



A
PURSUIT
of HOME

HAVEN MANOR + 3



KRISTI ANN HUNTER

RITA Award-Winning Author

H A V E N M A N O R • 3

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of HOME



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To the Ultimate Example of Love
1 John 3:16

And to Jacob, who has shown me the true meaning
of service and sacrificial love.

Prologue

SOMEWHERE IN THE FRENCH COUNTRYSIDE
1806

Sometimes stories are more about the one doing the telling than the tale being told. The true magic is the heart in the words, the emotion in the pauses, the depth of the conviction.

That was why Jessamine Beauchene always asked her father to tell it again, even when the request made her older brother groan.

“You’ve got it memorized by now,” he complained as he dug his toe into the dirt in front of the log he, Jessamine, and their father were sitting on. They’d escaped into the night to give Mama a bit of space. Some days were more difficult for her than others.

Jessamine could hardly remember the large rooms and enormous gardens of the palace. This small farm with its four-room cottage and large barn had been home for half her life. It was different for Mama, Papa, and Nicolas. They remembered the grand parties and the fancy clothes.

Mama said they’d go back someday, and it was important to remember what that would be like. Sometimes she would have their cook, Ismelde, make an elaborate meal in the rudimentary kitchen. Jessamine would help, even though that made Mama frown.

Jessamine and her mother would dress in their finest worn, outdated gowns, and they'd simper and saunter the way Mama said people did at court. Jessamine always felt silly but it made her mother happy, so she did it.

Tonight had been one of those nights. It hadn't made Mama happy, though. It had made her cry. Lots of things made her cry lately. Ever since Jessamine's uncle, the king, had been forced to flee the capital a few months earlier and go into hiding with the rest of the family, Mama had despaired of ever getting to go home.

She tended to hurl blame when she was in despair, so they'd learned it best to let her have the back bedchamber to herself on evenings like this. Once she was asleep, they could all creep back in and find their own beds.

"It never hurts to hear the story again," Papa said, patting his son on the back. "Remembering your legacy is essential to finding your destiny."

He shifted his position on the log, and Jessamine's heart beat a bit faster as the energy crackled through the air. It was like a fairy tale to her, recollections of memories so vague and distant they might have been a dream.

"Many centuries ago," Papa began in a grave voice, "Evrart the Wanderer set out to establish a land of his own. Through the mountains and along the rivers he wandered, sleeping under the trees and in caves, refusing to even pitch his tent until he'd found the perfect place.

"Then one day he topped a mountain. A spring bubbled forth from the rocks atop that mountain, creating a steady stream of water that flowed down the rocks and joined other streams until it became a river rolling across a lush countryside. In the distance was the sea, a barely visible line on the horizon."

"Verbonne," Jessamine whispered.

"Yes, my child. He pitched his tent on the mountain and named the place Verbonne. From the mouth of the spring he pulled an opal. Large, smooth, nearly translucent in its perfection. He called

it the waterstone and considered it a sign that he was meant to rule over this land.

“He built a fortress out of stone and declared himself king. He was anointed with water from the spring, poured over the waterstone and onto Evrart’s head. Soon others came to join him and his kingdom grew into a powerful land.”

“Not powerful enough,” Nicolas grumbled, though without much conviction. He always made this observation at this point in the story.

“There is power beyond might and strength, my son,” Papa said, just as he always did. “Evrart did everything he could to make Verbonne a place of intellect and culture. His children and his children’s children continued that very legacy. A university was formed, filled with minds to rival those in any other country. Our art was renowned, with even the Italians coming to study our creators. Verbonne became the jewel of Europe.

“But jewels are sometimes coveted, my children, and others wanted Verbonne for themselves. Though strength of arms could not withstand the onslaught, strength of mind and heart prevailed.”

“Not yet,” Nicolas grumbled.

“Persevered, then,” Papa said with a good-natured shrug. He didn’t care which words he said; it was the heart of the story he cared about.

