



Your Eve

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SELAH AWARD - WINNING AUTHOR

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Your Eve

November 1816

Suffolk, England

The letter weighed the world. Mayhap it wasn't a letter. After all, letters had words, did they not?

This had none. Just an empty piece of paper, smudged with dirty fingerprints, folded together and sealed without the mark of a signet ring. *Dear heavens, it cannot be.*

"What a waggish thing, Mrs. Tomlinson." Her middle-aged lady's maid, Prudence Gill, draped a cashmere shawl around Eve's shoulders. The cashmere embraced her in warmth. "Who would pay to post a letter without writing?"

From the bench beneath the grape arbor, Eve fingered the paper. She traced the edges. If she squinted, the page looked like

sand—creamy and soft, glinting with sunlight, then darkened by the evening tide.

Her throat ached. Everything ached. She rubbed the finger smudges, memorized every folded crease, and imagined the one who must have made them. Who else could it be but him? The one who couldn't write, who rarely spoke, who told her things through his eyes and not his lips?

"No." She stood so fast the grapevines and wooden beams seemed to sway around her. *No, it cannot be.*

Not after so many years. Five years. 'Twould make no sense for him to come back now, not when she'd finally given in and conquered the darkness.

"Mrs. Tomlinson? Forgive me, but you seem a bit ashen—"

"A carriage."

"What?"

"A carriage. I need a carriage. I must go—"

"Oh no, Mrs. Tomlinson!" The maid scurried after her as Eve left the grape arbor and took the path back for the manor. "His lordship shall not like this."

What had her father ever liked? Besides the exotic maps framed in his study. Or the trophies hanging on his walls. Or the money and men and malice he used to gain such wealth. "Father shall not know."

"But your wedding tomorrow—"

"It is not my wedding. It is Father's."

"Yes, but—"

"Please, Prudence." She took the woman's hands, bony and cold, and held the eyes that were already worrying. "You are dear and true and gentle, and you are anxious for me far too

much. I have needed such care these last years. Indeed, I might have died without it.”

The woman’s cheeks colored, and her gaze fell.

“But this once.” Eve squeezed the hands. “This once, you must let me care for myself.”

Prudence withdrew from the touch, mumbled something about seeing the carriage prepared, then bustled away to the stable yard.

Eve darted for the manor. She was panting hard by the time she closed her bedchamber door behind her.

How the room swallowed her up. She’d been dead in this room. The walls, the ceiling, the sash windows—they had been her tomb. She’d known nothing but illness and blackness and haunting silence.

Except for the memories.

Like the waft of food to a starving creature, the memories had invaded, taunted her, and driven the sickness deeper into her blood.

She never imagined she could want to live again. Not even when she told Prudence to replace the black dresses with ones of color. Or when she went outside again, breathed fresh air, and joined the world she’d been dead to. Or agreed, as her father had long been demanding, to marry the illustrious son of the viscount.

Eve slipped to the walnut chest of drawers and pulled at the bottom left handle. She reached inside, fingered the smooth seashell, and placed the wordless letter beside it.

They were together. A part of him and a part of her.

For the first time in five years, she wanted to be alive.

Five Years Earlier

Atlantic Ocean

“ARTHUR.” MORE WATER SLOSHED INTO THE rowboat. Thunder reverberated. “Arthur, please.”

Head in her lap, he rolled his eyes to look up at her. No emotion. He must have known he was dying, surrounded by the stench of his burnt flesh, the blood, the heavy smoke of cannon fire.

“Your husband. Not goin’ to make it, he hain’t.” The ship’s captain, with an injured arm cradled to his side, pulled a brass spyglass from his coat. “None of us are, likely.”

“What’d ye see?” asked the helmsman.

“Cain’t see *The Gunnilda* no more. Not even her mast.”

“And the privateers?”

“Nay. Too deuced dark, it be, with this storm.” As if in answer to the captain, lightning zipped across the sky and the waves surged higher.

