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Opening extract from

At Somerton: Secrets & Sapphires

Written by

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Prologue

At Sea in Summer, 1912

Lady Ada Averley leaned on the rail of the steamboat *Moldavia*, feeling the hum of the ship's huge engines through the steel, a rhythmic shudder like a giant's breathing. The black sea glittered with the reflection of the stars above her, and the wind tugged at her hat and loosened the dark curls that framed her pale face. Her features were a perfect mirror of her late mother's, but the gray eyes and the proudly lifted chin were pure Averley.

This steamboat had carried many young Englishwomen to India in its time, just as it would have carried any other commodity that was in short supply in the colonies. Less frequently did it bring them back again. Even less frequently was the Englishwoman in question as attractive and eligible as Lady Ada, eldest child of the Earl of Westlake.

The wild romantic shores of Italy lay behind them; tonight they were passing through the Straits of Gibraltar. Before Ada lay England, and the prospect of her first season this coming spring. But she was not looking forward to the dances and the attention of young men.

Her mind was as restless as the sea. She knew what her late mother's friends said about her. "Quite beautiful," they agreed, "but too serious." It was understandable, they said,

with the tragedy of her mother's death and the responsibility she had inherited for her delicate younger sister.

That was not all. The news about her father's resignation from the post of lieutenant-governor only added to her worries. Georgiana was too young and too naturally light-hearted to understand the severity of the rumors that circled like kites, but Ada understood what they meant for her, on the eve of her first season. At least the other debutantes would be relieved: another contender out of the race meant more chances for them. It seemed her parents' efforts to bring up a perfect lady would be wasted. She knew quite well that it was wrong to be on the first-class deck at midnight with no hat, no gloves, and no chaperone. But she could not sleep. After days at sea even the luxurious stateroom felt like a prison, but it was not just that, nor the scent of the sea wind, that had brought her up to the deck. It was the sense that the ship carrying her to England was also carrying her ever closer to adulthood. This homecoming meant freedom from the *Moldavia*, but it might also mean an even more stifling prison. So much depended on the next few months, and whether she could persuade her father to take her dreams of university seriously.

In her ungloved hand was a piece of paper torn from *The Times*, an article about women's suffrage written by the Liberal peer Lord Fintan. She'd meant to read it in the bright moonlight, but she had quite forgotten it. Now the wind whisked the paper out of her grip. It fluttered away across the deck. Ada exclaimed and ran after it.

It blew toward the shadows by the lifeboats. A red star gleamed there in the darkness above the rail. The paper twitched up into the air. Ada grabbed for it.

She smelled the cheroot first, and then the darkness

became solid, and she gasped as she bumped into the soft warmth of a man's body. She hadn't seen him there, hidden by the shadow of the lifeboat, until she ran straight into him.

He stepped forward into the moonlight. She saw the handsome, strongly carved face of a dark-skinned boy, his teeth gleaming in a smile. In one hand he held her paper. With the other, he steadied her. From his looks he was not much older than she, but his movements were not awkward and boyish, they were confident—almost, she would have said, arrogant.

He removed the cheroot from his mouth and flicked it overboard, its red tip glowing. "Do you throw yourself into the arms of every man you meet?" he said, with a deep, soft laugh. "Or am I particularly honored?" His eyes shone like moonlit water and she felt very unsteady in their gaze.

"I—I beg your pardon. I—I didn't see you." She was breathless, and her face grew hot with shock and embarrassment. To have run across the deck like that, straight at him! He must have thought her insane. Her hand went to her hatless hair, until she remembered she had no gloves on either, and let it fall. She flushed again at the thought of her appearance. Willing her heartbeat to slow down, she said as coldly as she could manage: "I would like my paper back, please."

He glanced at the paper, and with a bow, offered it to her.

"'The Suffrage Question.' An unusual choice for a young lady's reading."

His ironic smile annoyed Ada. She was no stranger to being mocked for her desire to learn. But this young man's knowing expression somehow irked her more than others', and with the worry about her father fresh in her mind, she

felt especially stung. "Not all young ladies are quite as lacking in intelligence as certain young men would like them to be," she said, taking the paper from his hand. Her fingers grazed his as she did so, and the burning returned to her face.

She turned, her heart thumping, and walked quickly away. She was trembling. With rage? Or something else? Already she was regretting her sharp words. It was unladylike. It was undignified. But it got very tiresome, being treated like a brainless doll. Sometimes she dreamed she was shut up in a glass case in a museum, screaming silently, thumping her fists against the invisible walls, while the world strolled past without noticing her.

"Lady Ada!"

He was following her. Of course he would think he had the right to be familiar now. How did he even know her name? She turned around, prepared to put him in his place, but he spoke too quickly.

