

A Change of Stars

By

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Chapter One

Papa took to death with his usual whole-hearted gusto.

He bounced back into our lives one unexpected bright spring morning, flushed with excitement, enthusiasm, and a raging fever. There were welcome home hugs, a flourish of presents and then, when the joy and confusion were at their peak, Papa collapsed face-down on the tea table in mid-sentence. From homecoming to sickbed to funeral, he accomplished in four days that which took lesser beings at least a week. He shared his illness, his final souvenir, with such typical generosity that by the time of his death fully half the household was confined to bed.

Papa never did like to travel alone.

In the end, Mother was his only companion into the afterlife. I hope he waited for her; it was a journey she made with great reluctance. Ten years of being an invalid were put to good use and she clung to life with the grim tenacity of hard practice. She resisted Papa's invitation for two long weeks. Toward the end she began to glow with her own rosy light, a sign of heaven approaching. It wasn't until weeks later that I realised that the glow had come from the furnace of my own head.

Ten years of nursing and constant companionship, sleepless nights and broken days; two weeks of fever and delirium and I missed her last goodbye by hours. She slipped away without my witness and I do not think I can forgive Papa for that.

"You should have left me there," I said. "It was my right."

My sister sighed. "Sarah, you were extremely ill. You were burning up. I couldn't very well leave you in an incoherent heap on the floor. Contrary to what you may believe, you are not the only competent nurse in the family." She paused, took a deep breath and regained her sickroom manner with a visible effort. "Mother was never alone. I was at her side until the very end. As was George."

"George was there?"

Elvira nodded. "Mother asked for him, repeatedly. Thankfully he had not yet left for the day. The hand of Providence was at work that morning."

I raised my eyebrows and a faint tinge of red rose on Elvira's cheeks. Providence does not usually act through an over-indulgence in alcohol.

"Did she ask for me?"

Elvira patted my hand with slow soothing strokes, until I jerked my arm away and tucked it beneath the sheets. “She lacked for nothing, Sarah. All she would want now is for you to get better.”

“I am better,” I said, although we both knew it wasn’t true. “How is George?”

“He’s fine. He had such a mild case. It was you that we were all worried about.”

Elvira’s voice was low and calm, the perfect tone for talking to an invalid.

I was not an invalid!

I wondered if Mother had felt this sudden, impossible anger. It coiled in my stomach, in my arms. I had to hold myself still for fear of hitting out, clench my mouth so I wouldn’t scream.

“I’m tired.” I turned on my side, tugging the blankets up to my shoulder.

“Of course.” Elvira busied herself about the room.

“Leave the curtains open,” I said.

“Don’t be silly, Sarah. People will see in.”

She drew the thick curtains and dimmed the light. Her footsteps whispered across the room; a gentle kiss dropped on my temple. She pulled the blankets up another inch. The wool itched against my cheek.

“Sleep well,” she said, closing the door. I lay stiff in her wake, listening for the hard clack of heels on the wooden stairs. Finally I was alone.

I fought my way out of the firmly-tucked sheets. My muscles were reluctant to obey me; I had been in bed too long. Step by slow step, I inched over to the window. A moment’s rest and I tugged the curtains open; their rich brocade seemed to have been threaded with lead while I was asleep. The pale summer evening flooded into the room. Outside everything was still and calm. The evening star glimmered proud and solitary in the fading glow of sunset.

I rested my head against the cold glass. Mother was gone. Her illness had been my life – what was there for me now? I stayed there for a long time, my heart and mind empty.

The cold brought me back. It had grown late. The night sky was sprinkled with stars, but they were poor feeble things, pale and sickly against the glow of the streetlights. Only Venus shone with any conviction. I drew on her strength. I would need it or Elvira would smother me.

I was shivering by the time I regained the safety of the bed, my legs almost too weak to hold me, but for the first time in weeks, I went to sleep with a view of the night sky.

“Sarey!” George burst into my room the next morning as I was practising standing unaided. His hug caught me unprepared and almost knocked me down.

“Elvira said you were getting better.” He took hold of my shoulders and pushed me over to the window for a better look. “You don’t look better. You look terrible. Shall I buy you some rouge to put the colour back in your cheeks?” He grinned. “Maybe I will – just imagine Elvira’s face!”

He let go of me and threw himself onto the window seat. I followed him down rather more abruptly than I intended. I leant back heavily against the cushions and flicked my skirts out to hide my trembling legs.

“It seems like ages since I’ve seen you.” I said. “You are quite recovered?”

“I’m fine. You know me – constitution of a horse! Look, I’m sorry I didn’t come to see you earlier, Sarey, but you know what Elvira’s like.” George made a face. “And, what with Papa and Mother...” He let the sentence trail off. “It’s all been a bit ghastly really.”

“Elvira means well,” I said. “And she’ll be gone soon. Then it will be just us.”

We sat for a moment and contemplated that.

George started to speak, but I overrode him. “It will be all right, George. I promise it will.”

In some ways, nothing would change. I had been running the household since I was fifteen; Mother in her room, Papa off exploring. He had spent less than three months of every year at home. In reality, I hardly knew him. But the *idea* of Papa, now that was another thing entirely, and my heart clenched at the thought of a world in which he did not exist.

“George, let’s go somewhere! Just you and me. Paris, or Rome... or even Brighton. Just somewhere different, away from all these memories. We’ll tell Elvira I’m convalescing! She can go home to her children.”

“The thing is...,” George rubbed his chin and a line of thin golden bristles caught the light.

“George! Are you growing a beard?” I reached out and rubbed his sandpapery cheek.

He grinned. “Man of the house, and all that. Thought it was about time.” The grin faded and he ran his hand through his thick blond hair. “The thing is... Sarey, do you remember Henry Finch?” He stopped.

I murmured encouragingly. All George's friends were the same to me. A galumphing pack of half-grown Labradors. Sleek, well-fed pups pretending to be wild, charging about the city in search of excitement, food and drink.

"Well, you see, Henry's in a bit of a fix—"

A sudden grinding crash from outside interrupted him. We twisted around to stare out the window. A carriage in the street below had attempted to pass another with insufficient room. Now their wheels were wedged tightly together and the coachmen were yelling insults at each.

George snorted. "They should turn that coachman off. There was bags of room. Even you could have passed there. Look, you can see the park from here! I didn't know you had such a terrific view. Look at all the people walking along. It's as good as a play." He stopped and peered more intently at a small figure sitting on a bench by the pond. "Is that Henry? Oh Lord, it is! And I said I'd meet him at twelve. What time is it? He's probably been waiting half an hour at least."

George leapt off the window seat and out the door. There was a great clatter down the stairs and I caught the echoes of a frantic rush of activity that seemed to involve everyone from the cook to the housemaid. In few minutes, he reappeared on the street below, gloves in hand, cramming his hat on his head as he headed for the park at a run. He dashed across the road, right in front of a delivery cart. The driver hauled hard on the reins and shouted abuse, but George didn't notice.

Across the road, a Hansom cab had just pulled up. George made a sharp turn around it and collided full-tilt with the alighting passenger. They both went down. Hats and gloves flew in the air. The sun gleamed on the stranger's blond hair. It was almost the same shade as George's, but wilder – long and wavy. He regained his feet while George was still floundering and held out a helping hand. George sprang up, waved his arms and they both laughed. George could make anyone into a friend. Collecting his hat and gloves, he bounded off.

In the park, Henry was still waiting patiently on his bench.

George's visit had left me longing for my bed, but I had told Elvira that I would be down for luncheon. Mother and Papa frowned from the photograph on the mantel as they watched me cross the room. It wasn't a good likeness. Papa so still and silent, although if you looked closely you could see his lips were blurred, and Mother nervous in the unfamiliar sun as she waited for me to finish the exposure. But it was the only one I had of the two of them together, the last time that Mother went outside.

I was taking a short rest on the bottom stair when Annie discovered me. She backed through the kitchen door and walked along the corridor, still talking to Cook over her shoulder. Turning her head at the last moment, she caught sight of me and screamed. I caught the edge of the tray just before she dropped it in my lap.

“Lord, Miss Sarah, you didn’t half give me a fright.” Annie regained control of the tray. “What on earth are you doing there? I was just bringing you your tray.”

“What is it?” I asked.

Reluctantly, Annie removed the cover. A quivering slimy mass lay stretched across the plate like a dirty jellyfish. Large chunks of darker brown rippled, half-seen, in its depths.

“I detest calf’s foot jelly. I will never eat another mouthful as long as I live.” I spoke loudly. I knew Cook was listening.

“Now, Miss Sarah, you know it’s good for you. Ever so nutritious, the doctor said.” Annie looked longingly at the kitchen door, hoping for reinforcements.

“I think doctors only proscribe it so they know exactly when the patient is on the mend – when they are strong enough to refuse to eat it. I want bread and cheese – something solid. I still have teeth, you know.”

Annie hesitated for a moment, but she knew it was useless.

“And lots of relish!” I called after her retreating back.

When she returned, I debated continuing on into the dining room. But downstairs was downstairs, Elvira wasn’t home and my legs felt as wobbly as the jelly I had returned to Cook. I ate my luncheon where I was, sitting on the bottom step.

Halfway through, I was regretting my decision. The wooden stairs were hard and uncomfortable and there was an unpleasant draught coming from the front door. Elvira would be home any minute. With that thought, the doorbell chimed.

“That’ll be Mrs. Elvira,” Annie announced as she bustled past to open the door. “I don’t know what she will think when she sees you there.”

Elvira stepped inside and saw me at once. “Oh, Sarah,” was all she said, collapsing into a hall chair and staring at me with sad, tired eyes. There were lines on her face that I’d never seen before. All at once I felt small and childish. I put my plate carefully down on the step and pushed myself to my feet.

“I think I’ll go back to bed now.”

Annie rushed to help me. Elvira took the other side and in a slow procession we went back up the stairs.

“George came to see me this morning,” I said, when I was safely tucked in. “It was nice.”

Elvira shot me a sharp look. “He did?”

I nodded. “It be will odd at first, I suppose, just the two of us. But we’ll get used to it.”

Elvira stood up abruptly. “He didn’t tell you... I should have known. Well, if he thinks I’m going to—”

“Tell me what?” I murmured. Annie had brought a hot posset to help me sleep, and someone had been exceedingly liberal with the wine.

Elvira sank down in a chair beside my bed and took my hand. “Sarah darling, George has joined the army. It’s all thanks to a friend of his, a Mr. Bird or some such thing.”

“Finch,” I informed Elvira, happy to be of service, “Henry Finch.” I was drifting away on a wine-red cloud, full of fuzzy goodwill to the world.

“How much brandy did Annie put in that cup?” Elvira picked it up and took a good sniff. “Good Lord, you’ll be drunk as a lord. I said just a tot! There’s no point in talking to you now, but don’t worry about a thing. You’re coming home with me.”

Chapter Two

There were thirty seven books in Papa's study. Thirty seven books, nine thousand, nine hundred and fifty three pages and too many words to count.

Newton's Principia and Opticks occupied the prime positions with the natural arrogance of genius. Other, lesser, works competed for attention on either side – all except A Course of Chymistry which lay huddled at the end of the shelf, as if well aware it was over one hundred years out of date. Lower down, Charles Darwin rubbed spines with Charles Dickens (travelogues only).

There were travel books and old medical books, and a few extremely dry works of theology, but unless you counted Johnson's A General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates (and most people did), the only fiction was mythical. The Age of Fable and its companion The Age of Chivalry were banished to the dusty unattainable heights of the bookcase, their frivolity tolerated purely because of the antiquity of their contents. My mother did not believe in imagination.

Thirty seven books, a dilapidated globe and a secret subscription to The English Mechanic. These were my education.

At Elvira's house, there would be no books. There would be tea parties and outings and grand balls. But first there would be six months of quiet contemplation, enlivened by a little light needlework. I awoke the next morning with the feeling that I was in purgatory.

There was a soft tap on the door just as I was doing up the last buttons of my dress.

"Hot chocolate, Miss Sarah," Annie called, pushing the door open. She paused when she saw that I was up and dressed. "Like your father, you are. He could never abide to be sick, always had to be up and doing. And just where are you off to at this hour of the morning?" She placed the tray of steaming drinks on my little desk and turned back to examine me. Her face was flushed from the stairs and the steam; her hair already escaping its tight bun. I suddenly wondered how old she was. She put her hands on her hips. "You don't need to tell me, it'll be that photography nonsense again, I'm sure. Suppose it won't do no good to tell you to get back in bed?"

I shook my head. "I'm feeling a lot stronger today, Annie. I've been in bed long enough."

Annie sighed and handed me a cup of hot chocolate. “Drink that up. At least then you won’t be fainting out in that studio of yours.” She hoisted the tray back onto her hip and opened the door. Out in the hallway, she looked at me. “One hour, Miss Sarah. Any more and I’m telling Mrs. Elvira.”

I gulped the chocolate as quickly as I could, blowing hard to cool it. Annie would be sure to check on the empty cup. Then I caught up an old woollen shawl and went before anyone else came to stop me.

The studio was right at the back of the long narrow garden. I had to stop several times to rest. The garden stretched before me, becoming more and more elastic with every step. When I finally reached the studio door, the house seemed impossibly distant and I was struck by the awful thought that someone might have removed the key.

But no, there it was, hanging from its usual hook beneath the eaves. My legs shook with relief and I barely made it inside before I collapsed upon the old velvet sofa. The room was filled with the cold, clear light of early morning. It poured in through two enormous skylights and combined with the acrid smells of chemicals and dust. I closed my eyes and inhaled the potent atmosphere like an elixir.

The studio owed its existence to Papa’s grand tour of California and the Great Lone Pine earthquake of 1872. On the night of the disaster Papa was sound asleep in nearby Independence. The first rumble of the quake awakened him in time to escape through the window. But the building collapsed with all his possessions and his right foot still inside. As a result of that crushed right foot, Papa returned to England for an unusually long and boring stay, and as a result of that he began to experiment with photography.

Papa’s interests were short and sharp. By the time his foot had healed, he had lost all interest in things photographic, but had acquired a studio, camera and darkroom. When he left on his next journey, they became mine.

The only furniture in the studio was a much scrubbed wooden table and the red sofa on which I was sitting. So many bodies had sat here, stiff and posed, waiting for the miracle that would trap their image in glass. Sharp and crisp in the unflinching truth of black and white. Sometimes, in the full mid-summer sun, the sofa blazed with such a fiery intensity that I found myself unable to close the camera shutter and turn the glorious ruby red to grey. Then I told my sitters that the exposure had failed and wished for a way to capture colours – either that or a plain black sofa.

Mother had sat for me, many years earlier, before her sickness took hold. Elvira, on the eve of her wedding, and George, too, although it cost me my telescope. Papa sat only once. He could never spare the time.

Enough memories! I sat up and inspected my domain. It had been many months since I had been here and the dust was thick, the windows dirty. I found my broom and set to work.

“Sarah! What on earth do you think you are doing?” Elvira’s voice cut through my daydreams. Tiredness settled on me with the falling cloud of dust and I started to cough.

Elvira caught me by the shoulders and sat me down. “It’s past 10 o’clock. Breakfast’s been on the table for half an hour at least and I’m sure that you’ve eaten nothing! If I hadn’t forced that Annie to tell me where you were, there’s no telling what would have happened.”

Annie shrugged a silent apology from the doorway.

“It isn’t Annie’s fault,” I said.

“Well, I know that!” Elvira snapped.

“I haven’t checked my equipment.” I gestured to the locked cabinet where the camera and photographic supplies were kept. “I think I need to order more collodion. And I want to look at the camera.” I stood up and teetered for a moment. Then my knees gave way and I sat back down rather abruptly.

“You’ll do no such thing,” said Elvira and she summoned Annie inside to help me back to the house.

A vast array of breakfast dishes were laid out on the sideboard: scrambled eggs, mushrooms, cold tongue, bacon, hot rolls. Elvira was prepared to feed an army. I eyed the grilled kippers with a shudder of distaste and took a slice of toast.

Elvira opened her mouth, but fortunately George chose that moment to bounce into the room. “Morning, Elvira, Sarey.” His eyes widened at the sight of all the food. “Are we expecting company?” He didn’t wait for an answer, but grabbed a plate and began to pile on heaping spoonfuls of everything.

“It’s not manna from Heaven, George. There’ll be another breakfast tomorrow. Come and sit down and eat like a gentleman,” Elvira said.

“It won’t be a breakfast like this,” George said, but he pulled out a chair and joined us.

“At Larchwoods, Albert and I breakfast like this every day,” Elvira informed me. This was offered as an inducement to sweeten my impending visit, but in fact it explained a lot about the solidity of Albert, Elvira’s husband.

“How nice,” I said. “I prefer toast. And I’m not coming to Larchwoods. I’m staying here, with Annie and Cook – three spinsters together. It’s perfectly unexceptional.”

“You can’t stay here,” Elvira said. “George is selling the house.”

“What?” I swung round to stare at George. He hastily took an enormous bite of bacon. He mumbled something and waved at his mouth, all without meeting my eye.

“Oh for goodness’ sake,” Elvira exclaimed. “Stop being such a big baby, George. Sarah’s a sensible girl, she’ll understand.”

“Well, I don’t,” I said. “How can you sell this house, George? It’s our home!”

George made a mammoth swallow. I could see the lump travelling down his throat. For a moment, just a moment, I wished it would choke him.

“Need the money,” George muttered, eyes fixed on his plate. He loaded up another forkful of bacon and shoved it in his mouth.

Elvira sighed and took over. “George is to go to the Royal Military College, to train as an officer cadet. It is expensive.”

“What about Oxford?”

“Hang Oxford,” George said. “Never wanted to go anyway. That was all Papa’s idea. I always wanted to join the army. Papa wouldn’t let me. But Uncle John will. Wants me to, in fact.” He beamed at me.

Leave Oxford! I stared at him, my toast frozen halfway to my mouth. My chest tightened and I had to force myself to breathe. *George was leaving Oxford.*

George stared at me in alarm. “Don’t cry, Sarey! I’ll be quite safe. Not even a small war on at the moment, more’s the pity. That’s why I have to go Military College – best chance for advancement. Maybe by the time I come out there will be some action somewhere.”

Elvira gave a short, sharp hiss like an exasperated cat and handed him a soft roll to stop his mouth. She turned to me.

“Sarah, I don’t know why you are making such a fuss. George has never been cut out for academic studies, although he can do well enough when he chooses. You know this – think of all the hours you have spent tutoring him. You will be free of all that.”

I stumbled to my feet, knocking over my chair and my tea cup in the process. “I... I... need to lie down.” I fled the room, hoping desperately that Elvira would not come after me.

When I reached the safety of my room, I collapsed on the window seat and cried. Tears of grief, tears of rage and scalding tears of sheer frustration. Oxford was everything I’d ever dreamed of, and George was throwing it away. Those hours taking him step by step through his books had been among the happiest of my life. Now he would be learning armaments and military tactics, subjects on which he would need no help and certainly no encouragement. And I – I would be entombed at Larchwoods, instructing Elvira’s children on the correct use of the globes and enduring, yet again, Albert’s exploits on the hunting field.

No! The last thought stiffened my backbone. I would not do it! Far better to be alone, impoverished, and free than living in mind-numbing comfort. My eye lit on the photograph on the mantelpiece. An idea began to swell in my brain, such an enormous idea that I wondered if my head could contain it.

I could be a photographer.

I could open a studio, take portraits for money. I was good, even Papa said so. I had the equipment, a good supply of chemicals and glass plates. Annie could be my assistant. I could find a small house, build a studio and people would come from far and wide to have their portrait taken. Look at Julia Margaret Campbell. She had photographed everyone without even leaving the Isle of Wight. I would be right here in London and *my* photographs were in focus.

I shot to my feet. My camera was in the studio.

“Elvira! Elvira, come quickly!” I swayed against the back door, my lungs heaving.

“What is it? Sarah, are you sick? Whatever is the matter?” Elvira and Annie appeared from opposite directions, both speaking at once. Annie felt my brow while Elvira caught my wrist. I gasped for breath, unable to speak.

“Her pulse is tumultuous,” said Elvira.

“Her skin’s right clammy, but she ain’t got a fever,” said Annie.

I pushed their hands away. “I’m not ill. We’ve been robbed. The studio – everything’s gone. My camera’s gone. All the chemicals and plates. There’s nothing left. The cabinet is empty.”

Elvira threw her hands up. “For goodness’ sake, what a fuss over nothing. There’s been no robbery. I cleaned out the studio myself.”

I sagged against the doorpost. The relief was indescribable. “Where is everything? Where is my camera?” I was never going to let that camera out of my sight again. I would sleep with it if I had to.

Elvira gave me a surprised look. “I sold it, of course. That nice Mr. Shaw from the London Photographic Society came to pay his condolences and offered to take the whole lot off my hands. He paid a rather outrageous sum for it all. I feel rather guilty about it.”

“You sold my camera?” My grip on the doorpost began to slip.

“It was Papa’s camera, really,” Elvira told me. “You are no longer a girl, Sarah, and photography is not a suitable pastime for a lady. The state of your gowns, my dear! Besides, there is simply no room for a studio at Larchwoods.”

“It was *my* camera, Elvira, and photography was never just a pastime. I will acquire another camera, even if I have to live on bread and water for a year. If there is no room for a studio at Larchwoods, with its fifteen bedrooms and acres of stables, then there is no room for me and I will not come.

“Heavens, my dear, calm yourself. If it means that much to you I’m sure we can find a corner that is not being used. An airing cupboard or some such thing. And one of Albert’s friends is bound to have a camera they have grown tired of. There’s no need for such dramatics. Now I must see Cook about afternoon tea.”

I watched her walk towards the kitchen and tried to swallow my anger. It served no purpose. Elvira was sure she had acted for the best. Elvira always acted for the best and it was impossible to change her mind. When dealing with Elvira, action was more effective than anger. For the first time, I wondered about my inheritance. Just how independent could I be?

We had an afternoon visitor. Across the room, a fly buzzed in endless circles around the window. I stabbed my needle through the linen pillowcase and watched a pinprick of blood bloom across the white cloth.

It is possible to die of boredom. It is not a quick death. Every tick of the clock strikes a tiny blow to the heart; each dreary conversation smothers a little more of the soul; a person might linger for years, clinging to life by the fingernails.

During Mother’s illness, my social circle had contracted to almost nothing – the doctor, a few aged relatives and the select few of Mother’s friends who could not be

denied. Her death had opened the door to society once more and a constant stream of condolences had poured in. Half of London seemed to have some acquaintance with my parents. Until now, I had been too sick to attend these visitors. I began to contemplate the possibility of a migraine.

“Sarah, you are not attending!” My sister accompanied the words with a simper, and a sharp kick beneath the table. “Mrs. Dawson has been telling us of Italy. It is most interesting.”

I regarded our guest with a faint twitch of curiosity. She was truly a whale of a woman. Her journey from the carriage to our front parlour had been ponderous and slow, with several stops to rest. The thought of her journeying all the way from London to Rome was unimaginable. It must have taken years.

“When were you in Italy,” I asked.

Mrs. Dawson’s jowls quivered, her corsets creaked with outrage. “I have not been there myself, nor would I want to! I was talking of Mr. Blakemore’s public lecture. It was extremely well attended, you know, and illustrated too.”

“With photographs?” I sat a little straighter.

Mrs. Dawson dismissed my question with a wave of her hand. “None of that newfangled nonsense!”

My short burst of interest evaporated. I sank back into my chair and picked up my needle. My sister asked some question. Mrs. Dawson’s braying laugh boomed across the room. The to-and-fro of the conversation washed over me as I contemplated our visitor.

Gravity was not kind to her. It pulled her down into folds and wrinkles. She should have been a creature of the sea. I pictured a herd, a pod, of Mrs. Dawsons floating in state, their bulk cradled by the ocean’s depths and their voluminous skirts billowing gently in the current. Their hooting calls would echo back and forth, softened by the water and the thick blue light.

Another kick woke me from this pleasant daydream.

Mrs. Dawson was frowning at me. The conversation had stopped.

“We would love to come, Mrs. Dawson. It will be a great pleasure.” Elvira’s glare left me in no doubt that my inattention had been noted.

I added my declarations of joy to those of my sister and observed with great relief that Mrs. Dawson appeared to be leaving.

“What exactly is it that we are so delighted to be doing?” I asked Elvira, when we returned to the parlour.

Elvira sighed. "Mrs. Dawson is making up a party for Mr. Blakemore's final lecture. She has offered to send her own carriage for us." She paused to look me over. "You will need a new dress..."

"Why must I have a new dress? You have drenched two perfectly serviceable dresses in this noxious dye already – why waste money on another one? They look awful and smell worse!" I was glad that all the mirrors had been covered in black crepe. It was petty and vain, but I hated the way the dull flat black drained the colour from my skin. It brought me one step too close to the grave.

Elvira nodded. "It is a shame that black suits you so little, still there's nothing to be done about that." She held up a finger and I could see an idea cross her face. "I know! Mother had a dress made up when Aunt Valencia passed on. It will be in the attic. I think it will fit you – you have Mother's height."

Elvira was being polite. I had Mother's height, but nothing else. George and Elvira had inherited her glossy blond hair and blue eyes. I had Papa's lean frame and a lot of mousey-brown hair that came from no one. Elvira told me once that my hair turned to tawny-gold in the sun. Like a lion's mane. She had just broken my Chinese abacus at the time and was trying to distract me from my tears.

"That dress must be at least ten years old!" I said. "And it was hideous then."

The thought of the lecture hall loomed – the noise, the people and the hot, stagnant air. Mrs. Dawson's strident voice echoed in my head. "I shouldn't go. Isn't it too soon to be going out? Whatever will people think?"

"It has been two months," Elvira said, gently. "And a lecture is hardly the same thing as a ball. It will do you good. The dress can be altered; the material was top quality," She waved at the maid clearing away the tea things. "Annie can do it this afternoon."

There was a clatter of tea cups. Annie straightened up too quickly; the tea tray sagged in her grasp. A cup slipped off and landed with a thud. It began to roll, leaving a trail of glistening tea drops across the carpet. I leapt to my feet, but before I could catch it, the cup spiralled into the leg of a chair. There was an unmistakeable crack.

"So sorry, ma'am," Annie gasped. She was on her knees in an instant, gathering up the pieces and placing them tenderly on the tray. The back of her neck was stiff and vulnerable. I sat down and held my tongue. Anything I said would only make it worse.

"You stupid woman!" Elvira said. "This was my mother's favourite tea service. That cup is irreplaceable!"

I looked at the tea service with renewed interest. On closer examination, I hoped that Elvira was mistaken. Enormous cabbage roses blazed an unlikely shade of scarlet against a stewed spinach background. When she realised that she would be bed-ridden and unable to supervise their use, Mother had ordered many of her treasures packed away, but this? Surely she had better taste?

Annie climbed wearily to her feet, her gaze never leaving the carpet. She held the tray hard and high against her stomach.

“Come, Elvira,” I said, forgetting my previous resolution. “Annie did not mean to break the cup. It is merely that you startled her when you said she must sew my dress this afternoon. No doubt she has plans.”

“Plans?” Elvira said as though she feared for my sanity. “She is a maid!”

“And today is her half-day. Even a maid may make arrangements for their spare time.”

Elvira frowned. “I have spoken to you several times, Sarah, about this habit of gossiping with the servants. It must stop.” She spun back to Annie, standing stiff and somehow shrunken. “You will have no more half-days until you have paid for that cup in full. Now, get out!”

Elvira pointed to the door and Annie scuttled out.

“That was too harsh, Elvira,” I said. “It was an accident.”

Elvira gave me a long level stare. “You have done her no favours, Sarah. You have allowed her to consider herself one of the family. She is not. How well do you think she will adapt to a new position?”

“What new position?”

“This house is being sold, Sarah. You must resign yourself to that. And there is no place for Annie at Larchwoods.”

It was then that I told Elvira of my plans to set up my own establishment. They were not well received.

Towards evening, the faintest of taps sounded against the door.

“Come in, Annie,” I called.

She peeked around the door. “I’ve come to fit the dress, Miss Sarah.”

Her face was scrubbed clean, but her red, puffy eyes told the true story.

“Don’t worry,” I said, rushing forward to take her hands. “I can help you with the money. I have a small amount put by.”

“Miss!” Annie’s face brightened for a moment. “I’ll pay you back, honest I will.”

She held out Mother's dress for my inspection. It was, of course, of the highest quality Henrietta cloth, soft and luxurious as cashmere, and the pinnacle of fashion – ten years earlier.

“So it's true, then, Miss Sarah? The house is to be sold?”

“Yes.” I looked around my room. My refuge. I wondered where I would be able to afford to live now. “But you don't need to worry about finding a new position. I have a plan. I'm going to set up my own establishment. We can live there together – you, myself and Cook. We might be poor, but we'll be happy.”

Annie laid the dress down on the bed. She put her hands on her hips and looked at me. She was a small woman, hard and sinewy. Her frizzy ginger hair was severely pulled back. Deep lines were etched into her cheeks and around her pale blue eyes, some from laughter, some not.

“Thought this plan up yourself, did you?”

I nodded. Somehow this had gone wrong. I had thought Annie would be pleased, but she looked grim and hard. Once, when I was ten, I had stampeded the chickens through her freshly washed kitchen. I felt ten now.

“Never thought to ask me or Cook as to whether it would suit?”

I shook my head slowly.

“Well, it don't suit, Miss Sarah. It don't suit at all. You'll have to do your establishment settin' up on your own.” Annie opened up her sewing basket and began to take out what would be needed. “You'd best be trying that dress on now.”

“*Why* doesn't it suit, Annie?” I said as she ruthlessly yanked and tugged me out of one dress and into another. “What will I do without you?”

Annie refused to answer until I was suitably clad. Then she took pity on me.

“I'm going to me sister in New Zealand, Miss Sarah. She's been after me to come for ever such a long time. And now I reckon I can.”

“New Zealand!”

The jolt of it was like missing a step on a familiar staircase. Annie had been in the background of my life for as long as I could remember. Her small, wiry figure bustled through the echoing rooms of my childhood in a cloud of summer-scented beeswax; as dear to me as the worn smoothness of the banister and the weight of the velvet curtains in my room.

I had known this woman my whole life and now I didn't know her at all.

She had a sister. She had dreams of her own.

Annie took advantage of my shock to spin me around and pin up the back seams.

“Not so tight,” I gasped, when I finally managed to take a breath. “I want to be able to move. And no frills.”

Annie shook her head, her voice muffled by a mouth full of pins. “It needs a bit of draping at the back, Miss Sarah, a little train. I wouldn’t be able to hold my head up otherwise.”

I watched her work for awhile. I felt oddly hesitant.

“You really want to go?” I finally asked. “To emigrate to New Zealand? Sail to the other side of the world and leave everything behind?”

Annie forced her lips into a hard line. “I do, Miss Sarah. There now!” She pushed in the last pin. “Do a little spin in front of the mirror there, and let’s see how it looks.”

The dress was so full of pins it was like wearing a hedgehog. I walked over to the mirror holding myself so stiff and straight that even Mother would have approved of my posture. I observed my reflection. It was certainly an improvement. The gentle drape of the material softened my hard edges and the way it gathered at the back gave the suggestion of a figure.

Annie came up behind me. I looked into her reflected eyes. “Please don’t go, I need you,” I said.

She dropped her gaze. “I’ve family there, Miss Sarah. Nieces and nephews I’ve never seen. There’s nothing for me here.”

What could I say to that? Annie was part of my family; I hadn’t realised I wasn’t part of hers.

I began the painful task of extracting myself from the sharp dress. “At least I still have Cook. If I can find a suitable companion, Elvira won’t make too much fuss.” I screwed up my face as I considered the kind of companion that Elvira would find suitable.

Annie made a sudden movement.

“Ow! What was that for?” I rubbed the spot where she had jabbed me and looked at her more closely. “What aren’t you telling me, Annie? I will have Cook, won’t I? Surely she can’t desert me too?”

Annie gathered the dress up in her arms. “I’ll have this ready by morning,” she said.

I pulled on my dressing gown and followed her to the door. I leant against the handle and glared at her. “You are not leaving until you tell me, Annie, so you may as well just get it over with. Is Cook deserting me?”

Annie glared back. “She’s not deserting you, Miss Sarah, she’s getting married!”

Annie wrenched the door open and scurried out. I stared after her, stunned. Cook – married! One might as well imagine a mountain marrying, or an oak tree, or a river. She was so much a part of the kitchen landscape that one almost forgot she wasn't bound to it by stone.

I was still standing there, caught in the ruin of my plans, when there was yet another knock at the door, a decisive double-rap. The door opened without waiting for an answer.

"Good," Elvira said. "You are here." She viewed my dressing gown approvingly. "You are about to have a sleep. I shall keep you but a few moments. Let us sit down; you will be getting tired just standing there."

I watched Elvira with a familiar loving resentment as she moved to the window seat. In all our childhood games, Elvira had been the guardian of the rule book and real life was no exception. She knew exactly what everyone should do, how they should do it and when. Why was not important. After a few moments, I sat down on the bed.

"What a pretty view you have," Elvira said. "One can see all the way to the lake. And this room has such nice proportions." She smoothed out her skirt and sat down carefully, her eyes roaming across the walls and high ceilings. "I believe it might even be a trifle larger than my own room." A faint crease of dissatisfaction appeared between her eyebrows.

"Elvira, surely you did not come to talk about my room?"

"No." She got up and strode to the fireplace. She picked up the photograph of Mother and Papa. "Sarah," she began, still with her back to me. "Would it really be such a trial to live at Larchwoods? I know sometimes I can be a little..." Elvira paused and put the photograph down. "I will try not to interfere, I promise." Spinning around, she crossed the room, holding out her hands to me. "Please come. The children love your visits. They talk about you constantly. You seem to have a knack for enjoyment that I lack. Albert loves you like a sister. And as for myself... well, I miss you. I miss everyone, Mother, Papa – even George."

I reached out and Elvira clasped my hand in a tight grip. There was an unfamiliar sheen of tears in her eyes. I pulled her down beside me and hugged her tight.

"I miss them too."

We held each other for a few seconds, just long enough for comfort to lapse into awkwardness.

"Well, then," Elvira said, pushing me away and sitting upright. "That's settled. Although..." She shot me a sly glance as she wiped away a hint of tears, "It may be that

you will find a home of your own sooner than you think. Mrs. Dawson's son is quite taken with you. You will see for yourself tomorrow."

"I see." The best I could do was a quiet hiss, but Elvira seemed not to notice. "Is that Mr. *Frederick* Dawson? He is quite rich, is he not?" And with the manners and countenance of a fish. At our last meeting, he had stared at me fixedly with his pallid bulging eyes while gulping at everything I said.

"Yes, indeed," Elvira said approvingly, "and the family is so well connected. Albert feels you would suit very well."

I closed my eyes and leaned back against the pillow. Less than a minute since I had agreed to make Larchwoods my home, and already Elvira was finding me another one.

The bed dipped and bounced as Elvira rose.

"I'll leave you now," she said. "I fear you have a headache."

Chapter Three

The imprisoning of light is a messy and frustrating art.

First you must pose your subject. Inanimate objects are excellent. Children are not recommended, unless they are asleep or prostrated with exhaustion.

Set up and focus your camera. Examine the image upside down on the glass. Repose your subject and hope they are strong of body and placid of temperament. Photography is tiring; there are good reasons for those grim stares and the conveniently-placed tables and chairs found in any studio.

Into your darkroom and prepare your glass plate. First the coating of clear, sticky collodion which, incidentally, can also be used as a bandage on any cuts from the sharp-edged glass. Tilt the plate back and forth until the surface is smooth and even. Now bathe it in nitrate of silver. This will react with the collodion to form a coating of silver salt and it is this coating that will trap the light.

But silver salts are greedy, and any light will do (excepting only red, which is not to their taste). The plate must be protected until the time is right. Slide it, wet and dripping, into the light-proof holder. Now you must move quickly, for the plate must not dry out.

Return to your camera, solution splattering upon your shoes and dress. Check the focus and pose your subject once again; raising weary chins, straightening sagging backs. Insert the holder into the camera and remove the dark slide. Pose your subject for the final time and impress upon them the need to remain completely motionless for the next few seconds. No matter if the heavens fall or trumpets ring – they must not move.

Then remove the lens cap and discover just how long five seconds can be. I like to spend the time imagining the bright sunshine falling from the air and solidifying into silver. Gold would seem more appropriate, but silver is what works. If the sunshine is not bright, you will need considerably longer than five seconds.

Finally the exposure is over, the lens cap is replaced and the subject is released. Now they may scratch and twitch and pull faces to their hearts' content (remember, I did say children were not recommended).

Remove the plate, seal up the light-proof holder (for as I said, silver salts are greedy and will absorb all the light they find), and hasten once more to the darkroom. The plate must be developed before it dries. If photographing outside – a mountain or a

lake – there will be no time to get back home. You must take the darkroom with you, in a tent or a buggy or a haversack.

Back in the dark, safe in the faint glow of the ruby light, now the plate can be removed from the holder. Pour the developing solution over the surface of the plate. The image you have caught will slowly appear, ghostly faint at first, but gradually becoming darker and darker. At exactly the right moment, not too light and not too dark, plunge the plate into a bath of water and the image is caught. The silver is fixed. No more light can enter, and none can leave. The scene is trapped in the glass, as you made it – for better or for worse.

Now you wash it in hyposulphite of soda or potassium cyanide, your choice, but remember cyanide is a poison and deadly. Do not lick your fingers.

And there it is – a slice of the world, in black and white.

It is not our world; it is a strange and magic world where black is white and white is black. Silver-haired Grandmothers regain their black tresses, a widow becomes a bride.

To restore reality, a print must be made. Prepare a sheet of albumen paper, lay it under the plate and leave them both in the bright sunlight. Light and dark will regain their proper alignment. The paper will become a photograph.

And it will be blurred. I did say not to use children.

“There was a present for you in Papa’s luggage,” Elvira informed me. “A large present. A whole suitcase, in fact.”

“Oh?” I said, sharing her surprise. My usual presents from Papa were afterthoughts: a handful of foreign coins dug from his pocket, a carte de visite of Abraham Lincoln used as a bookmark, the book he had just finished reading. An entire suitcase seemed unlikely.