A shudder raced along Eve’s spine. The life inside her kicked, and she pressed her hand to her mouth, lest she retch inside the crowded rowboat.

Arthur lifted his hand. He caught her cheek, brushed his melted fingers to her chin. He’d never touched her this way before. Not gently, tearfully, with a look in his eye as if he loved her. Did he?

No, he couldn’t. He’d only married her for the same reason she’d married him.

Her father.

But she wished he did. She wished anyone did. How much easier to die being loved.

The rowboat lurched. The captain lost his spyglass, the helmsman cursed—and the only other man, who worked at the only oar they had left, kept his gaze firm ahead of them.

Would to heaven she could know his calm. Would to heaven she had something to fight against, to strive for like he did—instead of sitting in helpless despair. *God, please.*

Water crashed into the boat again and swirled above her half boots, cold as it seeped through her dress. Another curse. Another wave. Another rumble of thunder.

“We’re goin’ down!” The captain’s cry lifted as a wave rose over them. The boat flipped.

Something crashed into her head and Arthur slipped out of her arms. *No, no.* Deeper, deeper. She flailed in the water, groped for him, but her lungs screamed for air. *Not Arthur.* Where was he? Why couldn’t she feel him?

’Twould be right they should die together. Him, her, and the baby. Even if he didn’t love her, if she didn’t love him. *God, please—*

Her arm was caught in a strong grip. She was hauled up. An arm circled her waist as her head broke the surface. She gulped in air and saltwater, vomited into another wave.

“Hold this.” A deep voice rose above the waves. Her rescuer draped her across a broken shaft of wood, his heavy body half on hers, and paddled them forward with his hands.

Behind them, someone shouted. The helmsman maybe. But it was gargled and strained—and when she glanced back with

stinging eyes, there were no heads bobbing the ocean. He was dead. They were all dead. Arthur was dead.

“Hold on.” The man’s voice rose as the wood climbed another wave. “Hold tight.”

Only she had no strength. Didn’t he realize? Didn’t he know they’d die too?

But the ocean never devoured them. Sometimes a wave pushed them under a minute or two, but they always surfaced again. Rain pelted her back where he didn’t cover her. Saltwater pained her eyes. More than once, she gagged, but nothing came out but more water.

’Twas nighttime, then daytime again. When the rain was gone, the sun blistered her skin, her fingers bloodied from clinging to the splintery wood, and her legs cramped from kicking.

But the stranger kept moving them forward.

He said nothing. Not in all those hours, amid all her crying, all her praying, all her senseless mutterings. He breathed quietly, assuredly, with the same confidence as the man at the oar.

Maybe he *was* the man at the oar.

She couldn’t remember anything but Arthur. Their trip on the packet ship to Buenos Aires. The French privateers coming after them, the roar of cannon fire, and the explosion that ate away her husband’s face.

Darkness claimed her. When she awoke, her legs were scraping something thick and rough. Sand? Was she dreaming?

Water splashed her face as she jolted fully awake, but the stranger caught her up and dragged her onward. *Land*. A feverish

joy raced through her. 'Twas warm and dry and powdery, and the comfort of it forced away some of her chill.

She must have drifted into unconsciousness, for when she opened her eyes, the stranger's face was across from her.

His eyes were closed. He was shirtless and bruised with sun blisters marring the handsome features. His hand was on her belly. As if he cared she was with child. As if he'd fought to live for her sake, endured everything, stayed strong to see that her child might live.

Thank you. A storm of tears wracked her body. The baby stirred beneath his touch, and relief numbed any pain, if only for a moment. *Thank you for saving my baby.*

November 1816

THE CARRIAGE JARRED AWAKE EVERY NERVE. Prudence sat beside Eve, wringing her hands and glancing out the window, as if to assure herself his lordship had not found out and followed.

They would know if he had.

All heaven would know.

"Mrs. Tomlinson, you do not know where to find him. You do not even know if it is him at all."

