

Two

Joseph snapped shut his father's case file on Georgina and leaned back in his cabin desk chair, stretching out the kinks in his neck and shoulders.

What had he gotten himself into?

Four days aboard the *Nevada* and thankfully, no medical incidents from Georgina yet. But those he was equipped to handle. Regular conversation and interaction with her? Impossible. As embarrassing as it was, she seemed to recognize how uncomfortable he was around her, from the few wary glances she'd cast him across the meal table and the way she evaded his company altogether any other time.

Yet she'd easily befriended their fellow passengers. In fact, she'd formed a special bond with another woman on board, Mrs. Dexter, and the woman's son, Matthew.

He moved the utterly worthless case file to one corner of his desk and inwardly cursed himself for his behavior back at the San Francisco wharf. The noises and smells of the shipyard had already overwhelmed him, and then being in Georgina's company again after so long—her all grown up and just as boisterous as ever—only added to his agitation.

Withdrawing into himself, into a place where he could keep his

mind calm despite the outward clamor, had been the only option. But she'd pierced through, not only with those perceptive amber eyes, but her touch as well. He hadn't had time to school his reaction when she reached for him.

Twice.

Though he'd eventually blundered his way through guiding her aboard, she'd relinquished his arm as soon as it was polite to do so, then had all but avoided him since. The situation was amenable to him, for his stomach turned into a roiling pit of nerves when near her, especially if she attempted to touch him again.

His medical treatises were content enough companions. He reached for Austin Flint's *A Treatise on the Principles and Practice of Medicine: Designed for the Use of Practitioners and Students of Medicine* poised at the other corner of his desk and cracked it open. He'd read it once before, but that didn't stop him from filling his journal with the tidbits he'd gleaned from this second read through.

He absorbed himself in the familiar embrace of medical research, the scratch of his pen across his journal's notepaper an additional balm to his nerves. After jotting down a particularly interesting note from page seventy-two on embolisms in the pulmonary artery—termed thrombosis—his fountain pen stilled. No, this wouldn't do. His drawing of an obstructed vein looked more like a spotted snake than any human anatomy.

The treatise was informative, but for all its verbiage, its nearly nine hundred pages had no sketches or drawings to help him visualize what the words described within a person's body. And as his note page before him unequivocally displayed, he lacked any skills whatsoever to create the drawings himself.

He heaved a sigh. As if in answer to his frustration, the dinner bell rang, and he neatly stowed his things before donning his dinner wear and schooling his necktie into a four-in-hand knot. Though why dress so formally for a barely palatable meal? The ants and weevils that burrowed within the daily bread were the only creatures willing to consume that particular portion. But one could hope the rest of the meal would be tolerable.

After locking his cabin door, he wound his way from the ship's

underbelly to the dining saloon and ducked inside, intent on his usual spot in the corner, as far from everyone else as possible.

“Over here, Dr. Livingston.”

From his periphery, Mrs. Dexter waved at him from where she sat across the table from Georgina.

He nodded at the two women, keeping his focus on the older one as he approached. Georgina’s gaze remained on him, however, and his stomach knotted itself almost as tight as his necktie.

“Oh, Dr. Livingston,” Mrs. Dexter said. “Might you sit here with us? I’m beginning to fret over Matthew’s cough, and I had hoped to get your medical opinion.”

He murmured his assent and sat in the empty chair next to her, the one her son typically occupied. She continued. “I know there’s a designated ship’s doctor, but he’s advanced in years and always seems closer to his drink than the passengers.”

Joseph had observed the same behavior in the aging man. “Of course. Please tell me, what ails Matthew?”

Mrs. Dexter went into detail about how Matthew had first complained of a tickle in his throat a day ago that had grown into a constant bark. “Georgina tried her peppermint oil, which seemed to help at first, but I’m afraid he’s worse today.”

Joseph hazarded a glance at Georgina. She studied him in that unnerving way of hers. Her eyes, usually glinting with some sort of mischief, were now wide, exposing the whites, the pupils dilated. He looked away, back at Mrs. Dexter. “I can stop by after dinner, unless I should see him now.”

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary.” Mrs. Dexter punctuated her words with a shake of her head. “He was asleep when I left a few moments ago and the rest will do him good, no doubt. Go ahead and enjoy your meal.”

Joseph nodded, though he couldn’t comply with her last directive. It wasn’t merely because of the company he now had to keep, but the food itself. As was no surprise, insects aplenty wriggled within this evening’s biscuits.

“Where did you earn your medical degree, Dr. Livingston?” Mrs. Dexter asked, cutting into his introspection.

“The New York Homeopathic Medical College.” Though the slice of meat on his plate contained no visible invaders, he merely pushed it around with his fork, his appetite already gone.

“Quite prestigious,” she crooned. At her unwanted praise, his cheeks heated and his tongue floundered. Mercifully, she carried on. “Now, Georgina tells me you’ve known each other since you were young.”

Mrs. Dexter was awfully curious tonight, but he breathed a sigh. This query had an easy answer. “Yes.”

