

Chapter Three



Lady Sarah Dunbar stepped out of the hansom cab with Kate. She paid the driver and turned to face her shipmate. “Well, this is home.”

Kate gazed wide-eyed at the stately house. “You live here? This looks nicer than your house in Saint Kilda.”

“Oh yes, dear,” Sarah said, mindful that Kate had little understanding of aristocratic life in Britain. “We intended our time in Australia to be temporary. My husband, however, seems to have made his stay more permanent. Let’s hope it remains that way.” She sighed and stared at the front door. “The staff should have received my message.”

“How many servants do you have?” Kate asked.

Many high-society ladies would have bristled at being asked such a question, but Sarah cared little for her title of Lady Dunbar, or for standing on ceremony.

“This house maintains a staff of six. That does not include Miss Henshaw, whose future employment has not yet been resolved.” Sarah paused. Her statement could be construed as disparaging of her former lady’s maid. Lizzie Henshaw had served as one of the *Vera B*’s crew members from the very beginning of their adventures over a year earlier. She cleared her throat. “Lizzie has not yet fully enumerated her intentions on the matter.”

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Kate wiped at her eyes nervously. "I hate to see our crew part ways."

Sarah smiled and reached for Kate's elbow. "Come now, let us go in. We need a good cup of tea and a rest from our exertions." She ascended the front steps and rapped the knocker.

Nearly a full minute passed. Sarah gave her friend an apologetic glance and knocked again, louder this time. Footsteps approached, and the door opened a few inches, revealing a slender young man with straight brown hair, round spectacles, and a hatchet-like nose. He wore a black morning suit, as a butler should, but his neckcloth and hair were a bit sloppy. Sarah had never seen him before.

"I beg your pardon," she said when the young man failed to do more than gawk at them. "What is your name?"

He cocked his head to one side. "I might well ask you the same. May I help you, madam?"

"I should think so. This is my house, after all."

The young man failed to open the door wider or make any effort to welcome them in. "Well, I say. I suppose you might be Lady Dunbar."

"Indeed I am." Sarah stared at him. "Now let me into the house. Is Richards here? I must see him at once."

"Richards?" The man frowned. "Was he the old butler? No, he's been released two years past. Never met him myself. I manage the household now."

"Released!" Sarah stepped closer. "By whom?"

The new butler drew himself up tall. "By Sir Randall, madam."

The name struck Sarah like lightning. The image of a pasty-faced youth she had not seen in over a decade flashed through her mind. "Master Randall? But he's been dead these ten years."

"Dead?" The butler squinted at her in surprise. "I should scarcely think so, madam. Having been in his employ for nearly that long, I believe I would be aware if he were." A flash of recognition snapped into his eyes. "Ah—of course. I suppose your husband, Lord Dunbar, may have presented it that way."

Sarah's eyes flew open with indignation. "Do you mean to tell me my husband lied to me about the death of his son?" She winced. Dunbar had done many things more manipulative and harmful than this, so why should she be surprised?

"What he did or did not tell you, madam, I can scarcely be privy to," the butler said smoothly. "But I can say that Lord Dunbar has kept in frequent communication with Sir Randall through the mail. He signed this house over to him for his personal use, and I moved in to manage it when he took possession."

"Indeed." Sarah practically spat out the word. "I must see Master Randall, then."

"Oh no, ma'am. That won't do at all. Sir Randall declared you are not to be admitted."

"Indeed." Sarah glanced at Kate, who glared at the butler, barely checking her fury.

"Yes," said the butler in a businesslike tone. He retrieved a small, leather-bound notebook from his breast pocket and leafed through it. "Yes, here, on page twenty-three, his instructions are to exclude you specifically."

"Let me see that." Sarah seized the little volume from the man's hand.

"I say!" He grasped for the book. Sarah pulled away, and he grabbed her arm.

"Unhand her."

