

Chapter One

Lieutenant Heyward Elliott sized up his target as he drew within range. Average elevation, no obstructions, good line of sight—he had a clear shot. It was now or never.

He marched past the wrought iron fence and climbed the short, wide flight of steps to knock on the door of the town house of Mr. Horatio Bayles. Three knocks should do it. Two would sound hesitant. Four would sound desperate. And though he felt desperate at the moment, he would not show it.

A footman with a long face and drawn expression answered his knock. He looked at Heyward's worn uniform with surprise that quickly turned to mild disdain.

Heyward wondered how many other out-of-work naval officers had come to apply for the position of steward. From the footman's reaction, he guessed he had been the worst outfitted of the lot.

"Yes?" the footman asked, his eyes already half closed with boredom.

Heyward snapped to attention, noting that he had a good two inches advantage in height over the disdainful servant. "I am Heyward Elliott, late of His Majesty's sloop *Aliceanna*. I've an appointment with Mr. Bayles at two bells. Err, one o'clock."

The footman's face cracked into the ghost of a smile.

Damn. His last appointment had been about a position at the Admiralty, so the Navy remained much in his mind. But he had to put it out of his mind now and be ready to talk of account books and correspondence and acreage quotas. Mr. Bayles had this house in town in the fashionable but not pretentious Bedford Square, as well as estates in Essex. In addition, he was expected to be knighted for an exemplary service that no one could quite remember. Bayles was an up-and-coming man in the world and someone with whom he would do well to gain favor.

Trying to brush away his misgivings, Heyward followed the footman through a hallway tiled in a nondescript gray-and-white pattern, with a mahogany staircase rising to his left.

"An egg boiled for one minute versus one boiled for thirty seconds."

The feminine voice, flat, matter-of-fact, with little intonation, came from above his head, somewhere on the stairs most likely. He looked up just in time to see two eggs hurtling toward his face. He managed to catch one, but the other smashed against his shoe and oozed to the floor. White bits of cooked egg clung to the edge of the buckle.

He looked up again in surprise. As far as he knew, Mr. Bayles was not in the business of raising chickens in his town house.

A girl peered over the railing from the second floor. Then she disappeared from his view and came thundering down the stairs. "You've ruined it!" she accused, her long,

narrow face set into a frown as she paused for a moment to lean over the rail a few feet above him. Then she continued down the stairs, dashed up to him and snatched the unbroken egg from his hand. "We will have to start all over," she fumed.

Rather than apologizing, as she seemed to expect, Heyward glared right back at her. Her girlish prank had caused him no harm, but it would have given someone like his mother enough of a shock to bring on an attack of apoplexy. Before he knew what he was doing, he found himself scolding her as if she were one of his sisters. "Young lady," he reprimanded sternly, "you should take more care where you drop..." He glanced around to see what else might have been loosed from the landing above but saw nothing other than the runny remains of the egg that had hit his shoe. "Things," he finished lamely.

The girl squinted at him, now seeming much older than she had at first, despite her disheveled hair and unchecked demeanor. She was in her late teens, perhaps even of age. "You, sir, should take care where you walk. The egg was already destined for that spot." She pointed to the floor where a thin river of egg yolk ran toward a small marble statue at the foot of the stairs.

Heyward cast a glance toward the footman, but his face remained impassive. So he turned his attention back to the young lady, favoring her with the look he might turn on a ship's boy who had just slipped a handful of weevils into his messmate's grog ration. "Had I been a guest of more advanced years, your prank would have given me a frightful shock."

Another set of footfalls on the stairs indicated that someone was about to join them and he fervently hoped it was not his prospective employer, because the voice of the egg-dropping girl had now risen to a painful screech. "It was *not* a prank," she insisted. "It was one of a series of experiments which I am documenting as part of a study for the Royal Society." She stamped her foot to add emphasis to her last words.

A second young lady, older and more handsome, came down the stairs. "There, there, Helen," she soothed. "I'm sure you've no need to be so upset. Whatever has interrupted your experiment this time can..." Her words trailed off when she caught sight of him.

The girl called Helen stamped her foot again. "I am *not* upset over the eggs. He referred to my experiment as a prank." Tears of rage sprang to the corners of her eyes. "He ridicules me. I cannot bear it!" She whirled around and stormed back up the stairs.

The other young lady turned toward Heyward, her blue eyes flashing with anger and her well-formed mouth now shaped into a definite frown. "You should be ashamed of yourself," she admonished. "Ridiculing a young lady of her delicate sensibilities."

"I meant no ridicule," he tried to explain. "I only chastised her for —"

The handsome young lady took a step closer, her hands clenched into fists at her sides. "Have you any right, sir, to chastise a girl of delicate sensibilities when you are a guest in her house?"

"She is the daughter of Mr. Bayles?" He began to wonder if he wanted to be in the employ of the man, if he were as unbalanced as the daughter.

"As good as. She is the friend and guest of his daughter. And I will not have my guests ridiculed or chastised by unknown persons under our very roof." Her voice rose to a loud pitch, though not so strident as that of the girl whose sensibilities she protected.

So *she* was Mr. Bayles' daughter. This young lady with pretty blue eyes, well-proportioned features and color that rose becomingly in her face was Mr. Bayles' daughter. What a pleasant prospect that would have been, if only she didn't appear to detest him.

A gentleman old enough to be her father, and who therefore most likely *was* her father, shuffled out into the hallway. He was somewhat short of stature and his eyes and features were small. His gaze focused intently through his spectacles on the young lady, as if he were only capable of observing one aspect of a situation at a time. "What's all this, then, Sophie?"

She raked Heyward up and down with her eyes, no doubt taking in every frayed hem and patch on his uniform. "This...man accosted Helen right here in the foyer. I believe he should be escorted out at once."

Heyward tried to catch his host's eye. "Mr. Bayles, I meant no disrespect to the young—"

Mr. Bayles' attention snapped to him, but it was accompanied by a frown of dismissal. "I do not believe we have been introduced, sir, nor do I believe we shall be. A good day to you. Show him the door, Allen," he growled as he shuffled back down the hallway.

The footman was at his elbow in an instant, but Heyward needed no urging. His chances for the position had clearly slipped to nothing and the sooner he could retreat from this unexpected disaster, the better.

Met with unexpected enemy forces, he thought ruefully as he closed the gate behind himself. *A hopeless cause.*

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Sophie Bayles dashed up the stairs to the first floor, glanced into the drawing room and, seeing no sign of Helen, continued up the second flight of stairs to the small bedchamber in the garret where Helen preferred to sleep. The ceiling was lower here for the quarters were for servants and small children. But here Helen could have a room with a western exposure that enabled her to see the stars in the morning, and that made her happy. Even in the short time she had been with them, they had all learned that it was easier to keep Helen happy.

The fact that Helen was the sister of her own sister's dearest friend—and that she was stranded at their house until the rest of her family were able to return to London—

necessitated that Sophie should treat her with as much indulgent kindness as she could manage and she insisted that the servants do likewise. But the further fact that Helen behaved just as irrationally as her brother Geoffrey—who had been hauled off to Bedlam after attacking a gentleman at the opera—made such kindness trying at times. Sophie found herself counting the days until Helen's sister Lucia and her own sister Eugenie returned to town. Lucia would take her troublesome sister and brother back to Hertfordshire and Geni would rejoin Sophie in the social events of the season. But until then, she had an irrational houseguest to indulge.

She knocked on the door to Helen's bedchamber. "May I come in?"

"As you wish."

When she opened the door, she found Helen carefully arranging the pillows on her bed, squaring the angles of the corners and punching them until they were of equal height.

"Is it not a little early to be concerned with the pillows?"

Helen cast a sharp glance at her. "Perhaps I shall retire a little early this evening."

"It is early afternoon, dear." Sophie offered what she hoped was an encouraging smile. "Did he upset you all that much?"

"It was like having Geoffrey here."

"Your brother insults you?"

Helen gave the pillow an extra-vehement punch. "He finds no greater joy. Having him locked in Bedlam and out of my presence for the past fortnight has been the most enjoyable time of my life." She bit her lip. "I do miss Lucia, though."

Sophie smiled again, but restrained the urge to put a comforting arm around Helen, because such closeness would not actually be comforting at all to a girl like Helen, who had so many peculiarities and did not like to be touched. "I'm sure Lucia and Geoffrey both will be back with you soon. You know Geoffrey was only in Bedlam for a few nights. They've been in the rest home at Shady View since then. And Eugenie tells me Geoffrey has improved a good deal and may be released soon."

Helen narrowed her eyes. "If that thought is meant to comfort me, it does not. Having Geoffrey return would be just as bad as—as having that rude Lieutenant Elliott underfoot."

"You knew that man?" Sophie asked in surprise.

Helen shrugged. "I knew he was expected at one o'clock. An interview with your father. But he arrived early and interfered with my gravitational egg experiment."