“What was inside it?”

“I don’t know.”

I put my finger in my book and stared. “You don’t know?”

“It seems to have gone missing,” Elvira said, in a disgruntled tone. “I put it aside to examine later, but no one seems to have seen it for weeks. It’s not in the storeroom with the rest of Papa’s things. A whole suitcase, just for you; what could he have been thinking?”

“Perhaps the suitcase *was* the present?” Not that I needed a suitcase. Two weeks in Paris with an elderly aunt were the extent of my travels. Last year I had attempted a

walking holiday in Scotland with George. I got as far as the train station before Mother, afflicted by a severe attack of nerves, sent Annie to summon me home. From George's descriptions, the Highland landscape was delightful.

I had a sudden guilty thought: Mother was dead; I could go to Scotland for as long as I liked. No one would call me home. No one needed me.

"No, no, it was quite heavy," Elvira said, returning my thoughts to the suitcase. "I think there would have been several parcels inside."

I put my book down and got to my feet. "I think I'll go and look for it."

I discovered the present in Papa's study. It had been pushed behind the aspidistra, a particularly luxurious specimen which had been passed down from Papa's great uncle. The glossy leaves had multiplied over the years into a miniature jungle which could have concealed a young pig. Not surprising then that Elvira missed the small leather satchel.

There was a label attached. It read, in Papa's spidery handwriting: *To Sarah*.

I sat back on my heels and regarded it warily. Papa's presents were not always the blessings that they first appeared. He had given George a monkey, the cutest creature imaginable in a red waistcoat and black hat – until we discovered its shrieking phobia of horses and its bounty of fleas. Mother once received a rainbow of silken shawls, light as air. Her delight had been tempered by the snake curled up beneath them. It was, as Papa pointed out, completely dead, but Mother had ordered the shawls burnt none-the-less.

I reminded myself that it was more than two months since Papa's return. I took a deep breath, undid the latches and flicked open the flap. Nothing happened, so I pulled the bag closer.

Inside there were three separate bundles, two well-padded with black cloth, and a smaller one wrapped in brown paper. On closer inspection, I realised that it was to this small bundle that the label was attached, not the suitcase itself. A hasty closing of the flap had trapped the label outside the bag. I was right; an entire suitcase had been unlikely. I took a moment to consider my options, but only a moment. Providence had given this gift to me and I would keep it. There might be books.

I opened my bundle first, removing the label and placing it prominently to one side in case Elvira came to supervise. The contents of the package gave me almost as much joy as the prospect of a whole suitcase. It was a stack of photographs.

There were twenty in all and I flicked through them again and again, wondering at the alien landscapes and unknown faces. My gaze finally came to rest on a single

photograph. It showed an elderly man, his entire face so covered in tattoos one might almost imagine that he was masked. He wore a magnificent cape of feathers and clutched a club in a white-knuckled grip. I had never seen anyone so proud and yet so lost. I wanted to know more. Who was he? What was he thinking as he sat there, frozen in time, and why was he there at all, uncomfortably out of place in a photographer's studio? I wanted to see the colours of the feathers and discover whether the club was wood or stone – all impossible to know from the photograph.

I turned the image over. Someone, not Papa, had written, *Maori man with moko, New Zealand.*

New Zealand. I rifled through the pack and found two other images of New Zealand. One showed jagged mountains rising, sharp as teeth, from a mirror-still lake. A dense cover of trees clung to the impossibly steep slopes and there was not the slightest trace of human habitation. As I stared, the outside noise of the busy London street receded. The close and overcrowded study walls faded away. I could feel myself on that lakeside beach: the cold clear air flowing like liquid over my face, the immense silence ringing in my unaccustomed ears. I closed my eyes and inhaled deeply – and caught a lungful of smuts on the back of my throat. The resulting coughing fit catapulted me abruptly back into the real world. I turned to the next photograph.

I looked, and looked again. At first I could make no sense of what I was seeing. It was a landscape from hell. Blinding white stone flowed down a hillside like treacle, engulfing the surrounding forest and spreading out into great terraces and plateaus. Steam spouted in wisps and clouds from unseen vents. It was desolate and strangely beautiful. The back read *The White Terraces, Lake Rotomahana, New Zealand.*

I slowly put the photographs to the side. I had lived in the wake of Papa's wanderlust all my life. His study was filled with mementos of his travels – a Japanese fan, a fez we used for charades, a carved mask that had given me nightmares for months when I was six. There were stories behind every piece, and I knew them all. Over in the far corner was the globe. Its continents and oceans were criss-crossed with faint pencil lines from my childhood attempts to track Papa's movements, based on his infrequent and often incomplete letters.

I had listened, and marvelled and dreamed, but my duty had always been clear. Mother needed me. I could barely remember a time when she hadn't. Elvira was the oldest; she would wed. George was bound for higher things, even if, at times, it was hard to imagine what those things could be. Mother was my responsibility. And after Mother? When my thoughts had stretched that far, I had assumed that I would keep

house for George, at least until that far-off misty moment when he wed. Now Mother was gone and George was going. I wasn't needed anymore.

My eyes lingered on the globe. New Zealand was just visible from where I sat, the tip of the North Island sliding out of sight around the curve of the horizon. Annie was braving that ocean. She would see new constellations, new peoples, new creatures – a whole new world – while I, who had dreamed of adventure all my life, would see only Larchwoods.

Beneath the package of photographs, there was a small, black, leather-bound book. Papa's last journal. There was one for every trip – more than one if the trip was long. I opened it reverently to the first page. There, as always, was a sketch map of his route. As Papa's trips went, this one was relatively simple: outward-bound from London down through the Atlantic and around the Cape of Good Hope to Auckland; a short backwards jog to Sydney before jumping across the Pacific, Fiji and the Sandwich Islands as stepping stones, to San Francisco. Here Papa had left the water and continued overland to New York before re-crossing the Atlantic to London and home.

I traced the route with my finger. England, New Zealand, America and back. All the way around the world in a few flicks of the pen. A thought whispered in my head: *I could do that...*

I took out the next bundle and unwrapped the cloth. And inside was a miracle even better than books – a packet of Bennett's Instantaneous Gelatine Photographic plates! Papa and I had talked of these long and hard last time he was home.

The wet-plate photographic process was effective, but it was also messy, cumbersome and restrictive. When Dr. Maddox had developed a new system using gelatine emulsions, called, rather unimaginatively, dry plate photography, the photographic community had been delighted. The new process was far less messy and, most importantly, the plates did not require immediate development. A wave of photographers had poised to flood the countryside, capturing mountains and wilderness previously out of reach. Unfortunately, the gelatine emulsion was discovered to be rather susceptible to friction – finger-print holes in the image were deemed unacceptable. The wave receded.

Then, Mr. Charles Bennet had found a way to harden the emulsion and recently had invented a process that reduced the exposure times of dry plates down to a mere fraction of a second. Short enough to capture even that most elusive of photographic prey – the smile. And now Mr. Bennet was producing these wondrous plates in a factory, ready-made and ready-coated, for anyone to buy. As Papa had.

That would mean...

I snatched the last package from the satchel and ripped aside the covering. And there it was – a brand-new dry plate camera. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. All glossy mahogany and shining brass. I opened it up and slid the bellows in and out, watching the various objects in the room blur and sharpen, upside down on the glass screen. A fuzzy roundness appeared. I moved the lens and New Zealand came into sharp focus. The globe had turned slightly in the breeze from the open door. Both islands were clearly visible.

Annie came in just as I was shutting the camera up.

“Heavens, Miss Sarah, what are you doing down there on the floor? You’ll be all over dirt.”

“Annie! I know what I’m going to do. It’s perfect, absolutely perfect.”

Annie regarded me warily.

“I’m going to travel!” I exclaimed, hugging the camera with delight. “Look at these photographs – aren’t they wonderful? And this new camera. I can take it anywhere. I don’t need to rush back to the darkroom. You can wait hours before developing the plates, even days! I want to go here...and here...and especially here.” I dealt the photographs out onto Papa’s desk, until I came to the images of New Zealand. “But most of all I want to go *here*! And do you know where that is, Annie?”

Annie shook her head, “Miss Sarah, you’re gettin’ all excited. Let me feel your head.”

“Annie, I’ve never felt better. These photographs were taken in New Zealand. Just imagine it!”

Annie regarded the images with horror. She picked up the photograph of the tattooed man. “Do they all look like that over there then? My sister told me things were getting almost civilised. The fighting’s all done with and everything. She says there’s places where you might almost imagine yourself back in England.” She tapped the image of the steaming rocks. “That there do not look like England. Not one little bit. That hill’s on fire!”

I took the photograph back. “I think that it is steam, not smoke. Isn’t it wonderful? Did you ever imagine that such a place even existed? When are you leaving for New Zealand, Annie? I do hope I can still book a passage.”

“Book a passage?” Annie frowned at me. “To New Zealand? Miss Sarah, you can’t be serious?”

“I’ve never been more serious in my life,” I assured her. “I’m going to follow in Papa’s footsteps. I’m going to circumnavigate the globe!”

“Mrs. Elvira will raise such a fuss, miss. She’ll never let you go.”

I swept the photographs into a pile. “Indeed, she will, Annie.” I could not contain the grin that burst across my face. “She must. Have you not heard Albert discussing the benefits of a sea voyage for convalescents? He says it is just the thing. And Elvira is the perfect wife. She would never disagree with Albert.”

“You’re getting better, Miss Sarah,” Annie protested. “You’ll be right as right in a few days.”

“I think I feel a relapse coming on, Annie.” I raised my fist and gave a loud and theatrical cough. “Fresh sea air would do me a world of good. If you are with me, how can Elvira fuss? Now, when do we leave?”

Annie opened her mouth to say something, but it was lost in a loud rapping from the front door.

She frowned. “Who can that be, banging away like that? They’re gonna knock the paint right off. I just polished that knocker.”

Annie stormed off to find out who was at the door. I hoped it wasn’t some poor misguided salesman who should have been using the kitchen door.

I packed everything back in the satchel and sneaked to the study door. A salesman would be preferable to Mrs. Dawson or any of Elvira’s other visitors. I was in no mood to make pleasant conversation. I wanted to try out my camera. I had no chemicals of my own, but I knew Papa had a photographer friend with his own portrait studio. All I had to do was get away without Elvira noticing.

I opened the door the tiniest crack and peeked through. It wasn’t a salesman. And it wasn’t Mrs. Dawson either.

A stranger filled the hallway, the width of his shoulders emphasized by the odd cut of his coat. Annie showed him into the parlour and he ducked his head as he passed through the door with the unconscious grace of long habit. The movement made his blond hair glint in the glow of the hall light, too long and shaggy for the current fashion. I caught my breath at a flash of memory.

He had good hearing. His eyes flicked down the corridor until he found me, peering through the doorway like a schoolgirl. I jerked back out of sight, but not in time to miss his smile. The memory clicked into place.

He was the man from the Hansom cab; the one George had knocked down.

Chapter Four

I have a natural affinity for lying – both the telling and the detection. This is not one of the usual accomplishments of a young lady in society, but it is more useful than embroidery. When your thoughts are the only thing you truly own, you will guard them any way you can. Most people, my sister amongst them, consider lying to be a sin. I feel that it depends upon the circumstances.

Detachment and observation are the keys to fabrication: detachment in the telling, observation in the detection.

At the instant of the lie, a true master of the art does not care about discovery. The lie might be simple, as close to the truth as possible, or it might be a flight of fancy so daring that the listener holds their breath in almost-disbelief, but whichever it is, the teller must believe it absolutely, if just for a single moment.

The ability to detect a lie is as valuable as reading, writing or arithmetic. It should be taught in school. But it isn't and most people are oblivious. Discovering a lie takes practice: years of watching and listening. You must look for the small things, the clenched fists, the restless feet, the eyes. Things that even the speaker does not realise are telling the truth.

But the truth can be dangerous.

I picked up the suitcase and snuck another look out the door. All clear. Quick as I could, I made for the stairs and the safety of my room. I wasn't quick enough. I was only halfway up when Annie called me back.

"Miss Sarah, there's a visitor in the parlour. Mrs. Elvira requests your company." Annie scowled at me from the bottom of the stairs and made frantic shooing motions with her hands, but her voice was quiet and respectful. Elvira must be in earshot.

I sighed and began to trudge back down the stairs.

"Don't you go in looking like that!" Annie hissed at me. "It's a *gentleman* visitor. Your dress is filthy and there's cinders all over your face. Go and change!"

I sighed again, and headed back up the stair.

"Quickly!"

Back in my room, I folded back the rug. It had been banished from the parlour many years ago and was old and threadbare, but I liked it. The colours had faded to a soft glow that gave an illusion of warmth. And it made a good cover for my hidey-hole.

I pulled up the two short floorboards and examined the hole underneath. The satchel would be a tight fit. I took two books out of the hole. There was no need to hide them now. Papa's unfortunate habit of giving away his books before I had finished them was a thing of the past.

The satchel still didn't fit. I removed the camera, the package of plates and Papa's diary and stowed them safely. I was putting the photographs back in the bag when footsteps sounded on the stairs. I hurriedly replaced the floorboards and smoothed out the rug. When Elvira entered, I was washing my face.

"We have a visitor, Sarah."

"I know, I know, I'm coming, but I had to change."

Elvira took in my dress and face. "What have you been doing? You're nineteen, my dear, not nine. It is time to grow up."

"I found the suitcase from Papa." I nodded toward the bed and continued to splash water on my face. It was icy-cold.

Elvira's gaze sharpened and she started for the bed, visitor momentarily forgotten. She never could abide a mystery.

I shrugged myself into a clean dress. It wasn't the height of fashion – Annie had better things to do than help me dress – but for once, Elvira was too distracted to notice.

"Is this all?" she said. The satchel was upended on the bedspread and Elvira was leafing through the packet of photographs.

"Aren't they wonderful?" I said. "The landscapes are so exotic."

Elvira threw the photographs on the bed and examined the bag. "The suitcase is quite handsome. A useful size." She felt the leather with possessive fingers.

"Yes," I said. "It was kind of Papa to think of me. I have nothing like it."

Elvira pursed her lips and dropped the bag. I turned away so she wouldn't see my smile.

"Come downstairs as soon as you are ready," she said as she swept out the door. "I must not keep our visitor waiting."

Just when I thought she was gone, her head popped back around the doorway. "Put on your new dress, the one that used to be Mother's. That one is not fit for company. The dye is running."

"Please accept my deepest condolences," our visitor said, standing up to offer me a small bow.

His voice was rich and deep, with an odd twanging accent that I couldn't place.

“Mr Larkin is from America,” Elvira told me. “He had some business with Papa. Unfortunately, he had not heard our sad news.”

American! That explained the accent and the clothes. I had never met an American before.

“Indeed, I had not,” Mr. Larkin said, “or I would not have intruded upon your grief in such a state.” He gestured at his clean, but slightly wrinkled coat. “Please forgive me, I have just this morning arrived and my business was a matter of some urgency. However, now...” His voice trailed off.

I regarded our visitor thoughtfully. Just this morning arrived, and yet knocked flat by George right outside our front door two days ago.

I took a seat and indicated that he should do likewise. He turned to Papa’s chair and my hand went out to stop him. I caught myself in time. It was the strongest chair in the room.

“Thank you for your kind thoughts, Mr. Larkin,” I said. “How did you know Papa?”

“We met in San Francisco,” he replied, leaning back until the chair creaked and picking up his tea cup. It looked like a child’s toy in his hand. Annie brought in a plate of Cook’s freshly-made scones, and the last of the cherry preserves, carefully hoarded since last summer. Mr Larkin smiled at her as she set them down and a faint tinge of red rose in her cheeks. Annie had never met an American either.

Beside me, Elvira poured another cup of tea. “I hope you had a pleasant voyage, Mr. Larkin. Will your stay in London be a long one?”

Mr. Larkin ran his hand through his hair, disordering the carefully slicked-back locks. He gave Elvira a rueful smile. “Well, Ma’am, I don’t know how long I’ll be staying now. Your Father’s passing has thrown me and that’s a fact.” His deep drawl bounced off the confining parlour walls; it was a voice that longed for wide open spaces.

Elvira spotted the opening she had been hoping for and dove in. “Perhaps we can help, Mr. Larkin. What exactly was the nature of your business with Papa?” She leant forward, her nose almost twitching with anticipation. The source of Papa’s income had always been a mystery, the sort that well-bred young women don’t inquire about.

Our visitor looked down at the floor and shuffled his feet. He cleared his throat. “I don’t know if I should say, Ma’am. Perhaps I could talk to your husband?”

“Mr. Knight is not expected here until tomorrow,” Elvira said. “He is at our country residence. I could send for him.”

“I wouldn’t dream of putting you to such trouble, Mrs. Knight. My business with your father was of no great importance.” Mr. Larkin shuffled a little more in a pretty show of embarrassment. I watched with interest, for show was all it was. His body was loose and relaxed, one hand lying open on the arm of the chair, his other hand hidden by his hat – but not by the mirror over the mantelpiece. There, his white-knuckled reflection showed that whatever was coming was of vital importance to Mr. Larkin – so important that I wasn’t sure if the hat would survive.

“I must have misunderstood, Mr. Larkin,” I said. “I thought you said the matter was of some urgency. That you came straight from your ship as soon as it landed. You did just arrive in England, did you not?”

The pale blue eyes shot me a quick, calculating glance. “The matter is of importance to me, of course, or I would not have disturbed you, Miss Price.”

Elvira shushed me. “My sister does not mean to give offense, Sir. Please, let us help.”

“The truth is I am looking for my brother and I have reason to believe that your father had information as to his whereabouts.”

“How long has it been since you saw your brother, Mr. Larkin?”

“Three years.” Mr. Larkin heaved a sigh. “We quarrelled, Ma’am, and I admit I was angry. At first I didn’t try too hard to find him. But I’m engaged to be married and he’s the only family I have. I want him at the wedding.”

“Married,” said Elvira. “How delightful. Is it to be a large affair?”

“As large as her father can make it,” Mr Larkin replied. “There are uncles and cousins scattered all the way from San Francisco to Boston. I’ll need Ned’s support.”

“How will you find him?” I said. “Papa is gone. Is there anyone else you can ask?”

“No, Ma’am.” He hesitated, opened his mouth to speak and closed it again.

“What is it?” Elvira said.

“Well, there is one thing, Ma’am, one thing that might help.” Mr. Larkin began to twirl his hat in his large hands. “Well, I’ll just ask – you can always say no. You see, your father was always writing. He had this little black book and anything that happened, anything interesting or unusual, he’d write it all down. And I wondered, well, if I could take a look at that book, maybe he might have mentioned my brother and I might be able to work out where he is.”

“Papa’s journal – of course! What a wonderful idea.” Elvira clapped her hands. She rang the bell for Annie.

While the hunt for Papa's journal went on around us, I considered our guest. "Why do you think that Papa might have known your brother's whereabouts, Mr. Larkin?"

He smiled at me, a wry twist of the lips with a faintest hint of a dimple, but it didn't reach his eyes. "My brother is an unusual man, Miss Price. He has a rare gift for birds. Just fascinated by them. For as long as I can remember, he's always had a flock of them hanging around. Even in the middle of the desert, where you'd swear black and blue there wasn't a living thing for miles, Ned would find something. He'd make a pet out of a vulture if that's all there was."

Behind us Annie brought in a stack of black books: Papa's journals from previous trips. Elvira rifled through them and shook her head.

"And Papa?" I prompted.

"I was in a saloon in San Francisco and I overheard your father talking to his friends. He was telling some tale about a man he had met on his travels, a man he said could talk to birds, get them to do anything. Well, that sounded exactly like my brother."

"Why didn't you ask him then?" I said.

Mr. Larkin turned red. "There was a spot of bother. I never got the chance."

Elvira came to his rescue. "Sarah, do stop pestering Mr. Larkin, with all your questions. There are some things a young lady doesn't need to hear."

There are some things a gentleman would be embarrassed to tell a lady, but Mr. Larkin wasn't embarrassed. He was angry. He recovered himself in an instant, but that was enough. For that one instant he could have stepped out of the pages of Mr. Johnson's *Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates*. I saw him on the deck of a ship, his too-long hair tied back, a cutlass in each hand and with just that look in his eye as he made some poor unfortunate walk the plank.

"Are you a sailor, Mr. Larkin?" I asked.

He looked startled. "I have been."

"Sarah, have you seen Papa's journal?" Elvira interrupted. "Annie seems to think it might have been in the satchel."

"There were only the photographs," I assured her. "Nothing else."

She nodded, "I did say it was a silly idea. Why would Papa have given it to you?"

As I have said, I am an excellent liar; unfortunately, Mr. Larkin was watching Annie, not me.

“Now why did Annie think that?” He gave Elvira a charming smile and she turned back to Annie with a question on her face.

“It was just the way Miss Sarah was talking,” Annie said, slowly. “Saying she was going to travel the world, follow in her Papa’s footsteps and all, like she knew exactly where he’d been. I must’ve been mistaken, Mrs. Elvira.”

“What on earth do you mean, travel the world?” Elvira demanded, “I don’t know where you get these ideas from, Annie. Miss Sarah is not going to travel the world. She is coming to Larchwoods. Aren’t you, Sarah?”

I closed my eyes for a moment. This was not how I had meant to make the announcement.

“Sarah? I am talking to you.”

“We have a visitor, Elvira.” I nodded at Mr. Larkin. His body was relaxed in his chair, but his alert, intelligent gaze was taking in every nuance of the conversation. I felt as though very soon he would work out how to see inside my head. “Now is not the time.”

Her good breeding asserted itself. She restrained her annoyance with an almost visible effort. “Do forgive me, Mr. Larkin. I’m afraid the journal seems to have disappeared. However, we shall not give up the search. And, now, I’m afraid we have another appointment. We are engaged to spend the afternoon with friends.”

“I thank you kindly for your efforts, Ma’am,” said Mr. Larkin, rising to his feet. “I would be mighty grateful for the information should that journal turn up someday. It would be a sad thing to lose the knowledge of your father’s last journey.” His eyes paused on mine as he spoke.

“Indeed it would,” I said, giving him my hand and a smile in farewell. “It has been a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Larkin.”

As soon as the front door had closed behind our visitor, Elvira turned to me. “We will talk after dinner. Mrs. Dawson will be arriving at any moment.”

“Mrs. Dawson?” My mind was a blank.

“Mr. Blackmore’s lecture! She is collecting us in her carriage.”

Oh yes, a talk about Italy by a man who detested the place, to an audience who had no desire to go.

“How delightful,” I said. “How could I have forgotten?”

We were home later than expected from our outing, having stopped off at the Dawsons' for an excruciating afternoon tea. The sight of a hired coach pulled up in front of our house filled me with dismay. I didn't think I could be polite for even one more second.

"Who could that be? I exclaimed.

We rounded the coach and there on the pavement was Albert, paying off the coachman. I had never been so pleased to see him.

"Albert!" Elvira cried as she alighted from the Dawson's carriage. "I didn't think you were arriving until tomorrow."

He looked up, "That the Dawson's carriage, Elvira? Well done." He gave a nod of approval and returned to carefully counting coins into the coachman's palm. When that was completed to his satisfaction, although not that of the coachman, he finally gave his wife his full attention.

"Albert," Elvira said. "I'm so glad you are here. Sarah has determined upon a mad scheme, and you are just the person to make her see sense."

Albert took her arm and hurried her toward the house, "Not on the street, Elvira. We don't want the whole neighbourhood knowing our business."

Whatever words you might use to describe Albert (pompous, overbearing and boring, were my private favourites), malicious was not one of them. Whatever he did, however annoying he was, his actions all sprang from a desire to do good, a desire to improve. People, conditions, society – no matter how complex, no matter how little his personal experience – Albert believed that he could fix it all. And nothing you could say or do would convince him otherwise.

So as soon as Albert grasped that I was taking his oft-uttered advice to heart and planning a journey of convalescence, the matter was settled. I simply had to appear suitably wan and delicate, a condition easily achieved after several hours in the company of Mr. Frederick Dawson. Elvira was powerless to disagree.

By the very next day, the juggernaut that was Albert Knight had lumbered into action, planning, outfitting and organising my travels.

Chapter Five

A voyage by sea is perilous. The journey from England to New Zealand takes around three months; a little quicker if the ship is fast, the winds are favourable and the captain is foolhardy, a little longer if they are not. Sometimes, a lot longer – as in the case of the unfortunate Cossipore which suffered not one, but two disasters, and limped into port well over a year after first departing England.

Some ships don't arrive at all.

A surprising number of journeys end in the English Channel. Strong headwinds, heavy traffic and thick fog do not combine well.

Collisions are not the only danger. There are many other ways to wreck a ship – reefs, rocks and icebergs, to name a few. You must watch out for sleeping whales, and waking ones who use the ship as a barnacle scraper.

Disease is to be avoided at all cost. Measles and scarlet fever are the biggest killers, but you may also take your pick from smallpox, tuberculosis, typhoid and typhus.

There are other hazards. You might tumble down the hatch or be swept from the deck in high seas. The food might be contaminated. The fresh water might run out.

Or the ship might catch on fire. The hulk of the Cospatrick burns in the memory of every traveller, whether they admit it or not. Of the almost five hundred people on board, a grand total of three souls survived. And then only by virtue of cannibalism, a more common diet in shipwrecks than you might suppose.

There are indeed a great variety of ways to perish at sea, and Elvira enumerated them, every one, in the weeks before my departure.

I stood on the gangway and gazed at the chaos in front of me.

All over the main deck, families of emigrants huddled in bewildered clumps, their baggage tumbled in higgledy-piggledy piles around them. Carpenters jostled their way through the crowd, planks slung over their shoulders, as they finished turning below-decks from cargo hold to passenger cabin – work that should have been finished days ago. Sailors cursed and shoved, rushing to stow trunks, load supplies, and ready the ship. Friends and relatives hugged. Children played tag amid the stacks of lumber, crates of chickens, squealing pigs and coils of rope. The cook counted his barrels of flour and screamed at the porter. Hawkers and merchants touted their wares.

The air was a swirling tumult of noise: hammering, shouting, wailing and squawking.

We were due to leave the following morning. How could order be imposed in such a short time?

There was a tug on my sleeve. “Miss Sarah, you’ve got to keep moving,” Annie said. “We’re holding up the line.”

On board ship our porter dumped our luggage from his barrow and disappeared.

“Come back, man!” George yelled at his departing back.

“He won’t,” I said. “He means to get as many loads as he can, and who can blame him?”

“Me, for one, if it means we have to lug all this lot ourselves,” George muttered. “Where do we go anyhow?”

I looked about, orientating myself to the ship that was to be my world for the next few months. The three tall masts towered above us and ropes stretched everywhere, like a giant spider web. A couple of small figures scampered in the rigging, a hundred feet above our heads. I caught George eyeing them speculatively.

“Anyone caught in the rigging is painted with tar and hung upside down from the bow sprit all night,” I told him.

“Rubbish,” he said, but he dropped his eyes.

There were so many people that it was hard to get a clear view of the decks. I was glad that a family emergency had prevented Elvira from accompanying me. This hullabaloo would not suit her ideas about convalescence.

“Do you still have that letter for Elvira?” I asked George. I had to pinch his arm to get his attention.

He patted his coat pocket in a rather careless way. “Of course, I do. Do you know, Sarey, I had no idea how interesting sailing was. Perhaps I should have joined the navy. Do you think this ship has any cannons? In case of pirates or some such thing?”

“We are going to the Southern Ocean, George. It’s too cold for pirates.”

I pointed towards the raised deck at the rear of the ship. The *stern*, I told myself. “The first class cabins should be there. I’ll see if I can find the steward.”

When I finally came back with the steward and a burly sailor, I was surprised to find that the pile of luggage was considerably diminished. “Where are the other trunks?” I asked George.

“Some chap came and asked what was to be put in the hold. I gave him the ones you didn’t need.”

“I asked him to wait, Miss Sarah, until you came back,” Annie said. “But...” She turned up her palms helplessly.

I examined the labels in a panic. “George, you’ve given him the wrong box. This is the one for the hold. That one had my camera and all my books. My camera, George! What if it gets broken?”

“Calm down, Sarey,” George said. “I watched you pack that camera myself; it would survive a train wreck.”

I wasn’t listening; I had just had an awful realisation. “Do you realise that they won’t open the hold again until we reach the Southern Ocean. I can’t do without books for two months! We’ve got to get them back.” I turned to the steward. “How do we get them back?”

“How long ago did he take the boxes, sir?” the steward asked George.

George shrugged, “Quarter of an hour?”

“I’m very sorry, Miss. They’ll be packed in tight by now. Just look at it all.” He gestured to the main hatch. A constant stream of trunks, sacks and boxes were being man-handled down into the hold. I could just imagine how many already stood between me and my books.

The steward checked my ticket once more, tucked one of the smaller boxes under his arm and disappeared in the direction of the cabins, the burly sailor waddling in his wake with the bulk of the luggage.

“Perhaps you can buy another book before we sail,” George suggested. “There’s a man over there selling bibles. Tell you what – I’ll get you one myself. A little going-away present.”

The first class saloon was a long narrow room, panelled in rich mahogany. A table ran down the centre, with a bench tucked under either side. The only light came from a large skylight. There were no other windows, as the room was surrounded on all sides by cabins. It felt dark, cramped and coffin-like – a feeling not helped by the mizzen-mast, which rose through the floor like the trunk of an enormous tree, bursting through the centre of the table and continuing on up through the roof. I resolved to spend as much time on deck as possible.

Several of the cabin doors stood open as the passengers bustled to and fro putting things to rights.

I stopped in the doorway to my room. Another three steps and my nose would be pressed against the porthole. There was little more room in the other direction and my

head almost brushed the ceiling. At present, all the available space was occupied by my luggage and furniture. I was glad that I had said goodbye to George on the deck. There was no room for him.

A couple of built-in berths were tucked along one side, and a strange wooden box was pulled up against the ceiling.

Annie saw me eyeing it. "They say it's a bed," she said, doubtfully. "A sort of swinging bed."

I shoved a trunk out of the way, and squeezed across the room. "Do these open, do you think?" One good push and the porthole swung wide. A cool breeze flowed into the cabin, bringing with it the muddy stench and clamour of the dock.

"Where do you want this, Miss Sarah?" Annie swung my travelling desk onto the bed. It had been Papa's, a simple box of battered rosewood that opened to form a generous writing surface. The plain exterior also hid a multitude of useful compartments. I had hardly believed my good fortune when Elvira had claimed Mother's more delicate desk.

"I can put it away, Annie. Why don't you find your own bunk?"

"No, Miss. Mrs Elvira hired me to look after you, and look after you I will." She opened a trunk and clucked her tongue at the state of the clothes inside.

Outside the window, a seagull cried and wheeled up into the empty sky.

"Annie, I hired you and I'm telling you to go." I saw her face and softened my voice. "Please, Annie? I need some time alone."

Annie looked across the room and out the porthole. I don't know what she saw there, but she nodded. "I'll be back to help you dress for dinner." Then she was gone, through the salon and down the staircase to the single women's cabin. She had refused a second-class ticket. She said she knew her place.

I shut the door behind her and sat on the bed. For a time I did nothing but watch the bright tangle of reflected light on the ceiling and listen to the gulls and the lap of the waves.

I had borrowed a hammer from the carpenter and was hammering some nails into the wall above the bunk to act as hooks when there was a knock on the door.

"Ahem..." A practised cough sounded behind me and the door slid open. I turned to see a round, leathery face with a bristly ruff of white whiskers peering around the doorframe. A second face appeared slightly lower down, softer, rounder and pinker, but just as curious.

“Sorry to interrupt, my dear,” the leathery face said, dark eyes darting brightly about the room. “And you’re doing such a good job, with the banging and all. But we couldn’t help overhearing earlier, the missus and myself, that is.” One face nodded to the other, both beaming happily. “We couldn’t help overhearing that you had a slight mishap with a box of books.” The smiles disappeared abruptly. “A tragedy such as that, my dear, simply cannot be borne. And we thought, the missus and myself, that you might be appreciating this.” And with the air of a conjuror, an arm appeared, the wiry fingers clasping a book.

“How wonderful!” I dropped the hammer and jumped down from the bunk. As I approached the doorway, the rest of my strange visitors were revealed. They were an odd couple. The husband was elderly, a small, spry monkey of a man; the wife several years younger and plump and comforting as a currant bun.

“There’s more where that came from,” the old man said, handing me the book.

I caressed the leather binding with delight. “*A Lady’s Life in the Rocky Mountains*. I have longed to read this. Thank you so much!”

The man bowed, the woman bobbed. “Thaddeus Whelk, at your service, my dear. And this is my missus, my Mary, the joy of my life.” His smile held such immense love as he gazed at her that I looked away. “And you must be Miss Price!” He leaned closer and whispered behind his hand. “I hope you won’t think us forward, we had the all names from the steward.”

“I am indeed Miss Price,” I said. “I’m so pleased to meet you.”

“We won’t keep you. We’re off to take a turn about the deck.” They disappeared into the saloon, leaving me with a smile on my face. I placed the book on my desk. There would be time enough for reading in the months to come.

That evening, I met a few more of my fellow passengers. The two stern cabins, the largest on the ship, were full of Dibbles, a father, a mother, a couple of grandmothers and too many children to count. The parents seemed amiable, but exhausted. Mr Dibble was on his way to take up an important post in the Government, but in the constant hubbub of his offspring I never discovered what it was.

The dinner table was guarded by an ancient dragon, Mrs Bittlesworth, and her two dragonette daughters, Mabel and Agnes. Each newcomer was subjected to a duel of ancestry before being allocated their place at the dinner table.

Mrs Bittlesworth opened with her biggest card – her great-uncle, the Earl. I countered with an imaginary Marquis, twice removed on my father’s side. Mrs

Bittlesworth was at a loss. She gamely offered a viscount by way of marriage to a third cousin but she knew she was defeated. She was graciously rising to her feet to offer me her place when Agnes plucked at her sleeve. A whispered conference ensued which gave the dragon confidence for a last attack.

“And your mother’s family, Miss Price? Where are they from?”

Having spied the Whelks banished to happy isolation at the far end of the table. I made a quick decision to join them.

“It was so romantic, Mrs Bittlesworth. Like something from a novel!”

Mrs Bittlesworth looked horrified.

“Mama was just a poor milkmaid, but it was love at first sight. They eloped, in the dead of night. Papa’s family cut him off of course without a single penny, but they were so happy.”

Mrs Bittlesworth gathered her daughters closer to her starched and beribboned sides like a mother hen protecting her chicks. “Eloped! With a milkmaid!” She took a moment to recover. “Have you met the Whelks, Miss Price? Delightful people – I’m sure you will have much in common.”

She barely waited for me to go before she was deep in gossip with Mrs Butler, wife of the Right Honourable Mr. Butler. Every so often a head would pop up and glare at our end of the table. The occasional remark drifted our way: *riff-raff, dreadfully common, think they can buy their way anywhere.*

“Shame on you, Miss Price,” Mrs Whelk scolded as I took my place. “Your poor mother was no milkmaid, I’m sure of it. You’ve got breeding written all over you.”

Mr Whelk was chortling so hard he choked on his soup. “And where’d you get the money to go a’travelling if your Papa has not a single penny, that’s what I’d like to know.”

I shot them both a rueful grin. “I admit I might have got a little carried away but she deserved it.”

“That she did, my dear,” said Mr. Whelk, “and nobody can deny. Not even you, Mary.”

That night, as I lay in my unfamiliar bed in my unfamiliar cabin, surrounded by the gentle swish of the water and the slow creaks of the ship, I felt something inside me relax. This was my own adventure. I was no longer a daughter or a sister or an aunt. For the first time in my life, I belonged to myself and myself alone. I turned on my side and drifted dreamlessly into sleep.

The next morning dawned fair and clear. My portholes having no covering, I was up at first light. I stole up onto the deck and watched the world of the docks come to life around me. First the dockers appeared, rough and shabby men often lost from sight beneath their enormous loads, then porters with handcarts, and carters with wagons. Sailors wobbled on board their ships with grey-green faces, and trembling legs; they had made the most of their shore leave. Messenger boys darted every which way, smart as hummingbirds in their bright uniforms. There were cook stalls selling jellied eel and pork pies, hot coffee and pea soup. And hawkers selling almost everything else, from bibles to portable stoves.

A few last-minute passengers arrived. On the main deck, the steward, a round and roly-poly man named Buller, backed out of the cookhouse with a tray of hot coffee. He saw me and smiled. A minute later, he reappeared out of the salon hatch, with a cup of coffee and a fresh roll.

“Make the most of it, Miss Price, it’ll be ship’s biscuits for breakfast soon enough.”

Soon the whole ship was awake. The steerage passengers crowded the main deck, getting in the way of the sailors. My fellow cabin passengers did the same on the poop deck, impeding the Captain and his officers as they strode about shouting orders. A little steam tug came up alongside us, small as a child’s toy beside the towering hulk of the *Ocean Queen*. The ship was hooked up to the tug. The gangway was removed and the ropes cast off.

The chain to the tug tightened and the ship gave a great jerk. My stomach clenched with excitement and a little fear. We were on the move!

The ship began to draw away from the dock, slowly and carefully. A great cheer went up from the passengers. I felt a wiggle beside me and a small hand crept into mine. Looking down, I discovered a little Dibble, a girl of perhaps ten. I dredged my memory for a name: Ellie.

“We’re really going, Miss, aren’t we?” She hopped from foot to foot. Excitement or nerves? I couldn’t tell.

I nodded. “Are you scared? There’s no need.”

She turned wide indignant eyes to me. “Scared? Of course, not!” Her hand clutched mine a little tighter.

Suddenly she jerked her hand away and pointed, "Look over there! Someone's missed the boat."

Everyone looked. A wagon was being driven at breakneck speed along the dock. Pedestrians dived out of the way as the wagon swerved its way towards us. The driver spotted the retreating ship and gave a shout.

I tugged on the arm of a passing sailor. "There's a passenger. Can we stop?"

The sailor grinned. "No, Miss. He'll have to try his luck at the gates. He can get on there, if he's game enough." He was gone before I could ask him what he meant.

