



Discovering Dahlia (The Blue Orchid Society #5)

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Category: Historical

Description: Following a painful public humiliation, Dahlia Lancaster was left heartbroken, friendless, and shunned by London Society.

But rather than dwelling on the balls she'll never attend, Dahlia has turned her attentions to her unconventional inheritance—a steamship company.

After a year of work, she's preparing to launch The Aurora, a luxury ocean liner that promises to revolutionize travel.

The invitation list is exclusive: Dahlia's closest friends—the Blue Orchid Society—as well as a few influential individuals from her old life, whose presence will ensure the success of her endeavor.

Unfortunately, not all have the best interests of Dahlia or her shipping line at heart.

Lord Meredith has loved Dahlia since their first meeting.

But after her fall from grace, she has evaded his every attempt to see her—until she extends an invitation to join her on The Aurora.

Once aboard, Lord Meredith and Dahlia's tentative rekindling of their friendship is interrupted when things begin to go terribly wrong.

Mischievous dealings take on an ominous tone, and it's clear that someone is intent on humiliating Dahlia again or worse—but she will not be sunk so easily.

With Lord Meredith at her side, Dahlia is determined to discover the culprit.

So intent, in fact, that she doesn't recognize another threat looming until it's too late: she's in danger of losing her heart.

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April 19, 1873

Dahlia Lancaster took a small step away from her cluster of friends and lowered her shoulders slightly to elongate her neck. She knew every person at the Marchioness of Molyneaux's ball was watching her. Of course they were. The shade and cut of her gown would be on request from London dressmakers tomorrow morning, her likeness drawn in the society columns. This night was the most important of her life, and she could feel the eyes upon her—some appraising, some jealous, some simply curious.

She cast her own gaze around the ballroom, appreciating the globe chandeliers with their warm yellow light and the stained glass ceilings. One day she would be responsible for hosting this Easter ball, and she had specific improvements in mind—not only to the guest list but to the refreshment table as well—and she would most certainly insist upon dance cards. The Marchioness was decidedly old fashioned in her omission of them.

On the far side of the room, Mother and Dahlia's cousin, Elizabeth, were speaking with Lord Tynsdale. Dahlia squinted. She could not make out what they were talking about, but the conversation seemed cordial enough, which was good, considering Elizabeth's tendency toward argument with members of a particular political inclination.

Dahlia continued to watch the room. She moved again, just a slight twist of her hips to rustle her skirts and make her pose more interesting. She knew all the tricks, had perfected them over the past few years—a tip of the chin to cast her face in a more flattering light, a flick of an elegant wrist to accentuate an outstretched arm. She was used to the attention her appearance garnered. Since she was a child, she'd been

aware of the admiration brought on by her dark curls and large blue eyes. And now that her father had declared her the sole inheritor of the Paragon Line, his ocean liner company, she was one of the most sought-after women in London, and for more than her beauty. The envy she felt around her would only grow once the marquess announced his son, Lord Ruben's, engagement at midnight. It would come as no surprise to anyone when Dahlia was revealed as the future marchioness. Lord Ruben's attentions to her had been noted in all the society columns. He had confessed his love, and they had discussed their future together. The pair of them were considered to be the most famous couple in the country.

She looked toward where she'd last seen Lord Ruben, spotting him easily at the center of a group of men who wore ruby pins in their cravats—his idea, naturally. Lord Ruben was always at the center of a group. And here he was with his closest friends, the West End Casanovas, as they called themselves. But unusually, tonight Ruben was not entertaining the crowd. He frowned, scratching his neck, and didn't appear to be listening to the conversation around him.

After a moment he looked toward her, but his gaze slid across Dahlia as if he didn't notice her at all.

His lack of acknowledgment surprised her. Dahlia had expected some sort of understanding to pass between them, shared nervousness or excitement as their relationship became a matter of public record and transformed into an official connection. Perhaps the significance of the moment was simply pressing on his mind, and he was contemplating.

Dahlia returned her attention to her clique of young ladies, noting that they all mimicked her bearing on some level, whether consciously or not. Lorene alone was not standing in any kind of pose. She clasped a gloved hand around her wrist in a manner that looked neither elegant nor comfortable and peered distractedly toward the dais, where the orchestra played. Did her arm hurt?

Just as Dahlia had the thought, Charlotte Grey frowned, poking Lorene with her elbow. “You look ill,” she said in a low voice. “Correct your face.”

Lorene scoffed a puff of air from her nose and looked in the other direction, away from her friends.

The dancing had paused, and the edges of the crowded room grew even more crowded. Dahlia and her group stood near an open window, and she was grateful for the breeze as they gossiped. Even in the early spring, the ballroom was unpleasantly warm.

“How could you not have noticed Mrs. Fortescue’s gown?” Lady Priscilla Bremerton was saying with an exaggerated look of horror on her face. “She must know that peach color makes her skin look sickly.”

“She wore the same dress to Lady Robinson’s garden party last year,” Charlotte added. “Surely you saw it, Dahlia.”

“I did.” Dahlia nodded, although she could not fully bring her mind to the conversation. Truth be told, she was becoming a bit nervous. A glance at the clock showed another half hour until midnight.

“I wonder if the Fortescues are having financial difficulties,” Priscilla said. “I shouldn’t be surprised. Not with the way—”

The sound of shattering crystal silenced the crowd for just a moment. A dropped glass, Dahlia supposed. Servants rushed in the direction of the sound.

She looked back toward Ruben, but instead of catching the eye of her soon-to-be fiancé, her gaze met that of Ruben’s closest friend, Lord Meredith. His face lit up, and Dahlia couldn’t help but smile back at him.

Lord Meredith left the group and came toward the women, bowing when he reached them. He was a head taller than any of them, with a broad chest and deep-brown eyes. “Good evening, ladies. How are the Darling Debutantes tonight?” He spoke the appellation with a small smirk and a wink. The Illustrated London News society column had given the name to Dahlia and her friends, and the moniker had caught on.

The ladies greeted Meredith with smiles and curtsies. His Lordship was a favorite among their group—among every group. He was an easy person to like. A “gentle giant,” people said, with a warm smile and a genuinely good-hearted nature. Dahlia considered him to be one of her very dearest friends.

“Miss Lancaster,” he said, blowing out a breath. “I wondered if I might—”

She pulled the folding fan from her reticule and handed it to him before he finished the question.

Meredith gave a grateful smile as he opened it and waved it vigorously in front of his face. The wind lifted his dark curls from his forehead. He was one of the few men she knew who did not have a mustache. He wore side-whiskers instead, trimmed, no doubt, by a fastidious valet. Dahlia liked the look. It emphasized his square jaw and drew attention to his open face and the small cleft in his chin.

He leaned his head back and to either side to fan his neck.

The other ladies stepped back, apparently fearful that their coiffures would be disheveled by the gusts he was causing.

“How is it you never have a folding fan?” Dahlia asked him, shaking her head as if she were scolding. “Didn’t I give you a perfectly good one just last year for your birthday?”

He made a noise that was somewhere between a grunt and a chuckle. He shrugged. “I forget.”

“Perhaps you need a larger one so you don’t,” Dahlia said. “You could wear it in your belt like a saber.”

“I’d much rather borrow yours,” he said, tipping his head forward to fan the back of his neck. “How would I look with an enormous fan hanging from my belt?”

“Like a man who grows tired of always being hot,” Dahlia said. “And perhaps the trend will catch on. Maybe everyone would wear large fans in their belts—you could be famous.”

He tapped the fan to his palm, closing it and handed it back to her. He frowned but couldn’t fully hide the smile in his eyes. “That is not how I wish to become famous, Dahlia Lancaster, thank you very much.”

“A pity,” she said, returning the fan to her reticule. “You are missing out on a lucrative business opportunity.”

He tugged on his shirtfront, pulling it away from his chest to make a breeze. “Pure torture, that’s what this is,” he said.

One of his curls was askew. Dahlia reached up and flicked it so that it fell back onto his forehead with the others.

Meredith’s make-believe frown dissolved and his face softened. He took Dahlia’s hand and opened his mouth as if he would say something. But he closed it directly and shook his head the slightest bit before resuming his usual smile. “Shall we?” He tipped his head toward the dance floor.

The first strains of a waltz had started.

The pair walked together to the floor and took their positions. And as they spun through the other couples, Dahlia realized she was no longer nervous. She was grateful to have a friend such as Meredith, someone she was truly comfortable with, who could make her laugh and whose strong arms made her feel safe.

The rubies in her bracelet glittered where her arm rested on his shoulder, reminding her that the time was drawing close for the marquess's announcement. A part of her wished she and Meredith could just continue dancing. But that was silly. She was to be the future marchioness. How could she not be happy?

She looked at her partner and saw Lord Meredith was watching her with a strange expression that both unsettled and comforted her. Seeing it, she missed her footing.

Meredith's arms tightened around her, keeping her from falling. "Steady on," he said.

Dahlia startled, concentrating on her feet until she fell back into the rhythm of the dance. When she looked back at his face, the expression was gone, and she was left wondering if she'd imagined it. The state of her nerves led her to believe that she had.

The dance ended, and the music stopped completely. A feeling of anticipation charged the air. The time had come.

Meredith returned Dahlia to her friends, and the young ladies moved with the crowd to the raised dais at the end of the ballroom, where the musicians were vacating their seats for a well-earned recess. The chimes of the grand clock echoed through the space. Midnight exactly. Their host was nothing if not punctual.

The marquess stepped onto the platform, and his son, Lord Ruben, joined him. Dahlia had never seen him looking so nervous. His face was red and sweat gleamed on his

forehead.

Dahlia's mother came through the crowd to join her daughter. From the bleary look in her eyes, she had already had far too much to drink. A common occurrence since Dahlia's father's diagnosis of tuberculosis. She smiled up at her daughter, and her proud expression made Dahlia's heart ache. If only her father could be here.

"I am very happy for you, my dear," her mother said a bit too loudly. "You have been so favored, both with beauty and circumstance. And Lord Ruben is fortunate to have you."

Dahlia linked arms with her mother and gave a smile, hoping to quiet her. She looked at Ruben, but his gaze was firmly averted from catching anyone's eye. His hands were clasped behind his back, and his hair was becoming damp with the sweat.

The marquess helped his wife step onto the dais with them. Her Ladyship looked over the crowd with a gaze that held all the condescension her title demanded and more. Her eyes lit on Dahlia and her mother, and the corners of her mouth tightened. She had never acted warmly toward Dahlia, but perhaps that would all change after tonight.

"As you all know," Lord Molyneaux began, "my family has a very important announcement this evening." He looked at his son, but Ruben did not turn his head. "There have been some, myself among them, who have wondered if this day would ever come, if the lad would ever settle down and accept his duties as the future marquess." He clapped his son on his shoulder.

Ruben's face color deepened to crimson.

"It has finally come about," Lord Molyneaux continued as servers with trays moved through the crowd, distributing sparkling wine. "My son has chosen a companion to

share his life and home with, as well as further the interest of our legacy and bear an heir worthy of the title of the Marquess of Molyneaux. And I could not be more pleased with his choice.”

He took a glass, as did the others on the platform. “Tonight is one of utmost importance for my family personally, as well as for the kingdom. The young lady proceeds from a noble family, one of excellent standing. Her pedigree is impeccable.”

Dahlia considered her parents and felt a surge of warmth for the marquess at the compliment he paid them.

The marquess and his wife raised their glasses. “I am very pleased to announce the forthcoming marriage of Lord Ruben and Lady Lorene Stanhope.”

Gasps sounded throughout the room, the loudest coming from Dahlia’s mother.

Dahlia stared at the marquess, certain she had misunderstood. Had he made a mistake? Was somebody playing a joke?

Ruben reached out his hand to assist Lorene as she stepped up next to him. Red rubies sparkled around her wrist as the light caught the bracelet she wore. It was an exact match to the one he’d given Dahlia.

The room went entirely silent for a moment of shock, and then the whispers began.

“Ruben?” Dahlia said aloud. Her thoughts were sluggish, like they had grown thick and heavy, and she was unable to make sense of what was happening.

“This can’t be,” her mother said. “Dahlia, you...” Her words trailed off as she motioned toward the stage with her glass.

Ruben kissed Lorene's cheek, and the company followed the marquess in raising their glasses and drinking a toast in tribute to the couple. But the action was halfhearted. None were looking at the dais. The entire room stared at Dahlia. All but Ruben, who still would not meet her eye.

Dahlia looked instead at Lorene, her closest friend. Surely she would correct this. But when Lorene looked back, her expression was one of triumph, a brow raised and her lips pulled into a smirk.

The reality of the situation sank slowly over Dahlia, and her muddled thoughts grasped the truth.

It wasn't a mistake.

Her legs trembled and her face heated as panic set in. It couldn't be true.

Movements at the corner of her eye drew her gaze, and she saw her friends moving away, making space between themselves and her. Only her mother remained close.

Dahlia heard a snicker, then another. Voices started, some containing laughter, all animated by scandal.

Her stomach clenched, and she feared she would be ill. She thrust her glass at her mother and started toward the exit on the far side of the large room, walking as she always did, back straight, eyes ahead, attempting to act as if she were not in the least upset.

"Dahlia, my dear," her mother began, but Dahlia didn't stop.

The crowd parted around her, and the voices grew louder, as did the laughter.

Lord Meredith was hurrying toward her. “Miss Lancaster.”

Dahlia continued. She veered away from him. Lord Meredith’s pity would make her break down entirely. Tears started to prickle at her eyes, and sobs were making her chest heave. She hurried her stride, determined not to cry in front of the haut ton .

Only once she reached the main hall did she allow herself a choking breath. Sobs tore from her throat, echoing up the grand staircase. She rushed past it, throwing decorum to the wind and grasping her skirts to keep from tripping. Her thoughts were unfocused, and she ran without direction down a corridor. All she could think of was getting away from the ballroom and finding where Elizabeth had gone. Her cousin was the only person she could think of who would offer understanding at her situation, rather than pity or judgment. At the very least she hoped to find a place to weep alone.

A light shone beneath the library door. Dahlia was certain the room would be empty since all of the guests were gathered in the ballroom to hear the marquess’s announcement. She opened the door and slipped inside.

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One year later

Dahlia hurried through the ship's dining room, confirming the tablecloths were wrinkle free and vases of fresh flowers were set. She continued on toward the stern and into the saloon, scanning the room and finding sparkling windows, a stocked bookshelf and bar, dusted surfaces, and pillows fluffed in the corners of sofas, just as she'd instructed. The SS Aurora's staff really was exceptional. She straightened an already straight picture frame and tugged a drape pleat into place, wishing she had time to inspect each of the cabins.

She wasn't nervous per se, but she was anxious that this cruise be a success. The future of the Paragon Line depended upon it. And the passengers, the elite of London Society, were notoriously difficult to please. This past year of snubs from former friends and rescinded invitations had only reinforced that knowledge. Dahlia was already an outcast among those she'd formerly associated with, but if this expedition failed to impress, her business would be eschewed as well.

Pushing open the door to the main deck, she found her assistant, Victor Vandelay, leaning against the rail, writing in a notebook. He was, as always, dressed fashionably in coordinated waistcoat and trousers of a plaid design, an impeccably tied neckcloth, and highly polished shoes. Seeing him gave reassurance. Victor was incredibly competent at his job, efficient and unruffled, even in the most taxing circumstances. Dahlia had come to value him as more than an assistant; he was a trusted confidant and friend.

She greeted him, resting a hand on the rail beside him and looking out at the view of the Royal Navy College beyond Greenwich Park. Turning her gaze downward to the

docks, she could see carriages arriving and trunks being unloaded. The time had come. She took a steadying breath and started toward the bow, where the gangway was attached to the dock. Captain Carmichael was already there, waiting to greet the passengers as they embarked. With him were some of the senior officers as well as the pilot, Mr. Webster, who would see the ship safely through the Channel. Captain Carmichael hadn't liked veering from the typical course of launching in Liverpool, but this was not a typical journey. And since all of the passengers would already be in London after the parliamentary session had ended a few days earlier, Dahlia had wanted the cruise to begin there. Besides, she thought it good for publicity. The impressive sight of a brand-new ocean liner in the Thames had brought a steady stream of admirers to the dockyard. Upon their return, she would open the ship for tours.

Victor snapped the notebook shut, falling into step beside her. "Miss Lancaster, there is a"—he cleared his throat—"small change in the passenger list."

Something in the way he spoke gave her pause. Victor was never unsure about anything.

"I trust you can manage a late adjustment in the berthing assignments without the need to bring it to my attention," Dahlia said, watching her assistant carefully.

"It is more significant than that," he said. "I did not want to tell you too soon and have you worry, but I fear I have left it too late, and now..."

"Out with it," Dahlia ordered. "What haven't you told me?"

Victor looked toward the dock and then back at her, letting out a breath. "Lord and Lady Ruben will be joining the cruise." He winced.

Dahlia's stomach turned to ice. She had seen Ruben and Lorene only a very few

times since the marquess's ball a year earlier, and they had never spoken more than a stiff greeting to her. The thought of the pair of them here, together... She reached to grab the rail, but stopped, holding her hand fisted at her side and raising her chin. This was not the time for uncertainty. "How did this happen?" Her voice came out sharper than she'd intended. "They were not invited."

"His agent contacted the office last week," Victor said. "Insisted His Lordship's invitation must have been misplaced and requested a new one."

Why would he want to come? Dahlia almost asked the question aloud but stopped herself. She knew the answer. In addition to her dearest friends, high-ranking government officials, select members of the aristocracy, and noble families had all been invited for the SS Aurora's inaugural cruise. The passengers were an exclusive few. And Ruben hated to be excluded from anything, let alone such a private and modish event.

"A man of Lord Ruben's standing is hardly the type one refuses," Victor continued. "I feared it would only cast a shadow over the Paragon Line if his request for passage was declined. The last thing we want is negative publicity."

"Of course. You did the right thing," Dahlia said, hearing the words as if someone else were speaking them. She felt unsteady on her feet, and it had nothing to do with the waves of the Thames beneath her. "Lord and Lady Ruben are naturally welcome. And their patronage will only be an asset to the prestige of the ship."

"I assigned them to the Emerald Suite," he said, opening his book and looking relieved to be discussing business matters once again.

"Not the Sapphire?" Dahlia asked.

"The Duchess of Dorchester will be in the Sapphire," Victor said. "And, of course,

Lady Mather and her friends will remain in the Pearl. I spoke to Mr. Yeates already. He and Mrs. Yeates are transferring their things to an interior cabin.”

Now it was Dahlia’s turn to wince. Her cousin and vice president of Lancaster Steam Sailing and Shipping Limited had been quite keen on traveling in one of the four outboard suites. He and his wife, Kathryn, had come aboard hours ago to establish themselves in the Emerald Suite and make ready to welcome the guests. “Mr. and Mrs. Yeates can relocate to my cabin,” Dahlia said.

Victor shook his head. “It would hardly do for the company’s president to take a lower berth. You have a reputation to uphold. You cannot make way for a man of lower position simply because it is the polite thing to do. You must be seen entering and exiting the Diamond Suite if you wish to be taken seriously as a woman and a business owner.” His expression was serious. “You are laying the path.”

Dahlia sighed. Victor had said similar things before. He had a vision of the future that was quite different from her own, seeing women in all positions of government and as leaders of industry. She considered herself an anomaly, knowing most fathers would prefer to leave their estates to sons or other male heirs. The world of business was for men, and Dahlia had struggled for over a year to be heard, let alone be taken seriously by bankers, shipbuilders, cargo masters, coal mine owners, and practically every man she’d had professional dealings with. Her colleagues had acted as though Dahlia were nothing more than a novelty. A foible of an eccentric father. And they treated her as such. Most preferred to do business directly with Victor, but he had consistently deferred to her. He had told her again and again that if she were to maintain the respect of both her associates and subordinates, she needed to act like a leader, no matter how uncomfortable it made her.

“I do feel selfish,” Dahlia said, still unsettled by the berthing reassignments. “I am only one person, and to enjoy the finest cabin on the ship—”

“You own the ship,” Victor reminded her. He turned her around by the shoulders, pointing her gaze upward to the sailyards and the steam funnels between them. “Look at this; look at what you have created. If not for your vision to expand your father’s cargo shipping company, this glorious vessel would be resigned to a life of ferrying tea, spices, and cotton. Leisurely sea travel is a revolutionary idea. A brilliant idea. And it was your idea. The Paragon Line is all your doing, and this ship is only the beginning. Here, you are in charge—the highest in the chain of command. Do not forget that. And do not allow Lord Ruben or Mr. Yeates or any person to make you believe that you are any less or that you deserve any less.”

Dahlia looked back at Victor, giving him a grateful smile and crossing her arms to pat his hands where they sat on her shoulders. “Thank you. I needed that.” She breathed in and slowly out, then took a step away, turning to continue toward Captain Carmichael, Victor following, but she paused as a flash of red caught her eye. Ruben had just alighted from his carriage, the evening sun making the ruby pin in his necktie sparkle. He glanced up, his gaze meeting Dahlia’s for just an instant before she turned away. She touched the brooch at her neck, a painted blue orchid surrounded by filigree silver, taking strength from the reassurance that her own friends would be on the ship as well. Ruben couldn’t hurt her anymore. Especially with the Blue Orchid Society in attendance.

Dahlia scanned the crowd for the four women who had become her dear comrades, her mind traveling back to that night in the Marquess of Molyneux’s library when she’d thought her world had ended. But what she’d found was so much more than what she’d lost. Sophie, Vivian, Hazel, and Elizabeth had become dearer to Dahlia than friends who shared gossip and shopping excursions. They were a source of strength, of encouragement, a sisterhood.

She was disappointed not to see any Blue Orchid Society members down on the dock. But they would be along soon enough. She and Victor continued on across the deck to where the gangway met the rail.

As they approached the captain, Victor signaled to a group of musicians in custom livery who began playing the ship's anthem, a signal for the boarding to commence.

Captain Carmichael was a large man, broad through the chest with a thick gray mustache that he'd waxed into a point on either side of his mouth. He greeted Dahlia with a nod. "Miss Lancaster."

Dahlia nodded back. She was pleased with her selection of captain. Not only had he sailed with the company for years, but he was well-liked and respected among crew and passengers, a trait Dahlia considered nearly as important as his impeccable record.

She greeted Mr. Webster, who politely took his leave to join the officers on the bridge.

The purser, Mr. Bryce, moved to stand with Victor. The pair of them were responsible for distributing room assignments, keys, and deck plans. Stewards stood at the ready to escort passengers to their quarters and assist servants with luggage.

Through the wrought-iron railings, Dahlia could see the first passengers making their way over the suspended slats of the gangway. Large nets were extended on either side for safety, but the travelers still walked carefully. As they drew closer, Dahlia smiled, recognizing the three elderly women making their way over the hanging bridge: Mrs. Griffin, Lady Chatsworth, whose grandson was engaged to Elizabeth, and Sophie's grandmother, the Dowager Lady Mather, whom her friends called Mimi.

The ladies were of an age when most would be more at home in a drawing room with their feet up and sipping a cup of tea. But not these three. Intelligent, broad-minded, and very eccentric, they were always willing to have an adventure.

When Mimi reached the top of the gangway, she took hold of the railing with one

hand and Captain Carmichael's offered hand with the other to step onto the deck. She was grinning. "Gracious, wasn't that exciting?" She looked back at her companions.

Mrs. Griffin was directly behind her. The woman was a bit more frail and used a walking stick, placing it carefully on the slats and holding tightly to the rope running alongside the gangway. A nervous-looking maid followed, holding out her own hands, ready to catch the older woman should she slip. In spite of her slow process, Mrs. Griffin grinned as well.

Mimi kissed Dahlia's cheeks. "It is lovely to see you, my dear, and here, in your element." She gazed over the deck, lifting her eyes to admire the steam funnels. "The ship is absolutely beautiful."

"Thank you," Dahlia said, knowing Mimi did not give out unwarranted compliments.

Mrs. Griffin took the captain's hand, handed her walking stick to the maid, and grabbed on to the railing before taking the last uneven step. The maid followed.

Lady Chatsworth completed the trio, gracefully stepping onto the deck to join her friends. "My dear Miss Lancaster," she said, holding out a hand to greet Dahlia. "Your invitation was very welcome."

"Wasn't it?" Mrs. Griffin said. "It has been such a hot summer. A sailing expedition is just the thing." She turned to look over the railing. "Goodness, what a drop!"

"I am so delighted you could all join us," Dahlia said, determined not to glance behind the ladies to where Ruben and Lorene were crossing the gangway behind the lady's maids carrying travel bags and footmen bearing the older women's trunks.

"Allow me to introduce you to the ship's captain."

Captain Carmichael was charming, greeting the elderly women with a charisma that bordered on flirting.

The older women were thrilled by his attentions, and even more so when he invited them to join him at the Captain's Table for tea and biscuits later that evening.

Ruben and Lorene had reached the end of the gangway, but Dahlia ignored them. She would not be rushed on their account. She introduced the older women to Victor and the purser, who were already directing the servants toward the lower decks. Mr. Bryce gave the women the key to the Pearl Suite, and Victor waved over a steward to accompany them and direct the servants.

Now there was nothing to do but face Ruben and Lorene, but Dahlia was not ready. "Oh yes," she called after Mimi and her friends. "You must have your photographs taken." She pointed portside to where a photographer had arranged a backdrop with the ship's name. Dahlia had been especially pleased with that idea once she'd thought of it. She'd converted a lower, windowless berth into a photography studio, where the photos could be processed during the cruise, giving the passengers a souvenir to take home.

The women happily crossed to the photographer, and having no other excuse to avoid Lord and Lady Ruben, Dahlia steadied her nerves and turned back to join the captain, who was already speaking with them.

Dahlia hoped her expression would not betray the tumult she felt within. "Lord and Lady Ruben, welcome aboard." Dahlia met their gazes only briefly. Then, seeing Victor approach, she took a step back, motioning toward him. "My assistant, Mr. Vandelay, will answer any questions you have." She turned toward the next guests, but Ruben would not be dismissed.

"Miss Lancaster," he said in a booming voice, as if they were long-lost friends. He

took her hand, kissing the air above it. “You must give us a tour of your boat.”

“Ship,” Dahlia snapped before she could stop herself, pulling her hand away. She knew he was trying to get a reaction and wished she hadn’t risen to the bait. Ruben had a way of making people feel small. Why hadn’t she noticed it when they were together?

“It is a beautiful ship ,” Ruben said, undeterred. “Isn’t it, darling?” He glanced at Lorene, but not long enough for her to respond. “A beautiful ship for a beautiful woman.”

“Excuse me,” Dahlia said. She crossed the deck to join Mimi and her friends and spent a few moments looking busy, arranging the women into a pose and stepping back to look through the camera, as if she had any idea how photography worked.

“He’s gone now.” Mimi motioned with her chin over Dahlia’s shoulder to where Ruben and Lorene had been.

“Thank you.” Dahlia breathed out a breath that was much heavier than she’d intended.

More guests arrived, and she and the captain settled into a routine, he helping the ladies board, she making introductions. Each of the passengers was a member of a class that had all but abandoned Dahlia when Lord Ruben had publicly jilted her. Many of the introductions were accompanied by awkward small talk, but the fact that they were here at all was a testament to her innovation, and her pride over the company she’d grown and the ship in which they stood gave her confidence.

At last, the members of the Blue Orchid Society arrived. They must have arranged to meet so they could come on board together. Dahlia’s spirits lifted at the sight of her friends. These were the people she truly wanted to share this experience with. All the

other passengers were ancillary.

Lady Sophronia Graham came aboard first and wrapped Dahlia in an embrace. “I am so glad to be here!” She glanced at the passengers on the deck. The breeze blew chestnut-colored curls over her face, and she shook them away with a jerk of her head. “Has my grandmother arrived already?”

Dahlia nodded. “First aboard, actually.”

Sophie groaned. “I wish she would have waited. I told her we would help.” She intensified eye contact and shook her head in exasperation. “When we are that age, will we be so very independent as to not accept assistance?”

“I can guarantee you will.” Sophie’s husband, Inspector Jonathan Graham of the London Metropolitan Police, joined her, tipping his hat and greeting Dahlia. Jonathan wore his usual dark jacket and trousers with a misshapen fob hanging from the pocket watch on his waistcoat. Sophie had told Dahlia the lump of metal was a bullet, but she hadn’t shared the story of why her husband had kept it. Perhaps Dahlia would find a moment to inquire during the cruise.

Sophie took Jonathan’s arm and Dahlia introduced the pair to the captain.

Vivian, Lady Covington, arrived next. Her embrace was warm, but she seemed distracted, as she often was, with her mind constantly calculating. At this moment, her gaze was moving over the complicated system of rigging attached to the ship’s spars and sails.

Her husband, Lord Covington, was called Benedict by his friends. He smiled brightly, greeting Dahlia with a tip of his hat as Jonathan had done, and motioned at the ship. “Dahlia, this is wonderful.”

“Thank you.” She smiled back, pleased by his reaction. Benedict had traveled widely, spending years in Asia before meeting Vivian. Dahlia was glad he could be impressed by the ship after having spent so much time at sea.

She turned to introduce the couple to the captain, but upon seeing his uniform, Vivian spoke to him before Dahlia had the chance to say anything. “The ship has a four-cylinder steam reciprocating compound engine?” she asked. “And I imagine... ten boilers?”

“Twelve,” Captain Carmichael said, beaming. “You must be Lady Covington.” He tipped his head toward Dahlia as he reached for Vivian’s hand. “I’ve been told by Miss Lancaster that you’ll be wantin’ to see the equipment up close. And there’s a complete copy of the ship’s building and engineering plans awaiting you in your cabin.”

Vivian gave a satisfied nod, and Dahlia introduced the captain to Benedict.

Hazel Thornton and her fiancé, Dr. Jim Jackson, came aboard next. Hazel grabbed on to his arm, looking unsteady on her feet with the slight rocking of the boat. “It has been a while since I’ve sailed,” she said to Dahlia, with a blush coloring her face. Regaining her feet, she kissed Dahlia’s cheek. “Thank you so much for the invitation,” she said in her soft voice. “Jim and I are just delighted about the prospect of an ocean holiday.”

Dahlia greeted Jim and introduced him to the captain.

When he heard Jim’s title, Captain Carmichael’s brow rose. “A doctor, eh? Spent any time in a ship’s infirmary?”

“Not by choice,” Jim said. “Yellow fever on a voyage between Dubrovnik and Barcelona. A short bout, fortunately.”

Hearing him speak, the captain's other brow rose. "American, are you? Well, I'll not hold it against you. I'm grateful for all the medical assistance I can get."

"Oh?" Hazel asked. "Are there many injuries aboard? Illnesses?"

"This is Hazel Thornton, Captain," Dahlia said by way of explanation. "She's a nurse."

"Pleased to have you, Miss Thornton," Captain Carmichael said. "And, to answer your question, yes to both. There is, of course, the occasional accident, and once in a while a person contracts a fever or a cough or some such. But the more pressing concern is mal de mer . One never knows how landlubbers will react to sea travel. Some will only be a bit irritable for an hour before getting their sea legs. Others will be pale, sweating, and vomiting for days."

"That sounds completely terrible," a familiar voice said. "I'd recommend against using that sentence in your advertising brochure, cousin."

Dahlia turned and found Elizabeth Miller listening to the conversation with a look of disgust. "Thank you for that excellent advice," Dahlia replied dryly, then smirked, bringing her cousin into an embrace. Charles, Lord Chatsworth, Elizabeth's fiancé, was with her, and Dahlia gave him a smile, inclining her head. "Your grandmother came aboard an hour ago, Charles," she said.

"I imagine she's already up to mischief of some type or other," he replied, giving one of his famous flashing smiles and running the side of his finger over his mustache. "We'll find her soon enough, wherever the action is."

Charles and Elizabeth met the captain, and before Vivian could return to interrogating him about gross tonnage or something of that sort, Dahlia took the opportunity to bring her friends together for a photograph.

The men waited while the Blue Orchid Society posed in front of the backdrop. Dahlia stood in the center with two of her friends on either side, their arms linked. Any last feelings of inadequacy brought on by Lord Ruben dissipated. With these women by her side, Dahlia felt invincible.

Seeing that the Duchess of Dorchester had arrived, Dahlia excused herself. As she introduced Captain Carmichael to Her Grace and her traveling companion, Miss Albright, Dahlia saw her friends each pose for the photographer with their partner. A few moments later, she watched them leave with stewards to find their cabins. Seeing the four couples walking arm in arm, her warm feelings were mixed with bittersweet nostalgia for the way they were before, when it was just the five of them. She was happy for her friends, happy they had found such worthy companions, but loneliness was heavy in her chest, surprising her.

She looked away, swallowing against the lump that rose in her throat, and reminding herself that there was a good reason she was alone. Since Ruben's betrayal, she had vowed never to trust a man again. And now that she was the president of her own company, her conviction was even stronger. She could never be certain that a man was interested in her and not in Lancaster Steam Sailing and Shipping Limited. Marrying into a thriving enterprise was too tempting for a gentleman, and she could never be certain whether affection for her would be genuine or simply an act to obtain the company. She needed nothing from marriage, so she was resigned. The loneliness would pass. And that part of her that still believed in true love, that wished to be swept off her feet by a romantic hero, was nothing short of silly.

Dahlia wiped at her eyes and spun around, intending to return to the business of greeting passengers, but her forward momentum propelled her directly into the wall of a man's chest, and she lost her footing. Arms went around her, holding tight to keep her from falling.

"Steady on, Miss Lancaster."

Dahlia grabbed on to his arms as her feet slipped on the deck. She knew the voice, and comfort flooded through her at the sound of Lord Meredith's voice. The initial reaction was tempered when her mind caught up with her. Meredith was Ruben's close friend. And as such, he was no longer a person she could trust.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Miles Ashcroft, Lord Meredith, had pictured various scenarios throughout the last weeks as he'd anticipated his first encounter with Dahlia Lancaster onboard the SS Aurora . He'd considered where they might meet, fretted over what to wear, even rehearsed in front of a mirror what he would say. But only in his most fantastical version of events had he imagined her falling into his arms the moment he stepped onto the deck. That was not to say he had not considered the possibility—dreamed of it, even. But in spite of his preparations, he was completely surprised when it did happen. Surprised, but not at all displeased.

The truth was, Miles loved Dahlia Lancaster. He had loved her since the first day they'd met, years earlier, at her coming-out ball. He, and every other man in London, had been smitten silly by the sight of her. But Miles's feelings had gone deeper than simple admiration of her appearance. She was clever, diverting, and very thoughtful. In time, the two had become friends. But once Ruben had expressed an interest, Miles had stepped back and resigned himself to knowing that friends was all he and Dahlia could ever be.

Dahlia regained her footing and pulled back, standing up straight. A softness flitted across her face, but it was replaced quickly by a polite smile, as if a door had been slammed on any nostalgia. "Lord Meredith, welcome aboard." There was no hint in her expression that there had once been a connection between them. "Have you met Captain Carmichael?"

Miles schooled his own expression, matching it to hers and hiding his disappointment at the coolness of her reception. He did not give up hope, however, that their former closeness could return. He followed her gaze toward the top of the gangway, seeing the uniformed man she indicated. "He was speaking with the duchess when I

arrived,” Miles said.

“You will enjoy him.” Dahlia motioned for him to accompany her. “And he does like to meet all of the passengers.”

Miles followed, glad that at least she had not found an excuse to leave as she’d done the few times they’d come upon one another in the past year. His chest was hot as he remembered the Molyneaux’s Easter ball. Dahlia’s face falling and the way she’d fought against the tears as she’d fled from the ballroom still made his heart ache. Since that day, she had avoided both Society and Miles himself. And he could hardly blame her. Such public humiliation and the consequences would not endear anyone toward the friends of the person who’d caused it.

As Miles and Dahlia walked toward the captain, a thin man with a bushy mustache joined them. He scowled and walked with noisy, stomping steps, very obviously unhappy.

Dahlia sighed. “Lord Meredith, may I introduce Mr. Daniel Yeates? He is the vice president of Lancaster Steam Sailing and Shipping Limited. And my third cousin.” She added the last part as if familial closeness would explain away the man’s ill manners.

“How do you do?” Miles said.

Mr. Yeates gave a curt nod. “Your Lordship.” His expression did not relax.

“I’d hoped you would have joined the captain and myself earlier,” Dahlia said, “to welcome aboard the passengers.”

Her cousin huffed. “I’d hoped to as well,” he said. “But Mrs. Yeates is still very upset. It took some time to soothe her.”

Dahlia grimaced. “Yes, I am very sorry about the change in the cabin assignments.”

“I understand your cabin did not change.”

Dahlia did not respond to what was clearly an attempt to elicit a reaction. “Captain?” she called.

Seeing them approach, the captain turned fully toward them. His shoulders were wide. The skin of his face was weathered, and deep lines spouted from the corners of his eyes, a result, Miles thought, of years of squinting against a bright sun.

Dahlia stopped, nodding between Miles and the Captain. “Lord Meredith, please meet our fearless leader, Captain Carmichael.”

The banter in her voice only emphasized how cool she’d been to Miles. And both jealousy and sadness filled him in equal measure. It used to be him with whom she teased.

“It is a great pleasure to meet you, Captain,” Miles said.

“Yourself as well, my lord.”

Mr. Yeates leaned close to Dahlia and whispered something. She whispered back.

“Oh, Lord Meredith, there you are.” Lady Priscilla’s voice came from behind, and a moment later, the young woman had taken hold of Miles’s elbow. Her friends, Helen Rothschild and Charlotte Grey, were with her. The trio were all beautiful, wearing smart traveling clothes and elegant hair arrangements. They greeted Miles amiably.

Seeing them, Dahlia went still, but she faltered for only an instant before her polite smile returned and she cordially welcomed the young ladies who, until a year earlier,

had been her dear friends. The only hint of discomfort that remained was a heightened color on her cheeks. Miles was amazed by her poise in the circumstance. She betrayed none of the distress she must have felt as she introduced the women to Captain Carmichael with the grace of an accomplished hostess.

The young ladies made polite small talk with the captain. But their refusal to look at Dahlia belied their own discomfort at the situation.

“I thought the ship was steam powered,” Lady Priscilla said, looking with annoyance at the sails and then at last at Dahlia. Her blonde curls, large blue eyes, and perpetual pout always gave Miles the impression of an unhappy child.

“It was certainly advertised as such.” Miss Grey took her cue from her friend, looking annoyed as well.

Miss Rothschild only looked uncertain. Out of the three, she was the one whose avoidance of Dahlia Miles found most difficult to believe. But he did understand her loyalty to her other friends and the strain of being in the middle. He’d felt it himself when it came to Ruben and Dahlia.

“The sails are merely for reinforcement, ladies,” Captain Carmichael said pleasantly. “All ocean liners are equipped with them. If the winds are in our favor, why waste the coal?”

“I was made to believe it would be an entirely modern ship,” Lady Priscilla said, sounding arrogant rather than disappointed.

“Then, you are fortunate indeed.” Captain Carmichael maintained his good nature, but the skin around his mouth was strained. “The SS Aurora is the most modernistic ship on the seas. She was constructed with the finest materials available and uses the very latest technology.” He ran a hand over the railing as he spoke, as if to soothe the

ship from insults. “You’ll not find a more fuel-efficient vessel, nor one with such attention to comfort. Miss Lancaster has seen to that.”

The ladies looked at Dahlia, doubt and disbelief evident in their expressions.

“She appears to be a fine ship, sir,” Miles said, hoping to steer the conversation in a more courteous direction.

“The finest you’ve ever seen,” Captain Carmichael said. “But I can’t take the credit. That’s all down to the owner.” He nodded toward Dahlia. “Not a detail she didn’t see to personally.”

“I would not believe anything less from Miss Lancaster,” Miles said.

Dahlia glanced at both men, gave an appreciative smile, then went back to her whispered conversation with her cousin. It did not seem to be a pleasant discussion.

“I confess to knowing very little about steamships,” Miles said to the captain. “But I would be very interested to learn more.”

The captain looked him over, and Miles got the impression that he was a man used to sizing people up. “I believe you would.” He held Miles’s gaze with an approving eye. “I promised Lady Covington a tour. If you’re available tomorrow morning after breakfast, perhaps you’d join us?”

