

LOST
IN
DARKNESS

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"A Sailor's Song," featured in chapter nine, is taken from *Fugitive Verses* by Joanna Baillie. First published in 1840 and now in the public domain.

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DEDICATION

To my brother, Bradley Reid,
because brothers always hold
a place in a sister's heart;
and as always,
To the Saviour of my Soul,
the One who owns my heart.

*“He was soon borne away by the wave
and lost in darkness and distance.”*

MARY SHELLEY, *Frankenstein*

ONE

“There is something at work in my soul which I do not understand. I am practically industrious—painstaking;—a workman to execute with perseverance and labour:—but besides this, there is a love for the marvelous, a belief in the marvelous, intertwined in all my projects, which hurries me out of the common pathways of men, even to the wild sea and unvisited regions I am about to explore.”



London, 1815

There was something glorious about the first day of June. The time of year when the earth exhaled a warm breath, coaxing tender shoots and delicate emotion. And for one blessed moment, Amelia Balfour surrendered to the wonder of it, lifting her face to the sunshine beaming through her bedroom window. Surely this was how heaven would feel.

But for now, the grind of wheels and soot-flaked air of London beckoned. Snapping out of her reverie, she primped her bonnet bow tight beneath her chin then scurried out of her bedroom. God may still sit on the mercy seat, but her editor would pace a deadly cadence behind his desk if she were late.

Near the front door, Amelia gave her portfolio a final peek through. Manuscript, check. Proposal for a new travel handbook, double check.

Lucky Egyptian Ibis feather...

Wait a minute.

Plunging her hand in deeper, she fingered around for the white plume with a black tip. She could've sworn she'd set it in there last night before retiring. This would never do.

"Betsey?" She peered down the corridor, hoping to spy a sturdy grey gown. If asked to do so, her maid and faithful companion could find a singular grain of peppery-pink sand amidst an entire Menorcan beach. "Have you seen—?"

A rap on the front door echoed through the foyer as Betsey rounded the corner. Everything about the woman was robust, from the dense stripe of silver hair that refused to conform to the rest of her dark locks, to the wide cut of her shoulders and thick waistline. She was a battleship. Formidable. Durable. Not to be trifled with. And Amelia loved her with her whole heart.

"I'll get that for you, miss." Betsey tipped her head towards the door, her heavy shoes thudding like distant cannon fire with each step.

Amelia held up a hand. "Thank you, but no. I'd rather you find my Ibis feather."

"Your—oh! I know just the place."

With a snap of her fingers, Betsey turned on her heel, and Amelia turned to the door.

A cadaverous man in a lawn-green frockcoat loomed on the stoop, sunshine glinting off his spectacles. Amelia blinked, not for the brilliance of reflected sunspots but for the incongruity of seeing her editor at her home instead of ensconced in his paper-strewn office. An unprecedented action, for Mr. Moritz never ventured outside the publishing house save for a late-night dash to his home for a few hours of sleep. What on earth was he doing here?

He dipped his head in a curt bow. "Good day, Miss Balfour."

"Mr. Moritz." She tucked her chin in greeting. "What a surprise. I was just on my way to see you."

"I suspected as much, but I felt a private setting would be more appropriate for our meeting."

Her throat closed. This couldn't be good. Forcing a smile, she

stepped aside. "Do come in."

After he passed, she retrieved her portfolio then scuttled ahead of him. "This way, please." She led him into the sitting room and stopped near the bellpull. "Shall I ring for tea?"

"You may wish to ring for something stronger when I tell you why I am here." He doffed his hat, the flat line of his lips giving away nothing. "Perhaps you should take a seat."

The milk she'd taken with her breakfast curdled into hard lumps in her belly. She'd been right. Only ill could come of a superior deigning a home visit to one of his writers.

Willing her fingers to keep from trembling, she pulled out her manuscript and closed the distance between them, offering it over. "Perhaps you would like to read this first?"

He took the bound papers, yet shook his head, not one pomaded hair straying from the movement. "No need, Miss Balfour. I trust every I is dotted and T is crossed, for such is your perfection." With his free hand, he reached into an inside pocket, but paused before producing anything. "Are you certain you would not like to sit?"