Of course she knew. She'd known the second her fingers touched his letter, as if his presence still lived there, sweet and quiet. How she missed his silence. Why could all the world sing

and laugh and speak praise to her—but only his lack of sound could reach her soul?

Now, that very same soul hovered above its grave. She would die again if he'd already left. She would die again if he turned her away. She would die again if she found him in the village lodging house, standing beside a wife, a baby in one of their arms.

"Mrs. Tomlinson." Prudence's voice beside her, fraught again. "You are crying."

Crying?

Eve swatted the tears from her cheek with the back of her glove. She shouldn't cry. Yesterday, yes. The years before, yes.

But not now.

The carriage halted, the door came open, and Eve took the hand of the footman. She turned before her maid had a chance to follow. "Wait here for me, Prudence."

"But it is not proper—"

"You forget, do you not," she stepped away from the footman and lowered her voice, "that I have been alone with him already?"

The woman's cheeks flooded with pink. "I remember, indeed."

"Then do nothing more than pray. If he is not to be found at the lodging house, we shall look elsewhere."

"Yes, Mrs. Tomlinson."

Wrapping her wool cloak tighter, Eve approached the local rubblestone-and-brick building with its grubby windows and slate door jamb. Inside, a plump woman in a pinafore poked the hearth. Eve cleared her throat.

"No more rooms, dearie."

"I am not looking for a room. I am looking for a man."

"Ain't we all, though?" The woman hooked her poker on the wall and turned. "Well, you don't look like no one who'd be staying at the likes o' here. What sort o' gent you say you was looking for?"

"A Mr. Britton." The name felt strange on her lips. How long since she'd spoken it aloud? "J-John Britton."

"Well, you be in luck, little dearie." The woman waddled to the stairs and motioned Eve to follow her. "Come 'long. I'll show you meself. Don't think he be here just now. Goes out a good bit, he does. Not that I notice, mind you. Far be it from me to think a handsome bloke like that, poor or not, would take a second look at an ape-leader like me." At the top of the stairs, the woman knocked, then threw open a wooden door. "Just you sit there and wait for him. I'll be telling him to expect you, I will, if I see him on his way up." She shut the door behind Eve.

Then she was alone—with his shirtsleeve draped across the only chair, his bed rumpled but clean, his knapsack in the corner by the window. Her face burned. She couldn't sit. She couldn't move. What would Father say if he knew?

He would curse. He would hate her. He would shout that people would talk and she would be ruined and everything he'd worked for would be gone.

Let it be ruined. What did it matter? What did she care for the world her father had built? He hadn't climbed wealth's ladder for her, as he claimed. Nor for her mother, may she rest in peace.

He'd climbed that ladder for himself. Every rung he ascended

took him farther away from her—until he was so distant she couldn't reach him at all.

Too many times, she'd tried to climb up to him.

Like marrying Arthur Tomlinson.

Or accepting the proposal, only weeks ago, to marry the son of a viscount.

But she was done climbing. She belonged here, now, in a dirty room in a lodging house waiting for a man most peerage wouldn't dare grip hands with.

John Britton.

Her John Britton.

Five Years Earlier

THERE WAS SOMETHING DIFFERENT ABOUT THE night. The air was more tropical, the breeze less gusty, the streaked horizon hazier and pinker.

Without a word, Mr. Britton settled the child in her arms. "There." A wobble rang the quiet voice, and his eyes were misty above his smile. A smile for her. A smile for the life they'd saved together.

On her makeshift bed of palm leaves and sand, Eve drew the baby against her neck. How sweet he smelled. Just like the air right now—fresh, clean, beautiful. Her heart throbbed against the tiny body. Her soul wept as she clung to him. *My son, my son.*

Mr. Britton leaned down. He stroked the head with two of

his fingers, faintly and slowly, then met her eyes. *We saved him*, he seemed to say.

Tears were on her cheeks. She didn't realize until he brushed them away.

Then he left her alone under their crude lean-to and walked to the edge of the water. Up and down the beach he paced, shirtless, his blond hair bleached lighter from exposure to the sun. Then he stopped. He picked up a stick, tossed it into the water, and lifted it again when the tide carried it back.