“I’d be delighted,” Miles said. He could not help but smile at the prospect, not only of seeing the ship and its workings but of watching the captain answer Lady Covington’s questions. He knew she would have many. “Thank you.”

The captain gave another sharp nod.

“Would you care to have your photograph taken before you are shown to your cabins?” Dahlia asked the women. Although her words were spoken graciously, they could not have been mistaken for anything but a dismissal. She indicated the photographer, and a steward took the cue, leading the three young ladies across the deck.

Even after they departed, the air felt tense.

Dahlia’s shoulders relaxed visibly, and she rubbed her eyes. She gave the captain a grateful smile, then a moment later, looked up at Miles as if only now remembering he was still with them.

“You should pose for a photograph as well, my lord.” Dahlia held out a hand and took a few steps toward the photographer, whose head was covered with a cloth as he looked through the camera at where the Darling Debs posed in front of a backdrop. “A keepsake to remember the cruise.”

Miles squinted his eyes, shaking his head. “I don’t fancy a photograph of myself alone. Might you consent to join me?”

“Of course.” Dahlia gave the same polite smile, and the pair waited for the photographer to finish. He had to change the plate three times, making a photograph for each of the women, before Miles and Dahlia could cross the deck to stand in front of the backdrop.

Miles stood beside her, unsure what to do. Should he offer his arm? Touch the small of her back? Smile? Not smile? His hands felt cumbersome, as if he were holding something and didn’t know where to put it down. At last he clasped them behind his back.

Dahlia stood still, giving no indication that she wished for it to be an amiable

photograph, instead giving every indication that she did not wish to be here at all. She clasped her hands in front of her, not even brushing him with her skirts.

The photographer was still readying his equipment, and the longer Miles stood beside her, the more discomfort he could feel.

“The weather is lovely this afternoon,” he said. “Perfect for sea travel, don’t you think?”

Dahlia glanced at him and then back at the photographer. “Yes, it is.”

“Hold still, please.” The photographer put his head beneath the cloth and held up his fingers, counting down. After twenty seconds, he emerged to change the plate. In another twenty seconds, he was finished.

Dahlia excused herself politely and left Miles standing alone.

Disappointment hung heavy in his gut as he watched her go. But he reminded himself that he’d expected this. There was an entire week ahead in which they would be in close proximity. He knew, in time, he could regain her friendship, prove he wasn’t like Ruben, and earn back her trust. She had trusted him before. Surely she could again.

He pushed out a breath through his nose and looked around the deck. He didn’t know where to go, and he definitely didn’t want to bother Dahlia and Captain Carmichael again.

As if anticipating his question, a man appeared beside him, looking dapper in a plaid waistcoat and trousers. The trimmed blue-green tip of a peacock feather poked out of his satin hat band. He gave a polite bow. “Lord Meredith, how do you do? I am Victor Vandelay, Miss Lancaster’s assistant. If you’d follow me, please, Mr. Bryce

has your berthing assignment.” He introduced Miles to the purser, who presented a brass key and an envelope, thick with its contents.

“Welcome aboard, Your Lordship.” Mr. Bryce motioned to a steward, who joined them promptly.

Miles glanced at the key, seeing that the number 7 had been etched into the bow.

“We launch in just over an hour, my lord,” Victor Vandelay said, snapping shut his pocket watch and putting it into his waistcoat pocket. “And you’ll not want to miss that.”

Miles nodded, impressed by Dahlia’s staff. Those he’d met were competent and professional.

The steward led Miles through a door, holding it open. “The saloon, Your Lordship.”

Miles stepped inside, astonished by the sight of oak-paneled walls and thick carpets. The room was luxurious and comfortable, with large windows, plush sofas, and deep wing chairs. Miles’s father was an investor in a cargo-shipping company, so Miles was no stranger to ships. But the functionality and bare utilitarianism of a freight ship made the amenities of the SS Aurora even more impressive. The saloon was furnished with the same care and eye to detail as a drawing room in a manor house.

He followed the steward to a grand staircase with carved balustrades and polished railings. Passengers walked past the windows, enjoying the view from the promenade decks.

“The dining room is through there, my lord.” The steward pointed to a pair of doors to one side of the staircase before leading Miles down. “Tea and biscuits will be served tonight at seven,” he said. “Many passengers will be feeling the effects of the

ship's motion, so the first onboard meal will be gentle on the stomach. The effects pass for most within a day."

Two wood-panel passageways branched off the landing, each leading along a corridor lit by gas lamps. The steward led Miles down the left one. The first door had no number, simply the word Diamond painted in gold. Beyond were the numbered cabins. Some of the doors they passed were open, with servants bringing luggage and passengers settling in to their accommodations.

Ruben's voice came from the far end of the corridor. It sounded as if he were complaining about something.

Miles was glad when the steward stopped well before the end, indicating the door with the number 7. It wasn't as if he didn't wish to see Ruben. The two of them had been friends for years, and Miles felt a debt of gratitude to Ruben that stretched back to their school days. But lately, he felt the need to brace himself before meeting up with his old friend. And the feeling left him with guilt at his disloyalty.

He unlocked the door and stepped inside. The room was larger than he'd expected, with golden wood on the floors and wall panels. A thick rug covered the center of the floor, and the bed's headboard was a rich mahogany decorated tastefully with carved molding.

"Looks like your valet has already been here." The steward nodded his approval at the dinner coat and clean shirt hanging on the closet door. Freshly polished shoes were beside a plush wing-back chair.

Well done, Peterman.

The steward pointed to a switch beside the berth. "The bell will alert your valet on the steerage deck, and there is running water here in the basin. It may take a few

moments to get hot.” He patted the faucet. “If you need clean linens or anything at all, don’t hesitate to contact a steward. One will always be nearby. Is there anything else I can do for you, my lord?”

“Not at the moment. Thank you.”

The steward left, and Miles closed the door behind him. He tossed his hat onto the bed and shed his coat as he surveyed the cabin. He was pleased at the sight of soft pillows and a duvet patterned in blues and greens. Ocean liners were not known for their comfortable beds, but the SS Aurora, he was finding, set her own precedent. As, he knew, did her owner.

A tasteful picture hung on the wall, depicting a stone bridge in the twilight. Miles knelt on the bed and looked through the porthole. Crowds were gathering on the docks to watch the ship depart.

He leaned to the side, watching workers on the docks as they operated pulleys and heaved loads. There was always a feeling of jealousy when Miles watched men working with their hands. Aching muscles, a sweat-stained brow, completing a physically demanding task—that had always been the sort of work Miles had enjoyed. He had attempted over the years to learn the management of his father’s shipping enterprises, but the workings of business made him feel simpleminded, which was both frustrating and humiliating. It did not come naturally to him in the way physical activity did. He would prefer mending a fence or chopping logs to calculating accounts. But, of course, as the heir apparent to the Earl of Rushford, few such opportunities presented themselves. He’d found an outlet for his energy in hunting, riding, and fencing, all activities permissible for a peer. But there was still something missing. The feeling of accomplishment, he supposed, at putting one’s back into a difficult task and seeing it through to completion.

He turned around, sitting with his back against the bulkhead wall, and studied the

picture opposite him. The painting was very serene... and romantic. He could imagine standing upon the bridge, watching the sunset cast a golden light over the world. Was it a sign? Was this cruise the start of something new between himself and Dahlia? Or did the painting's twilight signify that it was over, the time had passed, and it was too late?

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Dahlia climbed the stairs from the main deck, walking under the hanging quarter boards that bore the ship's name. She stepped onto the terrace deck, which made up the roof of the dining room and saloon. Ahead was the door leading to the ship's offices. The only deck higher was the bridge, where Captain Carmichael and Mr. Webster stood, preparing to give the orders to launch.

Seeing her, the captain touched a finger to his hat brim, and she saluted him in return, smiling. This was not the first time they'd sailed together. They had brought the SS Aurora from Belfast to Liverpool and then to London, but everything was different with actual passengers aboard. It was like they had been rehearsing all along, but now it was time for the show to begin. A wiggle of excitement moved through her, tinged with nervousness.

Deep below, the engines were already humming, the windlass cranking as it drew up the anchor. Passengers gathered on the main deck, with only a few venturing higher. Everyone wanted to stand at the rail. Friends and family massed on the docks to wave farewell and enjoy the spectacle of an ocean liner launching from London. With them, Dahlia was pleased to see, were photographers, their cameras ready on tripods.

The orchestra took their cue and started to play. Stewards carried trays of sparkling wine, distributing them as they moved among the passengers. The captain had warned against alcohol while stomachs were still adjusting to the ship's motion, but Dahlia had insisted upon it. This was a celebration, after all, and she intended to do it properly.

She accepted a glass and nodded to the passengers who stood nearby. Lord Lockhart, a sponsor of Elizabeth's charity school, was beside Dahlia at the rail. He raised his

glass, muttering an awkward greeting, and smoothed down his wayward dark hair, which was in desperate need of a trim. His waistcoat was, as usual, wrinkled, and his trousers were too short. Dahlia liked His Lordship. All of the Blue Orchid Society did. While Lord Lockhart and Elizabeth shared very different views politically and had had a rough beginning, their concern for London's underprivileged children had made the two unlikely friends.

Next to Lord Lockhart—certainly not on purpose—were the Darling Debs, and farther along the rail, Lord Ruben was turned away, speaking with Lord Meredith. Dahlia inclined her head in acknowledgment when Lord Meredith's gaze met hers, and turned to her other side, greeting Mimi, Lady Chatsworth, and Mrs. Griffin as they approached. Dahlia was pleased to see Mrs. Griffin holding on to Victor's arm as she walked. She didn't think the dear woman would have managed the steep stairs alone with her cane. The elderly women wore delighted smiles as they sipped their drinks and watched the crew's preparations to launch.

Dahlia heard familiar voices and looked back at the stairs, pleased to see her friends climbing to the terrace deck. The four couples came to join her at the rail.

"There you are," Sophie said, squeezing Dahlia in a one-armed hug. She pointed with a tip of her wine glass toward the docks. "My photographer is down there, and I've left instructions that the launch of the SS Aurora is to be front-page news."

"I'm so grateful," Dahlia said. She raised a brow in a teasing expression. "But doesn't a story need to involve a criminal element to be featured in the Illustrated Police News? I hope we are not being accused of breaking any laws."

"Only the law against women resisting Society norms," Elizabeth said, "and taking our rightful place in the world, in spite of the men who would wish us to remain subservient."

“If that was a law, my dear, you would be awaiting the hangman,” Chatsworth said, putting an arm around his outspoken fiancé’s waist. “Wouldn’t she, Inspector?”

“They all would,” Jonathan said in his grumbling voice, motioning with his glass to the five women of the Blue Orchid Society. He smiled, but the expression was a weak one. His face was pale. From what Dahlia knew of him, Jonathan had never left London, let alone traveled by sea. The mal de mer must be affecting him already.

“Are you well, Jonathan?” Elizabeth asked.

“I’m afraid he suffers from motion sickness,” Sophie said, rubbing her husband’s back and giving a sympathetic look. “It started nearly the second he stepped on board.”

“I’m well,” Jonathan said.

“Hazel?” Dahlia looked down the railing, finding the nurse and Dr. Jackson.

“No need to fuss.” Jonathan scowled. None of the women were cowed in the least by the expression. The police inspector put up a gruff exterior, but beneath, he was warmhearted and gentle.

But Hazel was already there, the backs of her fingers on the inspector’s forehead. “No fever,” she said. “But your skin is very clammy.”

“I would recommend something to settle your stomach,” Dr. Jackson said, joining his fiancée. “However, with motion sickness, I’m afraid there is nothing else to be done but wait it out.”

Jonathan nodded, his jaw clenched tightly, as if he were fighting to hold back the contents of his stomach. He was stubborn, and Dahlia did not even suggest that he

might wish to return to his cabin to lie down. She was certain Sophie had already done so. With any luck, he would be hale and hearty tomorrow morning.

A steward brought a folded paper sack, handing it to Sophie. Hopefully the inspector would not need it.

Dahlia took a sip of sparkling wine and rested her hand on the railing, leaning forward to watch as the anchors were raised and the gangway taken down. The mooring ropes were detached from the deck fittings and hoisted up to be stored tidily away. The movements were becoming more familiar to her, but she was still mesmerized by the speed and efficiency with which the crew managed their tasks. Once the ship was loose, the pistons started working, their chugging noise getting faster as the steam heated and puffed from the funnels.

The ship rocked once it was loose and lurched when it started forward. Dahlia had come to expect it and adjusted her stance accordingly, but the others around her were not so prepared. All around her, guests stumbled and grabbed at the handrail.

Lord Lockhart, a man not known for his physical grace, gasped and reached out for the handrail as well. He unintentionally grabbed on to Miss Rothschild's arm instead, pulling her toward him. He struggled to regain his balance without causing her to lose hers, miraculously managing not to spill his drink.

The young lady was not so lucky. Her cup tipped, splashing its contents over the pair of them as she fell against him.

Lord Lockhart's face went splotchy, and he stuttered out an apology. "Miss, I . . . I . . . please, I did not intend to . . ."

Dahlia took his glass, freeing his hand as he set Miss Rothschild to rights.

Instead of looking upset, Miss Rothschild blushed very prettily. “Thank you for catching me, Your Lordship. I rather lost my balance.” She held on to his arm, still unsteady, her gaze never leaving his.

A steward took away the glasses discreetly and swiped a rag over the deck, but neither Miss Rothschild nor Lord Lockheart appeared to notice.

Lorene, Charlotte, and Priscilla stared open-mouthed at the pair, and Dahlia knew her friends must be staring too.

Captain Carmichael let go one long blast from the ship’s horn, breaking the spell and reclaiming the attention of the passengers to the operation at hand.

Deep beneath the water, the ship’s propeller gained speed, pushing the SS Aurora forward, and with that, the cruise was officially underway.

A cheer went up, and colorful streamers burst from the decks, shooting out toward the spectators. Handkerchiefs waved the voyagers on, and photographers’ heads dove under their cloths, and within a moment, it was all behind them.

Dahlia met Victor’s gaze, and her assistant raised his glass. She returned the gesture, feeling very grateful for him. He alone knew what it had taken to bring this all about. This launch was his triumph as well as hers.

Even after the applause and cheering stopped, the merry atmosphere lingered. Passengers talked excitedly, looking over the rails to the water moving beneath them. The band continued to play, but Dahlia allowed herself to enjoy the festivities for only a moment longer. A light supper would be served within the hour, and she wanted to be certain the food was in order. And, less pleasantly, the effects of mal de mer would be apparent soon enough for some unlucky passengers, and the stewards needed to be ready with basins and cloths.

Victor's gaze met hers again. He undoubtedly had the same thoughts as he bid the older women farewell.

Dahlia walked quickly over the deck to join her assistant. She paused near Ruben's group to set her glass on a server's tray.

"Will you just look around you?" Lord Ruben was saying. Based on the color in his cheeks and the volume of his voice, the cup in his hand was not his first, nor, most likely, his second. "See what is possible when one does not spend all one's time worrying about gowns and ribbons and house parties?" He looked at Lorene with an expression of disdain that made his wife's face go red.

Dahlia rushed away, praying that her former friend did not see her. She would never wish Lorene to know she'd overheard her husband speaking so cruelly to her, especially when Ruben's insult to his wife was, in a way, praise of Dahlia, or at least of her accomplishment.

She joined Victor, and the pair of them continued on to the galley. But Dahlia's mind could not stop returning to what she'd overheard. Ruben's words should have been a boost to her confidence, but as much as she might have enjoyed hearing them, she couldn't find it in herself to take pleasure in Lorene's humiliation.

The next morning, Dahlia rose just as the sky was turning the slightest bit purple, and dressed. The ship was anchored for the night off the coast of Whitstable, and the decks were lit by gas lanterns, but within the hour, the sun would be up, and they would be off, headed for their first port of call: Boulogne-sur-Mer. The sea was an inky black, and the morning was chilly. With a blanket wrapped around her shoulders, she climbed up to the terrace deck, as she had each morning since bringing the SS Aurora from Belfast, and started for the bow.

She came around the corner of the bulkhead supporting the bridge and stopped. Someone was already there. A man sat in the center of the deck, legs crossed and hands resting on his knees. It took only an instant before recognition dawned, and though she could not see his face in the dim light, she knew exactly who he was. Benedict adhered to many of the habits he had developed while living with monks in China, and it appeared he had chosen the terrace deck for his meditation.

“Good morning, Dahlia,” Benedict said. His voice was not loud, but it carried over the sound of the waves hitting against the hold and the creaks of the ship.

“I did not mean to disturb you,” she said. “I just came to clear my head.” She’d intended to spend some quiet time alone, breathing the fresh air and settling her thoughts to prepare for the day. She’d taken up the practice on the first mornings at sea, when her mind was spinning with worries about the maiden voyage. It had calmed her, and she looked forward to these peaceful moments before the passengers awoke and she returned to the duties of solving problems and making decisions.

“Then, we are here for the same reason,” he replied. “But if you would prefer it, I will find another—”

“No, of course not,” Dahlia interrupted.

He nodded, his face still cast in shadows, and held out his hand, offering her a seat on the deck beside him.

Dahlia gave a small laugh at the idea. Her skirts would wrinkle beyond recognition. Nor would she be able to rise if she did manage to sit. Not gracefully, in any case. Her corset would see to that. “I prefer to stand, thank you.” She crossed to the bow, resting a hand on the rail and closing her eyes, drawing in a deep, calming breath. The launch had gone off without a hitch. And aside from a few small surprises—cabin adjustments and the results of motion sickness—it had all been

better than she'd hoped. She took in another breath, considering the day ahead. Some passengers might still feel ill, so she and Captain Carmichael had decided upon an afternoon arrival at Boulogne-sur-Mer. Guests could disembark, if they desired, and explore the city or even go sea bathing.

Victor had pointed out that some may choose to eat a French supper in a café or even return hungry after the ship's meal had already been served, so the chefs were preparing a flexible meal that could be made quickly, depending on demand, kept warm, and served at various times. The chefs were also keeping milder fare at the ready for those who still felt the effects of motion sickness.

She thought again of how grateful she was for her assistant and his idea of this "rehearsal journey" with a small number of passengers, where complications and adjustments could be made before the ship was at full capacity.

A gust of wind blew her hair, nearly taking her hat with it, and sprayed a fine mist over her face. She glanced over her shoulder to see whether the wind had bothered Lord Benedict, but he appeared not to have moved. The sky was lighter, nearly lavender now. It was almost time to turn off the lanterns. She looked up to the bridge. The lanterns up there were glowing. There was movement, and though she couldn't hear anything over the wind and waves, she was certain Captain Carmichael was already giving orders. Any moment now the crew would get to work, engines would start up, passengers would wake, and the peace of the morning—

A shout stopped her thoughts, and Dahlia spun. Benedict had already jumped to his feet and was heading in the direction the noise had come from.

She rushed after him, rounding the corner of the bulwark to find Victor sprawled on the ground. The papers and notebook he had apparently been carrying were spread around him, some being caught up by the wind.

“The entertainment schedules!” he cried in a panicked voice.

“Stay there,” Dahlia ordered him.

Benedict crouched beside Victor, helping him to a sitting position, while Dahlia rushed around the deck to catch the papers as well as her assistant’s hat before they were blown away.

“Victor, are you all right?” She knelt beside him, cramming the papers under her arm so they wouldn’t be lost again.

Victor looked relieved to see the schedules were recovered. He held a handkerchief to the side of his forehead and pressed another to his knee. “I slipped,” he said. He drew away the handkerchief, revealing a cut above his eye.

Dahlia pushed his hand back to his forehead. “Keep it there,” she said, glancing at the cloth on his knee, which was already colored with blood as well. The decks were often slippery, especially with the wind blowing seawater onto them, so it was not entirely surprising that a person would fall. She was just surprised that it was a person as experienced on the decks as Victor. “I will send for Dr. Jackson and Hazel.”

Two stewards had already appeared at the bottom of the steps. Hearing her, one of the men met her eyes and nodded, hurrying away to carry out her order. The other steward started up the steps, but when he neared the top, his foot slid out from under him, and he plunged forward.

With a quick reaction, Benedict caught him before he hit the deck, and once the steward had regained his feet, the two bent down to examine the steps. The steward touched the stair just below the deck, bringing up his hand and sniffing his fingers. He frowned. “Engine grease, I believe.”

“Engine grease?” Dahlia asked. “But how did it get there? The engines are nowhere near the upper decks.”

“And it wasn’t here when I came up the stairs,” Benedict said thoughtfully. “I would have certainly fallen in the dark.

“As would I.” Dahlia looked at the step with the grease. Though the decks were lit, this stair was still cast in shadow. Any of them would have missed it. “There must be a leaking bucket,” she said uncertainly. Or... or what? She had no idea how this might have happened. Why would anyone have cause to carry grease around outside the engine room? She glanced up at the bridge, wondering if there was some apparatus that required greasing. The wheel, perhaps? Or the engine-order telegraph? That must be the answer. But she couldn’t imagine Captain Carmichael didn’t have a safety procedure in place to avoid carrying grease around in the dark. He was adamant that the decks were kept spotless.

Another steward joined them, bringing a bucket and a mop, and with him was Mr. Yeates. Dahlia’s cousin came partway up the stairs, stopping when Benedict held out his hand in warning.

“I heard there was an accident.” Mr. Yeates looked at Victor.

Victor’s face clouded as it always did when Mr. Yeates was present. Though Dahlia didn’t understand the specifics, she knew her assistant did not like her cousin.

“Engine grease, sir,” the steward repeated, holding up his fingers.

“Well, get it cleaned up, then,” Mr. Yeates snapped at the man with the mop.

“If some grease was dropped, there could be more,” Dahlia said. “All of the decks must be inspected. We do not want anyone else to slip.”

The steward nodded and dipped his mop into the water.

“Wait,” Victor said in a loud voice. “Do not wash it just yet.”

All of them turned to him.

“But—” Dahlia started to protest.

“Send for Inspector Graham,” Victor said.

Benedict nodded his agreement.

Dahlia could only look at the men in confusion.

“There is an inspector onboard?” Mr. Yeates asked.

“Inspector Jonathan Graham of the London Metropolitan Police,” Benedict said.

“The mystery is solved,” Mr. Yeates said with contempt. “You slipped on grease.”

“Surely this little accident is not something for which we should trouble Jonathan,” Dahlia said. She did not like her cousin’s tone, but he was right. They knew what had happened.

“Perhaps not,” Victor replied. “It may be nothing, but the inspector will have a better chance of determining whether this was merely unhappy fortune or whether something more nefarious is afoot. Grease doesn’t drip,” he said, frowning. “Nor does it spread itself out evenly.”

Benedict frowned as well, his typically peaceful face brooding.

Dahlia pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders. “You think a person did this on purpose?” She couldn’t believe it. What would be the point?

Victor looked down at the offending step and at the steward still standing uncertainly with his mop, then turned to Dahlia and Benedict. “Falling up the stairs can cause injury.” He rolled his eyes upward at the handkerchief still pressed to his forehead. “But if someone had slipped going down ...”

“It would almost certainly have been fatal,” Benedict finished for him.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

The first morning of the cruise, Miles came into the dining room, inhaling the aroma of bacon and sausage. A fine spread was arranged on a sideboard table. His stomach rumbled, but he didn't go immediately toward the food. He scanned the room, hoping to see Dahlia.

After a moment, he found her sitting at a table with her group of friends. The doctor, whose name Miles didn't know, Benedict, and Chatsworth, sat with the five women. Miles was still not used to this shift in alliances. A year ago, Dahlia, Benedict, and Chatsworth would have been sitting with Ruben and Miles. He watched the group, wondering what they were discussing. Based on their expressions and how they all leaned close together, the topic was weighty. Had something happened?

On the other side of the room, Ruben sat with Lorene and the other Debs. When their gazes met, Ruben lifted a hand, waving for Miles to join them.

Miles nodded his acknowledgment, more out of habit than desire, and glanced back to the other table, wishing he could come up with a reason to sit with Dahlia's group instead. But, after her cool reception the day before, he didn't believe she would welcome him.

He filled a plate and sat at Ruben's table and spread a white napkin on his lap. Miles felt disloyal for wanting to avoid him. The two had been friends for so long, and Miles felt indebted to the man. If not for him, Miles's young life would likely have been less than pleasant. Ruben was the closest thing he had to a brother.

However, in the past year, his friend had changed. His words had become spiteful, his demeanor angry, and it seemed as though he always had a drink of some kind in his

hand, which did not improve his temperament at all.

The ship engines churned deep below, making a low rumbling sound that was just loud enough to keep conversations at the various tables private.

The ladies were comparing the breakfast pastries, cutting them into small pieces so each could sample the various offerings.

Miss Grey arranged some of the pieces on a saucer and gave it to Miles. “My favorite is the almond croissant,” she said.

Miles popped the small bite she indicated into his mouth, nodding his agreement. The almond croissant was delicious.

A server brought tea, and Miles thanked her, reaching for the sugar pot. The crest of the SS Aurora was on one side of the dish, with the word Sugar artfully painted on the other. He smiled. Dahlia truly saw to every detail.

Lorene pushed her own plate of pastry pieces away. “None compares in the slightest to Jean-Luc’s creations. He is a true cuisinier”—she sniffed, waving her hand around the table, indicating the food that was, to her mind, not up to the standard of her home’s personal chef—“not simply a cook turning out common fare for masses of people.” She glanced at Ruben, as if expecting her husband to agree with her assessment.

Ruben pulled her plate toward him and put a piece of pastry in his mouth. “There’s no need to be so fastidious, my dear.” He took another piece, chewing it with the first. “The food is quite good. Especially when one considers the limitations of a ship’s galley.” He looked across the room to where Dahlia was sitting.

Lorene followed her husband’s gaze, and her face fell. She covered her

disappointment by taking a sip of tea.

Miles cut off a bite of sausage. He felt sorry for the woman. He'd seen similar treatment from Ruben toward her over the past year. Resentment, criticism, contempt. And it was taking an obvious toll. Lorene spoke less in her husband's presence, and her face was drawn and tired-looking.

"The quartermaster is arranging a competition of quoits on the promenade deck," Miss Rochester said in an obvious attempt to change the subject. "And we all know you have a particular skill with the game, Lord Meredith."

It was true. Quoits was popular in the Midlands, where Miles's family seat was located. He had played it since he was a boy, enjoying a bit of notoriety at various local fairs and family gatherings. But today he was glad for an excuse to miss it. "I'm afraid I've already made plans," he said. "The captain has invited me for a tour of the ship."

"Oh, that sounds very dull," Lady Priscilla said. "I do hope you won't be long."

"Perhaps not," he said carefully, not wanting to make a commitment. "Or perhaps we will be occupied all day."

"Do you intend to go sea bathing at Boulogne-sur-Mer?" Miss Rothschild asked the group. "With the weather so warm, I imagine it would be lovely to take a dip." She glanced across the room, and Miles could have sworn he saw the young lady blush. He followed her gaze but could not tell what or who had caused the reaction.

"There is to be a walking tour of the old city," Miss Grey said. "But I would prefer the seaside, wouldn't you, Lorene?"

Lorene looked up, appearing to be surprised out of her thoughts when her name was

said. She did not look at her husband at all as she answered. "I would indeed."

Once he finished breakfast, Miles excused himself and started for the exit to the promenade deck. Lady Covington left her group at the same time, meeting him at the doorway. Their tour of the ship would begin in just a few moments.

He stood aside, giving a bow and indicating for the lady to precede him. "Good morning, my lady."

"Good morning, Lord Meredith." Lady Covington glanced back before she walked out onto the deck. She stepped away from the door, but instead of preceding him up to the bridge, she stopped and turned to him. "I'm sorry to tell you, but our tour has been postponed."

"Oh?" Miles asked. There was something in the way she spoke that led him to believe there was more to the story. "Has something happened?"

She glanced toward the doorway again, as if making certain they would not be overheard. "There was an accident," she said in a lowered voice. Miles raised his brows, and she hurried on. "Mr. Vandelay—Dahlia's assistant, you know—was injured. Not badly." She added this last bit after Miles's eyes widened.

He tipped his head, not fully understanding how the assistant's mishap might affect their tour. Or why.

"An investigation is underway," Lady Covington said, her voice so low that he found it difficult to hear over the sound of the engines. "The captain is making inquiries."

Miles was quite disappointed that his morning plans had been postponed, but there was still Boulogne-sur-Mer this afternoon to look forward to.

She glanced toward the door again. “Dahlia doesn’t wish to alarm any of the passengers, so please keep this information to yourself.”

“Yes, of course,” Miles said. Obviously, if there was a safety issue that had already caused one injury and required the attention of the captain, it was wise not to cause panic.

“She and Benedict seem rather shaken,” Her Ladyship continued. “Jonathan recommended they remain alert.”

Alert? At the sound of Dahlia’s name used in conjunction with such a word of caution, Miles’s senses sharpened, and he focused more intently on both Lady Covington and the conversation. Her words were tinged with worry, and he noticed for the first time that the corners of her mouth were tight and her face pale. Miles did not know Lady Covington well, but the few times they had met, she had appeared practical and competent, if a bit socially awkward. Right now she seemed... afraid. He thought back over their short conversation, understanding it in an entirely different light. Had the accident been malevolent? Was Dahlia in danger? His thoughts moved quicker. “Who is Jonathan?”

“Inspector Jonathan Graham of the London Metropolitan Police, Lady Sophronia’s husband,” Lady Covington said as if of course everyone knew Jonathan. “He examined the scene.”

Miles’s mind was still trying to catch up. The scene? And why must Dahlia and Benedict remain alert? “What did he find?”

“Petroleum-based mechanical lubricant,” she said in a pragmatic tone. “He seemed concerned by both its location and its manner of distribution.”

What was she saying? Each of Lady Covington’s replies to Miles’s questions left him

more confused. And alarmed. He should speak to someone else. Someone who would explain the situation in clear facts. “Where is the inspector now?” He hadn’t seen the man with the others at breakfast. Was he still investigating somewhere?

“In his cabin, I believe,” Lady Covington answered. “The endolymph fluid of his inner ears is still affecting the nerve endings that trigger an adverse response in his central nervous system, you see.”

“I don’t...” Miles’s voice trailed off and he rubbed his brow. A headache was starting to build. “Do you know his cabin number?”

A moment later, Miles knocked on the door of Cabin 19. Beyond, he heard a groan and then the shuffle of feet over carpet before the door was opened to reveal a gray-faced man in his nightclothes.

“Lord Meredith,” the inspector said. “I wasn’t expecting—”

Miles did not give the man an opportunity to turn him away. He pushed the door open fully and stepped around him, sitting on the chair facing the bed and setting his hat on the table beside him. “I’m sorry to disturb you, Inspector, but this could not wait.”

Graham closed the door. “Please, have a seat,” he said in a sardonic tone as he sat on the bed. He leaned back against the propped pillows, as if crossing the room had exerted him beyond his capability. In spite of his pallor and weakness, the inspector’s gaze was shrewd as he studied Miles. “How can I help you, my lord?”

Miles was glad introductions weren’t necessary. He had met the inspector before, nearly a year earlier, while the man, in disguise, pursued a murder case. He wondered if Inspector Graham’s scrutiny was a result of Miles’s friendship with the guilty party in that case. Or perhaps he just looked at everyone this way. “Lady Covington has made me aware that there is an investigation on the ship,” Miles said. “An accident, I

understand, resulting in an injury. She gave very few details, but I was led to believe Benedict and Miss Lancaster may be in some type of danger.”

The inspector continued to study him. “I am not in the habit of revealing details of an ongoing case,” he said.

Miles wondered whether the inspector considered his interest in the situation to be suspicious. The way the man scrutinized him made him want to squirm or look away. But he knew doing so would only make him look guilty. Of what, he did not know. But under Inspector Graham’s severe gaze, he was almost ready to confess to any number of things.

The boat tipped slightly, and the inspector closed his eyes and groaned again.

“What happened to Mr. Vandelay?” Miles asked, emboldened now that the inspector was no longer staring at him. “What type of accident did he experience, and why are the circumstances under suspicion, requiring a police inspector’s examination and the captain’s attention? For what reason must Benedict and Miss Lancaster remain alert? Are they in danger of some sort?”

Inspector Graham cracked open his eyelids, watching Miles without responding. His jaw looked tight, and Miles suspected he was fighting a wave of sick.

“I should like to help, Inspector,” Miles said sincerely. “Benedict is one of my closest friends. If he or Miss Lancaster is under threat, I believe I should be aware.”

After a long moment, Inspector Graham nodded just the slightest bit. The nausea seemed to have passed. “As I am little use in this condition and I don’t wish for my wife and her friends to embroil themselves in yet another life-threatening situation, I believe I have little choice but to trust you, my lord.”

Miles remained silent as Inspector Graham rubbed his eyes.

After a moment, the inspector spoke. “Mr. Vandelay slipped on engine grease early this morning as he climbed the stairs to meet Miss Lancaster on the terrace deck.” Graham did not move, but Miles felt as if he leaned forward, his gaze growing more intent. “Upon inspection, I found bristles in the grease and determined a brush of some sort was used to spread it out evenly over the stair, making it invisible in the dark—and potentially deadly.”

Miles listened to his explanation, trying to picture the scene in his mind. “You believe the grease was put there deliberately.”

“I do.”

“With the malicious intent of causing a person to fall.”

The inspector gave a curt nod, but before Miles could ask further questions, a knock sounded on the door. He rose and opened it, finding a steward bearing a tea tray.

“For Inspector Graham,” the steward said. “Ginger tea to calm his stomach.”

Miles thanked the steward and, rather than bidding him enter, took the tray himself. He thought the inspector would prefer the privacy under the circumstances. He set the tea tray down on a low table and poured a cup. “Sugar?”

Inspector Graham shook his head, accepting the cup and saucer and holding them in his lap.

Miles returned to his seat. “Please continue, Inspector.”

“As I said,” Inspector Graham resumed, “Mr. Vandalay was on his way to meet Miss

Lancaster when he slipped on the grease. She and Lord Benedict were on the terrace deck when it happened—she, as is her habit, having risen early to take in the sea air and he for his morning meditation practice.” The inspector took a sip of the tea and wrinkled his nose.

“Perhaps the sugar?” Miles asked again.

The inspector nodded, and Miles returned his cup a moment later with the sugar added, then returned to his seat once again.

“The two did not arrive together,” Inspector Graham continued. “Lord Benedict estimated he had been there for half an hour before Miss Lancaster joined him, which was twenty minutes before Mr. Vandelay’s accident.”

“And you assume, since neither Benedict nor Miss Lancaster slipped on their way up the stairs, that the grease was applied during that twenty-minute window,” Miles guessed.

The inspector nodded again, sipping the tea with a grimace. “Might I trouble you to fetch the sack of peppermints in my coat?” he asked, pointing to the wardrobe.

Miles did so, and the inspector offered a sweet, which Miles declined. He was becoming frustrated with the slow extraction of information.

“I don’t believe Vandelay to be the target,” Inspector Graham said, apparently finding the tea palatable with a peppermint in his mouth. “It is not his habit to meet Miss Lancaster that early, nor in that exact location.”

The implications in his words left Miles cold with dread. “You think someone laid a trap intended to harm either Benedict or Miss Lancaster.”

“You know them both well,” Inspector Graham said. “Who is the most likely target?”

“Benedict is a bit eccentric and outspoken when it comes to the working class,” Miles said, considering. “He has ruffled some feathers with his factory regulations. But none of those affected are on this ship. And Miss Lancaster... everyone here was personally invited by her. I can’t think of anyone who would wish her ill.” His thoughts flicked to Ruben and Lorene, but he dismissed the idea immediately. Ruben did not hate Dahlia, and Miles was certain neither was capable of the crime in question.

“I agree Lord Benedict is the more likely target,” Inspector Graham said, taking another peppermint. “But we cannot rule out Miss Lancaster entirely. She begins each morning on the terrace deck, goes up there directly after waking.” He frowned. “And routine is dangerous if someone intends a person harm.”

The chill in Miles’s gut intensified. Benedict and Dahlia were two of the most gracious people of his acquaintance. Both were immeasurably kind and generous. He couldn’t believe either of them to be the intended victim of such malice.

“We must also consider who would have access to engine grease,” Miles pointed out. “There cannot be many who know where to find it.”

“Do you know where to find it?” the inspector asked.

“Not precisely,” Miles said. “The engine room, I suppose. It may take a bit of searching, but it would not be difficult.” He drew a hand over his face, his thoughts swirling with questions.

“I am afraid I have no other insights,” Inspector Graham said. “You now know everything I know about this case.” He put a hand over his mouth and closed his eyes as another wave of nausea apparently overcame him.

Miles took the inspector's cup and saucer and set a bowl on the bed next to him. He had never taken the role of nursemaid, and felt awkward in the situation. And he also felt an urgency to find Dahlia and Benedict. The inspector clearly needed rest, so Miles did not resume his seat. "I have taken enough of your time, Inspector. If there is anything you need..."

"Keep an eye on them, Lord Meredith." The inspector looked even paler than when Miles had arrived. The conversation had apparently taken too much of his energy. "And if you see anything at all suspicious, tell me at once."

Miles nodded, made his exit, and hurried through the passageway to climb the stairs to the dining room. Neither of those he sought were inside, so he continued on through the saloon. After a short search, he located them both on the promenade deck with their group of friends. Seeing them, Miles paused, leaning against the rail and letting relief wash over him, relaxing his muscles. He glanced around but saw that nobody on the deck was watching either Dahlia or Benedict with a nefarious sneer. But instead of feeling comforted, his worry returned. Someone on this ship meant one of his friends harm, and he pledged to himself not to allow anything to happen to them.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Dahlia was grateful the quartermaster had arranged coverings to shade sections of the promenade deck. It was not yet noon, but the sun blazed, reflecting off the water. Thank goodness for the breeze. She was with the other Blue Orchid Society members and their partners—save for Jonathan, who was still feeling ill—the women seated on deck chairs and the men leaning on the railings as they watched a game of quoits taking place on the deck beyond the covering of the shade. When she'd dreamed of a luxury cruise with her friends, this type of moment was exactly what she'd wanted. But she couldn't have foreseen the weight of being in charge.

What a relief it would be to have someone to ease the burden. Someone she could talk to. Victor would listen. He would offer advice, but even though she considered the man to be her friend, he was still her assistant. And in such a relationship, a separation always existed. One he would respectfully maintain. What Dahlia wanted was someone she could confide in. A person who had no professional interest in the company. Someone whose opinion she trusted. Lord Meredith came into her thoughts, and Dahlia glanced around, wondering where the man might be. A year ago, he would have been exactly whom she'd have turned to. But now she supposed a separation of a different type existed between herself and her former confidante.

Her friends chatted, and Dahlia smiled and nodded at the appropriate moments, but her thoughts were miles away as she contemplated the implications of this morning's accident and what she should do about it. It seemed almost reckless to continue the journey, but the thought of canceling made her stomach ill. She shifted in her seat, as if movement might dislodge the uncomfortable sensation, and turned her attention to the game, unwilling to allow the others to see her worry.

Ruben and Lorene were at one end of the contest, quoits in hand, and their opponents

were Helen Rothschild and, of all people, Lord Lockhart.

A steward stood by a scoreboard, ready to flip the numbers and, if needed, act as judge, and nearby, a few spectators sat watching. Charlotte's and Priscilla's chairs were among those on the uncovered deck. They apparently preferred to sit beneath parasols rather than join those in the shade. Dahlia couldn't help but study each of the passengers with a suspicious eye. One of these people was responsible for what had happened.

Ruben went first, tossing his ring of rope toward the hob and landing it right at the base.

Polite applause sounded.

"A fine start," Lord Chatsworth said. "'Twill be difficult to top that."

"Jolly good toss," Lord Lockhart called to his opponent. He dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief and accepted the ring from Helen. He threw it with a flick of the wrist in the same way a person might toss a hat onto a rack, making the quoit spin as it traveled across the deck. It caught onto the hob and spiraled down to land at its base.

"A ringer," Dr. Jackson said, "on his first toss!" He nodded, looking impressed.

