

“*The Indebted Earl* is both beautiful and engaging, as the reader embarks on an adventure full of unexpected twists and turns. A diverse cast of new characters, and the return of a few we fell in love with in *The Gentleman Spy*, makes this a must-read for historical romance fans.”

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“Erica Vetsch has penned a captivating tale that stirred and satisfied my love of Regency from first page to last. With winsome characters, heart-tugging romance, and a dash of intrigue, readers will adore this final installment in the beloved Serendipity and Secrets series.”

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“Vetsch’s impeccable research and compelling Regency voice have made Serendipity and Secrets one of the strongest offerings in inspirational historical romance in years. The compulsive trilogy comes to a wonderful conclusion in a tale that packs as much adventure as it does heart. High emotional stakes, love lost and found, and an intelligent treatment of duty and honor will delight established fans while sweeping newcomers off their feet.”

RACHEL McMILLAN, author of *The London Restoration*
and *The Mozart Code*

“What do you get when you mix an injured naval captain with a grieving young woman and three orphans? A poignant love story filled with action, adventure, and heartwarming moments, that’s what. *The Indebted Earl* is going on my keeper shelf for sure!”

MICHELLE GRIEP, best-selling author of *The House at the End of the Moor*

“*The Indebted Earl* is a marvelous book. I love the way Erica Vetsch creates characters I care about. Get them deep into trouble, and in the end, loyalty, bravery, love, and faith save the day.”

MARY CONNEALY, author of *Braced for Love*, book one of the Brothers in Arms series

“Thoroughly researched with genuine, well-wrought characters, *The Indebted Earl* is a don't-miss read! Vetsch's rich writing and carefully crafted story sweep the reader into Regency England with all the delights of this fascinating genre. This third volume in her Serendipity and Secrets series brings a satisfying resolution to the trilogy.”

JAN DREXLER, award-winning author of *Softly Blows the Bugle*

Praise for *The Lost Lieutenant*
Serendipity & Secrets Book 1

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“A riveting Regency read, with captivating characters that will tug at your heartstrings.”

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SERENDIPITY & SECRETS

The Lost Lieutenant
The Gentleman Spy
The Indebted Earl

SERENDIPITY & SECRETS

The
INDEBTED EARL



ERICA VETSCH



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The Indebted Earl

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CHAPTER 1

Military Hospital
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June 15, 1814

IF IT GOT any hotter, the Royal Navy would have to ship him home in a flask.

Captain Charles Wyvern dabbed the sweat from his temples with his already-soaked handkerchief as he entered the military hospital. What wouldn't he give to be aboard his vessel, palms braced against the rail, taking the sea breeze full in the face?

Those days were still a fair bit off, but he *would* experience them again. He fisted his hand around the square of cloth, his mouth firming. It would take determination and patience, but those he had in abundance.

First he must recover fully from his wounds, get to London, and finally appeal to the Admiralty to give him another command. Formidable tasks, but he was making progress on the first one, at least. Charles entered the ward where he had so recently been a patient, and halfway down the crowded row of billets he found the bed he sought.

Guilt settled like a twelve-pounder in his gut as he inhaled the cloying scents of orange blossoms and dust, carbolic and sweat. Though he had been discharged nearly a week ago to complete his recuperation in the officers' quarters in Oporto, Charles faithfully returned to the hospital every day to attend his friend Major Richardson. For weeks they had lain side by side, sharing the miseries and camaraderie of military hospital

life. Major Richardson had led the Royal Marines aboard Charles's last command.

But each had been tacking on a different course since arriving at the hospital. As Charles had improved, Richardson had declined. Again Charles felt the sinking weight of guilt. It was his fault Rich was here at all. If only he hadn't been complacent, had followed through on protocols, most likely neither would have been injured and Rich wouldn't now be dying.

He reached Richardson's cot and pulled up a chair. The young officer's hollow cheeks, his taut, yellowed skin, and the way his body seemed sunken into the bedding all spoke of his waning condition. The chair creaked as Charles sat, and Richardson stirred, his eyes fluttering open.

"How are you faring today, Rich?" Charles kept his voice quiet. The way his comrade looked, even a whisper might cause him pain.

"Still here, Captain."

The rasp in his throat had Charles reaching for the water pitcher, and he dipped the corner of a towel into the water and let a few drops dribble into Rich's mouth. Charles smiled that Rich, though given permission weeks ago, couldn't quite bring himself to call his captain by his first name. It wouldn't be proper, he'd said. He wouldn't want anyone to think he was trading on their friendship and treating the captain cavalierly.

"Thank you." A weak smile touched Rich's cracked lips.

"What else can I do for you?" Charles didn't wait for Rich to ask, easing him up in order to flip his pillow. Though the coolness wouldn't last, it had to feel better for a while.

Rich grimaced as he lay flat again. "How are you, sir?" His voice was as thin as a frayed rope.

"I'm coming right." Charles rolled his shoulders slightly, wincing as familiar pain—though much reduced—arced across his shoulders. He'd received a rather nasty slice from a cutlass during the capture of a French vessel, and the injury had taken far too long to heal.

Charles didn't know how to tell Rich he'd received the all clear to head back to Britain. An anchor lodged in Charles's chest every time he considered leaving the dying marine behind.

After all, Rich had saved Charles's life at the expense of his own.

Charles had thought Rich would have passed on by now, and yet he lingered. Day after day his body fought to keep its tenuous grip on this world, retreating in protracted increments. Though he had fought valiantly, he would soon have to strike his colors and raise the white flag.

Charles shooed away the incessantly buzzing flies and touched Rich lightly on the shoulder. When they had first been transported together to the hospital in Oporto, the major had been hopeful. He'd taken a musket ball to the right side, and though in considerable pain, had remained cheerful and expectant of restoration to health. He'd maintained that hope, holding on to the thought of all he had to return home to in order to keep his spirits up.

"Sophie?" Rich asked.

"Of course." Following their well-worn routine, Charles opened the sea chest under the table beside the cot and withdrew a packet of envelopes. "I'll read the latest."

He unfolded the letter dated two weeks before. One nice thing about being on the beach, the mail arrived regularly. Charles received no mail, not having anyone left to write to him. When he had first gone to sea, his mother had penned a note twice a year, but when she passed away, his mail had stopped. Any news from home was welcome aboard ship, and it was common to hand letters around the officers' mess, or at least read aloud snippets of a less personal nature.

Clearing his throat, he read to the major:

Dearest Rich,

Summer has *finally* arrived in Oxfordshire. The gardens are a riotous glory of color, so heartily greeted after the drab and cold winter refused to take the hint it had overstayed its welcome.

Is it wrong that I love the informal gardens, bursting with flowers run amok, far more than the parterre garden at Haverly with all the box hedges perfectly trimmed and every sprout consigned to its well-planned spot? The more serendipitous garden at Primrose Cottage suits my temperament better, I think, allowed to roam and bloom and burst forth when and where it pleases.

Mother would say it is my undisciplined ways leading me

The INDEBTED EARL

to embrace unruly flower gardens, but I prefer to think of the blossoms—and my ways—as adventurous rather than rebellious. Spending time in the informal gardens speaks to my soul, and I find peace and inspiration there. After all, it is our special place, and I long for the day when we will wander its free-spirited paths once more.

Our darling Mamie is well enough. She occasionally drifts into a sort of twilight of thought where she appears to see memories from the past with more clarity than her current surroundings, but then she is back, not realizing she's been gone. The physician assures me this is normal for an aging person, though perhaps on the early side for a woman of Mamie's years. He says I am not to worry. Have you noticed how often people tell you not to worry, even when there is something definitely worrisome occurring? Still, the doctor is a dear man, and he is so gentle and kind with Mamie.

Mother is still not resigned to me fulfilling my promise to you of caring for Mamie while you are gone. She doesn't understand it is so much more than mere obligation. I truly love Mamie, and I am honored you would put your dear mama into my care until you return.

Marcus and Charlotte have arrived from London to inhabit the manor for the summer. Charlotte is now in "a delicate condition." Why can't we just say she's going to have a baby? Why must we be coy, with little side glances to invite people in on the secret we all know? So silly. I prefer plain speaking myself, but then again, you know that as well as anyone. My brother smiles indulgently when I speak my mind, but Mother gets a pinch-mouthed look that says she wishes I didn't vex her patience so much. You have always encouraged me to share what I'm thinking and feeling and wondering about, and you never quash me or tell me to spend less time talking and more time listening. It's one of the many reasons I love you.

In addition to Marcus and Charlotte, Mother and Cilla and little Honora Mary have returned from London. They are living

in the dower house. I do wonder about Cilla, whether she is content to live with Mother for the rest of her days. I hope a handsome and kind man will someday stride into her life and love her and Honora Mary the way they deserve and take them away from Haverly so she can live her own life. Not that she seemed unhappy wed to Neville. But he was so much like Father, reluctant to show emotion, more consumed with his role as the heir than anything else.