The wagon paused for a moment; there was a heated discussion between driver and passenger.

"He's going for the gates!" someone said.

The wagon took off in a different direction. I lost sight of it behind the stacks of boxes.

The tug pulled us through the basin, into the lock. A crowd of well-wishers were gathered by the great gates. Cheering and shouting filled the air as we moved into position.

"There he is again." Ellie said.

The wagon skidded to a stop alongside the ship. The late passenger began to frantically remove his baggage. A few of the bystanders went to his aid. Two big dockers carried a trunk to the edge of the lock. A couple of experimental swings, and... heave!

"Watch out!" the crowd yelled and the passengers on deck scattered. The trunk was followed by a rain of bags and cases. There was a clang as the second set of lock gates shut behind us.

"He'd better hurry up," I said. "They'll be changing the water level now."

Ellie clutched my fingers. "What if he falls in?"

Just then an errant toss sent a bag into one of the ropes. It bounced back and was over the side before anyone could reach it.

"Where is it? Where is it?" Ellie cried, as I leant right out over the side. There was a far-away splash. The water was a long way down.

A sailor tousled her hair. "Don't worry, little missy, those boats will pick it up." He waved at the rowboats clustered behind the ship like gnats. "That's what they're waiting for. A bag is nothing; what they'd really like is a man. The money's better." He was right, the rowers were gazing hungrily at the man readying himself to jump aboard, as if their wishes alone could drag him down.

All this time, the water around us was sinking as the ship dropped down to the level of the Thames.

“He’s jumping!” Ellie said.

The man took a few running steps and leapt. On both deck and dock, everyone held their breath. He flew over the perilous gap with ease. At the peak of the jump the wind caught his hat, flipping it up and away in a carefree arc. Long blond hair tumbled free.

I started forward: I knew that hair, those long legs. It was Mr. Larkin!

He landed heavily on the deck, tumbling forward. A couple of sailors caught him and steadied him. Sweeping a hand through his windblown locks, he said something to the sailors that made them grin. Then he spun back to the waiting crowd and swept into a deep bow. The onlookers erupted in a thunder of cheers and applause.

“I know him,” I whispered to Ellie. “I wonder—”

Just then, Mr Larkin turned and scanned the poop deck, searching each face until he found mine. My question was answered: he had followed me.

“What a vulgar man,” said Mrs Bittlesworth, leaning over the rail for a better look.

“But so athletic,” said Miss Agnes. “Do you suppose he is travelling first class?”

The dock gates opened. Shouts of farewell rang across the water. There was a raising of hats and a flutter of handkerchiefs. Down on the main deck, several women burst into tears. Mrs. Bittlesworth sniffed disapprovingly.

As the tug pulled us down the river, all the steerage passengers were ordered up onto the poop deck.

“What’s happening?” Ellie wanted to know.

“It’s the medical inspection. They want to make sure no one is sick.”

She looked alarmed. “Do we have to be inspected?”

“No, no, only the steerage passengers.”

I saw Annie at the back of the crowd. Her freckles stood out on her pale skin like cinnamon on rice pudding. I wondered if she was going to faint. I smiled reassuringly, but her eyes were locked on the Captain and she didn’t see me. Ellie and I snuck down the stairs to the main deck and found a place where we could watch both the inspection and the passing shore. Three stout and important gentlemen in top hats of varying heights took their places at the railing of the poop deck. An anxious murmur rose from

the crowd as the stoutest man in the tallest hat climbed onto a stool and took out a sheaf of paper.

“Time for the roll call,” said a voice in my ear.

I jumped and spun around to find Mr Larkin standing right behind me.

He had slipped on a veneer of Englishness along with his new coat of blue superfine. The coat was of the latest cut and brought out the colour of his eyes to perfection. His hair was slicked back and pomaded. His shoes were polished and his hat was right in style. He looked quite the gentleman. But his hair was a fraction too long and the accent, though tamer now, still hinted at something wilder than green fields and hedgerows.

“Mr Larkin! I did not know that we would be travelling together.”

He smiled. “I didn’t know myself, not until yesterday. I received a letter from Ned.” He paused as if waiting for me to say something. “My brother is in New Zealand.”

“How nice,” I said. “This is Ellie Dibble. Ellie, this is Mr Larkin. He is to be a fellow passenger.”

Mr Larkin switched on his charming smile. I realised that until that moment Ellie had been of no interest, and hence, no importance.

“Hello, Ellie,” he said. “Lovely to meet you.” He reached out and tugged her ear. “What’s this you have tucked away?” Unfolding his fingers, he revealed a farthing, very small and brown in his large palm. “Now, why don’t you go and find your Mother? Miss Price and I have some business to discuss.”

Ellie considered him from under her thick black fringe. “Mr Whelk does that better,” she said finally. “And *he* gave me a ha’penny.” She pocketed the coin and scooted away before he could reply.

I laughed. “I think you’ll need more money to make a friend there.” I moved a few steps away and sat down on the hatch cover. Mr Larkin’s intense stare was making me uneasy.

“I saw your sister yesterday. She said your father talked about writing a book.”

“Poor Papa! He was always saying that. How someday he’d settle down and write a masterpiece, full of all the characters he’d met on his travels. That’s right, I remember now. He listed a few of his favourites in his last letter. Does Elvira think your brother was among them?”

“Yes.” He continued to watch me, like a snake watching a mouse.

I could not imagine that Elvira would have given Papa's letter to a stranger, not that it would have been particularly informative even if she had. Papa's letters never were. On the infrequent occasions when he remembered his family, he would scribble on whatever odd scraps of paper were to hand. His letters were treasured more as evidence of his continued existence than for their contents. All the details of his travels were saved for his journals.

"Your sister read me the description. It fitted my brother perfectly," Mr Larkin continued. "The letter was written from New Zealand, but did not say where your father encountered him."

"How fortunate that your brother wrote to you then," I said.

"Yes, fortunate indeed," Mr Larkin said. "Except he forgot to include a return address."

"So you plan to search the length of New Zealand? That seems a tremendous effort, even for a wedding. You and your brother must be very close."

"Our parents died young," Mr Larkin said. "I was practically a father to the boy."

Chapter Six

The deck of the Ocean Queen bore an odd resemblance to my Great-Aunt Seraphina's front parlour. Both held more objects than one would have felt possible, were difficult to navigate without tripping over something unexpected, and were scrubbed spotlessly clean. However my Great-Aunt's parlour contained considerably less rope.

The Ocean Queen was entangled in rope: swifters, shrouds, sheets, clewlines, halliards, buntlines, leechlines, downhauls and braces. Every one was necessary and every one was named. Tucked in between the ropes were the animals. Chickens, pigs (we had three, Percival, Peregrine and a lone female who was eaten before there was time to name her) and a milk goat. There should have been a cow, but she was left behind in the rush to sail. Great-Aunt Seraphina had a canary, songless and sullen, and a multitude of cold china creatures overflowing every surface.

People were the difference. The decks swarmed with people. Passengers, sailors and officers, all determined to spend as little time as possible in the damp and odorous confines of their cabins. My Great-Aunt Seraphina did not approve of people. She did not let them into her parlour.

Something wet, cold and slightly slimy shoved into my hand. I screamed and spun around. A pair of chocolate brown eyes gazed adoringly into mine; a long pink tongue swiped across my face.

"Don't worry, Miss Price, it's only Charlie. He's friendly."

"So I've discovered." I looked up from the grinning Labrador and found a raiding party. The Captain, resplendent in his brass buttons and pirate beard, was surrounded by all his officers and a gaggle of sailors brandishing a variety of odd implements: long poles, hammers and chisels. Hovering at the very back was a thin pale man with a ledger.

"We need to open the hatch, Miss," said Mr MacDonald, the First Mate. "To check for stowaways."

I jumped up but stayed in front of the hatch cover. "What are you going to do if you find one," I asked, eyeing the sharp edge of the chisel. The ship's carpenter took very good care of his tools.

“Bless you, Miss,” Mr MacDonald said, following my glance. “We won’t do them any harm.” His voice was too hearty for comfort. “Those are for opening crates, and poking into barrels. It’s a wonder the places these people find to hide.”

I stepped reluctantly away from the hatch. “And I suppose Charlie will sniff them out, Mr MacDonald?”

“Good Lord, no!” the First Mate said, flipping the hatch open. “He just gets in the way. Last time we did this, he jumped in a pickle barrel and nearly drowned. I’d appreciate it greatly if you would keep him up here with you.” Raising up his lantern, he descended into the depths, the rag-tag band of searchers following him. I grabbed Charlie’s collar before he could plunge down the steps. He whined unhappily, but stayed.

“I’ll come with you if I may?” Mr Larkin said to the Captain, who nodded his assent.

I was glad to be rid of him.

Up on the poop deck, the medical inspection was proceeding at a rapid pace. A quick glance at the nose and throat, a poke in the stomach, and off they went – medical certificate in hand. Annie had been dreading this, although she had never been sick a day in her life. She had a morbid fear of doctors. In her long recital of the various ends of her friends and relatives, a visit to the doctor was invariably fatal. Even for something as simple as an ingrown toenail.

The inspection alone had almost made her consider my offer to pay for a second-class cabin, but in the end, she had declared that she would rather be carried off the ship in a coffin than go where she was not wanted. I hadn’t thought the coffin likely at the time, but now, seeing medical science at work, I wasn’t so sure.

With over three hundred passengers on board, the doctors had significantly less than a minute per passenger, and even then they would be at it for hours. From where I stood, I could see several people who looked distinctly unwell, a man hiding his sneezes in an enormous handkerchief, a child uncommonly pink and listless. When they too passed inspection and walked off, clutching their precious piece of paper, I began to understand Elvira’s concern about disease.

“Miss Price!” Mr Whelk appeared at my elbow, and I jumped. I was beginning to wonder if this ship had a supply of rabbit holes – people seemed to be forever popping up when I least expected them.

“I hope I didn’t startle you, my dear,” Mr Whelk said, grinning with delight at having done exactly that. “I was wondering if you’d like to accompany me on a tour of the ship. My darling Mary, light of my life that she is, has declared a desire for my absence.”

“Getting in her way, were you?” I said, as he offered me his arm.

“She is arranging our cabin. I was, and here I quote my beloved, ‘about as much use as a bucket with a hole in the bottom’. She suggested I come on deck and pester someone else.” He waved at a group of men lounging in the shade of the forecastle. “Now, do you suppose any of these fellows have the wits God gave a mackerel?”

By this time we had moved to easy hearing distance of the sailors and one shot Mr. Whelk a look. “It is a tour you’re wanting? Captain’s orders, I suppose?”

Mr Whelk inclined his head.

“Then Bill’s your lad. Nothing that boy likes better than a tour. Look under the hat.” The sailor sniggered as he pointed and all his friends joined in.

The hat in question was certainly distinctive – a patchwork of multi-coloured leather with a brim wide enough to hide the entire face of the man reclining underneath it.

Bill said nothing. He didn’t move.

Mr Whelk lifted the hat up by the brim. We caught a glimpse of a wild snarl of beard before a large hand reached up and clamped the hat down securely once again. Bill snorted and turned on his left shoulder.

“You’ll have to do more than that,” the helpful sailor said. “Give him a kick and he’ll wake up right as rain. Here, I’ll do it.” He crossed the deck and booted the hapless Bill in the thigh. Hard enough to bruise.

The sleeper’s long leg lashed out and caught his tormenter in the ankle. “Do that again William Harris, and I’ll throw you overboard.”

Harris’ shipmates were sniggering at him now and he didn’t like it. He drew back his foot for another kick, but his would-be victim was sitting up, watching him.

“These people want a tour,” Harris said sullenly.

Bill rose slowly to his feet, one hand clutching his head. He towered over us, rumped and grumpy as a midwinter bear. Even his eyebrows grimaced.

I tugged on Mr Whelk’s elbow. “He doesn’t look well; perhaps we should leave him in peace.”

The bear stretched and yawned. His bleary gaze passed from Mr Whelk to me. He blinked and bloodshot brown eyes scanned me from top to toe. “I’m all right, Miss. Just

a rough night, is all. Last night on shore, you know how it is.” He appealed to Mr Whelk, who nodded.

“Of course. I realise that we are depriving you of your valuable leisure time and will ensure that you are adequately compensated.”

The sailors looked blank – until a handful of coins dropped into Bill’s palm, and the grimace turned into a grin. He shook his fistful of coins at the others, “Who’s laughing now, you lubbers?”

We set off on our tour with our giant guide. As we started up the steps to the forecandle, Ellie appeared, a host of smaller Dibbles at her heels. “We want to come too.”

Mr Whelk glanced at Bill, who shrugged. “It don’t bother me.”

The Dibbles surged forward. Bill gave a sudden laugh and swung the youngest up onto his shoulders. The movement had a practised ease and he gave a little jig that had the child shrieking with laughter and Bill grinning. I realised that he was much younger than I had thought. The grin turned sheepish when he caught my eye.

“Who made your hat, Bill?”

“Me little sister, Miss. She made it special. I didn’t have the heart to say no.”

“Do you miss your family?”

He hesitated, “Sometimes, Miss, especially me Ma. Don’t you tell no one!”

We examined the ship from stem to stern. Bill in the lead was Gulliver surrounded by eager Lilliputian Dibbles. They swung on the ropes and swarmed up the masts, until Bill plucked them off by the seats of their pants. They peeked into the cookhouse and were sworn at by the cook, entrancing new words that the little Dibbles repeated with magpie glee. Ellie cast horrified looks at the poop deck while Bill and Mr Whelk laughed.

“It’s not funny,” she hissed. “Mama will wash our mouths out with soap. Yours too!”

Their mouths shut with a snap.

We met ‘Chips’, the carpenter, and ‘Sails’, the sailmaker. The whole voyage, I never did find out their real names. Mr Whelk was insatiable; he wanted to know everything: the names of the sails, how the cargo was stowed, where the sailors came from. He was particularly intrigued by the water purifier. Here Bill was a great disappointment.

“You put sea water in here, shovel the coal in there,” he repeated in desperation, “and the fresh water comes out into this bucket. That’s all I know, Mr Whelk, honest!”

“It must be a form of distillation,” I said, peering at the contraption with interest. “The water is vaporised, passed through this filter and then condensed.”

“Yes,” said Mr Whelk, taking off his jacket. “Now, if we could just remove this bolt here, we might be able to see—”

“Mr Whelk!” Bill panicked and pulled the old man away. “We need that.”

Mr Whelk continued on, but not without a longing backward glance.

The tour ended at the wheel.

“You lot must never touch this,” Bill growled at the Dibbles. “Not so much as a finger, d’you hear? If I ever catch you at it, I’ll whip you meself!”

Fully as tall as Bill, the satiny wood gleamed with temptation. It was more than little hands could bear. First one, then another, then all the children reached out. Bill roared. The children screamed with terrified joy. Arms outstretched, he chased them across the deck, straight into the solidly booted legs of the First Mate.

“Bill Delany, find some work, before I find some for you!”

The children took one look at the grim face and fled. Bill wasn’t far behind.

“How did your stowaway hunt go, Mr MacDonald?” I asked, trying to distract the First Mate, before he dreamed up some horrible punishment for poor Bill.

“Not a single bleeding soul,” the Mate said, and stomped off.

We anchored for the night at Gravesend. I went below in a state of mild disappointment. Our first day of travel and we had not yet made it to the open sea. I had spent all day outside, an unusual, but invigorating experience, and I did not want to be shut up with strangers to make polite conversation. I opened the door of my cabin and stopped.

“Whatever’s the matter, my dear? You’re as stiff as a statue,” Mrs Whelk came up behind me and strained to peer over my shoulder. “Oh my goodness! You’ve been robbed!”

“Robbed? What nonsense! We’re on a ship. You can’t be robbed on a ship.” Mrs Bittlesworth poked me in the ribs until I moved. “Humph, well, I’m sure there’s a perfectly good explanation. Girl’s probably one of them those Bohemians. Messy creatures, Bohemians. Hides it well, but there you are.”

“I’m not a Bohemian, Mrs Bittlesworth.” I turned to Mrs Whelk. “Could you fetch the Captain, Mrs. Whelk? And I would be most grateful if you took Mrs Bittlesworth with you.”

Mrs Whelk nodded. She ushered the older woman out of the room: a small determined sheepdog herding a goose.

I closed the door behind them and looked around. Everything I owned was on the floor. Drawers had been upended, suitcases emptied, even my box of drawing pencils had been tipped out. What valuables could the thief have possibly imagined might be nestled in amongst the charcoal sticks and erasers? I waded in and began to restore some order.

“What is the meaning of this?” a gruff voice demanded from the doorway.

“I’ve been robbed, Captain Dennison.”

“No one has ever been robbed on my ship before.”

“Believe me, Sir, I would much rather that record had remained unbroken.”

“Yes, well.” The Captain looked embarrassed. He took refuge in shouting. “What has been taken? Anything of value?”

“That’s the odd thing,” I said, straightening up. “The only one thing missing seems to be my bible.” The small leather-bound book that George had bought me as compensation for the loss of my other books had been in my desk drawer and I could not find it in the mess on the floor.

“Your *bible*?” the Captain repeated. “What sort of a thief steals a bible?”

“I have no idea,” I said. “I had my most valuable items with me on deck. It seemed safer with all the coming and going.” I patted my rather voluminous sewing bag. It bulged and bumped in odd places.

The Captain seemed a little offended, but faced with the evidence in front of us, even he could not deny that it had been a sensible precaution.

“Must have been one of those hawkers. Like fleas, if you ask me. Didn’t think the little beggars would dare leave the main deck, though. Are you sure it is not how you left it?”

I surveyed the surrounding chaos. “Quite sure, Captain.”

“I suppose you will wish to report this to the shipping company? Make a complaint and all that,” Captain Dennison said gloomily.

“I don’t really see the point, do you? Nothing has been taken and I’m sure you are taking all possible precautions.”

The Captain brightened at these words. “Quite right, Miss Price. I thought you looked like a sensible girl. You should keep your door locked from now on.”

I glanced pointedly at the bare doorframe and the Captain coloured. “Chips will make you a lock.”

“Excuse me, Captain?” Mr Dibble came up behind us.

“Yes?” Captain Dennison answered unenthusiastically, his mind still taken up with the puzzle of my robbery.

Mr Dibble coughed apologetically, “I’m afraid we’ve been robbed too, Sir.”

The Captain’s face turned an unappealing shade of beetroot and Mr Dibble retreated a step or two.

“It’s not a large robbery, Captain. Just a trinket or two belonging to my wife. But rather a mess, I’m afraid and the women are a little upset. Perhaps you would be so good as to...” His voice trailed off as he led the still speechless Captain to view the damage.

Mrs Butler slipped something into my hand. “I know you will not want to be without God’s word, Miss Price,” she said in her soft colourless voice that I had to strain to hear. “I have plenty to spare.” She retreated without waiting for my thanks.

She had given me another bible, so like my own that I checked the cover, but there was no name inside. She must have bought it from the same vendor. Perhaps she had bought up his entire stock to share with the benighted New Zealanders.

The robberies were the talk of the dinner table. Mrs Bittlesworth was of the opinion that I had brought it on myself, although even she could not quite say how. Everyone was intrigued that only the bible had been taken, but then, I had nothing much of any worth to take.

“Just wait until we are two months out from England,” said Mr Larkin. “Then all those goodies you have stowed away will be the most valuable things on board. The chocolates alone will be worth their weight in gold.”

I regarded him thoughtfully, “How do you know I have chocolates, Mr Larkin?”

“An educated guess, Miss Price. A young lady such as yourself could not be deprived of chocolates for three whole months; it would be a cruelty of the highest order.” He smiled sweetly at me and continued to peel his apple. When he was finished, he presented the unbroken spiral of skin to Miss Agnes with a flourish.

The next day dawned grey and foggy. There was a last-minute flurry of activity, as the ship was readied for sea. The hatches were battened down, everything was made secure and stowed away. Under the guidance of a much larger tug and then a pilot, we made our way out into the channel and around the coast to Deal.

Much to the First Mate's delight, a pair of stowaways was discovered hiding in one of the ship's boats. Bill made the discovery and his stock with the First Mate flew sky-high. He was stowing the emergency provisions, when a packet of ship's biscuits was snatched right out of his hands. Further investigation produced a pair of scrawny boys, shivering and extremely hungry. They had provided themselves with a flask of water, but had not thought of food. They had been hiding for three days. After an invigorating talk with Mr MacDonald, they were sent home with the Pilot.

And then our journey began in earnest.

The sailors rushed about like madmen, the activity terrifying to the untrained eye. They raised the sails, lowered the sails, pulled on ropes, and slackened them off. And all the time, they yelled and shouted in an almost-English, full of mizzen-masts and t'ga'nts'ls. The ship creaked as she plunged into the waves, the sails roared and the ropes whined. The deck tilted first one way, then another as we tacked our slow way forward, fighting the headwind all the way.

Some of the women and children were so terrified, Mrs Bittlesworth among them, that it was almost a relief when the seasickness took hold. One by one, the numbers at the salon dinner table dropped away, until I and Dr Gaspard were the solitary survivors.

The Doctor had joined the ship at Gravesend. He was a small neat man with small neat features. His goatee was precisely trimmed, his hair expertly slicked back. He didn't seem to like either people or sailing and I wondered why he had signed on to be the doctor of an emigrant ship. He ate every meal with quick precise movements and no conversation. As soon as he was finished, he disappeared into his cabin and refused to come out, no matter how hard anyone knocked.

"Doctor Gaspard, there's a woman in steerage who's sure she's dying. Won't you come and at least look at her?" The First Mate banged his fist against the doorpost in frustration.

"No one ever died of seasickness," came the Doctor's muffled reply. "There's nothing I can do. She'll be better in a week. They'll all be better in a week. Now go away!"

In the name of human kindness, I ventured below decks to the single women's compartment to tend to Annie.

Once.

Twenty women shared a space lit by a single flickering lantern, and all of them were ill. The trickle of fresh air that seeped through the bars of the four small portholes

was powerless against the overwhelming stench of vomit and sweat. I stood choking at the bottom of the stairs and peered through the gloom in search of Annie.

A solid red-faced woman bustled over. “Yes, Ma’am?” She wore a no-nonsense apron and her sleeves were rolled up in a way that told anyone who was interested that she was in charge.

“I was looking for Annie Spencer. I’m here to help.”

The woman looked me up and down, and even in the dim light she noted the quality of my dress and the pale skin of my hands. “Miss Price, are you?”

I nodded.

“I’m the Matron. You can go over if you want, but Annie won’t thank you for being here. The likes of you ain’t what she needs right now.”

“I’m a good nurse,” I protested. “I have experience and I want to help.” Even as I spoke, I knew I lied. I wasn’t sure if I could stay even five minutes in that fetid hole without throwing up.

The woman studied me a moment longer and then nodded curtly at the far bunk. My hand over my mouth, I made my way down the narrow corridor between the row of bunks and the long table. Limp, half-glimpsed forms moaned pathetically. The wooden floor was slippery underfoot. I didn’t look down.

I stared into the dark cave that was Annie’s bunk, “Annie? Are you all right?”

There was an awful retching, the sound of someone who has been sick so many times there is nothing left. A moment’s pause and then a pale, pale face glimmered in the darkness. Annie’s wiry hair straggled limply down the sides of her face; her eyes were bloodshot and almost hidden by the black circles beneath them. She looked like she had been dead for three days.

“Miss Sarah?” Her hand went automatically to her hair, “You shouldn’t be here!”

I caught hold of her hand and sat down on the edge of the bunk. Something damp and foul-smelling seeped through my skirt. “I’ve come to look after you, Annie. Look, I’ve brought you some cordial.”

Annie dived for her bucket and made it just in time. I looked away to give her privacy.

Finally she was finished. Wiping her mouth, she lay back exhausted. “Please go, Miss Sarah. Please, just go.”

I paused uncertainly, until the Matron took me by the elbow and steered me back to the steps. “She’s best off without you, Ma’am. Don’t take it personal.”

I heard the words with such relief that I knew it must show on my face. I was a fraud, offering my services from convention rather than conviction. I was shamed by this coarse uneducated woman who was performing a true Christian duty, while I longed for the fresh air and sea wind.

To my surprise, she patted my arm and said, "I'm not saying it wasn't good of you to come. There's some up there who wouldn't know a kindness if it bit them. But it'd worry her to have you nurse her. It wouldn't be right." I took her at her word and escaped.

The heavy winds and seasickness continued for another week as we beat our way back and forth across the channel. We were not alone. Once I counted twenty sails around us, some outward bound like us, others set for England. With so many boats, on so many different tacks, I was glad the weather had turned fine. At night, our lights seemed pathetically dim compared to the bright lights of the steamships. In the fog, they wouldn't be visible at all.

Charlie was delighted with my company. There were no other passengers on deck and the sailors had no time to play. So we were the solitary witnesses as the last glimpses of England slipped out of view. We passed the tip of Cornwall at the edge of night on our third day out. The Lizard and the land behind it grew misty and faint in the growing dusk, until all that was left was the bright beam from the lighthouse, shining like a star to speed us on our way.

Chapter Seven

I put my hair up and my skirts down on the day I turned thirteen and my mother decided she needed a full-time nurse. My birthday presents included a boned corset (capable, according to the label, of compressing the waist to a mere eighteen inches) and a handwritten list of instructions from my sister entitled The Behaviour of a Lady. This consisted of a great many Do Not's and a very few Do's: Do not talk loudly, Do not take large steps, Do not read too much (and never in company), Do chew each mouthful a minimum of twenty times. I read it through once and threw it away. The only company I saw were Papa's friends, all of whom would think of me as nine until the day they died.

I soon found tight lacing and twenty pounds of petticoats to be incompatible with the demands of either nursing or photography. On discovering the existence of the Rational Dress Society, I formed my own personal branch without delay. Elvira did not approve of my reversion to the padded cotton stays of childhood, but she did admit that, as I was never out in society, at least no one would notice.

A ship is not a place for the fashionable and I saw little reason to change my habits. Mile-wide crinolines and dragging trains were mercifully things of the past, however the modern, figure-hugging silhouette was little better. A look in which the skirts were pulled as tight to the knees as possible and tied firmly in position was not conducive to walking, or even sitting, let alone clambering up and down the poop deck steps. The saving grace was the built-in cushion provided by the bustle for when the inevitable fall occurred.

It was significant that not once was fashion mentioned in the long list of recommended items for travellers venturing to New Zealand. The words, warm, strong and stout appeared repeatedly.

The weather became warmer, the sea bluer. People gradually began to emerge from their misery. Ten days into our voyage, I was helping Charlie and the Dibbles herd the chickens. Any hen that strayed too close to the rails would find itself dangling from Charlie's soft mouth and on a trip back to the hen coop, where it would be deposited unharmed but moist on the straw. This was a favourite activity for all, except perhaps the chickens and even they seemed to prefer it to the monotony of their coop. Finally I

had had enough and I flung myself down beside Mrs Whelk, ignoring all the cries of protest.

“Hush, children,” she said. “Let poor Miss Price get her breath back.”

I rested for a moment. For once, Albert was right – every day I spent in the sea air made me stronger. I gazed at the endless blue horizon and the memory of Mother’s overheated overstuffed bedroom rose in my mind: the windows permanently sealed against London’s dirt, the air thick with the scents of laudanum and port. The thought made my lungs tighten and my head ache. If only Albert had suggested convalescence for Mother.

Across the deck, the Misses Bittlesworth minced along the railing with small unsteady steps. Miss Mabel’s light brown tresses were a trifle drab beside her sister’s burnished copper locks, but she had compensated as best she could with a profusion of ringlets. Their dresses were miracles of modern dressmaking, the sleek curves of the bodices exploding into waterfalls of flounces and ruffles. The tightly-bound skirts and stiff corsets meant that they couldn’t move any part of their body except their eyes with any freedom, but they looked magnificent.

An errant chicken dashed over and hid behind Miss Mabel’s flounced bustle, Charlie bouncing close behind in single-minded pursuit. Miss Mabel sprang back, shrieking, and fell into Miss Agnes. Fortunately two young men from the second class cabin were on hand to catch them before they toppled like dominoes. Ellie’s skinny black-stockinged legs flashed back and forth as she darted in and around them, trying to catch the chicken.

I watched Miss Agnes twirl her parasol and thank her rescuer with a dazzling smile as he placed her back on her feet. I think his name was Bates. We had conversed the day before about a seabird spotted far off to starboard. Mr Bates had claimed it was an albatross, but I assured him that we were still too far north. From the way Miss Agnes clung to his arm and giggled, I did not think they were discussing wildlife. For the first time in a very long time, I wondered what I had done with my corset.

“Our thief is back,” Mrs Whelk said. “I overheard Mrs Bittlesworth talking to the Captain – with the set of lungs that woman has, a body can’t help but overhear. Someone turned over their cabin while she and the girls were out on their morning constitutional.”

“Serves her right,” I muttered. “I hope they took something valuable.”

Mrs Whelk looked at me with reproving blue eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

Mrs Whelk relented. "Nothing much is missing. A few shillings, a couple of rings. It's all very puzzling. There's been no trouble in steerage, or in the second-class cabin."

"Must be a first-class thief," I said.

That earned me another reproving look and a change of subject. "You're good with those children, my dear."

"I enjoy it." I fiddled with the pages of my book. "Do you have children, Mrs Whelk?"

The knitting needles slowed for a moment. "No," she said. "Some things aren't meant to be." The clack of the needles sped up. "Mr Whelk has children, from his first wife. A son and two daughters. The son is already in New Zealand. We'll be visiting with him until we find our feet."

"Mrs Whelk?"

"Yes, dear?"

"What does Mr Whelk *do*?" I had wondered about this on and off since I had met him. He was such an odd mix, interested in everything and anybody.

She laughed. "Anything he wants, my dear. That brain of his is fairly buzzing with ideas and all of them are winners."

The ship's bell rang for dinner and I reached for my bag, tucked in the shadow of the hatch. As I swung it out, the contents cascaded to the deck. Coins bounced in all directions. The box of pencils slammed open; the pencils rolled everywhere. A comb, my drawing pad, a box of matches, a paper bag of boiled sweets, everything fell to the ground. The paper bag burst open. Charlie gave a delighted woof and began to chase the sweets, snatching them up and gobbling them whole. For a moment, I was too stunned to move.

"What on earth did you do, child?" said Mrs Whelk. "Here, Ellie, stop that stupid animal before he makes himself sick."

I picked up my empty bag. "Someone's cut it!" I thrust my hand through the top and out the slit in the bottom. "Look." I turned to Mrs Whelk and wiggled my fingers.

"Well, if that don't beat the band!" she said. "Is anything missing?"

At that moment, the ship plunged into a wave. The deck tilted and my jumbled possessions began to slide.

"All hands on deck," Mrs Whelk ordered and she dived to catch my comb as it slipped under the ship's boat. The Dibbles joined in with glee and in just a few minutes everything in sight had been rounded up. I sat on the deck and spread my skirts and the children dropped the items into my lap.

“Is everything there?” Mrs Whelk repeated, as I sifted through it.

“My bible is missing,” I said. “Again! The new one that Mrs Butler gave me. And I think I’m missing a few pennies. They probably slipped through the cracks.”

“How very, very odd.”

Mrs Whelk and I regarded each other.

“Mrs Whelk,” I said, “did you see anyone near my bag?”

“No, my dear, but...” she coloured slightly, “well, it’s possible that I might have closed my eyes for just a moment while you were playing with the children. I wasn’t asleep, you understand, I’m not so old that I need an afternoon nap. I was just resting my eyes. The glare, you know.”

“I see.” I thought for a moment. “How long do you think you might have been resting?”

“I really couldn’t say, child. My mind was a blank.”

“She was snoring,” said a Dibble. “I heard her.”

“Me too,” said another.

“And me.”

One after the other, they all piped up, until Mrs Whelk collapsed in giggles. “All right, all right! I was sound asleep – I admit it. But I’m sure I was not snoring!” She glared at the Dibbles with mock fury.

“So it could have happened anytime in the last half an hour or more,” I said.

“Broad daylight!” said Mrs Whelk. “I don’t like it. This thief is getting more and more brazen.”

Gathering up all my odds and ends, I trailed the others down to dinner. On the main deck, a familiar gleam of blond hair caught the sun.

Ellie followed my gaze. “It can’t have been Mr Larkin,” she said. “He’s been down there the whole time.”

I gave her a startled glance. “I never said anything about Mr Larkin!”

“You don’t have to. He’s slimy. But it wasn’t him. I was watching.”

She snatched up my ruined bag and trotted down the steps to the saloon before I could ask her any more questions.

“The thief has been after me all along,” Mrs Bittlesworth told the dinner table.

“Miss Price has nothing of value. We will find that she is mistaken.”

I rolled my eyes and wondered how I could possibly be mistaken about a razor-edged slit that ran the entire length of my bag.

“I saw that face, young lady. Girls these days have no respect.” She returned to the subject of the crimes against herself. “We will find it is a person of the lower classes. It would be best to lock the hatches at night.”

“Mother,” Miss Mabel protested, “the robberies happened during the day.”

“Be quiet, girl,” her mother snapped.

Mr Dibble coughed apologetically. “As it happens, we were robbed too. Again. My mother-in-law’s pearl necklace.”

Mrs Bittlesworth gave him a look usually reserved for cockroaches in the pantry, and he subsided, abashed. Mrs Dibble, however, was looking at the Captain.

“Mother was actually in the cabin at the time,” she said in her high fretful voice. “I can’t understand how she didn’t notice.”

We all looked down the table to where the old lady sat, scraping up the last of the beef stew with a single-minded persistence that threatened to take the pattern off the plate. She had given no sign that she was aware of anyone else in the room; I wasn’t even sure that she knew she was on a boat. A glance was shared around the table and no one said a word.

Mr Whelk helped himself to another helping of mashed potatoes. “Maybe it’s a blessing that your box of books ended up in the hold, my dear. At least it’s safe there.”

I laughed, “I imagine I am the only person in creation who has not yet read Miss Austen’s novels. If anyone were to break open that box they would be severely disappointed.”

“My daughters only read improving books,” said Mrs Bittlesworth in a loud voice. “They have never read a novel in their lives.”

“Maybe a pirate hid a treasure map on the ship, and he’s trying to get it back,” said Ellie. This was the first time she had been allowed to dine with the adults, and judging from her mother’s frown, it might be the last.

“If that’s the case, I surely hope he finds it soon, before everything I own is ruined,” I said.

“Are all your books down in the hold?” said Mr Larkin, from across the table.

I was a little taken aback. He had barely said a word to me since that first rather odd conversation, preferring instead the charms of Miss Mabel and Miss Agnes. Particularly Miss Agnes. “Yes, they are. The whole box was stowed away by mistake.”

“I could lend you something to read, if you like. I have several books that might interest you.”

“Thank you, but Mr Whelk has been keeping me well supplied.”

He nodded, “If you run out then,” and turned back to Miss Agnes. She immediately cast a sly look in my direction and said something I couldn’t hear. She finished with a delicate trill of laughter that made him smile. I wondered if Mr Larkin had told her he was engaged.

That night, there was to be a concert. Cabin-class passengers only were invited. Miss Mabel had hand-delivered the invitations; formal dress was required. As Annie helped me into my best dress, I couldn’t help wishing it was something light and frivolous – pale yellow or sky blue, something that would glimmer and glow in the soft tropical night. But with still six months of mourning left, black was the only option. At home in London, it had seemed only right, but here, a thousand miles and several worlds away, the colour was a heavy weight dragging me down.

As Annie dressed my hair, I searched for the jet beads Elvira had given me as a parting gift. The necklace was on my dressing table, but the bracelet was nowhere to be found.

“I was wearing it the day we came on board, but it is so loose that I’m always afraid it will fall off. I remember – I put it in my bag.” I turned to the ruined bag, lying on the bed and felt a rush of anger. The beads were ugly, heavy and far too big, but they had been given with love.

“The hair bracelet then,” Annie said.

I shuddered. Another of Elvira’s gifts, an intricate tangle of our parent’s hair, hand-woven and joined with a gold clasp. It was the height of fashion and it itched dreadfully.

“I think I’ll do without jewellery tonight.”

A full moon glowed before the ship, the first one of the voyage. It hung low and yellow in the sky, laying a shining path over the water for the ship to follow. The assembled guests preened and fluffed out their finery while a cluster of steerage passengers watched in admiration from the main deck. Even Dr Gaspard was there, wrested from his cabin by Miss Mabel’s wiles. He stood at the railing, his back to the chatter and light, staring at the ocean as if wondering how long it would take a person to sink.

A passenger from second-class took out his trumpet and began to play. I spared a thought for Annie and the rest of the single women, already herded down to their stuffy squalid bunks by Matron.

“We must dance,” Miss Mabel cried and she pulled Mr Larkin to the centre of the deck.

Miss Agnes, who had been a couple of steps further away, sent an evil look at her sister’s back before turning to survey the second class passengers. After careful consideration, she selected Mr Bates. Mr Bates might have been travelling second-class, but he was an aspiring lawyer with prospects. His two friends looked disappointed, but soon found their own partners, a pair of blushing sisters from a family of farmers. Miss Agnes tipped back her head and glared at the interlopers down the length of her delicate well-bred nose, but just as she was opening her mouth to speak, her sister called, “A waltz, oh, do play a waltz!” and the first strains of the dance looped and swung out into the night air.

The four couples swooped into action. Miss Mabel and Miss Agnes managed their partners with the greatest of ease, gliding gracefully over the rough boards. The others, less able and unused to dancing on a moving surface, took a few false steps and tripped in fits of giggles before starting again.

All around me, the older folk smiled indulgently and tapped their toes. Except Mrs Bittlesworth, who muttered about the mixing of first and second-class, but people were used to that and ignored her. I watched the whirl and flare of dresses, the clasped hands, and felt an odd emptiness in my stomach. I longed to take part, but at the same time, I was terrified that someone would ask me. My entire dancing experience consisted of marching around the drawing room, clasped stiffly in George’s arms while Elvira pounded at the piano keyboard and shouted instructions. For many years, I had thought dancing was just one more of the games Elvira made up to torture us.

“Miss Price, what you sitting here for? Should be dancing. Do me the honour?”

