

HARBOR FOR THE NIGHTINGALE

—Book 4 of The Stranje House Novels—

An Unedited Excerpt

KATHLEEN BALDWIN

CHAPTER ONE

MISS MAYA BARRINGTON'S TYPHOON

*July 1814, Mayfair, London, Haversmythe House
Miss Stranje hosts a coming-out ball for her young ladies*

ALL THE WORLD IS SOUND. Even if I were blind, I would still be able to see. It is as if everything hums—the trees, the air, stones, and people—especially people. They all sing songs.

Some songs are more dangerous than others.

Most of the guests have already arrived at the ball, and our receiving line is dwindling. Georgie, Lady Jane, and Tess left us to join a lively country-dance. Seraphina still stands quietly beside me. Her inner music wraps as delicately around her as does the silk of her cloud-blue ballgown. With her white-blond hair, Sera is the closest thing to an angel I have ever seen. On my other side, stands our rock, our headmistress, Miss Stranje, a woman made of iron.

The footman at the doors announces another arrival. “Lord and Lady Barrington.” My father and his wife stand in the doorway. The instruments playing serenely within me crash to a stop and clatter to the floor of my soul.

He came.

I press my hand against my heart to keep it from flapping and shrieking like a strangled bird. Seraphina edges closer so that our shoulders touch. She is trying to lend

me strength.

The ballroom overflows with people. Dozens of strangers clad in shimmering finery, surround us, laughing and talking, but my very English stepmother ignores them all and marches straight for the receiving line. She holds her nose aloft, and her mouth pinched up so tight that her porcelain white face looks almost skeletal. An out of tune clarinet, she squeaks toward us, every step making me wish I could stop up my ears.

People say she is beautiful. My father certainly must have thought so. I fail to see it, especially when her face prunes up as it is doing now. It is a familiar expression. One that causes me to quake nervously while simultaneously clenching my fists.

Stepmother. That is what I was instructed to call her. I cannot bring myself to do it. *Mother* is a title of sacred honor. This woman, whose soul honks like an out of tune oboe, hasn't the faintest motherly inclination toward me. To me, she will never be anything more than the woman who married my father. Never mind that my mother, his first wife, was a maharaja's daughter. To the new Lady Barrington, I am merely the brown-skinned embarrassment her husband acquired in India. Her hate roars at me like high tide slamming against a rocky shore.

She halts, and her blond sausage curls quiver with distaste as she plants herself squarely in front of Miss Stranje. She does not curtsy or even nod in response to our headmistress's greeting.

Her words trickle out so sweetly that most people would not notice she is gritting her teeth as she utters them. "Miss Stranje, a word if you please."

Naturally, Seraphina notices. She notices everything—it is her gift. *And her curse.* She reaches for my hand to reassure me. Of the five of us, we who are Miss Stranje's students, Seraphina Wyndham is the only one who truly understands me, and I do not want my best friend to suffer if she is caught being supportive of me. So, I smile reassuringly and slip free of her fingers. This is my battle, and I must face it alone.

Sera tugs my arm as I step away and furtively whispers, "Do something. Calm her."

She, like everyone else at Stranje House, mistakenly thinks my voice contains some sort of magical power to soothe. It is much simpler than that. My grandmother taught me how to use certain tones and cadences to relax people and communicate tranquility. Most souls are more than receptive, they hunger for it. My father's wife is a different matter. I have tried in the past, and rather than succumb to my calming tactics, she

resists. On several occasions, she even covered her ears and screeched at me. I remember well her accusations of witchcraft and demonic bedevilment. It was on those grounds she convinced my father to send me away to Stranje House.

I wish, for Miss Stranje's sake, Lady Barrington would let me quiet her rat-like tendency to snipe and bite. Although I'm not worried. I am confident our headmistress has guessed what is coming and will manage my father's wife quite handily without my help. After all, a rat does not surprise an owl.

"This way, Lady Barrington." Miss Stranje graciously directs our bristling guest to the side of the receiving line.

Father's charming wife clasps my shoulder and propels me forward with her. I could not possibly soothe her now. I'm not nearly composed enough to do it. Indeed, I am battling an overwhelming inclination to yank her boney claw from my shoulder and twist it until she cries off.

"What have you done, Miss Stranje?" Lady Barrington releases me and waves her hand at my ensemble. She is objecting to Miss Stranje's ingenious innovation, a traditional sari draped over an English ballgown.

"Why have you dressed the child thus?" Lady Barrington's fingers close in a fist around the embroidered veil covering my hair. "I'm mortified! You've garbed her like a heathen. Surely, this is an affront to everyone here." She flicks the saffron silk away as if it has soiled her gloves. "How do you expect Lord Barrington and myself to weather this . . . this *outrage!*"

She barks so loud that some of our guests turned to stare.

