



The Valentine Writer (Sweet Historical Romance Shorts)

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Category: Historical

Description: Shes spent her life writing everyone elses love story. Its time she learns to write her own.

Beloved and sickly since childhood, Mary Danforth lends her pen to her siblings courtships while accepting her own inevitable spinsterhood. When her brother returns home with a brooding, handsome captain in tow, Mary strikes up an unlikely friendship with the gentleman that makes her dare to dream of more.

Captain William Hayes has never thought to take a wife, not with his own fortunes as uncertain as they are. But seeing an admirable young lady unnecessarily give up on all her prospects might just be what it takes to make him want to sort out a better future, specifically one with her.

Total Pages (Source): 7

CHAPTER 1

The subtle autumn wind brushed her cheeks gently, almost like a mother's caress, as Mary lowered her pen. She blew softly over the foolscap.

Mary smiled.

It was not her best work. That title belonged to the odd little poem she had first composed on her eldest brother John's behalf years ago. But Mary liked to think that her newly married brother Jacob would be happy with the fun little tribute to his wife.

Mary gave a soft, hollow chuckle. Her brothers were lucky that their respective wives had not thrown a fit when they had first learned that the moving letters and poems they had thought to be from their suitors had actually originated under Mary's pen. It had started as little more than a jest—a teasing moment when the whole family, excited by the prospect of having one of the seven siblings poised to marry, had pestered poor John with their respective mimicry of what a love letter from him must have sounded like to his lady love.

The others—Jacob, Silas, Siegfried, Alice, Jane, and Fanny—had all offered their own ridiculous renditions. And then Mary, between a cough and a sniff, had presented a silly little ditty that rhymed John's name with the most unflattering descriptions while connecting his bride's with everything sweet. The room had stilled. And once John started begging Mary to be his mouthpiece, every single one of her siblings wishing to pursue matrimony began to do the same.

Mary laughed as she reviewed her latest piece. Well, not all her siblings had needed

her help, at least not yet. Alice and Jane had demanded the wooing to come from their husbands-to-be, as was right. Silas and Siegfried, being the younger pair amongst the Danforth brothers, had yet to begin any serious courtships. And little Fanny, a good four years younger than Mary herself, had conveniently gotten betrothed to a dear childhood friend—thus circumventing any need for prolonged or persuasive pursuits.

"Did you finish Jacob's poem already?" Fanny's voice, high and bubbly, preceded her approach out the back door of the comfortable, if modest, Danforth home. Mary turned from her spot to smile at her sister, admiring the way the sun glimmered off the shiniest golden locks of the family. Her three sisters had all been blessed with daintier, prettier faces and forms, flatteringly juxtaposed to her four brothers' taller frames. Only Mary was different.

Brown hair, plain skin, and a frame that was slightly too tall to be fashionable—mixed with a dash of poor health—had always rendered Mary quite invisible to anyone outside of Greybrook Manor.

"I can't believe Jacob is making you work for him when he is securely married to Pauline." Fanny plopped onto the slanted stone seat beside Mary. It was not strictly a bench, but Mary used it often enough as a writing spot for her to be unable to think of it as anything else. Its breadth was limited, but the two sisters fit snugly enough.

Mary averted a sneeze before calming her nose enough to smile.

"Is it the new perfume?" Fanny frowned. She sniffed her own wrist. "I thought I barely put any on."

"It's fine." Mary tried her best to smile as she sniffed. "I can manage, especially outdoors."

"I am not any less selfish than Jacob, am I?"

"It is their anniversary, if you must know. I am only gifting them a short poem."

"May I?"

Mary handed over the sheet.

Dainty as a woodland flower,

with strength despite her frame,

My darling is more dear to me

than riches or acclaim.

Her touches soothe my pains and wounds,

her smiles my sorrows chase

And nowhere would I rather be

than in her dear embrace.

"It is very sweet." Fanny sighed. "If only Peyton would write to me this way."

"Do you wish for me to teach him?" Mary teased.

Fanny laughed. "I rather think Peyton is beyond such skills. He is a military man for a reason."

"A gentle soul in a soldier's garb."

“I know. I still find it odd to think of him as having the stomach for battle—but his sense of duty is unimpeachable. He sees his commission as a way to serve both the Crown and our future.”

"Do you worry for him?"

"How could I not? It is not the safest job in the world, is it?" Fanny toyed with the fringes of her sleeve. Mary found herself doing the same with her shawl. The air was not particularly cold, but Mary could hardly ever take her chances when she fell ill so easily. "But I take comfort in my nightly prayers."

"I'm glad to hear it."

There were days when Mary had little else to comfort her other than prayers and letters. But while her family, dear as they were, knew of her letters as a service she rendered for her siblings' pursuit of matrimonial love—the other letters she kept to herself, almost as if revealing them to the world would cause them to vanish like some old, cursed scroll.

It was a silly thought, almost superstitious, but Mary found it lingering in her mind rather often, particularly now that the last of her sisters was betrothed. Perhaps it was her way of pretending that her private writings were not odd or downright embarrassing.

A low rumble in the distance hinted at the possibility of impending rain, and the sisters quickly gathered their things to turn inside.

"Do you think Jacob will tell Pauline he wrote this?" Fanny handed back the poem just as they reached the kitchen door.

Mary chuckled despite herself. "I doubt he can fool her now."

The persistent breeze outside knocked at the window, sending Mary, letter in hand, burrowing deeper under her quilt despite the healthy fire in the hearth. Fanny, along with the rest of the family, still lingered downstairs. The Peytons and Oswalds and Rutherfords were dear friends, generational neighbors of the Danforth family. Mary had no aversion to their company. But her health didn't quite allow her to have the freedoms her siblings did.

There had been times she wondered if her sacrifice was worthwhile. Would one day of merrymaking truly kill her? Did she have to retire early to bed like an old woman while her siblings chattered away?

In her heart of hearts, Mary liked people. She'd always thought Greybrook Manor felt happier filled with a veritable cluster of souls filling its rooms and wandering its hallways. There was a warmth that no fire could imitate whenever her family gathered together, cheerful and exuberant.

But that was not her lot in life.

Mary sighed under her breath. Her sisters differed from her in more than just physical appearances. While other young people aged six and twenty would not need to think twice about a few extra minutes spent in the rain, failure to take particular care for Mary meant catching a cold, earning herself a fever, and another possible bout of pneumonia, which might or might not be her last.

She tried not to wallow, on most days. Her family loved her, and she had her books. Was the loss of a normal social presence truly that much of a sacrifice to make?

Her fingers traced the paper in her hand, the words still freshly dried. If she could never experience courtship, love, and marriage for herself, at least she had her letters to keep her company.

My dearest husband,

Did you enjoy your ride today? I watched your arrival, cutting such a handsome figure atop your steed, and very nearly lost my breath. The rolling fields unfolded around you like a king's domain, our home the crowning jewel. I had your favorite dishes prepared for dinner, and I like to think you appreciated them given the hearty way you wolfed them down.

Mary chuckled to herself. Most women might not think a man wolfing down dishes to be romantic, but she rather preferred her imaginary husband to show some roughness about him.

The latest books you've purchased for me are an utter delight. I look forward to reading each one. Given that you have slipped in a volume on housekeeping amidst all the novels, should I take it to mean that you find my management lacking? I tease, of course, for I do not think you capable of ever saying something you do not mean. You say you like our home the way it is, and I trust your forthrightness enough to believe it so.

Your cousin has written, accepting our invitation. We shall have young children in our corridors again soon. Do you not love the patter of their tiny feet? It is the closest thing I have to motherhood, and I cherish each opportunity to have it.

A thousand kisses for you, my love.

Yours,

Mary

She smiled, the ache in her heart bittersweet, as she folded the letter and slipped it among others like it. Some girls dreamt of dramatic voyages or sweeping romances.

Some yearned to experience an extraordinary life.

Mary would be ever so content with an ordinary life—even if it took a hefty dose of imagination to have one.

The shouts and rattling the next morning began long before any actual people landed on Greybrook's doorstep. Servants rushed about, hollering news about an approaching caravan of guests. Mary and Fanny dressed as quickly as they could in the absence of a maid. Whatever was causing the commotion downstairs had everyone in Greybrook occupied, and an aura of expectation thrummed in the sisters' shared bedroom, making commonplace gestures feel shakier than usual.

“Who do you think it might be?” Fanny asked, her hands deftly pinning up her abundance of golden hair.

“It could be a new tradesman bringing all his family and wares.”

“To Greybrook? Surely not.”

Mary chuckled. “I tease. Given how busy the servants are, it must be someone Mama knows—and someone who might be staying in Greybrook.”

“Do you think—oh, Mary, I do not think I dare to hope!” Fanny whirled around, suddenly teary-eyed. “The war has ended in our victory, has it not? Can it?—”

“We all most certainly hope so.” Mary felt a lump in her own throat. She clasped Fanny's hands. “If the soldiers have been permitted to return, then the guests downstairs?—”

“Might well be Silas, and Peyton!” Fanny pulled her sister into a crushing embrace.

“I do not know what to think!”

Mary patted the youngest Danforth sibling gently on the back. “Then perhaps we can stop thinking and see for ourselves?”

“Oh, yes, please.”

Fanny wiped herself clear of any tears, smiled, and rushed out the door, her hurried footsteps echoing loudly down the stairs. Mary followed quietly after.

