Sophia's Secret

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Extract

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Chapter One

It wasn't chance. There wasn't any part of it that happened just by chance.

I learnt this later; though the realisation, when it came, was hard for me to grasp because I'd always had a firm belief in self-determination. My life so far had seemed to bear this out – I'd chosen certain paths and they had led to certain ends, all good, and any minor bumps that I had met along the way I could accept as not bad luck, but simply products of my own imperfect judgement. If I'd had to choose a creed, it would have been the poet William Henley's bravely ringing lines: *I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul.*

So on that winter morning when it all began, when I first took my rental car and headed north from Aberdeen, it never once occurred to me that someone else's hand was at the helm.

I honestly believed it was my own decision, turning off the main road for the smaller one that ran along the coastline. Not the wisest of decisions, maybe, seeing as the roads were edged with what I'd been assured was Scotland's deepest snow in forty years, and I'd been warned I might run into drifting

and delays. Caution and the knowledge I was running on a schedule should have kept me to the more well-travelled highway, but the small sign that said 'Coastal Route' diverted me.

My father always told me that the sea was in my blood. I had been born and raised beside it on the shores of Nova Scotia, and I never could resist its siren pull. So when the main road out of Aberdeen turned inland I turned right instead, and took the way along the coast.

I couldn't say how far away I was when I first saw the ruined castle on the cliffs, a line of jagged darkness set against a cloud-filled sky, but from the moment I first saw it I was captivated, driving slightly faster in the hope I'd reach it sooner, paying no attention to the clustered houses I was driving past, and feeling disappointment when the road curved sharply off again, away from it. But then, beyond the tangle of a wood, the road curved back again, and there it was: a long dark ruin, sharp against the snowbound fields that stretched forbiddingly between the cliff's edge and the road.

I saw a car park up ahead, a little level place with logs to mark the spaces for the cars, and on an impulse I pulled in and stopped.

It was empty. Not surprising, since it wasn't even noon yet, and the day was cold and windy, and there wasn't any reason anyone would stop out here unless they wanted to walk out to see the ruin. And from looking at the only path that I could see that led to it – a frozen farm lane drifted deep with snow that would have risen past my knees – I guessed there wouldn't be too many people stopping here today.

I knew I shouldn't stop, myself. There wasn't time. I had to be in Peterhead by one o'clock. But something in me felt a

sudden need to know exactly where I was, and so I reached to check my map.

I'd spent the past five months in France; I'd bought my map there, and it had its limitations, being more concerned with roads and highways than with towns and ruins. I was looking so hard at the squiggle of coastline and trying to make out the names in fine print that I didn't see the man till he'd gone past me, walking slowly, hands in pockets, with a muddy-footed spaniel at his heels.

It seemed a strange place for a man on foot to be, out here. The road was busy and the snow along the banks left little room to walk beside it, but I didn't question his appearance. Any time I had a choice between a living, breathing person and a map, I chose the person. So I scrambled, map in hand, and got my car door open, but the salt wind blowing off the sea across the fields was stronger than I'd thought it would be. It stole my voice. I had to try again. 'Excuse me…'

I believe the spaniel heard me first. It turned, and then the man turned too, and seeing me, retraced his steps. He was a younger man than I'd expected, not much older than myself – mid-thirties, maybe, with dark hair whipped roughly by the wind and a close-trimmed dark beard that made him look a little like a pirate. His walk, too, had a swagger to it, confident. He asked me, 'Can I help you?'

'Can you show me where I am?' I held the map towards him.

Coming round to block the wind, he stood beside me, head bent to the printed coastline. 'Here,' he said, and pointed to a nameless headland. 'Cruden Bay. Where are ye meant to be?' His head turned very slightly as he asked that, and I saw his eyes were not a pirate's eyes. They were clear grey, and

friendly, and his voice was friendly too, with all the pleasant, rolling cadence of the northern Scot.

I said, 'I'm going north, to Peterhead.'

'Well, that's not a problem.' He pointed it out on the map. 'It's not far. You just keep on this road, it'll take you right up into Peterhead.' Close by his knee the dog yawned a complaint, and he sighed and looked down. 'Half a minute. You see that I'm talking?'

