



THE
LIGHT OF

Stars

A Novel

JENELLE HOVDE

Praise for Jenelle Hovde

This delightful enemies-to-lovers story features lively characters who spar with one another and keep the sparks flying. It has all the charm and atmosphere we love in a Regency romance, while inciting deeper, more meaningful thought. With an interesting plot and a conflicted hero and heroine, this Regency romance will keep you turning the pages until the exciting end.

MELANIE DICKERSON, author of *The Good Fortune of Miss Robbins*, on *The Light of Stars*

Jenelle Hovde breathes new life into the Regency romance genre by adding the tensions and dangers of the East India Company to a tale of love, family drama, and choosing to seek the light amidst the darkness. *The Light of Stars* is a poignant glimpse into the hearts of characters who will capture you from the first page and inspire you to look up to the heavens for a reminder of the God who sets all the universe, our lives included, into motion.

ROSEANNA M. WHITE, award-winning author of *The Collector of Burned Books*

An archaeological dig turns up secrets past and present in this spirited Regency romance. . . . [F]ans of Julie Klassen and Sarah Ladd will be swept up.

PUBLISHERS WEEKLY on *No Stone Unturned*

In *No Stone Unturned*, Jenelle Hovde has written a sweeping Regency romance filled with heart and history. Fans of Mimi Matthews and Julie Klassen will find much to love in this tale which melds the atmospheric intrigue of *Jane Eyre* with the rugged beauty of *Poldark*. Against the backdrop of the rural English countryside, Hovde's characters unearth not only ancient Roman mosaics but also deep, hidden truths about themselves. I thoroughly enjoyed the novel for its intelligent characters and fresh take on a turbulent Regency romance.

ELIZABETH CAMDEN, RITA Award-winning author

As fresh and lovely as its cover. . . . A feast of romance and suspense unfolds against the picturesque backdrop of West Sussex, a world inhabited with richly detailed characters you'll want to befriend. Jenelle Hovde makes an unforgettable debut!

LAURA FRANTZ, Christy Award–winning author of *The Indigo Heiress*, on *No Stone Unturned*

What a delightful story, filled with the intrigue and wit of *Bridgerton* and the deep emotional connection of *Downton Abbey*. If you love Regency romance with subtle but fascinating historical nuggets and novels that lead you to gently measure your heart, *No Stone Unturned* should be on your TBR list now!

MESU ANDREWS, Christy Award–winning author of *Isaiah's Daughter*

I was utterly enchanted by this story! The unconventional heroine and the broken hero were a perfect pairing in this novel of ancient ruins and noble families. Mystery, romance, and history come together beautifully in this heartfelt, endearing novel. Readers will be eager for Hovde's next book!

JOANNA DAVIDSON POLITANO, award-winning author of *The Curious Inheritance of Blakely House* and other novels, on *No Stone Unturned*

As someone with an endless fascination for archaeology and old homes, I was captivated by the charming yet dangerous estate of Hawthorn Abbey. *No Stone Unturned* is a mysterious treasure hunt with a dashing hero and an undaunted heroine, both determined to save the British manor in their own way. If you enjoy reading Jane Austen, you'll love Jenelle Hovde's Regency romance.

MELANIE DOBSON, award-winning author of *The Wings of Poppy Pendleton* and *The Curator's Daughter*

What could be better than a feisty heroine and a broodingly handsome hero? A story full of intrigue set against the windswept English countryside, that's what. Author Jenelle Hovde has crafted a Regency tale that's as emotionally

stirring as it is delightfully engaging. With every turn of the page, expect suspense, snappy dialogue, and heart-melting moments that linger long after the last chapter. This one is going on my keeper shelf!

MICHELLE GRIEP, Christy Award–winning author of *Of Gold and Shadows*,
on *No Stone Unturned*

I loved the mix of history, romance, archaeology, and faith in this adventurous and delightful Regency tale. Bridget's determination to uncover Roman ruins and her search for recognition and love will inspire readers and take them on an exciting and surprising journey. Those who enjoy novels by Julie Klassen, Roseanna M. White, and Carolyn Miller will be delighted to find a new author who brings the era and English setting to life. Well written and highly recommended!

