In the Straits:
Making History Accessible
Through the Parent-Child Relationship

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Abstract

Historical fiction gives its readers the chance to meet historic figures, fight alongside their favorite characters in past wars, and experience forgotten ways of life. This genre also offers an alternate route for those who enjoy learning about history but who do not particularly enjoy reading the classics. With my chosen creative work, *In the Straits*, I invite my readers to explore the lesser-known past of Malaya and what it was like during the days leading up to the bloodiest war in history, World War II, through the eyes of a separated father and daughter who will do anything to be reunited with each other. In this creative work, I intend to demonstrate that past worlds which may seem unrelatable to readers today are made more accessible by the accentuation of the parent-child relationship. For this reason, my thesis is titled "*In the Straits*: Making History Accessible through the Parent-Child Relationship." Using a survey of past literature and contemporary historical fiction, I will explain how trends in literature make works accessible to readers during the time in which they are written. Consequently, this demonstrates why contemporary authors often incorporate the parent-child relationship within their works: modern readers are interested and moved by relationship between parent and child. Thus, its emphasis within the historical fiction novel helps make the characters, location, and era of the work more accessible to readers.

Dedication

First and foremost, I dedicate this project to my husband and high school sweetheart, Caleb, who does not coddle me when life gets hard, but who instead, in his quiet and thoughtful way, shows me how to be the best version of myself. He taught me that crying is okay, but only if it is followed by action. He taught me how to pick myself up and how to love fiercely.

I also dedicate this work to my young son, Charlie, who has made my journey seem impossible to outsiders who do not know him. He makes everything in my life infinitely better, and he is what pushes me to continue focusing on family values in my writing.

Finally, I must recognize my parents, Bill and Dancy Borges, and my brother, Seth, who have all been the reason for the focus of this work. My brother's colossal heart for giving and aversion toward family strife remind me every day about the ins and outs of keeping up family relationships, the daily grind. My parents' devotion to making our unique, multicultural, Christian home one that was also relatively normal, balanced, and safe is nothing short of a wonder to me: but without it, I never would have understood how to prioritize my life.

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This acknowledgement would not be complete without also thanking my partner-in-crime, Shelby Poulin, who has been through the entire program with me. She listened to every ill-conceived story idea I had and never judged.

Finally, I recognize all the friends and colleagues who listened to me ramble about my story over meals, office breaks, and in between our teaching schedules. Namely, Jennifer, Sandra, Nathan, Sarah, Josh, Laura, and Nic—these people did not question my decision to go back to school and always offered a listening ear, even when they did not have the time.

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Chapter 1: Artist Statement

At the end of second grade, my teacher wrote me a goodbye letter, encouraging me to "cherish the days" of my childhood because they would slip away from me like "sand through fingers." I never forgot her words; they stayed with me throughout my school years. When my friends around me became eager to grow up, I found myself afraid of change, and so I clung to the familiar pillars in my life: my parents. I knew my time with them would eventually end and that I would soon be on my own. I wrestled against the natural currents of my adolescence, the part of me that pulled me in the direction of my friends and my future. But the other part of me wanted more time with Mom and Dad—more of that sand to burrow myself in.

My parents dedicated a great portion of their lives toward making our home a safe and welcoming place. And now that I am a mother, I want the same for my son. I pray that he will also cherish his childhood and feel the same way about me as I did about my parents. As I reflect on my upbringing and his future, I contend that there are few earthly sentiments that move me more than the relationship between parents and their children.

Thus, when it comes to literature, that relationship is the feature that I hunt for and crave to understand. It does not matter now prevalent or non-existent that relationship is within the literature I read—I involuntarily gravitate toward it, because it is the moments of my own childhood and parenthood experiences that have both lifted my soul and brought me to my knees. It is moments like those that I know can help the calloused feel again, prove life's worth to the depressed, and provoke curiosity within the lost.

The relationship between parent and child is a universal channel that connects us all, and perhaps even more so for those who have grown up in loving homes. This is why the theme of family has long existed in literature and why it continues to prevail in modern works. What it

proves about human nature is that people want to believe that a parent would go to inconceivable lengths to save his or her child. After all, was this not the reason that Atticus Finch fought tooth and nail to save a black man, just so that his children would have at least one good role model to look up to in their wretched town? Is this not why Jean Valjean went to the barricades to rescue Marius, the man who would marry and take his beloved daughter away? What Harper Lee and Victor Hugo did in these works was authenticate a popular sentiment: that people go to great lengths to rescue those whom they love.

Vision

Impetus

The overarching driving force behind *In the Straits* was my desire to explore the relationship between parent and child within a historical setting. However, I specifically chose to do that within the Malaya of World War II because, first of all, Malaysia is where I grew up. I have always felt a fondness and sense of gratitude toward the people and place of my childhood, and I wanted to give something back to them in a flattering and meaningful way. Second, I wanted to show readers that they could connect to characters who lived during a perilous time in history like the early forties, especially in a less developed part of the world. It is easy to disassociate myself from the characters from such a time because I often pass their historical mindsets and motives off as conceptions of the past. Arguably, this disconnect comes about because in modern times, we emphasize things they never emphasized; we do not value things they once valued.

To mitigate this detachment, I have attempted to recapitulate those “old time values” again—by presenting historical fiction through a universal lens. Readers can experience historical fiction to the fullest when they see that characters of the past were not so different than

characters today. There are universal traits that certainly people of the past also experienced, and the one that I have particularly chosen to emphasize is that of the parent-child relationship, since this is a phenomenon I greatly value. That, coupled with my secondary impetus for *In the Straits*—to present what life in Malaya was like before and during World War II, especially for the Chinese Malayans and the British expatriates who were still living there during that time, has driven me to move forward with this project.

Background

Back in the late 1930s, Malaysia was known as Malaya and was still mostly ruled by the British. Although the British had been present there for over a century by this point, Malaya's culture was not innately English. Rather, the culture there had already been previously influenced by Dutch and Portuguese settlers from earlier centuries (Cartwright). By the 1930s, Malaya had morphed into this unique blend of English, Dutch, Portuguese, Chinese, and Malay cultures. The population was diverse, and one group among them were the descendants of the Javanese, Chinese, and Europeans who had intermarried over the centuries, the Peranakans. These Malayans, who often resided along the Straits of Malacca in coastal towns like Penang, Singapore, and of course, Malacca, also referred to themselves as the *Baba Nyonya*, which roughly translates to "locally born." The Peranakans are the people who make up some of my main characters in *In the Straits.*

The Peranakans also refer to themselves as the "Straits Born Chinese," because of where they (and their ancestors) were born—along the Straits of Malacca. Although Peranakans are a minor group when compared to Malaysia's main ethnic group—the Malays—or the group second in size—the Chinese Malaysians—the Peranakans are a proud and loud people who are trying to preserve what is still left of their cultural practices—like *kebaya* making and speaking

their unique *Baba Malay* language. While most Malaysians consider the Peranakan culture distinct and unique, the Malaysian government labels Peranakans as being simply "Chinese Malaysians" on their official documents. My own mother currently falls into this category of Malaysians.

Even though most Peranakans do not fight the issue today, the Peranakans of the 1930s and 1940s surely coveted their own official label that would have set them apart from the Chinese, whom the *kempeitai* targeted during the Japanese Occupation in Malaya. The Japanese carried out atrocities against the Chinese, such as the Sook Ching Massacre, in which they meant to "purge through cleansing" (Singsank 90). The Peranakans, who were officially recognized as being Chinese, were part of the people who "were singled out as targets of Japanese colonial violence due to their monetary support of the Chinese resistance in mainland China and a continuing perception of a pan-Chinese identity in political culture" (Hardwick 45). Japan's requisition of power which had begun in Manchuria in the early '30s swept down toward Malaya by the late 1930s, and they occupied Malaya from 1941-1945. The loss of British power here devastated many aspects of Malaya's growth and was considered "the worst disaster and largest capitulation in British history" by Winston Churchill himself (43).

Because this time in Malaya's history was so consequential to its people, I chose the setting of Malaya in World War II and made my characters primarily Chinese and Peranakan so that I could explore what life might have been like for families such as my own during that time. My grandfather was part of a guerilla army that camped out in the rainforests of Malaya when he was only thirteen years old, and my late grandmother remembered being dressed as a boy during the occupation. As Chinese Malayans, they experienced the Japanese' brutality firsthand, and

their experiences have provided me with a unique venue where I can safely imagine the parent-child relationship of that day might have been like.

Process

In the Straits first began as a story idea when my mother told me stories about my grandparents' lives during the war. This further piqued my interest about the Peranakan culture, too, since much of these stories were set around the culture of the day and within our family. I became troubled about my own past, realizing that though I had lived in Malaysia during my formative years, I had neglected to fully acknowledge and appreciate my heritage when I was a child. Like many expatriate children who are enrolled in international schools where diversity is so promoted, I took for granted much of my own familial culture that had surrounded me my entire childhood.

Thus, it took a second look at my former life to realize the cultural significance of Malaysia in world history, and as a result, this second look pushed me to use Malaya as my setting for *In the Straits*. Knowing what I wanted my story to teach, I began writing out the plot using Freytag's Pyramid method, which is a "dramatic structural framework developed by Gustav Freytag, a German playwright and novelist of the mid-nineteenth century," who "theorized that effective stories could be broken into two halves, the play and counterplay, with the climax in the middle" (The Write Practice). I came up with several pyramids until I found a pyramid I liked, and I used that model for my novel, filling in the details of the story from there. I have conducted several interviews with my own family members to learn about the details of day-to-day life as a Peranakan. Some of these details have already been embedded into *In the Straits.*

Literary Context

Inspiration

I can herald most of my inspiration for *In the Straits* back to my childhood. My fascination with historical stories began when I was a child reading books by my favorite author, Enid Blyton. Blyton wrote fervently during the earlier part of the twentieth century and through the Second World War, producing works like the *St. Clare's* series, or the *Famous Five* series. Her stories often involved children who went to boarding schools in England. As a child who belonged to protective, loving parents, the idea of boarding school intrigued me because it seemed so foreign and frightening. I found it difficult to believe that parents who claimed to love their children would send them away on purpose. Yet, Blyton had the ability to make boarding school seem like the most wonderful place in the world.

My interests expanded to other types of fiction, too. When I was nine years old, *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens became a key inspiration for me. Though my adoration for this work is not remarkable to anyone who knows Dickens' novels, it was this work that became the genesis of most of my literary interests today. *Oliver Twist* expanded my fascination of boarding schools to the world of orphanages also. Dickens showed me that there were children whose parents had died, and nothing was more unsettling to me than that thought. Thus, the common denominator between my literary obsessions was this: the parent had to be as crucial to the child as the child is to the parent.

Since leaving my childhood home in Malaysia, I have often found myself looking back on my former life as if it had been one long dream. As an adult, I am fascinated by the history and culture I was mostly unaware of during my childhood. Though my Malaysian mother wholeheartedly embraced our culture in the house, I grew up as many Malaysian biracial

children do: dreaming of a life somewhere else. Malaysia's tropical humidity, constant political unrest, and seemingly backwatered lifestyle might not have been ideal for a child who watched American television shows growing up (on costly international channels my red-blooded American father paid extra for), but as I look back on my former life today, I see nothing but the absolute best that my parents could have ever provided me with. These thoughts, coupled with the recent discovery of my grandparents' roles during World War II, have driven me to craft a story that implements these most essential parts of my life: the relationship between parent and child, and Malaysian culture.

Significance in a Lost World

Familial Love

History certainly provides wonderful pictures of familial and romantic love that resonate with us (Queen Victoria and Prince Albert and their family are among the first ones that come to mind), but the most constructive advice regarding familial love comes from Scripture. Verses like, "We love because He first loved us" (*NKJV,* 1 Jn 4:19), appear repeatedly throughout the Word, reminding me that love should not be something I should wait around for or hope falls upon me, but rather, it is something that must be deliberate. A verse I have revisited much in my adult life has been 1 Peter 4:8, which says, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins." This verse is somewhat of a life verse for *In the Straits* because of the story's premise: both father and daughter have wronged each other, and true reconciliation between them will take more than a physical reunion; it will take the dying of self to each other and the act of forgiveness from both. Only love can drive a person to truly "cover" the feelings he feels against those that have wronged him, and that is the crux of *In the Straits*.

Many undoubtedly need to see a clear picture of what familial love should look like—particularly family members who have suffered estrangement from others in their family because of "emotional, physical, or sexual abuse in childhood by the parent, 'toxic' behaviors such as disrespect or hurtfulness, feeling unsupported, and clashes in values," as Joshua Coleman puts it in "A Shift in American Family Values Is Fueling Estrangement" (Coleman). In a world where sin continues to prevail, people need a message of hope that the family unit can prevail if they only apply that Scriptural behest to love.

Love Often Requires Sacrifice

A secondary significance of *In the Straits*' message is the idea that love often requires sacrifice. For me, it is easy to get lost in this world's definition of love; instead of love being the medium that "covers a multitude of sins," I sometimes depict love as being more about the desires people feel—no matter how destructive those desires are. I interpret love egocentrically, rather than selflessly.

But the ultimate picture of love and sacrifice is, of course, seen in the life and death of Christ. His sacrifice came in the purest form—knowing that many would never return the favor or even acknowledge what He did for them. His death portrays what culture today does not: that love is most evident in the sacrifices that we make for the people we claim to love—no matter how big or small those sacrifices are. Though John 15:13 says, "Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one's life for his friends," sacrifice comes in more ways than death. Rather, sacrifice entails the daily "dying to self"—in other words, denying the love we feel for ourselves and instead choosing to love others first.

With *In the Straits,* I hope to teach this lesson of true love and sacrifice, to give my readers another version of what familial love should look like. My desire is that those who walk

away from my story moved will spread this idea of love and sacrifice, and ultimately question the source of where that message originates.

Conclusion

Given these thoughts, the parent-child relationship is a familiar medium I can use to not only help my readers learn Scriptural truth but to also connect them with a time and place that might not be so familiar. *In the Straits* gives me a chance to envision a version of my hometown that my grandparents experienced firsthand and a chance to explore the possibilities and quality of life during World War II in Malaya. Additionally, it allows me to demonstrate to modern readers the painful effect the war had on Southeast Asian countries and more importantly to its individuals. *In the Straits* thus fits the mold of two popular subgenres of modern historical fiction: the historical romance and the historical family saga. These subgenres of historical fiction serve their readers in many aspects—including enlightenment and, of course, entertainment—but they have the potential to do so much more. Historical fiction has the potential to help us not just see the world as it was years ago, but to experience it as if we were thrown back into the past, if only we can find a way to connect to its characters.

Chapter 2: Critical Paper

The historical fiction novelist is posed with many challenges when it comes to crafting his work. Perhaps the most discussed of these challenges is the novelist's obligation to provide his readers with historically accurate details. Another challenge is for the writer to accurately portray the common vernacular of the day in which his story is set. When it comes to picky modern readers, the historical fiction novelist is posed with yet another quandary: to present readers with characters who are not only historically believable, but who are also relatable in some way.

It is not unusual to hear modern readers criticize classic literature, griping that they are dated in ideologies, unrelatable in their conflict, illegible in their linguistics, or just plain longwinded and boring. These reasons, coupled with the simple fact that older literary works were obviously written during and about another time, make some of the classics daunting to readers today. On the flipside, contemporary literature usually requires much less effort for them to consume, in terms of readability and the speed of perception, which is why so many modern readers prefer to pick up contemporary pieces instead of the classics. Consequently, these readers miss out on many regaling works of fiction that have the withstood the test of time.

With that in mind, historical fiction novelists today have the unique opportunity to present the past—the same kind of worlds and people that exist within the classics—just with a fresher take for the purposes of reaching a modern audience. Using the genre pioneered by some of the "greats," such as Leo Tolstoy and James Fenimore Cooper, modern historical fiction can enhance this genre using certain techniques to ensure their modern audiences walk away satiated from the work. After all, it is the goal of the fiction writer to touch his readers through the written word, or as Sol Stein states in *Stein on Writing*, to "[evoke] emotion," which requires

"the fiction writer [to] avoid anything that distracts from the experience even momentarily" (7). This includes lofty language and the arbitrary settings that seemingly pervade older literature. It also implies unrelatable conflict and motivation. Basically, anything that may potentially detract from the story's ability to convey meaning should be deliberated carefully by the historical fiction novelist, to ensure that the work can be as enjoyable as possible for the reader.

At the same time, historical writers can engage modern audiences by focusing on aspects such as character development and the prevalent lessons they want their characters to learn. Certainly, this is not a groundbreaking notion; however, an argument can be made that modern novelists focus more on the sensational elements that make up their character than past writers ever did. While earlier works seemed to concentrate heavily on the societal, political, and religious aspects of their stories, writers today often seem more interested in developing the parts of their characters that make them human.

Moreover, within the last sixty or so years, Western culture has begun greatly promoting the importance of the family unit. The parent-child relationship has been extensively discussed, and it continues to be studied today in all fields of study ranging from medicine and psychology to religion and education. As a result, Western culture has shifted to today's focus of the family. This paradigm has drifted into the literary world also, and its effects are clearly seen in contemporary literature. What has happened naturally in the last half century—the synthesis of the parent-child relationship into the fiction novel—has become an extremely useful tool for the historical fiction writer specifically, because it is through spotlighting the humanizing qualities of people, such as their interpersonal relationships, that the writer is able to engage the modern-day reader.

Thus, this paper aims to demonstrate the benefits of accentuating on the parent-child relationship in the historical fiction novel as well as to address how fiction of the past and present have dealt with the parent-child relationship within the novel. To achieve this goal, one must first address the obstacle that historical fiction writers face today: how to draw readers into a historical world that is relatable to them. In essence, how can writers avoid the pitfalls of writing historical fiction while still keeping the interest in history alive? Though this question may be answered from many angles, there is definitive truth in this: accentuating the parent-child relationship in the historical fiction novel creates a more accessible genre for the modern reader.

Humanizing the Protagonist

First, accentuating the parent-child relationship within the historical fiction novel, such as classical literature, will make its characters more accessible to readers. Stories set in past settings may sometimes come across as inaccessible because modern readers often lack context. In other words, past writers focused on elements in which readers today have "shallow reservoirs" of knowledge (Lindquist). In other words, writers of the past did not focus on themes that are popular with readers today. Comparing and contrasting how and why past literature and contemporary historical fiction focus on different elements is one way to gain insight into why accentuating a parent-child relationship into historical fiction can create more accessible characters for modern readers.

The Focus of Past Writers

To begin, a preliminary survey of past literature reveals how former writers often overlooked or ignored the parent-child relationship of their characters. The primary reason for this is that past writers focused on character features more relevant to their day. A look at ancient and medieval English literature, for example, shows how those writers desired their protagonists

to manifest courtly love and chivalry. One of the earliest and most well-known English literary heroes, Beowulf, possessed the human virtues of bravery and loyalty. The narrator of this epic even opens with this line: "Yes, we have heard of the glory of the Spear-Danes' kings in the old days—how the princes of that people did brave deeds" (*Beowulf* 3). This epic embodies "what we know of heroism," in the words of E. L. Risden in the article "*Beowulf,* Tolkien, and Epic Ephiphanies" (Risden 192), and is a sign of the priorities of this day. This is only one example from Anglo-Saxon literature, of course, yet it effectively demonstrates an overlying persona of its day, a day when the notion of family was important but not quite as heavily emphasized within literature.

As previously mentioned, the purpose behind writing fictional characters has almost always been for more than just entertainment. Fictional characters have been written to teach and inspire, too. The Renaissance period also demonstrates this fact, as this was a period when English writers began crafting their heroes to concentrate on the rediscovery of the arts. According to Paul Oskar Kristellar, professor of Education at the University of Texas, the Renaissance is "best defined as a scholarly and literary movement that advocated the study and imitation of classical antiquity and that came to affect more or less deeply all areas of the Renaissance period," such as the rebirth of humanism as an ideology (586). Perhaps the most famous writer of all time, William Shakespeare, demonstrates this best with Henry from *Henry V*. This play focuses on power and leadership and ethics, all of which were commonly discussed topics of the Greeks and Romans, whom the pioneers of the Renaissance were trying to recapitulate. It is Henry who famously proclaims on St. Crispin's day, "If we are mark'd to die, we are now / To do our country loss; and if to live / The fewer men, the greater share of honour" (*Henry V* 4.3.20-22), demonstrating the period's rebirth of the leader figure. With that said, the

theme of family is certainly still signified in many of Shakespeare's plays but is overshadowed by the other themes that dominate his work like the ones mentioned above. This fact, coupled with what seems like a foreign form of English within Shakespeare's works, also undoubtedly make this historical classic seem less than accessible to younger readers today.

Trends in literature permeating from the times did not stop with the Renaissance. During the Restoration in the late 1600s, many English writers experienced political defeat, which explains why this period saw themes like moderation, reason, and realism in its writing, according to American literary scholar Steven Zwicker (426). Classic works such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* and John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* also saw characters portraying lessons of universal hierarchy and saving mankind. David A. Brewer of Ohio State University contends that this period was so affected by the Exclusion Crisis and reign of James II that the literary period of the restoration lasted even longer than the political period itself (96). By and large, people were so influenced by the political climate of the day that their literary characters could not help reflecting their beliefs on the matter, even years after the fact. Once again, the parent-child relationship was not seen here as a defining trait of this time, even though it was occasionally highlighted, such as in the relationship between Palmyra and her father Polydamas in *Marriage A-la-mode*, John Dryden's most famous comedy.

