

A woman with dark, curly hair, wearing a white bonnet with a large white flower, a teal dress with a white collar, and holding a bouquet of light pink roses and a pair of round glasses. She is looking off to the side with a slight smile. The background shows a large brick house with a grey roof, surrounded by greenery, under a soft, hazy sky.

The Maid of
Fairbourne Hall

JULIE KLASSEN

*The only aristocrat known to have
disguised herself as a servant is Georgiana,
Duchess of Devonshire, in 1786.*

—Giles Waterfield and Anne French, *Below Stairs*

Chapter 1



LONDON
AUGUST 1815

He is reading my letters now too. . . .
Margaret Elinor Macy sat at her dressing table, heart pounding. Her face in the looking glass shone pale beneath curly dark hair, her light blue eyes anxious. She glanced from her reflection to the letter in her hand. The seal had been pried open and unsuccessfully re-pressed. Her mother's new husband had obviously begun checking her post—perhaps fearful the next invitation she received would not be to a ball but rather to take refuge in another house, out of reach and out from under his power.

It was bad enough when the footman began following her everywhere she went, whether the occasion warranted a servant's escort or not. Then an hour ago she had asked to wear her aunt's pearl necklace, only to be refused.

"Too many footpads on the streets at night," Sterling Benton had said. Though she and her mother had always worn their better jewelry before.

Sterling had locked in his safe almost all the Macy family valuables "for safekeeping." Privately Margaret guessed he'd sold some pieces and locked the rest away so she couldn't barter them for passage somewhere far away.

He had long since ceased granting her any allowance, claiming strained finances. That might be true, but Margaret knew Sterling had other motives for keeping her dependent on him for every shilling. Though soon to inherit a large sum from her great-aunt, at the moment Margaret was unable to buy herself a hairpin, let alone passage anywhere.

She regarded her wan reflection once more. She was not looking forward to the ball at the Valmores', though in the past masquerades had been her favorite. She loved the disguises, the mystery, the chance to flirt behind a mask, to pretend she was someone she was not. For weeks she had planned to appear as a milkmaid, a costume the Duchess of Queensberry had donned for a formal portrait, sparking a rage of paintings of gentlewomen in servants' attire. Margaret guessed she would not be the only "milkmaid" in attendance that evening.

Her coiffeur was a concoction of dark hair piled high with a long spiral curl gracing each side of her neck. But she was having second thoughts about it. She had relished the notion of fooling the other guests until masks were removed halfway through the ball. At the moment, however, the very idea of costumes seemed frivolous. Besides, the dark hair did not flatter her complexion.

Reaching up, she yanked the wig from her head.

"Joan!" she called sharply.

The second housemaid had doubled as young lady's maid ever since Sterling had dismissed Margaret's abigail. The experienced lady's maid, Miss Durand, was busy arranging Mother's hair. Margaret sniffed. As if it mattered how well a married woman looked. *Her* future did not depend on appearing her prettiest that night.

Joan, a thin, practical housemaid in her midtwenties, hurried in

carrying a lace cap and the cape she had been pressing. She tripped over Margaret's dressing gown, bunched on the carpet where Margaret had let it fall. Why had Joan not picked it up?

"Do be careful," Margaret snapped. "I don't want my cape ruined or the cap crushed."

"Yes, miss." As Joan righted herself, irritation flashed in her eyes.

Well, she had only herself to blame. After all, it was Joan's job to tidy the room and care for Margaret's clothes.

"I need you to dress my hair," Margaret said. "I have decided not to wear the wig after all."

"But . . ." The maid bit her lip, then sighed. "Yes, miss."

Joan had secured Margaret's blond hair in a tight knot to accommodate the wig, but now she would need to unpin, curl, arrange, and re-pin her hair with soft height and curls at her temples to flatter Margaret's somewhat round face. She hoped a simple housemaid was up to the task. Margaret guessed she would have to talk her through the process.

Margaret herself had become quite adept at arranging her sister's hair. Enjoyed it, actually. Fortunately, Caroline had not yet "come out" and was not attending the ball, otherwise three Macy women would never be ready in time.

Joan unpinned the knot and began brushing out Margaret's fair locks, using, Margaret thought, a bit more force than necessary.

"Gentle, Joan. I have no wish to be bald."

"Yes, miss."

Margaret had often been told her fair golden hair was her best feature. She could not, on this night of nights, cover it up. She would need all the appeal she could muster if her plan had any hope of succeeding.



Margaret entered wearing the simple blue gown, apron, and mask, with a small lace cap atop her glorious hair and a milk pail in hand. Studiously ignoring the young man beside her, she surveyed the ballroom.

The goddess Diana laughed with a sultan in turban and flowing robes. Egyptians in headdresses, jewels spangling their foreheads, danced with gypsies. Punch's wife mingled with beggars. Some people sacrificed anonymity for attractiveness. Others, especially those wearing the ubiquitous dominoes—masks over their faces and hooded capes—were unrecognizable. The gay music, colorful costumes, laughter, and jesting created a carnival-like atmosphere. But the jovial feeling did not reach Margaret and did nothing to ease her anxiety.

She saw him across the ballroom, and her muscles tensed—a lithe cat fixing upon her prey. Yet she feared she would be the one left injured.

Lewis Upchurch wore a rakish patch over one eye, but was otherwise perfectly turned out in fine evening attire of black tailcoat, pristine white waistcoat and cravat, knee-length pantaloons, and polished shoes. He stood talking to a man and woman. The man she recognized as Lewis's friend Piers Saxby. He wore a tricorne hat and kerchief, looking very like engravings she had seen of Blackbeard and other pirates of old. Margaret was acquainted with Saxby's sister, Lavinia. The two girls had been at school together. Perhaps she might inquire after Lavinia as an excuse to approach the trio.

But she would need to tread carefully. Lewis Upchurch might be a good catch, but he would not be an easy one, and she was by no means certain of her ability to snare him. For a moment she stood where she was, shocked by her mercenary thoughts.

A few years ago, when she learned of the inheritance coming to her upon her twenty-fifth birthday, she'd thought she had no need to marry. Great Aunt Josephine, a spinster herself, had seen to that. Margaret had planned to take her time, marry for love or not at all. But with the odious man beside her determined to spoil that plan, she was willing to compromise. She would never marry a man she loathed, but she could marry charming, handsome Lewis Upchurch. She had been quite infatuated with him once. Had even rejected his brother in hopes of winning him. And Lewis, she believed, had admired her. He had certainly flirted with her.

But then her beloved father had died, and Margaret had lost interest in Lewis Upchurch and society at large. She had remained home in mourning for more than a year. When she had reentered society earlier this season, Lewis had shown renewed if sporadic interest in her, but nothing had come of it. Was she too late?

Pushing back her shoulders, Margaret removed her mask and steeled her resolve. Enticing a proposal from Lewis Upchurch was her best hope, her only plan for escaping the Benton house and the vile snare set for her by Sterling and his nephew.

As if her thoughts, her intentions, had been declared aloud, the young man beside her stiffened. She risked a glance at Marcus Benton and found him following the direction of her gaze across the room. His wide-set catlike eyes narrowed. He looked at her, smile smug beneath his pug nose. He was not a tall man, only an inch or so taller than she. Dark tousled hair fell over his forehead in imitation of casual ease, yet she knew his valet had spent half an hour arranging it. She had once thought Marcus handsome, but no longer.