Honora Mary has grown, no longer content to sleep in her cradle for much of the day. She has too much exploring to do. Though she cannot yet crawl, she has discovered a talent for rolling that brings her closer to the item she wishes to investigate. I have a feeling that when she can walk, we'll all be required to chase her about to ensure her safety. She looks so much like Neville, it almost hurts. Cilla says she is glad because she has something tangible to remember her husband by. I think I can understand how she feels.

There are times when I wish we had given into impulse to marry in haste rather than listen to Mother and wait until your next extended leave. Even now I might have a little one underfoot with your eyes and my thirst for adventure.

Another change has occurred at Haverly Manor. Mother and Charlotte have embarked upon a campaign of reform, and you'll never guess. They've brought a coterie of ladies from the city to train as domestics in the main and dower houses. The ladies are former Cyprians . . . there, another delicate euphemism. They were prostitutes, Rich. Charlotte hopes to help women leave that life and find better ways to support themselves, and she will give them letters of character when they complete their training. Many are the dependents of killed or wounded veterans, which makes their plight all the more tragic. I can only imagine what it must be like to be in their situation.

I wish Charlotte every success in this endeavor. It has actually relieved my mind somewhat, because Mother has decided to champion these efforts, and as a result, she's too busy "redeeming"

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these women to fuss overly about me. She has only mentioned my leaving your home and Mamie and returning to Haverly a handful of times since she arrived.

You've instructed me not to fret about you, nor to ask after your recovery, and yet I find that quite impossible. So many soldiers are arriving home since Paris has fallen and the war on the Peninsula is won. Now that Napoleon has been defeated and will be exiled from France, the entire country is in quite the uproar. I wish you were here to experience it. There are celebrations everywhere from St. James's Palace to the local public houses. People can hardly believe the war is finally over. After so many years, I wonder if Britain will know how to exist without the danger.

But it is you I worry about, especially since this Captain Wyvern has taken to writing your letters for you. Are you still unable to put pen to paper yourself? Not that I am unappreciative of the captain's efforts, and please do tell him so. Though his penmanship is difficult to decipher. It has become a sort of code-breaking exercise Mamie and I thoroughly enjoy, even going so far as to employ her quizzing glass when we encounter a particularly scrawling bit. Don't tell the captain. I would not like him to think we make sport of him or do not appreciate his efforts on your behalf.

We miss you terribly, and we long for the day when you will come walking up the drive. We have been making a few small preparations for your homecoming here at Primrose Cottage. Mamie instructs Mrs. Chapman every day to be ready to bake your favorite plum duff dessert. For myself, I anticipate the moment when I will look into your eyes, press my hand to your chest to feel the steady beat of your heart, and know all is right in my world again.

Charles glanced up. The major's eyes were closed, his chest barely moving as he breathed. Had he heard the words read to him?

Heaviness weighed Charles's wounded shoulders at the thought of the

woman who had written this letter receiving the news she would never again see the man she loved and had pledged to marry upon his return from battle.

War was most cruel.

While Charles felt it wrong that Rich wouldn't allow anyone to tell his fiancée the truth about his condition, he respected his friend's wishes. But he did so regretfully, resisting the temptation to inform her privately, hoping to somehow soften an un-softenable blow.

For weeks Rich had held on to hope that he would recover, and thus hoped to save Sophie's worrying over nothing. When it became more and more apparent that he would not heal from his wounds, he feared Sophie would try to come to him in Portugal. As the sister of a powerful duke, she might have prevailed upon her brother to see her safely to the Peninsula now that peace had been won, and Rich would not have Sophie see him in such a state. "She must remember me as I was."

Though he should have folded the letter and returned it to the chest now that Rich had fallen asleep, Charles hesitated. He scanned the pages until he found again the place his name was mentioned. Lady Sophia wasn't wrong when she noted his poor handwriting. He'd received a fair few complaints from the Admiralty on the subject over the years when he'd turned in his logbooks after each voyage.

Lady Sophia Haverly. A duke's daughter, a baron's fiancée, a true English rose.

Dare he admit how much he had looked forward to mail arriving aboard ship and here at the hospital? Richardson had been generous in reading portions of her letters aloud in the wardroom aboard the *Dogged* over the months. Charles suspected half the officers on the ship nursed a *tendresse* for the major's fiancée. Or at least the idea of her, with her quick wit and breezy writing style.

Not that he himself had succumbed to the charming missives beyond a mild interest. They were always sunny, always encouraging, bits and bobs of life in their Oxfordshire village. The concepts were mostly foreign to Charles, who had known no other life but the sea since he was a child. He'd joined the Royal Navy at twelve, making his way up from powder monkey to captain over the span of twenty-four years. As such, he was

almost a foreigner in his own country when he found himself ashore in England.

Here in the hospital, as Rich's condition had worsened, the major had asked Charles to read the letters aloud, and eventually to pen the replies. The last letter Charles had composed had been almost entirely his own creation, Rich being too weak to contribute much to the epistle.

Charles had described the flowers outside the hospital, the orange blossoms' overpowering scent from the grove near his billet, and the bustle of the port—anything he thought might interest the young noblewoman. Was it lying not to reveal Rich's true condition? A bond existed between Charles and this woman he had never met, for they both cared for Rich. Charles had never written a letter to a young lady before, and he wasn't sure if he was executing the task correctly. He felt odd ending the letter with an endearment or two, hoping he could put into words what he knew Rich felt for his lady.

He sighed. If it weren't for him, Rich would be hale, hearty, and most likely walking up that drive in Oxfordshire, ready to resume his life as a baron and marry Lady Sophia.

Charles's fingers brushed the signature on the letter. Unlike himself, Lady Sophia Haverly wrote a beautiful hand, and her name was as feminine and appealing as her correspondence. Her words and the images they created set up an odd longing in his heart that he didn't quite know what to do with, making him homesick for a place he had never been. As a battle-hardened sea captain, full of salt and tar, he shouldn't be interested in the words of a young woman he'd never met, a woman more than a decade younger than himself, and most importantly a woman betrothed to a dying man who was his friend.

Such thoughts were both frivolous and unworthy. He shook his head, reminding himself he had no attachment to this young woman in her bucolic village. He was a mere conduit at this point, taking dictation to send to her, reading her words aloud to her intended. Her letters were a pleasant distraction from the tedium of hospital life, a bit of a novelty in his seagoing experience. Anticipated and enjoyed now but soon forgotten once he was aboard ship once more.

Even as he told himself this, he knew it wasn't true. He would not

forget Lady Sophia, nor the light she had brought into the lives of himself and his officers through her words.

Tucking her letter into its envelope, he placed it with the others back into Rich's sea chest—locker, he supposed it was called on land. The movement caused tightness across his shoulders but not the agonizing searing of previous weeks. The long wound had needed two separate surgeries to open, clean, and drain, but he had finally reached the point where every movement wasn't torture.

He checked the clock on the opposite wall. If he had been aboard his beloved HMS *Dogged*, the duty officer would be sounding the changing of the watch. Sadly, with the injury to her captain, the *Dogged* had been turned over to another's command. By this time she was probably berthed at Plymouth or Portsmouth with only a skeleton crew, the rest of his men ashore and scattered.

Would he get his ship back, or, with the cessation of hostilities, would he be set ashore as well? If he were beached for any length of time, what would he do with himself? His life was at sea, and it was all he wanted.

The surgeon entered the ward. Why did the man always appear to have been dragged through a gun port backward? Hair on end, clothes rumpled, instruments spilling from his pockets. Nothing shipshape about his appearance. He'd soon find himself on the wrong side of a disciplinary hearing if he were in Charles's chain of command.

"Good day, Captain." The surgeon consulted a small notebook. "I didn't expect to see you here now that you've been cleared for release back to England."

Charles shot a glance at Rich, but the major didn't appear to have heard. "Pettigrew." He dipped his chin in greeting.

"I was thinking of you earlier today as I performed a procedure on a cavalry soldier who isn't progressing as well as I had hoped. He, too, had a saber slash, but on his chest. I had to reopen him and extract a piece of his uniform embedded deep in the wound. Now the debris is removed, I can only hope he heals as well as you have."

Charles quelled a shudder. Lord willing, he would never have to endure such medical treatment again. The second surgery to drain and clean

the wound had nearly done him in. It had been all he could do not to disgrace himself by crying out during the procedure.

“I envy you returning to Britain soon. I shall be posted here until the last man either recovers or passes on, I suppose.” The surgeon heaved a martyred sigh that set Charles’s teeth on edge. “What wouldn’t I give to be home right now.”

