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SATURDAY, November 12, 1898

"NO, HE IS GONE TO ENGLAND."

I clung to this fiction as a drowning man clings to a slip of debris, even as the rip tide pulls him out to an unforgiving ocean. My left hand gripped the cushion of the couch, and the other held Shao's hand, and those two small connection points were all that kept me from bolting. A terrible chill crept through my limbs: an ethereal cold, not of frost and winter, but of sheer animal terror and an instinctual urge to bolt. I shook my head, inhaled slowly and focused on the opposite wall, where Mr. Fish's lovely red paintings of Australia provided a stark counterpoint to the grey Canadian landscape outside the parlor windows. "He is gone to England, Mr. McGregor," I insisted. It was true, it had to be true, I needed them all to believe it true --

The people gathered in Mr. Fish's parlor for Jess' funeral, all dressed in dark finery and attempting to uphold an image of refinement, paused their conversations to listen. Some were so bold, they turned their heads to watch, and a few of the less cultivated guests

even leaned in to listen to the constable, not bothering to hide their interest at all.

He crouched before me. "No, Miss Saunders," said Rufus McGregor.

One might assume that a big, barrel-chested man like Mr. McGregor would be loud and brash, but he possessed a talent for speaking softly when discretion demanded it. His voice dropped to a hush. "No, there's no doubt, my dear," he said, "The body still wore scraps of clothes, and the inner lining of the coat was monogrammed, and your father's watch was still clipped to the waistcoat." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small burlap bag, heavy and rounded, and he held it between his calloused palms like an offering before pressing it into my grasp. "We are quite certain, the man we found was Dr. John Saunders, and he has been murdered."

At the mere whisper of the dreaded word, a terrible stillness fell over the crowd.

From the bag tumbled my father's pocket watch. The soft gold finish had been etched dull by salt water. I flicked open the cover, sand grinding in the hinge, and saw that it had protected the engraved message on the inner curve from the ravages of the sea.

JOHN SAUNDERS, The Royal Hospital of St. Bartholomew, 1875

I closed my eyes and snapped the watch case shut it again. Mr. McGregor squeezed my hand as my heart galloped in my chest. "But, but he... he has gone..."

"He was shot?" said Mr. Fish, aghast. He laid his long, slender fingers on my shoulder, but he was a dour old bachelor unaccustomed to giving comfort, and the gesture felt bony and awkward.

"No, sir -- " said McGregor.

Stabbed, I thought.

"He was stabbed -- "

In the neck.

"The back of the neck, sir."

God's teeth.

McGregor stood to face Mr. Fish. "It was the attack of a vicious coward," he continued, and though he knew he must explain, he was

reluctant to tell the awful truth. The constable, whom I'd not seen since last August in the coal mining town of Cumberland, looked older than I remembered; he'd grown world-weary and sick-of-heart. His face, lop-sided and lumpy from years of boxing, had lost some of its optimism, but he was a man with purpose, too, and a plan. While his expression was tired and pitying, his brown eyes contained a smoldering focus. "Forgive me, Miss Saunders," he said, then to Mr. Fish, he continued, "Two Chinamen fetched the constable in Union Bay. They claimed to be digging for clams, but I suspect they were scouring the beach north of Union Bay for an opium shipment." His eyes flitted to Shao. "The contraband is packed in barrels of salt and tipped overboard to avoid the customs officials, and when the salt dissolves after a day or two, the barrels float and come ashore." He returned his attention to me. "But, whether it was opium or clams, they instead stumbled upon the remains of a man. It's our good fortune that they were moral men, and reported their gruesome discovery, rather than push him back in the sea."

Yes, how very fortunate.

"How do you know he was murdered?" Mr. Fish insisted. "Perhaps it was an accident. We mustn't rush to assumptions."

Mr. Fish was trying his very best to save my reputation, bless him.

But McGregor was a man of the law and he had no concern for the reputations of little girls. "I saw it myself, sir. The body was very much decayed but the wound was quite clear: a single thrust through the nape of the neck, the spine cleanly severed."

Shao drew me under his arm. "Have a little compassion!" he said, "Can't you see, she's in shock?"

