

The Misadventures of Expectations

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

By
Laura Solano
July 14, 2023

Dedication

This book is lovingly dedicated to my niece and nephews—those here, gone and yet to come. You are all so loved and cherished. I hope each of you experience God's love and purpose. Whatever you do in life, always choose God and He will not fail you.

Acknowledgments

God, you are the only reason I am here today. Thank you for giving me a mother who always told me I needed to write a book. Even though I ignored her words for years, I never forgot her belief in me. Thank you for being with me every step of the way and giving me the endurance I needed to keep pushing through.

I want to thank my family for their constant encouragement and love. Mom and Dad, you are the most loving parents. Despite dementia and multiple strokes, when it comes to parenting me, your personality radiates past all medical handicaps. Your constant love and acceptance mean the world to me. I love you both so much.

In addition, I'd like to thank my professors at Liberty University, especially Drs. James Latta and Karen Dodson. Your wisdom is invaluable. I am so grateful to have worked with you and learned so much from the faculty during my time in the Graduate School.

And to my Charnotary Apron Queens, I am so grateful that God placed you, wonderful ladies, into my life—your friendship is a balm to my soul and a joy to my heart. One day we will start checking off items from our adventure to do list.

Finally, to the one who sat through every click of my laptop, Delta—my German Shepherd service dog—I thank you. I know it was difficult to sit with me for long periods of time. However, I appreciate your diligence in making sure I step away from the computer to go on long walks. You are the reason I am sane and not too fat. Stay stunning, baby girl.

Abstract

The following research and manuscript discusses the art of using characterization and storytelling to teach younger generations. If used effectively, characterization has the power to transport a reader into the story's world. The manuscript that follows is the first attempt at a story about friendship, loyalty, and self-actualization. Against all odds, a young man leaves his country to uncover the truth about his family's demise and reported treason. As he ventures forward, he meets all kinds of people and learns the value of true friendship.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Dedication..... | 1 |
| Acknowledgments..... | 2 |
| Abstract..... | 3 |
| Working Title..... | 5 |
| Artist Statement..... | 5 |
| Critical Research Paper..... | 14 |
| The Misadventures of Expectations..... | 28 |
| Preface..... | 29 |
| Chapter One..... | 30 |
| Chapter Two..... | 34 |
| Chapter Three..... | 37 |
| Chapter Four..... | 39 |
| Chapter Five..... | 47 |
| Chapter Six..... | 58 |
| Chapter Seven..... | 62 |
| Chapter Eight..... | 70 |
| Chapter Nine..... | 73 |
| Chapter Ten..... | 76 |
| Chapter Eleven..... | 83 |
| Chapter Twelve..... | 89 |
| Chapter Thirteen..... | 96 |
| Chapter Fourteen..... | 99 |
| Chapter Fifteen..... | 107 |
| Chapter Sixteen..... | 112 |
| Chapter Seventeen..... | 117 |

Working Title

The working title for my thesis project is *The Misadventure of Expectations*. I chose this title as a nod toward the story's plot.

Artist Statement

Inspiration

Life is hard. Regardless of who you are, who you were, or who you will become, we all must trudge through the trenches of life at some point. Navigating life as a young person is daunting, which is why I am writing *The Misadventures of Expectations*. This story is inspired by my love for my many nieces and nephews and my desire to protect them from the evils of this world. Nevertheless, they must fight their own battles. I hope they will draw inspiration from the pages of this story on how to persevere amid adversity.

Introduction to the Manuscript

The Misadventures of Expectation is a fictional story about a boy named Barrett who travels across the Atlantic Ocean to clear his father's name. Barrett and his best friend Leo will embark on an adventure filled with the harsh realities of life in the 1800s. Through the ups and downs of their journey, Barrett discovers that who he was meant to be can only be found by listening to his heart.

Initially, Barrett tried to conform to whom his father wanted him to be: a scientist like himself. Unfortunately, Barrett did not have the penchant for the life of a scientist. He would rather be outside exploring the woods surrounding his home than be stuck in his father's laboratory all day.

When a laboratory accident causes his father, Christopher, to lose his research funding

and is forced to join an expedition to Costa Rica, Barrett finds his world turned upside down. Faced with this unwanted expedition, Christopher, who hates boats, the heat, and being away from home, blames Barrett for his change in circumstances. He decides that Barrett is not responsible or resourceful enough to accompany him on this expedition with the rest of the family. So Barrett is left in England while his father, mother, and sister explore the wilds of the Caribbean.

Not long after the father is out of the country, a London newspaper reveals that Barrett's father is a traitor and is in league with Napoleon Bonaparte. Recognizing that his misstep in the laboratory eventually led to the nation believing his father to be a traitor, Barrett decides to intervene and set the record straight.

The story continues with his and Leo's many misadventures that lead to the truth behind the accusations. Barrett discovers his value while navigating corruption, piracy, and love during this time. Specifically, he understands that his father's expectations are not about Barrett but Christopher's insecurities and fears. By rejecting his father's expectations, Barrett can embrace the man God created him to be.

Impetus

It is impossible for me to write this story without being influenced and driven by my love for family. As a Colombian American woman, I was raised with strong family connections and have therefore been conditioned to look after the younger members of my family. As an aunt to thirteen nieces and nephews, I am naturally biased toward wanting to help them succeed in life. I cannot help but wonder how I can use this story to teach them life lessons. With a new wave of children entering the family, I want to create a new way of nurturing Godly principles into their

lives.

A year before I began writing this story, my twenty-one year old nephew died of hypothermia on a cold February morning. James's passing was unexpected and unfair. Yet, in his death, we discovered what a huge impact he made on the kingdom of God. He was not a preacher or an overzealous Christian spouting homily to everyone he encountered. Instead, he was a mischievous yet likable young man who humbly lived out his faith.

In the months following his death, we heard story after story of how James touched the lives of the people around him. Most of his actions were small and easy to dismiss unless you were the one directly impacted by his deeds. We began to see a running theme of a young man living in a fallen world who continued to show up for his friends. He was someone who counseled his friends with wisdom beyond his years. He had not lost sight of who God created him to be. We saw the undeniable presence of the Holy Spirit working through James's everyday life.

His departure caused the world to stop and forced all who knew him to take another look at Jesus, whom James so confidently and comfortably embraced in his life. Was he now in the heavenly realm with his Savior? Will I get to go there too? What am I doing in my life to live like James? These questions were asked by those of us who loved him and even by those who did not. The student body where he attended, started a hashtag, #livinglikejames, to encourage each other to be more like James. Living like James means embracing life enthusiastically, scoffing in the face of a challenge, and always showing up for one's friends, all while maintaining faith in God.

Occasionally, grief overtakes me when I think of losing James. I miss his crooked grin

and his teasing nature. My heart goes out to his parents and brother, who carry the weight of his loss heavily on their hearts. I could easily allow myself to drown in the sorrow of what was and could have been. Yet, something always stops me. And it is the memory of a well-lived life. It may have been a short life, but it was exactly as his life was supposed to go. Like the rest of us, he was a relatable boy who had his triumphs and struggles. Somehow, he learned how to lean into God's presence and become a man that radiates God's presence, a bright light that casts away my sorrows even after his death.

James is the cousin I wish my younger nieces and nephews could get to know. My brother's wife gave birth to their first boy a year after his death. This little boy, Barrett, is the youngest of a family full of girls and ironically looks just like James did as a baby. With the start of this new life, I cannot help but reflect on how James was raised. What was done right in his life that resulted in him having such a strong impact on the Kingdom of God? How can we repeat these measures in Barrett's life? While Barrett and his sisters are a fresh take on life, they will each encounter the same evils in the world. They need to decide for themselves how to handle these challenges. While James is not around for them to confide in and seek counsel, I am still here.

The driving force behind this narrative is to creatively educate my nieces and nephews about the evils they might face and then encourage them to choose the right path. The children are too young to hear about people who will try to control them. They are too innocent to hear how sociopathic behavior might destroy their lives. However, they are old enough to hear a story about recognizing bad behavior and choosing to do good in the world. As they age, they might reflect upon the story and see the depth behind each character and situation. They will have the

understanding and maturity to recognize the underlying themes at that time. For now, I want to introduce these themes in an age-appropriate way.

Vision

The main themes in this story are self-actualization and resilience in the face of hardships. While I want to write a fun adventure story for my readers to get lost in, I also want to bring in real-life issues they can relate to. By focusing on the characterization of each of my characters, I want to show my readers what good and bad behaviors look like. I also want my reader to see that our good or bad behaviors can create the situations we find ourselves in. My characters will be forced to navigate various self-imposed situations, and those others force us into. I hope my readers will learn some life lessons that they can apply in their lives.

For example, the older I get, the more I realize how much our society is affected by narcissistic behavior. Either we adapt this behavior or live alongside others corrupted by this unhealthy behavior. So, I weaved in a character with what personality theorist Theodore Milton describes as a covetous psychopath (Stout, 2005). Out of jealousy, this character will manipulate events leading to his successful colleague's downfall. While my character did not choose this behavior, he is forced to live with the consequences of being associated with a sociopath.

Another underlying theme in *The Misadventures of Expectations* is understanding that we are constantly bombarded with voices telling us who we should be, how we should live, and what we need in our life. In modern times, we get these messages through social media, school, and loved ones, and often these messages can contradict each other. With this constant barrage of mixed messages, how can we expect young people to know what to do? Therefore, it is imperative to learn which voice to listen to early in life and how to discern the truth behind each

message. Ultimately, it is in listening to the voice of God that we can fully understand who we are meant to be. And in that understanding, we can rest in the peace God intended us to have.

I want to show how everyone struggles in their heart. I am fascinated by how psychological and behavioral issues are present in everyday life. Let me clarify the difference between the two types of issues. Psychological disorders distort brain activity, altering the individual's psyche. The individual may be unaware of their unhealthy psychological condition without medical intervention. Behavioral health is seen in how an individual reacts to different environments and situations. Any person, whether mentally healthy or not, may exhibit behavioral issues, but it is not a permanent condition like psychological disorders are. Both of these conditions affect the personality and character of individuals. Nonetheless, many people are plagued with these issues from within themselves or others projecting their poor mental health onto them. Understanding the underlying causes of these unhealthy behaviors is the first step to dismantling the lies they spread.

I choose to incorporate themes of mental health in my novel because they are real issues my readers can connect with, either now or in the future. I want them to know the difference between healthy and unhealthy behavior and how to manage them. I placed these serious themes inside a fun and occasionally humorous story to make the lessons more palatable. Hopefully, my readers can learn how to navigate a suffering world through the examples in my story.

Literary Context

My choice for writing this story as a historical adventure fiction is fueled by my creative philosophy that literature should be a safe place to escape from our everyday lives and where we can process and understand our world. Readers can distance themselves from their lives in the

twenty-first century by settling into the Napoleonic Era. The characters will face similar issues we experience today without the glare of technological and societal advances to distract them from the root of the problems.

The Misadventure of Expectations aligns with other literary works, such as Mark Twain's tales of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn. Twain's stories are set along the backdrop of the Mississippi River in the mid-1800s. Like my characters, Twain's characters find themselves in one scrape after another.

Another literary work that my book aligns with is J.K. Rowling's Harry Potter series. While my story is not considered fantasy like Rowling's books are, I draw inspiration from her writing and characterization techniques. Our works are stories for young adults with deep-rooted themes of overcoming evil. The characters in the Harry Potter series deal with common obstacles, such as jealousy, pride, forgiveness, and love. All the while, Rowling takes her readers on an adventure as the protagonist faces one challenging situation after another. Likewise, in *The Misadventure of Expectations*, the readers follow Barrett and Leo as they deal with disappointment, jealousy, and hope.

Significance of the Topic as a Christian Writer

My novel's theme of perseverance and self-actualization is important to me as a Christian writer. I was raised in a Christian home, supported by a loving congregation, and educated through a Christian lens. These formative years were crucial to my development as a Christian. I leaned heavily on the Christian principles I was taught with each adversity I faced as an adult.

Having walked through the fires of my personal life and survived, I want to ensure the same kind of security for my nieces and nephews. My way of equipping them is to share with

them life lessons creatively. By crafting a story about a child who is faced with impossible odds, I can capture their attention while teaching them how to make the right choices. These stories may seem insignificant, but I know that they are not. Suppose my readers come across someone in their life who shares similar characteristics with one of my characters. In that case, they can reflect upon the lessons learned from my story to help navigate their relationship with that person.

Conclusion

No part of life is outside of God's influence. It does not matter if we are the godliest person or if we are the most corrupt individual. Every aspect of our life is connected to God. As a Christian writer, I want to return the focus to God. I am not a flashy Christian who talks about God at every turn. That is not my personality. Instead, I dwell on Him as I move about my life. I am not perfect, but I am okay with these imperfections. I am working on bringing my life into harmony with God. As a Christian writer, I want to write about life as I live it, one that experiences the full weight of life's ups and downs. My story can be more relatable and reach a greater audience by being honest about life's difficulties.

References

Solano, Laura. *Thesis Topic and Title*. Liberty University, 23 March 2023.

Stout, Martha. *The Sociopath Next Door*. Harmony Books, 2005.

Critical Research Paper

Introduction

Making characters come alive is the true art of storytelling. To spark life into the pages of a novel, a writer must make their characters believable. Many elements go into creating a story, but characterization is the most important. Maren Elwood broke down how to use characterization to make your characters come alive in her book *Characters Make Your Story*. Written in the mid-twentieth century, her timeless wisdom is still true today as it was when she originally penned her advice to authors. To successfully create characters, the writer must understand how to use direct and indirect characterization. Then, they must artfully construct a person in the reader's mind without the reader noticing. The writer can do this through various methods, such as comparing and contrasting. Characterization is the deliberate act of arresting the reader's attention through literary devices subtly infused throughout the story.

Direct and Indirect Characterization

The first thing the writer needs to understand is the difference between direct and indirect characterization. Direct characterization is the shameless act of the writer deliberately telling the reader about the character. It is typically done through exposition. While direct characterization can benefit unimportant characters, it is best if the writer avoids this technique with his major characters. Otherwise, they risk losing the reader's interest. In contrast, indirect characterization can craft a world within the reader's mind without the reader noticing.

Indirect characterization is where the true craft of storytelling comes alive. When writers use indirect characterization, they refrain from revealing every detail about a character. Instead, they feed the reader bits and pieces of information about their nature, thus activating the reader's

imagination and allowing the reader to fill in the blanks. By doing this, the reader “is free to draw his own conclusion and is, therefore, other things being equal, more interesting to the reader than direct characterization” (Elwood, 1943). If a writer cannot maintain the reader’s attention, their story is dead. Characterization is used as a hook and to breathe life into a character.

The most popular use of characterization is seen through a character’s actions. A character’s gait, muscular movements, facial expressions, and reactions to emotional or environmental stimuli say much about who the character is. These unconscious movements are the most telling attributes of the story’s players. However, to get a better handle on indirect characterization, we must first distinguish between static and dynamic characterization.

Static Characterization

Once the writer has revealed the main character traits of each character, they must continue to reinforce these traits throughout the story. Yet, the writer must do this without the reader noticing. To perpetuate the character traits of the story’s main actors, the writer can allow seemingly unimportant attributes to do the work. By illustrating the character’s static characterizations, such as their name, body type, habits, posture, expressions, and occupations, the writer can reinforce the picture the writer wants to create in the reader’s mind. Elwood admonishes that,

The fullest, most truthful expression of man’s character is man himself. As well try to tell someone that nature of the earth without mentions its shape, its seas, its mountains, its rain and sunshine, its colors at dawn and sunset, as try to express the nature of man without taking into consideration his physical appearance, clothing, belonging. There are

static expressions of his character; this is to say, character expressed without actions.

They betray his true character to the observant onlooker. (1942)

The writer must use care to portray these static characterization traits for the reader. They must also be written entertainingly to avoid losing the reader's interest. Every aspect of the writing must continue entertaining and pushing the story along. This constant word-building through characterization aids in moving the plot along and allows the reader to believe that a character would act how the author designates them.

Naming their character something that highlights or contrasts the actor's character traits is another example of static characterization. For example, if your character is a tough, stern military man, calling him Roman or Colt helps further his characterization. Or, the author could give him a name that contrasts with his character, and by doing so, the reader unconsciously considers the irony of such a tough man named Ashley.

Showing a character's body type can also represent the actor's character. The mental picture of a fit muscular man is associated with a disciplined, proactive, and possibly vain character. A fat or sloppily-attired person brings to mind lazy and selfish attributes. The beauty of this type of characterization is that the reader is unaware of what the writer is doing since the reader makes these associations subconsciously.

J.K. Rowling often uses contrast when characterizing her actors, such as in Hagrid's case. When the reader first meets him, she describes him as a giant, but slowly, she reveals he is more of a lovable teddy bear. She writes,

The door was hit with such force that it swung clean off its hinges and with a deafening crash landed flat on the floor.

A giant of a man was standing in the doorway. His face was almost completely hidden by a long, shaggy mane of hair and a wild tangled beard, but you could make out his eyes, glinting like black beetles under all the hair.

The giant squeezed his way into the hut, stooping so that his head just brushed the ceiling. He bent down, picked up the door, and fitted it easily back into its frame. The noise of the storm outside dropped a little. He turned to look at that them all.

“Couldn’t make us a cup o’ tea, could yeh? It’s not been an easy journey....

(Rowling, 1997)

A storm rages outside. Suddenly, the door is violently knocked off its hinges. Then a giant appears in the doorway. She describes him as a wild beast of a man. But then she contrasts that image with him kindly replacing the door and asking for a cup of tea. Teacups are small and fragile items. The idea of something so delicate in Hagrid’s hands beautifully accentuates his monstrous image. Her initial characterization of Hagrid perfectly shows who the man is. As the reader continues in the series, they will come to love this lovable giant.

