

LONDON BEGINNINGS • BOOK 3

The
ARTFUL
MATCH

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This is a work of historical reconstruction; the appearances of certain historical figures are therefore inevitable. All other characters, however, are products of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

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He maketh the storm a calm, so that
the waves thereof are still.
Then are they glad because they be
quiet; so he bringeth them unto
their desired haven.

—PSALM 107:29–30



Prologue

LA GUAIRA, VENEZUELA
AUGUST 1881

JULIA BERNAY STEPHENSON WATCHED as her father carefully stirred honey into his coffee. For years she had thought he was dead, and now, even though it had been a week since she'd found him alive, she still looked at him with wondering eyes.

Paul Bernay didn't exactly match her memory. He was older now, of course, and not as robust, for traumatic events had aged him. There was a tremor in his hands as he set down the spoon and raised the mug to his lips. His speech had been scattered in the beginning, reflecting a frail and troubled mind, but Julia's presence had begun to set him on the mend.

When Julia and her husband, Michael, first walked into this little pub and saw him, the moment had been electric. Julia had known instantly that he was her father.

Paul had taken longer to recognize her. It wasn't until she had thrown her arms around him that he began to respond. Julia couldn't blame him. He hadn't seen her since she was a child, and now she was all grown up and appearing out of the blue.

But then his arms had tightened as he returned her embrace, and he murmured, "Daughter." He had even gleaned which of his daughters

was holding him. When he'd said, "My Julia," her heart had swelled with happiness.

Every bitter thought she'd nurtured for years regarding him had vanished in an instant. "Yes, Papa," she had said, clinging to him tightly. "It's your Julia."

It seemed like such a fantastical dream that just a few short months ago, Julia would never have believed it. She was newly married to a man whose love she cherished, and soon she would return to England to begin her medical studies. Best of all, she would bring her father back with her—if she could get him to agree.

That had been a sticking point, because her father was terrified of the idea of returning to England.

The coffee had been brought out by Diego, a young man who filled a variety of positions at this humble oasis in the port town of La Guaira, Venezuela. He spoke good rudimentary English, picked up over the years through his interactions with Paul and with the English and American sailors who spent time here while their ships were in port. Because Paul had not spoken coherently at first, Diego had told them what was known of his story.

Eighteen years ago, Diego's brother was a sailor aboard a merchant ship that visited a small Caribbean island shortly after a hurricane had left it in shambles. The residents who had survived were attempting to piece together their homes and businesses. Under a pile of rubble, they had found Julia's father.

He'd been unconscious after weathering the storm outdoors, clinging to a stubby tree while being pelted with flying debris. No one had seen him before, nor did they have any idea how he'd come to the island. The few hundred residents all knew each other, so this had been a great mystery. Nobody knew what to do with him, for his mind was too scattered to enable him to care for himself.

Diego's brother took pity on the man and persuaded him to come to Venezuela. Diego had been a mere lad of five at the time, but he and Paul—now christened Pablo—had hit it off from the beginning.

"It took months of my mother's gentle care before he would speak more than two words at a time," Diego had explained.

In the years that followed, Paul Bernay had lived with Diego's family much like a kindly but doddering uncle. He was popular with the sailors because he helped them while away idle hours playing checkers and listening to their stories. He took up carving small figurines in wood and made a bit of money now and then selling them.

Pablo never spoke about his past or what had landed him on that island, although many people, including Diego's family, had tried to prod the information from him. They could not tell whether he was being intentionally secretive or whether he was so battered by the storm that he had lost his memory.

Over this past week, Julia had shared with her father all that had happened to the family while he had been away. He still spoke very little, but every day he seemed to grow more able and willing to speak, his words coming out more clearly.

Julia had been trying to coax him into revealing the information he'd kept silent about all these years, and today they finally seemed to be getting somewhere. With careful, gentle questioning, they had been able to take Paul's mind back to the moment he'd realized his ship was heading directly toward a hurricane.

"It was the barometer," her father said. "It was falling—down, down. There was trouble brewing. I could feel it in my bones. After fifteen years at sea, I could feel the weather, as though the winds were talking to me."

"But what happened to the ship, Papa?" Julia asked. Her father had been the ship's second officer and in charge of navigation. Knowing trouble was coming, he surely would have taken the ship to safety.

His hands began to shake again, and he set down his cup, flattening his palms on the table in an effort to stop their involuntary movement.

