

PARTING THE VEIL EXCERPT

FROM CHAPTER ONE

Eliza flew awake, paralyzed, her heart racing like a wild thing. *Not again.* A scream threatened at the back of her throat. Black, watery shadows loomed in the corners. Eliza closed her eyes and opened them again, grounding her senses in the here and now. She traced the pleats on the canopy with her eyes and counted: *One, two, three.* Slowly, her pulse steadied. *Four, five, six.* The feeling returned to her fingers. She gripped the edge of the mattress until they ached. *Seven, eight, nine, ten.* Her head ceased its crazed spinning. She could breathe.

The dream had been too real this time. Too much like a memory. She could still feel the sharp, choking sting of water and the weight of her dress dragging her to the bottom of the pond, no matter how hard she fought for the surface. But she wasn't drowning. She was safe in England. *Home.*

Moonlight streamed through the drapes and limned the room with silver, creating a chiaroscuro painting out of otherwise normal objects. In the distance, thunder crackled a warning. The wind picked up, tearing through the eaves with a wicked howl. A shutter came loose and began thumping against the house, steady as a carpenter's hammer. Eliza pushed the covers aside, careful not to wake Lydia, and crossed to the casement.

The moon cut a clean, gray path on the ground, broken only by the shadows of scudding clouds. She swung open the sash. Frigid air slammed her full in the face. As she leaned out to pull the wayward shutter to the sill, a familiar sound met her ears. She strained to listen. Hoofbeats.

Suddenly, a horse and rider burst through the trees bordering the ruined mansion she'd seen from the road. They tore across the heath at a full gallop, the horseman's caped coat flaring out behind him. He sat well in his saddle—riding high in his stirrups as he made a clean jump over a low stone wall and returned to a run. The horse was big and rawboned, perhaps a warmblood or a Friesian. Impressive animal. Bred for kings and war.

A fierce gust of wind hissed through the trees. The shutter tore free from Eliza's hand and slammed into the side of the house with a crack as loud as a pistol shot. The rider slowed, pivoting in his saddle. From this distance, she could only make out the moonlit oval of his face, but his eyes seemed to meet hers for a long moment. She gasped and took a step backward, the hem of her gown luffing over the sill.

Clouds raced to cover the moon. Sharp droplets spat at the windowpanes as the earthy scent of rain dampened the air. The rider turned and urged his horse back to speed. They were soon gone, disappearing into the birchwood forest. Eliza pulled the drapes closed against the storm, her imagination uncoiling.