"You mean he was supposed to be in the house?" Sophie felt a sinking sensation in her stomach. "Father had invited him? He expected to see him?"

"Yes, yes," Helen waved away her concern. "I believe he was one of the candidates for steward. But if he's going to come around early, messing up egg drops, then your father really does not need to have him about."

Sophie looked at her for a moment. This was starting to make sense, but it was an unpleasant sense. "Did you drop your eggs *on* him?"

Helen shook her head. "Absolutely not. I dropped my eggs according to plan and he walked into the target area."

"Papa invited a man for an interview and you broke raw eggs on him," Sophie repeated, the sick feeling now spreading through her insides.

"No, not at all. The eggs were partially cooked. And only one of them broke." Helen nodded toward a chest of drawers, where an egg lay nestled against her hairbrush.

"Why did you drop eggs in the foyer when we were expecting a guest?"

"He wasn't expected until one o'clock. I dropped the eggs at twelve-fifty, which gave me precisely nine minutes and forty seconds—allowing a generous twenty seconds to traverse two flights of stairs—to measure the diameter of the residue and then mop it up."

Sophie decided she needed to sit, and since the chairs in the room were covered with toast rinds and other odds and ends she preferred not examine at close range, she had to sit on the bed, even though she might dislodge the pillows. "Ah, look, Helen, next time can you drop your eggs outside?"

Helen scowled as she straightened the two pillows nearest to her. "Then I have to factor in wind, barometric pressure and humidity."

"Never mind." Sophie closed her eyes with a sigh. She had wronged this Lieutenant Elliott and accused him of the worst behavior when it was Helen she should have reprimanded. She had cost the man any chance of the position with her father. And from the look of his clothing, he needed that position. She owed him an apology. But that would really be improper, since they had not been introduced. At the very least, though, she could make things right with her father, to give the poor fellow another chance at the position.

That much she could do.

And then she might go shopping for a new bonnet. Something hard enough to withstand the concussion of an egg being dropped from a great height.

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Heyward allowed his pace to slow a little when he'd traversed several blocks from the Bayles residence, pulling up the collar of his coat to block some of the icy wind. He was used to walking quickly and with a purpose, but it gradually dawned on him that he had no purpose now. It was too soon to check back at the Admiralty, and the other positions he had applied for were with private shipping firms, where it was not as easy to anonymously skulk about for information. His ride back to Enfield would not leave until Lawton concluded his business, probably not before dark.

He had nothing to do.

And he did not even have a hopeful story for his sisters, which was the worst part of all. Two days ago, he'd ridden back with a man who grew oranges and other delicacies in a glasshouse, brought his sisters a basket of sweet limes that hadn't sold to the homes of the nobility and told them all about his interview with the shipping firm of Winston and Walters. He frankly held out little hope that he'd be chosen for the position. Competition was so fierce and he had been asked questions about his former captain, Lord Cochrane, whom everyone seemed to hate at the moment. When the threat of Napoleon loomed on the horizon, Cochrane had been a hero. Now he was an unnecessary embarrassment to the government. It was unfair. And Heyward had ventured just enough of this opinion to sabotage his chances at that position.

He told none of this to Caro and Jane, of course. Just how much the position paid, and the good coal and candles they would be able to afford. Despite shivering in their thin shawls and calico gowns, the silly girls were more interested in dreams of new bonnets, slippers and gloves than in keeping their little house warm and comfortable.

So maybe that would be the story he could bring home for them today. He could go to Oxford Street and observe the shops that sold the sorts of things that the girls spoke of so rapturously. He would memorize the details so that he could describe all the finery he would buy them. Once he obtained employment.

He wasn't quite sure where the street lay from his present position, but he had plenty of time. Though the earth showed no signs of warming for spring, the days were growing longer and he could expect daylight until after three bells. Half past five. That gave him nearly four hours, since his interview with Mr. Bayles ended so early. Or to be precise, never even began.

A blast of cold hit him as he turned the corner. It was certainly no worse than any he'd endured in the North Sea, and yet it seemed colder, perhaps because the smoke from chimneys in the brick buildings lining the street reminded him that warmth lay just beyond his reach. Really it was only his hands that were cold, he told himself. And if he only walked faster, they would warm up.

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Sophie put on her best smile, swept down to the kitchen to fill a plate with her father's favorite rosewater teacakes and intercepted Allen with the post so that she could bring him the best mail herself. "Papa?" she asked as she knocked on the door to his study. "May I have a word with you, sir?"

She took the noncommittal muttered response as an affirmative one and opened the door, laying the cakes just near enough that he could smell them, but where they would not interfere with the array of papers he had spread over his desk. Then she stepped back to wait until she had gained his attention.

Her father stole one quick look at the cakes but turned his attention back to a row of figures on the paper in front of him. He muttered some numbers, shook his head and scratched a figure in the margin. "Cannot be right," he murmured, rubbing his chin.

"Poor Papa," Sophie sighed. Her father seemed to have aged a score of years since his previous steward gave notice. He had a great mind for envisioning trade plans and no patience or stamina whatsoever for putting any plans into action. "You have enough to occupy you without taking on the duties of a steward as well."

"What?" Her father blinked as if surprised to find her in the room with him. He reached for a teacake, contemplating its golden edges for a moment before taking a bite. "Thank you, my dear. Cook burned the toast this morning and I do find myself in need of sustenance. I cannot for the life of me manage to get these figures to come out as they should."

"Yes, Papa. That is why you have a steward."

"But I haven't one at the moment."

"Did you not have a man here to interview for the position?" She put on her best pleading smile. "He seemed capable enough." If she could convince her father to hire Lieutenant Elliott, she could assuage her guilt and lighten her father's burden.

But her father frowned. "Capable? My dear, you said he accosted that girl who's staying with us. What's her name...Lucia?"

Sophie struggled to suppress a sigh of frustration, since she had been forced to repeat the same information to her father nearly every day for the last fortnight. "No, she is Helen." *One of the crazy twins*, she wanted to add. "Lucia is her sister, who is not with us at the moment. She is with Eugenie in the country." And if she did not return soon, they would all be driven crazy. Geni had brought Helen and Geoffrey to London to convince her friend Lucia to stay for the season. But the plan had gone awry right from the start. After Geoffrey attacked a gentleman at the opera, Lucia and Geni somehow removed him to a rest home outside of town and were working to enable his return home.

Helen, while less violent than her brother, often seemed no more reasonable.

Sophie cleared her throat. "I was mistaken, sir. Helen hit the man with an egg, so he had every right to reprimand her."

"Helen hit him with an egg, you said? Did I hear you correctly?" Her father shook his head. "Makes no sense at all."

"Yes, that is why I believe the young man was not out of line in speaking—"

Her father tapped his pen against the ledger. "Why would Helen hit him with an egg?"

Sophie bit her lip. They'd tried to keep Helen's experiments a secret, as she really didn't think her father would approve of Helen setting fire to things in her room. "Um, well, I do not believe we shall have Helen with us for too much longer so I would not worry too much about—"

Again her father shook his head with a frown. "The man must have lied to you about the egg."

"No," Sophie rushed her words, anxious to correct the misunderstanding, "he told me nothing about the egg. It was Helen who —"

Her father waved with his pen to interrupt. "It sounds like Helen needs a rest, a long rest. Is she fully within her reason?"

Sophie swallowed hard. She was on dangerous ground. After seeing Geoffrey's violent outburst at the opera, her father might feel it best to have Helen locked up too. "Helen is...is perfectly well."

"That's good then. So the rude young man did not upset her overmuch?"

Sophie shook her head. "No, no, not at all." Well, in truth he had, but then sometimes the position of the clouds at sunrise could upset Helen to the same degree. "And you see, he was not actually rude, but just defending himself, so I think perhaps you should give him another —"

"Defending himself against Helen?" The pen slipped through his fingers to jab ineffectually at the page. "Why, the girl's not yet reached her majority and she cannot weigh nine stone. And the man was armed, for heaven's sake—he had a sword. Why should he have to defend himself against her?"

Sophie decided not to bring up the eggs again. "I made a mistake, Papa. There is nothing wrong with the gentleman and I think you should give him another chance. Reschedule the interview."

"No," her father said with more certainty than usual. "I heard the way he raised his voice. I have no need of such confrontations in my house every morning. And besides, I've already sent word to the man I interviewed yesterday—Silas Ringeour, I believe his name was."

Sophie tried to remember if she'd seen him. "Was he from the Navy as well?"

Her father sighed. "Which of them was not? I daresay I'll have little use for experience in boarding prizes and firing broadsides. But war is all any young man has a talent for these days. This Ringeour seemed personable enough. I think he'll get on well with the tenants and staff. We'll have no caterwauling about eggs, at any rate."

"Can you not at least give Lieutenant Elliott a chance? Speak with him yourself?"

"No, as I've said, the matter is already settled. I sent Harrison out with a message a quarter of an hour ago."