It was all Jessamine cared about, too. The way his voice would rise and fall, the reverence that coated his words. Sometimes he would whisper certain parts because he cared too much to say them any louder.

“With the threat of war looming, our queen took it upon herself to save the heart of Verbonne. She took everything that represented King Evrart’s legacy and stole away with it in the night. Even if they conquered the land, they would never lay claim to the true Verbonne.”

Jessamine sat up a little straighter at this part. She’d been named after that courageous queen.

“Alas,” Papa said with a sigh, “she was not to see her country reborn. Her life passed on, and our king, who had been reduced to acting as little more than governor of his beloved land, was forced to take a second wife if he hoped to one day restore the crown to its full glory.

“Others have threatened that tenuous hold, claiming to be the rightful heirs to what little power remains, but the descendants of Evrart have remained steady. Your uncle, along with you, my dear children, and your cousins are the latest in that line of steadfast leaders who maintain the hope that one day the heart of Verbonne will return to her. She will thrive in knowledge and culture again, in her own power and freedom.

“One day we will unlock the key sent to us by the queen mother, who fled that fateful night with Queen Jessamine. We are the trusted keepers of the secret, which will be revealed to us at the proper time, when Verbonne is ready to rise again.”

Jessamine sighed and laid her head on her father’s shoulder. She loved how Papa always said that last part. There was always such deep hope in it. In that moment, he didn’t sound tired or worried or frightened or all of those many other things he often seemed. It was the reason Jessamine loved this story so much. When he told it, he became the Papa she remembered from the palace, in her dreamlike recollections.

“I’ll help you make it happen, Papa,” Jessamine said.

“It’s not for us to do,” Nicolas said with a shake of his head. “When all of this is over it will be our uncle who pulls Verbonne from the ashes, or maybe Prince Audebert.”

“We will all play a part in the restoration of Verbonne. It is close, my children. I can feel it—” Papa stopped short as a small light appeared in the distance. One light became several, all moving quickly and growing larger.

“Inside. Now,” Papa said harshly, pulling Jessamine up by her arm and dragging her toward the house. He barged through the door of the cottage. “Someone is coming.”

Everything happened so quickly, as if everyone besides Jessamine

knew what they were supposed to do in this situation. She'd never been told, never been warned. What was she to do other than stand in the middle of the room and stare?

Her uncle Gerard, King of Verbonne, was still decorated with the court robe he'd worn during dinner. He shifted the heavy leather curtain hung across the window in order to peer outside. "We must get to the barn and the safe room there. Get the bag."

"Is there time?" Jessamine's mother gripped her hands tightly in her skirt, wrinkling the faded silk.

"We have to try," Papa said as he shoved the largest piece of furniture in the room—a sofa, brought from the palace in the early days of their asylum, but now showing the considerable wear of many years of country living. He pried up one of the wide floorboards as Mama and Ismelde ran for the door at the back of the cottage.

Beneath the floorboard was a dug-out area from which he grabbed a small sack. He handed it to Jessamine. "Hold this for me, *mon oisillon*."

He was about to slide the floorboard back into place when the first scream cut through the air from behind the house.

For one breath no one moved, and then everyone did. Gerard, Nicolas, and Audebert ran toward the screams as Papa grabbed Jessamine's small shoulders. Despite being fifteen years of age, she'd yet to grow much bigger than a child.

"No matter what you see or hear, my precious girl, you stay silent. Carry on the heart of Verbonne for me." He glanced over his shoulder to the other side of the room, where some of the close personal servants and royal advisors who had become Jessamine's hidden little village stood pale and frightened. When he turned back to her, his face was grim. "Carry on for us all."

Then he shoved her into the hole, dropped his gaze to the bag clutched to her middle, and put the floorboard back in place.

Jessamine didn't move, barely breathed. There was a small crack through which she could see, but only the front door was visible. Mere hours ago, she and Papa and Nicolas had escaped

through that door, laughing about how Mama was in one of her moods.

