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TRINITY COLLEGE

Senior Thesis

JULIA

Submitted by

MACIE E. BRIDGE '21

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for

The Degree of Bachelor of Arts

2021

Director: Ethan Rutherford

Reader: Hilary Wyss

Reader: Chris Hager

“What does it mean to be a woman?”

*~ J.W.H., *The Hermaphrodite**

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Foreword

Growing up, I knew the name Julia Ward Howe. I knew she was a writer. I knew she was the grumpy old woman with a doily pinned to her head on the first page of a book my parents kept. I knew that I was related to her, somehow, on my father's side. And I knew that, as the other kids on the school bus sang "Glory, glory, hallelujah! The teacher hit me with a ruler!" they were disparaging "The Battle Hymn of the Republic", which she was known for.

I knew all of this, and yet, I did not care. Can you blame a kid? I was interested in history, but as far as I was concerned, Julia's story was obscure and of little note beyond the Battle Hymn—I was far more content to play Louisa May Alcott in the fourth-grade history fair. For the better part of my life, I forgot about Julia. When I arrived at Trinity College a few years ago, I found my own interest in literature and realized that I could, in fact, write fiction and poetry (a discovery which came as quite a shock). Throughout this time, Julia's name was occasionally tossed into the conversation by various family members—*of course you're an English major, it's in your blood*. This frustrated me, immeasurably. I didn't want my passion surrounding my studies to be attributed to the pre-ordination of my lineage. This was my work and my writing: Julia had nothing to do with it.

There are many moments I could point to as the ones in which this story came alive, but those would be enough to fill their own essay. Instead, I'll tell you of only two, my "points of no return". The first came on a rainy December day, during which I was procrastinating finals work and found myself on Julia's Wikipedia page. It was the first time I had landed there. I remember that it was lengthier, fuller than I expected it to be. As I scrolled through, I learned that she had written far, far more than the Battle Hymn, and it was then that I realized her work as an abolitionist and a suffragist. In that moment, all of my previous annoyance at Julia's legacy

vanished, and everything clicked. I was not sitting at Trinity College writing, reading, and leading because Julia had predestined my future; I was *able* to be here because of the work that she had done so boldly for all women, and for me.

After this, I researched quietly, in my free time. I checked countless books out from the library, and began spending many hours on JSTOR. I texted my grandmother— “What exactly is the lineage?” “You, your father, me, Elizabeth, Julia, Laura, then Julia.” What I was discovering of Julia’s story thrilled me, but I was equally horrified that I could live my life, alongside so many others, without any idea of the work she did or who she truly was.

The next determining moment came a few months later, when I could no longer keep my enthusiasm to myself. I’d just fully uncovered the story behind Julia’s first poetry collection, *Passion Flowers* (unfortunately, far beyond the reach of a five-chapter thesis. I can assure you, though, it lies ahead) and I had to tell someone. Luckily, I crossed paths with Professor Hilary Wyss that same day. She sat with me in the English department lounge and listened attentively as I rambled about what I’d been finding. When I finished, she looked me square in the eye.

“So, what are you going to do about it?”

It was in that moment that this story came irrevocably into existence. I remember telling Professor Wyss I didn’t know what I would do about it – what could I do? I was but an undergraduate, following my nerd-inclined whims wherever they took me. But her question also made me realize I had a responsibility to Julia’s story. If I could see so much of myself in her, find the trying threads of our own contemporary culture reflected in her story, surely, others would, too. And if I wouldn’t tell her story, who would? I knew I had to write.

As I record this in the final days of April 2021, it has been well over a year since I started working towards this project. In the beginning months, I focused mainly on research. The

sources which this work leans on most heavily are, first, Julia's own writings. Both *Passion Flowers* and *The Hermaphrodite* not only introduced me to Julia's writing style, but also helped me uncover the things she was concerned with: notions of gender roles, familial relations, marriage, and, ultimately, her own deep discontent and sadness. I have also relied heavily on Julia's autobiography, *Reminiscences*. Julia recorded her own story at eighty years old, and while it is void of emotive reflections, it has served as an excellent indication of the events and people which were transformative to her.

In addition to these, Gary William's scholarship in *Hungry Heart: The Literary Emergence of Julia Ward Howe* and his work towards publishing *The Hermaphrodite* significantly added to my understanding of what it meant for Julia to write in her time; my initial strides in character development are, largely, thanks to him. Louise Hall Tharp's 1956 *Three Saints and a Sinner* takes a seemingly-fictional approach to the story of Julia and her siblings, Sam, Louisa, and Annie. I was able to reference Tharp's work for a few biographical details: a fact which I am very grateful for, as her work (in addition to Julia's own autobiography) was the main source which touched on the circumstances of Julia's early life. In my search through online archives, I found that Julia's journals, letters, and others' writings about her mainly begin after she was well into her thirties. Thus, the sources listed above gave me a strong sense of the woman Julia would become—the woman that will appear in later chapters of this novel. The story, however, was drawing me to start far before this, to turn back the pages to when Julia was only twenty-two; a task which required that I put away the references and biographies, and write her for myself.

This story did not open easily to me. Initially, writing it felt intensely intimate and my impulses towards details and research made the scope of the project feel paralyzing. I often

found myself struggling with imposter syndrome. I wrote forward, nonetheless, and my beginning efforts resulted in a clunky first draft which neared the 120-page mark, but was subsequently abandoned. I don't regret this. I needed that draft—in writing it, I taught myself the story, and the characters. I got my bearings within this fictionalized New England haven. And slowly, the balance shifted. The writing blossomed out of the details I once feared touching. As I hit a stride, I found myself turning to writers outside the historical fiction genre. A few that became stylistic and thematic pillars for my work include Ron Hansen, Miriam Toews, Phillip Pullman, and Virginia Woolf. I learned to trust myself in the story, and the version you will see here took on a life of its own. I am simply along for the ride, shaping the sentences, and that, I think, is all a writer can ask for.

Much of what you will find in these chapters is fiction, and some of it is fact. I'll leave it to you to discern which is which. What I know for sure, however, is that whether fact or fiction, this story is true. Julia was so much more than the Battle Hymn. She was a sister and a daughter. She was a wife and a mother. She was desperate to create, desperate to be loved, desperate to be seen. She was a woman of faith, and she was relentlessly resilient. She was, at the end of the day, human, like the rest of us. My sincerest hope is that this story allows you to know Julia as I do. To find yourself in her, and to find joy, hope, something familiar, in the tale of one of America's brilliant legends. What I present to you today is only the very beginning. There is far, far more to come after chapter five.

Enough about me already, enough about writing. The curtains are drawing, the woman of the hour awaits. I give you my great, great, great, great Grandmother: Julia.

Part I

November, 1842

Chapter One

Julia had often been told she was a talented young lady, and she'd never doubted this to be true: many things came naturally to her. These included such polished habits as switching rapidly between six different languages so to fluster her tutor, performing on the piano-forte any concerto requested of her—even on the evenings when the bones of her corset were burrowing deep into her skin—and being the first to offer elaborate apologies to her siblings after becoming viciously angry with them. She wrote poetry and daydreamed; imagined herself as the meadowlark on the fencepost, flitting between the velvet leaves that decorated the streets of New York.

Perhaps it was because so much came easily that she was so distressed by her twenty-second year. Everything felt out of place. Of course, she told herself, these were not usual events that she'd been subject to—one shouldn't expect to be cast into three separate periods of mourning, one after another, with no reprieve. Making it all worse, Sam, her dearest elder brother, had begun pressing her to find a husband nearly every moment he got. At her age, he said, the issue was imperative. When they were all able to stop wrapping themselves in black silk and crepe, she was to return to their social engagements without her usual intentions of impressing everyone, but to find the attention of a singular man.

A chill rippled into her shoulders as she perched at her writing desk. There was a cold draft in the house today which soaked through her woolen socks like a puddle of rainwater. She forced a finger beneath the twist of her strawberry braids. Her mind had felt numb for weeks now, and her journal was opened to the same empty page. She swung her feet beneath the chair, pushing her skirts back and forth; the fabric layers chafed together. A grandfather clock droned, steady, behind her. The pen lay next to the inkwell, and her fingers itched to pick it up. But what

was there to write? Whenever she tried, whenever her mind reached for the intricacies she'd once known on the page—bird song in the rain, the purple scarf of twilight—she found her pen could no longer shape them. These musings paled, parched of all meaning, in comparison to her year of endless nights and unanswered prayer. Life had become far too serious to try to fit anything within the confines of a poem.

“Julia.” Louisa stood in the doorway with their niece, Margaret, tucked onto her hip. Her sister tilted her head impatiently and Margaret reached for a spill of Louisa’s hair.

“I’m sorry,” Julia said. She didn’t need to ask to know Louisa had already called for her multiple times.

“Next time, I’ll just hit you over the head with a book instead of calling,” Louisa said. A smile crept across her lips. She was never truly angry, and any annoyance faded twice as quickly as it had come. “Written anything good?”

“Nothing yet.”

Abandoning her journal, she reached to smooth the cotton gown her niece was wearing. Margaret was just now old enough to sit up on her own and would look to Julia expectantly when they entered the same room. She’d inherited the thin lips the Ward siblings all shared, and had been spared their sharp nose. Hers was smaller, unpretentious, like her mother’s had been. Margaret was another thing which had not come naturally to Julia at first. She had never quite known what to do with an infant, but Margaret’s cruel fate to grow without a mother made her see herself in the girl. She’d warmed to her and could now hold her without searching for the open arms of the governess. *See*, she reminded herself, *I am capable of overcoming the unnatural.*

Louisa hugged Margaret closer to her. “This sweet one is in a cheerful mood this morning. Oh, Annie’s waiting for you—”

“No! I’m late,” Julia interrupted, throwing herself from her desk and across the room. “And we’re supposed to pick up Mary!” Swinging her cloak around her, she secured the ribbon into a bow at her collarbone. The black wool pulled heavy, a comfort on her shoulders. “If Sam asks where we’ve gone, remind him we’re spending all of his money on a new set of gowns so that I can bewitch the next man who crosses my path.”

She whirled herself around the doorframe as Louisa grinned, fanning Julia and her sarcasm out of the room. Having raced down the staircase, she found Annie waiting for her by the door. Her sister wore her yellow skirts. She’d started to do so again a few weeks ago, and her face seemed to glow along with them. Julia was always jealous of her youngest sibling’s ability to wear gracefully such a sunny color—yellows, among others, matched terribly with her own hair.

“Did you forget?” Annie asked, taking a bouncing step towards the door.

“Yes—writing, trying to write,” she said, following Annie out of the dim entryway.

The crisp November air rushed through their petticoats as they stepped out into the street. She loved the city this time of year. The scarlet and amber leaves had just begun to secede their color to match the mud of the streets, and the cool breeze made the click of heels against cobblestone sidewalks echo more clearly.

“What fun it will be,” Annie said, “to have some new dresses.”

“And to see Mary,” Julia said, “it’s been so long—do you know where we’re going?”

Annie lagged behind Julia’s quick pace as they turned onto the next block.

“Not at all, I’m just following. I doubt I’d even recognize Mary if she walked straight up to us.”

Mary had been Julia’s favorite friend for many years growing up. Their parents had been close, and she remembered being sent to play with Mary frequently after her mother passed, just days after Annie was born. Louisa had been invited to join on occasion, but with Annie being five years younger, she was never quite included in their “society”, as they had called it. Mary’s family moved to Boston some ten years ago now, leaving their home to a cousin’s family. Julia found Mary to be the kind of friend who, when they reunited on occasion, could pick up exactly where they left off.

“Anyway, I’m excited to have new gowns,” Annie continued, “and to see you in something besides black for a change.”

“I haven’t been wearing only black, I have—”

“—dark blue, dark green, grey, the last year has left us all a bit colorless, Julia. But you have to admit, you’re the last to come out of it,” Annie said. “It’s alright, these things take time.”

Julia sighed. She was glad they were approaching their destination now, relieving her the chance to respond to Annie’s unfortunately true observation. She led them off the sidewalk and through a picket fence. The red paint of Mary’s family’s house was beginning to curl away from the siding, but it was still beautifully familiar to her. She knocked a few times on the front door, and it swung open promptly. A mousy girl stood at the opening. Her expression looked as though she’d just dropped the day’s basket of eggs on the floor as she peered over the ruffles of her stained apron.

“Good afternoon,” Julia said, “Is Ms. Evans home?” Just as she posed this question, Mary appeared in the foyer behind the flustered maid. Her blue skirts flushed in the light to match the sky above.

“The Ward sisters! You’re late!” Her nose crinkled as she smiled, tugging at the freckles which speckled her face. “Annie! You’ve grown so much since we last saw each other, you’re a real woman now, aren’t you? And Julia,” Mary said, stepping out onto the stoop to embrace her friend.

As young girls, she and Mary used to take each other’s confidence to bemoan the things they found unbecoming about themselves: “*I wish I could read faster, like you.*” “*You read perfectly fast. I wish I held my temper as well as you.*” “*I don’t always. You just need to think of happier things.*”

“I’ve missed you,” Julia said, “how are you?”

“I’m wonderful, really, but I should be asking how you are—did you receive my letters?”

Indeed, she had received Mary’s letters. They’d arrived with the flood of condolence notes, many of which were still unopened, sealed in a box pushed under her bed. She had tried to pen a worthwhile response to Mary, but after five days with a still blank page, she decided it was too difficult.

“Oh, I couldn’t have bothered you with our misfortunes,” she said, “and besides, it will be much more pleasant to inform you of them now that we are nearly recovered from it all.” She reached for Mary’s hand and turned back towards the street. “But we should talk as we walk; I think I’ve already made us late enough.”

The three strode in line down the wide sidewalks, their steps synchronizing so to click just loud enough over the horses trotting past, carriages in tow.

“But tell me, really,” Mary said, “how are you managing?”