"I must apologize," he said. He sounded serious. "That was not a gentlemanly comment, and I deserved what you said."

His expression was so sincere that Ada was at a complete loss for what to do next.

"I don't think we have been introduced," she said.

"Excuse me, you are quite right." He bowed quickly; the movement was particularly Indian and Ada felt a sudden stab of homesickness. "I have seen you in the first-class dining hall. My name is Ravi Sundaresan. I am traveling with Mr. Douglas Varley, to study at Oxford University."

"Oh!" Ada's frown disappeared. Douglas Varley was an old friend of her father's and a very influential politician. The two men had become reacquainted on the voyage and spent long hours in the smoking saloon together. His wispy gray mustache made her think of a dead mouse. But she did not

care what he looked like; he was the most welcome person in the world to her, because he was still speaking to her father, and that had kept the rumors at bay onboard ship.

Still, it was not a formal introduction, and she knew she should walk away. But the boy stood there, his hands in his pockets, looking at her intently. There was something both gentle and fierce about him and she could not make herself leave.

"I'm sorry," the boy said. "I realize that this means I've forced my acquaintance upon you. I quite forgot that we had not been formally introduced."

Ada found herself blushing again and she was grateful for the darkness. "I—I appreciate your rescue, Mr. Sundaresan." She made a half nod, half curtsy, and at once felt like a fool. "Of the article, I mean. I thought the moonlight would be strong enough to read . . ." She stumbled to a halt. How stupid to remind him of the article.

"I came out here to see the stars," Ravi said, acting as if she had said nothing silly at all. "Did you know they had names, Lady Ada?"

"Of course I . . ." she started to say, but trailed off when he placed a hand on her arm and guided her toward the rail. For a few moments Ada's world contracted to the warm pressure of his hand on her elbow. She felt a shiver of excitement that had nothing to do with the cool sea breeze. *This is terribly improper,* she scolded herself. But it was also the most interesting thing that had happened during the entire voyage.

Ravi pointed up into the sky. Ada followed his finger with her eyes, to a line of three bright stars, as perfectly aligned as guardsmen. "Orion," he said. His finger traced the outline of a great man in stars, leaning upon his club. "The great hunter."

Ada remembered being in her father's library in Kolkata, sitting curled under the desk reading translations of Aesop and Ovid, while outside the monkeys chattered in the trees and the long hot afternoon went by, marked by the swish of the punkah pulled by a servant.

"After his death the gods placed him in the sky to honor his skill," she said.

"Yes, that is the ancient Greeks' story," he agreed. "But we know these stars as the Stag, Mriga."

"I didn't know the constellations had Indian names."

"The ancient Indians were great astronomers."

His finger traced another shape, and Ada stared as the constellation of Orion seemed to reshape itself into the form of a silver stag. "Mriga is pursuing his own daughter, the beautiful Rohini—this star, here, which Western astronomers call Aldebaran. But the gods were angry at this transgression, and shot him through with Isus Trikanda, the three-jointed arrow—which you call Orion's belt."

Ada was silent, gazing up at the stars. They shone like distant diamonds. She had never guessed that there was so much more to learn even about the constellations. This boy knew so much more than she ever would.

"It must be nice to be a boy," she found herself saying.

Ravi raised an eyebrow.

"In *your* case, I don't think it would have been an improvement."

Ada shook her head, though she couldn't help but smile at the compliment. "If I were a boy, I would have been educated. There's so much I don't know."

"That's an odd thing for a young lady to complain about," he said. The ironic note was back in his voice. "Most are quite happy in their ignorance."

Ada's skin bristled, and before she could stop herself, she said, "As it happens, I want to go to Oxford too." She caught his eye; he looked startled.

What did she care? She wouldn't see him again. The freedom of saying her deepest wish felt so wonderful. And his face, though shocked, looked almost admiring. He was very handsome. The conversation had begun to excite her.

"Well, I hope it doesn't sound selfish if I say that I wish you success." Ada had barely time to understand the flattery before he hurried on: "I must admit to being surprised, though. I understood from your father you were to come out this year, and I suppose I thought your mind would be full of dresses and dances."

"Well, it isn't. It's full of Socrates and Euclid."

He laughed. "When we met, I took you for the perfect young lady. I see you are anything but." Seeing her expression, his face broke into a mischievous smile. "Don't misunderstand me. I think there are real ladies and perfect ladies. Perfect ladies are all gloves and fan-cases. Real ladies are . . ."

"Are what?"

"Are like you."

She had never been looked at this way by a young man, and she felt both exhilarated and frightened. She pressed her hands against the cold rail and then against her cheeks. As she did so, he moved a bit closer, and she noticed his jacket had a faint perfume of spice, and underneath it, the smell of his skin. She was aware of his closeness.

