

the Nabob's
Daughter

Rosemary Morris

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Digital ISBNs

Kindle 9780228632474
Coresource 9780228632481
B&N Nook 9780228632498
PDF 9780228632504

Print ISBNs

Amazon Print 9780228632511
Indigo Spark 9780228632528
Barnes & Noble 9780228632535
BWL Print 9780228632542

BWL Publishing Inc.



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Cover art by Michelle Lee

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Dedication

With gratitude to my friend Indradyumna Swami.

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Prologue

Madras 1799

Fear clutched the Honourable Benedict Tremayne, fifth son of Lord Hector and Lady Ariadne Tremayne, Earl and Countess of Tresellion, while he waited for his wife to deliver their baby. His black hair dishevelled, his neckcloth disarranged, yet again he looked at the clock. Jane's groaning in travail continued for thirty-six hours. Could she and their babe survive? He dreaded the worst outcome. Benedict struggled to dismiss the memory of his first wife, who died within hours of Sylvester, their son's birth. Would God, fate, or even karma, a logical Hindu belief which interested him, be merciful and spare the lives of his second wife and their babe?

An oblong wooden frame attached to a rope, pulled by a servant from the outside of the wall, moved backward and forward. It did little to cool the unbearable heat of this season by day and by night, prior to sheets of monsoon rain poured from a dark blue-black sky. Benedict flung himself onto a chair, reached for the glass of claret on a table and gulped the contents. About to order a servant to refill it, he changed his mind. Overindulgence might lead to falling into a drunken stupor. Exhausted by anxiety, he leant back. His eyes closed. Memories drifted through his mind. He thought about his birthplace, Castle Tresellion, his family's ancestral property built in Cornwall during William the Conqueror's reign.

Benedict sighed. Should he have sent Jane to be cared for by his parents while he remained in Madras to manage his import-export business? She would have been comfortable in the granite castle situated above cliffs sloping down to the sandy bay, fringed by fisherman's cottages at a safe distance from high tides whipped into frenzies by gale-force winds in winter. Benedict stiffened his spine. He never submitted to fear of death, even at sea during his perilous voyages to and from England. He must meet

whatever lay ahead courageously. Only a fool believed death could be cheated. It occurred at the appointed time, regardless of the place.

He and Mrs de Lancy, Jane's dear friend, who was staying with them to support his wife during labour, were reluctant to send the seven-year-olds Sylvester and Mrs. de Lancy's son, Vivian, to England to be educated. Concerned friends advised them to because they believed life in India neither suited English children's constitutions nor offered suitable education. "The boys," they said, "should have been sent to England when they were five years old." He sighed. Madras had a reputation for being healthy, but graveyards were crowded with the remains of the deceased.

Stalwart men, women and children could be struck down by a fever and die between breakfast and supper. Benedict's chest heaved. He dreaded the day Sylvester, the proverbial apple of his eye, must go to England and study at Eton and Oxford. He shuddered at the thought of his cherished heir's premature death here, at sea or in England. If the unthinkable happened, he needed another direct successor.

At fifteen, his father sent him to Madras to be employed as one of the East India Company's writers. Neither of them anticipated his success. Grateful for the yield from a small but welcome private income, Benedict spent five years with scant remuneration for entering accounts in ledgers. Afterward, free to trade, he blossomed like a flame tree for ten years while he grasped every opportunity in the melting pot of trade, nationalities, cultures and religions.

Benedict linked his hands across his flat stomach. Proud of his achievements, he looked around the large drawing room. He bought his first house in Fort St George, named to honour England's patron saint. The property contained small rooms on the ground floor and large ones on the second. Beneath them were godowns, where he kept his stock for export and imported wares to be sold. Yet despite strong walls around the fort and cannons to protect residents, he owned an impressive mansion built to the west of St George, away from noisy, dusty streets. He had superintended the construction of Tremayne House, a classic three-storey mansion with a portico and twenty tall columns at the front. In fierce tropical sunshine, the building dazzled Benedict's eyes whenever he returned home from business ventures. Whenever he saw the walls of his home covered with white plaster resembling marble, he could swear his heart swelled with pride. On the hottest days, he enjoyed sitting on one of three verandas shaded by roofs as he

admired the extensive gardens. During unbearable heat, he retreated to cooler underground rooms.

In the large drawing room, Benedict tried to distract himself from his apprehension concerning his wife's travail. He looked appreciatively at the Venetian blinds, wallpaper imported from China, mirrors, engravings and paintings of the Madras Presidency. Proud of marquetry card tables and teak armchairs made by skilled Indian craftsmen, he tried to relax and banish his fear. Visitors admired the dining room, which contained polished teakwood furniture, silverware, and crystal. He had created a beautiful, comfortable home with teak floors and furniture instead of mahogany, which prevented voracious white ants from destroying everything in their path.

His guests praised the well-appointed bedchambers with mosquito nets lowered over the bedsteads at night. "And," Mrs de Lancy had remarked, "the boys' rooms are perfect."

"Sylvester enjoys sharing them with Vivian," Benedict commented. "But please tell me if you approve of the day and night nurseries for the baby? My unfortunate wife has been too sickly to be interested in them. Have I forgotten any necessities?"

"No. My compliments, Mr Tremayne. Nothing is lacking," she assured him.

Benedict shifted on his chair. For how much longer must Jane endure torment? Would she survive? After such a long struggle, could she give birth to a live son or daughter?

Bates, his butler, a former soldier who limped due to a wound during his service in the East India Company's army, knocked the door and opened it. "Mrs de Lancy," he announced.

Marianne de Lancy trudged across the floor. Wisps of damp, fair curls clung around her forehead and face with dark circles beneath her eloquent grey eyes. Benedict stared at her. Unable to ask her for news for fear of it being disastrous, his breath caught in his throat.

"Congratulations. Jane is weak, but the baby is healthy." With her hand pressed against the small of her back, she swayed.

Benedict sprang up. "Please sit down, Madam. Some Madeira wine to revive you?"

Marianne sank onto a chair. "Yes, please."

Jane and the baby lived. Relief flooded him. For the first time in his life, his knees buckled. He supported himself with his hands on the back of a chair.

Bates served wine. Marianne sipped some

“Mr Tremayne, there is something I must tell you in private,” she said.

Bates did not wait for instructions to leave the room.

Marianne moistened her tongue. “Mr Tremayne, your wife is very feeble,” she began hesitantly. She looked down at the wine in her crystal glass. “The baby’s head, which is very large, was the reason for the birth taking so long.”

Why did she tell him that? Women were usually coy about what happened in the privacy of the lying-in chamber. “I must see them.”

Colour filled Marianne’s pale cheeks. “There is something else I must tell you.”

One hand on the door handle, he paused. “What is it?” he asked, afraid the child was deformed.

Her hand shook. A few drops of wine fell onto her bloodstained apron. “I apologise for the indelicate message the midwife asked me to deliver.”

“What is it?” he repeated, impatient to leave.”

“Mrs Tremayne should...er...never quicken with another child.” Marianne’s hands trembled with obvious embarrassment and spilled more wine. “If she did, due to an injury sustained during her travail, it would be a miracle if she survived.”

Benedict pushed the implication out of his mind. “I beg your leave. I must congratulate my wife and meet our son.”

Gentlemen always want sons, Marianne thought.

Always interested in diverse cultures, Benedict had consulted Hindu and Muslim astrologers, who assured him he would have another son. Without waiting to hear what Mrs de Lancy would say, he shoved open the door and raced up the marble stairs to the second floor, where Sylvester and Vivian sat on a low divan.

His son’s blue eyes glittered. “Papa! Punj Ayah said if we are quiet, Mama Jane will give me a baby brother or sister.”

The question why Sylvester always called his stepmother Mama Jane not Mama flitted through Benedict’s mind.

Vivian rumbled his curly black hair. “It’s taking a very long time,” he grumbled.

“And we are very hungry,” Sylvester complained.

Benedict looked at the disgruntled pair, annoyed because Punj Ayah deserted them. “Be patient. You can eat soon.”

He went to his wife's bedchamber where the midwife faced him.

While Jane struggled to give birth, Benedict's Hindu valet suggested he summon the old Tamil midwife famous for her skill. With a determined expression in her eyes, she pressed the palms of her hands together. "Memsahib must be sleeping," she insisted.

The air tainted with the smell of blood, Benedict approached the large tent bed where Jane lay still as a dead woman, her face drained of colour. "My son?" he demanded in Tamil.

He looked at Punj Ayah, a widow who only spoke a little broken English, engaged to tend the baby, now seated on the floor beneath a window, her head modestly covered by the end of her white muslin sari. She pulled the thick rope attached to an oblong, ornately carved teak crib gently swinging backward and forward. After a few quick steps, he reached it and bent to gaze at the baby's cherubic face with unblemished skin.

Someone tugged on the long sleeve of his comfortable, ankle-length cotton kurta with a small collar. He heard whispers, turned around, and saw his son and Vivian.

"Papa, will you love my brother more than you love me?" Sylvester asked.

He gazed at the child's small, anxious face. "Love him more than you? Never."

"Promise, Papa?"

"Yes, I am a gentleman, and gentlemen always keep their promises."

Apprehension faded from Sylvester's sapphire-blue eyes.

The midwife cackled. "Son? No! A daughter."

A daughter!

Punj Ayah stood. The crib stilled. Since his son's birth, he forgot how small newborn babies were. He peered at his daughter's face, unmarked by her difficult birth. To him, her head looked tiny. The boys stood on the other side of the crib, staring at her. "Papa, she is very pretty."

Something stirred in Benedict's chest. *My daughter is more than that. She is beautiful.* He bent again and touched her hand. Her finger gripped his thumb. Gently, he uncoiled his precious babe's finger and picked her up. Cradled in his arms, he forgot he had wanted another son.

"What is my sister's name, Papa?"

"Call her Lily, sir. I like the name," Vivian said.

Never did he imagine she would bring such joy. "I prefer Joyce because she brings joy. Sylvester and Vivian, you must always protect her."

"Protect her, Papa?"

"Yes, look after her. Vow you will."

Sylvester frowned. "Vow?"

"Promise," Benedict explained.

Sylvester craned his neck to look down at Joyce. "I promise, Papa."

And I vow to help him look after Joyce," Vivian said, his dark eyes solemn, in a measured voice unusual for such a young boy.

* * *

Jane groaned and opened her eyes and saw Morwenna seated on a chair by her bed.

"Drink this, Memsahib," the midwife said.

Thirsty, she gulped down the concoction of herbs to induce sleep.

She woke after eight hours aching from head to toe, and the pain where the midwife cut her to allow Joyce's head to emerge was unbearable. "Make it stop!"

"What?" Morwenna asked.

"The servant's baby who is crying. I have a headache. Tell her to take the wretched creature away," Jane whimpered.

"Your daughter is crying," Morwenna told her.

Jane winced and touched her stomach. "I don't remember the birth."

"You are confused because the midwife drugged you during her dreadful struggle to deliver your beautiful baby girl."

Tears oozed down Jane's ghost-white face. A daughter. Heaven help her! Benedict wanted another son. She could not bear the thought of again being with child and torment in labour.

"Do you want to see her?"

"No."

"I know Mr Tremayne wanted a son, but he is delighted with your daughter. He named her Joyce." Her smile fond, Marianne continued. "Sylvester and Vivian are entranced by her."

Jane bit her lower lip so hard she drew blood. The midwife walked to the bed. Memsahib needing rest.”

“I’ll leave you for now, Jane. I shall return after I wash, change my clothes, and have something to eat and drink,” Marianne said.

Jane sobbed. She never wanted children and was glad her first marriage had been barren. When they were young, she and Benedict loved each other and wanted to marry but his father refused his consent. After her first husband and Benedict’s former wife died, during his only visit to England, he courted her and their love burned more fiercely. Glad he already had a son, which meant he would not be disappointed because she did not conceive his child, on the day they married she was wreathed with roses and happiness.

She woke from another fitful sleep. Every part of her body still ached. Marianne sat on the chair by the bed, the baby in her arms. Jane shuddered and turned her head away.

“Congratulations. Your daughter is adorable. Shall I give her to you?”

The oldest of nine siblings, seven of them died in infancy leaving her inconsolable. Tears trickled down her cheeks. Death stalked babies and children. She would not, could not risk her heart. “No!” she exclaimed more forcibly than she intended.

“As you please.” Marianne smiled. “Your husband is impatient to see you. I shall tell him you are awake.”

The door opened. Her friend said something to Benedict, who strode to the bed. He bent over and clasped her hand. “Sylvester and Vivian have fallen as much in love with our daughter, Joyce, as I have. Thank you, sweetheart, for bringing me such happiness.”

Jane wanted all of Benedict’s love and devotion. Already jealous of her husband’s love for Sylvester, during the years after Joyce’s birth, she could not bear his deep love for his children and the attention he bestowed on them.

Chapter One

Madras, January 1802

Marianne de Lancy choked back her emotion as she gazed at Vivian in the drawing room at Tremayne House. The day she dreaded since her son's birth nine years ago arrived. Today, he and his friend Sylvester would sail to England. Neither she nor Mr Tremayne could have borne parting with the children a younger age.

They received their education from a tutor, who prepared them to attend Eton College. He would take charge of them on the voyage to England and introduce them to Benedict's parents.

Vivian knelt in front of three-year-old Joyce. "Nearly time for me and your brother to say goodbye."

Joyce's eyes, bright blue like her father's, gazed at him. "Will you come back?"

Marianne looked fondly at the little girl. If only Jane would soften toward her intelligent, young daughter whose command of the English language was impressive.

Vivian glanced from Sylvester to the thin child, small for her age. "Yes, we will."

Tears rolled down Joyce's cheeks. "No, no, no, don't go."

Bless the child. Marianne blinked to hold back her own tears.

"Joyce, stop your nonsense," Jane ordered.

"You are too harsh," Benedict said, a sharp edge to his voice. "Joyce loves the boys."

Jane shrugged while Vivian spoke gently to her unwanted daughter.

Children should be cherished. Marianne could not understand why the woman, who she no longer considered a friend, was an unnatural mother.

Sylvester bent to wipe his half-sister's tears away with his pocket kerchief. He shook his head in a silent pact to warn her not to annoy his stepmother.

"I have a present for you." Vivian gave Joyce a silver heart suspended from a chain.

Her smile illuminated her lightly tanned face from which no trace of the lovely baby remained. She hugged him. "Thank you, it is beautiful."

“I bought it from the shop you inherited from Papa,” Vivian explained to his mother.

Marrienne admired him. If her son had asked her, instead of paying for the gift with his small allowance, she would have given it to him. She blinked. Perchance, proud of their son, her late husband looked down from heaven. Her shoulders heaved. Yesterday evening, she heard Vivian’s bedtime prayers for the last time. On his return to Madras, he would be a young man responsible for his prayers.

“Mama.”

She looked down at her adored son’s face, with the last trace of infant chubbiness, and tousled his hair.

He squirmed and smoothed it with his hands. “Don’t be sad, Mama. I shall write to you every week.”

Marianne composed herself while Joyce tugged the hem of Vivian’s coat and held out his present. “Please put it around my neck.”

He stooped to oblige the little girl.

Marianne’s thoughts raced through her mind. With exceptional good luck, Vivian might reach England in four months, but most voyages took between six and eight. Depending on the conditions at sea, it Vivian’s letters might not arrive for a year or more.

Bates approached her. “A chair, Madam?” He drew one forward.

“Thank you,” she replied, appreciative of the butler’s gentle indicating sympathy.

“If you will pardon me for saying so, the young gentlemen will be missed,” Bates said.

She sat, her head inclined toward the floor. Vivian, Sylvester and their tutor would be in danger from pirates, storms, shipwrecks and fire on Mr Tremayne’s merchant ship, Sea Sprite. Marianne pressed a hand over her heart and struggled to be calm.

Even Mr Tremayne’s assurance about thirty-eight eighteen pounders on his ship to ward off attacks and that it would sail in convoy with the East India Company’s ships did not alleviate her fear.

Mr Tremayne, who persuaded her not to accompany them in a frail craft through tumultuous surf to the tall ship, would take Vivian and Sylvester on board and wish them a safe voyage.

“Mama.” Vivian stood in front of her and executed a perfect bow.

She must not embarrass him with an emotional farewell. “God bless you, my son,” she said, a hand on his head, although she longed to hug him.

“Mrs de Lancy.” Sylvester bowed. His vivid blue eyes like his father’s and his face bright with eager anticipation of the adventure ahead, he went outside with Vivian to the carriage behind which an oxcart was loaded with luggage.

Joyce broke free from her mother’s grasp and ran after them to the door. “Syl, Viv, come back. Please, please don’t go.”

The sound of the front door closing reached the drawing room. Jane caught hold of Joyce. “You are making my headache worse. If you don’t stop caterwauling, I’ll give you something to really cry about. Stop it! Sylvester is only your half-brother, and Vivian is merely his friend.”

Joyce tried to pull away from her and cried louder. Her mother raised her arm and slapped her hard across the right side of her face. Joyce screamed as a large diamond embedded in a gold ring cut her. Blood trickled down her cheek.

Shocked into silence, Joyce touched the wound while her mother gripped her shoulder.

“A glass of wine to mark the occasion of the young gentlemen’s departure, Mrs Tremayne?” Bates asked, his face impassive, pre-empting, Marianne who intended to intervene and comfort Joyce.

Jane nodded. He poured a glass of Madeira wine and gave her the crystal glass. She gulped the contents but still held onto her daughter.

“Mrs Tremayne, may I take Miss Joyce to her nursery where you won’t hear her crying?” Bates asked.

“An excellent suggestion,” Marianne said to the butler, who often found time to amuse Joyce and the boys. Several days ago, she watched him help them fly kites he helped them make, with Joyce clapping her hands, watching them soar high into the sky.

Shocked into silence, the little girl touched her face.

Bates stooped to pick her up.

Appalled by Jane’s cruelty, Marianne handed him her cambric kerchief with which he gently wiped the child’s face.

“Blow your nose, Miss Joyce.” Bates held the kerchief to it.

Joyce fingered her painful cheek and glared at her mother. “Papa told you not to hit me. When I tell him, he will be angry.”

Jane gasped. Bates hurried out of the room with Joyce’s head against his shoulder.

“Don’t frown at me, Marianne. I suppose you disapprove of me chastising my child for her own good,” Jane said. “At her age, my mother told me it is never too early for a little lady to understand excessive displays of sensibility are unacceptable. If I wailed like my wretched daughter, Mother would have beaten me with a cane. My husband overindulges her.”

“Yes, I disapprove. Who would not? There is no justification for the way you treat Joyce, or for your indifference to Sylvester. Previously, you were gentle and affectionate. Time has showed me it was a façade. You are cold, cruel and –”

“You don’t understand,” Jane broke in.

“I do. You are jealous of Mr Tremayne’s love of his children because you want all of it. You are a fool not to appreciate your situation. You have an admirable husband who gives you everything you ask for and a sweet daughter I love as if she were my own. No, don’t say another word,” she concluded and marched out of the room.

If it were not for her situation, Marianne would have boarded the ship with the boys. She stayed in Madras to conserve her inheritance, one of the largest emporiums in Fort St George which Mr Tremayne, her late husband’s close friend, helped her to manage. On her way to her bedchamber, she contemplated selling it and returning to England. Marianne shook her head. No, it would decrease the size of the inheritance, God willing, her son would benefit from. Another alternative was to leave Tremayne House. However, Joyce needed her love. How could she desert her? Besides, an English widow residing alone in India except for servants would lose her good name.

* * *

In the nursery, Bates sat Joyce on the floor beside the ayah. “Her mother slapped her because she cried when Sylvester and Vivian left,” he explained in hesitant Tamil.

“Memsahib Tremayne is a witch!” the elderly woman muttered in her own language and continued. ‘Missy Memsahib, be brave. I’ll clean your face.’

Joyce relished the description of her mama. While ayah’s gentle hands washed away the rest of the blood, Joyce thought about witches in fairy stories Papa told her and demonesses in Punj Ayah’s tales in which they were punished. She pressed a hand over

her painful cheek. Perhaps the holy man could punish Mama. “Take me to Govinda Sadhu,” she ordered Punj Ayah.

Bates's eyebrows rose. “To the man who lives beneath a tamarind tree near the river?”

“Yes,” Joyce said firmly, determined to visit the sadhu.” Mama resented his presence on the estate. She claimed he was dirty, although he bathed three times a day in a stream fed by a spring. Joyce was glad Papa refused to evict Govinda Sadhu. She liked the old man who did not go from house to house like other holy mendicants, his bowl in his hand, to beg for food. People respected him and took food to him. So did Punj Ayah, who sometimes allowed her to add to it.

“Wait patiently until your father returns after the boat sails for me to tell him you are...er...waiting for him.” Bates patted her on the head.

Alone with her ayah, Joyce watched her finger her necklace made from tiny wooden beads made from a tulasi bush Hindus considered sacred. “Take me to Govinda Sadhu,” Joyce repeated. The woman did not respond. Joyce screwed up her face and stamped her foot.

“No, no, Missy Memsahib, be good. Don’t have a temper tantrum. I’ll put balm on your poor cheek.” Her eyes widened. “I’ll take you to see him but our visits must be secret. If Memsahib found out, she would send me away. We would never see each other again,” she said in Tamil.

Joyce, who spoke and understood the language flung herself into her dear ayah’s arms. What would she do without her?

* * *

Benedict waited on shore for the good ship Sea Sprite, its sails billowing, cross the horizon. He stepped into his carriage. Morose, he returned home. No one would fill the void left by Sylvester. Not even Joyce, regardless of her unique place in his heart. He wished his wife were not indifferent to her. Why, he asked himself yet again, does she lack the milk of human kindness Mrs de Lancy has in abundance? He appreciated the widow who treated Joyce like a beloved daughter. The lady was a very welcome addition to his household, and he was fond of her son. Benedict smiled, remembering Vivian’s farewell words. ‘I shall return to India one day and keep my promise to protect Joyce. While I am away, I will write to her.’

Sylvester had laughed. "Protect her from what? Papa will take good care of her." He did not mention Jane, with whom he lived in a state of silent but armed neutrality while waiting for her to propel metaphorical cannon fire. Benedict sighed. Jane was still beautiful as she was on their wedding day. His hands tightened. On their wedding night he experienced her passion. He knew she resented their daughter's birth because he no longer slept with her to avoid putting her life in jeopardy if she quickened with child. He pitied her and hoped she would never find out he fulfilled his needs with his mistress, who doted on him, and Lionel, their son. His upper lip curled. The astrologer's prediction he would have another son after Sylvester's birth was correct, but he had assumed the baby's mother would be his wife. Did the many gods Hindus believed in enjoy tricking him?

A footman lowered the step and opened the carriage door. Perspiring in formal attire, he traced the line between his intricately arranged muslin neckcloth and high starched shirt collar. His cream, heavy silk waistcoat, a blue superfine coat, tight-fitting cream pantaloons, a beaver hat and kid gloves, he wore to escort his son and Vivian to the ship added to his discomfort. He would go straight to his dressing room and change into cool cotton garments.

Comfortable in a loose fitting kurta and trousers, he entered the drawing room where Marianne stood, hands on her hips, in front of his ashen-faced wife seated on a chair. He cleared his throat. "Such gloom. Are you mourning Sylvester and Vivian's departure to England or has someone died?" he asked trying to sound jocular as he gazed around the spacious room. "Have you nothing to say, Mrs Tremayne?"

The colour in his wife's cheeks heightened. She looked from him to Marianne and back at him. She moistened her lips with her tongue. An action which always revealed she was frightened or nervous.

Bates entered the room. "Sir, I apologise for neglecting my duty. I should have waited by the front door to open it for you."

His butler seemed flustered. "Where were you?" Benedict asked, his voice level.

Bates cleared his throat and looked up at the ceiling as though he hunted for an answer.

"Well?" Benedict exclaimed.

"With Miss Joyce, sir."

Jane moaned.

His senses alert, Benedict spoke. "Why?"

Bates shifted his glance away from his mistress, who twisted her gold ring set with a large diamond around and around her finger. "With the utmost respect, sir, it is not for me to say."

Terror seized Benedict. Since he took the boys and their tutor to board Sea Sprite, had Joyce been struck down by a deadly fever? No, if she were, Mrs de Lancy would be with her. "Bates, where is my daughter?"

"With her ayah in the nursery, sir."

For the first time Benedict saw the former soldier ill at ease. He mopped the sweat caused by heat and sudden fear from his forehead as he hurried to see his daughter.

Where was Joyce? Where was her ayah? With a hollow sensation in his stomach, he gazed at a bloodstained cloth on the washstand beside a bowl and jug painted with foxgloves he imported from England. "Bates," he shouted from the nursery threshold. The man climbed the stairs as fast as his limp allowed. "Where are Joyce and her nurse?"

"I think they are outdoors, sir."

"Order the servants to search the grounds for them and bring them to me when they are found. And Bates."

"Yes, sir."

"Request my wife and Mrs de Lancy to wait in the drawing room until Joyce and her ayah join us."

* * *

Bates carried tear stained Joyce into the drawing room, Benedict stared at her crumpled gown and untidy hair. "Why are you so...grubby? Where were you? Lost?"

"No, Papa, I went to see Govinda Sadhu."

"Who lives under the tree?"

She nodded.

"Why?"

"He is kind. I know he would never hurt me. I feel good with him."

He stared at her face. "What cut your cheek?" he asked in a calm voice more deadly than a raised one. Afraid of her answer, his stomach lurched. *As God is my witness, if she has been assaulted, I'll kill the criminal.*

His wife moaned as Joyce pointed at her. "Mama slapped me. The jewel in her ring cut me."

He glared at his wife, who shrank against the back of her chair. "What! Why?"

"Because—" his wife began.

"I did not ask you. I asked Joyce." As though struck by a sudden bolt of lightning his wife's beauty repelled him. Shocked, he understood ever since their meeting years ago he mistook lust for love. He picked Joyce up. "Don't be frightened, Puss. Tell me why your mother hit you?"

Tears filled her eyes and trickled down her face. "I was crying because I want Syl and Viv to stay here, Papa."

Rage consumed him. "Is it true, Mrs de Lancy?" he asked, almost unable to believe what Joyce said." In response to the lady's nod, he shook with anger and added. "Mrs de Lancy, please be good enough to take Joyce to Punj Ayah."

"I don't tell lies," Joyce said in a small voice. "You told me it is naughty, and you told Mama not to hit me, but she did."

"I promise your mother will never do so again. Now, be a good child. Go to your ayah with Mrs de Lancy."

Alone with her husband, Jane fidgeted. She looked down at her hands tightly clasped together on her lap. "Mr Tremayne, please allow me to explain. I—"

"Nothing you could say would justify what you did. As your husband, I have the right to thrash you," he said, his back stiff as a ramrod. "I will not, although you are a cruel, unnatural mother. Your indifference to Sylvester and your brutal treatment of Joyce has forfeited my love...no... not love - any affection I had for you."

Jane heaved herself onto her feet. "But I love you." Her hands reached toward him.

"Sit," he ordered as he would a disobedient dog. "You deserve to be banished to my house in Fort St George."

She sank onto the chair and stared at him wide-eyed, her mouth opening and shutting like a fish out of water.

“In public, I will offer you the courtesy you don’t deserve as my wife to avoid speculation.” He glared at her. “In future, if you ever mistreat Joyce, you will not be mistress here. The only reason I shall tolerate your presence in my house is to avoid a scandal which would affect my children’s reputation if I sent you away.”

His wife burst into tears. He ignored them. His fists clenched he swept out of the drawing room.

Chapter Two

Madras. November 1807

Bored and restless after the seven-month voyage to India, seventeen-year-old Vivian and Sylvester waited to disembark. Delighted because his exile in England ended after almost six years, Vivian glanced at his friend whose hands gripped the side of the ship. His greenish complexion bore its own testimony. ‘I will never board a ship again,’ Sylvester, a victim of acute seasickness, frequently swore during the voyage.

Vivian stared at the Coromandel Coast from Sea Sprite one of a fleet with a Royal Navy escort. Madras did not have a harbour or a river inlet, so the ships anchored a mile or more offshore. Eager to be reunited with his mother, he screwed up his eyes and stared toward the surf pounding on the shore.

“Ugh. Not again,” Sylvester winced, clutched his throat, bent over the side of the ship and vomited.

Flags flashed up and down in the strong breeze as the first mate exchanged signals with other ships. Sylvester groaned in response to about a hundred ships and Fort St George exchanging gun salutes. He spat into the swell and pointed at catamarans paddling across turbulent waves. “Is there no other way to reach land?” he moaned.

“Not unless you want to stay on board,” Sylvester.

Vivian gazed at each small one made from three lightweight anjali tree planks tied together with coconut fibre, paddled to shore by two men. He sympathised with

Sylvester, who lost so much weight that his clothes hung off him as though he were a scarecrow. “The worst will soon be over. By now your father will know we have arrived and be waiting to greet us and take us home.”

A few freckles seemed even more prominent than usual on his friend’s pallid face, in shocking contrast to his mop of auburn hair, the same colour as his deceased mother’s hair in her portrait. Vivian’s mouth tightened. His own dark hair and eyes resembled his late father’s, who died when he was three years old.

Sylvester pointed to a rope ladder. “I am too weak to climb down it,” he said staring at a catamaran and two boatmen, naked except for their loincloths from whom ladies averted their eyes.

“Yes, you can, Sylvester. Hold on tight, put one foot after the other and think how relieved you will be when you recover. Don’t be afraid. We learned to swim in the sea during our visits to your grandparents in Cornwall. If you fall in, you won’t drown.”

“Damn you, I’m not frightened,” Sylvester lied.

Seated next to his nauseous friend, Vivian gazed ahead. He had forgotten the extent of the flat, sandy shore stretching for miles north and south backed by the few hills inland. The boatmen sang a lively song. Pleased because he remembered enough Tamil to understand most of the words, he stared ahead as he drew even closer to the country he still thought of as his homeland.

Surf struck the catamaran and rolled it to the shore. Vivian leapt onto the beach Sylvester retched. He helped his friend clamber out and supported him and paid the boatmen who haggled.

Vivian and looked around for Mr Tremayne among the crowd of busy people whose skin varied from European pale ones to much darker shades. He inhaled the scents of the sea, spices, and sweat while he looked at impressive multi-storey buildings in a row above the shore. A squadron of sepoy wearing dusty red coats

marched toward the cantonment at St Thomas Mount, reputed to be the site of St Thomas's martyrdom in A.D. seventy-two. The most recent letter from Mama, written five months ago, informed him beyond its gates, Lord Clive, the new Governor of the Madras Presidency, was overseeing improvements to Government House set in seventy-five acres of verdant parkland. Presumably without a thought of the saint.

Vivian ignored men clamouring for employment, hawkers selling savoury snacks, sweetmeats, and water from Hindus and or Muslims. He gazed at Fort St George, surrounded by bastions and vast stone walls around its perimeter. Above them steeples, temple domes, and minarets rose toward the dull grey sky that threatened more monsoon rain.

Impatience to greet his mother swelled. Six feet tall and strong, at first sight, would she recognise him?

Mr Tremayne joined them. "Sylvester, what happened? You are very thin! Almost skeletal." He embraced his son, who sagged against him and gazed across Sylvester's head at Vivian. "A pleasure to see you. Mrs de Lancy and Joyce are at Tremayne House, impatient to greet you."

Vivian bowed. "I am delighted to see you, sir. Every day in England, I wanted to return. Now I have, I am eager to see Mama and Joyce."

Stifled by his broadcloth coat and kerseymere pantaloons, he looked forward to changing into cool, cotton ones more suited to the climate he knew a small minority of Europeans preferred. He also knew some became vegetarians and were profoundly interested in Hindu religion and philosophy, and some converted to Islam, but the majority did not abandon their Christian religion, which they considered superior to all others.

He wiped his forehead, looking forward to eating curries, savouries, chutneys, pickles and desserts again.

When he tottered, Mr Tremayne laughed. "You will soon find your land legs after so long at sea. Come to the carriage."

English by birth, educated at Eton, Mr Tremayne's hospitable family in Cornwall welcomed him but he revelled in his return to Madras, his home, a place of beauty, prosperity, and poverty.

At Tremayne House, he appreciated the grounds where tamarind and fragrant Queen of the Night trees cast shade and he listened to the familiar sounds of birdsong, myna birds chattering, and the incessant sound of distant surf breaking on the shore. One day, he promised himself, he would own a property magnificent as this one.

* * *

Bates, who stood at the head of a line of senior servants outside the house, some of whom Vivian recognised, greeted them first. "Good day Master Tremayne, good day Mr de Lancy, May I say welcome home?"

Master? Oh. Bates called Sylvester 'master' to distinguish him from his father but addressed him as Mr Vivian.

"The ladies are waiting for you in the drawing room," Bates added.

"I am not," Mama said as she hurried outside. "My dear, dear child."

"No longer a child," Vivian protested and strode forward to make his bow.

"You are not," she said. "You are a tall, handsome gentleman, but not too young for me to embrace." She put her arms around him. Tears in her eyes, she held him close. "Thank God for bringing you safely home!" She kissed his cheeks. "Are you well?"

He hugged her, kissed her breathing in the familiar scent of her jasmine perfume, which he never forgot during the years they were separated. "Yes, but please don't cry. I am overjoyed to see you and am in the best of health, but Sylvester suffered from *mal de mer* from the beginning to the end of the voyage."

His face creased with palpable anxiety Mr Tremayne spoke. "Straight to bed with him, he must rest to recuperate."

Seven-year-old Joyce erupted from the front door, followed by her ayah. "Missy Baba, your mother will be angry. She told you to wait to see your brother and Memsahib's son in the big room," she scolded in Tamil.

Joyce ignored her and observed them. She frowned and pointed at Sylvester, heedless of her mother's stricture should not to. "I remember you," she said thoughtfully. "Do you remember me?"

"Of course, I remember you, Joyce," her brother assured her, his tone flat. He gagged but did not cast up his accounts. Mr Tremayne gestured to two servants. "Sylvester, your

room has been prepared. They will help you upstairs and into bed. Bates, summon the doctor.”

Vivian imagined Sylvester felt ill enough to prefer to be at the bottom of the sea. “And I remember you, Joyce,” he said. “You are the little lady I promised to protect on the day you were born.”

“Lady?” Joyce giggled. “No one else thinks I am.”

“You are dressed like one, so you must be.”

“Oh.” Joyce’s bright blue eyes glowed. Her sweet smile transformed her plain face. She touched her throat above the low neck of her white muslin gown. “Look at the silver heart you gave me.”

Vivian smiled. “Oh, you are still wearing it. I think you will like the presents I brought England for you from England.”

She danced up and down, her sun-streaked light brown ringlets bouncing on either side of her face “What are they?”

“Don’t be so impatient, Joyce. You will find out later,” his mother said. She looked at him. “Mrs Tremayne is waiting to greet you in the drawing room.”

Joyce’s Cupid’s bow mouth pursed. Her expression resembled a frightened creature’s threatened by a predator. Vivian scrutinised her face. He noticed a small white scar on her cheek and touched it with his forefinger. “What happened? Did you fall over?”

“N...no, my Mama slapped me. Her ring cut me,” Joyce explained, too young to dissemble.

Startled, his eyebrows raised, he looked at his mother, who took hold of Joyce’s hand and led her to the drawing room, followed by Mr Tremayne.

Mrs Tremayne remained seated on a chair, one of a group opposite the door. Furious with her for injuring Joyce Vivian walked forward and bowed.

“Mr de Lancy, I daresay you regret returning to India,” she said as though she could not believe anyone would unless it were to seek a fortune or they were forced to.

“No, madam, while I was exiled to become an English gentleman, it seemed as if India was in my blood,” he said, furious. “I was eager to come back.” ‘But, not Sylvester’ he could have added. “In between bouts of seasickness, he complained about his father’s summons to return from England where he settled like a bird in a nest.

Mrs Tremayne's amber eyes widened. "Extraordinary!" she exclaimed. "I wonder why you wanted to leave a civilised country for an uncivilised one?"

Mr Tremayne frowned. "Fortunately, not everyone shares your opinion," he said tartly to her. "Vivian, now you have paid your respects to my wife, do you want to refresh yourself or eat first?" He smiled at Mrs de Lancy. "Since news of Sea Sprite's arrival, your mother gave cook instructions to prepare a special meal for you."

"Good. I will eat first. At Eton, my mouth watered as I remembered my favourite dishes while eating bland meals without even a pepper pot on the table to make them more palatable."

Sylvester's stepmother sniffed. "I prefer English food and, to judge by imports from England sold in De Lancy's Emporium, so do many of our compatriots."

"Vivian, I regret the growing tendency to reject all things Indian, endorsed by Richard Wellsley, the new Governor General, which is creeping into society," Mr Tremayne said.

His wife clicked her teeth. "At least you don't wear Indian clothes on formal occasions."

"And am comfortable in them on informal ones," her husband said.

Surprised by the sharp edge in their voices, which he did not remember from the past, Vivian glanced from husband to wife.

Bates returned and inclined his head. "I have summoned the doctor to attend to Master Tremayne with a message to tell him his patient is worn to the bone by seasickness,"

"A to do about nothing, Bates. Sylvester merely suffered from nausea. I daresay, he will recover without medical treatment," Mrs Tremayne said.

"Much more than nausea, madam," Vivian said, disliking her more than ever.

"Mrs Tremayne, do you wish the meal to be served indoors or on the veranda overlooking the gardens where it will be cooler?" Bates asked.

"The veranda, Bates," she said.

Mr Tremayne walked toward the door. "I shall join all of you there after the doctor gives his verdict, and I have changed into more comfortable clothes. Vivian do you remember there are three seasons in the Madras Presidency: hot, hotter, and hottest. The only relief is during the monsoon with the drop in temperature."

“I have forgotten little, sir.” Vivian stood. “Will you come outside with me Joyce?” he asked and waited for his mother and Mrs Tremayne to precede them.”

“Joyce’s meals are always served in the nursery,” Mrs Tremayne objected.

“Our daughter is old enough to join us,” her husband said. “My boy, you must be famished. I don’t expect either you or the ladies to wait for me to eat your meal.”

Vivian smiled. At seventeen, he did not think of himself as a boy, but he liked Mr Tremayne addressing him as one. He glanced at Joyce, whose cheeks reddened. Her lower lip caught between her teeth she looked nervously at her mother.

Vivian sensed Mr Tremayne and won a victory in an undeclared war not without metaphorical bloodshed. He glanced at his mother. Why did she live here? There would be time to ask her and discuss various matters, not the least of which was his future.

Outside candle sconces and lanterns hanging from the ceiling shone, so did the white floors and columns, which resembled marble. On a long table spread with a white tablecloth, crystal and silver, including covers over glasses to keep insects out, sparkled. Flowers, the bright colours of gemstones, in pots contrasted with the bare-foot servants’ white uniforms banded with crimson on their sashes and turbans. The scent of spices pervaded his nose. His mouth watered. A servant behind his chair wafted a peacock feather fan to deter mosquitoes. In the past he took everything for granted. Now he understood it represented Mr Tremayne’s success as a wealthy nabob. He ate food from a priceless imported porcelain plate, side plate and bowl heaped with delicious curries, flat breads, rice, savouries and sweetmeats, even more convinced he wanted to spend the rest of his life in India.

Halfway through the meal, Mr. Tremayne returned.

Vivian looked at his mother, who pressed a hand against her throat encircled by an opal necklace. “Sylvester?”

“Says he would never have guessed he could be so ill and survive,” Mr Tremayne replied.

The expression in her eyes revealed her anxiety. “What did the doctor say?”

“He prescribed rest and a diet of soup, easily digestible food, and medicine to settle his stomach.”

Mr Tremayne glanced at his wife, who ate without showing the slightest concern for her stepson.

“Of course, Sylvester protested, saying it was heaven being on dry land instead of on an abominable ship, and he demanded more substantial food,” he continued. “The doctor warned him not to go against his advice and left the medicine to be taken four times a day.”

“Some chicken pie, Vivian?” Mrs Tremayne asked.

“No thank you. In England, I dreamt of the food Prahlad das makes.”

“Vivian?” Mr Tremayne commenced.

“Sir?”

“Will you be too tired to rise early and ride with us at dawn while it is cool?”

“No, I will not. I look forward to joining you.”

“Good. Mrs De Lancy and Joyce, an intrepid rider, will accompany us.” Mr Tremayne chuckled. “Her groom frequently has to restrain her from urging her pony over obstacles too large for him to clear, and I threaten her with a leading rein.”

Joyce opened her mouth, obviously about to protest, but her father waved her to silence.

“Vivian, you may try out the thoroughbred I bought for you,” his mother said.

“Thank you, Mama, I look forward to it.”

“I hope Sylvester will approve of the chestnut I bought for him. I anticipate him joining us in the mornings,” Mr Tremayne said. “And, Vivian, both of you will enjoy playing cricket on the new pitch.”

Vivian swallowed his mouthful of vegetable curry and chapati. One of the few things he really enjoyed in England was playing the game on a pleasant summer day.

Mama smiled at him. “After we have breakfast, I shall ask Sylvester if he needs anything from my emporium which we will go to after Vivian and I go there to discuss business.”

Joyce caught hold of his sleeve. “Promise not to go without giving me my presents.”

He laughed about to tell the impatient seven-year-old he would give them to her after dinner.

Mrs Tremayne glared at her daughter. “You are greedy. Don’t pester Mr de Lancy. Go to the nursery,” she forestalled him.

Vivian stood. “Miss Joyce, I shall go with you to give you your gifts.” He did not regret declaring silent war against the disagreeable woman.

Chapter Three

Dressed in white, her black hair streaked with grey cut short according to Hindu custom for widows, plump Punj Ayah, who always refused to sit on a chair, squatted near the door in the day nursery.

Joyce sat opposite Vivian by the window, screened with a white lattice to stop mischievous monkeys from entering and creating havoc. Three servants brought a large box, parcels wrapped in cloth, and a small box covered in blue velvet, which they put on the table.

“For me?” Joyce asked breathlessly. Her eyes shone in the candlelight, and her hands hovered over her presents. “Yes,” Vivian replied, amused and gratified by her excitement. “I did not bring them across the sea for anyone else.”

“May I open them?”

“Of course.”

“I don’t know whether to open the smallest or the largest one first.”

“Joyce, it is said good things come in small packages,” said Vivian’s mother, entering the room dressed in a pale green gown, her opal necklace and earrings shimmering.

Proud to be her son, Vivian gazed at her. For the first time, he fully appreciated her beauty and elegance. “Have you seen Sylvester?” he asked her.

“Yes, I made sure he is comfortable, listened to his complaints about, in his words, ‘slop only fit for babes.’ I am here to say goodnight to Joyce.” She smiled and shook a finger at the child. “You should be in your nightgown. Open your presents quickly so you will not be too tired to ride with us in the morning.”

Joyce unwrapped an oblong box. Speechless, she stared at a doll, with a pretty, hand-painted porcelain face and hands and a cloth body dressed in fashionable silk and velvet clothes.

“Don’t you like it?” Vivian teased her because her delight was obvious.

“Not it, her,” Joyce reprimanded him. “I love her!” Her forehead wrinkled. “I must christen her. Her name is Amelie-Rose because she is a French girl. Thank you for giving her to me,” she cooed.

“I am glad you are pleased.” He glanced at his mother. “The present in the largest box and several others are from Joyce and Sylvester’s grandparents. The countess helped me to choose the gifts. Mother, you would like her. Unlike many aristocratic ladies, she is not arrogant.”

Joyce picked up the doll and examined her forget-me-not blue silk gown, worn over two petticoats, a white one and a red flannel one. “I’ll ask the dirzi, who sits sewing all day on the veranda, to make more clothes for her.”

“You could sew something,” Marianne suggested.

“I cannot,” stated Joyce because she did not enjoy needlework.

Vivian tapped a large, square parcel. “See what is inside this.”

One by one, Joyce took out the doll’s exquisite clothes, imitations of everything a well-dressed young girl of fashion would wear by day and night, including dainty red, yellow and green Morocco leather shoes and jewellery. “Dear Amelie-Rose, you will be the best-dressed doll in Madras,” she murmured.

“These are from me,” Vivian said, handing her two parcels, which contained two jigsaw puzzles and a journal with a small key to lock it.

“You are very kind, Mr de Lancy. How did you know I wanted one?”

“I did not. Your grandmother said even little ladies confide secrets in them,” he said, very pleased because she liked it despite his doubt in response to the countess’ suggestion.”

Joyce unwrapped the fourth one. “What is this?” she asked, looking at a square wooden box inlaid with patterns of foliage in assorted colours.

“A *carillon a musique*, a music box.” He turned the key. “Listen. It plays *My Love Is Like a Red Rose*.”

Delighted Joyce listened to it. She turned the key to hear it again. “Amelie-Rose and I love it. Thank you for giving it to us, Mr de Lancy.”

“Don’t address me as Mr de Lancy, call me Vivian as you used to.”

He put another parcel in front of her.

Joyce took out a leather-bound book and read the gold-tooled title aloud. "*Tales From Around the World*." She turned the pages and gazed at hand-tinted illustrations.

"What are you looking for?" Vivian asked.

"Stories which ayah and sadhu tell me."

"Sadhu?"

"Yes, have you forgotten the nice holy man who lives under a tree. He tells me about Krishna, who stole butter from his mother's pots and fed it to monkeys, and Rama, who rescued his wife, Sita, from the demon Ravana."

His mother frowned.

Vivian remembered listening to those stories and many more with bated breath as a young boy from the same ascetic."

"Joyce, your father allows him to live there, but you should not—" Marianne began.

"Don't worry, Mother," Vivian interrupted. "Listening to those fascinating tales neither harmed me nor prevented me from being a Christian although I am interested in other religions."

"Good. Never doubt Lord Jesus Christ is our dear redeemer," Marianne said.

"What is in the enormous wooden box?" Joyce asked.

"It is a present from your grandparents," Vivian helped her to open it.

Wide-eyed, Joyce stared at a doll's house. "It is beautiful," she breathed.

He handed her the last boxes. Speechless, she opened them and examined the exquisite miniature furniture, a tiny hand-painted porcelain tea and dinner service, minute kitchen paraphernalia, and silver models of cutlery and other items.

"You must be tired, Vivian," Marianne repeated. "Don't say you are not. I can see you are," she fussed as though she were a mother hen with one chick. She looked at Joyce. "Your ayah is yawning. She will prepare you to go to bed. I shall return to hear your prayers and kiss you goodnight."

Vivian tensed. Surely Joyce's mother, not his, should.

* * *

Snug beneath her mosquito net, Joyce opened her eyes at dawn. Happy, she peered through the lattice screen at the horizon, a blend of pale gold, pink and saffron. Someone

knocked on the door. Punj Ayah rose from her padded mat on the floor, opened it, and took a small silver platter from a servant, and gave it to Joyce.

Every day, Joyce drank milk, ate fruit, dressed in her dark blue riding habit, joined her father, Mrs de Lancy, and, sometimes, Mama. She wriggled her toes eagerly, anticipating Vivian being well enough to accompany them. She ate fast and got out of bed. “Ayah, dress me quickly.”

Her hat firmly secured by ribbons knotted and tied in a bow under her chin, riding crop in her gloved hand, Joyce tip-toed into Sylvester’s bedroom, followed by Punj Ayah. What could she do for him? If she were feverish, her ayah bathed her forehead. She pulled off her leather riding gloves, put them on the bed. The palm of her hand on his burning hot brow she gave an order to Punj Ayah. “Bring me a wet cloth from the washstand.”