I smiled. 'What's his name?'

'Angus.'

Bending, I scratched the dog's hanging ears, spattered with mud. 'Hello, Angus. You've been for a run.'

'Aye, he'd run all the day if I'd let him. He's not one for standing still.'

Neither, I thought, was his master. The man had an aura of energy, restlessness, and I'd delayed him enough. 'Then I'll let you get going,' I said as I straightened. 'Thank you for your help.'

'Nae bother,' he assured me, and he turned and started off again, the spaniel trotting happily ahead.

The hardened footpath stretched ahead of them, towards the sea, and at its end I saw the castle ruin standing stark and square and roofless to the swiftly running clouds, and as I looked at it I felt a sudden pulling urge to stay – to leave the car parked where it was and follow man and dog where they had gone, and hear the roaring of the sea around those crumbled walls.

But I had promises to keep.

So with reluctance, I got back into my rental car, turned the key and started off again towards the north.

* * *

'You're somewhere else.' Jane's voice, accusing me but gently, broke my thoughts.

We were sitting in the upstairs bedroom of her house in Peterhead, the bedroom with the little chains of rosebuds on the wallpaper, away from the commotion of the gathering downstairs. I gave myself a mental shake, and smiled. 'I'm not, I—'

'Carolyn McClelland,' she said, using my full first name in the way she always did when catching me about to tell a lie, 'I've been your agent for nearly seven years, I can't be fooled. Is it the book?' Her eyes were keen. 'I shouldn't have dragged you over here like this, should I? Not when you were writing.'

'Don't be silly. There are more important things,' I said, 'than writing.' And to show how much I meant that, I leant forward for another close look at the sleeping baby wrapped in blankets on her lap. 'He's really beautiful.'

'He is, rather, isn't he?' Proudly, she followed my gaze. 'Alan's mum says he looks just like Alan did.'

I couldn't see it. 'He's got more of you in him, I think. Just look at that hair.'

'Oh, the hair, God, yes, poor little chap,' she said, touching the bright copper-gold softness of the small head. 'I did hope he'd be spared that. He'll freckle, you know.'

'But freckles look so cute on little boys.'

'Yes, well, be sure you come and tell him that, when he's sixteen and cursing me.'

'At least,' I said, 'he won't begrudge the name you gave him. Jack's a nice, good, manly name.'

'The choice of desperation. I was hoping for something that sounded more Scottish, but Alan was so bloody-minded. Every time I came up with a name he'd say, "No, we had a

dog called that", and that would be the end of it. Honestly, Carrie, I thought for a while we'd be having him christened as "Baby boy Ramsay".'

But of course they hadn't. Jane and Alan always found a way around their differences, and little Jack Ramsay had made it to church today, with me arriving in time to stand up as his godmother. That I'd managed to do it only by breaking every speed limit between my stop in Cruden Bay and here had left the baby so supremely unimpressed that, when he'd first laid eyes on me, he'd yawned and fallen fast asleep, not even waking when the minister had doused his head with water.

'Is he always so calm?' I asked now, as I looked at him.

'What, didn't you think I could have a calm baby?' Jane's eyes teased me, because she knew her own nature. She wasn't what I would have called a calm person. She had a strong will; she was driven, and vibrant, so very alive that she made me feel colourless, somehow, beside her. And tired. I couldn't keep up.

It didn't help that I'd been struck by some virus last month that had kept me in bed over Christmas and taken the fun out of New Year's and now, a week later, I still wasn't back to full speed. But even when I was in good health, Jane's energy level was miles above mine.

That was why we worked so well together; why I'd chosen her. I wasn't any good myself with publishers – I gave in far too easily. I couldn't stomach conflict, so I'd learnt to leave it all to Jane, and she had fought my battles for me, which was why I found myself, at thirty-one, with four bestselling novels to my credit and the freedom to live anywhere, and anyhow, I chose.

'How is the house in France?' she asked me, coming back, as she inevitably would do, to my work. 'You're still at Saint-Germain-en-Laye?'