And he wasn't the only one. The other men watching sat up straighter, paying attention now, and Helen Rothschild beamed at her partner.

Ruben's surprised expression turned quickly into a frown.

"There is more to Lord Lockhart than meets the eye," Benedict said, and Dahlia was glad to see him smile. Since Victor's accident a few hours earlier, he had been more

somber than usual.

“I would venture a guess that Miss Rothschild is in full agreement,” Charles said. He waggled his brows.

“Lord Lockhart simply understands the properties of gravitation, aerodynamics, and drag force,” Vivian said. “It is hardly surprising that a contest dependent on Newton’s laws should be mastered by an expert in physical sciences.”

“Undoubtedly, you are correct, my dear.” Benedict smiled affectionately at his wife.

Although the conversation around her was light, Dahlia could feel the concern underneath the cheerful tones of her friends. Once breakfast was finished, they had all agreed not to discuss the matter of the sabotaged step, but she could not get it out of her head. And based on the worried glances among the others, neither could they.

The difference was Dahlia was responsible. The decision of whether to continue the cruise was up to her. She sighed, glancing at her friends and the others gathered on the deck. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves. The cruise was on its way to being the success she’d dreamed of.

This journey was intended to be a wonderful experience for her closest friends. An adventure, of course, but she hadn’t considered it would be anything but entirely safe. And now one of them had very nearly been hurt—poor Victor. Although it was only a scraped knee and a bump on the head, she knew it had disconcerted him more than he’d let on. And it was done by someone here on the ship. Of course, she didn’t consider each person on the SS Aurora to be her dearest comrade, but each one was known to her. And she trusted them. Again, she thought of Meredith, wishing things were as they’d once been between them. He would know what to do.

From the chair next to hers, Sophie poked her arm.

Dahlia realized someone must have spoken to her and looked up. "I beg your pardon. My mind was wandering. What was that?"

"I wondered where Meredith had gone to," Chatsworth said. He stood between Sophie's and Elizabeth's chairs, his hip leaning on his fiancée's chair. "I haven't seen the chap at all since last night's supper."

Dahlia blinked and attempted to look curiously around, as if she had not just been thinking the exact same thing. With the ship's tour canceled and a competition afoot, she couldn't think of anywhere else Meredith might be.

"It's not like him to miss out on a game of quoits," Benedict said. "He might even give Lockhart a run for his money."

"I encountered Lord Meredith this morning," Vivian said as she watched Lorene toss her ring. It passed over the post and landed over a yard away. Lorene's shoulders fell and Ruben shook his head. A dead quit. The steward removed it. "It was just after breakfast," Vivian continued. "He was disappointed that the captain's tour was postponed. At least, I think he was. He seemed rather distracted." She glanced toward the saloon doors and gave a small start. "Oh. There he is now."

Meredith was looking around the deck. His hat brim shadowed his face, preventing Dahlia from seeing his expression, but he appeared to relax when he looked toward them. She suspected Vivian had told him about the accident and he had been worried about Benedict. It gave her a warm feeling to see his concern for his friend and the relief at finding him safe. If there was one thing she knew about Meredith, it was that he was extremely loyal to the people he cared about.

Her heart felt heavy at the thought. There was a time she had believed herself among that group. She sighed, looking back toward the quoits game as Helen tossed her ring. It landed short of the spindle, resting on the board and earning her team another two

points, not to mention a grin from her partner that caused her to blush.

But, as was the case with loyalty—Dahlia sighed again— sometimes a person must choose. And Meredith had made his choice, his unwavering allegiance to Ruben fixed. And the pain she had shoved away so successfully over the past year reared its head just for an instant before she took control and pushed it back down to where it belonged. Losing Meredith's friendship had hurt more than any other.

She glanced toward him again, noting that he remained where he was, just outside the doors. He'd leaned his shoulders back against the outer wall of the saloon, hands in his pockets to watch the game. It surprised her that he hadn't joined Ruben's group, but perhaps he wished to remain in the shade. It was comforting to have him there—another thought Dahlia pushed away.

She stood, excusing herself to check on Victor and see to the luncheon preparations. It was to be a light meal since they would reach the port of Boulogne-sur-Mer soon after.

As she drew close to the door, Meredith pushed away from the wall and tipped his hat in greeting. "Miss Lancaster."

But before she could respond, Mr. Yeates came through the saloon doors. His gaze landed on Dahlia right away. "There you are," he said as he took the few steps to where she stood. "I beg your pardon, Lord Meredith, but this cannot wait."

Meredith nodded his acknowledgment and stepped back into the shade.

Dahlia frowned at her cousin's rudeness and gave Meredith a glance she hoped he understood as an apology.

He gave a small shrug, apparently happy enough to wait.

“I hate to interrupt your leisure time.” Her cousin spoke with his typical dissatisfied tone. “You must know that the harbor pilot will arrive any moment. Have you the port fees?”

“Victor has all the documentation prepared, and he has set aside the funds for the port authority,” Dahlia said. She knew her cousin was only making certain the cruise ran smoothly, but his need to oversee every single detail as well as question her judgment about rudimentary decisions were becoming tiresome. “It is all in hand. Captain Carmichael and Mr. Webster are ready for the pilot’s arrival.” She tried to speak with a patient voice. She knew Meredith could hear the interaction, and she felt embarrassed that in less than a day, he had heard her reprimanded twice by a person who rightfully should be a subordinate. He must think her a terrible manager of a business.

“Yes, well, there is much more to managing a voyage than simply lolling about the decks,” Mr. Yeates went on, gesturing with a lift of his chin toward where she had been sitting with her friends. “Some of us are working very diligently to ensure that this indulgence of yours goes off without a hitch.”

Mr. Yeates had made his feelings about offering the ship’s maiden voyage as a complimentary expedition for an exclusive group very clear. He thought it a waste of money and resources, while Dahlia and Victor had argued that the publicity generated would, in time, more than make up for any expenditures. It was investment, Victor had said.

In the end, Dahlia had won out with the sheer fact that it was her ship and she was the company’s president, and while she was grateful for her cousin’s advice, in this case, she would do as she wished.

“And what of the planned tour?” he asked.

“The arrangements have been made for the tour guides as well as the omnibuses,” Dahlia said, trying not to sound angry. “I will pay them personally.”

“You are leaving the ship?” Her cousin looked shocked.

Dahlia was shocked as well. What could possibly be the reason for his reaction? Her surprise turned to irritation, and she decided to change the topic. “I’ve not seen Mrs. Yeates at all since yesterday. I do hope she has not taken ill.”

“She did not sleep well,” her cousin said.

The way he scowled as he held her gaze told her he blamed the inferior accommodations. As each of the stateroom mattresses had been purchased from the same manufacturer, Dahlia did not even acknowledge his comment.

“If you’ll excuse me.” She turned away from Mr. Yeates and put on her hostess smile. “Lord Meredith.” Dahlia stepped into the shade beside him. “Apologies for the interruption. I do hope you are enjoying your cruise.”

“Very much so, Miss Lancaster.”

His smile was familiar and comforting, and for an instant, she forgot the distance between them, and her impulse was to confide in him, to unburden herself as she once had done so easily, knowing she could fully trust him with her worries. She contemplated and then made a decision, taking a chance. She turned, taking a step and tipping her head in an invitation for him to join her. “Lady Covington told you about the... incident this morning?”

“She did.” He walked beside her.

He didn’t offer his arm, and she wondered if it was because she was so tense that he

was fearful of reprimand. She willed herself to relax but couldn't quite manage it. The truth was she needed him. And relying on anyone when they had the power to hurt her was terrifying. "I am worried, my lord."

He glanced at her but did not interrupt.

They reached the stairs leading up to the terrace deck and started up. "I don't know what to do," she said after a moment, hating that she was allowing herself to be vulnerable.

"Tell me what's wrong," he said.

Without thinking, Dahlia grabbed on to the rail when they reached the offending stair. It didn't look any different from the others, but its shiny wood finish still gave her a chill as she stepped on it.

Meredith's fingers brushed the small of her back. It was a simple gesture of support, but it felt as enormous as if he'd built a scaffolding to hold her up.

"Lord Benedict is in danger," she said, continuing on along the deck to the next staircase. "And the person who wishes him harm is here, on this ship." She started up the stairs. "Should I terminate the cruise?" Now that she'd said it aloud, despair settled heavily on her shoulders. "If we turned back now, we would be in London before nightfall, and..." She let her voice trail off, knowing he understood the implications. She swallowed hard.

"And the reputation of your cruise line would suffer irreparable damage from the unfavorable publicity," he said, opening the door she had stopped in front of. He was right. If it was discovered that a person was endangered on her ship, the repercussions would be enormous.

They stepped inside. To their right was another door and, beyond, stairs leading up to the bridge. Male voices came from above. The captain's she heard distinctly as he gave an order and another as the order was acknowledged and carried out. Dahlia led Meredith in the other direction. They followed a narrow, paneled corridor lit by glowing gas lamps between closed doors. The only sounds were their footsteps clicking on the bare wooden deck and the rustle of Dahlia's skirts. The operational part of the ship was clean and efficient, but it was much less ornate than the sections the passengers saw.

The final door, Dahlia's office, was at the stern.

When they stepped inside, Victor rose from a chair on the side of her desk. Ledgers, papers, and envelopes were stacked tidily in front of him. His face betrayed no surprise at seeing her companion, but Dahlia was certain her assistant was nearly bursting with curiosity. "Good morning, Miss Lancaster, Lord Meredith."

"Mr. Vandelay." Meredith removed his hat and inclined his head.

"How do you feel, Victor?" Dahlia went around to her side of the desk and took a closer look at her assistant's forehead.

"Perfectly well," he said. He must've noticed Meredith wince at the purple lump above his brow, because he gave a cheerful smile. "It looks much worse than it is." He closed the ledger and set two envelopes in front of Dahlia, along with a stack of documents for the port authority.

"If you will excuse me, I must make certain the arrangements are in order for the musicians coming aboard this afternoon." He took his hat from the rack and gave a gracious nod before leaving.

Dahlia did not miss that he had a slight limp, and the heaviness on her shoulders felt

even more discouraging. “Madame Théo and Monsieur Bonnet of the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Paris,” Dahlia said, taking her seat and indicating that Meredith should do likewise. It was easier to speak of the musicians than the actual topic on which she wished for advice. “Victor was able to engage them for this evening.” She glanced at the papers and leaned back in her chair.

“That sounds wonderful,” Meredith said. He put his hat on the table beside his chair. “La Jolie Parfumeuse is reported to be very entertaining.”

Dahlia was glad he didn’t press her to get on with the conversation she’d begun. She needed time to manage her emotions, to gather her thoughts.

Meredith glanced around the office, and Dahlia wondered what he thought of it. She worked in a man’s domain. All of her contacts, business associates, and most of her employees were men. In order to maintain their respect, the office decor had only subtle hints of femininity. A soft landscape painting, a lace lampshade. For this same reason, the room held nothing personal, no photographs or trinkets that would make Dahlia appear anything less than a competent businesswoman managing her own company.

She rubbed her eyes. “I think I must cancel,” she said. “No pleasure cruise is worth risk to a man’s life. I know everyone will be disappointed, none more than myself, but what else can I do?”

Meredith scratched his side-whiskers, pulling his lips to the side in an expression she recognized. He was contemplating his answer. And a bit of weight lifted. She was being taken seriously.

“I’m not so certain that cancellation is the right answer.” His brows were drawn, and he spoke slowly. “The villain has tipped his hand,” he said. “His movements—all of our movements, actually—will be under scrutiny now.” He nodded, his eyes focused

beyond her. “With the crew and Benedict’s friends aware of the attempt, he could not be safer, in my opinion. Here, with only a small pool of possible suspects, the perpetrator has a better chance of being caught.” He blinked, looking at her directly. “I believe it will be easier to ensure Ben’s safety here in this limited space than in London, for example, where he could come into contact with any number of people.”

His answer surprised Dahlia. She hadn’t thought of it that way. On the SS Aurora , the chances of anyone being harmed seemed minimal, especially now that they were alerted that someone with malevolent intentions was aboard. She interlaced her fingers, setting her hands on the desk as she thought through what Meredith had said.

“You are unconvinced,” he said after a moment.

“I am just unsure,” she replied.

“Understandable.”

“I want to fix this, to make everything right again, but no matter how I turn the problem around, I cannot find an answer that is entirely sufficient.”

“Miss Lancaster, you would not be the conscientious woman I know you to be if you did not take this incident seriously. Responsibility can be a heavy burden—especially when it is borne alone.” He leaned forward. “But you do not have to do it alone. How can I help?”

There it was. The thing she had hoped for. Someone to offer guidance, to hear her concerns, to help bear the worry. She had shown herself to be vulnerable, and Meredith had responded how she knew he would, with thoughtful understanding. With support, with friendship. But still something inside her was afraid to trust. Afraid to be hurt.

Dahlia breathed. She held her fingers tighter and tried to keep apprehension from her expression. She still felt ill at ease thinking of how very close Benedict had come to harm.

“Will you look after him?” she said at last. “I have the captain’s reassurance that the crew is on watch, but I need more. Someone I trust fully.” She looked down at her hands.

“We will do it together,” Meredith said. “The pair of us can watch over poor Benedict like over-vigilant nursemaids.”

There was a teasing in his tone, but she knew he took the matter seriously.

She laughed. “He will be so pleased to find us dogging his every step.”

“And if, tomorrow morning, you still feel concern, the question of continuing the cruise can be re-examined then,” Meredith said. “You do not have to decide everything this moment, nor do you have to make the decision alone. Not when you have friends to help you.”

With his words came the relief she had sought. It was exactly what she’d needed. Someone to listen, to offer advice, and to trust her. A plan was in place, and it felt right. Confiding in Meredith felt right. Having her old friend by her side— She broke off the thought, alarmed at how easily she had slipped back into her former role. How quickly she had forgotten a year of hurt and betrayal. She sat up straight, taking the reins and steering the coach back on track. “Thank you, Lord Meredith,” she said. “I have work to do before we disembark. I will meet you at the gangway once we’ve docked?”

He tipped his head, and she could see the question in his expression, but he did not voice it. Instead he rose, taking his hat and bidding her farewell before leaving her

office.

Dahlia sank back in her seat, wrestling her emotions back to where they belonged. She could trust Lord Meredith with this responsibility, but with her heart... with that, she would never trust him again.

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A few hours after meeting with Dahlia in her office, Miles took luncheon quickly and hurried to the main deck to observe as the ship was brought into port. Even with the ship's steam power, navigating such an enormous vessel into position was no easy task. And it was fascinating to watch.

As the ship slowed and turned to dock, the port city of Boulogne-sur-Mer provided an impressive vista beyond. Whitewashed houses with red-tile roofs rose up a large hill, interspersed with deep-green trees. Crowning the city were the walls of a medieval chateau, its square bell tower and the rounded dome of a basilica making a unique skyline. It was, in a word, charming, and Miles was thrilled for the chance to enjoy the town with Dahlia. For a few moments, as they'd talked in her office, she'd been the woman he'd known before. She'd come to him for help, confided in him. He'd left feeling more hopeful than he had in a year. Could he and Dahlia put everything behind them and begin anew? Or would the end of this cruise mark the end of their alliance?

At last, the ship was in position and the anchor dropped. With practiced movements, the sailors tossed ropes, and their counterparts on the dock fastened them, their hands moving in a blur as they tied complicated knots and pulled them tight, with muscles straining. A gangway was extended, but rather than a hanging bridge with rope handrails, the walkway was a ramp made of thick boards set between the dock and the ship's deck. Wooden rails ran along the sides.

By the time the gangway was in place, passengers had congregated, ready to disembark.

Miles looked over the assemblage and found Dahlia easily. She was already off the

ship, standing on the dock and speaking to the port agents. Her manner was so utterly confident that, had Miles not seen her uncertainty only a few hours earlier, he would have found it difficult to believe the woman to be capable of such doubts.

“You left the dining room so quickly, I wondered if your lunch had betrayed you.”

Ruben’s voice came from behind, and Miles turned his head, seeing that Ruben, Lorene, Miss Grey, and Lady Priscilla had joined him. He nodded an acknowledgment to his friends, turning more fully toward them, but he continued to watch Dahlia out of the corner of his eye. She was standing right at the edge of the dock and, in his opinion, in a very vulnerable position, should someone knock her off-balance. All those skirts would be heavy were they to be soaked with water. Could Dahlia swim? His muscles tensed, and he estimated how quickly he could reach her if he were to climb over the rail and jump in.

“Is everything all right, Lord Meredith?” Miss Grey asked. “You seem to be distracted.”

“Yes,” he said, making himself smile. “Please excuse me if I was rude. I came to watch as the ship berthed.”

“Are you planning to join us at the seaside, my lord?” Lady Priscilla said. “The weather is splendid, and the steward said we shall be able to hire bathing costumes and machines.”

He now noticed the women wearing striped light-colored dresses with wide straw hats. Each carried a parasol. Even Ruben wore a straw boater hat, ready for a day on the seashore.

“I’d thought to join the walking tour,” Miles said, keeping his voice casual.

“Walking tour?” Ruben laughed. “Looking at decrepit buildings and hearing about a crumbling French castle? Surely you are joking.”

Miles shrugged. “I thought I might enjoy it.” Leaning an elbow against the rail to keep Dahlia in view, he scanned the crowd and found Ben, his arm linked with his wife’s. Chatsworth was next to him and said something that made not only Benedict break into a laugh, but everyone standing close enough to hear as well. A spyglass poked out of Chatsworth’s pocket, indicating the man intended to view the local birds while they were ashore. “Seems a delightful enough town,” Miles added.

Ruben was conspicuously silent, and when Miles looked back, his friend was watching him with a confused expression.

“Perhaps I’ll join you afterward,” Miles said.

Ruben continued to regard him, but he didn’t argue, which was surprising. “Come along, ladies. There’s a café near the waterfront that serves fresh seafood and rather a fine cherry brandy, if I recollect.” He frowned, watching Miles as he spoke, then turned and walked toward the gangway with the women following.

Miles’s heart was heavy knowing he’d disappointed his friend. But he’d promised Dahlia, and even if he had not, he would still have stayed near her. Although everyone else’s focus was on protecting Ben, Miles hadn’t forgotten there had been two people on the terrace deck this morning.

When they reached land, the groups went their own way. The seabathers took a path down to the shore, and those joining the walking tour came to where two omnibuses waited.

Dahlia greeted the tour guides who directed the sightseers to the carriages. The vehicles must have been specifically made for the warm climate, having open sides.

The crowd moved forward.

“Lord Meredith.” Lord Lockhart tipped his hat as he and Miss Rothschild passed. “Good afternoon.” The couple climbed aboard, sharing a bench in front of the Duchess of Dorchester and Miss Albright.

Lady Mather, Lady Chatsworth, and Mrs. Griffin came toward the omnibuses. Mrs. Griffin leaned on a cane, and Miles wondered how she would manage the cobblestone pathways and stairs of the old city. He held her arm, assisting her to climb up, as Chatsworth seated his grandmother in the bench behind.

Chatsworth kissed his fiancée’s cheek, nodded at Miles, and started for the beach. The young woman—Dahlia’s cousin Elizabeth—climbed into one of the omnibuses, scooting down on the bench to leave a space beside her.

Dahlia came toward them, and Miles assumed she would join her cousin. He offered a hand to help her step up, but she took his arm instead, leading him to the other omnibus and indicating the bench behind Benedict and Lady Covington. “You’ll sit here by me, won’t you?” she asked.

Although he knew the reason for the invitation, and it had nothing to do with her feelings for him, he felt a pleasant twist in his belly at both her touch and the invitation.

Dahlia’s attention was drawn to two people hurrying from the dock toward them. The doctor accompanied Lady Sophronia. When they reached the omnibus, he assisted her onto the bench next to Elizabeth, then took a seat by his wife. Dahlia took one last glance toward the docks and then at the carriages, as if making certain everyone was settled, before taking Miles’s hand and stepping up. She arranged her skirts and sat, scooting over for Miles to join her.

A couple was seated behind them, and when Miles glanced back, he was disappointed to see Mr. Yeates had decided to come on the tour after all. The woman next to him, who Miles assumed was his wife, wore an expression of displeasure.

Dahlia turned back at the same time. She greeted the couple pleasantly, although she did not project the warmth into her tone she might have otherwise. “I am glad to see you, Mrs. Yeates,” she said. “I have heard the gardens at the chateau are particularly lovely. I hope you will enjoy them, although I am sure they are nothing compared to your own.”

Mrs. Yeates tipped her head and gave a small nod in acknowledgment.

“You may not have met Lord Meredith,” Dahlia said. “My lord, this is Mrs. Kathryn Yeates.”

“A pleasure,” Miles said. “I take it you are an appreciator of flowers?”

“I am a horticulturist,” Mrs. Yeates said, looking irritated with his assumption.

“Ah,” he began, but luckily he was saved from continuing the conversation when the omnibus started off.

Dahlia took his arm, turning him to face forward again. She squeezed his arm and lifted a brow, letting him know wordlessly that he had been in danger of being subjected to a dull and longwinded description of Mrs. Yeates’s garden. He smirked, keeping his gaze averted from hers, lest they both break into laughter. The twist returned to his belly, and he allowed himself to savor the feeling, pleased at the silent communication between them. He wondered if she had missed their rapport as well.

A woman at the front of the conveyance stepped up onto the running board, holding on to a bench for balance as she faced the passengers. “Welcome to ze beautiful

Boulogne-sur-Mer.” She spoke with a French accent. “As we have but a few hours, I shall give a brief history of ze city before we arrive at ze old sector.”

The woman continued talking, speaking of Roman walls, medieval wars, and Napoleon’s Grande Armée, but Miles heard hardly any of it. He was far too aware of Dahlia’s arm, still wrapped around his own, and the way their shoulders and hips pressed together when the omnibus rounded a corner. Every part of him felt warm, most especially his chest, which felt like it had expanded to twice its size. He wondered if Dahlia felt the same, but seeing the way she tipped her head, listening to the tour guide’s information, and craned her neck to see points of interest, it appeared he was the only one.

The ride ended far too soon, and the passengers disembarked, crossing the drawbridge to gather at the chateau gates. Looking over the edge of the bridge, Miles could see that where there had once been a moat was a very pretty walkway running around the inside of the wall.

The two guides waited until they were all close enough to hear before the same woman who had spoken earlier took charge, pointing up to the castle above them. “Ze chateau herself was constructed in ze zirteenth century by ze Count of Boulogne, Philippe Hurepel...” She continued speaking, and Miles looked up at the thick stone walls, wondering whether Dahlia was going to take his arm again. He glanced to the side, seeing Benedict was safely nearby, listening to the oration.

At last, the guide finished. “Now you will enjoy walking along ze ramparts.” She indicated the tops of the chateau wall. Then she opened the pocket watch that hung from a chain around her neck, looked at it, and snapped it shut. “We will meet in ze garden at three o’clock to continue on to ze basilica.”

The group dispersed, couples and individuals moving about to admire the gardens. Some of the more adventurous took to the steep steps, climbing up to walk the

ramparts, among them Benedict and his wife.

Dahlia caught Miles's gaze and motioned toward Benedict with a tip of her head. They would follow.

Although Miles could see no danger on the castle walls, short of Benedict being shoved over the side—unlikely in this public space—he could not have been happier to agree to the invitation.

The castle walls went around the inner courtyard in the shape of a pentagon, with the chateau in one corner. The ramparts were wide, giving plenty of room for a couple to walk side by side as they admired the spectacular views of the town.

Benedict and Lady Covington chatted as they strolled, and Dahlia and Miles followed behind at a discreet distance.

“Splendid, isn't it?” Dahlia said. She'd paused to look across the city to the deep-blue water beyond. A breeze blew the wayward curls around her face and on her neck.

“A striking view, yes.” Miles clasped his hands behind his back and pretended he was looking out at the vista rather than at the woman beside him.

Dahlia started off again, not allowing Benedict to get too far ahead.

“I have neglected to inquire about your parents,” Miles said. “And for that I apologize. How is your father's health?”

The corners of Dahlia's eyes tightened in a slight wince. “My parents have gone to a sanatorium in Switzerland,” she said. “There is a doctor there who claims he can cure tuberculosis of the lungs with fresh air and exercise and nutrition.” She sighed. “I believe there is only a small chance that he will be entirely healed. But...”

“But even a small chance offers hope.”

She nodded, giving him a little smile. “From their letters, they are at least enjoying a beautiful holiday in the Alps,” she said.

“I admire your father a great deal,” Miles said. “He has a way of making every person feel important, as if what they are saying is exactly the thing he is most interested in hearing.” Miles’s own father was the exact opposite. Short-tempered, impatient, and perpetually disappointed.

“That is a good description of my father,” Dahlia said. Her voice had turned sad, and Miles wondered whether he should have brought up the topic in the first place. “I wish he could have seen the SS Aurora completed, but he was far too ill to come to the shipyard. By the time she sailed to London, he had already left for the Continent.”

“He would have been impressed,” Miles said. “How could anyone not be? She is the most beautiful ship I have ever seen.”

“It’s true,” Dahlia said, nodding. Only a hint of a smirk and a twinkle in her eye revealed that she spoke partially in jest. “She really is.”

Miles grinned. He was glad the conversation had taken a lighter turn.

“And what of your parents, my lord?” Dahlia asked. “Are they in good health?”

Nothing could ruin the mood faster than bringing Lord Rushford into the conversation, so Miles answered briefly. “They are, thank you. My father is as hearty as ever, and my stepmother is quite well.” He glanced ahead and saw Benedict and Lady Covington begin a descent of the stone steps. “They are going down to the gardens,” he said, offering his arm. “Shall we?”

The waltz at the Marquess of Molyneaux's ball popped into Miles's mind, as did the memory of the warmth he'd felt with Dahlia in his arms as they'd danced.

She looked behind them now, and then down toward the stairs, as if she'd become turned around. "Are you certain the gardens are this way?"

"Yes."

"You've been here before?" she asked.

"On my Grand Tour, after I finished at university."

"Oh, I don't remember that," she said. "I was still very young then." The sparkle returned to her eye. "You remember, I am much younger than you."

"I am only seven years your senior, Miss Lancaster, and in the grand scheme of things, that is hardly any time at all."

Dahlia shook her head, making a tutting sound. "Oh dear, it seems as though your poor old mind is softening. Mathematics can be difficult for the elderly." She patted his arm. "You are seven and a half years older than I. There is a difference." Her voice was grave, but she could not contain the smile tugging at the corners of her lips.

Miles laughed. "Four months does not constitute half a year," he said. "Perhaps, in your extreme youth, you have not fully grasped the complications of arithmetic."

"It is possible." She nodded.

They paused at the top of the stone steps, and Miles took her arm, wrapping it tightly around his. The steps were steep and uneven, and with all of her skirts, Dahlia would not be able to see where to place her feet.

“Not to worry,” she said. “I won’t let you fall.” The teasing tone was still in her voice, but much less so. As they descended, she looked around the garden and up at the ramparts, regarding the other members of the tour group. “I can’t stop looking at everyone with suspicion.”

“Neither can I,” he said.

“I don’t like feeling this way, as if someone near me might have malicious intent. Whoever could it be?”

“I don’t know,” Miles confessed, wondering the same thing.

“Everyone likes Benedict. Of course, he is a bit eccentric, but that only makes him the more endearing. I cannot believe anyone would wish him harm.”

Miles nodded, still holding her arm tightly as they moved down onto a particularly uneven step. “He has been rather outspoken about poor conditions for factory workers,” he said. “But none of the affected parties are on the ship,” he said, repeating the same argument he’d used with Inspector Graham. “And, in truth, his changes have not caused anyone other than himself financial hardship.” Miles considered again whether Benedict was actually the intended target. He glanced at the woman beside him. Does Dahlia have any enemies?

The only person who had shown any sort of ill will toward her was Mr. Yeates, but while the man seemed resentful, Miles did not believe him capable of inflicting physical harm. And what motive would he have? From what Miles understood, the man owed his position within the company to Dahlia. He wouldn’t harm the person distributing his salary.

He glanced around the castle courtyard, regarding the others as Dahlia had done. The idea that any of them had set a deadly trap was ridiculous. These people all loved her.

He did not doubt it for an instant. Might the blame be laid upon a crewmember with a grudge? He did not want to bring up the possibility now. Perhaps once they returned to the ship, he would ask her.

When they came to the bottom of the steps, Miss Miller and Lady Sophronia came to join them. Dahlia released Miles's arm, and the four made the appropriate greetings.

"I take it poor Johnathan is still ill?" Dahlia asked. She started along a path, admiring the gardens.

"Yes." Lady Sophronia sighed as she fell into step beside her friend. "He's had a dreadful time of it. Jim called on him after luncheon. He is surprised that it has lingered this long."

"Perhaps he needs just a few more hours of rest," Dahlia said.

Miles tipped his head in an invitation for Miss Miller to walk with him. After a hesitation on her part, the pair of them started along the path as well, following behind the others through the castle's inner court.

Miles could feel his companion's gaze scrutinizing him. He had met Dahlia's cousin only a few times in passing. She was engaged to Chatsworth, one of his dearest friends, but the rift between Dahlia and Ruben had grown so deep that the chance for their friends to come into contact had been nearly impossible. And Miles was sorry for it. He disliked the feeling that, in making Miss Miller's acquaintance, he was somehow betraying Ruben but in not doing so, he was being disloyal to Chatsworth. How had what should have been a simple acquaintanceship grown so complicated?

"I take it Chatsworth is off in search of birds?" Miles said.

"Naturally," Miss Miller answered. "He seizes any opportunity."

Her voice was not warm, and he wondered if she felt the same struggle between her loyalties as he did his.

“And you do not accompany him, Miss Miller?” He gave a smile so she would know he was simply asking out of curiosity rather than accusing her of indifference toward her fiancé and his interests.

“Sometimes,” she said. “But I believe he prefers the solitude. Just himself and his feathered friends.” Her expression was still guarded and slightly suspicious.

“I remember,” Miles said. “Ever since we were lads.” He glanced at his companion, and seeing her brows raise with interest, he continued. “Chatsworth gives every impression that he prefers to be at the center of everything, making people laugh, being the life of the party, that sort of thing. But those of us who know him well...” He paused, motioning between the pair of them with an open palm. “We know it is all for appearances. A facade behind which he hides.”

“Yes.” The suspicion in Miss Miller’s expression was gone now, and she watched him attentively, her curiosity obvious.

“We were at Eton together,” Miles said. “Perhaps you know that.” Seeing her nod, he went on. “Chatsworth used to disappear for hours at a time. Don’t know if anyone else noticed. Lads of that age typically don’t perceive much beyond what trouble we might get away with or whether we would be eating bread and bacon again for supper.”

Miss Miller smiled, but she did not interrupt.

They walked around where Mrs. Yeates was bent over beside the path, examining a plant at close range.

“I used to go off on my own as well,” Miles said. “Although I may seem to you like a titan of academia, the truth is school was very difficult for me.” He gave a wry smile. “I much preferred exploring the riverbanks or climbing trees. And that is where I found Chatsworth.” He couldn’t help but grin at the memory. “The first time, I heard him before I saw him. Funny whistles coming from a thicket as he attempted to imitate birdsong.”

At this Miss Miller gave a fond smile. “He still does that.”

Miles chuckled. “He didn’t see me, so I crept closer, watching as he attempted to communicate with a bird on a branch overhead.”

Mrs. Miller’s smile grew.

“I knew he must wish to be left alone, and I did not want to embarrass him, so I left quietly, walking back the way I’d come. I came upon him a few other times over the years, writing in his little book or looking at the branches through a spyglass, and sometimes he was making the noises—although, they did not really sound very much like birdsong.”

“And you never told him?” Miss Miller asked.

Miles shook his head. “Nor anyone else. Boys ridicule one another over far less. Especially bored boys away from home. They are always looking for a weakness to exploit.” He knew the truth of that far too well.

She was quiet for a moment. “Not only boys,” she said. “Plenty of girls believe anyone perceived as ‘different’ to be fair game for persecution. And not only children.”

Something in her face told him she was far more familiar with this truth than she

would like.

He nodded, seeing a commonality in the woman—one that, if he were to look closely, he thought he would see in every person. “Such a phenomenon, I suppose, is not limited by age, nor by gender.”

Just as they reached where the tour group was gathering, the two shared a look of understanding that pleased him very much, not only because Miss Miller was Chatsworth’s fiancée and Dahlia’s cousin but also because in the past year, he’d rarely spoken as openly with anyone. And he liked the genuine quality of their interaction. If Miss Miller could ever forgive him for being a member of the West End Casanovas, he believed they might actually become friends.

Dahlia came to stand beside him, and Miss Miller excused herself to go join Lady Sophronia and the others.

“That was very brave of you,” Dahlia said, a twinkle in her eye. “My cousin is not typically fond of members of the ton . Especially male members. I’m surprised you are still in one piece.”

He laughed, but not because he thought she was making a joke. He could well believe Miss Miller capable of giving him a dressing down. He’d seen her temper before—luckily, it had not been directed at himself.

“She is engaged to a member of the ton ,” he pointed out. “A male member, if you will recall.”

“Chatsworth is an unexpected exception.”

“Well, it may surprise you to know that Miss Miller and I had a lovely conversation. We have quite a lot in common.”

“Indeed?”

Miles nodded.

“Such as . . . ?” Dahlia prodded.

His smile grew into a grin. “Come along, Miss Lancaster. The tour group is leaving.” He started off, pleased that, for once, he had left Dahlia unsure. Let her be curious about him for a change.

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Dahlia walked with the group toward the basilica. One of the omnibuses rode ahead with a few of the older women, but Dahlia's friends had chosen to walk, so she'd stayed with them, even though the uneven roads were not treating her feet kindly. New boots with a stylish heel and side buttons would not be her footwear of choice should she return to Boulogne-sur-Mer in the future.

"Here we are on the Rue de Lille," the tour guide said. She was waiting for them on a corner, where they could pause and look up toward the basilica's entrance. "Pilgrims have traveled this same route since the Middle Ages." She swept her hand in a grand gesture up the road to the stone arch beneath the dome, where double doors led inside.

The omnibus waited for them at the entrance, and the gentlemen assisted the older women to alight.

Dahlia stepped through the doorway, her eyes immediately drawn upward to the underside of the dome. It was so much higher than it had appeared from outside.

A low whistle sounded from behind her.

Jim and Hazel had entered, and the doctor stared up at the impressive architecture as well. "Would you look at that?" he said, his American accent echoing in the space.

"Shhh." Hazel put her finger to her lips. "We're in a church, darling."

Once they were all inside, the tour guide continued on, describing the reconstruction that took place after the French Revolution. She continued to talk on about the

Renaissance and Classical styles and the architect, but Dahlia had stopped listening. She wondered whether it would be distracting if she sat in the pew beside Mrs. Griffin. Perhaps if she just unfastened a few of the buttons on her boots, she could ease the aching in her feet.

As she waited for a break in the tour guide's lecture, she looked across the group to where Lord Meredith stood beside Benedict.

Seeing her, he gave a very impertinent wink.

She looked away, pretending to be fascinated by the tour guide's description of Abbot Haffreingue and his efforts to restore the cathedral to its former glory. What had His Lordship been talking about with Elizabeth? And why did it bother Dahlia that they had apparently developed a rapport? It should be just what she wanted, but their friendly interaction didn't sit well with her. Elizabeth had always been Dahlia's staunchest supporter. In the weeks after Ruben's announced engagement, she had vowed all manner of revenge against the man as well as all of his associates. And now, only a year later, here she was, chatting and laughing with Meredith. Had she forgotten how he had remained friends with Ruben, forsaking what Dahlia had considered to be her very closest friendship?

Dahlia was irritated with herself for having such thoughts. She did not wish to be considered a victim. She'd risen above it all, put it behind her. But a part of her still held on to the pain. It was a reminder of what had happened when she'd allowed herself to trust. She looked at Elizabeth, who was standing with Sophie, their heads tilted back as they studied the decorative cornices on the tops of the high columns.

Dahlia realized she'd been more comfortable when there had been a distinct division between her friends and the members of high Society who had snubbed her. Us versus Them. The lines were clear, and by keeping some close and pushing some away, Dahlia had control, not allowing herself to be hurt again. But the lines had

begun to blur, first with Benedict and Vivian, and then with Chatsworth and Elizabeth. And each alliance had felt like a betrayal. Though, of course, she would never admit such a thing to anyone. She knew it was selfishness. But it was also a matter of protection. And fear. She was abandoned once by those closest to her. If it were to happen again... the very thought made her feel panicked. Her face had gotten hot, her chest tightened, and she was breathing heavily. She forced herself to shake off her dark thoughts and calm down. Seeing that the crowd was moving, she made her way toward a pew.

Mrs. Griffin stood when she arrived, leaning on her cane. "I suppose we should follow." Seeing Dahlia's confused expression, she smiled kindly. "Daydreaming, were you? Entirely understandable, especially once the talk turns to clergy constitutions, diocese, and episcopal seats." Mrs. Griffin shuffled out into the aisle. "The tour is continuing below to the crypt. It is apparently the largest in France, if the guide is to be believed. We don't want to miss that, do we?"

"Of course not," Dahlia said. She glanced once at the pew, then joined Mrs. Griffin, walking slowly to keep pace with her, and they followed to where the others were already going down into the vaults.

The two tour guides were lighting and distributing lanterns.

"Use caution," one said as she handed a lantern to Dahlia. "Ze stairs are lit by gas lamps, and a few of ze rooms, but most of ze crypt is yet to be fully excavated. It is a marvel, but it is also hazardous. Watch your footing."

Hearing the warning, Dahlia took Mrs. Griffin's arm, determined that the older woman should not fall.

She held the lantern aloft, following the group with Mrs. Griffin down the steps and into the cool, damp air. The crypt smelled like clay and moss.

Reaching the bottom of the steps, the group spread out, walking beneath the thick columns and studying elaborate frescoes. Lanterns bobbed throughout the space, and voices echoed eerily, sounding as if they were coming from far away.

Dahlia kept ahold of Mrs. Griffin's arm. As she took in her surroundings, she saw that the crypt was a warren of columns and archways and doors that led to more rooms, alcoves, and niches and even more chambers beyond. It took only a moment to see that masonry and dirt filled parts of the space, blocking off some of the doors entirely. Once they moved beyond the few rooms immediately at the bottom of the stairs, the only light came from the lantern she held.

An arch carved with angels was to their left. Dahlia lifted the lantern to illuminate the details of the designs as well as the frescoes on the wall behind. Patterns painted in bright colors were, for the most part, undamaged, even though they had been covered for hundreds of years.

"Amazing, isn't it?" Mrs. Griffin said.

"Completely so," Dahlia agreed. They continued on through the arch to where other lanterns moved around the chamber beyond. Another doorway revealed a partially excavated room, smaller than the one preceding. Painted columns stood at each corner, and in the center were large stone blocks among the scattered rubble.

Dahlia and her aching feet were relieved at the sight. "I wonder, Mrs. Griffin, would you mind very much if we sat for a moment? My shoes are unfortunately rather tight."

"Oh, that would be just the thing." They made their way through the debris. Mrs. Griffin moved slowly, and Dahlia kept the lantern low enough to illuminate the ground, lest either of them trip.

She helped Mrs. Griffin sit on a block, setting the lantern near the wall to illuminate the pattern of vines, and then she sat on another block to admire it, sighing as she did. She unfastened the buttons of her boots, hoping it would make the pain bearable long enough to get back onto the ship, where she could change into a more comfortable pair.

The lantern's flame cast flickering shadows, making the vines in the mural look as if they were moving, but the rest of the room, including the space where the women sat, remained in shadow.

"I wonder where Lady Chatsworth and Lady Mather have gotten to," Dahlia said. She gave in to temptation and slid off her shoes, resting her stockinged feet on the cool stone floor.

"Knowing those two, they are in the deepest, darkest part of the crypt, hoping to catch sight of a phantom." Mrs. Griffin chuckled, then shifted, groaning softly. She set her cane down on the ground. "I fear my adventuring days may be behind me."

"Nonsense," Dahlia said. "How does that old saying go? Where there's a will, there's a way."