He was thinner, this stranger.

Only he wasn't a stranger.

Not anymore. Not after he'd held back her hair every time she was sick, or given up much of his food so she would not suffer. Why would he do such a thing? Would Arthur have hungered in her stead? Would her father?

Eve rubbed the baby's cheek when he cried. No, they wouldn't have. Not either of them. They hadn't the heart of John Britton.

Heat suffused her cheeks when he glanced back at her. She knew nothing about him. Indeed, they'd spoken no more than two or three words each day. Where did he come from? Where had he been bound before *The Gunnilda* was attacked? Had he friends, enemies? Was his home in Britain or was his heart in Buenos Aires?

Yet none of her questions mattered.

She knew him.

Without ever trying and with all her questions unanswered, she understood him and trusted him. He was strong yet gentle.

He was brave, resolute, and confident enough that nothing would ever make her afraid again, so long as he stayed close.

He had rescued her. He had rescued her son.

And she almost loved him for it.

November 1816

HOW MUCH TIME HAD PASSED? AN HOUR?

With hesitant fingers, Eve lifted his shirtsleeves from the back of the chair. She folded the white cotton fabric, brought it to her nose, and breathed in the warm scent of him.

Then she settled in the chair. She stared out the window as the late morning wore on into afternoon. Her attention was drawn to the knapsack in the corner more than once. What did he keep there?

Would it be some sort of sin to look?

Heart skipping faster, she hurried from the chair and knelt beside the bag. She opened the leather flap. First she pulled out a linen-wrapped loaf of bread. Then a folding knife. Then a small worn Bible—an oddity, as he could not read.

There was something else. Something long and wooden that made a knot spring to her throat. *Dear God, give me strength.*

Why had he kept it all this time? She didn't want to remember.

But she closed her eyes and was back on the island she wished she'd never left.

Five Years Earlier

EVE FINISHED OFF THE LAST OF THE FISH AND WIPED her fingers on her soiled dress. The muslin fabric was shredded and soiled—and she'd long since removed her stockings and shoes. What would Father think to see her scampering about barefoot, dressed in rags, with her hair disheveled and loose?

He would think her a disgrace. Maybe she would have thought it of herself.

But she almost felt...well, she almost felt free.

She glanced back at little David. He slept cradled in her chemise in the carved-out log Mr. Britton had made for him. His cheeks were flushed, his tiny arms above his head. A likeness of her, with his chestnut-colored hair and upturned nose, yet without any resemblance to Arthur. What would he have thought to see his son? Would he have smiled with tears as Mr. Britton had? Would he have held him in his arms, kissed his forehead, and swayed him back and forth when he cried?

Eve pushed away such thoughts. 'Twas not fair to question Arthur now, to be disappointed in him as much in death as she had been in life. He had been amiable to her, after all, hadn't he?

Mayhap a bit aloof. Mayhap strick sometimes, in the same way her father was.

But still amiable.

She snapped a few twigs from the pile, tossed them into the fire, then made her way to the beach.

Mr. Britton was seated on the sand, trousers rolled to his knees, working with a chunk of wood and his folding knife.

At her approach, he glanced back. His beard was full, the hair ragged along his neck. If she had passed him in her phaeton on a London street, she might have thought him a ragpicker or a common pickpocket.

But no, he looked a king. He had the eyes of a king, the lips of a king, the noble strength of a king. When she closed her eyes at night, close enough to hear his slow breathing on the other side of the lean-to, she could imagine she was the queen. That the island was theirs, the world was theirs, and that they belonged together.

Just him, her, and the baby.

Their baby.

Not because little David shared his blood, nor because Eve Tomlinson and John Britton were wed.

But because he loved the child. And the child loved him.

And Eve loved them both.

She sat next to him on the sand, smiled at the sight of his handicraft. "What is it?"

He lifted the wooden toy, shaped like so many of the rattles she'd played with as a child. He handed it to her. "For David."

