

TABLE OF SIGNIFICANT CHARACTERS

- In Order of Appearance -

- Cecilia Bassingthwaite** . . . a plucky young lady
- Miss Darlington** . . . Cecilia's great-aunt
- Cilla** . . . a dolorous memory
- Pleasance** . . . a housemaid and several ghosts
- Eduardo de Luca** . . . an Italian assassin
- Ned Lightbourne** . . . a charming pirate in league with the enemy
- Isabella Armitage** . . . a lady nemesis
- Alexander O'Riley** . . . a dangerous Irish pirate (and concerned chum)
- Patrick Morvath** . . . a villainous poet; the aforementioned enemy
- Constantinopla Brown** . . . a girl just home from boarding school
- Assorted scoundrels**
- Jane Fairweather** . . . a spinster
- Tom Eames** . . . a misled youth
- Various ruffians**
- Teddy Luxe** . . . a fencing master with provocative hips
- Captain Smith** . . . an agent with Her Majesty's secret police brigade
- Unnamed brigands**
- Lady Victoria and Lord Albert** . . . pseudonymous hotel guests
- Cecilia's wits** . . . a costumed company
- Jacobsen** . . . a determined pursuer
- Queen Victoria** . . . England's monarch

TABLE OF SIGNIFICANT CHARACTERS

Prince Albert . . . deceased

Frederick Bassingthwaite . . . an earnest fellow; Cecilia's cousin

Duarte Leveport of Valando . . . a Portuguese baron

The ghost of Emily Brontë . . . alleged

Charles Darwin . . . a rival

Major Candent . . . an officer in Her Majesty's service

Miscellaneous princes

Dr. Lumes . . . a proficient dancer



AN UNEXPECTED CALLER—THE PLIGHT OF THE AUK—
SEMANTICS—THE LEVEL MOON—NOT THE LEVEL MOON—
THE CALLER RETURNS—A DISCUSSION OF CHOLERA—
AN EXPLOSION—LUNCHEON IS SERVED

There was no possibility of walking to the library that day. Morning rain had blanched the air, and Miss Darlington feared that if Cecilia ventured out she would develop a cough and be dead within the week. Therefore Cecilia was at home, sitting with her aunt in a room ten degrees colder than the streets of London, and reading aloud *The Song of Hiawatha* by “that American rogue, Mr. Longfellow,” when the strange gentleman knocked at their door.

As the sound barged through the house, interrupting Cecilia’s recitation mid-rhyme, she looked inquiringly at her aunt. But Miss Darlington’s own gaze went to the mantel clock, which was ticking sedately toward a quarter to one. The old lady frowned.

“It is an abomination the way people these days knock at any wild, unseemly hour,” she said in much the same tone the prime minister had used in Parliament recently to decry the London rioters. “I do declare—!”

Cecilia waited, but Miss Darlington’s only declaration came in the

form of sipping her tea pointedly, by which Cecilia understood that the abominable caller was to be ignored. She returned to *Hiawatha* and had just begun proceeding “toward the land of the Pearl-Feather” when the knocking came again with increased force, silencing her and causing Miss Darlington to set her teacup into its saucer with a *clink*. Tea splashed, and Cecilia hastily laid down the poetry book before things really got out of hand.

“I shall see who it is,” she said, smoothing her dress as she rose and touching the red-gold hair at her temples, although there was no crease in the muslin nor a single strand out of place in her coiffure.

“Do be careful, dear,” Miss Darlington admonished. “Anyone attempting to visit at this time of day is obviously some kind of hooligan.”

“Fear not, Aunty.” Cecilia took up a bone-handled letter opener from the small table beside her chair. “They will not trouble me.”

Miss Darlington harrumphed. “We are buying no subscriptions today,” she called out as Cecilia left the room.

In fact they had never bought subscriptions, so this was an unnecessary injunction, although typical of Miss Darlington, who persisted in seeing her ward as the reckless tomboy who had entered her care ten years before: prone to climbing trees, fashioning cloaks from tablecloths, and making unauthorized doorstep purchases whenever the fancy took her. But a decade’s proper education had wrought wonders, and now Cecilia walked the hall quite calmly, her French heels tapping against the polished marble floor, her intentions aimed in no way toward the taking of a subscription. She opened the door.

“Yes?” she asked.

“Good afternoon,” said the man on the step. “May I interest you in a brochure on the plight of the endangered North Atlantic auk?”

Cecilia blinked from his pleasant smile to the brochure he was holding out in a black-gloved hand. She noticed at once the scandalous lack of hat upon his blond hair and the embroidery trimming his black

THE WISTERIA SOCIETY OF LADY SCOUNDRELS

frock coat. He wore neither sideburns nor mustache, his boots were tall and buckled, and a silver hoop hung from one ear. She looked again at his smile, which quirked in response.

“No,” she said, and closed the door.

And bolted it.

Ned remained for a moment longer with the brochure extended as his brain waited for his body to catch up with events. He considered what he had seen of the woman who had stood so briefly in the shadows of the doorway, but he could not recall the exact color of the sash that waisted her soft white dress, nor whether it had been pearls or stars in her hair, nor even how deeply winter dreamed in her lovely eyes. He held only a general impression of “beauty so rare and face so fair”—and implacability so terrifying in such a young woman.

