

CARRIE TURANSKY

AUTHOR OF ACROSS THE BLUE



A NOVEL

No Ocean Too Wide

**SNEAK
PEEK**



**SAMPLE
ONLY**

**UNCORRECTED
PROOF**



No OCEAN
TOO WIDE

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SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

BOOKS BY CARRIE TURANSKY

NOVELS

Across the Blue

Shine Like the Dawn

A Refuge at Highland Hall

The Daughter of Highland Hall

The Governess of Highland Hall

Snowflake Sweethearts

A Man to Trust

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Moonlight Over Manhattan

A Trusting Heart, in *Mountain Christmas Brides*

Wherever Love Takes Us, in *Where Two Hearts Meet*

Tea for Two, in *Where Two Hearts Meet*

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NO OCEAN TOO WIDE

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You will have to apply the sc code to niv, and then the sym-sup code to the register marks.

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SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

*To Shirley Turansky, my dear mother-in-law, encourager,
and friend, who was born in Windsor, Ontario, Canada,
and whose ancestors came from England. May this story
give you another glimpse of Canadian history.*

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Defend the weak and the fatherless;
uphold the cause of the poor and the oppressed.
Rescue the weak and the needy;
deliver them from the hand of the wicked.

—PSALM 82:3–4, NIV

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SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

London 1909

Katie McAlister's heart pounded out a frantic beat as she gripped the rickety railing and rushed down the back stairs. She shoved open the heavy door at the bottom and jumped into the dark alley behind the dress shop. Cool, gray mist swirled around her, carrying the smell of rotting food and choking coal smoke.

She darted a quick glance to the left and then the right, and tremors raced down her arms. She never went out alone at this time of night. It wasn't safe, not in this part of London. She couldn't let her fears keep her from doing what she must.

If only her older sister, Laura, were here. She would know what to do, but she was miles away.

Katie took off down the alley, dodging wooden crates overflowing with broken bottles and stinking trash. A cat's screech pierced the air. Katie gasped and jumped to the side. The cat dashed past, a black shadow in the faint light of the gas streetlamps.

She pulled in a ragged breath as she rounded the corner, her footsteps slapping on the cold, slick cobblestones. She should have gone for help sooner, but Mum had begged her not to leave.

She ran past the boot shop and bakery, then cut through an alley and dashed up to the Grahams' door. With a shaky hand she knocked three times, then bit her lip and stood back. No one came so she pounded again, harder this time. "Mrs. Graham!"

The door finally swung open, and her mother's friend squinted out at her. She wore a white ruffled cap over her hair and a gray woolen shawl draped around her shoulders. "Goodness, Katie, is that you?"

“Yes ma’am. Can you come? Mum has taken a turn for the worse. She’s burnin’ with fever, and her breathing is so raspy we don’t know what to do.”

A fearful look flashed across the woman’s face, and she gave a quick nod. “Of course, love. I’ll just gather some things.”

Katie closed her stinging eyes and blew out a heavy breath. Everything would be all right now. Mrs. Graham knew how to nurse the sick. Katie swallowed hard, praying Mrs. Graham’s help would be enough. But the painful memory of her dad’s accident eighteen months earlier came rushing back.

He had been injured in a terrible train wreck. Mum had nursed him around the clock for three days. The whole family had prayed he would recover, but he’d slipped away from them and shattered their world.

They’d been forced to leave their modest home and move into the three small rooms over the dress shop where Mum worked long hours doing hand sewing, finishing dresses for Mrs. Palmer. At least Mum had worked for Mrs. Palmer until eight days ago, when she had come down with a fever and taken to her bed.

Mrs. Graham stepped outside, carrying a basket over her arm. “Come along, child.”

Katie stiffened. She wasn’t a child. She was fourteen, and she worked alongside Mum most days, caring for her younger sister, Grace, and doing some of the cooking and laundry. But this was no time to argue the point. She hurried after Mrs. Graham, sending up a silent prayer as she followed her mum’s friend through the neighborhood and then turned into the alley behind the dress shop. She ran ahead and opened the door for Mrs. Graham.

“Blimey, it’s as dark as a cave in here.” Mrs. Graham grabbed up her skirt and climbed the creaking stairs.