Her forehead puckered, her mouth pursed, despite her ayah’s protest, she wiped Sylvester’s brow.

“What! Don’t plague me like an insect, Monkey Face!” her brother exclaimed.

Time never dimmed the dreadful day on which Mama slapped her and she sobbed. She knew even young ladies should not cry. If she did it was where Papa, Mama or Mrs de Lancy could not see her, and if Punj Ayah did, she scolded her, saying, “Missy Memsahibs don’t cry like servants’ children.”

Joyce waited impatiently to see her brother, whose face she almost forgot believing he would love her as much as dear Papa did. If he would neither have compared her to an insect buzzing around him nor called her Monkey Face.

“Joyce! Why are you crying,” he asked.

“You said I am an insect and called me monkey face,” she said between sobs.

Booted and spurred, Vivian had entered the room and heard what she said. “Sylvester!” Vivian protested. “Joyce is not like an insect and her face is not like a monkey’s.”

Her brother ignored him. He heaved himself up, took the cloth from her, reached over the side of the bed and put an arm around her waist. With his free hand he fumbled under the pillow for a kerchief. “Sweetheart please stop crying and dry your eyes with this.”

She wiped her face and. Glazed eyes wide, stared at him. “I know I am not pretty, but I did not know I have a face like a...a—” More sobs escaped her.

“Sweetheart,” Sylvester repeated, “you don’t. I am sorry for oversetting you. My only excuse is you have forgotten sometimes I addressed you by that name. And you are wrong about yourself. You have pretty eyes and a beautiful smile.”

“Why did you call me one?”

“It was my special nickname for you. I loved you for being so lively and inquisitive, although Mother Jane was forever scolding you.”

“She still does,” Joyce said mournfully.

Her brother and Vivian gazed at each other as though an unspoken message passed between them.

Sylvester sank back against the heap of pillows, his breath shallow. “Am I forgiven, Joyce?”

“Yes, if you never call me monkey face again.”

“Your brother is tired,” Vivian said. “He needs rest. Come with me. I daresay your father is waiting for us with my mother.”

In the forecourt, her syce helped her mount beneath a dusky blue sky with dark clouds pierced by gold sunshine. “Thank you,” she said to him and patted Star, her black pony with a white blaze on its forehead.

The syce beside them, Star trotted after the others on their thoroughbred horses, Mama, an excellent horsewoman on Papa’s right and Vivian next to dear Mrs de Lancy.

She spurred her pony forward to keep up with them.

“Missy Memsahib,” the syce protested.

Joyce passed the grove of mango trees near the baobab tree beneath which Sadhu lived, and reached the river, bordered by rice fields on the opposite bank.

They reined in their horses and, from a small distance, gazed at the sheet of water shimmering in the sunshine, and white sand on the shore.

“No sign of a mugger’s imprints,” Papa said

Joyce shuddered at the thought of the predators which glided through the water, snatched their victims, animal or human, in their powerful jaws and dragged them to their underwater lairs.

Papa scrutinized her. “You are quiet, Joyce. Does something trouble you?”

“Don’t waste your time with her. I daresay she is sulking about something,” Mama said.

Papa's eyes flashed. "Our daughter does not sulk."

"Are you unwell, Joyce?" Marianne asked.

"No, I am frightened of muggers."

"So am I. It is sensible to be cautious, which is why we keep a safe distance between us and the shore. Don't think about them. Ride home between me and Vivian," Marianne said.

At the house, Papa visited Sylvester. Joyce went with the others to enjoy breakfast on the veranda where she peeped nervously at her mother.

A servant pulled back the chair at the foot of the table for Mama to sit.

"Mrs Tremayne, the cook, prepared tea and toast for you. Do you require anything else?" Bates asked.

Mama only spoke to servants out of necessity. She looked down her straight nose with delicately shaped nostrils and shook her head.

Joyce scrutinized the heaped plate on the table in front of her. Thin, ten-inch round soft dosas made from a paste of fermented black gram lentils and rice, served with coconut chutney, and spicy sambar made with lentils, vegetables and tamarind. Her mouth watered while she listened to Mama say grace asking God to bless their food and thank Him for it.

Joyce wondered why, like Hindus, Mama did not first offer it to God for Him to enjoy. Her stomach rumbled. With her fingers, she popped dosa and sambar into her mouth.

"Delicious," Vivian said between mouthfuls.

"I asked Cook to prepare this. Is it still one of your favourites?" Marianne asked him.

"Yes, Mother. Spices are exported to England, and curries are served sometimes, but they never taste the same as they do here."

Joyce removed the silver cover from her crystal glass of lime water. The edge of her gold bangle latched onto the rim of the glass, which fell over. Apprehensive, she watched the contents spread over the spotless white tablecloth.

"Clumsy child!" Mama exclaimed. "You are not fit to eat with adults. Go to your nursery."

"An unfortunate accident, Jane," Marianne said. "I am certain the child is sorry."

"Yes, I am," Joyce said, humiliated and on the brink of tears. She trembled. "I am very sorry."

“Jane, you made an ado about something unimportant. Your husband would not be angry with Joyce about the mishap. Let us put it out of our minds,” Marianne said too quietly to be overheard.

“Very well. Joyce. You may stay,” Mama said sharply.

* * *

The knuckle bones in Vivian’s clenched fists gleamed white as ivory. *Mrs Tremayne has a viper’s tongue. Does she know how frightened Joyce is of her?* He sought for something to say to raise the child’s spirits.

“Did Amelie-Rose sleep well?” he asked, having learned a lot about children from Sylvester’s youngest cousins.

Though her eyes were moist, Joyce giggled. “I took her to bed with me. We did not wake up once during the night.”

If she is hungry, with your mother’s permission, you should fetch her,” he said.

“Amelie-Rose?” Mrs Tremayne questioned them.

“I bought the doll in England for Joyce,” Vivian said in a level tone. He stared into the woman’s eyes. “It will comfort her.”

“Indeed,” Marianne intervened. “Joyce, your mother will not object to you fetching it.”

Vivian took a deep breath. He would keep his vow to protect the child he loved since he saw her soon after her birth, regardless of the consequences.

While Joyce scurried away from the veranda, he believed in the logical Hindu belief some people were reborn as friends or enemies. Could Joyce and Mrs Tremayne have been foes in a previous life? Did the soul transmigrate from body to body, birth after birth? Were he and Joyce friends or relations in a previous life? He shook his head to rebuke himself for questioning Christian doctrine. “Mrs Tremayne,” he began.

“Yes, Vivian.” She spread butter on another piece of toast.

“You should be ashamed of yourself for bullying and mistreating your daughter.”

Her knife clattered onto the plate.

“If Joyce dropped her knife, would you admonish her for being clumsy?”

Colour flooded into the woman’s cheeks. “You are an impertinent jackanapes.”

Her words seemed to hang in the air while he sipped some lime water. "You are mistaken, madam. My mother told me my father was an honourable gentleman who always kept his word. I shall follow his example and protect Joyce."

"How?" Jane picked up her knife. Fury blazed in her eyes. "Were it not for your mother, my dearest friend, I would order you to leave my house."

Secretly amazed by his audacity, Vivian took another deep breath and glanced at his mother, who almost imperceptibly shook her head at him.

Joyce returned. "You are right, Vivian. Amelie-Rose is hungry."

Mrs Tremayne sniffed derisively.

"I have put her apron on in case she spills anything on her beautiful silk gown." She glanced furtively at her mother. "I don't want Amelie-Rose to be as clumsy as I am."

"You are not clumsy. When I saw you today for the first time after many years, I admired the way you walk. If your name were not Joyce, it should be Grace," Vivian said.

"Well-spoken," Benjamin remarked as he walked to his chair at the head of the table. "Joyce, who is Amelie-Rose, and why do you think you are clumsy?"

"She is the doll Vivian gave me. Papa, I knocked over my glass of lime water by mistake. Mama said I am clumsy."

"Mrs Tremayne, a change of air at my house in Fort St George might be advisable." Benjamin said to his wife in an icy tone. "You always treat our daughter too harshly."

Vivian looked from one to the other unable to understand why the suggestion sounded like a veiled threat. Was it because of Mr Tremayne's taut face and rigid demeanour?

"Papa."

"Yes, Puss."

"I like Vivian, but Mama doesn't. She said if Mrs de Lancy were not her friend, she would tell him to leave here. And she called him...a jackanape."

"How is Sylvester," Marianne asked after a brief, awkward silence.

"Not as pale and unsteady as he was yesterday. He is looking forward to substantial meals, but like my wife, he prefers English cuisine to Indian cuisine."

"What does cuisine mean, Papa?"

"The type of food."

"Oh." The child turned her attention to her doll. "Eat nicely, Amelie-Rose."

“Vivian.”

“Yes, Mother.”

“If you have finished your breakfast, it is time to visit the emporium.” She dabbed her mouth with her napkin. “Bates, please send to the stable for my carriage to wait for me in front of the house.”

“Mother, why are you friends with the detestable woman?” Vivian demanded as soon as they set out.

“I am not.”

Vivian raised his eyebrows. “If it is true—” She waved her finger at him. He broke off for a moment. “Please accept my apology. You taught me how important it is to be truthful. I know you would never lie to me.”

“Good. While Jane was with child, she changed into an angry, bitter woman who ignored her baby from birth. I have never understood why, as you told her, she bullies Joyce.” She smiled. “I am proud of your determination to keep the vow to protect Joyce you made when you and Sylvester were little boys, Sylvester asked Mr Tremayne ‘what is a vow.’ He explained to you and his son ‘a vow means a promise’.”

Embarrassed by her praise for something he considered his duty, Vivian looked out of the window at the lush green paddy fields of rice on either side of the road to town. “If you are not her friend, why do you live with her at Tremayne House?” he enquired while the carriage, pulled by a matched pair of chestnuts, overtook an oxcart. A group of women with one end of their saris pulled up over their heads to conceal their faces, balanced clay pots of water on their heads.

“Four years after your father died Jane was with child she was downhearted. Concerned about her melancholy, Mr Tremayne asked me to stay at their house. I agreed to stay there until after the birth.”

“Why are you still there?” Vivian turned his father’s signet ring, his most valued possession, around his finger.

“For three reasons you are old enough to understand. I wanted to avoid gossip, which would damage my reputation if I lived alone, and because Mr Tremayne is very kind. He has helped me manage the emporium you will inherit.”

“And the third?”

“Is because of Joyce. I loved your father too much ever to marry again, so I think of her as the beloved daughter I will never have.”

Vivian watched a group of barefoot men dressed in white cotton walk toward Fort St George. He considered his mother’s reasons: “Do you intend to live with the Tremaynes forever?”

“No, it is one of the things I intend to discuss with you. Joyce is taught by a governess who comes to the house five days a week. When she is nine, the child will be educated in England. If I engage a companion we can live in our own house without my reputation suffering.”

The carriage slowed as the horses drew it along the road crowded with carts and palanquins, rickshaws, horse and ox-drawn vehicles and masses of people. It halted outside De Lancy’s Emporium. “Come, Vivian, we have a lot to discuss.”

Impressed by the large three-storey building, he stepped out of the carriage and held out his arm. His mother rested her hand on it. “Come,” she repeated after she got out and led him into the building.

Chapter Four

Since her husband died, with Mr Tremayne's advice, Marianne managed and improved her legacy, De Lancy's Emporium.

She added two more departments, each one, divided from the other four by arches. Marianne a large variety of merchandise, either shipped into Madras or bought at auctions, which attracted her clientele.

Enticed by an advertisement in the local newspaper and by word of mouth, well-dressed men and women gathered in the smallest one to purchase the wares catering to their British taste.

Vivan observed imported wine and bottles of pale ale sold very well, and so did hams, pickles, cheese, salted salmon or herrings, mushroom ketchup, walnut ketchup, marmalade, confectionery and much more.

"Mother, the improvements you made after I went to England are amazing!" Vivian exclaimed.

"Ah, you are impressed," she said, very pleased by his reaction.

With Vivian beside her, Marianne halted by a table where members of the eager crowd were choosing candied almonds, sugar plums, blackcurrant drops, marzipan, fruit lozenges, and other treats. She knew the high demand would deplete the inventory. Within a week or two she anticipated the next consignment.

She nodded or spoke briefly to acquaintances but neither conversed with them nor introduced him.

"Later, Vivian you may choose whichever sweetmeats you fancy."

He grinned. "Thank you, but I confess I yearned for burfi, sandesh and other local sweetmeats in England."

"I am not surprised," she said, "but don't linger here." Marianne led Vivian up a flight of stairs to the first floor she and his father occupied above what was then a very small emporium. Outside the door to her office, she took a wrought iron key from her reticule

and turned it in the lock. A servant, dressed in spotless white apart from his scarlet turban and sash, waited for her to step back for him to close the door.

“Jai Sri Krishna,” Vivian said, offering the traditional greeting, Victory to Lord Krishna. “Arjuna how are you and your family?” he asked in Tamil.

“We are being well, thank you, Sahib.”

Marianne put her hand on Vivian’s arm. “Come into my office.”

The door shut, she locked it, turned around and indicated a tray on her desk. “I daresay you are thirsty. What would you like to drink, lime water, pale ale or sherry wine?”

“Pale ale. If I asked for sherry wine, you might dilute it with water as you did for me and Sylvester when we were children.”

“Not now you are a young man.” She sat on a chair behind the desk, opened two bottles and poured the contents into tall glasses etched with vines.

Vivian prowled around the office. He stopped to look at the oil painting of his father on one of the white walls.

Marianne gazed at her son, whose black curly hair, chestnut brown eyes, and high cheekbones were replicas of her late husband’s. Grief surfaced. If only death had not claimed him. In the morning, he complained of a fever. By evening, he was dead. Two days later, her beloved’s coffin was interred. Thereafter, every Sunday, she attended the service at St Mary’s Anglican church, the first built in Fort St George. Afterward, she put flowers on the slab of marble over his grave in front a tall stone angel.

Looking at Vivian’s fair skin, not yet tanned by the merciless sun, she admired his excellent figure. In Western clothes, his broad chest, slender waist, narrow hips and long legs, which pantaloons showed off to perfection, reminded her of his father.

“I wish I remembered Papa.” Vivian sank onto a sofa beneath the window.

Marianne blinked to hold back tears, picked up her glass and sipped lime water. “So do I,” she replied, unable to modulate her voice. Another sip helped her to regain control over her sensibilities. “You resemble him. No one who knew him would doubt you are his son.”

“He would be proud of you. Few ladies could achieve as much as you have.” Vivian smiled. “I am amazed by your accomplishment. I don’t remember you selling so much porcelain, mirrors, clocks, and wallpaper displayed in the first department, as well as the

fabrics, brocades, silk velvet, and haberdashery in the second.” He raised his glass. “A toast, may you continue to prosper.”

“To tempt my present and new customers, I continually add new items to my stock.”

“I have a suggestion?” Vivian drained his glass. “I know nothing about business, so you might dismiss my idea.”

“What is it?”

“Joyce is delighted with her presents. You could sell children’s toys.”

“An excellent idea. Thank you. Why did I not think of that? I could include teething rings and rattles for babies.”

“And toy soldiers, rifles and cannons for boys. If you also imported a fort and a castle, you could have replicas made by local craftsmen and ones of Joyce’s doll’s house and much more.”

“I shall,” Marianne replied enthusiastically. “Now, I have several matters to discuss with you.”

“First, with your permission, I have some questions,” Vivian said hesitantly.

She guessed what they might be. Surprised he had not asked long ago, her stomach clenched. “What are they?”

“You have never spoken about your family or Papa’s. I went to England, met members of Sylvester’s relatives, and became curious. I sent two letters asking if there are I have relatives I could meet. “Did they go astray?”

She shook her head. “No, I chose not to satisfy your understandable curiosity in writing.”

Her son’s forehead creased. “You must have a good reason?”

“Some things are better said than written.” She sighed. “My father, a clergyman, was a distant relative of Baron de Lancy to whom he owed his inadequate living. Your grandmother, who died soon after my marriage, was the daughter of another well-born prelate. My parents lavished love on me, their only child. Although they were poor, I enjoyed a happy childhood in the village near the Baronet De Lancy’s estate. Your papa and I fell in love at first sight.” Her cheeks hot, she stared down at her hands clasped together on her lap. “Percy de Lancy, his father’s younger son, was twenty-one and I was sixteen, when I strayed onto the baronet’s land. On my way back to the vicarage, carrying a basket full of mushrooms I collected in the woods, I saw Percy. ” She broke off and

covered her burning cheeks with her hands. “Frightened of being charged with trespass, I dropped my basket.”

“What happened next?” Vivian prompted her.

“I have never forgotten watching Percy dismount from his horse. He bowed to me, an unfashionable, unimportant girl. Your father smiled like an angel. He helped me pick up the mushrooms. Our hands touched. From that second, despite his betrothal, which his parents arranged, inexplicably, we loved each other. For months we met in secret. He asked me to be his wife. Immediately I accepted his proposal.” He told his father and mother he would marry me. They were furious with my parents and intimidated them. My father sent me to Edinburgh to live with an elderly lady. Since your birth, I have dreaded the day coming when I would have to tell you the truth.”

“Why Mama?”

Marianne dabbed her eyes with a small, lace-edged kerchief. “I don’t blame my parents for cutting us out of their lives after Percy followed me to Scotland, and without hesitation, I agreed to elope with him. We married at Gretna Green. Afterward, I never visited my dear, distraught parents. Except for his uncle, a shareholder in the East India Company, who suggested we should emigrate to the Madras Presidency, none your papa’s family ever wrote or spoke to us.”

Finding it increasingly difficult to speak, she sipped more lime water. “Your papa and I used his modest inheritance from his childless godfather to settle here and open the emporium which you will inherit.” Prepared for Vivian’s horrified reaction to her shameless elopement, she forced herself to look at him, although tears filled her eyes. “I daresay you despise me, now you know the truth.”

“How could I? You are the best mother any son could have.”

“One who caused the de Lancy’s to disown your papa.”

He walked around the desk and kissed her forehead. “Their loss not yours and my father’s. I am proud of Papa for his refusal to be forced into an arranged marriage and of you for having the courage to marry him.”

Marianne’s shoulders heaved, but relieved, she smiled at him.

“How did your parents react, Mama?”

Tears spilled down her cheeks. “I wrote to them on the day after my wedding, begging them to forgive me. When we disembarked at Madras, we did not have an address for

them to reply to my letter. From Fort St George, I sent another one in which I asked them to join us and enclosed a draft to be drawn from your papa's bank for their expenses. It took over a year to receive a kind reply from the new incumbent of your grandfather's living. He informed me an infectious disease swept through the village and claimed my parents' lives." She dabbed her cheeks. "He also wrote 'they were loved, and people came from far and wide to attend their funeral and pay tributes to them'." She sniffed. "I am sorry for crying. After your father died, I was drained of tears forever."

Vivian took the damp kerchief from her and tenderly dried her eyes. "I am proud of you," he repeated. "I hope if I meet the love of my life and elope, you will not disown me."

"Never." Marianne stood and held him in a close embrace. "I am more relieved than you can conceive because you have not condemned me." She sat behind the desk and drank the rest of her lime water. "Indeed, I did not anticipate your question and my explanation today. Another drink?"

"Limewater to have a clear head while we talk," her son teased her.

Vivian's smile made her painful revelation and her hard work worthwhile. She filled his glass. He took it from her and waited for her to speak.

"My last will and testament has been drawn up, signed and witnessed. Mr Tremayne and my attorney have copies." She opened a drawer and took out a document with several seals attached to it. "This copy is for you."

"Thank you, but I hope you have many happy years ahead."

She smiled. "So do I."

"And, Mother—"

Marianne raised her eyebrows. "Yes?"

"Did you ever regret marrying Papa?"

"Not for one moment."

Her son's cheeks reddened as he gazed into her eyes. "Have you...did you or do you want to get married again?"

"No, despite many proposals. As I told you, I never wanted to," she replied, her voice husky. Marianne cleared her throat. "I brought you here to discuss your future. Do you want to live in India or England?" She stood. "Consider your answer on which so much depends while I attend to some urgent business."

* * *

Seated opposite his mother's vacant chair, elbows on the desk, Vivian pressed the tips of his fingers together and assembled his thoughts. In the past, merchants from the Spice Islands stopped in Madras from where local products, chintz, cotton, silk, spice and other goods were exported. His mind flickered back in time.

The British arrived in India where trade thrived in the seventeenth century. Subsequently The East India Company established itself close to textile weavers, whose products were sought internationally, Armenian, Dutch, French and Portuguese traders conducted business in South India and Kerala. Madras became an important commercial city where ideas and cultures were exchanged.

Most British men who came to India to feather their nests took no interest in Hindu, Muslim, Jain and other communities. They discovered little other than business to attract them in a continent rife with poverty and squalor, where masses of people shouted and jabbered in many languages. Most of those employed by the three East India Company Presidencies planned to make their fortunes and shake India's dust from their feet and sail back home to England.

Vivian shifted on the hard seat of his chair. An Englishman born in India, he automatically became a subject of King George the Third. He frowned. Should he feel guilty because he could offer neither the unfortunate king nor the Prince Regent, the future George the Fourth more than lip service? Forced to ask himself the disloyal question, he considered his future. In England, he would be insignificant. Due to his mother's wealth and Mr Tremayne's patronage, few doors would be closed to him in this land he loved. Ambitious parents would court him on their daughters' behalf's. Ladies who came to India to desperate to find a husband would be glad to marry him. What did England's complicated social structure and months of uncertain weather offer him compared to life in the Madras Presidency where he could afford whatever he desired.

He crossed the tiled floor to the window and looked down at Europeans, Hindus, and Muslims on foot or in vehicles, including palanquins with drawn curtains. Inside them, ladies probably sat in seclusion with female attendants.

As a child, he played with boys regardless of their caste, creed, or nationality. He looked at skinny ones dressed in tattered clothes. They kicked a rotting cabbage with as much enjoyment as privileged ones played with a ball. He did not share the prejudices creeping into British society distancing itself from local people, including offspring of European fathers and Indian mothers. A society in which many stopped serving Indian food to guests.

Unbidden, the memory of an early evening in June after light rain, the harbinger of the south-west monsoon, on Mr Tremayne's estate filled his mind. At sunset he strolled back to the house after visiting Govinda Sadhu, whose stories from ancient Sanskrit literature fascinated him. Slowly, the sun sank lower on the horizon. Bands of gold, saffron and amber yielded to rose and mauve. Cows with full udders ambled to the cowshed. The unforgettable scent of smoke rose from cow dung fires in the servants' quarters.

Vivian relaxed. He would participate in his mother's business in any way she wished, but whenever possible he would travel in South India and beyond. He was India's child, not a bigoted foreigner. Vivian planned to become one of the Englishmen considered eccentric, for studying and respecting other cultures. He would learn Sanskrit, read and translate sacred books. In the future, he would buy a house on St Thomas Mount where the air was cooler than in the fort or on Mr Tremayne's estate.

Wherever he lived, he would not serve only English food to guests, instead, he would also serve curries, sweetmeats, and other tasty preparations from the Indian cuisine.

Vivian watched his mother enter the office dressed in a pale green and primrose yellow striped silk gown rustling with each step. She walked toward him waving her peacock feather fan.

She sat behind her desk. Her eyebrows raised, she waited for him to speak.

"I shall live in India," he answered her unspoken question.

Her eyes sparkled. "Why have you chosen to live here?"

"It is my home."

"Ah, Vivian, I think you will fare better here than in England. In two years, if Mr Tremayne agrees, I shall take Joyce to England and leave you to manage the emporium. I will have trained you to. If there are, Mr Tremayne will help you. With his advice and the

most trusted members of my staff's I am confident de Lancy's will prosper during my absence."

Surprised by her decision, somewhat intimidated by the responsibility his mother would give him, Vivian cleared his throat. "In the time, I hope to earn your approval and trust."

"You already have it, I am certain you will meet the challenge. I shall stay in England waiting for Joyce to become accustomed to her new life, and I have sold valuable items I cannot consign to anyone. If Lady Luck favours me, I shall return in a year and a half."

"What must you sell in person?"

"You are about to see treasure." His mother stood, walked to the window and lowered the wood blind. "Please roll back the rug. Use the handle slotted into the centre of the floor to raise the trap door and remove the small iron chests." She chuckled. "Your expression tells me the secret hiding place astonishes you."

"Yes, it does. Does anyone else know about it?"

"Only Mr Tremayne. Your father was a prudent gentleman who hid money and valuable items there. I have continued the custom."

"Surely one or more of the servants are suspicious."

"Why should they be? The door is always locked whether I am here or not unless I am present while the office is cleaned."

Curious about the contents of the Vivian knelt and put each one on the desk.

He gazed at dust which marred the knees of his perfectly tailored, biscuit-coloured pantaloons clinging to his legs like tight gloves, and wiped sweat from his forehead. The sooner he wore comfortable loose-fitting cotton clothes like Mr Tremayne the better.

Marianne unlocked and opened one of the chests.

"Look, Vivian."

He goggled at a string of enormous pearls, an emerald necklace, a gold belt embedded with rubies, bracelets and rings set with diamonds. He picked up a velvet bag and tipped aigrettes set with fire opals and various gemstones to be worn on turbans onto the desk. "Where...I mean how...did you get these, Mother?"

"Seringapatam was looted after Tipu Sultan's defeat. Gold and jewels were offered in the bazaars by sepoys and camp followers. Subsequently, a prize committee distributed the remaining contents of Tipu's vast treasury. Many of the recipients wanted cash. They

sold their shares. I am among those who seized the opportunity to benefit. This hoard and the income from the emporium will ensure you never lack anything here or in England.”

His jaw tightened. *Yes, but it would be a hollow legacy because I don't have an affectionate family like Sylvester's with which to identify myself.*

Chapter Five

Sylvester would have welcomed death when undergoing the worst throes of seasickness. After being bedridden for a month since he disembarked, languid, his face pale, he did not have the energy to confront his father about urgent matters stalking his mind.

“Glad to see you have fattened up,” said Vivian, who sat opposite him on the veranda during a lull in the monsoon rain. “I feared bringing news of your burial at sea to your father.”

He shook his forefinger at Vivian. “When I return to, I mean visit England, I shall risk the consequences.”

“Do you want to go to England despite what you suffered during the voyage?”

“Bates advised me to consult a Kavi raja who prescribes treatments unknown to European doctors.” He sank his chin into the intricate folds of his starched muslin cravat. “I am inclined to test the man’s remedy.”

Vivian’s eyebrows rose. “On a voyage to England?”

“No, from Madras to Calcutta.”

A cool breeze stirred delphiniums, lupins, hollyhocks, and other potted plants sown from seeds sent to Mrs Tremayne from a relative in England. Vivian, dressed in comfortable cotton clothes, shivered. He stood to remove his warm cream cashmere chaddar folded into a narrow oblong arranged it over his right shoulder. He unfolded it and wrapped it around himself.

“Why do you dress in those clothes?” Sylvester asked. “With your brown eyes, black hair and sun-bronzed face, you might be mistaken for an Indian.”

Vivian chuckled. “Step down from your high horse. You were not so critical in the past. Instead of sweating in waistcoats, superfine coats, skintight pantaloons and hessian boots you could be at ease in the comfortable clothes your father and I prefer.”

“Confound it! Neither of you understand the importance of maintaining yourselves as Englishmen.”

Vivian sat and scrutinised Sylvester's face. "Regardless of what we wear, we maintain it without difficulty."

Sylvester stared in the direction of the banyan tree where the old Indian man lived close to the stream which sometimes overflowed its banks. "Although you consort with—what is the word for the so-called holy man?"

Vivian's eyes hardened. "Sadhu."

"English is good enough for me. I don't spend an hour every day with an ignorant Indian studying God knows what."

"If you did, you would soon appreciate he is an educated Brahmin," Vivian said, his voice frosty.

"Who has nothing worthwhile to offer me."

Vivian's deep sigh caused chest his chest to rise. "If you opened your mind, you would appreciate his ancient culture and knowledge."

"Which are insignificant compared to Christian values, British culture and modern inventions."

"Shall we talk about something else, Sylvester? Our friendship is too valuable to damage because we disagree."

Sylvester smoothed his cravat with one hand and gestured to a servant with the other. "Fill our glasses," he ordered. "Vivian, why have you decided to live in this godforsaken land in which missionaries convert so few people and, by all accounts, only those who are poor and hungry."

"You would not understand."

Warned by Vivian's decisive tone, he sipped some ale and did not speak.

"Sylvester, do you want to live in India?" Vivian asked.

"Of course, he does," said Joyce, almost dancing up the steps from the garden, Amelie-Rose clasped in her arms. "But Mama does not," she said slowly, a bewildered expression in her eyes. "She hates living here but I don't know why. Do you hate it, Sylvester?"

"Hate is too strong a word, but there are many reasons why I dislike the country," Sylvester replied.

"Why?" Joyce asked.

"In England you will understand," Sylvester replied.

"I will not. I love it here. Do you, Vivian?"

"Yes."

"Missy Baba," panted Punj Ayah, who hurried after her. "Your dress and shoes are dirty. Come quick. Put on clean ones. Memsahib will shout at us if she sees you," she said in Tamil.

"I know. But what does it matter? Mama is always cross with me." Tears on the tips of her long eyelashes, Joyce thrust her chin forward as though she did not care.

"Come with me, Missy Baba," repeated Punj Ayah, who understood little English. She tried to catch hold of her charge's hand.

Joyce dodged away from her. "Sylvester, why does Mama not love me?" She stood in front of his chair and wiped her eyes with her hand.

Heartsick for his little sister, Sylvester put an arm around her narrow waist and drew her close to him. He glanced at Vivian. For a mere second or two, he was tempted to take the coward's way out and say of course her mother loved her. "I don't know either why she does or dislikes me."

"If we are very good, can we make her love us?" Joyce asked, her eyes wistful.

"I don't think so." What could he say to comfort her? "As soon as she scolds you, remember how much Papa loves you."

A beautiful smile transformed Joyce's anxious face. "Mama is not...nice, but Papa is the best father in the world." She pressed her doll's painted cheek against her pallid one. "Amelie-Rose, I love him, and we love you, Vivian, and your mother, and Bates, who is very kind to me, Punj Ayah, and Govinda Sadhu." Her eyes shone. "Do you know Mrs de Lancy will sell copies of my doll's house and the toy theatre in her shop? Amelie-Rose and I enjoy playing with them."

"Missy Baba, you can't have lunch in dirty clothes, come and put on clean clothes" Ayah begged in Tamil, the language Sylvester had almost forgotten, although Joyce understood it and spoke it fluently.

"I curse the day my father married the heartless woman," Sylvester exploded after his sister left. "Joyce is an innocent, kind child who visited me every day while I was confined to bed. She deserves much better than she receives from the cold blooded woman. In England, our father's family will cosset Joyce and never say an unkind word to her. She should go there as soon as possible."

“Who could take her there?” Vivian asked. “I doubt Mr Tremayne would delegate anyone to manage his business if he went to England, and I am sure he would not allow Mrs Tremayne to take her.”

Sylvester frowned. “Even if the cure for seasickness seems effective, I don’t think Papa would allow me to take her in case it reoccurred,” he mused.

“If I learn to manage the emporium, my mother, who loves Joyce and has business in England, is willing to take her. She would wait for Joyce to be at ease with your relatives, and return here when she settled her affairs.”

“In the meantime, if there is no other alternative, I wish my father would order my stepmother to live in Fort St George.” Sylvester glowered. “I shall repeat what Joyce said and tell him how miserable his wife makes her.”

The sky darkened. Storm clouds gathered. Distant thunder rumbled. Branches of lightning dazzled their eyes.

“Shall we go indoors to escape the next deluge? The wind is bound to drive rain onto the veranda?” Vivian asked.

“Yes,” Sylvester agreed, knowing he should not delay a frank confrontation with his father but dreading the outcome.

* * *

Mid-morning on the day after Sylvester’s lengthy conversation with Vivian, he sat on one of a pair of chairs upholstered with chintz which added splashes of colour in the library where business was conducted. He waited to speak frankly to his father. Uneasy about his imminent interview, his gaze flickered over the shelves of books on one white wall and the opposite one where Papa’s collection of brass or marble figures of Hindu gods, goddesses and other artifacts were displayed on shelves. In his mind, he rehearsed what he would say. Determined not to be dragooned into an abhorrent life in India he wondered how his father would react. He would have written a letter to him instead of returning here if he had enough funds to stay in England. The rain, mercilessly drumming against the stout wood shutters lowered to keep it at bay, oppressed him. Sylvester poured a glass of Canary wine from the decanter on the low table between the chairs. Deep in thought, the sound of the door opening, which heralded his father’s arrival, startled him.

Sylvester's mouth tightened. His father wore a long, ankle-length wool kurta. Pleased with his perfectly tailored blue coat and dove grey pantaloons, Sylvester deplored his father's choice.

He sat down on the chair next to Sylvester's.

"Some wine, sir?" Sylvester asked, unable to think of a suitable reply.

"Yes, please. Do you like my library, which still serves as my office?"

"I do, except for those heathen statues."

"You should appreciate my valuable collection. Can you name any of them?" Benedict asked.

"No, sir."

"You surprise me. Vivian remembers most of their names. For example, Hanuman is the monkey warrior who helped save Rama's wife, Sita, after the demon, Ravana, kidnapped her."

Sylvester twirled a silver button on his coat. "You and Vivian are more interested in...er...Indian mythology than I am."

Benedict gazed down at the wine in his glass. "While you recovered from the voyage, I did not tell you about my plans for your future. Did you ask to speak to me in private to find out what they are?" He smiled. "To judge by how you are turning your coat button around and around, you are nervous. There is no need to be."

"I don't want to displease you, sir, but I must speak to you about my stepmother. She has never spoke a kind word to me, and Joyce is miserable because she seizes every opportunity to reprimand her for trivialities. I know you love Joyce. Why don't you carry out your threat to banish Mrs Tremayne to your property in Fort St George?"

"Upon my word, you are bold, but to answer your question, separation from her might create a scandal which affects your sister's prospect of an excellent marriage."

"Yesterday, Joyce asked why her mother doesn't love her. She also asked if we are very good, can we make her love us?"

"Thank you for telling me." Benedict's eyes darkened, and the grooves on either side of his mouth deepened.

"After Joyce confided in me, Vivian and I thought she should go to England as soon as possible to escape your wife's acid tongue. The problem is, who could take her?"

“It almost broke my heart to part with you when you were nine years old and I don’t want to be separated from Joyce when she is the same age,” Benedict said.

Sylvester poured more wine into their glasses. “I have a suggestion.”

“What?”

“Joyce said her mother hates India. If it is true, you could send Mrs Tremayne to England and spread the word it is for her health.”

“Maybe it would be a perfect solution. Shall we drink to the possibility?” Benedict raised his glass. “To the future, which includes my plans for you.”

Sylvester raised his glass, drank and eyed his father apprehensively. “Do they include us quitting India?”

“What!”

“England offers many advantages. You are a nabob. We could live in sumptuously there.”

“A preposterous suggestion, besides, I live here in luxury. Have you got windmills in your head?”

“No, sir. Joyce must go to a seminary in England. Later, she should enter polite society. If she marries in England, you might never see her again,” Sylvester said, playing his highest card.

“Joyce will come home to enter Madras society after she has been presented to the queen and made her debut in England.”

Sylvester prowled around the library. “But India is not our home, sir. It is a foreign country.”

Benedict gripped the stem of his wineglass. “From which we will not be uprooted. You are my heir. I shall train you to—”

“No! I would prefer to die at sea to being condemned to live here.”

The stem of Benedict’s glass broke. Blood trickled from his hand and stained his kurta. “No.” Benedict picked out the splinters and wrapped his kerchief around the injury. “Sit down. I cannot believe you would prefer dying at sea to all the advantages you have here.”

“You are injured, sir. I can explain later.”

“You may not.”

For the first time, Father looked at him contemptuously. Sylvester quailed and gazed at the idols he had always despised. They strengthened his determination. "I prefer the changing seasons in England to intolerable heat, my grandparent's life on his estate in beautiful Cornwall, and mansion in London, which my grandparents visit every year for the season." Sylvester transferred his gaze to his father. A sword piercing him would be less painful than the shocked expression in Papa's bright blue eyes. "I prefer English servants to heathen ones and—"

"Enough! You tell me what you don't want, not what you do."

"A house in London and a country estate, no matter how small."

Benedict removed the blood-stained cloth, examined his hand and winced as he took off his signet ring. "How would you maintain yourself?"

"I could be your factor, collect rents from my tenants and breed horses which I would sell."

"You are too young to either be in charge of an estate or be my factor," Benedict said slowly. "Yet, forcing you to stay here and be trained to manage my business enterprises after I die is futile. Unless it is idle talk, your readiness to endure sea sickness convinces me you will not change your mind."

"It is not idle talk," Sylvester insisted.

"You are bookish. I shall send you to university in England. Afterward, my factor, will train you to replace him upon his retirement. I will pay you, buy property near Castle Tresellion and a house in London for you, and invest money in your name to provide a substantial income. It will be on the understanding that you will receive no more from me."

"Thank you, Papa." Delighted by such generosity, Sylvester wished his father's voice and visage were not as cold, if not colder than ice on a winter sea.

"And, Sylvester."

"Yes."

"In England never neglect Joyce."

"I love her. You did not need to tell me that. Immediately after her birth, Vivian and I promised to protect her." He grimaced. "I wish we could shield her from my stepmother. Incidentally, do you know Vivian told her she should be ashamed of bullying and mistreating Joyce."

Papa's face and eyes softened. "I am indebted to him."

Why am I ill at ease? Without so much as the wherewithal to pay for my passage to England, Papa could have refused to allow me to quit India. He has agreed to more than I expected.

"In April, you will board a ship bound for Padstow. From there go to Cornwall and stay with your grandparents prior to attending university," Benedict said. "Leave the library. There is no more to be said."

"Yes, there is. No one could have a better father than you, sir."

"I am gratified," Benedict said softly. "After more time spent in England you might decide your future is here."

* * *

Benedict's iron mastery over his reaction to his son's revelation wavered. His plans for Sylvester to take his place in his business empire were overturned. The pain in his injured hand was insignificant compared to the metaphorical blow Sylvester struck. His chin sank onto his kurta's narrow collar. While Sylvester was in England, he missed his boy and eagerly awaited his return. Not for a second had he suspected Sylvester did not share his own and Vivan's love of India and think of the land as his home. He doubted Sylvester would ever change his mind about the sub-continent. His hopes for days to come destroyed, he must change his last will and testament. Benedict struck the gong three times.

"Fetch a bowl of water, bandages, and send Mr Bates to me," he ordered the servant who answered the summons."

After Bates removed the last tiny fragment of glass, Benedict washed his hand.

"A salve, sir, to prevent infection?"

"Yes." He must make provision for his loyal butler in his will.

The blood-stained kerchief and broken glass taken away, his hand treated and bandaged, Benedict summoned his lawyer. In this land of sudden death, he must have his new will signed, witnessed and sealed without delay.

Chapter Six

Joyce wrote in her journal at her desk in the schoolroom, the tip of her tongue protruding between her lips. *Once upon a time, there was a little boy called Krishna who was very*— Her pencil hovered over the page because she did not know how to spell naughty. She could leave a space to add the word and later ask Miss Harrison how to spell it, but if she told the truth, her governess would say she wanted to help and try to persuade her to allow her to read the journal. Joyce considered substituting bad for naughty, but her inner voice told her Krishna was never bad. She glanced at Punj Ayah, who sat on the floor with her back against the wall and dozed.

“Amelie-Rose, Papa will tell us how to spell naughty,” she whispered, put down the pencil and locked her journal. She slipped off her chair. Carrying Amelie-Rose and her journal, she tip-toed to the door, glad her grass-green Morocco shoes did not make a sound on the teakwood floor. Joyce went downstairs to the first floor. Unless Papa went to Fort St George, he spent most of the day in his library where, no matter how busy he was, or who might be with him, his smile always welcomed her.

* * *

“Papa,” his daughter’s voice alerted Benedict.

Joyce hugged her doll, from whom she was inseparable, the journal, Sylvester’s present, in her other hand. His heart overflowed with love for his heiress as he held his arms out toward her. After Sylvester’s rejection of plans for his future, her delighted smile warmed him as she ran across the floor. He enfolded her in his arms, kissed the top of her sun-kissed light brown hair and sat her on his lap.

“At this time in the morning, you should be with your governess,” Benedict said, trying to sound severe.

“Miss Harrison sent a message to let us know she is ill.” Joyce’s large blue eyes, the exact shade of his own and Sylvester’s widened. “Don’t scold me, Papa. Amelie-Rose told me to run away from the schoolroom because we wanted to see you.”

He suppressed his amusement. “You know Punj Ayah should be with you.”

“We want to ask you something.” Joyce pursed her pretty Cupid bow mouth.

“Nevertheless, you should not come here alone.”

His daughter straightened her back, sat her doll on his desk, and opened her journal with a small key. “Please tell me how to spell naughty.”

“Why?” Had his wife upset the child again?

Joyce drew his quill, ink and pounce box closer. “I am writing a story about little Krishna, who stole butter from his mother and fed it to monkeys from the forest.”

Benedict spelt it for her.

Joyce wrote the word and shook fine sand from the pounce box over it to dry the ink.

“Who told you the tale?” Benedict asked.

“Punj Ayah,” she replied. “Govinda Sadhu says Krishna is God. He tells me lots of other stories about Him.”

“Who do you think is God?”

“Well,” Joyce said slowly, “Govinda Sadhu says God has many names. If he is right, one of them is God the Father. Reverend Mathew taught me God is our Father in heaven and told me to pray to Lord Jesus.” Joyce scrutinised his face. “Papa.”

“Yes, Puss.”

“Do you really love me?”

Surprised by the question he held her close. “Yes, I have loved you since the day you were born. I cradled you in my arms and gazed at your beautiful little face. I rejoiced and named you Joyce.”

Joyce crumpled a fold of her white muslin gown in her hand. “I am not beautiful now!” She peeped at him through her long eyelashes. “Mama says I am an ugly little creature and no one loves me.”

Furious with his wife, he smoothed her hair. “You are not, and every day I love you more.”

She slipped off his lap. “I don’t believe you.”

“Do you think I would lie to you?”

She nodded.

“Why?” he asked, perplexed.

“Because Mama says you will send me to England to be rid of me. B...but I don’t want to go. My home will always be here.”

About to reassure her, send for Punj Ayah to take charge of her, and explain why they must part for many years, she got down from his lap. Her creased, starched gown looked like a rag as she grabbed her doll, held it tight and journal and marched out of the library.

Throughout Vivian’s early years, he immersed himself in Indian stories about gods and goddesses and chose to live here. Benedict wished Sylvester would make the same choice and prayed Joyce would do so.

He was furious with his wife, who he assumed would be in her boudoir she would not go outside while rain lashed down.

His heart heavy, Benedict quietly entered Jane’s sanctum with cream walls, porcelain figurines, which included a bashful shepherdess and her swain, a bookcase crammed with romantic novels and books of poetry imported from England. Gowned in a sea green, Small, glossy brown curls fell onto her forehead from her lace-edged, cambric mob cap. Benedict looked at her. Seated on a sofa upholstered with pale pink, heavy silk, her head bent over an embroidery frame, her beauty did not tempt him.

“Good morning, Madam,” Benedict said

Jane’s pretty mouth formed an O. Her needlework fell onto her lap. “Ben, what a delightful surprise. ‘Tis an age since you came here.”

“May I sit?” Without waiting for permission, he sat on a chair opposite the sofa. *Never was a man more deceived by the true nature of a woman*

The delicate colour in Jane’s cheeks increased. “A glass of wine?”

“No thank you, Madam.”

“Madam! In private, Ben. Is formality necessary?”

He ignored her smooth, long-fingered white hands fluttering toward him. “It is to avoid you being under a misapprehension.” He forestalled her when she opened her mouth to speak. “You don’t have a drop of human kindness in you so—”

“Given the opportunity, I could be very kind to you.” Jane clasped her hands demurely on her lap and gazed down at them. “I am your wife, Ben. Don’t neglect me. I promise you will always be welcome here and in my bedchamber.”

"I don't want your blatant invitation. Every time I see the scar on our daughter's face caused by your ring when you slapped her, I am reminded of your cruelty."

"B...but I love you and—"

"Please don't enact a Cheltenham tragedy." Benedict leant forward and stared into her eyes. "*If* you love me, it is your misfortune. Your inexplicable ill-treatment of my son and our daughter forfeited my affection."

"If you will be my husband in more than name, I promise to—"

"It is too late for me to be, but not for honesty. Do you hate living in India?"

"Yes. Oh, Ben, I would be ecstatic if we returned to England."

"My home is here. If you wish to live there, you may, and I shall give you a generous allowance."

"What! Leave you to install your low born mistress, Diana Avery and her son here. Never!"

"A *lady* should pretend she is not aware of her husband straying from the marital bed, one which I have no desire to share." With difficulty, Benedict checked his anger. "However, you are mistaken. Mrs Avery is no longer my mistress. Nevertheless, since you mentioned her lineage, I remind you of your French relations. While England and France are at war, you might be suspected of being a traitor."

"That is ridiculous!"

"As much as it is to refer to Mrs Avery's inferior birth."

"Whatever the case, I don't know why you separated from the adulteress, but judging by the warmth in your voice when you speak about her, as soon as I left India, you would replace me with her."

"You are mistaken, Madam. I did not come to discuss the lady. I came to tell you I will not allow you to continue bullying and humiliating Joyce."

Her eyes wary, Jane shrugged, releasing the scent of her rose perfume. "Has the snivelling child complained to you because I correct her when she is at fault?"

"Don't try to justify your unnatural conduct toward our daughter." Benedict slammed his left fist onto the palm of his right hand. "I shall put an end to it."

Jane shrugged again as though she were not alarmed. Nevertheless, she shrank against the back of the sofa.

“Madam, you must accept the consequences. To avoid gossip, which might affect Joyce’s future, it will be said you are going to England to visit your family and for the sake of your health.”

Jane stood and stretched out her arms toward him. “But I love you and—”

“You will be locked in your boudoir and bedchamber guarded by servants paid too well for you to bribe them.”

“Don’t be cruel!” Jane exclaimed her face stripped of colour.

“Your cruelty not mine is the cause of your predicament. During your imminent departure you will never speak to Joyce, have pin money, receive or visit acquaintances.”

Benedict looked down at his distraught wife, who covered her face with her hands. “You have driven me to my decision. No one in this household, including my son, Mrs de Lancy, Vivian or the servants, will censure me. Good day to you, Madam.” He left the boudoir without a backward glance, turned the key in the lock and put it in his pocket.

* * *

The door to her apartment locked, outraged by her husband’s decision, Jane paced the floor. She snatched up the figurine of the simpering shepherdess and flung it onto the floor, where it broke into smithereens. After another turn around the room, she threw down the moonstruck porcelain swain and stared at the fragments of both ornaments. She thought she convinced Joyce if she complained to her father, he would not love her.

Jane flung herself down onto the sofa. Overcome by a storm of tears she questioned why she loved her husband. She pounded her fist on the arm of the sofa. If only she could lie blissfully in his arms again. If only they had not come to India. Choked by sobs, her head moved from side to side against the seat of the sofa. *‘If only’ must be two of the saddest words in the world.*

* * *

A week after Benedict’s confrontation with his wife, he decided to go to Fort St George. On the pretext of urgent business, he informed Sylvester, Vivian and Mrs de Lancy he would stay in the rooms above his warehouse for several days. Benedict gave his

butler instructions. "While I am away, Mrs Tremayne will be isolated in her rooms. If she complains, please ignore her." At the front door, he handed Bates the key to the boudoir.