McGregor ignored him and angled his face down to me. "What of the thief Jack Hunter? Have you seen him since summer?"

I shook my head, still dazed. "No."

"Not once? I've heard rumors he's in Victoria --"

"No, no, I haven't," I stammered, still thinking frantically. I pressed my face to Shao's chest, squeezed my eyes shut, tried to think, but my mind was a flock of sparrows, scattering in all directions.

Mr. Fish tut-tutted. "Give her space, man," he said, "Can't you see,

the wee girl needs an opportunity to breath? Come, Amaryllis. It's into the attic room with you. Mr. Chen, please accompany our dear Lizzie. She ought not to be alone with this grievous news."

Before I could protest, I found myself ushered upstairs under Shao's protective arm, and only released when I'd been installed upon the edge of the bed and the door firmly closed.

I set the watch on the mattress and dropped my head in my hands. The sparse attic room reeled around me, so I closed my eyes tightly as wordless thoughts whirled through my skull. What do I say? What do I do? What *could* I do, in the face of this news? The bed squeaked as Shao sat next to me. He wrapped his arms around me, and when he held me close, I lay still against him as my mind struggled. How to explain, how to feel, how to react? His presence alone soothed me. He smelled warm and sweet and familiar: a fleeting hint of comfort and stability amid the chaos. "I'm sorry, Liz," he whispered, and he pressed a kiss to the crown of my head. "I'm so sorry."

I pressed my face into him and said nothing, because I didn't know what to say.

Let me be honest: I'd known my father was dead for months and months. I knew he was dead because I'd killed him.

But maybe I'd told my own lies so often, I'd started to believe them. I'd put my past behind me and I'd been looking only to the bright future: Chen Shaozhu and I were to marry, we would own a little business in Victoria, and we would be happy together, forever and ever. But I'd been so blinded by the light that I hadn't noticed the sinister truth, lurking in the shadows like a panther, preparing to spring.

I pressed my ear against his chest and heard the strong, steady rhythm of his heart. His warm hands held me tightly. The toes of our boots touched. We sat as close as two bodies can be, yet I felt as though he was drifting a million miles away across a widening divide.

"If Jack is behind this, you must tell McGregor," he said.

Ten days had passed since I'd last seen Jack Hunter, striding away through the crowded streets of Victoria. I'd encouraged him to be a free man again. I hoped he'd seize that opportunity and quit this

place. Victoria was a city, true, but it was small and parochial, and its networks were limited in size; it would be a simple task for a lawman to track a cur of Jack's caliber through the opium dens and brothels. Jack was the only person alive who knew what had happened that night, on the beach, when I slammed his hunting knife down through the back of my father's neck.

My belly clenched, my blood chilled. This was fear. I did not feel it often, but I felt it now.

Like a slipped gear falling into place, Shao's statement knocked my frantic thoughts into alignment. I knew what I must do.

I couldn't take the risk that McGregor would find Jack Hunter, because I knew that Jack would tell the truth - all of it - if it meant escaping the hangman's noose.

That noose would then slip, very quickly, around my own throat.

"Liz?"

Betrayal seeped through Shao's puzzled expression. My heart snapped in two.

"I don't know where Jack is."

"No, but you lied to McGregor: you saw Jack only a few weeks ago," he said, and with terrible realization, he recoiled and added, "You lied to me, too."

"I haven't --"

The betrayal shifted into anger. "You did. You told me you received a letter from your father in October."

"Yes, but --"

"How can that be, Liz, if Dr. Saunders was already dead?"

I shrank back from him. I tried to summon up a steel-clad answer, but every excuse slipped through my grasp like mist. How could I explain? I was still caught in the urge to protect Shao from the awful account of that August night, but every lie I conjured would only make this situation worse, and in my frantic need to shelter him from my monstrous actions, the thought of telling the truth never even occurred.

I bit hard into the flesh of my cheek. The bright stab of pain and the taste of blood gave me focus. There was only one thing I

could say now, and the words ripped my throat as I forced them out.

"You need to go, Shao."

I may as well have slapped him, for the look he gave me.

"What?!"

I disentangled myself from his grasp, erecting a barrier of empty space between us. My voice didn't sound like my own; it was too cold, too flat. "I need you to leave." At his look of confusion, I almost reconsidered my course but instead, I pointed to the door. "You must go, right now."