The water rushed through their toes, cool and frothy, then drew back into the ocean.

She felt his eyes on her. She didn't want to look at him. She was afraid he could see too much, that he'd see farther than anyone had seen in her life. Would he know the silly fancies she nursed through the night? Would he know that she...that she

loved him? Was it possible he loved her? Had anyone ever loved her truly?

Despite herself, she met his gaze.

He smiled and said nothing. Always nothing. But it was the sweetest, the dearest, the most wonderful nothing she'd heard in her life. How did he always make her feel this way?

As if she were enough. As if she didn't do him shame. As if she were a treasure, something worth saving and keeping and cherishing. Only did he? Did John Britton cherish her, or was he only so kind as to make her think he did?

"Mr. Britton?"

He turned back to the water, brows rising, and stood.

"What is it?"

"A ship."

Her stomach dropped as she spotted the cream masts, the lion-faced bowsprit. A bowsprit she'd seen before—just before the cannon fire.

"The *corsairs*." He nodded back to the lean-to. "Get the child."

"But should we not hide?"

"Too late. They have seen the smoke."

Fear made the blood in her veins run hot. She almost questioned him, clung to his arm and begged him to tell her what they would do.

But she didn't. He wasn't afraid. She knew by his eyes.

She would not be afraid either.

With prayers on her breath, she raced back to the lean-to and gathered little David in her arms. By the time she returned to the beach, the ship's anchors splashed into gentle waves. Two

rowboats lowered, then glided through the water as fast as her heart hammered in her chest.

God, show us mercy.

Mr. Britton braced himself in front of her.

One by one, twenty or more privateers clambered out of the rowboats and waded ashore. They approached behind a greasy captain in black tailcoat and worn bicorne hat. He yelled a command in French and the men behind him halted. "Good day, *monsieur*."

Mr. Britton nodded.

"You are alone, the three of you?"

"Yes."

"How long?"

"Since *The Gunnilda*."

A smile brightened the dark, high-cheek boned face. "Ah, so we have met before. Apologies, *monsieur*. Had we known the vessel to be but a packet ship, with nothing more than mail and worthless passengers, we would have avoided the encounter." His gaze flicked to Eve. Up and down, slowly enough that heat crept up her neck. "But perhaps the greatest booty on your ship, *monsieur*, was escaped without my notice."

"Take me."

Eve's chest stabbed with the words. No.

Stepping closer, Mr. Britton said again, "Take me as your prisoner and leave the mother and child alone."

"To die in such a desolate place?" The captain shared a smile with his men. "*Non*, I am not so cruel. We will take all of you. Bernoul, take our brave *monsieur* to the brig and lock him up.

Dicy, handle the child. I will remain onshore and acquaint myself with the *mademoiselle*—”

“No.” Low, quiet, deep. The air trembled when Mr. Britton spoke, and a flicker of surprise crossed the captain’s sweaty face.

“*Non?*” He crossed his arms. “You realize, of course, I can have you whipped? Greater yet kill?”

“Do what you wish to me. I offer no fight. But harm the mother or child and I shall kill you.”

“*Oui*, I believe you would try.”

“Succeed, sir.”

“You have much gallantry for an Englishman. Or foolishness, perhaps. Dicy?”

A baldheaded crewman, with brass-hilted swords at each hip, stepped forward.

“Assist the *mademoiselle* to my side. I wish to speak with her.”

Eve’s chest heaved, but Mr. Britton glanced back at her and nodded his approval. When the man called Dicy drug her forward, she did not resist.

Then she stood before the captain, close enough the rancid scent of his breath turned her stomach. His eyes, black and hooded, stayed on hers. “This man is your husband?”

“No.”

“Yet you love him?”

Every part of her burned, but she didn’t dare look back at Mr. Britton’s face. “Yes.”