The focus again shifted drastically in the 1800s within western literature, when writers began formulating ideas about realism, progress, and social class because of the developments in scientific research. This period also saw the novel become the most popular genre in English literature. George Eliot's *Middlemarch* is a classic example of a writer testing the grounds for literary realism within her characters. Eliot focused on the truth of everyday experiences in this work. Brian Swann, writer of the article "*Middlemarch*: Realism and Symbolic Form," asserts

that for Eliot, “the crumbling of the ideal is the construction of the real, but the tradition of the ideal is transformed and incorporated into a new reality”; thus, in *Middlemarch,* Eliot “devotes no little space to discussions of the symbolic mode of perception” (285). Eliot was but one Victorian author to embed this idea of realism within her characters.

During the same literary period, writers such as Jane Austen surrounded their characters’ stories around elements of morality and social class. Austen’s novels especially focused on social standing, although she also began steering into the direction of more personal issues like familial love. One of her most famous novels, *Pride and Prejudice,* even opens with her famous line which details the social constructs of the day: “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife” (1). Although the story primarily surrounds the chaotic relationship between Elizabeth Bennet and Mr. Darcy, Austen deliberately explores both the moral and questionable virtues of the Bennet family in this work. It can be argued that Austen’s steering toward personal issues like the parent-child relationship is why her works still remain popular with readers of all ages today.

More recently in the early twentieth century, despair and disillusionment became prevalent themes in literary characters. This is unsurprising considering the devastation mankind saw during the first half of this century, with two world wars and worldwide depression. One writer who helped set the trend for this literary period was Irish author James Joyce. In his best-known work *Ulysses,* he focused on the idea of self-consciousness and man’s quest for belonging, according to Barbara R. Tomasi, professor of English at the University of Buffalo (177). Along the same lines, English writer Virginia Woolfe highlighted the elements of war, British society in this new post-war era, and—as author Brian Phillips puts it in his article “Reality and Virginia Woolfe”—the “grotesque” (1). These years saw people shifting toward a

disenchantment of family values, explaining why the parent-child relationship, while it may have surfaced, was once again not considered a prevalent character motive of this period.

Thus, writers have always written about what is prevalent to them at the time; they structure their characters to fit the worlds they also build for them. This is problematic for modern readers, however, because they struggle finding connection with characters from these older works. Therefore, it is important to find that deeper affiliation for the reader within the characters being written, to accomplish what writer K. M. Weiland argues will help your "story resonate on a deeper level than entertainment" (15). Essentially, the character must embody universal qualities to reach the reader on a personal level.

In conjunction with these thoughts, a look at popular archetypes of past literature also demonstrates why the parent-child relationship was neglected and also why it now prevails in modern literature. For example, in the 1800s and early 1900s, two popular archetypes writers used were that of the orphan and the ineffectual parent. To begin, the orphan is famously seen in countless popular fairytales and folktales, such as in the version of *Cinderella* that was popularized by the Brothers Grimm in the early 1800s. Later in the century, Charles Dickens further popularized the orphan with *Oliver Twist* and *Great Expectations*. The creation of the Dickensian orphan is unsurprising considering the high number of "children of the state" whom Claudia Nelson, author of "Adoption, Fostering, and the Poor," claims were products of the "family life's [inability] to eradicate the problems associated with impoverished children" (57). Similarly in America, esteemed author Mark Twain also used the orphan in both *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Hana Wirth-Nesher writes in "The Literary Orphan as National Hero: Huck and Pip" that both "Pip and Huck are born into a tradition of literary orphans who, by virtue of their not being limited by the rules and constraints

of parents and kin, are free to seek spiritual surrogate parents and moral codes" (260). Certainly, these are only two out of countless other orphans created during this dynamic and vast period; other literary orphans popular to this day include Anne Shirley from Lucy Maud Montgomery's *Anne of Green Gables*, Jane from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, Emma from Jane Austen's novel of the same name, and Eppie from George Eliot's *Silas Marner*. Thus, the use of the orphan during this period demonstrates two facts: first, it shows how writers were already leaning toward the direction of how contemporary writers would utilize the parent-child relationship, and second, it portrays the sad truth about countless children had no parents or parental figures with whom they could have relationships with in the first place.

Closely coinciding with the orphan archetype is that of the ineffectual parent. This archetype is also unsurprising of the times because of the physical dissolvement of the family unit during the 1800s and the early 1900s as a result of extreme poverty and casualties from wars. A classic example of the ineffectual parent is Daisy Buchanan from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Daisy, obsessed with wealth and material things, gives little attention to her daughter, Pamela. Instead, she remains only concerned with saving herself and her way of life, going so far as to ruin Gatsby's life by first choosing to stay with her husband, Tom, because of his stability, and then later also allowing Gatsby take the blame for her killing another woman (Fitzgerald 151-153). Little is mentioned about the Buchanans' daughter in the work, though many scholars have brought Pamela's name up in discussion—so much so that a new fictional book was even written about Pamela in recent years (*Daisy Buchanan's Daughter* by Tom Carson).

In like manner, Mrs. Reed in Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is also a character of low moral esteem. In fact, she is often heralded as a picture of injustice today. Mrs. Reed, Jane's aunt who is given

care over the orphaned Jane, despises the girl, "keeping [her] at a distance" because she is jealous of her husband's care for Jane (Brontë 9). While she is not Jane's actual parent, the ineffectualness of this parent figure is evident. Another honorable mention of this literary period is Huckleberry Finn's drunkard father, who repeatedly threatens to "tan" and "take it out" on poor Huck because he learned how to read (Twain 29). All in all, the portrayal of parents being inadequate was a common feature of this period.

Notably, the ineffectual parent archetype also made its way into children's literature during the late Victorian period and into the early contemporary era. In J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan,* the children have a "prim Newfoundland dog, called Nana" as their nurse because "[the Darlings] were poor, owing the amount of milk the children drank" (4). While at first Mrs. Darling seems concerned about her children, especially when Wendy begins telling her tales about a boy named Peter who visits her, she still ultimately decides to leave the children with Nana that night so that she and Mr. Darling can attend a party (Barrie 27). Similarly in Frances Hodgson Burnett's *The Secret Garden*, both Mary and Colin's parents are seen as tragic figures incapable of carrying out their parental duties, though Mr. Craven redeems himself by the end of that tale when he finally decided to "believe in better things" (*The Secret Garden* 348). Thus, the archetypes of the orphan and ineffectual parent speak volumes of these writer's perspectives of the time—a time that seemed to lack protagonists with outstanding parent-child relationships.

Archetypes are not the only evidence of this unfortunate phenomena, however. There were other popular character tropes in more recent historical literature that aided in this absence of the literary parent-child relationship in the past. Two commonly used ones in the 1800s and early 1900s were the boarding school and individualistic character. The boarding school trope was especially popular in the early twentieth century, particularly in children's literature. One

popular English children's author, Enid Blyton, wrote dozens of different books about children who attended boarding schools. An example would be her popular *St. Clare's* series, which follows Pat and Isabel O'Sullivan, a pair of identical twins who are sent to the boarding school of their mother's choice, St. Clare's, where Pat claims "anybody can go, and the dormitories take six or eight girls and aren't nearly as nicely furnished as the maids' bedrooms are at home" (Blyton 6). While the parents exist in these stories, their presence has little to do with the events of these books. Similarly, Frances Hodgson Burnett highlights boarding school in *A Little Princess,* though in this case, Burnett makes boarding school less attractive to readers than other writers of the time. Here, boarding school is "a big, dull, brick house" in which everything is "ugly" (*A Little Princess* 12). Equally awful, though in other ways, is the headmistress, Miss Minchin, who has "large, cold fishy eyes, and a large, cold, fishy smile" (*A Little Princess* 13), and who greatly mistreats poor little Sara in this tale.

The boarding school trope was not only seen in children's fiction, however. D. J. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye* highlights the dim prospect for some boarding school children after World War II. Some years before that, Charlotte Brontë also used the boarding school setting in her works, such as in *Villette,* which American author Steven Millhauser claims must be "the darkest and most disturbing novel of the exuberant Victorian era" (176). In *Villette,* boarding school is said to be haunted by a ghost—obviously rendering the place as dismal and unwelcoming to children—making modern readers wonder why parents would ever have sent their children to these places at all if not for the lack of good parent-child relationships during this time.

Besides the trope of boarding school, though, writers of the earlier part of the twentieth century also began implementing ideas of individualism—or, the "moral, political or social

outlook that stresses human independence and the importance of individual self-reliance and liberty" (Philosophy)—within their characters. This philosophy, which the Victorians seemed to adopt from the earlier Romantics (CUNY), is woven into countless works of the twentieth century, such as William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, where a group of boys must figure out how to survive after being stranded on an island, or, again, Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, where "individuals have recently been drafted into the army to go to war, and then subjected to Prohibition laws during peacetime." In the latter's case, Fitzgerald's individualism "reflects the emergence of a mass society in which the individual may be influenced, often without knowing it, by the persuasive power of advertising and fashion, cinema, radio and magazines" (York Notes). Thus, these trends in past protagonists exist because of the circumstances in which they were crafted. Past literary periods greatly steered authors away from a positive focus on the parent-child relationship. Instead, the focus of those works reveal the political, religious, and social climates of their day and not so much on interpersonal relationships such as between family members.

The Focus of Writers Today

Following the middle of the twentieth century, culture shifted toward a post-modernistic atmosphere which saw writers reacting to the events of World War II. In literature, themes of subjectivity and alienation which had become popular earlier in the century remained prevalent, and "fiction continued to incorporate realism, social criticism, and the journalistic style of writing," according to *Literature of America* (265). Despite the seemingly rampant despondency of this time, there also came a newer exploration of the parent-child relationship within literature culminating from other fields of academia. A resurgence of familial expectations in Western

culture and push for healthier relationships and understanding the human psyche began materializing, resulting in literature that also reflected these new notions.

Thus, the healthier side of the parent-child relationship within literary characters was underscored in the later years of the twentieth century. The reemergence of the orphan archetype gave readers a fresh take on this character: the orphan now focused even more on his desire for closeness and affection from a parental figure. He was now aware that gaining a home and parent figure was not sufficient; he also needed that parent-child relationship. While this focus on the family is prevalent in more modern literature, however, it must be noted once again that past authors did not totally neglect the value of family—they just did not focus on it as much as contemporary writers do. Nevertheless, attempts to steer their audiences to the importance of family existed before this time and served as groundwork for later writers who wanted their characters to focus on the family. Many older works exemplify this. In *Little Women*, for example, Louisa May Alcott's primary focus was on the family, and is "partly a kind of dream—an illusionary picture of life as we wish it to be," though readers are "relatively certain that it never was really like this," muses David Curtis, English teacher at Corona del Mar High School in Newport Beach, California (878). Likewise, in *Pride and Prejudice*, while Austen demonstrates the social constructs of her day, she also portrays the bond of sisterhood, particularly between Elizabeth and Jane. But despite these author's efforts, the family did not seem to truly make its debut as a literary focus until the twentieth century.

During and after the wars of the early twentieth century, new practices in psychiatry emerged, especially following the popularity of theories stemming from neurologists such as Sigmund Freud whose ideas about family were "as influential and controversial as any to date," according to Alejandro R. Aparicio in his article, "Family and Social Dynamics: Freudian

Interpretation, Explanation, and Prediction of Behavior" (1). After him and in other fields came respected pediatricians such as Dr. Benjamin Spock who rose to fame with books like *The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care,* in which he famously assures worried mothers, "Trust yourself. You know more than you think you do" (Spock). Later in the century, Christian evangelist and psychologist James Dobson also wrote works such as *Dare to Discipline,* which focuses on the parent-child relationship (Dobson). Despite the differences in psychiatrists and doctors of the century may have had regarding the parent-child relationship, one common denominator reigned: the parent-child relationship is pervasive and far-reaching, and it should be a topic of discussion. Thus, the parent-child relationship became highlighted in the mid to late twentieth century not only in Western literary culture, but in other cultures, too, because modern readers now began relating to characters who valued good parent-child relationships.

A great early example of a work that embodied this growing desire to highlight the character's parent-child relationship is Betty Smith's *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn,* which was written during World War II. The work centers on a girl named Francie and her relationship with her family, particularly her father. In Allen Tan's article "Four Meanings of Fatherhood," Tan describes her father as the type who "does not spend much time or effort in the role [as father]," although "it is a role that he enjoys." Tan goes on to explain that the father is "weak, alcoholic," is "often out of the house for days at a time," but "nevertheless has a warm and loving relationship with his daughter" (28). Another contemporary work, *East of Eden* by John Steinback, weaves the stories of two dysfunctional families together, while dealing especially with the relationship between father and son. Steinback portrays Adam Trask as a man who may be impractical and foolish at times but who wants to do right by his twin boys. Mimi Gladstein, English professor at the University of Texas at El Paso notes that Steinback definitely did not

"choose family for his fictional explorations" and that he "steered clear of home and hearth as prime settings for his characters to interact in or as a backdrop for major action" (36). Still, the timeframe of *East of Eden* signifies the attitude change toward the parent-child relationship in literary characters. This change permeated throughout the contemporary literature of the twentieth century and beyond.

The Humanizing Characters of In the Straits

A critical part of writing historical fiction today is making sure there is a medium of accessibility within the novel that modern readers may use. Writers of the historical novel, particularly coming-of-age historical novels which may resonate with adults in their twenties and thirties and perhaps even in young adults, must find a way to incorporate elements of their characters—characters who, fictionally, lived in the past—to make the work believable and thus more meaningful to modern readers. Therefore, *In the Straits* focuses on the parent-child relationship to make the characters of the story more accessible for readers today.

To explain, *In the Straits* follows the story of a Malayan father and daughter, Sam and Rosalie, who are both internally and externally at odds with each other. Their tale opens with Rosalie getting expelled from her English boarding school in Cornwall. She had been sent there a year prior by her father Sam, a sea captain who raised Rosalie on the Straits of Malacca and who gave her no explanation for why he sent her away so suddenly. When she gets herself expelled from school, Rosalie expects to be sent back to her father's ship, but she is instead told that Sam is missing and is forced to go back to Malaya to live with her dead mother's relatives. While there, she becomes determined to find out what happened to her father.

Additionally, in the world of *In the Straits*, the people in Malaya find themselves in a unique state of being because they know it will not be long before a second world war reaches

them. Some people are tense with anticipation, while others are ignorant of the growing threats from the Japanese, who have already occupied much of the East. Another group of locals, the Peranakans (who make up the characters of *In the Straits*), largely stand behind their leadership, the British colonists, who boast their strength and ability to keep Malaya safe; they continue living their lavish lifestyles, seemingly unaffected by the impending war. *In the Straits* attempts to reflect the true attitude of the Malayans during this period, particularly those who lived along the Straits, the "small number of Asiatics [who] were allowed to mix socially with the white bosses" and who were "appointed unofficial members of the governor's Executive Council or the Legislative Council." Namely, these were often the Peranakan people who worked their way into the government. Though "they were patronized by the white officials, [they] accepted their inferior status with aplomb, for they considered themselves superior to their fellow Asiatics." Interestingly enough, though the British colonists are often demonized in academia today, many the Malayans who lived during the time seemed to accept their superiority "as the natural order of things," and do not recall questioning the British or their ways (Lee 52).

Within this world, Rosalie must navigate through not only the obstacles set forth because of impending war (such as a halt on international travel), but also the cultural trials brought on by her Peranakan family, who wish to maintain as many traditions as possible, such as securing advantageous marriages for all the women in the family. This is the world Rosalie will need to cross to be able to figure out what happened to her father. Additionally, Rosalie's issues with her father will not simply be solved by triumphing over these hurdles; she must also learn, understand, and forgive the reasons Sam had for sending her away from him in the first place. Only then can Rosalie truly fix her relationship with him. *In the Straits* explores both the internal and external facets of the parent-child relationship to reach its audience.

In the Straits also plays off the sobering fact that many parents were forced to send their children away during the war, all across the world. As is seen in other World War II fiction, such as C.S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe,* children in England were commonly sent to the countryside to avoid being in the targeted areas of bombing. In Malaya, however, many did not get the chance to hide their children when Japan invaded, and those who stayed behind were exposed to the atrocities imposed by the Japanese, according to Wang Gungwu, who writes about his memories from the war in *War and Memory in Malaysia and Singapore* (11). While the plot of *In the Straits* does not entail Sam's death in war or even at the hands of the Japanese, the simple fact that this story is planted in this historical time and location gives the audience a chance to imagine if the war itself has something to do with Sam's disappearance and Rosalie's exile to England.

Thus, *In the Straits* attempts to access its readership through a heavy focus on the parent-child relationship and endeavors to reflect what it would be like for characters torn between the British and Malayan empires to save the only thing in the world that matters to them: family. Although parent-child relationships of 1930s Malaya may have looked very different than relationships today, this story gives readers the chance to imagine and experience what it would be like for those past people whose lives *were* completely driven by the notion to save family. In doing this, *In the Straits* modifies and accentuates the parent-child relationship to create a more accessible characters for the modern reader, making the genre more accessible overall.

Entrenching the Historical World

Historical fiction provides readers with not only an enjoyable pedagogy of history education, but also an intermission from the reader's fast-paced modern world. Unquestioningly, this is why historical fiction enthusiasts gravitate toward this genre, since it permits them "to be

moved by what happened… the inner lives of people across time and place… [illuminating] history's untold stories, allowing the reader to experience a more complex truth," according to Linda Kass, assistant editor for *Narrative,* an online literary magazine (Kass). Historical fiction serves as a unique subgenre because it evokes curiosity within the reader to know what life might have been like for people who lived in other times.

However, historical fiction still remains one of the most heavily criticized genres, not only because history scholars or "history buffs" seem to relish in pointing out their historical inaccuracies, but also because of those who claim to dislike the genre all together. Those who dislike historical fiction often argue that the genre makes them question the truth behind whether those events happened in the first place, according to Greer Macallister in her article "On (Not) Defending Historical Fiction" (Macallister). This is not surprising considering that their argument is based on what readers desire to get from leisurely reading: a connection with the characters of the story in some way that causes them to become immersed in the details. But without the element of engagement to the setting, the reader is unable to fully enjoy the work. One way to mitigate the issue of detachment from setting, then, is for the writer to accentuate the parent-child relationship to make the setting more accessible for the modern reader.

The Setting of Past Writers

First, the contemporary historical fiction writer should note that past fiction is sometimes difficult to grasp for modern readers because of the foreign historical and geographical settings within them. As mentioned, there are certainly many ways a writer today can amend this—one being to focus on an element that speaks to modern readers, such as the parent-child relationship of the characters. For the average reader in the Western World, reading about the parent-child

relationship will force him to take note of the similarities between people of the past and today, and this may encourage him to look for other similarities between this world and the characters'.

Obviously, not all works of either past and present have always done their settings justice. An example of an older work that really seemed to fail in its portrayal of setting—particularly in its geographical setting—was Ernest Hemingway's *Across the River and into the Trees.* This novel is set in Venice, which is known for its beautiful waterways and bridges and breathtaking views. While Hemingway does portray elements of the setting's beauty, the characters of this novel dominate this story. In a commentary by Philip Rahv, he complains about the following:

> There is hardly any aesthetic distance between the author and Colonel Richard Cantwell, the hero of the novel. They have so much in common, in their private history and war experience no less than in their opinions, tastes, attitudes, and prejudices, that there is no telling them apart. Thus the author intrudes everywhere, violating the most elementary specifications that make for verisimilitude in a work of fiction (Rahv).

This work was not considered one of Hemingway's best, and many of his counterparts were aware that Hemingway was visibly disappointed with the work's reception. Today, this work is hardly considered a classic, much less one that readers gravitate toward when they are looking for a pleasurable escape into a foreign historical setting.

On the other hand, other works of the past *have* implemented techniques to make setting much more understandable, thus securing their positions as classics today. One excessively scrutinized classic is Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter.* The period in which this story is set is colonial America, which is a period known for many traits, one of which was societal pressure. The story follows an unmarried mother who is forced to wear a scarlet letter, which

becomes “her passport into regions where other women dared not tread. Shame, despair, solitude!” (Hawthorne 137) Though readers today often criticize the notion of public humiliation as a major driving force behind a story’s lesson, Hawthorne makes the story plausible through his use of other very prevalent, universal themes such as the nature of evil, the human condition, and guilt. In doing this, Hawthorne ensured that the story would resonate with readers of the future, too. Thus, while past works may often seem unrelatable to modern readers because of its portrayal of setting, other writers focused on everlasting truths about humanity. And though sometimes it is difficult for modern readers to place themselves in the places and times of the classics, there are techniques writers can use to keep readers engaged.

The Settings of Contemporary Historical Fiction

The parent-child relationship in fiction today is one prevalent tool that can help the historical element of historical fiction become much more accessible for readers. In literature that is set in unfamiliar territory or unknown worlds, modern readers cling to what is familiar. This is clearly seen in the genre of fantasy. In fantasy literature, the writer is “free from most of the conventions of other fiction writers,” and so “the long arm of coincidence does not bother the author, nor problems of time or place,” according to Harrison Smith, author of the article “The Rise of Fantasy of Literature” (312). Thus, fantasy writers must cling to the personification of their characters to relate to what they are writing, since other elements in this genre are fantastical.

Other genres like historical fiction do the same thing—they usher their readers into their historical worlds through the use of universal techniques such as the parent-child relationship, because doing this helps writers not only understand the characters, but also the region in which the story is written. When it comes to geographical setting, the goal of the historical fiction

novelist (or any novelist, really) should be, as James Scott Bell in *Plot & Structure* puts it, to "dig deeper and find original details," to ensure that this will take readers to "a place [they have] never been before" (17). And this is especially true with historical fiction, since properly crafting a fictional historical location is immensely vital to building the authenticity and believability of the entire story. The dynamic between parent and child is one that every culture experiences, and so, embedding this theme into historical fiction will almost always certainly speak to readers.

