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THE ORPHAN'S TALE

PAM JENOFF



THE
LOST GIRLS
OF PARIS

CHAPTER ONE

GRACE

New York, 1946

If not for the second-worst mistake of Grace Healey's life, she never would have found the suitcase.

At nine twenty on a Tuesday morning, Grace should have been headed south on the first of two buses she took to get downtown, commuting from the rooming house in Hell's Kitchen to the Lower East Side office where she worked. And she *was* on her way to work. But she was nowhere near the neighborhood she had come to call home. Instead, she was racing south on Madison Avenue, corralling her corkscrew hair into a low knot. She quickly removed her coat, despite the chill, so she could take off her mint green cardigan. She didn't want Frankie to notice it was the exact same one she had been wearing at work the previous day and question the unthinkable: whether she had gone home at all.

Grace paused to study herself in the window of a five-and-dime. She wished the store was open so she could buy some

powder to hide the marks on her neck and sample a bit of perfume to conceal the stench of day-old brandy mixed with that delicious-but-wrong smell of Mark's aftershave, which made her dizzy and ashamed with every inhale. A wino sat on the corner, moaning to himself in sleep. Looking at his gray, lifeless pallor, Grace felt a certain solidarity. From the adjacent alley came the banging on a trash can, a sound marching in time with the thudding in her own head. The whole city of New York seemed green and hungover. Or perhaps she was confusing it for herself.

Sharp gusts of February wind cut across Madison, causing the flags that hung from the skyscrapers above to whip furiously. An old crumpled newspaper danced along the gutter. Hearing the bells of Saint Agnes's toll half past nine, Grace pressed on, her skin growing moist under her collar as she neared a run. Grand Central Terminal loomed hulking ahead. Just a bit farther and she could turn left on Forty-Second Street and catch an express bus downtown on Lexington.

But as she neared the intersection at Forty-Third, the street ahead was blocked. Police cars sat three across, cordoning off Madison and preventing anyone from going farther south. A car accident, Grace suspected at first, noting the black Studebaker, which sat jackknifed across the street, steam billowing from the hood. More cars clogged the Midtown streets than ever these days, jockeying for space with the buses and taxis and trucks making deliveries. There did not appear to be another vehicle involved, though. A lone ambulance sat at the corner. The medics did not rush about urgently, but stood leaning against the vehicle, smoking.

Grace started toward a policeman, whose paunchy face pushed up from the high collar of his uniform, navy with gold buttons. "Excuse me. Will the street be closed for long? I'm late for work."

He looked out at her disdainfully from under the brim of his hat, as if despite all of the women who had worked dutifully in

the factories to take the place of the men who had enlisted and gone overseas during the war, the notion of a woman holding a job was still laughable. "You can't go this way," he replied officiously. "And you won't be able to anytime soon."

"What happened?" she asked, but the policeman turned away. Grace took a step forward, craning to see.

"A woman was hit by a car and died," a man in a flat wool cap beside her said.

Taking in the shattered windshield of the Studebaker, Grace suddenly felt sick. "Such a shame," she managed finally.

"I didn't see it," the man replied. "But someone said she was killed instantly. At least she didn't suffer."

At least. That was the phrase Grace heard too often after Tom had died. At least she was still young. At least there had not been children—as if that made it somehow easier to bear. (Children, she sometimes thought, would not have been a burden, but a bit of him left behind forever.)

"You just never know where it will all end," mused the flat-capped man beside her. Grace did not answer. Tom's death had been unexpected, too, an overturned jeep on the way from the army base to the train station in Georgia, headed to New York to see her before he'd deployed. They called him a casualty of war, but in fact it had been just another accident that might have happened anywhere.

A flashbulb from a reporter's camera popped, causing her to blink. Grace shielded her eyes then backed away blindly through the crowd that had formed, seeking air amid the cigarette smoke and sweat and perfume.

Away from the police barricade now, Grace looked over her shoulder. Forty-Third Street was blocked to the west as well, preventing her from cutting across. To go back up Madison and around the other side of the station would take at least another half an hour, making her even later for work than she already was. Again, she cursed the night before. If it weren't for Mark,

she wouldn't be standing here, faced with no other choice than to cut through Grand Central—the one place she had sworn to never go again.

Grace turned to face it. Grand Central loomed before her, its massive shadow darkening the pavement below. Commuters streamed endlessly through its doors. She imagined the inside of the station, the concourse where the light slatted in through the stained glass windows, the big clock where friends and lovers met. It was not the place she couldn't bear to see, but the people. The girls with their fresh red lipstick, pressing tongues against teeth to make sure the color hadn't bled through, clutching purses expectantly. Freshly washed children looking just a bit nervous at seeing a father who they could not remember because he had left when they were scarcely toddlers. The soldiers in uniforms rumpled from travel bounding onto the platform with wilted daisies in hand. The reunion that would never be hers.

She should just give up and go home. Grace longed for a nice bath, perhaps a nap. But she had to get to work. Frankie had interviews with a French family at ten and needed her to take dictation. And after that the Rosenbergs were coming, seeking papers for housing. Normally this was what she loved about the work, losing herself in other peoples' problems. But today the responsibility weighed down heavy upon her.

No, she had to go forward and there was only one choice. Squaring her shoulders, Grace started toward Grand Central.

She walked through the station door. It was the first time she had been here since that afternoon she'd arrived from Connecticut in her best shirred dress, hair perfectly coiffed in victory rolls and topped with her pillbox hat. Tom hadn't arrived on the three from Philadelphia, where he should have changed trains, as expected and she assumed he had missed his connection. When he didn't get off the next train either, she became a bit uneasy. She checked the message board beside the information booth at the center of the station, where people pinned

notes in case Tom had come early or she had somehow missed him. She had no way to reach him or check and there was nothing to do but wait. She ate a hot dog that smudged her lipstick and turned sour in her mouth, read the newspaper headlines at the kiosk a second, then a third time. Trains came and emptied, spilling onto the platform soldiers who might have been Tom but weren't. By the time the last train of the night arrived at eight thirty, she was frantic with worry. Tom never would have left her standing like this. What had happened? Finally, an auburn-haired lieutenant she'd recognized from Tom's induction ceremony came toward her with an expression of dread and she'd known. She could still feel his unfamiliar hands catching her as her knees buckled.

The station looked the same now as it had that night, a businesslike, never-ending stream of commuters and travelers, undisturbed by the role it had played so large in her mind these many months. *Just get across*, she told herself, the wide exit at the far side of the station calling to her like a beacon. She didn't have to stop and remember.

Something pulled at her leg strangely, like the tearing of a small child's fingers. Grace stopped and looked behind her. It was only a run in her nylons. Had Mark's hands made it? The tear was growing larger with every step now, an almost gash across her calf. She was seized with the need to get them off.

Grace raced for the stairs to the public washroom on the lower level. As she passed a bench, she stumbled, nearly falling. Her foot twisted, causing a wave of pain to shoot through her ankle. She limped to the bench and lifted her foot, assuming that the heel that she had not had fixed properly had come off again. But the shoe was still intact. No, there was something jutting out from beneath the bench she had just passed that had caused her to trip. A brown suitcase, shoved haphazardly beneath. She looked around with annoyance, wondering who could have been so irresponsible as to leave it like that, but there was no

one close and the other people passed by without taking notice. Perhaps whoever owned it had gone to the restroom or to buy a newspaper. She pushed it farther underneath the bench so that no one else would trip on it and kept walking.

Outside the door to the ladies' room, Grace noticed a man sitting on the ground in a tattered uniform. For a fleeting second, she was glad Tom had not lived to fight and return destroyed from what he had seen. She would always have the golden image of him, perfect and strong. He would not come home scarred like so many she saw now, struggling to put a brave face over the brokenness. Grace reached in her pocket for the last of her coins, trying not to think about the coffee she so dearly wanted that she would now have to do without. She pressed the money into the man's cracked palm. She simply couldn't look away.

Grace continued into the ladies' room, locking herself in a stall to remove her nylons. Then she walked to the mirror to smooth her ink-black hair and reapply her Coty lipstick, tasting in its waxiness all that had happened the night before. At the next sink, a woman younger than herself smoothed her coat over her rounded belly. Pregnancies were everywhere now, it seemed, the fruits of so many joyous reunions with the boys who came home from the war. Grace could feel the woman looking at her disheveled appearance. *Knowing*.

Mindful that she was even later now for work, Grace hurried from the restroom. As she started across the station once more, she noticed the suitcase she had nearly tripped over moments earlier. It was still sitting under the bench. Slowing, she walked to the suitcase, looking around for someone coming to claim it.

When no one did, Grace knelt to examine the suitcase. There was nothing terribly extraordinary about it, rounded like a thousand other valises that travelers carried through the station every day, with a worn mother-of-pearl handle that was nicer than most. Only this one wasn't passing through; it was sitting under a bench unattended. *Abandoned*. Had someone lost it? She stopped

with a moment's caution, remembering a story from during the war about a bag that was actually a bomb. But that was all over, the danger of invasion or other attack that had once seemed to lurk around every corner now faded.

Grace studied the case for some sign of ownership. There was a name chalked onto the side. She recalled uneasily some of Frankie's clients, survivors whom the Germans had forced to write their names on their suitcases in a false promise that they would be reunited with their belongings. This one bore a single word: *Trigg*.

Grace considered her options: tell a porter, or simply walk away. She was late for work. But curiosity nagged at her. Perhaps there was a tag inside. She toyed with the clasp. It popped open in her fingers seemingly of its own accord. She found herself lifting the lid a few inches. She glanced over her shoulder, feeling as though at any minute she might get caught. Then she looked inside the suitcase. It was neatly packed, with a silver-backed hairbrush and an unwrapped bar of Yardley's lavender soap tucked in a top corner, women's clothes folded with perfect creases. There was a pair of baby shoes tucked in the rear of the case, but no other sign of children's clothing.

Suddenly, being in the suitcase felt like an unforgivable invasion of privacy (which, of course, it was). Grace pulled back her hand quickly. As she did, something sliced into her index finger. "Ouch!" she cried aloud, in spite of herself. A line of blood an inch or more long, already widening with red bubbles, appeared. She put her finger to her mouth, sucking on the wound to stop the bleeding. Then she reached for the case with her good hand, needing to know what had cut her, a razor or knife. Below the clothes was an envelope, maybe a quarter inch thick. The sharp edge of the paper had cut her hand. *Leave it*, a voice inside her seemed to say. But unable to stop herself, she opened the envelope.

Inside lay a pack of photographs, wrapped carefully in a piece

of lace. Grace pulled them out, and as she did a drop of blood seeped from her finger onto the lace, irreparably staining it. There were about a dozen photos in all, each a portrait of a single young woman. They looked too different to be related to one another. Some wore military uniforms, others crisply pressed blouses or blazers. Not one among them could have been older than twenty-five.

Holding the photos of these strangers felt too intimate, wrong. Grace wanted to put them away, forget what she had seen. But the eyes of the girl in the top photo were dark and beckoning. Who was she?

Just then there were sirens outside the station and it felt as though they might be meant for her, the police coming to arrest her for opening someone else's bag. Hurriedly, Grace struggled to rewrap the photos in the lace and put the whole thing back into the suitcase. But the lace bunched and she could not get the packet back into the envelope. The sirens were getting louder now. There was no time. Furtively, she tucked the photos into her own satchel and she pushed the suitcase back under the bench with her foot, well out of sight.

Then she started for the exit, the wound on her finger throbbing. "I should have known," she muttered to herself, "that no good could ever come from going into the station."

CHAPTER TWO

ELEANOR

London, 1943

The Director was furious.

He slammed his paw-like hand down on the long conference table so hard the teacups rattled and tea sloshed over the rims all the way at the far end. The normal banter and chatter of the morning meeting went silent. His face reddened.

“Another two agents captured,” he bellowed, not bothering to lower his voice. One of the typists passing in the corridor stopped, taking in the scene with wide eyes before scurrying on. Eleanor stood hurriedly to close the door, swatting at the cloud of cigarette smoke that had formed above them.

“Yes, sir,” Captain Michaels, the Royal Air Force attaché, stammered. “The agents dropped near Marseille were arrested, just hours after arrival. There’s been no word and we’re presuming they’ve been killed.”

“Which ones?” the Director demanded. Gregory Winslow, Director of Special Operations Executive, was a former army

colonel, highly decorated in the Great War. Though close to sixty, he remained an imposing figure, known only as “the Director” to everyone at headquarters.

Captain Michaels looked flummoxed by the question. To the men who ran the operation from afar, the agents in the field were nameless chess pieces.

But not to Eleanor, who was seated beside him. “James, Harry. Canadian by birth and a graduate of Magdalen College, Oxford. Peterson, Ewan, former Royal Air Force.” She knew the details of every man they’d dropped into the field by heart.

“That makes the second set of arrests this month.” The Director chewed on the end of his pipe without bothering to light it.

“The third,” Eleanor corrected softly, not wanting to enrage him further but unwilling to lie. It had been almost three years since Churchill had authorized the creation of Special Operations Executive, or SOE, and charged it with the order to “set Europe ablaze” through sabotage and subversion. Since then, they had deployed close to three hundred agents into Europe to disrupt munitions factories and rail lines. The majority had gone into France as part of the unit called “F Section” to weaken the infrastructure and arm the French partisans ahead of the long-rumored cross-Channel Allied invasion.

But beyond the walls of its Baker Street headquarters, SOE was hardly regarded as a shining success. MI6 and some of the other traditional government agencies resented SOE’s sabotage, which they saw as amateurish and damaging to their own, more clandestine, operations. The success of SOE efforts were also hard to quantify, either because they were classified or because their effect would not be fully felt until the invasion. And lately things had started to go wrong, their agents arrested in increasing number. Was it the size of the operations that was the problem, making them victims of their own success? Or was it something else entirely?

The Director turned to Eleanor, newfound prey that had sud-

denly caught the lion's attention. "What the hell is happening, Trigg? Are they ill prepared? Making mistakes?"

Eleanor was surprised. She had come to SOE as a secretary shortly after the organization was created. Getting hired had been an uphill battle: she was not just a woman, but a Polish national—and a Jew. Few thought she belonged here. Oftentimes she wondered herself how she'd come from her small village near Pinsk to the halls of power in London. But she'd persuaded the Director to give her a chance, and through her skill and knowledge, meticulous attention to detail and encyclopedic memory, she had gained his trust. Even though her title and pay had remained the same, she was now much more of an advisor. The Director insisted that she sit not with the other secretaries along the periphery, but at the conference table immediately to his right. (He did this in part, she suspected, to compensate for his deafness in his ear on that side, which he admitted to no one else. She always debriefed him in private just after the meeting to make certain he had not missed anything.)

This was the first time, though, that the Director had asked for her opinion in front of the others. "Respectfully, sir, it isn't the training, or the execution." Eleanor was suddenly aware of every eye on her. She prided herself on lying low in the agency, drawing as little attention as possible. But now her cover, so to speak, had been blown, and the men were watching her with an unmasked skepticism.

"Then what is it?" the Director asked, his usual lack of patience worn even thinner.

"It's that they are men." Eleanor chose her words carefully, not letting him rush her, wanting to make him understand in a way that would not cause offense. "Most of the young Frenchmen are gone from the cities or towns. Conscripted to the LVF, off fighting for the Vichy collaborationist militia or imprisoned for refusing to do so. It's impossible for our agents to fit in now."

"So what then? Should we send them all to ground?"

Eleanor shook her head. The agents could not go into hiding. They needed to be able to interact with the locals in order to get information. It was the waitress in Lautrec overhearing the officers chatter after too much wine, the farmer's wife noticing changes in the trains that passed by the fields, the observations of everyday citizens that yielded the real information. And the agents needed to be making contacts with the *reseau*, the local networks of resistance, in order to fortify their efforts to subvert the Germans. No, the agents of the F Section could not operate by hiding in the cellars and caves.

"Then what?" the Director pressed.

"There's another option..." She faltered and he looked at her impatiently. Eleanor was not one to be at a loss for words, but what she was about to say was so audacious she hardly dared. She took a deep breath. "Send women."

"Women? I don't understand."

The idea had come to her weeks earlier as she watched one of the girls in the radio room decode a message that had come through from a field agent in France with a swift and sure hand. Her talents were wasted, Eleanor thought. The girl should be transmitting from the field. The idea had been so foreign that it had taken time to crystalize in Eleanor's own mind. She had not meant to bring it up now, or maybe ever, but it had come out nonetheless, a half-formed thing.

"Yes." Eleanor had heard stories of women agents, rogue operatives working on their own in the east, carrying messages and helping POWs to escape. Such things had happened in the First World War as well, probably to a greater extent than most people imagined. But to create a formal program to actually train and deploy women was something altogether different.

"But what would they *do*?" the Director asked.

"The same work as the men," Eleanor replied, suddenly annoyed at having to explain what should have been obvious. "Courier messages. Transmit by radio. Arm the partisans, blow

up bridges.” Women had risen up to take on all sorts of roles on the home front, not just nursing and local guard. They manned anti-aircraft guns and flew planes. Why was the notion that they could do this, too, so hard to understand?

“A women’s sector?” Michaels interjected, barely containing his skepticism.

Ignoring him, Eleanor turned to face the Director squarely. “Think about it, sir,” she said, gaining steam as the idea firmed in her mind. “Young men are scarce in France, but women are everywhere. They blend in on the street and in the shops and cafés.”

“As for the other women who work here already...” She hesitated, considering the wireless radio operators who labored tirelessly for SOE. On some level they were perfect: skilled, knowledgeable, wholly committed to the cause. But the same assets that made them ideal also rendered them useless for the field. They were simply too entrenched to train as operatives, and they had seen and knew too much to be deployed. “They won’t do either. The women would need to be freshly recruited.”

“But where would we find them?” the Director asked, seeming to warm to the idea.

“The same places we do the men.” It was true they didn’t have the corps of officers from which to recruit. “From the WACs or the FANYs, the universities and trade schools, or in the factories or on the street.” There was not a single résumé that made an ideal agent, no special degree. It was more of a sense that one could do the work. “The same types of people—smart, adaptable, proficient in French,” she added.

“They would have to be trained,” Michaels pointed out, making it sound like an insurmountable obstacle.

“Just like the men,” Eleanor countered. “No one is born knowing how to do this.”

“And then?” the Director asked.

“And then we deploy them.”

"Sir," Michaels interjected. "The Geneva Convention expressly prohibits women combatants." The men around the table nodded their heads, seeming to seize on the point.

"The convention prohibits a lot of things," Eleanor shot back. She knew all of the dark corners of SOE, the ways in which the agency and others cut corners and skirted the law in the desperation of war. "We can make them part of the FANY as a cover."

"We'd be risking the lives of wives, daughters and mothers," Michaels pointed out.

"I don't like it," said one of the other uniformed men from the far end of the table. Nervousness tugged at Eleanor's stomach. The Director was not the most strong-willed of leaders. If the others all lined up behind Michaels, he might back away from the idea.

"Do you like losing a half-dozen men every fortnight to the Germans?" Eleanor shot back, scarcely believing her own nerve.

"We'll try it," the Director said with unusual decisiveness, foreclosing any further debate. He turned to Eleanor. "Set up an office down the street at Norgeby House and let me know what you need."

"Me?" she asked, surprised.

"You thought of it, Trigg. And you're going to run the bloody thing." Recalling the casualties they had discussed just minutes earlier, Eleanor cringed at the Director's choice of words.

"Sir," Michaels interjected. "I hardly think that Miss Trigg is qualified. Meaning no offense," he added, tilting his head in her direction. The men looked at her dubiously.

"None taken." Eleanor had long ago hardened herself to the dismissiveness of the men around her.

"Sir," the army officer at the far end of the table interjected. "I, too, find Miss Trigg a most unlikely choice. With her background..." Heads nodded around the table, their skeptical looks accompanied by a few murmurs. Eleanor could feel them studying her, wondering about her loyalties. *Not one of us*, the men's expressions seemed

to say, *and not to be trusted*. For all that she did for SOE, they still regarded her as an enemy. Alien, foreign. It was not for lack of trying. She had worked to fit in, to mute all traces of her accent. And she had applied for British citizenship. Her naturalization application had been denied once, on grounds that even the Director, for all of his power and clearances, had not been able to ascertain. She had resubmitted it a second time a few months earlier with a note of recommendation from him, hoping this might make the difference. Thus far, she had not received a response.

Eleanor cleared her throat, prepared to withdraw from consideration. But the Director spoke first. "Eleanor, set up your office," he ordered. "Begin recruiting and training the girls with all due haste." He raised his hand, foreclosing further discussion.

"Yes, sir." She kept her head up, unwilling to look away from the eyes now trained upon her.

After the meeting, Eleanor waited until the others had left before approaching the Director. "Sir, I hardly think..."

"Nonsense, Trigg. We all know you are the man for the job, if you'll pardon the expression. Even the military chaps, though they may not want to admit it or quite understand why."

"But, sir, even if that is true, I'm an outsider. I don't have the clout."

"You're an outsider, and that is just one of the things that makes you perfect for the position." He lowered his voice. "I'm tired of it all getting mired by politics. You won't let personal loyalties or other concerns affect your judgment." She nodded, knowing that was true. She had no husband or children, no outside distractions. The mission was the only thing that mattered—and always had been.

"Are you sure I can't go?" she asked, already knowing the answer. Though flattered that he wanted her to run the women's operation, it would still be a distant second-best to actually deploying as one of the agents in the field.

"Without the paperwork, you couldn't possibly." He was right,

of course. In London, she might be able to hide her background. But to get papers to send her over, especially now, while her citizenship application was pending, was another matter entirely. “Anyway, this is much more important. You’re the head of a department now. We need you to recruit the girls. Train them. It has to be someone they trust.”

“Me?” Eleanor knew the other women who worked at SOE saw her as cold and distant, not the type they would invite to lunch or tea, much less confide in.

“Eleanor,” the Director continued, his voice low and stern, eyes piercing. “Few of us are finding ourselves where we expected at the start of the war.”

That, she reflected, was more true than he possibly could have known. She thought about what he was asking. A chance to take the helm, to try to fix all of the mistakes that she’d been forced to watch from the sidelines these many months, powerless to do anything. Though one step short of actual deployment, this would be an opportunity to do so much more.

“We need you to figure out where the girls belong and get them there,” the Director continued on, as though it had all been settled and she’d said yes. Inwardly, Eleanor felt conflicted. The prospect of taking this on was appealing. At the same time, she saw the enormity of the task splayed before her on the table like a deck of cards. The men already faced so much, and while in her heart she knew that the women were the answer, getting them ready would be Herculean. It was too much, the kind of involvement—and exposure—that she could hardly afford.

Then she looked up at the photos on the wall of fallen SOE agents, young men who had given everything for the war. She imagined the German security intelligence, the Sicherheitsdienst, at their French headquarters on the Avenue Foch in Paris. The SD was headed by the infamous Sturmbannführer Hans Kriegl, a former concentration camp commandant who Eleanor knew from the files to be as cunning as he was cruel. There were re-

ports of his using the children of locals to coerce confessions, of hanging prisoners alive from meat hooks to withdraw information before leaving them there to die. He was undoubtedly planning the downfall of more agents even as they spoke.

Eleanor knew then that she had no choice but to take on the task. "Fine. I'll need complete control," she added. It was always important to go first when setting the terms.

"You shall have it."

"And I report only to you." Special sectors would, in other circumstances, report through one of the Director's deputies. Eleanor peered out of the corner of her eye at Michaels, who lingered in the hallway. He and the other men would not be happy about her having the Director's ear, even more so than she already had. "To you," she repeated for emphasis, letting her words sink in.

"No bureaucratic meddling," the Director promised. "You report only to me." She could hear then the desperation in his voice, how very much he needed her to make this work.

CHAPTER THREE

M A R I E

London, 1944

The last place Marie would have expected to be recruited as a secret agent (if indeed she could have anticipated it at all) was in the loo.

An hour earlier, Marie sat at a table by the window in the Town House, a quiet café on York Street she had come to frequent, savoring a few minutes of quiet after a day of endless clacking at the dingy War Office annex where she had taken a position as a typist. She thought of the coming weekend, just two days off, and smiled, imagining five-year-old Tess and the crooked tooth that surely would have come in a bit more by now. That was the thing about only seeing her daughter on the weekend—Marie seemed to miss years in the days in between. She wanted to be out in the country with Tess, playing by the brook and digging for stones. But someone had to stay here and make a few pounds in order to keep their aging row home in Maida Vale from falling into foreclosure or disrepair, assuming the bombs didn't take it all first.

There was a booming noise in the distance, causing the dishes on the table to rattle. Marie started, reaching instinctively for the gas mask that no one carried anymore since the Blitz had ended. She lifted her gaze to the plate glass window of the café. Outside the rain-soaked street, a boy of no more than eight or nine was trying to scrape up bits of coal from the pavement. Her stomach ached. Where was his mother?

She remembered the day more than two years ago that she'd decided to send Tess away. At first, the notion of being separated from her daughter was almost unthinkable. Then a bomb had hit the flats across the street, killing seven children. But for the grace of God, that might have been Tess. The next morning, Marie began making arrangements.

At least Tess was with Aunt Hazel. The woman was more of a cousin and a bit dour to be sure, but was nevertheless fond of the little girl. And Tess loved the old vicarage in East Anglia, with its endless cupboards and musty crawl spaces. She could run wild across the fens when the weather permitted, and help Hazel with her work at the post office when it did not. Marie couldn't imagine putting her girl on a train to be sent off to the countryside to a cold convent or God-knows-where-else, into the arms of strangers. She had seen it at King's Cross almost every Friday last year as she made her way north to visit Tess—mothers battling back tears as they adjusted coats and scarves on the little ones, younger siblings clinging to older, children with too-large suitcases crying openly, trying to escape through the carriage windows. It made the two-hour journey until she could reach Tess and wrap her arms around her almost unbearable. She stayed each Sunday until Hazel reminded her that she had best take the last train or miss curfew. Her daughter was safe and well and with family. But that didn't make the fact that it was only Wednesday any more bearable.

Should she have brought Tess back already? That was the question that had dogged Marie these past few months as she

had seen the trickle of children coming back to the city. The Blitz was long over and there was a kind of normalcy that had resumed now that they weren't sleeping in the Tube stations at night. But the war was far from won, and Marie sensed that something far worse was yet to come.

Pushing her doubts aside, Marie pulled a book from her bag. It was poetry by Baudelaire, which she loved because his elegant verse took her back to happier times as a child summering on the coast in Brittany with her mother.

"Excuse me," a man said a moment later. She looked up, annoyed by the interruption. He was fortyish, thin and unremarkable in a tweedy sport coat and glasses. A scone sat untouched on the plate at the table next to her from which he had risen. "I was curious about what you are reading." She wondered if he were trying to make advances. The intrusions were everywhere now with all of the American GIs in the city, spilling from the pubs at midday and walking three abreast in the streets, their jarring laughter breaking the stillness.

But the man's accent was British and his mild expression contained no hint of impropriety. Marie held up the book so that he could see. "Would you mind reading me a bit?" he asked. "I'm afraid I don't speak French."

"Really, I don't think..." she began to demur, surprised by the odd request.

"Please," he said, cutting her off, his tone almost imploring. "You'd be doing me a kindness." She wondered why it meant so much to him. Perhaps he had lost someone French or was a veteran who had fought over there.

"All right," she relented. A few lines couldn't hurt. She began to read from the poem, "*N'importe où hors du monde* (Anywhere Out of the World)." Her voice was self-conscious at first, but she felt herself slowly gain confidence.

After a few sentences, Marie stopped. "How was that?" She expected him to ask her to read further.

He did not. "You've studied French?"

She shook her head. "No, but I speak it. My mother was French and we spent summers there when I was a child." In truth, the summers had been an escape from her father, an angry drunk unable to find work or hold down a job, resentful of her mother's breeding and family money and disappointed that Marie wasn't a boy. That was the reason Marie and her mother summered far away in France. And it was the reason Marie had run away from the Herefordshire manor where she'd been raised to London when she was eighteen, and then took her mother's surname. She knew if she stayed in the house she had dreaded all her childhood with her father's worsening temper, she wouldn't make it out alive.

"Your accent is extraordinary," the man said. "Nearly perfect." How could he know that if he didn't speak French? she wondered. "Are you working?" he asked.

"Yes," she blurted. The transition in subject was abrupt, the question too personal. She stood hurriedly, fumbling in her purse for coins. "I'm sorry, but I really must go."

The man reached up and when she looked back she saw he was holding a business card. "I didn't mean to be rude. But I was wondering if you would like a job." She took the card. *Number 64 Baker Street*, was all it said. No person or office named. "Ask for Eleanor Trigg."

"Why should I?" she asked, perplexed. "I have a job."

He shook his head slightly. "This is different. It's important work and you'd be well suited—and well compensated. I'm afraid I can't say any more."

"When should I go there?" she asked, though certain that she never would.

"Now." She'd expected an appointment. "So you'll go?"

Marie left a few coins on the table and left the café without answering, eager to be away from the man and his intrusiveness. Outside, she opened her umbrella and adjusted her bur-

gundy print scarf to protect against the chill. She rounded the corner, then stopped, peering over her shoulder to make sure he had not followed her. She looked down at the card, simple black and white. *Official.*

She could have told the man no, Marie realized. Even now, she could throw out the card and walk away. But she was curious; what kind of work, and for whom? Perhaps it was something more interesting than endless typing. The man had said it paid well, too, something she dearly needed.

Ten minutes later, Marie found herself standing at the end of Baker Street. She paused by a red post box at the corner. The storied home of Sherlock Holmes was meant to be on Baker Street, she recalled. She had always imagined it as mysterious, shrouded in fog. But the block was like any other, drab office buildings with ground floor shops. Farther down the row there were brick town houses that had been converted for business use. She walked to Number 64, then hesitated. Inter-Services Research Bureau, the sign by the door read. What on earth was this all about?

Before she could knock the door flew open and a hand that did not seem attached to anybody pointed left. "Orchard Court, Portman Square. Around the corner and down the street."

"Excuse me," Marie said, holding up the card though there seemed to be no one to see it. "My name is Marie Roux. I was told to come here and ask for Eleanor Trigg." The door closed.

"Curiouser and curiouser," she muttered, thinking of Tess's favorite book, the illustrated version of *Alice in Wonderland* Marie read aloud to her when she visited. Around the corner there were more row houses. She continued down the street to Portman Square and found the building marked "Orchard Court." Marie knocked. There was no answer. The whole thing was starting to feel like a very odd prank. She turned, ready to go home and forget this folly.

Behind her, the door opened with a creak. She spun back to

face a white-haired butler. "Yes?" He stared at her coldly, like she was a door-to-door salesman peddling something unwanted. Too nervous to speak, she held out the card.

He waved her inside. "Come." His tone was impatient now, as though she was expected and late. He led her through a foyer, its high ceiling and chandelier giving the impression that it had once been the entranceway to a grand home. He opened a door on his right, then closed it again quickly. "Wait here," he instructed.

Marie stood awkwardly in the foyer, feeling entirely as though she did not belong. She heard footsteps on the floor above and turned to see a handsome young man with a shock of blond hair descending a curved staircase. Noticing her, he stopped. "So, you're part of the Racket?" he asked.

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

He smiled. "Just wandered in then?" He did not wait for an answer. "The Racket—that's what we call all of this." He gestured around the foyer.

The butler reappeared, clearing his throat. His stern expression gave Marie the undeniable sense that they were not supposed to be speaking with one another. Without another word, the blond man disappeared around the corner into another of what seemed to be an endless number of doors.

The butler led her down the hallway and opened the door to an onyx-and-white-tiled bathroom. She turned back, puzzled; she hadn't asked for the loo. "Wait in here."

Before Marie could protest, the butler closed the door, leaving her alone. She stood awkwardly, inhaling the smell of mildew lingering beneath cleaners. Asked to wait in a toilet! She needed to leave but was not quite sure how to manage it. She perched on the edge of a claw-footed bathtub, ankles neatly crossed. Five minutes passed, then ten.

At last the door opened with a click and a woman walked in. She was older than Marie by at least a decade, maybe two. Her

face was grave. At first her dark hair appeared to be short, but closer Marie saw that it was pulled tightly in a bun at the nape of her neck. She wore no makeup or jewelry, and her starched white shirt was perfectly pressed, almost military.

"I'm Eleanor Trigg, Chief Recruitment Officer. I'm sorry for the accommodations," she said, her voice clipped. "We are short on space." The explanation seemed odd, given the size of the house, the number of doors Marie had seen. But then she remembered the man whom the butler seemed to chastise for speaking with her. Perhaps the people who came here weren't meant to see one another at all.

Eleanor appraised Marie as one might a vase or piece of jewelry, her gaze steely and unrelenting. "So you've decided then?" she said, making it sound as if they were at the end of a long conversation and had not met thirty seconds earlier.

"Decided?" Marie repeated, puzzled.

"Yes. You have to decide if you want to risk your life, and I have to decide if I can let you."

Marie's mind whirled. "I'm sorry... I'm afraid I don't understand."

"You don't know who we are, do you?" Marie shook her head. "Then what are you doing here?"

"A man in a café gave me a card and..." Marie faltered, hearing the ridiculousness of the situation in her own voice. She had not even learned his name. "I should just go." She stood.

The woman pressed a firm hand on her shoulder. "Not necessarily. Just because you don't know why you've come, doesn't mean you shouldn't be here. We often find purpose where we least expect it—or not." Her style was brusque, unfeminine and unquestionably stern. "Don't blame the man who sent you. He wasn't authorized to say more. Our work is highly classified. Many who work at the most senior levels of Whitehall itself have no idea what it is that we do."

"Which is what, exactly?" Marie ventured to ask.

"We're a branch of Special Operations Executive."

"Oh," Marie said, though the answer really didn't clarify matters for her.

"Covert operations."

"Like the codebreakers at Bletchley?" She'd known a girl who had left the typing pool to do that once.

"Something like that. Our work is a bit more physical, though. On the ground."

"In Europe?" Eleanor nodded. Marie understood then: they meant to send her over, into the war. "You want me to be a spy?"

"We don't ask questions here," Eleanor snapped. Then it was not, Marie reflected, the place for her. She had always been curious, too curious, her mother would say, with never-ending questions that only made her father's temper worsen as Marie progressed through her teen years. "We aren't spies," Eleanor added, as though the suggestion was offensive. "Espionage is the business of MI6. Rather, here at SOE, our mission is sabotage, or destroying things like railroad tracks, telegraph lines, factory equipment and such, in order to hinder the Germans. We also help the local partisans arm and resist."

"I've never heard of such things."

"Exactly." Eleanor sounded almost pleased.

"But what makes you think I could have any part in something like this? I'm hardly qualified."

"Nonsense. You're smart, capable." How could this woman, who had only just met her, possibly know that? It was perhaps the first time in her life that anyone had described her that way. Her father made sure she felt the very opposite. And Richard, her now-gone husband, had treated her as if she was special for a fleeting moment, and look where all that had led. Marie had never thought of herself as any of those things, but now she found herself sitting a bit taller. "You speak the language. You're exactly who we're looking for. Have you ever played a musical instrument?" Eleanor asked.

Though it seemed nothing should surprise her anymore, Marie found the question strange. "Piano when I was very young. Harp in school."

"That could be useful. Open your mouth," Eleanor ordered, her voice suddenly terse. Marie was certain that she had misheard. But Eleanor's face was serious. "Your mouth" came the command again, insistent and impatient. Reluctantly, Marie complied. Eleanor stared into her mouth like a dentist. Marie bristled, resenting the intrusion by a woman she had only just met. "That back filling will have to go," Eleanor said decisively, stepping back.

"Go?" Marie's voice rose with alarm. "But that's a perfectly good filling—just a year old and was quite expensive."

"Exactly. Too expensive. It will mark you as English right away. We'll have it replaced with porcelain—that's what the French use."