Julia grasped her father's fingers. They were as cold and rough as sandpaper. She prayed her touch would calm his heart as well as the nervous movement of his hands. "I've told you, Papa. There is nothing for you to fear. The ship was written off as a loss due to the storm. No one in England knows what really happened. There is no one who can harm you now."

Her father shook his head. "The authorities . . ." He looked into

her eyes. His own were lined with worry. "If they discover I am alive, there will be questions. There will be trouble."

"I will be there to aid you with any legal issues," Michael assured him. They had already told Paul that Michael was a seasoned barrister.

"If there are secrets we must keep, we will keep them," Julia agreed. A great burden on her heart had been lifted when she'd learned that her father had never planned to abandon them. "Whatever you were caught up in, I know you were innocent—or at the very least, that you were participating against your will."

His hands grasped hers tighter. "How do you know that?"

"It was that conversation I overheard the last night I saw you, when I came to the pub to fetch you for dinner. You were speaking to another man as the two of you came outside. Do you remember? You noticed me standing just on the other side of some crates."

He nodded. "That was one of my captain's henchmen."

Due to misunderstandings fostered by their mother, Julia and her sisters had grown up thinking their father was the captain of a merchant ship. They'd learned only recently that he'd in fact been a second officer.

"You insisted you hadn't heard anything," Paul continued. "I didn't believe you. I told myself it didn't matter. You could not have understood what we were talking about."

"I heard enough to get the wrong idea about why you never came back. I thought you were planning to abandon us."

His hands jerked in surprise. "What did you hear?"

Julia was able to recite it word for word because she'd turned over the sentences so often in her mind. "I wish to heaven I could be free from the whole lot of them. I had such plans for my life, you know. And it was nothing like this." Julia paused, closing her eyes briefly, experiencing the old, familiar wash of pain. "I thought you were speaking about us—your family."

"No," he protested. "I regret every day without you. And Marie—"

He broke down in earnest, tears flowing. No one moved or spoke, allowing him time to grieve. His joy at seeing his daughter again had been tempered by the news that his beloved wife was dead, and his heartache was still fresh, overwhelming him at times.

After a while, Michael quietly pulled a handkerchief from his coat pocket and pushed it in Paul's direction. Paul picked it up and used it to dry his eyes. He examined the high-quality linen for a moment, then gave Michael a look of approval. "You have done well, daughter," he said to Julia.

Julia smiled. Yes, she had. But it was Michael's goodness and honorable character that she was most grateful for, not his ability to buy fine things.

"What did that conversation mean?" she pressed gently.

She and Michael had heard one theory from Charlie Stains, the old sailor who helped them locate her father. Charlie thought Paul might have been caught up in illegal activities related to the American Civil War. If this was true, it could explain why he'd been afraid to return to England.

Paul studied everyone at the table with him, as though weighing whether to speak. Michael had been gradually earning his trust over these days, but Paul seemed to gauge him one last time.

He then looked to Diego, who'd been listening intently. Diego placed a hand over his heart. "I will tell no one, Pablo."

Finally, after surveying the pub and assuring himself that no one else was within earshot, Paul said softly, "Gunrunning."

Julia and Michael exchanged glances. Charlie's guess had been correct.

"We were taking goods to Barbados," her father continued. Now that he'd shared the heart of it, he seemed ready to tell his tale. "We also had a secret stash of munitions to be delivered at a port in the Bahamas. From there, they would go to blockade runners and be smuggled to the Confederates. I said I wanted no part of a scheme that would prolong the evils of war. They told me I had no choice. They threatened my family. My beautiful wife and my precious girls."

His voice cracked on the last phrase. Perhaps he was remembering how young and vulnerable his wife and children had been at the time.

"I had a premonition things weren't going to turn out right. I could feel it as surely as if someone had laid a cold hand on my arm. I tried to jump ship in Barbados, but the captain's ruffians caught me. They beat me unconscious and hauled me back to the ship."

He paused to take a breath and sip more coffee. His voice had picked up strength as he'd gone along. "Now they knew they couldn't trust me. They didn't believe my warnings about the storm, either. No one spoke to me more than was absolutely necessary. There were whispered conversations that stopped when I approached. So I became stealthier in my movements. I overheard enough to piece together their plans. I was going to fall overboard before we got to the Bahamas."

Julia gasped. Michael said, "They were going to murder you?"

Her father's hands shook as he wiped his forehead with the handkerchief. "The next night, I let down a dinghy and escaped. I decided it would be better to die on the open seas than to let those dogs kill me."

"God was with you," Diego said. "You made it to land. They did not."

