



I sincerely hope your Christmas . . . may abound in the gaieties which the season generally brings.

—Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*



She threw up the window . . . to pluck that beautiful half-blown Christmas rose that grew upon the little shrub without, just peeping from the snow. . . . And, having gently dashed the glittering powder from its leaves, approached it to her lips and said, “This rose is not so fragrant as a summer flower, but it has stood through hardships none of them could bear . . . it is still fresh and blooming as a flower can be, with the cold snow even now on its petals.”

—Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*



ONE



Often, the bride's sister or closest female friend accompanied the couple [on their wedding trip].

—Maria Grace, *Courtship and Marriage in Jane Austen's World*

OCTOBER 1820

Miss Sarah Summers sat on her neatly made bed, a treasure in each hand. In her left she held a letter from the man she'd been betrothed to before his death at sea more than three years before.

In her right palm lay a dried thistle—stalk, spiny bulb, and purple flower crown—the symbol of Scotland. It had been given to her by a Scotsman who, despite her efforts to forget him, still occupied a large part of her thoughts . . . and, if she were honest with herself, her heart.

Callum Henshall and his stepdaughter

had been their very first guests at Sea View the previous year, and all the Summerses had liked them. Mr. Henshall had expressed interest in Sarah during his stay, but Sarah had discouraged him. Now she wondered if she had done the right thing.

She carefully tucked both the letter and the thistle into the chest at the foot of her bed. For the impending trip, she was taking only a small leather trunk, one bandbox, and her reticule.

Was she really about to leave Sidmouth for an extended absence? Her pulse beat hard at the thought. Since moving to Sea View two years before, Sarah had never left for more than a few hours at a time. What was she doing? How could she just leave the guest house and Mamma? Leave their guests, their staff, and her responsibilities? Might there still be time to change her mind about traveling with Claire and her husband?

Sadly, no. Their plans were set.

A knock sounded on the bedchamber door and her youngest sister, Georgiana, entered. At seventeen, Georgie was the picture of blossoming womanhood, although Sarah still saw glimpses of the rough-and-tumble tomboy she had been.

“All packed?” Georgie asked.

“Nearly.”

“I wish I were going with you.”

“I thought you loved it here?”

“I do. Yet I long to see more of the world. I’ve only ever been to Sidmouth and May Hill.”

“You’re young. You shall have other opportunities. For now, I need you to help with things here while I’m gone.”

“I know.” Georgie sighed.

Sarah regarded her usually cheerful sister with concern. “Are you unwell, my dear? You seem . . . well, sad.”

“No, not sad. Restless, more like. But I am glad you are going to Scotland. It’s time you had an adventure. Besides, Mr. Henshall’s not a bad fellow—you could do worse.”

“Why, thank you,” Sarah dryly replied. “Remember, we are primarily going to Scotland to look over the house Claire inherited. Seeing Mr. Henshall is only a secondary consideration.”

“Right.” Her sister snorted. “You will pass along my greetings to Effie, I trust?”

Sarah’s heart warmed at the thought of Mr. Henshall’s stepdaughter. “Certainly. If we manage to see them, that is.”

“Why should you not? Mr. Henshall will probably convince you to remain in Scotland, and then there go our plans for a jolly Christmas here.”

“That is unlikely to happen.”

Georgiana studied her. “Still no reply?”

Sarah shook her head. This wasn’t a topic she cared to revisit—best to change the subject. “Now, don’t worry. I shan’t forget my promise. I know the last few years have not been ideal, but we shall have a far more festive Christmas-tide this year. You’ll see. William and Claire don’t want to leave Mira for too long. We plan to return in time for Stir-Up Sunday.”

“I’m counting on it.”

“By the way,” Sarah added, “Claire told me you have offered to spend time with Mira while she and William are away. That is kind of you.”

Georgie shrugged off the praise. “Armaan and Sonali will be busy with the boarding house, and a girl Mira’s age needs to play out-of-doors.”

“You certainly did. Still do.”

Her sister nodded. “I’ll also visit the Sidmouth School as usual to play with the pupils there. When I am not needed here, of course.”