Peace for England was finally in sight—and peace for Fanny as well. For while Silas's return would be wonderful news for the entire family, Mary had no doubt that Fanny was flying down the stairs not for her brother but for her beloved Lieutenant Peyton.

As expected, Mary reached the front parlor just as the first rounds of tears and embraces were concluding. Fanny hung onto her lieutenant like a vine, while Mama kept her arm tethered around her third son. Silas beamed at everyone in the room, looking older yet just as boyish as ever at the very same time.

On Mama's other side, young Siegfried, himself a taller and lankier counterpart of Silas, beamed at the comments that he had done a good job as the man of the family while all his brothers had been away. Even Papa was present this morning, his stern looks a little less stern than usual. A few village servants, no doubt hired to help with transport for the day, scurried in and out of the room carrying a wide variety of items. And near the entrance, wholly visible yet somehow quietly withdrawn, stood a tall, striking stranger, his red coat a clear indication of how he came to be in the company of Silas and Peyton.

"It was a harrowing experience, I tell you," Silas declared, loud voice ringing, no doubt embellishing some of his recent adventures. "The shelling was relentless, and I would not have all my limbs on my person if not for my comrades."

Mama gasped at the news, a worthy audience for Silas's theatrics, and she muttered her thanks to Silas's two friends.

Peyton, with his average height, brown hair, and pleasant face, acknowledged the thanks with a civil bow. The stranger by the entrance—his frame taking up almost the entire side of the wall—frowned and grunted, as if he did not agree with Silas's descriptions. He cleared his throat before saying in a low and commanding tone that sent Mary's heart to an unholy skip, "It was nothing, I assure you. Danforth is telling tales."

"Oh, but I am not, Captain ." Silas teased, his smile as easy as ever. "I do not think it was anything but your heroics that delivered me that day. I was so hungry I fairly well fainted on the battleground."

"Did you have to go without food often?" Fanny asked in a concerned tone, her question seemingly as much for her brother as for her betrothed.

Peyton patted Fanny's hand. "We were not fed lavishly, of course, but we are safe, are we not? And back to the comfort of hearth and home."

Fanny agreed, as did Mama, and the room seemed to crescendo once more into a fervor as everyone expressed how wonderful it was to have their beloved Silas and his friends back. Peyton readily joined Silas in assuring everyone of their well-being. But the tall captain—severe, handsome, and in possession of a set of broad shoulders that nearly spanned the entire side of the room he occupied—did not seem to agree. Instead, he heaved a sigh, looked almost resigned, and shrunk farther against the wall.

Mary rarely had the chance to extend sympathy to others when she herself had been handed such a meager portion of good fortune—but seeing a man looking so uneasy about being thrust into the hubbub of the Danforth home rather tugged at her compassion. Keeping an eye on the rest of her family, she edged slowly along the

length of the wall.

The captain, whatever his name, looked tired—as if war had worn on him so much that he had nothing left in him to celebrate. Silas seemed to think of war as a grand adventure. Peyton, even with his former boyishness scrubbed away, looked glad to be where he was. The village gossip that tended to glorify battle seemed mostly to agree with the latter two.

The captain, however, looked unmoved by it all. His arms remained crossed, his face remained tense, and his brow remained furrowed. Upon closer inspection, Mary spotted a scar that lined his cheek, a faded line from his cheekbone to his temple. Was this what war did to some people? She herself could hardly imagine living through life and death only to remain as cheerful as Silas seemed to.

Mary was almost to their silent visitor when Silas called out.

"Mary! There you are!"

She turned and flashed her brother a genuine smile. She widened her arms to match his. "Silas!"

He rushed forward to hug her, and she squeezed him tight before letting go.

"You don't look any bit different, Mary dear," he said.

"I am glad to hear it."

"And you have no idea how happy I am to see you."

"Truly now? I would think you only have eyes for your lady loves."

She did not expect her jest to spur her exuberant brother into an unmanly blush. "Oh, Mary, if only you knew it. I am glad to see you—for I do believe I shall have need of your services very soon."

"Oh?"

"Philomena Oswald might require a love letter or two to woo." He grinned.

But, of course she did.

"You waste no time, do you?"

"War does make a man reckon sooner with his mortality."

Mary had never been to war, but she most certainly had reckoned with her mortality enough to understand. She smiled before giving her brother another hug. "Then I will be happy to help."

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Source Creation Date: August 12, 2025, 7:24 am

CHAPTER 2

"It is an absolute delight, I swear!" Silas exclaimed during the dinner party two days later. Philomena Oswald, no doubt freshly flattered by the note Mary had penned on her brother's behalf, blushed prettily beside him given his effusive response to her question regarding his opinion on her family's presence. "I do declare I am glad to be home."

The whole table agreed obligingly. Even the gruff Captain Hayes, whose rudimentary acquaintance Mary had gained in the interval since the soldiers' return, grunted in a more light-hearted way than usual. Mary tried her best to swallow the piece of mutton she had in her mouth before joining in the laughter. It was a dish that often lent her an upset stomach, but she didn't want to voice a complaint when the rest of the party was so thrilled to have their brave officers back home. Given the long list of foods that tended to cause her ill, it was hardly reasonable to expect Mama to avoid them all.

"I cannot disagree with you on that account," Lieutenant Peyton said from Mary's right, his eyes fixed on a flushing Fanny. "Many a day during the war, we kept our spirits high only by imagining the warmth of home. To be able to enjoy home in its actuality is a large blessing indeed."

The generous party once more murmured their agreement of the more sentimental statement, and Fanny looked ready to swoon into her lieutenant's arms, regardless of any dishes or silverware that might block the way.

Mary forced down another piece of mutton and smiled. It was good to have her family together, at least the ones still unmarried. Soon, Fanny and even Silas might

be setting up homes of their own, and Greybrook would only have Siegfried and Mary left in residence with their parents. Mary stole a glance at the youngest of the eight Danforth siblings. Skinny, speckled Siegfried was seated next to the tiny Miss Peyton, together making up the youngest end of the table. And even a cursory glance was enough to show how much of an effort Siegfried was exerting to flirt with the lieutenant's little sister.

Soon, there would only be Mary left. And as much as she loved Greybrook, it was not particularly exciting to look forward to a future of being left behind. Being alone was hardly a curse, but it was so much less mortifying to be alone because one chose to be rather than to be alone because everyone else had managed to find a life without you.

Dessert came around, with the friendly neighbors marveling just enough at the new pudding recipe to make Mama beam. Mary declined her share, knowing that it would only fuss with her stomach further, and she soon found herself taking sips of water while everyone else enjoyed the pudding. It was only one of the many ways she seemed to always be different.

Soon, as was often the case in the last two days, the conversation turned to matrimony.

"Oh, but it is a most pleasant business, is it not?" Papa responded to the older Mr. Peyton's question about the timing of Fanny's impending nuptials—a much-anticipated union that would unite their families. "I dare say I have enough set aside for Fanny's dowry without us having to wait particularly long."

"Truly, Papa?" Fanny breathed, sparkles in her eyes.

"Your mother and I have been making plans for all of you."

"Mighty thoughtful, I must say," portly Mr. Oswald declared. He clucked his tongue.

"Not an easy task with war ongoing."

"We manage." Papa sounded rather proud of himself. "And with Silas, Siegfried, and Mary still at home for the foreseeable future, we have no reason to worry over multiple children all at once."

"But what if I were to have other plans?" Silas piped up, his mischievous face aglow. Poor Philomena Oswald blushed so hard Mary thought she might burn. "Would the household be ready for such changes?"

"You have your own funds to manage." Papa reminded. "I can hardly be called upon to provide for every single cent that every single one of my children need."

"But Mary needs so little," said young Siegfried, his voice as sharp as his adolescent elbows, as artless with his words as with everything else. "Surely, you can spare some more for your sons?"

"If anything, she might need more," said Fanny.

"Why?"

"Because when a lady doesn't—" Fanny seemed to think better of what she had been about to say, and she cut herself off before casting an apologetic look Mary's way.

Mama looked nervous for a moment, while Papa sighed and shook his head. "Let us not talk of such gauche topics, shall we? Tonight, we celebrate our heroes' return, and we drink to their health. Tomorrow has enough cares of its own." He raised a glass, prompting everyone else to follow suit. "To Captain Hayes, Lieutenant Peyton, and our very own Silas—may your happiness in peacetime be according to your bravery in war."

Everyone echoed the toast, and Mary breathed a sigh of relief over not having to discuss why she would need more or less of a portion from her parents. She knew her lot as a spinster, but it still wasn't particularly enjoyable to have the fact so openly acknowledged and discussed.

The ladies adjourned promptly after dinner, with a besotted Fanny sending lovelorn looks at Lieutenant Peyton as if they were to be parted for weeks rather than an hour at the most. Mary smiled at the image, glad that at least her lively young sister had a marriage of love to look forward to. It would have been difficult to part with her for anything less.

No sooner had the women entered the parlor, however, that a slight chill informed Mary of her need to retire. She was rarely an active participant of post-dinner conversation, but there was some degree of amusement to be found in listening to everyone else.

What a pity that she was to be robbed of even that tonight.

“Mama.” She reached out to her mother, tugging the latter back momentarily. “I—I fear I may not be well appointed enough to stay longer tonight.”