"You are quite right. That's the spirit, isn't it? Quite so." She stretched out her leg straight in front of her to rest it on another block. "A pity my hip doesn't always agree with my will. But perhaps I do have some adventure in me yet."

"I'm pleased to hear it." Dahlia leaned back to rest on her hands. "How do you and your companions find your suite? Might you require more pillows for your comfort?" She wondered if there was anything else to be done for Mrs. Griffin's hip. Perhaps Jim would have a suggestion.

"It is excellent. Completely excellent. Everything is. What a dream this cruise has

been. The air in London was particularly bad this winter, and this sea air is just the thing.”

“I am very glad you and your friends were able to come,” Dahlia said.

“We wouldn’t have missed it for—”

A crash sounded and the room went dark. The lantern must have fallen. Dahlia pondered for only a moment how it could have slipped off the flat surface, but more pressing thoughts took precedence. Such as how she was to go about finding a light and, with it, get herself and an elderly woman with limited mobility out of the crypt. She strained her eyes but saw only darkness. Her chest was tight, and her fingers and toes tingled with the first hints of panic.

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Griffin said. “This won’t do.”

The older woman’s voice was calm, and hearing it eased a bit of Dahlia’s fear. But only just.

She heard a sound. Footsteps? Scurrying? But the acoustics of the place gave no hint as to where it came from. “Hello?” Dahlia called. “Is someone there?” Her voice echoed strangely, somehow sounding both muffled and magnified.

The noise stopped. Perhaps she’d imagined it.

She and Mrs. Griffin sat in silence, and Dahlia thought that silence was worse. The tingling in her fingers and toes grew stronger, and she fought against the fear that came upon her in dark places. She pushed away the thoughts that pressed into her mind. They are memories, she said to herself. She was safe now, and she wouldn’t let her emotions take control.

“Hello?” Dahlia called again. She looked toward the doorway but still saw no lights.

Nobody answered. She couldn’t see the room beyond at all. There were no moving lights. Only darkness.

“Perhaps the others have returned upstairs,” Dahlia said. She felt on the floor for her shoes, wincing as she pushed her feet inside. The panic was still there, hovering on the edges of her thoughts, threatening to push in. “We may be able to catch up if we hurry.”

She reached down to help her companion to her feet, but when she took Mrs. Griffin’s arm, the woman didn’t stand. Instead she took Dahlia’s hand, holding it in her own. “You’ll find someone much faster without me.”

“I can’t leave you here alone.” Dahlia was appalled by the thought.

“It’s just for a moment or two. We aren’t that far from the stairs. Someone will hear you, or you will find the gas lights quickly and come directly back.”

She was right, but the idea of the woman sitting here alone in the darkness made Dahlia hesitate. “Will you be all right?”

Mrs. Griffin squeezed her hand. “I’m not afraid of the darkness,” she said. “And if a phantom comes, I have my cane for protection.” Even though Dahlia couldn’t see, she knew her companion had a glimmer in her eye. “Nothing to worry about,” Mrs. Griffin said. “Our friends are just around the corner. I know it.”

The lightness in her tone was at odds with the heavy dread just below Dahlia’s ribs. She squeezed Mrs. Griffin’s hand in return and turned in the direction of the doorway, starting off. Because she was afraid of tripping on the debris covering the floor, she slid her feet forward carefully and held her hands straight out in front of

her, ready to either catch herself or feel the wall before she crashed into it.

The distance to the wall was farther than she had expected, and when her fingers at last touched the cold stone, the shape of the room in her mind had grown completely out of proportion. "I'm at the wall," she said to Mrs. Griffin.

"Very good," the woman replied. "The doorway is just a bit to the right, I think."

The wall ended, and Dahlia came to the open space of the doorway. Her heart sank when she saw no lights beyond. "Are you there?" she called into the dark chamber. "Can anyone hear me?" But when the sound of her echoing voice died away, there was no answer.

She believed the other entrance to this chamber was straight ahead. She stepped tentatively, arms in front of her, feet sliding, and ears straining for any sound of the tour group. She came to the opposite wall and followed it to another opening, hearing the difference in the air when she came into a larger chamber. She turned, feeling along the wall, and believed she would reach the next opening. But when she came to the corner, she continued to follow the wall and came to the opening much sooner than she'd estimated. She considered whether to continue around the walls in this chamber in search of another entrance or move through to the next, wishing she'd paid better attention on her arrival. If only she hadn't been so focused on her feet.

Stepping through the opening, she squinted, hoping to see the gas lamps directing her to the staircase. But either she was in the wrong place, or they had been extinguished. "Is anyone there?"

The darkness had no response. Somehow the quiet felt even quieter now. Her breathing quickened, but Dahlia forced herself to think through the situation logically. She did not know in which direction to continue, and if she went on blindly, she would most likely just get lost or perhaps injured. She decided to return to Mrs.

Griffin. The others would notice their absence soon enough and come for them. She turned to go back, trailing one hand along the wall, but the opening was gone. Had she turned in the wrong direction? Or was it just a bit farther along? She found a corner and knew for certain she had gone the wrong way.

“Mrs. Griffin?” Dahlia called, hoping to orient herself. But her friend did not reply.

The building panic took hold now, and Dahlia lost her ability to push it away. She felt as if the world were spinning. Memories of that horrible night flashed in her mind. Calling out for her parents, dark trees surrounding her as she’d stumbled toward where she thought her grandmother’s house had been.

She tripped, falling to the ground, and pulled her knees to her chest as fear confused her thoughts and she could not distinguish reality from the memory.

“Dahlia?”

She heard the voice far away. Father? No, that wasn’t right. She shook her head, trying to sort her thoughts.

“Dahlia, where are you?”

“I’m here.” Her voice shook as she called out, catching on a sob. “Meredith, I’m here.”

Light illuminated the room, and then she was in his arms. She buried her face in his chest as she wept. She knew him, knew his smell and the sound of his voice. They were as familiar to her as breath. “You came. I knew you would.”

“There. You’re safe now.”

Dahlia clung to Meredith's coat. She knew she was making a scene, but the terror that had filled her body needed somewhere to go. It left through tears and sniffles.

"You've had a fright," he said in a low voice, rubbing her back. "But you're safe now."

Dahlia started. "Mrs. Griffin. She's waiting for me."

"We found her," he said. "Not to worry."

Another light drew near, and Dahlia straightened, taking Meredith's offered handkerchief and wiping her dripping face as she fought to regain control of her emotions.

"Dahlia, are you hurt?"

She looked toward Jim's voice, then squinted, holding up a hand against his lantern light.

"I'm not hurt," she said, fighting to keep her voice steady. "I was disoriented, and I tripped."

Jim offered a hand, and he and Meredith helped her to her feet. "I can assess you better once we have better light."

"That won't be necessary," Dahlia said. She handed back the handkerchief and straightened her skirts and shoulders, then drew in a deep breath and let it out.

Meredith kept hold of her arm.

"This way to the exit." Jim motioned with a sweep of his lantern.

“One moment, if you please.” Dahlia breathed again. “Gentlemen, if I am to retain the respect of the passengers and crew, I need to show a competent—” She fought to still her shaking. “Just now, I... if you please, would you keep my reaction between us?”

“Of course,” Jim said. “There is no reason to speak of it to anyone else.” He started off, and the pair followed behind.

Though she could see the light ahead, the darkness was still around her, and Dahlia leaned closer to her companion.

Meredith’s arm went around her, and she held on to his other hand. Walking like this, as if she were an invalid, would typically have felt humiliating, but here, in the darkness, she needed the comfort. She needed him, she realized, feeling her cheeks heat at the thought. She’d always needed him. But something inside, whether it was pride or fear, pushed the thought away, and she firmed up her resolve. She trusted Meredith’s advice, and she was grateful for his friendship, but for the sake of her heart, she would allow her feelings to go no deeper.

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The ride back to the port after the tour was mostly silent. Many of the participants dozed on the omnibuses. On the seat beside Miles, Dahlia stared at the passing landscape. A few times, he considered engaging her in conversation, but even though his instinct was to continue to offer reassurance, he decided against it. Not only because she would not wish for others to overhear but also because the fright she'd suffered seemed to have left her emotional state quite precarious, and the last thing she would want would be to break down in tears again, in front of the others.

Miles's own thoughts proceeded along a different path. Once the group had reconvened in the cathedral apse and discovered that Dahlia and Mrs. Griffin were absent, he, Dr. Jackson, and Benedict had relit lanterns and rushed back through the doorway into the crypt. The lights along the staircase and in the few main rooms had been extinguished when the tour group had departed, but following the path they'd taken before, they found Mrs. Griffin in a smaller room off to one side, where Miles had last seen her and Dahlia.

When he'd discovered that Dahlia had gone off on her own, Miles had left to find her. She had not wandered far but had gone in completely the wrong direction, deeper into the unrestored parts of the crypt. It was lucky she'd not fallen into one of the places where the floors were missing or tripped on the piles of debris.

Dahlia's reaction to being lost in the darkness had shocked him. She had been so utterly vulnerable and without a trace of her typical self-assured confidence. Even at the Marquess of Molyneaux's ball a year earlier, she had held her head high, and her chin hadn't even wavered as she'd walked from the ballroom. She had been uncertain for a few moments this morning as she'd considered whether or not to cancel the cruise. But this was different in every way. In all the years he'd known her, he'd

never seen her fall completely to pieces.

You came. I knew you would. Those words had been spoken through her terror, so reasonably, Miles should not put much stock in them. But he could not get them out of his mind. While he had always felt a genuine concern for Dahlia's health and welfare, those two sentences had triggered something deeper. A protectiveness that was fierce in its strength and primal in its nature had come over him, and he'd had to force himself to release his embrace once she'd pulled away, and to allow her to walk back up the stairs unaided. Dahlia would not appreciate being treated like a child or a fragile teacup. Miles would have to tamp down the medieval compulsion to don a suit of armor and follow the woman around with a sword.

This love business—it really was trying on a man's state of mind.

The omnibuses reached the port, and the passengers began to disembark.

Miles helped Dahlia descend, and the moment her feet touched the ground, she snapped back into her role as leader. Just by walking a small way away and speaking in a loud voice, she had everyone's attention. "There are still two hours until supper," she said. "Plenty of time to explore the seashore, visit a café, or take a short nap. And you will not want to be late this evening. Our entertainment has come all the way from Paris to perform songs from Jacques Offenbach's new opera."

Excitement followed this announcement.

Dahlia thanked the carriage drivers and tour guides.

The group dispersed, most making their way toward the seashore, while Dahlia and a few others started toward the ship.

Miles started to follow, glancing around for Ben.

The man had stopped with his wife on the path. Catching Miles's eye, Benedict held up a hand, motioning for him to join them.

Once he did, Lady Covington excused herself, hurrying away to join Dahlia and their other friends.

"Thought I saw Ruben down that way," Benedict said.

Miles looked in the direction he indicated. The walkway along the seashore was lined with caf  s and shops between which tourists strolled. Beneath an umbrella on an outside table sat a man alone, staring out at the water. After watching for a moment, Miles nodded, recognizing him by his mannerisms. It certainly was Ruben.

"What do you think, old boy?" Benedict said. "Want to join him?"

Miles glanced at Dahlia. She had stopped and, seeing him with Ben, had given a quick nod of approval and continued on toward the ship.

"Why not?" Miles said, patting his friend on the shoulder as they started off along the road toward the caf  .

When they neared their friend's table, Ruben held up his glass in welcome. "How was the tour, gents?" He spoke in a sarcastic tone. "Did you get your fill of historical facts and castle gardens?"

Choosing to ignore the question, Miles took a seat, glancing at the brandy bottle in the center of the table. "Did you enjoy sea bathing?"

"Well enough," Ruben said. "Water's a bit cold for my taste. But the ladies liked it."

The calm in his voice took Miles by surprise. His friend had grown so sarcastic and

bitter that Miles was used to hearing complaints. Perhaps the brandy had settled him.

Benedict took a seat on Ruben's other side. "And where have they gone, the ladies?"

"Back to the ship," Ruben said, motioning for a server. "Wet hair and all that."

A man with an apron and a mop of blond hair brought two more glasses. Just as he set them down, a familiar voice called from the beach.

Chatsworth was walking over the sand and rocks toward them, waving his arm over his head.

The men waved back. "Un autre, s'il vous pla?t," Ruben said to the server.

Chatsworth stepped up onto the paving stones, paused to wipe dirt from his shoes and trouser legs, then took a seat, picking up the bottle to study the label. "Brandy in the afternoon?"

Ruben shrugged. "It's beneficial for digestion." He patted his belly. "Especially after all the oysters. And I like the taste."

Chatsworth nodded for the server to pour. He scooted his chair around to have a better view of the sea and sank back in it. "Marvelous place, wouldn't you say? Just look at that view." He swept his hand in front of him.

Miles leaned back in his own chair, cupping a brandy glass in his palm and gazing out over the sea in a moment of complete contentment. He looked at the others at the table, feeling a warmth that he hadn't felt in a long while. He'd missed his friends. Since they were boys, this group of men had been inseparable. But the past year had changed everything. Through circumstances and words that should never have been said, their relationships had become strained. And with two of them married and one

engaged, the time they used to spend together was now truncated—by necessity as well as preference.

“You know,” Ruben said. “I’ve thought about hosting a retreat at Gairloch this fall. Just the four of us, like the old days. What do you all think?”

Hearing the name of Ruben’s hunting lodge, Miles and Chatsworth looked at Benedict, bracing for his response. Ben strongly objected to hunting, believing it to be cruel to kill any creature, nor did he eat meat.

“I don’t—” Benedict began, but Ruben spoke again, cutting off his words.

“We wouldn’t hunt the entire time, naturally. Plenty of other targets to shoot.” He stared out at the water as he spoke, sounding surprisingly anxious, as if he worried his friends would turn down his invitation. “The horses will be glad to be ridden. There are birds to spot and a quiet forest perfect for... ah, meditation.”

The other three looked at one another. That Ruben had extended an invitation to his lodge was nothing new, but his willingness to accommodate each of them in their own particular way was a concession he’d never made before. Ruben was not known for compromise. When they had gone to his lodge in the past, it was with the understanding that he would dictate the schedule of activities. He was a hunting man and took for granted that the others would hunt when they were with him.

“That sounds very enjoyable,” Miles said carefully. Riding and shooting were two of his favorite pastimes. But he was not sure of Ruben’s intentions. It was all so unlike him.

“It does indeed,” Chatsworth said, shooting Miles a confused look.

Benedict nodded, also looking unsure. They were all waiting for the other shoe to

drop. For Ruben to say something sarcastic or give an insult.

“It is settled, then.” Ruben drank the rest of his glassful in one gulp and reached for the bottle to refill it. “I’ll make the arrangements as soon as possible.”

Miles accepted a refill as well, as did the others. The last bit of the bottle was tipped out into Chatsworth’s glass. He raised it in a salute, and the others joined in, silently reaffirming their friendship.

The men drank their brandy quietly, enjoying the sea air and the sounds of the waves. Earlier tensions seemed to have eased. Could their friendship return to what it had been? Or was this all just an anomaly or a lull between storms?

Half an hour later, the four walked back to the ship. The companionable feeling remained, and Meredith was pleased. With all of his friends paired with a partner, he hated to admit how lonely he’d been of late.

When they boarded the SS Aurora , the sounds of cheering and grunts met their ears. The noise was familiar. Men yelling encouragement and applauding while others engaged in wrestling or pugilism or another type of event. Miles felt a rush of excitement at the thought of an athletic competition. They continued along the promenade deck, coming to the other side of the saloon and found a group of men and a few women standing in a wide circle around a spar that had been arranged horizontally between the deck and a support. It was fastened tightly on either side to keep it in place.

Two crewmen sat astride the rounded beam, facing one another. Each held the center of a staff with what appeared to be pillows roped to each end. At the boatswain’s signal, the combatants started swinging the staff at their opponent.

Meredith saw right away that the staffs were not intended to deliver heavy blows.

Even without the softening pillows, the fighters were too close to get a good swing. The hits were intended to throw an opponent off-balance and knock him off the spar. The contest was all in good fun, with the two competitors calling insults and laughing.

Miles and his companions watched three bouts, each lasting only a matter of moments as the men struck and pushed one another with their padded poles while fighting to keep their seat.

Another man fell, and the winner raised his staff with both hands into the air. “Who’ll challenge me?” he called, with one end of the staff sweeping over the gathered crowd.

“Here,” Ruben called, slapping a hand on Miles’s shoulder. “I’ve a contender right here!”

“Bring him forth,” the man on the spar called back.

Meredith did not argue. He’d been itching to take a turn from the moment they’d arrived. He stripped off his coat and strode through the parted crowd, rolling up his sleeves as he went.

Crewmembers placed wagers as he passed and whispered words such as “dandy” and “fop,” which made him all the more eager to prove himself.

He climbed up, straddling the spar with legs hanging a foot off the deck, and shifted his weight until he was balanced on the rounded surface.

The boatswain acting as referee handed him a staff.

The champion smiled, showing gaps where his teeth were missing. He was a bald

man with eyes that bulged slightly. He tipped his head to the side, cracking his neck. “Don’ ye worry, Beau Brummel. I’ll go easy on ye.”

Miles grinned, weighing the staff in his hands.

As soon as the referee gave the signal, Miles braced himself, taking the first hit on his ribs. It wasn’t hard, but he hadn’t wanted to risk losing his stability by blocking it. He returned a hit, testing out his balance as he did. Though he was tempted, a strong swing would push his center too far to the side, leaving him open to being shoved over.

“Ye call that a hit?” his opponent barked. “My niece hits harder, and she’s still wearin’ diapers.”

The other crewmen laughed, and Miles joined in, enjoying himself.

Looking extremely smug, his opponent pulled back his staff, ready to deliver a heavy blow. This time Miles parried, but instead of batting the blow away, he directed it, letting it pass and causing his opponent to overcorrect. Miles gave him one swift smack on the shoulder, and the man fell onto the deck.

The crew laughed at their fallen comrade. Miles’s friends cheered, and around them, money changed hands. Holding on to the spar, Miles reached down, offering to assist the fallen man.

The man grabbed on to his hand. “Well done, lad.” The man grinned. “Had ye pegged as a spoon-fed prat, but ye got one over on me.”

“What’s your name, sir?” Miles asked.

“Sir?” The man laughed. “Not a sir at all.” He gave a small bow. “Milton Barrow at

your service, my lord.”

“Then, Milton Barrow, I propose a rematch. One where you do not underestimate me, nor I you.”

Milton Barrow happily climbed back onto the spar.

The match was much more difficult this time. Milton Barrow had the greater experience. His seat was steady, and his hits were hard. Even with the pillows, Miles thought he would have some bruises to his ribs and shoulders.

Miles nearly lost his balance multiple times but managed to readjust. He delivered a few good hits, but they hardly seemed to make a difference to the bald man facing him.

Twisting to the side, Miles blocked a particularly solid blow. From the side of his vision, something caught his eye. A flash of deep pink. He glanced in that direction, seeing that Dahlia had just joined the crowd.

She was watching with a bemused smile, her hair newly arranged and wearing a fresh gown—

Whack.

Before Miles had even registered the hit, he crashed down onto the deck.

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Dahlia gasped as Meredith took a hit to the head and toppled off the spar.

Beside her, Victor sucked in a breath through his teeth. Perhaps he was remembering his own crash onto the deck just this morning.

She was immediately relieved when Meredith rose, waving to the crowd and grinning sheepishly.

“He’ll be feeling that later,” Victor muttered.

The crew and other spectators cheered loudly, some thumping him on the back, and Mr. Barrow shook his hand.

Benedict was nearby, applauding and standing with Chatsworth and Ruben. Seeing that Benedict was safe and within sight of Meredith, Dahlia continued with Victor on toward the gangway. The performers from Paris would be here any minute.

“If you would prefer,” Victor said, “I will visit the galley while you welcome the musicians.”

Dahlia started to shake her head but found the motion too painful. “You arranged for the musicians, so you should meet them.” She did not tell him that her mind was still groggy from being awoken twenty minutes earlier and finding it difficult to rally herself into the mode of hostess. The fear she’d felt in the basilica’s crypt had entirely exhausted her to the point that the moment she’d arrived back at the ship, she’d kicked off her shoes, climbed out of her gown, and in spite of her intention to just rest her eyes, fallen immediately into a deep sleep. Too deep, she feared, based on her

sluggish thoughts and aching head. Her feeling so exhausted while it was still only the first full day did not bode well for the rest of the trip.

“Once they are safely aboard, I will visit the galley while you see to their accommodations. You are much better with that sort of thing. And besides, your French is superior to mine.” Her assistant had been so excited about booking the opera performers that Dahlia wished for him to have the honor of receiving them.

Victor nodded, his eyes sparkling in spite of his attempt to school his expression. “And naturally, they will sit at the Captain’s Table for dinner?”

“Yes.”

When Dahlia and Victor reached the bow of the ship, a small party was just crossing the gangway bridge toward the deck. They moved slowly, giving her time to study them. Even though she had never met either of them before, Dahlia knew the two singers right away. They were plump, with lavish clothing that must have been very uncomfortable in the heat. The man had an enormous waxed mustache and the woman an ornate hairstyle that looked suspiciously like a wig. The others, a young man and woman carrying bags and suitcases, must be their servants.

Victor stepped forward. “Madame Théo, Monsieur Bonnet, welcome. We are so delighted to have you.” He spoke in flawless French.

Both singers regarded him with imperious stares.

“I am Mister Vandelay,” Victor continued on. “It was I who made the arrangements with the Théâtre de la Renaissance.” With no flicker of acknowledgment from them, he turned, motioning to Dahlia. “And, please, may I introduce Miss Lancaster, the owner of the Paragon Line?”

At this, both pairs of eyes turned to Dahlia. M. Bonnet sniffed, and Mme Théo gave a slight nod.

The man who had accompanied them set down the baggage he carried. “If you please, mademoiselle, monsieur, my master does not speak before a performance. He must save his voice for ze music.”

“Oh yes, of course.” Dahlia gave her warmest greeting. “Delighted to have you aboard.”

Mme Théo leaned forward, kissing the air near both of Dahlia’s cheeks. She was apparently saving her voice as well.

M. Bonnet nodded and motioned with a roll of his wrist to the man who accompanied him.

Dahlia and Victor glanced at one another, confused by the motion.

“If you please, my master must rest,” the servant said.

“Oui, et mademoiselle aussi,” the female servant said.

“Yes, of course,” Victor continued in French. “We have lovely cabins where you can rest and make use of the facilities before your performance. If you and your servants would please follow me.”

He motioned toward the doors leading into the saloon and led the group along the deck. “Supper will be served soon, and if there is anything at all you need before or after, I would be more than happy...” His voice trailed off as they reached the doors and entered.

Dahlia was tempted to return to see whether Meredith was still involved with the deck games. The memory of his bared forearms and broad shoulders beneath his waistcoat made the temperature rise in her face, so she turned in the opposite direction. There was the meal to oversee.

Once inside, she made her way down the stairs toward the galley and walked along the narrow corridor when she nearly bumped into Mrs. Yeates, who was carrying a tea tray.

Dahlia stepped to the side, giving the woman room to move past her. “How did you enjoy the tour this afternoon?” she asked. “The gardens were simply lovely, weren’t they?”

“Yes. Lovely,” Mrs. Yeates answered. She turned to the side as she passed, and then she carried on without saying anything more.

Dahlia blew out a breath. Keeping every person happy all the time was the duty of the ship’s hostess, but it could be exhausting. Especially when some people refused to be pleased. She rubbed her forehead, still feeling out of sorts. Putting on a smile, she stepped inside the kitchen, inhaling the delicious aromas.

Galley workers were chopping vegetables, and Francois, the head chef, was stirring a gravy. He turned when Dahlia entered and motioned her over. “Zis velouté...” He wafted the smell toward his nose with fluttering fingers, closing his eyes as if in rapture.

“It smells delicious.” Dahlia smiled at the performance. Her chef was prone to dramatics.

Francois dipped a spoon in the sauce and offered it to her.

Dahlia blew on it and tasted the sample. “Mmm... oh my, Francois! This is the best velouté I’ve ever tasted.”

“Ouí.” The chef gave a nod of agreement. “ Les chanteurs d’opéra , zey will be pleased.”

“They will believe they are in a fine Parisian restaurant,” Dahlia said.

Victor came into the galley. “The performers have a few requests,” he said, looking harried. “Madame requests lavender tea with honey directly before and after her performance, and Monsieur would like lemon water, not too hot, nor too cold.

Francois snapped his fingers and pointed toward the larder.

A galley worker set down her knife and went inside, returning with a small basket holding the requested ingredients.

Victor thanked her, taking the basket. “I will deliver these to the dining room bar right away.”

“I’ll see you there in a few moments,” Dahlia said.

She talked to Francois for awhile longer. While she trusted his ability to make a menu without consulting her, she’d found the chef required a certain amount of praise to keep him contented. But she was happy to give it. He was doing an exceptional job in the limited confines of a ship’s galley, which she knew he would. She truly appreciated it.

The cruise was a practice for the cooks as well. With the ship operating at less than one tenth its passenger capacity, it was a gentle way to ease the stewards and staff in to the rigors of their duties. Soon enough, the line would begin regular voyages, with

complete passenger lists and sea journeys that lasted weeks at a time.

Dahlia went back up the stairs to the dining room, finding Victor was already there arranging chairs near the stage. The raised platform at the far end of the dining room was ready, prepared with a simple and tasteful backdrop—no doubt of Victor's creation. Sheer white curtains hung against the wall at the rear of the stage with a single garland of greenery and fresh flowers draping across the top. While it was beautiful, it would not detract from the performers.

She cast an approving eye over the table settings. A few of the stewards were finishing up the final touches, setting out butter plates, sugar bowls, saltcellars, and pepper mills. The others moved to the bar to make drinks or lined the walls, preparing to assist the diners and serve the meal.

Passengers would begin to arrive at any moment.

Dahlia took her place beside the door with Captain Carmichael and exchanged pleasantries with him, ready to greet their guests. She kept her smile in place, but her head still ached.

Madame Théo and Monsieur Bonnet were among the very last to arrive. The performers came into the dining room in full costume and makeup, which seen up close, was rather startling.

Dahlia introduced them to the captain.

“A pleasure to have you aboard.” Captain Carmichael gave an elaborate continental bow, which based on the two opera singers' lifted chins and pleasant nods, appeared to be well received. He accepted Mme Théo's outstretched hand and kissed it.

Before taking her place, Dahlia glanced around, ensuring that all the guests had been

seated to their satisfaction. By this point in the cruise, the passengers had established tables, sitting where they had the night before. She saw that the other members of the Blue Orchid Society and their partners had brought an extra chair to their table, sitting close to accommodate all seven of them—Jonathan must still be feeling ill—and wished her responsibilities as hostess permitted her to join them. Perhaps tomorrow night she would dine with her friends.

Meredith, as usual, sat with Ruben, Lorene, and the other three Darling Debs.

Victor was with Mrs. Griffin, Lady Chatsworth, and Lady Mather. Though Dahlia could not hear their conversation, she imagined Mrs. Griffin recounting the tale of the pitch darkness and unexplained sounds of the crypt and enjoying the jealousy from her friends at her adventure. Mr. and Mrs. Yeates sat with them.

At the Captain's Table, Captain Carmichael sat beside the Duchess of Dorchester, with Mme Théo on his other side. M. Bonnet was between his colleague and Dahlia, and Miss Albright rounded out the table.

The dinner service started, and within a few moments, both the captain and Dahlia had given up on speaking with their musical neighbors, who were still resting their voices, and turned to the duchess and her companion.

"That is a lovely gown, Miss Albright," Dahlia said to the woman next to her.

"Thank you," Miss Albright responded quietly, looking down at her plate.

Dahlia had never known the woman to speak very much. She was the spinster daughter of the duchess's sister-in-law, and known to be shy, a softly spoken woman who wore her hair in a simple fashion and typically preferred unadorned clothing. Tonight, however, her gown, though plain in comparison to the other guests' clothing, was made of a soft-blue satin with two lines of pearl buttons descending the

bodice.

“How do you find your accommodations?” Dahlia asked.

“Very well. Thank you.”

Dahlia picked up her soup spoon. It appeared there would be no conversation after all.

The captain sprinkled some salt onto his soup and offered the saltcellar to Mme Théo.

“I enjoyed the visit to Boulogne-sur-Mer,” Miss Albright said softly.

Dahlia was surprised that the woman had spoken but pleased that it may not be a silent meal after all. “I’m so glad. Weren’t the chateau gardens splendid?”

“Yes, very. And the basilica was magnificent.” She took a spoonful of soup and glanced at Dahlia while she sipped. “I am so sorry you were lost down in the crypt. It must have been dreadful.”

Dahlia disciplined her expression into an easy smile. “Wasn’t that a silly accident?”

Miss Albright took another spoonful of soup. “You are brave, Miss Lancaster. I would have been very frightened.” She accepted the saltcellar from Mme Théo and sprinkled a portion over her soup.

Dahlia considered whether to admit the truth about how she’d felt in the darkness of the crypt. Just the memory of it sent a shot of panic through her. It would be a relief to confide in another person, but she decided against it. “I would not say brave,” she said. “But, luckily, the incident lasted for only a few min—” Her voice cut off.

Miss Albright had taken a sip of the soup and her nose wrinkled.

“Is everything all right?” Dahlia asked.

“Yes.” She smiled. “Perfectly so.” But instead of continuing to eat, she set down her soup spoon.

Dahlia noticed some of the others at the table had done the same. Perhaps they had oversalted the soup. She thought it was flavored enough and enjoyed it as it was.

The main course was served. Dahlia made a note to compliment Francois on the chicken. It was simply delicious. And seeing the other diners’ responses reaffirmed that she truly had employed a magnificent chef.

The saltcellar remained where it was, in front of Miss Albright. And since none of the other diners asked for it, Dahlia guessed that the chicken was perfectly seasoned.

Once the meal was finished, dessert and tea were served. Dahlia made certain the musicians were given exactly the warm drinks they had requested. She stirred her own tea, adding sugar, and while it cooled, she took a bite of merengue.

The conversation around her was softer now that the passengers had full bellies. A feeling of contentment and anticipation permeated the room, and she noticed glances toward the opera singers as the two sipped their honeyed drinks in preparation to go on stage.

Behind Dahlia, a teacup clattered onto its saucer, startling her. And from the other side of the room someone gasped. Voices grew louder, and though she couldn’t hear what they said, she knew something was wrong. She looked around the room, seeing unhappy expressions and hearing cries of confusion. The Duchess of Dorchester pressed her fingers to her mouth.

“Your Grace?” Dahlia asked. She stood. “What is wrong?”

“The tea,” Miss Albright said.

“The tea?” Dahlia asked. She took a small sip from her own teacup and couldn’t stop the grimace that pulled at her face and puckered her mouth. “Salt.” She picked up the sugar bowl and looked inside. It appeared to be in order, but when she tasted the supposed sugar, her deduction was confirmed.

Looking around at the other tables, she saw that the other diners were coming to the same conclusion.

The stewards moved into action, removing the tea and the sugar bowls.

Dahlia left the table and came to where they were gathering. “What has happened?” she asked one of the stewards, trying not to sound angry.

“It appears the salt and sugar have been switched, miss.”

“You mean the containers were filled improperly,” she corrected.

“With respect, miss,” the steward said, setting the offending tableware in a cupboard, “they must have been switched. We used these same sugar bowls and saltcellars earlier today for breakfast and luncheon.”

“And they weren’t refilled since?”

“No, miss.”

By this time, Sophie had joined her and must have heard the last of the exchange. “Surely nobody exchanged them on purpose,” she said, picking up one of the sugar

bowls. The word Sugar was painted clearly on one side, and on the other, the crest of the SS Aurora . Sophie examined a saltcellar.

“I can’t imagine how. Or why,” Dahlia said. As a journalist, Sophie was always looking for a story, but there was no story here. “It’s just a mistake.”

Someone had already brought fresh tea and sugar from the kitchen, and the stewards were moving quickly to replace the salty tea. Luckily there were so few passengers that the process didn’t take long.

“Where are the sugar and salt kept?” Sophie asked the steward.

He motioned for her to come around and opened a cupboard beneath the bar. “In here, on these shelves.”

“Quite a lot has been spilled,” she said, touching her finger to her tongue and then doing it again. “Of both sugar and salt.”

Dahlia did not remain to listen to her friend’s deductions on what was clearly a mishap, one easily made, with salt and sugar looking so similar. She felt the heat of a blush on her neck as she passed the other diners and returned to her table. She reminded herself that such things happen, even when one meticulously plans out every detail. Victor caught her eye. He shook his head slightly, brows drawn, indicating that he was as confused as she was. But Dahlia knew he would look into the matter, and he would ensure it did not happen again. He glanced at the performers and then back at Dahlia.

She nodded and he rose and made his way to the front of the dining room. He stepped onto the stage, clapping to get the diners’ attention. “This evening, rather than separating for after-dinner drinks, you are invited to remain in your seats for the entertainment.” He waited for seats to be turned around and for the passengers to

settle. “Tonight we are extremely fortunate to have with us two of the most talented and well-known performers in the world. They have come directly from the Théâtre de la Renaissance for our entertainment, and we could not be more delighted.” He clasped his hands together, then lifted one, palm up, toward the Captain’s Table. “Performing selections from Jacques Offenbach’s *La Jolie Parfumeuse*, the SS Aurora presents Madame Théo and Monsieur Bonnet.”

Luckily the opera singers hadn’t used sugar to sweeten their drinks. That was one catastrophe dodged. The pair stood, making their way to the stage at the end of the dining room, he walking with a swagger and she a flounce. Applause sounded.

Mme Théo and M. Bonnet took their places on the stage, and the first strains of music came from a small orchestra. With a gusto that made Dahlia jump, the soprano let out the first note. Her voice rose through the dining room. In a moment, her partner joined in.

The songs were beautiful and, in the small space, very loud. Perhaps next time Dahlia would schedule the operatic performance on the deck.

Once she was certain that it was indeed sugar in her teacup, she took a sip. She was glad the singing was loud enough that she didn’t have to apologize to her tablemates for the salt and sugar mix-up. The debacle had not done her aching head any favors.

Just as the soprano’s aria began, Meredith sat in the empty chair beside her. He leaned close to speak into her ear over the noise of the music. “What is your verdict?”

Dahlia shivered as his breath tickled her ear. “Verdict?” she whispered back. “About the salt and sugar?” Was he determined to investigate along with Sophie? She shook her head. “It was just a mistake.”

“About the cruise,” he corrected. “Do you wish to cut it short?”

Dahlia looked to where Benedict sat beside his wife. His face was peaceful as he watched the singers. Dahlia scanned the room, seeing the faces of her friends. All of the passengers appeared to be enjoying themselves. Even the Darling Debs, who usually seemed dissatisfied with everything, seemed particularly pleased. She leaned back to speak into Meredith's ear. "I don't wish to. But is it reckless to continue? What do you think?"

"I think such a decision should only be made by the owner of the Paragon Line. Whatever choice you make will be the right one."

Dahlia took another sip of tea, considering as she watched the stage. Aside from a few incidents this afternoon, the cruise was proceeding smoothly. Benedict appeared to be safe, as did the other passengers. And sitting here beside Meredith, she felt entirely content. Safe, as she always did when he was near. Perhaps the worst was behind them. She leaned over. "I think we should carry on."

He nodded.

"But cautiously. We must continue to watch Benedict."

He nodded again.

Dahlia sat back, reveling in the beautiful music and avoiding glances toward the table where she knew Sophie was still trying to work out a motive behind the salt and sugar mix-up. Her friend would want to investigate, she knew, but there was nothing more to discover. Such things were bound to happen. Nothing nefarious had taken place. It was just a mishap.

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Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

The sun had not fully risen the next morning when Miles stood on the terrace deck, leaning back against the rail. Benedict was there, sitting on his mat.

Just as the light broke through the horizon, shining its first beams over the water, Dahlia came up the stairs. Seeing Miles, she startled, but she must have recognized him in the darkness, because she came closer. “Thank you for being here.” She kept her voice low and looked toward Benedict and back. “He really does wake early, doesn’t he?”

“He does,” Miles said. “I heard his cabin door close at half past five and hurried after him.”

Dahlia shivered beneath her cloak.

While he couldn’t see her face, Miles could imagine her expression. She did not like to be cold any more than he liked to be hot. “Go on,” he said, moving back to lean against the rail. “Do what it is you do here. I won’t bother you.”

Dahlia shivered again. She looked toward the railing at the bow. “It’s nothing really,” she said. “Just a few moments to collect my thoughts before the day begins.”

Miles held up a hand, gesturing toward the bow.

Dahlia went to the very foremost part of the deck, where the railing began to curve. She set a hand on the rail but looked back, then returned to where Miles stood. “I feel silly with you watching,” she whispered.

“Then, I won’t watch.” He turned around, facing away, toward the water.

“That is even worse,” Dahlia said, sighing. “Come on, then.” She returned to the bow, and Miles went with her.

“What am I to do?” he asked, amused by her fluster.

“Just stand still,” she said. “And keep watch on Lord Benedict.” She didn’t glance over to see whether he followed her instructions or not, but instead, she closed her eyes, breathing in a deep breath and letting it out slowly. She did it again, her chest and shoulders rising and falling.

Miles glanced back at Ben. The light was still dim, and even more so in the darkness under the bridge. But he could see that his friend hadn’t moved.

Dahlia opened her eyes now, staring out at the water. She remained silent, so Miles did the same. Boulogne-sur-Mer looked as if it still slept, beneath the shadow of the hill above while the clouds and harbor waves slowly became illuminated by the rising sun until they glowed above and below.

The sun shone on Dahlia’s face, casting it in a light-rose color. Her eyes sparkled, and her cheeks glowed.

Miles had never seen any sight more beautiful, and an intense happiness settled over him, like a soft blanket fresh from the clothesline on a sunny day.

Dahlia released the rail and turned, leaning back against it. “That is it,” she said, looking a bit embarrassed. “My little routine is simple, but these few moments of quiet have become essential to my temperament.” She pulled her cloak tighter around herself, looking first toward Benedict and then in the direction of the stairs. “I need to meet Victor to look over the day’s itinerary,” she said.

“You work too hard,” Miles told her, speaking to cover the fact that he felt nearly giddy being with her. “You should be enjoying your time with your friends.”

“I shall.” She nodded. “It is a full day at sea. Very few arrangements to be made today.”

As they watched, Benedict rose. He lifted his arms, then lowered them, and moved gracefully in a Tai Chi routine. His movements were slow and intentional, and he stepped lightly, his hands and feet synchronized in what looked almost like a combination of a dance and combat practice.

“And yourself?” Dahlia asked. “What do you plan to do today?”

Miles was glad she kept up the conversation rather than hurrying off to arrange breakfast or manage the ship’s schedules. If he had his way, he’d spend the entire morning standing at the ship’s bow alone with her. “Today is my tour with Captain Carmichael and Lady Covington.”

“Oh yes.”

“Unless you would prefer for me to remain with Ben?”

“No,” she said. “Between myself and our friends, I’m certain we can keep a watchful eye on him.”

Ben brought his hands together, pressing a fist against his palm and bowing. When he lifted his head, his face lit up, as if he were seeing them for the first time. “Beautiful morning, isn’t it?” he asked before giving a salute and leaving to descend to the lower deck.

Miles and Dahlia followed. Victor met them at the bottom of the stairs, so Miles bid

him and Dahlia good morning and returned to his cabin, where his valet waited with a razor and a cup of warm shaving soap. Miles sank into his chair and leaned his head back as the valet set to work.

“Pleasant morning, my lord?”

Miles, glanced up, seeing the question in Peterman’s raised brow. He realized he was still smiling, the warm glow from being near Dahlia lingering, making his chest light and his outlook cheery. “A pleasant morning indeed.”

“This arrived for you.” The valet handed Miles an envelope bearing the ship’s logo. Miles’s name was written on the front.