She swallowed. Maybe she should, especially since Betsey had not yet returned with her lucky feather. Still, if she were going to be dismissed, ought she not suffer such a disgrace with all the poise and dignity she could muster? It wasn't as if she'd never been in dire straits before. Straightening her spine, she tucked her elbows tight to her side. "Whatever you may say, Mr. Moritz, can be heard as well on my feet as on my sofa."

"You are a singular woman, Miss Balfour, a trait which has earned you this." He held out two rectangular documents not much bigger than his hand.

She narrowed her eyes on what appeared to be tickets. Two berths on the HMS *Blackwell*, sailing June 8, 1:00 p.m., port of Southampton, bound for Cairo.

Cairo?

Her breath caught. "You are not letting me go?"

"Actually, I am—to Egypt." He chuckled. "All expenses paid for you and your maid. The ship sails in a week. Are you up for the challenge?"

Of all the ludicrous questions! Her jaw unhinged, quite unladylike but totally unstoppable. “I assure you, Mr. Moritz, it is no challenge whatsoever to write of veiled ladies with their turbaned sheikhs. In truth, sir, it is a particular dream of mine.”

“As I well know.” He stretched forward, peering at her from kindly grey eyes. “Which is why I put my neck on the chopping block for you. It took a fair amount of arm twisting with old man Krebe, yet I prevailed. Lucky for you, I am all muscle.” He flexed his arm, pride lifting a thin bicep and his sharp chin.

“Oh, Mr. Moritz...” She clutched the tickets to her chest. “How can I ever thank you?”

“By saving the neck I risked and penning the most brilliant journal in the history of travel writing.”

“Which is what I always aspire to.” She tossed back her shoulders. “Don’t worry, sir, I will not let you down.”

“I should hope not. Or both our heads may yet roll.” He tugged at his collar. “Krebe made that inordinately clear. And with that cheery thought, I bid you adieu. I imagine there is a certain amount of packing you will wish to be about.” He clapped on his hat as he strode to the door. “No need to see me out, Miss Balfour. Good day.”

Of course he was entirely wrong. It wasn’t just a *good* day but a dazzling one. Magnificently auspicious. The sort of day she’d hoped and yearned for these past seven years. Finally—*finally!*—she’d been good enough for God to notice, to answer, to shed His grace and favour upon. She gazed up at the ceiling.

“Thank You,” she whispered. “Your blessing means the world to me and I—”

Another rap of the door knocker ended her prayer. What had Mr. Moritz forgotten?

“Don’t trouble yourself, miss,” Betsey called from the corridor.

Before Amelia could tuck away the tickets, the maid ushered in a wisp of a man dressed in a blue coat so somber and dark it might as well have been black. “Miss Balfour, a Mr. Walton to see you.” Introduction made, Betsey vanished out the door, apparently still on the hunt for the feather.

“Mr. Walton.” Amelia curtsied, all the while examining the man and the name, neither of which sparked any recognition.

“Miss Balfour.” He nodded, his short stature giving her full view of a bald patch on the crown of his head. “I am here on behalf of your father. Perhaps you’d like to take a seat?”

Father? At once she sank onto the sofa, as if the man himself had issued the order. And if she listened hard enough, she could hear his commanding voice as distinctly as the day he’d sent her on her way with naught but a curt goodbye and the promise of a yearly stipend just to be rid of her.

She clutched the Cairo tickets all the tighter. “I trust all is well?”

Mr. Walton took the chair adjacent, his feet barely skimming the carpet, so short were his legs. Setting his brief-bag on his lap, he clicked open the lock, the report of it as sharp as the hammer of a pistol.

Amelia winced, as much from the sound as from the way his dark little eyes met hers. There was something foreboding in his gaze. Like a sinister shadow glimpsed from the corner of the eye and knowing in your gut that it was coming for you.

“I am afraid I bear upsetting news, Miss Balfour. Three weeks ago, your father suffered an apoplexy, one from which he did not recover. In short, I regret to inform you that Grafton Balfour is deceased and has since been buried in the family plot at Clifton.”