"See there, Lady Ada." He stood behind her and spoke softly, near her ear. "Your Ursa Major, the Great Bear."

"I see it." Ada gazed at the familiar constellation. "When I look up at the stars, they remind me that even those things that seem impossible can come to pass."

Ada realized something. Looking up into the depth of the night and the countless stars, she felt somehow as if she were standing on the brink of a precipice, and that if she had the courage to step forward, she might find that she could fly. She shivered—half with cold, half with excitement.

"Please." He handed her his jacket. Ada was about to refuse, but the expression in his eyes made her falter. While she was trying to collect herself, he placed the jacket around her shoulders.

"They're so beautiful," she said, looking up at the stars again.

"Yes," said Ravi. "Yes, they are. And that's the most important thing. Whoever we are, whatever we call them, we look at the stars firstly because they are beautiful. Names, stories—all that comes later."

She sensed that he was looking at her as he spoke.

"Since the dawn of time, men have loved to gaze upon beautiful things from afar."

Ada turned her head, startled, toward him.

"I mustn't—" She was breathless. He was too close to her, she should do something, she should say something, she should . . . and instead their lips were coming together, and his warm arms were around her, and all she could think was: So *this* is it, finally, *this* is what it feels like.

Chapter One

The clock in the housekeeper's parlor had been there since before Mrs. Cliffe had come to Somerton Court. It had a solid, squat oak casing, with brass workings and a face that had to be polished daily by the second housemaid. The numbers were inscribed in the old-fashioned script of the early years of Victoria, and its slow, heavy pulse never missed a beat. The years passed and people came and went, but the ticking of the clock was always there, behind the clash of the pans and the rattle of the tea things and the shrill summons of the servants' bells. The clock stood for Somerton Court itself; eternal, unchanging. The land had been part of the estates of the Earl of Westlake for five hundred years; there had been a house on this spot for four hundred, though the current building with its Adam ballroom and neoclassical frontage dated only from 1815. The lineage of the family they served was a source of great pride for Mrs. Cliffe and, she felt, the entire household staff.

Now, as she went over the estate accounts, it seemed the tick of the clock stood for something sinister. Time running out.

Sir William could talk all he wanted about investments. She knew it was gambling and speculation that made the money escape like water from a leaky bucket. It was a good

thing Lord Westlake was coming home—for the estate, at least. Of course, it might also cause problems.

Her thoughts turned to Rose, and she got to her feet abruptly, walking over to the mantelpiece. In the mirror above it she surveyed her own face closely. How many of those lines had been there ten years ago? It was hard to remember. At least her eyes were still clear and large, and as deep a blue as a summer evening. Like Rose's eyes.

She had always encouraged Rose to wear her hair in such a way as to show those vivid blue eyes off. Any wise mother would do the same, especially now that Rose was sixteen. But the rest of Rose's face . . . her full mouth, the way she smiled . . . if anyone looked too closely, those could give away the secret.

None of the servants she oversaw would have believed her capable of such an emotion . . . but today Mrs. Cliffe, head housekeeper, was frightened.

"I don't know how we'll ever get it all done in time!"

It was Cook who said it, but they were all thinking it. Rose had been thinking it since she stumbled out of bed that morning before light, shivering as she swept out the grates and lit the fire in the breakfast room, polished the brass, and ran downstairs to get the hot water for the family's baths. Lord Westlake was due back tomorrow and although the master bedroom was in order, the young ladies' rooms were still only half ready. It didn't help that they were understaffed. The hall-boy had just been sacked for being drunk when he opened the door to the Marquis of Sunderland's eldest son, no less, and the nursemaid had given notice, to no one's surprise. Sir William and Lady Edith's son, Augustus, was generally considered below stairs to be a small demon sent from hell two years ago specifically to torture the inhabitants

of Somerton. So the parlormaid had been sent up to the nursery, and she was in a fury about the insult to her dignity, and of course all her work had fallen onto the other housemaids, including Rose.

Mary, the second housemaid, passed her as she went down the servants' stairs with the last empty can of water. Rose caught her arm.

"Mary! Have you finished Lady Ada's room yet?"

"Lady Ada?" Mary shook her off. "Have a heart, I've been scrubbing the steps all morning. My knees are killing me. Then there's the drawing room to get ready—" She headed off down the stairs, her cap askew and her mousy hair escaping.

"Then I'll begin on Lady Ada's room, is that all right, Mrs. Cliffe?" Rose called after her mother as she hurried along the passage.

"Yes, Rose, and after you've done that you need to—" She broke off as Martha, the scullery maid, came bursting through the back door, practically shouting. "The luggage is here. And they've brought a tiger!"