And then his body made pace, and he grinned.

Miss Darlington was pouring herself another cup of tea when Cecilia returned to the parlor. “Who was it?” she asked without looking up.

“A pirate, I believe,” Cecilia said as she sat and, taking the little book of poetry, began sliding a finger down a page to relocate the line at which she’d been interrupted.

Miss Darlington set the teapot down. With a delicate pair of tongs fashioned like a sea monster, she began loading sugar cubes into her cup. “What made you think that?”

Cecilia was quiet a moment as she recollected the man. He had been handsome in a rather dangerous way, despite the ridiculous coat. A light in his eyes had suggested he’d known his brochure would not fool her, but he’d entertained himself with the pose anyway. She predicted his hair would fall over his brow if a breeze went through it, and

that the slight bulge in his trousers had been in case she was not happy to see him—a dagger, or perhaps a gun.

“Well?” her aunt prompted, and Cecilia blinked herself back into focus.

“He had a tattoo of an anchor on his wrist,” she said. “Part of it was visible from beneath his sleeve. But he did not offer me a secret handshake, nor invite himself in for tea, as anyone of decent piratic society would have done, so I took him for a rogue and shut him out.”

“A rogue pirate! At our door!” Miss Darlington made a small, disapproving noise behind pursed lips. “How reprehensible. Think of the germs he might have had. I wonder what he was after.”

Cecilia shrugged. Had Hiawatha confronted the magician yet? She could not remember. Her finger, three-quarters of the way down the page, moved up again. “The Scope diamond, perhaps,” she said. “Or Lady Askew’s necklace.”

Miss Darlington clanked a teaspoon around her cup in a manner that made Cecilia wince. “Imagine if you had been out as you planned, Cecilia dear. What would I have done, had he broken in?”

“Shot him?” Cecilia suggested.

Miss Darlington arched two vehemently plucked eyebrows toward the ringlets on her brow. “Good heavens, child, what do you take me for, a maniac? Think of the damage a ricocheting bullet would do in this room.”

“Stabbed him, then?”

“And get blood all over the rug? It’s a sixteenth-century Persian antique, you know, part of the royal collection. It took a great deal of effort to acquire.”

“Steal,” Cecilia murmured.

“Obtain by private means.”

“Well,” Cecilia said, abandoning a losing battle in favor of the

original topic of conversation. "It was indeed fortunate I was here. 'The level moon stared at him—'"

"The moon? Is it up already?" Miss Darlington glared at the wall as if she might see through its swarm of framed pictures, its wallpaper and wood, to the celestial orb beyond, and therefore convey her disgust at its diurnal shenanigans.

"No, it stared at Hiawatha," Cecilia explained. "In the poem."

"Oh. Carry on, then."

"'In his face stared pale and haggard—'"

"Repetitive fellow, isn't he?"

"Poets do tend to—"

Miss Darlington waved a hand irritably. "I don't mean the poet, girl. The pirate. Look, he's now trying to climb in the window."

Cecilia glanced up to see the man from the doorstep tugging on the wooden frame of the parlor window. Although his face was obscured by the lace curtain, she fancied she could see him muttering with exasperation. Sighing, she laid down the book once more, rose gracefully, and made her way through a clutter of furniture, statuettes, vases bearing long-stemmed roses from the garden (the neighbor's garden, to be precise), and various priceless (which is to say purloined) goods, to part the curtain, unlatch the window, and slide it up.

"Yes?" she asked in the same tone she had used at the doorstep.

The man seemed rather startled by her appearance. His hair had fallen exactly as she had supposed it would, and his shadowed eyes held a more sober mood than before.

"If you ask again for my interest in the great North Atlantic auk," Cecilia said, "I will be obliged to tell you the bird has in fact been extinct for almost fifty years."

"I could have sworn this window opened to a bedroom," he said, brushing his hair back to reveal a mild frown.

“We are not common rabble, to sleep on the ground floor. I don’t know your name, for you have not done us the courtesy of leaving a calling card, but I assume it would in any case be a *nom de pirata*. I am all too aware of your kind.”

“No doubt,” he replied, “since you are also my kind.”

Cecilia gasped. “How dare you, sir!”

“Do you deny that you and your aunt belong to the Wisteria Society and so are among the most notorious pirates in England?”

“I don’t deny it, but that is my exact point. We are far superior to your kind. Furthermore, these are not appropriate business hours. We are ten minutes away from taking luncheon, and you have inconvenienced us twice now. Please remove yourself from the premises.”

“But—”

“I am prepared to use a greater force of persuasion if required.” She held up the bone-handled letter opener, and he laughed.

“Oh no, please don’t prick me,” he said mockingly.

Cecilia flicked a minuscule latch on the letter opener’s handle. In an instant, with a hiss of steel, the letter opener extended to the extremely effective length of a rapier.

The man stepped back. “I say, there’s no need for such violence. I only wanted to warn you that Lady Armitage has taken out a contract on your life.”

From across the room came Miss Darlington’s dry, brusque laugh. Cecilia herself merely smiled, and even then with only one side of her mouth.