"Lei Zi!"

I set my teeth. "Go downstairs, Shao. My father is dead. I'm an orphan. If you're going to demand that I tell you what happened, then you'll have to wait, because I need a few moments to collect myself. Then," I took a deep breath, knowing bitterly this would be my final lie to him, "Then I'll come down and meet you in the kitchen, and I'll tell you everything."

He looked stricken, but furious, too, that I'd dare to dismiss him, as if he was only the help, as if any equality between us was fiction.

I stood and pressed a kiss on his lips, and whispered in his ear, "I love you."

That was not a lie -- that would never be a lie -- but I knew when he looked back at this memory, he would hate me for that sentence. He would never believe that I loved him.

Reluctantly, Shao accepted my terms. He stepped outside the door and closed it. His footsteps echoed and creaked on the narrow stairs leading down to the kitchen.

And when they were gone, I began.

First, I dragged my father's Gladstone bag from under the bed and checked all its contents: the envelope of money, Father's medical kit, and Shao's curved apothecary knife. From the night table, I snatched a copy of William Osler's "Principles and Practices of Medicine" that I'd borrowed from Emma Briggs. Inside its pages was a photo of my sister Violet that I'd been using as a bookmark. I took the salt-worn watch, too, and put both book and watch in the bag. Lastly,

almost as an afterthought, I grabbed my mother's cameo from the chest of drawers and placed it in, too. Then I snapped the brass clasp closed and heaved the bag onto my hip; it was heavy, but not enough to slow me down.

I threw open the narrow attic window. Low grey clouds rolled in from the Strait of Juan de Fuca, but the rain had not yet started to fall and the roof tiles were dry. I wasn't afraid of falling: honestly, if I slipped and tumbled down two stories and broke my neck and died, it would've solved a great many problems.

It was easy to scoot down the roof to the gutter, swing over the edge to the rose arbor, and climb down hand-over-hand to the yard, holding the Gladstone bag between my knees. Then I vaulted the back gate and sprinted down the alleyways of James Bay, towards the Inner Harbor, and I did not look back.



I RESOLVED that I would not cry, not yet.

Believe me, I desperately wanted to, but my eyes stayed dry and, for the first time since McGregor arrived, my pulse steadied. It might've been my own callousness, or merely a bestial instinct to survive, but as I left the tidy neighborhood of James Bay in my wake, I thought nothing of Shao or Mr. Fish or my father or all the people I'd betrayed. I jogged passed the Government buildings and the old Indian women selling salmon from their canoes on the waterfront, through the crowds of a late Saturday afternoon, and I realized that I couldn't waste time thinking backwards and regretting. I must only look forward, devising my next action. If I ran in a panic, they'd find me with no trouble at all. I needed a path to follow, a purpose, a goal. I must leave Victoria as soon as possible: I needed a destination.

A murky mist rose up from the cobbles around the Inner Harbor, muffling my footsteps and snaking around my ankles, while thick, spongy clouds rolled across the sea. I ran across the narrow, wooden pedestrian causeway that spanned the mudflats, heaving the clumsy walrus-hide bag on my hip. When I reached the north side of the

bridge and Victoria's commercial district, I paused in the sheltered doorway of a brick warehouse to consider my next step. The first fat splats of rain hit the pavement.

Mr. Fish could no longer give me a home. I couldn't go to Mr. Lim, Shao's generous and benevolent employer, in case my grotesque past ruined any hope for Shao's future. I dared not go to Mason and Emma Briggs. I knew Emma would give me a haven if I asked because she had a generous heart and an adventurous spirit, but I couldn't bring my troubles to their household. She was a new mother, and Dr. Briggs had been a good friend, and I wouldn't wish to ensnare them in this mess, too.

I pressed the heel of my hand to my forehead.

God damn it.

They'd found my father. I thought John Saunders was gone, washed away from the face of the earth by the unyielding current, but I was stupid and thoughtless. If the ocean could return Jess to her family for burial, why didn't I realize it could do the same for Father?

Damn him!