Katie stopped at the bottom step and looked up. Gray light shone through the lone window, spreading ghostly shadows over the steps. Cold dread filled her stomach. If only she could turn and run away from the painful scene that awaited her. But her twin brother, Garth, was upstairs with Mum and seven-year-old Grace. They were counting on her, and she wouldn’t leave them to face this frightening night alone.

Pulling in a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders and climbed the stairs. When she reached the top, she followed Mrs. Graham inside. Dank odors from the alley penetrated their small flat even though she and Mum did their best to keep everything clean. A single lantern burned by Mum's bedside, spreading a faint light around the chilly room.

Mrs. Graham bustled toward the bed where Mum lay. Katie's brother and sister sat on the other bed. Grace curled up beside Garth and hid her face in his shoulder. He looked across at Katie, his anxious gaze penetrating hers, reading her thoughts.

It had always been that way, ever since she could remember. Mum said when they were toddlers they had their own language—"twin-speak," she used to call it. And though many years had passed since then, they still had a strong connection and could usually tell what the other was thinking. There were no secrets between them.

Katie moved toward the bed where Grace and Garth waited. She gently ran her hand over her sister's damp blond curls. Poor dear. It was almost midnight. She should be asleep, dreaming of happier days.

Mrs. Graham spoke softly to Mum as she straightened the sheet and blanket across her chest, but Mum did not answer. Instead, she tossed her head, her cheeks flushed and damp.

Grace looked across at Mrs. Graham. "Is she going to be all right?"

Mrs. Graham hesitated. "Of course, love." But her words were unconvincing. She shifted her gaze from Grace to Katie. "Why don't you go in the kitchen and put on the teakettle? Garth, you and Grace go with her. A cuppa will help us all."

"Yes ma'am." Katie reached for Grace's hand and helped her sister off the bed. Garth stood and followed them into the adjoining room.

Garth added a small scoop of coal to the stove, his expression distant and troubled. Katie filled the kettle and tried to ignore the ache in her chest. Grace climbed into one of the chairs at the round table, watching them both with wide blue eyes.

Katie took four cups from the shelf and set them on the table, then reached

for the canister of tea. It was almost empty, and they had no sugar. The bread was gone. All they had left were a few shriveled potatoes and an onion. With a weary sigh, she added tea leaves to the pot and let them steep.

Grace leaned her elbow on the table and placed her chin in her hand. “Can I have hot chocolate?”

Garth sent Katie a quick glance, his meaning clear. *Don't upset Grace*. He turned to their younger sister. “Not tonight, Gracie. Maybe tomorrow.”

Grace crossed her arms on the table and lay her head down with a tired sigh.

Garth opened the cupboard and scanned the empty shelves. He gave his head a slight shake, then turned to face Katie. “I'll speak to Mr. Davies. Maybe he'll give me my wages early.”

Katie nodded, hoping the butcher would agree. Garth worked for Mr. Davies after school and all day on Saturday as his delivery boy. The man was notoriously stingy and always made Garth wait until the end of the month for his pay. It wasn't much, but Mum hadn't earned any money since she'd been feeling poorly, and they needed Garth's wages as soon as Mr. Davies would pay him.

Mrs. Graham stepped into the kitchen, her hands clasped tightly together. “Garth, I need you to run back to my house and tell Mr. Graham to fetch the wagon. We have to take your mum to the hospital.”

Katie's heart lurched. “Mum doesn't want to go to the hospital. Surely there's something we can do for her here.”

Mrs. Graham's expression softened as she looked from Katie to Garth. “Your mum needs a doctor and trained nurses looking after her, or I fear she . . .” Her voice drifted off, and she shot a pained look at Grace.

Katie laid her hand over the cross necklace beneath her dress and tried to swallow back her fear. She knew Mum's illness was serious. But they couldn't afford to summon a doctor. How would they ever be able to pay a hospital bill?

But what choice did they have? With Dad gone and Laura working so far away, someone had to make this choice for Mum.

Garth grabbed his cap and sweater from the hook on the wall and strode toward the door without a word. He would do as Mrs. Graham asked and fetch her husband.