"After the enormous sum we paid you, it is beyond my comprehension why you should do us such a disservice—"

"Lady Barrington!" Miss Stranje's tone chops through the woman's tirade. "Calm yourself." Our headmistress stands a good four or five inches taller than most women, and she straightens to make every inch count. "You sadly mistake the matter, my lady. The other guests are well acquainted with your husband's daughter. In fact, a few weeks ago she was invited by no less a personage than Lady Jersey to sing at Carlton House for the Prince Regent. Miss Barrington's voice impressed His Highness so greatly that he, *the highest authority in the land*, suggested your stepdaughter ought to be declared a national treasure."

“What?” Lady Barrington blinks at this news, but her astonishment is short-lived. She clears her throat and steps up emboldened. “Oh, *that*. I am well aware of Maya’s ability to mesmerize others with her voice. She uses demonic trickery, and you ought not allow—”

Miss Stranje leans forward, her tone low and deadly. “Are you unaware of the fact that Lady Castlereagh issued Miss Barrington vouchers for Almack’s?”

“Al-Almack’s . . .” Lady Barrington sputters at the mention of high society’s most exclusive social club. Her hands flutter to her mouth in disbelief. “No. That can’t be. Lady Castlereagh approved of *her*?” She glances sideways at me and her upper lips curls as if she tastes something foul in the air.

“Yes. Her vouchers were signed and sealed by the great lady herself.” Miss Stranje’s face transforms into a mask of hardened steel under which most people tremble in fear. “Not to put too fine a point on it, my lady, but Miss Barrington has been granted entry into the highest social circles. And, more to the point, it is my understanding that the patronesses refused to grant you vouchers. You were denied, is that not so?”

Lady Barrington steps back, unwilling to answer, a hand clutching her throat.

Miss Stranje refuses to let her quarry wriggle away. “In fact, my dear lady, anyone planning a soiree or ball during the remainder of the season, *anyone who is anyone*, has invited Miss Barrington to attend. I have stacks of invitations, dozens of notes, all of them begging your husband’s daughter to do them the honor of singing at their gatherings. Indeed, society has taken her under their wing so thoroughly I had rather thought you would be offering me a bonus, instead of this ill-conceived reprimand.”

Miss Stranje turns and levels a shrewd gaze at my father, who until this moment stood behind us silently observing.

He places a hand on his wife’s waist and moves her aside. This stranger, this formidable Englishman who I used to call Papa with such glee, steps up to my headmistress and takes her measure. After a moment that stretches long enough to hammer my stomach into mincemeat, he nods respectfully. “Very well, Miss Stranje. I shall send additional remuneration to you in the morning.”

His wife gasps, and indignation squeals off her like sour yellow gas.

He turns to me and reaches for my hand. Every instinct in me shouts to pull back. *Do not let him touch you*. It has been many long years since I have seen anything

resembling a fatherly mannerism from him. I am terrified of what I might feel, and yet even more terrified of what I might miss if I pull away.

A sharp intake of breath crosses my lips, but then all other sounds cease. I no longer hear laughter or talking from the guests in the ballroom. No footsteps. No shuffling or clattering. The hum of impenetrable silence muffles everything else as I watch him lift my hand.

My father bows slightly, the way all the other gentlemen did as they came through the receiving line. He holds my fingers loosely as if we are mere acquaintances. “You look lovely, Maya, very much like your mother.” He straightens, and I think I hear a whiff of sound—a soft keening, low and mournful. Except it is so brief and distant, I cannot be certain.

“You have her fire in your eyes. She would be proud.” He squares his shoulders. “I’m pleased to see you making your way in the world—flourishing on your own.”

Flourishing?

Hardly.

Unable to summon enough breath for words, I dip in an English curtsey that has become a habit. When I am able to speak, it sounds embarrassingly weak and fluttery, like a frightened bird. “Thank you, my lord.”

He lets go of my gloved fingers, offers his arm to his wife, and leaves me. Without a backward glance, he walks away. His measured gait is aloof and elegant, no different from that of a hundred other strangers in this room. The hollow thump of his heels as he abandons me hurts far worse than anything the spiteful woman he married has ever said.

I wish now that I had not allowed him to touch me. I ought to have run from the house—anything would be better than this grinding loneliness that darkens my insides. I would rather rip out my heart than to fall into the chasm threatening to swallow me. I’ve been in that dark place before.

The way he dismisses me without a second thought, sends me spiraling back to India. I’m there again, in the stifling heat of his sickroom. Worried, I’d snuck in to see him and stood quietly at the foot of his bed. Fear thumped through me like an elephant march as I watched him thrash under the sheets, fevered with the same epidemic that had only days earlier taken my mother’s life.