CARRIE TURANSKY, award-winning author of *A Token of Love* and *The Legacy of Longdale Manor*, on *No Stone Unturned*

What a delightful, heart-wrenching, edge-of-your-seat ride! This story is a must-read for fans of Julie Klassen, Michelle Griep, or Erica Vetsch. Jenelle Hovde is one to watch!

SHANNON MCNEAR, 2014 RITA Award finalist, 2021 Selah winner, and author of the *Daughters of the Lost Colony* series, on *No Stone Unturned*

THE LIGHT OF STARS



Tyndale House Publishers
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JENELLE HOVDE

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PROLOGUE

Kitty

*He healeth the broken in heart,
and bindeth up their wounds.
He telleth the number of the stars;
he calleth them all by their names.*

PSALM 147:3-4

1803, HYDERABAD, INDIA

The night smelled of jasmine and smoke.

Torchlight flickered across the marble arches and carved lattice screens, sending shadows skittering along the palace courtyard. I clutched Ghulam's hand so tightly my nails must have bitten into his skin, but my older brother did not flinch. His other arm wrapped around my sleeve, tugging me close to the shelter of the wall, as if he alone could drag me out of the open expanse and back into the safety of the harem. Somewhere beyond the colonnade, voices shouted, sharp and urgent.

"Stay with me, Noor," Ghulam whispered as a clash of boots echoed against the pavement.

British soldiers and sepoy burst through the arched gateway, red coats blazing in the torchlight. Brass plates on the tall shakos atop their heads caught the firelight and flashed like coins, while their white trousers looked already dust-stained from battle.

We pressed ourselves deeper into the shadowed edge of the courtyard, hearts hammering, as if stillness alone could keep us invisible.

I hid behind my brave twelve-year-old brother. I was only six, still small enough to believe in whispered promises. We had been awakened in the middle of the night by a servant who coaxed us outside with strange tales of dates and sweets and our mother waiting for us on a moonlit adventure. Of course, we agreed—especially after being confined to our rooms for days while illness swept through the palace. And with Father newly gone, Mother’s absence weighed heavier than ever. She often took us out in the late evening for fresh air and to point out the stars above and teach us their names.

But no treats and no Mother awaited us.

The servant who had lured us away slipped back into the palace, leaving us stranded as the soldiers advanced, muskets leveled and bayonets gleaming sharp and merciless. At their head strode an older man with red hair already streaked with gray, his scarlet coat trimmed in gold and a crimson sash slashed across his chest. His sword gleamed, unsheathed and catching every flicker of flame as he barked for the guards to clear the way. When he saw us, he gestured to my brother and me with a weapon in hand.

“Drag him. And her, if you must,” he said in Urdu.

Within seconds I was yanked from my brother’s side by one of the soldiers and forced to move toward the older man, who stared at me.

I screamed as loud as I could. Where was my mother? Surely the nizam’s guards would rescue us. Why were they nowhere to be found?

“Let my sister go!” Ghulam cried, but he was powerless against such strong men.

We stumbled over the tiles of the courtyard, our slippered feet sliding in haste, the hem of my purple gown darkening with dust. Shouts erupted behind us, the clipped orders of British soldiers mingling with

the sudden wails of women. More torches hissed in the damp night air, signaling an invasion.

“Faster!” the older man snapped as we were driven out of the courtyard.

A soldier’s gloved hand shoved against my shoulder, forcing me forward. My foot caught on the edge of a tile and I pitched to my knees, the stone biting through silk. Pain stung, but I twisted back, clawing against his grip, desperate to wrench free. My gaze flew to the doorway we had just left.

My mother stood there, framed in the lamplight, her jeweled veil slipping loose as she reached for us. Her chest heaved as if she had run as fast as she could.

“Noor! Ghulam!” Her voice broke as the British soldiers barred her way. “Give me my children!”

I screamed again and lurched against the soldier’s grip, grasping for her. She flung her arms toward me as well, her fingers straining as if somehow she could touch me despite the distance.

“Don’t look behind you. Don’t stop,” the older man said fiercely as he grabbed my hand, his grip crushing like an iron band.

My mother’s frantic sobs echoed behind us, mingling with the pounding of boots.

The older man swept me into his arms and hurled me toward a waiting black carriage just beyond the palace gates. Behind us, the great doors of the courtyard gaped open, unguarded and ominously silent.