“Excellent.” Sarah rose and embraced her. “And keeping busy like that, you’ll find the time will pass quickly.”

She said it as much to reassure herself as Georgiana.



The family gathered to bid them farewell. Her sister Emily took Sarah's arm and led her out of the house. She leaned close and confided, "It's your turn, Sarah. I just know it. I hope Mr. Henshall kisses more than your hand this time!" She grinned and squeezed her arm. "Oh, and if you should happen to meet Sir Walter Scott, don't forget to tell him your sister is a great admirer of his work."

Their brother-in-law William stood at the open door of the yellow post chaise and handed Sarah inside to join their eldest sister, Claire. Several others encircled the waiting vehicle: sister Viola and her husband, Jack Hutton. Sonali and Armaan Sagar, little Mira in her uncle's arms. Mamma waved her handkerchief, and Georgie held the town stray by the scruff to keep him from nipping at the horses. And finally Mr. Gwilt, their diligent man-of-all-work, stepped to the open window. Being short in stature, he raised himself to his tiptoes and reassured her one last time, "Please don't worry, Miss Sarah. We shall take good care of Sea View while you're gone."

Would they?

After one last kiss to his daughter's cheek, William climbed in and closed the door. He took Claire's hand and leaned forward to address them both. "Ready, you two?"

“Ready,” Claire agreed.

Sarah managed a wooden nod.

A few moments later, the hired post chaise rattled away from Sidmouth, beginning the long journey north. The snug interior held only one forward-facing bench, and she felt Claire’s shoulder press into hers at every turning.

Sarah shifted on the padded seat, agitation gnawing at her, urging her to demand the vehicle stop and let her down. The cord that bound her to Sea View, to Mamma and her other sisters, stretched tighter and tighter, pulling at her ribs, until it seemed about to snap in two and tear out her heart as well.

She became aware of Claire’s worried gaze on her profile and felt her sister squeeze her hand. Sarah had no wish to dampen Claire’s pleasure on this, her wedding trip. She turned to her and mustered a smile.

Claire and William had remained in Sidmouth for a few weeks after their nuptials before departing on this trip. They had delayed because they’d wanted to witness the quiet wedding of Mira’s uncle, Armaan, and Sonali Patel. And because they’d wanted to help the couple as they took over ownership of the boarding house until they had things well in hand. Armaan and Sonali had generously offered to care for Mira during their absence.

Did Mamma, Georgie, Emily, and Mr. Gwilt have things at Sea View well in hand? She hoped she'd remembered to show them everything that needed to be done: the menus, the orders and payments to butcher, green-grocer, coal merchant, et cetera. Had she left anything off her many lists? What if something went wrong? Would they be able to deal with any demanding guests?

Sarah reminded herself that she truly wanted to go to Scotland—or at least to see a certain handsome Scotsman—but perhaps she should have refused. Let her sister and new husband travel alone together.

Both Claire and William had assured Sarah she was welcome to accompany them. A bride's sister or close friend often traveled with a new-wed couple. Husband and wife would, of course, have their own room at inns along the way, but the sisters could help each other dress and enjoy each other's company and conversation during the long hours on the road.

On Claire's other side, William lifted his wife's hand and kissed her knuckles.

Sarah pretended not to notice.

Instead, she gazed at the passing countryside through the front window. She looked past the two postilions, who rode the left-hand horse of each pair pulling the chaise. The

men's boots and coats were already splattered with mud, and they had not yet crossed the Devonshire border. Sarah felt sorry for whoever had to do their laundry. At the thought, her stomach twisted. Had she remembered to detail the laundry lists?

Sarah forced herself to breathe slowly and deeply and admonished herself not to worry.



The days passed quickly as they traveled, even though they had to pause every few hours to change horses, and often positions as well. It would be a long journey to Scotland, and they broke it up with several stops along the way.

They visited Bath, the picturesque ruins of Tintern Abbey, and the spa town of Cheltenham. Now and again, Sarah witnessed a sweet caress or stolen kiss between her traveling companions and looked away, feigning interest in the view and feeling like a gooseberry.