'It's fine, thanks. And I'm still there, yes. It helps me get my details right. The palace there is central to the plot, it's where the action mostly happens.' Saint-Germain had been the French king's gift of refuge to the Stewart kings of Scotland for the first years of their exile, where old King James and young King James by turns had held court with their loyal supporters, who'd plotted and schemed with the nobles of Scotland through three luckless Jacobite uprisings. My story was intended to revolve around Nathaniel Hooke, an Irishman at Saint-Germain, who seemed to me to be the perfect hero for a novel.

He'd been born in 1664, a year before the Plague, and only four years after the restoration of King Charles II to the battered throne of England. When King Charles had died and his Catholic brother, James, came to the throne, Hooke had taken up arms in rebellion, but then had changed sides and abandoned his Protestant faith for the Catholic Church, becoming one of James's stout defenders. But it wasn't any use. England was a nation full of Protestants, and any king who called himself a Catholic couldn't hope to keep the throne. James's claim had been challenged by that of his own daughter, Mary, and William of Orange, her husband. And that had meant war.

Nathaniel Hooke had been right in the thick of it. He'd fought for James in Scotland and been captured as a spy, and held a prisoner in the fearsome Tower of London. After his release he'd promptly taken up his sword again and gone to fight for James, and when the battles all were over, and

William and Mary ruled firm on their throne, and James fled into exile, Hooke had gone with him to France.

But he did not accept defeat. Instead, he'd turned his many talents to convincing those around him that a well-planned joint invasion by the French king and the Scots could set things right again, restore the exiled Stewarts to their rightful throne.

They nearly had succeeded.

History remembered the tragic romance of Culloden and Bonnie Prince Charlie, years after Hooke's time. But it was not in that cold winter at Culloden that the Jacobites – quite literally, the 'followers of James', and of the Stewarts – came closest to a realisation of their purpose. No, that happened in the spring of 1708, when an invasion fleet of French and Scottish soldiers, Hooke's idea, anchored off the coast of Scotland in the Firth of Forth. On board the flagship was the tall, twenty-year-old James Stewart – not the James who had fled England, but his son, whom many, not only in Scotland but in England, accepted as their true king. On shore, assembled armies of the highlanders and loyal Scottish nobles waited eagerly to welcome him and turn their might against the weakened armies to the south.

Long months of careful preparations and clandestine plans had come to their fruition, and the golden moment seemed at hand, when once again a Stewart king would claim the throne of England.

How this great adventure failed, and why, was one of the most fascinating stories of the period, a story of intrigue and treachery that all sides had tried hard to cover up and bury, seizing documents, destroying correspondence, spreading rumours and misinformation that had been believed as fact down to the present day.

Most of the details that survived had been recorded by Nathaniel Hooke.

I liked the man. I'd read his letters, and I'd walked the halls of Saint-Germain-en-Laye, where he had walked. I knew the details of his marriage and his children and his relatively long life and his death. So it was frustrating to me that, after five long months of writing, I still struggled with the pages of my novel, and Hooke's character refused to come alive.

I knew Jane sensed that I was having trouble – as she said, she'd known me far too long and far too well to overlook my moods. But she knew, too, I didn't like to talk about my problems, so she took care not to come at me directly. 'Do you know, last weekend I read through those chapters that you sent me—'

'When on earth do you have time to read?'

'There's always time to read. I read those chapters, and I wondered if you'd ever thought of telling things from someone else's point of view…a narrator, you know, the way Fitzgerald does with Nick in *The Great Gatsby*. It occurred to me that someone on the outside could perhaps move round more freely, and link all the scenes together for you. Just a thought.' She left it there, and no doubt knowing that my first response to anyone's advice was staunch resistance, changed the subject.

Nearly twenty minutes later, I was laughing at her dry descriptions of the joys of caring for a newborn, when her husband, Alan, thrust his head around the doorway of the bedroom.

'You do know there's a party going on downstairs?' he asked us, with a scowl I would have taken much more seriously if I hadn't known it was all bluff. He was a softie, on

the inside. 'I can't entertain this lot all on my own.'