He took her arm, but she shrugged it off. Inhaling deeply, Margaret strode across the ballroom, empty now between dances. At the head of the room, musicians relaxed over punch and ale, laughing amongst themselves. Directly ahead of her, Lewis Upchurch faced Mr. Saxby and the woman she did not recognize. Like Margaret, her face was exposed. She wore the clingy Grecian robes of a Diana. Margaret would have liked to speak to Lewis alone, but she dared not wait or her courage would fail her. Perhaps the other couple would excuse themselves.

Margaret bolstered herself by remembering that Lewis had shown particular interest in her in the past, seeking her out for dancing, escorting her in to supper on several occasions, calling the next morning as etiquette required. Lewis had been pleasant and attentive, not to mention heartbreakingly handsome. But he had never proposed. Perhaps she had not encouraged him properly. After all, she had been in no hurry to marry.

Until now.

Besides Marcus Benton, only one man had ever proposed marriage to her, and that had been two years ago, before Lewis returned from the West Indies and turned her head. The memory of the way she had coldly and abruptly rejected Nathaniel Upchurch, Lewis's younger brother, still brought a stab of guilt. Nathaniel would have married her once, but she had certainly crushed any feelings he held for her. At all events, Nathaniel was far away in Barbados, and had been for nearly two years, managing the family's sugar interests in Lewis's stead. Even Nathaniel—meek, pale, studious, bespectacled younger son that he was—would have been a better fate than Marcus Benton.

Margaret smiled as she neared the trio, hoping no one noticed her brazen approach. She willed Lewis to look her way, hoping his face would light up when he saw her. She paused before them and Lewis glanced over, but her appearance brought no light to his countenance. If anything, caution shadowed his dark eyes, at least that was how her insecure soul read his expression. *Don't appear too eager*, she reminded herself. A man like Lewis Upchurch was accustomed to desperate women and their desperate mammas throwing themselves at him. She must be careful.

"Miss Macy," he acknowledged politely.

She nodded at him, then turned her most beguiling smile—she hoped—on his friend instead. "Mr. Saxby. You may not remember me, but I was at school with your sister, Lavinia."

Piers Saxby was a few years older than Lewis, his features somewhat ordinary. But he invariably embellished his appearance with all the trappings of a dandy: fine clothes, quizzing glass, and snuffbox.

The man's dull grey eyes lit with recognition if not interest. "Ah, Miss Macy, of course. Indeed, I recall Lavinia mentioning your name." He bowed, and Margaret dipped a curtsy sure to show off her feminine curves. She hoped Lewis was watching.

But when she glanced back up, her heart fell. For Lewis had already returned his attention to the woman beside him. The very beautiful woman, Margaret now saw at closer range.

Sensing her gaze, Lewis Upchurch cleared his throat and said dutifully, “Miss Macy. Have you met the lovely Miss Lyons?”

Margaret turned to the striking brunette. “I have not had that pleasure.”

“Then allow me. Miss Barbara Lyons, may I present Miss Margaret Macy. I believe you are acquainted with her stepfather, Sterling Benton?”

The woman’s dark eyes sparkled. “Indeed I am. An exceedingly handsome man and most charming too. Do you not find him so, Miss Macy? Why, if he were my stepfather I should never leave home.”

Margaret swallowed the hot retort burning her throat and pasted on a false smile. “I don’t actually think of Mr. Benton as a stepfather, as I was already grown when he married my mother.”

“Quite right, Miss Macy.” Barbara Lyons grinned. “If I were you I should not care to think of such a man as my stepfather either.”

Margaret shuddered at the woman’s innuendo.

“How you must enjoy living in Mr. Benton’s fine house in Berkeley Square,” the woman added.

Margaret noticed neither she nor Saxby showed any sign of leaving Lewis’s side.

“I miss the country, actually,” Margaret replied. “And from where do you hail, Miss Lyons?”

“Ah, you must excuse us, Miss Macy,” Lewis Upchurch interrupted. “For Miss Lyons here has promised me the next dance, and the musicians are even now preparing to play.”

“Oh . . . of course,” Margaret faltered, observing with chagrin that as yet only one musician had returned to his place. “Em . . . enjoy your dance.” She again curtsied and turned away.

It hadn’t been the *cut direct*, but close to it. Cheeks flaming, she walked toward the door, trying not to hurry, hoping her mortification was not obvious to the milling throngs. Nor to Marcus Benton.

She escaped the ballroom and hastened across the hall to the salon designated as the ladies’ dressing room for the evening. Inside, her friend Emily Lathrop tied a cloak about her shoulders and replaced her reticule over gloved wrist.

“Emily! How glad I am to see you. Are you leaving already?”

“Yes. Mamma has a headache and wants to go home.”

“So do I, as it happens. Might I beg a ride?”

“Of course. But surely your family would—?”

“Oh . . .” Margaret feigned a casual air. “The Bentons are not ready to leave, and I do hate to spoil their evening.”

Emily touched her arm, eyes concerned. “They cannot force you to marry him, you know.”

Margaret arched one brow. “Can they not? I shall hold you to it.” She gathered her shawl and followed her friend into the hall.

There, raised voices from the ballroom drew them back to its doors. *Bang. Squeal*—wood against wood. An overturned chair slid across the floor. The music stopped, one violin shrieking in protest as the musicians lowered their instruments one after the other, and dancers scattered.

Emily grasped Margaret’s wrist and pulled her into the ballroom. Margaret resisted, not wanting anyone to see her dressed to depart, but Emily ignored her and stepped closer. Both young women craned their necks to see past taller gentlemen and ladies’ feathers to identify the cause of the commotion.

Ringed by the cautious but curious crowd, two men stood, chests out, hands fisted. Both were tall and dark-haired. Lewis Upchurch stood facing their direction, his handsome features sparking with shock and irritation. For one moment, Margaret thought the other man was Piers Saxby, offended at the attention Lewis paid Miss Lyons. But in the next she remembered that Saxby wore evening dress beneath his tricorne hat, while the man facing Lewis wore trim buckskin breeches, tall boots, and a riding coat.

“You are needed at home,” the man growled.

Lewis smirked. “And hello to you too.”

“Now.”

The man’s profile came into view—a black beard obscured his features, making him look twice the pirate Saxby had appeared.

“Temper, temper, Nate. Are these the manners you learnt in the West Indies?”

Margaret gasped. It couldn't be.

"And what of your manners?" the second man challenged. "Did Father not write and ask you to return home and do your duty?"

Nathaniel Upchurch. Margaret couldn't believe it. Gone were the pale features, the thin frame, the hesitant posture, the spectacles. Now broad shoulders strained against his cutaway coat. Form-fitting leather breeches outlined muscular legs. The unfashionable dark beard emphasized his sharp cheekbones and long nose. His skin was golden brown. His hair unruly, some escaping its queue. Even his voice sounded different—lower, harsher, yet still familiar.

Lewis grinned. "I am doing my duty. I am representing our otherwise dull family during the important social season."

Nathaniel glanced around as if suddenly aware of their audience. "Will you step outside to speak with me in private or shall I drag you?"

"You might try."

Nathaniel grabbed Lewis's arm, and Lewis lurched forward, caught off guard by the strength of the pull.

Beside her Emily whispered, "Is that Nathaniel Upchurch?"

Margaret nodded.

"But he is so changed. Had he not been arguing with his brother, I should not have recognized him. He looks, well, nearly savage, does he not?"

Again, Margaret managed a wooden nod.

"If I did not know better, I would think him a pirate." Emily drew in a sharp breath. "Perhaps he is! Perhaps *he* is the Poet Pirate the papers are full of!"