I remember his wide-eyed alarm when he noticed me standing by his bedpost. I was only six, but I can still hear his hoarse shout for the servants. “Get her out of here. Send her away!”

“No! No. I want to stay with you. Let me stay with you,” I begged. Crying, I clung to his bedpost, refusing to leave.

“Go! Take the chi—” Retching cut his rebuke short. Next came a string of muffled curses. “Out!”

“Come, missy. You cannot stay. Your father is very sick.” Servants dragged me kicking and screaming from his room. Later, my *ayah* told me Papa wanted me to stay out of his room so that I would not catch his illness. I will never know if that was true or not. My *ayah* may have been trying to spare my feelings. I do remember telling her I didn’t care if I got sick and died. I would rather stay with my papa.

“No, *kanya*. No, little girl. You must not say such things.” She brushed my hair until it gleamed like my papa’s black boots. “You will live, child. I see this. The future blooms in you. You are *gende ka phool*.” She pulled a marigold out of a small vase and placed it in my palms. “Protector. Sun lion.” I touched the bright orange petals and thought to myself, what good is such a small flower. It is too fragile—too easily crushed.

I was right.

The next day, on Papa’s orders, his attaché arranged to escort me to my grandmother’s family in the north. My father sent me away from the only world I’d ever known. On that long trip, loneliness and hurt chewed me up. Why would he send me so far away? Was he too sick? Or was his grief too heavy for him to share in mine? Perhaps my black hair and olive skin reminded him too much of her. Or was it because my mother was gone and he no longer cared for me?

Why?

We traveled for days and days, journeying toward the great mountains where the five rivers meet, and all the way there, sadness gnawed on my soul.

Few Europeans had ever ventured to the old villages and cities along the rivers. People were wary and distrustful of my white escort. He had difficulty finding a guide, and even when we did, we made several wrong turns. I did not care. Numb with grief, certain my father would die, or that he no longer loved me. I was already a lost child. What did it matter if we wandered forever?

After several treacherous river crossings, our guide located my family's village on the Tawi River. The weary attaché deposited me and my trunks in their midst and hurriedly left. I sat in the dirt beside my baggage, completely abandoned. The last ember of hope flickered inside me and blew out.

Strangers, who I would learn later were my cousins and aunts, gathered in a circle around me, staring, their faces ripe with curiosity and suspicion. Half-English, half-Indian, I was an unwelcome oddity, who belonged nowhere. I sat in the center of their circle, feeling like an oddly painted lizard. Did they judge me poisonous? Or edible?

A woman's joyous cry startled me. Astonished, I stood up. In my exhausted state, amidst all the confusion, I briefly mistook her voice for my mother's. I stared at the old woman running toward me. The voice, although eerily similar, did not belong to my dead mother. It belonged to my grandmother.

She burst through her gathered kinsman, took one look at me, and opened her arms. Though I learned later she had only visited me once as an infant, she kissed my forehead and hugged me, rocking and murmuring in Hindi. In tears, she declared to all my cousins and aunts that I was her daughter returned home.

Grandmother, my *naanii*, did not care about my mixed blood. She had no qualms about teaching her half-caste granddaughter the ways of her people. Others in our village were not so quick to trust me. I was half-English, after all. But out of respect for my grandmother, they kept their opinions to themselves. *Naanii* taught me how to make bread, how to mix healing herbs, braid hair, sew, and a thousand other things.

More importantly, *Naanii* taught me to listen.

To hear the world around us.

Over and over, she told me, "All life sings a song if we will but stop and listen."

I remember standing on the banks of the river washing clothes. "Close your eyes, little bird," *Naanii* said. "Quiet your mind and tell me what you hear?"

I pointed to her kinswoman standing in the shallows scrubbing her laundry against the stones. "I hear Kanishka humming a contented tune."

Grandmother, ever patient, smiled and asked, "And the stones, little one, what do they sing?"

I laughed and closed my eyes tight, listening for subtler vibrations. "They are old, *Naanii*. Their voices are quiet and deep. I can hardly hear them. Kanishka sings too

loudly, so does the wind in the trees and grass.” I opened my eyes. “And the river is especially loud.”

“Ahh.” She nodded, wrung out the cloth she’d been laundering, and set it in her basket. “It is true. Water is bold and brash. Very noisy.” She galloped her fingers through the air. “Always rushing to and fro. River thinks she is all-powerful. You must try harder, my child. Listen for the calm voice of the stones.” She laid a smooth pebble in my palm and pointed to one of the large rocks jutting up, splitting the current of the river. “Do you feel it? The mighty waters push and shove with the strength of a hundred horses, yet that boulder is unmoved. Hear how deep it hums, how sure it is of its connection with mother earth.”