Katie poured a cup of tea for Mrs. Graham and took it to her. Then she sat with Grace beside Mum's bed. Fearsome questions filled her mind while they waited for Garth to return with Mr. Graham. Mum's face grew even more flushed, and she tossed her head from side to side, murmuring words Katie couldn't understand.

Finally, footsteps sounded on the stairs. Garth strode in, followed by Mr. Graham and the Grahams' son, Jacob. They quickly placed a heavy blanket under Mum to use as a stretcher. Mr. Graham took two corners near Mum's head, and Mrs. Graham and Jacob each took one of the other corners.

Katie reached for her sweater. "We'll come with you."

"No, love. It's late. You'd best stay here." Mrs. Graham sent another pointed glance at Grace, her meaning clear. Grace was too young to see all the suffering at the hospital. "I'll send word when we know more."

Katie looked at Garth, who gave a solemn nod, but cold fear gripped her heart as the Grahams started across the room. Grace burst into tears and clung to Katie's leg, hiding her face in the folds of Katie's skirt.

Katie patted her sister's back. "Hush now. It'll be all right." But her own hot tears overflowed and rolled down her cheeks.

Garth stood next to Katie, his cap in his hand, his cheeks ruddy and his jaw tight. He shed no tears, but his eyes turned glassy as the Grahams carried Mum out the door and down the steps.

"What will we do now?" Katie's throat felt so tight she could barely force out the words.

Garth closed the door and glared at the floor for a few seconds. Finally, he looked up. "We have to send word to Laura."

Katie's thoughts shifted to her older sister. Laura was twenty-one and worked as a lady's maid for a wealthy family on a large estate near St. Albans, about an hour's train ride north of London. "Do you think she'll come?"

"I don't know."

"But what if she does, then loses her position?"

"They wouldn't sack her for coming to help her family, would they?"

Katie rubbed her tired eyes. They counted on the money Laura sent each month to help pay the rent for their flat. Still, Garth was right. They had to tell

their sister what had happened to Mum. She sighed. "It's late. We can write to Laura tomorrow."

Garth nodded. He reached into his sweater pocket, pulled out a small, round paper-wrapped package, and held it out to Grace.

Grace's tears slowed, and she hiccupped. "What is it?"

"Open it and see."

Grace wiped her nose on her sleeve and pulled off the paper, revealing a currant bun inside. Her eyes lit up. "Where did you get it, Garth?"

"Jacob gave it to me while we waited for his dad to bring the wagon 'round." He took another bun from his pocket and held it out to Katie.

Her stomach contracted, but she pushed it back toward him. "You eat it."

"I already had one. This one's for you."

A wave of gratefulness flowed through her. She slipped the bun out of the paper and took a bite, savoring the sweet, buttery treat. "It's really good."

Garth's mouth tipped up. "Jacob is kind, like his mum."

Katie nodded and took another small bite, wanting to make the bun last as long as she could.

Garth frowned toward the small clock on the shelf. "It's late. We should try to get some sleep."

Katie glanced out the window. "I guess you're right."

The sky was dark except for the moon's faint glow through the shifting clouds. She yawned and finished the last bite of her bun. Her eyes felt gritty, and her neck and shoulders ached. She'd lie down with her sister in the bed they shared, but she doubted she'd be able to fall asleep. Too many troublesome thoughts tumbled through her mind tonight.

How long would Mum have to stay in the hospital? What would it cost? How would they get along without her? What if she didn't get well? Would they be left alone to face the future as orphans without a home? She'd seen children begging on the street and others who turned to stealing to survive.

She closed her eyes, trying to block out those painful images. That would never happen to them. Everything would be all right in the morning. Mum would get better, she'd come home, and they'd all be safe and happy together.



Katie stared out the rain-streaked window, searching the street below, but saw no sign of Garth. She glanced at the small clock on the shelf above the sink and bit her lip.

Where could he be? When he'd left that morning, he'd told her he would come home as soon as he finished making deliveries for Mr. Davies. On Saturday he usually finished by one or two o'clock at the latest, but it was almost three now. Why was he so late? Had he convinced Mr. Davies to give him his pay and then stopped to buy some food on the way home? She blew out a deep breath. Yes, that must be the reason.

She walked over to the table where her little sister sat drawing on the back of an old wrinkled flyer. Grace hummed while she worked on her picture, looking lost in her imaginary world. Katie laid her hand on Grace's shoulder, as much to comfort herself as her sister.