Sophie fumed. If she'd come to see her father right away instead of procuring bribes from the kitchen and pawing through the mail, she might have made a difference. But it was too late now. She had completely ruined Lieutenant Elliott's chance for the position.

Chapter Two

Sophie bid farewell to her father and walked slowly down the hall.

She'd done all she could, tried her best. It was disappointing to be sure, but there was nothing for it. She had failed. But there was a wonderful card party tonight, and the good company would surely dispel her bad mood.

It was not her fault Helen had dropped an egg on him. Actually, though, it had been her reprimand that set her father against the man.

And he looked so desperately in need of a position. Though he bore himself with strength and ease, there was a tension in his face that bordered on desperation.

But it was not her fault.

She walked slowly up the stairs, marveling at how they seemed so long sometimes and yet could be traversed without notice at other times. Today they seemed about as tall as the Dover cliffs, which she had never seen but were depicted in an oil painting in the drawing room.

At the top of the cliffs—or rather, stairs—she trudged down the hall to her bedchamber. She would pick out her gown for tonight, giving her maid Peggy plenty of time to air and press it and perhaps even locate matching stockings.

But her clothing seemed as dull as the winter sky outside. She could see nothing worth looking at, either outside or in.

Nevertheless, despite the dreary sky, her eye was still drawn to the light from the window, and she stepped closer to peer out into the wet street. “Do I want to go for a walk?” she murmured to the sooty glass.

“Sophie, dear, is that you?” her mother called when she stepped back out into the hall.

Sophie turned away from the stairs and toward her mother's voice. “Mama? I thought you'd gone to call on Lady Sommersby.”

Her mother sat at a table next to her bed, still wearing her dressing gown. “My back troubles me overmuch. Instead, I've enjoyed the company of a bag of hot sand.” She glanced at the bonnet in Sophie's hands. “Are you venturing out, dear?”

“I thought to take a walk with Helen.”

Her mother beckoned for her to come closer. “You girls might walk on Oxford Street as well as anywhere else. Can you buy me some tincture of camphor and a new nightshift? I fear I will be spending more time in a state of undress and I am sick to death of this old thing.”

"Your maid could do just as well in half the time." Sophie looked around and lowered her voice. "You know if I take Helen shopping we will spend an inordinate amount of time counting our steps and rearranging the displays."

"I understand, dear, truly." Her mother patted her hand. "But one wants judgment in the matter of undergarments and Dinah and Peggy can scarcely tell the difference between batiste and sackcloth. I trust your touch."

"Perhaps I should go without Helen, then. I've said nothing to her."

"Do take her," her mother urged. "The poor girl gets out so seldom. Always locked away upstairs reading."

"Uh, yes. Reading." Sophie glanced up toward the garret. Fortunately the burning smells never drifted to this side of the house.

Her mother smiled. "So you'll undertake the errand for me? And while you're out, you really should replace that bonnet."

"I know." She tried to look critically at the faded blue silk headwear in her hands. The thing was at least two years old and terribly out of fashion. Her mother did not want anyone to think they had fallen on hard times or that they paid no attention to style. "But I like this bonnet," she murmured almost to herself. It was comfortable, stayed in place without any pins and blocked the sun just right without obscuring her vision too much.

"You know," her mother squinted suspiciously at the bonnet, "I thought you bought a new one when we first arrived in town."

"I did." It was still sitting in the box inside her wardrobe.

"Why do you not wear that one, then?"

She should. She really should if they were to appear in company.

Her mother smiled indulgently. "Well, if you do not like the new one, select another, then. And Geni will probably stand in need of one when she returns, but I do not believe your sister would care to have you shop for her."

Sophie laughed. "No, indeed. Even if she liked it, she would claim otherwise. It is in the nature of younger sisters."

Her mother's smile faded a bit. "You are both too old to get on so. These rivalries were to be expected when you were girls at school. But you both look and act so young that I sometimes forget..." Her mother let her words trail off, thankfully, for Sophie was in no mood to be reminded that her mother had been married and given birth to two children by the time she was Sophie's age.

"We'd best be off, then." Sophie smiled with forced cheer. Taking Helen to Oxford Street to shop for undergarments would not have been her first choice as a means to improve her mood.

And Helen was not exactly pleased either when she told her in the carriage.

"We're to shop for undergarments? In public?" Helen shuddered, clutching a basket in her lap as if for protection.

"Unfortunately, yes. And tincture of camphor."

"Well, Lucia orders all our undergarments made by a woman in the village. Surely your mother can do the same."

"She wishes to have something new straightaway and will not wait for a seamstress."

Helen raised one eyebrow. "What has she done to her nightshift, then, that she must have a new one at once?"

Sophie sank back into her seat with a sigh. "I do not believe that is an appropriate question, Helen."

"That is what older people say when they do not wish us to know the truth."

"It is not always necessary for you to know the truth. Some things should be kept private."

"Nonsense. Truth is always preferable to fiction."

Fortunately, Sophie was saved from further and potentially limitless debate by the sudden jerk of the carriage. She peered out the curtain. "We've arrived."

Helen preceded her out the door. "Where do we go first?"

Sophie paused for a moment. For all the time she spent shopping, it still took a moment to orient herself. "The chemist we want is this way, and we'll stop there first."

"Do you think he'll have sulfur?"

"If he does, you'll not be burning it in your bedchamber," Sophie warned. She gave orders to the coachman to meet them in the same place in two hours.

With a nod, he flicked the reins at the horses and soon disappeared into the array of horses, coaches, carts and other traffic.

With a footman following at a respectable distance, she and Helen walked down the street at a leisurely pace—that is to say that Sophie was walking slowly and Helen was counting the paving stones, so Sophie did not dare interrupt. When she reached one hundred, she paused.

"That's the milliner's we'll visit after we take care of Mama's errands." Sophie pointed to a shop just across the street from them.

Helen nodded and took up her counting again. They reached the chemist without incident, procured a tincture of camphor and a small quantity of sulfur which the chemist assured Sophie would not explode if mixed with toast crumbs.

At the mantua maker, Helen closed her eyes and covered her ears while Sophie described their errand to the proprietress. Sophie assured her there were no men in the shop, but Helen remained in self-imposed darkness while Sophie sampled the feel of several fabrics and selected something she hoped her mother would like.

Then they were off to shop for bonnets. Surprisingly for someone who paid little attention to matters of dress and who had to be reminded not to wear the same morning

gown every day for a fortnight, Helen took great enjoyment in trying on headwear of every description.

"What think you of this one, Sophie?" Helen asked with a suddenly serious expression as she turned away from the mirror to show off a beaver fur top hat.

Sophie tried to suppress a smile, since Helen looked so serious. "I believe that is a gentleman's hat, dear."

"And does it make me look like a gentleman?" Helen cracked a smile.

"No." Sophie shook her head. "A tradesman at most."

Helen let out a few snorts of laughter, and the unexpected sound made Sophie laugh as well. Then Helen began a pantomime of a gentleman with a cane, and the slightly hunched posture and shuffling gait reminded Sophie so much of her father that she laughed even harder. The more she tried to control herself, the funnier it became and soon she had tears streaming down her cheeks.

At last Sophie removed the hat and began to tug Helen toward the door. "We must leave before they arrest us for public drunkenness."

"But w-we haven't been drinking," Helen sputtered.

"Would you believe us if we told you that?"

"N-no! And I know I never touch spirits."

This set them both off again—Helen had in fact given a short temperance lecture at dinner just the previous Tuesday—so Sophie took a deep breath, made one final effort to gain control of herself and pushed Helen out the door of the shop.

Much of the light had faded from the sky by this time, though it was difficult to tell behind the buildings whether the sun had slipped below the horizon. Lamplighters had already attended one end of the street. After the warm closeness of the shop, the cold air took her breath away, so Sophie pulled her pelisse together tight in front of her chest, squinting as she tried to get her bearings. She had told the coachman to pick them up in front of—

Helen had left her side.

Sophie turned frantically to look for her. She quickly sighted her only a few steps away crossing the street, apparently unmindful of the carriage and four bearing down on her from the left. "Helen, no!" Sophie made a dash to pull her out of the way but Helen moved with brisk determination, her eyes fixed on a lamppost on the other side of the street. Sophie choked on the scream that rose in her throat as the carriage drew closer, horse hooves thundering against the pavement.

And then suddenly the carriage swerved and rolled harmlessly by, spattering them both with a light spray of muddy water. Sophie blinked. One moment, disaster seemed imminent. Then it was over, just like that.

She stepped to Helen's side. "You're not hurt, are you? Did you not see that carriage? You could have been killed."

Helen looked annoyed. "The driver should have watched where he was going. Even Geoffrey would have done a better job. If that man hadn't waved the horses off, I would have been quashed quite flat."

"And that did not scare you?" Sophie marveled at the matter-of-fact manner in which Helen spoke of her own demise. "Wait, you said a man waved the horses off?" She turned to find the footman. "We should thank Harrison for his quick action."

