

Whispers
from the
Shadows

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*To my sister, Jennifer.
Whenever I write a heroine with a knack for art—
or a hero more than a foot taller than said heroine—
I think of you (and that towering brother-in-law of mine).
You bring beauty to my life,
and I'm proud to be your Pooky.*

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*Ye were sometimes darkness, but
now are ye light in the Lord:
walk as children of light . . .
See then that ye walk circumspectly,
not as fools, but as wise,
redeeming the time, because the days are evil.*

EPHESIANS 5:8,15-16



*“We have the greatest opportunity the world has ever seen,
as long as we remain honest—which will be as long as
we can keep the attention of our people alive.
If they once become inattentive to public affairs,
you and I, and Congress and Assemblies, judges and governors,
would all become wolves.”*

THOMAS JEFFERSON



THE CHESAPEAKE BAY REGION

One

London, England
April 1814

The servants hefting her trunks onto the carriage might as well have been loading her coffin. Gwyneth Fairchild pulled her pelisse close and gazed across Hanover Square with a sick feeling in her stomach. Surely she would awaken from this nightmare and walk down to the breakfast room to find Papa smiling at her. He would speak and say something that actually made sense.

Not like yesterday.

She shut her eyes against the image of all that was familiar, all that she might never see again. What if the *Scribe* went down? Was attacked by a renegade French ship or those dreadful American pirates? What if, assuming she made it to Annapolis, they killed her the moment she stepped ashore?

Annapolis. Had Papa not looked so sorrowful, so determined when he said that word yesterday, she would have thought he had gone mad.

His hand settled on her shoulder now, warm and large. Those hands had steadied her all her life. Capable, that was what General Isaac Fairchild had always been. Capable and steady and so very noble.

All that was worthy of love and respect. So surely she could trust him now when logic and reason said she couldn't.

"I know it makes little sense to you, dear heart." He touched her chin, a silent bid for her to look at him. She found his eyes gleaming with moisture he would never shed. Not when anyone could see him, though she had heard his heartrending sobs when Mama died last fall. "I wish there were another way, but there is not."

Another way *for what*? He hadn't said, wouldn't say. Gwyneth drew in a tremulous breath and tried to stand tall and proud, the way Mama had taught her, the way Papa himself had instilled. To convey with her posture that she was the great-granddaughter of a duke, the granddaughter of two earls, the daughter of a general.

A daughter sent into exile for no apparent reason. Separated from all those she loved, the only people left in the world who mattered. "Papa—"

"I know." He leaned in and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I do. But I cannot entrust you to anyone but the Lanes."

A light mist descended, heavier than fog but too tame to be called rain. At this moment, a thunderstorm would have better matched her confusion. "Please tell me what is happening. Why must you entrust me to anyone? And if you must, why not Aunt Poole or Aunt Gates?"

His jaw moved for a moment but no words came. Nay, he simply looked past her, his eyes searching for something unseen. Then he sighed. "The Lanes will welcome you and take care of you, Gwyn. I will follow as quickly as I can. A month at the outside. No more."

Exactly what he said yesterday too. He would give no explanation as to why he was sending her to a nation with whom they were at war, across the Atlantic to a family she had met only once, when she was but a tot.

"Papa, your words hint at danger, but what could threaten me here more than the sea and its pirates? The French, the Americans?"

"The French ought to pose no threat now that we've subdued them." He reached inside his coat of blazing red and pulled out an envelope. "In all likelihood your ship will reach harbor safely, but if by chance you do encounter American privateers, offer them this."

She frowned as she took the envelope. It was too thin to contain anything but a single sheet of paper. "What—"

“Trust me. ’Twill suffice.” Chatter from the house grew louder, and Papa looked away again, to the nearing housekeeper and gardener. “There are the Wesleys. Time to go.”

A million arguments sprang to her tongue. She didn’t want to leave. Not her home, not him, not all she held dear. Not her first Season, the one that had been put off because of Mama’s illness last year. Not her friends.

And what about Sir Arthur? She hadn’t even spoken to him to tell him she was leaving, hadn’t dared send a note. “Papa, Sir Arthur . . .”

“It isn’t to be, Gwyn, not now. Perhaps when this has passed, when it is safe for you to return.”

Tears burned, begging to be set loose, but she clenched her teeth and blinked. How had it come to this? Promise had finally shone its light again. Shopping with Aunt Gates had made it feel as though Mama were with her still. Making the rounds with her friends had finally distracted her from the loss. Getting vouchers for Almack’s, and then Sir Arthur’s court—she had, at long last, looked forward to the future.