"When was this? What day?" Julia asked.

"My brother said the hurricane hit that island on the third Sunday in September," Diego supplied. With a tiny smile, he added, "You can believe there was more prayer going on that day than usual."

A memory sparked in Julia's mind of a Sunday shortly after she'd seen her father for the last time. It had been a beautiful, cloudless day in Plymouth, but Julia had been in a funk. Sorrowful thoughts had plagued her ever since her father had left. She had begun to nurture the fear that he would not return.

That afternoon after church, while Cara had been napping and their mother dozing in a chair, Rosalyn had persuaded Julia to go for a walk. They'd climbed their favorite cliff, where they had a view of the sparkling sea. Julia had confided her fears to Rosalyn, and Rosalyn had suggested they pray for their father. Perhaps those simple prayers of two children had helped save him.

Yes, people had been praying that day. And even if they didn't know exactly what they were praying for, God had answered them nonetheless.



Moonlight shimmered on the water, making a silver trail for the ship to follow as it sailed eastward across the Atlantic Ocean.

At last, they were going home.

Julia said a prayer for her father, now asleep in a cabin below. Despite relatively calm seas, sleep had not come easily for him. Michael had managed to allay his concerns about the legal difficulties of returning to England, but the terrors he'd endured during the hurricane remained embedded in his soul. In the end, only his love for his daughters and his powerful desire to be reunited with them had induced him to board this ship.

As Julia gazed at the sea, she envisioned her sisters' joy when she presented them with their father. It was as if he were raised from the dead, given that for nearly twenty years they had believed him gone.

Except for Cara. She had never once stopped believing their father was alive. She had clung to that hope like an anchor through the storms of life. Julia felt more than a little chagrin at all the times she'd berated her sister for building castles in the air. Cara had been right all along. Julia, with her supposedly clear-eyed view of the world, had learned that sometimes the "sensible" path wasn't the right one after all.

She heard a familiar tread behind her. Smiling to herself, she closed her eyes, waiting in anticipation.

Michael's arm slipped around her waist. "What are you pondering, my love?"

Julia leaned against his chest and said dreamily, "I'm thinking how nice it is sometimes to leave common sense by the wayside."

She felt his chest move as he chuckled. "That's quite a statement coming from you, soon-to-be Dr. Julia."

She didn't bother to explain. Instead, she took a moment to savor being in his arms. They'd been married such a short time, and yet she could not remember, in any tangible way, how she'd lived her life before him. "To be honest, I was thinking of how overjoyed Cara will be. I hope it will make up for my leaving England with no warning."

Julia still felt remorse over not sharing her plans with her sisters. Only after the fact had she written them letters revealing that she and Michael had been quietly married on a Monday morning and were going to Venezuela on their honeymoon. She had not explained why they were making such an unusual journey, lest she raise hopes that would turn out to be false.

The letters had gone into the red postbox at the railway station just minutes before Julia and Michael boarded the train for Southampton. By presenting her sisters with a *fait accompli*, she had hoped to lessen their worry. If they knew her plans ahead of time, they would have fretted endlessly over how to dissuade her. It would have been a terrible strain on them all. The logic was sound, but it hadn't alleviated her feelings of guilt.

Michael stroked the back of her neck, a gesture that soothed and relaxed her. "Any anger she feels will disappear as soon as she lays eyes on your father."

Julia could hardly wait. It was a homecoming that was the stuff of dreams.



CHAPTER

1



NEAR EXETER, IN SOUTHWEST ENGLAND
FOUR WEEKS EARLIER

IT WAS GOING TO BE A FINE DAY—no matter what anyone else might say about it.

This was Caroline Bernay's firm resolution as she packed up the drawing supplies for her and four-year-old Robbie. After a week of nearly relentless rain, the morning had finally dawned dry, although the sun was filtered by dark clouds that looked delightfully ominous. Cara couldn't wait to try her hand at capturing them on paper.

Filled with anticipation for the day, she went down the back stairs to the servants' hall. There, she found the butler sitting at the long table, drinking tea while reading yesterday's newspaper.

"Shame on you for dilly-dallying, Mr. Lowe," Cara teased, although in truth she was happy to see him sitting there. He never took the luxury of a morning break unless Sir John and Lady Needenham were both gone from the house.

"And may I ask what mischief *you* are up to?" he returned. His

voice was curt, but there was humor in it. He was used to Cara's teasing by now.

"Mrs. James promised to make a picnic lunch for Robbie and me. Robbie is desperate to play outside."