Grace looked up, her blue eyes soft and innocent. "When's Garth coming?"

"I'm sure he'll be here soon." Katie forced a smile. "Tell me about your drawing."

Grace pointed to the stick figures. "This is me and Mum, and this is you and Garth. We're at the park, by the lake, feeding the ducks."

Katie nodded and swallowed. "Very nice." She blinked her stinging eyes. Oh, to be young and feel safe and believe everything was going to be all right.

She'd spent the day trying to keep busy and not worry about Mum. As soon as the dress shop opened, she'd gone downstairs and told Mrs. Palmer that Mum had been taken to the hospital. The stern woman seemed more concerned about who would do the hand sewing than about Mum's illness. Katie offered to take Mum's place, but Mrs. Palmer wouldn't hear of it. Mum had been teaching Katie how to do the intricate stitching, and she was becoming quite skilled. But Mrs. Palmer didn't believe it.

The dressmaker sent her off with a warning that she would not let them stay in the rooms over the shop unless Mum got well and came back to work

soon. Katie slowly climbed the steps with the woman's harsh words ringing in her ears. Back in the flat she'd written a letter to Laura, but she had no stamp or money to buy one. She set it aside and read a story to Grace before tidying up to prepare for Mum's homecoming. Surely she wouldn't have to stay at the hospital too long.

At noon she fried the last of the potatoes and the onion and gave Grace the largest portion. She'd thought about saving some for Garth, but Mrs. Davies usually slipped him a small meat pie or slice of bread and butter before he left to make his deliveries. Grace hoped that was the case today. If not, Garth would be hungry.

Someone knocked, and Katie quickly crossed the room and opened the door.

Mrs. Graham waited in the hallway, her basket over her arm. "Hello, Katie. May I come in?"

"Yes please. Have you been to the hospital? How is Mum?"

Mrs. Graham glanced at Grace and gave her a slight smile. "Hello, love. I've brought you a treat." She took a small orange from her basket and handed it to Grace.

Her sister's face brightened. "Thank you!" She accepted the orange, sat down at the table, and started pulling off the peel.

Mrs. Graham motioned Katie to move away from Grace, then lowered her voice. "I'm just on my way back from the hospital. There's no change in your mum's condition."

Katie gave a slight nod. It wasn't the news she'd hoped for, but Mum was still alive and that gave her hope.

"I spoke to the doctor," Mrs. Graham continued. "He says she has pneumonia. She's weak but stable."

"Can we go see her today?"

"That's a long way, love, and they wouldn't allow Grace to go in. She's too young."

Katie sighed and nodded. She wasn't sure why she'd asked. They couldn't afford to pay for a ride across town, and it would be too far to walk.

"Now, you mustn't worry. Your mum is getting good care, and with time

I'm sure she'll get well." Mrs. Graham reached in her basket and took out another orange. Her eyes glowed as she handed it to Katie. "The Lord will take care of her. You just keep a good eye on Grace and say your prayers."

"I will." Katie accepted the cool, smooth orange, and her mouth watered.

Jumbled voices sounded below, and then heavy footsteps pounded up the stairs.

Mrs. Graham glanced toward the door. "Gracious saints above, who is that?"

The door burst open and a policeman hustled in, tugging Garth by the arm.

Katie's heart lurched, and her gaze darted from the policeman to Garth. Her brother's face burned red, and he set his mouth in a grim line. As soon as he met Katie's gaze, he clenched his jaw and looked away.

The officer glared at Mrs. Graham. "Are you Mrs. Edna McAlister?"

"No sir. I'm Mrs. Ruby Graham."

Katie fisted her hands. What had Garth done? He could be headstrong, and he liked to tease, but he'd never been in trouble with the police.

Mrs. Graham's face paled. "What happened, Officer?"

"This lad was caught stealing a loaf of bread from Pinkham's Bakery." The officer jerked Garth's arm. "He said his family was starving and that he only wanted to bring them something to eat, but no one here looks to be starving."