Joyce, who once again escaped from Punj Ayah, ran to him. "Please take me with you, Papa," she pleaded as he ruffled her hair.

"No, I will not have a moment to spare for you. There is nothing for you to worry about. No one will say a cross word to you while I am away."

She twisted folds of her muslin dress in her hands. "Mama will."

Benedict knelt and enfolded her in his arms. "Puss, your mother will not say a word to you."

"Good." Her body relaxed. She wound her arms around his neck and looked over his shoulder at Vivian as he came indoors. "Please tell Papa not to go away."

"I dare not," Vivian teased her. "Don't cry. I am at your service, poppet."

Joyce giggled. "But I'm only a child."

"When you are a lady, I cannot promise to be your knight in shining armour, but I shall be your obedient servant."

Wide-eyed, she gazed at Vivian. "I want you to be my knight like one in a storybook."

"You might change your mind when you are older."

"I will not," she said.

"Time will tell," Vivian said. "For now, shall we play draughts? If you practice, you might be able to beat Mr Tremayne when he returns. Tomorrow, would you like me to take you to the de Lancy Emporium?"

"Yes, please."

* * *

Dressed in a grey merino gown, a concession to warmth and convention at almost the end of her second year of half-mourning for her husband, Diana Avery re-read Benedict's letter at the table laid for breakfast. Her mind drifted to the past. She made two mistakes. The first was at seventeen when she allowed her widowed mother, Mrs Sutton, who only had a small income to support them, to persuade her to marry well-to-do, forty-year-old Avery. She put the tip of her forefinger in her mouth, a childish habit whenever she was thoughtful. One for which her mother always reproved her.

Diana remembered with distaste how her husband frequently chuckled her under the chin, stroked her auburn hair and called her his pretty little bride while repeatedly expressing his hope for a son. Avery, a recluse by nature, had spent most of his time studying ancient history in his library. Like a coddled, captive bird with clipped wings, she longed to fly away and explore the world.

Four years after Diana married, her mare took exception to a pack of vociferous pariah dogs. Unnerved, the horse bolted out of the fort and galloped down the road. Benedict, who subsequently called her his damsel in distress, gallantly urged his stallion after her. Abreast with her he seized the mare's bridle. They ignored her syce, who, on Avery's instruction, always accompanied her when she rode every morning. Diana smiled, recalling how she gazed into her rescuer's expressive blue eyes.

She sighed recalling being deep in love with Benedict and how little persuasion she needed to become his mistress for the six happiest months of her life. Well, she paid the price when she terminated her illicit relationship because she was with child, and feared the consequences if Avery ever suspected her infidelity. After she gave birth to auburn-haired, blue-eyed Lionel, Avery doted on him although Lionel did not resemble him.

She still loved Benedict. Again, her guilty conscience, because she deceived Avery, pricked her. He never treated her unkindly, and sometimes put aside his books to play with Lionel. Her stomach rumbled. Time to have breakfast.

Outside the door of the small parlour, she and her sharp-eyed mother preferred to the large dining room when they ate breakfast, a servant held out a tray. She took a letter from it, broke the red wax seal and read. Her heart rate increased. Why did Benedict want to see her two years after Avery's death, and only a month since Lionel celebrated his fifth birthday?

"Good morning, my love," her widowed mother, Mrs Sutton said. "I don't know why you prefer those savoury fritters made from whatever it is."

"A batter of ground urad lentils, spices and herbs," Diana explained. "Dipped into coconut chutney, they are delicious. You should try some." She put the letter next to her plate.

"I prefer toast with marmalade from de Lancy's Emporium." Her mother glanced across the table. "Who wrote it?" she asked and reached past the coffee pot to take it.

Diana grabbed it. "Mr Tremayne," she replied with feigned nonchalance.

“Why?”

Soon after Avery died, Benedict conspired with his lawyer to pretend he was his illegitimate son’s trustee. “Some business connected to Lionel. He asks me to call on him at my convenience.”

“Impertinent,” Mrs Sutton commented, a piece of toast suspended in her hand between her plate and her mouth. “You must guard your reputation. It is not the thing, my love, for a widow to visit a gentleman without a chaperon. I shall accompany you.”

Diana opened her eyes, the exact shade of green as her mother’s. *Does Mama suspect Benedict is Lionel’s father? Surely not. She is too outspoken not to have confronted me about it.*

“Dear Mama, if you are soaked during a downpour between my carriage and Mr Tremayne’s warehouse, it will trigger your aches and pains. I assure you it is unnecessary to accompany me.”

Mrs Sutton fingered her muslin mob cap’s ribbons tied under her chin. “A gentleman would call on you, not summon you.”

“I hope you agree it is not improper for me to go to the warehouse merely to sign a paper which his underling might present to me.”

“Take my advice not to affix your signature to any document which your lawyer has not approved of,” Mrs Sutton adjured her.

Diana choked back her irritation. “If you imply the *gentleman* would stoop low enough to cheat me, it is ridiculous.” With her spoon, she scooped up some kitchri, a favourite blend of rice and split mung beans the consistency of mashed potato. “Enough has been said. After breakfast, I must give instructions to the servants and say good morning to Lionel before I leave.”

“As you please.” Her face sour as a lime, Mrs Sutton ate a piece of toast.

“Don’t be annoyed with me, Mother.” Diana finished her breakfast and stood. “You are a doting grandmother. Please don’t spoil Lionel while I am out. Too many sugar plums are bad for him.” She bent to kiss her mother’s cheek.

“I promise not to give into your young tyrant’s demands,” Mrs Sutton said.

Diana rested her hand lightly on her mother’s shoulder. “You must not think I don’t appreciate your concern and advice, but please remember I am no longer your little girl who must be shielded.”

“No matter how old you are, you will always be my child, as Lionel will always be yours, regardless of his age. I have always wanted the best for you. Avery offered you security. I thought you would be content with him, but I was mistaken. I apologise. Nevertheless, don’t make a mistake when you discuss Lionel with Mr Tremayne.”

Diana caught her breath. Those words confirmed Mama suspected the truth about Benedict’s relationship with Lionel.

Chapter Seven

Benedict bowed, rendered speechless by the sight of Diana framed in the doorway of his elegant drawing room above the warehouse. Nearing the end of her second year since becoming a widow, she was dressed in half-mourning. Her dark grey broadcloth pelisse trimmed with dove grey crape and a gunmetal grey hat with a high crown enhanced her fair complexion and stray curls of her glorious auburn hair.

Diana responded with a graceful curtsy. "Benedict," she said softly in her musical voice which still thrilled him. She walked slowly and elegantly across the large oriental rug and halted in front of him. "I hope you are in the best of health."

He gazed at the lady whom he wanted to shield from adversity. To have Diana as his constant companion. Waking next to her every morning would be a joy. With an effort, he controlled intense love combined with passionate desire flooding through him and recovered his voice. "I am well, and you are blooming with health and beauty."

"You are too kind, sir," she said demurely, although the love and desire revealed in her eyes matched his own.

Nervous as a green youth, Benedict cleared his throat. He gestured to two chairs and a sofa upholstered in red velvet. "Please sit down."

Diana chose a chair separated from the sofa by a low, oblong rosewood table laden with refreshments. "A glass of wine or, if you are chilled due to the weather, I can send for tea or coffee."

"A glass of wine," she replied without looking away from him for a second.

"Ratafia, Madeira or Canary?"

"Ratafia." She tightened her hands, encased in short black kid gloves, on her lap.

Diana's eyes seemed to burn twin holes in his heart, an unforeseen reaction after six years apart. He filled a glass and put it in front of her on a small table. She picked it up and quickly sipped ratafia flavoured with peach kernels. "My mother is surprised because you asked me to visit you."

“What did you tell her?” he asked, glad to broach the reason for their separation.

“Reluctant to deceive her, I explained in your capacity as my son’s trustee, you want to discuss something with me.”

“Our son,” he corrected her.

“Y...yes. Guilt for deceiving Avery weighs heavy on my conscience.”

“A man you loved no more than I love my wife.”

Diana sipped more ratafia. “Avery bored me until I wanted to scream, but it was not an excuse for adultery.”

“Ah, you don’t believe we should seize happiness when we have the opportunity?”

“N...not at another person’s expense. I...I was Avery’s prized possession, which he valued but did not love.” Her eyes stricken with uncertainty, she continued. “I am certain he never doubted Lionel, who he loved with his whole heart, was his son. Every time I saw them together shame tortured me.”

“Diana, when you told me you were with child you said Avery, who always wanted one but ceased sharing your bed when you did not conceive.” Benedict winced. “You tempted him back into it. When you told him he would be a father he was delighted. The result of our infidelity was Avery’s happiness. Banish the past which cannot be altered. Instead of reproaching yourself, understand you sacrificed our love to make sure the truth from did not shatter the foundation of your husband’s life.”

Diana took a black silk pocket handkerchief out of her steel-grey velvet reticule and wiped her eyes. “Every word you spoke is true, but does your conscience never trouble you?”

“For loving you? No.” He gazed into his glass of Madeira wine. “I shall be honest, or in theatrical terms, bare my wounded heart to you. My parents arranged my first marriage. As time passed, we did our duty, but only affection developed between us, yet I mourned when she died immediately after Sylvester’s birth. Previously I loved my present wife, who—” Benedict broke off and put his glass aside. Elbows on his knees, he clasped his head with both hands. “I shall only say she is unkind to my son and treats our daughter, Joyce, with such extreme cruelty I am obliged to keep her under lock and key till she returns to England.” He removed his hands from his face and straightened his back. “Diana, I swear by all I hold dear I love you and have missed you since the day we separated. If you love me, and if it were possible, I would marry you tomorrow.”

“And I you,” Diana said softly, “but if you invite me to be your mistress again, my answer will be no.”

“It is not my intention. I have another proposition in mind.”

“Not a bigamous marriage?”

He chuckled, appreciative of her sense of humour. “I will never regret our former liaison which is why I want to make provision for Lionel’s future.

“P...provision!”

“Yes, one of the reasons I still love you is because, although you know I am a nabob, you made no demands on me after Avery died.”

Diana shrugged as though the subject did not interest her. “I am not mercenary. Even if I were, there is no need for me to be. My husband left me well-provided for.”

Benedict leant forward and scrutinized her face. “Did Avery appoint a guardian for our son? Have you selected one?”

“No, I assume if I die while Lionel is young, my mother would be responsible for him.”

“She will probably predecease you.”

Diana pressed a hand over her heart. “You must think I am a fool for not making provision for Lionel’s future.”

“No, merely impractical. I found it difficult to name a guardian for my daughter in my will. My love don’t be alarmed. You might outlive me.”

“I hope not. A world without you in it would be a poorer place. Since we parted thoughts about what we shared always cheered me.”

“Another glass of ratafia?” he asked, reluctant to come to the point for fear she would refuse to accept his plan.

“No, thank you.”

The time came to seize the bull by its proverbial horns. “To secure Lionel’s future, I want to adopt him.”

Every vestige of colour drained from Diana’s face. “What! You want to steal my child!”

“Not steal. He would live with you and visit me. Please consider the advantages. As one of my heirs, no expense will be spared for his education.”

“Do you believe I would allow you to buy our son whom you have neither seen nor spoken a word to?”

“Buy! You are unjust and mistaken. Occasionally, I have admired Lionel from afar when he rides his pony beside you when you are mounted on your grey.”

Diana stood, swayed and sank back onto the chair. “I need another glass of ratafia.”

Tight-laced stays are every lady’s enemy when overcome by her sensibilities. Untying them, a pleasurable task, would benefit Diana more than wine, Benedict thought. He filled a glass, watched her gulp the contents.

“Diana, please don’t underestimate what I wish to bestow unconditionally on our son.”

“Avery died two years ago. Why is this the first time you asked to adopt Lionel?”

“After his death, I provided for Lionel in my will. Circumstances which prevented me from suggesting it have changed.”

“How?” Diana asked, mistrust obvious in her sharp tone.

“As I said, my wife has been an unkind stepmother and a cruel mother. I shall never forgive her for slapping Joyce’s face so hard that her the diamond in her ring scarred her cheek. Since then, we have never shared a bed. God alone knows how she would have reacted to Lionel if I had adopted him.” He took a deep breath. “Joyce and I will be well-rid of my wife when her ship sails to England.

“I hope you will consent to the adoption.”

Diana leant against the back of her chair. The expression in her eyes softened. “My poor love, I am sorry Mrs Tremayne made you and your children suffer.”

Her love! Every muscle in his body relaxed. He opened his mouth, about to tell her he adored her, but she raised her hand to forestall him.

“Benedict, was your wife the only reason for waiting so long to put the question to me?”

How would she react if he told her about Sylvester’s decision to leave India? “No, but the most important reason is I want Lionel to benefit is because he is my son. You cannot imagine how painful it has been not to contrive reasons to meet him for fear someone might guess I am his father.”

Diana’s scrutiny of his face did not waver. “The other reasons?”

He decided to be honest. “My son, Sylvester, prefers life in England to one here, which he would hate. I shall buy him property and make substantial provision for him in return

for a disclaimer. Thereafter, my daughter Joyce and Lionel, my adopted son, will be my heirs.”

Diana filled her glass with Madeira and drank slowly instead of gulping it. “How would you react if our son chose England instead of India and was disinterested in your business empire?”

“Despite my disappointment, I accepted Sylvester’s choice and would accept Lionel.’ After his education in England, subject to the same proviso as my older son’s, I would agree and set him up for life.”

Diana pursed her mouth.

“Have you nothing to say?”

“If either or both of us died while Lionel is still young, what would happen to him?” Diana asked.

“Unless you wish to appoint guardians, please trust me to arrange every eventuality as tightly as knots around a secure parcel.”

Diana put the glass down on the table and smiled. “Although our liaison, which I will never repeat, was dishonourable, you are a praiseworthy gentleman. It would be wrong of me to thwart your plans.”

“Thank you,” Benedict murmured, almost stupefied because he had feared her refusal.

Diana stood. “When Mrs Tremayne sails to England I shall inform my mother about our decision and I sign the adoption contract and introduce you to Lionel.”

“My love, I have a suggestion.”

“Please don’t address me as your love,” Diana protested. “What do you suggest?”

He cleared his throat. “No one could accuse you of impropriety if you and your mother agreed to live at Tremayne House instead of visiting me with Lionel.”

“I...”

“Please consider it.”

Diana paced around the room, her forehead furrowed and her black leather slippers tapping on the floor. “I must consult my mother.”

“As you please. Incidentally, if you accept my proposal, it will enable Mrs de Lancy, my wife’s former companion, and her son Vivian to continue to live at my house without causing gossip. Don’t be anxious. Everyone likes the lady and her son.”

Diana dipped a curtsy. "I cannot answer you now, so I must bid you *adieu*."

Benedict bowed and wished he were free to marry his love.

* * *

Marianne entered the snug parlour. She smiled fondly at Vivian and Joyce, who did not glance up from the chequered board. Unlike Vivian and Sylvester, few young gentlemen would be willing to entertain a lonely little girl.

Joyce clapped her hands, "A king."

Vivian moved a draught. "Which I have blocked."

The little girl's hand hovered above the black and white draughtsmen. "He is boxed in by your draughts. You win again, but I shall win the next game."

"Not this evening. It is time for you to go to bed," Marianne said.

"Please, may we play one more game?" Joyce pouted while she waited for the reply.

"Not if you don't want to be too tired to visit my emporium tomorrow," Marianne answered.

"I am not tired now," the child protested.

Vivian yawned. "I am, so I want to go to bed."

Joyce's forehead wrinkled. "I don't believe you. Only children go to bed this early."

"We can play draughts or another game tomorrow evening," Vivan offered.

"Go to your bedchamber with Punj Ayah, who will help you to change into your nightgown. Later, I will come there to hear your prayers," Marianne said.

Head bowed, with the air of one about to face her executioner, Joyce stood.

Marianne chuckled as the door closed. "Joyce is sharp as a honed blade. I wish her mother—" She broke off. "The less said about the woman, the better."

"Very sensible, Mama, if you don't want to have an apoplexy. I am glad Mr Tremayne has – so to speak – halted the woman in her tracks."

"How?"

"Oh, I assumed he told you what he has decided."

"How do you know what his decision is?"

"Bates told me Mrs Tremayne will go to England. In the meantime, she is to be locked in her rooms and forbidden to see Joyce or have visitors."

“Good. The spiteful, jealous woman deserves it, She scarred the child’s cheek with her diamond ring.”

“Jealous, Mama?”

“Yes, she wanted all her husband’s love. If she ever received it, she has lost it, but I cannot sympathise with her. You might not be tired, but I am. I shall retire after I hear Joyce’s prayers. Goodnight, my son.”

Vivian stood and bowed employing the elegance he learnt in England. “Goodnight.” He kissed her on the cheek, and she hugged him.

Upstairs, Marianne entered the bedchamber where Punj Ayah was tying the ribbons of a nightcap, trimmed with frills and edged with narrow lace, under her charge’s chin.

Free from her attendant’s ministrations, enveloped in her cotton nightgown, Joyce knelt by her bed draped in a net to discourage mosquitoes. She pressed the palms of her hands together, closed her eyes and recited The Lord’s Prayer and the twenty-third psalm in her low, sweet voice. She shifted her position, prayed for those she loved, and added. “Dear Lord Jesus Christ, please don’t let my papa send me to England, Amen.”

About to get into bed, she eyed Mrs de Lancy. “I don’t understand why I must go to a seminary in England,” she said tremulously.

Marianne sat down on a wing chair. “Come here, sweetheart.” Joyce hurried to sit on her lap. “You enjoy more freedom here than you would in England, where well-born ladies are governed by rules you must learn.”

“I don’t understand.”

“For example, no lady should be friendly with servants.”

“Why?”

“One day, you will understand polite society’s customs,” Marianne said hastily. To avoid Joyce cross-questioning her, she broached the next subject. “Mr Tremayne insists you learn more than Miss Harrison can teach you. In England, your beautiful voice will be trained, and you will learn how to play a pianoforte and harp. An art master or mistress will teach you to sketch and paint watercolours, and you will learn to improve your stitchery. Don’t screw up your face. I know you don’t like plying a needle, but a lady is expected to embroider beautifully and know how to sew a fine seam.”

Joyce tensed. “Is it all I must learn?”

“No. You will continue with the subjects Miss Harrison has begun teaching you, including French, and, maybe, Italian. When you are a well-educated, prettily behaved young girl with excellent posture, deportment, and manners, and will know how to behave in society, your papa will be very proud of you.”

Marianne held Joyce a little closer and ignored her sigh.

“What are posture and deportment?”

“Having a straight back and walking gracefully, instead of running around like a harum-scarum, and being perfectly seated on the saddle.”

“I will have riding lessons?”

“Of course. And you will make friends at the seminary.”

Joyce will have ones who are daughters from upper-class families who speak in well-modulated voices. When she leaves the seminary, she will know how to conduct herself in society.

“I never want to leave home. Is there anything I can say to Papa to change his mind?”

“No. Mr Tremayne loves you and wants you to have the best possible education.”

“Papa is sad because Sylvester will live in England, but I will always want to come home.” Joyce yawned. “I am glad Vivian will be here when I return.” Too young to guard her sensibilities, Joyce’s face brightened. “My brother will be in England. He writes that I shall love our grandparents and most of our other relations. And he wrote that Cornwall is beautiful and I cannot imagine how magnificent Castle Tresellion is.” Sleepy-eyed, her long lashes fluttered like butterflies’ wings.

“And I shall take you to England and stay there with you for a month or more,” Marianne assured her.

“Thank you,” Joyce murmured sleepily.

“You are half asleep, child. Into bed with you.”

“I love you, Mrs de Lancy,” Joyce whispered.

Marianne adjusted the mosquito net and gazed down at the child of her heart. “And I love you.”

“Missy Baba sleep?” asked Punj Ayah, who lay down on her pallet.

“Nearly.” Marianne snuffed out all but one candle, shut the door and went to her bedchamber.

Chapter Eight

Benedict entered his wife's boudoir, accompanied by Bates and Daventry, his lawyer. "Madam, your baggage is on board Sea Sprite." He unrolled a document and spread it on her escritoire. "Sign this in the presence of these witnesses, who will affix their signatures."

Jane glared at him from the chaise longue, her face pale after three months of incarceration. "Why should I?"

"Refuse, and I shall give you no more than a pittance to maintain yourself in England."

She read the contract and frowned. "For pity's sake, Ben."

"Pity! I remind you, Madam, you have none for Sylvester or Joyce, which is why you are in your present predicament."

"These terms are monstrous. What will our families think if I am forbidden to see Joyce when she comes to England?"

"I neither know nor care but assume you only put the question because you don't want them to suspect you are an unnatural mother," Benedict responded in an even tone. Jane did not deny it so he continued. "I shall tell my parents and Sylvester you may not communicate with Joyce. Should you break the terms of this agreement, Joyce will inform Sylvester and my other lawyer in England. Afterward, you would no longer receive one penny from me."

Jane's cheeks blazed as she dipped her quill into the inkpot and signed.

Benedict smiled. He had clipped more than her wings.

The witnesses signed the document. Benedict dried the ink with sand from the pounce pot. He attached a red wax seal imprinted with his family's crest to the scroll and secured it with a red cord. "Mr Daventry, Bates, my business is concluded." He ignored his wife's outburst of loud sobs while he led the men to the door. Tomorrow, he would watch his merchant ship Sea Sprite set sail with his wife aboard, thus closing the last page of their life as husband and wife. He hoped golden days filled with happiness were ahead for him and Joyce

On his way to the library, where he would soon instruct Mr Daventry to prepare the agreement for Lionel's adoption.

Benedict smiled. Joyce benefitted from how he dealt with her mother. Free from her, his beloved daughter's laughter frequently rang out, and her cheeks were plumper now she was no longer afraid of Jane. He opened the library door and looked fondly at Sylvester and Joyce. "I did not expect to find you here."

Sylvester stood and bowed. Joyce, with Amelie-Rose tucked under her arm, ran to him instead of making her curtsy, in accordance with the custom that when a daughter saw a parent for the first time on a day, and a son bowed. "Impudent Puss," he said, laughter in his voice.

Her eyes were so wide they seemed too large for her troubled face, so she gazed at him. "Papa, is Mama leaving tomorrow?"

"Yes," he replied. *Surely, Joyce did not want Jane to stay here.*

"Sylvester says I will like England b...but even if it is wrong of me, I won't if I must see Mama there." She sat her doll on a chair. "Amelie-Rose will run away if Mama ever comes near her."

Will my precious daughter harbour the scars of Jane's unkindness all her life? He sat and drew Joyce onto his lap. "In future, your mother's path will never cross yours."

"Good." She peered at him. "Papa, I don't want Sylvester to live in England."

"I know," her brother said, "but, as I have explained, I will visit you."

"Promise?"

"Yes, I never break a promise."

"Sylvester, Castle Tresellion is too far from London for Joyce to attend a seminary there. Instead, she will attend a select one in Bath, a much shorter distance from your grandfather's estate, which both of you will visit during vacations," Benedict said.

"It will be a pleasure, sir," Sylvester said with unusual meekness.

"Your obedience pleases me, but don't forget my warning. There will be severe consequences if you roister while you are at Oxford. If you are sent down for any reason, I shall disown you. I shall say no more other than I expect you to be a son I can be proud of. Be diligent. Enjoy your time at university and make friends whose conduct is irreproachable."

"I shall remember what you said," Sylvester said quietly.

“Don’t forget it. There is another subject. Our family hails from the West Country. Therefore, I have it in mind to purchase an estate for you within easy reach of our ancestral home and Padstow.”

“Padstow, sir?” Sylvester asked, palpably curious.

“Yes, so my factor may teach you about my business conducted there.” A pang in his heart, Benedict gazed at his son’s eager face. “I hope you will never regret your decision to quit India.”

“Thank you, sir. I shall write to you regularly.”

Joyce shifted her position on his lap and looked up at his face. “And I want you to be proud of me, Papa. I enjoy my lessons with Miss Harrington. Except for stitchery I want to learn more. It would be perfect if I could go to a seminary in India.” She sighed. “Mrs de Lancy explained why I must go to England and give up my -what did she say? Oh, yes, I remember, my harum-scarum ways. If I do, will you still love me?”

“I promise to always love you and your brother,” Benedict said huskily.

“And Vivian, Papa?”

“Yes, Puss.”

Her head against Benedict’s shoulder, she gazed at Sylvester. “I am glad Vivian will live in Madras but am very sad because you don’t want to.”

“Don’t be. After your years in England, you might choose to stay there.”

Joyce shook her head vehemently. “Every day, while I am away, I shall look forward to coming back.”

“You might change your mind,” Sylvester said.

“Never!” she exclaimed with total conviction.

Bates opened the door and announced Mr Daventry’s arrival.

Benedict assumed his lawyer brought the adoption agreement for him to approve. “Sylvester, please take Joyce to Punj Ayah.” He wondered how his son and daughter would react to the news they would have a young brother.

Joyce picked up Amelie-Rose and left the library with her brother.

* * *

Thankful because pride had prevented his wife from drawing attention to them and the widow Benedict employed to be her companion on board, Benedict watched Sea Sprite set sail. Rid of her he rolled his shoulders, enjoyed his freedom, and discounted Jane's final plea to relent. Yet he suffered a twinge of regret for what could have been a happy marriage.

A week after the adoption agreement was signed and witnessed, Benedict received a letter from Diana in which she wrote she would move into Trevelyan House with their son and her mother. In his written reply, he expressed delight at her decision and wrote that he would wait on her at eleven o'clock on the morning of the next day. When he arrived, her butler, dressed in white with a moss-green sash and turban, led Benedict to a parlour in the two-storey house with a small drive at the front and a garden at the back. While he waited, he studied watercolours, signed D. Avery hung on the wall. Amazed by her talent, he turned from an exquisite painting of a river, the water a sheet of gold at sunset, when the door opened.

Diana entered the parlour dressed in mauve, a colour suitable for half-mourning, her auburn hair bound at the back of her head from where it tumbled in glossy ringlets. Their son, a handsome boy with auburn hair, dressed in a white shirt with a frill at the neck, a blue waistcoat, and a matching coat over loose-fitting buff pantaloons, came with her.

Benedict bowed. Diana curtsied. "Good day," they said simultaneously.

A pair of large blue eyes in a small face, with high cheekbones, chubby cheeks and a square jaw, scrutinized Benedict.

"Mr Tremayne, meet my son." Diana put a hand on the child's shoulder.

"Good day, Lionel," Benedict said.

His son frowned, a hostile glint in his eyes.

"Lionel, I explained you would meet your new papa this morning," Diana said softly. "Please say good day to him and bow."

The boy shook his head and jutted his chin, which seemed remarkably determined for a five-year-old. "Don't want a new papa."

"Why?" Benedict asked.

His son scuffed the toe of his black half-boot on the hardwood floor. "I have a papa. Mama tells me stories 'bout him."

Benedict thought the youngster might be intimidated by a tall stranger who loomed over him. He sat on a padded chair in Diana's well-furnished but not luxurious parlour. "I know you have a papa in heaven." At least Benedict hoped Avery was there. "I am your second father."

"Don't want you," Lionel shouted.

Benedict ignored the protest. "I promise you, your mother and grandmother will enjoy living in my big house."

The boy glared at him.

"You will meet your sister, Joyce, your brother, Sylvester, and his friend Vivian, who lives with us. I expect you will enjoy board games with them," Benedict thought of something else to tempt him with. "After the monsoon, if you ask Vivian politely, he might teach you to play cricket."

Lionel stopped scuffing the toes of his shoes and gazed at his mother.

"I'm sure you would enjoy learning how to play the game, my little man," Diana said.

"Do you ride a pony, Lionel?" Benedict knew the answer but was keen to instigate a conversation.

"Not in the rain."

"When the monsoon ends you may ride every morning with me and anyone else who wants to join us."

Lionel puffed out his plump cheeks.

Benedict understood the child did not know how to explain he felt threatened by the prospect of change. "There is nothing to be frightened of Lionel. Would you like to visit my home with your mother and grandmother?"

"I think we will enjoy seeing it. Go to tell Ayah the *good* news," Diana said firmly to prevent his protest.

Lionel looked balefully at him as he left.

"Benedict, please grant me a week to accustom him to imminent change."

"More if he needs it."

Diana caught her lower lip between her teeth.

"What troubles you?" Benedict asked.

"Regardless of how you expect me to occupy my time when I move, I cannot renounce an obligation, which I should have mentioned." She waved her hand to silence him. "I

must continue to attend to the one here in Fort St George. After Avery's burial at the cemetery, I found a naked, abandoned baby girl near a gravestone. Poor parents prefer sons, so I assumed she was left to die because they could not afford to feed her and would never have been able to afford her bride price. I could not leave her to suffer such a cruel fate. I wrapped her in my shawl and took her home. Afterward, several babies were left at night on my doorstep. I found patrons and raised funds to provide a home where fifty little girls now thrive. I must continue to oversee their welfare."

Benedict opened his mouth to speak.

Diana's forehead creased. "Please don't say you disapprove."

He chuckled. "Don't be a wet goose and don't look so worried. You should have asked me to contribute."

"I did not want to take advantage of our...former liaison."

"From now on, you may ask for as much money as you need to support them."

"Thank you, it has been a struggle to provide for them," she said with tears in her eyes.

His heart overflowed with love. "Don't be foolish," he teased her. "There is no reason to thank me. I admire you. So many of us so-called Christians merely talk about helping the poverty stricken. Except for missionaries who want to convert them, few people try to alleviate their suffering."

"I know." Diana wiped her eyes with a pocket handkerchief. "I am not a watering pot. Your generosity brought tears to my eyes."

"You may have whatever you need for your proteges. I look forward to meeting them."

"You are very kind, but I have said enough about them. Shall we talk about your children?" Diana sat straighter. "How did Sylvester and Joyce react when you told them they have an adopted brother?"

"I have not told them. I shall inform them today to prepare them for your visit with Lionel. Sylvester, who will leave Madras forever in three weeks, might need time to come to terms with the adoption." Desolate, he clenched his fists. Would he ever be able to entrust his business empire to someone to visit England? If not, he would neither see his firstborn again nor meet his future wife or, if God blessed them, their children.

Diana smiled lovingly at him. "You will miss him."

Her words resembled salt on an open wound.

“Yes.” Unable to say more lest grief choked him, Benedict controlled himself. “Shall I send my coach to fetch you and Lionel eight days from now?”

“Yes, please, but—”

“But what?”

“I don’t know how to thank you adequately for—”

“Don’t!” He stood, raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Diana, I would surrender my life for you.”

“A... and I for you, but we must not allow our sensibilities to overpower us. From now on, our relationship must be platonic.”

“I know. It will be difficult to resist temptation, but I promise to always treat you with utmost respect.” He stared into her eyes and bowed. “Farewell, my love, and goodbye for now, my dearest friend,” he said whimsically, regretful because they would not be lovers.

* * *

Benedict undressed, his mind occupied by thoughts of the best way to inform Sylvester and Joyce about Lionel’s adoption. He handed his coat, pantaloons and other clothes to his bearer to put them away. Dressed in a comfortable, dark blue kurta and narrow white trousers, his gold signet ring and a sapphire one on his fingers, he went to the small dining room to enjoy luncheon. With Bates in attendance, he enjoyed rasam, made with tamarind and tomato flavoured with spices, served with steamed rice, accompanied by yoghurt, and pickles. To complete his meal, he chose several small squares of coconut burfi, a delicious sweetmeat to which he was partial. Replete, he addressed Bates, who ruled the servants with a firm but just hand.

“After a gentleman called Mr Avery died, I became his son, Lionel’s, trustee. This week, I adopted the five-year old boy. He will live here with his mother and grandmother. Anyone who does not treat them courteously will be dismissed.”

Bates’ eyes widened, but not a muscle in his face moved. “You may depend on me and all your other staff, sir.”

Jane knew about his affair with Diana, so omniscient Bates might have found out about it. Tense, he discounted the possibility anyone suspected Avery was not Lionel’s father.

“May I ask where they will be accommodated so preparations may be made, sir?” Bates asked, his face impassive.

Benedict slowly ate more burfi to give himself time to decide. Although the building was spacious, there was only one acceptable solution. “Mrs Avery and her son will occupy the rooms previously occupied by Mrs Tremayne. Lionel will sleep in his mother’s bedchamber near the empty room next to Joyce’s night nursery. Mrs Sutton may sleep in the bedchamber adjacent to her daughter’s apartment. Attend to it, Bates.” Benedict stood. “Please ask Sylvester and Joyce to join me in the library.”

Chapter Nine

Amused by his untidy daughter's appearance, he watched her prance into the library with Amelie-Rose in the crook of her arm followed by Punj Ayah clucking like a hen with a single chick.

"You sent for me, Papa?" She asked as her ayah retied Joyce's blue silk sash.

"Yes, Puss."

Sylvester, immaculate in a blue coat with silver buttons, yellow and blue vertically striped waistcoat, and buff pantaloons, entered the room, dabbing perspiration from his forehead with a pocket handkerchief.

"If you wore kurtas, you would be more comfortable." Benedict watched his son try to adjust the upstanding points of his stiffly starched shirt collar wilting in the heat. "Here you aspire to be a peacock and I daresay you will strive to be a tulip in England."

Sylvester flushed, and Joyce giggled. "A tulip?" she asked.

"A very fashionable gentleman," Benedict explained. "But I did not send for you to discuss your brother's clothes."

"Why did you?" she asked.

"Because I need help." He gestured to the chairs. "Please sit down."

"How, Father?" Sylvester asked.

Benedict's hands tightened. How would they react to the news? "Since a young boy's father died, I have been his trustee."

"What does trustee mean?" Joyce asked.

"That Papa looks after his money and property," Sylvester explained.

Benedict cleared his throat. "I decided I needed to do more for the child, whose name is Lionel Avery, so I have...er... taken him under my wing."

How should he proceed while Sylvester and Joyce continued to gaze unwaveringly at him? A simple explanation would be best. "I worried about Lionel, who is merely five years old. His only family are his mother, Mrs Avery, and his grandmother, Mrs Sutton."

Joyce frowned. "Why were you worried, Papa?"

“I did not know what would happen to him should his mother and grandmother die while he is still a child. If they did, he would be alone in the world. Therefore, I have provided for him.”

“How?” Sylvester asked again, the single word loud as a pistol shot.

“To keep Lionel safe, I adopted him. Aware of your own and Joyce’s kind heart, I am confident you will welcome him into our family when he and his mother and grandmother move here from Fort Saint George.”

“What!” Sylvester exclaimed. “You have replaced me because I have not fulfilled your expectations?”

“I love you and Joyce. Surely you know no one could ever replace either of you.”

Sylvester’s cheeks flamed with the intensity of a rampaging outbreak of destructive fire burning everything in its path. Benedict hoped, like monsoon rains which lowered the fierce temperature, Sylvester’s fury could be dowsed.

“It is as difficult for Lionel to accept me as it is for you to come to terms with having another brother. He neither wants me to be his adopted father nor to swap his home for ours. Imagine how hard he will find it when he lives with us, Sylvester. While you wait to sail to England, I rely on you, Puss and Vivian to be kind-hearted.”

Joyce frowned. She clutched Amelie-Rose and whispered something to her.

His expression tough as granite, Sylvester gazed at the collection of brass and marble figures of Hindu gods and goddesses arranged on shelves. “I am as sorry for him as I am for myself, so I shall welcome him. However, no matter whatever you say to convince me otherwise, sir, I have been supplanted.”

“Nonsense, Sylvester, you are my firstborn son. Lionel could never oust you from my heart.” Benedict forced himself to relax his hands. “I would be a sad excuse for a gentleman if my heart were not large enough to also embrace Lionel. When you see his frightened, woebegone face, I hope your heart will soften.” He shifted his attention to Joyce. “Puss, I think you will enjoy having a younger brother.”

“I don’t want one. God did not answer my prayer for a baby sister. He gave me a brother I don’t want.”

“Nonsense!” Sylvester protested. “Papa gave us Lionel, who we don’t want.”

She stared at him, tears trickling down her face while she fingered the silver heart which she never took off. "Oh, Sylvester, I don't want you to go to England," she said for the umpteenth time.

"Don't cry." Sylvester said. "We will see each other there."

"Of course, you will," Benedict said trying to inject cheerfulness into his voice. "As I said, while you are here, I depend on you as well as Joyce and Vivian to welcome Lionel and play with him."

"I shall do my uttermost to please you, sir."

When Sylvester caught his lips between his teeth, Benedict knew he only said it to please him.

"If there is no more to be said, I shall take your leave to change my shirt, sir," his son said and marched out of the library.

Ayah, whom they knew did not understand much of the conversation in English, took the opportunity to speak. "Missy Baba, come here. Why are you always untidy after I dress you? Sahib must think I don't take good care of you," she fussed in Tamil.

"You are wrong. I know you are devoted to my daughter," Benedict said in the same language while she smoothed Joyce's muslin gown .

"Missy Baba sad?" Ayah whispered to Joyce in her limited English

"No, Papa gave me news that surprised me. I shall have a new brother," Joyce replied in Tamil.

"Is Memsahib pregnant?" Ayah asked forthrightly in the same language, which did not apply the English indirect terms 'increasing' or 'being with child.'

Joyce rolled her eyes. "Papa, I don't know how to explain it to her."

"A young boy I shall treat in every way as my young son by birth, Punj Ayah," Benedict, an expert in several dialects, said. "His mother and grandmother will live here."

Punj Ayah beamed. "Missy Baba, it is good news, yes?"

To judge by his daughter's distressed face, she wanted to cast herself into her ayah's arms and press her face against her ample bosom.

"Missy Baba, if Sahib has no more to say, come to the nursery. I shall help you change into clean clothes, brush and comb your hair."

Joyce looked back at him from the open door. "I shall play with Lionel, Papa," she said in the tone a Christian martyr might have used on the way to death.

Benedict realised he failed to anticipate his children would react so badly even after their initial surprise. Yet, he trusted their good manners and hearts and hoped for the best possible result. He pressed the tips of his fingers together. How would Mrs de Lancy and Vivian receive the news when they returned from the emporium to dine?

* * *

Delicious aromas filled the dining room, spreading from the table laden with flat bread, curries, rice, savouries, yogurt, and sweet dishes, while Mrs de Lancy observed Benedict's subdued son and daughter.

Vivian failed to draw Sylvester into conversation.

Joyce's shoulders drooped. "Viv, I am grateful to you for giving me my silver pendant. It comforts me when I am sad."

Benedict winced. He banished Jane for Joyce's sake and wanted her to be happy.

"Why are you sad?" Vivian asked.

"Papa has adopted a boy called Lionel who will live here. He wants me to play with him." She pushed her plate away. "I wanted a baby sister, not a five-year-old brother."

Mrs de Lancy choked on her food. Vivian spilled lemon water onto his large, round metal plate heaped with delicious food.

With his habitual aplomb, Bates quietly ordered a servant to replace the plate.

"Blabbermouth, in England, I daresay soon one or other of our relatives will have a baby girl for you to dote on," Sylvester said.

"How many are there?" Joyce asked.

"Father has four older brothers and three sisters. All of them are married and have children," Sylvester answered.

"I want my own baby sister," Joyce persisted.

"What we want and what we get are different, so we have to accept it," Sylvester said impatiently.

"True, but you are their only granddaughter, Joyce."

Benedict thought about the complicated web he wove when he became entangled with Diana. He looked at Mrs de Lancy, who sat on his right. "I intended to tell you and Vivian I have adopted Lionel Avery after dinner, but my little tattler broke the news."

“Avery,” Marianne mused. “Is his mother the lady who opened an orphanage for abandoned female babies? I admire her. So many of us want to help the needy, but there are hordes of them, so we don’t know where to begin.”

“Have you met Mrs Avery?” Benedict asked.

“Briefly, when she asked me for a contribution to maintain her charitable foundation and invited me to visit it. I gave her a donation of bolts of fabric for bed linen and clothes,” Marianne said. “In Mrs Avery’s absence, the superintendent, a Hindu widow, welcomed me. She allowed me to see her little charges. I am very impressed. Each group of five babies, infants or small girls is cared for by a widowed ayah.”

“Remarkable,” Benedict said.

“May I see them?” Joyce piped up.

“Ask Mrs Avery when she visits us, Puss,” he said. “Finish your meal. It is time for you to go to bed.”

Conversation ceased while Marianne stood to follow Joyce to the night nursery and hear her prayers.

“Mrs de Lancy, I would be obliged if you would join me with Vivian in the library at your convenience,” Benedict said.

Joyce tugged the hem of Sylvester’s sleeve. “I am not a blabbermouth. I can keep secrets. No one told me not to say we have another brother.” She put her hands on her hips and glared at him. “Say sorry for being rude.”

Benedict chuckled. “What have you to say, Sylvester.”

“I apologise, Joyce,” Sylvester said affectionately.

“And you, Papa, should not have called me a tattler. Amelie-Rose is cross with you.”

“I agree,” he said, suppressing his amusement. “Please tell Amelie-Rose I am sorry. Good night, Puss.”

“Good night, Papa. Good night, Sylvester.”

“I shall miss Joyce when she goes to England as much as I will miss you,” Benedict said, heavy-hearted.

“You will have the consolation of your new son.” Sylvester strode out of the room.

Benedict shrugged. No matter what he said, he accepted he could not alleviate his son’s jealousy. On his way to the library with Vivian, as though he were a child, he crossed

his fingers behind his back. If good luck favoured them, Sylvester would like Lionel and accept him wholeheartedly.

Vivian stood back to allow him to enter the library first. "It is good of you to have adopted the child, sir. I look forward to meeting him," he said as they sat on chairs.

"Thank you." Benedict wished his children were equally gracious. He glanced at the walls hung with painted silk hangings depicting Hindu gods and goddesses. Finally, he gazed at his favourite one of young Krishna in the forest with calves and his cowherd boyfriends.

"Have you met Mrs Avery?" he asked to break the silence.

"Twice when she shopped at the emporium. I doubt she will remember me, though I told her I admire her and donated half of my allowance." Vivian's eyes shone. "In future, I want to help beggar boys." He grimaced. "Do you know cruel men mutilate children to collect money for them? Those half-starved unfortunates are dressed in rags."

"How do you know?"

"I feed some and talk to them."

"Commendable." Benedict's conscience pricked him. "How could you help?"

"I want to buy a property where boys can be fed, have a place to sleep and be educated. Of course, compared to the number in need, I could only help a few, but—" Vivian broke off as though he hunted for the right words, "- surely it would be better to do something instead of nothing." He leant forward, elbows on knees covered by a kurta. "God has given me a lot, so I should share some of my blessings."

Marianne entered the library and sat opposite them. "I am sorry to have kept you waiting. Joyce prayed for a miracle not to allow Lionel becoming her brother. I tried to convince her instead of a baby sister, she will enjoy living with another child with whom she may play."

"Ah, a glass of wine?" Benedict asked. His hand hovered over bottles and decanters on a painted teakwood chest.

"Yes please, a glass of sherry."

"May I have a glass of claret, sir," Vivian asked.

Benedict served them. With his glass of port in hand, he sighed. "I am sorry my little puss told you I have adopted Lionel. I intended to tell you after we dined that he and his

mother, and grandmother a model of strict propriety will live here She will prevent any...er...malicious gossip about her daughter's presence here in my wife's absence."

* * *

By prior arrangement, Benedict sent his carriage to collect Lionel, Diana and Mrs Sutton after they attended the church service at St Mary's on Sunday.

Bates ushered them into the drawing room and announced them.

Benedict bowed. "You are welcome," greeted them and introduced them to Sylvester and Joyce, and Mrs de Lancy and Vivian, who closed the emporium on Sundays. The ladies curtsied, Sylvester and Vivian bowed.

While they sat, Benedict looked at his daughter. After this morning's service in the chapel on his estate, her white, starched muslin gown, confined at the waist with a broad jade-green sash, was still immaculate, and her sun-kissed hair was tidy.

Benedict faced Lionel, dressed according to fashion as a young gentleman. His son scowled at Joyce. "I don't like girls."

"Shame on you, Lionel, for your rudeness." His grandmother shook her head. The black feathers on her hat quivered, emphasizing her displeasure. Diana's cheeks flushed with obvious mortification.

Joyce stamped her small foot encased in a small, green Morocco leather shoe. "I don't like little boys."

The adults looked from one to another. Benedict tried not to laugh at the two cross little faces, Joyce's thin and Lionel's, with the endearing chubbiness of early childhood.

"Understandable, Lionel," Vivian's voice broke a brief silence. "When I was a small boy, except for Joyce, I did not like girls."

Lionel pressed his lips into a mutinous line.

Bates stepped forward with a tray of lemon water for the children and offered a glass to Lionel.

"Don't want it." He looked at his mother. "Mama, I want to go home."

"Not now. Please behave yourself," Diana said firmly.

Lionel's mouth quivered.

"If I were you, I would drink it if you would like me to take you to the stables to see the horses. If not, I shall go there with your sister," Vivian said.

The boy hesitated, took the glass and downed some of the drink.

“Sylvester, perhaps your brother does not like horses. Shall we go to check the small cut on my gelding’s foreleg?” Vivian asked.

Indecisive, Lionel stared at them. “I do like horses. I can ride my pony.”

“Good. When you live here you may go riding with me, Joyce and Vivian,” Sylvester said. “Are you coming with us?”

His glass empty, Lionel nodded.

Joyce glowered.

Vivian smiled at her. “Will you join us?”

“Yes,” she muttered.

Marianne sighed. “Joyce, try not to dirty your new gown.” She looked at the butler. “Bates.”

“Yes, madam?”

“Send a servant to fetch an apron for Miss Joyce.”

* * *

Rain fell when they reached the stables where there was the unforgettable odour of horses, manure, hay, and leather.

Lionel gazed at the sleek horses. Immediately,

Vivian examined the cut on his chestnut’s leg. “Good,” he said to the head syce. “It has almost healed.”

Joyce’s dappled pony nudged her. She petted the animal. “No treats today. Don’t whinny, I shall bring you some tomorrow.”

Her adopted brother walked along the paved floor, eyeing the inquisitive horses who looked at them from over the half doors of their stalls. He paused to admire a black stallion with a coat shining like satin. “I could ride him.”

Joyce hurried to him. “Nonsense, you are too small. Only Papa rides Zeus.” Her eyes glinted like sapphires. “Sometimes, Papa lets me sit in front of him on the saddle, but you are only a little boy, so you cannot.”

“I am not a little boy. I am a big one. If I asked him, he would let me ride with him on Zeus.”

Vivian and Sylvester exchanged glances. It seemed Lionel accepted Benedict was his new father.

“We have spent long enough in the stable. Sylvester consulted his watch. “ Nearly two o’clock. Time to enjoy nuncheon. Are you hungry, Lionel?”

The child yawned and nodded.

“You are tired.” Sylvester beckoned to Vivian. “Please sit my brother across my shoulders. Papa carried me on his when I was a little ...er... your age Lionel.”

Joyce held Vivian’s hand tightly as she watched the interloper settle with a leg on either side of Sylvester’s neck. A few tears trickled down her cheeks. “Mama said I am useless because fathers want sons, not daughters. Papa told me to be nice to Lionel. I shall try, but I am very unhappy because he wants this new brother more than me.”

Vivian crouched down and put an arm around her. “Never. Your father has loved you since the day you were born.”

She wiped her eyes on the backs of her hands. “I am sorry. Punj Ayah says Missy Memsahibs must never cry.”