Now the door shook from the force of blows that would soon render the wooden bar braced across it useless.

The pounding of feet returning to the cottage and incoherent yells filled the pit as surely as the smell of dirt and wood. The front door burst open and a man entered, lantern held high. For a moment, his face was framed by the crack Jessamine peered through.

He had a beard, dark and curly, and a scar slashed across his forehead. She couldn't look into his eyes, but she didn't need to in order to know he was a hard, mean man.

"Gather them all," he said in a voice that was most decidedly not French, "and search the entire place. This line of interlopers will cease sitting on the throne of Verbonne."

More shuffling of feet, more screaming, more everything assaulted Jessamine's senses. Pieces came to her, bits of phrases, pleas, and cries. The sofa was tossed on its side, partially blocking the crack Jessamine peered through. The rip of fabric followed. Her family was ushered out as the entire place was searched.

"I think we found it," someone said in French, and a trunk was carried out the front door.

It was the trunk her uncle had brought with him. It held the king's scepter and crown and all the most important government documents.

The man with the curly beard stepped into the edge of what Jessamine could see. "The line will be corrected and the proper head anointed. Burn this place. Start the fire in the crops so by the time it reaches here and attracts attention the blaze will be too much to fight. When I am finished, there will be no trace of their line."

Then he was gone.

And it was dark.

The loud pounding of Jessamine's heart was all that broke the total silence.

They were going to burn the cottage.

With her still inside.

She began to fight and scream and push, but the sofa was stretched across the floorboards, and her slight body, scrunched into a pit with no way to move, couldn't budge it.

It wasn't until she heard a man say, "What's this?" in a voice bearing the same accent as the man with the curly beard that Jessamine considered the dire consequences of the noise she was making. What if the fire had been a threat to get her to reveal her location and that of the bag her father had deemed so important?

"We're too late," another voice said. "They've taken them all, and if there was anything to be found, it's already been gotten."

"Search the barn one more time," the first voice said.

"The fire's coming. There's no point."

"Search it."

After a sigh, footsteps receded, and a soft grunt preceded the scrape of the sofa against the floorboards.

Jessamine wriggled and twisted until she could shove the bag beneath her stomacher. She normally hated the stiff dress bodice her mother insisted formal gowns still needed, despite the flowing fashions that had begun appearing before they ran from the palace, but at that moment, Jessamine was grateful for it.

With the bag shoved into a space that was already tight, though, she could barely breathe. Something sharp poked her in the stomach and that, combined with her fear, sent tears coursing down her cheeks. The sudden sobs made breathing even more difficult.

The board lifted, and the light from a single small lantern revealed a pair of grey eyes. They didn't look like the eyes of a particularly nice man, but they looked kind and capable.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Jess—" hiccup—"Jess—" snuffle. Panic welled. She couldn't find enough air to say her full name.

"Well, Jess," the man said, "I'm here to rescue you. How do you feel about going to England?"



CHAPTER ONE

MARLBOROUGH, ENGLAND

1816

Sometimes, despite time, distance, and a significant amount of ignoring it, the past never quite went away.

Over the past two days, everything Jess had run from had spilled over the wall of the past and covered her present like gravy. Lumpy, bitter, burnt gravy. Every emotion she'd worked hard to bury had risen to the surface, making her mind a muddled swarm of incomplete thoughts and sharp colors.

After one sleepless night, she'd done what she did best: shoved every modicum of mind-numbing emotion into a trunk, locked it, and set about determining how to solve the problem at hand.

A second sleepless night allowed irritation to trickle out of the locked trunk and fill her until she wanted to stab something. Of all the feelings she'd felt over the past two days—elation, fear, grief, excitement, hope, despair, really any emotion that could be elaborately overdone in a gothic novel—irritation was the one she most knew how to deal with.

People were often rather irritating, after all, especially when you were trying to extract secrets from them.