Heat rose in Katie's face. *Oh, Garth, you know Mum would never want you to steal anything, no matter how hungry we are.*

"I shouldn't have taken it." Garth looked up at the officer, a challenge in his eyes. "But I'm not lying. Look around. You'll see I'm telling the truth. We've no food."

The policeman dropped his hold on Garth's arm and strode across the room. He pulled open the cupboards and searched the empty shelves. He huffed, then turned around, glaring at Mrs. Graham. "Is it true their mother is in the hospital?"

"Yes sir. We took her there last night. But I didn't realize the children had nothing to eat. They never said as much to me."

The bobby frowned and scanned the room, his gaze eventually resting on Grace. "How old are you, young lady?"

Grace darted a frightened glance at Katie and shrank down in her chair.

Katie placed her hand on Grace's shoulder. "She's seven."

"And you?"

Katie lifted her chin. "I'm fourteen."

"The same age as your brother?"

"Yes sir. We're twins."

The policeman narrowed his eyes. "You don't look like twins to me."

Katie would've laughed if it hadn't been such a serious situation. "No sir. We're fraternal twins, not identical."

"Well, three children can't be staying alone in a place like this with no food. You'll have to come with me."

Panic shot through Katie, and she tightened her hold on Grace's shoulder. He couldn't really take them away, could he?

Garth crossed the room and stood beside Katie. "Our mum will be coming home from the hospital any day. We can't leave."

The bobby turned to Mrs. Graham. "Is that true?"

The woman hesitated. "Well, we hope she'll be coming home soon, but there's no way to know for sure."

"I can't leave young children on their own with no food and no parents to watch over them." He lowered his voice. "Can you take care of them until their mother returns?"

Mrs. Graham's eyes widened, and she lifted her hand to her chest. "Oh . . . I'd like to, but I don't know what Mr. Graham would say. We have six children of our own and barely enough room for our family."

"All right, then." The officer stepped toward Garth. "I'll take them to the Grangeford Children's Home."

"No! Please, we want to stay here." Garth gripped Katie's hand. "I have a job delivering for Mr. Davies, the butcher on Layton Street, and Katie does piecework for Mrs. Palmer, the dressmaker downstairs. We'll be paid soon. That will give us enough money to buy food until Mum comes back."

"Sorry, lad. You need to come with me." The policeman stepped toward Garth.

"What if we refuse?" Katie wrapped her arm around Grace's shoulders.

The policeman narrowed his eyes and studied her. “Then I’ll have to arrest your brother for stealing that bread and take him to jail.”

She looked at Garth, trying to read his thoughts, but for once she couldn’t. Maybe he felt as confused and panicked as she.

The bobby crossed his burly arms. “You only have two choices. All three of you must come along with me now, or I’ll take the lad to jail, then return and take you girls to the children’s home.”

Garth shot a fearful glance at Katie. Then resignation filled his eyes. He looked back at the policeman. “We want to stay together.”

“It will only be until your mum gets well.” Mrs. Graham forced a slight smile. “You’ll have plenty to eat and a safe place to sleep. Your mum can come and fetch you when she’s well.”

Katie’s stomach roiled, and a dizzy wave swept over her. It all sounded reasonable, but what if Mum didn’t get well? What would happen then?



Laura McAlister slid Mrs. Frasier’s burgundy silk dress off the ironing board and held it up to make sure she’d pressed out every wrinkle. Sunlight streamed through the laundry room window, making the black beads on the bodice sparkle. She turned the dress slowly, checking the back and sides. Satisfied with her work, she tucked a hanger into the neck of the dress, draped the long skirt over her arm, and headed out to the lower hall.

It was almost noon and time for the servants’ midday meal. She’d take the dress upstairs and hang it in her mistress’s room, then join the rest of the staff in the servants’ hall. Perhaps the morning post had arrived, and she’d find a letter from Mum waiting for her. She usually received letters from home once or twice a week, but for some reason there had been no word for almost two weeks.

Anxious thoughts rose in Laura’s mind, and her chest tightened. If she didn’t hear something soon, she would ask for a day off so she could travel to London and check on her family.

It was painful and worrisome to be separated from them, but after Dad died, Laura needed to find work to help support her family. Through a friend

she heard about Mr. and Mrs. Harrington, a wealthy family in London who were looking to hire a new maid. She'd gone to the interview and been hired that same day.