It all came together in Marie's mind then: the man's interest in her language skills, Eleanor's concern over whether a tooth filling was too English. "You want me to impersonate a French-woman."

"Among other things, yes. You'll receive training in operations skills before you are deployed—if you make it through training." Eleanor spoke as though Marie had already agreed to go. "That's all I can say about it for now. Secrecy is of the utmost importance to our operations."

Deployed. Operations. Marie's head swam. It seemed surreal that in this elegant town house just steps from the shops and bustle of Oxford Street, covert war against Germany was planned and waged.

"The car will be here for you in one hour to take you to training school," Eleanor said, as though it were all settled.

"Now? But that's so soon! I would have to sort out my affairs and pack."

"It is always the way," Eleanor replied. Perhaps, Marie re-

flected, they didn't want to give people a chance to go home and have second thoughts. "We'll provide everything you need and give notice to the War Office for you." Marie stared at Eleanor with surprise. She hadn't said where she worked. She realized then that these people, whoever they were, knew too much about her. The meeting in the café had not been by chance.

"How long would I have to be gone?" Marie asked.

"That depends on the mission and a variety of other circumstances. You can resign at any time."

Leave, a voice not her own seemed to say. Marie was into something much bigger and deeper than she had imagined. But her feet remained planted, curiosity piqued. "I have a daughter up near Ely with my aunt. She's five."

"And your husband?"

"Killed in action," she lied. In fact, Tess's father, Richard, had been an unemployed actor who had gotten by on parts as extras in West End shows and disappeared shortly after Tess was born. Marie had come to London when she was eighteen, fleeing her father's home, and had promptly fallen for the first bad apple that dropped at her feet. "He went missing at Dunkirk." The explanation, a morbid lie, was preferable to the likely truth: that he was in Buenos Aires, spending what was left of her mother's inheritance, which Marie had naively moved to a joint account to cover their household expenses when they had first married.

"Your daughter is well cared for?" Marie nodded. "Good. You would not be able to concentrate on training if you were worried about that."

She would never stop worrying about Tess, Marie thought. She knew in that instant that Eleanor did not have children.

Marie thought about Tess up in the countryside, the weekend visits that wouldn't happen if she accepted Eleanor's proposal. What kind of mother would do such a thing? The responsible choice would be to stay here in London, to thank Eleanor and go back to whatever ordinary life was left during the war. She

was the only parent Tess had. If she failed to come back, Tess would have no one but aging Aunt Hazel, who surely couldn't look after her much longer.

"The work pays ten pounds per week," Eleanor added.

That was five times what Marie made typing. She'd found the best work she could in London, but it hadn't been enough. Even combined with a second job, the kind that would have kept her from getting up to see Tess at the weekends, she would not have made what Eleanor was offering. She did the calculations. She would have enough to keep up the house even after sending money to Hazel each week to cover Tess's care and expenses, something that simply was not possible now. She imagined a new dress for her daughter, perhaps even a few toys at Christmas. Tess was unspoiled and never complained, but Marie often wished to give her more of the things she had taken for granted in her own childhood. It wasn't like she could be with Tess now while she was stuck working in London anyway. And, in truth, Marie was curious about the mysterious adventure Eleanor was dangling in front of her. She felt so useless sitting here in London, typing endlessly. Might as well do some good, make a real difference in the war effort—if, as Eleanor had said, she in fact had what it took.

"All right then. I'm ready. But I have to phone and let my daughter's caretaker know that I won't be coming up."

Eleanor shook her head firmly. "Impossible. No one can know where you are going—or even that you are going. We'll send a telegram informing your family that you've been called away for work."

"I can't simply leave without saying anything."

"That is exactly what you must do." Eleanor stared at her evenly. Though her expression did not change, Marie saw a flicker of doubt behind her eyes. "If you aren't prepared to do this, you can just leave."

"I have to speak to my daughter. I won't go unless I can hear her voice."

"Fine," Eleanor relented finally. "But you cannot tell her that you are going. There's a phone in the next room you can use. Keep it brief. No more than five minutes." Eleanor spoke as though she was in charge of Marie now, owned her. Marie wondered if accepting had been a mistake. "Say nothing of your departure," Eleanor reiterated. Marie sensed it was some sort of test—perhaps the first of many.

Eleanor started for the door, indicating that Marie should follow. "Wait," Marie said. "There's one thing." Eleanor turned back, the start of annoyance creeping onto her face. "I should tell you that my father's family is German." Marie watched Eleanor's face, half hoping the information might cause Eleanor to change her mind about accepting Marie for whatever she was proposing.

But Eleanor simply nodded in confirmation. "I know."

"But how?"

"You've sat in that same café every day, haven't you?" Marie nodded. "You should stop that, by the way. Terrible habit. Varying one's routine is key. In any event, you sit there and read books in French and one of our people noticed and thought you might be a good recruit. We followed you back to work, learned who you are. We ran you through the cards, found you qualified, at least for initial consideration." Marie was stunned; all of this had been going on and she'd had no idea. "We have finders, recruiters looking for girls who might be the right sort all over Britain. But in the end I decide if they are the right sort to go. Every single one of the girls passes through me." There was a note of protectiveness in her voice.

"And you think I do?"

"You might," Eleanor said carefully. "You've got the proper credentials. But in training you'll be tested to see if you can actually put them into use. Skills on paper are useless if you don't

have the grit to see it all through. Do you have any political allegiances of your own?"

"None. My mother didn't believe in..."

"Enough," Eleanor snapped. "Don't answer a question with any more than you have to." Another test. "You must never talk about yourself or your past. You'll be given a new identity in training." And until then, Marie thought, it would be as if she simply didn't exist.

Eleanor held open the door to the toilet. Marie walked through into a study with high bookshelves. A black phone sat on a mahogany desk. "You can call here." Eleanor remained in the doorway, not even pretending to give her privacy. Marie dialed the operator and asked to be connected to the post office where Hazel worked each day, hoping she had not yet gone home. She asked for Hazel from the woman who answered.

Then a warbling voice came across the line. "Marie! Is something wrong?"

"Everything's fine," Marie reassured quickly, so desperately wanting to tell her the truth about why she had called. "Just checking on Tess."

"I'll fetch her." One minute passed then another. Quickly, Marie thought, wondering if Eleanor would snatch the phone from her hand the moment five minutes had passed.

"Allo!" Tess's voice squeaked, flooding Marie's heart.

"Darling, how are you?"

"Mummy, I'm helping Aunt Hazel sort the mail."

Marie smiled, imagining her playing around the pigeonholes. "Good girl."

"And just two more days until I see you." Tess, who even as a young child had an acute sense of time, knew her mother always came on Friday. Only now she wouldn't be. Marie's heart wrenched.

"Let me speak to your auntie. And, Tess, I love you," she added.

But Tess was already gone. Hazel came back on the line. “She’s well?” Marie asked.

“She’s brilliant. Counting to a hundred and doing sums. So bright. Why, just the other day, she...” Hazel stopped, seeming to sense that sharing what Marie had missed would only make things worse. Marie couldn’t help but feel a tiny bit jealous. When Richard abandoned her and left her alone with a newborn, Marie had been terrified. But in those long nights of comforting and nursing an infant, she and Tess had become one. Then she’d been forced to send Tess away. She was missing so much of Tess’s childhood as this bloody war dragged on. “You’ll see for yourself at the weekend,” Hazel added kindly.

Marie’s stomach ached as though she had been punched. “I have to go.”

“See you soon,” Hazel replied.

Fearful she would say more, Marie hung up the phone.

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CHAPTER ONE

London, January 1892

“WOULD ANYONE CARE to explain this to me?” Sidney Althea Gordon Honeywell looked up from the newspaper clippings spread before her on the table in her small dining room. “Well?”

Across the table, three of the dearest ladies Sidney had ever known stared back at her, the very picture of elderly innocence.

“Anyone,” Sidney prompted. “Anyone at all?”

“I think it speaks for itself, dear,” Lady Guinevere Blodgett said in a vaguely chastising manner.

Mrs. Persephone Fitzhew-Wellmore nodded. She and Lady Blodgett had long insisted Sidney call them by their given names—Poppy and Gwen—in spite of the nearly fifty-year difference in their ages as it made them feel terribly old otherwise and they weren’t at all fond of that. “I don’t really see what needs to be explained.”

The third member of the trio, Mrs. Ophelia Higginbotham—Aunt Effie—wisely held her tongue.

Sidney narrowed her eyes. “*You* have nothing to say?”

“Not quite yet.” Effie—her grandmother’s dearest friend and an aunt by affection rather than blood—smiled pleasantly. “I would rather hear your thoughts first.”

“No doubt.” Sidney studied the clippings on the table

although there was no need. The words had burned themselves into her mind the moment she read them. "It appears we have a series of letters to *The Times* from—" she picked up a clipping "—the Earl of Brenton in which he alleges that I don't know what I write about. That my stories are total fiction. That I've never been to Egypt. That I am in fact a fraud. And, as we all know—" she blew a resigned breath "—I am."

"Rubbish," Aunt Effie said staunchly. "You never claimed your stories were anything other than fiction."

"It's not your fault that the public decided your adventures were real," Poppy added.

"Regardless, I should have corrected the mistaken impression the moment I became aware of it." It still bothered Sidney that she had allowed herself to be talked out of doing exactly that.

When Sidney had begun writing her *Tales of a Lady Adventurer in Egypt* in an attempt to supplement her modest income shortly after her mother's death four years ago, she had no idea her work would ever be published, let alone become popular. Sidney's father died some thirteen years ago, leaving Sidney and her mother a cozy house near Portman Square and an adequate income from a small trust. Father no doubt assumed Mother would eventually remarry or at least that his daughter would find a husband, but Sidney had not had the opportunity. Mother never recovered from losing the love of her life and her grief took a toll on her health. It was left to Sidney to run their small household as well as care for her mother, a responsibility Sidney neither questioned nor resented.

"Your popularity did take us all unawares. But when your book was published with all of your previously published stories from the *Daily Messenger* it did seem ev-

everyone was reading it and clamoring for more of your work. By then it really was too late.” Gwen shrugged. “It’s hard to undo something like that. No one ever believes it was inadvertent. We know you, of course, and we are well aware that you simply didn’t notice the attention your stories were receiving. You do tend to live in your own little world when you’re writing, Sidney dear.”

In hindsight Sidney felt like something of a ninny but writing did sweep her away to another world altogether. A world of adventure and romance that at times seemed more real than the London she lived in.

“Besides, we thought it was quite thrilling,” Poppy said, her eyes glittering with excitement. “Why, you’ve become famous. The Queen of the Desert and all.”

Sidney winced at the title her readers had bestowed upon her.

“And wasn’t your Mr. Cadwallender rather pleased that your readers thought your adventures were true?” Poppy pointed out.

“The man was ecstatic. He said it would make the stories more popular and I allowed myself to be convinced.” Sidney struggled to keep calm even as her future, her dreams, were crumbling around her. “I should have known it would come to this.”

Sidney still wasn’t sure how the public misunderstanding had happened. After all, the main character in Sidney’s stories was Millicent Forester, a charming young widow and intrepid adventurer who had lost her husband shortly after they arrived in Egypt. A woman confident and courageous and all the things Sidney was not. But while Millicent was nothing more than a figment of Sidney’s imagination, her writing was based on the journals of her grandmother Althea Gordon. Admittedly Sidney

did take a fair amount of poetic license, and with each new work, her stories bore less and less resemblance to her grandmother's experiences. Sidney wouldn't have known anything about her grandmother at all had it not been for Aunt Effie.

It was shortly after her father's death that Sidney first made Ophelia Higginbotham's acquaintance. She was the wife of a military man who had then become an explorer and adventurer when his days of service to the Crown ended. Effie had met Sidney's grandmother through mutual acquaintances. Years later, Effie would tell Sidney it was as if they'd each discovered a sister they never knew they had. They forged a friendship that would last the rest of Althea's life. Much of that life was spent in Egypt with Sidney's grandfather Alfred, locating and excavating ancient ruins and recovering lost artifacts. Althea regularly wrote her dear friend of their adventures and kept scrupulous records in the form of her journals that she would leave with Effie for safekeeping when she and her husband headed back to the desert.

It was through her grandmother's letters to Effie that Sidney learned of her mother's estrangement from her parents. It had always been something of a mystery and while Sidney was named in part for her grandmother, her mother had avoided further discussion. The Gordons were lost at sea when Sidney was very young and she never knew them. But with each of her grandmother's letters the story of her life unfolded. Sidney's mother had accompanied her parents on their Egyptian expeditions when she was a girl but grew to detest travel in general as well as the climate, the desert and all things Egyptian. When she was old enough, her parents allowed her to stay in England and attend school although, to

read Grandmother's letters, leaving her only child behind was a heart-wrenching decision. In spite of visits home to England, Althea and her daughter grew apart. Mother blamed Egypt and she never returned to the land of the pharaohs.

Effie became Sidney's friend and, in many ways, her mentor. Neither woman thought it wise to let Sidney's mother know of their relationship which did seem wrong but also necessary. There was no doubt Mother would not take it well and, given her fragile health, Sidney did want to avoid any upset. What would have been even worse in her mother's eyes was that Sidney fell in love. Passionately, irrevocably in love with the idea of travel, of seeing foreign lands and, most especially, with Egypt.

From then on, Sidney read everything she could about the country, its past and its present. She took night classes at Queen's College on Egyptian history and civilization, hieroglyphics and excavations, and all sorts of other fascinating subjects. She attended lectures and exhibits, often accompanied by Effie and her friends.

When Mother died, Sidney realized her trust would continue to keep a roof over her head but little else. Her dreams of traveling the world and at last seeing Egypt for herself would remain nothing more than that unless she came up with a way to generate additional income. Aunt Effie had not only encouraged her writing, but had brought her initial offerings to the attention of Mr. James Cadwallender at *Cadwallender's Daily Messenger*, the paper that now published her work.

"There's really no getting around it." Sidney shook her head. "His lordship is right. I am a charlatan, a fake, a fraud."

"Don't be absurd." Effie huffed. "The fact that these adventures are not technically yours—"

“Although you *do* own the writing you based them on,” Poppy said, “so in the strictest definition of the term, one could easily argue that they do belong to you. Therefore they are *yours*.”

“—does not make them any less true, at the heart of it at least,” Effie continued. “Really, there are two points to consider here.” She held her hands up as if balancing a scale. “On one hand—” she raised her left hand “—you have never claimed you personally had these adventures. On the other—” she lowered her left hand and raised her right “—they are, more or less, true stories.”

“Although as Althea was married to Alfred, I suspect there were not quite as many dashing gentlemen in her experiences as Sidney has in her stories,” Poppy murmured.

“Millicent Forester is a young widow, Poppy,” Gwen reminded her. “It wouldn’t be any fun at all if there wasn’t the occasional dashing gentleman in her way.”

“They’re simply not your experiences,” Effie finished.

“And therein lies the problem.” Sidney sighed and shuffled through the clippings on the table. “Or one of the problems.” In her dismay over the earl’s scathing comments, she had completely ignored the rest of this disaster. “His lordship’s letters are not the worst of it though, are they?”

“They are dreadful letters.” Poppy huffed. “Simply dreadful.

Gwen sniffed. “Very nearly rude, I would say.”

“And yet—” Sidney’s tone hardened “—not the worst of it.” She moved several of the clippings to one side. “These are the letters from the earl.” She waved at the remaining clippings. “While these responses are allegedly from me.”

The ladies wisely said nothing.

"I did not write these." Sidney narrowed her eyes. "Which begs the question of who did."

Gwen, Poppy and Effie traded glances. Effie drew a deep breath. "It's my fault I'm afraid. I started this. When that vile man wrote the first letter I should have ignored it."

"But it really was rather boorish," Gwen added.

"And it did seem he was laying down a kind of gauntlet." Aunt Effie grimaced. "So I picked it up."

"And wrote him back?" Sidney's voice rose. "In my name?"

"It seemed appropriate at the time," Effie said weakly. "But, upon reflection, it might have been a mistake."

Poppy nodded. "As it did seem to incite him. The man obviously has no sense of moderation. As you can see, the second letter was even worse."

"He compares my stories to penny dreadfuls." Sidney drew her brows together. "That's not at all fair. My stories are adventurous but not nearly as far-fetched and melodramatic."

"You're right, he wasn't the least bit fair." Gwen nodded. "You can certainly see why we all felt it necessary to respond to that particular letter."

"We did help Effie write that one. More than help I suppose. You might call it a collaboration." Poppy winced. "As well as the one after that. We really couldn't help ourselves. Someone needed to defend you. Why, the man even criticizes your style of writing."

Effie shook her head. "We could not let that go unchallenged."

"And you never thought to mention this to me?"

"We wanted to protect you, dear." Gwen smiled.

“We did think his lordship would give up.” Effie paused. “Eventually.”

“But he hasn’t given up, has he?” Sidney glared at the older ladies. “No, in fact the man has challenged me to travel to Egypt and prove that I know what I’m writing about. If I fail, he intends to petition the Egyptian Antiquities Society to rescind my membership.” Sidney had paid little notice to the praise and attention her stories had received but being granted membership in the Antiquities Society a few months ago was an honor she cherished. Her grandparents were among the founding members of the society and, while she had not yet attended a society event, being a part of that illustrious organization was the very best part of her newfound success.

“Fortunately, we’ve given this a great deal of thought,” Poppy said. “Indeed, we’ve thought of nothing else since the moment we saw the earl’s latest letter this morning.”

“And promptly came here to tell you about—” Gwen gestured at the clippings “—all of it.”

“Not promptly enough, it’s after noon.” Sidney blew a long breath. This might well explain why she’d received a note within the past hour from Mr. Cadwallender requesting she come to the *Messenger* offices at her earliest possible convenience. “Mr. Cadwallender wishes to see me and I suspect this is what it’s about.” She shook her head. “What a dreadful mess this is. What am I supposed to do?”

“You should definitely pay a call on Mr. Cadwallender,” Poppy said firmly.

Gwen nodded. “At once, I should think.”

“And then?” The most awful helpless note sounded in Sidney’s voice. She did so hate sounding helpless.

“And then.” Aunt Effie rose to her feet. “Then you shall go to Egypt.”

"I THINK IT'S a brilliant idea." Mr. James Cadwallender sat behind his desk in his office in the center of what had always struck Sidney as the sheer bedlam of the world that was *Cadwallender's Daily Messenger*. The office itself was enclosed with walls of paneled wood beneath glass windows that rose to the ceiling, allowing the publisher to observe his domain while saving him from the endless cacophony of noise that was apparently the natural environment of reporters in search of news.

"Brilliant?" Sidney stared at the man. Didn't he realize how impossible this was. "It's not the least bit brilliant. It's dreadful, that's what it is. Positively dreadful."

"Come now, Miss Honeywell." Mr. Cadwallender chuckled. He really was a fine figure of a man with dark brown hair and eyes that were an interesting shade of amber. Sidney had always found him quite dashing although perhaps not today. "How is sending my very favorite writer off to prove she knows what she writes about anything less than brilliant. By Jove, I wish I'd thought of it myself."

"Mr. Cadwallender," Sidney said slowly, "surely you have not forgotten that my work is fiction."

"Of course I have not forgotten but the public believes it's all real. They believe Millicent Forester is a thinly veiled version of you or rather of Mrs. Gordon." He grinned. "And who am I to tell our loyal readership that they're wrong."

Aunt Effie nodded in agreement. She had insisted on accompanying Sidney for the sake of propriety although they both knew propriety was the last thing on the older woman's mind. She simply didn't want to miss what happened next and no doubt had orders from Poppy and

Gwen to report back every detail. "And we would hate to shatter their illusions."

"Exactly," Mr. Cadwallender said.

"Their illusions will be more than shattered when the earl is proved right," Sidney said sharply.

"But he won't be proved right because you won't let him." Mr. Cadwallender leaned forward across his desk and met her gaze directly. "Miss Honeywell, Sidney, you and I both know you have never been to Egypt. We know your stories are loosely based on the life of your grandmother. But all those people out there who read your stories, who clamor for more, who adore every word you write, who've taken Millicent Forester to heart, they don't know you aren't her and have never stepped foot out of England. To them, you have led the life they have always dreamed of living. They count on you, Sidney, to lift them out of their tired, ordinary, everyday lives and bring them to the sands of Egypt. To allow them to take part in the discovery of ancient tombs. To illuminate the sights of that exciting land. Surely, you don't want to deprive them of all that?"

"Well, no, I suppose not. But—"

"People don't care if your stories are true or not."

"Then why can't we simply tell them the truth?" Indeed, that was exactly what Sidney wanted to do when she first realized her stories were being taken as fact.

"Because they will care if they think you lied to them." He shrugged. "It's the nature of things."

"So the lie continues to grow?" Sidney couldn't hide the stubborn note in her voice. This deception did seem, well, wrong.

"Not at all. This earl, in his superior, condescending manner, has challenged your knowledge of Egypt and all

things Egyptian. You are one of the most knowledgeable people I've ever met on the topic. Why, you know things most people would never even think to ask. Doesn't she, Mrs. Higginbotham?"

"Oh, she does indeed, Mr. Cadwallender." Effie nodded. "She's spent years taking classes with highly notable personages at Queen's College. I wouldn't dare to count the number of lectures on Egyptology she's attended. Sidney is familiar with every Egyptian artifact on display at the British Museum as well as elsewhere in London. And she reads everything that's printed on the subject." Pride rang in Effie's voice. "I daresay there is no one better versed in anything pertaining to Egypt—past and present—than Sidney."

"Thank you, Aunt Effie." Sidney cast her a grateful smile. "Regardless of my studies and all that I've learned, the fact remains that I've never actually been to Egypt."

"A minor point." Mr. Cadwallender waved off her comment. "If anyone can pull this off you can. I have every confidence in you, Sidney. By the time you return—"

"I don't recall agreeing to go."

"Really, dear." Effie leaned close and patted her hand. "I don't see that you have any particular choice."

"That's not entirely true." Mr. Cadwallender studied her for a long moment. "You have several choices. You can choose to admit publicly that his lordship is right—that you don't know what you're writing about—"

"And allow the beast to win?" Effie straightened in her chair. "Never!"

"In which case there would be a nasty scandal. You would lose your readers who would feel betrayed by you. Cadwallender Publishing and the *Daily Messenger* could

not continue to publish your work. We do have a reputation to maintain.”

As the *Daily Messenger* did seem to base most of its articles on little more than scandal and gossip, apparently reputation was in the eye of the beholder.

“You’re the one who convinced me not to tell the truth when this misunderstanding began,” Sidney pointed out.

“Water under the bridge, Miss Honeywell.” He waved off her comment. “No sense fretting about what’s over and done with. We simply must move forward from here. As I said you have choices. Confess the truth and face the consequences—”

Effie shuddered.

“—or you can kill off Millicent and end the stories altogether—”

Effie gasped in horror.

“—or you can go to Egypt and make the Earl of Brenton eat his words. He started this—beat him at his own game. Prove to him and the world that he’s wrong. It would serve him right. Certainly, you’ve never been to Egypt in person but you can’t tell me your mind, your heart, your very soul hasn’t been there.”

“Her spirit.” Effie nodded.

“Exactly, Sidney.” Mr. Cadwallender’s gaze locked with hers. “Carpe diem. Seize the day. Isn’t this the opportunity you’ve been waiting for?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” Effie jumped to her feet. “She’ll do it!”

Sidney could only stare at her.

“Of course she will.” Mr. Cadwallender grinned. “I didn’t doubt it for a moment.”

Sidney’s gaze shifted between Effie and Mr. Cadwallender. He was right—she did have a choice. And an opportunity. This was her chance to set things right. To

have the adventures, to be the heroine her readers believed her to be.

For the first time since reading his lordship's challenge, the idea of travel to Egypt seemed not only possible but probable. And why not? She was a thirty-two-year-old spinster with no particular prospects for marriage. No family to speak of except for Aunt Effie and her friends. And absolutely no good reason not to at long last follow her heart. She had nothing to lose and at the very least, the adventure of a lifetime to gain.

"Very well, then." She swallowed hard. "I'll do it."

"Excellent." He grinned. "The *Messenger* will pay for all your expenses and we will, of course, send a reporter along."

"A reporter?" Effie sank down into her chair.

Sidney widened her eyes. "Is that necessary?"

"Absolutely. This, my dear girl, will be the story of the year." He paused. "Have you heard of Nellie Bly?"

Sidney shook her head. "I don't think so."

"You do need to get out more, dear," Effie said under her breath.

"Nellie Bly is an American female reporter who attempted to travel around the world in less than eighty days a few years ago. She managed it in only seventy-two." Mr. Cadwallender's eyes sparkled. "It was quite a story. One that captured the imagination of the reading public in America and very nearly everywhere else. I anticipate the story of the Queen of the Desert's return to Egypt to be every bit as profitable."

Sidney's brow rose. "Profitable, Mr. Cadwallender?"

"Profitable, Miss Honeywell," he said firmly. "This story will increase readership and therefore generate greater revenue. Stories like this sell newspapers and

books. While our mission is to enlighten and inform our readers, we cannot do so with inadequate funding. Nor can we afford to send our correspondents on trips to Egypt.”

“Regardless, don’t you think yet another observer watching my every move is dangerous?”

“I have every confidence in you, Miss Honeywell. If I didn’t, I would neither finance nor encourage this trip. In point of fact, being accompanied by one of my reporters is in your best interest.” He grimaced. “Frankly, if I don’t send someone along to document this venture, make no mistake, *The Times* surely will. I suspect you would prefer a reporter who works for me rather than a competitor who would like nothing better than to discredit all of us.”

“That makes sense I suppose.” Sidney sighed. This was becoming more and more complicated. “Will this reporter know the truth? About my experience with Egypt that is.”

“Absolutely not, Miss Honeywell.” Disbelief shone in Mr. Cadwallender’s eyes. “I would never allow one of my reporters to actively mislead the public.”

“Which means it’s up to me to *actively mislead* him as well as the earl.”

“Oh, the earl isn’t going. While he is willing to publicly denigrate your work, he is not willing to see this through personally. He’s sending a representative, a nephew I believe, a Mr. Harry Armstrong. Apparently, Mr. Armstrong visited Egypt in his youth and now considers himself something of an expert.”

“Wonderful,” Sidney said under her breath.

“I strongly suspect the earl’s criticism was a direct result of his nephew’s prodding.” He paused. “You need to prove your legitimacy to Armstrong’s satisfaction. If,

in his opinion, you do so, he will issue a public apology. If you fail, I've agreed to publish his book."

Sidney widened her eyes. "He's written a book?"

"Of allegedly true stories about his experiences in Egypt." The publisher sighed. "God help us all."

"One moment, Mr. Cadwallender." Effie's brow furrowed. "You're saying that the very man who decides whether or not Sidney is who the public believes her to be, has a great deal to gain if he decides she's a fraud." Effie shook her head. "That's extremely subjective and doesn't sound the least bit fair to me."

"Fair or not, that's the challenge. Refusing it would be the same as admitting he's right." He met Sidney's gaze directly. "You can do this, Sidney. Show the man around Egypt. Take him to the pyramids and maybe a tomb or two. Just enough to establish your expertise. It's not as if you have to discover a pharaoh's treasure."

"But that would be perfect," Effie murmured.

"You have the knowledge and, I have no doubt, the courage to pull off an endeavor of this nature. To be the heroine of your own story. You *are* Millicent Forester. You need to remember that." His tone softened. "We both have a great deal to lose if you aren't successful. My family started Cadwallender Publishing nearly a century ago. I would hate to be the Cadwallender to preside over its demise."

Sidney studied him for a long moment. Did she have the courage to carry off an escapade of this magnitude? Did she have the knowledge to step foot in Egypt for the first time and convince at least two people she did indeed know what she was doing? Still, aside from the deceptive aspect of it all, wasn't this exactly what she had spent years preparing for? Isn't this what she had always

wanted? Didn't she owe her readers at least a valiant attempt to be who they thought she was? And apparently, more than just her own future was at stake. She squared her shoulders. "I shall not let you down, Mr. Cadwallender."

"Excellent." Effie beamed. "The Lady Travelers Society will make the arrangements at once. Oh, we will be a jolly little band of travelers."

"We?" Mr. Cadwallender shook his head. "I'm afraid you misunderstand, Mrs. Higginbotham. I will not be going along to Egypt." He scoffed. "I have a newspaper to run."

"Of course you do, Mr. Cadwallender. And no one would expect a man of your responsibilities to abandon his duties even for something as important as this. But I'm afraid you are the one who has misunderstood." The glint in Effie's eyes belied the pleasant tone of her voice. "My friends and I cannot allow our dear Sidney to wander off to the land of the pharaohs without the proper accompaniment. Chaperones if you will."

Mr. Cadwallender's brow furrowed. "Chaperones?"

"Of course. Lady Blodgett, Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore and myself will be joining Sidney's party."

"Not necessary, Mrs. Higginbotham," Mr. Cadwallender said blithely. "Why, Nellie Bly went around the entire world completely on her own."

Effie sniffed. "Miss Bly is American. Such things are to be expected from an American. Subjects of Her Majesty do not adhere to such slip-shod standards of propriety and deportment."

"Might I point out that Miss Honeywell writes as Mrs. Gordon, a widow." His lips quirked upward in a

subtle show of triumph. "Therefore chaperones are not expected."

"And might I point out that your less than reputable rivals might portray this venture—an unattached female, regardless of whether she is a widow, heading off on a journey of unknown length with a gentleman and a male reporter—as something rife with the possibility of inappropriate activity. Why, the entire venture would be fraught with the suggestion of scandal." Effie shook her head in a regretful manner. "As much as your paper seems to delight in laying out all the juicy details of whatever scandal comes along, I wouldn't think you would want the *Daily Messenger* itself exposed to that sort of thing."

"No." He glared. "I suppose I wouldn't."

"Chaperones will eliminate any hint of impropriety. Furthermore..." She ticked the points off on her fingers. "The other ladies and myself are all the widows of men who each spent a good deal of time in Egypt. They were, as well, honored members of the Explorers Club. Which means that we have a certain amount of credibility as observers. In addition, Sidney will need assistance, support if you will, to carry off this ruse successfully. I daresay we don't want anyone else discovering the truth."

"No, we do not." He drummed his fingers on the desk. "I assume you expect me to finance your trip as well."

"It does seem to me we are doing you a very great favor by accompanying Miss Honeywell." Effie smiled, a triumphant gleam in her eye.

"It seems to me the word *blackmail* is more appropriate than *favor*."

"Semantics, Mr. Cadwallender." Effie waved off the comment. "One word is often just as good as another as long as the end result is the same."

“As long as it’s the result you want?”

Effie smiled pleasantly.

Mr. Cadwallender heaved a sigh of resignation. “Very well, then.” He turned to Sidney. “How soon can you be ready to leave?”

Sidney thought for a moment. She had nothing to attend to. Nothing keeping her in London. Indeed, she could have her bags packed and be ready to go within a day or so. “As soon as the arrangements can be made, I would think.”

“Excellent.” He rose to his feet behind his desk, Aunt Effie and Sidney following suit. “I have no doubt this will be an extremely successful venture for you—for all of us, Miss Honeywell.”

“Thank you, Mr. Cadwallender.”

He opened the door and Aunt Effie swept out of his office, Sidney a step behind. They made their way through the sea of desks, frenzied gentlemen with ink-stained fingers and organized confusion, to the front lobby. Sidney barely noticed any of it.

“That went nicely, I think,” Aunt Effie said with a satisfied nod after they’d requested a cab.

“I daresay Mr. Cadwallender has never faced the widow of a colonel before.” Sidney grinned.

“Fighting for what you want has as much to do with knowing who you are and, of course, knowing what you want.” Effie’s lips curved in a satisfied smile. “Being the wife of a colonel is simply the icing on the cake.”

Sidney hesitated. “Are you certain you and the others are up to this?”

“Because we are no longer in the prime of youth?”

“Well, yes.”

“I assure you, Sidney, we are quite spry.” She paused.

“There are two kinds of women in this world, my dear. Those who wave goodbye to others starting on grand adventures and those waving back from the window of a train or the deck of a ship.” Effie raised her chin. “It’s past time that Gwen, Poppy and I became the latter. We too need to seize the day. Besides, this may well be our last chance.”

“And perhaps my only chance.”

“Then we shall have to make the most of it.” Effie grinned. “As Mr. Cadwallender is paying for it, we should make certain he gets his money’s worth.”

Sidney laughed. Good Lord! Thanks to a stuffy, arrogant, rude beast of a lord and his nephew she was finally going to Egypt. Certainly, given the amount of deception involved, it was not going to be easy. But it was past time to stop dreaming about what she wanted. Her very future was now at stake. In many ways, it seemed her life—her story—was just beginning.

And she could hardly wait to turn the page.

CHAPTER TWO

“THIS MRS. GORDON is a fraud, I tell you.” Harold Armstrong, the new Earl of Brenton, paced the impressive width of the private parlor his predecessors had used as an office in the grand Mayfair house that was now his. Harry was not prone to pacing, or at least he never had been, but everything about his life had changed in recent months and he had a great deal on his mind. In addition, the events of today failed to provide the satisfaction he had expected which cast an unfamiliar sense of doubt over his actions. Harold Armstrong was not used to doubt. “And I intend to expose her for the complete and utter fake she is.”

“Try not to restrain yourself, Harry.” Lord Benjamin Deane, who had been Harry’s friend since their days at Cambridge, lounged in one of the wingback chairs positioned in front of the fireplace. “Tell me what you really think about her.”

Harry paused. “This is not the least bit humorous, Ben.”

“On the contrary, Harry old boy, it may well be the funniest thing I’ve run into in a long time.”

“Exactly what do you find so amusing?”

“First and foremost the fact that you can’t see the humor in it is in itself most amusing. You do seem to be wound tighter than a watch spring these days.”

“Nonsense.”

“But I suppose when one has abruptly become an earl—an eligible and eminently marriageable earl—without realizing it was even a remote possibility, one does tend to lose one’s sense of humor.”

“Rubbish, I haven’t lost anything.” Harry denied it but he was indeed more serious of late. Although, as he’d never been particularly serious about anything in his life until recently, it was perhaps past time. “Indeed, I find the convoluted manner in which I came into this title to be damn amusing.”

And completely unexpected. Harry had always known the man he considered his father, Sir Arthur Armstrong, was his mother’s second husband and a distant cousin of his natural father, who had died before Harry was born. Harry had heard the story any number of times growing up of how Arthur had fallen head over heels for Harry’s mother the moment he met the lovely young widow. Unfortunately, they had only a few years together before she succumbed to influenza. Harry scarcely remembered her and had long suspected the stories of his mother Arthur told were meant to keep her close to both Harry and Arthur.

Both men were aware that they each shared an ancestral link to the tenth Earl of Brenton although it had never seemed of particular importance. Arthur was a scholar of history and long-dead civilizations and a highly regarded expert on ancient Egypt and its artifacts, knighted several years ago in acknowledgment of his scholarly work as well as his efforts in furthering the reputation and collections of the British Museum. He had not raised Harry as a man who would one day be an earl but rather as the son of a man with his nose perpetually in a book and his head more often than not in a long past century. It was only due

to fate, death and the fact that there were more females than males in the earl's direct lineage that Harry became the fourteenth Earl of Brenton some eleven months ago.

"And—" Harry flashed his friend an unrepentant grin and, for a moment, felt like the Harry Armstrong of old "—the money doesn't hurt."

"A definite benefit." Ben laughed. As the youngest son of a wealthy marquess, Ben had never been without funds and had in fact financed their first excursion to Egypt nearly twenty years ago.