“She is wrong. Even Sahibs cry sometimes.”

Joyce widened her large eyes, blue as the sky on a day so hot water in the river became little more than a trickle.

“Believe me. On the day you were born, your father cried because he was so happy. Never forget and believe our hearts are big enough to love many people.”

“Oh, Vivian, I love you as much as I love Sylvester.”

“And I love you. As you know, I promised to protect you and will always try to.” His stomach rumbled. “Time to eat.”

Chapter Ten

June 1808

With extreme caution, her feet bare and careful not to wake Punj Ayah, Joyce tip-toed across the teak floor of her bedchamber to look out of the window. Outside, the sun rose in the limitless pale-yellow dawn sky. In the distance, a kingfisher's vibrant colour flashed. Closer to the house, a chital walked leisurely toward the river. Joyce caught her breath. "Dear God, when the deer drinks please don't let it be caught by the ugly mugger and dragged in its fearsome jaws to an underwater lair," she prayed.

House sparrows chattered as though they exchanged gossip. A large flock of green parakeets nestled in the small sandalwood tree, close enough for her to inhale its fragrance. A pair of red kites glided high above her across the cloudless sky.

In England, the robins would have red breasts instead of the perky, blue-breasted ones foraging for insects. She tightened her hands to stop them trembling. Eight days from now, almost a year after Sylvester's departure, she would sail to an unfamiliar shore with Mrs de Lancy. How would she survive without everyone else and everything she loved? Joyce gazed at dear Punj Ayah, who slept on her pallet on the floor.

She could not remember a day without the woman who looked after her since she was newborn. How could she part from her? Joyce wanted to cry in the plump ayah's arms, her face pressed against the comfort of her soft breast. Whenever she looked at Punj Ayah her own misery over their forthcoming separation was reflected in the devoted servant's golden-brown eyes. Servant! This was the first time she thought of the woman as one. It created a bar between them because she was no longer a small girl to be told lovingly, "Missy Memsahibs don't cry."

Joyce squeezed her eyes shut to visualise her new residence, Castle Tresellion, high above the sea, which ebbed and flowed into a semi-circular bay edged with gigantic rocky cliffs, which Sylvester described in his letters. The picture of it she tried to form in her

mind evaded her. She gulped. Her brother's assurance of a warm welcome from her grandparents and other relatives did not console her.

'In noble families with many sons,' Sylvester wrote to her, 'the eldest son inherits the title and property. Three of Papa's other brothers are in the army, the navy, the church, and the fourth is a lawyer. Grandmama,' her brother added, 'confessed when Papa, the youngest, was provided for by sending him to India for his own good, she feared her heart would break. She was also afraid he might become a victim of a fatal disease.'

Joyce caught her lower lip between her teeth. *Papa says he is sending me to England for my own good! I don't believe it is.* For the first time, she did not have absolute trust in him. Children were told many things, such as nasty medicine and discipline were good for them. She shuddered, convinced the foreign country most English people in India called home, which they looked forward to returning to, would be worse than anything she ever experienced.

Papa grieved because Sylvester would never settle in Madras. She knew many men came to India with great expectations. Unlike Papa, few became nabobs. Her nostrils flared. There was no one he would entrust his business to while he crossed the ocean to see her older brother. Well, in Sylvester's absence, Lionel, whom she suspected Papa would train to manage his business empire, would be the only child at Tremayne House. Although she did not completely dislike bumptious Lionel, her jealousy of the cuckoo in what had been her perfect nest never entirely subsided.

Would Papa miss her as much as she would miss him?

Punj Ayah, stirred, sat up and rubbed her eyes. "Missy Memsahib, you woke early," she mumbled. "Will you go riding this morning?"

"Yes," she replied, conscious there were only a few more mornings to do so with Papa.

Would she have her own horse in the stable in England? If she did, where would she ride? Sylvester's description of riding along the clifftop path with a view of the sea on one side and the countryside on the other seemed dangerous. Suppose his horse stumbled or reared if something startled it. Would he and his mare fall to their deaths?

"Go back to bed." Punj Ayah hurried out of the bedchamber.

Instead of going back to bed, Joyce continued to look out of the window toward the kitchen garden, where English vegetables grew in cool weather, and okra yielded a crop during the monsoon season. Beyond it were groves of fruit trees, which included bananas,

mangoes, guavas, lychees, mangosteens and papayas. Coconut trees were on one side of the river, which divided the estate into two. Thirsty, she moistened her lips with her tongue, almost able to taste coconut milk and the sweet pulp scooped from the shells. Her governess told her in England, she would enjoy eating apples, cherries, plums, pears, strawberries and raspberries. Would she like them as much as familiar fruit?

Her forehead creased. What would she eat in England? Except for the buttered toast spread with orange marmalade Mrs de Lancy imported, Mama always ate at breakfast, she preferred spiced vegetables and other food made by the Brahmin cook to those chicken, fish or meat dishes cooked by the Muslim one.

Immersed in self-pity, Joyce's mind wandered.

Dressed in a spotless white blouse and sari Punj Ayah returned and gave her a sweet yogurt drink and a banana. She ate and drank and dressed in her riding habit. At the door Joyce looked back at Punj Ayah from the doorway. "When I come back from England, will you be here?"

"No, Missy Memsahib. Sahib will send me money every month when I return to my village. My brother, who is poor, although widow are inauspicious, will allow me to live with him and his family." She held up her hand. "No, no, don't cry. I shall come to see you, Missy Memsahib. Dry your tears. I shall take you to the stable."

On her way there, Joyce could not imagine Tremayne House without the elderly woman's constant presence. Thoughtful, she swished her riding crop backward and forward.

"Good morning, Joyce," Marianne said, elegant in dark green, a hat with a jaunty peacock feather, and leather riding gloves. Mounted on her bay mare next to Vivian seated on his spirited chestnut she smiled at her.

"Good morning," Joyce replied.

She admired Papa astride Zeus with Lionel at his right astride his pony. "G-g-good morning, Papa," she stuttered, overset because there were so few days left with him.

"Good morning, Puss.

She went to the mounting block where her syce held her grey's bridle. Settled on the side saddle, she guided the mare to Papa's left.

Instead of proceeding to the river, they rode through sandy villages on her father's vast estate, where there were only one or two small brick houses among smaller mud and

daub ones thatched with palm leaves, and compounds of cows, bulls, oxen and other animals. Joyce looked at doorsteps on which intricate, coloured chalk patterns were drawn every day by village women. She knew these villages were very different from the descriptions of English ones Sylvester mentioned in his letters.

Joyce tried to impress everything on her memory. Small temples, women clustered around wells sunk by Papa to spare them collecting water from the river, at risk from muggers, and walking back to their huts with clay pots of water balanced on their heads. She gazed with awe at the magnificent banyan trees beneath which the men assembled above their roots spread far and wide above ground, and little stone statues of pot-bellied Ganesh with an elephant head reputed to bestow good luck.

When they rode from village to village, she looked away from men, women, and children who relieved themselves on the outskirts. One of the many reasons why most foreigners referred to Indians as uncivilized. Her forehead pleated. She could not remember when she first found out fierce sunshine baked human waste, torrential rain dissolved it and thus fertilised the earth. It was why those areas became so productive and sought after. She screwed up her nose. This was not something she would think about in the future. Onboard ship, she would sketch and paint only the sights she loved from memory. Yet nothing would recreate the scent of smoke from cow dung fires on which women cooked.

"I am hungry," Papa said when Zeus trotted back toward Tremayne House. He glanced at her. "Puss, you are too quiet this morning."

She shrugged and swept her free hand around to indicate the landscape. "Since you are sending me away because you said it is for my own good, what is there for me to say? How did you feel when your parents sent you here?"

"Sad to part with my family but excited to set out on an adventure, which is how I want you to feel." He glanced at her. "Through regular letters, which I have eagerly anticipated for twenty-five years, except for the one when I went to England to marry Sylvester's mother, and the other when your mother and I wed in Cornwall, I have never been completely cut off from my family."

An ocean apart, Papa and I will not see each other every day. Too unhappy to answer him, Joyce spurred her gentle but spirited pony forward. She dismounted in the stable yard and marched, as quickly as the full skirt of her habit allowed her, to the spacious

entrance hall, where Punj Ayah waited for her. Joyce stripped off her gloves and handed them, her riding crop and hat to her.

In the dining room, convinced she was too miserable to eat, Joyce sat at her place opposite Mrs Avery.

“I am very hungry,” Lionel shrilled.

“Speak quietly,” his mother reproved him.

Marianne recited a short grace to thank The Lord for the food they would eat.

Joyce eyed one of her favourite breakfasts: fried paratha, the flatbread which Prahlad Das, their Brahmin cook, stuffed with spiced potatoes. Recently, on every day, for each meal, he prepared savoury and sweet vegetarian food she liked best. They included delicious sweetmeats and a creamy, sweet rice pudding flavoured with cardamon and saffron, with the addition of flaked almonds. Two days in advance of her departure, Joyce went to the kitchen where no meat, fish and eggs were cooked, followed by Punj Ayah, who grumbled as she took each step. Undeterred by her, Joyce thanked Prahlad Das for his delicious meals and asked him to prepare food to take to Govinda Sadhu on the following day. “Happy to serve him, Missy Baba,” he said cheerfully.

“Thank you. When I return, I hope you will still cook for us.”

“If Krishna is willing it.” Respectful, he pressed the palms of his hands together.

* * *

Joyce stood in front of Govinda Sadhu who sat crossed legged, his eyes closed.

“Don’t disturb my sadhu,” said a boy sitting opposite him.

“Who are you?” Joyce asked, surprised because Govinda Sadhu had always been alone when she visited him.

“His chela,” the boy replied.

“Chela?”

“His student.”

Joyce scrutinized the boy dressed in a single saffron cloth tied around his waist, the ends passed between his legs and tucked in at the back; and a yellow mark on his forehead to identify him as a Vaishnava, who believed Krishna is The Supreme God.

“And servant,” Punj Ayah muttered gazing at the scrawny chela. She put down a large basket filled with containers of food. Tired, she lowered herself onto the ground.

Joyce gazed at the thin boy. *How old is he? Ten or eleven?*

The sadhu opened his eyes.

“Govinda Sadhu please accept this food cooked by a Brahmin. It is the last I can bring for a long time because I am going to my father’s birthplace.”

The sadhu stood on her right, his hand over her head. “Bless you, child. Trust Lord Krishna to protect you.”

Joyce could not explain to herself how those simple words gave her peace.

Returning to his customary place, the sadhu sat and closed his eyes.

About to leave, she looked at the chela. “Do you need anything?”

He shook his head.

“Of course, you don’t,” she said slowly in Tamil. “You only need your sadhu?”

“You are fortunate to have the holy man’s blessing,” Punj Ayah said on their way back to the house.

Yes, she was. At night, as she lay in bed, fearful of what lay ahead, the Govinda Sadhu’s blessing comforted her. Although her religion was different from his, she would remember lotus-eyed Krishna and trust him.

Joyce woke when the sun shone in a cloudless azure sky. She yawned, stretched. Lazy, she glanced around her bedchamber at every familiar object.

Punj Ayah entered carrying a tray bearing Joyce’s morning drink and fruit.

Fully conscious, Joyce pushed off the bedclothes. Today, she would board Sea Sprite which would sail to England on the noon tide with a convoy of merchant ships and half a dozen of His Majesty’s navy’s ones armed with canons. Her luggage and Mrs de Lancy’s was already on board.

Tears reddened Punj Ayah’s eyes, but Joyce knew it would be useless for her to cry. She drank and ate slowly, got out of bed, and hugged her ayah. No words were necessary, so she let go of her. They did not speak while Punj Ayah dressed her in a green gown instead of a white one, which Mrs de Lancy said would quickly be sullied on the ship. With her treasured Amelie-Rose in her arms, despite Mrs Sutton’s words. *Joyce, you are nearly ten years old. Don’t you think it’s time for you to put aside childish things?*

Joyce resented the question. “No,” she had replied

She held Amelie-Rose closer and scrutinized the view from the window.

Punj Ayah answered a knock on the door. She shook her head at Vivian framed in the doorway. He looked past her. "Joyce, I have not been able to see you in private, so I am here to give you a present."

How kind of him. "Thank you, Viv." Joyce frowned. "Punj Ayah, stand aside to let him enter."

After a furtive look down the corridor, the woman pursed her mouth, obeyed and closed the door.

"Today, I am dressed appropriately as an English gentleman to say goodbye to you and my mother." Vivian walked towards her. "Joyce, I shall be sorry to see you leave, but we may write to each other." He took a small indigo-blue, velvet-covered box from his scarlet silk waistcoat pocket and held it out to her.

What could be inside it? Excited, Joyce opened the lid. "Vivian," she breathed, staring at a pair of silver, heart-shaped earrings nestled like lovebirds in a blue silk nest.

"A pair of hearts to match your pendant," Vivian said. "I hope you like them."

"Like! I love them." Propriety ignored, she flung herself into his arms and pretended not to hear Punj Ayah's shocked, "Missy Baba!"

Vivian laughed and released himself.

"Please help me to put them on, Punj Ayah," Joyce said. "Vivian, I still love you as much as Sylvester."

He patted her cheek. "And I love you. Shall we go to the dining room?"

She fingered one of the earrings and went with him to have breakfast, but she could not force herself to eat more than a mouthful of spiced semolina cooked in coconut milk coconut and drank sweetened yogurt mixed with water.

"Eat some more," Marianne urged her.

She shook her head. Another small mouthful would choke her.

Papa stood. "Puss, come with me."

Her footsteps slow she accompanied him to the library. Determined not to shed any more tears, she gazed mindlessly at the floor.

Papa sat behind his desk and beckoned to her. "Are you too old to sit on my lap, Puss?"

"N...no, Papa."

"Good, come here."

Snuggled against him with Amelie-Rose, she inhaled his familiar scent of sandalwood soap. He slid a thick leather-bound book with leaves edged with gold across the desk toward her. "Your old journal is full. This is a new one, which you may lock with the key. It is for you to keep a private record of your thoughts and the sights you see and to sketch them. And, if you wish, to share them in your letters to me." He looked at the clock. "Time to leave. By now, the carriages are waiting for us."

She gulped, kissed his smooth, shaved cheek and got down from his lap.

"Come, Puss."

Amelie-Rose still tucked under her arm and the journal in one hand, Joyce walked to the front door between two rows of servants who salaamed or pressed the palms of their hands together and bowed their heads. Punj Ayah wept. Bates indicated a large wooden box. "Prahlad Das filled it with savoury tit bits and sweetmeats for you to enjoy on board ship."

"Give me some," Lionel said loudly and licked his lips.

Bate's eyes narrowed. "When you go to England, he might prepare some for you."

"I shall miss you, Bates," Joyce said.

"And I you. When we meet again, you will be too old to fly a kite with me."

"Never!" she exclaimed.

A servant opened the front door. She stepped outside, turned around and whispered goodbye to her home.

"Farewell," Mrs Avery and Mrs Sutton said simultaneously but Lionel ignored her, Joyce looked at his mother. "I wish I could say goodbye to your orphans."

"I shall say it for you," Mrs Avery said.

Joyce entered the carriage, followed by Papa, Mrs de Lancy and Vivian. She sat still as a statue as she tried to finally come to terms with the imminent change in her life.

Glad a stranger was not appointed to take charge of her, Joyce clung to Mrs de Lancy's hand. No matter what the future held, she must always be brave and make Papa proud of her.

Chapter Eleven

July 1808

Accustomed to bustling, noisy streets in Fort St George, nothing prepared Joyce for the vociferous, close-packed crowds on the beach. Deafened by them, they bewildered and intimidated her. Thank goodness for her father's small contingent of servants carrying small items of baggage packed this morning and keeping away insistent vendors who came too close. As they walked along the shore, subjected to heat and the smell of sweat from the crowd, Papa's hand on her shoulder reassured her.

"Neither you, Mrs de Lancy, Vivian, nor Polly Wilson, the maidservant, have anything to fear," he said

Nevertheless, Joyce clutched Amelie-Rose tighter and whispered to the doll, "Don't be frightened."

Terrified she nearly dropped her constant companion when Papa coaxed her onto a narrow catamaran made of three logs lashed together.

"Oh, what would I do without you if your face was smashed?" she asked Amelie-Rose and held her closer.

It seemed impossible for the skinny man kneeling in the craft to paddle it through the surf repeatedly lashing the shore and across the waves to her father's merchant ship.

Despite her misgivings, Joyce reached the deck, unharmed but with damp clothes. She drew close to Papa and Mrs de Lancy who reached the ships in two other catamarans.

"Mrs de Lancy, Joyce, meet Captain Harvey and his intrepid wife who always travels with him.

"Good day, Mr Tremayne. Ladies." The captain bowed and swept off his low-brimmed, round hat. "Welcome aboard, ladies. I am at your service and assure you everything within our power will be done to make you comfortable."

Mrs Harvey curtsied. "Indeed, it will."

Marianne looked white-faced Wilson, who a sailor helped to get out of rope seat, slung down the side of the ship.

“I hope our maid’s accommodation is acceptable.”

“Indeed, it is, madam. All of Mr Tremayne’s instructions have been carried out. She has a small cabin adjacent to the larger one you and Miss Tremayne will share next to the cuddy,” Mrs Harvey said.

The unfamiliar name caught Joyce’s attention. “What is a cuddy?” She scrutinized the captain. Not tall and handsome as her father, he looked strong, and his weathered face and observant hazel eyes seemed good-natured.

“The cuddy is for me, my wife, officers, when we are off duty, and guests to spend time together and have our meals.” Captain Harvey inclined his head toward Papa. “Do you wish to examine the ladies’ large cabin to ensure your instructions have been carried out?”

“Yes, you may take us there,” Papa replied.

“This way, sir, but time’s short because the ship must sail on the high tide,” the captain said.

Yes, it is too short! After Sea Sprite sets out, I will not see Papa for until I have been presented to the queen. Joyce swallowed her panic as they went down a companionway.

They entered the cabin with oak panels and brass fittings.

“The furniture’s nailed to the floor,” Captain Harvey explained.

“Why?” Joyce asked.

He smiled at her. “To keep them still during storms, Miss Tremayne.”

“Oh,” she said, flattered because he addressed her as though she were an adult.

“I daresay you would be scared if you woke at night in a cot sliding across the floor,” Mrs Harvey said.

Marianne pressed her hand down on a mattress. “Comfortable,” she commented, straightened and surveyed the entire cabin. “Thank you, Captain Harvey and your good wife. Everything seems adequate.”

“Good. I’ve appointed Nat, a dependable sailor, who has been under my command for many years, to serve you. Please ask him for anything you need.” He glanced from each of them to the ornamental clock attached to the panelled wall. “By now, the sails are billowing. Shall we go on deck, Madam?”

“Yes, Captain.” Marianne looked at the baggage heaped onto the wood floor. “Wilson, stay here to unpack.”

Every footstep they took from the cabin to the deck took Joyce closer to the moment she must part from Papa and Vivian. She fingered her silver heart suspended from the chain around her neck.

Marianne embraced Vivian. “God bless you.”

He stepped out of her arms. “I will do my best to ensure De Lancy Emporium prospers and I shall open an orphanage for abandoned boys.”

“I have complete belief in your capability and support your plan to help unfortunate children. The average voyage takes four to six months, God willing, Vivian, after Joyce is settled in England and I have concluded my business, we shall see each other in less than a year,” Marianne said.

Papa wiped his eyes with his kerchief. “I shall miss you, Joyce.” He picked her up, held her close and kissed her cheeks several times. She stared at him, unable to speak, afraid she would sob and beg him not to send her away.

“Time to say goodbye my brave Puss.” He put her down. “Don’t forget to write in your journal every day and write to me. I shall look forward to receiving your letters.”

Determined not to cry though tears were in her eyes, she stared at his face. “G...goodbye, P...Papa,” she stuttered. “I shall write and th...think about you every day. And I shall write to you, Viv. Please don’t forget me.”

“Never,” he replied. “And you have silver hearts to remind you of me. Goodbye.”

Joyce stood at a rail on the merchantman with Mrs de Lancy and waved to Vivian and Papa. Tears in her eyes, she watched them leave in catamarans. Sea Sprite surged forward. Joyce trembled as though she were in a nightmare, worse than any about loathsome muggers, from which she would wake in her cosy bed at Tremayne House. No longer able to see Papa and Vivan, she stared at the undulating waves that carrying her far them and the land she loved.

“Amelie-Rose, did you see them leave? Do you think they will be safe?” She wobbled and clutched the rail.

“Landlubbers are always unsteady when they board ship,” Captain Harvey said. “Don’t worry, Miss Tremayne, you’ll soon find your sea legs.” He indicated a small sailor

with a wrinkled face and lively brown eyes. “Meet Nat. He’ll take you to the cuddy to have refreshment.

Mrs de Lancy groaned. “No, please, not a mouthful.” She bent her head over the side and cast up her accounts.

“Don’t look at her,” Joyce told Amelie-Rose.

* * *

Dear Journal, Joyce wrote, yesterday, when I parted from Papa and Vivian, I was miserable. After I stood on deck watching the shore as Papa’s ship sailed away, I could not speak, eat or write in you. My dear father will never know how hard it is for me to write the first words.

A week later, she wrote.

Since The ship sailed, poor Mrs de Lancy has been seasick every day. She stared into space, trying to decide what to write next. Nat promises her she will recover soon. Our cabin stinks of vomit, so he suggests she breathe fresh air on deck, but she says she can only bend her head over the bucket to be sick.

I like Nat. He is kind. Because Mrs de Lancy stays in bed, he takes me and Wilson to the cuddy every day to have our meals. She pulled a face. Although Captain Harvey tells me to eat everything, I cannot. At breakfast, I ate bread spread with butter and sweet red conserve, and at noon, a bread roll, cheese and fruit. At dinner, I could not stomach more than a few mouthfuls of boiled mutton pudding. In our cabin, I ate some savoury titbits and sweetmeats Prahlad Das made for me. I must resist the temptation and only eat a few at a time to make them last for as long as possible.

I am still unsteady when I walk. Nat says I will soon have my sea legs. He taught me larboard is the left side of the ship when I face the bow. Starboard is the right side of the ship when I look forward. He explained the cuddy is beneath the round house, also called the poop, which is on the quarterdeck. Nat smiled when he said. ‘You ask too many questions, Miss.’

After dinner, glad to be out of the cabin that still reeks although the slop_bucket is emptied and cleaned regularly, I stood with Nat on the quarterdeck. He taught me to see the centre of the Milky Way, and the Southern Cross, a pattern of stars shaped like a

kite. I did not know the stars in the northern and southern parts of the world are different.

Dear Journal, I shall write to you every day I am at sea. I will also write letters to Papa and Vivian, which Nat says will be sent by ship from the Cape of Good Hope and anywhere else the Sea Sprite stops to take fresh water and supplies on board.

20th November 1808

After five months at sea the ship parted from the convoy and is moored in the estuary of River Carnel at Padstow Dock. I was almost scared out of my mind when French war ships and later pirates attacked Sea Sprit. By God's mercy they were driven away by canon fire. For two weeks, we endured uninterrupted gales with thunder and lightning streaking across dark, sullen skies from which ceaseless raindrops pelted down. At night, during the most violent weather, I lay strapped into my cot to prevent me falling out. A fortnight later the wind failed for more than two sennights, so our passage was delayed in the doldrums. Captain Harvey and the crew feared with the ship immobile, we might starve to death if we were there for several months.

I prayed every day throughout all these trials. Mrs de Lancy was still seasick. Once, she cried out she did not care whether she would live or die. Wilson grumbled, wailed, and pulled her mob cap down over her face. She declared despite the money she would be paid, she would have stayed in Madras if she had knew about the hardships on the voyage.

Tomorrow, the factor will take charge of Papa's cargo. Our baggage will be unloaded, and I shall disembark with Mrs de Lancy and Wilson.

25th November 1808

Dear Journal, Amelie-Rose and I are still trying to be brave about our future. Yet we would pay any price to be back in Madras with Papa and Viv. I am waiting to discover what fate has in store for me.

I woke up this morning unable to move after a nightmare in which I struggled between a mugger's jaws full of fearful teeth. Aware it was only a bad dream, I tried to

wake up, but it seemed the scaly beast carried me underwater to its lair. Who could save me, God the Father, Jesus or Krishna I wondered in the middle of the horror? My body rigid, my eyes opened. Safety! No mugger lurked, waiting for an opportunity to snatch me. Like a cradle, the ship rocked gently. What does the future hold for me away from India?"

* * *

30th November 1808

Dear Journal, Mrs de Lancy is very thin but she is recovering from seasickness. I have not suffered from any ailments, and thankfully we have escaped from every dreadful danger.

Joyce put her quill down and locked her journal when Wilson entered the cabin, her round face slightly more cheerful than usual. "Time for you and the mistress to dress. The tide will turn soon. The captain wants to be rid of you so the ship can sail to Bristol." Her strident voice woke Mrs de Lancy. "He says when you arrived, a message was to be sent to the castle. While we wait to go there, we will put up at Doyle's Hotel."

Joyce pushed back the bedcovers. She got out of bed and looked out of the porthole. Her spirit low, she saw the pale sun presiding over a sullen grey sky above an expanse of dark grey water ruffled by wind.

"Don't dawdle, Miss Tremayne," Wilson urged her. "Get dressed while I pack the rest of your duds."

An hour later, Joyce said goodbye to Nat, who had calmed her fears and helped her while away many hours during the tedious journey. The gangplank lowered. She followed Captain Harvey, with Mrs de Lancy beside her and Wilson behind them, onto the dock where sailors moved heavy cargo from other ships and rolled either empty barrels or full ones requiring more effort. Ladies and gentlemen greeted some passengers who disembarked from other ships. With the smell of gutted fish, seaweed, obnoxious debris and tar in her nostrils, Joyce watched some women. Dressed in gaudy clothes, their cheeks dark pink, they strutted backward and forward across the round cobbles.

Joyce watched one who walked away with her hand clamped on a sailor's arm. She pointed at the others. "Who are they?" she asked Mrs de Lancy.

Captain Harvey coughed several times and looked in the opposite direction.

The colour in Marianne's cheeks, reddened by the brisk wind, deepened. "I don't know. 'Pon my word, the cold cuts through me like a knife, and you look half-frozen."

"I am, but who-" Joyce began.

"Mercy, Child. How often have you been told not to ask too many questions?"

Joyce pressed her lips together. Later, perhaps Wilson could tell her why there were so many painted women, if they did paint their faces, at the dock.

"Joyce, we must buy fur-lined cloaks with hoods, warm gloves and muffs," Marianne said.

"Captain Harvey?" asked a man enveloped in a thick brown cloak with two capes, raised his beaver hat respectfully.

The captain nodded.

"I am Peter, one of Mr Doyle's footmen. He sent me to take the ladies by coach to his hotel. He also sent another footman to load their luggage onto a fargon." Peter bowed.

"Ladies, please follow me."

Captain Harvey swept off his hat embellished with a red and gold rosette and bowed. "Good day, Miss Tremayne. Good day, Mrs de Lancy, I must resume command of the ship."

"Goodbye, Captain," Joyce said. "When I write to my father, I shall tell him how kind you, Mrs Harvey and Nat have been."

"I doubt you will want to return from *This happy breed of men, this little world, This precious stone set in a silver sea*, to India" he quoted.

"Only happy men?" Joyce asked.

The captain spluttered. "And women," he conceded after he caught his breath.

She opened her mouth to say the sea was more often blue or grey and explain she would always want to go home.

Marianne forestalled her. "Captain Harvey, possibly I shall return to Madras on Sea Sprite when my business is concluded. We might meet again."

"As God wills it, Madam."

Joyce watched the captain stride away across the dock.

Peter led them to the carriage drawn by a pair of glossy black horses. He opened the door and lowered the steps.

"I am famished and deathly cold, Joyce," Marianne said. "At the hotel, I hope we may enjoy a substantial breakfast, and there will be roaring fires to warm the cockles of our hearts." She clicked her teeth. "Don't ask me what the cockles of our hearts in the saying are."

Joyce stored it in her memory for future use. She pursed her mouth. How would she learn anything if she were not allowed to ask questions? And who were those garish women? Still curious when they arrived at the hotel, from which Doyle, a spruce man with a pale complexion and nutmeg-coloured hair, came out and bowed low. "Miss Tremayne, Madam, you are welcome."

I am only a child. Why did he greet me first?

"Miss Tremayne," he repeated, your noble grandfather, the gracious Earl of Tresellion, sent his secretary to inspect my hotel. Satisfied everything meets the highest standard, his lordship sent instructions for me to be at your command when you arrived in England."

"Thank you, Mr Doyle," Joyce said because Mrs de Lancy raised her lorgnette, scrutinised him. He looked down. She did not speak.

Joyce gazed at the impressive five-storey building with a flotilla of lattice windows different from any she saw in India. The gold-painted sign Doyle's Hotel hung from an iron bracket above the large front door on either side of which, she saw other equally large doors. Above them hung individual signs - Coffee House, Tavern, Banqueting Hall, and Smoking Room.

"This way, ladies." Doyle led them into a large entrance hall wainscoted with oak and up a wide flight of stairs. He opened a door and stood back to allow them to enter a room. "This is your parlour next to your bedchambers and a dressing room. He pointed at a bell rope. Pull it to summon your maidservant from her chamber in the attic."

Marianne stretched out her hands and stood in front of the cheerful fire. "Come here, Joyce. Warm yourself." She sank onto a chair at one side of the hearth. "And you, Wilson," she added kindly.

"I hope you will be satisfied with everything," Doyle said. "You only need to ask for whatever you require."

"Which is a substantial breakfast for me and Miss Tremayne."

"I shall send word to the kitchen for you to be served immediately," Doyle said.

“And breakfast for my maid.”

“In the servants’ hall?” Doyle asked.

“Yes,” Marianne replied.

“Doyle, are there any shops where we may purchase warm cloaks and other necessities in Padstow?” Marianne asked.

“No need to bestir yourselves, Madam. I shall arrange for a selection for you to choose from to be sent here.”

“Which are to include some for my maid.”

“Thank you, Madam.” Wilson favoured her with a rare smile.

“Wilson.”

“Yes, Madam.”

“Inform me if your accommodation is uncomfortable and you are not well-fed.”

“Thank you, I shall.”

“The man’s a toady!” Marianne said as they took off their pelisses, hats and gloves. Two footmen in black livery trimmed with scarlet arrived. They set a table by the window and served breakfast.

“Our maid’s breakfast?” Marianne asked one of them.

“She may follow us to the servant’s hall below stairs where she will be served.”

Marianne dismissed Wilson, who followed the tall footmen. At the table she poured coffee for herself from a silver pot and served Joyce with some diluted with hot milk.

Mrs de Lancy looked appreciatively at fried chops, coddled eggs, and sliced cold meats.

Joyce only wanted to eat cheese, rolls and small sugared cakes.

Unable to eat another morsel, Joyce wiped her mouth on her napkin. “When do you think the coach to take us to Castle Tresellion will arrive, Mrs de Lancy?”

“Today or tomorrow, but at whatever the time we will not leave without warm cloaks with hoods.”

The Tremaynes still played prominent parts in the county’s history as they did for generations.

‘Our ancestor, a seventy-year-old royalist, the sixth earl who defeated a week long assault on his castle by Cromwell’s Roundheads during the Civil War. The holes in the walls around the castle made by canon are still there,’ Papa had told her.

Curiosity and apprehension about her family she was about to meet, warred within Joyce.

Chapter Twelve

1st December 1808

Dispirited, Joyce stared at her reflection in the mirror in the hotel bedroom. She fingered her hair released from curl papers Mrs de Lancy twined around them yesterday evening. She studied her curls and ringlets kept in place with the application of sugar water after it dried.

“Don’t fidget,” Mrs de Lancy had said while she arranged them. “I cannot stress how important it is for you to make a favourable impression on your grandparents.”

Joyce turned away from the mirror. Small for her age, still skinny, her light brown hair usually straight as arrows and no longer sun kissed after the voyage, only her eyes blue as her father’s beautiful ones might impress her relatives.

After breakfast, when the modiste, Madame Blanchet arrived, Marianne agreed to purchase a scarlet broadcloth cloak from Madame, who assured her the colour was in fashion. “It is not suitable for you, Mademoiselle Tremayne. Sometimes, it is better not to be dressed in the latest mode. You understand, don’t you?”

Joyce nodded.

“Scarlet would not flatter your delicate complexion, Mademoiselle.”

Relieved because she knew the colour would not suit her pallid complexion, Joyce waited for tactful Madame to suggest a suitable one.

“A million pardons. Ze cloaks I have would swamp you. Mademoiselle.” Madame said, unable to pronounce the. In the French manner, she gesticulated, her hands eloquently emphasizing her words. “No need to despair.” She plucked something from an array spread on the bed. “Regard zis pink cloak a lady ordered for her daughter, zen rejected it. It is perfect for you?” Madame helped her put it on and drew the hood over her head. “Marvellous, to behold you. Mademoiselle, please to regard yourself in ze mirror.” She turned around to face Marianne. “Ze young lady should never wear white,” she said

referring to Joyce's gown. "Cream and soft colours are for her. One comprehends you and Mademoiselle need new clothes made in ze latest fashions. If it is your pleasure, I would be honoured to supply them."

Joyce observed her reflection in the mirror and stroked the soft, thick wool, ankle-length cloak. Pleased by how much the pink hood framing her face suited her, she smiled and looked at Mrs de Lancy. "I want Madame Blanchet to make my new gowns."

"Mademoiselle is gracious." The modiste's eyelashes fluttered.

"Madame, I cannot guarantee Miss Tremayne's grandmother will accept my recommendation, but I shall give it, although she might give her custom elsewhere," Marianne said.

"Zank, you. Me, I shall pray to ze good God for her ladyship to patronise me." The modiste picked up two muffs. "For your consideration, Madame, please consider ze large black bear fur one for you and ze smaller chinchilla one for Mademoiselle."

"For me, Mrs de Lancy?" Joyce asked, delighted.

"Yes." Marianne smiled.

"Madame, you may send your bill for Miss Tremayne's cloak and muff to Lady Tremayne. I shall visit your establishment to order some gowns and settle my account."

"*Merci*, Madame, I will be honoured to serve you. Please take my card."

While the modiste's assistant packed the wares, Joyce gazed out of the window at the street crowded with pedestrians, footmen, horsemen, humble carts and wagons, hackney carriages, stagecoaches, a mail coach, and wealthy peoples' coaches and carriages, proceeding along rain-soaked cobbles glistening between small puddles.

Despondent, she viewed yet another day with sullen grey skies and wind, causing men to hold onto the brims of their tall hats to prevent them being snatched away. Condemned to long years away from familiar blue skies and warmth, Joyce looked at purple clouds and cuddled Amelie-Rose for comfort. To the left of the street, a large black travelling coach with bright yellow hubs on the red wheels approached. It drew nearer. Joyce saw a waterproof crimson hammer cloth embroidered like the one on Papa's coach during the monsoon spread over the coachman's seat. Joyce stared at the man's box coat with many capes and his low, cocked hat, which protected him from the dreadful weather. He reined in the team of four magnificent black horses harnessed to the coach outside the hotel.

Pride surged through her as Joyce admired the Tremayne coat of arms painted on the door. Two golden eagles supported the shield under a helmet with a closed visor, surmounted by a gold cross and beneath it the Tremayne motto. Honour, Valour and Duty. *It took courage, she mused, for my ancestor to refuse to pledge loyalty to Queen Mary and her husband, William of Orange. I admire him because his honour demanded he keep the oath of allegiance he made to Mary's father, James Second, whose throne she and her husband supplanted.*

A footman, also protected from the cold weather by a box coat and broad-brimmed hat, got down from the platform on the rear of the coach. He opened the door, lowered the step and held out his arm. Joyce watched a petite lady swathed in an ankle-length grey pelisse trimmed with ermine accept his assistance. She spoke briefly to the coachman, raised an umbrella and walked at a moderate pace to the hotel's front door, which the footman opened.

"Mrs de Lancy, the coach has arrived."

"At last, Joyce, you are near the end of your journey."

"Not yours. You will go to Bath on business." Anxious, she gazed at the lady who always cared for her as though she, not Mama, were her loving mother.

"Don't look so worried," Marianne said. "You know I shall stay with you for some time."

Joyce heaved a relieved sigh. "I wonder who the lady who got out of the coach is."

"Miss Curiosity, I daresay you will soon find out," Marianne teased her.

Joyce returned to the window. Outside, the winter sun shed light on the wet street. She caught her lower lip between her teeth. Would there be warm sunshine in summer? "In front of the hotel, a fargon is behind the coach," she remarked.

Wilson entered the room and bobbed a curtsey. "Did you send for me, madam.?"

"A half hour ago," Marianne said, her annoyance obvious because Wilson did not answer the summons immediately. "A fargon has arrived, which I think is for our baggage. If so, you will travel in it to make certain nothing disappears on the way to Tresellion Castle."

Wilson sniffed, bobbed another curtsey, and left the bedchamber.

"She is impertinent," Marianne commented.

"I don't like her. She grumbles too much," Joyce responded.

Marianne glanced around the bedchamber. "Shall we go into the parlour and wait to find out who arrived in the coach?"

They were about to sit down on either side of the blazing fire in the grate when someone rapped on the door. "Come," Marianne called.

A footman in Doyle's black and silver livery, white stockings and powdered wig, entered the parlour followed by a lady. "Baroness Beecham," he announced.

Marianne and Joyce curtsied to the noblewoman, whose husband would inherit Grandfather's title if he did not die overseas in the war against the French.

Her ladyship sank onto the sofa opposite the fireplace. "So, you are my niece, my brother-in-law, Benjamin's daughter," she said. "Pon my word, you are a scrawny little thing, you need to be fattened up.

Joyce's cheeks burned. At first, she wanted to cover them with her hands. Fury bolstered her. She glared at her aunt. "You are rude!" she exploded, cut to the quick by the words.

Her ladyship looked at Mrs de Lancy. "And you are?"

"Mrs de Lancy, your niece's chaperon, my lady."

"Hm. The seminary will improve her conduct. Time may enhance her appearance. If they don't, it is insignificant because she is an heiress. When she is of age, there will be many suitors to choose from. Fattened up she is certain make a prestigious match."

Joyce cringed. She wanted to return to Papa, who only failed her when he insisted, she go to this cold country where, struck in her heart, she suffered from his sister-in-law's cruel words. Joyce scowled, neither wanting to be fattened up nor sent to the seminary. As for a prestigious match, she would only marry a man she loved.

"Joyce, your father would be ashamed of you. Apologise to Lady Beecham," Marianne ordered.

Her nostrils flared. "I am sorry, Aunt, but you should not have called me scrawny."

The baroness' chuckle surprised her. "You have inherited the Tremayne's blue eyes and bold spirit." She waved a finger at Mrs de Lancy. "I am hungry. Please order cold meats, bread and butter, and sherry for me to be served here. Tell them to be quick. I want to depart within the half hour so we can arrive at the castle by dusk."

* * *

Marianne, still weak from the aftermath of seasickness, dozed in the commodious, well-sprung coach.

“Joyce does your father intend to visit you and Sylvester in England?” her aunt asked.

“No.” She peered out of the window at an isolated farm surrounded by a low grey stone wall with fields beyond which was a wilderness. “Where are we, aunt?”

“I told you. We have crossed the border into Cornwall.”

“I meant, where are we now?”

“On the king’s highway near the coast.”

“Oh, look, aunt!” she pointed at small cottages huddled together and a small, squat grey stone church with a steeple soaring towards heaven.

“At what?” her aunt gazed at the scenery. “We are near the Russell’s estate. It means we should reach Tresellion in two hours or less.”

Joyce admired a farmhouse and barnyard enclosed by a low wall made from uneven stones, and fields where cattle and sheep grazed, beyond which there were low hills in the far distance.

“When you left India, was your father in good health?” Aunt Beecham asked.

“Yes.”

“I am glad to hear he is well in a country where it is said people sicken at dawn and are dead by sunset.” Joyce blanched. *God preserve Papa’s life on earth.* She looked away from her tactless aunt’s scrutiny. “Child, you are a mere slip of a girl. I suppose you suffer from poor health and am surprised you are not buried in a grave far from your home in England.”

Home! In this foreign country?

“What have you to say?” her aunt asked.

“I am healthy.”

Aunt Beecham shrugged. “I cannot imagine your father’s life in India. I suppose his house is small.”

“It is not.” With a pang of acute homesickness Joyce described it and turned her head toward the window to conceal tears in her eyes.

“I daresay Castle Tresellion would dwarf it, and he could not accommodate the many members of our family already gathered to celebrate your arrival.” The baroness began naming them. “I am tired,” she said when she finally stopped talking. Her eyelids closed. Asleep, her mouth open, she snored, her flawless oval face no longer beautiful.

Joyce gazed at a curious circle of tall grey stones in the distance. Why was it been built? The coach proceeded past isolated buildings and farms, she saw chickens, geese, waterfowl on ponds, more cattle and sheep, but not a man, woman, or child. Overhead, unfamiliar white birds flew across a dark sky

Tired from travelling, she leant back against the squab and drifted asleep despite her aunt’s snores.

When Joyce woke, she rubbed her eyes and heard rain pounding on the roof of the stationary coach. If only she could wave a fairy wand and say a spell to transport her from this dismal country to—Her aunt’s strident voice prevented her from completing the thought. “Joyce, we have arrived. We must rush inside if we don’t want to look as though we are half-drowned.”

Wan Mrs de Lancy, who spoke a little and dozed throughout most of their journey, smiled at her. “Where are we, Joyce?” She took her hands out of her muff and adjusted the hood of her cloak.

“At the castle,” she replied.

Joyce followed her aunt and Mrs de Lancy into a courtyard illuminated by golden light streaming through purple-grey dusk from an immense building. It looked like a fairytale illustrated in one of her children’s books.

“Myth claims King Arthur was born at Tintagel Castle in Cornwall, the land of my birth with its history enriched by legends,” Papa had told her.

Joyce hurried with the ladies to an enormous, domed wooden door with iron studs and latches. She entered the largest entrance hall she could have imagined. She gazed at two suits of armour, presumably worn by her ancestors, weapons they wielded hundreds of years ago, and shields they defended themselves with displayed on the walls. Above the mantelpiece, Joyce recognised Saint Piran’s banner with a white cross on a black background. She smiled. A larger banner above her home in India declared Papa was proud of Cornwall’s patron saint.

Servants took their cloaks, muffs, gloves and hats. They wiped their wet faces on their kerchiefs.

“Joyce, come to the Great Hall with Mrs de Lancy to meet your family.” Her aunt noticed bedraggled Wilson hurry toward them. “Provision will be made for your woman.”

A stately butler led them around an enormous screen that protected the entrance hall from draughts. A grand staircase ascended to the two-storey high Great Hall, with an enormous, stained glass oriel window beneath which a handsome elderly gentleman and a beautiful lady with silver-white hair sat. Joyce stared at them breathing in the scent of beeswax candles, and people’s perfumes which did not entirely conceal the nauseating odour of unwashed bodies and roast meat.

The butler announced their arrival in a voice which rose above the babble of a large crowd of fashionably dressed people.

Joyce felt completely insignificant. She looked down. Shyness rooted her to the parquet floor. Arms enfolded her. Soft lips kissed her cheeks. She breathed in the sweet fragrance of flowery perfume “You are welcome for my dear son Benedict’s sake and your own.”

The gentle arms released her. Joyce summoned the courage to gaze into a pair of smiling hazel eyes. “Grandmama?” she whispered.

“Yes, I am your grandmother. I presume the lady next to you is Mrs de Lancy, who your father mentioned in a letter. Thank you, Madam, for caring for Joyce. Thank The Lord both of you are safe with us. I shudder when I think of the danger ships face at sea and thank Him because Sylvester arrived safely.

Warmed by her grandmother’s loving words, Joyce gathered more courage and stared up at the enormous, dark wood beams that crossed the white ceiling.

“Welcome, Joyce,” a gentleman said. “You are doubly welcome because out of fifteen grandchildren, you are our only granddaughter. We have waited impatiently to meet you since your birth. May I add a kiss to my greeting?”

Joyce transferred her attention from the roof, which dwarfed her, to her grandfather. She gasped. Blue-eyed, with a square chin and muscular build, he was an older version of Papa.

He kissed her on her forehead. "Your birth and Tremayne-blue eyes ensure your important place in the family." He looked beyond her at Mrs de Lancy and inclined his head. "Thank you, Madam, for bringing your precious charge to a safe harbour."

Marianne curtsied. "It is my pleasure, my lord. I have loved Miss Tremayne since the hour of her birth."

"Did you have an accident, Joyce?" Grandfather stroked the scar on her cheek.

"N...no, Grandpapa, Mama's ring cut me when she hit me. B...but I am safe. Mama is in England, but she is not allowed to visit me."

Grandfather's mouth formed a firm, straight line, and his eyes blazed. "Indeed, she will not ."

"Mrs de Lancy Joyce is too tired to be introduced to her relations today, and she is too sleepy to join us at dinner. After she dines in her bedchamber, which you will share, see her safe her to bed."

How many of her cousins were here? The question would be answered tomorrow when she hoped Sylvester would arrive. Relief surged through her. For now, she could escape from a horde of eyes inspecting her and probably finding her lacking.

Chapter Thirteen

Beside Mrs de Lancy, Joyce plodded after the footman through a rabbit warren of ancient parts of the castle. They passed huge oak doors fastened with iron latches and lancet windows high up in the walls.

The castle built soon after the Duke of Normandy conquered England without a guide, how would they find their way through the labyrinth from the oldest part of the building, with bone-chilling draughts, and damp emanating from stonewalls, to new additions?

The footman opened a door and stood back for them to enter.

“Your bedchamber, Miss Tremayne, Mrs de Lancy. Tug the bell rope to summon a servant.” He bowed. “By your leave.” His footsteps sounded hollow as he walked away beneath the painted ceiling soaring above him.

Joyce put her hand over her mouth and yawned, looking at Wilson and another maidservant, dressed in a dark green gown, ankle-length white apron and a frilled mobcap, unpacking their baggage.

“You are?” Marianne asked the maid.

She curtsied. “Baxter, Ann Baxter, Madam. Housekeeper said as I’m to serve Miss Tremayne.”

Joyce smiled. *Not a grumpy maid like Wilson! A young one who looks cheerful.*

“How old are you?” asked Mariane.

Baxter’s gaze slid to Wilson. “Twenty-five, Madam. My duty is to serve the young lady and, ...er... as Mrs Mabey, the housekeeper, ordered me, in her own words, to be the Earl and Countess’ ewe lamb’s shepherdess.”

Ewe lamb! Shepherdess! Joyce stared thoughtfully at the patterned carpet that covered most of the wood floor. She suspected it would not be as easy to slip outside on her own from here as it had been from her far away home, which she saw in her mind’s

eye. If only she were there now on her way to visit Govinda Sadhu seated tranquilly under the banyan tree.

“And,” Baxter said to Mrs de Lancy, “Mrs Mabey is sorry you and my mistress must share the green bedroom because the castle is packed with people putting up here for Christmas.”

Joyce looked around at the emerald green and gold striped curtains matching those tied back around the mahogany bed with four posts, the Chinese wallpaper like the type in Papa’s house, gilt-framed pier mirrors, and beautiful oil paintings of landscapes and seascapes hung on the walls.

“After New Year’s Eve,” Baxter continued, “Miss Tremayne and her governess will share the schoolroom and—”

“You have said enough, Baxter,” Mrs de Lancy interrupted.

