



Lady Maybe

By Julie Klassen

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Now she has awakened as though from some strange, suffocating dream in a warm and welcoming room she has never seen before, and tended to by kind, unfamiliar faces. But not all has been swept away. She recalls fragments of the accident. She remembers a baby. And a ring on her finger reminds her of a lie.

But most of all, there is a secret. And in this house of strangers she can trust no one but herself to keep it.

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Editorial Review

Review

Praise for Julie Klassen

“[It’s] what readers love of Jane Austen, *Downton Abbey* and even a bit of *Jane Eyre*...everything a historical romance reader looks for.”—*Historical Novels Review*

“Multiple Christy Award-winning Klassen once again demonstrates her gift for creating richly layered characters and skillfully integrating a multitude of fascinating historical facts into a spirited story.”—*Booklist*

“Delightful...Julie Klassen weaves a compelling story...fully imagined. I loved it!”—*New York Times* bestselling author Beverly Lewis

“A strong and entertaining story that you’ll finish with a sigh. Read it and tell your friends to buy it too.”—National bestselling author Lauraine Snelling

“Regency/Klassen fans will love the mystery, romance, and drama.”—*Publishers Weekly*

“Well-developed characters, plot twists, and attention to period detail make this a sure bet for fans of Regency novels.”—*Library Journal*

“Klassen has written an amazing historical novel. Her style may remind readers of Jane Austen and Lawana Blackwell, and she handles a 19th-century taboo with grace, style and respect.”—*RT Book Reviews*

“The characters are strong—the writing excellent.”—*Once Upon a Romance*

About the Author

Julie Klassen is the bestselling, three-time Christy Award-winning author of *Lady Maybe*, *The Secret of Pembroke Park*, *The Maid of Fairbourne Hall*, and *The Girl in the Gatehouse*. She loves all things Jane—*Jane Eyre* and Jane Austen. A graduate of the University of Illinois, Julie worked in publishing for sixteen years and now writes full time. She and her husband have two sons and live in St. Paul, Minnesota.

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CHAPTER 1

Bath, England

1819

Lady Marianna Mayfield sat at her dressing table—clothed, curled, and powdered. She feigned interest in her reflection in the mirror, but in reality, she watched the housemaid behind her, packing away every last one of her belongings.

Early that morning, Sir John had come to her room and announced that they were leaving Bath that very day. He refused to tell her where they were going, fearful she would somehow get word to Anthony Fontaine. Nor

was he allowing her to bring any of the servants, who would of course wish to know where they were headed, and might let slip their destination.

Marianna's stomach clenched. Did he really think another move would stop her? Stop *him*?

She shot to her feet and stalked to the window. Pulling back the gauzy drapery, she frowned. There in the rear mews, the groom and coachman prepared the new carriage for departure—replacing the long, spring-loaded candles in its brass lamps, then checking the wheels and springs.

Now she knew why he had ordered a traveling chariot, custom built for long journeys. It was an expensive equipage, but a man like Sir John Mayfield would not blink at the cost. Not when he was determined to steal away with her, and leave any would-be followers behind.

Anthony will find me. Of course he would. He had done so easily the last time they moved, taking a house here in Bath. Still, she wished he might return early from London, before they departed. Perhaps he would finally stand up to Sir John, tell him what he could do with his futile scheme, and end this farce of a marriage once and for all.

A knock sounded on the open doorjamb. Frown still in place, she glanced over, expecting Sir John with another edict.

Instead it was the butler, Hopkins. "A caller for you, your ladyship."

Marianna's heart leapt.

"It is Miss Rogers," he added. "Are you at home, or shall I send her away?"

Marianna's momentary elation deflated, but not completely.

"Heavens no, don't send her away," she said. "Show her into the morning room."

"Very good, your ladyship." Hopkins bowed and departed.

The arrival of her former companion was certainly a surprise, considering how abruptly Hannah Rogers had left their employ a half year before—but not an unhappy surprise. Glancing at her empty drawers and wardrobe with sinking heart, Marianna left her bedchamber and made her way downstairs.

A familiar, willowy figure rose at her entrance, assailing Marianna with waves of nostalgic fondness—followed by betrayal that the woman had left without a word. She swallowed the bitter lump and began, "Hannah! My goodness. I never expected to see you again."

The young woman met her gaze, expression tense. "My lady."

Marianna smiled brightly. "You're a godsend, an absolute godsend—if I believed in such things. What timing! That you should come back now."

Hannah Rogers clasped her hands tightly, and lowered her eyes. "I . . . I never received my final allowance."

Companions received a modest salary referred to as an allowance, not vulgar "wages." Marianna had not expected the belated request, but didn't quibble.

"Of course you should have it. I never understood why you left without collecting your due." She rang a bell

on the side table and Hopkins appeared.

“Ask Mr. Ward to bring in Miss Rogers’s remaining allowance, if you please.”

When the butler left the room, Marianna turned back to Hannah and asked, “How have you been keeping?”

“Oh . . .” Miss Rogers formed a tenuous smile. “Well enough, thank you.”

Unconvinced, Marianna sat and studied her, taking in the wary eyes, pale skin, and sharp cheekbones—the hollows beneath more noticeable than she remembered.

“You appear in good health,” Marianna allowed. “If a little tired. And thin.”

“Thank you, my lady.”

“Please, be seated. I would offer you refreshment, but Sir John has seen fit to dismiss most of the servants already. We’re down to Hopkins, Mr. Ward, and one maid.”

Hannah remained standing, but Marianna didn’t press her. Instead, she tentatively asked, “And have you found another situation? I awaited word from you, or request for a character reference, but nothing ever came.”

“Yes. I have another place, or did, until recently.”

“Oh?” Hope rising, Marianna asked, “Are you not engaged at present?”

“No.”

Marianna rose and eagerly took the young woman’s hand. “Again, I say, what timing. For I am in dire need of a traveling companion.”

“Traveling companion?”

“Yes. Sir John insists on uprooting us again. Just when I have begun to appreciate Bath society. But he will not yield, and so off we go.” She laughed in artificial gaiety. “Say you will come with me as my companion, Hannah. He won’t even let me take my lady’s maid. He’s already dismissed her.”

He would probably refuse to allow Miss Rogers to go with them as well, Marianna knew, but she had to try.