He broke the seal and pulled out the contents. It was the photograph taken when he’d first come aboard. As he studied it, his high spirits lessened. In the image, Dahlia’s smile was amiable, but it was obvious by the coolness in her eyes and the tight way she held herself that it was forced. His neck was hot. Was he being foolish to believe her feelings toward him had warmed in such a short time? In the crypt, he’d believed her words had been for him, that they were an indication of something special, her confidence that he would always come for her. But now he saw them for what they were: words spoken in a moment of panic. Taking them as proof of a special bond between them was ridiculous. He pushed the photograph back into the envelope and tossed it onto the side table, his cheery disposition entirely gone.

Half an hour later, Miles came up the stairs to find the dining room practically empty. Benedict and Lady Covington sat at one of the tables beside a window. Once Miles had filled his plate, he joined them.

“Good day,” Benedict said. “I was very pleased to see you this morning at my

meditation practice.”

Miles nodded, unsure of what to say. Naturally, Benedict knew why he’d been there, but following his friend around like a bodyguard still felt strange.

“I imagine you are looking forward to the ship tour as much as my wife is,” Benedict continued, apparently not at all bothered by Miles’s assumed role as his protector.

“Very much so,” Miles said. “Good morning, my lady.”

“Lord Meredith.” Lady Covington inclined her head.

“Have you plans to fill the day, Ben?” Miles asked.

“I believe I will have plenty to occupy my time. Cards, deck games. Have you visited the ship’s library? The selection is excellent. I shall not be bored.”

“Nor shall we,” Lady Covington said. “I am very eager to view firsthand a compound steam engine with the capacity to power a vessel of this size. I estimate the force required of the boilers would be over sixty pounds per square inch.” She opened a notebook and wrote something on a page. “To generate such power and use it efficiently is a feat indeed, wouldn’t you say?”

“Indeed.” Miles dipped a piece of toast into his eggs and took a bite. He wished to view the engine as well. Not exactly for scientific purposes. He never did completely understand the mathematics of physical properties required for such calculations. But as the lady had said, machinery with the strength to power a ship of this size must be impressive. Diagrams and equations in books did not capture Miles’s interest, but seeing directly how things work, touching them, analyzing from different angles, he was able to understand in a way that schooling had never taught him.

Ben looked out through the window. “The day is far too fine to spend in the bowels of a ship,” he said, turning to Miles. “Perhaps we might play at quoits when you finish?”

“A fine idea,” Miles replied. He looked out of the window as well, admiring how the freshly risen sun sparkled in blinding flashes on the waves.

He and Lady Covington finished breakfast and took their leave, exiting the dining room. In only an hour, the air had warmed to a pleasant temperature.

Captain Carmichael was waiting for them on the terrace deck. He gave a gracious bow. “Lady Covington, Lord Meredith.” He checked his pocket watch, giving a sharp nod. “Exactly on time.”

He led them inside the ship, but instead of turning down the corridor toward Dahlia’s office as Miles had done the day before, he opened the door to his right. He stepped aside and allowed the two to precede him. Lady Covington went ahead, and Meredith followed. They climbed a spiral staircase, emerging at the very highest point of the ship.

The bridge had no roof, and rather than rails, there were sturdy bulwarks that came up to Miles’s waist. He recognized the ship’s wheel and a compass in its binnacle box. He turned slowly around to see the scene from all angles. From this vantage, the captain had an unimpeded view of both the sails and the sea around them.

Miles and Lady Covington were introduced to the quartermaster, Mr. Keller, and the channel pilot, Mr. Webster. Captain Carmichael explained that the pilot was not a member of the ship’s regular crew but an expert on the tides, sea depths, and harbors of the channel who sailed temporarily with the SS Aurora . If the cruise were to continue out to sea, Mr. Webster would have no need to accompany them. Mr. Keller acted as helmsman and watch, as well as assisted the captain with sail and navigation

calculations.

The captain directed their attention to a device opposite the wheel. “The engine order telegraph,” he said. “A simple mechanism, but crucial to a steamship’s operation.”

Miles and Lady Covington studied the apparatus. It was shaped like a clock, with a round dial about ten inches in diameter. A knob in the center was attached to a handle that extended past the dial’s edge, giving the operator a grip he could hold on to in order to move the marker. The sections on the face were marked with words such as Stop , Slow , and Full Speed .

“Since the ship’s speed can’t be controlled from the bridge, this is how we communicate with the engine room.” Captain Carmichael took hold of the hand grip, demonstrating, without actually moving it, how it could be shifted from section to section. Moving the indicator rang a bell in the engine room and shifted the marker on an identical engine order telegraph’s indicator belowdecks. Once the engineers followed the order, they adjusted their own indicator, moving the one on the bridge’s device, showing it was complete.

Lady Covington examined the simple machine closely, asking questions about speed of propulsion and oxidation of the gears.

Captain Carmichael chuckled, grinning at her and Miles. “I cannot wait to introduce ye to the lead engineer, my lady. He’ll have all the answers ye seek.” He turned back, taking in the view of the furled sails and their intricate rigging. “If ye’ve any questions about what happens above decks, though, I’ll provide any explanations ye require.”

As the captain and Her Ladyship delved into a discussion on angles and wind aerodynamics, Miles took a few steps away, watching the deck below. A few crewmembers appeared to be inspecting the lines, moving methodically from one to

another, applying a layer of tar where they felt it necessary. They climbed up and down, sometimes swinging, sometimes sliding with a skill Miles envied. Other crewmembers crisscrossed, mops in hand, as they made certain the decks were clean and dry.

Miles studied the intricate system of ropes that moved the sails into the positions required to capture the maximum amount of wind. And while he could not calculate the equations necessary to describe the angles, he could see intuitively how the operation worked, and he wished again to be a part of it. To be climbing the rigging, hauling ropes, heaving the bars of a capstan to lift a spar into place or to raise an anchor. He longed to be doing, working with his muscles, feeling the exhaustion and satisfaction at the completion of a difficult task, rather than sipping tea in a drawing room or dancing at a ball.

They continued the tour, taking the stairs downward from the terrace deck to the promenade deck, and descended farther beneath the first-class passenger deck to the second-class cabins and storerooms. They passed through the galley, where Captain Carmichael introduced them to the chef, Francois, before continuing on. The captain indicated a door in the corridor. "Here is the engineer's cabin," he said. "And the engine room is down here." He took a few steps farther and stopped at an alcove where the top of a ladder was attached to the wall. The remainder ran down into a shaft beneath.

"I apologize, my lady," the captain said, his hand on the top rungs of the ladder. "But the descent may be difficult from here. If you choose—"

"Not a problem, Captain," Lady Covington said in her practical way. She moved around to the other side of the ladder, grasped the handrails, placed her foot on a rung, and started to step down.

Miles and Captain Carmichael looked at one another. The captain grinned and Miles

shrugged as she lowered herself.

They descended after her, and as they did, the air grew hotter and the humming noise louder.

When they reached the bottom, the noise was nearly deafening, and the heat was stifling. All around, enormous pieces of machinery gleamed as men polished and greased the gears. Pipes of various sizes made a maze, and above, crewmembers moved over catwalks, adjusting dials and turning knobs and cranks. Some of the machinery was moving, and Miles recognized the noise of the boilers.

“Watch your skirts, my lady,” the captain said, pointing to a crankshaft rotating near the walkway.

A man with a thick beard, uniform coat, and brimmed cap with the ship’s insignia came toward them.

“David Fulton, the SS Aurora ’s chief engineer,” Captain Carmichael said in a raised voice. “And here we have Lady Covington and Lord Meredith.”

They exchanged greetings.

“We’ll be casting off, soon,” the captain said. “I’m needed on the bridge.” He motioned toward the engine with his chin. “And you’ll certainly want to see the engine at work once it’s at full power.”

They bid him farewell as Mr. Fulton took charge of the tour, walking them through the engine room and pointing out the various pieces of equipment and describing their purpose.

The process of taking water from the ocean and, through the use of these instruments,

converting it into energy capable of propelling a full-size ship was simply remarkable. Miles listened with one ear as Lady Covington took out a notebook and began to question Mr. Fulton in earnest. In spite of the heat and the sulphury smell of the burning coal, the bowels of the ship felt exciting and alive. Miles watched with interest as the engineers and crewmembers went about their work.

He wandered over to the far door of the engine room, and the heat grew more intense. When he looked through the doorway, he saw a row of twelve boilers. Each was far taller than a man and at least twice as wide. From another door, farther along, men were bringing wheelbarrows of coal, and others were shoveling it into the open maws of the boilers.

A bell rang, and Miles turned around to see the chief engineer move to the engine order telegraph. He called out directions, moving his marker to indicate that the captain's order had been received.

Lady Covington watched intently as he read the rows of dials, adjusting a knob here and there.

The activity that had been steady and efficient intensified. Crewmembers moved faster, turning cranks and wheels. Inside the boiler room, men called out with increased energy, shoveling with a more rapid pace as the engines began working in earnest, making a steady chugging sound.

One of the shoveling men glanced over, catching Miles's eye. He grinned, his remaining white teeth gleaming in a soot-blackened face. The flames of the fire reflected on his bald head.

Miles inclined his head. "Milton Barrow, nice to see you."

Milton's grin grew, his few teeth reflecting in the flames. "'Twas nicer to see ye lying

flat on the deck.”

At this Miles laughed. “I imagine it was.” He enjoyed Mr. Barrow’s banter; while many of his peers might consider the man’s insubordination unacceptable, Miles found it amusing.

“Ave ye jes come to watch?” Milton Burrow asked. “Or will ye be getting yer lordly hands dirty?”

Miles could not resist such a challenge. He removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves. When he stepped near the boilers, a wave of heat hit him. Someone handed him a shovel, and another pointed toward a barrow full of coal. Miles thrust in his shovel and got to work. The rhythmic motion was soothing. And just as the engine room felt alive, the strain in his muscles gave him a feeling of purpose. He was not only a passenger but part of the machinery setting the ship into motion. And thoughts of the photograph, of the danger aboard the ship, and his hopes for a possible future with Dahlia moved to the back of his thoughts. His mind felt clearer, his tensions relaxed. Within only a moment, his back and face were dripping, but he did not stop, pushing the shovel into the coal, lifting the load, and tossing it deep into the boiler.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Dahlia rested her elbow on the back of a sofa in the sunlit saloon and leaned her cheek against her hand, listening and occasionally laughing as Sophie reported on how Jonathan was feeling. The inspector was starting to improve, thank goodness. His recovery was a relief to everyone, most of all his wife, whose tolerance for being awoken multiple times during the night was very near its end.

Elizabeth and Hazel sat with them. The morning had been filled with tea and sunshine and comfortable conversation. It was exactly how Dahlia had hoped to spend her time on the cruise. Enjoying the company of her very dearest friends in a lovely atmosphere where none had any responsibilities or any reason to hurry off.

“And yesterday afternoon, Jonathan declared that he is done with ginger tea forever,” Sophie said, her dramatic tone eliciting chuckles from her friends.

“I am so relieved he is recovering,” Hazel said.

“The world comes to a stop when a man is ill,” Elizabeth said. “But for a woman, it is business as usual. We’ve no time to be pampered, nor the patience for it.” She flipped her hand in the air as if to swat the idea away.

“I imagine Charles would hover over you like a mother hen, should you fall ill,” Dahlia teased her friend.

Elizabeth’s cheeks colored.

“And surely you wouldn’t turn away his tender treatment,” Sophie added.

“Or his tender kisses,” Hazel said with an impish lift of her brow.

Elizabeth’s entire face had gone red, but her arguments didn’t continue. Instead, she smiled softly, glancing toward the other side of the saloon, where Charles, Jim, and Benedict were playing a game of cards with Lord Lockhart.

“He is much better,” Sophie said, sparing Elizabeth future embarrassment by returning the topic to the inspector’s health. “And I am very grateful to everyone for their care. Especially to the galley for sending the tea, even if Jonathan grew tired of it and complained constantly about the taste.” She raised her brows, looking exasperated by his fastidiousness. “He was resting soundly this morning, and I believe he may feel well enough to join us for luncheon today.”

“That is good news indeed,” Hazel said. “We have missed his company these past days. And yours as well, Dahlia. You’ve been so busy, I feel as though we’ve hardly seen you at all.”

Dahlia blew out a breath. “I apologize. With any luck, things will run more smoothly from here on, and I’ll be free to join you all more often. That was the whole intention behind this cruise, but things have gotten away from me.”

“No need to apologize,” Elizabeth said. “You have a massive responsibility with this ship, and endless details to supervise.”

“And so many little problems I hadn’t planned on,” Dahlia confessed.

“There have been some suspicious happenings, haven’t there?” Sophie asked, leaning in closer to the group.

“Unexpected,” Dahlia said. “But not suspicious.”

“The greased stair?” Elizabeth said, leaning in as well and lowering her voice. “You cannot claim that was simply happenstance.”

Dahlia had no answer, but she did not feel easy about it.

“And what of the lantern in the crypt?” Hazel said. She leaned in as well. “Jim thought it very strange that a lantern should just fall off a perfectly sturdy block of stone.”

“A block of crumbling stone in an excavation site,” Dahlia corrected. Just thinking of the crypt made her start to sweat. “I did not put the lantern down on a flat surface, and it fell off. Nothing nefarious about it at all.”

The other women looked between themselves, clearly not accepting her explanation.

“And what of the sugar and salt?” Sophie asked. “Between luncheon and dinner, someone switched them. They must have done it while we were all ashore. But who? And what was the motive?”

Dahlia closed her eyes. She knew her friends meant well, but they were finding menace where none existed. She shifted around to sit up straight, then leaned in with the others, so close that their heads almost touched. “If someone truly meant to cause harm, switching the salt and sugar is not the way to do it. It was an inconvenience, but nobody was hurt. And there was no danger in the crypt, other than losing my direction in the darkness.” She shivered as she said it. “The only circumstance that can actually be considered a threat is the greased stair. But precautions have since been taken to keep Benedict safe.”

“I still believe it is all a plot of some kind,” Sophie said. “There are too many strange happenings to be considered merely coincidental.”

Elizabeth squinted, looking skeptical.

Hazel drew her brows together, looking worried.

Dahlia did not want to discuss it. She glanced at the clock. "I must sign the papers for tomorrow's port authority in Jersey," she said. "But after luncheon, I fully intend to spend the entire afternoon with my friends. Vivian should be finished with her tour by then. Perhaps we could play deck games? Or cards? Or simply sit and watch the sea and enjoy the breeze and a glass of something delicious?"

"The day is too fine to stay inside," Hazel said.

"Jonathan would be happy to join us on the deck," Sophie said. "He hasn't seen the sun in days."

"Then, it is decided. I will have the boatswain prepare the quoits court for those who desire to play. And, for the rest of us, deck chairs and sparkling wine."

Dahlia left her friends. She nodded as she passed the men playing cards and stopped to exchange greetings with Lady Chatsworth, Lady Mather, Mrs. Griffin, and the Duchess of Dorchester, who were all very intent on their game of whist.

Miss Albright sat near them, knitting.

Dahlia paused. "Miss Albright, what lovely yarn."

The woman smiled shyly, thanking her.

Dahlia made her way to her office, and when she entered, Victor stood to greet her.

"The port documents." He handed her a stack of papers. "And the contract for the

play actors. Their manager, a Monsieur Badeau, will handle the payment.”

Victor had made a similar arrangement with the performers as he had with the opera singers. They would board the ship in the evening, perform after supper, and spend the night in the first-class cabins. He’d insisted that if they were treated well and paid generously, word would spread in the artistic community. Fine entertainers would seize the opportunity to perform for the Paragon Line, attracting even more prestige for the company.

Dahlia took the papers and sat at her desk. She glanced over them, hardly reading the words. Her thoughts were still back with Sophie and her theories.

“You seem worried,” Victor said when he returned to his seat.

“I am worried,” Dahlia confessed. She stretched her neck from side to side and leaned back in her chair. “I worry something terrible will happen tonight to ruin the performance this evening. Or the dinner. Or the afternoon’s activities.”

“Why would something terrible happen?” he asked.

“Sophie is convinced there is a scheme at play.” Dahlia rubbed her forehead.

“A scheme meant to . . . ?” Victor prodded.

“I don’t know. Meant to ruin the cruise, perhaps?”

“Why would she think that? Because of the salt and sugar confusion?” Victor looked completely bewildered.

“Now that you say it, it does sound foolish,” Dahlia said. “But you mustn’t forget the threat to Lord Benedict.”

“I did not forget,” Victor said. He drummed his fingers on the table. “I am afraid I just don’t see it. If someone did indeed intend to do harm to His Lordship, to the point that they understood his routine, followed him undetected, and set a sophisticated trap, then I do not see why this same villain would then perform a harmless prank with the dinner service.”

Dahlia considered what he said. The two incidents did not sound like the efforts of the same person at all. Not only were the methods different, but their intended outcomes were not even similar.

“It is human nature to search for patterns,” Victor continued. “But in this, I do not think the instances are at all connected. Though, I will admit, there is certainly something suspicious happening.”

“You’re right, of course,” Dahlia said. She smiled sheepishly and looked down at the papers in front of her. Everything was in order and awaited only her signature and the payment of the fees. She would retrieve the money from the safe once they were in port.

Tea was delivered, which Dahlia thought strange so close to the midday meal. But perhaps Victor had sent for it. She thanked the steward but did not pour a cup.

“Have you seen Mr. Yeates today?” she asked her assistant.

“I don’t believe so,” Victor said. He raised his brow at the tea tray.

“Neither have I.” Dahlia was surprised that the man had been so absent when the first day of the trip, it had seemed he was everywhere. He was an important member of the company, and she’d imagined he would be more involved, not only with the business aspects of the cruise but with the social as well. Perhaps his wife was demanding of his time.

“He and Mrs. Yeates must have taken breakfast in their cabin this morning,” Victor said. “He could be in his office now. Shall I check?”

“He has arranged to requisition a load of coal in Jersey, and he will be needing the payment when we arrive this afternoon,” Dahlia said. “I shall probably see him in the dining room, and we can discuss it then.”

Victor looked at his pocket watch and raised his brows. “I hadn’t realized it was time for the midday meal.” He rose and moved to the office door, holding it open. “Shall we?”

After luncheon was finished, Dahlia and her friends separated to change or rest, promising to meet on the deck in an hour. The quoits board was already put up, and as they ate, stewards were arranging chairs and awnings. It promised to be a lovely afternoon.

A steward caught up with her as she headed for the door. He handed her a shawl. “This was left at that table, Miss Lancaster.” He pointed to where Ruben and the Debs had sat for their meal, but Dahlia didn’t need to know which table. She recognized the shawl as belonging to Lorene.

Since she was headed down to the cabins, she offered to deliver it. She descended the stairs and started along the corridor toward the Emerald Suite, but the sounds of a dispute coming from inside made her pause. The door was open, and she could hear their voices clearly.

“It is just a friendly game,” Lorene was saying. “I can’t understand why you are taking it so seriously.”

“We didn’t just lose; we were trounced,” Ruben responded. “You weren’t even trying.”

“Then, you should find a partner who is less humiliating,” Lorene said, her voice softer but no less bitter. “I’m sure Dahlia knows how to toss a quoit.”

Hearing her name, Dahlia’s skin went hot.

“Why must you bring her into this?” Ruben said in a voice that sounded annoyed.

“Bring her in?” Lorene sounded shrill. “Dahlia Lancaster has been the third person in our marriage from the beginning. I am not blind, Ruben, nor am I naive. I know how you feel about her.”

“You don’t know anything.”

Dahlia looked around for somewhere to escape to. If she were to be found outside the open door during this argument... she didn’t even want to think about the ramifications. She glanced back toward her cabin, but fearing her footsteps would be heard before she made it all the way back, she rushed down the small passage that led to the staircase going to the lower decks.

She descended at nearly a run, stopping at the bottom to catch her breath. Her heart was pounding so forcefully that she could feel it in her ears and eyes. She had never once considered that she would be a source of argument in her former friends’ marriage. Poor Lorene. Dahlia’s stomach rolled. Being near Ruben and Lorene was difficult enough. The pair of them had humiliated her, been the cause of her ousting from high Society, the source of her estrangement from her former friends and former life. But this... it was so much worse. She thought she might be ill.

Whyever had Ruben insisted on an invitation for this cruise? The idea that he might

still have feelings for her was so much worse than when she'd learned he was engaged to her best friend. The former was a betrayal of an expectation only. This... she put a hand over her mouth, the other pressed to the wall. Did Lorene believe Dahlia had done anything to encourage Ruben? She was breathing heavily now, and sweating.

She stayed that way for a long moment, trying to calm her pounding heart and fighting against a feeling of shame and the unfairness of it all. She had not invited them on this cruise, had not asked for any of this. So why should her stomach be roiling and her mouth sour?

Her heartbeat and breathing eventually returned to their regular pace, and her skin cooled, but the ill feeling wouldn't abate. She glanced toward the galley, thinking perhaps a cup of tea or a piece of bread might ease her queasiness. She could not bring herself to return to the upper deck. Not when she might happen upon those two.

Nearing the galley, she heard voices. Francois and... Meredith? Confusion moved into place besides her myriad of other emotions. What could Meredith be doing in the galley?

Dahlia stepped inside, and seeing him, she gasped. Meredith was covered in black coal dust with lines trailing down the sides of his face, where he had apparently been sweating. He stood in the small space, holding a plate and eating a sandwich as he and the chef laughed together about something Dahlia had not heard.

When he saw her, he smiled and inclined his head, as was his usual greeting. "Good morning, Miss Lancaster."

"Good afternoon," she corrected. She crossed her arms, looking from the top of his dust-covered head down to the toes of his begrimed shoes. "You are filthy. What has happened to you? I thought you were on a tour with the captain. Did you fall into the

coal bunker?”

Both Francois and Meredith chuckled, but she hadn't intended it as a joke at all. The sight of Meredith in such a state was alarming. And it was even more vexing that he looked attractive . His neckcloth was gone and his collar unfastened. She looked away from the muscles on the side of his neck and the ridge of his collarbone, feeling a new flush starting.

“I spent a few hours shoveling with the lads,” Meredith said. “Good crew you have here.”

“Whyever would you do that?” Dahlia asked. She couldn't stop staring at his dirty face and arms. “You're meant to be enjoying yourself, not laboring in the boiler room.”

“I enjoyed myself immensely,” Meredith said. He looked a bit more serious now, but no less pleased.

“I... well, I'm glad,” she said, still confused. First Ruben and Lorene and now this. Nothing was happening as she'd planned. Nobody was acting how she'd assumed they would. And when had Lord Meredith become so handsome ? “Will you join us on the deck?” Dahlia said after too long a silence. “If you manage to clean yourself up.” She raised a brow, looking at the lines of black in his wrist creases. At least it appeared he'd washed his hands before picking up his food.

“I would be pleased to,” Meredith said. He put the rest of the sandwich into his mouth, then patted Francois on the shoulder. “Merci,” he said once he'd swallowed. “C'était délicieux.”

Francois beamed.

A galley worker took away Meredith's plate.

Dahlia redirected her emotions back to being irritated. She thought of the gleaming deck of the corridor, the brand-new linens in the cabins, and frowned at the idea of coal smudges.

"Not to worry, Miss Lancaster. My valet, Peterman, has cleaned far worse. He will ensure not one blemish remains on either my clothing or the cabin."

Dahlia blushed again, embarrassed that he'd so accurately perceived her thoughts. She schooled her expression into one of indifference and gave a nod.

He picked up his coat from where it lay over a stool and bid them farewell.

"Francois, have you seen Mr. Yeates?" Dahlia asked the chef in a businesslike tone, hoping nobody in the kitchen had noticed her reaction to Lord Meredith's appearance.

He shook his head. "Non. But Madame Yeates was here, making her tea... perhaps an hour ago?"

"He must be taking meals in his cabin," she mused. She left the kitchen, unsure of whether to go in search of Mr. Yeates or to let him find her. She decided on the latter, and believing she had given Ruben and Lorene enough time to have left their suite, she climbed the stairs, leaving the scarf hanging on the doorknob to the Emerald Suite, and went to join her friends on the promenade deck.

A small part of her mind was still picturing Meredith's open collar, only to be corrected by the part that reminded her of the very reason the two had been out of contact for over a year. Meredith was Ruben's closest friend. And, for that, she could never fully trust him.

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On the promenade deck, Miles leaned his hips back against the rail and shook his head, letting the breeze dry his hair. His muscles ached pleasantly from his morning spent in the boiler room, and his skin tingled from the scouring required to remove all of the coal dust. He had told Dahlia the truth. Peterman had fastidiously collected Miles's dirty clothing and supervised his scrubbing. Miles had full confidence that not one speck of dust remained on either himself or in the cabin.

He stepped around to survey the quoits board, crouching behind one spindle and squinting to judge the distance required for the toss. The breeze would impact its trajectory, but that was easy enough to compensate for.

Returning to the rail, he watched as the other passengers made their way onto the deck and took up positions.

Ruben, Chatsworth, and Benedict were standing beside the boatswain, studying the quoit rings and adding their names to the scoreboard.

Dahlia and her friends sat beneath the awning. He noticed that the inspector, apparently feeling better, had joined them. The man appeared tired, and there was a blanket covering his legs, but his face had regained much of its lost color.

Dr. Jackson sat with the women as well, holding hands with Miss Thornton.

Miles attempted to catch Dahlia's eye, but she was listening intently to Lady Covington. Based on the woman's hand motions, she was no doubt describing the morning's ship tour, specifically the workings of the engine.

A small distance away, their deck chairs clustered together, sat Lorene, Priscilla, Charlotte, and Helen. Lord Lockhart sat near the women—near Helen, at least, a closed book on his knee. Miles wondered whether he intended to participate in quoits today or would occupy himself with the book. The man had shown himself to be a worthy competitor, and Miles hoped to challenge him sometime during the cruise.

The older women on the ship, Lady Chatsworth, Lady Mather, Mrs. Griffin, and the Duchess of Dorchester, occupied a third group of deck chairs, with Her Grace's companion knitting nearby.

Miles crossed the deck and joined the competitors and the boatswain. He looked at the board, surprised at the listings. It appeared the four men were not to form two teams but were each partnering with one of the elder women. Miles saw he was paired with the eccentric Lady Mather and grinned, giving a pleased nod. If not a battle of skill, this contest would certainly be diverting.

The first match was called out, setting Miles and Lady Mather against Chatsworth and his grandmother.

Hearing their names, the women left their deck chairs to join them.

Ruben and Benedict took the seats the women had vacated.

“Good afternoon, Lady Mather.” Miles gave his partner an elegant bow. “How am I so fortunate as to have the most engaging teammate on the ship?”

“Lord Meredith.” She curtsied in return. “I insisted upon it.” She gave their opponents an impertinent smirk. “I like to win, you know.”

Chatsworth laughed, and Lady Chatsworth gave a good-natured smirk back to her friend.

Miles thought he'd seen just a glimpse of what the women must have been like when they were younger. He knew their friendship had lasted for decades, and seeing the playful way the women still teased one another, he couldn't help but laugh as well.

The men took the quoits, and the pairs separated, going to their sides of the court.

Lady Mather motioned to the Chatsworths with her chin, speaking under her breath. "Joanna is proficient with many things, but throwing contests is not one of them."

Miles laughed again and offered her a quoit. "Shall we give them what for?"

She twirled it in her hand. "Quite so."

The partnerships took their places and faced one another across the board.

The boatswain laid down markers on the deck, indicating where the ladies would stand to throw. The men would throw from behind the spindle. Lady Chatsworth threw first, and Miles had to step aside to avoid being hit by her errant toss.

She winced, glancing at her grandson.

The spectators clapped politely

"Just testing out the wind," Chatsworth said, returning his grandmother's parasol to her.

Lady Mather tossed next, her quoit coming very near the spindle but still missing.

"Well done," Miles said.

She shook her head, giving a disappointed frown to the applauding spectators, and

opened her own parasol.

Chatsworth tossed his quoit, hitting the spindle, and his grandmother clapped a hand against her parasol handle. “Excellent toss, Charles!”

Miles took up his position. He extended his arm, hand empty, in a few practice tosses, then took the ring, flinging it with a snap of his wrist. It sailed in a straight line, hooking the spindle and circling down to the base. He caught Chatsworth’s gaze and raised a brow.

Chatsworth smiled and shook his head at the cocksure expression, applauding the ringer with the others.

The boatswain called out the score, marking it on the board and calling for the new teams to be substituted in.

Miles picked up the tossed rings, giving them to Benedict.

Lady Mather tipped her head, watching him from beneath the shade of her parasol. “You look very much like your grandfather, you know. But I see some of your grandmother too. Here”—she pointed to her own face—“around the eyes.” She smiled softly. “She did have kind eyes. And she was very intelligent, you know.”

Miles was surprised by her gentler tone. Only a few moments ago, this same woman was boasting to her opponents. “I only knew her when I was very young,” he said.

She nodded. “Yes, it was such a tragedy when she passed. She was a true friend to me at a time when high Society had all but washed their hands of my mother and myself. After my father’s death, a cousin inherited the estate, and within only a few years, through greed and gambling, he had lost the inheritance entirely.” She took Miles’s arm, and they moved off the court, making way for the next team. They stood on the

far side, near the rail and across the court from where the spectators sat beneath the awning.

“It is amazing how quickly so many supposed friends are willing to ostracize a person for something over which they had no control,” Lady Mather continued.

Miles followed her gaze to Dahlia, and he knew they were no longer talking about the cousin’s gambling. He knew he was being chastised and did not know how to respond. Instead of speaking, he feigned interest in the game.

Benedict and Lady Griffin took their place on the court, facing Ruben and the duchess, and the quoits tournament continued.

“I love that young woman like my own daughter,” Lady Mather said, either oblivious to Miles’s discomfort or perhaps in spite of it. “What she’s endured this past year...” She looked purposefully toward Ruben, then the Darling Debs, and back at Miles.

He felt the reprimand down to his bones, and heat flashed over his skin.

When his eyes met hers, Lady Mather’s expression was not castigating but gentle. “Dahlia suffered a slight that most would never come back from, but she’s risen magnificently from the ashes. Wouldn’t you say? Just look at her. Think of all she’s accomplished.”

Miles did look.

Dahlia was clapping with the others. She smiled at something one of her friends said. The heat that had been on his face a moment ago moved into his chest, expanding as he considered this magnificent ship and the endeavor it had taken to make it into a luxury cruise liner. What she had done was simply brilliant. He remembered the broken woman who had run from the marquess’s ballroom and compared her to this

successful businessowner he saw before him. A phoenix from the ashes indeed.

“She has done what I never could,” Lady Mather said. “Thanks to the inheritance law, Dahlia is able to control her financial stability. But in spite of everything, one can never control the conduct of others.”

“After... the ball...” He glanced at Lady Mather, making certain she understood what event he was speaking of. “I tried to visit her. More than once. I went to her house; I invited her and her parents to supper... but she would not see me.”

Lady Mather’s face softened further, and he realized that instead of a critic, she was an ally, and he was relieved at last to have the chance to tell his side.

“It is hard to swallow one’s pride,” she said, looking sympathetic toward both of them. “Especially after such a humiliation. But time does heal. And, as for you, my lord, I know it is difficult to find your footing when your loyalties are divided.”

“Do you think,” he began, but he stopped when Benedict handed him the quoits. He and Lady Griffin had joined them. Miles hadn’t noticed that the game had ended. And with it, his and Lady Mather’s conversation.

“The pair of you have your work cut out for you, making up for my lack of aim.” Benedict grimaced. “I must apologize to my partner.”

Lady Griffin was holding on to Benedict’s arm with one hand and her cane with the other. “Lord Benedict is being chivalrous,” she said. “It was I, of course, who lost our points.”

“Lord Meredith will make up the difference easily,” Lady Mather said, giving her partner a thump on the arm.

Benedict and Mrs. Griffin argued graciously on the way back to their seats beneath the awning.

Miles and Lady Mather took their positions, facing Team Chatsworth once again. He looked to the scoreboard, calculating quickly the points they would have to make up. But his mind was no longer on the game.

Lady Mather had given him a lot to think about. He had hoped enough time had passed that he and Dahlia could simply resume their former friendship without discussing what had happened between her and Ruben—or, more specifically, what Ruben had done to her, how it had hurt her, how it had changed her life, and why Miles had not been more present during what must have been her darkest hours.

He reminded himself that he had made an effort. He thought of the flowers he'd brought, the cards he'd left... but if he were honest with himself, he could have done more. And how did one apologize for such a failure? For remaining loyal to the person who had wronged her? How could he explain his reasons for continued association with Ruben after his abominable behavior toward her? He did have reasons. And if she only understood, perhaps... He was not sure she would listen and was even less sure that she'd accept his explanation. But once he had an opportunity, he was going to try.

The quoits continued throughout the afternoon with different pairings. Miles and Lord Lockhart found themselves in a particularly competitive battle, their scores even with each round until at last, Miles's toss was short, giving Lockhart the victory.

Once the match was finished, Miles shook Lockhart's hand, congratulating him on a match well played, and took a seat under the awning, beside Inspector Graham. Miles gratefully accepted a glass of lemonade from a steward.

Lockhart returned to his deck chair beside Miss Rothschild, who gave him a cold

lemonade and a warm smile.

Miles took a long drink of the lemonade and sat back in his chair. The shade felt good after the sun on the deck.

“Well played, Your Lordship,” Inspector Graham said.

Miles lifted his glass, thanking him for the compliment. “You look much improved, Inspector.”

“I am improved.” He let out a long sigh and shook his head. “The past three days are some I never want to repeat,” he said.

“I believe you,” Miles said.

“The worst part was that cursed tea.” His lip curled in revulsion. “It was meant to soothe the sick, but I could swear it made it worse.”

Miles grimaced, commiserating with the man. Though he did not suffer from motion sickness himself, he fully sympathized with having an ill stomach.

“You’ve seen nothing suspicious these past days?” Inspector Graham asked. “No further threat to Lord Benedict?”

Miles shook his head. “Nothing at all.”

“My wife thinks there is a conspiracy afoot.” The inspector grunted as he shifted in his seat. “She’s always looking for a story.”

“And you?” Miles asked. “What do you think?”

“I think there’s no reason to believe the situation is any more than what it is. An attempt at harm. But until the villain shows his or her hand, there is nothing we can do other than remain on our guard.”

Miles nodded, his gaze moving past the inspector to where Dahlia sat talking with Lady Covington. Was Her Ladyship still talking about the engine room? “I intend to remain alert, to safeguard both Benedict and Miss Lancaster.”

“Good man,” the inspector said. “I will do the same. Jim and Lord Chatsworth will be vigilant as well. And we shall hope that, seeing it, the culprit will let go their design to do injury.”

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The next morning after breakfast, the passengers disembarked at the port of St. Aubin's Bay on the island of Jersey. It was the third morning of the cruise, and the weather was warm and sunny. Since their destination of Gorey Harbour was too small to accommodate the ship and had no dock, Victor had arranged for excursion cars to transport them.

Dahlia led the group to the waiting carriages, surprised that an island of fewer than fifty square miles would boast such large conveyances. The carriages had no roofs or sides. And in addition to the drivers' seats, there were four long benches behind, which were long enough for three or four riders on each.

As Dahlia paid and gave instructions to the drivers, the ship's passengers began to climb aboard the carriages, taking their seats. Two conveyances departed, and Dahlia walked with the driver to another. She was pleased to hear the happy chatter of those heading out on this excursion, and she couldn't help but smile as she felt the warm sun on her face and thought of the day ahead.

Victor had left the ship with a company of stewards hours earlier to prepare the venue at Gorey. Francis had planned a particularly delicious picnic to be prepared and served on the beach, which would be augmented with oysters fresh from the sea.

The driver accompanying her halted, holding out a hand to assist her in boarding. Dahlia took it, thanking him. She looked up into the carriage and drew in a sharp breath, flinching and pulling back, and if not for the man holding her hand, she may well have fallen onto the road.

Only one vacant seat remained in the excursion car, and it was next to Lorene. Ruben

sat on the woman's other side.

Dahlia looked away quickly, but it was too late. She and Lorene had made eye contact. To go to a different carriage now would be the height of rudeness.

From the corner of her eye, Dahlia saw a commotion. Elizabeth had seen the crisis of her cousin's situation. She stood, attempting to shift around her own bench to make room, but Dahlia caught her eye, giving a quick shake of her head. It is only a short journey, she thought, bracing herself with a genial smile and stepping into the carriage.

The driver climbed into his seat, and they were off.

"Good morning." Dahlia spoke before either Lorene or Ruben had the chance. "Isn't this a lovely day for an excursion?" Her voice sounded high and squeaked in her ears. She maintained her smile despite the pummeling of her heart against her ribs and held the handle of her parasol tightly in her lap to keep her hands from shaking. She didn't dare try to open it until her nerves had calmed.

"Lovely," Lorene said in a monotone voice without looking at her.

"Indeed it is, Miss Lancaster," Ruben said.

On the bench ahead of her, Priscilla, Charlotte, Helen, and Lord Lockhart kept their eyes forward, but Dahlia knew by their unnatural stillness that they were straining their ears, not wanting to miss what would undoubtedly be fodder for future gossip.

Elizabeth looked back at Dahlia, her expression panicked.

"How are you enjoying yourselves?" Dahlia asked, falling back on the question she felt compelled, as hostess, to ask every person on the cruise. She was grateful that

such an impersonal topic was easily at hand. “And your accommodations?”

“Acceptable, thank you,” Lorene replied in the same dull tone. She glanced toward Dahlia without fully looking at her and then turned away.

“Exceptional,” Ruben said in a more decided tone, as if to correct his wife’s lack of enthusiasm. He leaned forward to see around Lorene. “The ship is a marvel. Don’t you agree, my dear?” His gaze moved to his wife, and his brows raised expectantly, waiting for her agreement.

Instead of looking at either of them, Lorene focused her eyes on the back of the bench in front of them, as if she wished she sat ahead with her friends instead of in the most uncomfortable seat on the island. Stiffness radiated off her, and in spite of her own discomfort, Dahlia couldn’t help but feel sorry for the woman.

“It has been very nice,” Lorene said at last. The resentment in her voice reminded Dahlia of a child whose parent was persuading them to thank a relative for an unwanted gift.

“Nice?” Ruben’s voice boomed, causing both women, as well as every occupant on the bench in front of them, to jump. “Just look at her!” He motioned behind them to where the SS Aurora was berthed. “She is the most beautiful ship I’ve ever seen, let alone traveled on.” Seeing that his wife still refused to meet his gaze, he frowned and looked beyond her again to Dahlia. “Some women have a difficult enough time merely managing their household staff.” The corner of his brow lifted, and even though she didn’t turn her head, Lorene winced. “But to see what you’ve accomplished, Miss Lancaster—directing your own company, the administration of a ship, clients, employees, and crew—it is an unbelievable accomplishment.” His voice dropped with his last words, his smile softening and his eyes looking intensely into hers.

Dahlia recognized the look. A year ago, it would have started delicious flutterings in her chest. His tone would have made her knees feel as if they were melting. But today she saw them for what they were: a performance. Artificial and insincere and intended to hurt the woman he was supposed to love more than to flatter the one he spoke to.

This was not the first time she'd seen or spoken with Lord and Lady Ruben since that awful night, but until now, their communication had been merely passing politeness. Now Dahlia felt like a pawn being used to upset her former beau's wife, and that perception made her physically ill. She looked ahead, wishing she had any idea of how much farther until their destination. For an instant, she considered whether she could simply hop out of the carriage and walk the remainder of the way, but they were moving too quickly for her to manage it.

She grasped for something else to say, wanting to turn the topic away from herself and back to Lorene. "Your necklace is very unique, my lady." She fought to control the pitch of her voice but still sounded nervous and squeaky. "This amethyst is a pleasing color with your skin tone."

"Thank you," Lorene said without inflection. She had become, if possible, more tensed.

The carriage had left the town of St. Helier and traveled along low hills covered with lush vegetation. They went around a bend, and Dahlia grasped to the seat-rail beside her hip, holding tight, lest she slide into Lorene. With a pang, she remembered the ease with which she and her former friend used to converse. The two of them could talk for hours, their giggles and gossip wearing them out. They had spent so many long days together, shopping, attending events, lolling in Dahlia's garden or Lorene's drawing room as they discussed fashion or friends. Lorene had once been so very dear to her. And, in Dahlia's heart, she always would be, no matter what had transpired between them. It made her ache to see that her friend maintained none of

the same feelings.