Arthur had a respectable family fortune of his own although finances had never been particularly important to him, and Harry had grown up in modest surroundings. Now, in addition to the country estate that accompanied Harry's title, he had inherited a large London mansion and had, after much debate, convinced his father to change residences. While Arthur was initially reluctant to uproot his life, he had been lured to the Mayfair house by its grand library and spacious rooms. Arthur's domicile was close to bursting with books, relics and various collections he had accumulated over the years. Besides, Harry had argued, even though he was thirty-eight years of age, a man could always use the company and wisdom of his father.

"Although that entire business about my being eligible and eminently marriageable is somewhat bothersome." Harry was far more used to being the pursuer than the pursued. He pinned his friend with an accusing look. "You could have warned me."

"Where would be the fun in that?"

"I had no idea the mothers of unwed daughters could be quite so determined." Harry shuddered.

"This is just the beginning," Ben said, "and you may

consider *that* your warning. Heed it well. When you were merely the son of a scholar, those fearsome mothers looking for an excellent match paid you no attention whatsoever. Now that you have a title and fortune, you have become a highly sought after commodity.”

“I’m not sure I like being a commodity, no matter how highly sought.”

“None of us do.”

“It’s easier for you.” Harry strode to the decanter of brandy the butler, Jeffries, had thoughtfully placed on a nearby table. “You have a mother and sisters to help guide you through the morass of society nonsense.” Harry poured two glasses and handed one to Ben.

“You would think that would make it easier.” Ben raised his glass to his friend. “But you would be wrong.”

Ben was at least more used to the social requirements of the aristocracy than Harry. On those occasions when the two would return to London from Egypt, Ben was immediately pulled into the orbit of his formidable family and their endless social obligations whereas Harry usually spent those interludes in companionship with his father.

“On that score, you should be grateful. It’s the females in my family who are the most determined to see me wed. Fortunately, I have three older brothers, including the next marquess, who have engaged their matchmaking tendencies to this point.” He took a deep swallow of the brandy. “Unfortunately, my brothers have now all married and I am apparently fair game since I am now home for good.”

It was not necessary for either man to mention the reason why Ben was home and yet it hung in the air between them. Unspoken and always present.

“All you have to do is find a suitable wife and you’ll be off the market.”

Harry sank down into the chair next to Ben’s. “I can’t say I’m interested in marriage. At least not now.”

“Sorry, Harry. Your interests are of little concern.” Ben shook his head in a mournful manner. “One of the prime responsibilities of any title holder is to marry, produce an heir and preferably a spare, so as to secure the title for the future.”

“In my case it’s a title I never sought, feel no particular loyalty to and don’t especially want.” Harry paused. “Except for the money, of course. The money is nice.” He glanced around the elegant room with its paneled walls, shelves reaching to the distant ceiling and portraits of unknown ancestors glaring down at him. “And the house.”

“Consider the house a bonus as you are stuck with the title, *Lord Brenton*.”

“Yes.” He blew a long breath. “I suppose I am.”

Harry still wasn’t used to the idea of being *Lord* anything. When he, Ben and Walter Pickering, had left their studies at Cambridge to seek ancient treasure in the deserts of Egypt, he had—they all had—assumed they would return having made their fortunes. Their friends were not as confident and many wagered the trio would come to a bad end and never be heard from again. There were moments when they came perilously close to fulfilling that expectation. What no one expected was that Harry and his companions would discover a passion and respect for Egypt and the mystery of its past that, combined with the influence of his father, would turn them from somewhat disreputable treasure hunters to relatively respectable archeologists. Why, Harry couldn’t remember the last time they had blatantly smuggled or stolen

a valuable piece of Egypt's past. Although admittedly, there might have been a piece or two, or several dozen, that they had obtained for the British Museum in recent years through questionable and possibly less than legitimate means. Not as much fun—or profitable—as their earlier days but fairly satisfying all in all.

But then Walter died of a fever that probably would have been a minor ailment in England. Logically and rationally, Harry knew it was no one's fault but knew as well that Ben blamed himself just as Harry did. Perhaps it was indeed Walter's death, or perhaps they had overstayed their welcome, or perhaps the passion they'd had for the excitement and adventure to be found in the land of the pharaohs had run its course. Or possibly they had at last grown up. No doubt the death of a close friend would do that to a man. Walter had been gone for more than a year when Harry received notice of his inheritance and decided to return to England permanently. Ben too was ready to turn toward home.

Harry wasn't quite sure what he had expected but his first few months in England had been filled with documents to be signed, legalities to be attended to and endless details regarding his new position in life. He'd had to hire a secretary to oversee his affairs and found himself not only with a country estate but an estate manager and tenants as well. He and his father had resided at Brenton Hall, a few hours by train from London, for several months while Jeffries was charged with moving Arthur's possessions and readying the London house.

Jeffries had been his father's butler for as long as Harry could remember and he was as much his father's best friend and a second father to Harry as he was servant. Theirs had always been a bachelor household. Harry

had installed him, as well as the rest of their modest staff, in the new residence. The Mayfair house itself was apparently little used as the previous earl was somewhat reclusive and had preferred to reside at the country estate. It had then sat vacant for over a year due to the complexities of inheritance as well as identification and location of the new earl and the previous staff had moved on to other positions. Jeffries had been hard-pressed to hide his glee in overseeing setting the grand house to rights as well as hiring the additional staff the new abode required.

The frantic pace of the first few months did not prepare Harry for the tedium that followed. He had always been a man of action. His predecessor had retained competent employees—solicitors, estate managers and various other agents—who had been in their respective positions for years and from Harry's assessment no changes were necessary. His new secretary managed his correspondence, business and social obligations—invitations had virtually flooded the house since his arrival—and he had no particular interest in politics. All of which led him to wonder if perhaps he and Ben had made a mistake in deciding to return home permanently. Life now was rather dull and he feared he'd become somewhat dull as well. But upon further reflection—and God knew he had plenty of time for reflection—he realized his heart was simply no longer in the life of adventure he'd once savored. The past was the past and it was time to forge ahead.

Still, why waste a lifetime of experience? He was intelligent and capable. Why not take his almost twenty years of exploits and share them with the world? Why not write of his adventures? And not his alone but his and Ben's and Walter's. If H. Rider Haggard—who hadn't nearly the background Harry and his friends had—could become

successful at it, so could Harry. He no longer needed the money but the fame—or rather—the *acknowledgment* of their deeds, validation of their life's work and recognition of their efforts in furthering the field of Egyptology as well as a modicum of respect would be rather nice. And didn't Walter deserve at least that?

"I think Mrs. Gordon's stories are remarkably well done," Ben said, bringing the topic back to the object of Harry's ire. "I find the *Tales of a Lady Adventurer in Egypt* most entertaining."

"You have no taste."

"And you have no tolerance." Ben picked up the latest copy of the *Daily Messenger* with Mrs. Gordon's newest offering from the table between the chairs. "The lady's stories are great fun, Harry. They have adventure, a touch of romance, even a bit of mystery. I quite enjoy them."

"They're inaccurate."

"Certainly she has left off some of the more unpleasant aspects of life in Egypt—"

"Some?" Harry scoffed. "You won't find so much as a mention of sand fleas or vermin in any of her stories."

"Perhaps because people don't really want to read about sand fleas and vermin. I know I don't."

"Details," Harry said firmly, "are important. You cannot go about leaving out particulars simply because they're disagreeable."

Still, upon the kind of deliberation one can only have in hindsight, too much accuracy might well have been Harry's problem. He had written several stories, and indeed had nearly an entire book completed, before submitting anything for publication. Each and every submission was met with polite but firm rejection and nicely phrased, yet still unflattering, comments about his ability to re-

late a story in an interesting manner. It made no sense to him whatsoever. Even worse, he was tactfully told that as long as Mrs. Gordon was writing stories about Egypt that were adored by the public, there was no place for his less-than-entertaining work. But he wasn't merely writing stories—his were true. Harry could only surmise that those who never stepped foot outside of London could not possibly be expected to appreciate the gritty realism of his work, ignoring the fact that his readership was likely to be made up of those very same people. He then asked his father—a man as well-read as ever there was—and Ben—who had lived Harry's adventures by his side—to read his work.

Their reactions were less enthusiastic than Harry had hoped. Father was evasive over the quality of Harry's writing while swearing he wouldn't have had a peaceful night's rest if he had known all that Harry was engaged in during his years in Egypt, while Ben had simply muttered how it was all rather duller than he remembered.

Apparently, Harry Armstrong, who had never lacked in confidence about anything and had mastered very nearly everything he had ever attempted could write a grammatically accurate sentence that was of no interest whatsoever. He intended to work on that.

"Regardless of what people want, or think they want, if one purports to be detailing factual experiences one cannot leave off the less than pleasant aspects. Details are what brings a story to life and facts are indisputable," Harry said in a lofty manner.

Ben laughed.

"This isn't funny." Harry scowled. "This is how I intend to spend the rest of my days. I am of an age where squandering my time and money in a futile pursuit of

pleasure seems absurd and, oddly enough, has no particular appeal—”

“Who would have thought?” Ben shook his head in a mournful manner.

“And I’m far too young to do nothing at all. But no one is interested in my writing, which is based on unvarnished truth and unsentimental reality, because this woman—” he grabbed the paper from Ben’s hand and shook it at him “—has fed them frothy tales of gallant desert chieftains, bandits more dashing than deadly, virtuous treasure hunters interested only in uncovering the grandeur of the ancients—”

“I’d say that’s a fairly accurate description of us.” Ben grinned. “Although I would add handsome and daring as well.”

“The stories she spins are of a land of illusion and fantasy with no more substance to them than fairy tales. They’re full of *feelings* rather than facts.”

“There’s nothing wrong with feelings and she does say she has taken occasional liberty with facts in pursuit of a good story,” Ben noted mildly.

“Occasional? Ha!” Harry glared. “Camels, as you well know, are not noble beasts gliding over the sands like ships at full sail but unpleasant, rude, disgusting creatures whose only redeeming quality is their suitability for the desert climate. It’s utter rubbish for God’s sake. And people have accepted it all as fact.”

“People, all in all, aren’t very bright.”

“Did you know they call her the Queen of the Desert?”

“Yes, I believe you have mentioned that.” Ben pressed his lips together to keep from laughing. “More than once.”

“More like the queen of deception, ill-conceived fa-

bles and outright fraud.” Harry dropped the paper on to the table and then tossed back his brandy. It did not help.

“And you did not hesitate to say exactly that in your letters to *The Times*.”

“Of course I did. I could do nothing less. People deserve to know when they’re being hoodwinked,” Harry said staunchly, ignoring what might have been the tiniest stab of regret.

He had always been rather gallant where women were concerned and women had always liked him. He did now wonder if boredom with his new life coupled with frustration at his inability to sell his work might have had something to do with initiating his letters to *The Times*. Not that he was wrong in calling attention to Mrs. Gordon’s misrepresentations of fact in her *Tales*. Nor was he wrong in threatening her membership in the Antiquities Society, but he had opened the proverbial Pandora’s box.

“And Egypt deserves better. She is grand and glorious, timeless and dangerous. And worthy of respect. The place is already overrun with tourists. Stories like Mrs. Gordon’s, that depict the country as little more than a fanciful winter resort in the shadow of the pyramids, only encourage more visitors who refuse to relish in the very land they’ve come to experience but rather insist on bringing their own ways with them. This woman, with her inaccuracies and rose-colored portrayal, is assisting in the ruination of an ancient land.”

“I can’t say I entirely disagree with you there.”

“Even worse, those who believe her nonsense, who think seeking the treasure of the ancients can be accomplished as easily as writing a few paragraphs, and with as little risk, flock to Egypt only to be rudely awakened.”

“Isn’t that what we did?”

“We were young and stupid and it was a different time. And, ultimately, we paid a price for being seduced by Egypt.”

Ben was silent for a long moment. “Regardless, you could have been a bit more diplomatic in your censure.”

“Yes, I suppose I could have.” Harry blew a frustrated breath. “And I probably should have. I realize now that it might have been wiser, and certainly more courteous, to have been less strident in my condemnation.”

“You did stir up something of a hornet’s nest.”

“I am well aware of that.”

While the wisdom of his first letter to *The Times* was debatable, he could see now that it had not been a good idea to continue to engage the woman via additional letters. It had only served to escalate their dispute to the point where he had challenged her to travel to Egypt and prove that she knew what she was writing about. Apparently justifiable indignation negated any possibility of intelligent thought, but then prudence and discretion had never been Harry Armstrong’s strongest qualities. Lord Brenton would have to do better.

“Given your attitude toward your new title—” Ben nodded at the newspaper “—I was rather surprised that you signed your letters as Lord Brenton rather than Harry Armstrong.”

“At first, it didn’t seem quite fair to identify myself as an earl and not at all sporting. She is a woman, after all, and a widow. I didn’t want to intimidate her.” Although, judging by her responses, a little intimidation might have served him well. “But the more I read of her work—” and the more rejection Harry Armstrong’s writing received “—the more I realized writing to *The Times* as Lord Brenton would give added weight to my charges.”

Ben picked up the paper and paged to the latest installment of *Tales of a Lady Adventurer in Egypt*. "Have you read the stories in the *Messenger* and those in her book closely or has your outrage prevented that?"

"Close enough."

"I doubt it," Ben said under his breath. "Have you noticed that her depiction of Egypt is somewhat, oh, dated if you will?"

"Somewhat?" Harry snorted. "She might as well be writing in the time of the pharaohs themselves. Obviously, she has based her *Tales* on old, poorly researched, fictitious accounts."

"She never mentions the throngs of tourists that have increased in the last twenty years, thanks to the railroads and the Suez Canal, or the government regulations that only serve to complicate excavations and any number of other details."

"We've already established she is not overly fond of accurate details." He paused. "Aside from vermin."

Ben studied the story for a moment. "It strikes me that these might well be the accounts of someone who has not been to Egypt for some time. Perhaps even decades." Ben looked up from the paper and grinned. "I'd wager you've been exchanging letters with an old lady."

"Surely not." Harry scoffed. "You've seen her responses to my letters. They're confrontational, unsuitably forward and verge perilously close to rude although she never engages in blatant discourtesy. She was quite civil when she called me arrogant."

"Yes, I noticed that."

"Admittedly, I would expect any woman who writes about lady adventurers in Egypt—whether those stories are true or not—to defend her position although I do

think her polite implication that I am somehow resentful of her success because she's female is going a bit far."

"I noticed that too."

Harry narrowed his eyes. "She is always polite."

"Indeed she is. It must be most annoying."

"You have no idea." He shook his head. "But an elderly woman? Absolutely not. Those letters could not possibly be the work of a fragile, old lady. They're entirely too assertive and forceful."

Ben stared. "You don't know any old ladies, do you?"

Harry frowned. "No, but—"

"You, my friend, have been engaged in a battle with a dear, sweet old lady." Ben chuckled. "And even then you couldn't win."

Harry drew his brows together. "Are you sure?"

"You should meet my grandmother." Ben glanced at the paper. "These are exactly the kind of letters she'd write, this is the very tone she'd take and she'd do so with a great deal of satisfaction."

Harry stared at his friend. The idea that Mrs. Gordon was an older woman hadn't so much as crossed his mind. If Ben was right... "Bloody hell."

"I say leave her alone. End this nonsense right now."

Ben sipped his drink. "Let this be, Harry. I don't think this is a war you can win."

Regardless, he did feel compelled to defend himself. "Her reckless disregard of fact destroys any shred of credibility she may have. Her work reflects badly on those of us who know what we are writing about. In many ways, she is my direct competition. Indeed, I've been told as much. Discrediting her—"

"Would probably expose her publicly. She obviously wants to be circumspect. You never see a photograph

of her or hear of any kind of public appearance. I can't believe you want to do that to a dear, sweet old lady—"

"I would question your use of *sweet*," Harry muttered.

"Nonetheless, once the public gets a look at her, all that white hair and wrinkles, leaning on a cane—"

"You don't know that."

"No, but I daresay she'll look something like that. And people will be entirely on her side. Poor, little old lady pitted against the arrogant Earl of Brenton." Ben shook his head in apparent sympathy. "You will not only look like a fool, but like a mean, unpleasant sort as well."

"I would prefer to avoid that." Ben might well be right about Mrs. Gordon's age as well as the repercussions to Harry's reputation should this go any further. "I do see your point about dropping this whole matter. Unfortunately..."

Ben's brow rose. "Unfortunately?"

"You do know I challenged her to go to Egypt and prove her knowledge."

"Good God." Ben groaned. "She's accepted hasn't she?"

"The *Daily Messenger* did on her behalf." Harry winced. "I was notified this morning. They're sending a reporter as well." It had sounded like such a good idea when he had first thought of demanding Mrs. Gordon prove her legitimacy. Now it seemed rather stupid. "We leave for Egypt as soon as arrangements can be made."

"Can you get out of it?"

"Not without looking like an even greater idiot."

"One of those damned-if-you-do sort of things."

"So it would appear." Harry considered his options. There didn't seem to be any. "Say, why don't you come along? I could certainly use a friend by my side. It would be like old times."

"Absolutely not," Ben said firmly. "As much as I would

love to witness this debacle, my father has decided to put me to work in one of the family interests. Shipping I think although it's still rather vague." He sipped his drink. "He and my brothers are trying to decide where I'll do the least harm."

"Nonsense. More likely they're trying to ascertain where you'll be of greatest benefit."

Ben's family had never been especially pleased with his choices in life—wandering the desert seeking ancient treasure, no matter how legitimate he had become, was not what had been envisioned for the youngest son of a marquess. But Ben was far more competent and capable than his family might suspect and had saved Harry's neck on more than one occasion.

"I've decided not to use my title on this venture," Harry said. "In fact, the earl has already informed the *Daily Messenger* that he was sending a representative in his stead to accompany Mrs. Gordon to Egypt. One Harry Armstrong." He winced. "The earl's nephew."

"Nephew?" Ben snorted back a laugh.

"It has to be someone the earl trusts."

"Of course." Ben shook his head in disbelief. "Why not just use your title? It does open a lot of doors you know."

"You rarely used your title in Egypt."

"Mine is honorary."

"For one thing, I don't intend to write as Lord Brenton. It's Harry Armstrong's exploits I'll be writing about. Lord Brenton has never been to the desert."

"You do realize you're one in the same?"

"It doesn't feel like it. It doesn't feel, well, right. It feels as if I'm wearing a suit of clothes that doesn't fit. As if I'm trying to be someone I'm not. I was simply the only male on the right branch of the family tree. This title isn't

something I wanted although I suppose I'm resigned to it." He paused. "Also, I wish to avoid undue attention and the possibility of unpleasant publicity and, well, scandal."

"Do you?" Ben snorted. "You have changed."

"Pity isn't it?" Harry got to his feet, strode across the room, grabbed the brandy decanter and returned. "Harry Armstrong's exploits need to be as far removed from the Earl of Brenton as possible. I am now the titular head of a family which evidently carries with it certain obligations, as was made very clear to me by a representative of said family. Not that they are interested in having much to do with me. Which does suit me, by the way."

"To be expected really." Ben nodded and held out his now empty glass. "You're the interloper who claimed their family heritage."

"Not by choice." Harry refilled Ben's glass, then his own, and settled back in his chair. "There are apparently a fair number of unattached female relations that I am now, at least in a hereditary sense, responsible for. My involvement in anything untoward, past or present, would reflect poorly on them, thus hindering their chances for a good marriage. Which would then be laid firmly at my feet." He grimaced. "Do you realize I now have a rather large family?"

"Again—the house in town, the estate in the country and, of course, the fortune make up for it."

"We shall see." Although it was an excellent estate, a very nice house and an even nicer fortune. "There are all sorts of responsibilities I never considered." He glanced at Ben. "It's not actually a requirement but I am expected to take a seat in the House of Lords now." Harry blew a long breath. "I know nothing about running a country."

"I wouldn't worry about it." Ben chuckled. "In that, at least, you'll fit right in."

There is nothing as delightful and exhilarating as the day one steps foot on board a ship bound for the shores of Egypt. As one turns one's face toward the rising sun and the land of the pharaohs, one's heart is filled with the heady anticipation of what is to come and the thrill of the adventures that lie ahead.

—*Tales of a Lady Adventurer in Egypt*

Steamship is now the most efficient way to travel between London and Alexandria. Before setting foot on any vessel it is always wise to investigate a ship's history to avoid unwelcome surprises of incompetence among captain and crew.

—*My Adventures in Egypt,*
The True Writings of Harold Armstrong

CHAPTER THREE

Three weeks later

THERE WAS MUCH to be said for having a lot of money.

The moment Harry had arrived at the Royal Albert docks, his luggage had been whisked away to be unpacked in his first class stateroom for the nearly two-week voyage to Alexandria. First class on the Peninsular and Oriental ship the *Ancona*. Harry couldn't resist a satisfied grin. He was not used to traveling in anything other than the most modest of circumstances. Having substantial resources would not be at all hard to adjust to.

He glanced around the bustling docks and ignored a

trickle of impatience. Harry had received a note from James Cadwallender a few days ago saying the publisher of *Cadwallender's Daily Messenger* would be on hand today to make introductions and see their party off. According to Cadwallender, that party included not only Mrs. Gordon and the *Messenger's* reporter but companions of Mrs. Gordon's as well. And weren't additional elderly ladies exactly what this venture needed? The very idea made Harry's teeth clench. He had considered protesting to Cadwallender but, for once, held his immediate impulse in check. He had resolved to follow the advice of Ben and his father and be as charming and agreeable as possible. Put his best foot forward as it were.

He had also decided, again on the advice of his father and his friend as well as the urgings of his own conscience, to let the matter of Mrs. Gordon's accuracy rest when it came to public exposure and not subject her to ridicule and censure. Once he had undeniable proof of her incompetence in all matters relating to Egypt, he intended to have a firm talk with her, point out the error of her ways in misleading her readers and strongly suggest she change the title of her stories to the *Fictitious Tales of a Lady Adventurer in Egypt*. As he intended to title his stories *My Adventures in Egypt*, *The True Writings of Harold Armstrong* when they were eventually published, it did seem this was a solution that would at least provide some separation of public appeal between his work and hers, thereby avoiding direct competition. It was not a perfect solution—and people might well prefer her stories to his anyway—but he'd been feeling badly ever since Ben had brought up the likelihood of Mrs. Gordon being an old lady. Harry had reread all of her stories and had come to the inescapable conclusion that

Ben was right. Even though in many ways Egypt was as unchanging as the sands of the desert itself, no one who had stepped foot in the country in the last twenty years or so would write about it in the same manner she had. Although admittedly, if one could overlook the flowery language and massive inaccuracies, they were somewhat entertaining.

It was the right thing to do. After all, she was an elderly widow, probably with a minimal income and no doubt needed the money from her writing to make ends meet. He may be trying to carve a new path for his life but he could certainly afford to be generous. With every passing year, Harry had become more and more cognizant of doing the right thing even when it was difficult. It provided a measure of moral satisfaction and made him a better man. He quite liked that.

Still, impatience was beginning to win over resolve and Harry resisted the urge to tap his foot. He did wish the others would arrive. He wanted to get this business of introductions over with and retire to his stateroom. But what could one expect from a group of females? He may not have much experience with older women, but he certainly had a great deal with younger members of their gender. Regardless of nationality, they were universally chatty, prone to excessive giggling and nearly always late. Although admittedly, they were frequently enchanting and could be a great deal of fun as well. He blew a resigned breath. He did not expect anything about this venture to be fun.

Harry had taken up a position near the *Ancona's* gangplank, as Cadwallender had instructed, and now surveyed the docks, busy with provisions and goods being loaded

onto ships as well as crowds of excited passengers headed for parts unknown.

"Mr. Armstrong?" A man a few years older than Harry stepped up to him with a smile. Three elderly ladies and a somewhat nondescript younger woman—probably a granddaughter seeing them off—trailed behind.

"Yes?" Harry adopted a pleasant smile of his own.

"Excellent. I'm James Cadwallender." Cadwallender thrust out his hand to shake Harry's. "Good day to start a voyage, don't you think?"

"Better than expected," Harry said. It was in fact quite cold but the inevitable January rain had held off today and the sun was making a weak effort to shine. Sun and warmth were two things he missed about Egypt. "I must say, I appreciate you taking the time to see us off."

"Oh, I wouldn't miss it." A wicked gleam of amusement shone in the man's eyes. "Allow me to introduce your traveling companions." Cadwallender turned toward the ladies.

"No need, Mr. Cadwallender." Harry braced himself, adopted his most charming smile and stepped toward the closest woman, the shortest of the three elderly ladies. She was exactly as he had pictured Mrs. Gordon right down to the fair, nearly white hair escaping from an absurd feathered hat and fur-trimmed wrap. He took her hand and bowed slightly. "I would know you anywhere, Mrs. Gordon."

"Would you?" Her blue eyes shone with amusement. "How very clever of you." She leaned closer and lowered her voice. "And how very wrong."

"My apologies." He dropped her hand and stepped back. Damnation. She was the closest to Cadwallender and he'd thought surely—

"We, however, would certainly know you anywhere." The next elderly lady, with graying dark hair, a hat just as ridiculous as the first woman's and the overbearing manner of a dragon about to belch flames, eyed him with obvious disgust. "Simply by the air of arrogance as well as impatience about you. No doubt exactly like your uncle."

"I am working on that," he said and continued to maintain his smile. "Then you must be Mrs. Gordon."

She sniffed. "Wrong again, Mr. Armstrong. But then I suspect you and your uncle must be used to being wrong."

He drew his brows together. "Now, see here, I—"

"Mr. Cadwallender," the third older lady, who was surely Mrs. Gordon, said in a no-nonsense tone. "Are you going to set the poor man straight or are you enjoying this entirely too much?"

Cadwallender chuckled. "I am enjoying it. However—" he turned to Harry "—I do apologize but it was rather fun to watch someone else be maneuvered by these three. Allow me to introduce Lady Blodgett."

"You are a scamp, Mr. Cadwallender. Fortunately, you are smarter than you look," Lady Blodgett said and held out her hand to Harry. "Delighted to meet you, Mr. Armstrong."

He took her hand and nodded a bow. "Lady Blodgett."

"This is Mrs. Higginbotham," Cadwallender said.

"Mr. Armstrong." The dragon nodded and did not remove her hands from her fur muff to shake his.

Cadwallender indicated the remaining older lady. "And Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore."

"Mr. Armstrong." Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore beamed. "I can't tell you how pleased we are to be accompanying you and our dear Miss—Mrs. Gordon on this exciting venture."

Harry stared in confusion.

"And this," Cadwallender said, gesturing at the younger woman, "is Mrs. Gordon."

Ben was wrong.

The genuine Mrs. Gordon considered him with ill-concealed amusement. "Good day, Mr. Armstrong."

"You're not old," he said without thinking. She couldn't possibly be much older than thirty.

"Not yet." The corners of her lips quirked upward and she held out her hand. "I am sorry if you're disappointed."

"Not at all," he murmured and took her hand, gazing down into the loveliest eyes he had ever seen. Blue and fair and clear, the color of the sky on a perfect desert day. She was considerably shorter than he but then most people were. Wisps of pale blond hair escaped from a fashionable hat to dance around a heart-shaped face. Her cheeks were pinked by the chill of the day, her lips reddened by the wind and most inviting. How had he thought she was nondescript? "I am delighted to at last meet you in person."

"Delighted? Are you indeed, Mr. Armstrong?" She pulled her hand from his. "I must say I am surprised as I would think you would not be the least bit delighted to make the acquaintance of someone who, oh, let me think. How did your uncle phrase it?"

"He said your inaccuracy was stunning and you had as little regard for truth and facts as a fish does for a carriage," the dragon said with a distinctly murderous look in her eye.

"And he called your prose flowery, debilitating and enough to make any rational human being choke with the sweetness of it." Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore shook her head

in a chastising manner. "Your uncle should be ashamed of himself, Mr. Armstrong."

Harry swallowed hard. It was one thing to write a letter to *The Times* criticizing a work and quite something else to be confronted by the author of that work and her band of elderly termagants. "Yes, well, he might have used words to that effect."

"He used those words exactly," Lady Blodgett said. "They were overly harsh and rather rude. I do think an apology is called for."

"Of course." He nodded. "And I do..." What was he doing? Blast it all. Three minutes with these women and they had him entirely turned around. He drew a steadying breath. "You're right, Lady Blodgett, and I do apologize for my uncle if his wording was less than tactful." He turned to Mrs. Gordon and met her gaze directly. "Which in no way means he was not correct in his assessment of your work."

"You agree with him, then?"

He nodded. "I do."

"Have you read my work?"

"I have."

Her lovely eyes narrowed. "He said I was too inept to ever be allowed a pen in my hand. Do you agree with that?"

"You called him an arrogant ass, Mrs. Gordon," he said sharply.

"Mr. Armstrong," Lady Blodgett murmured. "Your language."

"In *The Times*?" The dragon gasped. "She would never call anyone an ass—"

"Effie!" Lady Blodgett snapped.

"—in *The Times*. Unlike the *Daily Messenger*, *The*

Times would never allow that kind of language. No matter how appropriate the term might be." She glanced at Lady Blodgett. "There are moments, Gwen, when nothing else will do."

"On the contrary, Mr. Armstrong, I believed she called your uncle an arrogant, ill-tempered buffoon," Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore said pleasantly. "If you choose to substitute another term, well, you would certainly know better than we."

"Lady Blodgett was right. An apology is in order and I shall gladly offer that apology." Mrs. Gordon smiled but her eyes blazed. "I am dreadfully sorry for having ignored the sensibilities of buffoons everywhere and unjustly insulting them by adding your uncle, and you as well, to their company."

"Now, see here," Harry began.

"Good day, Mr. Cadwallender." A man nearly as tall as Harry, and several years younger, strode up to their group. "I hope I'm not late, sir."

"Not at all, Corbin." Cadwallender was clearly trying not to grin. "Mr. Armstrong and the ladies were just becoming acquainted. Ladies, this is one of my finest reporters, Mr. Daniel Corbin. He will be on hand to record Mrs. Gordon's triumph."

"Or defeat," Harry said under his breath.

"And will be sending dispatches along the way as to Mrs. Gordon's new adventures in Egypt." The publisher paused. "That is a catchy title. I shall have to remember that." He turned to the ladies. "Corbin, allow me to introduce Lady Blodgett."

"Lady Blodgett." Corbin took her hand and raised it to his lips. "It's an honor and a privilege to meet you, my lady. I was a great admirer of your husband."

“Lady Blodgett’s late husband, Sir Charles Blodgett, was quite a well-known explorer,” Cadwallender said in an aside to Harry.

“Of course,” Harry murmured.

Lady Blodgett tilted her head slightly and considered the reporter. “How very kind of you to say, Mr. Corbin.”

“And this is Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore,” Cadwallender said.

Corbin turned to Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore and took her hand. “Mr. Cadwallender did not tell me I would be in such august company. I am delighted to meet you, Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore. Your husband’s reputation among his fellow explorers was legendary.”

It was all Harry could do to keep from snorting in derision. He would wager significant money that Corbin did indeed know exactly who made up Mrs. Gordon’s party and had made inquiries into their backgrounds in advance of this meeting.

“Thank you, Mr. Corbin.” Mrs. Fitzhew-Wellmore dimpled. “Malcolm would be most pleased to know he has not been forgotten.”

“I daresay he never will be,” Corbin said firmly.

“And Mrs. Higginbotham.” Cadwallender indicated the dragon.

“No doubt you have something nice to say about my husband as well.” The dragon eyed the reporter suspiciously but offered her hand.

“Mrs. Higginbotham.” Corbin took her hand and gazed into her eyes. “My favorite uncle served with your husband in the Crimea. He often said there was no finer officer to serve under than Colonel Higginbotham and credits your husband with his survival of that conflict. Allow me to offer my thanks from my entire family.”

“Oh.” The dragon looked a bit taken aback. Harry wouldn’t have thought it possible. Then she smiled and for a moment, he could see she must have been quite lovely in her youth. “I was right. That was very nice, Mr. Corbin.”

Corbin laughed and turned to Mrs. Gordon. “Which means you must be Mrs. Gordon.”

“Well, if I must.” Mrs. Gordon extended her hand.

“I can’t tell you what a pleasure it is to meet you at last. I am an ardent follower of your *Tales*.” Corbin raised her gloved hand to his lips in an absurd and well-practiced display of inappropriate gallantry, his gaze never wavering from hers. “But I had no idea the writer of such exciting adventures would be quite so lovely.”

“What did you expect, Mr. Corbin?” Mrs. Gordon smiled, a distinctly flirtatious sort of smile in Harry’s opinion.

“I’m not sure exactly.” Corbin continued to gaze into her eyes. Did the man have no sense of restraint? “But I did not expect someone as lovely as she is brilliant. May I tell you how much I admire your work? I find your writing fascinating and completely absorbing. You, Mrs. Gordon, have the rare ability to take your readers on a journey of adventure and excitement.”

Harry snorted.

“Unfortunately, Mr. Corbin, not everyone agrees with you.” Mrs. Gordon nodded in Harry’s direction.

“Ah yes.” Corbin released Mrs. Gordon’s hand reluctantly and turned his attention to Harry. “Mr. Armstrong, I presume?”

“Mr. Corbin.” Harry nodded and accepted the man’s offered hand. Corbin’s handshake was even firmer than his employer’s. Too firm really, as if he was trying to

prove a point. Harry tightened his grip in response. Two could play at whatever game this reporter was playing.

Corbin released his hand and Harry ignored the need to flex his fingers. "You're rather well-known yourself among archeologists and Egyptologists, Mr. Armstrong."

Apparently the ladies weren't the only ones Corbin researched, although obviously not well as he made no reference to Harry's newfound title. Good. "I have spent a number of years in Egypt."

"Mr. Armstrong considers himself quite an expert on all things Egyptian," Mrs. Gordon said coolly.

Harry narrowed his eyes. "As do you."

Mrs. Gordon shrugged in an offhand manner as if her knowledge was not in question and turned to Cadwallender. "It was quite thoughtful of you to see us off, Mr. Cadwallender. And most appreciated."

"Here's to an excellent voyage and a successful journey." Cadwallender took her hand and smiled. "I have every confidence in you, Mrs. Gordon."

"Thank you, Mr. Cadwallender." She slanted a quick glance at Harry then smiled up at the publisher. "I assure you, you will not be disappointed." She stepped back and looked at the other women. "Ladies, shall we board?"

"Will we see you at dinner tonight?" Corbin asked, the most annoying note of eagerness in his voice.

"I doubt it. I prefer to spend the first night on a ship in my rooms. But tomorrow—" she cast the reporter a brilliant smile "—I will certainly see you tomorrow." She nodded at the publisher. "Farewell, Mr. Cadwallender."

Cadwallender tipped his hat. "Bon voyage, Mrs. Gordon."

"Mr. Armstrong," she said curtly, turned and moved toward the ship.

The other ladies bid Cadwallender farewell and then followed Mrs. Gordon in a flutter of feminine excitement. She started up the gangplank, her entourage trailing behind.

“Splendid job, Sidney.” Lady Blodgett’s voice drifted back to him. One thing he had already noticed about traveling with this particular group, whether it was intentional or simply the result of aging, but all three older ladies spoke a bit louder than perhaps necessary.

Mrs. Gordon’s chin raised just a notch. He would have thought she couldn’t hold herself any straighter but apparently he was wrong.

Cadwallender chuckled. “This should be an interesting trip. I’m almost sorry I’m not coming along.” He grinned at Harry. “Bon voyage, Mr. Armstrong. I have no doubt Mrs. Gordon will prove his lordship’s charges completely false. I would wish you good luck but I’m certain you understand why I don’t.” He glanced at the ladies, now stepping onto the ship. “Although I suspect you will need it. Corbin, a word please before you board.” He turned and stepped away.

“Yes, sir.” Corbin cast an admiring glance toward the ship. “A truly fine specimen of the very best England has to offer.”

Harry wasn’t sure he would completely agree. “She does appear to be a seaworthy enough vessel.”