Both Sarah and the butler responded slack-jawed as Kate gripped the man's wrist and twisted it, pulling him through the doorway onto the stoop. He yelped and released Sarah's arm, staring wide-eyed at the red-haired fury he had provoked.

"I've killed men less insolent than you." Kate dropped the man's wrist and scowled at him without blinking.

"Thank you, Miss Robinson, that will do," Sarah murmured. Kate's fierce loyalty and short temper could be a distinct liability, especially in genteel society.

"Well, I say." The butler trembled and rubbed his wrist.

Sarah flipped through the notebook. She recognized the script—it was indeed that of her stepson, Randall. On page twenty-three, after detailed instructions for the management of the wine cellar, she found a terse statement: *By the way, if the old hag should ever return, show her nothing but the door.*

Sarah's face flamed. She thrust the notebook back into the butler's hand. "Very well, I've seen enough. Give my regards to Sir Randall."

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She wouldn't comment on her stepson's premature use of a title. "Let us be going, Miss Robinson."

Animated with rage but not wishing to make more of a scene, Sarah clopped down the steps and marched along the street. Kate followed. Sarah hardly knew what to tell her, nor what to do next. They had to go somewhere, but where? Back to the ship? An inn, perhaps?

When they had gone a quarter mile down the street, she stopped and turned to her companion.

"Oh, Mrs. Fiske, how awful," Kate moaned.

Sarah sighed. "Now, dear, this is a blow, to be sure, but I will see this all put right, as God wills it. I do have another home, you know. Dunbar Castle, up in Scotland. But I must corroborate my standing there before I bother to make that journey."

Kate nodded soberly.

"And I have other options." Sarah's eyes burned. She found herself on the verge of tears—an unusual predicament for her. "There is my family in Bath I can look to, of course. And I have friends, many of whom live in London throughout the season. I can inquire among them as well. But we will not be able to stay at my home tonight, as I had hoped, nor do I know where to house our crew after they disembark."

"Captain Alice will know what to do," Kate said softly.

Sarah shrugged. "I suppose you caught the gist of what I just learned. My husband's first wife died in childbirth, and her son, Randall, whom Dunbar told me had died while touring in Russia, has confiscated my house with his father's blessing. All with me oblivious to the whole. I can't tell you how this strikes at my very marrow."

"Lady Dunbar!" A lilting voice sounded from the direction they had come.

Sarah glanced back along the street. A young woman in a maid's outfit trotted toward them.

"Lady Dunbar, wait."

"Martha?" Sarah hardly dared believe her eyes. As the girl approached, Sarah was sure of it. "Martha, it is good to see you."

"Oh, and you, mum." The maid hastened up to her, panting. "I thought I 'eard you at the door, when that good-for-nothing Bolens sent you off so shameful-like. 'E's a mean one, 'e is!"

"So I observed." Sarah nodded in response to Martha's petite curtsy. "You were not released, then, when Richards was?"

"Oh no, mum." Martha smiled darkly. "I just kept quiet and 'elpful like, and the gov'nor kept me on, unlike most t'others. Only me and Mr. Double 'enry's left 'ere of the ones you knew."

"Ah, Henry McHenry is a good man." Sarah smiled at the mention of the quiet groom who lived over the stable.

"Aye, mum, 'e always keeps 'is mouth closed around folks, and that's kept 'im in good stead. But Lady Dunbar, now that you're 'ere, will you be staying long?" Martha's eyes betrayed a hopeful anxiety.

Sarah exhaled and looked at Kate. "I can't say yet, I'm afraid."

"Cause if you are staying, mum, I certainly would prefer to work for you, if I might. I've 'ad about enough of the gov'nor and that toad Bolens."

"Oh. Well ..." Sarah surveyed the area. "Perhaps we could go to a tearoom, and I could explain the situation? Is Mrs. Fielding's still open?"

"Oh yes, mum. They 'ave delectable crumpets."

"Then you must join Miss Robinson and me. Let us proceed." Sarah straightened her shoulders and struck off down the street.