What wasn't so easily determined was what part of her current situation irritated her most: that someone had been able to locate her to deliver the letter, that she'd been able to decipher the old

code without the slightest bit of trouble, or that she was going to have to ask a very bothersome man for his assistance.

No, it was the last one. Definitely.

She'd known her days of hidden isolation were numbered, and no one could expect nearly ten years of living in the shadows of intrigue and danger to disappear with a few well-placed country breezes. Needing help was an annoyance, though.

Having to ask for it was an aggravation.

Having to ask *him* was almost nauseating.

There was nothing else for it, though. If the letter she'd received was true—and she had complete confidence in the man who'd written it, so she had to assume it was—then she didn't have a choice.

She needed Mr. Derek Thornbury's help.

To get it, she was going to have to ask him, which required talking to him, which required being in the same room with him without taking her knife from its hidden sheath and stabbing him in the leg. A tall order, as the man was simply too vexing for words.

He was a walking, talking reminder of everything she wasn't good at, and he pointed it out to her constantly. The man couldn't open his mouth without making Jess feel like a veritable idiot.

Unfortunately, those skills were exactly what she needed.

He knew how to read and interpret old texts and he knew art. Jess knew tactics, strategy, and intricate disguises. Her current plan had her in the kitchen, preparing a tea tray with all his favorites. It had been a while since she'd cooked them, as she'd avoided making any dish he seemed to favor.

Subtle, petty revenge was also a skill Jess held in great abundance.

Voices broke the solitude of the kitchen that had been Jess's refuge for the past three years as a pair of maids passed through on their way to the washroom. They were just two of the many people who now filled the home that had been a perfect hiding place for so long. Even though all of the servants hired within the last two months had been born and raised in the local area and couldn't possibly know of her past, Jess found herself watching

them with constant vigilance, seeking the slightest hint that they might not be who they said they were.

Not that it mattered if they'd been the ones to reveal her location. Jess had known this secretive, sheltered house would eventually become exposed. Despite the danger, she hadn't been able to bring herself to move on.

She'd stayed, even as the others stepped out of hiding and got married, even as she went from the kitchen's solitary inhabitant to having authority over a small kitchen staff, even as guests started coming and going.

Or coming and never leaving, in some people's cases. She frowned at the tray she was putting together.

In all fairness, he'd been hired to assess the enormous amount of art in the estate, but he was also close to the owner and taking an awfully long time to complete his task. He hovered somewhere between employee and friend.

Rather like herself.

Jess had come to care about the people she'd been in hiding with. Despite knowing that it made her vulnerable, she'd exposed part of her heart.

Now she'd been found.

It was, actually, a good thing. The regret that would have risen from learning the contents of the letter after it was too late would have slowly eaten her alive until she was nothing but a pile of misery and guilt.

She didn't have to worry about that, though, because she *did* know the contents, *did* have what was needed to potentially solve the problem, and *did* have a plan.

Of sorts.

It was more of a notion, really.

Actually making a workable plan required Mr. Derek Thornbury's help, which required a peace offering of syrup-infused Naples biscuits.

Jess went to the larder for flour and turned an ear to the conversation two maids were having. One of them was stuttering a

bit, something she did only when she slept poorly the night before. On the way back to the worktable, Jess took a slight detour to nudge a bucket out of the way of another maid crossing the room with her arms piled so high with linens that she couldn't possibly watch where she was going.

Soon the biscuit dough was mixed, including a little syrup to make the final product soft and cake-like. The suggestion of the additional ingredient had been the first thing *that man* had ever said to her. Jess hated to bake, or cook for that matter, hated the memories attached to the skills, but she knew she was good at it. Very good. An art scholar shouldn't have known more about it than she did.

When she'd tried to prove him wrong, the result had been delicious. Jess had thrown them in the fire and refused to make any more. Until today.