The maid curtsied. “I beg your pardon, Madam.”

A governess! Papa said I would be educated at a seminary for young ladies in Bath.

Wilson answered a knock on the door. “Hot water,” said a footman and handed her a wooden bucket with an iron rim.

Wilson clutched the handle with both hands. “It is very heavy.” She staggered. “Baxter, help me.”

They carried it to the marble washstand furnished with a blue and white ceramic basin and jug.

“Wilson, find Miss Tremayne’s nightgown. Joyce, wash away the dust from your journey,” Marianne said.

Joyce grasped a bar of lavender-scented soap. She washed her hands and face and dried them on a linen towel Baxter handed her.

Wilson poured the water into an empty bucket under the washstand. She refilled the basin for Mrs de Lancy, who quickly washed and dried her hands and face.

Someone knocked on the door. Marianne nodded at Wilson, who admitted two footmen. They put trays of food and drink on the round table between two tall windows with Venetian blinds and curtains tied back with gold cords, bowed and left.

Joyce ate vegetables she sprinkled with pepper, drank wine diluted with water, and enjoyed a slice of apple pie smothered with cream.

“Some more?” Marianne asked.

“No, thank you, I could not eat another morsel.”

“You are half-asleep.” Marianne tugged the bell rope to summon servants.

Footmen came to remove the trays. A maidservant brought a copper bed pan filled with hot embers to warm the bed.

Baxter undressed Joyce and helped her into a linen night shift, fastened the buttons at the neck, and tied the ribbons of her nightcap under her chin. With Amelie-Rose tucked under her arm, Joyce clambered, exhausted, onto the bed she would share with Mrs de Lancy. She lay onto the right side of the comfortable feather mattress, pulled up the sheet and blankets and slept.

* * *

Saint Nicholas’ Day. 6th December 1808

Half awake, Joyce rubbed her sticky eyes. She forced them open. Her vision impaired, disorientated she clutched Amelie-Rose and sat up. *Where am I?* She rubbed her eyes. Joyce peered across the dim bedchamber toward the windows. Sleepy, she remembered getting into bed last night. She glanced at the other side of the bed where Mrs de Lancy slept. *What time is it?* Joyce slid out onto the carpet, cradling Amelie-Rose in her arms. She tip-toed to a window three times taller than her height. Behind the curtain, she struggled to raise the Venetian blind high enough to look outside at the pale amber dawn streaked with gold in an azure-blue sky. Beneath it, the colours were reflected on the undulating sea, which ebbed and flowed from the sandy beach guarded by tall granite outcrops.

Joyce glanced towards the fireplace. She shivered. Only ash remained from the blazing logs in the grate when she went to sleep, but she lingered gazing at the path high above the shore. Wrapped in hooded cloaks, their hands encased in leather gloves, did Grandpapa ride along it with ladies and gentlemen? If so, would she be allowed to join them? If not, could she ride there with Sylvester? Reminded of early morning rides in India, her shoulders slumped.

Don’t cry, she scolded herself. *Sylvester and I will enjoy riding together*. Soothed by the prospect of a familiar activity, she walked toward the bed where Mrs de Lancy still slumbered.

“Oh! How could I have I forgotten it is St Nicholas’ Day when small gifts are exchanged?” she whispered. “Have Wilson and Baxter unpacked those Papa sent for our family? Did he send anything for me?” Cheered by her last thought, she propped Amelie-Rose against a small portmanteau. She took Mrs de Lancy’s gift, wrapped in muslin from it. “And I haven’t forgotten you, Amelie-Rose,” she whispered. Joyce dangled a scarlet satin sash in front of her doll’s face. She removed the blue silk one and replaced it with the new one. Mrs de Lancy stirred in bed.

“You look beautiful,” Joyce whispered to her small, treasured companion. She yawned, returned to bed, put the parcel under her pillow, and settled Amelie-Rose between her and her chaperon.

On the brink of sleep, she heard a maidservant enter the bedchamber and listened to the hay rustle and wood crackle as she lit a fire in the hearth. Warm and cosy, Joyce slept until Mrs de Lancy woke her to have breakfast.

“Here?” she asked, surprised when it was served in their bedchamber.

“Yes, Joyce, it is the custom for most ladies to be served in their bedchambers while the gentlemen eat in the breakfast parlour.”

She enjoyed sweet hot chocolate, freshly baked bread, and butter superior to those in Madras. Nevertheless, she would have preferred a substantial meal shared there after an early morning ride. She dabbed her mouth with a napkin.

“Time to dress,” Marianne rang the bell to summon their maids. Time to get dressed, Joyce.”

Joyce’s hair, released from curl papers, artfully arranged, wearing a cream, high-waisted gown made from broadcloth for warmth, she gave Mrs de Lancy a watercolour of a silver path cast by the harvest moon’s light across the dark sea she painted on board ship.

“Your needlework leaves much to be desired, but you are a very talented young artist. Thank you, Joyce. I shall have it framed and always treasure it.”

Conscious of her blush in response to praise Joyce unwrapped the small parcel Mrs de Lancy gave her. “Did you make these for me?” She tried to sound delighted by a forget-me-not blue velvet pincushion and an exquisitely embroidered needle case.

“Yes, to encourage you because I know you don’t enjoy needlework, an accomplishment expected of every lady.”

Joyce traced the tiny pattern of honeysuckle with the tip of her forefinger. How many times was instructed to unpick the part of her sampler? Would she ever finish it? "Thank you, they are beautiful." She doubted she could ever match the quality of either Mrs de Lancy's plain sewing, which included making shirts and cravats for Vivian at home when there were no guests, or embroidery when there were.

Someone who rapped hard on the door, opened it a little. "May I come in?" a male voice asked through the gap.

Joyce would recognise the deep tone anywhere. She pulled the door wide open. "Sylvester!" She flung her arms around his neck. Tears in her eyes, she craned her neck to study his handsome face. "You cannot guess how happy I am to see you."

"I did not expect such a warm welcome. Take care. You are crushing my neckcloth which took me thirty minutes to arrange. Don't choke me." He gently removed her arms and gazed down at her. "Ah, you still wear Vivian's silver hearts."

"Always."

"She is never parted from them," Marianne said.

"Forgive me, Madam. Captured by Joyce's arms around my neck, I did not notice you." He bowed. "I hope you are in good health."

"Mrs de Lancy has recovered, after she cast up her accounts every day during the voyage."

"As one who once suffered from *mal de mer*, I offer you my deepest sympathy. I shall give you some medicine made in India which relieved me of torment during my last voyage to England."

"Thank you, Sylvester." Marianne smiled at them. "I daresay you and Joyce have much to say to each other. I shall see you later."

Sylvester opened the door for her to leave. He closed it, turned around, gazed at his reflection in a pier glass and adjusted his starched neckcloth.

"Do you need a comb or brush to tidy your hair?" Joyce asked.

"No, thank you."

Why did he sound irritated? "It is untidy," she ventured.

"It is the fashion for a gentleman's hair to appear dishevelled. My hairstyle is called *a la Titus*. Don't look at me disapprovingly."

“Am I? I did not intend to.” Joyce admired his blue kerseymere morning coat with silver buttons, cream waistcoat and pantaloons, and glossy black half boots. “You must be...what is it called?... in the height of fashion.”

“Yes, it is.” He handed her a package. “For you, monkey face. Oh, I apologise. Last time I called you that, you cried.”

“I will not cry today, but please call me Joyce. She took her present from him and removed the paper in which it was wrapped. “Satin ribbons, all the colours of the rainbow for my hair. They are beautiful, thank you very much.” She hunted in a drawer and took out a narrow parcel. “For you.”

He opened it and held up a short peacock feather quill.

“I hope you like it. I thought it might remind you of home every time you dip it into the inkwell.”

“My thanks for such a beautiful gift.” Sylvester hesitated. “Papa has accepted my home is and will always be in England.”

“Why?”

“For many reasons you are probably too young to understand.”

She sniffed. “Is it because you don’t love me and Papa?”

“Of course not.” Sylvester wiped his forehead on the back of his hand. “In Madras I don’t like the heat, the crowds of insects, illnesses which snatch people’s lives away in a few hours.” He passed his forefinger around the edge of his stiff starched collar and took a deep breath. “And there are other reasons. I believe as an Englishman, I belong in my own country, where Papa’s and my mother’s families have welcomed me.” He shrugged. “As I said, you are too young to understand I belong on this great island.”

Joyce forced herself to speak. “I shall never be happy in this cold land.”

“It is not always cold. The heat is rarely unbearable, and the changing seasons, spring, summer, autumn, and winter, are beautiful.”

“Are they?” Her mouth quivered. “S...Sylvester.”

“Yes.”

Joyce clenched her hands. “I did not want to leave. I don’t want to live here. P...please write to Papa and beg him to let me return home.”

“If I asked him, he would not change his mind. Try to be cheerful. You will enjoy your new life.”

“No, she would not. Her familiar world at an end, how could she face this new one? Joyce covered her face with her hands and peeped through a gap in her fingers.

Sylvester knelt in front of her. “Look at me. Do you think I would lie to you?”

“N...no,” she answered, remembering Papa asked her the same question.

“Believe me. You will enjoy your life in England.”

He smiled at Marianne who entered the room.

“Mrs de Lancy, I am trying to reassure my sister who is homesick.”

“Home is where one’s heart is,” Marianne said. “Joyce, you are young and may decide your future will not be in Madras. Don’t be sad. Friends and family are here to celebrate. We shall dine in the Great Hall and exchange gifts.”

* * *

7th December 1808

Rain lashed the windows while Joyce finished her breakfast in bed. She pushed the tray away from her, thinking about Sylvester. *When will he return to Oxford? Will the weather be good enough for us to ride along the path above the cliffs? Will Grandpapa allow us to?*

Miserable, because she overheard her uncle, the clergyman, say. “I wish my parents joy of my sulky niece. The sooner she is schooled in good manners the better.” Not true! She had been too shy, not sulky, to talk to so many relatives, but she whispered thank you for each gift. Cambric handkerchiefs edged with broad lace, a knitting bag, several pin cushions, two books of children’s fairytales, trinkets and much more, including a silver heart-shaped brooch Vivian sent to Sylvester to give to her. At least dear Vivian shared her love of India, and one happy day, God willing, she would see him again. In the meantime, she would continue writing to him.

Her brother helped her distribute Papa's presents, among which were Kashmiri shawls, which the ladies were delighted with. Grandpapa gave her an easel. Speechless with delight, she listened to him tell her Papa mentioned she was a talented young artist in her letters. “Will you paint a picture for me?” Grandmama asked and gave her paintbrushes.

“Yes, Grandmama,” she replied quietly, ill at ease among the crowd gathered in the Great Hall.

* * *

Joyce sat at the table in her bedchamber, her peacock feather quill dipped in an ink pot, ready to begin writing a letter to Papa while she waited for the dressmaker to arrive to measure her and suggest designs and fabrics to Grandmama.

She looked down at the pristine paper.

Dear Papa, she wrote, her forehead creased. What should she write first? Joyce took a deep breath and dipped the quill into the ink again. *I am healthy. I hope you and Vivian are. Sylvester is at Castle Tresellion. He is well. I am very pleased to see him but sad because he says he will never return to India. I shall.* Should she beg Papa to send for her as soon as he received this letter?

“Miss Tremayne, please go to the winter parlour.”

Grandmama must be waiting there for her. She put the quill down.

Baxter led her through several corridors, down a flight of stairs, and opened a door. “Go in. I shall finish tidying your bedchamber.”

Anelie-Rose in her arms Joyce stepped across the threshold. Alarmed by seven of her cousins’ hostile faces, she cringed when they formed a circle around her and chanted repeatedly.

*“Baby, from the east,
With a doll at her chest,
Is an ugly little beast.”*

Their hands were linked together too tightly for her to escape. One of her cousins snatched Amelie-Rose. He flung her over his head onto the wood floor where her exquisite porcelain face smashed.

“You are the ugly beasts,” Joyce screamed, tears pouring down her face.

“Contemptible ones,” said a voice from someone who stood at the threshold.

Her tormentors released each other’s hands and retreated toward the wall opposite the door.

Joyce wiped her eyes with her hands. She stared at the most handsome youth she saw and the beautiful girl beside him.

Chapter Fourteen

The youth whose furious voice caused Joyce's bullies to disband spoke. "Gawayne Gascoyne, at your service, Miss Tremayne." He glowered at her cousins, his large jade green eyes expressing anger and contempt. A wave of his hand indicated the pretty girl who stood beside him. "Miss Tremayne, my sister, Morwenna, and I are your grandfather's wards."

Joyce remembered the tales about King Arthur and the knights of the round table Papa held her spellbound with when entertained her with them. She gazed at her saviour. *Gawayne is the name of King Arthur's brave, loyal, knight. I don't know if he saved a maiden in distress, but Gascoyne rescued me. Sylvester and Vivian are handsome, but he is -?* She struggled to find the right word to describe his gold curls, long eyelashes any lady would envy, and high cheekbones set in an oval face. *He is tall and looks strong. The only word to describe him is gorgeous.*

Morwenna, looked fondly at him. "My brother is too modest to introduce himself as Baron Gascoyne."

"My title is unimportant." Gawayne glared at her cousins. "You disgust me!"

"We were only teasing her. It was a game," James, one of the boys, muttered.

"Your father is a gallant major, stationed in winter quarters in Portugal, waiting for battle against the French to recommence in the spring. He risks his life to serve our king and country. He deserves a better son than a miserable little worm whose feeble excuse for cruelty is he teased his cousin."

"I...I am sorry. I did not—" James broke off, his cheeks bright red.

"Think," Gawayne supplied. "None of you thought. Do you suppose an apology excuses your shameful behaviour? You are snakes jealous of the attention Miss Tremayne's grandparents give her."

Except for her mother's cruel treatment, always surrounded by love, she could not understand why the boys were so nasty. Heartbroken, she pointed at James. "You killed Amelie-Rose."

"Who? Where is she?" Gawayne looked around.

"There." Joyce pointed at Amelie-Rose, which she treasured because Vivian gave her. His forehead creased. "Oh, a doll."

"I am sorry, Joyce," Morwenna said and clasped her hand. "Gawayne, obviously, it was very important to Miss Tremayne."

At home, Joyce studied the Bible with her governess. Words from it flitted through her mind. *When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.*

I am a female child, not a man, but I never thought of Amelie-Rose as a childish thing to be put aside. Joyce closed her eyes.

"Miss Tremayne, I shall tell your grandfather and my friend, Sylvester, how shamefully you have been treated. In future, I shall do my utmost to shield you from harm," Gawayne said in a well-modulated voice.

Long ago, knights carried shields! Her cheeks warmed in response to Gawayne who, as the saying went, she would think of as her knight in shining armour.

His upper lip curled. He glared at her cousins. They shuffled. Each one apologised to her.

Still outraged, she inclined her head toward them. "I accept your apologies, but I will always remember how cruel you are." She touched the small, white scar on her cheek. Some things are unforgettable. *Mama's slap is one of them.* She pressed her lips together, wishing she could seek consolation from her dear Punj Ayah.

Baxter entered the winter parlour. "Your room's tidy, Miss, I hope you have enjoyed your time with your cousins.

"She has not. They bullied her," Gawayne said.

Oh, no! I should not have sent you go the winter parlour alone. She pointed at Amelie Rose's remains. "What happened to your pretty doll? An accident? Don't be upset. Though you're too old to play with dolls, you can ask for another one. Her ladyship sent me to tell you to come to her boudoir. The dressmaker's there.

Shocked by her maid's insensibility, her back rigid, Joyce's mouth quivered.

“And the countess is waiting for you, Miss Gascoyne,” Baxter added and led the way.

“May I call you Joyce?” Morwenna asked.

She nodded, looking at the young girl’s pretty face and fair hair the same colour as Gawayne’s.

“And you may call me Morwenna. I hope we will already be friends when we go to the seminary in Bath in the spring.”

Oh, she would only have a governess for a few months. Joyce shivered not only because of a draught whistling up a flight of steep stone stairs. Without Amelie-Rose, who could she confide in? Baxter’s words, ‘too old to play with dolls,’ rang in her mind. “How old are you, Morwenna?”

“Ten and my brother is nearly fifteen.”

“Do you have a doll?”

“Yes, but since I was eight years old, she has been on a shelf in the old night nursery.”

No longer Papa’s pampered little daughter at home, Joyce knew she must accept changes in her life, which included Amelie-Rose’s destruction.

Escorted by Baxter, she went with Morwenna to the exquisite Wedgewood blue and white boudoir where Grandmama waited with the French modiste, Adele, and Mrs de Lancy.

Her grandmother greeted them with a smile. They curtsied and submitted to being measured.

Adele tutted as she considered Joyce’s gown. “*Mon Dieu*, the good lord knows you need my services. Fear not, you will soon be as elegant as Miss Gascoyne.”

Joyce suppressed a sigh. Her clothes would be stylish, but there would not be a miracle to transform her into a beauty with golden hair and a flawless complexion like Morwenna’s.

* * *

“Devils. What possessed them to persecute my shy little sister?” Sylvester asked Gascoyne, who described the boys’ taunts to him.

“Jealousy. Lord and Lady Tremayne are delighted to have a granddaughter who they give far more attention than to them,” Gascoyne said.

“Whatever the reason, they will suffer the consequences. Come with me. I shall thrash them and report them to my grandfather.”

* * *

Alone in her bedchamber, Joyce wanted to throw herself onto her bed and sob, but she refused to be a scared rabbit bolting into a burrow. Consumed by rage, she marched across the floor. Fury replaced the tears that threatened when the beastly boys chanted the rhyme and circled around her. Her fists clenched, her nails bit into the palms of her hands. She plonked down on the chair at her *escritoire*. She pulled the letter she began writing to Papa toward her, nibbled her lower lip, picked up the quill and dipped it in the inkpot. The words streamed from her. If her father were here, he would punish his nephews. Oh, she wanted her cousins to suffer as much as they made her. And she wanted James, who snatched Amelie-Rose from her and flung her across the winter parlour so hard her face smashed, to be severely punished. The words *vengeance is mine sayeth the Lord* invaded her mind. Instead of waiting for Him to take it, she wanted Him to act now.

Joyce closed her eyes and visualised Govinda Sadhu’s serene face., when he explained karma decreed for every action, good or bad, there was a reaction. Her hands relaxed. *Well, if there is karma, those boys will receive severe ones*, she thought with enormous satisfaction.

* * *

Marianne opened the door of the bedchamber she shared with Joyce.

“Sylvester told me what happened. My dear child I am very sorry.”

“I am a young lady, not a child, Mrs de Lancy,” Joyce said without a trace of warmth in her voice.” She put her quill down and swivelled around on her chair.

Whatever Joyce claimed, she was a child. Prepared to comfort her she entered the bedchamber, expecting to find distraught. Nothing could have primed her for ice-cold blue eyes staring at her dispassionately.

“Sweetheart, Sylvester will tell your grandfather how you were treated. Your cousins will be punished.”

Joyce shrugged as if it was of no consequence. Again, she swivelled around on her chair, this time toward the desk. “I shall finish writing my letter to Papa.”

“I hope you are not going to tell him your cousins were unkind to you.”

“Why?”

“It would distress him.”

Joyce squared her shoulders. “I know it will, but I shall never keep any secrets from Papa.”

Marianne sank down onto a chair. “If you were my daughter, I could not love you more and-”

“And I love you, Mrs de Lancy, but I never want to talk to anyone about what happened today.”

Had there been the hint of a quaver in Joyce’s voice? “It will soon be time for nuncheon. Would you like to eat here or in the Great Hall, which is the only place large enough for so many people to gather?”

“In the Great Hall.”

Marianne admired Joyce’s courage. It would be easier for her to hide from her cousins.

Joyce picked up her quill. Marianne accepted the silent dismissal, opened the door and looked thoughtfully at Joyce’s back. *She is a child I don’t recognise because, suddenly, she seems older than her age.* Saddened by the change in Joyce, Marianne walked along the corridor. At the end, she dithered. On her way to the Great Hall, by mistake she went down the wrong flight of stairs, At the bottom were two corridors. Confused, Marianne descended. Cold and exhausted, she wandered through the maze of more corridors and closed doors. Screams from behind one guarded by two tall footmen surprised her.

Astonished because anyone chose to live in such a labyrinth, and judging by the noise, she hoped Joyce’s graceless cousins were not tormenting another victim. “Open the door,” she ordered the footmen.

They stood still.

“Immediately,” she added.

“Madam,” one of them began to protest, but when Marianne insisted, he opened the door.

Sylvester, a riding crop held in his hand and another young gentleman came out of the chamber.

“Mrs de Lancy, what are you doing here?” A click of Sylvester’s fingers dismissed the footmen.

Flustered, she peeped around him into the chamber and stared at a group of boys cowering against the wall opposite the door. “I was trying to find my way to the Great Hall when I heard screams.”

“Made by Joyce’s cousins, who jeered at her.” Sylvester shut the door.

“How?” Marianne eyed the riding crop.

“They circled around my sister and chanted a cruel song they composed.” Sylvester tugged his earlobe as he once did when confronted with any childish misdemeanour. “To ensure they would never mistreat her again, I wanted to thrash them.”

His companion bowed. “Permit me to introduce myself. Gascoyne, Earl Tremayne’s ward, at your service, Madam. May I ask who you are?”

“Mrs de Lancy and her son lived in my father’s house in Madras. She travelled with my sister to England,” Sylvester explained.

Gawayne inclined his head. “I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Madam. You are cold and shocked. Please allow us to show you the way to the Great Hall.”

“Not yet,” Marianne said, glad of her warm, finely woven wool gown. “Sylvester, you should have told your grandfather what happened and trusted him to punish your cousins,” she said in her sternest voice.

“On the day Joyce was born, I promised to protect her. I could not have prevented what happened. When I found out, I decided to thrash our cousins.” He gulped. “However, I remembered Papa abhors violence.” He flung the crop onto the floor. “I confronted those ignorant boys and intimidated them with threats of what I would do if, in future, they ever mistreat Joyce. I shall report them to Grandfather and trust him to deal out what they deserve.”

“I shall bear witness to what happened. It is nearly time to have nuncheon. Beforehand we may to inform Lord Tremayne.” Gawayne held out his arm. “Madam, please allow me to assist you. The floors in this part of the ancient castle are treacherous.”

Marianne put her hand on his arm, appreciative of the exceptionally handsome young man’s courtesy.

“Mrs de Lancy,” Sylvester began. “If my grandfather will allow Joyce to visit my property with my friend, Baron Gascoyne and his sister, would you chaperon Joyce and

Miss Gascoyne from tomorrow to the twenty-third of December? Apart from her dreadful experience, Joyce is shy and feels lost in the crowd of people gathered here.”

* * *

Joyce entered the noisy Great Hall with Mrs de Lancy. She glanced at her grandparents seated at the large table at the top of two long ones at right angles to it. She glanced fleetingly at her cousins’ allotted places at one. They were not there. She heaved a relieved sigh. In future, she would always be with a maid or a chaperone to prevent them having an opportunity to bully her.

“Mrs de Lancy, there is an empty chair between Sylvester and Gawayne, and another next to Sylvester. Shall we sit there with you on his right?”

“Yes, Joyce.” Marianne agreed.

Seated between her brother and Gawayne, Joyce ate cheese instead of meat, pickles, and buttered rolls.

“Joyce, grandfather is furious with our cousins. He chastised them and gave orders for them to be confined in the schoolroom and their bedrooms until Christmas Day.”

Relief flooded through her.

“Sylvester understands you are not at ease here,” Marianne said. “He has persuaded your grandparents to allow you to visit his estate with Baron Gascoyne and his sister. I shall chaperon you and Miss Gascoyne. It is for you to decide whether we leave tomorrow, return here on the twenty-third to celebrate Christmas, or stay here.”

“You will like my peaceful house,” Sylvester assured her. “When I am at Oxford University, it will be managed by my bailiff and steward, appointed by our grandfather.”

She yearned for her tranquil home in India. The chatter, hustle and bustle in Madras never intimidated her. Here she felt she was a proverbial fish out of water.

Delighted because she could escape from Castle Tresellion, her nervousness evaporated like early morning mist.

“You will admire my horses,” Sylvester added.

“I look forward to seeing them.” She smiled at him. If she still thought of herself as a mere child, she would have hugged him. “Will we ride together every day?”

“Yes. I have a small, dappled mare with enough spirit to please you, and a grey I think Mrs de Lancy will like.”

“I am looking forward to visiting your stables again,” said Gawayne. “Some of your thoroughbred horses are certain to win races.”

Convinced Gawayne be her knight and with Sylvester shield her from her cousins when they returned to the castle, happiness welled up inside Joyce.

From the minute they arrived at Sylvester’s manor house, built a hundred years ago in Queen Anne Stuart’s reign, Joyce enjoyed herself.

On rainy days, they decorated the house with holly and ivy, played chess and other games, asked each other riddles, read, and occupied themselves with other pursuits. When the weather permitted, they rode.

“No muggers here,” Joyce commented when their horses trotted along the banks of a river in full spate rushing between green fields edged with drystone walls.

“Muggers?” Gawayne asked.

“Crocodiles lurking in wait for their prey,” she explained.

Morwenna shuddered. “What a horrible country.”

“No, it is beautiful. I hope you and your brother will visit it,” Joyce said softly.

Wind stirred the bare branches of trees on the estate’s borders. The sky darkened. “It will rain. Time to return to the stables,” Sylvester said.

Joyce looked up at the ominous blue-black clouds gathered overhead. At home, wind and dark sky predicted the first drops of plump raindrops heralding the monsoon, which brought new life to parched land. At home, she always put her tongue out to catch a rain drop.

After they dined, Gawayne sat beside her on the sofa opposite the hearth in the cosy parlour warmed by a fire in the grate. She looked up from the small sketch pad on her lap and put down her pencil.

“Miss Tremayne, please describe your life in India,” he said.

“It would be a very long tale about my home.”

“You and Sylvester are English. Are you not at home here as your brother is?”

“My brother is, I am not. I am counting the end of days, weeks, months and years when I may return to Madras. What can I say about India?” She described the landscape where Papa’s house was on his estate and the glorious sunrises and sunsets. “There is so

much more I love. The tasty food, the people, including Bates our English butler, my ayah and other servants I am fond of, their religions and ancient tales. It is impossible for me to tell you about everything. There are splendid palaces and mud dwellings thatched with palm fronds. The streets where cows and bulls Hindus consider sacred wander wherever they please.”

“Sacred!” Gawayne exclaimed. “Why?”

“The cow is a mother because she gives milk, and the bull is the father.”

“Is that why you don’t eat veal or beef?”

Butterflies seemed to flutter in her stomach. “You noticed,” she said, to hide her confusion at his observation but pleased by it.

“Why doesn’t Sylvester want to return to Madras?”

She looked across the parlour at her brother playing a game of cards with Morwenna, while Mrs de Lancy read. “You must ask him. My dear friend, Vivian, loves the country. He wants to live there for the rest of his life.”

Frost seemed cover Gawayne’s jade-green eyes. “Who is he?”

“Mrs de Lancy’s son. She and Vivian live in Papa’s house. While she is in England, Vivian is managing her emporium, the largest one in Madras.” She touched the silver heart suspended from the chain around her neck. “He gave me this, silver earrings and a brooch to match them.”

Gawayne’s eyes narrowed. “How old is he?”

“Nineteen. Why?”

“Idle curiosity, Miss Tremayne.” His smile transformed his face. “Your description of your home fascinated me

The clock struck ten. Mrs de Lancy closed her book. “It t is time to retire.”

Morwenna followed the others on their way out of the parlour, Gawayne grasped her elbow to detain her. “Never forget your marriage settlement is secure, but our father was a gambler and my inheritance is negligible. To increase my income, I must marry an heiress,” he whispered. “Always remember Joyce Tremayne is a nabob’s daughter. Cultivate her friendship.”

On the twenty-first of December, St Thomas's Day, according to custom, poor people gathered outside Sylvester's house to collect alms. Joyce helped Sylvester to distribute, food, money clothes and shoes.

Lord Jesus Christ said, *the poor you will always have with you*. From her own experience she knew they were in England and India.

Chapter Fifteen

23rd December 1808

Joyce stood by the wall with Gawayne and Morwenna in the Great Hall. She admired evergreen garlands with bright splashes of holly berries and wreaths of ivy, rosemary, bay, and laurel decorated with red and gold ribbons and fruit.

She craned her neck and pointed at balls of green leaves with clusters of white berries suspended low from the high ceiling. “Look at those, Morwenna? Why are they there?”

Her friend giggled and blushed. “It is—” she began.

“They are mistletoe kissing balls. It is customary to kiss a female standing beneath one and pluck a berry from it. When the last one has been plucked, the kissing ends,” Gawayne explained.

“Oh!” Joyce gasped when Gawayne stooped to kiss her cheek.

“Enough tomfoolery,” chided Marianne, who stood near them.

Gawayne put his hand over his heart. “Madam, I intended no harm when I saluted Miss Tremayne.”

Of course not. Gawayne is my friend. He would never mistreat me.

Mrs de Lancy chatted with a friend.

Joyce pointed at a tall fir tree with bundles of sweetmeats, fruit and toys tied onto the branches. “Why is it here?” Without waiting for an answer, her arm linked with Morwenna’s, followed by Baxter, she edged her way through the horde of fashionable people to examine it.

“After Queen Charlotte invited the children on the Windsor estate to a party at the castle where they received gifts from a Christmas tree, the custom began,” Morwenna explained. “We are waiting for the children on Tresellion estate to gather here at three o’clock.”

A lady tried to squeeze past them. She tripped. Red wine spilled from her glass onto Morwenna's gown.

"Oh, no! My new white muslin is ruined."

"I am sorry, Miss Tremayne," the lady apologised.

"No need to do so, it was an accident." Morwenna looked at Joyce. "Please wait for me here while change my gown," Morwenna said. "

Where is Mrs de Lancy? I shall miss her when she completes her business – whatever it is – and returns to Madras. Uncomfortable among so many people, Joyce concealed herself behind the tree in front of a wall and overheard Aunt Beecham.

"My youngest son, James, and his cousins should not have be banished because of a prank played on my wretched niece by marriage. From the moment I first set eyes on Joyce, I knew nothing good could come from a girl with a bold spirit concealed by a quiet manner."

"You have my sympathy," an unctuous male voice said, "but, my dear sister-in-law, we must be charitable and not forget our Christian duty toward her. And we must not condemn her. If Benjamin sent our niece home from the heathen land when she was four or five years old, she would have been schooled."

Joyce peered through a gap in the branches at the profile of Uncle Paul, a vicar, whose black clothes, white shirt, and neckcloth were in stark contrast to the other gentlemen's.

"My friend, Joyce's mother, who lives near here with her parents, remembers her speaks fondly about her daughter. Joyce is the unjust reason for separation from Benjamin, nevertheless she longs to be reunited with her only child."

"Commendable," Uncle Paul murmured.

Fond of me? Papa forbade her to speak or write to me, but if she is sorry for ill-treating me, he might allow her to? Does she want to make amends? Do my other grandparents, the Denzils, want to meet me? In the depths of her being was the small girl who longed for a mother who cherished her. Nevertheless, she trusted Papa, who must have a good reason for his decision. She would ignore any overtures from Mama which might threaten her and be grateful for Mrs de Lancy's motherly love.

"Come, with me, Lady Beecham," Uncle Paul said. "I shall not abandon you while I tend to children, who are members of my flock, when they come to receive generous largesse."

Joyce pressed her lips together. She would be obliged to attend church and hear his sermons, but she would never accept him as her shepherd.

She noticed Gawayne talking to a group of superbly dressed young men and saw Mrs de Lancy still engaged in conversation with a lady. Relieved by the sight of her, Joyce emerged from her hiding place when Morwenna entered the Great Hall wearing a clean gown. Joyce would have joined her if the company had not quietened and parted, forming an aisle. On her way down to the tree, the countess, magnificent in rose-pink silk and pearl jewellery reached her.

“Joyce, would you like to help me distribute gifts to the children,” her grandmother asked.”

“Yes, please, Grandmamma.”

The massive door with iron straps, relics from the past, opened. Footmen guided a line of excited children to the tree while they talked or whispered to each other.

“Silence, little ones! You are gathered here together to—” Uncle Paul began.

“To receive presents, not to hear a sermon,” Grandmama interrupted too quietly for most people to hear. “No one knows better than I do, although you don’t have a true vocation, you enjoy the sound of your own voice and patronising those inferior to you by birth.”

Although Joyce did not understand her grandmother’s precise meaning, she stifled her giggle.

“Mother, you cannot deny I do my duty,” her uncle protested.

“Without Christian charity,” Grandmama said. “I cannot reach the top of the tree to remove the children’s treats. Stay here to help me.”

“Perhaps a footman,” Uncle Paul murmured.

“To allow you to neglect charity of which your biblical namesake spoke humbly in the Bible.” Grandmama smiled at the small girl at the head of the file. She plucked a tiny doll and a gilded gingerbread from a branch and gave them to the delighted child. “Merry Christmas, Sarah.”

“Thank you, my lady.” The child dressed in faded but clean clothes bobbed a curtsy.

Joyce passed presents from the lower branches of the tree to her grandmother, who gave them to the boys and girls whose names Grandmama knew and sometimes questioned them about their families.

A timid five or six-year-old girl with untidy hair clutched an older boy's hand and gazed down at the floor.

"Your sister is still very shy, Jack," Grandmama said. "Bessie, look at the tree. What would you like me to give you?"

Jack prodded the little girl dressed in clean clothes as ragged as his. "Don't be afeared. Do as me lady says."

"Something to eat," Bessie whispered.

"Say please. Don't forget what Ma taught us before she died," her brother said.

"Please," Bessie muttered as she looked up.

"Oh, no!" Joyce breathed, staring at the purple bruise on one side of Bessie's face. "Poor little girl!" she exclaimed, remembering her shock when Mama slapped her, and the ring cut her cheek.

"Jack, despite his lordship's previous warning, did your father hit your Bessie again?" Grandmama asked softly.

The boy squirmed. His cheeks reddened. "Yes, but he told me not to tell anyone," he replied in a low voice. Grandmama handed Bessie and Jack gifts, which included gingerbread, fruit and preserved sugar plums. "Baxter, take these children to my parlour. Send to the kitchen for food to feed them and wait for me to join you."

Grandmama smiled at each child and spoke kind words to every child who left holding gifts.

"Come with me to my parlour, Joyce."

On their way to the door, her grandmother stopped to speak to members of their family and her friends.

Joyce followed Grandmama out of the Great Hall and up a flight of stone stairs. In the passage at the top, she gestured to a bench opposite a fresco of the Adoration of the Magi offering their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the babe lying in a manger.

"Joyce, many people who own great estates depend on their stewards and bailiffs to manage them, but your grandfather and I know every man, woman and child on our land. We believe it is our Christian duty to oversee their welfare. When you marry, I shall expect you to follow our example."

"If I marry," Joyce murmured.

Grandmama frowned. "If? Of course you will."

“Why would any gentleman want me to be his wife? Morwenna is beautiful. Many gentlemen will want to be her husband but—”

“What?” her grandmother asked softly.

“Aunt Beecham said I am scrawny, and I know I my face is as plain as...as a boiled pudding.”

“Joyce, a kind heart like yours is more important than beauty.” She chuckled. “During my childhood, I was plumper than a boiled pudding and as pasty as one. When I made my curtsy to polite society my appearance had improved, and I am sure yours will. Besides, my marriage settlement ensured my father received many requests for my hand in marriage. I am lucky because he consulted me and waited for me to meet my husband to be, your dear grandfather.” She laughed. “Another father might have agreed to his daughter marrying an impoverished marquess who needed her fortune, but mine would never have agreed to my marrying to gain a title.

“Sweet girl, you are a nabob’s daughter, which is why many gentlemen will want to marry you. I hope you will never be a charming, handsome wolf’s prey. A predator who woos you because of it.” She stood. “No more about that subject. I must rescue Bessie and Jack. Since their mother died last year, their father—” she cleared her throat. “You saw Bessie’s bruise, so there is no need to tell you how he treats his children. I shall send a footman to summon Mrs Grant. She is a good-humoured childless widow whose prayers to have children were not granted. I am sure she will agree to look after them from now on. I shall pay her for their maintenance, and their father will be sent away from our estate and forbidden to return. Jack and Bessie will have a happy Christmas. So will we. There will be sumptuous meals, singing, games to enjoy, and dancing.”

In the evening, prepared for bed, Joyce sat at the table in her bedchamber. To always remember what Grandmama said about duty and marriage, she recorded it in her journal. Next, in her letter to Papa, from whom she never kept any secrets, she told him what Aunt Beecham said about Mama.

Joyce shrugged, yawned and got into bed, unable to imagine her future. when she returned home when she hoped Papa would be proud of her. She must live in England and go to the seminary later in the year, so she would try to enjoy the Christmas festivities. In bed, she wished that after dear Mrs de Lancy dealt with her private business, she would

not return to India. Beforehand, she must give Mrs de Lancy letters and gifts from her to Papa and Vivian. What would they like? Joyce tried to decide as she drifted off to sleep.

* * *

On Christmas Eve Joyce stood between Gawayne and Morwenna in the Great Hall gazing at a tall candle with a flame like a beacon.“

Listen,” Gawayne said.

“To what?” Joyce asked.

“The hurrahs? They mean the Yule Log is about to be dragged here,” he explained. “People gather to see it ignited from the candle flame.

The door opened, everyone close to the fireplace stepped back. They watched eight burly men drag the twelve-foot-long log with a six-foot girth to the hearth. Their faces sweating, they rolled it into the fireplace, next to which Grandpapa stood, and sang a song in Cornish. After it ended, her grandfather gestured to a footman to hand each man a drawstring purse. They clutched their rewards, tugged their forelocks and trooped outside.

“Gawayne, what did the words mean?” Joyce asked.

“I don’t know. Few members of our class speak the language unlike your grandparents, who are Cornish to the core of their beings, I only understand a few words, but I was told the song expresses the hope the log will burn for as long as possible, spreading good cheer and warmth.”

A footman held out a silver salver of glasses filled with golden wine. Morwenna put her long, white fingers around one of the crystal stems.

“No, you are too young to drink wine.” Gawayne laughed at her and took the glass. “Don’t pout. I have complete confidence in Miss Tremayne. I am certain she knows better than to drink wine at her age.” He glanced at the footman. “Fetch barley water or another suitable drink for the young ladies.”

Joyce’s eyelashes fluttered. She envied Morwenna. If only she had a brother as delightful as Gawayne, who would never call her monkey face. A frisson ran down her spine. Although he could not be her brother, he could be what? At best either her bold knight in shining armour like those in times of old, whom Papa told her stories about, or her friend. Her cheeks hot, she gazed at him. In the evening, she mentioned him in her

letter to her father and added she was pleased because his sister, Morwenna, would attend the seminary with her. But she confided although she looked forward to games such as apple bobbing, blind man's bluff and hide and seek, she would prefer to be with him.

Chapter Sixteen

25th December 1815

Sixteen-year-old Joyce sat, back straight, feet side by side, her hands on her lap, in the box pew at church with her grandparents and senior members of her father's family. While she wished she were already on her voyage to Madras aboard Sea Sprite, the words in Uncle Paul's sermon penetrated her thoughts. "And God, our Father in Heaven, so loved the world He sent His only begotten son." She remembered Govinda Sadhu's explanation according to their actions, every man, woman, and child would be reincarnated flashed through her mind. Without pause for consideration, she spoke. "If God our Father loves us, I don't believe He condemns sinners to eternal hell."

Titters, sniggers, whispers and suppressed laughter filled the church. Mortified by her rash thoughtlessness, she glanced out of the corner of her eyes at her grandparents. Grandfather cleared his throat and leaned forward to look sternly at her.

"It is not for you, Niece, to question God's will," Uncle Paul declaimed, his cheeks purple as ripe plums. His loud voice echoed around the cold, ancient building.

Joyce gazed at the cream stone walls, floor and up at the arched ceiling. Unable to adore the large, lifelike image of Christ, naked but for a loincloth and crown of thorns on a large wooden cross, she shuddered. Apart from bright-as-jewels stained glass images in the windows, she considered the church a joyless place. Guilty because she should be celebrating Jesus's birth in Bethlehem, she stood when the organist played the opening bars of *The First Noel*.

After the service, she left the church shivering despite her fur-lined pelisse, beaver hat, and muff. Beneath a sullen grey sky, evergreen trees and red berries on holly bushes were the only bright colour. Never would she be at ease away from the land of her birth. She closed her eyes. If only she could sail to Madras with Gawayne, who she was certain would ask her father for permission to marry her, without waiting for her to be presented

to the queen. Deep in a happy daydream about her future with the gentleman she loved, a voice jerked her out of it.

Surprised, she looked at her cousin James. After his father's death at the Battle of Waterloo, he inherited the title Viscount Pascoe and became their grandfather's heir. Although she would never forget, he was one of seven cousins who, as they circled around her chanting their rhyme that began, 'Ugly Little Beast,' courtesy compelled her to murmur, "Pascoe." She stared ahead and walked faster, hoping he would not follow her. Unfortunately, he quickened his pace to keep up with her.

"No need for formality. You may address me as Cousin James."

"There is no reason for you to speak to me. I remember the cruel chant."

"Which is why I seized this opportunity to speak in private to you."

"Private?" she scoffed. "Are you blind? We are part of a large congregation which has left the church. Ahead of us are our grandparents, your mother, my brother, Sylvester and his wife. Not far behind us are Gawayne and Morwenna and too many others for me to mention."

"Ignore them. Cousin Joyce, they are too engaged in conversation to pay attention to us."

She withdrew a hand from her muff and waved it toward his mother, who looked back over her shoulder and frowned at her while she spoke to Uncle Paul.

"Ah," James said, looking at them. "Cousin Joyce, I appreciate the question you asked in church, which dumbfounded our sanctimonious uncle." He tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. "No one could be less suited than him to be a clergyman."

Joyce chuckled in response to his opinion of Uncle Paul, which she agreed with. She scrutinized him. No longer an awkward boy four years her senior, James had developed into a tall, broad-shouldered, handsome young man with vivid blue eyes the same colour as her own, which many of her family inherited.

James patted her arm with his free hand. "Good, Ice-maiden, you are amused. I feared you would turn into a hedgehog and pierce me with your prickles. Oh, I beg you not to scowl. Years ago, not only did Grandfather punish me and some of our other cousins for taunting you. He also wrote to my father about my part in it. I have never forgotten Papa's letter. He threatened to disown me if, in future, I ever mistreated a female.

“We have been at school. When I left mine, I studied at Oxford University, and we only saw each other during our brief vacations. This is the first opportunity to offer you my sincere apologies.”

She tensed. “Why were all of you so cruel?”

Jame’s cheeks reddened. “We were jealous.”

Expressionless, she gazed into his eyes. He did not flinch. “Why?”

“Our grandparents, who only had sons and grandsons, gave you more attention than we ever had. They cherished and cossetted you from the day you arrived at the castle.” He coughed to clear his throat. “And you our uncle the nabob’s spoiled heiress, were too proud to say a word or even glance at us.”

“Only because I was too shy.”

They followed those in front of them into the castle. She could forgive James, but she would never forget. “I... don’t know how to explain how much the rhyme hurt me, and now there is no time to.”

“There will be time for us to sit next to each other and enjoy a sumptuous meal.”

She hesitated. Usually, she sat with Gawayne and Morwenna in the Great Hall.

“Please spare me from sitting next to the insipid young heiress. I have no interest in who Mama wants me to marry,” her cousin said.

She laughed and agreed.

James bowed. “Thank you, pretty cousin.”

Pretty! Was he mocking her? “Am I not still an ugly–?”

His forefinger across her mouth silenced her. “You were plain but never ugly and now your mirror will confirm you are good-looking.”

* * *

Joyce smiled on her way to her bedchamber where her maid helped her to take off her warm pelisse, muff, gloves, and hat. While Baxter put them away, Joyce stood in front of the tall, gilt-framed pier glass. Instead of briefly glancing at her reflection to ensure she was tidy, Joyce scrutinized it. She did not have a fairy godmother to wave a magic wand and transform her into a beauty like Morwenna, whose figure, porcelain white skin and golden hair were those of an accredited belle. Fortunately, her own complexion was no longer sallow, and her hair was thick. Joyce never forgot her aunt saying she was a

‘scrawny little thing.’ She doubted the petite young lady looking at her from the mirror would grow taller, but she had nothing in common with her aunt’s cruel comment. When James said she was pretty, she tried to believe it. Faced by her image adorned with her silver pendant, earrings and brooch, dressed in a new ivory silk gown, a holly-berry red sash around the high waist, she smiled. Doubts about her appearance still lingered. Would Gawayne admire her?

“Shall I tidy your hair, Miss?” Baxter asked.

“Yes, please,” she said, glad because its colour had darkened from light brown and now curled at the ends.

“May I say you will be one of the best-looking ladies at the Christmas dinner? I’m proud to be your maid,” Baxter said.

In response to the compliment, Joyce took a deep breath and looked affectionately at the good-natured young woman. “Thank-you. Enjoy your meal in the servant’s hall this evening,”

“Thank you, Miss.” Baxter’s brown eyes glowed. “After we eat there will be dancing.”

Joyce stepped toward the door Baxter hastened to open for her. She remembered Papa explained honest, loyal servants deserved rewards. Tomorrow, she thought, as she entered the Great Hall, grateful for the warmth from the yule log after the chill elsewhere, she would add money to Baxter’s Christmas box contained a new gown and petticoat.

“Miss Tremayne, my compliments on your charming appearance,” Gawayne greeted her. “May I say I have never seen you look better?” His right hand over his heart, he bowed, straightened and indicated a trestle table spread with linen cloths, set with porcelain, crystal glasses, monogrammed silver cutlery, and ornamented with bowls of greenery with tall, fragrant beeswax candles. “Merry Christmas, Miss Tremayne. Will you sit between me and Morwenna?”

James joined them. “I shall have the honour of my cousin’s company at the earl and countess’s table,” he intervened.

Joyce frowned. Why did her cousin and friend, dressed in perfectly tailored coats and pantaloons, which emphasized their lithe figures, striped waistcoats and immaculate white linen, look coldly at each other? She regretted agreeing to sit next to James, who held out his arm. She put her hand encased in an elbow-length white glove on it and hoped Gawayne understood she would prefer to sit next to him.

“Come, Cousin Joyce,” James said.

They walked along the length of the Great Hall to the table beneath the oriel window, where Joyce kissed her grandparents’ wrinkled cheeks. “Merry Christmas, Grandmama and Grandpapa,” she said, nervous because they might reprimand her for expressing her thoughts aloud in church.

“You are a disrespectful minx, but you may sit at my table,” Grandpapa said.

“Joyce, my prayer for you to be a perfect young lady when you left the seminary has not been answered.” Grandmama sounded amused. Her eyes twinkled. “Merry Christmas, my love. James, be seated next to me. Joyce, sit beside him.”

Grandfather stood. Light from the chandelier high-lighted his frost-white hair and emphasised the wrinkles on his face. Grandpapa, who never spoke a cross word to her and treated her with utmost kindness would celebrate his seventy-sixth birthday in March. Sometimes he was short of breath. For how long would he live? Fear tugged at her.

Uncle Paul finished saying grace, asking the Lord to bless the food they ate. “Amen,” everyone chorused. Her grandfather raised his glass. “I wish you all a merry Christmas and everything Lady Luck grants in the new year.”