“I’m managing well,” Annie said, taking the question for herself. “It’s hard to believe father passed a full year ago now. But I can’t say it was a terrible shock to any of us, he’d had a cough for quite some time. It disrupted things, still. And Henry wasn’t home when it happened, he was still out at sea, so Louisa, Julia, and I, moved in with Sam and his wife, Emily—”

“—who was the sweetest thing,” Julia interjected, “you would have loved her, we all loved her—”

“—yes,” Annie continued, “and their home is where we’re still staying now. It’s a beautiful place, we call it Astor House because Emily was an Astor—it was really lovely to move in there, but then in March, soon after we’d moved in, Henry was sent home having caught pneumonia. It was a horrible thing to see—he was all pale and feverish. We were all there when he died. So then,”

Julia felt Mary’s fingers squeeze her own. Although partially hidden by her bonnet, she could see Mary had a pained look in her eye. Julia had only heard the story told like this in her head, and Annie was leaving out details that she didn’t have the freedom to forget—like that, on the day Henry died, she wasn’t just there, in the room—she’d cradled her brother’s head in her lap, her fingers twisted through his damp hair as he breathed his last. She often still felt the weight of his skull, lifeless, pressing into her leg. She closed her eyes for a moment as they paused to cross the street, willing the image out of her mind. A flag nearby beat itself against the wind. Annie caught her breath before starting again.

“So then, in July, our niece Margaret was born. And Emily did so well for the whole thing—well, I wasn’t *there*, but I heard some of it, and the midwife says so—but then that night, she just wouldn’t stop bleeding.” Julia was certain Mary would feel her hand quivering now.

Annie hadn't said how that night Louisa had shaken her out of a dead sleep, asking her to take the baby while the others dealt with the body. She had sat on the edge of her bed for hours, unsure of how to hold her niece's delicate frame, listening to her brother's wails echo down the hall—a sound so unearthly she hadn't dared to move until the sun rose the next morning.

“So now it's just Louisa, Sam, Julia, and I,” Annie said, “Sam is so good with Margaret—I think she's doing quite fine.”

“The poor thing, left motherless. And you?” Mary asked, turning to Julia.

“I'm alright,” she said, nodding lightly.

“She's alright,” Annie said, “except for that she spends all of her time alone in her bedroom, sitting at her writing desk. But maybe you can help us draw her out of there, Mary.”

Annie had been the most persistent, most observant of Julia's grief, often more aware of it than she was herself. *You're weeping again*, Annie would say, always before she had noticed the hot streams running down her cheeks, her lungs heaving for air. Annie was the first to usher their siblings out of a room, and the first to close the door to the library for Julia's privacy. She had wondered, often, how Annie had recovered so much more easily than the rest of them. Perhaps, she told herself, it was because Annie was a newborn when their mother died. She'd never known a life that wasn't marked by death. It was natural to her.

The seamstress' shop smelled of lemon oil and dust. Plumes billowed in the air as a cynical looking woman beat a fold of calico that had been left to the top shelf too long. Annie was already in a back corner, cradling muslin the color of raspberries as she gazed dreamily into the mirror. Julia adored this place. Before she'd been forced to hide herself in black for a year, she'd earned the nickname of “the diva” around the city. Examining the shelves of shops like

these renewed a sense of hope, made her feel like she could redesign herself however she'd like—the diva could continually emerge redefined.

They had made an appointment that day for new fittings, and she was soon standing on a pedestal in only her corset and petticoat. She crossed her hands across her chest as the seamstress pulled a new hoop skirt around her waist; she didn't have much to cover, but the gesture brought some small sense of security. In the mirror, she could see Mary and Annie sitting behind her, watching women bustle in and out of the store. She smiled as she watched them.

“Mary, let's hear something cheerful. You look bright, what's the news from Boston?”

In the reflection, Mary's eyes found Julia's, and her face flushed.

“Well, I do have a bit of good news.”

“Oh! Oh, she's all pink,” Annie said, “look at her cheeks Julia—is it a man, Mary? Are you going to be married? Oh, I *love* love, tell us every—”

“—let her speak, Annie!”

Mary covered her eyes, which were grinning as brightly as her smile. “Yes,” she said, “his name is James Stanton, he's a lawyer, and he's just so kind to me—”

“—is he handsome?”

“*Annie!*” she hissed. Mary laughed, waving Annie's comment away as though it were a fly.

“Yes, and we're to be married.”

“Married?” The question flew from her lips before she could stop it.

“Of course she's getting married,” Annie said, rolling her eyes. “Why do you look so disappointed? It's exciting.”

“It is exciting.” Mary said, nodding assuredly. She pressed her fingers through her skirts modestly as she spoke. “As a girl you always hope it will be exciting, and I’m lucky that it is. I can’t wait.”

Julia smiled at her friend through the reflection, pretending to be extra occupied with the sapphire stripes the seamstress was unfolding around her. It was strange to see herself in color again—a part of her longed for the protection of her black skirts.

“See, marriage doesn’t have to be such a miserable idea, Julia.” Annie said, and turned to Mary. “Whenever Sam tries to speak with her about it, she gets all anxious like he’s asked her to drink poison or something.”

Mary snorted.

“Julia, are you so afraid of men?”

“I’m not afraid of men, and I’m not *afraid* of marriage,” she said, running her finger tips along the fabric circling her corset. “Some days, I actually think I might love it—marriage, and all. But things would be different. Everything would change.”

Mary nodded. “That change doesn’t have to be bad. Besides, there isn’t much of an alternative, and any gentleman would be lucky to have you as a wife. Particularly a woman who can pull off such stripes.”

Julia wanted to be convinced by Mary’s assurance: she had once, truly, loved the idea of a courtship, the idea of being the sole keeper of a person’s attention. She’d longed for it, and had been impossibly frustrated when her father’s guarding had made her introduction to society two years later than other girls her age. By the time she’d become confident, able to wander from Emily’s side at balls, the mourning had started, and she hadn’t caught anyone’s eye. Now, daydreams about courtship didn’t have the same sweetness as they once had. They led instead to

imaginings of funerals—her own funeral—how a sheet might drape over her visage, whether they'd press a lily or a rose between her heavy fingers.

She spent the rest of the appointment absorbing the citrus vapors from the air. Annie was fitted for new skirts in the raspberry muslin and Mary found a pattern spattered with lilacs. As she imagined Mary's creamy skin dripping with the floral cloth, she could only see her friend now hanging off the arm of some strapping young man. The idea brought a sour taste to her mouth; she wasn't sure if it was jealousy or fear. Perhaps, both.

She had just stepped off the shop's front stoop, soothingly drowned in her black skirts once more, when Mary's hand caught her elbow, forcing her to turn through a gust of November wind. Mary glanced over her shoulder. She was checking for Annie, who had decided to purchase a bonnet at the last minute and waved them on to wait for her outside.

"I need you to do me a favor," Mary said, hurriedly. "Do you know where the Unitarian church in the city is?"

"Across the street from the bank my father worked in — they've caused a bit of a stir." She couldn't imagine what Mary wanted to know this for. The church had recently split to form its own after a theological dispute. *They're contesting the Trinity now*, she remembered her brother complaining, *what God-fearing Christian would fall for that?* It was nothing she'd expect Mary to be involved in.

"Yes, well, I need you to come there with me this Sunday. Please?"

"Why? What are you scheming?"

"I'm not scheming anything—I want to go to the service." She scowled at Mary from under the brim of her bonnet. Mary sighed, and reluctantly turned closer. "James and I went one

Sunday to the one in Boston just to see, because everyone was talking about how *different* it was, and we ended up enjoying it—it’s refreshing, really. But my uncle will expect me to go with his family across town and it’ll take *all* day, and it sounds like you could use a change of scenery, anyway.”

“I don’t know, Mary, churches make my head dizzy these days.” Mustering the energy for such a trip felt beyond her. She had never been one to pay much attention in church—her father used to become so serious around the subject, she had always just wished to fade into the background. His theology had never been her own, and yet, following Sam to the building they grew up in was mindless now, a rehearsed act, even if the preaching did make her want to weep each Sunday.

“Please? You don’t even have to listen, just sit there with me, and I can tell my uncle I’ve gone with you and he’ll think nothing of it.”

“And what should I tell Sam?”

“Tell him you’ve gone with my family.” She knew she shouldn’t agree. This was the makings of a terrible set of rumors. And if Sam found out, she would never hear the end of it. But her heart skipped at the thought of the risk: a thrill she hadn’t felt in ages. The bell at the door rang, and Annie appeared on the stoop behind Mary.

“Alright, fine,” she whispered, “I’ll meet you at quarter to nine.”

When Sunday arrived, she told Sam she was going with Mary to the Methodist Church the Evans family always attended. He was staring blankly out the window, his left hand grasping at the roots of his thick, dark hair as he had done, often, for the last five months. The lines ran deeply across his forehead. He waved her off without pause. She lingered for a moment,

wondering if she should say something. She hated the idea of interrupting what could be his own rose-colored memories of Emily, though, so she left, silently.

The cold whipped under her skirts and up her legs, numbing her skin until she thought she might be floating. She had to bite her lip to keep from laughing. *It's silly*, she told herself, *to be so giddy for something as simple as going to church with a friend*. Everyone she passed by was doing the same as her, anyway. But as she traced her memories, she knew she'd spent her whole life trying not to do anything wrong. Her impulse towards rebellion was safely kept under lock and key by her most practiced virtue of discipline. This was the first time she'd allowed herself to break—to intentionally do something she knew would raise eyebrows, incur lectures from her brother, and, surely, would have caused her father to faint on the spot. Those who associated with this place were the subject of abhorrent rumors in her family's circles. She didn't want to think through what she was doing—the knowledge that it was rebellion alone did something to warm her veins.

When she met Mary, they giggled together like young girls eavesdropping on their mothers' gossip. Her hands clutched at Mary's elbow, guiding her through the streets to their destination.

“We can't look like we're up to anything—you're crying, stop laughing.”

“I'm not laughing, it's the wind in my eyes,” Mary sputtered, blinking dramatically

“We must distract ourselves or else someone will notice us—tell me more about this James you're betrothed to.”

“I don't think we're turning that many heads, but if I must,” Mary said, wiping a tear from her eye. She launched gleefully into a description about her new muse that was, among many things, so abstract and virtuous Julia concluded she could not imagine the man accurately

until she had met him herself. It was such a comfort, she thought, to have her friend by her side again. Particularly since the streets they walked held an eerie nostalgia. This was the way to her father's work—she remembered the turns vividly. She'd walked these cobblestones many times as a child, generally trailed by her brothers, holding hands with her sisters. The journey had always been an appeasement to their pleas to see the city, to see where it was their father went each day. If her father could see her now, would he be ashamed? He'd be horrified, she was sure, that she'd even given thought to entering such an institution. She could hear his familiar lectures about heresy now. She wondered, for a moment, if she should turn around. The wind rushed behind them—she imagined his voice calling her name. Mary walked steadily beside her, pulling her forward. They rounded the corner of a block.

The building rose from the marbled soot of the sidewalk like the peak of a mountain, snow-covered and blindingly bright. Julia wanted to cower before it, shy from the iron railings and fresh paint. She imagined the whole structure was cold like snow—thought it might seep through her gloves, make her hands burn red. A nausea pressed into her chest and threatened to crawl up the lace at her neck. Mary's gloved hand tugged at her arm.

"Come on," she said, "we don't want to be caught gawking now."

Julia smiled and forced herself to swallow the spit that had pooled in her mouth. Mary pulled her inward, past the iron railings, past the snowy walls, and tucked her into the back corner of a sea of pews. The building smelled of the melting wax of altar candles. She watched blooms of dust illuminate as they drifted past painted windows. The people, who were not as finely dressed as Mary and herself, murmured with the excitement she only remembered from audiences at theaters she once attended with her mother. As she searched for something to hold, the congregation hushed.

The round of the pew pressed through the back of her corset. She could barely see the preacher, who had taken his place at the altar. She held a hymnal against her stomach and pressed her thumb into the rigged spine. She tried to still her mind to the rubbing of the leather beneath her finger, but the bellow of the preacher's voice shattered over her. The congregation responded. They began to rise and fall, waves crashing against the port, their salt never quite reaching the altar. She tried to move with them—she could recite the Lord's prayer, knew when to thumb a cross into her collarbone. But between these moments, she stumbled to follow Mary. Her breath grew more shallow. She was a gull tossed on the waves, trying desperately to move with the current. The waves grew taller. Her hands clutched at the book, her skirts, the book, again.

The crisp pages of new hymnals crackled through the room. The people held the books to their breasts. She followed. Mary stared hopefully ahead as the organ produced its first notes. Julia glued her eyes to the page in front of her. A bead of sweat traced her neck.

*Many, mighty are our foes!
Human these, angelic those,
Where for refuge shall we flee?
Christ our great redemption see!*

The preacher's voice rolled like a militia's drums—thunderous, harmless, a signal of what was to come—and as she listened she realized sensation was slowly draining from her body. She dug her fingers into the curled edge of the pew before her, felt it go soft beneath her clutch. Her nails bore in. She threw her eyes around the room. Light was piercing the stained window above the altar—a portrait of Christ as the good shepherd, cradling a lamb, set against a fractal sunset of indigo, fuchsia, scarlet. In the corner, a jagged piece of violet was swirled with

frost from the early morning. It reminded her of the frozen beginnings of ponds in early winter, the kind of ice one could become trapped under after stepping out too early. It teased light above the surface. Her mind spun, unanchored. Her skin prickled with heat.

*Seraphs, flames of sacred fire,
View this myst'ry with desire;
Hark! the bright enraptur'd throng
Catch, and raise the grateful song.*

Mary's soprano rose above the crowd around them, and she felt her friend swell with joy beside her. That must be what she disliked about this place, she thought: the hope. The light shifted with the clouds outside. She envied the way the lilac shard of the stained window fit with the rest. It wasn't fair, that it could exist so perfectly, seamlessly. She wanted, suddenly, to be closer to the window, to see the pooled color more clearly, and as this thought took hold she was struck by the abrupt desire to run down the aisle, hear the floor boards cave at her weight. She wanted to climb the altar, throw her small frame against the wall and reach until she could feel the plum edges, feel the ice sting her finger tips. She gasped for air. Her lungs felt full of pond water—she was trapped, drowning, unable to find relief. The light behind the window began to pulse with her heart beat.

