

REFUGE
FOR
MASTERMINDS



KATHLEEN BALDWIN



A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK

New York

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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One



LADY JANE MOORE

The oil lamp flickers and hisses. It is late, very late. The oil will run out soon. Even though it is long past midnight, I continue working at my desk in the library, listing possibilities, drawing lines from one hypothesis to another, scratching out those lines and mapping new ones, trying to calculate which of the many options our enemy will take next. In my mind, the players line up before me like pieces on a chessboard, and it keeps coming back to this—to Lady Daneska.

Evil queen takes knight.

Checkmate.

We lose.

Except Daneska isn't a queen. She was once one of us, one of Miss Stranje's students. Now she's Napoleon's clever little troublemaker, and paramour to Ghost. Ghost is code name for the British traitor who leads the emperor's secret Order of the Iron Crown. I set down the quill and massage my forehead.

The knight is in danger.

Alexander Sinclair, nephew of the American inventor Robert Fulton, has been hiding at Stranje House. He's slated to leave in three short days. Captain Grey and Lord Wyatt plan to help him sail the prototype of his steam-powered warship to London where they'll demonstrate its capabilities to the British Admiralty. Everything hinges on Alexander and his warship arriving unscathed in London.

They shouldn't risk that journey. Not yet, not until we have more safeguards in place, but I've been overruled. They insist there isn't time.

Why can't they see what will happen?

Lady Daneska wants that steamship for Napoleon, and she doesn't care whose throat she has to cut to get it. She proved that when she tried to steal the plans a few days ago and nearly killed Tess and Madame Cho. And if Napoleon gets that warship, England will lose this war.

She'll try to steal it. I know she will and I can predict exactly how it will play out. Their men will attack at sea, pirate the ship, and capture Mr. Sinclair, or send him and the others to graves at the bottom of the ocean.

Mr. Sinclair scoffed at my warning yesterday. "You fret too much, Lady Jane. The *Mary Isabella* is highly maneuverable." He and Georgie are exceedingly proud of their prototype of Fulton's remarkable invention. "That vessel can outrun any other ship because she can sail against the tide and winds."

Their boastful assurances are all well and good, but my misgivings remain. "Have you forgotten we've been infiltrated?" I protested. "Stranje House has a traitor."

They shrugged off my objections. "The Iron Crown has fake

plans.” Georgie tried to placate me. “That buys us the time we need.”

We survived Lady Daneska’s last attack and sent her away with falsified plans, so now everyone is convinced we finally have the advantage. When in truth, the temporary advantage we may have gained slips away with every deadly tick of the clock.

There must be a way to make them listen to reason.

I slump over my desk, weary and troubled, well aware there is another, less altruistic, thought vexing me. Even if, by some miracle, we succeed in getting Mr. Sinclair and Fulton’s remarkable warship safely to London, Mr. Sinclair will then most likely make a hasty departure to the United States.

Of course, he will. Why shouldn’t he?

What does it matter?

I sit, ramrod straight, hoping proper posture will alleviate the pinch in my neck. He is nothing to me. *Less than nothing.* To be frank, the golden-haired inventor is the most maddening young man of my acquaintance, and that’s saying a great deal considering my two plague-y older brothers and their wastrel friends.

My head begins to throb abominably. I stand, slide my papers beneath the blotter, and extinguish the lamp. Mr. Sinclair is a sharp-tongued fellow with boorish manners, and he is not even an Englishman. The idea of parting with him ought to be a relief.

Ought to be—but it isn’t.

The thought of his leaving twists my stomach into a Gordian knot. Some warm milk might ease it out of its misery. Yes, that is exactly the tonic I need, a calming cup of warm milk. I pad silently out of the library and head down the dark hallway toward the kitchen.

Stranje House is an odd place at night when everyone is asleep. It's as if the old Tudor manor is alive the way it creaks and the windows shudder. A young lady given to flights of imagination might feel as if the walls are leaning in as she walks through the unlit hallways. I, however, do not indulge in such far-fetched thoughts. I'm quite certain that moaning sound is nothing more than wind breathing through the secret passages.