Mama looked at her in understanding. Mama always empathized with Mary’s physical limitations, even if she did not always comprehend the emotional strains that came with those selfsame limitations. Mary might be resigned to being an eventual spinster, but no one ever truly wished to be infirm.

“Do rest, darling.” Mama patted Mary’s hand. “Shall I have some tea brought up for you?”

“Not at the moment. Thank you.”

With a nod and another reminder to watch for her health, Mama turned from Mary to her other guests. Mary slipped away, the usual disappointment of having to live her life so differently from everybody else as familiar as the lines on her own hand.

The narrow hallways at Greybrook were rarely lit at full light, but there was at least always some light guiding the way, and Mary weaved her way easily around the corner to the stairways rather briskly for her standards, only to run into a large human being.

"Oh!" She stepped back, tugging her shawl around her, and looked up. "Captain Hayes."

He nodded his head deeply, perhaps in lieu of a bow. His tall, broad frame seemed to render the usually spacious hallway smaller somehow. Without his red coat, he appeared even more somber and grave. "I beg your pardon, Miss Danforth."

Mary smiled cordially. "As I beg yours. I'm sorry for my haste. I did not think to find the hallways occupied."

He nodded again. At this distance, Mary could see how his seemingly permanent frown was not quite a frown but rather a deep-seated solemnity that had been etched into his features. His features were handsome, in the most classic sense—but his dark impressions rendered them to look more forbidding than affable.

Did the man bear much weight upon his shoulders, or many troubles in his mind? It was perhaps to be expected. Most people did not live through the rages of battle and remain as buoyant as her brother Silas. In fact, standing between the wall and the large human being she had just run into, Mary had a stray thought that her brother and Peyton were merely boys while this particular guest was every inch a man.

"I must admit myself to not be the sort who prefers lively company," said the captain,

perhaps to explain his own presence. "I prefer my early hours."

"My family can be boisterous. I hope we are not oversetting you."

"They can be— lively ."

"It is perhaps a result of having so many siblings. One cannot hear you if you speak softly."

" You speak softly, and you are most definitely not boisterous."

"Perhaps not." Mary chuckled quietly. "But I am hardly the person steering most of the conversation."

"Ah, no—I do not think anyone can wrestle that role from Danforth—that is, Silas Danforth." The captain's face softened slightly to veer close to a smile. The dim light rendered his scar almost entirely invisible.

Mary smiled. "I suppose even the battlefield cannot dampen Silas's spirit."

"It did at times, I think. People can hardly maintain high spirits at all times in the midst of war. But while an expressive personality might not be what a commander prefers, it can at times be invaluable to maintain morale."

"You seem a wise man, Captain Hayes."

He met her eyes as if he were trying to decipher something from them. "You strike me as a wise woman as well, Miss Danforth."

Mary almost blushed. "There is not much wisdom to be gleaned from a spinster who has never left home."

"On the contrary," he said in a low, confiding tone, "it is often the quiet ones who know best. At least, I would like to think so."

She smiled at the compliment, recognizing the kindred spirit before her. They'd managed to exchange a few cordial conversations in the last two days, but this was the first time they were speaking at length. A smatter of laughter echoed down the hall. It sounded as if the gentlemen had already finished their port.

Mary sighed and lowered her head for a brief moment before looking up once more. "I hope I am not disturbing you."

"Not at all. It is I who am inconveniencing you."

"Hardly. My mother has bid me to rest, and I am only off to retire before I risk another bout of illness."

"Are you ill often, Miss Danforth?"

"I—" Mary paused a moment in consideration. She used to be sickly. And it had seemed prudent to avoid returning to such sickly ways, knowing as she did that her constitution was hardly on par with other young people's. "Not as often of late. But given my common brushes with serious ailments as a child—the dangers are never far from mind."

He nodded. "That is understandable."

"I bid you a good night, Captain Hayes."

He bowed his head deeply once more, just as Mary realized that he could not possibly bend his body in the tight quarters they currently occupied. "And I you, Miss Danforth."

With another parting smile, Mary shifted her way around the captain and slipped up to her room. The fire in the grate had been lit early enough to welcome her warmly, and a few quick tricks she had acquired over the past years allowed her to slip out of her evening clothes with minimal effort and ensconce herself in bed.

Then she wrote.

My dearest husband,

Did you enjoy the dinner party at Mama's? I regret that I had to retire so soon after the meal's conclusion. I hope that my brothers, as rowdy as they might be at times, proved ample company for you. Silas might never have a serious bone in his body, but Jacob and John do have plenty of sense when one takes the time to talk to them. It is interesting, is it not, that the children of one family with the same parents can span such a spectrum of personalities? Just because one sibling can talk ceaselessly the entire evening does not mean that the rest of them could string together more than a few words in company. Just because one sister finds love young does not mean others might ever find love at all.

Mary sighed. She was rarely this morose with her secret letters.

She shook her head, as if to clear the cloud over her mind.

The baker has promised to give us the freshest rolls tomorrow morning. I must ensure that the housekeeper remembers to arrive early lest the poor man be tempted to break his promise once more. I fear my digestion has barely recovered from the last round of stale loaves. It is intriguing to think that a loaf of bread that can so easily appear the same can have such detrimental effects upon a person's body if it were not kept fresh. It is a stark reminder indeed that one's inward character ought to be much more valued than one's appearances. A person healthy in body is quite different from a person healthy in spirit.

With luck, one might be blessed enough to be both. But if forced to choose, I must admit myself unconventional enough to believe that it is the inward soul that matters more. How fortunate am I that you, my darling, have chosen to see past my external limitations? Not many men would desire a gentle and quiet spirit over a pretty face and an able body. I count my blessings every day that I have crossed paths with at least one of them.

Yours evermore,

Mary

And with that footnote upon her dearest private wishes, Mary allowed herself to sleep.

CHAPTER 3

The wind blew subtly as Mary mulled over her latest creation.

Sweeter than the songbird's tune

Fairer than a springtime bloom

Philomena seems to me

God's greatest creature one could see

Mary grimaced at the last line. She had plenty more polishing to do if she were to actually aid Silas in his courtship of Miss Oswald. She ruminated on a few more choices as she drifted leisurely across Greybrook Manor's back lawn. Fanny was away shopping with Mama today. And her little sister knew Mary well enough to understand that curating a trousseau was hardly her preferred way of spending time with her family. Mary harbored no bitterness over Fanny's impending happiness—but fashion was hardly her favorite way of celebrating it.

The soft breeze provided coolness without any potential risk to her health, and Mary allowed herself a deep draft of morning air as she wandered towards her favorite writing spot. Mornings like this were rare, and she was determined not to waste the opportunity when one presented itself so perfectly. She closed her eyes briefly, letting her feet find their own way across the familiar turf for a few short seconds. Perhaps, with the right inspiration, she might even pen another letter to her imaginary husband.

"Miss Danforth," a deep voice greeted her. Mary opened her eyes, drawing to an abrupt stop.

"Captain Hayes." She recovered in a moment and quickly folded the foolscap back into her reticule. How ridiculous the man might think her if he found her scribbling letters to an unknown man! It was bad enough that she had been wandering with her eyes closed like an irresponsible child. "I apologize for intruding."

A small tick that might have been a smile passed over his lips. "Given that I am but a temporary occupant of this house while you remain a permanent one, I would consider myself as the trespasser."

"It is hardly necessary to be so harsh upon yourself, sir."

"But it is true, is it not? I am a visitor—an unexpected one at that—invited only by your brother and his unending assurance of your mother's ready hospitality."

"I hope we have not made you feel unwelcome."

"Not at all," he assured, looking almost solemn for a moment before softening once more. "I am unaccustomed to being left to my own devices while visiting, but it has been a refreshing change."

"I hardly know if that is a request for me to stay or to leave."

He looked abashed. "Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive."

He nodded once before falling silent. Mary waited, uncertain what to say.

She was rarely this awkward in conversation. Even if she had never been as eloquent with spoken words as she was with a pen, she seldom found it difficult to put together a decent sentence.

Then again, she seldom conversed alone with men outside her family.

"Thank you." The captain's voice was low yet gentle. Mary had no doubt that he could easily wield command over his men with a harsher tone, but she was thankful that he chose to be mild-mannered with her. "I'm afraid that I speak thoughtlessly at times. I must admit that after years away from society, one forgets how to be tactful."

"Some people have never been away—and yet display little tact nonetheless."

He met her eye over her olive branch. She offered the hint of a smile, and he released a breath he had apparently been holding in.

"Thank you," he said.

"Whatever for?"

"Your understanding, I suppose."

Mary shrugged, her shawl falling off her shoulders. She tugged it back. "I am hardly capable of truly understanding the breadth and depth of what you must have endured on the battlefield. An inevitable spinster such as I can have no true knowledge of what you must have experienced."

"Perhaps not." He turned away, his eyes roaming, as if taking in the scenery before him. It was not a particularly grand view, but it was a comforting one, and Mary allowed the calmness of the English countryside to soothe her soul. "But I believe you capable of things far beyond your immediate realm of experience."

“I find your confidence complimentary yet unfounded, sir.”

“Is it?” He looked sideways at her. The harsh lines of his face made him look every inch an army captain, but there was a softness to his gaze. “You proclaim yourself an inevitable spinster—and yet even your brothers cannot rival your ability to encourage love with your words.”

