, and began to whisper.

"Sir?" James inquired again, more forcefully. "Lieutenant Patrick Sloane. Have you heard of this man?" Other men sat up, stirred by the commotion.

"He helps the doctor." The soft, childlike voice belonged to a boy lying on a cot across the aisle. James darted over to the boy's side, the others following. The boy could not have been older than fifteen. He did not lift his head and appeared weak and ill as he pointed across the chapel to a door at the edge of the room. "The infirmary," he said and then dropped his hand back onto his cot as if it took all his energy to point them in that direction.

"He is here. Patrick is here." James motioned in the direction of the door. The room was starting to fill with commotion, men standing from their cots.

"We must go," Lord Brumley called to James and Lord Ramsey.

"Lieutenant Sloane is kind."

James looked down at the boy, who stared at the ceiling, as if he were talking to a ghost. James wanted to scoop the boy up and take him with them,

but he knew it was not possible. The boy could barely move; he was not likely to last the night. The nature of war was ruthless, and James had had to make impossible decisions before. He placed his hand on the boy's forehead. "Thank you, my friend." He lingered for a moment before leaving him.

The men scurried down the aisle of prisoners toward the door, the kitchen boy still Lord Martin's captive. They ducked through the doorway to find a dimly lit corridor, but every door they passed was dark and empty. The volume of men's voices in the chapel increased.

"The guards will hear the commotion," Lord Martin said. His prisoner began to squirm and call out from behind his gag, and Lord Martin covered his mouth again to muffle the sound.

"That is good," Lord Ramsey answered. "It will give us a diversion, but likely only minutes."

James led them down the corridor and around the corner where he saw a flicker of candlelight from a doorway. "Here." He motioned toward the door, and they shuffled into a smaller room than the one they'd just left, where there were at least a dozen more men sleeping on cots. By the sight of them, it was clear this was the infirmary. James looked at each of the men but saw no sign of Patrick or a doctor. He was not here. James looked again at each prisoner. "Do any of you know Lieutenant Sloane?" Doubt crept in as he realized the boy could have been suffering from delusions.

"They took him."

"What?" James leaned down to the soldier who spoke.

"He's gone."

Distant clamoring jolted him to his feet.

"The guards must have reached the chapel," Lord Brumley called from the corridor.

Lord Ramsey placed his hand on James's shoulder. "We must go."

James froze in disbelief. This was not how this was supposed to end. He was supposed to find Patrick here.

"Lord Whitfield?" Lord Ramsey took his arm, but he ripped it away.

"I cannot leave this place without him." James balled his fists, his jaw clenching.

"He is not here," Lord Ramsey countered. "We must go. You must let him go."

James allowed Lord Ramsey to pull him out of the room, and they

followed Lords Brumley and Martin and the kitchen boy through the corridors, looking for an exit. The convent was like a maze.

James choked on his breath. Patrick had been here and now he was gone? Gone where? Was he executed? The mere thought felt like a heavy blow to his gut that left him seizing for breath. He had experienced loss before, but not like this.

Lord Martin called back. “It appears the only exits are through the kitchen and the front gate, but we cannot find either.”

“Ask the fisherman.” Brumley went to untie the gag, and Lord Martin swatted his hand away.

“If we remove his gag, the noise he will make will put us in far more danger than we are now.”

“You, there!”

The men whipped around to see three prison guards advancing toward them.

“Run!” Lord Ramsey commanded.

Alarm spiked through James’s brain, propelling him to move, and they all clamored down the corridor.

“Where is the exit?” James heard Lord Brumley yell at their captive. He looked back to see a raised pistol in the young man’s face. Their captive pointed, and they ran quickly down a corridor to the right. When they came to an open courtyard, they saw a clear path to the front gate. The men sprinted along the outer wall until they found themselves within ten paces of the gate.

“Leave him,” Lord Ramsey commanded, and Lord Martin released the fisherman but left his hands bound. Lord Ramsey dropped two gold coins into the young man’s hands. “*Le bateau.*” The boy looked at the coins, eyes wide with wonder, as the men left him. “Let us hope none of the guards are a very good shot. We make for the river!” Lord Ramsey yelled as they reached the gate.

James tried to catch his breath, but his chest was seizing at the thought of leaving this prison without Patrick. He had risked everything in stubborn pursuit of a futile mission. And now he and his comrades were running for their lives.

Before he was ready, Lords Brumley and Martin opened the gate. “Now!” Lord Martin barked.

James knew the exact moment the outside guards spotted them. He heard yelling, and then shots were fired. He did not stop to look behind him, heaving his body forward, willing his legs to move faster.

Lord Brumley was in front of him, but James had lost sight of Lords Ramsey and Martin. Another shot was fired, and he felt a white-hot explosion pierce his lower back. He fell to the ground, unable to move. He tried to hoist himself up with his arms, but sharp stabs of pain ricocheted through his body, and he fell back down on his face.

He shut his eyes as the agony overtook him and Sarah's face appeared in the darkness. She smiled at him, but he could see only disappointment in her eyes. He knew why. His mulish obstinance had willed him away from her and led him and his comrades into this danger. He had sacrificed their love and his life for nothing—no rescue, no resolution, only death. He reached for her in his mind, but her image vanished before him. He cried out to her, but she was gone. He was alone in the darkness once again.