My heart thudded as though it would burst from my chest as Ghulam joined me inside the carriage. Together, we huddled in the dark interior. The red-haired man clambered in, along with two British soldiers close behind.

“Where are they taking us?” I whispered. “Why isn’t Mother coming with us?”

Ghulam's lips pressed into a thin line. He did not answer. Perhaps he did not know. Perhaps he feared the answer.

Pressing against the window, I strained for some sight of Mother within the courtyard where I had played the day before. A whip cracked. Our carriage lurched. The palace receded into the night, its white domes and minarets shrinking until only the stars remained above.

I sank against the cushioned seat, my body shaking. My brother wrapped an arm around me, awkward and stiff, but protective all the same.

"We'll be all right," he said through gritted teeth. "I won't let anything happen to you. I prom—"

"Listen to me," the old man interrupted. "Do you know who I am?"
I sniffled and shook my head.

"I am your grandfather, Colonel Richard Grenville. When I learned of your father's untimely demise and rumors of diphtheria gutting the city, I came all the way from London to find you."

"I-I want my m-mother," I demanded as I shivered uncontrollably.

He leaned forward, the leather seat creaking beneath his weight. "You must never speak of her again. You are going to live with me at my estate. You both will learn to speak English since you are the children of a gentleman. Your names are now Edward and Katherine Grenville. I never want to hear Urdu out of your mouths after tonight."

Ghulam's grip tightened around my shoulders while I cried. He muttered a very naughty word in Urdu, barely loud enough for me to hear.

My mother's cries still rang in my ears even though we were far from the palace. Ahead lay a future I could not imagine—a world without the warmth of her embrace, without the songs that had once lulled me to sleep beneath painted ceilings and fringed canopies. I slumped against my brother as the city flashed by. What I could see of the sky was now devoid of stars—the very lights my mother loved to point out to me.

Darkness fell within the carriage as we raced into the unknown, and my grandfather said no more.

The only thing I knew for certain was this: Nothing would ever be the same again.

Kitty

Seek him that maketh the seven stars and Orion, and turneth the shadow of death into the morning, and maketh the day dark with night: that calleth for the waters of the sea, and poureth them out upon the face of the earth: The Lord is his name.

AMOS 5:8

DECEMBER 1814, SEVEN OAKES, ENGLAND

I stood outside Grandfather's study and inhaled a shaky breath.

The winter sun slanted low through the mullioned windows, casting a watery light across ledgers and maps. The man known as the Iron Colonel sat tall behind his desk, his shoulders still broad from years of service, his dark coat cut to military precision. Time had silvered his hair at the temples and carved stern lines at the corners of his eyes, yet there was no mistaking the strength in his bearing. His presence filled the room like a command.

I smoothed my skirts and at last stepped inside, determined to ask him to finally allow me a trip to London to see my brother. Perhaps even experience a season, although I was far more interested in visiting museums and bluestocking salons.

He did not rise when I entered, only lifted his head from the page, quill poised above the ledger.

“What is it, Katherine?” His voice carried the weight of impatience, a sound I knew too well.

“I have a request, Grandfather.” My words felt fragile. “Might I be allowed a season in London this spring? I am nearly eight and ten. I should love to attend the museums and lectures. Lady Ashford said I could call, perhaps even meet her friends—”

The quill scraped hard across the page. “How did you ever secure the attention of this Lady Ashford? As for attending a lecture, I won’t have you indulge in such wild fancies.”

I dared not confess the entire truth. Two years ago, I had read her treatise in *The Times* regarding social issues, and Edward had been so kind to hunt down her address. For well over a year, Lady Ashford and I had corresponded regularly about all matters pertaining to science, literature, and my love of astronomy.

I groaned inwardly though I pressed on with a bright smile. “Surely it would not disgrace us. My studies harm no one. The stars—”

He glared at me. “You will not speak of stars to me. A Grenville’s duty is not to chase the cosmos.”

I fell silent, and my eyes wandered to his desk. Two envelopes rested at his elbow, the wax seals stamped deep. For one heartbeat I glimpsed a crest, curved and regal, before his hand swept them away.

Letters from India.