Years later, I would hear the stones sing, but not that day. That day I heard my grandmother, not just her words; I heard the unfathomable vibrations of her soul. It was as if she was as ancient and knowing as the stones of which she spoke.

I wish I were still standing on the banks of the Tawi River. Instead, I am here in London with too many sounds roaring in my ears—the babble of our many guests, the rumble of the city seeping up through the bones of this house. My father has taken me half a world away from the person who loves me best in all the world. Even though she is thousands of miles away, I close my eyes, hoping to catch my grandmother’s distant pulse. I try to block out all the other noises, searching for those melodic threads that run between us even at this great distance.

“Maya? Maya! Are you all right?” Lady Jane rests her hand on my shoulder and startles me out of my search. She and Sera stare at me expectantly. “The musicians are tuning up for a quadrille. We are about to return to the dancing. But you seem shaken, what’s wrong?”

I look at Lady Jane, wondering how to answer. I am not *all right*, as she phrases it, but what else can I say, here in this jangling place. “Yes, I hear the music,” I say, and try to smile as if it is an important observation, as if the frivolity of dancing lightens my heart.

“Hmm,” she says skeptically, and takes my hand, pulling me along with her like the mighty river carrying a piece of flotsam. I feel her questions clamoring to be asked, but luckily, I also know Lady Jane will restrain herself. This is not the time or place for that sort of discussion. She glances around the room and spots Alexander Sinclair.

Immediately she brightens, and I feel joy pulse through her fingertips.

“Come.” she leads the way and, arm in arm, we face both the music and crowd together.



CHAPTER TWO DANGEROUS ENGLISHMEN

I DRIFT THROUGH THE NEXT TWO HOURS, closing my ears to everything except the music flowing from the orchestra. Everyone here thinks I am so peaceable and tame. Infinitely calm. They think this because, in the past, I have used my voice to calm their hearts, just as my grandmother used hers to calm mine. They have also seen me meditate, but they do not know why I do it.

No one knows the truth.

Inside me, races a wild storm. A typhoon. It thunders against my ribs, rattling my soul, and I fear the day I can no longer hold it back. Shortly before my father took me away to England, *Naanii* instructed me to let the storm escape a little at a time. How? If I open the door, my fury will roar like a lion and leap out to devour what is left of my tattered world.

No, I must hold the storm inside.

I manage to do so, until the supper dance with Lord Kinsworth. He will perform a duet with me later this evening, and so he thought it best if we sat together at dinner. By all outward appearances, Lord Kinsworth is a very pleasant young man. At least, that is what Lady Jersey says of him. Lady de Lieven begs to differ with her friend's assessment. "Pleasant? Are you mad? He is an absolute Adonis. There isn't a female in Britain who doesn't catch her breath at the sight of him." She made this bold claim and added, with a girlish sigh, "Too bad, he's so young."

I wish someone other than me would notice that regardless of how handsome he is, the man is dangerous. I can't remember meeting anyone so elusive. Lord Kinsworth is impossible to figure out, and I do not like that. On the other hand, I must admit he does sing quite well. Fearlessly, in fact. His throat opens with a clear rich tone, full of depth and power. He holds nothing back there. His voice is incredible—so warm it would melt the butter on our bread plates.

I also concede that I hear kindness strumming through his being. I suppose some people find kindness an even more alluring trait than his commanding shoulders or his powerful physique. I do not. And frankly, the fact that he could easily pick me up with one arm is not reassuring either. Yes, kindness can be alluring, but shouldn't that arouse suspicion? I don't trust kindness. Not at all. A lion's mane might appear soft and inviting, but only a fool dares pet that lovely fur. There are always teeth attached. I am much more comfortable with people like Miss Stranje, whose stern no-nonsense demeanor lets me know exactly where I stand.

What's more, I care nothing for Lord Kinsworth's honey brown hair or his absurdly blue eyes. He must be dangerous, else why would his inner music always be running away, staying just out of my reach, laughing at me, as if we are playing a game of hide-and-seek.

It bothers me.

Dancing with Lord Kinsworth epitomizes our questionable friendship. Perhaps it is because a dance is very much like a chase. I step forward, he steps back, he moves toward me, and I step aside. No one in this dance is ever truly captured.

Afterward, he leads me into the dining room for supper and sits beside me. We silently busy ourselves spooning up creamed asparagus and cheese soup. Footmen remove our bowls and ready our plates for the main course. I glance sidelong, to the far

corner of the table, at my father and his wife. They are chatting amiably with their dinner partners. My father does not even glance in my direction.

“You’re awfully quiet tonight.” Lord Kinsworth leans into me, nudging my shoulder with his. At the same time, he is irreverently twirling his dinner fork. “Not nerves, is it?”