“I see. Most well I see.” He motioned to Dicy with a flicker of his hand and the man drew both swords. The captain removed his hat. “I have made my decision. I will do as the *monsieur* has requested and will leave you and your child

unharméd. But I am too much French and much too devoted to Napoleon, you must understand, to leave a wretched Englishman yet alive. I must have some satisfaction."

Dicy's swords glinted in the sunlight.

The air choked out of her. "No."

"The choice is yours."

"Do not kill him."

"It is him, I fear, or you."

"Then me."

"Mrs. Tomlinson, no—" But she didn't listen. Let them take her. Let them kill her. How much sooner she'd rather the sword plunge her than to see him fall, to see him injured, to watch him die.

"Your *monsieur* is not the only brave one among us." The captain wiped sweat from his forehead, replaced his hat, and shouted a command in French to the shabbily-dressed men. They retreated back toward their rowboats. Even Dicy sheaved his swords and left.

Only the captain remained, half smiling, arms crossed again at his chest. "At our next port, a letter will be sent to your country with your whereabouts. I imagine help will be swift in coming."

Relief drained away the tension in Eve's body. She clung to little David and fought the tears, as Mr. Britton's arm tugged her to his side.

The captain shook his head. "To find one who loves enough to die is rare. To find two? Unbelievable. Even Napoleon would understand." With a tip of his hat and an *au revior*, the captain

returned to his ship with his men, the anchors were pulled, and the ship with the lion bowsprit sailed away.

The island was theirs again.

Everything was different after that. Days passed into weeks. Without many words, yet with looks that were softer, they played and lived and loved in a land undisturbed.

Sometimes they'd wander the length of the island together. From one side to the other, they'd push through trees and find more fresh water holes and gather more sticks for the fires. Then, in the heat of day, they'd wade into the ocean. She'd splash his face, he'd grin or laugh, and their rags would both be wet by the time the folly was over.

Other times they'd sit quietly, close to the flaming fire, with David half in her arms and half in his. She'd talk about his nose, while Mr. Britton touched his cheek, and together they'd watch the child drift into slumber. How wonderful all of it was. To be so near to him. To belong to someone and be loved by someone, without needing to do or say or be anything more than what she was.

He never said he loved her.

Not like Father did.

Or Arthur.

But she knew. She knew so much she wished the ship would never come, and the day would never end, and the king and queen and the child they loved could stay here forever.

She should have known it could never be.

With the colder air of September, something changed. David grew paler. The sweet glow of his eyes became clouded, watery, and his wails disturbed the quiet salty air.

Mr. Britton said the fever would go away. He situated the carved log closer to the fire and stayed up all night to keep it burning. It wasn't enough.

Eve held the baby herself. She swaddled him tighter in the dirty chemise, cradled him against her bosom to keep him warm, prayed herself in and out of sleep.

When morning came, her heart paralyzed. Before she pulled him back and saw his face, she knew. His body was limp. His skin blue and strange. His eyes closed, never to open again.

God, no. She screamed with no sound. She pressed him to her neck and stood, pounded his back, chafed his cold face. This could not be. He was well. He was sleeping. Heaven have mercy, he must be sleeping because if he didn't wake up she could not live. Not without him. Her baby.

Mr. Britton ran from the beach, trousers already wet, fishing spear in his hand. He threw it down and took the child, but his face creased with pain.

And she died. She died a hundred times over and the sting made her numb and the world dipped into blackness. She screamed for David, but he wouldn't give him back.

He carried him away. She'd never hold him again. Never laugh at his upturned nose or croon away his cries or tickle the tiny tummy until he waved his arms and smiled.

God, no. She collapsed to her knees and stretched her fingers deep into the burning sand. She gasped. She wailed. She shook so hard the world became a blur, a senseless blur.

'Twas a long time before Mr. Britton came back. He bent next to her in the sand, his face close to hers. Tears dripped into his beard.

The child was buried. She didn't know where and it didn't matter, because he wasn't hers anymore. He belonged to the dead. He belonged to Arthur.