Ahead of the carriage, Mont Orgueil Castle looked down on the island from a high hilltop next to the deep aqua sea. Fishing vessels bobbed in the picturesque harbor. A lovely village spread along the shorefront above a seawall, and beyond, green hills led up to the castle. The view was stunning.

“I have never visited Jersey,” Dahlia said, finding the silence to be almost as uncomfortable as the conversation. “Have you, Lady Ruben?”

“I have not,” Lorene said.

“Nor have I,” Ruben said. “But this cruise has given me a taste for travel. I daresay I will be booking future journeys aboard the Paragon Line.”

Lorene inhaled sharply, and her nostrils flared. Dahlia shifted around so her knees were directed away from the couple. She gripped the seat-rail, ready to dismount the instant the carriage stopped. The journey took them down into Gorey and along the village’s main road, paralleling the shore. They continued on to the far side of the castle. Below the seawall was a beautiful stretch of seashore, deserted save for the marquee tents for the SS Aurora’s passengers.

When the carriage finally halted, Dahlia was the first to alight, hurrying away from her seatmates and allowing her tensed muscles to ease. The feeling of discomfort lingered like a malaise she couldn’t quite shake. A bitter taste stung the back of her throat, and her hands were shaking.

“Dahlia!” Elizabeth rushed through the disembarking crowd. When she reached Dahlia, she grasped her arm. “I am so sorry. I did not see until it was too late.” Elizabeth’s eyes were wide, her forehead crinkled in rows of distress.

“It is no matter. I survived.” Dahlia widened her own eyes and whispered, “Barely.”

Elizabeth made a sound that could have been a harrumph but sounded more like a growl as she looked behind at Lord and Lady Ruben.

“I couldn’t avoid them forever, could I?” Dahlia said. “And better here than in a dark alley somewhere.” She was trying to make light of the situation, but from Elizabeth’s serious expression, her cousin saw straight through her attempts.

“I should have paid closer attention.” Elizabeth glanced back toward the carriage, then took Dahlia’s arm and started toward the seawall stairs. “You shouldn’t have had to face them alone.”

Dahlia sighed. She squeezed Elizabeth’s arm as they walked, and no further words were needed. Her cousin’s outrage was reassuring. Her friends were always ready to give support.

There was a bit of a press when they reached the steps that led down to the shore. The stairs were steep, and the descent was necessarily slow. She and Elizabeth waited their turn.

Presently, Lady Mather and her friends were climbing down, assisted by Meredith, Charles, and Benedict.

From above, Dahlia watched Meredith. One of his arms was around Lady Mather’s waist, and the other held her forearm as they stepped downward together.

Dahlia had seen him yesterday, assisting the crew as the ship docked. The memory of his disheveled hair and muscled arms as he pulled on the ropes came into her thoughts, making her blush. And that brought a feeling of irritation. She’d expected he would have saved her a seat this morning. Hadn’t they ridden together to the castle

at Boulogne-sur-Mer? Of course, this was insignificant reasoning for her assumption, but the discomfiture of her interaction with Lord and Lady Ruben was still fresh, dredging up old insecurities.

Meredith had made it clear that he was, first and foremost, Ruben's friend. And Dahlia was foolish for believing she could shift his loyalties.

She and Elizabeth made their way down the stone steps and crossed the hard sand of the beach together.

"Oh my," Elizabeth said as they neared the tents. "You have really outdone yourself, cousin."

"Not I," Dahlia said. "This is all Victor's doing."

The tents were large, their sides folded and tied up to give full views on three sides. Beneath the shade of the canvas, chairs sat around circular tables. Each was covered with a white tablecloth, and in the center was an elegant floral arrangement. A long line of rectangular tables was arranged buffet-style with large ice-filled bowls of fruit, selections of cheese and sliced meats, and warming trays filled with delicious-smelling foods. A bar was set up at one end, and a steward was already pouring drinks.

Elizabeth sat beside her husband and his grandmother, assuring Dahlia that she would protect the empty seat beside her with her life, lest her cousin find herself again seated with undesirable acquaintances.

Dahlia thanked her and went in search of Victor.

Seeing him talking to Francois, she went toward the buffet area.

Victor started toward her, but he stopped, turning around a floral arrangement and tucking a sprig deeper before giving it a satisfied look and continuing on. He gave a small bow. “Miss Lancaster.”

In spite of her unsettled temperament, Dahlia smiled at his gallantry. “This all looks spectacular,” she said. “Where did you possibly find ice?”

“There is a cold house just north of here,” he said, as if discovering such a thing on a remote island were nothing at all.

They walked along the buffet, and then Victor led her between the tents toward the beach, where various equipment was set in orderly rows. “The boatswain arranged for tug-of-war ropes, tools for sand sculpting, small rowing boats, and badminton.” He gestured to where a group of stewards were setting up a high net. He glanced at his pocket watch, snapping it closed and putting it back into his waistcoat pocket. “Within the hour, the sea-bathing machines will be delivered, and an hour after that, the oysters.”

Dahlia raised her parasol against the sun. She surveyed the scene, taking it all in with amazement and pride. Her assistant had gone above and beyond what was necessary, making the shore excursion into an unforgettable experience for their guests. “You really want this cruise to succeed,” she said, turning to look at Victor.

“Of course I do,” Victor said. “The success of the Paragon Line is all of our success.”

Warmth expanded inside her. “Thank you,” she said. She motioned around with her hand. “For all of this. For all you do. I don’t believe I thank you enough.”

“I enjoy it,” Victor said. “Throwing fancy parties with someone else’s money. Ordering people around...” He wagged his brows. “It is everything I’d ever hoped for in my professional life.”

Dahlia smiled at his jest. “And what of your personal life?” she asked. “Leaving London for weeks at a time cannot be good for maintaining relationships.”

He tipped his head from side to side, shrugging. “As I said, I enjoy it. And right now, it is where I wish to be.”

Dahlia studied his expression for a moment. “I understand. But if that should change, please tell me.”

Victor smiled. “I shall.” He was watching a group descending the stairs with baskets. “That must be the croissants,” he said. “Will you excuse me?”

She nodded and he hurried away.

Dahlia remained where she was, watching the activity around her. Guests were talking happily, drinking and eating in the shade of the tent. She imagined some would take an excursion up to the castle, while others would spend their time sea bathing or participating in the beach diversions. Many would be content to sip a drink and chat with friends in the beautiful surroundings. Today really would be the highlight of the cruise, and all because of Victor. She felt a hint of remorse. She truly took her assistant for granted.

She walked slowly back to the tents, watching the other passengers as they made requests of the stewards. Did any of them know how much work had been done on their behalf? Until a year ago, she’d certainly had no idea. She was no longer the same debutante who’d demanded a particular gown washed and pressed for the next day, even though doing so had meant a lady’s maid would be deprived of sleep, or throwing a hat into the bin because the feathers were the wrong color. How often had she sent back a meal to the kitchen when it hadn’t suited her? She watched the stewards hurry to fill orders and grant requests and knew the other passengers didn’t notice the workers as people at all. Not that she blamed them. Until she’d taken on

this position, she hadn't been aware of anything but her own whims either. What a change this year had brought, and the result of her new enterprise left her in a strange middle ground—no longer a full member of high Society but merely adjacent. And the same went for the servant class. She was much closer to working for those passengers on board than indulging in a pleasure trip with them.

Her contemplations continued as she returned to the tent where Elizabeth sat. Dahlia had changed, and she was proud of the woman she'd become. Though she didn't care to admit it, Ruben's words rang true. She had accomplished something. She'd worked hard to learn the management of the company, and she should be proud of what she'd done. She'd discovered who she was and what she was capable of. And she had learned the value of true friends.

So why did Ruben still make her feel small? Why did the loss of her friendship with the Darling Debs still hurt? Would she ever overcome the flush of humiliation when she remembered the Marchioness of Molyneaux's ball?

She sighed, putting on her hostess smile and entering the tent. She glanced toward the table where Lorene, Ruben, and the other Debs sat, feeling the familiar clench in her belly and ache in her heart, which was made far worse when Meredith joined them.

Dahlia looked away, frustrated at the pain she couldn't quite push away. She found her Blue Orchid Society friends and took a seat with them, trying to lose herself in their conversation. Her father had often told her that time healed all wounds. The truth of that remained to be seen.

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Luncheon was served beneath the tents on the beach. Miles wondered if food tasted better in the sea air or whether Francois was a confectionary miracle maker. The meal had been absolutely splendid. Miles had eaten far more oysters than he should have, and the thick slices of hearty bread and soft cheese sat heavily in his belly. Not to mention the jam puffs.

He glanced across to Dahlia's table in hopes that he might catch her gaze, but he was disappointed again. She appeared fully engrossed in her friends' conversation.

The plates were cleared away, leaving the diners with cold drinks. Miles sipped a ginger beer, feeling completely content. At least, as far as his stomach was concerned.

At Ruben's suggestion, the two of them left the table, heading down toward the water and the gaming equipment arranged there.

Miles picked up a badminton racquet, testing the tension of the strings with his fingertips while Ruben hefted the tug-of-war rope.

Benedict and Chatsworth came across the sand to join them.

"Are you inclined to play solo, Meredith?" Benedict asked, picking up a racquet of his own. "Or should we assemble teams?" He swished the racquet as if challenging Miles to a sword fight.

Miles patted his belly. "It's much too soon after lunch," he said. "But once my meal is digested, I'll happily accept your challenge."

“The ladies want to go shopping in town,” Ruben said, his frown making it clear that he did not look forward to the excursion.

“Vivian and her friends hope to see the castle,” Benedict said. He looked much happier with that idea, but that was typical. Benedict was rarely bothered by anything.

With his eyes, Miles followed the road leading up to Mont Orgueil castle, and he regretted the extra jam puff. If not for his promise to watch over Ben, he would have preferred to remain beneath the shade of a tent.

Chatsworth was looking down the beach to the rocks at the far end. “I believe the tide has left behind some pools there.” He squinted, then took the spyglass from his pocket, looking through it. “I’m nearly certain that’s a razorbill,” he muttered.

Ruben sighed. “It looks like we’re separating.”

“Come to the castle,” Miles said. “I’m certain the ladies don’t require your company in the shops.”

“They’d probably prefer to peruse the dressmakers and souvenir stands on their own,” Chatsworth said, still looking through his spyglass.

Ruben glanced toward town and then at the castle. He shook his head. “Don’t know which is worse.” In the end, he decided to join those remaining beneath the tents with their cool drinks and card games.

A quarter of an hour later, a group had gathered on the road at the top of the seawall stairs to begin their trek. There was only a small number, fewer than ten, and Miles was relieved that Dahlia was among them. He felt optimistic after seeing her chatting with Lorene and Ruben in the excursion car. Perhaps they had found a way to get past what had transpired a year ago and Miles would no longer have to divide himself,

being friends with only one of them at a time and watching what he said, lest he offend one of the parties.

The group began walking, and within only a moment, the road became steep. Instead of pleasant chatter, the words spoken were only occasional as they trekked upward. They made their way back and forth along switchbacks, drawn out in a long line. Benedict and Lady Covington walked directly ahead of Miles, and he was glad their pace was not quick.

Even though he considered himself to be in better than average physical condition, Miles was huffing by the time he reached the castle gates. The group continued on and up along stairs and paths, dispersing little by little as individuals and couples broke off to explore different sections of the castle.

Seeing that Inspector Graham was staying close to Ben, Miles went in search of Dahlia. He hadn't quite seen where she'd gone but knew the general direction, so he continued on, under arches, between narrow passages, peering into various stone chambers, and finally he climbed the steep circular stairs of a turret, coming out on top of a tower.

Dahlia was there, alone, looking over the battlement toward the beach below and the ocean beyond. She held a parasol, one hand resting on the stone wall. Hearing him, she turned.

Miles halted, not only to catch his breath but to take in the sight of her. He couldn't help it. The lace of her parasol cast speckles of light over her face, neck, and shoulders. Her eyes were wide, one brow raised in question. The expression lasted for only an instant before she schooled her expression to its usual refined politeness. She gave a nod of acknowledgment and turned back to the view.

That glimpse, the flash of vulnerability, uncertainty, took him back to an earlier time,

when Dahlia had worn no mask with him. When she'd allowed herself to be fully seen. He'd caught hints of it days before in her office when she'd asked for help, and again for a moment in the basilica's crypt when she'd been frightened. Seeing it again froze him, made his heart flip almost painfully and his mouth go dry.

There was so much to their history. So much to sort through. And he felt the weight of needing to say exactly the right words lest he shatter any hope of a future together.

Her slight nod hadn't exactly been a warm greeting. Nevertheless, Miles stepped forward to stand next to her. "You don't happen to have a fan, do you?" he asked. "It seems I have forgotten mine."

She loosened the strings of the reticule at her wrist and extracted a folding fan, handing it to Miles without a glance in his direction.

He opened it, gratefully waving cool air at his face. He'd hoped the recollection of their earlier practice would have softened her with its remembrance, but she remained quiet. Her mind was obviously occupied, and he wondered whether the source was new or whether the general pressure of managing the cruise was the cause.

"A splendid view, isn't it?" he said at last. His skin still hadn't cooled, and he wished he could loosen his necktie or at least remove his coat. How was Dahlia managing to look so refreshed? Aside from a slight flush to her cheeks, she looked entirely comfortable.

"Beautiful," she said, though her tone did not encourage further comment.

Miles looked down toward the tents on the beach. Groups were dispersing now, some headed toward town, and a few had taken up the badminton racquets and started a match. Though he couldn't see them, a fair number apparently remained beneath the shade, indulging in cards or conversation. Farther along the shore—in the opposite

direction from Chatsworth's rocky bird territory—a line of bathing machines had arrived, and some of the ship's passengers were headed in that direction. He couldn't help a bit of jealousy. A dip in the cool seawater sounded heavenly.

“Do you intend to go sea bathing?” he asked.

“I do not,” Dahlia said.

Miles opened his mouth to point out that it was the perfect day for it, but he closed it. Dahlia did not seem in the mood for small talk. There was no better time than now to broach the topic he'd hoped to discuss, but as he considered exactly what to say, he could not come up with a clever way to introduce it, so he plunged right in. “It seemed a pleasant conversation you had with Ruben and Lorene in the carriage,” he said. “I was glad to see that perhaps some bridges were mended?”

Dahlia turned toward him now, and one glance at the iciness in her gaze told him he'd chosen badly.

“I thought—I mean, it appeared things were going well.” He fumbled with his words, but by the hardening of her face, he knew he was just making the situation worse.

“How could you think that a few moments of forced proximity is all it would take to resolve life-changing damage? That there is anything at all that could be said that would repair—” Her voice caught, and she clenched her mouth so tightly that he could see the muscles of her jaws working. The anger in her expression was startling, as if it had been there all this time, hidden away, and his foolish words had exposed it.

Miles's instincts told him to run.

“Do you not remember what happened?” She spoke every word slowly, distinctly, in

a voice laced with ice and fury. But in it, Miles could also hear pain. More than he'd thought possible. "You have no idea what this year has been like, do you, Lord Meredith? No, of course you don't." She pushed out a jagged breath, in which he would not have been surprised to see fire. "You have not been shunned by Society. Your life, as you knew it, did not stop." Hurt entered her eyes, filling them with tears. Her lip trembled and her voice dropped to a whisper. "You did not lose all of your friends in one instant." Her tears spilled over, and Dahlia turned away quickly, loosening the strings on her reticule, likely looking for a handkerchief.

Miles put one into her hand, giving it a gentle tug to turn her back around toward him. "I lost the one I cared the most about."

As she wiped her tears, Dahlia huffed, letting him know in no uncertain terms that she did not believe that one bit.

"I tried to visit you," he said, feeling the need to defend himself. "You wouldn't see me. Those first weeks, I came every day. I left flowers, dinner invitations for you and your parents... but nothing. No answer, no... nothing."

Dahlia looked away. "Those weeks were... dark," she said. "I hardly left my room. If not for my cousin and the Blue Orchid Society women, I don't know if I ever would have."

"I should have been more persistent," he said. "Tried harder. But..." He wanted to take her hand, but one held her parasol and the other his damp handkerchief. He contented himself with touching her arm.

"If you really cared about me, you would not have remained friends with them... with him ! You made your choice, Lord Meredith. And it was not me." She wiped at her tears again.

And here they were, at the crux of it. Miles's divided loyalties. How could he care about both Ruben and Dahlia? The fact was, he did.

"I know Ruben isn't perfect," he began.

Dahlia scoffed.

"Most of the time, he isn't even likable," he said. "But I owe him a great debt. One that goes back to when we were children."

"A debt?" She looked skeptical, but at least she was listening.

Miles rested a hand on the wall, leaning against it. "We met at Eton, as you know."

Dahlia nodded.

"But there is more to it." Miles swallowed, his neck going hot. He'd planned to tell the story, but the memory of those first days was painful and humiliating. He smiled, trying to make his voice sound nonchalant. "Though you see before you a perfect specimen of manhood, such was not always the case." His smile felt forced, so he dropped it. "I was large for my age, quite a bit bigger than any of the other first-year boys, and many of the second and third years as well. Large, clumsy, shy, and as far as schoolwork, I was... not the brightest student." He winced. "And that is putting it lightly. Let's just say I was different; I stood out. And in that environment, standing out is like having a target on one's back."

He glanced at Dahlia, seeing compassion in her gaze. His neck heated further, moving up to his ears, and he employed the folding fan.

"Boys that age—or any age, really—are like feral animals," he said. "Like wolves. The pack discovers quickly which is the weakest and goes after it." He swallowed

again. “It did not take them long to single me out. Hours, really.” He tried to make his voice light. “Young boys could make a medieval torture chamber seem like a grandmother’s tearoom. They are geniuses at torment.”

Dahlia tucked away the handkerchief and touched his hand where it rested on the wall.

Miles nearly choked at the rush of emotion the small touch brought. He continued on. “Just as quickly, the pack singles out the alpha. The leader. There is always one. Perhaps girls are the same,” he said with a small shrug. “The alpha is not always the biggest or the smartest or the wealthiest. He is the most confident. A natural leader. The other boys recognize him immediately. It is instinct. He knows he is the leader, and they all want to please him. They would do anything for his approval.”

“That was Ruben,” Dahlia said.

Miles nodded. “Yes. That was Ruben.”

“And what happened?” she asked.

“He befriended me,” Miles said simply. “I do not know why. He was in a position to make my life miserable. He could have done it easily. The others would have joined in. It would probably have only added to his popularity. But, for some reason, he attached himself to me that first week, making it clear to everyone that I was his friend, and as such, I was off limits to teasing and torment.”

He looked up at her, seeing that she was still listening. Her head was tipped to the side, her eyes soft. And a measure of relief washed over him. At the very least, she was no longer breathing fire.

“And that was it,” he said. “After those first”—he swallowed—“horrible days, I had a

friend. And I'd never had a friend like Ruben. He was always coming up with schemes. He helped me with my schoolwork, and he never treated me as if I were simpleminded or dull. It was like he saw something in me that I didn't know was there. I loved school because of him. Our group of close friends increased, adding Ben, Chatsworth, and of course Everleigh." He shook his head at the mention of his former companion, who was now serving a sentence in an Australian penal colony. "What had begun as the most horrific experience became the happiest time of my life. And it was because of Ruben."

"I didn't know any of that," Dahlia said after a moment. Her hand was still on his, and no force in nature would make Miles shift away.

"It is not something I speak of often," he said. "Or ever, really. I don't believe I've actually told the story to anyone."

"I'm glad you told me," Dahlia said. "It does help me understand." She looked down toward the tents, as if she might see through them to the people inside. Her eyes tightened. "But it does not repair the hurt he caused."

"I know," Miles said. "And that is not something I can do. I seek only to help you understand the reason for my own loyalties. It is difficult to be torn between two friends who have become enemies."

Dahlia continued to stare down at the tents. She took her hand away, and Miles wished he could read her thoughts. She had been hurt so badly that he didn't know if anything he said could ease her pain.

He rallied his courage again. There was one more thing he needed to say that he truly did not wish to. But for his loyalty to Ruben and his desire for honesty before pushing forward with his own suit, he must get it all out in the open. "Ruben's choice was forced upon him," Miles said. "His parents required it. If he'd been allowed, he

would have chosen to marry you.”

“I don’t believe you,” she said. “I learned afterward that he and Lorene were courting in secret. They had been for some time.”

“Yes, that is true.” He did not offer any defense. That was not his battle to fight. “But he did love you. I know that for certain.” Miles hated saying it. But it was the truth.

Dahlia was quiet for a long time before pulling her gaze away from the top of the tents. She turned toward him. “I do not think Ruben would have been a good husband,” she said. “I have heard him speak to Lorene with such contempt.” She shook her head, her unbelief evident. “How could he do that? She is... at least, she was... such a wonderful person. He is lucky to have her.”

“I hope he realizes it one day,” Miles agreed.

“I do too,” Dahlia said. She tipped back her parasol, readjusting it on her shoulder. “To be clear, I do not pine for Ruben. My heart is not broken because he is married to someone else. I do not love him.” She squinted, turning her head to the side as if considering. “I don’t know if I ever did. Not truly. Though it was exciting to be photographed and featured in the society pages, I do not think that is really love. It is more... infatuation, I believe. And I feel as though I was a different person then. So much younger.”

“What is love, then, Miss Lancaster?” Miles asked. “Can you, in your aged wisdom, define it?”

“I believe it is simpler than I thought,” she said. “And at the same time, more complex.” She shook her head, giving a small smile at the inconsistency in her answer. “When I look at my parents, at my friends, and at those they have fallen in love with, love seems to be easy. They do not require constant grand gestures or

expensive gifts or gushing adoration. Their love grows in quiet moments—sharing the best things that happened in a day, taking a walk together. Little things. They are friends. They trust. They encourage.” As Dahlia spoke, her cheeks reddened. She paused, studying Miles, and her cheeks reddened further.

Seeing it gave him hope. He took a step closer, his legs brushing the front of her skirts. “And is there anyone who fits the bill for you, Miss Lancaster? Is there someone you find yourself wanting to tell your daily triumphs to? Someone you are eager to encourage?” He kept his voice light, but his heart felt anything but. It was as if a carpenter had taken up residence inside his ribs and was hammering away.

“There might be someone,” Dahlia said. But then she looked away, staring at the water. The hand on her parasol handle tightened, her knuckles turning red. “But it is hard to know for certain.”

“Allow me to tell you something I know for certain,” Miles said. “The instant I saw the invitation for this cruise on the SS Aurora , I knew without a doubt that I must be on board. That I would do all in my power to be here. To be with you. To attempt to return our friendship to what it once was. And... if things went as I hoped, to deepen it into something more.”

Dahlia drew in a soft gasp.

“Love may be simple and complex,” he said, taking her hand. “But there is also an element of trust. A leap of faith, if you will. A moment when you give your heart to another and trust it will be held dear. With hope that they will extend theirs in return.”

Dahlia looked at their joined hands, and Miles was certain she could feel his pulse pounding. She raised her eyes, looking at him directly now, and something in her gaze made the world go still.

Miles tugged her toward him, holding her hand against his heart. He leaned forward slowly, giving her the chance to retreat and at the same time praying she wouldn't.

He kissed her, and everything else fell away. Nothing else existed. Nothing else mattered. The only thing was her. And her touch was everything he'd dreamed it would be. Miles pulled her closer, his arms moving around her waist and pressing her against him.

The parasol dropped. Dahlia's arms twined around his neck, and she deepened the kiss of her own volition.

He held her tightly, feeling the elation of a fresh beginning. The creation of something new, something wonderful, something that was theirs alone. Kissing Dahlia was exactly as he'd imagined—and he had imagined it often—but at the same time, nothing could have prepared him for the depth of the emotions it unlocked inside him.

They drew apart, and Dahlia looked up at him with flushed cheeks and a shy smile. "I had not expected that." She glanced behind her and bent to retrieve her parasol.

"It was unexpected, true," Miles said. His lips were tingling and his head spun. "But not unwelcome, I hope."

"No," she said. "Not unwelcome at all." She closed her parasol, propping it up against the wall next to her. She turned back to him, a teasing smile pulling her lips to the side. "In fact, I don't believe I was quite finished."

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

Dahlia went down the tower steps feeling as if she were floating. Meredith was a step ahead. She hardly noticed the twisting of the staircase or the cool of the stone walls under her fingers. Her thoughts felt as if they were scattering in the wind. And only one was anchored in her mind. Meredith had kissed her. And she'd kissed him back. And she never would have believed it was possible to feel this contented. A small giggle pushed its way out, and Meredith turned his head. "What was that?"

"A sneeze," she told him, feeling featherbrained. She was actually giddy.

For the next hour, the pair explored Mont Orgueil Castle, climbing up tall towers, descending down to dank dungeons. They walked through halls that had been used for banquets, strolled in gardens, and peered at the view of the sea through paneless windows. But Dahlia hardly noticed any of it, aside from the man next to her. She perceived every movement he made, each time his arm brushed hers, the way he bent his head down when he stepped beneath a low doorframe, and how he tapped his fingers on stones as they passed. It was all familiar, and yet it was like she was seeing her old friend through different eyes and discovering him all over again.

They occasionally met up with others from the ship as they wandered, and Dahlia must have made some conversation, but for the life of her, she could not remember who they had seen or what she'd said. The kiss had addled her brain somehow, leaving her dizzy and delirious with happiness.

Meredith was silent, but the silence was a comfortable one, as if they were each coming to terms with what had happened, what had changed, and what it might mean for the future. There was so much to think about. But right now, Dahlia didn't want to think. She wanted to remember the feel of Meredith's arms around her. His lips on

hers. She let her emotions move through her, not fighting against them.

Simple and complex , she thought, taking Meredith's hand to step down onto the main road. And an element of trust. She glanced at him as they walked back down the road to the seashore.

He looked back, his expression warm. Dahlia smiled, and a thrill went through her.

When they reached Gorey, Miles took her hand, assisting her on the stone steps from the seawall onto the beach. They started toward the tents.

A group was assembled around the badminton equipment, and when Miles and Dahlia drew near, a few of the men waved, calling for him to join them.

Dahlia was surprised to see that Benedict and Charles had already returned from the castle and were among them. She looked toward the tents, seeing that her friends had also returned and waved to her from a table beneath the shade. Were she and Meredith the last to come back from the excursion? It hardly seemed like any time at all had passed.

She and Meredith stopped.

Both looked toward their friends and then back to each other. Would he take offense if she excused herself to join the Blue Orchid Society?

"If you don't mind—" Meredith said.

"I should—" Dahlia began.

Seeing that they both had the same worry, the pair of them laughed, and the sound returned Dahlia to her senses. "Thank you for accompanying me, Lord Meredith."

He inclined his head, tipping his hat. “Always a pleasure, Miss Lancaster.” The corner of his eye squeezed in the smallest of winks.

And the giddy feeling of bliss rushed back through her at their shared secret. She left him, crossing the sand and joining her friends at their table.

The women all stared at her.

Dahlia sat. She waved to a steward, who brought her a cool lemonade. She thanked him, taking a drink and setting it on the tablecloth. She adjusted her skirts. Her movements were slow, giving her, she hoped, a chance to discipline her expression.

“Did you all enjoy the castle?” she asked in what she thought was a casually interested voice.

“Very much,” Hazel said.

“Indeed,” Vivian said.

Sophronia nodded, taking a drink.

“Not as much as you did, cousin,” Elizabeth said in a sardonic voice.

Heat crept up Dahlia’s neck to her cheeks, and she turned to watch the badminton match in an attempt to hide it. “What was that?” she asked innocently as she glanced at the others at the table.

They were still staring, watching her, as if they were waiting for her to say something. Elizabeth looked as if she were struggling to hold back a smile. Sophie coughed into a handkerchief.

Did they know? Impossible.

“You kissed Meredith,” Elizabeth said. Her mouth twisted in a smirk.

The others let out their breaths, grinning as if they had been waiting to do so.

Dahlia’s face exploded in a blush. She looked around the tent, making certain nobody was close enough to hear. “How could you possibly know that?” Her voice came out as a splutter.

“You were atop the highest tower in the castle,” Elizabeth said, her eyes at half-mast. “Hard to miss. And even if we hadn’t seen it for ourselves...”

“Your expression gives you away,” Sophie said. She was smirking too.

Elizabeth snickered.

Dahlia was indignant. And embarrassed. “What expression?” She was still spluttering. But, under the circumstance, she thought it impossible not to be.

“The increased facial blood flow,” Vivian said.

“And your dreamy eyes,” Hazel said. She put her hand over her lips, stifling a giggle.

Hearing it, the others couldn’t help themselves. After a moment, even Dahlia was laughing. The giddiness she’d felt earlier made her silly. She sighed loudly, closing her eyes and resting the backs of her fingers on her forehead. “It’s all true.”

The laughter increased.

“Oh dear, this is serious,” Sophie said.

“Hazel, perhaps you should feel her pulse,” Elizabeth teased.

Dahlia shook her head, giving her friends a flat look. “It’s not as though none of you has ever”—she looked around again, making sure she wouldn’t be overheard—“kissed a man.” She looked down at her hands as her blush returned. “Though, I grant you have all done so less publicly.”

The women broke into peals of laughter again.

“We are very happy for you, Dahlia,” Hazel said after they had stopped to draw breath.

“Lord Meredith is a fine man,” Vivian agreed.

“He is, isn’t he?” Dahlia smiled and looked toward the beach. Meredith had removed his coat and hat and was right in the middle of the badminton game. His curls bounced as he stretched out his arm to hit the shuttlecock back over the net with a swift flick of his wrist. Dahlia watched him happily. But, after a moment, she voiced a worry that had been nagging at her. “Is this... I mean, what will people think?” she said, feeling the heat of a new kind of blush. One much less pleasant.

“Who gives a care what people think?” Elizabeth said. She frowned. “I certainly do not.”

“Think about what, specifically?” Sophie asked.

“Meredith and Ruben are... of course, you know.” Dahlia was struggling to put her concern into words. “They are such close friends. I’m sure people will talk once...” She motioned with a tip of her head toward Meredith. “Once it is known.”

“People will always talk,” Vivian said decidedly. “There is nothing to be done about

it.” There was a hint of pain in her words. She had experienced firsthand how high Society treated a newcomer.

Sophie’s head was tipped to the side. She was looking closely at Dahlia, as if trying to discern her meaning. “You worry people might believe you are trying to wheedle your way back into the good graces of the haut ton by beguiling one of its respected members?”

Hazel’s mouth fell open, and Vivian’s eyes widened at the boldness of the question.

“Oh my,” Elizabeth said. “Don’t spare her feelings.”

Sophie winced. “I apologize. Was that too blunt?”

“Don’t apologize,” Dahlia said. “That is definitely part of it. I suppose you’re right, Vivian. People will always talk.” She looked back toward the badminton game. “I just do not wish for Meredith to become the object of their gossip. I don’t want his reputation ruined by my own.” She grimaced.

The women nodded, understanding.

“Well, there is nothing for it but to wait and see,” Sophie said. “Nothing you can do. So.” She leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table. “You must tell us every detail of the kiss.”

Hazel, Vivian, and Elizabeth leaned in as well, their hats nearly touching over the round table.

“What did he say?” Hazel set her chin on her hand.

“What did you say?” Vivian interlaced her fingers.

“Who kissed whom?” Elizabeth waggled her brows.

Dahlia smiled, and the blush returned. She glanced over her shoulder, then rested her arms on the table, leaning in with the others. “It all began when Lord Meredith arrived at the top of the tower steps. He was out of breath and heated, so he asked for my fan.”

Later that afternoon, the passengers returned in their excursion cars to the dock at St. Aubin’s Bay. Dahlia sat beside Meredith as they traveled, and based on the sideways looks and whispers among the other passengers, word of their kiss in the tower had spread.

Neither the gossip nor the attention bothered her. The passengers were, for the most part, her friends. And besides, Dahlia was not the person she’d been a year ago. She was much less concerned with the opinion of high Society.

Meredith sat on the bench next to her, legs extended as far as was possible in the cramped carriage, ankles crossed. He appeared entirely comfortable. His clothes were wrinkled from the activities on the seashore. There was a wet patch on one leg, where he’d fallen, and a sunburn colored his cheeks and nose.

The conversation in the carriage was sparse. Some passengers dozed. It seemed the sun, activities, and delicious meal had tired them out. Dinner was still hours away, and Dahlia assumed most would nap in their cabins until then. She, however, had work to do.

Once they boarded the ship, Meredith climbed the stairs with her to the terrace deck. They walked down the corridor, stopping outside the door of Dahlia’s office.

“Thank you for accompanying me,” Dahlia said. “Today was... I enjoyed it very much.”

“As did I.” The flicker of the gas lamps enhanced the shadow of Meredith’s jaw and made small fires glow in his eyes. He leaned forward, pressing a kiss to her lips.

Dahlia cupped his cheek, her thumb rubbing over the whiskers on his chin. “I’ll see you at dinner.” She turned away, reaching for the doorknob.

“Must you work now?” he asked. He did not pout, but his voice sounded disappointed. “I can think of so many other, pleasanter, ways to bide the time.” He put his hands on her waist.

“I must.” Dahlia turned toward him again and laid her palms on his chest. “There is a coal delivery to sort out with Mr. Yeates, and the magician for tonight’s performance will arrive soon.”

Meredith’s arms tightened around her, enveloping her and bringing her so close that she had no choice but to slide her arms around him as well. “I suppose I shall have to—”

The office door opened and Victor stood inside. He looked between the pair of them, only the smallest flicker of his brow showing any surprise at finding them in such a circumstance. “I beg your pardon,” he said, moving to close the door.

Dahlia pulled away from Meredith’s embrace. She stopped the door with her outstretched hand. “Good afternoon, Lord Meredith,” she said in a tone much too formal for the action that preceded it.

“Good afternoon, Miss Lancaster.” He inclined his head and left down the corridor.

Dahlia went inside the office. “Have you seen Mr. Yeates today, Victor?” She spoke in a business tone, hoping to hide the embarrassment she felt at being discovered in Lord Meredith’s arms. She moved to sit behind her desk, straightening her skirts and trying to act as she did every day when she sat here.

“I have not,” Victor said. He shuffled through a neat pile of papers, drawing one out and setting it aside. “Mrs. Yeates brought word that her husband is ill.”

“Ill?” Dahlia had heard nothing of this. But it probably explained his absence the past few days.

Victor shrugged. “Apparently so.”

“You managed the coal delivery yourself, then?”

“Yes.” He slid the receipt across the table, still not looking up.

“And the magician?” Dahlia asked.

“Arrives in an hour.” He snapped closed his pocket watch. “Here is his contract. It wants only your signature and the payment.” He slid another paper across the desk without meeting her gaze.

Dahlia took it, glancing over it. Of course it was all in order. “Victor, are you angry with me?” she asked.

“No. I’m not angry.” He uncapped an inkwell and opened a ledger, seemingly engrossed in his work.

“Your responses are very laconic,” she said. “And that is not like you at all.”

He wrote something in a ledger, grunting an acknowledgment to her words.

Dahlia frowned. She knew something was amiss. “Is it because of Lord Meredith?” She felt the familiar heat bloom in her cheeks at the mention of the man and the memory of the position Victor had caught the pair of them in a few moments earlier.

Victor set down the quill on the ledger. He blew out a sigh through his nose. “I am not angry, Miss Lancaster.”

Dahlia was quiet, waiting for him to continue.

“I am . . . uneasy. Troubled, perhaps.”

“Are you going to tell me why?” she asked.

“I have a fierce loyalty to this company. I am immensely proud to belong to it. I believe in the Paragon Line. I believe in you as its president.”

“I have no doubt of that, Victor,” Dahlia said. She felt uneasy now too, sensing a “but” coming.

Victor let out another nose sigh. “I don’t want to see you throw all of this away.” He motioned around with a wave of his hand, indicating the office, the ship. “To lose all you have worked so hard for.”

“Why would you think that? Of course I am not going to—”

“What sort of wife does Lord Meredith want, do you suppose?”

Dahlia was shocked, both by being interrupted and the audacity of his question. “It is rather early to—”

“A Society wife.” Victor answered his own question. “Do you think he—or anyone else—expects the future Countess of Rushford to spend her days at a shipyard office? To sail away for weeks at a time?”

Dahlia didn’t answer. She hadn’t thought of that. If there was to be a future with Meredith... what would it look like? She felt foolish that she hadn’t contemplated beyond kisses and courting. It took only a moment of consideration to realize Victor was right. She couldn’t picture a scenario that would not involve major changes, major compromises—on both their sides. The idea of leaving the Paragon Line to live in Foxborough Hall, to throw dinner parties for the same people who had ostracized her, to spend her days shopping or visiting, felt like a pin popping the bubble of bliss she’d wrapped herself in. And she felt foolish that she’d not thought through it realistically. The Dahlia of a year ago could happily slide into the roles of hostess and wife with no adjustment whatsoever. But Dahlia, the woman of business, could not.

“His Lordship is a fine man,” Victor said. “An honorable man. I can see why you like him. But you have worked too hard. You have achieved too much to just walk away from all of it.”

“You’re right,” Dahlia whispered. Her throat had tightened. “I hadn’t...” Tears prickled behind her eyes and her heart ached.

Victor reached across the desk, offering a handkerchief.

Dahlia took it. “I should like to be alone, if you please.” She fought to keep her voice steady.

“Of course.” He capped the ink pot and stood. When he reached the door, Victor paused, as if he’d say something more, but changed his mind and exited.

Dahlia released her tears, letting them flow. Sobs choked her throat. She had been so

foolish, letting herself be carried away by tender words and kisses. Was she so desperate for love that she did not even think the situation through before leaping in? The ache inside her heart increased, and she mourned for something she'd known for only a few hours. The truth was, Dahlia realized it had been there all along. But she hadn't seen her easy friendship with Meredith as anything more. Until it was. And now, knowing it could never be, hurt worse than she could have imagined.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

The sullied state of Miles's trousers from playing beach games earned only the shadow of a frown from Peterman. He took the soiled clothing and scuffed shoes away without complaint, and within half an hour, Miles was clean, shaved, and wearing a fresh dinner jacket. He hadn't even bothered to nap, knowing there was no possible way his mind would calm enough for sleep. The day had brought far too much excitement.

Feeling restless, he left the cabin and went up the stairs to the saloon.

Lorene, Priscilla, Charlotte, and Helen were the only people inside.

When he greeted them, Lorene gave only the slightest nod. The others returned the greeting, but their responses seemed cooler than usual, and they left soon after. He wondered whether their reaction had to do with Dahlia. Did they know what had happened at the castle? Most likely. Women always seemed to know.

Miles took a seat near a window. A steward offered a drink, which he gratefully accepted before sitting back to enjoy the view of the sea and allow the feeling of blissful contentment to wash over him. He could not remember a time when he'd felt so happy, and the feeling warmed him to his core. As did the excellent scotch.

The sun was getting low, bathing the room in a warm golden color. Or perhaps that was simply how Miles saw the world now. It stood to reason that everything would appear more beautiful now that he was entirely filled with joy. He wondered how long Dahlia would be working. She'd promised to see him at dinner, but he hoped she might finish earlier. Perhaps they could walk on the promenade deck before the sun set.

The idea of spending the next day at Shanklin with her was thrilling. He wondered if she had trekked through the chine before. The ravine was spectacular, with waterfalls and stunning vegetation. He imagined strolling down a footpath arm in arm with Dahlia. Perhaps they would stop to share a kiss. He couldn't help the smile and sigh as he thought of the perfect day ahead.

A woman came up the stairs and into the saloon. Miles recognized her as Miss Thornton, one of Dahlia's friends. She looked around as if she were searching for someone, and her gaze landed on Miles.

"Good afternoon, Your Lordship." She looked past him to the doors.

Miles stood. "Miss Thornton, nice to see you. Is everything all right?"

"Yes, nothing to worry about." She smiled.

Miles had never exchanged more than a few words with the woman. He hadn't had reason to. The two shared few common friends.