"It wasn't Harrison," Helen corrected. "It was that man over there." She pointed over her shoulder.

Sophie looked over to see a man attempting to wipe mud from his breeches. He wore a naval uniform, now a more muddy brown than blue. Fairly tall, with a slender build and an unruly shock of sandy-colored hair, he seemed familiar. As he stood upright and she saw his dark, scowling eyes, she immediately recognized Lieutenant Elliott. She already owed this man an apology, now she owed thanks, and probably another apology. Once again, Helen's inappropriate behavior had proved disastrous to him.

With gritted teeth and half-closed eyes, she hurried over, bracing for a well-deserved angry outburst. "Thank you, sir."

He did not say anything for a moment and she realized he was breathing hard. "My pleasure," he said with a nod.

Sophie glanced around. Propriety would allow her to thank this stranger, perhaps, but to be seen talking with him further would reflect poorly on her. She should get Helen to join her.

But then the conversation would focus entirely on Helen.

Sophie rushed on with her apology. "Surely not. We've caused you no end of trouble today."

"Not at all." But he bit his lip.

"Um, I can pay to have that cleaned." She pointed to his soiled uniform and then immediately felt heat in her face. If speaking to him was improper, then pointing to his clothes and suggesting that he undress would only be so much worse.

"Not necessary. Please 'scuse me." He looked down and after a minute she realized he must be looking for his hat. It had grown rapidly darker, so that it was hard to discern objects out of the lamplight.

She motioned for Helen and the footman to join them and she too began to scan the ground for the missing hat.

Then she walked into Helen, turned around and collided with Lieutenant Elliott. Her face now felt feverish and she was glad that he couldn't see her too well. At the same time, she was embarrassed to realize that she was disappointed that she couldn't see him up close, because he was rather pleasant to look on.

"Sorry," they both mumbled at the same time. He immediately began to look for the hat again.

"What are we counting?" Helen finally asked after a few minutes fruitless searching along the edge of the street.

"We are not counting. We look for the lieutenant's hat. It must have come off when he—" Sophie stopped. "What did you do to stop that carriage?" she asked the lieutenant.

"I waved to the driver," he answered simply.

"I couldn't really see what he was doing," Helen explained, "but I think he waved his hat. So it's probably somewhere out there." She pointed toward the expanse of mud and muck in the middle of the street.

Sophie looked over with that sinking feeling she'd felt far too many times today. "Oh." Lieutenant Elliott stood in greater need of a new hat than even she did.

He dodged into the street between horses and a dray wagon. The sodden item he retrieved from the muck bore less resemblance to a hat than a pile of stable refuse.

"You will allow me to buy you a new one," Sophie insisted.

He sighed. "I believe I have little need of such, but thank you. By the time I'm called to sea again, the Admiralty will have decreed some new fashion. No sense in making the investment."

"It is a small enough investment, surely." Too late she realized that perhaps though the price of a hat was a small matter to her family, it might be a major purchase for another. But he wore a uniform and still received some naval salary. Surely he couldn't be *that* desperate for money. Unless he spent it all on drink or gambling.

"Watch yourselves," Helen warned.

Sophie looked around. Was someone observing them? Was she standing too close to the lieutenant? Did someone think them a couple? She took a step away from him.

Grabbing her arm, Helen pulled her out of the street. "Have you learned nothing from this experience? At the very least, you'd have ended up covered in the same muck as the lieutenant."

Sophie swallowed a nervous laugh. She was on pins and needles around this man and had no idea why. It must be her unease at the lack of introduction. But of course it was of no consequence. He did not move in the same circles as her family, obviously, and since he would not work for her father, she would likely never run across him again. He would gamble or drink himself into nameless oblivion.

Then she caught a glimpse of his face as he stepped closer to the streetlamp. He looked flustered—just as she felt—and a little lost. And very tired. Like a child who had stayed up too late and yet refused to go to bed. He did not have the jaded, resigned visage of a gambler.

"It is growing late. May I call you a hackney?" he offered.

"Don't fall for it," Helen whispered to her. "Geoffrey plays this joke all the time." In a louder voice she said, "No. I'm a young lady and I haven't a horse in front of me."

The lieutenant's face wrinkled in puzzlement.

"Heavens, you're even more of a culchie than I am. I meant, I'm not a hackney and neither is Sophie," Helen explained slowly. "Oh. You really meant to call us transportation."

The lieutenant nodded. "Yes."

"We have a carriage," Sophie offered. "The coachman should be waiting for us just over there."

"Near the shop with the bottles of intestinal worms in the window," Helen added for clarification.

"Of course. May I see to your safety?" He motioned for them to walk ahead, while he stayed back with the footman.

"I hope you would be so good as to accompany us," Sophie suggested, hoping she didn't sound hesitant. She really did not understand why it seemed so important that he agree.

He paused a moment, then gave a tight-lipped nod.

They set off down the street in silence, sidestepping chattering shoppers and silent shop employees who slunk home in the shadows. Helen mumbled to herself as she counted each door they passed.

A man with a round, well-fed face leaned out of a carriage with a grin as they passed and Sophie tensed, expecting some sort of untoward comment. But the man ignored her and addressed his words to the lieutenant. "Elliott, you almost missed me."

The lieutenant stopped with a startled look, as if awakened from a dream. "I'm sorry, Mr. Lawton. I will only be a few minutes longer. Would you be so good as to wait?"

Mr. Lawton looked at her and winked. "Surely, m'boy. But you mustn't keep your other women waiting too long either."

Sophie quickly turned away and speeded her steps along the street. If this man had the wrong idea about them, then surely others must also. "Helen, hurry, if you please."

Helen waved her to be quiet so she could concentrate on her step count.

"No, it's... I shall explain on the way home," the lieutenant was saying. His hurried steps told her that he was catching up to her, but she did not look back. This had been a mistake. She and Helen would have been in no danger walking back to the carriage together without his escort. And now she had given everyone ideas.

She almost expected him to try to take her arm.

After another minute, she looked back to see why he had not.

He walked several feet behind Helen, his eyes scanning on all sides as if he expected tigers to leap out at them.

Then suddenly she could not suppress the urge to laugh, despite her anxiety—or perhaps because of it. "This has been a ridiculous day."

Helen ignored her. The lieutenant nodded distractedly. With misgiving she realized that a day full of minor mishaps for her had more dire consequences for him. She stopped and waited for him to catch up to her. "Where is home?" she asked abruptly. She would find out where this Mr. Lawton lived and send a servant with money to pay for a new hat and the cleaning of the lieutenant's uniform.

"Enfield."

She pictured rows of tiny houses, wives hanging laundry on lines crisscrossed through even tinier gardens, gangly children clustered on steps and leaning out windows. Did the lieutenant hurry home to a pretty wife and children in one of those tiny houses?

And why would she care?

She couldn't think of anything else to say, and they continued to walk in silence until she sighted the familiar outline of her family's small carriage. The coachman jumped down from the box and opened the door before she had a chance to thank the lieutenant.

He bowed. "A pleasant evening to you, ladies."

Should she apologize? Thank him? She smiled wanly, and before she could say anything, he was gone.

Chapter Three

Heyward leaned back against the seat in Lawton's battered coach and closed his eyes with a sigh. He raked his hands through his hair, wishing it would cover his face so his neighbor would not see the play of emotions there.

"So now I see why you were so anxious to make your appointment this afternoon," Lawton teased him as he settled back in the seat with a bag of fried pork cracklings. "Care for one?"

"No, thank you."

"Ah yes. She leaves no appetite for food."

Heyward opened his eyes. "W-who?" But he knew perfectly well to whom the man referred.

Lawton gave a snort of laughter. "Not the one with the long, skinny face like a horse, that's for sure."

Startled at his friend's poor manners, Heyward sat up stiffly. "That is an unkind description of anyone, woman or man. If you wish to speak so, I shall have to leave your company." Even if it meant walking more than ten miles back to Enfield.

Lawton waved him back. "Rest easy, m'boy. I meant no insult. But the one girl could not hold a candle to the other, you must admit."

"I-I did not notice."

"Ha! You'd best hope we don't overturn and meet our maker now, boy, or you shall surely fry in hell for telling the biggest lie of your life." Lawton tossed a piece of pork rind in the air and caught it in his mouth.

Heyward said nothing. The young lady was beautiful, enticing when she defended her friend in anger and even more appealing when she flashed a rare smile. And for that reason he couldn't mind that she cost him the position with her father. But he did not want to think about her anymore, for nothing good could come of it. He couldn't afford to think on any young woman, let alone one so far out of reach.

"Did your business go well?" he asked to change the subject.

"Better'n expected." Lawton stuffed a handful of pork cracklings in his mouth, chewed and swallowed in a great gulp. "I sold all of my current shipment and arranged the sale of two future loads. So I shan't need to come to town again for some time. More's the pity for you, I s'pose."