“Actually, Armstrong.” Corbin tore his gaze from the ship. “I wasn’t referring to the ship.” He grinned in a self-assured manner and hurried after his employer.

The reporter was obviously an outrageous flirt. The kind of man who couldn’t believe that any woman wouldn’t swoon at the chance to be on his arm or in his bed. Arrogant, self-centered, charming, a man like

Corbin took conquest and seduction as his due. Harry knew that kind of man. For much of his life, Harry had been that kind of man. Perhaps he still was. Opportunities for female companions that were not seeking marriage had simply been limited since his return to England.

His gaze strayed up to Mrs. Gordon, stepping onto the ship to be greeted by the captain. Not that he had any inclination toward seduction but his intentions had certainly changed in the last few minutes. Now that he knew she wasn't a dear, sweet old lady his reasons for not exposing her fraudulent writings were no longer valid. She was not a fragile elderly flower but an outspoken, argumentative female who was apparently prepared to do battle. Or rather continue to do battle. The combat between them had begun when he'd sent his first letter to *The Times* and she'd responded. Now, it was a full-fledged war to be waged in the streets of Cairo and the sands of the Valley of the Kings. Even if she had a small army of elderly ladies by her side, he would not allow her to win.

It wasn't merely the future of his writing or the acknowledgment of his accomplishments in Egypt or even Walter's legacy at stake. Why, Truth itself was in the balance. He could not, he would not, permit a writer of frivolous fiction to stand in the way of truth.

No matter how lovely her eyes were.

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SOPHIA JAMES

*The Cinderella
Countess*

Chapter One



London—1815

‘There is a man here to see you, Belle, but I warn you he is unlike any man I have ever seen before.’

‘Is he disfigured?’ Annabelle Smith asked from above her burner where a tincture of peppermint and camphor was coming to a boil nicely, the steam of it rising into the air. ‘Or is he just very ill?’

Rosemary Greene laughed. ‘Here is his calling card. His waistcoat is of pink shiny satin and he has ornate rings on every one of his fingers. His hair is styled in a way I have never seen the likes of before and there is a carriage outside in the roadway that looks like it comes from a fairy tale. A good one, with a happy ending.’

Annabelle glanced at the card. Lytton Staines, the Earl of Thornton. What could a man like this possibly want with her and why would he come here to her humble abode on the fraying edges of Whitechapel?

‘Put him into the front room, Rose, and make cer-

tain the dog is not in there with him. I will be there in a moment.'

Rosemary hesitated. 'Do you want me to accompany you?'

'Why should I require that?'

'Our visitor is a young man from society and you are a young woman. Is not a chaperon needed in such circumstances?'

Belle laughed at the worry on her friend's face. 'Undoubtedly if this was society it would be needed, but it is not and he has probably come to purchase medicines. Give me five minutes with this brew and in the meanwhile offer him a cup of tea. If he asks for anything stronger than that, however, do not allow it for we need all the alcohol we have left for the patients.'

Rose nodded. 'He looks rather arrogant and very rich. Shall I get your aunt to sit with him? I don't think I feel quite up to it myself.'

Belle smiled. 'If we are lucky, the Earl of Thornton might have second thoughts about staying and will depart before I finish this.'

Lytton Staines looked around the room he had been asked to wait in, which was small but very tidy. There was a rug on the floor that appeared as though it had been plaited with old and colourful rags and on the wall before him were a number of badly executed paintings of flowers. He wondered why he had come here himself and not sent a servant in his stead. But even as he thought this he knew the answer. This

was his sister's last chance and he did not want another to mess up the possibility of Miss Smith's offering her help.

The woman who had shown him into the front parlour had disappeared, leaving him with an ancient lady and a small hairy dog who had poked its head up from beneath his chair. A sort of mongrel terrier, he determined, his teeth yellowed and his top lip drawn back. Not in a smile, either. He tried to nudge the animal away with his boot in a fashion that wasn't offensive and succeeded only in bringing the hound closer, its eyes fixed upon him.

In a room down a narrow passageway someone was singing. Lytton would have liked to have put his hands to his ears to cancel out the cacophony, but that did not seem quite polite either.

He should not have come. Nothing at all about this place was familiar to him and he felt suddenly out of his depth. A surprising admission, given that in the higher echelons of the *ton* he'd always felt more than adequate.

The cup of tea brought in by a servant a moment before sat on the table beside him, a plume of fragrant steam filling the air.

For a second a smile twitched as he imagined his friends Shay, Aurelian and Edward seeing him here like this. It was the first slight humour he had felt in weeks and he reached for the softness of the emotion with an ache.

Dying became no one, that was for certain, and

sickness and all its accompanying messiness was not something he had ever had any dealings with before.

‘Thank God,’ he muttered under his breath and saw the old lady look up.

He tipped his head and she frowned at him, the glasses she wore falling to the very end of a decent-sized nose and allowing him to see her properly.

Once she must have been a beauty, he thought, before the touch of time had ruined everything. His own thirty-five years suddenly seemed numerous, the down slide to old age horribly close.

With care he reached for the teacup only because it gave him something to do and took a sip.

‘Tea was always my mother’s favourite drink.’ These words came unbidden as Lytton recognised the taste of the same black variety his mother favoured and the frown on the old woman opposite receded.

As he shifted a little to allow the material in his jacket some room, the dog before him suddenly leapt, its brown and white body hurtling through the air to connect with the cup first and his waistcoat second, the hot scald of liquid on his thighs shocking and the sound of thin bone china shattering loud upon the plain timber boards of the floor.

The dog’s teeth were fastened on the stranger’s clothing. Belle heard the tear of silk and breathed out hard, wondering why Tante Alicia had not reprimanded her pet for such poor behaviour.

‘Stanley. Stop that.’ She hurried into the front room with horror. ‘I am so sorry, sir, but he loves the colour

pink and your waistcoat is of the shade he is most attracted to.'

Her hands tried to dislodge the canine's teeth from their sharp hold, but she had no luck at all. If anything, the expensive silk ripped further and she was pulled over almost on top of the Earl of Thornton in the ensuing tangle, her hand coming across the warm wetness at his thighs before he snatched it away.

'Cease.' His voice cut through the chaos and for a moment Belle wondered momentarily if it was to her or to Stanley that he spoke.

Tante Alicia's terrier did just as he was told, slinking to the door and out of the room with his tail firmly between bowed legs, Alicia herself following.

Annabelle was left in a more compromising position, her balance precarious because of her desperate hope of allowing no more damage to a garment of clothing that looked as if it might be worth more than cost of this entire house put together.

'God, but he has torn it badly,' she said beneath her breath, further words dissolving into French and directed at her departing aunt.

She broke off this tirade when she realised its absolute inappropriateness and regained her feet, crossing to the cabinet by the window and proceeding to extract a pound note from her velvet purse in the drawer.

'I will certainly pay for any damage, sir. I'd hoped Stanley might have been outside in the garden, you see, but unfortunately, he was not.'

'He has a penchant for the colour pink because of a fluffy toy he had as a puppy?' the man asked.

‘You speak French?’

‘Fluently. I presume that you are Miss Annabelle Smith? The herbalist?’

When she nodded he carried on.

‘I am Lord Thornton and I wish to employ your services in regards to my sister. She has been struck down with a wasting sickness and no physician in England has been able to find a cure for her.’

‘But you are of the opinion that I might?’

‘People talk of you with great respect.’

‘People you know?’ She could not stop the disbelief betrayed in her words.

‘My valet, actually. You were instrumental in allowing his father a few more good years.’

‘Yet more often I do not foil the plans of God.’

‘You are a religious woman, then?’

‘More of a practical one. If you imagine me as the answer to all your...prayers, you may be disappointed.’ She faltered.

‘I am not a man who puts much stock in prayers, Miss Smith.’

‘What do you put stock in, then?’

For a second she thought she saw anger flint before he hid it.

‘Brandy. Gaming. Horseflesh. Women.’

There was a wicked glimmer of danger in his gold eyes and Belle stepped back.

Miss Annabelle Smith looked shocked but he was not here to pretend. She had the most astonishing blue eyes Lytton had ever seen and when her fingers had

run over his private parts in her haste to remove the dog from the hem of his waistcoat he'd felt an instantaneous connection of red-hot lust.

Hell.

Did the tea have something in it, some herbal aphrodisiac that befuddled his brain and bypassed sense? Because already he wanted her fingers back where they had only briefly rested.

He pushed the money she offered away and stood, his boot crunching the remnants of the teacup into even smaller parts, the roses once etched into the china now disembodied.

He could not imagine what had made him answer her query as to what he put stock in so rudely, but, he suddenly felt just like the dog—Stanley, had she called him?—all his hackles raised and a sense of fate eroding free will.

There was protection in the depravities of his true self and suddenly even his sister's need for Annabelle Smith's magical concoctions was secondary to his own need for escape.

But she was not letting him go so easily, the towel she had in her hand now dabbing again at his thigh.

Was she deranged? What female would think this acceptable? With horror he felt a renewed rising in his cursed appendage and knew that she had seen the betrayal of his body in her instant and fumbling withdrawal. The white towel was stained brown in tea.

'I thought...' She stopped and dimples that he had not known she had suddenly surfaced. 'I am sorry.' With determination she stuck the cloth out for him

to take and turned her back. 'You may see to yourself, Lord Earl of Thornton. I should have understood that before.'

His title was wrong. She had no idea how to address a peer of the realm. He rubbed at his thighs with speed and was glad of the lessening hot wetness.

Taking in a breath, he realised how much he had needed air. She still had not turned around, her shapely bottom outlined beneath the thin day dress she wore. There were patches at a side pocket and the head of some straggly plant stuck out of the top.

She smelt of plants, too, the mist of them all around her. Not an unpleasant smell, but highly unusual. Most ladies of his acquaintance held scents of violets, or roses, or lavender.

'I have finished with the towel, Miss Smith.'

He was amused by her allowance of so much privacy.

'Thank you.' She snatched it back from him and the awkward maiden became once again a direct and determined woman, no air of humour visible.

'I would need to see your sister before I prescribed her anything. Proper medicine does not enjoy guesswork and a wasting sickness encompasses many maladies that are as different from each other as night is to day.'

'Very well. She is here in London for the next week, seeing specialists, so if you would have some time...'

'Pick me up here at nine tomorrow morning. I need to prepare some treatments but...' She hesitated and

then carried on. 'I do not come cheap, my lord Earl. Each consultation would be in the vicinity of three pounds.'

Lytton thought she held her breath as she said this, but he could have been wrong. 'Done. I will be here at nine.'

'Good day, then.'

She put her hand out and shook his. He felt small hardened spots on her fingers and wondered what work might have brought those about.

Not the soft pliable hands of a lady. Not the grip of one either. The one ring she wore was small and gold. He felt the excess of his own jewellery with a rising distaste.

A moment later he was in his carriage, leaning his head back against fine brown leather. He needed a stiff drink and quickly.

'White's,' he said to the footman who was closest, glad when the conveyance began to move away from the cloying poverty of Whitechapel and from the contrary, forceful and highly unusual Miss Annabelle Smith.

His club was busy when he arrived and he strode over to where Aurelian de la Tomber was sitting talking to Edward Tully.

'I thought you were still in Sussex with your beautiful wife, Lian?'

'I was until this morning. I am only up here for the day and will go home first thing tomorrow.'

‘Wedded life suits you, then. You were always far more nomadic.’

‘The philosophy of one woman and one home is addictive.’

‘Then you are a lucky man.’

Lytton saw Edward looking at him strangely and hoped he’d kept the sting out of his reply. It was getting more and more difficult to be kind, he thought, and swallowed the brandy delivered by a passing servant, ordering another in its wake.

He was unsettled and distinctly out of sorts, his visit to the East End of London searing into any contentment he’d had.

‘I’ve just had a meeting with a woman who concocts medicines in the dingy surroundings of Whitechapel. Someone needs to do something about the smell of the place, by the way, for it is more pungent than ever.’

‘Was the herbalist hopeful of finding some remedy for your sister?’

Edward looked at him directly, sincerity in his eyes.

‘She was.’ Lytton said this because to imagine anything else was unthinkable and because right now he needed hope more than honesty.

‘Who is she?’ Aurelian asked.

‘Miss Annabelle Smith. My valet recommended her services.’

‘She cured him? Of what?’

‘No. She prolonged the life of his father and the family were grateful. I can’t quite imagine how he paid the costs, though.’

‘The costs of her visits?’

‘Three pounds a time feels steep.’

‘Had you given her your card before she charged you?’

Lytton nodded. ‘And I would have been willing to pay more if she had asked.’

‘The mystery of supply and demand, then? How old is she?’

‘Not young. She spoke French, too, which was surprising.’

That interested Aurelian. ‘Smith is not a French name?’

‘Neither is Annabelle. There was an older woman there who did appear to be from France, though. An aunt I think she called her after their dog attacked me.’ He loosened the buttons of his jacket to show them the wreckage of his waistcoat.

‘A colour like that needs tearing apart.’ Edward’s voice held humour, but Aurelian’s was much more serious.

‘I have never heard of this woman or of her French aunt. Perhaps it bears looking into?’

‘No.’ Lytton said this in a tone that had the others observing him. ‘No investigations. She is meeting Lucy tomorrow.’

Edward was trying his hardest to look nonchalant, but he could tell his friend was curious.

‘What does she look like?’

‘Strong. Certain. Direct. She is nothing like the females of the *ton*. Her dress was at least ten years out of date and she favours scarves to tie her hair

back. It is dark and curly and reaches to at least her waist. She was...uncommon.'

'It seems she made quite an impression on you then, Thorn? I saw Susan Castleton a few hours back and she said you were supposed to be meeting her tonight?'

'I am. We are going to the ballet.'

Susan had been his mistress for all of the last four months, but Lytton was becoming tired of her demands. She wanted a lot more than he could give her and despite her obvious beauty he was bored of the easy and constant sex. God, that admission had him sitting up straighter. It was Lucy, he supposed, and the ever-close presence of her sadness and ill health.

He wished life was as easy as it used to be, nothing in his way and everything to live for. One of his fingers threaded through the hole in his waistcoat and just for a second he questioned what ill-thought-out notion had ever convinced him to buy clothing in quite this colour.

It was Susan's doing, he supposed, and her love of fashion. Easier to just give in to her choice of fabric than fight for the more sombre hues. He wondered when that had happened, this surrender of his opinion, and frowned, resolving to do away with both the excessive rings and the colour pink forthwith.

Miss Annabelle Smith was contrary and unusual and more than different. He could never imagine her allowing another to tell her what to wear or what to do. Even with the mantle of poverty curtailing choices she seemed to have found her exact path in life and was revelling in it.

* * *

Belle awoke in the dark of night, sweating and struggling for breath. The dreams were back. She swallowed away panic and sat up, flinting the candle at her bedside so that it chased away some of the shadows.

The same people shouting, the same fear, the same numbness that had her standing in the room of a mansion she had never recognised. She thought she hated them, these people, though she was not supposed to. She knew she wanted to run away as fast as her legs could carry her and although she could never quite see them she understood that they looked like her. How she would know this eluded sense, but that certainty had been there ever since she had first had the nightmares when she was very young. Sometimes she even heard them speak her name.

The sound of the night noise from the street calmed her as did the snoring of her aunt in the room next door. At times like this she was thankful for the thin walls of their dwelling, for they gave her a reason to not feel so alone.

The visage of Lytton Staines, the Earl of Thornton, floated into her memory as well, his smile so very different from the clothes he wore.

She remembered the hardness of male flesh beneath the thin beige superfine when her fingers had run along his thighs by mistake. Her face flamed. God, she had never been near a man in quite such a compromising way and she knew he had seen her embarrassed withdrawal.

The incident with the spilled tea this afternoon began to attain gigantic proportions, a mistake she might relive again each time she saw him which would be in only a matter of hours as he was due to collect her in the morning at nine. She needed to go back to sleep. She needed to be at her best in the company of Lord Thornton because otherwise there were things about him that were unsettling.

He was beautiful for a start and a man well used to the exalted title that sat on his shoulders. He was also watchful. She had seen how he'd glanced around her house, assessing her lack of fortune and understanding her more-than-dire straits.

She wondered what he might have thought of her paintings, the flowers she lovingly drew adorning most of one wall in the front room. Drawing was a way for her to relax and she enjoyed the art of constructing a picture.

In her early twenties she had drawn faces, eerie unfamiliar ones which she had thrown away, but now she stuck to plants, using bold thick lines. The memory of those early paintings summoned her dreams and she shook off the thought. She would be thirty-two next week and her small business of providing proper medicines for the sick around Whitechapel was growing. She grimaced at the charge per visit she had asked the Earl to pay, but, if a few consultations with the sister of a man who could patently afford any exorbitant fee allowed many others to collect their needs for nothing, then so be it. Not many could pay even a penny.

He'd looked just so absurdly rich. She wondered where he lived here in London. One of the beautiful squares in the centre of Mayfair, she supposed. Places into which she had seldom ventured.

Would it be to one of those town houses that he would take her in order to tend to his sister? Would his family be in attendance? Alicia had told her the Earl had mentioned a mother who enjoyed tea.

She had not addressed him properly. She had realised this soon after he had left because she had asked Milly, the kitchen maid, if she knew how one was supposed to speak to an earl. The girl had been a maid in the house of a highly born lord a few years before.

My lord Earl was definitely an error. According to Milly she could have used 'my lord' or 'your lordship', or 'Lord Thornton'. Belle had decided when she saw him next she would use the second.

At least that was cleared up and sleep felt a little nearer. She had prepared all the tinctures, medicines and ointment she would take with her to see Lord Thornton's sister so it was only a case of getting herself ready now.

What could she wear? The question both annoyed and worried her. She should not care about such shallow things, but she did. She wanted suddenly to look nice for the mother who enjoyed tea. That thought made her smile and she lay back down on her bed watching the moon through undrawn curtains.

It had rained yesterday, but tonight it was largely clear.

As she closed her eyes, the last image she saw before sleep was that of the Earl of Thornton observing her with angry shock as she had wiped away the hot tea from his skin-tight pantaloons.

Chapter Two



Miss Smith was sitting on the front doorstep of her Whitechapel house when his carriage pulled up to the corner on the dot of nine. She held a large wicker basket in front of her, covered almost entirely by a dark blue cloth.

The oddness of a woman waiting alone outside her home and completely on time had Lytton waving away the footman as he jumped down to the ground.

Miss Annabelle Smith appeared pleased to see him as she stood, her hand shading her face and the odd shape of her hat sending a shadow down one side of her cheek.

‘I thought perhaps you might have decided not to come,’ she said, her fingers keeping the cloth on her basket anchored in the growing breeze.

The heightened notice of her as a woman he’d felt yesterday returned this morning and Lytton shoved it away.

‘My chaperon will be here in just a moment as Aunt Alicia would not settle until I agreed to have

her with me. I hope that is all right with you, your lordship?’

She knew, now, how to address him. He found himself missing the ‘my lord Earl’.

‘Of course.’ The words sounded more distant than he had meant them to be. She looked tired, dark circles under her eyes, and there was a cut on her thumb. He hoped the injury had not come about in the preparation of his sister’s medicines.

Pulling the three pounds he had ready from his pocket, he offered them to her.

‘If it is too much I quite understand,’ she said, but he shook his head.

‘I can afford it, Miss Smith, and I am grateful that you would consent to attending my sister at such short notice.’

The same velvet purse he had seen yesterday came out of her pocket, the notes carefully tucked within it.

‘It will be useful to buy more supplies for those who cannot pay. There are many such folk here.’

‘You have lived in this house for a while?’

‘We have, your lordship. It is rented, but it is home.’

‘Yet you do not speak with the accent of the East End?’

She looked away, distracted as the same woman he had seen yesterday joined them, busy fingers tying the ribbons on her bonnet.

‘This is my friend, Mrs Rosemary Greene.’

‘We met briefly yesterday. Ma’am.’ He tipped his head and the older woman blushed dark red, but was saved from answering as Annabelle Smith caught

at her arm and shepherded her towards the conveyance. When the footman helped each of them up Miss Smith took a deep breath, giving Lytton the impression she did not much wish to get in. He took the seat opposite them as the door closed, listening to the horses being called on.

‘Did you ever read the fairy tale *Cendrillon* by Charles Perrault, your lordship?’ Her dimples were on display, picked out by the incoming sunshine.

‘I did, Miss Smith.’

‘Your carriage reminds me of that. Ornate and absurdly comfortable.’

‘You read it in French?’

‘When I was a child I lived in France for a time with my aunt.’

The traffic at this time of the morning was busy and they were travelling so slowly it seemed as if all of London was on the road.

The silence inside the carriage lengthened, their last exchange throwing up questions. She did not give the impression of one born abroad for her words held only the accent of English privilege and wealth. How could that be?

He hoped like hell that any of his extended family would not converge on his town house this morning, for he wanted to allow Miss Smith some time to talk with his sister by herself. His mother would be present, of course, but she was lost in her own sadness these days and appeared befuddled most of the time. Today such confusion would aid him.

It was as if Lucy’s sickness had ripped the heart out

of the Thorntons and trampled any happiness underfoot. It was probably why he had taken up with Susan Castleton to be honest, Lytton thought, her sense of devil-may-care just the attitude he had needed to counter the constant surge of melancholy.

Miss Smith was watching the passing streets with interest, her fingers laced together and still. When they went around a sharp corner, though, as their speed increased he saw her grasp at the seat beneath her, each knuckle white.

‘It is perfectly safe. My driver is one of the most skilled in London.’

Blue eyes washed over him and then looked back to the outside vistas.

‘People more usually come to see me, your lordship.’

‘You don’t use hackneys, then?’

‘Never.’

This was stated in such a way that left little room for debate and Mrs Greene caught his eye as he frowned, an awkward worry across her face.

Portman Square was now coming into view, the façade of his town house standing on one corner. He hoped that Annabelle Smith would not be flustered by the wealth of it, for in comparison to her living quarters in Whitechapel it suddenly looked enormous.

As they alighted an expression unlike any he had ever seen briefly crossed her face. Shock, he thought, and pure horror, her pallor white and the pulse at her throat fast. His hand reached out to take her arm as he imagined she might simply faint.

‘Are you well, Miss Smith?’

He saw the comprehension of what she had shown him reach her eyes, her shoulders stiffening, but she did not let him go, her fingers grabbing at the material of his jacket.

Then the door opened and his mother stood there, black fury on her face.

‘You cannot bring your doxies into this house, Thornton. I shall simply not allow it. Your valet has told me you were in the company of one of your mistresses, Mrs Castleton, last night and now you dare to bring in these two this morning. Your father, bless his soul, would be rolling in his grave and as for your sister...’

She stopped and twisted a large kerchief, dabbing at her nose as she left them, a discomfited silence all around.

‘I am sorry. My mother is not herself.’

It was all he could think to say, the fury roiling inside him pressed down. He needed Annabelle Smith to see his sister, that was his overriding thought, and he would deal with his mother’s unexpected accusations when he could.

The Earl of Thornton kept mistresses and his mother thought she and Rosemary were fallen woman? The haze of seeing the Thornton town house dispersed under such a ludicrous assassination of her character and if there had not been a patient inside awaiting she would have simply insisted upon being taken home.

This behaviour was so common with the very

wealthy, this complete and utter disregard for others, and if the Earl had somehow inveigled her into thinking differently then the more fool she.

It was why Belle had always made it a policy to never do business with the aristocracy, her few very early forays into providing remedies for the wealthy ending in disaster. They either did not pay or they looked down their noses at her. However, she'd had none of the overt hatred shown by the Earl's mother.

Well, here at least she had already been paid, the three-pound fee tucked firmly into her purse.

The Earl looked furious, the muscles in his jaw working up and down and as they entered into the entrance proper he asked them if they might wait for just a moment.

'Yes of course, your lordship.' As Rosemary answered she drew Annabelle over to a set of comfortable-looking armchairs arranged around a table, a vase of pastel-shaded flowers upon it that were made of dyed silk.

Belle sat in a haze, the smell of polish and cleaning product in the air. Everything was as familiar as it was strange and she could not understand this at all. She had seen a house just like this one in her dreams: the winding staircase, the black and white tiles, the numerous doors that led off the entrance hall to elaborately dressed and furnished salons, portraits of the past arranged solemnly on the walls up and down the staircase.

'What on earth is wrong with you, Belle? You look like you have seen a ghost.'

‘I think I have.’

‘I cannot believe the Earl’s mother would have thought we were doxies.’ Rose looked horrified as she rearranged the red and green scarf draped about her neck into a more concealing style.

‘She has probably never seen one before and I suppose we dress differently from the people who live around here.’

Belle hoped the woman would not return to find them again just as she prayed she could have asked for her coat and hat and left.

But she’d been paid well for a consultation and the carriage outside had rumbled on already down the street. Their only avenue of escape was the Earl. He suddenly came down the passageway to one side, another servant accompanying him.

‘My sister’s suite is this way. There is a sitting room just outside if Mrs Greene would feel comfortable waiting there.’

Rose nodded and so did Belle, this visit becoming more and more exhausting. She did not truly feel up to the task of reassuring a young, sick and aristocratic patient, but had no true way to relay that to the Earl of Thornton without appearing ridiculous. Still, if his awful mother was there with more of her accusations she would turn and go.

As they mounted the staircase the smell of camphor rose from her basket and Annabelle presumed the container in it had fallen over. Removing the fabric, she righted it and jammed it in more tightly against the wad of bandages at its side.

The light was dimmer now and the noises from the street and the house more distant. The scent of sickness was present, too, her nostrils flaring to pick up any undertones of disease. Surprisingly there were none, a fact that had her frowning.

‘If you could wait here, Mrs Greene, it would be appreciated. My sister in her present state is not good at receiving strangers and one new face is probably enough for now.’

Seeing Rose settled Belle followed the Earl through a further anteroom, which opened into a large and beautiful bedchamber, full of the accoutrements of ill health and all the shades half-drawn. There were medicine bottles as well as basins and cloths on a long table. Vases full of flowers decorated every other flat surface.

At the side of the bed a maid sat, but she instantly stood and went from the room, though there had been no gesture from the Earl to ask her to leave.

‘Lucy?’ The Earl’s voice was softer, a tenderness there that had been missing in every other conversation Belle had had with him. ‘Miss Smith is come to see you. The herbalist I told you of.’

‘I do not want another medical person here, Thorn. I’ve said that. I just want to be left alone.’

The tone of the voice was strong. A further oddness. If Lady Lucy had been in bed for this many weeks and deathly ill she would have sounded more fragile.

She had burrowed in under the blankets, only the top of her golden head seen. Her fingernails were bit-

ten to the quick, every single one of them, but there was no discolouration of the nail beds.

‘Miss Smith is well thought of in her parish of Whitechapel. She seldom visits outside her home area, so in this we are more than fortunate.’

‘Where is Mother?’

‘I asked her to stay in her room.’

‘She is being impossible this morning. I wish she might return to Balmain and leave me here with you. How old is Miss Smith?’

‘See for yourself. She is right here.’

The blanket stilled and then a face popped out from the rumpled wool. A gaunt face of wrecked beauty, the hair cut into slivers of ill-fashioned spikes.

Belle hoped she did not look surprised, the first impressions between a patient and a healer important ones.

‘You are not too...old.’ This came from Lucy.

‘I am thirty-two next week. It seems inordinately old to me. But what is the alternative?’

Unexpectedly the young woman smiled. ‘This.’

‘Perhaps,’ Belle said quietly. ‘When did you last eat?’

‘I am no longer hungry. I have broth sometimes.’

‘Could I listen to your pulse?’

‘No. I don’t like to be touched.’

‘Never?’ Surprise threaded into her words. ‘Who has examined you then?’

‘No one. I do not allow it. It can be seen from a distance that my malady is taking the life from me. All sorts of medicines have been tried. And have failed.

One doctor did touch me against all my will and bled me twice. Now I just wish to die. It will be easier for everyone.'

Belle heard the Earl draw in a breath and felt a huge sorrow for him.

'Could I sit with you for a moment, Miss Staines? Alone?'

'Without my brother, you mean. Without anyone here. I do not know if...'

But the Earl had already gone, walking like a ghost towards the door, his footsteps quiet.

Belle waited for a moment and closed her eyes. There was so much to be found in silence. The girl's breathing was fast and a little shallow, but there was no underlying disease in her passageways. She moved her feet a lot, indicating a nervous disposition. She could hear the sound of the sheets rustling and Lady Lucy sniffed twice. She was coming down with a cold, perhaps, though her constitution sounded robust.

Opening her eyes, Belle looked at her patient directly, the golden glance of the Earl's sister flecked with a darker yellow.

'Why do you lie, Miss Staines?'

'Pardon?' A shocked breath was drawn in with haste.

'There is no disease in your body. But what is there is something you need to speak of.'

'You cannot know this.' These words were small and sharp.

'Today I shall run camphor across your chest and peppermint under the soles of your feet. If I was you,

I should then begin to take an interest in the world. Tomorrow I shall return with different medicines. A week should be enough for you to start getting up again and then we can face the problem that is the true reason why you have taken to your bed.'

'Problem?'

'Think about it. Your family is suffering from the charade you are putting them through and if the physicians they have dispatched to attend to your needs have never delved deeper into the truth of what ails you then that is their poor practice. But it is time now to face up to what has happened to you and live again in any way that you can.'

'Get out.'

Belle stood, her heart hammering. 'I am sorry, but I will not. Only with good sense can you face what must come next because, believe it or not, this is the way of life. A set back and then a triumph. Yours will be spectacular.'

'Are you a witch, Miss Smith? One of the occult?'

'Perhaps.' Her reply came with a fervour. This girl needed to believe in her words or otherwise she would be lost. 'Magic is something that you now require so I want you to unbutton your nightdress and I will find my camphor.'

Ten minutes later she was downstairs again and the Earl of Thornton had recalled his conveyance.

'I am sorry I cannot accompany you back to White-chapel, Miss Smith, but I have other business in the city. You said that you'd told my sister that you would

be back on the morrow so I shall make sure my conveyance is outside your house again at nine.'

'No. Tomorrow we shall find our own way. But have the maid bring up a plate of chicken broth with a small crust of bread for your sister. Tell her that such sustenance will do her good and I will be asking after how much she has eaten.'

'Very well. Thank you.'

The Earl did not believe that his sister would deign to eat anything. He was disappointed in her short visit, too, Belle could tell, the smell of camphor and peppermint the only tangible evidence of her doctoring. He imagined her a quack and a charlatan and an expensive one at that and would continue to do so unless his sister took her advice.

She tipped her head and turned for the pathway, unsurprised when the door was closed behind them.

Once home she sought out her aunt where she sat in the small alcove off the kitchen.

'I recognised the Earl of Thornton's house, Tante Alicia. I think I knew one just like it.'

Her aunt simply stared at her.

'It was similar to the house in my dreams. The one I told you about.'

'I always said that you were an auld one, Annabelle, a traveller who has been here before in another lifetime.'

'Who are they, Alicia? The people I remember who are dressed like those at the Thornton town house.'

'I have told you again and again that there are no

ghosts who stalk you and that I do not know of these people you see.'

'Then who were my parents?'

'I never met them. I took you in when a nun from the convent in the village asked it of me. A sick child from England who was placed in the hands of the lord when a servant brought her there, to the church of Notre-Dame de la Nativité. Maria, the nun, was English herself and spoke with you every day for years until your French was fluent and you could cope. That is all I know. I wish there had been more, but there was not. I'd imagined you would stay with me for only a matter of weeks, but when no one came back to claim you and the months went on...' She stopped, regathering herself. 'By then you were the child I had never had and I prayed to our lord every day that the situation would continue, that I would not have to give you up because that would have broken my heart.'

They had been through all this before so many times. It all made perfect sense and yet...

Today Lady Lucy had made perfect sense to her as well, hiding there in her bed in a darkened room where no one could get to her. She had stopped eating. She had ceased to want to live. The anger in Belle surfaced with a suddenness that she did not conceal.

Everyone was lying.

Her aunt.

Lady Lucy.

Even the handsome Earl of Thornton with his succession of mistresses and his bitter mother.

Taking leave of her aunt and walking to her own

room, Belle lifted up a paintbrush, dipping it in oil and mixing it with red powder after finding a sheet of paper.

Nothing was real. Everything was false. She liked the banal deceiving strokes she drew as they ran across the truth and banished it. Lives built on falsity. Paintings borne on fury. Lady Lucy was young and well brought up. Belle wanted to kill the man who had left her the wreck that she was, but as yet there could be only the small and quiet steps of acceptance before the healing began.

Lytton spent the afternoon entwined in the arms of the beautiful widow Mrs Susan Castleton in the rooms he had provided for her in Kensington.

She had impeccable taste, he would give her that, but what had been wonderful, even as recent as last week, now was not.

His mother's words had stung and the look on Miss Annabelle Smith's face had stung further.

Why did the healer have to be so damned unusual? His sister had gulped down the broth and the crust and asked for a cup of tea to finish her lunch with. She had not eaten properly in weeks and now after a ten-minute visit with the contrary Miss Smith she was suddenly pulling herself out of the mire. Lucy thought she was a witch and had told him so, a woman of fearful evil and unspeakable power. She did not wish for her to visit again.

Well, if a witch could cajole his sister into re-joining the real world then so be it, and her alchemy

would certainly be welcome in his town house after the disappointing efforts of all the other renowned physicians. He would be asking her back.

‘You are so very well formed, Thornton.’ The whisper in his ear had him turning, Susan’s chestnut curls trailing across his chest when she tweaked his nipple, her body nudging his own in further invitation.

God, she was insatiable. When he had first met her he could barely believe his luck, but now...now he wondered if she might squeeze all the life from him and leave him as much a wreck as his sister.

‘I want to eat you up. All of you.’

Her words were so like what he had just been thinking that he pushed her from him and sat up.

He didn’t want this any more, this salacious liaison so far away from what he knew to be right. Even a few weeks ago he would have found such passion exciting. Now all he wanted to do was escape.

‘I need to go, Susan. I am not sure if I shall be back.’

If this was too brutal for her then he was sorry for it, but he disliked lying. To anyone.

‘You joke, surely, Thornton. We have been here all afternoon feeding off one another.’

The further reference to food made him stand and find his clothes. Fumbling with the one ring he wore today, he twisted it from his finger.

‘It is worth the price of the rent on this place for at least another year. I thank you for your patience with me, but now it is finished. I can’t do this any more.’

Tears began to fall down her cheeks. ‘You cannot

possibly be serious, Thornton. I love you, I love you with all my heart and—’

He stopped her by placing a finger across her generous reddened lips.

‘You loved Derwent a year ago and you loved Marcus Merryweather before that. There will be another after me.’

As he walked away, garments in hand, she picked up a vase and threw it at him hard, the glass smashing against the side of his head and drawing blood as it shattered.

‘You will regret this, I swear it. No one will ever make love to you in the way I have, especially one whom you might take as a wife. They are all cold and wooden and witless.’

Hell. Had Aurelian or Edward said something publicly of his plans to be married before the end of the Season? He hoped not. If that happened he would have a hundred mamas and their chicks upon him, courting him with guile and hope.

The day that had begun strangely just seemed to get stranger. He could feel warm blood running across one cheek and yet he couldn’t go home because his mother was prowling through the corridors of his town house and Lucy had spent almost the entire morning crying.

His younger brother was in trouble again with his school and Prudence, his oldest sister, was in Rome seeing the sights with her new husband. He would have liked to talk with her, but she was not due back

for at least a few months, skipping out of England with a haste that was unbecoming.

No one in his entire family was coping. His father's death the Christmas before last had seen to that and here he was, bogged down by the responsibility of a title he'd little reason to like and a mistress who had just tried to kill him.

Once he had been free and unburdened. Now every man and his dog wanted a piece of him. Once the most reading he had done was to glance at the IOUs from the gambling tables where his luck never seemed to run out. Now it was writing reports, filling out forms and doing all the myriad other things a large and complicated estate required.