Margaret barely heard her fanciful friend. Her mind was clouded with a vision of Nathaniel Upchurch as she had last seen him. Eyes wide, pained, and misty green behind smudged spectacles. His thin mouth downturned. Dejected.

Regaining his balance, Lewis shook his arm free. "Unhand me, ape."

At the insult, Nathaniel slammed his fist into his brother's jaw. Gasps and cries rose among the frozen guests, heating them to agitated life.

Margaret did not realize she had cried out as well, until Nathaniel's head snapped in her direction.

For a second he stood there, stilled, one hand grasping his brother's cravat, his other fisted. Across the distance, his gaze met hers. Margaret sucked in a breath at the intensity in those eyes. Intense not with love or longing, but with undisguised disgust. His thin lips twisted into a scowl, making his long nose hawklike.

If she had thought Lewis's recent snub painful, Nathaniel's reaction felt far more cutting, though not a single word had been exchanged. It was as she had feared. He had never forgiven her and could not stand the sight of her.

Margaret turned, snagging Emily's hand and pulling her away.

"What a brute!" Emily panted behind her. "Are you not glad you rejected him when you did?"

Margaret *was* relieved. How fierce he looked. She had never before been frightened of him, nor had she imagined him capable of violence.

Margaret paused only long enough to whisper in her mother's ear that the Lathrops were taking her home, then hurried away before she might object. Distracted as she was by the fight, her mother vaguely nodded. Sterling stood several yards away, his gaze trained on four guests in regimentals escorting the Upchurch brothers from the room.

*A married woman could not own
property, sign legal documents or enter into
a contract, or keep a salary for herself.*

—the legal doctrine of Coverture,
English Common Law

Chapter 2



On the short ride to Berkeley Square, Margaret remained quiet as Emily described the fight to her parents. Her mind was preoccupied, reviewing the disturbing images, the disturbing memories, and her utter failure to achieve her ends.

The stately coach halted before Sterling Benton's tall, terraced town house, and Margaret thanked the Lathrops and bid them good-night. The groom handed her down, and she walked the few steps to the front door. When the liveried footman opened it for her, she did not miss the crease in his brow at seeing her arrive alone. Perhaps he feared Sterling might somehow blame him for failing in his watchdog duty.

Margaret sailed past the lackey without so much as a nod of acknowledgment. Crossing the hall, she lifted her skirt to avoid tripping as she climbed the many stairs.

Reaching the third level, she tiptoed first to Gilbert's bedchamber. She peeked through the open door, getting a little lump in her throat to see her brother sprawled across the bed, hand under his cheek and

hair askew, looking very much like the little boy she still thought him. She crept inside and pulled the bedclothes to his chin. Margaret prayed Sterling would not pull Gilbert from Eton as he threatened to do. Gil needed to learn all he could if he was to go on to Oxford and into the church, as their father had always hoped.

Next she stopped at her sister's room. More modest than her brother, Caroline's door was closed. Margaret inched it open and peered in, finding her asleep as well. At sixteen, Caroline would be attending balls very soon. Leaning over the bed, Margaret stroked the caramel-colored hair from her sister's brow. How innocent she looked. How sweet. A swell of love bordering on the maternal filled Margaret's breast.

Caroline's eyes fluttered open before drifting shut again. She murmured sleepily, "How was the ball?"

"Lovely," Margaret whispered, having no wish to worry her. "Sweet dreams, sweetness." *Sweetness*—her father's nickname for her. How long had it been since Margaret deserved the moniker?

She slipped from her sister's room and, taking advantage of their absence, crept down to the adjoining bedchambers Sterling and her mother shared. In Mamma's dressing room, she was surprised not to see the miniature of Stephen Macy displayed anywhere. It had been on the dressing table not long ago, she was sure. Margaret could understand not wanting it in the bedchamber, where Sterling would have to see it. But here in Mamma's private dressing room? Margaret opened the top drawer, and there it was, face down. How disloyal it seemed. She turned over the portrait and studied it, shaking her head in wonder. How much Gil was beginning to look like their father. "We have not forgotten you," she whispered to the handsome, youthful image. "At least, I have not."

Returning the small portrait to its place, she wandered through Sterling's dressing room. How impeccably neat everything was. She hoped his fastidious valet wouldn't catch her in there.

On Sterling's dressing table, she saw a handful of coins—guineas, crowns, and shillings.

Dared she?

As it was, she didn't even have coach fare, let alone money for lodgings, should the situation continue to escalate . . . or rather, deteriorate. She ought to have something put by, just in case. She should not be completely at Sterling's mercy until her inheritance came.

Yet Margaret was a vicar's daughter. She knew stealing was wrong. But was this really stealing, she asked herself, when he had taken her jewelry?

It was a loan, she decided. She would pay him back when she had money of her own. A few coins would seem a trifle then—but now? They might make the difference between escape and a trap. She selected several, but did not take them all—that would be too obvious. How cold the coins seemed against her fingertips, as she tucked them into the pocket of her “milkmaid” apron. She felt their weight all the way back to her room.

Once there, she slid the coins into her reticule. A few minutes later, Joan came in and helped her change into her nightclothes. As Margaret climbed into bed, the distant sound of the front door shutting surprised her.

They were home early.

She quickly blew out her bedside candle as Joan gathered the discarded clothing and backed from the room, closing the door behind her.

A few moments later, someone tapped lightly on her bedchamber door. Her stomach lurched. Was it her mother, or Sterling?

“Margaret?” someone whispered.

Marcus! At her bedchamber door, at night? Margaret's heart thumped in her breast. Surely he would not dare enter.

Candlelight flickered from under the door. Hushed voices echoed in the corridor—Marcus's and a woman's.

Nerves quaking, Margaret rose and tiptoed to the door.

“Yes, sir. Miss Macy's home,” Joan said. “She's gone to bed.”

Margaret knelt down and peered through the keyhole.

“Well then, Joan, there's nothing to keep *you* from . . .” Marcus's voice grew muffled. As Margaret's eyes adjusted to the flickering

light, she saw Marcus pressing his face into Joan's neck, as though to whisper in her ear . . . or kiss her. Margaret's stomach roiled. She couldn't see Joan's face, but she saw Marcus capture the maid's hand and begin to tug her down the corridor.

"There you are, Mr. Benton." The low voice of Murdoch, their butler, interrupted the scene. "Your uncle requests your presence in the study."

Joan pulled her hand free. Marcus muttered an oath and disappeared.

Releasing a breath she had not realized she was holding, Margaret climbed back into bed. Yet long after Marcus's footsteps faded and the house was quiet, Margaret lay awake, unsettling images circling through her mind: Sterling and Marcus. Marcus and Joan. Miss Lyons and Lewis. Lewis and Nathaniel . . .

The last image she saw before sleep finally overtook her was Nathaniel Upchurch's look of disgust shooting across the ballroom and scorching her skin.



In the morning, Margaret entered the breakfast room, startled to find Sterling Benton eating alone. She'd hoped to avoid him, waiting until he, an early riser, would normally have departed, while his wastrel nephew would no doubt still be abed.

Sterling sat stirring a cup of coffee, although she knew he added neither sugar nor milk. With his thick silver hair, chiseled features, and confident sophistication, she understood what women like Miss Lyons, like her mother, saw in him. Still, how stunned and nearly sickened she had been when her mother announced her engagement to the man a mere twelvemonth after Stephen Macy's death.

Margaret forced a civil tone. "Good morning."