Home. The word set up a restlessness in Charles that he didn’t know how to sort. His home was at sea aboard whatever ship he served. There was the ancestral estate in coastal Devonshire, but he had never been there. And the old earl, his uncle, wouldn’t want to see him anyway. In a few days, Charles would arrive ashore in Britain, a stranger in the land of his birth, with no plans beyond trying to get back to sea as quickly as possible. Pray the good Lord would show favor and have him commanding a deck again soon. This lack of direction was most disturbing.

The doctor moved to Richardson’s side, his expression grave. Lifting the man’s wrist, he felt for a pulse. The major’s breaths were shallow, barely enough to stir the sheet across his chest.

“Has he awakened at all today?”

“I gave him a sip of water and read a bit of one of his letters to him not long ago.”

After consulting his notebook once more and jotting a few lines, the doctor stuffed it into his bulging pocket and dragged his hands down his face. “I expect to receive notice he’s slipped away every time I make my rounds. He’s got a tenacious heart, but his systems are shutting down. It won’t be long now. Probably tonight or tomorrow.”

When the doctor left, Charles sat quietly beside his friend, his thoughts drifting like flotsam on the tide as he listened to Rich’s quick breathing and shooed away flies. When an orderly wheeled the dinner cart down the row of beds, Charles stirred. Long hours had passed with barely a notice from him.

“Sir?” The orderly raised his brows. “The night doctor doesn’t like visitors staying into the evening.” He spoke hesitantly, his eyes moving between Richardson and Charles.

“Understood.” Charles made no move to rise.

The orderly dithered, tugging at his earlobe.

“Corporal, if the night doctor has a problem with my presence, send him to me.” Charles made up his mind he would stay with his friend until the end. He owed the young man that and so very much more. If the sawbones posted to this ward didn’t care for his presence here, it would be too bad for him.

The orderly nodded. “Very good, sir. Can I bring you anything?” He inclined his head to Rich’s frail form. “I’m glad someone will be with him, sir.”

“A pitcher of fresh water wouldn’t go amiss, Corporal. When you’ve time.”

The man knuckled his forehead and pushed the dinner cart down the row.

Rich’s hand fluttered, and Charles touched the paper-dry skin.

“Yes? What is it?” Charles asked softly.

“Promise me . . .” The young major’s throat lurched, and his tongue darted out to touch his cracked lips.

Charles gave Rich a few drops of water, their heads close together. He startled when Rich’s eyes flew open and bored into his from such close range. With a surprisingly strong grip, the marine grasped Charles’s wrist.

“Promise me . . .” He stopped, clearly gathering his wherewithal for one last charge. “Promise me you’ll go see Sophie. Tell her . . . what happened to me.”

Go see his fiancée? No. Charles wanted no part of that. Rich wouldn’t let him tell her via letter, and now he wanted Charles to go see her? How could he possibly? If he faced her, he would have to tell her the truth . . . that Rich had lost his life protecting him.

But Richardson wasn’t finished. Gasping, as if determined to speak his piece before it was too late, he said, “Promise me you will tell her how much . . . I loved her. Take her my things . . . and tell her I was thinking of her when I died.”

No. Please, no. Don’t ask it of me. If you ask, I will be honor bound to say yes.

Despite being parched as an old gunnysack, tears formed at the corners of Rich’s eyes and slowly rolled toward his ears.

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Then he fired the shot that hit Charles amidships and holed him below the waterline.

“Promise me you will take care of her after I’ve gone. She always tries to take care of everyone else, but promise me . . . you’ll look after her. I trust you, Charles. You’ve always been a good friend to me. Be a good friend to Sophie . . . Take my place . . .”

His eyes pled with Charles, his hand shaking. How could Charles refuse his friend’s dying request? And yet how could he fulfill it?

“Rest easy, Rich. I promise I’ll call on her. I’ll do whatever I can for her.”

The words had barely escaped Charles’s lips when Rich’s eyes closed, his grip slackened, and he let out one last, long breath.



Lady Sophia Haverly shook the vicar’s hand, barely seeing him through her black lace veil as they stood on the steps of the little chapel on her brother’s estate.

It had been decided the memorial service should be kept small, with only a handful of mourners, and Sophie was thankful. She couldn’t have borne it if the chapel had been crowded with the merely curious.

Sophie descended the stone steps, not feeling her shoes on the treads. Sunshine filtered through the oak trees, creating dappled patterns on the crushed-stone path leading toward the lych-gate into the cemetery. The lych-gate where no bier would be placed. Rich had succumbed to his wounds in Portugal, and he had been buried there.

They had no body to commit to the ground here in England.

As a Royal Marine, Rich had done his fighting mostly at sea, and she had known the war could take his life at any moment, and if that occurred when he was aboard ship, he would be buried at sea. That there would be no graveside service for his mourners. She had thought she was prepared for this.

She had been wrong. Nothing had prepared her for this.

Sophie felt as if her insides consisted of a carefully assembled house of whist cards, and if she moved too quickly or even stepped too firmly,

the cards would tumble and flutter away. Since learning of Rich's death, she concentrated nearly every minute of every day on not letting the cards tip.

The rest of the mourners filed out behind her, Mother and Cilla, Marcus and Charlotte, and Mamie. Each dressed somberly, careful of what they said so as not to cause more pain.

Sophie didn't know if more pain was possible.

Mother stalked forward and embraced Sophie awkwardly. She was not one to show physical affection, but Sophie appreciated the attempt.

"I hope you'll soon give up this nonsense about staying on at Primrose." Mother stepped back, adjusting her veil to frame the gray curls clustered around her face. "There's no need to continue living there when you have a family to look after you."

"Thank you, Mother. I am content where I am for now." Sophie couched her refusal as kindly as possible.

With a concerned frown, Mother turned to her carriage. Cilla sent Sophie a compassionate look and a small wave before following her mother-in-law.

Charlotte was next, and she hugged Sophie tight, a gesture that nearly did Sophie in. "I'll call tomorrow. Try to rest." Charlotte's jade-green eyes were full of words she wanted to say, but she was kind enough not to let them out just now. Sophie squeezed her fingers and nodded, blinking hard.

She took Mamie's hand, tucking it into her elbow, and walked toward the carriage her brother had provided for the day. Black paint gleamed, the horses' black hides too, and the ostrich feathers fastened to their bridles were black as ink. And yet the sun shone and the wind rustled the leaves overhead. Water splashed in the distance, where it tumbled over the mill wheel. How could the rest of the world go on when hers felt like it had ended?

"I remember when we brought him here for the first time." Mamie, her shoulders bowed under her shawl, took small steps, and Sophie shortened hers to match. "The baby I thought I would never have. I was well past forty, after all. But then God answered my prayers, and there I was, old enough to be a grandmother, bringing my newborn son to this chapel for his christening." Her voice held no sorrow, only memory. "It was a

warm day, like this. Warm enough it rained in the afternoon, and all the guests scurried inside the house like chickens into a coop.”

Her soft lips twitched, and her blue eyes, faded now but reminiscent of Rich’s, sparkled. “I wasn’t sorry Lady Gainsford was the last into the house. Her hat was properly destroyed by the rain. She kept asking all day, wasn’t I just mortified to be having a child at my age and didn’t I think it a bit irresponsible of me? The woman hadn’t an inkling how long I had prayed for a baby of my own, and how I had given up hope of ever being a mother. That woman always had something spiteful to say, though she phrased it as concern.”

Sophie squeezed Mamie’s hand. “How could anyone be spiteful to you, pet? And thank you for telling me about Rich’s christening. I hadn’t realized it had taken place here. Mine did too, you know. Not that I remember it.” She smiled, though she didn’t want to. She carefully raised her heavy veil—provided by her mother for the occasion—and draped it back over her bonnet and away from her face. She took a deep breath. Or at least she tried to. It seemed she hadn’t been able to breathe properly for days.

When the news had come—brought by her brother, Marcus, the Duke of Haverly—Sophie had known before he spoke what he would say. The look in his eyes was enough. Her tears had started before a word was said. Marcus had taken her into his arms and held her tight, his chin resting on her head. Rich would not come home. All their plans were shattered, as was her heart.

Over the past few days, Mamie had fluttered and gripped Sophie’s hands until they hurt, staring into her eyes, searching for reassurance and clarity. She spent much time in silent grief, remembering, and some retelling stories of Rich’s childhood. Sophie worried the sorrow would have her retreating from reality into those shadowy places where she couldn’t remember the present and lived solely in the past.

As a result, Sophie determined to carry her sorrow inside, to not let Mamie see her distress. She would allow Mamie to relive her happy times, and she would carry her own grief quietly. Sophie had promised Rich she would take care of his mother, and she intended to keep her promise. Her responsibility didn’t end with Rich’s death. If anything, it was greater now.