He had barely come up for air in weeks save in the bed of Susan Castleton, but that was now also lost to him. He couldn't regret this even a bit, he thought, as he finished dressing and made his leave.

He'd spend the evening at White's and when the place closed he'd go to Edward Tully's town house. At least Derwent would understand his fading interest in a woman whom he, too, had once been intimate with.

'You need to go abroad, Thorn, and escape your family.' Edward's words were said with the edge of strong cognac upon them.

'Easy for you to say with your father still hale and hearty and an older brother who will take on the heavy mantle of the title.'

Edward laughed as he upended yet another glass

of cognac and gestured to a servant going by to bring another bottle. 'How are the marriage plans going?'

Lytton swore.

He'd confided in Lian and Edward about his intention to marry as a result of Lucy's ill health, his own mortality staring him in the face. He now wished he hadn't.

'Wide hips and a passable face wasn't it?' Edward plainly saw a humour that Lytton himself did not. 'The first girl you saw with both qualifications?'

'I was drunk.'

'More drunk than you are tonight?'

At that Lytton laughed. 'More drunk and also happier, possibly.'

'Well, Lian is happy and so is Shay. Perhaps a wife is the answer. A woman of substance. No shallow-brained ingénue or experienced courtesan.'

'And where are those women?' Lytton asked. 'Shay found Celeste in the underbelly of Napoleon's Paris and Lian's Violet was thrown up from the greed of treason and lost gold.'

'Stuart Townsend said he saw you this morning in a carriage with a woman he did not recognise, Thorn. He said she looked interesting?'

Lytton shook his head. For some reason he did not want to talk of Annabelle Smith. His whole family must have disappointed her today and he did not wish to continue the trend. He stayed silent.

'And the fact that you will not speak of her makes it even more interesting.'

He stood. 'I think I need to go home, Edward, and sleep. For a hundred years, if I only could.'

'There's a masked ball at the Seymours' tomorrow evening. Come with me to that and blow away a few cobwebs.'

'Perhaps I might. I will send you word in the morning.'

Outside the sky was clearer and the stars were out. A vibrant endless heaven, Lytton thought, enjoying the fresh air. He had meant to stay at Edward's, but suddenly wanted to be home.

Annabelle Smith was due tomorrow again at the ungodly hour of nine and he did not want to miss seeing her. That thought worried him more than any other.

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PROLOGUE

Soviet Union—1942

The priest presiding over my wedding was half-starved, half-frozen and wearing rags, but he was resourceful; he'd blessed a chunk of moldy bread from breakfast to serve as a communion wafer.

"Repeat the vows after me." He smiled. My vision blurred, but I spoke the traditional vows through lips numb from cold.

"I take you, Tomasz Slaski, to be my husband, and I promise to love, honor and respect you, to be faithful to you, and not to forsake you until we are parted by death, in fear of God, One in the Holy Trinity and all the Saints."

I'd looked to my wedding to Tomasz as a beacon, the same way a sailor on rough seas might fix his gaze upon a lighthouse at the distant shore. Our love had been my reason to live and to carry on and to *fight* for so many years, but our wedding day was supposed to be a brief reprieve from all of the hardship and suffering. The reality of that day was so very different, and my disappointment in those moments seemed bigger than the world itself.

We were supposed to marry in the regal church in our hometown—not there, standing just beyond the tent city of the Buzuluk refugee and military camp, *just* far enough from the tents that the squalid stench of eighty thousand desperate souls was slightly less thick in the air. That reprieve from the crowds and

the smell came at a cost; we were outside, sheltered only by the branches of a sparse fir tree. It was an unseasonably cold day for fall, and every now and again fat snowflakes would fall from the heavy gray skies to melt into our hair or our clothing or to make still more mud in the ground around our feet.

I'd known my "friends" in the assembled crowd of well-wishers for only a few weeks. Every other person who'd once been important to me was in a concentration camp or dead or just plain lost. My groom awkwardly declined to take communion—a gesture which bewildered that poor, kindly priest, but didn't surprise me one bit. Even as the bride, I wore the only set of clothes I owned, and by then once-simple routines like bathing had become luxuries long forgotten. The lice infestation that had overrun the entire camp had not spared me, nor my groom, nor the priest—nor even a single individual in the small crowd of well-wishers. Our entire assembly shifted and twitched constantly, desperate to soothe that endless itch.

I was dull with shock, which was almost a blessing, because it was probably all that saved me from weeping my way through the ceremony.

Mrs. Konczal was yet another new friend to me, but she was fast becoming a dear one. She was in charge of the orphans, and I'd been working alongside her on compulsory work duties since my arrival at the camp. When the ceremony was done, she ushered a group of children out from the small crowd of onlookers and she flashed me a radiant smile. Then she raised her arms to conduct and, together, she and the makeshift choir began to sing *Serdeczna Matko*—a hymn to the Beloved Mother. Those orphans were filthy and skinny and alone, just as I was, but they weren't sad at all in that moment. Instead, their hopeful gazes were focused on me, and they were eager to see me pleased. I wanted nothing more than to wallow in the awfulness of my situation—but the hope in those innocent eyes took

priority over my self-pity. I forced myself to share with them all a bright, proud smile, and then I made myself a promise.

There would be no more tears from me that day. If those orphans could be generous and brave in the face of their situation, then so could I.

After that I focused only on the music, and the sound of Mrs. Konczal's magnificent voice as it rose high above and around us in a soaring solo. Her tone was sweet and true, and she scaled the melody like it was a game—bringing me something close to joy in a moment that *should* have been joyful, offering me peace in a moment that *should* have been peaceful and dragging me back once more to a faith I kept wishing I could lose.

And as that song wound on, I closed my eyes and I forced down my fear and my doubt, until I could once again trust that the broken pieces of my life would fall into place one day.

War had taken almost everything from me; but I *refused* to let it shake my confidence in the man I loved.

CHAPTER I

Alice

I'm having a very bad day, but however bad I feel right now, I know my son is feeling worse. We're at the grocery store a few blocks away from our house in Winter Park, Florida. Eddie is on the floor, his legs flailing as he screams at the top of his lungs. He's pinching his upper arms compulsively; ugly purple and red bruises are already starting to form. Eddie is also covered in yogurt, because when all of this started twenty minutes ago, he emptied the refrigerator shelves onto the floor and there are now packages of various shapes and sizes on the tiles around him—an increasingly messy landing pad for his limbs as they thrash. The skin on his face has mottled from the exertion, and there are beads of sweat on his forehead.

Eddie's medication has made him gain a lot of weight in the last few years, and now he weighs sixty-eight pounds—that's more than half my body weight. I can't pick him up and carry him out to the car as I would have done in his early years. It didn't feel easy at the time, but back then, this kind of public breakdown was much simpler because we could just evacuate.

Today's disaster happened when Eddie reached the yogurt aisle. He has a relatively broad palate for yogurt compared to his peers at the special school he attends—Eddie will at least eat strawberry *and* vanilla Go-Gurt. There can be no substitutions

on brand or container—and no point trying to refill old tubes, either, because Eddie sees right through it.

It has to be Go-Gurt. It has to be strawberry or vanilla. It has to be *in* the tube.

At some point recently, someone at Go-Gurt decided to improve the design of the graphics on the tubes—the logo has shifted and the colors are more vibrant. I'm sure no one at Go-Gurt realized that such a tiny change would one day lead to a seven-year-old boy smashing up a supermarket aisle in a bewildered rage.

To Eddie, Go-Gurt has the old-style label, and this new label only means that Eddie no longer recognizes Go-Gurt as food he can tolerate. He knew we were going to the store to get yogurt, then we came to the store, and Eddie looked at the long yogurt aisle, and he saw a lot of things, all of which he now identifies as “not-yogurt.”

I try to avoid this kind of incident, so we always have a whole shelfful of Go-Gurt in the fridge at home. If not for my grandmother's recent hospitalization, I'd have done this trip alone yesterday when Eddie was at school, before he ate the last two tubes and “we are running a little low on yogurt and soup” became “holy crap, the only thing we have left in the house that Eddie can eat is a single tin of soup and he won't eat soup for breakfast.”

I don't actually know what I'm going to do about that now. All I know is that if Campbell's ever changes the label of their pumpkin soup tins, I'm going to curl up into a little ball and give up on life.

Maybe I'm more like Eddie than I know, because this *one small thing* today has me feeling like I might melt down too. Besides Eddie and his sister, Pascale, my grandmother Hanna is the most important person in my world. My husband, Wade, and mother, Julita, would probably take exception to that statement, but I'm frustrated with them both, so right now that's just how

I feel. My grandmother, or *Babcia* as I've always called her, is currently in the hospital, because two days ago she was sitting at the dining table at her retirement home when she had what we now know was a minor stroke. And today, I spent the entire morning rushing—rushing around the house, rushing in the car, rushing to the yogurt aisle—all so Eddie and I could get to Babcia to spend time with her. I don't even want to acknowledge to myself that maybe I'm rushing even more than usual because I'm trying to make the most of the time we have left with her. In the background to all of this hurriedness, I'm increasingly aware that her time is running out.

Eddie has virtually no expressive language—basically he can't speak. He can *hear* just fine, but his receptive language skills are weak too, so to warn him that today instead of going to the train station to watch trains as we usually do on a Thursday, I had to come up with a visual symbol he'd understand. I got up at 5:00 a.m. I printed out some photos I took yesterday at the hospital, then trimmed them and I stuck them onto his timetable, right after the symbol for *eat* and the symbol for *Publix* and *yogurt*. I wrote a social script that explained that today we had to go to the hospital and we would see Babcia, but that she would be in bed and she would not be able to talk with us, and that Babcia was okay and Eddie is okay and everything is going to be okay.

I'm aware that much of the reassurance in that script is a lie. I'm not naive—Babcia is ninety-five years old, the chances of her walking out of the hospital this time are slim—she's probably *not* okay at all. But that's what Eddie needed to hear, so that's what I told him. I sat him down with the schedule and the script and I ran through both until Eddie opened his iPad and the communications program he uses—an Augmentative and Alternative Communication app, AAC for short; it's a simple but life-changing concept—each screen displays a series of images that represent the words Eddie can't say. By pressing on

those images, Eddie is able to find a voice. This morning, he looked down at the screen for a moment, then he pressed on the *Yes* button, so I knew he understood what he'd read, at least to some degree.

Everything was fine until we arrived here, and the packaging had changed. In the time that's passed since, concerned staff and shoppers have come and gone.

"Can we help, ma'am?" they asked at first, and I shook my head, explained his autism diagnosis and let them go on their merry way. Then the offers of help became more insistent. "*Can we carry him out to your car for you, ma'am?*" So then I explained that he doesn't really like to be touched at the best of times, but if a bunch of strangers touched him, the situation would get worse. I could see from the expression on their faces that they doubted things *could* get any worse, but not so much that they dared risk it.

Then a woman came past with an identically dressed set of perfectly behaved, no doubt neurotypical children sitting up high in her cart. As she navigated her cart around my out-of-control son, I heard one of the children ask her what was wrong with him, and she muttered, "He just needs a good spankin', darlin'."

Sure, I thought. He just needs a spankin'. That'll teach him how to deal with sensory overload and learn to speak. Maybe if I spank him, he'll use the toilet spontaneously and I can ditch the obsessively regimented routine I use to prevent his incontinence. Such an easy solution... Why didn't I think of spanking him seven years ago? But just as my temper started to simmer she glanced at me, and I met her gaze before she looked away. I caught a hint of pity in her eyes, and there was no mistaking the fear. The woman blushed, averted her gaze and that leisurely journey with her children in the cart became a veritable sprint to the next aisle.

People say things like that because it makes them feel better in what is undoubtedly a very awkward situation. I don't blame her—I kind of envy her. I wish I could be that self-righteous, but seven years of parenting Edison Michaels has taught me

nothing if not humility. I'm doing the best I can, it's usually not good enough and that's just the way it is.

The manager came by a few minutes ago.

"Ma'am, we have to do something. He's done hundreds of dollars' worth of damage to my stock and now the other shoppers are getting upset."

"I'm all ears," I said, and I shrugged. "What do you propose?"

"Can we call the paramedics? It's a medical crisis, right?"

"What do you think they're going to do? Sedate him?"

His eyes brightened. "Can they do that?"

I scowled at him, and his face fell again. We sat in uncomfortable silence for a moment, then I sighed as if he'd convinced me.

"You call the paramedics, then," I said, but the knowing smile I gave him must have scared him just a bit, because he stepped away from me. "Let's just see how Eddie copes with a paramedic visit. I'm sure the blaring sirens and the uniforms and *more* strangers can't make things much worse." I paused, then I looked at him innocently. "*Right?*"

The manager walked away muttering to himself, but he must have thought twice about the paramedics because I've yet to hear sirens. Instead, there are visibly uncomfortable store assistants standing at either end of the aisle quietly explaining the situation to shoppers and offering to pick out any products they require to save them walking near my noisy, awkward son.

As for me, I'm sitting on the floor beside him now. I want to be stoic and I want to be calm, but I'm sobbing intermittently, because no matter how many times this happens, it's utterly humiliating. I've tried everything I can to defuse this situation and my every attempt has failed. This will only end when Eddie tires himself out.

Really, I should have known better than to risk bringing him into a grocery store today. I don't think he fully understands what this hospital visit means, but he knows *something* is off. Not for the first time, I wish he could handle a full-time

school placement, instead of the two-day-a-week schedule we've had to settle for. If only I could have dropped him off at school today and come here alone, or even if I could have convinced my husband, Wade, to stay home from work with Eddie.

Wade had meetings. He always has meetings, especially when *not* having meetings would mean he would have to be alone with Edison.

"Excuse me."

I look up wearily, expecting to find another staff member has come to offer "assistance." Instead, it is an elderly woman—a frail woman, with kind gray eyes and a startling blue hue to her hair. Blue rinse aside, she looks a lot like my Babcia—short and skinny, but purposefully styled. This woman is carrying a flashy handbag and she's dressed from head to toe in explosive floral prints, all the way down to her fabric Mary Janes, which are patterned with gerberas. Babcia would wear those shoes too. Even now, well into her nineties, Babcia is still generally dressed in clothes featuring crazy flowers or outlandish lace. I have a feeling if the two women met, they'd be instant friends. I feel a pinch in my chest at the recognition, and impatience sweeps over me.

Hurry up, Eddie. We have to hurry. Babcia is sick and we need to get to the hospital.

The woman offers me a gentle smile and opens her handbag conspiratorially.

"Do you think something in here could help?" She withdraws from her bag a collection of little trinkets—a red balloon, a blue lollipop, a tiny wooden doll and a small wooden dreidel. The woman crouches beside me, then drops them all onto the floor.

I've already tried distraction so I *know* this isn't going to work, but the kindness in the woman's gaze almost brings me to tears anyway. When I look into her eyes, I see empathy and understanding—but not a hint of pity. It's a beautiful and unfortunately rare thing to have someone understand my situation instead of judging it.

I murmur false appreciation and I glance between the woman and Edison while I try to figure out if this is going to make the situation worse. He *has* at least turned the volume down a little, and out of his puffy, tear-filled eyes, he's watching the woman warily. He does so love Babcia. Perhaps he sees the likeness too.

I nod toward the woman, and she lifts the balloon. Eddie doesn't react. She lifts the doll, and again, his expression remains pinched. Then the lollipop, with the same result. I've completely lost hope when she picks up the dreidel, so I'm surprised when Eddie's wailing falters just a little.

Colorful Hebrew characters are etched into each side, and the woman runs her finger over one of them, then sets the dreidel onto the floor and gives an elegant flick of her wrist. As the dreidel spins, the colors hypnotically blend into a brilliant blur. "My grandson is on the spectrum too," she tells me quietly. "I have at least an inkling of how difficult your situation is. The dreidels are Braden's favorite too..."

Eddie is staring intently at the dreidel as it spins. His wailing has stopped. All that's left behind now are soft, shuddering sobs.

"Do you know what the Hebrew means?" the woman asks me quietly. I shake my head, and she reads softly, "It's an acronym—it stands for *a great miracle happened there*."

I want to tell the woman that I don't believe in miracles anymore, but I'm not sure that's true, because one seems to be unfolding right before me. Eddie is now almost silent but for the occasional snuffle or echoed sob. The dreidel's spin fades until it wobbles, then it topples onto its side. I hear the sharp intake of his breath.

"Darling boy, do you know what this is?" the woman asks quietly.

"He doesn't speak," I try to explain, but Eddie chooses that exact moment to dig deep into his bag of embarrassing autism tricks as he turns his gaze to me and says hoarsely, "I love you, Eddie."

The woman glances at me, and I try to explain,

“That’s just...it’s called echolalia...he can *say* words, but there’s no meaning behind them. He’s just parroting what he hears me say to him—he doesn’t know what it means. It’s kind his way of saying *Mommy*.”

The woman offers me another gentle smile now and she sets the dreidel down right near Eddie, starts it spinning again and waits. He stares in silent wonder, and by the time the dreidel falls onto its side for a second time, he’s completely calm. I fumble for his iPad, load the AAC, then hit the *finish* and the *car* buttons before I turn the screen toward Eddie. He sits up, drags himself to his feet and looks at me expectantly.

“That’s it, sweetheart,” the woman says softly. She bends and picks up the dreidel, and she passes it to Eddie as she murmurs, “What a clever boy, calming yourself down like that. Your mommy must be so proud of you.”

“Thank you,” I say to the woman.

She nods, and she touches my forearm briefly as she murmurs, “You’re doing a good job, Momma. Don’t you ever forget that.”

Her words feel like platitudes at first. I lead Edison from the store, empty-handed but for the unexpected treasure from the stranger. I clip him into his special-order car seat, a necessity despite his size because he won’t sit still enough for a regular seat belt. I slide into my own seat, and I glance at him in the rearview mirror. He’s staring at the dreidel, calm and still, but he’s a million miles away like he always is, and I’m tired. I’m always tired.

You’re doing a good job, Momma. Don’t you ever forget that.

I don’t cry much over Eddie. I love him. I care for him. I don’t ever let myself feel self-pity. I’m like an alcoholic who won’t take even a drop of drink. I know once I open the floodgates to feeling sorry for myself, I’ll get a taste for it and it will destroy me.

But today my grandmother is in the hospital, and the kind woman with the gerbera shoes felt like an angel visiting me in

my hour of need, and what if Babcia sent her, and what if this is my grandmother's last gift to me because she's about to slip away?

It's my turn for a meltdown. Eddie plays with his dreidel, holding it right in front of his face and rotating it very slowly in the air as if he's trying to figure out how it works. I sob. I give myself eight luxurious minutes of weeping, because that brings us to 10:00 a.m., and we're now exactly an hour later than I hoped to be.

When the car clock ticks over the hour, I decide to stop wallowing—and then I do: just like that I turn the pity off. I wipe my nose with a Kleenex, clear my throat and start the car. As soon as I press the ignition, my phone connects to the car and on the touch screen by the steering wheel, the missed messages from my mom appear.

Where are you?

You said you'd be here by 9:00. Are you still coming?

Alice. Call me please, what's going on?

Babcia is awake, but come quickly because I don't know how long it will be until she needs another nap.

And then finally, one from Wade.

Sorry I couldn't take today off, honey. Are you mad?

We haven't even made it to the hospital yet. It's going to be a long day.

CHAPTER 2

Alina

Tomasz Slaski was determined to be a doctor like his father, but I always thought he was born to tell stories. I decided I'd marry him one day as he told me an elaborate tale about rescuing a mermaid princess from the lake while the rest of our town was asleep. I was nine and Tomasz was twelve years old, but we were already good friends, and that day I decided that he was mine. Somewhere in the years that followed, he came to see me as *his* too, and by the time I finished grade seven and my family could no longer afford to send me to school, Tomasz had a well-established habit of calling on me at home.

Like most of the children I knew, I left school and went to work in the fields with my parents—although *unlike* most of the children I knew, I never really worked all that hard. I was the youngest child, and even once puberty had come and gone, I was still fine-boned and only just five feet tall. Everyone else in my family was tall and strong, and despite my twin brothers being only fourteen months older than me, my family had never really stopped treating me like a child. I didn't mind that too much at all as long as it meant the twins did the heavy lifting with the farm work.

Tomasz was from a wealthier family and long destined for university, so he stayed on at high school far longer than most in our district in southern Poland. Even once our paths diverged,

he would regularly climb the hill between our homes to spend time with me, and every time he visited, he'd charm my whole family with outrageous tales from his week.

Even as a child and a teenager, Tomasz had a way of speaking that made you think that anything was possible. That's what I loved about him first—he opened up my world to endless possibilities, and in doing so, filled it with magic. But for Tomasz, I'd never even have wondered about the world beyond my village, but once we fell in love, exploring it with him was pretty much all I could think about.

I wished so much that we could be married before he left for medical school so that I could go with him to the city. Mostly I couldn't bear the thought of us parting, but a part of that desperation was rooted in my impatience to leave the family farm. My home was just past the outskirts of the rural township of Trzebinia, where Tomasz's father Aleksy was the doctor, and his mother Julita had been a schoolteacher until she died in childbirth with his little sister. I was certain my life lay beyond the small world we inhabited, but there was no way to escape without marriage, and I was still a little too young for that—only fifteen at the time. The best I could hope for was that one day, Tomasz would come back for me.

The weekend arrived before Tomasz was due to leave, late in the spring of 1938. Time has a way of diluting how we remember things, but there are some memories too pure for even the ravages of the years, and that Sunday is as fresh in my mind as it was when I woke the next morning. Perhaps it's just a side effect of holding the memory so close to myself over the years, replaying it in my mind over and over again as if it was my favorite film. Even now when I struggle to remember where I am sometimes or what day it is, I'm certain I still remember everything from *that* day—every moment, every touch, every scent and every sound. All day, heavy gray clouds had lingered low in the sky. We'd had so much rain in the days before that

my boots were coated, and I wasn't sure how much was from the animals and how much was from the mud. For days, the weather had been dreary, but by that Sunday evening, a cruel wind had blown in that made it bitter.

My brothers Filipe and Stanislaw had both worked all day in the cold while I was chatting with Tomasz, so my parents insisted I do one last task to tend to the animals before supper. I resisted fiercely until Tomasz took my hand and led the way.

"You are so spoiled," he laughed softly.

"You sound like my parents," I muttered.

"Well, maybe it's true." He glanced back at me, still pulling me along by my hand, but the adoration in his gaze was undeniable. "Don't worry, Spoiled Alina. I love you anyway."

At that, I felt a flush of pride and pleasure so strong that everything else became irrelevant.

"I love you too," I said, and he dragged me a little farther and a little faster so that I almost crashed into him, and then at the very last second, executed a sneaky kiss.

"You are brave to do that with my father so close." I grinned.

"Perhaps I am brave," he said. "Or perhaps love has made me stupid." At that, he cast a slightly anxious glance toward the house just to make sure my father hadn't seen us, and when I burst out laughing, he kissed me again.

"Enough fun and games," he said. "Let's get this over and done with."

Soon enough we were finished, and it was *finally* time to go inside to escape the awful weather. I moved to make a beeline for the house, but Tomasz caught my elbow and he said lightly, "Let's go up to the hill."

"What!" I gasped as my teeth chattered. He smiled anyway, and I laughed at him. "Tomasz! Maybe I'm a little spoiled, but *you* are definitely crazy."

"Alina, *moje wszystko*," he said—and that got me—it *always* got me, because his pet name for me meant "my everything," and

every time he said it I'd go weak at the knees. His gaze grew very serious and he said, "This is our last evening together for a while, and I want a moment with you before we sit with your parents. Please?"

The hill was a wooded peak, the very end of a long, thin thatch of thick forest left untouched simply because the ground was so rocky and the pinnacle so steep it served no useful farming purpose. That hill sheltered my house and the lands of our farm, and provided a barrier between our quiet existence and town life in Trzebinia. From the top of our hill to the building that housed both Tomasz's family and his father's medical practice was a brisk fifteen-minute walk, or at times when he wasn't supposed to be there with me in the first place, an eight-minute sprint.

For as long as I could remember, the hill had always been *our* spot—somewhere we could enjoy both the view and in more recent years, each other. It was a place where we had privacy if we hid in the pockets of clearing between the trees. If we sat near the long, flat boulder at the very top, we had the visibility to catch any family members who might come for us, particularly Tomasz's younger sister, Emilia, who seemed to have an instinct to come looking for us whenever our passion for each other might burn out of control.

We climbed the incline that evening until we reached the peak, and by then, what scant daylight we'd had was gone and the dull lights of the houses in Trzebinia were twinkling below us. As we took our positions on the boulder, Tomasz wrapped his arms around me and pulled me hard against his chest. He was shaking too, and at first, I thought that was because of the cold.

"This is ridiculous," I laughed softly, turning my head toward him. "We're going to catch our death, Tomasz!"

His arms tightened around me, just a little, and then he drew in a deep breath.

"Alina," he said, "your father has given us permission and his

blessing for a wedding, but we need to wait a few years...and by then I'll be earning some money to provide for you anyway. We will have time to think of the details later...just know that whatever places you can dream of, I'll find a way to take you there, Alina Dziak. We can have a good life." His voice became rough, and he cleared his throat before he whispered, "I will *give* you a good life."

I was surprised and delighted by the proposal, but also momentarily insecure, so I pulled away from him a little and asked carefully, "But how do you know you'll still want to be with me once you see what life is like in the big city?"

He shifted then, adjusting my position so that we could face each other, and he cupped my face in his hands.

"All I know and all I need to know is that whenever we are apart, I always miss you, and I know you feel the same. *That* is never going to change—it doesn't matter what college brings. You and I were made for each other—so whether you come to be with me or I come home to be with you—we will always find our way back to one another. This is just a little pause now, but you'll see. Time apart will change nothing."

This was just another amazing story Tomasz was telling—only this time, it was the story of our future, and a promise that we would share one after all. I could see it in my mind as if it had already happened—I knew in that moment that we *would* marry, and we would have babies, and then we would grow old together. I was astounded by the love I felt for Tomasz, and that I could see that same desperate love mirrored in his eyes felt like a miracle.

I was the luckiest girl in Poland—the luckiest girl on Earth, to find such a wonderful man and to have him love me back just as deeply as I loved him. He was clever, and so kind, and so handsome—and Tomasz Slaski had the most amazing eyes. They were a startling shade of green, and they always sparkled

just a little, as if he was quietly enjoying a mischievous secret. I pulled him close then and I pressed my face into his neck.

"Tomasz," I whispered, through the happiest of tears. "I was always going to wait for you. Even before you asked me to."

Father took me into the town the next morning to say good-bye to Tomasz before he left for Warsaw. We were engaged now and that was a milestone the adults in our life respected, so for the first time ever, we embraced in front of our fathers. Aleksy carried Tomasz's suitcase, and Tomasz held tightly to his train ticket. Despite the noisy sobs Emilia was making, she looked a picture in one of her pretty floral dresses. I fussed over him on the platform, fiddling with the lapel of his coat and straightening the fall of his thick sandy hair.

"I'll write you," Tomasz promised me. "And I'll come home as much as I can."

"I know," I said. His expression was somber but his eyes were dry, and I was determined to be brave too that day until he was out of sight. He kissed me on the cheek, and then he shook my father's hand. After saying goodbye to his father and sister, Tomasz took his suitcase, and walked onto the carriage. When he hung out the window to wave to us, his gaze was fixed on mine. I forced myself to smile until the train dragged him all the way from my sight. Aleksy gave me a brief hug and said gruffly, "You'll make a fine daughter one day, Alina."

"She'll make a fine *sister*, Father," Emilia protested. She gave one last shuddering sob and sniffed dramatically, then she took my hand and pulled me away from Aleksy's embrace. I didn't have much experience with children—but the soft spot I held for Emilia grew exponentially in that moment as she beamed up at me with those shiny green eyes. I kissed the side of her head, then hugged her tightly.

"Don't worry, little one. I'll be your sister even while we wait."

"I know he didn't want to leave you, Alina, and I know this is hard on you too," Aleksy murmured. "But Tomasz has wanted to be a doctor since before he learned to read, and we had to let him go." He fell silent for a moment, then he cleared his throat and asked, "You'll visit with us while Tomasz is away, won't you?"

"Of course I will," I promised him. There was a lingering sadness in Aleksy's gaze, and he and Tomasz looked so alike—the same green eyes, the same sandy hair, even the same build. Seeing Aleksy sad was like seeing Tomasz sad in the distant future, and I hated the very thought of it—so I gave him another gentle hug.

"You are already my family, Aleksy," I said. He smiled down at me, just as Emilia cleared her throat pointedly. "And you too, little Emilia. I promise I'll visit you both as often as I can until Tomasz comes back to us."

My father was solemn on the walk back to the farm, and in her usual stoic style, my mother was impatient with my moping that evening. When I climbed into bed for an early night, she appeared in the doorway between my room and the living space.

"I am being brave, Mama," I lied, wiping at my eyes to avoid her scolding for my tears. She hesitated, then she stepped into my room and extended her hand toward me. Nestled safe within her calloused palm was her wedding ring, a plain but thick gold band that she'd worn for as long as I remembered.

"When the time is right, we will have a wedding at the church in the township, and Tomasz can put this ring on your finger. We don't have much to offer you for your marriage, but this ring was my mother's, and it has seen Father and I through twenty-nine years of marriage. Good times, bad times—the ring has held us steadfast. I give it to you to bring you fortune for your future—but I want you to hold on to it even now so that while you wait, you will remember the life that's ahead of you."

As soon she finished her speech, she spun on her heel and pulled my door closed behind her, as if she knew I'd cry some

more and she couldn't even bear to see it. After that, I kept the ring buried in my clothes drawer, beneath a pile of woolen socks. Every night before I went to sleep, I'd take that little ring in my hand, and I'd go to my window.

I'd stare out toward the hill that had borne witness to so many quiet moments with Tomasz, and I'd clutch that ring tightly against my chest while I prayed to Mother Mary to keep Tomasz safe until he came home to me.

CHAPTER 3

Alice

As we step into the geriatric ward, Eddie spots Babcia, and he immediately breaks out of my grasp and runs into her room.

“Eddie,” he calls as he runs. “Eddie darling, do you want something to eat?”

Echolalia is the bane of my existence sometimes. Babcia is constantly offering Edison—and everyone else—food, and so now, when he sees Babcia, he mimics her. It’s harmless when we’re alone. When we’re in public and he piles on that faux Polish accent, it sounds a lot like he’s mocking her. The nurse reviewing Babcia’s IV setup frowns at him, and I want to explain to her what’s going on, but I’m too stricken by the sight of Babcia herself. She’s propped up and her eyes are open. This should feel like an improvement on the semiconscious state she was in last night, except that she’s clearly still very weak—she’s sunk heavily into the pillows.

“Hello, Edison.” I hear my mother sigh as I catch up to Eddie and join him in the room. Eddie looks at Mom, then mutters under his breath, “Stop doing that, Eddie.”

Mom remains silent but her disapproval is palpable, as it always is when Eddie’s echolalia reminds us all that the phrase he most associates with her is a scolding. Now she turns her gaze to me, and she says, “Alice, you are incredibly late.”

I feel justified in ignoring my mother’s greeting given it is

equal parts social nicety and criticism, which is the exact ratio that comprises almost every communication she undertakes. Julita Slaski-Davis is a lot of things; a lifelong marathon runner, a venerated district court judge, a militant civil libertarian, an avid environmentalist; a seventy-six-year old who has *no* intention of retiring from her work anytime soon. People are forever telling me she's an inspiration, and I can see their point, because she's an impressive woman. The one thing she's *not* is a cuddly, maternal grandma—which is exactly why Eddie and I have a much easier relationship with Babcia.

I take the space next to Eddie at my grandmother's bedside and wrap my hand around hers. The weathered skin of her fingers is cold, so I clasp my other hand around it and try to warm her up a little.

"Babcia," I murmur. "How are you feeling?"

Babcia makes a sound that's closer to a grunt than a word and distress registers in her eyes as she searches my gaze. Mom sighs impatiently.

"If you'd been here earlier, you'd already know that she may be awake now, but I don't think she can hear. These *nurses* don't know anything. I'm waiting for the doctor to tell me what the Hell is going on."

The nurse beside Mom raises her eyebrows, but she doesn't look at Mom or even at me. If she did look at me, I'd offer her an apologetic wince, but the nurse is clearly determined to get her job done and get out of the room as quickly as she can. She presses one last button on the IV regulator, then touches my grandmother's arm to get her attention. Babcia turns to face her.

"Okay, Hanna," she nurse says gently. "I'll leave you with your family now. Just buzz if you need me, okay?"

Eddie pushes me out of the way as soon as the nurse goes, and fumbles to take Babcia's hand. When I let him have it, he immediately settles. I glance back to Babcia, and I see the smile she turns on for him. I always thought my relationship with my

grandmother was unique. She all but raised me through different phases of my childhood; my mother's career has *always* come first. But as special as it is, our relationship isn't a patch on the bond she has with Eddie. In a world that doesn't understand my son, he's always had Babcia, who doesn't care if she understands him or not—she simply adores him the way he is.

I survey her carefully now, assessing her, as if I can scan her with my gaze and realize the extent of the damage within her mind.

"Can you hear me, Babcia?" I say, and she turns toward me, but frowns fiercely as she concentrates. Her only response is the swell of tears that rise to her eyes. I glance at Mom, who is standing stiffly, her jaw set hard.

"I think she can hear," I say to Mom, who hesitates, then offers, "Well, then...maybe she doesn't recognize us?"

"Eddie," Eddie says. "Eddie darling, do you want something to eat?"

Babcia turns to him and she smiles a tired but brilliant smile that immediately earns a matching smile from my son. He releases Babcia's hand, throws his iPad up onto the bed beside her legs and starts trying to climb the railings.

"Eddie," Mom says impatiently. "Don't do that. Babcia is not well. Alice, you need to stop him. This is *not* a playground."

But Babcia tries to pull herself into a sitting position and opens her arms wide toward Eddie, and even Mom falls silent at that. I pull the bedrail down, and help shift the various cords out of the way as my very solid son climbs all the way onto the bed beside his very fragile great-grandmother. Babcia shifts over, slowly and carefully, purposefully making room for him *right* beside her. He nestles into her side and closes his eyes, and as she sinks back into the pillow, she rests her cheek against Eddie's blond hair. Then Babcia closes her eyes too, and she breathes him in as if he's a newborn baby.

"She certainly seems to recognize Eddie," I say softly.

Mom sighs impatiently and runs her hand through the stiff tufts of her no-nonsense gray hair. I settle onto the chair beside the bed and reach into my bag for my phone. There's another message from Wade on the screen.

Ally, I really am sorry. Please write back and let me know you're okay.

I know I'm not being fair, but I'm still so disappointed that he wouldn't help me today. I scowl and think about turning the phone off, but at the last second, I relent and reply.

Having a very bad day, but I am okay.

It's a long while later that we're approached by a middle-aged woman in a lab coat, who motions toward us to join her at the nurses' desk. Eddie is holding the dreidel up again in front of his face and doesn't react to me at all as I turn from the bed, so I leave him be.

"I'm Doctor Chang, Hanna's physician. I wanted to update you on her condition."

Babcia is stable today, but given the location of the stroke, her doctors think there's damage to the language centers in her brain. She can certainly hear, but she's not reactive to requests or instructions and further testing needs to be done. Behind us, I hear Eddie's iPad as the robotic voice of the AAC app announces, *Dreidel*.