Mary flushed. “That is hardly—I do not?—”

“Am I mistaken?”

“No.” How could he be—when her brothers talked so freely of availing of her assistance over every dinner at Greybrook? Mary tugged at her shawl. “I do try my best to be of help.”

“And yet none of them seem to understand the value of your service.”

Mary chuckled, unusually shy. “It is hardly a service.”

“But it is.”

"That is little compared to what you must have had to endure on the battlefield."

"Perhaps—yet I am not ignorant of the fact that many battles on the home front might prove more difficult than physical enemies wielding swords and guns."

"That is a generous statement."

He smiled wryly. "There are times, Miss Danforth, when I wish I could be strategizing a military campaign rather than entangling myself in domestic matters."

The contemplative turn of his words intrigued her. "You hardly strike me as a man who likes to arbitrate between the cook and the housekeeper."

Captain Hayes chuckled, and Mary followed. He seemed to muse privately over something for another quick moment before deciding not to expound on his enigmatic statement. "You seem to be quite unaccompanied today, Miss Danforth. And as I am not vain enough to assume you wandered over just to entertain me—I cannot help but conclude that another reason must have brought you to this particular location."

Mary sighed softly. "It hardly matters. It is only that I visit this rock often."

"To view the woods? Or to think upon life?"

She pondered the implications before admitting, "I come to write."

His eyes seemed to light up with interest. "For yourself—or for others?"

"A bit of both."

"I have heard that you are also a faithful correspondent. Silas is blessed. Many soldiers were sustained through the war only by news from home."

It struck Mary just then how lonely many of the kingdom's bravest men must have been as they defended the crown. Her compassion loosened her tongue. "I write to my siblings, yes—but I almost just as often write on their behalf."

"So it is true then—all this talk about your courting on their behalf?"

Mary smiled, suddenly shy. "I do not know to consider it a greater embarrassment for them or for me to admit such a thing."

"You pen their letters for them then?"

"Worse, I'm afraid." Her smile turned sheepish. Encouraged by the curious look on the captain's face, she lowered herself onto the flat rock beside them. He sat beside her, no doubt having just occupied the same spot before her arrival. Fingers trembling, she procured the latest poem from her reticule. "You see. The poem is an utter mess, and I just might have to retire my position as the family's laureate if I cannot produce something more adequate for Silas."

To her surprise, the captain laughed. "Silas, the little dunderhead. I should have known he could not woo a woman on his own merits."

"Now that is hardly fair." Mary chuckled along. "For his incessant talking at dinner is all his own work."

"Of that I have no doubt."

They shared smiles over their mutual acquaintances. It was unusual to find such serene, soothing company. Even with her beloved family, gatherings were always boisterous or deeply emotive. Serenity had always only ever been available to her in solitude.

To know that such a tranquil version of contentment was possible with other people was as intriguing as it was depressing. One day soon, the captain would inevitably leave—and with him, the hope of a lovely friendship.

"Do you ever write for yourself then?" asked the captain, a moment later. "It seems hardly fair that you play scribe to all your siblings' happiness only to overlook your own."

It was an honest question—although the true answer hovered dangerously close to

something Mary hoped no one would ever discover.

She inhaled deeply before replying, "I am, amongst many other things, a realist. And I know full well that the sort of happiness in store for my brothers and sisters is unlikely to be in the cards for someone like me."

"You think too little of yourself, Miss Danforth."

"No, I do not." She met his eye, relieved when she saw compassion without pity. "I know my own physical limitations—and I choose to contend with them with contentment and peace."

"You do not envy your siblings?"

"No. I love them far too much for that."

A shade of admiration and respect touched his gaze. He reached over and squeezed her gloved hand briefly before letting go. "You are as brave as half of the soldiers I have ever encountered, Miss Danforth."

"I consider that a compliment, Captain Hayes."

He nodded. "As you should."

"Oh, but the pink one is so much prettier," Mama insisted as Fanny twirled around with the fabric draped around her shoulders the following afternoon. The shopping in town was insufficient, apparently, and Greybrook had been overtaken by a veritable army of silks and muslins and needles today, "This would do for a day dress, perhaps, but hardly for evening attire."

"We are not to be wealthy landlords constantly hosting dinner parties, Mama," Fanny

reminded, her smile as sweet and refreshing as ever. "Peyton and I shall have our own home, but it is modest at best."

"Never let it be said that any Danforth daughter marries with an unbecoming trousseau."

"A dress need not be expensive to still be every bit beautiful," Fanny assured.

Mary watched with a quiet, wistful smile as the womenfolk of the house—mistress and servants alike—rushed to assist Fanny with all the fabrics. It was not the first time Mary witnessed a sibling taking this step in her journey, but there was something particularly plaintive about watching a younger sister, and one who shared her room for years, taking the final steps to prepare for her new life. Soon, Mary would be the only sister left at Greybrook Manor. And while she had always known this to be her future, there was some melancholy to watching it unfold with so little variation.

No gallant knights rode down the lane to announce her secret betrothal to a prince. No wandering wizards came to declare her role necessary to the success of a hero's quest. No fairy godmothers appeared to grant her reprieve from her unremarkable life, even for the mere span of a single evening.

Mary sighed as a bout of dizziness assaulted her. She closed her eyes until it passed. She was content with her lot in life. Her family loved her, and her parents had afforded her every care they could from the local apothecary and any visiting physicians. If she had been born to a lesser set of loved ones, she might long have been deserted or overlooked for her healthier siblings. But her contentment did not mean she stopped dreaming—especially when it seemed at times that it was the only thing left for her to do.

"Mary, darling, will you not convince Fanny that she looks so much more becoming

in pink?" Mama called over the length of the parlor.

Mary glanced at her sister, who was shaking her head vehemently while the local seamstress tried to pin the rose-colored fabric around her body. Mary chuckled. "Fanny looks good in any color, Mama. Did you not always praise her for her complexion? The blue would look just as good as the pink."

"You two—always taking each other's sides." Mama shook her head fondly. "I cannot have my peace with any more than one of you in the house."

"I suppose it is good then that your children are marrying one by one," said Fanny. "Did you see Silas and Philomena this morning? He looked quite ready to propose."

"It shall do me much good when he does," said Mary, "for I can finally stop agonizing over that poem."

All the women chuckled, and Mary enjoyed the fleeting sense of normalcy the moment yielded.

"Don't rest on your laurels just yet," said Mama as she disapproved of yet another piece of blue fabric, to Fanny's great dismay. "Siegfried mentioned to your father last night that he might wish to be courting Miss Peyton soon."

"Siegfried?" Fanny shrieked. "The boy is two years shy of twenty. What does he know about courting."

"Did you not already know Peyton when he was eighteen?"

"I suppose." Fanny seemed to breathe in relief when the seamstress unwound another rose-colored muslin from her chest. She truly seemed to detest the color. "But Siegfried is a child."

"As were you once upon a time."

"As all of us were," Mary said.

"And soon all of you will be leaving us." Mama sighed. "Although at least I shall have Mary."

Mary could hardly decide if it was flattering or disappointing to be regarded this way by her mother.

"Nonsense, Mama, Mary might yet marry before Siegfried," Fanny declared confidently. The servants exchanged curious looks, making Mary wish Fanny hadn't been so quick to jump to her defense. "Did you not notice how Captain Hayes seems to be constantly watching her?"

Now the servants began to whisper, and Mary wished she could slink away in mortification.

"Is he now?" Mama asked with rounded eyes. "Mary, dear, is there something you are not telling us?"

There was, of course—but it was not what Mama seemed to be implying.

"Captain Hayes has been nothing but civil to me," said Mary. "I appreciate his being so. Not all men are so gallant."

Mama and Fanny murmured their assent before moving on to discuss the last three samples of fabrics, leaving Mary to consider to herself if the thought of Captain Hayes ever noticing her that way was a hopeful or a hopeless prospect.

Dinner with a full table, difficult to imagine a mere two weeks ago, now felt almost

commonplace as the Danforths, the Peytons, and their respective guests settled in. Silas was as energetic as ever, babbling endlessly about his military campaigns, often earning a chuckle from Peyton or a reproving grunt from Captain Hayes whenever his stories grew too embellished. Young Siegfried, perhaps having been chastened by Papa, spoke more circumspectly than he did the nights before. And Peyton and Fanny continued to make doe eyes at each other while Mama cooed over their blossoming love.

It was a familiar scene, a comforting scene. And Mary smiled sincerely throughout the entire meal at her family's lighthearted banter. She even braved staying after dinner, choosing to linger close to the fireplace instead of retiring to her room.

One day soon, she would be the only child left sharing her parents' home. She would have plenty of time to write then.

She would treasure these rare moments of everybody's presence for now.

"Miss Danforth," a low tone sounded behind her soon after the men joined the women.

Mary turned halfway around.

"Captain Hayes." She nodded.

He bowed in response before surprising her by pulling up a spare ottoman and seating himself beside her.

She had spoken with the man before—alone, even. But something about being in the presence of her family, mixed with Fanny's flippant comment this afternoon, made Mary feel unexpectedly flustered. The captain was tall, his features handsome in a severe, almost solemn way. And tucked onto a small ottoman that looked mostly the

worse for wear, he felt almost overwhelmingly masculine beside her.

"I am surprised not to find you reading—or writing," said the captain, beckoning Mary out of her self-consciousness.