Rose and her mother exchanged a glance and ran back along the passage to the back door. Rose burst out onto the cobbles, not sure whether to believe Martha. She was the greatest gossip in the world, but on the other hand the noise outside seemed to warrant a tiger at the very least.

In the courtyard, the station horse was pulling at his reins madly while the driver tried to calm him. Bandboxes and trunks were piled high upon the wagon. Tobias, the stable boy, looking sweaty and nervous, was handing the luggage down to James.

"Oh, Martha, that's a rug!" Rose said with relief, as she saw the tiger, rolled up with its tail between its legs. But there

was still something in the dead, glaring glass eyes that made her flatten herself against the wall while James carried it in. It *smelled* of India. She reached her hand out to touch the fur, half expecting the fiery colors to burn her.

If colors were music, she thought, this would be a wild dance. She could almost hear its rhythms in her head. Her fingers itched to try it out on the piano. But there was no time for that; instead she sang under her breath so she would remember the tune. If only she could have a quiet evening to herself to write the music down. But then she would have to steal a pencil and some paper, and there would be all the trouble of hiding it from everyone. Maybe it was better this way.

"You wouldn't believe how much luggage they've sent," James was saying as he unloaded. "And there's more coming up from the station!"

The servants were clustered in the passage around the unloaded luggage.

"Look at all them hatboxes! How many heads have they got between them?" Martha exclaimed. "And what's that?" She made a face as she looked at a thing like a huge metal flower fixed to a wooden base, which teetered on the top of the pile.

Rose gasped. "It's a gramophone." She couldn't believe what she was looking at. Sir William and Lady Edith didn't care for music, and they had never troubled to get one.

"A what? A grampus?" Martha said.

"No, a gramophone. It plays music," Rose replied.

"How?"

"Oh, don't ask me. Maybe that electricity does it." Rose looked at it longingly. Of course she would never be allowed to touch it, probably not even to dust it. It was far too expensive

to be entrusted to a mere housemaid. But how wonderful it would be if she could carry music around with her, to listen to any time she pleased.

"Have you felt the weight of Lady Ada's trunk?" Martha was round-eyed. "Must be packed with sapphires and rubies at least. I've heard some of them Indian jewels are cursed—"

"Martha!" Rose's mother's reproving voice silenced them all. "That's none of your business. Back to work." Martha scurried off to the kitchen. "James, Roderick, get Lord Westlake's luggage up to his room."

"What about the unpacking?" James asked. "Is his lordship traveling with a valet?"

"I'm not sure. Communication has been very difficult." She looked at the butler. "Mr. Cooper—perhaps you would be kind enough to unpack just this once? You used to valet for his lordship. You'll know how he wants things."

Mr. Cooper nodded his bald head, saying, "As this is an emergency, Mrs. Cliffe, I am glad to be of service."

"Thank you." Rose's mother looked around at the luggage. "Annie and Rose, you'll have to take care of the young ladies' luggage. The footmen will carry it up when they're done with Lord Westlake's."

Rose bent down to inspect the nearest trunk. She wanted to see what kind of unpacking lay ahead. On the brass clasps there was a monogram picked out in brass studs: *FT.*

"Who's FT?" she said. "Those aren't family initials." She scanned the luggage. "And, look, those bandboxes. They've got the same mark on them. Whose are they?"

"You're right. Blow it!" Roderick said. "They've sent the wrong luggage."

Rose immediately ran to the door. "Tobias, don't let the man go!" she called. "He'll have to take it all back—" She fell

silent as the station wagon rattled away, to reveal a girl with very fair hair and neat, almost doll-like features, carrying a small leather suitcase. She glanced around at the courtyard, with a careful, assessing gaze and began picking her way across the cobbles toward the door.

"Who's *she*?" Rose whispered to Annie, who was peering round the door with her.

The girl wore a pale green traveling gown and primrose-yellow gloves, and the feathers in her hat nodded as she crossed the threshold. The dress was not in the latest style, but to Rose, whose own wardrobe consisted of two uniforms, flannel petticoats, and a spare apron for best, it was an elegant dress. She couldn't be a lady, though. A lady would have entered through the front door, not the servants' entrance.

With her chin lifted delicately the girl examined the open-mouthed servants as if she were a duchess considering a selection of unpromising scullery maids.

"Why was no one at the station to meet me?" she demanded.

The servants looked at each other blankly.

"Miss—excuse me—who are you?" Mr. Cooper said.

The girl frowned.

"My goodness! I understood that things would be slow in the countryside, but I did not expect quite such ignorance." She handed Mr. Cooper her parasol and went on down the servants' passage.

Rose's mother recovered herself first.

"She can't go that way! The master will see her." She darted after her, and Rose followed, just in time to see the girl rustling up the steps into the main house. Cook came out of the kitchen as she passed, and stared after her in astonishment.