He looked up, piercing her with his icy blue eyes. "Is it? You tell me."

Margaret helped herself to a plate at the sideboard, more as an excuse to turn her back on him than eagerness for food. Finding herself alone with him, her appetite had fled.

"I take it you did not enjoy yourself last night," he said. "I did not approve of your leaving alone."

"I was not alone. I left with Emily Lathrop and her parents."

"And you did not dance once, although I am certain Marcus must have asked you."

Margaret knew any offer Marcus made—whether for a dance or marriage—was made at his uncle's behest.

"I was not in the mood for dancing," she said, thinking, *since Lewis Upchurch never asked.*

Sterling sipped his coffee. "You left before the most interesting part of the evening."

"Oh?"

"Nathaniel Upchurch returned from the West Indies as wild as a heathen. He struck his brother, Lewis, without provocation in front of the entire assembly."

Margaret had heard snatches of the argument and surmised there had been some provocation—at least in Nathaniel's mind—but she remained silent.

So Sterling had not seen her come back into the ballroom. The thought that Sterling's eagle eyes were less than perfect felt somehow comforting.

"Your mother tells me he once courted you," Sterling continued.

Margaret blindly placed a muffin on her plate. "That was years ago, before he left England."

"And you rejected his suit?"

"I did."

"Very wise, my girl. Very wise."

It certainly had seemed wise—then and more so now, after last night's violent demonstration. Still the smug tone irked. "And why is that?"

"Because you are free to marry Marcus. As it was meant to be. You cannot fight destiny, my girl."

He rose and stood beside her, his long manicured fingers pressing into her arm. "I would not advise fighting destiny, Margaret. Destiny always wins. And so, my dear, do I."

Margaret shivered but made no reply.

With a last warning look, Sterling left her.

Sighing, Margaret sat down to a solitary breakfast of tea, egg, and muffin. Her stomach churned, and she pushed away the food, sipping the tea instead.

It would not do her any harm to miss a few meals. She always put on a bit of weight during the season, with all the rich food and midnight suppers. Did Lewis Upchurch prefer willowy women like Miss Lyons? Apparently so.

Leaving her breakfast untouched, Margaret returned to her bed-chamber. From the bottom of her dressing chest, she lifted out the mahogany writing box where she kept mementos of her father. She raised the beautifully carved lid and breathed deeply. The aroma from a sachet she had made of her father's pipe tobacco enveloped her in its earthy, spicy familiarity. *Oh, Papa. How I miss you. . . .* She fingered her father's things—his New Testament, two letters he had written to her, his spectacles, and an old pair of his gloves. She gripped the limp leather fingers. What she wouldn't give to hold his hand once more.



That afternoon, Margaret bid a poignant farewell to her sister as her mother and Sterling looked on.

Caroline was returning to Miss Hightower's Seminary for Girls, where Margaret herself had attended years before. Loath to stay in the town house alone with the Benton men, Margaret offered to ride along.

Her mother hesitated. Joanna Macy Benton was a tall, handsome woman, though her once fair hair had darkened to a mousy brown and fine lines marred her face. She was a few years older than her dashing new husband, and all the complexion creams in London could not disguise that fact. Nor could her thin smile belie her deep unhappiness. For though Sterling Benton had pursued her with determined admiration and charm, both had quickly faded after the wedding, leaving the new bride confused and desperate to right whatever it was she had done wrong.

Her mother's eyes, wide and vulnerable, shifted to Sterling before returning to Margaret. "My dear, you know I would enjoy your company, but the barouche would be far too crowded with Caroline and her school friend. Not to mention their many belongings."

She glanced again at Sterling, eager for a look of approval. The two of them clearly had other reasons for wanting Margaret to remain in Berkeley Square.

A few hours later, her brother was packed and ready to leave as well. Gilbert had plans to spend the final few weeks of his term break at a friend's country estate, riding and shooting, until both boys had to return to Eton in early September. Margaret was happy for him, knowing he missed country life as much as she did, but sad for herself. How lonely she would be.

Blinking back tears, she embraced him and kissed his cheek.

"What's all this then, ey?" Gilbert protested her tight hold and grimaced at her tears. "Come on, Mags. I'm not going away forever. I shall see you at the end of next term."

She forced a smile. "Of course you will. I am only being silly."

He winked at her. "Well, nothing new there."

Although they did not speak of it, Margaret knew her young brother was aware of the tension in the house. She did not want him to worry, so she socked him on the shoulder on his way out the door, as any good sister would.

Afterward, Margaret went back upstairs to dress for dinner. She dreaded the thought of dining with only Sterling and Marcus. How uncomfortable that would be. She perused her wardrobe, apathetic about what to wear. Where was Joan? She pulled the bell cord to summon the maid to help her dress. Several moments passed, but no one came. Finally she heard the telltale *clitter-clat* of Joan's worn-to-the-nail half boots in the passage outside. But the footsteps hurried right past Margaret's room.

She pushed open her door. "Joan?"

Joan, rushing toward the stairs, turned back at her call.

“Did you not hear the bell?”

Joan looked pale. “Can’t stop now, miss. Theo says Mr. Murdoch wants to see me without delay.”

It was clear from her stricken expression that Joan feared she was in trouble. Margaret wondered idly what the girl had done but dismissed the thought. She had enough problems of her own. “But it is time to dress for dinner.”

At the opposite end of the passage a door opened, and Marcus Benton stepped from his room, already dressed in evening attire. Joan stiffened and hurried away. Marcus flicked a frown at the maid, before turning a speculative gaze to Margaret. It was the first time she had seen him all day.

He sauntered toward her. “Don’t think I didn’t know what you were about last night.”

Not wanting to be alone with him, or risk his following her into her room, Margaret turned and walked toward the stairway, pretending she had not heard him. She would not bother to change for dinner. What did it matter?

He trotted down the stairs beside her. “Throwing yourself at Lewis Upchurch like that—tsk, tsk.”

Margaret bristled. “I did no such thing.”

At the landing, he stepped in front of her and blocked her way, cornering her against the wall. “I cannot say I am sorry he rebuffed you, my sweet. For he could never feel for you the way I do.” He ran a finger down her arm, and she jerked away.

“Did you really think that if he had not offered marriage before, he would do so last night, for all your batting of lashes and flaunting of décolletage?”

Anger and mortification singed her ears, but she could not refute the charge.

“My dear Margaret. I am not the blind fool Upchurch is. I am not immune to your charms. Why do you insist on putting me off? I have been patient these many months, but I grow weary of waiting.”

The warm, sweet words soothed her injured pride. His finger

tickled her arm once more, sending shivers not altogether unpleasant down her spine. Like his uncle, Marcus embodied a masculine persistence and confidence she had always found appealing. Was her own confidence so lacking? Would she always be malleable in such hands—lose sight of her scruples and self-worth?

“Oh, Margaret . . .” He kissed the back of her hand, and for a moment she allowed him to hold it. Would it really be so bad to marry Marcus Benton? He was a good-looking young man, though more than a year her junior. He had an elegant bearing even for his slight height and was admired by many girls. And Marcus wanted *her*, wanted to wed *her*. How happy Sterling would be. Even her mother would approve—not because she liked Marcus, but because she was desperate to please Sterling, who seemed determined not to be pleased with her on any account. Margaret could buy peace for the household. Blessed peace.

But at what price?

She squeezed her eyes shut and shook herself mentally awake. What was she thinking? Any interest Marcus had in her was purely mercenary, manufactured for his uncle’s sake. Oh, that her mother had never told Sterling of her pending inheritance!