An example of a contemporary historical work that makes use of the parent-child relationship to help set the foreign location is Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See*, which takes place in German-Occupied France during World War II. The tale opens with a blind girl named Marie-Laure Leblanc, whose father Daniel tries to help keep them safe from the Nazis, away from the "drone of the airplanes" (6). Doerr effectively builds his story on the foundation of that initial premise, helping readers connect to this historically foreign world through the relationship between father and daughter. Daniel's role in the beginning of Marie-Laure's character arc is crucial because he sets up his daughter for success when he teaches her how to navigate the neighborhood whilst being blind, which ends up being an important part of the tale later on.

Physical location of the setting is not all that the implementation of the parent-child dynamic improves, however. With this theme, the time period within historical fiction also becomes more accessible for the modern reader. This is because modern readers sometimes struggle to understand time periods that force characters to behave differently than characters today would behave. Social constructs, political warfare, and religion are a few among many of the factors behind why readers today often misunderstand entire cultures and people groups of the past, thus giving themselves a misrepresentation of entire eras as well. And so, understanding

a specific era in history requires the reader to understand the culture, which then requires him to understand and connect to the people of the day. In her novel *The Night Tiger,* Yangsze Choo builds the historical world of 1930s Malaya surrounding the events happening to the protagonist, Ji Lin. The tale begins with Ji Lin's goal of earning enough money at her night job as a dancer to pay off the debts of her mother, who is incapable of caring for herself and is dependent on her daughter. Ji Lin describes it like this: "Stricken, I found myself consoling [my mother]. It was always like this. No matter what happened, I'd try to save her" (Choo 358). It is ultimately because of Ji Lin's need to "save" her mother that she is thrown into the time-bound task of returning a severed finger back to its dead owner's grave before fifty days are up, as part of an old Malayan superstition that Choo employs in this novel. As this story progresses, the theme of family is prevalent in not only Ji Lin's relationship with her mother, but also her stepbrother.

Thus, the cultural and literary shift toward a focus on the parent-child relationship helps writers, and particularly historical fiction writers, to build worlds to make the story more accessible for the reader. It is a relationship that everybody on earth can form an opinion about, because every person has, at one time or another, had a parent of some kind. And so, this relationship is one that the historical fiction novelist should consider accentuating within his work to maximize its potential effectiveness.

Making the Setting of In the Straits *Accessible*

Just like with characterization, the conscientious crafting of the historical setting is a vital part to making historical fiction accessible. The Urban Writers, a company that specializes in helping writers craft their novels, even argues that "the setting of a historical fiction novel is the most important part of the literary work…. The reader should feel like they are transported to this period almost immediately when they start reading. And, as they continue reading, they

should transcend into your setting even more as the story continues." It is crucial that the writer not only make the setting accurate to the period it is set in, but also relatable to readers. One way to do that is by using interpersonal relationships between characters, because that will "help the reader understand certain aspects of historical periods" (The Urban Writers). And so, *In the Straits* aspires to make its historical setting of pre-World War II Malaya accessible to readers by implementing a strong emphasis on the parent-child relationship.

One way that *In the Straits* makes setting accessible is by its portrayal of the parent-child relationship within Malayan culture. Fitting into subgenre of the historical family saga, *In the Straits* deals heavily with the tumultuous relationship between father and daughter, a relationship that is not typically portrayed in a positive light when written into this time period and this part of the world. Despite the theme's obscurity, however, this relationship may be the key to helping one understand that there are universal traits between all people across all times and that can bring cultures together. For the Malayans of 1930s, the parent-child relationship was in many ways like its contemporary version, in that parents wanted the best for their children. The differences were in the parents' methods of attaining the "best." While it was normal for Malayan parents to publicly cane their children in 1939, or in former Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's case, "to be held by [his] ears over a well" as punishment (Lee 25), today's Malayan parent would most likely opt for a much gentler approach to dealing with insubordination. But even with the differences in parenting styles, there is an element of that parent-child relationship that remains universal, showing readers that people in the past were not so different than people today. The historical writer should focus on those elements within the parent-child relationship that are universal because this will make the foreign setting more accessible for readers.

Another way that *In the Straits* makes setting accessible is through its development of the parent-child relationship within this time period. In 1939, Malaya was a hotbed of brewing racism between its people groups—particularly between the Chinese and Malays, but also with the British colonists. This tension prevailed even in light of all that was happening in Europe and, more prevalently to them, in China. *In the Straits* demonstrates this tension in its backdrop, taking the advice of Andrew Noakes, founder of The History Quill, a team dedicated to specifically helping historical fiction novelists:

> Use real events as the backdrop for your mostly fictional story. The aim here is slightly different. Yes, you're basing the backdrop of your story on what really happened, but your core story is almost entirely fictional and will usually focus more on characters who are made up than renderings of real-life figures (though that's not to say the story can't have *any* real-life figures – it certainly can)" (Noakes).

Within this setting of tensions that happened in real life, *In the Straits* incorporates the relationship of Sam and Rosalie, pushing forward the agenda of helping readers access the time period better by learning through the ups and downs of their relationship. To make the genre of historical fiction palatable and accessible, *In the Straits* seeks to exemplify "the common denominator… the human element," which is "what makes historical fiction so attractive and potential page-turners" (Urban Writers). In doing that, the relationship between parent and child becomes the focus of *In the Straits*, and the effects of World War II on the Malayan people becomes a tool to accentuate and sensationalize that focus.

Conclusion

Thus, readers today can conceive historical fiction more effectively when the author focuses on modern constituents such as the parent-child relationship because it helps them better

understand the characters, the historical location of the story, as well as the time period in which the story is set. The revision and emphasis of the parent-child relationship within contemporary literature today attests to the fact that modern readers are drawn to the humanizing effect of its incorporation within fiction. When it comes to historical fiction, the novelist begins his work with the tides already against him: the genre itself is one of the most heavily scrutinized, severely judged genres, even though it is also one of the most popular today; and so, the writer of it has ample reason to desire the assurance of the effectiveness and accessibility of his work to modern readers. The accentuation of interpersonal relationships within the stories characters is an effective means that the historical fiction writer can use because there are few bonds more universally understood than the one between parent and child.

Chapter 3: Creative Manuscript

Prologue
Cornwall, England
November 1939

Rosalie limped to the headmaster's office, her head bowed low. The wooden heel of her scuffed-up Oxford—the good ankle—bumped into her bandaged one, causing her to flinch for the twentieth time that day. Lifting her eyes to the unlatched, oak-paneled door, she mused how this time was different. This time, her remorse was real; yesterday's ruse had gone all wrong.

"Do stop dawdling and come in, Miss Saga," a deep voice grunted from inside.

Distressed, she entered. The door creaked loudly as it swung open, revealing Headmaster Lester at his foretold disposition: crouched over his desk scribbling words down on paper. Was he writing a letter? A report card?

It doesn't matter, she concluded, staggering toward his desk. *My time here is over.*

Springing up unexpectedly, the headmaster charged his lengthy self across the room to his monolith of a filing cabinet. With his long, branch-like forearms, he flung open a middle drawer, flipping through its long row of files before retrieving a frayed, bursting folder. Rosalie could see her name on it.

"Sit down, Miss Saga."

She leaned her wooden crutch against his pedestal desk, easing herself into the chair across from him. Her thick, brown braid swung over her left shoulder, settling there. She winced as she adjusted it. Everything hurt today.

"Rosalie Saga Wang." Headmaster Lester had returned to his seat and was now scanning her documents through gold-rimmed spectacles. She noticed the unshaved glow about his cheeks

which diminished from his pristine, pencil-thin mustache. He obviously hadn't slept well the night before.

"Miss Saga, this is a folder I've opened too many times this year."

Even when he's tired, he's methodical, she thought, squirming. It had been two years since anyone had said her full name out loud. In fact, last week marked twenty-four months since her arrival at Dankworth School, a modest but progressive institution for girls that was hidden between two coastal hills near the Cornish village of Polperro. Rosalie had been ushered into this very chair, in fact—then an angry, unyielding foreign girl of fifteen who'd been sent away from home for the first time—where she had vocalized her desire to be known only by her first and middle names from then on. This was a decision she thought might help her fit in socially at boarding school, where she would otherwise be known as the ethnically ambiguous anomaly from Malaya.

Now it was ironic that she was hearing her full name again in this same place, on what would probably be her last day in Cornwall.

She twiddled her thumbs in her lap, the corner of her nail catching on a loose thread of her pleated tunic. She glanced up once to notice that the headmaster was resting his furrowed brows on his fingers. She wished he would just get on with it, but he simply sat there in thoughtful silence. Rosalie's eyes darted up to the oil painting that hung behind him, the one of a cliff overlooking what was presumably the Celtic Sea. Despite her imminent expulsion, she'd still miss that painting when she was gone. It reminded her of better times on the ocean.

"I'm not sure how to begin," he finally said, his voice crisp. "Your infractions over the two last years have all been notable, impressive, and, if the rumors I hear are true, even highly-

esteemed by your schoolmates, Miss Saga, but never have you contravened as you did last night."

Her eyes fixed on his. "Please, sir, let me explain—"

"*Never* have I spent so much of my own efforts on a single student," he said, whipping through the contents of the folder with nimble fingers. "Again and again, I have put myself on the line for you, truly believing that you would change with time but—"

"Thomas wasn't supposed to get hurt! We only meant to—"

"Silence!" he exploded, slamming the folder down. Sheets scattered across the old desk like shuffleboard disks shot too far over. Rosalie looked down at her knees, heart pounding. In all the years she'd known the headmaster, both at the institution and out, he had never yelled at her. Not even when she locked Monsieur Jourdain in the class cupboard the day of their French midterm.

"Look at me, Miss Saga" The headmaster had placed his hands on the edge of the desk, trying to compose himself. "Your actions yesterday destroyed our institution's first ever automobile and landed Thomas Harman—a star pupil *and* guest student, no less—in the hospital. You are lucky to be alive and lucky that his father convinced the schoolboard not to press charges against you both!"

To Rosalie's horror, the headmaster's face morphed into one of anguish.

"*What* were you thinking, sneaking off in the dead of the night like that, Rosalie? Don't you realize what's going on in the world?" He took off his spectacles, soberly searching the young woman's face. The lines on his forehead had disappeared. "What would I have told Sam if something worse had happened to you?"

The mention of her first name made Rosalie catch her breath. The pretentious air between them was finally broken. In all the months she had spent at Dankworth, neither had ever let slip to anyone the nature of their personal relationship.

"Well?"

She stared at her bandaged leg, fighting back tears. His question was valid: what *had* she been thinking? That if she got into enough trouble they'd have to kick her out? And that if they kicked her out, life could go back to what it was before, with her father, Sam, and her governess, Helena? Even she knew things could never be the same after what happened two years ago.

"I'm sorry, Uncle Lester," she blubbered, knowing how flat her words were. Last night had been a half-baked idea that never should have happened. *If only I'd never met Thomas*. Her heart broke at the thought of the boy who had just last week seemed like the solution to all her life's problems. She never would have introduced herself to him, or any of the four other boys who had enrolled at Dankworth six months ago as part of their new integration policy.

"I'm not sure an apology will save you this time, Rosalie."

"I don't know what else I can say. I made a mistake."

"You stole a car."

"We were just going to take it around the school compound. Thomas was supposed to drive, but I insisted on taking a turn—"

"And then you crashed it into a tree, also costing the school a considerable amount of property damage."

With wet, brown eyes, she faced the man before her. His anger had dissipated; his temperament matched hers, though she suspected his to be more of disappointment than regret. And why shouldn't he be disappointed with her? After all, he had known Rosalie since she was a

little girl, when he used to work with her sea captain father who transported goods up and down the Straits of Malacca. And though *Uncle* was mostly a Malayan term of endearment, Lester was one of the closest things to an uncle that she knew. But now, their relationship was tainted.

Worse than that, Lester had defended her countless times over the last years, despite her many indiscretions at his institution. At Sam's last-minute behest, he had taken her into his dignified school, mid-term, without so much as a glance at her documents beforehand. He had even found accommodations for her during school breaks when she had nowhere else to go. Of all the people in Rosalie's life, Lester especially didn't deserve this betrayal.

"Uncle Lester, perhaps Sam can pay—"

"This brings me to my next point, Rosalie," he interrupted, sitting back down. "As you know, Sam's communication has been sparse lately."

Rosalie didn't need a reminder that the last time she heard from Sam had been months ago for her seventeenth birthday, when he mailed her a pressed cluster of flowers from a saga tree—the kind of tree that she was named after. No return address, no note. Just a linen envelope left on the windowsill by her bed when she woke up that morning—that was all he'd done for her in the entire last year. Rosalie brushed aside the hurt.

"We began reaching out to him when he missed some deadlines for your school bills," Lester continued, his tone now subdued, "but our attempts have been unsuccessful. He has not been seen in over four months now—not by anyone in Singapore, Hong Kong, Penang, Tioman Island—anywhere that he normally stops."

"Uncle Lester, you know that Sam is almost never on land. For all we know, he could be somewhere in the Bay of Bengal right now."

"That may be true, but all his contacts have confirmed that he's missed appointments, shipments, meetings—anything he had scheduled since August. Nobody's heard from him. With everything going on in the world, I'm concerned for him, Rosalie, and I'm concerned for you, too. Your actions, coupled with your unpaid school fees, have given the school ground to dismiss you."

Her head snapped up. *Here it was—expulsion.* She stared at Lester, whose eyes gave away his years of experience as headmaster, but also his discomfort at evicting a friend's daughter.

Dismissal is a good thing, she reminded herself. *Remember, you wanted to leave as soon as you arrived here. Circumstances might look different now, but that fact hasn't changed.* Yet the picture of Thomas lying next to her, unconscious, still refused to leave her mind.

"Rosalie, I know it's been a hard two years for you. In fact, I know better than anyone here the circumstances from which you came—having once lived in Southeast Asia myself—and that is why despite all your efforts to get kicked out, I stood by you. But now, I must stand by the school board's decision to expel you. I'm sorry, but you will need to leave in three days' time. I'll plan to take you to the dock myself."

"Can't I just take the train to London?"

"London?"

"Helena is in London, isn't she? You know that she's the closest thing I have to family."

"Not quite," he said, replacing his spectacles before reorganizing the scattered documents. "When Sam enrolled you here, he gave me explicit instructions that you were to go to family if anything like this happened. He listed your grandmother, Florence Lee, among several other names I can't pronounce. They live in—"

"Malacca." Rosalie closed her eyes. *What have you done, Sam?*

"Right. Your ultimate destination will be Malacca, Malaya. In any case, I have no record of any Helen here on file, and you know you can't go to London right now anyways, not when they're so desperately trying to move children and women out."

"Can't I stay here? I could work or something—"

"You know I would keep you if I could, Rosalie, but we've been forced to take on more evacuees than we can handle. All the families around here have. You need to go where it's safest for you—and that's back home."

Rosalie was stunned. None of it made sense. Malacca wasn't home! In all their years spent across the Straits, Sam never ported there if he could help it. She didn't want to imagine the heat and humidity of Malaya, not to mention the cultural practices she wasn't accustomed to at all…

"Don't be so downcast about it, Rosalie. You've already received more formal schooling that most, I dare say. And there are worse places you could be sent to, I assure you, especially in our current climate. From what I hear, Malaya seems to be carrying on, untouched, as if the rest of the world weren't about to implode at any moment. You'll be much safer there. It will certainly be nice to escape our freezing winter this year, hmm?"

"Only to melt in the armpit of Asia," muttered Rosalie bitterly.

Lester sighed, as if he alone had been the one to doom her to her fate. But Rosalie knew that his hands were tied; the deal had been struck. Feeling too miserable for words, she sat there idly, fighting back tears. There was no use crying. There was no use being angry at him. After all, it was her own thoughtlessness that brought her to this moment. Leaning forward on his desk, she wept into the nook of her elbow, each sob firing a shot of pain through her aching body.

Chapter 1
Loue Harbour, Cornwall
Three Days Later

The taste of the ocean and patter of bustling footsteps behind her served as a reminder that this new life at sea wasn't new at all; it has just been forgotten.

Rosalie stood at the stern of the *Velocitas,* watching the ocean grow between her and the land to which she had been banished. Stone houses built on the coastal rocks that decorated both sides of the harbor's trench shrunk the closer they got to the open water. She leaned over, looking down at the crystal emerald sea, realizing how marvelous of a replica Lester's painting had been. Looking back up, she embraced the briny air, breathing it in as if it were the first breath she'd taken in a while. And perhaps it was; in a way, she'd felt like she had been holding her breath for the last two years as she had been trying to leave. But now that she was back on a boat, she couldn't help but feel like a first-time traveler on foreign soil.

The *Velocitas* bore much resemblance to Sam's ship, the *Brani*, being vast enough to take walks on but small enough that she couldn't get lost within. Like the *Brani*, this one was privately owned, too, its mission to ferry personal cargo, as well as passengers, across international waters. Being back on the water felt like being back in a familiar dream. Things were so similar, yet so different at the same time.

Even if this were Sam's ship, could things be like they were before?

Rosalie wrinkled her nose, noticing for the first time the smell of fresh paint and turpentine. *So much for being in a familiar place.* This ship was new, as the *Brani* had surely once been. Still, this one was every bit as engaged as Sam's, with crewmembers marching around importantly, attending to the after-departure mooring lines. The few commuters like Rosalie who managed to secure passage on board the vessel stood around the deck in clusters,

chatting quietly among themselves using foreign tones. Unsurprisingly, most of the passengers weren't British; international travel wasn't commonplace anymore. She presumed most of them were deserters or outcasts—maybe even Jewish. So many of them had moved to England that year.

The crewmembers, however, were an assortment of older Scots and Englishmen. Like Sam's, these sailors also wore crisp, bleached-white uniforms that could blind you if the sunlight caught them just right.

It's like I'm back on our ship, Sam, but it's also like I'm further away from you than ever.

She brushed away the dark curl that the breeze had blown across her cheek. She wasn't used to wearing her hair up; the busyness of boarding school had provoked her to opt for the much easier single braid most mornings, much to the derision of her classmates who envied her tumbling, chocolate locks that she refused to cut, roll, or pin despite the trend. Lucy Cather had even told her it was improper to keep dressing like a girl when she had clearly become a woman, but Rosalie didn't care. Some social practices weren't worth the time they required of her.

But now that she was no longer on a school girl's schedule, she had taken her hand at finger curls. Reaching back to secure a hair pin, she caught a glimpse of her sensible blue button-up dress that she was wearing for the first time. It was strange not sporting a school uniform after two, nonstop years of it, but she'd already decided that she liked normal clothes. And dressing as a woman and not a girl implied that she had more control over what she got to wear, which was an unequivocal benefit of adulthood.

Helena would be proud to see that my sewing skills have improved. I'm not exactly Elsa Schiaparelli yet, but I doubt anyone would know who she is where I'm going anyways.

Rosalie sighed, remembering her destination. She turned around to take in the the *Velocitas* again—this would be her home for the near future, and it wasn't anything exciting. Not at all like those new ocean liners that had ocean-view restaurants, swimming pools, and air conditioning in every room. Rosalie recalled the time Sam had taken her and Helena to visit the brand new RMS *Orion* several years back when they ported in London. Rosalie had reveled in its splendor.

But the Brani *was still home to me.* Even after experiencing the glamorous *Orion*, Rosalie remembered feeling content when she returned to her cabin on Sam's older, less-flashy vessel. She'd always coveted that feeling of home and hearth, even if that meant her place on a ship.

She wiped away a tear that had rolled down her cheek.

You can't fall apart. Not yet—not before you find out what happened to him. Over the last three days, Rosalie's worries had tormented her. It didn't help that the isolation to which Lester had punished Rosalie presented her with plenty of time to conjure up the worst kind of fantasies about Sam's disappearance. She just knew in the pit of her stomach that something was wrong.

Sliding her palms down the polished handrail, she locked eyes with the open ocean, wondering how it could both comfort and terrify her at the same time. Sam was out there somewhere, she was sure; but where had he gone? And what had he done with Helena?

"Have you been shown to your room, Miss Wang?"

"Captain Langhart," said Rosalie, turning to face the older man. It had been a few years since she'd last seen him, but she'd been relieved to hear Lester had secured passage on his ship. He still wore the same spotless cap and friendly expression.

"I assume that *Miss Wang* is what you'd like to be called now that you're no longer that little girl who once tried climbing up Sam's foremast?"

Rosalie couldn't help smiling at the memory. Sam had sentenced her to kitchen duty for the next week over that incident.

"Yes, thank you. I feel like I've been such a bother to everyone."

The captain joined her at the handrail, gripping it with firm hands. "Oh, bosh. They know you're the daughter of a dear friend of mine. Besides, they're too busy worrying about keeping their jobs."

Rosalie glanced up at an austere-looking crewmember as he darted across the deck. He couldn't have been younger than fifty.

"Half my men got taken up, so most of these are new to me," he explained, "but at least they're keen. I suspect that up till a few months ago, they assumed their days working a ship were long over."

Rosalie had almost forgotten how the conventions of ship life must have changed over the last two years, with all the young men gone.

"What do you think of her?" Captain Langhart pointed up toward the funnel, eyes squinted. He raised his hand to his forehead, shielding the sun from his face. "She's new, you know."

Rosalie was pleasantly surprised that the captain had asked for her opinion. Perhaps she had grown up more in the last year than she knew.

How would Helena have responded to this question?

"I was just standing here admiring all of it, actually," she finally answered in her best imitation of the governess. "She's exemplary." She flinched, hoping she used the word correctly.

The captain nodded, contentment sweeping across his face. “A beauty, isn’t she? This is only her fourth voyage. I’m almost used to her. I didn’t think I’d be issued another ship with everything going on, but the colonies still need someone to transport their goods to them.”