Mary chuckled, trying her best not to sound nervous. "I suppose there must be some respite at times. My siblings do not always have to be wooing their women."

"And succeeding only thanks to you."

"I dare not claim so much credit."

"You might be surprised, sometimes, at how little a man may know about talking to a woman—even if said man shows every confidence on the battlefield."

"You speak from observation then? Or perhaps from experience?"

Mary watched, fascinated, as an uneven flush crept up the captain's long neck.

"A man suited for the battlefield is often ill-suited for the drawing room," he offered by way of an indirect answer.

"I suppose I can understand that. I cannot imagine my brother having much use for his pranks in the trenches."

"He tried."

Mary stopped suppressing her smile when she saw the captain sporting one of his own. "I suppose one cannot truly change one's nature merely by changing one's circumstances."

"No, I would think not."

"I cannot imagine it easy—to be trained for war and yet be taught to pursue peace. We all have long prayed for our soldiers to come home, but I must admit that not many of us have given thought to how suited a time of peace might be for those accustomed to battle."

An almost appreciative glint touched the captain's steady gaze. "You see what many do not see, Miss Danforth."

His tone sounded far too close to admiration for Mary's sanity, and she busied herself momentarily with the fringes of her shawl. "Perhaps being a quiet observer of life has lent me the ability to see what some might not."

"But are you always an observer?"

"Sir?"

"Is there never a time when you are the one living life—rather than one merely observing it?"

In her personal dreams, perhaps—but never in reality. Mary steeled herself. "I do not think many people would be eager to keep company with a woman frailer than their grandmother."

"Frailty of the body is hardly the same as frailty of the mind. And almost all the women I've crossed paths with are in possession of the latter."

"Surely, you do not mean?—"

"Or frailty of character, perhaps." His face turned thoughtful. "And if one were to be

truly honest, it is strength of character and of heart that truly matters, at the end of it all."

"Unexpected words from a military man."

His smile looked wry at best. "Or perhaps merely a world-weary man."

"Perhaps you have observed things I have not observed then."

"Perhaps." He sighed, long and low.

She waited a moment before asking, "Do you miss it—the war?"

"I do not miss the dangers or the risks—the knowledge that a comrade who stands beside you now might not be breathing the very next moment," he admitted freely. The rest of the room chattered away happily, leaving them to their private conversation. "But the purposefulness, I must admit, I yearn for at times."

Mary reached out to touch his arm only to pull back abruptly when he looked at her in surprise. She tugged her shawl closer around her. "I—I understand. I do not know what peacetime harbors for you, sir, but I hope you know that you are most welcome here until your path becomes clear."

He angled slightly more towards her. The edge of his lips ticked up slightly, briefly. "Am I?"

It was growing difficult to breathe. Perhaps she ought to retire sooner than she expected.

Mary swallowed. "We are in no hurry to lose good company."

The captain nodded, his gaze softer than before. "I am glad we are of an accord." Then, as if teasing her, he added, "I would so hate to have to stop sampling the wafers at Greybrook. Nothing in the army can quite compare."

Silas called for both of them to join the card games just as Mary's chuckle trailed off. And while both of them declined, their privacy was drawn to an end by the need to spectate.

At least, spectating was what Mary did best.

CHAPTER 4

My dearest husband,

The weather has been milder of late, allowing me more opportunities to immerse myself in nature. The wildflowers have run amok along the brook, but I hardly have the heart to think of removing them. What a pretty sight they make! It is as if nature is offering its splendor in contrast to the manmade art we harbor within our homes.

I have been promised by the grocer that we will receive the latest array of spices by tomorrow. I cannot wait to undertake the new wafer recipe once more. You seemed to have enjoyed them so thoroughly the last time they were served.

M ary lowered her quill momentarily, taking care to angle herself in a way that would protect her letter from flying away. Her private letters to her imaginary husband—a vague, generic endeavor before—had suddenly begun to feel frightfully specific of late. No longer was the idea of marriage something she daydreamed about to an unrealized character. Sometime, somehow, in the span of the last few weeks, her fancies had taken on the shape of a tall, brooding man of war—a kind yet haunted soul with gentle words and quiet manners.

Mary sighed. It was futile to dream of such things. She had learned that lesson a long time ago. And while dreaming without expecting any of her dreams to actually come true had felt harmless enough before, her reins on her expectations had been slipping so much of late that she worried she was setting herself up for emptied hopes and a bruised heart.

It was all well and good when her imaginary husband was a wholly fictitious creature. It was much harder now that secret hopes and reality seemed to have blurred the lines between them. Why bother dreaming of what cannot be? Fanny might tease all she wanted about the captain's attentions, but Mary knew she was never made for any sort of lasting attachment. Who would want a wife, after all, who had to hedge her every decision lest another ailment whisk her away from the world for good?

She glanced down at the letter in her hand. Imagining a life had been enough before. It was extremely unsettling that it suddenly felt insufficient now.

She sighed as she folded the unfinished letter. On mornings like this, with Greybrook mostly empty and the servants occupied with work and gossip, the fact that her imaginations were falling short hurt even more than usual.

A loud huff and heavy footsteps swept by, and Mary scrambled to put away all evidence of her writing. Her family knew that she wrote often, but she had hidden these particular letters for a reason, and she had every intention to continue doing so.

It was not until she had successfully tucked away her private correspondence that she noticed who exactly had stormed across the clearing. He did not seem to notice her as he marched until he stood a mere few yards away.

"Captain Hayes," she greeted, rising slowly.

He turned sharply towards her, as if he had only noticed her now. The tempestuous look on his face, no doubt an expression that aided him in his battlefield command, melted slightly into a light frown.

"Miss Danforth." He bowed. "I did not realize the area was occupied. Forgive me for intruding. I should have known, truly."

Mary tried to smile, though it was rather difficult to when one's companion scowled so deeply. "It is no matter. I was only writing."

He nodded, still appearing greatly preoccupied. "You are often writing."

"Very often, yes." She had never felt embarrassed about writing before. But, somehow, faced with whatever great trouble the captain had, Mary felt unusually shy about her little hobby. "But I do not think that is what most concerns you right now, captain."

His eyes met hers, and an almost apologetic look crept into his gaze. "No, I suppose not. Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive." She stepped closer. She almost reached for him but restrained herself in time. Mary swallowed. "I am accustomed to being overlooked. Pray, do not trouble yourself."

His frown deepened once more. "No woman deserves to be perpetually overlooked."

She knew he was speaking of womankind in general, but his words warmed her in an unexpected, unwarranted way.

"You are too kind," she said limply. "Please, sir, if you would rather take a seat."

The tall captain eyed Mary's previous perch on the slanted rock, its breadth barely enough for the two of them, and she wanted to blush all over again.

"I would be much obliged," he said before she could take back her offer, and he promptly stepped over and sat down, his coat brushing her gown as he did. Mary swallowed and shifted to the side before lowering herself beside him.

It was not the first time they shared such close proximity, but something about the rigidity of their seats today made Mary more nervous than usual. Had he detected her burgeoning feelings for him and wished to discourage her? Was she becoming overly sensitive about his actions merely because the man behind them had begun to grow dear to her?

"I fear I am poor company today," he said, his voice low and world-weary.

"Being loquacious is hardly the only measure of good company." She tugged at her shawl. "If it were, I would be a sorry sister to have around."

"Your family loves you dearly—despite their thoughtlessness at times."

"I know. I count myself blessed."

A brief silence lingered.

"I fear I cannot count myself as blessed when it comes to my own relations," said the captain.

Mary listened quietly. She could sense that his confidence was rarely bestowed, and she hardly wished to say anything that might cause him to retract it.

"Your brothers are with Peyton this morning," he said.

"I am aware," answered Mary.

"They are visiting the home Peyton shall be occupying with your sister when they wed."

"I hope they find everything in order."

"As do I—particularly when my own visit home did not unfold quite as well."

A sudden image of Captain Hayes returning to a confused, tired wife appeared in Mary's mind. In her imagination, the woman glared at him, only to soften and reach for him a moment later. A few children peered at the captain, their faces reflecting his features even as they hid behind their mother's skirts.

Was the captain married? Did Mary even know anything about the man apart from his powerful presence and his unexpected tenderness? She felt as if she could not breathe.

"You might wonder, Miss Danforth, why I have continued to avail myself of your family's hospitality when the home that ought to be mine lies a mere hour's drive away."

Mary licked her lips. "I hope we have not made you feel unwelcome in any way."

"On the contrary, I find myself much more dearly received here than in the home that supposedly bears my name."

Mary waited quietly, uncertain how to respond to his enigmatic statements.

"My brother was a married man," the captain said of his own volition a moment later. His eyes and tone both felt far away. "He, the heir, had settled into his life role admirably. And I, the second son, had followed my calling onto the battlefield. It was a dangerous calling, but it was one of purpose."

Mary nodded, a faithful audience.

The captain sighed. "Little did anyone expect that it was the brother who stayed on English soil that perished first."

Mary's heart clenched. The thought of losing any of her siblings was a sobering thought. She tugged at her shawl once more. "My condolences, captain."

"Thank you. I did not wish to lose my brother, but I did. And while my sorrow is sincere, there are some in the neighborhood who seem to think that his demise was a fortunate turn for me."

"Because of the house."

"Yes—a small but profitable estate on the edge of a growing town."