Heyward sighed. "I may try my prospects abroad."

"And leave your sisters alone?"

"They're hardly alone. They do have their mother."

"She's one of the girls. Barely more than a slip herself."

"They managed well enough in my absence in the service before. I daresay they'll do so again."

"Ah, but their hopes all hung on your return. Every sentence started with 'when this war is over and Heyward returned to us'."

"I know," Heyward said quietly. With his command of the *Aliceanna*, they had expected him to come home a post captain with a secure income to provide dowries for his sisters. Instead, the Navy refused to ratify his command, kept his rank at lieutenant and required him to repay the captain's salary he had drawn for nine months. It left him with virtually no income whatsoever and forced the sternest economy on all of them. But they had told no one.

Only six months more and he would at least draw half pay. But even if the creditors would wait, the money would be too little to keep them out of debtor's prison unless he found a position soon.

"Have you had a row, you an' your sweetheart?" Lawton asked with concern. "You look all despaired."

Heyward decided he'd better end this talk here and now before Lawton spread his story about. "I haven't a 'sweetheart,' Lawton, nor have I ever had one, so don't be thinking I lament an engagement that has come to a sorry end. I've had no time to court a young lady, nor do I expect to have such in the near future. If I look 'despaired' as you say, it is only that my bed is lumpy and I've not slept well these past nights."

"Well, there's one sure cure for a lumpy bed, but it takes two, if you know what I mean."

Heyward grinned. "I think it would best if I pretend I did not."

"Tryin' to keep your mind off it, eh?" Lawton asked sympathetically. "Ver' well. We can d'scuss the upcoming bout in Hailsham. Broughton's Rules, I unnerstand. Do you like Scroggins to win?"

"He's a conceited, overconfident bully. I'd like to see him lose."

"That's not what I asked. D'you think he'll win again?"

"Yes." Heyward sighed. The bullies always seemed to come out ahead.

* * * * *

As soon as enough sunlight struggled through the smoky morning to light her bedchamber, Sophie rose and dressed herself in the only gown she could fasten without the assistance of her maid. In her haste, she put a hole in one of her stockings and did not bother to straighten the seams so that one of her shoes felt like she had an enormous stone wedged in the toe. But the pain did not matter.

At least, that's what she kept reminding herself. Speed was the only thing that mattered.

After leaving her room and closing the door softly behind her, she hurried down the hall, looking up as she neared the stairs to make sure that Helen wasn't about to engage in another gravity experiment with eggs cast from the floor above. When she saw that the coast was clear, she nearly threw herself down the stairs, determined to be the first one into the breakfast parlor. She needed to speak to one of the footmen alone, so she could send him to deliver the letter to Enfield without anyone else knowing.

She accomplished her goal, arriving so early that not only were there no other diners, but the cook had not even sent up the food. She lifted all the lids on the buffet to find each of them cold and empty.

"My apologies, Miss Bayles," Allen said in horror as he stepped into the room. "We did not expect you at this hour."

"Why, what time is it? Never mind." She lowered her voice. "I have an urgent errand for you."

A look of concern flashed across his face as his gaze shifted briefly toward her mother's bedchamber.

"Do not look so alarmed, I will not send you to the physician. I wish you to go to Enfield and deliver this letter to the home of Mr. Lawton, who keeps a carriage. At least I believe he does." She paused for a moment. What had seemed a sure plan last night now seemed full of holes. There might well be any number of Mr. Lawtons in Enfield. He might have rented the carriage.

Allen frowned. "Are you quite sure, Miss Bayles?"

Sophie put on her best "mistress of the house" gaze. "Quite sure." But nevertheless, she wondered if she should have addressed her note to Mr. Lawton rather than the lieutenant himself, because it appeared unlikely that Allen would actually deliver it. His disdain for the lieutenant's shabby appearance and angry words had been no secret.

He bowed reluctantly. "Very well. I shall endeavor to undertake the delivery after breakfast."

"No. Do it now. I shall arrange for someone else to serve the meal."

His bow was even less enthusiastic this time. "As you wish."

She watched out the window to make sure that he rode out of the yard in the right direction, but after that she could do no more. Based on the price of ladies' bonnets, she had estimated what the price of a man's hat might be. She asked Peggy how much a hired woman might charge for laundering a filthy shirt and cleaning a suit. And then she added a little extra, just to be sure.

But what if it wasn't enough? Or what if she insulted him by sending it?

She paced back and forth in front of the sideboard for just long enough to realize how little room there was to pace back and forth in that particular room.

Just as she had decided to return to her own bedroom, the sound of footsteps along the corridor made her hold back, in case the servant happened to be carrying a heavy bucket of slops or something else with which Sophie would not want to risk a collision.

But the young woman who dashed by was not carrying anything at all. And she was not a servant—she was Helen. With her figure encased in a long woolen cloak and her face reddened by the wind, it was obvious that she had just returned from a lengthy trip outside, most likely without a chaperone.

Sophie waited a moment and then followed her upstairs and entered her bedchamber without knocking. “Where did you go at this hour of the morning?” she demanded.

Helen unfastened the clasp on her cloak and swung it around her shoulders, bunching the mass of dark red wool in her arms.

“Today I examined Gower Street and Chenies Mews.”

“Today?” Sophie began to pace nervously once again. “Do you mean to suggest that you have ventured out unaccompanied on other mornings? You cannot convince me that you persuaded one of the servants to accompany you at this hour.”

“I prefer to conduct my examinations alone.”

Sophie winced as she imagined Helen stopping to examine bits of refuse or other items in the street. “It is not proper or safe, you realize.”

Helen sighed impatiently but said nothing.

“Why did you examine those streets?”

“I’ve not observed that segment of the city before.”

“And what is it about those particular blocks of houses that interests you?”

“I examine every segment of the city within reach. Today I made particular observation of the distance sounds travel in the fog. Yesterday, I could hear the ferryman quite clearly when I reached—”

Sophie found herself growing dizzy, but whether it was from the rapid pace of Helen’s discourse or her attempt to pace in an impossibly small section of floor she could not tell. She held up her hand to interrupt. “I still do not understand. What do you look for?”

Helen hung her cloak on a peg beside the bed, taking care to keep it clear of the pillows. “I look because I have the opportunity to do so. I have lived my whole life near Little Heath. Until your sister brought Geoffrey and me into London, we had never seen more than five houses clustered together.” Satisfied at least that the cloak was hanging straight and in no danger of touching the pillows, Helen turned to face her. “When Lucia returns—with or without Geoffrey—she is likely to take me back to Little Heath, where we shall remain the remainder of our lives. This is my opportunity to catalog a city and I intend to put it to good use.”

“Oh.” Sophie felt suddenly very small. To her, the chief advantage of the season in town was the shopping and parties. “Must you go alone? You should at least have Peggy with you.”

“The servants do not trust me any more than your parents do.”

"Well you, uh..." Sophie searched her mind for diplomatic words. "You defy their expectations."

"I frighten them." Helen stepped over to the window to examine a collection of aged breakfast residue that belonged in a pig's stomach several weeks ago.

"Well, I would not go so far as to say... Well perhaps, on occasion... Yes I suppose you do," Sophie admitted. "But they're also afraid *for* you. You seem so fragile at times."

"They fail to grasp what is important." Helen looked over at her for a moment. "But I think perhaps *you* understand, at least in fits and starts."

It was the oddest compliment Sophie had ever received. But it made her feel good nonetheless, that Helen was pleased with her. Helen's regard mattered in no drawing room or ballroom in the *ton*—nowhere else, in fact—but Sophie took pleasure in it nonetheless.

Helen brushed her hands together, releasing a spray of crumbs. "So then tomorrow, perhaps you will come with me and I will explain my observations."

"Yes, very well." Then an unpleasant thought occurred to her. "Do you always start out so early?"

"Earlier usually. I awoke late this morning."

"Oh."

"And *you* rose earlier than usual," Helen continued, looking at her curiously.

"I did," Sophie admitted.

With the hint of a conspiratorial grin, Helen edged closer. "You've discovered my secret, so it is only fair for you to divulge yours."

"What makes you think I've a secret?" Sophie responded quickly, crossing her arms in front of her chest.

"You've gone pale and will not look me in the eyes."

Did she dare confide in Helen? "You must not tell anyone," she said at last.

"If you do not tell that I go out without a chaperone."

"Very well." Sophie took a deep breath. "I sent Allen with a note and money for Lieutenant Elliott. To pay for his ruined hat."

Helen pursed her lips. "That seems reasonable."

"Allen did not seem to approve."

"Allen has not approved of a single word I've uttered since I entered your house. I would take his behavior as a sign that yours was entirely appropriate."

"I fear he may not even deliver the note."

"Then send another. With someone else."

"An excellent idea. But I cannot simply say the same thing."

"You can."

Sophie paced toward the window and turned abruptly from the site of experimental breakfast decay on the windowsill. "But I do not wish to. It will make me appear dreadfully dull and insecure."