One transgression wouldn't have been enough to make Jess hate the man. Probably. He made it excessively easy, though, by continuing to be a pompous font of knowledge and suggestions. Well, perhaps not pompous.

The man was often too focused on what he was doing to care about lording his exceptional brain over everyone else in the room, but that didn't change the fact that he knew facts others didn't and felt the need to broadcast it on a regular basis.

With any luck, however, she could get him to display his brilliance one more time in a way that benefited her.

With the tea steeping in the steaming pot and the plates of food as prettily arranged as she could manage, Jess took the tray up the servants' stairs. She got a few strange looks, but then, people tended to look at whatever was different. It was the first rule of disguise. Try to look as normal as possible for the surroundings you're in. No one paid attention to normal.

Unfortunately, there was nothing Jess could do about the fact that before now she'd rarely showed her face abovestairs, and she almost never hand-delivered a tray. Sometimes there just wasn't time to set up a proper scene.

Once out of the servants' domain, she faced a problem. Where

in the world was her target? As far as Jess could tell, there was no rhyme or reason to Mr. Thornbury's path through the house as he catalogued the abundance of art and antiquities. She could only hope the records he was keeping were more organized than his methods.

Ten minutes later, with the steam no longer curling as nicely from the teapot, she found him in the upstairs private parlor.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Thornbury." She pasted a smile on her face, reminded herself that she'd done worse in the name of necessity, and set the tray down on a little side table.

He looked up from the notebook he was forever scribbling in and tilted his head as he looked at her, making the overgrown flop of brown hair droop over his eyebrows. "Good afternoon."

"I brought you tea."

"I see that." He crossed the room and lifted the top of the pot to gaze into the depths of the brown liquid. "Is it poisoned?"

Jess gritted her teeth but didn't let her smile drop. One single time she'd threatened to put foxglove in his tea if he didn't stop leaving paintings and sculptures spread out on the dining table, and now he looked at every drop of liquid she prepared as if he expected a sea creature to jump out of it.

"No, it isn't poisoned. In fact, I was wondering if I could presume to share a cup with you."

"You want to have tea." He placed a hand on his chest, making the dull brown coat he'd left unbuttoned fall open. "With me."

Jess silently counted to three before speaking. "Yes."

He glanced down at the tea and then back to her, his hazel eyes narrowing a bit behind his round black spectacles.

She couldn't fault his suspicions. Their situation was a strange one. Officially, she was the cook of this country estate and should never approach a gentleman visitor, even if he was, technically, also an employee of the marquis who owned the place. She was, however, a friend of the new marchioness, and before the marquis had come to live here she'd been much more than just the cook, so the social hierarchy was more than a little muddled.

There was also the fact that she'd done nothing to hide how much he irritated her. They'd yet to have a conversation anyone would consider pleasant and proper.

Finally, Mr. Thornbury cleared his throat and nodded before gesturing toward a chair beside the low table. "As you took the trouble to make the tea, I see no reason why you should not partake in it."

Once Jess was seated, he lowered himself onto the sofa that sat at an angle to the chair and table, watching silently as Jess fixed the tea and served plates of food.

He gave the cup she handed him one more contemplative glance before sipping it. "There's a fascinating Caravaggio piece in this room. Just over there. It's hanging in the corner, as if it's trying to hide. A rather odd place to hang such a masterpiece."

Jess took a deep breath and reminded herself that there was more to life than book knowledge. "I don't know anything about Caravaggio."

"I know," he said slowly. "Which does make me wonder why you'd want to have tea with me."

Jess had to give him credit for not being a coward. He'd never had any problem saying what he thought. If only he didn't have such smart thoughts, she might admire that ability.

Carefully, she set her cup to the side and clasped her hands in her lap before raising her eyes to his. Even though she wanted to keep her gaze steady, she was forced to blink away the grittiness of two sleepless nights before she could focus on him properly. She knew the words she needed to say, knew that to continue on with her efforts alone would mean significant delay and possibly even failure.