Hannah shook her head. “I couldn’t leave Bath, my lady. Not now.”

“You must! I shall . . . double your allowance to convince you. If Sir John does not agree, I shall use my own money.”

Hannah hesitated, then faltered, “I . . . I don’t even know where you are going.”

“Nor do I! He won’t even tell his own wife where we are bound. Isn’t that a laugh? Think I’ll tell a certain someone, which of course I would.”

Again Hannah shook her head. “I couldn’t leave at present. I have family here—”

“Your father lives in Bristol.” Marianna reminded her. “And you left him when we moved here.”

“Yes, but . . . that was different.”

“Oh, I don’t imagine it will be so much different,” Marianna said breezily. “I doubt we’ll go far. The last time we only moved from Bristol to Bath—as though a mere dozen miles would keep us apart.”

She knew Hannah would understand the reference to her first love, whom Miss Rogers had met on several occasions.

Still Hannah hesitated. “I don’t know. . . .”

“Oh, do come, Hannah. It won’t be forever. If you don’t like the place, or need to return to your family, you will be free to leave. You left before, after all, when it suited you.” Marianna smiled to soften the words—jab and assurance rolled into one.

She continued, “I really can’t bear this alone. Traveling with Sir John to some unknown place. No comforting presence between us. No familiar, friendly faces. He insists we hire all new servants when we arrive. We are not to take Hopkins or even Mr. Ward.”

As if on cue, the door opened and her husband’s secretary entered. She noticed Hannah stiffen.

“Ah, Mr. Ward. You remember Hannah Rogers, I trust?”

The thin man with thinner hair and pockmarked skin turned expressionless eyes her way. “Yes, m’lady. Left without notice, as I recall.”

“Yes, well, no matter. She has come for her allowance, which she is owed fairly, so no argument, if you please.”

His eyes glinted with displeasure or perhaps rebellion. “Yes, m’lady. Hopkins did inform me.”

He turned stiffly to Miss Rogers. “I’ve taken a penalty from your *allowance*,” he began in patronizing fashion, “for leaving without proper notice, along with the eleven days you missed that quarter. Here is the remainder.”

Miss Rogers gingerly extended her palm, head bowed like a beggar. The man dropped several sovereigns and shillings onto her outstretched hand, smirking all the while.

“Thank you,” Hannah mumbled.

He turned without a word and quit the room.

Watching him go, Marianna shivered. “I cannot say I am sorry to leave him behind. Odious man. He is returning to Bristol to oversee Sir John’s interests there.”

Hannah glanced down at the coins in her hand. “I’m grateful for the offer, my lady. I am. But I . . . need to think about it.”

Marianna Mayfield studied her. Something was different about Miss Rogers. What was it? “Well don’t think too long,” Marianna said. “We’re leaving at four this afternoon, according to Sir John. Unless I can persuade him to forgo this idiotic notion. Jealous fool.”

Hannah looked up at her, expression torn. Almost miserable. She said, “If I’m not here by half past three,

don't wait for me. It means I'm not coming."

The hours passed all too quickly. The maid continued packing, and Marianna continued pacing. Still Anthony did not arrive. Nor did Hannah.

Marianna looked out the drawing room window toward the street. The traveling chariot had been moved to the front of the house, four horses now harnessed to it, the lead horse now and again stamping an eager hoof.

The maid, butler, and a hired lad stowed their belongings in the built-in imperial—like a large, shallow valise atop the roof. More baggage rode in the rear, strapped in to the outside seat where two servants could have sat, had Sir John allowed her to take any with them.

At that moment, he strode into the room, imposing in his shooting jacket. He sternly insisted Marianna gather her hand luggage and prepare to depart so Hopkins could begin closing up the house. He turned on his heel and stalked away, his grim expression brooking no disagreement.

One of Marianna's friends had told her she was lucky to have a husband with such a decided, commanding manner. Marianna did not agree. But she knew further argument about staying would be futile. The house had already been sold. She glanced at her watch pin. Twenty after three.

Ten more minutes . . .

Still hoping her former companion would arrive in time, she gathered her things and stepped outside.

Beside the carriage, Sir John spoke with a hired postilion, who would ride the lead horse for the first stage of the journey. They were taking no groom or guard. As Marianna approached, Sir John reached inside and extracted a flintlock rifle from the chariot's concealed gun case. He checked it, then returned it to its hiding place. Apparently, he would act as guard himself. Perhaps she ought be glad Anthony had not shown up after all.

Her gaze fell to her watch pin once more. Half past three. *Dash it.* She had so hoped Hannah would come.

Suddenly that very figure appeared at the end of Camden Place, where the crescent met Lansdown Street. Marianna's heart lifted. As she watched, a tall, dark-haired young man jogged after Hannah and snagged her by the elbow. They were too far away for Marianna to hear their conversation, but she saw Hannah shake her head and gently extract her arm from his grip. Resignation showed in her expression, but no fear. A suitor, perhaps? If so, no wonder Hannah hesitated to leave Bath.

Hannah turned away from the man and strode toward the carriage.

"John, look," Marianna said. "Miss Rogers has come to join us!"

Her tall husband stiffened and turned to stare, expression inscrutable.

Hannah Rogers hurried toward them, valise bumping against her leg.

Marianna beamed. "Oh, Hannah, how happy I am to see you! I dread making this journey, but I shall not mind nearly so much with you beside me."

"The offer still stands?" Hannah asked, panting to catch her breath.

Marianna ignored her husband's glare and smiled at her would-be companion. "Of course."

“And I may return if the situation doesn’t suit?”

“Well you won’t be a prisoner, Hannah. I wish I could say the same for myself.” She sent Sir John a pointed look. Waited for him to refuse. To insist that they travel alone.

His jaw clenched, but he said nothing.

The hired lad strapped Hannah’s valise with the others, and the three entered the carriage, settling themselves onto the velvet cushions of the plush interior. Marianna reached up and fingered the golden tassels of the rich blue window draperies and murmured, “What a pretty cage.”

They rode through the night in uneasy silence, stopping to change horses at coaching inns along the way. Cramped and sleepy, Marianna sat as far away from Sir John as possible on the bench seat they shared. She leaned against the carriage wall and looked out the side window, avoiding his gaze.