“That is hardly cause for breaking and entering. Lady Armitage has been trying to kill my aunt for years now.”

“Not your aunt,” he said. “You.”

A delicate flush wafted briefly over Cecilia’s face. “I’m flattered. She has actually employed an assassin?”

“Yes,” the man said in a dire tone.

“And does this assassin have a name?”

“Eduardo de Luca.”

“Italian,” Cecilia said, disappointment withering each syllable.

“You need to be a bit older before you can attract a proper assassin, my dear,” Miss Darlington advised from the interior.

The man frowned. “Eduardo de Luca is a proper assassin.”

“Ha.” Miss Darlington sat back in her chair and crossed her ankles in an uncharacteristically dissolute fashion. “I venture to guess Signor de Luca has never yet killed any creature greater than a fly.”

“And why would you say that, madam?” the man demanded.

She looked down her nose at him, quite a feat considering she was some distance away. “A real assassin would hire a sensible tailor. And a barber. And would not attempt to murder someone five minutes before luncheon. Close the window, Cecilia, you’ll catch consumption from that icy draft.”

“Wait,” the man said, holding out a hand, but Cecilia closed the window, turned the latch, and drew together the heavy velvet drapes.

“Do you think Pleasance might be ready soon with our meal?” she asked as she moved across the room—not to her chair, but to the door leading into the hall.

“Sit down, Cecilia,” Miss Darlington ordered. “A lady does not pace in this restless manner.”

Cecilia did as she was bidden but upon taking up her book laid it down again without a glance. She brushed at a speck of dust on her sleeve.

“Fidgeting,” Miss Darlington snapped out the observation and Cecilia hastily placed both hands together on her lap.

“Maybe there will be chicken today,” she said. “Pleasance usually roasts a chicken on Tuesdays.”

"Indeed she does," Miss Darlington agreed. "However, today is Thursday. Where are your wits, girl? Surely you are not in such hysterics over a mere contract of assassination?"

"No," Cecilia said. But she bit her lip and dared a glance at Miss Darlington. The old lady looked back at her with a trace of sympathy so faint it might have existed only in Cecilia's imagination, were Cecilia to have such a thing.

"The assassin won't actually be Italian," she assured her niece. "Armitage doesn't have the blunt to employ a foreigner. It will be some jumped-up Johnny from the Tilbury Docks."

This did not improve Cecilia's spirits. She tugged unconsciously on the silver locket that hung from a black ribbon around her neck. Seeing this, Miss Darlington sighed with impatience. Her own locket of similar forlorn aspect rode the gray crinoline swathing her bosom, and she wished for a moment that she might speak once more with the woman whose portrait and lock of golden hair rested within. But then, Cilla would have even less patience for a sulking maiden.

"Lamb," she said with an effort at gentleness. Cecilia blinked, her eyes darkening to a wistful orphan blue. Miss Darlington frowned. "If it's Thursday," she elaborated, "luncheon will be lamb, with mint sauce and boiled potatoes."

"Yes, you're right," Cecilia said, pulling herself together. "Also peas."

Miss Darlington nodded. It was a satisfactory end to the matter, and she could have left it there. After all, one does not want to encourage the younger generation too much, lest they lose sight of their proper place: under one's thumb. She decided, however, to take pity on the girl, having herself once been as high-spirited. "Perhaps tomorrow the weather will be better fit for some perambulation," she said. "You might go to the library, and afterward get a bun from Sally Lunn's."

"But isn't that in Bath?"

"I thought a change of scenery might do us good. Mayfair is be-

coming altogether too rowdy. We shall fly the house down this afternoon. It will be a chance to give Pleasance a refresher course on the flight incantation's last stanza. Her vowels are still too flat. Approaching the ground with one's front door at a thirty-degree angle is rather more excitement than one likes for an afternoon. And yes, I can see from your expression you still think I shouldn't have shared the incantation's secret with her, but Pleasance can be trusted. Granted, she did fly that bookshop into the Serpentine when they told her they didn't stock any Dickens novels, but that only shows a praiseworthy enthusiasm for literature. She'll get us safely to Bath, and then you can take a nice stroll among the shops. Maybe you can buy some pretty lace ribbons or a new dagger before getting your iced bun."

"Thank you, Aunty," Cecilia answered, just as she was supposed to. In fact she would rather have gone to Oxford, or even just across the park to visit the Natural History Museum, but to suggest either would risk Miss Darlington reversing her decision altogether. So she simply smiled and obeyed. There followed a moment's pleasant quiet.

"Although eat only half the bun, mind you," Miss Darlington said as Cecilia took up *Hiawatha* and tried yet again to find her place among the reeds and water lilies. "We don't want you falling ill with cholera."

"That is a disease of contaminated water, Aunty."

Miss Darlington sniffed, not liking to be corrected. "A baker uses water I'm sure to make his wares. One can never be too careful, dear."

"Yes, Aunty. 'The level moon stared at him, in his face stared pale and haggard, 'til—'"

Crash!

The two women looked over at the window as it shattered. A grenade tumbled onto the carpet.

