



PROLOGUE



I HEFT THE GUN to my shoulder, feeling its familiar weight and the heat of the metal through my dress. Sighting along the barrel, I curl my finger around the trigger. The world shrinks around my target as I breathe in.

Exhaling, I squeeze.

An explosion of sound, and the tin can twenty yards away topples from its perch.

“Told you so, George,” I mutter, letting the stock fall to rest on a fence post. The horses in the field alongside me swish their tails, slapping insects from their flanks. The gunshot stilled the relentless cicada hum for a moment; with a hot ticking, it begins again. I reach a hand up to wipe the sweat from my neck.

A shimmering heat haze rises along the rutted track leading from our farm to town, and as I reload the muzzle,

squinting at the remaining row of cans, a plume of dust swirls up and takes shape. It's a moment before I recognize the motion as that of an approaching rider.

I smile, making a dash at my hair and dress, slapping the worst of the grime from my skirts. I hadn't thought to see Connor today. But even as I smooth my hair, I realize that it isn't him. The horse is the same shade of chestnut as Connor's mare, but the rider has none of his ease in the saddle.

My stomach turns over. I remember the last time George and I welcomed a stranger to our farm: a doctor who charged too much, who told us nothing could be done. I fight back a rising tide of dread. If George has been hurt . . . But no, if anything's happened, the news wouldn't come from town.

I hold the rifle in both hands, across my body so the rider can see it. He's wearing a jacket and breeches of pale gray, reddened with dust and nicer by far than what my brother wears on Sundays. His hair is pale under his hat, and the beginnings of an unpromising mustache grace his lip. The jacket, store-bought by the look of it, slumps damply about his slight form, and a slender leather case rests over the front of the saddle. If he's armed, I can't see his gun.

As he approaches, he throws up a hand. "Young lady! Hold your fire!" Grinning at me, he reins in the horse with a dusty flourish.

I tip the gun so that its muzzle points to the ground and move toward the steaming horse. "You're far from town," I say to the stranger.

He dismounts, his leather shoes hitting the packed earth with a thump. I'm no longer afraid, just curious—this fellow couldn't best a city girl in a fight, much less a farm girl with a

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rifle. Bowing slightly, he offers his hand. His nails are perfect, clean crescents.

“Good afternoon, miss. I apologize for arriving with no prior notice, but I wasn’t sure how to announce myself ahead of time.” He gestures around, as if to underscore the lack of a postbox. “My name is Herman DeLaney. I’m a solicitor with Cryer and Thompson, and I’ve come to you from New York City.”

He says this with a satisfied air that I’d take more seriously from a larger man.

“I’m Katherine Randolph,” I say. “And I come from right here.” I hold my dirt- and oil-smearred hand out partway, waiting to see whether he’ll take it. After a moment’s hesitation, he does.

As I tie his mount to the hitching post, he runs his eyes over our house. I see it as he does: sun-bleached boards, dilapidated but well kept. A sagging porch, though freshly swept. And lovely painted flowers winding up from the house’s baseboards—our flower beds haven’t thrived in the heat, but my brother’s artistic talents produce blooms far lovelier than anything I could have grown.

I call the man’s attention back from the flowering boards. “Mr. DeLaney, I must ask. For what purpose have you traveled all the way from New York?”

He turns toward me, a slight smile flickering about his mouth. “Is George Randolph at home?”

“My brother has gone to look at a stallion in Paulstown.” I remember that this man is not from these parts, and amend myself. “That’s ten miles away. He should be back by evening. You’re welcome, of course, to return tomorrow.”

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The man just smiles and removes his hat, wiping his forehead with a cornflower-blue handkerchief he produces from inside his dusty coat.

“If it’s all right with you, Miss Randolph, I believe I’ll wait.” He sits back on the hitching post with a sigh. “I have something very important to discuss with Mr. Randolph.”

“Something so important that it can’t wait one day?”

He leans forward, his toes just touching the ground. “Indeed.” He taps his leather case with a manicured finger. “Pardon me for being forward, but I believe I am about to change your fortunes.”

I feel a confused thrill at his words. What could this beanpole of a city man be carrying that would support his claim? “My brother won’t return until well after sundown, sir—and it’s far too hot to be left in anticipation.”

He laughs at my words, settling himself more comfortably on his post. “Perhaps you’re right. You *are* a Randolph, after all. Let’s start with this: Have you ever wished to see England?”

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CHAPTER 1



“ARMS UP, DEAR.”

I lift my arms over my head.

“Good,” says Cousin Grace. “You’ll make no move more sudden than that, and it seems your bosom will stay in place.”

I don’t see how my bosom has any choice. It and the rest of me are bound fast in a mercilessly tight concoction of cream satin. I keep catching glances of myself in the mirror, and each time the girl I see looks a little less like me. My black curls are pinned up in an elaborate style that leaves my neck bare. I’d almost forgotten the mole in the hollow of my left clavicle. Shimmering white gloves wrap my arms to the elbow, reflecting the glow of the strand of pearls that clings to my throat. Katherine the farm girl is in there somewhere, beneath the finery—I see her in the obstinate jawline, a touch too wide, in the dark gray eyes that can’t hide their boredom. Grace

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surveys my bare arms with satisfaction—though the taut lines of my muscles are still visible, they’re slackening from disuse. There are no buckets to heave up from the well here, and someone else chops the firewood.

What would Connor think if he could see me now?

“Arms back down,” Grace murmurs as Elsie, our dressing maid, fusses with another hairpin. If I don’t turn my head too quickly, her work might just survive the evening ahead.

Grace suddenly shrieks, and Stella scurries out from under her skirts, yapping. “I don’t understand, Katherine dear, why you insist on keeping that mutt in your room!”

“Because I love her with all my heart.” *And because you can trust animals*, I think but don’t say. There’s nothing fake about a dog. “Besides, she’s very fond of you,” I add sweetly.

“Well, the feeling is one-sided. She’s got hairs all over my dress.”

Elsie flutters over to tend to my cousin’s skirts, and I manage a crouch, tickling Stella under her chin. She was a gift from George the day after we arrived in England, and I adore her—she’s the only one here even less polished than I am.

I walk to the window and tug aside the thick brocade curtain. The estate sprawls out in the dimming February twilight, a wintry tapestry of browns and faded greens. Over its horizon, to the south, is the quarry that once supplied stone to build the house and many others in the area. It fell into disuse some ten years ago, according to George. At the bottom of the smooth lawns, the lake lies black and still, and the trees beyond carpet the valley in a great swath. The forest of Walthingham, planted two hundred years ago, covers several

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hundred acres. I hold a hand to the chilly glass, listening to the evening song drifting from the aviary.

There's movement at the forest's edge, something darting from trunk to trunk.

"Someone's in the trees," I say, pointing to the spot.

Grace comes to my side, but when I look again the thing has gone. "I can't see anything," she says.

"I'm sure. . . ."

"Just a deer," she says. "They come sometimes to the lake to drink."

"I think it was a man," I say, staring until my eyes blur and sting, and I have to blink.

In the glass, Grace's reflection flinches. Then two shapes emerge from the trees on the long driveway leading to the house—carriages. "Your guests!" says Grace, her voice light. "We haven't long."

My guests. Cold seeps into my fingertips from the windowpane, and my ghostly, black-eyed reflection stares back at me mockingly. I turn away.

Grace looks me up and down. "Don't furrow your brow. You'll perform just perfectly."

I don't want to perform at all, thank you very much, I think. I'm not a traveling show.

Grace must mistake my strained smile for nerves. "You've done wonderfully over the past four weeks, Katherine. You'll be a sensation!"

Has it been only four weeks since we arrived here? America, and Connor, seem to belong to another lifetime. I feel a swell of guilt, not for being here, but for starting to forget.

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“Thank you,” I say. “For everything you’ve done for me.”

Grace stands up and adjusts her skirts. She is wearing lace as well, but it is dyed a rich scarlet, and cut higher to her neck. Though she asks me to treat her like a sister, she is technically the same generation as my father—his cousin, in fact. She acts very much like a maiden aunt, steering me patiently through the convoluted channels of English society.

“I have enjoyed every moment,” she says. “Now, I must go speak with Mrs. Whiting. Just relax and enjoy the night—we’ve been over everything that’s important. Come along, Elsie.”

