



DELILAH MARVELLE

The Rumor Series

∞ BONUS CHAPTERS ∞

Chapter One

When will I come to understand my life?

-From the diary of Lady Augustine Jane Ascott

19 September, 1800

New York City

Lady Augustine Jane Ascott was more than certain that having an unknown man loitering outside her family's rented row house at night, signaling her and her brother to open their bedchamber window, was a serious cause for concern. She simply didn't know how to go about announcing that concern to her parents at the breakfast table without openly confirming all of her ten-year-old brother's conspiracy theories of aristocratic annihilation.

"I despise New York," her brother, Nathaniel, muttered, stabbing a fork into his biscuit. Black hair cascaded into his eyes. He shoved it away with the back of his hand. "Fortunately, we leave for Liverpool within the week." He dipped and redipped the end of the biscuit into the

buttery mint sauce garnishing his porcelain plate and heaved out a breath. “I only hope we survive long enough to touch English soil given the house appears to be under surveillance by American patriots. They may very well burn the house whilst we sleep. Savages is what these people are. Savages. Much like the French.” He lifted his small chin up off his knotted cravat and slid a rigid finger across the length of his throat, mimicking the guillotine.

Augustine stuck out a slippered foot and nudged his calf beneath the linen-covered table. “Enough. No one is going to burn the house *or* cut off any heads. This isn’t France.”

“Not yet it isn’t.” Nathaniel bit off a piece of his biscuit and wagged his fork at her in between chews. “Give it another year. Or better yet two days. Either way, we aristos are doomed. *Doomed*. Cromwell himself will rise from the dead to oversee it.”

Their father, the Earl of Sumner, glanced toward their mother from over the rim of his porcelain cup. His rugged features flickered in amusement. “Everyone knows we are here to invest in land, Atwood, not war. One day, you will learn that sadly, patriotism is but an afterthought once money is involved. But do tell. What sort of goblin conspiracy do you speak of this time? Hmm?”

“I don’t speak of goblins,” Nathaniel insisted, his piercingly bright blue eyes darting to each of them. “I speak of real flesh and blood with a top hat and cigar to boot.” He leaned toward Augustine, his dark brows coming together, and tapped her arm. “Isn’t that so, Auggie? Tell him. Tell him what you saw. Tell him what we both saw last night.”

The earl and her mother paused.

Augustine fingered her fork, knowing her parents always relied on her to convey the truth her brother never got around to. “Nathaniel informed me this past week that there was a man

trying to communicate with him through the window at night. I didn't believe him, given his perpetual need to exaggerate accounts, until he dashed into my room last night and pointed him out through the window. And there he was, leaning against the lamppost smoking a cigar and watching us. He held up his hand in what appeared to be a greeting and signaled for us to open the window. When I refused, he stripped his glove, held up the cigar and dashed it out on the palm of his hand as if he meant to do the same to us. That was when we dove under the covers and didn't emerge until this morning." She winced, knowing how childish that sounded. "I thought you should know."

Her mother's blue eyes widened. "I ask that you cease encouraging your brother's delusions about war and mayhem. Why would a man be signaling children at night and threatening them with a cigar?"

Augustine bit back the need to reprimand her mother for calling her a child. She also bit back pointing out that she had read all about *children* being snatched and sold to the slavery market. She imagined aristocratic children would fetch a good American dollar, especially if they were sold to France.

Shoving his unfinished plate away, Nathaniel jumped to his booted feet and stumbled against the legs of the oversized upholstered chair. "Perhaps when this house is burned to the foundation, or we all *die*, maybe then you'll believe me. The French Revolution is merely the beginning of mass aristocratic annihilation. Let it be known that I was the first to say it." Squaring his shoulders, he marched out of the breakfast room with quick, manly strides as if he were a general intent on going to war without the permission of the King.

"That boy is a full forty at heart, I dare say," Lady Sumner chided, shaking her head and causing her blond chignon to sway. "A full forty."