Miss Thornton was slight with blonde hair, light-blue eyes, and pale skin. Everything about her seemed gentle, like a newborn lamb. But right now there was something anxious in her manner. Not exactly distressed, but she appeared to be in a hurry.

"I was hoping to find Mr. Vandelay or someone who might have a list of the cabin assignments. You don't know where he is, do you?" Her voice was soft in spite of her rushed manner.

"I believe he is with Miss Lancaster, in her office."

Her brows furrowed, and she glanced back in the direction she'd come, her cheeks pulling in a slight grimace. "I'm not quite certain where her office is."

Miles held out a hand toward the doors that led to the deck. "Allow me to escort you."

"Thank you." Her smile was gentle. "That is very kind of you, my lord."

They left the saloon and walked across the promenade deck and had taken only a few steps up toward the terrace deck when Mr. Vandelay himself started down toward them.

They stepped back down, waiting.

"Lord Meredith, Miss Thornton." Mr. Vandelay gave a small bow. His gaze lingered on Miles, his expression strange.

Miles attributed his response to the awkwardness of their last encounter.

"I was coming to find you, Mr. Vandelay," Miss Thornton said. "Mrs. Griffin is feeling poor. I sent to the galley for ginger tea but was told Mrs. Yeates had the canister in her cabin. Apparently, her husband is rather ill as well. Might I trouble you for their cabin number?"

"Twenty-six," Mr. Vandelay said without needing to consult a register.

Miles wondered whether he had all of the cabins and their occupants memorized. He would not be surprised. Mr. Vandelay seemed a very competent assistant. "I will send a steward for the tea."

"No need," Miss Thornton replied. "I am on my way back down there now. Thank you."

"If there is anything else I can do to help, please notify me," Mr. Vandelay said.

“Although, in this case, my advice would most likely come in the form of sending for a nurse.” He nodded at her and smiled. “And that has already been done.”

“I will find you if I need anything further,” Miss Thornton said with a smile. “Thank you, Mr. Vandelay.”

The assistant gave a quick bow and continued on about his business.

“Mrs. Griffin is ill?” Miles asked, accompanying Miss Thornton back toward the saloon. “That is a shame.”

“Yes, the poor dear. She thinks perhaps she ate too much seafood.”

“Didn’t we all?” Miles winced, remembering the ache in his own belly earlier today. He held open the saloon door, and they went inside. “Do you know how to find the galley?” he asked.

Miss Thornton shook her head. “I’m afraid I’ve hardly explored the ship at all.”

“Come along.” Miles offered his arm. “Let’s collect the tea and I’ll show you the way. Francois, the head chef, may even offer us a pastry while we wait for the tea to brew.”

Cabin twenty-six was easy enough to find. Having an even number, it was located on the interior of the ship, meaning it had no porthole. Miles thought it was a pity that Mr. and Mrs. Yeates could not look out at the stars or hear the waves slapping the hull as they fell asleep at night.

Miss Thornton knocked on the door. “Mrs. Yeates? It’s Hazel Thornton.”

There was movement inside, but no answering voice.

“If I might speak with you for a moment,” Miss Thornton said. “It is important.”

The sounds of movement came again, and Mr. Yeates opened the door just a crack. His face was pale, his hair damp and plastered down to his forehead. His appearance gave no doubt that he was ill. He looked between the two of them, frowning.

“I’m so sorry to trouble you, Mr. Yeates,” Miss Thornton said. “I was told the canister for the ginger tea—”

“The tea.” He practically snarled the words. He left the doorway and returned with a tin canister. He thrust it at the young woman. “Take it. I hope never to see it again. My wife insists upon my drinking it, but the taste...” He frowned further.

“Yes, the taste can be rather strong, but ginger is an effective treatment for stomach maladies,” Miss Thornton said, taking the canister. “If you’d like, Dr. Jackson would be happy to call on you. He may be able to recommend a different treatment.”

“No need for that,” Mr. Yeates said. “And there is no need to return that .” He glowered at the tea canister as if it had done him personal injury. “I’d rather suffer.” He shut the door.

Miles and Miss Thornton looked at one another, astonished by the man’s strange behavior and his rudeness.

“He does not mince words, does he?” Miles said, widening his eyes and bouncing his eyebrows.

“Poor man,” Miss Thornton said, lowering her voice so as to ensure it would not be heard through the door. “Being ill does not bring out the best in one’s temper.” Her eyes sparkled with repressed laughter, showing Miles that she was not entirely altruistic. “Shall we continue on to the galley?”

As Miles had hoped, a plate of pastries was set before them when he and Miss Thornton arrived in the galley. He selected a caramel-colored macaron and took a bite. “Delicious, Francois,” he said to the chef. “But I would expect no less.”

Francois beamed. He directed a galley assistant to pour tea for his guests while another arranged a tray to be delivered to the Pearl Suite.

Miles leaned a hip against the preparation counter, turning to his companion. Miss Thornton was eating a macaron of her own. “How is it that you chose nursing as your vocation?” he asked.

“My mother was a healer,” Miss Thornton said. “She wasn’t formally trained. Women weren’t in those days, you know. In India, when I was very young, there was an attack on the residency.” Her face paled as she spoke, but her voice remained steady. “There were noises outside the walls, cannon fire, men yelling, rifles. And inside, so much illness. And fear.”

Could she be talking about the Siege of Lucknow? If so, her composure in describing the horrific event was commendable. He nodded for her to continue.

“Most of the women did not know what to do. They panicked and wept, but Mother was steady and calm. She helped people, soothed them, and eased their pain. I wished to do the same.”

“From what I’ve seen of you, Miss Thornton, you have more than lived up to her precedent.”

“Thank you.” She smiled shyly and took another bite of macaron.

Miles considered the woman standing before him. And all the members of Dahlia’s group of friends. A news reporter, an inventor, a nurse, and a headmistress. They

were all intelligent, with unique interests and aspirations that went beyond what interested most women of his acquaintance. He glanced at the brooch on Miss Thornton's collar. Dahlia often wore one with the same design. A blue orchid surrounded by silver filagree. He'd never asked her about it, or about how her friendships with these women had developed, but he was intrigued. He did not believe the Dahlia he'd known a year ago would have undertaken the responsibility of president of a steamship company. The credit for her success went to Dahlia, of course, but he couldn't help but think these women were involved as well. They had no doubt encouraged her, helping her grow and discover that she was indeed qualified for the position. Miles felt an affection toward them at the thought.

Once the tray was prepared, Miles carried it back up the stairs. At the Pearl Suite, Miss Thornton knocked, and Dr. Jackson opened the door. He thanked Miles, relieving him of the tray.

Dr. Jackson was another person Miles wouldn't mind knowing better. He seemed a very respectable man and, from the few snatches Miles had overheard about the doctor's military service, a fascinating one as well.

Miles excused himself and returned up the stairs, seeing through the windows that the sky was darkened and the deck lamps had been lit. More passengers had assembled in the saloon for pre-supper drinks, but Miles was not inclined to conversation with any of them. He had wished to find Dahlia returned from her business, but she was not there. Nor were Ben, Chatsworth, or even Ruben.

He found her on the promenade deck. She and her assistant were at the gangway, greeting a man in a cape and a top hat. He was surely the magician for that night's entertainment.

Miles waited, and soon enough, Mr. Vandelay and the magician started toward the dining room, the latter directing porters carrying trunks that likely held his props.

Dahlia turned.

A wonderful thrill moved through Miles when her gaze met his. He walked toward her, wondering as he did whether she had a worry on her mind. She did not seem to be in the same state as when he'd left her earlier that afternoon. The cheerfulness was gone from her countenance, and her eyes appeared red.

"Good evening," he said when he reached her.

"Lord Meredith, we need to talk." Dahlia's voice sounded flat.

"Has something happened?" Was she worried about Mrs. Griffin's health, or had some other trouble been brought to her attention? The responsibility of overseeing the ship was one he did not envy, but he hoped he could ease some of her concerns, or at least try.

She glanced around, rubbing her fingers on her forehead. "I apologize. I made a mistake. I should not have allowed... I should not have kissed you." She glanced around again.

This was not at all what Miles had expected, and he cast his thoughts over their interactions, trying to understand what could have brought this on.

"I'm a woman of business," she continued.

"Yes, I know," Miles said, trying to understand what that had to do with kissing.

The lines between her brows deepened, and she appeared to be searching for the right words. "I know men have particular expectations of women," she said. "Especially those they..." She rubbed her forehead again, looking distressed.

Miles reached for her hand, then thought better of it. He rested his palm on the ship's rail instead. "Dahlia, I cannot understand your concern if you do not tell me what it is."

Her face had reddened, which was much better than its pallor of a moment before. She rested her hands on the rail as well, looking toward the shore. "I know it was only a kiss," she said. She did not glance at him. "And I do not want to make assumptions about you or your intentions. But I do not wish for you to make assumptions about me or my intentions either."

"It was not just a kiss," he said. "Not to me."

Dahlia nodded. "That is why I must be clear with you." She kept her gaze on the shore, perhaps finding it easier to speak directly without looking at him. "I do not intend to leave my position at Lancaster Steam Sailing and Shipping Limited. I enjoy it. I am good at it. And it will take a particular sort of man to be comfortable with such a modern woman and my lifestyle."

"Especially if that man hopes to share a life with you," Miles added.

"Yes," she whispered. She cleared her throat. "I am sorry I misled you. I was... distracted. I wasn't thinking properly."

Miles understood that fully. He had not been thinking properly ever since his lips had touched hers. But he did comprehend her concern. Or, at least, he thought he did. She worried that a life with him, as the future Countess of Rushford, would make it impossible for her to retain her duties at the steamship company. That she must give up either one or the other. It hurt more than a bit to realize she would choose her business over him. But that wasn't what she'd said.

He took her arm, turning her to face him. "It will work out," he said. "I know that

reaching this point, in both your career and your personal growth, has been difficult. I know you do not want to give it up, to return to Society life, but perhaps it doesn't have to be one or the other. And we do not have to figure anything out today. We can make decisions as they come."

Dahlia shook her head, frustration clear in the tightness of her shoulders. "That won't suffice. We must move forward with a plan. Do you have a plan?"

"I'm afraid not," he said. "But I have confidence." He gave her arm a small squeeze. "Confidence in myself, confidence in you, and confidence in us. And I have hope. I know if it is right, this will all work out. And for now, that is enough."

Dahlia tipped her head, as if considering. She looked uncertain. But before she could say anything, the bell rang, announcing the dinner service would begin.

Relief softened her expression as she was spared an answer. "Please excuse me." She hurried off to the dining room.

Miles watched her go, wondering what she might have said. Would she put an end to this before it began? He did not believe so. But she did bring up a good point. One he must consider as well. Simply being in love with the woman did not ensure an easy road ahead should they continue with a relationship. A return to Society would not be easy for her, and having a wife who worked in a shipyard would not be easy for him. And that was not including the complexities of family relations and expectations or his own duties as a member of Parliament. She was right to be concerned. Whatever their future might look like, it would not be conventional. But Miles knew one thing for certain. He would never ask her to change, nor would he expect her to leave her position in her company. Those decisions would be for Dahlia alone.

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Dahlia did not sit at the Captain's Table tonight. She opted instead to enjoy the meal with her friends. The day had been exhausting, and she was glad for the ease of conversation with those she was comfortable with.

Mr. and Mrs. Yeates sat with Captain Carmichael. The former still appeared ill, and his wife wore an angry expression that Dahlia was beginning to expect. She also wore gloves, which was strange and rather gauche at the dining table.

The magician, Hubert "the Magnificent" Barbieri had insisted on taking his meal in his cabin, wanting to maintain an air of mystery until he came onstage. Ruben, Lorene, Priscilla, Charlotte, and Meredith also sat at the Captain's Table. When Dahlia looked around the room for Helen Rothschild, she found the young lady sitting beside Lord Lockhart.

She glanced back at the Captain's Table and was disappointed that Meredith didn't meet her gaze. He was telling something to the young women at the table, which they apparently found extremely humorous.

Dahlia frowned, thinking about her conversation with him. When she'd talked with Victor, ending a romance with Meredith had seemed like the only solution. But she was questioning it now. In spite of what she and Victor had both assumed, Meredith hadn't seemed overly concerned with Dahlia's conforming to Society standards. He had not been bothered when she'd declared her intention to maintain her position at the steamship company. In fact, he'd seemed to take it for granted that problems would arise and the two of them would confront them together. Victor's scenario assumed she and Meredith would have opposing goals. But Meredith assumed they would work as a team. His confidence in her, in the two of them, made her heart light

again.

She glanced toward him again, but he was talking to Ruben now, so Dahlia turned back to her tablemates. Hazel offered a plate of potatoes, and Dahlia scooped one onto her plate.

“I am very eager to see Mr. Barbieri’s performance,” Vivian was saying.

“He came to a house party my sister attended,” Sophie said. She wiped her napkin across her lips. “She said he was very impressive. They spent much of the days following trying to discern how he managed his illusions.”

“Misdirection,” Inspector Graham said. “A favorite skill of pickpockets. They will capture your attention with one hand while relieving you of your billfold with the other.”

“In China,” Benedict said, “I saw a man perform a trick. He brought an empty glass tank onto the stage and called volunteers to come up to the stage to verify that it was indeed empty. A volunteer lifted it, turning it onto its side. Another even crawled in. Once the audience was satisfied, the magician righted the tank, covered it with a cloth, and clapped his hands. When he removed the cloth, the tank was filled with water. There were even fishes swimming in it.” Benedict looked around at the table, letting the amazement at what he’d witnessed astonish his tablemates. “There was no time to fill the tank. Nobody brought buckets of water onto the stage. It was empty one minute and filled the next. I don’t know how he managed it.”

“He must have had assistance,” Vivian said. “Water does not simply appear. It is against the laws of nature.”

“But not against the laws of magic,” Charles said, wiggling his fingers mysteriously.

“In Petersburg,” Jim said, “a sergeant entertained the injured troops with sleight-of-hand tricks—disappearing and reappearing coins, that sort of thing. Close as I watched his hands, I never could see how he did it.”

“There were street performers in India who charmed cobras with their songs,” Hazel said. “The snakes acted as if they were entranced, swaying to the music.”

“I’m not sure you are all aware, but I am a bit of a magician myself,” Charles said. Only the slightest smirk betrayed him. He wiped off a teaspoon with a napkin, then blew on it, setting it on the end of his nose and moving his hands away, spreading his fingers with a flourish. The teaspoon remained stuck to his nose unaided. “Voila,” he said.

Benedict laughed and Hazel clapped.

Elizabeth shook her head.

Vivian muttered something about adhesion and gravity.

“The company could have saved the cost of Hubert the Magnificent’s fee if we’d known you were so talented,” Dahlia said.

“I am also very humble,” he said, removing the spoon and setting it back on the table. “I don’t like to boast about my talents.”

Once the diners had finished, Victor stood on the low stage, clapping his hands for everyone’s attention. “Ladies and Gentlemen, drinks and dessert will be served during the entertainment portion of the evening.”

Dahlia was surprised by the unconventional plan, but she supposed it didn’t hurt anything to start the magic show now.

“And now, without further ado, Lancaster Steam Sailing and Shipping Limited is very pleased to present the one and only Hubert ‘the Magnificent’ Barbieri!” Victor held out his hand toward the side of the stage. There was a pop and a burst of smoke, and when it cleared, Hubert the Magnificent stood there, his hair slicked back, his cape billowing.

The company applauded, and he removed his hat, bowing dramatically.

For the next hour, Hubert the Magnificent entertained the crowd with a mixture of parlor and stage tricks. At times, he moved among the tables.

At the Captain’s Table, the magician took the napkin from Ruben’s lap and placed it over his empty drink. He brought down his hand hard. Everyone winced. But instead of the sound of breaking glass, there was only the slap of a palm against the table. The cup had vanished. Hubert the Magnificent whipped aside the napkin, and beneath it was a pocket watch. Ruben recognized it as his own. He picked it up, his mouth open in an O. Hubert the Magnificent pointed toward Ruben’s coat, telling him to check his pocket. Inside was the glass.

The room gasped and broke into applause.

Meredith laughed, reaching to tap his own glass to the one Ruben held.

At another table, the magician blindfolded himself. He spread out a deck of cards, telling those at the table to call out a card. “Two of hearts,” Helen Rothschild said.

Hubert the Magnificent pointed to a card. When Helen turned it over, it was indeed the two of hearts. He repeated the trick for each of the diners seated at her table.

The magician showed the diners at Dahlia’s table a gold coin. He was careful to point out Queen Victoria’s profile on one side of the coin and the cross of St. George on the

other.

“And now, madam,” he said to Hazel. “If you will be so kind as to place the coin under the gentleman’s hat.” He motioned to Jim.

Jim scowled but allowed Hazel to set the coin on his head. She verified that the Queen’s picture was facing upward before putting the hat back.

Hubert the Magnificent made his way around the table, making coins appear behind ears, in pockets, and tucked under collars. When he returned to Jim, he asked, “Shall we see if the coin has flipped over?” He pulled off Jim’s hat.

Instead of a coin, a dove fluttered out from beneath the hat.

Hazel squeaked in shock.

Jim’s mouth fell open. He put his hand on his head, staring at the bird as it flew around the room.

Applause greeted this trick as well.

Hubert the Magnificent returned to the stage, where a table had been set up. On top of it were three bowls of mixed fruit. He pulled silk handkerchiefs from his sleeve, placing one over each bowl, then invited three audience members to come up to the stage. At his command, they removed the handkerchiefs in the same instant. The fruit within had sorted itself, apples in one bowl, lemons in another, and oranges in the third.

The audience cheered.

Remembering Jim’s words about redirection, Dahlia had kept her eyes on the bowls

the entire time, and she'd not seen anything amiss. How had he managed it?

A server passed the stage, carrying a tray of drinks.

Hubert the Magnificent stopped him, reaching into the server's breast pocket and drawing out a pink silk handkerchief, which he used to dab his forehead.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, for my next trick, I shall need to borrow an object of great value." He looked closely around at the audience. "Jewels give the most dramatic effect beneath stage lights," he said, earning a small laugh. He held out a hand to the Duchess of Dorchester, specifically at the diamond necklace she wore. "Your Grace, may I?"

Miss Albright opened her eyes wide, looking as if she would protest, but the duchess simply smiled, inclined her head, and turned to allow her companion to unlatch the necklace. Miss Albright brought it to the stage.

Hubert the Magnificent held the necklace up, letting it sparkle in the light. Three large teardrop diamonds, the largest in the center, were surrounded by smaller but no less lustrous stones. Dahlia had seen the necklace before. It was one of Her Grace's favorites and very likely an heirloom.

The magician stepped down off the stage, walking around to both corners, allowing the audience to get a good look at the necklace. He produced a shiny black pouch from his pocket and held it out to a server, directing the man to hold it open.

Hubert the Magnificent lowered the necklace into the pouch and took it from the server, cinching the tasseled drawstrings. He returned to the stage, setting the bag on the table. It made a small thud, proving the necklace was inside.

The audience was perfectly still, watching.

The magician drew a wand with a silver tip from inside his coat. He tapped on the bag one, two, three times, then tugged on one of the drawstrings, flipping the bag into his hand. In a flash, the bag was gone and he held a bouquet of flowers. He stepped off the stage, offering them to the duchess. “A fair trade, wouldn’t you say?”

The audience laughed.

The duchess accepted the flowers with a good-natured smile.

Hubert the Magnificent motioned a server toward him from the rear of the room, this one holding a tray containing a cake. The magician took a knife, cutting into the cake, and from inside, he took out the black bag. He brushed crumbs from it, then held it up, receiving applause.

“How in the . . . ?” Jim muttered.

Hubert the Magnificent loosened the gold drawstrings, tipping over the bag.

But instead of the diamond necklace spilling out, a pastry fork fell into his hand.

The magician’s demeanor changed immediately. Where he had been smiling and moving gracefully through the room with exaggerated motions before, now he stood still, frowning. He dropped the pouch onto the ground. “What is the meaning of this?” he snapped at the server with the cake tray.

Dahlia looked closer at the server, realizing she didn’t know the man. Even though he wore the correct uniform, he must be part of the magician’s act. An assistant would help explain some of the illusions Hubert the Magnificent had managed.

“How dare you try to pull one over on me?” The magician growled the words as he lunged at his assistant.

The man dropped the cake, and in Hubert the Magnificent's rush forward, he stepped in it, slipping and crashing to the deck.

"I did what I've always done," the server said, backing up. "I didn't change anything."

The magician pushed himself to his feet. "Thief!" he yelled. "Where is the necklace?"

Dahlia and her friends looked at one another. Was this all part of the act?

The others in the room appeared to be wondering the same thing.

Inspector Graham was on his feet. He moved quickly, stopping the cake-covered magician just as he grabbed the server's coat.

Meredith joined him, and the pair of them removed both the magician and the server from the room.

Dahlia and the other diners sat in shocked silence. What had happened? Had the duchess's necklace truly been stolen right in front of them?

Servers hurried to clean up the cake.

Victor stepped up onto the stage, reassuring the crowd that it was all in hand and the misunderstanding would be sorted out promptly. In the meantime, wouldn't they all enjoy another drink and perhaps some more dessert?

The silence broke and was immediately filled with upset voices.

Victor stepped off the stage and sat beside the duchess. From his manner, he appeared to be reassuring her.

Dahlia met Sophie's gaze. Her friend was calculating, trying to piece together clues and figure out what had happened. The two of them stood and hurried from the dining room. They followed the trail of cake crumbs into the far corner of the saloon.

Jonathan and Meredith stood over the two other men. The fight had gone out of the magician, and instead of the flamboyant performer, he looked like a frightened old man.

The assistant looked confused and frightened as well, his gaze moving back and forth between the two men who had apprehended him.

"What is happening?" Dahlia demanded, speaking to all of them instead of to any one in particular. "Where is the duchess's necklace?"

Hubert the Magnificent slumped lower in his chair, looking with a downcast gaze at his cake-covered trousers. "I'm afraid it's gone."

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Miles moved aside, allowing Dahlia to step up next to him to better see the magician. Her eyes were darting from person to person in the small space. She looked confused and very concerned.

He touched the small of her back, just to let her know he was there and fully supporting her. She didn't pull away, which he took as a good sign. Perhaps she had taken his words fully to heart.

"Where is the necklace?" Dahlia repeated herself, looking directly at the magician.

"I don't know," the magician said. "It was supposed to be in the cake. But..." He lifted his hand, as if reminding her of the pastry fork it had held moments earlier.

"Tell us what happened, sir," Inspector Graham said. His words were calm, but his voice was serious, brooking no argument. "Step by step, explain the trick to us, from the moment you took Her Grace's necklace."

Lady Sophronia pulled a small notebook from her bag and handed it to her husband, along with a pencil.

He nodded his thanks, opening the book and holding the pencil over the paper, ready to take notes on the interview.

From behind the closed doors of the dining room, the ship's musicians began to play. Mr. Vandelay, it seemed, was at least keeping a clear head during the crisis, arranging for the entertainment to continue and keeping the passengers distracted.

“I’ve done the illusion hundreds of times,” Hubert the Magnificent said. He truly looked baffled. “The necklace never leaves the assistant’s possession.” He waved his fingers toward his assistant. “The bag that I take to the stage is a duplicate.”

“But we heard the thump when you put it on the table. The bag wasn’t empty,” Dahlia said. “Perhaps you confused the two.”

The magician shook his head. He straightened his arm, shaking his wrist and then digging his fingers into his sleeve. After some wriggling, he pulled out a drawstring bag they all recognized. Dahlia snatched it away from him, loosening the fastenings, and tipped it.

She poured a pile of pebbles into her palm.

“This is the bag from the stage,” Hubert the Magnificent said.

“You chose the duchess’s necklace because its heft and size would mimic what was already in the bag,” Meredith guessed.

Dahlia tipped the pebbles back into the bag.

The magician nodded. “Exactly. Once the exchange is made—a simple switch—the spectators are watching the bag of pebbles as it travels back to the stage, leaving Bertie here free to conceal the real bag—the one with the necklace—inside the cake.”

Five sets of eyes turned to Bertie.

“I did just what I always do,” he said, holding up his hands. His eyes were wide, and Miles wondered whether the man was more frightened of the police detective or the magician.

“Tell us every move you made, Bertie,” Inspector Graham said. He tapped the pencil on the page. “From the moment you took possession of the bag.”

“I walked back through the tables to where I’d left the cake,” Bertie said. “Slowly, like you told me.” He looked at the magician. “So as not to draw attention.”

“And where was the bag as you did this?” Miles asked.

“In my pocket, where Mr. Barbieri left it during the exchange.” Bertie tapped the pocket at his waist. Miles thought it was not the most secure place for a parcel of that value. If anyone knew it was there, it would have been easy enough to slip a hand in, just as the magician apparently had done to put it there.

“Did you stop at all?” Inspector Graham asked. “Speak to anyone?”

“I’m playing the role of a server, ain’t I?” Bernie looked offended. “I stopped when a gentleman asked me to pour a drink.” He looked at the doors to the dining room, as if he were trying to remember what had transpired inside. “I took away some empty plates, brought some clean glasses. Plated some desserts, same as the other servers.”

Dahlia folded her arms, scowling, apparently irritated by the implication that anyone could simply step in and perform the duties of her trained staff.

“Do you remember anyone in particular?” Inspector Graham asked. “Diners, other servers... any who were particularly close to your jacket pocket? Paid you extra attention? Any who may have bumped or jostled you?”

“Long enough to take the pouch and replace the contents?” Lady Sophronia clarified.

“Suppose any diner could have done it when I leaned in to fill a glass,” Bertie said. “A server might have done when we were gathered at the rear of the room, filling and

emptying trays.”

“But who would have known the necklace was in your pocket?” Miles asked, frustrated that the questioning was getting them no closer to finding an answer.

Inspector Graham glanced at Miles and nodded, approving his line of thinking. “Did anyone besides the two of you know the method behind this illusion?” he asked.

“Certainly not,” Hubert the Magnificent said, looking appalled at the very idea. “A magician never reveals his secrets. Such a thing would go against our code.”

“I will, of course, need to search your persons,” Inspector Graham said. “And you are to remain under watch until further notice. At the moment, the two of you are the prime suspects.”

The performers both nodded, their expressions worried.

At Inspector Graham’s request, Miles accompanied him and the two men to a cabin on the lower deck. They painstakingly searched through the suspects’ clothing, discovering hidden pockets throughout. There was even a small pouch sewn into the magician’s sock and a false heel on his shoe. But in the end, no necklace was discovered.

They left a steward at the door with strict instructions not to let the two men out of his sight and returned to the saloon.

When Dahlia saw them approach, she raised her brows in question.

Miles shook his head.

Dahlia blew out a heavy breath. “What do you propose?”

“We must narrow down the pool of suspects,” Inspector Graham said. “As of right now, it consists of every person on this ship. Who would have reason to take the necklace?”

“None of the passengers, surely,” Sophronia said. “I can’t believe any is in a financial circumstance that would lead to the necessity of thievery. And that must be the motivation, mustn’t it?”

“I know each member of the crew personally,” Dahlia said. “And the staff. None of them are thieves.”

“I cannot imagine any would take such a risk either,” Miles said. “Not when the penalty would certainly be death—or, at the very least, transportation.”

“And yet the necklace has been stolen,” Inspector Graham said. He fingered the fob on his pocket watch chain. “There is a high probability it is still in the dining room,” he continued. “I will station a steward to guard the door and not allow anyone out until they are searched.”

“Certainly not,” Dahlia snapped. “I will not have my guests treated like criminals. There must be another way.” She started to pace. “People will start to ask questions—likely they already are. The duchess...” She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. “We must find the necklace as soon as possible.”

“While it is impractical to keep everyone in the dining room,” Miles said, “it is not impractical to keep them upon the ship. Nobody has reason to disembark tonight. It is my opinion that we should allow the evening to proceed as if nothing is wrong. The necklace will be found eventually.”

Dahlia gave him a grateful look.

“The thief is likely hiding it right this moment,” Inspector Graham said. “Or at least searching for a suitable spot where they can return and collect it when nobody is around.”

“Then, we should look for anyone who appears suspicious,” Sophronia said.

“Easier said than done,” Inspector Graham said with a wry smile.

“We should return to our seats,” Dahlia said, turning toward the dining room. “The necklace is not out here.”

“Agreed,” Inspector Graham said. “We will keep our eyes open for anything unusual, and once the after-dinner entertainment is finished, Lord Meredith and I will search the ballroom.” He glanced at Miles, who nodded in agreement.

“I will have Victor direct stewards to assist you,” Dahlia said.

“Vivian, Hazel, Elizabeth, and I will mingle among the crowd,” Sophronia said. “Watch and listen for anything abnormal.”

“And if the necklace is not found tonight,” the inspector said, “we will need to revise our plan. Increase the search area to the saloon, the other public areas.” He turned to look at Dahlia directly. “And, if needed, the passenger’s cabins.”

Her jaw tightened.

“As a last resort,” Miles said, hoping to reassure her.

The inspector nodded.

“I shall need to hold a conference with Captain Carmichael and Mr. Yeates,” Dahlia

said. Her voice was heavy with discouragement. “I do not know if the cruise can continue under these circumstances. Legal action may need to be taken.”

Now that they had decided on a plan, they went about setting it in motion. When the music in the dining room ended, the four of them returned inside.

If they’d thought the other passengers would have forgotten about the missing necklace in the past half an hour, they were sorely mistaken. All around them, gossip abounded.

Miles heard snatches of conversation as he passed between groups of gathered passengers. All referenced the missing necklace and Inspector Graham’s removal of the magician and his assistant.

Across the room, Mr. Vandelay was leading the duchess toward the doors with her companion following behind. Dahlia met them, and the four of them talked in a small group. The duchess appeared upset, but she also appeared to be listening graciously as Dahlia explained the situation.

Miles caught Inspector Graham’s gaze. Seeing the man’s nod, the two of them made their way to the stage and started a systematic search of the magician’s trunk. In another circumstance, Miles would have enjoyed the activity enormously. The contents were intriguing. He studied a pair of rings, discovering a nearly invisible gap where they could be pulled apart. There were scarves, silk flowers, and even a container of what appeared to be explosive powder, but no diamonds. He knocked around the sides and lid of the chest, but he could discern no hidden compartments.

The room eventually emptied, save for the servers who were still cleaning off the tables.

One approached where Miles and Inspector Graham knelt on the stage.

“Inspector?”

Inspector Graham nodded his head in the affirmative.

“Adam Keller, head steward, at your service. Mr. Vandelay has directed myself and the staff to await your instructions.”

Miles left the chest and went to the magician’s table, lifting the tablecloth to have a look beneath it.

“As you know, we are searching for a diamond necklace,” Inspector Graham said to Mr. Keller. “I believe it may still be in the dining room. Look beneath the tables, in the curtain folds, inside teapots, under carpets... search every inch of this place.”

“Yes, sir.”

Miles pulled off the tablecloth, tossing it to the ground, and crouched down, looking under the table. He felt along the table legs, searching for any crack or opening.

“And if you find anything at all, notify me or Lord Meredith immediately,” the inspector said.

He helped Miles tip the table onto its side for a closer inspection of the underside.

“What if one of the staff is the thief?” Miles asked, wiggling a table leg. He motioned with his chin to where the servers were looking beneath tables and chairs. Since the dining room furniture was bolted to the deck, they were unable to turn them over.

“Dahlia doesn’t believe any of her staff capable of the crime, and as for myself, I am inclined to agree with her. I do not believe any but a person who does not expect punishment would take such a risk. As you said before, the penalty for such a crime

would surely be the rope.”

Miles was glad Inspector Graham took Dahlia’s opinion seriously, but if the culprit wasn’t the magicians or the staff, and there were no crew in the dining room when the necklace went missing, that left only the passengers. And just like Lady Sophronia, Miles couldn’t imagine any of them were to blame. Each of the guests on board was a personal friend of his in some capacity, and there was not one he could believe capable of thievery.

“You suspect a passenger is responsible?” Miles asked.

The inspector shrugged. “This early in the investigation, I don’t know what to think. But we have no choice but to use the serving staff. The two of us cannot search the whole ship ourselves.” They lifted the table back upright.

Miles looked around the stage, wondering where to search next. “How do you know I’m not the thief?” he asked the inspector.

Inspector Graham considered before he replied. “I fancy myself rather a good judge of character, my lord.” He motioned to the edge of the stage, feeling around beneath the raised lip. “I do not believe you to be reckless, nor do I believe you would do anything that might result in losing Dahlia’s good opinion.”

Miles studied the inspector’s expression, and seeing he was sincere, he nodded at the soundness of his reasoning and crouched down to join him.

Benedict and Chatsworth joined them, and over the next hour, the four men lifted the edges of the carpets, pulled down curtain rods, unpotted plants, and meticulously went through every server’s cart and dining room cupboard. But they found no sign of the diamond necklace.

Once the saloon was empty of passengers, the men and the servers expanded their search into that section of the ship, looking beneath and inside cushions and pillows, beneath sofas, and through the bar.

Lady Sophronia, Lady Covington, and Miss Miller soon joined them.

Just as Inspector Graham and Jonathan were discussing expanding the search into the galley and scullery in case the necklace had somehow been overlooked among the dirty dishes, Mr. Keller approached them, followed closely by Lady Sophronia.

“My lord, Inspector, have a look at this.” He held a napkin by its corners. He set it down on the bar and opened it, revealing a small pile of oysters, their shells cracked open. “We found these hidden throughout the saloon,” he told them.

Miles wrinkled his nose at the fishy smell that rose from the pile. He could only imagine how much worse it would be if the oysters had not been discovered for days.

Oysters? Miles and Inspector Graham looked at one another.

The steward put the corners of the napkin back over the oysters. “I know it’s not the necklace, but you said if anything was found...”

“Thank you, Mr. Keller,” Inspector Graham said. “You did the right thing, bringing this to my attention.”

The steward inclined his head and returned to the search.

“You see, my dear?” Lady Sophronia said to her husband. “It is a scheme after all. A plot.” She motioned to the napkin full of oysters, her eyes fiery. “Oysters don’t simply hide themselves behind books or under sofa cushions. Someone has hatched a cruel conspiracy. The salt and sugar, the greased stair, and now this.”

“It appears so,” Inspector Graham said. “But to what purpose?”

“To discredit the Paragon Line, I believe,” she said.

Miles could well imagine the reports the passengers would bring home to London. A fishy smell in the saloon, serving mishaps, a dangerous staircase, not to mention valuables going missing. Coming from the elite members of Society, word would travel faster than fire in a field of straw, and they would be ruinous to the reputation of the company. And to Dahlia. He felt sick just thinking of it. All of her hard work would be discredited, the reputation of her cruise line ruined.

“We should focus the inquiry on who might have a quarrel against the steamship line,” Lady Sophronia said. She took the notebook from her husband’s coat pocket and opened it. “I will make a list of passenger lines, and—”

Her words cut off when Miss Thornton called her name. The nurse had come into the saloon in a rush.

“What is it, Hazel?”

“Your grandmother, Sophie.” Miss Thornton’s words were breathless. “And yours, Lord Chatsworth. Both have taken ill, as well as Mrs. Griffin.”

“Poor Mimi,” Lady Sophronia said. “I will go to her at once.”

“Do not give her that ginger tea,” Inspector Graham said. “It is terrible.”

“She has already drunk it,” Miss Thornton said, her forehead wrinkling. “As has Lady Chatsworth.”

“Did they drink the tea before or after they took ill?” Miles asked. A terrible

realization had taken shape in his thoughts.

“Before,” Miss Thornton said. “I brought it for Mrs. Griffin’s nausea, but she has grown so much worse. And the others...” She looked at Miles and then Inspector Graham. “You don’t think the tea is the cause?”

Inspector Graham frowned, his expression a mixture of intense concentration and anger.

The women looked at him, then at Miles.

“Lord Meredith,” Lady Sophronia’s face had gone pale. She grasped Miss Thornton’s hand, and her words came out in a horrified whisper. “You cannot suspect... poison?”

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Dahlia rubbed her forehead. The conference with Captain Carmichael and Mr. Yeates mostly devolved into arguments and finger pointing. None of the SS Aurora's pressing matters were being solved. She looked at Victor. Her assistant sat in his usual seat to the side of her desk and appeared every bit as frustrated as she was.

Victor glanced at his pocket watch, then turned its face toward Dahlia. Seeing that the hour had passed midnight, she sighed. At least the passengers were most likely in their cabins. An entire day on the seashore had been exhausting.

"This cruise was a mistake from the beginning," Mr. Yeates said, renewing his argument. He stood behind, rather than sitting in, one of the chairs facing Dahlia's desk. "The company may as well have dumped thousands of pounds straight into the Channel."

"If you will remember," Dahlia said, trying to keep her voice even—they'd had this same argument so many times, she practically knew the words by heart—"the cruise is a promotional investment that will pay for itself through publicity. Passengers will tell their friends, and through word of mouth, the reputation of the ship and the cruise line will grow."

Mr. Yeates snorted. "A free cruise for wealthy people who could easily afford to pay for it." He shook his head. "We should charge them more, not less."

"This is all beside the point," the captain said from his seat next to Mr. Yeates's empty chair. "A crime has been committed, and the culprit is still at large on the ship."

“It wouldn’t have happened if Miss Lancaster hadn’t distributed tickets, gratis, for the cruise.”

A knock on the door stopped the argument.

Dahlia sighed, glad for the reprieve, even if she knew it would be short-lived. She rubbed her forehead again, grateful when a steward entered with a tea tray. Tea was just what she needed.

“Thank you, Wilson,” she said. “And please thank Francois.”

The steward set down the tray on the desk and poured the tea. He held up a plate filled with pastries. “Bilberry tarts.” He used a fork to serve the pastries onto individual plates. “Cook says they’re your favorite.”

Dahlia smiled, nodding her acknowledgment of the gesture. She accepted a cup and saucer, setting them on her desk beside a small plate holding a tart.

“Have you need of anything else, Miss Lancaster?” Wilson asked.

“No, thank you. Is there any news from the main deck?” she asked. “How goes the search?”

“Ongoing, I’m afraid.” The steward set napkins and utensils in front of the four of them and then left.

“Every one of the cabins should be searched,” Captain Carmichael said, resuming the discussion. He took a sip of tea.

“I cannot and will not treat my guests in such a fashion.” Dahlia stirred sugar into her tea. “These are not the type of people who will forgive such an intrusion.”

Mr. Yeates snorted again, a task made the more difficult by the tart he'd stuffed into his mouth. He swallowed some tea. "Your guests should realize a free ticket does not include the right to privacy."

"It absolutely does." Instead of calming her, the tea—and most likely the sugar—fueled her anger. "These guests will be treated with the respect afforded to every other passenger on every other ship. And more." She watched Mr. Yeates eat another tart, feeling her appetite for the pastry disappear as crumbs caught in his mustache. "They are, as you will remember, members of high Society, and we will afford them all the recognition and deference entitled by their positions."

"They are not entitled to commit crimes and escape punishment," Captain Carmichael said. "The crime was committed at sea, and the investigation must follow maritime laws."

"We cannot punish everyone on board," Dahlia replied. She glanced at the door, wondering where Meredith had gone and wishing he were there. Victor was on her side, but in spite of their rapport, her assistant was still an employee. As with the others, there was, of necessity, distance between them. At this moment, Dahlia wished more than anything for someone to share this burden with. She sipped the tea.

Did she hope for a partner? That was not quite what she had in mind. A partner would require her to give up control of the business. But she longed for the unwavering support of a companion—and she knew innately that was something Meredith would give.

"If searching the main areas doesn't yield results, we must push on, and that means entering private cabins," Captain Carmichael said in his patient voice.

Dahlia knew he was right; she just could not feel comfortable with it. She took another deep sip of tea.

“These passengers do not deserve special treatment,” Mr. Yeates said. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and mopped his brow. In his anger, his face had become quite red. He grabbed tightly to the back of the chair, his words becoming slurred and garbled. “Just because they are... special does not mean they are... rich.” He looked at Dahlia but appeared unable to focus. He blinked, as if he couldn’t keep his eyes open.