I looked around in horror. Captain Dennison stood beside me, holding out his hand. I could almost see the whiskey fumes.

“Please...Captain, I’m perfectly content. You see, I don’t dance.”

“Nonsense,” the Captain said. “Pretty young thing like you? Bound to want to dance. Girls always do. No need to be modest.”

“I’m not being modest,” I protested as he towed me relentlessly towards the middle of the deck. “I do not dance.”

The Captain didn’t listen. He caught up my hand, clamped my waist in a hot sweaty grip and pulled me close. Far closer than George had ever done. Captain Dennison was not a tall man, so the glory of his whiskey breath caught me full in the

face. I coughed and stumbled, and the Captain took the opportunity to draw me even closer.

Eyes streaming, unable to breathe and continually straining against the Captain's embrace, I tripped around the dance floor, catching miserable glimpses of the whirling figures beside me. I hadn't believed that anything could be worse than dancing with George. I was wrong.

"You really can't dance, can you?" the Captain roared, sending a gust of garlic and alcohol into my ear and clutching me tighter to his chest. I heard a silvery peal of laughter and knew Miss Agnes was nearby.

"No, I can't." I said, twisting my hand free. "Now let me sit down."

"Everyone can dance. They just need the right partner. Mind if I try?"

Captain Dennison staggered to a stop and stared at the man who had tapped him on the shoulder.

"Be my guest," he said, adding in whispered shout, "Watch your toes. Girl couldn't dance a polka."

Mr Larkin extended his hand. I stepped back. "He is not joking, you know. I am a terrible dancer. Go back to Miss Mabel."

"I'm willing to take the risk," he said. "Besides, she has found another partner." His fingers, warm and dry, closed around mine.

Once again, I found myself far closer to a man than I ever had been before, but this was a much more pleasant experience. Mr Larkin smelt of pipe smoke and a hint of ginger. His shoulder felt like rock through the cloth of his coat – another new coat, a distant part of my brain noted. His hand on my waist seemed to cover half my back and the heat of it burned through my dress.

"Look at me." Mr Larkin tilted up my chin with our joined hands. "Watch my eyes."

He piloted me through the steps with a firm strength that even I could follow. The rhythm of the music filled my body and finally everything made sense.

"I'm dancing!" I said, amazed, and promptly trod on Mr Larkin's foot. "I am sorry."

"Don't think," he said. "Don't talk – just move."

We started up again, and it was magical. I spun round and round the small space, my thoughts slipping away into the moonlight. I could have gone on forever.

"Dr Gaspard?" a man called up from the main deck. "Is the Doctor up there?"

The trumpeter lowered his instrument and the music stopped.

Mr Larkin released my hand and stepped back. The cool of the night rushed in.

“Yes?” Dr Gaspard and Miss Mabel came to a reluctant halt beside me.

“We need your help, Doctor. There’s a little boy down here that’s sick.”

“Put him to bed,” the doctor said. “I’m sure he’ll be fine in the morning.”

“Begging your pardon, sir, but the missus said I wasn’t to come back without you. The boy’s burning up, sir. She thinks it’s measles.”

Chapter Eight

In recent years, there have been many great advances in medical science. Unfortunately, most of them have been in the detection and identification of disease rather than the cure. The modern physician can pronounce with wonderful accuracy whether the patient has scarlet fever, or measles, or croup, but visit a dozen different doctors and they will proscribe a dozen different remedies.

Mother's condition, however, defied diagnosis. Her symptoms changed with the seasons; her doctors changed by the month. Blisters, bloodletting and leeches, pills of all possible sizes and colours, syrup of poppies, tincture of arsenic, calomel powder: she tried them all. Some might even have worked, but there was always something else – something new, improved and promising miracles. Illness became her life. The house was her sanctuary; the world outside a place of pestilence, forever trying to break in.

In our childhood, my siblings and I, like most children, were protected from disease by clothing (as many layers as possible), virtuous thoughts and cod liver oil. Sadly, these are often not sufficient.

The missus was right, the boy had measles.

Alarmed by the possibility, Dr Gaspard had immediately moved the child and his mother to a makeshift hospital in a walled-off section of the main cabin. There the boy had tossed all night in a burning fever, while the rest of the ship waited and hoped. That hope was not realised; the tell-tale rash appeared with the first light of dawn.

Dr Gaspard appeared at the breakfast table, unshaven and worn.

“Well?” Mrs Dibble greeted him, anxiously.

He shook his head. “It’s measles. I’d keep your children off the main deck. There’s no telling how many others are infected.”

“And the boy?” Mrs Whelk asked.

Again the doctor shook his head. “It doesn’t look good. The child’s just skin and bones. He’s got nothing to fight with.”

Mrs Whelk rose from the table and bustled off to her cabin. In a few moments she was back, clutching a black leather bag that looked remarkably like the doctor’s own. She planted a kiss on the top of Mr Whelk’s bald head as he reached out and patted her hand.

“Are you sure, my dove?” he asked.

“I was a nurse when I met you, Thaddeus Whelk, and I’ll be a nurse till the day I die. I’m needed, my dear.”

“A nurse?” Dr Gaspard looked up from his coffee, his tired eyes taking a moment to focus. “Trained?”

“The Nightingale Training School,” Mrs Whelk stated proudly. “One of the first graduates.”

Dr Gaspard studied her intently for a moment before nodding. “Your help would be greatly appreciated. I fear this could be much worse before the journey is over.”

“I’ll see if I can make the child comfortable,” Mrs Whelk said, and heaved her bulk up the stairs.

As soon as she was out of sight, Mrs Bittlesworth gave a sniff. “A nurse, how common.”

Mr Whelk flushed an angry red and opened his mouth, but before he could say a word, the doctor was speaking. “Miss Nightingale is one of the heroines of our age. Her Training School has raised the art of nursing to a science. I won’t hear a word spoken against her or any of her nurses. Good day to you, ma’am.” A tight-lipped nod of the head and he was gone.

“Well said,” applauded Mr Whelk. “And I’ll tell you, ma’am, that a better woman than my Mary you won’t find, not if you were to search to the very ends of the earth.”

Mrs Bittlesworth scanned the table in search of allies, but found none. She retired to her cabin in a huff, and swept Miss Mabel and Agnes along with her, completely oblivious to Miss Mabel’s lingering gaze on the hatch where Dr Gaspard had disappeared from view.

The next few days brought us further into the tropics and deeper into the grip of an epidemic. Several new cases of measles were diagnosed, and one of scarlet fever, all children under the age of five. The hospital had to be expanded to accommodate the new cots. The mood of the boat was sombre indeed. There was no more moonlit dancing, even laughter seemed out of place.

On the fifteenth day of our voyage, little Henry Brown, the first child to sicken, passed away. He was two months shy of his second birthday.

The entire ship gathered for the funeral. The bundle of white canvas that lay on the plank seemed impossibly small. Captain Dennison, grey and solemn in his best suit, stepped forward and began to speak, “We therefore commit his body to the deep...” The low hoarse voice rolled out across the waves. The prayer ended and there was a heavy silence. Two sailors raised the ends of the plank and the little weighted bundle began to

slide. Tears filled my eyes and I had to look away. The moment dragged on forever as we waited. At last there was a faint, final splash. The boy's mother wailed in despair and made a rush for the railing. Her husband caught her and she collapsed, sobbing, in his arms.

Eyes averted, the crowd began to drift apart, leaving them to their pain.

I climbed back up to the poop deck and stood for a long time watching the ocean drift past. It seemed as alien and uncaring as a desert, but the longer I watched the more life I saw. Flying fish, glistening green in the sun, and a host of small dark birds with flashes of white which swooped and darted like swallows. Sometimes they seemed to tire of flying and would run across the surface of the water, wings outstretched. Stormy petrels, the Captain called them. Bill said they were Mother Carey's chickens and held the souls of sailors lost at sea – as did Cape Pigeons, albatross and any other convenient seabird.

One of the birds wheeled past me, over the deck and back out to sea. It was smaller than the rest, barely fully grown and I wondered what happened to the souls of the children who died at sea.

I wished for my camera. Several times in London, I had seen photographs of the dead. The images offered undeniable proof of existence, something a mother could point to and say 'I had a child, and he was beautiful'. Without even a photograph to leave behind, little Henry had barely made a ripple on the world.

The sun was hot upon my shoulders. We were well into the tropics now. The sailors had dressed the ship in her oldest sails in anticipation of the light tropical breezes. The best and strongest sails had been put away and wouldn't be brought out until we reached the storm-tossed Southern Ocean. How many more funerals would we have before then?

There was a sudden commotion at the other end of the ship. The First Mate burst out of his cabin and rushed down to see what was happening. I followed, curious.

An all-out brawl appeared to be in progress between a group of sailors and some of the young men from steerage. Mr MacDonald waded into the fight and grabbed the closest two participants by their collars. He hauled them backward, choking and spluttering.

"What is the meaning of this? There's been a funeral on board not two hours gone. What will the poor mother think if she sees you bunch of sorry numbskulls fighting like brats?"

With many interruptions, and a few wild punches, the story came out. Some of the young men in steerage had decided to go fishing off the forecastle. None of them had been within twenty miles of the ocean before so when they finally managed to land a fish, there had been much joyous celebration. The sailors in the off-duty watch who were trying to sleep directly underneath had objected. Violently. The remains of the offending fish were splattered all across the roof of the forecastle and through the hair of one of the fishermen, who sat clutching his dazed head in his hands.

Mr MacDonald sent the passengers down to their bunks to cool off, telling them in no uncertain terms that the forecastle was the sailors' territory and by invitation only. The sailors also retired to their bunks, but with a lot of discontented muttering.

The excitement over, I returned to the poop deck. To my delight, I found that Bill was on the helm. After a quick check for the Captain, I went to discuss the latest happenings with him.

"The crew ain't happy, Miss Sarah. They say this ship is bad luck."

"Why, Bill?"

"The Company wanted us to sail on Friday." Bill immediately turned around three times and spat on the deck.

"And that's bad?" I asked.

"The worst," Bill said. "Ships as sail on Fridays don't come back, never."

"We sailed on Saturday," I said, "so everything is fine."

Bill shook his head. "We should've stayed till Sunday. That's the best day. The sea knows. She's waiting. We thought it'd be right. Everyone threw a farthing overboard, well, those that had one. Old Harry, he was stony-broke on account of the gin, but he spit over the side and the bosun tossed a penny, so everything was right there. And Jock got a cat, the first black one he could find." Bill paused for a moment, looking worried, "It's not doing so well. It's a bit small and he should've left it with its Ma. Maybe that's why the sea is angry. Do you think there'll be more deaths, Miss Sarah?"

"I don't know, Bill, but I think there might. Dr Gaspard said one of the children has come down with scarlet fever as well as measles."

We stood for a moment in silence, lost in our own melancholy thoughts. I thought about the poor children fighting for their lives below decks. Dr Gaspard was doing the best he could, but even he admitted that it wasn't much.

Bill's thoughts were elsewhere. "I hope the cat don't die," he said.

"Bill, the children are more important!"

“Yes, Miss, I know. But the crew will take it hard if the cat dies and that’s for certain. It’d be a right bad sign.”

I sighed, “Well, I don’t know much about measles, but I do know about kittens. I must have nursed seven of Dinah’s runts back to health. Where is this wretched animal?”

I found the kitten tucked in a corner of the cookhouse. It was a tiny scrap of jet black, not really big enough to be out on its own in this wide, wet world. Jock had provided it with a bowl of water and a few scraps of salt beef, but it needed milk.

I begged some preserved milk from the cook. He gave it up reluctantly, as if it was more precious than gold. He only gave in when I agreed to have my coffee black. It was no great hardship on my part, the milk left an oily scum that made the coffee almost undrinkable. The Doctor provided a glass eyedropper and I had everything I needed, except enthusiasm for the many sleepless nights ahead. I scowled at the kitten and raised the dropper.

“Allow me.” One large hand plucked the kitten from my grasp, the other hand took the dropper. Both were deposited into the waiting arms of Ellie Dibble.

“Just a few drops at a time,” Mr Larkin said, showing her how to dribble the milk into the kitten’s tiny mouth. “If milk comes out her nose, you’ve given her too much.”

A cluster of little Dibbles crowded close for a better look.

Ellie cradled the kitten. “Is she going to be all right?”

I hesitated. I didn’t want to lie to the girl. “I don’t know, Ellie. She’s very weak,” I said finally. “She isn’t as young as I had feared. Her eyes are well open. We’ll just have to look after her the best we can. Keep her warm and fed and give her lots of love.”

“I can do that,” Ellie said. She stroked the tiny head. “Does she have a name?”

I smiled. “I don’t imagine she does. Why don’t you give one?”

A chorus of names sprang up all around Ellie.

“Sooty! Blacky! Claws!”

“What about Panther?” said Mr Larkin.

There was a general shout of approval.

“Where did you learn about raising kittens?” I asked as the Dibbles rushed off in search of their parents.

“Ned was always bringing home strays,” he said. “He never would let me drown them. Not even when they started eating his precious birds.”

Mr MacDonald said we were off the coast of Africa, although there was nothing to see. I fancied I could smell it on the wind, the hot dry scent of the Sahara. The mood on the ship did not improve. Children continued to sicken. Some got better, some did not. The sailors became surlier. They clumped in odd corners, whispering and muttering. A few days after the funeral, we were awakened in the middle of the night by shouting and crashes on the poop deck.

Clutching my robe close at the neck, I opened the cabin door and peered into the dim saloon, lit by a single nightlight burning above the table. Another crash reverberated through the timbers and set the lantern swinging. The Captain rushed out of his cabin, his jacket all askew and his nightgown tucked into his trousers. All around the saloon, doors popped open.

“Captain Dennison, what’s going on?” Mr Larkin demanded, as the Captain dashed up the ladder to the deck.

The Captain didn’t answer so Mr Larkin followed him up onto deck. There were a few more thuds and some muffled cursing that made Mrs Bittlesworth try to cover all four of her daughters’ ears at once. I could hear Mr MacDonald’s bull-like bellow, but couldn’t make out the words. Curiosity overcame me and, snatching a blanket off my bed, I started for the stairs.

“Just where do you think you’re going, young lady?” For a moment, the voice sounded so much like my mother that I stopped in my tracks. I spun around to find Mrs Whelk eyeing me with great disapproval. “Off to see what’s happening, are you? Going to be right in the middle of the fray? Well, think again. They’re drunk, the whole lot of them, and a pack of drunken sailors is not place for a girl like you. Now back to bed.” She looked so fierce, standing there in her pink candlewick robe, her hair in rags and sticking out like Medusa’s snakes, that I returned my cabin without a word. But not to sleep. First I had to know what was going on.

Ten minutes later, the Captain returned.

“Go back to your beds,” he said, in a weary voice. “Everything is fine. A few sailors got into the rum, that’s all. It’s all sorted out and nothing to worry about.”

There was a general murmur of discontent.

“Rum?” said Mrs Bittlesworth. “What do they need with rum? It should be tipped overboard, every drop.”

Despite the broken night, I woke before dawn for my morning walk. I loved this precious time when the day was new and fresh. I had the ship almost to myself and could escape the constant chatter and closeness of the other passengers. If I had had to travel steerage, to be surrounded by people all day and all night, I don't think I could have borne it. I had asked Annie about it, but she had looked at me strangely and said they were a nice lot of girls and it was friendly, just like sleeping four to a bed with her sisters when she was a girl.

I strode around the deck. Mr Whelk and I had worked out the distance of a circuit and I tried to do at least three miles every morning. The pre-dawn light was cool and grey. It slipped across my skin like silk. There were only a few sailors for company, and even they were scarce. This watch had been working all night to cover for the drunken sailors, and the wind was so light, the merest whisper against my cheek, that several men had slunk off to find a place to sleep. Bill had been at the helm when I emerged on deck and had told me that the other watch had drunk themselves into a stupor and had been no use to anyone.

On my third pass around, I heard a pair of whispered voices in deep conversation in the shadow of the ship's boat. As I approached I realised that it was the Captain and the First Mate. Elvira always says a lady shouldn't eavesdrop, but how else does a lady learn anything of importance? I crept forward until I could hear what they were saying.

"Whisky? Where did they get it from?" Captain Dennison said.

"They must have broached the cargo," Mr MacDonald answered. "I found a bottle hidden under Old Harry's mattress, expensive stuff. There's no way he could have bought it; he's poorer than a churchmouse. The label matches the ones in the hold. There's plenty more down there and now that they know it's there... You're going to have to come down hard, Captain. With the cargo we're carrying, the ship will go up like a torch if they drop a candle."

"Why did they do it?" the Captain said. "We've sailed three voyages with this crew, and never had trouble before. They know the danger and you and I loaded that whisky ourselves, so they didn't know it was there."

"Maybe not, Captain, but they know now. Everyone seemed happy enough when we left the Channel. It's as if something has stirred them up since then. And those damn measles haven't helped."

The voices began to come closer and I walked off briskly in the opposite direction. As I walked, I thought about what I had overheard. Mr MacDonald was right. The crew had not seemed unduly worried when we left England. With the coins and the

cat and the spitting, they obviously felt that they had overcome the bad luck of a possible Friday sailing. But lately something had changed. The shanties as they worked were more subdued, there were more fights and swearing. And I didn't think it was all down to something as simple as the measles. After all, measles and children went together like thunderclouds and rain; when lots of one gathered in the same place, you were bound to get the other. And speaking of rain...

A sudden darkening made me look up. I had been tramping around the deck for the past quarter of an hour, oblivious to my surroundings. The light no longer had the clear pearly brightness of dawn. It had deepened to a sullen green. Big bruised clouds were piled up on the horizon in a threatening mass of black. As the sun rose, the edges of the clouds were shot with streaks of fiery red.

"Better get inside, Miss," Bill called from the wheel. "Unless you want a soaking."

A few minutes later, the rain began. I could see it coming from the far horizon, a curtain of heavy smoke on the water. It hit the deck with a roar of thunder. I had never seen or felt anything like it. The water fell with an intensity that drenched me to the skin in seconds. It poured down my face, into my eyes and mouth, pushing aside the air so I had to gulp for breath. After days of washing my clothes, hair and body in nothing but salt water, it felt wonderful. I tipped back my head, spread out my arms and embraced the storm.

There was a flurry of activity around me. People emerged from all parts of the ship. Some just stood and soaked up the clean freshness. Others scurried about setting out anything that would hold water: buckets, bowls, saucepans, even hats. The downpour was as short as it was intense. Half an hour and it was all over. The sky regained its bright blue glare and all the buckets were brimming. Today we would drink as much as we wanted.

And into that bright glare was brought Old Harry. The Captain was determined to make an example, and Old Harry was it. The rest of the men had been equally drunk, but retained sufficient wits to toss the evidence over the side. Poor Harry had gone to sleep with his.

There was a trial, of sorts. The Captain was prosecutor, judge and jury, and justice was not his main intent. The sailors stood unsteadily in front of the forecastle, the officers gathered in a circle at the Captain's back. Interested passengers watched from whatever vantage point they could find.

Old Harry swore he didn't know where the whisky had come from. He said it had just appeared on his bunk and not to drink it would have been 'more than a man could stand'. He stood there, shaking, in his baggy trousers and salt-encrusted shirt, sparse white whiskers creeping over his face like a layer of barnacles. He looked at least one hundred and two.

Captain Dennison turned to the rest of the crew. "Give me the men responsible or I will stop the tobacco allowance."

"What? For everyone? That ain't fair, Capt'n," exclaimed a lean man with washed-out eyes. "Our watch didn't even get no drink."

"And we had to work a double shift."

"We ain't the ones who did it."

"Ain't right to punish everyone."

There was an angry muttering as the sailors protested. The First Mate shouted for silence. "The Captain has spoken. Anyone who wants to confess, or who has any information can come to the Captain's cabin."

The officers walked off and the muttering grew to a roar. The lean man who had first protested squared up to a squat sailor in a battered cap. "It's your watch as should be punished, William Harris. You should make them that done it go to the Capt'n."

"Maybe you'd like to shut your fat mouth. Jim Henderson."

Jim Henderson rocked back on his heels and shot a vicious punch into William Harris' jaw. The heavier man went down with a thud. There were a few seconds of silence, and then all the sailors were punching and yelling as the anger and frustration found an outlet.

The bosun gave them a few minutes to work it off before he began pulling combatants out of the fray. "All right, all right, that's enough of that. Get back to work, the lot of you, or there'll be worse than no 'baccy to come."

Chapter Nine

Mr Whelk was my ideal man, except only for the small matters of his looks, age and marital status. Although he barely reached my shoulder in his thick-soled, hob-nail boots, his mind reached out to the edges of the world. And in some cases, beyond.

In his cabin, there was a whole trunk devoted to my favourite periodical, The English Mechanic and Mirror of Science, and in every issue there was an article signed: T. D. Whelk. His contributions covered a staggering range of subjects: A Four-Wheeled Velocipede for Ladies; The Height of Hills; Celestial Measurements; How Pianofortes are Made; Inspection of Boilers. Nothing seemed too minor, too complex or too obscure to escape his attention.

To Mr Whelk, the Ocean Queen was a paradise. Every day he discovered a new skill to master or a new device to take apart. He interrogated Mr MacDonald on the measurement of latitude and longitude. He dangled precariously from the stern while Bill changed tack, watching the movement of the rudder with delight. He pestered Captain Dennison until he was allowed to throw out the log and measure the speed, all the time wondering aloud why the good Captain wasn't using the new patent log which recorded the speed and distance mechanically. After two days, the privilege was revoked.

Mr Whelk's moment of greatest joy came when the water condenser broke. While the other passengers bemoaned their fate and wondered if we would all die of thirst, Mr Whelk danced a jig of delight and sprinted the length of the ship to be there when Mr MacDonald pried off the cover. After an hour of perfect contentment with his head in the innards of the machine, Mr Whelk discovered a blocked pipe. The blockage was removed and Mr Whelk was the hero of the hour. As a reward, he was granted permission to investigate the rigging.

But Mrs Whelk said no.

We lay becalmed in the Doldrums, a region as dull and draining as its name. We were tantalisingly close to the equator, and remained that way for days. The air was still and heavy, pressing down on the ship like a steamy blanket. The sails stretched out across the sky in their full glory, straining to catch the slightest breath of wind. Any exercise had to be done early morning or late evening; the rest of the day was spent lying beneath the awning of the poop deck, too hot to move.

The Doctor and Mrs Whelk sweltered below deck, tending to the feverish children, only coming up for air when forced by Mr MacDonald. The surprise was Miss Mabel, sneaking away to join them whenever her mother's back was turned.

"She's sweet on the Doctor, of course," Mrs Whelk confided, in one of the increasingly rare moments she allowed herself on deck. "But she's got the makings of a good nurse, for all that. And she'd do him good, the poor man."

"Why is he a poor man?" I asked. I had wondered about Dr Gaspard since he first came on board.

"The usual sort of thing – rejected by a girl and, apart from drowning, the only thing he could think of was to disappear. Just like a man. No thought for his mother, she's probably worried sick. Forgot that he gets seasick, didn't even ask where the boat was going. And the girl sounds like a silly widget, all looks and no brain. He's a very good doctor when he puts his mind to it though. And these poor children have shocked him into doing just that. Miss Mabel will suit him very well."

Miss Mabel and Miss Agnes were over by the rail, deep in a whispered conversation.

"I don't think her sister's very happy about it," I said.

Miss Agnes turned away and took a step towards the saloon hatch. Towards Mrs Bittlesworth resting downstairs. Miss Mabel grabbed her elbow and jerked her sister back. She said something low and hard. Miss Agnes's face went white. Miss Mabel spun away, heading for the hospital and Miss Agnes watched her go, rubbing her arm absently as if she had forgotten why it hurt.

"There's something odd going on there," I said, "Those two were as close as two peas in a pod when they came on board, but lately they almost seem to be avoiding each other."

"What did you say, dear?" Mrs Whelk had been rummaging for her knitting.

I sighed and offered, once again, to help with the nursing.

"Thank you, dear, but it's such a tiny space. Any more helpers and we won't have room for patients."

I heard her with guilty relief. Although I had thought that nursing Mother was my vocation, the further I travelled from that sickroom, the more constricting and confined it seemed to become. In this vast ocean, even all of London seemed too small. My thoughts were expanding with every mile. How would I force myself back into my tiny English life?

The distance we travelled shrank each day; two hundred blustery miles became one hundred, fifty, then thirty or less. The steerage passengers were frantic for their children; every windless day was another day away from help. The sailors, still tobacco-less, were sullen and bored. Tempers rose, arguments flared. Everyone was bickering and sniping. I began to avoid the saloon at mealtimes. The wet hot air seemed to fill my stomach, making the thought of food impossible. I was not alone in my lack of appetite, most dishes returned to the steward's pantry almost untouched, but Mrs Bittlesworth noticed only me. She announced, often and with great glee, that seasickness was finally catching up with me. She had not forgiven me for escaping the earlier affliction.

My skin felt as tender and swollen as a ripe tomato. Comments and conversations, even breathing (Mr Dibble would have made an excellent walrus), pricked at me until I felt I would burst. I took to hiding in the shade behind the chicken coop. There I would read my latest treasure from Mr Whelk (*The Young Sea Officer's Sheet Anchor: a key to the leading of rigging and to practical seamanship*), practice my knot-work and watch the comings and goings of the steerage passengers on the main deck below. Tucked into the shadows as I was, with my black dress and brown hair, they would have had to look hard to notice me, and none ever did. Many came to gossip in the shade of the poop deck, and I learned many interesting facts from my aerial vantage point.

The most interesting of all came when the men had been without tobacco for three days. A familiar twang roused me from a half doze.

"This meeting is most unwise. I will not agree to another." Mr Larkin's voice was light and calm, even pleasant. It wasn't until the other voice started up with a disagreeable whine that I realised that the words were not.

"The men are gettin' nasty, gov. Real nasty. Someone's gonna crack less I can give 'em something to sweeten the deal. Otherwise it ain't worth it, see?"

Mr Larkin was disdainful. "What can they say?"

"They cain't say nothing, gov, You're right enough about that. Meself, on the other hand..." The voice trailed off suggestively.

I tried to place it. It was one of the sailors, but I wasn't sure which. There was a long pause. I wished I could see their faces, but I didn't dare move.

"All right," Mr Larkin said abruptly. "Another ten pounds, but not a penny more. Now go. I'll put it in the same place."

I scooted further back into the shadows and watched the short squat figure of William Harris cross the deck, hoping he wouldn't look back. Mr Larkin remained where he was. After a few minutes he hailed Bill, who was on his way up to the helm.

“Bill, my lad, maybe you can help me. What’s that bird there, off the starboard bow? Mr Harris didn’t know.”

I heard the puzzlement in Bill’s voice. “It’s one of them Mother Carey’s chicken’s, sir. Just like all the others.”

“No, the one I meant was different – there was more white on the wings. It seems to have gone now.”

“Yes, sir,” Bill said.

It was an odd conversation, and of course I wondered at it. Later that night, what had just been an oddity took a sinister turn.

After more than three weeks at sea, the creaking of the mast, the gentle lapping of the waves and the criss-cross of booted footsteps overhead had become nothing more than a background lullaby. It was the heat and stuffiness that kept me awake. I had both portholes wide open and thanked providence and Elvira for ensuring that I was on the weather side of the ship and so got whatever breeze there was. Tonight, however, there was none. I checked the small travelling clock that had been a parting gift from George. Three o’clock. I was sure I had heard the bell for every change of watch that night and with the cabin like an oven I gave up on sleep for several hours to come. I got up and went to the porthole. I was tall enough that I could rest my elbows on the sill with my head and shoulders in the night air. I wished, not for the first time, that I could sleep on deck.

Above me, the stars blazed across the velvet sky. The moon, now whittled down to the merest fingernail, had not yet risen, so they were at their most glorious. Stars were a revelation to me. My previous experience consisted merely of Venus and those few stars which managed to force their way through the London fog and appear as pallid whispers of their true selves. I had known intellectually of the ‘countless stars in the heavens’ but the reality was a miracle.

At first I had been content to just admire them, but then I heard Miss Agnes exclaiming over the difference in the constellations as we travelled further South. On discovering that I knew them only in theory, Mr. MacDonald had kindly begun instructing me.

I was standing with one foot on my stool, twisting my body around in attempt to discover the whereabouts of Orion, when something large and dark plunged past my head and crashed into the water below. The sudden splash surprised me so much I almost lost my grip on the shutter. I slid back into the cabin, scanning the sea. For a moment I thought I saw a shadow slipping slowly into the wake of the ship. I thought it

moved. An awful thought burst into my mind. Was it Charlie? The stupid dog had come close to falling several times already.

There was no time for a candle. I located my robe by touch and shrugged it on as I ran up on deck.

“Where’s Charlie?” I called as I came up through the hatch. “Did he fall overboard?”

No one answered.

“Quick!” I said. “We could still stop!”

Still no response. I ran across the deck and skidded to a halt. The helm was empty. The wheel was propped in position with a length of wood and no one was to be seen.

“Captain Dennison,” I yelled. “Mr MacDonald. Come quickly.” I ran back to the hatch and pounded on the cover.

After what seemed an age, I heard thudding footsteps below. Mr MacDonald rushed past me and grabbed the wheel.

“We have to stop,” I said. “Something fell overboard. I thought it might be Charlie, but there’s no one on the helm.”

A wet cold nose pushed into my hand. Hearing his name, Charlie had come to see what the fuss was about. I dropped to my knees and hugged him.

“Who was on duty?” Mr. MacDonald demanded of the surrounding sailors. He turned the bow into the wind, bringing the ship to a slow stop.

“William Harris,” said the second mate.

We all peered off the back of the ship, searching for a body in the dark water. I fondled Charlie’s silky ears and, even though it was probably a mortal sin, I couldn’t help but be glad he was not the one we were looking for.

“Here, look what I’ve found,” said Bill, holding up an empty bottle.

“That’s William, for you,” said one of his watch mates, nodding at the plank of wood steering the ship. “Never did see the point of working if he could be drinking.”

Mr MacDonald’s face was thunderous. “How many of you knew about this?” Guilt showed plainly on several faces. “Go and lower the boat.”

He pulled me over to the railing. “Now, Miss Price, how long ago did you hear the splash, and are you sure it was a person?”

I considered. “It must be at least ten minutes now. And I’m not sure of anything. Whatever it was, it was dark and it was heavy. Heavy enough for the spray to reach my porthole. I thought it was Charlie.” The dog wagged his tail, delighted to hear his name.

The First Mate looked grim. “We’re not going fast, but we’ll have covered a fair stretch of water even so. If there was a moon, there might be a chance, but as it is...” His voice trailed off. He took off his hat and rubbed his forehead wearily. “We’ll search the ship, just in case.”

He barked out a series of orders and the men rushed off. I looked around the deck, something had been worrying at me for the last few minutes and I finally worked out what it was.

“Mr MacDonald, where’s Captain Dennison? Shouldn’t someone let him know?” In truth, I didn’t see how he could have missed the commotion. Almost all the passengers had come up to see what was going on.

Mr MacDonald looked away. A slight flush rose on his cheeks. “The Captain is indisposed. I’ll tell him in the morning when he is feeling better. Now, Miss, you should be getting back to bed.”

How could I go to bed? I stayed on deck and scanned the sea while the ship’s boats swept back and forth in ever-increasing and ever more desperate circles. The first flush of dawn stained the sky and ripened slowly into day. When the clear morning light revealed nothing but empty vastness, the searchers admitted defeat and returned to the ship. I made my way back to my cabin, taking Charlie with me for comfort. As I passed the Captain’s cabin, I heard voices. Peering through the open door, I saw Mr MacDonald prying an empty bottle from the Captain’s hand as he struggled to lay him down on his bed. Jack Larkin was seated at the table, head pillowed on his arms and snoring softly.

“They had a night of it, these two,” Mr MacDonald said when he saw me watching. He looked down at Mr Larkin with disgust. “God knows the Captain has his reasons, but I had thought better of this one. Still I suppose there is a first time for everything.”

As I lay in my bed, hoping for a few hours sleep before the heat of the sun drove me from my cabin, I thought back to the conversation I had overheard and wondered why tonight of all nights, Jack Larkin had decided to drink the night away with the Captain.

I didn’t like the answer I came up with.

William Harris proved to be even more trouble dead than he had been alive. His ghost made its first appearance the very next night.

Lucy Higgins was the first to hear him. A buxom and overexcited blonde, she made the most of her moment in the sun. "It was horrible," she said, pressing her hands to her heaving chest. "Moaning and clanking and carrying on. I thought me heart was gonna jump right out of me body. Here—" She reached out and grabbed Mr MacDonald's hand, "It's still pounding now. You kin feel it."

He wrenched free with a grimace of distaste. "Did you *see* anything, Miss Higgins?"

She paused and glanced around the press of single women who shared her cabin. I could see her weighing her options. Seeing a ghost would be more impressive than just hearing it.

Bess Wall gave her a shove. "Go on, Lucy, you know you didn't see nothing. You would've squealed up a storm if y'did. Just about deafened the lot of us as it was."

Annie leaned closer to me and whispered, "Those two are no better than they ought to be and that's a fact."

"Did you hear anything, Annie," I asked.

Annie nodded. "I don't believe in ghosts and I've got the Good Lord to protect me so I didn't go screeching my head off like these flibbertigibbets, but there was something ..." She shivered in the hot sunshine and wrapped her arms tight around her body.

"Did anybody see anything?" Mr MacDonald asked the assembled women. One by one they shook their heads. If I hadn't been standing right beside little May Carter I wouldn't have heard her tiny whisper: "It glowed, like an angel."

I bent down. She was only just turned twelve, a child in the eyes of everyone except the Shipping Company which meant she was forced to travel in the single women's compartment, away from her large and loving family. As soon as she realised that I had heard her, she stared at me with wide frightened eyes and refused to say anything more.

"It sounds more like someone after the cargo than a ghost to me," the First Mate stated. "I'll organise a roster for the passengers. We'll all take turns watching the hold - in pairs."

There was a groan from the male passengers.

"Now, don't be such babies, it will only be for a couple of weeks. Then we'll be bringing the boxes up on deck. Winter clothes and all that. I warrant that ghost lays quiet once we get into the roaring forties. Dead or alive, it'll be all any of you can do just to hang on."

Mr Larkin looked alarmed. “That soon? It seems like it has only just started to turn warm.”

“It might not seem like it now, but another month and you’ll count yourself lucky if you can feel your toes.”

Mr Dibble and Mr Butler took the first night’s watch. They spent the night sitting on the hatch to the hold. Despite the balmy night, Mrs Dibble insisted on wrapping her husband in layers of blankets and creeping out every hour or so with cups of hot coffee. Every excursion was followed by the sneaking patter of little Dibbles, all on the lookout for thieves and pirates and all taking special pains to be *silent*.

I lay in my bunk with a pillow over my head to muffle the hissing whispers that could have pierced solid rock, and wondered how long it would take to lay William Harris’ ghost to rest.

Despite the coffee, the two watchmen were discovered the next morning, softly snoring on their nest of blankets. Mr Butler swore that they had closed their eyes but the merest moment before, and that nothing untoward had happened. Despite that, reports of the ghost were numerous. He had moaned in Bessie Thompson’s ear, rattled his chains beneath Harold Enderby’s bunk, glowed with a sickly light that almost caused poor Alf Smith to fall from the rigging in fright and delivered Old Harry a sharp rap on the head. All in all, the ghost of William Harris had had a busy night.

“What a load of bunk, begging your pardon, Miss Price,” said Bill. “Where would William Harris get chains, I like to know. And why would he be shaking them at Mr Enderby? He barely knew the man. That one’s just trying to get some attention.”

“So you don’t believe in the ghost, Bill?”

“Course I do! William Harris was a right piece of work. And Old Harry owed him sixpence. William ain’t one to forget a thing like that just because he’s dead.”

The next watch was Mr Larkin and Mr Whelk. I felt an odd pang of unease as I watched them going down to the main deck. Mr Whelk’s small round head reached only to Mr Larkin’s shoulder and it seemed like matching a grizzly bear with a pug. Or maybe a parrot, I amended, as Mr Whelk’s voice, still talking, floated back to me. He had been delighted with the pairing, declaring his determination to satisfy his interest in all things American. I wondered how he was planning to do that without letting Mr Larkin speak.

“Thaddeus! My darling Thaddeus!”

The scream snapped me out of my dream and out of bed. I was almost at the door before I thought of my wrap and turned back to snatch it off the chair. Out in the saloon, all the cabin doors were open and the room filled with people. But it was the central figures that drew all eyes.

Mr Larkin stood at the foot of the stairs, Mr Whelk in his arms. The small man’s head lolled back lifelessly and blood dripped in a steady relentless beat on the wooden floor. Mrs Whelk leant against her doorway, her face as white as if the blood were her own, hands across her mouth to bottle up the screams.

“Someone fetch the Doctor,” Mr Larkin grunted.

Mrs Whelk took a deep shuddering breath and stepped back into the cabin. “Put him on the bed. Where is he hurt, Mr Larkin?”

The room surged back to life.

“What happened?”

“Was it the ghost?”

“Is he dead?”

Mr Larkin strode into the Whelks’ cabin. I slipped in after him and slammed the door in Mrs Bittlesworth’s face. Her face hard as granite, Mrs Whelk assembled an array of bandages.

“There was a noise in the hold,” Mr Larkin said. “He went down to investigate. He must have slipped. I found him at the bottom of the ladder.”

The door burst open and Dr Gaspard rushed in, bag in hand. He shoved Mr Larkin’s bulk aside with one hand. “I need light,” he demanded.

I finished lighting the lantern and held it high over Mr Whelk’s still form. Dr Gaspard cast up one approving look before turning to the job at hand. He pushed at a round shoulder, gently rolling the patient onto his side. At his quick intake of breath, Mrs Whelk closed her eyes and swayed precariously for a moment.

“How bad, Doctor?” she asked in a soft voice.

“I won’t lie to you, Mrs Whelk. It’s not good. However I think there is still a chance. We need to stop this bleeding.”