*O, ye thrones of heav'nly light!
Since you're sav'd from endless night,
And since we are rais'd to you,
Let us still the song pursue.*

The last note reverberated against the wooden walls, followed by a chorus of books thumping closed. She turned to Mary.

“I have to go.”

Her eyes burned with tears. Mary clutched at her wrist, and shook her head curtly. Julia twisted away and out from the pew. She’d write an apology later. She pushed the door open, let the autumn wind embrace her, and didn’t turn back. The stained glass was pulsing behind her eyes, its cool dew seeping down her throat, lighting a match in her stomach. She heard her father’s voice again, louder now, persistent. She shouldn’t have gone, she knew this, she was too fragile still to face such life, such reverence. She wanted nothing more than to tear off her skirts and collapse on her bed.

And she was so close to finding this when she threw open the heavy wooden door to the Astor House. Sam was waiting for her, leaning against the table of the foyer. A slow trickle of dried leaves ran through the streets behind her. The door met its frame. Sam’s fingers gripped the silken maple like talons, and his face revealed nothing. He looked like their father.

“Julia,” he said, “do tell me. Why do you choose to risk everything?”

Chapter Two

Julia peeled the gloves from her damp fingers and returned her brother's stare. Her mind was still reeling and she wasn't at all in the mood for sparring. She was not, however, one to leave an argument go unmatched.

"And suppose I don't know what you're talking about?"

"You know exactly what I mean—"

"—but *suppose* I didn't." She bent to pick a pine needle from the bottom of her cloak. It was sticky, the color of tangerines, and she let it fall to the wood floor. Her heart remained in her throat, but she could feel herself steadying in the comfort of the Astor House. Sam moved from the table he leaned on. His hair was ruffled at the sides. He'd been gripping it again. His face flushed as he paced.

"Then I'd first say you're a fool, and that all of father's money on your years of tutoring was a complete waste, and then I'd carefully explain to you how, by choosing to enter that building, that church, *by yourself*, when it is the subject of such intense criticism by nearly everyone we know, you put not only your own reputation out for question but the reputation of our entire family."

She folded her hands in front of her and shrugged.

"*C'est vrai*. It was a risk."

"So we agree on something. But do I need to explain to you what could have happened, Julia? That if anyone found out and thought I supported you in this, or God forbid that I was attending myself, half of my business ventures could fall through, and our friends could dissociate from us with perfectly good reason, and no respectable Christian man would take you

as a wife—or your sisters.” He paused, covering his eyes with his hand. “If you can’t think of yourself, at least think of your sisters.”

He was exaggerating, she hoped. A part of her had known this would happen—it was why the idea so tantalized her in the first place. She wished the church hadn’t scared her so. It might have been nice to have something of her own to defend. Something new.

“How do you know?”

“How do I—Good Lord, Edward saw you walking in, the building is just a block from his house. What did you expect to happen? He stopped here to ask me about it—you’re lucky he’s a friend. He was genuinely concerned for you and won’t be spreading any rumors.”

She’d never liked Edward. His eyebrows slanted in a way that made him look perpetually sad. It didn’t surprise her that he would snitch.

“I suppose that is lucky,” she said. “I wasn’t alone, though. Mary was with me.” She wandered past her brother to the opening where the foyer became the parlor, and leaned against the doorframe. Her heart was still racing.

“Even better, two respectable ladies jeopardizing their prospects,” Sam said, kneading his fingers through the half-sprouted beard on his cheeks.

“If by prospects you mean eligibility to marry, Mary hasn’t lost a thing. She’s engaged.”

“And do you say that to taunt me?” he scoffed. He looked to the floor, refusing to meet her eyes.

“Sam, you know I will marry when I have to.”

“And I keep telling you,” he shouted, “that time is now—as soon as possible!”

She dug her nails into the bodice of her dress and breathed in sharply. “And I *am* listening, I just—”

“Are you, Julia? Are you? Because you always seem to have some ridiculous excuse up your sleeve and then you go and do *this*—”

“Just because I’m not falling at the feet of every man that I see does not mean I won’t do it when I have to!” Her words recoiled from the walls as soon as they met them, and she was sure she could hear her sisters scuttle from the second-floor landing, meeting the required end to their eavesdropping. Sam stood still, his thumbs tucked under his suspenders—the braces Emily had embroidered for him, coated in blue flowers and vines. His jaw hung loose. “I—I’m sorry,” she said quietly, “I just, I don’t feel well, and everything this year, it’s too much.” She blinked repeatedly to keep back the tears pooling under her lashes.

He shook his head. Without lifting his face from the floor, he opened his arms for a rare embrace. She leaned into him heavily, breathing in the salted ocean scent that always managed to cling to his shirts.

In the last many months, she’d kept Sam at a distance. His grief frightened her. In the nights, after the house was long quiet and her limbs were heavy beneath the covers, she would startle awake, imagining his aching wails had pierced the Astor house walls once more. She would hold still, waiting for the muffled whispers of the midwives, the distorted bumps that she was sure were the sounds of a body—Emily’s body—falling limp to the ground. The sounds never came, and she would never fall back to sleep. The moment haunted her, and it haunted Sam, too. He spent long afternoons staring out the windows, his pointer finger against his bottom lip, dazed. It had taken him a week to agree to hold his infant daughter, and a month after that to look at her sweet, unknowing face without stifling sobs. On Thursdays, he’d taken to visiting the gravesite with a bundle of flowers. Each week he’d come home with the wilted ones from the week past. One such day, he’d been arguing with Julia about her prospects again—without their

father there it was his duty, he said, to see her well taken care of. She should have known he was too fragile to take her anger, but she released it nonetheless, with the hopes of regaining a lost sense of normalcy. Instead, he stormed out, leaving the sunflowers he'd intended to bring on the foyer table. Their petals drooped in the warm afternoon. When he returned, he threw the bundle into the backyard, and didn't speak to her for three days.

"Marriage *can* be a great joy," he said, pulling away so to look her in the eye.

"I know," she said. "I only want things to be the way they used to."

"And I think you might enjoy the attention of a courtship," said Sam. She sputtered a laugh. They both knew she could never resist the limelight.

As she turned to find her way upstairs, Sam called one last instruction behind her.

"Julia, really, don't go back there again."

Once in her bedroom, she locked the brass doorknob behind her and pulled shut the heavy garnet curtains. She stripped off her layers until she was only in her stockings and chemise, the rest a hill on the floor. A cold draft still flooded the room, but this time she welcomed its chill against her arms. She lifted herself onto the bed and walked steadily to the headboard. Her third-story room was sealed with exposed beams across the ceiling, and she was just too short to touch them when standing on the bed—even with her best posture. Reaching for the top of the bureau, which stood barely a foot from the bedside, she pushed her weight onto her finger tips, knuckles caving under the pressure, and placed her foot up onto the maple slab of the headboard. The first time she'd done this, the acrobatic stunt had been a thrill. It reminded her of childhood trips upstate, where she would balance on fallen logs at the edge of the wood with her brothers. One foot in front of another. The precarious balance was a regular occurrence now, though. She often found herself longing for these moments of solitude, where she could lock her

door without question and lean into the threat of her stockings slipping against the glossy bedframe.

Now close enough to the ceiling's height, she leaned further from the bed and onto the bureau, pushing her forearm into the dusty surface. Her free hand crept up to the fold where the wallpaper met the ceiling. She closed her eyes. Her pointer finger slipped easily into a slit behind the closest beam, which couldn't have been more than two inches wide, and certainly wasn't visible to those who were not interested in a hiding space. She felt through the shadows, and found the string of beads exactly where she had left it. Hooking it gently, she pulled it into the light. A delicately folded fan followed. Its only visible panel revealed a pattern of snowdrops and olive branches. At its base a strand of translucent, peach beads clung to a small pencil. Its tip had been dulled long ago.

She held the fan loosely, easing herself from her precarious balance into the downy pillows below. The pins in her braids bore into the back of her head. She held the fan just above her face. It unfurled easily at the flick of her wrist, showering her with a bit of dust. On the one side, creamy silk was stained like honey in its pleats. The soft stems and leaves that traced it were blissfully unaware that they should have wilted long ago. When she was little, she used to imagine this side of the fan as an oil painting. A glimpse of an art gallery only she was privy to. In the last few years, though, she'd been more interested in the other side. It was made of a papery-material, one that chaffed and flaked more every time she forced it open. At the top of each panel a number had been printed in ink, presumably once richly black, now dulled to brown. Most beautifully, though, was the flowing script of her mother's handwriting.

Her father had bought this fan for her mother years ago when they had just started courting. It was imported from France—all the women there were using these at balls to reserve

dances for the gentlemen that asked. But when her mother received it as a gift, she hadn't bothered bringing it with her to any ball she attended. Instead, she'd recorded only the name of her love in each panel. *Samuel*. Julia loved the way each letter billowed into the next. She imagined her mother's small hands holding the pencil gently, the beaded chain swinging with each loop.

She twisted and untwisted the dangling tail of the fan between her fingers. She couldn't remember very much about her mother, and most of what she remembered she thought she'd crafted out of Sam's memories. She did remember the hum of her mother's voice when she listened with her head resting against her mother's chest, still welcome there even when she'd grown much too big. She remembered also the weighted pull of her mother sitting on the edge of her bed, reading scripture until Julia fell asleep. Her mother had a way of making the words feel like more than just stories — they came alive, and as her mother spoke, Julia knew they held the key to the world.

She'd often wondered if things hadn't turned out the way they had, if her mother hadn't left them so young, if she'd worry so often about her own death. As long as she could remember, the dread of it pulsed through her thoughts. Sometimes it bordered on curiosity — she wondered if it might happen while she was young, her skin still supple, her spirit keen on dancing in the sunlight. Or perhaps she'd live to see the turn of the century, long after she'd resigned to spend her days watching the birds tittering outside her bedroom window. Whenever it happened, she wondered if she would be in pain. She'd imagined how the moment might play out so many times that the scenes now lived alike her own memories. And in the last few months, her certainty that childbirth would take her became so strong she could no longer imagine a future beyond labor pains. She knew that marriage vows, no matter to whom, were her obligation and

death sentence. Her only hope was for a savior on the other side. Even that, she'd become skeptical of.

She had tried, without success, to write about this very thing—her past, the theological underpinnings which bound the Wards, for years; she'd tried to write about how, after her mother had passed, scripture reading had turned from the comforting lull before sleep to forced evenings sitting by the fireplace in a circle with her siblings. She'd tried to write about the heaviness of her father's Bible in her little hands, how the words had tumbled off her lips nonsensically, unkempt, and about the times her father had scolded her for her inadequate efforts—*sit up, he'd said, one day Christ will separate the sheep from the goats, and little girls who are careless with the scriptures are sure to be among the goats*. She'd tried to write about the hymnals, how, as a girl, she'd been lost in the church without her mother's fingers to play with so she'd begun to study the music. She'd feel the keys of an imaginary piano on the air beneath her fingertips. She'd tried, too, to write how she'd learned the name for her father's Calvinism, how she still bristled at the mention of heaven and hell.

She'd tried and the words never came. She had once hoped that seeing her history laid out on the page would somehow bring clarity to it all. It could help her parse through the memories, find her own beliefs beneath the clutter. Instead, her head felt perpetually fogged. Her mother would have told her to turn to God, she was sure of that. But unless she heard Christ's voice ring through her head, pull at her spirit like the deepest tones of the cello, she didn't think she'd ever believe He could understand her.

Swirls of frosted lilac pulsed behind her eyes again. Annie's voice echoed around her—*you're weeping. You're weeping, again*. As her tears began to spill like water from the cracked

seam of a teacup, she heard a snap. Her arms jolted to the sides at the surprising release of tension where her hands had been. “No,” she whispered. “No, no, no.”

Beads ricocheted onto the bed, tapping the floor, puttering down the wall and behind the headboard. They fell like petals of honeysuckle, innocently escaping their chain. The string that held them had broken cleanly from the tortoiseshell base of the fan. It hung naked in her hand. Her palm still clung damply to the pencil. She closed her eyes, and swallowed hard. The tears trickled down her temples, wetting her hair, puddling in her ears.

“If I am to be separated from the sheep, Lord,” she said, voice cracking, “You may as well strike me down now.”

But when she woke hours later, to her disappointment, she found she was still very much alive. Her bedroom had drained of solace, the bare skin on her knees numb and purple in the dry air. She dressed and gathered the beads into a tulle jewelry pouch, hiding them deep within a dresser drawer. She laced up her boots—the ones which could withstand water. She paused for a moment outside her wardrobe, contemplating the black cloak she’d worn so reliably for many months. Perhaps, she decided, she should start smaller. She would act, incrementally, against her own fear. She drew from the back of her wardrobe a cloak that reminded her of felted willow leaves, tucking away her black one in its place. At her desk, she tore the blank page from her journal. It folded into a tidy square and slid into a small pocket she’d stitched to the lining of this cloak. Alongside it, she tucked her mother’s pencil. If she could not find God in her bedroom, she decided, she would have to seek Him elsewhere.

As she made her way out, Annie called from the second-floor sitting room.

“Mary left a note for you, we didn’t know where you were—”

“—We didn’t open it,” Louisa called from further in, “but I *do* think it might be an invitation to Boston.”

“Don’t mock,” Julia called, “I know you already looked at it.” Annie stifled a laugh into the book she was holding. “I’ll read it later, I’m going for a walk. I’ll be back by supper.” She turned back to the staircase. As she heard Louisa begin to protest—it was getting dark—Annie stopped her softly.

“Let her go. Didn’t you see? She’s wearing her green again.”

