

One

She opened her eyes to darkness. Not the inky blackness of night, but the brushed charcoal that was a harbinger of dawn. For a long moment, she did not move. Something was... wrong. Beneath her cheek was not the softness of a pillow but a damp, gritty surface. Her feet were cold. Well, all of her was cold, but her feet especially. She wiggled her toes and realized they were wet.

She was wet.

Her gown—not a nightgown, as she could feel the restriction of her stays tied beneath the soggy fabric—was a heavy weight on her legs. In the distance, she heard...waves?

Slowly, and with great effort, she sat. Her head throbbed. She touched the locus of the pain, her fingers gingerly passing over a swollen knot on the back of her head. Her fingers came away wet. From blood or—she touched her tongue to her lips—saltwater?

She tried to remember where she was.

Blackness.

She closed her eyes and pressed a finger to her temple. The blackness did not recede.

Suddenly, a rush of cold water swept in around her, rising almost to her waist. She jumped up, regretted the action immediately as it made her world spin, and reached out for something to take hold of. Her bare hand landed on cold, slick rock. A cave? Was that where she was? A sea cave?

The water swirling about her ankles receded, but it would be back. The tide was coming in, and she had no idea if this cave would flood. She had to get out. Tentatively, she turned her head one way and then the other. She lifted her cumbersome skirts and began to move toward the

watery gray light. Her hands clutched at the wall of the cave, until she was thrown back against it as another wave of seawater washed in. Now that she was standing, the icy water reached to her knees. The sea withdrew again, sucking her with it. She welcomed the momentum as, somehow, she knew the tide would lead her out.

Two more waves crashed inside, the second wetting her hips, before she finally emerged from the cave. Outside, the sky was the pale blue of dawn with a hint of orange on the horizon. She tripped once, fell to her knees on the rocks outside the cave, then limped to the beach further inland. Out of breath, her head pounding, she sat down on the soft, dry sand and watched as the waves filled the cave where she'd been...what *had* she been doing there?

She looked about the empty stretch of beach and spotted nothing but gulls picking at crabs and the odd patch of seaweed. Where had she come from? Where was she now? She had a bed and a home somewhere, but the name was trapped in the blackness inside her mind.

And then she realized that her own name was trapped in that blackness. She tried to push through the murkiness, but it felt impenetrable.

Either that, or nothing was behind it...just a great void of emptiness.

Panic began to rise in her chest, constricting her lungs and making it difficult to draw in air. Her heart pounded as she closed her eyes and tried, in vain, to remember who she was. What was wrong with her? Even the smallest child knew his or her own name. Why could she not recall?

She clenched her hands into fists and attempted to slow her breathing. Opening her eyes, she said all the words she could think of. "Beach. Ocean. Dress. Hands. Legs. Feet. Gull. Shell. Sand. Boots. Sky. Clouds. Sun." She knew more words, but her throat was ragged, and she realized she was thirsty. How could she know what *thirst* was, know all the words for her

surroundings, and yet not know *where* she was or *who* she was? Dread threatened to overwhelm her again. She was shivering from wet and cold. She was hungry and thirsty. The throbbing in her head was all but unbearable. She wanted to go home, but she didn't know where home was.

She heard a voice on the wind and turned to see if she could place which direction it came from. But she saw no one. She wrapped her arms about her waist. *Calm down*, she told herself. *Take a breath. You are not allowed to go mad.*

Her arms tightened. There was that voice again. This time she looked to the south. She didn't know how she knew that direction was south, but she did. Rocky cliffs jutted out that way with no clear path to the summit. Beneath the cliffs was a narrow strip of beach not yet covered by the rising tide. A person walked along that strip. A man, she decided, seeing the way his dark greatcoat whipped about in the wind. She hadn't seen him before because his form had blended in with the landscape, but as he moved closer, she could discern his form more clearly. He wore no hat, and his dark hair whipped about his tan face.

"Marjorie!" he called.

She turned to look behind her, to see if anyone else was present. Was she Marjorie?

"Marjorie!" He was walking quickly now, his long strides eating up the distance between them. She stared as his facial features became more apparent. Under dark brows he had light eyes, crinkled with concern. His nose was straight and slightly red from the cold. His cheeks, prominent with subtle hollows beneath, were also pink from the cold. He did not have a beard, but he was not exactly clean-shaven. She could not remember the word for the dark stubble on his jaw. *Stubble*, perhaps that was the word, though her mind reached for another, more accurate.

"What the devil, Marjorie?" he said as he reached her and put his hands on her shoulders. "I've been up all night, pacing until I wore grooves in the floor. What happened?"

His hands, encased in dark gloves, were warm, and the heat seeped through her wet sleeves. She looked up at him, as he was a few inches taller than she, and recognized that same warmth of concern in his blue eyes—sea-blue eyes, she thought, eyes that almost matched the lighter color of the shallow water near the shore.

He bent his head to look into her eyes. “Marjorie? Are you well?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice sounding like it came from far away. At first, she wasn’t even certain she’d said the words aloud.

“What happened?”

“I don’t know,” she said.