Mary nodded. Greybrook Manor had been just that two generations ago. And due to her grandfather's and father's keen sense of management, the small property had managed to grow into sustaining the life of comfort they had now.

"I suppose there are always people who do not trust in the sincerity of seemingly honorable behavior," she said quietly.

"Particularly when it is her control of the estate at stake."

It took Mary a moment to understand. She looked up to find the captain already looking at her, his expression grim.

"Did your brother have an heir?"

"Only I."

"If that is the case?—"

"But his wife had been a widow—with a son."

“I see.”

“There is no reason for him to inherit—at least not apart from the small legacy my brother had graciously bestowed upon him.”

“I take it his mother thinks otherwise?”

He nodded. "She believes the land the rightful property of her son."

“That is unfortunate.”

“And a complication I wish I did not have to address.”

The weight of his revelations surrounded them, casting a dark shadow over an otherwise sunny day.

"The home, by law, is rightfully yours," said Mary.

"Yes," he replied, "and yet I have never experienced a colder reception anywhere else."

Mary nodded, her heart heavy for her newfound friend. "It is to your credit that you do not try to evict her."

"I have been tempted, I assure you." His face hardened momentarily before returning to its earlier, resigned look. "It is difficult, at times, to tread the line between gentleman and soldier."

"If only a well-planned military campaign could assist you."

"Indeed. Or, perhaps, if I can convince a fellow soldier to marry her away."

They exchanged a more playful look. Mary smiled. "It is time that I offer my services, captain? Shall I write letters from an unknown lover to your brother's widow?"

"It would prove most convenient." His tone sounded less strained than it had earlier. "If you can make the man handsome and wealthy, perhaps even titled, one might even have greater odds of succeeding."

"Perhaps I ought to mention a partiality for widows."

"Particularly ones widowed twice over."

"I suppose that can be arranged."

They chuckled over their futile plotting, both of them knowing full well that the captain was far too honorable a man and Mary too conscientious of a lady to ever go through with such a scheme.

"I must admit myself surprised that she has not attempted to set her cap on you ," Mary mentioned light-heartedly before she looked up.

The captain's expression caught her off-guard. He looked almost abashed, as if he were a child caught by his parents at a place he ought not to be. Mary flushed.

"Of course, if that is the case," she scrambled, "it would not be a wholly bad arrangement at all. That is, of course, if the two of you are amenable to such a match. There is wisdom to be had in marrying amidst people you are familiar with. And there is, of course, the matter with the estate, which is?—"

A warm hand covered Mary's, stopping her words and her breathing. She ventured to meet his eye.

"I have no intention whatsoever to marry my sister-in-law," he said with so much conviction that Mary felt the need to nod. Then his voice and expression softened. "The church forbids it. But even if they didn't, there is no reason to desire it when my preferences already lie in a different direction."

Mary swallowed. Was it possible to faint from sheer nerves? The thought sent her into a cough, and the captain hurried to ensconce her indoors, which was perhaps just as well.

It would do no one any good for her heart to get carried away.

CHAPTER 5

"Can you believe what Mama just told me!" Fanny giggled as she rushed into their room. Mary stuffed away her unfinished letter. She was usually never caught off-guard, but the unusual difficulty she had at conjuring words tonight had distracted her.

She turned to face her sister, a sister set to wed the very next day, with a patient smile. "Did she finally declare you her favorite child? You know we've always had our suspicions."

"Of course not, you silly girl!" Fanny declared as if she were ten years older rather than four years Mary's junior. She hopped onto the bed next to Mary. "She told me about what to expect about, well—the wedding."

"Did you not already know? We have attended plenty of weddings these few years. And Silas seems keen to have us attending his as soon as possible after yours."

"Oh, not the wedding itself." Fanny blushed. "It's about—about what comes after."

"The wedding breakfast then."

"Well, yes, that. But also—" Fanny turned around until she faced the ceiling. Her fingers toyed with a loose ruffle on her nightdress. "Also about the wedding night."

A familiar sense of being excluded, however unintentionally, washed over Mary. She had gone through this before. On the eves before her two other sisters had married,

they, too, had removed from their conversation with Mama flustered and blushing—seemingly wishing to spill everything in their minds to Mary yet choosing to refrain at the last moment.

The familiarity of the situation ought to make it easier—and yet Mary mourned in a small place of her heart that this was perhaps the last time such an event was to occur. Tomorrow, even Fanny would be gone. Then Mary would well and truly be the only daughter left at Greybrook, a spinster through and through.

"Was it very bad?" Mary tried to keep her tone light.

"I frankly don't know what to think." Fanny sent out a puff of air in place of a sigh. "If only I could confide in you, Mary, for you always know just what to say."

"Is there anything to prevent you from confiding in me?"

"Only the promise Mama extracted—under threat, mind you." The youngest Danforth daughter turned around until she faced Mary. The moonlight drifting through the window cast a pretty glow on the bride-to-be. "She seems to think that I would not be able to resist the temptation of telling you."

A small smile tugged at Mary's lips. "And was she right?"

"Quite." Fanny groaned. "Oh, Mary, how am I to sleep tonight—knowing how everything will change tomorrow?"

"I thought you were quite eager to marry Peyton."

"Of course I am—but then everything is going to change, isn't it? Like when Alice and Jane married, and even when John and Jacob did. I used to think it so unfair that they get to start their lives on their own while the rest of us stayed in Greybrook, but

now that it's my turn to leave, I find myself almost a little afraid of it."

Mary reached over to clasp Fanny's hand. "What are you afraid of? Are you not certain of marrying?"

"I am sure of my affections—and of his. That is not what I worry over."

"Then what?"

"I have always been coddled in Greybrook, Mary. What will I do without Papa and Mama presiding over the decisions? What will I do without you?"

And in a span of a few words, Mary learned that perhaps the blessings of marriage, something she had observed for years with longing, came with its burdens as well. She squeezed her sister's hand tighter.

"I'm sure you shall sort it all out splendidly."

"And if I don't? And if I fail spectacularly at keeping house or pleasing my husband or bearing children? I do not think I can bear it to disappoint."

"You shall not."

"But I cannot be sure of it, can I? There is so little one knows about the future—and Mama said reality is rarely the same as what we expect it to be."

The words were innocently said, and yet they cut deep for a woman who had nothing to hope for in her future save her own imagination. Mary swallowed.

"Then we walk by faith, do we not?" said Mary, speaking to herself as much as she was to her sister. "I myself barely know how long I shall live—how much time I have

left. The doctors have declared me unable to recover from a trifling cold gone worse more than once in the last twenty years?—"

"Mary—"

"And yet I live on." Mary smiled, even through the tears both of them seemed to be accumulating. "I breathe another day, and I laugh another day, and I write another day. And the presence of tomorrow is made all the sweeter by the fact that it has never been promised."

Fanny's smile looked blurred as far as Mary was concerned, but even then, its sincerity shone through.

"Oh Mary." Fanny embraced her as warmly as only a sister could. "I swear you always know just what to say."

Comforting Fanny had always been easy. It was comforting herself that was the problem.

No sooner had her sister drifted to sleep, a happy smile of anticipation on her childlike face, that Mary realized she was doomed not to sleep.

For the better half of her life, she had followed every order there was to preserve her existence. She rarely took risks with her own health. After a few close brushes with severe illness, even with death, Mary had long learned the art of being the world's most responsible patient.

She retired when others reveled. She wore layers when others did not. She avoided physical exertion with all the determination of an aged, matronly hypochondriac.

Yet what had all that effort brought her apart from a life well-preserved yet barely

lived?

Mary frowned. For years, she'd found contentment in being the invisible, steadfast sister. For years, she'd resigned herself to merely being alive.

But, for the first time in days or months or even years, Mary felt a rush of recklessness tugging at her heart. In the span of a few precious weeks, a quiet life that used to feel honest and consistent had begun to lose its appeal.

Even her private letters, the only part of Mary's life where she'd been willing to imagine stepping beyond the boundaries she currently kept, now felt hollow and staid. Fanny learned more about marriage tonight than Mary ever would. And tomorrow, Fanny would know even more.

What sort of life was this?

Mary swallowed as the truth hit her.

It was hardly even a life—a truth that her siblings saw before she ever did, a fact that Mary had forced herself to accept with a sense of martyrdom that made her nauseated to think about now.

With a grunt, she slipped out from under the counterpane. The night air chilled her, but Mary pulled on her own dressing gown before adding Fanny's on top of it. She glided her feet into her slippers, thankful for the minimal warmth they yielded. If she had planned this evening excursion, she would have warmed those slippers first. But plans upon plans had taken her nowhere, and a firm desire to protest the unfairness of it all emboldened her.

Tonight, she would live. She would go downstairs and find a book and read it as late as she wished, using as many candles as she required. She would breathe the chilly

evening air even if it scorched her lungs. She was not so foolhardy as to venture outdoors, but just thinking of leaving her bed while the house lay quiet sent a thrill of adventure down her spine.

She was no adventuress, and she never would be. But she was also determined to stop acting the part of an invalid when she was hardly bedridden.

With one last fortifying breath, Mary slipped out the room, down the hall, down the familiar old staircase, and into the well-loved family library.

As far as acts of defiance went, hers was laughably minuscule. What sort of protest was it to refuse bedtime like a child? But for Mary, her very presence in the library represented more than anything a child could do or say.