She sweeps from the room, followed by the serving girl, and I’m alone.

Everything that’s important. She means the rules, I suppose, the ones she’s spent a month drilling into me. The rules for eating, the rules for dancing, the rules for talking. The way to dress, to curtsy, to be an English “lady” rather than a girl from a farm in Virginia. The rules for snaring a husband, that’s what they add up to.

It’s a wonder these people can walk in a straight line with so many rules in their heads—but, of course, there are rules for walking, too.

I practice now, stepping toward the mirror, placing one foot in front of the other, trying to maintain perfect alignment from toe to heel. It’s harder than it looks, like crossing the slippery log over the creek toward Miller’s Pond. All that was at stake back then was a soaking in muddy water.

It’s been three months since Herman DeLaney, the lawyer from the city, did indeed change our fortunes. His firm, Cryer and Thompson, took care of all the details—getting us

to New York, finding a berth on the *St. Elizabeth*. George and I were simply swept along. I still blush to think of DeLaney's face when I asked how it was all being paid for. "By *you*, of course, Miss Randolph," he'd said with a grin.

I don't think either of us really threw much of a backward glance at Miller's Pond or the life we were leaving behind. Edward and Lila saw us off with tears, and there were vain promises that we would see them again. But after that, we let the current carry us away. During the monthlong wait in New York, I was too busy wandering the streets in awe to think properly about how life was changing. I think the reality began to dawn for both of us during the wretched twenty-eight days we were tossed around on the crossing. The only moment of levity on the whole voyage was when we toasted the New Year with a bottle of wine given to us by Herman. He'd scribbled a note on the label—*May you have a prosperous 1821*.

George had to explain to me five or six times what was in fact quite a simple, if improbable, stroke of luck. A grandfather we hadn't even known had died. Thrown from his horse at the age of seventy, he had died instantly of a broken neck. And with our father, his direct descendant, dead, his fortune passed to us. Now, where we were from, wealth was a relative concept. Just about everyone we mixed with, Connor included, had little, though we all had enough. Maybe the McConnells, with eight horses and twenty acres, were doing a lot better than us. Herman DeLaney, with his handsome town house in Manhattan, was definitely *well off*.

I didn't know what real wealth was, of course.

"What are you doing here, Katherine Randolph?" I whisper.

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At the sound of my voice, Stella looks up from beside the hearth, where a fire is stoked hot against the chill. In our old home, we had a single fireplace. This house has more than two dozen. But then, this bedroom is the size of our entire farmhouse. The bedding and walls are done up in dusty gold with warm red accents, and the carpet is a thick plush that I never tire of digging my toes into.

But will it ever feel like a home? I feel like a plant brought in from a greenhouse, potted in strange soil. It's not right, this place, this air. I feel like I'm withering.

A gentle rapping pulls me from my reverie. I turn and see George framed in the doorway, and force a smile. Our elevation to the gentry looks effortless on him, as everything does. He wears a midnight-colored tailcoat, and a collar that drapes his neck in velvet. He used to wear rugged breeches and boots in all weather, but now he's traded them for silk stockings and pointed leather shoes with shining buckles. He is only twenty, four years my senior, but his clothes give him a dignity befitting an older man.

"My grubby George!" I say. "I didn't truly believe the dirt could come all the way off."

He pulls a monstrous face at me. "Look who's talking!"

"It's Grace and Elsie's doing," I say. "Don't come too near or you'll make me a mess again."

"Mother and Father would be so proud," he says simply, and holds out his arm. I know he means well by saying such things, but I wish he wouldn't mention our parents like that. It undermines my defenses, and threatens to make me teary. "Of you also," I reply simply as we clasp arms. My hands look

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like someone else's—the nails, once kept short by hard work and a hundred little accidents, have grown longer.

“Oh, look,” I say, gripping his wrist, where a splotch of cerulean blue is dried onto his skin. “You’re letting us down.”

“Blast,” he says under his breath. “I was doing the vista from the west window.”

“I don’t see where the blue came in. These English skies seem to be gray most of the time.”

He tries to tweak my nose, like he used to when we were small, but I duck out of the way as quick as my styled hair will let me. He knows I’m teasing—George’s paintings are something to behold, and at last he’s getting the recognition he deserves. Tomorrow we go to London to speak with a curator at the Royal Academy. They’ve seen the landscapes George painted back home, and already they’re talking about exhibiting his work.

In the hallway we meet John, the under-footman, coming from the servants’ stairs with an armful of pressed linen. He moves aside and offers a shallow bow as we pass; for a moment, before I lower my gaze, his eyes catch on mine. I find it hard, sometimes, to meet his looks. His sun-paled hair is so like Connor’s, and from the back, with their broad shoulders and height, they could be mistaken for each other. But John does not share Connor’s easy smile. He often looks sad, I think, when he doesn’t know he’s being watched.

John’s was the first face I saw on English soil, waiting with my cousins the day we docked in Bristol. He’d carried my ancient blue trunk, weathered almost to whiteness, to the waiting carriage.

Now I feel his eyes on my exposed throat, and I am sure I'm blushing. "My lord, my lady," he murmurs. George nods a response. He's adjusting better than I am, learning to treat the servants, as Grace instructed, like part of the furniture.

George's hand is tight on my arm as we reach the stairs—he's more nervous than he's letting on.

"I may need to use that arm again after tonight," I say.

"I'm sorry," he replies. "It's just—are you actually looking forward to this?"

"This is our introduction to society," I say. "Think of it like branding cattle. A sharp pain, then we belong."

"And then to the slaughterhouse?" says George.

From below come the silvery sounds of the hired strings, and the low swell of voices. "They can't scare us, George," I say.

"Can't they?"

"We may not be as fine," I say. "But we're far richer."

We stifle our laughter as we walk down the stairs, and I try my best not to tangle my feet in my dress. The butler, Carrick, is waiting at the doors to the ballroom. Cousin Henry Campion, Grace's older brother, limps from the drawing room to the bottom of the stairs, smartly dressed in his dragoon's uniform. Until we were identified as Randolphs by Crowne & Crowne, the family's lawyers, he was custodian to Walthingham, and since our arrival he's welcomed us with great kindness. I haven't dared ask about his wound, but Elsie tells me he got it fighting in France, and that he nearly lost the leg to infection.

"The young lord and lady are ready for their audience,

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I see,” he says. “Katherine, you look beautiful tonight! Mr. Carrick, if you wouldn’t mind.”

George’s grip tightens on my arm again as the butler swings open the doors. His voice rings across the room beyond. “Ladies and gentlemen! Lord George and Lady Katherine Randolph!”



CHAPTER 2



“YOU WERE RAISED on a farm, they say. Was it dreadfully messy?” The woman in yellow lace grimaces.

“There was a fair amount of dirt,” I reply.

“But surely you knew all the time that your place was elsewhere. You must have felt it. The blood will out, as they say.”

“I was too busy, perhaps, to notice it.”

“But it’s all very romantic, is it not?”

I think the romance would have worn off for Lady Flint after a single winter on our tiny farmstead, but I laugh politely all the same.

The conversation bubbles on, and I look for George across the expanse of the ballroom. I wonder if he has told the story as many times as I have. Of our parents’ deaths five years before, our simple life under the kindness of our guardians,

Edward and Lila, and the lawyer's visit that changed everything.

I've met so many people; their faces and titles are a blur. Several are men from Cousin Henry's regiment; others are local landowners and their wives and children. Everyone seems to know each other, which makes sense: George and I are the strangers here.

"It must have been such a shock," says Lord Flint, "living in some dusty shack one moment, and now this." He throws a meaty hand around to indicate our present surroundings.

It wasn't quite a shack, I almost say, but then I suppose, to these people, it probably would be. Over our heads, candles reflect off glittering chandeliers, and the guests move below in a crush of richly clothed elegance and breeding. The evening is going better than I expected. Though I have made a few slips, none have been, in my cousin's parlance, fatal. True, the cords of Grace's neck tightened when I took a glass of champagne *before* George, but she quickly recovered her composure. From time to time she taps me on the arm, with a murmured "Well done," so perhaps I am learning the way of things slightly more quickly than Stella.

My brother is surrounded, as he has been for the last hour, by a group of young ladies and their mothers. It's been dawning on me slowly, what this evening means for him. Walthingham is his; at a stroke he has become one of the most eligible bachelors in the country. He's on display, like one of his own paintings on the wall, and these finely dressed guests are lining up to assess his worth. George and I are in this together for the moment, but soon enough he will be taken from me as well.