Everything had gone well at first, but then their nephew, Simon, came to stay. He'd made her life miserable with his suggestive comments, which had quickly progressed to cornering her in the hallways and finally to grabbing her on the back stairs. She'd escaped that last time with a torn dress. But she was so frightened she'd left that afternoon without giving notice.

Laura shuddered, pushed those sickening memories away, and started up the servants' stairs. It was a miracle she'd found a new position working for the Frasier family only one week later. Mr. and Mrs. Frasier lived a quiet life with few visitors. Mrs. Ellis, the housekeeper, and Mr. Sterling, the butler, kept a good eye on everyone, and they didn't allow any carrying on between members of the staff.

She felt safe at Bolton House, and she was grateful for her position.

When she reached the main floor landing, she saw Millie, her friend and a housemaid, standing by the green baize door, peeking into the entrance hall.

"What are you doing?" Laura whispered.

Her friend gasped and spun around. "Laura! You scared me."

"Sorry. What's happening out there?"

Millie grinned, and dimples appeared in her rosy cheeks. "Come and see for yourself."

Laura joined her friend and leaned close to the door. Tipping her head, she looked through the crack, and her breath caught in her throat. A tall, handsome young man stood at the bottom of the staircase, speaking to Mrs. Frasier. He wore a stylish gray suit that was perfectly tailored to fit his slim build. His blue paisley tie stood out against his white starched shirt and tanned face. From this distance she couldn't tell the color of his eyes, but he had light brown hair and a square jaw. Pleasant lines creased the areas around his mouth and eyes as he smiled and greeted Mrs. Frasier.

Laura pulled back and kept her voice low. "Who is he?"

"Andrew Frasier, Mr. and Mrs. Frasier's son."

Laura's stomach dropped. "Has he come to stay?"

"I hope so. Isn't he handsome?" Millie leaned closer. "He'll be the master of Bolton one day."

Laura bit her bottom lip and peeked through the crack once more. Mrs. Frasier had mentioned she had one married daughter and a son. But she said the son lived in London, and she didn't see him as often as she'd like. "What do you know about him?" Laura whispered.

"He's twenty-four, and he's training to be a solicitor."

Laura's shoulders tensed. How long would he stay at Bolton? Was he an honorable man or dangerous like Simon Harrington? She searched Andrew Frasier's face, trying to read past his smile, but it was impossible to discern his true character.

She would have to be very careful and stay far away from him.

Andrew handed his hat and coat to the footman. "It's good to see you, Mother." His voice carried easily through the entrance hall.

Mrs. Frasier looked up at him with shining eyes. "This is such a wonderful surprise. I wasn't expecting you until next week."

"We finished our business early, and when we heard there was a ship departing in two days, we decided to leave straightaway so we could be home in time for Easter."

"I'm so pleased. We've missed you, Andrew."

"And I've missed you as well."

Mrs. Frasier slipped her arm through his. He patted her hand, and they walked toward the drawing room together.

Laura turned to Millie. "It sounds like he's been away on a journey."

Millie nodded. "He's been in Italy for the last two months."

Laura's eyes widened. "Italy? Oh my, I didn't realize."

"Yes. Doesn't it sound wonderful?"

"What was he doing there?"

"He went with another man for their work." She squinted and tapped her chin. "I think his name is Mr. Dowd. He's the one training Mr. Frasier to be a solicitor."

“Why would Andrew Frasier take a position like that when he’s the heir to Bolton?”

Millie shrugged. “His father could live another twenty or thirty years. I suppose he wants to be useful and do something with his life.”

“Still, it seems odd for someone in his position to go off to London and work in a law office.”

“Not all wealthy men like to lead idle lives.”

“I suppose you’re right.” Laura glanced toward the door through which Mrs. Frasier and her son had disappeared. “I wonder if he’s just here for the Easter holiday or if he plans to stay longer.”

Millie grinned and got a dreamy look in her eyes. “I hope he’ll be staying for a good long while.”

A shiver raced up Laura’s back. If Andrew Frasier did plan to stay at Bolton past Easter, she might be looking for a new position very soon.

“*What* are you doing?” Mr. Sterling walked down the stairs toward them, a scowl lining his face.