The gravel crunched behind them, and Marcus caught them up as they reached the carriages. “Are you going to insist upon returning to Primrose Cottage?” Brotherly concern laced his words.

“We’ve been through this, Marcus. I don’t know who is more strident on the matter, you or Mother.” Sophie kept her tone patient and calm.

He raised one eyebrow, tilting his head in mock censure. “There’s no need to go that far, comparing me to Mother. I am aware we’ve discussed this several times, and yet you still remain obstinate. Your rooms are ready at Haverly, and Charlotte wants you to come to us.” He spread his hands in appeal. “How can I convince you? Tell me what to say to make my argument, and I will say it.”

“You’re a dear, Marcus, but my place is with Mamie, and Mamie’s place is at Primrose. I gave my word. You must understand that.”

Mamie’s head came up at the mention of her name, and her eyes, so innocent and childlike, searched for Sophie’s.

Sophie patted Mamie’s arm gently and nodded to the footman who stood ready to help her into the carriage. “Why don’t you get in, and I’ll join you shortly.”

Sophie turned back to her brother, tucking her arm through Marcus’s, pressing his elbow into her side. “Thank you for being such a rock. I don’t know how I would’ve gotten through this week without you.”

Her brother pulled her into his embrace, his chest rising on a deep breath. “I wish I could do more. I wish you didn’t have to walk down this path at all, and I wish you wouldn’t insist upon walking it alone. I wish you would come home where I can look after you properly.” He spoke into the top of her bonnet, hugging her as if he would take her pain upon himself if he could.

She chuckled, her laugh shaky. “That’s a lot of wishes.”

“You know you could bring Mamie with you.”

She leaned against him, drawing strength, as she had so often over the years. Before Rich had stolen her heart, Marcus had been the center of her world: brother, best friend, confidant, partner in crime. The two of them, second and third children of the Duke and Duchess of Haverly, had relied upon one another for affection and attention, since little was forthcoming from their parents. Eight years apart, Sophie had needed Marcus more

than he did her. When he'd gone to university and then into the military, she had ached with the loss.

Then she had met Rich, the boy who lived next door to the Haverly estate, and in him she had found a kindred spirit. Her loneliness had vanished, and their friendship had blossomed into something more.

Son of a baron, he had not been her mother's idea of a suitable match for a duke's daughter, but when Sophie refused to be moved on the subject, the duchess had raised her hands in surrender. Father hadn't cared much one way or the other, happy enough to have her future settled.

"I shall be fine, Marcus." She eased out of his embrace, not sure she spoke the truth. "Thank you again for all you've done."

"At least come back to Haverly for one night. Or for luncheon."

She shook her head. "You will only try to prevail upon me to stay. I do appreciate your offer, but I must be with Mamie at Primrose. It is where she feels most comfortable. It is her home, and now mine too."

Marcus squeezed her tightly once more and brushed a kiss on her forehead. "You always were a stubborn child." He cupped her shoulders for a moment and then helped her up into the coach. Closing the door, he rapped on the side, and the coachman put the horses into a walk. It was unseemly for the carriage to hurry under the circumstances.

Sophie leaned back against the squabs and closed her eyes. *I don't think I've ever been this tired. Yet every time I lie down and close my eyes, my mind won't let me sleep. There are so many things to see to yet.*

"It was a lovely service, wasn't it? The vicar said such nice things about my boy." Mamie stared out the open carriage windows, a faraway look in her eyes.

"It *was* a lovely service. And everyone has been so kind." Sophie kept her voice even and pleasant so as not to upset sweet Mamie, but she wanted to leap from the slow-moving carriage and run all the way to the haven of Primrose Cottage, where her memories of Rich were the most vivid. She wanted to curl up in her bed and reread his letters, cry when she felt like it, and not have to be strong for anyone.

The coach plodded on. As they approached the cottage, the sound of the horses' hooves dulled. The gardener had spread straw on the gravel path to deaden the noise.

Mrs. Chapman met them at the door. “I’ve lain on tea in the drawing room.” The housekeeper raised her arm and barely refrained from putting it around Lady Richardson, a breach of protocol that would be unprecedented and probably embarrassing for both parties.

Sometimes Sophie hated protocol. It kept people from being natural with one another.

“Thank you, Mrs. Chapman.” Sophie removed her hat and gave it to the housekeeper. “It was a lovely service.”

“Donnie and I and the girls had a moment of silence when they rang the bells.” She sniffed and touched the corner of her eye with her little finger. Donnie was the gardener, and “the girls” were the laundress and the upstairs maid, who came in daily from the village.

Sophie led Mamie into the drawing room. Everywhere she looked, there were mementos and memories of Rich. His seashell collection, gathered on various holidays to visit his mother’s family on the Devon coast. A cricket ball on the mantel, trophy of his school’s triumph in some match or other. His favorite books. A painting he’d purchased because he had liked the look in the dog’s eyes.

But they were more than possessions. Sophie had worked so hard to keep Rich present for herself and for Mamie while he was deployed, it was as if he were still here. Not a spirit or ghost. Sophie didn’t believe in such things. It was all the memories, the hope of his return, the promises for the future they had made that still seemed current. As if nothing had changed, and yet everything had.

She was both comforted and cast adrift.

Mamie eased into her favorite chair. “Thank you, Sophie, dear.”

“You’re welcome, Mamie, but for what?” Sophie knelt beside the older woman, taking her hand. Had the day been too much for her?

“For taking care of me. For trying to make all this easier for me, which makes it harder for you. You’ve shouldered all the burdens while Rich has been away, and now he’s gone, you’re still carrying the load.” She raised her other hand, soft and plump, and caressed Sophie’s cheek. “I know I am not much help. I can’t always remember . . .” She frowned. “It’s such a relief to know you are in control of all those matters I can’t look after any longer.”

“You’re no trouble at all, Mamie. I love living with you, and I promise,

no matter what happens, I will take care of you.” She rose and kissed Mamie’s gray curls. “Have your tea, and don’t worry your head about anything.”

Later, when Mamie was in her room resting, Sophie slipped outside to the back garden. Daisies bobbed in the breeze, butterflies flitted amongst the nigella, and bees bumped and buzzed through the scented stock. Color ran riot on the slope behind the house, and Sophie wandered to her favorite spot. Surrounded by dahlias and sweet peas, she sank onto the open square of grass, wrapping her arms around her knees and lowering her head.

Lord, why? Why did You have to take him from me? You could have kept him safe, could have healed him from his wounds, but You didn’t. All my plans are in ruins, and You seem very far away. How could this be Your will? This isn’t fair.

Tears wouldn’t fall. Somehow the sorrow was too deep. On this spot, just over three years ago, Rich had taken her into his arms and asked her to marry him.

He could have surrendered his commission and stayed in Oxfordshire, but he hadn’t. Just a little longer, he’d promised. The Royal Marines needed him; his men needed him. When he’d made that promise, he couldn’t have known how long it would be and that he would never return.

Mother had suggested . . . commanded . . . because of the whirlwind nature of their courtship and betrothal, that they wait until Rich returned from his next stretch of duty before they wed. Sophie hadn’t wanted to wait, and neither had Rich, but when the duke, her father, had waded in, they had acquiesced. They had their whole lives ahead to spend together. A few months or even a year wouldn’t matter much. They would honor her parents by giving in to their request.

How joyful Sophie had been to be loved by Rich, and proud of him in his uniform, proud of his sense of duty and honor. Of course she would wait for him—forever if necessary. Of course she would move to Primrose Cottage and care for Mamie until he fulfilled his duty.

And now it was all ruined. He wouldn’t be coming home to claim her as his own. They had put off their happiness for three long years, and now none of their plans would come to fruition.

ERICA VETSCH

She had been able to bear the loneliness when she thought there would be a happy ending someday, but how would she endure it now?

Everything she had thought was God's will had been dumped on its head. All the promises made were fallen to bits. She had no idea what to do next.

The sobs finally came, and her carefully constructed house of whist cards blew away on the storm of tears.



CHAPTER 2

CHARLES HAD NEVER seen so many epaulettes and bicorns all in one place. His heart sank like the barometer before a storm. He had known it would be challenging, but these odds were decidedly longer than he had anticipated.

He ascended the steps into the Admiralty, removing his cover as he passed through the doors and tucking it properly under his arm. Officers crowded the halls, their voices low. Each set of eyes that met his were troubled.

These men had a head start on him, for they had not languished in a hospital in Portugal for nearly three months. When peace had been declared, they had been cast upon the shore to make their case to the Admiralty for a new command, while he had been stuck on the Peninsula.

Charles edged through the officers until he reached the department he sought. The small foyer was standing-room only, with enough gold braid to gild a church altar.