The Doctor and Mrs Whelk set to work. I did what I could, fetching water, ripping bandages, all the time fighting back the crowd of spectators pushing in at the door. At last the battered head was swathed in clean bandages. The eyes were closed, the quick mobile features were still and waxen.

The Doctor wiped a weary hand across his face. “That’s all I can do. Now he’s in God’s hands.”

“Mrs Whelk, you’re welcome to share my cabin,” I said. “There is an extra bunk. I will sit with him while you sleep.”

Mrs Whelk’s smile was small and tight, a mere reflex. “I couldn’t sleep, child. He needs to know I’m here. I’ll read to him. Mr Larkin, would you be so kind as to pass me the book on the desk there?”

Mr Larkin nodded and reached for the top drawer.

“*On* the desk, Mr Larkin, not in the drawer.” Mrs Whelk’s voice was sharp, causing Mr Larkin to jerk in surprise, pulling the drawer out of the desk and sending the contents all over the floor.

I stared at the treasure trove rolling at my feet. Coins of all denominations, rings, bracelets, necklaces, a gold pocket watch. I bent slowly, reluctantly, and picked up a ring. Ornate gold scrolling, square-cut emerald, ugly as sin and twice as damning. I had never seen it before in my life, but I had been hearing about it every day for the last week.

Ever since it was stolen from Mrs Bittlesworth’s cabin.

Chapter Ten

The importance of science cannot be undervalued. All one has to do is look up. For centuries, the Sun, Moon and stars spun around the Earth in a wondrous dance, so intricate and complicated that their movements could predict anything from floods and famines to the love of a milkmaid's life. And then in just a few short years, with a theory and a telescope, Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo turned everything inside out and upside down.

Now it is the Earth that moves, whirling around the Sun, spinning on its axis, catching dizzying glimpses of the stationary heavens as it twirls.

And the stars! No longer mere pinpricks of light confined to an overhanging dome, but suns, as bright or even brighter than our own, flung out into an unimaginably huge universe to gather unknown planets.

From astrology to astronomy, from fate to science. Some may mourn the power of myth – Taurus the bull, Orion the Mighty Hunter striding across the sky (now tumbled head-over-heels by the Southern Hemisphere) – but I see only possibilities.

“My Grandmother’s ring! Thief! Thief! Captain Dennison, the thieves have been discovered.”

Any hope of a quiet resolution vanished with Mrs Bittlesworth’s appearance in the doorway. She had been getting in the way all night. Miss Agnes was peering over her mother’s shoulder, eyes fixed on Mr Larkin as he picked up a pearl necklace. She gave a gasp and fell back.

My thoughts were slippery with shock. There had to be another explanation. The only thing I knew for sure was that Mrs Bittlesworth’s screeching had no place in a sick room. I pushed her over the threshold and, for the second time in less than an hour, shut the door firmly in her face.

“Good girl,” said Dr Gaspard. He crossed to Mrs Whelk’s side and began rubbing her hands in his. She had not moved or said a word since the drawer fell. “Mrs Whelk? Come, ma’am, your husband needs you. Whatever the unpleasantness, you must hold on to that. You must read to him. Your voice will be his anchor.” He held out an impatient hand and snapped his fingers. “Mr Larkin, the book. And only the book this time, if you can manage it.”

My spirits rose a little at the glare burning beneath the Doctor's black brows. I wasn't the only one who didn't believe this nightmare. Mr Larkin flushed slightly as he passed across the book.

"I don't want to believe it myself, Doctor, but I'm afraid the evidence speaks for itself." Mr Larkin bent as he spoke and began to sweep all the stolen treasure back into the drawer. "Look, here are my cufflinks, and, Miss Price, weren't you missing a bracelet?" He held out a bracelet of jet beads, black and lifeless in the dim light. My mouth went dry; overlarge and ugly, it was definitely mine.

"Get out," the Doctor almost hissed the words. "This woman is the best nurse it has ever been my privilege to work with. She has been vouched for by Miss Nightingale personally. I would stake my honour that she has nothing to do with this."

"What about her husband?" Mr Larkin asked, softly.

There was a pause. "Get out," Doctor Gaspard said.

Thus began one of the worst days of my life. Outside the door, the accusations flew, fast and vicious. The Captain was dragged out of his cabin to officiate. Mrs Bittlesworth wanted him to pronounce sentence right then and there. She had never forgiven the Whelks for assuming that money could equate to class. But Mr Whelk's good natured enthusiasm had won him many friends and with the First Mate and the Doctor to back him, Captain Dennison refused to proceed until the accused was in a fit state to defend himself. Stuffing the evidence into a canvas bag, he retreated back to his room and locked the door.

Leaving Mrs Whelk to nurse her husband, and Mr Dibble to guard them both, the Doctor commandeered me to be his assistant in the infirmary. The rest of the day passed in a hot and airless blur. Too many small bodies were packed into the hastily expanded hospital ward. Some lay heart-breakingly still, some twisted and squirmed, wracked with fever and pain. And others were a blessed nuisance; thankfully over the worst, they were still too contagious to return to the main compartment, but thoroughly bored with lying in bed.

Miss Mabel appeared at the door with a tentative knock, "Mother's having her nap. Can I help?"

I happily relinquished my sponge and pan of warm water and gathered up the troublemakers.

"Who wants to hear a story?"

“What about?” asked a cautious young man of around six, with bright blue eyes and fading spots.

“Our last visitor was Mrs Butler,” said Dr Gaspard. “Her stories are most improving.”

My small spotty friend grimaced.

“Pirates,” I suggested. I knew my strengths.

“And ghosts,” the boy said.

Across the room, Dr Gaspard shook his head.

“Friendly ghosts,” I said. I didn’t want to be called back down here tonight when they all had nightmares.

The boy made another face, but settled down to listen.

As I spun my tale, I caught glimpses of the Doctor and Miss Mabel. Mrs Whelk was right, Miss Mabel was a good nurse and she was sweet on the Doctor. Judging from his smiles and the way his eyes followed her around the room, he was sweet on her too. No wonder she waited until her mother was asleep before she came to help; the old battleaxe would have a conniption if she had the slightest idea.

The thought itched at my mind. Mrs Bittlesworth would not approve of her precious daughter nursing common children, but here Miss Mabel was. The only way that could happen without a shipwide commotion was if Mrs Bittlesworth didn’t know. But Miss Agnes was as elitist as her mother, so why hadn’t she informed on her sister? There was only one explanation: Mabel had a hold over Agnes and was using it to force her silence.

Even yesterday, that would have been interesting, but right now I had bigger things to worry about. The Whelks were in trouble. It wouldn’t have sunk in yet – Mr Whelk being unconscious and his wife being busy keeping him alive. But when he returned to his senses, he was likely to find himself under arrest and confined to his cabin for the rest of the journey.

Dinner that night was a stiff and stilted affair. Mrs Whelk ate in her cabin, which at least meant that she didn’t have to suffer Mrs Bittlesworth as she held forth on the undeniable truth of the class system. I barely listened and ate a few bites of whatever was put in front of me. I wasn’t hungry, but if I didn’t eat, Mr Buller, the steward, would be knocking my door with a second supper. The jet bracelet was clasped around my wrist. I rolled it back and forth and tried to work out why it was bothering me so.

"I'm sorry. Recovering a bracelet is small consolation for losing a friend." Mr Larkin's warm hand covered my wrist in a brief caress.

My head shot up. Absorbed in my thoughts, I had not noticed him sitting down beside me.

"I have not lost a friend," I said. "Mr Whelk is not the thief."

The feel of his touch lingered on my skin. I rubbed my arms as if I was cold, but my cheeks burned.

"He is fortunate to have such a loyal supporter," Mr Larkin said, after a moment's pause.

I wondered if he was thinking of his brother. "I'm sure your brother will not still be angry with you. Not after all this time and after such a long journey. After all, he was the one who contacted you."

"How did you know about that?" Mr Larkin's head came up with a snap.

"You told me," I said, puzzled. "It was why you caught the ship."

He stared at me a moment too long. "Yes, that letter...I had forgotten that I told you. Your bracelet is particularly fine, Miss Price. You must have been sad to lose it. May I?"

Without waiting for an answer, he picked up my wrist and turned it back and for so that the jet beads caught the light. "A present from an admirer, perhaps?" His thumb stroked a gentle circle on my skin.

"From my sister." The air in the cabin seemed to have disappeared and the words came out as a gasp. I pulled my hand away and glanced down the table to see if anyone had noticed. Miss Agnes glared back at me with narrowed eyes.

"Of course, black doesn't really suit you. On the night of the dance, when the others were dressed in their finery, you were like an oriole pretending to be a sparrow. With your hair and eyes, you should be decked in gold."

The air returned to the room with a rush. An oriole, indeed! I looked up into Mr Larkin's face, ready to remind him of his upcoming nuptials, and something clicked.

Only three people knew my bracelet had been stolen, Annie, myself and the thief. I had not realised until I was dressing for the concert and the excitement of the dance and the awful events that followed had driven it from my mind. I had never reported it missing.

"What's wrong?" Mr Larkin's eyes narrowed.

"N...nothing," I stammered, wrenching my gaze back to the table. "I... I was just thinking of my sister. She is so far away." I conjured up thoughts of Elvira and, to my

surprise, my eyes filled with tears. I gave a realistic sniff. "Excuse me, I promised to check on Mrs Whelk." I stood up so quickly that I knocked my chair over and strode from the saloon.

When I reached the door to the Whelk's cabin, I risked a look back. Mr Larkin was staring after me, his brow furrowed.

The little room was lit by a single candle lantern and I paused for a moment to let my eyes adjust to the dim light. Mr Whelk lay in the same position in which I had last seen him, several hours ago.

"How is he?" I said in a hushed voice.

"No worse," Mrs Whelk replied. "The Doctor thinks he will live if he can make it through the night. As for the state of his mind... we'll have to wait and see."

Her hands clenched tight in her lap. "Miss Price, how will I bear it if he loses his wits? My poor Thaddeus, it would be better if he didn't live at all."

An awful thought, but when I imagined that bright, quicksilver brain slow and halting, I couldn't help but agree.

Mrs. Whelk reached out and took her husband's limp hand, "I didn't mean it, love. Please stay with me." She squeezed his hand tightly, as if she could pull him back from death. Almost I imagined that I saw him squeeze back. When her choked sobs faltered and she turned a wondering face to me, I knew I had not imagined it.

"He's still there! Sarah, he's still there!"

We embraced, and as she sat back, wiping the tears from her eyes, she said, "Thank God Mr Larkin was there. If he had lain there for even ten more minutes..."

"Mrs Whelk—" I said.

She interrupted to pat my hand. "Please call me Mary. After such a moment as this, I think we shall be on first name terms forever, unless..." she hesitated, "unless you believe us to be thieves?"

"No!" I said. "No, I know you are not. My dear Mrs Whelk... Mary..., you must not trust Mr Larkin. *He* is the thief!"

"Mr Larkin?" Mary looked astounded. "Sarah, he can't be. Why, he was a victim of the robberies himself."

"A clever thief, and I believe Mr Larkin to be extremely clever, would steal from himself so as not to be suspected." I brandished my arm at her, rattling the beads on my wrist. "Mary, he knew my bracelet was stolen, and I had told no one except Annie."

Mary wrinkled her brow, "Your bracelet, but I thought you said nothing was taken?"

“Exactly!” I stopped, feeling a flicker of doubt. Hadn’t Ellie said that Mr Larkin was down on the main deck? “He must have had an accomplice – perhaps it was William Harris!”

“Somehow I just can’t see Mr Harris having anything to do with a lady’s handbag,” Mary said with a faint smile.

William Harris had been squat, greasy and a hater of all things feminine. If by some chance he could have brought himself to touch my bag, surely those sweaty, unwashed palms would have left some imprint?

“Well, maybe it was someone else, but Mr Harris was blackmailing Mr Larkin, so they were definitely mixed up in *something* together – cargo broaching, most likely. Why not the robberies as well? It’s a shame Mr Harris fell overboard. He would have been a most valuable witness.”

“Sarah!” Mary exclaimed.

I realised what I had said and backtracked slightly, “Of course, it is a shame for other reasons too, particularly for Mr Harris. You will have to admit, Mary, that if they were in cahoots, then Mr Harris’s disappearance was extremely convenient for Mr Larkin... oh!” I clapped my hand to my mouth and continued in a whisper, “You don’t think Mr Larkin pushed him over do you?”

“I don’t think any such thing,” Mary said. “And, if you have any sense at all, you won’t either. I’m not the thief, and I know Mr Whelk isn’t, but Mr Larkin? And a murderer to boot. Why, Sarah? What possible reason could he have? And why would he want to incriminate us? He saved my dear Thaddeus.” She picked up the book that she had been reading from when I entered, the same book that had caused all the trouble.

“Gulliver’s Travels,” Mary said, when she saw me staring. “It’s his favourite.”

It was an ordinary, black, leather-bound book, nothing special. Apart from the gold lettering of the title, there were probably a thousand books just like it – my stolen bibles, for example.

Why anyone should want to steal not one, but two bibles, and both of them mine, had been a matter of considerable puzzlement to me. What if the bibles were not what the thief was after? What if it was a case of mistaken identity? I had another book, the same shape and size and also bound in black leather: Papa’s journal. The same journal that Mr Larkin had been so desperate to find all those months ago in London.

Back in my own cabin, I pulled my father’s suitcase from beneath my bunk and emptied the contents onto the mattress. Back in London, I had discovered that the

suitcase held one final gift – a secret compartment built into the base and so cleverly disguised as to be nearly invisible. In fact, it was George, not I, who found it, and then by accident.

He had been attempting to recreate for me his latest victory on the cricket field and the suitcase had been serving as both wicket and wicket-keeper. His bat had slipped, a lamp had been knocked over, and when the wreckage had been cleared, the lid of the hidden compartment had sprung open.

I had slipped the journal inside while I was packing, to hide it from Elvira who felt that all family treasures belonged at Larchwoods, and then forgotten about it. My fingers shook as I delved down to the bottom of the bag and twisted the locking mechanism. Would the journal still be there?

Yes! I felt the smooth leather and let out a sigh of relief. If the answers were anywhere, they were in here.

However finding them wouldn't be easy.

Papa's handwriting was beautiful, flowing and rounded, and, in general, easy to read. The problem was the words themselves; there was simply too many of them. In order to save paper and time, my father had invented his own system of code words, abbreviations and squiggles. Some of these I knew, some I didn't. To further complicate matters, Papa was a great believer in the system of crossed writing. When he reached the end of each page, he would rotate the book a quarter turn and continue writing, right over the top of what he had just written. Thus, each page of his journal was a checkerboard of indecipherable words and symbols which gave one a headache just to look at it.

I took a deep breath and opened the book. I was beginning to think that I held in my hand the key to both the robberies and the attack on Mr Whelk. Yes, attack – the more Mr Larkin became implicated in the thefts, the less reliable his witness became. Maybe something in here would tell me about his quest for his brother.

But the very first entry took my thoughts in quite a different direction.

Today I received my next assignment. Another journey and I have only been home two months. Sometimes it feels as though I am barely acquainted with my own family.

Sarah has become quite the accomplished photographer in the last year. I wish I could take her with me, her calm common sense and photographic skills could be extremely useful. But she is needed here; she must stay with her mother.

Papa had rarely mentioned my photography. I had thought that he had not taken much notice of it. To find out that he thought me accomplished... that he wanted me to accompany him. I had to stop reading as tears blurred the page in front of me. I brushed them away and continued.

“Miss Price?” The light tap on the door was followed by a soft whisper. “Miss Price, you can see the Southern Cross – you asked me to wake you.”

I sat up groggily and rubbed my neck. “What time is it?”

“It’s so late, it’s morning, miss, if you get my drift. But it’s a magnificent night.”

“Thank you, Mr MacDonald, I’ll be right up.”

For a moment I was tempted to just slip in under the covers. The Southern Cross would be there tomorrow. No. I was awake and even dressed – I had fallen asleep in my clothes. Papa would have been the first on deck. In fact, I knew he was – I had just read his account of it.

The journal? Where was it? I felt a sharp stab of panic before I saw a sliver of black caught between the mattress and the wall. It must have slipped off my lap when I fell asleep. I tucked it into the pocket of my skirt and made my way up to the deck.

The heavens blazed with a cold white fire: single stars, fierce and sharp as pinpricks, swirls of milky brilliance and glowing clouds of light, all impossibly bright and close. Below my feet the sea was a mirror to their beauty. A shoal of phosphorescence surrounded the ship, flowing from the rudder and bow into a lake of melted starlight.

My eyes were fixed on the glory above me, so at first I did not notice the dark shape at the rail.

“A splendid night, is it not, Miss Price.”

I jumped. “Mr Larkin, you startled me.”

“My apologies, that was not my intention.” He lowered his gaze and the starlight glimmered on his fair hair. “I couldn’t sleep. Why you are up late, Miss Price?”

“I was reading. Mr MacDonald came to tell me that he had sighted the Southern Cross. I have always wished to see it.” I turned to the rail and began to scan the sky. The breeze had picked up since that evening. It cut through my light dress. I shivered.

“You’re cold.” His coat slipped over my shoulders, the silk lining still warm from his body. The scent of ginger and pipe smoke surrounded me.

“Thank you.” A wave tilted the deck and I stumbled sideways. Into his arms. I felt the hard rectangle of Papa’s journal press between us. My cheeks flamed and I was glad for the darkness. I stepped away quickly and took refuge in small talk. “Have you seen the Southern Cross before, Mr Larkin?”

“Once,” he said. He didn’t seem inclined to continue.

On the lee side of the ship, I could make out the familiar shapes of the Cassiopeia and the Plough. I had expected the Southern Cross to stand out, to shout out across the sky in blazing diamonds: *This is the Southern Hemisphere*. As much as I searched the countless stars, I couldn’t find it anywhere

“Over there, Miss Price.” Mr Larkin said. He took my shoulders and turned me about so I was facing the other side of the ship, “Right down low.”

And there it was, a cross, although more like a diamond, or a child’s kite, slanting above the horizon.

It was an anticlimax in that brilliant night, but I still felt a thrill pass through me. For a moment, all my worries and problems were forgotten: I had travelled far enough to change the stars. Who knew what other wonders lay in store?

Chapter Eleven

Floating in a flimsy wooden shell on the vast ocean deeps, out of sight of land for months at a time, might be thought to engender a sense of fellowship for all God's creatures. A wonder at the complexity and variety of creation. A deep and abiding feeling of awe.

This is not the case.

The merest glimpse of another living creature, no matter how small, no matter how inoffensive, inevitably results in my fellow passengers attempting to kill it. The ingenuity devoted to this pursuit is astonishing. There are the more straight-forward, dare I say, primitive attempts. These generally involve throwing things: harpoons, spears, rocks, even on occasion, a boot. Fortunately for the animal in question, missiles thrown in excited haste from a moving ship rarely connect.

More lethal and more cunning are the traps. Hours, even days, of planning go into these. Groups of men plotting, arguing and, sometimes coming to blows, on the best way to outsmart a bird. And sometimes they actually manage to do it.

On those days, the rigging does double duty as a macabre clothesline where the limp carcasses are hung to dry – petrels, Cape pigeons, and albatross, all waiting to be skinned or beheaded and turned into trophies.

The odd thing, given this delight in hunting and the tedious monotony of a diet of preserved meat, is that spoils of this display of manly prowess are only to be admired, never eaten. I have often wondered if albatross would taste of fish.

We slipped across the equator and into the Southern Hemisphere in the dead of night. There was no signal, no fanfare and no way of knowing when it happened. The Captain mistrusted the mood of the men and wanted none of the usual hijinks. I had read about the ceremony of Crossing the Line and had been looking forward to seeing it, but Mr MacDonald swore me to secrecy. The wind began to pick up and the temperature dropped. Just a few degrees, but when combined with the fresh breeze, the change was delightful. The sun was bright, and the sea sparkled.

I kept the journal with me at all times, hidden in the pocket of my skirt, but I didn't dare read it on deck where Mr Larkin might see. In fact, I tried to avoid Mr Larkin altogether. For a cold-blooded killer, he was a little too charming. I felt as though I should be standing on the wheelhouse, denouncing him as a thief and a

murderer, but he was held in such high esteem by every member of the ship except myself, Charlie and Ellie, that it would have been in vain. Why, even Mrs Whelk, who had the most to gain from his guilt, believed him innocent.

If I was avoiding him for other reasons, I refused to acknowledge them, even to myself. The man was not only dangerous, he was engaged to be married.

I held my tongue and bided my time. I needed proof. And the only place I might find it was in Papa's journal. I poured over it in my cabin after supper. Every so often I would take a break and stand with my head out the porthole, watching the stars and the phosphorescent sea, the tops of the waves flashing with green fire in the dark. I grew expert at picking out the strange new constellations.

Slowly, but surely, I made my way through Papa's wandering thoughts. He seemed to write down every idea which entered his head. Ruminations on the nature of the heavens and lists of what had been offered for dinner were intermingled and seemingly of equal value. Although I had traced Papa's journey as far as Auckland and had still not found any trace of Mr Larkin's brother, I had no doubt that if Papa had met him, he would be in here. Everything else was.

Make that almost everything. Here and there, there were gaps: sometimes a few hours – a morning or afternoon – sometimes whole days. The entries hadn't been ripped out or deleted, they were simply periods of time when Papa, who on every other day recorded every detail of his life in tedious detail, wrote nothing. And made no explanation.

Elsewhere on the ship, life continued at a sombre pace. The infirmary was still overflowing and Mr Whelk lay in his cabin, still as death. Mary nursed him around the clock, except for the rare hours when I could force her away to rest. Dr Gaspard shook his head, and would only say that head injuries were unpredictable things.

"He'll be so sad to have missed this," Mary said one night, as she gazed from her window at the sea sparkling with rivers of light below us. "Nicholas, his son, wrote to us of this voyage. He tried to describe the night skies, the glowing water, but in the end, he gave up. Said we would have to see for ourselves. He even sent us the money for our fares – not that we needed it. He's got a lot of his dad in him, that one."

A sudden idea sparked in my brain. Maybe Mr Whelk didn't need to miss out completely.

"I'll be right back," I said.

When I returned, I edged carefully into the room, my treasure hidden behind my back.

“Voila!” I said.

The whole room lit up with a soft green glow as I held the jar of phosphorescent water high above my head.

Mary clapped in delight. “Sarah, you are a wonder.” She bent over her husband. “Look, my darling, Sarah has brought the sea to you.”

She motioned me closer and light fell across his face, turning it an eerie pale green. His eyelids twitched.

“Thaddeus?” Mary whispered.

The eyelids flickered open. He focussed on the jar and his lips pulled into a laborious half-smile. “The lady of the lamp.” His voice was thick, raspy from disuse. His eyes slid shut and he lapsed back into unconsciousness.

“He spoke! Sarah, he spoke. My Thaddeus is still there!”

Every evening after that, I leant out my porthole and caught a jar of liquid starlight on a string to light Mr Whelk’s way back home.

I took to spending the afternoons watching over Mr Whelk, while Mary relieved Dr Gaspard in the infirmary. I used the time to puzzle over Papa’s journal, carefully hidden inside a copy of *Pride and Prejudice* in case someone came in. I was reaching the end of Papa’s time in New Zealand and was beginning to despair of finding any clues to Mr Larkin’s situation.

And then...

Today I met one of the oddest fellows I have ever encountered. I can only make a guess at his appearance or age, his face being covered with a liberal application of hair and dirt. His name, my friends tell me, is Old Thomas, and he is a wonder with all forms of avian life. I am lucky to see him at all, for he shuns town life, spending his time on a remote island, the location of which is so secret that it is known to a mere handful. Today he was in town to pick up an unwanted bird from my hosts. It is a kakapo, given to their daughter as a chick by a local hunter. They tell me it is a form of parrot, but I fear they are pulling my leg, for it cannot fly and creeps along the ground like a hedgehog. And in the dark,

I might add – for the creature is nocturnal – and who ever heard of a night parrot?

I read the account again, uncertain as to whether Papa was joking. Such a bird seemed most unlikely. Earlier he had written of another kind of parrot, a kea, which lived in the snow and preyed on sheep in the dark of the night, so I knew he did not always stick strictly to the truth.

Parrot or not, it is a charming creature, but not one well-suited to town living. The stench of the thing! And the noise! Huge booms that can be heard for miles. My host could not take it anymore and was ready to knock the bird on the head, but his daughter wept herself into a decline. As a compromise, she has agreed to allow Old Thomas to take the creature away with him. Apparently he runs a sanctuary for such things.

When he arrived, he smelt like the kakapo's long lost cousin. Maybe working with the creatures has destroyed his sense of smell and eliminated the need to bathe. The young man with him, a silent blond giant introduced only as Young Ned, was truly a marvel. He talked to the bird in its own language, a series of creaking chirps, and had it climbing up his leg in no time. I would see this pair in their natural habitat. Perhaps my host can arrange it.

Young Ned must be Mr Larkin's brother. The name, the physical description and the way with birds all fit. But it still didn't tell me where he was or why Mr Larkin was so desperate to find him. I began to skim the pages, looking for another mention of young Ned, but very quickly I found that Papa's hieroglyphics meant that wasn't an option. I returned to plodding. Assorted parties, picnics and frolics later, I found what I was looking for.

Today I am visiting with Old Thomas on his island kingdom. My host tells me I am extremely privileged – it is an honour extended to only a select few. The invitation came late last night and I was up with the dawn to catch the tide. My captain was Young Ned, returning from the monthly supply run. Our conversation was extremely witty and clever, but, alas, a trifle one-sided, Young Ned being a man of few words. Those single words he did utter

lead me to believe that he is American, and I am determined to discover how he arrived at this odd life.

We threaded our way through the islands of the Hauraki Gulf, passing golden beaches and dark forests. The sea sparkled and a pod of friendly porpoises came to keep us company...

Here Papa launched into a lyrical description of the journey that lasted several close-written pages. I skipped forward.

The island rose from the water in front of us, a high hill, sloping down in a long peninsula to the East. From a distance it had the appearance of a whale basking on the surface, hence the local name: Whale Island. The base of the hill appeared to be surrounded on all sides by steep cliffs and the peninsula, although less steep, spread out into sharp-toothed reefs where the water surged and boiled white. I could not see a single spot safe to land.

When I pointed this out to my guide, he grunted and owned it was ‘a mite tricky’. Around the headland, and still no sight of safe harbour. Young Ned furled the sail and picked up the oars. He aimed the bow at what appeared to be unbroken rock. I mentioned this fact and he gestured to a large, almost circular boulder with a twisted tree behind it. The tree made a striking landmark, with its pale trunk and dark tangled branches blown sideways, like hair in the wind.

“We’re all right as long as those are lined up,” said Young Ned. It was the longest sentence of the trip. He then turned his back and hauled on the oars. I held my breath and clung on for dear life, my eyes fixed on those two landmarks. About twenty feet from what I was sure was certain death, a channel appeared. We shot through on an incoming wave, the rocks a bare three feet away on either side.

As we approached shore, the headland opened up to reveal a tiny cove. Never have I been more relieved to reach dry land.

“Miss Price?” Mr Larkin knocked on the half-closed door.

Shock prickled across my skin and I slipped the journal into my pocket, my heart knocking so hard it made my hands shake.

“Y... yes?” I swallowed, trying to get my voice under control. “Come in.”

His smooth blond head poked around the door. He saw my face and took a step into the room. "Is everything all right? Should I call the Doctor?"

"No, no, Mr Whelk is fine." I glanced down to check that that was true. I had been so caught up in Papa's world that anything could have happened and I wouldn't have noticed. The leathery brown face was as still as ever. I waved the book I had been using to disguise the journal at Mr Larkin, "I was miles away, I'm afraid. You gave me a fright."

Mr Larkin looked at the cover and gave me an odd look. "*A Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*? Are you sure you should be reading that, Miss Price?"

"Oh!" I had left *Pride and Prejudice* in my cabin and had picked the book at random from the pile beside the bed and propped the journal inside without even looking at the title. My cheeks burned as I looked at the first few entries. "It's... it's very educational."

Mr Larkin grinned. "I should imagine it is."

I dropped the book on the floor and tried to recover my dignity. "Did you have a message for me, sir?"

"Mr MacDonald says to tell you that he is trying to catch you a Portuguese-Man-of-War. He said you wanted to see one up close."

"Truly? How wonderful! Where is it?" I leaped up. I had seen them sailing beside us in the ocean, iridescent bubbles of pink and blue-green more delicate than the finest Venetian glass. Their tentacles, dark and dangerous, dragged out behind to half the length of the ship or more. The sailors had told me the merest touch was lethal and I was wondering how I could confirm that. Perhaps the cook might be persuaded to sacrifice one of his chickens, especially if it was already on the menu.

"Wait..." Halfway out the door, I remembered. I had promised to stay with Mr Whelk until Mary came back. Slowly, I returned to my seat. "I will look later."

"Go on," Mr Larkin said. "I'll sit with him. I could even continue reading where you left off."

Panic sat me firmly down in my chair. I could not leave him alone with Mr Whelk. "No, I—"

Fortunately, Mary arrived at the moment, for I did not know how to finish that sentence. Mr Larkin bowed to Mary, and held the door wide for me to exit.

I spotted Ellie peeking out of her cabin door. Mrs Dibble had been keeping the children close, even though Ellie had indignantly assured me that she had had measles and scarlet fever both, 'when I was just a baby!'.

“Miss Price,” Ellie hissed. “Miss Price, look.” She slid out of the door and unfolded her arms. Inside was the kitten, black as ever, but no longer tiny. Emerald eyes regarded me with an unwinking stare.

“Ellie, you’ve done wonderfully. I swear she has tripled in size. What a magnificent mother you are!”

Ellie beamed.

“Quick,” I said. “Ask your mother if you may come on deck. Mr MacDonald is to catch a Portuguese-Man-of-War.” I had a sudden flash of fifty feet of poisonous tentacles combined with a hoard of little Dibbles. I grabbed Ellie’s elbow. “Do not tell your brothers and sisters.”

It was many hours before I returned to my cabin. The Portuguese-Man-Of-War proved impossible to catch in a bucket. The mass of tentacles had tipped it out every time. However a school of grampus was spotted on the horizon, causing the male passengers to stampede for the harpoons. Ellie sprang to the railing, waving and shouting in an effort to drive the grampus away. Her efforts were ably seconded by a score of smaller Dibbles at the windows below, although, as I distinctly heard cries of ‘pirates ahoy!’ and ‘land ho!’, I don’t think they had the slightest notion as to what was going on.

At last I was alone. I shut the cabin door and slid a trunk in front of it. I wanted no more unexpected interruptions. Then I took out the journal and found my place. Papa’s account of his time on the island was extremely interesting, but as far as I could see, had nothing to do with Mr Larkin’s quest. Young Ned was a man of such few words that at times one wondered if he had a tongue at all. Still, at least now I knew where he was. Whale Island, however inaccessible, must be known to the locals.

This was the moment at which I realised that I intended to search for Ned Larkin myself.

On the trip back to Auckland, I interrogated Young Ned as to how he found himself in such a curious occupation. He is, as I said earlier, American, and I believe educated. When showing me the birds, he would inform me of both their common and scientific names, a practice that infuriated Old Thomas, the latter believing that one name is sufficient for any bird. In the crude hut that is their headquarters, there was a quantity of

books and journals, all clustered in neat piles around the tidier and sweeter-smelling of the two bunks.

Young Ned did not respond to my friendly overtures, and, in fact, did not say a single word until we reached the pier. I was onshore and bidding him farewell before he spoke. He said he had heard I was returning to England via San Francisco and asked if I would deliver a parcel for him. I replied in the affirmative and he handed me a small package, wrapped in oilskin.

“It’s for my brother,” he said. “Leave it at the front desk – don’t have anything to do with him, not even to talk to. He’s a bad lot.” Then he cast off.

‘Where do I take it?’ I called.

“The address is on it,” he replied.

I was fumbling at the label, trying to catch a glimpse of the destination, when he turned and shouted as an afterthought. “Take good care of it. It’s valuable.”

The label said, in thick black ink:

Mr Jack Larkin

Presidential Hotel

San Francisco

I gazed after the infuriating fellow. How dare he send me on such a mission without telling me what it is about? And worse, how dare he trust me not to open his parcel? For now, of course, I cannot. And it is a most intriguing shape.

I put down the journal and gazed unseeing at the cabin wall. So Mr Larkin was a ‘bad lot’. And Papa had delivered a package to him? Warning Papa not to talk to someone was like asking a terrier not to dig. It just wasn’t in his nature. They must have met. So Jack Larkin was lying about that as well as about his brother.

There was a sudden banging on the door. My heart just about jumped out of my mouth. I shoved the journal under the covers.

“Sarah, Sarah!” It was Mary. The handle twisted and there was a grunt as she attempted to open the door.

“Sarah, your door is stuck. You need to come, Thaddeus is awake! He is asking for you. Why won’t your door open?”

Mary pushed and shoved with the strength of ten men, or one woman whose husband has miraculously returned to life.

“I’m coming,” I called. “Stop pushing. The trunk has fallen in front of the door and it’s wedged tight. You have to shut the door.”

Mary was too excited to listen and she kept shoving at the door. “He needs you, Sarah. You must come.”

She must have really put her shoulder into it, because the trunk slid an inch across the floor and started to bulge around the bedpost.

“Mary, stop!” I said. “I have to move the trunk.”

Finally Mary understood and seconds later I was out. The saloon was ringed with curious faces, drawn from their sleep by the commotion. Jack Larkin was among them.

Mary grabbed my arm, looking charmingly dishevelled. “He’s awake, Sarah. He’s awake. Isn’t it wonderful?”

“Wonderful, indeed.”

Mary hustled me away to their cabin, barely allowing me time grab a robe and shrug it on.

“Thaddeus?” Mary’s voice was tentative in the dim light, as if she was afraid he would slip away again if she spoke too loud. “Sarah’s here – Miss Price.”

“Sarah.” His voice was a hoarse rasp, almost drowned by the gentle creak and slosh of the ship. A wrinkled hand jerked painfully off the quilt and I rushed to take it, fearing the worst. His fingers tightened in a surprisingly firm grip.

“I’m here,” I said.

He scanned my face, and seemed to be reassured by what he found. A tension eased from his face and his mouth slid into a half-smile. “Thought I heard you... before, when I was asleep.” His eyes began to close. “I had to make sure. Make sure you were safe.” He sank into sleep, still smiling.

I looked up at Mary, bemused. “What was that all about?”

“I don’t know,” she said, shaking her head. “He woke up and everything was fine. He knew me, knew who he was and where he was, thank the Lord. Then he started to get agitated. Started asking for you. He seemed to think you were in danger. Thank you for coming. He’s better now.”

Mr Whelk sighed in his sleep and rolled onto his side.

“After all those days of lying still as a statue, finally a natural sleep.” Tears rolled down Mary’s cheeks as she watched him. “He’s on the way home to me, Sarah. At last he’s on the way home.”

As I returned to my cabin I was filled with thankfulness, and determination. Mary’s joy must not be ruined. Somehow I had to find proof that they were not the thieves. I settled back into bed determined to keep reading. I reached for the journal, but found nothing.

I leapt out of bed and ripped back the covers. I dug frantically under the mattress and even slithered under the bunk to feel in all the dark corners. Nothing.

I slowly returned to bed and faced the truth.

The journal was gone.

Chapter Twelve

For the average traveller, shipboard food is a wonder of preservation over palate. Salt pork that crunches to the bite, biscuits so hard they take half an hour to chew, and potatoes sprinkled with quick-lime, these are all standard fare. Even worse is when the preservation fails. Then the cookhouse is filled with barrels of floating eggs and sulphurous fumes, weevily bread and liquid butter. Woe betide the ill-prepared passenger who entrusts their entire welfare to the Shipping Company and does not pack some tasty treats in their luggage.

We in cabin-class were better served: roast duck, boiled fowl, jugged hare, corned beef, potatoes (not preserved), carrots, plum pudding, gooseberry pie, jam tart, blancmange, and cheese. And that was just on Thursdays.

Mr Whelk awoke the next morning, his mind intact, his body battered, and his memory of the last week completely gone. He remembered nothing of the ghost watch with Mr Larkin, or even that we had a ghost, and he felt nothing but delight at the sight of me when I brought him his breakfast tray. It was frustrating, but perhaps the lack of incriminating detail would save him from a similar fate to that of William Harris.

“You were so worried,” Mary told him. “You said she was in danger.”

He looked up with an echo of his old twinkle in his eyes, “I can’t imagine why. You look all right to me, Sarah, my dear. A bit peaky, perhaps. Not getting enough sun? Too much lazing in your cabin. Should be on deck.”

“*Miss Price*,” said Mary pointedly, “has been giving up most of her time to look after you. She certainly hasn’t been lazing around in her cabin, on deck, or anywhere else.”

Mr Whelk winked at me, “After all we’ve been through, I feel sure we are entitled to first names. Aren’t we, Sarah?”

I nodded, although in my heart he would always be Mr Whelk, it suited him so well.

“How’s the water condenser doing? Still holding up?”

“Captain Dennison said it has never run so well, not even when it was new.”

We chatted for a little longer, while he played with the food on his plate. When his eyes began to droop, I took my leave.

Mary came out with me and shut the cabin door behind her.

“Have you told him about the thefts? About the things in the drawer?” I said.

“No.” Mary shook her head decisively. “Not until he’s stronger. I don’t want him upset yet.”

I thought of the frail battered body lying under those sheets and understood her reluctance. His personality, too large and vibrant to be contained in such a small vessel, had flowed around him in a cloud of energy and youth. Without that protection, in the few days since the accident he had shrunken and aged. I hoped that, with time, he would recover, but there was a vulnerability to him that had not been there before.

Still... he did love a challenge.

“I wish we could get into our baggage,” Mary said. She cast a worried look back at the door. “He’s got no appetite and who can blame him – salt pork and preserved milk. It’s not what an invalid needs. I’ve some treats from home that might tempt him, if I could just get at them.

“Next week,” I said. “That’s what the Captain said. I’ve got some delicacies packed away too, I thought the children might like them. Not to mention a whole trove of books.”

“Well, that those would probably do more for him than a whole shipload of treats,” Mary laughed. “I’ll tell him as soon as he wakes up.”