The announcement made no sense. Father, that domineering force of nature whom no one dared cross, was gone? Just like that? Without a farewell. Without any amends. She drew in a ragged breath, trying not to crumple the tickets in her hand. “Why am I hearing of this now? Why was no word sent sooner?”

“My apologies for that. The letter my clerk drew up somehow got shuffled in with other papers and was never posted. It was only recently discovered as I was making my preparations to travel here.”

She bit her lip, stopping an inappropriate smile, for the irony of the situation could not be denied. Father—that stoic man who insisted on precision at all costs—was likely rolling in his grave over the misplacement of his death announcement. Truly, she should be weeping for the loss of him, but though she might try, no tears could be forced.

Sweet heavens! Is this what she'd become—as callous towards him as he'd been to her and her brother?

Still, the information was so new. Grief would likely come calling in the dark of night when she least expected it. She met Mr. Walton's gaze. "This is very sudden. My father's health was never an issue, leastwise not that I was aware."

"Indeed, Miss Balfour. I worked with the man these past five years. Never a sniffle. Nary a cough. Though I suspect he felt this coming on."

"How so?"

He retrieved a folded paper. "The day before your father passed, I was summoned to Balfour House. He gave me this letter with the express directive that should anything happen to him, I was to personally deliver it to you. And so I am here. And so here you are." Mr. Walton held out the missive.

But Amelia didn't move, the temptation to live in blissful ignorance just a moment longer too strong to overcome. Her father had been domineering in life. Was he to be as officious in his death?

"Miss Balfour?"

Duty called. As it always had a way of doing, knocking, rapping, pounding on the door of her heart. There was nothing to be done for it, then. Father wrote the letter. She must read it.

She pulled the paper from Mr. Walton's fingers, folded open the page, and gazed at the recognizable bold lines of her father's pen.

Amelia,

But a few grains of sand remain in the hourglass of my life. Would that I could turn the hateful thing over, for never are regrets more poignant than during one's last breaths. Yet I will not trouble you with the requisite pleas for mercy and forgiveness. You are not heaven's gatekeeper.

Instead, I charge you with the guardianship of your brother, leastwise until the revolutionary surgery I have scheduled for him can be carried out. At such a point, you will be freed of all familial responsibilities if you so choose, for at last Colin will be able to face the world as his own man. I have arranged for him to arrive in Bristol by dark

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of night, June 8. My solicitor, Mr. Walton, will supply you with the appropriate details and means for your travel to Balfour House.

To avoid a case of too little, too late, I will not suffer you with trite words of apology or endearment. But rest assured, Amelia, that you have been, and I trust forever will be, the most obedient of daughters a man could ask for.

*As always, your father,
Grafton Balfour*

Father? What a farce.

Obedient? As ever.

But guardianship of her brother? She bit her lip. She'd always feared this day would come.

Amelia stared at the note, a scream welling up from the depths of her little girl heart that had only ever wanted unconditional love. Everything shook. Her legs. The letter. The tickets to Cairo. In one hand she held her future. In the other, her past.

And between lay the present's ugly decision of who to disappoint—her editor, herself, or the man she'd called Father.

TWO

“I often worked harder than the common sailors during the day, and devoted my nights to the study of mathematics, the theory of medicine, and those branches of physical science from which a naval adventurer might derive the greatest practical advantage.”



Bristol

Any dream worth pursuing required toil and hardship, but must it also entail the ruination of a perfectly good pair of trousers? Graham Lambert scowled at a gash in the fabric and slight sting on his calf. Pacing in the shadows had seemed like a good idea until he'd snagged against that cursed nail. He ought to have waited in one place. Stood still. Dash it! Must rash behaviour always be his downfall?

He anchored near the lamplight pouring out the window of the Llandoger Trow public house. Neither the steady stream of sailors from the nearby docks nor the actors exiting the Old Vic Theatre captured so much as a bat of his eye. Instead, he focused on a white-haired gentleman in a Paris beau hat who conversed with two other fellows until a gig was brought 'round. Whoever said women were long-winded harpies had clearly never suffered a half-hour parting from three men who'd spent the evening swapping tales inside a tavern.