In the next instant, his arm was yanked up around a man's shoulders. He heard Lord Ramsey's voice but could not discern his words. Another pair of arms took his other side and lifted him off the ground. James heard Patrick's voice pierce the darkness but knew it was impossible. Sharp pangs of light and blackness assaulted his eyes, and he clenched his comrade tight through the pain.

"Keep running! We are almost to the river!"

More shots were fired; he heard voices yelling. The guards were getting closer. They seemed to be multiplying. He slumped down as Lord Ramsey left his side, and he heard the familiar noise of a boat scraping along the ground. The men hoisted him over the side, and James's body collapsed, slamming onto the hard, wet bottom of the skiff. He heard his comrades shout commands at one another.

"James!" Again Patrick's voice rippled through his mind, and James knew he was dying, slipping to the other side to meet his friend.

Splashes of cold water on his face kept him conscious, but soon he begged for relief as every knock and bump of the boat on the water sent shots of searing agony through his body. He felt as if he were being harpooned over and over.

Patrick's voice echoed in his ears. "Stay with me, brother."

He felt himself slipping away. "Please, no . . . Sarah," he uttered on a weak

breath. The boat slammed against something hard, which jolted everyone back and threw James against the side of the boat. The explosion of pain in his abdomen ripped through him, all the way to his eyeballs, which manifested in a flash of light.

And then there was nothing.

CHAPTER 23

“I SEE IT!” SARAH SPOTTED the boat more than a mile upriver. Panicked hope sprang up in her chest as she squeezed Margot’s hand. “They made it. They are coming.” She watched the oars dip into the water as the men rowed, their progress slow as she waited in anxious anticipation. When they were within earshot, the men yelled, but she could not understand them. She first spotted Lord Martin, his large frame unmistakable, then Lord Ramsey. “Margot, I see your husband!” Sarah shouted. They ran down to the water’s edge. Where was James? She could not see him. Lord Brumley stood up, waving his arms, and finally she heard. “He is shot! Lord Whitfield is shot!”

Sarah’s blood ran chill, and panic seized her heart as she registered his words. She yelled back to the carriage, “Monsieur de Vitré, come quickly!”

When the skiff came nearer, Sarah saw a hunched form in the back of the boat, being held upright by a scruffy, bearded man. When the man raised his head, she could barely believe her eyes. Patrick?

Lord Ramsey helped Patrick lift James’s unconscious body upright as the other men rowed the last few paces. Sarah and Margot backed up as the skiff ran aground.

The men lifted James out of the boat.

“This way,” Sarah yelled, pointing toward the carriage.

They hoisted James onto the carriage bench, and Sarah climbed in after him. Was he alive? Did he have breath?

“Is there a doctor?” Patrick called. She turned to realize he was, in fact, real.

“No doctor,” Monsieur de Vitré said. “His best chance is for us to clean and redress the wound for the crossing. Pray he has not lost too much blood.”

They piled in, and Lord Brumley drove the carriage, commanding the horses to a gallop. James lay unconscious, splayed across the bench as the company jostled toward Calais.

“Will he live?” Dread marked Sarah’s question as she looked to Lord Ramsey.

He did not answer. His eyes slunk downward. She realized all the men were covered in mud and blood, and Patrick’s shirt was torn to shreds.

Sarah clutched James’s lifeless hand. “Please, James, come back. Come back to me.”

After more than two hours, the carriage's progress cut to a halt. Lords Brumley and Martin hopped down from the carriage and ran to the hillside cove where the *Whispering Penny* lay anchored in the inlet. Sarah and Margot clung to each other, following Lord Ramsey and Patrick, who carried James.

This time, this crossing, Sarah did not even notice the rocking and swaying of the boat. Over the course of the night and the next day, she held James's head in her lap in the cramped hull, praying for a miracle. She checked his brow often for signs of fever and watched his chest to make sure he breathed. Upon Patrick's inspection earlier, it seemed to have been a clean shot; the musket ball had torn straight through the muscle and exited out of James's abdomen, just under his rib cage. Though he'd lost a great deal of blood, they had been able to stop the bleeding and keep the wound bound. Still, Sarah felt desperate to reach English soil and find a doctor.

She breathed deep, remembering the sight of James yesterday, lifeless, being lifted out of the skiff. Her stomach clenched as she looked down at him now. Every time the boat pitched, he groaned in his sleep. She thought it a good sign, even though she did not want him to feel pain.

"Sleep now, my love," she whispered in his ear as she traced her finger along his whiskered jawline. She looked around the hull at Margot, Lord Ramsey, and Patrick, sleeping.

"My love," James muttered, repeating her words so softly Sarah wondered if she was imagining it. His eyes were closed, but then he uttered another word, almost a croak in his dry throat. "Sarah." She could hardly believe it. She sat up just a little, and the movement caused him to moan in pain. "Is it you?" he whispered through a cough.

"Yes," she whispered, tears almost choking her reply. He turned his head toward her in her lap and breathed out an audible sigh. She held him to her, stroking his hair.

"Patrick." James groaned, appearing to be in great pain as he buried his head in her skirts. "He is gone," he muttered.