The brass candle lamps glowed steadily beyond the windowpane. Eventually, night waned and dawn began to redden the sky, following their westward course along the Bristol Channel.

Miss Rogers, perched on the pull-down seat nearby, seemed to grow more restless with each passing mile. Brow furrowed, she bit her lip and twisted her long fingers again and again in her lap. Outside, a light drizzle began to fall, and if Marianna was not mistaken, her companion’s eyes were damp as well.

As they entered yet another unknown hamlet and rumbled past its village green, the three of them stared out the window at a sobering sight: a pair of low-lying wooden stocks. Two women sat on the ground behind them, bound at the ankles. One woman scowled and swore at the jeering passersby. The other stared off into the distance with as much quiet dignity as the mortifying position allowed. Marianna wondered what each woman had been found guilty of. She was struck by how differently each faced the consequences of her actions, whatever they were. A chill passed up Marianna’s neck. Would she face consequences for her own actions? She shrugged off the uncomfortable thought. Nothing would happen to her. It had not been her fault—or her idea. And after all, they had gotten away with everything for more than two years now.

Sometime later, they stopped at another coaching inn. To that point, they had traveled with a team of four, driven by a succession of mounted postilions. But this inn had only two horses available, and how mismatched they were. The weary postilion departed, replaced by a fresh young man of nineteen or twenty. He converted the chariot’s front box into a coachman’s seat and from there, lifted the reins.

“It won’t be long now,” Sir John said, continuing to survey the road behind them with wary eyes. “We’re beginning the final short stretch of the journey.”

As they left the inn yard, the drizzle swelled into a driving rain. The winds increased with each mile, howling and rocking the carriage.

They all lurched as the young driver pulled the horses to the side of the road and halted. He turned on his seat to face them through the front carriage window. Sir John opened the speaking flap to listen to what the young man had to say. Wind and rain garbled his words.

“The roads are awful bad, sir. And the storm is picking up. I don’t think it wise to go on.”

“Come lad, it cannot be much farther.”

“Three miles, give or take.”

“And no inn before?”

“No, sir. But a farmer might let us shelter in his barn.”

“A barn—with these ladies? No. We must press on. I have a particular reason.”

“But, sir . . .”

“I shall make it worth your while.” Through the flap, Sir John handed the young man a small bulging purse.

“And that much again when you deliver us there safely.”

The young man’s eyes widened. “Yes, sir.” He wiped the rain from his face and turned forward, allowing the flap to fall.

Marianna protested, “John, the boy is right. It is foolish to press on and get us all killed.”

Suddenly, Hannah sat up straighter. “Allow me down, if you please. I should not have come. It was a mistake.”

Astonished, Marianna stared at her. As did Sir John.

“I need to go back,” Hannah insisted, her voice nearly desperate.

Mouth grimly set, Sir John shook his head. “We are not going back.”

“I know—I shall find my own way. Just let me out.”

She rose and lunged toward the door, but he blocked her way with a strong, outstretched arm.

“I cannot in good conscience let you down here,” he said. “Not on this lonely stretch of road during a storm.”

“Hannah,” Marianna pleaded. “You agreed to come with me. I need you.”

“But I need—”

The coachman cracked his whip, the horses strained, and the carriage jerked into motion. To Marianna’s relief, her companion had lost her opportunity to abruptly abandon them a second time.

Tears filled Hannah’s eyes and rolled down her thin cheeks.

“See what you’ve done, John?” Marianna scowled at her husband. “You’ve upset her. My only friend in the world and you’ve upset her.” She added sullenly, “It won’t work you know. He shall find me anyway.”

Sir John set his jaw and stared straight ahead, though there was little to see through the front window save the coachman’s flapping greatcoat. Marianna glanced again at Hannah, noticing she kept her face averted to hide her tears.

Marianna wondered what had so upset the young woman, who had always seemed so stoic and self-contained in the past. But at the moment, Marianna had her own problems to think about. Turning toward the window, she stared at the lashing rain, the weedy verge between road and steep coastline, and the occasional glimpse of the grey Bristol Channel beyond. *He will find me*, she reassured herself again. *He did before*.

But Sir John had taken many new precautions this time, clearly more determined than ever. Well, *she* was

more determined as well. Things had changed—she had their child to think of now. And she would love that child far more than her father had ever loved her. Her chest tightened at the thought. If only she had figured out some way to get word to Anthony. But it was too late.

Suddenly the carriage wheels slipped as though on ice, losing their traction on the muddy road. The vehicle lurched. The horses screamed. So did Marianna.

Hannah cried out, “God almighty, help us. Protect him!”

The carriage fell to one side. A great snap and whinny and the vehicle was flying, weightless. A second later, it fell. Over the edge, toward the channel. The side of the cliff rushed toward them. A huge crash scattered her mind and shook her bones. A wheel sailed past the window. The next moment they were airborne again, before the top of the carriage hit rock, the vehicle rolling, rolling until she lost all sense of up and down. The world shifted violently and ended in a blinding collision.

And she knew no more.

CHAPTER 2

Pain. Cold. Weight pressing. Struggling to breathe . . .

Peering through narrow slits, she saw slivers of shimmering color, like light through prism glass. Yellow-white sun. Blue water. *Water?* A flash of red. Then blue again. A glint of purple and gold. Confusion. A hand in hers, slipping away. Metal, biting into her fingers.

Why can I not awaken from this dream?

So cold. So heavy. Darkness descending . . .

“Hello? Can you hear me?”

A man’s voice. *Must get out from under from this pressing weight.* She sucked in desperate, shallow breaths.

“Lady Mayfield? Can you hear me?”

Her eyes fluttered open and glimpsed faces floating above. More confusion. Why was the side window above her?

“It’s all right. We’re here to help you. I’m a doctor. Dr. Parrish.” The man nodded to the younger face hovering beside his. “My son, Edgar. We’re going to get you and your husband out of there.”

Your husband . . . She looked down and found Sir John lying limp across her body. Alive or dead? His hat bobbed lazily in the water filling the lower half of the carriage. His legs were sprawled, one bent at an unnatural angle.

There were only two of them in what was left of the carriage. Where was she? Turning her head, pain shot through her skull. She couldn’t turn far, pinned as she was. Through the gaping hole where the roof had once been, she looked out into the choppy water of the channel.