And she was the living. *God, let me die—*

"No." As if he'd known her thoughts, as if the thoughts were his too. Of course they were. He pulled her into his arms and cradled her, as if she were a child herself, and buried his face against hers.

He'd never touched her like this. Never held her this close.

But the king had a right to hold his queen.

He was all she had left.

November 1816

EVE LEFT THE WOODEN RATTLE IN THE KNAPSACK, returned all his things, and exited the room alone. Outside, the world was dark and the footman atop the carriage leaned his head back in sleep.

She awoke him, climbed in the carriage before he could assist her, and settled next to her maid in the blackness. The emptiness clawed her. Just as it had for five long years. Five years without little David. Five years without the man who had buried him. Five years loving no one and no one loving her.

"He did not come." The words were quiet against the jingle of tack and creak of carriage wheels.

Prudence patted her hand, but the touch meant little. "Some things, Mrs. Tomlinson, are not meant to be. You must think

about the wedding tomorrow. You must forget your Mr. Britton, as your father says.”

Forget? She could die for the agony and lock out the world and close all the windows in her bedchamber. She could put the black on again and weep her pillows wet, just as she’d done a hundred times over.

But she could not ever forget. What was she without her little David? What was she without her quiet king on their quiet island?

She was nothing.

She was untouchable to the living and unreachable to the dead. What had she left? How could she have thought that changing her dresses and coming out of her chamber and wedding a man of her father’s choosing would resolve anything?

Maybe the wordless letter hadn’t belonged to John Britton in the first place.

Or maybe it didn’t mean what she hoped. Maybe he didn’t want to see her. Maybe he couldn’t.

Perhaps she’d been right, when she’d imagined, in their last goodbye, that they’d never see each other again.

Five Years Earlier

EVE CRADLED HER KNEES ON THE BEACH IN RAGS SO wretched they offered no protection against the rain. The chill reached deeper than any cold she’d known. How many days since she’d eaten?

She couldn't remember. There was no hunger.

But her limbs were so thin, her skin so gaunt, and any strength she had left was finished. The ship was coming. Far in the distance, rainy wind filled the masts and a red and blue flag fluttered in dismal greeting.

Mr. Britton lowered himself beside her. His shoulder brushed hers. The only warmth, the only comfort she knew, but it made small difference in the abyss of so much pain. "The sea has your Arthur." Quiet words. Always quiet. "The island has your David."

Why could it not have been her? How could she endure such loss? How could she keep waking up every morning when all her empty arms longed to do was hold her child?

He turned his eyes to her. "But my heart has you."

She turned to him and grabbed his face. Her chest worked faster, as her freezing fingers eased through his wet beard. "I need you. I cannot leave this place. I cannot leave David here alone. I cannot be parted from you."

"We always knew the ship would come."

"Then we will get on together." Tears joined the raindrops. "We will go back to England and wed each other and—"

"No." He shook his head. He didn't say why, and she'd almost known he wouldn't. There were secrets behind his eyes. There'd been secrets all along. There was so much of him she didn't know and so many questions left unanswered. Now they were destroying the only part of her left.

He leaned forward and found her lips. She tasted of him for the first time and they drank, as king and queen, from a cup they may never share again.

Then he stood and waded out into the rain-splattered ocean, as the ship drew nearer with its drenched flag. In the same rowboat, they were hurried to the ship, forced into separate cabins, and sailed away from the familiar sandy shore.

Sickness claimed her and stole the consciousness she stopped trying to hold onto. In death-like sleep and rocked by the sway of the ship, she prayed she'd never awake.

Everything was lost to her now.

November 1816

“WHERE THE DEVIL HAVE YOU BEEN?”

Eve halted in the dark foyer, lit only by the flickering glow of her father's candle. No repulsion needled through her at the sight of his gray, lowered brows or his glowering eyes. Indeed, she was numb to such emotion.

She was numb to everything.

“I want an answer, Daughter, and I want one now. Have you any deuced idea what you have done?”

She unhooked her cloak and let it fall to the ground. Behind her, Prudence picked it up, breath heavy in distress.