He didn't know. He didn't know Patrick was there with them. She must tell him, but she did not want to give his body a shock in his fragile condition.

"James?"

He peeked his eyes open, swollen and moist, and moved his head to look at her. Torment racked his expression, and she yearned to take it away. "Patrick

is here.”

James did not say a word, only looked at her with a deep furrow in his brow. “Here?”

“Yes. Here with us.”

As if the words had finally penetrated his mind, his eyes widened, and he tried to sit up before Sarah could stop him. He groaned in pain and fell back again, unable to hold his own weight. Sarah held his shoulders as he lay back down. “Patrick is . . . just there”—she pointed—“with the others.” James turned to see his friend sitting up in the berth, his head slumped to one side, asleep.

James stared at Patrick. “How did this happen?” he asked. “We left the prison without him. I was shot. I was sure I was a dead man. I don’t understand.” His breath came hard. He was exerting too much of himself.

“Shh, rest now. I will let Lieutenant Sloane and Lord Ramsey convey the details of your escape when the time is right, but it does appear to be quite a miracle. If only I can see you well again.” She placed a soft kiss on his cheek.

James sighed and whispered, “A miracle indeed. If not for this torturous wound, I would have thought I had died and gone to heaven, waking up to the sound of your voice and hearing this news of Patrick.”

Sarah was overjoyed to see the pain in his expression ease a bit.

“You keep appearing out of nowhere like an angel sent to rescue me.” His weary smile appeared grateful, and it caused Sarah’s heart to swell.

“I have no choice. You keep needing to be rescued.”

His attempt to laugh turned to a cough and he winced in pain. Sarah went back to stroking his hair. “I’m sorry I gave you a scare with this wound.” He looked up into her eyes.

Sarah huffed out a breath. “‘A scare’ does not begin to express what that was.”

“But, by the grace of God, I am here, and I never mean to leave you again.”

Sarah did not speak, but a tear slid down her cheek and landed on James’s chin. He reached up and wiped the moisture from her face with the curve of his finger and then, cupping her neck, he pulled her face toward him until their lips met for a tender kiss.

“I had forgotten how besotted you two always were with each other.” Patrick’s voice emerged across the dark hull.

“Patrick.” James tried again to sit up.

“Patrick, will you help me persuade him to stop moving?” Sarah pleaded. “We must still take great care so that my husband may survive this journey.”

Patrick moved to the other side of the hull and took a seat near James’s head. “Listen to your wife now, and rest, old friend.”

“How is it you are here, Patrick?” James’s question was quiet yet insistent. Sarah knew he would not rest until he knew how it was done.

“Monsieur Simone, the prison doctor, and I left the prison to gather vegetables and herbs from the convent garden. We were walking back when we heard shots fired. We ran toward the front gate, whereupon I encountered Lord Ramsey lifting your limp frame off the ground. You gave me quite a shock, brother.” Patrick sighed. “It wasn’t until we had been rowing in the skiff for an hour or so that I was apprised of your extensive efforts to rescue me.”

“How is it you were outside the prison walls?” James whispered.

“When I came to the prison months ago, I was near death, and Monsieur Simone nursed me back to strength. We developed a friendship of sorts, and I took on the role of his assistant. We trust each other. His company and my occupation saved my sanity in that place.”

James sighed in relief. “I am beyond glad to see you.”

“And I you. I understand, were it not for the brave heroics of your wife, I might have remained a prisoner there until Napoleon gave up the ghost.”

Sarah smiled at Patrick’s gratitude. “I always knew she was first-rate.”

Patrick nodded with a grin.

It was clear that James had expended all the strength he could muster, and Patrick soon retired back to his berth. Sarah stroked James’s forehead as he closed his eyes. His brow relaxed, a newfound peace displayed in his expression as he slept. Sarah watched the rise and fall of his chest as he fell into a deep slumber, and she, too, drifted off to sleep. Through the night she woke every so often to find her husband still there, still breathing, still lying in her arms, and amid the turbulence of the sea, her soul felt as calm as still waters.

EPILOGUE

England, June 1811

“BEAT TO QUARTERS!” JAMES REPEATED *the command of the officer of the watch.*
“Every man!”

The drumroll accompanied the frenzy of men preparing for battle. An enemy vessel had been spotted not a mile distant off the starboard bow. Murky fog clung to the surface of the water, hiding the enemy vessel from view. There. He saw it and a flash of fire through the mist.

“Everybody down! Heads down!” Seconds later, eighteen-pounder gunshots ripped through the handrails, exploding into the ship’s rigging.
“Stand fast, men!”

He stood to survey the damage and heard more shots fired. Before he could take cover, a white-hot eruption pierced his side. He was hit! Again! His body slammed onto the deck, and he watched as his own blood seeped onto the wood planks of the quarterdeck. No! No—

“James.” A soft hand gripped his shoulder, and he heard Sarah’s voice, calm and soothing. “Wake up, my love. You’re having a nightmare.”

Sarah. Though the fog of confused panic still lingered, hearing her voice and feeling her warmth beside him began to settle him. He opened his eyes to see her leaning over him. Her hair fell loose across his arm and chest, reminding him he was not alone. He sat up and looked around the quiet bedchamber that had once felt like a prison. Now it was a place of refuge; it was home. The nightmares had become much less frequent, and when they did come, she was always there. He did not have to confront the terrors alone.