As the distance between them and Sea View lengthened, Sarah slowly began to relax and enjoy herself. They'd come too far to turn back now.

Continuing north, they spent a few days admiring the scenery of the Lake District. Sarah sometimes joined William and Claire

for meals, sightseeing, and shopping, but she insisted the two spend time alone together as well. She happily remained at the inn while they hired a boat for a romantic excursion on Windermere Lake. She recalled her own excursion in a small boat a year and a half ago, sailing along the coast with Callum Henshall, the sea breeze ruffling his hair, his warm gaze lingering on her face. . . . Would he look at her that way again? She certainly hoped so.

Every night, the new-wed couple retired to one room, and Sarah to another. Observing the tenderness between the two and Claire's glow of contentment, Sarah felt a pang. She was genuinely happy her eldest sister had found true love, yet she increasingly longed for a love of her own.

They did not stop in Carlisle—a place of bitter memories. A few years before, Claire had been abandoned there by a lord who'd convinced her to elope with him and then changed his mind before they'd even reached Gretna Green.

Instead, they continued on toward Edinburgh. Their aunt Mercer had stunned them all by leaving Claire her house as thanks for the time she had lived with and cared for her. Claire was eager to show it to both Sarah and William and gain their opinions on whether to keep the place or sell it. She had written

to their aunt's solicitor to inform him of their upcoming visit. The man wrote back to assure them of a gracious welcome, explaining that Agnes Mercer's elderly butler had stayed on to oversee the property while it was unoccupied and would be there to open the house for them and provide a set of keys.

Once all was arranged, Claire had urged Sarah to write to Mr. Henshall, letting him know of the planned trip. Sarah had protested that it would be too forward to suggest they meet, but Claire had assured her there was nothing untoward about it. They were traveling a long way to look at the house. While they were there, it would be only polite to visit an acquaintance, especially one who'd performed such kind offices for their family. After all, Mr. Henshall had paid a call at Aunt Mercer's on their behalf to learn how Claire fared, and later redeemed Claire's necklace from a pawn dealer.

Sarah had relented and written to him yet had received no reply.

She had already been nervous about the prospect of seeing him again, and his silence only added to her unease.

Her sisters had tried to encourage her, saying Sarah's letter may have been lost in the post. Or his reply had been delayed for some reason. Of course he would be happy to see her again.

Sarah hoped they were right. Otherwise, how mortifying the reunion might be.

Reaching the outskirts of Edinburgh at last, Sarah craned her neck to take it all in. Upon entering the city, Claire pointed out the Palace of Holyroodhouse and the Edinburgh Castle high on its rocky hill.

As they wound through the Old Town and into the New, the tightly packed shops, sooty grey buildings, and smokestacks soon gave way to rows of elegant terraced houses of lighter sandstone, church spires, and tree-lined squares.

Finally they reached Aunt Mercer's home in just such a row of tall, connected houses, where they alighted with stiff limbs and eagerness. William helped unload their baggage and dismissed the postilions with an extra gratuity for delivering them safely. The men would take the chaise and horses to a local livery.

As they approached the imposing home, the door opened and an elderly man dressed in black appeared.

Claire beamed at him. "Mr. Campbell! How good to see you again. And how glad I was to learn you still live here. Allow me to introduce my sister Sarah and my husband, Mr. Hammond."

"Welcome, one and all. And pleased I was

to learn who the new owner was to be! Your aunt did not breathe a word. A woman of surprises, was she not?”

“Indeed, she was.”

The former cook, maids, and footman had acquired new situations elsewhere, but Campbell explained that he had engaged two new housemaids and a kitchen maid to serve them during their visit, despite Claire’s offer to take their meals at a nearby inn.

Campbell’s own sister, who like her brother had been in service for many years, had come out of retirement to serve as cook.

He said, “I hope you approve of the arrangements, Miss . . . er, Mrs. Hammond.”

“Wholeheartedly. Thank you so much.”