My breath quickened at the thought of hearing from family. Once, at five and ten, I had managed to sneak out a missive to the nearest inn where post was delivered. But only once. Somehow word of the letter reached his ears before it left the inn; no doubt a servant eager to curry favor carried tales of my insubordination. After that, Grandfather made certain not a single servant would deliver a letter to India on my behalf. I wrote my mother each month regardless, storing every missive in a box hidden beneath my bed. A diary of sorts, intended only for her.

I tipped forward to see his papers better. “May I read your letters? Is that one from the palace at Hyderabad? I have seen that seal before.”

His chair scraped back. “Your entire family most certainly died of diphtheria, Katherine. Why must I keep explaining how I saved you and Edward from the same fate?” His gaze hardened, the words struck like daggers. “Trouble me no further. I have work to do.”

The desk drawer shut with a decisive thud, swallowing the letters whole.

But the seal . . .

The wax bore an oval impression with strokes sweeping upward and around in patterns I half remembered, flowing like vines across stone. Though I could not read the words, the shape of them stirred a buried memory from my past, as if I had once heard those syllables whispered in prayer.

I lowered in an awkward curtsy, my throat tight with questions unasked, and then withdrew from the study. Yet the vision of those foreign seals haunted me as I crossed the corridor.

If my mother and family were truly gone, why did he guard those letters as though they held the breath of the dead?



Breakfast at Seven Oakes had never tasted so bitter.

I ignored the plate of cold toast in front of me as my two guardians plotted out my future with nary a thought for my opinion. If anything, my request to go to London seemed to ignite Grandfather’s opposition to my studies and my volunteering at the local girls’ school run by Miss Tippens, where I assisted occasionally, offering what I could of astronomy.

“A season has its place,” he said, folding his napkin with brisk precision. “But the time has come for my grandchildren to step into their proper roles.”

“I agree,” Aunt Clarice replied from her end of the table. “Your studies are far too consuming as of late, Katherine. It is most unladylike.”

I winced at the poke against my fascination for astronomy. Nor did I wish to remind Aunt and Grandfather that the stars remained my only link to my mother, who had often stood on the terrace in the evening, pointing out constellations to me.

How ironic that I was kept secluded within this country manor, forced to fill my days reading every book I could find, while my beloved Edward frittered away his studies at Cambridge, going so far as to earn a formal written rebuke from the university.

I hadn't the stamina to argue with Aunt this morning, especially about my desperate need to leave Seven Oakes.

She had always hated books of any nature, cringing at the stash of romantic literature stacked under my bed.

“An heiress has no need to teach or gallivant with children of an inferior station,” Grandfather added.

“I cannot stay within this manor for the rest of my life,” I answered. “I am old enough for more beyond the countryside.”

Perhaps even a return to India . . .

He studied me for a long moment before clearing his throat. “With regard to a London visit, I have very good news that arrived this morning.”

Ah, I would learn of the two letters Grandfather had shoved into his desk!

“You will marry before the summer ends.”

I froze. Aunt Clarice gasped, while Grandfather removed a slip of paper from his coat. After nudging the letter in my direction, he waited as I picked it up with shaking fingers and unfolded the paper.

It was not the note I had hoped to read. No evidence of Hyderabad marked its surface.

His smile stretched tight when my gaze met his, yet the faint warmth did nothing to ease my nervousness.

“I want only the best for my family. I am most pleased with this development. So it would stand that you need not fret over experiencing a season after all.”

The precise handwriting brought a well of acid bubbling up inside me. *Impending marriage . . . Sebastian Sinclair . . . to arrive in London within six weeks . . .* Perhaps longer, depending on the ship and the weather.

Numb, I set the paper down.

“No need to look so concerned,” Grandfather said as he stabbed at his poached egg, sending it into quivers. “Lord Sinclair and I have planned this marriage for you since the day you were born. I had hoped for Hugh, the eldest Sinclair, but he married another and then died in a most unfortunate incident. Now it is Sebastian who brings two indigo plantations and all the vast estates tied to the Sinclair name. We cannot refuse such an alliance between our two distinguished families.”

Sebastian Sinclair.

Not him. Anyone but him.

My aunt frowned. “But marriage is unthinkable if she does not have a proper wardrobe! I must take Kitty to my favorite modistes.”