Helen eyed her with one eyebrow raised an impossible distance from the other. "And you care how you appear to him?"

Clasping her hands together, she grew vaguely aware that Helen's observation had made her uneasy. "You are right, of course. I do not care."

"You do, but you should not. In any case, write something different in the note and then your mind will be at ease."

"Yes, very well." She tried to think of a different way to offer money to pay for cleaning. But she did not want to send money again because then it would appear as if she wished something from him. What would she say?

She owed him more than a new hat. She owed him another chance. And suddenly, she had an idea of how she could give him that chance. Her mind grew so occupied with her new plan that she nearly plowed into Helen when they traversed the stairs down to breakfast.

Chapter Four

"Tell me again about the big black bonnet with the red feather," Caro urged as she chewed a mouthful of brown bread and milk. "It sounds positively wicked."

"A bonnet cannot be wicked," Heyward insisted, wishing his sister would chew with her mouth closed.

"We don't need to see your breakfast, Caro. And a wicked woman wears wicked clothes, does she not, Mama?" His sister Jane turned to their mother for reassurance.

"She does indeed. You must always choose your dress with care. Close the curtain, Jane."

"Only *those* sort of women wear red," Jane said as she let the window curtain fall back into place and turned back toward the table.

Heyward flipped to another section of the newspaper Lawton had given to them after he had finished with it. "It seems to me that colors sometimes go in and out of fashion and that the choice to wear a color has to do with a woman's propensity to follow that fashion rather than her morality."

Jane scoffed as she turned back toward the window. "What would a man know of fashion?"

The newspaper crunched in protest as Heyward leaned his elbows forward on the table. "For your sake, I spent the better part of the afternoon yesterday in Oxford Street studying just that."

"So you did," Caro admitted with a smile. "But, forgive us, brother, we have not asked how your interview went."

"It is just as well that you did not." Heyward took a hurried sip of his weak tea.

His mother offered him a sympathetic smile. "Did that horrid Lieutenant Ringeour apply for the same post this time too? Close the curtain, Jane."

"I do not believe so." Heyward brightened. "I did not have to see him, in any case."

Her motherly smile soon turned to a frown of concern. "He will goad you to a duel one of these days and then I don't know what we shall do."

"You have so little confidence in my ability to fight?"

"No, no, it's just that..."

He grinned. "You do."

"Well, you are such a nice boy." She held up her hand before he could object. "Man. You're a man now, of course. I simply cannot imagine you would deliberately hurt another man, that's all."

Heyward chuckled. "Mother, I've been in the Navy since I was fifteen. Do you know the purpose of the armed services? We are trained to kill other men. Encouraged to do so, on a regular basis."

His mother drained her teacup. "Frenchmen, Heyward. They hardly count."

Heyward decided not to answer that. He felt the smile fade from his face as he remembered the Frenchmen that "did not count". When they fired at another vessel, they could see little but smoke. But when they boarded...the "enemy" were only men with the same fear in their eyes that he was sure they saw in his own. He shivered despite the warmth of the small fire in the grate.

"Mr. Lawton has a visitor," Jane announced.

"Close the curtain, Jane," his mother said through a mouthful of toast.

Jane waved in short, frantic bursts. "Wait, just let me see...ooh, a footman in livery. He is speaking with Hobbs at the door and he carries a letter."

"Close the curtain, Jane," his mother repeated firmly, her voice no longer clouded with crumbs.

Heyward scanned the newspaper for a new topic of conversation. "I see that there is a proposal forward to import rhinoceroses to pull rail cars."

"What are rhinoceroses?" Jane asked, her attention wavering between the window and the cartoon in the newspaper to which Heyward was pointing.

"Um...they look much like overweight unicorns." He scanned the article. "But I gather they are much more dangerous."

"How would they know?" Caro scoffed as she peered into her teacup.

Heyward looked at her blankly. "How would who know?"

"How would anyone know about the dangers posed by a creature that doesn't exist?"

Heyward decided to look for another article.

"Ooh." Jane fairly bounced with excitement. "Mr. Lawton's man is directing him here. At least I think he is. Yes, yes! The man brings the letter here, to us."

"Close the curtain, Jane," Heyward said quickly.

"But he is coming up the steps even now —"

"Open the curtain, Jane," his mother ordered, waving her to move aside so she could look out.

"It is a letter with a blue seal." His mother's voice rose with girlish excitement. "I wonder what could it mean, Heyward. Maybe the post you applied for."

"Not bloody likely," Heyward muttered as he set his napkin on the table and started for the door.

"Do watch your language."

"Yes, Mother." He made it to the door by the time the footman arrived so he surprised the man by opening the door after the first knock.

The footman quickly recovered, his disconcertion replaced by a look of disdain. It was the footman from the Bayles household, and though Heyward was surprised to find the man on his doorstep, he was damned if he would let him know it.

"A letter for Lieutenant Heyward Elliott," the footman intoned slowly, keeping the paper firmly in his own hand.

"Yes." Heyward nodded impatiently. "You know that is me and you can see there is no servant."

"Yes, sir." The footman dropped the missive in Heyward's outstretched hand.

"Do you wish to stop in the kitchen for refreshment before your lengthy ride back?" Heyward decided that he might let the man know that he realized just how far he was from the Bayles' neighborhood.

"No, sir." The footman bowed, turned on his heel and marched back to his horse.

Jane remained at the window, watching the messenger until he could no longer be seen against the dingy graveled streets. Caro followed behind Heyward as he made his way back to the dining room, hanging just under his arm like an anxious hunting dog. His mother was little better. "Do tell us what it says, Heyward."

"I will. After I open it." He took his time. Though he did not recognize the seal, he assumed it to be that of Mr. Bayles. That meant it was most likely a simple rejection of his application for the post in his household, a nice gesture, since most prospective employers never bothered to make any answer at all.

He detached the seal from the paper with his knife, carefully unfolded the missive and was startled to see coins roll out onto the table.

"They've paid you in advance," his mother cried joyously.

"Not at all." He ignored everything else so he could focus on the unfamiliar, elaborate handwriting.

Lieutenant Elliott,

I hope you will accept my heartfelt apologies for the mishaps we caused you yesterday. Please allow me to offer remuneration for the damage to your hat and clothing. You did us a great service and we owe you our lives and well-being.

Your most humble and obedient servant,

Sophia Bayles

"A letter from a lady," Caro said excitedly.

"How do you know?" Heyward clutched the letter to his chest, belatedly realizing that his action was most incriminating. "I haven't read any of it to you yet."

"She writes on a lady's stationery." Caro leaned closer. "Is it perfumed?"

"Heyward, what is the meaning of this?" his mother asked.

"It means, Mother," Heyward tucked the letter under his arm, "that the lady has made a mistake and the money will have to be returned."

His mother looked crestfallen, like a child deprived of a sweet. "Must it?"

He nodded firmly. "It must."

"Who is it from?" Caro asked as she leaned under his arm to sniff the letter.

"I think it would be improper for me to say." Heyward tried to back away from her.

Caro stepped behind him and snatched the letter from under his arm. "Improper, pooh. You read everything that comes addressed to me."

"Because I am your elder and responsible for your well-being." Heyward reached for her hand and missed as she stepped out of range.

"You are responsible for keeping me a child," she countered, continuing to keep back just out of his reach. "You've not let me read one letter from Mr. Lawton."

"We'll not go into that again. The man is more than twice your age. And he is entirely unsuitable." Heyward shuddered at the thought of his sister in Lawton's company. Much as he appreciated the man's friendship and kindness, he could not stand the thought of selling his sister to the uncouth leech just to help the family fortunes.

Before his mother and sisters could speculate any further on the source of the money or possible ways to spend it, Heyward scooped the coins up and wrapped them in his handkerchief. Then he sat down to write a note of his own, politely thanking Miss Bayles, but declining her generosity.

He estimated that the note would take no time at all and then he could find a day laborer to help him repair a leak in the roof over the back bedchamber.

The note would be very simple. But he struggled with the words, trying not to sound ungrateful or brusque. Her face danced in his mind, first angry, then disappointed, but never smiling at him.

He sighed.

It took him so long to write the note, in fact, that his mother and sisters lost interest in watching him. His mother cleared the table of breakfast and Jane had even given up her customary post at the window. The light from outside showed it to be near midday by the time he had finished and sealed the note with his last wafer. He should post it with a coin in the seal, to show he could afford postage. The trouble was that he couldn't, since he was returning her money.

Perhaps it would wait a few days. Any money they had left would have to go toward fixing the leak.

As he went to fetch his coat, a knock at the door made him jump. He had become used to having every visitor announced by Jane so this time, he was caught unawares.

He opened the door to find Lawton knocking dried mud off the edges of his shoes.

"Elliott, m'boy." Lawton stamped his foot and grinned at him. "I have a most interesting letter for you."