We would've been so happy together, Shao and I. Our whole future would've been wonderful. Like an aching bruise, I sensed the fullness of our marriage and the sacrifice of its loss. All those delicious hopes and dreams had vanished in an instant, a candle puffed out with a single breath, but even knowing how beautiful it could've been, I never once considered going back to Shao. I'd trespassed too deeply against him, I'd abandoned him, I'd lied to him. He'd never forgive me. He'd hate me with every cell of his body.

And I, a murderer and a liar with the heart of a devil, deserved every ounce of his hatred.

I needed to leave Victoria as fast as possible, but how? Passenger ships and trains worked on strict schedules, and I didn't have the luxury of waiting a day or two. A single dirt road led north from Victoria, over the treacherous summit of Malahat Mountain to the town of Duncan's Crossing, but it was an overgrown, rocky track with a reputation for being terribly dangerous to cross in winter. I wouldn't make it halfway on foot before freezing. I had no provisions

- I didn't even have a coat - and it would be folly to walk it. No one would rent a wagon or a horse to a lone girl; such a transaction would set tongues wagging, quickly ruining the good reputation of a stable or livery.

I sank into the doorway and curled my arms around my legs. I was out of my depth. I knew the secrets and structures of the human body, but I had no clue how to travel in wintertime. I'd never had to *escape* before. The miserable, cold rain began to fall in sheets. My eyes drifted towards the dingy, narrow cleft of Wharf Street, that gloomy causeway that curves along the most dismal section of Victoria's waterfront, and the seed of an idea began to germinate.

It was not a good idea, I'm the first to admit it, but beggars can't be choosy.

I hurried down Wharf Street. Establishments here were of a lesser quality than those in James Bay, and on a rainy mid-afternoon, the public houses were crammed full of busy workmen slaking their thirsts. The only women I passed were fancy ladies waiting at the corner of Wharf and Broughton, their skirts hiked up to their bare knees, flashing toothless grins at anyone who walked steady or looked half-sober. They were bunters, working for their suppers, and maybe a bit of bob for a room tonight. I wasn't their clientele, so they showed no interest in the likes of me.

I reached a narrow black door squeezed between two storefronts - the front step of the Siren's Rest - and seized up the brass knocker to slam it hard against the wood. A bang echoed through the halls, howling for entrance.

A scrawny hag threw open the door. Her lank hair was pulled back in a severe bun, her musty blue dress hung heavy with filth around her knees. Her name was Mavis, and she ran the establishment, and she wasn't known for her charity. At the sight of me, her bulging eyes rolled in their sockets and her pock-marked jaw slackened, but before she had a chance to exclaim her displeasure at seeing me, I shoved her out of my way and stormed inside.

From upstairs came the sound of men's voices, women's laughter, grunts of drunken pleasure, squeaks of springs and floor boards,

couples captured in the agony of bliss. I dropped my bag to the floor. A miasma of dust puffed up around it.

"Where's he gone?" I demanded.

"Who?" she squawked, "Y'mean Nelly's John?"

"Where did he go?" I shouted, "Is he still here?"

"I ain't telling you a damn thing," she spat, and a long arc of spittle glistened on her chin. "Git out, you little bint! Git out before I --"

Compared to the fear I felt at the prospect of the noose, I wasn't afraid of Mavis. A flood of bottled-up emotions surged up: the disappointment, the despair, the anger and rage. I knew what I needed and nothing would stand between me and my goal. "Tell me where to find Jack Hunter," I demanded. I am not a large person, but neither was Mavis. I seized her bone-rack shoulders and pushed her against the wall. "Where is he!?"

Upstairs, sounds fumbled to a stop, replaced by the thudding clamor of bare feet, men shouting out in anger, girls wondering what the hell was happening at the front door.

Mavis gaped at my outburst, but the eel-woman had lived a long and violent life amongst unpredictable patrons, and she didn't let surprise get the best of her for long. She grabbed my hair, pulled hard on a handful of red tresses, wrenched my head down. Her arm tightened around my neck. I threw a punch at her, connecting with her jaw. Her teeth chattered but she did not let go.

Boots scuffled at the top of the stairs. Even as Mavis screeched curses in my ear, I craned my head against her grip to look up.