“Nerves?” I blink out of my trance and struggle to grasp his meaning.

“Are you apprehensive about our performance after dinner?”

“Oh, that.” I smile. Our upcoming duet had not even crossed my mind. “No. That is the least of my concerns. Are *you*? Apprehensive, I mean.”

“Of course. Can’t you tell?” He gives me an innocent grin, a grin he probably used his entire life to charm nursemaids, his mother, and every girl within a hundred miles. “I’m quaking in my boots.”

He is not telling the truth. Nor is he wearing boots. I hear laughter beneath his mockingly serious words, and now he begins spinning his fork on one finger. A very un-English thing to do. The woman across the table stares at him with a disapproving frown. He spins it faster. Before the thing should go flying across the table, I gently retrieve his fork and set it beside his plate.

Hunting for something to say, I come up with a feeble compliment. “It is very generous of you to have agreed to sing with me.”

“Generous?” His brows lift as if I’ve surprised him. “I assure you generosity has nothing to do with it.”

“No?” *If not that, then what?* I cannot keep the edge out of my tone. “Are you doing it out of pity?”

“Pity? Hmm. Let me think.” Part of my veil has drifted onto his sleeve, and he toys with the silk embroidery. “Yes. Perhaps that’s it.”

How does he do that? How does he make his face a mask of seriousness, and yet I can almost hear a boy laughing in the wind? Whatever the case, he has ruffled the last of my hard-won calm. I adjust the silver knife beside my plate until it lines up squarely.

“Pity?”

“Naturally. What else could it be?” His brows angle up and, despite his cheerful curls and square jaw, he pulls a long mournful face. “I felt pity for all these poor souls who would otherwise be deprived of our duet.”

He is jesting. “Oh,” I say, embarrassed because I can never find my footing with him.

The moment I think he is about to sing one song, he strikes up a different tune. My hands drop into my lap. “I see.”

“Why else do you think I would’ve spent all those long hours practicing with you?”
Were those hours so very torturous?

I blink at him, aware of the fact that as I struggle to respond my mouth is opening and shutting in a foolish manner. *Difficult man*. He doesn’t mean for me to answer—I’m sure of it. And yet, he waits expectantly, compelling me to speak. I turn away from him and focus on a vase of roses situated in the center of the table. “I thought you enjoyed singing?”

To this, he merely hums and lifts his shoulders in a shrug.

My gaze snaps back to him. “You do it quite well, for someone so indifferent.”

“You make it easy, Miss Barrington. Singing is like dancing. With the right partner, it is almost effortless. A pleasure.” He turns his attention to the footman, who offers to serve us slices of roast beef.

Roast beef. I smell rosemary and bay leaf, but also the flesh of some poor unsuspecting cow. In my country, cattle are a symbol of prosperity and life. It is forbidden to kill them. I cannot bring myself to even look at the platter. Whereas Lord Kinsworth indicates he would like an additional helping. Of course, he would, wouldn’t he? After all, Lord Kinsworth is an Englishman. An inscrutable beef-eating Englishman.

I do not belong here with people like him. I do not belong in England. It is a cold and unfeeling place. As soon as I reach my majority, and find some means to support myself, I am going back to India. I am fully aware that as a half-caste they will not fully accept me there either, but at least the people in India are not impossible to understand.

I wave the beef-bearing footman away and cross my arms, waiting for the roasted parsnips. A few moments later parsnips arrive, bathed in butter and herbs, followed by platters of fresh green beans garnished with almonds, bowls of pickled cauliflower, plover’s eggs in aspic jelly, and a dozen other offerings. Miss Stranje spared no expense. This is a feast worthy of a king, which is fortunate, given the fact that our honored guest, His Highness, Prince George, Regent of England, sits at the head of the table.

During the dessert course, Prince George rises to offer a toast. “To the brave young ladies of Stranje House. We are dazzled by your loveliness, charmed by your elegance, and eternally grateful you know when to shout.”

An uncomfortable chuckle goes around the table, followed by pale-cheeked grimaces as the memory whistles through us all like a high-pitched flute. He refers, of course, to the day our shouts warned Prince George and his admirals of a bomb about to explode. The gentlemen who were on the platform that day, men who might have died, admirals and statesmen—they bolster themselves against that dreadful memory and stand to honor us.

My cheeks grow warm with shyness, and I lower my gaze. Lord Kinsworth stands, too. For once, it does not feel as if he is laughing. He raises his glass when the Prince bellows. “To the young ladies! To their health and long life!”

A cheer shakes the air, making my heart pound faster. I am uncertain where to look, but I peek sideways, down the table to where my father stands. Curiosity ripples from him. His brows pinch as if he doesn’t understand what the Prince means. How could he? He wasn’t there that terrible day, and yet my father joins in and raises his glass. His head tilts to the side, and our eyes meet.