Claire insisted Sarah waste no time in sending a message to Mr. Henshall, who lived north of Edinburgh, near the town of Kirkcaldy.

“Just to let him know we’ve arrived safely and would be pleased to receive him here or to meet somewhere at his convenience.”

Sarah wrote a brief note in a shaky hand, and Campbell dispatched a messenger to deliver it.

Then the three settled in to explore Edinburgh while they waited.

They set off for the Old Town to visit the Palace of Holyroodhouse and the castle. On the way, Claire pointed out the shop where

she'd pawned the necklace Aunt Mercer had left her, to pay for the journey to Sidmouth.

The Edinburgh Castle had opened to visitors only that May. Before that it had been a military fortress and hospital and had also housed prisoners of war.

They purchased their tickets from the stationers on Bank Street for one shilling each and toured the Crown Room to see the Scottish regalia. The rest of the castle remained off limits.

Sarah wished Mr. Henshall were there to help explain the significance of the various items on display.

Over the next few days, the three strolled through the leafy squares of New Town, perused shops, and sampled Scottish cuisine.

And all the while Sarah was waiting and worrying. Why did Mr. Henshall not visit? Or at least send a reply? Had something happened to him or Effie?

Not long after reaching Edinburgh, William had written to an old friend, and soon they were invited to dinner at the home of Sir Robert and Henrietta Liston, who lived several miles west of Edinburgh. William, a former diplomat, had served with the Listons in Constantinople, where Sir Robert had been the ambassador.

Sarah and Claire dressed with care, both

of them somewhat intimidated by the prospect of dining with an ambassador and his wife. But upon arrival, their hosts quickly made them comfortable with their warm, unaffected manners.

When Mrs. Liston learned they lived in Sidmouth, she gave them a sad little smile. “One of my brothers is buried there. Nathaniel Marchant. A physician who spent much of his life in Antigua before his health declined. I understand there is a memorial to him in the church there.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” Sarah said. “And I shall look for it.”

Over dinner, the couple entertained them with tales of the customs and mishaps they’d experienced in the Ottoman Empire and other far-flung places where they had resided during their long diplomatic career.

The evening passed quite pleasantly. And again, Sarah could not help thinking how much Mr. Henshall’s company would have added to their enjoyment. Or at least to hers.



TWO



And who, indeed, that has once seen
Edinburgh, but must see it again
in dreams, waking or sleeping.

—Charlotte Brontë, letter

All too soon the time they'd allotted to Edinburgh began to draw to a close, and there was still no sign of Callum Henshall.

“We can't return to Sidmouth without at least trying to see him,” Claire insisted. “You have his direction from his letters. Let us pay a call. Then you will learn why he hasn't responded instead of assuming the worst. And you need not fear you are being too forward. I will say *I* insisted.”

William grinned. “And I shall happily share the blame.”

Sarah relented. “Oh, very well. Just to put my mind at ease.”

Had Mr. Henshall given up on Sarah and begun courting someone else? Was that why he had not replied nor come to see them? She hoped the truth would not prove to be worse than she imagined.

The next morning, Sarah dressed in a becoming frock and Claire curled her dark hair with a hot iron.

“You look lovely, Sarah,” Claire assured her.

Sarah thought the blue eyes staring back at her in the mirror looked weary as well as wary. She had not slept well, anxious as she was about the upcoming visit.

They set out for Kirkcaldy early that day, taking the new steam-powered *Broad Ferry* across the Firth of Forth to Dysart. From the harbor, they hired a driver with an old landau and even older horses to take them the rest of the way. Since the day was fine, they lowered the folding hood to enjoy the scenery. The wind spoiled the curls Claire had arranged so neatly on either side of Sarah’s face, but the views were worth it.

About a mile from the harbor, the driver pointed out the ruins of rough-stone Ravenscraig Castle, and recognition flashed

through Sarah. She recalled a long-ago meal around the Sea View dining table and Mr. Henshall's green eyes alight with nostalgia as he enthralled them with tales of his childhood, describing the abandoned castles near his home and a time he and a few other lads "*stormed Ravenscraig and laid siege to it with our wooden swords. . . .*" A land agent had set his dogs on them, and they'd had to hide in a shepherd's hut until the beasts gave up the chase, lured away by haggis.