Plopping her silver onto the porcelain plate with a clatter, Augustine glanced toward her parents in complete exasperation. “Setting aside his ridiculous theories of mass aristocratic annihilation, there really was a man. I think a constable ought to be called out. I didn’t like him. It was as if he wanted to take the tip of that cigar and burn it into *our* skin. Not his.”

Her father’s gray eyes snapped toward her. “You said that he dashed out the cigar on the palm of his hand?”

“That he did.”

“Was he tall?”

“Rather. Yes.”

“Young?”

“I wouldn’t know. It was dark and his hat shadowed his face. He was dressed nicely, though. Not at all like a commoner.”

“I see.” The earl slowly set his coffee cup back onto the table, fingering the rim, and shifted his jaw as if agitated by something.

Augustine leaned toward him. “I suggest we involve the watch, Papa. I didn’t like him.”

He intently met her gaze. “He is a friend of mine. So you needn’t worry. I suggest you eat.” The earl nudged his food about the plate with the tip of his knife and shifted in his seat, avoiding her gaze.

“A friend of yours?” Augustine squinted at him. “Could you at least tell this *friend* to desist? He shouldn’t be standing outside our window like that. ‘Tis nefarious, at best. You do realize Nathaniel has been crawling into my bed almost every night because of it?”

The earl leaned into the linen-covered table, swiped his mouth with the tips of his fingers and sighed. “I will ensure he desists. He shouldn’t be doing that.”

“No. He shouldn’t.” Augustine lowered her chin. “Might I inquire as to why he doesn’t call during the day like the rest of civilized society? Why does he stand there smoking cigars like some heathen in the middle of the night?”

The earl closed his eyes, rubbing his temple. “Augustine. I don’t wish to discuss this or him anymore. Do you understand?”

“But—”

“I will ensure he desists. That is all you need know.”

Augustine leaned toward him. “I am merely trying to better understand your association with him. I find it very odd that any respectable man, whom you consider to be a friend, would linger outside our windows at night and—”

The earl hit a fist against the table, causing the crystal and silver to rattle, and glared at her. “You need not lecture me on bloody respectability. I define it. Not you.”

Augustine edged back in her chair. It was the first time she’d ever had her father stare her down with such contempt. She could feel her skin prickling from that stare.

Her mother’s prim features tightened. “Sumner, what is with you this morning?” Her blond pinned curls quivered as she daintily speared the ham on her plate. “She was merely asking a question.”

Augustine held her father’s gaze. His grey eyes softened with regret, but he said nothing. Absolutely nothing. He hadn’t been himself since they’d arrived in New York City almost seven

months ago. Not that the man she had known back in London was any better in nature. But at least back in London he had never treated her with this...*disdain*.

Pushing back her chair from the dining table, Augustine rose, feeling too awkward to stay. "I wish to excuse myself. If I may."

The earl blew out a breath. "I didn't mean to reprimand you like that."

Augustine set her chin, trying to remain calm. What was she supposed to say to a man she held no respect for?

Her mother's thin brows came together as she gathered her lace napkin from the lap of her lilac gown and set it onto the table. "Augustine, please. Your father didn't mean it. Now sit." She gestured toward the unfinished plate. "You barely ate anything."

"I am not hungry." She coolly met her father's gaze. "In truth, I am far more concerned about Nathaniel than my appetite. That boy reads far too many novels about the French Revolution, and the worst part? You encourage it, Papa, thinking it grows his intellect. Only it doesn't. As you can see, it only grows his nerves and makes him think we are next. That said, I am asking that you never slam your fist into the table like that again. I am perfectly capable of understanding your point without being treated like a dog." Glaring at him, she quickly made her way out of the breakfast room, down the corridor and toward the narrow mahogany stairwell that led up to their suites.

Lingering before the staircase, she let out a long, shaky breath. A part of her crumbled inside knowing how much she used to revere and adore her father until she had accidentally discovered who he truly was: a man with no integrity or honor.

Sliding her hand upward, along the wood railing of the staircase, her fingers grazed its

smooth, hard surface as she made her way up the stairs. She missed home. She missed her books, her horse and her rooms in Surrey. She would be so happy and full of bliss to finally be back home, surrounded by the world she knew and loved.