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“. . . and you've encountered *snakes*, I've heard . . .” Lady Flint is saying.

Grace sidles up alongside us. “Forgive me,” she says to my companions, “but I must steal my cousin from you for a moment.” She takes me by the arm and leads me away. “Lady Flint is but two generations removed from a fortune-hunting lady's maid,” she says out of the side of her mouth. “I think we can do better than that.” As she steers me between the other guests, I wonder what she would have to say about me and George, if she could see where *we'd* come from. I decide it's best not to think so much, as we reach a plump older man with a rough and ruddy face, standing beside a young, fair-haired woman.

“Mr. Dowling,” says Grace. “May I introduce your hostess?”

I hold out my hand, as Grace has taught me, and Mr. Dowling stoops to kiss it. “What a pleasure it is to meet you,” he says.

“Mr. Dowling is our local magistrate,” says Grace. “And this is his daughter, Jane.”

The blond girl offers a curtsy and a smile, her gray-green eyes snapping with intelligence. Her dress is deep blue satin, with frothing underskirts of ivory lace and scalloped black ribbon below the bodice. I like her at once.

“I trust Miss Champion has been taking good care of you,” says Mr. Dowling. “Showing you the ropes, as they say.”

“Grace has been extremely patient,” I reply. “Life here is very different from what I'm used to.”

“She'll soon have you singing and embroidering with

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the best of them, I dare say.” Mr. Dowling nods with certainty. “I sometimes wonder whether my Jane would have benefited from a bit more guidance. Her singing is quite abominable.”

But he’s smiling as he speaks, and Jane bats his arm playfully. “Father!”

“Though I should add that she is possessed of other accomplishments,” continues her father. “Her harpsichord is tolerable.”

Jane raises her eyebrows. “My singing voice I inherited from you, Father.” She addresses herself to me. “Though my musicianship is beyond repair, perhaps we can join forces to save my embroidery. All my little flowers turn out looking like mud pies.”

“I’m afraid my accomplishments only stretch so far as shooting crows and shoeing horses.”

I dare not look at Grace’s expression, but Jane is grinning. “Let’s us two take a turn about the room,” she says.

And before I know it, she’s sweeping me away from her father and Grace. I try to match her delicate step as we thread between clusters of guests.

“Do you and your father live nearby?” I ask.

“On the Crescent,” she says. “It’s in the center of Bath. But come, the night’s too short to talk about our houses. It’s smaller than yours, suffice to say.” She nods discreetly toward a tall, slender brunette wearing a delicate pink gown and a sour expression. “That is Miss Livia Collins, normally a rather humorous girl, but just now she’s being jilted by that fellow with the unconvincing mustache.” She inclines her chin

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toward a pompous-looking young man wearing brightly buckled shoes and a spray of sparse hair on his upper lip.

I giggle, and forget for a moment to wonder whether I ought to.

“And that is Thomas Evans,” she says, pointing to a stocky, square-jawed man in long black tails. “He’s heir to a small fortune but best avoided, as his mother is insufferable.”

We make our way about the party, and Jane feeds me tidbits of gossip on the guests. I feel almost as though I’m back in Virginia, elbowing George and laughing at a church supper.

As we circle the party, we pass an open door leading to a small morning room, where Grace occasionally visits with her more intimate friends. By the half-light within, I see a tall man. He looks to be made of two colors only, black and white. A dark suit against a pale collar. Long black hair and almost porcelain skin. He’s staring at the wall.

“And what about him?” I ask.

Jane frowns. “I’ve never seen him before. He looks rather serious, though, don’t you think?”

A maid bearing a tray of small pastries passes us, and Jane takes one. “Get one now, or the men will eat them all,” she advises.

I do as she says. Just then, Jane’s father calls her name. We look across the ballroom, to where he stands next to an earnest-looking young man in an aggressively green jacket. “Good Lord,” says Jane. “I believe he has hooked me another suitor. You must find out more about our mystery guest, while I make my father remember why he does not try too hard to throw men in my way. Here, take this.”

She hands me her pastry and sets off demurely through the crowd. I return my gaze to the young man. His quiet shape in the dim light has a curious gravity to it as I slip through the doorway behind him. The room is cool and quiet after the din of the ballroom, the dusky pinks and greens of its furnishings glowing flatly golden in the meager candlelight. Moving closer, I see that the man is studying a painting on the wall—one that Grace pointed out to me on my first day here.

It depicts my grandfather, the late Lord Walthingham, as a younger man astride a tan horse. He looks much like my father did, only narrower in the face. It would have been a rather classical portrait, but for one detail: crouching next to the horse is a lean black panther. Its body is almost lost in the background, but its steady yellow eyes gaze straight out from the canvas. While I find it strange enough in daytime, it is more unsettling still at night, touched by candlelight. My slipper squeaks on the floor a little, and the man spins around.

“Sorry!” I say.

For the half second he is silent, I take him in. His black hair curls up along his neck and the strong line of his jaw. A lock of it falls over his brow, and for one mad moment I long to push it back for him. “I’m sorry,” he says quickly. “I should not be in here. Excuse me.”

He turns to walk away.

“No, please stay,” I say. “It is I who should apologize, for intruding upon your private moment.”

He flushes with embarrassment. “I was just admiring this painting,” he says. “I’m afraid such gatherings”—he nods toward the party—“are not to my taste.”

“Nor mine,” I say. “I try to keep up with all the names, but

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I'm still not sure if one lady's name is Arabella or Annabella, and whether so-and-so is an earl or a viscount or a lord." He looks unsure if I'm joking or not, half-smiling and half-frowning. "I warn you, if you tell me your name, I may forget it."

He shuffles his feet uncomfortably.

"But, please," I add, "do tell me it anyway."

"I am William Simpson, a lawyer for your estate. I've been working to put things in order since your grandfather's death. I am very sorry for your loss."

"Thank you, sir. I regret that I was never able to meet him." I gesture toward the painted panther. "Though I find his choice of pet rather odd, don't you?"

For a moment Mr. Simpson frowns. "My lady, that panther symbolizes loyalty and courage. Your grandfather was an exemplar of both."

My irreverence has offended him. "And the horse?" I ask quietly.

His voice softens. "The horse, I believe, is just a horse."

His face, already rather nice, is much improved by a slightly crooked smile, which vanishes too soon.

"Your grandfather's death was a great tragedy," says Mr. Simpson.

I nod slowly, feeling terribly guilty. In truth, I find it hard to summon feelings for a man I never met, and who, for all I know, never knew of our existence. Everyone has been at pains to say he died without suffering, though I wonder if that is wishful thinking. He wasn't found, Grace says, for half a day. It happened in the woods on the perimeter of the estate, and the loyal animal stayed with him until rescuers came looking.

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Thinking about it now, the portrait of the proud horseman takes on a macabre impression.

“I haven’t been on a horse since I arrived in England,” I say, hoping to move the conversation on. “I love riding, though I’ll have to learn the English way of it before I can go very far from home.”

“I’m afraid I’m not much of a horseman,” says Mr. Simpson. He looks at the floor, then at the painting once more, then the floor again. I realize suddenly that I still hold two canapés in my hands, and extend one lamely toward him.

Mr. Simpson looks confused but takes the glazed tier of golden pastry. When he bites into it, a flaking crumb falls onto his collar.

“May I?” Stepping toward him, I brush the flake gently aside with my gloved hand. He stands perfectly still, his chest rising and falling beneath my touch. The cloth, I notice, is rough, near homespun in quality, and slightly frayed at the seam.

“There,” I say. I look up at his face, my eyes lingering longer than they should. His skin is perfectly smooth, but for a tiny scar on his upper lip and the faintest grit of stubble coming in. His eyes, a deep blue, are trained on mine. My gaze falls unconsciously to his lips, expecting him to speak.

“There you are, Katherine, at last!” Grace calls from the doorway. “What *are* you doing, lurking in the . . . Oh! Mr. Simpson.”

He steps back sharply, as though I’ve pushed him.

“We were just admiring my grandfather’s portrait,” I say quickly. Too quickly, perhaps, because Grace’s eyes narrow.