When she emerged into the streets, she was met with a blanket of night air. She could think more clearly here, beneath the thick cloud cover. Her eyes adjusted, slowly. Lamplighters were setting a trail a few blocks ahead. She turned, and walked further into the darkness. Sometimes, when the clean ocean air was sealed between the buildings like this, she liked to imagine she was still freely roaming through the trees behind her childhood home, secluded at the end of Bond Street. She could nearly feel the bark chafing beneath the palms of her hands, the dirt between her toes. She used to tuck herself into a nook between the back fence and the garden pines when her siblings were having their lessons, or when the governess wasn’t looking. There, she’d play house—except it wasn’t the grand city estate Louisa always wanted to imagine; it was a cottage of her own, secluded from the world. Sometimes, she was in the mountains, other times by the seashore. She could cook for herself, gather the things she needed. And when she’d finished her chores she could play piano, compose her own symphonies, make oil paintings of whatever she pleased. Nestled in this thicket, she didn’t owe anything to anyone. She’d often stay there as long as she could—leaving only after the governess’s calls had turned from exasperated to angry. On the days that her father was in charge, she would only emerge

after Sam came to lure her out with warnings that if she waited any longer, father was sure to punish her. Her fondness of nature, the dirt, had since been trained out of her. The spirit, though, her longing for an unattainable room of her own, remained. She'd been more courageous between the trees than she was in this city. She'd felt this way when they'd moved out of their childhood home. The Astor house was lovely, but the city often overwhelmed her. Perhaps, she thought, if she were to simply imagine the towering houses as the expanse of pines she'd once longed to retreat to, things would feel different.

The shutter of a lamp's thin metal door rattled against the dewy air. She turned the corner and stood before the towering white building, again. Dimly lit, it was less threatening than it had been before. There weren't any people streaming in, no crowds to meet inside. She wanted to try again—just to see if this could be something of her own, if she could find what so many others sought between those walls. The streets were nearly deserted and, she decided, glancing over her shoulders, it was too dark for anyone to accurately identify her this time.

As the door squealed closed behind her, she paused. The air inside had cooled and carried traces of candle smoke. It was dark, besides a few throbbing flames by the altar. Hearing no one, she walked slowly up the aisle. She hadn't noticed earlier that the wood of the floors was so soft. She could walk and barely make a sound. The pew doors were all ajar. She considered taking a seat in the middle, somewhere she could take in the whole room, but it felt too intimate to sit in a seat someone else considered theirs. She ventured to the front, settled herself carefully. She had never taken a sacred space seriously, and she didn't know how to place her hands. She moved them across her lap awkwardly, deciding to leave them palms down. The altar—the stained window—towered over her. The colors were masked in the candlelight, reflecting back subtle

glimpses of gold. It didn't taunt her as it did earlier. She thought to say a prayer. Would that be enough?

Later, after she'd returned through the darkened New York streets and her siblings had been bade goodnight, she went to her writing desk. This time there was a newness about her; a glowing which clung to her shoulders, flickered at the ends of loose strands of hair like warm embers in the night.

She picked up the pen, opened the inkwell, and turned her journal to a new page. She wanted to remember, to record, what had happened in the church that evening. Finally, something worth writing about.

She had hoped to be alone in the sanctuary that night, and she had been, at first. *The candles flickered against the altar so gently*, she wrote, *I watched for what felt like hours*. She had watched for so long, in fact, she had nearly forgotten her body, forgotten the clothes pressing her into the hard wood of the pew. It had been silent. Silent, until she'd been joined by the priest.

She hadn't recognized him at first—he was clumsier than she'd expect. He'd arrived from a back staircase to snuff out the candles, but when he'd seen her, he took a seat. He looked up to the same window, the candles, she was contemplating. After some time, he'd kindly asked her why she was there. She couldn't remember now what it was she'd said, but it must have had something to do with prayer, as she remembered his response. *I don't believe it matters so much what we say as it does that we are saying something*. She'd never thought of prayer that way before. Her father would have said this was blasphemy, but the idea opened something inside her. She had started to speak. She told the priest how she was so often angry and afraid, even though she had so much to be joyful about. *I told him that I'm going to die in childbirth and*

there is nothing anyone can do to stop it, she wrote, mother did, Emily did, I am next. She told him how she'd never wanted to speak to God before, she'd never believed she was seen in the church—or anywhere—and she didn't understand why she should want to praise when she'd been so obviously condemned to be miserable. As she had spoken such irreverent, hateful words into the room, he had listened. Quietly, patiently. And when she had finished, she felt a peace she hadn't known in ages. *I think, she wrote, it may have been grace itself.*

She had decided, then, that although she didn't understand it all, she was old enough to begin choosing what she believed. She was old enough to marry, after all. And if she was to move forward, she must walk on her own. *Perhaps the whole point is to stop filling my mind with the ideas of other people and to seek God for myself, she wrote. Things are beginning to feel less messy, and I know what I must do next.*

When she'd finished recording all this, she took from her pocket the folded journal page she'd carried with her. Its edges were puckered now. After the priest had left her, she'd scrawled a note across the page with her mother's pencil. It was the last thing he'd told her—a message Queen Esther had once needed. It read in looping letters. *Perhaps I was made for such a time as this.*

Chapter Three

When Julia returned home from the church that evening, there had, indeed, been a letter from Mary waiting for her. As she suspected, the seal had been neatly broken. Beneath it, Mary's words were a cascade of apologies and well wishes. She, as usual, felt frighteningly responsible for Julia's surprise malady earlier that day. *I should have noticed you were pale; can you forgive me for staying behind?* There followed an invitation to Boston; her fiancé had asked her to join him on a tour of a school—the name and details of which Mary could not recall in the slightest, but would find out as soon as she was home—on an afternoon the next week. The whole ordeal sounded exceptionally boring to Mary, but if Julia would join her, she pleaded, it would be far more bearable. *Besides, she wrote, if Annie's accusations about your seclusion habits are true, we are in need of an excuse to get you away from New York for a few days, no?* She wanted to show Julia more of Boston, and her mother would be dying to see her, too.

Julia's first instinct was to decline the offer, to thank Mary kindly for thinking of her, to say she was still too fragile for such a trip. The idea of leaving the Astor house and the abiding watch of her siblings made her nervous. But then again, the timing of the invitation was uncanny. If she were to move forward, as she'd just promised herself, she would have to start sometime in the near future. A little trip to visit her friend, with the promise of some intellectual engagement beyond the redundant discourse her siblings offered, seemed like a safe choice. Perhaps Mary was right, after all. It could be good for her to get away. Such a trip could be another small step to help her reimagine her life. She would not dwell, she decided, and she would not ponder. She penned her response, quickly, with an exuberant acceptance.

Once in Boston, she was received warmly at the Evans' home. Her bags burst with autumn dresses from the season before, with the exception of one raven shawl. It was there in the event that she her nerves got the better of her but, she resolved, it would not be removed from the bag unless absolutely necessary. Her mother's pencil remained safely in her pocket for whenever she might need it, too. The ivory-trimmed front of the Evans' place faced the street with a set of fourteen windows, not counting the red painted door. Each room felt brighter than the ones she'd become used to inhabiting in the Astor house. They were light swept; life full. Mary whisked her inside and immediately took up her own cheerful chattering. She didn't dwell on the incident of the week before. Rather, she told Julia everything she could about her friends in Boston—*you'll never know Cecelia, so it doesn't matter if I tell you her secret*—and recounted the details of her wedding planning, the trip they'd be taking afterwards.

Julia was particularly grateful for Mary's rambling today, as it passed the time she might otherwise spend fretting about what was to come; Mary had clarified that the school they'd be visiting was the Perkin's School for the Blind, and when she'd told Sam of the news, he'd made the magnitude of the event quite clear. *The school itself is revolutionary*, he'd told her, *and if you're to meet the director, you'll need to be on your best behavior. He's a revered man, most would pay for a minute of his attention.* Mary's tales of the city's latest gossip and her recent adventures distracted Julia, pulled her into the present, made her nearly forget her grief, nearly believe she had left it in New York.

That was, until Mrs. Evans joined them for supper.

Mrs. Evans was nothing like Julia's own mother had been: she was loud, drenched herself in perfume, and proudly denounced reading as a habit. But Julia could only associate the two together—she remembered them sitting to tea as she and Mary played with dolls by the fireplace,

or frolicked in the summer heat. There had been many a time, even when her mother was still alive, that she had been folded into Mrs. Evans' embrace, squeezed tightly against her large bosom, and had been given the comfort only a mother could impart. Mrs. Evans was older now, her hair as blonde as Mary's bristled like straw, but as she pulled Julia into the familiar embrace, she could, for a moment, imagine nothing had changed. When she pulled back, meeting Julia's grey eyes with her own hazel ones, they both instantly filled with tears. Mrs. Evans didn't say anything, only shook her head, and pulled Julia in tighter.

Later, when supper had been cleared and they'd regained some joviality, some normalcy, she launched into the questions Julia would only expect from Mrs. Evans.

"Tell me—are you spending time with any *men*?"

"Mother!" Mary shot Mrs. Evans a look across the table which looked, to Julia, as though they'd had a previous conversation about avoiding the subject.

"It's a perfectly reasonable question. Any young lady is thinking about it."

"It's fine," she said. This was her chance to begin convincing herself. "I haven't. Not yet, at least."

"Ah," Mary said, "only not yet."

"Well maybe I'll find you someone, dear. I'm very accomplished in matchmaking. Your parents met just down the street from here, you know."

Julia did know that her parents had met in the city. Her mother had grown up here; she'd told stories of watching for ships at the harbor, climbing trees to hide from passersby on the streets. Julia had only been to Boston to visit family a handful of times, but she'd never known quite where it was her mother had grown up. She smiled, and nodded. She pushed her food around her plate, welcomed another embrace from Mrs. Evans when the evening was over. The

thick scent of jasmine held to her dress long after they'd let go. This was where her parents had met—where her mother had been faced with the same questions Julia was now. And that night, as she drifted off between unfamiliar linens, she dreamt that her mother was still there. She'd just been lost, in Boston, this whole time. Julia could smell her sweet scent on the breeze, she need only look around the next corner—no, the next—and she'd find her, bring her home. Then she was in a third-story bedroom, her own third-story bedroom, and her mother was there, perched at the writing desk. *Why do you look so worried, love?* Her mother said. *I've only been here working on a poem all this time.* She woke then, the blankets twisted tight between her fists.

In the morning, she was rambling to Mary about the writers she'd been reading—Germans, Goethe and Schiller—in attempt to distract herself from the haunt of the night's dream, when there was a rap on the door. Mary had been staring dreamily out the window, nodding mindlessly in agreement with her, but really was waiting for her James. She flew to the door at the sound. As she heaved it open, Julia straightened the fingers of her gloves and checked for the pencil in her pocket. The pocket rested at her ribcage, so she could never feel more than a phantom trace through her corset—one could never check to be sure too many times. It was still there. Resolving to face what was next, she turned to find that, filling the doorway, was a man with hair like sand reeds. His nose was flat, his jaw wide. He beamed at Mary who, as she greeted him, appeared to be using all of her strength not to throw herself at him. Mary's cheeks were brick-scarlet by the time she turned to introduce Julia.

“And this is Julia, who I've told you all about.”

“Mr. Stanton,” Julia said, “I can't thank you enough for inviting me today, it's lovely to meet you.”

“The pleasure is mine, and please call me James” he bellowed. “Mary’s told me you’ll be the perfect company for this excursion. The director of the school and I have some friends in common who arranged the visit, I’ve been wanting to see it for some time.”

He led them to the carriage waiting outside and as they were pulled away, out from the city center, he launched into a tour of the passing streets.

“That rooftop over there, behind the red house, that’s the school I went to as a boy. And that store front right here—to your left, Mary—that used to be where we’d go to buy sugar candies on Saturdays.” As he recounted the stories of each street, each building they passed, Julia remembered the stories her mother had told her. She hadn’t thought about their details in a long time, but now that they’d emerged, she could see her mother everywhere. It was as though she’d drifted from a dream—leaning on the fencepost in conversation with a friend, swinging the door to the market store open, watching the starlings swoop low over the city streets at dusk. Julia wanted to know more. Had she stood in the church she’d passed by on the way here? Had she stared at the colored glass windows and questioned God, too? Or was it in one of these homes down the street where she’d lain on the bed in her attic room, traced Julia’s father’s name over and over into her fan? Had she been certain she’d write and be a wife, a mother? Or had she been happy with any possibility? She longed to know where her mother’s home had been, where she had spent her days, young, still alive.

By the time the large, brassy letters on the front of the Perkins School were visible, Julia was regretting leaving her black shawl behind, and the Astor house in the first place. Her hands clasped in her lap, and as the carriage pulled to the side of the road, she put her concentration in holding her fingers still. *This is not all so unnatural*, she told herself, *look for the beauty*. And surely, as she stepped out of the opened door and onto the street, those brassy letters above

glistened in the dim autumnal sunlight. The brownstone front of the building stood boldly over the cobblestones of Dorchester Heights.

She held her chin up and let the thick smoke on the air pull her after Mary and James, towards the building. As they approached the granite steps, she was grateful for Mary's hand outstretched to her. James skipped ahead and, once at the door, swooped his arm in exaggerated gallantry, ushering Julia and Mary inside. As they passed him, the girlish giggle Mary let out melted into the narrow corridor of the school's entryway. The hall was paneled with red cherry wood, mimicking the building's brick front. It was cold inside, quiet.

"Do we wait here?" she whispered.

"Yes," James whispered back, "Can't be long."

The building creaked in the silence, triggering the shrill laughter of a child from somewhere far above them. Julia looked to Mary and James, who were both gazing away from the other, apparently lost in thought. The paneling pressed in closer. Far down the hall, light leaked through the frosted glass of a doorway. The wood, all of it, appeared coffin-like.

Just as she thought she might have to spew some ridiculous idea purely to break the silence, the door heaved open once more. It let in a gust of bright, chilled air. She took it in readily before the airless passageway sealed again. Two men strode in, quite in the middle of their own conversation. The first to enter swung a striking blue coat off of his shoulders; the lines in his forehead were etched in like those on a sculptor's bust. He smiled as he entered, but only the lower half of his face seemed to move. How perplexing, she thought—he must do particularly trying work to have his face stuck so irritably. She wouldn't trust him, not until she knew more about him. He bypassed her, anyway, to greet James first.