In the event, the opening of the hold revealed a minor disaster. The ghost of William Harris had been extremely busy. Many boxes had been opened and the warm moist air of the tropics had set to work on the contents. In some cases, whatever was left had been finished off by the rats. Coats were mildewed, crackers nibbled and a case of bottled peaches had exploded, spraying a family’s entire winter wardrobe with sticky golden juice.

My box of books had come off worst. The top was broken completely off and the contents dumped carelessly onto the rough planks of the hold. Some had fallen into puddles and were ruined, their pages stuck together and the words run into illegible blobs. Some were covered in a fluffy mould that had eaten into the paper. A few were still readable, but the leather covers were spotted and stained, no longer the prized possessions they had been when I boarded.

Mr MacDonald and I stood in the hold and surveyed the damage.

“They must have thought it contained something valuable,” he said. “On account of all those labels, you see.” He gestured at the box.

Property of Miss Sarah Price.

Care required.

If found, please return to Miss Sarah Price.

Important!

I sighed. In retrospect, I could see that they probably did give the wrong impression.

“They were expecting jewellery or fine furs, fancy liquor at the very least. When all they found were books, someone got angry.” He pointed at my copy of *Oliver Twist*, ripped in half and flung clear across the hold.

My heart thumped as I approached the box. It didn’t contain just books, my camera was in there. I had tried very hard not to look for it in the mess of broken books. If it was smashed I didn’t want to see.

I pushed aside the last few pieces of splintered wood and peered inside. Mr MacDonald raised the lantern high so I could see. With a cry of delight, I unearthed my camera. And the glass slides. Both were safe in their sturdy wooden boxes. At least, I hoped the slides were. I shook the case gently. No ominous tinkling, just a reassuring soft clunk, but I wouldn’t know for sure until I was ready to use them.

I didn’t say it aloud, but Mr MacDonald was wrong. Even illiterate thieves would consider a camera to be worth taking. This was not done by someone looking for loot; the destruction was too systematic. This was done by someone looking for a book, a very particular book, and I could make a good guess as to which one.

“If I knew who did all this, I’d hang them off the yardarm by their toenails, even a ghost!” Mr MacDonald growled, “It is such a *mess*!”

Never mind the damage and theft, what troubled our First Mate the most was the chaos in his normally spic-and-span hold.

“Don’t worry,” I said. “I don’t think William Harris’ ghost will be giving us any more trouble.”

Perhaps it was just as well that Mr MacDonald didn’t hear me.

I adjusted the index arm of the sextant until the image of the sun was aligned with the horizon.

“I was sorry to hear about your books,” Mr Larkin said, behind me.

I made a careful note of the sun’s altitude, before turning. It had taken much pleading before Mr MacDonald had entrusted me with the task of the daily measurement of our latitude and I wasn’t going to give him a reason to take it away.

“Thank you,” I said. Oddly enough, I believed him. Even if he had been bribing William Harris to search for Papa’s journal, I was sure he had never intended the wholesale looting of the hold that had occurred.

“What’s our position?” Mr Larkin said.

“We are at the same latitude as the Cape of Good Hope” I said. “Finally, we can start heading east. Captain Dennison said he didn’t want to go any further south than he had to.” I smiled at Mr Larkin. “From now, it’s straight on to New Zealand.”

He laughed, “And how many thousand miles to go?”

“A few. I’m trying not to think of that right now.”

Mr Larkin took the sextant from me and examined it. “Where did you learn to use this?”

“Mr MacDonald has been showing me. It is really extraordinarily simple. You point the half-silvered mirror at the horizon and...” I let my voice trail off. “You’re not really interested, are you?”

“Not really, no.” He grinned at me. “Ned explained it to me once, in excruciating detail. I didn’t listen then, and I can’t imagine it would be any different the second time around. Although the instructor is much more attractive.”

He moved forward and laid the sextant back in the case. When he straightened up my nose was inches from his chest. I took a half-step back. The railing pressed into my back like a cage.

“You don’t let a minute go to waste, do you? Most young ladies would be bored stiff on a trip like this. Either that or flirting with anything in trousers. You just want to learn. I bet there is not a part of the ship you don’t know about.”

He took another step, and I had nowhere to go. He was too close. I took a deep breath, but it didn’t seem to reach my lungs. Behind me there was only sea and sky; the railing felt flimsy and far too low. Not a soul was in sight. He reached for me.

I brought my notebook down on his head with a solid, satisfying thunk and stabbed my pen into his shoulder. The nib broke against the thick weave of his jacket and ink splattered us both.

Mr Larkin stepped back and scowled down at his coat. “If I had wanted to be rid of you, Miss Price, you would already be over the rail. There was no need to ruin my coat.”

“Forgive me, Sir. I was unaware of your intentions.” I glared at him. “Perhaps you would be so kind as to let me go before I scream?”

Mr Larkin looked up at that. "Scream? I think not. You're not the type. As to my intentions..." He reached out and tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. His fingers lingered on my cheek, the warmth burning through the layers of my skin right down to the bone. His spicy scent filled my head and made my thoughts disappear. His hand slipped around the back of my neck and pulled me forward. His lips touched mine.

"There you are, Mr Larkin. I've been looking for you. You promised me a game of cards, sir."

Captain Dennison's voice shocked me back to reality like a spray of icy water. I pushed Mr Larkin away. "You forget yourself, Sir! You are engaged."

"Calm yourself, Miss Price. It was just a kiss, not a proposal of marriage." He was smiling as he turned to the Captain. "Miss Price was instructing me on the use of the sextant, Captain. Most educational. I'm afraid I lost track of the time."

The Captain glanced from Mr Larkin to me and back again before carefully averting his eyes. "Quite...fascinating things. If you're ready? I'll be in my cabin." He spun on his heel and walked off. Behind him the deck was empty, save for Miss Agnes. Her flat gaze took in my flushed cheeks and rumpled hair and gave nothing back.

Mr Larkin took my hand. "As I said, Miss Price, most educational. And far more enjoyable than Ned's lectures."

"Perhaps I would have preferred what your brother would have to say." Not the sharpest retort, but the best my vacant brain could provide.

Mr Larkin laughed. "You and Ned would be well suited. What a pity he's wanted for murder."

The weather grew colder, first the nights, and then the days as well. Mildewed or not, the winter clothes became more and more welcome. The crew took down the torn and battered warm-weather sails and dressed the ship in her Sunday best: crisp white that was strong enough for the winds to come. The winds increased, soon we were averaging well over two hundred miles a day, sometimes over three hundred.

The infirmary was still full and one cold grey day, there was another funeral. Another small bundle sank below the waves, and another weeping mother refused all consolation. My heart ached for the courage of these parents, braving such sorrow in search of a better life.

Mary moved back to nursing the children and I took over Mr Whelk – Thaddeus, as he insisted I call him. It was a demanding job. The only thing that kept him in that bed was the dizziness that attacked him every time he attempted to rise. Of course, that

didn't stop him from trying. I lost count of the times I came back into the room from some minor errand, only to find him collapsed in a heap beside the bed.

Trying to keep him entertained was an exhausting business. I read, but I didn't read fast enough. We played cards until he had won every penny I owned. I finally worked out exactly how he was cheating and began, very slowly to win it back. I brought in my camera and showed him how it worked. I had to promise to give him a lesson when we landed before he would give it back.

I escaped onto deck every chance I got. The sailors were working hard now and had no time to chat. The sky sails and royals were taken in, the first time the main royal had been stowed for the whole journey. As the weather cooled and it became too cold to sit still, I spent my free time tramping round and round the deck, a hard task when the ship was lying over in the wind. I trudged up the steep hill of the deck, casting many nervous glances at the rushing water behind me, only to slither back down a few minutes later.

I had my portholes shut tight now, and the ship's carpenter had made the rounds – battening down the hatches and nailing and lashing everything that could be nailed or lashed.

Mr MacDonald advised us all to look to our own cabins. I took heed of his warning and spent a morning making sure that everything in my cabin was secured in place. Some of the others did not, and one night as the ship rocked back and forth in the waves and we began to understand the purpose of the annoying raised edges of the saloon table, the contents of those cabins could be heard sliding ominously – first to one side, then the other.

The noise of the ship increased, the waves whooshed beneath the hull, and crashed against the portholes. The wind hummed in the ropes and roared at the sails and everywhere the boards of the ship creaked and groaned.

After one particularly rough night which I had spent crushed up against the side of the bunk, I asked Bill when it would be over.

He grinned and said, "Just you wait until we hit a storm, then you'll see what real sailing is like."

It was no longer possible to sit out on deck after supper. As I was forced to spend more time with my fellow passengers, two things became clear. First, both Mrs Bittlesworth and Mr Larkin were spending a lot of time in their respective cabins. In Mr Larkin's case, there was a lot of speculation, but for Mrs Bittlesworth, the reason was

clear. Even though the pure vinegar running through her veins aided in keeping her in a well-preserved state, she was an old lady and she was finding the journey hard. And that contributed to my second observation: Miss Agnes Bittlesworth was a very unhappy woman.

I caught her casting frequent glances at Mr Larkin's closed door, possible because I was doing the very same thing. My wish was for his empty cabin so that I could search for my journal, a plan I eventually had to admit was doomed to failure now that the saloon was continuously occupied. I wondered how he was getting on with my father's code. Judging by his scowling face and brusque manner at the table, it wasn't going well.

And Miss Agnes, well, there I wasn't sure. Mrs Dibble thought it to be a lover's spat. They had been so much together at the beginning of the voyage.

"Have you seen them lately, Miss Price?" she whispered, leaning close. "Why, just the other day, when I was taking my daily constitutional, I saw her running up to Mr Larkin and he gave her the cold shoulder. Yes, he did, Miss Price! Just turned around and walked the other way as if she didn't exist, the poor lamb, and he must have heard her. 'Mr Larkin,' she called, 'Mr Larkin, I must speak with you.' I heard her, clear as a bell, right on the other side of the ship, so it stands to reason that he did too. But there you are – young girls are always too fond of good looks and it brings nothing but heartache."

Miss Agnes was certainly in pain, but to me, it didn't look like heartache. I was no expert – all my experience of love came from books – but Miss Agnes did not display the symptoms of a broken heart. There was no swooning over tear-stained letters, no sighing gazes at the object of her affection over dinner, no attempts to accidentally fall into his arms as she descended into the saloon. In fact, she watched him to avoid him, always choosing the opposite end of the table at meals, disappearing into her cabin or on deck as soon he entered the saloon, and generally acting like a chicken forced to share a hen coop with a fox.

When I tried to talk to her, she raised enough of her customary disdain to cut me off, before I had finished the first sentence. But as I was leaving, she grabbed my hand.

"Miss Price, how is Mr Whelk?"

I stopped in surprise. "He is much better, although still confined to bed." I noticed that Mr Larkin had come out of his cabin and spoke more loudly. "Of course, he does not remember anything about the accident. And Dr Gaspard says it may be that he never does."

“About the thefts, the discovery? Have you told him?”

“No,” I said. “Mrs Whelk feels he is too weak. The strain of being falsely accused might cause a severe setback.”

Miss Agnes dropped her eyes. “I understand. Mother is also quite ill. Her heart, you know. Her doctor warned her, but she insisted on making the trip. Dr Gaspard has been most attentive, but...” Her voice faltered and she looked up at me with an appeal in her eyes. She knew how much she was asking. “Mrs Whelk is reckoned to be an excellent nurse. Do you think she might visit with Mother? I am so worried about her.”

“I don’t know,” I said, coldly. In my mind, I could already hear Mary scolding me. I sighed. “I’ll ask her.”

Miss Agnes squeezed my hand, “Thank you.”

Two days later, I was awoken by the crying of birds. The wind had dropped and the sea was blue and calm. Up on deck, I found the ship surrounded by a flock of Cape pigeons, their black wings splashed with white as if someone had thrown paint at them. Soaring through their frantic bustle with regal calm – a King surrounded by his buzzing subjects – was an albatross. He skimmed over the waves, swooping and floating, never once flapping his immense wings. I watched in wonder; I had never seen anything so graceful.

“An albatross!” cried Mr Bates, “We must catch it.”

“I’ll get some salt pork,” said his friend, as they rushed off to find their lines.

Soon half a dozen baited lines were floating off the side of the ship, their wooden buoys bobbing lazily in the water.

“Surely they can’t catch something as big as an albatross that way?” I said to Bill. I wouldn’t have believed that any bird could be caught on a line, but had already seen it done more times than I could count. The birds thought the wood was something to eat and as they pecked at it, their legs became entangled in the string and they were pulled aboard.

“Not with just a line, no. They’re too strong. You need a hook.” Bill unhooked one from the pocket of his shirt and showed it to me. “It’s a special albatross hook. If you get it caught just right in the curve of their beak, you can pull them in. They always pull back, y’see. If they flew forward, they’d get off easy. Stupid birds.” He eyed the eager fishermen mournfully. “I ain’t never caught an albatross.”

“I thought it wasn’t done? What about the Ancient Mariner, and all that?”

Bill gave me a confused look, “Do you mean Old Harry? He’s caught loads of albatross.”

“No, I meant the poem, Samuel Coleridge?”

Bill looked blank.

“Don’t they hold the souls of dead sailors?” For someone who had been terrified at the thought of sailing on a Friday, he seemed remarkably calm about souls.

“Well, p’rhaps, but last trip the Bosun sold a mollyhawk skin to a passenger for ten shillings – imagine what you could get for an albatross. Look, they’ve caught one!”

Mr Bates had indeed managed to hook an albatross. It fought the whole way, straining back against the hook in its beak. Once on deck, the fight abruptly went out of it. It staggered about on the unfamiliar surface, leaving a trail of blood as the rough planks cut its tender feet. Mr Bates leapt about in front of it, teasing and poking the poor creature while it made half-hearted attempts to bite him. Little Dibbles danced in a ring around them both, in danger of being knocked overboard by the great wings.

“You want to watch out,” Bill called. “They get a bit crook on deck. He’ll pro’bly–”

Too late. The great bird retched and a foul-smelling stream of half-digested fish splashed onto Mr Bates’ shiny boots. He let out a yell of disgust and grabbed hold of the head, giving it a vicious twist. The huge bird slumped to the deck.

“A splendid specimen, Mr Bates,” said Mr MacDonald. “If you wish to keep the head, Chips can mount it for you. He does a very good job.”

“Papa’s caught one! Papa’s caught an albytross!”

Mr Dibble was pulling in a second bird, aided by the adulation of his offspring. Ellie jumped down the ladder at breakneck speed to be the first to bear the news to her mother. “Mama! We’ve got an albatross!”

“Just wait,” I called. “I’ll fetch my camera.”

I lined the two men up at the side of the boat. They held the birds by the necks while the Dibble offspring stretched the wings to the fullest extent. I had to retreat across the deck to fit them all in.

“Wonderful,” I said, stowing the plate away in the light-proof container. It was the first photograph I had taken on the voyage and I hoped the day was calm enough that it would come out. While I had everything set up, I took a few more of the crew and the passengers, although who knew when I would be able to develop them. I considered commandeering part of the hold for a darkroom, but I didn’t think the Captain would allow it. I would have to wait until we were on land.

Mr Bates and Mr Dibble were not the only successful fishermen. Even Bill took a break from the helm and achieved his wish. Soon a whole row of the birds hung from a line by their crossed feet, their long wings trailing on the deck.

“You can have a wing, if you like, Miss Price,” Bill offered. “I’ll skin it for you and everything – they make a nice cape, the ladies say.”

I thanked him, wondering what sort of an event one would wear an albatross wing to. Elvira would know.

Ellie tugged on my sleeve. “Mama asks if you would come down to the cabin, if you please.”

The bloody footprints and swinging bodies were making me slightly queasy, so I was happy to oblige.

Mrs Dibble welcomed me into her cabin with a slight tinge of red in her cheeks. “I dare say you will think it foolish nonsense, Miss Price, but I would dearly love to see an albatross. I have always adored Mr Coleridge’s poem,” she confided. “But I don’t wish to leave my mother alone. Would you...?”

I smiled. “I don’t think it is foolish at all. Of course, I’ll look after her.”

“Thank you,” she said, and dashed from the cabin, light-footed as a girl.

I took a moment to look around. The stern cabins were the largest on the ship, but the large rear windows, so light and airy in the tropics, were now covered with heavy wooden shutters and the room was dank, airless and dark. In addition, the sheer quantity of the Dibbles’ belongings had swallowed all available space. A narrow pathway wound between the furniture and the piles of toys and clothes. Several swinging beds hung from the ceiling at a height perfectly calculated to catch the unwary a good clout around the ears. As I gazed about the dim and crowded room, I began to wonder if Mrs Dibble’s mother had been mistakenly buried beneath one of the stacks. I could see no sign of her.

“Is that you, Janie?” A creaky whisper rose from a pile of discarded clothes on the far bunk. Close examination showed a pair of rheumy eyes peering out from under an exceedingly elaborate and beribboned lace cap.

“No, I’m Miss Price,” I said, “I’ve come to look after you for a while.”

“How delightful,” she said, peering at me short-sightedly. “How different you look. Have you changed your hair? It seems quite a different colour.”

I didn’t know how to answer that. As far as I was aware, I had never spoken to the old lady before in the entire voyage. I suddenly realised that I did not even know her name. Surely she had not always been known as Mrs Dibble’s mother?

“Did you bring some more of those caramels? Janie won’t let me have them, you know. She was ever so mad. Didn’t tell her where I got ‘em though!” She gave a witch’s cackle which ended in a coughing fit. I looked at the door, wondering when Mrs Dibble would return.

The old lady beckoned and patted the bunk beside her. I sat down gingerly, hoping I wouldn’t accidentally crush her breadstick legs. She twined a curl of my hair around her finger.

“It was prettier before,” she said. “Warm as firelight. Red as a robin.” She giggled.

I stiffened. There was only one female passenger in first class with red hair, and that was Miss Agnes. The idea of prim and proper Miss Agnes dispensing good cheer to the aged, especially this particular aged who smelled of violets and stale sweat, was impossible.

“What did we do last time I came,” I said. “I’ve forgotten.”

“Dress-up, silly,” the old lady said, delighted to find someone with a worse memory than herself. “We played dress-up. We can’t do that anymore though. They’re gone, you see.” She shook her head mournfully. “Do you know where they went? Janie was so mad. Or was that because of the caramels?”

I took her hand gently and waited until she looked at me. “What has gone?”

“The pearls, my dear. And they looked so sweet around your neck.” She frowned. “You look so different today. The pearls must be here somewhere.” Her gaze began to dart around the room. She twitched at the covers with her free hand, her breathing coming in pants.

I patted her hand, “Janie found them. Don’t worry. Everything is fine.”

Her eyes sought my face and her breathing slowed. “She found them?”

“Yes,” I said. “They are perfectly safe.”

“Good.” She lay back down on the pillows and closed her eyes, her hand still clinging firmly to mine.

I did a lot of thinking while I waited for Mrs Dibble to return.

Chapter Thirteen

The poets and sailors are mistaken; sailing ships are not female. At sea, the ship becomes the undisputed master of its small deck-bound world. Sailors, passengers, all must attend to the ship's needs and wants before their own, even the Captain. Especially the Captain. For without the ship, you are nothing. Like a wife without a husband; a family without a father.

Despite the name, The Ocean Queen was Papa at his most capricious. In the fog and headwinds of the England Channel, the ship was Papa with gout, stuck in his armchair and barking demands and orders, the entire household scrabbling to appease him.

The trade winds brought memories of lazy summer afternoons. Of picnics and games, Papa with his shirtsleeves rolled up, his teeth white with laughter, ready to play.

Down in the Southern Ocean, I thought of Papa in one of his rare and terrible tempers. The ship rampaged through the mountainous seas looking for victims, and all anyone could do was hang on and hide.

I bided my time before confronting Miss Agnes Bittlesworth. I waited until I saw her heading up on deck for a solitary walk. She and Miss Mabel barely talked anymore. Miss Mabel spent almost all her time in the infirmary with Dr Gaspard; Miss Agnes spent her time alone.

I wrapped myself in my shawl and went after her.

"The ocean is beautiful, is it not?" I said, coming upon her as she gazed out over the railing.

She gasped and spun around, clutching her shawl to her chest. "How you startled me!" She turned back and focussed on the water. "Yes, it is nice."

In the troughs, the waves were the deepest possible blue, lightening gradually as they rose, until at the peak they turned a translucent green so clear and pure that it almost glowed. And when they broke, they were topped with snowy foam, bright as the highest mountain. More foam streamed from the bows, the gleaming white shot through with streaks of palest jade.

It wasn't nice; it was glorious.

I longed for my camera, but a black and white photograph could not do it justice – let alone the small matter of the plunging deck which would turn any image into a nondescript grey blur.

“I visited with Mrs Dibble’s mother the other day,” I said casually.

“Yes?” Miss Agnes suddenly discovered an untied bootlace and dropped to her knee. “She is crazy, you know. Quite insane. I don’t know why they brought her with them.”

“She seemed quite lucid when I saw her, except for mistaking me for you, of course. We had a very interesting discussion about your earlier visit. I wasn’t aware that you made a habit of it?”

The back of Miss Agnes’s neck flushed a miserable red. She mumbled something unintelligible.

Suddenly I tired of the game. “Look, I know it was you. You took the pearls and my jet beads, and maybe something else besides. And I don’t care. I just want to know why and I want to know about Mr Jack Larkin.”

She looked up at that. “I don’t want to talk about him. I wish I’d never met him. He’s poison.”

“I know,” I said.

“You *know*?” A spark of hope lit in her eyes. “Truly? But I saw you—”

I cut her off quickly. “That was Mr Larkin. Not me.”

She sighed. “I have fallen into a nightmare and I can’t wake myself up. I tried to tell Mabel, but she didn’t believe me. She hates me.” Miss Agnes hugged her arms across her chest and hunched over. I thought she might be crying.

“Come on, let’s walk, or we’ll freeze to death.” This conversation might be easier if we weren’t looking at each other. We linked arms and began to stagger along the heaving deck.

“I did take the pearls, and your bracelet, and Mother’s ring, but nothing else. Mr Larkin took the rest. I’m not a thief; it’s not as if they were valuable,” she said, with the casual dismissal of the truly wealthy. I refrained from commenting.

“It was a lark, you see – a dare,” she continued. “Mr Larkin had been so flattering, so attentive. He singled me out, you know. Usually people prefer Mabel. We were getting on so well and then...” She hesitated and continued in a smaller voice, “I knew it wasn’t right, but I did think it wouldn’t matter. I truly did. He said I wouldn’t dare and that we would put everything right back. I wanted to impress him.”

“So you took the pearls and slit open my bag and gave everything to Mr Larkin?”

“Yes.”

“He didn’t put them back?”

She shook her head, and the tears were falling for real now. “No. He didn’t. I begged him, and he just laughed. He said if I made a fuss, he’d tell everyone what I’d done. At first, it didn’t matter, because they were only trinkets and I didn’t think anyone would really miss them, but then...”

“Then they turned up in the Whelks’ chest of drawers.”

“And Mother got sick. If I tell the truth now, I think it would kill her. Because Mr Larkin wouldn’t back me up and it would look like I really was a thief. He would say I stole everything.”

“Does Miss Mabel know?”

Miss Agnes nodded. “She saw me coming out of the Dibbles’ cabin. I had the pearls in my hand. She won’t turn me in, but she despises me.” She clutched my arm. “I don’t understand, Miss Price. Why has he done this? To me and to Mr Whelk? Why does he hate us so much?”

“In some ways it’s worse, I don’t think he hates you. You were just a means to a goal and he doesn’t care what happens to you now.” I hesitated. I didn’t want to cause her more pain. “You did know he is engaged?”

She nodded. “Engagements can be broken, you know. Especially when the intended bride is many thousands of miles away. But this is one time when it would have been better not to try. I realise that now.” She looked into my eyes for the first time. “Do you, Miss Price?”

I broke away from her gaze. “Just one more question, Miss Bittlesworth, did he ask you to take something specific from my bag, something that wasn’t jewellery?”

She turned to me in surprise. “How did you know? He said you would have a little black book, a journal. He told me it was your diary and it would be a great joke to steal it. I didn’t have much time and there was only the one book so I took it. He was so angry when it turned out to be your new bible.” Her face paled at the memory. “He was going to throw it overboard, but I wouldn’t let him.”

I squeezed her arm reassuringly, “I’ll try and help you, Miss Bittlesworth. I may still have something that Mr Larkin wants. Maybe there is a way out of this without exposing either you or Mr Whelk.” I sighed, “But I don’t know what it is.”

We were below the coast of Africa now and running East with the wind behind us. Our speed increased to thirteen knots, then fourteen, then one day the rope snapped off

the log altogether. Mr MacDonald said we must be doing more than fifteen knots and he frowned as he said it. I lay in bed that night listening to the roar of the wind and the rush of the sea as it surged past. The ship hit the waves with a thunderous crash that made her shake and quiver and lie so far over that I thought she might never come up. In the morning, Bill just grinned and said it was only a big sea, not a storm at all. I noticed that he had secured his hat with a piece of string.

Halfway across the main deck, I realised that my morning walk was not a good idea. I lurched from handhold to handhold, clinging on as the ship rose and fell, my feet scrabbling on the wet planks. It was time to retreat. I turned and saw a wall of water rising far above my head. I lunged for the nearest rope, but before I could reach it the wave smashed into the ship. Cold grey-green sea surged over the railing and slammed into my legs. I staggered and fell. The water dragged me down the deck, rolling me over and over. I clawed at the boards beneath me, but the slippery wood offered no purchase. The railing loomed in front of me and I hit it hard. I grabbed the post with both hands as the weight of the ocean dragged at me. My fingers began to slip.

“Hold on.” Mr Larkin’s arm snaked around my waist. His fingers dug into my flesh with a comforting pain. The seconds stretched to hours before the ship righted and the wave washed empty back to the sea.

“Are you hurt?” Mr Larkin set me on my feet, but my knees were not working and I collapsed. He pulled my arm over his shoulders and half-carried me to the shelter of the cookhouse wall. There he propped me up and looked me over.

“Just bumps and bruises, I think. Nothing broken?”

My whole body was shaking. My fingers gripped the rough wool of his jacket and I couldn’t let go. “I’m f... fine.” My legs gave way and I fell against his chest. Strong arms wrapped around me, holding me up. The heat of his body soaked into me. I relaxed into him and the shaking eased. I was safe.

“Thank you,” I whispered into his coat.

“You’re welcome,” Mr Larkin said. I felt his breath stir my hair. “Can you promise me no more of these strolls? I don’t want to lose you quite yet.”

I could hear voices over the roar of the waves. Loud and agitated and coming closer. I pushed back out of Mr Larkin’s arms, and he let me go.

“How did you catch me in time?”

“I was watching you. I’m always watching you. Like I said, I can’t afford to lose you yet.”

Bill and Mr MacDonald rounded the corner of the cookhouse.

“Miss Price,” Bill gasped. “I thought you were a goner. Thank goodness for Mr Larkin. He sprung up out of nowhere. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I said, taking Mr MacDonald’s arm. “Just a bit shaken.”

I wasn’t the only one to have a misadventure. People were getting injured all the time: falling down the ladders, slipping on the deck. There were broken heads and bruised tailbones and bumps every imaginable place in between. I worried for Mary and Miss Mabel as they trotted back and forth to the infirmary.

The temperature plummeted. Even in the saloon, it was only a few degrees above freezing. And on deck, our breath gathered in icy clouds.

I wore my Macintosh and galoshes like a second skin. The waves were now coming right over the sides, so venturing on deck was a wet business. My Macintosh was all-enveloping, a personal rubbery tent, but even that couldn’t prevent the occasional dousing from an unexpected wave surging up from underneath. The sailors wore waterproof leggings under their coats, and I coveted them.

After many days of sailing alone, there was great excitement when the First Mate spotted a sail on the horizon. She was too far away to hail, but not too far to race. All the passengers and crew crowded onto the deck, grateful for another sign of humanity. The spirit of competition set in and at the crew’s urging, Mr MacDonald took over the helm. Even the Captain came on deck to cheer. Over the next few hours we steadily gained on them.

“We have them!” Captain Dennison shouted, his words ripped away by the rising wind. “Another hour or so, and we’ll be alongside.”

Mr MacDonald wrestled with the great wheel. I could see the muscles standing out on his neck. He cast a worried glance at the sails, tight and humming with strain. “The wind’s getting too strong, Captain. We need to take down the sails. I can barely hold the course as it is.”

Captain Dennison shook his head. “We can beat them.”

“Better we lose the race than lose the ship, Sir.” Mr MacDonald gestured behind us. “Look at what’s coming.”

All across the Western horizon, clouds bulged against the sky, dark as a day-old bruise and overlaid with a tinge of sullen yellow.

The Captain nodded. “Right as always, Mr MacDonald. Get those sails down now.”

“All hands on deck,” the First Mate bellowed. “All passengers get below. Now!”

Dinner consisted of ship's biscuits in our bunks. I wedged myself in with all the padding I could find and Charlie for company, and waited for the storm to be over. There was no possibility of sleep that night. The wind was an unappeasable monster, howling a dirge in the rigging. Wave after wave crashed over the ship, raining down on the poop deck above me, surging over the portholes, probing for weaknesses with icy fingers. Sometimes the sea slammed into the ship so hard that she seemed to freeze, completely paralyzed for several moments and I would hold my breath, waiting for her to break apart.

I lay curled in my warm, dry bunk and prayed for the sailors out in the storm. Every time a wave thundered across the deck above, I wondered if it had carried a man with it. Every time the ship slammed on her side, before lurching upright with a jerk, I wondered who might be dangling from the rigging, about to be swallowed whole by the raging sea. Finally I must have fallen asleep. I woke to Charlie's wet tongue washing my face, and silence.

Barely pausing to throw on some clothes, I rushed on deck to discover the damage. The mizzen royal sail was missing, and there was an empty space where the hen coop used to be, but all the sailors were safe. I sent up a prayer of thanks, while Charlie nosed forlornly around the broken stumps that were all that remained of the hen coop. While I stood there, shivering in the early morning light, there was a cry from the forecastle.

"Iceberg off the starboard bow!"

I hung over the railing and there it was, several miles off, a crystal castle in glittering greens and blues. I couldn't look away as we glided past. Never had danger been more silent or more beautiful.

"Captain, more off the port bow."

A host of smaller fragments bobbed beside us, much closer this time, a mile away at the most. I felt a prickle of fear as I remembered the wild force of last night's storm, driving the ship wherever it would. I scanned the horizon for the other ship, the one we had been racing.

"I don't reckon they made it," Bill said, coming up behind me and shading his eyes as he joined my search. "Last we saw, they were still under full sail. There wasn't time to take it down. We had a tricky time of it ourselves. Good thing we've got Mr MacDonald. He don't let himself get carried away, unlike some others." He cast a scowling glance at the Captain.

By the second month of our journey, everyone was heartily sick of each other's company. Before boarding I had heard tales of shipboard life, the concerts and parties, at homes and fancy teas. Some ships even boasted an onboard newspaper. Ours was not one of those ships.

The measles and scarlet fever epidemics had taken their toll on the entire boat. There were two more deaths: another infant and an adult, a woman in her twenties who was travelling alone. Annie said the woman had coughed every night, since we first sailed. Their burials were delayed a day and a night until the shark that was trailing the ship lost interest and disappeared.

Eleven weeks in, Mary lost the battle to keep Mr Whelk confined to his bed. As luck would have it, Mrs Bittlesworth entered the saloon just as he was seating himself at the table. She took one look at him and opened her mouth, "What is that man doing here?"

Agnes gave her a sharp jab in the ribs and nodded to Mary, who, as I had expected, had been doing without sleep to fit in nursing Mrs Bittlesworth without spending a minute less at the infirmary.

For a moment, Mrs Bittlesworth looked uncertain, an expression at odds with her natural arrogance. Mary faced her with a stony glare.

"Perhaps I'm not as well as I thought," Mrs Bittlesworth said, after a pause. "I think I'll eat in my room after all."

As the door closed after her, Mr Whelk turned to face his wife, a manoeuvre made difficult by the pile of shawls and blankets she had heaped on top of him.

"Mary, my dearest, what was that all about? And don't you say 'nothing'"

"But it is nothing, my love," she replied. "Mrs Bittlesworth has been a trifle out of sorts lately. I dare say it is her stomach playing up again."

At the other end of the table, Mrs Butler stood up and clutched her needlework to her chest like a plate of armour. "*I won't be silenced,*" she declared in a thin high voice. Everyone in the room stared. I couldn't remember ever hearing her speak louder than a murmur. "Mrs Bittlesworth is absolutely right. I refuse to share a table with a thief!" She glared at Mr Whelk, a white rabbit confronting a fox.

"A thief?" Mr Whelk looked up and down the table, as if to confirm that she was addressing him.

She gulped, “Yes, sir, a thief!” Then her nerve gave way and she scurried into her cabin, leaving a trail of silks, needles and scissors scattered behind her.

“A thief?” Mr Whelk roared. “Come back here, woman, and explain yourself.”

Mr Butler rose. “I’ll thank you not to talk to my wife like that, sir. A thief is indeed what you are, as the courts shall prove,” he said, before deciding that discretion was the better part of valour. “I must comfort her.” He scooted out of the saloon before Mr Whelk could respond.

Mr Whelk’s head swelled like an enraged turkey, his cheeks and bald pate turned an angry shade of vermillion and his white whiskers stood out in stiff bristles all around his chin. At any moment, his head would leave his shoulders and float up to bob against the skylight.

“A thief?” he roared again. “Where’s the Captain? I’ll put up with your petty slights and your snubs; I don’t care if you ignore me and keep your blithering conversation to yourselves, but I will not be called a thief. I demand satisfaction.”

I stood frozen. I didn’t know what to do. I was afraid that if I so much as touched him, he might explode. Luckily Mary had no such qualms.

“This is exactly why I didn’t tell you,” she exclaimed. “You always kick up such a fuss. Now you just calm right down and I’ll explain everything.” She collapsed into a chair beside him and added in a small pained voice, that caught his attention like no amount of yelling would have done, “Thaddeus, my dear, we are in such a pickle.”

I left her to explain, retreating to my cabin. I couldn’t stand seeing the face of such a sweet and noble man when his wife told him why the entire ship believed him to be a common thief. I had to find a way to prove him innocent, and the best way to do that was to find Mr Larkin’s brother. Armed with the knowledge that only he had, perhaps I could save both Agnes and Mr Whelk.

Chapter Fourteen

My fondness for my family increased with every mile I travelled. Elvira's overbearing bossiness, George's disregard for anything that did not suit his convenience, all faded with distance into endearing quirks. My writing desk was full of letters I had written, all saying nothing of importance. For Elvira, I described the passengers, their clothes and lineage; for George, the shark Mr MacDonald harpooned and how many hours he took to land it. I would post them as soon as we reached Auckland, although I could not expect a reply for six months or more.

I did not write of the unfamiliar constellations, the fascinating variety of sea-life, or the intricacies of celestial navigation. I did not tell of my fierce wind-lashed delight in the storms nor of the way my soul expanded in the quiet dawn light. I did not mention the peace of solitude or the joy of discovery.

Nor did I mention Mr Larkin.

"How long are we expected to stay here?" Mrs Bittlesworth's gaze swept over the island in disbelief before returning to Captain Dennison.

The Captain sighed. "As I have told you, ma'am, we are in quarantine. We must remain here until the health inspectors say the danger of infection is over."

The words were short and sharp. He bit off the letters as though he wanted to say something else entirely. A muscle twitched in his jaw and he scanned the lower deck for escape. When a sailor lost his grip on a rope and sent a load of boxes crashing back down into the hold, the Captain was moving almost before the noise reached us.

"If you'll excuse me," he said, over his shoulder, "I must attend to the cargo."

"My daughters and I are not sick," Mrs Bittlesworth complained to the group at large. "Surely we can go on. Let the invalids stay here."

No one bothered to respond.

After more than three months of sea and sky stretching unbroken to the edges of the world, the land tugged at my gaze. Islands and headlands surrounded us, cutting off the horizon with their unexpected solidity.

The day didn't match the joy of arrival, but even topped by grey clouds and edged by white-capped waves, the island in front of us was beautiful. The ship was moored in the arms of a welcoming bay. Ahead was a curve of golden sand, fringed with unfamiliar trees. Dark grey-green leaves were topped with a multitude of crimson blossoms; the joyful colour an almost painful contrast to the muted blue-green palette of

the voyage. Behind the trees, the ground rose in a gentle grass-covered slope. The headland closest to us held a number of low wooden buildings: the quarantine station, our home for the next few weeks.

“I shall complain to the Governer,” Mrs Bittlesworth said. “He was a friend of my late husband, you know.”

Small boats bobbed around the ship. Sailors were manhandling the cargo out of the hold and down into the waiting hands, ready for transport to shore. The choppy waves made the job difficult and several packages ended up floating in the water. A sudden gust of wind caught several of the boaters unawares. Boats rocked wildly and more than a few men sat down with a thump.

“Wind’s picking up,” Mr MacDonald announced on his way past. “You might want to wait in your cabins.”

A splatter of rain backed up his words and sent Mrs Bittlesworth hurrying for the salon, pulling Miss Agnes and Miss Mabel in her wake.

“I’d better get back to Thaddeus,” Mary said. “He’ll want a full report. He was so looking forward to this – the first landfall.” She pursed her lips and turned away, but not before I saw the sheen of tears in her eyes. “And instead he’s confined to his cabin like a common guttersnipe!” She brushed at her cheeks as she went down the hatch.

I bowed my head against the railing. Mary didn’t realise it, but Mr Whelk was lucky he wasn’t in the brig. Only Mr MacDonald’s intervention had prevented the Captain from giving in to Mrs Bittlesworth’s demands.

Another splatter, harder this time. Rain swept across the water, shutting out the land beyond. The splatters became a drumming and the poop deck emptied. Even the steerage passengers made a rush for the hatches. The feathers on Annie’s best hat bobbed as she ran. I had tried to persuade her to save it for our arrival in Auckland and her reunion with her sister, but she had a very strong sense of occasion. I hoped the feathers weren’t past saving.