Cecilia expelled a sigh of tedium. She snapped the book shut, wended her way through the furnishings, pulled back the drapes, and deposited the grenade through the broken windowpane onto the ter-

race, where it exploded in a flash of burning light, brick shards, and fluttering lavender buds.

“Ahem.”

Cecilia turned to see Pleasance standing in the drawing room doorway, plucking a glass splinter from one of the dark curls that habitually escaped her white lace cap.

“Excuse the interruption, misses, but I have news,” she declared in the portentous tones of a young woman who spent too much time reading lurid Gothic fiction and consorting with the figments of her melodramatic imagination. “Luncheon is served.”

Miss Darlington pushed herself up from the chair. “Please arrange for a glazier to come as soon as possible, Pleasance. We shall have to use the Lilac Drawing Room this afternoon, although I prefer to keep it for entertaining guests. The risk from that broken window is simply too great to bear. My own dear cousin nearly died of pneumonia under similar circumstances, as you know.”

Cecilia murmured an agreement, although she recalled that Cousin Alatheia’s illness, contracted while attempting to fly a cottage in a hurricane, had little real consequence other than the loss of a chimney (and five crew members)—Alatheia continuing on in robust health to maraud the coastline for several more years before losing a skirmish with Lord Vesbry’s pet alligator while holidaying in the South of France.

Miss Darlington tapped a path across the room with her mahogany cane, but Cecilia paused, twitching the drapes slightly so as to peer through jagged glass and smoke at the garden. The assassin was leaning back against the iron railings of the house across the street. He noticed Cecilia and touched one finger to his temple in salutation. Cecilia frowned.

“Don’t dawdle, girl,” Miss Darlington chastised. Cecilia lowered the curtain, adjusting it slightly so it hung straight, and then followed her aunt toward the dining room and their Thursday lamb roast.

❖ 2 ❖

THE LADY ANTICIPATES HER CALLER—A DISAPPOINTMENT—
THE PLIGHT OF CECILIA'S DIGITS—ANOTHER EXPLOSION (FIGURATIVE)—
WHISKEY AT WHITE'S—BARBAROUS O'RILEY—THE LOOMING ABBEY—
TWO CAPTAINS CONFER—BETRAYAL IS EXPOSED

Isabella Armitage was no bird-brained girl; and no police force had ensnared her, despite their efforts over the years. Lately, however, she had found herself tempted to do something that would almost certainly see her imprisoned, regardless of her wealth and degree.

The outrage of that Darlington woman displaying herself in plain view (that is, to anyone with binoculars) in such a noble district as Mayfair, when she was no better than a common fingersmith! Lady Armitage could not abide it.

Granted, such outrages had been occurring for a decade, but familiarity was no impediment to Lady Armitage's wrath. As a daughter of the Hollister family from York, none of whom had knowingly spoken to any denizen of Lancashire in the four centuries since the Wars of the Roses, she felt no difficulty sustaining a mere ten years' indignation.

Even so, she'd tried all she could to smooth troubled waters. But Darlington had rudely persisted in avoiding the knife (and gun, poison, rabid dog, fall from a great height, garrote, flaming arrow). The

time had come for different tactics. As a daughter of the Fairley clan on her distaff side, Lady Armitage had all the wit and flexibility that had seen her ancestors survive the civil war by deftly switching sides, religions, and marriages, whenever circumstances required. She needn't try a seventeenth time to exterminate the Darlington woman. She would transition promptly to a new plan.

Killing Cecilia.

The pirate had promised to help. "Just rest, and I'll assassinate her for you," he had said, smiling in a lithe, melting way that reminded Lady Armitage of her second husband before the slow-acting poison began bloating his tongue. She'd been wary about hiring an outsider, but within five minutes of their meeting, the pirate had filled her with murderous excitement. They'd sipped wine, exchanged a few jokes about poison, before getting down to business, and she'd felt deep in her heart (or at least somewhere) that he was the one for the job.

"How would you like it done?" he'd asked. "Gun, garrote?"

Lady Armitage had shrugged. "I leave that up to your artistic discretion, Signor de Luca. But killing only. Nothing impolite. I am an ethical woman, and Cecilia is after all innocent."

He'd raised an eyebrow in dispute of anyone's innocence, and Lady Armitage had felt so gently chided, so tenderly assumed to be naive, just like a sweet and adorable woman, that she had actually blushed for the first time in seventy years. Murdering three husbands (and misplacing a fourth) tended to inure a woman to masculine charm, and yet as this man had looked at her over the rim of his wineglass, she'd found herself unexpectedly aflutter and trying to remember dizzily where she'd stored her wedding ring.

"Miss Darlington will be prostrate with grief at the loss of her niece," she'd said. "It's even better than killing the woman herself. And then of course I'll kill her too, but Cecilia's death will soften her up for assassination."

“It’s an interesting plan,” the signor had agreed. “Tell me about Cecilia. What do I need to know?”

“Oh, she’s a dear girl.” She’d sighed, remembering a quiet, somber child who called her Aunty Army and was fascinated by her dagger collection. That was back in the good old days, down at the docks and along the golden shores, when the Wisteria Society still met regularly to discuss knitting patterns and the latest explosives catalog. How long ago had it been? Long enough that little Cecilia was all grown up and eligible for assassination.