James and Sarah had returned to Whitfield Manor last week after nine months in London. Shortly after they had returned from France, word from Château de Vitré had been sent conveying all was well. No one in Paris had heard tell of a prison break in the north of France. Parisian society gossip consisted solely of the birth of Napoleon Bonaparte’s son, whose baptism included the most elaborate procession the empire had yet produced.

James had healed from his wounds and done what he could to participate in the House of Lords for the Season. With Sarah by his side, it had been easy. They had spent most days together and every night. James had not known how life could be sweeter until they’d returned to Whitfield.

An hour later, when he saw it was near dawn, he kissed Sarah’s cheek and

left her slumbering in the house to go check on the progress of their new garden. He had started digging the trenches for the foundation of the wall, and he wanted to survey his work before the wedding.

Lord Calcourt had proposed marriage to Amelia Wilkes not a month past, and today they would wed. James smiled and turned, looking out to the tree line. Everything was burgeoning with life, green and splendid. Hope—that no longer pained him—sprang up in his chest. He looked forward to the coming days and all the unknowns he might face because Sarah was with him. She had shown him a way through his grief, and the clouds had at last begun to clear.

* * *

When James faced Patrick, his oldest friend in the world, on the stone steps behind the old parish church, he smiled. The sun shone down, casting its glow on the idyllic setting. He adjusted Patrick's cravat and brushed off the shoulders of his naval uniform before turning to watch Sarah walk through the wildflowers in the surrounding meadow. She was an angel; he was certain of it.

"I see your wife is absolutely glowing," Patrick said. "I believe it is because of your care of her."

James eyed Sarah. "I believe you are right, Patrick. She is indeed glowing."

He offered her his arm as she approached him. "Lady Whitfield, will you accompany me into the church? The ceremony is about to begin." She nodded and took his arm, looking up at the clear morning sky. "It seems this union has been blessed with the most perfect day," James observed.

"Just like ours," Sarah agreed.

James recalled their wedding day, so many years ago, and the beautiful weather that had blessed their union. He was ever so glad to be this far along in their journey together. That day he had not had a clue how unexpected and rocky their path would be, but he also could not have imagined the joy and the love that had grown from such difficulties.

As they walked into the church and took their seats, James smiled at his mother. Lord and Lady Ramsey sat in the next pew, and James felt most fortunate to be surrounded by friends who would have done anything and had done everything to see him and Sarah happy.

Mr. Wilkes beamed with pride as he escorted his daughter down the aisle.

Miss Catherine Wilkes sat in the pew with Lord Calcourt's two young daughters and lovingly whispered to her soon-to-be nieces. The entire family seemed overjoyed by this union.

James gazed at Sarah while they listened to the words of the ceremony. Amelia and Lord Calcourt promised to love and honor one another in sickness and in health. He held Sarah's hand in his, reaffirming this promise to her in his heart as the words were spoken.

At the end of the ceremony, Amelia and Lord Calcourt traveled down the aisle arm in arm, and as James and Sarah stood with the other parishioners, Sarah leaned toward him. "Do you think we might refurbish the nursery?"

Confused by her question, he said, "Of course, but it might be some time before we have use of it."

"It may be sooner than you realize."

It took some time for realization to dawn on him, but then it happened. His eyebrows rose in surprise. "You are?" He looked down at her waistline. "We are?" He looked back to her eyes.

Sarah nodded, laughing at his flustered reaction. They were alone in the church now, the rest of wedding party having left to see the newlyweds off.

She giggled all the more as James picked her up and swung her around in the aisle. "Is it a boy? Is it a girl?" he asked as he set her down. He could not believe such a miracle was possible.

"My dear, we will not know until our child is born."

James nodded. "Yes, of course." Now he was laughing. "What do we do?"

"Well, mostly, we wait"—she lifted herself onto her toes and kissed his cheek—"and enjoy the beginning of a lifetime of days together."

James looked into her eyes—those eyes that still took his breath away every time he set his gaze upon them. He drew her into his embrace. "That I can do."

Quoted in *An Uncharted Devotion* Edmund Spenser, “*The Ways of God Unsearchable*,” *The Faerie Queene*, Book V, Canto II, in Edward Farr, ed., *Select Poetry, Chiefly Devotional, of the Reign of Queen Elizabeth* (Cambridge: University Press, 1845), 2011, Bartleby, <https://www.bartleby.com/261/9.html>.

John Donne, “No Man Is an Island,” CommonLit, <https://www.commonlit.org/en/texts/no-man-is-an-island>.

Author's Notes

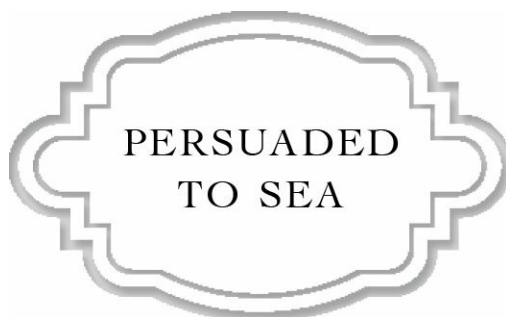
AS A READER OF HISTORICAL fiction, I always enjoy understanding the distinction between actual events in history and the author's creative liberties. Though my story is certainly fictional, much of the events take place within the context of a fascinating period of time in European history. The following are nonfictional aspects that influenced the characters and plotline of my story.