Elwood advises writers to go further into physical description than just body types. For instance, by observing a woman’s facial features, we can learn much about her character. Elwood instructs writers to look closely at the people around them and see what they can learn from their features,

Suppose we are walking down the street. A woman is approaching us. We concentrate our attention on the lineaments of her face, disregarding for the moment everything else about her appearance. We notice her wide forehead, large eyes set far apart, straight nose, a rather large mouth, firm yet full lips, a round chin with a dimple or indentation in it. The

general contour of her face tells us she is in her early thirties. What do these lineaments of her face tell us about her character. . . . Her wide forehead and eyes set far apart tell us that she is highly intelligent. Looking at her straight nose we know that she is firm in her beliefs and conviction. Her large mouth denotes generosity, sympathy and versatility. Her chin corroborates the testimony given by her nose and the dimple shows that she likes admiration and appreciation. (1942)

After observing these features, the writer is challenged with weaving in these details in a way that is both intriguing and moves the story along. They do not have to include every detail about the character. Rather, they can use the character's features to create drama and continue to hook the reader. Elwood shows writers how to do this,

Lucia's face was an autobiography of uncut pages. It challenged attention, but defied scrutiny. When a man first saw her, he beheld a blonde Madonna exquisitely masked with an inscrutability that both intrigued him and compelled reverence. Later, he discovered a wide inviting mouth, a faintly dimpled chin and ventured—as who would not—to explore. Then, at last, those dark hovering eyes flashed into action like an intermittent stop signal, alternately beckoning and warning. (1942)

Closely examining the first and second passages above reveals two distinctly different descriptions of Lucia's face. The first description lists all her facial features with corresponding analysis. This type of description tells the reader about the woman's character. It leaves very little for the imagination. This type of description is in danger of boring the reader enough to stop reading. The second description of Lucia's face paints a picture of intrigue for the reader. Intrigue is the hook that will keep a reader turning the pages. Elwood's second description infuses life

into two characters at once. Her pictorial of Lucia arouses interest and creates an image in the reader's mind that will captivate her reader. She gives just enough information for each reader to imagine the version of Lucia that interests them. All the writer has to do is allude to the features, and the reader will fill in the blanks. This technique encourages the reader to be an active participant in the story.

Specifically, the character's posture can reinforce character traits. How a person holds themselves speaks to what they believe about themselves. One's posture can be an unconscious outward expression of their character. An erect posture can represent alertness, confidence, or intelligence, depending on how the writer reveals it. Elwood contrasts a woman who holds her head high with her chin lifted upwards to a woman who always holds her head at an angle. The subtle posturing says a lot about the character of each woman. Perhaps the woman who holds her head high is expecting to be challenged. Or maybe, she holds her head high because she has the confidence of someone who always gets what she wants. The woman with her head positioned at an angle sends a different message. She might also be confident, but her confidence is in figuring out her opponent. Perhaps she is an introvert who wants to process the world in front of her before jumping to any conclusions. Either way, each woman is signaling something about her character by how she holds her head. These little clues provide indirect characterization that reinforces the author's previously established description.

If the writer were to look past the obvious physical characteristics and examine the expressions characters make, it could also reveal much about the character. The unconscious musculature moves of one's face can reveal hidden motives and emotions that the character

might not want to admit. Elwood challenges writers to watch people's faces when they do not think anyone is looking,

Train yourself to notice people's faces when they are in repose, and their owners are unconscious that they are being observed. It is then that aspects of character are revealed that you might otherwise never detect. At such movements look carefully.... That woman who was so bright, so vivacious, so charming a moment ago. Look at her, now that her escort has left for a moment. Her eyes are narrowed, her lips make a straight, inexorable line. If he could see her as she is now – but he won't. Here he comes and she is all softness and smiles again. (1942)

Weaving these moments of honesty can reveal much about the character without over-explaining to the reader. Furthermore, the reader has the pleasure of uncovering hidden motives that are not obvious to other characters.

Discussing a character's clothing is another way to show characterization. Clothing is an outward representation of what is going on inside a person. According to Elwood, a person deliberately chooses their clothing, and their clothing tastes are based on their character traits. She goes even further to say, "Show any writer what a person wears, and the writer should be able to deduce a great deal as to what that person is" (1942).

Outside of a character's physical appearance, a writer may use other factors to show characterizations, such as a character's occupation. People already have preconceived ideas about various lines of work. Elwood recommends introducing a character's profession early in the story to allow the reader to build a general idea about the nature of the character. Then later, they will

be ready when you give specific details about their work to help individualize the character (1942). Using careers is useful because it allows the reader to do most of the work.

The writer can also look to the environment for further characterization. When using the environment or setting, the writer will compare or contrast their character against the background to highlight certain character traits. For instance, placing a cowboy in the middle of fast pace New York City will bring to the foreground of the reader's imagination a vision of an out-of-place dusty man with deep values of hard work. The reader might see him uncomfortable in his setting but determined to accomplish his goal. Contrasting the environment and the character is another way to capture the reader's attention and help move the story forward.

The beauty of using static characterization is that the reader is unaware that the writer is telling them about the character. Instead, it reminds readers of their memories and experience and allows those thoughts to color the picture the author is painting. The author is then free to use other devices to characterize without losing the interest of their readers.

Dynamic Characterization

Elwood differentiates dynamic characterization from static characterization by the actions one makes through “bodily or muscular movements, and speech... [by their] walk, gestures, mannerisms, [and] changing facial expressions” (1942). Since static characterization reveals character traits through a body at rest, dynamic characterization shows character traits when the body is in motion. How a character moves their body, uses words, and physically reacts to a situation are all ways to show dynamic characterization.

When looking at a person’s walk, subtle character traits can leak out. Walking is an unconscious gesture. A sneaky person's walk will differ from a lazy man's gait. One might keep

their arms tight to their sides, while the other might loosely swing their arms. One might have a short quick step, while the other might have a slower meandering gait (Elwood, 1942). Both of these walks reflect a person's character. Alternatively, the author might use this to individualize a character, which can aid in hooking the reader's attention.

Similarly, how a person moves the muscles in their face can reveal much. Specifically, the eyes and mouth express the most characteristically. Describing the character's eyes, shape, color, or movement can reveal a character's temperament and motives. Likewise, the mouth can express emotion through its muscular movements. These outward expressions are a great tool to reveal a character's inner struggle.

Another example from the Harry Potter series is when J.K. Rowling shows the series' main villain, Lord Voldemort, receiving his human form for the first time since his self-imposed exile. She writes,

Voldemort looked away from Harry and began examining his own body. His hands were like large spiders; his long white fingers caressed his own chest, his arms, his face; the red eyes, whose pupils were slits, like a cat's, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness. He held up his hands and flexed the fingers, his expression rapt and exultant. ...Voldemort turned his scarlet eyes upon Harry, laughing a high, cold, mirthless laugh. (Rowling, 2000)

In this passage, Rowling describes his eyes as being red and shaped like slits. This description further characterizes Lord Voldemort's evil character.

Thoughts are a unique way of revealing who a character is because, usually, people do not lie to themselves (Elwood, 1942). Motives are revealed plainly. However, if the writer is

clever, they might use their thoughts to show how the character may lie to themselves. Guided by the writer, this method engages the readers to uncover the character's true motives.

Another way to characterize is to listen to how the character speaks or how others talk about him. When crafting dialogue, the writer must be intentional about how they want the character to come across to the reader. They must carefully select words that reflect the character's personality, motives, and emotions. Maren Elwood claims that,

Speech is the most flexible tool with which the writer characterizes an actor. It is one of the most characteristic acts of a human being. It consists of the *words* themselves, the *way* they are said, and the *tone* of the voice used. (Elwood, 1942)

However, the writer must create a naturally-sounding conversation. Elwood urges writers to imagine their character is in front of them. She admonishes the writer to first *listen* to them talk. What do they say? How do they speak? The tempo and words a person use can reflect a person's background and education. The tone is another aspect of speech that can be difficult to describe in writing. Elwood's technique is to use adverbs, comparisons, or figures of speech. She further explains,

Never forget the importance of *individualizing*, along with giving actual character-traits. I stress individualizing characters because it is an important part of making any fiction character come alive. Suppose you have presented the dominant character-traits of your actor, but you want to further individualize him by means of his voice. You will, of course, choose a quality of voice in keeping with your character; that is, you will not give a patient man a petulant, singsong voice, or a bully a low-pitch melodious voice. (1942)

How a person delivers their words offers many ways to characterize their actors. The writer can select or combine any of these characterizations to round out their character.

J.K Rowling skillfully combines dialogue, thoughts, word choice, and contrast to further characterize Harry Potter in the second book of the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. She writes,

“Er—hello,” said Harry nervously.

“Harry Potter!” said the creature in a high-pitch voice Harry was sure would carry down the stairs. “So long has Dobby wanted to meet you, sir...Such an honor it is...”

“Th-thank you,” said Harry, edging along the wall and sinking into his desk chair, next to Hedwig, who was asleep in her large cage. He wanted to ask, “What are you?” but thought it would sound rude, so instead he said, “Who are you?”

“Dobby, sir. Just Dobby. Dobby the house-elf,” said the creature.

“Oh—really?” said Harry. “Er—I don’t want to be rude or anything, but – this isn’t a great time for me to have a house-elf in my bedroom.”

Aunt Petunia’s high, false laugh sounded from the living room. The elf hung his head.

“Not that I’m not pleased to meet you,” said Harry quickly, “but, er, is there any particular reason you’re here?”

“Oh, yes, sir,” said Dobby earnestly. “Dobby has come to tell you, sir...it is difficult, sir... Dobby wonders where to begin....”

“Sit down,” said Harry politely, pointing at the bed.

To his horror, the elf burst into tears—very noisy tears.

“*S-sit down!*” he wailed. “*Never...never ever...*”

Harry thought he heard the voices downstairs falter.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, “I didn’t mean to offend you or anything—”

“Offend Dobby!” chocked the elf. “Dobby has *never* been asked to sit down by a wizard—like an *equal*—”

Harry, trying to say “Shh!” and look comforting at the same time, ushering Dobby back onto the bed where he sat hiccoughing, looking like a large and very ugly doll. At least he managed to control himself, and sat with his great eyes fixed on Harry in an expression of adoration. (Rowling, 1998)

In this passage, the reader meets Dobby, the house elf, and witnesses how others see Harry Potter. Dobby speaks reverently toward Harry. He calls him “sir” and says he has been longing to meet Harry Potter. This hints to the reader that Harry must be a good person. Rowling further reinforces this through Harry’s thoughts. Despite Dobby’s hideous appearance and intrusions into his room, Harry did not want to be rude to Dobby. Instead, he speaks respectfully to his intruder and even tries to comfort Dobby despite the cost to him. All of these actions speak to the character of Harry Potter. As Rowling does this, she is writing entertainingly and moving the story along.

Conclusion

Combining indirect and direct, static and dynamic characterization with other literary devices, a writer has the power to hold a reader’s attention until the very last page. Eighty years later, Maren Elwood’s characterization method is still the best way to breathe life into any

literary character. Crafting a well-rounded character is truly a work of art. Without laying a story with characterization, a story will fall apart.

References

Elwood, M. (1942). *Characters make the story*. The Writer, Inc.

Rowling, J.K. (1997). *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. Scholastic, Inc.

Rowling, J.K. (1998). *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. Scholastic, Inc.

Rowling, J.K. (2000). *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. Scholastic, Inc.

The Misadventures of Expectations

by

Laura Solano

Preface

It was three o'clock in the morning, and all was still among the homes on Mayfair Street, except for the house on the end where a dark figure slid out of a side window. Well, maybe "slid" is a bit generous. The usually nimble body of Barrett Meadows tumbled out of the window and fell into the azalea bushes below him.

Above him, Leo smirked and said, "Hurry up, you idiot!"

Untangling himself from the pink bushes, Barrett brushed himself off and looked up at his best friend. "Says the fool who hasn't left the house yet."

Leo jumped down beside Barrett, clearing the azalea bushes. Rolling his eyes at his best friend's perfect landing, Barrett pushed Leo into the bushes.

A light flickered on in the upstairs bedrooms bringing Barrett back to the seriousness of their escape. Putting a finger to his mouth, he motioned to the window above them. Leo's playful demeanor evaporated as he saw someone inside the house struggle to open the window. The boys edged away from the bushes and moved along the side of the house just as Whit Roberts stuck his head out the window. Craning his neck to and fro with his wiry hair catching in the wind, he yelled into the night air, "Who's out there?"

Reaching the corner of the house, Leo grabbed his hat, pressed it firmly against his head, and whispered to Barrett, "Let's get out of here!" and took off into the woods. With one last look up at his father's research partner, Barrett grabbed his satchel and took off after Leo, leaving behind his summer prison.

Chapter One

Spring 1807

Barrett Meadows was neither a boy nor a man. He was at that indiscriminate time in life when he was expected to behave like a man even though everyone treated him like a boy. For as long as he could remember was told he would become a botanist like his father, and his grandfather. No one bothered to ask him what he wanted, for if they did, they might be surprised by his answer. Living in a laboratory staring into an microscope for the rest of his life felt like a death sentence.

The summer before he turned fifteen, his father told him he wanted Barrett to spend more time in the lab. Fearing a summer cooped up between four walls, Barrett convinced his father that it would be a better use of his time to observe nature in its natural environment: the woods. Afterall, during the school year he would have no time to spend outside.

Each morning, he woke early and set off for the woods before his father could tell him otherwise. Wandering through the woods, he listened to the birds chirping to one another and watched the rabbits nibble on twigs. The further he ventured into the dense woods, the freer his soul felt. Stepping over an old downed tree, he took in the dewy trees with birds swooping in and out of their branches. Closing his eyes, he breathed in the crisp morning air and let himself be serenaded by the quiet rustle of leaves as a gentle breeze moved through the treetops. The chatter of the woodland creatures rushed over him as he tried to distinguish which sound belonged to which animal. He expelled a deep breath—WHACK!

Barrett's eyes shoot open just in time to see his best friend Leo launch another acorn at his head.

"You get so weird when you're alone in the woods. Seriously. I'm embarrassed for you."

Leo laughed as he made his way over to Barrett.

"And yet, you still meet me here every day. You really need more friends." Barret replied.

"If only more of the boys from school lived around here. It looks like it's just you and me for the summer," Leo grinned.

Stepping over branches, the boys made their way to a badger's den they recently discovered. "Hey, let's see if the badgers got our gift," Barrett suggested. While they hadn't seen a badger yet, the pawprints leading down into a hole gave away their presence. Badgers lived in underground tunnels and only came out at night. Yet, Barrett was determined to see one.

"It's gone! They took the earthworms we left them." Barrett's eyes widened with delight. "Okay, so that confirms it. This is an active passage for them. If we come back at night, I bet we could see them. We'll leave another pile of earthworms to attract them back to this spot."

A rustling on the other side of the tree caught Barrett's attention. Stepping past the opening of the badger's den, Barrett pushed aside the brush to reveal a small and pathetic-looking fox. Its fur was caked in mud and dried blood. Timid eyes looked up at Barrett. A soft whimper escaped its lips. Barrett slipped his coat off his body and wrapped it around the fox. Gingerly, he cradled the fox against his chest. In a calm voice, he addressed Leo, "I'm taking him to my father. He can help him."

Leo's eyebrows rose. "And how exactly is Mr. Meadows supposed to fix a fox?"

Careful not to disturb the injured animal, Barrett backtracked out of the woods. "He's a scientist. He'll know what to do. Maybe he has a salve or something. And maybe he can make

him something to eat to nourish him. He looks sickly, doesn't he? Father is always going on about the medicinal powers of nature. He'll know what to do."

Crossing the field between the woods and his father's home, Barrett considered how his father always told him he needed to focus more on his studies. *"If you're going to spend time in nature, then consider how nature takes care of itself. Observe the conditions it thrives in and then consider why it does so. The clues are there if you look close enough."* Cradling the whimpering fox against his chest, Barrett imagined his father's pleasure when he brought this injured animal to cure with one of his remedies.

Christopher Meadow had a large greenhouse connected to a small cottage that his father used as a laboratory. The cottage was built behind the family home so Mr. Meadows could study plant life. It was not unusual to find him there at all hours of the day and night. Mrs. Meadows complained that if it weren't for his biological need to eat and rest, she would never see her husband. Nonetheless, those countless hours in the laboratory produced many discoveries. He had authored numerous articles discussing how farmers could improve their crops or explained how nature provided natural remedies to many of life's ailments.

Opening the cottage door for Barrett and the wounded animal, Leo stood aside while his friend rushed through the doorway.

"Father?" Barrett's eyes searched the room for Mr. Meadows.

BANG!

The door behind Barrett slammed shut, startling the fox out of its stupor. Frantically the fox leaped out his arms and onto the counter next to Barrett, knocking over vials and canisters. Various liquids and powders spilled onto the counter and floor. Jumping from the counter to the

work table in the center of the room, the fox continued to wreak havoc in the laboratory until it jumped through a window and disappeared into the morning haze.

The whole episode lasted less than a minute, but it felt like an eternity to Barrett as his father's workspace was destroyed. Behind him, he heard a whoosh as the contents on the counter caught fire. Barrett's eyes widened as the flames began to grow. Looking around for something to put the fire out, he spied a beaker filled with liquid. He lunged for it.

"Nooooo!" Screamed Leo. But it was too late. Barrett threw the liquid on the fire. Instantaneously, the fire erupted. A flame shot back towards Barrett, causing his sleeve to catch fire. The fire now raced up the back wall and across the counters. Leo pushed Barrett outside before the fire worsened. Quickly, he stripped his jacket off and beat the fire out of Barret's sleeve.

Christopher Meadows burst out of the main house and ran towards the boys. The cottage, so serene moments ago, was now fully engulfed in flames.

"What happened?" He shouted over the cacophony of the fire.

"There was a fox," Barrett mumbled.

Chapter Two

Barrett Meadows glared at his father, Christopher Meadows, standing beside his waiting carriage. Every fiber of his being wanted to push his way into the cab. The thought that his family was leaving him behind was unfathomable. Despite his father's complaints about having to travel overseas to conduct his research now that the laboratory was destroyed, Barrett knew that it would be an adventure of a lifetime.

"Father, you can't seriously think leaving me behind with your stodgy research partner is better than letting me join you on your expedition to Costa Rica?" Barrett stared at his father in disbelief. "I can learn more from you in one week than I could by spending an entire summer with old Mr. Roberts."