I've no need of a candle. Even in the deep of night, I know my way around Stranje House well enough and prefer to forgo the wobbly glare of a flame. Besides, the heavy darkness suits my mood.

The last stairs leading down to the kitchen are wide stone steps with no banister. They can be a trifle thorny to navigate in the dark. Fortunately, thin gray moonlight whiskers up from the downstairs windows and I glide my hand along the wall for added guidance.

Stepping into the spacious room, I breathe deep the smell of baked rye bread and onion soup that still lingers. But something yanks my attention to the window above the baking table.

It might've been a wisp of fog, or an owl soaring by to catch a mouse in the garden, except it had seemed bigger and more human. If I were prone to fanciful ruminations, I might've thought a phantom flitted past, but my suspicions run in an entirely different direction. I rush to the window and lean up on my toes to peer out. In the distance I spot the creature, cloaked in gray, who passed by the window, and she wears a dress.

Most decidedly not a ghost.

Although she may be working for one.

Unless I miss my guess, this particular phantom is going about her duplicitous duties, reporting our plans to Ghost's cohorts. I press closer to the window hoping to see her more clearly. Rub-

bing the glass, I squint, straining to identify her, watching as the clever minx leads the dogs to their pen and shuts them in.

This has to be our betrayer—our traitor. The person responsible for all our slanted looks and unspoken suspicions. The sneaky girl who is ripping apart the bonds of friendship here at Stranje House. At least, when Lady Daneska betrayed us, we'd known who she was, and she didn't hide the fact that she ran off to join Napoleon's cause.

This traitor moves in secret, slowly stealing away the confidence we have in one another's loyalty. She is a disease, rotting us from the inside out. For what are we without trust? Naught but a group of misfits and outcasts. Trust is the foundation of our strength. Without it, we will surely crumble and leave the path clear for Napoleon to sail in and conquer England.

Which of us would commit such a crime?

I intend to find out.

Pulling my shawl around my shoulders, I hurry to the bench beside the kitchen door and slip on Cook's pattens, the wooden clogs she wears to go out into the muddy garden. Her mud shoes are three sizes too big but they will have to do. I leave the door unlatched so I can return easily, and sneak out to follow our poisonous little turncoat.

Last week I cut holes in the right side pockets of my dresses. I slip my hand through the opening and reach for the dagger strapped in a sheath to my hip. Ever since Tess taught me how to wield a knife in a close fight, I've kept it on my person. I breathe easier once I feel the hilt in my palm. Without a coat and bonnet, I am not properly dressed for an outdoor excursion, especially one in the middle of the night, but at least I'm suitably armed.

I keep to the shadows, as does our traitor. We skirt through

the trees alongside the drive, all the way to the towering gates that guard Stranje House. She opens the ancient iron sentinels just wide enough to slip through. They creak. She pulls her hooded cloak tighter and glances over her shoulder, as if she senses she's being watched. I hold back, crouching in the undergrowth, not daring to get any closer lest the culprit see me and pretend she is simply out for a late-night stroll. The misty night hangs over us in a swirling fog, and I am too far away to make out her features.

I wait until she scurries on her little rat feet far enough down the road that she won't see me pass through the open gate behind her. Unlike Tess, I am not skilled at creeping through the woods and undergrowth. Each branch that cracks and every pile of leaves that crunches underfoot causes me to hold my breath, expecting to be discovered.

In truth, I am nothing like the other girls at Stranje House. They all have extraordinary talents and skills. Tess is a warrior who has the advantage of prophetic dreams. Sera takes notice of every detail, no matter how minuscule, and draws conclusions based on the smallest thread of evidence. Georgie is a brilliant scientist, and Maya's voice is magical, she can soothe tempers with a few, well-spoken words.

I have none of those skills.