Family and friends stood, raised their glasses of punch, and repeated the toast. Joyce peeped sideways at James, heir to the earldom. Since his father’s death, he lived with Grandpapa at the castle to help and learn how to manage his future inheritance.

“Be seated,” Grandpapa said. He nodded at his butler. “Let the feast begin.”

“Cousin Joyce, I assume now you have entered the cream of Cornish society, you are looking forward to your debut in London and your presentation at court,” James said.

“It will please my father and our grandparents,” she replied listlessly.

“Not you?” he asked, his tone harsh.

She shrugged while a footman ladled dried pea soup into their bowls.

“Does the prospect intimidate you?” James enquired. “No need for it to. You will be welcomed by the ton. Unlike beautiful Morwenna, who will also make her curtsy in the Queen’s drawing room when you do, you will be sought after by many gentlemen who will ask Grandpapa for permission to propose marriage to you,” James reassured her.

“Will Morwenna be cold-shouldered?” she asked, alarmed by the idea.

“No. She is well-born, but her marriage settlement will be adequate but modest, and she has little more than beauty and good manners to recommend her.” He chuckled. “Unlike you, she will be spared the attentions of fortune hunters, parents who want their sons to be financially secure, and gentlemen who want to add your inheritance to their wealth.” James patted her arm. “Don’t worry, Grandpapa will, as the saying goes, sort out the chaff from the wheat. You will enjoy your ball at Tresellion House in London, other debutantes’ balls, concerts, routs, theatres, alfresco breakfasts, taking the air in a carriage or riding in Hyde Park and many more entertainments.”

“With Gawayne and Morwenna.”

“Gascoyne!” James corrected her, his tone sharp as a sliver of broken glass.

“Yes, I should address him thus, but I call him Gawayne because he and his sister have been my friends since I first came to England,” she said quickly, aware of her faux pas.

A footman removed their gold-rimmed, hand-painted porcelain soup plates from the top of their matching dinner plates.

“We are in public now, so a different etiquette applies. You may call me Cousin James in private but Pascoe elsewhere.” He gestured toward the gentleman on her left. “Sir Alistair is waiting to speak to you. His charm could lure wild birds into his hand but be warned, he is a charming, confirmed bachelor. Don’t lose your heart to him.”

Joyce remembered at the table, she was expected to divide her time between the gentlemen seated on either side. She swallowed, imagining protocol was designed to trap the unwary.

Her cousin leant forward to look across her at the gentleman. “Miss Tremayne, allow me to introduce you to Sir Alistair, Baronet Radcliffe.”

Why was Sir Alastair seated at her grandparents’ table when many other noblemen of higher rank were not invited to sit?

“Sir Alistair, I am pleased to introduce my cousin, Miss Tremayne.”

“I am pleased to make your acquaintance,” she said to the baronet. Joyce admired his regular features, large green eyes and glossy chestnut brown hair. She judged, he was taller than average, slim, and well-proportioned. *An extremely handsome gentleman despite a narrow scar stretching in a white line from the outer edge of his left eyebrow to his square jaw,* she thought.

Joyce wished Morwenna, who was better than her at making polite conversation, sat next to him.

“Sir Alastair, may I introduce you to my cousin, Miss Tremayne?”

“Thank you, Pascoe. I am delighted to meet you, Miss Tremayne.” Alastair traced his scar with a forefinger. “A souvenir from the battle at Waterloo, which I am told repulses all the debutantes.”

“Not all,” she responded quickly.” Embarrassed, Joyce realised she should not have stared at it. “When I noticed it, I was sorry because you were injured. I am grateful because you are one of the gallant men who saved us from the Corsican monster.”

He scrutinized her face. “Thank you for your kind words, Miss Tremayne. You have a compassionate heart.

Footmen replaced monogrammed silver soup tureens with the first remove, crab, crayfish, lobsters, and mackerel in rich sauces, and prawns in crisp batter.

“What may I serve you with, Miss Tremayne?” Alistair asked.

“A small portion of lobster,” she said.

“An excellent choice. I am told there are no finer ones than those caught in Cornwall,” he remarked. “If I am not mistaken, you lived in India for almost ten years. Did you eat them there?”

“I don’t think there are any.” Her mouth quivered. She wished she were at her father’s table where dear Bates would supervise the servants. At home, she knew all their names, was fussed over by their wives, and played with their children. Here, she would be rebuked if she were on easy terms with male or female servants. She sighed. When she asked Baxter about her family, the young woman was surprised and said there was little to say about them and she rarely saw them.

Sir Alistair served her lobster, helped himself to some, crab and prawns while she ate and tried to think of something to say to interest him.

“I overheard you and Pascoe speaking about your future launch into the polite world. If I misunderstood, please forgive me for saying you seemed disinterested in it,” Alistair said.

“Somewhat,” she admitted.

“Why?” he speared prawns onto his silver fork.

“I don’t want to be paraded like a filly at a horse market.” Mortified by her indiscreet vulgarity, she covered her burning cheeks with her hands. How often was she rebuked at the young ladies’ seminary for allowing words to pop out of her mouth instead of choosing them carefully?

Alastair laughed but looked at her with a grave expression in the depths of his eyes.

“I am sorry. I should not have said that.” She looked down at her plate and attacked a piece of lobster with her knife and fork.

“Don’t apologise. I enjoyed your comment in church. I also appreciate your comparison to a filly at a market. Most debutantes are eager to immerse themselves in all the polite world’s pleasures, dream of being courted by their own Prince Charming, marrying, and, as storybooks end, living happily ever after.”

“I hope their dreams come true.” Would a handsome prince ask her to marry him? Joyce wished she sat next to Gawayne, who she could not think of as Gascoyne. She studied the table at which he sat according to precedence halfway down on the right-hand side of the Great Hall. Jealousy stabbed her when he laughed at something a beauty said made him laugh.

“Miss Tremayne, you are well-born, young and very pretty, so I don’t fully understand why you balk at the idea of participating in the London season?”

His praise drew her attention back from Gawayne. “Not balk, Sir Alastair. To please my father and grandparents I am resigned to being presented to the queen if her health improves.” She watched the footmen replace the second remove with platters of roast geese, other poultry, vegetables, beef, pork, mutton, venison, sauces, and baskets of savoury pastries.

“Miss Tremayne, you are unique. Every young lady I have met who recently left the schoolroom has been eager to make her debut. I still don’t understand your reluctance to enter society.”

Joyce toyed with one of the silver earrings Vivian gave her and stared down at her lap.

“I apologise, Miss Tremayne. I am too curious by nature. I am a fool to have embarrassed you.”

She scrutinized his face, noting his square jaw and lightly tanned skin instead of the alabaster complexion many gentlemen prized. “I don’t think you are a fool, sir,” she said

slowly and looked down at her dirty plate and cutlery, which a footman replaced with clean ones.

“Thank you for your crumb of praise.”

His face resembled a mischievous boy’s caught out in a misdemeanour. She choked back a vulgar burst of laughter. “You are persistent. I will answer your question. I want to go home instead of being a reluctant debutante.”

Alastair raised his eyebrows. “Home?”

“Yes, to Papa in Madras, where, unlike my brother, I want to live for the rest of my life.”

“I might visit India because I would like to travel to distant lands.”

“Cousin Joyce, may I carve a slice of beef for you?” James interrupted.

“No, no, thank you.”

“Ah, it is time for me to converse with Lady Mary who is sitting at my left.” Sir Alistair smiled. “In the future, I hope you will describe your home to me.”

Chapter Seventeen

Lady Ariadne, Countess of Tresellion stood when footmen took the remains of the seventh remove – Christmas puddings and other delicious desserts – she led the ladies out of the Great Hall where gentlemen stayed to enjoy port. Half asleep after the sumptuous Christmas feast combined with heat from the hearth and a multitude of candles, Joyce put her hand over her mouth to conceal a yawn. “Tomorrow, I don’t think I will be able to eat another morsel.”

“Yes, you will, if you sleep until it is time to enjoy punch, mince pies, cakes, gingerbread and more, which will be served at supper.” Her face radiant, Morwenna clasped her hands between her breasts. “I hope we will have partners for all the dances.”

“I pray no one will ask me. I only had dance lessons at the seminary and am not ready to dance in public,” Joyce squeaked like a frightened mouse as they went upstairs to their bedchamber.

“Part of our instruction was with young gentlemen from the academy,” Morwenna reminded her.

“Mere tongue-tied schoolboys prone to tripping over their feet or treading on my toes,” Joyce scoffed. “Some of their faces spotty faces, and their foreheads sweated.”

Morwenna frowned. “I wish your grandmother would give us permission to waltz.”

“Grandmama does not approve of it, but we may participate in country dances and the quadrille.”

“I cannot imagine being held so close in a handsome, young gentleman’s arms it is almost scandalous,” Morwenna said wistfully.

“There is no promissory note to stipulate your partner would match your description. He might be old, podgy and have bad breath.”

Morwenna stamped her daintily shod foot. “Must you be so prosaic, Joyce? Is there no one you want to dance with?”

Yes, with Gawayne if he asks me instead of the beauty who amused him at the feast.
“No one in particular, and I doubt anyone will ask me.”

“My brother admires you. I am sure he will, and I think Sir Alistair will. He seemed ... er... very taken with you at the feast,” Morwenna sounded nonchalant but stared at her so intensely Joyce thought she tried to read her mind, which made her ill at ease. “He is old but I like him.” Joyce opened the bedroom door.

“As much as Gawayne?”

“How could I? Sir Alistair must be eight-and-twenty or more, and I only met him once.” She pulled the bell rope to summon Baxter to help her undress.

Woken by Morwenna at dusk, Baxter’s helped, Joyce to dress in a cream crepe gown ornamented with seed pearls, worn over a white satin petticoat. Her maid fastened the blue silk sash passed from beneath her breasts to her back. She adjusted the puffed sleeves edged with delicate lace, stood back and clasped her hands together. “”You look perfect, Miss.”

“Thank you, Baxter,” Joyce said.

She went with Morwenna to the crowded Great Hall, where trestle tables replaced sofas and chairs around the perimeter. They threaded her way through the throng to sit on either side of the countess.

“Your gown becomes you, Joyce.” Grandmama glanced at Morwenna, dressed in a simple white muslin gown. “You are well-dressed.”

“Thank you,” Morwenna said, her eyes downcast.

Several gentlemen, including Sir Alastair and Gawayne, approached them. The baronet bowed first. “Miss Tremayne, please do me the honour of standing up with me for the first and supper dance?”

Joyce did not reply. She would prefer to dance for the first time in public with Gawayne.

“My granddaughter is shy, Sir Alistair,” Grandmama said. “Joyce, gather your wits, accept, and give the baronet your dance card for him to enter his name.”

Flustered, she obeyed.

“It will be my pleasure to claim you,” he said.

“F...for the first dance?” she stammered.

“What else?” he asked, laughter in his eyes.

Joyce waited for Gawayne to ask her to dance with him, but Grandmama introduced her to gentlemen whose names soon filled her dance card. In the gallery, the musicians tuned their instruments. “My lords, ladies, and gentlemen, please take your places,” her grandfather’s house steward, chosen to act as the Master of Ceremony, announced.

Sir Alastair claimed her for the lively cotillion and escorted her onto the wide expanse of floor cleared for the ball.

When they formed part of a square with three other couples, air with the scent of beeswax candles, ladies’ and gentlemen’s perfume, and the unpleasant smell of food lingering from the feast assailed Joyce. The music began. The gentlemen bowed. The ladies curtsied to their partners.

During the first lively figure, Joyce’s lips moved constantly. “What are you saying, Miss Tremayne?” Alistair asked, during the allemande, a figure in the dance, when in unusual proximity they held their hands behind each other’s backs.

Joyce looked up from his burgundy and cream-coloured superfine waistcoat. She shook her head. “Hush! Please don’t interrupt me. I am whispering the movements to help me concentrate on my steps and keep my correct place in the square. If I make a mistake, I will be mortified.”

“Miss Tremayne, you are too graceful and light on your feet to be embarrassed by a misstep. I am privileged to open the ball with you.”

“Oh!” Her eyes glowed. “Graceful? Thank you. If it is true, Papa would be proud of me.”

Alistair studied Joyce’s innocent expression. Most debutantes considered a compliment an invitation to flutter their eyelashes with assumed modesty and flirt. Miss Tremayne, a nabob’s daughter, a matrimonial prize he intended to pursue, was as unconscious of her humble reaction as a bud about to blossom.

The cotillion ended. Alastair led her to the chair beside her grandmother.

After the hour-long popular country dance, *Nelson’s Victory*, Alastair claimed Joyce for the dance prior to supper. He held out his arm.

Breathless, the colour in her cheeks heightened, , although she would prefer to dance with Gawayne and be taken to supper by him, her hand encased in elbow-length white gloves, she put the tips of her fingers on Sir Alistair’s arm.

Alastair gestured to the blazing yule log. “Miss Tremayne, it is very hot. Would you prefer a cool drink and conversation to dancing?”

Joyce caught her lower lip between her teeth. Her cheeks warmed. She released her lip. “I want to accept your suggestion because my slippers are too tight, and my toes hurt. If I do, Grandmama might scold me.”

“I don’t think so. If a lady remains in view of everyone, it is permissible for her to sit with a gentleman and converse.” His face impassive, Alistair led Joyce to a sofa between two palm trees in large pots where they would not be overheard. He neither considered himself vain nor top-lofty, yet connected by birth to many aristocratic families, denying his attributes would be false humility. Torn between astonishment and amusement at this outspoken young lady making the transition from the schoolroom to society, who chose to sit next to him only because her feet hurt, he sat beside her.

“Miss Tremayne, I am curious. Why do you want to live the rest of your life in India, a land plagued by disease, extreme heat, snakes and many other trials and tribulations?” Alistair asked.

Instead of replying, she watched the dancers, turning her head from side to side as though she were searching for someone.

“Miss Tremayne.” Alistair prompted her in a loud voice, irritated because he was unaccustomed to being ignored.

Her blue eyes, possibly the most beautiful he ever saw, gazed at him. “Sir Alastair, I am not deaf. Please don’t raise your voice when you address me.”

“I apologise. When you did not answer my question, I thought you were abstracted or did not hear it.”

“Some punch, sir?” interrupted a footman who held out a silver platter.

Alastair served Joyce and took another glass for himself.

“Ah!” she exclaimed. “There he is.”

“Who?” he asked, annoyed because he was accustomed young ladies, he singled out devoting their entire attention to him.

“Gascoyne. He and his sister, Morwenna, my grandfather’s wards, are my dearest friends.” Joyce’s smooth forehead creased. “She has only danced with one gentleman, please enter your name on her card.” The lines on her forehead deepened. “Please don’t tell her I asked you to. She would be chagrined.”

“Maybe on another occasion. I have a partner for every dance,” Alistair hedged. He would never waste his time dancing with any beautiful nonentity without the prospect of a more than generous marriage settlement. He inclined his head toward Joyce. “Don’t you want to confide in me?”

Obviously confused, her long eyelashes fluttered. “Confide?”

“I should have said explain instead of confide. Please tell me why you want to return to India.”

“To live with my dear Papa at home and—” she broke off.

“Please forgive me for oversetting you.”

“There is no need. You are too nice to say anything to disturb me.”

“Thank you for your good opinion of me. I hope I will never forfeit it.”

“I reply to Papa, Mrs de Lancy and Vivian’s letters, but there is a hole inside me that will only be filled when I see them again.”

“Who are the lady and Vivian?” he asked to break a brief silence.

Joyce’s cheeks flushed. “She kept my mother company when she was with child. Afterward, she continued to live at Papa’s mansion, where she has always treated me as though I am her daughter. Vivian is her son.

Alastair searched his memory. Was her mother dead? He did not think so, and tried to remember gossip about her parents? “Is it as though you have two mothers?”

Her finger traced a small white scar on her cheek. “The last time I saw Mama, I was five years old. After so many years, she is a stranger. I only think of Mrs de Lancy as a mother.” Joyce took a deep breath. “It cannot interest you, Sir Alastair.”

Joyce sounded like a young child meticulously schooled to know what she should and should not say in polite society.

“When did you last see your father?” he asked to change the subject.

“Eight years ago, when he sent me to this gloomy, grey, country to be educated. He has broken his promise to send for me after I joined the haut ton and been presented to the queen.”

“I regret your poor opinion of England.”

“Was I rude?” Her eyes opened wide, resembling a stricken little girl about to be reprimanded.

He choked back his amusement. “No, I value honesty, but you are an English lady, so I am surprised because you don’t think of England as your home.”

“Never!” Joyce exclaimed vehemently. “Perhaps I am unjust, but to me, this country is dull compared to my homeland, where there is dazzling, exceptional beauty, and even the poorest women are graceful.” She smiled. “They have perfect poise when they walk without spilling a single drop from the water pots they balance on their heads.” She closed her eyes as though she were transported far away from the castle. “In the evenings, smoke rises from fires on which meals are cooked beneath red and gold sunsets which illuminate the sky over Papa’s estate. Throughout the year night darkness comes more quickly and earlier than here. The moon appears enormous in a dark, velvet sky from which it seems possible to pluck the stars. In England, even the harvest moon looks remote and insignificant.” Alastair watched her expressive face as she continued. “I wish I could paint a word picture of the flocks of parrots winging their way from tree to tree, which I see through my bedroom window at daybreak.”

“At dawn?”

“Yes, we rise early and ride as far as the river before the temperature soars.” She shivered. “I am more afraid of crocodiles than any other wild creatures. Papa gave orders for wells to be dug for our people.” She sighed. “Unfortunately, some women still washed their clothes in the river. Those loathsome muggers still seized a women and girls and dragged them to their underwater lairs.”

Alastair grimaced. “I don’t blame you for being frightened of them. I would be.”

“When I think about the monsters, I distract myself with memories of flowers. Yellow mimosa, red poinsettias, white moon flowers, and many other ones enchanting as the peppermint green and primrose yellow butterflies the size of small birds. I admit there are snakes and nasty insects, but I don’t think about them when I long for home. I visualise the ancient, magnificent palaces and temples, or my father’s kind servants and their children, who I played with, a holy man and my ayah.”

“Ayah?”

“My Indian nursemaid. I also miss the scent of smoke from cow dung fires and spicy food cooking on them. And I can almost smell marigold garlands made for Krishna and Radha, the Hindu god and goddess in the temple Papa allowed to be built on his land.”

The music ceased. People gathered around the sides of the Great Hall. Servants filled it with tables, spread them with linen cloths and arranged silver cutlery, porcelain plates and glasses with barley twist stems on them.

Alastair held out his arm. Joyce put the tips of her fingers on it. "Thank you for telling me about India. Your word pictures brought it to life."

"Which I try to capture in my watercolours," she said, trying to see Gawayne in the crowd.

Part of every young lady's education included art, but few were talented. "I would like to see them," Alistair said politely and gestured to a round table and eight chairs. "Shall we sit here?"

"I think my grandparents expect me to join them."

"If the earl and countess do, they will send for you," Alistair reassured her, certain they would not because they assumed he was a wealthy, eligible bachelor.

"If you are certain." She sat.

"May my sister and I join you?" Gascoyne asked.

"Please do," Joyce replied.

Alistair noted the light blazing in Joyce's eyes when she looked at Gascoyne. It would be unfortunate if she followed an unwary path toward this young man with an even smaller inheritance than his own.

James, Viscount Pascoe, led Lady Amelia, the Marquess of Ripley's oldest daughter, to the table. "Sir Alastair, my wife told me you have been introduced to her."

"Yes, I have," Alastair said.

"May we join you," James asked.

"Please be seated," Joyce stood and introduced her sister-in-law to Gawayne and Morwenna.

Alistair stroked his chin with his forefinger, a habit when he was particularly thoughtful. He had noticed brief disapproval in Pascoe's eyes when he sat opposite the earl's wards.

Efficient footmen in splendid livery put platters of small pies and tarts, gingerbread, sugared cakes and festive mince pies on the table. Joyce's mouth watered when sweet and savoury aromas wafted toward her. A footman poured wine red as Viscount Pascoe's

velvet coat. Alistair raised his glass. "Christmas greetings to each of you and absent friends and family."

The others at the table repeated the toast and drank. A tall, perfectly dressed gentleman bent over Joyce and kissed her cheek.

Alistair's grip on the stem of his glass tightened. *Who the devil is he?*

Joyce swivelled on her chair and looked up. "Sylvester, I did not expect to see you and your wife here. In your letter you wrote you would celebrate Christmas on your estate."

"After we went to church and partook of luncheon with guests at our house in response to Grandfather's letter asking us to come to the castle this evening, my wife and I set out in time to reach here earlier. We arrived late because I stopped to help an elderly gentleman and his wife. One of the horses harnessed to their carriage cast a shoe. How are you, Puss?"

"Only Papa ever called me Puss," Joyce said, her eyes moistening.

"And now, my dear sister, I shall because you are a pretty one."

The gentleman is Miss Tremayne's brother, not a gentleman who took an unforgivable liberty. Alistair compared her appeal to a kitten taking its first steps in an uncertain world. If she fell in love with him and gained her family's consent to their marriage, he would always treat her considerately and respectfully.

"You are pretty, Miss Tremayne," he said softly after he was introduced to her brother. He winced inwardly because he spoke too heartily. "Your plate is empty. You must eat more to keep up your strength to dance after we have eaten. I enjoyed my beef and kidney pie. May I serve you with one?" He picked up tongs to transfer the golden pastry concealing the succulent meat.

"N...no thank you." She waved her hand to prevent him from putting it on her plate.

"Sir Alastair, if you were well-acquainted with my sister, you would know she never eats beef," Sylvester said as he sat at the table.

"Why?" Alistair asked.

"Foolishly, she is influenced by Hindus who believe cows are sacred."

Joyce glared at Sylvester, who stood to hand her onto a chair.

Her sister-in-law joined them. "Joyce, I apologise for not greeting you earlier. I had to wash away dirt from the journey and change my gown,

Sylvester's brother-in-law, the Marquess of Ripley's heir, put a hand on his sister's shoulder. "Mother sent me to fetch you.

"Miss Tremayne, please forgive my rag manners for not bowing to you. Good evening, Sir Alistair. Come, Amelia."

Relieved when no more was said about what she chose to eat or not, Joyce selected a small cake flavoured with vanilla.

Chapter Eighteen

On Boxing Day, as dawn's pastel colours faded, James and the earl rode ahead of the other gentlemen along the clifftop path. On this crisp morning at high tide, with the pale sun on the horizon, waves performed their dance far below as they dashed onto the seaweed-strewn high tide mark. Greedy gulls screamed following fishing boats. James considered what he would say later in the day to his grandfather.

"Sir," he began, "After breakfast, there is an urgent matter I want to discuss with you in private."

Hector's lips twitched as though he were about to laugh. "You intrigue me, Pascoe. I hope you are not entangled with a female from whom you want me to help you extricate yourself."

"Nothing of the sort," James protested. "It is a subject of interest to you."

"Time to return to the castle," Hector said when they reached the lighthouse on the headland above a dangerous part of the coast. "Your grandmother always has breakfast in bed. After we change out of our riding habits, you may join me for breakfast in my dressing room."

"Thank you, sir," James said as they rode back, their horses' breath steaming in the cold air.

When he changed his clothes, James avoided any apparel that would prompt his grandfather to accuse him of being a dandy. He resisted the temptation to wear a fashionable Belcher handkerchief named after a popular prize-fighter around his neck. It would provoke his grandfather's condemnation. He hoped no fault would be found with his dark blue tailcoat, light blue and cream striped waistcoat, and buff cassimere pantaloons, and light blue waistcoat. He tweaked his neckcloth arranged in an unostentatious barrel knot and went to join his astute, good natured but formidable grandsire.

In the large, comfortable dressing room, the earl sat at a table in front of the window with a view of turbulent grey waves frothing and receding on the sandy beach.

“Glad you are not a fop, James,” Hector said instead of addressing him by his title. He gestured to boiled eggs, kippers and herrings, kept hot on chafing dishes, cold ham, soft rolls, a glass dish of butter, cruets of salt and pepper and a small silver dish of mustard. “Food to keep up our strength, Pascoe. I dismissed the footman so we can converse alone. I shall drink coffee but will send for ale if you should you prefer it.”

“Coffee, not ale, Grandfather,” James said while they piled food on their plates.

“Have your say, Pascoe.”

James spread butter on a bread roll. removed bones from a portion of kipper and swallowed a tasty mouthful. “You might consider what I am about to say insignificant, but as your heir, I am obliged to do my duty.”

Hector put down his knife and fork and stared intently at him. “Commendable,” he said drily. “You almost persuade me when the time comes for you to follow my footsteps, you will be worthy.”

A rush of unanticipated affection for his grandfather surprised James. “I hope it will not come to pass for many years.”

“If your words are genuine, your sentiment is praiseworthy.”

“Please don’t be cynical, sir.”

“Enough! Please tell me why you asked to speak to me in private.”

James sipped coffee to give himself time to choose his words and decided to come straight to the point. “I disapprove of Joyce’s affection for your ward, Gascoyne and doubt you and Grandmother comprehend how deep-rooted it is.”

“I know Gawayne and his sister became close to Joyce soon after she came to us from Madras,” Hector said slowly.

“Sometimes childhood friendships intensify. In a crowd, Cousin Joyce always searches for Gawayne. Her face brightens when she sees him. I think you would be wise to distance them from each other.”

Hector put his elbow on the table, propped his chin on it and closed his eyes, obviously sunk in thought.

Only the clock ticking on the mantelpiece sounded while James hoped his grandfather was not angry with him for his implication about his cousin and Baron Gascoyne. Hungry after his ride in the fresh morning, he ate.

“Pascoe.”

His grandfather’s strident voice startled him. “Sir.” He held his breath.

“Thank you for sharing your suspicion with me. Joyce is barely seventeen years old. Her father trusts me and your grandmother to ensure her welfare. We must steer her away from unsuitable suitors and not allow a betrothal, which he must sanction. Gascoyne’s inheritance is negligible compared to Joyce’s future one. If she has a romantic attachment to him, I agree it would be, as you said, better to put a distance between them.”

James released his breath, relieved because his grandfather did not consider it impertinent of him to have shared his suspicion.

“Thank you, Pascoe. You have given me much to consider. I shall discuss the subject with your grandmother and decide what should be done.”

* * *

27th December

Baxter parted the curtains and raised the blind in Joyce’s bedchamber. “A fine sunny morning, Miss Tremayne,” she said cheerfully.

Joyce looked out of the window at the pale yellow the winter sun. For the umpteenth time she wished she could enjoy the rest of the Christmas season at home with Papa, Mrs de Lancy, and Vivian.

Baxter put a tray on a table by the bed. “Hot chocolate for both of you.”

Joyce looked at her friend who shared her bed. She stirred but did not open her eyes.

Baxter ignored Morwenna, filled a cup for Joyce and told her to drink quickly because the countess summoned her.

Joyce finished the sweet, hot drink. With Baxter’s help, she swiftly dressed in a cream-coloured merino gown and tied her hair at the nape of her neck with a cream and gold striped ribbon.

Baxter followed her out of her bedchamber to the countess’ dressing room and knocked on a door. Smith, Grandmother’s personal maid, opened it.

In the warm bedchamber, a tray on her lap, Grandmother sat in a bed large enough for three people to sleep in, propped up by plump pillows against the bedhead.

“Good morning, Joyce. Sit at the table and serve yourself. There are buttered rolls and toast, plum cake, pound cake, and hot coffee in the silver pot. ”

“Good morning, Grandmama.” Joyce curtsied and served herself with cup of coffee and toast spread with butter. Would Grandmama scold her for an indiscretion? She sat and puffed out her breath. If only there were not so many complicated rules to be obeyed.

“My dear child, don’t be nervous. My reprimands are intended to steer you through society’s shoals. I sympathise with you. I remember how difficult it was to adapt from the schoolroom to make my debut when relationships were more complex than they are now. You cannot imagine how often your great-grandmother feared I would never marry well because I made so many blunders.

Joyce’s mouth gaped. She stared at her self-assured grandmother, unable to visualise her as a debutante prone to error.

“You are not a landed fish. Close your mouth, my love. I sent for you to speak about marriage.”

Joyce’s imagination gained full control over her thoughts. She swallowed staring at her grandparents’ matrimonial bed. When were the rose-red and gold brocade curtains drawn to give them total privacy they could do...what? Joyce gripped a fold of her gown and told herself she was not a chattel to be disposed of. She would not agree to an arranged marriage with a stranger. “I shall refuse,” she said, the words unintentionally bursting from her.

“Refuse what, Joyce?”

“To...too,” she broke off.

“Pon my word, child, you seem distraught. What is amiss?”

Speechless, she stared at Grandmother, who grew up at a time when arranged marriages of convenience were customary.

“You seem frightened, sweetheart. Are you afraid of wedlock?”

Wedlock sounds like a lifelong prison sentence. Joyce gathered her courage. “Only of being forced into one.”

Adriane laughed. “Something there is no reason for you to be afraid of. Your Papa, your brother, your grandfather, and I merely want to safeguard you.”

“From what?” Joyce poured more coffee into her cup.

“Benjamin is a nabob. If your future husband is acceptable, your settlement will be substantial, and your inheritance will be enormous despite the boy your father adopted. That is for the future. At just seventeen, you are too young to accept any gentleman’s marriage proposal, particularly one from a known fortune hunter. At your age you should be carefree and enjoy everything the cream of society has to offer.”

“Even if I am...I mean suppose I am in love and want to tie the knot earlier?”

Light burned in Grandmama’s sea-grey eyes. “If a gentleman worthy of you returns your affection, he will wait for you to no longer be a child recently out of the schoolroom. At your age, young ladies often form temporary attachments. It will not be wrong to introduce you to gentlemen I approve of with the hope matrimony will follow with one of them.”

“Suppose I agree to a betrothal before I return to my home in Madras?”

“Are you still impatient to leave us? After so long, are you unhappy in England?” Adriane dabbed her eyes with a table napkin. “You are our only granddaughter. Don’t you know how precious you are?”

“Please don’t cry, Grandmama. I love you and Grandpapa and am grateful to Gascoyne and Morwenna for their friendship. Yet there has not been a day since I arrived here when I did not long to be in my beautiful birthplace.”

“Don’t you like England?”

She shrugged. “Not as much as India. I have never known a sense of belonging here. At the seminary, I had little in common with the other girls, and I could not stomach the bland food. Even Morwenna, who has always been good to me, cannot understand why I am desperate to go home to Papa, and Mrs de Lancy, who treats me as her daughter, her son, dear Vivian, Punj Ayah, Bates, my father’s kind butler, and his loyal servants.”

“Ayah?”

“My nurse.” Joyce fingered the scar on her cheek. “Unlike my mother, who I feared, I always felt safe with Punj Ayah. Mrs de Lancy always heard my prayers at bedtime, and my ayah sang me to sleep with lullabies and comforted me when I nightmares about crocodiles haunted me. She slept on a mattress on the floor in my nursery, dressed, fed, and cared for me in every way. Together, we visited Govinda Sadhu, a holy man, and I worshipped with her at the temple Papa built for the Hindus on the estate.”

“Enough! The Tremaynes are Christians, not ignorant; what do you call them? Ah, yes, Hindus. My poor child, if Benedict sent you to us when you were four or five years old, your head would not be filled with nonsense, and you would be happy here.”

Joyce decided it would be imprudent to mention the melodious calls to summon the faithful to prayer from the mosque several times a day. Morwenna, and Gawayne—“Joyce almost quailed under her grandmother’s stern glance. “I beg your pardon, Grandmama. I know I should refer to him as Gascoyne. Well, they enjoy listening to the stories of gods and demons my dear Ayah told me. One day I hope they will visit me in Madras.”

“Unlikely,” Adriadne said with unaccustomed tartness. “And friendships with servants are inappropriate.”

“Why?”

“You will know when you are old enough to understand.” Ariadne wiped her mouth on a linen napkin. “You may leave. It is time for me to dress.”

In her boudoir, Adriadne tapped her fingers on her dressing table. Her conversation with her granddaughter confirmed Pascoe's suspicion. Joyce wanted to marry Gascoyne.

Smith held up the ivory comb. “Shall I part your hair in the centre and arrange it in a knot at the back of your head?”

“Yes,” Ariadne said, more concerned about Joyce than her appearance. Tomorrow, most of the guests, including Sylvester and his wife, would leave the castle.” A knock on the door interrupted her thoughts.

The comb still in her hand, Smith opened the door. A masculine voice murmured something. “Mr Tremayne,” she announced.

“My grandson here so soon after breakfast!” Adriane tied the jade-green satin ribbons of her sleeping jacket worn over an ankle-length night shift. “Admit him.”

Sylvester bowed. “Good day, Grandmama, I hope you are well.”

“I am, thank you.” She turned around on the dressing table stool to face him. “I intended to send for you later today about your sister on a matter which should concern you.”

“When Joyce was born, my friend Vivian and I promised my father we would always protect her. I am here to voice my qualms.”

She gestured to the chairs on either side of the window. “Shall we sit opposite each other?”

“A glass of wine?” she asked when they were seated.

“No, thank you.” Sylvester turned his gold signet ring around and around his finger and gazed out of the window.

Adriane looked at her handsome grandson. “You resemble your father at the same age as you are now.” She admired his slim figure, pure white neckcloth and shirt, iron-grey coat with a black velvet collar, plain light blue waistcoat and buff pantaloons. “You dress unostentatiously and fashionably as your father did.” She dabbed her eyes with a small kerchief. “I am too old to live for long. Could he be persuaded to come to England?”

“I expect you have many years ahead of you.” Joyce did not want to think about Grandmama’s death. “I don’t think Papa will leave India , but you could visit him in Madras. My sister is determined to return there. When she does, you could chaperone her.”

Adriane shook her head. “Not at my age. But you did not come here to talk about your father. What do you want to tell me?”

“I might be mistaken, but Joyce is ... er.... attached to an unsuitable gentleman.” Agitated, Sylvester stood and paced up and down the boudoir and nearly knocked over a painting of the Cornish coast on an easel.

“Your sister painted it,” Adriane said. “If she were not an heiress, she could earn her bread and butter from the proceeds of her art.”

“She could if she wed an impoverished man our father disapproved of, which might prompt him to cut her out of his will.”

“Please sit down. Watching you pace so fast makes me dizzy.” Sylvester sank onto a chair. “Do you believe Benjamin would leave Joyce without a penny if she made a mesalliance?”

“Yes, to judge by the way he treated me I think he might disown her. Papa gave me my estate, settled money on me because I prefer England to Madras, and removed my name from his will.”

Adriane clasped her hands beneath her breasts. “Tell me who you think Joyce wants to marry.”

“Gascoyne.”

“Foolish child. She may look much higher than him for a husband,” she murmured. “You share Pascoe’s suspicion. Thank you for telling me. I know what must be done and am certain your grandfather will agree.”

* * *

January 2nd, 1816

A footman opened the door of the book room. “Baron Gascoyne,” he announced and withdrew.

“Good day, Gascoyne.” As if it choked his ward, Hector watched him slide a finger between his neck and starched collar as though it choked him.

His ward bowed. “Good day, sir.” He looked briefly at the earl seated on a chair behind the desk. “Good day, my lady,” he greeted the countess, sitting on a chair beside her husband’s.

She inclined her head. “I hope this year will favour you.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

“I daresay you are impatient to find out why I sent for you,” Hector gestured to a chair. “I shall enlighten you when you are seated.”

“I admit I am curious and confess to hoping I have not unwittingly offended you or your countess.” Gawayne sat opposite the desk.

“You have not. I summoned you because New Year is a suitable time for change,” Hector said, his voice deeper than usual.

Gawayne shifted his position on the chair and gazed at the ranks of books on shelves. “Change, sir?”

Aware Gascoyne was uneasy, Hector nodded. “Yes. Since you became my ward, oversaw your estate and invested in Government funds on your behalf.”

His ward transferred his attention from the bookshelves to him and looked at him full in the face. “Thank you, sir, and for treating me and my sister as one of your family. I assure you I appreciate everything you and the countess have done for us.”

Hector appreciated the young man’s words, but thought they might merely be lip service, he was conscious of the wary expression in his ward’s eyes.

“Gascoyne, you are twenty-three years old, the same age as my husband when his father died,” Ariadne said. “He inherited much more than this estate and took up the reins. After careful thought, we decided it is time for you to take charge of your affairs. As the earl said, New Year is a suitable time for change. From now on, you must live on your estate and manage the rest of your inheritance. We look forward to knowing you have stepped into your new life and to welcoming you when you visit us,” Ariadne said gently.

“My lady, this sudden decision surprises me!”

Ariadne ignored Gawayne’s agitation revealed as he ruffled his carefully styled, pomaded golden curls. “There is no need for you to be anxious about your sister. When she leaves the castle with you, I have arranged for your late mother’s widowed sister to chaperon her.”

“Morwenna’s inheritance, which will be released when she is twenty-one is sufficient for her to marry well. Hector stood, walked around the desk, and squeezed Gascoyne’s shoulder. “It is more than time for you to take your seat in the House of Lords, and we look forward to your and sister’s advantageous marriages,” he said, emphasizing the word advantageous. “When both of you have children, I hope you will permit us to treat them as though they are our grandchildren.”

“Indeed, God willing, we also look forward to having great-grandchildren.” Ariadne sighed. “I pray my only granddaughter will decide not to return to India, marry well, and I shall have the joy of seeing her children.”

Hector stood. “I summoned my attorney to finalise the agreement for you to receive your legacy. Gascoyne, you have my good wishes. You may leave to tell Morwenna about her future.”

Hector raised his eyebrows when the door closed behind Gascoyne. “My lady, he plays his cards close to his chest. He might have planned to marry Joyce. Whether or not, we are wise to ensure she rarely sees him.”

Chapter Nineteen

4th January 1816

At her escritoire, a crow's quill poised in her hand, Joyce gazed out of the window in her dressing room. Incessant rain prevented her from riding along the slippery cliff-top path before breakfast. In the distance, the Atlantic Ocean thrust up waves high enough to flood a tall ship's decks, wreak havoc and sweep a person overboard. Undiscouraged by the possibility of drowning at sea, she remembered Govinda Sadhu's reaction when she wept after a crocodile snatched a servant's daughter with whom she often played. *Why are you crying?* he asked her. *In scripture it is stated every person has an exact number of breaths. When the last one is inhaled, the soul leaves the body. According to their actions good and bad it transmigrates into a new one.* A logical explanation. She gazed down at the letter she commenced writing to Papa. She wanted to have a long, happy life like her grandparents, but death, which always lurked, could never be defeated.

Joyce dipped the quill into the inkpot and wrote.

Thank you for my New Year gifts. I shall treasure the beautiful gold bracelets, earrings and ring. With her fingertip, she stroked the silver jewellery she never took off. I hope you are pleased with the miniature watercolour portraits I painted of your parents.

Did you eat peahen instead of goose on Christmas Day? Did your cook prepare twelfth-night cakes made with honey, ginger, and pepper, which I enjoyed here?

Papa, when may I come home? she penned with a lump in her throat. *I long for curries, aubergines, okra and other vegetables fresh from your estate which are not grown here, my favourite fruit, delicious mangoes, and papayas, bananas, guavas, and jackfruit.*

Dear Papa, I am very unhappy. My grandparents are treat me well, but I long to be with you, Mrs de Lancy, and Vivian, Bates and Punj Ayah. I want to come home after

my presentation instead of joining London Society at the ball Grandmama and Grandpapa will hold for me. Please don't -.

The door opened. Joyce put down the quill and looked at Baxter and two maidservants.

"Miss Tremayne, her ladyship ordered us to take everything except the furniture to your new bedchamber, dressing room and boudoir."

"Why? Where are they?"

"I don't know why. The new chambers are opposite her ladyship's."

"Don't touch either my possessions or Morwenna's until I have spoken to the countess."

"Begging your pardon, Miss Morwenna will remain here, and I'm to obey my orders," Baxter told her.

Joyce frowned. Since they became friends, she and Morwenna always shared bedchambers at the seminary, at the castle and in London. Puzzled, she sped to the boudoir, where her grandmother was discussing menus with the chef.

"Please pardon me for disturbing you, Grandmama."

"Leave us." Ariadne waved a hand to dismiss two attendants, the chef and her dresser.

"Grandmother, why will Morwenna and I be separated?" Joyce demanded.

"Sit down, my love, and compose yourself."

Breathless after hurrying along corridors and up and down stairs, Joyce plopped onto a chair opposite her grandmother's.

"Baron Gascoyne is no longer your grandfather's ward. In future, he will reside on his estate with Morwenna."

"Please don't let them to leave. I lo-" Joyce broke off. It would be folly to say she loved Gawayne and yearned to be his bride. "Gawayne and Morwenna are my dearest friends."

"Your grandfather's decision is final," Ariadne said, her face a mask.

"I shall appeal to him," Joyce said too distraught for caution.

"To no avail, child."

"Why?" She clenched her fists. "Grandpapa has never refused me anything." Her fingernails pressed painfully into the palms of her hands.

“When Gascoyne and Morwenna’s parents died, we took them into our household. Now they are no longer children it is time for Gascoyne to, figuratively speaking, let go of your grandfather’s coattails and take responsibility for himself and Morwenna.”

Joyce checked sobs rising in her throat.

“No need to react as if the end of the world is imminent,” Ariadne said.

“Mine is,” she retorted.

“Nonsense. You have much to look forward to. When we go to London, you will mix in the cream of society and make your curtsy to Her Majesty if her health permits. Should Gascoyne bring Morwenna to town, you will see them and I shall sponsor her. Don’t be downcast. You will form many new friendships. Come with me to see your apartment.”

* * *

In the Countess’ parlour, Joyce stabbed a needle in and out of her needlework. Tomorrow marked three days since Grandmother told her Gawayne and Morwenna would leave the castle and live on his estate. By day, Joyce maintained a calm façade. At night, she wept and woke with red, swollen eyes. If Grandmama noticed their condition, although Baxter put cold compresses on them, she did not comment. Resentment choked Joyce. Every day, she was chaperoned. At night, Baxter slept on a truckle bed near her own. Nevertheless, whatever the risk, tonight she would find a way to speak to Gawayne before he took up residence on his estate tomorrow. While Baxter slept soundly, she would creep through the castle to his bedchamber to bid him farewell. Her jaw tightened. If she were discovered, any punishment would be worthwhile.

The clock struck two o’clock. Grandmother, an expert needlewoman, folded the little bedgown she was making for a great-grandchild. “I am peckish, Joyce. Shall we partake of nuncheon in the small dining room?”

The minute they entered the room, Joyce saw Gawayne standing near the fireplace with Morwenna. She took a step toward them. Grandmother caught hold of her wrist. “My love, sit on my right at the top table beneath the stained glass oriel window.

Obedience her only option, Joyce’s nostrils flared. Convinced she could barely eat a morsel, she looked at sliced cold meats, cheese, rolls, butter, condiments, biscuits and small cakes on the table for the informal meal.

Sir Alistair stood with his back to the window, his attire immaculate. He bowed. "Good day, Lady Tremayne."

"Good day," Ariadne greeted him.

"Miss Tremayne may I be seated next to you?"

He scrutinised her face. Had he noticed her reddened eyes? "Yes," she consented, knowing she would not be permitted to sit between Gawayne and Morwenna who sat at another table.

Sir Alistair sat and gestured to the closest serving dishes. "What may I serve you with Miss Tremayne?"

"A sliver of cheese and a roll will suffice."

"A glass of ratafia or cup of coffee," he asked.

"Coffee," she replied absentmindedly. She gazed at Gawayne, desperate to speak to him.

"When will I see you in London?" Sir Alistair asked.

"At the beginning of March. My grandparents want to settle into their house in time for my ball, which will be one of the first, if not the first, in the season." She gestured to the food on the table. "In July, I shall sail home. I look forward to having curries, spiced soups, and sweetmeats again."

"My chef made curries flavoured with imported spices for you," Ariadne said.

"I am grateful, but they never taste the same as those made at home."

Every day in Madras, she would instruct the cook to prepare whatever she fancied.

If the voyage took six months, she would have celebrated her eighteenth birthday, and if Lady Luck favoured her, Gawayne and Morwenna would have accompanied her. In the meantime, she must endure the months ahead. Today, her most urgent need was to speak to Gawayne. Yet did she have the courage to leave her bedchamber in the middle of the night to tiptoe along corridors, up and down stairs to his bedchamber? If she were discovered, how would she be punished? *At least I will not be locked up and only given bread and water like a maiden in days of old.*

"Sir Alistair, can we not persuade you to stay here longer?" Ariadne asked.

"I have urgent affairs to attend to. I regret I must refuse your kind invitation."

"I hope you will be among the guests who put up with us at intervals during winter" Ariadne said.

"I hope to, Countess. If not, our paths will cross in London during March."

Until the nuncheon ended, Joyce participated in chatter during nuncheon.

"Come, Joyce," Ariadne said.

She followed her grandmother toward the door. Gawayne brushed against her, dropped a small piece of paper and walked away. A quick glance at Grandmama engaged in conversation gave her the opportunity to pick it up.

Gawayne glanced back at her and nodded. Sir Alistair gazed at her and raised an eyebrow. Did he see her grab the note? As though she were a guilty schoolroom miss, her cheeks burned. Impatient to examine the note and hopeful her grandmother was too engrossed to notice her, Joyce left the dining room. She hurried to her bedchamber, hands trembling as she smoothed the paper and read.

Miss Tremayne,

Tomorrow, my sister and I will leave to reside at my estate. I would be honoured if you agreed to snatch a few moments with me. Please meet me at nightfall in the pavilion after we dine.

*Your devoted servant,
Gawayne.*

Although Joyce planned to sneak into his bedchamber, every instinct told her not to accept his improper request. Her heart insisted she should risk anything.

Baxter entered the bedchamber. The countess sent a footman to summon you to her parlour.

How could she slip away from her dresser, who acted as Grandmama's watchdog, to meet Gawayne? "Please inform her ladyship I must rest because my head aches and I am nauseous." Her conscience pricked her about the lie because Papa taught her to always be truthful, yet she wanted to meet Gawayne. There was no alternative.

"I will send a maid to inform her ladyship. Shall I undress you, help you to bed and bathe your forehead with lavender water?"

"You may apply it, but I shall rest on the chaise longue and dose."

The hours waiting for the assignation were tedious. Grandmother visited her. She put a cool hand on her forehead. "My love, I am relieved. You don't have a fever, but I shall summon the doctor if you have not recovered tomorrow."

Joyce shrank back ashamed of guilty deception.

Dusk yielded to night. Baxter served her soup, bread, and butter. Too nervous to eat much, Joyce allowed her maid to prepare her for bed.

"Baxter."

"Miss?"

"Your snores always disturb me. Tonight, sleep in the maids' quarters. I shall lock my door."

"You might be taken worse in the night and need to be nursed," Baxter objected.

"All I need is a sound night's sleep without being disturbed by your grunts and snores. Please leave."

Baxter stalked out of the bedchamber.

The door locked, Joyce raced into her dressing room. She pulled a dress over her nightgown, put on a pair of black half boots, a gunmetal-grey woollen cloak lined with pink silk and pulled the hood over her head. Her hands shook as she tied the strings under her chin. She opened the door and peered up and down the deserted corridor. The door locked, the key in her pocket, afraid of discovery at every second, each step cautious, she made her way to a back door. After a struggle with the iron bolt, she slid it back into the door frame. Outside, frigid air snatched her breath and hurt her nostrils.