“Please don’t cry, dear heart.” Papa thumbed away a wily tear that escaped her blockade and kissed her forehead again. “Up with you, now. You must be at the docks soon.”

Instead, she surged forward and wrapped her arms around him. “I don’t want to leave you, Papa. I can’t. Don’t make me go. Or come with me.”

He held her close. “Would that I could. Would that I didn’t have to bid goodbye, yet again, to the one who matters most.” He gave her another squeeze, another kiss, and then he set her back. His eyes were rimmed with red. “I love you, Gwyneth. Go with God.”

He let her go and pivoted on his heel, all but charging back into the house. She almost wished she could resent him, but how could she, seeing his struggle? Whatever his reasons, they must be valid.

And whatever his reasons, they must be dire. A shiver coursed up her spine and made the mist seem colder. Isaac Fairchild was a respected general, a man loved by all. A man of considerable sway in London and beyond. If there were something frightening enough that he must send her away, was planning on leaving himself—

And for America, no less. Would he be going there to take

command of troops? Possibly. Though why would he be secretive about it? But then, there was much about Papa's work he could not discuss. Secrets, always secrets.

"All's secure, Miss Fairchild," the driver called down from the bench.

She slipped the envelope into her reticule and took a step toward the Wesleys. They, at least, would provide familiar faces for the journey. They would be an anchor on the foreign seas.

Quick hoofbeats snagged her attention. "Miss Fairchild!"

Her eyes went wide when she saw the dashing figure astride the horse. Sir Arthur reined to a halt beside the carriage and leaped down, fervor ablaze in his eyes.

"Miss Fairchild." He gripped her hands as he searched her face with his gaze. He had the loveliest brown eyes, so warm and beckoning, the perfect fit to his straight nose and sculpted mouth. "Is it true, then? Broffield just told me that Miss Gregory said you were leaving Town."

"I..." He was holding her hands. Sir Arthur Hart, Knight of the Order of Saint Patrick, presumed heir to a viscounty, the most sought-after bachelor in England, grasped her fingers as if he never intended to let go. The mass of confusion inside twisted. "Yes, it is true. My father..."

He eased closer, his gaze so compelling she feared she might drown in it. "Something to do with military business, then? You will return soon?"

"I don't know. I don't think Papa knows."

"Dear Miss Fairchild. Gwyneth." His fingers tightened around hers, much like the band around her chest. Never before had he spoken her given name. Hearing it in his rich tenor, spoken with such affection, made her fear her tears would overcome her after all. "Why must you go with him? Can you not stay here with your aunt?"

Her attempt at swallowing got stuck in her throat. "I am all Papa has now since my mother passed away, and he is loath to be separated." True, so true. Why, then, was he sending her an ocean away to a hostile land?

"But surely there is a way to convince him. What if..." He paused and then swallowed before using their joined hands to pull her closer. "What if you were betrothed?"

Her heart quickened inside her, beating a desperate tattoo against her ribs. *Would* that change anything? Could it? “I...don’t know.”

“Gwyneth.” Oh, he made her name into music. The breeze toyed with his honey-colored hair under the brim of his hat, making her itch to touch the curls. “My darling, I have such a love and admiration for you. If you would feel inclined toward accepting my hand, I will speak with your father this very moment.”

At first all she could think was *He proposed!* Then she drew in a quick breath and nodded with too much enthusiasm. “Of course I am inclined if he agrees. Only...” She drew away when he moved closer still, recalling Papa’s discomposure mere minutes before. “Let me speak with him first, as he was out of countenance.”

“Certainly. Yes. Anything.” He laughed and raised her hands to kiss her knuckles. As if surprised she had said yes. “I will take a turn through your garden to try to calm myself.”

“Perfect.” If only she could be sure Papa would agree. If only she could be sure that, if not, Sir Arthur would wait for her. She pulled away, but he snagged her hand again.

“Gwyneth. Darling.” He smiled, so bright and handsome it made her doubt trouble could exist. “I will make you very happy.”

A smile stole onto her lips. It melted away again in a moment, but he had turned toward the garden by then.

Mrs. Wesley snagged her attention with a shooing motion toward the door. “You had better hurry, love. If the general does not change his mind, we must hasten on our way.”

Gwyneth flew through the mist up the steps to the door and back into the house. For a moment she paused to breathe in home, but she hadn’t time to savor it. If her mission went well, she needn’t say good-bye to it at all.

Please, Lord. Please let him relent.