As my brothers so delicately phrased it, I am an overly opinionated female who refuses to mind her own business. Of course, they would say that, wouldn't they? After our parents died, the two rascals spent all their time in the brothels and gaming rooms of London. They abandoned me, leaving me to manage the servants and our failing estate. By implementing new farming methods, I was able to make the estate profitable, and by investing the extra capital, I tripled our income. My brothers wanted the

money to support their habits. I tried to stop them, restricting their access, and scolding them for their excesses. That's why they packed me up and hauled me off to Stranje House, to keep me out of their way. They may be scoundrels, but they are correct, I am stubborn and rarely obedient. I have absolutely no idea why Miss Stranje allows me to stay. She says it is because I am a mastermind.

Stuff and nonsense!

I'm no mastermind. A mastermind is a strategic genius. I'm nothing of the kind. Oh, I admit I am a bit managing, and I have a rather strong bent toward the practical, but only because I easily grasp the facts of a situation, much the way one does when playing chess. It's a simple thing, really, anticipating an opponent's next few moves, and it's only natural to devise and implement a sensible course of action. After all, it's my duty to protect and care for the people I love. That's all there is to it.

Nothing extraordinary.

Well, I suppose I do have a knack for organizing the players in my plans, and I like to think I do so with quiet efficiency. Occasionally, my friends tell me I'm not as subtle about organizing them as I imagine myself to be. They sometimes tease me about that. Tess, in particular, likes to needle me by saying I would've made a splendid governess. Although, when it comes to teasing, none of them holds a candle to Alexander Sinclair.

What would they have me do? Sit back and twiddle my thumbs when trouble is brewing? *Not ruddy likely.* Not when people I care about are in danger. I was born an earl's daughter. It's only natural that when difficulties arise, if no one steps up into the driver's seat, I do what must be done and take the reins in hand.

That is the very reason I'm out here in the middle of the night, slogging through mud and rotting leaves, struggling to

keep from knocking Cook's clunky pattens against rocks and fallen branches in the underbrush. I may not excel at this sort of activity, but I'm certainly not going to allow this villainous creature to escape. She is threatening all of us at Stranje House—my friends, England, and even my annoying Mr. Sinclair.

Truth is, I would wade through a snake-filled bog if need be. Stranje House is my refuge, my sanctuary. I'll protect it or die trying. My no-account brothers will never know the favor they did me by bringing me here to Miss Stranje. She allows me to experiment with crop rotation and animal husbandry to my heart's content, and this is the perfect place for me to hide. As long as no one outside of our little circle learns I am here at Stranje House, there is a chance, or the hope of a chance, no one will discover my secret.

For now, though, it is Stranje House's secrets that need protecting, not mine. I tuck my shawl tighter and press forward. The traitor stops up ahead in a small clearing off to the side of the road. She looks around as if expecting to find someone lurking in the trees up ahead.

Where is that blasted moon? Why must it drift behind clouds when I so desperately need its light to see our betrayer. I hide behind a wide oak and hold my breath, hoping she won't see me peering around the edge as I try to catch a glimpse of her face. If only I could see the color of her hair, or the pattern of the dress she wears beneath her cloak, *anything* that might give me a clue as to her identity.

The sound of chirping insects and piping tree frogs fills the night. A shrill whistle cuts through the noise of the woods—a poor mimic of a hawk screech. The traitor answers with a light trill meant to sound less like a predatory bird and more like an

innocent sweet songbird. Ha! There is nothing innocent or sweet about our Judas.

At the edge of the trees farthest from me, a man emerges cloaked in a brown greatcoat, wearing a dark hat pulled low over his brow. She approaches him and mumbles a greeting.

I draw my knife and clasp it tight. The weight of it in my fist makes me feel a little stronger, a little braver. I press against the tree, straining to hear. If I can catch a clear snippet of her voice I'll know who it is, but the dead leaves and the foliage seemed to swallow up the sound. "What've you learned?" He speaks low as if he fears being overheard.

Her voice is higher, much softer, making it far more difficult to hear than his. I only catch a word here and there. I think I heard her say, "Ship."

"When?" he demands. "Where?"

Her answer is impossible to distinguish. She speaks rapidly and gestures toward the coast. I cringe when he asks, "To London?"

She nods.

"Two days." He rubs his chin. "Doesn't give us much time."