“Excuse me.” He waited for a narrow opening to form as men jostled to create space for him.

“No good butting in. You’ll have to wait your turn like the rest of us,” one man muttered. “Who do you think you are?”

Charles didn’t answer. The man had a right to be testy. Peacetime could be trying to a battle-hardened sailor. He reached the clerk’s desk.

“The back of the line, sir.” Without looking up from the papers on his small table, the clerk raised his hand in the direction of the far end of the hall. His voice dripped with boredom. Half a meat pie lay on a greasy paper

on the corner of the desk, and the man's collar was unfastened. The papers before him weren't personnel records but a rather lurid-looking broadsheet. What had the navy come to that slackers like this were employed at the Admiralty?

"Sailor." Charles used his "command voice," the one he employed on high seas when the crew needed guidance.

The man's head snapped up, and several others turned as the sound echoed off the groined ceiling.

"On your feet, man."

The clerk jumped up, gulping, and organized himself to attention.

"When was the last time you were aboard a ship?" Charles's stare pinned him in place as he took a sounding of the man's depth.

Charles made a circle in the air with his forefinger to take in the occupants of the crowded anteroom. "Sailor, every one of these men has served bravely for more years and more battles than you can count. They have endured hardship, peril, inclement weather, and privation all in the name of the Royal Navy. While you have been growing calluses on your haunches, clerking for an admiral, these men kept Old Boney from marching up Pall Mall and planting the French flag at St. James's Palace. It would behoove you to show a modicum of respect, for these men, for the Royal Navy, whose uniform you wear, and for Admiral Barrington, whom you serve."

"Charles, are you scolding my staff?" The voice came from the office doorway, and everyone snapped to attention. Admiral Barrington flicked a glance at his aide and then around the crowded room. "I can't say that it isn't warranted. Seaman Phipps, Captain Wyvern has an appointment, if you will check your ledger, and he's exactly on time. While I speak with him, perhaps you can do something useful and organize some benches or chairs for the men who've come calling today?"

He stepped back and invited Charles into his sanctum, closing the door and shutting them in. Papers, books, charts, and maps littered the desk and meeting table, and more crammed the shelves.

"Have a seat, if you can find one. Someday the broadsheets will announce I have been killed in an avalanche of paperwork. If it isn't the Chancellor of the Exchequer wanting reports down to the last grain of

gunpowder, it's Customs and Excise wanting to know what the Royal Navy is going to do about the rampant smuggling along every coastline in Britain. As if this was a navy problem. We've just finished fighting the most glorious naval war in our nation's history, and the Revenue wants to turn us into constables on the coast. They should sort out their own problems." The admiral rounded his desk and dropped into his seat while Charles moved a stack of logbooks from a Windsor chair. "And before you ask, no, I don't have a command for you. Not for you nor for the scores of other officers who darken my door each day."

"What about the *Dogged*? Return me to my ship and I'll be a happy man."

"The *Dogged* is docked in Portsmouth with most of the fleet, and that's where she'll stay. There are no orders for her and no need of a captain, though if there was such a need, there are others in line ahead of you. Officers of higher rank and lengthier service will receive commands first."

"Surely there must be something? It doesn't have to be a frigate. I'd take a sloop. At the moment, I'd take a leaky row boat." Desperation tinged his voice, and he sought to quell his feelings. "Just give me anything afloat."

"I know." Barrington planted his elbows on his desk, denting the papers as he rested his chin on his clasped hands. "But there are decorated men with more experience and better connections at the front of the line. Men who are not coming off months in hospital, recovering from nasty cutlass wounds. How are you feeling, by the by?"

"Never better. A paltry cut that is fully healed." This wasn't strictly true, but near enough. The wound had healed, though he suspected he would always have some stiffness and restriction of movement.

Barrington, who had captained the first ship Charles had been assigned to as a boy of twelve, nodded, his eyes sharp as sail needles. "Glad to hear it. Have you any idea the complications of drawing down our navy now that we've won the war? Not even the Admiralty can agree on what size our fighting force should be, and there are so many backroom deals being done for who gets to command the remaining ships, it resembles a cross between the London Stock Exchange and a boxing bout."

"Then how can I get one of those deals made for me?" Charles hated

the politics involved in the navy, especially when it came to handing out positions to people who were unqualified but had the right connections. In his case, he was both the nephew of an earl and an experienced commander. He wouldn't be shorting the navy if they gave him another ship. He had earned his way up the ranks and had experience and intelligence. Though he hated trading on the family name, especially since his uncle wanted nothing to do with him, he would at least explore that option before he submitted meekly to being put on indefinite shore leave. "Do I need to rely on my pedigree to get a command? To whom should I speak to see it done?"

Barrington slumped in his chair and pinched the bridge of his nose. "There's a bit of a complication with that, I'm afraid."

Charles straightened. "What complication?"

"It seems your family is *persona non grata* at Whitehall these days. Having a cousin who tried to assassinate the Prince Regent is a bit of a blight on the family tree. Only your exemplary service record and the need for experienced ship captains kept you in command this long."

Arthur Bracken, the black sheep of the family. The man who had attempted to assassinate the Prince Regent, failed spectacularly, and been shot trying to escape. Charles's relationship with the former Viscount Fitzroy wasn't common knowledge amongst his navy peers, but those in power in the Admiralty knew.

"I had nothing to do with that. I hadn't seen Arthur in ten years at least. He was a child the last time we were face-to-face." Charles crushed his bicorn on his lap, then tried to relax his hands. When word had spread that Viscount Fitzroy, heir to the Earl of Rothwell, had tried to stab the Prince Regent, Charles had been ashamed and appalled. He hadn't mentioned the familial tie to his crew lest he be tarred with the same brush.

"I'm afraid you're guilty by association." Barrington frowned. "Not guilty as such, but having that swirling about you when the discussion of who gets a command and who doesn't means you're always going to be moved to the back of the queue. Especially as you are now Viscount Fitzroy yourself."

Charles wanted to snap that it wasn't fair, but he knew how childish that would sound. "Very well." He rose. "I hope you will keep me in mind should something arise."

“Now, Charles, don’t be like that. I’m doing my best for you. You’ve had a long time in service. Maybe it’s time for you to retire. You’ve certainly got the means, what with all the prize money you must have amassed since taking command of your own vessel. Will you go to the family estate? I’m sure the earl would be glad to see you. You are his heir now, after all.”

I am equally sure he would not be glad to see me. He would have to renege on many a tirade in order to welcome the “spawn of his slattern sister and that baseborn sailor she married.”

“I may be the heir at the moment, but I still have hopes that my uncle will marry and produce a child of his own and relieve me of the title. He’s getting on, but other men his age and older have begotten children. Now that he knows the title is set to go to me, I suspect he’ll be only too eager to procreate. I am not his favorite nephew, though I am the only one remaining. I imagine he has long hoped some French bullet or cannonball would take care of the problem for him. No, I won’t be calling upon my uncle. Beyond that, I have another errand that will take me to Oxfordshire. If there is anything I can do to further my cause, you’ll let me know?”

“Of course. What takes you to Oxfordshire? That’s as landlocked as can be.”

“I must visit the late Baron Richardson’s mother and his fiancée. I must repay a debt I owe.” He bowed and spun on his heel, wanting only to remove himself from the Admiralty so he could reassess.

All the way down the crowded hall, he met the eyes of those who stared at him, looking for any indication that his petition had found favor. He hoped his face gave away nothing.

Once outside, he settled his bicorn on his head, points fore and aft, and squared his shoulders. If the path to another command was blocked for the moment, he would have to face it. He must discharge his debt to Major Richardson. Perhaps by the time he accomplished the deed, a position aboard ship would have opened up for him.



Nearly a fortnight after the memorial service, Sophie hurried up the gravel drive, clutching a handful of condolence letters and cards close to her chest

in an attempt to keep them dry. Rain, a few drops at first and then a deluge, plunged from dark-bellied clouds in a headlong dash to hurtle into the ground. The wind whipped and gusted, tearing at Sophie's skirts as she gained the front steps.

Once inside the house, she flicked through the damp letters. Though she knew it was foolish, she couldn't quell the futile hope that there would be a letter from Rich. It had been a habit for so long, waiting for Thursday, hearing the coach, hurrying to the front gate full of anticipation. How long would it take for the ingrained response to the weekly mail delivery to diminish?

Mamie came from the back of the house, over her arm a trug laden with flowers. "I'm glad I finished before the rain started. Mrs. Chapman is bringing a vase. Aren't they beautiful? The scented stock is almost too strong, but I love it." She set the basket on a side table. "I thought having something bright and happy in the house might cheer us up."

Sophie forced a smile. "What a lovely thought."