Thinking of it, Lady Armitage had sighed again, melancholic. And Signor de Luca had reached over, one strand of hair falling across his eye roguishly, and patted her hand with gentle sympathy.

“Do it,” she’d said, staring at his long, swooping lashes, his curving lips. “Kill the girl. And then we’ll deal with Darlington.”

He’d laughed and drunk a toast to her brilliance, and she’d spent that evening sewing rosettes onto a garter and dreaming of the Italian hills bright with summer’s sun as she toured them on her (fifth) honeymoon.

The very next day, he’d set her plan into action. And it worked! Lady Armitage watched with bated breath, but after the dust of the explosion settled, she could discern no movement from the Darlington drawing room. Maybe a twitch of the drapes, but that would only be natural considering the great rush of air. On the street, neighbors were gathering in a state of panic, not so much from the explosion as from the realization that there were two pirate houses in their midst, but Lady Armitage had no interest in them. After all, pirates did the civic thing by displaying a black flag from their roof whilst going about pillaging and blowing things apart. If the public failed to look up, whose fault was that?

She turned away from the window, allowing herself a satisfied nod. Poor Cecilia, dead so young. And yet, the chit had been half a ghost already, pallid and quiet: a faint remembrance of her mother.

The thought tossed a memory up with it, a vision of bright billowing hair, flashing eyes . . . and a sword-pierced breast soaked in blood. Lady Armitage shuddered.

Then smiled. This was no time to be maudlin. She'd just killed a girl! Already the air seemed brighter (if literally darker, due to smoke from the bomb). Sweeping herself down upon a pink velvet divan, she reclined sensuously to await Signor de Luca's arrival.

A moment later she sat up to be sure her stockings were taut before easing back once more. With a careful hand, she smoothed the high plume of her snow-colored hair (it is entirely possible snow in parts of the north country could be gray) and settled her expression into elegance.

Several minutes passed without action. Lady Armitage was yawning, scratching at an itch within her ear, when her butler, Whittaker, finally ushered in the pirate.

"What took you so long to get here?" she demanded querulously.

He bowed. "I beg your pardon. I had to climb a drainpipe to reach the front door. It seems your house is currently sitting atop the roof of another."

"We are experiencing minor technical difficulties."

Ever since her lady's maid had thrown all good sense to the wind and run away to become a librarian, Lady Armitage had been forced to fly the house herself. Clearly, however, her brilliant mind overpowered the ancient flight incantation. Last month, she'd bunny hopped the house into the Avon River and had to replace all her carpets; this week she'd aimed for Chesterfield Street and ended up on a rooftop instead. Alas, the perils of genius. A town house was simply too light; no doubt some castle or cathedral would better contain the forces of her great intellect. Besides, she'd always fancied having one of those portcullis things at her front door.

She ought to train one of her other servants to fly the house, but

they were all men, and Lady Armitage doubted their mental strength. Oh, they looked robust enough in their elegant livery, but could they keep it up all night? In her experience, they could not. At least two of her husbands had put it into quagmires, and a third landed it on Queen Victoria's head (the head of the royal statue in Exeter, that is). Lady Armitage thought she was better off managing things herself, and if that meant perching on the occasional rooftop—well, she could simply call it a penthouse.

"Besides," she said to Signor de Luca, "I should imagine climbing is no problem for an Italian."

His expression went momentarily blank as he tried to parse this logic. Then he smiled again. "Half-Italian, ma'am."

"Never mind your preposterous heritage, is the deed done?"

"Yes," he said, and her spirits rose so high they burst forth as a smile from her thin, creased lips.

"That is to say," he added, and her spirits drooped again, as did her mouth. "Not quite yet, my lady. But we have them on the run."

Lady Armitage smacked her hand against the mahogany rim of the divan and tried not to wince as pain shot through her bones. "On the run? On the run? The house is still standing right there!" She gestured to the window, through which the Darlington house could be seen if one walked over and looked out (and down).

"I meant their blood, ma'am," he answered smoothly. Lady Armitage began to suspect his pretty smile was mocking her. "Their pulses will be racing with fear."

"Ha. That is no accomplishment. You might have as easily sneezed in Darlington's direction and achieved the same result. I do not want them running; I want that girl lying still, motionless, dead, and Darlington destroyed by a grief that will end only when I literally destroy her. You have failed me, Signor de Luca!"

She would have swooned in despair, but the divan was rather nar-

row and she did not trust that a faint wouldn't see her toppling onto the floor.

"Ma'am, I assure you not," the man said. He took a step toward her, his smile rising at one tip in much the same way a shark's might when trailing its prey. Lady Armitage watched warily as he knelt on one knee beside the divan and grasped her hand. It was the left hand, with its pale band around the third finger where her ring had been (the same ring with each marriage, for while husbands were easily discarded, a really nice ring, flattering to the finger, was not). He kissed it, then gazed up at her over her knuckles, through his eyelashes. She almost slid right off the velvet into his lap; only her corset, which was too tightly laced for sudden movements, saved her.

"I will admit I like to play a little with my quarry," he said in a wry, murmuring voice. "As you know, a pirate's life can be tedious, and we take our fun where we can."