Grandfather scooped up a jiggling bit of yolk. “I have no doubt you will arrange an excellent trousseau for Katherine when we arrive in London. Surely you can find a local seamstress in the meantime.”

London. At long last, I would be free of this country confine, but at what cost?

My aunt’s voice dimmed while a memory captured my attention, faint but stubborn—the image of a chubby-cheeked boy sneering at me.

He had sat beside me at Grandfather’s table years ago, the young heir from India, complaining of England’s bland fare as though the cook had personally insulted him.

“You’ll get used to it,” I’d said primly. It had burned me that he acted as though he knew more about my homeland than I did.

“I shan’t. India is the only place worth living.”

“Then why did you leave it?” I had challenged.

His grin had been quick and wicked. “To meet *you*, apparently.”

Then he had tugged one of my curls.

Before I could stop myself, my palm met his cheek with a crack that silenced the table. He’d gaped—then, to my astonishment, laughed.

I shook off the memory and lifted my chin. “I shall do no such thing. I’d sooner wed the stuffed peacock from your trophy wall. He would at least preen less than the Sinclair I remember.”

“Shocking insolence,” Aunt Clarice declared with round eyes. “Imagine refusing the Sinclair family!”

Grandfather arched a grizzled eyebrow at my show of defiance. “You will not find a better match in all of London or all the continent. Sebastian will eventually sit on the board of directors of the East India Company. You cannot discount power like that, my girl. Real power.”

I refused to be deterred by their reactions. “Why can I not find another match, one just as suitable in rank? Perhaps your Sebastian will also feel differently when he crosses onto the English shore and takes a look at me.”

“He will be pleased with you, I’m certain,” Grandfather countered as he studied me. “You appear very much like your father, and for that I am grateful.”

My fists balled as rage simmered through me. It was true I took after the auburn-haired James Grenville while my brother resembled our beautiful mother. We were treated very differently by Grandfather because of it.

He continued, oblivious to my discomfort over such a remark. “I do not want you embarrassing our family with these childish moods of yours. I have enough to deal with concerning Edward failing his classes at Cambridge and gallivanting about London with a wild set. No, child, you do not want to be presented in court, nor do you need to be exposed to the futile gossip of cackling hens.”

Child. I swallowed back a retort.

Why would I embarrass him? Hadn't I worked with a dancing tutor and accomplished everything Aunt Clarice set out before me?

I sucked in a sharp breath as I reconsidered his words, the meaning piercing through me until my fingers trembled. *There. . . it was.* The subtle reminder that I would never be truly English enough, that I would somehow bring humiliation to the sterling Grenville reputation. I would never be good enough for the esteemed Almack's society simply because of my hidden name tied to monsoons and a way of life the English didn't cherish.

But I was the daughter of a princess. Why should I be ashamed of my heritage? Had I not changed enough of myself to please him?

"I *will* have a say in the matter," I protested.

"No, you will not. I've allowed you a great deal of freedom, to the point that you've trotted around the countryside with that telescope in hand. I can take the telescope away. I bought it for you, after all. I can take all of your astronomy and every single privilege away until you come to your senses. You think I will continue to allow you to slip away to the local school to feed Miss Tippens's addlebrained girls with silly notions that they can become anything other than wives or mothers? You would do well to remember that your duty is to marry whomever I choose." The meager warmth flickering in his eyes had chilled considerably.

I stared at him, my cheeks burning. "I daresay there isn't much left that you can steal from me." As if to agree with my anger, the wind moaned against the windows of the dining room—a shrieking sound I had never quite grown accustomed to.

Aunt no longer met my gaze, fiddling instead with her fork. She usually grew silent when Grandfather turned into iron.

We finished breakfast in silence, Grandfather lost in his thoughts. I frantically debated how to best reclaim my freedom. Aunt Clarice complained about the weather when another gust flung sleet at the windows.

At length, Grandfather spoke again, albeit softer.

“Katherine, remember this—our family has a long and proud history. You are a *Grenville*, and that means something. I won’t see you paired with any fortune hunter or sporting dandy who comes your way.”

I swallowed the lump in my throat, his words echoing in my mind as I rose from my chair and hurried out of the room before I burst into tears.

“Why did you not tell her sooner about this marriage?” My aunt’s strident voice echoed from the dining room. Out of sight, I halted as Grandfather hushed her soundly.