"Were there letters?" Mamie's voice held hope too.

"Several from friends. A few from addresses I don't recognize." Somehow Sophie would summon the strength and will to answer them all. No one had told her that grief was so exhausting. Her body felt battered and her mind drained before she even got out of bed in the morning.

"Do you mind if I arrange flowers with you in the drawing room? I can take them to the kitchen if you'd like. I don't want to disturb you." Mamie took a few steps toward the rear door.

"Of course not. I'll read the cards aloud while you work, and you can help me answer them."

They spent a quiet hour responding to the letters until Mamie flagged.

"You go upstairs and rest, love. I'll finish the last of these. There are only two, and I know both the senders." Sophie returned a card to its envelope.

"You're a dear. I don't know what I would do without you here." Mamie rose and touched the flowers she'd gathered, releasing the heady aroma of summer and sunshine even as the rain continued and the sun hid behind sullen clouds.

Sophie kept on with the writing, repeating the same phrases on the black-edged stationary. *Thank you so much for your kind note. We cherish*

his memory and are grateful that you do as well. She had just replaced the stopper in the ink bottle and checked the condition of her quill when wheels crunching on the drive drew her attention.

Her shoulders drooped. Had the vicar decided to call? Or was it Marcus and Charlotte, come once more to convince her to move back to Haverly? Sweet as they were, she wouldn't give in. Her place was at Primrose with Mamie. It was right, and she was at peace with her decision, if not with her circumstances.

Please pray the visitor wasn't Mother. Sophie didn't have the energy to deal with the dowager today. She often had to remind herself that Mother's overbearing, pedantic nature came from a place of care and concern . . . and a wee bit of bossiness. If Mother didn't care, she wouldn't meddle. At least that was what Sophie told herself.

She parted the curtains and peered through the raindrop ribbons on the window glass.

A carriage and four entered the gate and headed up the drive. Her fingers curled on the drapes. Bags under a canvas cover were fastened atop the coach. Whoever it was, they had come a fair distance. Perhaps they were lost and needing directions?

Please, Lord, let this visit be brief. At least it was nearly teatime. Refreshments would help the visit pass more easily, and whoever it was could be on their way shortly thereafter.

Sophie hurried to the door. Primrose boasted no footman or butler. In an effort to keep expenses down while Rich was away, Mamie had not filled the post when the butler retired. They would have to be even more parsimonious in the coming days, though Sophie's allowance from the Haverly estate would help. She kept their financial situation from Marcus's notice, knowing he would swoop in with aid and she would feel beholden.

Her independent streak might someday be her downfall, according to her mother, but it was sustaining her through this difficult time. Sophie couldn't muster a smile for company, but she hoped she had at least a neutral expression. Marcus teased her often about how she should never play cards for money, because her every thought shouted from her face as loudly as a town crier. Mother said much the same thing, but without the indulgent humor.

A tall, austere-looking man in a dark cloak emerged from the coach, putting on a bicorn as he stepped to the ground. A bicorn meant navy, didn't it? His eyes locked with hers, and she felt an odd sensation. Though she was sure they had never met, there was something familiar about him.

He paused on the bottom step, rain pelting his shoulders and hat. He had a narrow face, a longish nose, and fine blue eyes. His hair appeared to be brown, but with some gray at the temples and a touch of unruly curl. He must be her senior by a score of years or better. Older even than Marcus. His cloak parted, and she glimpsed gold braid on blue wool. Definitely naval. Was this a courtesy call or an official visit?

Sophie stepped back. "Please, sir, come in out of the rain. And tell your coachman to pull around to the carriage house. No need for him to wait in the elements. If he comes to the back door, he'll find warmth and refreshment."

The officer motioned to the coachman, who touched his hat brim and shook up the reins. Without a word, the navy man gained the threshold and stepped inside. With a practiced hand, he removed his bicorn and fished beneath his cloak, removing a card. "Captain Charles Wyvern, milady."

Sophie's fingers went numb, and she fumbled the card. It fluttered to the floor. "Oh dear. I'm sorry." He retrieved the card, and she took the bit of stiff paper once more as a stab of pain shot through her.

Captain Charles Wyvern, who had commanded the ship on which Rich had served. Who had been billeted next to him in hospital in Portugal. No wonder she had half recognized him. Rich had described him in detail when first being posted to his ship and had mentioned him frequently. The captain looked exactly as she had imagined he would, though older and more drawn.

She gathered herself. "Please allow me to take your cloak. Do come into the parlor. We can lay a fire if you're chilled. It's not a pleasant day for traveling. I never expected you to call upon us here at Primrose. I hope your journey was pleasant in spite of the rain. We'll have tea soon." Sophie stopped short. She was babbling. The captain hadn't moved, as if waiting for her to pause so he could speak. He glanced to where she had his card clutched to her chest, and she lowered her hands. Her nerves had been stretched taut for so long, it seemed any little thing would upset them.

Even a visit from a . . . stranger? Was Captain Wyvern a stranger? He didn't seem like it, and yet he was. Marcus would quiz her, if he were here, about how she could bounce from full spate to woolgathering in the same breath.

With long, tapered fingers, the captain released the frog closure at his throat and removed his cloak. Water dripped in a circle on the stone-flagged floor, and he held the garment away from himself. "I apologize for calling unannounced. It is most presumptuous of me, but I needed to speak with you."

Mrs. Chapman's quiet footfalls sounded, and she stopped a few feet away. "Lady Sophia, I'll take the gentleman's cloak. Shall I bring in tea right away?"

The captain handed the housekeeper the cloak and his hat with a small nod.

She leaned in close to Sophie. "Should I wake the mistress?"

Sophie shook her head. "Let her sleep. If you wake her, she's liable to be upset and foggy."

"Yes, milady."

Sophia moved across the hall. "Please, sir, come in and be comfortable." She led the way into the drawing room. Halfway across the rug, she realized she'd left something out. "Oh, forgive me. I'm Soph—" Her mother's chastisements rang in her ears. "I'm Lady Sophia Haverly."

The captain, with movements that could only be described as punctilious, bowed with a small click of his boot heels and moved to the wing chair in front of the fireplace. A jab struck Sophie's heart. Rich's favorite chair.

As the captain was waiting for her to take a seat before he did, Sophie adjusted her skirts and settled into the corner of the sofa.

He straightened his white breeches, his shining black Hessians gleaming and dotted with raindrops. "Lady Sophia, I came to express my condolences." He pressed his lips together, and his Adam's apple lurched on a swallow. "Major Richardson was an excellent marine, and an excellent officer, and an excellent friend. He served his country and his ship honorably. On behalf of myself and the crew of the HMS *Dogged*, you have our heartfelt sympathies."

Pride and grief clashed in Sophie's breast. And jealousy. This man had

spent more time with Rich over the past three years than she had. They had shared meals, laughter, danger, duty. Even pain and suffering.

“Rich spoke highly of you, Captain.” Sophie clenched her fingers in her lap. “Thank you for writing to us on his behalf when he was not able to pen words himself.”

Mrs. Chapman entered, gripping the handles of a large tray. Sophie moved a stack of books on the low table between them to make room.

“Thank you, Mrs. Chapman. Have you seen to the captain’s coachman?”

“He’s eating scones as we speak. Donnie is tending the horses.” Mrs. Chapman held Sophie’s gaze. Would their guest be staying for supper? Possibly for the night? What arrangements should she make?

Sophie gave a small shrug and shake of her head.

When the housekeeper had gone, Sophie poured a cup of tea, inhaling the fragrance and dropping in two spoonfuls of sugar before handing it to the captain. His brows arched as he took the cup.

A smile, the first she’d felt like issuing in a long time, tugged at Sophie’s lips. “I must have remembered from one of Rich’s letters how you take your tea. He remarked often how supplies would run short and you would bemoan the lack of sugar for your tea.” Rich had portrayed the expression on his captain’s face in quite a humorous manner, and now that Sophie had met him in person, she could see it clearly.

He nodded, shifting his shoulders and wincing, though he tried to hide it.

Was it good manners to ask after a man’s war injuries? Was it bad manners not to? “I hope you are recovering from your wounds?”

“I am managing well, thank you.” He took a sip from his cup, rested it on his knee, and looked at the floor. Then he raised his chin. “It’s because of my injury that I am here.”

Sophie set the teapot down. His injury? Was he seeing a specialist in the area?

“I first must make my confession to you.” His expression became bleak, his eyes far away, as if remembering something painful. He sat at attention even though he remained in his chair. She imagined he would look much the same if facing a firing squad. What had he to confess?

He took a fortifying breath and set the teacup back on the tray. “I must apologize, because I bear responsibility for your loss. If it weren’t for me, Rich would still be alive and would be home with you now.” He gripped his knees, the skin taut over his knuckles.