“Father, I am tired—”

“You are not playing the invalid with me.” He seized her arm when she tried to pass. “You have lain in your bed and claimed illness for the last time. It is finished. All of this is finished. For five years, you have shamed me. You have thrown away opportu-

nity and made us the latest on dit to every gossipmonger in the parish. Now this."

A shudder moved through her as he leaned closer.

"If that blackguard you shared an island with does not leave here tonight, by heaven I shall remove him myself."

She froze. *God, please.* All strength left her legs. Surely it could not be true. Surely he could not be here. Surely her father was only taunting her, hurting her, trying to make her believe.

"He actually fathoms you will marry him, the fool."

Tears stung her eyes. Mr. Britton wanted her? Wanted her as his?

"The little blackguard, little nothing of a man. You know he had the audacity to look into my face and tell me he had come for you?"

"Where is he?"

"I am not finished with you—"

She jerked at her arm as a sob escaped her throat. "Where is he!"

"The study. And when I am quite through with you, you shall march in there and tell him to leave this place. Tell him no daughter of such bloodlines, of such family prestige, would ever deign herself to such a pauper of a man."

"You cannot stop me."

"You know I can."

"Not this time. I cannot be locked in my chamber or forced into another loveless matrimony or guilted into anything else you may expect of me." She turned her face away. "Let me go."

"So you can run away with this dog and leave me behind

with scandal? Hardly, Eve. Hardly. You are *my* daughter and shall do as I say.”

She shook her head as Prudence whimpered from somewhere behind her and the candle shook in her father’s hand. “No, I—”

“You are your mother’s daughter. You realize what she would have expected of you.”

“No.”

“You are from a lineage of respect and honor. You dare not disgrace me. You dare not defy me. You are mine and tomorrow you will be a bride and everything I have built for us is a part of you—”

“No, Father, no.” She forced her gaze into his, quivered deep inside the core of her. “I am none of those things. I am nothing at all but the woman who loves John Britton. You must know that.”

“Marry him and you are not my daughter.”

“Then I am not your daughter.”

His face changed. The fury faded, his lips parted, and for the first time, he seemed at a loss. As if he knew he had no power against her. As if he realized there was no hope of pulling her up his ladder. Not now. Not ever.

He released her. Silence passed between them. He looked away, features hidden in the shadows, then glanced back with a look more sad than anything else. “Leave now and you shall have no part in anything that belongs to you. You realize that, of course?”

“I want no part of it without him.”

“Then go.” He cursed beneath his breath and blew out the

candle. Darkness enveloped them. He had climbed the last rung, the one so high she couldn't see him and would never reach him again. "Go and never come back."

Without a goodbye spoken between them, she raced from the foyer, through the corridors, and burst into the study she'd often dreaded.

This time her father did not sit behind the desk with his exotic maps and trophies and ledgers.

A king stood there instead, standing by the window, with moonlight illuminating his shaven face. His eyes were already on hers. How soft was the look of them. How they smiled, and cried, and said all the things he never uttered with his voice.

She crossed the room and touched his cheeks. Then his lips. Then the corner of his eyes, where dampness met her fingers. Tears for little David and the grave. Tears for the island they left and could never return to. Tears for today, for now, and the life he was giving back to her.

He swallowed her into his arms. How his comfort healed her wounds. How easily all her hurt and fear fled in the touch of his strength. *I am yours.* All her broken pieces were complete. *I am your Eve and nothing else.*

Hand in hand, they left the study, then the manor, then the iron-wrought gates that had imprisoned her. Not only for these last five years, but the whole of her life. She was free again. Alive again. Strong again because he was strong.

John Britton, I love you. He didn't have to say it back. Maybe he never would.

But she knew.

She always knew.

About the Author



HANNAH LINDER, represented by Books & Such Literary Management, is a Christian author residing in the mountains of central West Virginia. She is a two-time 2021 Selah Award winner, an American Christian Fiction Writers (ACFW) member, and a Jane Austen member. When

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