She sighed. "Eduardo, Eduardo, what shall I do with you?"

"Oh, anything you like, ma'am," he answered, grinning.

She snatched back her hand and scrambled off the divan before she really did find herself in a compromising position. After all, it was nice to dream, but there remained some legal doubt about the vitality of her lost fourth husband, and she could hardly point to the particular heap in the dust-yard that would settle the matter once and for all.

Behind her back, Ned rolled his eyes, but when Lady Armitage glanced his way again he was smiling sweetly as he got to his feet.

Charming boy, she thought. Far too charming for anyone's good. Probably best not to look at him. "Well now," she said briskly, pacing the room, pausing here and there to stroke a stuffed peacock, stare at a portrait of a noble ancestor, shift a chimpanzee's skull slightly on its doily. "I appreciate your jovial manner, Eduardo, but I do so want the girl dead. Perhaps you could, for me, try a little solemnity? A little stabbing, or suffocating her in her—um, chair? Not in her bed, of

course, that would be scandalous. And no more incendiary devices. There are treasures in that house to be scavenged once Darlington is dead, and a bomb might damage them. When you have completed your task, bring me the girl's smallest finger, or perhaps a toe or two, and I will pay you our agreed amount."

She risked another glance, and her pulse faltered as she saw a sudden coldness in his eyes. But the next moment, without even blinking, he was returning her gaze with pleasant equanimity.

"Her smallest finger," he said, and bowed. If he was down there a touch longer than ordinary, Lady Armitage thought nothing of it, except perhaps that he meant to show her respect. When he straightened, his hair had slipped down, and he seemed younger—yet more dangerous to her heart, both in terms of sentiment and in regard to its inability to function with a knife impaled in it.

"I shall retire to Lyme Regis. When you have killed the girl, you will find me situated on Marine Parade. I have a mind to walk the Cobb and feel the sea breeze through my tresses."

His gaze flicked to the erect fan of her hair, but otherwise his expression did not alter. "That will be a long journey from London. You might have to wait awhile for your *digitus truncatum*."

"Oh yes, I forgot you lost your house and are reduced to traveling by mere horse. Poor boy, less a pirate these days than a highwayman."

He said nothing in quite the most disturbing manner, and Lady Armitage found herself reaching for the locket she kept on a fob chain at her waist. Its cool gold surface always eased her thoughts, despite the heated memory it contained. *Oh, Cilla, she thought, what has the world come to, without you in it? Pretty boys with provocative smiles, sweet girls who will not die. It is almost more than a poor, frail woman can bear!*

She turned to look again at the assassin. "I want her dead, do you understand? Dead. And I want proof. You have seven days."

“Your wish is my command.”

She extended her long white hand, fingers draping from their bones, rings glinting in the light of the chandelier above. She applied the steely will of her Thorvaldson heritage (from her grandmother on her father’s side) and absolutely did not allow the hand to tremble, no matter what her heart was doing within its secret cage.

He crossed the room, took her hand—but then unexpectedly lowered it, and, leaning closer, he kissed her mouth instead.

It was as if he had tossed another of his bombs; heat, wishes, and desiccated flowers exploded in her brain. Shifting back, he gave her a thoroughly piratical grin, then departed the room without further word.

“Well,” Lady Armitage said, fanning herself. “Outrageous!”

Falling onto the divan, she laid a hand against her brow. She felt decidedly hot and bothered. But being a Thorvaldson made her kin to Vikings, who had brutalized half the known world, and she had practiced her own piracy ruthlessly, successfully (indeed, Vikingly), for decades before that boy had even been born. No one kissed Lady Isabella Armitage and got away with it for long.

While she awaited the luncheon bell, she pondered whom she might employ to assassinate the assassin.

For the rest of that afternoon Ned sat in White’s club for gentlemen, drinking whiskey to cleanse the taste of Lady Armitage from his mouth. He had stopped off at Henry Poole & Co. along the way and outfitted himself in the best suit counterfeit money could buy, for he always honored the club’s dress code, even if he was not, legally speaking, a member. He had finally succeeded in ridding himself of the old lady’s tang and was contemplating where he might sleep that night when a dark-haired man dropped abruptly into the chair opposite him.

Damn. It was Alex O’Riley—pirate, smuggler, general rogue about town, and just who Ned least wanted to see right now. Without a word, the man slouched back in the chair, his long black coat falling open to reveal a shirt bereft of either tie or waistcoat. He rested his boots upon the mahogany table as if he was in a local pub and pushed a hand against one dark blue eye, squinting at Ned with the other as if he’d just come from *another* local pub and still had the hangover to prove it.

Ned frowned. Alex was the sort who gave pirates a bad—that is to say, an even worse—name; one almost expected him to shout, *Ahoy!* while pushing people off a plank from his sitting room into shark-infested waters far below. He was also Ned’s favorite person in the world. They had swindled lords together, got drunk together more times than either could remember, and once they forced Alex’s ramshackle house to its limits making the London-Cashel run in less than twelve hours, although they did lose a few windowpanes along the way. Ned counted him as something greater than a brother: a true friend.

“Go away,” he muttered, drinking the last of his whiskey in one swallow.

