

## Three



As Victoria waited for Harrison to return with the water, she struggled to quell the overwhelm at her circumstances tightening in her chest. The sleep deprivation from her nights at sea and single, too-short night ashore. The unceasing bustle of the big city. The knowledge that somewhere nearby fire was consuming a building. Harrison's imposing presence. Meeting his blazing amber eyes at breakfast this morning, and then again, a few minutes ago at his door. The indignation burning there was a fresh stab to her already fragile heart.

At least Harrison's eyes weren't the same haunting ice blue of Silas's.

Suppressing a shudder at the memory of her former husband, Victoria opened her valise and retrieved her small apothecary set. Selecting lavender, she dabbed a few drops of the oil on her wrists and behind her earlobes, breathing deeply to allow the herb's aroma to work its calming effect.

Its familiar smell transported her to another time, back to when she watched her father use it and other alternative

ministrations on his patients. She had quickly become adept at combining the oils with acupressure techniques to alleviate neighbors' and friends' minor ailments. Her mother had especially relied on Victoria's skill during her frequent nervous spells.

Before the accident with Silas, that is.

A knock on the door startled her back to the present.

*Harrison.*

Upon opening the door, she found him re-dressed, his ever-tousled dark hair the only part of him pushing propriety now. He appeared about as wrung out as she felt. He had mentioned head pains when making his excuses earlier in the evening. Were they still plaguing him now?

As she took the cool glass he silently proffered her, her ungloved fingers brushed his and he jerked back at the touch. The glass wobbled, and though she caught it with her other hand from an all-out tumble to the ground, a few drops sloshed onto Harrison's hand and the carpet below. Heat flamed across her cheeks.

Unable to meet his gaze, Victoria murmured a thank you.

Harrison wiped his wet hand on his trousers, and an all-out conflagration of mortification broke out within her.

She was about to ask after his head pain, when he gave a curt bow, a "Good night, Mrs. Clarke," and turned toward his room.

She whispered a fleeting good night in response to his retreating back, doubtful the iced water was enough to douse the burn of humiliation within her.



Victoria awoke the next morning to Isabella's cheerful humming. Despite tossing and turning after the encounter

with Harrison, she must have fallen into a deep sleep and missed Isabella's return to their shared room.

"Good morning, dear." Isabella bustled about the room, repacking her trunk and valise. "I'm so glad you finally slept well. You were quite out last night."

"Yes, thank you," Victoria responded around a parched throat.

A glance at her nightstand and the now empty water glass Harrison had brought sent another wave of embarrassment at how she had acted last night coursing through her. He must think her so feeble-minded, losing control like she did over the fire bells and nearly breaking down his door. Fire still triggered the unwanted memories of her final confrontation with Silas, and in her fatigue last night, the recollection had overpowered her.

But she couldn't very well explain that to Harrison.

"I don't want to rush you, but breakfast service ends in thirty minutes, and I am ravenous." Isabella had finished packing and stood in a deep blue muslin gown, an expectant smile on her face. "You look refreshed this morning. I'm glad to see it. We have another busy day ahead of us, and the railcars in America wait for no man. Or woman. Although, the railroads have not yet taught punctuality to the Canadians, or so I found out in my weeks up north," she finished with a wave of one hand.

"I'll be but a moment," Victoria replied and hastily completed her morning toilette while Isabella chattered on about Canadian railcars.

Victoria changed back into the dress she had arrived in, marveling at the speed and efficacy of the hotel's steam laundry. Yesterday, she had relinquished her two worn dresses to the clerk, who, after making a notation in his record book, took the dresses and returned them washed and dried the

same day. And all for a charge of eight shillings each. *Americans and their industry for speed.*

As she was securing her veil in place, she caught Isabella's reflection in the mirror.

"You know I don't mind," Isabella said, appearing at her most solemn state the entire trip thus far.

"I know, my friend," Victoria replied. Trying for light-heartedness, she jested, "But Mr. Wright might very well have a fit of fright."

To Victoria's surprise, Isabella responded in all seriousness. "Harrison's compassion is not to be underestimated. He's been through his own trials. Sure, he might appear gruff, but he's not like Silas."

Unsure how to answer—particularly as thoughts of her former husband resurfaced—Victoria gave Isabella a reassuring smile and nodded. "Well, then. Let us go see how far our tardiness has stretched Mr. Wright's compassion."

Isabella let out a small laugh of delight at her quip, and the two made their way downstairs.

Every time Victoria traversed the American House's halls, its grandeur astounded her anew. It certainly matched America's reputation for monster hotels Isabella had touted. Upon reaching the ground-floor entry hall and its soaring ceiling and black-and-white checkered floor, they joined the hundreds of other guests and retail establishments' visitors milling about.