Rosalie watched the older man’s eyes graze across the deck, a habit that was Sam’s as well. *There’s something about men and their property,* she thought, observing him. But though he dressed and carried himself much like Sam did, Langhart wasn’t really like Sam at all. Langhart was pristine, proud, and refined, while Sam was rugged, dignified, and private. If this were Sam’s ship, he might’ve been standing on the deck talking to her, too, but only because she was his daughter. Sam was always busily attending to the needs of his ship and crew first—not socializing with any passengers who might’ve bought passage on board his private ship.

He always put duty before everything, even before me.

Rosalie swallowed the lump that was forming in her throat. She couldn’t lose it now—not here, with the captain right next to her, and certainly not when she’d just convinced him that she’d become an adult.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been on a ship, Captain,” she commented.

“There’s nothing quite like it, is there? I’ve been sailing for over thirty years now, and I never tire of it. Your father knows what I mean.”

Sam.

“Have you heard from him at all, Captain?”

Langhart frowned. He was clearly acquainted with the situation. “Afraid not, Miss. But you needn’t concern yourself with that on our voyage. It’s not unheard of for sea captains like your father’s to go off every once in a while. He might’ve had to dock somewhere if his boat was giving him trouble. I’m sure he’ll touch base with you once you get back to Malaya.”

Despite her missing him, Rosalie wasn't so sure she was ready for that. Not after the way they left things a year ago.

"This won't be a quick trip," continued Langhart. "We will need to make several stops, to pick up and drop off passengers on the way. Important clientele. The *Velocitas* is fast, but I suspect it'll be six or seven weeks before we get to the Straits. Still, I'm glad I was ported in Cornwall when your headmaster came looking for a way home for you. It worked out nicely."

Nice wasn't how Rosalie would describe her situation. *Stuck, cornered,* or even *helpless* was more like it. But then again, she should be grateful for Captain Langhart, who was not obliged to help her at all, save for the fact that he had worked with Sam in the past.

Sam and his connections.

As if hearing her thoughts, the captain added, "Yep—I've had dealings with your father for over ten years now. Great man, that Sam. Great businessman. The first businessman I worked with in Malaya actually. Did your father ever tell you about our first meeting?"

"Mmm, I don't think so."

"Well, I assumed he didn't speak English," said the captain with a chuckle. "The man who arranged the meeting between us had it out for me, and so he conveniently left out the fact that the famous Captain Sam Wang, who was of Chinese descent, could speak English better than I could! I had no idea what colonization had done over there. Naturally, I expected Sam to be like the other Chinamen I'd read about. I brought with me a translation book to help us talk."

Rosalie suppressed a smile, imagining how Sam might have reacted to that. It certainly wasn't the first mistake of its kind. Throughout her childhood, she had witnessed many of Sam's first meetings. Sometimes the meetings went like Langhart's—especially if the newcomers did

not know that Sam could speak English, or that he could speak it better than they could—but even if not, Sam was usually well-respected by the end of his first meetings anyway.

"He was gracious enough not to be insulted," continued the captain. "He shook my hand and introduced himself in the clearest English I'd ever heard, and then he proceeded to order us both coffee in Malay. Outstanding."

"Sounds like my father."

"Great man, that Sam."

Rosalie pushed away from the railing, unable to talk about Sam anymore. "Is there anything I can do to help you on the ship, Captain?"

The older man beamed down at her. "Did your father let you help him?"

Rosalie shrugged, trying to forget even the good memories. "He'd let me ring the dinner bell once in a while," she joked.

"I thought as much. I think we're set, but I hope you have something to occupy yourself with during our voyage."

"Thank you, Captain."

"And Miss Wang, you might find the port side most to your liking over the next few weeks."

Within the next few minutes, Rosalie was on port side, straightening a lounging chair that had been propped up against the wall.

Perfect. Rosalie dragged the chair under the shade, plopping down. She pulled out a little brown novel from her dress pocket, knowing that for the next month or two, this would be her life: life at a standstill. And if life was going to be so, then there was no reason why she shouldn't make the most of it. After all, nobody on board the ship knew her, nor were they

interested in talking to a seemingly rebellious young woman who had just been expelled from boarding school.

That night, the lull of the ocean helped Rosalie fall asleep faster than she had in a year. The intense familiarity of the ship lured Rosalie away into a deep sleep.

"Rosalie, are you ready?" Helena stood by Rosalie's cabin door, dressed in an old sailor's shirt and patchy riding pants. It was hard to believe she'd ever been a nun traveling across the Atlantic on a missionary steamship.

Eleven-year-old Rosalie scoured the cabin for the old sleeping bag and dumbbells they always used on Tuesday and Thursday nights. It had become routine that after most of the day crew had checked in for the night, Rosalie and her governess would spend a couple hours exercising together on the back deck.

"Ready," she said. "Let's go."

This time, they started their activity below the bridge, where, off its mezzanine floor, hung iron rails low enough to grab hold of.

"What are we doing here, Helena?"

"Pull-ups."

"You can't do a pull up!"

The governess rolled up her sleeves. "Watch me."

Rosalie giggled the first few times she watched the woman pull herself up with ease. By the sixth, however, Helena had slowed down, breathing deeply, arms wobbling.

"You can do it!" cheered on Rosalie. "Just a couple more!"

Helena pulled herself up twice more before landing on her feet triumphantly. "What'd you think of that, Cherub?"

"Impressive," she admitted, "but I think I can do better."

Before Rosalie could try, a loud clatter came from the doorway that led to the lower accommodation. It sounded like someone had dropped a tray of dishes on the floor. Glancing into the door's porthole, they spotted Sam's head bobbing up and down as he hurriedly retrieved his dropped objects.

"It's Sam!" gasped Rosalie, looking back at Helena. "He shouldn't be here at this hour, should he?"

Helena covered her smile. "I think he might have been spying on us. Probably wants to make sure you don't bulk up so much that you look like one of his sailors! You wait here, I'll go make sure he's okay."

Rosalie observed as Helena pushed her way in.

"Ah, Miss Beezley…" Sam's low, mumbled excuses became muffled as the door shut behind her.

"Oh, you've dropped your supper, Captain Wang," came Helena's apologetic voice. "Let me help you."

Rosalie watched them intently through the porthole window. They looked lovely working together.

"No, don't think that," Rosalie chided herself. "Not again." She tore her away from the door, trying to remember what happened. Where she was. Then it hit her.

"Sam." His name escaped her lips as she sprang up in bed. Panting, she twisted on her lamp, her eyes wide as she peered around the cabin. She wasn't on the *Brani*; Sam wasn't here. It had all been a dream. A memory.

A continuous clamor of rushed footsteps outside her door proved to be the source of her awakening. She climbed out of bed and headed to the door, leaning against it to listen to the loud voices of sailors in the passageway. They sounded concerned. Pulling on her robe, she cracked the door open to pop her head out. The noisemakers had already passed her door.

Guess I missed the fun.

Before she could retreat, the door adjacent to hers clicked open, revealing a plump, middle-aged woman wearing a bright pink robe and curlers in her hair. Rosalie could hear a baby crying from inside the cabin.

"Der's been pirate ship sighting," she explained groggily, her Polish accent thick. "My husband just went up to help."

"Pirates?"

"Yes—three times dis month already."

The woman stepped back against the doorframe, making room for more crewmembers rushing by. Rosalie watched the crew ascend the staircase at the end of the passageway.

"Don't be afraid, *Koteczko,*" said the woman with a kind smile. "Captain Langhart's been captain for long time. He knows what to do."

Afraid? Rosalie wanted to laugh at the assumption the lady had made about her, but then remembered that it would've been normal for any other young woman to be fearful at the mention of pirates. But not for Rosalie, who had witnessed several encounters with pirates during her childhood on the ocean. Pirate sightings were common in the Straits of Malacca, and like

Langhart, Sam had usually been able to avoid them, too. In Rosalie's experience, the pirates were always willing to depart peacefully once Sam's entire crew emerged on deck. Sam's crew had a reputation of being tenacious and agile, and above all, loyal to him. Pirates had never gotten past Sam's hull.

"They're headed away, ladies," an English crewmember informed the ladies as he made his way back.

"What happened dis time, Jack?"

"Captain thinks they might've sighted another ship east of them," he explained quietly. "They turned away from us. We'll be out of their sight in no time."

"Was it Pembelot again?"

The sailor looked back at Rosalie to see if she was listening. Rosalie pretended to watch the rest of the sailors as they marched past her.

"Captain thinks so," he muttered. "He thinks it was one of them, anyway. They seem to be everywhere these days."

"My husband thinks they're just out der for display only, like vase in shop window. They want to be seen, not to be touched."

"It's possible they just want to intimidate," said the sailor. "But I think they're out here looking for something. You'd think they'd give it a rest given all that's happening in these parts. They're only putting themselves at more risk by trying to loot people way out here."

Just then, Captain Langhart appeared, his face painted with concern. He nodded at the women, fastening his eyes on Rosalie. "Good evening, ladies. Is everybody all right down here?"

"Yes, sir," said Rosalie. "Is everything all right up there?"

"Yes, yes, good, good," he said, looking a little more relieved. "It was just a blip, but we're in the clear now. Well, goodnight, then."

Rosalie watched the captain leave, looking again at the woman, whose husband had just returned. To Rosalie's disappointment, the gossiping sailor then left. Mrs. Polish nodded blearily at Rosalie before retreating to her cabin with her husband. Sliding further behind her door as more sailors returned to their barracks, she remembered Sam's rule of not roaming the ship alone at night, and especially not in nightwear. When the last of the men cleared out, Rosalie lingered at the door for just a moment longer, watching the dim light on the ceiling flicker on and off. The sound of the wailing Polish baby also soon tapered, making its singing mother's voice audible, sweet. Rosalie pulled her robe further across her chest, hugging herself.

Where are you, Sam? How could you leave me like this?

Unsettled by this sudden pang of loneliness, Rosalie retreated to her bed and crawled under the covers. She turned out the light, praying that somewhere out there, Sam was making his way toward her right now.

Chapter 2
Malacca, Malaya
1912

Sam huddled into a corner of the walkway behind his house, rubbing away tears with scuffed-up hands. His nail-dug palms bled from where he had clenched too tightly, his eye twitched from where it had been hit.

Father never took suggestions well.

Sam's private tutor had only given Mr. Wang that book list to encourage Sam to read more over the summer, but Father had seen the tutor's gesture as a complaint—a complaint that Sam's academic performance was not up to par with his counterparts throughout the Straits Settlements.

"You'll never amount to anything," his father had seethed, his Mandarin thick with malice as he gripped the boy's collar with both fists. "How dare you bring embarrassment upon our family? How dare you bring embarrassment to my business?" With breath putrid of sweet *Lihing*, the rice wine he always ordered from Borneo, Father them scoured Sam's face. "Don't you know that your stupidity reflects badly on *me*?"

Relinquishing the boy, Mr. Wang swiftly seized his typical weapon of choice—the smooth rattan *tongkat* that had once served as Grandmother's walking stick. Sam knew better than to respond; he knew better than to retreat. But still, he instinctively cowered when the strikes began, his arms doing their best to impede the blows which were wild and unruly. For the first few seconds, Sam shrieked in anguish each time the tongkat whipped into this little body. A hard slap across the face was what all it took for Father to silence him. Sam had looked into this father's crazed eyes, realizing that it was no use trying to fight the man. The more Sam would react, the harder Father would hit.

The ten-year-old boy now sat convalescing behind their great Dutch-inspired home, licking his wounds. He could hear children playing nearby—familiar voices. Undoubtedly playing with their *gasing*, those fist-sized wooden tops that spin when wound with string and launched into the air.

I'd give anything to be playing with them right now, he thought, crossing his battered legs and scooting back up against the concrete wall that barricaded the entire property. He winced, feeling the hot herringbone brick floor against his damaged hands. Tears now spewed out of his eyes even more forcefully than before.

Wretched sun. Wretched day.

It was about four in the afternoon, and the tropical Malayan heat was not letting up. To cool himself off, Sam pinched the front of his linen shirt that was now clinging to his clammy skin, grimacing as sweat trickled over a welt on his left arm. He glanced across the yard at the bougainvillea-covered wall that separated their house from the main street, wondering if the fiasco had been loud enough for outsiders to hear.

Not that it would have mattered, of course, even if they had. A father had a right to beat his son, and even more than that, who would stand up against Father? Mr. Wang was a big name in Malacca—among locals and foreigners alike; people knew that the Wangs owned a good portion of the fishing boats that docked in Malacca. The man was respected and revered. Yet, part of Sam wanted to scream for help. Surely beatings of this caliber were frowned upon, even in these backwaters.

"Mary was worthless, as usual," he said bitterly, drawing lines in the red dirt with a stick. "She never steps in, even when she can." Mary, his older sister, feared little in life except their father, whose violent temper seemed to know no limit.

"Useless coward," he muttered. "At least Ruth tried to help."

Little Ruth, who was younger than him by five years, had emerged halfway through the scuffle, bravely flinging herself between Father and Sam in an attempt to divert Father's swings. But Father wasn't done yet, and he continued the beating as soon as the screaming Ruth was detained back in her room. Father never stopped swinging that tongkat until he was done.

Sam flinched when he heard a small voice call out from above.

"Hello! Why are you crying?" A fair face appeared over the wall. Sam scuttled to his feet to see who it was. He didn't recognize her, but she was young. In fact, she couldn't have been much older than he.

"How did you get up there?"

That wall was over six feet tall. The girl had pulled herself up completely, straddling it with legs on both sides.

"How do you think?" she quipped. "I climbed up the tree."

Sam rubbed away the last of his tears which had left streaks down his dusty face. He looked back at the side door of his house to make sure no one was watching. "Stay right there!" he cried, running out the back gate to meet her. She was already descending the last branch as he arrived.

"I hate mango trees," she complained to herself in Mandarin, wiping sappy hands on her ruffled dress, which was already matted with leaves and dirt from the climb.

"Who are you?" asked Sam, trying to figure out if the girl was European or not. She was too fair to be Malay, too pink to be Chinese, yet she spoke Mandarin like a local. And like him, she dressed like the British colonists.

"I'm Martha," she said with a halfhearted curtsy, before plunging her gloved hand forward for him. Everything she did seemed rather rehearsed, he thought. After a momentary freeze, Sam quickly took the stranger's hand and gave it a peck like he had been taught to do in his lessons. His face glowed bright red as he looked around the street to see if anyone had been watching. No one had.

"Aren't you going to tell me your name?" she asked, impatiently tapping her foot.

Sam swallowed, suddenly feeling very aware of himself. He wondered if he should apologize for his lack of manners, but it seemed that this girl didn't need reminding.

"I'm Sam," he said, ignoring the throbbing in his hurt eye. "This is my house, and that's my mango tree."

"Well, your mango tree is making me itch," she said, taking off her lace gloves to inspect her hands.

"Well, why did you climb it then?"

"I heard you crying," she said, matter-of-factly. "Why were you crying, anyway?"

"I wasn't crying."

"Well, I heard sniffling," she insisted, "and then I saw you wiping your face. Don't deny it."

Relentless. "I was wiping away sweat."

"It's hardly hot enough to sweat," she argued, rolling her eyes. "I should know, I have on this ridiculous dress."

Sam didn't like this conversation and now wanted the girl to go away. But he also had questions that he wanted answers to. "Are you British?"

"I'm half and half."

Ah. Mixed breed. There were quite a few of them here in the Straits. “Eurasian?”

“My father was British, my mother is a *nyonya*. Or Eurasian. Whichever she wants to go by, really.”

Sam now understood. *Nyonyas* referred to the Peranakan women of Malaya—a unique and proud ethnic group in these parts that originated from the blending of Chinese, Malay, Thai, and Javanese blood. Some of the Peranakan also carried European blood, just as in Sam’s own family’s case. His mother was part Dutch. The Wangs, like many of the Peranakan, were heavily influenced by the British in their day-to-day life, boasting multilingual tongues and blended lifestyles—“the best of both worlds,” his mother had once put it. It seemed that this girl had grown up in a similar setting.

“I’m *baba*, too,” said Sam proudly, referring to the male term for Peranakans.

“Oh, really.” Martha seemed less interested in his background than she was in the woman across the street who was now waving at her.

“Well, don’t I look it?”

Martha eyed the battered boy skeptically. “Well, you look more Chinese than anything else to me.”

“That’s because my father *is* Chinese.”

“I see. Well, that’s my mother over there calling me. I must go.”

“But you just got here,” he said, sulking. “Why did you even come?”

“I told you—I heard you crying. But since you were clearly *not* crying, I really must go now.”

Sam stopped her. “What if I had been crying?”

“You admit it then?” She was smiling devilishly.

"Let's say that I was."

Martha chuckled as she rummaged through her beaded satchel. To his surprise, she eventually pulled out a glass bottle filled with a strange, dark liquid.

"What is that?"

"How do you not know what a Coca-Cola is? Don't they teach you anything at those local schools?"

"I have a private tutor!" exclaimed Sam, shocked at the girl's rudeness. "You're no better than I."

Martha's expression was ridden with scorn, but she still handed him the bottle. "Here. Have this."

He accepted it, dolefully inspecting its contents. He had heard of Coca-Colas but knew that they weren't sold anywhere close to Malacca. "How'd you get one?"

"My family does business with many Europeans. One of the men gave us an entire case. Are you excited to try it?"

Sam was but too shy to admit it.

"Go on," she said. "Try it."

"How do I open it?"

Martha cackled, as if the joke he had just told was great. "You use a bottle opener!"

Sam's face heated up again, and her laughter stopped when she realized that he might not have one. "Well, I've seen my stepfather open bottles with knives before," she offered. "You could try that."

Sam nodded, his excitement returning. "Wait, so this is what you climbed the tree for? To give me this drink?"

The girl, once again distracted with her mother who was now calling her by name, explained as she crossed the street. “I was sad this morning and one of my father’s workers gave it to me. It made me feel better. But now I think you need this more than I do!”

Sam watched Martha join her mother, who leaned in close to her, speaking sternly. He observed them until they were out of sight, hoping all the while that Martha would look back at him. She never did. He turned to the bottle in hand, again eyeing the strange bubbly liquid. Pocketing the drink, he ran back home, already planning to get Ruth in on his little secret.

Chapter 3
Strait of Malacca
December 31, 1939

It was her last night aboard the *Velocitas* when Rosalie ushered in the new year. The last few weeks had been mind-numbingly dull, with not even another pirate ship sighting to rile things up. Rosalie kept busy by writing dozens of letters to friends of her father, imploring them to inform her of any news they had of him or of Helena. She paid for postage with the last bit of money Sam had sent with his last Dankworth payment.

Over the weeks, Captain Langhart had ported at interesting places like St. Helena and Cape Town—but nowhere Rosalie hadn't been before. At each port, the Captain made her promise to stay on board with him. "The world has become a frightful place" became the captain's motto each time they docked; and as much as this annoyed Rosalie, she stayed on board at his request, not wanting to add more sins to her ledger.

My life seems to constantly be in the hands of men who are looking out for me. It would be so much easier to be angry with them if they were unkind to me, she jested.

Stretching out on the empty deck, she greeted the warm night air of the Straits as she would an old adversary—irritably and with contempt. As much as she had missed living on the *Brani*, the constant humidity of Malaya was something she could stand to live without. Rosalie thought fondly of the crisp autumn breeze she had left behind in Cornwall.

You always want what you can't have, she scolded herself, rolling over onto her stomach. When Sam had sent her to England two years ago, she had gone kicking and screaming, because at that time, surely nothing was worse than being forced to go to an English boarding school with all their stuffy rules and assemblies and marching about in uniforms. And certainly nothing was worse than leaving behind the only cabin she had ever slept in.

But above all dwelt the anguish of being thrown away by the one person she had trusted more than anyone else in the world.

Rosalie wouldn't allow herself to think about her last words with him, even though she felt the imminent need to deal with it. After all, she'd eventually have to face him again. When she did, would she lie, telling him that she hated him for sending her away? Or would she admit that boarding school had been considerably more enjoyable than she'd expected?

Because now that she was headed toward an uncharted life in the backwoods of Malaya, she couldn't help but covet the four walls of stability and structure Dankworth School had provided. Anything, really, was better than the fate that awaited her on a peninsula in the South China Sea.

Don't forget that Dankworth might've been your only chance to make it in the modern world, too, she reminded herself. At least there, she had been working toward earning an education worth something. Maybe she could've gone on to study at somewhere prestigious like Oxford. Some women were known to do it.

Just admit it. You loved school.

Rosalie had relished in the daily roster of French, literature, geography. She'd found pleasure in memorizing theorems and lines from *Henry V.* And when her teachers weren't busy punishing her for talking or passing notes, she liked them too; they'd quite passionately encouraged her to pluck up the willpower to straighten her ways, to grow up. But it wasn't until second year, when Rosalie learned about her own competitiveness—particularly in rounders and track and swimming—that she truly desired a change. Rosalie had qualified for all the teams this year, and she was thrilled with the level of competition the other students provided. It had been one thing to grow up losing races to Sam's crewmembers—many of whom were ex-military,

taller than her by feet, and extremely aggressive—across the deck of their ship, but it was an entirely different thing to lose to peers her size and age. School had brought out her inner champion.

Boarding school had also forced Rosalie to branch out her interests, too. In her sixth month at Dankworth, she found herself the leader of the sewing club—a less-than-athletic bunch of sewing enthusiasts who crafted school uniforms, play costumes, and even clothes for the poor. Of course, her presence there had initially started out as a punishment from Uncle Lester, but this was a punishment that panned out well in the end. Rosalie discovered that all of Helena's sewing lessons in years past paid off in terms of how well she could follow a pattern, hem a skirt, or darn a sock. It was only a few weeks into her punishment that the club promoted her to become its leader.