Laura pulled in a quick breath and straightened. “Nothing, sir.”

He narrowed his eyes. “The staff at Bolton are concerned about their duties and do not eavesdrop on the family. Is that clear?”

“Yes sir,” Millie and Laura said in unison.

“Now, off with you, and don’t let me find you lurking on the servants’ stairs or peeking through doorways!”

“Yes sir.” Laura gripped the hanger and dress and started up the stairs.

Millie caught up and chuckled under her breath. “Mr. Sterling is such an old windbag.”

“Don’t let him hear you say that.” Mr. Sterling was in charge of all the staff along with Mrs. Ellis. He could sack her and send her packing if he wasn’t pleased with her work or behavior. It was best to keep her mouth closed, keep her mind on her work, and be respectful of those above her.

“Mr. Andrew Frasier is certainly handsome, isn’t he? I wonder if he has a lady love?”

Laura’s stomach tightened. “It’s none of our business. I’m sure he would not like to hear two of the maids discussing his private affairs.”

“I suppose,” Mille said with a saucy grin. “But there’s no reason a girl can’t do a little dreaming.”



“A letter arrived for you this morning,” Mrs. Ellis held out the slim ivory envelope toward Laura. She peered at Laura through wire-rimmed spectacles that rode halfway down her long nose. Her silver-streaked hair was parted in the center and pulled back in a small, severe bun.

“Thank you, ma’am.” Laura took the letter and slipped it into her apron pocket. She quickly downed the last of her tea, rose from the table, and slipped out of the servants’ hall. Tucking her hand in her apron pocket, she wrapped her fingers around the letter and headed down the lower passageway. Hoping to take in a bit of sunshine and read her letter outside in private, she pushed open the door and stepped outside.

The fresh scent of newly mown grass and spring flowers greeted her as she walked out to the back courtyard. She followed the gravel path around the side of the house and entered the holly hedge border garden. Yellow and white daffodils with silvery-green leaves bobbed their heads in the light breeze. Pink, purple, and yellow tulips lined the flower beds, with feathery green ferns unfurling around them. Overhead, the plum tree looked like a pink cloud floating above the pathway.

Laura sat on the stone bench in the shade of the holly hedge and carefully tore open the envelope. She pulled out the single sheet of paper, and a rush of surprise flowed through her. Mum and Katie were the only ones who wrote to her, but this handwriting was unfamiliar. She turned over the letter and found Mrs. Graham’s signature at the bottom. Her shoulders tensed, and she focused on the opening lines.

Dear Laura, I'm sorry to say your mum has had a very difficult time these last few weeks, and she is quite unwell. Katie and Garth did the best they could to take care of her, and I came most days, but she had a high fever and was growing weaker, so my husband and I took her to St. Joseph's Hospital last Friday night.

UNCORRECTED PROOF

SNEAK PEEK  SAMPLE ONLY

Laura's heart clenched, and she stared at the letter. How could she have gone about her duties every day and not realized her dear mum was suffering so? Tears filled her eyes, and she had to blink a few times before she could continue reading.

The nurses are giving her good care, and the doctors are hopeful she will recover from her pneumonia, but it is not certain. I wanted to prepare you in case the worst happens. I will visit her as often as I can, and I promise to send word when the situation changes.

The next paragraph was just as upsetting as Mrs. Graham told how her brother had been arrested and her three siblings had been taken to a children's home.

I hope you will come to London if you can. I'm sure it would cheer your mum to see you and know that you are doing what you can to look in on your sisters and brother and let them know they are not forgotten. Please write and tell me if you're coming. I will keep you and your family in my prayers.

*Your friend,
Ruby Graham*

Laura clutched the letter to her heart, her throat aching. After all they'd already suffered, now they were facing another round of painful hardships. Her brother and sisters had tried to take care of themselves and Mum, but it was too much for them. All the while they'd been hungry and not known where to turn. Her poor brother had felt so desperate he had stolen food. That was not like him, not at all.

She closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. Katie, Grace, and Garth must be terrified. Which home had they been taken to? Were they together, or had they been separated? Many of the homes accepted only boys or only girls.

She had to go to London. Her family needed her. Would Mrs. Frasier allow it, or would she sack her and hire someone else to take her place? If she

lost her position, she would have no money to help her family. She might be able to find a new position in London, but how could she care for her siblings if she was working every day?