“Oh, how delightful to be on an adventure with a good friend.” Mrs. Dexter glanced expectantly between him and Georgina, who’d been at her quietest since, well, ever.

Were he and Georgina friends? He didn’t quite know, and he didn’t dare glance Georgina’s way to gauge her opinion on the matter. But disagreeing with Mrs. Dexter would hardly be polite. Sweat prickled his brow and palms as he debated whether she expected a response and, if so, what he should say.

The silence stretched on.

“I agree a friend would likely make a journey better,” he finally said, more to his plate than to Mrs. Dexter. There, he’d successfully avoided confirming whether his and Georgina’s relationship amounted to such familiarity as friends.

By some miracle, his answer appeared to satisfy the older woman. The telltale signs of a social misstep—awkward silence and pointed looks between his companions—were not currently present. He was not always so lucky in his conversations with others, though.

The two women transitioned to talking amongst themselves, and Joseph breathed another sigh at being once more left with his thoughts. He resisted the urge to peek at his watch fob and instead silently pleaded for the stewards to complete the meal service with the same haste they’d practiced the last three days.

As if he’d conjured the fellow, a steward appeared and cleared Mrs. Dexter’s and Georgina’s plates.

While Mrs. Dexter engaged the steward in a conversation about

preparing and delivering a tray for Matthew, Joseph's eyes caught on Georgina's movements.

She slipped first one, then another, piece of insect-infested biscuit from her plate into the pouch dangling from her belt. A chatelaine, he believed it was called.

How very odd. Had he missed something in his father's case file about her squirreling away bits of food, and ones crawling with pests at that? She looked up and he darted his eyes to the table.

Had she caught him observing her?

The steward cleared Joseph's plate, and he stood as the women rose from their seats. "I'll grab my Gladstone from my cabin and be along shortly to check on Matthew."

Mrs. Dexter thanked him and left the saloon with Georgina, whose fingers tapped an impatient rhythm on her skirt. His suspicions raised, he allowed the women a slight lead, then followed.

After Mrs. Dexter entered her cabin, Georgina took off down the hall toward her quarters at a fast clip, thankfully focusing her attention ahead of her and not behind, else she'd discover his position.

The absurdity of his actions stalled him for a moment. What was he doing, sneaking around the bowels of a ship spying on Georgina? But she was up to something, and he was charged with the duty of ensuring no harm befell her on this trip. And so, he stayed his course, waiting behind a corner until she entered her berth before approaching the closed door.

He pressed his ear to the wooden slab, his breathing deafening to his ears, but apparently inaudible to the room's occupant. Georgina's incoherent muttering didn't waver.

"Nehushtan," she called out, loud enough for him to make out the words. "Nehushtan."

Was she reading the Bible? For why else would she shout the name of the brazen serpent in the Second Book of Kings?

He best leave her to her studying. But at a despaired cry of "oh, where are you?" from the other side of the door, he froze. He couldn't go without ensuring she was all right. With little

forethought for how he'd explain his presence at her cabin door, he rapped on the wood three times.

"Who is it?" she called, her voice muffled.

"It's Joseph."

Silence was the only response.

He cleared his throat and spoke again, louder this time. "I heard noises. Are you—is everything all right?"

The door cracked, and Georgina's face appeared in the small gap. She swiped an errant tendril of hair from her face, but it did nothing to restore the piece to her loosened coiffure. "Yes, quite. Thank you for your concern." She pushed the door closed a bit, then uttered a gasp and yanked it wide open, exclaiming, "Nehushtan!"

Unable to keep pace with her vacillating emotions, Joseph turned to retreat to his cabin.

"No, stop," she cried. "Don't move."

He complied with her command, more out of shock than deference. She approached him slowly, her hands held up. "Hold steady or you'll squash him."

He registered a movement on his trouser leg but didn't dare look down. "Georgina, who is—"

"Shh! I've almost got him." She crouched at his feet, and at another brush on his trouser leg—presumably her hands this time—he clamped his eyes shut. It would be just his luck if someone stumbled upon them in this predicament. He'd have no logical justification, for he hardly understood what was happening himself.

"There, all set."

He snapped his eyes open. Georgina had righted herself, her left hand tucked behind her back, her cheeks pink with excitement. "Good night," she said as she backed toward her cabin.

"Hold on a moment." He couldn't let her get away without some explanation.

"Yes?" Her eyes bore into his as if she knew his weakness, and he darted his gaze to the ground, then back to her.

"Wh—what is behind your back?" It was more a pitiful plea

than a command, but it was the best he could do under the circumstances.

Her lips pursed. "Can I trust you?"

He nodded.

A long, silent moment passed. "Come in, then." She turned and entered her cabin, not waiting to see if he'd follow.

Despite the folly of the action, he did.

When she shut the door behind them, his surprise and discomfort increased, his promise to her brother to maintain propriety ringing in his ears. In his desire to avoid looking at her, he surveyed the cabin. It was tidy and smelled as she did—of sunshine and orange blossoms. He eyed an open sketchbook on her bunk, a compelling reproduction of the *Nevada* imprinted on its pages, before casting his eyes to his feet.