Looking past his father to his mother, he silently pleaded for her to intervene. Only his mother, Phie Meadows, refused to look at Barrett. Outwardly she appeared calm, but Barrett knew that her fists clenching her skirts said otherwise. She was furious with his father for leaving Barrett behind. Barrett had listened as his mother made her stand known to Father. Yet, Father stood his ground. He was adamant that Barrett was too much of a liability to take with him. Plus, this trip would interfere with Barrett's studies once school resumed in the fall. So, he arranged for his son to shadow his research partner, Whit Roberts, for the summer. Once school resumed in the fall, Barrett would return to boarding school.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Christopher explained, "You are too immature for the level of responsibility I would need from you on this expedition. You were lucky that you weren't badly injured in the fire. Honestly, I still can't fathom why you wanted to bring a wild animal into my laboratory. If anything it made me realize that you still have a lot of learning to

do. I would be doing you a grave disservice if I interrupted your education. You need to go to school before joining me in the field. You're not ready yet." Taking a deep breath to calm his frustrations, he continued, "We will write and keep you updated on every step of the journey."

"And I will send you some of my drawings so you can see what we see, too." Charlotte, Barrett's sixteen-year-old sister, said from the carriage. Charlotte and Mother both assisted Father in his research. Mother took copious notes for his father, while Charlotte illustrated the various plants that Father studied. Everyone in his family had a role but him. Barrett knew better than to argue; his father wouldn't listen. Christopher Meadows firmly believed that success was found in books, something Barrett tended to ignore. Barrett preferred wandering in the woods and learning about wildlife through observation. Reading was dull and lifeless. In fact, there was nothing more boring than reading. Her Majesty should consider forcing criminals to read as part of their punishment.

"Your time will come, Barrett. But, in the meantime, be on your best behavior while staying with Mr. Roberts. He will take good care of you."

With a resigned sigh, Barrett nodded, "I understand, Sir. I will make you proud."

"That's my boy." Smiling down at his son, Christopher patted Barrett's head in approval. Barrett mustered all his remaining strength not to swat his father's hand away. Barrett knew that his father still saw him as a child. Unfortunately, he looked more like a ten-year-old kid than his actual age of fourteen. Despite Mother's assurances that he would fill out like a bear and be as tall as the trees, Barrett had yet to see any growth.

Extending his hand to his father, Barrett said goodbye to his father. Turning to his mother, he saw the shimmering of her unshed tears as he hugged her goodbye. He knew he would be

missed, but it was not enough to dull the ache of being left behind. Charlotte squeezed him tight, returned to her seat, and waved goodbye as the horses led his family away.

Barrett watched as the carriage rode down the street. Jealousy and shame battled within him. If it weren't for his foolish mistake with the fox, his father would not be forced to leave England. With a deep sigh, Barrett turned towards the foreboding home of Mr. Whit Roberts. A hawk flew over the house and landed on the eaves. Serenely, the bird looked towards the tree-lined fence that ran down the west side of the property. The lonely border stood guard to keep unwanted intruders from escaping into the woods. Then, as if reaching the same decision as Barrett, the hawk took off for the forest. Following the hawk's path, Barrett raced towards his tree-packed haven. Later, he would face his prison sentence in Mr. Roberts's home. But for now, he would take solace among the trees while the musical chatter of the woodland animals washes over him.

Somehow, he must find a way through this torturous existence.

Chapter Three

Tracking mud into Mr. Roberts's home was one of the few pleasures Barrett enjoyed. Nothing made Whit Roberts more upset than dirt in his pristine home. Crossing over the front door's threshold, Barrett stomped his boots across the foyer and into the study. Whit Robert sucked in a shocked gasp as Barrett walked across the room.

"My dear boy! Look what you've done!" Whit Roberts quickly rose from his chair but failed to notice the footstool before him. Stumbling over the stool, he lurched forward, flailing his arms in the air as he landed unceremoniously on top of a large muddy puddle. As he pushed off the ground, his hand slipped on the wet floor and fell face-first into the mud. Then jumping up faster than Barrett thought the older man could move, Whit Roberts began frantically wiping the muck off his face while dry heaving simultaneously.

Shame washed over Barrett's face. *I may have taken it too far this time.* Barrett watched as Whit Roberts bent over, gagging. *Horse manure might have been a bit much.*

Quickly, looking around for anything to help Whit, Barrett grabbed a scarf draped across the table. "Here, use this!"

Whit pressed the fabric against his skin and wiped off the offending substance. As the dry heaving subsided, Whit pulled the fabric away from his face as if noticing it for the first time. He stared at the material in astonishment. "Dear God, you've ruined it!"

The color drained from Barrett's face as he realized that the scarf he gave Whit was not a scarf—it was the Union Jack. The treasured gift from the Prince Regent was on permanent display in the study. "I...uh...I am... oh... I am so sorry," Barrett stammered. "I thought it was a scarf."

"What, you didn't recognize the British flag?" Whit cradled the fabric against his chest, ignoring the muck smeared across it. The fluff of white hair that crowned Whit's head stood as if trying to distance itself from the manure on the man's face.

"But, what was it doing out of the case?" Barrett glanced over at the empty frame sitting on the side table.

"I was looking at it!" Whit barked.

"Why?"

"Does it matter? It's ruined now!" Whit seethed in righteous indignation.

Taking a step towards Whit, Barrett stretched out his hands for the flag. "Here, let me take it. I can get it cleaned up, right as new."

"You will do no such thing, you worthless child! Get out of my sight!"

Dejected, Barrett started to make his way to the study door. "STOP! Take off your shoes before you move another inch. I will not have you destroying any more of my home," Whit Roberts screeched.

Sitting down where he stood, Barrett removed his boots.

"A telegraph for you, Sir."

The Roberts' butler entered the study holding a silver tray with an envelope on top of it. Whit extended his hand and sighed, "Bring it here, Charles."

Before Barrett could warn Charles, the butler stepped into a foul-smelling paddy. Quickly, Barrett left the room before he could be yelled at again. Racing up the stairs, he heard the clamor of the butler colliding with the floor. He needed to get out of the house, but not before he changed out of his smelly clothes.

Chapter Four

With swift whacks of his knife, Barrett annihilated the thorny blackberry vines that dared to block his path. Trampling the berries under his boots, Barrett eyed a suspicious-looking downed tree ahead.

"You might succeed more with a scabbard than with that sorry blade you've got there." Leo lazily picked up a few blackberries that survived Barrett's wrath and popped them into his mouth. "You know, you have a unique way of expressing your passion for vegetation."

Barrett glared at Leo, "Vegetation is not my passion; it's my father's. And it's called botany, moron."

"Same thing." Smirking, Leo pushed past Barrett further into the woods.

Sighing, Barrett turned and followed his best friend. "I wish Father paid more attention to the wildlife that depended on his stupid plants. I don't understand how he can study the same plants over and over again. Botany is so boring. Nothing new ever happens. Animals, on the other hand, are fascinating! They have personalities and amazing skills. Like, how do bears sleep for months at a time without food?"

Leo shrugged and threw up his hands, "It's a mystery! No one knows."

"Shut up! I'm serious. It's amazing! And then there are the ants-"

"Oh, please, tell me! What about the ants?" Leo interrupted.

Annoyed, Barrett shoved Leo off the path and into a tree. Leo let out a yelp and fell to the ground. "Well, they're a lot smarter than you, that's for sure," Barrett laughed.

Looking up at Barrett, Leo's lip curved up on one side. "Maybe, but I bet I can fight better than them." With the swiftness of a snake, Leo maneuvered to the side of Barrett and kicked him

behind his knees. Eyes wide, Barrett lurched forward, trying to regain his balance. But he was no match for Leo, who swiped Barrett's feet from under him. Leo quickly jumped up to his feet and ran off.

Laughing, the boys chased each other through the woods, tumbling over logs and splashing through creeks. At the edge of the woods, the boys emerged sweaty and covered in mud. Panting, Leo leaned against the fence bordering the Roberts' property. Thunder cracked in the distance. Barrett looked at the sky and said, "You might as well stay for dinner. It will be pouring buckets soon."

"Don't act like you care about my well-being. You don't want to be alone with old man Roberts."

"It's true. I don't care about you." Then, scrunching his nose, Barrett said, "Wow, that is impressive. You stink." Proudly, Leo smelled his underarms. "You're welcome."

"Let's go, idiot."

"Hey, let's make his house really smell. Shall I roll my body on his carpets and furniture?"

"Most definitely. That's how the dogs do it." Barrett laughed at the image.

"I am not a dog," Leo punched him in the shoulder.

"Noted." Barrett laughed as they made their way closer to the Roberts' home.

Overhead, the thunder cracked in delight while the clouds looked down in disapproval. Suddenly, the clouds opened up and dumped buckets of rainwater. Within minutes all traces of their time in the woods was washed away.

Sneaking into the house, the rain-drenched boys raced up the stairs to Barrett's room. Outside, the wind howled, and the sky turned dark. In the bedroom, Barrett and Leo were

surprised to see Gertrude, the housemaid, rummaging through his things. With her back to the boys, she emptied a tall dresser full of Barrett's clothes into a steamer trunk.

"What are you doing?" Barrett demanded.

Gertrude yelped in fright as she turned and looked at the boys. "Exactly what it looks like; I am getting rid of the scum." Gertrude's beaked nose snarled in disgust at him.

"Not too smart, are ya? Those are clean clothes. You can tell by the cleanliness of the clothes." Leo quipped, "We're wearing the dirty clothes."

Rolling his eyes at Barrett, Leo swiped a pair of clean trousers and a shirt and headed for the adjoining room. He slammed the door behind him, then shouted through the door, "For being such an intelligent man, Mr. Roberts sure likes to hire the dumb ones."

Gertrude stared after Leo in stunned silence, her tiny mouth opened and closed in confusion. Barrett wondered if her brain was malfunctioning from Leo's comment. Then, as if remembering Barrett was in the room, she turned to him, squinting her beady little eyes, she said, "You are done here! Your plan to infiltrate this house, to steal and sabotage, is over! We know who you are and who you work for!"

Staring at the woman who resembled a witch more than a housemaid, he spoke slowly, "Gertrude, I am thirteen years old. I am too young to be that interesting."

"It's true. He's a bore!" Leo shouted from the dressing room next door.

Chuckling, Barrett said, "Seriously, Gertrude. What are you on about? You are making no sense, as usual."

Gertrude's face flushed red. "The likes of you will not fool me! Me master, neither! Once Mr. Roberts finds out who ya really are, he'll be sending ya to the Tower of London, that he will!"

Nodding towards the haphazardly packed trunk, "Ah, that is why you packed me up. It is so kind of you to anticipate my needs, dear Gertrude. I shall remember you while I languish away in the Tower."

"You will do no such thing!" Spit flew from her mouth.

With water dripping from his hair and mud caked to his clothes, Barrett bowed graciously before her, "If you insist."

Gertrude's eyes narrowed at Barret. In a huff, she threw the rest of his clothes on the ground and she marched towards the bedroom door. With one hand on the knob, she turned back to Barrett, "I hope you rot in hell!"

And with a loud thump, she slammed the door behind her.

"Message received, madam," Barrett mumbled as he watched her retreat.

Movement in Barrett's peripheral caught his attention, and he turned to see Leo emerging from the dressing room. Leo had stuffed his 5'8 frame into Barrett's small clothes.

"Sure. Please help yourself to my clothes. They fit you well," Barret laughed as he rummaged through the pile of clothes on the ground. He pulled off his dirty shirt and asked Leo, "What is wrong with that woman? I swear she has had it out for me since I got here. Did I tell you she accused me of stealing the silverware once? It turns out another maid was polishing it. I bet she didn't bother to check with the other servants before she attacked me with her accusations."

Tucking his clean shirt into a fresh pair of trousers, Barrett looked up at Leo. "Did you hear me?"

Leo's rigid body stood frozen in the doorway. His usually pale face was now translucent. His eyes were fixed on Barrett as if trying to unravel a puzzle. In his hands, he clenched a newspaper.

Barrett's smile dropped, "What is it?"

As if waking from a trance, Leo snapped into action. Walking over to Barrett, he handed him the newspaper. "Read this."

Barrett took the paper and began reading. The more he read, the more color he lost from his face. "No," he whispered as he lowered himself to the floor. The tears in his eyes blurred the words on the print-smudged page.

Shipwreck Reveals British Traitor

The remains of the Veritas washed up on the American coast last week. No survivors were found. Among the wreckage were weapons and ammunition, which local authorities believe were intended to resupply Napoleon Bonaparte's troops in the Caribbean. British officials were shocked to discover one of their vessels was being used to transport French weapons.

The Crown commissioned the Veritas as a research vessel led by noted botanist Dr. Christopher Meadows to study plant life in the Caribbean. However, the wreckage reveals Dr. Meadows' traitorous intentions to use British resources to supply the enemy.

While it is unknown where the weapons and ammunition originated, there is no doubt that we had a traitor in our midst!

Barrett wiped his eyes, "No." Pushing himself off the ground, he grabbed his satchel from atop the wardrobe. Wordlessly, he gathered things from around his room and stuffed them into his sack.

"Barrett, what's going on?" Leo asked.

"You heard Gertrude. Once Mr. Roberts reads that article, he will turn me out of his home." Picking up a pocket watch, he considered it for a moment before stuffing it into his pocket.

"Do you want to talk about what the article said?" Leo asked cautiously.

"No."

"Okay, then, what can I do?"

"Grab your things, and get your boots on. We will make a break for it as soon as it stops raining."

Without further questioning Barrett's logic, Leo grabbed the newspaper and ripped out the article about Barrett's father. At Barrett's raised eyebrows, he explained, "Just in case he asks for the paper before we get a chance to leave." Stuffing the article into this pocket, Leo said, "Now, he won't get a chance to find out."

Barrett nodded and resumed gathering his things. Barrett could feel Leo's eyes as he moved around the room.

Sneaking through the dark house, Barrett and Leo made their way into the kitchen. Barrett stuffed cheese and bread into his satchel, while Leo did the same with the pillowcase he borrowed from Barrett's bed.

"Think this will be enough?" Leo asked.

Without looking up, Barrett grunted in agreement. He silently closed the clasps on his bag and threw it over his shoulder. At the kitchen door, Barrett paused and placed his ear against the wood.

Leo whispered to Barrett, "Everyone went to bed hours ago. You're being paranoid." Placing his hand on the door, he pushed it open and stepped into the hallway. Growling, Barrett followed behind him.

It took the boys five minutes to get to Mr. Roberts' study. Not because the house was considerably large but because the place looked different in the dark. Bumping into Mr. Roberts' desk, Leo let out a yelp.

"Shhh! You will wake the house!" Barrett said over his shoulder as he approached the window.

"Well, if you let me use a lantern, maybe I wouldn't be running into everything." Leo stretched his hands before him while gingerly making his way to the window.

Sweeping aside the long curtains, Barrett pushed the window open. The cold night air rushed into the room. Holding the sides of the window, Barrett jumped onto the window's ledge.

The wind ran through his hair as Barrett stared out into the yard. Below him were the azalea bushes, if he jumped far out enough he could clear them. Once on the ground, he would make his way to the woods. And there, he would find freedom.

A hand pressed hard against Barrett's back as he lurched forward and fell hard into the azalea bushes. His satchel landed a few feet in front of him. Barrett looked up to see Leo leaning out of the window. "You were taking too long."

Pulling himself onto the window's ledge, Leo gracefully jumped to the ground, clearing the bushes. "Come on, let's go." Leo directed as he took off towards the woods.

Chapter Five

The serene pinks and purples stretching across the morning sky contrasted with the cacophony of the London docks below them. Despite the early hours, the docks were full of life. Crewmates shouted as they readied their vessel for their next voyage. Men lobbied for positions on the ships while grubby street children darted through the crowd. Among the crowd, two boys, one tall and the other short made their way through the sea of dirty people.

"So, what's the plan here?" Leo pulled his pillow case closer against his chest as he elbowed through the crowd.

"Find a boat that will take us to America," Barrett said nonchalantly.

"Mate, you can't just board any ship here. You have to have a ticket. And to get a ticket, you have to have money. Do you have money?" Leo raised one eyebrow and looked at his friend.

"A little." Barrett's eyes darted around the crowd. "But that's not the plan."

"Ahh, the plan. So, there is one. I thought you wanted to wander through the woods all night, but somehow, we ended up here. Thought that was a strange route for a midnight stroll with your favorite friend."

"You're not my favorite friend." Barrett shot back.

Leo groaned and bent over. "I'm crushed!" A man pushing a cart behind Leo yelled at him to move. Leo jumped out of the man's path before being run over by a cart full of fish. "That could've been disastrous." Turning back to Barrett, "I am your only friend because no one else can put up with your boring monologues about woodland creatures. Therefore, I am your favorite friend."

"This nonsense talk makes me second guess bringing you along," Barrett smirked, causing the tension in his back to relax.

Leo ran his hands through his hair and slowed his pace. "Seriously, Barrett. What is the plan here?"

Taking a deep breath, Barrett said, "I need to find out what happened to my family. What *really* happened to them! I've been going through that article all night, and it makes no sense. There is no way my father was helping Napoleon."

"Yeah, I know. And if he were, he wouldn't take his family along. Not that I believe he was." Leo added at Barrett's sharp look. "But wouldn't other people see that, too?"

"Yeah. Something doesn't feel right about this whole thing. And I have to find out. And the only way to do that is to go where the ship's remains washed up."

A light lit behind Leo's eyes, "You really want to travel across the ocean?"

"Yeah, except I haven't figured out exactly how to do that." Barrett smiled sheepishly at Leo.

A smile crept over Leo's face. "I do."

Barrett followed Leo's gaze towards the servants and sailors carrying boxes, crates, and trunks onto the vessel. Passengers gathered around the ramp to the main deck, saying their goodbyes while workers frantically loaded their belongings on a separate ramp. Meanwhile, the ship's crew hurried along the deck, preparing the boat for departure. Each person was immersed in their own affairs.

"It's simple." Leo continued, nodding towards the piles of luggage waiting to be loaded, "We act like we belong. All we need to do is pick up one of those trunks by the ramp and carry it

onboard. To anyone watching, we will look like household servants delivering our employer's things to their cabin. Everyone is too busy to notice us."