An owl hooted. A fox barked. Light breeze rustled leaves on trees on either side of the path. Another sound caught her attention. Footsteps? Surely not, unless Gawayne was behind her on his way to their rendezvous. Should she return to her bedchamber? No! Nervous, every sense alert, she quickened her pace. Ahead she saw the pavilion near the lake at the rear of the castle. Breathless with anticipation, her heart beating too fast, she entered the circular building open to the elements. By the light of a candle in a lantern, she saw Gawayne. Enveloped in a cloak dark as night, the hood concealing his golden hair and part of his face, he stepped forward.

"I feared you would not come but prayed you would not disappoint me."

His warm breath fanned her cheek. When he kissed the back of her hand, he ignited a fire she never suspected could be kindled so fast and could burn so fiercely.

“Your hand is ice-cold, Joyce,” he said, abandoning formality to address her by her given name. “You should have worn gloves.”

Gawayne rubbed her hands between his own, encased in soft leather gloves. Overcome by sudden shyness, she looked down. She had never been so close to a member of the opposite sex to whom she was not related. Heat scalded her cheeks. She pulled her hands away from his. “I...I should not be here.”

“I know, but we will see each other in London for the season, perhaps only from a distance.” Gawayne led her to a wicker chair. “Please sit down.”

Guilt not strong enough to deter her she sat and folded her warmed hands on her lap. Gawayne knelt. “Joyce, can you deny you love me, as dearly as I love you?”

He loved her! Speechless with joy, almost faint, she stared at his beloved face illuminated by lantern light.

He stroked her cheek with his forefinger, his touch light as a feather. “Please say you will marry me. If you do, I swear when we are husband and wife, I shall treasure you and devote myself to your happiness for as long as I live.”

“Yes, I will marry you and look forward to us living in Hindustan,” she said joyously, without hesitation.

“In India!”

“Yes, that is the country’s Indian name. You said you would like to go there with me,” she replied in a small voice.

“My sweet love, everything shall be as you wish.”

Thoughts raced through her mind. Her grandparents would not consent to her marriage until she was eighteen, and only with Papa’s consent to a gentleman, they considered acceptable. Her heart would smash into smithereens if they refused to allow her to marry her true love.

“Gawayne, suppose my family does not agree when you ask for my hand? By law, I must be twenty-one to wed without Papa’s consent.”

“We can elope to Gretna Green to tie the knot.”

“I cannot. It would be scandalous. Moreover, it is possible my entire family, including Papa, would disown me.”

“Forgive me. I should not have suggested it.” He rummaged in his pocket, withdrew his hand and held it out toward her. “Please accept this token of my love, my mother’s betrothal ring.” He slipped it onto her finger.

Too choked by emotion to thank him, Joyce gazed down at the sapphire with diamonds on each side embedded in gold.

“You can only wear it in public when our betrothal is announced. I suggest you conceal it on a long chain around your neck to replace your small silver heart.”

An image of Vivian’s affectionate face when she last saw him appeared. “No! It was given to me by a dear friend, with whom I have corresponded while I am in this foreign country. I will never remove it.”

Gawayne drew her up to her feet. He cupped her face in both hands. “Shall we seal our betrothal with a kiss?”

Shocked, she wrenched herself away from him. “No, I cannot risk being with child.”

“What!” Gawayne exclaimed. “You cannot believe—.”

“It is late. I must go.” She hurried out of the pavilion.

“Joyce, I shall think about you every day while we are parted and long for the day when we met in London,” Gawayne called after her.

“I will yearn to be with you,” she shouted.

“To ensure we are not seen together, I shall wait here for you to have time to reach the castle.”

Halfway along the path, a cough disturbed her. She gasped, paralysed with fear. Who was there?

“Miss Tremayne, I did not anticipate seeing you here without an attendant at night.”

Joyce recognised the suave voice. “I did not expect to encounter you, Sir Alistair.” She sought an explanation. “A severe headache confined me in my bedchamber. I thought fresh air would cure it.” More lies which Papa would strongly disapprove of.

“That won’t fudge,” Sir Alistair said wryly.

“Oh!” She pressed her hands against her hot cheeks. “On my way here, I thought I imagined footsteps behind me.” *What does he know? What did he witness?* “May I depend on your discretion?”

“If despicable Baron Gascoyne were not about to live at his estate, you could not.”

“The baron is not contemptible, he is a...an honourable gentleman.”

“Miss Tremayne, you are so young you almost wring my heart.” He bowed. “I shall leave Cornwall early tomorrow morning and look forward to seeing you in London, where I hope you will return the ring to Gascoyne. If you promise never again to be so foolhardy I shall be discreet.”

“I...I promise.” Joyce clamped her lips together. *Keeping my promise to find an opportunity to speak to Gawayne privately in London will not be foolhardy because we are betrothed.*

“I shall say no more about your folly. However, foolish child, if you permitted Gascoyne to kiss you, I would have been obliged to tell your grandfather about your escapade.”

Why did he sound amused? Joyce watched him walk away, his posture and gait a confident gentleman's. Puzzled because he often sought her company. She did not understand why he concerned himself with her but gave it little thought.

Chapter Twenty

25th June 1816

At Tresellion House, grandfather's five-storey residence in Mayfair, Joyce sat in her undergarments looking at her reflection in her dressing table mirror.

"Would you prefer braids or a chignon at the back of your head, Miss Tremayne?"

Joyce looked her hair parted in the centre, already arranged with small curls over her forehead.

"Not braids." Joyce pinched her cheeks to add more colour to them.

Baxter gathered the hair at the back of her head and twisted it into a chignon. Joyce glanced at the clock. In a half hour, Sir Alistair would collect her to take her for a drive in his phaeton at Hyde Park between the fashionable hour of five and six p.m. Her coiffure completed, Joyce stood.

Baxter fetched a high-necked, high-waisted, cream-coloured muslin carriage gown and pelisse and helped her put them on. While Joyce fidgeted, she tweaked frills protruding from the long sleeves into place. She stood back and clasped her hands together at her chest. "Perfect, I'm proud to serve you," she breathed. "If I may say, the colour suits your complexion better than white."

"Pon my word, your praise overwhelms me," Joyce teased her.

Baxter set the high-crowned hat, ornamented with artificial cream and pink roses around the brim on Joyce's head, and tied the broad ribbons to secure the hat in place in a firm bow beneath Joyce's chin. "Don't worry, Miss. If it's windy, your hat won't be blown away."

Her furred pink parasol with a cream fringe held by the tip in one hand and a dark pink, velvet reticule dangling from her wrist, Joyce joined her grandmother in the yellow drawing room to wait for the baronet.

"You are so elegant you will be admired," Ariadne said.

Joyce curtsied. "Thank you, Grandmama." She clenched her jaw and sank onto a chair. The last parliamentary session would end in a week. After Grandpapa took part in

this year's affairs of state, she was expected to return to Cornwall, instead of setting sail for Madras from the London pool, filled with ships from all over the world. Papa broke his promise to send for her after she completed her education at the seminary, in a London season. In his next letter to Grandpapa and Grandmama, he might have instructed them to arrange her passage home on Sea Sprite.

She pouted. Since her presentation to Queen Charlotte at St James, no one could accuse her of not being compliant. Besieged by suitors, she attended balls, alfresco breakfasts, routs masquerades, military reviews, plays viewed from her grandparent's box at the theatre and other entertainments. Yet she always longed to escape from the London season, a marriage market filled with competitive parents and their daughters. Joyce groaned. Watched by eagle-eyed Grandmama, she rarely snatched more than a few words with Gawayne and occasionally managed a brief chat with Morwenna. To her, the difference in their circumstances was unimportant.

Despite the disparity in their incomes, certain Gawayne loved her and was not one of the fortune hunters her grandparents warned her about he wished, like Sir Alistair, he basked in the sunshine of their approval. Unlike many other gentlemen, the urbane baronet never flirted with her or, even worse, embarrassed her with a declaration of undying love, for which she was grateful. Joyce liked him. He could always be depended on to offer small services. Among others, he put her shawl around her shoulders if she was cold, snubbed pretentious suitors. In a crowded room, with her hand on his muscular arm, he often guided her through a crowd of people. When she was thirsty, he fetched a drink.

"Sir Alistair," a footman announced.

She stood and returned Alistair's bow with a curtsy. Despite the scar on his face, the baronet would stand out in a crowd. Even the most severe judge would not find anything in his appearance to criticize. His dark blue, kerseymere tailcoat buttoned to the waist, a blue and green striped waistcoat, straw-coloured pantaloons, and black Hessian boots, polished to mirror-like perfection, were faultless.

The corners of his mouth twitched as though he were amused. "Miss Tremayne, my phaeton awaits. Countess, you can trust me to take great care of your granddaughter."

Joyce put her gloved hand on the arm Sir Alistair held out toward her. The footman opened the door.

“Miss Tremayne, may one hope pray you were pleased by what you saw when you gazed so intently at me?”

Wretch! His question threw her into confusion as they walked to the front door. “I apologise for my r...rude scrutiny,” she faltered. “I merely thought y...you are dressed w...with good taste and propriety.” Aware her cheeks flushed warmly with embarrassment she clutched his coat sleeve.

“Thank you for your compliments. Have mercy. My valet, a very superior being, will not forgive me if my coat sleeve is creased. If I don’t meet his standard, he threatens to leave my employment.” Alistair said as they walked to the phaeton. “It is my turn to beg forgiveness for my ill-bred questions.”

Joyce flexed her hand and replaced it lightly on his arm. “You need not ask for it,” she said, unable to think of an adequate reply. She peered up at his face through her eyelashes. “We are fortunate with the weather,” she remarked to change the conversation to a safe topic while he helped her up into the phaeton.

“What else is there to speak about other than London stinks in hot weather. The town is thin of company since many members of the ton went to Brighton, some other seaside town or their estates in the country.”

She wanted to ask him why he sought her out so frequently. Instead, she shrugged.

“Are you sorry the season is nearly over?” Alistair asked.

“No, I hope my father will arrange for me to go home soon.” Her only regret was she would be sad if she did not have the pleasure of seeing Gawayne even from a distance. Her mouth pursed, she decided nothing would prevent her from speaking to her betrothed at the first opportunity when she would persuade him to join her in Madras.

Alistair took the reins from Dick, his small tiger attired in smart livery, a little cockade on his hat and polished, knee-high black boots. The phaeton moved forward. Dick jumped up onto the box at the back.

“Miss Tremayne, you have not replied to my question. One asks oneself what you could be daydreaming about?”

Joyce hastily gathered her wits. “I am glad the season is over,” she said too quietly for Dick to hear her. “Your matched pair of greys are magnificent. Their coats shine like satin.”

The thoroughbreds attracted praise as they trotted around the square—the centre, surrounded by iron railings, a calm, green oasis in the busy city.

“Miss Tremayne, you did not answer my question.”

“I daydreamed about sailing home and seeing my dear Papa,” she again added softly to prevent Dick from hearing her above the sound of other traffic. Curious because she could not fathom why the baronet frequently sought her company. Unlike other members of the upper ten thousand, nicknamed the ton, who danced with her, asked to go with them to Hyde Park in their phaetons, tried to flirt with her, and paid her compliments which flooded her cheeks with blushes, Sir Alistair did not court her. Yet, except for Gawayne, she preferred him to any other gentleman.

Always at ease with Sir Alistair. Joyce dabbed perspiration from her forehead, opened her parasol and held it over her head.

“It is hot today. Would you prefer an ice cream at Gunter’s to a drive in the park?”

She looked at his clean cut profile. “No, thank you. I don’t want to disturb you by asking you to change your plan.”

He glanced from his greys to her and back to them. “I doubt you could ever perturb me.”

“Not even when you—?” No, she should not mention her clandestine tryst at night with Gawayne.

“If you were about to refer to my presence when you met Gascoyne, I considered you unwise but have too much confidence in your underlying good sense to be worried.”

“Thank you for more than I deserve.”

He chuckled. “Perhaps it is, but you were sensible to refuse his kiss.”

Joyce stared at her hands gripped together so tightly on her lap that her pale pink Limerick gloves might split. “Why do you trouble yourself with me? You must of me as a foolish child,” she persisted and relaxed her hands.

“I don’t but those who are responsible for you might.” He laughed. “To answer your question, it is due to my vanity. No lady other than you preferred to sit beside me at a ball instead of dancing because her feet hurt, so I decided to woo you.”

Could he be serious? No. He never behaved like any other of her suitors. “Fibber,” Joyce mocked. “What is the real reason?” she demanded and acknowledged two of her admirers, who bowed their heads as Sir Alistair drove past.

“Minx,” Alistair joked. “Since you press me so hard, I shall answer you while we refresh ourselves at Gunter’s.”

On the way down Rotten Row toward Hyde Park Corner, they either acknowledged acquaintances and friends with a gesture, or Alistair reined in the greys to exchange brief words.

The phaeton passed through the tollgate and they were on the way to Gunter’s passing through crowded streets.

“Sir Alistair, do you think the sunshine will continue for a week or more?” Joyce asked, grateful because a comment about unpredictable weather always initiated a conversation.

“It might, but I think there will be thunderstorms.”

Joyce searched for another topic. She chose the Prince Regent’s popular daughter, who would inherit the throne. “Princess Charlotte and her husband, Leopold of...of—”

“Saxe-Coburg-Saalfeld,” Alastair reminded her. “What of them?”

“They joined the exodus from London and are now in Worthing. Many people who go there, bathe in the sea and drink seawater. Do you think it is beneficial?”

“A dip in the sea is invigorating, but although you might think I am decrepit, I am not old enough to be tempted to take a doctor’s advice to drink the salty water.”

“Do you enjoy making fun of me? I merely mentioned bathing in the sea and seawater because the princess and her husband are at the coast, and I thought it was a suitable subject for polite conversation. I wonder if they are fortunate to be blessed with a happy marriage.”

“If so, Miss Tremayne, indeed, they are fortunate. Too frequently, a happy one is fortuitous.”

Joyce touched the scar on her cheek with the tip of her finger. *Does he know my parents are estranged?*

“I believe your grandparents’ marriage is one made in heaven,” he added.

Not a subject she would discuss. Joyce heaved a sigh. Grandmama tried to drill propriety into her, but she often received a sharp dressing down. Too often, she broke society’s bewildering numbers of unwritten rules and regulations and feared she was about to break another one. “Sir Alister, I don’t want to incur my grandmother’s anger.

Please pardon me for asking if partaking of refreshment with you at Gunter's will damage my reputation."

He turned his head from the road ahead and studied her, sympathy revealed in his eyes.

She swallowed to avoid her sensibilities controlling her. The earl and countess were delighted to have a granddaughter. She could not accuse them of unkindness. Yet she knew they were disappointed because she did not meet all their expectations.

Alistair transferred his attention to the road ahead. "There are no objections to a lady enjoying refreshment with a gentleman at Gunter's, which is not the proprietor's only claim to fame. He caters for events at private houses. The decorations on the tables are subtle publicity for his fruit syrups, fragile sugar-spun creations, cakes, biscuits, and candied fruit. The fresh fruit he serves include pineapples, which are so expensive ladies, who cannot afford their price, borrow one to impress their guests."

Joyce giggled, imagining one on loan at different houses. A prized centrepiece on a table.

"Ah, we have arrived at Berkely Square. I shall park the phaeton in the shade under the plane trees." He looked at his tiger, who got down from the phaeton. "Dick."

"Yes, sir?"

"Hitch the horses' reins to the rail." He took his drawstring purse out of his pocket and removed several coins. Take these to pay for whatever you would enjoy eating and drinking. When you see I am ready to leave, return."

"Thank you, sir." Dick touched the brim of his hat and walked jauntily toward the other side of the square.

"Miss Tremayne, would you like to have a chilled fruit syrup and an ice cream?"

"No, thank you. If they are available, I would prefer lemon or lime water to quench my thirst and an ice cream."

"Which flavour of fruit or flowers?"

"Do you think I could have-? No, Gunter's would not have it. How silly of me. I was about to ask a foolish question."

"If you don't ask you will never know if your preference is available. What is it?"

"Mangos, my favourite fruit, are shipped to England, but I don't suppose they are an ingredient in Gunter's ice cream. May I have a strawberry one?"

Alistair beckoned to a waiter. "Two glasses of lemon water, two mango ice creams if they are available, otherwise one strawberry and one elderflower."

"Very good, sir, I shall serve you with the drinks and mango ice creams. As you see, we are very busy, so there will be a short delay." The man scurried away.

"I am about to enjoy a little bit of paradise," Joyce said. "You cannot imagine the taste of either large fresh mangos or small ones squeezed in their skins until the contents fizz like champagne. I cannot thank you enough for bringing me here."

"There is no need to. I am always pleased to be with you."

She widened her eyes and blinked in fragmented sunshine passed through the leaves overhead. "You said you would tell me at Gunter's why you trouble yourself with me." She frowned. "Now we are here, please explain."

"Miss Tremayne, you could never trouble me," he began, his voice aloof and his face impassive.

"Oh! You are kind. Except for when I was young in India, I don't think I bothered anyone other than my mother, who, as I told you, I have not seen since I was five." Once more, she fingered her scar. "In England, no matter how hard I try, my conduct often displeases my grandparents and other relatives. Even my brother, Sylvester, sometimes scolds me. I suppose it is inevitable because he chose to live in England for the rest of his life and I am counting the days until I return to India." The second after Joyce said that her determination to speak to Gawayne increased. She resolved neither anything nor anyone would stand between them. She half-closed her eyes to veil their expressions with her eyelashes.

"Once, when you were unwise, you troubled me. The cause is in the past and will have no significance in future. The answer to your question about why I seek your company is simple. I like you and if there is a lonely space in your heart my admiration and friendship might be able to fill it."

Joyce looked into his large green eyes and almost lost herself in them. Only an ice maiden would reject friendship with a gentleman not romantically attached to her. Certain he said he would woo her to tease her she relaxed but wondered whether he would censure her if he knew she was determined to have a private conversation with her betrothed. *If Gawayne finds out Sir Alistair is my friend, he might be jealous and object.* She put the thought out of her mind.

The waiter served their order on small trays.

Alistair picked up his glass. "Don't let your ice cream melt, Miss Tremayne."

Joyce tasted it. "Delicious!" she exclaimed.

"I agree. This flavour will be my favourite, and I shall purchase imported mangos when they are available."

"If you ever visit India, you will enjoy fresh ones even more," she assured him.

"Shall I have the pleasure of seeing you at the Montgomery's soiree this evening, Miss Tremayne?" he asked when they finished their refreshments.

"Yes." She replied and prayed Gawayne and Morwenna, popular members of society who received many invitations, would be there.

* * *

Joyce studied her reflection in her dressing table mirror. She pushed curls back behind her ears to reveal the heart-shaped silver earrings Vivian gave her eight years ago. The matching pendant rested against her unblemished skin above the low-cut neckline of her ivory-coloured silk gown. Nothing, she thought, could be more elegant than either her ivory satin fillet edged with silver and pearls around her head or silver bracelets set with large pearls worn over her elbow-length white kid gloves. She dressed to please Gawayne. If he attended the Montgomery's soiree, would he admire her and contrive a meeting? She twirled around and looked down at the silver tassels around the hem of her gown.

Baxter's habitually solemn face surrendered to a broad smile. "Miss Tremayne, your mirror reveals a perfect young lady. I am sure, Sir Alistair, who is taken with you, will admire you."

Joyce stood still and stared at the woman. "Taken with me!" she exclaimed, her voice cold as ice.

Her dresser flinched. "I beg your pardon. Um... I only repeated what I heard said."

Joyce choked back her anger and resisted the temptation to stoop low enough to ask from which chatterbox. "I know I can trust you not to gossip."

Baxter drew herself up to her full height. "You may. I don't tittle-tattle."

Joyce stood still while the dresser arranged an exquisite Kashmir shawl, one of Papa's gifts, around her. Equipped with a small ivory fan and a satin reticule in which she put her betrothal ring which she always kept close to her, she joined her grandparents. Joyce smiled mischievously. She had only promised Sir Alistair never to be foolhardy.

Chapter Twenty-One

Lady Montgomery, splendid in turquoise satin and diamonds, and her husband, dressed for the evening in a corbeau coloured coat, white waistcoat and black satin breeches, waited at the top of the stairs at their spacious house in Berkeley Square to welcome their guests to their soiree.

Grandmama, splendid in violet silk and amethyst jewellery, and Lady Montgomery, who had been friends since they entered polite society when they were sixteen, kissed each other's cheeks while their husbands spoke briefly to each other.

"You have met my granddaughter?" Ariadne asked.

"Yes. Welcome, child."

Joyce curtsied. She wished old ladies would not address her as a child.

"Will your granddaughter entertain us this evening?" Lady Russell asked.

Joyce's lips twitched. Why did she put the question to Grandmama instead of to her?

"She plays the pianoforte better than many young ladies and sings delightfully but is too modest to put herself forward in public."

"Better than drawing attention to herself like some bold young ladies." She waved a finger at Morwenna, who waited to be received. "I don't accuse your former ward's sister of immodesty. And her brother's unassuming air and good manners ensure his popularity. They are a credit to you. I daresay you look forward to seeing them and hearing Baron Gascoyne recite." Lady Montgomery half turned around to indicate a pair of open doors behind her. "Please join our guests."

Close to her grandmother, Joyce entered the drawing room with walls hung with pink and gold damask, an impressive marble chimneypiece, and a pair of Chinese *famille* rose vases on the mantelpiece. She gazed at an oil painting above it, which she presumed was of her host and hostess in the eighteenth century's elaborate clothes, powdered wigs, and their children in similar attire.

Joyce took a glass of ratafia from a silver tray held by a footman, who circulated among guests. The gentlemen wore intricately arranged white neckcloths, double-breasted coats, knee-length breeches and silk stockings. The ladies were dressed in sumptuous evening gowns with several frills, flounces or rouleaux and artificial flowers at the hems. Anxious, she scanned the drawing room. .

“Shall we be seated?” Grandmama asked, her gloved hand on Grandpapa’s arm.

Joyce caught her breath when Sir Alistair greeted her instead of her betrothed, who she was desperate to speak to.

Alistair handed her grandmother onto one of the chairs upholstered in rose pink velvet.

Grandmama patted the seat of the chair beside her. “Joyce, sit next to me. Sir Alistair, please be seated beside her.”

While he waited politely for her to be seated, at last, she saw Gawayne and Morwenna on the far side of the drawing room. Her immediate impulse was to hurry toward them. Conscious of her grandparents and the baronet, she restrained herself. She sat on the chair. Had Gawayne seen her? How would she contrive to speak alone to him? Could she snatch a moment with Morwenna and ask her to tell her brother she was determined to meet him?

In the space in front of the fireplace, a debutante dressed in a pale blue net worn over a white satin petticoat plucked the harp strings. Impatient to greet Gawayne and Morwenna, Joyce ignored Sir Alistair, the music and several guests’ performances.

Gawayne stood facing everyone and said a few words. Spellbound, she gazed at him. His bottle-green coat emphasised his broad shoulders and slender waist. Tight fitting sage-green knee-length breeches and cream silk stockings revealed his well-shaped legs. Candlelight from a chandelier shone on his golden curls and unblemished complexion. Surely no other lady was blessed with such a handsome fiancé.

Gawayne bowed. When he faced the audience, Joyce was certain he gazed and smiled only at her, a thrill ran up and down her spine.

“My lords, ladies and gentlemen,” he began in his deep, melodious voice, “for your pleasure, I shall recite sonnet number sixteen by the bard.”

“Who is the bard?” a lady’s voice asked from the back of the drawing room.

Heads turned to see the speaker. Some of the audience tittered.

“William Shakespeare is the great English bard,” Gawayne explained. “I shall commence my recitation.”

*“Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments; love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds,*

Still certain Gawayne gazed only at her, Joyce gasped in ecstasy. She clasped her hands below her breasts. He wanted her to understand no obstacles to their marriage would ever succeed. She blinked tears of joy from her eyes.

Alistair’s hand, holding a pristine white handkerchief, reached across her. “I imagine ladies find these sentiments heart-wrenching,” he whispered.

“Shush! I want to listen to the sonnet!” she murmured too quietly for Grandmama to overhear and missed some of the poignant words.

Was Gawayne frowning at them? Did he not know her love was constant? Could he be jealous of Sir Alistair? She must tell him there was no reason to be.

Gawayne’s voice penetrated her thoughts.

*“Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom:
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ nor no man ever loved,”* he concluded.

In response to his audience’s tumultuous applause, he bowed, stepped forward, bowed again to Grandpapa and Grandmama, approached her and bowed. “Miss Tremayne, a pleasure to see you,” he said then walked out of the drawing room.

Accompanied by a gentleman who played the pianoforte, a debutante sang.

“Grandmama, I must visit the ladies’ retiring room.” Joyce left without waiting for permission. Along the corridor, the door to another drawing room, where footmen were serving food and drinks, stood open. She looked from one person to another but did not see her betrothed and his sister. Back in the corridor, she walked slowly. Where were they? Voices came from a parlour with a door slightly ajar.

“Morwenna, when we first met Joyce, I ordered you to befriend her,” Gawayne said. “Now, our future is at stake. To participate in this year’s London Season, I practised stringent economy. You must persuade Joyce to meet me to convince the pampered chit to elope with me. At best, her grandparents think I am unsuitable to be her husband. At worst, they know I am a fortune hunter.”

“B...but, Gawayne, even if Joyce agrees, and I doubt she will because of her strict principles, her father might cut her off without a penny, and the Earl and Countess are such high sticklers they would disown her.”

“I doubt it. Everything she has said about her father implies he dotes on her. Besides, her grandparents would do their utmost to avoid scandal.”

Heartbreak, incipient tears, and outrage fought in Joyce. She trembled from head to foot. Faint, she leaned against the wall to support herself but slid onto the floor. For good reason, her grandparents separated her from Gawayne. Papa cautioned her in a letter: “Be careful, Puss. The world is full of cheaters and the cheated. Never allow your sensibilities and affection to overrule your good sense.”

Close to tears, she shuddered at the thought of anyone finding out she had been hoodwinked. Joyce summoned her pride inherited from a long line of noble Cornish men and women. She stood. Outrage consumed her. She flung open the door.

Gawayne saw her. He slapped his sister across her face so hard her neck snapped back. “You fool, Morwenna, you have ruined everything,” he shouted. “I told you to shut the door.”

“I am glad she did not.” Joyce opened her reticule withdrew the betrothal ring he gave her and hurled it at him. “You are unscrupulous.”

“Yes, I am, so take back the ring lest I reveal you agreed to a secret betrothal and say I reneged because you are immoral.”

“By my faith, Gascoyne, you are not a gentleman,” drawled a quiet voice from the threshold.

“Sir Alistair!” Joyce exclaimed.

“I am yet to recite the tale of a blameless damsel and her violent suitor at Lord and Lady Montgomery’s soiree.” His eyes narrowed as he looked at Morwenna. “Miss Gascoyne, you have my sympathy. My mind fails to forecast the audience’s reaction after I recite the infuriated scoundrel slapped his sister’s face.”

Gawayne gobbled like a turkey cock, his cheeks scarlet, the expression in his eyes venomous.

Alister stared glacially at him. "If one word from you damages Miss Tremayne's reputation, I promise you will have cause to regret it."

Morwenna burst into tears. "Joyce, I am sorry, sorrier than you can imagine. My brother forced me to—"

"The blame is as much yours as it is his. You could have told me." Joyce swept out of the room, her hand on Sir Alistair's arm. In the corridor, she swallowed and looked sideways at him. "I think you have appointed yourself to be my saviour."

"No, merely your humble servant," he replied.

Joyce tried but failed to interpret the intent expression in his eyes revealed by candlelight from a nearby sconce. Unbidden, tears trickled down her cheeks.

"Don't cry. You were very brave when you returned his ring." Silent for a moment, he added. "Your grandparents must not suspect anything is amiss. I suggest we enter the drawing room separately."

She dabbed her cheeks with the back of her glove. "My tears are because I am long to go home."

"To Tresellion Square?"

"No, to India. I told you Papa promised I could return after my debut. The monsoon will soon be favourable for me to set sail to Madras."

Alistair looked thoughtfully at her. "After the battle at Waterloo, I thought I never wanted to leave these shores again. I have changed my mind. I might visit India."

Joyce forced herself to smile. "Papa would be pleased to meet you, and if they are in season, you will enjoy fresh mangos," she said, afraid her grandparents might try to keep her with them to ensure she made a suitable match. What would the result be if they ever discovered the truth about her and Gawayne? Her conscience pricked. Morwenna, Gawayne's victim, needed help. Should she offer to take her to Madras where she would be besieged by suitors because gentlemen outnumbered ladies?

Alistair broke into her thoughts. He raised her flaccid, gloved hand to his lips and kissed the air above it. "Remember, although you are shocked by Gascoyne's perfidy, some gentleman's love is as fixed as the pole star."

"I know. Grandpapa's is, and my brother, Sylvester, adores his wife." She scrutinised Sir Alistair's face. "Is there a lady you want to marry?" she asked impulsively.

"An impertinent question which your youth pardons," he replied, his face inscrutable.

"Please forgive me."

He smiled. "I shall answer your curiosity. At your age, I wooed a lady I wanted to lead to the altar, but she married another suitor."

"How sad," Joyce said.

"How fortunate." He laughed. "At the time, I did not understand we were not suited and I was too young to marry."

"Has there never been another lady you wanted to be your wife?"

"No, only recently." He waved his forefinger at her. "No more questions. If you don't return to the drawing room, your grandmother will send someone in search of you. I shall follow later. And, Joyce."

"Yes."

"Don't dwell on what passed between you and Gascoyne."

"Oh, I am fortunate to have you as my friend."

She returned to her chair next to grandmamma."

"Why were you away for so long?" Ariadne whispered.

"I was talking to Sir Alistair," she said in outward control of her turmoil.

"Ah," Grandmama breathed as the gentleman seated himself. She nodded at him while a lady, with a twinkle in her eye said she would read an extract from Jane Austen's popular novel *Pride and Prejudice*.

'It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife,' she began and waited for a ripple of laughter to die down while heads turned to look at eligible bachelors.

Why did she think Sir Alistair was a confirmed bachelor. *There is no reason for him not to marry and if he does, his wife will be fortunate. Would he take a wife? Most aristocratic gentlemen wanted a son to inherit their titles.*

"Grandmama, does Sir Alistair have many relatives?" Joyce asked on their way back to Tresellion Square.

Ariadne settled back against the squabs. "His parents, who your grandfather and I counted among our friends, are dead. She frowned. Although it is assumed he is wealthy

I doubt his inheritance is no more than adequate. If I am not mistaken, he cannot afford to marry a lady who will not have a generous marriage settlement. Let me think. He has an uncle who would become the next Baronet Radclyffe if Alistair does not make haste to enter what is rudely called the parson's trap and have a son."

"Tut-tut, my lady, such language. If marriage is a trap, it is one I entered willingly," Hector said.

"So did I, but many men are wary of it. Who is to say Sir Alistair is not one of them?" Ariadne said. The coach jolted. She put up her hand to adjust her high-crowned hat with a high poke in front around which three ostrich plumes dyed to match her golden-brown pelisse curled. "Where was I? Ah, yes," she mused. "Sir Alistair has a clutch of cousins from the paternal and maternal branches of his family, but, as the saying goes, they do not live in each other's pockets. Should he marry, his uncle's nose will be out of joint."

The coach halted. The steps were lowered. Grandpapa got out and helped them to descend. Indoors, about to go to their bedchambers, he patted her hand. "We have known Alistair since he was a small boy. He is fastidious. If he marries, I believe he will never stray from his marriage vows. Unlike the disgraceful Prince George, the heir to the throne, some of us believe in holy matrimony and strive to be exemplary husbands." He cleared his throat as though his words embarrassed him. "Good night, child, your grandmother and I hope to see you wed to a suitable gentleman in England."

Her grandparents would be disappointed because marriage in this country would mean she could not go to Madras without her husband's permission. Joyce exercised iron control while she followed them upstairs. "Goodnight," she said, when she opened her bedroom door. Frantic to have solitude, if she did not require Baxter to unlace her stays, she would have dismissed her. Reluctant, she submitted to the woman's ministrations. "Baxter, I can tie the strings of my nightcap under my chin. And from now on sleep in the maidservant's quarter. Tomorrow I shall give an order for your truckle bed to be removed."

Baxter did not dare to argue with her. She snuffed out the candles and left the bedchamber.

Joyce removed a pair of vases, which she considered hideous, from the mantelpiece and hurled them down instead of surrendering to a flood of tears. She released the blind,

She drew a chair to the window sat and looked out at the quiet square. Lit by a full moon in a midnight blue sky spangled with stars a breeze wafted the scent of roses.

She choked back a sob. *Fool. Ignorant fool. Bamboozled by an unscrupulous man who pretended to love me.* Joyce did not know whether she was angrier with herself for being deceived or Gawayne's pretence. An owl glided to the centre of the square and swooped down. A mouse squeaked. Joyce shuddered. She had been Gawayne's prey. Not true! Nothing sheltered the unfortunate little creature but her grandparents must have harboured suspicions about Gascoyne and acted to protect her.

Morwenna! Was her affection been false coin or genuine? When her brother raged and slapped her face with the full force of his strong hand was it for the first time? Joyce frowned. Even if Morwenna pretended to be her friend and lied when she said she was sorry, her brother must have controlled her. Whatever the truth, Morwenna needed protection.

Her elbows on the windowsill, sorrowful Joyce propped her face on her hands. Pride reasserted itself. Never again would a glib predator deceive her. Scornful laughter escaped her. Who could she trust her sad tale with and seek aid for Morwenna? No one! In a few brief hours, she changed from a reckless girl to a cautious woman. Sylvester was too occupied with his estate and the imminent arrival of his firstborn to pay her attention. She could not confide in her grandparents. They would be shocked and try harder to persuade her to agree to an advantageous marriage. Her friend Sir Alistair seemed omniscient. Suppose out of greed, he plotted to be more than her friend because her father was a nabob. She would be too ashamed of her duplicity to confide in Papa. Yet, somehow, with or without her grandparents' approval, she must return to him as soon as possible.

Her straight back rigid, Joyce stood. She had received a note from the Sea Sprite's captain. At anchor in the London pool, the merchantman returned from Canada with a cargo of beaver pelts. When it was sold in accordance with Papa's instructions and the ship was loaded with goods, it would set sail for Madras. She doubted Captain Harvey, would gainsay her instructions. Joyce smiled. By whatever means she must employ, she would be on board.

She lowered the blind. In her dark bedchamber got into bed. Settled on the thick feather mattress, her head snuggled onto soft pillows, and the covers pulled up to her chin, she made plans. Soon her luggage would be packed to take to Cornwall. Instead, she

would seize the opportunity to send it to Sea Sprite. She would copy Papa's script in a letter with forged instructions from him to the captain.

At last, she would go home.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Joyce woke from a restless night's sleep filled with half-remembered nightmares about Gascoyne's betrayal and his brutality.

I hate him as much as I hate crocodiles and pity Morwenna.

She yawned the memory of yesterday's perfidy vivid. Was it the first time Gascoyne slapped his sister? How sincere was Morwenna when she said she was sorry for obeying his orders? Joyce recalled the years during which they were been inseparable. Had Morwenna's friendship always been entirely false? Whether it was or not, she should never be at risk of Gascoyne ever losing his temper and hitting her again. There must be some way to prevent it.

Baxter entered the bedchamber carrying a tray. "Good morning, Miss."

Joyce nodded at her. *Far from good*, she thought, sat up. Her back against the bedhead, the tray of hot chocolate and thinly sliced bread and butter across her lap, she could not banish the memory of Morwenna's head jerking back when her brother hit her.

Baxter pulled up the blind. Sunshine flooded through the muslin curtain, which prevented anyone in the square seeing inside the bedchamber. She turned around. "Your bedcovers are rumpled. Didn't you sleep well?"

"I was restless," Joyce admitted.

"Are you ill?"

"No." Thoughtful, Joyce sipped the sweet beverage and ate a slice of bread and butter. Her eyes opened wide. *Although Morwenna lives with her brother, she is still Grandfather's ward!* He must remove her from Gascoyne's custody, but how can it be accomplished?

About to return the chair by the window to its usual place, Baxter gasped. "Mercy me. Miss Morwenna is here so early in the morning without a maid or a footman to attend her?"

Joyce spilled a little of the sweet drink onto the tray, got out of bed, and rushed to look outside. Morwenna raised her hand to knock on the door.

“Baxter, hurry downstairs to bring her here.”

Palpably agog with curiosity, Baxter hurried out of the bedchamber. “Miss Morwenna,” she announced in a shocked voice when she returned. “Shall I tell her ladyship she is here?”

“No! Put a chair by my bed. Fetch fresh chocolate, more bread and butter, and another cup and plate.” Horrified, Joyce gazed at Morwenna’s bruised cheek, black eye and red marks on her neck visible above the collar on her pelisse.

Baxter glanced from her to Morwenna, opened her mouth to speak, and changed her mind. After a backward glance at them, she left the bedchamber.

Joyce gestured to a chair. She waited for her pathetic, unexpected visitor to be seated. “I assume Gascoyne is responsible for your injuries.”

Morwenna nodded.

“Why did he hit you?”

Morwenna ignored the chair. She took two agitated turns around the bedchamber, her kid half-boots soundless on the Axminster carpet. “During the night, in a drunken rage, he entered my room and beat me. I yelled loudly. John, a footman in the servants’ quarters, heard me. He came and dragged Gascoyne away and put him to bed.” While Morwenna spoke, tears rolled down her cheeks. “Gawayne pounded me and threatened to sell me to the highest bidder in or out of wedlock.” She dried her face on the sleeve of her pelisse. “At dawn, I dressed, crept out of my bedchamber and saw John on guard opposite the door. He wanted to escort me, but if Gawayne found out, he would dismiss him without a reference. I apologise for coming here, but I could not stay under the same roof as my brother and have nowhere else to go.” She winced when she lowered herself onto the chair.

Joyce tapped her fingertips on the tray. “I understand why you are here, but I have a question I want you to answer honestly. Was your friendship always a pretence?”

“Never! I suffered agonies of guilt, but although my brother hit me yesterday at the soiree for the first time, I was always too afraid not to obey him. Please believe I could not love you more if you were my sister.”

Since we first met, Morwenna has always been gentle and affectionate, but Gascoyne’s true nature was concealed. Her fingers entwined Joyce gazed at Morwenna’s ravaged face. “Why did your brother behave unforgivably?”

“Papa was bookish. He spent most of his time in the library. His estate was mismanaged. Since our parents died, Gawayne has always resented my inheritance specified in our father’s last will and testament. Gawayne wants much more than his income provides. Better clothes, thoroughbred horses, and so many other things. From the moment Lord and Lady Tresellion took us in, he envied their wealth and resented you.”

“Me! Why?”

Everyone at the castle knew as a nabob’s daughter, your marriage settlement would enable you and your husband to command every luxury imaginable. My brother was determined to marry you and shape you to his will. He was always careful not to show you his ...um... dark aspect.” Morwenna stared down at her feet placed primly side by side. Tears rained down her discoloured, swollen cheeks. She sniffed. “He is a bully. Oh, I have said enough about him. I can never live with him again. W... what will become of me?”

Joyce sipped some lukewarm chocolate. Feeling older than her age since she went to the soiree, she stared out of the window and considered her reply. “You are still the earl’s ward. My grandparents will ask who assaulted you. Tell them the truth about what your brother did and he threatened to sell you to the highest bidder.”

Morwenna wrapped her arms around herself. “Ouch, my ribs are painful. I think Gawayne will guess where I am, but not dare to come here. I am petrified, certain he will try to find an opportunity to abduct me.”

“Don’t be so fanciful, Morwenna.”

“Not fanciful. You don’t know him as well as I do.”

“I don’t want to. He is a lunatic who should be in Bedlam.

“Yes, he should,” Morwenna murmured.

Previously, Joyce told Gawayne and Morwenna she hoped they would travel to Madras where she imagined Papa would welcoming them as her betrothed and future sister-in-law. She wrinkled her nose. Would Morwenna accept an invitation to accompany her on the voyage? Captain Harvey’s respectable wife, who still travelled with him despite the dangers and discomforts, could chaperon them.

“Morwenna, all the tears in the world cannot help you. Please go into my dressing room. Take off your gloves, hat, and pelisse. You will feel more the thing if you also wash your face and tidy your hair.”

Morwenna gulped. "You must despise me for being a watering pot." She limped to the dressing room, one hand pressed against her ribs.

With overwhelming relief Joyce reclined against the bedhead. Married to the brutal, pseudo gentleman, God alone knew which horrors would have awaited her.

Yes, if I can arrange it, I shall take Morwenna to India.

Baxter entered the bedchamber carrying another tray.

"Please put it on the table. Hot chocolate will help to revive Miss Gascoyne when she returns from my dressing room."

"I also brought selfheal to soothe the poor young lady's eye, cheek, and any other bruises she might have."

"A good deed, Baxter. She will be fortunate if her eyesight is not impaired. When she drinks and eats, dress me. Soon, the earl will return from his morning ride in Hyde Park. I shall have breakfast with him while Morwenna rests in my bed."

An hour later, dressed in a long-sleeved cream jaconet morning gown, the high neckline edged with a ruff, Joyce entered the breakfast parlour.

"Good morning, Grandpapa."

A plate of thickly sliced ham and eggs flavoured with herbs sat on the table in front of him. He glanced up from *The Times*, spread open on his right, and looked at her. "Good morning, Joyce." He fastened one of the brass buttons on his riding coat. "I presume you have come to inform me Morwenna arrived in an unfortunate state."

She choked back the words in the tip of her tongue. Harris, the butler, who stood behind her grandfather's chair, must have told him about Morwenna's painful face. Was there never an end to even the most superior servant's gossip?"

"When Morwenna arrived, Harris was shocked by her injuries and, later, horrified when Baxter told him Gascoyne is responsible," Hector explained.

The news would have spread to the lowest kitchen maid and the stable hands by now. Joyce forced herself to relax her jaw.

"Leave us, Harris," Hector ordered.

Joyce waited to speak alone with him. "Morwenna is terrified of her brother. She fears wherever she is, he will kidnap her, beat her and in her words 'sell her in or out of marriage' to the highest bidder. Gascoyne must be insane. Morwenna is still your ward. What can be done to help her?"

“Four of my footmen and a groom armed with a pistol have gone to collect her possessions. Within the week, she shall come with us to Cornwall. Don’t look so surprised. Serve yourself to breakfast.”

“Grandpapa, you are an out and outer.”

He laughed. “Thank you for the compliment, but I am not perfect in every way.” He eyed her severely. “If you don’t want a stern reprimand from my countess, don’t use unladylike cant.”

Joyce went to the buffet. She put two boiled eggs into eggcups and added a bread roll and butter on a blue and white Wedgewood plate. At the table, she sat opposite her grandfather and filled a cup with coffee. She gazed at the blue walls and curtains in tones complementing the Wedgewood breakfast service and considered how to introduce the topic uppermost in her mind. It would be best to come straight to the point. “Grandpapa, the town is becoming short of company now the season is over. It is time for me to return to India.”

“Why?”

“Please don’t pretend not to know the answer.” She removed the brown shell from the top of an egg.

“You know, your grandmother is set on attending your marriage to an eligible parti.”

“Impossible!” Joyce exclaimed with an effort to control her temper. “I am too young to marry, and I will never accept an offer from a gentleman Papa has not met and approved of.”

“Benedict would not object if I write a letter to him in which I recommend a gentleman who has Sir Alistair’s *savoir faire*. Indeed, I would be pleased to consent if he asked me for permission to propose marriage to you.”

“A thirty-year old gentleman!”

Did he expect Sir Alistair to make an offer for her hand? She looked at her grandfather across the table covered with a white linen tablecloth and set with silver and crystal.

“A gentleman older than his bride knows how to cosset her.”

“I will never accept a husband who would not agree to settle in Madras. I cannot, will not, live for the rest of my life in this country.”

“As you said, you are young. You must depend on those who are older and wiser than you to know what is suitable. My marriage to your grandmother was arranged. We only

met three times before making our wedding vows. Our parents' made a wise choice. We have never regretted our union."

Grandfather did not need to say more. A girl with the lowest intelligence in the prestigious marriage market would understand his implication. Tense, she ate, drank, and planned her escape on her way back to her bedchamber where Morwenna slept.

Joyce tip-toed to a door and entered her pink and cream boudoir. From a drawer in her rosewood escritoire, she removed bundles of letters from Papa, Mrs de Lancy and Vivian. She put them on a low table next to the chaise longue, stretched out on it, and read the correspondence from her dearest ones. Worn out by a sleepless night, Morwenna's shocking situation, and Grandpapa's inflexibility, she drifted off to sleep.

Grandmama's voice from the bedchamber woke her. Briefly disorientated, she gathered the heart-warming letters and returned them to the drawer.

"Morwenna, my poor child," Joyce heard her grandmother say. "The earl told me your brother mistreated you. I see he did not exaggerate how serious it is. We will take care of you. Your personal effects from Gascoyne's house will be put in the bedchamber prepared for you, and our doctor will examine you."

"Oh, no, Lady Ariadne, it would be too embarrassing," Morwenna protested.

"Nonsense! Don't be afraid of him. He is the soul of discretion. His manner is gentlemanly. Royalty and members of the haut ton consult him."

"Thank you, Lady Tresellion. Words cannot express my appreciation," Morwenna said tremulously. "I don't want to impose on you, but can you help my abigail, who will suffer for not telling Gascoyne I slipped out of the house, and John, the footman, who came to my rescue? I fear, at best, my brother will dismiss them without references. At worst, I c...cannot imagine how he will punish them."

"Hush, everything will be taken care of. To be concerned for them while you are suffering so much does you credit," Ariadne said. "I shall send a groom with instructions to bring them here. The footman will be recompensed for defending you, and if she agrees, your abigail will continue in your service."

"Thank you, Lady Tresellion," Morwenna repeated. "You don't know how frightened I am. I fear my brother will kidnap me."

“While you are in our charge? Impossible! Your sensibilities are agitated. Don’t succumb to foolish imagination. When you recover from your injuries, you must not dwell on Gascoyne’s ... er... insanity.”

Does Grandmama share my opinion that Gascoyne should be in Bedlam?

“Be assured you are safe with us, Morwenna,” Ariadne continued. “At the end of a week, when everyone’s baggage is packed, you shall travel with us to Cornwall.”

Joyce clenched her fists. Her fertile brain added to her plan to return to India with Morwenna. She sat at her escritoire in her dressing room and sharpened her new goose quill. She wrote on a sheet of foolscap paper pressed between two rollers to give it a smooth surface and marked with her family’s crest. She read her letter to Captain Harvey. Satisfied with it, she folded it in half and sealed it with a red wax wafer.

Joyce turned around on her chair to look at Baxter, who entered the room unannounced. “Miss Gascoyne is in her bedchamber. Her ladyship ordered me to pack your trunks and bandboxes, which two footmen are bringing from the attic. With your permission, I’ll put aside garments to wear this week to be packed on the day we leave apart from those you need for the journey.”

Without waiting for a reply, Baxter continued. “I’ll be glad to turn my back on London, which smells bad in this hot weather.”

“You may go,” Joyce said.

Baxter put her hands on her hips. “Not unless I’ve turned you out in style. There is an ink stain on your bodice, which will be difficult, if not impossible, to remove, and your hair is untidy.”

Joyce looked down at the tiny stain, which was almost unnoticeable. If she did not submit to Baxter, she would be forced to listen to admonitions for several days.