The younger man above her looked in the same direction. He pointed. “Pa. Look. Is someone out there?”

The older man squinted. “Can’t tell. Too far out.”

But she could tell. A red cloak floated on the tide, drawing the form it shrouded farther from shore.

The older man looked down at her again. “Was there someone else with you?”

She nodded, pain searing her. She felt as though needles pricked her scalp.

The man reverently removed his hat. “Too far to go after. Even if we could swim.”

A roaring in her ears. It couldn’t be.

“A servant?” he asked.

A companion was higher than a servant, she thought. A gentlewoman. She opened her mouth to explain, but no sound came. Her brain and tongue seemed disconnected. She pressed a hand to her aching chest and nodded again.

“There’s nothing we can do for her. I’m so sorry. But let’s get you out of there.”

Darkness tunneled her vision once more, and she sank into it.

—

The next time she opened her eyes, the same face hovered above her, nearer now. The older face, looking not into her eyes, but at some lower part of her. Who was he? He’d said his name, but she’d forgotten it. She couldn’t see much of the room without moving her head, but the bedchamber was not familiar. Where was she? How long had she been there? Her brain felt sluggish, addled, only partially aware of the rest of her.

“She’s opened her eyes,” said a woman’s voice, one she did not recognize.

She tried to turn her head toward the woman, but pain flared before her eyes, momentarily blinding her.

The man’s voice tensed. “My lady? How do you feel?”

“She’s in pain, George,” the woman snapped. “Even I can see that.”

She parted her lips, tried to speak. “He . . . lay . . .”

He took her hand, eyes round in concern. “Sir John is badly injured, my lady. But he lives, so there is hope. You leave him to me, all right? Do not fret. You’ve sustained several injuries yourself, but you will recover.”

“The . . . the . . . ?”

He grimaced as though he’d understood her. “I am afraid the coachman is dead. The harnesses snapped when the carriage fell and the horses ran free. The young man was not as fortunate.”

She pressed her eyes closed. *Poor man*, she thought. Though she didn’t really remember him.

“It’s not your fault, my lady. You mustn’t upset yourself.” He shook his head. “We saw the horses running wild, harnesses flapping, and that’s how we knew to look for the carriage in the first place. The crest confirmed who you were, though of course we were expecting you.” He patted her hand. “Now. You just rest, and Mrs. Parrish and I shall take care of you and your husband.”

Husband . . . She closed her eyes and pushed the uncomfortable thought away.

—

She lay, floating in and out of foggy wakefulness. The kind doctor had given her laudanum for the pain. A broken arm, he'd said. And a head wound—a gash and concussion. Now and again, someone gently lifted her head and pressed sips of water or broth to her lips, but she had little sense of time passing.

The woman's voice said, "Sir John is bad off indeed, and if he lasts the week I shall be very much surprised."

A second woman hushed the first. "Shh. She'll hear you."

In spite of the distance between them, she would never have wished such harm to befall him. *Poor Sir John*, she thought.

Lying there with her eyes closed, she tried to recall his face. Her thoughts slowly wheeled back until scattered images flickered through her mind. . . .

Sir John picking up a fire iron and poking at a log in frustration.

Sir John, looking at her, jaw clenched. "What I want is a wife who will be faithful to me. Is that too much to ask?"

Another flicker. Another image. His usually stern face softened and stilled in her mind like a portrait, captured in oils and cobwebbed recollection. A handsome face, she thought, if her memory could be trusted. Grey-blue eyes and strong, masculine features framed by light brown hair . . .

She had admired him once, she realized. What had changed between them? Had they ever been happy?

She tried to recall their lives before—where they had come from. Bath, she thought. And before that Bristol. Vaguely, she remembered when Sir John announced they were moving to Bath. She remembered feeling torn. Should she obey his wishes? Should she go?

He hadn't wanted to, but in the end he had taken them both. His wife and her companion. Just as he'd brought them both on this trip. Yes, she remembered Bath, the lovely house in Camden Place. And an ugly house in dreary Trim Street. Trim Street? What on earth would have taken her there . . . ? She grimaced, trying to think. But her mind remained a muddle.

She must have uttered some agitated sound, for a kind woman's voice crooned, "There, there. It's all right. You're safe." A gentle hand lifted her head. "Drink some of this now. . . ."

A cup rim touched her lips and she sipped.

"That's it," the woman said. "Very good, my dear."

The warm broth soothed her aching throat. The warm words soothed her troubled soul.

—

She knew it was a dream, but couldn't awaken. She dreamt she'd left a helpless baby in a basket on the shore of the Bristol Channel. She'd meant to return for the child directly, but instead she lay there as though

paralyzed, unable to force her frozen body to move. The tide was coming in. Closer and closer, licking at the sides of the basket. A hand reached toward it—a woman's hand. But the woman was in the water, the tide pulling her, dragging her away, her waterlogged gown and cloak weighing her down.

She grasped the woman's hand, trying to save her, but the wet fingers slipped through hers. Remembering the child, she turned, but it was too late. The basket was already floating away across the channel. . . .

With a start, she sucked in a breath and opened her eyes. She blinked at her surroundings. The half-tester bed was not hers. The lace-trimmed dressing table was unfamiliar.

She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to think. Where was she? What had happened? The carriage crash, that was it. They were not in Bath any longer. Nor in Bristol. Somewhere in the West Country, she believed, but had no idea where. Oh, what was wrong with her? Why could she not remember? It felt like a warm dark blanket lay over her mind's eye, blocking her memory, hindering clear thought.

One thing she knew with panicky certainty. She was forgetting something. Something important.

The door opened and the kind woman entered with a basin of water and folded cloths. "Good morning, my lady," she greeted warmly. She set the basin on a side table, then stepped to the washstand for soap.

"Good morning, Mrs. . . . I'm sorry, I forgot your name."

"That's all right, my lady. I often forget names myself. I'm Mrs. Turrill."

The kind woman was perhaps in her early sixties, evidenced by the many lines creasing her long, pleasant face. Her hair was still brown, though its center part was considerably wider than a younger woman's would be.

Mrs. Turrill helped her wash her face and hands and clean her teeth. Then she opened a drawer of the wardrobe and extracted a fresh nightdress and wrapper.