Yet, despite all the distraction boarding school had granted her with, Rosalie still despised the fact that Sam had exiled her. Even more than that, she hated that it was his continual pride that kept him away. Still, had it not been for her spirited personality (and Uncle Lester's help, of course), Rosalie knew that she would've gotten herself expelled much sooner.

But then that incident with Thomas happened.

Feeling unsettled by the memory of him, she sat back up, staring into the black abyss before her. The scene lay silent and sober, a dark mass with little definition between water and heaven, save for the stars that dotted the sky. Rosalie smirked, thinking of her conflicting feelings. For all her complaints about the humidity here, there still would never be a sky as nostalgic and familiar as this. From the age of eight, she had been able to know her east from west just by looking up at the stars. The constellations never seemed quite as brilliant or obvious

in any other skies she traveled to. Not even at Cornwall, where she used to sneak off after hours with Thomas to the rooftop of the conservatory.

Again, she shoved the thoughts of Thomas away, trying to focus on the days ahead. According to Captain Langhart, Sam was still missing at sea. Langhart had graciously kept her informed each time he made port, and no one had seen or heard of Sam in weeks. He reminded her that Sam could very well have heard the news and was already in Malacca now, waiting for her, but Rosalie knew in her heart he wasn't. Her desolate expression prompted him to also remind her that should Sam not be there, she would need to wait in Malacca until he came for her.

I should be out there looking for him, but where do I even start?

And first, she had to meet the family. She'd considered running away once she landed, but she knew Malacca wasn't a big enough town for her to get by unnoticed, especially since, according to Langhart, her family was already waiting for her arrival. In any case, running away on unfamiliar soil is never a good plan. No, instead, tomorrow she would port in Malacca and allow herself to be rickshawed off to some horrible hut in a remote village, where her aunties would prattle off to her in unknown dialects and her primal grandmother would force-feed her unidentifiable Malayan delicacies.

Oh, the food!

She dreaded the impending alien meals she would soon be attending among family—family she did not know, serving food she did not want. Like most of her stunted cultural education, her appreciation for local food had been hampered over the years because Sam had taken on board an old British cook who'd needed a job. Though the old cook had occasionally given Asian cuisine some genuine tries—Chinese or Malay or Indian dishes—the crew had

beckoned him to stick with basic old British foods instead. Rosalie shuddered, remembering the first time her father made her try *durian*, the "king of fruits," he'd called it, when they made a stop in Singapore. She had balked when the stench first hit her.

"What *is* that foul smell?" she had asked, pinching her nose as she inched closer to the party. Several of Sam's crew laughed at the girl's reaction. She grimaced as she hovered over them to see what they were scattered around. The deck was decorated with patches of old newspapers, upon which were stacked enormous piles of the strangest-looking crop Rosalie had ever seen. They were green, oblong, and pointy with spikes—reminiscent of sick porcupines more than fruit, she thought.

Rosalie observed as her father and Teo, Sam's partner, took control of the affair, cleavers in hand, kneeling close to the ground as they worked.

"Come try it," beckoned Sam, dropping the cleaver and using his palms and weight to split a durian husk. Rosalie couldn't help but be impressed. Sam was the captain and here he was, dressed casually in a white linen shirt that was thin enough to make out his tanned skin beneath, on the deck floor, hacking away at smelly fruit. Rosalie watched as the husk broke into two fully-loaded wedges. Sam served his men the saffron, fleshy pulp inside.

"I think I'll stay over here." She watched Teo put a rather enormous piece into his mouth. After a few moments of swooshing it around his mouth, he spat out a large brown seed. Rosalie tried not to show her disgust.

"You can hardly call yourself Malayan if you won't even give durian an honest try," her father chided, in between bites of his own. He pinched some off a fresh pulp. "Here, try this bit. This is good."

The thirteen-year-old eyed the piece suspiciously, shocked that no one else seemed revolted by its smell or appearance. The creamy substance seemed to resemble congealed face cream.

"It stinks worse than sewage." She coughed, covering her nose with the back of her wrist. "How do you ever manage to get past the smell?"

Ignoring her question, Sam wolfed down the piece in his hand before reaching for another. The men around him joined in, passing around the husk wedges carefully, so as not to hurt anyone with the durians' pointy skin. Rosalie concluded that the consumption of durian had to be a cultural practice—one that perhaps she would have understood had she grown up on Malayan land as Sam had, and not just on a boat in the Straits.

"I'm surprised this is your first encounter with durian," came a voice behind her. Rosalie turned to see Helena, who had just been handed a piece. The woman licked her lips before tucking in.

"Helena! How can you stand it?" she said, impressed. She was always amazed when Helena demonstrated her genuine acclamation to the local flair.

"Oh, I love this fruit," she said, tossing a clean, walnut-sized seed onto one of the empty husks. "Durian was one of the first things I tried when I came over, you know."

Rosalie wasn't surprised. Helena had once told her that when she first came to Malaya back in 1926 for mission work with the Catholic church, she had been the most daring of her group. Much to the apprehension of the rest of the nuns, Helena had excitedly embraced all the culture Malaya had to offer—Chinese, Indian, Peranakan, and Malay—it didn't matter which. Helena loved them all. Now Helena was quick to admit that her expulsion from the mission team

later on had been completely warranted—she had truly been more interested in learning and living the Malayan culture than she had been in proselytizing them.

Footsteps of some night workers behind Rosalie broke her out of her memories. She arose, book in hand, and shuffled back inside for the night. Tomorrow promised to be a distressing day, whether or not Sam showed up.

"Once more unto the breach."

Chapter 4
Malacca, Malaya
1917

Father's hands were rough as they adjusted Sam's tie.

"We must look respectable today," said Mr. Wang, concentrating hard. "You especially must be up to this task. You're sixteen now, and everyone will be watching you."

Annoyed that his father had insisted on helping him get dressed, Sam glowered down at his outfit: a newly-tailored white shirt and blue tie paired with light khaki pants. Sam watched as Father pulled the tie through the loop, yanking down on it hard. Father was always coarse, but especially when it came to the Lees, who seemed to own most of the fishing boats this side of the Malayan peninsula.

"The Lees are known for their outstanding morals," he continued, "but they're also known for their ties with the British. They work closely with the expatriates and have their hands in everything—politics, education, business, *fish.* This is why we dress the way we do—why we live the way we do. We must at least try to play the part if we wish to work alongside them."

Sam said nothing. He knew how much this party meant to his father. Today, the Lee family of Malacca was throwing a massive banquet for all the local fishermen and their families as a goodwill gesture to celebrate the successful fishing season. Banquets like these were not unusual, but what was unusual was that this was the first time Father was bringing Sam along.

"For people like the Lees, reputation is everything. That's why they throw lavish parties for their men; it is why they go to church on Sundays. Their actions are a ruse to make us believe they're good people."

"But, Father, are they not good?" Sam questioned. He'd never heard anything bad said about the Lees before.

"Whether or not they are isn't the point. Don't you see? Their gestures are insincere. They care less about their workers than they do about their power and image. And they're powerful, son. Powerful enough to destroy us. This is why we need to work with them, not against or even alongside them. I won't have our family business quelled by the Lees."

But Sam had a difficult time believing that Matthew, the highly educated patron of the wealthy Baba-Nyonya Lee family, would ever deliberately try to destroy them, the Wangs. Sure, Matthew owned one of the largest fishing companies on the Straits, but he couldn't be malicious. If anything, Matthew seemed a lot like his grandfather, Jacob, the man he inherited the company from. Sam had once heard that Jacob started his business back when the British East India Company still had its stakes deep in Malayan soil. When all that began dissipating, though, because of growing tensions against the British from the locals during the Great war, Matthew turned toward the Malaccans for manpower. He converted his grandfather's ten-man crew into a fleet of ships that delivered fish both locally and to surrounding towns.

In essence, the Lees' armada made the Wangs' trawlers look like canoes. And now Sam's father, Mr. Wang, wanted to join forces with him.

"Remember that your presence today is important. Today, you show everyone that you will be the heir—the next owner of our small but proud business."

Sam stared past his father's shoulder into the mirror. *Samuel Wang—business owner?* He himself could perhaps imagine it, but how much of his father's words were said in genuine hope, and not dread? It was tradition to pass your business on to your firstborn son, but Father had scarcely ever shown any hope for Sam's future before. In fact, Mr. Wang had never acknowledged Sam's capabilities at all, despite the boy's decent marks in school and potential interest in studying at Cambridge for a year. But still, Sam couldn't help but feel a prick of hope

that he could still earn favor in his father's eyes. History might argue this feat impossible, but a little part of Sam dreamed of a better future for himself.

Father said nothing else as they descended the stairs of their two-story home. Mother stood at the front door, waiting, the look of trepidation plastered across her face as she gazed, glassy-eyed, out into the courtyard. She was dressed finely in blue silk, a dress undoubtedly created just for this party. Mother was beautiful, and Sam felt sorry for her. Father treated her more like an expensive boat that he could show off around town than as a wife. And even more infuriating than that was Mother's unyielding devotion to him. Sam wondered if she even enjoyed these parties Father forced her to. Ripping his eyes away from her, Sam scoured the room for his sisters, spotting both Ruth and Mary in the corner, quietly reading their books. They weren't invited to the party, of course.

"The car has arrived, my dear," said Mother, taking one more hesitant look in the small, gilded mirror on the wall.

"You should have gone with the pink," Father said, his cold eyes grazing over her outfit. "It would have looked finer." He walked past her into the courtyard.

"I suppose you're right," she said, deflated.

Mother took one more look at herself. Sam rested his hand on his mother's shoulder, and she turned back, as if noticing his presence for the first time that morning.

"Mother."

"Yes, my dear?"

"You look lovely."

Her troubled eyes softened. She lightly dusted his shoulder. "Thank you. You look very regal today. Like a prince."

Father's call made them hurry out to the car. He always hired a car when it came to work functions because of this simple reason: he needed to show all his competitors that he was a worthy opponent. And a car meant affluence.

The drive to the Lee's residence was short but unfamiliar. Malacca was no Singapore, but the town was developing into something of a metropolis, its inhabitants liked to claim, and it seemed that everyday new roads were being carved into the ground, leading off to foreign segments of the historic borough. Downtown roads were now sprinkled with rickshaws and some cars, and many, many people. Sam knew where he was until the driver took a slight turn off a main road, heading through a jungle through which a dirt path had been carved. After the trek through the rainforest, Sam spotted a glimmer of the ocean in the distance.

"We're here," said Mother, eyes glued to the window. Sam wondered if she was excited or nervous. He could never tell with her.

Sounds of lively conversation, buoyant music, and silverware clinking against porcelain plates hit Sam as soon as the car door opened. The driver parked a distance from the party. Sam stepped out, taking in the crowds that huddled under the large, white tents that had been set up close to the water bank. These tents covered the length of the property, eighty yards long at least, shading the company from the unforgiving Malayan sun. Uniformed Javanian servants trekked in and out from under the tents and back into the house, which stood in front of the water, next to the thick jungle. The house was one of the largest Sam had ever seen—perhaps thrice as large as his own.

This banquet was undoubtedly the busiest, poshest event Sam had ever attended, he decided, feeling suddenly juvenile and insignificant in the midst of it all. Attendees included several local government officials that he recognized, men his father had worked with and their

families, as well as several European families—at least those that had been prevented from participating in the current war which threatened most of the western world.

"Back straight, head up," Father muttered, pushing his way in front of him. He headed straight for Sultan Abdhul Shah, quite possibly the most prominent attendee. The Sultan graciously shook Father's hand.

"Your father is just nervous," said Mother, brushing up against Sam. "He's been talking about this party for weeks. I don't know if he's mentioned this to you, but he's hoping to join forces with the Lees today."

Sam watched the Sultan expertly weave Father into the ongoing conversation. It seemed natural for Mr. Wang to blend into this crowd, as if he were their equal—which, in many ways—he was. Sam had heard that his own family had once been so wealthy that they ate only imported fruit for dessert and had two servants each. But those days were long gone now, as recessions had befallen them and most of the wealth had dissipated. Mr. Wang's business now only survived on a year-to-year basis.

Sam found himself alone when Mother discreetly drifted toward soon a flock of opulently dressed women who were sipping on sweetened barley water. He stood outside the tent for several moments, hands in pocket, looking back once at the driver who was already leaning against the car, lighting a cigarette.

He turned toward the party and headed to the food tables. This was the only part of the tent that was quiet enough to hear his own thoughts. Servants stood behind the tables, ready to replenish guests' plates and offer them a cool beverage. Sam eyed the bounteous spread, sure he had never seen so much food in his life. Domes of *bee hoon*—fried rice vermicelli with squid

and shrimp—as well as stands of mini cucumber sandwiches appealed to him most. He grabbed a plate and began loading up.

"Now this is what I call a meal!" he said, stacking his sandwiches high. He was balancing the pile when hushed, distressed voices broke through beside him.

"…I told you, Ma, I don't see the point in me talking to him," said the girl, who was around Sam's age. She stood by the food table in her yellow silk dress, removing her gloves as her mother glowered over her. "I don't understand why this is so important to you."

"You don't see the point because you don't *want* to see the point," her mother said frustratedly. "If you would only stop being selfish, you would see how much your words could help your brothers."

The girl grabbed a plate and began piling it with a small mountain of shelled rambutans and lychees. "This is nothing I haven't heard before, Ma."

"Rahmat and his wife value your opinion because of your friendship with their daughter," urged her mother. "Don't you understand? This could change everything for your brothers."

Sam realized he was eavesdropping and turned away quietly, but only after his fork slipped out of his hand and onto the wooden table. The women looked up at him, then back at each other, now speaking too quietly for Sam to hear. Embarrassed, Sam retreated to an empty table to enjoy the meal by himself. Moments later, the girl in the yellow dress joined him.

"Got room for another?"

Mouth full of noodles, he quickly swallowed as he stood up. "Hello," he said, pulling out a seat for her.

"Oh, no bother, no bother," said the girl, quickly sitting down. She plopped the plate of juicy fruit down next to his. Sam felt suddenly embarrassed at the enormous pile of sandwiches

he had served himself, but the girl didn't seem to care. He watched her spoon a rather large dose of lychee into her mouth, suddenly realizing that she looked familiar.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" she asked, wiping her mouth with a napkin.

"Like what?"

"It's because of what you heard me and my mother arguing about earlier, isn't it? You're wondering what we were talking about! Well, it serves you right for listening in to another's conversation when you weren't supposed to. I've always said that it's only worth listening in if you know what the conversation is about beforehand…"

"I know you, don't I? You're the girl who gave me the Coca-Cola! Martha, was it?"

The girl paused, looking at Sam silently for a moment. Then she remembered, too. "Oh, are you the crying boy I climbed that jackfruit tree for?"

Sam laughed. "It was a mango tree, actually, and I told you then—I wasn't crying."

"I'm certain it was a jackfruit tree."

"Well, the tree is still there and I've yet to see a single jackfruit grow from it."

The girl smiled. "I'm so sorry, I don't think I remember your name."

"It's Sam Wang."

She sat back, arms crossed. "Well, Sam Wang, did you ever drink it?"

"I did," Sam recalled, letting a smile slip, "I even found a bottle opener in my father's desk that I sneaked it into my room that night."

"So how did it taste? Was it sweet like I promised?"

"Well, the half of what was left after I opened it was," he admitted. "I guess in my dash upstairs I shook it around too much and—"

"Oh no…"

"Oh yes," said Sam. "I got into bed, with my little sister beside me, and cracked it open, and Coca-Cola spewed everywhere!"

"I'm so sorry," the girl said, covering her smile. "What a waste."

"It's okay, we drank the rest of it. And the next day when my *kakak* came to clean my room, she saw the dark stain and thought I had soiled the bed during the night!"

The girl was in stitches, and Sam felt comfortable next to her—more comfortable than he'd felt with anyone besides his sisters. But a sudden firm hand on his shoulder reminded him of his place.

"I hope you'll join me for adult conversation soon, Son."

Sam leapt to his feet. "Father, yes, I plan to—"

"You haven't introduced me to your friend," said Mr. Wang, his eyes landing on Martha, who was watching the interaction with fascination.

"Oh, yes," said Sam, turning around. "This is an old acquaintance of mine."

Martha also stood to her feet, a terse smile across her lips. She extended her hand to the older man gracefully. "I'm Martha Lee."

Sam's eyes grew as he turned to face her. *You're a Lee?*

"Ah, undoubtedly the accomplished first daughter of our gracious host today," said Father, shaking her hand. "I have known Mr. Lee for a long time."

"And I'm familiar with your work, Mr. Wang," said Martha. "You own a great portion of vessels on the eastern bay, do you not?"

Father was obviously delighted at his work being known. "I do," he said, patting his son on the back. "Samuel here is my eldest and heir to the company."

"How delightful," smiled Martha, ignoring Sam's gaping expression.

"I'll let you get back to your meal," said Mr. Wang. Before leaving, he leaned in close to Sam. "Come find me when you've finished. I'd like to introduce you to some people."

Sam's chest welled up with more hope than he had felt in years. Had this serendipitous friendship with Martha been his ticket to patriarchal approval? Would father now see things differently?

"I'd no idea you were the famous Mr. Wang's heir," said Martha, sitting back down.

"Nor I you the eldest Lee daughter," said Sam, joining her. "I thought you were mixed. Isn't Matthew Lee a Chinese? I know your mother is Nyonya."

"Matthew Lee isn't my real father," she said, taking another bite of fruit. "My mother's first husband was Simon Rutherford. Simon was my true father."

"Wait—Rutherford, as in that old British businessman? The one who built that strip of shops down by the quay?"

"That's the one."

"How interesting."

"It's only interesting if it isn't your life the Lees are controlling," said Martha, vexed. "I was destined to live in England under my father, but Matthew won't allow it. So I'm stuck here in the tropics."

"Oh," said Sam. "You wish to go to England?"

"I wish to go anywhere that isn't here."

"Oh, Malacca's not so bad, is it? It's quite developed now."

"Thanks to the British," said Martha. "Malacca is fine. I just wish to go somewhere where there is more."

"And Mr. Lee is preventing you from this?"

She looked sorry that she had brought it up. “I’m not saying that Matthew is a bad father. He’s been a wonderful one. And though I didn’t know my birth father, but I think even Simon would have liked Matthew. It’s impossible not to like the man.”

“But?”

“*But he is so protective!”*

“Now, come on, Martha. You can’t blame a man for wanting to protect a girl like you.”

Sam paused, requiting her blank expression. He shouldn’t have said it like that.

“Truthfully,” she finally began, “I don’t blame him. I’m just bitter that he’s allowed my brothers to travel, while he has me sitting in my mother’s seamstress shop sewing buttons onto kebayas! My brother George is even slotted to take classes at Oxford once this dreadful war is over. He’ll be one of the first Malayans to study there, I reckon.”

“That’s incredible,” said Sam, unwilling to reveal his own hopes to travel to Cambridge in a few years. There was no need to add coal to the fire.

“It seems that everything is about my brothers, and while that is the way of the world, I’m not sure I am fine with that.”

Sam sat back, enamored with her eloquence. Her poise. Her fierce spirit. She was everything his own father wanted in a son, everything Mr. Wang was himself. How did one become that? Was it innate, or something one could learn? Sam didn’t know, but he was sure that it would take more than a simple act to prove himself a Martha to his father.

“You asked for me?” Sam appeared next to his father at the party.

"Yes." Mr. Wang tilted his head toward him. "In a few moments, I will introduce you to the men who will be your future partners. Your colleagues."

Sam looked ahead at the suit-clad group of men standing just outside their tent. They seemed to be lightly conversing with each other, having a good time. Sam noticed their shiny wristwatches and polished shoes, suddenly grateful that his father had dressed him that morning.

"I've never thought this before today, but I think you might fit in here with us."

"Your tune has certainly changed," said Sam, eyeing him suspiciously.

"Well, you impressed me back there," said Father, placing a hand on his shoulder that Sam almost flinched away from. Father didn't notice. "How is it that you've never told me of your friendship with Martha Lee, Son? How did you meet her?"

Sam thought back to the beating this man had given him all those years ago—one beating out of the dozens. *Best not to bring up old wounds.* "I can't remember when we met," he lied.

"Well, I like it," said Father, "and I approve. She is said to be headstrong and determined, and she is obviously attractive. Do you see a future in it?"

A future? Sam's thoughts flew a million different directions. He was only sixteen; yet it wasn't uncommon to marry this young. But a marriage would delay his plans to study abroad.

"I know what you're thinking," said Father, "and I'm not talking about marriage."

"You aren't?"

"Well, not right away. I'm talking about a friendship. Do you think you can forge a close friendship with her? Get to know her?"

Ah, this was it. Father sees a way in through me.

"It's possible, Father, but why?"

"I think a friendship with her may secure the future of our business alliance, and security is what we need most now."

"*Our* business alliance? You don't mean to say Mr. Lee and you—"

Mr. Wang's boxy mouth had formed an unnatural smile. "Yes, son, an alliance. Mr. Lee just extended an offer that I accepted. We're to be business partners."

Sam had never seen his father excited about anything before. Unsure of how to react, he patted him on the shoulder. "Father, that is wonderful. But if you've already received and accepted this offer, then why do you still need my help? What good would this friendship do?"

Mr. Wang turned his son away from the crowd, leaning in. "Sam, we need to think long-term. An alliance is good, but it good for only now, for me. You know that I almost lost our family's fortune once, and now that I have regained it in other ways, we need to make sure we do not lose it again. Our ties with the Lees can assure us of this. It can assure your mother and your sisters. Your tie with the Lee family may be your ticket to our never losing out, ever again."