Dressed in a pale blue cambric gown a pattern of cornflower blue spots and her hair tidy, Joyce met her dresser’s exacting standard and went toward Morwenna’s bedchamber. At the door, Dr Knight, a dignified man dressed in a black coat and dark grey pantaloons, the sombre tones relieved by white linen, came out onto the corridor. Her grandmother joined him.

“Countess, there will be no permanent effects of the bruises all over the lady. The ointment I prescribed will soothe her pain. If it becomes more acute, small doses of

laudanum may be administered. I shall my leave to attend to another patient in urgent need of treatment. Good day to you.” He bowed and went downstairs.

“Bruises all over Morwenna’s body?” Joyce asked when he was out of earshot.

Ariadne nodded. “Yes, I have never been more shocked. I can hardly believe the earl and I never suspected what Gascoyne was capable of while he lived under our roof. When we decided it was time for Gascoyne to manage his own affairs your grandfather did not want to separate brother and sister.” She dabbed her eyes with her handkerchief.

“Grandmama, we were deceived. From the day I met him, I liked him. As time passed by, I appreciated him as no more than a...a dear friend.”

Thank God, he revealed himself in his true colours. I cannot imagine a worse fate than marriage to him.

From the back stairs a neatly dressed woman followed Mabey, the housekeeper, toward them. “Parry, Miss Gascoyne’s abigail,” Mabey said.

“Where is my poor lady?” the woman demanded.

“Don’t speak to your superiors unless you are spoken to,” Mabey ordered Parry.

“Your lady is resting in bed,” Ariadne said.

“Parry, did the footman who assisted your mistress come here with you?” Joyce asked.

“Yes, Miss Tremayne, he is with Harris.”

Good. If... what is his name – ah, yes - John is engaged, he will be useful. “With your permission, Grandmother, I shall keep Morwenna company while Mabey arranges for Parry’s accommodation.”

Without waiting for her grandmother to agree, she entered the bedchamber.

Morwenna gazed anxiously at her. “No matter what anyone says, I am certain Gascoyne will kidnap me.”

“Not if you agree to my plan,” Joyce said with total conviction.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Three days after Gascoyne assaulted Morwenna, Joyce turned away from the window in the blue drawing room. “Morwenna, don’t forget what you must say.”

“I shall not, but what will happen if your plan misfires?”

Joyce turned around to continue her survey. Early this morning her grandparents left London to offer their condolences to a widow. The preparations to depart from Cornwall tomorrow at dawn were complete. The footmen obeyed her order to bring her luggage and Morwenna’s to the hall. There was no reason why her scheme would be unsuccessful.

“Oh, no!” she exclaimed.

“What is wrong?” quavered Morwenna, whose emotions were as precarious as a tightrope walkers.

“Sir Alistair could not have arrived at a more inopportune moment. Look at him in a travelling coach loaded with luggage. I should have told the butler we were not at home, but who would have thought anyone would call at this hour of the morning?” The front door opened for her unwelcome guest entered the house. Next, with fury, she stared at a hackney, its body yellow and the roof black. by its yellow paint. A flatbed wagon halted behind Sir Alistair’s coach. She stiffened her spine. “Don’t be in a twitter, Morwenna. Nothing will deter me.”

The drawing room door opened quietly as a whisper. “Good morning, Miss Tremayne, Miss Gascoyne. Please forgive me for not waiting to be announced.” They responded with curtsies. “What, may I ask, Miss Tremayne, will you not be deterred from?” Alexander drawled. He transferred his gaze from her to Morwenna. “Ye Gods! I am shocked by your appearance, Miss Gascoyne,” he said, his mouth agape. “Were you a gentleman I would assume you came off the worst in a boxing match.”

Someone banged repeatedly on the front door. Loud voices sounded from the entrance hall. Feet pounded noisily up the stairs. Sir Alistair swung around. Two tall burly

men with unkempt beards, wearing stained flannel shirts, dirty fustian breeches and wool stockings, burst into the drawing room, cudgels held aloft. "Do as yer told an' no harm'll come to yer," one of them said.

"Gascoyne," Morwenna shrieked. "I knew Gawayne would have me kidnapped," she lied to conceal the truth.

"Your brother! Kidnap you?" Alistair asked.

The red-headed man glared at him and made a threatened him with his cudgel. "If yer know what's good for yer, keep yer bone box shut. And there's no saying yer walking stick ain't a swordstick. Hand it t'me."

"Ladies, prudence is advisable," Alistair said

"I told yer to keep yer bone box shut," Red Head growled like an infuriated dog.

Holding knives at the butler and three footmen's throats, four more unkempt, strong men shoved their captives into the drawing room. They gagged them, tied their hands together behind their backs, and bound their feet. One of the thugs brandished a cutlass and pointed at Joyce, Morwenna and Sir Alistair. "Downstairs with the three of yer. Keep schtum or yer'll pay for it," he ordered.

Four of the cutthroats heaved Joyce and Morwenna's trunks, which were packed for the journey to Cornwall, from the hall to the wagon. Sir Alistair's trunk, portmanteaux and dressing case were transferred from his coach.

Alistair looked at two street urchins who held his matched pair of greys bridles. "Where are my coachman and footmen?"

"Told yer that yer would pay for it if yer didn't keep schtum," said the red head. He struck Sir Alistair on the back so hard he stumbled. Two of the attackers shoved him forward. "Into the hackney with yer and the ladies," Red Head ordered.

"What should be done with this bang up to the knocker cove, Miss," Red Head asked, a pistol aimed at Alistair's head when they were seated.

The hackney moved forward at a brisk pace. Joyce looked at Morwenna. "We cannot risk Sir Alistair informing my grandparents about our destination. Sir Alistair must go with us.

"To prevent him making an outcry when we arrive, press the pistol into his side, she said to Red Head.

"Go where?" Sir Alistair demanded without a trace of a drawl.

“You will soon find out,” Joyce said. Desperation but forced me to seek help from these men. Because you came to Tremayne House so early in the morning you are here. If you follow instructions without question you won’t be harmed.”

“That is little comfort. I am outraged by the painful blow from the brute’s cudgel and the prospect of a loaded pistol being fired at me,” he said with fully justified indignation.

“I ain’t a brute,” Red Head protested.

Joyce ignored him. “Sir Alistair, your reaction is completely understandable.” She clasped her gloved hands together. “Please don’t be afraid and be sensible when you alight from the hackney.”

“I am sorry you were hurt and sympathise Sir Alistair. I know what it is to be struck and suffer excruciatingly,” Morwenna said.

“Thank you.” Alistair scrutinized her face. “Is your eye very painful?”

“Baxter, Miss Tremayne’s abigail, applied a conserve of red roses and a rotten apple wrapped in cambric, which helped more than the doctor’s remedy.”

“I am glad it helped relieve the pain.” He started to lean forward, but Red Head shoved him back again. Alistair’s jaw tightened. “Miss Gascoyne, do you know who battered you??”

Morwenna covered her face with her hands.

“Miss Gascoyne, tell me who the culprit is. Should I ever have an opportunity I shall act on your behalf.”

“I cannot tell you,” she mumbled.

This time, when Alistair leant forward, Red Head remained watchful but did not react. “I never hurt a female and don’t hold with them as does,” he said.

Alistair did not respond to the uncalled-for interruption. “Cannot tell me, Mistress Gascoyne, or will not?”

“Don’t question her,” Joyce said. “Later, there will be many opportunities for her to confide in you if she wishes.”

“It seems I am to be held in custody for some time,” Alistair said dryly.

Joyce wrinkled her forehead. “Please tell me why you came to the house this morning?”

"I accepted your grandfather's invitation to travel to Cornwall with you. However, I made up my mind to ask him a question. If his reply did not favour me, I would have gone to my estate."

Eyes wide open, Joyce stared at his face, which gave no clue to his innermost thoughts: "Did you intend to ask Grandfather for permission to address me? If he consented and you proposed marriage, I would have declined."

"Why?" he asked.

"I am too young to wed anyone, and you are-" she broke off. Frankness would be ill-judged.

Did she imagine a flash of anger in Sir Alistair's eyes?

"My dear child, were you about to say I am too old to be your husband? Are you dreaming either of a young Lochinvar to sweep you away on his horse," he asked.

Gascoyne's betrayal cured her of any romantic nonsense. "Unless I am mistaken why do you want to marry me? When it came to the point could you not pluck up your courage because you feared my grandfather would refuse, but why should he?"

"Don't be unmaidenly," Morwenna said. "Sir Alistair is an admirable gentleman and must deplore your unbecoming forthrightness."

"Instead of sarcasm?" Joyce retorted.

Alistair inclined his head toward Morwenna. He looked at her so intently it seemed as if it were the first time he noticed her. "Despite the blow to my pride, Miss Gascoyne, I assure you my heart is not lacerated."

Morwenna blushed and stared out of the window.

"To answer your question, Miss Tremayne, with the earl's blessing, I intended to ask you to wed me for two reasons. I like you, and it is time for me to father an heir."

"Not for the large marriage settlement Papa will arrange?" Joyce said.

"I still appreciate your forthrightness." He chuckled. "My dear Miss Tremayne," he said with a slight hint of irony, additional funds and property are always welcome, but whatever my future wife brings to our nuptials, I am not totally dependent on it to provide for her comfort."

"Well spoken." Morwenna's soft eyes murmured gazed admiringly at him.

Joyce ignored the interruption. Since Gascoyne's greed was exposed, could she believe any gentleman would marry her for any reason other than Papa being a nabob, who could endow her with wealth far beyond most people's aspirations?

"Sir Alistair do you want me to be your wife because your pockets are either nearly to let or almost empty? If I am wrong, I am sorry for speaking in haste because I wanted to be fair-minded, but please grant I am always honest."

"Don't yer get leg-shackled to any gent who don't love yer," said Red Head, whose hand on the pistol aimed at Sir Alistair never wavered. "Me wife's me love, and I'd not leave her and the young ones even if someone wanted to grease me fist."

"Grease your fist?" Joyce asked.

"Bribe him or give him money," Alistair explained. "And, yes, Miss Tremayne, to my cost I know how honest you always are."

Deep in thought, Joyce did not speak. Apart from Morwenna, who murmured something undistinguishable, neither Sir Alistair nor Red Head uttered a word until the hackney halted.

"Out with yer, ladies."

One of Red Head's dirty companions, who travelled in the wagon, opened the door and lowered the step. Standing on the flag way, Joyce held out her hand to help Morwenna, who, due to the beating, was unsteady.

"Now me bang up to the mark, don't try any tricks," Red Head warned Alistair. "There's me with me pistol and five of me friends ready to put an end to em." Red Head warned Alistair.

"London Pool!" Alistair, exclaimed. "Are you all in league with Miss Gascoyne's brother to abduct her?"

"That is what we want the Earl and Countess to believe. I regret being obliged to make off with you. Please forgive me," Joyce said.

"Forgive my obtuseness. I don't understand your reason for holding me against my will," Alistair drawled.

"Grandfather will believe Gascoyne seized us. While he searches for me and Morwenna, we will be sailing to India on Sea Sprite, my father's tall merchant ship."

"We!" Every vestige of good humour left Sir Alistair's face. "What reason did you have to take me?" he asked, obviously no longer employing a drawl to feign indifference.

“You are astute. I feared you would realise these men are sailors, reach the correct conclusion, and inform Grandfather,” Joyce explained.

“Preposterous. You should have asked the earl to arrange for your passage.”

Joyce watched luggage being loaded onto launches on undulating water, sparkling with sunshine. “I owe you an explanation, Sir Alistair. My grandfather drove me to act. Papa promised I could return home after my presentation to the queen and a London season. Each time I begged Grandpapa to allow me to depart, he refused because he and Grandmama wanted me to stay in England and marry a marquess with an ancient lineage who they recommended to Papa.”

“Miss Tremayne, after you are on board, there will be no reason to detain me,” Alistair said. “And-”

Joyce waved her forefinger at Alistair to silence him. “Yes, there will. I cannot risk you telling the earl where I am. Don’t fret. I shall grant you time to write letters with instructions for how your affairs are to be dealt with during your absence. They will be posted tomorrow before the ship sets sail under Captain Harvey’s command.”

He glared at her. “I shall return to England when I disembark.”

“You might wish to at one of the ports where fresh supplies of water and food will be replenished.” She shrugged, indifferent to his situation. “If you can pay for your passage, you may ask a captain to take you on board.”

“Madam I would never have believed you could have changed into a conniving little devil. I cannot meet the cost until I send for funds from England.”

“Therefore, you must wait for the northeast monsoon, which usually begins in October.”

“Depending on how long we are at sea, at worst, for six months!” he exclaimed.

“Yes. After our arrival, Sir Alistair, I suggest you enjoy Papa’s hospitality.”

Red Beard manhandled Sir Alistair onto a launch, into which two sailors helped Joyce and Morwenna to sit with gentleness at odds with their rough appearance. When they reached the ship, two seats were lowered for them. From behind Sir Alistair, Red Beard prodded him to reluctantly climb up a rope ladder.

“Don’t look down,” Joyce shouted. “You might fall.”

“I shall never forgive you for this, Miss Tremayne,” he yelled back at her.

“Welcome aboard, Miss Tremayne,” Captain Harvey greeted her. I presume your companion is Miss Gascoyne, whom you mentioned in your letter but you didn’t mention this gentleman. Who is he?”

“Sir Alistair, baronet, an unexpected inconvenience,” Joyce said tartly. “Please lock him up.”

Captain Harvey beckoned to two stalwart sailors. “Lock the gentleman in the hold.”

“When I return to England, Captain, I shall sue you for wrongful imprisonment,” Alistair threatened.

“Miss Tremayne, will the gentleman be kept under lock and key for the entire journey?” Captain Harvey asked.

“No, release him when we are offshore and he cannot escape,” Joyce replied.

“There is only one cabin below the roundhouse available for him. An old India hand who booked it is too ill to travel. His fare has been refunded. There is no charge for your captive other than paying for the furniture, mattress, pillows and other items. It will save Sir Alistair from sleeping below deck with the crew.”

“On my father’s behalf, I authorise you to pay for it with money from the sale of beaver pelts in London.”

Mrs Harvey rushed along the deck, her plump, weathered face almost split in half by a wide smile. “Miss Tremayne, I can hardly believe you were the unhappy little girl who once travelled to England with us.”

“I have never forgotten you and your kindness. I hope you are in the best of health and spirits.”

Mrs Harvey bobbed a curtsey. “I’m very well, thank you, Miss.”

“As you see, I am no longer forlorn. To the contrary I am overjoyed to be going home.”

“If the monsoon favours us, you’ll be there in four months,” Captain Harvey said, the light breeze ruffling his grey-streaked brown hair.

His good wife beamed. “When we received your father’s letter.”

Guilty of forgery she quailed. *What will Papa say when he finds out?*

Revised to here

Miss Tremayne, I hurried ashore to buy bedding and furniture for your cabin and Miss Gascoyne’s,” Mrs Harvey said. “They are in the round house on the upper part of the deck. The furniture is tied down on rings and cleats so it won’t shift during storms. I hope

you have everything you need. The ship will sail tomorrow. There's time enough for me to purchase anything else you want.”

“Thank you.” Joyce watched all the luggage being unloaded from a longboat.

Mrs Harvey’s eyebrows almost met across her forehead. “Don’t thank me, nothing is too much trouble for Mr Tremayne’s daughter.”

The fond words increased Joyce’s self-reproach for deceiving them.

* * *

After her letter to her grandfather and Sir Alistair’s, with instructions to his attorney posted, the ship sailed on a morning tide.

At night, her hand under her cheek on the soft pillow in her adult cot, Joyce sighed contentedly. Strong wind urged the ship forward too fast for Grandpapa to have it intercepted. He could not for force her to go back to London to do what he considered best for her. In complete dark, Joyce drifted off to sleep the sound of footsteps overhead on the poop deck, the ship’s timbers creaking, and wind like a melody in the rigging.

On the fourth day at sea, Joyce came on deck where Morwenna, her hair golden as a newly minted guinea, walked up and down with Alistair to stretch their limbs. With little warning, blue-black clouds gathered. In the distance, strings of dazzling lightning flashed. Thunder boomed. Morwenna screamed. The wind increased. Torrential rain slashed Joyce’s face. Without a glance or a word to her, his arm around Morwenna, to stop the wind bowling her over, Alistair guided her to the stairs.

Joyce searched for something solid to cling to. Lightning illuminated Red Head’s face. “Hold me arm, Miss, wouldn’t do for yer to be knocked off yer feet and be swept overboard.”

“Thank you.”

Sea Sprite rolled on towering waves. “Miss, hold on tight, me sea legs won’t let yer fall,” Red Head said when they approached her cabin.

Joyce thanked him again, closed the door. She managed to strip off her wet gown and take off her sodden shoes with thin soles that had not helped her keep her balance. Heedless of her damp underclothes and wet hair, she got into her cot and pulled the covers up over herself.

Joyce woke several times during the night. Each time she fell asleep listening to the repetitive sound of rain pounding the poop deck. Each time

which lulled her to sleep. By the following morning, the storm yielded to a clear blue sky beneath which Joyce made her way along the companionway and deck to the cuddy at eight o'clock for breakfast. Twenty people, including the fervent missionary who said grace, were already seated. Mrs Harvey and Sir Alistair were sat seated beside each other. Joyce took a seat on their right between Alistair and Captain Harvey's second in command.

"I tossed and turned all night, afraid the ship would sink, and I would be drowned," Morwenna said tremulously.

"Lord love you, Missy," Mrs Harvey said. "Only a squall. There's worse to come on our way to Madras."

"Oh no." Colour fled from Morwenna's cheeks. She clung to Sir Alistair's arm.

He patted her free hand. "Don't be afraid. I shall protect you."

From drowning? How? Joyce glanced at them, suppressed a giggle, and helped herself to tea, bread and butter. She never imagined her erstwhile suitor in the role of a knight errant.

"Miss Gascoyne, shall we stroll along the deck after breakfast?" asked Alistair.

"Yes, please." A little colour returned to Morwenna's pale face.

Joyce drank tea, ate bread and butter. What should she do today? She decided to have her easel set up on the foredeck and paint a seascape.

"Don't forget, a drum will beat at two o'clock to summon you to luncheon," Mrs Harvey announced. "Everyone remember lemon consumed daily will prevent scurvy. Don't forget you will only receive six pints of water each day for necessities."

"It won't be enough to wash my clothes," Morwenna protested.

"Which won't be possible until we reach the first port of call," Mrs Harvey said dryly.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Joyce spent the morning after the storm painting. Never completely satisfied her paint brushes captured what she saw, she answered the drumbeat summoning her to luncheon. Morwenna, who had been walking up and down the deck with Sir Alistair, linked arms with her.

“I remember you cowering under the bedclothes at the first sound of thunder when we shared a room at the seminary, Morwenna. Are you still frightened of storms?”

“Yes, I am. Since I was a small girl, they petrified me. I fear everyone on board during a one will be lost at sea, though Sir Alistair, who is very sympathetic, says the odds are against it.”

“He is right. When you are scared, think about Captain Harvey. He has sailed on merchantmen since he was little more than a boy. Despite the danger, he has never been harmed.”

At the sound of Sir Alistair’s name, Morwenna’s eyes glowed.

“Don’t allow anxiety prey on you. Papa considers Captain Harvey’s navigational skills unrivalled. At times, the weather was so tempestuous when I sailed on this ship to England, Mrs de Lancy, who suffered from sea sickness during the entire voyage, thought it would be impossible to arrive safely.”

Who is Mrs de Lancy?” Morwenna asked.

“You met her. When I came to England she brought me to Castle Tresellion. Have you forgotten her? Joyce fingered Vivian’s first gift, the silver, heart-shaped pendant. “There are few people I want to be reunited with as much I do with her and her son, Vivian, with who I have exchanged letters since we parted.”

At the bottom of the companionway, tears trickled down Morwenna’s cheeks.

“I hope thoughts of more storms are not oversetting you despite my assurances and Sir Alistair’s,” Joyce said, concealing her irritation.

“It is not why I am crying.” Morwenna dried her cheeks with a handkerchief. “You are fortunate to have people who love you, but, as I told Sir Alistair, I have no one to care whether I live or die.”

“I do, and I am sure Miss Tremayne does,” said Alistair, who followed them.

Joyce glanced at Morwenna, *worried because his attention might break her heart. Although she is beautiful, her manners are excellent, and her speech is refined he might merely be passing the time on board with her.*

Sea Sprite reached the table bay at the Cape of Good Hope, where Joyce and the other passengers, bored with each other’s company, were eager to disembark after the long, monotonous journey. Impatient, they waited while the ship beat about the bay for two weeks in rough weather and heaving water before it dropped anchor. Ashore, Joyce questioned Sir Alistair’s motives, but conceded he might be besotted by Morwenna’s unaffected, gentle manners and her lustrous grey eyes, which constantly looked dotingly at him.

Joyce tutted. If his intentions were honest toward Morwenna, she was as mistaken about his character as about Gascoyne’s, also naïve because, only recently, she never suspected Sir Alistair wanted to marry her.

At The Cape, controlled by the British after the long war with the French, she would share a room with Morwenna in Morrisson’s guesthouse, which Mrs Harvey recommended. She pressed her lips tightly together and made up her mind to prevent Sir Alistair from finding any opportunity to make improper advances to Morwenna during their stay. Yet, if, incredibly, his intentions were honourable, she would be doing Morwenna a disservice by keeping them apart.

At sea, seated in front of her easel, she picked up her paintbrush to complete another watercolour of the ocean, sometimes still as a millpond, at others ruffled or storm-tossed. Her favourite one, which she would give to Papa depicted a golden haze over the sea and bands of apricot, peach, orange and flame in bands on the horizon.

Someone nearby coughed. She put the paintbrush into a mug of water.

“Miss.”

Joyce looked up. Red Beard, his weatherbeaten face, and anxious brown eyes, so dark they were almost black, stood at the right of her easel. “Miss.

Tremayne, I’ve somemat to ask yer.”

“What is it?”

He gazed at her incomplete painting of the ship’s billowing sails against the background of an azure sky dotted with wind-driven, puffy, white clouds. “Thing is, Miss, would yer paint me portrait fer me to give to me wife? She loves me and would be chuffed to have it to look at while I’m at sea. If yer’d paint it when I’m off duty, I’d dress in me best and trim me beard.” He smoothed his grubby flannel shirt. “I’d pay yer, Miss.”

Touched by the offer, she doubted he could put had much money aside for his family. “I am grateful to you for bringing Miss Gascoyne and me safely to the ship. I will not charge you.”

He tugged his lank forelock. “Thank yer. Miss. Tell me if there’s anything I can do for yer.”

A week later, Red Head posed for his portrait dressed in a cheap blue coat, red waistcoat, buff breeches, and black wool stockings.

Captain Harvey paused during his inspection of the poop deck. “Admirable. You brought the ruffian to life with your paintbrush.”

“Ruffian, Captain?” Joyce asked.

“Except for my officers, that is what I call all the Europeans, Chinese, lascars and others under my command. Never fear. All the crew members are chosen carefully and are well-paid. I have no complaints about most of them.”

Red Head saluted, his mouth in a straight line, a protest about being referred to as a ruffian.

Captain Harvey touched his forehead with two fingers. “Sailor, you are dismissed.” He smiled at her. “How do you fare on this voyage?”

“Well, thank you. I don’t suffer from sea sickness and am not unnerved by rough seas and thunderstorms.”

“Good, but do you find life aboard tedious as most of the other passengers do?”

She indicated the oil painting. “No. I have rarely have time to paint for as long as I want to. I write letters, enjoy reading, listen to the ship’s band of fifes and drums, and listen to men singing. I also like playing chess, draughts and card games.”

“Your companions, Miss Morwenna and Sir Alistair frequently entertain each other.” The captain cleared his throat. “To be honest, Miss Tremayne, it’s not unusual for a lady

and gentleman to ... er ... become attached to each other on a long journey at sea. Neither Mrs Harvey nor I tolerate improper dealing. I hope my frankness has not offended you."

"There is no need for you to say anything more about this subject," Joyce said, her face and tone of voice as stern as her grandmother's at her most dignified.

"I shall be glad to step ashore on the Cape and even more glad when we reach Madras," she said to change the subject. "My appearance has changed so much since I left. Do you think my father will recognise me, Captain Harvey?"

"To be sure he will and be proud of the fine young woman you have become." Alert, he looked at the calmer sea and the pale grey sky. "At last, the weather's on the turn. Soon, the ship can drop anchor."

During the days when supplies were delivered if Joyce glued Morwenna to her side, she could not have kept her closer. Sir Alistair would neither look nor speak to her. He kept his distance from them. Whenever he came within their sight, Morwenna sighed and stared at him, her adulation obvious.

Joyce ignored her despondency till the effect of being on land raised her companion's spirits. They enjoyed strolls past canals, through clean, charming streets of white houses and canals.

"Look!" Morwenna pointed at wild animals either in outdoor enclosures or cages when they walked past the Governor's House. Fascinate by them they dawdled.

Bathed, their hair washed, and their clothes laundered, refreshed after they lodged in the comfortable boarding house, where they enjoyed fresh food and wine. Back on board Sea Sprite after a week on dry land they were not as irritated by cramped quarters as they were previously. All the passengers, including the sober missionary, were cheerful. Unfortunately, their good mood deteriorated and squabbles frequently occurred. Joyce rebuffed anyone, who tried to gain sympathy for unimportant grievances, and wondered where Morwenna and Sir Alistair's frequent association would lead them.

Fierce winds drove the monsoon, which would bring torrential rain to the western ghats along the Coromandel coast, kept Joyce undercover. Summoned to dine at three o'clock by drumbeats, Joyce entered the cuddy, where iron staples hammered into the deck secured the table and chairs. Joints of beef and mutton, pies, puddings and other dishes were arranged on long sausage shapes of green baize filled with sawdust to keep them in place. Joyce sat in her usual place on Mrs Harvey's right. The missionary, who

constantly spoke fervently about his plans to convert unbelievers to Christianity, said grace. Mr Wynne, the first mate, who entertained her with tales about his experiences at sea and in foreign lands, seated himself on her left. “Good day, Mistress Tremayne. Ah, the smell of roast meat, after salted chickens, pork and tongue, when there was no more livestock on our way to the Cape. Our arrival new life into me. Some roast beef?”

“No, thank you.” In England, she resisted every attempt to persuade her to eat it. She eyed the spry, elderly sailor’s wrinkled, good-humoured face toughened by wind and rain. It would be impossible to make him understand why she did.

He tucked into roast beef and potatoes. Joyce ate macaroni in cheese sauce. At home in Madras, sickened by the cruelty involved in slaughtering animals on board, she swore an oath to exclude all meat and poultry from her diet.

“Miss Tremayne, when it’s too windy and wet for you to paint on deck, you and Miss Gascoyne are welcome to join me when I sew,” Mrs Harvey said.

Morwenna gazed intently at Sir Alistair, who sat beside her. Joyce restrained herself from shaking her head. She had heard the term calf love. Was Morwenna genuinely in love with him, or so infatuated she could not bear to be apart from him?

“Thank you for asking us.” Joyce said. “I am an indifferent needlewoman, but Morwenna is accomplished.” She ignored Morwenna’s reproachful look at her, doubtless, because she would prefer being with Sir Alistair to sewing with the captain’s wife.

During the voyage to Mauritius, where their ship moored to replenish supplies, Joyce stopped fretting about Morwenna and Sir Alistair. She helped her erstwhile friend by rescuing her from Gascoyne. Only time would determine her future.

At last, from approximately twenty miles from Point de Galle on the southernmost tip of Ceylon, the passengers breathed in the welcome scent of vegetation. Joyce’s feet tapped on the deck. She wanted to dance for joy when the ship driven by the monsoon wind sped east toward Madras. Her feet tapped on the deck. In a fever of impatience, she could not settle for anything until Sea Sprite, amid countless Indiamen and Royal navy ships, moored a mile away from surf frothing and pounding on the shore. Catamarans arrived with fresh food and returned to land with letters.

After Papa received news of her arrival, how long would it take him to be reunited with her? Joyce tried to control her impatience. She spoke to Morwenna, who stood beside

her gazing at Fort Saint George. "We will disembark today or tomorrow." She turned around to go to her cabin.

Morwenna caught hold of her arm. "How will we reach land?"

Joyce pointed to an improved type of catamaran with an awning to shield passengers from sun and sea spray, beneath which were small, crude chairs with cushions to sit on. "On one of those."

Horried, Morwenna stared at twelve oarsmen, naked except for small loincloths and conical hats beneath which they put letters to keep them dry. "No! I cannot get into one of them."

"This is not the time to be missish. If you refuse, you must stay on board to wait for Sea Sprite's return to England."

Morwenna rolled her eyes. "I cannot swim. If the boat capsizes, I will drown."

"Believe me. You will be safe. On my way to the ship on which I went to England, a much smaller catamaran rowed by two men took me to it. Don't be a coward. Stiffen your spine instead of being a watering pot. I shall tell Wilson to pack for us."

Morwenna walked slowly to companionway. "I n...never knew you could be so heartless.

Heartless! If she were, she would have left Morwenna in England at risk of being her brother's victim.

No word from Papa arrived, but on the following morning, she received a brief missive from Vivian with instructions to go ashore. Joyce sent word to Sir Alistair and Morwenna to have confidence in the oarsmen who would convey them to the beach.

Joyce ate her last meal on board. She thanked Captain Harvey for a safe passage and said farewell to Mrs Harvey. Without hesitation, she sat on a rope chair, which lowered her to a catamaran. The closer she came to shore through the turbulent surf, the harder she searched for her father. Two of the oarsmen carried on her through the breakers to the beach. Joyce paid them, wrinkled her nose and pressed a hand to her forehead. Besieged by dozens of men who asked her to employ them, demanded to carry her luggage, or tried to sell her water or food, Joyce ignored them intent on her reunion with her father. Her impatience increased. *Where is he?* She sweltered in the fierce tropical heat. A hand against her damp forehead she stared at the beach trying to see him.

A word from a tall gentleman dressed in a white tunic and trousers dispersed most of them. "Thank you for your assistance, sir." She studied his handsome face. "Vivian, or am I mistaken?"

"I am, but you are no longer the little girl who captured my heart. Through your letters, I am still your captive."

A frisson ran down her back. His words warmed her heart unlike any other gentleman's. "Viv" Joyce said, using her childhood nickname for him, "I see the boy in you I love." She looked around. "Where is Papa."

"He could not come."

"Why not?"

"Explanations can wait. Shall we go to Tremayne House?"

"Not yet," Joyce said when Morwenna, her face tear-stained after her ordeal on the catamaran, and Sir Alistair reached her. "Mr de Lancy, may I introduce Miss Gascoyne and Sir Alistair, my companions on the voyage?"

The gentlemen bowed to each other. Morwenna curtsied.

Vivian beckoned to an elderly man a short distance away. He limped toward them. "Here is someone impatient to see you, Miss Tremayne."

"Bates, I hope you are well," Joyce greeted him delightedly.

"I am, thank you, despite my white hair and more wrinkles. May I say I am delighted to see you looking so bonny."

"Thank you. I have never forgotten how well you treated me."

"It is too hot to stay here," Vivian said. "Bates, take Miss Tremayne's guests to lodge at the house in Fort St George while I take her to Tremayne House."

"Why?" Joyce asked.

Vivian smiled at her. "Trust me, to know what is best."

It would be a relief to have a respite from Morwenna and Sir Alistair, who had not spoken a single word to her on shore.

She trusted Vivian, nevertheless, she hesitated. "Miss Gascoyne needs a chaperon."

"Unnecessary, Mr de Lancy," Alistair said. "Miss Gascoyne has done me the honour of agreeing to be my wife. If it can be arranged, we shall marry today." His eyes hard as flint, he stared at Joyce. "Mr de Lancy, circumstances forced me to leave England in dire straits. I would be obliged for a loan, which will be reimbursed when we return."

“You shall have it,” Vivian said.

“Miss Tremayne’s fears for her companion may be put to rest. In England, my lawyer will discuss my wife’s inheritance and her marriage settlement.”

Morwenna smiled and returned the tenderness in his eyes with her own.

“Congratulations,” Joyce said, amazed because he must love Morwenna.

Bates ushered the betrothed couple into two palanquins with curtains and mattresses to sit or lie on, gave instructions to the bearers, and entered a third one.

“Your carriage awaits, Miss Tremayne. The ground is uneven. I suggest you put your hand on my arm to avoid stumbling,” Vivian said.

“Do we need to be formal? In the past, we used each other’s Christian names,” Joyce said, seated next to him in the carriage.

“Do I dare to address you as Joyce now you are a beautiful, fashionable young woman?” he asked.

Beautiful? Is he flattering me? Fashionable, yes. “Have you changed? I remember how adventurous you were. Is there anything you would not dare?” she teased him.

Chapter Twenty-Five

In the carriage beside Vivian, Joyce opened her mouth to question him. He forestalled her. “Recently I barely had a minute to call my own.” He leant back against the squab. “Forgive me if I nap on the way to Tremayne House.”

“Please stay awake and answer my questions. Why did you greet me instead of Papa? How is your mother?” She frowned. He had fallen asleep with astonishing speed. She was tempted to wake him by poking him with the tip of her parasol.

Joyce looked out of the window at the half-recalled ox carts, pedestrians, men, and boys, who drove cows and goats on their way to or from Fort St George. She glimpsed amid the forest on either side of the road she glimpsed houses constructed while she was in England. *Who lives in them? Why did I assume everything would be the same? hope Tremayne House and its grounds are unchanged. Oh, I wish I could fly there fast as a bird to its nest.*

The horses drew the coach through an ornamental gateway the entry to Tremayne estate.

Vivian opened his large brown eyes fringed with long black eyelashes. Suspicious, she gazed at his handsome face. *Perhaps he pretended to sleep? If he did, why?*

The coach door opened. The steps were lowered. Joyce hurried out. Two servants dressed in white opened the double front doors and salaamed.

“Vivian where are-?” she broke off in response to his gentle, firm hand cupping her elbow. “Come.” He ushered her inside and guided her to the drawing room. A servant shut the door. Tired, Joyce sank onto a sofa and studied the magnificent room. Without Papa’s presence, it seemed... what?

“May I sit next to you, Joyce?”

Something she could not identify in his tone alarmed her. She patted the space beside her. Vivian sat. Apprehensive, she studied his face and noticed dark circles under his eyes.

“Joyce.”

“Yes.”

Without permission he held her hand as if she were still the little girl. “You asked me where your father and my mother are. You must be brave,” he said hoarsely. “There is no easy way to give you bad news. I would give anything not to be the one to tell you they are dead.”

Unable to speak or move, Joyce understood she was no longer a cherished child. She wanted to tell Vivian he lied but knew he did not. She would never again see the two people she believed she loved more than anyone else. Joyce wanted to cry without restraint, yet she swallowed repeatedly to control the anguish which flooded through her.

“How did they die?” she whispered, gazing into Vivian’s eyes mirroring her anguish.

“From the blue death known here as cholera because the patient’s body appears dried out and has a bluish-grey hue. There is no cure. Its victims die within twenty-four hours of the disease’s brutal onslaught.”

At the thought of the dreadful death her father and Mrs de Lancy suffered, she shuddered and struggled to speak. “Vivian, I sympathise with you. I loved your mother. I shall miss her more than mere tears and words can express.”

Vivian swallowed. The muscles in his neck rippled. “I loved your father. I owe him more than you can imagine. He treated me as though he was my father. I can never find the words to express my gratitude for his love and guidance. He was compassionate and would have pitied the other victims.”

“Who were they?”

“Apart from my mother, Lionel and his grandmother.”

“Not Mrs Avery?”

“No. On the day they died she was at the orphanage she founded for abandoned girls to share breakfast with them. Mrs Avery often goes there to make sure their food is satisfactory. I accompanied her to consult her about how to manage my orphanage for boys. Afterward she spent the day there. I visited a carpenter who makes toys for De Lancy’s Emporium.” He shuddered. “When I returned here to dine, Lionel and Mrs Sutton were dead, Mrs Avery fainted and was been put to bed in her chamber. My mother and Mr Tremayne were too close to death to be conscious of me.”

The library door opened. Bare feet made no sound on the teak floor. Joyce looked across the room and launched herself off the sofa. “Punj Ayah!” The child in her welcomed her former nurse’s loving arms around her. She yearned to go back to being the little girl

in the past when Punj Ayah dried her tears and comforted her. Never did she need solace more, but nothing could compensate her for Papa and Mrs de Lancy's deaths. Pity for Mrs Avery's loss of her son and mother pierced the fog in her brain that threatened to overpower her. "When did they die, Vivian?"

"A month ago."

She trembled, unable to imagine a world without Papa and Mrs de Lancy.

"Joyce, please forgive me for giving way to grief earlier. I should be comforting you."

"There is none for me unless-" she broke off. *Unless Govinda Sadhu, who believes the soul transmigrates from body to body, can.*

Bates entered the library. "Mr de Lancy, the mistress must be hungry and thirsty. Nuncheon is set out in the small parlour."

The mistress? I am mistress of Tremayne House! "Thank you, Bates. I am not hungry."

Regardless of his position as a servant, Bates approached her and grasped her hand. "Have you forgotten you said we are friends when you were young? If our friendship has endured, come with me without argument. Prahlad Das has prepared your favourite food. He'll be disappointed if you don't eat

Joyce remembered he carried her to her nursery after Mama's ring cut her cheek consoled her.

"Joyce, chapters in our lives are closed. To refuse sustenance will serve no purpose," Vivian said.

Her hand clasped in Bates' she entered the small dining room.

* * *

Joyce occupied a bedchamber usually set aside for a guest. Punj Ayah began unpacking, her luggage, found a nightgown and helped her put it on. "Why did you come here?" Joyce asked in Tamil

"My pension was not paid I came to get it. Now, Missy Memsahib, I am sleeping here on the floor."

"No! I shall send for you in the morning."

Punj Ayah left. Beyond comfort, Joyce's tears burst like a dam overflowing its banks. In England, she thought about Papa every day. Sometimes, she dreamt they were together

and woke heartbroken when she remembered they were an ocean apart. She hugged a pillow. How could she endure life without Papa?

Someone knocked on the door. She could not stop crying to shout to whoever it was to go away. The door opened and closed. Joyce squeezed her eyes shut. Who dared to enter the bedchamber without permission when she wanted to be alone in the darkened room with her grief? Her eyes half-open, she saw whoever came lit candles, which cast light and shadows on the walls. Someone sat on the edge of her bed, drew her up and put arms around her. Shocked, she tried to draw away.

“Joyce, it is improper for me to be here with you,” Vivian said quietly. “My only excuse is my heart went out to you when I heard you weeping. We must help each other come to terms with my mother and your father’s deaths.”

Her sobs subsided. Vivian wiped her face with his kerchief. He handed it to her. “Blow your nose,” he said and put an arm around her.

Joyce’s grief, which Vivian shared, his compassion and his touch strengthened her.

“You are exhausted.” He plumped up her pillows. “Lie down.”

Vivian carried a chair to the side of her bed. He drew the bedcovers up to her neck. “Joyce, I don’t want you to be alone. I shall sleep in the chair.”

“But-” she began.

“The only lady here who could stay here for the night is Mrs Avery, who is distraught.”

“Poor woman.” With her hand in Vivian’s warm clasp, she drifted off to sleep.

The sound of rain lashing against the shutters as fiercely as her previous sobs woke her. She opened her eyes and gazed at Vivian whose presence calmed her. “Good morning, thank you for not deserting me.”

He rubbed the stubble on his chin. “I shall bathe, shave and send Punj Ayah to attend to you. When we are ready, I shall have breakfast with you.”

“I am not hungry.”

“You must eat to be strong. There are many matters for you to attend to. Today, I shall send for Mr Tremayne’s lawyer to bring your father’s will. Tomorrow, you should start to familiarise yourself with your vast business empire. Don’t be dismayed, I shall assist the lawyer his senior staff to help you.”

“Vivian, there is something I must do first,” she said, daunted by what lay ahead.

“What?”

“Visit Papa’s grave to pray for him.”

* * *

Dressed in black from head to toe, Joyce stared at her father’s marble headstone. The inscription included the dates of his and only his first wife’s births and deaths, and the words beloved father of Sylvester and Joyce.

In a low voice, she recited the Lord’s prayer and the twenty-third psalm. *What would it be like to go through the valley of the shadow of death? How would it feel to be comforted by His rod and His staff and to dwell in the house of The Lord forever? Wherever Papa is, I hope he knew how much I will miss him every day of my life and look down at me from heaven.* “Rest in peace, Papa,” she whispered, an intolerable ache in her heart. She turned toward Vivian and put her hand on his strong arm.

“Vivian,” she said when they stood by the carriage.

“Yes.”

“When your mother died, I hope there was someone to comfort you as you have me.”

“Bates mastered his grief to. I shall always be grateful to him.”

“As I shall be to you.”

“Our sorrow is a raw wound, but we must console ourselves with happy memories of the time we spent with your father and my mother.”

It is so painful that I fear I will never recover.

They were silent until the carriage reached Tremayne House. She should have gone inside to offer her condolences to Mrs. Avery. First there was something else she wanted to do.

“Vivian, I need solitude. I have a lot to think about. I shall go for a walk.”

He looked up at the dull grey sky and dark clouds. “I respect your need for privacy, but don’t stay outdoors for long. It will rain soon. You will be drenched.” He inclined his head toward her and went indoors.

Joyce walked briskly along the familiar route to the banyan tree under which Govinda Sadhu lived. A youth dressed in the saffron cloth of one who renounced family, earthly possessions and pleasure sat there cross-legged. She coughed loudly. His eyes opened. He took something from a small clay pot, stood and walked toward her.

“Where is Govinda Sadhu?” she asked.

“He left his body chanting the names of the Supreme Lord, Krishna.”

Another loss! She had depended on Sadhu’s wisdom to help her.

“Don’t lament,” said the chela. “It is written he who remembers the Lord when he leaves his body will return to His eternal abode and never suffer again on earth.”

Joyce wiped her eyes on the backs of her black gloves.

“I am think you were the child who came with her ayah to give my sadhu food.”

“Yes, I did.”

The chela held out a string of wooden beads he took from the earthenware pot. “The prayer beads are the ones Govinda Sadhu prayed on every day. He instructed me to give them to you. He said if you pray on the beads one by one, they will comfort you. Although my preceptor has left his body, He and the gift bless you.”

“Thank you,” Joyce said, humbled by Govinda Sadhu’s remembrance of her and the prayer beads, which she knew were made of wood from Tulasi, a bush believed to be holy.

“Don’t seek me here again, I shall go to an ashram. After the monsoon rains, I will go on pilgrimages to holy places.” He handed her a cloth bag with loops it could be suspended from. “Keep your beads in this and put your right hand in it when you pray.”

Another chapter of my life has closed. How can I bear it? Yet, on her way back to the house, did she imagine the prayer beads would help her enter a peaceful one?

During the following days, with Vivian’s help, Joyce dealt with the pages of her life unfolding in her life’s new chapters. Apart from a substantial bequest to Bates and minor ones to loyal servants, she inherited everything. Her wealth secure, Joyce signed documents to sell Papa’s business enterprises and transfer the ownership of Sea Sprite to Captain Harvey. At night, worn out by demands made on her time, her tears flowed, but not with the total abandonment when Vivian spent the night in her bedchamber. To comfort herself she always took the prayer beads from under her pillow and held them in her hand. The repetition of Govinda Sadhu’s litany a daily repetition of Krishna’s name soothed her and helped her sleep.

Finally, she steeled herself to do her duty and write to her grandparents and Sylvester. Poor Grandmama, who longed to see her youngest son again, would be grief-stricken. In the library, filled with memories of Papa, a tear rolled onto the letter to her brother. Would he reproach himself for his decision to live in England? Would he be torn to pieces by sorrow and be comforted by his wife and small son? Joyce read each letter. Satisfied with

what she wrote, she sealed them with red, wafers. Elbows on the table she rested her bowed head on her trembling hands. She loved Tremayne House, but every part reminded her she would never again hear Papa call her Puss. Her immense fortune could never compensate her for her loss. Her scheme to return to Madras, and her arrival in triumph to be reunited with her father came to naught. A future no better than dust and ashes lay ahead. She tensed. No, she would not unleash another useless torrent of grief.

“Joyce.”

The door had opened too quietly for her to hear Vivian enter. She looked at him standing on the threshold of the beautiful library, filled with many of Papa’s treasures. “I have written to my grandparents and Sylvester to tell them Papa died.”

“No more tears?” Vivian asked.

“Only a few, but I cannot neither imagine my future on this estate where everything reminds me of my father nor of a life away from it. It is as though each memory is painfully embedded in my soul.”

“Your father loved you very much and I do in a different way. You are too young to bury yourself in the past. Mr Tremayne always desired the best for you. He would want you to marry a gentleman you love and have children to bring joy and laughter to this house. Sons and daughters who you can tell about their grandfather and all his achievements.” Vivian cleared his throat. “And he would expect you to care for everyone you are now responsible for.”

Yes, Papa would. She could almost hear Grandmama telling her she and Grandpapa knew every person on their estate. She remembered the mistreated boy and girl her grandmother removed from their cruel father’s custody.

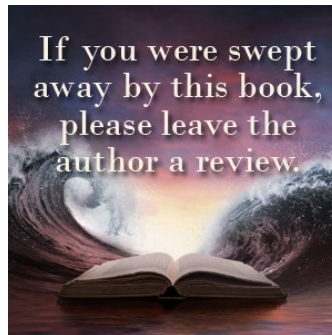
“I am too inexperienced to know how to do my duty.”

“I shall help you and I am certain that one day you will recognise your true love,” he said in a husky voice.

The flame in Vivian’s eyes ignited exquisite sensations she experienced for the first time. She wanted – what? His love? Yes, more than anything else. Eyes wide, she stared at him. In the library, her favourite room in the house where she often sat on Papa’s lap when she was a child, Joyce saw her future stretch ahead. Through a storm of grief, she entered a happy haven with the man she loved. She fingered a silver earring, stood and flung herself into arms ready to receive her.

“By some miracle, sweetheart, you love me.” Vivian whispered in her ear, “Darling, you are my heaven and earth. I shall love you and strive to make you happy for as long as we both shall live.”

The End.



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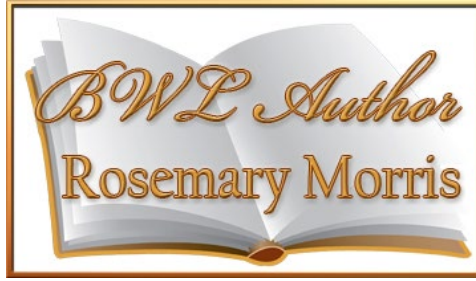
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Rosemary Morris lives in a town in Southeast England with easy access to London and open countryside. Her novels are set in England during the reigns of Edward II and Queen Anne Stuart, 1702-1714, the Regency era, and the 20th century. They explore themes 21st-century people can relate to; for example, a soldier suffering from posttraumatic stress syndrome, a woman seeking her birth parents, and fourteen-year-old best friends, Indira and Daisy, sometimes agree to disagree about their beliefs.

At heart, Rosemary is a historian. Her novels are meticulously researched to capture times past – speech, fashion, food, customs and much more. The novels, which have received many five-star reviews, are sensual but with firmly closed bedroom doors so the reader can relish the details of emerging romances.

When Rosemary is not engrossed in researching historical non-fiction or studying Indian classical literature, she is reading fiction, writing, or engaged in ‘writerly’ activities. She enjoys time spent with her family and friends, knitting, growing her own in her organic garden, and putting it to good use in her vegetarian cuisine.

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Bibliography

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