I'm not paying much attention to Eddie, only enough that I'm vaguely surprised he managed to figure out what his new treasure is called. His visual language app lists thousands of images he can use to identify concepts he might need to communicate, but *dreidel* is hardly going to be in the "most commonly used" section of the menu. I enjoy a moment or two of Mommy-pride in among the panic of the seemingly endless bad news from

Doctor Chang. *Could be permanent, more testing required, scans, this situation is not entirely unheard of, unfortunately high chance of further events. End of life plans?*

I like dreidel, Eddie's iPad says. *Your turn.*

I wince and turn back to glance at the bed, where Eddie has turned the iPad toward my grandmother. He's sitting up now, his back against the bedrail. I don't know what I expect to see, but I'm surprised when Babcia lifts her hand slowly and hits the screen.

I...like...

I interrupt the doctor by grabbing her forearm, and she startles and steps away from me.

"Sorry," I blurt. "Just...look."

The doctor and Mom turn just in time to see Babcia hit the next button. Mom draws in a sharp breath.

...dreidel...too. Babcia hits each button slowly and with obvious difficulty, but eventually, she expresses herself just fine.

Babcia hurt? Eddie asks now.

Babcia scared, Babcia types.

Eddie scared, Eddie types.

Eddie...is...okay, Babcia slowly pecks out. *Babcia...is...okay.*

Eddie nods, and sinks back onto the bed to rest his head in Babcia's shoulder again.

"Is he autistic?" the doctor asks.

"He's on the autism spectrum, yes," I correct her. The terminology doesn't matter, not really, but it matters to me because my son is more than a label. To say he *is* autistic is not accurate—autism is not who he is, it is a part of who he is. This is semantics to someone who doesn't live with the disorder every day and the doctor looks at me blankly, as if she can't even hear the distinction. I feel heat on my cheeks. "He's nonverbal. He uses the Augmentative and Alternative Communication app to speak. Babcia is already used to communicating that way, although she's normally much faster—"

"That's the problem with her hand," Mom interrupts me,

and she's glaring at the doctor again. "I told you, she's having trouble moving her right side."

"I remember, and we're looking into it," the doctor says, then she pauses a moment and admits, "We don't tend to use technology with elderly patients in this situation—most of them don't have a clue where to start. So as difficult as this is, at least she has the advantage of her familiarity with the concept. I'll talk to a speech pathologist. This is good."

"This isn't *good*," Mom says impatiently. "*Good* isn't my mother having to speak through a damned iPad app, it's frustrating enough that we have to use the rotten thing for Eddie. How long will this last for? How are you going to fix it?"

"Julita, in these—"

"It's *Judge Slaski-Davis*." My mother corrects her, and I sigh a little as I turn back toward the bed. Babcia catches my eye and nods toward the iPad, so I quietly leave the doctor to deal with my nightmare of a mother. Babcia hits the *your turn* button, and I take the iPad from her hands.

Are you hurt? I ask her. She takes the iPad and flicks through the screens until she can find the right images. Then slowly and carefully, she speaks.

Babcia okay. Want help.

She hands me the iPad immediately, obviously keen to see my reply, but I have no idea what to say to her or even how to ask her for more information about what she needs. I look from the iPad screen then back to her face and her blue eyes quickly shift from pleading to impatient. She motions for me to pass her the iPad again and so I do, and then she scrolls through screens and screens. She finds the magnifying glass icon and hits it, and the iPad says *find*, but then she goes back to scrolling. Her gaze narrows. Her lips tighten. Beads of sweat break out on her lined forehead, and more time passes as a flush gradually rises in her cheeks. She hits the *find* button again and again, and then she growls and pushes the iPad toward me.

Her frustration is palpable, but I don't know what to do. Mom and the doctor are still squabbling, and Eddie is still curled up beside Babcia, rolling the dreidel along the sheet now as if it is a toy train. I look at Babcia helplessly, and she raises her hands as if to say *I don't know, either*. For a moment, I swipe through the screens of Eddie's most commonly used icons, pausing each time so she can check to see if what she needs is there. After a minute or so of this, a new thought strikes me. I open the app to the *new icon* page, and as soon as I do, Babcia snatches the device back eagerly. She finds a picture of a young man, then starts to type, slowly and carefully. She's not using her forefinger—she's using the side of her pinkie and her ring finger. It's awkward, and it takes her a few goes to form the word correctly, but then she does, and she clicks the save button and shows me proudly.

Tomasz.

"How is she?" Mom asks me from the doorway. I look up to her and find the doctor has gone, possibly to find a stiff drink.

"It's slow, but she's using the device. She's just asked me for—"

It occurs to me what Babcia *is actually* asking, and my heart sinks.

"Oh no, Babcia," I whisper, but the words are pointless—if the stroke has damaged her receptive language, then she's in much the same boat as Eddie; spoken words have no meaning for her right now. I meet her gaze again, and tears glimmer in her eyes. I look from her to the iPad, but I have absolutely no idea how to tell her that her husband died just over twelve months ago. Pa was a brilliant pediatric surgeon until his seventies, then he taught at the University of Florida until his eighties—but as soon as he retired, dementia took hold and after a long, miserable decline, he died last year. "Babcia...he's...he...um..."

She shakes her head fiercely and she hits the buttons again.

Find Tomasz.

More scrolling, then:

Need help.

Emergency.

Find Tomasz.

Then, while I'm still struggling to figure out how to deal with this, she selects another series of icons and the device reads a nonsensical message to me:

Babcia fire Tomasz.

Her hands are shaking. Her face is set in a fierce frown, but there's determination in her gaze. I put my hand gently on her forearm and when she looks up at me, I shake my head slowly, but her eyes register only confusion and frustration.

I'm confused and frustrated too—and I'm suddenly angry, because it is brutally unfair to see this proud woman so confused.

"Babcia..." I whisper, and she sighs impatiently and shakes my hand off her arm. My grandmother has an unlimited depth of empathy and she loves relentlessly—but she's the toughest woman I know, and she seems completely undeterred by my inability to communicate with her. She goes back to scrolling through the pages of icons on the screen of the iPad, until I see her expression brighten. Again and again, she repeats this process, painstakingly forming a sentence. Over the next few minutes, Mom goes to find a coffee, and I watch as Babcia tries to wrangle this clumsy communication method into submission. It's easier for her now that all of the icons are on the "recently used" page, and soon she's just hitting the same buttons over and over again now.

Need help. Find...box...go home. Want home.

I swallow my sigh, take the iPad and tell her *Babcia in hospital now. Then go home later.*

This is the language pattern I have to use with my son, and it's one that's automatic for me—*now* this, *then* something else—explaining sequences of events and time to him because he has *no* concept of it without the guidelines of instructions and schedules. Communicating via the AAC is so damned restrictive. With Eddie, I'm used to the limitations because it's all we've

ever had—and it is *vastly* better than nothing. Until he learned to read and use the AAC, our whole life was a series of meltdowns inspired by his overwhelming frustration at being locked inside himself, unable to communicate.

The problem now is that with Babcia, I'm used to the endless freedom of spoken communication, and having to revert to this AAC app suddenly does seem an impossibly poor substitute.

Babcia snatches the iPad back and resumes her demands.

Need help.

Find Tomasz.

Home.

Box.

Now.

Help.

Box.

Camera.

Paper.

Babcia fire Tomasz.

Mom steps all the way into the room. She hands me a coffee, then returns to stand at the foot of the bed.

"What's this about?" she asks me.

"I don't know," I admit. Babcia gives us both an impatient glare now and repeats the commands, and when we still don't react, she turns the sound *all the way up* and hits the repeat button again. This is a trick she's learned from my son, who does the exact same thing when he's not getting his own way.

Help.

Find Tomasz.

Box.

Camera. Paper. Box.

Now. Now. Emergency. Now.

Find Tomasz. Now.

Babcia fire Tomasz.

"Christ. She's really forgotten Pa passed," Mom whispers,

and I glance at her. Mom is not known for vulnerability, but right now her expression is pinched and I think I see tears in her eyes. I shake my head slowly. Babcia seems quite determined that she doesn't need me to remind her that Pa has passed, so I just don't think that's it.

Find Tomasz.

Find box.

Box. Find. Now. Need help.

"Oh!" Mom gasps suddenly. "She has that box of mementos. I haven't seen it in years—not since we moved them into the retirement home after Pa got sick. It's either in storage or at her unit there. Maybe that's what she wants, maybe she wants a *photo* of Pa? That makes sense, doesn't it?"

"Ah, yes," I say. A wave of relief relaxes muscles I didn't even know I'd tensed. "Good thinking, Mom."

"I can go try to find it if you'll stay with her?"

"Please, yes," I say, and I take the iPad. I hit the photograph of Mom, and the iPad reads *Nanna*, so I wince and start to edit the label on the photo—but Babcia waves my hand away impatiently. Our gazes lock, and she gives me a wry smile, as if she's telling me *I'm broken, kiddo, but not stupid*. I'm so relieved by that smile that I bend to kiss her forehead, and then I hit some more buttons.

Nanna find box now.

Babcia sighs with happiness and hits the *yes* button, then rests her hand on my forearm and squeezes. She can't speak at the moment, but she's been a guiding light for my entire life, so I hear her voice in my head anyway.

Good girl, Alice. Thank you.

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Appetites & Vices



FELICIA GROSSMAN

Chapter One

June 1841, Centerville, Delaware

Throw one chair when you're eleven and you're a pariah for life.

Ursula ran her finger along the edge of the gilt-wood console table in the Truitts' vestibule, alone. The music and conversation of the rollicking party in the adjoining rooms wafted through the empty space.

Her presence at the soirée was secured out of obligation—humiliating, but at least being the sole child of a banking baron provided some benefits. Loans were hard to come by in this economy, especially in Delaware, so if the husbands had any say in the guest list, the Nunes name was etched on an invitation.

Bollocks. Her father always complained that parties were frivolous and boring, but if she wanted to see Hugo, this was the place to be. It was time for him to propose. True, the season had hardly begun, but if he did as promised, the night's outing wouldn't be a complete waste.

Her chin steady, she ascended the hosts' grand double staircase. Almost as impressive as the one in her father's house, though a bit old-fashioned.

She shoved a crème puff into her mouth to ease her

rumbling stomach. Perhaps she should take one more gander at the refreshment table and swipe a few more treats. Last time they'd served the most delicious baked apples, and pound cake with sugared berries, and fruit dipped in chocolate. She closed her eyes at the memory.

Chocolate. Ambrosia had nothing on chocolate. With strawberries. *Divine.* Later—Hugo first, sweets later.

Marriage was the only prudent course of action. He was her best friend, and she was his, and if they didn't marry each other, they'd have to marry strangers. Or, worse, no one would marry her and when her father died she'd be all alone. Besides, they had a pact.

She hitched her skirts and crept into the upstairs hall.

Hugo Middleton's familiar form slumped so low he covered more chair rail than wall. His shoulder rested against a portrait of some long-dead Truitt ancestor. The frame was already crooked. She'd have to fix that before they left.

She tapped his shoulder. No need to beat around the bush. It was time. If he did it now people would congratulate her, act friendly towards her, smile at her, pretend she belonged so for once, she didn't have to tiptoe over glass. "Are you going to talk to my father tonight or tomorrow?"

"Ursula." Hugo stuttered her name, his pale eyes wide.

She blinked. Was that displeasure on his face? Unlike everyone else, Hugo was never unhappy to see her. Unease scalded her stomach. "You need to ask him. It's

time.”

“Now, Ursula, you know I adore you, have always adored you, and if there was any possible way...” The stuttering increased as he grasped her hand.

Clammy. She wrinkled her nose but stifled her distaste. She’d buy him some talc.

He began again. “My family’s business has had some setbacks. The Middleton fortune and name aren’t what they once were. My parents are in a bit of financial trouble.”

The man had to be joking. Money? This was about money? Money was easy. She could dance in relief. Money was what the Nuneses did best. The whispered criticisms involved them having too much, not too little.

“Hugo, my family is the wealthiest in Delaware. Our Dutch and British holdings can charge whatever interest we desire, and my father will do anything I want so we could help your parents, purchase Middleton Carriers. My father’s always looking to expand, and...”

She bit her lip. Should she say it? Would it be rude? Her father said marriage required trust and honesty. And Hugo loved his own parents so he’d want the truth. Ursula fiddled with the emerald-eyed lion’s head on her bracelet, one of her mother’s favorites. “Now I don’t want to appear forward or ill-mannered or what have you, but Middleton’s model is outdated. Have you looked at rail transport? The steam engine is the way of the future.”

Hugo mopped his brow. The man could certainly

sweat. Not his most becoming quality, but no one was perfect—she was far from it, no matter how hard she worked. Besides, Hugo was close to ideal, at least for her. He never mocked her, was kind to her animals, never told her how frizzled her hair was or that her gowns weren't the right color or cut. Besides her father, Hugo was the only person who let her breathe.

“We can't. I know we had plans for our mutual protection, but my parents forbid it. I'm sorry. It's not just the business, it's my father. He wants—needs, really—a judgeship, a Federal one—a circuit court one. We're going to Philadelphia. My parents need me to marry someone who...” Hugo mumbled the end of his sentence into his sleeve.

Her heart galloped away, dragging all hopes of surviving adulthood with it.

What did she do wrong this time? Was it the chair again? Or the chafing dish? She'd tried so hard. She'd behaved. She'd followed most of the rules too. And who could remember what words were impolite or how to fold one's napkin anyway? What more could people want? Her throat was tight as if she'd swallowed an entire biscuit—one made of lead.

“Someone who what?” Was that a catch in her voice? Blazes, Nuneses didn't cry. Even when they lost. Crying was weakness and people in her circle filleted the weak for breakfast.

“Ursula, I'm sorry. I really am. I adore you. You're still

the only woman I'd ever want to marry." He fumbled with his cuff. "But your father is, well, not Christian."

Bollocks, double bollocks, and blast.

Why did that have to be such an issue? It didn't matter. It shouldn't matter. Why was her money good enough, but not her? She clenched her fists, her nails biting into her skin.

She could convince him. No one could argue like she could. That's what her father said, and her father was always right, except when he said no to her, which was almost never.

She straightened her shoulders.

"You'd never notice. We never spend time with other Jews. I mean, we live in Delaware." She shook as she spoke, unable to halt her mouth or body. Curls spilled loose from their holdings and flopped in her face. "We see family, I suppose, but rarely. My father takes me to parties and the opera, not synagogue or church. We're too amusing for that. And we pray before most people wake. You could sleep through it."

She knit her fingers. It made sense. She and Hugo made sense. Wasn't that enough?

"Ursula, I can't, I just really can't." Hugo's eyes darted in her direction one last time as he fled down the stairs, his coattails flapping, before the sob-like gasp escaped her lips.

* * *

Jay Truitt leaned against the doorframe and downed the remainder of a glass of champagne, his third, not enough to sleep, but enough to loosen the garrote around his gut. The air was thick as tar in his parents' house.

The vest was a mistake. He tugged at the garment. At least he wasn't old and stiff and in need of a corset like half his friends.

Why did his mother invite him home anyway? He was a failure. The woman's two-month experiment was pointless. He might as well leave instead of waiting around for his father to take charge. Jay gulped. No way he'd survive the man's "cure" again.

He patted under every surface in the second-floor guest room for the third time. He could've sworn he'd hidden a stash behind the mirror. Dash it. This is what his parents wrought. Two years he'd held himself together, but the moment he returned home a single craving ensorcelled his senses—too many people, too many rules, too many memories.

At least his perch permitted him a front row seat to a rather stimulating conversation and confirmation he wasn't the only miserable guest. Bravo. He should toast the unfortunate couple.

Poor, poor Hugo. He and Ursula Nunes would never work. The Middleton name, though old as his own, lacked cachet and finances. The family's holdings were decimated when the American banks crashed and the Middletons lacked the political pull for Hugo's father's

ambitions. His own father, the fourth John Thaddeus Truitt, gossiped about the whole affair the other night. Perhaps he should've listened harder.

Or not. The Middletons and their problems were dull—Delaware dull.

The lady in question was another matter. How old was she again? Twenty, twenty-one? She couldn't have been more than fourteen the last time she'd been in his house for a party.

Ursula Nunes was all grown-up now. Big blue eyes, thick lashes, cascading blonde curls, adorable pert mouth, any fetching feature one could want. Her jaw and brow were a bit wide, but no one was perfect.

Besides, what made little Miss Nunes interesting and, more, delicious—was her figure, on complete display in a snug-bodice gown cut to show her shoulders, collarbone and much more. Like her impressive décolletage—two crème puffs set atop a flute of plum wine. A bit much for some people's taste, but only the boring frowned upon excess.

Her lack of interest in anyone else's money or status was a bit refreshing, actually, as was her confidence. But for Hugo? Poor, poor Hugo. She'd never do, unless the man aimed for a heart attack and early grave. Everyone in Delaware knew the Middletons were so stodgy Puritans appeared hedonistic by comparison.

Jay clasped both hands over his mouth to muffle his laughter. All he could picture was the pushy blonde next

to Hugo at Lower Brandywine Presbyterian Church in scarlet or something equally inappropriate. She'd probably critique the Gospel.

Loudly.

He peered out the cracked guest room door. Her looks really were a waste. If she'd been fortunate, she'd have been born docile-but-plain or at least a sedate pretty. Society rewarded conformity. The woman was doomed. Ursula Nunes was a four-time deviant. Her Jewishness, her wealth, her near-aggressive beauty, and her charm—or lack thereof—made her almost hopeless.

Jay paused as she wrapped her arms tighter around her body, clutching her elbows. Her shoulders shook, but she made no sound.

“What to do, what to do?” She repeated the phrase as she stalked back and forth between the bannister and the wall, half muttering, half projecting.

He blinked. Good lord, she was bouncing. The puffed sleeves slid down from her slender shoulders. Jay swallowed. It'd been too long. Way too long. Why had he sworn off women again? Whomever decided that their collars should lay beneath their shoulders should be elected president, or better, be given his own riverboat.

“Philadelphia. I have to get to Philadelphia. If I can talk to his parents, I'll make them understand. They'll have to let us marry if I argue it right. I just need to get into the parties. How hard can that really be?” She nibbled on her fingernails, diluting her attractiveness a smidge.

He held his breath to fight his raging case of the snickers.

The woman was delusional, but intriguing. Not even her father with all his money would be able to secure the right invitations outside of Wilmington.

And arguing her position to Hugo's parents? Yes, a perfect way to display her social aptitude. Jay swallowed his chortle. If Ursula Nunes thought she could convince those self-important snobs of anything, she was the one who belonged in an asylum. Not him.

He cracked the door open a touch more. Her eyelashes were wet, but her cheeks remained dry. Most people, not just women, would've withered in her shoes, and yet she still fought. Fascinating.

An idea formed—a terrible, awful, wonderful idea.

His mother's words echoed in his head.

You're more than you think, Jay. All you need is a bit of stability, perhaps a wife. Come home. If you can show your father you've changed, he'll trust you and we can be a family again.

As if his father would ever trust him. The man found fault with the tone of his cry when he emerged from the womb. As for a wife—he was never doing that again. If his mother only knew...

Jay inhaled through his nose. If the scheme turned out, perhaps his parents would leave him alone. As for Miss Nunes, well, he'd do his best. Maybe he could give her a few pointers.

He squinted through the crack. Was she still muttering nonsense to herself? More than a few pointers. Not the worst occupation for his mind.

Even if he couldn't fix her, watching her and Hugo's drama would be decent distraction for the next two months. He glanced back at the mirror. If he wasn't in his father's house there'd be less temptation.

Yes, the next moments held quite a bit of promise. He just had to execute. Time to turn on the charm—to be the old Jay, the one who collected multiple garters at every party—one last time.

Glass in hand, he swung the door open until it cracked against the wall. Ursula jumped. He centered himself in the doorway and settled into a lean.

“Good evening, Miss Nunes.” He lifted the flute in her direction. “You probably don't remember me. I'm Jay. This is my parents' house and I have a proposal for you.”

Chapter Two

Had he been listening the entire time? Ursula's cheeks burned. Jay, Jay Truitt. John was his real name, wasn't it? John Thaddeus-the-something, like his father. He hadn't been home in years.

There was gossip about him, and not the good kind. She frowned. Something about him being a drunkard? He was certainly staring at her with a particularly foolish grin—probably with a devastating quip at her expense right on the tip of his tongue. As if she needed that. The backs of her eyes ached.

Time to get rid of him.

"I don't do business with intoxicated individuals." She pointed at his empty glass in case he couldn't understand.

School. That was the bent of the rumors. Well, actually, *schools*. Plural. He'd been kicked out of multiple schools, quite the feat for someone with the Truitt name and legacy.

Wasteful miscreant.

"I'm not drunk." He lifted the glass, jiggling it. "I've had two of these, maybe three."

He hiccupped.

Typical.

Society was a mystery. This man was celebrated while

she, and her mother before her, were ostracized over a few too many beads and some innocuous verbal stumbles?

“I can handle three. I’m not a small man.” As if to emphasize his point, he straightened his back and stepped towards her.

No, he wasn’t small. She was a decent height herself, yet he was at least a head taller and in the chandelier light, much more handsome than he’d been when they’d last crossed paths. His chestnut hair, full and thick, was shorter than fashionable and without sideburns.

Not lean, not bulky, Jay was just, well, large, like a Great Dane. With a wolf’s attitude. He certainly was no Saint Bernard bent on rescuing innocents, though who’d rescue her?

Ursula swallowed. His eyes were something else. What color were they? Green, brown, gray, all three? A fascinating mixture.

“Still, it just wouldn’t be fair.” She hugged herself. Maybe she’d shrink herself down to nothing and he’d leave her be.

His smirk deepened. Perhaps not. She gulped.

“What wouldn’t be fair?” One long stride and he was mere feet away.

Do not be intimidated, Ursula, do not be intimidated.

“Taking advantage of a poor drunkard.” She brushed past him, her sleeve grazing the brass leaves at the bottom of a sconce.

Her lungs pumped her ribs against her corset boning. She needed to find her father. She'd convince him to take her to Philadelphia. He'd get her into the parties. Money was money. Everyone had a price. Where to stay, that was another matter. No, she was getting ahead of herself. First thing was to get rid of Jay Truitt.

The last thing she needed was to be humiliated by some smug, spoiled profligate. His type adored her for "pranks." She couldn't stomach another "accidental" spill down her bosom or wine in her hair after what happened with Hugo.

And the metal biscuit was back, cutting off her air, along with a burning behind her eyes.

Think Ursula, think.

She grasped for a barb from the gossip she could hurl to repel him. "Isn't that why you were asked to leave, where was it, Harvard? And then Yale?"

Jay strolled over and leaned against the railing, his body so close the wool of his frock coat kissed the silk of her sleeve.

"My parents would've preferred that." He stretched his arms above his head in the most undignified manner possible. "Harvard's dean didn't appreciate my friendship with his daughter, and Yale's with his niece. Fortunately, Brown's dean was an only child with sons. To be fair, my marks weren't anything to write home about either."

Jay's arm brushed against hers again and she shivered. When she caught his eye, he cocked his head as if he

dared her to react, to move away, or worse, move closer. Like she'd give him either satisfaction.

"It's a wonder you even have a degree." Ursula scrunched her nose. "So, a dullard, not a drunkard, and libertine to boot. I'm not sure if that's an improvement."

"Have you been conversing with my father?"

He raised an eyebrow and dared to wink at her like she was some barmaid. Why did people toy with her so much? Why couldn't they leave her be? It wasn't fair. It just wasn't.

"I like to argue I'm just a bit of an underachiever," he added.

"Either way, I don't think you have anything of value to offer me, Mr. Truitt, and I believe any negotiation would put you at a deep and unfair disadvantage. I try to be very careful with those who aren't as blessed as I am in certain departments."

She clutched at her gown. Good lord, she was sweating worse than Hugo.

Jay placed the glass on the floor. He shook his shoulders and spine, like a peacock fanning his tail. He was only inches from her so the rise and fall of his chest was visible. A faint scent—almost like cloves mixed with wood and a trace of sweetness, but tart, like cherries—flit towards her. She'd have bet on alcohol. There was a hint of liquor, maybe whiskey, but not overpowering nor even unpleasant. The look he gave her though, was another story—a squirm-inducing other story.

“You are certainly well-endowed, in more ways than one.” His eyes didn’t meet hers and instead settled several inches lower.

Oh, for the love of—well, at least the corset and dress did what they should. All the servants swore her figure was perfect, and the other girls were jealous, though that was probably a lie aimed at preventing the extra work of cleaning tear stains out of silk.

She gritted her teeth. She should slap him. She really should, and yet, somehow, she couldn’t muster the indignation. There was something—what was the word? Boyish, yes, almost boyish—that was it. And the way he teased was so...*no. No, no, no, no.*

How was he muddling her so much?

Ursula sighed. “What do you want, Mr. Truitt?” She might as well hear him out. She’d never see him again. After he finished, she’d find her father, plot in peace and everything would go her way. She’d make it.

“It’s Jay, and what I want is to become engaged. With you. To you.”

She blinked and swished the back of her teeth with her tongue. Just sugar, she hadn’t had any spirits so she wasn’t inebriated. But couldn’t have heard right. “Pardon me?”

“Tonight, if possible, though I suppose I’ll have to officially ask permission from your father tomorrow.” His lip twitched.

“Why?” The word was more of a gasp.

He had to be mad. Also, did he have to stand so close?

She wrinkled her nose. “Why would you want to become engaged to me? We don’t even know each other. We have nothing in common.”

And they didn’t. They might have been born less than two miles away from each other, in similar houses, but the gulf between their experiences could never be traversed. Jay lived in a world free of real consequences. His type paid a pittance, if anything, for their mistakes, while hers could execute flawlessly and still be denied even the smallest opportunities.

Ursula clenched her fists so hard she shook. “I mean, I’m serious and enjoy numbers and books. I need a husband to match my interests, one that will suit the Nunes businesses, and I’m sure people say you’re charming or some such nonsense, but I’m—”

A single finger pressed against her lips. She blinked again, over and over. She had to be dreaming. He couldn’t really be touching her mouth.

“I’m going to end that monologue before you say something you’ll regret, or more likely, before you say something you should regret. Though I’m not sure you’re capable of that emotion.” He closed his eyes. “I don’t want to actually marry you, Ursula.”

She grabbed his wrist, yanking his hand from her mouth by his sleeve. Excellent quality material and stitching. The man might be daft and kind of mean, but at least he had some taste.

“Then why do you want to...?” She couldn’t say all the words.

“You have a problem. You’d like entrance to some of Philadelphia’s most exclusive social engagements to convince Hugo Middleton’s parents to permit your nuptials, or, better convince him to—how do I put this delicately?—grow a spine. However, your last name, background, and certain incidents in your past, at least so I’ve heard, will make that rather difficult. I have no such issues, despite my reputation for excess. My name still impresses people. Better, people of a certain set covet what Truitts have. Jealousy is an excellent motivator.”

Ursula bit her lip. Why did he have to make actual sense? It would be much easier if he’d just passed out on the stairs or did something else irresponsible wastrels did. Worse, what was wrong with her that she was not only listening to, but considering his plan? Was marriage to Hugo worth that sort of humiliation?

An image of herself wandering her father’s estate in the dark, face wrinkled, in complete, oppressive silence flashed in her mind. No invitations. No visitors. Her father’s family wresting any control of the business from her...she’d be so bored and lonely she’d start pretending her animals talked back.

Her heart squeezed.

Worth it. Very worth it. Because, honestly, who besides Hugo would even entertain the idea of marrying her? With her mother gone and no friends to speak of she

needed someone.

She exhaled. “What do you want out of this arrangement?”

Jay turned and gazed at the foyer below. He ran his fingers through his hair. She moved next to him, imitating his position, her elbows resting on the glossy railing.

“My parents want me to return to Delaware, settle down and manage the business.”

“And you don’t want to?” She suppressed a gasp. How could he not? Truitt Industries was vast and prominent, even if it had shed its most profitable line two years ago for a song. They’d previously cornered the market on tincture of opium in America, but even without that...to head that sort of enterprise would be incredible. Jay’d get to devise a strategy to maximize profits over a variety of lines and markets. It’d be like playing chess, billiards, and cards all at once.

“No.” Jay bent his neck, his voice almost serious. “I don’t have a talent for it. It’s better if I just stay away. I have cousins whom everyone finds more suitable.”

“What do you want to do?” She studied him. What did this man enjoy? Besides the obvious?

“I don’t know. I’ve never really thought about it.” He shrugged, still staring out over the party. “Travel? I like meeting people.”

“And finding ways to remove their clothing.” She snorted.

He whipped his head around, his eyes wide and she

slapped both hands over her mouth. Ugh, she sounded like a hog. Her face grew hot. Double ugh, red was not a flattering color on her.

Jay whooped, his laughter so loud it was a wonder the partygoers below didn't stare up at them.

"That wasn't bad." He wiped his eyes. "Are you offering?"

The cretin had the nerve to lick his lower lip. His full, perfect, lower lip.

"Hardly." Damn it all, she was sweating again. Next party she was dousing herself in talc. "That's a negotiation you shall never win, Mr. Truitt."

"Never is a long time, Miss Nunes."

Her hands shook so hard her fan bobbed against her wrist. She couldn't use it. She didn't dare.

"So." Ursula cleared her throat. "Back to the previous discussion, how would a temporary engagement solve your problem?"

Jay tugged at his high collar. Perhaps he was becoming a little warm as well. Too bad he didn't have a fan. That many layers of clothing...perhaps there were some advantages to womanhood. At least her neck was free.

"Isn't it enough that I find you amusing? The comment to Hugo about the steam engine was brilliant, intentionally and un. In my opinion, you're the least boring person in Delaware. I'm not sure I want to know all the stories from your past, but as long as I have all my appendages after the engagement ends, I should be most

satisfied.”

Liar. Definite liar.

She forced her spine straight. “I don’t believe it. No one, save my father and Hugo, has ever wanted to spend time with me.” She folded her arms and glared as darkly as she could. “This better not be some sort of elaborate prank designed to humiliate me because if it is I will see to it that none of the Truitt businesses ever get a loan from us again. Or any other bank.” Her throat burned, lemons followed by whiskey.

Jay held his palms up to her, almost as if he was about to defend himself from a blow. “Woah, all right. No, I swear, that’s not what this is.” He brushed her shoulder, a small, intentional josh, as if they were friends. “Look, I’m supposed to go to the parties anyway and to attend with a beautiful woman on my arm who can joke and doesn’t require me to be anything more than myself... All I need you to do is jilt me. For once, I won’t be the villain. A good faux broken heart will be enough for my parents to stop trying to make me into something I’m not.”

She gazed into his eyes and scowled. What was sincere? His explanation was almost too neat. There had to be more, but if there was, he certainly wasn’t sharing. Fiddlesticks. She’d never been able to read people, and Jay Truitt was confusing, to say the least.

Still, what exactly did she have to lose? He was right in many ways. Her mind drifted to the letters her father wrote to Hartford Female Seminary, St. Mary’s Hall,

Mount Holyoke Female Seminary, and several others, offering generous donations to admit her. The responses were the same. The lump in her throat grew spikes. Certain doors would never be open to her or her kind. Jay Truitt was probably her only hope of getting near Hugo for the next few weeks.

Besides, it wouldn't be so bad. She'd win, in the end. She'd have a big, beautiful wedding with tons of flowers and jewels and a dress like no one in Delaware had ever seen, and she'd be a Middleton. No one would ever be mean to her again. And she'd have a human companion who wasn't related to her. Who'd chosen her.

She sucked in another breath—blasted boning, she'd be bruised in the morning. Jay winked again and her stomach fizzed. If only she'd grabbed a few more crème puffs.

“So, if I agreed, how exactly would this work?”

Chapter Three

The Nunes carriage hit a bump and the top of Jay's skull slammed against the roof—the curse of being tall. At least the vehicle was well appointed, though a little ostentatious for his taste. Who knew one could gild so many types of fabric? He'd counted at least two dozen. Not to mention the trims. But what else could he do? No one had even glanced at him since he sat down almost an hour ago. He yanked at his tie.

Too bad the Nuneses with all their riches neglected to bring ice. The box was like a blasted oven. Worse than outside. A difficult feat as Hell had nothing on summer in Philadelphia.

“You think I'm going to fail.” Hostile was the tone Ursula chose for her opening remark.

Fitting. After all, she hadn't gotten her way. None of her excuses held muster and she was stuck with him the entire ride. The way she hid nothing—every emotion on the surface—and the problems it caused her were fascinating. So fascinating he'd hardly thought of anything else since his parents' party three days ago.

He stammered a vague response, which was met with a loud sniff.

“Blast, Jay, that wasn't an answer. Didn't they teach

you diction in those fancy schools?”

He coughed back a laugh. One had to give her points for refusing idle chatter or even pleasantries. She had a bit of a singular mind, like some sort of ratter. A shapely, blonde ratter. She only looked like a poodle.

What was so special about Hugo Middleton anyway? How anyone could think that pussy-footed, tongue-tied lackey was worth so much trouble was beyond him.

A Harvard degree was one matter, but the man wasn't even special to look at. Thin and pale, like an invalid, with brows that inched too close together. His taste in clothing was dour. He never drank, never told jokes and danced like he'd sat on a railway spike—after being clobbered on the head with the object.

If Ursula hadn't been a Jew, Hugo'd be so far beneath her it'd be laughable, chair tossing or no chair tossing. Encouraging her designs towards the man was almost like taking advantage of her.

Jay sucked in a breath. “I think you underestimate the pressure that Hugo is under.”

“But why?” She mewled the question, through her nose. Like an oboe. Played off-key.

Just when she piqued his sympathy too. Jay gripped the silk fabric of the seat. Maybe there was no “almost” about her hopelessness. A man would have to be drunk or dead or a complete fool to find whining attractive. Especially with Ursula's level of verve. And vocal tone.

Perhaps he should walk to Philadelphia to rescue his

ears. And nerves.

He eyed her animals. The cat snored and the monkey was distracted by the rolling hills out the window. What were their ridiculous names again? Artemis—Arte and Hecate? Ludicrous. At least she hadn't brought the damned bird. That thing had almost clawed his head.

And the dog had watered his shoe. Thank goodness most of his extensive wardrobe was unscathed. For now. He shuddered.

At the moment though, the situation was almost safe. Too bad she wore a travelling cloak. The flesh to fabric ratio was out of proportion.

Also, there was the matter of Rose, the maid. Though silent, the glint in her eye conveyed she'd be of no assistance, at least not to him.

* * *

He drummed his fingers on his knee. What was the proper tack with his faux fiancée?

"The Middletons need connections you can't give them, more than they need money." He made his voice patient, emulating his mother, not his father.

"Those social constructions aren't as important anymore. I mean, President Jackson was an abomination, but no one could say he didn't transcend. Men voted for him, and he was an uneducated incompetent. I'm better than that. I'd never get rid of the Bank of the United

States. Also, isn't what Hugo wants enough to make them relent? My father'd never do that to me."

"Your father is—" Jay pursed his lips, searching for the right word. His mind wandered a little when she said the word "bank." If only there was a way to suggest words to ban in social situations without losing an appendage to a primate.

And how to explain her father? The man was...unusual. Ursula detailed the entire scheme to him and yet Nunes agreed—agreed to permit his daughter to either marry Hugo Middleton or make a fool of herself trying.

Certain things have to be learned, even by the cleverest.

Whatever Nunes meant by that. Some sort of game was afoot, though what its parameters were was anyone's guess.

The whole meeting with the man had been odd. A private chat with a young lady's father was never Jay's ideal activity. Judah Nunes had sat like a king on his throne, sipping brandy from a golden glass without offering Jay a drop.

And staying with the family in Philadelphia, engaged but not married? The man just offered the arrangement—excellent for the plot, but completely improper. No parents he knew would permit such a configuration. Was it some sort of Jewish norm?

Jay frowned as he caught a whiff of his shoe. His faux father-in-law's smirk as the butler towed him off flashed

in his mind. The elastic-gusset Chelsea boots were his favorite. He might be beyond redemption, but his innocent wardrobe shouldn't have to pay his penance.

Fine. If this is what Ursula's father thought appropriate, far be it from him to tell the man otherwise. Nunes could fight the gossip himself.