The other man, having stepped in modestly behind the first, now twirled his top hat off of his head expertly, revealing a nest of wild brown curls. He held his hat to his chest and extended a hand out to Julia before revoking it rapidly. He scoffed at himself, bashful, almost skittish, and smiled at her as though she'd just been let in on a private joke. Sliding his feet together and placing his free hand safely behind his back, he performed an inelegant little bow.

“Henry Longfellow, happy to make your acquaintance, and you might be?”

“Julia Ward, lovely to meet you.”

She thought he might be about to say something more, as he swayed gaily towards her, when she heard James say her name. He was gesturing in her direction, and the man with the stone face was glancing her up and down. He nodded cordially in her direction.

“Charles Sumner.” She only nodded back—he already knew her name, and he didn't need to know anything more. “Dr. Howe informed me he might be a few minutes late,” Mr. Sumner continued, now addressing everyone, “why don't we wait in here rather than crowding the hall.” He gestured to one of the doors far down the corridor. Mary and James followed promptly, and Julia washed with relief as they moved. Surely, it would feel less suffocating where they were going. As they walked, Mr. Longfellow fell in step with her.

“So Ms. Ward, tell me, how is it that you find yourself here today?” Mr. Longfellow's stride was calmer than hers, and the way his shoulders rested, arms swinging, made her realize the tension she was holding in her neck. Something about him reminded her of her brothers, before everything had happened. Maybe it was the gaiety about him. Or perhaps it was the messy edges of his sideburns.

“A guest of Mr. Stanton's,” she said, “Ms. Evans and I grew up together—I just needed to get out of New York for a bit.”

“Ah, New York. What do you do with your time there?” The nonchalance in his words startled her. If he kept speaking to her like this, she thought, she might be able to quell her nerves for good. She slowed her pace beside him.

“Well, things haven’t been ordinary lately, but generally I write, study—literature and languages and—”

“Languages! How many? I’ve recently mastered my seventh.”

“Seven, oh, you’ve beat me—I know only six.”

“A close match,” he said, tossing his hat a few inches from his fingers before pulling it back to his chest. “And I daresay I’ve never known a woman to provide such competition. Well done, Ms. Ward.” He winked at her as they entered the classroom after the others, breaking away to go speak to James.

The classroom Mr. Sumner had led them to was not much nicer than the hallway they’d exited; it, too, seemed to have taken an entire state’s worth of cherry trees to furnish. It did, however, have an expansive window at the back, which Julia found herself immediately drawn to. It felt, to her nervous mind, like the respite she used to find when holding her breath just a second longer than planned when swimming as a child, the open sunlight a safe haven from murky lake floors. On the sill there sat a small stack of leather-bound books. She traced her finger over them, for the sake of looking more intellectual than the damsel staring out the window. Across the binding was the word “Braille”, printed in capital letters, widely spaced. Flipping the cover back, she found the pages covered in letters raised on the page, accompanied by series of dots, all arranged in geometric formations. It was all quite tidy looking, she thought. As she felt each letter with the pad of her finger, she wondered what her name might look like in this print, running across the top of a page, the words of a poem etched beneath it. Julia Ward.

“Can you read these books now, too?” Mary joined her at the back, and leaned against her to look at the open page.

“I wish,” she said, laughing, “It’s remarkable, isn’t it?” She held the book out for Mary to take a better look, but her friend was already gazing elsewhere.

“What do you think of Mr. Longfellow?” Mary whispered.

“He seems friendly,” Julia said.

At that moment, there was a rush beside the window that, coinciding with the book’s cover thudding closed, caused Mary to jump exaggeratedly away from the glass. A man riding a horse careened past the window, circling back once, then twice, until he’d slowed to a stop. He swung himself off of the animal, tying it hurriedly to a post some feet away from the building, and, having run his fingers through his grey speckled hair and beard, bounded towards a side entrance.

“Well,” Mr. Sumner said, peering at the window, “it is quite like the chevalier to make such an entrance.”

Within moments, the pounding of footsteps could be heard in the hall, and the man was promptly in the doorway. The way Mr. Sumner looked to him, straightening his collar as the man entered, Julia assumed this could only be Dr. Howe, the director everyone had told her of. He towered above her—all of them—in height.

“I’m so sorry to have missed your arrival,” he said, making his way in greeting rapidly around the semi-circle they’d formed. When he shook her hand, she watched his grey eyes nearly disappear, smiling abundantly, pressed with crow’s feet. The scent of rosemary carried on him. “In a moment,” he said, “I’d love to introduce you all to one of my students. But first, let me show you the place and tell you a bit about my work.”

He began to lead them back out into the hall. She considered protesting—she truly found it suffocating—but not wanting to draw any attention to herself, she followed. Mr. Longfellow slid back in line beside her as the party moved. She was glad to have the chance to ask him a question. She leaned closer to him, speaking low.

“Why did Mr. Sumner call Dr. Howe the chevalier?”

“Can’t say for certain,” he responded, “but I believe it may have something to do with his work in the Greek Revolution years back—he was the medic, no, raised funds? Something of the sort. I doubt he’d consider me more than an acquaintance, but I’ve heard a few of his friends call him by that.”

“Quite the philanthropist,” she said.

“Quite! And now I must ask—is Greek one of those languages you’re so proficient in?” She felt her cheeks grow hot.

“Proficient might be an exaggeration,” she said, “but I do understand most.”

Dr. Howe began speaking then, from the front of their little crowd. As he led them into a much larger room, this one lined with tables, he re-introduced the Perkin’s School—the first school for the blind in America.

“And it all began a handful of years ago with just a few students taken into my father’s house,” he said. “Now we have all this!” He waved his hands over his head, beaming as he watched them take in the room. It wasn’t that nicely designed, she decided, but the intention of the space was what mattered. And Dr. Howe’s enthusiasm, above all, was intoxicating. He explained to them the history of the place, his investment in his students. While he spoke, he continued to throw his hands about wildly. She wasn’t sure she’d seen anyone exude such passion for their work, but as he continued to speak, she began to realize why: they were truly

helping people here. People that the rest of the world had given up on, left to live purposeless lives. Dr. Howe's work, she thought, sounded very difficult. But he had spent his years seeing results, watching his students improve, and that, she thought, must be intensely life-giving. This cause was worthy—novel—above any charity she'd considered in the past.

This was confirmed, fully, to Julia when he introduced them to one of his students.

"I'd like you all to meet Laura," he said, as he guided a young girl, no more than twelve years old, into the room. Laura wore her hair pinned tightly into a bun, and she walked smoothly, almost as though she were gliding. She wore glasses that were frosted alike the classroom doors, and her lips were curled into the smallest of grins. Dr. Howe's hand rested on her shoulder.

"Laura," he told them, "is both deaf and blind. She started with us here some five years ago now and is my first student to proficiently learn the Braille reading code—when she began, she only knew some primitive signs to express herself."

Dr. Howe went on at length about Laura, pausing in his enthused address only when he had fully run out of breath, this time after having finished a lengthy explanation of Laura's strides in algebra. His hand held her shoulder tenderly, his fingers pressing into the heather cotton of her dress. The way he boasted of her achievements, described the way Laura was welcome in his own home—she'd learned to make bread under the watchful eye of his sister—Julia wondered if he didn't love the girl as his own daughter. A flush of envy coursed through her. What would it have felt like, she wondered, if her father had spoken of her in this way? If he'd noticed her efforts, or praised her even once for a poem she'd left on his desk? She watched Dr. Howe's eyes crinkle with pride as he looked to his pupil, and she thought that it was exactly this kind of affection, this kind of exultation, that she had wanted to see from her father all those years.

As Julia observed the two, attempting to swallow her envy, she caught an abrupt movement out of the corner of her eye. It was Mary. She fumbled desperately with the bracelet at her wrist. She had tears in her eyes.

“The poor girl!” Mary said, finally freeing the braided silver band from her wrist. “I want her to have this.” Clearly, Julia wasn’t the only one in the room touched by Dr. Howe’s work. *I should have brought a gift of my own*, she thought, *now I’ll look rude*. But as Mary stepped forward, her arm outstretched for Laura’s wrist, Julia saw Dr. Howe’s fingers clench at Laura’s shoulder until she tensed. In one definitive step he placed himself between Laura and Mary—standing so tall Julia was sure he had completely blocked Mary’s view of the girl—and seized the bracelet roughly from Mary’s delicate grasp. His face washed with aggravation.

“I can assure you, Ms. Evans, Laura is *not* in need of your charity.” He flushed as he declared this, and stared unforgivingly into Mary’s face.

For a moment, Julia thought he must be joking. The impassioned director, becoming so suddenly stiff and serious. A melodic laugh bubbled from her, expecting to be met with the harmony of others. Instead, she felt Mr. Longfellow suck in his breath beside her, sharply. She looked to him and, finding that he was staring intently at the floor, evading her glance, she sealed her falling smile shut promptly. Her silk-coated fingers flew to her cheek in embarrassment, and, finding no comforting place to rest, promptly placed them back on her skirts. She tried to think of what she might say to rescue Mary, but found Dr. Howe’s stance so intimidating, she froze.

“Oh, no, no, of course not,” Mary said quietly, her voice cracking, “how silly of me to think so.” Although Julia could only see Mary’s blonde curls where they escaped from her bonnet, she knew well Mary’s look of shock—lips parted just slightly, eyes held wide—and she said a small prayer for her friend that the tears she’d been holding would not escape now.

Dr. Howe stretched out his fist to return the silver piece, clearing his throat and adjusting his weight from his toes to his heels, and back again. Mary fumbled for her bracelet with a now shaking hand, and, losing it between her nervous fingers, sent it flying to the floor across the room. It ricocheted from floor to desk and floor again, releasing upon each impact a new falsetto note, a melody which quite reminded Julia of a child's early piano lessons. Mary and James turned simultaneously to retrieve the jewelry, engaging in an awkward dance as they negotiated who should rush between the desks. Mary advanced, although her billowing skirts meant she had to shuffle sideways to fit, her eyes glued to the floor, and her face the true color of cherries.

"Perhaps," Mr. Sumner said, alarmingly unphased by the whole incident, "we should move on. There are still more rooms we can show you."

"I am so, so, sorry," Mary said again from where she'd bent to reach the bracelet. Her voice was reaching vibratos Julia had never known her to hit intentionally. Dr. Howe moved back to where he'd previously stood beside Laura, with no response. As he placed his hand gently on her shoulder again, Julia watched the girl relax, her chest falling, the muscles at her jaw unclenching. Mr. Longfellow shifted his feet beside her, still looking stiffly at the floor. She saw the vein in James's neck pulse as he stretched his arm outwards to gather Mary back beside him. The silence rung through her ears. The clock in the hallway hammered onwards. "I don't know why I thought – it's so silly of me – I'm truly very sorry."

Dr. Howe was looking concernedly at Laura. No one moved.

"Dr. Howe, do tell us more of Laura's education of late," Julia said, unable to take the silence any longer, "I'm very much interested in it."

He looked to her as though startled out of a daze, his brow still furrowed. She thought he might turn on her now, too. But his face softened until she thought she caught a glimpse of a smile.

“Glad—gladly, Ms. Ward, thank you for asking” he stuttered. Clearing his throat, he picked up where he had left off—now telling of piano lessons, how Laura could feel the music’s vibrations in her body, differentiate between the notes. Julia wondered what she might notice if she were deprived of such senses. This must be, she thought, why people let their eyelids fall heavy in prayer. Perhaps she’d feel God more clearly that way, as Laura could feel the music. Or perhaps she would only hear her own voice louder—find her footing into the next poem more easily without colors and light to lure her elsewhere. She closed her eyes just briefly. Beneath the song of Dr. Howe’s lecture, she could hear Mr. Longfellow breathing beside her, ever so lightly. She made a note to practice this more often.

What a strange, marvelous gathering this had turned out to be. If she were a playwright, she thought, she could make quite the cast out of these characters. Mr. Longfellow was exceptionally warm and friendly, acting as though they’d known one another for years. Mr. Sumner, she was certain, was a man she’d never want to be caught alone in a room with—he was far too callous for her liking, and seemed abnormally obsessed with Dr. Howe. And now Dr. Howe was an anomaly to her as well, his show of anger having taken them all by surprise. Perhaps, though, she should be kinder to him, she thought. This habit was not unlike her own.

Slowly, as Dr. Howe had continued his spirited accounts of the workings of the school, the discomfort that had so filled the room faded; succumbing to the breeze of anecdotes like the downy plumes of dandelion seedlings in August. And by the time they were brought back to the

lightless entryway, she was quite disappointed to be leaving. As she buttoned her pelisse, and goodbyes and thanks were expressed profusely, Dr. Howe stepped aside the group to speak to her.

“And Ms. Ward? What did you think of the place?” He looked to her expectantly. As she found herself the object of his attention, she suddenly remembered all of the things Sam had said to her about him. *Be on your best behavior, he’s the most respected, anyone would be honored with so much as a moment’s acquaintance.* Her hand flew to the spot at her waist where she could feel the hard round of her mother’s pencil, still tucked into her inner pocket.

“I think I must be glowing,” she said. “It’s been a delight to be here, and to meet you all.” He nodded, his eyes lingering on her for a moment longer than felt natural.

Mary pulled at her elbow. “Should we walk a bit from here? Oh, James, we might show Julia some of this side of the city.”

She said a short goodbye, and let her friend pull her back into the smoke-filled wind of Boston. As the heavy door closed behind them, Julia was glad she had agreed to come here—the unnatural, overcome yet again.

Her heart beat syncopated to the clatter of the city rhythm as she mindlessly followed Mary and James, who were walking together ahead. And just as her mind was nearly all-consumed by the thick wind against her cheeks, she heard her name being called.

Turning, she found Mr. Longfellow chasing after them, holding his hat awkwardly to his head.

“Ms. Ward,” he said at his approach, breathing heavily. “Would you mind—would it be a bother, if I walked with you?”