There stood Jack, pulling his shirt on in a hurry.

"What the hell--" he started, but when he saw my face, his eyes widened.

"Git out, ya bint!" Mavis hissed in my ear, "Git outta here b'fore you ruin the place!"

"Jesus Christ!" Jack shouted, thundering down the stairs. "Let her go!"

Mavis pulled more cruelly, forced my head down, but I locked my eyes on Jack and snarled.

I had sought him out with the intention to seek his council. I'd

intended to warn him that McGregor was trying to find him and hang him, and ask him the best way to leave Victoria. I'd even thought I might ask his opinion where to go.

But when I saw his face, such a ferocious rage coursed through me that every rational urge vanished.

Jack Hunter had ruined my life. This damnable wretch had destroyed everything my family had built; he'd dogged my father to the ends of the Empire, he'd exposed all of my father's wickedness, and he'd wrenched from me a very comfortable and secure home. Yes, it was built on lies; I know that, as well as anyone. But Jack Hunter had been the key that opened the door to my Hell, and seeing him there, descending the stairs, reminded me of all I'd lost.

No words formed in my mind. Instead, rage coursed through my hands, up my arms, across my shoulders. It spread like a blight over my vision, my brain, my heart, my head. I roared at him, but Jack was too stunned by the sight of us, smashing and punching and tearing at each other, to realize my fury had shifted to him. He grabbed the madam by the back of her skinny neck.

"Let her go!" he demanded, "God damn it, Mavis, let the girl go!"

Jack yanked her off me, tossing her aside, and instantly I flew at him, eager for blood. He reeled back and pinned me against the wall with one arm. I spat and scratched and kicked, but he was so very much bigger than me; if any of my childish assaults connected with him, he gave no indication they hurt.

"She's gone mad!" Mavis screeched, "Toss her out!"

"Liz!" he said, searching my face for any scrap of an explanation, "Lizzie, what's happened?"

At that small gesture of concern, my anger soured into despair. I was tired. I was sore. The fight drained out of me. When Mavis rebounded and returned, she managed a sharp slap across my face, but I barely felt the impact.

Too much. It was all too much to bear. My father was dead and everyone knew it, and I would hang for killing him, and my life was over. Only fifteen, and soon I would dangle from a scaffold, with a crowd around me all pushing forward to snatch locks of my hair for

their macabre collections. Oh, God! I didn't regret what I had done - I never once felt remorse for stabbing my father - but I felt remorse for ruining Shao's life, for lying to him, for losing him. As Jack released me from his hold against the wall, I felt the disappointment filling me up, and I slumped to the floor.

I was going to die.

My hands clamped over my face.

God damn it, he killed Violet, and in a terrible twist, he's managed to kill me, too.

Jack's hands wrapped around my shoulders. "What's happened, Liz?"

I couldn't speak. I'd never felt such a consuming sorrow; it was as if an entire lifetime of bottled-up grief came pouring out. I couldn't even look at him as I crumbled, I was so ashamed of my despair. Tears streamed down my cheeks and I sobbed into my hands.

If he was surprised by my outburst, he said nothing to reflect it. Jack ordered Mavis to lock the door. Then he lifted me up, snagged the Gladstone bag with one hand, and carried me upstairs, and took me into the moldy little bedroom where once I'd sat with Nell. He dumped me on the bed, and I heard Nell give a shout of surprise from her hiding place behind the door.

"Get out, Nelly," he said to her.

"Jesus, she's having the fits--"

"GET OUT."

Nell fled and he slammed the door after her.

I curled into a ball to be as small as possible and sobbed into the filthy mattress until my eyelids were raw. The mattress muffled my horrible gasping noises, but it also stunk of sour sweat and tasted of mildew, and eventually I sat up, rested my head upon my knees, and scrubbed at my eyes with the back of my hand, feeling empty and embarrassed and heartbroken and vulnerable. When I finally looked at him, Jack was fastening his suspenders to the buttons at the waist of his trousers. He watched me with suspicion.

Bodies shuffled in the hall. People were pressing their ears against

the door, desperate to know what was happening. Jack's expression reflected the same question.

"Y'care to tell me what the hell's goin' on?"