I stayed where I was. I felt as though I couldn’t stand another moment aboard the ship. I longed to feel the grass, smell the earth. My possessions were boxed and stacked and ready to go. There was nothing more I could do, and I refused to listen to Mrs Bittlesworth’s complaints yet again.

Someone tapped my shoulder. I turned to find a stranger grinning at me and my heart leapt in my chest. After so long in the same company, an unknown face was as shocking as a mask. The man was big and beefy, with a sweaty sunburned face and

work-worn hands almost twice the size of mine, but his smile was a child's smile – sweet and uncomplicated.

“Do you want to go ashore, lady?” The high voice was odd coming from that big frame.

I smiled at him, “Very much, but I'll have to wait. It will be hours before they are finished with the unloading.”

He shook his head in long slow sweeps. “The man has a boat for you. Jimmy, he said. That's me. Tell the pretty lady in the black dress, he said. That's you. ”

“What man?”

Jimmy pulled me over to the side of the boat and pointed, “There, see?”

A small wooden boat banged against the side of the ship. Bill was seated at the oars, holding on to a rope ladder, his multi-coloured hat hiding his face from the rain.

“He said, hurry. He said, don't tell anyone or...” his round open face creased with the effort of remembering. “Or they'll all want to come!”

I laughed, thinking of Mrs Bittlesworth, “Quite right!” I picked up my knitting bag and pointed to the small box on the deck. “Can you manage that?” This time I wasn't going to let my camera equipment out of my sight.

Jimmy nodded. “I'm strong.” He pulled back his sleeve and flexed his biceps in demonstration.

My new friend clambered down the rope ladder with surprisingly agility, even with my box tucked under one arm. I peered over the rail to watch him and began to have second thoughts. The boat was a long way down. And it rocked. With every wave, a gap opened up, giving me a glimpse of cold grey water before the boat thumped back against the wall of the ship. In and out, in and out; it made me dizzy.

A big moon face smiled up at me. “Come on, lady.”

The rope ladder slapped wetly against the ship. The rain began to fall harder, drumming against the deck. Perhaps I should wait for the gangway.

No, Papa would have done this.

“Don't look up,” I told the men below.

I swung my leg over the rail and felt for the slippery rungs. Of course, Papa would not have been wearing a dress.

At the bottom of the ladder, I stopped. How was I going to step into the moving boat? The thought had barely entered my head when a huge pair of hands grabbed my

waist and plucked me off the ladder like a ripe fruit. I was deposited in the bow in a tangle of skirts and petticoats.

“Bye, lady.” The boat lurched and dipped as a heavy weight was removed, but my hat had fallen over my eyes and I couldn’t see a thing.

By the time I had myself put to rights we were twenty feet from the ship. Jimmy waved to me from the top of the ladder. The short choppy waves slapped against the bow and a shower of spray hit my face with every stroke of the oars. Behind us, the *Ocean Queen* loomed out of the thickening gloom like a surfacing whale; she made our little boat look like a bathtub.

Bill was pulling hard at the oars. We were hundred feet from the ship now. I waved, glad I hadn’t waited, glad that my first footsteps in a new world would be alone and silent, not surrounded by meaningless jabber.

I suddenly realised that no one had seen me go. Mary would worry. Annie would probably decide I had fallen overboard. I waved harder, trying to attract someone’s notice, hoping that they would at least tell the Captain where I was, but the driving rain had sent all the passengers inside, and the sailors were busy. The only creature who noticed was Charlie, sitting on the roof of the pig pen.

“Stop that, you’ll tip us over.”

I froze. Slowly I turned around to gaze at the man at the oars. Bill’s familiar hat tipped back, and I finally got a glimpse of the face underneath. It wasn’t Bill.

“Mr Larkin?” My heart was beating fast and I had to clench the gunwale to stay upright. “Where’s Bill? What have you done with him?”

Mr Larkin took up the oars again and didn’t answer.

“Help!” I shouted. “Somebody help me!” I began to wave my arms frantically.

Mr Larkin turned around with a curse and grabbed my wrist. The boat rocked and water sloshed in over the side.

“You little fool, do you want to drown? You’ll sink like a stone in that dress. I couldn’t save you even if I wanted to.”

It was then I realised that we were not heading to the beach. We were not landing. We were almost around the headland and out of sight.

“Help!” I screamed into the wind with renewed vigour.

“No one will hear you.”

He was wrong, Charlie heard. He stood up; his tail did a couple of slow, uncertain wags.

“Charlie, help!”

I hoped he would raise the alarm, bark and howl and whine until everyone rushed to find out what the matter was. Not Charlie. He launched himself off the pig pen and over the rail. A great splash rose up from where he hit the water and I held my breath as I waited for him to surface. It was a long way down...

There! A small black shape split the waves, plowing towards me in a determined dog-paddle. He was a strong swimmer, and had gained on us considerably by the time we rounded the headland and lost sight of him.

"Wait for him," I begged.

Mr Larkin didn't look at me, but he did ship the oars. For a moment I thought he was answering my request, but then I realised he was merely readying the boat to sail. With this wind, we would be far away before anyone even realised that I was missing.

"What do you want with me? Why are you taking me? Mr Larkin, please... I want to go back."

"I think, under the circumstances, you can call me Jack," he said, untangling the sail. "Mr Larkin seems so formal now that we are eloping."

"Eloping!" My jaw dropped open as I drew in a shocked breath. "No one will believe that!"

"Sweetheart, you don't know how many nights I have sat up with the Captain, pouring out my tale of our forbidden love. I fear our Captain Dennison was also thwarted in love; my account of your parents' disapproval struck a chord. When I told him that you were to be forced into the arms of another as soon as we arrived, he was positively eager to assist in our escape."

"No." All my disbelief was contained in that one syllable. "What about your fiancée?"

"The dear Captain doesn't know that she exists."

"And does she? Or is she just another lie?"

"She's real enough. And rich enough, and the reason I'm here at the ends of the earth chasing after my double-crossing brother. She will never find out about this."

"This is an abduction, not an elopement."

He shrugged. "What else will people think when you disappear with a man?"

"I thought you were Bill!"

"No one will know that, not even Jimmy. He, simple soul that he is, will say that you got into the boat of your own free will, happily even. That you waved goodbye."

I growled with frustration as I sought the words to counter his argument. He was right. I had got into the boat of my own accord. I had smiled at Jimmy as we left, full of

the delight of my secret escape. If I didn't get back soon, if we were away overnight... Well, society might consider marriage to be the only solution, but I did not. Besides, Mr Larkin had a prior commitment.

With the oars unmanned, the waves were pushing us closer to the rocky shoreline. Mr Larkin was busy with the ropes. I sized up the distance – maybe twenty feet? I couldn't swim, but I felt sure I understood the principles. Without giving myself time to reconsider, I stood up, sucked in a deep breath and leapt over the side.

The water engulfed me. My head went under and I couldn't see. My skirts tangled around my legs, heavy as armour. I kicked frantically, beating at the dead weight. My arms flailed as I broke the surface. I gasped – a single quick breath, half air, half water. The salt burned my throat and I choked. More water poured into my mouth and I slipped under again. A desperate kick and I struggled up, tilting my head back to get my face above water. A ring of fire tightened around my chest. I lunged upwards and gulped. Down again, deeper and deeper. My hair wrapped around my eyes like seaweed; the silver-bright light of the surface glowed high above me. I thrashed again and again against my confining skirts, but my lungs were exploding in my chest and I knew it was too far.

My arm jerked upwards. The cuff cut into my wrist as I dangled, suspended in the dim green. I stopped struggling and just floated. Slowly, I began to move, upwards towards the light. I felt calm, almost peaceful.

Water broke over my head and the peace vanished as my body took over. I sucked in huge sobbing breaths. Charlie swam beside me, my sleeve still clenched between his teeth.

“Grab this.”

Something hard struck me between the shoulder blades: an oar. I clung to it. Nothing had ever felt more wonderfully solid. Mr Larkin hauled me into the boat, dumping me on the bottom in a sodden puddle. I lay where I had fallen, unable to do anything but gasp. And vomit. A sudden spasm brought up a stomach-full of seawater.

Mr Larkin swore and grabbed my shoulders, pulling me up until my head was over the side of the boat. I retched again and again, until the water inside me was just a memory. My eyes hurt. My throat ached. My chest burned.

An urgent bark pierced the fog in my brain. I pushed my sodden hair back from my face and peered through the rain.

Charlie was swimming beside the boat. His head was barely above the water. He barked again.

“Pull him in.” My voice was harsh and rough in my raw throat. I could hardly speak.

“No”

I reached over the side, grabbed Charlie’s dense coat and pulled. Charlie yelped and I ended up back in the bottom of the boat with two handfuls of black fur. A waterlogged dog is heavier than lead. I coughed out some more water and tried again.

By leaning right out of the boat, I managed to get my arms under Charlie’s front legs. I tried to straighten up and found myself slipping.

“Help me!”

“Oh, for God’s sake.” Rough hands seized the back of my dress and heaved. The sea didn’t want to let Charlie go; it clung to him like glue. Mr Larkin pulled harder. Charlie popped out of the water like a cork. We all tumbled backwards, Charlie on top of me and both of us on Mr Larkin.

“Get off me!”

I tried to comply, but Charlie was delighted to be rescued and insisted on licking every piece of bare skin he could find. Nose, hands, ears – he didn’t care. It wasn’t until he stood up and I was released from one hundred pounds of waterlogged dog that I could finally move. Then I realised what he was about to do.

“No, Charlie!”

Charlie shook. The boat rocked wildly. Water, seaweed and drool sprayed in all directions. I managed to cover my face just in time. Poor Mr Larkin, still wheezing in the bottom of the boat was not so quick.

A great ribbon of saliva decorated the front of what had once been an extremely stylish waistcoat, rubbery fronds of kelp dangled from his ear and a truly hideous scowl marred his handsome features. He lunged at Charlie.

“I’ll throw you back, you miserable mongrel.”

The dog crouched and barked enthusiastically, always ready to play. Mr Larkin grabbed Charlie round the middle and attempted to throw him over the side. Charlie wriggled and squirmed until he had tipped into a handstand, his paws on the bottom of boat and his tail lashing Mr Larkin’s unprotected head. Powerful hind legs pushed against his captor’s shoulders. Mr Larkin staggered back, tripped against the gunwhale and splashed into the sea. Charlie whipped around and barked appreciatively.

“I should sail away and leave you here,” I told him, when his head emerged, spitting water.

“You don’t know how.” But he swam to the boat with quick strokes and hauled himself aboard. The dunking seemed to have washed away his temper along with the grime.

“So tell me, Jack,” I said. Dishevelled and dripping wet, sitting in a puddle of slimy water, he could not possibly be addressed as Mr Larkin. “Do all your elopements begin this way?”

Chapter Fifteen

Elvira had given me much advice on reputations and respectability. While courting, she and Albert were such models of propriety that they never had a single moment by themselves, let alone a private conversation.

“Anything Albert has to tell me could be said in front of the Bishop himself,” Elvira had frequently declared. And having been the unwilling recipient of many of Albert’s exchanges, I knew this to be true, provided the Bishop didn’t mind being bored to mindless desperation.

Loss of reputation, Elvira told me, would leave me a spinster. Unfortunately for Elvira, all my heroines were spinsters. Marianne North and Harriet Martineau never married. Isabella Bird did so reluctantly and late. Husbands and adventure did not seem to go together and of the two, I was beginning to realise which one I preferred.

Jack stared at me for a few moments.

“No,” he said, at last. “This is the first one.”

First elopement? Or first one where the intended bride almost drowned? I decided not to ask.

“What do you really want?” I already knew, but I still had hopes that the longer I delayed perhaps someone would come to my rescue.

“Don’t be stupid. You know exactly what I want,” Jack said. “My brother.”

“Why should I help you?”

Suddenly there was a knife in his hand. I hadn’t seen him pull it out. Even on this sullen grey day, light gleamed along the blade.

“You wouldn’t hurt me.” I couldn’t stop a question creeping into those words.

“Not you, not yet. I still need you.”

Before I could react, he was across the boat and behind me. One tug and Charlie’s head was taut over his arm, the knife resting on the dog’s throat.

“I don’t need the mongrel,” he whispered in my ear.

My whole body went stiff and still. The breath died in my throat as I looked at him out of the very corner of my eyes, not daring to turn my head.

“Please, don’t...”

“Do we have a deal?” The knife moved deeper into the thick black fur. The dog yelped and bucked, his claws raked my legs in a desperate struggle to be free.

“I’ll do it.” I nodded frantically.

“Good.”

The knife disappeared, Charlie collapsed back into my lap and Jack settled himself back at the tiller.

“So where is he?”

“A place called Whale Island,” I said, feeling Charlie’s neck to make sure he wasn’t hurt. My fingers came up smeared with red, but the cut seemed to be small. Charlie cuddled close, trying to fit himself onto my lap. I hugged his warm wet body close. He was trembling. “Somewhere out near Great Barrier Island.”

Jack’s head came up. “So close?”

There was no time for anytime else. An unexpected squall hit us broadside, tipping the boat right over and making Jack lose his grip on the tiller. While we had been acting out our drama, the weather had closed in. Driving rain closed the world down to a misty grey sphere. Jack pulled in the sail and clenched the tiller, forcing the boat away from the rocks. The muscles stood out on his forearms and his face was grim.

Charlie and I huddled together for warmth and comfort. We watched Jack sail into the storm. I wondered if he was a good sailor. If he wasn’t, I would find out soon enough. I wondered if my camera equipment would survive the drenching, but there was nothing I could do about that either.

Some miserable time later, the wind slackened. The waves no longer thudded against the hull of the boat. The lull penetrated my half-doze, head resting on Charlie’s wide back. We had slipped into the shelter of a long narrow bay, an inlet. On one side a steep cliff rose into the gloom, on the other, small twisted trees struggled to find purchase on the rocky shore. There was nowhere to land.

“Where are we?”

“I’ve no idea,” Jack said. “But it’s sheltered, and that’s good enough for me.”

A frown creased his forehead as he studied the shoreline. “I hope there’s a beach up here.”

I hoped there was too. I was cold and wet and despite my intermittent attempts at bailing, there was a good two inches of water sloshing around in the bottom of the boat. I did not want to spend the night aboard. Besides, as I had already discovered, it is difficult to escape from a boat when you can’t swim. Perhaps I would have better luck on land.

“There.” Jack couldn’t hide the relief in his voice as we rounded a corner and a sloping beach came into view. It wasn’t much of a beach, being more mud than sand, but it was backed by a gentle grassy slope. There were even a couple of trees to keep the

rain off. And with that thought, the rain began to ease. Within moments, there was a break in the clouds and a patch of blue sky showed through.

“About bloody time,” Jack muttered. He ran the boat up onto the ground and hopped out. He leaned on the front of the boat, his head bowed wearily.

Finally he said, “Get out. Both of you.”

I pushed Charlie off my lap. He paused with his paws on the side of the boat, looking down at the water. His last experience of jumping overboard had made him wary.

“It’s only six inches deep, you stupid mutt.” Jack reached out to grab Charlie’s collar, but a low warning growl made him back away.

“It’s all right, Charlie... see?”

I levered myself over the side, only to find that my legs, trapped for hours beneath Charlie’s heavy body, had gone to sleep. I collapsed backwards with a splash. Charlie leapt off the boat in fright and bounded up onto dry land.

“I assume that was all part of some brilliant plan to reassure the dog,” said Jack. He grabbed the bow and hauled. The boat moved an inch up the sand. He tried again.

“Right, get behind and push.”

“Push?” I wasn’t sure that I had heard correctly.

“Yes, push – unless you want to be stuck on this island forever when the tide comes in and the boat floats away.”

Ripples dragged at my skirts as I trudged around to the stern and leant my weight against the boat.

“Now!” Jack said, and I heaved. My feet sank into the gelatinous muck and the boat suddenly lurched forward.

“Again,” Jack said.

By the time the boat was secure, I was filthy, exhausted and missing a shoe. Charlie found it for me. He dropped it at my feet – a misshapen present, full of mud and hermit crabs.

We set up camp under a stand of spreading gray-green trees. Beneath the wide sheltering branches, the ground was almost dry. Crimson blossoms carpeted the ground and I examined one curiously. It was like nothing I had ever seen before. There were no real petals, just long narrow fronds tipped with golden pollen. I brushed it against my cheek. It left a damp silky trail across my skin.

“What kind of tree is this?”

Jack didn't look up. "Don't know."

I tucked the flower away in my pocket. Someone, somewhere, would know.

"I'll get some firewood. The food's in here." Jack dumped a wooden box at my feet, and disappeared into the trees.

I was alone. The boat lay on the beach, the sail waving in gentle invitation.

A sickness settled in my heart. It was too late. The shadows of the trees had already stretched across the sand and engulfed the hull. Even if I managed to drag the boat down to the water, even if I could manage the sail and the tiller without capsizing or running aground, it would soon be dark.

One night together and, in the eyes of the world, this pretend elopement would be a reality. When no marriage eventuated, and Jack Larkin went on his merry way, what would I be left with?

"Travel," I told myself, sternly. "Photography." If my reputation was ruined, I would simply have to go where I didn't have one. I dropped to my knees and began to check my equipment.

"What are you doing? Where's the dinner?"

Startled, I dropped the lens cap I was holding and it rolled down the slope.

"Look what you made me do. If that gets sand in it, it could scratch the lens." I scrambled after the cap and examined it carefully, blowing across the surface before wiping it with my silk cleaning cloth. "I think it will be all right. Everything has survived extremely well. The only damage is a slight dampness on the bottom of one of the boxes of plates, but I think it will only affect one or two of the plates. George laughed, but triple layers of waterproofing were a good idea."

"What," Jack said, dropping an armful of firewood with a crash, "about my dinner?"

I fastened the lens cap back on to the camera and returned it to its coverings. "If you wanted a cook, you should have kidnapped one."

Our dinner that night consisted of dried beef, and an unfamiliar white shellfish boiled to the texture of gritty rubber. We chewed in silence.

Jack had come prepared for camping. A mysterious oil-skin bundle in the bottom of the boat proved to be a tent – just the one. While Jack checked the boat for the last time, Charlie and I went to bed.

Despite Elivira's best intentions, I was not entirely ignorant of the ways of men and women. When I was younger we had had a maidservant who was extremely pretty.

I had followed her whispered tales of amorous adventure with great interest and had been most disappointed when Elvira had dismissed her. George, it seemed, had been interested in her affairs in a rather more personal way.

If Charlie himself was not an adequate deterrent, perhaps his pungent smell would be. In the confined space, it was almost overpowering.

Footsteps approached the tent. Charlie growled, low and menacing, and the footsteps stopped.

“Your blankets are by the fire,” I called.

There was a long pause before Jack turned away.

“Don’t bother trying to escape,” he said. “I’m a very light sleeper.”

“Breakfast.” Papa’s journal and a soggy ship’s biscuit were flung into the tent. Charlie pounced before I was fully awake and the biscuit was gone. Cold misty air seeped in through the open tent flap. Outside everything seemed suspiciously grey.

“What time is it?” I put my hand to my hair. I had braided it before I slept, but it had escaped overnight and now had the consistency of felted wool.

Jack pulled a watch from his waistcoat pocket. He shook it a couple of times. “Don’t know. Come on, I want to get an early start.” He handed me another biscuit.

“How did you know I had this?” I asked, waving the journal. “I assume you didn’t follow me all the way to New Zealand on a whim.”

Jack took out an envelope. It looked vaguely familiar. I looked closer.

“That’s my letter to Elvira! The one I gave to George before we left. You stole it!” I thought of Mr Whelk and the missing Mr Harris and my heart skipped a beat. “What about George? Did you hurt him?”

“Hurt him?” Jack gave a contemptuous snort. “What for? I bumped into him outside your house, saw the letter and offered to deliver it for him. George having far better things to do than be your messenger boy, the offer was gratefully received.”

“You didn’t sail because of a letter from your brother, did you? You read my letter. And then decided not to deliver it at all.”

“Of course,” Jack agreed.

“I suppose I told Elvira about the journal.”

“You did indeed, which didn’t leave me much time. Less than a day to organise a trip around the world.”

“How did you *know* that Papa had written about your brother?”

Jack smiled. It made me shiver. “I see you haven’t read about your father’s adventures in San Francisco. We shared a very convivial evening when he delivered Ned’s letter. He told me all about his travels. Said he was thinking of writing his memoirs and how he wrote everything down so he wouldn’t forget. The *one* thing he didn’t mention was that he wrote in code. Now show me where to go.” He unrolled a large chart on the sand.

I stared at his hand. His middle finger held a ring that hadn’t been there on board ship, a large triangle of beaten gold with a carved bloodstone lion in the centre. It was very distinctive and very familiar. I had last seen it adorning the hand of Captain Dennison.

“Where is the island? Read the journal.”

“I don’t know.”

Jack looked up, and the smile dropped away. “You don’t know?” he repeated softly.

I swallowed. “Papa doesn’t write that way. He doesn’t give directions, nothing concrete anyway. No latitude or longitude, no distances. It’s all a little more... observational. I won’t know if we are going the right way until I see it.”

On a clear day, it’s hard to get lost in the Hauraki Gulf. The dark bulk of Rangitoto Island looms out of the sparkling water, its slope-shouldered cone menacing and unmistakable. Unfortunately, it wasn’t a clear day.

“We are here,” I told Jack. “Look at the shape of those headlands.”

“No, we’re here.” He let go of the sail to point to the chart. “I was sailing the boat yesterday, I know where I was going.”

“Well, you’re wrong. We passed that cluster of rocks, a few minutes before we entered the inlet. Of course, they didn’t look exactly like that – this isn’t a very good chart. Where did you get it?”

“Captain Dennison.”

“He gave it to you?”

Jack didn’t bother to answer.

“You should have stolen one from Mr MacDonald. His are much more accurate. And north is that way. You are heading north-east.”

Jack snarled something I chose not to hear, but he changed course.

The day passed slowly. Papa's description of the route was detailed and descriptive, but a trifle poetic. We searched in vain for *a hillside gilded by Midas' golden touch*.

"It's no use, he could be talking about anything," Jack said. "Sunshine, flowers... even pumpkins. What's the next bit?"

"Something about Lot's wife, I think."

Jack growled in frustration. "You're making this up. We're sailing round in circles." His hand strayed to his boot and I saw a glint of steel.

"No, no, look. I see it. The white column of rock up there. Remember, Lot's wife was turned to a pillar of salt. We're on the right track."

The knife slid back into its sheath. I filed the information away for future use.

The light was starting to dim by the time we finally saw the island. It floated in the mist like the whale it was named for. It seemed to be lying on a blanket of lace. As we got closer, I realised that it was spray.

"Perhaps we should find somewhere to spend the night and come back in the morning," I said, "when the light is better. Is your brother a better sailor than you?"

"My brother is a better man all round," Jack said.

"What about the murder?"

"I exaggerated, Miss Price. He was just an accomplice. But on the run, none-the-less. Remind me again what we are looking for."

An accomplice. Which meant someone else had done the killing.

I pushed the thought away and looked down at Papa's journal. The words were fading into the page and I had to bring the book close to my face. "...*a large, almost circular boulder with a twisted tree behind it. The tree made a striking landmark, with its pale trunk and dark tangled branches blown sideways, like hair in the wind....* and the tree and boulder have to be lined up. What did your brother do to you?"

"He stole something of mine. There! That must be the tree."

For once, Papa's description was entirely accurate. The white trunk gleamed in the dusk and the branches flew out behind it.

"And there's the boulder."

Jack furled the sail and took out the oars. "You'll have to steer."

I took one look over his shoulder and began to unlace my boots. When we tipped out, I wanted as little as possible dragging me down.

"Your confidence touches me," Jack said when he saw what I was doing. "Just keep us straight."

I locked my gaze onto to the boulder and the tree and seized the tiller with sweaty, slippery palms. I didn't look at the rocks. The waves caught the boat, picking it up and throwing it forward, faster and faster. The tiller bucked and twisted in my hands as the sea tried to take control. Splinters of wood dug into my palms, but I gripped the tiller harder. I could feel the rocks looming on either side, close as death.

The boat started to turn, to slip side-on to the waves. Jack put out an oar to turn us back. He grunted with effort, straining to stop it being ripped from his grasp. A crack like an explosion sent him tumbling backwards, the end of the oar broken away.

The side of the boat scraped against the rocks. A horrible grinding sound. I imagined the wood being scoured away, getting thinner and thinner. My skin prickled as I waited for the cold water to come pouring in. There was nothing I could do except cling to the tiller and pray.

And then we were through. The rocks opened up. The waves spread out and slowed down. I closed my eyes and thanked the Lord.

"We made it," Jack said. His face was dripping with sweat and spray.

We drifted around an outcrop of rocks, and there, hidden away in the curve of the land, was a sweep of sand, a rickety jetty and a path leading up into the trees. But no boat.

"What if he's not here anymore," I said. I had never considered that possibility.

Jack pointed up to the ridge. A thin plume of smoke rose above the branches.

"Someone is," he said.

Chapter Sixteen

These are the necessities for travel: stout shoes, a warm cloak, and information. In preparation for my journey, I scoured the proceedings of the Royal Society for every mention of New Zealand. I read Mr Buller on birdlife and Mr Haast on geology. I visited the British Museum, examined the skeleton of the moa bird and marvelled at its size. Sadly, size was no protection and skeletons were all that were left. I discovered a Maori-English phrasebook in a London bookseller's, a moment of great triumph.

By the date of my departure, I had accumulated three journals of notes, several books and a map. Elvira contributed the shoes and cloak, and two trunks of assorted clothing besides. I felt I was as well prepared for an unknown land as I could be.

I was wrong.

The old man was sitting at the table with his back to us. He knew we were there; the birds had seen to that. The clearing outside the cabin was full of birds: birds in cages, birds on perches, birds running loose. Our arrival had set off a chorus of raucous shrieks and caws that must have alerted the whole island. And that was before Charlie had joined in. He was still outside, in pursuit of some speckled brown birds that had run off into the bushes squawking with alarm. Charlie had chased them in the mistaken belief that they were chickens.

"You're back early. Didn't you find anything?" The old man's voice was thin and querulous. I tried to remember his name...Thomas, that was it.

"Told you you'd find nothing," the old man continued with a cackle. "Not everything's book-learning, Ned, me lad. Well, cat got your tongue? Or don't want to admit you were wrong." He finally turned to look at us.

I sucked in a sharp breath. The milky bloom of cataract spread across each eye. Old Thomas was enclosed in his own personal fog.

Jack stiffened. I could see the thought crossing his mind, *he could be Ned*. He waited a moment too long and the old man frowned.

"Who are you? This is private property."

Jack came in and shut the door behind him. The edges of the room disappeared into darkness. Old Thomas put out a hand and felt for the chair as if his balance had vanished with the light.

"Who are you?" he said again, and this time his voice shook.

“Friends,” said Jack, advancing into the room. “We’re looking for Ned.” He stopped in front of the old man, a fraction too close for comfort. Old Thomas tried to step back and ended up against the chair. He sat down with a thud.

“Ned? What’ve you got against Ned? He’s a good lad.”

“Why, nothing,” Jack said, with an easy smile, “I just want to see him. He’s my brother.”

“And who’s that?” The old man pointed his bristly chin at me, just as I lit the lamp with a spill of wood from the fire. The sudden flare of light made him wince. “That’s a girl! I ain’t having no girl on my island.”

Of the two of us, I would have thought it obvious that Jack was the one to worry about. I ignored his ranting, raising up the lamp to examine the room. It was small: two bunks against the far wall, the top one a tangled nest of dirty blankets, the bottom neat, tidy and unslept-in; the table and chairs by the fire; a bench by the window for preparing food. Everything came in pairs, two beds, two chairs, two plates, and, save that one bottom bunk, everything was filthy.

Bacon rinds and eggshells littered the bench. Flies buzzed over the unwashed plates, slow and uncertain in the dim light. Oatmeal spilled across the floor from a sack in the corner. I swear I could see the mouse’s bright eyes peeking from the hole.

The owner of the tidy bunk obviously didn’t trust his companion’s housekeeping. Wooden boxes with tight-fitting covers were lined up beneath the bed. Piles of books were stacked neatly on a shelf.

“That Ned’s?”

Jack began to rifle through Ned’s belongings, very quickly turning order into chaos. He paid particular attention to the books, flicking through the pages and turning them upside down to shake out anything hidden inside. As he finished with each one he threw it on the floor.

He searched a box of close-written pages, filling the room with a blizzard of white paper.

“Careful with those. The boy’s worked hard on them.” Old Thomas shuffled around the room, trying to catch the pages before they landed.

The old man mashed the papers together in his rough, crooked hands. Finally I couldn’t stand it anymore and took them from him. As I began to put them in order I realised that they were scientific articles, papers for the Royal Society of New Zealand: *On a new species of Puffin; The Distribution of the Green Gecko (Naultinus Elegans) on the Islands of the Hauraki Gulf; Notes on the Feeding Habits of the Tui*

(*Prosthemadera novaeseelandiae*). And one more, half-written, which bore the crossings-out and revisions of recent editing: *The Nesting Habits and Clutch Size of the Blue Penguin*.

Jack's voice cut through Old Thomas's whining. "When will Ned be back?"

The last box teetered on the edge of the bed. All the others were empty, their contents discarded.

The old man hesitated. "Tomorrow evening, most likely. He's gone looking for penguins."

Jack nodded, "That sounds like Ned. We'll wait."

"She's not sleeping in here." Old Thomas pointed at me. "Wouldn't be right."

"I'll get the tent," I said quickly. The fug of unwashed socks, rotting food and smoke was making me sick. It smelt worse than the stench that had wafted out of the steerage compartments after a rough night at sea. I escaped into the twilight.

A harsh scream broke my sleep and brought me upright, heart pounding and sweat starting on my brow. Beside me, Charlie snored gently. It's a bird, I told myself, for the fifth time that night, and I lay back down without much hope of rest. My blanket was too thin on the rocky ground; the birds made too much noise; Charlie took up too much room. And I was trapped on an island with an old man and a killer. I would be getting no more sleep tonight.

I lit my lantern, and took out some light reading – Ned's treatise on green geckos.

When dawn broke, the whole island burst into song. It seemed there was a bird on every branch of every tree. Liquid trills punctuated by harsh squawks, insistent bells and gentle flutings – *day has come, time to rise*.

I put down the final page of Ned's paper. His writing was wonderful: clear, concise and lucid. Everything a piece of scientific prose should be.

The mist and rain of yesterday had disappeared. From my vantage point at the top of the ridge the sea spread out in front of me, calm and blue. A slight breeze ruffled the water, splintering the sunlight into a thousand glittering diamonds. No sails interrupted the smooth surface and the only other islands in sight were faint and grey with distance. Help was a long way off.

Yesterday I had peppered Jack with questions about the techniques of sailing. He had answered them all with a condescending smile that seemed to indicate that, as for swimming, sailing theory might not be the same as practice. I looked again at the expanse of open water I would have to cross.

“Thinking of leaving?” Jack’s voice in my ear made me jump. “I’ve taken away the tiller so don’t waste your time.” He turned away without waiting for an answer.

So there was nothing to do but wait, and secretly I was relieved.

“What is this?” Jack poked the pale lump on his plate. The outer crust was charred and gritty, while the innards oozed a grey-white goo the consistency of rubber.

“Damper,” I said. “Old Thomas made it. You’ll need some of this.” I passed him a can of treacle.

He tipped on a thick golden swirl and took a bite.

“Pah!” Jack spat out his mouthful. “That’s disgusting.”

“You need more treacle.” I said

He threw the damper on the grass and began to spoon the syrup straight out of the can. Charlie pounced, only just beating a couple of seagulls. Jack held the spoon high and let the sticky liquid flow slowly back to the can.

“Did you know this is exactly the same colour as your hair?”

I laughed. “First an oriole, now a spoonful of treacle. I’m overwhelmed.”

I continued unpacking my camera. The birds here were so tame that it might be possible to photograph them.

Jack laughed when he saw what I intended. “Want me to shoot a few and stuff them? It’s the only way that they will hold still long enough.”

“Have you ever been photographed, Jack?”

“Once. When I was a child. Mama decided we needed a family portrait. Turned out she was right. Our father left the next year and she died a few years later. That picture was all we had left of both of them. Ned probably still has it somewhere. Don’t think I’ve ever sat in one place for so long in my life. Even then I moved too soon and my father walloped me for spoiling the picture.” He grinned as if that was a good memory. “You’ll just be wasting your time – can’t tell a bird it’ll get a hiding if it moves.”

My eye was caught by the glinting gold of his ring and I regarded him thoughtfully. I might not be able to help Ned Larkin, but perhaps there was a way to assist Mr Whelk?

“Would you like to make a bet?” I indicated the camera and then the birds.

“You’re on. But what will you stake?” He looked me up and down. Slowly.

I swallowed. “My camera against your ring.”

Jack’s eyes lingered on my face. Finally he nodded, “Agreed. I choose the bird.”

He looked around the clearing, studying the birds. "That one."

The bird watched us with intense interest as we approached its wooden perch, hopping excitedly from one foot to the other. A white feathery puff curled out from its throat, for all the world as if it wore a cravat. In the shade, it looked black, but the sunlight turned its feathers iridescent green and blue. How I longed to be able capture those colours.

"Bring the perch into the sunlight. The shade would give you too much advantage." I busied myself with setting up the equipment. "There by that rock"

As I had hoped, Jack could not force the perch back into the rocky ground. "You'll just have to hold it," I said.

He grumbled, but obeyed. "Just the bird, though. I don't want to be part of it."

I framed the picture. "Hold the stand with both hands, it's wobbling. Good. Now keep it still." I clicked my tongue, the bird looked at me inquiringly and I flipped off the lens cap. The bird held the pose for a couple of seconds before putting its head back and squawking. It swung beneath its perch and looked at Jack from upside down.

He laughed. "That was the quickest bet I ever won."

"Let's make it best of three," I said, quickly, putting the lens cap back on.

"I've got better things to do," he said. "I'll be back later for a lesson on how to work my new camera."

He strode off, whistling cheerfully. I watched him go and hoped that lesson would be forgotten. I wasn't sure if I could explain the workings of the camera without mentioning the shutter. And in particular without mentioning the fact that, with the new dry-plate cameras, the shutter, not the lens cap controlled the exposure. In this bright sunshine, I had needed a shutter speed of less than half a second to get a crystal-clear image of Mr Jack Larkin and his stolen ring. Just in case, I decided to hide the plate.

"What have you done?" I asked, when Jack returned. Something was different, something in the way he moved. Like a cat slinking out of a bird's nest.

"Just a little welcome home present for my little brother."

"What did he do to you to deserve so much hate?"

"I told you, he stole something of mine. Something important. And now he thinks he'll try a little blackmail. All because I pulled him out of Harvard to help me."

"Your brother was at Harvard?"

"Yeah, studying birds or some stupid thing. What kind of life is that for a grown man? He should have thanked me."

I felt sick. “Your brother is a scholar. A genius.”

Jack laughed. “And an accomplice to murder. When I get through with him, Harvard won’t have him back as a janitor. Now, where’s my camera?”

As he reached out his hand to take it, the sleeve of his coat fell back. There were two small spots of red on his cuff.

I looked for Charlie. He was nowhere to be seen.

I got to my feet. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Where are you going?”

“Somewhere private – a gentleman wouldn’t ask.” Somehow I managed to conjure up a blush. I never knew I was such a good actress; my head felt like it had no blood at all.

Last time I saw him, Charlie had been chasing some of the sturdy brown birds – wekas, Old Thomas called them – down the path to the jetty. The same path by which Jack had just come up.

“I wouldn’t go that way,” Jack said as I crossed the clearing.

I looked at him. His smile was open and uncomplicated, but something was not quite right.

“Not if you want privacy,” he explained. “Ned might come home any moment now.”

The forest behind the hut was dark and cool. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust. The thick undergrowth caught at my skirt as I fought my way around the back of the hut and back to the path. Every noise, the crunch of dead leaves, the crack of the branches, hung in the air, amplified by my need for silence. It took a long time to find the path. I was on the verge of turning back when I finally broke through. I was much closer to the bay than I expected.

“Charlie?” I called softly. There was no response – no excited woof, no big black body crashing through the undergrowth. “Charlie?” I began to run.

The rain had turned the last section of the path into a mudslide. My feet slipped out from under me and I slid down to the sand, landing in a muddy heap.

The beach was empty.

Where now?

A whining caught my attention. Tucked into the bush was a small battered hut.

“Charlie?” I whispered.

A short sharp bark answered me. Charlie’s head poked around the corner of the hut. He barked again and disappeared. I pushed myself slowly to my feet and

approached cautiously. My earlier speed had deserted me; there was nothing I wanted less than to see inside that hut. Charlie waited for me at the door. His tail was between his legs, his attention focussed on whatever was inside.

A hand landed on my shoulder.

My heart thumped so hard I thought it would break out of my chest.

“I told you not to come here,” Jack said. He reached past me and pushed the door open.

Old Thomas lay sprawled on a bed of fishing nets and old canvas. He looked just as grumpy and querulous as he had in life, except for the long deep gash curving around his neck in an incongruous bloody smile. A halo of drunken flies buzzed about his head, their feeding disturbed by our entrance.

“The old fool was trying to warn Ned,” Jack said. “I couldn’t have that.”

For a few moments I was frozen. A fly, huge and black, brushed across my face. Without thinking, I batted it away. It left a smear of blood on my hand.

I made it to the sand before I threw up.

When I came back to myself, I was locked in the woodshed at the back of the cabin. I had vague memories of Jack dragging me, still retching, up the path from the beach and pushing me inside. There were no windows, but the shed was roughly made and enough light crept through the cracks to form a dim twilight. There was a jug of water beside the door. My hands shook as I picked it up.

A few swallows and although my mouth was still sour with fear and vomit, I made myself put the jug down. It was already hot and airless in the little shed. By evening, after a full day of baking in the sun, it would be almost unbearable. I would need the water.

The door was locked, as I knew it would be. Barred from the outside. I searched for a stick thin enough to poke through the cracks and strong enough to lift the bar, but all I found were spiders. And an insect that I had not seen before – shiny brown and black with enormous pincers and long spiky legs – a battle-hardened, armoured grasshopper.

