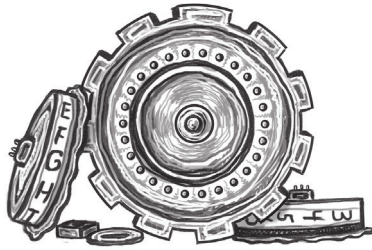


# I



England  
January, 1906

“I AM VERY SORRY TO INFORM YOU of the death...’ No, no. Not dramatic enough. ‘I am *immeasurably* sorry to inform you of the *tragic* death of His Grace, the sixteenth-and-three-quarters Duke of Hartleigh.”

“Twelfth, Daddy. You’re the twelfth duke.”

Clifford Kinsley, who, much to his dismay, was now apparently the *twelfth* Duke of Hartleigh, set down his pen and turned in his chair to face his seven-year-old daughter.

“How do you know that?”

Lola shrugged one shoulder, the movement setting her jet-black curls bouncing. “I counted the pictures.”

“Pictures?”

She pointed across the study to where a pile of ghastly, faded portraits leaned against the empty bookshelves. “Those pictures. They’re old dukes or something. There’s ten pictures there, plus the big statue outside. Eleven. Are you going to get a picture made, Daddy?”

Cliff grimaced. "God, no."

"Miss Wallace says you're not supposed to say 'God' all the time. She says I should say 'goodness' if I say anything."

"Who the hell is Miss Wallace?"

Lola shrugged again. "That lady who's here to watch me. I think she's a teacher, but they called her a word I don't know. It sounded like 'government' or something."

"Governess."

"That." She stuffed her hands in her pockets.

"Don't drop spiders on her."

Lola pulled her hands out and turned them palms up. "No spiders."

"Good." Cliff pushed his spectacles more firmly onto his nose. "I'm sure you're as frustrated with all this as I am, but we both should remember that the people who work here didn't ask for this any more than we did. We should be nice to them."

Her little head bobbed in agreement.

Cliff glanced at the door. It was closed, but who knew whether there were servants lurking outside. This place was crawling with people. At home it had always been just him and Lo. And that's how he liked it.

Since his arrival in England, he'd been surrounded at almost all times. A driver had met him at the train station and driven him to this massive house, apologizing for its small size and unsuitability. Only later had Cliff discovered this was a "dower house," intended as a residence for the old duke's widow. The still-larger house across the gardens was meant to be his home. Apparently it had been sold off due to some questionable point of law. He owned the land, but not the house. Cliff remained baffled by the entire thing.

Fortunately, the dower house included this cozy, if sparsely furnished study. And when he retreated here, no one intruded without knocking. It was the closest thing he had to a refuge at the moment.

He glanced again at the door and lowered his voice. "We

won't be here much longer. Soon the twelfth duke will be dead and you and I will start a new life in California."

Lola skipped over to him and climbed into his lap. "What's it like in California?"

"I don't know. I've never been there."

"I want to go home to Chicago. I miss the city. I miss the lake." She nuzzled against his chest, and Cliff pressed a kiss into her hair.

"Me too, baby. Me too. You'll like San Francisco. It's right on the ocean."

She straightened up, frowning at him. "I don't like the ocean. The boat made my tummy sick and it was *so* long."

"Maybe we'll take an airship this time."

Her eyes widened. "Ooh, like a sky-pirate ship?"

Cliff winced. Lord save him from pirate-loving little girls. "More like a naval ship. Very clean. Organized. I'll make sure to buy you a telescope and you can learn about air currents and steam engines."

"And how to sword fight?" She made a slashing motion with her arm, smacking him on the side of the head.

He grunted and lifted her off his lap. "Not around me. I don't want to die for real. Now go back to your toys. I need to finish brainstorming ways to kill the duke."

She slashed the air. "Swords!"

"We have to disappear, Lo. Something like drowning in the ocean or falling into a bog."

"Hmm." She plopped on the ground beside her dolls, and for a few minutes, Cliff thought that was the end of it.

He scribbled about half a page of mostly worthless notes. Honestly, he didn't have anything better than the bog. Set upon by thieves in London would spark a search for a body. For a duke they'd probably dredge the whole damned Thames. "Washed out to sea while fishing?" he muttered. He probably owned some sort of boat, and it was probably full of holes.

"Daddy? Can it be pirates?"

*For the love of God.*

"Babe, there really aren't that many pirates."

"The lady next door is a pirate."

"What?" Cliff knew nothing about the woman who lived in the former Hartleigh mansion, except that she was rich. He'd never even seen her. "Don't be ridiculous."

"It's true."

He shook his head. "Pirates don't live in giant ducal houses in the Middle of Nowhere, England."

Lola hopped up, clutching her favorite doll to her chest. "It's true, Daddy. I saw her. I was playing outside and she was practicing with her sword and slicing things up, and she saw me and did this." Lola put a single finger to her lips. "She was secret pirate practicing."