- Compared with other periods in history, there was a significant increase in espionage activity between Britain and France during the Napoleonic Wars. Napoleon himself employed secret agents who spied on various countries and obtained government secrets all over Europe. There is also evidence of female spies during this time. One such notable female, a wife of a British military officer, infiltrated Napoleon's inner circle, acquiring his personal attention.
- Jersey Island is positioned fourteen miles off the coast of France. Smugglers and fishers from Jersey Island were recruited by the continental blockade for espionage between Britain and France. One of these Jersey inhabitants, a British agent, was able to make 184 spy missions from Jersey to France before he was eventually captured by the French and executed in 1808.
- The year 1810 was the height of Napoleon Bonaparte's military prowess. In Paris he enjoyed elaborate military parades and took pride in the pristine condition of his regiments. The arc de triomphe was built in commemoration of his military dominance in Europe, but it would take forty years to erect the monument carved in stone. Only the foundation had been completed by the time of his marriage to the Austrian Archduchess Marie Louise in 1810. In honor of her ceremonial entry into Paris, a full-scale depiction of the design, carved from wood and painted canvas, was erected at the site.
- The Tuileries Palace was Napoleon's primary residence during his reign as Emperor of France. Though France had just endured a bloody revolution, during which aristocrats were targeted and executed by guillotine, Napoleon was more conqueror than revolutionary, and he welcomed the presence of nobles in his society circles. His insecurities

about his humble beginnings caused him to surround himself with titled society and even establish a new aristocracy.

- Hygiene and fashion were of paramount importance during the Napoleonic era, especially at the palace. This extended from Napoleon himself, who placed great importance on his own appearance. Men were expected to wear the same costume when they came to the palace. And women's costumes, though varied, were elaborate in design, including expensive jewelry and perfume.
- During the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, hundreds of thousands of prisoners were held captive all over the world. Before then, it was common practice to exchange and return prisoners to their respective countries, but Napoleon did not release British captives. He did not want to give men back to England to, once again, fight against the French. Captured officers often lived in relative comfort compared with lower-class sailors. Though Patrick was an officer, his living conditions in prison reflected more of the lower class.
- During the French Revolution, the government expelled all nuns and monks from their monasteries and cut off all monetary support. Though less common than my story suggests, some convents and monasteries were converted to prisons. In fact, in 1792 revolutionaries attacked the Tuileries and imprisoned Louis XVI, Marie Antoinette, and their family in an old monastery called Le Temple. They remained there until they were tried and guillotined the following year.
- One of the greatest horrors of the French Revolution was the execution of sixteen Carmelite nuns who offered refuge to a young aristocratic girl. The nuns were expelled from their convent in Compiègne in northeastern France and put on trial in Paris. It is said that when the sisters were carted to the guillotine, the crowd, who normally cheered for the executions, was silent. This event may have been one of the contributing factors to bring about the end of the Reign of Terror. Robespierre himself, the author of much bloodshed during the Revolution, was executed only eleven days later. It is important to note, however, that the Carmelite convent in Compiègne was not converted to a prison.
- Lord Ramsey's character is a combined trope or depiction of Sir Percy Blakeney and Sir Andrew Ffoulkes from the popular novel *The Scarlet*

Pimpernel by Baroness Orczy. The heroics of the league of the Scarlet Pimpernel were not based on historical fact but were all fiction. Unfortunately, those executed by guillotine during the Reign of Terror did not have the hope of rescue by such heroic characters.



PERSUADED
TO SEA

London, England, July 1814

MISS HARRIET LOCKHART GLANCED DOWN from the upstairs window onto the lamplit London drive. It was not yet nine o'clock, and the carriage had already arrived. It was the last public ball of the Season, and she just had to be there. She swiped her gloves from the dressing table and regarded herself in the mirror one last time before descending the staircase in search of her father, the admiral. He had resisted her urgings to attend tonight's ball but had finally relented after Harriet had fairly begged him. Because tonight could change everything.

She started down the stairs, pleased to see her father waiting in the entry hall. He looked smart as ever in his uniform. The gold epaulets adorning the shoulders of his dark-blue coat gave him a regal appearance, and his silver hair appeared quite dignified. The admiral lifted his gaze to her and smiled, his light-blue eyes a stark contrast to the leathery skin that encompassed them. "You look marvelous, my dear."

"Thank you, Father." Harriet slipped her hand through the admiral's arm and gave him a light kiss on the cheek.

He opened the door, and the warm night air enveloped them as they stepped out into the night. She was glad to be wearing a gown made of light muslin material and could not imagine how her father would fare all evening in his wool coat, though she knew he must be used to it. The mild summer air in London was nothing compared to the tropic heat of the East Indies.

As the admiral assisted Harriet into the carriage, she felt giddy with excitement for the evening's festivities and the prospect of seeing Mr. Foote again. Perhaps he might even steal away a moment to ask her a particular question. Her stomach fluttered at the thought.