Stunned at this admission, Sophie shook her head. This man was Rich’s friend. He couldn’t possibly have caused Rich’s death.

“Sir, I am sure you are mistaken. We understood that Rich had been shot. Are you saying you are the one who shot him?” Was that it? And if so, how was she going to bear it? It must have been an accident. But . . . surely God wouldn’t take Rich from her by accident? *If You are sovereign, nothing happens by accident, right?* Sophie dreaded what the captain would say, yet she longed to know.

Captain Wyvern shook his head. “I’ll start at the beginning. Our ship, the *Dogged*, was stationed off the coast of France. On April twelve, the same day Wellington was capturing Toulouse, we spotted a sail on the horizon. A *Téméraire* class, the *Bravoure*.”

As if he could no longer sit still, he rose and went to the window, legs braced apart, hands clasped behind him. She could envision him aboard a ship, commanding, issuing orders, watching the horizon.

“The *Dogged* is a swift vessel, and it was natural we should give chase. It is a tactic of French ships to show themselves and then race for the coast and the protection of the batteries there. However, with favorable winds and a well-trained crew, we were able to reel in the *Bravoure* well before we would be in any danger from the coastal guns. A brisk battle ensued, and though we had taken some damage, we were able to draw alongside and batten the *Bravoure* to the *Dogged*.”

Sophie listened intently, but it was as if he wasn’t really speaking to her. In some ways it was like listening to Mamie spin yarns about her childhood. Far away and vague on some points, piercingly accurate on others.

“When the grappling hooks were shot across, that was the signal for the marines to board the *Bravoure*. Major Richardson . . . Rich . . . was always the first to advance in those situations, and his men followed. I remained in command aboard the *Dogged*. Though the fighting was fierce, Rich soon had the French crew disarmed and assembled on the deck. The

French colors were struck, and the enemy ship was ours. The men cheered. It was our third such battle in as many weeks, and each time we had been victorious. I suppose it was our run of wins that caused our . . . my . . . complacency. After assessing the damage to the *Dogged* and issuing orders to begin repairs, I boarded the captured vessel. I should have checked that a thorough search of the ship had been done, that all the prisoners had been accounted for, but I did not.”

For long moments, the only sound in the room was the rain washing down the window glass and the ticking of the ormolu clock on the mantel. A chill, slithery feeling invaded Sophie’s insides.

At last the captain stirred, rousing himself to finish the tale. He turned and faced her, not flinching, though the task clearly pained him.

“I was lax in my duty, and two French sailors burst from their hiding places on the foredeck. One had a cutlass and one a pistol. The one with the saber swung with the intent to take off my head, and if it wasn’t for the quick actions of Rich, I would be dead now. Rich launched himself toward me while firing his pistol at the swordsman, causing my assailant’s arm to drop at the last instant, and I suffered a slice across my back.”

Again he twitched his shoulders and grimaced. “Because Rich was intent upon saving me, he neglected to save himself. The Frenchman with the pistol fired and caught Rich in the side. By the time the rest of my crew understood what was happening and apprehended the enemy, Rich and I both lay on the deck with severe wounds.”

Sophie’s fingers came up to cover her lips. Rich had been wounded saving his friend’s life. And the captain admitted that it was his fault. He should have made sure the captured ship was secure before relaxing his guard. His admission floated in her head, shock making it difficult to attend to the accompanying emotions.

Deep creases etched into his cheeks, his mouth a grim line. “We were taken to the military hospital in Oporto. Rich apologized over and over, but it wasn’t his fault. The ultimate responsibility lay with me, and I failed him. It is a burden I shall bear for the rest of my days.”

Sophie’s emotions bobbed on a rough sea. If he had seen to his duty, Rich would be alive? And he had the gall to show up here expecting her to . . . what? Say that she forgave him? Tell him she bore him no ill will?

Anger flared through her, and she turned away lest her face should declare her feelings. She wanted to rail at him, shout that it wasn't fair. Shake her fists and demand why. She wanted answers, and not just from the captain.

Why, God? Why did You allow this to happen? How can this possibly be Your will? She focused on Captain Wyvern's guilt. For a moment it felt good to have someone tangible to blame, somewhere to put her anger.

The captain waited, shoulders braced, face grim, anguish plain in his eyes. No doubt he was prepared for her recriminations. But what should she say?

What would Rich want her to say? By the captain's own admission, Rich had tried to take the blame for the incident that had cost him his life.

No, it couldn't possibly be Rich's fault. He wouldn't be so foolhardy when he knew he was coming home to her.

Yet in her heart she knew Rich would have sacrificed his life if it meant saving another. The fire went out of her, and she took a short breath, sinking once more into sorrow and exhaustion.

Was she better off knowing the circumstances of Rich's death? It changed nothing, other than that she was now forced to make a choice.

A choice that offended her sense of justice. But she could see Rich, compassion in his blue eyes, asking her to do the right thing.

After a moment, she rose and crossed the room. Captain Wyvern stood his ground, hands once more behind his back. "Captain, I appreciate what it took for you to come here." She spoke kindly even though she didn't feel kind. "I am certain Rich did not hold you at fault. He would not wish me to blame you either." She didn't say she forgave the captain, because she believed in speaking the truth, and his admissions were too new, too raw for her to process just now. Hopefully, emotion would eventually follow action.

The captain took a deep breath, his eyes bleak. "I understand. The major was a good man, and I wish God had chosen to take me instead."

Sophie needed to free herself from this tangle of feelings. She hadn't worked through her thoughts on God's role in Rich's death, and she wasn't ready to lay all bare now, especially to this man. "Captain, it is nearly dark. Have you accommodations for the night?" Rich would want

her to offer him hospitality, and Mamie would be distressed if she learned he had been here and she had missed his visit. “You are welcome to stay here with us.”

“I had planned to find lodgings at an inn.” His brows knitted. “I do not wish to impose.”

“Please accept the hospitality of Primrose Cottage tonight. If you have no obligations calling you away, we would be pleased to have you as our guest.”

“That is most kind, Lady Sophia. I am grateful.”

Though he looked pained as he said it.



Lady Sophia was both more beautiful and younger looking than he had expected. Which was odd, since Rich had shown Charles a miniature of her, and Charles had known her approximate age. But meeting her in person, he caught a hint of the restless vitality that her letters portrayed and Rich’s stories had told. He felt like a mossy-backed sea turtle in comparison to her fresh-faced youth. Though she was subdued by her loss, her grief did not dampen the intelligent sharpness in her blue eyes.

The miniature had been a good likeness, yet it didn’t do her justice. Especially now, in the glow of the candles on the dinner table. Though she wore a simple black dress trimmed with plain black ribbon, her skin glowed and her eyes mirrored the candle flames. Light raced across her dark-brown hair and created shadows along her collarbones. Lady Sophia sat directly opposite him, with Mamie at the head of the table, and he couldn’t stop looking at Lady Sophia.

He had not asked for her forgiveness, because he could not forgive himself. And she had not offered forgiveness, at least not in so many words. Was it because she could not forgive either? She had tried to hide her feelings, but he had read several emotions on her face: anger, longing, grief, doubt, resignation. Each had played across her features in succession, recognizable because they had mirrored his own. She had said Rich would not hold him at fault. Therefore she would not either. The two had been so in tune that their actions mirrored each other’s. Charles had never had

that kind of relationship with anyone, much less a woman he loved. Again that faint pang of yearning struck the corners of his heart.

In spite of whatever misgivings she might have, she had offered him hospitality. Was that too done from a sense of duty and recalling what Rich would have wanted, or was it a demonstration of a generous nature?

Lady Mamie Richardson had welcomed him as if he were a long-lost son. Her delight had seemed genuine, and to his utter surprise and discomfort, she had hugged him. The warmth of her gesture had thickened his throat and roughened his voice. As she squeezed him, she had even whispered in his ear how thankful she was for his coming. When was the last time someone had embraced him? He couldn't recall.

"What are your plans now that peace has been declared?" Lady Richardson toyed with her lorgnette, twisting the attached ribbon idly. The elderly woman hadn't eaten much of the dinner, but she seemed in control of her mental faculties. Charles hadn't known what to expect of Rich's mother based upon Lady Sophia's letters, whether she might be doddering and vague. But this woman was kindness itself, even when he repeated the story of how Rich had suffered his wounds. "Will you see your family?"

Her reception and forgiveness heaped coals of fire upon his head.

"I will return to London and continue to assail the Admiralty to give me a new posting. I have family in Devonshire, though we are not close."

His cousin, the jackanapes, had all but scuttled Charles's naval career from afar. What had possessed him to try to kill the Prince Regent? Their uncle must be nearly apoplectic to have such a scoundrel as a nephew. The earl's view of Charles had always been derogatory, but at least Charles had never attempted regicide.