Her eyes landed on another candle left alone on the credenza. Someone else was here. Who else read this late? Did other people keep such hours? How deep into the night did her siblings tarry while she resigned herself to bed each night?

Approaching footsteps told Mary where to turn. She lifted her candle.

But it was not one of her siblings in the library at midnight. It was Captain Hayes.

"Captain." She tried to keep her voice level, a difficult feat given how cold the evening air was.

"Miss Danforth." He nodded his head as he walked closer to the candlelight. The man had the tendency to appear solemn in public. But somehow, tonight, even without his coat and with his cravat slightly askew, the captain appeared even more somber than he did upon his first arrival at Greybrook.

Mary almost wondered if she was merely unaccustomed to seeing people so late at

night.

"I'm sorry for intruding," she said, her whisper-soft voice amplified by the otherwise empty room.

"I think it is I who owe you that apology—for it is your house, is it not?"

Mary's smile felt more brittle than she expected. "As we have discussed before—it is my father's house, not mine."

"Ah—yes. And one's place of residence is hardly always one's true home."

"Nor is the house one possesses always one's place of residence."

Her daring allusion to his quagmire sent him quirking a brow. And yet his eyes seemed to hint at respect more than offense. Slowly, with what looked almost like measured deliberation, the captain stepped around the chair before him.

"Shall we sit?" He gestured to the other matching chair across from him.

Mary smiled. "I am not so frail as that."

"No, you are not." His voice carried an unexpected touch of pride. "I was almost afraid that you were not aware of this little fact, Miss Danforth."

Mary felt a small flush of embarrassment. "I am not so entirely withdrawn."

"Not withdrawn—only careful, very careful."

"Perhaps."

"It is not a bad trait—to be mindful."

"Until it becomes one, doesn't it?"

It was unfair for her to direct her frustration at herself towards Captain Hayes. He was not the one refusing to live life. He was not the one allowing everyone else to go through life's experiences while she remained primly in her own little corner, surviving for survival's sake.

At least Silas, for all his loud-mouthed behavior, had survived for the sake of king and country. She was surviving for no one's end.

Somehow, in the midst of her lengthy spell of personal reflection, Captain Hayes had drifted close enough for her to feel the warmth of his presence. It was tempting, almost shockingly so, to bury herself in that warmth. She felt the touch of a finger tilt her chin upwards. She yielded, her eyes meeting his.

"Do you like your life, Miss Danforth?" he asked, his words low yet clear.

She thought she did. She had been so certain of it. Did he have to ask the question on the one night her grasp on her lifelong contentment was weakening its hold?

"I—" The words died on her lips, replaced by a choking sensation that trailed from her tongue to her throat. She frowned slightly. "I—I am thankful."

He nodded. "One of your most endearing qualities."

"You speak as if I have many of them, Captain." Her voice sounded breathless to her own ears, but it was an entirely different sort of breathlessness from the kind she had as a child, struggling to breathe at the slightest provocation.

"Of course you do," he responded to her seamlessly, as if he were used to flattering ladies rather than barking orders at his men. "Selflessness, patience, a determination to believe the best of life when it has given you little reason to do so."

Mary inhaled, feeling a trifle of a snuffle. "I do not know if I am any of those things."

"You are all of them—and more."

More— the word taunted her. When Mary had scarlet fever at ten, Mama had whispered fervently at her bedside that having Mary live was 'all that she dared to ask for'—that it did not matter if she lost her ability to see or speak or walk. The Lord had answered with more than that, for Mary had survived the difficult fight intact. It had felt selfish to ask for more ever since.

Surviving had always been her sole purpose in life. Did she dare contemplate anything beyond it? Was this what it felt like to tempt fate?

"What more?" she whispered.

He did not speak. He did not seem to even breathe. But imperceptibly, he moved forward, his tall frame looming over hers, sending thrills down every inch of her skin despite the warmth his body brought.

"As much as you would wish."

"And if I hardly know what I wish?"

His smile was small, enigmatic, and well-nigh irresistible. "Then perhaps we can sort out the answer together."

Then he leaned to the side and brushed his lips against her cheek. Her lungs flamed. It

was almost unfathomable how one tiny gesture, one second of a sliver of touching skin, could evoke such overwhelming emotions.

He cleared his throat as he pulled back, leaving Mary's knees weak.

"Goodnight, Miss Danforth," he said.

She did not bother to respond as he picked up his taper and slipped out the library.

Mary sighed, shivering, as she pulled her double dressing gowns more tightly around her. Tomorrow was an important day for the family, but she could not help but wonder if today had been more life-altering for her.

CHAPTER 6

The merrymaking over the new Mr. and Mrs. Peyton was unlike anything their humble town had ever seen before. For while there had been memorable times when the local gentlewomen had married higher-ranking men, there was no joy comparable to the joy of neighbors watching two families they'd long been acquainted with become attached through marriage. Both the bride's parents and the groom's could not cease smiling, and even Mary was able to momentarily forget her recent private struggles in light of her entire family's evident jubilation.

"Oh, we shall miss you, dear," Mama gushed at Fanny while the guests enjoyed the wedding breakfast. Cheers, jokes, and giggles abounded while bright smiles painted the length of the dining table. And in the midst of it all, Fanny bloomed, clearly undaunted by the monumental change that had just befallen her.

Mary almost envied her sister—for the simple, joyful confidence that seemed to brim from little Fanny's entire frame.

The laughter and the unapologetic gluttony continued for a good few hours, with raucous applause for a drunk singing Silas in tow, until Mary found her senses extended so far beyond their usual limits that she had no choice but to retire.

After bestowing a bittersweet parting embrace to her sister and a sincere welcome to her new brother-in-law, Mary slipped out the dining room and turned down the hall—where she came face to face with Captain Hayes.

The way he straightened himself from the wall indicated that he had been waiting,

particularly for her, for perhaps an extended amount of time.

She swallowed before she bowed her head. "Captain Hayes."

"Miss Danforth." His bow was deeper, his mien more solemn. She was certain he had joined the festivities earlier, but he must have excused himself some time before she did. His eyes, when they met hers, sported a mixture of eagerness and hesitation. "I hope I am not intruding at an inopportune moment."

Mary pursed her lips for the briefest of moments. "It is of no import."

"I wish to apologize," he spoke, ever frank. His tall frame managed to look open and approachable despite how he loomed over her. "Last night—what I did—what I?—"

Mary held her breath.

"I should not have done what I did," he said.

She allowed the statement to settle, for both their sakes. Then she agreed quietly, "No, you shouldn't have, though if it is raised expectations that you fear, you do not need?—"

"No," he answered, the certainty of his one uttered word hit like a sinking stone in her stomach. His next words tugged it back afloat. "I had no right to act as I had done, especially when my own affairs have not been settled. How can I dare to offer myself when I barely know if I can keep a roof over my own head?"

A slight pang of hope throbbed within her. "I did not think you were offering."

"You did not—" He paused slightly. "Have I not been marked enough in my attentions these weeks then?"

Mary whispered, her every nerve agitated, "You have been very kind, of course, but growing up as I did with my physical limitations—I have always found it best to interpret any kindnesses extended towards me as a matter of charity."

"I am not a charitable man."

"I beg to differ. A lesser man would have long dealt with your brother's wife in a far more selfish matter."

"With regard to that, I am not noble, only cowardly."

"A cowardly captain? I beg to disagree."

"Who else but a coward would engage a woman's affections without making an offer? Who else but a coward would tarry in another man's house while avoiding the one that is rightfully his?"

"Captain—"

"I claim to have been fighting for the happiness of our entire country, and yet here I stand too afraid to reach out to grasp my own."

Mary let the revelations between his words wrap around her. Then she said quietly, "I have long found that happiness may not be about receiving the full measure of one's hopes. To expect to do so is foolish at best, for happiness is what you make of whatever it is you already have before you."

He looked at her thoughtfully, a disconcertingly perceptive angle to his gaze. "But that is not what you do."

"I do not understand you."

"You do not find happiness in what is before you."

"I do," she insisted. "I love my family, and I am thankful for my life. The comforts I enjoy?—"

"You would not be writing otherwise."

His statement, so simply put, shook her to her very core as much as his fleeting brush of a kiss did last night. Mary swallowed. "I write to help."

"You do."

"And that is the extent of it."

"Is it?"

For a quick breath, she almost wished to scold him. How dare a man of such short acquaintance claim to know the reasons behind the one thing that had always been her own? But his eyes whispered that he understood, that he cared—that it mattered to him that she was happy.

Mary inhaled. "There is little else for me."

"You can have more," he answered right away. "You can have more than this family, more than this house—more than a life lived in proxy."

"I do not think?—"

"You can ."

Somehow, in the time they'd been conversing, the captain had managed to draw so

close that she had to arch her neck to maintain his gaze. Or, perhaps, it had been she drifting closer. It was difficult to tell.

Her breath quivered. She swallowed to even it. "As can you, Captain."

Instead of appearing offended, he surprised her with a smile.

"Can I?" he whispered, his lips a mere hair's breadth from hers.

Her heartbeat raged in her ears. Her lungs trembled. But she could hear her own smile in her answer, "Yes."

His reply was of a far more demonstrative variety.

The sun shone bright the next morning as the sights of the English countryside rolled away around her. To her side, the captain sat ramrod straight in his seat, a military man through and through.