Barrett's eyes skimmed over the scene in front of them. While ladies and gentlemen dressed in the latest fashion alighted from their carriages, saying goodbye to family and friends who escorted them to the docks, their servants were busy unloading trunks, carpet bags, and hatboxes from atop and behind the carriage. Each item was deposited in a pile next to a smaller ramp until all the items were unloaded. Some workers worked in teams; one or two would unload the carriage, while another servant would load their employer's cargo onto the ship. These teams worked like a well-oiled machine. They had done this before and worked out an efficient system of moving items from the carriage to the cabins aboard.

"It'll never work. The servants know we have no business touching their master's things." Barrett's voice fell flat with this realization.

"Not if we select the right person to help. We need to find someone alone and inexperienced. They won't know it's not normal to be helped by two innocent boys like us."

Leo scanned the crowd. His eyes caught sight of a bald man in a red jacket stretched over his bulging frame. Under his coat, Leo could see his shirt straining to stay buttoned up over his gelatinous belly. The man's neck folds spilled over the collar. Behind him, a servant, drenched in sweat, was unloading trunks from the carriage and dragging them near the ramp's entrance.

"Pick it up! Don't drag it around like a sack of potatoes! Use your muscles! You'll ruin my trunk." As the fat man shouted at his servant, the buttons on his shirt did an admirable job of not exposing his belly.

"He's the one." Without waiting for an answer, Leo jogged over to the servant. After a brief exchange, he turned back to Barrett and waved him over.

The servant was nodding enthusiastically. "Yes, please deliver this to Cabin 17. And don't scratch it!"

"No problem." Leo motioned for Barrett to pick up one end of the trunk while he grabbed the other. The boys made their way up the ramp with the trunk in hand. Once aboard the ship, the ship's crew moved back and forth between the servants; occasionally, a crewmate barked at the servants to move, but no one noticed the two boys carrying a trunk.

Following the other servants on deck, Leo and Barrett made their way onto the ship, across the deck, and into the living quarters. The long narrow hallway forced Leo to walk backward while Barrett read the cabin numbers on the doors they passed. "Here it is."

Entering the cabin, the boys lowered the massive trunk to the floor. Wiping the sweat off his forehead, Barrett took in his surroundings. "Now what?"

Straightening his shirt, Leo said, "Now we blend in." Outside, a horn sounded off. Moving into the hallway, servants were rushing past.

"What's the hurry?" Barrett asked one of the servants, trying to get past him.

"That's the departure warning." Racing outside, the boys watched as the servants disembarked and returned to their master's carriages.

"What do servants do when their masters are away?" Leo asked.

"Probably move into their master's rooms and sleep all day. That's what I'd do."

"ALL ABOARD!" A sailor yelled.

The final remnants of passengers on the docks boarded the ship. The ramps were hauled back onto the vessel. Sailors shouted as they released the lines anchoring the vessel to the pier. Slowly, this ship pulled out of port, leaving England behind. The cacophony of London was gently replaced with the loud whisper of the wind.

The weight of the past twenty-four hours pressed down on Barrett's heart. His family was presumed dead, his father accused of being a traitor, and his escape from the Roberts' home to this ship; could it get any worse? Barrett felt Leo's watchful gaze on him. "Thanks."

"For what?"

"For everything." Raising his head, Barrett watched as the coastline grew distant.

"Yeah, of course. Come on. Let's take a walk and get to know our new home." Leo said. Pushing off the railing, Barrett felt a blanket of peace covering him. He was on his way to get answers.

A child wailed beside him as an embarrassed nanny tried vainly to quiet her charge.

"I swear, Mildred, if you cannot calm that child, I will leave you behind when we dock in Oslo." The mother threatened.

Barrett's mouth dropped open. "You've got to be kidding me." Barrett glared at Leo. "This ship is headed to Norway, not America!"

Frantically, Leo looked around as if expecting a magical bridge to appear that would connect the ship to the rapidly disappearing British shoreline. Worry etched across his face.

"How was I to know?"

Barrett lowered his voice so that the other passengers couldn't overhear him. "Oh, I don't know, maybe by finding out which ships were headed to America. And then getting on one of those ships instead."

A hand clamped on Barrett's shoulder and wrenched him around. "Is this the one?" Foul breath assaulted Barrett's face as the fat man from earlier glared at him. Barely visible behind the man, his servant nodded.

"Yep, he's the one. Him and that other one there." Barrett's felt the eyes of nearby passengers on him as the chatter around him quieted.

"Hey, get off me," Barrett fought to loosen the man's grip, but it was too strong for him to shake, no doubt strengthened from a lifetime of stealing food out of the mouths of the hungry.

"Not a chance. I know your kind," bellowed the fat man, "you'll take off the second I let go."

Darting his eyes around the deck, Barrett noticed a crowd forming. Great, the last thing they needed was for people to take note of them.

Leo stepped forward as if reading his mind and said in a low voice, "Look, mister, I don't know what you think we've done, but maybe we could talk about this in private?"

A woman holding a carousal leaned forward. *This is not good*, thought Barrett.

"Speak up!" the fat man bellowed, "I can't hear you over the sound of this blasted wind."

Taking another step forward, Leo pointed toward the door leading to the passenger's cabins. "Let's talk in your cabin."

"My cabin! I don't want either of you anywhere near my things!" Then, with the talent of an opera singer, the man threw his voice over the whipping wind, interrupting passengers' conversations at the far end of the deck, "What kind of fool do you think I am?"

A sailor fastening a line looked up at the sound of his voice.

"Excuse me. I don't believe we have met yet; I am Captain Gordan. What seems to be the problem here?" A well-dressed man in his fifties interrupted the fat man. He eyed the two boys taking in their disheveled appearance.

"I'd like to know the same thing. I don't know what racket you have going here, but I want full compensation for the damage your deckhands did to my belongings."

The captain's eyes darkened at the mention of deckhands. The sailor fastening the lines gave one last tug on the ropes and began making his way through the crowd of passengers who were giddy with the drama unfolding in front of them.

"They aren't deckhands." The captain's voice was steely.

"Well, I don't care what their jobs are. They broke my things." The fat man shouted.

Barrett and Leo looked at each other wide-eyed. "What are you talking about? We didn't touch your things. I mean, yeah, we delivered your trunk, but we didn't open it. We left as soon as we dropped it off."

The fat man bellowed, "Are you calling me a liar?"

"No, no," Leo placated, "not you, but look at your servant's face." He gestured to the servant who was standing shame faced behind the man. As one, the crowd turned to look at the servant trying to hide behind a stack of crates, his face red with shame.

The lady with the carousal took a step forward, trying to get a better look. "I can't see him. What's on his face?" she asked her companion.

"I don't think there's anything on his face," her companion replied.

Letting go of Barrett, the fat man barked at his servant, "Did you break the picture of my mother and blame it on these deckhands?"

"Not deckhands." Growled the sailor. Another crewmate stepped through the crowd. Glaring at the boys, they looked like dogs waiting to be released by their master.

Weakly, the servant lowered his head and nodded.

The lady with carousal gasped. Her companion rolled her eyes and said, "It's impossible to find trustworthy servants. I'm not surprised one bit."

With all eyes on the servant, the boys inched back. "I don't think so." The captain nodded to his sailors, and they pounced on Barrett and Leo. Gripping their arms, they twisted them behind their backs. The boys struggled, but they were no match for the brute strength of the sailors.

Approaching the struggling bodies of Barrett and Leo, the captain said, "Stowaways." A gasp ripped through the crowd. Then, leaning in closely, so only the boys could hear, the captain said, "You're lucky there are witnesses here. Otherwise, I'd throw you overboard and let the sea deal with you."

"Chain them up. We'll dump them at the next port of call. We should be there by nightfall." The captain instructed his men. The sailors restrained the boys and dragged them away from the crowd.

Once they were safely out of the crowd's view, the sailor holding Leo threw him to the ground. Hovering over Leo, a sinister grin spread across the sailor's face. Without warning, he began kicking Leo repeatedly.

"Get off him!" Barrett struggled in vain to break free from his captor's hold. Horrified, Barrett watched as his best friend was ruthlessly beaten in front of him. Then, spitting on Leo, the sailor cackled at the boy's pleas for mercy.

"Enough." The captain approached his men and bent down into Leo's face. Then, standing back up, he addressed Leo's abusers. "You remembered from last time, I see."

"Aye. Can't touch that pretty face, or the lady passengers will complain."

"I loathe these passenger voyages." Loosening his cravat, the captain addressed his men. "Edinburgh will be our last stop to gather supplies for our Norwegian friends. Be quick about the handoff." Without a glance at Barrett, the captain walked off.

Leo's body was pulled into a sitting position as the sailor bound his hands and feet to the crates. Barrett's captor pushed him next to Leo and tied him up. Grabbing Barrett by his collar, he threw his words into his face, "I don't care what the captain says. If you try to escape, I will cut your throat and feed you to the fish." Releasing Barrett, he spat a foul wad onto the ground beside him and walked away.

Barrett's heart pounded as he watched the sailors leave. "Hey, Leo, are you okay?"

Leo groaned in response. Positioning himself against the crates, tears spilled down Leo's cheeks. "What just happened?"

"It's all my fault. First, sneaking onto a ship and then wandering onto the deck like we had any right to be here. What kind of idiot am I? I am so sorry. I got you into this mess, and now look at you."

"I wasn't thinking either," Leo said through gritted teeth.

"I guess the good news is we will be getting off in Scotland. I'm sure we can make our way home from there."

Leo winced as he took a deep breath. "No, that's not the plan."

"Screw the plan!" Barrett shot back, "We could've been killed today. We are lucky this ship has one last port before heading to Oslo."

"No." Holding his stomach, Leo said, "You don't have a home. We need a better plan."

"But—"

"Mate, I truly don't care what you think right now. I'm the one who took the beating, and I'm not complaining." Guilt flushed over Barrett's face. "Oh, don't worry. I'll be right as rain once we return to dry land."

"I don't know. You look pretty bad."

"And yet, somehow, I still look better than you."

Barrett shook his head in disbelief. "Be serious. We're in over our heads." He lifted his bound hands for emphasis. "And we're about to be stranded in Scotland."

"I am serious, but right now, I want to rest. We'll figure it out once we get to Scotland." With that, Leo leaned his head against the crate and closed his eyes.

Barrett grunted but acquiesced. Following Leo's lead, he closed his eyes and fell into a restless sleep. Night fell while the boys slept on the deck. They were jerked awake by the shouts

of sailors preparing to dock the ship. Fifteen minutes later, their ropes were untied, and they were escorted off the boat.

Chapter Six

The Scottish harbor was cold and uninviting. Wet glimmers of moonlight glistened off the wooden planks. Shadows darted away from the few street lamps as if hiding from the light. Scantly clad women advertised their wares. Two men stumble out of a tavern.

"Over there." Barrett motioned to the tavern ahead.

As they approached the pub, the music and chatter grew. Then, pushing through the door, they walked into a dimly lit room that smelled like sweat and alcohol. Groups of men gathered around small tables; some exchanged stories of past conquests while others played cards. A man played the fiddle as drunk sailors sang along. A burly barkeep cleaning a mug looked out into the room as if watching over his children.

Leo and Barrett went to an empty table in the back of the room. A portly woman appeared at their table. "This tavern is for paying folks. If you sit, you have to order something."

"Uh, okay. Do you have anything to eat?" Barrett asked.

"Aye. Some stew leftover from earlier; it's a bit cold now."

"That'll do." Barrett nodded.

"And some ale," Leo added before the lady walked away.

Barrett Meadows took in the sight of his injured best friend. Guilt gutted him for bringing Leo on this mission to discover what had happened to his family. Helplessly watching his friend take their punishment was worse than any suffering Barrett had ever endured. They were lucky that was all they did to them. Even stranger, they did not turn them over to the authorities in Edinburgh. Instead, they were escorted off the ship with no fanfare.

Noticing Barrett looking at him, Leo gave Barrett a lopsided smile, "Everything okay?"

Annoyance swept over Barrett, eradicating any pity he had for Leo. "You're such an idiot. No, of course not. Nothing is okay! We messed up! That's what's wrong. Here." Barrett pushed a spoon across the wooden table. "Look at yourself! Children will cry in the streets when they see your swollen face and a black eye."

Picking up the spoon, Leo examined his reflection from multiple angles and then tossed it back on the table. "Yes, they will. The boys will know they will never be as tough as me, and the girls will be overwhelmed by my shockingly good looks." Leo gave his friend a sympathetic look. "I know it must be hard on you to be around someone constantly overshadowing you. I do commend your perseverance."

Despite himself, Barrett laughed. Leo glanced up as the barmaid delivered their stew and beer. "Mmm, looks delicious!" Leo winked at the lady.

"Flirting with me won't make that cold stew taste better." She chuckled and walked away.

"I only speak the truth," he called after her. Leo picked up the spoon and inhaled the cold brown lumps of meat before him. With each spoonful, Leo's arm slowed as if the weight of the scoop was too much.

"What's the matter?" Barrett asked in between spoonfuls.

"Ah, nothing. Just tired, I suppose." Reaching for his ale, Leo gingerly picked up his mug with both hands and sipped slowly. Barrett eyed him as he wiped his mouth on his sleeve. Next to them, a group of men shouted as two men chugged their ale. The first one slammed his drink on the table when he finished, declaring himself the winner. Startled by the mug slamming on the table, Leo winced as his body clenched in response to the sudden bang.

"Tired, huh?" Barrett said, "You're sipping your beer, and now you're wincing like you're in pain. Come on, what's wrong with you?"

Sighing, Leo confessed, "I think I did something to my ribs, like bruised them or maybe cracked one or two. It hurts when I lift my arms and when I take deep breaths. I'm okay, or at least I will be okay."

Barrett's eyes widened, "We need to take you to see a doctor!" He raised out of his chair and looked around the pub. "I don't even know where to find a doctor here."

"Sit down. There's nothing a doctor can do." The humor was gone from his voice now. "This happened to me before when I fell off a horse and cracked a rib. The only thing I can do is rest and let it heal itself. We need to find a place to sleep tonight...and maybe for a few days until I can travel again." Picking up the spoon, Leo gritted his teeth as he mustered the strength to eat the rest of his dinner.

"Well, ya can't say I didn't warn ya," laughed the barmaid as she approached their table. "More ale?"

"Aye," Barrett replied, pushing his mug towards her. Reaching for his mug, she asked, "So what brings youngsters like you two out here on this dreary night?"

"Oh, we were traveling on one of the ships that docked earlier today. But my friend here, he, uh, had a little accident and had to come on shore to heal up."

Raising an eyebrow, the woman paused pouring and looked over at Leo. "Is that so?"

"Apparently," Leo said, mustering a pained smile.

"Hey, do you know any place we can stay around here? Just for a few nights?" Leo asked the woman. As if remembering why she was standing at their table, the woman filled Leo's mug

with more ale. "Well, if you want to work in exchange for food and board, we can put you in one of the rooms above the pub. It's not much, but it's clean. Mostly. The boy who usually helps us is worthless. He breaks more glasses than the drunks." She looked at both of them, "Interested?"

Barrett looked over at Leo, who gave a pathetic shrug in response. Stretching out his hand towards the woman, "Deal."

Chapter Seven

The cool morning air nipped at Barrett's skin as he threw his legs over the side of his bed. Leo was passed out cold on a small bed wedged in the corner of the room. Yawning, he pulled his sweater over his head, grabbed his jacket, and quietly left their room. Slipping down the back stairs, Barrett passed through the empty kitchen and out the back door.

A low fog blanketed the cobbled streets of Edinburgh. Pulling his jacket snugly around himself, Barrett headed down to the harbor. He saw workers moving crates on and off ships through the haze. The fog muffled their shouts as they worked.

"You're up earlier than I expected," came a voice nearby.

Barret turned to greet Fiona, the portly woman from last night who offered them room and board in exchange for work. Fiona was not quite old but not quite young; she was of an indiscernible age. Yet behind her tired face shone bright eyes that didn't miss a thing. She had attempted to pull her hair into a knot on top of her head, but the halo of frizz surrounding her face had other plans.

"Good morning, ma'am," Barrett said.

"Ha! Imagine that! Me addressed as "Ma'am!" Dan will get a kick outta that! No, no. Just call me Fiona. Everyone does. We don't stand on no fancy airs around here." As she laughed, a loose curl fell from the mass of hair on her head. She swiped it out of her eyes with the back of her hand.

"I think I can manage that." He motioned towards the brown papered package she was carrying. "Here, let me take that for you. And just because I'll call you Fiona doesn't mean I will stop treating you like a lady."

Chuckling, Fiona relinquished her package to Barrett. "Your mother sure did teach you right," The smile on Barrett's face faltered at the mention of his mother.

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you." She placed her hand on his arm. "Oh, no. I can see that I did. You look upset. Did something happen to her? I don't mean to press, but we opened a can of worms here, and I feel like I can't just walk away from you now. Not that I was going to walk away, mind you." She babbled nervously.

"No, it's okay. Don't worry about it. You just caught me off guard, that's all." Barrett nodded back to the tavern. "Do you want me to take these back to the tavern for you?"

"That'd be grand. I like to get the first pick of the morning catch. I always start my day off this way. The calmness of the morning helps balance out the hectic tavern in the evening." They walked side by side through the morning mist as they made their way back to the tavern's kitchen. Reaching the door, Fiona pulled it open for Barrett.

"You can just sit them down on the counter over there." Barrett placed the cold fish wrapped in brown paper on the stone countertop. Fiona grabbed the kettle off the stove and stepped outside. Shouting through the door, she said, "We don't have anything fancy here. Just a pump for your water." Stepping back into the kitchen, she began to heat the water. "You'll need to know where to get the water if you're going to get any work done here."

Straightening his posture at the mention of work, Barrett said, "Definitely. What exactly do you want me to do."

Waving her hand as if shooing away a fly, she said, "Oh, we can discuss that later. We work late hours around here. And because of that we don't start workig until late morning. Here.

Take a seat. I'll make you something to eat. Do you want some tea? What am I sayin'? Of course, you do!" Rolling up her sleeves, she got started on the breakfast.

"I am a bit hungry. I should probably go wake up Leo. He'll be disappointed to miss breakfast." Barrett started towards the stairs when Fiona quickly reached out to stop him.

"Don't you go wake up that poor boy! He looks like he needs some sleep. I'll keep something warm for him. Just sit down like I told you and relax while you can."

"Well, okay. I guess I can do that."

Smiling at Barrett, Fiona turned back to her work cooking. "Now, tell me about that momma of yours."