"What a blessing all your gowns were not spoilt in the accident, my lady. Your trunk must have been thrown clear."

Another flash of memory. Trunks and valises strapped in the rear seat. "Yes . . ." she murmured.

"It won't be long. In a few days you'll be up and about and wearing your pretty things." The housekeeper lifted the bodice of a gown of blue satin. "Oh, I like this one. Looks brand new."

Was it? It must be, for she could not remember seeing it before.

"And here is a lovely day dress." The housekeeper shook out a serviceable muslin and squinted at its neckline. "It's missing a button. I'm not terribly skilled with a needle, but I can manage that."

The day dress, in a pale wash of rose pink, did look familiar. She recognized it with relief. She hadn't completely lost her memory.

Lifting a hand to push a stray hair from her face, she stilled, captured by the sight of a ring on her finger. She stared at the hand aloft above her, as though it were a separate entity—someone else's hand. On it shone a gold band, with amethyst and purple sapphires. She recognized the ring at once and sighed gratefully. Things were starting to come back to her.

But again that heavy shadow fell over her. That nagging fear. Things might be coming back, but she was still forgetting something. Something far more important than a dress or ring.

The cheerful doctor stopped in that morning and found her still staring at the ring.

“Almost lost that,” he said. “Found it clasped in your hand and slid it back on your finger myself.”

She hesitated. “Oh. I . . . Th—thank you.”

He studied her face. “How are you feeling?”

“Confused.”

“And no wonder, my lady. What a shock you’ve had. The concussion you suffered could very well muddle your mind for some days to come.”

Perhaps that explained her jumbled thoughts and elusive memories. His calm assurance eased her fear. She looked around the sunny room and asked, “Where am I?”

“Clifton House, between Countisbury and Lynton, in Devonshire.”

Devonshire? Had she known he’d meant to go so far? The name “Clifton” meant nothing to her. She asked, “Is this your house?”

“Good heavens, no. It’s your house. Been in your husband’s family for ages, though he’s never lived here before. My son has been caretaking the place since the former tenants left last year.”

“I . . . see,” she murmured, though she didn’t see, really.

“Don’t worry, my lady. It will all come back in time.” He rubbed his hands together and beamed at her. “Well. I imagine you want to see your husband.”

The smile of reply that lifted her mouth faltered, then fell. No, she did not want to see him. In fact, the thought filled her with misgiving. She hedged, “I . . . don’t know.”

“I understand. But he doesn’t look too bad. Bruises and cuts on his face, head, and hands, but most of his injuries are internal.”

Was she only reluctant to see his injuries, or was it something more? Sir John had never hurt her, had he? Then why was she afraid?

The doctor took her good arm and helped her rise. The room swam and tilted and she leaned against him for support.

“Dizzy?”

“Yes,” she panted.

Mrs. Turrill came in with her sewing basket and tut-tutted. “She is not ready to be up and about yet, doctor.”

“So I see. I was only going to take her across the corridor to see Sir John. But I think we shall wait a day or two.”

“I should say so. Besides, I’ll want to brush her hair and get her dressed proper before she visits him.”

“I’m afraid he shan’t notice at the moment.”

“Perhaps not,” she said. “But a woman likes to feel pretty when she sees the man she loves.”

Together they helped her back into bed.

She knew they referred to Sir John, but another face shimmered before her mind’s eye. Settling under the bedclothes, she pushed away thoughts of Sir John, and tried to focus on the faint image of sparkling blue eyes and an affectionate smile. But other images kept pushing his face aside—a red cloak floating on the tide, a hand slipping from hers. . . . Had she only dreamt it, or was she remembering something that had actually happened?

CHAPTER 3

That next afternoon, Dr. Parrish came in and sat at her bedside. “And how are you feeling today, my lady?”

“Better, I think.”

“Everyone treating you well?”

She nodded. “Mrs. Turrill is very kind.”

He beamed. “I am happy to hear it. Sally Turrill is my cousin and I recommended her for the position myself. Though not everyone was in favor of the arrangement.”

“I am grateful you did.”

“You don’t know how that pleases me. Men love to be right, you know.” He winked at her. He then went on to explain that Mrs. Turrill had prepared the house for their arrival and, after the accident, had offered to serve as her nurse and lady’s maid, as well as cook-housekeeper. He said, “Apparently, Sir John asked Edgar to engage minimal staff, but planned to select the rest of the servants after you arrived. But, well, as it is . . .” He lifted his hands in a helpless gesture. “Sally *has* hired a young manservant and a kitchen maid. Otherwise, she has been making do.”

“I hope it isn’t too much for her,” she said.

“I’ve not heard a single word of complaint from her. Likes to be busy, Sally does.”

His smile dimmed then. He clasped his hands over his knee and cleared his throat. “Now, um, there is something I need to tell you . . .”

A woman passed by the open door, and, seeing the two of them together, paused in its threshold. Sir John’s chamber nurse, she believed, though she wasn’t sure of her name.

The woman frowned at them. “It must be grand to sit and talk while others change bedding and bandages, and feed and tend your patients. I’ve had more than enough for one day, doctor. It’s your turn.”

The woman stalked away, her heels echoing down the corridor and clumping down the stairs.

When they were alone again she asked, "Is that Sir John's nurse?"

"Em, no." He gave a lame little chuckle. "My wife."

"Oh! I'm sorry. That is, I did not realize. . . ."

He lifted a hand to stem her apology. "Understandable misapprehension," he consoled. "Mrs. Parrish has, um, kindly agreed to act as chamber nurse. She tends Sir John during my absences, while I call on other patients. It's only temporary, until the nurse I usually employ finishes with her current patient."

"Ah, I see."

He rose. "Well, I had better go and look in on Sir John. We shall finish our talk later, all right?"

After several minutes had passed, Mrs. Turrill entered wearing an apron over a simple frock as usual, and carrying a dinner tray. "Hello, my lady. How are you feeling?"

"Better, I think. Thank you. Dr. Parrish and I were just speaking of you."

"Were you indeed? That explains the itch in my ear. Well, George is a good man, but if he tells you any tales about my wild younger days, I shall have to return the favor!" She grinned. "Known him since a lad, I have. What a scamp he was, too."

"But your accent is . . . familiar."

"You've a good ear, my lady! I was born in this parish, like George, but was in service in Bristol for many a year."