A choked sob rose in her throat, and she lifted her hand to cover her mouth. She ought to pray for Mum and her siblings, but she couldn't seem to form her churning thoughts into words. Bowing her head, she waited, wishing for some comfort, but the heavens seemed distant and silent.

A breeze ruffled the plum blossoms overhead, and a few pink petals fluttered to the ground around her. She raised her hand, covered her eyes, and let her tears fall.



Andrew clasped his hands behind his back and strolled across the emerald-green grass in the old rose garden with his mother by his side. It was too early for the roses to bloom, but he could see the new shoots leafing out with the promise that they would put on a fine show in a few weeks. Now was the time for the borders to shine with rows of colorful tulips, bleeding hearts, grape hyacinths, and forget-me-nots.

It was good to be home and walk through his family's private gardens. He'd spent hours out here when he was a boy, following Mr. Harding, the gruff but softhearted old gardener who'd taught him how to till the fertile beds, transplant perennials, and prune the climbing roses. In between those gardening lessons, Andrew chased rabbits and watched robins build their nests and feed their young.

He had stayed outside and followed Mr. Harding whenever the weather was agreeable—and sometimes even when it wasn't. He had enjoyed those hours with the old man, soaking in the secrets of the garden. It kept him out of the house and away from his father, who had a fiery temper and was rarely pleased with anything Andrew said or did.

He clenched his jaw, pushed that thought away, and turned to his mother. "So, where is Father?"

"He's in Scotland on a fishing trip. He should be back tomorrow or Saturday."

Andrew nodded, thankful he and his mother would have some time together before his father returned.

“So, tell me about Italy.” She looked up at him with a warm smile. “I hope you didn’t spend all your time taking care of business.”

Andrew’s gaze drifted off across the garden as he recalled the highlights of the two months he’d spent in Italy with his friend and mentor, Henry Dowd. “Rome was amazing. There is a lot of history there and so many sights to see. But we spent most of our time near Florence. The countryside is beautiful, with several historic hilltop towns that date back to medieval times.”

“That sounds lovely.”

“Yes, it’s a charming area. Those hilltop towns have colorful, narrow streets and sun-drenched town squares they call *piazzas*. The artwork is remarkable, and the people are so friendly. The food is outstanding as well.”

“No wonder you enjoyed it so much.”

He grinned. “I did, and I hope to return someday.”

“And your business? Everything went well?”

“Yes. We settled the estate of one of our clients and completed the sale of all his Italian holdings.”

Their footman approached. “Excuse me, ma’am, but Mrs. Jackson has arrived.”

“Oh dear. Please tell her I’ll join her soon.”

The footman nodded and hurried back toward the house.

“I’m sorry, Andrew. I forgot Althea was coming today. She and I are heading up the Spring Fete Committee for St. Luke’s. We have all kinds of details to discuss.”

“That’s fine, Mother.” He bent and kissed her cheek. “Enjoy the time with your friend. I’ll see you after.”

“Thank you, dear.” She patted his arm, then walked toward the house.

Andrew pulled in a deep breath, savoring the scent of moist earth and fragrant flowers. A peaceful stroll around the rest of the garden to see what else was blooming would give him time to consider what he would say to his father when he returned from his fishing trip. The conversation most likely would not be pleasant, but it was long overdue.

He reached the end of the rose garden and set off down the gravel path that went toward the pond, then on to the orchard.

An unusual sound stopped him, and he cocked his head to listen. Was that someone crying on the other side of the holly hedge? After listening a moment more, he took a few steps in that direction.

When he reached the end of the hedge, he stopped and looked around the side. A young woman dressed in a black maid's uniform and white apron sat on the stone bench. Her blond hair was pulled back under her maid's cap, and she clutched a letter to her chest. Her shoulders trembled, and tears glistened on her cheeks.

His chest tightened, and he shifted back out of view. He wasn't sure if he should speak to her or leave her alone to deal with whatever sorrowful news she'd received in that letter. Was it a broken romance or some painful family matter that caused her tears?

Either way, she might be helped by a compassionate word. He stepped around the end of the hedge and walked up the path.