Undeterred, Aunt Clarice continued, “You must not let Mr. Sinclair take her back to India! That country drove James mad.”

Grandfather’s muted response, harsh and guttural, finally silenced my aunt.

Waiting, I forced myself to hold my breath to learn more of the country she referred to with such ill-concealed rage, but nothing but the clink of glasses came, along with a servant entering the dining room with another tray.

Aunt, too, had lived in Calcutta for several years as a young woman before returning to England, leaving my father—her only sibling—behind in Hyderabad. He had married into the household of the nizam of Hyderabad, the sovereign prince whose court stood at the heart of India’s power. Everyone sought the nizam’s favor, Aunt had admitted once in an unguarded moment. The French, the English, and rulers of neighboring states alike. His treasury brimmed with diamonds and pearls, and his authority stretched across vital trade routes that carried goods to both coasts of India. To stand within his circle was to stand at the crossroads of commerce and politics, where promises and alliances could shape the future of nations.

So many things were forbidden for discussion in our home, and I was tired of hiding within this English manor, locked away from the world. Forced to be a perfect English rose and marry a man I reviled.

As I walked through the halls, the portraits of my ancestors watching from the walls, I couldn't shake the feeling that I would never truly live up to the name my grandfather so revered—yet one he forbade me from learning about.

Whatever Grandfather concealed, I would uncover it. Even if it cost me everything. And I would find a way to thwart his plans.



The house had long gone silent when I stole from my room later that day. Only the groan of the old timbers beneath my weighted steps and the hiss of wind against the windows broke the midnight stillness. My candle flame wavered as I crept through the corridor, clutching the candle like a fragile secret.

Downstairs, Grandfather's study door stood half-closed, as though daring me to slip inside.

The air smelled of pipe smoke and leather, and the shadows seemed to hold their breath.

A great desk dominated the room, every surface burdened with papers, maps, and letters. I set the candle down and opened the nearest drawer.

There it lay—a letter with a broken seal and the bold signature of Lord Sinclair.

The script burned into my sight.

My debt to you for saving my life is now repaid. I send my grandson Sebastian to wed your granddaughter, thus binding our families. He will arrive within six months to claim his bride. Rest assured, the alliance between the Grenville and Sinclair families will stand firm as we agreed upon. Moreover, Sebastian will put to rest any fears regarding the East India Company's policies.

A chill traced my spine. I was nothing more than a pawn on my grandfather's board.

I folded the letter carefully, though my hands shook, and slid it back where I found it. My eyes caught on another envelope, pushed half beneath a ledger. The wax seal was broken, as if someone had read it in haste. The paper itself felt different—thinner, faintly scented of spice.

Exhaling, I reached for it. The script curved and flowed just as I remembered, beautiful with each stroke. I struggled to decipher the words, but I recognized the salutation.

Mir Ghulam Ali Sahib Allum and Noor-un-Nissa,

I gasped. My old name . . . now forbidden to me.

The candle guttered, throwing strange shapes on the walls. I pressed the page to my chest. If my mother, Khair-un-Nissa, was truly dead, then who had written this? What family remained in Hyderabad, reaching for me and my brother? I had a mother, a grandmother, cousins . . .

If only I could read all of the script, but I had left India so long ago. My memory of the written language had slipped away.

But one word caught my attention.

خطرہ

Khatrah. Danger.

And then . . . my stomach dropped. Another few words stood out.

Khair-un-Nissa Begum. My mother's name.

What did all of this mean?

A floorboard creaked down the hall. Heart pounding, I blew out the candle and held my breath as the cook shuffled past. He paused at the door and moved on, no doubt unable to see me clearly thanks to his filmy vision.

What would Edward say to such a letter? If I took it, Grandfather would surely suspect a theft and tear the manor apart to find it.

But what news came from Hyderabad? Why would someone write to Edward and me?

Grandfather said my mother had died, but what if he was wrong? Why forbid me from even writing to the palace to know for certain?

Never would the image of her weeping leave my mind. Most evenings, when I stared at the stars, just as she had taught me, I felt as though I could reach through the firmament and touch her. She could not be gone.

I waited several minutes, debating whether to keep the letter, before finally sliding it back beneath the ledger, my mind afire with questions that no one in this house would ever answer.