Chapter Four

“It’s a lovely day for a walk,” Mr. Longfellow said, “if you don’t mind my company—I’ll be taking Boylston street, only a few blocks up.”

“Of course,” Julia said, accepting the arm extended to her. Toasted leaves crackled beneath their feet as they walked. “Mary was just going to give me our own little tour.”

At the mention of her name, Mary turned around and grinned at Julia.

“The exciting part doesn’t start for a bit, you two can just follow for now!”

“Well then, Mr. Longfellow—”

“—Henry, call me Henry—”

“You’ve barely told me a thing about yourself—what is it that you do with your days, besides practicing your seven languages?”

“I teach, mostly,” he said, fidgeting with his cufflinks, “and I write.”

“Do you? So do I,” she said, eagerly turning to look up at him. She found his eyes waiting for her. They were the same color as the olive leaves that braided her mother’s fan. It was too intense; she forced her gaze forward again. “Have you published?”

“A thing or two. Have you?”

“Me?”

He laughed.

“No, I was speaking to the finch in that tree,” he said. “The publishing houses aren’t only for men these days, Ms. Ward.”

“I think I’ll publish something one day.”

“Good,” he said. The sun kissed her neck as they turned another block, Mary and James still leading ahead. They walked the next moments in silence. She bit her cheek to keep from

smiling too widely and was suddenly very aware of the way her gloved fingers were tucked into his elbow. She thought she might be holding on too tightly, but as her fingertips shifted within her gloves—suddenly strikingly thin, her hand warming against his body—she decided not to move, for fear that he might think she moved out of repulsion, disinterest. She was overthinking things, she was sure. *Another step*, she told herself, *this is another small step*. Her anxiety was only because she wasn't used to this kind of attention—attention that wasn't built around her flaunting her talents in the ballroom. Once, when she was eleven, she had argued over this with her governess, who was insisting she put away her pen for her singing lesson. “*But you love to sing*,” the governess said. “*I don't love to sing*,” Julia responded, huffing out of the room, “*I love the way people look at me when I do*.” “*There isn't a difference*,” the governess said, “*this is the art of being a lady*.”

She had always thought her governess right on this point, but now she was beginning to wonder if there was a difference. The attention she'd been given the last many months may not have come from admiring eyes at gatherings, but they'd been looks of pity, condolence, sparked by the tragedies which were out of her control. It was nice to have someone interested in her without knowledge of these events, without seeing her demonstrate some skill—she could be sure, for once, that Henry was speaking to her simply because he found her, without circumstance or talent, interesting. When he spoke next, she nearly jumped.

“I wonder what a linguist like yourself might be reading these days?”

“Goethe and Schiller recently,” she said. “I've always had an affinity for German writers.”

“Ah, so have I. What do you make of them?”

“Their philosophies are fascinating—their ideas of art being so inseparable from freedom. And the way that they argue for self-control, discerning one’s emotions with care. I think it’s lovely. But I also think they’ve missed something—I just haven’t quite put my finger on it yet.”

“Well, when you do get your finger on it,” he said, “will you write your ideas down?”

“I—probably, yes, I will. I hadn’t thought of it.”

“Write it down, and then you should send it to a journal. Write a review. Share your idea with mankind!” He flung his arm to the sky, closely missing the hat of a man walking the other direction, who ducked and mumbled a curse under his breath.

“You flatter me, Mr. Longfellow—”

“—Henry. And I’m serious.” The bare skin at her wrist pressed into the wool of his coat—had he pulled her hand closer?

“But do you really think any publication would want my work?”

“If you write half as well as you speak, I don’t see why not.” Julia smiled at the ground, tilting her head so that, she hoped, he couldn’t see the scarlet in her cheeks. “At the very least,” he said, “I’d like to read it.”

The cobblestones wore unevenly beneath their feet as they walked. Julia’s mother had published a poem once. Sam had told her about it in passing one day years ago—he was the only one who had been old enough to remember the event. She had searched for the poem, but hadn’t found it with any of the family’s keepsakes. The effort seemed futile, anyways, since her mother hadn’t attached her name to the work. There were thousands of anonymous poems to parse through, and any of them could have been hers. Even though Julia was often flooded with frustration for being unable to find it, she loved the idea that her mother had been writing, that she’d created something she was proud of enough to send to others to read, even if it was without

her name. She wanted to share this with Henry when he stopped walking rather abruptly beside her.

“I’m sorry to say this is where I have to leave you all,” he said, loud enough so Mary and James would hear from ahead. Julia began to move her hand—although unhappy their walk was ending, she was relieved to have such a cue for her anxious fingers—and, briefly, he held it in both of his. His gloved hands were warm, and for a moment she forgot who she was with, and where they were going. “It was a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Ward. I hope it happens again soon.”

With that, he took off across the street with bounding steps, fidgeting with the buttons on his coat he went. He moved like a deer darting back into the forest. Graceful, subtly heedless. The final stroke of his fingers lingered on the back of her hand. She watched the top of his hat, bobbing above the crowd, growing smaller and smaller, before it was lost around a corner.

Mary immediately rushed to Julia’s side. She motioned for James to continue walking ahead of them.

“Well, *someone* hit it off with the gentlemen today,” she said, leaning into Julia teasingly. She reached to her cheek, hoping that it was cool to the touch and any redness could easily be explained by the brisk air.

“Oh don’t be silly—”

“— I’m not being silly, they couldn’t keep their eyes off of you. And I’ve never met Mr. Longfellow before but the last I heard was that he was still pining after a girl who turned down his proposal years ago—I think you just relieved him of a five-year toil with heartbreak.”

“I’m sure he was just being kind to me, is all,” she said, fixing her eyes on the sidewalk before her.

“Men are rarely just kind for no reason, Julia,” Mary said, gesturing towards James ahead. “You know your sisters would agree.”

And on that point, Julia agreed, as well. She’d always thought—*known*—that when a man was so kind to her it was because there was much to gain from the transaction. Since the day she had come out in New York society, marriage had been the objective, spoken and unspoken. It stained every conversation, permeated the glances men sent her way. As much as it followed her about, it was also a fact of life. Perhaps, she wondered, this was why she was so startled by the way Henry had spoken to her. She didn’t think his reason was the same as so many others. He seemed genuine.

The next day, having returned from a stroll in the park with Mary, a small package was waiting in the foyer. She passed the side table and parcel with little thought—it was a bundle wrapped in cream-colored tissue, nothing out of the ordinary. Mary, having entered behind her, reached for it immediately. Upon her touch, it crackled airily.

“What is this?” she said, holding it up to her face before quickly placing it back on the table. She clawed at the twine holding it and, as Julia approached to watch Mary’s hurried method of unwrapping, she discovered that this was not, in fact, a wrapped parcel. It was a thick stack of weathered papers—not altogether unlike the ones inside her own writing desk at home. They were stained with signs of sunlight and tea rings, ready to burst from the thick string that bound them. From beneath the twist, Mary tore a crisp envelope.

“For you,” she said, half wondering and half intrigued.

“For me?” Julia took the envelope from Mary hesitantly—hardly anyone besides her siblings knew she was here, and even they were expecting her home in only two days. Unless

some other tragedy had struck, nothing could be important enough to send anything here. But her name truly was scrawled across the smooth cream paper. As she unfolded it, Mary continued to wrestle with the knotted twine. The words inside were tightly bound, etched evenly across the page.

Ms. Ward, A few journals for your endeavors. I've read them all, so I am happy for you to keep them. I've been thinking more of our conversation, and I wonder if an anonymous publication might interest you? Some of the best have started that way, and it might lessen any intimidation in the act.

I would very much enjoy hearing your thoughts on any of the work here. And, of course, on any writing of your own.

Yours, H.L.

His address was written neatly, intentionally, across the bottom. She read the page a second time, and a third. He'd left this, just for her. They'd hardly met, and yet he had more encouraging words to say about her aspirations than her siblings combined. It was only when she'd finished reading a fourth time, remembering the papers—the journals—he'd left that she noticed the trace of blood in her mouth; she'd bit her lip too hard this time.

“Don't bother to tell me what it says,” Mary said, having lost attention in the stack of journals, “I'm not at all interested in why you're gawking at a mysterious letter!” Mary pulled the letter from Julia's hand, which she gladly let go to instead inspect her new reading material.

“It's from Mr. Longfellow,” she said softly. She flipped through the pages of the six, no, seven, journals while Mary read. They were mostly all New England Review, a welcome variation from the New York Review Sam kept at home. Some copies looked more worn than others, their corners drooping over the stiff pages of one below, but they nearly all had page

corners turned down. She imagined him thumbing through the pages, pausing to press the rough corners, perhaps for himself, or perhaps with her in mind. She gathered the pile delicately, holding them as though they were the brittle stems of Louisa's pressed flower collection.

Mary looked up from the letter and, folding it, held it back to Julia. Her eyes were wide with excitement, and she smiled knowingly.

"He's just being kind," Julia said, "I'm sure it's nothing."

"Just, just, just!" Mary exclaimed. "It's always *just* until it isn't anymore!"

That night, she stole away to her room after supper. There, she read the journals, recounted Henry's words in her mind. *The publishing houses aren't only for the men these days, Ms. Ward.* She wanted this to be true. The hope of it sent her back to the German poets she had towed to Boston with her. Goethe and Schiller. They fancied themselves philosophers, and their ideas were quite good—she loved what they wrote about art; that it is through art that one comes to understand beauty, beauty that one understands goodness, goodness that one can learn to be free. It articulated the immensity she had felt her whole life whenever faced with astounding music, literature, paintings. Although she could only think of her own selfish, abstract desires for freedom—she'd heard the rumblings about slavery, and thought that sort of freedom much more necessary and immediate—she loved the idea of roaming free, untethered to anything but the longings of her own heart. It had been through art, she thought, that she had learned the most of what she knew of goodness and beauty, come the closest to feeling freedom take her spirit.

There was still something missing from the philosophy, though. She turned their theories over in her mind—sought out the shadowed back-alley in. But she continually found herself at a dead end. In those moments, when the words became so loud in her mind that they built an unpierceable brick wall taller, taller, she relegated them to the page, refusing to succumb to their

impasse. They filled her journal with messy, crooked prose. She began to cherish the chaos, contained in the privacy of her pages, and wondered if it wasn't art just to see the turmoil from her head come so alive on the page.

With the little time she had left of her visit to Boston, she tried valiantly to give Mary her attention. But when they walked about the city, she found she was never fully listening to her friend's stories, as she impulsively scanned the crowd around her, wondering if by chance they could meet Henry again. She could thank him for his gift, tell him that she was writing her ideas like he'd suggested. Occasionally, they'd pass someone wearing the same velvety top hat, or whose gait had the same skip in it when she observed them from behind. Her heart would catch in her throat until it was clear, again, that it wasn't him. It wasn't that she wanted to obsess over him, or the idea of romance, she told herself. But he had been kind to her, and his encouragement was intriguing. What she was feeling, she determined, was nothing more than enthusiasm in getting to know him.

When she arrived home to the Astor house, she rushed to her bedroom. Her fingers had itched to verify the presence of the rose-colored beads in her dresser the whole journey home and, finding them there, silky and pearled, she folded herself into the chilled seat of her window. It was just wide enough so that, when she placed one foot on top of the other, she balanced comfortably. Her forehead pressed flat into the glass, and she sighed. Home at last. She'd felt such pride as she left Boston that morning—she'd done it, faced the unknown, and managed to enjoy herself, too. But as she breathed in the cool nutmeg air rising from the kitchen below, she found that pride was heavier now, a veil of soot cast over it. She closed her eyes. It was this place. The walls of this room reverberated with her grief, her unanswered questions, and they always would. When she'd entered the door downstairs, her sisters had greeted her with the

same, age old questions. “*Did you meet anyone?*” “*Yes, the tour was lovely—*” “*—but did you meet any men?*” She would never fully escape it; the heaviness was seeping back into her spirit. And so she tried to cling to the beautiful things that had emerged: Henry’s letter tucked in her case. The idea of publishing more tangible than ever.

There was a bird on the ground in the yard below her window. Its blue-grey feathers blended with the frosted ground at twilight. She might have missed it if she hadn’t watched it swoop to landing. It hopped merrily, prodding at the hard soil here and there. What a mystery, she thought, God’s creation was to her. Why would the bird ever choose to land when it had the chance to spend its life in the open sky? Didn’t it know the pain that was to be found here on the ground?

The pain. She paused, holding her breath. That was it—that was what had to be missing. Months ago, Louisa had asked Julia’s opinion on a cross stitch when she’d unexpectedly burst into tears again. It wasn’t fair, Julia had said, that Louisa had created something so splendid when she hadn’t been able to write a single word in weeks. “*Not to be frank with you, Julia,*” Louisa had responded, “*but I thought the whole point was that artists were supposed to use their sorrow to make something real, or even just dramatic.*” Julia had made accusations that Louisa simply didn’t understand what she was feeling, but perhaps she should have taken her sister’s point more seriously. Goethe and Schiller, she’d found, argued that it wasn’t purely feeling one’s emotions that set a person free, but practicing self-control through them. They argued that this was what sprouted into art, created a cycle of freedom—but they also said the point of art was to communicate beauty, and that, she thought, must include the raw, untouched parts of God’s creation. *Created in His image*—the bird in the garden below, and the very depths of her own

spirit. In all their search for art and goodness, she decided, Goethe and Schiller had neglected the pain of the artist, and so, she realized, had she.

It was because of this realization that she woke the next morning with eagerness. She bundled herself, and tore eight pages out of her journal. She carried her shoes as she tip-toed down the staircase, evading the fourth-to-last step, which had a tendency to pop, deeply, when pressed just right. Julia crept to the back entry of the kitchen. She listened for a few moments until she was certain the maids were otherwise engaged. Once inside, it took rummaging through a few different drawers before she found what she was looking for—a knife to whittle her pencil.