At long last, several hearty goodbyes traveled on the night air, and

the men parted ways. Graham pushed off the wall and closed in on the white-haired fellow paying off a stable hand for retrieving his gig. "Mr. Peckwood, a word, if you don't mind. I promise to be brief."

Uriah Peckwood, a prominent and—as some claimed—rather provocative surgeon, turned on his heel. His hat dipped low over a wide swath of forehead, his sharp blue eyes narrowing as he dissected Graham's face. In person, the intelligence of the man's gaze far outshone that of his image in quarterlies and journals. "Do I know you?"

Graham nodded. "Somewhat."

"I've never cared for cryptic conversation, sir. State your name. Make it plain."

"Graham Lambert, at your service." He dipped a bow.

"Lambert?" His name rolled off the surgeon's tongue like the tasting of a foreign sweetmeat—neither familiar nor entirely unpalatable. But then the man's dark eyes brightened, and he lifted a finger. "Ahh, yes. Graham Lambert. I know the name, for you see, I *never* forget names, yet I am unable to place your face."

"Through no fault of your own, sir. We have never formally met." Graham stepped closer to be heard above a particularly boisterous ditty leaching out the tavern's door. "I submitted a proposal for partnership several weeks back."

"That's right." Mr. Peckwood stroked his clean-shaven jawline. "Did you not receive my correspondence on the matter, Mr. Lambert?"

The mere mention of the letter was a fresh punch to the gut, but defeat was not an option he'd willingly embrace. A trait that had served him well over the years. Mostly. "I did receive your letter, this very afternoon, in fact. Hence my immediate need to speak with you. I tried your office, but—"

"My office is always closed on Thursdays."

"Yet it *could* be open, were you to take me on as your partner." Graham flexed his fingers then clenched them tight. Would the man welcome such boldness or scorn it as a sign of ill breeding? Peckwood's unwavering stare gave no clue to his reaction, which put Graham off balance. An unnerving sensation for a seasoned seaman.

"Mr. Lambert, I believe I was very clear in my letter that I am not

interested in a partnership. And with that, I wish you well and bid you good night.” He turned to his gig.

In one swift move, Graham sidestepped him and blocked his way. “Please, I simply ask that you hear me out before you drive off. That’s all.”

Peckwood turned, clearly annoyed, then heaved a great sigh. “Very well, Mr. Lambert. You have my ear.”

Graham retreated a step. This was it. His final shot. The one that would either make or break him. It took every jot of willpower not to grab hold of the man’s shoulders and impress upon him the importance of his acceptance.

“I am a diligent worker, Mr. Peckwood, a surgeon and an apothecary. Dependable to a fault. In my years as a naval surgeon, I learned to push past the usual physical limitations, developing innovations in technique and acquiring the skill to think quickly on my feet. I have seen diseases most have only read of in textbooks and am a practiced hand with injuries of any sort. Though you may look far and wide, you would be hard pressed to find another candidate as well qualified to work alongside you.”

“Therein lies the heart of the matter.” Peckwood shook his head. “I do not now, nor ever, wish to partner with anyone.”

No surprise there. The man’s letter had revealed as much. Graham clenched his jaw. If he could not persuade this visionary of medical thinking, there’d be no way to convince a more traditional surgeon to associate with him, and he’d be on his own. Without funding to furnish a full practice. Left with no choice but to roam about as a traveling healer, offering legitimate services to a distrusting public.

There was nothing for it then but to fire his biggest gun. Would that it might not misfire! He clenched the lapels of his coat. “Taking me on, sir, would free you up from your office commitments, and your work at St. Peter’s would move forward at an exponential rate—a work we both know could change the field of medicine forever.”

The older fellow gaped. “What the devil would you know about that?”

Graham swallowed. Exactly. What did he know other than that

he'd spied the man coming and going at odd hours from the warden's office at the asylum? Still, he'd not learned to bluff a hand of cards in the wardroom for nothing.

"Come now, sir." He patted Peckwood's arm. "You think I would so easily invest my life's savings to associate with a man I did not first research?"