Instantly, I turn away. Confusion tumbles through me, two storms colliding, one warm, one cold, and I am like with a cyclone sucking all the air out of my lungs. I hum quietly to calm my jumbled emotions.

Lord Kinsworth glances at me and leans down so that only I can hear. “Cheer up, Miss Barrington. You needn’t wear the hero laurels long. Any minute now, and you can chuck them aside.”

I do not know what to say to that odd comment. “I am not a hero.”

“Quite right. Begging your pardon. What is it they call you?”

Many things, I’m sure.

I open my mouth to reprimand him for his rudeness, but he is already rattling on. “A hero-ness? No, that’s not it. Ah, I have it—a heroine. Yes, that’s it.”

“No. Neither one. That is to say—” I am at a complete loss for words, and fully aware of the fact that I am sputtering. Prince George signals for all of us to sit down. Lord Kinsworth ignores my stammering and moves to help me with my chair.

“My lady,” he says, being absurdly gallant.

Finally, everyone is seated. I am still struggling to find a suitable comment to put Lord Kinsworth in his place. Except my chance vanishes when the Prince lifts his cup again. “And to peace.”

“To peace!” We echo this sentiment. Millions have died in battles with Napoleon. This war has bruised us all and wounded dozens of nations. Let us be done with it.

Our cheer fades, but the Prince continues to hold his cup aloft. From where I sit halfway down the table, I hear an ominous thrum radiating from many of the men at the table, Admirals, Captains, Lords, all lean in, apprehensive about something. Listening closer, I souls trudging slower as if in a funeral march. I sit back, gripping the seat of my chair, joining in their dread of what he might say next.

Miss Stranje straightens. Her features harden as if she is steeling herself for the worst. Lady Jane stares intently at the Prince, her tensed muscles whirring with alarm. Lord Kinsworth falls eerily silent. He slouches, pretending to be relaxed, but I feel the fighter inside him, ready to spring up and swing his fists.

“*Peace.*” The Prince Regent begins with a childish tremor, dragging out the word as if by slowly scraping his sword from its scabbard we won’t notice the threat. “We have been at war with Napoleon Bonaparte for eleven long years. Eleven years our men have given their lives. It is time to bring it to a close.” He nods, sagely staring into his wine. Then, with a resolute sniff, he lifts his gaze to ours. “Here it is. We have agreed to meet with Napoleon in order to negotiate a settlement.”

A settlement?

I am not the only one around the table who sucks in a wary breath. *What kind of settlement?* He means peace, but I hear only drums. War drums pounding in my ears.

The Prince Regent He gages their reaction and begins bleating at us like an injured goat. Surely, I cannot be the only one who hears the tantrum in his cadence. “P’rhaps you don’t grasp what a remarkable turn of events this is. Yes, yes, remarkable. In a few weeks’ time, we may finally achieve the peace England, and indeed all of Europe has so desperately desired for the last decade.” Prince George makes this claim as if he believes such a thing is possible. He is a child wishing upon a star.

There can be no peace. Negotiating with Napoleon is tantamount to surrender. Does Prince George plan to surrender England to Napoleon?

Low murmurs punctuate the beating war drums. Admiral Gambier slams down his cup and rises, striding out of the dining room. His wife hurries after him, looking fearful, as she should. In other countries, they might lop off the admiral’s head for rudely walking out on the ruler.

Lord Kinsworth slants toward me. “Interesting kettle of fish His Highness dumped on the table, wouldn’t you agree?”

I survey the worried faces surrounding us and whisper, “A rather *dangerous* kettle of fish, I should think.” *More like a foul-smelling kettle of poisonous snakes.*

“Uh-oh!” Lord Kinsworth’s sudden alarm causes me to start. He grabs his spoon and holds it as if it is a weapon. “Your strawberry ice is melting, my dear.” He reaches over and scoops up a spoonful from my plate.

The gray-haired lady across the table huffs loudly. “Manners, young man. *Manners.*”

Without a jot of shame, Lord Kinsworth chuckles and conspiratorially whispers into my ear, “I wonder how Lady Dreyfus will react when Boney’s troops march into town and snatch the food from *her* plate.”

He doesn’t wait for my retort, which is a good thing since I cannot think of one. Instead, he helps himself to another spoonful of my ice and holds it up in tribute to the indignant lady. Closing his eyes and humming with pleasure, he leans close to me and adds, “This ice is a miracle, Miss Barrington. You really ought to give it a try.”

He is incorrigible. I shake my head in a scolding manner, but cannot keep the corners of my lips from quirking up. “I would, my lord, except you seem to be devouring it for me.”