Halfway up the stairs, her mother's intent voice drifted out toward her. She paused.

"That was uncalled for, Sumner."

"I know. Believe me, I know. I was agitated, is all."

"Agitated. I see. And who is this man they were referring to? What does he want?"

"I suggest you eat."

There was a moment of silence. "Where do you know him from?"

"Anne, I am not in the mood for this."

"And neither am I," her mother bit out. "What aren't you telling me, Sumner? Who is he? I want to know."

He sighed. "He is a friend. Nothing more."

"A friend? A friend whom I know I have never heard of before, who frightens our children by extinguishing cigars on his bare hand and lingers beneath their windows at night. Pray tell, what business has he with our children?"

"He has no interest in the children at all."

"His behavior indicates otherwise."

"It isn't that. He has no one in his life. No one he can trust, anyway. Let us leave it at

that.”

“What does he want? Given that he has no one.”

“For God’s sake, enough. He has a right to privacy.”

“Not if he threatens us, he doesn’t.”

“Anne—”

“I want his name, Sumner. Before I have the watch investigate this matter whilst having his business printed in every paper in town.”

“Leave him be. He is but a boy of seventeen. Hardly a threat to you or anyone else.”

A gasp escaped her mother. “And why would a man your age be cavorting with a seventeen-year-old boy?”

There was a pulsing moment of silence.

“How did you meet him?” her mother insisted.

He hesitated. “Anne, please.”

“*How did you meet him?*” her mother insisted, her voice pitching. “Do I not deserve *some* measure of respect? Do I not? Honesty is all I have ever asked for.”

There was another moment of silence.

“I met him in a brothel off Broadway whilst fucking a few women,” the earl growled. “Is that the sort of honesty you wanted?”

Augustine clapped an astonished hand against her mouth to keep herself from gasping

and betraying that she was listening.

“Sumner,” her mother choked out, “you promised you were done with such places and other women. You promised.”

The earl’s voice hardened. “I don’t need you judging me, Anne. I really don’t. Who I fuck and how I fuck them is none of your goddamn—”

A loud smack startled Augustine.

“I despise you, Sumner! You only ever try to break me!” The clattering of a chair, her mother’s sob and the quick echoing of frantic steps heading out of the breakfast room caused Augustine’s heart to skitter.

Gathering up her skirts, Augustine hurried up the remaining stairs, her throat tightening against her own need to sob. A lone tear streaked its way down her cheek. She had always known her father had quietly dallied with other women, even back in London, for she had once found an unfolded letter of a most graphic nature from a woman on his writing desk when she had been searching for ink. Though it was a difficult decision and she didn’t know if she had any right to interfere with her parents’ relationship, she gave the letter to her mother all the same.

Heartbreakingly, her mother had already known about the dalliances and had asked her not to speak of it again. The woman then quietly burned the letter. It was as if her mother believed that by burning that letter, her father would rise into becoming a better man. Only he never did. Augustine had prayed that by traveling abroad, there would be an opportunity for them to bond as a family outside her father’s despicable dalliances. But it was obvious he had dragged his filthy practices from London into New York.

Fortunately, they were leaving this dirty, dirty city and whatever associations her father

had made during their months spent in it. No more New York. No more uncobbled streets that cloaked her clothes, her bonnet and hair in a layer of grit and dust that the carriages kicked up at every breath. At least in London it rained enough to wash away the layers of grit that blanketed the city. Here it only baked and remained throughout the summer and early fall.

Turning down the brightly lit corridor, which showcased a row of small windows that illuminated the sunlit morning outside, she made her way down its length and jerked to a halt.

Nathaniel sat on the floor, propped against the wall, with his trouser-clad knees to his chin. “The house could burn and they still wouldn’t believe me,” he grumbled.

A breath escaped her as she lowered herself to her knees and brushed aside silken strands of his black hair. “They don’t want you overreacting the way you always do. Nor do they want you being frightened.”

He glanced up, those mischievous, ice-blue eyes searching her face. He scrambled up to his booted feet. “I’m not frightened.” Placing small hands behind his back, he set his chin. “I’m not.”