It's wretchedly dark and I'm too far from the spies. A smaller tree stands directly in front of me, a narrow alder. It is an enticing two yards closer to them. I hunch low, preparing to dart forward unseen.

Someone grabs me from behind. He claps a hand over my mouth. "Don't," he whispers in my ear.

Instinct takes over. Without a second thought, I move into the training I've practiced with Tess and our defensive arts master, Madame Cho. I jab backward with my elbow and strike him squarely in his ribs. Extending my leg, I clamp hold of his arm and heave him over my shoulder. Immediately, I pounce on the

villain with my knife at his throat. I blink, unable to believe my eyes.

Alexander Sinclair! It can't be.

It is him. Those are his disorderly blond curls. It's his broad chest I've pinned to the ground, his rumpled shirt and worn coat.

What in heaven's name is he doing here? My breath catches. *He must be in league with the traitor.* I never should have trusted him. Never. I let my guard down and what happens, the blighter turns out to be a common spy. I dig my elbow into his ribs.

"What are you doing?" he says under his breath, as if I am the one making a blunder.

"Me?" I press the knife closer to his treacherous throat. "What are you doing here?"

"Following you," he whispers heatedly.

I don't believe his innocent act. "You grabbed me."

"Yes, because you were about to give yourself away."

I ease up with the knife and glance over at the traitor and her accomplice. *Too late.* I groan. They've seen us.

Her accomplice curses roundly. "Fool! You've been followed." He shoves her away and takes off like a stag crashing through the underbrush. Our sneaky betrayer follows suit, except she bolts in a different direction.

It's my turn to curse, something I never do. "Dash it all! She's getting away."

I scramble up, springing after her, dodging trees and bounding over fallen logs. Behind me, I hear Alexander scramble to his feet. He quickly passes me in pursuit of the traitor.

My heart hammers like a war drum as I follow them blindly through the moonless woods, slapping branches out of the way. My foot lands in a puddle of fetid water and it sloshes across my dress. The stench makes me cringe. Saplings scrape at my

face and arms, as if trying to entrap me, but I keep going. We must catch the culprit.

A crescent moon peeks out for a few silvery seconds, only long enough for me to see we are still on her heels. It disappears again behind clouds, and I feel as if I am drowning in ink. I can't see where I'm going, and can scarcely catch my breath. We turn, I've no idea in what direction we're heading now, but it is heavily wooded and a downhill slope. Cook's pattens are not made for running and it is dark, too dark. Straining to make out Alexander's broad form a few yards ahead of me, I stumble over a root and pitch head first over a rise.

The fall startles a cry out of me. I tumble downhill, snapping branches, bashing against rocks and mounds. Finally, I land with a loud crash, startling birds who squawk and fly from their slumber.

"Jane!" Alexander shouts. "Jane! Are you hurt?"

Only my pride. I've landed in a pile of wet muck and leaves. My hair is full of twigs, and judging by the stinging sensation, I've skinned both my elbows and forearms. My shawl is lost. No doubt it will make a dandy addition to some creature's lair, and this work dress will need a long soak before it will ever be wearable again.

"I'm all right," I reassure him. "Keep after her! We've got to catch her."

Too late. I can hear he has stopped running. He's tromping toward me, charging through the underbrush, breathing hard.

I sigh, guessing what he will say before he says it. "It's no good. I've lost her."

I can't help myself. I grab a handful of decaying leaves and crush them in my fist. "No. No. No!"

"Afraid so. Sounded like all hell breaking loose when you fell.

I worried you'd broken your neck." He squats beside me and brushes clumps of mud off my shoulder. "When I turned back, she'd disappeared."

I moan, not because of the bruises I am beginning to feel, but because I can't bear the thought of having lost her. *We were so close.*

"Are you planning to lie there all night, Lady Jane?"

Flippant as ever. If it weren't so dark, I would make the effort to glare at him. "This is your fault, you know. I would've had her if you hadn't interfered."

"Maybe. Maybe not." He pulls several twigs out of my tangled hair. "There's another possibility. The way I saw it, that fellow had a pistol tucked inside that great big coat of his. If there hadn't been two of us, I figure he would've pulled it out and blown your pretty little brains all over the forest floor."