With an impish grin, he sets down his spoon and gestures for me to taste it for myself. It is only then, after I have scooped up a spoonful of strawberry ice and it is dancing divinely on my tongue, that I realize Lord Kinsworth has managed to distract me from both the confusion my father caused and the gravity of Prince George’s dreadful announcement.



CHAPTER THREE WHAT SONG OF WOЕ IS THIS?

*A glooming peace this morning with it brings.
The sun, for sorrow, will not show his head...
For never was there a story of more woe
Than this of Juliet and her Romeo.*

AFTER DINNER, despite the Prince's unsettling announcement, Miss Stranje continues with her plan for Lord Kinsworth and me to sing for our guests. "Are you certain?" I ask, fighting to moderate the slight quiver in my throat. "The ballad, after what the Prince said . . . I'm not sure it is quite—"

"We shall stay on course, Miss Barrington." Miss Stranje moves past me, marshaling the guests to their seats. Seraphina takes her place at the piano, behind her a violinist and violoncellist warm up. The deep notes of the violoncello rumble through me, adding to the shakiness of my legs. Lord Kinsworth and I turn and face a very gloomy gathering of England's high society. The room throbs with so many heated emotions, confusion and worry, fear and anger, the force of it nearly topples me.

The ballad we practiced is a retelling of Romeo and Juliet. It will not lift our guests' spirits. In hushed tones, I confide this concern to Lord Kinsworth, "I wish we had chosen a different song. Perhaps we ought to switch it to something else."

"Difficult this late in the game." With a guiding hand on my back, he situates us closer to the piano. "I suspect this song may be the very thing they need." He winks at me as if we are sharing a secret. "It'll be cathartic. Let's give them someone else's troubles to think on."

I hope he is right. I am still staring at him, considering the idea, when Sera and the

other musicians begin playing the introduction. *Very well.* If this sad story is to distract them from their turmoil, let us make it exquisitely sad.

Lord Kinsworth opens the song with a bravado I envy. His bold cheerful notes startle our listeners. They sit up in their chairs as Romeo teases Juliet upon their first meeting. We are dancing again, he and I, only this time it is with our voices. Juliet cleverly evades Romeo's advances, until he holds up his palm and sings to her of kisses. *Sings to me.* Lord Kinsworth mimes the actions of the song and holds his palm up—awaiting mine.

Impertinent. We did not practice it that way, but what can I do except lift mine to his? Impossible to miss the breathless quality in my answering refrain. I cannot stop the slight tremor in each note as he steps closer, pressing his palm to mine.

I must not let him fluster me. I sing with more force, struggling to calm my silly heart. He is an expert charmer—so very like Romeo. And everyone knows, it did not end well for them. I do not run from the room. I can't. Twice today, I ought to have fled. Instead, I stay and harmonize with him.

I am forced to admit to myself, the way our voices intertwine, I would not run away even if I could. It is pure heaven. My traitorous vocal cords follow his as surely as if he were the Pied Piper and I, a witless child.

The ballad is another chase of sorts, a furtive dance of hidden passion. In and out of joy, we run, teased with the promise of happiness and hope, until the end. When Juliet discovers Romeo is poisoned, saltwater stings my cheeks.

Save me! It means these tears leaking from my eyes are real. Lord Kinsworth has wrapped me so tight in the imagery that I cannot escape my grief. It is fiction, I know this, but he has cast me under his spell so thoroughly that, like Juliet, I cannot bear thinking of life without the warming touch of his voice.

They feel it, too. Lady Jersey's cheeks are wet as I raise an imaginary dagger. Even my father's eyes are watering. I plunge the invisible blade into my heart, and sing, "Oh happy dagger, this is thy sheath. There rust and let me die."

The ballad concludes with Juliet's soaring declaration of grief, and the violoncello dragging a low mournful sob across the strings. This is how our song ends. The Prince of Verona does not ride in and scold us for our folly, nor does he summarize the tragedy. It is over.

A weighty silence nearly suffocates us all.

The audience does not leap to their feet and applaud. Instead of clapping, most of the ladies are blotting their eyes. Several gentlemen pull out handkerchiefs and dab at their own cheeks. Lady Jersey hunches forward, and her shoulders shake as she surrenders to racking sobs.

This is a disaster.

We have grieved them when they so desperately needed cheering.

I turn to Lord Kinsworth for reassurance. He seems distressed, as well. A rare thing for him. I strain to understand. It cannot have been the ballad—we practiced it at least a dozen times. Was I off key? It felt as if every note hit its mark.

What can be vexing him? I would swear I hear trepidation whirring in his soul. *And his heart*—his heart is pattering like running feet. How can this be?