She slowly rose to her own feet. “There is no need to hide what I know to be true. You have every right to be. Respectable, good men don’t behave that way.”

He eyed her and then the corridor. “Can I sleep with you tonight?”

She sighed. “No.”

“Why not?” he whined up at her. “I sleep better.”

She leaned toward him and tapped his forehead. “Yes, you sleep better, but I don’t. You always roll away with the linens and leave me cold. I prefer having my own linens and mattress,

thank you. You aren't exactly the size of a cat anymore. More like a well-fed pony."

He glared up at her. "With some blighter standing outside my window at night dashing out cigars on the palm of his hand, I feel my skin crawling away from me. I need you. Two against one is always best."

She reached out and gathered him into her arms, pressing his warmth assuredly against herself. "Oh, yes, I suppose I could defend you with my lace parasol. Or better yet, my slipper." She rubbed his shoulders and sighed. "The man is an acquaintance of Papa's."

"An acquaintance?"

"Yes. And Papa said he would ask him to desist, so you needn't worry about seeing him again."

Nathaniel glanced up at her from where he clung to her waist. "Papa said that?"

She touched that smooth little cheek. "He did. Though I still wouldn't linger by the window or interact with him if you do happen to see him again."

He blinked rapidly. "Even with him being an acquaintance of Papa's? Why?"

"Because we shouldn't trust him," she insisted, not wanting him to be aware of their father's despicable practices. There were some things children shouldn't know. There were some things she wished she didn't know.

"Why shouldn't we trust him?" Nathaniel insisted.

"Because *I* don't trust him given his odious behavior. We know nothing about him."
Only that he and Papa met in a brothel and that he is...my age.

Nathaniel edged out of her embrace, squinting up at her. “Why, you are just as scared of him as I am. Aren’t you?”

She pushed at his head playfully, sending him off to the side. “Off with you. No man could ever scare me.”

Tugging on his morning coat, he announced, “I will see you at nine. And I promise to bring my own linen. So you needn’t worry about me rolling away with yours.”

Augustine slowly shook her head. “God save the poor woman you ever end up with when you are older. You will hoodwink her at every turn, won’t you?”

Smoothing the sides of his hair, he theatrically smirked, his blue eyes dancing. “I won’t have to hoodwink women, Auggie. One look will be enough to make them all cooperate.”

She lifted a brow. “Do you know what really scares me?”

He paused, his features growing serious. “What?”

“*You*. One moment you’re an old man waving his cane and the next you’re a child stomping his feet.”

He huffed out a breath, letting his arms fall to his sides. “Can I not sleep with you?”

“No.”

“Damn you, Auggie! Why not?”

Her eyes widened. “*Nathaniel!* Don’t you dare be using that sort of language. Not with me. Not with anyone.”

He rolled his eyes. “Papa uses it.”

“Yes, well, he is three times your age and none the wiser. I have no doubt whatsoever Papa also induces God to faint on the hour.”

He eyed her. “Four.”

She blinked. “What?”

“Four. Papa is almost four times my age. Not three. Don’t misrepresent the facts.”

She glared at him. “Off with you and your facts already. And don’t you be crawling into my bed. Not with that foul mouth and that high-and-mighty attitude. You haven’t earned it. If Papa won’t teach you how to be a gentleman, then I will. Now off with you.”

Nathaniel held up his hands, spun away and stomped off, letting his arms smack back down to his sides. Halfway down the hall he called out over his shoulder, “You know where to find me if the man with the cigar comes calling. Though I suggest you bring your own linens. Because I’m not sharing.”

She rolled her eyes. The boy really was forty at heart. Maybe even fifty.

Chapter Two

Who can I trust? No one.

-From the diary of Lady Augustine Jane Ascott

When the house had grown quiet, Augustine peeled back the coverlet of her bed and was about to crawl into its comforting warmth for the night, when she paused. For there, tucked beneath the coverlet, on her pillow, was a small cream-colored piece of parchment.