A million thoughts flew through Sam's head at that moment, but one stuck out more than the others: *Martha*. Could she really be means to financial security? The ticket to Sam's acceptance? Was Martha really the answer? Sam thought of the girl with brown hair, brown eyes. The feisty one. The one who made his head foggy. If she was his ticket, then he was all on board.

Chapter 5
Malacca Seaport
January 1, 1940

Rosalie shielded her face from the sun as she gazed down at the busy Malaccan quayside. Sam wasn't in Malacca; the captain had already checked so she was stalling. The *Velocitas* had docked portside about an hour before, and though Rosalie had already taken what seemed like the entire morning to emerge from her cabin, she now found herself alone on the deck, as if she were the first one there. She watched as local workers busily crowded the quay, assisting Captain Langhart's men as they worked to safely engage ship and land. They untied ropes and lowered the bridge—a scene she had watched more times that she could count. The only thing different about this scene was that Sam wasn't the one calling the shots.

Disembarking the *Velocitas* proved to be less momentous than expected. Captain Langhart became quickly occupied upon arrival, making her goodbye with him short and unemotional, although he apologized for not having more time to personally escort her off. She thanked him for his help these last months, and he told her that she would be received by someone when she got on shore. With a nod, Rosalie wished him well and turned toward the quay, bags in hand.

"Well, we're certainly not in England anymore," she said, taking in the scene. Local traders and fishermen jabbered loudly in all directions, speaking a goulash of Malay, Mandarin, and English, while sidelined shopkeepers tended to their brightly-canopied stalls that displayed cot-sized platters of Malay cakes, candies, and pastries. Customers bargained loudly for these treats which they bought in two's and three's, scarfing down the coconut *kuih* as they sought momentary shelter from the sun under the station awning. No one seemed overtly bothered by the heat, Rosalie noticed, but then again, few were dressed as she was—in a navy flannel skirt

and white checkered blouse with a scarf tucked under. She'd gotten a little carried away with her newfound freedom.

Rosalie's face grew hotter the more aware she became of the fabric around her sweaty neck.

"Who do I have to impress?" She untied the scarf, inducing immediate relief. Rosalie awkwardly dragged her trunk toward the dock, where a local man appeared from nowhere. He was Malay, his caramel caramel skin leathered from his time in the sun. He grinned at Rosalie, showing several missing teeth.

"*Saya akan membawa*," he said cheerfully, pointing to her trunk with brown hands. Her Malay was rusty, but she knew that he was offering to help her with her chest.

"*Terima kasih,"* she responded, thanking him.

Using surprising strength, he lifted the trunk up to his chest, leading the way through the crowded station. Rosalie felt the eyes of locals fall upon her as they weaved through the masses.

I wonder if I should've put on my kebaya, she thought, thinking of the traditional garment her father had specially made for her two years ago when they had docked in Penang, before things went downhill. Living on a boat, she had never officially learned the rules of proper apparel. Sam certainly hadn't the time to dictate her outfit choices, nor did he care much for rite or ritual. But when she turned fifteen, he'd surprised her with that kebaya.

I should've worn it today. It still fits.

Forever people had commented on Rosalie's unique looks. She wasn't fully Caucasian, she wasn't fully Asian—she was a blend of both, thanks to her late mother who had been half English herself. It had always seemed to Rosalie that she looked more European than Malayan,

like Sam, but Sam usually avoided the questions he was asked when people saw his daughter. After a while, the question, "Was your wife white?" got to be old.

But when Sam had her fitted for that kebaya, insisting that she become "acquainted with her Asian roots," he had told her how much she resembled her mother. Rosalie was proud of that, and impressed by how much she loved the outfit—a white and purple ensemble, with black and blue roses embroidered all across the snug blouse that paired perfectly with its matching, ankle-length skirt. She loved it so much she even wore it to several ship dinners, at the encouragement of Helena.

"*Tunggu disini*." The man told her she could wait here, gesturing to a rickety-looking chair perched under the station awning. He placed her trunk neatly beside it. They had reached a less crowded part of the station, and Rosalie looked around, feeling out of place.

"*Duduk*!" He insisted that she sit down, bowing toward the chair again. She obliged him, not knowing what else to do.

"Um, *Pakcik*—" she began, referring to the man as *uncle*, "do you know who am I waiting for?"

The man showed his missing teeth again. "Ah! You wait for Mistress Lee to come."

Rosalie nodded, pulling the rest of the scarf off her neck and dabbing her forehead with it. *Looks like Florence is trekking out here herself,* she thought, taking her hat off and fanning herself. Rosalie imagined a cheongsam-clad, elderly Chinese woman who spoke nothing but Mandarin or worse—*hokkien,* a rougher, common dialect that was spoken in these parts that she knew nothing of. *How will I ever talk to anyone here?* she wondered, her wrist already tired from the fanning. *My Malay and Mandarin are nominal at best*.

Pakcik suddenly took off, and Rosalie wondered if it was the end of her interaction with him. A few moments later, however, he returned with a large paper cup of tea.

"Ice lemon tea," he exclaimed, putting the cup into her sweaty hand.

"Oh," said Rosalie, moved. She was obviously not hiding her discomfort well. "*Terima kasih,*" she repeated, before gulping down a long, cool drink of the tea. It tasted sweet like nectar. She paused for a moment, remembering Helena's warning to be careful of drinks from the locals—"drink only drinks that have been boiled first," she had warned.

Tea passes, then, she said, finishing the drink as the man ran off again. Rosalie slid back in her seat, watching people come and go from the station. Bicycle rickshaws, canopied carts drawn by dinging bicycles, parked along the station side in neat rows, waiting for passengers to arrive. Eventually some did—even some from the*Velocitas,* Rosalie recognized—and they were driven off down the busy streets. Some cars beeped their way to the station, too, picking up what looked like European merchants and some wealthy Chinese businessmen. Rosalie tried not to think about the crashed car back in Cornwall.

Just as she began feeling as if she would melt into a puddle on the pavement, a gleaming black and white Rolls Royce pulled up in front of the station. A scrawny, young, Caucasian man with a horribly sunburnt face scrambled out of the driver's door. He adjusted his necktie as he paced up and down the front of the station, clearly looking for someone. His gaze soon fell on Rosalie, the only passenger left under the awning.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said, his American accent unmistakable, "do you speak English?"

"I do," said Rosalie, clutching her purse tight to her chest. Helena had also warned her against talking to strangers; but this man looked young, innocent, and worried, and Rosalie couldn't help but feel sorry for him. "Can I help you?"

The driver took off his cap, making his burnt face look even redder. "Gosh, yes," he breathed, looking as if she had just saved the world. "Have you seen any European men come this way in the last fifteen minutes? I'm running late and was supposed to meet my boss here."

"I've only been here for about five, but I've already seen two leave from here."

Color drained from his face. "Could you tell if they either of them was an English?"

"Sorry, I think they were both Dutch, and both from the ship I was on."

"I've really done it this time," he said, wiping his forehead with the back of his hand. "I'm sorry for bothering you, ma'am. Thanks for your help anyway."

"No bother," she said, feeling sorry for him. She watched him plod back to his car, lingering outside of it for several moments before climbing back in. He looked more distraught than ever as he drove away.

"I bet his master is some petulant tycoon from London—probably owns a rubber plantation," she muttered.

"No, not a rubber plantation."

Rosalie sprang up, taking in the tall, young Englishmen who had appeared beside her.

Where did he come from?

"I'm sorry I frightened you." He laughed, beckoning her to sit back down. But Rosalie realized she felt better standing in the heat than sitting.

"No, *I'm* sorry," she declared, embarrassed. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Do you always make such rapid assumptions about people you don't know?"

His smile was infectious, and Rosalie was glad she hadn't offended him. "Not always—just when it's this hot outside."

He couldn't have been too much older than she—perhaps in his early twenties. He was obviously English by the way he spoke, though maybe she detected some American in his accent, too. But his attire was very British: he wore a beige English drape coat over his white shirt, which he had unbuttoned at the top, not much different than the young men in England. She looked away when he began taking off his coat. Clearly, he was bothered by the heat, too.

"That's good," he said, slinging his coat over his suitcase. "I'd hate to be judged because of my father's car."

"That was your father's?"

"It is, and that man Donnie's his driver."

"You've missed your ride, then," said Rosalie, looking apologetic.

"Donnie will come back around in a bit, I'm sure. He always does."

Rosalie nodded, unsure of what else to say to this stranger. Boarding school Rosalie would've encouraged her to be reckless. Well-brought-up Rosalie would've told her to stop the conversation at once. But she couldn't seem to stop herself.

"I've never been in a Rolls Royce before," she blurted, inwardly slamming her head against a wall. *Of all the stupid things to say*.

Lee didn't seem bothered by it. "Well, you're not missing out. They're terribly uncomfortable. You're better off on one of those rickshaws."

Rosalie repressed the smile that was forming across her lips. "I don't mind the rickshaws. I haven't ridden one in ages. I think I'll be taking one here in a moment when my grandmother arrives."

"Not your first time in the Straits, then?"

"Heavens, no," said Rosalie, fanning her face again. "I grew up on these waters with my father. He's local. But I'd never been to Malacca before today. We usually ported in Penang and Singapore—sometimes Tioman Island."

The man looked as though he had more questions for her but was unsure if they were appropriate. Rosalie couldn't help feeling that it was refreshing to have a full-on conversation with someone other than the ship people who had turned out to be mostly stuffy businessmen or sailors.

"I take it it's not your first time here either, since you own a business?" she asked.

"I've been traveling up and down the east coast for a few months now. My father's business will eventually be mine, and he's teaching me the ropes. I'm head engineer on one of his ships right now. We've been mostly in Singapore and Penang, sailing back and forth along the Straits."

"So what *is* the family business, if it's not rubber?"

"Well, it's a bit of this and that. Mostly, we own a line of companies that own international freighters. We're based in England, but we have a line of them here, too. I'd hate to bore you with ship details, though."

"I grew up on a two six-cylinder, double-acting engine cargo vessel my whole life."

The man looked surprised. "How big was the crew?"

Rosalie smiled. "Forty."

"I've misjudged you, my apologies."

"I think we're even now."

Stop that, Rosalie.

She couldn't let another fiasco happen, like it did with Thomas. She'd heard stories about how some foreigners would come to the Straits and win over the local women as if they were prizes to be won, only to leave them behind when they returned to their homelands.

Not that I'm actually local.

Still, Rosalie was very intrigued her that this man was in the same line of work as her father. She wondered if he was familiar with Sam's work. Before she could ask, he crouched down to pick up his briefcase.

"Here comes Donnie again," he said, watching the driver speed down the lane. "And by the looks of it, he's been spending too much time in this heat." He turned to her once more, putting out his hand. "I'm Francis Archibald, by the way."

She lifted her sweaty hand to his, subtly drying it on her skirt first.

"I'm Rosalie Wang."

As soon as the name escaped her lips, she wondered if she should have given her middle name instead of her last. Would this man think differently of her now that he knew she was a native? Shaking her hand, Francis's eyes met hers, long enough for Rosalie to fear for her heart.

Don't be naïve.

"Be safe now," he said, breaking his gaze and heading to his car. Rosalie darted her eyes away, too, suddenly catching a glimpse of Captain Langhart who stood across the quay, watching her. He waved, and she waved back, disheveled from having just met a stranger.

Donnie had parked in front of the station again, springing out to greet Francis, who patted him on the back. The engine was soon restarted, and she forced herself to look away as they pulled out.

"Hey Rosalie!" Francis had rolled his window down.

"Yes?"

"Looks like there'll be no rickshaw for you today!"

She looked to where he was pointing and saw that another Rolls Royce had just pulled up. Beside it, a turban-wearing Indian man—a Sikh, Rosalie remembered they were called—stood carrying a sign in hand reading ROSALIE WANG.

"What on earth…"

The sound of Francis's car drifted off as Rosalie's eyes fell upon the woman who was getting out of the car's backseat door. She was no older than sixty, dressed finely in a tan and pink kebaya, adorned with a long, pearl necklace. Her delicate gray hair rested low in a loose bun; her shoes flickered in stark, polished black. There was no rickshaw, no cheongsam beside her. There was no fear-inducing prattling. In fact, Rosalie even felt a sudden pang of familiarity upon looking at this woman, who then met her eye.

This was Florence, her grandmother.

Chapter 6

There she is. Rosalie waited as the woman sauntered over, her steps perfectly paced and fluid, almost as if she were floating on air.

For all the times Rosalie had imagined this moment over the last month, she never expected it to look like this. How could she have known that Florence was so youthful, so elegant—when she had scarcely heard her name before these last weeks?

Florence approached, her expression serene. She seemed to be examining Rosalie's face, though she said nothing.

Does she speak English?

Rosalie was at a loss for words herself. She didn't want to insult her grandmother just as soon as she'd arrived. Several protracted moments passed as they stood under the awning observing one other. Florence finally gestured to the Sikh.

"*Bawa ini.*" Her voice was crystal clear as she told him to help with the bags. Rosalie shifted so he could take them, grateful for the permission to move.

Well, she speaks Malay. But that doesn't help; everyone here speaks some Malay.

As if hearing Rosalie's thoughts, Florence gracefully turned back to her with another serene expression. "Well, Rosalie, it's been quite some time since we last met."

Rosalie relaxed her shoulders, right before her grandmother's words sunk in. *Quite some time?*

"Have we met before then?"

"It's not surprising that you don't remember me. After all, it's been twelve years now."

Rosalie's mind raced as she trailed behind Florence to the car, where the Sikh was already loading her items into the trunk. "Are you sure? I've never been to Malacca before."

"You were only five years old," said Florence, sliding in after her, "but don't you remember your mother bringing you here?"

Rosalie remembered the memory of her mother. She remembered Martha's songs, her hugs, her voice. But not her face, and certainly not her death. Sam had mentioned once that Martha contracted diphtheria when Rosalie was only five. The rest of the details were elusive.

"I don't remember much about her, to be honest."

"You and your parents were here in Malacca for several weeks before she became ill," she added. "Do you remember my house?"

"I can't say that I do."

"Well, I think you'll find it to your liking."

What I'd like is a ticket out of here.

Silent, Rosalie rested her head on the window, noticing for the first time the fine interior of the car—beige leather seats and polished finishes. She'd forgotten she was in a Rolls Royce.

Hold on—are the Lees rich?

"You're much quieter than you used to be, you know."

Florence was staring out the window, watching the station shrink away from them. Rosalie thought she looked like a painting that hand hung outside Lester's office, the one of his grandmother, who'd once been the matron of Dankworth. *Poised.*

"Well, I'm just a little confused, to be honest," she admitted.

"Oh?"

"It's just that, well, being sent here was a…*surprise*, first of all."

Florence pursed her lips. “What’s surprising about being sent to family?”

“Well, I’d never even met you before, for starters.”

“But you have,” objected Florence, meeting her eyes. “You just don’t—”

“—remember. I know,” said Rosalie, trying not to feel exasperated. “But that’s not even the surprising part. All last month on my way here, I’ve had to paint pictures in my head of you, based on the limited knowledge Sam gave me over the years. But then now meeting you. You’re nothing at all like I imagined.”

“Sam shouldn’t have kept you from us. It wasn’t right of him.” She turned her face away, glassy eyes fixed on the window.

“I didn’t mean to offend you. I just meant that I knew so little about you that I didn’t know if you would even speak English. My Mandarin is rusty, you see.”

Florence’s head snapped back as she stifled a laugh. “You were afraid I wouldn’t speak English? Why would you assume that? Your father speaks English, doesn’t he?”

Embarrassed, Rosalie tried to explain. “Well, he once mentioned that my mother spoke Chinese, and I assumed—”

“We may speak Chinese, and we may support the Chinese, my dear, but we are not innately Chinese,” Florence corrected. “I’m Eurasian. My ancestors have mixed blood. You come from a prestigious line of Peranakans, in fact. Didn’t you know that?”

Rosalie felt worried and knew that she wasn’t doing well at hiding it. Her comprehension of her own culture was shockingly limited, even to herself, and it was going to show. Everyone was going to find out that she knew little of the different ethnic groups, the foods, the clothing. Even though Sam had tepidly tried to instruct her in their ways over the years, the need to

understand local customs had seemed trivial to their way of life on the boat, so Rosalie had taken little of it to heart.

"Don't fret, my dear. Now that you're here, I'll be able to fill in the gaps left by your boarding school."

Rosalie skimmed Florence's face, alarmed. *Does she know why I'm here?*

"We can talk about the circumstances that led you here another time."

Rosalie was about to explain herself when she heard a commotion outside of the stalled car. They glanced out the window at a row of shops, where a mob had gathered in the street.

"What is going on out there?"

"Ranveer said there was a prison break about an hour ago," said Florence, nodding toward the driver. "Don't be alarmed. This wouldn't be the first one. People say that prison is cursed."

"Cursed?"

Florence shrugged. "Don't believe everything you hear. We're Methodists, after all."

"I'm just curious."

Her grandmother leaned over with a sparkle in her eye. "Well, that prison used to be an old Dutch sanctuary, dating several centuries back. The old priest who resided there was said to be cruel, maybe even possessed. He allegedly stole from the natives, all in the name of God, of course. When our people fought back, the church listened, and they eventually exiled him back home. But when he heard news of his deportation, the priest burrowed himself in the innermost chamber of the sanctuary and killed himself. They say that his ghost now roams the building, occasionally freeing its prisoners, almost always the worst sort, to get revenge on the locals here for sending him away."

Rosalie raised her brows. “That’s quite the tale.”

“Want to hear my take on it? I think the man who guards the prisoners has something to do with all the escapes.”

Rosalie looked out at the crumbling fortress of a prison. It didn’t look as if it would be all that difficult to break out of.

“Now that we’ve gotten the formalities out of the way,” interrupted Florence, “what can you tell me about your father?”

“Nothing, I’m afraid,” said Rosalie. “I’d hoped he would already be here waiting for me, but he wasn’t. Have you heard anything?”

“Only what that wanton, Brock Lester, wrote to me in his very uninformative letter,” snapped Florence. “If his mother knew he had done that, she’d have his hide for supper!”

“You don’t mean to say you know Uncle Lester?”

“Brock? Of course, I do! I knew all the Lesters when they lived in Malacca a couple decades ago. His mother Hyacinth was a friend and loyal customer of mine.”

“A customer?”

“Yes, at my boutique.”

“*Your* boutique?”

“Your father really didn’t tell you much, did he,” the older woman surmised. “Yes, my boutique belonged to my father before he died. He was a seamster by trade, though he had grown up working in a clothing factory in Portugal. He was half Portuguese, you see. He lived half his life in Portugal before moving here and marrying a local Nyonya woman—my mother. She taught him how to sew, tailor, and even embroider. They passed their knowledge onto me, and I took over the boutique when my father became ill. My first husband, your biological grandfather,

was very progressive in his beliefs and allowed me to keep running the shop when I married him."

"My grandfather was English, wasn't he?"

"That's right," said Florence, obviously pleased that the girl knew at least some detail about her heritage. "My first husband's name was Simon, and he was a businessman from England. We married when I was seventeen and had one daughter together—your mother, Martha."

"What was he like?"

"He was very involved in politics. His own mother had been part of Kensington Society, which you may have heard of before. They fought for women's suffrage in the 1850s."

Rosalie had studied a little about it at boarding school.

"Well, Simon took after his mother and even attended rallies with her as a boy in the eighties, when she lobbied for the Women's Married Property Act."

"How inspiring."

"That was just who my mother-in-law was, and young Simon became ever passionate about women's rights, too, which made him wildly unpopular amongst his peers, as you can imagine. When he eventually got out of politics and began traveling, he realized how much happier he was on the water. After we married, the rights of my father's boutique went to Simon, but Simon never allowed anyone to call it his. As far as he was concerned, that shop was mine."

"And that's where you met Hyacinth?"

"Yes." Florence was lost deep in her memories.

"I stayed with Hyacinth last Christmas, actually," said Rosalie. "She was ill and didn't talk much, but it was lovely when she did." Rosalie wondered why Hyacinth hadn't mentioned Florence to her at all.

"Yes, the Lesters are wonderful people. But I'll never forgive Brock for that wretched letter he sent me. Imagine this—he writes to tell me that Sam is missing and that my granddaughter would be coming to me because she is being discharged—yet offered no explanation for either! And to think I once sewed him a summer wardrobe! Don't mistake me, my dear, I was pleased at first to hear that you were schooling at Dankworth, but that letter from Brock infuriated me."

Rosalie fidgeted with her hands to stay occupied. How was it that her grandmother, whom Sam had never even mentioned before, knew more about Rosalie than she did about her grandmother?

"Sam kept me informed all these years," Florence explained, as if Rosalie had said her thoughts again. "I knew about all about the excursions you went on with him, the trips to Tioman and Bali, the year-long trek around England. I knew about your studies and all about Helena—"

"Helena?" Rosalie's head snapped up. "Did Sam tell you anything about her? Did he give you an address? She's in London, isn't she?"

Florence seemed hesitant to say. "He seemed to leave her out of the details when he wrote me to say you were going to Dankworth."

"Not surprising." Rosalie blinked away the tears that had formed, relieved that the car finally stopped. She peered out the window at the welcoming committee that was lined up outside a massive structure. She hadn't been paying attention to their surroundings at all during the drive.

“Is that your house?” she asked, trying not to make eye contact with anyone outside.

“Don’t be nervous,” Florence said before getting out, “they can smell fear!”

Chapter 7
Lee House
1940

Lee House was a mansion on the waterfront, unlike any of the houses she had seen in England, or even in Penang or Tioman. The sprawling property lay behind a dense patch of rainforest that Rosalie hadn't even realized they'd driven through. She studied the house which soared three stories high, a whitewashed monument-like structure.

Fumbling out of the car, she glanced at Florence for guidance.

"Just follow me," her grandmother whispered, taking the lead.