"It's of the *Thamnophis* genus, or so the man in San Francisco told me."

Joseph had learned much Latin both in medical school and in his practice, but his expertise with the language didn't extend to that exact term. Raising his head, he received his answer. "A snake?"

"Yes, isn't he glorious?" She held the creature up, its alternating bands of yellow and black glinting as it serpentine around her palm and fingers. "Here, hold him."

Before he could object, she closed the gap between them with two steps. His pulse climbed skyward. She was so close. *Too* close. But he miraculously stopped himself from stepping back despite the safety the distance offered. As she guided the snake onto his outstretched palm, her ungloved hands brushed his, soft and warm, and he clenched his jaw to keep from flinching at the contact.

"Y—you like animals." He'd delivered the comment as more statement than question. He'd read that detail in his father's case file. Perhaps the only valuable thing in it. Well, at least his flustered mind recalled *something* relevant to the topic at hand.

She beamed, delight dancing in her eyes. "I find them easier to get along with than people most times."

He allowed a small smile. "Very true. Is Nehushtan a healer too? Like the snake in the Bible after which I'm assuming he's named?"

"That's unconfirmed at present." She shrugged. "But he is an expert at devouring insects," she added with another smile.

Ah, that explained the infested bread she'd stashed away.

"You can borrow him if you'd like, to rid your cabin of the cockroaches. He was very thorough with mine." She gestured animatedly around her cabin. Enthusiastic about animals, indeed. "You'll just have to keep your eye on him. He's quite stealthy."

Her attention became too much to bear, and he directed his eyes to the snake once more. Could he count each of its tiny, glistening scales? "Thank you, but I'll make do without." Here he was, having a fairly normal conversation with a woman his age, albeit one about a rather abnormal topic. He held the snake out to her. "You know he can't join us in the Hawaiian Islands."

She took Nehushtan from him, a frown clouding her face. "Whyever not?"

Well, so much for his newfound proficiency at conversation. A myriad of logical reasons whirled in his mind, yet his brain didn't communicate them to his lips. "B—because."

She huffed and turned around. "You sound like Harrison. *Because I say so.* I'm not your sister, you know."

"No, you're not." His sister, Jesse, was Georgina's same age, but nearly as quiet and reserved as he was. He was treading into dangerous territory. How did he retreat?

Keeping her back to him, she returned the snake to a makeshift enclosure in the corner. "I am my own person, Joseph. I can make decisions for myself."

"Yes, but consider Nehushtan's happiness." By some twist of fate, his tangled thoughts had cleared enough for him to speak somewhat rationally.

She whirled to face him. "You don't think he'd be happy with me?"

Of course that wasn't what he'd meant, but she'd somehow taken affront all the same. "No. I mean, yes." He tugged on his jacket sleeves and adjusted his spectacles, the charged air emanating from her only adding to his tongue's inability to form words. He cleared his throat. "What I mean is, are the volcanoes and jungles of the

Hawaiian Islands the best home for a snake that dwells in California?”

She sniffled. *Was she crying now?* He glanced at her, the moisture gathering in her eyes more than enough confirmation. The telltale heat of awkwardness crept up his neck. How much longer could he endure her company in such close quarters?

“Y—you’re right,” she said. “I didn’t think about any of that.”

Her case file mentioned strong emotions caused her fainting spells. So, two things of use from its pages.

But how did he calm her? He withdrew his handkerchief from his pocket and offered it to her. “Here.”

She took it with a small nod and whimpered, “thank you.”

Now what was he supposed to do? His strengths didn’t include comforting. He awkwardly reached a hand out and gave two pats on her shoulder before hastily withdrawing it again. *There, that should be enough, right?*

“Oh, whatever will I do, Joseph? We’re halfway to the islands, and I can’t very well let him go in the middle of the ocean.”

Solutions. She wanted solutions. Here, he could help, the answer springing to his mind. “Captain Blethen.”

She wrinkled her nose. “He’s old and smokes cigars and lives on a ship. What would he do with a snake?”

Joseph would never be able to keep pace with her mind. “He can return Nehushtan to San Francisco on his journey back,” he explained.

Her face brightened. “Why, yes. Splendid idea. Meanwhile, I’ll keep Nehushtan safe and feed him all the insects he wants.”

“That will work,” he said, nodding. She beamed at him, and satisfaction at having caused it coursed through him. The room was suddenly twice as small and twice as warm.

He needed to escape.

Grasping at a detail his muddled mind happened to recall, he said, “I must go tend to Matthew.”

“Oh, yes. Please don’t let me keep you.” She returned his handkerchief. “Thank you again. I hope you’re as successful with curing what ails Matthew as you were with my trouble.”

Joseph nodded and turned, fumbling with the door handle until it gave way. Once he'd extricated himself from her cabin, he darted a quick glance to either side, confirming no one had observed his exodus.

But luck, not any aptitude on his part, had caused his success with Georgina. Hopefully, that good fortune continued throughout the rest of the trip.

He would need it.