She bit back a smile. Nathaniel's nightly message had been delivered without fail. It was something he did every night, even when he wasn't particularly pleased with her. The lone candle she'd set in its holder on the bedside table wavered, shifting circular golden light from the flame across the surface of the card, which had been strategically turned upside down, so she wouldn't see the message on the other side.

"Nathaniel, Nathaniel," she murmured, plucking up the parchment. "What have you written to me tonight? A message of war? Or a message of love?" Turning it over, she blinked at the small, scrawled letters he tried to fit all on the size of the card. She sighed, turned toward the candle and tilted the tiny inscription toward the light.

I forgive you.

Augustine rolled her eyes and pulled the upper flaps of her lilac robe together with her other hand. This, after he had maliciously ignored her all day and had even refused her generous, if defeated, offer of having him sleep with her. That boy and his—

A scraping sound, similar to that of wood being dragged against wood, made her pause. Augustine fingered the parchment and slowly turned toward the curtained windows behind her that the chambermaid had earlier drawn for the night. Seeing nothing out of the ordinary, that is, no billowing curtain from an open window or the indentation of a body or boots hidden beneath the hem of the curtains—thank goodness—she turned away.

Her eyes darted beyond the four-poster, past the dresser, the large mirror and the porcelain washing basin, which had been set on the oak sideboard against the wall. Again, nothing out of the ordinary. Even the paneled door leading from her bedchamber out into the corridor of the row house remained closed.

Silence pulsed against her ears.

Augustine huffed out a breath and glanced down at the parchment, which she held between her thumb and forefinger. Her brother's conspiracy theories of aristocratic annihilation were going to be the death of her.

Rounding the bed, she approached the nightstand and placed Nathaniel's message beside the candleholder. She glanced back toward the window and paused. Taking up the candlestick holder by its looped ear, she turned and made her way toward the window, cupping the flame with a shaky hand to protect it from extinguishing. She pushed the brocaded curtain aside and

held up the candle toward the window and the night beyond. In doing so, her own face was reflected in the glass. Her grey eyes, which appeared black in the reflection, stared back at her, seemingly questioning what on earth she was doing.

She looked beyond her own blurred image, trying to make out the vast treed square in the darkness on the other side of the dirt street below. No one stood beneath the gas-lit lamppost. She pushed out a grateful breath knowing that Papa was good for his word at least once in a while.

Augustine awkwardly settled into the upholstered chair at the breakfast table, arranging her alabaster morning gown, and paused, noting that neither her mother or her brother were at the table. She glanced toward her father, who was scanning the review of the New York market in the newspaper as he did every morning. “Is Mama not coming to breakfast?”

“No,” the earl muttered. “She isn’t particularly pleased with me at the moment.”

“And what about Nathaniel?” Augustine clasped her hands together to keep them from trembling. “Is he not coming to breakfast, either?”

Lord Sumner glanced up, his grey eyes reserved and pensive. “He should be here any moment. I just told Mrs. Doran to fetch him.” He lowered his gaze back to the newspaper. “I should have invested in coffee,” he mused, tapping a finger at its price. The gold-and-ruby ring on his finger shimmered. “I drink enough of it.” He folded the newspaper, shaking his dark

head, which was streaked with glimmers of grey, and smacked the paper against the side of the table before setting it beside his plate. “Four hundred bags just came in from Saint Domingo and the price is up. I knew I should have bought shares.”

He acted as if the market were the only thing of serious concern. “Papa?”

He pushed the newspaper toward the middle of the table and dragged his plate closer to himself. “Yes? What is it?”

She swallowed, knowing she couldn’t keep her words in a breath more. “Why do you continue to hurt Mama by dallying with other women?”

He glanced up, his dark brows flickering. He eventually leaned toward her and confided in a sharp tone, “You are overstepping your bounds. Do you understand?”

Blinking back tears, she glanced away. “What I understand, Papa, is that you continue to overstep *your* bounds as a gentleman. She is still your wife, no matter your relationship, and deserves respect for that. What would you think of Mama if she were to dally the way you do?”

He scrubbed his hair with a hand before letting it drop onto the table with a thud. “Men have different rights.”