Knowing this didn't make the task any easier.

One hand slid against her leg, and the slight sound of paper crinkling reminded her of the letter nestled in her pocket. Her brother was alive and doing everything he could to restore the family legacy. Someone—presumably the same someone she'd been hiding from most of her life—wanted him to fail. She held the key to ensuring her brother's success . . . only she didn't know how to use it.

If she wanted to prevent her father's life work from fading into the war-torn lands of Europe, she would have to allow Mr. Thornbury deeper into her life.

She straightened her shoulders and looked him in the eye. "Mr. Thornbury, I need your help."



Derek Thornbury didn't know a lot about people, at least not living ones—and he knew even less about females—but he did know one thing: this particular female didn't like him.

It didn't require advanced skills in observation, which he admittedly didn't have, nor an abundance of knowledge in the ways women had interacted with men throughout history—which he *did* have. No, it was fairly obvious that she didn't like him because the last few times they'd had a conversation, she'd said, "*I don't like you.*"

That was the type of social indicator even Derek couldn't quite miss.

Yet here she was, sitting down to tea with him, and, if his ears could be believed, she was asking for his help.

Carefully, he set his teacup down. He set the biscuit down, too, though with more reluctance. Jess might confound him on more than one level, but he did very much enjoy her cooking skills. "What?"

He'd meant to ask more, really he had. Perhaps, "What do you mean?" or "What do you need?" or even "What would make you desperate enough that you would willingly seek me out and spend more than a modicum of time in my company?" But since he wasn't sure which question to ask, it simply came out as "What?"

She sighed, releasing a longer breath than he would have thought her petite body capable of holding. "I need your help."

That didn't answer any of his questions.

He picked up the biscuit and put it back down again without taking a bite. "What do you need my help with?"

"I have a diary of sorts, an old one written by an ancestor of mine. It's in Italian."

“You speak Italian.” In fact, she spoke it very well, with a flawless accent and the fluency of a native. They’d argued in the language more than once, though his verbal skills were decidedly less eloquent than hers. He rather thought that was why she chose to use the language.

Pink stained her cheeks, and for the first time he could remember, her golden gaze refused to meet his. “Yes.” She cleared her throat. “I speak it, but I’m afraid reading it is a bit of a slow endeavor. I have to sound everything out and say it aloud. Even then I don’t always know what it’s talking about. Translating the diary would take me weeks, possibly more. I’m afraid I don’t have that kind of time.”

Derek leaned back on the sofa and tilted his head as he considered her.

She rubbed one hand over her skirt before continuing. “There’s . . . well, for lack of a better word, this diary holds a message about where this ancestor hid something of great value.”

He picked his tea back up, more than a little disappointed even as he was intrigued. She wouldn’t be the first person to try to pull him into a bit of potential thievery by glorifying it as some sort of treasure hunt. “And you would like to get your hands on it?”

“Yes. No.” She sighed again. “It isn’t for me.”

That was new. “Who is it for, then?”

“Someone I thought was dead but apparently isn’t.”

There was a slight lilt to her words, an accent that almost sounded French but wasn’t. A tone that had been buried underneath a proper English sound for years. He’d heard it before, when she was especially upset about something he’d done. It was thicker today, though.

“As interesting as a real-life Lazarus would be,” he said, “I’m going to need a bit more than that. I’ve a job I’ve committed to do, after all.”

“You’ve been here for months,” she growled. “How much more could there possibly be?”

“There’s a great deal of art that has been amassed at Haven

Manor over the years. The original owner was a consummate collector.”

“It isn’t going anywhere.”

“Presumably neither is whatever you’re looking for, if you intend to locate it with a long-dead ancestor’s diary.”

Her lips thinned and her finely arched blond eyebrows pulled in until a fierce frown covered her face. It looked wrong on her features. Everything about her was petite and delicate, perfect like a porcelain doll or a Botticelli painting. “I have reason to believe the item is now vitally important.”