He frowned. "You know the entire kitchen staff have their hands full preparing for the dinner party."

"All the more reason why it is good that we shall be out of your hair all day."

The butler turned his eyes heavenward. "Small favors."

Cara smiled and went off to find the cook.



"This is the perfect spot," Cara announced as she and Robbie reached the crest of the rise. "Great views all around."

"It's windy up here," Robbie observed, grabbing his hat before the wind could snatch it away.

"Yes, but see what interesting things it is doing to the clouds." She pointed at the clouds being whisked across the sky, forming beautiful patterns as they went.

Robbie didn't even look up. His gaze was focused on a stream that ran along a stand of trees at the bottom of the hill. "Can't we go and play down there?"

"We'll do that after you've had your lunch." *And a nap*, she silently added to herself. But she knew better than to say it aloud. Robbie was far easier to get down for a nap if he didn't see it coming. She spread out the blanket she'd brought and set the picnic basket on top to keep it anchored against the breeze. "See, I even got the cook to pack some buttermilk for us to have with our sandwiches."

"Hooray!" Robbie immediately turned his attention to the picnic basket. He loved buttermilk and had not yet figured out the connection between consuming it and becoming drowsy. Cara was not usually so ruthless about getting him to nap, but today she was under strict orders from Lady Needenham that Robbie should be rested so he could stay up past his usual bedtime for a brief presentation to their dinner guests tonight. Cara would benefit from this plan, too: while Robbie

was sleeping, she could sketch. She'd brought along a pad and some drawing wax. It was all she could manage to bring, since she was also carrying the blanket and food.

After they'd enjoyed chicken sandwiches, fruit, and biscuits washed down with buttermilk, Robbie said, "Can we go for a walk now? I saw a rabbit down by the brook."

"We'll go in a bit." Cara knew the delay would give time for the digesting food to bring on sleepiness. "Look, is that a ladybug?" She pointed toward the grass at the edge of the blanket.

Robbie stretched out on his stomach with his chin propped on one hand to study the ladybug. He watched as it crawled along on a stem of grass. After a while he tired of that and began to riffle through the clovers, looking for any with four leaves. He wasn't yet sleeping, but the yawn he gave was an indication he would be soon. Cara knew the signs. His hand movements became less frequent and eventually stopped altogether as he fell into a doze.

Cara pulled out her pad and drawing implements, happy the clouds were still presenting a dramatic tension to the idyllic fields below. In her sketch, she included Robbie, too. He looked charming with his head on one arm and a few clovers in his hand. Although she loved painting landscapes, she found special joy in drawing portraits. It was so satisfying to capture a person's look or attitude in just the right way.

Soon Cara found herself yawning, too. She'd stayed up far too late finishing a gothic novel. Once she'd found the corner shelf in the library that held Lady Needenham's favorite books, Cara had begun devouring them all. Why hadn't anyone told her, when forcing her to plod through dry tomes for school, that some books could actually be *fun*?

Setting aside her drawing wax, she stretched out on her back and looked up at the clouds moving at a solemn pace across the murky sky. White and gray in a multitude of shades—more than she could find a name for. How fascinating, she thought idly, that God could make a rainbow out of hues of gray. . . .

The breeze rustled the trees below, adding a gentle hum to the murmur of the brook. A perfectly imperfect day.

“Miss Bernay?” Robbie’s voice was soft, seemingly coming from a long way away.

“Hmm?”

But she didn’t hear anything else. His voice faded into the landscape of her dreams.



Cara only realized she had drifted off when a fluttering movement sent a breath of air across her face and startled her awake. She sat up, blinking, trying to gauge the time. The sun’s position seemed far advanced, although it was difficult to tell because the cloud cover had gotten heavier, obscuring the sun. She felt stiff and a little cold. They must have both slept longer than they’d intended. Far from being cranky tonight, Robbie might be too energized to sleep. She’d have to ensure they took a brisk walk before returning home, if they had time.

She turned to wake the boy, but the blanket next to her was empty. She looked around, her gaze widening from the immediate area to the larger meadow and then down toward the brook with worry. There was no sign of him.

“Robbie!” she shouted. “Where are you?”

There was no answer.

“Robbie!” Cara repeated the call louder this time, trying to quell the urge to panic. How could she have fallen into such a deep sleep? It wasn’t like her to sleep so soundly during daylight hours.

