

One

London, 1913

It was dark where she was crouched but the little girl did as she'd been told. The lady had said to wait, it wasn't safe yet, they had to be as quiet as larder mice. It was a game, just like hide-and-seek.

From behind the wooden barrels the little girl listened. Made a picture in her mind the way Papa had taught her. Men, near and far, sailors she supposed, shouted to one another. Rough, loud voices, full of the sea and its salt. In the distance: bloated ships' horns, tin whistles, splashing oars and, far above, grey gulls cawing, wings flattened to absorb the ripening sunlight.

The lady would be back, she'd said so, but the little girl hoped it would be soon. She'd been waiting a long time, so long that the sun had drifted across the sky and was now warming her knees through her new dress. She listened for the lady's skirts, swishing against the wooden deck. Her heels clipping, hurrying, always hurrying, in a way the little girl's own mamma never did. The little girl wondered, in the vague, unconcerned manner of much-loved children, where Mamma was. When she would be coming. And she wondered about the lady. She knew who she was, she'd heard Grandmamma talking about her. The lady was called the Authoress and she lived in the little cottage on the far side of the estate, beyond the maze. The little girl wasn't supposed to know. She had been forbidden to play in the bramble maze. Mamma and Grandmamma had told her it was dangerous to go near the cliff. But sometimes, when no one was looking, she liked to do forbidden things.

Dust motes, hundreds of them, danced in the sliver of sunlight that had appeared between two barrels. The little girl smiled and the lady, the cliff, the maze, Mamma left her thoughts. She held out a finger, tried to catch a speck upon it. Laughed at the way the motes came so close before skirting away.

The noises beyond her hiding spot were changing now. The little girl could hear the hubbub of movement, voices laced with excitement. She leaned into the veil of light and pressed her face against the cool wood of the barrels. With one eye she looked upon the decks.

Legs and shoes and petticoat hems. The tails of colored paper streamers flicking this way and that. Wily gulls hunting the decks for crumbs.

A lurch and the huge boat groaned, long and low from deep within its belly. Vibrations passed through the deck boards and into the little girl's fingertips. A moment of suspension and she found herself holding her breath, palms flat beside her, then the boat heaved and pushed itself away from the dock. The horn bellowed and there was a wave of cheering, cries of "Bon voyage!" They were on their way. To America, a place called New York, where Papa had been born. She'd heard them whispering about it for some time, Mamma telling Papa they should go as soon as possible, that they could afford to wait no longer.

The little girl laughed again; the boat was gliding through the water like a giant whale, like Moby Dick in the story her father often read to her. Mamma didn't like it when he read such stories. She said they were too frightening and would put ideas in her head that couldn't be got out. Papa always gave Mamma a kiss on the forehead when she said that sort of thing, told her she was right and that he'd be more careful in the future. But he still told the little girl stories of the great whale. And others -- the ones that were the little girl's favorite, from the fairy-tale book, about eyeless crones, and orphaned maidens, and long journeys across the sea. He just made sure that Mamma didn't know, that it remained their secret.

The little girl understood they had to have secrets from Mamma. Mamma wasn't well, had been sickly since before the little girl was born. Grandmamma was always bidding her be good, warning her that if Mamma were to get upset something terrible might happen and it would be all her fault. The little girl loved her mother and didn't want to make her sad, didn't want something terrible to happen, so she kept things secret. Like the fairy stories, and playing near the maze, and the times Papa had taken her to visit the Authoress in the cottage on the far side of the estate.

"Aha!" A voice by her ear. "Found you!" The barrel was heaved aside and the little girl squinted up into the sun. Blinked until the owner of the voice moved to block the light. It was a big boy, eight or nine, she guessed. "You're not Sally," he said.

The little girl shook her head.

"Who are you?"

She wasn't meant to tell anybody her name. It was a game they were playing, she and the lady.

"Well?"

"It's a secret."

His nose wrinkled, freckles drew together. "What for?"

She shrugged. She wasn't supposed to speak of the lady, Papa was always telling her so.

"Where's Sally, then?" The boy was growing impatient. He looked left and right. "She ran this way, I'm sure of it."

A whoop of laughter from further down the deck and the scramble of fleeing footsteps. The boy's face lit up. "Quick!" he said as he started to run. "She's getting away."

The little girl leaned her head around the barrel and watched him weaving in and out of the crowd in keen pursuit of a flurry of white petticoats.

Her toes itched to join them.

But the lady had said to wait.

The boy was getting further away. Ducking around a portly man with a waxed moustache, causing him to scowl so that his features scurried towards the center of his face like a family of startled crabs.

The little girl laughed.

Maybe it was all part of the same game. The lady reminded her more of a child than of the other grown-ups she knew. Perhaps she was playing, too.

The little girl slid from behind the barrel and stood slowly. Her left foot had gone to sleep and now had pins and needles. She waited a moment for feeling to return, watched as the boy turned the corner and disappeared.

Then, without another thought, she set off after him. Feet pounding, heart singing in her chest.