Sighing, Barrett looked longingly towards the stairs.

"I can see you don't wanna talk about your momma, but it sure looks like you need to do some talking. And, I'm a right fine listener." Shaking her spatula in Barrett's facet, she continued, "Whatever you say to me will stay between us." Turning to her stove, she cracked one egg after another into the skillet.

Reluctantly, Barrett pulled off his outer coat and threw it on the bench next to him.

"Well, it's not just my mother; it's also my father and sister, Charlotte. I received word that their ship sunk off the coast of the Americas."

Fiona gasped and spun towards Barrett, "Oh, you poor thing! To lose one's family so young!" Fiona reached for the tea kettle and poured Barrett some tea. Then, sliding the cup and saucer across the rough wooden table, Fiona said, "I'm so sorry, honey. It ain't much, but there is something about a nice cuppa tea to soothe the soul."

Barret wrapped both hands around the little cup, closed his eyes, and let the heat from the cup wash over him. "My mother used to say the same thing."

"Well, then she was a right smart woman, your mother."

"Is." Barrett corrected.

"What's that?" Fiona asked.

"She is a smart woman. Wise, too." Barrett said into his cup. Fiona reached across the table and patted his arm. "Yes, I'm sure she is. And she will always be alive in your heart."

Barrett looked up at Fiona, who stood between the table and stove, unsure whether to go to him or return to her cooking. A dark red apron was tied over her brown dress. She wore a matching cloth on her head that attempted to cover her unruly hair. He didn't remember her wearing them when they entered the kitchen. He wondered when she put them on. What else had he missed? Annoyed at himself for his lack of awareness, he took a steadying breath and let go of his tea.

"I don't think they died." Barrett waited for Fiona to scoff or look at him like he was mad. Instead, her eyes softened, and she sat across from Barrett. "Why don't you tell me what happened, then."

Emboldened, Barrett told her about his family's trip to Costa Rica and how Barrett was left behind to finish his schooling. Fiona listened quietly as the horrors of the past few days poured out of Barrett's soul.

"My father is not a traitor. He's a scientist," Barrett exclaimed, "He gets excited about flora and fauna, not politics and wars."

"He does sound like a bore," Fiona said with a slight smile

"Exactly! Boring men are not plotting with Napoleon," Barrett agreed.

Fiona gave Barrett a sympathetic smile and said gently, "I believe you. There must have been some mistake. What did the authorities tell you about the accident?"

Swallowing his tea, Barrett said, "What authorities?"

Frowning, Fiona said, "The folks who came and told you about the shipwreck."

Barrett looked past Fiona and motioned to the food on the stove. "Any chance that's ready?"

She placed her doughy hands on the table and retrieved a plate of food. Scooping food onto the dish, she mumbled, "Boys. Always thinking about their stomach." Sliding the plate across the table, Fiona said, "Now, there's plenty more where that came from."

"Thank you, ma'am- I mean, Fiona." Shoveling the eggs and toast into his mouth, Barrett gave her a sloppy grin.

Sitting back down, Fiona gently asked again, "When a ship goes down, the proper authorities will notify the family. Either in person or in a letter. So what did they have to say about this tragedy?"

Shaking his head, "No one told me. I found out about it in the newspaper. I guess they didn't think a traitor's family was worthy of a notification." Bitterness edged his words as he picked up his tea and washed down his food.

"Oh," Fiona stared at Barrett for a long minute while he finished the food on his plate. Then she asked, "When did you say the ship sank?"

"Last week." Barrett picked up his plate and walked over to the sink. Setting the plate on the counter, he grabbed the nearest bucket. "It's okay to use this to get water for cleaning the dishes?"

"Aye." Fiona absentmindedly said. Her eyes followed Barrett as he stepped outside to get water and returned to the sink with a fresh bucket of water. Rolling up his sleeves, Barrett got started on the dishes. Fiona watched as the boy sloppily scrubbed her dishes. She'd have to rewash everything later. She moved over to his side and placed her hand over the dishes signaling him to stop.

"Am I doing it wrong?" Barrett asked Fiona.

"Aye." She took the plate and wet rag out of his hand. "Barrett, I've lived in this seaport town all my life and watched many people come and go. But never have I heard of news traveling across the ocean in one week."

A cloud of confusion settled over Barrett's face. "Something is not right about your story. I'm not saying ya lying, but maybe someone is lying to ya." Fiona said. "How is it you came across the article?"

"Leo found it in the room next to mine. I think he said it was lying on the console table."

"And is that where ya usually find the paper?" Fiona prodded.

Tilting his head to the side, Barrett considered that for a moment. "Actually, no. Mr. Roberts—the man whose house I was staying— usually has his butler deliver it to him with his morning meal. Sometimes he takes it into the study with him after breakfast."

"Ah, so what was it doing in your rooms?" Fiona asked.

Resting his hands on the edge of the sink, Barrett answered, "Well, maybe the servants took it for kindling."

"And do Mr. Roberts's servants usually leave unused kindling around the house?" Fiona asked.

Barrett considered her question for a moment. "Mr. Roberts's would fire them instantaneously if they created a mess in his perfectly ordered house." Seeing the knowing look in Fiona's eyes, Barrett continued. "You're right. It was rather odd for the newspaper to be outside Mr. Roberts' grasp. And for it to be laid open to the article about the shipwreck seems a bit too—"

"Ridiculous!" Fiona threw up her hands in exasperation. Then, waving a dough finger at Barrett, she said, "Now you're just a youngin', so you can't be blamed for other people takin' advantages of ya. But, ya listen to me now!" Fiona shook with anger, "Someone is up to no good when it concerns your family. And it was probably, a right good thing that you left when you did. Who knows what trouble would've befallen you if you stayed in that house?" She hit the table with her pudgy fist to emphasize her point. "I'm glad ya are here. Stay as long as ya like; I've got plenty of work to keep ya both busy."

"Ah, yes. Thank you." Barrett looked blankly at her.

"Of course. Now go wake your friend. We've got a lot of work to do before we open up." Fiona shooed him out of the room. Barrett climbed the back staircase two at a time. Fiona called after him, "And grab some cloth out of the closet for Leo to wrap around his ribs!" Barrett opened a small closet door at the top of the stairs and peered inside. Grabbing the first stack of cloth he found, he headed to his shared room.

When Barrett pushed through the door, Leo was examining his bruised torso with a small hand mirror.

"Wow, you packed a mirror? Glad you remembered to bring the important things with you." Barrett tried to throw the fabric in Leo's face, but he swatted the material away with the hand mirror. It fell into a disheveled pile at Leo's feet.

"Hey! Be careful with me! I break easily." Leo threw the mirror on the bed. "I found the mirror on the dresser, idiot. What's with the sheets?" He winced as he bent to pick up the dingy-looking cloth. He held it up in the sunlight for closer examination.

Barrett shrugged, "Fiona said something about wrapping your ribs with it."

"Oh, yeah. Our nanny had to wrap my ribs last time I broke them." Leo began to wrap the cloth around his torso. "Here, help me with this." He held out one end of the fabric for Barrett to grab.

Barrett raised his eyebrows, "Nah, I'm good. Hurry up. Fiona is waiting on ya. We've got work to do."

Sighing, Leo slowly wrapped his sheet around himself. When he ran out of sheets, he tied the ends in a tight knot. Pulling his shirt over his head, he turned to Barrett. With his arms stretched out, he asked, "How do I look?"

Groaning, Barrett replied, "Like an idiot." Clammoring down the stairs the boys got to ran into the kitchen to learn what their new jobs was.

Chapter Eight

Over the next few weeks, Barrett and Leo fell into a rhythm of working alongside Fiona and her brother, Dan. Each morning Barrett and Fiona would walk to the docks to purchase fresh fish. Missing his mother's wisdom, Barrett often sought out the kind-hearted woman whenever he could. Fiona, who never had children, took to the two boys as if they were hers.

Once back in the tavern, Barrett scrubbed the floorboards until they shined, only to be dirtied again by patrons coming and going each evening. When deliveries arrived, Barrett dutifully unloaded the crates of supplies and made a point of showing Leo how helpful he was being. Leo would respond by knocking a chair into Barrett's path. While Barrett never dropped a crate, a few close calls set Fiona on a tangent about fooling around when work was to be done. The boys knew they could never really upset her, no matter how loud Fiona shouted.

While Barrett was busy with his chores, Leo was assigned the lesser taxing assignments, like cleaning the dishes and polishing the silver. During the evenings, when the tavern was full of sailors drinking and shouting, Leo was behind the bar helping Dan out where he could. Mostly, it meant he was cleaning glasses and keeping the bar clean. When Dan wasn't looking, he would pour a drink for himself.

Dan was unlike Fiona in every way. While Fiona was loud and bossy, Dan was quiet and unassuming. He had a stillness about him that commanded strength. While his hands were always working, his eyes didn't miss a thing. When he looked at a person, it was as if he was measuring their every action and weighing their every word. Yet, he rarely spoke. His contemplative quiet was unsettling to the roughest of characters. It was as if he looked into your soul, saw the ugliness inside you, and instead of revealing the worst of you to the world, he kept

quiet as if by some silent agreement. He would not betray you to the world if you did not betray him.

Leo, who never could keep his mouth shut, was in awe of this giant of a man. He followed him around like a puppy, watching his every move.

“How come it’s just you and Fiona here?” Leo asked Dan as he neatly stacked the glasses behind the bar.

Dan flipped a barstool upside down and began working on tightening or replacing the screws as needed. “Well, our family has been running this tavern for generations. When our Da died, he left it to Fiona and me. Our Ma was a great cook. We used to serve meals all day long, but after she passed, we couldn’t find a cook to replace her. Fiona does an okay job, but she’s no cook. Maybe one day, we’ll do that again” Flipping the stool over, he tested its sturdiness before moving on to the next seat.

Leo studied Dan as he carefully fixed each loose joint. Moving from behind the bar, Leo said, “Can I help with that?”

“Sure, just grab a stool or chair and get to tightening,” Dan replied, “These chairs take a beating each night. No need to waste money replacing them when we can do some simple repairs.”

Leo rummaged through the worn tools Dan had in a sack on the floor. Grabbing something similar to what Leo had in his hand, he set to work on a set of chairs at a nearby table.

“Did you used to help your Da out?” Dan asked.

Leo let out a forced laugh. “My father has never seen a tool in his life. He would not subject himself to such lowly work like this if his life depended on it.” Leo turned the screw tightly into place.

“Then how is he okay with you being here?” Dan gently flipped the last barstool right side up and placed it under the bar.

“Oh, he thinks I’m with a friend in London.”

“He doesn’t know you’re here?”

“Nah. I’m one of many sons strewn all over England. He travels about Europe and trusts his aging nanny to care for us. Mother died in childbirth, and Father hasn’t been interested in us ever since.”

“What about the nanny?” Dan asked.

“Oh, she’s ancient. She can’t keep us straight anyway. She has the little ones to care for, and we, the older ones, are sent away to schools. I sent her a note saying I was staying with a friend for the summer, and then we would head to boarding school together in the fall.” Leo flipped his chair over and sat on it. Wiggling, he tested the quality of his work. “Perfect.”

Chapter Nine

That evening, as the tavern slowly filled with tired seamen, Leo was busy behind the bar, cleaning glasses, wiping down the counter, and pouring himself the occasional drink for all his hard work. Meanwhile, Barrett bustled around the dark and smoky tavern, dropping off steaming bowls of stew or mugs of ale to boisterous patrons. After handing out his last bowl of stew, he started wiping down and clearing tables of used discarded dishes. As he carried the dirty dishes to the kitchen, he shouted over the loud hum of the tavern to Leo. "Care to help?"

Leo tipped his stolen ale to Barrett, "I wish I could, but I still can't lift anything more than one mug at a time." Smirking, he threw back the rest of his beer and slammed the empty mug on the bar. Wiping his mouth, he winked at Barrett as his friend disappeared into the kitchen.

"Hey! You think I don't see you, Leo! If you're well enough to drink my beer, then you must be well enough to work off the cost of that drink!" Fiona maneuvered her ample body between two groups of men carrying empty mugs. Slamming the mugs on the bartop, she said, "Fill 'em up."

"Aw, Fiona. It was just a little sip to quench my parched body. I didn't mean any harm." He placed the mugs under the tap, refilled each one, and then passed them back to Fiona.

She placed each mug on her tray. "You're not fooling me. I've seen you moving around the past week. You're more than able to help Barrett with more. Tonight, help with the cleanup." Without waiting for a reply, she left with her drinks and disappeared into the shadowy tavern. Sighing, Leo picked up a rag and began wiping down the bar.

"Trust me; there are nuggets as big as chestnuts nestled into the riverbanks. They are just waiting for someone like us to dig them out." Boomed a voice at the end of the bar. Leo's ears

perked up at the interesting topic, and he began working toward the two men seated at the end of the bar. As he wiped an invisible stain off the bar, he eased dropped on the men talking.

"Byron, you are a fool. If that were true, someone would have already claimed all that gold." The young man raised his glass to his lips and emptied the remains of his mug. He was smartly dressed in a wool coat overtop a fitted suit.

Eyeing the empty mug, Leo asked the man, "Need a refill?"

"Aye," he replied. Leo refilled the mug and slid it back towards the man.

"Is it true that there is gold in America?" Leo asked.

Byron slapped his hand on the counter, "It's true! And I'm trying to convince my cousin here to go on an adventure of a lifetime with me."

"It's a fool's errand. I can assure you, there is no gold to be found. We don't have time for childish adventures. We have to get to New York and work on finding investors."

"Liam, you have no business sense. No one cares about your clothes. I'm telling you, we will have more luck mining for gold. The Americans are sloppy and unmotivated. They barely made it to the colonies with the clothes on their backs. They don't have the financial means that men like we do. We have enough money to finance our expedition through California and the Yukon."

Liam rolled his eyes. "It's an expedition now?"

Leaning forward in his stool, Byron excitedly said, "Of course it is!"

"And you want us to use our money to finance your pipe dream?"

"Yes!" Byron's bloodshot eyes widened in excitement. "We don't need investors for this," his hand swept over Liam's attire. "There's plenty of money from Grandpa's trust to sustain us

for a lifetime of adventures." Byron's voice carried over the room's noise, causing others to take notice of him. Dan, who had just returned from the kitchen with a new stack of glassware, was frowning at the two men in advertising their wealth.

Upon seeing that Dan had returned from the kitchen, Leo abandoned the invisible stain and dried the freshly washed glasses. The rest of the night went by in a blur for both boys. Dan served drinks and broke up fights with the ease of a gentle giant. While Barrett and Leo exhausted themselves, keeping the drinks moving, serving the tables, and cleaning dishes.

Chapter Ten

The next morning, Barrett woke to cupboard doors slamming shut and dishes clattering in the kitchen below him. Across his bedroom, Leo was stretched out on his cot. A dollop of drool was dangled from the corner of his mouth.

Barrett grabbed his pillow and threw it at Leo. “You better get up before Fiona whips you!”

Groning, Leo threw back his covers as he sat up in bed. “Why did I promise to clean out the cellar for Fiona?”

“Because she told you to do it today.”

“But why so early?” Leo complained as he pulled his trousers on.

“Because you’re milking your injury, and I’m the only one doing all the work around here.” Leo rolled his eyes and stretched his exhausted frame. Barrett raised an eyebrow at Leo’s short trouser leg. “You should ask Fiona if she can lengthen your clothes.”

“Lengthen my clothes. What stupidity are you on about now?” Leo quipped.

“Your clothes! Your sleeves are too short, and so are your trousers. It’s completely unfair. Do you ever stop growing?” Barrett pulled his socks on before reaching down and grabbing his boots.

“That’s because I’m a man. Speaking of which, do you think you’ll ever grow some real hair on your face? It’s getting awkward for me, a grown man, to hang around a boy all day.”

A boy-sized boot smacked Leo in the gut knocking the wind out of him. Reaching out to grab the dresser, Leo bent over and coughed for air.

“Not so tough, are you?” Barrett swiped his boot off the floor and strutted back to his bed to continue putting his boots on. “Besides, I’m older than you.”

“Yeah, by a day,” Barrett said between gasps.

A pounding on the door startled them both. Barrett jumped up and opened the door to Fiona, who stood with one hand on her hip while her other welded a wooden spoon accusatorially towards the open door.

“Oh, I hope I’m not bothering ya, but you two are making quite the racket in there. If you’re not too busy, I was wondering if you could get started on your chores.” Fiona’s eyes darted toward Leo’s bent-over body. “What’s the matter with you?”

“Barrett threw his boot at me?” Leo’s face winced in pain.

Fiona raised her chin and said, “Good. You probably deserved it.”

Leo’s jaw slacked at her while Barrett tried to smother his laughter. “Oh, Barrett Meadows, I don’t know what you’re laughing about. You’re supposed to be helping clean out the cellar before the big shipment comes in this afternoon.”

Jumping up, Barrett grabbed his jacket and stepped towards the door. “Fiona, I didn’t know you wanted my help, too.”

Waving her spoon at Barrett’s face, she said, “I told Leo last night this was a job for the pair of you.” Waving her spoon towards Leo, she said, “You don’t think that lazy sack of bones could be counted on to get the job done in a few hours, do you?”

“Ah, Fiona, you wound me.” Leo placed a hand over his heart.

Huffing, Fiona spun around and headed back downstairs. Barrett heard Fiona mumbling not so quietly under her breath, “Lord knows why I put up with these boys.”

“Because you love us!” Leo shouted after her. Smiling, he turned to Barrett and said, “I’m going to miss her when we leave here.” Shutting the door behind them, the boys headed downstairs. Passing through the kitchen, they swiped an apple and headed to the cellar.

“So what does she want us to do exactly?” Barrett asked.

“There is a bunch of junk that used to belong to her father in the back corner. She wants us to get rid of it. There is a door leading to the back alley down here. She wants us to use it.”

“I’ve been down here a million times and never seen a door,” Barrett asked skeptically.

Shrugging his shoulders, Leo made his way through the rows of shelves and crates. Carrying his lantern in front of him, Leo squeezed past a stack of broken barrels and crates. His light revealed a small wooden door with a skeleton key sticking out of the lock. “Well, that’s great security.” Twisting the doorknob with one hand, he placed his other hand on the door and gave a great shove. The door barely moved. He tried again, using his shoulder to push the door open, but it only moved an inch or two.