Peckwood harrumphed. "You are canny, Mr. Lambert."

"I am determined, Mr. Peckwood."

"That is more than apparent." The man smiled, then sobered, his gaze locking onto Graham's. "But you should know I am a greater force with which to be reckoned. While your former captain highly recommends your work and your character, enough so that he was able to save you from the disgrace of a dishonourable discharge, it seems even his good word was not enough to thwart your administrative dismissal from His Majesty's Navy."

Air whooshed from Graham's lungs. Blast! The man had done his due diligence as well. Fighting the urge to tuck tail and retreat into the public house, he planted his feet. "I own my past sins, yet in the future I vow that no matter how righteous, my anger shall never best me again."

"I commend you for such an indomitable resolution." Peckwood sniffed, his long nose wrinkling. "Yet intention never negates risk."

"No man can claim to be risk-free, and if he does, he lies. I am no saint, Mr. Peckwood. I am a surgeon, highly skilled and ambitious, two traits which will serve you and the practice well."

"Your candor is refreshing." Peckwood eyed him with a sharp gaze, and Graham got the distinct impression the fellow examined and diagnosed every fault he could find, from the crooked knot in his cravat to the scuff on his left shoe.

"But I am curious, Mr. Lambert. There is a plethora of other surgeons in this wide world of ours. Why such dogged resolve to add your name to the shingle above my door?"

A fair question, one that Graham had given weeks of research to before deciding whose fate to entwine with his own. "It is no secret you are a visionary." He shrugged. "Your work with Sir Humphry Davy on

the anesthetic properties of nitrous oxide is revolutionary. The article you wrote did not receive the recognition it should have, and I daresay if it had, even now the medical community would be pursuing a more humane way of conducting surgeries.”

Peckwood’s jaw dropped. “Are you an avid reader of obscurity, then?”

“I am an avid reader, period.”

A great chuckle rumbled in Peckwood’s throat. “So serious, Mr. Lambert. I wonder if your bedside manner is as grim.”

“I am exemplary with patients, I assure you.”

“Hmm,” Peckwood drawled. “I suppose that will prove out.”

Will prove? His heart faltered a beat. “Sir?”

For a long moment—one that could suck the soul right out of a body—Peckwood stared off into the night sky. As the man’s silence prolonged, hoots and hollers rang from the public house. Tackle clinked and clanked on ships moored for the night. All the while, hope and trepidation rocked Graham’s gut like contrary waves battering either side of a vessel.

“Well, Mr. Lambert,” Peckwood said at length, “being that you come with the highest of praise from your captain and, I suspect, will continue to hound me should I refuse your proposition, I agree to a three-month probationary period, at which point either I shall take you on as a full partner or send you on your way and pocket your deposit. But know this...”

A different man looked out from Peckwood’s eyes. Nay, a demon. One that crawled under Graham’s skin and burned a trail down his spine.

“There is a reason I have never had a partner, for I am a particularly private man. My personal life and my current medical research at St. Peter’s have no part in our agreement and are off-limits to your inquiry. Is that quite understood?”

“Without question.” And without hesitation. If Peckwood were occupied in his own pursuits, there’d be less chance he’d muddle about in Graham’s. “Besides, I imagine I will be more than busy with office calls and home visits.”

“Ha ha! Not to mention manning the surgery on your own each Thursday. I suppose with you about, it will free me up to pursue investors for a certain procedure I am developing.”

Graham shoved out his hand before the fellow could change his mind. “Will you shake on it, then?”

Peckwood gazed at his fingers, mind clearly whirring, before finally clasping his hand. “See you tomorrow morning at eight sharp, Mr. Lambert, at which point we shall iron smooth the financial and other details. Good night.”

Bypassing Graham, the older surgeon hefted himself up into his gig.

Graham tipped his head at him. “Good night, sir.”

He stared down the road long after the carriage departed, unused to the suddenly buoyant feeling in his gut. He hadn’t felt this light since the day he’d left home as a lad of fifteen. But this time, it was a legitimate joy. A decision he’d not carry around like the ball and chain he already wore—one that tethered him to a weighty regret.