Be that as it may, the odds of him getting a captaincy anytime soon were bleak. It was probably wrong to pray for another outbreak of war, but war seemed to be the only path back to a command.

"If you don't get a ship, what will you do?" Lady Sophia asked. Her demeanor to him was perfectly proper but a trifle distant. He didn't blame her. He doubted he would be as composed in her place.

"I will probably apply to the East India Company for a captaincy of a merchant vessel." Though it would be a last resort. He was a navy man to his core. He had worked every day for over two decades to reach his

current rank, and he wouldn't quit without a fight. Captaining a merchant vessel would seem a flat end to a fine career.

"Have you no prospects on land? I would think you would have had enough of the navy and war. Rich felt it his duty to serve his country, but he intended to come home the moment peace was declared and never take up arms again." Lady Sophia placed her hand on the stem of her goblet, rotating the glass and watching the lamplight wink off the ruby liquid inside.

Had she any idea what a picture she made?

Charles shrugged. "I've known no other life since I was a lad. I put to sea at twelve. Through study and experience, I made my way up through the ranks. It was a difficult climb, and I hope my career isn't terminal at captain."

"To sea at twelve?" Lady Richardson shook her head. "So young. Did you run away to join the navy then?"

"No, madam. I am the son of a sailor, and it was both his expectation and my wish. I am most comfortable at sea." He paused, looking around the pleasant dining room. "However, your hospitality has its appeal. The food is better, and the company excellent." He raised his glass to them, dipping his head a bit. It would be unkind to make them think he wanted to be elsewhere, though he most fervently did. He hadn't discharged his full duty to Rich yet, and he wasn't certain how to go about it.

When the meal concluded, the ladies offered to leave him to after-dinner port and cigars, but he didn't like port, and he didn't smoke. "I'll join you, if I may. Or I can take myself upstairs to my room if you'd rather be on your own this evening?" He stood first and pulled out Lady Richardson's chair.

"We won't banish you unless that's your preference." Lady Sophia picked up the candelabra from the table. "It is our custom to spend our evenings with some reading and conversation. You may join us if you wish."

He offered his arm to Lady Richardson and followed Lady Sophia across the hall to the drawing room. The candlelight created shadows that danced and jumped with Lady Sophia's movements, and in her wake Charles could smell a light lemony perfume. Far removed from the smells aboard ship, to be sure.

As he settled Lady Richardson into a chair, he knew he should stop shilly-shallying and do the thing he had been tasked to do. It wasn't in his nature to shirk a duty, and putting this particular one off as long as he had chafed. "Ladies, I had a threefold reason for visiting you. The first was to express my condolences and sorrow for your loss. The second was to relay to you how Rich came by his fatal injuries. The third still remains."

Lady Sophia had placed the candelabra on a side table and now used one of the tapers to light the wall sconces. She paused, looking over her shoulder, the soft golden light making her eyes appear larger. She seemed to be begging him to say nothing more that would hurt her.

If only he had that option. He was honor bound to fulfill his promise to Rich. If only his friend had not given him this duty.

Charles swallowed and took a breath in through his nose. "When Major Richardson passed away, he left in my possession his sea chest. He charged me with returning those things to your keeping and delivering a final message."

Lady Sophia's hand lowered, and she paused before placing the candle back into its holder. "A message?" Each word was trimmed in pain but also eager longing. "I would have any word from Rich that you possess."

"Major Richardson asked me to tell you that he was thinking of you, Lady Sophia, when he left this world. He asked me to tell you that he loved you very much."

She inhaled sharply, her hands pressing against her midriff. Her lips trembled, and she blinked hastily, looking away.

He hated causing her more grief. Perhaps once the sharpness of her pain subsided, she would be comforted by her lover's last words. Later she would no doubt be glad she had Rich's things, but for now they would probably only remind her of what she had lost. "My coachman brought Rich's sea chest to my room. Would you prefer me to bring it downstairs?"

Lady Richardson studied Lady Sophia, and when she didn't speak, shook her head. "I think it would be best if it was taken to Sophie's room. She'll want to look through it in private." Her smile was kind. "You can see to the chore when we head upstairs for bed."

Lady Sophia nodded. She had subsided onto the arm of the settee next to Lady Richardson, and the two held hands, as if drawing strength from

one another. The younger woman's face was as pale as a topgallant in the moonlight, and he had the oddest urge to put his arms around her and shield her from pain. Which was ridiculous. He had no notion how to comfort a woman, and as he was the cause of her pain, she would surely reject any solace he might offer.

He stood before the fireplace, his back to the mantel, his hands clasped behind him. "I must ask, is there anything that you, Lady Sophia and Lady Richardson, need? Any way that I may be of service to you?" He wouldn't mention the promise Rich had begged of him, as he didn't want them to think he inquired only out of duty. He would have asked in any case. He owed them that much and more.

The ladies looked at each other, and Lady Sophia shook her head slightly.

Lady Richardson nodded. "Captain Wyvern, that is most kind of you, but we need nothing." She reached into a small basket at her side and withdrew yarn and needles. "We are most content here at Primrose."

"Perhaps your finances? I am a wealthy man. Captains are given the lion's share of any prizes taken at sea, and the *Dogged* was a successful hunter. Is there someone in charge of your finances to whom I might speak?" It was bad manners to speak of money, but for Rich's sake, he must.

Lady Sophia's back stiffened. "Captain, if we needed any help in that quarter, my brother, the Duke of Haverly, is more than capable of assisting us."

Her voice could have come straight from the North Sea. The spark of indignation in her eyes relieved his spirit. That independent streak would be of good use to her in the coming months.

"I mean no offense." He wished there was range in the drawing room to pace. This room with all its feminine furnishings hemmed him in as neatly as the gunwales of a rowboat. If only he could stride the quarter-deck of the *Dogged* with space to think and breathe. "I feel it my duty to aid you in whatever way I can. I am indebted to Major Richardson and to you." He spread his hands.

"How are you indebted to us?" Lady Sophia asked, still stiff. "You owe us nothing. Rich absolved you of debt, and we can only do the same."

Heat crept up above his collar, and he shifted his weight. Dare he say that her letters had been the only bright spots in many months of sea duty? That her epistles had kept him sane while in the hospital? How much he had looked forward to hearing even the bits that Rich chose to share in the wardroom?

“You have offered hospitality and welcome where I didn’t expect it. Though from your letters, I should have.”

“My letters?” Her delicate brows rose, accentuating the heart shape of her face.

“Lady Sophia, I read your letters to Rich . . . Major Richardson . . . when he could not read them for himself. And before that, he shared from them occasionally aboard ship. He described you as warm and generous, willing to extend grace and constantly caring for others.” He stopped, lest he give too much away. “I do not think the major’s assessments were wrong.”

Lady Richardson nodded, reaching over to pat Lady Sophia’s hand. “That describes you beautifully, dear. A treasure.”

“It’s you who are the treasure, sweet Mamie. You find good in everybody.” Lady Sophia squeezed Mamie’s hand and rose from the arm of the settee to take a seat in a chair before the fire.

Charles cleared his throat, trying to nudge the topic back to his aiding the two women. “Surely there is some way I might serve you?” How could he fulfill his promise to Rich to look after them if they wouldn’t take anything he had to offer? How could he do right by the woman whose letters had meant so much, who had sacrificed for her country as surely as her betrothed had, if she turned aside his efforts?



Late that night, as he lay awake in Rich’s house, having eaten at Rich’s table and conversed with Rich’s mother and fiancée, he chided himself. What had he thought would happen? That he would roll up in his carriage, dispense condolences and cash, and then depart with a clear conscience, debt discharged?

He reached for a small object on the bedside table. Even if that had been true, he had foregone a clear conscience in one impulsive moment

tonight. Before he had carried Rich's sea chest to Lady Sophia's room, he'd opened it and removed one item.

The rain had ceased, and before he'd climbed into bed, he'd opened the drapes. He held up the item now, turning it so the moonlight fell full upon it.

The miniature of Sophie that had been Rich's most treasured possession.

He'd been wrong to take it. It didn't belong to him. He'd known it the moment he'd removed it from the chest. The stain on his integrity robbed him of sleep. He should return it to her, though he couldn't imagine how without causing much embarrassment.

He could just leave it on the bedside table and let it be a mystery as to how it had gotten there. But that was the coward's way out. And for all his faults, he was no coward.

Tomorrow he would front Lady Sophia, beg her pardon and forgiveness once more, and hand her the painting. He would then depart and never see Lady Sophia again.

He was a fool. His thoughts chased one another, doubling back and circling, but always returning to the same point.

His future and Lady Sophia's lay far apart, and try as he might, he would never be able to repay all he owed her.