Leo yelled over his shoulder, “Something is blocking this door on the other side. Go outside and see if you can move it, will ya?”

“Yeah, sure.” Barrett headed up the cellar stairs and into the kitchen, where the backdoor to the garden was located. Outside, he looked along the tavern’s stone wall. While plenty of weeds and dirt existed, no door was in sight. An unkempt bush perturbed from the side of the building. Scrapes of trash and broken glass littered the ground around the bush.

As Barrett neared the bush, he could see a small alleyway between the tavern and the next building over. Pushing back the brush, Barrett forced his way past it and into the musky alley.

Litter filled the narrow space between buildings. Stepping over boxes and debris, he approached the steps leading down to the lower landing. The steps descending to a door below were covered with junk.

“Are you out there yet?” Leo called out from inside the cellar.

“Yeah, I’m here, but it’s blocked. I don’t know what all this stuff is, but it looks like some crates and random trash. I think I see a shoe in there too. Get up here and help me clear this out.”

“Alright, I’m on my way,” Leo shouted up to Barrett.

With his back to the stairs, Barrett took in the alley. A putrid smell lingered in the air—no doubt from drunks emptying their stomachs after a night of imbibing. A rat scurried over his shoe. Barrett tried to take a quick step back, but his foot got caught on something behind him, causing him to lose his balance. Trying to regain his footing, he stepped on something slippery, and his feet shot forward. Falling backward, he tumbled down the stairs behind him.

Moments later, Leo found Barrett partially submerged under old newspapers, trying to get himself up. “What are you doing down there?”

“Shut up and give me a hand.” Leo laughed as he helped his friend up. “It’s disgusting back here. No wonder Fiona wanted us to clean it up. I bet she knew how gross it was out here.”

Nodding his head, he looked down at his soiled clothes in disgust. “This is your fault, you know. You milked your injury far too long. Fiona’s annoyed you took advantage of her kindness.” Brushing the dirt off his leg, he noticed a reddish-brown gook splattered all over him. “Gross. What is this?”

Leo bent down to Barrett’s short frame for a closer look. “It looks like blood.” Together both boys glanced down the stairs. “I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

Barrett took a cautious step back down the stairs and slowly moved aside the newspaper. As he pushed the paper to the side, a gray, lifeless face stared up at him.

“I know him,” Leo whispered. “He was the bloke in the pub last night. He and his cousin were talking about mining for gold in California. He was bragging about all the money he had.”

“That’s probably what got him killed. He’s dressed too flashy for these parts.” Barrett said as he appraised the young gentleman.

Leo’s face was ashen as he looked at the young man who was so animated the previous night. “He was with another man.” Leo raised his eyes from the body and began to scan the alleyway when his eyes settled on a particularly lumpy pile of newspapers. Cautiously, Leo made his way over the suspicious pile of trash and began to push aside the papers. Underneath revealed the body of the other man he served ale to last night.

“What’s going on here?” A deep baritone voice yelled from the top of the alley.

Unable to move, the boys stared as the figure moved closer. “You two look like you’ve seen a ghost,” Dan said as he maneuvered through the alleyway.

“They’re dead.” Barrett said monotone.

Dan’s face revealed nothing as he bent down and examined the first and then the second body. Silently, he checked their pulse and then their clothing. Finding an envelope, he went through its contents. Finishing his examination, Dan looked at the boys with sorrow. “You boys have to leave now,” Dan said.

Leo stared at Dan as if he had grown a third head.

“Dan, you know we didn’t do this, right?” Barrett said barely above a whisper.

“Aye,” Dan said.

“I don’t understand,” Barrett asked. “Why?”

“Because once word gets out about who your father is, you’ll be blamed for these men’s deaths,” Dan said gently. The blood from Barrett’s face drained as realization hit him.

“That’s absurd.” Leo finally chimed in.

“You know about my father?” Barrett asked. “Did Fiona tell you?”

“No, but even in the wilds of Scotland, we hear news about traitors to the crown.”

Throwing his hands up when he caught sight of the steely glint in Leo’s eye, he continued, “Son, I’m not saying I believe it. You hear things when you tend bar for as long as I have. And I know there’s some nasty business going down with that little French man’s war. Your father wouldn’t be the first to be a scapegoat for Napoleon’s cause.”

Frustrated, Leo said, “But what does Barrett’s father have to do with this murder? And why would we be blamed?”

“An investigation will reveal who you boys truly are. The authorities will love to pin this on a traitor’s son. So, you have to go.”

“But...” Leo’s voice trailed off.

“I found this on their bodies—tickets for their passage on the *Fortuitous*. It’s a ship headed to New York. There’s still time for you to make it. The ship leaves soon. Grab your things, don’t say anything to Fiona, and head down to the dock.” Reading from the papers, he said, “From now on, Barrett, you will go by the name of Byron James. And Leo, you will be Liam James.” He handed them the tickets. “When you get safely off the ship, I’m sure you can return to your original names, as long as you never see any passengers from the ship again.” With a sigh, he looked them both over. “I’m glad to have met you both. I’ll explain to Fiona after you leave.

She'll understand. Once you are safely settled, send us a letter, will ya? Otherwise, Fiona will be worried sick."

Barrett and Leo stared at this giant of a man. They both had so many questions but no time to ask. Straightening his back, Barrett thrust his hand out to Dan. Gently, Dan grasped his hand and shook it. "It's been a pleasure, Sir. Thank you for all you've done for us. I hope to see you again." Barrett said, eyes glistening with respect.

Leo threw his arms around Dan and mumbled his thanks into Dan's shoulder. Dan gingerly pated Leo on the back as the boy squeezed him. Lightly pushing Leo off him, Dan said, "You two need to go. Now."

The boys took off running back into the tavern. They grabbed their few belongings and slipped out of the house, avoiding Fiona. Together they ran down the street to the docks.

Only one ship was readying to push off, the *Fortuitous*. Double-checking the ticket information, the boys headed to their next adventure.

Chapter Eleven

On board the elegant ship, the boys were greeted by a porter who led them to their cabin. Along the way, he rattled off a list of activities and amenities for the boys. Neither Barrett nor Leo processed anything he said as they took in the polished deck and the narrow hallways leading to their cabins.

"Here we are, Messrs. James." Silently, the boys entered their cabin. "As you can see, your luggage was delivered yesterday. Will there be anything else?"

Barrett pulled on his earlobe and said, "No, that will be all. Thank you."

"Very well. Here is the key to your cabin," pausing to look the boys up and down, he said, "Dinner will be served at six sharp. The dress is formal." His eyes lingered on the now reddish-brown stains on Barrett's trousers.

Following his gaze, Leo said. "Don't worry about him. I'll make sure he gets cleaned up." "Of course, Sir." With a click of his heels, he was gone.

Pulling out his pocket knife, Leo picked the luggage's locks. "Let's see what we're working with here." Soon piles of clothing littered their cabin.

Barrett grabbed a journal he found in one of the trunks. Flipping it open he, he skimmed the first couple of pages. "Liam and Baron are cousins on their way to New York. It says here that Baron hopes to find investors for their new business venture."

"What kind of business?" With one eye raised, Leo lifted a brightly colored jacket with ruffles from a trunk.

"Fashion," Barret said. "They want to bring European fashion to the Americas. Something about bypassing the French and Napoleon." Barrett read on. "But apparently, Liam is more interested in conquering the wilds of America. Something about looking for gold."

"Liam sounds like my kind of man. Fashion is woman's work." Leo pulled a pair of boots out of the trunk. "Okay, these aren't so bad."

The boys spent the rest of the day going through their newly acquired belongings. Leo dressed in Liam's high fashion clothes. They were bold and highly conspicuous. But they had an air of elegance and masculinity to them. Byron's clothing was the complete opposite of Liam's vibrant attire. Where Liam had vibrant colors, Byron's clothing was muted. However, it was made of high-quality fabric and fitted Barret's body, showing off the newly acquired muscles he gained from working in the tavern.

"We look good." Leo strutted around the room.

"I look good. You look like a peacock." Barrett smirked.

"I don't care what you say. I look stunning." Leo lifted Liam's hat on his head, saying, "Come on. Let's take these clothes for a walk."

The sun gleamed off the polished wood of the ship. Couples promenaded along the deck, taking in the crisp afternoon air. Two women sat on a bench quietly talking. If it weren't for the age difference between the two, you would think they were twins. A strong breeze whipped across the deck, causing the hat to fly off the younger woman's perfectly styled hair. She gasped as her hat soared through the air. Leaping to the side, Leo grasped the hat's brim just before it was carried off to sea.

Hat in hand, Leo approached the woman. Barrett watched as Leo suddenly stopped in front of the women. Barrett quickly joined the small group staring at one another. Upon closer inspection, Barrett noticed that the young woman was a girl about their age. Her mouth was quirked to the side as Leo stared at her wide-eyed and mouth slightly agape.

"So, may I have my hat back?" The young woman said.

Leo stood rooted to the ground, uncharacteristically silent.

Barrett grabbed the hat from his starstruck friend's grip and returned it to the girl. "My apologies for my cousin; he seems to have forgotten how to speak."

"Indeed, he has," clipped the older woman.

"Allow me to introduce ourselves. My name is Baron James, and this is my cousin, Liam James." Barrett bowed.

"James, you say? Are you a relation of Sir Edward James?" the woman's eyes sparkled in the sunlight.

"Oh, well...uh," Barrett stuttered, unsure how to answer.

At his side, Leo finally found his voice. "Yes, Sir James is our grandfather."

"How lucky you are to be a relation to such a charitable man," the woman purred in appreciation. "It is a pleasure to meet your acquaintance. I am Mrs. Rebecca Rose, and this is my daughter, Miss Eva Rose."

Tilting her head, Eva eyed Leo's pale yellow coat and cerulean waistcoat. "That is a lovely shade of blue you have on. Quite fitting for a day at sea. It matches both the heavens and the ocean."

"Eva! We do not comment on gentleman's attire," Mrs. Rose admonished her daughter. She turned back to the boys with a sweetness reserved for the angels. "My apologies, gentleman. My daughter is still mastering the fine art of becoming a refined lady. We are on our way to New York, where she will attend a lovely boarding school for girls." Pink spread across Eva's delicate face.

"No apologies needed. I welcome such commentary. I love fashion," Leo stated.

Baffled by such an unusual comment, her lips formed a soft O. Mrs. Rose looked questioningly toward Barrett. "I must say. It is unusual to hear gentlemen speak about fashion with any passion."

"We are in the textile business. My cousin and I are going to New York to find investors in our fashion line."

Eva raised one eyebrow and took in the boy's clothing.

"Oh, how fascinating! With a grandfather like Sir Edward James, I am sure you will find much success." Mrs. Rose cooed. Next to her, Eva rolled her eyes at her mother's shameless flattery.

"Indeed. Americans have a bolder sense of style than the British. I think our line will do quite well there." Leo grabbed his lapels and nodded his head.

Smirking, Barrett mumbled, "I doubt it."

Eva's eyes widened as she tried to hide her laugh behind her gloved hand.

"What's that you say?" Mrs. Rose addressed Barrett.

"I believe he said he doubted their success in New York." Eva's eyes glinted mischievously.

Leo shot a wounded look at Eva, "I hope you wouldn't believe such a falsehood. I have no doubt the men of New York will welcome a fresh look." Sighing, he looked over at Barrett. "As you can see, my cousin prefers the muted colors of depression."

"Depression?" Barrett turned to Leo, "My wardrobe is sophisticated, while yours looks like a peacock."

Mrs. Rose's eyes darted between the boy, trying to decide how to respond. "Oh, why, I'm sure you will succeed in New York." She smiled sweetly at them.

"You are too kind, Mrs. Rose," Barrett bowed towards the matronly woman. "but only one of us will find success. Our grandfather sent us on a mission."

"Oh." Mrs. Rose leaned in closer, afraid she might miss the juiciest gossip.

"Well, it's more of a competition of sorts. I believe my clothesline will be better suited for the Americans than Le— uh, Liam's. Whoever gets the most money from investors will win Grandfather's endorsement and, uh, his money." Barrett rocked on his heels and smiled at Leo.

He was feeling quite proud of his improv.

Clasping her hands together, Mrs. Rose said, "How exciting! Eva, isn't this just thrilling! A fashion competition!"

Eva took in Leo's eager face and Barrett's proud smirk. "Indeed it is."

"Gentlemen, it was wonderful meeting you. We must get ready for dinner. We were invited to dine at the Captain's table. Hopefully, we will meet again." Mother and daughter walked off arm and arm.

Leo watched Eva as she disappeared into the crowd of passengers. "What beauty have I seen? She must be an angel, for no human could be that lovely."

Barrett stepped in front of Leo's line of vision. "Promise me you will never say that again. You sound like an idiot."

"I am an idiot for letting her walk out of my life like that." Leo pinned.

"You have got to be kidding me! We can't afford such distractions right now. We are on a mission and should probably not draw attention to ourselves. I can't believe you said we were the grandsons of Sir Edward James. Do you even know who that is?"

Sidestepping Barrett, Leo continued his stroll along the deck. "Someone who impressed my future mother-in-law." Humming a tune to himself, he took in the ocean's rolling waves.

"Sir Edward James is a ruthless solicitor with a reputation for destroying anyone who comes against his clients." Barrett said.

"Then why was Mrs. Rose so impressed with him?" Leo asked.

"Because he combats his negative image with his generous donations and charity. Most people ignore his questionable practices because of his generous nature. He and his wife host an elaborate ball every season, and invitations to their ball are coveted among every circle in London."

"Oh, well." Leo pulled out a bag of peanuts from his pocket. "I guess we choose our grandfather well."

Barrett looked at his best friend and wondered how often he was dropped on his head as an infant. "No, Leo. Impersonating the grandsons of such a wicked man is not a good idea. What if he finds out?"

"Relax, *cousin*, we're halfway to America. He will never know." Leo popped a handful of peanuts into his mouth.

Chapter Twelve

Soft candlelight lit the ship's dining room. Round tables nailed to the floor were draped with elegant white tablecloths. Passengers filed into the room and sat at their assigned tables. Dressed in the James cousin's finest, Leo and Barrett stood inside the dining room as if they were lost children searching for a home. Spotting the porter who escorted them to their cabin earlier, Leo waved him over.

"Yes, Sir?" the porter asked.

"I'm afraid I'm not sure where to sit. I'm sure you told us earlier, but we've plumb forgotten. Must be the sea," Leo said.

With a sigh, the porter quickly explained the seating arrangement for each meal. "The only exceptions are those invited to dine with the captain. They will receive an invitation earlier in the day."

"I see," Barrett said.

"Who won the lucky ticket to dine with the captain tonight?" Leo questioned.

Straightening his back and lifting his head slightly, the porter said, "That honor goes to Mr. and Mrs. Rose and their daughter, Miss Rose, and the James cousins. Very esteemed passengers."

Barret shot Leo a pained look.

Leo's smile stretched the limits of his face, "That's wonderful news! Since we are Liam and Baron James, I guess that means we will be dining with the lovely Rose family and the captain."

The porter's eyes rounded as he took in the boys' appearance. "My apologies, gentlemen. I didn't recognize you from this morning. You look..." his voice trailed off as he took in Leo's bright outfit and Barrett's stylish dress coat.

"Clean?" Leo smirked

"Stylish?" Barrett said with a lopsided grin.

"Like men." Realizing his error, the porter quickly amended, "Like fine gentlemen, which of course, you are."

Barrett dropped his grin and leaned in, "What do you mean by men? Did you think we were ladies?"

Throwing his hands up, the porter said hurriedly, "No, of course not! It's just that when I met you this morning, you were dressed like, um..." The porter looked around as if trying to find a lifeboat to save him from himself.

"Well?" Leo urged.

"Younger," the porter gulped.

"Are you saying we are old men now?" Leo questioned.

"No, of course not! I meant, younger like boys. You were dressed in dirty rags and had mud all over you. You were a right mess." Seeing Leo lift his eyebrows, he added, "Nothing is wrong with that. It's just that we were told that you were men of fashion." Barrett crossed his arms against his chest.

Lazily, Leo examined his fingernails, "Well, I did tell you we would get cleaned up."

"Yes, sir. That you did. Please, let me take you to your seats. It's right this way." The embarrassed porter led the boys to a table at the front of the room. Seated around the table was

Mrs. Rose, who sat beside a man who wore an expression of boredom. He must have been Mr. Rose. Next to him, Eva Rose watched as Leo and Barrett were escorted to the table. Leo spying on an open seat next to Eva, quickly claimed the seat for himself.

“Good evening, Miss Rose. You look lovely tonight.” Leo said with his most charming smile.

“Why thank you, Mr. James.” Eva smiled kindly at Leo. “A lady probably shouldn’t comment on men’s fashion, but you have quite a unique taste for color.”

Looking down at his purple waistcoat peeking out from his dress coat, Leo ran a hand over his newly acquired wardrobe. “Thank you. I remember you said you loved cerulean, so I chose this color for you.”

“Did I?” Her lips curved into a small smile.

“Indeed,” Leo said proudly.

“I don’t remember saying that, but I must admit, I am a little confused. Your waistcoat is violet, not cerulean. You know that cerulean is a shade of blue, right?” Eva’s face revealed an amused grin.

Leo’s face fell. Next to him, Barratt chuckled. “Don’t mind Liam; he tends to go color blind around pretty faces.”

With a serious look, Leo said, “It’s true. The sight of a beautiful woman is bad for business.” Eva rolled her eyes.

Mr. Rose perked up at the word business. “You are right, young man! The ladies have no place in business. They are a distraction and bad for business all around.”

Just then, a man with a bushy mustache took his seat at their table. “Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I apologize for my tardiness. I am Captain Travigo.” Flicking his napkin open, he smiled grimly at his dinner guest. “There is much to look after on this voyage across the Atlantic. Napoleon hasn’t made things easy for travel.”

“That French nuisance has made trading with the colonies near impossible.” Mr. Rose grunted. “Someone should shoot the man and put us *all* out of our misery.”

“Henry!” gasped Mrs. Rose. “How can you say such things!”

The captain raised his glass towards her husband and said, “If Napoleon weren’t around, it would make my life a lot easier.”