Gentlemen lounged on settees in the hall reading newspapers or stood grouped together, talking. Piles of luggage abounded, with little regard for lighter items crushed by heavier. Thankfully, their luggage was still in their rooms.

They passed the main counter, behind which the clerks distributed keys to those arriving and collected them—and the two-dollar-a-day charge—from those departing, all the while

responding to the brass bells wired to each room that jingled at each guest's whims.

Though the endless bedlam of ringing bells, tramping feet, and chattering voices unnerved Victoria, Isabella glided through the hubbub unfazed.

A left turn took them into the dining room, which was mercifully emptier than normal that morning. Only a few dozen people sat scattered throughout the room's round tables, though it could certainly hold nearly twenty times as many patrons. Victoria expelled a breath of relief.

"There's Harrison," Isabella called, pointing to where Harrison sat at the same table as yesterday morning, flipping through the newspaper. Victoria's stomach clenched at the sight of him, and she tried not to dwell too much as to why, as she took her usual seat at the table. Isabella sat beside her again.

"Victoria, Harrison, you'll never guess where I dined last night," Isabella said. Apparently too eager to wait for a response, she continued, "Longfellow's mansion!"

Isabella's excitement was contagious. Victoria gasped, and she looked up from her plate for the first time. "Why, Isabella, that is incredible. What was it like? What was *he* like?" She even let a small smile expand over her lips. She admired the American's lyrical prose and often retreated into it and other books during particularly lonesome times, which happened with increased regularity lately.

"It's a stately house, with a generous side verandah and large garden out front. Quite impressive, especially given its history as General Washington's former residence. But its current owner was most endearing."

Isabella leaned forward, the grin of one who holds key information spread wide across her lips. "Mr. Longfellow personally greeted us at the door. His merry blue eyes and

joviality were instantly welcoming, and while I found him tall, I daresay you would tower over him, Harrison.”

Victoria glanced at Harrison. He was listening attentively to Isabella too, although he flicked his gaze momentarily in her direction as if he’d sensed her eyes on him.

Her stomach clenched again, and she refocused on Isabella.

“Oh, the library.” Isabella was all but wiggling in her seat. “Victoria, you wouldn’t believe the number of books it held. And though old-style paneling adorned its walls, the room revealed Mrs. Longfellow’s feminine persuasion too.”

“But I’ve saved the best for last,” Isabella added, growing even more animated. “We were all sitting there talking in the library, when the door opened and a little boy of no more than ten—Longfellow’s son—bounded into the room, scrambled into his father’s lap, and asked Longfellow to whittle a stick for him. Such a darling.”

A pang shot through Victoria’s chest at the picture of parental domesticity, and her eyes sought her plate again. Would the ache of never knowing if her child was a boy or girl ever subside?

Oblivious to Victoria’s inner turmoil, Isabella carried on, “Longfellow even graced us with a reading from his poetry. You could feel the truth, energy, and earnestness of his “Psalm of Life,” and I believe it might be my new favorite of his. Here, I wrote down my favorite part,” she said, opening a flap of paper she’d pulled from her pocket and reciting its contents in her strong, melodic voice.

*“Lives of great men all remind us,  
We can make our lives sublime,  
And, departing, leave behind us  
Footprints on the sands of time;*

THE WAYFARING WIDOW

*Footprints, that perhaps another,  
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,  
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,  
Seeing, shall take heart again.*

*Let us, then, be up and doing,  
With a heart for any fate;  
Still ...”*

Here, Isabella faltered. “Oh my, I can’t seem to decipher my penmanship here. Still ...”

“Achieving, still pursuing, / Learn to labor and to wait.” Victoria finished, belatedly realizing Harrison’s gravelly baritone had matched her word for word. She glanced to him, and his amber eyes echoed the surprise likely showing in her blue ones—well the one he could see that is.

*So, the gruff Harrison has a soft side for poetry?*

He shrugged one shoulder as if trying to appear indifferent. What felt like ages, but was surely mere moments, passed.

“Yes, nicely done.” Isabella’s interruption broke the invisible communication between them. “Why, I think we can count two more among the ranks of Longfellow enthusiasts.”

Isabella held up her half-full goblet of iced water and called for a toast. “To being up and doing, still achieving, still pursuing.”

Harrison hesitantly lifted his glass. Though she also had reservations about Isabella’s ambitions for this trip, Victoria lifted her glass too. For how could she “take heart again” and expect a future “life sublime” with all that had happened in her past?