“Well,” she says, her lips pursed, “Lieutenant Hastings has

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been asking after you. The dancing is about to start, and you have promised him the first.”

I nod, though I can't remember which one Lieutenant Hastings is, and I long to stay another moment in this quiet room. Instead I must follow her back to the ballroom, leaving Mr. Simpson behind.

“Good-bye, William,” I say.

He bows discreetly. “I hope you enjoy your evening, Lady Walthingham,” he says. “It's Arabella, by the way. The name you've forgotten.”

“What is he talking about?” mutters Grace.

The music has shifted to a higher tempo. The lieutenant turns out to be a tall man with pale eyes and a high forehead, whose fingertips brush my bare arm as he leads me into the row of dancers.

“How are you enjoying your first ball, Lady Randolph?” he asks.

“Very much,” I say. “Though you must forgive me if I step on your feet.”

“I'll forgive you in advance. You look light as a feather, Lady Randolph.” He drops his hand to my waist as the rest of the couples line up.

“Were you in my cousin's regiment, sir?” I ask. “He has spoken very highly of his fellow soldiers.”

“I am a military doctor, my lady.”

Henry stands alongside us, partnered with Jane Dowling, and he leans toward me. “This is the man who saved my leg, Katherine, after I took a musket ball from the French. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't be fit to partner anybody.”

Though the music is unfamiliar, the lieutenant guides me

into it effortlessly. Even Henry, on his lame leg, manages ably enough with Jane. Is it just my imagination, or are they standing slightly closer than the other dancers? Certainly, her cheeks have taken on a high flush.

After a few turns, the lieutenant releases me, and another man in uniform takes my arms. I think we've met before, but I can't remember his name.

"And what do you think of England, Lady Randolph?" he says smoothly.

"I'm sure it will feel like home in time."

The soldier laughs. "I'm sure it will. And your brother? He seems to be enjoying England very much indeed."

I look down the line, to where George is gazing at his partner, a beautiful raven-haired girl.

Before I can respond, we have swapped again, and I'm partnered now with Henry. We spin and turn in time with the others.

"You're a natural!" he says. "I hope you have a hard heart."

"Why?" I ask.

"Because you're going to have to refuse an awful lot of proposals before this season is out."

I'm still wondering how to reply to that when he passes me on to a captain called Wilson. I'm starting to enjoy myself. It's nothing like the dances at home, with toothless Christopher on his flute, but the music is easy to follow, and I see Grace smiling proudly from the edge of the room. Jane and my brother dance together, both laughing aloud.

When it's time for Captain Wilson and me to part, he says, "I hope you will have many balls at Walthingham Hall, Lady Randolph. I'll be sorry if this is our last dance together."

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I look along the line to my next partner—and my eyes meet Mr. Simpson's. As I raise my brow in surprise, he looks suddenly flustered. His feet halt, then start again, out of time with the music, then tangle with those of Lieutenant Hastings to his right. He can't stop himself from falling at my feet.

The music plays on for a few bars, but when the dancers come to a halt, it does, too, in a discordant stutter.

"I think we have a tumbler!" bellows Lord Flint. His wife beside him lets out a peal of laughter.

As Mr. Simpson picks himself up, I reach to help him. But he pulls himself away, his eyes blazing blue.

"The lawyer's had a bit too much champagne, I think," says Captain Wilson.

"No, it was my fault," I say. "Forgive my clumsiness, Mr. Simpson; I think it distracted you."

He brushes himself down, unwilling to meet my eyes. "The fault is mine, Lady Randolph. I should not be here at all."

He's gone before I can speak, darting quickly through the main doors. As I watch him go, my mouth lifts into an imitation of a smile for the guests still watching me.

Then the music starts up again, and Mr. Simpson is forgotten.

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CHAPTER 3



AFTER THE LAWYER'S sudden departure, I find I have little energy for a ball. Though I do my best to dance, to smile, I'm relieved when, at a signal from the butler, the musicians begin to pack away their instruments. Grace sends servants to wake the sleeping coachmen, women in wilted silks lean drowsily into their husbands, and at last the long night is drawing to a close.

George, rosy with drink, throws an arm around my shoulders. "Nothing like being branded, Kat," he says, kissing me on the cheek. "But the only one with a pain on his backside is that lawyer fellow."

I frown at him, teasingly. "It's a long ride to London tomorrow, and I expect you to stay awake for it."

He gently musses my hair and leaves the ballroom, walking with the deliberate gait men use to disguise tipsiness.

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I see Henry nodding farewell to Mr. Dowling, who is deep in conversation with a gentleman I know to be a judge. Henry then bows to Jane, taking her hand. I watch the way his fingers linger, wrapped in hers, and the way Jane lifts her eyes to meet his. Yes, there's something there, for certain. I might be unused to this country, but love looks the same everywhere.

"A safe journey home," he says to her.

A few officers are departing together, and they jostle me lightly as they pass.

"My apologies, my lady," one of them says, turning. "But you can't blame us for our haste. The Beast of Walthingham preys on the wicked, they say, so we must rush straight to our beds."

"The Beast of Walthingham?" I say, my skin prickling at the strange name. For a moment I can see the strange shape in the trees again from my window.

"Gentlemen, please," says Grace from her place by the front door. "I advise you not to add the needless frightening of young women to your list of sins tonight."

The men bow at her as they exit, but I can see the sardonic curl of their smiles.

"What did they mean?" I ask my cousin. "What is the Beast of Walthingham?"

Grace sighs heavily. "It's a lot of nonsense. Your grandfather kept a small menagerie of exotic creatures on the estate, and they were sold off after his passing. Some of the servants like to fancy that an animal or two escaped first. Imagining the woods full of ravaging beasts gives a bit of flavor to life, I suppose."

Several ladies waiting to make their good-byes look

discomfited by her words. Henry has joined his sister, and he breaks in. "The only animal Grandfather was unable to sell was our African elephant," he says. "His rampages have been the ruin of our west wing, and we go through an extraordinary number of peanuts."

Grace shoos at her brother dismissively, and a few of the guests laugh. But a middle-aged woman in green satin pauses beside me, her lips pursed. "Your cousin's elephant can't explain what happened at Longbrooke," she says darkly.

I know that Longbrooke is a large farm that links to the eastern edge of the estate, a few miles from the house as the crow flies, but this is the first I've heard of any happenings there.

"Enough of that," says Grace, placing a hand on the woman's shoulder.

The visitor tugs it away. "A dozen head of sheep torn up in the night," she says. "Not even eaten. Just torn up, as if in spite."

The jollity of the conversation has suddenly turned ugly, and the faces around me are ugly, too: red with drink, features cast in shadow.

Then the illusion passes. These people are just tired, this woman overwrought. A young man attempts to pull her away from me, toward the door. "Mother, come. It's too late for silly stories."

"Where I'm from, wild animals are a regular nuisance," I say, with as much brightness as I can muster. "George was always running things off our land, and I've killed several rattlesnakes with a shovel."

The young man's uncomfortable silence is more than

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made up for by Jane's unladylike guffaw. She turns it unconvincingly into a yawn and looks over to where her father is still engaged in conversation with the judge. "I'm nearly asleep on my feet. Take the air with me, Katherine? I'd like to see the damage done to the west wing up close."

A signal to a servant to bring my coat, and we pass down the front steps into the cool of the night. The parkland is cast in darkness, shadows on shadows. A small part of me is afraid, but deliciously so, thinking of a wild beast stalking the grounds just beyond the house.

Jane takes my arm in hers as we pick our way across the quiet lawn. The air is fresh and cold, and the stars burn icily overhead. We cross great patches of lamplight thrown down from the windows, interspersed with silvery swaths of moonlight.

"May I ask you something of a personal nature, Katherine?" asks Jane.

With everyone else around me so stuffy, her question rather takes me by surprise. "By all means."

"Your father . . . he grew up here. All his life, he was surrounded by *this*." Her hand sweeps across the house, the grounds, encompassing the whole rich life of Walthingham. "How could he have given it all up to risk a life abroad?"

"I don't think he chose to give it up, exactly," I say slowly. "He just happened to choose the wrong wife. My mother was an innkeeper's daughter—they met by chance when his carriage broke down outside her family's tavern. My grandfather did not approve of the match."

Jane's eyebrows arch. "He must have learned to accept it in time, if all of this is now yours."