'Darling,' Jane replied, 'they *are* your relatives.'

'All the more reason not to leave me alone with them.' But he winked at me. 'She's not got you talking shop, I hope? I told her she's to let you be. She's too concerned with contracts.'

Jane reminded him, 'Well, that's my job. And for your information, I am never in the least concerned that Carrie's going to break a contract. She has another seven months before the first draft's due.'

She'd meant for that to cheer me, but I think that Alan must have seen my shoulders sag, because he held his hand to me and said, 'Come on, then. Come downstairs and have a drink, and tell me how the trip was. I'm amazed you made it all that way in time.'

There were enough jokes floating round about my tendency to get distracted when I travelled, so I opted not to tell them anything about my detour up the coast. But it reminded me, 'Alan,' I asked, 'are you flying tomorrow?'

'I am. Why?'

Alan's little fleet of helicopters helped to serve the off-shore oil rigs dotted through the North Sea off the rugged coast of Peterhead. He was a fearless pilot, as I'd learnt the one and only time I'd let him take me up. I'd barely had the legs to stand when he'd returned me to the ground. But now I said, 'I wondered if you'd fly me up the coast a bit. Nathaniel Hooke came over twice from France, to intrigue with the Scottish nobles, and both times he landed at the Earl of Erroll's castle, Slains, which, from the map I've got, the old one, looks to be somewhere just north of here. I'd like to see the castle, or what's left of it, from out at sea, the way it would have looked

to Hooke when he first saw it, coming over.'

'Slains? Aye, I can take you over that. But it's not up the coast, it's down. At Cruden Bay.'

I stared. 'Where?'

'Cruden Bay. You would have missed it, coming up the way you did.'

Jane, sharp as ever, noticed something in my face, in my expression. 'What?' she asked.

I never ceased to be surprised by serendipity – the way chance happenings collided with my life. Of all the places that I could have stopped, I thought. Aloud I only said, 'It's nothing. Could we go tomorrow, Alan?'

'Aye. Tell you what – I'll take you early so that you can have your look from out at sea, and if you want when we get back I'll watch wee Jack awhile and Jane can drive you down to have a wander round. It'll do you both good, get a breath of sea air.'

And so that's what we did.

What I saw from the air looked much larger than what I had seen from the ground – a roofless, sprawling ruin that seemed to sit right at the edge of the cliffs, with the sea boiling white far below. It sent one small cold thrill down my spine, and I knew that familiar sensation enough to be frankly impatient to get on the ground, so that Jane could take over and drive me back down.

There were two other cars in the car park this time, and the snow of the footpath showed deep, sliding prints. I ploughed ahead of Jane, and raised my face towards the salt blasts of the wind that left a taste upon my lips and set me shivering again within the warm folds of my jacket.

I confess I couldn't, afterwards, remember any other people

being there, although I knew there had been. Nor could I recall too many details of the ruin itself – just images, of pointed walls and hard pink granite flecked with grey that glittered in the light…the one high square-walled tower standing solid near the cliff's edge…the silence of the inner chambers, where the wind stopped raging and began to moan and weep, and where the bare roof timbers overhead cast shadows on the drifted snow. In one large room a massive gaping window faced the sea, and when I stood and leant my hands against the sunwarmed sill I noticed, looking down, the imprints of a small dog's paws, perhaps a spaniel's, and beside them deeper footprints showing where a man had stood and looked, as I was looking, out towards the limitless horizon.

I could almost feel him standing at my shoulder now, but in my mind he'd changed so that he wasn't any more the modern stranger I had talked to in the car park yesterday, but someone of an older time, a man with boots and cloak and sword. The thought of him became so real I turned…and found Jane watching me.

She smiled at the expression on my face. She knew it well, from all the times that she'd been present when my characters began to stir, and talk, and take on life. Her voice was casual. 'You know that you can always come and stay with us, and work. We have the room.'

I shook my head. 'You have a baby. You don't need a house guest, too.'

She looked at me again, and what she saw made her decide. 'Then come on. Let's go down and find a place for you to let in Cruden Bay.'