“Charming,” Alex replied lightly. He crossed one ankle over the other, his boot buckles imperiling the table’s polish and causing a nearby gentleman to gasp in outrage. “You look miserable. What have you been doing, handing out free food or something?”

Ned poured more whiskey from a crystal decanter. “Worse. Why am I looking at your ugly face, O’Riley? Aren’t you supposed to be in Ireland?” He made an offering gesture with the decanter.

“Cheers,” Alex said, taking it and drinking without any intervention of glass or good manners. The neighboring gentleman gasped more pointedly; even Ned raised an eyebrow. “Don’t mind me,” Alex said with a crooked smile. “I was indeed in Ireland, so I need all the alcohol I can get.”

“Your father?”

The decanter came down on the table with a thud. “Let’s not talk about it. What brings you to White’s on this fine day?”

“I’m meeting someone you don’t want to. Hence, go away.”

“Who?”

Ned answered with no more than a long, cold stare, and Alex stopped smiling. He swung his feet down from the table. “Not—”

“Yes. Have I mentioned, go away?”

Alex leaned forward, somber. “Damn, Ned, are you sure you should be doing that? I know he—”

“I’m sure.”

“Can’t I help you to—”

“No. I don’t need any help.”

“Everyone needs help sometimes.”

Ned scowled. Cilla had said those same words to him once, and her ghost had whispered them through the years ever since, reminding him of dark promises he had yet to keep. His scowl shifted into a grim smile. “I’m better off on my own, O’Riley. You can help by leaving before he gets here.”

“Look,” Alex said, uncharacteristically serious. “I know we’ve done some wild things in our day, but this is more dangerous than even I’d want to contemplate, and that’s saying something. I think you’ve gone mad.”

Ned laughed. “No doubt. Now, stop talking. He just walked in. If you value our friendship, go steal something—seduce someone—just go.”

“All right.” Alex stood, but he lingered a moment longer, frowning down at Ned. “I’ll leave, but know that I’m in London if you need me.”

“I won’t need you.”

Alex reluctantly left, slipping the neighboring gentleman’s gold cigarette case from the table into his coat pocket along the way. Ned

would have whispered, *I don't need anyone at all*, but at that moment a shadow fell over him, a coolness, a great dragging silence like the empty dark chambers of an ancient abbey. Ned sighed into his whiskey glass.

"Captain Morvath," he said as the man slid into a chair. This one didn't slouch or put up his feet. This one held himself like a cocked weapon.

"Edward Lightbourne." It was a soft voice, typical of those who long had spoken with great power; a voice that could whisper death in a tower room and far below a man would be strangled among the garden roses.

"You should say Captain Lightbourne," Ned replied.

"Captain of what? Your house fell off a cliff. Captain of a horse, perchance? Or a rented carriage?"

Ned said nothing, swallowed whiskey. He looked sidelong at the sleek, gray-haired man, seeing only angles like a scimitar, eyes like char, cruel suggestions in the shadows. Behind him, at the far end of the room, Alex was glancing back worriedly. The whiskey burned in Ned's throat.

"I've been looking for you," Morvath said ominously.

Ned shrugged. "I was busy with a personal matter."

"You have no personal matters until you get my job done. Who was that man you were just talking to?"

"Some idiot trying to sell me on an investment idea."

"I hope you didn't listen to him. Believe me when I tell you people can't be trusted. Which reminds me, there was an explosion in Chesterfield Street earlier. If you were the one responsible . . ."

"I wasn't," Ned lied complacently.

"I want the girl brought to me safe and sound, Lightbourne. No explosions. Do you understand?"

"I understand." In fact he was only too well aware of the writhing

depths of Morvath's psyche, where a bastard heritage the captain could never properly claim lurked like an aquatic monster, rearing now in a moment of narcissism, now in a moment of abject worthlessness. Morvath was riding that monster with the intention of destroying anyone who had offended him, but his plan for Cecilia seemed in some ways worse than destruction.

Ned tried not to think about it. "You can count on me," he said.

The captain expelled a hissing laugh, and Ned understood he was not counted on beyond the merest fraction. It came as a relief. People whom Patrick Morvath relied upon tended to end up facedown beneath the roses.

"Anyone tries to assassinate her, you kill them," Morvath said, and Ned tried not to smirk. "Darlington house is on the move. I heard it from over on Curzon Street. Someone is making a real hash of the spell's unmooring phrase."

"Interesting." Ned drank whiskey again and wished he could unmoor himself and fly away to some cozy hearth fire miles from here, where the drink was warm milk and the company not a homicidal maniac.

"Follow them," Morvath ordered. "Steal a house or, I don't know, a wheelbarrow for all I care. And no more distractions with 'personal matters' if you don't want me to start docking you."

"You haven't paid me any wages at all yet," Ned reminded him.

"I wasn't talking about docking wages," Morvath said, and stared pointedly at Ned's ear. "Time is running out. Everything must be in place before the Queen's Jubilee Banquet. All the other elements of my plan are coming together like the lines of an exquisite poem. My spies are ready, my artillery complete. It's beautiful, Edward, the best plan that's ever been made. Only this last thing remains. If you fail me with it, or betray me, you'll be sorry. 'In the next world I could not be worse than I am in this.'"