“A bit late, though,” I say. “I never met him. And I think my father would have liked to know he was forgiven before he . . . before they passed away.”

We reach the house’s west wing, in midrenovation after the destruction caused not by an elephant but by a felled oak tree, lightning-struck during a summer storm. The rebuilding is nearly complete, but great chunks of pale stone from the estate’s abandoned quarry still litter the ground.

Jane lays her little gloved hand on mine and looks up at the looming, unlit structure. “It’s rather unsettling,” she says. Then her face brightens. “So, did you meet any interesting men tonight, Kat? Any likely husbands for the lady of Walthingham Hall?”

She’s teasing me, I know, but her tone is fond and knowing.

“My brother was the one on display tonight, not me,” I say. “I’m far too young to think of husbands.”

She cocks her head, catching me in her frank gaze. “It would be nice if that were true, but trust me—a girl like you cannot remain unmatched for long.”

A girl like me? I have never felt less sure of what kind of girl I am. Not one ready to marry, that’s for sure. “I’m still adjusting to my life here; I can’t think of husbands just yet.” I remember the way she looked at my cousin Henry as they spun on the floor. “And what about you?”

“If my father has anything to say about it, I’ll be packed off to the first rich man who will have me,” she says ruefully. “He thinks only of providing for my material comfort—neither looks, conversation, nor a tendency toward regular bathing impresses him so much as an estate.”

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“But,” I venture, laughing, “what about the man you danced with tonight?”

“I danced with more than one, Katherine,” she says coyly—then dips her head, seeming to catch my meaning. “There isn’t much to say. Not a promise, exactly, but something very close to it.” Her eyes shine with suppressed happiness, and in that moment, she seems much younger and more vulnerable.

There’s a flash of movement just beyond the rocks. The laughter sticks in my throat. Squinting into the shadows, I see the shapes of three men approaching, one of them swinging what looks like a wine bottle from his hand. There’s something in their determined stride that I don’t like, and I take Jane’s arm. “Let’s keep walking,” I say firmly, as we move swiftly past the darkened west wing. I have the sudden, desperate feeling that we won’t be safe until we reach the lit side of the house.

Jane has spotted them, too. “Katherine,” she says in a whisper, and her hand tightens on my arm. The men are soldiers in smart uniforms. At five yards’ distance they step into the middle of the path.

“We thought you might want company,” says the tallest of the three, a man with a rosy neck and hair that looks nearly white in the moonlight. The other two are darker, and watch us with a hunger that’s worse than words.

When neither Jane nor I respond, the tall man gives an exaggerated bow. “You both look lovely tonight,” he says. “That is the kind of thing you girls like to hear, ain’t it?”

“Good evening, gentlemen,” I say curtly.

As I try to lead Jane around them, they block our progress. I think about screaming. Someone would surely hear.

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“It’s colder than expected,” I say, in a voice that’s steadier than I feel. “We’d like to return to the house.”

“Surely you’d prefer to spend an hour in our company.” The man jiggles his bottle, which contains something stronger than wine. I can smell it. “We’ve got something that’ll warm you up.”

I bridle at his words, and have a very Grace-like thought: Does he not recognize who I am? “Surely you’re mistaking us for some other women you’ve met tonight. My friend and I have no wish to enjoy your company.”

“You women like to think you’re so different, one from another,” says one of the dark-haired soldiers, a stocky man. “But when you get down to what counts, you’re all exactly the same.”

I hear Jane’s intake of breath, and a flash of hot rage overtakes me. “If you’ve ever met a woman who has endured even a moment of your company by choice, then she’s nothing like me. I’d rather spend an hour with my head in a hornet’s nest.”

In a flash, the shorter man lunges forward and grabs my arm. I slap his face hard, and he looks shocked for a moment before he reaches toward me again, his fingers hooking around my scarf. I lift my knee sharply, driving it into his groin.

Though he moans in pain, he still keeps hold of me. As I struggle I can see Jane from the corner of my eye, frozen in place. The man’s smell—tobacco and liquor breath—assaults me as I cringe away.

“Remove your hands at once.”

The man’s voice, coming from behind us, is honey in my

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ears. Struggling against the soldier's grip, I turn and see John, in his footman's uniform but no coat, standing upright and empty-handed.

"Bugger off, boy, and polish some boots," says the short man, letting me go to cradle the place between his legs. I quickly move to Jane's side, rubbing the tender skin of my throat.

John holds his ground, his face shadowed and unreadable. "First I'll escort the ladies back to the front of the house," he says.

I hear the dreadful *snick* of steel as the blond soldier pulls his sword. "Walk away," he says, his voice dripping disdain.

John stands straighter, moving slowly toward us. "I will not," he replies.

Just then, Henry rounds the corner of the house. When he sees us he pauses a moment, his eyes sweeping over our figures in the moonlight and the drawn sword. Then he speeds forward, despite the painful-looking roll of his hip, moving his body in front of Jane's.

"You call yourselves men of the king's army," he spits in a cold fury. "Put up your sword and leave at once, and do not expect to be welcomed at Walthingham again. You'll be lucky if you don't lose your commissions."

The sword wilts in the fair-haired soldier's hand, and his two comrades step back, their heads bowed, but make no move to leave. Henry reaches down and grabs a chunk of rock, lobbing it at their feet as though he were driving off dogs. "Get off this property! Now!"

The men slink back into the shadows of the house. My

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heart thumps painfully in my chest, and I can't stop touching my neck.

Jane clutches at Henry's arm, tears standing out in her eyes. "Thank you, sir. They were horrible. I . . . I could hardly breathe. . . ."

Henry steps close to her, shielding her with his arms.

"John, too, should be thanked," I say faintly, my heart still hammering. But when I look around to do so, he has vanished.

Henry murmurs to Jane, too softly for me to hear, as we walk back around the house.

As we move into view of the last few departing carriages, Henry, still supporting Jane, pauses. "Please allow me to speak to your father about this terrible event, Jane. It happened on our grounds, and I want the chance to apologize to him for it."

She nods without speaking, and Henry moves away toward Mr. Dowling.

"It was a horrible ending to a lovely evening," I say.

Jane attempts to smile. "Please don't think me forward, Lady Katherine, but should you want company, or find yourself in town, you must come and visit me. We girls should stick together."

"That would be lovely," I say.

She takes my hand, pressing it tightly between hers. "I mean it," she says, her eyes serious.

I smile back. Her offer seems heartfelt, and I wonder if it has something to do with the ordeal we have just endured together, or the bond she appears to share with my cousin Henry. In whatever case, I feel grateful to have made a friend

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this evening with whom I can speak freely. She is as unlike Grace as chalk is to cheese. “Will you be here for the shoot?” I ask her. “It’s in a few days’ time.”

Jane’s wry smile returns. “It’s hardly a pursuit I relish—blasting defenseless creatures from the sky for sport—but I can accompany my father if you wish.”

I draw my hand from hers. “Yes, you must,” I say.

“Coming, Jane?” calls her father.

“Yes, Papa,” she says, before leaning closer to me. “The dear old thing loves a good shoot. Luckily, so do the birds, when he’s brandishing his gun. I doubt he could hit a chicken at five paces.”

Laughing, I wish her good night, and she heads for her carriage.

While the horses take her away, I walk into the house and straight up the main staircase.

My room, lit by a crackling fire, is stifling after the crisp outdoors. Elsie dozes by the hearth, a book sprawled open across her chest. When I enter, she stands, yawning.

“Oh, Lady Katherine,” she says sleepily, tucking the book away. “Was the ball as lovely as you hoped?”

I struggle to think back to the warmly lit dance floor, the smiles of the crowd. A girl’s first ball ought to be remembered as a remarkable thing—and it was an experience Elsie could never share. I force a smile for her benefit. “It was beautiful. I’ll tell you about the dresses tomorrow.”

“You look very pretty,” she says wistfully. “I like your hair like that, all falling loose.”

Impulsively I reach for my fan, which rests on the dressing table. “Please, take this.”

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Her face falls. "Pardon, my lady?"

I continue to hold it toward her. "It's a gift, to show my gratitude. For everything you've done, everything you've helped me with since I got here."

She shakes her head and backs away, as if she's actually frightened of the fan. "I couldn't, my lady. It wouldn't be right."

"Nonsense," I say. "Please, take it."