Marcus must have mistaken her stillness for acquiescence, for he suddenly grasped her shoulders and pressed his mouth to hers.

She jerked away. “I have never given you leave to use my Christian name, Mr. Benton,” she said coldly. “Much less to kiss me. Please remember that in future.”

She hurried down the remaining stairs, but not before she heard him swear under his breath.



After enduring a strained dinner with only the three of them at the table, Margaret retired to her room early, wanting to avoid the men and weary after tossing and turning the night before. She pulled the bedside bell cord to summon Joan to help her undress and bring her some warm milk. Five minutes later, she pulled again. Still, no one came.

Grumbling to herself in irritation, Margaret stalked to her door. If no one would come to her, then she would go down herself and stretch her restless limbs in the process. She had never ventured belowstairs here in Sterling Benton's house. But as a girl, she had spent many an hour in the warm kitchen and stillroom of Lime Tree Lodge, enjoying a snug afternoon baking biscuits with Mrs. Haines or listening to the housekeeper and nurse swap stories of their lives before entering service.

Margaret descended two flights of stairs. Then, passing silently along the ground floor on her way to the basement steps, she heard muffled voices coming from the study and paused outside its door, which was slightly ajar. She sidled closer and pressed her ear to the crack.

"I have tried." Marcus's voice.

"Then try harder." Sterling.

"What would you have me do? I have been as charming and attentive as I know how. She does not like me."

"She once did. When you first came."

"Well, apparently she has revised her opinion. She is cold to me now."

"Then warm her. Have I not placed you here under my very roof? Given you every opportunity?"

Marcus grumbled something Margaret did not hear.

"And last night I saw her talking with Lewis Upchurch. A man who paid her every attention earlier this season. I fear she will stir his interest again, and we shall lose her."

"Lose her money, you mean."

"Need I remind you that whoever marries the chit will control her inheritance?"

"But if she does not marry, she will control it herself."

"And no doubt spend it on gewgaws and falderals and I know not what." A glass clinked against the table. Sterling's voice had risen, but he moderated it once more. "I shall instruct Murdoch not to allow Upchurch to call—nor any other gentlemen, for that matter."

“And I tell you, Uncle, Lewis Upchurch is no longer interested in Margaret.”

“Let us hope you are right. Even so, if you have botched things as badly as you say, we can’t have her eloping with some opportunistic buck while we’re not paying heed.”

Marcus said, “A good thing the inheritance is a well-kept secret. If everyone knew, men would be beating down our doors.” Sarcasm curled his voice. “If only *you* had known, Uncle.”

“You forget yourself, Marcus.” Sterling’s cool voice held an undercurrent of warning. “Now,” he gritted out, “I don’t care how you do it, just get her to marry you.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Did I not pay for your education, Marcus? Can you really be such a simpleton?”

“What do you mean?”

“Come now. Charm and flattery never fail, at least where Macy women are concerned. Woo her, flatter her, make love to her. And if all else fails . . . compromise.”

“You are not suggesting . . . ?”

“Why not. You have done the like before.”

Marcus hissed, “But she is a *lady*.”

“And will be restored to respectability as soon as she weds you.”

Margaret pressed a hand over her mouth, stifling a cry of outrage and swallowing the acid climbing her throat.

Milk forgotten, she stole back upstairs. *The vile lechers!*

Reaching her room, Margaret pushed a chair against the door, doubting it would slow a man for long. She paced back and forth across her bedchamber. She was no match for Marcus physically. If he forced himself into her room, she would be a caged bird, a cornered hare.

One of her father’s sermons came to mind, the one about how everyone might take advice from young Joseph. When Potiphar’s lascivious wife tried to seduce him, he did not bar himself in his room.

He fled.

She needed to do the same. She would not stay in Sterling Benton's home another night.

But where could she go? She had only the few coins she had found on his dressing table. Those wouldn't take her far. If only her mother were home. For though she had clearly taken Sterling's side to this point, she would never stand for her daughter's ruin!

Margaret heard something and stood still, straining her ears. Had Marcus come to her door already?

Muffled sobbing. What in the world? She crossed to her dressing room and opened the door. Joan slumped against the wall, her pale face blotchy beneath auburn fringe and white cap, her light eyes streaming tears.

"What is it?" Margaret asked, but dread prickled through her, as if she already knew the answer. Had Marcus . . . ?

"It's Mr. Benton. He accused me of taking money from his dressing room. But I never did, miss. I never!"

Margaret's mouth went dry. Her stomach knotted. "I am sorry, Joan. I don't know what to say."

Joan's round eyes beseeched hers. "You believe me, don't you?"

Margaret pressed her lips together. "Yes."

Something in Joan's expression shifted. Her brows lowered and she stared at Margaret with disconcerting directness.

Margaret looked away first.

Joan said, "He told me to leave straightaway, but I snuck up here to see you. I hoped you might believe me and write me a character. I won't get another post without one."

Margaret's mind spun. She had no time to be writing letters. Not now. "I know nothing of character references, Joan. Though I would be happy to vouch for you . . . sometime."

Joan frowned. "It was you what took the money, wasn't it?"

Margaret swallowed back the guilt churning her innards like spoiled cod. How had Joan guessed? She was usually a better actress than that. "It was only a few coins. I never intended for you to take the blame."

The tears in Joan's eyes sparked into anger. "And who else would be blamed when the money turned up missing? It's always the maid."

"I thought . . . I hoped he would not notice."

"A man like him?"

"It was foolish. I see that now."

"But you won't go and tell him it wasn't me who took it, will you?"

Margaret hesitated, then shook her head. "I am afraid not. Not yet. I cannot let him know I have any money."

Joan's face mottled red and white. "Of all the bacon-brained lies . . ."

Margaret reeled. "How dare you? How ungrateful—"

"Me ungrateful?" The cords in Joan's throat stuck out. "What have you ever done for me? It's me what's done for you all these months, up working before you rise and after you're in bed. And for what? To get the sack for taking money you stole!"

The venom in her maid's voice shocked her. She had never known Joan felt this way about her.

An idea struck Margaret and she changed tack. "Where will you go?"

Joan sniffed. "To my sister's. Not that you care."

"I do care. I . . . I want to come with you."

Joan's brow puckered. "With *me*? Have you any idea where I'm going?"

"Your sister's, I believe you said."

"My sister, who lives in a run-down tenement in Billingsgate? You've never ventured into such a neighborhood, I'd wager. And with good reason."

"Let me go with you. I need to leave. Now. But I cannot go anywhere alone at night. It is not safe."

"It's not safe where I'm going either."

"We shall be safer together," Margaret insisted. "Look, I only took that money because I needed it to escape."

"Escape? Why should you need to escape?" Joan's lip curled. "Mr. Benton won't buy the new silk stockings you set your heart on?"

Goodness. Now that Joan had no post to protect, she allowed her

tongue free rein. Margaret bit back an angry retort of her own and said earnestly, "No, I need to escape because I fear for my virtue."

Joan's eyebrows rose. "Young Mr. Benton?"

Margaret nodded.

"If it's unwanted attention he's giving you, tell his uncle."

"Who do you think put him up to it?"

The maid's eyes widened. "But, why . . . ?"

"I will explain later. I expect any minute for him to come through that door, and I don't want to be here when he does."

Joan crossed her arms and asked sullenly, "Why should I help you?"