Jay turned back to Ursula. Why was he being so delicate? She could handle the truth.

She tightened her folded arms and tapped her toe—at him, at his careful, considerate silence.

He resisted an impolite gesture. She was still a lady, after all. Sort of.

“Your relationship with your father is unique. He serves you, not the other way around. I'm sure there's some reason why, but that's not the way it's usually done, especially not with sons, firstborn sons, sons with responsibilities to their families.”

Can you not take anything seriously, Jay? Do you care about anything besides your own pleasure? How old had he been when his father first asked those questions? Seven?

“Really?” She cocked her head. “So how do your trips to New Orleans and New York comport? Why were you permitted to fail out of multiple schools while Hugo has to give up everything that he wants?”

New Orleans. She had to mention that city, the place he'd left his soul if he ever had one. He gritted his teeth. “I wasn't ‘permitted to fail out of multiple schools.’ My

parents weren't pleased. We just had enough capital that it wasn't a problem. Life isn't fair, Ursula."

Why did she needle so much? She had no idea who he was or what his life was like. She had no responsibilities except to marry someone who wasn't a complete imbecile and wouldn't destroy one of the fastest growing banking empires in the world. More, she'd never failed anyone.

His skin itched. Jay dug his nails into his palms so he didn't scratch. Despite two years of going without, the moment he reached Delaware the sensation returned. He could smell it too, even if his father had burned every trace of the stuff in the Truitt properties, and, apparently, found everything he'd hidden. The temptation inflamed his senses. Despite his family's precautions, he could obtain the substance his body craved. He still had sources. He'd have already gone to them if he hadn't been so distracted by Ursula.

"Says the man who always wins in that equation." She pouted and pressed her face to the window, oblivious to his discomfort.

The monkey shot him another glare before it nuzzled her cheek.

He gripped at his trousers. "Your life will be satisfying, Ursula, even if you don't marry Hugo Middleton. You'll find someone. I'm sure someone of your own kind—"

Her head whipped around. "My own kind?" Her voice rose an octave.

Jay grimaced. Not exactly what he intended. What had

gotten into him today? People were his strong suit, but with Ursula, she rubbed off on him instead of the other way around. Disastrous. The course needed to be righted and fast.

“I beg your pardon, Ursula.” He forced himself to pause, breathe, think. “I meant that wouldn’t your father be happier if you married someone more like him?”

“My father is special. But if you meant another Jew, possibly.”

She fingered a golden tassel on one of the seat cushions. “I don’t really know. My parents were never really part of the community. We pray in the morning, light candles, don’t eat pork, fast on certain days, but for us it’s more a lack of engaging in activities that people who *aren’t* Jews do.”

No pork? How tragic. Jay licked his lips in honor of his morning ham.

“We limited our interactions with the community in Philadelphia, though my uncle is very involved. It all had something to do with my mother not getting along with my father’s family. They didn’t like her or she didn’t like them.” She frowned. “No one ever told me the whole story.”

A secret. Jay stifled a gasp. “And you never asked?”

He would’ve inquired until his father sent him to bed without supper, after which he would’ve broken into every office the man owned searching for the truth. Considering how much she’d recalled about him, a mere

acquaintance who'd left Delaware when she was still a child, how could she not have studied and analyzed every detail of her parents' lives?

There was a catch again in Ursula's voice. "My mother was always ill and when she was gone it didn't really matter any longer."

Didn't it? How could Ursula be so uncurious about her own family—her own life? Though, if her mother was sick, maybe she was preoccupied. "How long ago did she die?"

"Seven years." Ursula stroked the cat, her hand running over the creature's ears. Her swallow was visible. "A cancer."

"I'm sorry." The reply was automatic, but true. Whatever troubles he had with his own parents, at least they both were present.

He picked his brain for memories of Ursula's mother. A vague image of a woman with ash-colored curls popped into his head. He'd been home, in between schools, and overheard a conversation between his aunts regarding the late Mrs. Nunes, and not a complimentary one, as it centered on the woman's rather prominent bosom. Well, Ursula had inherited one feature from her.

Where did Ursula get the blonde hair though? Her father was so dark. She possessed his mannerisms, that was certain—particularly the obnoxious ones.

As if she could hear his thoughts, Ursula waved a hand at him. "It's fine. I feel terrible for my father though. He's

all alone.”

Jay pictured Nunes’ smirk at his predicament and, widower or not, he couldn’t quite muster the requisite sympathy for the man to consider him “poor.”

“You desire to give him grandchildren?” Was pleasing him why Ursula was so bent on marriage to Hugo?

“Perhaps. I don’t know. I’m not sure what will improve his life or mine. I’m twenty-one so I suppose I only have so much time.”

Her cloak slipped down her shoulders, rewarding him with a view at last.

What sort of woman already talked like a jaded widow this early in the season? She was a mystery.

“How romantic. Hugo must be so flattered,” he said.

“I adore Hugo. He’s the only person in Delaware, other than my parents, who never mocked me. When we were little, I was at one of his cousins’ for tea and I was in the garden crying because a few of the other girls, well—” Ursula swallowed again. “My mother dressed me. I always thought her beautiful, though looking back on it, she never was quite in fashion.”

Ursula wrinkled her brow. “I also might have fibbed a little so to not look foolish and really, how was I supposed to know that a kaleidoscope wasn’t a medical device and...”

Oh, why did she have to do that? Why did she have to be human too?

“Lot of tears?” he asked.

“Only after I screamed at them, called them a whole host of improper names that gentiles are particular about, and, perhaps, threw a chafing dish.”

Ursula smiled, though her eyes glimmered a bit too bright. “But Hugo wandered into the garden and sat with me and we talked. He read the same books I read. We were both thrilled by Fourier’s *Analyse des equations determines*, and I’m not sure, after that we found excuses to sit with each other and just read or discuss topics that matter.”

And that was the thing of it, wasn’t it? They were friends. That explained so much. An odd friendship, but Hugo was so meek, studious, and quiet that people often forgot he existed. Ursula was probably one of the only people who even noticed him.

Jay frowned. Before he could say anything more Ursula released a loud sigh. She fished a leather-bound volume out of her valise and flipped through the pages, twisting her mouth to the side again and tugging at a curl.

Odd, but endearing.

Why did those two words always pop into his head when he watched her? She wound the curl harder as she became more and more engrossed. The cat gave him a warning hiss. He bared his teeth back at her. Ridiculous beast. Ursula didn’t even notice. Now he was curious.

“What are you reading?” he asked.

She paused but didn’t meet his eye. “Just the books for one of the companies Nunes invested in. We only have a

small stake, but I like to personally verify the summaries we receive. We get sent copies of the books every three months.”

She gestured as she explained, knocking the window so the monkey shuddered. Her voice grew in volume and enthusiasm though she still didn’t lift her head. Was it so interesting she wouldn’t even look at him? What was the matter with her?

“Don’t you have a bookkeeper?” he asked.

“He reviews it first. I study it second.” She waved a hand, dismissing him. She was serious. A balance sheet, with numbers, beat him, Jay Truitt, for her attention.

Jay caught the maid’s eye. Her lips pressed together as if to hold in laughter. He returned his gaze to the top of Ursula’s head.

“Do you find mistakes?”

“Sometimes.” She ran her pointer finger over each line. “Those usually are found in the books of the charities we support. Those bookkeepers aren’t well paid, despite my suggestions.”

His lip curled at the image of her arguing with bored society ladies over what to pay charitable staff. That must go well.

She didn’t wait for a verbal response. “It’s more to know if we want to increase our investment or cut our losses. If there are suggestions to be made, I write them down for my father and he writes to the companies. Sometimes they take the suggestions, sometimes they

don't, but I watch. The bank is the primary source of income, but I'd like to carve out alternative sources, make the investment wing of Nunes really thrive."

The more Ursula spoke, the faster and more animated her voice grew. Her head, though, remained down, her eyes on the drab white pages in her lap, all her pretty features obscured.

"Do you ever make eye contact when you speak?" He almost covered his mouth. Why was her bluntness so contagious?

She lifted her chin and bright blue eyes glistened. Topaz, no sapphire, no something more brilliant nature hadn't yet discovered. Jay's breath hitched. All that passion. She was breathtaking.

"I'm not skilled at eye contact. Besides, I'm concentrating." Down went her head again, the light hidden once more.

"Fair enough. I suppose I should've brought some reading material," he said.

"Oh, you know how?"

His mouth flew open. What had he done to deserve the immediate insult? And more, how did Ursula, with all her social ineptitude, know exactly where to land her blow?

I'd like an explanation of these marks, Jay. Are you stupid, lazy, or plain disrespectful?

Dizzy, Jay willed down the echoes of his father.

"Have I offended you?" He sought mildness, but his tone crept into a hostile classification. He clasped his

hands. Natural emotional matching, that's all.

Ursula paused. Her brow knitted and her mouth pursed, twisted to the side in a strange but adorable expression.

“No, not at all, at least not today, well at least not a great deal. The other night, you treated me like I was desperate —”

Jay raised an eyebrow.

The cat on her lap stiffened and she stroked the beast's head. “I could've found a plan myself. You're making matters easier, but I would've succeeded on my own. You and I are just different. You don't offend me, but I just can't imagine either of us ever speaking to each other if it wasn't for this plot.”

She was a puzzlement. How to respond? Everything she said was true or should be true, but the recitation, in that calm, assured tone mangled something deep inside his gut.

They hit another bump, and his head connected with the velvet-lined ceiling again. If not for the showy fabric, he'd have passed out. Flamboyance had its perks.

Jay winced through all the discomfort. “That's fair. Though, I suppose, we're going to be forced to spend quite a bit of time together these next few weeks, and since we've agreed on no physical enjoyment, I'd at least hoped we could try for some decent conversation.”

A wry smile spread over her face at the mention of carnality.

“I'm not sure what we shall converse about, Mr. Truitt,

at least for an extended period of time, but speaking with you isn't a chore. You may not be an intellectual man, but you're amusing, almost adroit in your dialogue." She nodded and her smile turned warm because...mercy, that was a compliment. A generous one too—at least in her mind.

Good lord.

Jay threw his head back and did the only thing he could do. He laughed. He laughed so hard Hecate screeched, and Artemis hissed, but he paid them no heed. He just couldn't stop.

Tears swarmed in his eyes. He should check himself back into the asylum, it would be easier. He was about to make a similar quip, without the confession, when another sound surprised him. Ursula had joined him, hers a loud, full giggle, and damned if that wasn't the best sound he'd ever heard. He closed his eyes.

Wonders never did cease.

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Prologue

Virginia City, Nevada
Autumn 1870

"Portia! Wake up!"

Twelve-year-old Portia Carmichael slowly awakened to her Aunt Eddy roughly shaking her shoulder. "I need you to get dressed! Quickly!"

Portia sat up and through groggy eyes saw that it was still dark. Aunt Eddy was now waking Portia's ten-year-old sister, Regan.

"Come on, girls! We have to leave the house!"

Portia heard what sounded like shouting off in the distance outside. "What's happening?"

"I'll explain later. Put your shoes on!"

There was a fear in her aunt's voice she'd never heard before and that alone made Portia

throw off her nightgown and pull on the shirt and denims she'd left on the chair before going to bed.

Uncle Rhine rushed in. The moonlight streaming in through the windows showed the tense set of his ivory face and the rifle in his hand. "They're almost here!"

The shouting sounded closer, echoing like rumbling thunder.

Eddy was still helping the half-asleep Regan into her clothes. Once that was accomplished, Eddy took Portia and Regan by the hand. "We have to run!"

They flew down the stairs behind Uncle Rhine and out into the night. A wagon with two horses waited. Jim Dade, Uncle Rhine's business partner, held the reins. Mounted on horseback beside it was Kent Randolph, Uncle Rhine's eighteen-year-old bartender.

"Eddy, you and the girls get in and lie down!" Rhine ordered. "Kent, get to a safe place!"

Kent rode away, and Portia and Regan scrambled into the bed of the wagon. Aunt Eddy followed and gathered them tightly to her side. Rhine tossed a tarp over them. Portia felt the wagon dip as he took the seat beside his friend. "Go, Jim!"

The wagon took flight and because she wanted

to know what this all meant, Portia rose up and looked back. A crowd of men carrying torches surrounded the house. Windows were broken and the interior began glowing.

A male voice yelled. "They're getting away!"

Bullets hit the wagon and Eddy snatched Portia down. Only when the horses had put ample distance between themselves and the scene did Eddy raise the tarp. Portia and Regan watched the scene with wide eyes. Their home was fully engulfed. Flames shot out of the roof. Stunned, Portia asked, "Why did they do this?"

It took Eddy so long to answer, Portia didn't think she would respond. "They're angry because Uncle Rhine pretended to be White."

Icy fear grabbed her. "Will they follow us? Will they lynch Uncle Rhine?" Portia read the newspapers. Men of the race were being lynched daily.

"We're far enough away that I don't think they'll follow us."

"Are we ever going to go back?" Regan asked.

Eddy replied grimly, "No, we're going forward."

Portia wanted to ask if she was sure the mob wouldn't come after them, and where the wagon was going, but her aunt said, "Lie down. Try to sleep. We've a long journey ahead."

Still afraid, Portia settled in next to her little

sister and tried to be as brave as she knew Aunt Eddy needed them to be, but every time she closed her eyes, she saw the house afire, heard the roar of the angry mob, and thought about Uncle Rhine hanging from the end of a rope.



Chapter One

*Santa Catalina Mountains,
Arizona Territory
Spring 1885*

"I wonder how it feels to be that much in love."

In response to the question, Portia Carmichael glanced up from the ledger she was working on to look over at her sister, Regan, standing at the window. "I've no idea," she replied as she refocused on the column of numbers she was adding. Regan was gazing cow-eyed out at what Portia assumed were their aunt Eddy and uncle Rhine Fontaine. The sisters were in the business office of the Fontaine Hotel and although the twenty-five-year-old Regan longed for love and children, Portia, two years older, wanted neither. Being the manager of the family's successful hotel was more than enough to make Portia's life complete.

"To have someone look at you that way and know you are their entire world—oh my."

"Please don't swoon, or at least do it elsewhere," Portia teased. She didn't have to look up to know Regan responded with a shake of her head that held equal parts amusement and pity.

"Numbers won't keep you warm at night, sister mine."

"That's what quilts are for."

"One of these days, Cupid's going to hit you with an arrow right between the eyes. I just hope I'm around to see it."

Smiling, Portia ignored the prediction only to hear Regan gush, "Oh my, they're sharing a kiss."

Portia sighed audibly. "Why don't you step away from the window and let them have their privacy."

"They're having a picnic by the gazebo. If they wanted privacy they'd be in their suite behind closed doors."

She supposed Regan was right. The couple's love was legendary and they didn't keep their mutual affection a secret. At any moment of the day one could round a corner and find them stealing a kiss, holding hands as if still courting, or drowning in each other's eyes. Not that Portia found their affection unseemly; she was glad they were in love and that it extended to their nieces.

Regan vowed, "When I find someone to marry I want that type of love."

Their mother, Corinne, had been in love, and when her intended demanded she cast her daughters aside because they weren't his progeny, Corinne put the then twelve-year-old Portia and ten-year-old Regan on a train to their aunt Eddy in Virginia City and never looked back. In the fifteen years since, they'd not heard a word. Portia wanted no part of something that could cause such irreparable harm. She planned to remain unmarried and immerse herself in work. Work didn't break hearts.

"Don't you want to marry, Portia?"

"Not particularly, but if I do, he'll have to be an exceptional fellow who loves me for my intelligence and business acumen, not for how I perform on my knees. I'm not Mama."

Regan turned from the window, her voice thoughtful. "Do you ever wonder where she is?"

"Sometimes." Portia would never admit how much her heart still ached from being abandoned so callously or how often she thought about her.

"Do you think she wonders about us?"

"I don't know."

Corinne had been a whore, and the hardship of their life with her still held a pain they rarely discussed. Thanks to Aunt Eddy and Uncle Rhine they'd survived though and were still together.

Regan's attention returned to the scene outside the window. "I would love to be as happy as they are."

"I added this column wrong," Portia muttered, and began searching for her mistake. She blamed the error on being distracted by her sister's chatter.

"Thoughts of being in love can do that."

"No, your going on and on about love can do that," she replied, humor in her voice.

"Don't you want a man you can sneak off into a corner with and who will kiss you so passionately you don't care if the whole territory is watching?"

Portia shook her head with amusement. Regan changed beaus as frequently as some women changed their gloves but never stayed with any of them very long. "You're so shameless."

"I know, but somewhere there's a man who'll appreciate that part of me. I have no intentions of relying on quilts to keep me warm at night and neither should you, sister."

"Don't you have mail to deliver or something?" In addition to his vast business holdings, their uncle Rhine owned the government mail contract, and the unconventional Regan had talked him into letting her take charge of delivery. Twice a week she and her mule, Josephine, drove the five miles to Tucson to see to its distribution. As far as Portia knew there'd been no complaints about

Regan's race or gender; folks just wanted their mail.

"Not until the day after tomorrow, which you'd remember if you weren't so focused on your duties."

"I take my position very seriously."

"I know."

The tone made Portia look up.

Regan said sincerely, "I don't claim to know a lot about life but there has to be more to it than work. When was the last time you spent the day sitting in the meadow listening to bird songs or riding out to the canyon to take in the waterfalls?"

"I don't have time for that, Regan. A lot goes into keeping this hotel running. There's staff to manage and menus to approve, guests to oversee . . ."

"Which is why you have a staff. This place won't fall to pieces if you left your desk every now and again."

"You sound like Aunt Eddy."

"Good. She loves you, too, and we worry about you."

"No need. I'm fine."

Regan showed her exasperation and moved away from the window. "Am I to assume you don't need my help for the anniversary dinner this evening?"

"You're correct. Everything is in order." They'd be celebrating their aunt and uncle's fifteen years of marriage in the hotel's main ballroom.

"Okay. Then I'm going over to Old Man Blanchard's. He has a package for me to take to his daughter in Tucson."

"Okay." Mr. Blanchard lived on a ranch a short distance west of the hotel. "Make sure he's coming tonight. Aunt Eddy will be disappointed if he chooses to stay home and play checkers with Farley and Buck." Farley and Buck were his ranch hands.

"Will do," Regan promised, and she left the office.

Sitting alone, Portia knew her sister's gentle chastisement about the long hours she put in at her desk came from her heart, but there were those who thought the Fontaines mad for placing their niece in charge of their hotel—thoughts that never would have risen had Portia been a *nephew*. She wanted to prove she was as capable of the job as any man and so kept her nose to the grindstone. They were now living in the Arizona Territory in a beautiful, temperate area at the base of the Catalina Mountains a few miles north and east of the town of Tucson. Rhine and Eddy built the hotel from the ground up in '73 upon a large open swath of land originally owned by a mine

president. When the mine went dry, his funds did, too, and her uncle Rhine and aunt Eddy were able to buy it and the hundreds of acres of open range surrounding it from the bank for a pittance. Over the years, the Fontaine Hotel became famous for its fine food and luxurious accommodations. Lately it also served as magnet for well-to-do Europeans and Easterners wanting a taste of the Wild West; a new phenomenon Uncle Rhine called Dude Ranch Fever. Ranchers from the Rockies to the Mexican border were opening their doors to wealthy guests who wanted to hunt, fish, and ride the open ranges to take in the meadows, lakes, and canyon waterfalls. Some came strictly to view the myriad species of birds while others wanted to tour old silver mines or pretend to pan for gold. The Fontaine Hotel, in partnership with Mr. Blanchard's ranch, also offered guests the opportunity to watch cattle being branded, take roping lessons, and in the evening gather around a roaring campfire to eat and listen to Buck and Farley tell exaggerated stories of ghost towns, deadly outlaws, and dangerous Indians. The guests could then ride back to the hotel for the night or remain at the Blanchard place to sleep in tents or on bedrolls under the stars. It was a lucrative trade for both establishments, so much so that it was necessary for guests to make reservations a year in advance if they wanted to be

accommodated. Coordinating all the details took a clear head and a steady hand, and with so much to do, there was no time for Portia to take leisurely trips to view waterfalls.

A soft knock on the open door broke her reverie and she looked up to see her aunt Eddy standing on the threshold. Like her nieces, Eddy Carmichael Fontaine was a dark-skinned, dark-eyed beauty and she wore her forty-plus years well.

Portia asked, "So are you ready for your grand affair?"

"I suppose. You know how much I dislike all this fuss. I would've been content to celebrate with a nice quiet supper, maybe a few musicians and a cake, but your uncle loves fanfare."

"So you tolerate it."

"Barely, but only because I love him so much."

"Regan was spying on you two in the gazebo. Says she wants the kind of love you and Uncle Rhine share."

"That's not a bad goal. Although it took me a while to see it."

Portia knew that when Aunt Eddy and Uncle Rhine first met, he'd still been passing as a White man. Eddy hadn't wanted to fall in love with him because of the societal dangers tied to such unions. "But you did."

"Yes, and sometimes, like with this anniversary

business, I have to remind myself of that because only for him would I endure the torture of being fitted for a new gown."

Portia never failed to be amused by her aunt's aversion to dressmakers. "You have armoires stuffed with gowns yet you always say that."

"Because it's the truth. All the pin sticks, measurements, and having to stand still." She waved a hand dismissively. "A woman should be able to go into a dress shop, find something to her liking and leave with it."

"You can." Ready-to-wear gowns were becoming quite popular.

"But they all seem to be made for someone taller and they're never the right color. It's as maddening as the fittings." She sighed with exasperation and asked, "Is everything ready for the dinner tonight?"

"Yes, so no harassing the staff about what's being done or not being done." Her aunt and uncle had run the hotel as a team since its founding, but now Portia mostly held the reins. Although Eddy refused to relinquish control of the hotel's kitchen, Portia had relieved her of all duties related to the preparation of the anniversary dinner. She'd initially balked of course, then reluctantly agreed.

"Is Janie still baking the cake? Does she have enough eggs, flour?"

"Aunt Eddy," Portia chided. "Everything is being taken care of."

"But I feel so useless."

"I understand, but you aren't allowed to do anything except get gussied up and enjoy the party."

Eddy didn't like it and it showed on her face. She finally sighed audibly in surrender. "Okay, I suppose."

Portia almost felt sorry for her. Almost. Her aunt was the hardest-working woman she'd ever met and one of the reasons for the hotel's great success. Not being able to direct this event was threatening to send her around the bend. "If you want to do something, you can go over to the Wilson place and check on your centerpieces."

"I get to pick the flowers? Oh, be still my heart."

Portia laughed. "Or I could send Regan."

"Lord, no. She'd stick a bunch of saguaro on a plate and call it done. I'll go."

"Good."

There was silence for a moment as they viewed each other, and then Eddy asked, "Have I told you how proud I am of all you've grown up to be?"

Emotion filled Portia's throat. "Numerous times."

"I'm glad Corinne sent you and Regan to me."

"As are we." Had she not, both Portia and Regan would've had their virginity sold for a pittance and grown to adulthood with little knowledge

of the world beyond the walls of their mother's shack. They most certainly wouldn't have attended Oberlin to complete their education, nor would Portia have been given the opportunity to hone her bookkeeping skills at the San Francisco bank owned by Uncle Rhine's half-brother, Andrew. Portia was grateful every day for being given a home by Eddy and Rhine.

"I'll ride over and check on the flowers in a bit," her aunt said.

"Okay, and no worrying allowed."

With a roll of her eyes, Aunt Eddy departed.

By late afternoon, Portia was done with her ledgers. Realizing she'd missed lunch, she pushed her chair back from the desk and left the office for the kitchen. The hotel was spread out over five, white adobe, one-story buildings with red tiled roofs. One housed staff and the business offices. The others held guest rooms, the family quarters, dining spaces, and kitchens. All the buildings were connected by covered breezeways. As she stepped out into the sunshine to walk to the kitchen she was brought up short by the unexpected sight of a brown-skinned cowboy seated on the broad back of a beautiful blue roan stallion. She couldn't make out the man's features beneath the black felt hat, so shading her eyes against the bright sunlight, she asked, "May I help you?"

He pushed back the hat. "Is this the Fontaine place?"

"It is."

For a moment he didn't say anything else, simply stared down at her from his perch before fluidly dismounting to stand facing her. "Hello, Duchess."

Portia froze. She scanned the unshaven features, trying to place him. *Duchess*? Only one person had ever called her that. Suddenly recognition solved the mystery. "Kent Randolph?"

He nodded and a glint of amusement lit his eyes. "How've you been?"

She found herself slightly mesmerized by his handsome face and teasing gaze. "I've been well. You?"

"Can't complain. Good seeing you again."

"Same here." When she first came to live with Rhine and Eddy in Virginia City, she'd been twelve years old. He been six years older and the bartender at Rhine's saloon. She hadn't paid him much attention, except when he called her *Duchess*, which annoyed her to no end. The passage of fifteen years had turned him into a man taller than she by at least a foot and with shoulders wide enough to block the sun. Her eyes strayed over the worn gun belt strapped around his waist and the butt of the Colt it held. Snug

denims on muscular legs were covered with trail dust as were his boots, single-breasted gray shirt, and black leather vest. She heard he'd gone back East to medical school. With such rugged good looks, he certainly didn't resemble any doctor she'd ever met.

"You've grown up." His soft tone grabbed her attention and touched her in a way that made her feel warm, female.

She blinked. "Um, yes."

"Is your uncle here?"

Realizing she was staring, she shook herself free of whatever his eyes were doing to befuddle her so totally. "Yes. He's inside. This way, please."

She waited while he tied the roan to the post and reached for his saddlebag. Tossing it easily over his shoulder, they set out, his heeled boots echoing against the wooden walk. She got the feeling that he was eyeing the sway of her blue skirt, but she was so overwhelmed by the air of maleness he exuded, she kept walking and tried to ignore his effects on her usually unflappable self.

Her uncle's office was in the same building that housed her own, so she led Kent back to the breezeway and past the giant oaks and flowers enhancing the landscaping.

"Nice place you have here," he remarked as he looked around.

"Thank you. We like it."

"When the man in Tucson gave me directions to the hotel, I expected something more like the hotels back East or in Virginia City, not a spread like this. Looks more like a ranch."

They approached the door. He reached around her to open it. His arm gently grazed her shoulder and Portia jumped nervously.

"Sorry. Not trying to scare you," he said apologetically. "Just wanted to get the door for you."

"Thank you," she said, looking up into his face. She wondered if he remembered how uneasy and fearful she'd been around men when she and her sister first came to Virginia City. Because of Corinne's way of life, Portia had imagined herself fair game to any man in a pair of trousers, and as a result she'd been as afraid as a tiny mouse in a world filled with large feral cats.

He held the door aside. "After you."

She inclined her head and entered.

The coolness of the interior's air always offered relief from the blazing Arizona heat. "My uncle's office is this way."

She led him past the large sitting room filled with elegant dark wood furniture. The white adobe walls were adorned with framed brightly hued paintings and plants stood in large colorful floor pots.

"Feels like Mexico," he said.

"We're not that far from the border." She stopped at her uncle's closed door and knocked.

He called, "Come on in."

Kent entered behind her and when Rhine, who was seated behind a big fancy desk, saw him, his jaw dropped and he slowly got to his feet. "Where in the hell did you find him?" There was a smile of wonder on his face.

"Outside on a horse," she said with a grin. "I'll leave you two to your visit."

Kent turned to her and said in the same soft tone he'd used earlier, "Thanks, Duchess."

"You're welcome." Forcing herself to break his captivating gaze, she turned and exited.



Chapter Two

"Fifteen years is a long time."

Seated in one of the leather chairs in Rhine's office with a tumbler of fine scotch in his hand, Kent thought about all he'd seen and done since they'd parted ways in Virginia City. "Yes it is."

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

He smiled ruefully and sighed. "The long and short of it is, I bedded the wrong man's wife and spent three years in a Mexican prison for it."

Rhine showed his shock.

Kent explained. "He was a don. Pretty powerful, too. After he caught me in his bed, he convinced the local police I was responsible for a series of robberies in the area. Even supplied witnesses who swore they'd seen me at the scene. I was young, stupid, and full of myself. Not anymore." He slowly swirled the liquor in his glass.

Memories rose of the hell he'd lived through and he turned his mind away.

"Does Doc know?"

He thought about his father, Oliver. "He was so upset about my not finishing medical school, I didn't have the heart to write while I was in prison, not that I had access to stationery, but once I was released, I did send him a letter detailing my sins. We've corresponded on and off since and in one of his letters he mentioned you and Eddy were here in Arizona Territory."

"What have you been doing since your release?"

"Went to San Francisco first and signed on with a merchant shipping company and sailed the world. Afterwards, went to work at a ranch up near Sacramento. Learned everything I needed to know about horse wrangling. Saved my money. Would like to start my own operation someday." And since then he'd drifted from California to Wyoming and places in between, hiring himself out as a ranch hand, riding herd on cattle drives, and taking any other work he could find.

"And now?"

"Hoping you can give me a job."

"How long do you plan on being around?"

"As long as you'll have me." He met Rhine's eyes and added truthfully. "Looking to settle down."

"We already have a bartender but we can find something for you, I'm sure."

"Whatever you have will be fine."

Rhine raised his glass. "Then welcome back."

"Thanks."

Fifteen years ago, after the mob destroyed Rhine's saloon and Eddy Fontaine's newly built diner, a younger and cockier version of Kent enrolled in Howard Medical School. Being a doctor was the last thing he wanted—all he ever wanted to do was be a rancher—but he and his physician father had locked horns for years over his future, so to get Oliver off his back, Kent moved to Washington. He'd hated everything about it from the weather to the classes to the sneering condescending attitudes of the East Coast scions of the representative class. He'd enjoyed the young women though and spent an inordinate amount of time studying female anatomy, but in the end, not even that had been enough, so he'd left, much to his father's fury.

In response to a soft knock on the closed door, Rhine called, "Come in."

His wife, Eddy, entered. "Kenton! Portia said you were here." She threw her arms wide and a smiling Kent hugged her tight.

"So good to see you!" she gushed. "My goodness! Where have you been all these years? Did you fall off the face of the earth?"

"In a way. Rhine can explain."

She studied him, studied her husband's poker face, and said, "Okay. Are you staying?"

"I am if Rhine can find me a job."

Her joyful expression filled Kent's heart. He'd missed having them in his world. Rhine had been the older brother he'd always wanted and Eddy, the sister.

"Good. You could use a bath."

He chuckled. She'd always been frank.

Rhine asked her, "Should I put him in our wing?"

She nodded and said sincerely, "Yes, of course. It's wonderful having you here, Kent. Rhine will get you settled in and I'll see you at dinner—which is a party to celebrate our fifteenth anniversary."

He paused. "I don't own any fancy clothes."

"None needed."

He looked to Rhine for verification before asking, "Are you sure?"

"I am."

"Okay. Thanks, Eddy."

She left them and Kent said to Rhine, "Need to get my horse settled in first."

"Okay, stables are out back. Come on, I'll show you."

So Kent followed Rhine outside. On the way back to where he'd left his mount tied, they chatted about old times and old friends. "Is Jim Dade here, too?" Kent asked.

Rhine shook his head. "No. Jim's in upstate New York now. Opened a restaurant there. Eddy and I visited him last summer. He and his place are doing well."

James Dade had been in charge of the kitchen at Rhine's place in Virginia City and Rhine had looked upon him as an older brother, too. He'd hoped to find Jim still with Rhine and now the prospect of maybe never seeing him again was saddening.

When they reached his mount, Rhine assessed the big stallion. "You don't see many blue roans much anymore."

Kent untied the reins and gave the strong neck an affectionate pat. "No. Have had him for a while now. Descended from Indian stock. Found him in a herd up in Montana. Broke him myself. Seems content to let me ride him, but I get the feeling that one day I'm going to wake up and find he's lit out for Montana again." The horse eyed him with the superior stare Kent had grown accustomed to as if acknowledging the accuracy of his assessment.

"Does he have a name?"

Kent smiled, "Blue, of course."

Rhine chuckled and they headed to the stable.

After getting Blue settled into the fenced-in paddock and stowing the saddle in the tack room, Rhine told Kent, "Our head groom is an old

cowboy named Cal Grissom. He's off visiting his sister but will be back in a few days. You'll like him."

Kent saw Blue eyeing a beautiful Appaloosa mare. "That's a good-looking paint."

"Her name's Arizona. She belongs to Portia."

Kent watched Blue walking around the mare.

Rhine said, "I think Blue might be interested."

"I think you might be right."

Leaving the horses to get further acquainted, the two old friends resumed their walk to a breezeway that led to an adobe building with a red tiled roof that was set off by itself at the back of the sprawling property.

"Did you recognize Portia all grown-up?" Rhine asked as they entered.

"Took me a second or two, but I did." He didn't remember seeing a ring on Portia's finger. "Beaus coming out of her ears, I imagine."

Rhine chuckled, "Yes, but they may as well be fence posts for all the attention she gives them. She keeps saying she isn't interested in getting married. Her sister is just the opposite, though. Left to her own devices, Regan would have men dueling in the streets for her affections."

Kent found the information about Portia interesting. As a young girl she'd been stiff-backed and distant, and he'd given her the name Duchess just

to tease her. But why didn't she want to marry? Did she think herself too good for the average male, or was she one of those so called modern women who thought men were as useful as a one-legged stool? Regan on the other hand had been quite the pistol at age ten—open and gregarious. In fact, both girls had been handfuls at first: sassing the teacher, fighting at school, being suspended at school. No one knew how the other children learned their mother was a whore but the girls were berated and teased mercilessly—thus the fighting. And when some of the more sanctimonious parents decided they didn't want the girls around their children, Eddy had taken them out of school and hired a tutor to teach them at home.

And now, they were all grown-up. Although he had yet to see Regan, he assumed she was as much an ebony beauty as her sister and aunt. Kent followed Rhine past a nicely furnished sitting room. "This is the family's quarters. The kitchen and dining room are through that alcove. Eddy does the cooking. She says the staff have enough to do without waiting on us, too."

Rhine led him into a hallway and stopped in front of a closed door. "We'll put you in here. The girls' rooms are through that door down there, and Eddy and I are in the suite behind that one."

The doors he referenced were at opposite ends of the hallway. "These three rooms in between are reserved for family guests, and since you are family . . ."

Rhine turned the knob and led him into a space that was large and airy. The bed looked big enough for his six-foot-three-inch frame to sleep in comfortably. There were thin drapes fluttering in the soft breeze from the open windows and a set of French doors that opened to the outside.

"I have to be frank," Rhine stated, his voice bringing his attention back. "Even with the prison sentence I'm assuming you're still no monk."

He hid his grin.

"If you think to add my girls to the notches on your bedpost, think again. I will geld you, Kent."

The hidden grin died. "Understood."

"Wanted to make that clear."

And then as if he hadn't just threatened to turn him into a eunuch, Rhine said, "Bath is through that door and there's inside plumbing. Feel free to walk around the place to get your bearings if you have a mind to before dinner. And if you need anything, press that button on the wall. It rings in the housekeeping office."

Kent glanced over at the small gold button and nodded. The place was even more modern than he'd first thought.

"Are you hungry?"

"As a bear."

"Okay. I'll have one of the staff bring you a tray."

"Thanks, Rhine."

Rhine moved to the door. "Welcome back, Kent. Glad to have you with us again."

Kent's heart swelled with deeply felt emotion. "Good being with you again, old man."

Rhine grinned. "I'll see you later."

After his departure, Kent glanced around. He hadn't had a room to himself since leaving Virginia City. It felt odd, but good, too. There were no dirt floors littered with sleeping bodies to maneuver around in order to find a spot to lie down for the night as in the prison, and no bunkhouse filled with belching snoring men like on the ranches he'd worked. He set his saddlebag at his feet and stepped into the washroom. He eyed the big claw-foot tub and smiled his delight. All this luxury was going to take some time getting used to again but he was up to the challenge.