After a moment her reluctance blooms into a smile so radiant I'm almost ashamed. She opens the fan and flutters it gently, her eyes tracing its pattern of Oriental silk.

I'm tired, but too restless to sleep. "You know a bit about me," I say, "but I know nothing of you. Have you been at Walthingham long?"

"Yes. I left my family when I was quite young."

"Do they live close by, then?"

She folds the fan shut and tucks it out of sight in her apron. "I don't have anyone to speak of," she says. "I did have a sister once, who came with me to Walthingham Hall, but . . ." Her voice trails off, and she stretches her fingers toward the fire. "But I no longer have any family to speak of, no."

The orphan in me longs to clasp her hands, but I know such intimacy would embarrass her. I stay silent as she helps me undress. She takes such pride in folding the heavy satin, in clustering the hairpins away into a gilded box. As the clock in the hallway strikes one, she bids me good night.

Stella is already lying at the bottom of my bed, caught in a dream. I gently pat her as she paddles the air with her paws. Tonight must go down as a success in Grace's eyes, and really, I tell myself, the ball itself wasn't so bad. I think Jane and

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I might become firm friends—though in truth, Elsie and I have more in common than anyone I've met since arriving at Walthingham.

I should be happy, cosseted by luxury, my every wish attended to.

I blow out the candle on the bedside table and watch the gray smoke drift.

I *should* be happy.

So why am I not?

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CHAPTER 4



Dear Aunt Lila and Uncle Edward,

Your faraway girl has been a bit further than usual these days, and for that I am sincerely sorry. You mustn't believe that I've grown too grand to write; George keeps me in line quite nicely, as does the fear of using entirely the wrong utensils in front of my very high-class cousins.

I hope the winter hasn't been too harsh, and that Geoffrey has recovered from his fear of the "big horse" after his recent fall. Though I can't say I entirely blame him—Bluebell always was a cranky thing. Aunt Lila, please let me know which colors you like best, because I plan on sending you something lovely for Anna's wedding this spring.

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How is Paul getting along without George to help with the horses? And how is Connor?

I pause a moment to read what I've written. After an initial flurry of homesick letters, in which I tried to portray for them the opulence of our new life, I've allowed contact with my guardians to trail off. With the time taken for the crossing, I won't hear back for many weeks anyway.

When this letter finally reaches her, will Aunt Lila show it to Connor? And if she does, will it tug at his heart just a bit, to see the paper where I've folded it, and to think of my life going on without him?

A sharp rap at the door makes me jump. The cup of hot chocolate at my elbow wobbles, but doesn't spill. Before I can answer, Grace sails in, attired for visiting. A belted salmon dress makes the most of her narrow waist, and under the wide brim of a matching hat, her face looks nearly pretty—but, as always, a bit too thin.

"I hope you slept well, cousin," she says.

"I had no choice," I say, smiling. "That mattress must be a foot deep."

In truth, my sleep was fitful, punctured with dreams as strange as the preceding events. Behind my eyelids, something paced with a heavy tread. I woke to the long, keening sound of a woman's scream—which faded to nothing as my dream deserted me.

Grace assesses me with a raised chin, as she always does, before nodding once. "You look very well," she says.

When she brought the hot chocolate, Elsie also carried in

a deep blue day dress, with a puffed bodice and split skirt revealing an underskirt of palest ivory. The days when I'd throw on the first patched dress that came to hand and keep it on until bedtime feel very far away; here there are rules even about the clothes one wears in bed.

Grace wanders over to the window.

"I've received many cards of thanks for last night's ball, and more than one contained admiring words about you, Katherine."

My cheeks redden, and she smiles, moving forward and cupping her hand beneath my chin.

"Such pretty roses," she says. "It's an accomplishment to bring color to your cheeks so easily."

At her touch, the memory of the drunken soldier's fingers at my throat ripples through me, and I close my eyes against it. Grace moves her hand from my chin to my forehead. "And now you've gone pale as can be. Katherine, do not move too frequently from the heat of the fire to the chill by the windows. It will make you ill quicker than anything."

Just then a racket of birdsong and shrieks from the distant aviary rends the air. As I hurry to the window, the distant shrilling fades into silence.

The air outside is lightly silvered with snow. Nothing stirs on the grounds or in the still woods just beyond. I wonder what startled the birds so.

Grace's voice comes sharp behind me. "Katherine."

I whirl quickly and find her clutching the necklace I wore the night before, which I'd left draped across my dressing table so it wouldn't tangle.

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“These items need to be locked up,” she says, then lowers her voice to a theatrical whisper as Elsie’s footsteps come tripping down the hall. “No matter how close we may keep them, servants cannot be fully trusted.”

I wonder if I should tell her now about the fan. She would not approve, I’m sure.

“Surely we can trust Elsie, Aunt Grace. She’s been here since she was just old enough to work, has she not?”

“No matter, my dear. More than a few of my late mother’s pieces have gone missing. Not even the most valuable ones, but often the prettiest. That’s how you know it’s a maid’s fingers at work.”

Arranging her hat more firmly atop her head, she goes to the door. “I’m off to visit a few friends who were not well enough for last night’s ball. If I’m not back by the time you leave for London, I wish you a pleasant trip.”

She says it in a way that suggests she’s anything but happy I’m going to the city. Grace has repeated several times that she doesn’t think London’s the place for an “impressionable” young girl.

I glance at the enormous traveling case beside the bed, which Elsie helped me pack. “Thank you,” I say. “I’m well prepared for every eventuality, as you can see.”

As I settle back down in front of the fire, the clock in the hall strikes nine, and I resolve to give George just one more hour in bed before I wake him myself. We can’t miss the mid-day coach from Bath if we’re to make the overnight stop in Reading.

Putting my letter aside, I spend the next hour reading by the fire. We had books on the farm, but nothing like here.

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The housekeeper, Mrs. Whiting, a sallow older woman with fading red hair, looked suspicious when I asked for a key to the library, but she grudgingly gave it all the same. Most of the volumes I came across were monstrously dull—collections of legal papers, or obscure histories of European culture—but among them I found the novels of Defoe and Scott.

I'm racing toward the end of *Robinson Crusoe* when the gilded grandfather clock in the hall strikes ten. Annoyed, I ring for Mr. Carrick to ask if he's seen George.

"I believe he's left for London, my lady," he says.

"Left? Without me?"

"He took breakfast early."

"But we're leaving together," I say.

Carrick frowns. "It seems that is not the case. May I help you in any other matter, my lady?"

When I shake my head, still mulling my brother's departure, Carrick swiftly takes his leave.

George isn't in his rooms. The fireplace in his bedchamber is empty, and the room is bathed in a cold gray light that makes me shiver.

Someone's walking over my grave, I think, and then close my mind to the thought. It's an old superstition, and not one that I believe in.

"Where *have* you gotten to, George?" I mutter.

I'm turning back toward the hall when I see the painting on his easel. It stops me midturn and fills me with an uneasy feeling.

The canvas is large, half-finished, and darker in every way than his usual works. I can see at once that it's a rendering of

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Walthingham's wintry woods. White birches curve from a dark plane of raw ground into a foreboding sky. Shadows gather among the twisted roots of the trees. Though the canvas is dominated by trees, the roots draw the eye. I stand a moment, staring into them, as if I might find something crouching there.

The swirls of paint still look a little fresh, and I press the back of my thumbnail lightly to its surface. It gives wetly to my touch. Surely yesterday's work would be drier by now, unless . . . unless he was out painting this morning. There's little in this dark canvas that speaks of the blue I spied on his wrist last night—but for a faint daubing right in the top corner, streaked with gray, a window of sky breaking through the gloom.

My cloak, gloves, and soft boots are laid out in my dressing room, ready for the trip to London. I layer them over my dress, not bothering to call for Elsie. Of course George hasn't gone without me. Carrick must be mistaken. My brother has never been one for timekeeping, always showing up long after supper had cooled, always vague with his plans. But a sister is not a missed meal—George wouldn't just leave me behind. I bound down the stairs, Stella at my heels.

The crisped snow squeaks beneath my heels as I stride toward the stables. I can smell the horses before I see them. The familiar warmth of packed hay and the animals' big bodies always calms me, and I take a deep breath as I pass through the stable gate. I hear the faint sound of nickering—then, beneath it, something else. A woman's laughter, teasing and low.