Even now, Sarah smiled at the memory. His handsome face, good humor, and rich, accented voice were still clear in her mind.

The driver hailed a passing farm wagon and asked for directions to Whinstone Hall. Leaving the town of Kirkcaldy behind, they followed a wooded track until they reached a rambling two-story house of dark stone, its front door and windows framed in lighter sandstone. Sarah saw stables, a few other outbuildings, and fields dotted with grazing sheep beyond.

The front lawns were neatly trimmed, but the shrubs were in need of pruning and the flower gardens grew in weedy disarray.

After helping the ladies alight, William led the way to the front door and knocked.

As they waited, Sarah's heart beat painfully hard. She pushed a limp curl off her

face and then twisted her gloved hands together. A friendly cat approached and rubbed against Sarah's ankles, seeking attention, but Sarah was too distracted to oblige. Would Mr. Henshall be there? How would he react to seeing her on his doorstep? With pleasure or discomfort?

A few moments later, a housemaid welcomed them inside and showed them into a nearby parlour. "The master is away," she said, "but the lady of the house will be with ye shortly."

The lady of the house?

Was the maid referring to Effie, or . . . ?

As they sat down to wait, Sarah's stomach sank. Had Mr. Henshall married someone else without telling them? Perhaps a Scottish woman who shared his homeland and way of life? If so, could she truly blame him?

The woman who entered a few minutes later was perhaps a year or two older than Sarah's seven and twenty. She had a thin, pretty face and light ginger hair, and she walked with the faintest of limps.

"Good day," she began. "I wasna expectin' callers. What may I do for ye?"

Definitely a Scottish woman, down to her accent and red hair. In fact, she looked a bit like Effie.

William had risen at her entrance, but she gestured for him to be seated, while she perched on the edge of the settee.

Sarah said, “I did write to Mr. Henshall to let him know we were coming.”

“Did ye, now? I don’t recall him mentioning it.” She chuckled. “Then again, I tend to forget things or mislay them now and again. Are ye acquainted with Callum?”

Callum. The woman’s familiar use of his given name stung.

“Em, yes,” Sarah faltered. “I am Miss Sarah Summers. Mr. Henshall and Effie stayed with us in Devonshire the summer before last. We have corresponded several times since then.”

“Ah, I do remember Effie describing the long journey and the boarding house they stayed in, somewhere in the south of England. So terribly far from here. Managed by a family of sisters, I believe.”

“Y-yes.” Sarah gestured to her companions. “And this is my sister Claire and her husband.”

Sarah turned back to the woman, who had yet to give her name. Dare she hope she was only the housekeeper? The woman seemed too young and well-dressed for the role.

“Mr. Henshall has been very kind to our family,” Sarah explained, “and we simply

wished to call on him while we were in the area. To thank him.”

“Miss Summers, ye say?” the woman repeated, testing the name on her tongue with no recognition evident in her expression. “I’m afraid it’s not familiar.”

Had Mr. Henshall truly not mentioned them? Hurt filled her at the thought. Apparently his time at Sea View had meant more to her than to him.

The woman went on. “Then again, he’s mentioned several ladies in recent months, so it’s difficult to recall details. Well. I shall be sure and pass along your gratitude.”

Claire spoke up. “He is not here, then? Or Effie?”

The woman shook her head. “They have gone to visit her grandfather in Perth, many miles from here.”

“Do you expect them back soon?”

“I really canna say. Could be hours. Could be days. Depends on how soon he recovers. He’s fallen ill again.”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

The woman shrugged. “My father is often ill. Yet he has survived far worse and will no doubt rally again.”

“Your father?” Sarah echoed. “Then you are Mr. Henshall’s . . . sister?”

“His wife’s sister, aye. Miss Isla Ross.”

“Ah.” Relief flooded through Sarah.