She sped down the hallway and around the corner toward Papa’s study. He always ended up there, either busy at work or staring at the picture of Mama she’d painted for him. A professional portrait hung in the drawing room, but he said she had done the better job. Praise which always made her heart expand.

The study door was before her by the time she realized voices spilled

out. Two of them—though when had anyone else arrived? Surely no servant would dare speak over Papa like this.

“Isaac, listen to yourself!”

Gwyneth froze a step from the door. It was open a crack, letting her look in, though only the corner of the desk was visible, and just behind it, where Papa stood. But she recognized Uncle Gates’s voice.

“Isaac’ now, is it?” Papa’s laugh sounded dry. “Odd how you only remember our familial ties when we disagree. Otherwise it is always my rank to which you appeal.”

A loud bang made Gwyneth jump. Uncle’s fist connecting with wood, perhaps? “Blast it, Fairchild, it’s your rank you are abusing!”

“No! ’Tis my rank I honor. Someone, Gates, must do what is right. Someone must stand for justice rather than—”

“Hang all that noble rot.” A nasty curse spilled from Uncle Gates’s lips as glass shattered. Gwyneth recoiled, staring in horror at the sliver of room. What keepsake had he destroyed? The vase Mama had chosen two years ago? The small porcelain figure Gwyneth had given Papa for his birthday when she was fifteen? Something precious, for only the most special pieces gained a place of honor on Papa’s shelves.

And why? Why would Mama’s own brother do such a thing?

He sent something else toppling. “You are undermining *years* of careful work! The Home Office—”

“The Home Office, you say?” Papa leaned forward onto his desk, a look of deathly calm upon his face. “Nay. The Home Office has decent men in it yet. A few, at least, though you are not one of them. This evil must be stopped, Gates. *You* must be stopped.”

There came a shuffling sound, one Gwyneth couldn’t comprehend but which made Papa snap upright. Made him lift his hands, palms out, and make a placating motion. “Gates—”

“I am through reasoning with you, Fairchild. Tell me where they are. *Now.*”

One of Papa’s hands lowered toward his desk drawer, but another shuffle made him pause. “I am only—”

“You think me so great a fool? I already removed *that*, dear brother.” More curses exploded from Uncle Gates. Closer now, as though he were rounding the desk, just out of her view. “Tell me where they are!”

Papa’s sharp inhalation was clearly audible. “Gone.”

“Gone? Gone? What do you mean, *gone*?”

“Just that. Out of my hands and on their way to those who can put a stop to this before you destroy two nations in the name of avarice.”

A cry tore through the room, guttural and animalistic. Light flashed on something metallic as her uncle charged into view, the gleaming length held before him. Still, she had no idea what he wielded until she saw the silver stained red.

She pressed her hands to her mouth to hold back the scream, hold back the horror, but it didn’t help. Uncle still hissed words of hatred. Papa still staggered back, away from the blade. Then he crumpled and fell.

Gates followed him down, muttering, “You couldn’t have, not yet. You must have it.” His hands shoved into Papa’s jacket and searched.

Papa, fight back! But he didn’t. He gasped, seemed to struggle for a moment, and then went lax. *No. No, no, no, no, no!*

Did she bleed too? She must. She couldn’t move, couldn’t make a sound, couldn’t *be*. Not anymore.

When Papa’s head lolled to the side, he blinked and his gaze focused on her. There was life yet in those familiar depths, but it flickered. Sputtered. “Gwyneth.”

She didn’t hear it. She just saw the movement of his lips. But her uncle, tossing Papa’s case of calling cards into the wall, snarled. “*Now* you worry about your darling daughter? Oh, have no fear, Fairchild. Dear Uncle Gates will take care of our precious girl.”

Bile burned her throat.

Papa blinked again as he tried to pull in a breath that choked him. Again his gaze sharpened, caught hers. This time when his lips moved, he made no sound whatsoever. *Run!*

Then it was gone, all the light in his eyes. Extinguished like a flame left before an open window.

And she ran. She turned on silent slippers and fled back around the corner and down the hall. Out the doors and straight into the waiting carriage.

“Gwyneth? Miss Fairchild?”

All she noted of the voice was that it wasn’t Uncle Gates’s. Nothing else mattered. Seeing that the Wesleys were already seated, their eyes now wide, Gwyneth pulled the door shut herself. “Go!”

An eternal second later, the driver's "Yah!" reached her ears, and the carriage jolted forward.

When she closed her eyes, all she could see was darkness yawning before her.