“Whilst women have none?” she challenged. “Are we not made of flesh and blood, Papa? Do we not shed tears when our pride and our hearts are wounded?”

“When you are older, you will come to better understand the sort of relationship a woman has with a man.”

“Will I?” Arranging her lace napkin on her lap, Augustine signaled to the footman to bring over the breakfast tray, not interested in speaking to him anymore. It was a waste of

breath. “Heaven forbid I marry a man like you. Mama deserves far more respect and I will not tolerate your behavior.”

He glanced away, his features taking on an irritated, distant look. “You are naught more than a child and have no understanding of the real world.”

It was obvious that the father she had once loved was no more. Perhaps he had never been. “I may only be seventeen, Papa, but I can still understand the difference between right and wrong. And what you continue to do against the sanctity of matrimony is wrong. Very wrong. And I think you know that.”

He shifted in his chair but said nothing.

And neither did she.

A frantic female shout resounded from the corridor as heels *click-click-clicked* rapidly against the marble. “My lord! *My lord!*”

Augustine jerked toward the entrance of the breakfast room, almost bumping the footman and the tray he held out. The footman stepped back and away.

Mrs. Doran, the governess, darted in, her aged face flushed and her dark eyes wide. She skid to a halt, her beige morning gown falling around her slippered feet as she released it from a pale, clutched hand. “Lord Atwood is missing. The boy is missing and is nowhere to be found. Nowhere!”

Augustine scrambled up and out of her chair. “*Missing?* He can’t be missing. Have you peered into his wardrobe? You know how he always hides in it and plays patriot.”

“He isn’t there, my lady,” Mrs. Doran insisted, hurrying toward them. “He isn’t

anywhere.”

The earl rose to his booted feet and quickly rounded the table, stalking toward Mrs. Doran. “What the devil do you mean he isn’t anywhere?”

Mrs. Doran’s plain features twisted as she gestured helplessly toward the corridor behind them. “Not only isn’t he anywhere to be found, my lord, but there appears to have been some sort of-of...struggle in his room. His clothes and his books are everywhere. You know how uncommonly tidy he is. He would never do such a thing!”

Augustine’s heart threatened to explode within her chest, remembering the noise she had dismissed last night. “Oh, God. There was a noise last night. What if—” She gathered her skirts and dashed out of the breakfast room and into the corridor. “*Nathaniel!*” she shouted, her strained voice unable to mask the hysteria roaring through her veins.

She dashed up the stairs, praying to God the brat was only hiding. “*Nathaniel?!!*” she yelled, scrambling onto the landing and rounding the corner toward his bedchamber. “Nathaniel, answer me. *Answer me!*”

But he didn’t answer.

The corridor seemed to pulse and shrink as she skidded to a halt before Nathaniel’s bedchamber door, which had been left open. She froze at seeing a scattered mass of small shirts and trousers and books on the French Revolution spread unevenly across the wood floor. Even worse, the large four-poster bed had been eerily stripped of all the linen and lay twisted on the floor as if someone had wrenched Nathaniel out of his bed.

She slowly entered the room, a disturbing quake overtaking her soul. This was no game of patriot. This was real. Tears stung her eyes and her limbs felt numb. This couldn’t be

happening. This couldn't be happening. It couldn't. It couldn't, couldn't, couldn't.

Booted feet echoed down the corridor in a sprint. The earl paused within the entryway and lingered. "Holy God," he rasped, stumbling into the room. "Atwood? *Atwood!*" He darted across the room, past her, and shoved aside the drawn curtains of the window. His fingers grazed the still closed latch. "Someone must have gotten in through another part of the house. Someone must have—" He whipped toward her and rigidly pointed at her. "I am calling for the constable and the entire watch. Go to your mother. Stay with her until the watch arrives and oversees this. Do you understand me? *Go!*"

The man with the cigar had done this. He had done this and heaven only knew what he was doing to Nathaniel right now. Nausea gripped her as the room blurred.