Ned nodded. There was really nothing to say when the captain began quoting his ill-fated birth father. At least it was better than when he began quoting his own poetry. Ned tried not to shudder at the very thought. Glancing over the man's shoulder, he saw that Alex had finally left. Something spiky moved in his heart. Damn that anyone should take a pirate at his word. But he'd gone into this venture alone, and really a friend would only get in the way. He looked back at Morvath coolly.

"What about Miss Darlington?"

Morvath's face darkened. "I don't care about her," he growled. "Just Cecilia. Understand?"

Ned set down his whiskey and turned a smile—hard, sharp, uncompromised by humor—to the older man. "Your servant, sir."

"Excellent," Morvath said. "Soon, Edward, very soon, England will burn. It's going to be a beautiful thing."

3

A BOTANICAL ADVENTURE—THE INFLUENCE OF GHOSTS—
THE WISTERIA LADIES' SOCIETY—MISS DARLINGTON SURRENDERS—
PREVENTATIVE MEASURES—A BANDIT, A SKYLARK—
A VERBAL SALLY—MISS BASSINGTHWAITE—THE HALFPENNY
BRIDGE—ANOTHER SALLY· LUNN—CECILIA APPROACHES THE LIBRARY

It was not the thorn bending to the honeysuckles that was the cause of Cecilia's annoyance that morning, but the honeysuckles embracing her ankles as she tried to walk through the field. Flowers were altogether charming things, giving her hours of occupation as she arranged them in vases and pressed them in poetry books, but this indiscreet manner in which hedges overflowed and rambled all through the grass was decidedly uncouth.

Of course, she would not be trudging through them had the house gone into the actual city of Bath as it was meant. Pleasance could not explain what had happened.

"The compass was accurate," she had averred. "The incantation was incantated just right. I did all the math forward and back. It came out perfect."

And yet here they were in a field of cows and feral flowers, half a mile from the city.

Pleasance had dismantled the wheel, searching for a cause, which was pointless since the steering array was not attached to anything mechanical, merely serving as a conduit for the spell to provide direction. She had inspected the navigation tools. She had also held a conference with the old ghosts and villains who plagued her penny-dreadful consciousness, demanding they leave her in peace while she was flying.

Cecilia was privately inclined to believe therein lay the problem and could not understand why Miss Darlington persisted in allowing Pleasance the helm. But she also could not understand why she herself, and indeed all young pirates of her acquaintance, were forced through a long training regime—studying thaumaturgical physics, writing essays, taking countless elocution lessons, running a mile in full bustled gown—before being allowed their wings, and yet servants were just handed a copy of the highly secret, highly powerful spell and told to have it memorized by the end of the week.

She did not argue, however, because if the matter was examined too closely other questions regarding servants might arise, such as *Why don't you wash your own dishes?* and *Why don't you dress yourself for parties?*, and Cecilia was careful not to be too clever for her own good.

Besides, her elders knew what they were doing. After all, they had managed to keep control over the incantation for almost two hundred years, ever since Black Beryl introduced it to England.

Beryl had not originally been a pirate. She'd been the hardy young wife of Jeremiah Black, failed explorer—the failure being illuminated when he smashed their ship into an island in the Indian Ocean while seeking passage from London to Mexico. But on the shore of that island Beryl had found an old washed-up bottle containing a Latin poem. When she realized speaking the poem aloud created a magic that could move objects, regardless of weight, the possibilities had become readily apparent to her in a way they were not to her husband (mainly on account of him having been bashed to death with a compass

by “persons unknown”). She’d commandeered a local’s hut and flown back to England, where she shared the incantation with the ladies in her book club. They had turned from casual literary criticism to piracy with remarkable ease, establishing a class of magnificent women in flying mansions, thus causing a collapse in the hot-air-balloon picnicking industry—and a whole new meaning to the phrase “groundless fears.”

Cecilia had grown up on stories about those exciting days. Miss Darlington’s history lessons had been full of gunfire and brimstone. And villains had abounded, such as the book club members who found a devious use for the incantation, surreptitiously moving people and things rather than buildings, thereby committing vulgar witchcraft. The more honorable members had been forced to separate themselves from these degenerates by forming the Wisteria Society, a noble coterie of ladies who were virtuously open about their crimes.

“Two roads diverged in a yellow-wallpapered room, and we pirates took the better one,” Miss Darlington had told ten-year-old Cecilia, brandishing the dagger she liked to use to direct her lessons. “Anyone who dislikes pirates needs to blame those wicked witches in the first place!”

Then there had been the army. If His Majesty’s troops had not responded to the advent of airborne crime by trying to put the Wisteria Society back in their proper place—i.e., on the ground and preferably in the kitchen—the ladies would never have learned how to fight. Thus weaponized piracy was clearly the army’s fault.

“The war ended over a hundred years ago,” Miss Darlington had explained to Cecilia when the little girl had offered to rush out and join the battle. “Land-based guns were useless against flying houses, and the army finally gave up. But we can never relax. Anti-smuggling patrols and arrest warrants for minor infractions like armed bank robbery are only some of the indignities the government continues