"For me?" Why would someone send a letter to him at Lawton's address?

"May I come in?" Lawton peered inside.

"What? Oh, yes, of course." Shaking his head both at his lapse in manners and his surprise at the sudden influx of correspondence, Heyward stepped back to allow his neighbor to enter.

Lawton stepped into the small parlor with no hesitation. "If you've any tea left, I'll take some."

"Of course." Heyward considered asking one of his sisters to bring a cup, but decided the less attention he called to the visit, the better. He took his mother's heirloom china cup and saucer down from the shelf, surreptitiously wiped the dust from the inside and handed it to Lawton. Then he poured what remained of the tepid liquid in the pot on the table. "Would you like it heated?" he offered belatedly.

"Just right as it is." Lawton took a long slurp.

Heyward hoped he would not ask after "the girls". They'd managed to avoid the subject of his offer for Caroline all during the long ride back yesterday and it would be a shame to bring up the unpleasant topic now.

He cleared his throat. "You said you had a letter?"

Nodding, Lawton let a grin spread across his broad face. He patted his coat pocket but did not remove the letter from it. "I want ye to guess who it's from."

Heyward sighed. He had hoped it might, just might, be an offer of employment or word of another possible opening. But the lascivious grin on his neighbor's face betrayed that the letter could not be something so businesslike.

"Go on, guess," Lawton urged. "I'll bet you half a crown you can't guess because ye didn't get her name."

"Miss Sophia Bayles." Heyward held out his hand. Half a crown was half a crown.

"Well I'll be." Lawton fumbled in his pocket for a moment, his grin replaced by a look of astonishment. "I never thought you'd be so clever as to find her name."

Heyward decided the truth was the surest way to avoid rumor. "She has written me once already and sent money to pay for the muddied hat."

"Right decent of her."

He shook his head. "No, thoroughly unnecessary. I intend to return the money straightaway."

Lawton felt in his pocket for the letter. "Do you s'pose she's sent more money? Or reconsidered and asked for it back?"

"I shan't know, shall I? Until you let me read the letter. And I should ask how it came to be in your possession."

"Oh, of course." Lawton handed him the unsealed letter.

Heyward cast a skeptical look at him.

"It was enclosed in a letter to me. Delivered by a footman."

Heyward nodded. A smart maneuver. The servants would still talk, but it bore less of the appearance of impropriety to the outside world.

To Lieutenant Elliott,

I hope you forgive the liberty, but I wished to inform you of a position open in the neighborhood if you are still seeking employment. Sir Reginald Woodstock, an older gentleman of Bedford Square, is in need of a companion as his previous companion has retired to the country. Again, I do hope you will forgive the liberty I take in writing to you when we have not properly been introduced.

I remain your most humble and obedient servant,
Sophia Bayles

Heyward felt his hopes rise so much he had not realized how far they had fallen. He stifled the urge to hug Lawton.

"She has agreed to see you?" Lawton asked anxiously.

"What? Heavens no." That would be utterly improper.

"What does she say?"

"She does me the courtesy of informing me of a position open in her neighborhood. I will write to the gentleman at once to make my application and endeavor to see him as soon as possible. I can get into town with the milk wagon on Thursday, if not sooner."

Lawton's face wrinkled in thought for a moment. Then he clapped his hands together. "Meadworthy should be heading to town this afternoon. He will stay for some time, though, so you will need to find another means home."

Heyward jumped to his feet. "Thank you, yes, that will work. I shall go at once. I hope you will excuse me."

"Course, my boy. Of course. I'd have you use my coach, but it's let to the Lewis sisters for the remainder of the week."

"No matter. Mr. Meadworthy will surely let me ride with the coachman, if not with him. Thank you."

Heyward had no time to make preparations for the journey, but the kindly old Justice of the Peace let Heyward ride inside his carriage and shared his provisions so long as Heyward agreed to a nonstop game of piquet.

The walk from Mr. Meadworthy's lodgings near Gray's Inn to Bedford Square seemed to pass within moments, possibly because Heyward had decided he should stop at the Bayles home to return Miss Bayles' money before he called on Sir Reginald.

Before he knew it, he had arrived at the same house he approached only the day before with such high hopes. Had it been only one day? He shook his head in disbelief.

"You do well to shake your head, for you come on a wasted errand." A man's voice interrupted his thoughts—an ugly, sneering voice that instantly called to mind an ugly,

sneering face. Silas Ringeour, formerly first lieutenant on the *Shannon* and an unbearable cad who took credit for every one of his subordinates' accomplishments.

Heyward turned around to face him with reluctance. "I did not realize the harbor sludge had drifted this far inland," he said with forced cheer.

"Make your feeble jokes, but you've no chance at the position, for Mr. Bayles has already hired me as his new steward. I shall have control over the Bayles fortune and estates and my pick of his two daughters, who I am told are quite lovely." Ringeour rocked back on his heels with a smug grin.

"They will run in fear at the sight of your grasping hands, Ringeour."

The insult did not have the desired effect. Instead of scowling, Ringeour widened his grin in anticipation. "I shall enjoy myself immensely. Now get along before I call the watch and report you for vagrancy."

"It so happens that my errand is at a different house in the neighborhood." He would now have to have the money delivered by other means, because he could certainly not bring the letter for Miss Bayles to the house with Ringeour on duty.

"Go on, you are simply trying to save face. Not that yours is worth saving."

"I have an interview with Sir Reginald Woodstock regarding a position as his companion."

Ringeour let out a hideous barking laugh. "Woodstock? He's ninety if he's a day. The only place a companion could accompany him is to the privy."

"How would you know?" Heyward demanded.

"I made it my business to know everything about Mr. Bayles and his neighbors before I applied for the position."

Which meant that he probably tortured one of the other applicants to gather the information. Still, Heyward admired the effort, which exceeded his own.

"I do hope you'll excuse me." Heyward offered an exaggerated bow but immediately regretted his action, as it might give Ringeour the opportunity push him down face first into the street. He gave an awkward hop back.

Ringeour laughed again. "It's the East India service for you, Smelliott. No one but the blacks will have you."

Biting back his response, Heyward simply turned away—he had long since learned that Ringeour would have the last word if it killed them both.

Sir Reginald's house sat on the adjacent side of the square and was somewhat larger than the Bayles' home, though its furnishings showed considerably more age. A stooped manservant in a wrinkled coat answered his knock. He contemplated Heyward in silence for a moment.

"I am Lieutenant Heyward Elliott and I have to come to apply for the position as companion to Sir Reginald. If the position is still available."

The servant scratched his head. "Sir Reginald has not mentioned it in years, sir. But I will ask him."

In *years*? Heyward took a step back. Had Miss Bayles set him up to ridicule him? "I shall call again at a more convenient time." He bowed his head briefly and started to turn away.

"No, please, come inside," the servant urged enthusiastically. He motioned for Heyward to enter, but backed up with such tiny, mincing steps that it took him some time to move far enough that Heyward had room to step inside. At this same snail's pace, he led Heyward into a dark, dreary parlor. A tenuous cobweb stretched from the sofa to the tea table in front of it.

"We've drawn the curtains to protect the furniture," the servant said apologetically. He made his way slowly to the nearest bank of draperies and opened them with long, laborious pulls, wheezing with effort. Heyward started forward to assist him, but the man shook his head and Heyward decided he would insult the man if he did anything more than stand as an unhelpful guest.

"Please," the servant gasped between breaths, "take a seat. Would you," *pant*, "care for refreshment?"

"No, thank you." Heyward was actually quite thirsty after the long drive but would not have sent the worn servant to the kitchen for the world. He had spent enough time at sea with rationed water to know how to ignore thirst.

"Then I shall repair to Sir Reginald and ask if he would care to speak with you about the position." The servant bowed and took so long in rising that Heyward wondered if his arthritic joints had frozen in place. But he eventually did rise and turn, and with his same tiny footsteps made his way out of the room, closing the door carefully behind him.

Years in the service had also inured Heyward to delays, or the lengthy time spent waiting against the servant's return might have deprived him of all reason. When at last he heard the squeak of small footsteps in the hallway outside, he stood to face the doorway.

The servant opened the door but did not step into the room. "Sir Reginald requests that you would join him in the billiard room, sir."

"Yes, of course." Heyward started forward at once and nearly bowled the man over in his haste. Then he tried to time his steps, taking one for every three or four of the servant's, so that he could follow him to the billiard room. If the household was not the most vibrant now, the massive, ornate furnishings spoke of a rich and lively past and Heyward hoped the money was still there to pave the way to a prosperous future. The oriental carpet that lined the hallway—Heyward had never seen a carpeted hallway—was still thick and plush, though the colors had faded. He sneezed. Perhaps the dullness of color was due not to fading but to an excessive quantity of dust.

Not far down the hallway, the servant opened a large door and stepped aside to allow Heyward to enter first. "Lieutenant Heyward Elliott to see you, sir," he announced in a stronger voice than Heyward thought the man capable of.