Augustine gritted her teeth, ran at her father and seized the lapels on his morning coat, shaking him. "Your bastard of a friend did this!" She shook him again, refraining from punching him as he deserved. "He did this. Didn't he? *Didn't he?!*"

The earl seized her shoulders and squared her toward him, staring her down with reprimanding grey eyes. "Augustine." His fingers dug deep into her skin beneath the material of her gown. "He wouldn't do this. Not to me. He wouldn't."

She shook her head and kept shaking it, not believing a word of it. "How do you know that? Something isn't right, Papa. Something isn't right. Why would he take him? Why would he—"

"*Cease blubbing, goddamn you!*" he roared, rattling her violently, jarring her into gasping. "He wouldn't do this to me! He wouldn't!"

A sob she'd been holding painfully ripped out from her lips. Hot, thick tears trailed down her cheeks. "What have you involved us in?" she sobbed, wrenching herself out of his grasp and stumbling back. "Where is Nathaniel? *Where is he?!*"

The earl fell back, his features twisting. He swiped a shaky hand across his face and choked out, “We will find him. Let there be no doubt in that. Now go. Go to your mother. I must...I must fetch the watch.” He stumbled around her and out of the room, disappearing.

Another sob escaped her as she placed a shaky hand against her mouth, trying to keep hysteria from overtaking the last of her mind. She had to think, not stupidly stand about crying. She had to help Nathaniel. But how? *How?*

Drawing in quaking, unsteady breaths, she swiped away tears with the tips of her fingers and scanned the bed, the room and the scattered books and clothes from the open trunk and wardrobe, trying to piece together what might have happened. There didn’t appear to be any blood.

Thank the heavens.

She drifted toward the side of the bed in a daze, trying to focus despite a headache now pinching her skull. The lone candle that usually sat in its silver holder beside the bed was missing. It was a quirk only Nathaniel was known for, given he hated toting around the weight of the silver. Which meant he had gotten out of bed sometime last night for some unknown reason only not to have returned to it. Trying to imagine what might have happened, she slowly stepped back and lowered her gaze to the floor to retrace his steps. Small, random droplets of yellow beeswax had dripped from the candle Nathaniel had removed onto the wooden planks—now beneath her slippered feet—and trailed over to the wall.

Her gaze paused on one of the oak panels of the wall beside the bed. She blinked rapidly and edged closer. Odd. It wasn’t aligned with the rest of the panels. Squinting at it, she veered closer to the wall. Her eyes widened. The panel was sticking out. It was as if someone had—

She sucked it in a breath in disbelief. Leaning toward it, she frantically grabbed hold of the edge that wasn’t flush to the wall and pried it back toward her with a sharp tug, her arms

quaking against the movement. The sound of wood scraping against wood pierced the room as her fingers pinched against the hard surface. Gooseflesh covered her skin as she released it and fell back. It was the same sound she had heard last night.

She froze as the panel hinged itself open with a finishing creak and revealed a narrow, black tunnel veering into and alongside the length of the wall that disappeared somewhere beyond. Frigid air and the stench of rotting wood penetrated her nostrils. No sound emerged from within. It was like staring at the mouth of death itself.

Eerily, it didn't look as if someone had burrowed themselves through the walls and pushed out a panel to gain access to the bedchamber. The tunnel itself, from what she could make of it, also appeared to be paneled. There were even lantern hooks within that inner wall just on the upper right. It was as if this hidden entrance had been built into the house itself many, many years ago and had been strategically used on various occasions so as not to leave behind a trace of a visit. Had Nathaniel somehow found it and gotten lost within its walls whilst trying to explore it? Or had someone found...him?

Her throat tightened. "*Nathaniel?*" she shouted into the cool darkness beyond, leaning into the opening. She couldn't see anything beyond where she stood. "Nathaniel, are you in there? Answer me!"

Her frantic voice echoed beyond the walls and eventually lulled into deafening silence. No one was there. And she knew Nathaniel well enough to know he would have answered her if he could hear her.

A helpless sob escaped her lips. Something horrid and dark whispered that her Nathaniel was never coming back, that someone had maliciously taken him. Overwhelmed beyond breath or reason, Augustine staggered, unable to feel the floor beneath her slippered feet. She fainted. From that moment forth, her world and her life had remained black ever since.