She hurried down the hill. Robbie was bound to be somewhere along the water’s edge or in the trees beyond. Slipping on a patch of mud caused by yesterday’s rain, Cara murmured, “Robbie, if you’ve soiled your clothes, I won’t take you outside for a month.” But her threats were useless if she couldn’t find him first.

To her growing alarm, Robbie seemed to be nowhere. Over the next hour she covered every inch of ground he might reasonably have traveled, reprimanding herself the entire time for having been so negligent.

At last she returned to the foot of the hill where they’d picnicked. She paused, wiping sweat from her brow. The sun was definitely low on the horizon. The clouds, which had seemed appealing earlier today,

now only threatened. She would have to return to the house and get help. She would have to admit to Sir John that she had lost his son. She was terrified at the thought of Robbie being out in the dark. How in the world could he have traveled so far?

Tears began trickling down her cheeks, matched by the newly falling rain.

It was raining on a lost child.

Leaving behind everything she had brought with her, Cara took off at a run toward the manor house.



The hours that followed were perhaps the worst Cara had endured since her mother died. The disruption of the Needenhams' orderly household, the ruin of their elegant soiree, and most of all, the fear in Lady Needenham's eyes—these added more fuel to the guilt already consuming her.

Sir John hastily organized a search party comprised of four servants, several dogs, and two of the gentlemen from the dinner party who volunteered to come along. Starting at the picnic area, the dogs eagerly followed Robbie's scent.

Dusk became night, and they continued the search by lantern light. The dogs drew them onward, all the way to the hedges lining the fence at the far edge of the estate. All at once they clustered around one of the bushes, wriggling and wagging their tails. They were too well-trained to bark but emitted enthusiastic high-pitched growls. One of the footmen held his lantern high to light the area. Cara let out a cry of thanksgiving. Robbie was asleep under the bush.

The boy opened his eyes when one of the hounds began to sniff his face. "Jack?" He murmured the dog's name, his voice raspy and his expression dazed. Even by the wavering light of the lantern, Cara could see his cheeks were pale and he was shivering.

"Robbie!" She lunged forward to pick him up.

The steely arm of Sir John stopped her. "*Don't* go near him."

His words carried the force of a threat. He had barely kept his anger at bay these past few hours, only tolerating Cara's presence because he

needed her to show them where to begin the search. Now that they had found his son, Sir John only seemed doubly furious.

Cara obeyed, watching as Sir John scooped the child into his arms. Robbie turned instinctively into his father's chest, nestling there. Cara's heart pinched at the tenderness of it. Sir John's first words to his son, however, held reprimand. "Robbie, why did you wander so far away from Miss Bernay?"

Robbie rubbed his eyes, still not entirely awake. "I was following the bunny. I wanted to see where he lived. Miss Bernay didn't want to come. She was sleeping."

"Yes. I know." Sir John shot Cara a look. She shrank back, feeling the weight of his justified rage.

"Are you angry, Papa?" Robbie's voice was plaintive.

Sir John pressed the boy close to his chest. "You must promise never to do that again."

Cara had often thought Sir John lukewarm in his affection for the boy. Watching him now, she understood how wrong she'd been to judge him so unfairly.

Robbie began to shiver violently.

"Where's that blanket?" Sir John barked.

A footman stepped forward, pulling a blanket from an oilcloth pouch. In no time, the boy was bundled up and securely in his father's arms again. Sir John turned without another word and began walking with long, swift strides toward home.

Cara and the others followed in his wake. The footman gave her a sympathetic glance, but she was so crushed by remorse that she could not bring herself to acknowledge his attempt to make her feel better. This child now looked terribly ill, and it was her fault. And if the worst should happen . . . She gasped, needing air, and began to pray fervently as they trudged along the muddy track. Even if Robbie fully recovered, everything had changed. Sir John would soon give full vent to his anger, and it would be directed squarely at her.

It was, she thought miserably, no less than she deserved.



Dawn arrived feeble and wet, the sun barely piercing through heavy gray clouds. Cara sat by the window in her room, as she'd done for the past four days, staring out at the sodden landscape and praying.

The day after their nighttime search for Robbie, fever had set in, and he appeared to be getting worse.

Her back and neck ached, but she kept her vigil. With her door adjoining the nursery left open, she could see the door to Robbie's bedroom on the other side. It was closed. Those coming and going from the sick child's room used another door that opened onto the main hallway.