A crowd of seven people had flocked together at the front of the house, with their crew of servants off to the back. Of the seven superiors, two were middle-aged men whose eyes cast muted censure on the whole affair. Contrastingly, the two women in front of them, presumably their wives, donned airs of tenderness as Rosalie approached them. She didn't get a chance to look at the rest of the group before Florence began introductions.

"Uncle George, the eldest, and his wife, Auntie May."

Rosalie's eyes darted up to meet theirs. George, stately and sharp on all corners, nodded once, while his wife, draped in perfumed silk, lurched forward to offer a welcoming smile and handshake. Rosalie was sure she had never seen anyone so glamorous in her life.

"Next is your Auntie Irene, my second daughter, and her husband, Uncle William."

William, a foot shorter than his brother-in-law, seemed less daunting than George, though he too adorned the same disapproving expression. His wife Irene was a cushy, rotund woman with plush, painted lips and smut black hair. She nodded encouragingly to Rosalie, who felt overwhelmed by the attention.

"Those are their twin sons, Tim and Joel," continued Florence, pointing to two faces that were peeking out from behind the entrance. Auntie Irene threw them a furious glance before they disappeared into the house, their giggles heard in the distance.

"The next sibling, Uncle Eddie, and his wife Auntie Janice will come later with their children."

Florence walked Rosalie over to the last three women standing off to the side of the line, huddled together like a flock of geese, their intent eyes fixated on her.

"These are your cousins, the three daughters of your Uncle George and Auntie May."

Rosalie felt scrutinized as she neared the young women, who unashamedly ogled her up and down. Not for the first time that day, Rosalie wished she had chosen to dress in her kebaya. Then she might have fit in with these people.

Then again, perhaps not. Rosalie's eyes flickered over the crowd, noticing that their style of choice was a hybrid of cultures—a mixture of western fashion with traditional Baba Nyonya dress. For instance, the men wore slacks with square-toed Oxfords, but paired with indigenous *batik* shirts. The older women wore *qipaos,* looser versions of those cheongsam dresses that had become a worldwide phenomenon in the last decade, while her female cousins styled sensible, calf-length, western-style dresses that seemed to have all sorts of local flair added to them like Chinese buttons, beaded patterns, and embroidered patches.

"Rosalie, I'll leave you to the girls to help you get settled," said Florence, turning to the servants. "Advika, *tolong dia selepas itu.*"

A petite Indian girl no older than fifteen galloped up to the group. She beamed up at Rosalie, her white teeth stark against her sable skin.

"Rosalie, this is Advika, your maid. She's new here. I took her on to help you get acclimated." Florence leaned in close, whispering to Rosalie, "She's lovely and I'm sure not as pinheaded as everyone thinks, but you won't get a word out of her."

Rosalie eyed the girl who continued to grin wordlessly at her.

"My own maid? I'm sure I can get along without…"

Giggles erupted from two of the cousins and Rosalie turned to them, realizing that Florence had already gone inside. Without a word, Advika then relieved the bag from Rosalie's hands and ventured inside.

"Oh, but you don't have to—"

"She doesn't speak," said the middle girl. "We think she's mute. Ah Mah found her on the streets in Port Dickson last week. Her family had left her."

Rosalie looked at her cousins, unsure of what to say. The sun was beating down hard and she desperately wanted to change clothes.

"I'm Vicky," said the same girl, holding out her hand.

Rosalie shook it, relieved.

"This is Lauren, the youngest," said Vicky, pushing the younger girl forward, " and that is Diane."

Rosalie turned to the tallest girl who was glowering down at her. She looked around the same age as her.

How different could these girls be from the ones at boarding school?

"So you're the middle sister, then," said Rosalie to Vicky.

"Vicky's the troublemaker, Ma says," added Lauren, gaining a shove from her sister. "She thinks she's in charge."

"I'm in charge of all of you girls now," quipped Diane.

"Don't mind her," said Vicky, putting an arm around Rosalie and walking her toward the door. "She's a pettish old crow."

"She'll mind me if she has half a brain," said Diane, pushing her way in front of them.

Rosalie watched her go. *What a wet blanket.* She turned to Vicky. "Is she always like that?"

"Afraid so," said Vicky. "Don't let her bother you. She'll come around eventually. How old are you anyway? I'll be sixteen in May—seventeen by the Chinese calendar, of course."

Rosalie hadn't forgotten about East Asian age reckoning. They always included their time in the womb as the first year of life. "I turn eighteen in March."

"*Jiejie!*" cried both Vicky and Laura at once, giggling again. Rosalie couldn't help but smile at the girls' enthusiasm at having another "big sister."

They ushered Rosalie into Lee House, stepping through the grand doorway, into the foyer, where intricately detailed tiles decorated the room's floor. The white walls accessorized with black teakwood window shutters and molding extended ten or twelve feet high, draped with hand-painted tapestries laden with words and characters Rosalie couldn't decode by memory.

"Wow, this room must cater some great dinner parties," she breathed, trailing her finger across a large family portrait.

"This is just the foyer," said Vicky. "Parties are usually held in there, when they're not outside." She pointed to a room to the left. Rosalie peered in, seeing that the ceiling-height doors were cracked open enough to display a vast room with marble floors and several small dining tables spread throughout.

"We can show you more of the house later. You should go up to your room now. You don't want Advika unpacking everything without you there. You'll be searching for your things all night."

"I get my own room?"

"Yes, Ah Mah is giving you the room next to hers, you lucky duck. It used to be her maid's, before Geetika got married, so it's a bit small. But at least you have it to yourself. You're lucky to have come alone!"

Rosalie winced at the words.

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Vicky, her brows knitted. "I can be overly garrulous sometimes. Of course, you've had no say in what's happened to your father. That's not good luck at all."

Rosalie brushed it off. She was going to have to learn to be made of tougher stuff if she was going to survive alongside Diane anyways.

She spent most of the afternoon in her room, a small but tidy space with an ornate wooden bed in the middle that was draped with embroidered sheets; Florence had undoubtedly moved the bed into this room for Rosalie; it was far too grand for a servant's cot. After reassigning the places for all the things dear Advika had unpacked for her, Rosalie gazed around, taking in her new accommodations. There was a desk by the only window in the room, a modest washstand, wardrobe, and a narrow door that led into what was presumably Florence's room. Rosalie noticed beside her bed was a basket of books.

"*The Age of Innocence, The Inimitable Jeeves, Gentlemen Prefer Blondes…*" read Rosalie, a sly smile escaping her lips. These were pretty modern titles—books Uncle Lester certainly would not have allowed any of his Dankworth girls to read.

Voices outside her door caught her attention and she ventured over to peek out. Auntie May and Irene walked by, carrying baskets of small fabric bolts under their arms.

"She's lovely, don't you think?" said Irene. "She's as lovely as her mother was."

"Oh, don't you dare bring up Martha at dinner tonight," chided May. "You know how George gets when we talk about her. And especially now with Sam missing, he's on edge more now than ever."

"Your husband will have a stroke if he doesn't relax once in a while!"

The women laughed. "But seriously, don't bring up Martha."

"Oh, I won't. Don't worry. Don't forget I was there when the great scandal happened. I may have been young, but I witnessed it unravel."

"That's right, you did. I'd forgotten that. How terrible for you and George to start off your marriage like that."

"I know…"

The voices trailed off as the women disappeared further away. Rosalie shut the door behind her, processing what she just heard.

"A great scandal?"

What scandal was so great that to this day it was still affecting her Uncle George? Her uncles' displeasure in meeting her had been obvious, though but now it seemed confirmed. Rosalie sat back down on the bed, wondering if perhaps Florence could shed light on this later.

Chapter 8
Malacca
1920

Sam paced in the walkway outside a row of a busy shop lots. It was a hectic morning on one of the busiest streets in Malacca: customers haggled loudly with shopkeepers over the price of baskets, fish, eggs, while bells on bicycles dinged and car horns honked all around Sam. Passersby ignored him as they passed under the walkway, only one of them shaking his head when he almost bumped into him.

"Sorry, Uncle!" Sam cried to the stranger, who was already two shops down in his haste.

You need to get ahold of yourself. Pull yourself together.

After all, this wasn't the Queen of Sheba he was trying to impress; this was Martha Lee. But still, it had been three years since he laid eyes on her at that banquet, and she might've changed quite a bit since then. Three years had certainly changed him. A Great War had swept across the globe, though Sam had scarcely felt it, having thrown himself into his studies at the Raffles Institution in Singapore. After three years, he was taller, more educated, and had gotten a taste of the world in that time. But despite these changes, some things still remained the same. Like his fear of Father, and his feelings for Martha. Above all, his feelings.

In all that time, he had run both hot and cold: half the time, he hoped Father would drop the notion of binding him to Martha eternally; yet the other half of the time, Sam desperately hoped that Martha hadn't forgotten him or found someone else. All that time suffering hadn't done him a lick of good, it turned out, since Father hadn't changed at all.

But this could be a good thing, Sam reminded himself. And that's why he agreed to see her, why he learned through peers that Martha was still unmarried and now helped her mother at her seamstress shops making kebayas. He still stood a chance with her. He just needed to stick to

his plan today: enter, head straight to Martha, pretend to be surprised that she worked there, and then proceed to order five buttons under the guise of running an errand for his sister.

With a deep breath, Sam entered the shop, a colorful, messy establishment buzzing with business. Overwhelmed, he stood idly at the front for several moments, hidden behind tall bolts of gawdy-colored fabric he hoped were only meant to be used for curtains. He observed the people in the shop, deducing that three of them were customers simply by what they were doing; one was standing on a small footstool, being measured by a short woman with a measuring tape, while the other two were loudly bartering down the cost of some beaded shoes. Sam craned his neck to see one more woman standing behind the small counter in the back corner of the shop. Her head hung down low as if she were reading something.

Martha. He headed straight for her, glad that everyone was too preoccupied to even notice that he—a man, and a Wang, no less—had entered the seamstress's. Sam arrived at the counter, seeing that Martha was distracted reading a letter. He cleared his throat.

The girl's head flew up, her face radiating. "Samuel! What are you doing here?"

He was so relieved to see that she was pleased, not annoyed, to see him that he almost forgot his line.

"Martha! I didn't know you worked here."

She raised a brow. "You didn't?"

His face heated up as he cleared his throat again. "Well, I actually came here on an errand."

"An errand—at the seamstress's? Shouldn't that be a job for one of your sisters or maids?" She put her letter down and began folding it.

"Well, I—I wanted to get out of the house."

Martha sat back with a little smile he couldn't decipher. "Samuel Wang. It seems that you always appear when things in my life are uncertain."

"I do?"

"Mmhmm." She stuffed the letter into her pocket. "But never mind that," she said, looking over at her mother who was watching them from across the shop. "How can I help you today on this errand?" She got up and came around the counter holding a long wooden pole with a hook at the end of it—a tool he could only guess was for pulling down levels of fabric. He did his best to keep his eyes on hers, even though the turquoise kebaya she had on screamed out for his attention. He scrambled to remember his fake reason for coming.

"I need buttons," he blurted. "Five buttons."

She lingered, as if waiting for more information.

"What?" he asked, wincing. "Am I a complete dunce for coming here? Do they not sell buttons at fabric stores?"

"No, no, silly," said Martha, laughing. "I was waiting for you to tell me what *kind* of buttons you need."

"What kind?"

"I'm starting to think that tutor of yours didn't get too far with you, Sam."

There was that nerve again! Sam gaped at her, shocked that such an insult could come from such as pretty mouth. He stood there, taking in the details of her face hed' never noticed before: her countenance was angelic, with milk skin and eyes that perpetually sparkled. But her smile was devilish, playful. She was toying with him.

"You're going to have to help me out," he finally said, "what kind of buttons do you have?"

"Follow me." Martha traipsed over to a large teakwood cabinet that stood over by one wall of the shop. She yanked out the top drawer so that she could hold it in her arms like a tray, setting it down before them. Sam leaned over to examine the massive assortment of buttons, overwhelmed. Maybe he should've gone with fabric chalk.

"We've got beaded buttons, gemmed buttons, crocheted buttons, wooden buttons, and even my favorite—pearl buttons," she recited, waving her hand over the collection as if it were the hundredth time she was doing it that day. "What kind of project is your sister working on anyways?"

"A dress for a friend," he lied. "It's nothing special. I'll just take five of those wooden ones."

"No problem," she said, counting them out in her hand. Sam observed her carefully manicured hands as she flipped the engraved buttons both ways to make sure they weren't defective.

"So, Martha, what have you been up to since that party?"

She flashed him a wicked smile. "Like I said, you seem to show up in my life when things are uncertain for me."

"What do you mean?"

She dropped the buttons in a small sachet before handing it to him, pausing to check if her mother was still looking at him. She wasn't. "Florence Lee doesn't appreciate it when I loiter," she informed him.

Sam creased his forehead. "You call your mother by her first name?"

"Not always. Why, does that seem too disrespectful? I don't mean anything by it. I only say it when we're joking, and she usually laughs when she hears it. My mother and I have a special relationship."

Sam had to admit the practice was quaint, not that he'd ever dare to try it with his own mother. "So she's not the cause of your uncertainty, then?"

"Only partly."

Sam followed her back to the counter, where she scribbled down a receipt for him. He fished in his pockets for some coins to pay her with.

"You're an unusual girl, Martha." He dropped the coins into her hand.

She leaned over the counter, her eyes lighting up. "You want to know me, don't you, Sam?"

Sam squinted. Was she really ready to play this game with him? Because if she was going to flirt, he was going to, too. Forget that the plan today had just been to rekindle their friendship and ask to see her again; he was up for the challenge.

"I think I do," he said, stepping closer. "You intrigue me."

She sat up, arms crossed. "And your father's business has nothing to do with this little 'errand' of yours, right?"

Again with that brazenness. "Maybe it does. Does that change things?"

"You'd be the fifth one this week is all," she said, counting the coins out of the money box. "The fifth in a long line of suitors this year that I've turned down."

The fifth man to pursue her this week? Sam felt his back getting sweaty.

"You're playing with me, aren't you?

She laughed. “I am, but in truth, you’d be the second man this week to pursue me at the word of his father. And *he* was a rich traveling businessman with a mansion in the Cameron Highlands, so you’d better be in top form today. I’m feeling hard to impress.”

“Well, was the other guy at least as suave as I? As *debonaire*?”

She raised a brow. “You speak French?”

“Unfortunately, no. But I listened to two French men having a discussion last week at the Pagoda. It inspired me to pick up a few words here and there.”

“The Pagoda? You go to that restaurant for foreigners down by the quay?”

“It isn’t only for foreigners.”

“Are we talking about the same place then?”

“There’s only one Pagoda, but yes, foreigners frequent it because it’s so close to the water. Many of the sea merchants like to stay close to their boats. The Pagoda is more than a restaurant, though. We conduct business meetings there—it’s become a social hall over the last couple of years since they’ve expanded.” Sam finished, realizing how important he sounded, even to himself. He wondered if Martha would think he was bragging, but she almost looked impressed.

“I’d love to go to places like the Pagoda sometime,” she said with a jealous frown.

Now’s my chance. “Well, you know that it’s a respectable place, right? Women frequent it quite often with their husbands or dates. Would you like to go with me, say, next week?”

Hope shined in the girl’s eyes for a moment before fading away. “I can’t next week, actually. I’ll be going out of town.”

“Out of town?”

“Yes, to visit my cousin in Penang.”

"Oh, how lovely," said Sam, feeling a bit deflated. "I've been there several times. Penang is great. Well, maybe in a couple weeks, then, when you come back?"

"Well, I won't be back for a while actually," she answered, her excitement growing again. She scoured the shop again before pulling out the letter. "See this? This is my ticket out of here."

"I don't understand—you're running away?"

"Not exactly. But I've finally managed to convince by parents to let me visit my cousin for two weeks. What they don't know is that I plan to stay much longer than that! I'll feign illness or an injury or something that will prevent me from traveling back."

Suddenly Sam didn't remember Penang being wonderful at all. He pictured the busy Penang wharf he had visited before, where men—foreigners and locals alike—openly spoke of brothels and told stories of vicious pirates who frequented the port, often wreaking havoc. Penang wasn't safe for a girl to be alone—especially not Martha or her hairbrained cousin. "Martha, what exactly do you plan on doing while you're there? Why do you need to stay longer than two weeks?"

"Well, look here," she said, showing him the letter. "My cousin just wrote me to tell me about this hotel, the Eastern & Oriental. She is British, you see, from my father's side. And she dines at this hotel all the time. She's going to take me there. I'm going to wear European dresses and drink Port and dance with men I've never met!"

Hotels, wine, and men? She's delusional!

"Martha, you can't be serious!" He stepped back, hands on his hips.

She folded up the letter again. "I most certainly *am* serious, Samuel Wang! I thought you'd understand, coming from where you do. You know what an imposing family can be like."

“Martha, Penang can be dangerous without an escort. I don’t even go out alone when I’m there.”

“You won’t change my mind, Sam. I wouldn’t have told you if I knew you’d feel this way.”

“Well, of course I’ll worry.”

“But, you won’t tell my parents, will you? They think I’ll be sitting on Gloria’s balcony sipping barley water all week.”

Sam turned away, his face heated. “No, I won’t tell.” How could he do that to her? She’d be in enormous trouble, and he wasn’t sure how Matthew handled insubordination. But if he were anything like Mr. Wang, it wasn’t worth it. He would just have to pray that Gloria wouldn’t be as reckless as she sounded with Martha’s life. He looked over at her, his gentle concern plastered on her innocent face.

“You’re a nice boy, Sam,” said Martha, leaning over to touch his sleeve, “but surely you can see that you and I would never have worked. You’re rooted here. And I don’t want roots. I want wings.”

Chapter 9
Lee House
1940

A knock at the door broke Rosalie out of *The Inimitable Jeeves.* Before she could put the book down, Florence pushed her way in with Advika trailing behind, carrying a wooden tray of food. Exotic smells wafted into the room with them, and Rosalie jumped up out of the bed she had been lying on for most of the day. She eyed Advika's tray of blue willow bowls suspiciously, wondering what foreign dish lay beneath their bamboo lids.

"Let's dine in my room," announced Florence, gliding over to the door across from her bed.

"Your room?"

Florence looked at the girl as if she were deaf. "Yes, my room."

Rosalie blinked. "Well, I just assumed that there would be some sort of family dinner routine downstairs."

"Ah! Yes, normally, that would be the case," said Florence, pulling a key out of her pocket to unlock the door. "But you have come to us on an unusual day. The family has been invited to an important dinner downtown, and all except me are attending."

Rosalie trailed behind Florence into her bedroom, which was colossal by any standard, a sprawling space embellished with a cultural mesh of décor. Ceiling high tapestries painted with colorful Chinese characters and beautiful landscapes lined the walls, along with portraits of people of all kinds of ethnicities. Built-in mahogany shelves filled with books lined an entire wall of the room. Rosalie felt like she was walking into a dream.

"You've many books," said Rosalie, taking a seat at the table in her room. Translucent white puffs rose as Advika uncovered their personal bowls of rice. Rosalie fingered the rim of the fine china, sure she had never eaten out of anything quite as exquisite.

"I've always been an avid reader," said Florence, "even before I married Simon. My family had many close ties to affluent European families—all highly educated, naturally—so I grew up with quite a modern education. Did you find those books I left you?"

"I did, but I must admit I was a bit surprised."

"Why?" asked the older woman, picking up her chopsticks. "There's nothing wrong with doing a bit of cultural reading." Florence's eyes twinkled, and Rosalie realized her grandmother was being cheeky. "But perhaps it's best not to tell your cousins about those books. Their mothers might not approve."

Rosalie could hardly believe that Florence approved of them.

"Now, let's eat. *Kuài dian! Chi!"* she ordered, dishing questionable-looking vegetables into her granddaughter's bowl.

Rosalie managed a courtesy smile as she studied what had to be green capsicums smothered in a red chili sauce. She picked up her chopsticks, thankful Sam had at least imposed upon her to learn the art of using them. She expertly picked up a pepper, realizing that this was unlike any pepper she'd seen before. It was fuzzy, almost, and oozed a seedy goo. Rosalie couldn't imagine what it tasted like.

"Steamed okra," Florence explained, dipping hers back into the sauce before biting into it. "We serve it with *sambal belacan*, this chili shrimp paste. It's your auntie's specialty. She made it just for you, so be sure to eat lots."

Afraid to offend her grandmother, Rosalie simply smiled before discreetly banishing the okra to far side of her rice bowl. She glanced up at the other dish—some sort of meat cooked in a thick, soupy gravy. She had to admit that this one smelled lovely. Without prompt. Florence began dishing the meat into Rosalie's bowl, too.

"I'm glad we have this moment alone since this your first day here," she said, expertly ladling out the gravy. "It's luck that the family was invited to that dinner today, of all days."

"Why aren't you at that dinner?"

"Well, the dinner is for an event held by people I no longer have attachment to," said Florence, though Rosalie suspected there was more behind that answer. "But I wanted to spend this first night with you, anyway. I know our food and culture must seem somewhat strange to you, having grown up on the water. But now that you're here, I can show you things that can help prepare you for life. Things Martha would have shown you."

Rosalie stopped mid-bite, wondering what the woman meant.

"It would be wise to begin thinking of your future."

She means, "if Sam never comes back." Rosalie choked down the rice, reaching for her cup of hot tea. Sipping gently, the brew bitter on her tongue, she tried to squelch the brimming emotion.

"Come now, Rosalie, we must be realistic," said Florence tenderly, putting her chopsticks down.

"I'm not ready to put him in a coffin yet," said Rosalie, tears filling her eyes.

"I know you aren't, and I'm not ready for that either. Why do you think I've sent word out to every port in Malacca? I haven't lost hope."