"Ah."

Mrs. Turrill helped her sit up in bed, propped with pillows. She laid a linen cloth over the bedclothes and helped her eat soup and sip tea.

Afterward, the housekeeper reached into her apron pocket. "Edgar has been digging through the wreckage to see what might be salvaged." She extracted a black glove and held it near.

"Probably Sir John's," she said, and instinctively reached for it. She laid it on her lap and smoothed the soft leather. She felt her cheeks warm to see a man's glove on her leg, even if that part of her was covered in bedclothes. *Silly creature*, she told herself. She held the glove instead and tried to remember if she'd ever held Sir John's hand in hers.

A flare of memory flashed through her brain. Sir John taking her hand, almost roughly. She blinked. That couldn't be right. Oh, when would her brain cease its scattered state?

Mrs. Turrill searched in her pocket for another small object. "Do you recognize this?"

She held out a small piece of jewelry—a brooch. The pin bore a tiny painting of someone's eye under glass and framed by gems.

Mrs. Turrill said, "It's one of them lover's eyes. Popular tokens, I understand. I thought it might be yours, seeing as it's set in garnets—red for love and all that. Sir John's eye, is it?"

Was it? She didn't recall wearing it, yet she recalled so little. She *had* seen it before, she thought. The thickness of the eyebrow suggested a man's eye, with a brown iris. She pressed her own eyes closed, trying to recall the color and shape of Sir John's eyes. She'd thought they were bluish grey. Was her memory still so faulty, or had the miniaturist got it wrong somehow? Or was this image not of Sir John's eye at all, but rather a lover's, as the name suggested?

Had she a lover? Was she that sort of woman? Heaven help her if her father found out.

"I . . . don't know," she murmured, feeling frustrated and confused.

Mrs. Turrill patted her hand. "Don't worry, my lady. It will all come back to you eventually."

The housekeeper gathered up the dishes. "When I have time, I shall try to find a few more things of yours, my lady. Might help you remember. And perhaps something of that poor girl's to send to her family."

"Yes . . . Poor girl." She echoed sympathetically. The young woman's smiling face shimmered in her mind a moment, then faded away. She was too embarrassed to admit that at the moment, she did not recall her name.

—

That evening, she was still sitting propped up in bed when Dr. Parrish returned to her room.

"How good to see you sitting up, my lady." He smiled at her, then announced, "I have taken the liberty of borrowing a wheeled chair we might use. Edgar is waiting downstairs to help carry it up if you are willing to give it a go. I thought we might use it to convey you to Sir John's room, as you are no doubt anxious to see him."

"I . . ." She licked dry lips. "I should like to see him, yes." She forced a smile for the kind man's benefit, unsure why her stomach twisted at the thought.

A few minutes later, father and son returned to her door, a wicker-backed invalid chair between them. The doctor puffed at the exertion, while his strapping son looked unaffected.

She smiled at the young man. "Thank you, Edgar."

"My lady." He shyly tipped his hat and took his leave.

The doctor rolled the chair into the room and positioned it near the bed. Then he took her good arm and helped her rise. Again, the room swam and she leaned against him for support.

He looked at her in concern. "Still dizzy?"

She nodded, and settled with relief into the chair.

"Then we won't stay long and tire you out." He wheeled her through the door and across the paneled passageway. When they reached a door across the landing, Dr. Parrish stepped around the chair to open it, then eased her over the threshold.

The room was dim, the curtains drawn. An oil lamp burned on the side table.

Damp hands clasped in her lap, she looked toward the bed. Sir John lay there unnaturally still, fierce eyes closed, temple bruised, cheekbone swollen, mouth slack. So different than when she had last seen him,

pugnaciously refusing to yield. He wore a simple nightshirt, open at the throat, instead of his usual elegantly tied cravat. His exposed neck lay bare, specked with new whiskers. How vulnerable he looked. How weak.

She whispered, "Will he live?"

The physician hesitated. "Only God knows. I have done all I can for him. Set and bandaged his broken ankle. Wrapped his cracked clavicle and ribs. I pray there is no internal bleeding." Dr. Parrish grimaced. "His head injury is what concerns me the most. I've sent for a surgeon from Barnstaple to give his opinion. He should be here tomorrow."

She nodded her understanding. She felt pity for Sir John. Perhaps even grief. But beyond that, she wasn't sure what she felt. She stared at the broken man before her, her emotions a confusing jumble. Did she love him? He didn't love her, she didn't think. She pressed her eyes shut, willing herself to remember a wedding, or a wedding night. Nothing.

Then . . . fragments of memory spotted her vision. Buttons and hairpins falling to the floor. Cool rain on her skin. Warm hands. A man sweeping her up into his arms. But in the memory the man had no face. Was it Sir John? She couldn't be sure.

The memory faded. A wedding would have pleased her father. Though it would have disappointed the other man. For there had been someone else, had there not? Again she winced and tried to remember, but could not.

Instead, she saw another scene in passing, as though she walked through a theatre and out again mid-performance. . . .

There she was, sitting awkwardly in the morning room of the Bristol house.

Sir John stood, arms crossed, looking not at her but out the window. "So, what do you think of the arrangement?" he asked. "Are you willing?"

"Yes," she replied, knowing her father would approve.

He winced and shook his head. "But . . . should I agree to it?"

"Only if you wish to."

"My wishes?" He barked a dry little laugh. "God doesn't often grant me what I wish for, I find."

"Then perhaps you wish for the wrong things."

He looked at her then, and his flinty eyes held hers. "You may be right. And what is it *you* wish for?"

The scene faded. Had it been real or mere fancy? She could not have said how she'd answered his question or even if she had. Nor did she recall the specifics of their arrangement.

She did remember what a tall, commanding presence he had been. But the figure shrouded in bedclothes before her seemed sadly diminished. She wondered what Sir John had wished for so earnestly. It seemed unlikely that it would be granted now. For certainly no one would have wished for a fate like this.

CHAPTER 4

The next day, Dr. Parrish and Mrs. Turrill came into her bedchamber together, bringing unusual tension with them. Something had happened, she thought. Or was about to.

“What is it?” she asked. “Is it Sir John?”

“No. His condition has not changed,” the doctor assured her, without his customary smile. He sat at her bedside, asked how she was feeling, and then looked significantly at his cousin.