Cara's room was located near the top of the stairs, and she could easily hear all who went by: the servants, the doctor, Sir John. She did not think Lady Needenham ever left her son's bedside. Cara had been instructed in no uncertain terms to remain in her room. Only once did she dare break this command, and that was to tiptoe through the nursery late one night. She'd put her ear to the door of Robbie's room and heard her ladyship crying, imploring her son to be strong and get better.

Heartsick, Cara had slumped back to her chair and resumed her own feverish prayers. She had kept praying through the long days that had followed. As she faced yet another dismal dawn, helplessness welled up within her. Why should God listen to her prayers? What were they but desperate pleas to be saved from the consequences after her own negligence had endangered the life of a child?

She ought to have known a catastrophe like this would happen. Her life with the Needenham had been going well, but that could not negate the truth that Cara had never been able to keep anything for too long without ruining it. She ought never to have been entrusted with a child's care. Even though she'd spent two years overseeing the little ones at the orphanage where she had grown up, there had always been an adult present—especially after one of the toddlers had climbed on a chair to look out an open window and nearly fallen out. Although it was never stated aloud, the staff must have known that Cara was too inept to keep the children safe.

Shivering as the morning chill permeated the window, Cara

wiped back a tear. It had been a bleak, overcast day just like this when Mama had died. The kind of day her mother, who flourished on sunny days, had hated. Cara was the only other person in the room when her mother had finally slipped away after a long illness. “*Watch over her,*” Rosalyn had said. “*Julia and I are just going to make tea.*”

Cara had tried her best. But she’d wanted only to snuggle up to her mother as she’d often done before Mama became too weak to hold her. Craving the comfort of her mother’s arms, Cara had climbed into the bed. Mama had placed a feeble hand on her head, murmuring a few weak and unintelligible phrases. At that moment, it had been enough for Cara. She had not realized that whatever her mother had said, they were her final words. Cara had dozed off, and the next thing she knew, she was awakened by the sound of Rosalyn crying out in distress. Mama had died, and Cara had not prevented it.

No matter how often her sisters told her it was a foolish notion—that Cara was only six and that Mama would have died even if Cara had been awake—Cara knew in the depths of her heart that it was her fault. She had not kept watch, and the consequences had been terrible.

Propped up on the windowsill in front of Cara was the drawing she’d made of Robbie the day he’d gotten lost. It was smeared from the rain, and his face was barely recognizable. But in her mind’s eye, she saw him with crystal clarity, running across the field, vibrant with life.

Please, God, don’t let him die. I promise I will never, ever do anything so foolish again. I will change. I will be different.

She had been praying this for days to no avail. Did the Almighty think they were empty words? Perhaps He knew she could not be trusted to carry out her promise. She would always fall short, no matter how sincere she was. Exhausted from sleeplessness and worry, Cara decided she must change her prayer.

Dear God, please allow Robbie to live, and I promise I will not watch over children ever again. I will find a different occupation—one where I cannot endanger an innocent life.

With this prayer, Cara was offering up everything she had. She loved Robbie. The prospect of leaving him was crushing her heart. It was

sorrowful enough, without adding the fact that she would once more be without work or a place to live. But wasn't the life of this boy worth it?

Yes. Yes, it was.

Cara allowed the tears to fall unabated as she repeated her new prayer.



Later, when the sun was higher and endeavoring to gather strength to break through the clouds, Cara heard a commotion coming from Robbie's room. Lady Needenham cried out, and there was rapid talking from the men. Cara heard a fervency in their words that ratcheted up every one of her fears. She bolted from her seat, wringing her hands and wishing for the millionth time that she could see for herself how her beloved little boy was faring.

Someone left Robbie's room and scurried down the hallway. Cara cracked open her door and saw a maid rapidly descending the stairs. Something had most definitely changed. She dared to cross the nursery and place an ear to Robbie's door. She heard Sir John and the doctor in earnest conversation. Cara no longer heard her ladyship's voice, but she had a vision of her seated in a chair, crying. What was the cause?

Hearing the door to her adjoining bedroom open and someone entering, Cara raced back to it, alarmed at being caught. To her relief, it was Esther, one of the kitchen maids. She was carrying a tray of food for Cara's luncheon. Esther had been bringing her meals ever since Cara had been consigned to her room. Each time, the maid offered condolences and comfort, a kindness that Cara had received from no one else since the bedraggled search party had returned with the sick child.

Cara knew that Esther was a trusted servant who was always privy to what was going on in the family. "Esther, what is happening in Robbie's room? Do you know?"

The maid set down the tray and turned to face Cara. She was smiling. "Yes, miss. Master Robbie's fever has broken."