Mr. Sinclair has a point, but I refuse to credit it. "Don't be ridiculous." I cough up something that must've flown in my mouth during the tumble. "My brains aren't little."

"Right." He tugs another twig out of my hair. "So, instead of blaming me for all this trouble, my lady, what do you say you put those *large* devious brains of yours to work finding another way to catch our traitor? Won't she have to pass through the gate to get back to Stranje House? We could try heading her off there. Or we could lock it so she can't come back through."

I sit up, knowing full well I am plastered in mud and debris. Not caring because, after all, it's not Beau Brummell, the dandy of Mayfair, here with me. It's Mr. Alexander Sinclair, and he is accustomed to sloppy dress. I wipe off as much grime from my person as is possible. "No, unfortunately, our weaselly little traitor can easily bypass the gate by going through hedgerows in the back pasture. Or, she could make her way down to the shore-

line and come up by way of the bluffs. For that matter there are a hundred ways she can get back to Stranje House without going through the gate.”

He tosses the twig away and stands, holding out his hand to help me to my feet. “Not much use then, that big iron gate.”

“It stops carriages well enough.” I defend my beloved Stranje House, and busily shake a clump of mud off my skirts. “Now that I think on it, there may be another way to catch her.” I look up at him with excitement. “Come! We have to hurry back.”

No sooner do I say this than I realize I have absolutely no notion which way to go. I glance about the pitch-black woods and scan the clouded sky, struggling to get my bearings.

“Lost, are you, my lady?” Alexander chuckles under his breath.

“Of course not,” I huff, wishing desperately for some landmark by which I might set my direction. I see nothing to point the way, *nothing*, not one blessed thing. I begin hiking uphill, having decided to retrace my steps. One of Cook’s clogs flew off during my tumble, so I proceed with a rather lopsided gait, doing my best to dodge pointy sticks and other hazards.

“You’re certain this is the right direction?” Alexander follows close behind me, and I hear a mocking smile in his Yankee twang, rippling through his innocent question.

I will not allow him to dampen my confidence. “You may thank your lucky stars that I do. Considering I tumbled halfway down this hill, it is a wonder I’ve any sense of direction left at all.”

“A miracle! I shall notify the church.”

I ignore his sarcasm. “You may play the skeptic if you wish, but I’m certain if we retrace our steps we will come out very near the clearing in which we began. From there, it will simply be a matter of following the road back to the house.”

“Not a bad plan, as plans go. Excepting, the gal we were chasing

was clever as a fox. Seemed quite familiar with these woods. Did you happen to notice she didn't run in a straight line? By my reckoning, she led us a merry looping chase."

Looping? I stub the toe of my clog-less slipper against a rock. I'm hard-pressed not to yelp audibly, but I suck in the pain and limp forward as if nothing has happened. "And you noticed this how . . . ?"

"You're hurt." He grabs my shoulders and takes stock of me. "You've lost your shoe."

"Only Cook's patten. I shall make do with my slipper."

"Balderdash." He heaves out a deep breath. "I'll have to carry you."

I back away from him. "You shall do no such thing. That would be highly improper."

"Begging your pardon, my lady, but I don't see how there's any way around it. If you proceed with nothing but that flimsy excuse for a shoe, you're bound to put a thorn through your foot, or worse. That little bit of silk and felt isn't going to stop a sharp stone."

Much as I am loath to admit it, he's right. I stare down at my offending appendage, which is already soaked with muddy water. Any wound I incur will no doubt become infected. "Never mind. I will be fine."

"You're not stubborn in the least are you, Lady Jane?"

I hobble forward, ignoring his latest insult.

He follows on my heels, so close I feel his breath on my neck as he lets out an exasperated sigh. "We can do this one of two ways. I can sling you over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes, or you can ride, as my nephews like to do, piggyback style."

Piggyback! A sound rumbles in my throat, half indignant squawk, half harrumph. "Certainly not! We shall go on as we are."

“Have it your way. It will be easier to carry you over my shoulder anyway.”