Curiosity tickled Barrett. “Why is that?”

Stuffing a bread roll in his mouth, the captain answered, “Well, for one thing, the water would be a safer place. Many have turned a coin stealing goods to sell to Napoleon. Mostly weapons or any other supplies he might need. People are afraid to sail.” As if remembering who he was with, he added, “But don’t worry, you’re all safe aboard the *Fortuitous*.”

“I would hope so!” Mrs. Rose clucked.

“I don’t know. I think meeting a pirate might be a welcome change.” Staring at her plate, Eva absently swirled her food around.

Captain Travigo choked on his steak. Grabbing his wine glass, he guzzled down the remains of his wine before speaking. “Young lady, you know nothing of the world if you think meeting a pirate would be exciting. They are ruthless and depraved men who think nothing of slitting your neck for your possessions.”

He snapped his fingers in the air. A waiter materialized and poured more wine into his glass.

Eva lifted her chin and met the captain's gaze, despite the growing creep of red across her face. "Of course, I was only speaking in jest."

"Eva, refined young ladies do not make jokes." Eva's mother hissed at her.

As if he didn't not hearing Eva's exchange with the captain, her father chimed in. "I read about that scientist, Meadows, smuggling weapons across the Atlantic under his majesty's flag. What disgrace."

The table continued to discuss the Meadows scandal, but Barrett was lost in his own world. It was as if time had stopped at the mention of his father's name. Suddenly, he was no longer on a grand adventure with his best friend, pretending to be someone else. His parents and sister were gone, and all the world thought they were traitors. The weight of all he had lost pressed down on his heart, smothering all hopes of ever feeling happy again.

"Mr. James, are you alright?" Eva furrowed her brow in concern.

"How could I not be when seated with such a lovely dinner companion," Leo replied with a roguish grin.

Leveling Leo an annoyed glare, Eva said, "I meant your cousin, the other Mr. James." She inclined her head towards Barrett. "He seems to have gone white."

All heads turned towards Barrett. Mrs. Rose leaned in and eyed him appraisingly. "Mr. James, are you alright? I hope you're not feeling seasick."

Leo elbowed Barrett in the side. “Hey, what was that for?” Then as if noticing that his table had gone silent and was staring at him. “Oh, sorry. I guess I got lost in thought there. What were we discussing?”

With a knowing look, Leo said, “The captain was just telling us his doubts concerning the Meadows scandal. He thinks it is odd that Napoleon’s smugglers were moving weapons around the Americas. It would make more sense if it were happening in the waters around Europe, not America.”

A small weight lifted off Barrett’s heart. “True.”

“And also considering that the weapons were headed in the wrong direction. The fighting is happening in Europe.” The captain patted his mouth with his napkin, missing the crumbs caught in his mustache. Eva wrinkled her nose as the food danced above his lip with each word he spoke.

Henry Rose pointed his knife at the captain, “I wouldn’t be so quick to say that. I bet he will try to take over the colonies, too.”

Raising his glass, the captain said, “Well, then here’s to the death of that little French weasel.” Chuckling, the two men tipped their glasses toward each other before taking a drink. Fanning her face, Mrs. Rose said, “My word, all this talk of war and treason. I am afraid my nerves are on edge. I better go lay down.”

Standing, she turned to Eva, “Let’s go.”

Eva’s fork was paused halfway to her mouth. “My nerves are fine, thank you.” With a seemingly too-polite smile, Eva resumed her fork’s journey to her mouth.

With a steely voice, she said, “You will come back to the cabin with me. We have much to discuss about your crass behavior tonight.” Without waiting for Eva, she spun around and headed to the door.

“Think she will notice if I’m not behind her?” Eva winked conspiratorily at Leo and Barrett.

“Eva.” Her father drew out her name admonishingly.

Sighing, Eva stood and followed her mother out of the dining room.

Chapter Thirteen

The weeks aboard the *Fortuitous* trudged on like the slow erosion of a shoreline. Each day, Leo would drone on about Eva. Dressed like a bouquet of flowers, he sought her out at every possible chance. If Barrett's heart wasn't so heavy, he might have enjoyed watching Leo make a fool of himself in front of her. However, he couldn't push past his fears that he was making a mistake. What did he hope to find on the other side of the Atlantic? Yet, he didn't see how he could return to England when the entire country believed his father was a traitor. He knew the evidence was damaging, but he couldn't accept his father would ever help Napoleon. And why bring along his wife and daughter?

No. His father might not be perfect, but he would never put his loved ones at risk. He would never get involved with nefarious individuals. He loved England. He hated traveling. He had all he needed at home. Well, maybe not a laboratory anymore.

Dread washed over Barrett.

Was his father forced to seek financial compensation because Barrett burned his laboratory?

"Mind if I take in this lovely day with you?" Eva looked out over the water. Her maid stood off the side, pretending not to listen in.

"Be my guest. Although Leo—" Barrett winced at his mistake, "uh, Liam, will be upset he missed you."

"You don't have to call him Liam around me." Eva turned to Barrett and said in a low whisper, "It's okay. I know the truth."

Barrett's mouth was suddenly dry. "I'm not sure what you mean." He stumbled over his words, unable to make eye contact with her.

Smiling, she patted his arm. "You have nothing to fear. Rest assured, I will keep your secret."

Barrett glanced over her shoulder to the maid.

"Oh, and don't worry about Collette. She is the soul of discretion." The maid winked in agreement.

Wrapping her hand under his arm, she led him along the deck. "Come; exercise is good for the soul."

Barrett looked down at her and asked, "What do you think you know?"

"I don't think anything, but I do know everything. Do you truly think Leo could keep a secret from me?"

Barrett cursed under his breath.

"He is indeed pathetic. Cute but pathetic" She blushed at this admission. "Anyway, I am sorry about your family and everything you two have gone through since then. But I must warn you to be careful. My mother hopes to get rid of me and marry me off to the highest bidder. She plans to send a letter to your grandfather about a possible betrothal. And if she does that, then your lies will quickly unravel."

Alarmed, Barrett stopped and stared at her, "She can't do that!"

Tugging him to keep walking, "Barrett, you must compose yourself better. Your reactions tend to draw attention to yourself, and that is precisely what you should not be doing right now. Just smile and keep walking."

Resuming his stroll took every ounce of his willpower. “Why would she do something like that? Aren’t you only sixteen?”

“Yes, and according to my mother, that is old enough. I tend to give her migraines with my antics, or so she tells me. It is possible she is sending me to America because I misbehaved at the schools back home. She fears I will ruin her reputation with my tendency to get in trouble.” Shrugging her shoulder, she added, “She’s not wrong.”

“No wonder Leo likes you. The two of you together could be a disaster.”

“Not at all. I admit Leo can be rather impulsive, but I’m not. I like to consider every possible outcome before I put a plan into play. As long as we are smart, we can avoid disaster.” Eva glanced at Barrett, “In fact, we have come up with an infallible plan for your next move.”

Warily, he asked, “What is it?”

“My mother will help,” Eva said with an impish smile. “Something my mother will set into motion for us.”

“Us?” Barrett asked warily.

Winking, she said, “Maybe it is better if you don’t know all the details. Just leave those pesky particulars to me.”

Chapter Fourteen

The docks in New York swelled with people from all over the world. Sailors loaded and unloaded their cargo while vendors advertised their wares. Passengers waved down carriages and said goodbye to friends they met on the voyage.

But none of this registered with Barrett.

Barrett watched in fascination as a girl dressed in men's trousers chased down a man twice her size. Pushing people down who got in her way, she leaped on the man, tackling him to the ground. With the quickness of a viper, she pinned the man's arm between her knees and bent his arm backward. The man screamed out in pain.

"Tell me who it was, or I will break your arm," shouted the girl.

The man clenched his teeth, "I don't know what you're talking about."

The girl gave a slight shrug and bent the man's arm back even further.

"Okay!" screamed the man. "It was McHenry's crew!" The girl released the man's arm.

The man clumsily stood up, cradling his arm. Glaring at the girl, the man screeched, "Stella Castillo, you cow, you almost broke my arm!"

"Stop crying. You're embarrassing yourself." Stella pushed him.

Shaking his head, "You're the embarrassment! You think you're special because you're a woman with that little boat! McHenry's crew was right to take everything you had onboard and leave you that raft. You'll never be a real sailor!" He spits each word into her face.

Crack! Stella's fist connected with the man's face. Spinning around, she marched back towards the water, leaving the man howling in her wake.

Barrett tilted his head as he considered the girl. She jumped onto her schooner and disappeared below decks. It wasn't a large ship, but it was by no means a raft.

"I like America," Leo said.

"Yeah, this seems like your kind of place." Barrett tugged on his satchel's strap. The boys went through the James cousin's belongings in the days leading up to their arrival. Taking only what they needed, each boy packed a bag for the next leg of their journey. They made sure to grab a few toiletries, some food, and all the money. While Barrett was crossing the ocean, he shot up a few inches. Fortunately, he could fit into Byron's clothes.

"We should go talk to that girl?" Without waiting for an answer, Leo headed towards the small vessel they watched the girl disappear into.

Barrett called after him, "Are you crazy? She'll stab you!" He threw up his hands as he watched Leo call out to the girl on the boat. *Was Leo ever going to learn?* Barrett wondered.

A tap on his shoulder caused him to turn around. His jaw dropped upon seeing the woman in front of him. Speechless, he stared in disbelief as the sweet girl from the *Veritas* wore men's trousers with her hair swept into a cap. Her eyes gleamed in triumph at Barrett's reaction.

"So, this is part of the plan we didn't tell you about," Eva said smugly.

"Have you gone mad," Barrett growled.

"Maybe." She looked over his shoulder at Leo. "Come on. We need to get moving." Brushing past him, she moved quickly down the dock to where Leo was talking to Stella. Muttering under his breath, Barrett followed.

Leo was shaking Stella's hand when Barrett approached them. "Stella, I'd like you to meet Barrett Meadows. He is the one I was telling you about."

Stella tipped her hat towards Barrett. He noticed her strong muscles flex as she moved her hat. Up close, he saw that Stella was older than he first thought. She must be somewhere in her early twenties. Her face was tanned from a life lived outside.

Stella addressed the group, she said. "Listen, I'll take you where you need to go, but it takes more than one person to sail this ship. Everyone will need to pitch in."

"You can count on us," Eva said as she and Leo climbed aboard.

Barrett looked down at the unsteady plank between the pier and the boat. "It's best if you take it a run," Stella offered.

Eva looked over the railings at Barrett, "That's what I did. It's easy once you get going."

Exasperated, Barrett shouted, "I don't even know what you're doing here, Eva. You're supposed to be on your way to some fancy school. And you," Barrett gestured towards Stella, "I'm not sailing with some girl pirate! Leo, are you out of your mind? She just attacked a man."

Leo shrugged. "Yeah, she's the kind of person we need for the wilds of America. Look, we don't know this place. She does. And she can fight. We need her. Come on, let's go."

Stella stood behind Leo with her arms crossed. She stood a little taller with each of Leo's proclamations.

Dumbfounded, Barrett stared at his best friend. "This is going to end in a disaster. And why is Eva here?"

Leo placed his arm around Eva's shoulders. "We had to bring her. Otherwise, she would be heartbroken without me."

Laughing, Eva pushed his arm off her. "No. I'm here to ensure you two don't do anything stupid—like end up on a ship headed for Norway." She cocked her head to the side and looked smugly at Barrett.

Irritated, Barrett shouted back, "That only happened once."

Stella pointed at Barrett, "You coming? Because I'm about to push off."

Against his better judgment, Barret rushed up the board and jumped onto the deck. Behind him, Stella pulled on cables that lifted the board off the pier. Once the board was in the air, she pulled on more cables which spun it so that it was now horizontally pressed against the side of the boat. Pressing the final latch down, she tugged on the wood to ensure it was snugly in place.

"So, I don't want to question your methods, but why do you use that contraption when you have a perfectly good row boat here? You could drop anchor just off the shore and then row in." Leo rubbed the back of his neck.

"This is more fun. I designed it," she said nonchalantly. "And it annoys the other captains when I squeeze in here."

"I like it." Eva smiled appreciate at Stella.

"Thank you. I'll need your help rowing this lady out to sea before I can put the sails." She shouted over her shoulders as she disappeared through a hatch that led below decks.

Begrudgingly, Barrett headed towards the hatch. "This is madness. Eva, you haven't answered my question. What are you doing here? You can't be here with us. You're unchaperoned. Your mother will have a heart attack."

With a bounce in her step, Eva responded, "As a matter of fact, she is currently suffering from a migraine-not a heart attack. I may have spent the last couple of days arguing with my mother about everything and anything. When we disembarked from the *Fortuitous* this morning, she declared she was suffering from the worst migraine of her life."

"And...?" Barrett climbed down the ladder to the lower level.

"It was easy to convince my mother to let my maid escort me to the school. She was in too much pain to argue. So, she stayed behind while I came here." Eva gilded down the ladder. Despite her masculine attire, she still appeared every inch a lady.

"*That* is your grand plan? There are so many holes in your plans. What about your father? Where was he in all this? And what happens when you don't show up at the school?" Eyes growing round, Barrett said in a low voice, "My God, have we kidnapped you?"

"Wow. Leo was right about you." The light from Eva's face faded as she considered Barret. Softly said, "Look, we have it all worked out. My father wasn't coming with my mother and me. He has business to attend to in the city. And my maid went in my place. Trust me; she deserves a chance to attend this school. No one will be the wiser. And I will be free to live my life how I want to."

Barrett dropped onto the bench next to an oar handle. Grabbing onto it, he pulled heavily back.

"Woah!" Stella yelled at him from the bench in front of him. "Wait until everyone sits, then row when I tell you!"

"Sorry." Chastised, Barrett took his hand off the oar's handles. Eva and Leo sat down behind their own oar. Stella spun around and faced everyone.

"Now, here's how it's going to go. When I call out starboard, Leo and Eva, you row. Stay in sync with everyone. When I call out Port, that's you and me, Barrett. When I call Everyone, we all need to row."

"How do we know we won't run into something."

With a half smile, Stella said, "Don't worry about that; my first mate will let me know if we get too close. Everyone ready?" Heads nodded around the room. Sucking in a lungful of air, Stella shouted, "All aboard!"

A soulful howl cried above them.

"Port!" Barrett grabbed hold of the oar and pulled back in time with Stella. Again and again, they rowed until they heard a series of barks.

"Everyone!" Leo and Eva greedily pulled on their oars. Sweat dripped into Barrett's eyes as he put all his frustration into rowing. Stella, accompanied by muffled barks, called out directions as they maneuvered away from the marina and into the open water.

Barrett heard a low howl sound.

"Oar's up!" Everyone raised their oars out of the water, and Stella showed them how to secure them.

Barrett wiped a hand through his sweaty hair. "Is there a dog on board?"

"Sure is. He's my first mate. He directs me when I'm rowing down here. He's trained to tell me if an obstacle is in my way and which side it is on." Stella led them out of the room and pointed to an open area on the other side of the ladder. "Those hammocks are where we will all sleep. Everyone gets their own hammock. Throw any belongs in one of the closets down here." Without waiting for a response, she headed up the ladder.

"I'll take the one by the window," Eva claimed.

Barrett raced up the ladder and spotted Stella petting the biggest dog he had ever seen.

"Good boy, Theo."

Barret walked up to the two. "Theo?"

"It's first mate to you."

"Will he respond to that?" He reached out to let the dog smell his hand. Theo ignored him.

"No," Stella said, rubbing behind his ears.

"Then why would we call him that?" Barrett leaned in to pet the dog's head. Theo growled, and he snapped his hand back.

"Easy there, boy. He's okay....for now." Stella crooned to Theo. Looking up at Barrett, she said, "He's trained to ignore everyone but me. You have to get my permission to pet him first."

"That's amazing. How did you get him to be so obedient?" Barrett admired the look of devotion in the dog's eyes.

"Dogs are intelligent beings, and if you take the time you can train them, they can do almost anything. I found him on the streets of Cartagena on the same night I won *La Paraiso*. We've been together ever since. He's eager to please and loves having a job. So I taught him to help me. Usually, I have to row in myself, which I can do with my pulley system. I trained him to give me directions when I'm down below. Although, I have to admit it's a lot nicer having people onboard to help." Stella confided.

"I would imagine so. I still don't know if this is a good idea." Barrett looked out as the waves slapped against the side of the boat.

Stella stood and wiped her dog-slobbered hand off on her trousers. "Compared to the trek you were just on, this will be a quick ride down to the Carolinas. And if you're concerned for the girl, don't worry about her. I will look after her like she is my own sister. She has spunk, and from what Leo says, she's smart." Stella offered him a gentle smile. "It's good to have friends around you right now. We'll get you down the coast and find out what happened to your family. I know someone who might help you find what you're looking for." Slapping a hand on his shoulder, she added, "Come with me. I'll show you and your friends your jobs in *La Paraiso*."

Barrett considered her words. She was right. He needed to be in no other place than here with his friends. Each rock of the boat loosed the tension from his shoulders. It may not have made sense to anyone, but having a mission to propel him forward felt good. And who cares if he joined forces with a pirate whose first mate was a dog? Stella might show him how to train a dog as she did with Theo. And if Eva wanted to walk away from her life run by her mother, who was he to say she couldn't do as she pleased? Leo was right. This was exactly what they needed—a family.

Chapter Fifteen

La Paraiso pulled into Charleston Harbor a few days later. Stella decided to drop anchor and row into shore. The commotion of Theo howling and barking as he guided them into port would draw too much attention. Stella said it was better to arrive quietly instead of annoying people. Eva agreed. They climbed into the rowboat and went to shore, leaving Theo to guard the ship.

As Stella secured the rowboat, she instructed everyone, "There's an old pirate here that always seems to know what's happening on the water. He'll know more about your parent's shipwreck than what that newspaper told you. Barrett, you come with me to talk to him. Leo, Eva, you two find out what you can from the harbormaster about their ship."

Eva seemed to move with a purpose toward some fishermen to ask them for directions. Leo trailed behind her like a lovesick puppy. The fishermen pointed to a small white building not too far away.

"She is going to eat him alive if he doesn't get a backbone soon," Stella said as they watched Eva and Leo make their way to a little white building.