Peeking around the corner, I see a high bale of sweet,

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freshly turned hay . . . and atop it, my dressing maid, her hair falling from its bun and her arms wrapped tight around Matthew, the boy who stables our horses.

They must hear my gasp, because two faces turn toward me at once, one red and one pale as whey. Matt grabs his discarded hat from the straw, attempts the world's most sheepish bow, and flees into the nearest stall.

Elsie, not so quick, can barely meet my eyes as she stands, putting her clothes back into order. I have many long moments to inspect the stitching of my glove before she manages to speak. "Don't tell your cousin, I beg you," she whispers. "Or Mrs. Whiting. She'll send me away at once."

The housekeeper is even less tolerant of trespasses in etiquette than Grace is, and I have no doubt that Elsie's right.

"I won't tell anyone," I say. "Your secret is safe with me."

I raise my voice a bit, attempting to sound dignified. "Matthew, I'm traveling to Bath today. If you would, please have the carriage ready as soon as possible." I notice then that my brother's horse is not in his stall. "Where's Croxley?"

Matthew moves shyly back into view, peering over the stall door.

"Mr. Randolph must have taken him out. He was gone first thing."

First thing? We can't have gone to bed until one. "I hardly think my brother would have been riding in the freezing cold at dawn," I say.

"I'm afraid I wasn't here, my lady," he says. "I was polishing boots in the scullery."

The last I saw of George, he was tottering up the main staircase, clutching the banister like a man on the deck of a

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storm-tossed ship. And the last thing we spoke of was the trip to London, of taking it together—surely he could not have forgotten?

If I hurry, I can make the coach myself. When I catch up with him, my brother will have some explaining to do.

While Matt prepares the carriage, I walk back to the house to find John. I'll need a driver, and I'd much prefer it be someone I can talk to.

I'm halfway back when I see two men standing at the scullery door, speaking with John. There's something in their manner that makes me pause, then conceal myself in Walthingham's shadows before advancing. The pair should look comical next to each other—one tall and thin, the other short and nearly as thick around as he is tall—but their appearance does not inspire laughter. I judge them both to be in their forties, dressed in drab civilian suits of brown and black. The short man's neck overflows his collar, and the thin man has taken off his hat to reveal a bristling shaven head and small ears. They appear to have come on foot, which in these conditions strikes me as very odd indeed.

I creep closer, trailing my fingers against the rough stone wall.

"I've already told you once, and my answer will not change." The voice is John's. "The master of the house isn't in, and you have no business here until he's back."

"We'll keep coming back until we get what we came for," says the tall man, his voice perfectly even.

"You'll get exactly what you're owed," John replies. "But not while the master is away."

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He means Henry, I suppose—though my brother is lord of Walthingham Hall in name, he has not yet taken over the running of the estate.

The tall man eyes John for a long moment. I think of a dog with its hackles up, deciding whether to flee or fight. Finally he drops his shoulders, then stabs a finger into John's chest. "Mark my words, man. You will be seeing us again, and sooner than you'd like." His eyes flick upward toward the house, taking it in, and then he and his silent companion trudge away. I wait until they've rounded the corner of the house before walking on. John is rehangng a shelf against the scullery wall, hammer in hand.

"Don't worry, they didn't see you," he says. His tone is familiar, as it always is when I'm unaccompanied, but there's something heavy in it today.

"Who were those men? What did they want with Henry?"

"Them? They're nobody you need worry about. Just masons, here to discuss the renovations of the west wing. Though they would do better to start chasing down payment *after* they've completed the job, I think."

The story is a likely one, but it strikes me as false. "Indeed," I say.

In half an hour, the carriage is ready and John is checking over the tackle. Two black mares, sleek and blanketed, toss their heads and snort. John is dressed in a long coat and gloves, with a flat cap pulled down over his ears. I've told him I want to visit Jane Dowling—I will not give him the opportunity to dissuade me from chasing my errant brother.

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“You’re sure you’ll be warm enough?” he says as he helps me into the cushioned seats. Grace has insisted I bring two loose fur blankets, and I’m grateful for them.

“Enough,” I say. “I already feel guilty that you’ll be facing the elements while I’m tucked up in here.”

“It’s your place,” he says simply.

The avenue from the front of the house sweeps through the forest, running along high ground. In the dip before the house, below sculpted gardens, lies the lake, glassy and still. Already I’m feeling freer, just moments away from the house and its restrictions. Through the glass at the front, I see John seated above the horses, swaying with the carriage’s motion. Were I to need him, I could summon him by the bell-cord hanging close at hand. *My place*, indeed.

The rocking of the carriage has almost lulled me to sleep when a jounce over hard cobbles stirs me. We are descending toward the city. I see through the frosted glass the distant sweep of what must be the Royal Crescent, stately and ordered houses with columned porticoes bathed in sunlight. The snow on the road isn’t too bad, but the clouds above are the color of lead.

Impulsively, I ring the bell, and John brings the carriage to a halt. Opening the glass panel at his back, he peers down at me. “Everything all right, my lady?”

I open the carriage door and step out. “Move up,” I say, placing a foot on the mounting board.

“My lady?”

I climb up beside him, and he’s forced to shuffle along the seat.

“I’ve never seen the Royal Crescent before,” I say. “And the view’s much better from up here.”

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He laughs, a happy, unguarded sound. “Your aunt would not approve,” he says.

“We’d better not tell her, then.”

With a flick of the reins, the carriage lurches off, down the wide roads leading to Bath. Below us, people are going about their business with their heads down. The snow beneath their feet is churned and dirty, and more falls in fat wet flakes from the sky.

“You’re very good with the horses,” I say. “Easy with them, I mean.”

After a beat of silence, he responds. “Yes, I’ve been working with Walthingham’s horses my whole life, like my father before me. It was a good place to grow up.”

“And now that you’re grown?” I ask. “Will you stay there?”

“I should think so,” he says. “Until I marry, of course.”

He sounds so certain of himself that I smile. “Ah, you have someone in mind, then?”

As soon as I’ve said it, I wonder if it’s a clumsy question.

“There’s not so much to it. It’s just a matter of finding the right girl,” he says, without looking at me.

The right girl. If I were still the Katherine I was in Virginia, and John a farmer’s son from Paulstown—what then? Would we be like Elsie and Matt, sneaking off to the stables?

I flush, suddenly fearful that he can read my thoughts, and sit up straighter. “I mean to stay independent as long as I can,” I say. “I don’t wish to rush into a match.”

A gaggle of children in scarves and hats cross the road in front of us, and John has to rein in sharply to let them pass. When we’re moving once more, he seems to have lost the

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thread of our conversation. "We'll be at the Crescent soon," he says, nodding ahead.

"Oh, I must have misspoken. I don't wish to go to the Crescent."

"I thought you wished to visit Miss Dowling, my lady?"

"No, I won't bother her so soon after the ball," I say innocently. "I wish to go to the coaching house, where my brother would have departed from."

John frowns, and I know he isn't fooled. But, tapping the horse smartly with the reins, he does as I say. I am, after all, the lady of Walthingham Hall.

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CHAPTER 5



THE COACHING HOUSE is called the King's Head, and it's a two-story half-timbered building in the center of the city, nestled among shops and stalls.

I step carefully from the carriage into ice-crusting mud.

John jumps down at my side. "I'll come in with you, my lady."

"There's no need," I reply.

A steward directs me to a room near the main entrance, where a portly man is filling in a ledger behind a desk. He takes off his cap as I enter.

"Can I help you, miss?" he says.

I start to explain my predicament—that I'm looking to find the whereabouts of my brother, that I, too, should have been in the midday coach—when he holds up a meaty hand to interrupt me.

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“The coach couldn’t go today, miss,” he says. “Not with the snow.”

“Oh,” I say. “Then perhaps my brother went by a different route.”

“No coaches today at all,” he says. “It would be madness in these conditions.”

“You’re sure my brother’s horse is not stabled here? His name is Croxley. The horse, that is. A mahogany stallion.”

He glares at me above his eyeglasses, causing his chins to squash together impressively. “Quite sure, young lady. Now if you’ll excuse me.” He goes back to his ledger, paying me no further mind.