Cliff fought not to roll his eyes. "I don't think she's a pirate, Lo, but maybe we'll walk over tomorrow and pay her a visit." It couldn't hurt to get to know his neighbor a bit. People would take it as a sign he was growing accustomed to this whole duke thing. Put them at ease. Make them more likely to believe him truly dead when he vanished without a trace.

And with luck it would quash Lola's absurd pirate talk. After her constant buccaneer chatter throughout the agonizingly long ocean voyage, he really didn't think he could stand much more of it.

Lola bounced in place, clapping her hands. "Ooh, ooh! Can we really, Daddy? You'll see! She's a real pirate! I promise!"

He sighed and ruffled her hair. "If you say so, babe. Now let's get you to bed. It's getting late."

Cliff walked Lola upstairs to the bedroom she'd claimed as her own and helped her prepare for bed. Before she finished buttoning up her footed blanket sleeper, he popped open the metal plate in the center of her chest that protected the delicate workings of her biomechanical heart. Nestled among brass tubes and copper pipes, a small fuel tube filled with precious luxene glowed bright green.

"Fuel looks great," he said, then gently pressed the plate closed so it once again meshed snugly with her skin.

"Next time we refuel, can I do it all by myself?" Lola asked.

"You may, but only with supervision." He buttoned her up, tucked her into bed, and kissed her goodnight, wishing for the millionth time they didn't need to have these conversations.

Never would he forget his terror when the doctors had discovered the defect in Lola's heart. He'd consulted dozens of specialists before choosing the biomechanologist who had crafted her life-saving device.

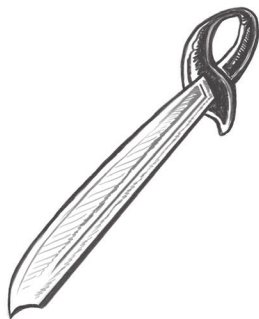
He trudged back down to the study. When he'd set out for England, he'd hoped the prestige of his new title might be of benefit to Lola. He'd thought perhaps it would give him access to a substantial, unadulterated supply of her rare and expensive fuel. Or give him a connection to top scientists, who might have better and safer alternatives to power her biomechanics.

Instead he had debts, a house full of people who thought him strange, and a neighbor his daughter believed was a pirate.

Cliff sank into his seat at the desk. He had no real work, no real purpose, just this unmitigated mess of an inheritance. He tapped his pen on the paper, then wrote, *Kidnapped by pirates and thrown overboard.*

The sooner Hartleigh died, the better.

## 2



SABINE GINGERLY LIFTED HER FOOT off the crushed object, pulling her skirt aside to see what she'd inadvertently stepped on.

*What did I ruin this time? A mummified bird? A taxidermied squirrel? The egg of an ancient creature?*

Whatever it was, it had crunched.

"Ah. Nur ein Heißluftballon." She bent and picked up the remains of the model, its balloon flattened and its wicker basket in pieces. She tossed it into the large metal waste bin she'd dragged here for just this purpose.

This room was the worst yet. Models, gadgets, and artifacts—some of which she couldn't even hope to identify—littered the floor. Every flat surface was strewn with objects, papers, and a thick layer of dust. No wonder everyone called the late Duke of Hartleigh "mad." She'd been here a month, and she'd been through less than a quarter of his bizarre and unorganized collection.

Sabine picked her way to the window seat, pushed aside a pair of tarnished candlesticks, and plopped down onto the

worn cushions. Outside, a few flakes of snow drifted from the sky. Pretty. Fortunately, from this view she could see neither the marble statue of the old duke in a toga and laurel wreath nor the pyramid-shaped mausoleum in which he had entombed himself behind the dower house.

A knock sounded on the door.

“Come in,” Sabine called, rising from her seat and again attempting to cross the room. She wondered what the carpet looked like beneath everything.

“Hey, Captain, there’s...” Hawkes paused and straightened his shoulders. “My lady, you have a visitor. Shall I bring him here?”

A part of her wanted to laugh at his stuffy, affected mannerisms. With his long, sandy hair whipping around his shoulders, and the wicked scar across his left cheek, he was as unbutlerish as a man could be, even in his fine suit, but he’d thrown himself into the role with such enthusiasm that she didn’t dare do anything that might discourage him.

“Here?” She stepped over a metal and brass contraption with no discernible function. “Only if he’s come to haul away trash.”

“Er, I think he’s the duke from next door. He left a card.”

Sabine hopped over a few more things and took the small rectangle from Hawke’s thick fingers. The sturdy, cream-colored paper stated its owner’s name and business in a clear, no-nonsense typeface.

Clifford J. Kinsley  
Kinsley Metals  
Scrap Collection & Recycling  
Chicago, Illinois

So this was the mysterious American duke. She’d been too busy working to pay a visit to her new neighbor, but she had seen his little girl playing outside.

“Scrap collection? Hmm. Perhaps he *will* haul away my trash. Show him into the, um... music room, please.”