After his bath he dressed in the only clean clothes he had, a simple shirt and a pair of trousers, and walked outside to sit on the bench he'd seen there earlier. It was still desert hot but he hoped the temperature would drop and cool the air a bit now that it was past midday. Yesterday

at this time he and Blue had been slowly making their way west from their last job on a spread in Colorado. The ride held no tub filled with hot water to soak away the weariness, no big bed to look forward to sleeping in. Just a bedroll on the ground beneath the stars. There'd certainly been no pretty girl to get reacquainted with. Which brought his thoughts to Portia. When she initially approached him outside, once he got a good look at her, he knew who she was right away, and her stunning beauty hit him like the kick of a mule. He thought he might have been struck dumb for a few moments because all he could do was stare at her gorgeous ebony face, the alluring, black feline eyes and the full sultry mouth. She was definitely all grown-up. With her hair pulled back and wearing a high necked blouse, she'd looked very prim and proper, even if the sway of her skirt belied that. However, the way she'd jumped when he accidentally brushed her arm gave him pause and brought back memories of how wary and fearful she'd been of men when she and her sister first came to live with Rhine and Eddy in Virginia City. He'd had no idea what she'd seen or experienced with her mother that made her so leery but she would visibly tense whenever a man came near, wouldn't hold lengthy conversations with him, Rhine, or Jim, and if any of them

were in a room with her, she'd either abruptly leave or stand with a chair or sofa in front of her as if having a barrier made her feel more secure. Granted he hadn't given her problem more than a cursory thought back then, after all she'd been a youngster in his eyes and he was more intent on serving drinks and finding a willing woman to bed. He did notice that as time went by, she seemed to become more comfortable. So, could remnants of that fear be why she'd been so skittish when he brushed her arm and why she didn't want to marry? The realization that that might be the answer made him ashamed of his earlier judgmental conclusions. If Rhine was able to find him a job at the hotel, he'd be spending more time with Portia, so he needed to be the perfect gentleman and not give her a reason to feel threatened in any way.

Portia searched through her armoire for a suitable gown to wear to the evening's anniversary celebration. There'd be a large buffet, music, and drinks, and she'd be expected to wear something more stylish than her usual serviceable skirt and blouse. She took down the emerald green dress she'd gotten in San Francisco last year but thought the neckline might be too bold. Growing up in Denver her clothing had been hand-me-downs

from churches and local benevolent societies and they'd always been threadbare, too large, or too small. That she would one day own more dresses than her arms could hold and shoes to match hadn't even been a dream in those days because it would have been too far-fetched. She paused, remembering the summer they'd received no donations and she and Regan were forced to wear the stitched together flour sacks their mother, Corinne, had somehow managed to obtain. They'd been barefoot that entire summer as well. Wondering if she'd ever rid herself of those tragic years, she pushed aside the haunting memories and refocused her attention on the emerald gown.

"You should wear that," Regan said behind her.

"No, I don't think so." She hung it back up in the armoire.

"Why not?" she asked, coming in and closing the door that connected their rooms. "You'd look beautiful."

"It's more suitable for the opera, not a dinner."

"How about that rose-colored one?"

Portia took it down and considered it. It was a lovely gown. The neckline was modest, the bodice fitted, and there were small satin roses of a darker hue along the hem of the flowing skirt. The short wispy cap sleeves would leave most of her arms bare but that wouldn't be bothersome.

"Have you heard that Kent Randolph is here?"

Regan asked, pausing to check her lip paint and hair in the mirror of Portia's vanity table. "One of the maids brought him a tray earlier and said he's incredibly handsome."

"I was with him earlier," she replied, doing her best not to remember her reaction to his warm voice. "He was in need of a shave."

"Did he say what he'd been doing all this time?"

"No." And she told herself she wasn't interested, even though a small part of her was curious.

"Did he mention how long he'd be staying?"

"No, but you can quiz him as much as you care to when you see him." It never occurred to her that he might be staying. If he did, she hoped it would only be for a short time. She didn't want to have to spend her days battling her reactions to those male eyes of his, but then again, maybe she'd build up an immunity to them, the way children built up an immunity to the pox.

"He's in one of the guest rooms down the hall."

Portia almost dropped the gown. *That close!* Recovering, she replied as disinterestedly as she could manage, "I had no idea."

Regan shrugged and took one last primping look in the mirror. "I suppose because he's family of sorts. Are you choosing that gown or not?"

"No." She put it back and took down one that was dove gray and had a high neck trimmed in

lace. Something inside her deemed the gown safer.

"That one's lovely, too, but not as nice as the other."

"One of Uncle Rhine's associates may have a business question and I want their eyes on my face, not my neckline."

"You really aren't any fun, sister," Regan replied, smiling.

"You have enough fun for the both of us."

"I wish that were true."

Portia chuckled. "We need to find you a husband. Maybe you should answer one of those mail-order-bride advertisements in the newspapers."

"That's not a bad idea."

Portia was appalled that her sister appeared to be mulling it over. "I was just pulling your leg, Regan. I wasn't serious."

"But just think, somewhere there might be a man who needs a wife to help him work his homestead and have his children. He'd be strapping, strong, and handsome. We'd fall madly in love. It would be an adventure and you know how much I crave adventure."

Portia walked over and placed her palm against Regan's forehead. "I think you're coming down with something. You may need to see Doc Finney."

Regan laughed and moved the hand away.
“That would be something, wouldn’t it?”

“What, your coming down with a brain fever?”

“No, silly. My becoming a mail-order bride.”

“As I said, it was a joke. Don’t even consider doing something so harebrained.”

“Women become mail-order brides all the time and besides, everyone thought my wanting to deliver the mail was harebrained, too.”

“Some of us still do.” Portia sat on the vanity’s purple tufted bench and pulled on her stockings then anchored them with the frilly green garters Regan had talked her into buying last fall.

“Delivering the mail is another form of adventure. I enjoy getting to see new places and people.”

The sisters were very different in that respect. Portia was content to sit at her desk, poring over ledgers and contracts while Regan always wanted to see what was over the next hill. “I don’t like the idea of your being robbed or losing a wheel or being attacked by a puma or a bear, or Apaches. You’re a pest sometimes but you’re my pest and I love you.”

“I appreciate your concern and I love you, too, but I can shoot just as well as you, and besides, everyone knows I only deliver letters and packages. Uncle Rhine won’t let me carry gold or payrolls and neither will the mine owners.”

"And that's a good thing."

"I know. I may be unconventional but I'm not irrational. Carrying gold dust can be extremely dangerous."

A few months ago, there'd been a gang preying on mail carriers. They were finally apprehended and jailed but not before they'd shot a man to death for the mine payroll he'd had on his wagon. Portia brushed out her hair and pinned it low on her neck. After removing her lightweight wrapper, she stepped into her gown and pulled it up over her flowered corset and shift. Once Regan helped fasten the line of small buttons on the back, Portia slipped silver hoops in her ear lobes and assessed herself in the mirror. "I'll do, I suppose."

"You'll more than do, sister mine. We Carmichael women are beauties, and when I find my mail-order husband, I'll ask if he has a brother."

Laughing, Portia playfully pushed her towards the door. "Let's go you silly goose."

They were still laughing when they stepped into the hallway, but then fell silent when Kent Randolph stepped out of his door at the same time.

"Ladies," he said.

Regan, never shy, walked up and said, "Hello. I'm Regan Carmichael. Are you Kent?"

"I am. Pleased to see you again, Regan. It's been a long time."

"It has indeed."

Portia's eyes gave a tiny roll and when they were horizontal again, they were caught by his.

"Duchess."

"Kent."

He was wearing a blue, long sleeved, double-breasted shirt that showed his muscular lines with a pair of dark trousers. Both had seen better days but were clean and pressed. His string tie was anchored by a lovely green agate. There was a thin silver bracelet around his wrist and his black leather boots were shined. He'd shaved but enough of a shadow remained to give him the look of a handsome and probably dangerous outlaw.

The silence grew as they assessed each other. Regan raised an eyebrow but Portia ignored it.

Still focused on Portia, he said, "I was hoping somebody would come along and show me the way to dinner."

"And here we are, right on time," Regan quipped.

"Much appreciated." He extended his arm. "Shall we?"

A smiling Regan obliged.

Portia knew instinctively that touching him, no matter how innocently, would not be a good idea. Even though he stood a slight distance away his heady presence was already playing havoc with

her self-control. For some reason all she wanted to do was stare at him. *Maybe I need to see Doc Finney, too.* "We should go. We don't want to keep the others waiting."

As if aware he'd rattled her, a slight smile played at the corners of his lips. She ignored that, too, and led the way.

When they entered the ballroom it was filled with the sounds of the musicians and a large number of guests conversing and milling about holding drinks and small china plates piled with food from the large sumptuous buffet. Tonight's invitation had been extended to just about everyone the Fontaines knew. Portia spotted her aunt and uncle across the room speaking with three people she didn't know. Most of the other faces were familiar, however: neighbors like Old Man Blanchard and his ranch hands Farley and Buck, some of the local businessmen and their wives. She and Regan nodded greetings to those they knew and made their way with Kent over to Eddy and Rhine.

Upon reaching them and before Portia could apologize for their tardy arrival, Kent said, "Sorry we're late. The ladies were waiting on me."

When he flashed Portia a quick conspiratorial wink, she hid her grin. *And he's charming.*

Their uncle waved off the apology. "You're

fine." The strangers were introduced as Albert and Hattie Salt, and their adult son, Edward.

Hattie, a tall skinny woman with thinning, dyed-red hair said, "My, aren't you girls lovely."

"Thank you," they murmured, passing a look between them and waiting to make a graceful exit. Aunt Eddy, dressed in a lovely cream-colored gown, was viewing the Salts with a plastered-on smile. Portia got the impression the Salts had done or said something she'd found displeasing.

Over the musicians and noisy crowd, Rhine added, "Kent Randolph used to work for me when we lived in Virginia City."

Albert, whose large girth seemed ready to burst the buttons on the black vest beneath his suit coat, asked, "And what do you do now, Randolph?"

"This and that. Ranch work mostly."

Portia saw the son, Edward, sneer. Ranches couldn't survive without workers and there was nothing wrong with a man making his livelihood that way. Although she'd just been introduced to Edward Salt, she didn't care for him. The cold look in her aunt's eyes seemed to mirror her assessment.

"And what do you do, Edward?" Regan asked pointedly. Apparently she'd seen the sneer, too.

"I'm a teacher," he replied, his attention moving between the sisters. "Howard educated. I'm thinking of starting a school here."

If invoking Howard was meant to impress her, it didn't. Neither did his heavily pomaded hair and soft-looking hands, which appeared to have never done a hard day's work. She wondered if he rode or preferred travel by carriage. She'd put her money on the latter. "It was nice meeting you," she lied, and then she and Regan and Kent drifted away. Regan waved at a friend across the ballroom and said to Portia, "I'm going over to speak to Damaris. I'll see you two later."

After her departure, Kent asked, "Are the Salts family friends?"

Portia smiled at an acquaintance and shook her head. "Never seen them before."

"You think he rides or drives?"

She stopped. Unable to mask her amusement, she said, "You're not supposed to be able to read my mind, Kent Randolph."

"Sorry, Duchess. I'll try and remember that for the future."

The eyes were so potent she swore he had some kind of mystical power. Finally shaking herself free, she smiled. "You do that."

With her aunt and uncle still occupied with the Salts, she knew it would be rude to leave Kent alone in a gathering of strangers, so she'd have to play hostess. "Do you want to get something to eat?"

"That would be fine."

On the way to the buffet table she stopped and introduced him to a group of ranchers and then to two of the mine owners. No one sneered when he described himself as a ranch hand. In fact, rancher Howard Lane said if Kent needed work to stop by.

"Nice man," Kent said as they continued on their way.

"Most people here aren't like the Salts. I saw the way their son sneered."

"I did, too. But a man like that doesn't matter to me, unless he has a gun in his hand."

"How are you, Miss Portia?"

Startled, she turned to the smiling face of the spectacles-wearing James Cordell. He was the son of the local reverend and a bookkeeper for one of the mines in the area. "I'm doing well, James. You?"

"Just fine." He was tall and so thin he always looked as if he was wearing his father's suits.

She saw him assessing Kent so she did the introductions. "I'd like you to meet a friend of the family. Kent Randolph. James Cordell."

Kent stuck out a hand and they shared a shake.

"How long have you known the Fontaines?" James asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

"I worked for Rhine fifteen years ago in Virginia City."

"I see. Miss Portia, I came to ask if you'd like to go riding with me tomorrow."

She pasted on a smile. "I'm sorry, James. I'm going to be busy." He was really a nice fellow and she felt bad about turning down his offer, but he was hell-bent on courting her even after being gently told a few years ago that they didn't suit. He'd make some young woman a very nice husband, so she dearly wished he'd set his sights on someone else. "And next week I'll have guests to tend to, so . . ."

"I—I understand."

"Thank you, James."

He didn't move, seemingly content to stare at her.

"Um, I have to introduce Kent around. Thanks for coming to the party."

"You're welcome."

They moved off and Kent said, "He's sweet on you, I take it."

She sighed. "Yes. He's very nice and I have gone riding with him on a few occasions, hoping that would be enough."

"But it wasn't."

She shook her head. "He's painfully shy and never says more than a few words the entire time." She couldn't understand why he and a few others who kept coming around refused to

take her refusals seriously. She supposed they assumed because she was female she didn't know her own mind.

"From some of the looks I've been getting, there are a number of men unhappy to see me with you."

"They can all shear sheep."

He laughed.

A smile teased her lips.

They finally made it to the buffet table. Among the many people there was Old Man Blanchard speaking with haberdashery owner, Darian Day, another of Portia's frustrated suitors. But unlike James, she took great pleasure in refusing his company because he was such a condescending ass.

Before she could introduce Kent to Mr. Blanchard, Day said, "You're looking lovely, Portia."

"Thank you, Mr. Day." As always, he was overdressed for the occasion, this time in a black long-tailed coat, white bow tie, and white wing-tipped shirt. Instead of the boots men like Mr. Blanchard and Kent were wearing, Day had on narrow-toed black shoes.

"And who's this?" he asked, staring Kent up and down.

"Darian Day. Kent Randolph. Kent was an employee of my uncle's when we lived in Virginia City."

"Welcome to Arizona Territory. I own a haberdashery in Tucson. When you get the extra funds, stop by and we can see about finding you something to wear that's a bit more suitable for a gathering like this."

Kent gave him a wintry smile. "I'll keep that in mind."

Day added, "And as the menfolk here will probably tell you, I've had my eye on this little filly for some time, but she's being real prickly about accepting my saddle."

Portia tossed back, "Probably because I abhor being referred to as a 'little filly.'"

Old Man Blanchard barked a laugh. "You tell him, Portia."

She loved the old man. "I need to check on things in the kitchen, Mr. Blanchard. May I leave Kent in your capable hands? My aunt and uncle are occupied." They were still across the room with the Salts.

He smiled. "Sure can. Grab a plate, Randolph, and let's get acquainted."

She gave Kent a departing nod, shot Day a glare, and walked away.

The kitchen was a beehive of activity. The head cook, a young Englishwoman named Sarah, was adding more sliced beef to a depleted tray while the other kitchen workers carried in empty

platters needing to be refilled. Setting aside her irritation with Day, she asked, "How're things in here, Sarah?"

"Hectic but under control. We had to shoo your aunt out earlier, though."

"Why? What did she want?"

"To make sure the pie slices were evenly cut. I told her she taught me everything I know and I would sic you on her if she didn't go back out and enjoy herself. She pouted and left."

Portia shook her head in amazement and amusement. "Whatever are we going to do with her?"

"You tell me, miss. She's your aunt."

Smiling, Portia scanned the organized chaos. Satisfied her help wasn't needed, she said, "If Aunt Eddy comes back, send someone for me. She's a guest of honor. Not the caterer."

"Yes, ma'am."

By the time the cake, ablaze with fifteen sparklers, was wheeled out, Portia was glad the evening was about to come to an end. Her feet were tired of being encased in the fancy heeled shoes, the corset beneath her dress pained her as it always did when propriety dictated she wear one, and she could feel a headache coming on from all the noise and the press of so many bodies. To escape the heat, some of the guests were enjoying their cake and ice cream outside at the trestle

table. As she walked the area to make sure everyone was having a good time, she spied Regan seated with her beau du jour, a young army sergeant she'd met a week ago. Beside them sat Old Man Blanchard, apparently playing duenna, and Portia smiled at the unhappy look on her sister's face. There'd be no sneaking off for stolen kisses with Mr. Blanchard around. A laughing Eddy was seated on Rhine's lap, however, and he was feeding her cake from a fork. The amused Portia hoped she wouldn't have to send them to their suite to keep their ardor from getting out of hand.

"Brought you some cake, Duchess."

Surprised, she turned and the closeness of Kent's presence wafted dizzily over her again.

"You do eat cake, don't you?"

She extricated herself from his silent spell and sputtered, "I do. Yes. Thank you." Admittedly moved by his thoughtfulness, she took the plate from his hand.

"Shall we find a seat?" he asked. "Or are you still on duty?"

"I am but I would like to sit for a moment." Usually her needs were secondary because of all that needed doing like making innumerable visits to the kitchen, saying "Thank you for coming" to the departing guests, and keeping an eye on the remaining amounts of food and drink.

"Good cake," he said.

"Glad you like it."

"You don't seem to be enjoying yourself very much."

She paused and wondered how he knew. She shrugged. "Managing a party of this size doesn't leave much time for enjoyment."

"I suppose you're right. Do you ever get to have fun?"

She thought about the conversation she'd had with Regan yesterday. "I have a lot to do."

"Not judging, Duchess. Just asking."

The sincerity in his manner and tone made his words believable. She wondered what kind of man he was. Their interactions in Virginia City had been minimal due to the difference in their ages and the fact that he worked in the saloon, a place she and her sister weren't allowed to enter when it was open to clients. What would she learn about him now that their ages and his employment weren't a factor?

Edward Salt walked up. "Ah, Miss Carmichael. I finally find you seated. May I speak with you?"

"Of course."

"Privately," he added.

Kent rose to leave them alone, but Portia said, "No, Kent. Please stay. I'm sure whatever Mr. Salt has to say will be all right for you to overhear."

Finish your cake." She had no intentions of being spoken to privately by him.

Salt didn't appear happy.

She didn't care.

He cleared his throat. "I'd like to call on you tomorrow if I might. Being new to the area, I'd be honored to have you show me around."

"Unfortunately I'm going to be busy. The hotel has guests arriving in a few days and there are a hundred things I have to oversee to get ready. I'm sure someone else can show you the sights better than I."

He didn't like that either.

She didn't care.

"Some other time then."

She didn't commit.

He walked away.

She blew out a breath.

Kent quipped, "Snappy dresser though."

"If you like that sort of thing."

Salt's black suit and gold-trimmed vest looked quite expensive, as did his shoes. She eyed Kent's plainer and more honest attire and must have scrutinized him longer than was polite because he said, "Fanciest set of duds I own, Duchess. Sorry."

"No. I was—just thinking how much more I liked your attire than his." Embarrassed by her admission and doing her best to ignore the heat

searing her cheeks, she dragged her eyes to his and found a quietness waiting there that spoke to her wordlessly. "Please, I wasn't judging you."

"Are you always this sincere?"

Portia felt as if they were alone in an empty room. "When I need to be, yes."

"Good to know," he said softly.

The three words left her heart pounding.

Regan walked up. She looked to Portia first and then Kent. Waving her hand in the space that separated them she said, "Hey, you two. Aunt Eddy and Uncle Rhine are saying their good-byes. Everyone is going home."

Portia stood. Whatever was unfolding inside herself wasn't something she'd ever experienced before, so she had no name for it nor any idea how to go about handling it. But she did know that this cowboy and his compelling gaze was the source. "I—I have to go."

He nodded, and as she and her sister walked away, she didn't see his smile as he finished his cake.



Chapter Three

Kent had no idea what time breakfast was served or how it was handled but as was his custom, he got up before dawn and went in search of food. The hallway anchored by the girls' bedrooms at one end and Rhine and Eddy's at the other was quiet. If they were still sleeping, he didn't want to disturb them so he left the hallway as quietly as he could. Retracing the route from yesterday, he walked down another short, tiled hallway that led to the family sitting area. Hearing voices, he followed the sound into the dining room. Eddy and Portia were seated at the table. There were plates in front of them and cups of coffee.

Eddy greeted him with a smile. "Good morning, Kent. Join us please. Did you sleep well?"

"I did. Been a while since I slept in a real bed." For a man more accustomed to sleeping on a

bedroll on the ground or the hard slats in a bunkhouse, it had been wonderful. He gave Portia a nod. "Morning."

She glanced away from her newspaper. "Good morning." Her attention immediately returned to the paper but not before letting her eyes stray his way one more time.

"Do you want eggs with your breakfast?" Eddy asked.

"Yes, but I can cook them myself. Just show me where things are in the kitchen." He noticed Portia's look of mild surprise.

Eddy shook her head. "No. I haven't been allowed to cook in days, so humor me."

He was accustomed to taking care of his own needs, including his meals, but he knew a losing battle when he was in one, so he offered a compromise. "Okay, but I cook them tomorrow."

"That's agreeable. Now, how do you like them?"

"Scrambled."

"I'll be back in a moment."

She went into the kitchen and left him alone with Portia. He didn't want to disturb her reading while he waited for Eddy to return so he walked to the windows that faced the well-manicured grounds. The sun was just coming up.

"How long are you planning on staying with us?" she asked.

"Rhine's offered me a job, so it depends on what it's going to be." He turned to gauge her reaction. Her face showed nothing. She'd be a good poker player. "Do you and your sister help out around here?"

"Yes. I manage the hotel, the guests, and the books."

He raised an eyebrow. He didn't know what he'd been expecting her to say but it certainly hadn't been that, but then again he remembered all she'd done last night at the party. "Lots of responsibility."

"Yes and responsibilities some people believe I shouldn't have."

That confused him. "Why?"

"Because I'm female."

"Ah." That now made sense, so he added, "Not all women are flighty. Just as all men aren't jackasses like Day."

Her mask dropped and there was interest in her eyes again. He decided he liked surprising her. He got the impression that the men who did were few and far between. "Remember, I lived in Virginia City with Eddy and Sylvie as examples of female know-how." Sylvia "Sylvie" Stewart, married to his father, had owned quite a bit of property in town. Her business acumen was as well-known and respected as Eddy's had been.

"You have no idea how many men think otherwise."

"I can only imagine."

Eddy returned with a bowl of steaming eggs. He took a seat and filled his plate. There was a platter holding warm biscuits—hidden beneath a tea towel to keep in the heat—fresh butter, slabs of crisp bacon, and orange marmalade. After pouring himself a cup of coffee he started in. The eggs were wonderful, far more expertly done than he could have managed but he was determined to cook tomorrow. The spoiled boy he'd once been had died in the Mexican prison and he didn't like being waited on—not even by friends. "Where's Rhine this morning?" he asked Eddy.

She smiled over her raised cup of coffee. "Still sleeping of course. He's never shaken the habit of owning a saloon and staying awake until dawn. Personally, I don't think he's ever made a serious effort to change. He enjoys lazing about until midday."

The younger version of Kent had enjoyed that as well, but when you hire on with a ranching outfit, foremen didn't pay you for lying in bed. There were horses to feed, fences to mend, cows to herd, and broncs to break. He looked to Portia. "Is your sister still sleeping?"

She spoke as gracefully as she could around

the biscuit she'd just bitten into. "No. She's having breakfast with Old Man Blanchard. She eats with him a couple of mornings a week. His wife died about ten years ago and he likes Regan's company. He has a married daughter in Tucson but she doesn't visit him very much."

"Which is a shame," Eddy opined. "Because he's a nice man and he's lonely. He looks on Regan as an adopted granddaughter."

Portia added, "And she has a big heart so she keeps an eye on him."

He heard the affection for her sister in her voice. When he'd known them in Nevada, the two had been very close. He was glad time hadn't eroded their love for each other. Being an only child, he envied that sibling bond. "Eggs are real good, Eddy. Thank you."

"My pleasure. Did you enjoy the party last night?"

"I did."

As he and Eddy chatted about the party and the people he'd been introduced to, Portia found herself further intrigued by him. Where most men were content to sit back and be waited upon, including her uncle whom she adored, Kent had seemed genuinely sincere about wanting to make his own eggs. Having grown up as the daughter of a prostitute, Portia learned at an early age that

men could be vile, controlling, and prone to using their fists. Until she and Regan became Eddy's wards, she never knew a man could be as tender and loving as Rhine was to their aunt. She'd been so wary of men it had taken her years to fully comprehend that Rhine and his former partner Jim Dade had no designs on her physically and would stand between her and a barreling train if necessary to keep her safe. Once she was able to come to grips with that, those parts of herself that were constantly on alert and fearful faded somewhat. She still tended to believe the world held more men like her mother's customers and haberdashery owner Darian Day than the good and decent type like her uncle.

"Portia?" Eddy's voice cut into her thoughts.

"I'm sorry. Wool gathering. Did I miss something?" She glanced over and saw Kent watching her with an unreadable expression. She moved her attention to her aunt.

"I said, I doubt we'll be entertaining the Salts in the future. If I never see them again, it will be too soon."

"How long have they been in Tucson?" Kent asked.

"Just a few weeks. Rhine met the husband at the barbershop and invited them to the party because he thought it would be a nice way for them

to meet some folks. Who knew that as soon as they arrived, he'd pester Rhine for a loan?"

"A loan for what?" Portia asked.

"A grocery store, I believe."

"And his collateral?" She saw Kent pause and view her as if she was the most interesting thing he'd seen in some time. Something inside her buzzed with an odd sense of pleasure.

"Rhine asked the same question. Salt said they could discuss it later."

"I don't want to be rude, Aunt Eddy, but I wouldn't lend them rusty nails."

"Agreed."

"I thought you looked a bit put out when we walked up," Portia said.

"I was. When the wife asked me what kind of hoodoo I used to snare such a handsome light-skinned man like your uncle, I almost punched her."

"Glad I missed that," Portia said, hiding her smile.

Eddy looked put out over the encounter all over again. "And we won't even discuss the way that son of theirs sneered at Kent."

"I ignored it," he told her.

"I didn't. When you and the girls left I told him if he sneered at any of my guests again, I'd have him thrown out."

Kent said, "That wasn't necessary, Eddy."

"In my mind it was. It is my home after all."

Portia saw him incline his head as if acquiescing.

"And, on top of all the other rude behavior, he had questions about you and Regan."

Portia was instantly wary. "Such as?"

"Were you two married? Did you have beaus? Were you due to inherit Rhine's estate? I told him your affairs were none of his business."

Portia added, "He asked if he could call on me today so I could show him the sights. I turned him down."

Edward Salt with his sneers and baby-soft hands had not made a good first impression. She found herself studying Kent's hands as he wielded his fork. They were clean and the calluses and shadows of healed cuts and abrasions on his long fingers were the result of hard work. Catching herself wondering how it might feel to touch them, she quickly turned away, but not before seeing his amusement as if he'd peeked inside her head and knew what she'd been thinking.

Regan entered and her eyes were red and swollen.

"What's wrong?" Portia asked with alarm.

"Old Man Blanchard died sometime during the night. I sent Farley for the doc and . . ." She paused to wipe the tears. "He's gone," she whispered.

Portia went to her and held her close. "Oh, honey. I'm so sorry."

Eddy got up from the table. "Let me go get Rhine." After placing a solemn kiss on Regan's cheek she hastily left the room.

Kent wasn't sure what he was supposed to do but watching Portia console her sister made him feel like an intruder. Since he was done with his breakfast, he stood and picked up his plate and carried it into the kitchen. When he came back out, the room was empty. He figured everyone would probably be gone for at least a little while. The table still held their dishes and what was left of the food, so he cleared the settings.

When Portia reappeared thirty minutes later, he was washing up the dishes. She stopped and stared.

"How's Regan?" he asked.

"Doing okay. She rode back over to Old Man Blanchard's place with Uncle Rhine and Aunt Eddy."

He nodded and set a clean cup in the dish drain.

In a voice filled with wonder, she asked, "What are you doing?"

Guessing he'd surprised her again, he smiled inwardly. "Washing the dishes."

"But why?"

"You and your family have a death to deal with.

Thought I'd help out. Men around here don't do dishes?"

"You've met some of the men around here. What do you think?"

He chuckled. "You always so blunt?"

"It's my Carmichael blood."

He faced her. "Last night after you cut Day to the quick and went into the kitchen, he said you needed a man to rid you of what he called your uppity mouth."

"Really?" she replied in a tone that let him know she wasn't pleased.

"Mr. Blanchard came to your defense, though." He set another plate in the drain. "How long has Day been trying to court you?"

"About a year and a half."

He looked her way. "Personally, I like your uppity mouth."

She swayed for a split second. He liked that, too.

She stammered, "I—I was coming back to clean up, but you seem to have everything in hand."

"For the most part, but I've no idea where some of these things go."

"You can just leave them in the drain. I'll—put them away later."

It didn't make a whole lot of sense for her to come back later when all she had to do was direct him now, but he didn't push. She seemed slightly

rattled and he was enjoying that as well. "Okay. So since you hold the reins here, do you know what my job will be?"

"No. Uncle Rhine will handle that."

"Anything you need done in the interim?"

She hastily shook her head.

"Fine. I'll go say good morning to Blue, maybe go for a ride, and wait for Rhine to return."

"Blue?"

"My horse."

"Oh yes. Of course."

He watched her watch him. In truth he wouldn't mind looking at her all day and she seemed torn between staying and fleeing. She finally muttered "I have to go" before beating a hasty retreat. Chuckling to himself, he went back to the dishes. He was enjoying Miss Portia Carmichael, probably more than Rhine would like so he needed to pull back on the reins a bit. If he could.

Kent saddled Blue a short while later, and rode off to do some exploring. Mountains both far and near were everywhere he looked, as were valleys, clear running streams, and stands of thick forest. One of the reasons he'd hated being at Howard was that there'd been no peace or silence. All the noise and commotion from the streetcars and crowds was so overwhelming it didn't allow a man to think. The wide open spaces that

made up the West were far better. He waded Blue into a standing pool so the stallion could drink. Savoring the surrounding beauty, Kent thought he would enjoy living here. For some reason he felt more settled and content than he had in a long time. Even though he'd only been back with Rhine and Eddy a day, it was as if all the years of drifting like a windblown tumbleweed had finally led him back to them in a way that felt as if he'd come home. He sensed he could put down roots here, build a home of his own and maybe find a wife and raise some children, which surprised him because he'd always been too restless to contemplate the possibility of marriage and a family. But in truth, he was tired of drifting, tired of being alone with no set place to come home to at the end of the day and having nothing to call his own but his horse, saddle, and the clothes on his back. He looked up at the cloudless blue sky, felt the gentle breeze on his face, and wondered what it was about this place that seemed to ease his loner's soul. He had no answer but was willing to stick around long enough to find out. With that in mind, he reined Blue around and headed back to the hotel.

Entering the hotel, he wondered how the family was faring with the death of their friend Blanchard, and if Rhine had returned. Thoughts of Portia's whereabouts arose as well, but he set

them aside for the moment. When he reached Rhine's office the door was open and Kent saw him inside at his desk.

"Come on in," Rhine said to him.

Kent took a seat. "Wanted to convey my condolences."

"Thanks. Blanchard was good man and we cared about him very much. Especially the girls. When they were growing up he taught them everything from how to ride bareback to building a smokeless fire. We'll miss him." He paused and asked, "Are you settling in?"

"I am. That bed is going to spoil me for the rest of my life, though."

Rhine smiled knowingly. "Only the best at the Fontaine Hotel. You told me you'd been a foreman?"

"On a couple of outfits."

"Are you up to doing it again?"

"Sure. Where?"

"The Blanchard place. His daughter's decided she doesn't want the property so I made her an offer that I'm hoping she'll accept. Portia has been keeping his books and his son-in-law wants them reviewed before going forward."

"Did he have a foreman?"

"Yes, but he wants to move on. Says the place won't be the same without the old man."

Kent understood. When a long-time owner

sells, or as in this case dies, a new regime often brings change to the old employees along with a level of uncertainty as to how the place will be run. "Is it cattle or horses?"

"Horses mostly but he has a small herd of longhorns."

"What about the other hands? How many are there?"

"Small outfit so only five counting the foreman. Blanchard used to break wild horses to supply the army but demand's faded. He now buys from an outfit up near Prescott and sells to individuals. He also maintains the mounts our guests ride."

"So no riding up to Montana or Wyoming for wild mustangs."

"No. Is that a problem?"

"Not really. Spent almost a decade chasing and breaking stallions and mares. After busting my collarbone twice, my wrists too many times to count, and my leg in two places a few years back, being a gentleman foreman may be just what I need at my age." The leg break had been so severe that, though healed, it still pained him in damp weather.

Rhine cracked, "You are getting fairly long in the tooth."

"Yours will always be longer." The shared grin reminded Kent just how much he'd missed having him in his life.

They spent the next few minutes talking about salary. Kent thought the figure Rhine offered to be fair.

"As I said, Portia's been handling Blanchard's books and payroll, and I don't see that changing once I'm the new owner. She'll also take care of ordering of any supplies you can't get in Tucson."

Kent wondered how she'd feel about his taking over as foreman. He found himself looking forward to interacting with her on a regular basis.

"You'll need to sit down with her and go over how the dude ranch visits are handled, too, since she's the one who coordinates it all. Any questions on anything we've talked about so far?"

"No. I would like to ride over and take a hard look at the buildings and the stables, but out of respect for his passing, I'll wait until after the funeral."

"The wake will be at his place, so you'll be able to see some of it, if you want to go."

"I only met him at the party last night but I liked him, so I would like to pay my respects if that's okay."

"That would be fine."

"Are the other hands staying on?"

"They said they'd let me know after the funeral."

"Did you tell them you were bringing in a new foreman?"

"I told them there was a good possibility."

"Were any of them hoping to move up to foreman?"

Rhine considered that for a moment. "I don't know that either. I probably should have considered that."

"Yes, but then I wouldn't have a job, so we'll wait and see what happens. If they all decide to move on, we'll hire new men. It may take some time but the work will get done." Kent was accustomed to putting in a full day's work so if he had to run the place shorthanded for a while he would. "Anything you want me to do in the meantime? All this sitting around is wearing on me."

"As a matter of fact, I do. How are you at chopping wood?"

Kent shrugged. "I've chopped a few piles in my life."

"Good. The kitchen always needs wood and Eddy says they're running low. The man who usually does it hasn't shown up for the past week or so. Not sure if he's quit on us or what, but there are enough logs out by the barn to keep you busy for a few days."

"Okay. You spoke of the wake. When's the funeral?"

"In a few days, I suppose. His daughter is his only family so there's no one else she has to wait for to arrive."

Kent wondered who'd mourn him when his time came. He assumed his father would see the Pearly Gates first but afterwards? There were no other Randolphs either—at least as far as he knew. Burying the maudlin thoughts, he asked Rhine, "I assume you'll want me living there as opposed to here?"

Rhine nodded. "He has a nice-sized place so you may as well move into the house."

"Where'd the old foreman stay?"

"Bunkhouse."

Kent mulled that over for a moment, too. If the other men stayed, he wondered how they'd feel about him being in the old man's house, or if they'd care. It could pave the way for some resentment and he didn't want to start off that way. He supposed he'd have to wait and see. No sense in worrying over something that might come into play. "How about I decide after I talk with the hands, if they stay."

"How about you simply move into the house. I don't want it sitting empty."

He nodded. "Whatever you say."

"Good. Anything else for now?"

"No. I'll get started on Eddy's wood. Where is it?"

"I'll show you."

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