I leave the room, more troubled than before. If George isn’t in London, where can he be? What if he went out to paint and got lost in the woods? What if his horse slipped and . . . I shake my head sharply. I won’t let myself get carried away. He’s probably back at the house already, feet up, snug and warm. He’s going to laugh at me when I get home, blue with cold. *You should have left a note*, I’ll tell him. That will only make him laugh more.

I’m walking back to my carriage when a man beside a piebald stallion catches my eye. His shoulders are broad beneath a crisp black coat, and the wind has ruffled his dark hair into disarray. He says something I can’t hear to the steward beside him, and they both laugh.

With a start of recognition, I realize that it’s William Simpson—a man I hardly imagined capable of laughter. Beneath his open coat, he wears a dark suit with a buttoned waistcoat. When our eyes meet, I raise a gloved hand to greet him. His smile falters, and he gazes at me with surprise, and

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something else. Disappointment? Red color rushes into his pale cheeks as I walk determinedly toward him.

“Lady Katherine,” he says, with a small bow. “What are you doing here?”

His tone is faintly accusing.

“Mr. Simpson. How lovely to see you, too. I was looking for my brother.”

He lifts an eyebrow. “That makes two of us.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Mr. Simpson clutches a document case in one hand, and gestures to the coaching house with the other. “We were supposed to travel together to London,” he says.

“*You* were going with him?”

Mr. Simpson nods briskly. “He wanted someone to find him an agent in London, to arrange the sale of his paintings.”

“George never told me that,” I say, in a more accusing tone than I intended.

He bristles. “That is between you and your brother,” he says.

“And why didn’t you say anything last night?” I ask him playfully. “As I recall, we were looking at a painting together at Walthingham Hall.” I want to make him smile again, the way he did for the steward.

“There was no opportunity,” he says, and judging from his pained expression, I know he is remembering his hurried exit. This isn’t going well at all. “Perhaps you think I’m ill suited to the task?” he persists. “Though I may be just a lawyer, I’m not entirely unschooled in the sale of art.”

“No, of course not. That isn’t what I—”

“No matter,” says Mr. Simpson. “The coach was canceled

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in any case, and Lord Walthingham never arrived. When you see him next, do tell him that I'll be waiting on him here until the roads clear."

He nods to the steward, and walks back toward the coaching house.

The snow thickens as we make our way back through the countryside, and my unhappiness deepens with it. It's too cold to sit up beside John, and he answers my misery with a tactful silence.

My anger at George for being so inconsiderate mixes in my mind with frustration at Mr. Simpson's paranoid sensitivity. He *must* have a sense of humor, however deeply buried.

It's not long before we're cresting the final ridge before the estate's borders, and Walthingham's great facade becomes visible in the distance. Though it's beautiful, its pale stone and glass illuminated in the dying light, it looks cold. The unlit windows of the upper floors peer at me like empty eyes.

Suddenly, one of the horses whinnies and the carriage lists sharply to the left. I brace myself against the door as we clatter sideways across the road, finally bumping to a heavy halt against a copse of bare trees.

"Are you all right back there, my lady?"

"Yes, I'm fine!" I call. I fumble with the door at my back until it swings open, then climb carefully out. Were it summer, I imagine I could look straight up into an acre of green-golden leaves; as it is, the carriage rests among black brambles clustered around the sturdy trunks of ancient, snow-silvered oaks.

John's already moved toward the horses, pushing his face into theirs, crooning quiet things to keep them calm. "We've

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lost a wheel, my lady," he says. "Get back inside and keep as warm as you can. I'll go to the house and get help."

"I'll come with you," I say.

"No," he says firmly. Am I mistaken, or does he cast a nervous glance toward the forest? "What I mean is, His Lordship would have my guts for garters should anything happen to you. It's a cold slog up to the house from here."

I've walked miles in worse, but that's when I was just Katherine. "Very well," I say heavily, stepping back onto the mounting board.

I settle back into my crooked seat as John strides up the track. Sitting among my fur blankets, I'm overcome with self-pity. What a wretched end to a wretched day.

As my ears get used to the quiet, I notice the noises of the forest—faint crackles and snaps in the frigid air. The horses stamp their feet to stay warm, and I try to judge the time by the darkening sky.

Despite the furs, cold seeps into my toes and fingertips. Ten minutes pass—perhaps fifteen—before I notice that I can see my breath. How long could it take John to get to the house and back? Surely he should have returned by now.

Unless something has happened to him on the way. I peer through the window at the dark forest. The Beast is a myth, I remind myself—but what if John has stumbled and hurt himself? Or what if he came across a poacher?

Time stretches, out here in the snow. Flakes fall and vanish on the horses' backs, poor things. Their manes are tinged with white. I've learned over long Virginia winters to be wary about frostbite, and to watch for the moment when chilly wakefulness turns into dreamy fatigue. When I start to feel

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warm again, I know it's a bad thing. I clap my hands against my arms, stamp my feet to wake my legs. This won't do. I can't just wait to freeze.

So I climb out, lifting my heavy skirts clear of the snow's crust. I unhitch both horses and throw the blankets over their broad backs. It's been a little while since I rode bareback, and the larger of the mares stumbles a bit as I mount her, eyes rolling whitely in her head.

"Let's just take this slowly," I mutter.

I trot her up the track toward the house, leading the other horse close beside us. I daren't risk going any faster for fear of the ice that might be hidden beneath the snow.

Finally, frustrated by our slow progress, I lead the horses off the uneven road and down toward the lake. It's a quicker route, and the ground is softer. According to Henry, the lake was dug by our great-great-grandfather, to make the most of the tributary of the River Avon, which runs through the estate. My own grandfather constructed the elegant Palladian bridge that spans its center in a gentle arch. When I first saw it, I thought it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever laid eyes on.

There's a cruel beauty to the landscape. I think, not for the first time, how much I wish to see my new home in summer. "Maybe I could love it then," I whisper, not knowing I'm speaking aloud until the words are already said.

The lake is set like a geode into the snow, its icy black center lapping against the hard-set crystals at its shallow edges. The horses, for some reason, don't want to cross. I nudge the mare harder, and she gives in, taking tentative steps up onto

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the bridge. The house is just two hundred yards up the lawn now. Nearly there.

We're halfway across when a flapping of wings startles the horses.

A patch of the lake near its center teems with crows. Shabby in their black overcoats, they pick at its surface, like vultures scavenging for carrion. I gaze down at them, and then freeze. My eyes grow hot in my skull, and my fingers clench tighter on the reins.

Because now I can see that the crows are concealing something with their raggedy bodies. Something dark and unrecognizable, half-frozen into the ice. I dismount and, at the same time, see three figures speeding toward me from the house. It's John and Mr. Carrick and Henry. Not George. My brother isn't with them.

Horror steals over my heart as I move my gaze back to the lake.

It cannot be.

On the bank is an overturned boat, just a small thing for an oarsman and a single passenger. It's tied to a jetty by a thick rope caked in snow. I leave the horses whickering on the bridge.

John has broken into a run, away from the others, his feet kicking up snow as he descends. He's shouting something—my name, I think.

It cannot be.

I hook my fingers beneath the boat and heave it over. The rope is stiff as I unhook it from the mooring post. With a push, the boat slides from the bank and settles on the water, sending a ripple cracking through the ice.

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Then John is at my side, his arm around my shoulder.

“Lady Katherine,” he says, “please.”

I point speechlessly at the water, to the thing half-submerged in the grip of the ice. The crows screech at one another, hopping and swooping in their attempts to get closer to it.

“It’s just a deer, my lady,” says John. “They sometimes fall in when they try to drink. . . .” His voice breaks off, ragged.

And now I know for sure.

“What’s happening down there?” calls Henry. He’s moving more quickly now, pulling his bad leg through the snow.

I tug myself from John’s side and steady myself against the boat. Icy water pools around my boots as I climb inside. John follows wordlessly. He turns out the oars tucked into the boat’s sides and, with strong strokes, propels us through jellied black ice.

Henry calls to us from the shore, a single word that I don’t hear. I motion for John to row on, until we’re close enough to scare off the crows. He drops the oars with a clank into the rowlocks and pulls at my arm, trying to turn me around. “Don’t look.”

His voice is taut, made to be obeyed, but it’s too late. The body, in dark, waterlogged velvet, is facedown and still, but the hair crawls with faint, underwater currents. One hand taps noiselessly against the ice.

On its wrist is a stripe of cerulean blue.

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