Barrett grinned. "He'll be fine. So, where is this friend of yours?"

Stella laughed, "I wouldn't call him a friend."

The pair headed to the main street in front of the docks. Stella ducked into an alleyway. Surrounded by brick walls, she picked up her way as she navigated through the back alleyways. Fearing he would lose Stella in this labyrinth, Barrett raced to keep up with her.

"What's the rush?" Barrett tripped over a discarded box.

"This is not a place you want to be found standing around." Stella tossed the words over her shoulder. "Not unless you want to be stabbed, robbed, and left for dead."

"Oh," Barrett mumbled.

"Here we are." Stella stood in front of a stairway leading down to a cellar door. A dingy sign over the door read *The Maurader's Match*. "When we get in there, don't say or do anything. Just stay next to me. And whatever you do, don't make eye contact with him, or he'll gut you faster than you can blink."

"Seriously?" Barrett said skeptically.

Stella glared at him. He threw up his hands in mock surrender. "Okay, okay. I won't look him in the eye." Together they descended into the cellar tavern. As the door shut behind them, it took a few seconds for Barrett's eyes to adjust to the poorly lit room. A smokey haze floated through the air, carrying the grumblings of its patrons. Stella led him to a back corner where the oldest and ugliest man Barrett had ever seen sat. His leathery face was a jigsaw of scars. He had a sharp nose, and the few teeth he had were jagged. His clothes were dirty and too big for him. He was a scrawny man whose bones pointed out of his body, ready to stab anyone who got near. Barrett couldn't tear his eyes off the ancient man before him.

"Well, looky here! If it ain't my sweet Stella. Come to bring light to an old man's heart?" Barrett watched in horror as Stella leaned in and kissed him on his cheek. She glanced back at Barrett and gave him a disapproving look. Barrett averted his eyes.

"You know I can't go long without seeing you." She sat beside him and motioned for Barrett to do the same.

"I'm too old to believe them lies. What really brings you here, Stella-girl?" The old man leaned back and took in Stella and Barrett.

"We're looking for information about a ship that went down a while back, the *Veritas*. His parents and sister were on it when it sunk."

"Is that why he looks like he lost his favorite puppy?"

"No. I told him you would gut him if he made eye contact with you." Stella smirked.

An uproar of laughter bellowed from the aged pirate. "Stella, you were always my favorite. Boy, you can look up now. Don't believe a word my granddaughter says when it comes. She tends to exaggerate when it comes to me. Though it does tickle this old heart."

Shocked and embarrassed, Barrett looked between the two searching for any resemblance. Where she had brown eyes, he had the lightest of green eyes. Her hair was brown, and his, well, it was grey. Who knows what color it was originally? Stella was muscular and healthy. Her grandfather's skin looked like it was draped over his skeleton. Any sign of muscle had long left their residence upon his body.

Despite the gloom of the tavern, the old man had a mischievous glint in his eyes. "I promise not to gut you as long as you are respectful to my granddaughter."

"I can agree to that," Barrett said sheepishly.

"Good. About the *Veritas*, that ship didn't sink. It blew up a couple of weeks ago. Some imbecile snuck onto the ship one night and set it on fire. I guess they didn't take into account the gunpowder on board. The whole thing lit up the sky. There was debris in the harbor for weeks. A real pain." Stella's grandfather drank from his mug.

"That's not what the newspaper said," Barrett interjected. "That must be a different ship. My parent's boat sunk a couple of months back, just a few weeks after they left England."

"No, there's only been one ship go down around here, and it was the *Veritas*. Sounds like your newspaper got the dates wrong."

"But how would they know about it before it was destroyed?" Barrett pinched his nose.

Tapping his gnarly finger against his misshapen nose, the pirate said, "Sounds like a conspiracy to me. I happen to know that a man in England paid a lot of money to have that ship blown up. Before it set sail from London, he loaded it up with guns and ammunition. He sent word ahead of the *Veritas* with instructions to destroy it once it was in the harbor. And the harbor master was paid not to do an inspection. The boy Johnny is a worthless piece of flesh. He was drinking all day, and by the time the *Veritas* arrived in port, he was passed out on the beach. I heard he only woke up because the tide was coming in. He's lucky it didn't pull him out to sea."

The pirate took a swig of his ale. Wiping his mouth, he continued, "But his luck didn't last. While he was asleep, the passengers and crew disembarked. Only a skeleton crew was left by the time he rowed out to their boat. He climbed aboard and set the place on fire. Only when he jumped out of the ship he missed his rowboat completely and drowned. Fool."

Barrett jumped up. "Wait! Some of the passengers got off the boat before it was destroyed?"

"That's what I said, innit?" The pirate looked at Stella like Barrett had gone mad. Stella pulled Barrett back down to the table. "Listen, Grandpa might not cut you, but plenty of others here will if you annoy them. Don't draw attention to yourself."

"Okay! Okay! But does that mean my parents might be alive?" Hope sparked in Barrett's voice.

Grandpa picked up his mug and chugged the rest of his ale. Wiping his mustache with the back of his hand, he considered Barrett. "Son, is your father the science man?"

"Yes!" Barrett grabbed the sides of the table and leaned over the table. Stella told him to relax and sit back down.

"Then yes, he's alive. Along with your momma and sister, too. But I can't say what shape they're in."

The blood drained from Barrett's face. "What does that mean?"

"That means ol' Johnny screwed up. He was supposed to blow up the ship with your family on board. With them still alive, the rest of their payment won't be coming in."

"But Johnny's dead. He can't collect it." Barrett reasoned.

"Aye, but his brothers can. They're not the brightest of boys. They are holding your family hostage over at Perry's Place. They sent a message demanding more money to kill them. Once they get word back from London, they will slit their throats. All three of them."

"We have to get them." Stella seethed. "Is Perry's Place the same place that runs a poker game out of their kitchen Saturday nights?"

"It is." Her grandpa nodded wisely.

Chapter Sixteen

“Alive!” Eva did a little jig that would’ve caused her mother to faint. “When the harbor master refused to see us, I didn’t know what to do next. I’m so glad you two had success today!”

“Okay, okay. Calm down,” Stella shushed Eva. “Your voice carries on water. We don’t want all of Charleston to know of our plan.”

“What is the plan?” Leo interjected. Barrett paced the deck behind him.

“We have to wait until tomorrow night when everyone is caught up playing cards. We will sneak in after they’ve played for a while. By then, they will be drunk and unreliable. We’ll take Theo with us in case it gets rowdy. Leo, we don’t know what shape they will be in, so I need you to get a carriage or something. Eva, can you play cards?”

Proudly, Eva said, “I was kicked out of my last school for my card playing abilities. Apparently, ladies aren’t supposed to participate in lewd behavior like gambling.”

“Great, you will be our man on the inside.”

“*Woman*,” Eva corrected.

“Just make sure everyone stays at the table. We’ll ring a bell outside when it’s time for you to go. Make an excuse and get out of there. We’ll meet you down at the docks, okay?”

Heads bobbed in agreement.

“Everyone, get some rest. Tomorrow is a big day.”

Sleep didn’t come easy for Barrett. His mind raced with every possible way this plan could go wrong. All around him, he heard the snores of friends being rocked to sleep in their hammocks. Barrett wished he could turn his mind off and fall asleep.

He believed his father, mother, and sister were dead for weeks. Now, it seems like they were alive. But what if the old pirate was wrong? What if they went to Perry's Place only to discover an empty room? Or worse, what if he was too late and they were already killed? When sleep finally descended on Barrett, he was lulled into the false reality of fires and death.

The next day Leo and Eva searched for transportation while Stella and Barrett scouted out Perry's Place. It was a small restaurant with an apartment above it. The restaurant was wedged between an apothecary shop and the town's doctor's office. There was a window above where a tall shadow passed. Barrett's heart jumped into his throat as he recognized his father's silhouette.

"That's him!" Barrett started to race forward when he felt an iron-clad grip clamped down on his shoulder.

Stella pulled him back into the shadows, where they stood across the street. Through a clenched jaw, she said, "Not until tonight. If we go in now, I can't guarantee everyone will make it out alive."

Seething, Barrett shrugged out her grip but did not advance further. Waiting was the worst part. Time seemed to slow down as Barrett waited for night to fall. But night finally arrived. He watched the restaurant's customers left for the evening while others trickled in to play cards. Through the glass, Barrett could see them head for the door in the back leading to the kitchen.

Another hour passed, and Eva arrived with Leo. Eva headed into the restaurant with the confidence of a woman who knew what she was doing.

"I'd hate to play against her," Stella whispered in the dark.

"Me, too," Barrett admitted.

The restaurant's front room lights were exhausted earlier in the evening. "Okay, so here's the plan. We go in the front. There's a staircase by the kitchen door leading upstairs. We leave Theo at the bottom of the staircase. He will growl if anyone comes near him."

"And what do we do if that happens?" Barrett was starting to sweat.

With a devilish smile, Stella said, "We improvise."

Stealthily they made their way across the street. Stella gently cracked open the door. She reached up and held the bell overhead from chiming as Barrett and Theo slipped past her. Silently, they crossed the room. They could hear Eva speaking animatedly about her sea ventures. The men nearby laughed as she continued.

Stella gave Theo a hand signal at the foot of the staircase. Understanding her meaning, the dog turned his back to the stairs and sat down. With Theo guarding their entry and exit, they moved quietly up the stairs. Muffled voices murmured down behind the door at the top of the stairs. Stella twisted the doorknob. The door opened to a small room with mismatched chairs and a desk. On the other side of the room was another door. Stella made her way to the door and tried the handle.

It was locked.

Pulling something out of her pocket, she fidgeted with the lock for a few minutes. The voices on the other side of the door went quiet as she worked. Barrett's heart thudded as he watched Stella pick the lock.

Click!

Pocketing her tools, Stella slowly turned the knob and opened the door. Light poured into the hallway as she stepped through the door. Barrett barged in behind her.

Inside, his father was standing in front of his mother and sister. His arms were spread wide to shield them from whatever evil was trying to come through the door.

Upon seeing her brother, Charlotte gasped, “What are you doing here?” She raced over to him and crushed him with a hug. She pulled back and took him in, “My word! You’ve grown! Do you have muscles in here?” She gave him a squeeze on his arms.

Behind him, his parents stood astonished as they watched their children embrace. Pushing his sister off him, Barrett looked at his parents, “We can talk later. We need to go before anyone notices you’re gone.”

“Yup, I’m with him,” Charlotte chirped as if Barrett had offered to take her horseback riding. Stella ushered Barrett’s shocked parents and eager sister out of the room. Making their way across the next room, Christopher seemed to come to life. He darted over to the desk and rummaged through the drawers. Grabbing a stack of papers, turned to leave. Unfortunately, as he did, he knocked the ink blotter off the desk. It crashed on the floor next to the desk.

“Quick! Down the stairs,” Stella directed the small family.

They were halfway down the stairs when they heard Theo growl.

“What the—” came a gruff voice below them.

Racing down the stairs, Stella yelled, “Charge!” Theo lunged at the half-drunk man. Stella ushered the family down the rest of the steps and out the door. Behind her, drunk men staggered out of the kitchen to see what all the commotion was about. Eva slipped past them and around the dog. Quickly, Stella prompted the door open with one of the dining chairs.

Outside, the Meadows family clamored on board the wagon Leo borrowed. Stella jumped onto the back of it, yelled for Leo to get them out of there, and then turned to whistle for Theo.

The brute of a dog jumped over the chair Stella left for him and raced alongside the now speeding wagon. Behind them, the men burst out of the restaurant, but none was prepared to chase them. They fired shots in the air, but it did no good. Stella and her crew were already long gone.

Chapter Seventeen

The wind whipped across the deck as Barrett and his family returned to New York. Stella stood vigil over the ship's wheel. On the deck below her, Phie Meadows squeezed her son tightly. Tears spilled down her face. "Thank you for coming. I don't know how you did it, but I'm glad you did. I prayed for God to rescue us, and he sent us you."

Barrett let his mother hold him, even though it was getting hard to breathe. Giving him one final squeeze, she let go and looked up at Stella and then over to Eva and Leo chatting by the railing. "You found a great group of friends here."

"I got lucky," Barrett admitted.

"No, luck had nothing to do with it. God brought each of them into your life for a purpose," Phie countered.

Turning to Theo, she bent to pat his head, "And you, too. We couldn't have done it without your help, big fella." Theo's tongue hung over the side of his mouth as she scratched his head.

Offended, Barrett yelled up to Stella, "How come he lets her pet him?"

"I gave him permission earlier," She yelled back, keeping her eye on the water.

Barrett scoffed.

Behind him, his father appraised Theo. "It's a wonder what she's done with that dog. I dare say if it weren't for Theo's well-timed intervention, we wouldn't have made it out of that mess in Charleston."

"Stella works with him every day to reinforce his training. Between her pulley inventions and Theo, she's navigated up and down the Americas by herself. She's not a conventional woman, but everything she does—and wears—has a purpose." Barret bragged to his father.

"Innovative. That's a rare quality to find. I wonder if she would be interested in spending time on dry land for a while." Christopher Meadow wondered.

"I doubt it. Why do you ask?"

Turning to his son, Christopher sighed, "I have to apologize to you. I hope you can forgive me for not seeing you. Meeting Stella and learning about all you did to find us despite your obstacles has shown me that trusting your care in God's hands is best for you. It's not my job to determine what is best for you but to encourage you on the path God has created for you."

Stunned, Barrett at his father, unsure if he heard him right. For as long as he could remember, his father always told him he knew best for Barrett. Barrett could never understand his father's love for botany, no matter how hard he tried. There had never been another path for Barrett to follow. His father was a scientist like his grandfather, and Barrett was expected to carry on the tradition of scientific discovery.

"I don't understand, and what does Stella have to do with it," Barrett searched his father's face for clues.

Christopher walked over to the stairs that separated the upper deck where Stella stood, guiding the ship and the lower deck where they stood. Sitting on the stairs, Christopher patted the space next to him. Barrett sat next to him.

"I'm glad my laboratory burned down; it forced me out of my comfort zone." Shocked registered on Barrett's face. For months he carried the guilt of upending his father's life. Yet here he was saying he was grateful it happened.

"I was too comfortable with life," Christopher continued. "I was ignoring the gifts God gave you by forcing you to follow my plan for you. I thought I knew what was best for you because why shouldn't what is best for me be any different than for you."

Christopher scratched the stubble as he paused to consider his next words. "I see now that I have wronged you. You are more capable than I gave your credit for. You crossed an ocean and overcame many obstacles to get to us. I've treated you as if you were still a child, not the man you've become." Christopher smiled proudly at Barrett, "And I see now that your appreciation for animals is more than a childish fascination. Seeing what Stella has done with Theo has led me to believe that maybe there can be something for you in this kind of work."

"Training dogs to be first mates?" Barrett said incredulously.

"Not exactly," Christopher smiled at the hungry look in his son's eyes. "I was thinking more along the lines of animal behavior. I think there is more to the animal kingdom than we realize. Maybe you could be the one to enlighten us."

In a flash, Barrett threw his arms around his father and shouted, "I accept! Thank you! Thank you!"

Playfully pushing Barret back, Christopher said, "Don't thank me just yet. I have yet to secure the proper instructor for you." With his head, he motioned towards Stella.

"Stella? Wow, you have a lot of faith in God if you think you can convince her to come ashore for any length of time. I don't think she'd survive on land. You do realize her veins are filled with seawater and not blood, right? She needs a daily infusion to stay alive."

"Amusing. I think we can come to an arrangement she will agree with." Christopher said thoughtfully.

A shadow crossed Barrett's face as he realized he still had to tell his father about the newspaper article and the allegations against him.

"Father, it might not be so easy to return to England." Pulling the worn newsprint from his pocket, he unfolded it and handed it to Christopher. A knot formed in the middle of Barrett's back as he watched his father learn that when news traveled about his shipwreck, so did allegations of his treason.

Looking up from the paper, Christopher asked, "Is this what has been weighing on you? It's not true."

"I know that!" Barrett said quickly. "It's just that everyone else believes it. We can't go back there. You'll get arrested."

A slow smile spread across Christopher's face. "As a matter of fact, we must return. While our illustrious captors held us hostage, I learned much during our stay in that horrible place. Our good friend Mr. Roberts orchestrated the weapons and ammunition to be placed on our ship. He hired those thugs to set fire to the ship with us. Unfortunately, they messed up that last part. Their brilliant solution was to kidnap and hold us for ransom until Mr. Roberts agreed to pay more for our deaths. Can't say it was a great plan, but they weren't the smartest men."

"Whit Roberts? Why on earth would he do such a thing? He's always telling you how the world of botany wouldn't survive without you." Barrett couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"Those weren't compliments, Son. Those were threats. I didn't realize it then, but I see it clearly now. While he might be fifteen years older than me, I believe he loathed that my success outshined his. Being an assistant to a much younger botanist must have been an unthinkable act of injustice. He wanted the accolades I received instead of watching me get what he felt he was owed. So by killing me and destroying my reputation, he could balance the scales of justice. I do not doubt that he will continue to paint me as the monster he believed I was."

Shaking the article, he added. "This was a nice touch, though. If we hadn't been delayed in New York, we might've arrived on time in Charleston, and the events of this article would've matched up. Although his mistake was publishing this too soon, news doesn't travel this fast. Traveling from Charleston to London takes longer than a week."

Barrett snapped his fingers as he remembered Fiona's words. "A woman I met in Edinburgh said the same thing."

Curling one side of his mouth, Christopher said, "So the seed of doubt has already spread."

"Is that enough to exonerate you? Barrett looked doubtful at his father.

"No, but it's just enough to set the stage for what I intend to present to the authorities. I remember seeing incriminating documents on the desk when they let me out of the room once."

"And that's what you took from the desk when we left?" Barrett said excitedly.

"Indeed. There are ledgers of payoffs, letters of instructions from Roberts, and more papers I haven't sorted through yet. We have nothing to worry about. Roberts will be in

handcuffs before he even realizes we've returned." As his father spoke, the knot loosened between his shoulder blades.

Slapping his hands on his knees, Christopher braced himself as he stood up and turned toward his son. Reaching out his hand, he said, "I promise when we return to England, all will be well."

Grasping his father's hand, Barrett allowed himself to be pulled up.

I suppose the world isn't mad after all.