"Every port?"

"Of course. My people know to come to me first if they hear any word about Sam or his crew. They are very loyal. They're actively looking for him."

Rosalie wanted to feel comforted but somehow wasn't.

"But don't you think Sam or Helena would've wanted to start preparing for your future at this point, even if they were here?"

"I don't know what Sam wants for me."

"He never told you?"

"We never talked about my future, and he sent me away to England before I ever began thinking about it." She felt her grandmother's gaze on her face.

"Well," said Florence, picking up the chopsticks once again, "I can see you like this dish. It's called *babi assam*. It's tamarind pork. It used to be Matthew's favorite. It can be made with other meats as well. We made it once with some fish Matthew caught. Did you know he was a fisherman?"

Rosalie looked around the lavish bedroom skeptically.

"His company owns a major portion of the fishing boats along the Straits. When he died, he left the company to George, and now William helps him. Their wives help with some of the secretarial work."

The mention of her aunts reminded Rosalie of the conversation she'd overheard in the hallway earlier. "Can I ask you something?"

"Mmm?"

"I overheard my aunties talking about my father and mother today. They mentioned some sort of scandal that involved my parents."

Florence's expression grew dark.

"Do you know what happened?"

Her grandmother waved her chopsticks in the air. "Your aunties can be such gossips, you know, always making mountains out of molehills."

"So there wasn't a scandal?"

Florence reached for another okra. "Martha was my most dramatic child, that is for certain. Your aunties could have been referring to any of a number of different incidents that she was involved in."

She doesn't want to tell me.

"There will be a *sepak* game tomorrow at the beach," said Florence, after a while. "Have you played before?"

"I've never played but I know it."

"Well, Vicky especially enjoys these games, probably because of the boys that play. The girls will be going."

Rosalie was surprised the girls were even allowed to attend the games.

"They're chaperoned games," Florence explained, seeing the girl's expression. "Plus, we hold them on our private beach. You should go with the girls tomorrow. Maybe you can meet some of the young people there."

Young people.

Her grandmother didn't have to explain what that meant. Rosalie looked down at her bowl of food, realizing how much it represented herself: delicate, sidelined, dejected. *Things don't have to stay this way.* Without another word, she picked up the exiled okra and stuffed it into her mouth before her mind could protest. If she was going to find Sam, she would need to have these people on her side.

Rosalie was slithering into bed when she heard her door creak open.

"Jie?" Vicky's head popped in.

I'm going to have to get used to people doing that. She pulled up her blanket to hide her silk night gown, a gift she had bought herself in England last summer.

"Come in."

Vicky closed the door, tiptoeing over to her bed. Rosalie breathed a sigh of relief to see Vicky also draped in luxurious blue lounging pajamas, as if she had just stepped off the cover of a Vogue magazine.

Who are these people?

"I just wanted to come in and tell you about the game tomorrow," said Vicky, sitting down on the edge of Rosalie's bed.

"You mean the *sepak* game?"

"Ah Mah told you then. I hope you'll come with us. I'll introduce you to everyone. It's important that you don't go alone, but with us—there will be men there."

Rosalie raised her brows, and Vicky threw her a devious look. "There's one boy in particular. His name is Geng Su, but he goes by his Christian name, Silas."

Her interest piqued, Rosalie leaned forward. "Your beau?"

Vicky broke down her façade with a giggle. "No, but I like him a lot. I'm hoping Father will officially introduce us soon. I've been dropping him hints."

"So, what, you want to marry him?" Rosalie wrapped her arms around herself. The average age for marriage in Malaya was around sixteen or seventeen, so there had to be a reason why both Vicky and Diane were still single.

Vicky knitted her brows. "Well, better him than one of those Teng boys! Never mind, I'll show you who they are tomorrow, too. But I really can't wait for you to see Silas. He's so handsome, Jie!"

"All right, I guess I'll go."

"Don't look so solemn about it," said Vicky, patting her on the arm. "You're almost eighteen. Don't you want to meet men? Aren't you looking forward to marriage?"

Rosalie peered sightlessly at the wall. She didn't know if she did or not. The last boy she had liked didn't work out so well.

"You have a beau already, don't you? That's why you're sad about being here, isn't it? Who was he? Did you meet him in England?"

"No, I have no beau. I mean, there *was* someone—"

"I knew it! Tell me about him at once! Was he English? Scottish? French?"

Rosalie let out an exasperated sigh. She hadn't planned on telling anyone here about Thomas.

"Well, he was quite handsome, if you must know, but he didn't end up being worth his salt. I met him at school, actually, and he's the reason I ended up here."

Vicky's eyes grew big. "What happened?"

Rosalie leaned back against the headboard, observing her cousin's earnest face. She was young, bored, and she wanted a good story.

What else have we to do?

"I was angry when Sam sent me to England, and I did as much as I dared to get kicked out. The principal was an infuriatingly tolerant man, unfortunately, so it didn't happen until I met him. Thomas."

"What did you do?"

Rosalie's eyes glistened as she looked away. "Well, we sneaked out one night, and he got hurt. It was terrible."

Vicky touched her arm. "Why were you so angry? I thought boarding school was supposed to be fun. I wished I could've gone."

"He sent me away."

"Who—your father? Why would he do that?"

She tried to squelch the brimming memories that had plagued her for two years. She couldn't relive them here and now.

"Rosalie?"

"I was selfish, you see," she explained, "and I did something that angered him. That's why he sent me away." Rosalie peered at her bed, thinking that the bed suddenly seemed very inviting. She pulled back the covers to crawl in again.

"How dreadful for you," said Vicky, her eyes also wet. She helped adjust Rosalie's blanket over her. "That was terrible of him, Jie."

Rosalie closed her eyes, her anger having turned to remorse. "It was my fault, Vicky. I shouldn't have interfered in the first place."

Chapter 10
Lee House
1920

"You're a fool, a proper fool, Samuel Wang."

He continued to curse himself as he pedaled down the dirt road through the dewy jungle. He glanced down at his watch: it was early, but he couldn't have waited any longer. Christmas season had come and gone, and he had run out of reasons to stay away. He had to see her again.

"Actually, *she's* the fool," he surmised, reaching the end of the path. There it stood, out of the woods—Lee House, in all its immutable glory.

He had left their seamstress shop two weeks ago, determined that he would stop this pursuit for Martha and never go back. After all, if she was determined to run off and humiliate her family, then he really couldn't stop her. He couldn't become permanently involved with someone like that, and Father wouldn't want that either if he knew what was going on.

"But how can I let her do that to herself?"

This was the question that had plagued him for weeks. Sam hopped off the bicycle, walking it over to the compound's wall. He kicked the bicycle's kickstand, muttering. "Am I to just let her walk straight into trouble and not do anything about it?"

He stood at the gate, dolefully taking in the massive property. He had no interest in maintaining a house this large, and families like the Lees always wanted them to live together.

"But then again, Martha isn't interested in staying here. She said that herself. She wants to leave, and I can take her away. I can make this work for everyone."

Even Father could get what he wanted. Sam ran his hand through his hair.

Not that he cares about what I want. He only cares about his image.

Yet Sam still yearned for Father's favor. After all, that is why he had kept Martha's plans a secret.

Thank heavens Father is away right now. I'll stop Martha from going to Penang, tell her of my intentions, and then tell Father.

That way, he wouldn't have to tell him any bad news. With a deep breath, Sam approached the gate of the house, pulling on the large brass bell that hung down from it. He stood there, pacing back and forth for several moments until a young man came out of the front door. He couldn't have been older than sixteen.

"Good morning," greeted Sam to the boy. "I'm—"

"—Samuel Wang. Yes, I know who you are." He was already unlatching the gate and letting him in. "Father saw you from his window. He said to let you in. He's waiting in his study for you."

Samuel swallowed. How was it that the great Mr. Matthew Lee knew who he was? He followed the boy, whose age showed in his lanky form and inflamed cheeks, hoping that he would run into Martha before they reached the study.

"I'm George, by the way," said the boy, grinning. He reached over to shake his hand.

"Nice to meet you," said Sam, thinking that on any other day he might've liked to chat with him. They reached the study, and George bowed out, closing the door behind him.

"Samuel Wang!" boomed Matthew, standing up from his upholstered desk chair. He put his hand out to Sam. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Sam shook his hand, thinking that Matthew's smile seemed tired. "I'm sorry to come over unannounced like this—"

"Nonsense, my boy," said Matthew, pouring a glass of water for him. "That is the true Malayan way, is it not?"

Sam accepted the glass, taking a deep, long drink. It certainly was the Malayan way, though not in their circles, where traditions and formalities were expected to be upheld.

"How's your father, Samuel?"

"He's well, Mr. Lee. He's away on business right now, actually."

"Ah, yes, that's right. I forgot he was headed to Singapore this week. I tried to tell him to send someone else, but your father is a stubborn man."

Sam smiled uneasily as Matthew gestured for him to sit.

"I think I know why you're here, Samuel," Matthew began, "but she's not here. I'm afraid she's just left for Penang. She left last week."

Sam placed the glass down on the table before him, closing his eyes. *I'm too late.* "I was afraid of that, sir."

"There was no talking her out of it," said Matthew, his eyes fixed on the glass.

"Well, do you know when she'll be back?"

Matthew folded his hands in his lap. "I can't say that I do."

"But she's just gone to Penang for a visit, hasn't she? She'll have to eventually return, right?"

The older man sighed as he leaned forward in his seat. "Sam, I don't know how well you knew my daughter, but she might've mentioned to you that I am not her real father."

"Yes, I knew."

"Regretfully, our relationship has not been as smooth as I had hoped it would be over the last few years. And I've learned that the tighter I hold onto people, the more they want to be set

free. Such was the case with Martha. She needs to figure her own way in the world. She won't have it any other way."

"So you let her go?" Sam could hardly believe it.

Matthew sat back in his chair with a grieved expression. "She would have gone either way, my boy. I felt it was best to give her freedom while she still thought it was mine to give."

"But sir, Penang is—"

Matthew held up his hands. "I know, I know. But it is done. There was nothing I could do short of stringing her up and locking her in her room. She's a mind of her own and she was determined to harm herself if I didn't let her go."

"What do you mean—"

"You're a good man, Samuel, and you would have been wonderful for my daughter. I'm even certain she would've liked you if she had allowed herself to. You're educated, well-traveled, and come from a good name. But I'm afraid that I don't see it happening. As far as I can see, she won't be returning to Malacca anytime soon, if she does at all."

Sam clasped his hands together. "I came here hoping I could talk some sense into her today, sir. I'm sorry I didn't come sooner. I was a coward."

Matthew pressed his lips together. "That's noble of you to say, but I don't think it would've done anything, my boy." His eyes narrowed. "Samuel, I hope your father won't be too disappointed that things didn't work out between you and Martha."

Sam's eyes darted up to his, instantly revealing that the great Matthew Lee was aware. Matthew knew all about Father's proclivity for violence. Bowing his head, Sam's heart grew distressed that his troubles were exposed to the world, even to someone as distinguished as Matthew Lee. But even more troublesome was that Sam hadn't denied it. What would Father do

if he knew about this conversation? And what would he do when he learned about Martha's absence? Sam knew it would be mere days before he'd find out.

Chapter 11
Lee House
1940

Rosalie awoke the next morning to the smell of fresh pork buns steaming up from the kitchen below her. Her stomach growled. Pork buns were Sam's favorite—he always ordered a big batch for the entire crew whenever they ported in Penang, reminding them that they never tasted as good as the ones from Malacca, the ones he had eaten growing up. Rosalie rolled onto her side, wiping away a tear that had run down her cheek.

Oh, Sam. How could you send me away like that? Without so much as an explanation or proper goodbye?

And now, there was a chance she'd never see him again, a chance they'd never reconcile in this lifetime.

Though whose fault it is, I do not know. I'm sure you'd say it was mine.

She rolled over onto her tear-soaked pillow just as footsteps neared her door.

"The sepak game," she recalled, sitting up.

Advika knocked quietly before entering with an armful of Rosalie's freshly-pressed outfits.

"Oh, wow, you already got into my wardrobe…"

The maid began hanging the dresses up. Rosalie scrambled out of bed, wrapping the sheet around her body to hide the gown again.

"Advika, you know I can do this myself—"

She stopped talking when the girl held up the outfit she had chosen for Rosalie.

"Oh, yes, what a fine job you did pressing this," she said, eyeing the outfit, "but I can't wear that today. This is my Dankworth uniform, you see—"

Advika had placed the hanger under her arm as she reached out to undrape the sheet from Rosalie, who flinched back, much to the maid's surprise.

"Oh dear, you don't understand me, do you?"

Advika stared at her blankly, still holding the uniform.

"Umm, let's see if I can remember the right words," Rosalie said, closing her eyes. "*Tiduk sesuai*," she proclaimed, using the Malay words for "unsuitable."

Nothing.

Advika stood by the bed, continuing to look confused. She dangled the school uniform before Rosalie again, gesturing for her to put it on. Rosalie shook her head, pointing to the little wardrobe that held her other dresses.

"That is my Dankworth uniform, Advika," she tried again, trying not to sound too exasperated. "It isn't suitable."

The maid still stood there, perplexed. Rosalie sighed, deciding she needed to take control of the situation. She opened the door of the wardrobe, pulling out a simple white blouse and plaid skirt, which Advika immediately took hold of to help her dress. Rosalie watched as the maid swiftly, expertly unbuttoned the blouse off its hanger.

She's practiced.

Advika gestured for Rosalie to drop the blanket, which she finally did. Rosalie watched as the maid worked silently around her. Once she was dressed, Advika began heading out the door with Rosalie's silk nightgown in hand. Rosalie clambered after her down the hall.

"Advika, that nightgown is quite delicate… it must be washed and dried carefully…" she tried, knowing it was no use. She watched the maid descend the steps as Florence walked up, looking pleased to see Rosalie.

"Was that pink silk I saw Advika walking out of your room with?"

Rosalie sighed. "Yes. A nightgown I made a year ago."

Florence cocked her head to the side. "You sew?"

"I do," said Rosalie, distracted. "Do you think she knows how to wash silk properly?"

Florence laughed. "Don't you remember who you're talking to?—what business I run?"

Relief flooded Rosalie.

"I was just coming up to get you for breakfast. Come along now."

Rosalie trailed behind her. "Isn't it too late?"

"Perhaps, but your cousins have just gone down anyway. They've been waking up later and later these days, I've noticed. Peculiar, but I try to never question one's beauty sleep."

Rosalie followed her downstairs, realizing she hadn't been downstairs since her arrival the day before. Taking in the unfamiliar room again, she noticed more details: the engraved molding around the arched doorway; the twelve or even fifteen-foot ceilings; the silver and black flecks of glitter in the grout between the marble slabs of flooring. Rosalie could scarcely believe that this had been her mother's home.

"Go join your cousins," said Florence, nudging her. Rosalie entered the dining hall, seeing her three cousins seated at the table. Vicky was in the middle of telling Lauren a story while Diane was lost in her newspaper.

"Must you spit when you talk?" she chided Vicky, wiping her cheek. "Now I've got pork all over my face."

"Don't be so dramatic. I'm already done with my bun. Any pork on your face is of your own doing."

"Don't be so proud of your piggish eating habits, sister. Sometimes you swallow your food so quickly I can hardly believe it."

Vicky ignored her, finally spotting Rosalie in the doorway. "Jie! Come sit!"

Rosalie sauntered over, noticing one glossy, white pork bun steaming in the middle of her plate. A red symbol branded the top of the bun.

"For me?"

"Yes!" said Vicky. "It's a Huang bun. They're famous in Malacca."

Sam's favorite.

"I hope you slept well," said Lauren.

"I did," she lied, hoping her eye bags weren't too prominent. She smiled at the girl, who was watching her, star-gazed, shifting her eyes over to Diane, who pretended not to notice her at all.

"I've got to head out in a little bit," announced Vicky. "I promised Ah Mah that I would help at her shop today. I have a car out waiting for me."

"Oh, don't we have that sepak game to go to today?"

"It's not till the late afternoon, when it's not so hot," said Vicky. "We'll be working till then."

"You work at the shop?"

"We all do," said Lauren cheerily.

"Ah Mah mentioned that she wants you to go to the shop, too," said Vicky. "She wants you fitted for some new clothing."

"*Appropriate* clothing," corrected Diane. Her sisters glared at her. Rosalie looked down at her blouse, wondering what was wrong with it. She had chosen the most conservative pairing she had. Besides the school uniform, of course.

"She just wants to help you blend in is all," explained Vicky, scowling at her sister. "Anyhow, you'll enjoy seeing the shop."

Rosalie had to admit it sounded fun, although she had planned to do some sleuthing today.

"Is there a telephone in the house?"

"Sorry, no," said Vicky. "I wish we had one, though."

I should have known.

"The fastest way to communicate is by telegram. You can get one of the drivers to deliver messages for you, too. The post office is near Ah Mah's shop downtown."

Moments later, Vicky and Lauren left to get ready for work. Rosalie nibbled on her bun, deep in thought, as Diane folded up the newspaper she was reading. She stood, gesturing for a maid to take her plate.

"Stay away from Vicky," she suddenly said, turning to Rosalie. "She's impressionable."

Rosalie watched Diane parade out of the room before she could say anything back. Swallowing down the rest of her pork bun, she shook off Diane's derisive order, reminding herself that Diane was no different than the mean girls she had known back at England. And like those girls back at Dankworth, Rosalie wasn't about to let Diane get in the way of her ambitions this time, either.

Rosalie stood on the pedestal as her aunts measured her, studying her grandmother's shop. Large kerosene lamps perched on every wall highlighted the kebayas**,** cheongsams, and dozens of pairs of beaded shoes which decorated every part of the room that wasn't already stacked with bolts of fabrics.

"Let me take over my granddaughter's measurements." Florence entered the shop, waving at some customers who were picking out fabric. Auntie May winked at Rosalie before handing the measuring tape over. Florence put on her spectacles, stepping up to the pedestal and rolling out the tape.

"Well, I think we'll make you several kebayas and cheongsams and day dresses," she declared. "How does that sound?"

"Well, it sounds lovely—"

"You can call me *Ah Mah*, like your cousins do," informed Florence with a cordial smile, before getting back to business.

"Ah Mah, I have clothes, you know. You don't need to do this."

"Nonsense. Who doesn't love a new wardrobe? And what good is having a family in the kebaya business if they don't make you any kebayas?"

Auntie Irene came up with a narrow bolt of fabric, light pink in color. "Ma, was this what you were talking about earlier?" She held it up below Rosalie's face, testing it against her skin.

"Yes, that's perfect!" beamed Florence. "Don't you think so?"

"It's quite lovely," agreed Irene. "I think some dark pink roses along the hem of the blouse will look especially riveting."

"Yes, yes," said Florence, writing down some measurements in a yellowing notebook, the tape in her mouth. "Rosalie will look just like her cousins in something like that."

Rosalie glanced up at the girls, who were seated close by, watching. Vicky and Lauren gawked unashamedly up at her, offering occasional compliments about Rosalie's skin and hair, while Diane sat cross-legged, deep in her needlework.

"I actually do have one kebaya," said Rosalie. "Sam had it made for me in Penang two years ago."

"I know," said Florence, putting the pencil behind her ear. "Advika showed me your wardrobe this morning."

"I always thought it was a beautiful kebaya," said Rosalie, trying not to be outraged at having her privacy invaded, "but I suppose you can make much lovelier ones here."

"Mother's shop has been around for decades," interrupted Auntie May, bringing up another bolt of fabric. "That's what makes hers so special. These days, people think they can throw together a blouse and skirt, sew on a few beads, and call it kebaya, but the real art is in the details. The beading and stitches. The design. The fabric. These details take time to learn, time to make. Time that—" she paused, placing an arm around Florence's shoulders, "—my mother-in-law has invested in her craft. She is one of the most celebrated kebaya makers in the Straits. You can't compare her with any old kebaya maker in the peninsula!"

"Oh, hush," said Florence, waving her away. "My daughter-in-law is kind. I only know what my own parents taught me."

Rosalie enjoyed listened to Florence and the aunties banter as they finished her measurements. After some time, she glanced over to the table where magazines lay in a disheveled stack. She craned her neck to see what they kind they were.

"I admit I rather love western fashion," said Florence, noticing Rosalie's interest. "With British and American magazines becoming more prevalent over here, I've noticed more and

more girls requesting western-style dresses. Those magazines are for inspiration. Have a gander if you like."

Curious, Rosalie leaned down and picked up the first magazine on the stack. It was from England. She peered at the model on the cover, a light-haired goddess clad in a chic black ensemble and veiled fascinator.

"Phew, look at her."

"Lovely, isn't she." Florence then looked down at her granddaughter, her eyes magnified behind the specs. "Did you know I have a distant relative in England who works in fashion? That's his dress. He designed it."

Rosalie raised her brows. "I suppose you do have family in England, from Simon's side."

"He's the grandson of Simon's brother," she explained. He actually visited us over a decade ago now, when he was still quite young. We lost touch over the years, but he wrote me some time ago when he patenting and sending designs to this new factory in Derby. After all these years, he still remembered my shop, and wrote to invite me to come visit him sometime in London."

"London?" Rosalie's interest was now piqued.

"Yes, have you been? I've only been once, decades ago…"

"I've been to London several times," said Rosalie hastily, stepping down from the pedestal. "Ah Mah," she began, trying out the name again, "would I be able to get in touch with this relative of yours?"

Florence shrugged as she took off her spectacles. "You want to write to Frederick? Sure, I don't see why not. I'll give you his address later."

Yes. Rosalie thanked her grandmother, sitting down to examine the magazine more carefully. *What luck that she knows someone well-connected in London. Surely this man can help me find Helena.* Because once she found Helena, she was sure she'd find Sam.

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