Abandoning the door, I took up a stout branch and began to pound the walls. Perhaps I could break my way out. The rough bark cut my hands and every blow dislodged more spiders. Soon the floor was alive with the scuttling creatures. I tried to remember if New Zealand was home to anything venomous.

The shed was rough, but very sturdy. My pounding made no impression on anything except the spiders. There was nothing to do but wait.

When night began seeping through the walls, I stopped worrying about what Jack was going to do with me and started worrying that he wasn't going to do anything at all. That he was simply going to leave me here. Perhaps he had already left; I had heard no sign of him all day.

The water was all gone, despite my attempts to ration it. The air of the shed was like an oven and I had a raging thirst. My head was a heavy ache; it felt as though the slightest movement would cause it to fall from my neck and roll across the floor.

The shed was dark when footsteps finally came. My involuntary surge of hope quickly turned to fear. I positioned myself behind the door, branch in hand. I braced my feet and readied myself to strike, but my head betrayed me. The walls swayed in and out and I had to put a hand out for balance. For a moment I thought I would be sick again.

The door opened and the flare of the lantern caught me full in the face. I swung out blindly, guessing where Jack's head would be. The lantern swung in a wide arc, and Jack swore as the wood connected. All I could see was a fiery afterimage against the black night. Jabbing my improvised weapon in front of me, I ducked down and felt for the door. There. The splinters dug into my fingers as I pushed through.

"You little ..." Jack caught a handful of my hair and jerked me upright.

Through the dazzle of the lantern, I saw blood trickling down his cheek. I stabbed forward and the stick went into his stomach. He doubled over, but didn't let go of my hair. I twisted and squirmed, pulling at his fingers.

"Let me go!"

A growl sounded beyond the lantern-light.

"Charlie," I called. "Charlie, help!"

There was a thud and a rip. Jack shouted. He let go of my hair and wrenched the stick out of my hand, spinning around to face the threat behind him.

I ran.

Across the clearing and into the bush. Beneath the sheltering trees, the darkness was almost solid. It filled up the gaps, pulled the trees closer together, hid the paths. Branches lashed my face and tore at my dress. Treacherous roots tangled my feet, tripping me up and twisting my ankles. I scrambled forward, on my hands and knees. A bush blocked my way, too dense to claw through. My breath sobbed in my chest. I was

making too much noise. Jack would hear me. I collapsed on the ground, hugging my body into a tight ball and trying to still my breathing.

Slow, deliberate footsteps crunched through the undergrowth. The lantern swept the darkness; light splintered on the leaves, making the shadows dance. I was hidden inside a tangle of thin wiry branches. I curled tighter, wrapping myself in the black of my mourning dress.

A branch cracked on the other side of the clearing. The footsteps paused. I didn't breath. Something rustled in the undergrowth. A bird? Charlie? It was going away, into the forest. For a moment there was silence and then the footsteps followed.

I had to get away. My hiding place was too precarious. A few more steps and I would have been discovered. I had to go now, before Jack came back. Despite the urgency, it was several moments before I could force my limbs to obey. Every sound, the crack of a twig, the swish of a mistimed branch, rang out like a siren. With each noise I froze; my senses stretching to hear Jack's pursuit. But he didn't come.

I slid further and further into the bush.

After a few minutes, I could hear something coming, something fast. Not Jack, an animal – loping through the undergrowth. I shrank back against a tree trunk, running my hands up the bark. The branches were too high, out of reach. The creature circled me, getting closer. Something brushed against my hand. Warm and wet. I jumped and cried out.

A furry nose butted me reprovingly.

Charlie.

I wound my fingers into his fur and the dark night seemed brighter.

"Let's go, Charlie," I whispered.

He seemed to understand. A great surge forward nearly pulled me off my feet. I tugged him back. "Slow down."

We twisted and turned, weaving between the trunks. I gripped Charlie tight, the thought of losing him, of being alone in that wilderness, was unbearable. Occasionally I fell, once I pulled him over, but he seemed to want the company too, and never even whined.

At last I saw a glimmer of light up ahead. A gleam of moonlight through the trees. I twisted under the final branch and emerged onto a grassy hillside sloping down to a cliff. The slope was studded with large rocks and shadowed holes. The wind smelt of fish and the acrid stench of guano. I could hear the sleepy mutter of quarrelling seabirds; the sea must be close.

Across the field, an outcrop of rocks offered a hiding place. I started across, exposed and defenceless under the bright moonlight.

A quarter of the way across the clearing, my foot caught in a hole. I plunged forward, landing on one of the large stones. It wriggled underneath me, flapping and squawking to be free. The panic spread. All around us stones were springing into the air. A skewer stabbed my head, more jabbed into my back and neck.

The earth itself seemed to be attacking me.

I couldn't move. My knees had turned to liquid and wouldn't hold me. I tucked myself into a ball, squeezed as tight as I could for protection. Finally the attack abated and I convinced my body to uncurl.

A dark shape rested on the grass right in front of my nose.

It glared at me with a malevolent black eye and clicked its beak. The blood trickling down my cheek was testament to just how strong and sharp that beak was. The bird was about the size of a pigeon, dark on top and snowy white underneath.

Puffinus assimilis, the little shearwater.

I had not spent last night reading Ned's research for nothing. And if this was their colony, then I knew where we were.

By the time we had reached the rocks, I had tripped over three more shearwaters, stepped in two more holes and my dress had acquired a coating of guano and blood, in addition to its original layers of salt, dog hair and dirt.

A small cave opened up at the base of the tor. Charlie and I tumbled in; several shearwaters and a strong smell of fish were already in residence.

The cave was small, cramped and damp, but it was a good hiding place. If Jack did manage to track us, we would have plenty of warning.

Chapter Seventeen

In London, I knew all the common species of birds and animals: pigeons and sparrows, rats and mice. I could identify the rarer blackbird and thrush, although the female blackbird, being brown, was trickier; it always seemed to me a little inconsiderate to have misnamed half the species.

On the Ocean Queen, new birds were introduced. Gulls, petrels, mollymawks and the majestic albatross became part of my everyday world. I knew them and admired them. Mr Whelk and I spent several evenings dissecting their wings and studying the contents of their gullets. An educational experience, to be sure, although I did not admit to the queasiness I felt at seeing such graceful creatures dismembered. Mr Whelk would have declared me most unscientific.

The birds of Whale Island were very much alive. They fought and squabbled, chirped and trilled. They kept me company, and scared me half to death. Glossy black birds tumbled inches from my head, racing through the trees at breakneck speeds; small brown ones with friendly flicking tails paced me through the forest. Best of all was the pigeon. Heralded by a heavy whir and an overfed thump on a sagging branch, it looked as though it had swallowed two of our scrawny London pigeons whole. For the first time in my life, I contemplated the thought of pigeon pie with a hearty appetite.

I woke to the whirl of wings. The shearwaters were on the move, swooping and swirling, screaming threats and greetings. They circled around us in formation, their wings held stiffly to attention, their colours flashing from white to dark to white as they changed direction with military precision.

“Time to go,” I told Charlie. “The noise will cover us.”

But where?

My only hope was the elusive Ned. He must have been delayed. If he had arrived last night, I would have heard voices from my jail in the woodshed.

Charlie and I worked our way through the bush to a ridge overlooking the cove. Distances shrank in the daylight – the nightmare miles in the dark were covered in just half an hour.

There were two boats in the cove. The second boat bobbed gently beside the jetty. Its sail was neatly furled, the oars stowed beneath the seat, but the bags and boxes of supplies were only half unloaded. A lumpy hessian sack lay on the jetty, potatoes spilling out through a split in the side. A treasure trove of shiny nails gleamed amongst

the dirt and sackcloth. In the water below the newspaper they had been wrapped in washed in and out with the waves.

Ned was already here and Jack had found him.

I sat down beside Charlie and hugged him close. I could leave. I could take the boat and go. The sea was calm and the other islands were enticingly close in the clear morning air. Even the reef was quiet. Everything I needed was there – sail, oars, even food. It would be hard work and I might not make it, but there was a good chance I would.

Old Thomas was dead. I could do nothing for him. Ned was a stranger. And Jack's brother. What kind of a man would harm his own brother?

Unfortunately I knew the answer to that.

I approached the cabin cautiously. The tethered birds were an effective alarm system. How would I get close enough to see what was happening without setting off a frenzy of squawks?

By sending in a decoy.

Charlie chased the stick across the clearing. The birds whistled and screamed in disapproval. There was a bang as the cabin door swung open.

"Sarah?"

Charlie barked. Jack's footsteps thudded down the steps and out into the clearing.

"Get out of here, you mongrel."

Charlie barked again, frisking in a circle around Jack

I pushed a block of wood up to the side window and peeked inside.

A man was slumped in a chair by the table. His arms were pulled back and tied behind the chair and his legs were tied at the ankle. A trickle of blood ran down his cheek and a bruise darkened one eye.

Jack's knife lay on the table. The blade was stained.

Outside, Charlie snarled, a sudden vicious sound I'd never heard from him. The man who must be Ned jerked upright. He saw me at the window and his eyes widened. I brought my finger to my lips. One word and Jack would return. I reached in the half-open window. A kitchen knife lay on the bench, but it was just out of reach. I had to make do with the frying pan. I lifted it carefully off the bench and out the window. It was very heavy and I needed both hands.

Out the front there was a thud and a high-pitched yelp.

“That’ll teach you.” Jack’s voice was full of satisfaction. The steps creaked. Cradling my prize, I quickly crouched down.

“Dogs can always tell,” Ned’s voice had Jack’s slow drawl. “I never understood why Mama wouldn’t let me have one. I do now.”

“Enough reminiscing. How did you find out about the wedding?”

“The wedding?” Ned sounded as surprised as I was. “*Your* wedding?” There was a pause. “Someone showed me a paper, a San Francisco paper – the Chronicle, I think. It was in the society pages: Jack Larkin and his bride-to-be, Arabella Rivenhurst. Congratulations. Her father must own half of California.”

“And you thought the time was right for a little blackmail.”

“Blackmail?”

“Don’t play dumb. The letter... the ring... the oh-so-guilty conscience. We both know what that all means.

“Pretend I don’t,” Ned said, slowly. “Explain it to me.”

“How about I read it? Maybe that will refresh your memory.”

There was a rustling of paper, then Jack began to read in a flat monotone:

“Dear Brother, congratulations on your engagement. Now that you are about to be married, perhaps you will understand why I had to leave. I have enclosed Teresa’s ring. You know what to do with it. I wish that I could attend your wedding in person, but my unfortunate financial situation makes that impossible. As soon as I am able, I hope to visit you in San Francisco and be presented to your lovely wife...”

There was a long silence. I couldn’t stand not knowing. Very carefully, I peeked over the window sill. Ned was staring at Jack, his mouth half-open. I could almost see the ideas clicking into place in his brain.

“Blackmail,” Jack said. “And a threat against my future wife. You are lucky I decided to come after you myself. Arabella’s father has rather a nasty reputation, especially when it comes to protecting his family. Give me the letters and the necklace, and I’ll let you go.”

“I can’t.”

Jack picked up his knife. “You’d better.”

“Jack, I really can’t. I don’t have the necklace anymore. I sent it back to the museum. I would have sent the ring back too, but I didn’t know Teresa’s last name, or where she came from or anything else about her.”

“I don’t believe that. No one gives away a fortune like that. Not even you.”

“It wasn’t mine... and it wasn’t yours either, Jack.”

“What about the letters?”

Ned said nothing.

“Dammit, Ned!” Jack hurled a plate at the wall. The sudden crash made us all jump. “I need this marriage.”

“You *need* this marriage?” Ned gave a short bark of laughter. “Now, I see. They don’t know, do they? And you thought I might tell them. Or not, if the price was right.”

“Ned...” Jack said in a soft voice. “Give me the letters. Don’t make me do this.” The knife flashed in his hand.

“I’m not making you do anything.”

Jack moved forward. All I could see was his broad back. Ned grunted, a deep animal sound of pain.

When Jack stepped back, Ned’s eyes were shut and his face tight. His shirt collar was pulled open and fresh blood was running from a cut on his chest. Jack was wiping his blade.

“You won’t kill me.” Ned sounded more certain than I would have been if I was sitting in that chair.

“Possibly not,” Jack said. “But there’s a long way to go before that, and I really do need those letters, Ned.” The knife gleamed again and Ned flinched.

I had to do something.

This time I let the birds announce me.

“Jack. I want to make a deal.” I stood in the middle of the clearing and waited.

The door banged and Jack came out. “What with?”

“I found something, something that might interest you. First I want a promise. I want you to take me to the island with the lighthouse. There are people there. Just take me there and drop me off. I’ll find them. And I won’t say anything about you.”

“What have you found?” Jack repeated. He came down the steps towards me and I found myself backing up.

I planted my feet. “Promise first.”

“All right, I promise. I’ll take you where you want – if you have what I want. Now show me.” He said it easily; it was a promise he intended to break.

“Over here, in the woodshed.”

Jack came quickly. “What is it?”

“Jewellery – a necklace,” I said. “It was hidden in the woodpile.”

“Anything else?”

“Nothing important, just some old letters.” *Don’t let him ask for details.*

“Letters?”

I pointed inside the dark shed. “In there.”

It was a measure of his eagerness and how little threat he thought me that he actually stooped and started inside. One step and his caution took over. He straightened up, “You go first—”

It was one step too far. The frying pan was behind the door where I had hidden it. I hefted it in both hands and swung it down on Jack’s head.

Hard.

“Who are you?” Ned strained back in the chair as I approached. His hands jerked against the ropes. “What do you want?”

I held up a hand and he stopped talking instantly.

“Jack said you were wanted for murder. Is that true?”

“I didn’t kill anyone,” Ned said. His eyes darted to the doorway.

“Wait, that wasn’t right.” My tired brain sorted through the memories of the last few days. “No, accomplice to murder. That’s what he said. I think I can guess who the murderer was. Who died?”

“Look, Jack will be back at any minute. We need to get away.” Ned started pulling at the ropes again.

I slammed my hand down on the table and realised that I was holding Jack’s knife. “Who died?” I shouted.

“A woman named Teresa. Jack was blackmailing her. She decided she had had enough. It was an accident. He didn’t mean to kill her.”

“And what about you?”

“I was the go-between. I thought I was delivering love letters. I was young and stupid, but it’s no excuse.”

Ned might be deluded; he might be lying; he might even be telling the truth. I was too tired to tell. But he knew how to use a sextant, and about the nesting habits of blue penguins. There comes a time when men of science must band together. I picked up the knife.

“What are you doing?” Ned said.

“Stay still or I’ll cut you.” The knots around his wrists were too tight for me to untie. I slipped Jack’s knife into the small gap and started to saw at the rope.

“Who are you? And where’s Jack?”

"I'm Sarah Price. There!"

Ned rolled his arms forward with a groan.

"You should rub your hands to get the blood back into them." I knelt down to free his ankles.

"Where's Jack?"

In my mind, the frying pan hit Jack's head again with the sound of a pumpkin falling onto a cold stone floor. The shock of it still reverberated in my arms.

"Outside."

Ned broke the last strands of rope as he pushed to his feet. "He'll be back. We need to get out."

"I don't think Jack will be a problem for a little while."

Maybe not ever again. For a moment bile swelled in my throat and I thought I might throw up.

Ned gave me an odd look. "What do you mean?" He stumbled out the open door and down the steps. I followed.

Jack was lying where I had left him. There was no blood, but he looked dead.

"I hit him." I said.

"What with?" Ned fell to his knees at Jack's head. "Don't get me wrong, I'm grateful, but how?" One knee landed on the frying pan I had dropped. He pulled it out of the long grass. "I see."

"Is he dead?" My voice seemed to fall to my feet. I wasn't sure if Ned heard me.

Ned felt for a pulse. "No, he's still alive. I think he'll be just fine, more's the pity. Now what are we going to do with him?"

"You could hit him," I suggested. "I don't think I can do it again."

Ned's mouth twisted in a wry smile. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I don't think I can do it either."

"We'll just have to tie him up then, and take him to the police." I paused. "There is a police force here?"

"I'm sure there's someone who can deal with him. But he's my brother, I won't lay charges."

"Not even for Old Thomas? And then there's Mr Harris, although I can't prove that, and poor Mr Whelk. I don't think they care that he's your brother."

Ned pulled the rope he was tying so tight that it cut into his brother's arm. "Old Thomas?"

"He's dead. Jack cut his throat."

Ned turned white and I felt a stab of remorse. I shouldn't have said it so bluntly, but my brain wasn't really working. There had been too many shocks in too short a period of time.

"And the others? Mr Harris and Mr Whelk? He killed them too?"

"Well, not Mr Whelk. Jack tried his hardest, but for an old man Mr Whelk is as tough as a boot. So when it didn't work, Jack set him up as a thief. As for Mr Harris, he had an unfortunate accident and fell overboard – just after trying a bit of blackmail on your brother. Careful! You need to loosen that rope unless you want him to lose a hand."

Ned didn't speak until he finished tying Jack up. "What about you? How did you get here?"

"Jack kidnapped me. He told the Captain it was an elopement. But..." I waved my hands down my body. I was too tall, too thin, and far too opinionated. "He really wanted the key to my father's journal and a bargaining chip if you proved too stubborn."

Ned looked confused.

"My father is... was Cornelius Price."

"Was? Did Jack...?"

"No, no," I said, quickly. "Jack didn't kill him. Papa died of a fever. But he visited you on the island. And you gave him a package for Jack."

"I *told* him not to deliver it in person."

"You didn't make him promise. Papa would have been unable to resist."

"And the bargaining chip?"

"Jack thought you might need some extra persuasion to tell him what he wanted to know. I didn't understand what he meant at the time, but I do now." I watched the blood seeping through Ned's shirt.

A look of horror passed across Ned's face. "He wouldn't have done that."

I didn't answer.

After a few moments, Ned said, "If I give him to the police, they'll hang him."

Again I didn't answer. It was true.

"Where is Old Thomas?"

"In the storage hut by the wharf."

Ned took a shovel that was leaning against the side of the cabin and left the clearing. He was gone half an hour. When he returned, his face was grim.

“We had better get going. It will take us several hours to get back to Auckland.”
He hauled Jack upright and slung him over his shoulder.

They were a similar height and build, Ned just a little taller and leaner. They were similar in looks as well, but everything about Jack was more extravagant: his hair was blonder, his eyes brilliant blue to Ned’s plain brown, his manners more polished and his air more refined. At the moment, they were a good match for bruises and bloodstains.

Ned started down the path, Jack’s head bouncing with every step.

“I’ve just got to get something,” I said.

“It had better be small,” Ned said. “We’ll be overloaded as it is, with three of us.”

“Plus Charlie.”

“Who’s Charlie?” Ned called after me.

A better question was: Where was Charlie?

I had not seen him since his encounter with Jack.

Charlie was in the tent. He was curled into tight ball and didn’t want to come out. He didn’t seem badly hurt. All I could find was a small cut over one eye. It wasn’t until I finally coaxed him out into the open that the full extent of the damage was revealed.

The end of his tail was completely bald. The white tuft at the end of his plummy tail was missing and the sharp bony point poked out, pink and naked as a mole rat. Charlie stood hunched over and miserable, his tail tucked firmly between his legs.

I dived behind the tent before I could commit the unpardonable sin of laughing. I had never seen a dog look more embarrassed. The package was where I had left it, buried beneath the floor of my tent. I pulled it out of the hole and scooped up Ned’s papers before hurrying back to the cabin.

“”I thought you were getting clothes.”

“Why would I want clothes?” The box for my camera was heavy but even in this calm weather I wasn’t going to take a chance without the extra waterproofing. With every step it slipped a little further through my fingers. I got it into the boat just before I lost it entirely. It fell on Jack’s foot and I thought he twitched.

“Is he waking up?”

“Don’t think so.” Ned nudged his brother with the toe of his hob-nailed boot. Jack didn’t move.

Charlie whined from the edge of the jetty, reluctant to get closer to his tormentor.

“Come on, Charlie. You don’t want to get left behind. He’s not going to hurt you again.”

Charlie leapt over Jack and scrabbled to sit as far forward as possible.

Ned flinched as the end of Charlie’s mutilated tail flicked past his face.

I untied the boat and pushed us off from the jetty. Ned set his weight into the oars. Rowing was hard work. The boat was sitting low in the water and the sail was of no use until we were clear of the reef. No one spoke for a long time.

The breeze had picked up and the boat was wallowing along with all the grace of a pregnant elephant. Whale Island was far behind us, hidden by the haze of the late afternoon sun. We were sailing along the coastline of a much larger island, large enough for the occasional sign of habitation – cleared fields, a wooden shack, a plume of smoke.

Ahead of us, a headland curved into a long open bay. Several small boats were drawn up on the sandy beach. A path led up through the trees to a red-roofed house on the ridge where smoke trickled lazily from the chimney. Someone was cooking dinner, safe and snug in their home.

Charlie barked, loud and urgent. There was a surge of movement behind me. The boat rocked wildly. I started to turn, but an arm snaked around my neck and pulled me backwards. A cold sliver of pain bit into my throat. Off-balance and falling, I clung to the arm holding me.

Jack was free.

“You should have checked for more knives,” he said. “One is never enough.”

“Let go of her.” Ned sounded calm, even reasonable, but he wasn’t the one with the knife cutting into his throat.

“Why? If you won’t do what I ask out of brotherly love, maybe you’ll do it to save her life. Where are the letters? And the necklace?”

“Brotherly love? Last time you said that, I ended up accomplice to murder.”

Jack pulled me round so Ned could see my face. I cried out as the movement dug the knife deeper into my skin. A trickle of warmth ran down my neck.

“Then don’t make the same mistake again,” Jack said.

My breath was coming in short gasps. Jack’s arm pressed hard against my throat and a black mist floated at the edge of my vision. An image of Old Thomas filled my mind, cast aside on the dirt floor, flies buzzing at his neck. I did not want to die like that. Unfortunately, there didn’t seem to be anything I could do to prevent it.

“I won’t.”

Jack’s hold on my neck slackened slightly. I gulped a great breath of air, careless of the knife. I was so busy breathing that it took a few moments to see the cause of my relief: Ned had a revolver.

He wasn’t holding it triumphantly or confidently, or even very steadily. He held it as far out from his body as he could; his hand shaking as though it were a viper that might turn on him at any moment. The muzzle wavered from Jack to me, out to sea and back again. I shrank back against Jack and almost echoed him when he said, “Put that down.”

“No,” Ned said.

“You wouldn’t shoot me.”

“I don’t want to.” Ned let go of the tiller and rubbed his face wearily. I felt Jack tense, readying to spring, but then Ned was looking again. “Why couldn’t you just leave me alone? You knew I wouldn’t turn you in. I just wanted you to stop. Why did you have to follow me?”

“The letter,” Jack said. “The ring. I owe Arabella’s father thousands. He’ll wipe the debt if I make his daughter happy. And she won’t be happy if she finds out about Teresa Simons.”

“I wasn’t blackmailing you! I just wanted you to return the ring to Teresa’s family. It was her wedding ring. You shouldn’t have taken it. I thought you would understand that now. Now that you were in love. I hadn’t realised that marriage is just a business deal to you. I should have.” Ned’s voice was flat, exhausted.

“You’re telling the truth.” Jack laughed. It was not a joyful sound. “I came halfway around the world because my brother is a romantic. When are you going to grow up, Ned?” He paused. “I want the letters.”

“Was it an accident?”

“What?” Jack was confused.

“Teresa’s death.” Ned said. “Was it an accident?”

“Of course.” The answer came a fraction too late.

Ned gripped the gun with both hands. “Put down the knife.”

Jack’s arm tightened again. I had managed to twist around so that he was no longer pressing on my throat and his knife rested on the thick knot of hair at the nape of my neck. I pushed up on his elbow and tried to drop down to the deck. There was a moment of give and then his arm turned to steel. A sharp pain arced across the back of my neck. The gap for my head was tiny, so tight it felt as though my face would be

scraped off as I forced down against his rough woollen sleeve. The pain in my neck increased. I screamed and pushed harder, frantic to escape.

The world exploded. A line of fire seared across the top of my head. Jack's arm released and I fell to the deck.

Jack was still standing. He held his right arm tight to his chest with the opposite hand, and he stared at his brother in shock.

"You shot me. I think you've broken my arm."

Ned was paper-white. He clasped the gun with both hands.

"I told you I didn't want to."

"They'll hang me if you turn me in."

"Yes."

Jack frowned with pain. "Maybe you have grown up a little." He paused to take a few deep breaths. His eyes scanned the horizon, then came to rest on me. "Did you know that Sarah, although possessed of many admirable qualities, can't swim?" His tone was conversational, but there was an edge of pain. He pressed his lips together for a moment before continuing. "In fact, in that dress, I've never seen anyone drown faster." A bloom of red was beginning to seep out from under his hand.

Ned frowned. "What's that got to do with anything?"

I was faster. I saw what he meant to do, but there was nowhere to go. Jack stooped and scooped me up with his good arm, grunting as my flailing arm hit his wound. He half-threw, half-pushed me over the side of the boat.

I landed with a splash. My head went under, but this time my legs were flat on the water. My skirts were spread out like a sail, buoying the lower half of my body while I paddled desperately to get my head above water. More splashes. I couldn't tell where they were coming from. Water streamed down my face and into my eyes. The world was a panic-stricken blur.

"Stop fighting."

Ned was behind me. He pulled me back against his chest and supported my weight with his body. He was as solid as an island.

"Grab the boat."

I reached up and on my second attempt managed to hook one elbow over the side. Ned grabbed a handful of my dress and pushed until I was dangling over the side of the boat, half-in and half-out. I hung there for a moment, spitting out water and panting. Ned surged in from the opposite side. Another tug on the back of my dress, and I was in.

“Where’s Jack?” I gasped, as soon as I could talk.

Ned pointed. As we watched, Jack swam the last few one-handed strokes to the headland. His wounded arm trailed uselessly behind him. The waves washed him against the rocks several times before he managed to catch a firm handhold and get to his feet. He turned back to the sea, shading his eyes against the sun. There was a fresh stain of red on the arm of his sea-washed shirt. When he caught sight of us, he waved. We had one last glimpse of his white shirt amongst the trees before he disappeared.

“Are you hurt?” Ned asked.

The back of my neck felt cold and vulnerable, not exactly painful. Perhaps it was shock. I put my hand up to check the wound and found only bare skin. My fingers came away with a trace of blood, and several long hairs. I looked down. There, in the bottom of the boat, was a shining coil of nut-brown hair.

My hair.

Chapter Eighteen

The novels of Miss Jane Austen are dangerous to young women. She leads readers and heroines both on a twisting dance to the altar and there abandons them, caught forever in the amber glow of perfect happiness. The story does not continue on. There is no ever-after, happy or otherwise, no growing old and fat and irritable with gout. Marriage, Miss Austen implies, is everything. Marriage is enough. And yet, even within her own pages, this is not true. Look to your parents, Elizabeth Bennett! How sure are you of your Mr Darcy?

Papa loved us. He told us so – Mother most of all. There were hugs and tears and promises at the start of every voyage, but for eight months every year he was gone. I think he loved his freedom more.

I am more like Papa than I knew.

“Stop!” I called, bursting through the double doors.

The impromptu court proceedings came to a halt as all the participants broke off to stare.

My newly shorn hair fluffed out around my head in a mass of uneven curls. My dress was mostly clean, thanks to my recent dunking, but it was wrinkled, ripped and stiff with salt.

Ned was not much better. Unshaven, streaked with blood from half a dozen brotherly knife wounds, his long hair pulled back in a ponytail and his clothes in tatters, he was Robinson Crusoe come to life.

The room was a dining hall, hastily rearranged into a courtroom. At the far end, a long table protected the dignity of the officials, all elderly men with portly bellies and impressive beards. Mr Whelk, small and wizened, but wearing his headdress of snowy bandages like a Maharaja’s turban, was seated to one side, his chair half-turned to the audience to display his shame to the greatest advantage. All the ship’s company were present, steerage passengers, cabin passengers, sailors, and, of course, Mrs Bittlesworth, ensconced in the front row like a queen.

“Stop,” I called again, although it was hardly necessary – no one had moved since our entrance. “Mr Whelk is not the thief – I can prove it.” I waved a bulky envelope above my head.

“Miss?... Miss Price?” Captain Dennison peered at me uncertainly. I had caught him mid-gesture and his hands flopped weakly at the ends of his outstretched arms, unsure whether to advance or retreat.

“Yes,” I said. “Which one of these gentlemen is the magistrate?”

A tall, bullish man in the middle inclined his head. He had bushy white eyebrows and a matching beard. It billowed out over his chest like feather-bed.

“I have that honour,” he declared.

“I object!” Mrs Bittlesworth said. Her voice rang through the courtroom. “This young woman is not a fit person to be addressing the court. She should be removed at once.”

“That is a very serious accusation, Madam,” the Magistrate said. “On what grounds do you make it?”

“She is a creature of lax morals, Sir. She ran off with a man, completely of her own free will. A man engaged to be married!”

The crowd drew a shocked breath. There were murmurs of disapproval. The Magistrate looked at me.

All the air seemed to have emptied from my lungs. I had forgotten. Murder, imprisonment, and torture had made my so-called elopement seem so long ago.

“Is this true?” said the Magistrate, frowning at my hesitation.

“No,” I said. “Well, yes... I mean, I did go off with Jack, but I didn’t go willingly. You see, I thought it was Bill—”

Ned squeezed my arm. “Stop,” he hissed.

“Jack? Bill?” The Magistrate looked appalled. “How many men are you involved with and which one is this?” He pointed at Ned.

“This is Ned,” I said. “Ned Larkin.”

“Ned?”

The crowd muttered and a couple of people booed.

“Young lady, nothing you have to say could be of any interest to this court. You will kindly leave at once.” The Magistrate beckoned to a policeman by the door.

“Miss Price is of excellent character. Anything she has done, she will have done for good reason. Sir, please hear her out.” Mary’s voice was quiet, but filled with the authority of twenty years of nursing cantankerous patients. Several rows back, I saw Annie nodding.

“And you are?” The Magistrate peered at her.

“Mrs Whelk, Sir.”

“The wife of the accused?” He turned back to the policeman.

Doctor Gaspard stood up. “I have no connection to the accused and I second that recommendation.”

“And me,” said Mr MacDonald. There was an echo of agreement from the crowd, mostly from the sailors. I hoped that the Magistrate did not notice that particular element. I did not think it would help my case. Never-the-less, I was much buoyed by the touching show of support. Unfortunately, the Magistrate was not.

“I do not listen to wanton strumpets in my court,” he roared. “She will leave now.”

Ned gave my arm another warning squeeze and stepped forward. “Sir!” he said, loud enough to be heard over the outraged audience. “I’ll thank you not to insult my future wife with such names.”

A hush fell on the room. The whole room leaned forward to catch his words.

“Future wife?” The Magistrate looked completely befuddled. “I thought you were already engaged?”

“That is my brother, Jack. He was simply bringing Miss Price to meet me.” Ned gave my arm a tug and I ended up clamped to his side. “After such a long separation, only those with low and vicious minds could reproach us for our eagerness to be reunited.”

Behind us, Mrs Bittlesworth gasped.

“So you are engaged? To this man?” The Magistrate was struggling to keep up.

“Apparently so,” I said.

“Then I see no reason not to continue. And I would ask the audience to keep their slander to themselves in future.” He glared at Mrs Bittlesworth. “What is your evidence?”

“Sir,” I said, “I have here a photograph of the true thief, in possession of his stolen booty. It exonerates Mr Whelk of all charges.” I pulled the photographic print out of the envelope and presented it to him with a flourish. “The contrast is not quite as sharp as I would like; I fear that the proprietor of the studio, although extremely obliging, is not as particular with his chemicals as he should be.” I turned to Mr Whelk, who was watching me with great interest.

“I’m afraid I presumed upon your good name, sir. I had no money, you see. Mr Green, of Green’s Photographic Emporium, was most helpful when I explained what I needed the photograph for. He seemed to know your son. He would have even developed the plate himself, but, of course, I did not allow that.”

“The image is perfectly clear, young lady,” the Magistrate interrupted. “But I am afraid I do not understand the significance.”

“May I?” I took the photograph back. “Captain Dennison, would you be so kind as to examine this and tell me what you see?”

Captain Dennison took the image in both hands and leaned in close. “Well, it’s Mr Jack Larkin. Seems to be fooling around with a bird or some such nonsense. Waste of the court’s time, if you ask me.”

“Could you look a little closer, Captain, particularly at Mr Larkin’s right hand.”

Captain Dennison peered. “That’s my ring! My signet ring. How the devil did that get there?”

The magistrate coughed reprovingly, “Language, Captain Dennison, please – there are ladies present.”

“I’m sorry, Sir, I was taken by surprise.” The Captain flushed bright red. “Look, see for yourself. This fellow is wearing my ring. There couldn’t be another one the same.”

“Jack Larkin, did you say? Is that not your brother?” The Magistrate looked at Ned.

Ned nodded, stiffly. “I thought him to have some honour left. It turns out I was mistaken.”

And when did the ring go missing, Captain.” The Magistrate examined the photograph with renewed interest.

The Captain’s colour increased to an unbecoming scarlet. He looked at his feet. “Well, um... well, I really couldn’t say, Sir.”

“You don’t know?” The Magistrate sounded incredulous.

“No, Sir.”

The Magistrate regarded him for a moment and then decided to move on. “Well, when did you wear it last?”

Mr MacDonald rose to his feet. “He was wearing it at our last dinner on board. After Mr Whelk was confined to his cabin and just before Mr Larkin disappeared.”

There were several murmurs of agreement from the audience.

“So Mr Whelk could not have stolen the item in question?” The Magistrate looked out into the assembled crowd for confirmation.

“He is still a thief,” Mrs Bittlesworth protested. “Everything else, including my emerald ring, was discovered in his possession. In his cabin.”

The Magistrate shuffled through his notes. “And the discovery of this horde of stolen treasure was made by—” He paused to scan a piece of paper. “A Mr Jack Larkin. That seems a little suspicious, does it not?”

“They were in it together,” Mrs Bittlesworth insisted stubbornly. “They must have been. Mr Larkin could not have taken my ring – why, he was talking to me right before I discovered the theft. He simply could not have done it.”

“Is that true?”

Mr MacDonald nodded unhappily. “It is, Sir. It was the main reason I didn’t suspect him at the time.”

“Well, in the light of that evidence—” The Magistrate raised his hand to a burly man with handcuffs who stood at the back of the room.

“I took Mother’s ring.” Agnes’ soft whisper barely reached the front table.

“I’m sorry, Miss. Would you say that again?”

Agnes stood up. She straightened her back and looked directly at the Magistrate. “I took Mother’s ring. It was a joke. Mr Larkin dared me to. I meant to put it straight back, but he took it off me. The next time I saw it was in Mr Whelk’s cabin. I swear Mr. Whelk had nothing to do with it.”

A buzz of excitement overwhelmed the proceedings. I took advantage of the chaos to slip closer to the Magistrate and inform him of the death of Old Thomas. Ned showed him the letters documenting Jack’s extremely successful blackmailing scheme in San Francisco, a scheme that had ended in the death of a society heiress, so wealthy that her murder was news even in New Zealand. Faced with this overwhelming evidence of Jack’s villainy, the Magistrate banged his gravel with such enthusiasm that the noise stopped.

“Mr Whelk is hereby proclaimed innocent of all charges. He is free to go.”

“Here’s to Sarah and her young man!” Mr Whelk raised his glass.

“He’s not—” I caught Mr Whelk’s grin and subsided, my cheeks flushing red. I looked across the remains of our celebratory picnic and down the hill to where Ned was examining the photographs I had taken of the journey. “He’s not my young man. That was merely a ploy,” I said, more calmly.

“That’s a shame,” Mary said. “There is talk, you know. Going off with Mr Larkin like that, it was bound to happen. I know it wasn’t your fault.” She hastily patted my hand, trying to rub away any offence. “If you were engaged to his brother, well, it would be unusual, but...” Her voice trailed off hopefully.

“No,” I said.

“Why not?” Ned called out. “These photographs are fantastic. Look how clear the tui is. I thought the only way to get that much detail was to have the bird stuffed.”

Why Not? What was he talking about?

Ned shuffled the photographs back into the envelope and looked up. “I owe you my life, Sarah. An engagement seems a small price to pay.”

“I don’t want to be engaged,” I said, but no one was listening.

Mary was already halfway down the hill. Mr Whelk was bellowing for someone to help him up. A hoard of little Dibbles were spiralling in from beach and bush. Annie had them barely under control. Only Ellie heard me.

“I think you should,” she said. “He’s even better at magic tricks than Mr Whelk. He found a sparrow in my ear! That’s a hundred times better than a sixpence.”

When the congratulations had died down, we were finally allowed to take a romantic stroll along the beach. Ned took my hand. I tried to jerk away, but he only held tighter, nodding at the huddle of watching bonnets behind us. “Pretend you like me,” he said.

“I do like you, I just don’t want to marry you. We hardly know each other.”

“If you don’t care for marriage, how about employment?”

“A job?”

Ned caught my other hand and pulled me round so I could see his face. “I need a photographer. I’ve got an expedition planned. I want to photograph the birds in the wild. Instead of shooting them. But I can’t take you if we’re not engaged. It wouldn’t be allowed.”

My brain was full of treacle,` my thoughts sticky and slow. I pulled out my handkerchief and rubbed my nose to buy some time. “You don’t want a wife, you want a photographer?”

“Exactly.” Ned frowned. “Don’t think you’ll get rich though. I can’t pay much, certainly not what you’re worth.”

“You would pay me money for taking photographs?” My head wasn’t working, but my heart leaped with understanding. No more stuffy parlours, no more afternoons of empty smiles and endless conversation. “Yes!”

“Hold on, you don’t even know where we’re going yet.”

“I don’t care. I’ll go anywhere.”

Ned grinned.

“I still don’t want to marry you,” I said.

“We’re engaged,” Ned said, “not married. An engagement can last for a long time, months – maybe even years. Just think how many photographs you can take in that time.”

The End