The billiard room was not quite as he expected. The billiard table had been pushed into the corner to make room for a four-poster bed that now occupied the center of the sizeable room. A tiny fire burned in a brazier near the bed and a fire not much bigger struggled in the fireplace at the end of the room. Gray light filtered through the long windows, illuminating the wizened face of the man lying in the bed.

Ringeour's assessment might have been correct after all. Sir Reginald did appear to be a man for whom a trip to the privy would be a major excursion. Heyward tried to erase the picture of Ringeour's sneer from his mind as he stepped closer to the bed to speak with his potential employer.

Then Sir Reginald opened his eyes and Heyward could see life and warmth that banished Ringeour's laughing visage from his mind. Weak in the body this man might be, but Heyward had the sense that this man had lived a life others only dream of.

Sir Reginald smiled. "Not what you expected, eh?"

Heyward bit back the polite lie that first sprung to his lips. "No," he admitted.

"How did you hear that I wanted a companion?"

"Your neighbor, Miss Bayles, wrote to me that your previous companion had retired and she thought you might be in need of a new one."

He closed his eyes for a moment. "Miss Bayles. Sophie. Fairly tall, slender build, light, piercing eyes, hair styled in some modern fashion with fake curls." His eyes snapped open. "Or is that her sister? No, her sister is somewhat shorter and inclined to plumpness, or at least she was as a child."

"Um, yes. That is the lady." Though Heyward would not have described her hair that way, he now concurred with the assessment. Young ladies, his sisters included, spent far too much time trying to coax their hair to behave in a fashion entirely at odds with its natural propensity.

"Have you formed an attachment with our Miss Sophie?"

Heyward shook his head. "No, no. Only a passing acquaintance. She knew me to be in need of a position and did me the kindness of informing me of your situation." Well, her intentions might have been sound enough, but she appeared to have wasted the time of everyone involved.

"I've not seen the Bayles daughters in over a year and do wonder how they get on in the world."

"I'm sorry to trouble you, sir. Had Miss Bayles known of your condition, I am certain she would have —"

Sir Reginald raised his fingers from the blanket, a small gesture, but one that spoke a firm denial nevertheless. "You do not trouble me in the least. We've had no visitor other than Dr. Driscoll for a long time, is that not right, Foley?"

The servant, Foley, nodded with a half smile. "A time, time and a half, and a half time."

Heyward smiled. "Then I am honored to be here."

"Do you play chess, Lieutenant?"

"Not when any serious wager rides on the outcome."

"Ah, but I have one that may tempt you. Win the match and you shall start at three thousand per year."

Heyward nearly staggered at the amount. "You're not serious."

"I am as serious as only a man as bored as myself can possibly be. My body can no longer rise from this bed to play my favorite game," he nodded toward the billiard table, "but my mind is as sharp as ever. You have seen something of the world and can entertain me with your stories. And if you can keep me entertained at chess, then your company is truly worth something. I assume you are still in need of a position?"

"Yes, yes of course."

"Then fetch the board, Foley. And the malt."

"But," Foley objected, "the doctor said you're not to drink —"

Sir Reginald held up his fingers again. "What the good doctor doesn't know will not hurt him. I shan't tell, and I'll pay you both to keep your silence. And everyone happy all around."

Heyward drew a chair up next to the bed and then assisted Foley with the other preparations for this all-important match. He took one sip of his whiskey, enjoyed the smooth heat and smoky flavor, but then left the remainder of the glass untouched while he concentrated on the game. Very quickly he realized that Sir Reginald was three steps ahead of him at every turn, and captured four pieces for his every one. The game ended with embarrassing speed.

He looked at the bedclothes littered with captured pieces, an entire army lying slain among the sheets and blankets. "I'm afraid I've disappointed you."

"Not as much as you disappointed yourself." Sir Reginald motioned for him to come closer and Foley excused himself from the room. "I'm afraid my offer of three thousand per annum was a bit of a bluff. I cannot afford to pay the Lord himself that much per year, let alone a companion. But I think you are trainable. And your duties will be light. Let me beat you at chess, teach me the latest gaming fancies and describe the life that goes on outside that window. And I shall pay five hundred a year."

"Are you in earnest this time?" Heyward held his breath, for this was still far more than he had expected.

Sir Reginald laughed. "Yes."

"Very well, Sir Reginald. Would you care to beat me at chess again?"

"Not at the moment." He glanced toward the window. "Perhaps you might assist Foley in serving our dinner. Though he will never admit it, the man is nearly as old as myself, and had he been able to afford my lifestyle, I daresay he would be in worse shape now than I am. As it is, life did him a favor by keeping him in service. Those of us with money only seem to use it to destroy ourselves."

"I would be delighted to help Foley."

Sir Reginald considered him for a moment. "I believe you would. You're a very obliging young man, Lieutenant."

"You must call me Heyward, of course, sir." He paused, goaded by something inside to reveal more than he usually would. "The money will mean a great deal to my family."

Sir Reginald's face lit with a smile. "Will it? Excellent. I'm glad to be of some use to someone, as my daughter likes to tell me that I have failed terribly in that regard most of my life."

"You have a daughter, sir?"

"Mrs. Fanny Phillipson. A most respectable, upright and thoroughly boring matron who would rather harass her dairymaids and worry over butter production than visit her lonely old father."

"Does she live far away?"

"Physically, mentally or spiritually?"

"Err, physically."

Sir Reginald sighed. "The answer is yes, in any case. She resides in Devonshire, does not play chess or any games on which someone might place a wager and she believes my soul to be a hopeless cause, damned for all eternity."

"And she does not try to set it to rights?"

"Not anymore, thank heaven. Now I am ready for dinner, and the only thing worse than loneliness is hunger. So do get on and help Foley because if we wait on him, we shall be eating our fricassee for breakfast." He gave a little chuckle which soon turned into an enormous cough.

Heyward wondered whether he should fetch the physician, because the cough showed no sign of lessening its grip. By the time Sir Reginald was at last able to draw a clear breath, he had grown deathly pale and tears streamed out of the corners of his eyes.

"Happens more often than it used to," he muttered hoarsely. "Go on and fetch our dinner. I grow hungry at an unfashionably early hour these days."

By the time Heyward and Foley returned with the dinner trays—of which Foley must carry the heaviest himself—Sir Reginald had fallen asleep. This did not seem to deter Foley, who heaped his master's plate with fricasseed chicken, roast potatoes, French beans and pickled beets. Then he puréed the potatoes with a fork and added water to make a thin paste.

Heyward wondered if this was some new fashion in dining and whether he was expected to do the same with his potatoes or any other of the dishes.

"Dinner, sir," Foley announced in the same almost frighteningly loud voice he had used to introduce Heyward.

"Wha?" Sir Reginald blinked at the plate Foley held in front of his nose.

"The fricassee you wanted, sir, with those little beans you're so fond of. And potatoes."

"The beets are a nice touch," Sir Reginald whispered hoarsely. "Such a vibrant color."

Foley beamed. "Thank you, sir. And are you ready sir, for...?"

Sir Reginald nodded. Foley set the plate down on the table next to the bed and then went back to grasp his master under the armpits. He then attempted to hoist Sir Reginald to a more upright position, but the servant's stooped posture and lack of leverage kept him from making much progress. After much grunting and straining, Heyward finally decided that wanted or not, they needed his help. He was able to lift Sir Reginald easily, as the man weighed much less than Heyward would have expected. "Place the pillow for him, you know how he best likes it," he indicated to a seething Foley. That seemed to placate him a little.

"Thank you both," Sir Reginald wheezed. "Now then, make yourself comfortable, Lieutenant, and enjoy your dinner. Foley's wife is an excellent cook."

Since Foley had seated himself in the chair Heyward used earlier, he squeezed a leather chair between the large bedside table and the billiard table. He perched his plate at the edge of the bedside table, and then, at his host's urging, began to eat.

The chicken and beans were indeed delicious, though he was still uncertain about what he was expected to do with the potatoes and he had no intention of eating the beets.

Foley had laid his master's plate on his lap, but Sir Reginald made no move to eat. Instead he watched Heyward and Foley with a wolfish expression in his eyes. Foley sat next to the bed, holding his plate up in one hand while he ate with the other. His food seemed to disappear with inordinate speed, and before Heyward was aware, the servant had emptied his plate and stood to assist his master with his own. He spooned the thin puréed potatoes into Sir Reginald's mouth like a nursemaid feeding a baby.

Heyward fought the urge to turn away. He was going to be paid by this man to look at unpleasant sights and possibly undertake some unpleasant tasks without flinching.

In that way, Sir Reginald's service would be very much like the Navy. And he would not need a new hat. Until he was called to active duty, he had no need of a uniform whatsoever, but continued to wear his because he had no other clothes. Now he would have means to purchase some.

His mother and sisters would soon enjoy dinners like this.

Fortune had smiled on him at last.