Any second, I expect Lord Kinsworth to paste on his cocksure smile or don his lopsided grin. Surely, he will turn me upside down with one of his teasing remarks. Except he doesn't. When he finally looks at me, his lips are pressed in a tight straight line, and . . .

Oh. He is unhappy. With me.

My stomach sinks, and I rest my hand on the edge of the piano to steady myself. I don't know what I did, but clearly, I am the cause of his consternation. He steps back, forcing his shoulders to relax, and bows. Except it is far too extravagant. Flamboyant. The sort of thing an actor might do. He means to be amusing, but I brace myself for what may come next.

“Fair Juliet . . .” He hides behind a performer's mask, pretending he is still playing the part of Romeo. “T'was an honor to have sung at your side, m'lady. Ne'er was there a voice that called more sweetly to the heart than thine.” He winces as if stung by his own tomfoolery.

I incline my head, silently accepting his compliment. *If that is what it was.*

His gaze flits off to the distance, anywhere but to me. “And now, I must be off. For lo, I hear the lark heralding the morn.”

It's obvious he does not intend for me to answer, but I cannot stop myself from uttering Juliet's response. “Nay, my lord, 'tis not the lark. It is the nightingale, you hear.”

He laughs, low in his neck, like a man being choked. With a curt nod, he strides away

as if he has urgent business elsewhere.

Perplexing man! What are you running from?

Most of our guests drift toward the ballroom, but Lady Jersey remains in her seat, struggling to dry her eyes. Lady Castlereagh, ever the stoic, takes the chair vacated beside Lady Jersey and rests a consoling hand on her friend's shoulder.

Here sit two of the most powerful women in England. Lady Jersey pretends to care about nothing except the latest fashion when all the while she has a finger in every political pie cooked up in Britain. And dear Lady Castlereagh, everyone thinks she is the most formidable of the patronesses, a stickler for the rules. In reality, she is a tenderhearted woman who quietly sacrificed all to support her husband. Lord Castlereagh holds the very thorny office of Minister of Foreign Affairs, and he would be lost without her.

These great matriarchs of society have been extremely gracious to me, the least I can do is go to Lady Jersey and apologize for upsetting her. I approach and wait until Lady Castlereagh gives me a nod of approval to speak. "I am very sorry, my lady, for causing you such distress. In light of the evening's events, I do wish we had chosen a different song—"

Lady Jersey waves away my apology.

Lady Castlereagh speaks for her. "Nonsense, Miss Barrington. I doubt either of us has ever heard anything so moving. Isn't that right, my dear?"

"Yes. Yes." Lady Jersey crumples her handkerchief and straightens her back. Tears left wide tracks in her powder. Yet she looks even more beautiful because the tears have washed away her artifice. And now, an intensity throbs from her, so strong that it weakens my knees.

Miss Stranje, Lady Jane, and Sera come up quietly and stand behind me.

"We will not—" Lady Jersey takes a shuddering breath, her hands tighten into fists, and she strikes them against her lap, digging her knuckles into the red silk. "—we *must* not make their mistake." She stares up at me as if I grasp her meaning. "Romeo and Juliet."

In truth, her words baffle me, but I nod in agreement. What I do hear and understand is the river of strength and conviction flowing out from beneath each syllable. With that river, the sound of a thousand horses thunders in my ears. It is with

that, I wholeheartedly agree.

Lady Jersey looks past us, squinting at the Prince Regent standing across the room. Her jaw flexes. “We must save Romeo from his poison.”

She whips back to Lady Castlereagh and me, her tone punctuating each word like an iron hammer. “And if that fails, we shall *not* fall upon our daggers.”

“Certainly not.” Miss Stranje takes a soldierly step forward. “Not now. Not ever.”

Eyes glistening fiercely, Lady Jersey lifts her chin and meets Miss Stranje’s warrior gaze. “For we are made of sterner stuff than Juliet.”

Lady Castlereagh claps her hand over Lady Jersey’s fist in a silent pact of agreement, and the two of them turn to us expectantly.

Are we, their protégés, strong enough to face what may come?

Sera nods solemnly, and Lady Jane steps up beside me, her chin raised courageously. Across the ballroom, Tess and Georgie are lining up for a country dance, and both of them cast concerned looks in our direction. I answer for all of us, echoing our mentors’ brave words, hoping that the coming storm will not prove them false.

“For we *are* made of sterner stuff.”



THANK YOU for your interest in *Harbor for the Nightingale*. Trouble is coming straight for the young ladies of Stranje House and the men in their lives. Lady Daneska will surprise them shortly, and things gets more and more complicated with every step the girls take.

We hope you enjoyed this excerpt. Kathleen would love to hear your feedback, comments and suggestions.

YOUR OPINION MATTERS.

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