In recent weeks Harriet had enjoyed the attentions of Mr. Oliver Foote, who seemed a very promising prospect for marriage. He was set to inherit a lovely property near Nottinghamshire, which seemed an idyllic setting to

build a life, but she had not yet secured a proposal. Mr. Foote was polite, well-groomed, amiable—and somewhat obtuse, it appeared. If the man would just propose! Harriet was running out of time. She and the admiral were set to leave for the country in one week.

“I am glad you convinced me to accompany you this evening, my dear, for I have just received word that two of my former captains, Turner and Sloane, will be in attendance.” The admiral’s eyes always lit with enthusiasm when he spoke of the service or the men with whom he served. “I daresay you remember them,” the admiral prodded. “You met them both years ago, when they escorted you and your dear mother to India aboard the *HMS Phantom*.”

Harriet shrugged in disinterest. “Yes, Father, I remember.” Her brows pinched together as an image of her terrified mother holding tight to the ship’s rail as it bore down against the great sea swells infiltrated her thoughts.

“Hattie, hold tight to me!” her mother had called. But fourteen-year-old Hattie had not needed the comfort. She had wanted to join with the sailors as they worked in concert to maneuver the sails and harness the powerful wind, moving their floating vessel farther and farther to the south. When she had stepped away to get a better view of the men climbing the sails, a low, sharp reprimand had pierced her ears.

“Away there, miss!” Hattie had turned to see a large imposing officer ordering her back toward her mother. “Take her below. This is no place for a little girl.” The officer had squinted narrowly at her. She remembered the annoyed and indifferent expressions of all the sailors as her mother had led her across the deck and down to their berth. She had felt so small and insignificant—minimized.

Harriet shook away the memory and turned from the carriage window back to her father. “I remember *Lieutenant* Sloane.” She spoke with sharpness. “He scolded me once when I stepped too near the rigging on deck.”

“He is now *Captain* Sloane,” the admiral corrected her, seeming a touch exasperated with her tone. “Harriet, the only way for a ship’s crew to survive a sea voyage is to follow the orders of their superiors. Captain Sloane was only trying to keep you safe.”

“And subordinate,” she muttered under her breath, turning again to the window to conceal her vexed expression.

“As he should,” the admiral rejoined.

Harriet’s thoughts drifted back to that sea voyage to India. As a young girl,

she had only ever wanted to be like one of those sailors, to be part of the work and excitement, but her mother and the officers, especially Lieutenant Sloane, had moderated her every move, keeping her away from the action in the name of keeping her safe. She huffed out a breath onto the window and watched as its steam left a mark and then disappeared.

Over the years she had grown so very weary of her father's obsession with the navy. It was a world from which she had always been excluded but which had impacted every part of her life. Her father was a stalwart man of duty, and she respected him for it, but it had cost her and her mother a great deal in their lives, the least of which was her entry into Society at a less-than-reasonable age. At almost twenty-one, Harriet had returned to England after seven years living in India and was just now concluding her first London Season.

The admiral had expressed no interest in attending this ball with *her* until he had learned of Captain Sloane's and Captain Turner's attendance. Her father thought of the men as the sons he never had. She, the admiral's only child, had been born a girl, with no hope of becoming anything other than someone's wife.

Harriet adjusted her position and counted the lamp lights, watching the buildings pass by as the carriage wheels clattered over the paving stones. She had grown tired of this conversation and wanted to turn her mind to something more pleasant. She hoped Mr. Foote would be waiting to greet her upon their arrival.

When she stepped out of the carriage, she was disappointed to find that he was not, in fact, waiting for her in the entryway. When she and her father entered the assembly room, Harriet examined the crowd in search of Mr. Foote's auburn hair. The large windows in the dance hall were open, but the crush of the ballroom felt oppressively hot. She watched her father pat his brow with a handkerchief and thought perhaps she should find him a place to sit when she eyed two familiar gentlemen and a lady walking toward them from across the room. Only one of the gentlemen wore the classic officer's uniform of the British navy, and the other, attired in a black coat, escorted the striking lady on his arm. Harriet recognized the couple to be Lord James Whitfield, formerly Captain Turner, and his wife, Lady Sarah Whitfield. Smiling at the handsome pair as they approached, Harriet avoided eye contact with Captain Sloane, who stood to the side.

“Admiral Lockhart, I cannot believe this is the same young lady who used to skip along the upper deck of the *Phantom*, braids flying about.” Lord Whitfield eyed Harriet, shaking his head in disbelief.

“Yes, yes, she is quite grown,” the admiral agreed.

“And quite beautiful,” Lady Whitfield chimed in, smiling warmly at Harriet. Harriet decided she liked the lady immediately.

“I agree,” Captain Sloane piped in from the edge of the conversation, and Harriet could not help but cast a quick glance in his direction. “She can’t be the same little Hattie who hid behind barrels and under stairs, giving the crew ever so much grief.”

Harriet’s heart stopped momentarily. Only her mother had ever called her Hattie, and the mention of the name pricked at her heart. A defensive annoyance sprang up within her. How could this man she barely knew cut straight to such tender and vulnerable feelings in no less than a minute? He did not know her.