Obviously not out of affection or loyalty, Margaret thought wryly. "Because I will write you the most flattering character reference you've ever read. Why, when I'm through, St. Thomas himself wouldn't doubt your abilities."

Joan's wary expression softened. "Very well. It's a bargain. But I only plan to stay with my sister until I find another place. You'll have to leave when I do."

"Agreed."

Joan surveyed her head to toe. "And you're not going anywhere with me dressed like that."

Margaret glanced down at the flounced day dress of white cambric muslin she'd yet to change out of, her mind quickly skipping to the other gowns in her wardrobe.

But Joan had other ideas. "There's some old clothes of poor Mrs. Poole's up in the attic." She was referring to the belongings of an ancient housemaid who'd died, bent over her pail and scrub brush, a few months before. "I'll fetch you a frock and cap from there."

"What is wrong with my gowns?"

"Nothing. If you want Theo to follow us and every pickpocket in London to harass us."

That was true. If the footman saw her coming downstairs dressed to go out, he would be on her trail before they reached the street.

"I shall be back directly," Joan said. "Meanwhile, cover up that hair."

Her hair. Margaret stared at her troubled reflection in the looking

glass. Yes, her blond hair would be a beacon in the night. She thought suddenly of the dark wig she had planned to wear for the masquerade ball. She hurried to her dressing table and lifted the wig from its stand, examining it by lamplight. Decisively, she pawed through the drawer until she came upon a pair of scissors. With them, she lopped off the long curls meant to cascade down each shoulder, leaving only a simple curly wig with dark fringe across the forehead. It would do.

Joan had yet to return. Increasingly anxious to leave, Margaret decided she had better begin changing without her. She slipped her arms from her gown, twisted it back to front, undid the ribbon ties, and let the dress fall to the floor. She stood there in shift and stays. *Heaven help me if Marcus comes in now.* She slipped a petticoat over her head, then sat on the edge of the bed and pulled on two pair of stockings, then her half boots. She went to her wardrobe and found the blue dress and white apron she had worn as a milkmaid and laid them across her bed. Surely they would suffice if Joan failed to find something in the attic. Perhaps anyone who saw her would mistake her for a second housemaid, a friend of Joan's come to call.

She pulled forth her plainest reticule and a carpetbag, and began stuffing in a few necessities. Her mind raced, panicked and muddled. *Think, she told herself. Think!* But it was difficult to plan when she had little idea of where she was going or for how long.

Still Joan had yet to return. What had happened to forestall her?

Nervously, Margaret tied her dressing gown over her underclothes and slipped out into the corridor, ears alert for the sound of anyone approaching—friend or foe.

Which was Joan?

Margaret tiptoed toward the stairway and paused. Hearing voices from around the corner, she pressed herself against the wall.

Sterling challenged, "Were you not dismissed earlier this evening?"

"Yes, sir," Joan replied.

"Then why are you still here?"

"I was only packing my belongings, sir." Joan's voice quavered, unnaturally high.

“Packing *only* your belongings, I trust. Let me see what you have in that valise.”

“’Tis only clothes and the like, sir.”

Margaret heard shuffling and a clasp being unsnapped and snapped. “Be sure that is all you take or I shall hire a thief-taker to hunt you down.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Mr. Benton?” Murdoch called from the landing below. “Sorry to disturb you, sir. But that man from Bow Street is here.”

What man from Bow Street? Margaret wondered.

“Thank you, Murdoch. I shall be down directly.”

Margaret risked a glance around the corner in time to see Sterling turn his icy blue eyes on the quaking maid. “I trust you will see yourself out and do no mischief on your way.”

Joan nodded.

“Be out in ten minutes or I shall have Murdoch toss you out.”

*I won't be a cook; I hate cooking. I won't be a nursery maid, nor a lady's maid, far less a lady's companion. . . .
I won't be anything but a housemaid.*

—Charlotte Brontë, in a letter to her sister Emily

Chapter 3



Ten minutes later, Margaret turned from her dressing table mirror to face Joan.
“Well?”

She wore an old grey frock Joan had unearthed from the attic, the apron she had worn as a milkmaid, and the dark wig pinned securely over her hair.

Seated on the bed, the maid studied her. “It changes you a great deal, miss. But I still think you need a cap.”

The only cap Joan had found had yellowed beyond wearing. Margaret lifted the small lace cap she had worn to the masquerade.

Joan shook her head. “Too fine.” She pulled something from her own valise. “You may borrow my spare. But if you keep it, it’ll cost you one of those shillings.”

“Very well.” Margaret pulled the floppy mobcap over her wig and looked at Joan for her reaction. “Now will anyone recognize me?”

Joan tilted her head to one side. “If they look close they will.”

Margaret looked back into the mirror. She lifted a stubby kohl pencil and darkened her eyebrows, as she had meant to do for the masquerade before abandoning plans to wear the wig. She then pulled open the mahogany writing box and from it extracted her father's small round spectacles. She placed them on her nose and hooked the arms over her ears. Again she faced Joan.

"What about now?"

"Much better, miss. As long as you don't talk, I think your brother could pass you in the street and not know you."

Margaret thought of the accents she had heard daily as a girl, spending hours with first her nurse and then the housekeeper while her mother was busy with this society event or that charity. Nanny Booker was from the north somewhere and Mrs. Haines from Bristol, she believed. Margaret had made a game of mimicking their accents, though now she wondered how charming they had really thought it. "An' wha' if I changed m'voice? Would ya know me then?"

Joan's eyes narrowed. "I don't talk like that."

Margaret quickly reverted to her normal way of speaking. "I know. And I am not trying to ridicule anyone. Only to disguise myself in every possible manner."

Joan lifted her chin in understanding, then dubiously eyed the narrow carpetbag. "Is that all you're taking?"

"Well, I cannot take a trunk, can I? Nor do I wish to arouse suspicion when we leave by the servants' entrance." Margaret riffled through the crammed bag. "I have an extra shift and the milkmaid frock as a spare—it doesn't weigh a thing. A nightdress and wrapper, slippers, comb, tooth powder, and the kohl." She did not mention her father's New Testament, nor the cameo he had given her, wrapped in a handkerchief. She slipped a shawl over her shoulders and looped bonnet ribbons over her wrist. "What else do I need?"

"Don't forget some of that nice paper for my character," Joan said.

When Margaret had slid a piece into her bag, Joan blew out a deep breath. "Well, it's time." She slapped her legs and stood.

Telling Margaret to wait in the room, Joan picked up her valise and crept down the corridor to listen at the top of the stairs. She waved Margaret forward. Margaret slipped from the room, quietly closing the door behind her. She followed Joan down the stairs on tiptoe, barely allowing herself to breathe. They descended one pair of stairs and then another without encountering anyone coming up. At the top of the basement steps, Joan motioned her to wait while she checked the passage below.

The maid's head soon popped back into view and again she waved Margaret down. Together they hurried along the narrow basement passageway, past the kitchen, to the service door at its far end. Joan opened it for her.

Margaret had just stepped through when a voice called from the kitchen behind them.

"Joan? Who's that with you?"

Margaret hesitated, unsure if she should run or turn around. Joan's firm hand on her arm kept her from doing either.

"'Tis only my sister, come to collect me," Joan said. "You heard I got the push?"

"Oh, Joan. I did," the female voice commiserated. "And sorry I was to hear it."

"I didn't steal anything, for the record."

"Of course you didn't. I'd wager he mislaid the money or spent it himself. Or that nephew of his pinched it. Not fair is it?"

"No, Mary, it's not fair."