She gathered the dusty shavings into a tidy pile, not knowing how the maids would want to deal with this sort of mess, and escaped the house unnoticed. It was snowing lightly, just barely sticking to the quiet streets and sidewalks. She'd always thought that this type of snow, which drifted so casually from the sky, fell like the sugar sprinkled over the little tea cakes she loved as a child. It stuck to her shoulders now, dampening the edges of her skirts as her feet moved. She was going back to the church.

This time, when she approached the building, she swung the door open forcefully and entered without stepping lightly. She knew she would be alone—it was early on a Saturday morning—and she wanted to hear her shoes click down the aisle, hear the building welcome her presence. The air was clean that day, still cool from the night. She liked the building better silent, she'd decided, and there was something particularly intimate about it offering her shelter from the snow.

She picked a pew at the left of the sanctuary and, after sliding in and finding there was no easy place to rest her paper without craning her neck, she settled to the floor. Her skirts gathered around her, messy, twisted, a robin's egg blanket of muslin for her lap. She spread the blank

pages across the glossy wood in front of her and lay her pencil down beside them; the trailing string still followed, reminding her of what she owed her mother—what she owed herself.

Placing her hands in her lap, she turned her face to the ceiling and breathed in.

“Do you see me?” She whispered into the cavernous space. “This is my prayer.”

And then the words came. She wrote, furiously, frantically. They felt clumsy at first—she hadn’t written anything real in so long—but as she pushed her pencil onwards, she found the rhythm, the dance, that she’d longed for. She was writing despite her pain and because of it, and the words, she thought, were a new kind of beauty.

She didn’t stop until the pages were full, long after her feet had grown numb against the hard floor beneath her. Her argument had taken shape, alive, before her. What a divine thing it was, she thought, to have such a muse. When she was satisfied with what she’d said, she gathered her stiffened joints from the floor and carefully collected her things. Her chest felt lighter now, and she quite liked the aching in her wrists and ankles—although they were surely pulsing against the cold, it made her feel as though what she’d accomplished was real. Her body could feel it. As she left, she moved slowly, retracing her steps down the aisle. She hoped the bright iced light that filled the hollowed room, that made even the shadowed corners appear moonlit, would linger about her as she left. And this time, as the door closed behind her and she entered back onto the busy, snow traced streets of New York midday, she hoped someone might see her here.

Upon returning home, though, it was clear that no concerned friend of the family had reported her unbecoming behavior this time. Her siblings, who seemed happily busy with other things, hadn’t even noticed she was missing. She slipped easily past Sam’s desk in the library,

taking a sheet of his mailing paper and returning to her own room. There, she studied her words. She copied them carefully onto fresh pages, reimagined them where they didn't make sense. Earlier, she'd decided she would heed Henry's advice, and publish anonymously. She had been hesitant at first: her mother's own choice to do so had tortured her for years. She had often wondered if her mother would have cared. Her namelessness left her inaccessible even to her own daughter. Maybe, she thought, her mother had been content to know that her poem had reached someone, somewhere, and that person didn't need to know her name. And maybe the anonymity had granted her a sense of freedom—she felt this now, an invitation to wield her words unreservedly. No one would ever know. Not, unless, she told them.

Hours later she had before her a draft, the pages stacked neatly on top of each other. She'd done it—another step forward. She penned a note to sit on top.

Henry, I can't thank you enough for the journals you left for me. I've very much enjoyed reading them. Your gift, dare I say, prompted exactly the piece I've been struggling to tease out of my mind. I've included a draft of it here—if it isn't too much to ask, I would love to know your thoughts. I've decided to take your advice, also, to publish anonymously. I assume I can I entrust you with my secret?

Do let me know if you're ever in New York—or in need of a translator.

Yours, J.W.

The days that followed passed swiftly, each marked with an ongoing contemplation of where between Boston and New York her letter could be and, perhaps more torturously, what Henry would write in response. She busied herself with a renewed vigor for Annie's piano lessons, took Margaret for afternoon strolls through their back garden, and tried her patience with a new cross stitch. Most of her hours, though, she spent writing. She didn't feel trapped to stare

at the blank page any longer and, she found, that as she continued to write because of her pain, her poems were awake, breathing, more than they had been before. They weren't only concerned with the small beauties of her days—the snap of fresh stems and the cool spray that followed, or the ring of porcelain tea cups against their floral coated saucers. They were becoming much more human. As she wrote them, the walls of the Astor house began to withdraw their haunting. Each day she found more relief; she walked past the empty bedroom without imagining her brother's still body beneath the covers, slept through a night without waking in a sweat, waiting for the sound of a phantom cry. It didn't all leave her, and she wasn't sure it ever would, but the small moments of relief were beginning to cluster. And so it was that she floated hopefully towards what was coming next as New York plunged deeper into the dark days of winter.

The next Saturday, she was deep in contemplation of another poem when she heard the familiar exchange of the mail carrier downstairs. She'd waited on his visits each day, anxiously, and today was no different. Lifting a prayer under her breath, she rushed down the winding central staircase of the Astor house to see what had been left. When she rounded the bend, she could see from across the foyer that the envelope on the table was the same size as the one she'd sent out. A smile stole her lips. She paced as her fingers freed the shining crimson seal, worked her crimped draft out of its paper fold and opened the new sheet that lay on top.

Ms. Ward, It's brilliant. Uniquely argued and, in my opinion, will fit perfectly aside all its male counterparts. I look forward to reading it in its official form in the coming months, and, don't worry. Your secret is safe with me.

Did you hear that Charles Dickens is to make an appearance here at the start of the new year? Folks here in Boston have gone to shambles in excitement. I've read Dickens' work—it's quite good. I assume I don't need to inform you of that, though.

Send my regards to your family.

Yours, H.L.

Chapter Five

It was a rare mid-January day: warm, with streams of snow running through the streets, dripping rhythmically off rooftops. The soft floors of the general store were stamped with shoe-shaped water stains; a pattern which resembled the guides to ballroom dancing Julia had been gifted for her fourteenth birthday. Louisa's hollowed steps were leaving fresh prints ahead. They'd been sent with a list: shoe polish for Sam, three inkwells for the supply in the library, and a spool of violet thread—nothing too blue or too deep, Annie had specified, or else it wouldn't match her newest embroidery.

Julia stood before the shelves of thread debating between shades of violet when Louisa pressed herself up next to her. She rushed in so quickly their heads bumped.

“Do you hear them? Behind us—it's Charlotte Baker and her mother,” Louisa whispered, unphased by her violent entrance. She twisted her lips together, scowled at the wall in front of them as she listened. Julia hadn't been listening herself, but now that she did, she recognized the smooth, alto voice at the other side of the shop. It was unmistakably Charlotte. Charlotte's father had done business with theirs, but the extent to which Julia and Louisa knew her personally was limited to a series of tea etiquette lessons their parents had arranged some ten years ago. Those ended after a petty brawl left their governess unwilling to try again—Charlotte had accused Louisa of sipping like her younger brother, to which Julia had asserted that Charlotte's nose was too big, anyways. The whole incident was irreconcilable to their young acquaintanceship.

“No, the orange is a horrible idea,” Charlotte said behind them. “It's too strong. The lavender is much nicer and undetectable.”

“Are they talking about soap?” she whispered to Louisa, trying to remember what was usually on the shelf the Bakers were standing at.

“They’re talking about the Dickens’ tour,” Louisa said, “I think they’re hosting one of the gatherings.”

The Dickens’ tour—Julia silently thrilled at the name of it. She knew much about the event, all from her letters with Henry. Their exchange had continued regularly since their initial letters in November; his responses arrived in the mail on Wednesdays, the occasional Thursday. He’d kept her updated on the excitement in Boston surrounding Charles Dickens’ arrival. *I’ve never seen a grown man so upset with a florist, he’d written, simply because they could not supply an arrangement of bluebells. Everyone knows they’re out of season until May.* When he’d told her of his own invitation to multiple of the event, her jealousy was quickly extinguished by his note that he’d be moving with the tour—following the gatherings from Boston to New York. *Perhaps we’ll have a chance to see each other?* he had asked. She’d responded in the affirmative. *It would be lovely to see you—tell me whenever your “chance” might be, and I will be there.* Whatever the details Charlotte and her mother were discussing, she needed to record them all, fully, for her next letter. Louisa turned away from the spooled wall and, standing shoulder to shoulder, leaned in to Julia’s ear once more. “I’m going to get us invited.”

“Louisa! You can’t just invite yourself,” she whispered, grabbing for her sister’s arm. Although she’d been slowly, steadily, emerging from mourning, she was not yet keen on picking up impolite conversation with distant acquaintances. Louisa was already making her way towards them, though, and given that Julia’s wrist did not bend backwards, she was forced to release her latch. Whirling around, she followed her sister reluctantly. She’d be there to pull her away from the embarrassment, at the very least.

Louisa wasted little time on pleasantries.

“Have you heard,” she asked, casually, “that Charles Dickens is making his way down the east coast?”

“Yes, it’s very exciting,” Charlotte said, offering a pitiful smile to Julia, who was approaching from behind Louisa.

“Very exciting,” Mrs. Baker said, “in fact, we have the honor of hosting one of the balls later this week. Oh, you ladies should be there, how could we ever forget the Ward sisters?”

“It’s such short notice,” Charlotte said, “I’m sure they have better plans already—”

“—we would love to be there,” Louisa interjected, pushing her elbow into Julia’s arm. “Thank you for the invitation!”

The idea of the ball brought with it a heap of emotions for Julia; she hadn’t been to a gathering of comparable size or prominence to this one since Emily was her company, coaching on all the politics of the dance floor. It would be bittersweet, she knew, to return without her. The most potent of her sentiments, however, was her delight at the chance to see Henry again. In the weeks previous, he had become her closest confidant, her best encouragement. She found herself divulging more and more to him with each letter. When she had mailed her critique, anonymously, to the literary journal, she wrote to him—how she wanted her anonymity to be humble like her mother, but she didn’t want to be forgotten. *You won’t be forgotten, not if you keep writing*, he said, *and besides, I’ll remember you*. She told him how she’d been so fearful in the church, but that she’d been going back inside to write; *is it sacrilegious?* she asked. *I don’t think so*, he had responded. *“Through Him all things are made,” is your writing not one in that?* She told him how, when Margaret sobbed in the middle of the night because her teeth were coming in and she needed to be held, she sobbed under her covers, too, because she missed

Emily, because she wanted to hear the words Emily would speak to soothe her daughter, not the lullaby of the night nurse. He'd responded with sympathy. *I can't imagine that agony. It must make one feel helpless—the cries of a child. Does prayer bring you any solace in those hours?*

They'd started to write about the little moments, too. *I stayed after session for hours today with one of my students, our German lesson was giving him troubles. You know how hard it can be,* he said. *This morning,* she responded. *I went to see if the next edition of "The New York Review" had been printed yet. It hasn't been, but it was nice to be out. There was frost coating everything, like diamonds. Have you taught the Grimm fairytales to your students?* His response arrived the next Wednesday. *You must not torture yourself with checking for the journal so regularly—their delay is no reflection on your talent. I'm glad you enjoy the frigid mornings. I find myself wishing each day at four o'clock that the sun would linger moments longer. Soon enough.*

Their conversation was easy, and each letter arrived to her possession with a new sense of joy: he'd thought to write, *again*. Her sisters teased her whenever the day's mail was handed first to one of them. *"It's another letter from Mr. Longfellow,"* they'd sing, *"calling after our Julia!"* She'd steal away to her room to break the fresh seal, indulge in his words. She dismissed her sisters' taunting with assertions that he was only being kind. She was sure, though, that this was more than kindness. The prospect of marriage still made her bristle, but she'd begun to wonder if it would be as terrible, as unbearable, as she'd previously imagined it to be if she'd be paid such thoughtful attention. She'd even caught herself, shamefully, contemplating if bearing children would be such a curse if someone like Henry were by her side. When Sam's brief lectures came, as they always did, she wasn't as apt to recoil. She could tolerate marriage, she thought, if it were with Henry.

When the day of the ball arrived, he hadn't written in nine days. The gatherings had started in Boston long ago, though, and she knew he was caught up in them; he simply hadn't had time to write. She had wanted to know if he might be there that evening. The chances seemed high. She contemplated this as Louisa braided her hair, her red strands twisted to the base of her neck, before wandering to the library where Sam was working to distract himself. There were still a few hours before they'd be leaving, and her palms were growing damp in anticipation. Sam's head was bowed to his desk. His pen scratched at the paper before him. He was so bent, she wondered how the tail of his quill wasn't dusting his nose. He acknowledged her presence briefly.

"Some reading for you," he said, motioning to the coffee table beside her. There lay a crisp fold of papers. *The New York Review, January, 1843*, was printed in bold, inky letters across the front. She froze where she was—leaning just slightly over the table, fingers hovering above the new pages. Despite Henry's warnings, she'd asked after the new edition nearly every day. She'd passed through the store just yesterday—she wasn't sure how she'd missed this. Sam had already turned back to his work. She tried to gather the journal calmly, without garnering his attention. The chances of anything being published by now, only a month later, if they even found her writing worthy, were slim. She sat on the buttery chair that faced the fireplace, her back to her brother. Checking over her shoulder once more—his head was still buried in his work—she began to turn the pages with shaky fingers. *If it isn't here*, she thought to herself, *it means nothing*.

As she pulled the pages back, each billowing slowly like a sail catching the wind, she felt her pulse rising to her neck. She scanned the page for her familiar words. When there was nothing she recognized, she sank for just a moment before pulling the next page back, ascending

once again. She was a buoy on the waves, a sparrow on the gale—her hopes rising, falling, rising again. Finally, she turned the fourth-to-last page. The bold title, “A Review of Goethe and Schiller” was printed neatly across the top of the paper, a gaping space where an author’s name could have been. She felt her lips fall open. She wanted to laugh, and cry. Both sputtered out. Her prayer had been heard.

She ran her fingers across every line, just to be certain these were her words. They were. Exactly as she had sent them, the same ones she’d nearly memorized. There for anyone to read. She couldn’t wait to tell Henry. He’d be so thrilled—oh, what a joy it might be if he were there tonight. She could impart such news while in her very finest gown. It would be a dream. She could imagine the look on his face now. It would still be an hour at least before they left, though. She had to tell someone. Sam would want to know.