Hawkes executed quite a nice bow for a man who had until two months ago been a pirate. “Certainly, my lady.”

Sabine made her way down the blessedly empty halls to the music room and took a seat at her favorite of the four pianos. Her fingers skimmed across the keys. Perhaps she would hire an instructor someday and learn to play. It seemed a pleasant sort of activity to take up in her retirement. And she had always had nimble fingers.

She’d left the door standing open, but Hawkes knocked anyway.

“His Grace, the Duke of Hartleigh,” the butler intoned, imparting the words with gravitas fit for a king. “And Miss, uh—”

“Lola Hartleigh,” the girl declared, bounding toward Sabine and thrusting out a hand. “I’m practicing my new name. H-E-A-R-T-L-E-Y.”

“Lo, it’s a title, not a name,” the duke said. “I don’t think that’s how it works.”

Sabine’s eyes lifted to study him as she shook Lola’s hand. Father and daughter shared the same black-as-night hair and the same prominent nose, but where her eyes were dark and her skin olive, he was pale. His light-colored eyes were partially obscured behind a pair of spectacles with oval-shaped lenses set in a bright red frame.

Eyeglasses as a fashion statement? Interesting. Sabine automatically adjusted her own plain spectacles.

“Also, it’s H-A-R-T. It means deer,” Hartleigh clarified. “And leigh is L-E-I-G-H for some ungodly reason.”

The girl’s brow furrowed. “Shouldn’t it be Hart-le-guh, then?”

“It’s one of those weird words, like ‘through.’”

“T-H-R-U. Through. Why is that weird?”

Hartleigh pulled out a cloth and wiped his spectacles. “Uh,



you know what, we'll have a spelling lesson another time. Let's meet our neighbor first." He gave Sabine a half-smile and a little shrug. "Sorry. She's at a curious age and I usually indulge her with explanations for just about everything." He extended a hand. "Clifford Kinsley, with an L-E-Y. Pleased to meet you."

"Sabine Diebin." His grip was firm, his hand warm against hers. "And for the curious..." She smiled at Lola. "Sabine has an E at the end, in the German way, not an A as you would spell it in English."

"Sa-been-ah," Lola pronounced carefully. "With an E."

The duke's dark brows crinkled slightly. "Isn't Diebin German for a lady thief?"

Sabine rocked backward in shock. "You speak German?"

He held his thumb and forefinger about an inch apart. "Ein bißchen."

Lola tugged urgently on her father's coat until he bent over to hear her whisper. He frowned and shook his head emphatically. He hoisted the girl up onto one of the other piano benches, then took a third bench for himself.

"So," he said. "You must be very fond of music."

"I am, but I'm afraid I don't play. These instruments came along with the house. The previous owner lived to be very old and gathered a massive collection of things during his lifetime. I'm still sorting through it all. Well, all but the few things that were moved to the dower house before the sale."

"The leftovers of the Mad Duke." He huffed a little laugh.

"Yes. I understand you run a scrap collection business? Perhaps I could employ you to haul everything away."

"I *was* in the recycling business." His mouth tightened into a hard line. "Now, unfortunately, I'm a goddamned duke, if you'll pardon my French."

Sabine tried not to laugh. She really did. But he was so delightfully, blunt-spokenly *American*.

"Has your new title destroyed your ability to pluck valuable bits from the rubbish?"

He adjusted his spectacles, assessing her with a steady gaze. His eyes were an icy blue, like the glacial caves in the Alps—quiet, still, and eerily beautiful.

“I don’t expect it has, no.”

“Since we are neighbors, maybe you would like to lend your expertise and help me straighten out this mess of a house? As payment, you may keep what you wish of the saleable items. After I have taken any that are of interest to me, of course.”

Hartleigh folded his arms across his chest. “Why, may I ask, did you purchase this house and all the items in it if you didn’t want them?”

“I do want them. Or, rather, I want some of them. There are items in this collection, purchased long ago, that are of great interest to me, if only I can find them in the mess.”

“So you’re a collector yourself, then.”

She chuckled. “More of a treasure hunter.”

“See, Daddy?” Lola grinned at her father. “I told you!”

“You told him I was a treasure hunter?” Sabine asked.

“No. I told him you were a pirate.”

“Oh, God.” Hartleigh put a hand to his temple. “I’m so sorry. Pirates are her new favorite thing. The trip across the ocean was very long, and we’d just read *Treasure Island* together...”

“Please, don’t apologize.”

He leaned so far forward he rocked the piano bench onto the front two legs. “No, I must. I’m sure there’s some way I could have better explained that you don’t call your new neighbor a pirate, even if she does collect treasure, and...”

“But I *am* a pirate,” Sabine said. “Haven’t you heard of the infamous La Capitaine? I am she.”

Hartleigh gaped at her. “I, uh...” Before he could stammer a coherent word, the piano bench slipped, sending the peculiar new duke tumbling to the floor with a resounding crash.