Mary had listened with no small degree of fascination this morning as the captain had tried to bargain for the curricule for their little visit—a vehicle that would have required the two of them to make this journey unchaperoned. Papa insisted clearly on the need for a maid and a groom, however, despite the short distance to the captain's homestead, and so they traveled as they did in the Danforths' spacious barouche.

Mary bit back a smile. It was almost odd to be chauffeured around by the family servants, as she herself had never needed such services before. What would a daughter who spent the majority of her time alone in her room need chaperones for?

The captain did not seem to like the way things unfolded, but he at least seemed to bear it with manly fortitude. He even seemed to act every bit the proper gentleman, at least until the maid, no doubt exhausted from her early morning chores, dozed off.

Then his hand closed over hers, making the conveyance feel smaller all of a sudden.
“Are you well?”

The smile that crept over Mary's lips was both gradual and thorough. The way his arms had felt around her yesterday, strong and unyielding, had rendered even the familiar Greybrook hallway dreamy and wonderful. She did not know what to expect of today's little trip, but she rather liked embracing what was promising to be an entirely new chapter of her otherwise mundane life.

“I am well.” She smiled up at him. “Are you ?”

He tensed slightly before relaxing once more. "I question myself every single moment if it was too selfish of me to invite you along," he whispered. "I cannot promise that my sister-in-law shall act in a civil manner."

"She is only looking out for her son."

"Rightfully—or otherwise."

"Or otherwise."

The reminder of the purpose of their visit today sobered them both, and they remained mostly quiet for another few minutes. A part of Mary wished to drink in the fresh air and new sights with wonder—but the stakes of their upcoming errand kept her securely tethered to earth.

Just how hostile was this other Mrs. Hayes? The law might not be her ally, but Mary knew how fiercely a mother might choose to defend what she believed to be in the best interests of her child.

“Have I scared you?” William asked, as they closed in another mile.

“No,” she answered truthfully. Mary tugged on her shawl. It was funny how she hardly felt the need for it today—not between the rush of the ride and the warmth of the captain’s company. “It is only that I wonder how things might look to her .”

“My brother’s wife?”

Mary nodded. Just over the last full bend, a fuller view of the modest country home crested on the horizon. Mary observed the two-story home with a heart's worth of mixed emotions. Could she—she who had never considered the possibility of ever residing anywhere except Greybrook Manor—possibly be the mistress of a such a place one day? Yet her heart clenched for someone else. Because the thought that another woman, another Mrs. Hayes, was facing the possibility of losing this home in favor of whomever the captain married struck a compassionate nerve within her.

“Does she know we are coming?” asked Mary, as the barouche began to slow.

“Perhaps.”

“Does she know I am coming?”

“I am afraid not.”

“Then she must think me the enemy.”

“Mary, please—you are the kindest soul I know. No one could possibly?—”

“But she can.” Mary turned to meet his eye. He held her gaze briefly before looking down at their joint hands.

“I suppose if one were in her position, one could possibly construe things as such.”

“She is afraid for her future—like I was.”

“And are you?”

“Not with you.” Mary looked up with all the trust she felt for the man beside her. “I know you will care. I know you will provide.”

“And what do you suggest I do about it?”

Mary smiled at the trust conveyed in that question. She glanced at the emerging house. A short, stocky, gently bred woman with a determined look on her face stood near the entrance, a young boy clinging to her side. The ride had indeed proven even shorter than the captain told her father this morning.

Mrs. Hayes was neither young nor old. In fact, she was likely Mary’s own age. It was almost heartbreaking to think of the burden and uncertainty a woman in her predicament would have to bear. Was it possible to persuade with compassion where insistence had failed before?

It was, by Mary’s humble estimation, worth a try.

“May I talk to her?” asked Mary, before they drew fully within earshot.

“To my sister-in-law?”

“Yes.”

His tone sounded unsure, but his words rang true. “By all means.”

Mary nodded. She waited patiently until they drew to a stop. And as soon as the captain handed her down, Mary rushed forward, an unexpected urgency to her steps.

And, likely surprising everybody else present, she gathered the woman's hands in her own and said, "Mrs. Hayes, I am Miss Mary Danforth—and we are here to ensure that you and your son will have a home to stay in for the rest of your life."

CHAPTER 7

The subtle breeze outside the Hayes homestead was warmer than that at Greybrook, a fact that Mary considered very much a blessing. She leaned against the nearby tree stump, allowing the air to soothe her. The conversation with Mrs. Hayes had proven to be a more genial experience than anyone had anticipated, and Mary now had the pleasure of waiting for the captain to join her after he formalized the agreements they had made with his sister-in-law.

Who knew that a lifetime spent pacifying agitated relatives could become such a deciding factor in her own happiness? Mary reflected on how the widowed Mrs. Hayes had softened from her combative stance mere moments into their first encounter. The woman was, at the end of the day, a mother hoping to ensure the future of her child. Could anyone truly blame her for such a desire?

Accustomed to waiting, Mary spent her time observing the gentle fields around her. The captain's home was no impressive, grand rolling property. Nor was it in any sort of way unique amidst the countless country homes in England. But it was beautiful, and it was ordinary, and it brimmed with the promise of home.

She'd overheard the captain mention something about them being as good as betrothed when appealing for the curicle this morning. And, truly, their embraces after the wedding breakfast might intimate as much. But could she presume enough to allow herself to imagine a future here?

The sound of firm, male footsteps approached. Warm arms braced around her shoulders before she could turn to face the man in whose hands she would gladly

entrust her future. It was a future she had never before considered possible, but the reality of his touch, of the kiss he now brushed against her brow, compelled her to start believing otherwise.

"I hope all is well?" she whispered.

"Very well." The contentment in his voice was evident, even under the sound of the wind. "You, my dear, disarmed her completely when I could not. And the promise of a stipend for a London life with her sister seemed just the thing to placate her."

"I do not know whether to remind you or not that it was your inheritance I was promising away. I did not think a man would take so lightly the idea of a woman promising away his money without asking him beforehand."

"But it is to be our money, is it not?"

He turned her around gently as she took in a deep, stabilizing breath. The face that hovered over hers was no longer that of a stranger—severe and solemn, perched to the side of the room away from the rest of the crowd. This was a face whose every line and angle had grown dear to her, his private smile a promise of something deeper and more meaningful between them.

"I was not aware that you had bequeathed me anything," she said with a soft, teasing smile.

"Is it the custom for a man yet living to bequeath anything to his wife?"

"Wife? I don't think I recall you asking, Captain."

The look of joy that spread across his features was not the sort of frivolous grin that Silas and his ilk liked to display—the kind of flirtatious look that Siegfried tried so desperately to emulate. This smile looked far more genuine, far more abiding, and far

more precious for how hard-earned it had been.

Slowly, he pulled away and lowered himself to one knee. Mary felt her heart soar.

"My dearest Mary," he said, his low voice barely audible over the sounds of nature and the throbbing in her own ears. "I am not the sort of man many might consider a catch. I have no great fortune, no great home, no grand future to offer."

"William—"

"But I offer myself." He pressed her hands. "And whatever humble existence you have seen for your own eyes today."

A warmth that had little to do with her surroundings grew within her and spread throughout her entire being.

"I hope that is enough."

She sniffed, her hopes and dreams colliding in a whirlwind of emotions.

"Will you marry me?"

"Yes." She smiled.

And she was in his arms before either could say another word.

My dearest husband,

I miss you heartily, and I do not know whether to hope that you have missed me just as much or not. To hope that you equal me in my longing would be selfish, for I would not wish to inflict such difficulty upon anyone else, particularly to someone I love. To hope that you miss me less than I miss you, however, would be to question

the sincerity of your last letter—and I am far too kind of a wife to do so.

Fanny gave birth last night, and it was difficult for me to hide the news of our own impending parenthood while everyone around me was expressing their delight over the safe arrival of the latest Danforth grandchild. Silas, competitive as ever, declared that he and Philomena would bear the next one—and in doing so made it thrice as difficult for me to hide our news. If only you had not been required to claim your reward in London on such short notice, I would at least have a tall frame to hide behind whenever I feared my face betrayed our little secret. I can only hope years of repressing my feelings equipped me well for such a time as this.

You need not worry over my health either, for our daily exercise around our house has done wonders for my constitution. And I do retire early still, for I seem incapable of functioning without sleeping at least half the day away. My family's expressed concern is due mostly to their lack of knowledge over my condition.

Tomorrow, Siegfried marries, and my eldest brother has already moved back to Greybrook in preparation. Mama cannot seem to stop weeping over one sentiment or another. Shall I be just as fragile when the time comes for our own child to wed? I would like to think that I would be more sensible than this. But I suppose there are deeper emotions involved when a woman marries off all seven of her children.

I hope the new Mrs. Jansen is doing well. It was very gracious of her to excuse us from having to continue supplying the stipend after her new marriage, but I suppose the amount must feel a trifle to her now that she is to marry such a prosperous man. The fact that her son can be apprenticed to him is a double blessing to be cherished indeed.

I miss you dearly, darling, and cannot wait to be reunited with you in a week's time. Do remember to warm the counterpane before you sleep. It allows you such better rest when you do. It is a mundane request, perhaps, but I'd like to think that your wife is the one person with every right to nag you about the mundane.

I love you.

Always,

Mary