My voice came out flat from a throat that was sore from screaming. "They're coming for you," I said. "The law. Rufus McGregor. They found Father's body and they're coming to hang you."

The expression on his face changed just a fraction, an almost imperceptible shift. His slate-blue eyes narrowed, his mouth tensed.

"Why'd ya come and warn me?" he asked. "You ain't got no fondness for me, that's fer damn sure."

"Because if they clap you in irons, you'll tell them I did it."

"How'd ya know I'd be here?"

"Because there's women, alcohol, and barrels of sin." I shrugged. "I told you to run, but you never do anything I say."

He gave a grunt to acknowledge that truth. "And what about Mr. Chen Shaozhu?"

I shook my head as my face contorted with grief. "Oh, God," I said, tears threatening again. I drew up my legs and hugged my knees to my chest. "He hates me now. I can't go back."

Jack digested this comment as he watched me struggle to regain my composure. He glanced at my walrus-hide bag on the floor. "So you're leavin'?"

"Yes. No. I don't know." I shook a little sense into my head. "I don't know how to get out of this damn city. I can't get a boat, and no one's going to rent me a horse." I rested my cheek on my knee. "I thought you might suggest something."

"How much money ya got?"

"I don't think it's proper for you to ask..."

"Drop yer pride and tell me: whatcha got?"

I scowled at him. "Eight hundred and twenty-three dollars."

His eyebrows arched. "Eight hundred...?" A wicked grin appeared on his face. Jack crossed his arms and said, "I ain't gonna ask how you found yerself twice a year's wages, girl, but shit, I'd love to know."

"Do you want it? Take it. Take it and run and don't tell anyone anything."

"I'm not asking you to buy my silence, ya little idiot," he said, sitting next to me on the bed. The whole thing almost collapsed, it bowed so low under us. "It's Saturday. What's the time?"

I shrugged and wiped tears from my face with the back of my hand. "Mid-afternoon. Maybe 4."

He was sharp. He looked rough and uneducated, but God's teeth! I watched him calculate this predicament and weigh the possibilities, and I couldn't help but marvel at how frighteningly cunning he looked. His blue eyes sparkled, he set his sharp teeth tightly together, his fingers drummed on his thigh. He plotted and schemed and, if I wasn't mistaken, he even appeared pleased to have fallen to his old conniving ways. His gaze flitted to the bag on the floor. "What else have you got? B'sides the money?"

"My father's medical instruments. A book. A watch. My mother's jewelry."

"That's it?"

"Yes."

"You brought a god damn book, but you didn't bring any clothes?"

I shook my head.

He threw me a scowl of disapproval, then looked me over to assess my outfit. I wore a simple black dress, a pair of warm wool stockings, and battered black boots.

"You got a coat?"

"No. It was hanging next to the stove in Mr. Fish's kitchen. I couldn't grab it without Shao seeing me."

Jack rose to his feet and strode into the hall, pushing through the small crowd outside, and when he returned, he had a brown lady's overcoat with patched elbows and a chunk missing from its collar. It was made of thick, rough wool that would keep out the wind, but it lacked three brass buttons. The two that remained were tarnished and green. He tossed the garment to me. When I caught it, a fog of cheap perfume and cat urine enveloped me. The owner had left a pair of old rabbit-skin gloves wadded in one pocket, and a crusty handkerchief in the other.

"Put on the coat. You'll freeze otherwise."

I did as he ordered. It was too roomy for me, but I wasn't going to complain; it had been hung near a stove and, along with the tear-inducing stink, it radiated a comfortable warmth. I'd been so upset, I hadn't noticed the growing chill in the air.

Jack buckled his belt and holster around his waist, grabbed his duster coat and battered black hat from the chair in the corner, and slung a leather satchel over one shoulder. "Come on."

"Where --?"

But he left without waiting for me. I heard his boots rapidly descend the stairs. I grabbed my own bag and followed quickly, not wanting to be left behind. When I reached the head of the stairs, I saw him in the main entrance hall with Nell, pressing a rough kiss to her lips. She patted his face, told him to come back and see her again. He gave her a smile that was both cheeky and full of sadness.

Then his expression hardened, and to me said, "Hurry up, kid," before vanishing out the door.