“Mr. Yeates?”

He put a hand on his forehead, swaying. “Thirsty,” he whispered.

Victor was on his feet. He stepped around the captain’s chair, reaching Mr. Yeates just as the man fell.

Victor caught him and, with Captain Carmichael’s help, lowered him to the ground.

Dahlia ran to the door. She opened it, yelling into the corridor for assistance.

A steward was there immediately.

“Fetch Dr. Jackson,” Dahlia ordered.

“And Inspector Graham,” Victor added.

The steward rushed away.

Dahlia joined the others, kneeling at Mr. Yeates’s side. His skin was flushed, and he held his belly, moaning as if it pained him.

“His skin is burning with fever,” Captain Carmichael said.

Victor loosened Mr. Yeates's necktie and unbuttoned his collar.

Jim burst into the room followed by Hazel, Vivian, Benedict, and Jonathan. Meredith came as well.

Seeing him filled Dahlia with relief.

A group of stewards gathered in the doorway, ready to assist as needed.

Jim knelt, feeling the neck of the patient. "What happened?"

"He grew red in the face and collapsed," Dahlia said. In spite of their recent arguing, she felt sorry for Mr. Yeates. "He has been ill for days. It must have taken all of his energy to come to this meeting at all. And in the end, it was too much for him."

Jim shook his head. "This is no typical fever." He looked at Jonathan. "He's been poisoned."

Dahlia went cold.

Jonathan lifted the lid of the teapot, sniffing its contents. "Did anyone else drink the tea?"

"All of us," Captain Carmichael said. He got to his feet as if to prove that he was not affected.

Victor paled. He grabbed on to the arm of Mr. Yeates's chair, pulling himself up to sit in it.

Meredith helped Dahlia to her feet. She was shaking—whether from the poison or fear, she did not know.

Meredith put his coat around her.

“Sit down, dear,” Hazel said. She directed Meredith to help Dahlia to her chair, and once she was seated, Hazel laid a hand on her forehead. “No fever,” she said in a reassuring voice. She put a hand on Dahlia’s cheek. “Do not be afraid.”

Dahlia could not even find words. Her mind felt as if it had stopped. As if making thoughts was now too difficult. She held on to Meredith’s arm.

Jonathan picked up the plate with Dahlia’s tart. He sniffed it, poked his finger into the jellied fruit, and touched it to his tongue, then spit into a napkin. “Sour,” he said. “Nightshade is my guess.”

“The symptoms would agree with your assessment,” Jim said.

“Fever, rash, slurred speech, bellyache, slowed respiration,” Vivian clarified.

Mr. Yeates groaned. He brought his knees to his stomach, clutching his belly in pain.

“Who ate the tarts?” Jonathan asked, gathering the plates of pastry.

“Only Mr. Yeates,” Victor replied.

Captain Carmichael and Dahlia nodded their agreement to his answer.

A thought pushed through Dahlia’s sluggish mind. “The tart was poisoned?” she said. “Impossible. Francois would not allow—”

“Bring the cook right away,” Jonathan said to the stewards at the door.

One ran off to fulfill the order.

“We need to get him to the sick bay,” Jim said, standing. He motioned for two stewards to assist, and the three of them carried Mr. Yeates from the room.

“Can he save him?” Dahlia asked Hazel.

“I don’t know,” Hazel said. “There are many factors. How much he ingested, how ripe the nightshade berries were, that sort of thing. And I worry poor Mr. Yeates already has poison in his system from the tea.”

Dahlia could only stare at her friend.

Seeing the question in her gaze, Hazel grimaced. “We’ve learned the ginger tea was poisoned as well. Jim believes it is elderberry seeds added to the ginger root.”

“I knew it was making my symptoms worse,” Jonathan said as if vindicated. “And it appears it has been doing the same for Mr. Yeates. And now the three women in the Pearl Suite.”

“The three...” Dahlia gasped as she realized who Jonathan meant. Mimi, Mrs. Griffin, and Lady Chatsworth. “Are they... ?”

“I believe they will be all right,” Hazel said. “They have responded well to the calabar bean treatment. Sophronia and Charles are with them now, and Jim and I have been keeping a close watch.”

“Physostigmine.” Vivian nodded, looking pleased with the choice. “An effective medicine.”

Dahlia’s mind swam with questions. Was everyone on the ship in danger of poison? Who could possibly be behind such an evil scheme? Her shaking grew worse.

Meredith knelt beside her. He rubbed her arms. “Dahlia?”

“What is happening aboard this ship?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he said. “But do not fear. You are not in danger, and you do not need to manage this alone.”

She looked up at her gathered friends, feeling a wave of relief. Meredith was right. She was not alone. And if there was a poisoner on the ship, there was nobody she trusted more to apprehend the culprit than the people in this very room. The thought buoyed her, giving her a boost of courage. She did not have to manage this situation by herself.

Francois entered the room. When he saw the gathering, his expression turned nervous.

“Sit down, please,” Jonathan said. His tone was cold.

Francois sat in the seat next to Victor.

“Now, if you don’t mind,” Jonathan said, “I would like you to answer some questions.”

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Dahlia's shaking stopped, and her gaze sharpened. That was good. Miles had worried she was near to having an attack of nerves. She leaned forward in her chair, resting her hands on the desk. The gesture was a simple one, but it made the fact clear that Dahlia was in charge once again.

Meredith stood on one side of her, and Miss Thornton was on the other. The young nurse watched Dahlia carefully, clearly still worried about her emotional state. But Meredith could sense that Dahlia was in control of herself. The momentary fit of nerves had passed.

Inspector Graham leaned back on the front of Dahlia's desk, his gaze boring into Francois. "Who sent the tea and tarts up to Miss Lancaster's office?"

"I did," Francois said. "Bilberry tarts, zey are Miss Lancaster's favorite. Under ze circumstances"—he rolled his hand—"I thought she might wish for a bit of refreshment."

Behind him, Miss Thornton and Lady Covington watched the chef closely. The inspector wrote something in a notebook.

"And you made the tarts yourself?" the inspector asked.

"Oui, of course."

Captain Carmichael shifted, folding his arms. His typically cheerful demeanor was gone, and Miles could see him as a formidable leader used to discipline on his ship.

“Then, you are responsible for the addition of nightshade berries,” Jonathan said. “Did you poison the canister of ginger tea as well, or did one of your galley assistants do that for you?”

“Nightshade?” Francois asked. He looked completely confused. “What is zis?”

“Atropa belladonna,” Lady Covington clarified.

“Non, it is not good,” Francois said, glancing back at Lady Covington. He looked less confused and more worried now. “Belladone, she is not for eating.” He waved his hands in front of him, palms out, as if he meant to stop anyone from trying. “Très mauvais. Very bad.”

“Francois,” Dahlia said. “There were belladonna berries in the tarts. Mr. Yeates is very sick from eating them.”

The chef’s eyes widened. He looked from the detective to Dahlia to the captain. “Non, non. It is impossible.” His hands waved again, this time more forcefully. “Francois does not put this evil thing in his delicious tarts.”

“Then, who did?” Inspector Graham asked.

The chef’s brow furrowed, and he looked to the side, thinking. “There is only myself and ze assistants,” he said.

“A steward delivered a tray to the office,” Captain Carmichael said. “Did you give the tray to the man directly?”

“I only bake ze tarts,” Francois said. “Ze assistants, zey arrange ze tray, brew ze tea...”

“Might the tarts have been left alone in the galley?” Miss Thornton asked. “Perhaps sitting on the table unattended while the stewards searched the dining room and the galley assistants went about their work?”

Fran c ois looked uncertain. “Oui, it is possible. Everyone in ze galley, we are all busy preparing for tomorrow’s breakfast.”

“Did anyone else come into the galley while the tray was being prepared?” Meredith asked. “Anyone who is not typically part of the breakfast preparations?”

“I don’t know,” Fran c ois admitted. “Ze galley is very busy, and I am not always watching ze comings and goings.”

Inspector Graham nodded, running his pocket watch fob through his fingers. He appeared to be considering the chef’s answers. “Are there more bilberry tarts?” he asked. “In the galley?”

“Oui.”

“I shall want to check them. If none are tainted, we shall know the poison was meant for this office alone.”

Dahlia went still at his words. “Meant for this office?” she asked. Her voice had a small squeak to it. If the others weren’t in the room, Meredith would have put his arms around her.

She looked at Victor and Captain Carmichael.

The two of them looked back at her wordlessly.

Meredith imagined they were all thinking the same thing. If the poison was meant for

this office, which of them was the intended victim? And just how close had they come to eating the tarts? It was luck alone that only one of them had been poisoned.

“Je suis désolé, mademoiselle,” François said to Dahlia. “My heart, she aches at the very idea of my beautiful pastries being used in this vile manner. But I did not do this thing. And I do not believe any of the galley assistants capable of such atrocity. I know each of them. I have worked with them for years, and never...” He shook his head, words failing him.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Miss Thornton said, “I am going to check on the patients.”

“Yes, thank you. And send a report on their status when you can,” Dahlia said.

“Of course.” She squeezed Dahlia’s hand. “I am very glad you are all right.” She crossed the room, opening the door.

“Hazel,” Dahlia called after her. “Will you please make sure Mrs. Yeates is aware of her husband’s condition? She will want to be with him if she isn’t already.”

As the nurse nodded and left the room, Lady Sophronia entered, coming to stand beside her husband.

“Inspector Graham, if you have no more questions for François,” Dahlia said, “he has work to do tonight, and you know where to find him if you need him.” Her voice sounded steadier.

Inspector Graham thanked the chef for his assistance, and the Frenchman departed.

Lady Sophronia took his vacated seat, and Lady Covington sat in the one beside her. Benedict stood by his wife’s chair.

“What is the status of the search?” Dahlia asked.

In the confusion, Miles had nearly forgotten about the diamonds altogether.

“Most of the passengers have retired for the night,” Inspector Graham said. “So searching the cabins can wait until morning. I hoped we might make a search of the lower decks, particularly the galley and the scullery. Anywhere dishes may have been taken and brought from.”

She nodded.

“And what would you have us do?” Lady Covington asked. She might have been directing her question to Dahlia or Inspector Graham, but he was the first to answer.

“I don’t know if there is more that can be done tonight,” he said.

“We couldn’t possibly sleep,” Lady Sophronia responded. “Not with all of the excitement.”

“The staff will need their rest,” Dahlia said. “They begin their duties early. As does the captain.” She looked at Captain Carmichael as she spoke.

He nodded his agreement.

Inspector Graham nodded as well. He looked at Miles. “If Your Lordship is inclined, I am willing to search for another hour.”

“Very well,” Miles said. He turned to Dahlia, seeing the exhaustion in her eyes. “This night has been very trying for you, Miss Lancaster. If you will accept a suggestion, I think you would benefit from sleep.”

Dahlia gave a tired smile. “You are right, of course.”

Miles and Inspector Graham took their leave and departed, walking down the dark corridor to the door that led to the terrace deck. They stepped outside. A cool breeze blew, but the night was pleasant. Aside from a few running lights, the ship was completely dark.

“What do you think?” the inspector asked.

“About Francois? He doesn’t seem the murderous type,” Miles said.

“He does not,” Inspector Graham said. “Nor does he seem foolish enough to commit a crime that could so easily be traced back to him.” They crossed to the stairs that led down to the main deck.

“Then, who?” Miles asked. The mystery was frustrating. There was such a small number of passengers on the ship. Discovering the culprit should be easy.

“That is the question,” the inspector said.

They reached the bottom of the stairs and started toward the saloon doors, but something caught Miles’s attention. He saw movement in the dining room window. He put out his hand, stopping the inspector, and pointed.

The dining room was lit by only a few dim gas lamps, but as they watched, it was clear someone moved among them.

Wordlessly, the men hurried through the saloon. Inspector Graham opened the dining room doors just a crack, and they slipped inside as quietly as possible.

Miles’s heart was pounding. Were they even now standing in the darkness with a

person who had attempted murder?

Across the room came the sound of a scrape and a grunt as someone apparently bumped into a chair.

Miles could just make out his companion. Inspector Graham moved slowly toward the sound, and Miles did the same, feeling his way and moving silently.

Their quarry moved past another light, and Miles thought they wore a cloak. He was unable to make out a face, nor could he distinguish features such as height or build.

Inspector Graham broke off, changing his course to intercept the cloaked figure.

The person had halted in the far corner of the room and appeared to crouch down. There was a rustling sound, and a moment later, they stood.

At that moment, Inspector Graham pounced, taking hold of the figure and drawing them to the wall.

Miles was right behind him.

“Check for weapons,” the inspector said, pressing the figure’s arms to the side.

“Unhand me at once!”

The men both paused at the sound of a woman’s voice, one Miles recognized.

“Lady Ruben?” he asked.

“Take your hands off me, or I shall report you.” She spoke in an imperious tone, but the inspector did not release her.

“I apologize, my lady,” Inspector Graham said. “I cannot do that until I am certain you do not pose a threat to myself or any of the other passengers.”

“Of course I do not pose a threat. Do you consider me to be a common criminal? Meredith, tell him who I am.”

Miles did not answer. His eyes had adjusted slightly more in the darkness, and he made his way to where Lorene had crouched down a moment before. He did the same, finding a potted fern. He put his hands in among the foliage, and his fingers brushed something made of cloth. He lifted it out. It felt like a dining napkin wrapped tightly around something heavy. Even without opening it, he knew he held the Duchess of Dorchester’s diamond necklace. Lorene’s attempt to hide it had failed.

His heart felt heavy as he brought the parcel to the detective. “Lorene, what have you done?”

She did not answer, turning her face away.

Inspector Graham held on to one of her arms. He gave a tug. “Come along. We’ll find somewhere with light, and I believe there is a holding cell or a brig of some sort in the lower decks.”

Hearing this, Lorene tried to pull away, but the inspector’s grip was sure.

Miles did not know what to do. Part of him wanted to take her away and insist that she could not have done it. But he had held the evidence in his hand. “Shall I go find Ruben?” he asked her in a gentle voice.

“No,” she said.

“My lady, you have put yourself in a significant amount of trouble,” the inspector

said. "I recommend sending for your husband."

"No," she said, the haughtiness gone from her voice. "He will not concern himself with me. He will want to distance himself, to protect his reputation."

Miles wanted to argue that of course that was not true. But he would not lie to the woman. He'd heard Ruben's disparaging remarks to her with his own ears. And he knew how strongly Ruben and his father valued the Molyneaux family's honor.

"Come along, then." He offered his arm. At the very least, he would give the woman the respect she deserved. "Inspector, you lead the way."

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Dahlia was roused by a knock at her door. She had put on her nightclothes and crawled beneath the bedclothes, but her thoughts would not still, and sleep had been elusive.

She turned on her lamp and wrapped a shawl around her shoulders before opening the door to find Lord Meredith there.

“I’m sorry to wake you,” he said. “But the diamonds have been found.”

A wave of relief nearly buckled Dahlia’s knees. She pressed a hand to the doorframe. “Oh, thank goodness. And do you know who...?”

Meredith grimaced and looked immediately uncomfortable. “Yes.”

His reaction changed her relief to dread. “Who is it?”

He glanced down the corridor and then back at her. “Lady Ruben.”

Dahlia was dumbstruck. Surely she’d misheard him. “Lorene?”

Meredith nodded. His silence on the matter unnerved her as much as his report.

“There must be a mistake,” she said. “Lorene would not...” She shook her head. “Impossible.”

She glanced past him, but of course nobody was there. “I must speak to her. Where is she?”

He winced again. "Inspector Graham is questioning her down in the brig. I thought you would want to know."

"The brig?" This was too much. She and Lorene had their differences, but the woman did not deserve to be locked in the little cell, no matter what she might or might not have done. "I will go to her. Wait just a moment." She closed the door, and instead of waking her lady's maid in the middle of the night, she put on the one dress she could fasten without help. Her hair, she did not even bother to pin up. It hung in a braid over her shoulder, tied with a ribbon. That would have to do.

Dahlia opened the door again, feeling more collected. "Are you certain she is the right person?" she asked.

Meredith turned to the side, allowing her to precede him toward the lower deck. "Yes, I'm afraid so. She was caught in the act, attempting to hide the necklace."

Instead of walking ahead of him, Dahlia took Meredith's hand. "What did she say?" she asked. "Did she give a reason?"

"She won't say anything," Meredith told her. "The inspector has been questioning her for nearly an hour."

"Poor Lorene," Dahlia said. Even though Lady Ruben could be proud to the point of arrogance, Dahlia just couldn't reconcile the woman she knew with a thief. And if it was true, could Lorene be capable of poisoning someone? "Is there any news about Mr. Yeates?"

Meredith shook his head. "Half an hour ago, his condition was unchanged."

He opened a wooden door, and they entered the brig, the small section of the ship where bars blocked off one section of the room to make a small jail cell. Inside was a

bench long enough for a man to lie down on. Lorene sat on it. She glanced toward the door when they entered but turned away immediately.

Until now, Dahlia had not completely believed it could be true, but seeing the woman behind bars made everything real. A lump she was not at all prepared for rose in her throat.

Meredith squeezed her hand, giving comfort she desperately needed. She had never expected to find herself in such a situation, let alone known how to manage it.

Jonathan sat on a stool outside the bars. He stood, closing his notebook, and gave a slight shake of the head, which Dahlia took to mean that Lorene was still not answering his questions.

“If you don’t mind, Inspector,” she said, “might I speak with Lady Ruben alone?”

He consented, and the men departed, closing the door behind them.

Dahlia stepped close to the bars, wishing she knew what to say. “Lorene?” She had not spoken directly with her former friend for so long that her Christian name sounded strange spoken aloud.

Lorene remained where she was, her face turned away.

“Lorene, is it true?” Dahlia asked. “Did you take the necklace?” There was no answer, so Dahlia pressed on. “I don’t understand. Why did you do it?”

“Why?” Lorene’s words were a whisper. “Why do you think?”

“I don’t—”

“You.” Lorene pointed at Dahlia, and her voice rose as she spoke. “You were always the prettiest, the most charming, the most intelligent... and I came in second. Always. The inferior, the alternative, the secondary. And even when I thought I had won at last, that I was finally the victor, that my future as the marchioness was superior, there you were, the owner of your very own luxury cruise line. Once again, you are the best, the brightest, the one with the amazing accomplishment. And I am... nothing.”

Dahlia thought of how Ruben had spoken to his wife on the deck the first day and later in their cabin. How he had compared the two. She felt sorry for Lorene. But she was also furious at the injustice of it all. Dahlia hadn’t asked for any of this. She hadn’t built the cruise line with the goal of upstaging her former friend. She had done it out of the desperation of her circumstances.

“Your plan was to ruin the cruise?” Dahlia tried to keep her voice calm, even though she felt anything but. “To discredit me? Lorene, I do not have a title nor standing in Society. My reputation is in tatters. This company is all I have.”

Lorene shrugged, lifting her chin, but her blink and the way her eyes slid to the side told Dahlia she was ashamed.

Dahlia sat on the stool beside the brig’s bars. “I am sorry you feel resentment toward me, but, Lorene, what you’ve done is reprehensible. You would commit murder just to bring disapproval to my cruise line?”

“Murder?” Lorene twisted on the bench to face Dahlia.

“Yes, the nightshade in the tarts. Mr. Yeates is even now fighting for his life in the sick bay, and the poisoned tea has made Lady Chatsworth, Lady Mather, and Mrs. Griffin very ill as well. Not to mention the grease on the quarter-board step, which could have caused Lord Benedict or myself serious injury.”

The color drained from Lorene's face. "I did not poison anyone. We—Priscilla, Helen, and Charlotte—switched the salt and sugar, and we hid some oysters in the saloon. They were just harmless pranks."

Knowing her other former friends had participated in the subversion stung, but Dahlia did not allow her hurt to show. "You stole Her Grace's necklace," she reminded Lorene.

"Yes, but I intended for it to be found the next day. We did not hurt anyone, nor did we intend to. We wanted to make the voyage uncomfortable, cause people to complain. That is all."

Dahlia studied Lorene's expression and decided she was telling the truth. Lorene was not a murderer, and Dahlia was certain the other women would not have gone along with it if her pranks had taken a dangerous turn.

"What is going to happen to me?" Lorene asked. "The inspector told me I will be taken to prison in the morning."

"Justice will be up to the duchess," Dahlia said. "I do not know whether she intends to press charges, but at the very least, you owe her an explanation and an apology, and Mr. Barbieri. His magic act was ruined and his character called into question. You will need to repair that as well." Dahlia stood.

"Ruben will be displeased with me," Lorene said. "Bringing scandal on the esteemed House of Molyneaux? He will never forgive it."

Dahlia started to the door but stopped. "Lorene, I never considered you to be a rival. You were my friend. I trusted you; I wanted every good thing for you. I—" Her voice cracked, and the thickness in her throat made her unable to finish the sentence. She left the brig to join Meredith and the inspector, closing the door behind her and

leaning against it, her eyes closed as she pushed back her tears.

“Dahlia?” Meredith took her hand. “Are you all right?”

“Lorene is not the poisoner,” she said, blinking. She was so tired. “She and her friends were responsible for the salt and sugar switch as well as the oysters in the saloon. And she confessed to stealing the necklace.” A realization struck. “Hubert the Magnificent performed at a house party given by Lorene’s aunt when we were much younger. I remember my parents telling me about it. I imagine that is where Lorene learned the secret of his trick. But she claims she had nothing to do with the poison or the greased step.”

“You believe her?” Inspector Graham asked.

“I do,” Dahlia said.

“Lord Meredith would agree with you,” he said. “There is still a would-be murderer in our midst.”

“I cannot for the life of me imagine who,” Dahlia said. “Or why.” She rubbed her forehead. “And what do we do now? Must we tell all the passengers not to eat or drink anything for the remainder of the cruise?”

“I—” Jonathan began, but his words were cut off when Ruben hurried down the corridor toward them.

“Where is Lorene?” he asked. There was panic in his voice. “Is she all right? I heard people have been poisoned.” He thrust his hands through his hair. “She must be well.”

“She is not poisoned, Ruben,” Meredith said. “But things are not well.”

“What do you mean?”

Dahlia stepped away from the door. “Before you go to her, I have something to say to you.”

Ruben’s brows lifted.

“You married a woman you can have a wonderful life with. Lorene is intelligent. She is accomplished, and you should consider yourself lucky to have her for a wife. Stop punishing her. Stop punishing yourself. Lorene needs you.” She took the brig keys from Jonathan and handed them to a confused-looking Ruben. “She needs to speak with you. And she needs you to listen—really listen and understand.”

Ruben took the keys, looking at her uncertainly. But instead of asking the questions that were no doubt on his mind, he went inside the brig, closing the door behind him.

The exchange left Dahlia feeling exhausted.

Meredith squeezed her hand, and she was grateful for it.

Dahlia walked with Meredith and Jonathan through the corridor toward the stairs leading to the cabin deck. But as the men started up, she did not go up with them. She went instead to pay a visit to the sick bay.

When she arrived, she found Jim sitting beside Mr. Yeates. Hazel must be in the Pearl Suite with the other patients.

“How is he?” she asked.

“Much the same,” he said. “But at the soonest opportunity, he should be taken to a hospital. The ship’s medicine chest is well stocked for the usual maladies, but for our

poisoning victims, we have had to make do. He would have a better chance at recovery in a hospital.” He glanced at the sleeping Mr. Yeates.

“And Mrs. Yeates? Have you seen her? I thought for certain she would be here with her husband.”

“She was here earlier this evening,” he said.

“That poor woman,” Dahlia said. “She must be so worried.”

Jim shrugged. “If she is, she has a strange way of showing it.” He picked up a towel and dabbed Mr. Yeates’s brow. “Half an hour after we brought him here, she stormed in, took one look at her husband, muttered something, and stormed back out.”

“I suppose we all manage our emotions differently, don’t we?” Dahlia said. Mrs. Yeates was certainly a strange woman. “I will visit her in the morning.”

“You’ll see her soon, then.” Jim motioned with his chin to the clock on the bulkhead and yawned.

Dahlia mimicked the action, putting her fingers over her mouth and realizing tiredness was a luxury she couldn’t afford. Morning was nearly here.

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Miles paced back and forth in his cabin. There was a villain on the ship, and as long as he or she remained at large, everyone aboard was in danger.

He looked at his pocket watch. The sun would rise within the hour. He was tired, but with the way his thoughts were spinning, sleep was out of the question. He changed into a fresh shirt and left his cabin, feeling like he needed to be doing something to actively help the investigation rather than sitting in his room while the danger was still present.

In the saloon, he found a group was assembled, sitting on the sofas and chairs, deep in discussion. He was unsurprised to see them. Present were Inspector Graham, Lady Sophronia, Benedict, Lady Covington, Chatsworth, Miss Miller, and Mr. Vandelay.

When Chatsworth saw Miles, he raised a hand. "Couldn't sleep, either, eh?"

Miles shook his head, coming to join them.

Inspector Graham gave him an approving nod.

"We were discussing the aspects of the case," Lady Sophronia told him. "While one mystery is solved, the original problem remains."

"A dangerous person is still aboard the ship," Chatsworth clarified, as if reading Miles's thoughts. "We must find him before anyone else is harmed."

"Or her," Miss Miller said.

Miles nodded. "As I see it, the stolen necklace led us in the wrong direction."

"A distraction," Benedict said.

"We were all operating under the assumption that the thief and the poisoner were one and the same," Lady Covington said.

"A careless mistake," Inspector Graham said, frowning. "It cost the investigation valuable time."

Lady Sophronia took her husband's hand. "The likelihood of two criminal plots happening simultaneously is very small."

The inspector's frown didn't abate, but he turned over his hand, holding his wife's tighter.

"So, then, how do we continue?" Miss Miller said impatiently. "Between the passengers, crew, and staff, there can be no more than one hundred people aboard the ship." She looked around at the others for verification of her count, and seeing confirming nods, she continued. "We should be able to identify the one with evil intent. Perhaps an interview of each person aboard. Discover whether they have been in the galley, have they any knowledge of poisons, can they account for their whereabouts after dinner last night?"

"We should be able to narrow down the pool of suspects," Lady Sophronia said, "by understanding the motivation for their crime."

Inspector Graham spoke next. "First of all, we need to identify the intended victim."

"It could be Mr. Vandelay," Chatsworth said. He gave the assistant an apologetic smile. "He was present at both attempts."

“Do you have any enemies, Mr. Vandelay?” Lady Sophronia asked.

The assistant shivered, crossing his arms. “None that I can think of,” he said.

“No,” Miles said. “Mr. Vandelay wasn’t expected on the terrace deck the first morning, and the tarts were not sent just to him.”

“They were sent to Dahlia’s office,” Lady Covington said, a crease forming between her brows. “And the chef said bilberry tarts are her favorite. They were meant specifically for her.” She looked at the others in the group, her eyes widening. “Dahlia was known to walk the terrace deck early each morning. She is the common factor in each of the attempts.”

Miles felt a jolt of energy shoot through his chest, accompanied by a cold fear. He had suspected such but assumed his worries were colored by his affection. To hear someone else confirm his suspicion was both affirming and terrifying.

“But why would anyone want to hurt Dahlia?” Miss Miller said. “It makes no sense. Every person aboard this ship is either her friend—or at the very least a warm acquaintance—or owes their livelihood to her. She has no enemies here.”

“Aside from those young ladies who have already been apprehended,” Inspector Graham said.

“They are not murderers, Jonathan,” Lady Sophronia said. “This is something else. Something much more malevolent.”

The members of the group looked at one another. All were confused. All were concerned for their friend’s safety. And, in Miles’s case, he felt hopeless. How could he protect Dahlia when he had no idea whom he was protecting her from? “Who would benefit monetarily from Dahlia’s... from her being gone?” he asked Miss

Miller, feeling that, as Dahlia's cousin, she would have the best chance of knowing her personal finances.

"Does she have a will?" Inspector Graham asked Miss Miller as well.

"I don't know," she said. "I suppose her father would be the beneficiary, but he is very ill."

"Mr. Yeates," Lady Sophronia said slowly. "Dahlia is one of the very first women to benefit from the new Women's Property Act. If not for the new legislation, the law of primogeniture would apply, and—"

"And Mr. Yeates would inherit everything," Miss Miller said. "So our principal suspect is the man lying near death in the sick bay." She folded her arms. "This line of reasoning is getting us nowhere."

Miles jolted. "Mr. Yeates was not the intended target of the poison," he said, his mind racing. "He has been sick for most of the cruise; he would have been assumed too ill to eat a pastry."

"But he must have been deliberately given the ginger tea," Lady Sophronia said.

"To keep him in bed, ill." Miles stood as realization crashed over him. "To keep him safely out of the way, prevent him from discovering what the poisoner was doing." He pointed at Inspector Graham. "And the other person who might have discovered the plot was made ill as well. She did not want a police inspector becoming suspicious."

"She?" Miss Miller asked.

"Of course!" Lady Covington snapped her fingers as understanding lit her face.

“Mrs. Yeates,” Lady Sophronia said.

“She has an understanding of plants,” Miles said. “A horticulturist, she called herself.”

“Her gloves,” Lady Sophronia said, looking animated. “She even wore them at mealtime. She may have rashes or even burns on her hands from handling the poisons.”

“She must have been furious when my uncle announced his intention to bequeath his property to Dahlia,” Miss Miller said. “The Yeateses would have been planning on the inheritance up until last year.”

“A blow indeed,” Chatsworth said.

“Oh no,” Mr. Vandelay muttered.

Inspector Graham lifted his chin and squinted. “If you’re right, my lord... Dahlia could be in danger this very moment.”

The members of the group jumped to their feet.

“Find Dahlia,” Inspector Graham said. “I will go after the suspect.”

“I’ll come with you,” Benedict said. Though he did not say the words aloud, they all knew if a situation turned violent, Benedict’s kung fu skills would be welcome.

“We’ll go to her cabin,” Lady Sophronia said, grabbing the hands of the other two women. They rushed off toward the stairs.

“I’ll go to her office,” Miles said. He met Chatsworth’s gaze, jerking his head to the

side in an invitation for the man to follow. Mr. Vandelay went with them, and the three men rushed out of the saloon. Miles's heart was pounding, and he wished they had not taken so long to solve the case. An instant could mean the difference between life and death.

Once they were on the main deck, he saw that the sky was lightening. Out of habit, he glanced up to the terrace deck. His gut froze. Instead of Dahlia enjoying the calm of the morning, he could make out two figures struggling. Even in the darkness he could tell that Dahlia was being pressed against the rail.

Chatsworth must have seen them, too, because he started toward the stairs on the starboard side of the deck.

That'll take too long. Miles knew instinctively that he needed to reach her faster. He ran in the other direction, springing upward into the rigging and climbing with a speed that could only be attributed to panic. Once he was above the port side of the terrace deck, he dropped down, landing directly behind Mrs. Yeates. The woman was pressing Dahlia to the rail, trying to reach her face.

Dahlia struggled, twisting her face as far to the side as she was able.

Miles grabbed Mrs. Yeates's arms, pulling her back and away.

The woman screamed, squirming, and then tried to touch his face. In her gloved fists, he could smell berries.

"Dahlia, did you swallow anything?" he called.

"No." She was wiping her shawl over her cheeks. "She missed my mouth."

He breathed a sigh of relief.

Chatsworth reached them, and the men wrestled off the poisoner's gloves, taking care to avoid the crushed berries, but in the darkness, they were not entirely successful.

A few moments later, Inspector Graham, Benedict, and the ladies joined them, and once Miles relinquished his prisoner, he embraced Dahlia, pulling her into a very passionate and very public kiss. The relief combined with the energy that panic had pushed into his veins had caused his decorum to flee. All that mattered was Dahlia. She was safe, and he would not let anyone threaten her again.

All around came the sounds of cheers.

"Meredith!" Dahlia pulled away from the kiss, ducking her head. "What will people say?"

"If they had any decency, they would avert their eyes," he said in a voice loud enough for the entire deck to hear.

Dahlia's hesitancy melted away, and she giggled. "If they are scandalized, it is entirely their own fault." She threw her arms around his neck, pulling him to her, and as far as Miles was concerned, the rest of the world ceased to exist.

Source Creation Date: August 8, 2025, 4:29 pm

That evening, Dahlia supervised the stringing of lights across the deck. The captain complained about attaching “frippery” to his rigging, but his protests were lighthearted at best. The unanticipated events of the previous night and early morning had made docking in Brighton instead of the planned stop at Shanklin necessary. It was imperative that Mr. Yeates be put on a train to a London hospital and Mrs. Yeates upon the same train, with a less pleasant destination. Jim and Jonathan had made the arrangements for the patient and prisoner transports with the police station at Brighton and had returned an hour earlier to spend the final evening of the cruise with their friends.

The day had been an eventful one. Dahlia, Meredith, and Chatsworth had all been treated for rashes caused by the nightshade berries on their hands and, in Dahlia’s and Meredith’s cases, on their cheeks—she’d told him it served him right for kissing her so boldly directly after Mrs. Yeates had smeared the poison on her face. But Meredith had claimed the kiss was well worth a bit of discomfort and a foul-smelling salve.

Since Hazel and Jim had been attending to patients and missed the action, they had insisted on hearing all of the details, and by the time Dahlia and the others were released from the sick bay, they had stumbled to their cabins, exhausted.

None of the passengers had complained about spending the afternoon at Brighton instead of on the Isle of Wight, for which Dahlia was very grateful. And tonight, the ball was to go ahead as planned.

Feeling satisfied with the decor, she climbed up to the terrace deck, both wanting to see the lights from the higher angle and feeling a need to confront the place where, only a few hours earlier, she very nearly was killed. The attack had come so quickly

that Dahlia had been taken off guard and had only saved herself from the poisonous berries by tripping on her skirts and causing Mrs. Yeates to stumble as well. She could not believe it when she had been pressed back against the rail, a fistful of poisonous berries directed at her mouth, and she'd seen Meredith scamper like a cat up the rigging. If he'd been only a moment later... Dahlia shivered, looking at the rail and the freshly scrubbed deck where all traces of nightshade berries had been cleaned away.

She came to the deck, looking over the edge, and was pleased to see Lorene and Ruben on the lower deck, sitting together on deck chairs, talking. She hoped her words or Lorene's desperate need for her husband's attention had been heard.

Footsteps sounded behind her, but she didn't turn. She knew it was Meredith, and a smile pulled at her mouth.

"Back at the scene of the crime, are you?" he said, coming to stand beside her.

"The scene of the rescue," she corrected.

He smirked. "Ah yes, that was rather remarkable, wasn't it? A swashbuckling escapade worthy of a character in an Alexandre Dumas novel."

"Indeed it was. I shall have to thank Milton Barrow for the excellent training he provided you in your balance competition."

Meredith looked over the rail toward Ruben and Lorene. "I hope they can be happy."

Dahlia nodded.

"I saw the two of them earlier," he said, "speaking with the duchess. I was not close enough to hear, but from what I saw, Her Grace appeared to have responded to the situation with her typical compassion." He turned around, resting his back against the

rail. “And Ruben announced that Hubert the Magnificent will be performing at Lorene’s birthday celebration next month.”

Dahlia smiled. “Everything is wrapped up in a tidy bow.”

“Everything?” he asked. “Where does this all leave us? You and me?”

“I don’t know,” she said. She turned toward him, resting a hand on the rail. “When Ruben... back when that all happened, I lost myself entirely. Who was I if not Lord Ruben’s intended? Who was I if not the belle of high Society? Everything I knew about myself was based upon those things—on who admired me, on which gossip rags featured a gown I wore, on how many invitations and visitors I received, on filled dance cards.” She inhaled and blew out a breath, surprised that remembering those times didn’t hurt like it once had.

“But then, in an instant, it was all gone. All of it. And I have spent the last year discovering who I am without my former life. What I am capable of. I worried a man would spoil it all, that I would have to change who I’ve become into who he wanted me to be.” She looked up at him to see that he was watching her closely. What she said next, the way she said it, would most likely determine the course of their relationship, so she chose her words carefully.

“I do not know what my future holds, Lord Meredith.” She took his hand in both of hers. “But I cannot imagine it without you in it.” Her eyes misted as she looked at him, and her heart swelled with emotion. “You have proven to be exactly the opposite of what I feared. You listen to me, you encourage me, and you allow me to take the lead concerning business manners. Not many men would do that.”

He tipped his head to the side, and a hopeful smile tugged at his lips. “I do not want to take your life away from you, Dahlia. I am very much in love with you, with the woman you’ve become. I simply ask to be a part of it.”

She stepped into his embrace, resting her head on his chest, feeling completely content. She thought of his calm support during her time of crisis. How he had jumped in without being asked and worked tirelessly to search for the jewels, to apprehend the thief, and solve the murder plot. And he'd done it all without taking away her command of the situation. A partner, she thought. That was what Meredith was; he was exactly what she needed, exactly who she needed.

That evening at dinner, the dining room had, under Dahlia's direction, changed its layout. Portable tables had been inserted between their larger permanent counterparts, creating one large table where all the passengers sat together.

Dahlia was pleased to see that the passengers had understood her intention, and instead of sitting in their typical small groups, they had spread, intermingling with others, who had, up until now, remained in their own small groups as well.

Dinner was served, and Francois had outdone himself, preparing course after course of delectable food and a beautiful selection of pastries, which he had three times assured Dahlia contained no poison. She'd resigned herself to the fact that he would continue to remind her of that, and often.

Once the meal was finished, servers brought glasses of sparkling wine. Dahlia stood, clinking her spoon on her glass until she had everyone's attention. "Friends, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for coming with me on the SS Aurora's maiden voyage."

The company applauded.

"This journey was a first for me. A pleasure cruise is not something I had ever undertaken, and there were some... unforeseen circumstances. I am grateful for your patience and for the help of all of those who made this cruise happen—most

especially my assistant, Victor Vandelay, without whose vision and attention to detail none of this would have been possible.”

Victor blushed, pressing a hand to his heart.

Dahlia waited for the applause to die down. “As I look out at all of you, my heart is full. When this cruise began, many of us arrived with those we know well, not wishing to take the daunting step of introducing ourselves or stepping outside the sphere in which we find comfort. But throughout the journey, that slowly changed. New friendships formed during shore expeditions or deck competitions. Tight-knit groups loosened. Relationships were formed. Perhaps there was even some romance.” She did not glance at Meredith or toward Lord Lockhart and Helen Rothschild, who were most obviously holding hands beneath the tablecloth. “And now here we all are at the end of our journey together, as a community of friends. And that is my hope for the future of the Paragon Line. That, in the confines of this ship, through shared experiences, preconception and bias will be overcome and that, in learning more about one another, we will learn more about ourselves.” She raised her glass. “To a community of friends.”

The toast was repeated, and the company applauded once again.

Outside, the musicians began to play, and passengers found their way to the main deck.

Meredith leaned over, tapping his glass against Dahlia’s. “Excellent speech,” he said.

“Thank you.”

He stood, putting a hand on the back of her chair. “I hear the waltz,” he said. “And it has been far too long since we enjoyed a dance together.”

Beneath the lights above the deck, he took her into his arms, and they stepped along

with the music. Dahlia remembered the last time they had danced. She looked up at her partner. A curl had fallen across his forehead, and she brushed it away.

Meredith's eyes were soft as he watched her; his smile was warm and familiar, and yet it made her chest burn.

"Would you do it all again?" he asked.

"Do what?"

"All of it. Everything that has happened in the last year, in the last week. Knowing how it would end, would you do it again?"

She considered what he meant. If the Dahlia who had rushed, weeping, from the Marquess of Molyneaux's ballroom could have seen how happy she would be, she would have endured the humiliation a hundred times. Everything that had happened from that fateful moment had led her to this one. To this man. "I would," she said firmly. "Would you?"

"I would change nothing," he said. "Except perhaps the rashes."

Dahlia loosened her grip on what must be a sore hand, wincing. "Will you join me on the SS Aurora's next cruise?" she asked. "You can shovel coal and climb rigging to your heart's content."

"Dahlia Lancaster, you do not even have to ask," he said, drawing her away from the lighted portion of the deck. They slipped into shadow, and he cupped her chin, bringing her face to his. "My darling, I would follow you anywhere."

The End