"Going to your sister's, then, are you?"

"Until I find another place." Joan gave Margaret a little shove, and she lurched forward, tripping on the bottom step before starting up the outside stairs.

"Good-bye, Joan, and Godspeed."

Margaret reached street level as Joan trotted up the stairs behind her.

"Let's go," the maid whispered, without a backward glance.

Margaret, however, looked over her shoulder several times as they crossed the square, fearing any moment the hovering footman or

Sterling himself would appear behind them. But all was quiet save for the clicking of their bootheels and the distant *clip-clop-clatter* of horse hooves on cobblestones.

They had made it.

What now? She'd known only that she had to get out of Benton's house that very night. In her panicked hurry she had not even left her mother a note. Even if she had, she knew very well Sterling would have read it. And lost no time in following any unintentional clues it held to find Margaret and drag her back. What would she have written at any rate? She didn't know where she was going beyond Billingsgate. And Joan had made it clear this would only be a brief stay until she found other employment. Margaret hoped it would buy her enough time to figure out her next step. She would write to her mother then.

Ahead of her, Joan strode briskly on, and Margaret strained and panted to keep up. On the next street, a man leaning in a shadowed doorway leered at them. Two militiamen whistled as they passed. Margaret decided she did not like walking London streets at night. "Joan? Joan, wait!" Her voice shook. "How far did you say it was?"

Joan glanced over her shoulder. "Three or four miles, I'd reckon."

Margaret swallowed. Perhaps she ought to risk going to Emily Lathrop's house instead. It could be no more than a mile or two away.

She recalled the last time she had gone to the Lathrops' in Red Lion Square. She had been vexed with Marcus and Sterling both, and hoped to beg an invitation to stay with Emily for a time. But she had not been in the Lathrops' drawing room an hour when she heard Sterling Benton's name announced and had to sit there while he lamented that her mother had taken ill and needed her at home.

It had all been a ruse. Her mother was in perfect health, although she had been "sick with worry," and quite put out with Margaret for leaving the house alone—though she had never minded when Margaret spent time with friends before.

At the end of the block, Joan waited for a post chaise to pass, allowing Margaret to catch up with her. "Do you know where Red Lion Square is?"

Joan looked wary. "Yes. My cousin has a post near there. Why?"

"Could you please walk there with me? My friend Emily lives there, and perhaps she might help me."

Joan shrugged an apathetic reply. "I suppose. 'Tisn't far out of my way."

Margaret was surprised she agreed so readily. Joan was apparently eager to be rid of her.

As she trudged behind Joan along busy Oxford Street, Margaret rehearsed how to explain her predicament to Emily, mortifying though it was. Emily would be happy to have her, once she quit laughing over her costume. But could she talk her parents into allowing her to stay? They were unlikely to believe her word over Sterling Benton's. Sterling could be so convincing, so persuasive. He would have them believing his nephew the soul of propriety and her a deluded ninny with an overinflated view of her "irresistible" charms. Mr. Lathrop would gently admonish her to be sensible and send her home with Sterling without a second thought.

She shuddered. Perhaps instead of asking to stay, she would ask Emily to loan her enough money to see her out of town and somewhere safe. Margaret would pay her back with interest as soon as she received her inheritance. She loathed the thought of borrowing money from friends. But she would have to set aside her pride. Pulling the mobcap down more snugly over her black wig and spectacles, she realized she already had.

They walked north and then turned into quiet and pretty Red Lion Square. There, Margaret led the way across the square's central garden. She paused behind one of the trees to survey the Lathrop town house across the street. Joan stood behind her. All was still, save for the flicking tail of a horse harnessed to a carriage waiting several houses away.

Margaret was about to cross the cobbles when she realized with a start that she recognized the landau with its brass candle lamps, as well as the coachman at the reins. Margaret retreated behind the tree once more. As she peered around it, the Lathrops' front door opened

and Sterling Benton appeared, framed by lamplight at its threshold, speaking in earnest confidence with Emily's father. Sterling shook his head somberly, appearing the perfect image of concerned stepfather. Mr. Lathrop nodded and the two men shook hands.

Sterling had certainly gotten there quickly. She and Joan had left perhaps only thirty or forty minutes before. Of course they had walked, while Sterling had a horse and carriage at his disposal. He—or Marcus, more likely—must have come to her room soon after she'd left and discovered her gone. Thank heaven she left when she did.

Clattering horse hooves galloped into the square, and Margaret peered around the other side of the tree. A man in a chimney-pot hat and cropped coat rode up, quickly dismounted, and tied his reins to a post. The man's hurry sounded an alarm in Margaret's mind. Was this the man from Bow Street Murdoch had announced before Margaret left? Had Sterling planned to hire a watchman but now commissioned the same man to find and apprehend her?

The newcomer trotted up the walkway toward Sterling and Mr. Lathrop. There on the stoop, the three men spoke, Sterling gesturing and frowning. He pulled something from his pocket and handed it to the officious-looking man. She could not see the object clearly from that distance, but based on the way the man studied it, she guessed it might be a framed miniature portrait. The one commissioned by her father for her eighteenth birthday?

Evidently, Sterling had arranged for the runner to meet him at the place he expected to find Margaret. Where he *would* have found her had she arrived even five minutes earlier. Sterling Benton knew her better than she realized, and that thought riddled her with anxiety. Where could she go, where could she hide, where Sterling Benton would never think to look for her?

A few minutes later, Sterling departed in the carriage and Mr. Lathrop retreated inside, yet the runner remained, leaning against the outside stair rail.

"Well?" Joan whispered.

“The watchman, or whatever he is, is making himself comfortable. I don’t think he is going anywhere soon.”

“Well, I *must* be going soon,” Joan said. “Are you coming with me or not?”

There was no point in staying. Sterling had gotten there first. Even if she managed to sneak inside and speak with Emily, her father would insist on sending her home. It was no good.

Margaret sighed. “Looks like I am.”

Joan echoed her sigh. “Well, come on, then.”

Staying to the shadows, they crossed the square and returned to the thoroughfare. Joan urged her to hurry, and soon Margaret’s thoughts were consumed with dodging flower carts, barrels, carriages, and horse droppings. And with trying to keep sight of Joan’s blue frock as she scurried ahead. Soon, Margaret’s feet were aching and her side cramping.

Joan turned only long enough to hiss, “Hurry! We’ve got a long way to go, and it’s getting late.”

Margaret eyed the passing hackney carriages with longing but knew she should not spend the little money she had. She bit back a groan and kept trotting along, the carpetbag swinging against her leg. Ahead, Joan strode smartly on, ever eastward, her heavier valise apparently no burden at all. Thirty or forty minutes later, they turned south onto Grace Church Street.

The street narrowed and darkened. The cobbles gave way to uneven paving, refuse-filled gutters, and smells that compelled Margaret to breathe from her mouth.

Finally, Joan turned down a lane signposted Fish Street Hill. There, they passed several old tenement buildings before Joan pushed open a narrow door. Margaret breathed a sigh of relief. Her next inhale brought salt air and the rank odor of rotting fish. They were close to the river here, she guessed. And the docks.

Too tired to care, she followed Joan inside and up two rickety flights of stairs. She stood, numb and mute, as Joan knocked softly on the door of number 23.

While they waited, Joan turned and whispered, "I've had all the trouble I care to from your Mr. Benton. I think it best we don't tell my sister your name or who you really are. Peg has never been good at keeping secrets."

Margaret nodded.