From the corner of her eye, she noticed William send Claire a confused look, which Sarah translated as, *The man Sarah admires has a wife?*

She hurried to correct that misapprehension. “So you must be Katrin’s sister. Mr. Henshall pointed out her grave in the Sidmouth churchyard. I am sorry for your loss.”

“Thank ye. Katrin was my only sister—God rest her. And Effie is her daughter. My one and only niece.”

Sarah nodded her understanding, then asked gently, “If your father is ill, do you not wish to be there with them as well?”

Miss Ross nodded. “Aye, were I welcome. He and I had a falling-out some time ago. It’s why I live here now. That, and to be close to Effie. I oversee things here in the house for them.”

“How kind.”

“Happy to do it. Effie is precious to me. The mere thought of her moving far from here, far from Scotland . . . Nay! It canna be borne.”

Sarah hesitated. “I am sure no one is suggesting such a thing.”

“Are ye? I hope you’re right. Thankfully, he has been spending time with one of our

neighbors, Miss Sorley, who lives just down the road. Charming woman.”

At the news, Sarah’s heart banged like iron against her ribs, and she dared not meet her sister’s gaze.

They left the house a short while later, with no offer of refreshment and little encouragement to remain.

Claire squeezed her hand. “I am so sorry, Sarah.”

“Don’t be,” Sarah said, a dull ache in her chest. “Perhaps it’s for the best.”

“Nonsense.”

“As I have said before, a relationship with someone who lives so far from Sea View, and Mamma, and the rest of you, would be impractical. Today’s disappointing visit will make it easier to come to terms with that reality.”

They climbed inside the waiting landau. Once they were all seated, Sarah glanced back at the charming stone house with its neglected garden and bid Whinstone Hall and Mr. Henshall farewell. As the vehicle lurched into motion and drove away, Sarah turned her eyes forward. She drew a long breath, squared her shoulders in resolve, and faced her companions.

“So there is no reason to factor my future into your decision about the Edinburgh house.

You must choose what is best for the two of you alone.”

“Well . . . there is no need to decide now. We have several factors to consider, including what is best for Mira.”

“Of course. Family comes first.”

They returned to the terraced house and packed up their things. Sarah donned a practical carriage dress and her most unaffected demeanor. She was not crushed. She was fine. Self-sufficient and capable. She glanced at the longcase clock and felt a kinship with it: tall, steady, and dependable.

She helped Claire pack, and then assisted Campbell and the housemaids in covering the upholstered furniture and Turkish carpets to help protect them from sunlight until Claire made her decision.

All the while, she was aware of Claire watching her, a worried expression pinching her pretty face, but her sister wisely chose not to say anything.

Sarah sent her what she hoped was a reassuring smile and kept busy.



Many times throughout the lengthy return trip, Sarah repeated to herself that this outcome was for the best. A closed door. A definite sign. Mr. Henshall’s silence coupled

with hundreds of miles between his home and Sea View were impediments that seemed indisputable now. And even though the “lady of the house” had only been his sister-in-law, she had hinted that he was pursuing a woman who lived close by. Yes, that would be better for Effie. Better for them all. Sarah had been right to conclude that any future between them was impossible. Apparently, he had come to that conclusion as well. She resolved to remain single and content. Life would be less complicated that way.

Sarah shifted toward the side window and made a concerted effort to turn her thoughts away from Mr. Henshall and toward the Christmas season ahead. The effort felt like trying to turn a huge ship against the tide. But with determination and self-discipline, she managed to take her thoughts captive.

She recalled her conversation with a melancholy Georgiana before they’d set out on this trip. Recent Christmases had been dismal affairs, first with mourning and the move to Sidmouth after Papa’s death, and then last year, with royalty come to stay next door, they’d been called on to host three of the Duke of Kent’s staff. Amid all the busyness as well as straitened finances, their own celebrations had been minimal at best.

Georgie had been quite disappointed, and

Sarah had promised her the next year—this year—would be better, and they would enjoy a far more festive Christmastide.

And as soon as she returned to Sea View, Sarah meant to make good on that promise.