Mrs. Turrill turned to her and began, “Edgar has brought up a few more things from the wreckage, and I think we’ve found something of yours, my lady.”

“Oh?” She looked at the woman with interest. “What is it?”

She held up an embroidered bag. “He found this among the rocks. It’s a needlework bag, apparently.”

Mrs. Turrill opened wide the bag’s cinched neck and extracted a ball of wool, and thin wooden needles still attached to a wad of knitting. She pulled it flat. “It’s a baby’s cap, I think,” the housekeeper said. “Did you make it?”

She accepted the damp, lopsided half circle and studied its loose, uneven stitches. “I don’t . . . think so.” She wondered if it had belonged to the poor woman in the carriage.

Dr. Parrish glanced at Mrs. Turrill again, then tentatively began, “You see, Sir John mentioned you were with child when he wrote, but—”

“Did he?” she interrupted in surprise.

The doctor exchanged an awkward look with his cousin, then continued, “But when I examined you, I . . .” he paused, apparently struggling to find the right words.

But she wasn’t really listening. She was staring at the small, knitted cap. She didn’t recognize it, and yet—looking at it filled her with a panicky dread.

Had she been knitting that cap? Was she expecting a child? How could she have forgotten something as life-changing as that? What was wrong with her—was her brain damaged? Instinctively, she laid her hand on her abdomen. So flat. Too flat.

The doctor cleared his throat and continued, “I’m afraid I discovered you’ve . . . lost the child.”

She stared at the man. “Lost him?”

With sad eyes, the doctor nodded and pressed her hand.

Grief pierced her, a dozen jabs with an icy knife of dread, deflating her heart, sending her soul into a dark well of pain. She forgot to breathe. Then—lungs searing hot—she opened her mouth and sucked in a sob-shaken breath.

She bit back the cry she longed to exhale, but there was no stopping the tears that spilled forth in its place.

Mrs. Turrill reached over and brushed a damp strand of hair from her face. “I am so sorry, my lady. It’s a

great loss, to be sure. I've lost a child of my own, and know the pain you must feel. But praise God, you and Sir John survived and may yet have other children."

She was vaguely aware of the doctor sending the woman a cautioning look, warning her not to raise her hopes, but she ignored it. Instead she recalled the dream—the baby in a basket, floating away from her. Had she lost her child? Lost him before he'd ever breathed? Then why did the sound of a baby's cry ring in her memory as familiar as her own voice?

Her mind whirled, set free like a globe knocked from its stand and sent spinning across the room.

Her tears stopped flowing then, and in their place pellets of memory fell like sleet—one stinging shard after another. She gasped aloud, relief and new pain enveloping her. She *had* lost her child. But that did not mean he was dead, did it? *Dear God, no.*

"My lady . . . ?" Mrs. Turrill asked, eyes wide and worried.

"I . . . I am all right," she managed. "Or at least I—we—shall be. I hope."

Footfalls hammered up the stairs and Edgar Parrish lurched through the open door.

"Pa, come quick," he panted. "The Dirksen boy took a bad fall from the tree in the churchyard."

Dr. Parrish stood immediately. "I'll get my bag. Have you alerted your mother?"

Edgar nodded. "She's in the gig already." The young man glanced at her sheepishly, his face reddening. "Sorry to interrupt, your ladyship."

She squinted up at him, confusion returning. "Not at all . . ."

The doctor turned to Mrs. Turrill. "Please look in on Sir John for me."

"Of course."

He looked at her and patted her hand. "Now. You just rest, my lady. Mrs. Turrill will look after you and your husband until we return."

She nodded vaguely as he turned away. Watching them all go, her mind silently echoed, *husband . . . ?* She had no husband.

She felt her brow knit and her whirling thoughts snag and snarl at the doctor's words. Her muddled brain had refused to take it in before. His words, Edgar's, Mrs. Turrill's had all seemed like nonsense. As if they were addressing someone else behind her, just out of view. Now her brain abruptly quit spinning and their words, their deferential manner, the fine room, snapped into place in her mind. They thought *she* was Lady Mayfield. That she, Hannah Rogers, was Sir John's wife.

That night, Hannah tossed and turned for hours, trying to figure out how the misunderstanding had first arisen and how best to break the news. She dreaded to think how these respectable people would react when they learned the truth.

When she finally fell asleep, the dream revisited her. Her baby in a basket on shore. She'd meant to return

for him directly, but instead lay there, unable to move. The tide was coming in. Closer and closer, lapping at the sides of the basket. A hand reached toward the basket—Lady Mayfield’s hand. But how could that be? Lady Mayfield was in the water, the tide pulling her, dragging her away, her waterlogged gown and cloak weighing her down. Hannah grasped her hand, trying to save her, but the woman’s fingers slipped from hers. Remembering her son, Hannah turned in alarm, but it was too late. The basket was already bobbing away across the channel.

The dream changed then—fearful imaginings replaced by fearful memory—a scene that was all too real. . . .

Hannah hurried to the old Trim Street terrace house where she’d spent her lying-in, and knocked on the door until the skin of her knuckles scraped raw. Finally, a narrow slit opened and a pair of irritated eyes appeared.

“Please, Mrs. Beech,” Hannah said. “I need to see him.”

“Have you got the money?”

“Not yet. But I will have.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

“You told me that yesterday and the day before, and the day before that.”

Hannah strived to keep her voice calm. “I know. I’m sorry. Please—”

“I’m out of patience. When you pay me what’s owed, you may see him. But not before.”

“You can’t do that. I’m his mother. I need—”

“And I need what’s due me. This is not a charity, girl. I’ve learnt how to deal with chits like you. Mercy gets me nowhere. It’s a hard line that speaks to girls used to gettin’ their way, wheedling another coin from some weak parent or sweetheart. Well I ain’t your mother nor your sweetheart. Give me what’s mine and I shall give you what’s yours.”

“But, you have no right—”

“I have every right.” The eyes flashed. “Don’t believe me? Go to the constable if you like. Tell him I’m holding your child and tell him why. Mr. Green has no sympathy for those who don’t pay what they owe. See if you don’t end up at the workhouse yet. Or debtor’s prison.”

Hannah gasped. “You wouldn’t. . . .”