I whip around. He stops only a few inches from me, and I crane my neck to look up at him, giving him my most ferocious glare. “Mr. Sinclair, we will observe the proprieties. The fact that you and I are out here in the wilderness alone is disastrous enough. If anyone finds out, my reputation will be in tatters. I absolutely refuse to return to Stranje House hanging over your shoulder as if I am a common tavern wench. And may I remind you, I am not above using my knife on you if the need arises.” I plant my fists on my hips and do my best to look imperious.

He says nothing to that, and well he shouldn't. I hope I am at least as intimidating as Tess would be in the same situation. Mr. Sinclair is prone to slow, lazy smiles. Moonlight catches on the twitching curve of his lips. He does not seem worried about me running him through with my blade. So I switch tactics, and the subject, hoping to distract him from carrying me. “Now if you will be so kind as to explain your theory on the traitor's circuitous route. How did you notice? More to the point, do you think you know the fastest way back to the road?”

His smirk vanishes and he stares down at me steadily, unnerving me enough that I drop my arms and take a step backward.

“Haven't done much hunting at night, have you, Lady Jane?”

“What has that to do with anything?” I frown. “Do I look the sort of young lady who hunts at night?”

He laughs. “At the moment I wouldn't take a wager on it one way or the other. You're full of surprises. I wouldn't have thought you capable of cutting my throat either, and yet a few minutes ago you seemed ready to do exactly that.”

“I didn't know it was you,” I mumble. “Not until after . . .”

“Yet here you are threatening me again.”

“Mr. Sinclair, am I to gather from this roundaboutation that you cannot actually guide us back to the house? Is all your talk about looping routes and shortest distances merely bragging on your part?”

“I don’t brag.” He glances up at the clouded sky, as if re-orienting himself. “Provided you don’t stand here jawing me dead too much longer, and those clouds don’t change shape any faster than they are now, then yes, I will be happy to show you the quickest path home, my lady. Unless, of course, you prefer to take the long way? I know how much you enjoy my company, and I wouldn’t want to deprive you, but it seems to me we’ve a fairly serious matter to attend to this evening.”

“Good heavens, Mr. Sinclair! Do you make a study in how to annoy me? For pity’s sake, let’s be on our way.” I roll out my hand indicating he should take the lead.

Instead, he bows, overdoing it on purpose. While I am casting my gaze heavenward in a silent plea for patience, he swoops me up in his arms, cradling me like a helpless infant.

“Put me down this instant!” I slap my hand against his chest.

“We are in a hurry, Lady Jane. I haven’t time to humor you.” His long legs are covering the hillside in strides that far outpace anything I could do. “First off, there isn’t one single solitary soul out here in the black of night to observe your sacred proprieties. Second, if you injure yourself it will slow us down even more. Do you want to catch this traitor or not?”

I say nothing, brooding because he is right again. The wretch. And I cannot believe he is carrying me, holding me against his chest as if he has every right to such an intimate act. What’s worse, what is even more inexcusable, is that I do not altogether dislike it. In fact, I begin to feel self-conscious because I stink of

rotting leaves and moldy muck. I am about to open my mouth and apologize when he cuts me off.

“Save your lectures, Lady Jane. When we get to the road I will set you on your feet, so no one will think you are a tavern wench.” He looks irritated for some reason. “Not that anyone ever would. One look at you puts that idea to rest once and for all. There is nothing about you nearly so comfortable or amiable as a tavern wench.”

Normally, his remarks set my teeth on edge. Normally, I have a quick rejoinder. Or, if I am at a loss for words, I sometimes feel an overwhelming urge to pummel him. *Normally*. But the fact that he finds me less amiable than a serving wench wounds me in unexpected places. I find I’m unable to speak. It’s as if he slapped me.

He shifts me in his arms as he wends his way sideways across the hill. “It would help if you could lower your standards enough to hang on to my neck,” he says rather gruffly, trying to maneuver us between two tall trees.

I wrap my arm up over his shoulder, still keeping mum, wishing I were someone else. Someone sweet and kind, like Sera. Or someone adorable and clever, like Georgie. *Anyone else*. Even a tavern wench.