“And you want it before anyone else?” Wasn’t that always the way of art? Let one person indicate an interest and everyone would proclaim it a masterpiece.

The actual quality mattered little when determining a piece’s value. It was all about who else wanted to possess it.

Saddened, and in truth a bit intimidated by the little woman, he dropped his gaze to her feet. Sturdy, worn leather boots poked out from beneath the forgettable skirt. A long pale scratch cut across the surface of the left toe.

Had she accidentally done that with one of those knives she was always threatening to throw at him whenever he dared to venture down to the kitchens?

He should probably start sending a servant to fetch whatever he needed from belowstairs, but he found an odd sort of enjoyment in aggravating the tiny woman. Like a child taunting a dog on a chain, he got the thrill of danger with the security of knowing she wouldn’t actually do anything.

At least, he didn’t think she would.

“I already told you it isn’t for me,” she said. “But yes, I need to find it first.”

Derek brought his gaze up from her feet, refusing to have this conversation with the floor.

Jess—he didn’t know her last name, and it seemed much too strange to call her Cook—flicked one fingernail gently with the other. She moved in no other way. Her breathing was even, her

posture calm, but her little fingernail tapped restlessly against her thumb.

Derek was a scholar of antiquities. He worked with things created by dead people. Well, things that had been created by people who were now dead. Important distinction, that. When he was working, he might go days without a significant interaction with anyone who drew breath.

Living people, quite inconveniently, required him to recall his manners and finish his sentences.

Jess wasn't merely an inconvenience, though. She was a massive complication, a mystery that was constantly changing, frustrating him to no end even as it kept enticing him closer.

Right now she was offering him an opportunity to get close enough to potentially solve the profound mystery she represented. Curiosity had proven to be an undeniable nag over the years, and frankly, anything—or, in this case, anyone—who was intimidating enough to inspire Jess to seek out help must be fascinating.

Of course, it was probably best if said person continued living in ignorance of Derek's existence.

Still, he couldn't resist curiosity's siren call. "Why do you need it first?"

She took a deep breath and straightened her shoulders, sliding into a proper posture that would meet the approval of even the strictest governess. "Because the fate of a country might rest on who finds this treasure first and when."

A country. Not *the* country. He'd suspected she wasn't from England, but that rather confirmed it. Considering the war that had only recently subsided in the French-speaking part of the world, that slight lilt in her voice encouraged skepticism. "Which country?"

Her frown deepened. "Are you going to help me?" She pulled an old leather-covered book from the pocket of her apron.

That was a bit unfair. Resisting the entire thing in concept was much simpler than denying his hand the chance to reach out and touch history, to open the pages and delve into the mind of someone who had lived before him.

The book was worn and frayed at the edges, with darkened spots where hands had held the book over the years. Diaries were incredible windows into the past. People wrote things in diaries that never touched the pages of official historic documents—life, love, the stories behind the scenes depicted in paintings and sculptures.

He wanted that diary. The only question was, did he want it badly enough to deal with *her*?

She turned the book enough for him to see a crest branded onto the cover of the book. The curling flow of lines looked like leaves, but he was willing to bet they were waves crashing against rocks because in the center of those curls was a shield bearing the image of a horned beast, something like a unicorn with paws. One foot was raised with a sword pointed to the sky, while another paw tucked close in to the body, holding a cross. Other parts of the branded image had faded over time, but he knew that horned beast. He'd seen it in books.

“How long ago was it written?” He swallowed hard, staring at the book as if it would disappear. If that diary was from the days before the fall of the monarchy, he wouldn't be able to sleep without having seen it with his own eyes.

“Only the first entry is dated. It says 1660.”

Derek licked his lips. He'd like to think he had enough sense to keep his fingers from being burnt by meddling in the affairs of others, but he was already leaning forward and reaching toward the book.

“Very well,” he said as his fingers extended toward her. “Where do we start?”