A few moments later, shuffling and grumbling came from the other side of the door. Then a woman's hoarse whisper. "Who's there?"

"Peg, it's Joan."

The lock clicked, and the door was opened by a frowzy woman very like Joan in appearance, though several years older and a stone heavier. She might have been pretty once, but her skin was rough, her face too careworn for her years.

"Good heavens, Joan. What's happened?"

Joan answered calmly, "I've lost my place."

Her sister's face crumpled. "Oh no. What did you do?"

"Nothing. Look, it's late. We'll talk in the morning, all right?"

The woman nodded over Joan's shoulder. "Who's this, then?"

Joan flicked Margaret a glance. "She's with me. She just needs a place a sleep for a night or two. Come on, Peg, let us in. We'll help with the children and give the place a good cleaning—whatever you like."

The woman frowned. "Oh, very well. But keep it down. The children are already asleep."

They stepped inside the dark room, which smelled of cabbage and soiled nappies. Margaret could see little, as their reluctant hostess spared no candle for them to get settled by.

"Candles are dear, they are," Peg explained as if reading her thoughts. "There's a bit of light from the window, if you need it. And embers in the stove."

Joan disappeared into the apartment's only separate room. She returned a moment later and tossed something onto the floor. Margaret realized with sinking dread that she was meant to sleep on an old blanket on the floor.

Margaret stood there, waiting for Joan to help her undress. But Joan followed her sister back into the bedchamber.

Margaret whispered after her, “Joan?”

“You’re on your own now, miss,” Joan said. “I am a maid no longer.” She shut the door behind her.

Well. She needn’t be so snippy, Margaret thought, oddly chastised as well as annoyed. She decided she was too tired to undress in any case and settled down atop the thin scratchy blanket on the floor, hoping no mice or rats decided to join her there.



Margaret awoke on her side, stiff. Her hip bone ached from being pressed against the hard floor. Sunlight, filtering through sooty windows, shone on the grey wool blanket she had pulled over herself in the night. Likely it had once been the golden hue of boiled wool. As she pushed it away, something furry brushed her hand. She gasped and bolted to her feet. A dark, hairy form fell from her shoulder to the floor. She shrieked, only to realize it was not a rat, but her wig. She quickly bent and pulled it on. Another creature appeared before her and she reared back and nearly shrieked again. This creature had a small pale face, curtained by stringy ginger hair.

“Hello,” the little girl said, staring at her. “Who are you?”

“I am . . .” *Who am I?* Margaret’s brain was a fog. She remembered Joan saying she ought not give her real name. Probably wise. If Sterling came here to question Joan’s sister, Peg might say Joan had been there with someone, but not that a Margaret had been there.

“I am a . . . friend . . . of Joan’s.”

“Is Aunt Joan here, too?”

“Yes. In your mamma’s room, I believe.” She made no effort to disguise her voice with the child.

The little girl tilted her head to one side. “What’s wrong with your hair?”

Margaret reached up and realized her wig was askew. She righted the wig and muttered lamely, “Always a mess in the morning. You, on the other hand, have very pretty hair.” She said it hoping to distract

the girl. She did not want her reporting to Sterling or a runner that a blond lady wearing a wig had been there. That would give away her disguise and make Sterling's search all the easier.

She eyed the girl's stringy hair again. "Or you could have. When was the last time you combed it?"

The little girl shrugged.

Margaret looked away from the girl to survey her surroundings. One end of the room housed a small stove, cupboards, and table and chairs. The other end held a pallet bed complete with sleeping boy and baskets heaped with fabric. Apparently Joan's sister was a seamstress of sorts. Margaret spied a piece of broken mirror hanging on the wall by a ribbon and walked over to it, checking her wig and cap and wiping a smear of kohl from between her eyes.

"I want breakfast," the little girl pouted.

"And I want to be a thousand miles from here," Margaret whispered to the stranger in the mirror.

Peg stepped out of the bedchamber, tying on an apron and stifling a yawn. She said, "Light the fire, will you?"

Margaret looked at the little girl. She seemed awfully young to be trusted with fire. It took Margaret a few seconds to realize Peg had asked *her*.

Margaret had poked at many a drawing room fire but had never actually laid one. She eyed the small stove. A bucket with a few pieces of coal sat at the ready.

Joan came out of the room, a toddler on her hip. She glanced at Margaret, then smiled down at the boy. "This is little Henry."

"Named for his father, he is." Peg pulled a sack of oats from the cupboard.

"Papa is gone to sea," a boy of seven or eight piped up. Margaret had not seen him rise from the pallet bed. "I am going to sea one day too."

"Not for a few more years, Michael. Don't be in a hurry," Joan said, an indulgent dimple in her cheek.

Margaret caught Joan's eye, and nodded her head toward the stove. Joan frowned at her, uncomprehending.

“Haven’t you got that fire lit yet?” Peg asked, not looking up as she pulled a pot from the cupboard.

“Um. . . . no. I am not certain . . .”

“I’ll do it,” Joan said in a long-suffering manner, placing the child in Margaret’s arms.

At least this was something Margaret could do. Having two siblings many years younger than herself, she knew how to hold a child.

Margaret settled the child against her and soon felt dampness seep into her gown. *Ugh*. She wondered if she could manage to change him. At Lime Tree Lodge, they had employed a nursery maid to deal with soiled nappies.

“What’s your name?” the older boy asked her.

“My name?” Margaret echoed stupidly. “Ah . . .” Her mind whirled. “Elinor,” she said, choosing her middle name.

“But she goes by Nora,” Joan added, perhaps finding the name too grand—or too close to her real name.

“Make the porridge, will you, Nora?” Peg said. “I’ve got six orders of piecework to finish today.” Peg glanced up. “You do know how to make porridge, I trust?”

“Course she does,” Joan said. “You go about your work, Peg, and we’ll manage breakfast.”

Peg nodded and crossed the room to the waiting baskets.

When her back was turned, Joan whispered, “Peg makes thin gruel for the children. It’s better for their little stomachs.”

And cheaper, Margaret thought, but did not say so.

“Six parts water to one part groats. Can you manage that? Unless you’d rather change Henry?”

“No thank you. I shall give gruel a go.”

Later, after they had eaten thin, lumpy, mildly scorched gruel with neither milk nor sugar, Margaret fumbled her way through drying the pot, spoons, and basins as Joan washed. As she did so, she thought about something Joan had said—that Peg’s name and address were recorded in Benton’s staff records as Joan’s next of kin.

Sterling might very well put two and two together and knock on Peg's door any moment looking for her. Margaret shuddered. She could not stay there long.

After the dishes were put away, Joan sat down with a wrinkled copy of a newspaper a few days old, reading through the advertisements. Not knowing what else to do, Margaret pulled her comb from her bag and went to work on the little girl's hair, untangling then plaiting the ginger strands.

Peg glanced from her sewing to Joan, still bent over the newspaper. "Any luck, Joan?"

Joan shook her head. "It seems everyone wants maids-of-all-work here in town. That's one fate I should like to avoid."

Reaching the end of the girl's hair, Margaret looked around for a ribbon or something else to secure it.

Peg tossed her a thin scrap of muslin. "Here."

Margaret tied the end of the plait, and the girl stroked her coppery braid, smiling coyly up at Joan. "Am I pretty, Aunt Joan?"

Joan looked from her niece to Margaret, then back again. "Pretty is as pretty does, little miss. You remember that."

The jab was intended for her, Margaret realized. At the moment, being pretty seemed of little use. What should she *do*?