“Sam,” she said. She turned to him and held the journal open so he could see. “I wrote this. I wrote this, and they published it.”

He pushed himself from his desk, no expression on his face, coming closer to read what she held. He lifted the pages out of her shaking fingers and scanned what she’d held open. When he reached the bottom, she saw his eyes return to the blank space where her name wasn’t, where it could have been, and his face softened. He smiled. A real smile—the kind that made the dimple on his left cheek bone hollow. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen it.

“You really did this?” He scanned the page again, pushing his fingers through his hair. “I read it earlier—and to think, I thought all that time you were writing upstairs you were just wallowing—it’s wonderful, Julia, really. I’ll have to keep this, then—”

“—I want to keep it,” she said, taking it back from him, “you can buy yourself another copy.”

He laughed.

“Of course, a fair trade.”

After they’d amply shared their astonishment, and she returned to the staircase to continue the long process of getting dressed for the evening, Sam called after her. “Julia—I think Mother would be proud of you for this.”

Her fingers continued to shake as she pulled on her gown—it was pale green, trimmed with silk like pear-skins. She paused to admire her figure in the mirror. Her sleeves billowed from her arms like storm clouds, golden jewelry dripped from her neck. She felt, she thought, the closest to a Greek Goddess she might ever be. At her desk, she read over the page—*her* page—again. She couldn’t sit in these skirts, but her blood was coursing too fast for her to be still, anyway. She ran her finger over the journal’s seam until the pulp was softer, warmer. In a choreography of gentle pressing, pulling, she slowly worked the page out of the collection. Its edge was nearly clean—as though it had been published alone, in single pages sent to drift all about the city, to catch the eye of anyone it fluttered past. She pulled out her inkwell and pen. She shouldn’t be writing in her nicest dress—if the ink spilled, she’d be ruined—but a part of her liked the risk tonight. If she did have to arrive at the ball with a speckled gown, she might be proud enough, tonight, to admit to the truth: she’d been writing. She pressed the pen’s tip steadily into the page before her, beneath the bold title, above the neatly printed words. *Ms. Julia Ward*. If her mother could be proud of her tonight, she thought, she could be, too.

When the carriage lurched to a halt before the First Plaza Hotel, jostling the sea of skirts she and her sisters created together like the runover of a painter’s palette, Julia woke out of her day dream. She’d spent the ride imagining exactly what she’d say to Henry when—if—she saw him. *It’s there, today*, she’d say, *on the sixteenth page*. She hoped, desperately, that he’d be

there. Her nerves were fringed at the idea of such a gathering without Emily, the first one of this size in so long, but if he were there, she'd have a comforter. She'd be able to manage.

The First Plaza Hotel rose from the blue January night like a lantern in a darkened wood. Amber light poured from the windows, weaving between the grand columns that stood like salt pillars, and pulsed into the street. People trickled in, each costume more extravagant than the last. As she climbed the stairs and entered alongside her siblings, the warmth of the place enveloped her, melting the cold that had tangled around her ankles between the Astor house and here. The room was already filled with people—at least two hundred, she guessed—packing the ivory drenched ballroom with bright magenta, turquoise, and rose. The rich notes ringing out from a string quartet, placed discreetly at the back corner, reverberated over the sharp tones of laughter and deep echoes of greeting. This, she thought, was the kind of grandiose fever dreams were made of.

“Come take a turn around the room with me,” Louisa said, wrapping her blackberry gloved hands around Julia’s elbow. “We’ll see who we recognize.”

They found equal parts strangers to acquaintances in the room. Louisa and Julia listed off names to each other as though playing a game—someone their father used to work with here, a friend of a childhood friend there. As they made their round, her heartbeat quickened against the whale bone ribs of her gown.

“I see Mrs. Elliot over there,” Louisa said. “She’s always so loud at parties.” Julia looked to where Louisa was pointing across the room—she’d met Mrs. Elliot before, and Louisa was right that she could be obnoxiously loud. She was standing now talking to a man whose back was towards Louisa and Julia. That man—the way his shoulders moved as he his head pressed back with laughter—it was just like her father. For a moment, she believed it was him. Should she run

to him or turn away? She didn't want to know how he'd look at her now—she'd done so many things he'd disapprove of, so many things he'd lose his temper over. She clung to Louisa's arm tighter.

“Louisa, that man—” He turned then, revealing his face. It wasn't her father. She washed with relief. What a foolish thing to have thought. There was something familiar about him, though. She studied him for a moment longer. His beard, the way he held his hand against his jacket—the Perkins School, she thought. This was Dr. Howe. Louisa was still looking to her expectantly. “Oh, I met him in Boston. He's the one who runs the Perkins School.”

“Aha,” Louisa said, peering at him. “He's handsome. And if he's here, maybe Mr. Longfellow is too. I wonder which one our guest of honor, Mr. Dickens is?”

Julia couldn't find Henry anywhere, though. She wanted to speak to him even more now that she'd unsettled herself so—visions of her father lingered at the edges of her sight, whirled behind her as she danced. She tried to distract herself, fell to the edges of the room with her sisters and their acquaintances. The drinks flowed and the music picked up. She tried her hardest not to glance over her shoulder too often. This wasn't how she wanted to spend the evening—she'd feel better if she could just speak to Henry.

She floated this way, putting on an act, until the evening was half way through. She had paused at the back of the room, having found Annie with a group of her friends, telling a story. This particular one Julia knew well; it was the time Annie had cut Louisa's hair while she was sleeping so many years ago, and Sam had been convinced he could fashion her a wig after grooming his horse at the stables. Julia was just about to interject her perspective when she saw him.

Henry's back was turned to her, across the room, but she was sure it was him immediately. The way he swayed as he spoke was exactly the joviality she had memorized, his hair the same nest of curls she remembered. She placed her glass down on a table nearby, and made her way towards him. The crowd slowed her, messes of gowns blocked her way. She waded against the honey light cast by the chandeliers. A careless man bumped into her, another woman nearly spilled her drink, but she didn't mind as she normally would. She was finally going to speak to him—she could finally tell him her news.

Having made her way around one grandiose chartreuse gown, she was about to rush to make her greeting when she noticed he was not standing alone. There was a girl—thin, drenched in sapphire satin. She hung from Henry's arm. He clutched her waist and seemed to be considering her eyes, her hazelnut braids, after every few words he spoke. She returned his glances sweetly, throwing her eyes up to his, then back to the floor. They were the picture of love. When she had walked through Boston with Henry that day, had he held her arm so closely, too? No, she told herself. No, he hadn't.

The corners of the room were beginning to swirl together. *Breathe*, she thought, *and leave before he sees you*. This was why he hadn't written in a week. This girl. Could this be the one Mary had told her about, the one she said he'd been pining after? She'd been silly to think they were becoming anything more than friends. She'd told Louisa he was only responding to be kind. She pushed through the crowded room without reserve this time, without excusing herself for the skirts she stepped on, the shoes she tripped over. She needed to get away.

"Julia," Louisa said, catching her elbow. "Come over here with me, I want to say hello to—"

“—I need to go,” Julia said, wrenching her arm free from Louisa’s grasp. She didn’t turn to explain herself, and only stopped to breathe once she had properly locked the door to the closet-sized powder room behind her. She clasped the edges of the decorated porcelain bowl that stood below the mirror, and looked herself in the eyes. The thick gold frame of the mirror cast sparkles across her face in the low lighting. Her face was flushed. It was silly, she thought. Silly, and childish to become so hopeful.

She peeled her gloves from her hands, ran her fingers beneath the cold trickle from the tap. *Don’t weep*, she told herself, *not now*. She would have to face the room again, eventually. And she couldn’t cry—it would make her eyes red—which meant she couldn’t tell either Louisa or Annie what she saw until they were safely at home. Inhaling deeply, she stared at the venetian grey wallpaper until her face had cooled. It didn’t matter if she couldn’t tell Henry tonight. She’d still been published; she was still moving forward. This wouldn’t change that, not unless she allowed it to.

Someone knocked on the door from the other side and tried the handle. Taking one last look in the mirror, Julia tidied a few loose strands into her strawberry braids.

“Lord, grant me strength,” she whispered, before shutting off the faucet and promptly opening the door. She smiled kindly to the woman on the other side. The heat of the crowd hit her anew and spun around once more. She strode to the center of the room. Annie rushed over to announce that she’d heard Charles Dickens wasn’t even there: he was home with a headache. She mumbled a response. Annie furrowed her eyebrows at Julia, confused by her lack of enthusiasm, but skipped off anyways, wanting to inform the friends she’d found. Her fingers were tingling now, shaking like the fluttering wings of a dragonfly. She stepped further into the center of the floor. The music ended, and as the quartet was flipping their music to a new page,

Julia gathered her energy. She'd left her black garments at home for a reason, she told herself. If Henry couldn't—wouldn't—see her, she'd make sure someone else did.

“The night has only just started,” she yelled, loudly, throwing her arms above her. “Why don't we all play a children's game?” She smiled eagerly at those closest to her, waiting to see their response to her brilliant idea. Instead, they peered at her as though she were a foreign animal in a cage for inspection. The heat crawled up her neck again. She gathered her hands in front of her. There was space enough in the crowd before her to quickly make an escape—if she ran outside, Sam would find her, she hoped, and he'd take her home. Surely, if he hadn't heard her just now, he would hear about this in minutes. He would be furious, completely furious, that she would make a public spectacle of herself.

The whir and buzz of the room quieted to a near-deafening low. Just as she thought she might faint, a large man across the room let out a deep, sharp laugh. Those around him jumped.

“What a ridiculous idea,” he said. Trills of laughter flew up from the crowd. “I say why not?” He swayed where he stood, clearly having had one too many drinks. But the room seemed to only be looking for permission, as conversation and laughter erupted again. A few bold spirits began to yell out their childhood favorites. Julia felt her chest heave with relief. She looked around her, bewildered, until she locked eyes with Louisa across the crowd. Louisa shook her head, wide-eyed in amazement—or maybe disappointment. She couldn't tell.

The man who had so loudly proclaimed his approval was waving her towards him, as he fielded the ideas of a few enthusiastic guests. She took her place beside him and began running her fingers over her olive skirts—a futile attempt to collect herself. She tried not to let her eyes wander. She didn't want to accidentally catch Henry's glance, but she did hope he might be watching her—that as he looked at her confidence, the way she dazzled those around her, he

could tell purely from the atmosphere she created that she had been published, and she hadn't told him.

She was nearly lost to her daze of anger and nerves when a familiar figure, the very one from before, approached.

"Dr. Howe," shouted the droll man beside her, "I can't imagine the games a general like you might have enjoyed! In fact, I can barely imagine you as a child!" He was slurring his words now. Dr. Howe, dressed in a cleanly pressed, black suit, smirked in her direction at their acquaintance's expense. She remembered again what Henry had told her—how important, revered, Dr. Howe was. If she should have been embarrassed by her current position, it was too late to change anything now—and she thought it kind of Dr. Howe to make light of what could be terribly awkward. He seemed much more lighthearted than she remembered.

"Actually, I have come to suggest a round of blindman's buff," he said, "if Ms. Ward approves?"

The man beside her wheezed. This time, Julia smirked. Their eyes locked, and a wave of repose rushed through her.

"I think that sounds wonderful, Dr. Howe."

Before she could quite grasp what was happening, the room was filled with the sound of skirts shuffling away from the action, and the laughter of men regressing into boys. Flirtations became bolder, as if the remembrance of a communal childhood made polite society irrelevant. The stately adults that had filled the room just moments ago were reduced to giggles and teasing. The game began with enthusiasm—what a wonder, she thought, that no one from the tipsy crowd was injured.

A certain Ms. Moore donated her flaming red scarf to the cause of the blindman, and it was now eagerly tied around the eyes of men and women in turn, rendering them each sightless. They stumbled about the ballroom, reaching for the next person to tag. Their endeavors increased in desperation the longer their turns went on, and often a chivalrous gentleman sacrificed himself for the sake of whichever lady was playing the blindman, placing themselves directly in her path. Julia forced herself to laugh, to shriek, with them, for fear of otherwise crying.

After a few rounds had passed, Annie's arm was snatched by a rather boisterous young man. Julia saw Louisa shake her head from where she was watching—Annie shouldn't have thrown herself in so enthusiastically if she didn't want to be caught. Annie's face looked of absolute dread as the scarf was stretched to cover her eyes, and she began her turn by timidly reaching beside her. It was at the moment of Julia's peak embarrassment for her sister, who was quite quickly losing the attention of the crowd, that Dr. Howe stepped forward. He walked up to Annie directly, brushing his arm against her shoulder. He was promptly caught. Annie seceded her blindfold without hesitation.

"The most generous," Annie whispered, laughing at herself, as she ran past Julia towards the safety of Louisa's watching place.

It *was* a generous thing for Dr. Howe to do. Perhaps it was the memory of the way he'd looked at her, traced her silhouette, so many weeks ago, or perhaps it was the way he grinned as he wrapped the scarlet scarf around his eyes, gladly releasing Annie from her misery. Whatever the reason, she began moving her way towards the front of the crowd. He stumbled this way and that. The crowd moved like a flock of starlings, bending away from his reach. She should be more hesitant, she thought, to bring much more attention to herself after her earlier close call. Instead, she walked out of the crowd and placed herself directly in his path. She stood firmly,

boldly. His outstretched arms caught first her shoulders, his hands covering them completely. And as they stumbled from the force of the impact—him forwards, Julia backwards—his arms wrapped around her small frame. He caught her tightly, using his weight to steady them. Still holding her with one arm, he pulled at his blindfold. The red scarf fluttered through the humid ballroom air like a flare. Her skin tingled where his hand pressed firmly into her dress, and when his eyes met hers, she felt her heartbeat echo in her chest.

“Well,” he said, smiling. “If it isn’t Ms. Ward.”

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