“I was fourteen years old then. I was not a child,” she replied, working to keep her emotions in check. “And I daresay one cannot blame me for looking for somewhere to hide, as I was one of the only females on a ship full of sailors who wanted me quite out of the way.” Though she had tried to soften it, her tone fell sharply, and Harriet could tell by looking at the company that they were taken aback. She noticed Lady Whitfield’s subdued smile she tried to cover with her gloved hand.

“I meant no offense, Miss Lockhart.” Captain Sloane stepped toward her, and the intensity of his gaze bothered her even more than his comment had. She could not identify the emotion she felt for this man but decided it was closer to the realm of loathing than anything else.

Where was Mr. Foote? Surely he would have sought her out by now. While the others continued in conversation, Harriet turned back to the assembly, rising up on the tips of her toes in hopes of a better view.

“Are you looking for someone?” The sound of Captain Sloane’s voice startled her, and she came down on her heels in a hurry.

“No,” she lied. “I was just surveying the dancers.”

“If you are certain you are not otherwise engaged, I wonder if I may claim the privilege of the next dance, Miss Lockhart?”

Harriet’s mind went blank. She had no partner to claim for the next dance and no excuses to offer in refusal. She had no desire to dance with this man,

but it seemed there was no escape. “You may.” She sputtered the words as though they did not want to be spoken.

When she turned to face Captain Sloane, she noticed a scar on his lower right cheek that pulled at the symmetry of his mouth when he smiled. She did not think it unappealing, however, and continued to watch the effect it made on his expression when he spoke.

“It has been quite some time since I danced, but I think I remember the steps.”

Harriet shifted her glance from his face to the hand he extended and reluctantly took it, allowing him to lead her to the dance floor. They faced one another, not talking. And when the music for a quadrille began, she turned from his gaze and followed the other ladies into the center of the formation. When she circled back, Harriet attempted conversation to lighten the atmosphere. “When do you return to your ship, Captain?” Her words came out stiff, so she tried to temper them with a smile.

“I do not have a post just now.” They separated once more, and again she followed the other ladies and returned. He continued. “During the peace with France, there is not enough work for all of us.” The captain seemed disappointed by his declaration. He was just like her father—forever yearning to be at sea, lured away by the next assignment, the next orders. Their devotion went beyond duty. It was an obsession of sorts.

She took a deep breath, trying to suppress the weighted feelings his sentiments caused in her heart as she looped around to meet his gaze. “You must wish to return to service as soon as possible,” she replied.

“It is my living.”

“And your passion, I daresay.” Harriet felt bold in her declaration.

The music ended, but Captain Sloane stood in place. “I sense some discord in your tone, Miss Lockhart. You are an admiral’s daughter. I would think *you*, of all people, would understand the nature of life in the service.” He did not move, intent on her reply.

“As an admiral’s daughter, I understand both more and less about the religion you call the navy.”

“What does that mean, exactly?”

“It *means* that for my entire life, the only thing I could expect from my father was his absence.” She looked down at her shoes. “He was forever leaving my mother and me.”

The captain made no reply.

Harriet saw couples taking position for the next dance. "We should move to the side."

Captain Sloane nodded and led her off the dance floor, still quiet before at last responding. "I thought the reason you and your mother moved to India was to be nearer to your father's post." He seemed intent on understanding her, but she knew he never could.

"That is true, but still, we saw him only two or three times a year." Harriet scooted the painful memories of her mother's melancholy aside and painted a smile on her face, curtsying. "It is no matter. Thank you for the dance, Captain Sloane." As she walked away from him, she could not imagine why she had just shared such personal feelings with that man. She did not even like him. She tried her best to shake off the discomforts of their conversation and return to happier thoughts, or less invasive ones, at least.

When she found her father again, she was delighted to discover Mr. Foote standing next to him. She almost skipped toward them, as she knew dancing with Mr. Foote would lift her spirits. There would be nothing remotely heavy about conversation with him, and she welcomed such levity.

He smiled and greeted her in his usual cheerful manner. "I hope my eyes do not deceive me, for I have just spotted the most beautiful lady in the room." Mr. Foote bowed to her, low and deep.

Harriet grinned wider than perhaps was ladylike, but her mood had just taken a swift upward turn. "Mr. Foote, I worried we would not see you this evening. I am happy to be wrong."

She spied the captain just behind Mr. Foote's shoulder, and she swore he was leaning in, perhaps eavesdropping on their conversation. Irritated, she put her hand into the crook of Mr. Foote's arm and turned her back to the captain. She pulled Mr. Foote toward the dance floor, hoping he might take her hint.

"Miss Lockhart, are you keen to dance?" He extended a hand.

"I thought you would never ask." She dipped her chin with a demure smile, working to appear as attentive as possible. She was behaving quite boldly, but she had just been rescued from a most dismal evening, and she meant to make the most of it.

As they danced, Harriet noticed Mr. Foote's perfectly pressed clothes, symmetrical face, and smooth hands. He was neat as a pin, not a hair out of

place. As a man of leisure, he had probably never worked a day in his life. He could afford to look perfect.

The scar on Captain Sloane's cheek infiltrated her thoughts. She pictured his strong rough hands and his sun-kissed, mussed head of hair. A stark contrast to the man before her. She smiled up at Mr. Foote, working to extinguish the captain's image from her mind.