“Wouldn’t I? I don’t keep brats whose way ain’t paid. And what would become of your wee babe then?”

Terror shot through Hannah. What was she threatening to do? Hannah could hardly believe this woman was the same benevolent matron who had received her so kindly only months before. She rushed on desperately, “I have a new situation, but I won’t receive my allowance until quarter’s end. What would you suggest I do—beg in the streets?”

“No. Nothing so unprofitable. I am a businesswoman after all. Do what most girls in your situation do.”

Hannah shivered. "I would never do such a thing, Mrs. Beech. Whatever you might think of me."

"Evidence to the contrary, perhaps now is the time to start. Tom Simpkins would set you up in no time, no doubt."

"Tom Simpkins is a—"

"Tom Simpkins is my brother, girl. Careful what you say."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Beech. But please—"

The eyes moved away from the slit. "Come back when you've got the money."

She called after the woman, "Who is nursing him?"

"Becky."

Becky? Sweet, simple, unstable Becky.

Hannah swallowed. "I will get the money, I will. Every last shilling. But promise me you'll take care of him until I return. Please—it isn't his fault. Take good care of him, I beg of you."

"Every day you leave him here is another shilling. The rate goes up when you're in arrears." The slit shut with a metallic click. How very final it sounded.

Hannah winced. A shilling a day? It was practically all she earned. She would never catch up. She stood there on the stoop, frozen in dread. Her breasts stung with pinpricks of milk. She had wrapped her bosom when she took the new situation—sneaking away to nurse her son once a day and twice on Sundays. Her milk had already diminished, yet the build-up still ached. But that was nothing to the pain in her heart. . . .

With a start, Hannah opened her eyes. She drew in a long breath and blinked at her surroundings. Where was Danny? She looked to the right and to the left, pulse pounding. Then she recalled with a heavy heart that her baby was not with her. He was at Mrs. Beech's, out of reach.

Becky will look out for him, she told herself. Becky will make sure he doesn't go hungry.

Then Hannah remembered Becky's trembling hands, pale face, and wide vacant eyes when she'd first seen the bereaved girl wandering the streets of Bath, looking for her own child, forgetting or unwilling to accept that her infant daughter had died.

Her precious son's well-being was in this girl's hands? *Oh, God in heaven, protect him! Keep him in your safekeeping until I can return for him.*

Return. She had to return to him. Now. What had she been thinking to leave him? Had she any idea the Mayfields meant to go so far, she never would have agreed. And now with Sir John lying near death and his wife drowned, she wouldn't even receive the generous allowance Lady Mayfield had promised her. How then would she redeem her son?

Tears trickled from the corners of her eyes, down her temples and into her hair. She raised a hand to brush the tears away—a hand that bore a large ring. A gold band, amethyst and purple sapphires.

She recognized it again, only now she remembered why—Marianna almost always wore it. How had Lady

Mayfield's ring ended on her hand? Fragments of memory tried to reassert themselves, but she saw only jumbled pieces through wavy, clouded glass. She had thought it only a dream. But had it really happened? Had she been sensible enough to grasp Lady Mayfield's hand before the woman was pulled out by the receding tide—and weak as she was, ended up with only her ring?

She blinked and blinked again. It didn't seem right. What a frightening, unsettling feeling, not being able to sift reality from dream.

But one thing she did remember and knew with all certainty. She needed to find a way to return to Bath as soon as possible, and with enough money to pay her ever-mounting debt to the matron who held her son's life in her hands. Though in reality both heartless Mrs. Beech and troubled Becky frightened her.

The gems of the ring caught the sunlight slicing through the window, sending shafts of colored light dancing on the ceiling.

A sign, or a temptation?

Surely a ring like this was worth a great deal. A ring Sir John, if he lived, would believe consigned to the tides, lost forever with his wife.

Dare she?

A short while later, Dr. Parrish and his wife stopped by to check on her. He cheerfully reported that the little boy who'd fallen from the tree was recovering nicely. "Little scamp dislocated his collarbone, but I've set it back in place. He'll be right as a trivet in no time."

"If his poor harried mamma can somehow keep him quiet in bed for a few days," Mrs. Parrish added doubtfully.

Hannah formed a faint, dutiful smile, though her thoughts and stomach churned.

Tentatively, she began, "May I ask, Dr. Parrish. Are you . . . well acquainted with Sir John?"

He sat in the armchair nearby, clearly happy to stay and talk. His wife lingered in the doorway.

"Not at all," Dr. Parrish said. "Only by letters. Never met the man before and I suppose I still haven't. Not really."

"But—" She frowned in concentration. "I thought you said your son . . . ?"

He nodded. "Edgar met him when Sir John came out to look at the place a few months ago."

"That's right," Mrs. Parrish added. "Dr. Parrish and I were away delivering twins at the time."

"Sir John came alone?"

"Had a man with him, Edgar said. A man of business, I think, though I don't exactly recall." The doctor's eyes sparkled. "But you were not with him, my lady. Edgar made no mention of the charming Lady Mayfield. That I would recall."

Mrs. Parrish frowned and crossed her arms.

Hannah opened her mouth to correct him, then stopped. The fact that a lady's companion would be sent packing once there was no lady in the house gave her pause. The valuable ring gave her pause. The very notion gave her pause. But her conscience rose up, urging her to tell the truth and find a way to redeem Danny honestly.

She asked, "Dr. Parrish, can you tell me how soon I will be well enough to travel?"

His eyes widened. "Travel? But you have only just arrived."

"I know. But I need to return to Bath as soon as possible."

Mrs. Parrish's frown deepened. "Why, if I may ask? If you forgot something, perhaps we might send for it."

Hannah shook her head. "I didn't forget anything." She winced at the irony of those words. "But I have left someone extremely important in Bath and I must return for him."

They both looked at her expectantly, awaiting an explanation.

She swallowed. "My son. I am ashamed to say I forgot him for a time."

The doctor's eyes widened once more. "Good heavens! When I examined you, I assumed you'd miscarried the child. Though considering, well, several things, I should have known you'd already delivered. I am so sorry I blundered in saying you'd lost the child. How incompetent you must think me!"

"Not at all," Hannah mumbled. "Remind me. How did you even know there was a child?"

"Sir John mentioned his wife was expecting in one of his letters."

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