He blew out a breath then released her and unfastened his coat. “You’re freezing. Let’s get you inside.” He dropped his coat over her shoulders, and she was immediately embraced by warmth and an oddly familiar scent. She picked out the smell of old books and ink, but there was something else there she couldn’t identify.

Under his greatcoat, he was dressed in dark breeches and black boots, a silk scarlet waistcoat, and a blue coat of superfine. He looked as though he’d just left his club, not dressed for a walk on the beach. He put an arm about her and began to guide her the way he’d come. She hesitated, unsure she should trust him. But she knew his scent. Surely, he was someone she was accustomed to, someone she could trust.

“Where are we going?” she asked, giving in to the light pressure of his hand on her back. He gave her a sharp look as though she should know that.

“Back to the cottage.”

The cottage. That sounded nice and warm.

“You’re hurt,” he said after she’d taken a few steps.

She waved a hand. "I scraped my knee. I'm fine."

His arm about her tightened. "You're fortunate that's all that happened to you. You've been out all night."

"I have?"

He halted and moved to face her. "What are you not telling me?" he demanded. "You're not behaving at all like yourself."

She stared up at him, into those lovely blue eyes. They looked familiar as well. She must have gazed into them many times. Her attention dipped to his lips as he spoke again.

"What happened last night?" he asked.

She shook her head. She didn't know how to tell him about the darkness, about how she couldn't penetrate it.

"Never mind. We'll discuss it later." And then he did something she would have never predicted. He lifted her up and carried her.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. Was this something he did often? Did she like to be carried about like a baby?

"You're pale as a specter and trembling violently from the cold," he said as he walked briskly. He was moving much faster carrying her than they had been a moment before. "For once, don't argue with me."

For once. She was an argumentative person? She must have been because even now she had to bite her tongue to keep from telling him to put her down. She did not like being treated as though she were helpless. And yet, he was warm and strong, and he smelled very good. She had the sense that she enjoyed libraries and reading and books. Those scents were appealing, but it was the scent underneath those—perhaps his personal scent—that made her want to lean in and

sniff. She liked the way he smelled and the way his arms felt about her, and yet, she had the sense that she did not want to like it. Did not want to admit how much she liked his touch, how much she liked *him*.

None of these feelings made any sense, and with her head pounding as it was, she couldn't begin to unravel them. Much easier to rest that hammering head against his chest, close her eyes, and let him carry her.

She must have drifted off because when she opened her eyes again, he was stepping through a doorway and into a cottage. The vestibule had wooden floors and a table against the wall. Above the table was a mirror, and as they passed it, she caught a glimpse of a woman being carried by a man.

She gasped as she realized that woman was her. "Put me down," she said.

"We're almost to the sitting—"

"Put me down!"

He complied immediately, setting her gently on her feet and taking hold of her arm to keep her steady. She lurched toward the mirror, keen to have another look at herself. She stepped in front of it and put her hands on the table. A stranger stared back at her. She had no idea whatsoever who the woman in the mirror could be.

She touched her cheek, and the woman in the mirror touched her cheek. She licked her lips, and the woman in the mirror did the same. "What is happening?" the woman in the mirror said.

"Marjorie?"

"Stop calling me that," she told the man who was standing at her side. She met his eyes in the mirror. "Is this what I look like?"

He paused—as anyone would at what must be an odd question. “You’re a bit worse for your exploits last night, but yes. That is your image. Are you feeling—”

She didn’t hear whatever else he said. She was too busy staring at herself. She had dark hair, long and disheveled and crusted with sand. As the man had claimed, she was very pale. Dark shadows smudged the skin beneath her eyes. Her eyes were an amber brown fringed with thick, dark lashes and dark brows. Sand still stuck to one side of her face, and her lips were almost blue from cold and trembling. Her expression was so serious, so intense. Did she always wear that expression?

Glancing down, she saw she wore a modest gown of gray with long sleeves and a high collar. The material was wet and torn at one shoulder. Even if the gown had been perfectly clean and neat, it would have been an ugly gown and exactly the wrong color to suit her. She didn’t know how she should know this—any of this—and not recognize herself in the mirror.

“I’m not feeling well,” she said, answering the man’s question, though she’d barely heard it. “My head—”

“I thought I saw blood. Come into the sitting room. I’ll take a look.”

Yes, the knot she’d felt earlier. That was why her head throbbed. But that wasn’t what she’d been about to say. She’d wanted to say something about the blackness in her mind, how she couldn’t penetrate whatever was behind it—the part that knew her name, her face, her life. The part that knew who the man beside her was.

She turned away from the mirror and looked at him. He was as much a stranger to her as her own face had been, and yet, he seemed to know her. “Who are you?” she asked. His eyes widened and he visibly started with the shock of her question. “No.” She held up a hand. “I should ask the other question first. Who am *I*?”

He stared at her for a long, long moment. His throat moved as he swallowed, and then he took a breath and drew himself up. “You are Marjorie...Burrows. Marjorie Burrows.”

At this point, she didn't expect to recognize her name, and she didn't. “And who are you?” she asked again.

“Simon,” he said.

“Simon what?”

He cleared his throat. “Burrows. Marjorie, I'm your husband.”