"The weather has been quite hot today," Mr. Foote commented as he stepped through the dance with delicate steps and perfect posture.

"Yes, it has been." Harriet paused. She found she had nothing else to add. But Mr. Foote seemed quite at ease not speaking, so she did not worry too much. There was time enough for conversation after the dance and, with any luck, many days after that.

When the music stopped, Mr. Foote led her to the side of the ballroom. He turned to face her and said, "I wonder if you might walk to the patio with me." For the first time this evening, his expression turned a touch more serious.

Harriet's heart began to pound. This could be the moment she had been waiting for. "Of course," she agreed. "I shall just tell my father. He will not mind, as I am sure we will not be alone."

After informing her father of her whereabouts and allowing Mr. Foote to lead her outside, she was pleased to discover there were enough people on the patio to maintain propriety but she and Mr. Foote had just enough privacy to engage in a discreet conversation.

He seemed nervous and began speaking before Harriet had a moment to compose herself. "Miss Lockhart, I want you to know how much I've enjoyed the time we've spent together these past weeks." A proposal was coming. She knew it. She placed her hand on the rail and tried to slow her breathing, preparing herself. "My father has requested I return to Nottinghamshire right away. He has some matters of business for me to attend to."

Harriet took a breath. He was leaving. She had not anticipated they would have to spend their engagement apart. She had thought perhaps he would stay in London and visit her in Devonshire, which was only a day's carriage ride away. Still, they would be married soon enough. The separation, though unexpected, would be brief.

Mr. Foote paused. Harriet knew he must be nervous, but she was growing

restless. She waited while he appeared to choose his next words carefully. “I wanted to see you this evening . . .” He paused. “To say goodbye.”

Harriet studied him, confused.

“Perhaps we may have the opportunity to meet again sometime in the future,” he added, his voice catching in his throat.

Harriet was speechless. Her breath came quickly. The longer she stayed silent, the more of his discomfort she detected. “When do you leave?” she managed.

“At first light.”

“Oh.” She uttered the word without thinking.

“I fear I must retire for the evening, as I have an early start tomorrow.” It was clear he was looking for an exit.

Pride flared inside her. She straightened her posture and extended a stiff hand. “Well then, farewell, Mr. Foote.” She could not muster any warmth in her tone.

Mr. Foote took her hand, bowed, and placed a stiff kiss on her glove. She watched him turn and walk away, standing motionless—for how long she could not tell. She had no indication that she would ever see him again. A wave of heat rose in her chest. Her thoughts were a muddle, but one emotion emerged and surpassed the rest—anger.

How could he have monopolized her time like he had these past weeks if he’d had no intention of proposing? The Season was over. Her first London Season ever, during which she had attended more parties and balls than she’d ever cared to, in what had become a futile effort to secure herself a marital match. At twenty-one, she already felt like a burden to her father. She was a spinster with dimming prospects. She had just lost what felt like her last chance. And she was angry—angry with her father for taking her to India. Angry with her mother for dying and leaving her all alone. Angry for having been born a girl and not able to secure her own future without the help of a man. What was she supposed to do now? Her father had come back to London, taking a position with the Admiralty *for her*. He was all she had, but he had the whole British navy; he had the whole world.

Harriet grabbed the railing with both hands for support and squeezed as hard as she could. She closed her eyes and tried to shut out the lighthearted voices and conversation of the guests on the patio. As emotion flooded into her heart and mind, she fought the swell of disappointment and the sting of

loneliness. She would not waste a tear on that man.

“Miss Lockhart?” A voice emerged in the darkness behind her. “Are you well?”

She could not think of a worse interruption at this moment than Captain Sloane. She drew in a long breath and turned around to face him. “I am perfectly well.” She tried to answer civilly, but she always seemed to cut straight past manners when she spoke to him.

“You don’t look perfectly well.” Those words, his blatant, rude, dissonant words echoed in her ears—the final straw of the evening. She could not believe the gall of this man.

“Then, please, Captain Sloane, tell me how I look,” she shot back, her breath heaving in and out of her chest, “because *I think* I look like a woman who would like to be left alone, but clearly that is not what you see.” She whipped back around as the tears she had been suppressing welled up in her eyes. She would not let him see them.

He did not reply. He was wise to hold his tongue. If he were really wise, he would retreat. “The admiral would like to leave.” His voice touched her ears, calm and quiet. “He sent me to convey his message.”

Captain Sloane did not deserve her disdain, but she could not bring herself to ask for his pardon. “Thank you.” Her words were barely audible through her tears, and she was certain he could hear the trembling in her voice. She felt grateful and mortified when she heard him at last step away and leave her alone on the patio. She dropped her head and finally let her tears flow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Amanda Taylor is a lover of all things story, whether it be books, movies, theater—musical and otherwise—art, music, or people. She earned her bachelor’s degree in English literature from the University of Utah, which only fueled her passion for classical literature.

She also loves to travel and explore new places with her husband and four teenagers. Though a self-proclaimed city girl, Amanda loves to spend time in nature, preferably the mountains or the ocean—or anywhere that sparks her imagination. Most days, she can be found driving carpool and singing her heart out to her favorite tunes. It took her only forty-three years to sit down long enough to write a story of her own, but now she is hooked. Writing is her new jam!